

## Fireworks for a United Italy

Antonella Iovino (July 14, 2011)



Casa Belvedere in Staten Island joined in celebrating 150 years of Italian unification, presenting an evening of memories, music, and fireworks.

Casa Belvedere extends over nearly three acres of land in the Grymes Hill section of Staten Island and enjoys a panoramic view of the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge and the New York City harbor. The property was purchased in 2008 by Gina Biancardi-Rammairone and Luciano Rammairone and has been restored and converted into a center for the promotion of culture, language, history, cuisine, and fashion of Italy. Through exhibits, events, and programs, students and visitors learn about Italian heritage and culture as well as the contributions that Italian Americans have made to the history of New York and the United States.



On June 3, the center has hosted the event A Night under the Stars, a presentation of culture, history, and music to celebrate the 150th anniversary of Italy's unification and 350 years of Staten Island.

i-Italy interviewed Lou Cavelli, the executive director of Casa Belvedere, who told us about the evening.

What prompted you to organize this event?

We wanted to celebrate the 150 years of Italian unification along with Staten Island's 350th anniversary, as the Italian community on Staten Island is more than 42% of the population, which is very significant and reflects its affinity for Italy and Italian culture.

What were the key moments of the festivities?

Three prizes were awarded to prominent people in the Italian community: the first went to Consul Talò, a great supporter of this foundation; the second went to Guy Molinari, president of the borough of Staten Island from 1990 to 2001; and finally the third went to James P. Molinaro, the current borough president. The presidents are both Italian-Americans: it is important to understand how Italian Americans have reached important positions in society in spite of the stereotypes.

Then there was the concert Italy, And I Love You So with Giada Valenti and Christopher Macchio.

For the occasion, Casa Belvedere hosted three exhibits: An Italian Story which gathers historic photos of the 350-year history of Staten Island on loan from the Center for Migration Studies; the exhibit Garibaldi: Larger than Life on loan from the Garibaldi-Meucci Museum; and the exhibit Italian Staten Island - Images of America by Andrew Paul Mele.

The evening ended with fireworks to frame Casa Belvedere's beautiful panoramic view.

What are some of the projects in which Casa Belvedere is currently engaged?

The villa will host Italian cooking classes, open to groups of 14 chefs at a time, in addition to catering facilities. We are working on projects that enhance Italian art, culture, and cuisine. We are not a real restaurant, but we do demonstrations with various chefs; we are not a winery, but we have hosted wine tastings dedicated to certain regions; we are not a museum but we do hold exhibits; we are not a theater, but we have had performances and this summer we will screen four Italian movies under the stars. We want to give Italian-Americans a new image of Italy. Often their impression is tied to an ancestral idea of rural Italy which their grandparents abandoned when they emigrated.

We are also very supportive of the Italian language: we are creating a program that involves young Italian-Americans from the College of the State Island. The idea is that Casa Belvedere will become a point of reference where they can rediscover their roots.

Casa Belvedere's initiatives are numerous and varied, and demonstrate a dedication to maintaining an active connection with Italy, both in the past and present. Its mission is to bring younger generations of Italian-Americans back to their culture of origin, to preserve the Italian language, and not to merely allow them to take refuge in recollections, but encourage them to be part of a people and a tradition that thrives beyond Italy's borders, enriched by a mutual exchange of culture and ideas.



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