

**SEMPRE AVANTI**  
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## **(TOO) HIGH EXPECTATIONS**

**By Dona De Sanctis**

“Thank goodness ‘The Sopranos’ is finally over,” an Italian American lawyer commented recently. “Too bad we failed to get it off the air years ago.”

His remark is a good example of what some Italian Americans expect anti-defamation organizations like the Sons of Italy CSJ to accomplish. Such expectations are invariably dashed because they are too high. It is time for us to look at what anti-defamation efforts can realistically accomplish and what they have achieved so far.

### **“THE SOPRANOS” SOAPBOX**

When this series premiered in 1999, the Sons of Italy and its CSJ, along with other leading Italian American organizations, began meeting with HBO executives in New York City.

Our purpose was not to convince HBO to drop the series. That would have been naïve. Instead we hoped to persuade the cable network to produce other HBO programs that presented decent and even admirable Italian Americans real and fictional to counterbalance Tony Soprano, Paulie Walnuts and the many other unattractive characters on the series.

We brought them a number of “treatments” for both documentaries and feature films that fit the bill. The executives listened politely and at length, but never followed up on our suggestions. “The Sopranos” stayed on the air and HBO never produced any program that presented an Italian American in a positive light.

In retrospect, however, “The Sopranos” was the best thing that ever

happened to the Italian American anti-defamation movement. Here's why.

For the past eight years, this wildly popular show has received enormous approval both from television critics and the secret "gangsta-wanna-be" that lurks in the heart of millions of American men, including a number of our own guys.

From the very first episode, everybody loved "The Sopranos" except a relatively small but vocal minority of Italian Americans, led by the Sons of Italy CSJ, the National Italian American Foundation (NIAF) and Unico's Italian American One Voice Coalition.

From 1999 to 2007, every season premiere of "The Sopranos" created a media feeding frenzy which the Sons of Italy CSJ tapped by issuing a press release criticizing David Chase, its creator, and HBO, its producer.

The releases created controversy, which, in turn, constituted "news" and generated hundreds of radio, television and newspaper interviews. Most media requests came from journalists and talk show hosts who were fans of the show and wanted to defend it.

But rather than talk about whether or not "The Sopranos" was great art, the CSJ and other groups used their interviews to draw attention to the double standard of political correctness that "The Sopranos" revealed.

They pointed out that Italian Americans had to put up with seeing themselves represented by characters that would never have faced a TV camera had they been black, Jewish or American Indian.

In interview after interview, Italian American advocates pointed out the injustice that allowed a cable network to make millions of dollars denigrating the culture, religion, traditions and values of an estimated 26 million Americans of Italian

heritage.

The media strategy worked. “The Sopranos” brought the issue of Italian American stereotyping to the pages of this nation’s most important newspapers – The New York Times, The Washington Post, The Chicago Tribune, and The Boston Globe, to name only a few, as well as countless local daily and weekly newspapers coast to coast.

It was written up in Parade magazine, the most widely read magazine in the nation (32 million readers *every* Sunday). It made both broadband and cable news networks like NBC, FOX, ABC, CBS, and MSNBC.

It grabbed the attention of such talk show hosts as Howard Stern, Bob Grant and Tom Leykis, among others, who are syndicated both nationally and internationally, as well as local popular talk shows from Maine to Alaska.

And speaking of international coverage, our criticism of “The Sopranos” and its stereotyping was reported around the world--in Great Britain, in Italy and the rest of Europe. It was picked up in Australia and South Africa and even made The Taiwan Times.

In short, “The Sopranos” gave us a worldwide soapbox – the most effective one in years. Thanks to all that media attention, reporters and columnists now are far better educated about our position on stereotyping, while countless numbers of Italian Americans have become more informed and increasingly incensed about the enormous disrespect for their heritage shown by Hollywood and television. All thanks to David Chase and “The Sopranos.”

### **“SHARK TALE”**

We met similar criticism in 2004 when the CSJ worked with NIAF, Unico

and other Italian American organizations under the umbrella of an alliance called the Coalition Against Racial, Religious and Ethnic Stereotyping (CARRES) to draw attention to Steven Spielberg's children mafia cartoon, "Shark Tale."

No one in his right mind should have expected an alliance of about 30 Italian American organizations with no significant financial resources to bring down Spielberg's DreamWorks Studio, one of the most wealthy and powerful producers in Hollywood.

That was never CARRES's goal. Instead, CARRES kept the pressure up for a full year before the film was released in October 2004, by using Spielberg's name to attract media attention to the issue. In Hollywood and the rest of America, Steven Spielberg is much admired for his humanitarian efforts.

CARRES pointed out his hypocrisy in calling for an end to stereotyping at the very same time he stood to make millions of dollars from a children's movie that stereotyped Italian Americans.

The pressure worked. When the movie opened, a number of reviewers mentioned that the film stereotyping Italian Americans – a comment that had never been made about "The Godfather," "Mickey Blue Eyes," "Analyze This" or any of Robert De Niro's other mafia-theme movies. CARRES's efforts also forced the Italian government to shelve plans to give honorary Italian citizenship to De Niro, who starred in "Shark Tale," during the movie's premiere in Italy.

## **DAVID AND GOLIATH**

The struggle to ensure that Italian Americans are portrayed in a balanced and respectful manner by the entertainment, advertising and news industries is exhausting and frustrating. The battle is carried on by a relatively small group of Italian

American organizations and individuals who receive very little financial support or encouragement. They have managed to use the media to draw attention to the problem, but solving it takes more than interviews and press releases.

Now let's look at how another ethnic group defends its heritage. The Jewish Anti-Defamation League (ADL) has an annual budget of \$44 million and a staff of 150. Think about it. When was the last time you saw a character of Jewish heritage portrayed as a goon or a buffoon on television or in the movies?

If anti-defamation is important to Italian Americans, the average family, social club and business owner needs to pull out the checkbook and support organizations like the Sons of Italy, the NIAF and Unico.

Once anti-defamation efforts are adequately funded, Tony Soprano will become *persona non grata* and keep company with Steppin Fetchit, Amos and Andy, Little Black Sambo, and other once-popular but now-offensive stereotypes.

Until that happens, let's keep our hopes high but our expectations grounded in reality.

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