



CGNY Go to Sicily. For a Common Ground Among Young Italians and Italian Americans

Kristine Jannuzzi (May 27, 2010)



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A museum lecture probably isn't the first place you'd expect to find a group of twenty- and thirty-somethings hanging out and having fun in Manhattan on a Friday night. But on a chilly March evening, members of [Commissione Giovani New York](#) [2](CGNY) met up at the Italian American Museum in Little Italy to learn about their heritage in the very place where some of their ancestors may have congregated over a hundred years ago.



Snippets of both Italian and English could be heard as the group explored the imposing bank vault, old-fashioned cash register, and array of photos, letters, passports, and other memorabilia on display. Dr. Joseph Scelsa, president of the museum, explained that the historic building once housed Banca Stabile, founded in 1885. He also shared some little-known facts about the neighborhood and those who settled there. After the lecture and tour, members moved on to dinner at Bread Tribeca, followed by dancing at Marquee.

It's precisely this combination of culture and camaraderie that CGNY members find so appealing. The group proudly promotes Italian culture, language, and heritage among youth in New York, and has fun while they're doing it. Although many organizations with similar missions cater specifically to either Italians or Italian Americans, Commissione Giovani warmly welcomes both, and exclusivity is not in their (bilingual) vocabulary. The board of directors is comprised of three Italians and three Italian Americans, and that same diversity is reflected among members.

Veronica Defrancis, a Bronx native whose grandparents are from Bari, first became involved with CGNY through the group's benefit for the earthquake victims in L'Aquila at Cipriani's last April. Since then, she's attended many other CGNY events, and even brought her mother with her to the Italian American Museum gathering.

"I love the way everyone interacts in the group," Veronica said. "They're very friendly - just because I don't speak or understand Italian, no one has brushed me off. I've been embraced, and I really appreciate that."

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Carol Torre, an Italian American who will be joining CGNY in Sicily, said she was thrilled when she first found out that the group had organized such a trip. "Both of my grandparents on my father's side were born in Sicily, and it's important for me to go and learn more about my heritage there."

For those who can't make the journey in September, CGNY events here in New York enable members to continually discover new aspects of their shared identities. Graziano Casale, President of CGNY and a native of Gaeta, said he was surprised to learn from Dr. Scelsa that Italian immigrants who came to the US often changed their names to sound more American in order to fit in. "Italian Americans are mainly self-made - they came here with nothing and started from zero. Most Italians who come to the US today come from a welfare state that gives them an entirely different approach to building a life here," Graziano commented. "But they all come from the same roots and they still share many of the same mannerisms, as well as the ability to sort things out in any situation."

Andrea Forte, another CGNY board member who is from Calabria, has found that Italian Americans are much more family oriented than Americans who don't have any ties to Italy. "Unfortunately, I think that the Italian identity of Italian Americans is getting a bit lost over time, as little pieces get forgotten in between generations. Because of this, places like the museum and groups such as CGNY are important to keep alive the legacy of who Italian Americans are and where they come from."

Veronica DeFrancis agrees. "I grew up around Italian Americans who have been here for a long time, so it's been interesting getting to know the Italians - observing their mannerisms, recognizing words that I'd heard as a child, and even interpreting their hand gestures," she says, laughing. "Italian Americans are very warm, and I see where that comes from now, because the Italians are even more affectionate. Men hug each other - they're not shy about it - and it's a beautiful thing."

For more information about Commissione Giovani, please visit www.commissioneiovani.org/newyork [4].



For information about the trip to Sicily, please contact CGNY at newyork@cg-usa.org [5].

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