

## Geraldine Ferraro, One Year After Her Departure

Diana Del Monte (April 12, 2012)



Aileen Riotto Sirey, Founder and Chair of NOIAW, meets i-Italy to share her memories of her best friend Geraldine Ferraro, the first woman to be a candidate for Vice-Presidency of the United States, as well as the only Italian-American to run for such a high office. A role model for Italian-American women, Ferraro died on March 26, 2011 after twelve years from being diagnosed with multiple myeloma.

The first time I saw Aileen Riotto Sirey, Founder & Chair of National Organization of Italian American Women ([NOIAW](#) [2]), was at the Conference organized by Calandra Institute, "Geraldine Ferraro: The Italian American Woman Who Made History" at [Hunter College](#) [3], last March 24.

In the presence of Arthur Gajarsa, Circuit Judge on the United States Court of Appeal for the Federal Circuit; Natalia Quintavalle, Consul General of Italy of New York, and introduced by Anthony Julian Tamburri, Dean at the [John D. Calandra Italian/American Institute](#) [4], Aileen Riotto Sirey was there to pay homage to her best friend, Geraldine Ferraro.



Next to Sirey was Geraldine's husband, John. In front of her, the audience. Most of the guests were people who knew or met Geraldine, and loved her. During the Q&A, everyone had a memory about Jerry they were thrilled to share. Soon enough, the event became like a family gathering and the walls of the hall resonated with laughter.

It would have been a shame if someone had broken that special atmosphere. As a reporter, I was afraid of doing so. Hence, I met Aileen Sirey in a café, a few days later, for an interview. Step by step, the interview itself became a warm and interesting conversation on Geraldine.

**Ms Sirey, I would like you to help me to know Jerry Ferraro better. She was a role model for Italian-American women, but I am interested in knowing more about her as a person. Where should I start?**

The history of her family. She felt a strong and warm link with her roots and she was always connected with her Italian cousins, even after her father's death. She was always very very proud to be Italian and she suffered a lot for the bad reputation Italian-Americans had.

**What do you mean?**

I'll give you a couple of examples. During the Sam Donaldson's show -- maybe you don't know it in Italy but was very popular here -- he was asked: "Why are you looking for Mafia about Ms Ferraro Family?" and he said, and I'm quoting him, "if you have an Italian-American background and you are in a public office you can be guaranteed that. Why not look for that?"

It made people very very angry, because there's always this description.

I have a very good friend in the furniture business and he's a welcoming man. You know, he offers his own limousine, his own driver and so on, but what do you think people believe? It comes from Mafia, if he has money he is in the Mafia.

I've been criticize myself because I have said that the fascination that America has for the Godfather and the Soprano's is not about crime, it's about our families. Americans are fascinated with Italian families, where everybody has his own role, and with the Italian value of family.

The fascination is with the relationships between these people.

**Geraldine suffered for that. As a psychologist, how would you consider these kinds of feelings against Italian-American people?**

Twenty years ago I made a research. I put several Italian-Americans together and we talked about discrimination and problems they met in their life. It was a men and women study; they met ten weeks, once a week, for two hours, just talk about Italian American issues. It was wonderful. At the end of the meetings we found that their self-esteem had increased. There was an increase in sense of belonging.

**But with the third, forth, maybe fifth generation there are not just Italian-Americans, but Italian-American-Irish people, or Italian-American-Chinese as well. What's happening now?**

You're right, after twenty years a lot of things are changed and I was also asked to repeat the study. But I didn't.

**Coming back to Geraldine's life, how heavy was it for her?**

I'll give you another example. When Jerry went to the Senate, in one of John's buildings, in one of those apartments, there was a pornographer. It became big news. How was that told by the papers? They said John rented one of his apartments to a pornographer, that he supported pornography. It was ridiculous. But the problem was not just with supporting pornography: everybody in this country



at the time believed that pornography was managed by the Mafia.

There was an article in The New York Times by Gloria Steiner. She basically said that what you learn from Jerry Ferraro's experience is that you have to be careful about the baggage your husband brings to you. It was terrible... I mean... What baggage? Her son wrote an article that was mentioned by Fox news. He was defending his father. He wrote: "my mother went to law school because my father paid for that."

**Geraldine was also a wife and a mother. She seems to be an antipodal women compared to the business woman stereotype. She was very close to her children and husband.**

Jerry was very naturally woman, she raised three kids. Her children are perfectly sane.

The oldest, Donna, was a television producer and now she's working a film on Jerry. Her son, John Jr., is a lawyer and works with his father, and the youngest, Laura Anne Lee, is a pediatrician.

When we talked, she always told stories about her kids and she never talked about other things. The first thing we discussed when she knew about her disease was what would happen to her children, if they would be together, you know.

She fought for twelve years.

And John... As he said at the conference, he financed her campaign but he was a very devoted husband until the hours of her death.

I didn't tell you a story: One of the last times I went to visit her, I was with John in the clinic's corridor. We were waiting to see Jerry who had had a treatment when we saw a nurse running to her room. She went to put Jerry in bed, and after few minutes the nurse came back and said "John, she wants YOU put her into the bed".

She felt so fragile, her bones were so delicate that she trusted just her husband to be touched, no one else. And he handled her and helped her to lay in bed.

He was a good guy, he IS a great guy... But we also had a lot of fun, we laughed and... you know...

**Actually, Saturday we laughed too.**

Sirey laughed. That's true, she was funny, but she was also very serious.

Most of all, Jerry was a socially concerned person. When she was sick, very sick, they (journalists) would write about her disease and she told them about her drugs. She wanted to keep helping people till the end. She meant: "What do people do if they don't have money to pay for healthcare that I have?"

She was always supporting people. She was a very socially concerned person because she loved people.

**In your opinion, where did that come from?**

She saw her mother's struggle while raising two children. Jerry said that after her father died, money disappeared... she didn't know how.

She told me about a Christmas. She said: "I remember a Christmas, a few years after my father died. I met my mom at five and she invited me to take a cup of coffee. Probably she had saved a few dollars each day for that. When she went at the restaurant she left a Christmas pack on a shelf and someone stole it" and she said "I will never forget how panicked my mother was" I asked "what happened, Jerry?", she said "I really don't know, maybe she had borrowed the money, she always protected me". Jerry was always very connected to her mother because she knew how she sacrificed



for her.

### **You mean that she was able to learn from her mother's life as well?**

She always identified, I would say, with the people who had less... even when she was very comfortable, she never forgot her roots, the family... the struggles that her mother had.

### **Over the years she became a role model for Italian American women. Was she conscious about it?**

She really was, when she would come to a lunch she had always people around her...

I can say what I say: she did for Italian-American women like no other woman did.

As I said during my presentation, she was a perfect public servant because she was so concerned.

She was upset just once with me, when she said: "Aileen I'm going to run for the Senate," and I said, "The senate? Why do you want to do that?"

Jerry said "What do you mean?" and I "Do you have to protect your place of history?, "My place of history?! I've got things to do! I've got move on! And I want to serve and I can do wonderfully like Senator," she said.

I was like "Ok, Jerry... Sorry".

### **But I think she faced hard moments in her career. I'm thinking about her losing the election, for example. Didn't that discourage her and make her want to give up?**

No, Jerry never thought like that, she was always like "ok, let's move on." It wasn't things like winning an election that could hurt her. You know, she had thoughts like "I'm still me," and she had a real sense who she was, thanks to her supporters.

(Sirey took a little moment and she adds, smiling)

Yeah, she was like "come on, let's move on!"

### **And how was Jerry as friend?**

(Sirey's smile becomes beaming)

She was very traditional, she loved to play golf and she loved to cook. We both love to cook, actually. We often exchanged recipes and we often called each other to say "what are you doing for dinner?" (She laughed), or "I'm making this," or "John likes that".

That was the kind of conversations we had... we spoke about the garden.

### **Is there anything you would like to add to our conversation?**

As I told during my presentation, she was a perfect public servant because she was so concerned.

There was a quote in Times sometime ago. It said: "Men go to the Congress because they want be something, women go to the Congress because they want to do something". Jerry was like that, she wanted to do something. (She was silent for a while) And I understood that.

As we stood up and were about to leave, she added:

But... I was telling you, when she was sick I was trying to figure out what was happening.



I'm psychologist but, you know, when you're so close to somebody it's very hard to be objective.

So, it's only been a year now... I miss her... chatting... being together... there was such a trust between us...

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