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Preserving Italian language in the U.S.

Margaret Cuomo, ILF president, determined to keep course on high-school curriculum

By Concita Minutola

These are frantic days for Italian courses in the U.S. The Italian Language Foundation (ILF), as well as various other organizations for the safeguarding of the Italian language in the U.S., and the Italian government are combining forces in an attempt to save the Advanced Placement Program (APP) in Italian Language and Culture at high schools.

"The APP for Italian is offered by the College Board, a nonprofit organization, throughout the world: in the U.S., Canada, Europe, etc," says Margaret Cuomo, the president of the Italian Language Foundation and the daughter of former New York governor Mario Cuomo. "This exam is important not only for high-school student resumés, but also because by passing the test, they get college credits." The program, however, is at risk.

Last April, three years after the introduction of the program to the U.S., "and notwithstanding the large numbers of registrations," adds Cuomo, the College Board announced that the Italian exam is in danger of being cut from the list of programs starting from 2009 if private funding is not in place by the end of October.

Cuomo, however, is optimistic. "The course will continue to be offered," she reassures. "This is why we created the Italian Language Foundation [Louis Tallarini is chair of the board]. It's a foundation that collects funds for this and other Italian language courses in the U.S." But the question now becomes how long this would continue to exist.

"It depends on the donations we receive," says Cuomo. "And we're working on a legal contract that specifies the conditions of this agreement. One thing is certain: raising funds [is] necessary to support the program. A portion will come from the efforts of the Italian government and other American partners just as the Chinese and Japanese governments are supporting their APP. Millions of dollars will be needed over time based on the increasing numbers of students registering for the APP exam."

Cuomo continues, "This is why we need to promote registration in the U.S. and throughout the world. We also created a taskforce to encourage students to participate."

At a press conference just this past week, External Affairs Minister Franco Frattini and the Cultural Affairs Minister Sandro Bondi announced new government initiatives to save the APP. This commitment, explains Cuomo, will involve not only the U.S. but also other countries.

"The Italian APP is also available to Canadian students," she says. "Our foundation was created to distribute the course and exam, so all countries that want to avail themselves of this will benefit from the funds we gather. I'd also like to tell all students of Italian origin and those studying Italian apart from their regular school curriculum, that they are eligible to write the APP test even without having taken the course. They can get all the information by visiting www.collegeboard.org. They

can also visit www.italianlanguagefoundation.org. Anyone who believes in the importance of preserving the Italian language and wants to participate in our support campaign can get further details from this site about how to make a donation.”

Why is the diffusion of the Italian language throughout the world so important to you?

“Many years ago, my mother Matilda Raffa Cuomo, started a campaign that dealt with establishing the Italian language and culture. Along with my father Mario Cuomo, she always defended the importance of Italian culture. But my initiative goes beyond what my parents taught. Anyone who loves science, art, architecture, literature, music, fashion, cuisine, etc., can recognize how indebted we are to the Italian language and culture. It’s the only way of truly understanding a culture and a language.”

What are the Foundation’s next steps?

“After the meeting with Frattini and with Bondi, we hope that Italy Premier Silvio Berlusconi will make a commitment to us when he visits New York later on in October.”

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