

nota dell'editore

The Wolves are a Model for Hard Hit Region

It is understandably difficult to remain optimistic about your region if you are from Western Pennsylvania, Eastern Ohio or other parts of the so-called Rust Belt. The region has been hard hit economically, in decline for the last 25 years. Home to many Italian Americans and PRIMO readers, I pay close attention to this part of the country. It seems no matter what well-meaning politicians try to do here, the region continues to lose factories, jobs and people. Over the years, political leaders have initiated macroeconomic policies to assist large corporations and still the region's economy declines. The policies are not working.

I advise the region's leaders to take another approach. First, lets persuade fellow Americans not to use the term "Rust Belt." I myself have never been fond of the term. You cannot expect a region to make a comeback when a negative stigma meaning decay is attached to it. Second, focus on the microeconomic component of the region to find the right model to improve the region's economy. Initiatives do not have to be large and expensive, just enough to get this sector of the economy moving.

The small organization or business will do the rest. Take for example one small Italian American organization, the National Association of the Wolves and what they have achieved in the region.

I never heard of the Wolves until I got a call from PRIMO reader Tony Celli. Tony works for Jack Wagner the Auditor General of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania but on Tony's spare time he serves as the National President of the Wolves. What he told me about this organization can serve as an inspiring model for the entire region.

The Wolves are a non-profit organization, although nationally chartered, basically exclusive to the region. They provide scholarships, grants and endowments for the region's college bound needy kids and funds for various people and groups also in need.

The Wolves consist of just 400 Italian American men and women living in the heart of where the region's

economy has been hardest hit. They live in towns and small cities like Farrell, New Castle, Ellwood City, Beaver Falls, Aliquippa, Erie, Coraopolis, Rochester, Meadville, New Brighton, Monaca, Ambridge of Western Pennsylvania and Youngstown and Trumbull County of Eastern Ohio.

These proud Italian Americans have raised \$1.5 million in scholarship, endowment and grant money so far this year.

Organizations of their size anywhere in the country would have a difficult time meeting this achievement. From where the Wolves reside among closed factories and businesses, the achievement is even more extraordinary.

If you are like me, you immediately assumed members of the Wolves are wealthy and passing around the hat among themselves raised the funds. Not true. You won't find a Donald Trump or Bill Gates among this group. As Tony told me, "The Wolves are made up of a cross section of Italian Americans. You will find lawyers, doctors, businessmen, union officials, workingmen, teachers and retirees in our group. You will find people of all walks of life. How we raise our money is through fundraising."

Members of the Wolves are made up of 14 dens divided into four districts. The average dens consist of between 18 to 33 members, however the 14 dens range from 10 to 70 individuals from specific communities of the region and organize various fundraisers. Tony's den of 70 members in Ellwood City, for instance, raised \$24,000.00 in scholarship, grant and endowment money selling lamb and fish dinners, meatball, hot sausage, fish, Philly cheese steaks sandwiches as well as fries at a local arts, craft and food festival held over the Fourth of July weekend. Another den in Youngstown, Ohio, headed by Greg Rossi, raised the same amount. Youngstown has had such a bad time with the economy that the city recently closed its airport. Still, Rossi and his group were able to garner \$12,000.00 in a reverse raffle fundraiser and \$13,000.00 in a golf outing.

Founded in 1929 by a group of businessmen and professionals of Italian extraction, the Wolves began its fundraising activities in 1951. To date, the organization has raised \$6.1 million in

scholarship, grant and endowment money. Over the years, 2,500 kids and individuals and groups in need have been the beneficiaries of Wolves' funds. Many of the region's kids have gone on to be doctors, lawyers and professors thanks in part to Wolves' scholarships. The irony is that the Wolves, primarily an Italian American organization, has likely given a significant amount of its scholarship money to non-Italians. "Children of our members are not eligible for our scholarships," explains Tony. "It has been a rule of our organization. We want no bias in deciding whom we grant scholarship money to. Scholarships are granted on the student's needs and grades without regard to ethnicity. Period."

The Wolves are an active and dynamic organization. Through letters to the Governor of Pennsylvania and their state's legislative bodies, they were able to get both the Pennsylvania Senate and House of Representatives to pass this year a proclamation that August 1 to August 6 would be National Association of the Wolves Week in Pennsylvania.

The group got its name based on the legend of the she-wolf who suckled Romulus and Remus, forefathers of ancient Rome. The unselfish nature of the she-wolf is the spirit behind the group's mission and motto, "Pro Bono Publico," Latin for "For the Good of the Public."

Perhaps more symbolic of the group is what happened to the wolves, the animal species, in our country. For many years, the wolves were on the verge of extinction. With just a little help from the government, most notably in the banning of DDTs, the wolves rebounded. Nowadays, you can find the animals running in large packs at several of the country's national parks and forests. The Wolves also were once faced with extinction. Tony says, "We saw a serious decline in membership. The region's economy fell and our membership followed. But we kept at it. We stayed organized and continued our fundraising. Our membership is now increasing. We are coming back."

So can the region.