

The History of the Relationship between Pittsburg and Isola delle Femmine

by Frank B. Bruno
April 1, 2021

In 1990, Vincent S. Di Maggio (Co-Founder & Chairman of FOI) traveled with his family to Isola to join the celebration of his Godparents', Mario and Kay Lucido, 50th Wedding Anniversary, which included renewing their marriage vows at the Santa Maria delle Grazie Catholic Church, with a reception at the Hotel Eufemia. While there, he met with Vincenzo Di Maggio, the then Mayor of Isola, and with Tonino Scala where they discussed the possibility of forming some alliance between Pittsburg and Isola delle Femmine. It was Tonino Scala who proposed a "Sister City" relationship between the two cities.

Upon Vince's return from Isola, he had occasion to call my Farmers Insurance office in Pittsburg. In talking together, we found that we were related, my mother being a Di Maggio, and both descendants of Isolani immigrants. Coincidentally, we were both planning to attend an upcoming fund raiser dinner for the Pittsburg Historical Society and decided to meet there in person for the first time.

At the dinner Vince asked me if Pittsburg had a sister city and if so, could they have an additional one. Even though Pittsburg had a sister city (Pohang, Korea), a sister city with Isola would be a more perfect fit given the long history of immigration from Isola since the late 19th century, such as my Nana Annie Belleci, Vince's great grandfather Giuseppe Di Maggio and Mary's great grandmother Angelina Di Maggio Cataldo, all immigrating near the end of the 19th century. I asked the then Mayor Joe Canciamilla and Pittsburg Chamber of Commerce Chairman Brad Nail if we could have another sister city and they both answered "YES". I relayed the answer to Vince and he said "let's do it." With that, we formed a committee of Mary Pappas Coniglio and Sal Coniglio, Rocco Battaglia, Vince "Rabbit" Coniglio, Sal Cacciaroni, Mike Troia, John Buffo, Vincent and myself.

Vince had taken note of the number of the FAX machine at the Hotel Eufemia when he was there earlier. With that communication path to Isola, he sent several messages back and forth between Pittsburg City Manager Tony Donato and Isola City Councilman Tonino Scala. Soon a connection was formed and things began to happen

The Isola delegation decided they would visit Pittsburg in October 1992 to make the Sister City relationship official. We had a lot of work to do. We secured agreement of the Pittsburg City Council to accept Isola delle Femmine as a Sister City. Mary Pappas Coniglio arranged all the details for the Isola delegation's 2-week visit and I raised funds to cover expenses. This first delegation from Isola delle Femmine arrived as planned in Pittsburg with then Mayor Giuseppe Mannino, Vice Mayor Stefano Bologna, City Councilmen Tonino Scala, Cosimo Pagano, and Gianni Impastato, and first Councilwoman Jolanda Bruno. They visited the State Capital, the cities of Monterey, Martinez, San Francisco as well as the city of Pittsburg. There were many parties and a huge welcoming reception at the Pittsburg Marina Center, attended by over 400 descendants from Isola delle Femmine, who visited with the Isola delegation. It was a historic and magical evening.



The Original Fisherman Statue in Pittsburg
Decorated with the American and Italian flags for the visit of the
delegation from Isola delle Femmine in 1992.

The Sister City relationship was officially established by a resolution of the City Council of the City of Pittsburg on November 16, 1992 and similar resolution by the city of Isola delle Femmine. Later, Monterey and Martinez followed becoming Sister Cities with Isola in 2017 and 2019 respectively.

During the Isola delegation's visit to Pittsburg in 1992, they saw the Fisherman Statue at the end of Railroad Avenue and 3rd Street, which Frank Vitale, also a Pittsburg descendent of Sicilian immigrants, had created years earlier in commemoration of Pittsburg's ties to Sicilian fishing. The delegation was adamant to have one for their new Piazza, which they named Piazza di Pittsburg in honor of our sister city relationship. In return the Pittsburg City Council approved and renamed a portion of Third Street from Marina Boulevard to Railroad Avenue, ending at the Fisherman Statue, "Isola delle Femmine" Boulevard.



Members of Our Committee in Front of the Fisherman Statue in Isola delle Femmine
From left to right: Sal Cacciaroni, John Buffo, Vincent S. Di Maggio, artist Frank Vitale, Frank Bruno, Mary Pappas Coniglio, Rocco Battaglia and Vince "Rabit" Coniglio

Our committee agreed to have another Fisherman Statue built but I didn't know how we were going to raise the funds to build another statue or even if one could be made. First we asked the Fisherman Statue artist Frank Vitale if it was possible. He told us he still had the molds for the statue and graciously donated the only remaining mold of the original statue, as well as his time working on putting the sculpture together. We had to raise funds to pay for the materials, bronzing, and the foundry as well as the shipping costs.

With a lot of speeches to local Italian groups asking for donations and a little creative currency exchange financing, we were able to solidify the cost of making the statue and shipping it to Isola. We even had a little money left over to discount the trip costs for the travelers to Isola for the celebration of the Sister City union, the unveiling of the Fisherman Statue, and the dedication of the Piazza di Pittsburg in May, 1994. All the efforts were successful with the assistance and partnership of Mary Pappas Coniglio and Vincent S. Di Maggio. Their dedication and words of encouragement helped me do what needed to be done.

During our inauguration trip in 1994 for the dedication of the statue and Piazza, our committee members and their spouses were joined by 100 people from our community, mostly descendants of Isola. Many had never traveled to Italy or Sicily before. We all witnessed what was a wonderful heartfelt reception and dedication of the new Piazza di Pittsburg and the beautiful Fisherman Statue, which is now a symbol of our Sister City relationship as well as the symbol of the city of Isola delle Femmine itself. It was historic and a very emotional experience for everyone.

There were follow-on Sister City trips in 1997, 2002, 2006, 2010, and in 2018 for the 25th Sister City Anniversary Celebration in Isola in which those attending also felt the magical experience of Isolani hospitality. While there in 2018, the City of Isola hosted an Immigrant's Celebration where 30 Northern California citizens witnessed the historic celebration of those Isolani citizens, who ventured to America, particularly to Pittsburg, in the late 1800's and early 1900's to make a better life for their families, our ancestors.

A plaque was presented to the City of Isola celebrating the historical event. It depicted a father, mother and a young child back in the late 1880's. The plaque was designed by Mary and myself. The face of the father was that of my father Ben J. Bruno, the mother that of Vincent S. Di Maggio's mother Stella Ann Verga, and the child that of Mary's mother Leonore Lombardo Pappas. The plaque was generously sponsored by Albert Seeno III. At the same time,

the City of Isola honored Albert D. Seeno, Jr and his family as being the most successful and prosperous descendants from Isola delle Femmine. It was all an unbelievable experience and one we will never forget.

We have now formed The FRIENDS OF ISOLA DELLE FEMMINE, a 501 (c) 3 non-profit corporation, to keep our culture and heritage alive for our children and families and we have expanded our efforts all over the USA and the World. We are especially proud of our organizations Board Members, who have generously contributed to two of our special programs, namely our Isola Relief Fund 2020, which is a direct financial support for those in need in Isola delle Femmine during the Covid-19 pandemic, and our First FOI Scholarship Program for 2021, which is available to students from any school district, who are our members, their children, grandchildren or great grandchildren, can meet the qualifications and applied before March 1, 2021.

All this came to fruition from the idea and pursuit of our own Vincenzo S. Di Maggio. Thank you, Enzo, for your vision, dedication, perseverance – your ancestors would be proud of you.

This was and is our adventure, our legacy, our calling, our time to continue the relationship started in the 1880's all the way to present times. *If not us, then who will keep the flame of our ancestors alive.* We encourage you to spread the word and keep our organization going by encouraging people to join The Friends of Isola delle Femmine organization. Go to our website to learn how, www.friendsofisola.org.

THERE ARE MANY EXCITING THINGS TO COME! WE CAN'T WAIT FOR THEM TO HAPPEN!
STAY TUNED!

