

What's in a name?

Protecting the reputation of Italian Americans

One of the strongest symbols of Italian American identity is an Italian name. Giving your child an Italian name is one way to transmit an Italian identity from one generation to the next. But possession of an Italian name also carries with it whatever stigma is attached to being Italian in America and there are numerous examples that being Italian can subject one to intolerance.

Italian American history is full of examples of Italian Americans changing their names to find acceptance and to remove the barriers of prejudice that they might encounter in their social or business relations or even before the law. During World War II, many Italian Americans changed their names to avoid the hostility toward them during the war. Even today, an Italian name puts Italian Americans at a disadvantage wherever affirmative action policies are in effect.

A number of recent court cases have recognized that being of Italian ancestry or possessing an Italian surname can affect how one is treated in our society.

In one recent case, a federal judge upheld a \$2.2 million bias award to an Italian immigrant banker who was fired after a supervisor said he wanted to "Americanize" a Manhattan branch bank and made discriminatory remarks about the mafia and the number of Italian American bank officers at the branch. In another case, Italian American Robert Ciccione, sued Louisiana Pacific for \$350,000 for disparaging remarks about his Italian ancestry such as references to mafia connections and referring to him as a "Wop" and a "Dago."

In another recent case, Major League Baseball officials paid over \$6 million to businessmen Vincent Tirendi and Vince Piazza who were rejected as potential team owners based on unfounded rumors they were connected.

Italian American faculty at the City University of New York recently won a major court battle by convincing a federal court that the University had discriminated against Italian Americans in faculty hiring and promotions. To settle, the University agreed to hire more Italian Americans and expand its Italian American Studies program.

Italian American student Janine Jacinto sued the California State University at Sacramento for discriminating against her because of her ancestry in admission to a graduate program. The University settled for a large monetary award and agreed to revise its admission criteria which favored other racial and ethnic groups.

The cases against both the City University of New York and the California State University in Sacramento were supported by Legal defense Funds established by the Italian American communities in the area.

A number of court decisions have found that Italian Americans are a "distinct people" with a "community of interest."

In the 1987 Biaggi case, a federal court found that Italian Americans are clearly identified by their names which separates them from most other ethnic groups. In addition, the court found that Italian Americans share a common experience and background in their links to Italian families, Italian culture, and Italian group loyalties, often share the same religious and culinary practices, and share certain cherished values received through generations of Italian civilization including values relevant to moral behavior. The court ruled these moral standards would not be represented if Italian Americans were excluded from juries.

The Biaggi court also found that Italians have been subject to stereotyping and invidious ethnic humor and continue to be excluded from executive, middle management and other job levels because of discrimination based on their ancestry.

Another 1987 federal case found that Italian Americans are a distinct group commonly identified by their last names and their neighborhoods and have been singled out for different treatment under the law.

In a major recent New York case, Justice Dominic Massaro of the New York Supreme Court, in an impassioned ruling, found that Italian Americans could not receive a fair trial if the group is excluded from the jury.

Invoking both the travails and triumphs of the Italian American experience, Justice Massaro asserted that Italian Americans have been subjected to a long and painful history of purposeful, unequal treatment and that instances of discriminatory treatment abound.

In his decision, Judge Massaro found that the Italian American saga is filled with chapters of unbounded rage and unfettered bigotry against them; lynchings at the hands of lawless mobs, condemnations from the pens of leading intellectuals, quota laws to restrict Italian immigration, miscarriages of justice by prejudiced courts; and the internment of innocent Italian Americans during World War II.

In an analysis that gives voice to the contemporary concern of Italian Americans about their good name and reputation, Massaro finds that "Italian Americans continue to be subjected by the media to disabilities on the basis of continuing stereotypical characterizations of criminality that denigrates their citizenship, drains their dignity and flies in the face of their reality. Against this backdrop of struggle... Italian Americans have relied on a common cultural patrimony, traditions and history to make important contributions to the moral, material and intellectual well-being of the nation."

Many Italian Americans, if not most, are painfully aware of the continuing bias and even hostility toward them in American society, especially from the media but even in the nations racial and other public policies. Where possible, Italian Americans are turning to the courts to protect themselves and their reputation as is illustrated by the legal victories they have scored.

Recent actions by the organized Italian American community to improve its status and image range from public education initiatives to include the Italian American experience in the school curriculum - to lobbying the media to adopt voluntary anti-defamation guidelines. **For Italian Americans to be accepted in American society on their terms, they will need to confront and challenge the institutions that demean them. What is at stake is the good name and reputation of an entire people.**