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He's why we love Little Italy

BY NINA GARIN

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San Diego's Little Italy is a place to find top-notch restaurants, bars and events.

But it wasn't always like that. Thanks to Marco Li Mandri, the area's been improving and growing since 1995.

Li Mandri, 58, knows quite a bit about building communities. He's president of New City America, a company that forms and manages business improvement districts across the United States, and he's also the head of the Little Italy Association.

Though the San Diego native lives in Kensington and graduated from Patrick Henry High, his earliest years were spent in Little Italy and it's also where his company is based.

Q: How did you get involved with the Little Italy Association?

A: I helped form the association in 1995 with a handful of business owners on India Street in 1995. We started with nothing and have built this into an incredible national urban neighborhood model. The board I work with consists of the oldest businesses in Little Italy, decades-old property owners and many young people.

Q: Why should people outside Little Italy care about the association?

A: In 2011, CNN Money magazine ran a story calling Little Italy one of the best models of neighborhood management in the US. Since 2000, over 2,300 new residential units have been built here with another 1,000 under construction today. The growth in Little Italy since 2000 is the most seen in its last 100 years. We have led Downtown out of the deep recession of 2008. More Italian immigrants are opening businesses in Little Italy here than anywhere else in the US.

Q: What kinds of things has the association done to improve Little Italy?

A: We provide daily sidewalk maintenance services, care for over 1,100 trees here, empty over 250 trash cans daily, maintain over 150 recycling containers, run a parking valet system 3 days per week, initiate all special events here, administer the weekly Little Italy Mercato farmer's market, administer all activities of the association, work with the school district, county, city and church on community activities, weigh in on all new developments and design and create new piazzas and public spaces.

Q: What would you like to see there in the future?

A: More young Italian immigrant businesses (we have over 20 immigrant owned businesses here now), more vertical residential construction, implementation of our new central Piazza at Date and India Streets and other neighborhood public spaces, more affordable housing, establishing our own Little Italy parking district, getting control over Amici Park in cooperation with the school district and taking this urban neighborhood to the next level of growth and management.

Q: How would you say San Diego's Little Italy compares to ones around the country?

A: When we started there were around six to eight really good Little Italys left in the United States. Today, I would say there are three to five. They would be the North End in Boston, San Diego's Little Italy and perhaps Arthur Avenue (New York) and North Beach (San Francisco). Taylor Street in Chicago is another community with a great history, coming back slowly.

Q: Are there any other local communities that you're inspired by?

A: I would state yes, absolutely. But I would identify the theorists and the district managers involved in successful districts nationwide.

Q: What are some of your favorite neighborhood spots?

A: Caffe Italia in the morning, Filippi's and Mona Lisa, the Piazza Natale at India and Date, the Piazza Basilone (West Fir Street), Our Lady of the Rosary (church on Columbia Street) and my office in Little Italy.

Q: What is one thing people would be surprised to find out about you?

A: I am a native San Diegan with five sisters whose first love was music. I have two guitars I never pick up. But anyone who knows me is not surprised to know that my wife Laura, our kids, my family and this community are closest to my heart.

Q: Where is the best cup of coffee in San Diego?

A: Caffe Italia, followed closely by Cafe Zucchero.

Q: Please describe your ideal San Diego weekend.

A: Working with my wife Laura in our yard in Kensington, hanging out with our kids and granddaughter and having pasta dinners on Sunday.