

That's amore: Community embraces Italian school

By Chris Rooney, Mill Valley Herald
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A novel idea from a Sausalito mom wanting to teach her child about Italian culture, created just a handful of months ago, is already experiencing growing pains.

The Girotondo Italian School has already expanded beyond its Mill Valley location's limits, so the founders are adding a kindergarten class and setting up shop in Terra Linda.



"We are experiencing remarkable demand and I cannot explain why Italian in particular is so popular. But I can tell you that it's a significant enough boom to have commanded the full attention of [the Business America Italy Association] and the Italian Consulate," reported Jessica Hall, a member of the school's board of directors and mother of Abigail, a 2-year-old student in the program. "They are holding a public panel [this week] to discuss the recent phenomenon. Our director [and school founder], Rosella Pusateri, will be a participant."

Hall added that, in the past five years, the Bay Area has gained La Piccola Scuola Italiana, Spazio Italiano, Mondo Bambini and Girotondo, all exclusively Italian-teaching schools.

So, the cozy southern Marin after-school program and preschool experienced unexpected and immediate growth. Was it hard to leave Mill Valley? "Yes, it was a heart-wrenching decision because we knew we would lose some of our

families. In the end though, we had to do what would be best for the school," said Hall.

The timing of the school's growth was not lost on the Girotondo parents and directors. While many public school districts are taking a financial beating, the Girotondo Italian School (GIS), just months after its very first fundraising effort, added the kindergarten class and found larger facilities.

GIS leased a facility in Terra Linda from the Dixie School District. The move will be completed in time for the fall 2008 session. This will be the third move for GIS in as many years to keep up with demand for the immersive bilingual education afforded its students.

The new location was found after Pusateri launched a full-scale effort with the help of Girotondo families.

"We canvassed Marin from top to bottom with our hearts in it," said board member and Novato resident Simonetta De La Renta. "Generally, you have to be in major cities like San Francisco to find high-quality, bilingual schools such as Girotondo, but we've had such success in the southern end of Marin that we see San Rafael as the perfect location to attract more families from the exploding Novato population with potential to expand our campus."

The new location isn't the only sign of growth at GIS. The school is working with new Academic Director Elizabeth Meyers to craft a curriculum that satisfies U.S. and Italian standards.

Meyers has a master's in the art of teaching (MAT) from National-Louis University in Chicago. She has taught language arts and social studies to middle school-age students for many years. Currently, Meyers teaches in the Novato Unified School District and is co-chair of the language arts department at San Jose Middle School.

"I am very excited to develop and implement the new curriculum, and to guide Girotondo as it becomes an elementary school," said Meyers in a prepared statement.

According to Pusateri, first grade will be offered in 2009 and offering an International Baccalaureate degree is the ultimate goal.

The school is also adding transportation to operations to cut down on commute time for parents.

"We drive from Berkeley every day to participate in the program," said board member Rosemary Castorina in a GIS press statement. While the bus will not reach as far as Berkeley, it will accommodate students living in southern Marin.

This may not be the school's last location. "If we continue to grow at our current rate, we may outgrow this location in the next few years. At that point we may be looking for property to buy and build on, but that's many fundraisers down the road," said Pusateri.

This school year, GIS has 38 enrolled students, with 50 expected to be enrolled next year.

GIS (girotondoschool.org) is hosting a Sat., May 17, open house at the new facility.

Photo caption: These youngsters promote their school, whose success has forced it to leave Mill Valley for Terra Linda, its third move in three years.

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