

# Remembering Bayside Social Center

By Jim Bregante

Ask any person who grew up in San Diego's Little Italy community from the 1930s to the 1960s, "What do you remember about Bayside?" You get an immediate smile, a chuckle, and then a story or two of that person's experience at the Social Center. I too, can relate to such a response.

Bayside Social Center provided me with fun and learning experiences as a child. I share those experiences today with friends who grew up with me. A common memory shared by my friends is that of Sister Katherine Salter and the Sisters of Social Service who were a nurturing example in our young lives. These ladies exemplified holiness and goodness. They were among the many adults in my life who were setting the example for growing up to be a good citizen.

The Bayside Settlement House in San Diego was established in 1932 by the Diocese of San Diego. In 1938, the Sisters of Social Service founded the Bayside Social Center and Child Care Center at 1704 Front Street. The property was located at the corner of Front Street and Date Street and occupied about half a city block



(Courtesy of Bayside Community Center)

In 1926, the Order of the Sisters of Social Service was founded in Los Angeles and recently celebrated over seventy-five years of service. The Order is active today in the United States, China

and Mexico. Their mission provided a meeting place to assist immigrants in assimilating into society and taught them to speak English. In San Diego, many of these immigrants were of Italian, Portuguese and Mexican descents. Mothers were able to leave their children in a safe environment while they worked in the tuna canneries and defense plants during WWII. The Diocese of San Diego sponsored these child care services free of charge.

The Sisters of Social Service were wonderful ladies and I cherished them as much as my mother. The Sisters were very active and never hesitated to run and or play games with us. They were fun to be with. The atmosphere at the Social Center was always one of fun, happiness, and children enjoying each other's friendship. I can see today how these relationships have lasted through adulthood.



Sr. Leanora Espindale and Girls, circa 1940's  
(Courtesy of Bayside Community Center)

I participated at Bayside during summer vacation and after school during the school year. Bayside was conveniently located across the street from Washington School and a block away from Our Lady of the Rosary Church. I attended Bayside from 1942 to 1949.

I was allowed to attend Bayside activities on my own. I do not remember being escorted by my

mother. I'm sure she was familiar with the Social Center, the Sisters and the services provided.

Bayside provided many activities to stimulate the children's creativity. The craft classes for various age groups included making toys, picture frames, piggy banks, religious articles, and tools. Recently a friend of mine showed me a letter opener he made at the social center that he is using still, sixty years later.

I enjoyed working in the kitchen of the center, baking cookies and pies under the supervision of the Sisters. The best part of cooking was sampling our culinary creations. The cooking experiences are vivid memories among my friends today.



Boy's cooking class, circa 1950  
(Courtesy of Bayside Community Center)

The property of the center had a grass play area and picnic ground. Dodge ball and kickball were popular games for the children. Festivities on the grounds included May Day celebrations, Fourth of July, church celebrations and visits by Bishop Charles Buddy.

During the summer months, the Sisters conducted tours to manufacturing companies. Seven-up Bottling Company, Wonder Bread Baking and Challenge Dairy. It was fun to see how these products were produced and we were always treated to a sample. We walked to all these facilities and that was part of the fun of the outing.

Field trips included visits to Balboa Park, Presidio Park and the San Diego Mission, Bonita Bay, La Jolla Shores, and the Star of India. Some of my friends and I had grandfathers who worked on the Star of India when it had sailed to Alaska for salmon fishing, and we were proud to set foot on the Star.

Transportation was by stake bed truck to locations which were not within walking distance. The stake bed truck had a flat bed with wooden slats to keep the cargo from falling out. The cargo was children. Kids just piled into the truck and away we went. That method is not legal today except while traveling in parades. Traffic was light in those days and we did not use freeways. The only three highways at that time were Highway 80 heading east, Coast Highway 101 and Highway 395.



Loading the Stake bed truck  
(Courtesy of Bayside Community Center)

In 1949, Camp Oliver in Descanso was placed under the direction of the Sisters of Social Service. Camping there became the favorite activity for the children in the community. Many of the former residents of the Italian community have fond memories of Camp Oliver. The Camp was donated by Lawrence Oliver, a pioneer Portuguese businessman who owned businesses related to the fishing industry. Mr. Oliver was a close friend of my Grandfather, Gerolamo Bregante.

Bayside organized baseball teams for children, ages fourteen years old and under. The teams played against other schools in the area. Again, the team was transported by the stake bed truck. Everybody remembers riding in the truck.

The Social Center provided support for our Lady of the Rosary Church by training altar boys on how to assist at Mass and they taught the servers to read Latin. The sisters were excellent in this area.

Some of the older girls assisted the Sisters in supervising the younger children and participating in children's social events. The social center was a very active facility.



Picnic area and playground, circa 1940's  
(Courtesy of Bayside Community Center)

A club house was located at the Social Center for meetings, plays, dances and singing classes. The teenagers formed social clubs and dancing gave us the opportunity to socialize with the neighborhood kids. There are husbands and wives today who started their romance at the social center.

Prior to entering high school, Bayside was the location in the neighborhood for good fun and bonding for a life long friendship with children in the Italian Community. The wonderful Sisters of Social Service rank tops in providing us the direction for later life. They provided me with a memorable experience in a fun-filled childhood.

In 1962, the building of Interstate 5 and the demolition of Washington School disrupted the property of the Social Center. Bayside relocated to the Linda Vista area and is now very active again, meeting the needs of the new community.

The Sisters of Social Service provided me with a wonderful childhood experience.

I'm smiling as I write this.

This essay is the seventh of future articles to be written by Jim Bregante, a native San Diegan, on growing up near the waterfront and the Little Italy area. He volunteers as a docent at the Maritime Museum of San Diego and is a Board Member of the Convivio Society for Italian Humanities. He narrates a historical journey of the waterfront and vicinity from the 1930's to the present via a power point presentation featuring pictures from historical and family archives. These pictures depict his family's start in the fishing industry as well as his experiences on the waterfront and as a child in Little Italy. His presentation is offered as a community service to acquaint audiences with the rich history and romance of our beautiful waterfront and Little Italy. Groups interested in scheduling a presentation can call (888) 485-4825 toll free or e-mail: [info@italianhistory.org](mailto:info@italianhistory.org).