

Beth Ashley: Sausalito mom offers Italian-language preschool in her home

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Rosella Pusateri-Gissendaner helps Matteo Bellissimo (left) with his art at Girotondo Italian School in Mill Valley. The school immerses kids ages 2 to 6 in Italian. (IJ photo/Jeff Vendsel)

Luca Pusateri-Gissendaner lives in Mill Valley, but he's more like a European child.

At age 4, he speaks English, Spanish and Italian.

Luca's mother is Rosella Pusateri-Gissendaner, a native of Italy who runs the Girotondo Italian School, teaching kids ages 2 through 6 to speak Italian.

"I dreamed of giving my son the gift of another language and a community of shared interests," Pusateri-Gissendaner says.

The front rooms of her Mill Valley home are a preschool licensed as a family day-care center where children play, cook, eat and interact entirely in Italian.

"After age 6 and 7," says Pusateri-Gissendaner, in lightly accented English, "they will be part of a larger world out there. They won't have other kids to speak Italian with. This way, they will build a community of (Italian-speaking) friends."

Pusateri-Gissendaner, who speaks several languages, said she believes that knowing more than one language expands one's understanding of the world, and also sharpens the intellect. "You become a better thinker, a better problem-solver."

Her school, which has 35 children enrolled, has morning sessions for 12 children five days a week - six in the 2- to 3-year age group, six in ages 4 to 6. Children come two, three or four times a week. Monthly tuition ranges from \$432 for classes two days a week to \$996 for five days a week.

Children 6 to 8, by now attending kindergarten and elementary grades, can attend an afternoon session to keep up their language skills

or to start Italian from scratch. Monthly fee: \$112.

Even babies can attend. Pusateri-Gissendaner runs afternoon Mommy and Me classes for mothers who want to bring babies to accustom them to the spoken and musical sounds of Italian.

Pusateri-Gissendaner began exposing Luca to Italian when he was 18 months old. She rented a room at the Sausalito Recreation Center and invited other Italian speakers to bring their children for what she called a playgroup. In a few months, she had 30 to 35 children "and I thought 'Great, I'm going to start this preschool,'" which she did in 2006.

The two front rooms and the kitchen of Pusateri-Gissendaner's home comprise the little school. The main room is studded with toys. "The children learn mostly through play," Pusateri-Gissendaner explains, though they are also learning the alphabet and measurements.

After the second week of school, none of the children is allowed to speak English.

Children at age 2 pick up Italian quickly. Older children are a tad slower, but soon get in the swing, she says.

Parents such as Jessica Hall of Larkspur are devoted to the school. Hall lived in Italy for five years as a child when her father served there as a U.S. Navy doctor. "I am passionate about bilingual education," she says. "I can't imagine having the possibility of another language and not taking advantage of it."

Hall has enrolled daughter Abigail, 2, at Girotondo. Her husband, Eric Call, who owns a media company, designed the school's Web site.

"This school has so much heart, it's hard not to pour myself into whatever's needed," she said.

Rosemary Castorina has driven her 3-year-old twins, Giulia and Isaac, from Berkeley to Girotondo ever since it opened.

"My parents are Italian, so it is very important to me to pass on the Italian culture and language to my children," she said. "As far as I know, Girotondo is the only school in the Bay Area that offers Italian immersion preschool and kindergarten."

Pusateri-Gissendaner used language to enhance a long marketing career in Italy, England, Switzerland and Africa. Later, she worked in guest relations for hotels in Kenya and one year for a travel company that took her to Sri Lanka and Thailand.

Almost persuaded by her parents to settle down and begin a family, she decided on one last fling - a vacation in the United States. She landed in San Francisco, took a side trip to Yosemite, and within 72 hours had called home.

"Guess what! I'm staying here," she said.

She got a student visa, took marketing classes, got a job at Wells Fargo and moved to Sausalito "because I love sailing."

She kept a sailboat at the same dock where her husband-to-be, David Gissendaner, ran his business, Dave's Diving.

Luca was born on her husband's boat. For the first year, the action-oriented Pusateri-Gissendaner "was in shock - to sit and breast feed for 30 minutes, and 30 minutes later to do the same thing."

By the second year, she was worrying about what kind of education to give her son, and the Sausalito playgroup was born.

Girotondo Italian School, named for an Italian round dance, was next, and now she is hoping to start an elementary school so her little graduates can continue their education in Italian.

To that end, the Girotondo Italian School Foundation has been formed with attorney Matteo Daste of San Rafael as one of the directors. Daste, whose 2-year-old son Luca attends Girotondo, says an elementary school would provide an Italian social center for Marin and be the only Italian-language elementary school in the Bay Area.

Pusateri-Gissendaner visualizes either a private or charter school.

"If I cannot open an elementary school, I will probably home-school my son," she said. "A couple of other parents would like to home-school with me."

Whatever happens, Pusateri-Gissendaner knows her child will continue to learn in Italian. She wants him to learn multiple languages, music and art.

"I can't imagine leaving Luca's education in the hands of someone else. I want to be part of it all."

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