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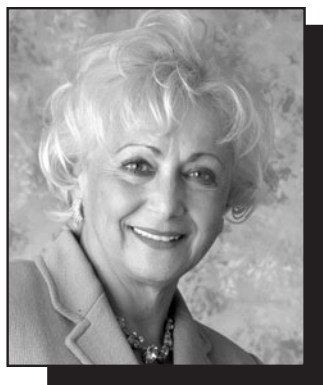
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## AFFILIATED ORGANIZATIONS

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## Gagliardo's words still ring true

*by Jo Ann Serpico, President*

In 2000, Joseph M. Gagliardo was president of the Joint Civic Committee of Italian Americans. His words at the Dante Award Luncheon on April 18 of that year made a lasting impression on me.

Recently, I called Joe and asked for his permission to share his speech with our readers. Although eight years have gone by, the message that he addresses in "How an Insensitive Person Became Sensitive" is still the primary concern of the Joint Civic Committee of Italian Americans.

Thank you, Joe. We take great pride in our ancestry. Let us continue to demand our rightful positive recognition.

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Christopher Columbus blazed a trail to the New World in 1492. Since then, over 500 years have passed. Let's consider what kind of influence Italians have had on our daily existence in America, as we embark on a family vacation to Washington, D.C.

By the way, America is named after Amerigo Vespucci.

In the morning, you hear the loud ring of your alarm. Guglielmo Marconi is responsible for perfecting wireless transmission.

As you fight off the sleepy feeling, you turn on the three way light in your bedroom to its brightest — that 3-way bulb was invented by Alessandro Dandini.

As you are in the shower, you hum "Born in the U.S.A." — a song written by Bruce Springsteen, whose mother's maiden name is Zirilli. You could have just as easily been humming a song by Frank Sinatra, Henry Mancini, Madonna (Ciccone), or countless other writers or performers.

As you go down to the breakfast table, you stop to get a steaming hot cup of coffee from your Mr. Coffee machine. That machine was invented by Vince Marotta.

As you sit down to read the paper, your throat is scratchy, so you pop a cough drop into your mouth. Cough drops were created by Vincent Ciccone.

As you round your family up and get them into your Chrysler Minivan, a company that was turned around by Lee Iacocca in the '80s, you notice that your son's Red Flyer Wagon is still sitting in the driveway. Italian immigrant Antonio Pasin developed the wagon in 1917.

You are finally at the airport and on the plane when the pilot shares the historical tidbit that Bonnie Tiburzi was the first woman pilot in commercial aviation. She was hired by American Airlines in 1973.

On the plane, you and your family relax and watch "It's a Wonderful Life" by Frank Capra.

As the plane begins its descent, the pilot offers you historical facts about your vacation spot:

The District of Columbia is named after Christopher Columbus.

The words in the Bill of Rights, "All men are created equal" were suggested to Thomas Jefferson by Filippo Mazzei, who wrote, "All men are by nature equally free and independent."

Two of the original signers of the Declaration of Independence were of Italian origin — William Paca and Ceasar Rodney.

Charles Bonaparte founded the FBI in 1908.

Geraldine Ferarro was the first woman to run for national office when she ran for president in 1984.

Finally, as you pass over the Holocaust Museum, you are told that more than 85 percent of Jews were saved as a result of efforts of its citizens and the clergy.

Why am I sensitive?

Notwithstanding the many accomplishments and contributions that have been made by Italian Americans, the media, especially the film industry, has created a "Berlin Wall of Italian Stereotyping."

Since 1928, there have been 1,057 films that Hollywood has produced about Italians — 73 percent (770) of those portrayed the Italian characters as violent criminals, buffoons or bigots; 27 percent (287) had positive portrayals.

On A&E, a "Biography" theme week on family businesses featured the Wallenda, DuPont, Kellogg and Coors families. The producers passed over the Gallo family, which launched the California wine industry, the Cafaro family, which developed the shopping mall, and the Ghiradelli family, famous for its chocolates. Instead they chose the Gambino crime family.

Italian mobsters have even invaded children's shows. For example, the "Animaniacs" cartoon series features a group of Mafioso pigeons known as the Goodfeathers.

Why is this wrong?

It is not based on fact. The Department of Justice estimates that there are roughly 5,000 Americans involved in organized crime, and not all of them are Italian. When you compare that to millions of Italians in the United States, a minuscule minority is tarring the overwhelming majority.

Notwithstanding the absence of fact, 75 percent of Americans think Italians are into organized crime.

Surveys show that this same negative thought process also permeates the minds of children. This is a double whammy, because the perpetuation will continue, and our children and grandchildren will still have to battle these destructive shadows that are cast upon them.

Negative stereotypes portrayed in the media are also wrong because:

- The wrong role models are being supplied to society, especially American youth.
- Those negative stereotypes betray the generations that worked so hard to help build America.
- Community acceptance does not make it right: Slavery was once accepted by society.
- The First Amendment does not make it morally right.