

Joseph Coccia. A Vision of Need

Letizia Airos (January 07, 2013)



Joseph Coccia has left us. It is a great loss, and I deeply regret not having had the time in the last few months to go visit him. I wanted to spend some more time with him, perhaps in his house, to conduct one of those interviews that require attention, to gather not only the words of those in front of you, but also suggestions, distant thoughts, desires. Maybe in his Italian, in that bit of a dialect, which tells a story of its own. This was not possible. There is less and less time for the truly important things. And now, as I learn of his death, Joseph Coccia leaves also in me, a void filled only by the memory of his eyes and his simple way in which he was able to get close to people. He did not want to be in the limelight, as unfortunately often is the case with other philanthropists. He had the ability to wait, while respecting work and to be aware, being the son of Joseph and Clementina Coccia, Italian immigrants, of having had a difficult life but being lucky at the same time, as he once told me. Cav. Joseph Coccia was a rare example, in my opinion, of sincere generosity without any



unnecessary grandstanding and with great human concern... But above all, Joseph Coccia had the ability to find himself among young people, as a great grandfather to all. We are publishing an article about him from about a year ago in order to remember him and to feel as he is still with us.

“Our vision was a vision of need...an official entity that children, students, adults, scholars, organizations can call on to assist in furthering our rich Italian heritage...before it fades or is lost to history.”

Cav. Joseph Coccia, Jr.

A broad smile. Piercing eyes. Facial features reminiscent of his homeland even though he was not born there. That vision of Italy is brought into every moment of his life along with the ever-present image of his father.

He is not only a grandfather to his relatives—he does, in fact, have five children, ten grandchildren, and two great-grandchildren—but to all the young people who are involved with his foundation.

To see him walking and interacting with students is always exciting. He moves among them, ascends to their level, is able to communicate with the same ease that a man has with his own grandchildren.

There is a sweetness about him that struck me the first time and continues to amaze me. His manner is firm but warm, with an obvious curiosity about the other person.

It is often difficult for an Italian to understand what it means to love our country from this side of the ocean, after so many years and when one is so far away. And, it must be said, it is equally difficult to find people who know how to promote their own culture of origin with true objectivity and without self-interest.

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Of course there will always be criticism whenever a difficult task is at hand such as preserving and promoting culture, and this includes the foundation that Coccia himself started. Missteps are always possible but it must be recognized that the Coccia Foundation, undoubtedly, is the sum total of a cultural mission dedicated to young people, one that is undertaken without rhetoric or artifice.

Coccia is supported by his entire family in this mission, especially his wife Elda, and his daughter Elisa, who has served as the foundation’s director for a number of years.

“It’s part of our lives,” Coccia tells me. “The foundation was created for young people to help them integrate and to promote the values that relate to our Italian identity.”

He tells us about his father using both Italian and English. “This is all dedicated to him and my love for Italy. I spent a lot of time with him and he told me about a lot of Italian things, many of them very simple. Now they are in my blood. I could not do it any other way.” His father came to the U.S. at the beginning of last century when he was only 17 years old to work in Pennsylvania’s coal mines. He then moved to NJ where he started a family and had two children.

“He worked a lot, from 4:30 in the morning until 10:00 at night. I also worked with him until I was twenty. I learned a lot and I am thankful that he allowed me to attend Catholic school from when I was eight years old.”

This is one of Joseph Coccia’s many emblematic stories. He was born in Newark to Italian parents who emigrated to the U.S. during the Great Depression. He went to Japan and Korea while serving in the army. He then focused his life on work and family. He married Elda who was born in Lioni (Avellino province) and had arrived in the U.S. when she was 15. They later had five children.

And Joseph worked—he worked very hard first as an insurance salesman then as a furniture salesman and went on to amass a small fortune which he decided to dedicate to preserving his cultural



heritage.

"I started with [UNICO](#) [2] and I immediately saw what was missing. I spoke with students--no one was helping them!"

The [Coccia Foundation](#) [3] was founded in 1994 when Cav. Joseph Coccia, Jr. and his wife Elda personally decided to do something significant. Since 2000, Joseph Coccia has devoted much of his time to preserving Italian culture in the U.S. He understands how important it is for universities and institutions of higher education to recognize and incorporate Italian studies into their curricula. In 2003 Joseph and Elda Coccia founded the Coccia Institute for the Italian Experience in America at [Montclair State University](#) [4].

The institute recently acquired the National Italian Association Foundation (NIAF) and the New Jersey Italian and Italian Heritage Commission as its first key partners. The institute participates in Italian heritage month every year in October, holds a yearly symposium, and organizes a summer program. Among its year round initiatives, it offers an Italian theater program for children between the ages of 6 and 12 as well as business lectures and cooking demonstrations. Besides these programs the institute also engages in substantial work as a charitable foundation.

As it states on the foundation's website: "Proud of their accomplishments, Joseph and Elda realized that Italian culture is in the hands of today's children. Because of that, they are working on a cause very near to our hearts: Seeking to establish and encourage Italian student clubs and promote the teaching of Italian language, culture, and heritage in as many universities and colleges as possible."

For my part, I encourage readers to visit the site and keep up-to-date on programs and participate in their events and meetings. At the Coccia Foundation that generous Italian spirit that many dream of is still alive today.

The [Coccia Foundation](#) [3] is a non-profit 501 (c) (3) Family Foundation, located in Saddle Brook, NJ.

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