Make It Happen

The Legacy of Salvatore Davino, Cav. Nazario “Larry” Paragano Sr., and a Commission Built to Last

By Robert J. DiBiase | Chair Emeritus, New Jersey Italian Heritage Commission



Governor James E. McGreevey and Commission Chairman Cav. Nazario “Larry” Paragano Sr. at the 2002 Columbus Day ceremonies at Drumthwacket. Archival photograph.

There comes a point when remembering our heritage is no longer enough.

We can celebrate our traditions, honor our ancestors, display our flags and gather proudly as Italian Americans. All of that matters. But Salvatore A. Davino and Cavaliere Nazario “Larry” Paragano Sr. understood something more: culture survives from generation to generation only when people are willing to build something that will outlive them.

They did.

The New Jersey Italian Heritage Commission stands as a lasting tribute to that conviction—and to people who believed deeply in education, public service and the importance of preserving Italian and Italian American culture and heritage.

Their work also left us something else: a model.

And I believe that model should not end at New Jersey's borders.

More Than Cultural Pride

The Commission's founding in 2002 gave that conviction a public foundation. Sal and Larry pursued more than a ceremonial organization: they helped establish a legislated institution through which educators, public officials and the Italian American community could work toward an enduring educational purpose.

Sal and Larry came from the world of business, but neither measured success solely by what he built professionally.

Larry spent more than fifty years in real estate, construction and banking. He was also a philanthropist and civic leader whose interests extended from New Jersey to Italy. He established and supported charitable organizations, promoted education and cultural preservation, participated in the New Jersey–Italy Trade Council, and was honored by the Italian government with the title of Cavaliere.

Most important to this story, Larry was one of the founders of the New Jersey Italian Heritage Commission and served as its first Chairman. The Commission itself remembered him as a leader whose guidance helped shape the organization.

Sal's accomplishments were equally broad. He built a successful career in construction, development and commercial real estate, but education and philanthropy occupied a special place in his life. For nearly three decades, he supported educational opportunities through Shepherds of Youth and St. Michael School in Newark. He served on the Board of Trustees of John Cabot University in Rome, was a Commissioner of the Italian American Heritage Commission and chaired the New Jersey–Italy Trade Council.

The public record tells us what these men accomplished. I was fortunate enough to know something about why they did it.

Sal: "Make It Happen"

Sal was my mentor.

He could be persuasive without reminding anyone of his position or influence. He possessed considerable business acumen, but he also had humor, generosity and an instinct for getting things accomplished.

I remember being in Chicago, receiving an award from Casa Italia for sharing the Commission's mission and its Universality of Italian Heritage curriculum. It was summer, and it was hot. My cell phone rang.

It was Sal.

He asked where I was.

“Chicago,” I told him.

Without missing a beat, he replied: “Did you lose a bet?”

That was Sal.

But behind the humor was a serious commitment to education and to the Italian American community.

When financial support was needed, Sal was the kind of person who could quietly step forward on his own. When an opportunity emerged to help Italian American students study at John Cabot University in Rome, he helped turn the idea into scholarship support.

His philosophy was rarely complicated: Make it happen.

His obituary records the same philosophy in different words. Sal often said that he wanted to leave the world better than he found it. His mission was to make a difference in the lives of others. Those of us who knew him saw that philosophy in action.

Larry: Build Something That Lasts

Larry approached leadership differently, but with equal determination.

When I became involved with the Commission, Larry wanted to know what I could contribute. He cared about mission, reputation and whether someone was prepared to work.

That seriousness mattered.

Larry understood that Italian American heritage could not depend indefinitely upon personalities, annual celebrations or the good intentions of individual organizations.

It needed structure. It needed cooperation. It needed education. And ultimately, it needed permanence.

That principle became part of the foundation of the New Jersey experience: cultural pride translated into an institution with a continuing public and educational purpose.

Larry did not simply talk about heritage. He helped create a structure through which heritage could be preserved, examined and taught.

Gilda: Giving the Mission an Educational Purpose

The history of the New Jersey Italian Heritage Commission, however, cannot be told simply through legislation or organizational structure.

Laws can establish institutions. People give them purpose.

Standing shoulder to shoulder with Larry during the Commission’s formative years was Cav. Dr. Gilda Rorro Baldassari—educator, scholar and steadfast advocate for Italian and Italian American heritage.

If Larry helped establish the institutional foundation, Gilda helped answer the question that ultimately determines whether such an institution matters: What are we going to teach the next generation?

That question became central to the Commission's identity.

Through her leadership of the Commission's educational work, Gilda brought the perspective of a lifelong educator to the mission. Heritage could not simply be celebrated. It had to enter the classroom with intellectual credibility. It had to be historically responsible. It had to be useful to teachers. And it had to help students understand Italian and Italian American contributions within the larger development of America and world civilization.

From that philosophy emerged one of the Commission's most consequential achievements—the "Universality of Italian Heritage" curriculum.

Its underlying idea was powerful precisely because it was not narrowly ethnic. Science. Medicine. Law. Art. Architecture. Literature. Music. Exploration. Engineering. Government. Immigration. Italian and Italian American history intersects with all of them.

Under Gilda's educational leadership, the Commission pursued an approach in which historically appropriate material could be infused into subjects that students were already studying. Heritage thereby became more than cultural remembrance.

It became an instrument for fact-based education and critical thinking.

And Gilda did something equally important. She stayed.

Organizations frequently begin with enthusiasm and gradually lose the people who carry their institutional memory. Gilda has remained a steadfast presence—educator, advocate and participant throughout the Italian American community—carrying forward the conviction that inspired the Commission in its earliest years.

That continuity matters.

Larry and Sal are no longer here to see where their work may lead. Gilda is. And those of us who shared that journey now have an opportunity—and perhaps an obligation—to take what was built in New Jersey and ask whether its lessons can benefit Italian Americans throughout the nation.

A Commission Is Not a Monument

The distinction is essential. A permanent commission provides continuity, but permanence alone is not its achievement. Its value rests in what it makes possible: historically grounded classroom resources, collaboration with educators and public institutions, and the opportunity for students to examine Italian and Italian American contributions as part of the larger American story.

The greatest tribute to Sal, Larry and those who helped build the Commission is not a plaque bearing their names.

It is a Commission that continues to work.

A properly constituted heritage commission can bring educators, scholars, cultural organizations, public officials and citizens together around a serious public purpose: historical accuracy, education and informed understanding.

That should matter to Italian Americans. It should also matter to legislators, educators and academia.

The purpose is not to tell students what to think. It is to provide historically responsible information and encourage them to think critically.

Italian heritage provides an extraordinary opportunity through which to accomplish that.

The “Universality of Italian Heritage” curriculum experience intersects with the development of science and medicine, art and architecture, literature and music, exploration and engineering, immigration and labor, commerce, government and public service.

Teaching those connections does not diminish anyone else’s heritage. It helps complete the historical record.

The Lesson for All of Us

Italian Americans have built hundreds of organizations across this country. We have foundations, museums, fraternal organizations, educational institutions, cultural associations and national organizations doing important work.

But the lesson extends beyond Italian America. Every cultural community faces the same fundamental question: How do we preserve what previous generations gave us while making it meaningful to generations that follow?

Organizations are essential to that work. They preserve traditions, create community, support scholarship and keep cultural identity alive.

They should not be replaced. They should be engaged.

The larger question is whether their knowledge, experience and resources can also be connected to something permanent within public life—an institution capable of bringing together culture, education, scholarship, community and government while surviving changes in political leadership and individual personalities.

New Jersey demonstrated that it can be done. Not perfectly. Not easily. And not without challenges. But it can be done.

And while the New Jersey Italian Heritage Commission grew from the Italian American experience, the principle behind it is universal: A culture that values its heritage must find meaningful ways to preserve it, teach it and pass it forward.

That may be one of the most important lessons Sal, Larry, Gilda and the other pioneers of the Commission leave us. And it is a lesson that belongs not only to Italian Americans—but to all of us.

A Living Legacy

Legacy should not be measured only by what was accomplished yesterday.

A legacy remains alive when someone carries it forward.

The New Jersey experience demonstrated that Italian American heritage can become part of a serious public educational mission. It showed that educators, cultural organizations, government officials, universities and community leaders can work together around a common purpose.

The question now is whether that experience should remain uniquely New Jersey's.

I do not believe it should.

That is where the Italian American Heritage Task Force—IATF— becomes the next chapter and part of the story.

From Their Work to Ours

IATF is not an attempt to reproduce the New Jersey Commission identically in fifty states.

Every state has its own legislature, educational system, Italian American community and political realities.

Nor is IATF intended to compete with existing Italian American organizations.

Its purpose is to facilitate. New Jersey gives us something extraordinarily valuable: experience.

We have legislation. We have organizational history. We have educational materials. We have partnerships. We have successes. We have disappointments and lessons learned. And we have more than two decades of experience showing what it takes to move from cultural pride toward institutional permanence.

Why should another state have to begin with a blank sheet of paper?

IATF can place that experience in the hands of people willing to lead and say: Here is what New Jersey learned. Let us help you build something appropriate for your state.

We can provide models, not mandates.

We can share legislative experience, educational resources and organizational guidance.

We can connect Italian American organizations with educators, community leaders and public officials.

And as those efforts grow, perhaps the New Jersey experience can offer something beyond Italian America as well—a framework other cultural communities can examine, adapt and make their own.

Most importantly, we can help another generation understand that preserving heritage requires more than remembering the past. It requires building for the future. From heritage to education. From education to permanence.

Their Legacy—Our Responsibility

As America commemorates its 250th anniversary, the question becomes especially timely. The Italian American story belongs within the nation's full historical record—not as an isolated celebration, but as part of the study of the people, ideas and institutions that helped shape America.

Sal Davino and Larry Paragano belonged to a generation of Italian Americans who understood that achievement brought with it an obligation to give something back.

They did not merely speak about heritage. They invested in it. They organized around it. They brought people together. And they helped establish an institution intended to survive them.

Gilda Rorro Baldassari helped give that institution its educational voice and has remained present to protect and advance that mission.

I have had the privilege of knowing them, working with them and learning from them.

Now I believe our responsibility is to carry what they began beyond ourselves.

Our culture and heritage are worth preserving. They are worth researching. They are worth teaching accurately. And they are worth protecting through institutions capable of continuing the work long after today's leaders are gone.

That is the enduring compliment we can pay Sal and Larry.

It is an opportunity for Gilda and those who remain from that formative generation to help carry their work into its next chapter.

And it is the challenge IATF now places before Italian Americans, educators, academics, cultural organizations, legislators and public officials throughout the country:

For me, Sal left us the answer years ago.

Make It Happen.