



Bee photo by Ehrhardt Kraus

Attorney William Cerruti, head of the newly formed Italian Cultural Society, in the group's Sierra 2 headquarters.

# Living Down Pizza And 'The Don'

## The Italian Cultural Society Aims To Redefine Things Italian

**W**HETHER IT is Don Corleone "making an offer you can't refuse" or cherubic Mama Celeste suggesting her pizza is *abbondanza* or Sergio Franchi singing his heart out in a collection of Neapolitan songs "not available in any store," the Italian presence is certainly widely noticed.

And there's that favorite little Italian restaurant around the corner, the opera, Joe DiMaggio, Frank Sinatra, North Beach and Mulberry Street. These and a thousand more *italianati* points of reference are as American as, well, pizza.

Trouble is, from the standpoint of increasing numbers of Italian-Americans, the attention usually given is outright defamatory, as in the case of "Godfather" allusions, or condescending, as in the references to singers, athletes and cooks. There is more to the Italian-American ethos than these, they insist.

Listen to William Cerruti, 40, a soft-voiced attorney and president of the 7½-month-old Italian Cultural Society of Sacramento:

"Italian-Americans have a lot in common. They are connected to one another by a vast web of distinct family, social and business relationships, shared experiences, values, tastes, styles and common interests. As a result, there exists an Italian America within American society which has played a part in shaping the lives of Italian-Americans."

He was listing some of the reasons for the existence of the society which recently opened its headquarters in the Sierra 2 Center, 2791 24th St., with a public reception attended by more than 300 people. It is one of myriad such organizations springing up across the country.

The local group developed largely as a result of Cerruti's efforts. After several years of having his Italian-American consciousness raised through books like Patrick Gallo's "Old Bread, New Wine," magazines like *Attenzione*, and national organizations like the American Italian Historical Association, the native Sacramentan last May wrote a letter to 30 leaders of the city's Italian community — which he estimates to be between 50,000 and 90,000 strong — outlining goals he would like to see the community accomplish and proposing an organization to work for their achievement.

"I thought there was a need for an Italian-American organization that was not only interested in Italian heritage, but that could serve as a gathering point for members of our community and as an example to the larger community. There are many Italian organizations that have been around for years, most having been founded by immigrants when they first came to this country. Unfortunately,

these older organizations tend to serve limited networks, exclude later generations of Italian-Americans, and never reach out to other communities."

**E**NTHUSIASM GREETED Cerruti's call. A meeting was held in a North Area coffee shop in June. Twenty of the 30 invited attended. Three more meetings were held in subsequent months, each being attended by a few more. "Our goals were developed and set down," said Cerruti. "Basically, we wanted to see the Italian community of Sacramento perpetuate

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**There is more to the Italian-American ethos than 'The Godfather' and singers, athletes and cooks.**

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and its presence established in a more visible fashion."

The society was incorporated last August. Specific plans were made to develop a historical collection about Italians in Sacramento and Northern California; establish Italian language classes for children and adults; sponsor concerts featuring classical and popular Italian music; build a circulating library of Italian and Italian-American books, periodicals and records; sponsor lectures, art shows and poetry readings, and develop an Italian festival in Sacramento similar to those put on by other ethnic groups.

"Obviously, some of these are quite long-range," Cerruti said. "We are not going to achieve all of them overnight. But we have a plan and a program. And now we have a physical center to work from."

So far, the society has signed up about 200 members, each paying dues averaging \$15 a year (several types of memberships are available). Among those on its board are Teresa Vinciguerra, president of The Poet Tree writers' group; importer-exporter Rino Saia; schoolteacher Jo D'Allesandro (one of the authors of the Sacramento Unified School District's ethnic education guide on Italians), and teacher-interior decorator Marylou Colombo.

Even before the society moved into the Sierra 2 Center, it made its existence known by sponsoring "An Evening of Italian Opera and

Poetry" last October at the Crocker Art Museum; an appearance of the Cantori di Assisi, one of Europe's leading choral groups, last November at the Blessed Sacrament Cathedral (attended by more than 1,200 people), and an appearance of Italian jazz pianist Giorgio Gaslini and his quintet last December at Sacramento City College.

**O**UT OF A DESIRE to have a physical home, the society moved into the Sierra 2 Center, the old Sierra Elementary School turned community center which rents space to arts-related groups. Like the other groups renting space there, the society took an old classroom — Room 13 on the second floor — and refurbished it with volunteer labor.

On opening night the room's walls were covered with pictures, charts, and posters. Some, done by local anthropologist and college instructor Bruce Pierini, depicted Italian population concentrations in Sacramento and the history of Italian immigration to the area.

As guests — including City Councilwoman Anne Rudin (nee Anna Noto), Mayor Phil Isenberg, Crocker Art Museum curator Roger Clisby, playwright Joseph Parente, artist Ettore Magni, KXPR jazz disc jockey Gary Vercelli, contractor Chuck Egiziano and surgeon Dr. Sebastian Conti — milled in cocktail party fashion, the room resonated with Italian music, sometimes recorded, sometimes played live by accordionist Melvin Dunne, one of Cerruti's uncles. The feeling of a large family affair was strong in the air.

"This is a fine beginning, but only a beginning," said Cerruti. "Eventually we would like to establish our own center on our own grounds, a place where we can gather, an educational place serving large numbers of people who want to see their heritage put on an equal footing with those of other peoples."

Until that becomes a reality, however, the room in Sierra 2 will serve as a base for the organization. Already, it is being used for Italian language classes (adults on Wednesday evenings; children on Saturday mornings).

For the present the facility, which has a nascent Italian-American library in it, will be open to the public from 1 to 4 p.m. Saturdays. Cerruti said plans call for it eventually being open "at least a few hours every day."

For information on the Italian Cultural Society, its classes or other activities, call Cerruti at 441-2463 (weekdays from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.) or at 451-4340 (evenings and weekends).