

Easton Hospital's President and CEO Maintains Strong Ties with His Community

By Pam and John Richetta

There's a genuine sincerity and a true feeling of welcome in the warm handshake and easy smile that greets you when you meet Cornelio Catena. Without the background of the executive offices that surround him, at first impression, you might find it difficult to place this unassuming and friendly personality in the midst of the overwhelming responsibilities associated with his position of President and Chief Executive Officer of Easton Hospital. Cor, as he is referred to by the hospital staff, is gracious and warm and a remarkably easy person to talk with. Perhaps that is the secret to the significant accomplishments and successes that Catena has spearheaded in the past three years since he arrived in the Lehigh Valley to assume these responsibilities. Cor Catena's credentials are impressive. He's a veteran of hospital management with more than twenty-six years of experience. Before coming to Easton Hospital's 369 bed acute care teaching hospital three years ago he served as a hospital CEO for more than fourteen years at other facilities throughout the United States. Catena, who is fluent in Italian, also resided in Rome, Italy for two years, where he developed the start-up of the Rome American Hospital for the Columbia/HCA Healthcare Corporation and served as the hospital's CEO.



The Easton Hospital that we see today under Cor Catena's leadership has had its roots in the community since November, 1890. The site of the first Easton Hospital, which was a former residence on Wolf Street, was purchased for a mere \$7,000. The wooden structure was converted and contained just 11 beds, with five attending physicians, four consulting physicians and one nurse. In just six months after opening its doors, 51 patients had been treated and by 1906, just 16 years following the hospital opening, the original wood building was replaced with a more modern brick structure which allowed expansion to 100 beds. In 1915 a fundraiser for a new hospital enabled the hospital corporation to buy all the land between 20th and 22nd Streets for the site of the future building. In addition, seventeen lots at 20th and Lehigh Streets were donated for the hospital site. Unfortunately World War I and administrative problems prevented the new hospital from being built until 1930.

Cor Catena speaks with tremendous pride about the history of Easton Hospital and the community he has adopted. *“Easton Hospital has been here for a hundred and fifteen years. It is a full service hospital. We do everything from birthing babies to helping people with cardiac conditions and other maladies. We have a very committed and dedicated staff of physicians and employees plus a very supportive board and a very supportive community, too. We're in the process of making some tremendous changes here in construction and equipment and infusing a lot capitol into the facility to upgrade it and make it so that we can do all sorts of modern procedures. Just important is the service we provide to the people who come through our doors. Our patients are really our guests! We all try to do whatever we can to make their stay here as comfortable as possible and it's everybody's job.”*

Just as much as Co Catena is dedicated to continually improving Easton Hospital, is his dedication to doing what he can for the community. He explained, *“We're partnering with Lafayette Ambassador Bank and each of us are contributing a million dollars over the next ten years to revitalize the West Ward of*

Easton. We're working with the city in that effort to help with the streetscapes and facades. It's all part of being a good citizen and a good neighbor."

The sparkle that comes to Cor Catena's eyes when he speaks about his family is evident, as is the fact that he is tremendously proud of his heritage what it and his family have contributed to who he is today. The generations of Catenas before him bear a varied Italian lineage. He is quick to point out, however, that he is also twenty-five per cent Sicilian. Three of Cor Catena's grandparents were born in Italy and one in Sicily. *"My grandmother from Sicily was born in the province di Messina in a small town, Casa di Ali. My mother's dad was from near Salerno. On my father's side his mother was from the province di Benevento near Naples and his dad was from a small town in Latina, south of Rome".* Not surprisingly, none of Cor's grandparents were married or even knew each other before immigrating to the United States. *"They came to the United States as kids and teenagers in the early 1920s with their parents, immigrating to upstate New York - my father's parents to Amsterdam, New York and my mother's parents to near Albany, New York. My father's father – my grandfather - had a bakery. He had learned how to be a baker in Rome. My father told me that his father ran away from home when he was just nine years older, leaving his small village and going to Rome. He got arrested and was sent back home to his father. Then, when he was twelve, he asked his father if he could leave and he went back to Rome and started working in a bakery off of the Pizza Fiernaze in Rome and then immigrated to this country and opened a bakery in Amsterdam, New York with his brother, who also came over."* Cor Catena's grandfather, Cornelio Catena, ran the family bakery for forty years, raising their two sons and a daughter with his wife, Antoinetta. *"My father worked in the bakery, too, as a kid and while he was in high school. Then my father went to college and on to law school and then became a lawyer and a juvenile court judge in upstate New York. It's interesting because I come from a long line of legal people on both sides of my family. My father was a lawyer; my mother's dad was a lawyer and then became a judge – a Supreme Court judge for New York State. I also have a great uncle that was a Supreme Court judge, and another uncle – my mother's sister's husband – who became a judge and my brother's a judge."*

Being seeped in the legal profession for generations, one would assume that this would be the same career path that Easton Hospital's President and CEO would move into instead of becoming a veteran of hospital management. But it didn't seem to have the fascination for Cor Catena that was needed to move into that field. *"I got into hospital administration because I enjoyed the sciences. I majored in zoology in college but I didn't know what I would do with a degree in zoology when I got out. However, I liked hospitals – I used to study at the medical school library at Vermont. I liked the ambiance, too, so when I came home one semester I spoke with the hospital administrator in my home town and he told me it was a great profession to get in to. I also spoke with several other people in the profession as well and they all told me the same thing, so I applied to graduate school in hospital administration, I got in and here I am."*

Like much of the Catena family history in moving to the United States, Cor Catena's path to Easton was a long and interesting one. *"I lived in a bunch of different places and kind of moved up the career ladder from an assistant Administrator to a Chief Operating Officer to a CEO. Most recently I was in upstate New York for five years. Then I got a call from my current boss who was in Tennessee and he told me about this opportunity in Easton, Pennsylvania. I came down here – it will be four years this October – and the time has gone so quickly. I've been married to my wife, Lauri, for twenty-five years this September and she has been wonderful. This move to Easton is our ninth move in those twenty-five years that we've been married and it hasn't been from Easton, to Palmer to Bethlehem! We got married right after Lauri finished college and our first house was in Overland Park in Kansas. She left her family where she grew up in Ohio and moved with me to Kansas then we moved to Lexington, Kentucky after just a few years then on to Virginia Beach, Virginia, then Houston, Texas then Rome, Italy followed by a move to Orlando, Florida then to Cape Coral, Florida then to Amsterdam, New York and now here, to Easton, Pennsylvania. I didn't know too much about Easton before we came here. It has been such a great*

experience for us and there is such a large Italian community here – many who are a part of our hospital staff! My former assistant who just recently moved on to another position in the hospital, Roberta Villari, is Italian. There's also Theresa Rizzolino who works out here and also Mike Alaveri, who is our assistant Financial Officer. In fact there are also many people who are from Italy who work here at the hospital. A number of ladies work in the medical records, in the laboratory and around the hospital that are from Italy.”

Growing up Italian in the Catena family with Cor's mother and father, Gene and Nancy, along with his seven brothers and sisters, elicits many fond memories for Cornelio Catena. Much of the traditions that his parents and grandparents established are still part of his family's life especially when he and Lauri and their three children, Gabriella, Gino and Cecelia return to upstate New York. *“When I was young we'd start off our Sunday by going to church in the morning. I was an alter boy and my brother was an alter boy, too, so we'd get up and go to eight o'clock mass and then my father would take the two of us and two of our friends out for sausage sandwiches at DiCaprio's Diner. Then we'd go home and have macaroni for dinner in the afternoon. My grandparents, my aunts and uncles, my cousins – we'd all be together.”*

Cornelio is the oldest of the Catena brothers and sisters. He is followed by his brother, Felix, who still lives in Amsterdam, New York, another brother, Gene, who lives in Vincenza, Italy with his wife and their four children. There's also John, who is a marine ecologist, living in Massachusetts with his wife and their three children as well as Tom who is a physician in Kenya, working in a mission hospital that is run by a Catholic church. Paul, the youngest of the six brothers, is a fifth year seminary student, studying to be a priest at St. Mary's Seminary in Baltimore, Maryland and Cor's only sister, Anne, lives in Palmer Township with her husband and their three young boys.

Cornelio Catena is a perfect match for this area in many ways. Not only does he have over twenty-six years of experience in the field of hospital management he has a true sense of family, a desire to serve his community and a true passion for making Easton Hospital one of the very best health care facilities in the Lehigh Valley. The charm and sincerity that are just two of the fine attributes that make up this gracious individual are, most definitely, part of what has contributed to the tremendous achievements Easton Hospital has realized since Cor Catena's arrival four years ago. He has a strong loyalty to Easton Hospital. He has come to love the community, he loves his work and he is also immensely pleased that the Lehigh Valley embraces their Italian heritage with such pride.