



NIAF Chairman Emeritus Frank J. Guarini sits with President William J. Clinton at a Foundation gala.

A Career of Excellence

FRANK J. GUARINI

By John Marino

The historic main post office in Jersey City, New Jersey, now bears the name of NIAF Chairman Emeritus Frank J. Guarini in recognition of his lifetime of public service. Here, NIAF Public Policy Director John Marino takes a look back at Guarini's many accomplishments.

After honorable service in the U.S. Navy during World War II, Frank J. Guarini — a grandchild of immigrants from Catanzaro, Calabria, and Campobasso, Molise— returned to his home town of Jersey City, New Jersey, only to view it with greater clarity. He didn't like what he saw. The city, and much of the state of New Jersey, was controlled by Mayor Frank Hague. Infamous for boasting "I am the law", Hague suppressed free speech, rigged elections, and intimidated opponents. When Guarini returned from the Pacific to this political climate, he was inspired to change it.

"It was really the spirit of returning servicemen," Guarini reminisced. "They went through a depression. They fought a war. And they were coming back to a land that was free and democratic, and if it wasn't, they were going to make it so."

His desire for change led to a life of community

service, starting with a post-war movement that overthrew Hague and culminating in seven terms as a U.S. Congressman for New Jersey. In honor of his long service to the community, the main U.S. post office in Jersey City — an historic Italian Renaissance building first built in 1911 and now preserved on the National Register of Historic Places - was named the "Frank J. Guarini Post Office Building" earlier this year.

The honor, made possible through a bill introduced by Congressman Albio Sires, has particular meaning for Guarini, who remembers childhood trips to that post office with his grandmother; an educated woman and midwife, she wrote letters for fellow immigrants and mailed them to friends and family in Italy. "Little would she suspect that the post office would bear her name," he mused.

Guarini's interest in public service was evident at ►

any early age. As a youth, he read the classics of the American political canon including Daniel Webster and Abraham Lincoln and had a general love of learning. His high school yearbook predicted that he would one day become a Member of Congress. Soon, Guarini went on to Dartmouth College where his interest in government was enhanced through the tutelage of Professor David Dayton McKean, whom Guarini cites as a major influence in his life.

McKean was also the leading expert on Frank Hague. “He used to discuss all these matters with me, and he took special interest in me because I came from Jersey City,” Guarini said of his mentor. “He imbued in me the deep objection that he had



Guarini served in the U.S. Navy during World War II, traveling to Tokyo Harbor in 1945.

for this kind of political machine.” Due to McKean’s tutelage, Guarini was inspired to pursue public service with a platform seeking reform.

But his time at Dartmouth was interrupted by the Second World War. He joined the Navy and served as a navigator aboard the U.S.S. *Mount McKinley*, the flagship of Pacific Amphibious Fleet. Guarini saw action including campaigns in Okinawa and the Philippines, and vividly recalls the surrender of Japan and perilous moments involving kamikaze pilot missions. Today, he typically does not speak much about that period of his life, although those closest to him recognize the impact it had upon him. His close friend Marie Garibaldi, a former New Jersey Supreme Court Justice and fellow NIAF Board Member, noted that “Frank is very patriotic and his service in the Navy was a defining moment in his life.”

Guarini served his country with distinction and left as a decorated naval officer with the Naval Commendation Medal and three battle stars. He

ultimately completed a B.A. from Dartmouth College and a J.D. and LL.M from New York University School of Law.

Following the war, he turned his eye back to Jersey City’s political climate. He went on to found and lead a post-war, reform-minded movement that included returning veterans who wanted to end corrupt machine politics like those of Hague. “When you feel that you’re fighting for something, it’s important. You develop a sense of what’s right and what’s wrong,” he said. “When you return home and find everything wrong, you want to use all your strength to correct it. That was how all the returning veterans felt who went to war with purpose and determination and returned home resolved to make everything right. They wouldn’t put up with a political dictatorship.”

A lawyer by trade, he successfully ran for the New Jersey State Senate and served on the Appropriation, Environmental, and Transportation Committees. His tenure was highlighted by several accomplishments including stringent environmental and land use legislation and the creation of the Meadows Sports Complex. Of note, Guarini originated the deal that brought the New York Giants, who were then playing in Yankee Stadium, to the Meadowlands. He was also instrumental in the substantial return of Ellis Island to New Jersey in a dispute with New York that reached the Supreme Court of the United States.

In 1978, he was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives where he represented New Jersey’s 14th Congressional District. He was selected to the powerful Ways and Means Committee on his first day in Congress, which was an unprecedented success for a freshman Member of Congress. His career in the Congress was marked by a commitment to fiscal responsibility, reducing government spending, and protecting American jobs. He also championed legislation that promoted fair trade policies, education, and the war on drugs.

But the transition to Congressman wasn’t always easy. “I very much missed the excitement of practicing law,” Guarini reminisced. “I enjoyed being in the courtroom arena. I was deeply involved in my practice. The first year was a withdrawal...It took a year to really get the feeling of being a lawyer out of my system.” He authored the first edition of the New Jersey Rules of Evidence, which is presently updated and used in the practice of law today.

Ultimately, Guarini made his peace with the change, knowing “that as a lawyer, I represented clients for a particular cause of action but as a Member of Congress, my work affected the entire nation of 300 million people. I felt it was a higher and a greater calling being in Congress.”

Congressman Bill Pascrell of New Jersey, who currently chairs the Italian American Congressional Delegation said, “Frank Guarini was a great Congressman and someone I have always admired. In many



Guarini presents a U.S. flag to then-Prime Minister of Italy Silvio Berlusconi at a NIAF reception in the U.S. Capitol in 2006.

ways, my own body of work on Capitol Hill resembles the legacy he left behind. His passion to stop the flow of drugs onto our streets was contagious and is an issue that I work tirelessly to continue.”

With an insider’s view of major world affairs, Guarini had many memorable moments as a Congressman. Traveling on a *codet* with Speaker Tip O’Neill, he met with the Soviet leadership during a critical period of the Cold War’s easing. He was also selected to be a delegate to NATO for its first meeting following the fall of the Berlin wall. Here they discussed the future of NATO in a post-Cold War world and questioned its ongoing mission and purpose. In the Congress, he voted against authoring the first Gulf War, which followed a White House meeting with President George H.W. Bush. Guarini asked the President about his plans for the troops when they approached the gates of Bagdad, as well as his post war game plan. Guarini was not satisfied with the President’s answer and subsequently cast a “no” vote, which still resonates today.

Guarini retired from Congress in 1993 after serving seven terms, having had enough of the increasingly partisan climate in Washington, D.C. He was interested in producing positive results for his district and the nation rather than fighting divisive political battles. Congressman Bill Frenzel, his GOP colleague, stated, “It was said of him that Frank was almost too independent, and certainly too nice, to be a Congressman.” Guarini left on a high note and believes his public service has enriched his life significantly, giving it greater meaning and purpose.

The Congressional experience was beneficial for Guarini on other levels. It was where he met some of his dearest friends including fellow Members of Congress Charles Rangel of New York, Marcy Kaptur of Ohio, and Benjamin Gilman of New York, with whom he remains close today. They all still see each other for dinner and even travel together. Chairman Rangel, one of his dearest friends and a keynote speaker at the post office dedication, described Guarini as “one of the most caring people that I have been privileged to meet. He cares for his family, friends, his community and his country. I am so proud to be among his friends.”

After his time in the Congress, President Bill Clinton appointed Guarini in 1994 to serve as U.S. Representative to the General Assembly of the United Nations. This unique experience included daily briefings on pivotal international relations issues such as nuclear inspections in countries including Iraq and travel to exotic places like Africa.

Guarini then returned to the private sector as an attorney, which had been his father’s profession. Despite his deep love of the law and commitment to the principles of justice, the younger Guarini soon became disenchanted by its practice and transitioned to real estate development. The timing could not have been better as he was part of a great boom in both residential and commercial development.

In the 1990s, Guarini began buying up vacant waterfront Jersey City land that once was used by the railroads. This is now prime real estate positioned across the Hudson River from lower Manhattan and ▶



Secretary of State Colin Powell, legendary tenor Luciano Pavarotti, and Guarini enjoy NIAF's 29th Anniversary Gala in 2004.

often referred to as “Wall Street West” due to the influx of financial service firms. Today Jersey City’s sprawling skyline features 50- and 60-story skyscrapers that often offer better amenities and lower rents. The Jersey City real estate transformation produced an economic impact that extended down the entire East Coast with Guarini playing a key role.

“Alexander Hamilton, who was a founder of our federal banking system, said that on this side of the Hudson River, Jersey City will be the greatest city of the new nation,” Guarini noted. “Having lost his life in a duel with Aaron Burr... all his efforts to make the Hudson River waterfront here in Jersey City a great city had evaporated...But today, when you look towards New Jersey, you see a new skyline that’s developing that wasn’t there 30 years ago. So Alexander Hamilton was partially right.”

The real estate business still keeps Guarini busy; nevertheless, he has time for a number of charitable pursuits. Education, always the common thread of his life, has led him to endow a number of educational programs at colleges and universities. These programs target students interested in pursuing careers in public service and diplomacy and are housed at Dartmouth College, New York University, John Cabot University in Rome, St. Peter’s College, and New Jersey City University, which also has a library named after him. Guarini also founded New York University’s Center on Environmental and Land Use Law; additionally,

the president’s residence at St. Peter’s College has been named in his honor.

He is currently Chairman Emeritus of NIAF, having served on the Foundation’s Board of Directors for 20 years. The Congressman endowed the Frank J. Guarini Public Policy Forum housed at NIAF, which is held on Capitol Hill in cooperation with the Italian American Congressional Delegation. This program assembles distinguished speakers addressing the critical policy issues of the day. Additionally, Guarini established a Dartmouth College School for Italian Language in Rome under NIAF’s name several years ago.

His extensive involvement in civic affairs includes service on the National Board of Governors of the American Cross; the National Board of Governors of the American Trial Lawyers Association; Chairman of the Board of Regents of St. Peter’s College; and Trustee of John Cabot University in Rome. Aside from the many prestigious boards on which he has served, he has received numerous honorary degrees and awards, including being bestowed the rank of the Grande Ufficiale in The Order of Merit of the Republic of Italy, and he is a member in the Sovereign Military Order of Malta.

Guarini’s life, marked by action, accomplishment and altruism, has been memorable indeed. Looking back on his achievements and his family’s immigration, perhaps Guarini himself summarized it best when he noted, “Only in America.”▲