

# NOT JUST A DREAM: The Grand Opening of the Croatia Club of Tampa Bay's New Croatian Cultural Center

By Kristin Vuković  
Photos by Kathy Vuković

The Winter of 2010 will hold special memories for the members of the Croatia Club of Tampa Bay; it marked the Grand Opening of their new Croatian Cultural Center in Clearwater, Florida. Principal builder John Dukovac wore a shirt bearing the name of his company, La Maison, with the caption: "We Build Dreams." It was appropriate attire for the long-anticipated event. Former Club Secretary Mary Kušček commented, "Having a building like this back when I was secretary was only just a dream--now it's a reality."

The completion of the Center was a triumph in many ways for members of the Croatia Club of Tampa Bay. There was talk of creating a cultural center for Croatians in Florida as far back as the 80's, but the Club started getting serious about the project just a few years ago. Late Club member Marko Pavičić of Marco Polo Builders, Inc. began architect selection in Spring 2005, but he passed away later that year. Club member John Dukovac and his partner Russell LeGrande of La Maison took over the project in 2008, and drafted new County-approved blueprints. Former Club President Lovro Vrbos commented, "God sent him ŠDukovacĆ to us." He added, "Some people were skeptical, but we made it."

A major obstacle in creating the center was



The Croatia Club of Tampa Bay's Croatian Cultural Center

financing. Initial funding was procured through contributions, raffles, and building material gifts, but it was not enough. Mr. Vrbos had the keen idea of creating shares, which allowed members to own a part of the building. Some members invested in shares ranging from \$2,000-40,000 to aid the project's completion; a generous member loaned the Club the remaining money needed to finish the building on schedule; and other members contributed talent, for example, painting and laying tile.

Another obstacle was the strict regulations of the County. Builder John Dukovac commented, "If it wasn't for him Špartner Russell LeGrande, project site managerĆ this club wouldn't be here. They have different rules here Šin Pinellas CountyĆ." Together, the Dukovac-LeGrande team was able to navigate County regulations and complete the building. While accepting awards given to him and Russell by the Club "for outstanding service and leadership," Dukovac said, "The heart that they Šthe Club membersĆ showed, this is the reason that the building is here. Hvala lijepo."

Applause greeted Kolinda Grabar Kitarović, Ambassador from the Republic of Croatia to the United States of America, who

arrived to cut the ribbon, signifying the official opening of the Center. During the ribbon-cutting ceremony, the tamburaši "Priateljji" from Chicago (band members Joe Kirin and brothers Steven and Den Ovarin) played "Viva Croatia" ("Živjela Hrvatska"). Standing by were Club President Ljubica Šimunović, former Club President Lovro Vrbos, and Fa-

ther Ivica Majstorović from Chicago, who blessed the opening. Pieces of the ribbon were cut and distributed to members as souvenirs. Drinks and hors d'oeuvres, including Dalmatian Ham (pršut), cheese (sir) and Dalmatian octopus salad (salat "hoba") were served upon entering the Center. Everyone stood with hands over hearts for the U.S. National Anthem, followed by The Croatian National Anthem, "Our Beautiful Homeland" ("Lijepa Naša Domovino"). Father Ivica blessed the community, building, and Club members, and led the Our Father ("oce Naš"). Concluding his blessing, Father Ivica said, "Only the people who built this Center know how hard it was to achieve. People should be aware that this place will bring a lot of happiness to this community in the future." Father Ivica then presented his gift to the Center, a large wooden crucifix, symbolizing his blessing.

In her opening address, Master of Ceremonies Mary Kušček thanked Mr. Dukovac, praising him as "one of the miracles of having this hall here today." She went on to say that she hoped the Center would be a home away from home for Croatians in Florida. Club President Ljubica Šimunović echoed Kušček's sentiments. Fighting back tears, she

said, "If it wasn't for Mr. Dukovac, we would not be in this building today. This was very difficult for us, but we did it." Šimunović went on to thank all of the Club members for their support, and honored the many members who were no longer with them. She also thanked Zvonko Crkvenčić, the largest shareholder, and Nikola Bašić, who loaned money to finish the Croatian Cultural Center, the only existing American Croatian club building in Florida.

Ambassador Kolinda Grabar Kitarović was one of the last to take the podium. She first spoke in Croatian, then English. "This Center and memories about being here will last forever," she told attentive members. "Thank you for your warm welcome. It is very nice to have a place like home, even though we are very far from home." The deep appreciation members felt for Kitarović's presence and remarks was later evident by the number of people who lined up to talk with and have a photo taken with her. Following Kitarović's speech, "Priateljji" played "Tonight is Our Party" ("Večeras je naša fešta") and the buffet dinner ensued, replete with traditional Croatian food such as sauerkraut and sausages, as well as many delicious pastries. When "Priateljji" played "Fairy of Velebit" ("Vilo Velebita"), members crowded around the band to sing along. This Croatian patriotic song was banned during the 1970's because Croatians were not allowed to express their love for Croatia during that time.

The Croatian Cultural Center is a new home for these members, a place where they can gather and celebrate their Croatian identity, history and culture, and pass it on to their children. Dukovac sat watching people dance and enjoy the music. "See, now this is what it's all about, right here" he said, patting his heart. "This is why it was built."

For Club information and upcoming events, call (941) 748-7222, (727) 449-2997 (Special thanks to Ivana Lipošćak for her help with translation)



Master of Ceremonies Mary Kušček



At the head table (from left to right): Dario Mihelin, Counselor for Political Affairs, Embassy of the Republic of Croatia to the United States of America; Zvonko M. Labas, Immediate Past Treasurer for the National Federation of Croatian Americans; Lovro Vrbos, Immediate Past President of the Croatia Club of Tampa Bay; Kolinda Grabar Kitarović, Ambassador, Embassy of the Republic of Croatia to the United States of America; Ljubica Šimunović, President of the Croatia Club of Tampa Bay; and John Dukovac, President, La Maison.



Ribbon Cutting Ceremony



The Croatian Connection



"Priateljju"



Builders' Awards