

Culture Keeper

CENTER PRESERVES CITY'S ITALIAN AMERICAN HERITAGE

By Jessica Laskey

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Bill Cerruti just returned from his annual trip to Italy. It was work and play.

Cerruti and his wife, a native of Lucca, lead tours as part of their work running the Italian Cultural Society, which they founded in 1981.

As a young man, a proud Italian American and East Sacramento native, Cerruti searched for a cultural organization to meet other young Italians and stay in touch with his roots. When the Italian American club system didn't click with him, he started his own group.



"I got so into it and it grew really fast," Cerruti says. "We rented space at Sierra 2 and rehabbed the room and became a program machine immediately because I was good at it. I had connections all over the country—film directors, you name it."

The Italian Cultural Society offers concerts, dance troupes, festivals, exhibits, language classes, a radio show and tours to help Italian Americans reconnect with their heritage.

"We promote a sense of community by providing cultural programs that reflect Italian American traditions, not just Italian traditions," Cerruti says. "Italians in America developed their own culture that was different than Italians from Italy."

The Italian Cultural Society offers a place for younger people to congregate. At first, the organization attracted offspring from the last wave of Italian immigration after World War II, people in their teens,

20s and 30s who were "our main workforce for decades and an integral part of everything we did,"

Cerruti says

The society outgrew Sierra 2 and built its own center after raising \$2 million. The Carmichael Italian Center and Museum opened on Fair Oaks Boulevard in 2007.

"One of the best days of my life was me and my wife dancing on the cement pad the day they poured it," Cerruti says. "It was a dream come true."

Since then, the center has grown despite recessions and a pandemic. It still offers language classes on Zoom and in-person.

And Cerruti hasn't stopped. The retired lawyer is an advocate for Italian American issues. He's chair of a governor-appointed commission and sponsors legislation.

In 2021, he successfully campaigned to get East Sac between 48th and 59th streets and J Street and Folsom Boulevard designated Little Italy.

Education is important for Cerruti, even as immigration slows from Italy.

"Behind everything we do is education," he says. "We want people to know who we are and to share our rich culture. Growing up in America, you don't have that cultural support. American society is tough. In Europe, you're born into your community, you don't have to go seek it. Americans are isolated from one another."

He continues, "The center is very welcoming. The minute you walk in, you can tell. So is our culture. It's a beautiful thing. So many people tell us we've changed their lives. They've rediscovered their ancestral roots and their own identities. We bridge those two worlds."