

Frank Isernio Keynote Speech

Italian Club Business Luncheon

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Columbia Tower Club

Our immigrant parents and grandparents willingly took on the challenge of creating a new life in America with strong hopes of providing a better life for their families. My mother came from San Marco in Foggia as a young girl. Her father labored paving city streets until he started his own construction business. My father was born the first year my grandparents came from Casserta near Naples. My father and his brothers labored at truck farming, eventually farming the 124 acres where Boeing now sits. My father was taken out of school at 12 years old to help on the farm and later run a produce route. They were among the first Italian immigrants to sell produce at the public market. . . Italy at the turn of the century was a country of poverty. Mostly agricultural, truly a land of have or have-nots. They and many others left their extended family and friends behind knowing full well they may never see them again. No matter what obstacles they faced, they relied on their imbedded priorities . . . dedication to family and the virtues of hard work.

Self-Motivation

Today I'd like to focus on three special qualities that I feel have been handed down to us by our Italian-American heritage. I am sure that many of you here today share similarities with me in your upbringing and have great reverence for what our immigrant predecessors accomplished with the little formal education that most had. So . . . we should ask ourselves. . . "What can **we** accomplish with **our** lives?" Because we truly are the architects of our lives. Yes, there are sometimes circumstances beyond our control, such as the horrible World Trade Center attacks recently . . . What did New Yorkers show us? . . . Not complacency or an attitude of . . . "there's nothing I can do about it". . . no, instead we saw courage, strength of character, kindness and generosity to their fellow man.

It's very easy nowadays to get wrapped up in all the bad news around us and sadly focus on what's wrong instead of focusing on the promise of what's good and what is possible to accomplish. I know there are still many people living in poverty in

America. On the other hand, I also know that nowhere else on the face of the earth does an individual have such an opportunity to forge a better life, if he so desires. Many young people of today are convinced that it is foolish to “pay your dues.” That in order to succeed, you need only to be lucky or get the right stock option package. Many tend to look for immediate gratification rather than long term return on efforts. When I started my company, I didn’t have a 5-year business plan and venture capitalists lined up to donate capitol. I started in a basement in Georgetown with a card table for a desk and a cardboard box for an in basket, making deliveries out of the trunk of my car.

I started making sausage at home. My mother and other relatives made it because it tasted better than what was available. I began making it as a hobby like some make wine. What we didn’t eat, I would give to friends. For years I heard, “You should sell this stuff.” . . .Did I think I could make a living at it? . . .no way. . . But here’s where a push in the right direction can make a difference . . .Tony and Flora Mascio had emigrated from Italy and worked every waking hour to provide for their family. They made ravioli in their small basement shop in Georgetown that Tony had constructed. One day Flora said, “Franco, I have a sausage stuffing machine that I use for cannelloni, come here and make a big batch of sausage rather than stuffing through a plastic funnel on your kitchen table. They also suggested, that I should sell the sausage and invited me to share their small basement shop. . . . God bless them. The kindness and generosity was overwhelming. Their encouragement made me say to myself that I should believe in myself as much as these friends believed in me. It was like family. No legal arrangement, no lease papers. It was simply kind Italian people helping one another.

There wasn’t any refrigeration and I couldn’t afford a commercial type, so I converted home refrigerators bought second hand from Honest Abe’s used appliance store, on Rainier Ave. I didn’t have a delivery truck, so I gutted the trunk of my car, drilled drain holes in the floor, and filled it with ice for deliveries. I got used to people rolling down their windows at stop lights and telling me my gas tank was leaking . . .To cover my personal expenses, I took a night job in the shipyards from 4 to midnight. For quite a while I’d sleep 4-5 hours, get up, make sausage, change my clothes and go from restaurant to restaurant to sell it. Vito Santoro at Vito’s on Ninth and Madison was my first customer. Big Vito was great. One look and a taste and he said, “I want it.” Others

weren't as encouraging. Some Italian restaurateurs would say, "This is great stuff. I'd like to buy some to take home, but my customers won't appreciate this kind of quality, besides it's expensive." Having people accept the product and compliment it was what kept me going. In the early eighties, mainstream restaurants began featuring pasta dishes on the menu. I made it my business to help them choose sausage as an ingredient. To show them the versatility of the product, I made it a point to always arrange to cook some sausage when I was presenting it. I knew if they could taste it and taste it cooked correctly, I had the sale almost complete.

I also noticed that there was little quality sausage available in supermarkets at the time, so I developed my first packaging concept and approached a retail chain. They said they would try it at one location if I would demonstrate. I put up a card table and cooked and sampled the product that first of hundreds of Saturdays to come. I'd ask the customers, "Try some Italian sausage." Many times they'd say no. I'd say "Why." They'd say "Because sausage is fatty or sausage has chemicals in it." I'd say, "This is lean and it doesn't have additives in it." Most people liked the product, but weren't sure how to use it, so I'd say, "What do you use to make a pasta sauce?" "Hamburger," I was told. I'd say, "Use the sausage in the sauce and here is a recipe."

As I grew, I serviced the accounts with driver salesmen taking orders the previous day and delivering the sausage fresh, within hours of production bypassing the then inefficient warehouse systems. And so it went. I listened to my customers and found out their preferences and the business prospered. In hindsight, the fact that I had little money and had to improvise made me more creative and eventually stronger. I wore lots of hats, but I was determined to make this business succeed each day.

Interestingly enough, I didn't have everyone cheering me on. My father was a very cautious man. Maybe because of his life struggle and the memory of the depression. He thought it was very risky to go out on my own. In contrast, my then 70 something mother would ask if she could wash sausage casings for me or answer the phone. My first business venture was with my mother when I was 7 or 8 years old. We were walking together past the florist shop in Georgetown and I saw planter pots filled with ivy in the store window. I asked, "Do they get money for that?" My mother said, "Yes." I said is that the same stuff that grows on the hill by our house?" She said, "Yes." She then very

wisely said, “Do you think you could sell plants if we put some in pots ourselves?” And I said, “Yes.” My first business was underway. Mother would put the clippings in pots and I would pull my wagon around the neighborhood and sell door to door. Later, I sold Christmas cards, eggs, you name it. It was fun and in hindsight, it gave me confidence and a sense of independence at an early age. I sum up my folks attitudes by one childhood memory. My father once said, “Don’t go near the water because you might drown.” My mother said, “Learn to swim. Take some swimming lessons.” My mother was always encouraging. She would say, “Read; the library is free.” My father found his value in working, saving and providing for his family. He also had strong principles and integrity that I deeply respect. Most of us are not blessed with some mythical perfect family, but I find that it is important to draw out the positive aspects and apply them to our lives. Probably one of the most important human characteristics to keep us on the path is resilience. Resilience is that ability to bounce back when faced with personal and professional disappointments. I think that Italians have that ability to bounce back. I saw it in my parents and other family members.

Even though my father made a modest income, my parents provided for us by growing vegetables and raising chickens and rabbits in the back yard. The eggs we didn’t use, my mother would sell. My mother canned fruits and vegetables every fall so we’d have them to eat in the winter. When they wanted chicken for dinner, my father killed one and my mother plucked the feathers and cleaned it. They made do. They were resourceful. They had resilience like so many others of that era.

No one that I know is exempt from debilitating illness, loss of a parent or child, loss of a job or financial worries. We will always have pluses and minuses in our life. . . Sometimes when I start to get overwhelmed, I think, “I’m surely not the only one that has gone through this situation and I’m sure in time it will pass if I dig deep and give it my all. I truly believe that the ball bounces the way your throw it. I don’t count on luck. We all know that an **entrepreneur** may be creative enough to start a business, but those same qualities may not keep the business afloat. The stuff that keeps it going is self-discipline, patience and resilience . . . The very virtues our immigrant relatives had.

In the sadness this country has experienced these last two weeks, who has been a better example of leadership, compassion, and courage than New York mayor, Rudy

Giuliani. As we all know, the man brought civility back to New York and in the process, cut crime in half, but still was constantly criticized. Last week, David Letterman paid tribute to this man among men. He said, "If you don't know how to behave, all you have to do at any moment is watch the mayor. Rudolph Giuliani is the personification of courage. Giuliani not only has motivated and inspired people, he has taken decisive action." . . . How refreshing it is to see an American hero being made of a man that stuck by his convictions. A man that epitomizes resilience . . .

Love of Life – Passion

Where is the number one vacation destination in the world? . . . Florence, Italy. Why do people all over the world flock to Italy to savor the art, the architecture, the food and the wine, the ambience of Venice and Rome, and the passionate, hospitable people?

Whenever I visit there and return home, I find that it reinforces my priorities in life. Family, time with friends, respect for beauty and quality. We Italians take enormous pleasure in food, music, getting together to celebrate not just holidays, but everyday. You can't help but reassess what is important in your life when you have been surrounded by a culture that savors every day they have on earth.

There seems to be an innate need for Italians to express themselves. They apply their passion in so many ways, regardless of what they do whether it is the creations of Michelangelo, the opera singers at La Scala, or in sports with Vince Lombardi, in entertainment with Frank Sinatra or Scorsese, or law with Chief Justice Scalia. They all display the self-motivation, resilience and a passion for life.

My goal was never to make Isernio's a global brand or grow the company to the size of General Mills. To me it has been the thrill of the journey. Quality, not quantity has been my motto. Even though we are now sold in many areas of the USA, my rewards come in the day-to-day moments. It is my reward to have people compliment the product, to use our products and weave them into their daily celebrations of life. I get calls and e-mail from many people that tell me how their family has come to expect our sausage at family get togethers, offer their recipes and make me promise to never change it. When I dig deep, I know my business has thrived because of the values I learned when growing up. Work hard; learn to love your work by applying yourself and take pride in refining it. Keep your commitments and treat customers and employees with respect. Something I

have to keep reminding myself of when I get stretched thin . . . life is beautiful and I am very thankful for the life I am living.

My mother will be having her 95th birthday a month from now. And she approaches life with passion. She wakes up everyday thankful and ready to accomplish more than she could possibly do. She doesn't fear the future-but embraces everyday with curiosity, faith and excitement.

This is the essence of the Italian-American experience. This self-motivation and determination to use whatever talents they possess, the resilience in facing the adversities of life, and the firm belief that each and everyday is truly a thing of beauty.

Sometimes we are so caught up in our daily life that we have forgotten the core values which our parents and grandparents have given us. Their priorities and basic beliefs never changed through all their hardships and they thrived. The events of the past weeks have abruptly reminded us that these values are to be honored and practiced. Self-motivation, determination, resilience and the unwavering belief that life, in spite of tragedy is beautiful . . .