

HISTORY of KANSAS CITY CHAPTER of UNICO NATIONAL



UNICO was organized in Waterbury, Connecticut in 1922 when a group of Italian Americans led by Dr. Anthony P. Vastola began providing service to the community in the form of charitable, patriotic and educational deeds. The idea then spread to several other cities in the East where additional chapters were chartered. The first UNICO convention was held in New York City in 1930. The National Italian Civic League, a similar organization, was established in Omaha, Nebraska in 1931 and spread to about 15 cities in the West. Both groups continued their fine work during the ensuing years. In 1946 efforts began to affect a merger, ultimately creating one national organization. On July 4, 1947, at a convention in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, UNICO National was born.

UNICO's motto is "Service Above Self". The word "UNICO" means "unique" or "only one of its kind" in the Italian language. UNICO is also an acronym and the letters symbolize our core values: U for Unity, N for Neighborliness, I for Integrity, C for Charity, and O for Opportunity.

The Kansas City Men's Chapter of UNICO National was subsequently formed in 1949. The members included prominent professionals and business owners from the Kansas City's Italian American community. The organization serves as a service organization raising funds for college scholarships, contributes to charitable causes and provides for needy families. UNICO likens itself as the Italian American Rotary Club.

Many prominent members have been a part of the Kansas City chapter. Most prominently were three members who went on to become presidents of the

National Organization and presided over all of the chapters in the United States. The three members were D. M. Nigro , Dr. James DiRenna and Dr. Louis Badeen. Other prominent members that have been part of the organization include Michael Berbiglia, Joseph Dasta, Tony DiPardo, Americo Felici, Henry Panethiere, Leonard Passantino, Dr. Dominic Tutera, Dr. Joseph Spallito, Tom Rago, Ross Cascio, Phil Balano, Leo Failone and Carl DiCapo.

The Kansas City Chapter has had a strong commitment to further the education of the Italian American community and established the UNICO four-year college scholarship for high school graduates in 1954. From 1954 to 1999 the scholarship was awarded to just one graduate. From 1999 until today the scholarship has been awarded to multiple graduates. For 2024 there will be 35 recipients of the UNICO scholarship totaling \$56,000 in awards (see full list). The organization has awarded over a million dollars in scholarships in total since its inception. Scholarships are the largest benefactor of the organizations fund raising efforts and its most significant source of pride.

The Kansas City Chapter has engaged in many charitable fund raising events to provide for the UNICO Scholarships and to contribute to its charitable causes. The two main events over its history include the “ I am an American Day’ gala and the Festa Italiana.

The “I am an American Day” gala was a fund raising event that honored a local citizen of Kansas City for their civic contributions. These events were black tie occasions and were held in major ballrooms at the Hyatt Regency, Crown Center, the downtown Marriott and Alameda Plaza hotels. Guests would typically include local and state politicians including the mayor of Kansas City, US House and Senate legislatures and even the Governor of Missouri. The number of guests would number over 400 in some years. Prominent awardees included H. Roe Bartle, Ewing Kaufman, Alex Nigro and Joseph Dasta (see full list). The “I am an American Day” galas were held from 1951 to 1997.

The second major fundraising event has been the Festa Italiana (the Italian Festival). For many years the Festa Italiana was held as a neighborhood event usually in the ‘North End’ or ‘Northeast’ neighborhood of Kansas City and was not tied to the

Kansas City Chapter of UNICO. These events were generally produced by the Don Bosco Center, the American Son's & Daughters of Columbus or other local Italian American groups. The event gained some prominence when it was held at Crown Center in the heart of downtown Kansas City during the mid-1970s and early 1980s and drew big crowds from all over the Kansas City metropolitan area. It then went through some ups and downs in the 1990s as it was held at the Concourse Park, St. Pius X High School and the River Market area. In 2002 it was resurrected by the Kansas City Chapter of UNICO and was again held at Crown Center. This was the first year in which UNICO spearheaded the event in its entirety. The event was held at Crown Center for two more years before moving to its current location at the Zona Rosa Shopping Center. Since its move to Zona Rosa the event has grown annually to the extent that in 2023 it is estimated that over 30,000 people attended the three day festival.

The Kansas City Chapter has benefited from its recent success by attracting new members. The chapter currently boasts 175 members and ranks as the second largest chapter amongst the 144 UNICO chapters across the United States.