

A Way to the Stars

Vincent Cuccia is the first recipient of the IAM'S Graduate Fellowship provided by NIAF

by Dwayne Saunders

It's a long time since Italian Americans held one of the worst records for attending college and graduate school thanks in no small part to the efforts of The National Italian American Foundation (NIAF) and the John D. Calandra Italian American Institute, Queens College/CUNY.

In the beginning of this year, NIAF provided the Italian American Museum, an affiliate of the Calandra Institute, with a grant to support an Italian American graduate student at Queens College at CUNY. Congressman Frank Guarini, Chairman of NIAF, explained it was to, "afford the opportunity to young talented people who are looking for an education."

The first recipient of the Italian American Museum's Graduate Fellowship is Vincent P. Cuccia who is earning his MA in Creative Writing.

Mr. Cuccia, half Sicilian and half Neapolitan, was born in the Bronx but raised in Wappingers Falls, New York. At a young age he was diagnosed with a visual impairment that could not be corrected. His parents were firm believers in education, though, and insisted he go to college. Consequently, Mr. Cuccia went on to graduate from Hunter College with a BA in Creative Writing.

Although Mr. Cuccia always wanted to be a writer, he got "stuck". "I was afraid to write and publish, because the writing classes I was in were more destructive than constructive. I also had no opportunities to write." It wasn't until he started working for the Italian American Museum that he got his chance to write.

Three years ago, he started facilitating an Italian American writers group at the Museum, The Calandra Writers Workshop. "That group is like a family. We bring food and eat and drink while going over each other's work. The atmosphere is so supportive I found myself wanting to write again." And after years of silence, he looks forward to his first publication.

In 2003 Dr. Joseph V. Scelsa, the president of the Museum, asked Mr. Cuccia to write articles for the *American Italian Review*.



Vincent P. Cuccia

"I told Dr. Scelsa that I was looking for more opportunities to write, and he took me seriously." He liked the work so much that he promoted Mr. Cuccia to Managing Editor. "I have learned so much about myself and my community from working on this paper. It is the most interesting job I have ever had."

A&I is a quarterly newspaper that covers news items about Italy, The City University of New York, and Italian Americans. It premiered two years ago as one of the many efforts by the Italian American Museum to preserve and promote Italian Americana.

Around this time, Mr. Cuccia considered going back to school for a masters but decided against it for financial reasons. "Dr. Scelsa seemed disappointed that I was not going back to school. I felt bad, but I didn't know what to do." Then Dr. Scelsa told Mr. Cuccia to apply for the Graduate Fellowship and he won.

"I am honored to be the first recipient of this fellowship," said Mr. Cuccia. "The Museum and NIAF set a precedent by choosing a visually impaired creative writer candidate. Their trust and support is empowering."

By financially supporting higher education, NIAF and the Museum are encouraging and empowering Italian Americans to achieve more. As Congressman Frank Guarini said, "The idea of America as a place where you can reach for the stars is only possible through education."

A Second Check for the Museum UNICO Supports IAM



Left to Right: UNICO National East Coast Aide from the Queensboro Chapter-NY, Lou Di Rico; UNICO National Immediate Past President from the Verona Chapter-NJ, John Alati; Dr. Scelsa, UNICO National President from the San Diego Chapter-CA, Frank Caperino and Andy Governale from the Fairfield Chapter-NJ.

Last month, at the third annual gala for the Italian American Museum, UNICO presented a check for \$5,000 to the Museum, the second installment of their pledge to provide \$25,000 over a five-year period. This support will help the Museum, temporarily located at 28 W 44th St. 17th fl., to continue exploring the rich cultural heritage of Italy and Italian Americans by presenting the individual and collective struggles and achievements of Italians and their heirs to the American way of life. In English UNICO translates as "only one of its kind", but also functions as an acronym for U-Unity, N-Neighborliness, I-Integrity, C-Charity, and O-Opportunity. It is a service organization similar to Lions or Rotary whose mission is to work on both national and community activities that uplift the prestige of Italian Americans. "We have a responsibility to uplift the image of Italian Americans," said Lou DeRico, the Special Assistant to the President of UNICO, "and we feel the Museum does that. What better endeavor to support?"

V.P.C.

by Francesca Di Meglio

BOOKS/ Philip Cannistraro and Gerald Meyer Editors

Light on Italian American Radicalism

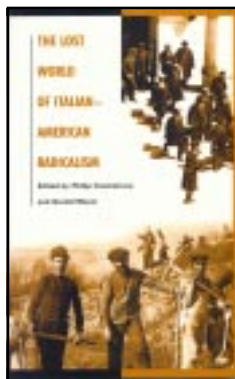
Pizza, pasta, *The Godfather*, and assimilation. That is the abridged version of the Italian immigration story that most Americans know. But whole chunks have been missing from that history—until now.

In *The Lost World of Italian-American Radicalism* (Praeger, 2003), Editors Professors Philip Cannistraro and Gerald Meyer open one's eyes to the contributions Italian Americans made to then radical causes – from the organization of labor unions to modern day feminism and the fight for gay rights. As a result, this book is a must-read for anyone seeking a fuller picture of radicalism in the United States.

Unlike others, Cannistraro and Meyer do not paint a sugarcoated portrait of Italian Americans. Instead, they chose 16 selections from noted authors, including Rudolph Vecoli and Jennifer Guglielmo, that feature astute and honest observations about everything from anarchists Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti's execution to homophobia in the Italian American community.

This refreshing collection is not only a history text. Ultimately, it is about coming to terms with your ethnic identity – and learning to relate to others who are different. "The root of Italian American radicalism in the literature of the late twentieth century goes back to the family, is unceasingly about the family, as it struggles with the complexities of its own ethnicity and the divergent paths that children of families take regarding how they are going to live and whom they are going to love," writes Mary Jo Bona in chapter 15 about women's radical novels.

Bona goes on to analyze the experience of lesbians in the Italian American community,



but her point about family includes all Italian Americans and particularly the ones spotlighted in this book. The labor unions were extensions of the family. Jackie DiSalvo's piece about white Civil Rights leader Father James Groppi concludes that, while he was in the church, Groppi's congregation served as his family. In Julia Lisella's well-written article about writer Rosa Zagnoni Marinoni, Lisella points out that Italian American women gained power from the family and not necessarily from public roles in the community.

Readers notice that once individuals accepted their roles within this larger family of the Italian American community, they had to find a way to identify with other ethnic groups. A shared interest in better working conditions, Communism, feminism, or Civil Rights united Italians with Greeks, Irish, Spanish, and, certainly, African Americans. Guglielmo explains that Italians were classified as non-whites when they first arrived to the United States, which made them targets for discrimination. This identification actually helped them relate with other immigrants, who were also outsiders in the New World.

The book, however, also shows that Italian Americans had their own prejudices – from the competition between Italians and Jews in the labor movement to outright racism against African Americans. Taking on the trappings of the American Caucasian – refraining from speaking Italian, avoiding discussions of their religious beliefs – was part of the

assimilation process. But Italians paid a cost for Americanization. In addition to losing tradition and losing a connection to Italy, Italian Americans gave up their radical history. Thanks to Cannistraro and Meyer, the community is now being reclaimed.