

NIAF's Star-Studded Gala

At the NIAF Awards Gala, Secretary of State Powell Reaffirms the US-Italy Friendship

by Vincent P. Cuccia

"I want to thank God for giving me a head start in life by making me Italian American," Carmella LaSpada, the founder of No Greater Love (NGL), proudly stated at the National Italian American Foundation's (NIAF) 29th annual awards gala this past October 16th. NIAF's gala celebration, which was held at the Hilton Washington & Towers, is one of the most premier annual events of Washington DC. It attracts 3,000 people from over 40 states and everybody who is anybody attended. The honorees list was an astounding who's who of Italian American pride.

The gala opened with a moving tribute to the late Christopher Reeve, who back in 2001, along with his wife Dana Morosini Reeve, received NIAF's "One America Award."

Secretary of State Colin L. Powell addressed the 3,000 guests. He started by extending congratulations to NIAF on behalf of President George W. Bush for their 29 years of hard work, dedication and service to the community. He thanked Italy and Italians for being "steadfast partners in the cause of freedom." Italy has supported the United States' efforts in Iraq. Regarding Italy's inclusion in the United Nations Security Council, Powell made no promises except to say, "We don't forget our friends." Powell also recounted childhood memories growing up in the Bronx and learning much from Italian American mentors. As a child of Jamaican immigrants, he often connected with other children of immigrants and their parents.

NIAF chairman Frank Guarini introduced one of Italy's highest-ranking Governmental officials, Honorable Franco Frattini, then Minister of Foreign Affairs (Gianfranco Fini is now the new minister). Frattini spoke of Italy's role in helping the U.S. fight terrorism, and the close relationship between our two countries.

The Deus was studded with political luminaries. There were U.S. Congressmen John Mica and Charlie Rangel and Assistant Secretary of State Patricia de Stacy Harrison. Frank Libutti, Undersecretary, Department of Homeland Security, and Janet Napolitano, Governor of Arizona also attended with Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia.

The entertainment began with impressions by Fred Travalena. He poked fun at the speech patterns of both Senator John Kerry and President George Bush. He also imitated the great crooners of yesteryear and today: Dean Martin, Tony Bennet and, of course, Frank Sinatra.

Then actor/comedian Tony Danza took over as Master of Ceremonies. Tony Danza, who currently hosts his own talk show on ABC, started his career as an Italian American taxi driver on the hit television show "Taxi". He went on to add a little Italian Americana to the show "Who's the Boss." Throughout the evening, Danza intermittently reported the scores of the World Series as it was being played out that night.



Left then Italian Foreign Minister Franco Frattini (left), Luciano Pavarotti (center) and Secretary of State Colin Powell. Above Tim McGraw and Yogi Berra

The honorees and the presenters were Italian American leaders in business, sports, art, government and entertainment. Baseball legend Yogi Berra presented the NIAF award to Grammy Award-winning country music singer, and son of baseball player Dough McGraw, Tim McGraw. McGraw's mother's family came from Bologna and Naples and settled in Louisiana. Joseph Volpe, general manager of The Metropolitan Opera inducted opera's greatest living tenor, Luciano Pavarotti into the NIAF Italian American Hall of Fame in Music. Pavarotti is most famous for his portrayal of Rudolfo from Puccini's *La Bohem* and Mario from Puccini's *Tosca*. Major General Raymond T. Odierno, whose United States Army division captured Saddam Hussein, presented Carmella LaSpada with the NIAF Special Achievement Award in Humanitarian Service with No Greater Love (NGL). LaSpada founded NGL in 1971, and it is the only humanitarian, educational, non-profit organization in

the United States solely dedicated to providing annual programs of remembrance, friendship and care for families who lost a loved one in the service of our country or by an act of terrorism. NGL is committed to freedom, human dignity and the idea that "the beginning of the end of war lies in remembrance."

Senator Bill Bradley presented Joseph J. Plumeri, chairman and CEO of Willis Group Holdings Limited, with the NIAF Special Achievement Award in Business. Plumeri's, whose motivational slogan is "Success is never final. Failure is never fatal. All that is important is courage and faith," said that everybody wants the same thing-to be motivated; to feel good; and to be told they are attractive.

Then Faith Hill sang a rousing rendition of "Happy Birthday" to Luciano Pavarotti, whose birthday was only a few days earlier. It was then that the great tenor announced that he would retire from singing in October of 2005.

Dominic Massaro President of the American Society of Italian Legions of Merit

*New York State Supreme Court Justice
Dominic R. Massaro, Cavaliere di
Gran Croce della Repubblica Italiana,
newly installed president of the
American Society of the Italian
Legions of Merit speaking before the
Society at its annual Christmas Gala
on Dec. 7th 2004.
(Photo by Vito Catalano)*



This year NIAF awarded more than \$1.3 million in scholarships and grants to students across the U.S. and Italy. At the gala, scholarship recipient Roberto Iarussi sang "The Star-Spangled Banner." NIAF also announced two new scholarships in honor of the late James Cantalupo, former McDonald's Chairman and CEO, and the other in honor of Jack Valenti, former President and CEO of the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA).

Recognizing the younger generation, NIAF organized its 8th annual youth gala which attracted nearly 300 young Americans of Italian descent from 25 states. Blind Olympic athlete and motivational speaker Rich Ruffalo was honored at the NIAF Youth Gala for his achievements in public speaking, education and athletics. Afterwards, the young adults, along with many gala attendees, enjoyed a post-gala dessert buffet, coffee and dancing.

NIAF is involved in helping to send an American to the Italian Parliament. In a recent interview with Dom Serafini, the editor and publisher of "VideoAge," the world's second largest international TV trade magazine, told NIAF, "For over forty years, Italians residing outside Italy have wanted to exercise their right to vote in national elections without returning to Italy." But Serafini says, "In 2006 Italian citizens living outside of Italy can vote via mail to elect a total of six senators and 12 deputies-Italians in North and Central America will elect one senator and two deputies." This initiative will give Italian Americans a direct link with the Italian government and that means that their "business, political and cultural activities will be brought to the table for discussion," says Serafini.

NIAF is a non-profit, non-partisan foundation dedicated to promoting the contributions of Italian Americans. The foundation has a wide-range of programs that provide scholarships and grants, legislative internships in Congress, conferences and cultural seminars. For more information, visit their website at www.niaf.org.