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Op-ed
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Many in the Italian-American community were pleased to hear that Belmar Mayor Kenneth E. Pringle apologized for his use of the pejorative term "guido" when describing certain tourists who flock to his town each summer. It was the right thing to do for anyone who claims to be politically correct and especially necessary for an elected official where the public demands a higher standard. His apology provides an opportunity to educate on two separate but sometimes related issues — the growing "guido" phenomenon and Italian-American stereotyping.

Pringle's guido comment tapped into a sore spot for many Italian-Americans, who are often negatively stereotyped as gangsters and buffoons. This disturbs many who do not identify with Tony Soprano or Joey Tribbiani and are tired of being asked if they are in the mafia. This image problem of Italian-Americans is not new and, to be fair, many groups have endured far worse. However, what separates Italian-Americans from other groups is the degree to which it is accepted in society. New York Post columnist Jack Newfield succinctly recognized that back in 1992 when he wrote, "prejudice against Italian Americans is the most tolerated intolerance," while John Patrick Shanley, in Time magazine, noted in 1988 that "they (Italians) are the last ethnic group America can comfortably mock."

Occurrences of Italian-American stereotyping pervade American society and most people do not even recognize them. Pay attention the next time you are watching a commercial for a pizza chain or a new "Italian" sandwich. We even see it in children's movies, such as "Shark Tale" and various cartoons. Recently, NBC-TV golf commentator Johnny Miller described Rocco Mediate as "looking more like the guy who cleans Tiger's pool" and questioned whether "guys with the name Rocco get on the trophy." Miller apologized, but is still on the air. If he made the same type of remarks about Tiger Woods, he would have ended up carpooling with Jimmy the Greek and Don Imus.

Italian-American stereotyping exists and is largely tolerated in society, as Pringle, to his credit, points out in his apology. But what is this guido phenomenon he references? There is a trend where young men, often with names like Murphy or Smith, describe themselves as "guidos." This group transcends ethnic lines and has a lifestyle of debauchery as a common thread.



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It is difficult to define what a guido is. How would one explain it to a person residing in Denver or Dallas? Guidos share a fashion sense, as well as a set of values principled upon excess. They aspire to gain admittance to places like D'Jais rather than Princeton University and spend far more time in the weight room or in front of a mirror rather than in a library. Their out-of-control antics often clash with the year-round residents and Pringle's vision of transforming Belmar into another Spring Lake.

While not all these guidos are of Italian ancestry, some are. And as a result, sometimes the Italian-American image problem is self-inflicted. This guido trend draws a parallel to what we see in the African-American community with people such as Bill Cosby attempting to communicate his positive message to the hip-hop culture. The guidos don't understand how ridiculous they are and Italian-Americans don't want to claim them.

In the Italian language, "Guido" (with a capital G) is a male name or nickname while "guido" (with a lower case g) stems from the verb "guidare" and means to operate or drive. Through the years, it has assumed a negative connotation in popular American culture and remains directly linked with Italian-Americans.

But if you are from Belmar, you may cut Pringle some slack as you know it is a colloquial term that has long been used to describe tourists who are not specifically Italian-American. Nonetheless, Pringle was careless to use the word. He is a well-educated individual who worked for the law firm that produced the current U.S. Supreme Court chief justice. He should have exercised better judgment than to use such a loaded word, which he now recognizes. He did the right thing by apologizing.

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