

Broken Dream Becomes Grander Reality in South OC

Casa Romantica Facility Is Community Resource

By KIM HAMAN

Casa Romantica Cultural Center and Gardens is nestled among the distinctive homes that line the curved streets of San Clemente.

The community facility can be a reminder for those who live here that life doesn't always work out as anticipated, and of what can happen when dreams falter.

The Spanish Colonial Revival-style facility, originally the home of one San Clemente's founders, is now a vibrant community center that hosts arts and cultural events and gives back to the community through its offerings, including free educational programs, school tours, camps and student exhibitions (see list of upcoming events, page 28).

Its annual black-tie Toast to the Casa event raised \$90,000 last year to support the programs, which benefit 2,000 children each year.

The center is a resource some of its leaders consider a hidden gem, and it packs a colorful history that helped pave the way for its use today.

"Casa Romantica is an amazing place," says Executive Director **Berenika D. Schmitz**, whose passion for the center bubbles over when she shares its history, "with an amazing story."

Different Beginning

It was built as a home for **Ole Hanson**, who was mayor of Seattle from 1918 to 1919 and came to Orange County following an unsuccessful bid for the U.S. presidency in 1920.

Hanson wanted to build a Spanish-style resort town, a respite for urban-weary Californians.

He and his partners financed the construction of the new city over the next decade with buildings designed in the Spanish Colonial Revival style that reflected Hanson's personal vision of a "Spanish City by the Sea."

In 1927 Hanson commissioned architect **Carl Lindbom** to build a home for him, his wife, and their 10 children.

Lindbom was renowned for his design of the nearby La Casa Pacifica in 1926, another elaborate ocean-view mansion that would later gain recognition as President **Richard Nixon's** "Western White House."

Casa Romantica, as Hanson's home was christened in 1946 by a later owner, was a meticulously designed, seven-bedroom, seven-bath mansion complete with a courtyard, fountains, and meandering paths that led through elaborate gardens.

The founding of the city of San Clemente was a success. Hanson's financial life, however, wasn't.

Hanson, financially leveraged with mortgages on his various property ventures, lost all of his remaining holdings when the Great Depression hit, including his mansion in San Clemente. He and his family relocated to Twentynine Palms, where he died of a heart attack in 1940 at age 66.

Dream Deferred

The mansion in the following years went through foreclosure, several owners, another name change, a 24-year period as a retirement home, and a decade-long stint as a wedding and special-events venue.

There was at one point discussion of turning it into condominiums, according to news reports.

The fine materials and meticulous craftsmanship that defined the mansion were obscured by later alterations to the building, Schmitz says.

The San Clemente Redevelopment Agency purchased the property in 1989, and the home joined the National Registry of Historic Places two years later.

In 1999 the agency began to explore whether Casa Romantica could be converted to a cultural arts center, turning to prominent San Clemente



Casa Romantica leaders: David Westendorf, vice president; Berenika Schmitz, executive director; Ruth DeNault, president; Bonnie Koch, secretary; Gordon Olson, treasurer

business and community leaders **Ruth DeNault** and **Guy Varriano** for help. DeNault, along with her husband, **Jim**, founded the first True Value Hardware in 1956 when San Clemente was a town of just 3,500 people. Varriano, though new to San Clemente after moving here in 1998, was a retired senior vice president of **HSBC Bank**. DeNault and Varriano were tasked with helping recruit other local leaders to serve on a founding board.

"It was a challenge to find the right people to take this on," DeNault recalls. Eventually, DeNault and three others, including Varriano, who still serves alongside her on Casa's board, became the founding board members. They helped establish the Casa Romantica Cultural Center and Gardens as a nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization in 2002.

"We wanted the Casa to become the cultural heart of the city," she says.

An anonymous \$1.5 million donation combined with money raised through developers, the city, and other donors, enabled the board to restore the mansion to its former glory.

"It was so exciting to see Casa Romantica so beautiful again," DeNault says.

Casa Romantica Cultural Center and Gardens officially opened its doors to the public in 2003 and today offers events such as ballets and musical performances.

New Vision

Its reputation as a cultural destination grew at a steady pace over the following decade, says **Bonnie Koch**, who joined Casa's board a few years ago. She is also a longtime San Clemente resident and business leader as owner of **El Camino Travel**, which her parents launched in 1952.

The center's initial focus was narrow.

"The Casa focused on sharing the history of San Clemente," Koch says. "We did have programs and exhibits, but they weren't planned comprehensively."

Then, in 2013, the board brought on a young new executive director, Schmitz, a 2005 Harvard alumnae who graduated magna cum laude. Her resume included a year as a fellow with the DeVos Institute of Arts Management at **Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts** in Washington, D.C. She also founded the **Dana Point Symphony** in 2011 and is the current chair of the city of Dana Point's cultural commission.

Schmitz' goal, she says, was to quickly expand what she calls Casa Romantica's reputation as Orange County's cultural heart by adding carefully selected programs, exhibits and performances that appealed to a wider group of people. She also developed a comprehensive

social media campaign for the venue.

"It was wonderful to have someone who knew what they were doing before they got here," Koch says of Schmitz.

Board member **Gordon Olson**, a retired attorney with intellectual property law firm **Knobbe Martens Olson and Bear**, said that initially, there was some controversy over bringing on Schmitz because some perceived her as wanting to implement change too quickly.

"There is this idea in the nonprofit world that you have to move slowly," Schmitz explains. "Many of my colleagues from Harvard have started businesses that are doing something innovative and fast. I think we're at a cultural and historic place where nonprofits can do the same thing."

"Sometimes it can be a little scary to move so fast, but you have to have a plan. We do. We're not just making change for the sake of making

change, but to grow thoughtfully and intentionally."

The approach seems to be working. Casa Romantica, since Schmitz joined, has doubled its membership and event ticket sales. Its annual budget now approaches \$1 million, which represents a 30% increase across the center's 2013-14 and 2014-15 fiscal years.

"There is something for everyone here," she says. "People love quality and really good experiences. We want to make sure everyone who comes here has a fantastic experience."

Businesses Bought In

Schmitz and the board are also working to secure corporate and business support. The facility has always enjoyed the support of local businesses and now has donor companies such as **Fluid Master, Farmers & Merchants Bank, Hurley**, and a host of others.

Greg Stoutenburgh, president of **Epica Medical Innovations** in San Clemente, says he decided to lend his company's support to Casa Romantica after visiting the location for the first time several months ago.

"I was so impressed by what the Casa is providing the community," he says. "There is a lack of access to quality arts, history, and the various things that the Casa can offer. By providing these sorts of events, people are able to experience this culture and enjoy it. The arts enrich the entire community. The richer a society is, the better a business will do."

Ole Hanson built the city of San Clemente as a place of respite. Now the center has become the heart of San Clemente, DeNault says, and symbolizes how dead dreams can be reborn in even grander ways.

"People come here, young and old, and feel that this is their house," DeNault says. "Then they walk out on the terrace and think, 'Wow, this is my ocean view.' And that's really what we want—for people to know that Casa Romantica and everything it offers really belongs to the people of San Clemente and all of Orange County." ■

Kids Get Gift of Music at Casa Romantica's Academy

Free Program One of Batch Designed for the Young Set

By KIM HAMAN

Ten-year-old **Dillon** had a dream: to learn to play the guitar. At least that's what he said in the application video he sent in to be considered for **Casa Romantica's** free Music Festival and Academy.

At the annual two-week academy, which took place in July, children ages 8 to 13 studied piano, violin, viola and cello through private studio lessons, performances, musicianship training, parent workshops and innovative classes.

So if Dillon's dream was to play guitar, why was he selected to be one of the 25 children to participate? After all, more than 70 applied.

"There was just something about him," says Executive Director **Berenika D. Schmitz**. "He was so bright and funny. We knew he'd be a great addition."

Dillon was offered the viola, a stringed instrument slightly larger than a violin but with a lower pitch—not quite the guitar he was hoping for, but he took to it right away,

Schmitz recalls.

The boy, initially unfocused, soon began to warm up to the instrument.

He was playing "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star" on it by the end of the first week and ready by the end of the second week for the solo he would perform at the academy's finale concert for parents and friends.

"People underestimate what kids can do," Schmitz says. "If you give children the opportunity, they will work hard. They love being part of something special, something bigger than themselves."

That's just one of the reasons, Schmitz says, that Casa Romantica focuses many of its programs on children, including a free children's gardening program, guest performers geared to children's interests, and school tours that bring in children from across San Juan Capistrano and surrounding cities. Fundraisers and donations pay for the programs.

"Casa Romantica's children's programs fill a real need," says **Greg Stoutenburgh**, a Casa Romantica donor and president of **Epica Medical Innovations LLC** in San Clemente. "Children see that there is more to life than reality TV. ... By exposing children to art and culture, you're opening them up to a whole new world." ■