

Passion

Entrepreneurs the world over are passionate about their craft.

By Gail Ivers

About a year ago, St. Cloud State University approached the Chamber with the idea of traveling together to Macerata, Italy. Since 2010 SCSU has had a contractual relationship with the University of Macerata that involved study abroad and faculty exchange programs. The agreement has been facilitated by Christine Imbra, SCSU professor of higher education administration, and the University of Macerata's Paola Nicolini, vice president for orientation and tutoring.

In 2012 a second contract between the two institutions expanded the relationship to include student internships, and seminars, workshops and courses. But this is just a small part of Imbra and Nicolini's vision. Their goal is much broader and involves relationships and partnerships among higher education, city government, and business.

That's where we come in. Certainly the St. Cloud Area Chamber can help draw businesses into the loop for student and faculty internships. But what about an economic relationship with businesses – entrepreneurs – in Macerata? The best way to find out, Imbra argued, was for us to make the trip to Italy. We agreed.

In October 2013 Chamber President Teresa Bohnen and I, along with Imbra and SCSU Dean of the Herberger Business School Diana Lawson, spent six days in Macerata touring businesses, meeting with community leaders, and exploring this ancient town built on the top of a mountain.

Both the president of the university, Luigi Lacche, and the mayor of Macerata, Romano Carancini, made time in their schedules to meet and welcome us. Both heartily endorsed an expanded economic partnership and expressed interest in visiting St. Cloud.

We spent an extended visit with the Macerata Chamber of Commerce. Chambers in Italy are similar in name only to chambers in the U.S. To do business in Italy you must be licensed by the state and the licensing agency is the chamber of commerce. Therefore if you are a business, you must join the chamber.

The focus of the chamber becomes much more regionally programmatic. The Macerata Chamber has a series of major initiatives including a focus on early childhood education. They also are working to promote the wines of the region. They have a large showroom and training center, separate from their office, where their staff sommelier hosts wine tastings and seminars.

As we discussed possible partnerships, it was clear that we in St. Cloud have much greater flexibility in developing programming. Chief operating officer for the Macerata Chamber, expressed enthusiasm for the ideas, reservations about execution, and optimism for finding common ground.

Far and away the most interesting part of the trip for me is what I like most in St. Cloud: visiting businesses. With Nicolini as our guide, translator, and chauffeur, we had the opportunity to meet six entrepreneurs. Some spoke English, most did not. But it didn't matter because passion is a universal language.

As a seamstress and embroidery aficionado, my personal favorite was le spose di Francesca (Brides of Francesca), where they make custom wedding dresses by hand. Brides select a picture or pattern, they are measured at Francesca's, then the dress and all of its embellishments – satin roses, veil, lace – are made by hand. It takes as little as a week to create the dress and on average costs about \$1500 if you order it directly from Francesca. If you order it from a bridal shop, the same dress will cost about \$5000. (For those of you who have a bride-to-be in the family, you could fly to Macerata, order the dress at Francesca, tour Italy for a week, and bring the dress home for less than \$5000. Think about it.) The

detail, creativity, and skill of the owners and workers were that of an artist and I would have been happy just to own a piece of the custom lace.

Everyone we met at Francesca and the other businesses couldn't talk fast enough or share enough information with us. Nicolini kept asking them to slow down, or stop, so she could translate. It reminded me of our own business owners who sincerely want their guests to understand how interesting their work is and how hard they try to be innovative and please their customers.

We also learned that the problems of business owners are the same the world over: government regulations, taxes, uncertainty, employees, distributors.... We felt completely at home among our Italian small business hosts!

Throughout our trip Bohnen and I talked about how we would apply what we were learning to our own programming. Certainly internships are an area we'd like to develop. The Chamber already has an internship program for underserved youth. Now we'd like to look at helping connect our members with graduate students from Italy. Fine arts, human resources, translation, business plan development, and technology are all areas where visiting Macerata students can help businesses in Central Minn.

We're also looking forward to a visit from a delegation from Macerata in the spring. Mayor Carancini, the Chamber's Chief Operating Officer, and vineyard owner Benedetta Lucangeli have all indicated to Nicolini that they might join her when she brings her students to St. Cloud. This time we will serve as hosts and introduce them to some of our local entrepreneurs. And if there is enough interest, we will look at leading a business exchange to Italy in 2015 or 2016. Such visits are the first step in an on-going business relationship.

If you would like to learn more about doing business in Italy, hosting a student intern, or participating in a business exchange, please let me know. When you stand on the hills of Macerata the world looks like a very large place. When you shake the hand of a new friend, you realize it's not.

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