

SEMPRE AVANTI

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TIME TO SAY “GOOD BYE”

By Dona De Sanctis

This is my last “Sempre Avanti” column. In September, I resigned as deputy executive director of the Order Sons of Italy in America (OSIA) and will no longer be responsible for any of OSIA’s advocacy work on behalf of Italian Americans.

This brings to an end nearly 16 years of anti-defamation work on my part: ten years with the National Italian American Foundation (NIAF) and almost six years with OSIA. It was time to step aside. I leave with mixed feelings. We have scored some major victories, but so much remains to be done.

SIGNS OF PROGRESS

On the plus side, I believe the media, the American public and Italian Americans themselves are far more aware of the sting of stereotyping than they were 10 or 15 years ago.

When I started advocacy work in the early 1990s, the familiar stereotype of us as either Don Corleone or Joey Tribbiani was so ingrained in American pop culture that most people did not even consider them offensive-- including many Italian Americans! While it is true that these stereotypes persist today, they are not as prevalent as before. An ever-growing number of Italian Americans now complain about them and our society is taking notice.

Some of this improvement is due to strategies that the Sons of Italy CSJ has used to fight stereotyping. Our main targets were the advertising, news and entertainment industries. Some of our most successful campaigns were aimed at America’s biggest institutions: Coca-Cola, the American Red Cross, Public Television and Steven Spielberg’s DreamWorks movie studio.

For example, we convinced Coke to pull an offensive three-minute film, *Mafia Movie Madness*, from more than 10,000 movie screens in the U.S. and Canada. We pressured a reluctant American Red Cross to advise its 960 chapters not to use the dinner theater production, “Tony ‘n Tina’s Wedding” or “The Sopranos’ Last Supper” as fund-raisers.

We got Public Television to change its website on the Medicis that presented them as Renaissance mobsters, and we embarrassed Steven Spielberg with a relentless year-long media campaign that criticized him for producing *Shark Tale*, the first full-length animated children’s Mafia cartoon.

As further indication of our clout, we even convinced the Italian government to cancel conferring of honorary Italian citizenship on no less than Robert De Niro, who voiced the role of the Godfather shark in Spielberg’s film. The honor was supposed to take place during the movie’s premiere in Italy, but was postponed for more than two years.

COLUMBUS REDEEMED

One of our most important efforts was aimed at restoring the reputation of Christopher Columbus. For that, we produced the report, “Columbus: Fact vs. Fiction” which used historical facts to challenge allegations that he was a slave trader who committed genocide. Our report, which is available for free at www.osia.org, is now used in social studies curricula in a number of school districts. I urge you to download it and make sure that your children’s school incorporates it in its social studies or history curriculum.

Our anti-defamation efforts were also aimed at educating Madison Avenue ad agencies, which produce stereotypical commercials. First, with help from other activist groups, we created a report that gave concrete proof of advertising stereotypes. (It also is available for free on our site.)

Then we sent that report to AdWeek, the most influential trade magazine for professionals in advertising, public relations and marketing. As a result, last year the magazine published an article, "Take Off the Apron" that urged Madison Avenue to stop stereotyping Italian Americans and other ethnic groups. (See our site for the article.)

Concrete proof that our efforts have made a difference came last September when ABC's "20/20" did a segment on Hollywood stereotypes and included Italian Americans, along with Blacks and Asians. The program aired coast to coast, marking the first time a national primetime television program dealt with Italian American stereotyping.

"FUHGETTABOUDIT"

It's bad enough when Public Television presents Italian Americans as thugs, but what do you say when a middle school in Middle America puts on a play whose characters are ignorant Italian American mobsters? It happened in Batavia, Illinois last fall with "Fuhgettaboudit: A Little Mobster Comedy."

OSIA and its CSJ helped form a coalition of local Italian American organizations that organized a media campaign to draw attention to the problem. They held a press conference, gave radio and newspaper interviews and made TV appearances. For four days, the story dominated Chicago's local news on the radio and TV. I predict it will be a long, long time before schools in Chicagoland forget the negative publicity the school and its principal received as a result of our efforts.

But for me, the most significant aspect of the Batavia school play incident was that so many important organizations put aside issues of turf to work together: OSIA, NIAF, the Italic Institute of America, the Joint Civic Committee of Italian Americans, and the Italian American

Human Relations Foundation of Chicago. Such cooperation was unheard of 15 years ago and is a significant indication of genuine progress for there is only strength in unity.

THE FUTURE

But anyone who still thinks that Italian Americans don't have an image problem should visit the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, DC, which operates on your tax dollars, by the way. There you will find that the only Italian Americans whose portraits are displayed are Madonna, Rocky Graziano and Al Capone.

More examples can be found in Italian America magazine's ironically titled column, "It's Only A Movie," that shows how stereotyping has invaded all levels of our society from children's books, to political campaigns, to high school sports.

Much has been accomplished but more remains to be done. So here's a suggestion. Do away with scholarships. Think about it. The U.S. Census Bureau states that our median annual income is \$61,300 and two-thirds of us work in white-collar jobs. Clearly, we are part of America's prosperous middle class. Italian American students can find scholarships from any number of sources. Do they still need ones targeted for Italian Americans?

Most Sons of Italy lodges give local students small scholarships ranging from \$500 to \$2,000 each. I believe many other Italian American organizations and clubs have similar scholarships. Let's do away with these small grants. They barely cover a student's text-book expenses anyway.

Instead, let's use the money to sponsor local events like conferences or special exhibits on our heritage. What if the money were used to donate books and DVDs on Italian American history and contributions to local public libraries and schools? Or to send a teacher to study in

Italy for the summer to perfect his or her Italian, making for a better teacher and bigger Italian classes?

Make no mistake. The only effective way to eradicate a harmful stereotype is to replace it with a positive image. No one will do this for us. We need to start at the local community level, educating our friends and neighbors (and family!) about who we are. A scholarship helps educate one student. A culture grant educates a community.

THE ONE VOICE COALITION

There are a number of tireless crusaders that I was honored to work with: the officers of OSIA's Commission for Social Justice, the NIAF, the Italic Institute of America, and our one-man army, **Manny Alfano**, founder of the Italian American One Voice Coalition, a national activist network. Manny was the first to use the Internet and E-mail to monitor the way Italian Americans are portrayed by the U.S. entertainment, advertising and news industries.

First he taps the Internet to find out how to contact the decision-maker who authorized the insulting commercial, the slanted news report or the offensive movie or television show. Next, he E-mails this information to thousands of activists in his coast-to-coast network. The result is a bombardment of emails and telephone calls to the offending party. His efforts have done much to educate corporate CEOs, newspaper editors and Hollywood studio moguls about how offensive and unkind Italian Americans find these stereotypes.

So my parting suggestion is for you to join the Italian American One Voice Coalition national activist network. You will stay informed about the issues and take action against the stereotypes. Plus, it is absolutely free.

As Manny says, "The power of the Internet is vast...we intend to improve our use of that power to let those who disrespect our ethnicity know that we will no longer remain silent in the

face of defamation.” See www.italianamericanonevoice.org or write to him at mannyalfano@comcast.net. There is no Italian American advocate/activist whose passion and sincerity I respect more than Manny Alfano’s.

TIME TO SAY GOOD-BYE

Finally, I want to thank editor Paul Basile for the opportunity he gave me several years ago to write this column for Fra Noi. I also thank all the other editors who have picked up this syndicated column for their newspapers around the country. And finally, I thank all of you for caring enough about our heritage to read it. I will still be an activist, of course, but as a private citizen, adding my voice to Manny’s and his coalition. The fight continues. Sempre Avanti!

Dona De Sanctis, Ph.D., is the former 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. She now works for OSIA as a consultant/editor in charge of its national magazine, ITALIAN AMERICA. To subscribe, see www.osia.org or email Dona at d-desanctis@osia.org