Gift to Hunter Continues Legacy of Italian School

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For decades, the Parliamo Italiano language school has taught the finer points of Italian to thousands of New Yorkers. Now it will reach even more students.

The Caravan Institute, the parent organization of Parliamo Italiano, has given Hunter College $10 million to continue the legacy of the school. The gift includes the assets of the school, including its townhouse at 132 E. 65th St.

The gift is an "opportunity to focus on the Italian language," says Jennifer J. Raab, president of Hunter College, and expands on already established for-credit and continuing education classes in languages at the college.

The college hopes to link the Italian language education to other academic and lecture programs in subjects ranging from art history to comparative literature, says Ms. Raab. "We're even thinking perhaps of linking language with a wine-tasting course," she says.

Hunter College will rename the building on East 65th Casa Lally, in honor of Franca Pironi Lally, the founder of Parliamo Italiano, who died in 2009. She began the school with her husband, John Lally, in the late 1970s. Approaching the study of the Italian language through the lens of culture and art was the original premise of the school and part of its success.

"Franca was a great scholar and teacher," says Fiona Lally, daughter of Franca and John and a member of the board of the Caravan Institute. "She also had the very shrewd sense of what it was that people wanted to do and there was a wonderful desire for people to learn to speak Italian in a conversational and comfortable way."

Ms. Lally estimates that more than 20,000 people have taken classes at Parliamo Italiano. Most students were drawn by the witty curriculum and intimate classes with native speakers and "lots of people laughing in this old townhouse with the terrace and flowers," says Ms. Lally.

And then there was Signora Lally, who was widely beloved by students and stayed on into her 80s to lead the school, doing everything from answering phones to substitute teaching. But Signora Lally was never keen to develop a succession for the school, says her daughter, and the Caravan Institute board had to develop a plan to keep the school going and invest in some needed organizational upgrades. The school "was really working on Xeroxes and phone calls," says Ms. Lally. "It needed some significant infrastructure."

The board embarked on a two-year process to find a partner. Hunter College needed the space and promised the institute that it would preserve the building. But the Caravan Institute board members had some concern that the college had only ever offered a limited selection of recreational Italian language courses.

It turns out that Hunter College had good reason, says Ms. Lally. The college decided it wasn't "even worth trying to do it with Parliamo Italiano just down the street," says Ms. Lally.

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