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Guest Column
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The tragic death of Poland's President Lech Kaczynski, First Lady Maria Kaczynska and 94 other top ranking Polish government, military, business and religious leaders who perished in an air crash on April 10 in Smolensk was on the minds of all who attended the *Am-Pol Eagle* Citizen of the Year awards luncheon. The funeral was taking place in Krakow that day and had it not been for the unusual circumstances of a volcano erupting in Iceland and preventing air travel, President Obama was scheduled to attend the funeral to express the depth of our country's condolences to an important and trusted ally of our country.

While the atmosphere may have been bittersweet, each of the award recipients spoke in loving terms of their Polish heritage and their accomplishments were significant. It was my pleasure to be among the honorees and the Cheektowaga connection was much in evidence. Among those also honored were the Franciscan Felician Sisters who first came to the Buffalo area in 1881 to teach the children of Polish immigrants. Several of the recipients, including myself, acknowledged the key role the Felicians have played in their education and life. My twelve years at Villa Maria Academy are a part of my being, and as I said half-jokingly, the reason I'm probably in this position today. Their presence over the years at several Cheektowaga area parishes and parish schools, Villa Maria Academy, Villa Maria College and St. Joe's Hospital has touched the lives of so many Cheektowaga residents. Even today, they have continued to play a key role in the stabilization of the Pine Ridge neighborhood on the Buffalo Cheektowaga border with their decision to renovate the Villa Maria Convent and remain in that community. For over 80 years the Felicians have considered Villa Maria their home base and they had a strong desire to remain a visible sign in this neighborhood. There is no doubt in my mind that this decision will play a key role in helping us to keep this neighborhood viable for a long time to come. The five-year renovation process they undertook included making their home more environmentally friendly by utilizing new technologies such as geothermal heating and cooling.

Another significant award recipient with a tie to Cheektowaga is the Msgr. Adamski Polish Saturday School which is currently housed at St. John Gualbert Parish. My grandparents helped to build the church and my father was a trustee until his passing. For 55 years the Polish Saturday School has taught generations to appreciate and embrace their Polish heritage. The school which is self-funded continues to grow with the students learning not only the Polish language but also Polish history and literature.

Lastly, I also wanted to bring attention to Barry Pawlowski, a senior at Cheektowaga Central High School, whose talent, energy and Polish pride is boundless as a member of the Polish Heritage Dancers. He gave one of the most touching speeches of the day.

There were other Cheektowaga connections among the many award recipients and this is not surprising. Cheektowaga's growth spurt in the Fifties and Sixties was predominantly by Polish Americans. We are rightly and proudly regarded as a Polish community. Sometimes people have a little fun at our expense, for the most part good-natured fun. Recently, a reporter for the *Buffalo News* was determined to point out that the Town Board had scheduled a meeting on Dyngus Day, likening it to the New Orleans city government meeting on Mardi Gras. While the Polish enjoy celebrating, we also have a strong work ethic and believe in first things first. Besides, our Town Board meetings are known for being well organized and there was going to be plenty of time left to enjoy the Dyngus Day festivities that were being held at several locations in Cheektowaga.