



Dorothea's House celebrates 100 years of Italian culture in Princeton

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"We are living in their shadow. This is why we are here."

PRINCETON – At the turn of the 20th century, Italians came to the United States in boatloads looking for a better life.

Those who settled in the Princeton area came largely from central Italy and established an Italian neighborhood along streets called Ewing, John, Humbert, Birch, Leigh and Witherspoon. Among the immigrants were the men who would become the stonemasons and gardeners of Princeton University and Drumthwacket. And, for the past 100 years, an Italianate building at 120 John St. – what is now Paul Robeson Place – has been a kind of sanctuary where they could always find a welcoming smile and a home away from home.

It is called Dorothea's House and on Oct. 5 its doors will open to the entire community in celebration of *cent'anni* – 100 years – of nurturing Italian culture and providing a gathering place for new Italian-Americans, those native-born and others interested in the language, films, art, literature, history, music and food of Italy.

The free 2-5 p.m. anniversary party is designed to give all who attend a look at what Dorothea's House has to offer. In preparation, the structure's interior and exterior has undergone a bit of sprucing up – fresh paint, some remodeling – in time for the *fiesta* whose entertainment will include the Coro d'Italia Italian-American singers and dancers from Upper Montclair; singers from Boheme Opera New Jersey; food specialties from area restaurants along with food from regions of Italy.

"We want people to know that we are about more than food," Linda Prospero, a member of the Dorothea's house board of trustees emphasized on a recent afternoon.

"Dorothea's House is a place where people can come for language classes, movies, lectures. It is a place of Italian culture – although the food is also really good."

Pietro Frassica, also on the board of trustees, is a Sicilian-born Princeton University professor who teaches both Italian literature and a class on the literature of Italian gastronomy there. He pointed out that the people who come to Dorothea's House come for a simple reason.

"They like it," he said. "We get about 75 to 100 people for programs we have and for Italian language movies we get about 50 to 75."

All programs are free and open to the entire community, with offerings as diverse as an appearance by famed television cook and author Liliana Bastianich to an upcoming slide presentation on Abruzzo, a tribute to Giuseppe Verdi and the House's most popular yearly event – the Polenta Festa, at which people share their homemade versions of the cornmeal dish with holiday music as a backdrop. It will be held this year on Dec. 7. After most programs at the center, those attending gather informally for conversation and often bring food to share.

The house is named after Dorothea van Dyke, who died in childbirth in 1912 at the age of 23. She was the daughter of Dr. Henry van Dyke, a Princeton University professor, poet and diplomat who donated the rear of his Bayard Lane home, Avalon, as the site for the two-story Dorothea's House. In order to honor her memory and the spirit in which she lived, her New York stockbroker husband, Guy Richard McLane, built and endowed Dorothea's House to reflect his late wife's interest in the well-being of Princeton's newly arrived Italian immigrants among whom she served as a volunteer social worker. That endowment still provides the house with enough money to survive and to offer its free programs along with scholarships to students in area high schools who reside in Princeton.

Eleanor Pinelli, a trustee who deals with the scholarships, said some 600 have been awarded since October 1963, with this year's totaling 38 to 40.

Originally the trustees of the Dorothea's House Association defined its purpose: "To originate, foster, develop, promote, carry on and engage in charitable work for the welfare of the inhabitants of Princeton, N.J., primarily those of the Italian race." It helped with finding housing, employment and social engagement for the immigrants. In the 1930s it expanded its reach by providing space to the entire community through local nonprofits.

The Senior Care Ministry of Princeton, Family Crisis Center and the Greater Princeton Youth Orchestra currently occupy space in the house. Since 1991, Italian language classes for children were initiated and now different levels of language education are offered for both adults and children. On a recent rainy afternoon, a white-haired man listened to his Italian language teacher and repeated the words she spoke, writing on papers in front of him, a map of Italy on the wall, a blackboard next to it. It was an age-old scene of teacher and student unfolding on the second floor of Dorothea's House.

With tears in his eyes, Professor Frassica reads a letter Dorothea's father sent to his son-in-law regarding Dorothea's House. In it are the words: "There is nothing so strengthening and healing to the heart as the thought of bringing aid and comfort to other people."

"We are living in their shadow," said Linda Prospero of the immigrants. "This is why we are here."

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Figure 1 Ellie Pinelli





Figure 2 Pietro Frassica and Linda Prospero

