

NIAF's 34th Anniversary Gala. A conversation with President Joseph Del Raso

Anthony J. Tamburri * (October 05, 2009)



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As is usually the case, the list honorees for this annual event reads like the “Who’s Who” of Italian



America in the various fields of science, commerce, culture, politics, and the arts. This year is no different from such lists. The 2009 honorees include: Department of Homeland Security Secretary [Janet Napolitano](#) [2]; culinary pioneer and restaurant entrepreneur [Lidia Matticchio Bastianich](#) [3]; award-nominated actress [Carla Gugino](#) [4]; renowned Italian singer and songwriter Antonello Venditti; and Chief Executive Officer of [PepsiCo Americas Beverages](#) [5] Massimo F. d'Amore. In tune with such celebrity status, the Master of Ceremonies will be late-night talk show host [Jimmy Kimmel](#) [6].

In addition to such an impressive cast of honorees, [Supreme Court Justice Samuel A. Alito, Jr.](#) [7] and Vinny Cerrato, Executive Vice President of Football Operations for the [Washington Redskins](#) [8], have confirmed their attendance. But they will not be alone as prominent Washington attendees; Speaker of the House [Nancy Pelosi](#) [9], who discussed her book at last year's Gala, also announced her plans to attend this year. So, whether you are a star-gazing Italian American or you wish to hear some provocative ideas from some of the more prominent voices from our community—from both the left and the right—this is the place to be during this year's [Italian Heritage and Culture Month](#). [10]

Incorporated in 1975, the National Italian American Foundation is a nonprofit, non-partisan educational foundation that promotes Italian/American culture and heritage. It serves as a resource on and for the Italian/American community through its various educational and youth programs, which include scholarships, grants, heritage travel, and mentoring.

Equally significant, NIAF is also the voice for Italian Americans in Washington, DC, working closely with the Italian/American Congressional Delegation and the White House. NIAF's mission has always been multi-fold; it includes advancing US - Italy business, political, and cultural relations; and NIAF has a business council that promotes networking with corporate leaders.

Three are the major areas through which NIAF accomplishes its goals: Youth Programs; Education and Culture; Public Policy. The first area includes the unique Students to Leaders (S2L) Program, which includes seminars in Language and Culture that give Italian language students the opportunity for professional development through encounters with the teaching profession and Italian education professionals. The seminars focus on learning up-to-date, effective teaching methods and skills for teaching Italian.

In the second area, the one component that stands out is the grants program. Reaching as much as \$15,000, individuals can apply for grants for all sorts of cultural programs, including symposia on language and culture, assistance in creative projects such as fiction and film, and seed monies for projects that will aid in the promotion and preservation of Italian/American culture.

Finally, NIAF contributes to the US socio-political discourse through its [Frank J. Guarini Public Policy Forum](#) [11] and its Public Policy Lecture Series, which includes the likes of Samuel Alito, Silvio Berlusconi, Anthony S. Fauci, Louis Freeh, Letizia Moratti, Raymond Odierno, Frank Pallone, Nancy Pelosi, John Podesta, Antonin Scalia, and Anthony Zinni.

We sat down recently with NIAF's President Joseph Del Raso, the newly elected President of the Board of Directors, and asked him about this year's Gala and NIAF in general.

i-Italy: Mr. Del Raso, in addition to the annual Gala's attraction as a wonderful weekend in order to celebrate Italian/American culture on a grand scale and, many would say, have some fun, are we correct to assume, in a more serious vein, that the Gala has the express purpose of raising a good deal of the funding NIAF needs both for basic operations and its special programs?

Joseph Del Raso: As a 501 © (3) non-profit and non-partisan educational foundation, we rely on our strong base of supporters. Through the generous donations of our members and sponsors who purchase individual gala tickets, tables and ads in our gala journal, we are able to continue our high level of educational programs for 2010 and introduce new programs. This year is especially



challenging due to the difficult economic times and the cutbacks that households have had to endure. A special thanks goes to [LM Wines](#) [12], [Deloitte LP](#) [13], [Gabelli Funds](#) [14], [Colavita USA](#) [15], [Conair](#) [16], [DelGrosso Foods Inc.](#) [17] [Pepsi Co](#) [5] and [Omicom Group](#) [18] for their most generous support of this year's gala.

i-Italy: Youth Programs; Education and Culture; Public Policy constitute a sort of triptych for NIAF's ragion d'essere, as we would say in Italian, leaving the French *raison d'être* for others to use. What stands out over the years as some prime examples of success in each of these three categories?

Joseph Del Raso: Public Policy Programs: Most recently Leon E. Panetta, CIA director, and Hon. Franco Frattini, Italy's Minister of Foreign Affairs, were the keynote speakers at the NIAF Frank J. Guarini Public Policy Forum on Capitol Hill. Panetta gave a major policy speech announcing al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden is believed to be in Pakistan and the chances of capturing or killing him have improved as that nation's military continues to drive against Taliban militants. Frattini made an official visit to meet with Italy's Ambassador and spoke at NIAF's forum about Italy's relations, the upcoming G8 Summit in L'Aquila and on going relief efforts in the region of Abruzzo. While at the forum Reps. [Bill Pascrell](#) [19] and [Pat Tiberi](#) [20], who serve as co-chairmen of the Italian American Congressional Delegation of the 111th Congress, presented to Frattini a House Resolution about the Abruzzo earthquake, mourning the loss of life, commending the U.S. for their actions and urging support. Both spoke before Italian American business executives, government officials and opinion leaders. This program educates while contributing to the public discourse.

The foundation's signature program for youth is its NIAF Ambassador [Peter F. Secchia Voyage of Discovery Program](#) [21]. In existence for nine consecutive years, this educational and cultural initiative sends more than 40 Italian American students to Italy each year (all expenses paid). We have reached more than 400 students as they discover the home of their ancestors and experience modern-day Italy. This year recipients toured the regions of Lombardy and Liguria. They met with executives from Esaote, a bio-medical company, visited the headquarters of [FIAT](#) [22] and [Autogrill](#) [23], the world's largest provider of food and beverage and retail services for travelers. They also had the opportunity to view Da Vinci's masterpiece, "The Last Supper" and have a Q&A period at Italy's leading financial daily- [Il Sole 24 Ore](#) [24].

To promote education and culture: We are excited to report that two of the 32 Italian students from L'Aquila who are continuing their studies at American universities, will be attending NIAF's gala convention weekend and speaking at the luncheon on Friday about their experiences in the U.S. and how the earthquake has impacted their families. A NIAF grant recipient "Pane Amaro: The Italian American Journey from Despised Immigrants to Honored Citizens" will be showcased with a screening of the documentary during NIAF's gala Convention Weekend on Friday, October 23. For those who will not be able to view the film by producers Gianfranco Norelli and Suma Kurin, it is available on DVD.

Since the scholarship programs inception in 1976, less than a year after NIAF was founded, NIAF has awarded \$10 million in scholarships and cultural grants across the U.S. These merit-based awards in humanities, engineering, medicine, business, music, Italian language and culture and other specialized fields continue to have an impact on so many young people. NIAF also has funded university grants to Italian Clubs and cultural and educational grants.

i-Italy: And what about NIAF's future? These past six months have included a type of restructuring of NIAF's Board of Directors and Staff positions, a process that is normal every so many years in any organization. How do you see these changes impacting on NIAF's overall mission?

Joseph Del Raso: Change is healthy. We have a newly elected board of directors and have filled all of our leadership positions, chairman, vice chairs, secretary, general counsel with dynamic individuals -- our dedicated board of prominent Italian American leaders are working together to build a stronger NIAF and bring their expertise and business acumen to the foundation. This board has been



involved in the making of the 2009 gala, sharing numerous contacts and exciting ideas. We also have a committed, professional staff, which are very passionate about our mission and their work. Our mission is stronger and more focused than ever.

i-Italy: We want to thank you for spending some time with us out of your busy day, and we look forward to seeing you toward the end of the month at NIAF's 34th Anniversary Gala and Annual Convention.

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