

New DAY DAWNING

by Paul Basile

After six whirlwind months of construction, the first floor of the Community Center at Casa Italia has been transformed as part of an ongoing *rinascimento* at the venerable institution.

The Community Center has always been a great venue for special events, with a modern lobby and restrooms, the Chandelier Room accommodating up to 140 guests, and the building's former gymnasium being available for larger crowds.

But the gymnasium was only accessible via flights of stairs, and food had to be prepared off-site and brought in, preventing the facility from reaching its full potential.

All that has changed, thanks to a dramatic renovation fueled by donations from generous individuals and organizations. The first floor now boasts a full-service kitchen, and the floor of the gymnasium has been raised to match the level of the Chandelier Room.

The new space has been completely reimagined, with stark white walls, a durable light-gray floor and a jet-black ceiling adorned with decorating grid and ductwork creating a sleek, modern vibe.

When combined with the Chandelier Room, the capacity of the Community Center now tops off at 350 guests, and upgrades to heating and air conditioning will keep the space warm in the winter and cool in the summer.

Spearheading this transformation has been Tony Turano, who rallied the funds and contractors for the first phase of construction and kept the work progressing at an admirable clip.

"He's a man with incredible vision and dedication to make us succeed,"

says Casa Chairman Peter Volpe.

The new banquet facility will be available for use by Italian American organizations that are associated with Casa Italia. Approved caterers are being lined up, and rates for food service and donations for space usage are being hammered out. Once those are established, representatives from community groups



The ultramodern new banquet space



The Chandelier Room

will be invited to an open house to learn more about what the Casa has to offer.

And that's just the latest development in a metamorphosis that has been rapidly gaining momentum at the Casa since the village of Stone Park purchased the property from the Scalabrini Fathers late last year.

Within two months of the acquisition, the village and the Casa had negotiated a lease that gives the Casa exclusive use of the Community Center and Italian Cultural Center at no cost to rent the



▲ BEVENUTO!

If you haven't seen the inside of the Community Center at Casa Italia since last year's Christmas Village, step inside. You won't believe your eyes.

buildings.

Since then, the village has replaced the roof, windows and gutters of the Italian Cultural Center, while the Casa has committed itself to maintaining the exterior of the Community Center and the interiors of both buildings.

So far, the roof and windows of the Community Center have been replaced and many of the second-floor rooms have been refurbished, with the installation of an elevator next on the to-do list. Down the road, additional funds will be raised to install an elevator and air conditioning in the Italian Cultural Center.

"Mayor (Beniamino) Mazzulla has been amazingly supportive and accommodating every step of the way," Volpe says. "He's been very responsive to our needs and has made us feel that the property is as much our home as it was when we were renting from the Scalabrini."

The village has been going full speed ahead on major improvements of its own.

The wooded area south of Holy Hill on the north side of the property has been cleared and leveled to make way for soccer fields. The pavilion of the Festival Center has been rewired and repaired, and the attached building is being completely rehabbed, including

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the installation of new flooring and kitchen equipment.

(Community groups can rent the Festival Center by calling the village of Stone Park at 708-345-5550.)

On the south end of the property, the Banquet Center and Office Center will be torn down to make way for senior housing and a new police station, and parking will be dramatically expanded.

"I'm excited to be working with Casa Italia to make the property something we can all be proud of — the residents of Stone Park and the Italian American community alike," Mazzulla says.

The statue of the Sacred Heart of Jesus that once stood in front of the Italian Cultural Center has been moved to the back of the building to clear the way for additional parking.

Meanwhile, it's been business as usual and then some at the Casa. The Cultural Center has been a beehive of activity since the first of the year. Administrative offices have been relocated there, along with the offices

of Patronato ACLI, which provides a variety of services to Italian citizens.

A growing team of dedicated volunteers has maintained a steady stream of programming, including film screenings, book presentations, and sessions on genealogy, ancient Roman architecture and the impact of AI, among a variety of other topics.

The Casa's popular bocce tournament was shifted to the Elmwood Park Recreation Center to steer clear of construction. Another highly successful language and culture summer camp was staged on the grounds under the direc-



The new Community Center kitchen

tion of Lyn Scolaro. Adult and children's language classes wrapped up in May with new sessions scheduled to begin this month.

At press time, plans were well under way for the Feast of San Francesco di Paola, Dancing Under the Stars and a benefit concert starring the Italian Bee Gees, all in August.

The Casa staff and board are mobilizing to honor Frank Conforti Jr. and the Conforti family of Frankie's Deli at a Nov. 8 gala at Carlisle Banquets, and the Community Center renovations will take the Christmas Village to a whole new level.

"The Casa is alive and well and I would argue better than ever," Volpe says. "The village has the property it needs to better serve its residents and the Casa is able to provide all the wonderful programs and service at a greatly reduced cost and effort. It's a win-win situation."

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