



## *Kay Russo*

On November 14, 1942, Kay was born at the Monterey Hospital to her loving parents, Anne and Allie Russo. She was the first born and only daughter. Her brother Anthony came along three years later and with the birth of a son, Kay's brief reign as the star had to be shared.

Kay was showered with love from her grandparents Nana Rosie and Nano Matteo Sampaolo and Nana Catherine and Nano Antonio Russo. Kay was blessed with many loving aunts and uncles who had a profound impact on her life. She took her place among the numerous first cousins who were more like brothers and sisters to her. To this day, Kay's cousins, their children and even their children form a bond of love and family pride. These have become the cornerstone of her life. She is known as "Auntie Kay" to all.

She grew up on Clay Street, in the heart of Spaghetti Hill. In keeping with the Sicilian culture, her family members were fisherman. Her dad and his siblings owned the largest purse seiner in Monterey, the Camarello.

She attended Thomas O Larkin School which is where her interest in recreation began. From her earliest days of riding bikes, flying kites and playing games, Kay had a knack for organizing her friends and relatives in fun activities. She went on to graduate from San Carlos

School, Junipero Memorial High School, Monterey Peninsula College and San Jose State University. In addition, she received an honorary degree from Southern Illinois University.

Kay's earliest job was a playground leader at Larkin School during the summer and after school at several local parks. Hundreds of kids played in the organized games and activities under Kay's leadership. Her playgrounds were rich in excursions, sandcastle contests, kickball and crafts of all kinds. The kids marched in local parades and had field trips from the beach to the skating rink to Santa Cruz Boardwalk.

While attending San Jose State, Kay was studying to be a history teacher and would come home each weekend to work at Dennis the Menace Park during the day and monitor teenage dances on Friday and Saturday nights at the Monterey Youth Center. Her boss, Peter J Aldrete, suggested she switch majors and transfer into the field of Parks & Recreation. Kay took his advice and received a degree in Parks & Recreation Administration.

The job of Recreation Supervisor opened in the City of Monterey and Pete Aldrete encouraged her to apply. Kay called her favorite cousin, Rena Coniglio, and asked for her advice. She also wanted input from Rena's husband, Peter Coniglio, whom Kay always referred to as "Prince Charming". They too encouraged her to apply for the job. Kay was ecstatic when she got the position. As supervisor, she would be able to plan programs and activities for children, teens, parents, families, adults, seniors and the handicapped. Kay's belief in family and tradition enabled her to envision parks and recreation programs that would be valued and enjoyed through multiple generations.

Kay created and developed numerous programs including expanding the summer programs, Whispering Pines Day Camp, Quien Sabe Camp at Big Sur and Toro Park, Winter Wonderland, Easter Funland, Annual Pumpkin Carving Contest, Easter Egg hunt, Christmas Tree Lighting Ceremony, La Posada, trips to the skating rink, Santa Cruz Boardwalk, Marine World and Kids Day at the Fair, talent shows, classes in disco, social dance, cooking, babysitting, fashion, pre-school, tiny tots, and a variety of sports, senior citizen programs, socials for the developmentally challenged, gatherings at Colton Hall, the Fourth of July parade, the lawn party and the

fireworks show.

Because of her outstanding leadership and organizational skills, the City Manager appointed her to the position of Recreation Superintendent. In 1986, Peter J Aldrete retired, and Kay replaced him as the Recreation and Community Services Director. She was the first female of Italian descent to lead a City of Monterey department.

Kay was involved in developing many facilities including Hilltop Park Center, Archer Park Center, Via Paraiso Park, Cypress Park, Senior Citizen Center Renovation, Casanova Oak Knoll Park, Window on the Bay, bike path, rec trail, tennis center, skateboard park and ballfields at the Presidio. She worked closely with the Monterey Neighborhood Association to upgrade the parks and their facilities throughout Monterey. She was on the MPC Recreation Advisory Committee and advisor to several California recreation departments. She served as President of California Parks and Recreation Society District 6.

Kay's biggest career challenge was the development and building of the Monterey Sports Center. It became the crown jewel of facilities in the State of California - a model for others to emulate. Kay was assisted by Jeff Vierra, Cindy Vierra and Pete Cutino to bring their vision to reality. She still vividly remembers opening day; she looked across the street only to see hundreds of families lined up eagerly waiting to come in for a tour. These included faces of the Monterey people who played in Kay's programs, their kids and their grandkids. For Kay, this was what it was all about.

She is most proud of the thousands of teens she hired into their first jobs as Rec leaders, camp counselors, community center staff and sports staff while mentoring them in recreation and community service and encouraging their educational endeavors. Family traditions continue with former Rec leaders' children as well as their grandchildren working with Kay in recreation.

Kay loved working with developmentally delayed children who came to the Whispering Pines Day Camp. When she inherited the program in 1966, only about ten special needs children attended camp each day. Kay set out to expand the program. It grew to over 50 special needs

children attending each day. Her belief was that these children should follow the same camping activities as the other children in the day camp program only requiring a little longer to accomplish the same activities: crafts, folk dancing, camp skills, singing, and hikes to name a few.

Kay received the prestigious Joseph P Kennedy Jr Foundation award for developing innovative programs for the handicapped. She and Day Camp Director Jennie Nicolayev traveled to Southern Illinois University to receive a grant which was only awarded to 30 recipients in the United States. She and Jennie shared with the executive committee that their special needs children did everything the other campers did. The committee was amazed! No child psychologist on staff, no cabins or kitchen facilities, no doctor or nurse on duty, no educators, no musical director, nope! Just young & enthusiastic recreation leaders showering these children with love, encouragement and just a little extra patience. As a result, they were fully integrated, accepted and appreciated for exactly who they were. This became the new way of what is now called mainstreaming special needs children.

For the past 34 years, with the help of fellow City employees Pam Erlandson and Joe Splane, Kay started the annual Splusso Golf Tournament. The tournament raised over one hundred thousand dollars for the "campership" program which helped to defray the cost for children in need. Kay said if it hadn't been for the generosity and involvement of the local community, the tournament would never have been possible. She remains eternally grateful for the continuous support given to the children.

Kay is a devout Catholic and attends mass daily. She was baptized at San Carlos Church and received her first communion and confirmation there. She was chosen as godparent to many due to her strong beliefs. Kay keeps God at the center of her life; she is a true believer. She lives with integrity and has remained steadfast in her faith.

Her Italian heritage is the inspiration for her extensive list of extraordinary achievements. The importance of family instilled by her Sicilian ancestors is clearly evident in her inclusive nature. Kay's brother Anthony and sister-in-law Donna along with their children

Joey, Matteo and Amy and great grand nephews and nieces, Matthew, Ashley, Ryan and Kody Gallagher and J.P. and Mila Russo keep Auntie Kay happily retired

For Kay it wasn't just a job; it was a lifelong act of love, commitment, sacrifice and service to the people. She has maintained that she couldn't have done her job in recreation without all the fantastic recreation staff that worked for her and with her, each of them made the programs a success and a gift to the community. She shares her award with each of you.

Thank you to Italian Heritage Society for this great honor.

