Italian-American
CULTURAL CENTER OF IOWA

Newsletter **MARCH/APRIL 2026**

Letter from the Board Chair

—Jeff Lamberti

As we move into March, I am struck by how quickly this vision is becoming reality.

January and February were filled with meaningful momentum — from winter celebrations and educational programming to continued construction progress and community outreach. Each gathering reinforces what we already know: the Italian American Cultural Center is not simply a building. It is a long-awaited home for our stories, traditions, and shared heritage.

And now, we are just seven months away from opening our doors to you.

Seven months from opening the doors to a Center that will celebrate Italian culture — and warmly welcome the entire community to experience our history, cuisine, genealogy, language, and traditions.

March and April will bring visible progress and important announcements as we prepare for our October opening celebration. The excitement is building. The finish line is in sight.

But before we open those doors, there is still an opportunity — and a responsibility — for all of us.

This Center will stand for generations. The question is simple:

Will your family be part of its foundation?

Through our Olive Tree Leaf Program, families can permanently honor their name and legacy inside the Center. For others, sponsoring a classroom, gathering space, kitchen, or gallery ensures your family's commitment to culture and community is recognized in a lasting and visible way.

If you have been considering how to participate — now is the time.

Review the enclosed pledge information. Talk with your family. Choose the legacy that reflects your story. Then take the step and contact me, or Loretta Sieman at 515.681.4451.

This Center is being built for everyone — Italian by heritage or Italian by heart. But it will only open because people like you decide to stand up and be counted.

We look forward to celebrating your family's place in this historic moment.

With gratitude and great anticipation,

Jeff Lamberti, Board Chair
Italian American Cultural Center

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Welcome Aboard, Debra Kurtz

—A Message from Board Chair Jeff Lamberti

On behalf of the Board of Directors of the Italian American Cultural Center, it is my distinct pleasure to welcome Debra Kurtz as our first official employee and our new Director of Events.

This is a milestone moment for our organization.

From the very beginning, our vision for the Center has been clear: this will be a place where memories are made. A place where families gather. Where traditions are honored. Where life's most meaningful celebrations — both big and small — unfold.

From weddings to milestone birthdays. From corporate gatherings to nonprofit board meetings. From cultural festivals to intimate family celebrations.

We knew that when the time came to bring someone on board to lead this effort, it had to be the right person.

Debra comes to us with decades of experience producing exceptional events across our community. As a professional event specialist, she has designed and executed gatherings ranging from major fundraising galas and corporate milestone celebrations to political events and community festivals. Her leadership has included managing guest chefs, large-scale public events with over 1,500 attendees, and complex multi-location celebrations.

As well as producing a multitude of civic, corporate, and social affairs, Debra served for nearly two decades as Director of Member Experiences at the Des Moines Art Center, where she oversaw major black-tie galas, fundraisers, public celebrations, and a robust facility rental program including weddings, corporate events, and private gatherings.

But what makes Debra truly special is not just her resume. It is her contagious enthusiasm, collaborative spirit, meticulous attention to detail, and unwavering professionalism. She understands that an event is never "just an event." It is someone's milestone. Someone's memory. Someone's story.

As we move closer to opening our doors, bringing Debra on board signals something important: the Italian American Cultural Center is not simply a building. It is becoming a living, breathing place of celebration and connection for the entire community.

When you host your event with us, you can trust it will be led with professionalism, precision, and genuine care.

Please join me in welcoming Debra to the Italian American Cultural Center family. We are honored she has chosen to help us shape this next chapter, and I have every confidence she will help ensure that every event held within these walls receives the excellence it deserves.

Benvenuta, Debra.

Jeff Lamberti, Board Chair

Italian American Cultural Center

Debra Kurtz

515-218-1451
kurtz@iaccofia.org

Cultural Corner

ITALY and Italian Cooking on the world stage at the UNESCO level as well as on the 2026 Winter Olympic Games!!!

—Paolo Bartesaghi

UNESCO (an agency of the United Nations established in 1945 to promote the exchange of information, ideas, and culture) recently inscribed Italian cooking as living cultural heritage. This honor is Italy's 21st item on UNESCO's intangible list joining Neapolitan pizza-making, Sicilian puppet theater, and Cremona's violin craftsmanship. UNESCO implements its activities through five major program areas: education, natural sciences, social and human sciences, culture, and communication and information.

UNESCO grants landmarks and cities as World Heritage Sites for their cultural and natural heritage. Italy has been granted numerous monuments, cities, and lakes as World Heritage Sites and, as of July 2025, has the most of any other country in the world. This is the first time that UNESCO has designated a country's cuisine as living heritage. This was not awarded to a specific restaurant or region or dish, but to an entire way of life; it was about kitchens, tables, traditions, seasons, and memories.

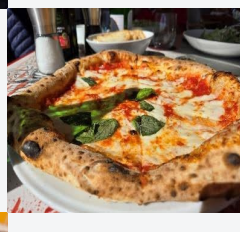
Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni hailed the recognition, saying in a statement that "this is a distinction that can only make us proud". "For us Italians," she said, "cuisine is not just food or a collection of recipes. It is much more: it is culture, tradition, work, wealth." She also added, "Italian cuisine is our most formidable ambassador. It supports tourism, enriches Italy's cultural offerings, and throughout the world it declares our desire to be present in many places and among the people who make Italy a community. And today I want to thank all the Italians around the world, because this is also an opportunity for them".

An 8,000-page dossier showed food as family, community, and tradition passed down through generations. Campaigners noted how Italy's simple cuisine valued seasonality, fresh produce and limiting waste, while its variety highlighted its regional culinary differences and influences from migrants and others. The citation highlighted the cultural importance Italians place on the rituals of cooking and eating. In its submission for recognition of its cuisine, Italy emphasized the "sustainability and biocultural diversity" of its food. Pier Luigi Petrillo, a member of the Italian UNESCO campaign and professor of comparative law at Rome's La Sapienza University, said that "cooking is a gesture of love, a way in which we tell something about ourselves to others and how we take care of others."

During the 2026 Winter Olympic Games in Milan/Cortina, the Italian food was at the center of the attention of many athletes. A variety of athletes kept score of the foods they were eating on social media and were judging them on a scale from 1 to 10. The athletes were quite strict in judging the foods and based their scores on taste, originality, and calorie/wellness of the food. I found that no score was below a 7 out of 10. Everybody was enjoying the Italian cuisine that varies from drinks to pasta dishes to desserts. Their favorite items were the tiramisu, the various pasta dishes, and pizza (all different kinds of authentic Italian pizza…not the "pineapple" pizza…HA!). The picture below shows a new pasta shape created especially for the 2026 Milan-Cortina Winter Olympics in the shape of the iconic five Olympic rings. This was created by Michelin-starred chef Carlo Cracco.

And talking about food, the Italian American Cultural Center of Iowa will be hosting two culinary events in the next few months. One is going to be "Sapori di Primavera" (Spring Flavors) on April 8 at Lucca Restaurant in the East Village and the second is going to be "Sapori d'Estate" (Summer Flavors) at Aposto at the Scala House Restaurant in Sherman Hill on June 17. They will be featuring hors d'oeuvres and wine. Please be sure to mark your calendars to attend. More information will be coming soon.

I hope you enjoyed this article and, as always, I thank you for your continued support of the Italian American Cultural Center of Iowa as we spread Italian culture throughout the community.



From Italian Roots to a Nordic Classroom

How Language Opened Doors I Never Expected

—Guest Author, Alexia Murano

If someone had told me in high school that I would one day teach at an international school in Norway, I would have laughed. Yet teaching has always felt like my calling.

As a young Italian American, culture and language shaped my world early. I grew up hearing stories about where my family came from and what it meant to stay connected to those roots while building your own path. My dad showed me how language connects generations. Later, my high school Spanish teacher showed me how it connects the world.

I wasn't even sure I wanted to take Spanish at first. But after two years in her classroom — and a cultural issues course that remains one of my favorites — I began to see how language opens doors. Her passion helped me realize I wanted to teach and help students understand cultures beyond their own.

At Luther College, I double majored in Elementary Education and Spanish and earned an ESL endorsement. Growing up around Italian while studying Spanish allowed me to experience firsthand the power of multilingualism — building confidence, relationships, and unexpected opportunities.

When it came time for student teaching, I initially considered Spain or Italy — places that felt familiar. My advisor encouraged me to think bigger. He suggested Norway.

It sounded wild. But I said yes.

In Kristiansand, I completed my student teaching at an IB World School. That experience transformed international teaching from a distant idea into something real. For the first time, I felt professionally at home.

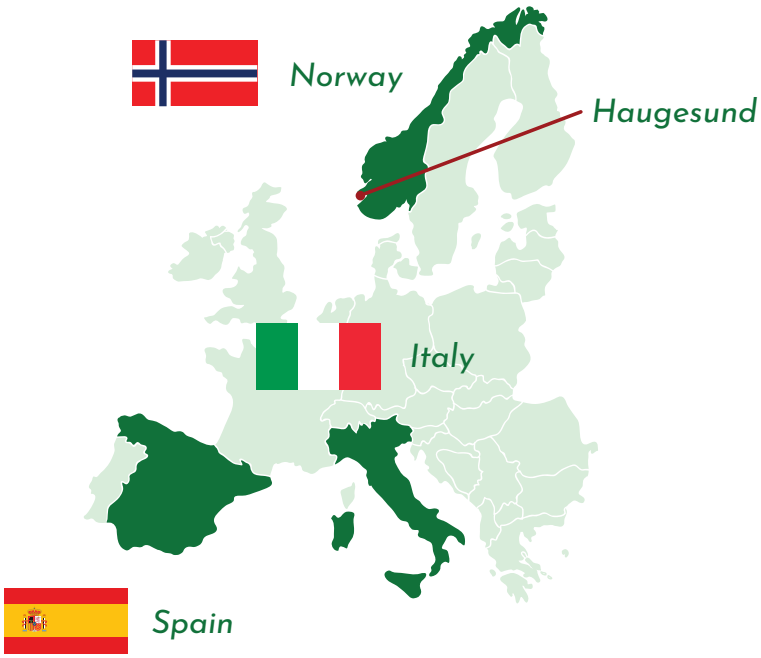
After graduation, I applied to international schools, the Fulbright program, and Spain's NALCAP program. I faced rejection after rejection. By late June, with no job secured, I began to wonder if my goal had been unrealistic.

Then everything changed.

A former mentor from Norway reached out. There was a fourth-grade opening in Haugesund. Was I interested?

Within weeks, I packed my life into three suitcases and boarded a one-way flight. In August 2025, I began my first year teaching in Norway.

Looking back, this journey isn't just about landing a job abroad. It's about what language made possible. Speaking Italian and Spanish gave me the confidence to navigate new cultures, connect across differences, and embrace opportunities I never imagined. Learning another language isn't just about vocabulary. It's about identity. It's about courage. And sometimes, it's about saying yes to a place you've never even considered — and finding exactly where you belong.



Alexia Murano, *originally from Des Moines, is a proud Italian American and first-year elementary teacher in Haugesund, Norway. A graduate of Luther College, she double majored in Elementary Education and Spanish and holds an ESL endorsement. Her love of language and heritage continues to shape her work in international education and her commitment to building connections across cultures.*

Around The Center

In Our Library

Several years ago, the Cultural Center received booklets called *Uses of Tradition: Arts of Italian Americans in Philadelphia*. The cover looked interesting, but I didn't look inside until recently.

This booklet presents information on the hidden stories of the Italian artisans who settled in Philadelphia. The focus is on the traditional expressive activities of Italians from the past to the present and how they impacted the area and the world culture.

Chapters are titled inheritance, survival, artistry, community, and communication. Within each chapter you will find the names of artisans who contributed their art works along with photos and pictures of the people and their creations.

The Inheritance section speaks of the persepio with its detailed Nativity scenes. The section titled Survival talks about the difficulty of maintaining the creative spirit and contains photos of the art on painted ceiling and shows examples of glassblowing products. Community celebrations are listed in the that section with pictures of the Our Lady of a Mount Carmel procession and discusses the artistry of palm weaving.

Even though the book talks about the traditions and artisans of Philadelphia, you will find that many of the traditions and jobs listed there are also a part of the Italian culture in Iowa. The Italian-American Cultural Center of Iowa Heritage Museum will have examples of the arts and traditional celebrations present in Iowa. We invite you to come and visit once the remodeling of the museum is complete.

Events

Pasta Dinner

On Sunday, February 15, 2026, the Heritage Advisory Council of the Italian-American Cultural Center of Iowa brought back one of the events that had been a crowd pleaser in previous years...a pasta dinner.

The dinner, sponsored by the Center, was held at the Pioneer Columbus Community Center. Diners enjoyed spaghetti and meatballs along with a lettuce salad with rolls and butter. Cookies and various drinks were available for dessert.
Graziano Brothers Grocers, Tumea and Sons Restaurant, Sysco Foods, and BRAVO of Des Moines all helped to make the dinner a success. We thank them so much for their contributions.

The Council is making plans for another pasta dinner during Heritage Month in October. Look for more information in our Newsletter and on our website as the time grows near.

La Befana Party

The Italian-American Cultural Center of Iowa's annual La Befana children's party was held on January 11, at the Vittoria Lodge.

Over a dozen children, ages 2 through 13, waited in anticipation of La Befana's promised visit. While they waited, they listened to the story of La Befana by Tomie DePalo, played games, put together puzzles, and did crafts.

Befana swept in to call each child by name and give them their bag of gifts. She also agreed to let parents and grandparents take her picture with each of them. After that refreshments were served. Parents, grandparents, and children enjoyed the celebration and went away with smiles on their faces.

Many thanks to the Vittoria Lodge for providing their hall for this party and to the ladies of the IAWI for providing the crafts and monitoring the craft tables.

Upcoming Events

Wednesday, April 8th

Sapori di Primavera (spring flavors)
Wine tasting and appetizers
Lucca Restaurant

Wednesday, June 17th

Sapori di Estate (summer flavors)
Wine tasting and appetizers
Aposto

Additional Information will soon be available on our website and Facebook page.
Also keep an eye out for a possible **Bocce Golf event** in May and our annual Italian Children's Day Camp in July or early August.

We Reflect and Remember

Barbara Vignarolli

John Scavo

To remember a friend or loved one with a memorial, send a check with your tax-deductible donation to:
Italian-American Cultural Center of Iowa-Memorials
PO Box 4994
Des Moines, Iowa 50305

Please include your name and address as well as the name and address of the person you would like to have informed of your gift.

With Gratitude to Our 2025 Gala Sponsors

The success of our November Gala would not have been possible without the generous support of the following partners.

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ITALIAN AMERICAN WOMEN OF IOWA (IAWI)

MARCH/APRIL NEWSLETTER

Monthly Meetings are held on the **4th Tuesday of the month!**

***Due to the construction starting at the Cultural Center, our monthly meetings will now be held at the Southside Senior Center! ***

Membership Dues:
If you would like to join IAWI, it is $25 for members under 65, $15 for seniors 65-74, and 75 and older are Life Members and have free membership. If you have any questions or need a membership form, please contact Lucrezia DeFrancisco Moore 515-710-1247 or Teresa Russo at (515) 371-9280 or visit our website ItalianAmericanWomenofIowa.com.

Cheer and Sympathy:
Please contact Gracy Kirkman at (515) 321-7178 if you, or someone you know, needs some cheer!

Recent Events:
- Members were able to see the Movie, Solo Mio.

Important Upcoming Events:
- Easter Bread Class for members March 7th or March 14th location/time TBD
- Attend Iowa Wolves Basketball game with exclusive brunch and game for International Women's Day for $20 March 8th, 2026
- Annual Easter Egg Hunt Saturday, March 28th 2pm at Columbus Park Des Moines, IA
- Easter Bread sale is being held at Graziano's on Saturday, April 4th 9am-noon
- Upcoming in April Lunch at Portofinos in Ankeny TBD
- April Movie "You,Me and Tuscany date/location TBD

Follow us for information on what's happening for IAWI!
- Facebook - Iawi IA
- Instagram - italianamericanwomenofiowa
    - Look for upcoming posts each month for social events and fundraisers

THE MEN AND WOMEN OF THE VITTORIA LODGE

MARCH NEWSLETTER

Societa' Vittoria Italiana

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The cavatelli dinner is fast approaching. Come join us on **March 29th** for this annual event. Enjoying a delicious dinner surrounded by family and friends is a wonderful way to spend a Sunday. And don't forget to stop by the bake sale where we will be attempting to,"Bake the world a better place"

We will be meeting at the lodge on **Sunday, March 22nd, at 11:00** to make our famous wandas. Our monthly meeting will follow at 2:00. This is a wonderful social opportunity.

The 2026 college scholarship application is available on our website, vittorialodge.com. This must be submitted by the deadline of **April 30th.**

The June Dinner for all members of the Vittoria Lodge will be on **Saturday, June 13th**. Reservations are required and can be made by calling Lesa at 515-306-3730 by June 5th. This is a wonderful event you won't want to miss. Make plans now to attend. The men's meeting will be on Sunday June 14th.

Cheer's to Spring's arrival!!

Roger Fiori
President, Vittoria Lodge

Deb Fleishman
President, Vittoria Lodge Auxiliary

The Olive Tree: A Symbol of Family and Heritage

In Italian culture, the olive tree represents strength, resilience, and deep roots—much like the bonds of family. Just as the tree endures through generations, so too does the love and connection shared by family members. Strong, rooted, and ever-growing, the olive tree symbolizes the enduring legacy of our Italian heritage.

In Memory of
GASPER & LUCIA ANANIA
Loved Always

Jeffry & Pamela
BAKER

In Memory of
BEVILACQUA
Leonardo

In Memory of
BEVILACQUA
Luigi

In Memory of
MUGAVERO
Anna

In Memory of
CELSI
Frank

Antonio Cosentino
DEFAZIO
fu Francesco

Frank
KOSS

Barbara
KRUSENSTJERNA

MAZZIE
Family

The
LETO
Family

The
MURROW
Family

In Honor of
CIVITATE
John & Therese (Pat)

Robert & DeAnne (Righi)
CHAMBERS
Family

In Honor of
PAOLO AND MARK

Dr. Chance
COPPOLA

Ryan
COPPOLA

Frank Anthony
DEFAZIO
My Dad.

Daniel Alan
SCARPINO
My Cousin. My Friend.

Paul & Opal
CARDAMON
Catherine & Nels Engblom

In Memory of
PALMER/LUCIA
Family

In Memory of
FRANK A. SCAGLIONE
June 5, 2024

Aldemiro & Marfisa
RIGHI

Dino & Augusta Anne
RIGHI

Steven & Delinda
RIGHI
Family

GRAZIANO BROTHERS

Joe & Christy
GRAZIANO

In Memory of
PASCUZZI
Steve & Rachel (Leo)

In Memory of
LETO
Samuel J.

The
KIRKMAN
Family

In Honor of
COSENZA
Lucy

Angelo & Barbara
VIGNAROLI
Family

In Honor of
RIZZUTI
Jackie

Marino, Marian & Jim
TAZZIOLI
My Parents and Brother

Michael Dino
RIGHI RYNER

CAPITAL CITY FRUIT

In Loving Memory of
CHARLES & MARY RUSSO
9/4/1987 6/10/2019

Joyfully Remember
FRANK TALARICO FAMILY
Roger Stefani family

Dawn and Gabbi
TAYLOR

Joseph & Ann Marie
GATTO

Teresa
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In Loving Memory
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☐ I/WE RECOMMEND A GRANT FROM MY/OUR DONOR ADVISED FUND. FUND NAME: _____

☐ $ _____ OF THIS PLEDGE WILL BE PAID BY A MATCHING GIFT PROGRAM AT

_____

DONOR(S) SIGNATURE(S): _____ DATE: _____

THANK YOU FOR YOUR SUPPORT OF THE ITALIAN-AMERICAN CULTURAL CENTER!

ITALIAN-AMERICAN CULTURAL CENTER OF IOWA

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