

Viva Italia! New school embraces Italian culture

By Chris Rooney, Twin Cities Times
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A modest fundraiser held last month proved to be just another successful step in the growth of a new Italian-language preschool.

The "Girotondo Sotto le Stelle" (Girotondo Under the Stars) event generated \$12,000 for the Girotondo Italian School, an immersion Italian-language pre-school and kindergarten.



"We are interested in taking every opportunity to create an environment of friendship among our families and the shared experience of evening festivities seemed like the best way to involve everyone," said Rosella Pusateri, school founder and director, adding that there are plans to make the fundraiser "an anticipated annual event."

The school has its roots in a Sausalito-based play group, which Pusateri initiated in 2003, "Bambini Let's Play in Italian."

The objective was to provide a chance for children to pick up a second language while learning about Italy's culture. A native Italian from Milan, Pusateri was equipped to get the group moving ... and growing. She was educated in Italy and traveled the world for various international companies.

According to the school's website, Pusateri left the corporate world about 12 years ago, instead providing private Italian (and swimming) lessons to both children and adults.

She met her husband, David, while sailing in Sausalito's Richardson Bay and the couple now have a young son, Luca, who was born on their schooner.

While one of the school's catalysts, Pusateri secured appropriate allies. Marisa Di Menna, an Italian native Raised in Switzerland, has a background in education, Italian and German, as well as in pottery, painting and yoga.

About 10 years ago, Di Menna came to the U.S. to learn English. After graduating from an intensive English program, she decided to enter college. This past May, she graduated with honors from Dominican University, receiving a master's degree in humanities. In addition, she holds a BA in art history with a minor in art.

Valentina Medda, a native Italian from Sardinia, is also part of the school's leaders. She holds a degree in Japanese studies from Ca' Foscari University in Venice. She has traveled extensively, living in Tokyo and London before meeting her husband in Italy and eventually relocating to California in 2006.

From a friendly play group and capable participants, a school was born. Pusateri describes it as "Reggio-Emilia-inspired" (referring to an approach to early childhood education that has attracted the worldwide attention of educators) and is open to children of all cultures ages 1-7. "The purpose is to give the gift of a second language while creating an environment of peers with whom they can share their language skills."

The fundraiser event helped the school with finances as well as the public's awareness.

"In coming years we hope to expand our little school to include grades one through eight," Pusateri said.

Dozens of parents and community activists gathered to support the Mill Valley-based school and the newly established nonprofit GIS Foundation.

The fundraising soiree was held, appropriately, at Mezzo Mezzo restaurant in San Rafael and featured Italian delicacies, mandolin music and a live auction. The most coveted auction item of the evening, a 12-passenger catered party on the Schooner Whitefin, was donated by Dave's Diving Service of Sausalito.

"We are thrilled to have exceeded our initial goal of \$10,000 and by the overwhelming support." Pusateri at the time in a prepared statement. "The Girotondo Sotto Le Stelle fundraising event was a great success, which will make a big difference to our children's education and in our Italo-American community. The primary mission of our school is threefold. It is to give to our children the gift of a second language, to build a community of people that have the same interests, and to create an environment where children can find peers with whom to share their Italian language skills. As we consider our next steps to offering more programs that will involve and benefit Marin families, our goal is to establish ourselves as guardians of Italian language and culture for the next generation."

In attendance were Ilia Salomone-Smith, former director of Primo Programma in San Francisco; Francesca Gaspari, director of Italingua Italian School in San Francisco; Keith Cox and his wife, Hillary Foss, owners of Pacific Catch in San Francisco and Corte Madera; Eric Call, CEO of Eric Call Media in Larkspur; Matteo Daste, partner with Leland, Parachini, Steinberg, Matzger & Melnick, LLP in San Francisco; and Chris Salemme, co-founder and CEO of Studycell.com in Berkeley.

Girotondo's preschool opened in 2006. The 30 students currently enrolled enjoy an Italian atmosphere while developing respect and awareness of diversity and multiculturalism. Other classes offered include "Mommy and Me," for children under 2 years old, and "After School" for children 5-7 years old.

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