

## Bridging Worlds... Through the Children

Chatham Central School has succeeded in doing something that even Italy's powerful President Silvio Berlusconi has promised for years, recently got approved, but has not yet accomplished—building a bridge between the island of Sicily and the outside world.

In Italy, the bridge in the public eye is a physical one—connecting Messina, Sicily, to the main Italian peninsula. A project that has been dreamed about for centuries, if not millennia. In Chatham, by contrast, most of the second graders of the Mary E. Dardess Elementary School probably had not even thought about what it would have been like to link to classmates in distant Sicily before it happened, by chance, last week. Except for one student, that is, seven-year old Chiara Lucia Perni, a little girl who has lived in both worlds, then succeeded in connecting them together for a short hour one winter day.

Chiara (pronounced *key'-ah-rah*), new to Chatham this year, is a bridge of the human kind. Bi-cultural, she was born in Seattle to Sally Veillette, a Chatham native... then has spent her young life going back and forth between New Concord, where she visits her grandparents, and Sicily, the place she calls home.

What brought Chiara and Sally to Italy? They have many relatives there. “And in the first year of life,” Sally explains, “a baby develops its ear... tuning its filter to the sounds that it will pay attention to. Offering a newborn two languages has many subtle benefits. It literally opens them to perceive more of the world.” Since Sally had her grandfather's old beachside apartment to use (the site of many a previous summer vacation), and a host of Sicilian relatives to visit (and dine with!), she and Chiara spent six months in Italy that first year, then chose to stay. Later, Chiara began school at the three-year Italian *scuola materna* (literally translated as “motherly school”)—their version of kindergarten.

“Our small rural beach town had sparse kindergarten facilities, at best... but I sure loved the recitals that the kids performed,” claimed Sally, “They were complex and original. The children would learn up to a dozen songs each... and give long recitations. We're talking about tiny little kids here. Three. Four. Five years old. Their ability to perform was amazing.” Learning through song and story have been traditional schooling methods since recorded history, and are still in the foreground in rural Sicily.

Chiara then learned to read and write in Sicily in first grade, before coming to Chatham for second grade. Last week, when it became Chiara's turn to be Student of the Week, she wanted to add an audio-visual connection between her two classrooms—via Skype. There are many differences to show. Most Italian schools are in session from 8:15am to 1:15pm, Monday through Saturday. Yes, *Saturday*. Children eat at home with their entire families, who take breaks from 1pm to 4pm each day—*la pausa pranzo*, they call it. Family unity is a sensation very important—*molto importante*—to the Italian culture. Even a child's elementary school teacher becomes like a second mother, staying with the class from 1<sup>st</sup> through 5<sup>th</sup> grade. The children call their teacher by her first name—like Chiara's *Maestra Rossana*.

“Emotional consistency and security is the primary Italian value, keeping traditions alive,” notes Chiara's mother, “whereas in America, we are renowned for our action-orientation, technology, and ability to

transform the world around us. Italians marvel at this.” The computer lab in Chiara’s Sicilian school was just put in last year, for example. There is a gym, but no recess period. Art, music, and sports are not a part of the regular instruction. But the young students learn how to write both in block letters—*and cursive*—in first grade. What may be the most interesting difference is that the group of friends that one forms in those early elementary school years often stays intact for 40 or 50 years in rural Sicilian towns—forming one’s *comitiva*, social group for a lifetime.

Who would have guessed that Chiara’s childhood *comitiva* would be huddled by a computer using Skype to connect to their distant *amica del cuore* (“friend of the heart”) from across the ocean? Living this new experience with her? The Sicilian mothers were thrilled, eyes riveted, as the webcam took the journey, step-by-step, wall-by-wall, through the well-equipped American classroom.

“We should repeat this every two weeks,” teacher Mrs. Sandy Lynn suggested. The kids agreed.

“It was fun,” added classmate Ally Hogencamp, “I’ve never had the chance to talk with people from another country before.”

“It was kinda cool,” commented Brendon Everett.

Classmate Savanna Jennings chimed in, “We got to see Chiara’s friends. They’re really interesting... next time I want to ask them what their school is like.” Due to the six hour time difference, the Sicilian school had already closed, so the call had taken place from a home computer instead.

“I liked seeing my friends again, too,” said Chiara, “and to let all my friends know each other.”

Tessa Fisher liked singing to the Sicilian children. The Sicilian kids did, too, and are preparing a song of their own to share with the Chatham students. They want to make a *bella figura*—a good impression—on their American counterparts.

“I liked the person there taking pictures,” Taylor Falkner noted, referring to school photographer John Mason’s presence. Yes, pride transcends borders, and is built-up by events such as these.

“It is easy to make mistakes, though,” warns Sally, who besides being a mother, also has founded Hands-On Sicily, a group which organizes cross-cultural exchanges. “Sicily is an island which has been invaded 13 times over its 3,000-year history. It has a love-hate relationship with the outside world... and holds tightly to its cultural identity.”

Crossing borders brings riches for everyone. Hearts open. Souls stir. Minds expand. The trick to interactions of any kind is to use them as inspiration—not vehicles to beat ourselves up or put someone else down. If another person or culture has something that we want, we can complain about it, pretend it’s not important to us, get turned off... or use it as inspiration.

Recently in Catania, Sicily, a public high school did an exchange program with an Orlando, Florida, school. First, the Americans visited the Italian school, enjoying its rich history, classical education structure, but wondering why the only two extracurricular activities offered were a Greek laboratory and Latin competition. Out of politeness, they didn't say anything... they just let the Sicilian students experience for themselves the fun that a wider range of after-school activities brings.

When the Sicilian children returned home from Orlando, they went to work creating not one or two, but a dozen, activities for their school, ranging from sports and theatre, to visits to the nearby volcanic Mt. Etna. Even a school newspaper. It may be hard to appreciate how hard this was for them to do—the teachers, school staff, and culture itself were rigidly against any change. The kids had to pay for much of it, too, out of their own pockets. But they were determined... and transformed their environment.

Little Chiara Perni spans both worlds, stumbling at times, making the occasional mistake that any bi-cultural child would. During the first particularly cold winter morning, she called out, "Hey, Mom, there's *frosting* all over that hill! *Look!*" When her lips turned red and sore, she said, "My lips are *chopped*," reaching for her "*chopstick*" to put on. Yes, bridging the worlds is full-time entertainment.

Every two week Mrs. Lynn's second grade elementary class will have chance to the cultivate the seed of diversity newly planted in our fertile Chatham soil, adding another spice to our traditional country-city mix. Best wishes! *Auguri!*

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***Caption:*** Mrs. Sandy Lynn's second grade class as they connect to Sicilian elementary school students via Skype. Chiara Lucia Perni, positioned at computer, is translating.

*Carson Allard, Samantha Bryant, Heather Damia, Brendan Everett, Taylor Falkner, Tessa Fisher, John Hoag, Ally Hogencamp, Savanna Jennings, Enzo Jones, Quinten Kastner, Patrick Keegan, Caroline Paolucci, Jacob Park, Avery Pulcher, Casey Sitzer, Randy VanAlstyne, Isabella Waldorf. Teacher: Mrs. Sandy Lynn*

***[Note: names are not in order yet]***



**Caption:** Chiara Perni's Italian classmates in a photo taken the day before her departure to the United States this September... to join Chatham's MED Elementary School.



**Caption:** "Maestra Rossana," Sicilian elementary school teacher follows her students through the school years—from first grade through fifth—forming a secure, consistent emotional foundation.

Translation of Sicilian Article from “Il Giornale della Sicilia,” 15 December, 2009

**COMMUNICATION: Child from New York in contact with her ex-classmates from Marina Elementary, thanks to the computer.**

***“Hi, I’m Chiara, can you see me?”***

*Technology makes the distances shorter between even the youngest children, giving birth to a bridge between Sicily and America. An audio-video computer conference is certainly an unusual way to introduce two elementary school classes—one in Marina di Ragusa, Sicily, and the other in Chatham, New York. The idea came from little Chiara Lucia Perni, an Italian-American, who is at school in New York this year and feels nostalgic about her Ragusan friends. “Chiara,” says her mother, Sally Veillette, a pioneer of relational tourism in Ragusa, “attended her first elementary school year in Marina di Ragusa last year. She misses her companions a lot! We have moved to New York for her to learn the English language and, above all, to be with her grandparents. Almost each week we organize Internet calls with her best friends in Sicily to calm her nostalgia. As a consequence was born the idea to do the same thing directly from Chiara’s new school, with the help of the school master Sandy Lynn and my assistant Bozena Nowak in Ragusa. The teachers were very touched and would like to repeat the experience.” 19 American students were present. They introduced themselves, talked, and showed their school room. They also sang an English song. The next time the Sicilian students will do the same.*

*By Barbara La Cognata, Ragusa, Sicily*