

Garnishing the Image of Italian American Women. The NOIAW 2011 Gala Luncheon

Gabrielle Pati (June 22, 2011)



On June 11, 2011, NOIAW held its eleventh Gala Luncheon in midtown Manhattan. Soprano Cristina Fontanelli sang both the Italian and American national anthems at the event's commencement. Honored at the luncheon were best-selling author, Lisa Scottoline, and President of the City College of New York, Dr. Lisa Staiano-Coico. A special tribute was paid to founding member, the late Geraldine Ferraro, on this special occasion.

Some may wonder who comes to mind when Americans think of Italian American women. Is it Snooky the 'guidette' star from MTV's *The Jersey Shore*? Or characters from yet another degrading and absurd reality show, *Mob Wives*? Hopefully not. Or is it the kind of woman like the late Geraldine Ferraro, the active politician from Queens who was the first woman (and first Italian American) to run for vice president, and who defiantly contested the demeaning attitude of George Bush Sr. in a 1984 debate? The question is open to discussion, but one thing is certain: the reputation of Italian American women can always be improved from its current status, characterized by myriad



stereotypes and expectations, some with hints of truth, others the furthest thing from a mass-media projected 'reality'.

The National Organization of Italian American Women is committed to preserving the Italian heritage, language and culture by promoting and supporting the advancement of Italian American women: it aims to foster relations and support among distinguished Italian American women in all fields and those prospective women of this new generation who also defy stereotypes and follow their own unique and ambitious destinies.

However, NOIAW does much more than this. It inspired young Italian American women to think of themselves beyond any socially constructed notion of what it means to be Italian in America today. NOIAW promotes a much needed positive image of American women of Italian descent by recognizing the hard work, dedication and merits of individual women who have contributed something to society; women who have studied and worked relentlessly; founded and organized a supportive network of contacts; achieved their goals despite often growing up underprivileged by today's standards of living. These and much more are recognizable qualities of the women in NOIAW. They include doctors, lawyers, artists, teachers, politicians, entrepreneurs and much more. Some of them are also dedicated mothers.

Today NOIAW has an extensive network of members that span across the U.S., and enjoys the honor of bestowing yearly scholarships to deserving American women of Italian origin. This year's recipients were Gianna Bove of New Jersey, who is studying justice at the American University in Washington; Clara Flebus, who studied at the University of Trieste and is studying law at New York University; Christina Scelfo of Howard Beach, NY who will be attending Hofstra LIJ School of Medicine; history major Rebekah Pastorello ; and Alexandra Calistri, recent graduate of the Georgetown Law Center as Juris Doctor, who received the Hon. Geraldine Ferraro Scholarship.

Besides scholarships, NOIAW also has a cultural exchange program in Italy, mentoring youth programs and member cultural programs. In the cultural exchange program, American students are given an educational and cultural experience during their visit to Italy in which they meet distinguished Italian women and develop relations on an international scale relating to their specific fields of interest.

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