

# RENAISSANCE MAN

## WHY: “BECAUSE I CAN AND BECAUSE I WANT TO.”

by Sal Martoche

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Francis S. Lestingi has always stood out from the crowd. The range of his interests and talents, coupled with the expertise he has developed in many diverse areas of study, is nothing short of breathtaking. And those interests recently included a \$600,000 donation to the Italian Cultural Center of Buffalo, the largest gift the center has received.

Maria Foss, chair of the CCI board, recently explained what this will mean for the future of CCI. “We will be able to pay off some debt, expand our lecture series, and follow through with the creation of our foundation to ensure the long-term viability of CCI,” she said.

So just who is the Francis S. Lestingi? The dictionary definition of a “renaissance man” states the person is one of many talents or areas of knowledge. And that fits Dr. Lestingi like a glove. He was born in Queens, N.Y., in 1936, and, while still in elementary school, he developed a life-long fascination and love for calligraphy. He created the signage used for church and school events, and, eventually, local merchants, grocers, butchers and pharmacists asked him to create paper signs for their shops with his calligraphy.

He attended Bishop Laughlin Memorial High School in Brooklyn, where he was taught by the De La Salle Christian Brothers. An excellent student, he quickly caught the attention of his teachers.

Although his father, Michael, came to the United States with only a fourth-grade education, he also brought with him his skill as a precise and disciplined cabinet maker. He set an example for Francis and his older brother, Joseph, who has a PhD in engineering from Yale University and served for many years as the dean of the school of engineering at Dayton University.

Dr. Lestingi laughingly refers to himself as “the teenage monk” because, upon graduation from Bishop Laughlin, he entered the Order of the De La Salle Christian Brothers and remained with them for 13 years, first as a student at Catholic University and then at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (RPI), where he received a master’s degree in physics.

It was during this period at RPI that his love of science and his love for artistic expression merged. He began to work on developing what he laughingly calls “power-point

presentations” before there was Power Point. The development of physics graphics and demonstrations for use on overhead projectors and his writings as a contributor to various professional journals brought him to the attention of Harvard University, where he was hired to design transparency graphics for use in high school physics courses being developed for the National Science Foundation. Eventually, Dr. Lestingi designed six volumes of illustrative physics graphics that were used in classrooms throughout the nation.

After 13 years, he left the Christian Brothers to pursue a deeper scientific commitment. He accepted a government fellowship to enter a PhD program at the University of Wisconsin. Upon graduation, he accepted an offer to teach physics, astronomy and the history of science at the State University College of New York at Buffalo. He also continued his work in calligraphy and gilding on signs he designed based on many of the skills he learned from his cabinet-maker father.

The range and depth of his interests and accomplishments are staggering. He has been a lecturer at locations as diverse as the Chautauqua Institution; the Museum of the Gilded Arts in Pontiac, Ill. the Castellani Art Gallery in Niagara Falls, and the Advanced Technology Tank Conference in Welland, Ont., Canada, to name a few.

He was the first SUNY professor to receive both the president’s and the SUNY chancellor’s awards for Excellence in Teaching. The love of education is also shared by his wife, Iris Skoog, who was an iconic teacher at Nardin Academy. Francis noted that Iris was affectionately known as the “Queen of the English Department” for 40 years! And yet, with all the success in his teaching career, he decided to return to the “letter arts” and started a business called Signs of Gold, Inc., with his master-woodworker son, Stephen. He enjoyed it so much he took early retirement after 25 years of teaching to become a full-time carver and gilder of magnificent signage.

Dr. Lestingi has garnered numerous first-place awards from the United States Signage Conference for his creative designs. He has published a staggering 23 articles on carving, gilding and handcrafted techniques. He has delivered over

20 workshops and seminars on these topics alone. Several art galleries and museums exhibit his gilded works.

Throughout his career, he has recognized the need to give back. And his pro bono restoration using gilding has assisted churches in New Orleans damaged by Hurricane Katrina and created signage for schools and not-for-profit organizations throughout the nation, including the Italian Cultural Center of Buffalo (CCI).

When Dr. Lestingi first heard about the efforts of Dr. Francesco Giacobbe to create a cultural institution that would stand out from other institutes by virtue of its breadth, creativity and openness, he began to investigate and had conversations with then-director John Vecchio. The two bonded immediately. Vecchio explained the need for creative signage, and the only question was whether they could afford the desired work. Dr. Lestingi generously donated his creations and things grew exponentially to the \$600,000 donation.

This Renaissance Man is responsible for six original digital type-face fonts. He is also the co-founder, co-director and president of the Buffalo Niagara Nikola Tesla Council, Inc., a 501(c)(3) organization whose mission he describes as to pay homage to inventor Nikola Tesla by imparting long overdue awareness of his contributions to the betterment of our civilization.

This group has developed what he terms the “Tesla Legacy Corridor.”

With the force of his convictions and his philanthropic generosity, he designed and placed a statute of Tesla in Buffalo in 2020 on Main and North Division streets, part of his efforts to develop a suitable testament to what Tesla has done in electrifying Buffalo and the world, the first to be named in Tesla’s honor.

You may wonder how a professor and artist who donates much of his work can afford this largess. Besides Tesla, he has a second hero whose creativity he admired greatly: Steve Jobs. In 1998, when Dr. Lestingi’s mother died, she left him a generous bequest he has prudently invested. Apple stock was and remains a favorite. As a testament to his respect and affection for Jobs, he wears black most of the time, just as he drives a Tesla to pay homage to that great man.

While in a sense Dr. Lestingi stands on the shoulders of these two men, in another sense he stands as tall and as straight as they do. The world needs more individuals like Dr. Francis Lestingi.



John Vecchio. Dr. Francis Lestingi, Lindsey Visser, Donato Curcio, Russell Payne, Toni Marie Di Leo, Angelo Pallisano, Maria Payne  
Dr. Francesco Giacobbe