



## **Columbus Citizen Foundation. Interview with Louis Tallarini**

Luigi Boccia (September 29, 2007)



As we are getting closer to the Columbus Day Parade, the President of the Columbus Citizen Foundation agreed to be interviewed and share with us his future plans and mission.

Mr. Tallarini is a successful businessman and the owner of a Manhattan based company, Value Investors, in real estate. Born 60 years ago in New Rochelle (NY) to American born Italians, he lives now in Westchester where he enjoys life with his family.

Since he became President of the CCF new challenges are confronting him, which he generously discussed with us.



**Mr. Tallarini: can you tell me a little bit about your family history or background. Many of our readers are already familiar with who you are, but aside from your professional life, can you tell us about yourself outside of the business environment?**

My family came to the USA in the early 1890's. My mother's father, Luigi Panico came from Lacedonia, Avellino. All the children of his family came except for one, whose descendents I met last September. My mother's mother came from Calitri, Avellino as well few years later and met my grandfather through his brother in New Rochelle - NY.

My mother was born here in 1914 in New Rochelle and at 93 she still lives there; she is very healthy and has never been on a plane. I offered her many times trips to Italy, but she doesn't want to get on a plane.

Last September I finally visited Lacedonia and Calitri. I went there to receive the Filippo Mazzei award in Bonito, near Avellino. A member of the Italian Government in that situation asked me about my heritage and they found the children that stayed behind in Lacedonia and Calitri, so we had a family reunion. On the 15th of August I also received the honorary citizenship from Lacedonia.

My father's family originally came from Piemonte and Bergamo and they emigrated here around 1886. He was an older man, his name was Ermenegildo Tallarini and he met and married Concetta Eremita from Campobasso here in USA and married her in St. Joseph's church, New Rochelle - it was one of the first weddings in the new church. It was 1906, a long time after he arrived in the USA.

As you can see my grandparents were immigrants, my parents were both born in the USA, but Italians on both sides.

I was born in New Rochelle as well, north of the city in Westchester, one of those small cities where the concentration of Italians is very high. I would say that Westchester in general is undoubtedly an area with a strong Italian flavor.

**What about the adolescence, did you feel part of a community, or beside the last name you felt just as any other American?**

We grew up in an era where the children of emigrants were being Americanized and I think that was because of a natural assimilation process. Simply put, I think that some of this assimilation was driven by the Second World War. We were not encouraged to learn or speak Italian in an educational environment. At least in my family there wasn't an emphasis on that, maybe because we were one generation passed.

**How influential has Italian Culture been in determining your lifestyle as an Italian-American? When did you let your heritage influence you?**

I think having Italian roots, even in the time of assimilation, it always influences the way you carry on your life. We still practice all of the Italian traditions. Each Sunday, since I was a child, was spent at my grandmother's house, at each grandmother's house. This went on forever, until I grew up and went in the Army and even afterwards. The whole family would gather. On my mother's side, my grandmother had 11 children, that gave her 36 grandchildren, so on a Sunday afternoon it wasn't unusual to have from 20 to 40 people in the backyard of this house, with all the women in the kitchen getting a meal ready and the men under the grapevine playing cards, talking, and drinking wine.

So we truly inherited the family tradition that we identify with Italy. This is one of the greatest value people brought here from Italy. Few cultures have the same veneration for family and elderly people. Think about how Italians take care of elderly parents or uncles.



**Have you cultivated your Italian roots all your life or is it more of a recent development?**

I'll qualify that answer. Today I think I'm part of a movement of second and third generation of Italian/Americans. We retain the family traditions in many respects, but we are not knowledgeable about many other aspects of Italy's culture: language and history and those are areas that many of us are now discovering in so many ways for the first time.

There is a reaction to the assimilation that makes us reach back and find out what we don't know about our culture. Until this process started my idea of what Italy is was exclusively what I would see in the USA. That was the only exposure we had after all.

**When did you become member of the CCF and what factors led you to that decision?**

I became a member in 1979, about 20 years ago. I was asked if I might have interest in the Columbus foundation by a member at the time and I really didn't have an idea of what the foundation was. I knew it was an organization of many prominent Italian Americans, not only financially prominent. The Foundation grew from the organization of the first Columbus day Parade which was 1929, organized by Generoso Pope a powerful Italian leader who emigrated from Benevento, Southern Italy. Those early members inherited his legacy and of course I didn't know the specific history of the Foundation when I was asked to join.

On the other side you could not grow up in this region of the United States and not know Generoso Pope and his newspaper Il Progresso. He was responsible for thousands of scholarships to not only Italian American students, but to all students that attended catholic schools in NY. He would say "pick the best students and also those who are in financial need and let's help them with our grants!"

Today we have 848 active scholarships recipients and this year we granted more than 2.4 million dollars in scholarship funds. This money goes to children who have economic needs and high academic performance. Grants are also given to children in Italy that we support through the Zeffirelli scholarships program, which supports all the arts: sculpture, movies, music, literature, etc.

**How has your life changed since you became president of this Foundation?**

It's an enormous responsibility. I'm president of an important investment company, but I spend more time as President of the Columbus Foundation. It's a full time job, really. This organization is responsible for supervising the largest celebration of Italian culture in the world, the Columbus Parade. This is possible because we have many members and volunteers. One of the few important administrative charges that I have is to supervise the chairman and the committees that run the various elements of this celebration: exhibition in Grand Central Station, broadcasting of the Parade in the USA and in Italy, the parade on 5th avenue, the gala and the many events that go on during that day. That's something that everybody knows. What most people don't know about are the efforts towards the scholarships programs to help hundreds of young students.

**With your scholarships you not only help Italian/Americans to get the education they couldn't get otherwise, but you are also contributing to the collective cultural identity of the younger generations of Italian/Americans. How important is that idea in what you do?**

We have brought now 4 separate scholarship programs: Zeffirelli, Elementary, High School and College. We have members who chair each committee and members who participate in the review of the applications and in the interview. We interview each student individually. That process starts right after the Columbus Parade. On Nov. 1st the applications are available online and students start



responding. The process finishes in June when we make the final awards in a ceremony for each program.

Of course these students keep a very strong connection with the foundation for the rest of their lives. Some of them join as members, some just come back as volunteers.

The chairman of our High School scholarship program, Vincent Toscano, is a former scholarship recipient. Two decades ago he received the scholarship to complete his studies. After graduating he entered the business world and became very successful. After 10 years he became member of our Foundation. More and more we do our very best to include also the families in our activities. We invite them to our programs, to the parade, we try to create a very strong sense of community.

Needless to say that we have also other programs that support trips to Italy or trips in the US Mid West where our students can take Italian classes. We subsidize tuition and room and board for these excursions.

### **And what is the biggest challenge you are confronting?**

There are two challenges. One is to continue to support and increase with the assistance we give to needy Italian Americans. The other challenge is the cultural one: to continue to educate Italian/Americans and Americans about Italian culture. Those are two primary missions. When you come to America, the first thing in your mind is to make a good living to support yourself and your family. Sometimes you get caught up. With all this wonderful success that we have in America, we end up forgetting about the foundation of our culture, not only of the Italian culture.

Much of American culture is based on Italy too. Italy was the first America if you think about the Roman Empire. It was the first real melting pot. The cradle of civilization for 2000 years. In many ways what is happening in America is what was happening in Italy two millennia ago. Even more recently there have been Italian personalities that played a huge role in helping this country to become what it is. Filangieri was one the closest correspondents of President Jefferson and Mazzei had many of the ideas that ended up in the constitution. To him they attributed the famous sentence : "All men are created equal". To not mention the fact that part of the 5th Amendment is the result of Cesare Beccaria's thought.

**Mr. Tallarini, your predecessor, Lawrence Auriana, was openly dealing with the problem of stereotyping.... He fought Hollywood and even Robert De Niro... He also made a lot of news when he refused Mayor Bloomberg's proposal to walk at the Columbus Parade with a couple of actors from the Sopranos... How do you feel about it? Do you think that your Foundation should continue to be on the front line in this?**

We will surely continue to be on the front line. No other culture has been subject to the amount of negative stereotyping that we as Italian/Americans have been subject to. Not only us, but our children, our neighbors, Americans around the USA, essentially being educated by Film and Television media that Italians are a certain way that we are not. So we think that when someone or some company uses negative stereotypes harming us as Italian Americans we have the right to make them aware of that and speak out against them. This is an educational process.

Mayor Bloomberg, regarding the particular episode you are referring to in your question, relied on trusted aids who gave him bad advice about these actors, who are good people and good actors, but who are also portraying characters in a show that showed under an incredible negative light Italian/Americans people and culture.

Each culture, for different reasons or maybe for the same reasons, has its own underbelly. Some of it it's based on culture: if you think about the first wave of emigrants, we are dealing with the lower economic classes; some of it is based on smart people taking advantage of weaker people.

In our case I would say it's in vogue as an entertainment venue to make fun or to stereotype Italians.



Today Michael Bloomberg is one of our best friends. It was embarrassing that we had to sue him if he pretended to march on 5th Av with those actors, because he would have violated freedom of association.

At the time the mayor didn't understand how offensive was the presence of those actors. He just got bad advice. To him it was just another TV show and probably he doesn't even watch the show. Because, I repeat, he is one of the closest friends and supporter of The Columbus Foundation Activities.

In some respects the whole episode was a blessing, because it got the right media attention. At the time Sopranos came out we went all around scratching our hands about this horrible show. It was not the first or the only case, there are many other TV shows and movies that stereotype Italians in a negative way, but this show in particular had a huge effect because it is on television, in your house, once a week and portrays the Italian Mafia Family as a MODERN family, making the paradox believable and realistic.

The staging of this show has no redeeming social or cultural value. The show is full of made up caricatures of what a crime driven modern Italian family might be like. This is someone's vision, someone's imagination that was put in to a show and doesn't have any connection with reality. How many people know that, though?

**And also, what about politics: what do you think of the Rudy Giuliani candidature?**

Rudy is going to make all the Italian-Americans proud. He was a forceful mayor. He had many friends here while he was mayor and he made enemies because he ran the city like a business. We don't always agree with his positions, for example when he didn't want to take position in the Soprano's case, but he makes all of the Italians feel proud in the USA. He may be indeed elected. We are very proud of him whether he wins the election or not.

**As an important 'persona' in the public eye of the Italian American community, what would you like to be remembered for in years to come?**

I'd like to be remembered for someone who helped the movement to reeducate Italian Americans about their culture.

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