

# St. Leo's Pandola Center sparks pride in Italian heritage

As a child, second-generation American Frank Verde (born Frank Pellegrini Verdecchia) was ashamed of his Italian heritage.

"Italians were the same as the Nazis during World War II – the enemy," he said. "We had to prove that we were Americans by denying our heritage."

Yet for the past eight years, the 78-year-old has paid homage to his grandfather, mother, aunts and uncles by studying Italian at the Rev. Oreste Pandola Learning Center in Little Italy.

An arm of the archdiocese's Italian parish, St. Leo the Great, in the quaint Baltimore neighborhood, the center is housed in the former St. Leo School. It was built by Verde's grandfather, and his mother and her nine siblings attended elementary school there.

"It's in my blood," said Verde, who begins a Thursday night Advanced Intermediate Italian class Sept. 29. "I can honor them (his ancestors) by acknowledging their dreams and maintaining the cultural contribution Italy has made to the world."

Many of Pandola's students – approximately 185 each semester – enroll to connect to their Italian heritage, as well as learn practical skills. The full menu of courses attracts a student base of people of middle age, college age, seniors and children; people who want to study Italian, and people planning a trip to Italy.

Six levels of the language are available (Introductory to Advanced Conversational) plus food, drink and cultural classes, including: how to make Limoncello, wine and biscotti; bocce ball, Italian card games, painting; Kitchen Kids, ravioli, and sauces.

"Part of our mission is to continue the tradition of the Italian culture," said principal Rosalie Ranieri, a St. Leo parishioner who co-founded the school in 1996 when the late Pallottine Father Oreste Pandola, then pastor, approached her with the idea. "Students can make the same items they remember making with their parents and

grandparents as kids.”

Although the center charges nominal fees for its classes, it is not based on profit; the emphasis is in meeting the needs of the students.

“It’s a nurturing environment, a sense of community,” said Ranieri. “Father Pandola’s philosophy was to meet the needs of the community. Many of our students take Italian to honor grandparents and parents who came to the U.S. from Italy.”

Ranieri said they are blessed with outstanding teachers – some who volunteer their time and resources – who help students like Frank Verde connect with their Italian heritage.

“I do this for the bold step my family took to leave everything behind,” said Verde, “and follow their dream to the land of opportunity and freedom. They wanted a better life. We are now living it for them.”

**Rev. Oreste Pandola Learning Center**  
**914 Stiles Street (former St. Leo School)**  
**Little Italy**

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