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Sharing the Italian-American culture

By Patricia D'Ascoli
SPECIAL TO THE NEWS-TIMES

Author to speak on a century of progress

Italian-Americans who are younger than 50 have probably experienced little, if any, discrimination on the basis of ethnicity. But many senior citizens can clearly remember a time when this wasn't the case.

And it is the kind of stories related by this generation that interests an author who will speak next Wednesday at the New Milford Senior Center.

Wisconsin author Dominic Pulera is traveling the country to discuss the Italian-American experience over the last 100 years.

During his presentation at the Senior Center, New Milford area senior citizens will have an opportunity to share their own personal stories with Pulera, who is collecting anecdotes for a book called "Green, White and Red: Italian Americans, the American Dream and the Italian Diaspora."

Catherine Killoran, New Mil-

ford Senior Center program coordinator, is excited about Pulera's program, and believes that New Milford seniors will be happy to share their experiences with him.

Killoran, who is one-quarter Italian herself, recalls when Pulera first contacted her about the possibility of speaking at the Senior Center, she was impressed with his respectful demeanor as well as his ideas.

"The Italian-American immigrant story is very much the story of any successful American immigrant population," said Killoran, who is interested in supporting programs that look for the common ground between people.

Like Pulera, she feels that seniors who are not of Italian heritage will also find the subject appealing.

During a recent phone interview, the 32-year-old Pulera noted that he has previously vis-

ited a number of towns in Connecticut, which — at 19 percent — boasts the second largest Italian-American population in the United States.

According to Pulera, who has already traveled to 37 states and plans to visit at least 40 before his project is complete, 18 percent of New Milford residents are Italian-American.

"It is very interesting to share this story with different groups of Americans," Pulera said of his project. "Italian-Americans are about 6 percent of the U.S. population, and it's important to me that everyone in the country feels a sense of ownership of the Italian-American story, because it's nice for all Americans to explore the different aspects of American culture."

Pulera will speak on the general theme of Italian-American progress by interweaving stories and anecdotes that illustrate

how far Italian-Americans have come.

He has interviewed people ranging in age from high school students to a 107-year-old woman. Pulera does not receive any compensation for his speaking engagements.

"I have been very privileged to speak to people who remember what it was like to be Italian in America when many Italians were poor and sometimes experienced discrimination," he said. "I share stories to illustrate how far we have come as a nation and a people."

Pulera has always been interested in American culture and history, and graduated magna cum laude from Beloit College with departmental honors in history.

He is a recognized expert on matters involving race, culture and diversity and has authored two nonfiction works, "Visible Differences" (2002) and "Sharing

the Dream" (2004). Pulera anticipates that his next book will be published some time in 2008.

Pulera's own Italian heritage is traced through his father's family to his great-grandparents, who immigrated to America from Calabria in southern Italy. The author has visited Italy six times in the last nine years, and has spoken to audiences there as well.

He said his father, Gene Pulera, frequently travels with him and will accompany him on his visit to New Milford.

"I'm really passionate about the Italian-American story as it relates to all Americans, and I try to convey that message to various audiences," Pulera reflected. "Our country created opportunities for people from many different backgrounds."

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Dominic Pulera will speak at the New Milford Senior Center on Oct. 18 at 10 a.m. For more information about the program, contact Catherine Killoran at (860) 355-6075.

Speaker notes Italian-American impact

BY GARY J. KUNICH

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Leonardo Pulera came to Kenosha in 1902 with nothing.

At Ellis Island, his occupation was listed as "peasant." He couldn't read. He couldn't write.

Now, 104 years later, his great grandson, Dominic Pulera, an image consultant and published author, addressed a crowd of students and adults at the University of Wisconsin-Parkside Wednesday on the strides Italians have made since his great-grandfather first stepped foot on American soil.

"We are at a turning point for Italian Americans," said Pulera, who grew up near Delavan. "Many of the first generation were poor there, and they were poor here, and there have been so many accomplishments, but we can look back at those stories because there is so much to celebrate," he said.

Pulera, 32, heard the stories his relatives told while he was

growing up, and gave them as much thought as any fourth-generation American kid who was part Italian and part German.

"It wasn't until I was about 20 and was in college, and started writing papers, that I started to question it. I wanted to learn from it," Pulera said.

Since then he's made six trips to Italy — some to his ancestral homeland in Calabria, on the tip of the boot.

He wrote two books — "Visible Differences: Why Race Will Matter to Americans in the 21st Century," and "Sharing the Dream: White Males in Multicultural America," that dealt with race and gender. His third book — due to be published in 2008 — is called "Green, White and Red."

"We're at a turning point in America because we're still in touch with some of the folks from the Old World, while the new generation is inherently American," Pulera said.

"A lot of the book will be personal — going back to the village my great-grandfather came from, those experiences and how welcoming everyone was. About 80 percent will be about experiences of other Italian Americans, and the rest about Italians in other parts of the world. I'm always fascinated to hear stories from people."

The book, he hopes, will help continue a resurgence many have in finding out about their history.

During the speaking event, Pulera rattled off numbers and facts from memory: Wisconsin is only 3 percent Italian — "in Dodgeville, a town of 4,000, there are only two Italian Americans," he said — but in Kenosha, the number is closer to 12 percent. He talked about how first-generation Italian Americans tried hiding their culture and were discriminated against before World War II, not even allowed inside dance halls, but that began to change after

the heroics of many Italian soldiers fighting for the United States.

Paul Gagliardi, 23, a Parkside student who spent two semesters studying at the University of Calabria in Italy, said he wanted to hear what Pulera had to say as a way to connect to his family's past.

"Going to Italy made me realize so many different other world perspectives. My heritage has always been a part of my family, but I think the generation before us lost their connection to their roots and culture, and not by choice. Going to Italy, and meeting people helped me grow as an individual. Listening to him gave me something more I could relate to."