

SEMPRE AVANTI
March 2007

Word Count: 1,310

LA FESTA DELLA DONNA

By Dona De Sanctis

Every year on March 8, many Western nations, including Italy, celebrate Women's Day in recognition of the social, political and economic advances women have made since the dawn of the 20th century.

The origins of this holiday are uncertain. Some believe the date was chosen to commemorate a strike that Russian women workers held on March 8, 1917 in St. Petersburg to protest World War I and food shortages.

Others connect the day with a 1908 strike of women textile workers in New York City, who wanted to change their harsh working conditions. The owner of the factory locked them in the building, which caught fire, killing all 129 women.

But whatever its origin, Women's Day is an opportunity to review the progress women have made in exercising their civil rights and blazing new trails for themselves in society. In Italy, women are given bouquets of yellow mimosas on March 8. In America, the day goes by unnoticed, but that should not prevent us from reflecting on Italian American women and their achievements on this year's *Festa della Donna*.

UGLY GINA

What does it mean to be a woman of Italian heritage in 21st century America? Unfortunately, most people base their answer on what they learn from television or

the movies, where two stereotypes of Italian American women dominate.

An example of the first is found on *Ugly Betty*, an award-winning, prime-time television series on ABC, about a close-knit Puerto Rican family in New York City. The father is an illegal immigrant. His daughter works for a fashion magazine. A college graduate, Betty Suarez regularly triumphs over nasty co-workers because she is smart, kind and principled.

Her polar opposite is a neighbor, who is boorish, promiscuous and unemployed. Her name? Gina Gambora. Shallow and ignorant, her fashion statements include “big” hair, long fingernails and tight pants.

The second stereotype is at the opposite end of the spectrum where we find an elderly, overweight woman dressed in black and obsessed with force-feeding her family. This stereotype is promoted by the advertising industry to sell any product that has Italian ingredients.

AMAZING NANCY

Such stereotypes do not stand the test of reality, however. The truth is that despite very traditional upbringing, for more than a century Italian American women have been trailblazers who have racked up an astonishing record of “firsts.”

Among these pioneers we find Congresswoman **Nancy Pelosi**, who this year became the first woman ever elected Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives. The most powerful woman in America’s history, Pelosi is third in line for the U.S. presidency.

Among Pelosi’s contemporaries are **Catherine De Angelis, M.D.**, the first woman editor of the 116-year-old “Journal of the American Medical Association”

(JAMA); **Patricia Fili-Krushel**, who became the first woman ever to head a national television network when she took over ABC in 1988 and **Geraldine Ferraro**, whom history will remember as the first woman to run for national office on a major political party ticket when she was a candidate for the vice presidency in 1984.

A TRADITION OF ACHIEVEMENT

These trailblazers are part of a pantheon of outstanding women of Italian heritage. Others include **Mother Frances Cabrini**, the first American saint, who founded colleges, hospitals and orphanages in the early 20th century; labor leader **Angela Bambace**, who helped organize the International Ladies Garment Workers Union and became its first woman vice president; **Ella Grasso**, the first woman ever elected governor in her own right; **Bonnie Tiburzi**, the first woman commercial airline pilot; **Mary Lou Retton**, America's first Olympic gold medal gymnast, to mention only a few.

Their record of achievement is all the more remarkable because it occurred in only four generations, each distinguished by different expectations about the role women were expected to play at home and in society.

The first generation of Italian American women came over in the late 19th and early 20th centuries from small towns and villages in southern Italy. Their role was clearly defined as wife and mother whose responsibility was to raise large families and take care of the home. They prided themselves on their spotless kitchens, their homemade pasta and starched sheets.

Sometimes they worked outside the home as seamstresses in sweatshops or behind the counter in their husband's store, but their jobs were not careers. The sole

purpose of work was to put food on the table.

Strangely enough, however, the daughters that these very traditional women raised did not follow in their mothers' footsteps. The second generation of Italian American women came of age between two world wars. Unlike their mothers, they spoke fluent English, had at least high school educations and were far more comfortable living in America than their mothers ever were.

After graduation, they went to work but not in sweatshops and grocery stores. Instead, they found white collar office jobs and when they married they had far fewer children. Yet once they married, they often quit their jobs and devoted themselves to their families just as their mothers had.

But when these mothers raised the third generation of Italian American women, they sent their daughters to college instead of to the kitchen and reveled in their daughters' careers, achievements and earning power.

And now this generation of Italian American women is encouraging their daughters to take advantage of all the opportunities that are their birthright as Americans, including positions of power in the board rooms of corporations, the halls of government, the classrooms of academia and the playing fields of sports.

But they also expect them to nurture and protect their families as Italian women have done for centuries. *Casa senza donna, barca senza timone*, as the saying goes...a home without a woman is a boat without a tiller.

These are daunting tasks but Italian American women are up to them. For centuries Italian men have recognized the strength of their women, sometimes elevating their powers to mythic proportions.

An example of this is in Susan Caperna Lloyd's moving book "No Pictures in My Grave." It begins at her Sicilian grandmother's funeral. As he stood at his mother's coffin, Lloyd's father took a picture of himself and his son out of his wallet and placed it in his dead mother's hands. "This way she'll pray for us," he told his daughter.

And Lloyd thought, "Not even death could destroy in my father's mind, his belief in the power of his mother to protect her family even from beyond the grave."

HER RIGHTFUL PLACE

So there you have it. A journey of four generations over the span of a little more than a century from the ancient towns and villages of southern Italy where their families had lived for centuries to positions of leadership and power in America's most important cities.

But despite these achievements, Italian American women have yet to be treated with respect by the mass media, which consistently misrepresents them with narrow and unflattering stereotypes.

So in celebration of the year 2007's *Festa della Donna* let's send a message to Hollywood that it is time to take the Italian American woman out of the kitchen or those tight capri pants and put her where she belongs among the strong, talented and educated women of 21ST century America.

We can start by contacting ABC to protest the characterization of Gina Gambora. To complain on-line, go to www.abc.com and click on "contact abc." For letters, write to ABC Audience Information, 500 Buena Vista Street, Burbank, California 91521-4551.

Dona De Sanctis, Ph.D., is deputy executive director of the Order Sons of Italy in America (OSIA), the oldest and largest national organization in the U.S. for men and women of Italian heritage. To join the Sons of Italy Commission for Social Justice and fight defamation, contact her at ddesanctis@osia.org or call (202) 547-2900.