

GRYMES HILL

DaVinci Society to fete 7 at scholarship dinner

To date, the group has awarded over \$1 million in scholarships to students at Wagner College

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As a way to observe Italian Heritage month, the DaVinci Society at Wagner College will host its 16th annual scholarship dinner to honor the "Next Generation," a unique evening that will showcase Italian culture in Nicotra's Ballroom at the Hilton Garden Inn, Thursday, Sept. 26 at 6 p.m.

Community service awards will be presented to five members of the "next generation," whose great-grandparents emigrated from Italy.

And to dispel negative connotations sometimes associated with Italian-Americans including the "reality" TV entertainment stereotypes, the honorees, who all have musical backgrounds, will perform during the evening.

The 2019 honorees include Jessica Caracciolo, Vincent Innocente, Eric Petillo, Wagner Class of 2013, Michael J. Pinto, Class of 2010 and Concetta Raineri, Class of 2013.

In addition, the Society's Lifetime Achievement Award will be presented to longtime, all-around entertainer Al Lambert. And in keeping with the evening's musical theme, Lambert will also croon to the audience.

The DaVinci Society customarily presents a Renaissance Award to an individual who is not of Italian descent and who is an exceptional representative of his or her ethnic or religious group. This year the honor will be bestowed upon Dr. Souhel Najjar, who is of Syrian heritage.

Lastly, a special welcome and introduction is being

planned for new Wagner College president, Dr. Joel Martin, and his wife, Jan.

Robert Scamardella, president of the organization, will serve as emcee.

The DaVinci Society serves to raise scholarship funds to benefit Staten Island Italian-American students. To date, the society has awarded over \$1 million in scholarship funds to qualifying students at Wagner College.

AL LAMBERT

A Wagner College grad, Lambert earned a bachelor of arts degree in sociology in 1968 and masters degree in education in 1977.

He started his professional career as a special education teacher in the former Willowbrook State School where he brought his love of music to students by establishing the first chorus ever comprised of children with special needs. For his efforts, he was named the recipient of the distinguished State Institution Teacher of the Year Award.

In time he entered the automobile dealership industry on Staten Island holding a number of positions from advertising and marketing director, general manager and public relations and sales coordinator to owning his own leasing firm.

But music has always been his passion and an integral part of Lambert's life: He's performed at more than 5,000 varied events and he has done so with an enthusiasm and spirit that is contagious.

He's made special appear-



Jessica Caracciolo



Vincent Innocente



Al Lambert



Dr. Souhel Najjar



Eric Petillo



Michael J. Pinto



Concetta Raineri

ances at Carnegie Hall, The Waldorf Astoria and the Village Gate and has happily performed and rubbed elbows at the neighborhood barber's birthday party, as well as with the likes of Pat Cooper, Rodney Dangerfield, Chuck Mangione, the Shirelles and many more as the opening act for the aforementioned celebrities.

A fixture at the South Shore Rotary Club and a tireless leader for a number of Staten Island causes, Lambert has utilized his talents over the last 50 years to help raise over \$2 million dollars for more than 35 worthy Staten Island charities.

JESSICA CARACCILO

Caracciolo attended the Quaker School Friends Seminary and St. John Villa Academy High School, where she received the Christian Woman Award for her community service involvement before going to earn a bachelor of science degree from Ithaca College.

Currently, she is a working actress and has appeared in stage presentations in the Staten Island community and beyond. But throughout it all her commitment to helping others remains a major focus in her life.

For the past three years she has served as co-chair of the JCC's Sunrise Day Camp's annual "Sunshine Sunday," a major event which raises funds for children suffering from cancer. She also is a proud founding board member of the Minty Organization, as well as a staff member of the Staten Island Children's Theatre Organization.

It's not uncommon to find her picking up trash around the YMCA's Camp Pouch or cleaning out storage closets at the St. George Theatre. And each year she goes "house to house" as "Santa's Helper" for On Your Mark and spends much time trying to find homes for stray dogs through Animal Light-house Rescue.

In between times she performs in the In the Wings Production's latest musical production at Snug Harbor Cultural Center & Botanical Garden.

VINCENT INNOCENTE

Innocente is a graduate of St Peter's Boys High School

and received his bachelor of science degree in communications and a master's of business administration degree in marketing management from St. John's University.

Since 2014, he's been the manager of marketing and audience services at the St. George Theatre Restoration, Inc.

Prior to joining the St. George Theatre, he served as business associate and special events coordinator at Snug Harbor. In 2012, he co-curated an art exhibit titled "Island Sounds: Celebrating 500 Years of Music on Staten Island," highlighting the great contributions Staten Island has made to the world of performing arts.

Innocente volunteered with organizations such as the Unity Games, March of Dimes, American Cancer Society, St. Roch's School, St. Peter's Boys High School, St. John's University, Major League Baseball, and others.

An accomplished musician, he performs both solo and with his band, Cause and The Effects.

He is a 2016 recipient of the SIEDC 20 Under 40 Award and was recognized as one of 10 Up and Comers in Staten Island in the 2018 City & State NY Magazine.

ERIC PETILLO

Petillo, a graduate of Wagner's nationally-ranked Theatre Department in 2013 is a St. Peter's Boys High School alum. He has worked at the St. George Theatre as the box office manager and Arts-in-Education coordinator since 2013 and also as Sundog Theatre Company's Curator-of-New Works, helping to seek out, procure and present original works to the Staten Island community.

Petillo is otherwise very active in local theatre scene having acted, written and directed for Sea View Playwright's Theatre ("Spring Awakenin," "Angels in America," "Buried Child,") Sundog Theatre Co. ("Scenes from the Staten Island Ferry," "The Ice Wolf," Staten Island Shakespearean Theatre Co. ("Macbeth,") and The Little Victory Theatre ("Some Girls.")

In addition, he is a founding member and on the board of directors of Hemlock Theatre Co., where he

most recently directed their productions of "Company" and "tick...tick...BOOM!" and co-starred in their production of "Green Day's American Idiot."

MICHAEL J. PINTO

Pinto is a member of the Wagner College Class of 2010 where he served as president of the Student Government Association and currently serves on the adjunct faculty of the Grymes Hill college.

Upon graduating Wagner, he entered St. John's University School of Law, where he earned a juris doctorate in 2013. Since 2018, he's been associated with the Staten Island law firm of Crawford, Bringslid, Vander Neut, LLP.

He also is the resident musical director and board member for In the Wings Theatre Organization and a board member of Illumni-Art Productions. A longtime member of Staten Island's theatrical community, in the fall of 2010, he founded The Minty Organization for the Performing Arts, now celebrating its 10th year.

In their annual June production, The Minty Awards attracts an audience of over 1,100 students, families and friends. Since its inception, they have donated over \$90,000 to Catholic high school theatre programs. As executive director, Pinto has overseen and implemented various educational programs including master classes, cabarets, and college audition workshops, taught by leading Broadway professionals.

CONCETTA RAINERI

"Chetti" as she is affectionately known, graduated from St. John Villa Academy High School in 2009, where she was heavily involved in her school's drama program — what inspired her to continue her studies in theatre.

In 2013 she graduated from Wagner College as a major in the Theatre Performance Program where she worked directly with Tony Award Winning actress Michele Pawk.

After graduation, her focus shifted toward her true passion: A pop career. She teamed up with the award winning company "The Practice" to record her first independent album featuring the single "In the

City." Her debut garnered hundreds of thousands of views on YouTube and other streaming platforms.

She made her off Broadway debut in the role of Lucia in "My Big Gay Italian Wedding" and has performed on ABC's live coverage of the New York City Columbus Day Parade for two consecutive years.

She's performed at Webster Hall, Irving Plaza, The Bitter End and the Mercury Lounge and the El Rey Theatre in Los Angeles. She also has been featured in TV and film, including Chipotle's "Farmed and Dangerous" Hulu Series soundtrack, along with the 2018 film "Gotti" featuring her song "Shadow Of My Father." She also sang the title song for "Barely Lethal," a Kyle Newman film starring Samuel L. Jackson.

DR. SOUHEL NAJJAR

Dr. Najjar was 23 years old when he stepped off a plane at JFK Airport in 1983 and began his life in the United States. He completed residencies at Albany Medical Center in anatomic/clinical pathology and neurology and a fellowship in eeg/epilepsy at New York University. He is board certified in neurology.

Dr. Najjar came to Staten Island and became the Director of Neurosciences and Stroke at Staten Island University Hospital and has since continued to grow in his profession. He is now the chief of neurology for all 35 hospitals in the Northwell System.

Internationally recognized for his clinical, research and teaching expertise, Dr Najjar has dedicated his career to the diagnosis and treatment of epilepsy of all ages, complex neurological disorders and autoimmune disorders of the central nervous system — and has been widely published. While he enjoys an impressive reputation as a neurologist, one of his cases became the subject of a New York Times best-selling book and a Netflix movie when a young New York Post reporter, Susannah Cahalan, began suffering from "bed-bug-bite sensations on the left side of her body, mood swings at work, seizures and hallucinations." Treated by many professionals and neurologists, Susannah was diagnosed with psychotic symptoms and a mental illness.

On the verge of being institutionalized, the family called in Dr. Najjar. He concluded that Susannah's condition was not psychiatric but was neurological.

Under Dr. Najjar's care she made a complete recovery and wrote a book about her experience called "Brain on Fire" which. The book was made into a movie of the same name. About his immigration to this country Dr. Najjar states simply, "The United States gave me everything."

Tickets for the fundraising dinner are \$160. For reservations, contact Betty McComiskey at Wagner College at 718-420-4014 or specialevents@wagner.edu. To purchase tickets with a credit card, use the following link: <https://alumniconnect.wagner.edu/2019davincisocietydinner>.

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