

Italian America and September 11, 2001

Anthony Julian Tamburri (September 06, 2011)



"FDNY - Flag & Helmet"

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"After the tragedy of September 11, 2001, people from all over the world reached out to the firefighters and police officers of New York City and their families. At the forefront were people from all Regions of Italy who made generous contributions to the victims' families and even hosted families during visits to Italy. Strong personal friendships developed, and many of us, individually



and collectively, had renewed interest in our heritage. The FDNY Columbia Association, started by firefighters to meet the needs of the City's Italian American community, now has an International Division with strong ties to our brothers and sisters in the Vigili di Fuoco. While ignorance and hatred may have been the cause of the tragedy of 9/11, concern for one another and the spirit of shared values ultimately triumphed." —Dan Nigro Chief, Fire Department, 2001-2002

One of the saddest tragedies in U.S. history, September 11, 2001 is also linked to a certain degree to the history of Italians in America. First, among the policemen, firefighters, and others who thrust themselves into harm's way in order to save others, Italian America lost more than three hundred of its American citizens of Italian descent. If we then consider Italians who worked in the States at that time, we might readily add ten (some say thirteen) more names, and this would lead to a number even more astonishing for our community. Secondly, many Americans of Italian descent played a major role in the immediate aftermath of the attack on the World Trade Center, some well known, others not.

There are various names that come to mind when we think of that infamous date and the subsequent series of events that, even today, continue to have their impact. There will always be etched in our minds, for example, a harrowing chain of consequences: the literal and metaphorical void, which still, ten years later, continues to engulf the many families of both the victims and survivors of this tragic disaster, including a large number of Italian Americans; nightmares that so many survivors, together with all those who rushed to help, still suffer regularly from night to night; and, worse still, the many people who, even if they survived those fatal collapses of buildings through the rubble, continue to suffer, in these subsequent years, from the many respiratory diseases, as well as other maladies of an even greater destruction, of both a physiological and psychological nature.

All this will never be erased from our memory, because, together with our many recollections of loved ones lost in this cowardly attack, every time we watch a movie that was filmed in New York before this inauspicious date, we will forever see those two magnificent towers.

Those Twin Towers, even in their absence today, continue to constitute a symbol of the determination of America, as well as a sign of the concept of human potential that here, even today, the United States represents. It is indeed that America to which our Italian grandparents and great-grandparents aspired and which many young Italians still seek out today, their number ever rising from year to year within this new Italian immigration to the United States, the so-called "fuga dei talenti" (the "flight of talent").

Who among our Italians in America comes to mind? Obviously, Rudy Giuliani, who was finishing his second and last term as mayor. Not necessarily the happiest of administrations according to various pundits, Giuliani nevertheless had proven more than capable of taking control of the situation and responded as effectively as possible, given the extraordinary conditions never seen before.

This was clearly visible in the days immediately after the attack; he was a mayor who coordinated the response of the various municipal departments and who simultaneously organized the support of state and federal authorities for the World Trade Center, for the restoration of the damaged infrastructure and for future anti-terrorism measures. Giuliani also communicated frequently through radio and television during those days, pointing out the various precautionary measures and specifying, for example, that there was no reason to believe that, connected to the attack, there was also a plan for the dispersal of chemical or biological weapons.

Eventually, the outgoing mayor, sometimes the target of strong criticism on his administration, emerged from this tragedy with a reputation as a public figure more positive than before, and more positive, which may seem an unfair comparison to some, than that of President Bush in those very same days.

The other person who comes to mind, less known especially outside the scope of the five New York City boroughs, is Peter J. Ganci, at that time Chief of New York's Fire Department. Having immediately rushed to the WTC from his command post in Brooklyn with his friend, Dan Nigro, then Deputy Chief, Ganci gave start to the relief efforts. He was in the basement of the first tower when it collapsed, lucky to have survived. Meanwhile, convinced that the second tower would soon collapse, Ganci ordered the mayor and other commissioners to get to safety, remaining behind with the Rev. Mychal Judge, chaplain of the Fire Department, and William Feehan, first deputy commissioner. Then, according to reports by survivors, Ganci refused to leave his men, and when, moments later, his prediction came true, and the other tower then imploded, the three who had stayed behind to help others instantly perished.

More than three hundred forty-three firefighters died on 11 September 2001, and at least sixty-nine were of Italian origin; among the twenty-three policemen who died in the WTC, four had Italian surnames. If we were to add those of mixed ethnicity, one would easily surpass one hundred, perhaps one hundred twenty-five. Others in the Italian/American community of New York offered aid and assistance in the aftermath, such as a group of outreach counselors from the John D. Calandra Italian American Institute (Queens College, CUNY), whose Associate Director of Counseling and two additional counselors offered emotional and psychological therapy to more than one thousand survivors of the disastrous attack on the WTC.



At this juncture, the anniversary of September 11, 2001 will forever remind us that the notion of brotherhood, a feeling of reciprocity for our neighbor, both in the literal and figurative sense of the term, is the most efficient way to build an honest and fair world based on coexistence and respect towards the other. This reminds us today of what Dan Nigro, former Chief of Fire Department, recently stated, as quoted above: “While ignorance and hatred may have been the cause of the tragedy of 9/11, concern for one another and the spirit of shared values ultimately triumphed.”

We Italian Americans—immigrants, children, and grandchildren that we may be—have learned this lesson of solidarity through the immigrant experience. And as we remember our ancestors who had endured for our benefit, so let us remember our brothers and sisters of September 11, 2001, Italians and non-Italians alike, who suffered the ultimate sacrifice so that others could be spared such an overwhelmingly violent and irrational end.

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