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MARGARET I. CUOMO  
& MARIANNA CUOMO MAIER

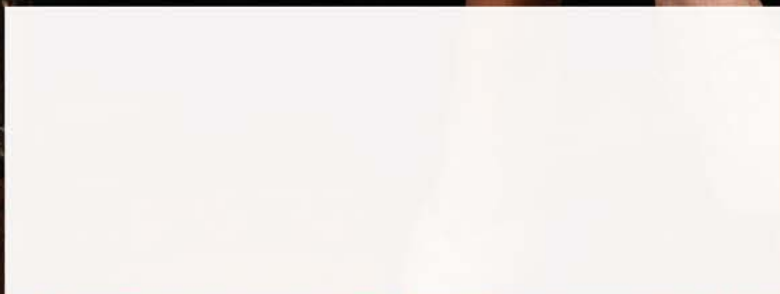
THE ITALIAN LANGUAGE FOUNDATION

**TONY BENNETT**  
TRIBUTE TO AN ICON

**THE 58TH BIENNIAL  
CONVENTION**

OSDIA ELECTS NEW  
NATIONAL OFFICERS

**ALLISON ZURFLUH**  
AN AMERICAN ARTIST IN  
THE VENETIAN LAGOON



BY ANDREW COTTO

### What inspired the founding of the Italian Language Foundation (ILF)?

**Margaret:** Teachers of Italian appealed to my father and mother and then to me because they were significantly limited by the lack of an Advanced Placement (AP) course in Italian language in American high schools. Therefore, many high schools nationally refused to offer Italian as a course of study. At that time, the AP was the benchmark for admission to good colleges, or any college for that matter. You needed AP credits on your transcript for applications to colleges. This situation impacted teachers of



Italian, because their employment in American schools was in jeopardy. Teachers of Italian felt powerless. As members of the Italian American community, my parents and I assisted the teachers of Italian. I wrote a letter to the College Board's President, Gaston Caperton, a reasonable and fair person, who entertained the letter. This was truly a miracle in itself!

## THE ITALIAN LANGUAGE FOUNDATION

# MARGARET I. CUOMO & MARIANNA CUOMO MAIER

Margaret I. Cuomo, M.D. is the daughter of Mario M. Cuomo, the late governor of New York State, and Matilda Cuomo. She is a radiologist, an advocate for cancer prevention, and the author of *A World Without Cancer*. Margaret's daughter, Marianna Cuomo Maier, a 2019 graduate of Yale University, is a National Board-Certified Health and Wellness Coach and Founder of Grata Wellness, LLC. Margaret co-founded the Italian Language Foundation (ILF), as a 501(c)(3) in 2008 with Louis Tallarini, a prominent Italian-American businessman and leader, with a mission to promote and support Italian language education. Marianna joined the organization in 2022 as the co-founder and leader of the Emerging Leadership Council of the ILF, together with Mr. Tallarini's daughter, Anna, to foster the next generation of enthusiasts for Italian language and culture. *Italian America* magazine spoke with Margaret and Marianna about their passion for Italian language and heritage, and about the important organization they operate in order to maintain and advance its relevance in America.



## As we say in storytelling: And then what happened?

**Margaret:** I attended a meeting at the College Board with my mother and Louis Tallarini, who was the President of the Columbus Citizens Foundation at the time, and with the leaders of other prominent Italian American organizations. The College Board agreed to consider our request to establish an AP course in Italian, but required our committee to gather the signatures of 500 high schools across the country attesting that they would offer AP Italian if it were established. That itself was a tremendous task, but we were also told that we were required to raise the funding for the courses. And that was an enormous financial challenge.



## How was that challenge accomplished?

**Margaret:** My father, mother, Mr. Tallarini, and I traveled to Rome, Italy, and we met in the office of the Prime Minister. I presented our case for the Italian language, and the Prime Minister graciously agreed to provide half of the funding required. We, the Americans, would be responsible for the other half, which we raised through contributions from several major Italian American organizations and individuals.

It was an unprecedented advocacy effort on the part of the Republic of Italy and the Italian-American community. Through our efforts, the College Board established the Advanced Placement Program in Italian Language and Culture.

Mr. Tallarini and I realized that we needed to create an organization dedicated exclusively to support and promote the AP Italian course and its enrollment. We created the Italian Language Foundation (ILF) to encourage and support the study of Italian.

How did we accomplish that goal? The ILF rewarded students who sat for the AP Italian exam, because the College Board would not count you as having taken the course if you didn't sit for the exam. So if you completed the course, but did not take the AP exam, it was as if you never took the course at all. The ILF created the Awards for Excellence offering a financial incentive. A student earning a score of 4 or 5 would be granted a financial reward. An excellent AP Italian score enhanced a student's resume, and there was also a cash reward, which was appreciated by students and their parents.

For teachers of Italian, the ILF offers free high quality professional development opportunities. Currently, the ILF Commitment to Excellence program offers high school and college students free mentorships, internships, and leadership programs. The ILF's College Fellowships are our newest addition, which are offered to American college students enrolled in Italian language classes.

## Why did Italian, as opposed to other languages, have to go through such a process for recognition by the College Board?

**Margaret:** It's a matter of demographics, and that's not an unreasonable approach. However, it is important to recognize and honor other cultures and other languages which have contributed greatly to the United States in every category you can name. To our knowledge, the Italians and Italian-Americans were unique in their efforts to advocate for the study of the Italian language and culture. To their credit, the College Board recognized our tireless efforts, and they became steadfast partners.

## When did you develop your passion for Italian language?

**Margaret:** All four of my grandparents were Italian immigrants. I lived with them all while I attended medical school, two years with one set who emigrated from the Sorrento region, and two years with my Sicilian grandpar-

ents. So I feel very closely aligned to my Italian heritage. My roots are definitely 100% Italian. My father created an expression, which is more relevant today than ever: “We are the sons and daughters of giants.” When I think of what our immigrant ancestors achieved under such adverse conditions and with no help from the government, it is just outstanding. I need to honor their memory and to make it clear to people who are not familiar with the Italian immigrant experience that this culture is incredibly rich and incredibly generous, and it has added so much to our nation in every way. We are part of the fiber of the United States. And I think that’s at the core of my dedication to this mission. I studied Italian at The Mary Louis Academy, and in college at St. John’s University. And I was fortunate to travel to Italy afterwards. It’s at the core of who I am.

Unfortunately, Italian was not offered in my middle or high school, so I studied Chinese from grade 6 – 12. At Yale, I enrolled in Italian language classes and was able to speak Italian again. I really wanted to reconnect with my Italian culture and heritage and learn the language. In the summer before my sophomore year, I studied Italian in Siena with Yale faculty. I lived in Siena for two months in a home-stay program hosted by a *nonna*, a lovely woman in her 80s who didn’t speak a word of English. It was in that immersion experience where I really felt the passion and enthusiasm both for the Italian language and for the culture. I gained a deeper understanding of the nature of Italians and their essence, which is connecting with one another and having passion for different areas of life, including art, architecture, fashion, cuisine, and all the many wonderful contributions to our own country and throughout history. During my stay in Siena, I became profoundly aware of the powerful impact of Italy and its language and culture.

**Both of you have your own respective, demanding careers. How are you able to dedicate the time it takes to run such a successful organization as a second job?**

**Margaret:** It is definitely a labor of love. I feel it is important because having been present from the founding of the ILF in 2008, I’ve seen it evolve and grow. We have accomplished a great deal in terms of promoting and supporting Italian language education nationally, with a minimum infrastructure of staff. The ILF has made significant progress, and it would be a pity not to continue into the next generation. Marianna represents the next generation of leadership in this effort. The full support and encouragement of my husband, Howard Maier, has been a key element in our success.

**Marianna:** It’s important to recognize that my mom spends a lot of time on a day-to-day basis with ILF operations, including planning events, webinars, and seminars. She develops new programs, attends events, and raises funds. And all of this, as she said, is a labor of love, and my mom has certainly orchestrated it all along because she cares deeply about it.

**Marianna, at what point did it become clear that you wanted to become part of the ILF?**

I’ve been inspired and in admiration all along of my mom and Mr. Tallarini and the work that they’ve been doing. And for me, I think it was transitioning from my role as a student to my current status as a professional, being

Marianna Cuomo Maier



PHOTO CREDIT: ERIKA KAPIN PHOTOGRAPHY

**Marianna, what was your first experience with the Italian language?**

**Marianna:** Growing up in our family and with my grandparents, there’s a strong pride for our Italian-American heritage and the immigrant story. Additionally, Italian was offered in my school from early childhood through grade 5. Certainly, throughout my life, my mom would continue to speak it, but unless you have a consistent education in a foreign language, it can be challenging.

in a capacity where I can be part of advocacy, serve as a leader, and assist in creating events. I serve on the board of directors of the Yale Alumni Fund, and that experience has demonstrated that the fundraising required of not-for-profit organizations can be tedious and difficult, and yet it is vital to the future of the organization.

### **So on the Emerging Leaders Council (ELC) right now, is it just you and Anna Tallarini?**

**Marianna:** Anna and I are the co-leaders, and we have a group of about 78 volunteers on the Emerging Leaders Council (ELC) from around the country. Many of us are New York City-based young professionals and friends whom we both know. The ELC welcomes members from every state. We're really trying to create a group that is committed to preserving and supporting the Italian language and culture from many different angles, while also recognizing that our parents or grandparents have brought such value as Italian-Americans. It's also important to recognize that the Emerging Leaders Council is a group of people who can appreciate the language and culture even without having Italian heritage. One example is a dear friend of mine with whom I studied Italian in college and who has a great passion for art and art history. She speaks Italian, but she herself has no Italian heritage. We are embracing those individuals as well, who have that appreciation of Italian culture and language and want to support our mission moving forward.

**Margaret:** One of the things we're very pleased about is that the majority of the ELC members *are not* of Italian heritage. As Marianna pointed out, many ELC members have studied Italian, but even if they haven't, we encourage them to join because they have a true interest and passion for Italian culture. Our goal is to spread our love of all things Italian to others who may not have any Italian heritage at all. That's the whole point, along with, of course, welcoming those who are of Italian descent and fostering their interests.

### **Do you think we are approaching a sort of Renaissance where people, and not only Italian-Americans, are embracing Italian culture more than ever before?**

**Marianna:** Yes! Consider the booming tourism to Italy, and the many movies and shows that feature Italian destinations as well. Fascination and respect for Italian culture is surging. I've never seen a time when Italy and Italian culture have been more valued and cherished than they are now.

**Margaret:** And I must add that more American students travel to Italy to study abroad than any other nation in Europe where English is not the first language.

### **Speaking of students, how many student members are there in the ILF?**

The Italian Language Foundation has hundreds of student members, and we'd like that to grow that to thousands. We have over 1,000 teachers of Italian who are ILF teacher members. Students of Italian join to be eligible for the free mentorship, leadership, and internship opportunities offered. The new ILF College Fellowship program is offered to students who are enrolled in an American college or university, and who are enrolled in Italian language classes. In the past, some students joined the ILF in high school, earned a reward and then departed. That's not our goal or our mission. We have reformulated, and we expect to gain new student and teacher members with our new College Fellowship program.



**Marianna Cuomo Maier (center), with her parents, Margaret I. Cuomo and Howard Maier.**

### **Can you tell us more about the fellowship program?**

**Margaret:** We now support college students with fellowships. The College Board and the Italian Language Foundation have had a very close relationship for many years. They respect the work we do, and they have offered helpful suggestions in terms of our programs for teachers and students of Italian. The VP of Italian at the College Board suggested that we find ways to support students of Italian beyond high school and into college. So now we offer fellowships to college students who enroll in Italian language classes in colleges across the USA. We are relying on our teacher members to explain to their students that they are eligible for this fellowship once they get to college. All information for our programs is found at [www.italianlanguagefoundation.org](http://www.italianlanguagefoundation.org)

However, you need to be a teacher member in order to have your students eligible for ILF programs. Our goal is to develop a community of teachers of Italian who are going to support the ILF's mission and encourage their students to receive the benefits of ILF membership.

### **What kind of support is provided to members of the ILF?**

**Margaret:** We started with the intention of supporting our students and encouraging them to study Italian, but from the very beginning we have also supported teachers of Italian. Since 2008, the ILF has offered free professional development workshops throughout the USA. Additionally, the ILF now offers webinars. If you're a member of the Italian Language Foundation, you are eligible to participate in our free professional development opportunities. For many years, the ILF has maintained its annual membership fee for teachers at \$25, which is extremely modest for all the free programming they receive. Membership for students is free.

### **What primary function does the ELC perform?**

**Marianna:** The major aspect of the ELC is community. We host events where we come together to learn a certain topic. We had an incredible book talk from Mauro Porcini, the Chief Design Officer of Pepsi, who wrote an amazing book entitled, *The Human Side of Innovation*. Moving forward, we're looking to do more book talks and also art exhibits. We have a tour of Little Italy coming up, conducted by the Italian-American Museum in Manhattan. We love visiting different restaurants, but it's not just about Italian cuisine. It's just as much about the owner's story or that of the chef. It's the people behind the food that are fascinating to me personally. I love hearing about their passion for their profession. And that's been an exciting thing to bring to the ELC. We're always looking for different experiences to expand our knowledge and expand the exposure to the generations of Italians and Italian Americans who have accomplished so much.

### **What else does the ELC do directly for members?**

**Marianna:** Some other valuable components of the ELC are internships and mentoring programs. The broad idea is that our support goes beyond just academia. Of course, you can go on to do wonderful things after studying the Italian language, but there are so many ways in which language can impact a person's career. We've created internship opportunities with Italian companies or companies owned by Italian-Americans, where a student could use the language in the many imprints that our culture has in business. So,



**Marianna Cuomo Maier and Margaret I. Cuomo, Vatican Gardens, 2016.**

the idea is a student takes the AP language course in high school or is at least enrolled in high school Italian classes. They are supported by us in college in their studies, and then they have an internship and potential employment once they graduate. Part of the support just mentioned is the mentoring component, where we pair students with ELC members as one-to-one mentors. We seek a mentee who is either in the same area of study or has the same professional goals, so that the student is not only being supported from a language standpoint, but more holistically as a human being.

**Margaret:** I must add that all of our ELC members are volunteers. They all serve as excellent postgraduate, young professional mentors to our high school and college students. It is such a warm and a mutually beneficial process for the ELC members and for the mentees. So, yes, that's critical to our mission.

### **Wonderful. I'll leave the last word to you, Margaret:**

**Margaret:** We have promoted the Advanced Placement Program in Italian language from the very beginning. But even if you don't have that advantage in high school, or even if you didn't choose to study Italian because it wasn't offered, we embrace you. There's always a point in your life where you can embrace the Italian language and the culture - the culture alone, the language alone, or any combination thereof. Come to us. We will advocate for you, and we will support you in achieving your goals. We hope that you will love the Italian language and culture as we do!

Learn more about the Italian Language Foundation at [www.ilf.org](http://www.ilf.org).  
Learn more at Grata Wellness at [www.gratawellness.com](http://www.gratawellness.com).