

June 1, 2010

## NFCA Cultural Foundation 2010 Assembly of Delegates Convenes in Pittsburgh

Washington, DC: The National Federation of Croatian Americans Cultural Foundation (NFCA) just completed its 17th Annual Assembly of Delegates with meetings all day Saturday, May 15, 2010, at the Doubletree Pittsburgh Hotel and Monroeville Convention Center. The many Delegates attending the Assembly included representatives of Croatian communities throughout the United States, including California, Florida, Illinois, Maryland, Michigan, Minnesota, Nebraska, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and the Washington, DC area.

The NFCA schedule began Friday afternoon with a tour of the headquarters of the Croatian Fraternal Union (CFU), the largest Croatian American organization and a founding organizational member of the NFCA. Officers of the CFU greeted Delegates and their guests and provided them with a tour of the CFU's outstanding museum. The CFU's museum showcases the history of the CFU and its integral role in the life of the Croatian American community.

The Saturday session started with President Steve Rukavina highlighting the NFCA's accomplishments during the past year. President Rukavina discussed the numerous high level meetings that NFCA representatives had with members of Congress and their staff as well as with US State Department foreign policy officials – including new United States Ambassador to Croatia James Foley – in recent months. Among other things, President Rukavina spoke of the successes the NFCA had in assisting the Archdiocese of Vrh Bosna (Sarajevo) in clearing roadblocks which had been placed in the way of building new Catholic Church buildings in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). He further outlined many initiatives that were implemented over the last twelve months including on-going work and advocacy for Bosnian Croats and several new membership outreach programs for NFCA.

NFCA Delegates heard from Treasurer Tom Steich and Assistant Treasurer Zvonko Labas as well as from Joe Foley, the NFCA's long time Director of Public Affairs. Mr. Foley's presentation focused on, among other things, his attendance on NFCA's behalf at numerous foreign policy conferences and seminars held in Washington that have related to Croatia and her neighbors in Southeastern Europe. Mr. Foley discussed in detail his additional interactions for NFCA with the Washington-based and international media, Congressional Members and their staffs, as well as his liaison efforts with the Croatian and other diplomatic communities in Washington.

During the afternoon public session, Croatia's Ambassador to the US,

Kolinda Grabar Kitarovic, gave an overview of recent Croatian national and international developments, and she provided positive appraisal of Croatian American relations over the past year. The Ambassador thanked the NFCA and its supportive members for the key role that they and the organization played by consistently encouraging the US Congress to help assist Croatia's recent ascension to full NATO membership. The Ambassador also suggested that, since Croatia has become a member of NATO, Croatian Americans should consider changing the focus of their activities to other issues that remain important to Republic of Croatia and to the Croatian American community. On this matter, Ambassador Grabar Kitarovic listed the need for assistance in having Croatia enter the US visa-waiver program and matters related to the elimination of double taxation.

The public also heard from Ambassador Robert Bradtke, the former United States Ambassador to Croatia, who reminisced about his time in Zagreb. The Ambassador especially treated the audience to vignettes concerning the 2009 trip of former President George W. Bush to Croatia, including the reaction over President Bush's most memorable statement made during an historic outdoor speech in Zagreb's St. Mark's Square: "Henceforth, should any danger threaten your people, America and the NATO alliance will stand with you and no one will be able to take your freedom away." Ambassador Bradtke, who remains an active American diplomat on other matters, also discussed the future geo-political significance of NATO membership for the Republic of Croatia. He received a sustained round of applause from the appreciative NFCA Assembly Delegates for his important contributions to Croatian-American relations.

In addition to the two Ambassadorial presentations, Justin Vujevich, MD (son of Marion Vujevich, MD, an Honorary Counsel of the Republic of Croatia) spoke about the Croatain American Cultural and Economic Alliance (CACEA) "Angel's Fund." The CACEA raises monies for dire medical procedures required by needy persons in Croatia. Thus far, the Fund has made three awards. Most recently, \$15,000 for needed surgery was provided to Luka Bistrovic, a two-year old boy from Cakovac born with a disrupted digestive system. Dr. Vujevich urged NFCA Delegates and the public to take news of the Angel's Fund and its work back to their respective local communities.

Mark Fatla and Mark Masterson of the Northside Leadership Council also made a presentation concerning their private/public initiative to save St. Nicholas Church in Pittsburgh. St. Nicholas is the oldest Croatian American Catholic parish in the United States. They noted the imperative need to raise funds to finance the restoration of the building (which they emphasized is in critical need of repairs) and its eventual conversion into a museum dedicated to immigration.

Discussions also took place among the Delegates and the public concerning two questions of importance to the Diaspora. First, Zvonko

Labas discussed the "Diaspora Initiative" which is being developed by the Croatian government as a means to improve relations between Croatia and its Diaspora. Mr. Labas noted in particular the correspondence that the NFCA has exchanged with Ivan Bagaric, a member of the Croatian Parliament, on this issue and the suggestions made by the NFCA with respect to the proposed project. Second, Mr. Labas, Mr. Rukavina, and Mr. Foley led additional discussions before the Assembly concerning the status of Croats in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Those who spoke generally agreed that the NFCA should support any efforts made by the Croatian government to increase professional, intellectual, and economic ties between Croatia and the Croatian American community. Most persons who spoke on matters related to BiH expressed the need to work with the Catholic Church as well as all Croatian political parties in BiH as the best means to assure the continuity and prosperousness of Croats in the country.

During their meetings, NFCA Delegates elected a new Board of Directors. The new Board later elected a new Executive Committee consisting of the following persons: John P. Kraljic of New York was elected President, Joe Brigich from the Croatian Fraternal Union was re-elected Executive Vice President, Jelena Rudela (CA) was elected Treasurer, Bill Vergot of Pittsburgh was re-elected Secretary, Tom Steich (MD) was elected Parliamentarian, and Ed Andrus (PA) was elected as an at-large officer. In addition, NFCA Delegates also elected three regional Vice Presidents: Zvonko Labas (Eastern VP from Maryland), Frank Jerbich (Central VP from Illinois), and Jim Kresnik (Western VP from Nebraska). Former President Steve Rukavina of Philadelphia will remain as a member of the Executive Committee in the post of immediate Past President.

The remaining Board Members include: John Balaich (MN), Tony Butala (PA), Tony Dizdar (OH), Bernard Luketich (PA), Marie McGuckin (IL), Anne Pavlich (MD), Ed Pazo (PA), Mijo Radocaj (OH), Joseph Rukavina (MN), Charles Stefanec (MI), Lovro Vrbos (FL), and Edward Yambrusic (Washington, DC).

Following the elections, President Kraljic led a closed-door session of the new Board and Executive Committee during which Board Members and Officers outlined, discussed, and approved the NFCA's plans for the coming year.

On Saturday night, the NFCA Delegates and guests were invited to a spectacular wine tasting and fundraising event held at the home of Peter Karlovich and Steve Herforth. Their award winning home is uniquely constructed with a magnificent view of Pittsburgh and proved to be a perfect setting for the evening's events. The wine served that evening included those generously donated by Tony Butala that came from his own Butala Vineyards of Nappa Valley as well as a fine selection of Croatian wines donated by Nadine Bognar, Diana Shaban,

and Dubravka Nezic. Entertainment that evening was provided by Orchestra Barabe and opened with the singing of the national anthems of the United States and Croatia. Tony Butala later feted the audience with classic Croatian and American songs, some from his long-time association with the Lettermen. Bill Vergot introduced the guests to Kumovi, an impressive local folk ensemble composed of both Croatian Americans and non-Croatian Americans. They sang an awe-inspiring compilation of Croatian folk songs. The large crowd was left amazed and quite appreciative at the end of Kumovi's performance.

Both Ambassadors Bradtke and Grabar Kitarovic spoke a few words to those present in honor of the first anniversary of Croatia's accession to NATO. President Kraljic thanked the attendees for their support of the NFCA, while Past President Rukavina announced the award of the NFCA's Presidential Award to the hosts, Peter Karlovich and Steve Henforth, who have tirelessly supported the NFCA and many other charitable causes of importance to the Croatian American community as well as to Croatia in general.

The entire NFCA organization would like to publicly thank and acknowledge the outstanding organizational skills of Bill Vergot who was this year's Assembly Coordinator. We would also like to acknowledge the invaluable work during the past year from Joe Foley, the NFCA's Public Affairs Director, Zvonko Labas, Sandy Butt, and NFCA's Washington intern Jelena Rudela - all of whom dedicated substantial amounts of time and effort in assuring the continued vitality of the NFCA. The NFCA looks forward to another year in promoting matters of importance to Croatia, Croats in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and all Croatian Americans.

The NFCA is the national umbrella organization of Croatian American groups that collectively represents approximately 130,000 members.