

Standing ovation for Gina Lollobrigida at NIAF Gala

(October 24, 2008)



The Gala was attended by Barbara Sinatra, wife of music legend Frank Sinatra, the Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi and the former Mayor of New York Rudolph W. Giuliani. Among the others present, Leonardo DiCaprio's father who accepted award on behalf of his son



From [The National Italian American Foundation Web Site](#) [2]

A special video on the Gala will be published on i-Italy and transmitted on [Cuny TV](#) [3] next week.

More than 3,000 guests attended the National Italian American Foundation's (NIAF) 33rd Anniversary Awards Gala on Saturday October 18, 2008 at the Hilton, Washington.

George DiCaprio, father of 2008 honoree actor [Leonardo DiCaprio](#) [4], accepted the NIAF award on behalf of his son, who was recuperating from pneumonia. He read a handwritten note from the [Golden Globe](#) [5] winner, who noted, "I am so humbled by this prestigious honor. My ancestors traveled from the 'knee of the boot', Naples, to have their sons and daughters live the American dream."

[Lollobrigida](#) [6] and DiCaprio each received NIAF Achievement Awards in Entertainment at the black-tie gala. Barbara Sinatra, wife of entertainment legend Frank Sinatra, and Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi presented their awards respectively. Lollobrigida noted in her acceptance speech that the Foundation's Lifetime Achievement Award was "a little premature" as, "I have a lot more work to do."

This year's NIAF Special Achievement Awards in Business were awarded to Mark T. Bertolini, president of [Aetna](#) [7], and Joseph DePinto, president and CEO of [7-Eleven](#) [8], Inc. Vincent Viola, a NIAF vice chairman, and [Michael Andretti](#) [9], a noted Formula One driver, presented their awards respectively. Gianmario Tondato da Ruos, CEO of [Autogrill S.p.A](#) [10], received the NIAF U.S./Italy Friendship Award, which honors prominent Italians who, as a result of their position or talent, have created a greater bond between our two nations. Former Mayor of New York [Rudolph W. Giuliani](#) [11], who received the Foundation's 2007 Achievement Award in Public Service, presented the award to Tondato da Ruos.

Wayne Pacelle, president and CEO of [The Human Society](#) [12], came to the podium to receive a NIAF Special Achievement Award in Humanitarian Service, presented by fellow Connecticut native and friend, U.S. Representative [Rosa De Lauro](#) [13]. To underscore the importance of the NIAF award, Pacelle quoted philosopher [Mahatma Gandhi](#) [14], saying, "You can judge a society by how they treat their animals."

During the evening, NIAF Vice Chairman Jerry Colangelo introduced a NIAF video tribute to Dr. A. Kenneth Ciongoli, NIAF chairman, for his years of outstanding leadership and service. NIAF's National Executive Director John B. Salamone received the Republic of Italy's Order of Merit "Commendatore," the country's highest honor, from Italy's Ambassador to the U.S. H.E. Giovanni Castellaneta.

At the gala, NIAF President Salvatore J. Zizza introduced one of Italy's highest ranking officials, Hon. Ignazio La Russa, Italy's Minister of Defense. Other notables in attendance included Supreme Court Justice Samuel Alito, Jr., Yankee great [Yogi Berra](#) [15], actress, singer and daughter of the late Dean Martin, [Deana Martin](#) [16], singer [Jerry Vale](#) [17], former NFL players Franco Harris and [Vince Ferragamo](#) [18], President of Georgetown University John J. DeGioia, and Franco Nuschese, president of Georgetown Entertainment Group. Comedian Tom Dreesen was this year's master of ceremonies.

The evening included a performance by [Peppino Di Capri](#) [19], one of Italy's popular singers, songwriters and pianists. The Naples-born artist sang Comme e' Ddoce 'O Mare" ("How Sweet is The Sea"), and other famous Neapolitan hits.

This year NIAF awarded nearly one million dollars for student scholarships and cultural grants across the U.S. and Italy. Recognizing the younger generation, NIAF organized its 12th annual youth gala, which attracted more than 300 young Americans of Italian descent from 20 states.

While the youth gala participants were finishing their dinner, [Patrizio Buanne](#) [20], a multi-platinum international recording artist, performed songs from his latest albums. Afterwards, the young adults, along with many gala attendees, enjoyed a post-gala dessert reception.

Earlier on Friday at a noon luncheon, Louis Zamperini, a former Olympian and World War II prisoner



of war, gave the keynote address. His autobiography, "Devil at My Heels," details Zamperini's life and experiences. A film based on his life story starring actor Nicolas Cage is under development.

The weekend also featured Friday evening's "Salute to the Martini" with a performance by Patrizio and a special tribute to Frank Sinatra in addition to two public policy conferences, "The Presidential Candidates' Perspectives on the Future of Healthcare in America," and "Energy: America's Challenge of the 21st Century."

The open forums featured surrogates from the presidential campaigns of Senator [Barack Obama](#) [21] and [Senator John McCain](#) [22], who communicated their candidates' healthcare and energy policy messages to prominent Italian American business and community leaders. These two conferences were held under the auspices of the NIAF Public Policy Institute.

To highlight the preservation of Italian language in educational institutions NIAF also hosted the standing-room-only conference, "Italian Language and Culture in American Schools."

Other events included NIAF's celebrity auction and luncheon in addition to the Foundation's Council 2000/Youth Networking Breakfast. The breakfast included a presentation of the sixth annual NIAF Teacher of the Year Award to Rosa Motta, who teaches Italian at Maury High School in Norfolk, Va. NIAF guests also enjoyed Piazza d'Italia, a two-day best of Italy exhibition, featuring Maseratis, a Lamborghini, luxury sport vehicles, a wine bar showcasing the best of Luca Maroni's Italian wines, and a cooking demonstration by Filippo and the Chef at the Snaidero Kitchen Display.

Speaker Pelosi discussed her latest book "Know Your Power: A Message to America's Daughters" with Sam Donaldson, ABC news correspondent, which was followed by a book signing at the Piazza on Saturday.

Italy's Region of Campania was this year's sponsoring region from Italy. Proceeds from the weekend events will benefit NIAF's scholarship and education programs.

NIAF Vice Chairman Joseph R. Cerrell thanked the guests for attending this year's event and to mark October 23-24, 2009 for NIAF's 34th Anniversary Convention Weekend. The gala closed with a chorus of "God Bless America."

NIAF is a non-profit organization based in Washington, D.C. aiming to preserve the heritage of Italian Americans.

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