



Fiorello LaGuardia: An Italian American Icon **By Rian Hanson**

One of the greatest politicians and attorneys in American history is Fiorello LaGuardia. The 99th mayor of New York City, he fought social injustice, becoming a hero for the rights of all. “The Little Flower” as he was nicknamed stood short in stature but big in heart. Completing his law degree while working as an interpreter for the US Bureau of Immigration at Ellis Island, he was an impressive linguist-fluent in 6 languages. LaGuardia’s first law practice focused on protecting immigrant workers in his native city. Representing those in need, often free of charge, he made numerous friends and amassed a reputation as a fighter of inequality. In 1933, La Guardia won the mayoral election and became the first Italian American mayor, a position he would hold for 12 years. His main goals upon taking office was to get the city back on track financially, end corruption, assist the unemployed, and advance the city’s infrastructure. He quickly completed many of his objectives because of his bipartisan approach. He created an invaluable ally in President Franklin D. Roosevelt which benefitted the city of New York. LaGuardia also supported and recognized members of the NYPD, cracking down on crime and fighting corruption by going after gangsters he felt were tarnishing the reputation of the Italian community. He was quoted as saying, “Let’s drive the bums out of town.”

LaGuardia was also an advocate for the less fortunate, believing, “Only a well-fed, well-housed, well- schooled people can enjoy the blessings of liberty.” Throughout his three terms as mayor, he was able to modernize New York City’s infrastructure. Major works credited to his tenure include LaGuardia airport, his namesake colleges including LaGuardia Community College, numerous parks, buildings, bridges, and tunnels.

Despite holding office during two of the most challenging times in our country’s history, the Great Depression and WWII, Major LaGuardia (as he preferred to be called) was beloved by so many and to this day often referenced in musicals, plays and films. A champion for Jewish, German, Irish and Italian Americans, he believed our country should be open to all. Fiorello LaGuardia supported many causes and went against the norm to stand up for what was just. A first-generation Italian American, he was instrumental in garnering political recognition for Italians by supporting their causes including attending rallies to promote fundraising. He also was determined to show that the sons of Italian immigrants in America were patriots who loved their country. Once a fighter pilot, he also represented Italian Americans not only in Congress but in the military. LaGuardia was in charge of training American pilots in Italy and working with the Italian industry to facilitate the production of needed war planes.

Fiorello LaGuardia was definitely an Italian American icon. A leader of Italian heritage in America, and he created a legacy of success and achievement.