



Andrea Bocelli Foundation Opens First Full-time School in a Hospital

“Our vision has always been global. Our mission is to create projects for poor communities with high illiteracy”



Italian Hours

Lucy Gordan



Bocelli, his wife, Eugenio Giani, The President of Tuscany, and Sara Funaro, the Vice-Mayor of Florence at the inauguration. Courtesy of The Andrea Bocelli Foundation. Photo: Giacomo Moresi, 2024.

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“In 1994, shortly after he’d won the San Remo Song Festival in the ‘new voices’ category for his song ‘Il mare calma della sera,’” Laura Biancalani, CEO of The Andrea Bocelli Foundation wrote me, “I knocked on Andrea’s front door to ask him to organize a concert to benefit a local hospice for the terminally ill. Impressed that only at age 18 I was dedicated at helping others, he agreed and we’ve been close friends and colleagues ever since.”

Bocelli’s first major international collaboration took place in January 2010 after a disastrous earthquake in Haiti which killed thousands and destroyed infrastructures. He, his manager Veronica Berti, whom he met in 2002 and married in 2014, and Biancalani worked with Father Rick Frechette, the founder of St. Luc Fondation there, whom they’d met a few months before at a New York concert and with whom they still collaborate. Over the next decade, until 2019’s civil war, the Bocellis and Biancalani traveled to Haiti at least 4 times a year to support and participate in humanitarian projects.

Founded in 2011, The Andrea Bocelli Foundation was inspired by Florence’s three-term mayor Giorgio La Pira’s fervent charitable interventions and the Bocellis’ first hands-on Haitian experience the year before. Since then, it has funded many humanitarian, educational and medical projects in England, Greece, Iraq, Syria, The United States, and Vatican City.

“Our vision,” explained Laura Biancalani, “has always been global. Our mission is to create projects for poor communities with high illiteracy. For example, over the years, the Foundation has raised over 60 million euros to construct schools in Haiti and ten in Italy, mostly in the Marches after August 2016 earthquake. These schools still provide quality education to over 20,000 students every day.”

Besides schools, The Foundation has created projects that provide access to drinking water and basic medical care to more than 400,000 people in Haiti’s most remote and impoverished areas.





A view of the Maria Manetti Shrem Educational Center

In 2020, in co-operation with the Italian Pediatric Hospitals Association (AOPI), The Foundation launched its still on-going “ABF H-LABS”, a program to support educational and artistic activities for the over 70,000 hospitalized students in Italy who attend schools in specialized facilities or at home thanks to the Foundation’s Home Education service. (This number rises to 1 million when it includes children with chronic illnesses). In 2022 over 17,000 children benefitted from these labs while hospitalized in eight Italian hospitals: The Meyer Children’s Hospital in Florence, Giannina Gaslini Children’s Hospital in Genoa; Salesi Hospital in Ancona; Burlo Garofolo Pediatric Institute in Trieste; Santobono-Pausilipo Pediatric Hospital in Naples; Gaetano Martino University Hospital in Messina; University Hospital of Padua; and “Ospedale Giovanni XXIII” Children’s Hospital in Bari.

Based on the success of the H-LABS program, last March 21st, The Foundation inaugurated its latest project, The Maria Manetti Shrem Educational Center at the Meyer Children’s Hospital in Florence. Named for the Florentine-Californian opera-lover, art collector, benefactor, and The Foundation’s ambassadress since 2017, it’s the world’s first school building on a hospital’s grounds.

Designed by the Rome-based international architectural firm Alvisi Kirimoto, the white-walled Center is surrounded by green lawns and includes a patio with tables, an area for patients to grow plants and vegetables, and a playroom. Large windows brighten its large irregularly-shaped classrooms and laboratories. Its furniture is colorful and cheerful. It’s the firm’s second project financed by The Foundation. The other is the Accademia della Musica Franco Corelli in Camerino in the Marches.

Open daily from 8 PM to 4 PM for lessons, the Center’s forty full-time teachers cover Italy’s traditional curriculum, from kindergarten to university, for the circa 250 Meyer patients plus hold laboratories in music, art, and computer science. Classes are one-on-one or in groups depending the student’s medical schedule.

“What’s unique about this project,” Biancalani wrote, “is its focus on art, music and digital technologies as key learning tools.”



For children and adolescents aren’t containers to fill, but rather fires to light.”

The Center’s staff also includes social workers and psychologists to help, again via music and art, the chronically-ill or dying children and their families.

Since the 2022/2023 academic year, The Foundation has participated in creating a master’s course at the University of Florence to train hospital teachers and educational administrators.

“Attempting to describe what one experiences in places like...the Meyer hospital,” said Andrea Bocelli, who was hospitalized frequently, although never at The Meyer, as a child for congenital glaucoma, at the Center’s inauguration, “is futile because the joys and sorrows experienced here cannot be expressed in words. Here one experiences a season of time, and time in life is short. We must optimize it and succeed in giving a profound meaning to the time spent in hospital by providing children with the tools they need so as not to waste time. When here, children feel the need not to fall behind their peers and even study more willingly than those not-hospitalized who have the opportunity to run and play soccer. The world is propelled forward by those who work and do, not by those who merely talk. Therefore, I would like to speak little and simply express my endless gratitude to everyone and sincerely wish them the best in the work they do.”

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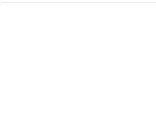


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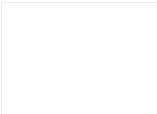
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