

Why Does Adele Sarno Matter?

Katherine D. LaGuardia (April 09, 2015)



Ms. Sarno is the embodiment of the soul of New York. She is part of our heritage as a city of immigrants. Yet she is facing eviction by her landlord, the Italian American Museum, because their development plans and the law support a quadrupling of her rent from \$820 to \$3500/month. Any plan to quadruple residential rent, as is being sought in Ms. Sarno's case, is both onerous and exploitative. It is essentially a heavy financial penalty placed on a vulnerable citizen with a fixed income in order to both intimidate and then likely evict in the interest of commercial development. This may be legal but it is morally wrong and it is not the New York City we should want to live in.

The Italian American Museum, located on Mulberry Street in Little Italy since 2001, was established to honor the culture and history of the Italians of the Great Migration who arrived by the millions in the late 1800s, mostly via Ellis Island, to seek a better life for themselves and their families. It is this generation who is credited with building much of New York as well as establishing a cultural influence that permeates every aspect of life in the city. These first generation Italians did what most new immigrants continue to do. They worked and lived in close knit communities where their language was spoken and the food was like home. These immigrants lived in, and often still do, multi-generational, overcrowded households where environmental conditions and contagious illnesses contribute to severe morbidity and mortality, especially for mothers, newborns and children.



When Fiorello LaGuardia became Mayor in 1933, he vowed to rid the city of these over-crowded tenements, and his commitment to clean and affordable housing for all New Yorkers began on the Lower East Side where disease was most prevalent.

His expansive public housing program soon spread to all boroughs. The plan took on an urgency because of the severe crowding and health conditions in the tenements, and a commissioned study advised that every new apartment have a window in each room for adequate ventilation and its own private toilet. And thus was the birth of public housing.

Mayor Bill de Blasio is reviving this philosophy of housing equity and justice in the 21st century through his affordable housing agenda as well as his support for City-funded legal services to protect tenants' rights. Every New Yorker deserves a decent home they can afford and no landlord should abuse that right by raising the rent so high that a tenant has no choice but to leave. In this era of rapid development and gentrification, the city runs the risk of becoming the 'Gated Community' that our Mayor sees as destroying the soul of the city. Adele Sarno, an 85 year old second generation Italian-American who has lived and raised her family in the protected enclave of Little Italy has been in her current apartment on Mulberry St for 53 years.

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As an Honorary Chair of the Museum, I have expressed my concern about this situation to the Museum's President, Joseph Scelsa. It would seem there is a solution where both entities can seek compromise and co-exist in peace. The IAM did not incur its claimed debt of over a million dollars because Ms Sarno was paying \$820/month or less for the past decades. A small increase in rent in the 3-5% range annually seems reasonable and the IAM can proceed with its development around Ms. Sarno. Alternatively, Ms. Sarno could continue paying the same amount of rent and provide some in kind services for the museum. Given the influence of the community groups and legal services she now has representing her, harnessing her good will is worth more than the damage done by such narrow-minded and ill spirited actions on the part of the Museum. Certainly the actions on behalf of the Italian American Museum in the past week are not in keeping with the legacy of Mayor LaGuardia and it is my hope that they come

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