

The Rocky Road to Italian American Success

Ottorino Cappelli (October 31, 2017)



We're interviewing Gabriel Battista, former executive chairman of Talk America, named by Ernst & Young as the Greater Washington Area Communications Entrepreneur of the Year in 2004. "Gabe," as his friends call him, is the co-chair of NIAF and a prominent Italian American leader in the nation's capital.

This interview was aired on our weekly TV show i-ItalyNY on NYC Life - Ch. 25, and you can watch it on demand on i-Italy.org and on our YouTube channel. The text here has been edited for publication.

Let's start with your parents. They were both born in Italy?

Well, my paternal grandfather Pietro came to the United States for the first time after the First World War; he worked and sent money to Italy and traveled back and forth. His family stayed in Italy at



first. My dad was born in the Molise region, in a small little town just outside of Isernia. It's called Macchia d'Isernia, I think it literally means "a spot of Isernia". He came here in 1927. My mother's family instead is from Giulianova, in the nearby region of Abruzzo. She was born in America, but just six months after her parents immigrated, so she always said she was from Giulianova.

Both your families settled in Philadelphia. They lived in Italian neighborhoods, I presume. How was life in Italian Philadelphia back then? And what about the relationships with other immigrant groups?

Well, in my father's neighborhood they were all Molisani. My mom's family lived nearby in a 4-square block Italian neighborhood, which is where I grew up. Mom and dad met at a church social, in this Italian national parish of Our Lady of the Angels. It was unique in the United States, certainly in Philadelphia. This is the story: originally there was a very large Irish parish close to where my parents lived, called Our Mother's Sorrows.

They weren't happy with the arrival of other Catholics like Italians, Poles, and Ukrainians, and they actually wanted them to go away. They said, "You will have to say Mass in this little room, and really what you should do is build your own church!" So in 1911 these immigrants built a church and it was called a national parish. The Catholic Church was ok with this, so the groups could be separated. So my parish was Italian, and in order for me to go to the grammar school they built, I had to be of Italian descent.

This national parish system stayed in place for decades—I believe when I was a boy there were 35 or 40 of them in Philadelphia, not just Italian, but also Ukrainian, Polish. Then in 1976 the Archdiocese decided this system was discriminatory because each of these enclaves had their own school, and even though their neighborhoods were changing, they didn't change-- as long as they had a school they stayed there. When they eliminated the national parishes, people fled to the suburbs. And my grammar school closed.

At one point you had to mingle with other ethnic groups. How was that experience? Were there episodes when you felt discrimination because of being Italian?

I grew up in a world of Italians. And they were not "just" Italians, but almost all of them came from Abruzzo. In fact my grandparents settled there because other relatives were there. And I must tell you, my parents had never taught me about prejudices, I didn't think prejudice existed. But later in life, people would look at me and say you're an Italian, and to me that was a foreign thing.

Give us an example.

Well, I will give you the prime example that was really shocking to me. I had the opportunity to work to pay for my own tuition. I worked in high school and I worked when I went to college at an industrial bakery for Acme Markets, a big supermarket chain in Philadelphia. I had very good grades from Villanova University as an engineer and I went to work for General Electric when I was 22 years old. There were no other Italian Americans in the group I worked in.

One day a guy came up to me and said, "How come you went to Villanova?" And I replied, "I wanted to be an engineer, that's why." "But of all the Italians I know," he said, "the only ones that go to college are the children of the Mafia. Was your father in the Mafia?" "No! My father was not in the mafia..." "Well, you're an exception..." I thought about it after, and I remember I told my mother. "Don't let it bother you," she said, "just show them that you're better than that." I know it's a lot less now, not as much as my parents or my grandparents had to put up with. It was really difficult for them.

How was it for them?

My parents and grandparents really had problems. My mom had to quit school because of this. It's a true story. She went to the Irish Catholic grammar school—there wasn't the Italian American Catholic school at that time. One day my mother came home and complained that the nuns kept calling her "Dago," and so my grandfather took her out of that school. She went to public school for the last two years before she went to work. So, it's always been there. Today it's not as bad as it used to be

because there are lots of people who have proven to the world that Italian Americans are very valuable members of society and they have added a lot of value to it—that's why my children feel none of that today.

You went to Italy several times in your life. Do you recall the first time? Your emotions?

I was maybe 29 years old working for General Electric and they asked me to head a joint project with FIAT. So, I went to live in Turin for nine months. My parents insisted that I visit the family while I was in Italy. Now, I have to tell you—as a boy growing up, I wanted to be an American; but when I went to Italy and I visited the families, I fell in love. I remember the first time I went to Giulianova on a train from Turin. I kept asking myself, “How are they going to know it's me? I've never seen these people.”

But when the train came into the station my mother's first cousin and his son came running to me, grabbed me and brought me home! When I asked, “How did you know who I was?” they showed me a book with photographs of me as a child, when I made my First Holy Communion, when I got confirmed, when I graduated from high school—not just me, but my brother, aunts, uncles, and cousins, all in a big book! My folks used to send photographs and they would save them. I wanted to be in Italy! It was family, it was loyalty, it was... you just felt embraced and after I came back from Turin, I wanted to know more about my Italian background, more about who I was, where I came from. I became very proud of my background.

This is why you got involved in the Italian-American community and NIAF?

Exactly! After I sold my last company, my desire to be closer to my roots got stronger. I became actively involved with NIAF and I was a member of the Columbus Citizens Foundation, where I met the former chairman of NIAF, Joe Del Raso, who introduced me to the American University of Rome...

Now you are the chair of the University's board, which includes other members of the NIAF Board of Directors. What is the American University of Rome and why is it so dear to you?

I became chairman five years ago. The American University of Rome is a fully accredited university with credits that are valid for transfer in the US. The school was founded in 1969 and we are moving it forward. We have established four master's degrees. We are working to enroll more four-year students, and not just study abroad students. For me it's a way to lead people—not just Americans, because last year we had graduates from 17 different counties—to recognize the culture and the value of Rome and Italy, and its contribution to Western civilization. So my participation is driven by my love for Italian culture. And even though everything is taught in English, the students live physically immersed in Italian culture.

We cannot avoid mentioning your career, though it may not have a direct connection to your Italian ancestry. How did you develop this passion for science and engineering? You had an intuition about the power of the Internet even before it became what it is today.

Well, there is an Italian connection. My parents encouraged me to try everything, and said, don't worry about failing, if it doesn't work try something else. I was a strong early devotee of the internet, and left as the CEO of Cable & Wireless to join Network Solutions—a small company, but one that was on the forefront of the internet.

They recruited me when the company had 50 people, and we were going to build a big company. It was a tremendous success, but again it was pushing the envelope, asking, what else can it be? That's what helped drive my success. I ended up being CEO of three companies and then at age 59 gave up all of that to get back to my Italian roots, and add value to the Italian American culture. I told myself, I am done, I made enough for me and my family, I can live the way I want now. what I wanted to do was directed to Italian American things.

As the co-chair of NIAF, what is in your view the “right thing” the Foundation should be



doing today?

NIAF is a great organization. Its original focus was the recognition of the valuable things Italian Americans had done in this country. Today, there are millions of stories, all of us may tell you stories about our parents and our grandparents and so on. But there are so many young Italian Americans who don't relate to the culture. We don't want them to become Italians—they are Americans—but they do need to have a feeling for Italian culture and embrace it. Italian culture is marvelous and when anybody understands it, they fall in love with it.

So I think the most important thing for NIAF today is to figure out how to reach people who are a generation or two generations younger than me, so they can feel the value of their ancestral culture, understand it, be proud of it, be part of it. I think that's important if we want to keep NIAF going for the long term.

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