

# Finalmente Un Posto Tutto Nostro (Finally a Place of Our Own)

By Sal Martoche



The quiet and dignified gentleman sitting across the table from me at first appears to be the epitome of humility, self-restraint and composure. Then something startling happens as he begins talking about the dream he shared with his late wife Renata and which he now passes on like a torch to so many of us. Their dream was to create a cultural center for Italian-Americans which would be a place of learning, memorializing their history, celebrating the arts and being grateful for their blessings as American citizens of Italian descent. Friends and strangers alike, as they hear him speak about what will soon be a reality, are motivated to join him in this endeavor. This quiet man, it seems, never sleeps. He is like the Pied Piper.

He knows his life's journey is nearing its conclusion. He smiles as he quotes from the great Martin Luther King in saying, "I have a dream." He goes on to explain how grateful he is to be an American, how he raised his family here. He made a wonderful life for himself and his family, but he has never forgotten where he came from or why and how he came to

the USA. He has made an invaluable contribution in WNY as a revered pediatrician. Now he seeks to leave his mark as a one who leads the drive to preserve and celebrate Italian culture. He is always quick to remind his friends that it is important for us not to forget our roots and our family, whether here or in the "old country."

"Non dimenticare" he says with a smile. He prevailed on an old friend and neighbor, Anthony Masiello, the former mayor of Buffalo, to join him in making this dream a reality. He has a way about him that convinces people of the absolute need for this project wherever he goes and to whomever he speaks. It's because he believes so deeply. His passion is infectious. The members of the board of directors of the Italian Cultural Center are enthusiastically and unanimously embracing this daunting undertaking.

Some might ask "Why in the world do we need a reminder of the past? Aren't we all Americans? Does this mean you think Italian Americans and Sicilian Americans are somehow better than other Americans?" Of course the answer to



Local dignitaries assist the Board Members of the Cultural Center at the ground breaking ceremony.

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each of these questions is apparent, but as many of us have discovered, there is so much to learn from our history and our forefathers. Mayor Anthony Masiello makes the point that one of the unique features of this project will be its inclusiveness. He reminds me of something I said to him a while back that has resonated with him. We have so much to learn from one another and if we expose our children and our grandchildren not only to our culture but also to the cultures of others in our community, won't we be doing something wonderful to help in our small way to promote understanding and cooperation and, yes, even love among people of different backgrounds? We will also be able to show them the wonders of Italy and Sicily in a way that might make it easier for them to understand us and our great devotion to family.

Judge Joseph Fiorella points out that so many contributions have been made to Buffalo and Western New York by Italians, Italian Americans, that will be forgotten if we don't do our best to find a place to remind people. He is quick to add that there's so much culture that traces back to Italy: music, art, food and so much wonderful history but we must make sure that we do our part or it will begin to fade away. Judge Amy Martoche, who recently returned from a wonder-

ful family trip to Italy says it is important particularly for her daughter Juliana that a place devoted to Italian history and culture along with a better understanding of other cultures is essential to a well- rounded education. "Juliana and I may both take Italian language classes and I am certainly looking forward to the culinary aspects of this new center. It's exciting."

The committee spearheading the financial effort to convert the old North Park library located at Delaware and Hertel Avenues into our new center is led by a team of dedicated volunteers under the direction of veteran fundraiser John Vecchio. His enthusiasm is contagious and his work ethic is seriously old world. He, along with associates Janice Barrett and Carol Lomoriello Dambmann, point out that while the committee has already received over \$1.5 million in cash and pledges for this project, we cannot rest on our laurels. If this project is to succeed and be what we all hope it can be, it needs to double that amount. A foundation must be established to make sure that what we do now will last for generations to come. It needs to involve both the afflu-

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ent, the not so affluent and the blue collar workers who may not contribute as much cash but who will contribute with their hearts and souls. Then and only then will it express the totality of our people and generate the enthusiasm and sustainability it needs. Vecchio pointed to the leadership shown by people like Donato Curcio, Russ Salvatore and Anthony Diina as exemplary. He reminds us constantly of the leadership of Rocco Termini. Lead financial gifts have been received from the Ciminelli family in honor of the late Frank Ciminelli, the Lo Curto family in honor of the late Councilmember Michael J. Lo Curto, Anthony P. LoRusso, Carl Montante, Sr., Maria Foss and Patrick Marrano. Various governmental figures have provided significant support, including Hon. Byron W. Brown of the City of Buffalo, Sen. Christopher Jacobs, Assemblyman Sean Ryan, the Erie County Legislature and Hon. Joel Feroletto of the Buffalo Common Council.

Toni Marie and Joe DiLeo, who together publish “Per Niente” magazine, are exactly the kind of outstanding individuals we hope to honor and memorialize at our new CCI. Every year they collect thousands of dollars as well as food, furniture and who knows what else, and they lovingly distribute it with the help of their friends to those in our community who are less fortunate. Many of these are new citizens to the Buffalo and Western New York area and many others are long-term residents who have fallen on hard times.

The great vision of architect Tomasso Briatico is clear. He will create a beautifully balanced interior, maintain the graceful lines of the existing structure and add enriched landscaping to create a structure that says we have once again taken the best of the old and added the new to create a structure which honors both in a significant way. “Elegant, classic and understated” is how he put it. “I want it to look like it always was intended to be there at that location and for that purpose.”

There will be memorials to the pioneers, our ancestors, who came before us. There will be walls of honor for fallen heroes and the contributions of doctors, lawyers, teachers, scientists and artists throughout the building. As Mayor Ma-



Mayor, Byron Brown—Dr Frank Giacobbe—Councilman Joel Feroletto—Rocco Termini

siello observed, “Everywhere you look in Buffalo and Western New York, you see the imprint of Italian-Americans whose talent, skill and work ethic enriched our community.” The cultural center will provide a prominent place to honor and remember them. Masiello added, “Our cultural center will be a living legacy to those brave people of past generations and a reminder to future generations as to who and what they are as Italian-Americans in Western New York.”

There will be studios for people to record their family histories and place it in safekeeping in a location that will respect and honor their journey. There will be cultural events and lectures. There will be movies, plays and music. There will, of course, be cooking classes and a bocce court. There will be courses in Italian history and culture as well as language courses. There will be a mixture of good times and fond memories.

We hope that everyone who learns of this project will participate generously in supporting it. Please help with your time, your talent and your dollars, as best you can. You will be glad you did.

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Artifact Museum



Teaching Kitchen