

# *VOCE DI GCICS*

GULF COAST ITALIAN CULTURE SOCIETY, INC.

P.O. BOX 2591, SARASOTA, FL. 34230

[www.gcics.com](http://www.gcics.com)

November 2022

Mary Rinaldi, Editor



## President's Message

A warm thank you to all who attended our Italian American Heritage Month Welcome Back Luncheon. It was a tremendous success. It was especially eventful for us as we had time to reflect on the aftermath of Hurricane Ian. Sarasota is grateful because our damage was minimal compared to our FL neighbors to the south, including the Ft. Myers area. Many are still dealing with the losses and will continue to for months. GCICS made a \$1,000 donation to the Suncoast Disaster Relief Fund, through the Community Foundation of Sarasota County (CFSC). By donating through the CFSC, our donation has been matched dollar-for-dollar by the Patterson Foundation.

Our Welcome Back Luncheon honored Roberto Mei as the GCICS 2022 Italian American of the Year. It was my pleasure to deliver the Opening Remarks reflecting on our Italian Heritage and what it means to our members. Tom Hurban gave a prayer befitting the day. After lunch, Gordon Bloom introduced Roberto, tracing his life, how he became a successful restaurateur, meeting his wife, and raising two children.

Roberto shared cherished memories as he told his personal story about his family, his

life as a young boy, working alongside his dad in the family-owned restaurants, and how he got his start. He knew the restaurant business thoroughly when he came to Sarasota. That was certainly evident when Cafe Baci came on the scene 31 years ago and became an instant success.

He shared another story with us. This was not the first time I was privy to his heartwarming tale. I realized after hearing it for a second time how his truth became more profound. I was much more aware as he recounted what his family experienced during WW II when Germany occupied Italy. As Roberto shared his story you could see his emotions and love for his mother and father as he described their courage. There are facts too numerous to mention. Specific dates, places, and other details are not important. What is important to know is that Roberto's mother and uncle showed an unparalleled bravery in helping Jewish people by supplying them with food while they hid in caves to evade the Germans, during a time when consequences would have been dealt with severely. She even hid her actions from her family to shield them from any possible retributions by the Germans.

Roberto's dad was arrested and was thought to be scheduled for execution. There is an irony to this story for it was the policy at the time that for every German soldier killed there would be 12 Italians executed in retaliation. Roberto's father was to receive this fate, but his father was thought to be a spy and only Hitler could give the order for executions of spies. He became a prisoner of war in Rome where he was held by the Germans. His father's life was spared. The war ended and he returned to his family. If all had gone wrong, it might have been a vastly different ending and sadly we would not have met this humble person we honored as our 2022 Italian American of the Year. Roberto's family received recognition by Yad Vashem, in Israel, "As One of the Righteous Among Nations," for helping Jewish people during the Holocaust and for carrying out remarkable and selfless deeds to save Jewish lives during WW II.

It was a blessing to get to know Roberto and Denise and learn about their children and grandchildren. Denise talked about her involvement with the YMCA, serving as a prominent Board member. I certainly enjoyed learning about the organization that most of us are familiar with, but through her eyes and knowledge. Her most moving story was how they both dedicated their time to foster children. Denise told of their involvement and hopes to be a positive force in a young boy's life and to show him what life could be like with lots of love and caring. I have no doubt that this young boy will draw on those experiences later in life. What can I say except that I could have spent hours hearing their stories. In the limited time we had, I came to realize how everything made

sense - why Roberto and Denise are held in such high esteem in our community. They are two extraordinary people with a deep commitment and appreciation for each other, their community, and those who have the good fortune to call them family or friends.

Following Roberto's remarks, I read the Award Citation. The "Introduction of Roberto" and the "Award Citation" were composed by Ellen Roderick, and as always excellent work. Ellen and I both had the pleasure of interviewing Roberto and Denise in preparation for the luncheon.

I continue to keep Ukraine in my thoughts and prayers. I want to thank our Board for their support and hard work which keeps our Society current. Special thanks to Ellen for the preparation work she did for our Welcome Back Luncheon. Please let Tom Hurban know if you will be attending our Welcome Back Bocce Picnic on Nov 13. The Holiday Party (12/11/22) is filling up fast. Look for Ellen's email with registration instructions.

Thanksgiving is upon us. I would like to add to the turkey, all the fixings, and your mother's favorite recipes, how much I appreciate you. Thank you for your support during challenging times. It is about much more than what will be served at the dinner table. As we fill our bellies, let us remember to bring our best selves to the table, and be thankful for our family and friends. Happy Thanksgiving to all.

Julie Bondarenko  
President

# THE WELCOME BACK LUNCHEON REVIEW

Photos by Phyllis Shonk & George Arfield



## GCICS ITALIAN CULTURAL HERITAGE MONTH

### Article by Ellen Roderick

It has been a tradition of GCICS to launch the Program Year with a Welcome Back Luncheon at a GCICS favorite: Mattison's 41. And so, on October 22, 2022, GCICS gathered to socialize, dine on fine Italian fare, and honor a "GCICS 2022 Italian American of the Year." Julie Bondarenko, GCICS President, presided. Here are the highlights.

\*58 members attended! That was amazing. We had 3 new members present: Michele Barsodi-Takei, Francine Hammond, and husband Gianni Sessa.

\*Our Honoree, Roberto Mei, Owner & Proprietor, Café Baci, accompanied by his wife Denise Mei, was conferred the honor of "GCICS 2022 Italian American of the Year." He also delivered keynote address.



\*Tom Hurban, Board member, gave the blessing. Gordon Bloom, Board member, introduced Roberto, and Julie read the Citation, both of which appear in the newsletter. Roberto spoke about his family living in Italy and the help family members gave the Jewish population hiding in the caves in the hills of Tuscany during World War II. Mattison's 41's chef and servers did an outstanding job.



**INTRODUCTION: ROBERTO MEI**  
**“GCICS 2022 ITALIAN AMERICAN OF THE YEAR”**  
**Written by Ellen Roderick; Delivered by Gordon Bloom**



Gordon Bloom

- \*Dateline: New York City, 1954 – Italian immigrants give birth to a baby boy, naming him Roberto.
- \*Fast forward 68 years. . .
- \*Dateline: Sarasota, Spring 2022 – a beloved and successful Sarasota, FL restaurateur announces his retirement.
- \*Dateline: Sarasota, fall 2022 – GCICS selects its “2022 Italian American of the Year,” Roberto Mei, who is our guest, our honoree, and our speaker this afternoon.
- \*I am honored to introduce Roberto Mei, Founder of Café Baci, a well-loved Italian restaurant on the South Tamiami Trail in Sarasota.
- \*My Introduction will be followed by remarks from Roberto.
- \*Following Roberto’s remarks, President Julie will read the official GCICS Citation, declaring Roberto “GCICS 2022 Italian American of the Year” which recognizes Roberto’s success in the restaurant business and his contributions to the greater Sarasota community.
- \*Born and raised in New York City, Roberto began working in his parents’ restaurants when he was 10. At the age of 18, he was the youngest restaurant manager in Manhattan.
- \*He was educated by the Jesuits, attending St. David’s School and Loyola High School on the Upper East Side of Manhattan.
- \*He then spent four years at Boston College, receiving a degree in Marketing & Finance in 1976. He spent a year in Houston, TX, returning then to New York City to work with his dad. Roberto married Denise, an American Airlines flight attendant, in 1981. They are the proud parents of two married children, daughter Lea and son Michael, and grandparents to four young children.
- \*What brought Roberto and Denise to Sarasota? Denise’s mother-in-law lived here and as has happened to many of us, Roberto and Denise came for a few visits and decided to make a new life here.
- \*Their dream was to open a first-class Italian restaurant, what Roberto called “a tablecloth restaurant.” And so, they did.
- \*Opening night, July 11, 1991 – as Roberto said: “the buzz was out” and the customers came; and the rest is history.
- \*Fast forward 31 years.
- \*We were all surprised and saddened when we opened the Herald Tribute and read that the Mei’s had decided to retire, close the restaurant on Mother’s Day 2022, and sell the property.

\*GCICS's final event at Café Baci was a successful St. Joseph's Celebration on March 20, 2022. But looking back, our Society held many enjoyable functions throughout the years in Roberto's restaurant. And he was very generous with gift certificates for us to use in our fundraising.

\*Without further ado ladies and gentlemen, please join me in welcoming a 6<sup>th</sup> generation restaurateur, Roberto Mei, to the lectern where he will share remarks about his Italian heritage. Roberto. . .

**CITATION: ROBERTO MEI**  
**“GCICS 2022 ITALIAN AMERICAN OF THE YEAR”**

**Written by Ellen Roderick &  
Delivered by Julie Bondarenko**



Julie Bondarenko

\*Since 1991, GCICS has had the privilege of honoring several outstanding “Italian Americans of the Year.” The Society was eager to honor a Gulf Coast resident who has made significant contributions to the welfare of the residents of Manatee or Sarasota County, or both. That person must be of Italian American ancestry. This is an important element of our Society's mission.

\*I am pleased to report that the Board of Directors was unanimous in its selection of Roberto Mei as our 2022 recipient.

\*It is an honor to share with you Roberto's many contributions to our Gulf Coast community. As the Founder of Café Baci, an authentic Italian restaurant on the South Trail, Roberto brought immense joy and pleasure through the years, to individuals, couples, families, and organizations who dined in his charming restaurant.

\*For 31 years, Café Baci was the “go to” dining establishment for many service organizations, including Kiwanis International, Sertoma International, and the Gulf Coast Italian Culture Society. Not only did Café Baci host us for our St. Joseph's Celebrations but also the Board of Directors held its yearly planning meetings over a long lunch each February.

\*Café Baci was known in Sarasota as a reasonably priced establishment with a touch of elegance - white tablecloths and Italian murals; and with staff who served customers in a most courteous manner. Much has been written about the entrees. I must insert a personal comment – in my judgement, the Eggplant Parmesan was the best in Sarasota. And I know other Society members who hold the same opinion.

\*Roberto had the reputation of treating his staff well. He believed in loyalty and fostered it in many ways. He trained his staff, he promoted them from within, and he encouraged them to accept new challenges.

\*The bottom line is that Roberto gave Sarasota residents a fine restaurant for 31 years, a restaurant that folks felt secure in bringing their out-of-town guests to.

\*And Roberto gave the greater Sarasota area a business that employed locals, a business that developed locals, which promoted locals, and that respected them as fine working citizens of Sarasota County.

\*But Roberto and Denise's contributions to the greater Sarasota community went well beyond running a fine restaurant. They GAVE BACK, devoting time and dollars to causes that they

believed fostered the welfare of the city and its citizens. Denise was deeply involved in philanthropy, serving as a Board member and Chair of the YMCA Foundation.

\*Roberto hosted local organizations such as the Health Department and the Fire Department; he assisted them with fundraisers; he publicized the organizations' worthy causes with signs on his property, and he made donations to numerous organizations.

\*He and Denise did a great deal of work with the "Y" as well as with United Cerebral Palsy, and the Make a Wish Foundation. They worked with foster children in the community and gave some of them work experience in the restaurant.

\*These are highlights of Roberto's extensive contributions to the greater Sarasota community. I know you will join me in a round of applause as we thank Roberto and Denise for being inspirational human beings in our world today.

\*Roberto and Denise, please join me at the podium for a formal presentation.



Roberto and Denise Mei



Presentation Of GCICS Citation

## BOCCE NEWS

Fall is here and many of our members are returning from visits north, including me. Many stalwarts have played bocce through the hot summer months. We thank Jerry Hall for maintaining the court.

For new members, we gather in an informal manner to play bocce on most Sundays from approximately 2-4 pm. Our Club maintains a single court on the Conservation Foundation grounds located at 400 Palmetto Ave. in Osprey. This road runs parallel to Rt. 41 behind the Spanish Point visitor center. Experience is NOT necessary, and we welcome new players!

As previously stated, WE maintain the bocce court there, but when the Conservation Foundation is having a function which conflicts with the time we play bocce, we are kindly asked not to play. Upcoming conflicting date when we SHOULD NOT play: Nov. 6. Please mark it on your calendars.

We formerly held our fall Welcome Back Picnic next to this bocce court but found that renting a larger site at the North Jetty Park in Nokomis worked better for our group. Because last year's event went so well, we will return to this site on Nov. 13. Don't miss this day!

Questions?

Tom Hurban, Bocce & Welcome Back Picnic Chair

908 507 3048 or [dorisntom@gmail.com](mailto:dorisntom@gmail.com)

## “GCICS WELCOME BACK PICNIC”

Sunday, November 13, 2022: 12:30-4:30 pm



**RSVP:** E-mail Tom if you plan to come: [dorisntom@gmail.com](mailto:dorisntom@gmail.com) or 908-507-3048; let him know **how many will be in your party**. We want to be prepared.

**BACKGROUND:** Last year the GCICS Picnic Committee and Board decided to change the venue from the grounds near our bocce court to a new location at the North Jetty Park, Nokomis. We received only positive feedback on the event and have decided to return there. The large pavilion, which has many picnic tables under cover, has been reserved. The beach and restrooms are close by. We will attempt to delineate a makeshift bocce court. This location is easy to find. After crossing the bridge to the Nokomis beaches on Casey Key, turn left and travel until the homes end, then turn right into the parking lot. The pavilion is now very visible to your left.

**COVID Precaution:** To safeguard our members, we ask you to honor this request: Attend ONLY if you have been fully vaccinated (2 shots: Moderna or Pfizer; or 1 shot: J&J) and remain symptom-free.

**WHEN:** Sunday, November 13, 2022, 12:30 - 4:30 pm.

**WHERE:** North Jetty Park pavilion. Nokomis; rain or shine.

**SEATING:** Multiple picnic benches; bring a different chair if something more comfortable is needed.

**DRINKS:** Alcohol is permitted. Bring whatever your personal preferences are; one restriction: Park Commission wants NO glass; manage this the best you can.

**UTENSILS:** We provide plastic silverware. You are welcome to bring metal. We have paper plates, napkins, and plastic glasses.

**FOOD:** After many years, we have found the following system works:

\*Each party brings whatever main course they themselves will enjoy.

\*You are also asked to bring another item to share with the group. This can be an appetizer, a salad, or a dessert.

**FEE:** NO charge! PLEASE COME and bring your smile!

Thank you,  
Tom Hurban  
GCICS Bocce Chair

# GCICS Holiday/Christmas Dinner Party & Fundraiser



You are invited to our GCICS Holiday/Christmas Dinner Party & Scholarship Fundraiser (12/11/22). **We are handling the “bring a dish” system as we did last year.**

**Event:** “GCICS Holiday/Christmas Dinner Party & Fundraiser”

**Date/Time:** Sunday, **Dec 11, 2022**, 5:30-9:00 pm

**Location:** Mike and Patty DiMichele’s home, 8425 Turnberry Circle, Sarasota, FL 34241

**Donation:** \$35 from each attendee.

**Bring:** Your dish, wine to share, badge, and holiday spirit.

**Registration:** Please use GCICS website to register/pay (steps appear at end of email)

**If Unable to Register Online:** Mail check to Judy Herman, 6150 Turnbury Pk. Dr #3103, Sarasota, FL 34243; payable to GCICS; include each person’s name.

**Deadline for Registering & Paying:** Online by **Dec 1**; or in Judy’s mailbox by **Dec 1**.

**Deadline for Signing Up for a Dish:** E-mail Pam ASAP after deciding you will attend. (See below.)

**COVID Precaution:** To safeguard our members, we ask you to honor this request: Attend **ONLY** if you have been fully vaccinated (2 shots: Moderna or Pfizer; or 1 shot: J&J) and remain symptom-free.

**Point of Contact:** Ellen Roderick, 301-775-1344 ([itrain@erols.com](mailto:itrain@erols.com))

**VERY IMPORTANT:**

If you have decided to attend, please take 2 steps:

1. Register/pay on GCICS Website or send check to Judy Herman (see above).
  2. E-mail Pam Arfield ([pamarfield3@gmail.com](mailto:pamarfield3@gmail.com)) with your 1<sup>st</sup> & 2<sup>nd</sup> choice of what **FOOD** you wish to bring; please be very detailed on what these choices are; and include your phone number in the email. **Pam will contact you to discuss and confirm.** We need two categories of food at this point in time.
1. Appetizers
  2. Dinner Entrees: Pork, Chicken, Beef

## STEPS FOR PAYING ONLINE

\*Go to this GCICS address: [www.gcics.org/payment](http://www.gcics.org/payment)

\*On 1<sup>st</sup> page, check “Member”, enter first & last name, email address, phone #, and click on the blue block.

\*On 2<sup>nd</sup> page, enter the total amount of your payment, **then enter in the block directly below “12/11/22” and list the name(s) of the person(s) for whom you are paying.** Please make sure you do this step.

\*Click PayPal checkout and the next page will come up. Complete what is needed.

\*Note: You do not need a PayPal account to pay for GCICS events. PayPal will accept your credit card directly. You will receive a confirmation email once you have completed the transaction.

We look forward to welcoming you.



**GULF COAST ITALIAN CULTURE SOCIETY**  
**SAVE THE DATES**

10/18/22

**\*11/5/22 (Sat) Sarasota Youth Opera Performance & Dinner;** performance (\$30) is "The Secret World of Og" @ 5:00 pm, followed by dinner @ 7:00 pm at Café Amici. Have reserved 35 tickets. Announced on 9/12/22.

**\*11/13/22 (Sun) Welcome Back Bocce Picnic** @ North Jetty Park Pavilion, Nokomis, 12:30-4:30 pm; bring own main course and a dish to share. Announced on 10/13/22.

**\*12/11/22 (Sun) Holiday/Christmas Party/Scholarship Fundraiser** @ Patty & Mike DiMichele's home, Misty Creek, Sarasota, 5:30 pm. Potluck; Scholarship donation (\$35), BYOB. Announced on 10/24/22.

**\*1/21/23 (Sat) Annual Meeting/Luncheon/Town Hall/Program** @ Peridia Golf & Country Club, Bradenton; N/C to members; 11:30-2:30 pm.; Speaker: Melissa Morgan's topic: "Anthony Rossi, Sicilian-born founder of Bradenton-based Tropicana." To be announced.

**\*2/4/23 (Sat): Bocce Invitational VII** @ Cascades, Sarasota; begins midday with practice, tournament, party, music, and dancing (fee). To be announced.

**\*2/21/23 (Shrove Tues): Carnevale/Mardi Gras/Scholarship Fundraiser** @ Linda Ahern's home, Peridia G&CC, Bradenton, 5:30 pm. Potluck, Scholarship donation (\$35), BYOB. To be announced.

**\*3/10/23 (Fri): Cultural Lecture:** "Keeping Up with the Florentines: Cities in Competition in Medieval & Renaissance Italy" by Dr. Carrie Beneš, Professor of Medieval & Renaissance History, New College of Florida; 2:00 - 4:00 pm at New College; Free and open to members & guests. To be announced.

**\*3/18/23 (Sat) or 3/19/23 (Sun):** St. Joseph's Celebration Luncheon; location to be determined so final date not yet established. To be announced.

**\*4/15/23 (Sat): Scholarship Festa Luncheon** @ Stoneybrook G&CC, 11:30-2:30 pm. To be announced.

**NOTE:** Cultural events (lectures, tours), La Cena's, and some additional "fun" events are being planned. Happy Hours (Mon), Bocce (Sun), and Italian Language Instruction (Wed) are ongoing.

## **OFFICERS/DIRECTORS**

### **President**

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### **Technology Chair**

Gordon Bloom  
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### **Past Presidents**

Joseph Raffaele, PhD	1988-1992
Gabriella Thurston	1993-2001
Patrick Corsentino	2001-2004
Arthur Castraberti	2004-2006
Marie Corsentino	2007
Mary Amabile Palmer	2008-2010
William Korp	2010-2014
Anthony Esposito	2015-2016
Sheryl Lazzarotti	2016-2020



Douglas Apicella

Douglas Apicella has recently joined GCICS, and he wishes to take this opportunity to express how excited he is to be joining an Italian cultural society, being a second-generation Italian and relatively recent arrival to the area.

Three of his grandparents came through Ellis Island in N.Y. from their native Italy (central and southern Italy), while the fourth was born in Manhattan as his parents had migrated at an earlier time. His parents were born in Queens, N.Y. and so was he. Since then, he has lived in seven states around the country and has traveled internationally while in the corporate world.

He has lived in NW Bradenton for two years and is married with a son who is living with them. He changed careers five years ago, transitioning from the corporate world to the kitchen, and he is now a personal chef. Of course, as an Italian, food has always been central to his life, his family and to his culture.

Beyond food, his wife, Hilary, and he enjoy the Florida weather where they play tennis, bicycle ride and attend outdoor and indoor musical and food events as time permits.

He looks forward to enriching his life by expanding his knowledge and appreciation of Italian art, music, food and history and the fine people of this organization.



