

"NFCFA Cultural Foundation 2011 Assembly of Delegates Convenes in Pittsburgh"

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Washington, DC: The National Federation of Croatian Americans Cultural Foundation (NFCFA) just completed its 18th Annual Assembly of Delegates on Saturday, June 4, 2011 at the Clarion Hotel in Pittsburgh. The many Delegates attending the Assembly represented Croatian communities from throughout the United States – including California, Florida, Illinois, Maryland, Michigan, Minnesota, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and the Washington, DC area.

The NFCFA's schedule began on Friday, June 3, with a tour of historic St. Nicholas' church in Millvale. The church, originally a Croatian Catholic parish, features murals by famed Croatian American artist Maxo Vanka. The murals are well known for their depiction of Croatian immigrant life in the 1930s and 1940s and the integration of same into themes relating to war, justice, poverty, and peace. Those present were treated to an informative and entertaining tour of the church and murals by Mary Petrich.

The Saturday session began with President John Kraljic highlighting the NFCFA's accomplishments during the past year. President Kraljic discussed the numerous high level meetings that NFCFA representatives had with members of Congress and their staff as well as the US State Department's foreign policy officials for SE Europe. President Kraljic also emphasized the efforts the NFCFA have made with its ongoing advocacy on behalf of Croats in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) as well as its criticisms of the recent action of the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in connection with its findings concerning General Ante Gotovina and Mr. Mladen Markac.

The NFCFA Treasurer, Jelena Rudela, reported on the past year's various contributions and the status of the budget with suggestions for improvement in the coming year.

Assistant Treasurer Zvonko Labas and Past President Steve Rukavina gave detailed presentations relating to their meetings with Croatian officials in Washington and in Croatia. Among other things, Mr. Labas discussed his meetings with the Diaspora representatives in Croatia's Parliament (the Sabor) – including a March meeting in Zagreb with Sabornik Ivan Bagaric – and the Sabor's pending legislative initiative regarding an enhanced relationship between the Republic of Croatia and its Diaspora.

Mr. Rukavina noted that during discussions with Croatian officials attention was especially focused on the ICTY verdict against General Gotovina and Mr. Markac, the situation of Croats in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and a host of Diaspora-related concerns.

During the afternoon public session, Dr. Bozo Ljubic – who is the Co-Speaker of the Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) Parliament, Chair of the Main Council of the Croatian National Assembly of BiH in Sarajevo, and President of the Croatian Democratic Union 1990 (HDZ 1990 party), which is one of the two major political parties that represent Croats in BiH – presented his analysis of the political problems afflicting Croats in his country. He also highlighted recent unilateral political changes made by the Office High Representative to the Dayton Peace Agreement. These changes have had the effect of locking out Croats from maintaining any consistent and meaningful voice in the highest institutions of this county – despite being one of the three constituent peoples of this nation-state. He felt that there is only one truth, and that is political crisis has been a permanent state in Bosnia and Herzegovina ever since the Dayton Peace Agreement was achieved. Dr. Ljubic, together with his foreign policy advisor, Peter Kraljevic, engaged in further discussions on these issues with the Delegates both during and after the afternoon session.

The following speaker was the out-going Croatian Ambassador to the United States, Kolinda Grabar Kitarovic. Ambassador Grabar Kitarovic was recently named Assistant for Public Diplomacy to NATO's General Secretary Anders Fogh Rasmussen – one of the six top NATO deputies to the Secretary General in Brussels. The Ambassador provided a general overview of the positive state of Croatian and American relations noting a few areas that can be improved. These include the need to introduce a visa waiver program for Croatians wishing to visit the United States, matters related to double taxation and regulation of Social Security payments to retirees living in Croatia.

The Ambassador especially thanked the NFCA and its members for their support during her tenure in Washington. She also stated the hope that her successor will continue to work closely together with the NFCA on matters affecting the economic and political success of the Republic of Croatia. Newly elected NFCA President Vergot provided a suitable parting gift for the Ambassador – a personally inscribed copy of George W. Bush's new book entitled "Decision Points", which provides a superb history of the expansion of NATO during his Presidency.

Delegates also heard Mark Fatla and Mark Masterson of the Northside Leadership Council discuss their continued work on a private/public initiative to save St. Nicholas' Croatian Church in Pittsburgh, the oldest Croatian American Catholic parish in the United States. This project continues to remain an important legacy matter for the entire Pittsburgh region, as well as the country's Croatian Americans. Plans are to convert the church into a national immigration museum.

The public session closed with a report made by Joseph Foley, the NFCA's Public Affairs Director, who publicly thanked the Croatian

Fraternal Union, the CFU's talented leadership and staff, and its signature publication 'Zajednicar' for its continued excellent coverage of matters affecting the Republic of Croatia and the entire Croatian American community.

Mr. Foley also detailed the many additional issues and events in which the NFCA has maintained a high profile in Washington and elsewhere over the prior year. These included: the May summit meeting at the Willard Hotel in Washington of an NFCA delegation with Croatian President Ivo Josipovic and his foreign policy advisors, the NFCA's letter to US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton highlighting the current negative economic and political plight of Croats in Bosnia, NFCA's publicly expressed concern and solidarity with other Croatian American individuals and entities over Cardinal Vinko Puljic's loss of a section of his Archdiocese residence in Sarajevo to former UDBA agent occupiers, the Capitol Hill reception for Prime Minister Jadranka Kosor while she was in Washington, and the current plans to ramp up the Congressional Croatian Caucus membership with the two new Caucus Co-Chairs for the 112th Congress, US Representatives Elton Gallegly (CA) and Dennis Kucinich (OH).

NFCA Delegates elected a new Executive Committee. Bill Vergot of Pennsylvania was elected President, Zvonko Labas of Maryland was elected Executive Vice President, Jelena Rudela of California was re-elected Treasurer, Anne Pavlich of Maryland was re-elected Secretary, and Mijo Radocaj of Ohio (a former NFCA President) was elected as an at-large officer. In addition, NFCA Delegates also elected three regional Vice Presidents: Steve Rukavina (Eastern VP from Philadelphia), Charles Stefanac (Central VP from Michigan) and Joe Cindrach (Western VP from California). Former President John Kraljic of New York will remain as a member of the Executive Committee in the post of immediate Past President.

The following were also elected to the NFCA's Board: Ed Andrus (Pennsylvania), Joe Brigich (Pennsylvania), Julie Bubanovich (Pennsylvania), Tony Dizdar (Ohio), Frank Jerbich (Illinois), Jim Kresnik (Nebraska), Paul Kunder (Florida), Ed Pazo (Pennsylvania), Joseph Rukavina (Minnesota), Mario Spalatin (Florida), Michael Stempihar (Maryland), Tom Steich (Maryland), and Pamela Weigand (Pennsylvania).

On Saturday night the NFCA Delegates and guests were invited to a spectacular wine tasting and fundraising event held at the incredible home of Peter Karlovich and Steve Herforth above beautiful Pittsburgh on Mt. Washington. As in the past, they were most gracious in offering the use of their home for projects close to their heart, and they have always welcomed the NFCA. The evening was very successful and most enjoyable as all listened to the entertainment of The Trubaduri tamburica orchestra from Pittsburgh.

During the evening, the NFCA Presidential Medal, which had been awarded the previous year to Mr. Karlovich and Herforth, was presented to them. The NFCA also presented Certificates of Appreciation to Dr. Marion Vujevich, the honorary consul of Croatia in Pittsburgh, for his fundraising efforts on behalf of the Dora Foundation (resulting in over \$120,000 being raised), to Ms. Nadine Bognar for her efforts in raising over \$10,000 for NFCA and de-mining efforts in Croatia, and to The Trubaduri tamburica orchestra for their generous support in numerous fundraising events during Croatia's Homeland War.

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 NFCA Public Affairs Director Joe Foley, Executive Vice President Zvonko Labas, and National Treasurer Jelena Rudela – all of whom dedicated substantial amounts of time and effort towards running the NFCA's Washington area office and 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. For additional public affairs information, please contact NFCA Headquarters by telephone or by email. For recent NFCA newsletters, important NFCA membership applications and chapter information, and other Croatian American news, please contact the NFCA.

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