

LIVING

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COURTESY OF JFK SCHOOL

Dolores Cobucci is in the back row, third from left, in this photo of the faculty of John F. Kennedy School, 1965-66.

Remarkable teachers

Educators to be honored at Washington Italian Festival

By TINA CALABRO
For the Observer-Reporter
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9th Annual Washington Italian Festival

The 9th Annual Washington Italian Festival will start at noon Sept. 27 at the Community Pavilion, 139 S. Main St., in downtown Washington. Admission is free. Prior to the festival, a kick-off concert will be held Sept. 26 featuring Shades of Time from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. at the pavilion. The festival will feature Italian music, vendors, food and beverages.

Each year, the Washington Italian Festival honors the contributions of the Italian American community. This year, the festival, planned for Sept. 27 at the Main Street Pavilion in downtown Washington, will highlight historic and contemporary educators of Italian heritage.

Between 1880 and 1930, hundreds of Italian immigrants settled in the city of Washington. They were among the four million mostly southern Italians who left desperate conditions to find better opportunities in America.

As these early immigrants struggled to learn English and laboriously make their way in their new country, they encouraged their children to develop their interests and abilities into careers. One of the careers that many pursued was teaching.

“The festival is thrilled to shine a spotlight on Italian American educators past and present,” said Carla Roney Miller, festival co-chair, special education teacher and great-granddaughter of Italian immigrants. “Italian heritage honors hard work, dedication, and the power of knowledge, all of which can transform lives. By honoring today’s educators, we also honor our ancestors’ sacrifices and their hope of building a better future. For the immigrant generation, becoming a teacher was not only a path to success, but a lifeline in their adopted country.”

Among the dozens of remarkable Italian American teachers who will be honored at the festival, the careers of three who left a lasting impression on their students are highlighted here:

Vincent DiBello (1905-1990)

Fifteen-year-old Vincenzo (Vincent) DiBello spoke no English when he arrived at New York’s Ellis Island from Italy in 1920, but he resolved to learn the language quickly and craft a future in his new country. His determination and abilities would lead him to become one of the first Italian immigrants to attend Washington & Jefferson College



COURTESY OF JEFF FERRALLI

Jennie Ferralli taught at Trinity High School from 1942 to 1981.



COURTESY OF MARY ANN WOLFE

Vincent DiBello, pictured here circa 1932, was a teacher for 52 years.

and complete a 52-year career in education.

Vincent came to America in the stuffy steerage level of a huge freighter with his mother, brother, and sister to begin a long-awaited chapter of their lives. The next stop on their journey would be the city of Washington, where Vincent’s father, Luigi, waited eagerly to reunite with his family.

Ten years earlier, in 1910, the elder DiBello had come to America from Aquara, a tiny village in the southern Italian province of Campania. Life in Aquara was hard, dirt poor. Any work other than subsistence farming was scarce. To safeguard his family’s future, Luigi followed a path of “chain migration” to Washington, where other immigrants from his region – “paisani” – helped him get settled. He landed a job as a laborer at Donley’s brickyard on East Maiden Street and saved his earnings to bring his family to Washington.



Carla Roney Miller, co-chair of the Washington Italian Festival, is a special education teacher at Transformation Learning.

Reunited after a decade apart, the family settled into a house on Houston Street, not far from the brickyard. Despite being 15 years old, Vincent was placed in the third grade at Fifth Ward Elementary. Diligent and studious by nature, he picked up English quickly and moved on to Washington High School, where he graduated in 1928 as one of the inaugural members of the school’s National Honor Society. His personality and accomplishments were so admired at Wash High that he was presented with a \$50 gold piece at graduation, which he applied to his tuition at W&J.

Vincent graduated from W&J in 1932 with a bachelor’s in mathematics, then a master’s in 1935. After three years of teaching at the Washington Seminary

on East Maiden Street, he was hired at Wash High, where for 35 years he taught a variety of math courses until his retirement in 1970. Post-retirement, he taught for two years at W&J, then 14 years at Immaculate Conception High School, retiring for the second time at age 82. He died in 1990 at age 85.

Vincent was a beloved teacher, said his daughter, Mary Ann Wolfe of Latrobe. He also had a reputation for being stern, she said. “He expected his students to work hard and do their best. Students were anxious going into his class. But if they were having trouble understanding anything, he would help them.

“Education was his life,” she added. “He was always working on school work.” Every evening after dinner,

he sat at the kitchen table to plan lessons and correct papers, placing everything in his well-worn leather satchel for the next school day.

When he retired from Immaculate Conception High School, faculty and students honored him with funds for a trip to his birthplace of Aquara, which he had not seen in 63 years, and other parts of Italy.

Aside from his teaching, Vincent and his wife, Julia (also an Italian immigrant), were treasured in the Italian American community for helping fellow immigrants with tasks that required a strong command of English. They helped innumerable people write letters, prepare tax returns, complete applications, and study for citizenship exams.

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Vincent (known as “Jimmy” to friends and family) and his wife felt a responsibility to give back, Wolfe said. “People helped them when they arrived, so they were happy to help others. They understood how hard it is when you are not fluent in the language.”

Vincent’s impact as an educator influenced the career choices of his children, grandchildren and former students. Daughter Mary Ann easily ticks off the names of nearly a dozen educators in the family, including herself and her brothers Louis and Tom.

Although he stood only 5 feet tall, Vincent DiBello was a towering figure among his students and community. Over his lifetime, he educated and supported thousands of students and fellow immigrants. In 1991, a scholarship fund was established in his memory at W&J. Over the years, the fund has benefited students who demonstrate a determination to succeed and advance the education of others.

Dolores Cobucci (1931-1975)

Dolores Cobucci was a renowned teacher at Washington’s Immaculate Conception elementary school, where she taught from 1958 to 1968. She was known as “Sarge,” a nickname that referenced her service in the U.S. Air Force, her erect demeanor, and the obedience she evoked in her students. Students of the era, including this writer, looked ahead with trepidation to their seventh- and eighth-grade years, when Miss Cobucci would be their teacher.

Class sizes in that era could be as large as 50 to 60 students in the stuffy upper floors of

the original 1901 building, before the school moved into its new (and newly named) John F. Kennedy building in 1965. Although the classes were big, there was no place to hide from Miss Cobucci’s commanding presence.

At a time when the school’s faculty was mostly religious teachers from the Sisters of Mercy, based in Pittsburgh, Dolores Cobucci assumed the singular role of preparing students for high school, both in academics and moral character. She was a tough disciplinarian, and suffered no fools. She was also known for her innate warmth and investment in her students’ growth.

Known to friends and family as “Dolly,” Dolores was the older of two children of Alfred Cobucci, an immigrant from Roccogloriosa, Salerno, and Mary Scuvotti Cobucci, the daughter of immigrants from a nearby village. Dolores’ parents encouraged education. Her younger brother Andrew also became a teacher.

Dolores’ expertise was math and science, but she stepped in to cover other subjects when the faculty was short-handed. Apropos to her military background, she supervised the student safety patrol. Following her tenure at Immaculate Conception and JFK, she completed a doctorate in geology at the University of Pittsburgh, and taught at Peters Township High School and Duquesne University.

Dolores is remembered by former students as independent and principled in her thinking, a renaissance woman who skillfully developed students’ grasp of math and science, while instilling a broad understanding of the world they would inherit – a world with the capability to destroy itself. She perceived and shared what she thought her students – often rapt in attention – needed to know.

Former students remember her vividly. “She was an inspiring force of nature,” said former student Cynthia Greco. “She was intimidating. However, you knew she loved her work, and wanted each of us to be the best that we could be.”

“She gave me a great love of history and geography,” said Bernadette Hagar, a student in the late 1960s. “A strong and straightforward person, truly admired.”

Dolores Cobucci endured tragedy in her lifetime. Her fiancé was killed in an accident in the 1950s. In the early 1970s, she faced breast cancer, dying at the age of 43. She is remembered today as a giant figure at Immaculate Conception, one of the most influential, scholarly, and admired teachers in the school’s history.

Jennie Ferralli (1918-2023)

When Jennie Ferralli passed away in 2023 at age 105, the tribute page on her obituary website brimmed with remembrances from Trinity High School students from her 39 years of teaching.

Repeatedly, former students described her in glowing terms:

“Beautiful inside and out.”
“She seemed to always have a smile for everyone.”

“One of the best that I ever had and that Trinity ever had.”

The descriptions ring true for her great-nephew Jeff Ferralli, who had his aunt as his American history teacher during the last school year before her retirement in 1981. “She knew her history and enjoyed sharing it with her students,” he said. “She was kind and supportive.”

Jennie was the youngest of eight children of Giovanni and Maria Chiarello Ferralli, immigrants from the southern Italian villages of San Giovanni in Fiore and Savelli,

respectively. Many from their area migrated to Washington in the early 1900s. Giovanni supported his family initially as a coal miner and later by working in a steel mill. They and other Ferralli relatives lived on Weirich Avenue in Washington.

Jennie graduated from Trinity in 1936 and returned there to teach in 1942. She had a bachelor’s in history and social studies from Chatham University and a master’s from the University of Pittsburgh. She was among a small number of Italian American women of her generation to pursue graduate-level studies.

As the child of immigrants, Jennie was attuned to the struggles of Americans who worked hard to make their way. She served as her

family’s historian and shared the Ferralli immigrant story with the younger generation.

Likewise, she encouraged her students to look deeply into history and share their learning with their classmates. Great-nephew Jeff Ferralli recalls his nervousness when he presented a report in his aunt’s American history class in 1981. Most students would be nervous about public speaking, he explained, but the climate of kindness in his aunt’s class eased students’ stress. “She was a sweet lady, very easy to talk to.”

She also had a great sense of humor, he added.

“Always a twinkle in her eye,” noted a former student in a remembrance.

Teacher Jennie Ferralli, the daughter of immigrants,

inspired others to reach high and feel the strength of her support.

Tina Calabro is the voluntary project manager of the Washington Italian Heritage Collection.

The ceremony honoring Italian American educators at the Sept. 27 Washington Italian Festival is scheduled for 1:30 p.m. on the main stage of the Main Street Pavilion. Washington County Commissioner Larry Maggi will host the ceremony. All contemporary and retired teachers of Italian heritage – and the families of teachers now deceased – are invited to join the recognition ceremony. For information, contact tina.calabro@verizon.net or call 412-818-9169.

CLASSIC SUDOKU

Fill in the blank cells using numbers 1 to 9. Each number can appear only once in each row, column and 3x3 block. Use logic and process elimination to solve the puzzle. The difficulty level ranges from Bronze (easiest) to Silver to Gold (hardest).

9			1	3	4			
	3							9
		1		7				6
7	1	5			2			
	9			1			7	
			5			3	9	1
6				3		8		
5							6	
		2	8		4			3

9/20/25

Rating: GOLD

Solution to 9/19/25

4	7	9	1	6	2	5	3	8
1	6	3	5	7	8	2	4	9
2	5	8	9	3	4	1	6	7
5	3	6	4	1	9	8	7	2
9	8	1	6	2	7	4	5	3
7	4	2	8	5	3	6	9	1
6	9	5	7	8	1	3	2	4
3	1	4	2	9	5	7	8	6
8	2	7	3	4	6	9	1	5

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PICKLES



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