



Fiorello LaGuardia **By Lucy Collins**

Known for smashing barriers and championing for social reform during his time, Fiorello La Guardia fought for those who could not fight themselves. He held many titles throughout his career: Congressman, Mayor, Major in the Air Force, Director General of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration and more. His legacy is not just encased through the Pulitzer Prize winning play "Fiorello!" or the airport posthumously named after him. He is remembered through the precedent he set to fight corruption and dedication to economic and social justice.

La Guardia was born to Italian immigrants in New York City but spent most of his childhood in Arizona. He saw firsthand government neglect of Native American people along with the exploitation of workers by railroad companies. The family moved to Trieste, his mother's hometown. At the age of 18, La Guardia began working for the American Consulate in Hungary. In 1906, he moved back to New York City and worked as an interpreter at Ellis Island. He saw how many people were not able to enter the United States, how many people desperately needed to for a better life. These experiences led him to attend NYU law school at night and eventually worked with immigrants and advocated for workers.

His drive to advocate for others led him into politics. He canvassed his lower Manhattan district, compelling constituents to vote for him by speaking Italian and Yiddish while promising to advocate for them. La Guardia lost his first election. This did not deter him. During his second election, his supporters monitored ballot counting to prevent fraud. This time he won. He took leave and served in the Armed Forces as a pilot and interpreter on the Italian and Austrian front during World War II.

The next few years brought devastation for La Guardia. Both his wife and infant daughter passed due to tuberculosis, and he fell into a state of depression. But in 1922, he once again ran for Congress to represent the Italian and Jewish neighborhood of East Harlem. His platform fought for minimum wages, maximum hours, rent control, free speech, worker's compensation, and higher taxes on the rich. One of his most prominent accomplishments was his co-sponsorship of the Norris-La Guardia Act of 1932, which restricted the power of courts to ban or restrain picketing, boycotts, or strikes by organized labor groups.

When the corrupt mayor of New York City, Jimmy Walker, was forced to resign after an investigation, La Guardia took the stage. His team organized Italian American support and won the election. As mayor, he set a goal to eradicate organized crime and attacked it with a vengeance. La Guardia's three terms produced 92 schools, the first health insurance plan for public service workers, an airport, and achieved getting "the aid, care and support of the needy" into the state constitution as a public obligation.

The "little flower's" legacy was built through dedication and assiduous effort. His memory has set an example for leaders ever since.