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# The Delaware Valley

MARCH 2021

VOL. 8 / NO. 3

# ITALIAN-AMERICAN HERALD

A MONTHLY NEWSPAPER SERVING THE ITALIAN-AMERICAN COMMUNITY

[WWW.ITALIANAMERICANHERALD.COM](http://WWW.ITALIANAMERICANHERALD.COM)



The town square in Parma, normally teeming with tourists, is almost deserted except for a few people wearing facemasks. | PHOTO CREDIT: Gabriella Clare Marino via Unsplash.

## Things we lost and found in 2020

As virus pulled people apart, hope and determination grew strong

By **Richard A. DiLiberto Jr.**

The year 2020, with its COVID virus, taught us abundant patience, adaptability, resilience, faith, and the value of home and family. Not since the Spanish Flu of 1918 has every American citizen, regardless of age, vim, vigor or somatotype, been suddenly summoned into service, to throw down against an invisible enemy, and preserve our very survival. The most basic tactile human expressions of affection, hugs and kisses were

cruelly forbidden by the virus.

Still, 2021 has brought renewed hope, positivity, the bumpy rollout of several vaccines, and continued counting of our blessings.

Throughout 2020, sadly, most of our cherished Italian-American customs and traditions were suspended. Birthday parties, anniversary celebrations, sharing St. Joseph's Day *zeppole* and coffee, extended family Sunday pasta dinners and *vino*, Easter Mass, first holy communions, spring weddings,

graduations (with *nonnos* surreptitiously slipping currency into the graduates' hands), Mothers' Day brunches, Fathers' Day baseball games, Independence Day picnics and handshakes, vacations, Columbus Day parades and receptions, Vendemmia, St. Anthony's Italian Festival, Thanksgiving, Christmas Eve Feast of the Seven Fishes, Midnight mass, Christmas Day with family, New Year's Eve midnight kisses, and New Year's Day dinner all were very limited, or missed all together. Many in our community

lost jobs, became ill (with some hospitalized), experienced serious clinical depression, or were just plain lonely.

These losses seemed comparatively small when juxtaposed with suffering and deaths of family members and friends (some to the coronavirus), without the catharsis of our being able to hold their hands and say goodbye, or the closure provided by a public mass, eulogy, funeral and burial.

Some members of the Delaware

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# FROM THE COVER

Commission on Italian Heritage and Culture generously and candidly shared their views and experiences for this article.

Dr. Louis A. Arena, linguistics professor emeritus at the University of Delaware, where he ran the Italy study-abroad program, noted: "COVID-19 taught us to live in bubbles. Everyone had a bubble around them. If we collided with one another, we could be infected. I experienced extreme 'caution-fatigue' (tired of being careful)."

Jack Polidori, a dual U.S./Italian citizen, who had a distinguished career in local, state and national political campaigns in 28 states, and served with the National Education Association, wrote: "Thankfully, when the disastrous COVID hit our shores, our doctor ordered us to stay in Arizona where we had been visiting! We complied fully. It helped us to make the best of a pretty bad situation... we got to get out into the wide open and warm spaces to walk and hike each day. Social distancing! We counted our blessings with each step. As seniors, we did our level best to heed the request of our brave, beleaguered health-care professionals and just kept a low profile in order to not show up at their hospitals! We felt like the curtailment of our busy, out-and-about lifestyles was the patriotic, respectful thing to do for them."

But the human spirit prevailed. Before the coronavirus swept across America, we learned of so many friends and family members suffering in Italy, and assisted in any way we could. Groups such as the National Italian American Foundation and UNICO sprung into action and garnered support.

At home, people were "reintroduced" to the evening television news (with *nonna's* reminiscences to the younger generation about Walter Cronkite), raptly seeking vital information and ways to protect their families.

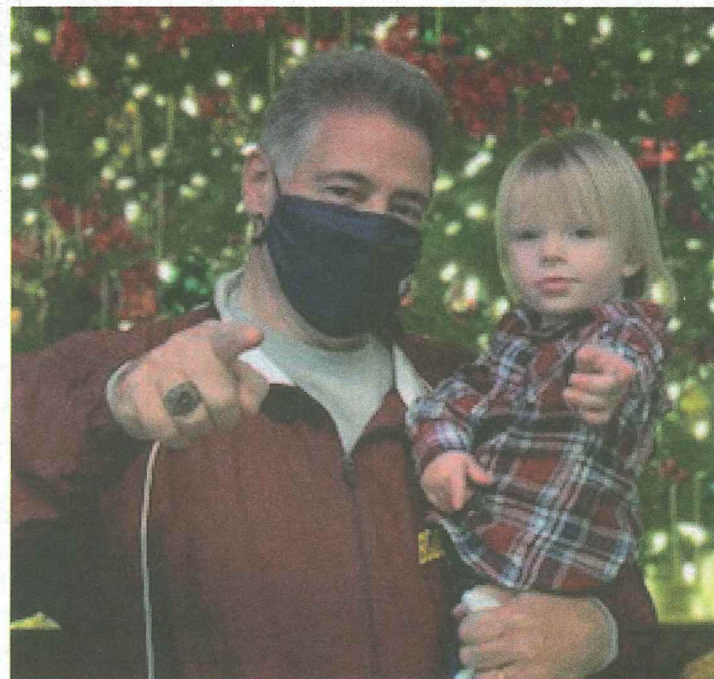
An Italian-American, Dr. Anthony Fauci, became a trusted and beloved source of information and inspiration for the nation. Dark, dour masks replaced colorful, jaunty, festive *silk cravatte*, and became part of the daily wardrobe. The harsh, sterile alcohol odor of hand sanitizer wafted through the air

instead of pleasant, sweet and salty *Acqua di Gio*. Travel restrictions were imposed, even to beloved and familiar contiguous states, keeping us from visiting friends and family. Necessarily, the art of letter writing (albeit mostly via email) was reborn. Drive-through COVID-19 testing "pop-up" sites were offered in all three Delaware counties every day, with many of us undergoing testing and anxiously waiting for the text message or email with the results.

Groceries were delivered to those trepidatious about entering the supermarket. Some spouses pensively shared evening meals in peace, while enjoying the melodious sounds of opera, Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin or Tony Bennett.

Many citizens learned cutting-edge computer technology, and engaged in FaceTime or Zoom virtual meetings with family or business associates. Many churches, and Malvern Retreat House, offered virtual daily prayer and Sunday services via YouTube. The Food Bank of Delaware, Emmanuel Dining Room, Salvation Army and other charities welcomed food and

their own safety and reported to work every day to keep our nation functioning. First responders, police, firefighters, paramedics, nurses, pharmacists, physicians, military personnel, and countless others exhibited superhuman bravery (beyond even what they normally do). Farmers, truck drivers, grocers, mechanics, and public utility personnel kept us fed, warm and comfortable. Teachers dutifully taught in-person or online, quenching our children's thirst for learning. Some families "made peace" over



Richard DiLiberto hugs his granddaughter Charlotte Jane Buckworth, who will turn 2 in May.

Before the coronavirus swept across America, we learned of so many friends and family members suffering in Italy, and assisted in any way we could. Groups such as the National Italian American Foundation and UNICO sprung into action and garnered support.

monetary contributions to help serve the less fortunate, and we met the challenge.

More Americans voted than at any time in American history, some waiting hours in line to do so. "Essential employees" risked

long-festering insults (the remote origins of which many were unable to remember with particularity).

Some of us were blessed with children or grandchildren recently. We prayerfully look

upon these little ones as the future scientists, physicians, lawyers, government leaders and problem-solvers who will navigate and conquer the quagmires which bog us. Someday, those most fortunate among us will hoist these children on our laps on New Year's Day, in the glow of a warm fire, and *sotto voce* tell them about these most difficult and trying days of 2020.

My fervent hope is that we will relate how we were challenged, but never gave up, and overcame these days. For now, we boldly lean forward into the future, with chins up and chests out, confident that, with our sacrifices, these babes of tender years will never have to experience what we did. When this is all over, we will copiously hug and kiss again, without fear, but with happy tears in our eyes. **IAH**

Rick DiLiberto, Esq., is chairman of the Delaware Commission on Italian Heritage and Culture, and a lawyer with the personal injury section in the law firm Young Conaway Stargatt & Taylor in Wilmington. A member of the Delaware House of Representatives from 1992-2002, he and his wife, Faith, welcomed their first grandchild, Charlotte Jane Buckworth, in May of 2019.