

## Rebuilding NIAF Anew

Letizia Airos (October 13, 2016)



The youngest president in the history of NIAF talks about his first years on the job, explains how the organization works, and outlines his views for the future. He also touches upon delicate topics such as NIAF's relationship with other Italian-American organizations, and he prides NIAF's partnership with i-Italy.

**Let's make an appraisal of your first term as the President of NIAF. What did you want to achieve when you started, and what have been your major accomplishments so far?**

We don't necessarily have term limits with this position. My seat as [President](#) [2] of the Board is ex officio to my job as Chief Operating Officer, so I'm not necessarily looking at my work here in the same way as others in term-limited positions might. When I came here, the Foundation was clearly



going through significant changes, and I wanted to make sure we started at the bottom by rebuilding how the Foundation did things. So far, our major accomplishments may not be glamorous ones, but we needed to spend these years doing things that would make the bones of the organization truly sound. We were able to create our first ever 3-year plan, and we actually executed it over the past 3 years. For example, for the first time in the Foundation's history, we were able to successfully publish our first 3 annual reports so that our members and the general public can be kept abreast of all aspects of our operations. We have been able to give more large educational grants and high dollar grants to projects in Italy that are very important both to me and to the Board of Directors.

**Are you satisfied with your tenure thus far? Is there anything that you wanted to accomplish but still haven't?**

I guess I could say I'm never going to be satisfied with my tenure here. I came to the Foundation because I really believe that our community can do so much more together, and while we've accomplished great things in building our organization, there are still so many things that I see down the road that will be imperative for the Italian American community. The one thing I think we can do better is reaching out to other groups. It's my hope that people in the community see me acting on my promise to make [NIAF](#) [3] into an ego-free leader of the community, but there are still hesitations when it comes to working together among the many groups in our community, and I really want to focus on bridging those gaps and tearing down those walls in the coming years. I believe if we don't, our community is going to lose valuable institutions that cannot only survive but thrive and grow stronger together.

Some people out there may not fully grasp what it is that NIAF does on a daily basis. In a few words, please describe the day-to-day challenges you and your staff face. Day-to-day operations at NIAF are incredibly diverse, particularly at a time like now where we are in the heart of what we call "Gala Season," which is the late summer through October when every spare moment is spent focusing on the massive [Gala Weekend](#) [4] that we put on here in Washington. But operations in the Headquarters are a mix between incredibly buttoned up and business oriented, and incredibly casual and family-like. We have to be able to do a lot with a little, and sometimes I don't think people realize exactly how much it is that we're doing out there in the community. We have hundreds and hundreds of scholarships; we have programs both here and in Italy, events around the country, our magazine, our web resources, and the list goes on and on. And of course we have to be ready to react to events like the recent earthquake. So while there is a lot of fun to being part of our team day to day, it's also, in many cases, a very frantic work place.

**What have you specifically done to rejuvenate NIAF and to reach out to younger generations?**

Our strategy on reaching out to younger generations has been to acknowledge that it's not enough to simply have a young person at the helm of the organization, and it's not enough to simply go out and try to create programs that will draw young people. We must bring young people into our organization, give them a voice in where this place is going, and show them how we serve our community. Something I'm really proud of is that we've been able to create multiple series of fellowships that have allowed us to integrate, at many different levels, young people into NIAF's operations. For example, our Italian American Leadership Fellows come from 8 - 10 universities around the country and are selected to participate in a yearlong fellowship in which they attend our Gala Weekend.

The Leadership Fellows will participate in meetings with mentors and faculty from their own home universities, so they can work with leaders of our organization in order to develop better strategies and systems to integrate Italian American clubs with NIAF, which will act as a central place for those clubs. We've also done a lot of work to convert our stately DC Headquarters, the Ambassador Peter F. Secchia building, into a publicly accessible museum and learning center so that Italian Americans from all over the nation can find a resource for the preservation and propagation of our history and culture here in the nation's capital. We're really proud that we were able to do that with the program for museum fellows.

We've got 3 incredibly intelligent young women working 3 days a week in our Headquarters on not



only preserving and categorizing the entire collection of artifacts of the Italian American experience, but also deciding, under the tutelage of a mentor-curator, how they would tell the Italian American story in our inaugural exhibit. We brought these young people in and gave them real responsibility to make decisions that will effect what NIAF is for the community. We've also really worked hard to go back and create an alumni network for all of the students who've received scholarships or been a part of our "Voyage of Discovery" program; by rebuilding those ties that we had neglected for so many years, we've been able to bring them out to participate in our New York Gala and our Washington, DC Gala Weekend. We've created a much more multigenerational experience from what we used to have at the Gala Weekend.

**Forgive us for tooting our own horn, but we at i-Italy are proud of the fact that, thanks to you, we're entering the second year of a fruitful partnership with NIAF.**

We're so proud of the relationship we've been able to build together as well. I think beyond the fact that we share so many goals and visions for the Italian American community and the Italian diaspora everywhere, the specific projects have been really amazing.

**We are particularly happy with our joint internship program in "Journalism and Italian-American Affairs." Four wonderful interns selected by you have just begun working at our headquarters this year.**

This is a great example of a program that, while it may have taken us a while to develop the specifics, ended up being so incredibly useful for our community and useful for the Italian diaspora. As you know, when we were faced with the incredible amount of exceptional applicants, I made the decision to change the program from 2 to 4 people! I feel these programs are not just about investing in making young Italians and Italian Americans better, but investing in making them active parts of the community. When a young person leaves an internship like this, there's no way he or she is not going to want to participate in what we do, both at i-Italy and NIAF. And when these great young kids come our way, it's our responsibility to make sure we are engaging as many of them as we can.

**Second, and most importantly, we began co-producing a series of televised interviews entitled "Italian Leadership in America." And we started at the very top with a long, deep conversation with Justice Alito.**

This is a great project other than the fact that I look kind of goofy introducing such luminaries at the beginning of each video!

I must say this is really a project that I think has a bright future. Often times people forget that Washington, DC is home to some incredibly accomplished Italian Americans and how much our community has achieved in so many different halls of power here in the nation's capital. Sitting down with someone like Justice Alito, in such a humbling and special environment like the Supreme Court offices, really makes me feel great about our efforts because I know that each and every one of these interviewees said "yes" immediately to our requests.

They did so because they felt good about sharing their Italian story, and that makes me feel like everything we do is for the right reasons. Even these incredibly accomplished individuals remember that their Italian heritage is at the core of who they are, and

I think that is something that will work to encourage in future generations as well.

To see the video of i-Italy at the NIAF's headquarters >>> [5]

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### Links



- [1] <http://iitaly.org/files/johnviolajpg>
- [2] [http://www.niaf.org/niaf\\_event/john-viola-appointed-niaf-chief-operating-officer/](http://www.niaf.org/niaf_event/john-viola-appointed-niaf-chief-operating-officer/)
- [3] <http://www.niaf.org>
- [4] <http://www.niaf.org/events/niaf-41st-anniversary-gala/#ad-image-0>
- [5] [https://youtu.be/69\\_u8mx-a-8](https://youtu.be/69_u8mx-a-8)