Columbus
IN PERSON; In Defense Of Columbus (excerpts from)
By MARY ANN CASTRONOVO FUSCO Published: October 8, 2000
THROUGHOUT time, treasure has typically been measured in trinkets and pennyweights, coins and carats. But to William J. Connell, a historian at Seton Hall University, ''there's nothing more precious than a hard fact.''
''The more you look for them,'' Mr. Connell says, ''the more you see how many interpretations there are.'' Lately, the 42-year-old scholar has taken to weighing the facts about Columbus, who at 41 became the most famous treasure-seeker of all time.
The fact that the Genoese explorer was preceded by the Vikings no longer fires up a debate. Arguments over Columbus's ethnic origins -- various groups claim him as Italian, Spanish, Greek, and Jewish -- are as old and usually as good-natured as the celebration of Columbus Day itself.
But one controversy that has tarnished the seafarer's reputation persists, periodically fanned by prevailing political winds. Though many maintain that Columbus was a noble-minded visionary who opened up a new land of opportunity for the oppressed masses of Europe, others see him as a greedy imperialist who slaughtered and spread disease among the indigenous people and institutionalized the slave trade.
''On the one hand, we have people desperate to make him theirs,'' Mr. Connell said with a chuckle during a recent interview in his campus office, ''and on the other hand, we have people who are trying to erase him from history.''
Last year, Mr. Connell spoke on Columbus and the meaning of Columbus Day before both public school students in Elizabeth and the West Orange Rotary Club. This year, he will address the Columbus Day Dinner Dance in Hanover, sponsored by District 11 of UNICO, an Italian-American civic organization that spearheaded the campaign to endow the chair in Italian studies at Seton Hall.
''Certainly we don't want to downplay the tragedies that happened,'' said John Sebastiano, president of the Montville chapter of UNICO. ''But for a lot of individuals, the symbolism of Christopher Columbus was that of a voyage of freedom. It really was the start of the globalization of our world.''

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