

Heritage, Politics and Women Empowerment

Ottorino Cappelli (June 06, 2017)



Washington, DC: Italian Leadership in America. Series / 3. Interviewing Patricia de Stacy Harrison, President and CEO of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, co-chair of NIAF, and a most captivating Italian leader in the Nation's capital.

Ms. [Patricia Harrison](#) [2], we'd like to start with your maiden name, which is de Stacy. But it's not that in Italian. What's the story?

My name is really De Stasio. My uncle Lou was a stockbroker in the early 20s, when there was a lot of prejudice against Italian Americans. So he changed his name to de Stacy because he felt it would be better if it sounded French! As a child I didn't even know it used to be De Stasio.

Growing Up Italian American in Brooklyn

Where did your ancestors come from?



My grandfather Nunziato De Stasio (he didn't change his name) was born in Salerno and came to this country when he was 16 years old. My grandmother Elisabetta was born in the United States but came from the same village as my grandfather. My grandfather was a big influence on my life. He was the unofficial mayor in our neighborhood of Bay Ridge! As a matter of fact, he had a barber shop where everyone went, including elected officials and policemen, and everyone respected him. I don't want to make him sound like the godfather of Brooklyn, but they all counted on him. Bay Ridge was very Italian back then and I grew up understanding tradition and how important it was. Every Sunday we would go eat at my grandparents' house. There was music, everybody talked and smoked, and I thought they were all the most glamorous people on earth. I still think that.

Did they talk to you about Italy?

Sure, and they always talked about it in a positive way. I did not go to Italy until I was in my 20s, but I had all these stories about family and what Italy meant and I felt I had a personal connection to Michelangelo or Machiavelli! My grandfather talked about Machiavelli so much I thought he was a relative. And there were all the great Italians in our lives, people like [Perry Como](#) [3]. Every time he was on television, my father would say, "He's Italian." Dad was so proud of him. And [Tony Bennett](#) [4], [Dean Martin](#) [5]—and [Frank Sinatra](#) [6], of course!

This E. Bruce Harrison you met. Who isn't Italian...

No, he's not! He's still trying to figure me out.

How did your family react to the fact that you were going to marry a non Italian? How did his family?

For his family it wasn't so much that I was Italian, but that I was from Brooklyn. His family was from the south so being from Brooklyn was like being from Mars. And when I went to meet his family in Alabama I got off to a bad start... But over time we got to know each other.

And what about your family in Brooklyn?

They were fine with it, and thought my husband was like [Prince Charles](#) [7], nice and very polite. At our gatherings, with the whole family talking a mile a minute, my husband could never get a word in edgewise. I told him to talk more—and not wait for them to stop. Eventually, everything worked out.

An Italian Woman in American Politics

Then you discovered another important part of your life: politics. How did you get to run for co-chair of the Republican National Committee?

First of all I am a Republican and I felt that the party really needed more women, more people of different backgrounds. I didn't know anything about the Republican National Committee, or about running for co-chair. You needed three Committee members to give you permission to run, but I didn't know anyone. It took forever to find out who was on this mysterious committee. But I picked three members at random, and got on a plane to ask them for their support just to run—they didn't also have to vote for me. They agreed, I ran, and I won! It was a lot of hard work.

That was in the late 1990s. Republicans were out of power then, but in 2000 they won the White House...

Yes, and I count my four years on the RNC a success because it led to a Republican President. In 2001, I was appointed by President Bush to be Assistant Secretary of State for Educational and Cultural Affairs under [Colin Powell](#) [8]. Oh my goodness, I admired General Powell so much! Working for him was an incredible experience; I learned so much about leadership and management, and had an opportunity to do things that made an impact.



In the meantime, were you also involved with NIAF?

Oh, I've been part of NIAF forever, 25 years. I had to resign when I was Assistant Secretary of State, but I still worked with [NIAF](#) [9], bringing young people from The Boys Home in Naples to meet with Colin Powell I would bring so many people from Italy to meet him that NIAF made him an honorary Italian American at its gala. He was proud of it.

Fighting for Women Empowerment

Another part of your life and career is related to women's empowerment, and you've written books about new women entrepreneurs. Why this special interest?

When we look at our sons and our daughters and we look at creating a world where people can live in peace, what disturbs me most is that the first people to suffer in oppressive countries are women. I couldn't solve all the world's problems, but I could start at home. I wanted to make sure that more small businesses were being started by women, for instance. So eventually I was named to the Small Business Administration advisory council and I also wrote a book about the qualities of a successful woman-entrepreneur, like attitude, vision, persistence, and confidence. They're the same for men, but it was a challenge for women to get that self-confidence; even today there's a conference every five minutes on how women can succeed in corporate life or as an entrepreneur.

You are a successful woman, a leader, and an Italian American. Are there strong women in your family who were mentors?

My grandmother, whom I was very afraid of because she wore black all the time, as it used to be common in Southern Italy. My grandfather was also afraid of her! My mother was an incredible person who always found a way to meet a challenge. If there was a problem she would never let me give up, saying "You are not thinking, you are not thinking enough! Go figure it out." She was creative and she never stopped thinking. When I would ask her whether I should do something, her answer was always the same—use your own judgment. So when I came to Washington I too became a very strong woman.

You're a strong woman, and you have strong women in your family, but the role of women in traditional Italian American culture has been to follow rather than lead. Do you feel you're different?

To tell you the truth, inside those families where, as they say, "men are making speeches and women are making coffee," women are pretty much running the show behind the scenes. I was fortunate in my career to have other women help me. And I would observe them closely. How did they dress? What do they do? Why are they talking like this? I just learned so much.

At the Helm of CPB

In 2005 you were named to be the President and CEO of the [Corporation for Public Broadcasting](#) [10]. You have been there for ten years and you must have shown a bipartisan attitude, for you were confirmed by President [Obama](#) [11]too. Tell us about this ongoing experience.

In a way it's a continuation of everything I had done. Through public media, I have an opportunity to really change lives from the youngest citizen's to the oldest, with programming that treats people as more than just consumers. We are not trying to sell something.

How can the Italian American community take advantage of the opportunities offered by



PBS?

Well, after five years in the making, when we broadcast [John Maggio](#) [12]’s documentary series The Italian Americans, we heard from so many Italian Americans as well as Americans of all backgrounds. So many people watched, and some were watching PBS for the first time. Local stations also produced companion documentaries on the Italian Americans of New York and New Jersey. That’s what a lot of other stations have done to connect to their Italian American viewers. The story is a story of success, of people coming here and working so hard, who found joy with their family and who also welcomed anyone to their home, no matter how poor, with food and wine. I think that’s what’s passed down. You know, my father always made the pasta in our house, and whether there were four people or fourteen, he would make enough food to feed a neighborhood. “Someone might come by,” he’d say. I think the lesson of those early immigrants was that no matter how hard it was, they were not going to let society beat them down. They had pride and courage and would not be destroyed by work. This is what we have to communicate to the new generations of any background—that it may not be easy but you have tools to emerge as yourself on the other side.

Let’s end our conversation on a lighter note. What’s your favorite Italian dish?

[laughing] Well, something I could eat over and over and over and over is linguine with white clam sauce. Tons of clams.

Can you cook it?

Of course I can cook it! And I also make a lasagna that could be used as a murder weapon, it’s so heavy and has everything in it. Really, really good. But after you eat it and you go into a coma, so I like linguine and clam sauce better.

Thank you very much for this talk, Ms. Harrison.

Thank you! I enjoyed it, it’s like visiting a psychiatrist! You can charge me!

Click [here](#) [13] to see the interview between Ottorino Cappelli and Patricia de Stacy Harrison

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