

The National Italian American Foundation (NIAF)

Yesterday at 9:00am · 7-11-16

Italian A Day

Anthony Joseph Celebrezze, Sr. (1910-1998) was a politician who was the first-ever Italian American to serve in a presidential cabinet. Born “Antonio Giuseppe Cilibrizzi” in Anzi, in the region of Basilicata, Celebrezze was one of 13 children. He and his family moved to the United States when he was just two years old, and his last name was Americanized upon arrival. Growing up in Cleveland, he attended John Carroll University and Ohio Northern University, College of Law. Celebrezze paid his way through college by working as a railroad laborer, freight truck driver, and a boxer. He began practicing general law in Cleveland until serving in the U.S. Navy during WWII. After the war, Celebrezze returned to law and politics.

He won a seat in the Ohio State Senate and served as a senator for 2 years as a Democrat, building relationships with the Republican majority. He later resigned to serve as Mayor of Cleveland, and was elected for five 2-year terms, among his many other roles. In 1961, President John F. Kennedy offered Celebrezze a lifetime appointment to a federal judgeship, but he turned it down to run for Mayor of Cleveland again. A year later, President Kennedy appointed Celebrezze to his cabinet as the United States Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare (now known as the Secretary of Health and Human Services). During his time on the cabinet, Celebrezze contributed to landmark legislation including the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Social Security Act of 1965. Eventually, Celebrezze returned to Cleveland, so that he could be reunited with his family. President Johnson appointed him to a seat on the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit; Celebrezze left behind a legacy of family involved in American politics.

