

Washington Italian Festival Organizers to Honor Predecessors

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By Tina Calabro



Performers at the 1986 Italian Festival

When the eighth annual Washington Italian Festival gets underway this weekend at the Main Street Pavilion, dedicated organizers from Primo Italiano Sons and Daughters of Italy No. 2800 will be in full force to ensure that the event is a success. The wholehearted effort, they say, builds upon the legacy of their dynamic predecessors – the leaders of Washington’s first Italian festival, which ran from 1982 to 1988. Fittingly, this year’s festival will honor those leaders of the 1980s on the main stage at 1:30 pm Saturday, Sept. 21. The current organizers stand on the shoulders of the original leaders, said Carla Miller, president of the Primo Italiano Club.

“The festival we have now wouldn’t be possible without the dedication of the men and women who held the first festival some 40 years ago. We want to honor them as we continue to celebrate our Italian heritage, music and food,” Miller said.

The 1980s festivals were the first to celebrate Washington’s large and vibrant Italian community, which originated in the early 1900s when hundreds of immigrants set down roots in the area. Several of the original festival organizers were the sons and daughters of immigrants. They took it as their mission to celebrate the accomplishments and sacrifices of the immigrant generation, many of whom by then were in the last years of their lives.



1983 Miss Italian Heritage, Gina Marie Julian, waves to parade goers.

Richard Celani, one of the original festival leaders who will be recognized Saturday, spoke of his reverence for the “old Italians” in a recent oral history for Washington’s Italian Heritage Collection: “They spoke very little English when they arrived and they struggled.”

Celani, the son of immigrant Pietro Celani and Virginia Aloia Celani, the daughter of immigrants, was a natural to help launch the festival in 1982 and serve as its chair for four years. He said it still amazes him how the three-day event attracted thousands of people and brought in national-level performers. such as vocalists Julius LaRosa and Anna Maria Alberghetti – as well as celebrities such as world champion boxer Jake LaMotta. Alberghetti’s performance in 1984 drew an audience of 8,000, he said.

Celani, a member of Washington City Council from 1976 to 1984, and others in the local Italian community envisioned staging a festival to rival the phenomenally successful one that had started a few years earlier in Clarksburg, W.Va. The belief that “we can do that here” drove the effort, said Eugene Trapuzzano, a Washington businessman who emigrated from Gizzeria in the Catanzaro province of Calabria in 1968 when he was 24 years old. “The festival was fantastic,” said Trapuzzano, who helped raise funds for it. “So many people you can’t imagine.”

Unlike the current festival’s single location at the Main Street Pavilion, the 1980s events involved all of downtown Washington, spanning Main Street from the intersection with Chestnut Street, past the county courthouse, and south to Washington & Jefferson College Field, with additional activities in Washington Park.

The inaugural festival featured a two-hour-long parade that assembled at Washington High School on Jefferson Avenue and climbed Chestnut Street before turning south onto Main Street. “It was a hell of a parade,” said Celani, noting that its military-like precision was overseen by the late Ralph Ruscello, a World War II veteran and retired brigadier general in the Pennsylvania National Guard.



Richard Celani served as chair of the Washington Italian festivals for four years in the 1980s. He’s pictured here at Citizens Library, where he recorded his oral history in May. Celani’s leadership will be recognized Sept. 21.

Each festival featured a Morra tournament, a two-person hand game that originated among southern Italian men. The object is to guess – in Italian, of course — the total number of fingers “thrown” by the two players. Play was known to get loud, Celani recalled with a laugh, adding that police officers wondered if a fight was about to break out. “No,” Celani explained to the police. “That’s the way the game is played. It’s who can scream the loudest. They get up in each other’s face.”

Many families today fondly remember the festivals’ Little Mr. Italy and Little Miss Italy contest, as well as the crowning of Miss Italian Heritage. Becky Waters – the mother of 1988’s Little Mr. Italy, Robert O’Donnell Waters – has lovingly preserved the costume her now-41-year-old son proudly wore as a 5-year-old. She has agreed to lend the costume to the Italian Heritage Collection for display.

Other 1980s festival activities, some of which continue today, are cooking contests and a recognition of the city’s oldest Italian American. The late Michael Johns, the 1982 honoree at age 101, was the grandfather of Bob Johns, who now helps lead the current festival. Floyd Marasco, 101, will be celebrated this year. He’s the father of Paulette Marasco Stout, who will read Italian folktales to children at this year’s festival.

Each 1980s festival featured a program book chock full of histories, photos, and information about the local Italian community. The program books, now preserved at Citizens Library and Washington County Historical Society, can be viewed online at <https://www.primoitaliano.org/italian-heritage-collection/publications-and-other-media/>.

Nancy Arena Razvoza, granddaughter of Italian immigrants, served as editor of the program book in 1984 and 1985. Her committee would start work on the publication a year in advance, she said, because of the immense amount of detail in each publication.

Razvoza said she especially enjoyed gathering stories about the customs and activities of the immigrant generation. Articles from her period as editor featured Italian groceries, barbers, shoe repairmen, tailors, bands, athletes and fraternal societies, and included dozens of historic photographs.

Razvoza’s late father Patsy Arena, who died in 2006, was a veritable font of information for these articles, she said. “I couldn’t have done it without him. I leaned on him for the history and contacts.”

Then as now, Italian music is a mainstay of the festival. The late Ann and Mario Julian were active in lining up big-name vocalists such as Julius LaRosa and Anna Maria Alberghetti. Ann herself was a popular singer who loved performing at the festivals, said her son Eugene Julian, a local attorney.

LaRosa was the focus of one of the most humorous episodes from the inaugural festival of 1982, said Celani. When organizers realized that they did not have a dressing room for the handsome LaRosa to change into his tux, they quickly escorted him to the David's Limited clothing store on Main Street. "There must have been 50 women (following him)," Celani said with a laugh. "Here's Julius LaRosa changing clothes, he's in his shorts. I finally said to the women, 'Let him put his clothes on!'"

A much more emotional scene is the one Celani calls his fondest memory. It occurred at Washington Park's main pavilion at the inaugural festival, attended by many older Italians who had never seen their culture celebrated so publicly.

"There were so many proud Italians there," Celani said. "The park was jammed. The Canonsburg Band was playing Italian songs and these old ladies and old guys were up there doing the tarantella. It was a sight to see."

As Celani walked through the pavilion, he noticed his mother and other relatives sitting together. Some of them were crying. At first, he thought something was wrong.

Nothing was wrong, they told him. "We just never thought we'd see this day."

The last Italian festival organized by the founding group was held in 1988. It was a bittersweet occasion, some say, because of varying views about the future of the festival as well as the stamina needed to sustain such an effort.

Nevertheless, the 1980s festivals achieved the goal of celebrating the immigrant generation, created lasting memories, documented the city's Italian American history in its program books – and inspired a new generation to keep up the tradition.

Tina Calabro is the voluntary project manager of the Washington Italian Heritage Collection. She invites anyone who would like to be recognized for their participation in the 1980s Italian festivals – and those who have photos, memorabilia or stories — to contact her at tina.calabro@verizon.net or 412-818-9169.



Ann Julian, a popular local vocalist, was a festival performer as well as organizer.
