Mills College Welcomes the Middlebury Italian School

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A s reported earlier this year, the San Francisco Bay Area is enjoying a resurgence in all things Italian, from Italian Cultural Spring, Italian restaurants, shops, cultural organizations, celebrations and Italian language classes are all thriving and growing with renewed interest.

This summer, Mills College in Oakland, California, will welcome an addition to their language department, the Middlebury Italian School. The Middlebury Italian School has its origins in Vermont and has now expanded to the West Coast. The French-viewed Middlebury Language School staff member and Logistics Assistant, Paula Matthews, to learn more.

When was the Italian Program at Middlebury

There are many reasons why the Italian School relocated to the West Coast. Mills College, being in close proximity to San Francisco, is an ideal location to host an Italian program, given that there is a strong Italian-American community in San Francisco and a rich Italian heritage. Students are able to attend culturally related Italian events and experience something that is not available at Middlebury, Vermont.

Is Mills College just the site for the summer program? Will programs continue to be offered during the academic year in Florence?

Yes, Mills College is just the site for the summer. We offer a variety of programs at Mills, seven week undergraduate program, a six week graduate program (both MA and DML), a three week program for adults and a one week refresh course for non-native teachers of Italian.

College in Vermont established? How long has there been on-site at Mills College?
The Italian School at Middlebury College in Vermont opened in 1992. It followed three other languages, German, French and Spanish, all initiated with the idea of offering intensive, full immersion summer language programs. Three languages, Arabic, Korean, and now Italian, are offered at Mills College. The Italian School relocated from Middlebury to Mills College in the summer of 2014.

Why was the West Coast chosen for a new site for the Italian language program?

There is no program in the United States that mirrors the uniqueness of the Italian Language School. What sets it apart is the dynamic that grows from students working, studying, eating, and living together with the faculty whom include scholars, professors, film directors and artists all dedicated to one unique passion—Italian language and culture. What happens is truly magical and the commitment and devotion of the faculty and staff is superb.

A trademark of the program is also the Language Pledge, which each student must sign at the beginning of the summer, promising to speak only in Italian.

How many students are expected to attend the Mills College program? What courses are offered?

A variety of courses are offered. Of course, there are the traditional literature, language and film classes, but then there are others which you will find at no other campus, such as a course on Tarantismo in southern Italy or a course on culinary culture and Italian identity. There is a strong emphasis on incorporating culture into the program, and in exploring the culture from all parts of Italy. This is done through a wealth of activities and workshops, such as Italian dance, theater, games, cooking, bocce, poetry writing, opera and popular singing, etc. We have 65-80 students attending each summer.

Rai International interviewed directors Antonio Viti and Elisabetta D’Amanda, both of whom highlighted the full immersion aspect of teaching la lingua italiana. Please expand on this concept and its benefits.

The concept of full immersion stems from the conviction that the best way to learn a foreign language is to be fully exposed to it on a daily basis and use it solely for all communication. Current foreign language pedagogy and research supports this conviction and upholds the effectiveness of full immersion language learning. This is, in fact, the principle underlying the Language Pledge which requires all students to communicate strictly in the target language. Bringing together a group of students who diligently respect this Pledge, in an environment that is rich in the language, is the ideal way to learn it.

Ms. Matthews concluded our interview by saying, “While it may seem counterintuitive, the very best way to experience Italian culture and language is, surprisingly, not going to Italy but going to Middlebury’s Italian School at Mills College! Without a doubt, your exposure to the Italian language and culture is, in many ways, richer and greater. And after the Middlebury experience, your appreciation and understanding of all things Italian will be much deeper.”

For more information about the Middlebury Italian School visit the website at http://www.middlebury.edu/ls/italian, or contact Paula Matthews at pmatthews@middlebury.edu.

Gaia Capecci teaching an Italian language class at Mills College. Photo courtesy of the Mills College Italian School staff.

ITalian Community Services provides Bay Area Italian-American seniors and families with trusted resources to help them live healthy, independent and productive lives.

We are committed to honoring and preserving the Italian language and culture, with an emphasis on the strength and support that comes from family, community, education and goodwill.

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