

# A Conversation with NIAF President John M. Viola

LAVINIA PISANI

The doors of the National Italian American Foundation (NIAF) opened up to current President & Operating Officer John M. Viola when he was 16 years old. It was Diana Femia, a family's friend, who first took Viola to a Gala Weekend, which inspired him to stay involved for 12 years before taking the reins of the community.

It was during that event that Viola felt the beat of his "Italianess," as he likes to refer to his origins.

More specifically, it was the after party of the Gala Weekend that still has a special place in Viola's memory. He remembers the moment he was gathered together with other young Italian-Americans around a piano in the lobby. It was "full of thousand of jubilant *paesani* that sang the Lou Monte and Neapolitan standards, which my grandparents taught me with the likes of Tommy Lasorda and Jerry Vale."

Viola keeps Italian music to his core.

In fact, when I asked him about the best Italian-American experience he has had in New York so far, Viola answered the *Festa del Giglio* in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, which is the neighborhood he was born in. "Every time I hear the first beats of that song *"O Giglio e Paradiso"* my foot starts to tap,

like something I awakened inside of me and I just feel great about life," Viola writes.

The fest has been going on for over 100 years in the neighborhood thanks to Nola's immigrants that spread the tradition in Williamsburg. Even though Viola's family is not from the town close to Naples, his roots come from the Campania and Sicily regions.

"There is just something about [this fest] that makes me feel very blessed to be Italian American and very blessed to be a New Yorker," Viola writes.

He is passionate and committed to spread the culture.

NIAF Chairman Joseph Del Raso felt these two characteristics, which ended up being the reasons why he pushed the board to trust the leadership of a young Viola. "Because to be frank, there were many in the Foundation who thought the idea of bringing in a 28-year-old to lead the most important group in the Italian American community was absolute insanity, but he really believed in me and really believed in my passion for what this community could be," Viola writes.

The kind of insanity that turns out well.

**How do you feel about leading the Italian-American community as a 32-year-old? What difficulties and opportunities are you facing because of your age?**

Being entrusted with the day-to-day operations of an organiza-



Current President & Operating Officer of NIAF, John M. Viola

tion like NIAF (one that I think is fairly important to the Italian American community) is an incredible responsibility, particularly at the age of 32. It really humbles me to think that the Board of Directors had the confidence in me to place me amongst this foundation's leadership as a 28 year old. I feel a great sense of responsibility not just to the people who have

worked so hard in past generations to build our community into what it is, but of course to the Italian Americans of my own generation. I feel like we must build a foundation that they will want to participate in, now and in the future. In terms of difficulties and opportunities, obviously it's hard in any bring peo-

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ple around to your ideas when you are by far the youngest person in the room. This is even more evident in our Italian culture, which in Italy and in the Italian American community has a clear and deep-seeded respect for the older generations. At the same time that makes for a lot of incredible opportunities because I am of an age that is still developing habits and strategies, and I get to learn from the most accomplished and engaged members of our community every day. And young people, who are obviously the future of our foundation and our community, might find it easier to participate when the face in front of them is someone from their own generation and not someone who might be a little out of touch with their everyday life. It's no coincidence that the median age of NIAF's membership has dropped significantly in the last few years. You can see in Italy how difficult it is for the younger generation to break into real leadership, but I think those unspoken boundaries are starting to crack and I feel like as much as the Italian American community reflects our Italian cousins, perhaps I get to be part of that growing chorus of young voices who are stepping up and taking on the challenges of the future.

#### What is the biggest lesson you have learned from NIAF Chairman Joseph Del Raso?

He's taught me a lot of things and has been a big part of my growth as a professional and a leader, but I think the most important thing I've learned from him is the idea that our Italian identity doesn't have to be based solely on nostalgia and warm, fuzzy memories, but can be based on new and dynamic relationships between Italy and her diaspora around the world. Joe's done a great job of building our profile and our participation in Italy and he's made a conscious effort to make NIAF true participants and not just observers to our Mother Country. And in a time where ethnic groups are assimilating at a rapid pace, that's been no easy task and I think he and NIAF's Board have done a great job in that evolution. He also taught me an incredible Abruzzese saying that translates, "Once the milk goes sour, it doesn't go sweet," and that was a great growth lesson for me and I quote him all the time. Sometimes things just don't work out to your designs, no matter how much you want them to, and you have to move on and be confident that there are other ways to pursue your vision instead of wasting time trying to do it your



NIAF President John M. Viola with Pope Francis

way.

#### What are the three biggest missions you want to achieve as NIAF President & Chief Operating Officer?

I think first and foremost, I want to see our community's institutions grow stronger and closer together. We've got 26 million of us in this country and if we're going to ask them to maintain their culture and to participate with us, they deserve efficient, transparent, and selfless servant-leadership and I think we can give them that. I think the future is one where a lot of groups are going to have to work closely together and perhaps even begin to merge into one another and I think that's a very good thing. I think we've got all of the conditions to be an ethnic group that defies the odds and maintains a healthy yet integrated cultural uniqueness... but that only happens together. Secondly, I think we need to focus on educating Italian Americans about modern Italy and educating modern Italians about Italian Americans. There's this huge gap in our perceptions of one another and I think many people on both sides, and in Italian diaspora communities throughout the world, don't recognize this great opportunity to work together in a new global context. Our diaspora is 200 million incredibly successful people around the world and we can do a lot of business and cultural exchange if we are conscious of learning more about who one another are. And this is a recommitment to the younger generation of Italian Americans too, it says that institutions like NIAF aren't just about memory, we are about the value that our Italian heritage

ads to our modern lives. My third mission would be to find ways to reclaim the Italian language in our community. Because of our unique history here, we're a community that's lost its own ethnic tongue and I know there is passion and interest in younger generations to take it back because the above missions are much more likely and much more real if our diaspora can speak in one language. It takes us from being tourists to being truly Italians and it's something I believe is very achievable.

#### The Italian language is almost dead among the Italian-American community because of former generations, who were forced to speak in English. What do you believe should be done to avoid this loss?

Like I said above, I think the reclamation of language is imperative and certainly I think this loss of language is the result of a very unique and, in many ways, painful history for our community. I think our community needs, first and foremost, to talk about why it's so important to reclaim the language, not just for heritage and pride, but for the opportunities it provides in a globalized world for us to do business and participate in Italy. For children and grandchildren of Italy all over the world, Italy should be a center for opportunity and in many ways a doorway to the rest of Europe for us. In a world where everyone is increasingly seeking out ways to participate as "global citizens", we have the opportunity to do that through our Italianess, and the language is essential to that. I think we need to show people why it's valu-

able, I think we need to provide resources for the teaching of Italian amongst our community, and I think we need to support the good works of those who are out there spreading the language. NIAF can't do that alone, so we need to have a concentrated and efficient community plan that, I personally think, should prioritize the teaching of Italian to Italian Americans in particular, and not just trying to go out and spread the language however we can. We have a personal case and a personal history with this language and I think it's our responsibility to be a little selfish on this.

#### During a former interview with La Voce di New York, you say that Italian-Americans could serve as a role model for Italy. Can you tell us a bit more about this thought?

I suppose role model is too bumbling of a phrase. I guess what I mean is that I believe modern Italy and contemporary Italians can look at what their countrymen have done over the generations in the many places where we have built our lives. I think our community retains the best of Italian ingenuity, work ethic, dedication, and values... but we've had the chance to test those tools in the soil of American meritocracy, in a place where opportunity really does come to those who put in the most work... and sometimes that's simply not the case in Italy. Maybe we can be a mirror or a lens into the Italian soul and the Italian ability. Perhaps we provide a sample of an alternative to Italian civic life.

#### What do you believe are the biggest differences between Italians that were born in Italy and those who were born in

America?

I think the major difference between Italians born in Italy and those of us in the diaspora is that Italians abroad tend to have much more outward pride in our Italianess. I think when you take Italians, no matter what generation, out of Italy, perhaps they realize how easy it is to take for granted the incredible culture and values that we're all so lucky to be born into. I mean, politically it's easier to be so proud of your heritage in a country where you are one of thousands of different ethnic groups, but I also think we, in this country, have a history of ethnic pride that's just hard to replicate back in Italy. I often interact with Italians who have come to America and they tell me how proud of their Italianess they are when they participate with NIAF and all of these Italian Americans. That makes me really proud.

#### What does "italianità" mean for you?

For me, "italianità" is something that comes from different places for different people. For me personally, it's my roots, it's my blood, it's an undeniable set of personality traits, and values, and habits, and tendencies that I have to chalk up to my ethnicity. It's the idea that when I interact with other people who are Italian, who feel Italian, who care about Italy, I have this unspoken connection and I think in some people that doesn't even have to come from an actual Italian ethnicity as much as perhaps an Italophile. Our culture is so accessible and so human and I think there are countless ways for people to attach to it and to let it be a big part of who they are.