

An Angeleno's Passion for Italy; A leading Democratic consultant embraces his heritage and hopes to see it celebrated downtown.

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Author: Teresa Watanabe
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CORRECTION: SEE CORRECTION APPENDED; Italian heritage -- A photo caption with an article in Friday's California section about Italian culture in Southern California said community activist Joe Cerrell was standing in front of the historic Italian Hall. In fact, he was standing in front of Casa Italiana, the meeting hall of St. Peter's Italian Catholic Church on North Broadway. The historic Italian Hall is on Olvera Street.

When Hollywood producer Doug DeLuca first wanted to stage what would become Southern California's largest annual Italian American festival, he says, one man bucked the naysayers and furnished him with invaluable contacts and advice.

When Nick Costantini took over efforts to refurbish the historic Italian Hall in downtown Los Angeles, he says, one man helped raise most of the \$1 million needed.

And when Los Angeles Councilwoman Jan Perry dreamed up an idea to create a Little Italy in her downtown district, she turned to the same man: Joe Cerrell.

Cerrell, 70, may be best known as a Democratic political consultant with deep ties to past and present party stars, including John F. Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson, Edmund G. "Pat" Brown, Jesse Unruh and Al Gore.

But his latest passion is his Italian heritage, and he promotes it wherever and whenever he can. Through fundraising, political lobbying and a can-do approach to most every proposed community project, Cerrell has helped spark an Italian Renaissance in Los Angeles.

Once members of a vibrant community centered in today's Chinatown, Italian Americans gradually assimilated and dispersed after World War I. Although the 2000 census counted 1.45 million Italian Americans in the state -- with roughly half in Southern California -- only shadows of that historic footprint remain.

In recent years, however, Cerrell and others have worked to revitalize the region's Italian presence with festivals, cultural events, language classes and a museum.

"This is my new love, after my family or, as we say in Italian, la famiglia," Cerrell says of his community activities.

At times, he manages to combine loves of both politics and Italian affairs.

As vice chairman of the National Italian American Foundation, for instance, he recently fired off letters protesting perceived anti-Italian slurs against U.S. Supreme Court nominee Samuel A. Alito Jr.

Cerrell frequently travels to Italy, where he has been knighted by the government, and he is affectionately called "California" by Italian President Carlo Ciampi.

"He is everywhere ... from meeting the Italian president to the smallest community gathering," Diego Brasioli, the Italian consul general in Los Angeles, says of Cerrell.

A "Mr. Italy" of Los Angeles?

"Yes," Brasioli says with a laugh, "I would say so."

Cerrell, a rotund man of droll humor and endless anecdotes, says his ethnic awakening came relatively late in life. A native New Yorker, Cerrell moved to Los Angeles in 1951 as a teenager for health reasons.

He never learned Italian or visited Italy growing up because his parents wanted him to assimilate as fully as possible.

When he enrolled in school in 1941, Cerrell says, his father even dropped the A off Cerrella so his son could escape anti-Italian discrimination during World War II. Except for Sunday pasta dinners, he says, he grew up with few markers of his ethnic identity.

"I knew I was Italian but really wasn't," Cerrell says.

His passion was politics. In 1953, at age 17, he co-founded the Trojan Democratic Club at USC, launching his lifelong political activism. Today, his Cerrell Associates mainly runs judicial campaigns and lobbies for corporate clients.

His dentist first got him involved in Italian American affairs more than 15 years ago, inviting him to join the national foundation. Within months, Cerrell says, he was hooked.

In 1990, he made his first visit to his ancestral town, Rossano, in the arch of the Italian boot. There, he traced his heritage back 300 years to a local monsignor and was made the town's honorary mayor.

"I don't want to sound like an evangelist," Cerrell says, "but I was born again."

The comparison is apt. Cerrell is as relentless in his search for new Italian American compatriots as a preacher trawling for lost souls. Sometimes he asks for money for the foundation's scholarship program. Other times he simply wants to expand his far-flung networks.

"I don't miss an opportunity," he says. "If I spot someone with a vowel at the end of their name, I try to get some money or a meeting."

He doesn't always succeed. Singer Paul Anka, for instance, turned out to be Lebanese.

In recent years, however, Cerrell says that Grove developer Rick Caruso, attorney Tom Girardi of "Erin Brockovich" fame and Angelo Mozilo, chief executive of the home mortgage giant Countrywide Credit Industries Inc. have accepted his invitation to become major donors to the national Italian foundation.

No Italian, dead or alive, appears beyond his support. Cerrell played a leading role in successfully lobbying to retain Columbus Day as a Los Angeles city holiday in 2002, after the City Council voted to dump it in favor of a Cesar Chavez Day.

Nationally, according to Italian foundation officials, Cerrell was instrumental in winning a 2003 congressional resolution recognizing the pivotal role of an Italian American, Antonio Meucci, in the invention of the telephone.

"No disrespect to Alexander Graham Bell," Cerrell says.

Brasioli, the consul general, says he has also caught Cerrell's evangelistic fire.

He says Cerrell's advice to kick up the Italian presence here inspired him to launch last year's "Italian Summer" of opera, film, fashion shows, wine tasting, literature and scientific seminars.

In 2003, the consulate signed an agreement with L.A. County officials to subsidize Italian language classes in public elementary schools.

Cerrell's latest dream is a Little Italy. A century ago, the downtown area boasted farmers and laborers, pasta makers and so many vintners it was considered California's wine capital.

The community's hub is still centered around the 101-year-old St. Peter's Italian Catholic Church and meeting hall on North Broadway.

Few other markers of the historic Little Italy remain. One of them is a sign marking the Pelanconi wine cellar on the wall of what is today La Golondrina Mexican restaurant on Olvera Street.

A cache of century-old Italian wine bottles was recently discovered there in an old well.

Cerrell and DeLuca have teamed up with Perry to bring the Little Italy vision to fruition. Perry, whose 9th Council District includes much of downtown, says she is considering the designation for an area along 2nd Street to bring a vibrant street culture to the corridor between Little Tokyo and the Grand Avenue Project development.

DeLuca envisions restaurants, shops and such possible cultural events as opera, strolling musicians and Venetian masked balls.

DeLuca, producer of the "Jimmy Kimmel Live" TV show, says Cerrell was key to the success of his San Gennaro Festival, a traditional extravaganza of Italian culture and arts honoring the city of Naples' patron saint. When he first presented the idea to Italian American community leaders in 2002, DeLuca says, most dismissed it as a pipe dream.

One man sat quietly, furiously scribbling notes. It was Cerrell, writing names of people DeLuca needed to meet to make the project happen.

"He knew everything about the Italian community," says DeLuca, a 39-year-old New Jersey native.

"We were young and energetic, but Joe was the puppet master ... focusing our energies for us."

Cerrell says he now spends nearly half his time on his Italian American activities. One day, he's hosting a lunch with former Dodger manager Tommy Lasorda. Another day, he will be off to Italy to host a "Welcome to Italy" reception for the new U.S. ambassador there.

"I was a late bloomer to my Italian heritage," Cerrell says, "but now I'm addicted to it."

[Illustration]

Caption: PHOTO: EMBRACING HIS ROOTS: "I don't miss an opportunity," Cerrell says. "If I spot someone with a vowel at the end of their name, I try to get some money or a meeting." He helped raise most of the money needed to renovate the historic Italian Hall behind him.; PHOTOGRAPHER: Mel Melcon Los Angeles Times; PHOTO: 'MY NEW LOVE': Joe Cerrell, near a sculpture called "The Immigrants" at St. Peter's Church, hopes to see a Little Italy in L.A.; PHOTOGRAPHER: Mel Melcon Los Angeles Times

Credit: Times Staff Writer

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