

I Madonnari to mark 30th anniversary

By JOSEF WOODARD

NEWS-PRESS CORRESPONDENT

This weekend, it will be business as usual and unusual, at the high profile site of the Santa Barbara Mission. The pavement in front of the church will be “defaced” in an artistically enlightened way, the customary concentration of tourists will be on hand, but in exponentially denser proportions, along with one of the strongest showings from the community all year.

In short, the weekly state and schedule of things will be disrupted, but a grand and well-grounded local annual tradition will take over the property. If it's Memorial Day weekend in Santa Barbara, this must be I Madonnari time.

As part of a festival that reaches its milestone 30th anniversary this weekend, artists will work diligently and fastidiously in the medium of chalk to create a gallery of 150 separate squares, in a “street painting” medium dating back centuries in Italy.

Squares have been sponsored by area businesses, and artists bring often elaborate visual concepts to the pavement/canvases, working in public, unafraid of getting their hands and knees dirty.

Over the weekend, the festival, proceeds from which benefit the Children's Creative Project, will spice up the sensory and festive

experience for visitors, with Italian food (from the Italian Market) and a steady roster of live music.

By late Monday, all will be quiet on the festival front, and the finished artistic products can be viewed in a more peaceful setting. Gradually, the “paintings” will fade into history, a function of this inherently temporary art form.

By this point, three decades into the life of I Madonnari, the event has cemented itself on the calendar and in the city's self-identity. But a major anniversary seems a ripe time to look back on the unique origins of the festival, the first such event of its kind in the United States.

I Madonnari exists thanks to the herculean efforts of Kathy Koury, a Santa Barbara County Education Office employee and founder/director of the Children's Creative Project.

Much has changed, but much has stayed the same.

“I originally designed the layout for the festival with the grid for street paintings, tents for the Italian food market, live music, concerts in the Mission Church and a separate Kid's Squares area for street painting,” Ms. Koury said. “I also created the concept of a festival poster, T-shirt, and note cards all designed from our street painting images, along with other items for sale.”

The germ of the idea came after internationally known Santa Barbara-based photographer Jesse

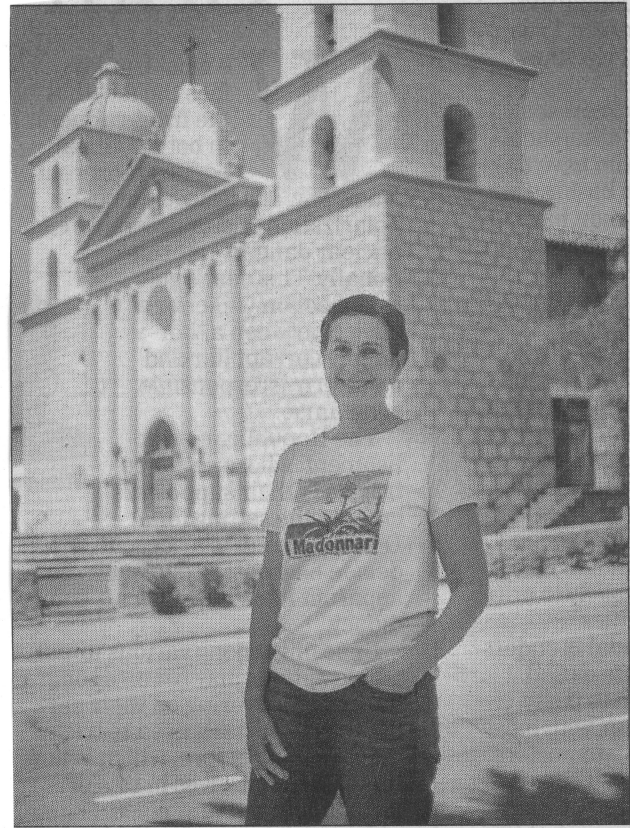
Alexander encouraged her to visit the International Painting Competition in Grazie di Curtatone, Italy, with the idea of her launching a local festival to benefit the Children's Creative Project.

She connected with street painter Kurt Wenner, a former Santa Barbara artist and designer who has mastered the art of three-dimensional street painting and has practiced his art around the world for decades. Ms. Koury hired Mr. Wenner to do street painting demonstrations in town, and visited him when she went to Italy, where he was living at the time.

“Once I saw this event,” she explained, “I knew this was something I wanted to create for both Santa Barbara and the Children's Creative Project. I had been looking for a unique fundraising event to benefit the CCP for many years, and this was it.

“It was perfect because it demonstrates the creative process in action, and this in turn relates to our mission as a nonprofit arts education program in the public schools. Our resident artists involve children in the creative process through classroom instruction in the visual and performing arts to education, inspire, and to provide joyful experiences for children.”

In 1986 she approached the Mission's Father Virgil Cordano with her concept for a festival, also involving



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Kathy Koury, founder/director of the Children's Creative Project, was instrumental in the development of the I Madonnari street painting festival, held annually at the Santa Barbara Mission.

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food and music, and a deal was in motion within 15 minutes of discussion. She also agreed to have the rugged parking lot repaved to allow for the chalk painting process to work.

She adds that, “unlike the festival in Italy, I felt our festival should not be a competition. I created the idea of financially ‘sponsored’ street painting squares — by businesses, organizations or individuals — whose names would appear at the top of each square. I developed a committee of local artists who in turn recruited other artists to participate as street painters. CCP Board committees and members acquired sponsors, and developed an ‘Italian Market’ of great food.

“Since no one in Santa Barbara knew what a street painting festival would be like, it was fun, exciting and challenging to make this new festival a reality.”

That reality has prevailed and grown, along with the world of I Madonnari street painting festivals, and artists who have adapted to its methodologies, and found in this old yet renewed medium both an expressive and a financially rewarding outlet for their work.

As festivals have proliferated in the United States and beyond, artists have specialized in the medium, such as Cecelia Linayao, this year’s featured artist. An artist who has worked in various medi-

ums, she has dedicated herself to the “street painting” idiom, and traveled to work in Italy, Mexico, China and elsewhere.

At the Mission, she will offer a large painting in front of the steps, on the theme of the Madonna (the root of I Madonnari.)

In other special events to commemorate the 30th birthday this

weekend, an epic 24-by-30-foot collaborative painting will be created by seven veterans of the familiar Santa Barbara-based painting crew — Sharyn Chan, Ann Hefferman, Lisa Jones, Jennifer LeMay, Jay Schwartz, Laura Wilkinson, and Tracy Lee Stum. Ms. Stum will present and sign her new book “The Art of Chalk.”