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Our Italian story

Documentary reflects on immigrants' struggles, success

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The audience laughs along with Lina Del Signore as she tells of meeting John, her then soon-to-be husband, in their hometown in Italy.

It is one of the lighter moments in a documentary that premiered Dec. 3, at a gala at Rock Financial Showplace in Novi. The evening celebrated *Our Italian Story*, a film focusing on the struggles and successes of Italian immigrants who came to southeast Michigan in search of the American dream.

Tony Filippis lost his legs after falling off of a train at age 12 in 1929 and faced discrimination when prospective employers learned of his disability. Undaunted, the Rochester Hills man learned the trade of crafting artificial limbs and went on to found Wright & Filippis, a leader in rehabilitative health care since 1944.

Nino Salvaggio turned 500 cases of strawberries into a chain of fruit markets in Farmington Hills, Troy and St. Clair Shores.

According to Armando Delicato, the film's historian and author of *Italians in Detroit*, many immigrants went into food distribution. On the lower east side, vestiges of their gardens of grape leaves and fig trees can still be seen in some yards.

Television audiences can view their stories commercial free at 1 p.m. Saturday, Dec. 16, and 9 a.m. Monday, Dec. 25, on WXYZ-TV Channel 7 thanks in part to Lipari Foods. When Jim Lipari first came to this country, he was selling barbecue sauce out of his station wagon. Today, Lipari Foods is a \$250 million a year business.

CELEBRATE THE CULTURE

"I didn't just want to do a documentary. I wanted to celebrate the culture," said Keith Famie, the film's executive director and producer. Famie told the audience he

started working on the film several years ago when his father was suffering from Alzheimer's and told "these amazing stories" about his Italian heritage.

"My intention always was never to have a host," said Famie. "I wanted to have the Italian community tell their story.

"It's about respect. It's about celebration. It's about the family."

Famie and cinematographer Kevin Hewitt of Livonia followed the Del Signorens in October to Fonte D'Amore, Italy, where they were married 49 years ago. The couple and film crew delight in an open-air market with its freshly made mozzarella. Then Lina reveals, much to her surprise, the events leading up to the day she finally said "yes" to John's proposal.

"When I go back I'm happy to see my family," said Lina, who came to the U.S. in 1962, four years after she married John. Back then it was common for Italian men to immigrate to the U.S. then send for their wives after becoming established.

"I love my family. It's a plain, simple life. When you're there you relax, unwind a little bit."

One touching scene shows the couple at a family burial site. Italians may visit the grave every day for a year after a death. Shortly before John's father died, he promised to take care of the St. Onofrio hermitage as his father had done. John and his sons annually held wild game dinners to raise money to repair the roof and restore the structure. It's the Del Signorens' way of giving back to the community. For 38 years, the couple owned Font D'Amore in Livonia, the restaurant named after their hometown which in English means "fountain of love."

Although the Del Signorens sold the restaurant in August, they still own Laurel Manor Banquet Center, operated by son Tino and his wife, Nanci; and Bacco, a Southfield restaurant co-owned with son Luciano. Until eight years ago, Lina owned and operated Lina's Bridal Salon in Plymouth and Birmingham.

INSPIRATIONAL STORIES

"I was so impressed," said Lina Del Signore after viewing the documentary. "I was so emotional listening to the stories."

Famie spent 70 hours producing footage of the heartwarming and inspirational stories of the immigrants who arrived in the U.S. unable to speak English.

Sergio De Guisti came to the U.S. at age 13 in 1954 and became an internationally known sculptor. In Michigan, the Redford artist is best known for the reliefs surrounding the Legacy of Labor sculpture he created with David Barr near Hart

Plaza in downtown Detroit.

De Guisti is well known as an instructor, having taught drawing for many years at Wayne State University and the Birmingham Bloomfield Art Center.

Silvio Barile, an untrained artist, came to the U.S. in May 1956 unable to speak English but by 1960 had opened the Redford Italian Bakery behind which he's created naive sculptures related to Roman architecture and culture. Barile began to build objects during his days in a concentration camp during World War II.

"I was a war refugee," said Barile, who recently closed the bakery. "It was a terrible shock for me. I was not prepared to confront a different culture."

Along with the visual arts, the documentary reflects on the musicians and authors who made good in America. Pierette Domenica Simpson survived the sinking of the Andrea Doria and went on to write a book about the disaster after teaching in Farmington schools for 20 years. John Zaretti of Canton carries on the legacy of Italian opera composer Giuseppe Verdi by founding the Verdi Opera Theatre of Michigan.

Famie tells their stories.

"Keith is truly a storyteller," said Thom Lipari, who spoke after dinner. Thom, CEO and president of Lipari Foods, is the son of immigrant Jim Lipari. "We can learn through their stories.

"The story these individuals tell is so important. Storytelling helps us remember the past."

For more information about the documentary, visit www.ourstoryof.com.