

Renaissance Man



NIAF leaders, family and friends reflect on the life and accomplishments of Foundation Chairman Dr. A. Kenneth Ciongoli

By Monica Soladay



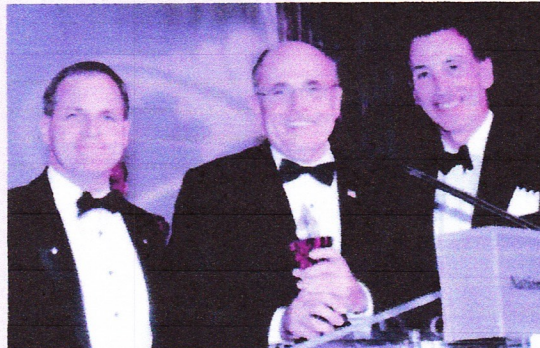
Ciongoli poses with close friend and fellow NIAF Board Member John A. DePasquale. Photo courtesy of John DePasquale.

In 1986, Dr. A. Kenneth Ciongoli joined the National Italian American Foundation (NIAF). Already an accomplished neurologist at the age of 43, he was interested in reconnecting with his heritage.

Twenty years later, Ciongoli had risen in NIAF's ranks to the position of Chairman of the Board, guiding the organization to an increased focus on education, youth outreach, and world policy. His success had as much to do with dedication to his heritage as it did with his personal traits: a thirst for knowledge, the pursuit of excellence in all things, charisma, and a deep concern for others. He was, in the eyes of many close friends and colleagues, a true Renaissance man with interests ranging from literature to athletics.



Barbara and Dr. A. Kenneth Ciongoli (center) pose with Italian Ambassador to the U.S. Giovanni Castellaneta and his wife, Lila, (left) and singer Deana Martin, daughter of Dean Martin, and her husband, John Griffith (right) during the 2007 NIAF gala.



NIAF General Counsel Hon. Louis J. Freeh, 2007 NIAF Honoree Rudolph W. Giuliani, and Ciongoli pose during NIAF's 32nd



Despite a 2007 cancer diagnosis, Ciongoli continued his hard work on NIAF's behalf, traveling to Rome and Milan in June 2008 for his annual Roman Roundtable, a discussion featuring prominent speakers discussing U.S./Italy relations, and a subsequent business conference. On October 18, he attended NIAF's 33rd Anniversary Gala in Washington, D.C. with his wife, Barbara, children, friends and family. He passed away 10 days later, at the age of 65.

"When he was diagnosed – I remember thinking how sad it was for the rest of the world," said his youngest son, Antonio Ciongoli, 24. "He just had so much more to give and so much more to do for Italian Americans."

LIFE LESSONS AT AN EARLY AGE

The only child of Alfred and Antoinette Ciongoli, Alfred Kenneth Ciongoli – or "Al" as he was known to his friends in his youth – was born in 1943 and grew up in the predominantly Italian-American neighborhood of South Philadelphia. The city's color, sense of community and connection to heritage always remained close to his heart, even after he grew up and built a life of his own in Vermont. In his later years, Ciongoli would return to the city, bringing fellow NIAF board members to experience the neighborhood where he grew up.

His mother doted on her only son and stayed home to care for her family while his father worked as a surveyor, decorated department store windows and owned buildings throughout the city. "He always had at least two jobs, maybe three to put my dad through school," reminisced Antonio of his grandfather.

In this environment, Ciongoli came of age knowing that children and togetherness were his family's first priority. "...Family is primary, with daily habits that include eating together at the dinner table," Ciongoli wrote about Italian-American tradition in "Beyond the Godfather," a collection of essays published in 1997 that he edited with Jay Parini. Accordingly, he came to ascribe the characteristics of "routine sympathy, congeniality, fairness, self-control, loyalty and duty" as common to Italian Americans.

Neighborhood life was an equally important part of his youth; years later as a father he would regale his children with stories about the lessons he learned as a child in South Philadelphia. "He was always looking for the lesson in anything and how history is going to benefit the future," Antonio said. "He always told those stories about growing up. And we loved them."

Ciongoli shared those stories with NIAF members as well; this summer, he reminisced about his youth in the previous issue of *Ambassador*, saying, "Growing up in South Philadelphia during the 1950s and 1960s, music was an integral part of my life. Like every other young man my age, I belonged to a four-man singing group – we called ourselves "We Four" – and emulated singing groups like Danny and the Juniors, the Four Aces, and the Four Freshmen. Fabian, Frankie Avalon and Bobby Redell

Living in an environment where anything was possible through hard work, Ciongoli began to dream of achievements beyond music. They involved an education and a career in medicine.

FROM SOUTH PHILADELPHIA TO THE IVY LEAGUE

As a teenager, Ciongoli graduated with honors from Philadelphia's St. Joseph's Preparatory School. In 1960, he enrolled in the University of Pennsylvania and was the first member of his family to attend



Ciongoli presents First Lady Barbara Bush with a NIAF Special Achievement Award for Literacy during the Foundation's 2007 Gala Weekend.

college. He met fellow Italian American John A. DePasquale during his first year at the Ivy League institution; the two grew into life-long friends, eventually both serving on the NIAF Board of Directors.

"We met probably the fifth day on campus as freshmen," recalled DePasquale of Ciongoli, who was a pre-med student, co-captain of the lightweight football team and a fellow member of Beta Theta Pi fraternity. Even at such a young age, the traits that would guarantee Ciongoli future success in life had already emerged, he noted, adding, "When we had fraternity meetings and rush sessions, his leadership qualities were evident."

Yet, "he was a much more fun-loving person than

Furthering a legacy

To honor the memory of Dr. A. Kenneth Ciongoli, the NIAF Board of Directors has established the **Dr. A. Kenneth Ciongoli Colloquium Endowment**. The Endowment will fund and host panel discussions and debates on a variety of topics at eight Ivy League colleges and other select universities throughout the United States. This important program will examine the global contributions of Western Civilization in addition to our culture, heritage and history.

For more information or to donate to the Dr. A. Kenneth Ciongoli Colloquium Endowment, contact



Ciongoli poses with his wife Barbara, left, and Ginette Toscano-Page, president of Club Garibaldi in Wellington, New Zealand, and her husband, Robin Page. The couple traveled from New Zealand to attend the 2007 NIAF gala after meeting Ciongoli during his visit to the country earlier that year.

extremely active in cultural and philanthropic activities. He was a founding member of the Vermont Italian Cultural Association (VICA) and a member of The Mutuo Soccorso, the oldest Italian American organization in Vermont.

In 1986, Ciongoli began his involvement with NIAF, first becoming involved as a council member and gradually taking on more responsibility. Eventually, he served as NIAF president from 1996-2000, vice chairman from 2000-2004, and chairman of the board from 2005 until his death. "I personally had an interest in his succeeding me as chairman because I knew of his talents and commitment to the Foundation," said Chairman Emeritus Frank J. Guarini. "He deeply believed in the mission of NIAF, the concept of preserving the history, heritage and accomplishments of Italian Americans."

Ciongoli dramatically expanded NIAF's role, elevating it from a scholarship provider and voice in Washington, D.C., to a major presence in American cultural, political and educational affairs. "He had the intellectual capacity to step back and look at an issue and then focus on how NIAF could contribute, whether through seminars or one-on-one, leader to leader," said NIAF Board Member Patricia de Stacy Harrison. "He really brought the organization to a new level by using the talent of the board as well as other opinion leaders and Congress, for example."

He was perhaps at his best when speaking about his great passions: Western Civilization in general and, more specifically, the role that Italians and their American descendants have played in the modern world. This interest gave rise to a number of policy and academic programs he personally launched at NIAF. "Ken then wanted to make an impression on the outside world that Italians were also to be recognized and respected for their contributions to the academy and the scholarly world," Del Raso said of such initiatives.

Under his leadership, the Foundation's annual Roman Roundtable conferences in Italy brought together leaders from the two nations to discuss issues of world-wide significance. "It really shows the power and value of NIAF focusing on issues that are global in nature, but also have an impact on a local and national level in terms of defense, security and economics," said Harrison, who attended the 2008 Roman Roundtable conference.

Additionally, Ciongoli established the Gay Talese Writers Series at the University of Pennsylvania, which provided a venue for up-and-coming Italian-American authors to receive tutelage from these more estab-

said program namesake and famed author Gay Talese, whose acquaintanceship with Ciongoli through NIAF grew into a close friendship. "Those who were in positions to write were calling more attention to Italian contributions."

Ciongoli was also dedicated to advancing possibilities for Italian-American youth. As vice chairman of NIAF's Council of 1000, he spearheaded "NIAF Visits the Ivies," a program exploring why Italian Americans continue to be underrepresented at Ivy League institutions. NIAF Board Member **Ciro C. Poppiti III, Esq.**, first met Ciongoli while a student at Princeton University during that time. The two developed a friendship and Ciongoli involved the young student in NIAF, eventually introducing Poppiti to his future wife.



Ciongoli, surrounded by friends and family, at NIAF's 33rd Anniversary Gala earlier this year.

Now co-chairman of NIAF's education committee, Poppiti credits Ciongoli with stirring interest in creating more youth-related events for NIAF. "Ken was the guy saying 'Hey, let's have a youth retreat. Let's have a youth institute. Let's have our young members have a say in what types of programs we're doing,'" Poppiti recalled. NIAF Vice Chairman Jerry Colangelo agreed, noting that "the special emphasis on education was his calling card."

Additionally, Ciongoli was a dedicated voice against ethnic stereotyping in all forms and led NIAF to advocate the appointment of qualified Italian Americans to cabinet posts and, in the case of Justice Samuel Alito, Jr., the United States Supreme Court. He also led delegations of business leaders on annual missions to Italy, as well as to Argentina and Australia, to foster cultural understanding, trade initiatives, and tourism between the U.S., Italy and abroad.

LOOKING FORWARD

As NIAF moves forward without Ciongoli's leadership, it's certain that his legacy and interests will have a lasting influence on NIAF's growth. "He wanted to make certain that the cultural aspect of the Italian-American community was properly recognized by not only the American public but also the Italian public," a top priority for the Foundation today, noted Zizza.

That impact extends not just to NIAF's work, but to our pride as well. "His great pride in his heritage was a joy to all and his interest in deepening the relationship with our brothers and sisters in Italy was paramount," agreed Colangelo.

"He made us all proud," said Talese. "One of the great achievements of his life was that he enhanced the respect that people had for themselves because



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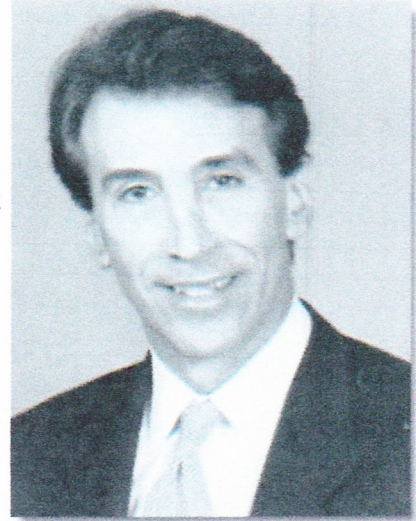
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NIAF honors chairman's memory with endowment fund

During his years as Chairman, Vice Chairman and a NIAF Board Member, Dr. A. Kenneth Ciongoli personified the Italian American spirit and the great contributions of Italian culture in America. His death on October 28, 2008 after a year-long battle with cancer has left a void.



To honor his memory, the NIAF Board of Directors has established the Dr. A. Kenneth Ciongoli Colloquium Endowment. The Endowment will fund and host panel discussions and debates on a variety of topics at eight Ivy League colleges and other select universities throughout the United States. This important program will examine the global contributions of Western civilization in addition to our culture, heritage and history.

For more information or to donate to the Dr. A. Kenneth Ciongoli Colloquium Endowment, [click here](#).

Foundation welcomes De Santis

James R. De Santis, an executive with more than 24 years experience leading nonprofits, has been named NIAF's National Executive Director and Chief Administrative Officer effective November 1, 2008.



"It is truly a personal and professional privilege to be chosen as NIAF's new executive director. I will approach this responsibility with deep respect for the tradition of the organization, a passion for its mission and commitment to continue its growth and impact," De Santis said.

De Santis has previously served as president of The Astronauts Memorial Foundation at the Kennedy Space Center, where he managed a \$30-million program for the



NIAF MOURNS PASSING OF NIAF CHAIRMAN A. KENNETH CIONGOLI

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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NIAF MOURNS PASSING OF NIAF CHAIRMAN

A. KENNETH CIONGOLI

(Washington, DC – October 29, 2008) Dr. A. Kenneth Ciongoli, chairman of the National Italian American Foundation (NIAF), passed away October 28, 2008, at his home in Burlington, Vt., after battling cancer for more than a year. He was 65 years old.

"NIAF has lost a great leader, the world has a lost a great man," John A. DePasquale, a member of the NIAF Board of Directors said.

For the past 18 years, Ciongoli served on the NIAF Board of Directors, leading the organization as Chairman since 2005. He joined the Foundation's board in 1990 and held a variety of leadership positions.

A prominent neurologist, Ciongoli's dual commitment to heritage and science defined his career. In 1980, he was appointed senior medical officer of the United States Olympic Team for the Lake Placid, New York games. More than 25 years later he returned to the Olympics in 2006 as part of a delegation of Italian-American leaders appointed by President George W. Bush to represent the United States in Torino, Italy.

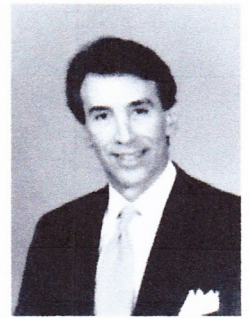
The many projects that he championed, including NIAF's annual Roman Roundtable conferences in Italy, the establishment of the Gay Talese Writers Series and his support of education through "NIAF Visits the Ivies," a program examining why Italian Americans are under-represented at Ivy League institutions, will serve as his legacy.

Ciongoli graduated with honors from St. Joseph's Preparatory School in Philadelphia, Penn., and was the first member of his family to attend college. He graduated from the University of Pennsylvania in 1964 and from the Philadelphia College of Osteopathic Medicine in 1968. He completed a general internship in Detroit, Mich., followed by a year of internal medicine at the University of Vermont. During his subsequent residency at the University of Vermont, he was the first neurology resident to be awarded the title of chief resident and began researching multiple sclerosis. He held a series of research and teaching posts at institutions such as Walter Reed Army hospital in Washington, D.C., the Wistar Institute at the University of Pennsylvania and the University of Pennsylvania Medical School. In 1974, Ciongoli was the first non-Danish citizen to be awarded a Danish government fellowship in medicine. His research led to the publication of more than 30 articles and abstracts on multiple sclerosis.

Ciongoli joined the faculty of the University of Vermont Medical School in 1975 and co-founded the Neurological Associates of Vermont in 1977. He was appointed Physician Commissioner of the State of Vermont by three different governors.

In addition to his work as a physician, Ciongoli was extremely active in cultural and philanthropic activities. He was a founding member of the Vermont Italian Cultural Association (VICA) and a member of The Mutuo Soccorso. In 1985 he began his involvement with the National Italian American Foundation (NIAF), culminating in positions as President (1996-2000), Vice Chairman (2000-2004), and Chairman of the Board (2005 to the present).

Ciongoli was a dedicated voice against ethnic stereotyping in all forms and advocated the bi-partisan confirmation of qualified Italian-Americans to the cabinet and the United States Supreme Court. He led delegations of business



*Dr. A. Kenneth
Ciongoli*

leaders on annual missions to Italy, Argentina and Australia to foster cultural understanding, trade initiatives, and tourism between the United States, Italy and abroad.

With his friend, noted author Jay Parini, Ciongoli co-edited "Beyond the Godfather," a series of essays by Italian-American authors and co-wrote "Passage to Liberty," a book on the Italian-American immigrant experience. He also authored the yet-unpublished "Let Me In," the autobiographical account of his journey from South Philadelphia to the Ivy League and back to his heritage.

In commemoration of his life and spirit, contributions can be made to The Dr. A. Kenneth Ciongoli Colloquium Endowment at the National Italian American Foundation. Visit www.niaf.org/ciongoli/.

NIAF is a non-profit organization based in Washington, D.C., and dedicated to preserving the heritage of Italian Americans. Visit www.niaf.org.