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Pannese Society celebrates cultural heritage

Pete Fontaine



Sun Rise photos by Pete Fontaine

Amedeo De Cotiis, the Assistant Mayor of Panni, Foggia, Italy and his sister Carolina enjoy a lighter moment with Johnston Mayor Joseph Polisena, Italian Consulate in RI Deborah Del Sesto and Lois and Carla Spremulli who hosted yesterday's Pannese Society Breakfast as their Johnston Home.



by special invitation from Johnston residents Louis and Carla Spremulli and the Pannese Society of Providence. He had a busy schedule during his visit that included 12 stops throughout the state and concluded with dinner at Il Fornello in Providence.

De Cotiis' day began with a Pannese breakfast at the Spremullis' residence at 21 Deer View Drive, where a host of family and friends, special dignitaries and elected officials welcomed the Italian mayor and his sister. His visit was part of The Pannese Society's mission to "promote the cultural, social, spiritual and education heritage from Panni, Italy."

The idea for the visit began when the Johnston couple visited Panni, where Louis Spremulli's grandfather was born before coming to America.

"They treated us like royalty," said Louis Spremulli. "I requested a meeting with the Mayor and we talked about lots of things. But most important of all was our Pannese Society. As we strive to keep our heritage through our patron saint, community and cultural activities for future generations to come."

While Louis and Carla Spremulli were in Panni, they extended an invitation to the mayor to come to Rhode Island.

"It's absolutely incredible," Louis Spremulli said. "Lots of people began getting involved...we had hosts [Antonio and Rosa De Luca of Peabody, Mass.] for Amedeo and Carolina and the trip was on."

It was roll out the welcome mat for visitors from Panni, which is where the grandparents and other family members who live here in Rhode Island came from years and year ago.

Moreover, as Polisena and Spremulli and officials of the Pannese Society agreed, it made sense to have the welcome party in Johnston, which has the largest Italian-American population of any town in Rhode Island.

Breakfast-goers also learned yesterday that De Cotiis is a character.

There was a new face in the Johnston mayor's chair yesterday morning.

The Johnston mayor was in his office filled with unique wall -hangings and pictures of Polisena's career. He was standing beside Amedeo De Cotiis, the assistant mayor of Panni, Foggia, Italy, who is here in Rhode Island on official business.

"Have a seat mayor," Polisena said to De Cotiis through interpreter Rosa Ferro, the Johnston mayor's sister-in-law. "Try my chair."

De Cotiis accepted the invitation amid applause as he sat in the chair Polisena has occupied since 2007.

"This is only for special visitors," Polisena began as he held a wooden gift case. "And you are indeed special. This is a wonderful day for our town and, therefore, we want to present you with the key to the city."

De Cotiis' eyes and face lit up with a wide smile during the brief trip to Town Hall. The Italian mayor received several other gifts from Polisena and Deputy Police Chief Daniel O. Parrillo.

De Cotiis was visiting Rhode Island with his sister Carolina

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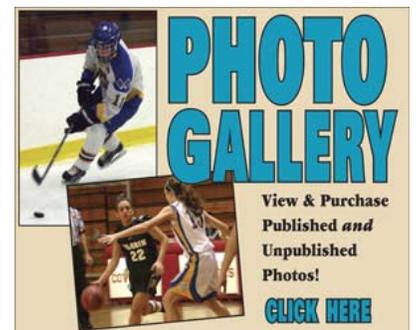


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"He gave up a wonderful career in agriculture," said Rosa DeLuca, who is traveling with De Cotiis as a host and interpreter.

"He's a Doctor of Agrarian Studies, but there's a distinct difference between Amedeo and the full-time mayor (of Panni)."

De Cotiis, DeLuca said after another of the countless interpretation sessions conducted throughout the visit "is a volunteer mayor. He doesn't get paid but the full-time mayor does."

"De Cotiis is 33. He wanted to help his village so he ran for mayor. And that old adage 'every vote counts' is true; Amedeo only won his election by 33 votes."

De Cotiis spoke of the evolution of Panni.

"There's also a big difference in the village of Panni today. Back in the 1950s the population was around 5,000 people. Now there are only about 850 residents in a village that's an hour and a half from Naples. And a lot of those families have moved. Many of them have come to Rhode Island."

"Look at my hair, Amedeo," said Polisen. "I hope yours doesn't end up this color if you continue to win the mayor's seat."

The Johnston mayor, while chatting with such dignitaries as State Senator Frank Ciccone and Deborah Del Sesto, the Honorary Consulate of Italy in Providence, spoke of the similarities in the two countries.

"While they may have a different culture, they have the same issues we all have."

After a whirlwind tour of Rhode Island that included such stops as State House, Holy Ghost Church, a visit to Federal Hill, Channel 10, Alex and Ani, Pepsi Bottling Company and the Pannese Society's home in Providence, what's next for Amedeo De Cotiis and his relationship with Rhode Island?

"We'd like to see different cultural exchanges," said Louis Spremulli. "We're talking about student exchanges and maintaining our Italian heritage from here to Italy. The Pannese Society and Young Pannese Social Club, even our Pannese Women's Auxiliary is excited. You never know what will come of this."

Polisen expressed his wish for future relations with De Cotiis, Panni, the Town of Johnston and the State of Rhode Island. During his address at the welcome breakfast, Polisen told attendees, "What a great and important day this is for our town. This is special, exciting."

Polisen also extended an invitation to De Cotiis to come back to Rhode Island in September.

"I'm going to receive the Italo-American Club's Man of the Year Award," Polisen said of the Sept. 22 gala to be held at the Providence Marriott Hotel. "Amedeo, I'd like you to be my guest."

On a day that was filled what Polisen called "a special celebration of our Italian-American heritage," De Cotiis presented the Johnston mayor and Spremulli with a flag of Panni.

"You people are always welcome in Panni. We'd love to have you come to Italy. We'll welcome and embrace you," said de Cotiis.

Attachments

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