

IAPC Elects New Officers: Justinian Society members, Mary Nicolau and Thomas Battista

By Leonard F. Amari

The Italian American Political Coalition recently elected new officers to serve for the 2005 through 2007 calendar years. The president and president-elect of the coalition are elected for two-year periods so as to have continuity in their programs. Further, they are elected to serve a two-year term because the first year is traditionally a non-election year, for all intents and purposes, so as to get up to speed in putting in place his or her agenda and in anticipation of an election year. Mary Nicolau, a highly respected Justinian and former Cook County Assistant State's Attorney, and Tom Battista, in private practice and former chair of the Illinois Property Tax Appeal Board, as president-elect, will bring a great deal of leadership to their new positions and we pledge our absolute support with the implementation of their agenda which, of course, is nothing more than to further the interests of our community, politically, in the Chicagoland area.

Nicolau is a principal with the law firm of Smith Kruse & Nicolau in Lincolnwood, Illinois. She practices general litigation with a main concentration in the area of real estate taxation, including hearing before the Board of Review, Property Tax Appeal Board, and the circuit courts. Nicolau is also a commissioner for the Court of Claims for the State of Illinois.

For our younger members, or those who just don't know, we provide here a brief history of the IAPC.

The Italian American Political Coalition, an Illinois not-for-profit entity was created in the early 1990s to fill a vacuum that existed for many years in this area, to create a voice, politically, for the Italian-American community.

At the time of the decennial census in 1990, as most folks in our community remember, the only two U.S. Congressmen from Illinois redistricted out of office were the only two whose names ended in a vowel, Congressmen Annunzio and Russo. A handful of attorneys and businessmen recognized this vagary and called a meeting at the law offices of Amari & Locallo, to discuss creating a "PAC," a political action committee, with an eye toward the empowerment of the Italian American community politically. To quote the highly respected and recently retired Raymond R. Coffey, the Chicago Sun-Times political reporter in a column he wrote May 5, 1994: "Many of them saw it then, see it still, as part of a troubling pattern in which they have been increasingly ignored, disrespected, taken for granted politically in Chicago and Illinois."

Prominent members of our community such as Tony Tortoriello, Dick Caifano, Jim Montana, Dominic DiFrisco, Tony Fornelli, Joe Annunzio, Joe Gagliardo, Bruno Tassone, Sam Tornatore and others, decided to create an entity with an eye toward coalescing our community, politically, to vote as a bloc, and to try to have some influence in the political process where, obviously, very little existed for some time.

In fact, it was Dick Caifano who called this author, initially, after the redistricting, and said: "Len, what are we going to do about this." It was this call that triggered a lunch at Tope Gigio's, with Dick Caifano, Len Amari, Tony Ferraro, Sam Tornatore, Joe Locallo and Joe Gagliardo that was the beginning of the creation of the IAPC.

As Italians are want to do, a great deal of disagreement existed as to what the process should be, the vehicle, the approach, who should be involved, e.g., should it be an arm of the Justinian Society of Lawyers, should we be bi-partisan/non- partisan, should elected officials be permitted to participate in the governance, etc. However, all of the founding board members were united in one purpose, to react to the disenfranchisement of our community in the political process, to do what we could to encourage people from our community to run for public office, and to be active in politics at every level. It was prominent Chicago attorney, past Justinian president, community leader and fellow founding board member John Spatuzza who suggested the name that describes our purpose – the Italian American Political Coalition. Tony Ferraro handled all of the entity creation paper-work. We now have and have had a board that consistently numbers thirty or so members, from all walks of life and are always looking for more committed people from our community, and especially more women who feel, as the founding board members felt, that we must not sit idly by and be ignored by the elected politicians.

For example, it wasn't so long ago when we had at least eight to as many as a dozen Italian-American justices on the Illinois Appellate Court. Presently, there is only one Italo-American on the Appellate Court, Justice Thomas Hoffman. In the history of the State of Illinois, we have only had one statewide constitutional elected official from our community. In the Chicago City Council, out of 50 there are only 3 Italian aldermen. Based upon population, our community is substantially under-represented across the state, in the executive and judicial branches and in both chambers of the State House. One could properly assume that being the 5th largest ethnic group in the State of Illinois that we would have much greater governmental and political representation or at least more attention to the needs, demands and interests of our community. Our mission statement then, and continuing, is to register folks from our community to vote, to encourage Italian-Americans to seek public office, to raise funds and to create mailings and any other vehicle available to us, in order to demonstrate that our community can impact on the outcome of an election. We have worked very hard since the creation of the IAPC to accomplish this end and we must continue with this struggle.

If you are interested in and would like more information about the Italian American Political Coalition contact Nina Albano Vidmer at (708) 338-1026, the executive director or visit us on the website, www.IAPCVOTE.org.