

ARKATI

THE VASSALLO GROUP PUBLICATION **2020**



ON THE FRONT LINE



**TRADITION.
INNOVATION.
DIVERSITY.**

With a heritage spanning over seven decades, Vassallo Group is one of Malta's most well established and successful companies, with a staff complement of over 1,900 and investments in a large variety of key macro sectors mainly in:

- **CONSTRUCTION • CARE • CATERING • PROPERTY MANAGEMENT**
- **BESPOKE FURNITURE • HOSPITALITY • ENERGY • EDUCATION**

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EDITORIAL

The year 2020 may easily be labelled as *annus horribilis*. It is after all, the year in which the COVID-19 pandemic wreaked havoc and turned our lives upside down. It has overshadowed, and at times even cancelled so many of our Group's events, which normally inject a dose of colour and festivity to our days, weekends, and seasons. Which explains why this edition of *Arkati* has as its central theme COVID-19 and the way the Group adapted and adjusted to the pandemic.

In this edition we explore how our operations were affected by the coronavirus and what was done to limit its impact, while safeguarding our employees and clients, particularly those who were most vulnerable and in our care.

The Group chairman and Group chief executive give us a helicopter view of the situation, while each CEO and other directors provide an account of how their company coped, and how they are still working to face the challenges posed by this pandemic.

Arkati 2020 also interviewed the key players involved in our Group's effort to deal with COVID-19; those responsible for the management of our human resources; residents' care; and health and safety.

This edition also focuses on the various lockdowns that took place between March and June. The aim of these was to minimise the risk of infection within our care homes and CaterEssence's Central Processing Unit. Several employers and their managers literally lived at their place of work for up to 10 weeks and their sense of dedication and sacrifice is captured in the articles and photos we included in this magazine.

Looking ahead, 2021 will be an important year for the Group, which will be marking its 75th anniversary. We are looking ahead with optimism, especially following news that the COVID-19 vaccine trials by three drugmakers are proving to be effective, filling us with hope that we can soon return to some normality. This may also allow our Group to celebrate its 75th anniversary through a number of events, which have become the hallmark of how we mark the most important milestones.

In the meantime we take this opportunity to wish our Chairman a wonderful birthday and you and your loved ones a special Christmas.

I hope you enjoy reading this edition as much as we enjoyed producing it.

Charlo Bonnici

Editor

There will be new opportunities

NAZZARENO VASSALLO

CHAIRMAN , VASSALLO GROUP

One of Zaren Vassallo's striking characteristics is that he doesn't seem to have a bone of negativity in his body. Whatever he may be feeling on the inside, his cheerful exterior constantly radiates optimism and positivity.

But he is certainly no dreamer. The Vassallo Group chairman can see trouble brewing from many miles away. In a media interview last year, he had warned of clouds on the horizon while others were still intoxicated by the champagne bubbles of economic boom. "It won't last forever," he had said, "and the stakes are very high because when the slowdown arrives people will get hurt."

If nobody heeded his words of caution then, they are certainly feeling the effects now. Zaren believes the slowdown had started early in 2019 even though some were keen to "maintain the hype". It hit with full force earlier this year with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. "The hype to move forward switched to taking action to limit the damage."

Zaren says lower rental rates have already become the rule rather than the exception and there is clearly an oversupply in the property market. "On paper, you won't see prices going down but in practice they will – because people will accept lower offers, especially now that bank loan moratoriums are coming to an end. This will affect construction and I expect 2021 to be a difficult year."

The Vassallo Group had started 2020 well – in line with the 2020 vision it has nurtured over the past five years – and financial results for January and February were "excellent". Then COVID hit.

"During the first wave, we took several important measures at all our facilities including CaterEssence, HILA and, of course, CareMalta. Our staff were heroic. Care workers, for example, agreed to live-in at the premises for the sake of our residents. They had no idea how long it would last; they were there for 10 weeks. It was a really special effort."

The chairman says he would never have imagined something of this nature would impact the business. "We have been affected in the past by certain issues but nothing on this scale. Care homes and in particular the catering and hospitality aspects of our business have been negatively impacted. Having said that, my father and grandfather endured war and Spanish Flu – so it seems that every so often the human race is called upon to go through extraordinary times."

Zaren, himself considered in a vulnerable age category, did not leave his home for around three months during the initial onset of the pandemic, and is sad to have missed his traditional Easter visits to CareMalta's residences. However, going forward he does not see





such extreme measures as practical. “We cannot again ask our staff to be in such an environment – away from their families – for so long.”

Till now, he says the Group has contained the situation. But it is not immune. “The next six months will be critical.” However, he adds that the company placed itself in a good position to deal with a reshaped economy – taking a decision some years ago to diversify the business by investing in specialised care homes.

“I do not like to go with the trend, but prefer to identify new niches. That’s what we had done when we went into the care sector for the first time in 1990 by opening Casa Arkati. Taking that direction has been satisfying not because our homes provide a good

dividend – though that matters – but because we have created 1,200 new jobs and now have 13 facilities with 1,700 residents after starting out with just six employees.

“As well as our homes, we are proceeding with two big projects: our business park in Burmarrad as well as the residence and community centre at the University of Malta. Thankfully, both these projects are not due to be completed for at least another year and we are hopeful the situation will return to some form of normality by then.

Ever the business mind, Zaren does, however, foresee that new opportunities will present themselves during the economic turmoil caused by the pandemic. “I remain positive. We are keeping our eyes fully wide open and are

always on the lookout for something new that makes sense.

“It is those who have their eggs in one basket – and the wrong basket – who will suffer most. I feel for them because they have been caught out by this. Our Group will get through 2020 and is not too far away from the targets we set. Our diversification proved to be the best strategy we could have adopted.

He also maintains Malta should learn a lesson from this experience: “We cannot try and do everything in one go. All the roads were dug up at the same time, for example. We have been in too much of a rush to develop and should have thought harder about being more sustainable. Ghettos were also allowed to develop in certain areas without





considering the social problems that were likely to arise when there was an economic slowdown.”

Zaren’s social conscience is a constant feature in a discussion with him. He says it’s something he felt from a young age and is a factor that drives him to continue to play a prominent role in his family business that involves his five children in different roles.

“Through our care facilities, we have changed people’s lives for the better and are now taking that one step further with specialised homes (dementia care, disability and ALS and other degenerative diseases). We have dealt with more people than the populations of Valletta and Floriana combined. But we view our residents as people not numbers. We have decided against building additional

floors at our facilities to ensure that each person is treated as an individual.

“We have cared for everyone: from the first President of Malta (Sir Anthony Mamo) to the poorest in society. It’s not about how much money you have, but serving people’s needs. Operating in this sector has also made it possible to bring more women into the workforce. These achievements bring me great satisfaction.”

With a cheerful smile, he also enthuses about celebrating the Group’s 75th anniversary in 2021. “We are proud of where we came from – the construction industry – and very happy with the way we have developed.

“We hope to involve our employees in our celebrations – as long as the pandemic doesn’t stop us – and will

“I do not like to go with the trend, but prefer to identify new niches”

publish a plan for the year. Not every company makes it as far as we have and I would like to thank everyone who has made a contribution in some form or other over the years.

It is no surprise that he counts among these contributors clients, partners, banks and, of course, the families who have entrusted the Group with caring for their loved ones.

“That’s the biggest success of all”. ■



Now is the time for companies to detox and prepare for the big race ahead

PIO VASSALLO
CEO, VASSALLO GROUP

An Ironman athlete, Pio Vassallo is well trained in pacing himself for a gruelling marathon, but nothing could have prepared him for the challenges and unpredictability COVID-19 posed to the Group's performance.

"When you're preparing for a race, you have a start and a finish. When the virus hit the island in March we were agile and adopted to the fear of the unknown. Now, we're better equipped, but you never know if you're going too fast or too slow to get to the finish line intact," he says.

Reflecting on the past months, Pio described how when the virus hit, all the Group rallied to safeguard its care homes and protect its vulnerable residents through a complete lockdown, and a live-in for staff and carers that lasted 10 weeks: "It was like we were preparing to load Noah's Ark."

As CEO, his next focus was the Group's catering and hotel arm, which was being pummelled by the sudden drop in tourism as airports starting closing worldwide.

Possessing the focus to adapt, Pio had to take the difficult decisions to terminate certain subcontractors and let some of the staff go, something that was unheard of during Malta's busy summer

months. The future in this area remains uncertain as hotels close, with the hope of reopening in spring.

The only consolation, if there was any, was the fact that everyone was battling the same 'enemy' and the reassurance that as the Maltese proverb goes – *b'qatra nerqu u b'ziffa ninxfu* (we drown in a drop and dry with a breeze) – the island would quickly get back on its feet.

Thankfully, the banks and government understood the problem and threw a lifebuoy to help some of the most badly hit businesses stay afloat.

For a while, most of the Group was working remotely and although this was initially exciting, the novelty soon started to wane and in summer arrangements were made for people to return in an environment that was safe and comfortable.

In the last quarter of this year, the Group, and the island, was bracing itself for the worst economic hit, and Pio was thankful the Group's assets were spread over different sectors and that traditionally, the attitude towards investment was one of caution... especially in the real estate sector where overdevelopment was leading to a slowdown even pre-COVID.



"There has to be an adjustment in the market and the companies that survive are those which reassess their ways of doing business... It's the same as a detox; now is the time for companies to go on a diet and prepare for a big race ahead."

The projects that kept moving were the University of Malta's Campus Hub and the Vassallo Business Park in Burmarrad, two of the Group's biggest projects, which showcase the family's commitment to the environment, and considerate development.



“I really believe in seeing our team develop and furthering their careers... We are ready to go again”



Land's End Hotel Topping up Ceremony

Was there an opportunity to be seized from all this upheaval?

“Things are going to get tougher before they get better, and during these past months it was a struggle to find a positive element in all that’s happened, here and worldwide. However, I’m an optimist by nature, and this has been an opportunity to look inwards, refocus and consolidate.”

Refocusing is what the Vassallo Group do well, and Pio’s eyes shine as he excitedly speaks about the projects for 2021 – education, and the creation of a

private sports school, which is close to Pio’s heart.

Sport has always been important throughout his childhood and his dream is to see this school start taking in its first students in three years; in time for the Games of the Small States of Europe.

“The government is committed to improving this area, and as a Group, our mission statement is to leave a positive contribution to society and the economy. This also ties in with our focus to provide healthier lifestyles.”

Another area where Pio will be dedicating his energies during his ‘free’ time, is injecting a dose of energy into the Malta Beach Soccer Association. Fusing his two passions – sport and business – his vision is to develop Malta as an international beach soccer destination and grow sports tourism.

Looking ahead at 2021, when the Group marks its 75th anniversary, Pio believes this milestone is an opportunity to go to the next level. Along the years, the Group has diversified and been extremely successful on several levels; the time was now ripe to reboot and start again with renewed energy.

“I love what I do... I was born into this business and it has opened up several opportunities... Leadership isn’t about being the best, but about making others better and I really believe in seeing our team develop and furthering their careers... We are ready to go again!” 🍷

COVID cemented CareMalta's crucial role to society



NATALIE BRIFFA FARRUGIA

CEO, CAREMALTA GROUP

Natalie Briffa Farrugia's face beams off Zoom. She still exudes energy and sports her trademark smile, but the enormous task she is entrusted with – to ensure the vulnerable residents in all CareMalta's homes are protected from the coronavirus – still weighs down on her.

The last time she was interviewed for Arkati's 2019 edition, Natalie was training for Barcelona's half Ironman and focusing on widening the ICare concept. One year on, the triathlon has been shelved and instead, in March she found herself racing over one weekend to shepherd close to 800 staff members into care homes for what turned out to be a 10-week live-in lockdown.

Her voice fills with pride as she recounts how each employee lived up to the ICare values and selflessly volunteered to leave their families and freedom to live at the care homes to ensure the elderly, who remain the most susceptible to COVID-19 complications, were safe.

This was a gargantuan logistical job as the entire Group rallied to secure hundreds of beds, mattresses, sanitisers, pillows, and procure the necessary IT to prepare for the lockdown.

Throughout, Natalie kept her teams motivated with words of encouragement for their extraordinary commitment, generosity of spirit, and strength.

At the time, the fear of the virus' unknown quantity spurred the Group to act, piling pressure on the government to halt home visits, and managing to close its homes just in time before the virus started to spread in the community.

"We had already witnessed how the virus had ravaged Italy, killing off the weak and the elderly, so I was always very cautious because this virus is bigger than us and overnight it can take over. We are fighting a horrible monster," she says.



Chamber of Commerce

After 10 weeks, when the number of active cases started dwindling to a handful, CareMalta and HILA cautiously began to reopen their 12 homes while maintaining the strictest prevention measures.

Natalie is grateful for the government's commitment and recognition of this hard work through the allocation of a €2 million grant for 40 homes across the islands.

Her recent appointment chairing the care homes section within the Malta Chamber of Commerce, has also put Natalie in the driving seat, using her expertise in the field to influence and lobby the government.

"We are going through very tough times... we thought the live-in was the toughest, but we didn't know what was in store."

What awaited was what they had been dreading all along – the virus' infiltration in the homes of the elderly; an increase in the number of deaths of older persons, very tough times both for the people who care for them and, most especially, heartbreak for their families.

Natalie is relieved that, although intervention came a bit too slow – "a day is like a month in these circumstances" – the pandemic had exposed the importance of the value of human beings; a reminder that ageism should not renege this generation from the right to medical intervention.

"There are times when I fear the worst. Yet with everyone's cooperation, more social responsibility and the support of all entities involved, we will continue to do our utmost to protect and care. We cannot let down our guard, or this virus will take over."

Reflecting on 2021, Natalie feels bestowed with a greater appreciation and gratitude in life. She believes the test of the past months cemented CareMalta's crucial function in society, highlighted society's vulnerabilities, and propelled the Group's determination and commitment to remain of service.

Although certain projects for 2020 had to be put on hold – such as deinstitutionalising mental health care – as the focus was to emerge from the war on the virus as unscathed as possible, Natalie is emboldened by people's sense of goodwill to give even more.

"A lot of good has emerged and this virus brought out the humanity in so many of us"



Presentation of commemorative plaques on June 4 at Casa Arkati



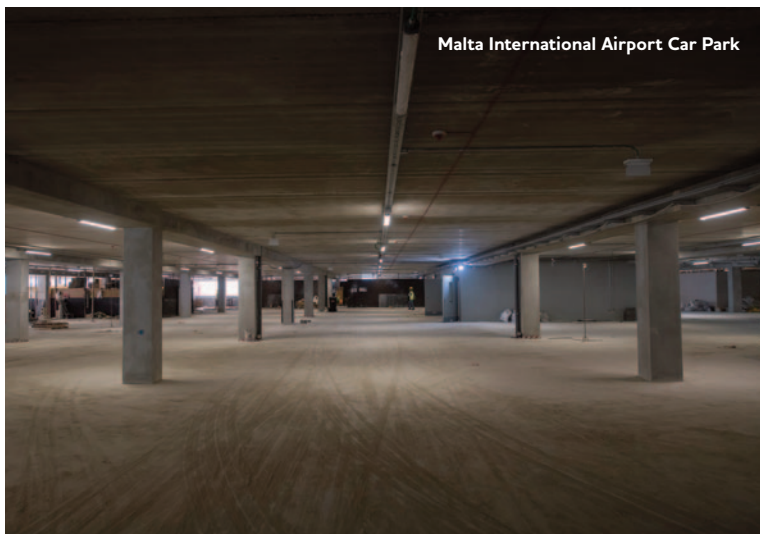
Live-in at Casa Marija

"A lot of good has emerged and this virus brought out the humanity in so many of us. It worked to bring us closer as we all fought a common 'enemy' to survive."

Looking ahead to celebrate Vassallo Group's 75th anniversary, Natalie said the philosophy to leave behind a legacy had been brought to the forefront, making the Group's choices in the future far easier.

"Whatever business venture we choose, we ultimately want to leave an impact for the good of society. Our motto – to be a private company with a public conscience – remains stronger than ever." ■

COVID-19 taught us to work differently



JONATHAN BUTTIGIEG
CEO, VASSALLO BUILDERS

The plan of Vassallo Builders for 2020 took an abrupt turn in March when the world was unexpectedly constrained to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic.

In comparison with the tourism, restaurants and retail sectors, construction was not immediately affected by lockdown measures and projects that had started before the pandemic were allowed to proceed.

Since the outbreak, the company formed a focus group to keep abreast with the health authorities' rapidly changing guidelines and implemented a series of measures to ensure continuity.

Like most businesses, teleworking for office-based operations was implemented and the Group's IT department was instrumental in making the transition as seamless as possible.

Weekly Tool-Box talks were held on construction sites as part of an educational and prevention campaign to promote good hygiene, social distancing and more recently the compulsory wearing of face masks for all its employees. Progress meetings normally held on site were also held virtually.

"In a matter of days, we not only adjusted to this new method of communicating, but realised how beneficial it is. Everyone turned up on time and it was convenient for all, as we cut down on travelling time and stress."

Perhaps the most innovative move Vassallo Builders made to adapt to the pandemic, was the switch from a palm reader where employees punched in and out, to a contactless facial recognition one. This was rolled out in June and is currently being implemented on all the major construction projects of Vassallo Builders.

"COVID-19 taught us to work differently. Over the past years, the Group's strategy was focused on growth. This year, we were suddenly faced with a situation, which forced us to shift our focus to handle an inevitable slowdown in the economy, and more importantly for us, in the construction industry."

Some delays were experienced on our projects due to quarantine requirements, foreign workers caught abroad when the airports shut down, and general disruptions in the supply chain.

The pandemic forced the board of directors to revisit the budget for the year: in May it implemented a new plan



accounting for the additional investment made by the company, and cancelled construction tenders in the final stages of negotiation.

“Understandably, investors were reluctant to commit to new projects due to the prevailing market conditions. It is believed the economy has until 2023 to reach the same level of 2019.

The years 2021 and 2022 are going to be very difficult and the company is undergoing a restructuring process to preserve as many jobs as possible during these difficult times.”

With all these measures in place, Vassallo Builders ensured continuity.

The Malta International Airport car park and the Lands End Hotel in Sliema have been completed, while work on the Campus Hub at the University of Malta continued as planned and should be wrapped up by the end of 2021. Vassallo Business Park in Burmarrad is also on track and work should be ready by next summer.

A new project that will be starting towards the end of this year will see the transformation of two houses in Mosta into a new HILA facility called Casa Santa Rosa.

The company is also leading the joint venture entrusted with the restoration of the St Paul's Pro-Cathedral's spire in Valletta.

“The Group is confident it will draw on its experience and adapt to overcome these hurdles and ensure its continued success in the years to come”

Vassallo Builders will erect a support scaffold structure around the Anglican church's spire and fabricate and install a “steel-belt” structure to reinforce the spire while the restoration and repair works are carried out. There are other projects in the pipeline for 2021, which should be starting soon after the Company's traditional Santa Marija Shutdown.

The management team is actively seeking new projects and is currently participating in various tenders to secure new work despite the slowdown in the construction industry.

2021 also marks the 75th anniversary of Vassallo Builders and preparations to commemorate this special occasion are under way, keeping in mind health guidelines.

Although the COVID-19 pandemic might still pose challenges in 2021, the Group is confident it will draw on its experience and adapt to overcome these hurdles and ensure its continued success in the years to come. ■

Relationships are everything

RUBEN VASSALLO
CEO, VASSALLO GROUP REALTY



Ruben Vassallo saves the one line that sums up his approach to business and life in general to the section of the interview dealing with the human challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic: “We are about relationships,” says the CEO of Realty, the Group’s property and development arm.

It may be a short sentence. But it means a great deal, especially when Ruben talks about the reality for Realty in 2020.

“This is obviously not going to be a good year for us from a financial perspective, but we have been doing everything we can to help out tenants in our various establishments. We reviewed rates in the retail sector because we believe in maintaining relationships in bad times as well as good.

“I’m aware that not all landlords have adopted the same approach, but, apart from being the right thing to do, taking an uncompromising line risks putting people out of business and that would be silly. We spoke to all of them and found solutions. We pride ourselves on this.”

Ruben also takes pride from the recent conversion of St Joseph Convent in Paola, which, with the nuns’ cooperation, has been “redesigned and repurposed” into Casal Nuovo. “We decided to hold a Mass there to mark the opening and were delighted to see not just the six former residents, but nuns from all the Order’s convents around Malta.

“It felt a little strange having the original owners there to ‘judge’ what we’d done with their property, but they were overjoyed, which made us happy too. We took great care to

respect the building, their mission and the fact that it will remain a cultural and social place.”

The home has also served a special function during the pandemic, taking on residents from other establishments that were affected by the crisis. “People often talk about numbers, but sometimes forget we are dealing with human beings and that it’s an ordeal for them to move home. This is a very difficult period for the elderly. They were born during the war and are now facing another attack.

“COVID is going to have a huge impact on social health,” Ruben says. But he is trying to ensure it does not disrupt too much of his routine, which starts each morning with accompanying his children to school from their St Paul’s Bay home.

“Personally, I wouldn’t want to work from home because I like the social aspect of my professional life. However, it will be



***“I’m a positive person
by nature and think we
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interesting to see how COVID will change working patterns. Some companies say employees work more efficiently from home and that it can cut costs. Do people need to be at an office five days a week, especially when they are trying to find a better balance between work and life? There’s a big question mark there.”

He says Realty was also well prepared for a downturn after Malta’s property boom. “Doubts about the sustainability of the market were already cropping up in 2019. Our feeling was that supply was exceeding demand and we felt that the market needed to settle down. So we factored this into our strategy and braced ourselves for a downward trend in the prices.

“Of course, no one expected so many workers to leave the island so suddenly and so many apartments and offices to be left empty. We have been coping because our business is diverse, but there is no doubt the pandemic has had an adverse



effect on construction and hospitality – sectors in which we are heavily involved – and the indications are that the country could be heading for a recession.”

That said, the Group is steaming ahead with projects like the Vassallo Business Park in Burmarrad, which is due to come to fruition by the end of 2021. “One hopes that the economic situation will start recovering by then. We had a very strong start to the year before the pandemic hit and we are certainly not ruling out embarking on new projects if the opportunity and location are right. But for the time being we are also focusing more on managing what we have rather than growth.”

Whatever happens as a result of the pandemic, Ruben is still looking forward to marking the Group’s 75th anniversary next year. “It may affect the celebrations we are able to hold, but it will not affect the significance of the occasion. We have a very long history as a company. The Group has experienced challenges in the past and there will be more to come. I’m a positive person by nature and think we will grow more even due to COVID. We have always moved on and are stronger than ever.” 🍷

There's always a silver lining to be found

ALEX TRANTER

CEO, CATERESSENCE

Battered but not beaten, CaterEssence will enter 2021 as a very different organisation to the previous year, having regrouped, restructured and reorganised itself, CEO Alex Tranter says.

"I am cautiously optimistic. COVID-19 has taught us many lessons and given many sectors the chance to stop, think, and reassess themselves and their futures. As difficult and as damaging as the pandemic was, there's always a silver lining to be found."

Saying that 2020 was a challenging year for the business sounds a bit of an understatement. The pandemic affected 50 per cent of the business, with the hotel and restaurant divisions being those hit the hardest.

The government-imposed lockdown forced the restaurants operated by CaterEssence – Panorama in Valletta and Madu in Paceville – to close down, with the company taking the critical decision not to reopen them.

The other half of the business mainly encompassed the contract catering provided to the healthcare sector, which continued to function in abnormal circumstances.

One of the immediate changes CaterEssence supported as soon as the pandemic broke out in mid-March, Alex says, was the spike in meals from a number of care homes operated by the company's major client, CareMalta, as well as the Archdiocese of Malta. This spike was caused by the fact that a number of care homes started a two-month live-in, which meant staff now had to be catered for on full board, in addition to residents.

This spike in meals helped boost CaterEssence's operations and supported the company in temporarily redeploying a number of its employees to the homes' kitchens.

"This increase in business activity in the healthcare sector served as a positive in a big negative, as COVID-19 impacted our hotels and restaurants division."

During the lockdown period, the company reduced the amount of hotels it serviced since they were closed. Some did not reopen at all, while others opened with very low occupancy rates, meaning they no longer required CaterEssence's catering services.

Early this summer, the business started to see some initial growth in the hotel and retail divisions. However, the second wave that hit in mid-August served to erode this, with the company going back to a very low business activity.

"The pandemic hit us badly – both in terms of the business, as well as our employees. All this gave CaterEssence no other option than to restructure in light of the significant market changes it faced."

The major restructuring took place across a departmental, people and business level. All business and management activities were consolidated around the Central Processing Unit (CPU) in Qormi. Through this main single hub the company is now managing, servicing

and controlling all its external locations with food and people.

The company also had to contend with the new reality that its continued business activity must now operate under a new regime of COVID-19 procedures.

Strict hygiene and sanitisation processes have been escalated to unprecedented levels, both at the Qormi central kitchen, as well as in all food handling and distribution processes. These include personal protective equipment and staff training, which had to be





introduced into what was already a very challenging environment.

The restructuring provided the business with an increased focus and helped ensure CaterEssence is stronger at the core. This has already started to yield business efficiencies and improved quality measures.

The company is now pursuing further business opportunities involving more volume-based activities. It is closely following government and private catering contracts and is being very aggressive in seeking to capture new business.

"The plan is to increase the volume production base of business, since 2021 might not take us to the levels that existed pre-COVID."

The year 2021 will also mark Vassallo Group's 75th anniversary since its founding, and Alex's 28th year with the Group.

"This is very significant to me because it means I was present for 37 per cent of the Group's history. I have witnessed the Group's growth: construction had been its key sector and, when I joined as the personal assistant to the Chairman, the Group had begun to venture into different sectors, such as hospitality and healthcare.

"I've seen a lot – I've seen the Group develop, thrive, become stronger, better and more professional and strategic in its choices. It gives me huge satisfaction to have been a part of this and to have witnessed and contributed to its success."

On a Group perspective, its 75th

anniversary helps give it the energy to ensure a consistent attitude in maintaining the core principles it has always believed in, which include its support of employees and their career development, the environment and society at large.

"Vassallo Group's contribution to society has been significant. Its history of 75 years has been carved out of its indelible character in how it thinks and moves. Our Chairman's vision, motivation and determination has been a fundamental key driver of this exciting and dynamic success story." ■

"Our Chairman's vision, motivation and determination has been a fundamental key driver of this exciting and dynamic success story"

The dreams are there

JANET SILVIO

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, HILA HOMES

No one was prepared for COVID-19 or its repercussions, but CareMalta and HILA have always practised high standards of infection control. So as the pandemic inched closer, the HILA team started preparing for the two completely different realities at Casa Apap Bologna and Dar Bjorn.

At the former, HILA provides respite to people with disabilities through a public private social partnership with Aġenzija Sapport, while the latter hosts people with ALS and other

neurodegenerative diseases. The service is managed and operated by HILA through a private social partnership with ALS Malta Foundation.

“Dar Bjorn went into lockdown at the end of March, with most of the carers living in with the vulnerable clients for eight weeks. However, at Casa Apap Bologna we delayed lockdown a bit to ensure the mental wellbeing of our clients.

“We had to draw a balance between the physical implications of the virus and mental health issues, meaning we could not change the residents’ lifestyle overnight.”

At Casa Apap Bologna, HILA kicked off its mitigation plan by pausing the respite services and carrying out a risk assessment of its residential service, which it provides to 26 people aged between five and 74 years.

Outings to the various day centres were halted, while clients in gainful employment stopped going to work. Other excursions were limited to contained areas, while staff started being picked up from home to avoid contact with other people on public transport.

By mid-April the home went into full lockdown as Janet did not want to leave any stone unturned.

“It was not easy as we had to readjust the clients’ routines, and we did experience meltdowns. We tried to keep their mind occupied a bit more than usual and fill the void left by the cancellation of outdoor activities.

“We introduced activities such as yoga, meditation, and online therapeutic sessions with Richmond Foundation, and also adapted everyday activities, such as eating in the garden instead of the dining room.”

The home cautiously restarted the respite service in June, following the implementation of a number of mitigation measures by Casa Apap Bologna to ensure a safe stay for all the clients.

Risk assessments are also continuously carried out on respite clients, whose carers provide details about their



whereabouts before checking in at Casa Apap Bologna. Every week, half of the staff and clients are also randomly swabbed.

Meanwhile, at Dar Bjorn, HILA maintained the highest preventive measures possible as clients are very vulnerable and at high risk of contracting any virus. This means that contact with those outside of the home is now more restricted, making an already challenging situation even more sensitive.

“It is quite an emotional ordeal... our clients are already suffering because of the nature of their condition. It’s a double-edged sword – we are protecting them from the virus by keeping them safe, but at the same time they are being deprived of a normal life and human contact with their loved ones.”

One thing is for sure, COVID-19 will remain with us for a long time and we need to learn to live with it.

“I cannot see us going back to how we were before at least the first quarter of 2021, and I believe some mitigation measures will remain in place even afterwards. These include the use of masks, chlorine-based carpets at the entrance of our premises and hand hygiene.”

Has the pandemic left any space – and energy – for 2021 plans?

“It has been a bit hard for us to plan for next year. The upper and middle management had to temporarily step down to assist floor operations and ensure things ran smoothly. So we rolled up our sleeves and took on hands-on roles.

“It is only recently that we started settling back into our regular routine... What I know for sure is that in 2021 I want to introduce new services.”

Janet hopes that by next year the new community facility, Casal Nuovo in Paola, will start hosting people with acute mental health conditions. HILA will also be opening a community home in Mosta, and hopefully another one in Gozo.

The dreams are there... but their fruition depends on when the current pandemic is brought under control. ■

“It’s a double-edged sword – we’re protecting them from the virus by keeping them safe but at the same time depriving them of a normal life”





***“The importance of diversification
in business is testimony to my
father’s great foresight”***

Incredible people emerge from times of adversity

CHRISTIAN VASSALLO

STRATEGY DIRECTOR, VASSALLO GROUP

2020 may indeed have shaped up to be an *annus horribilis*, but Vassallo Group's upcoming 75th anniversary comes as a timely reminder that the year was only a blip in the context of the Group's rich history, Strategy Director Christian Vassallo reflects.

"Our biggest challenge for 2021 is to work even harder to rebuild and strengthen the areas directly impacted during 2020. The anniversary reminds us of our responsibility to society, people and the projects we have worked on over the past 75 years. We trust that the seeds sown throughout 2020 and 2021 will yield results to be reaped throughout the next 75 years."

The company is still haunted by the painful episodes it faced, such as the decision to close off full divisions hit by COVID-19 to keep the rest of the organisation moving forward.

Yet, incredible people emerge from times of adversity, among them, employees who left their families to live in care homes and even in kitchens with limited outdoor space, Christian says admiringly.

The biggest lesson learnt was the importance of diversification in business.

"This is testimony to my father's great foresight. His plan has been proven right more than 30 years later. The different

entities within the Group came together – such as in the way Vassallo Builders supported CareMalta in setting up the live-in quarters – in the interest of our families, our customers and the nation at large."

The Group's largest single investment, the Campus Hub at the University of Malta, is on track to become Malta's first student village, with the language school, first lecture block and sections of the two accommodation buildings set to open in 2021.

Meanwhile, despite the challenges Hand in Hand Ltd faced after having to temporarily close down in line with government regulations, the resourceful clinical team managed to offer online parent coaching services to support families throughout the difficult period.

Despite all the challenges, the organisation successfully ran an intensive summer programme and, in October, even managed to kick off the scholastic year with 12 full-time students, funded by the government.

"One particular boy had been walled up at home since the previous October and was over the moon to be back. I am very proud that through the clinical teams' hard work, we have had the opportunity to bring about a positive impact on the children's future." ■



‘COVID-19 teased us out of our comfort zones’

CHARLO BONNICI

CEO, LEARNING WORKS

Learning Works was just celebrating its first anniversary when the coronavirus pandemic hit the island, shuttering classrooms and pulling the plug on physical lessons for its 400 students.

As CEO and principal of the higher education centre, Charlo had to think fast and hard, rallying his team to get a digital platform up and running within a week for the lessons to go online.

“In February we had picked up huge momentum and operations from our Qormi-based academy were running smoothly. Then COVID-19 came and knocked the wind out of us, but not for long,” Charlo says.

One of the major challenges he faced between March and June was the reality that a number of students who also worked in CareMalta’s homes were in lockdown, making it more difficult for them to find the place, time and energy to participate in the lectures.

But somehow, both students and lecturers tapped into their inner strength and rose to the occasion. Their sacrifices were celebrated last September when several students, who were enrolled in various accredited courses with Learning Works, were presented with their certificate in a scaled-down graduation ceremony.

The headache of managing smaller physical lessons with online sessions has not disappeared, but the team is successfully ensuring classes are running smoothly with minor disruptions.

Before the pandemic hit, there were plans to expand the training hub at

Landmark in Qormi. Unaware of what the future held and how finances would be affected, the simplest decision would have been to pause this project, but Charlo bit the bullet and believing that education is the future went ahead.

“COVID-19 has taught us a lot and in a way teased us all out of our comfort zones... We decided to believe in ourselves and in summer the project was complete and we had increased our facilities.”

With social distancing becoming the norm, bigger premises allowed Learning Works to accommodate students more comfortably, and with the number of courses in Level 3 Healthcare practically doubling this year, this decision was the wise one to take.

As an autonomous training academy, Learning Works is growing rapidly, and education is an area that Vassallo Group plans to grow as one of its main pillars.

One of the areas the academy is focusing on is women in leadership. At Level 6, this is the highest level training programme so far and is aimed at those focused on breaking the glass ceiling to make it to boardroom level or become a CEO.

This one-year programme, which will be delivered by a specialised lecturer from the UK, will also be offered internally, where the Group is sponsoring some of its interested employees as part of its 75th anniversary celebrations. It will also be open up to the public.

Charlo – who this year became the deputy chairman of the education committee within the Malta Chamber of Commerce, Enterprise and Industry and is also contributing within the education committee of the Malta Chamber of SMEs – has recently handed over his Human

Resources role, to focus mainly on Learning Works and education.

He speaks excitedly as he gives a sneak peek into the projects for 2021. Among them a venture to open a private school providing secondary and post-secondary education but with emphasis on sports.

Another goal for next year is to offer a Masters degree in sports coaching, following an agreement the Group will be signing with a top UK university. This unique Masters, which will largely be delivered online, has been designed to develop research-informed sport coaches.

Acknowledging that the virus may very well still be on its path of destruction, Learning Works is adapting and adjusting to the new realities to be as COVID-proof as possible.

“Events took a blow and we’re still venturing into the unknown, but we’re adapting and moving forward; we’re focusing on the Group’s strengths to continue delivering specialised courses and growing.” ■





“Events took a blow and we’re still venturing into the unknown, but we’re adapting and moving forward”



CareMalta's 'heroic' employees buckle down for 10 weeks

An overwhelming 540 CareMalta employees took the plunge when the pandemic hit the island in March and selflessly volunteered to enter a lockdown and barricade against the invisible 'enemy' to protect those most vulnerable to the virus.

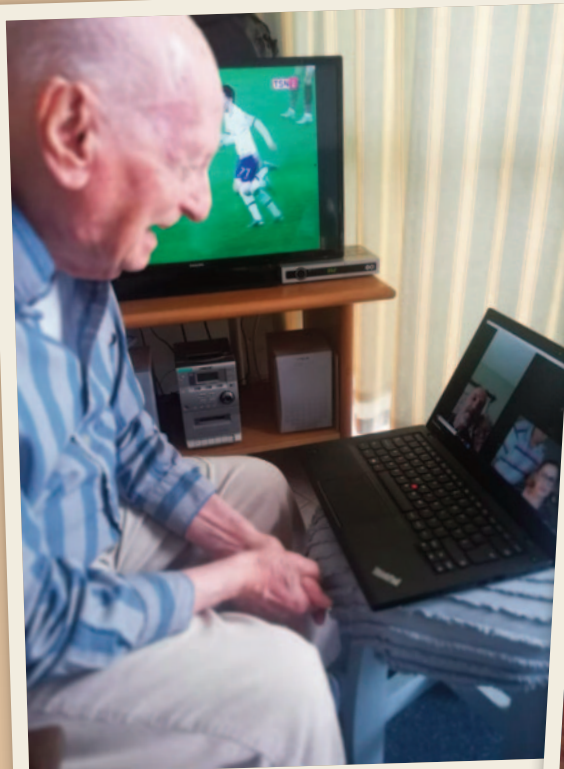
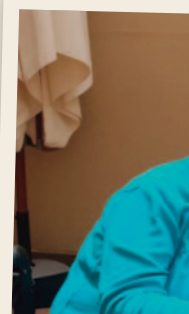
Over one weekend, Vassallo Group rallied the troops to secure bedding and amenities to make the stay of these volunteers, who were leaving their families and friends behind, as comfortable as possible.

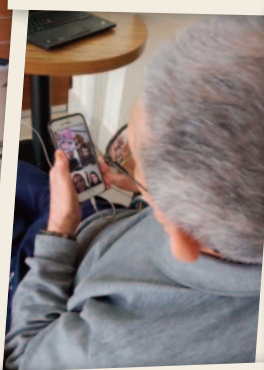
CareMalta CEO Natalie Briffa Farrugia was proud and humbled to see each employee live up to the company's values and its ICare mission.

None of them had ever anticipated the lockdown would drag on for an interminable 10 weeks, but each individual soldiered on with a spirit of solidarity and resilience that positively impacted their lives.

Their commitment was described as "a heroic gesture" by Vassallo Group chairman Nazzareno Vassallo.

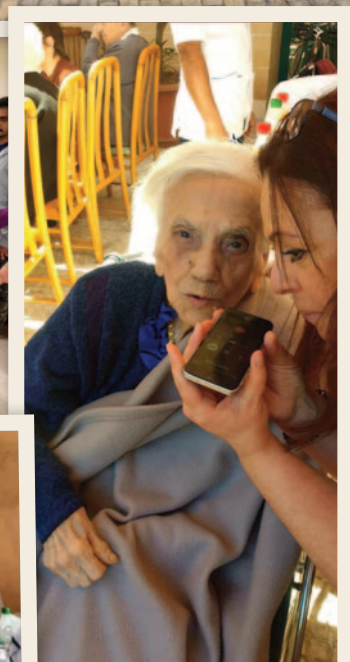
"It also shows that each employee viewed their job as a vocation based on love and respect towards those whose care they were entrusted with." ■





CareMalta's Live-in continued







Chefs strike special bond during CaterEssence live-in

The team behind CaterEssence's Central Processing Unit all came together during the early days of the pandemic and volunteered to spend a few weeks living on site in Qormi, to ensure the food production for elderly living in care homes could continue uninterrupted.

The team of chefs took it in turns to move out of their family home to minimise their exposure to COVID-19 and safeguard the production of more than 5,000 meals a day delivered to the 12 elderly care homes; nine of which are operated by CareMalta.

CPU general manager, Kevin Debattista, who joined both teams with a short 24-hour break in between to visit his family, described the experience as a fulfilling challenge as everyone came together to maintain the production of meals, and the hundreds of Easter eggs and traditional *figolli*.

"I'm very proud that the team worked as one, and truly gave their utmost. I am also very appreciative of all the external support we had, especially from our CEO Alex Tranter and the top management who were in daily contact with me, day and night, keeping up our morale after long days working in the kitchen. I feel very honoured to have been entrusted to lead this first ever live-in team experience." ■





‘We must stop looking at the past and start peering into the future’

STEPHEN BORG

**FINANCE DIRECTOR &
COMPANY SECRETARY,
VASSALLO GROUP**

When Stephen Borg celebrated his 20th anniversary with Vassallo Group back in March, little did he know that 2020 would truly be a year to remember... for all the wrong reasons!

“For most businesses, the global pandemic acted as a reset button,” Stephen says. “Everything we were used to changed overnight, and we found ourselves in a new playing field.”

The blow was dealt immediately. All entities within the Group were impacted to varying degrees, with those bearing the biggest brunt being the catering division – both restaurants closed down within days – and putting the care homes under threat.

Infection control was a key concern within the care homes, Stephen explains. After carefully following the way other countries had tackled the pandemic, one of the first measures taken by the Group was to literally seal off all the homes to slash their susceptibility to infection.

Emotional scenes ensued, with employees bidding their families farewell before confining themselves to the care homes for up to 10 weeks at a stretch. Meanwhile, arrangements were being made at breakneck speed to furnish the homes with enough mattresses to accommodate the staff, as well as WiFi systems to enable everyone to communicate with their loved ones in the world outside.

“It was a drastic measure to take, but it worked out well in terms of containing the spread of infection.”

Meanwhile, the ripple effect on the property rental market was felt at a somewhat staggered pace over a span of weeks, as tenants increasingly became unable to keep up with the payments.



“For most businesses, the global pandemic acted as a reset button”

The construction industry, Stephen adds, was somewhat spared the more punishing effects of COVID-19. Vassallo Group proceeded with its projects, mainly encapsulating the student accommodation project within the University, as well as the Vassallo Business Park in Burmarrad. However, there are not many new projects on the horizon. Developers, Stephen explains, have become more cautious with their investments.

“We’ll be feeling the ripple effect of this pandemic next year, and we might be forced to take further measures to mitigate the lack of revenue.”

But, ever the enterprising individual, Stephen is keen to find the silver lining. The pandemic has been a sobering experience for businesses and a number of key lessons have been learnt, he says.

First on the list is the importance of spreading one’s investment. Vassallo Group had the foresight of diversifying, which softened the blow and ensured not all divisions were impacted in the same manner. Investing in the long term proved to be a critical strategic move which helped ensure stability.



And lastly, businesses had to manage their loans and debts properly. Loan deferrals granted to major businesses helped them avert disaster and countered the reduced cash flows.

"Everyone must reflect during these unique times and create an opportunity from the situation. We must all stop looking at the past and start peering into the future."

The biggest challenge ahead is emerging from the current situation as quickly as possible, with as few scars as possible.

"We also need to look at business processes which can be improved, trimmed or redesigned from scratch, to make sure that once the engine starts running we have enough power to drive it forward."

As a Group, building processes within the construction industry were being redesigned and time-saving machinery and equipment brought in; while in the care sector, even higher infection control measures were introduced.

Looking ahead, Stephen said he was looking forward with increased anticipation to 2021, especially the celebrations to mark the Group's 75th anniversary.

"In today's business world, where everything is fast and short-lived, being around for 75 years is no easy feat. Having endured a life-changing year in 2020, the Group continues to be dynamic, distinct, and diverse... traits which will propel it forward for another 75 years." ■

The Arkati Foundation

Financial Statements

30 November 2019

Income and Expenditure Account

Year ended 30 November 2019

	Note	2019 €	2018 €
Income			
Investment income		13,135	11,859
Donations		57,367	56,522
Gross income		70,502	68,381
Fees and charges		-	(1,351)
Tax at source		(1,875)	(1,790)
Excess of income over expenditure		68,627	65,240
Allocated to:			
Accumulated funds		34,314	32,620
Distributable fund	4	34,313	62,620
		68,627	65,240

Statement of Affairs

30 November 2019

	Note	2019 €	2018 €
ASSETS AND LIABILITIES			
Non-current assets			
Financial assets	5	314,824	284,824
Current assets			
Other receivables		19,688	3,796
Cash and cash equivalents	6	88,015	81,675
		107,703	85,471
Total assets		422,527	370,295
Current liabilities			
Distributable income		60,235	51,845
Net assets		362,292	318,450
Represented by:-			
Capital Fund	7	11,647	11,647
Distributable fund	4	60,235	51,845
Accumulated fund	8	290,410	254,958
		362,292	318,450

These financial statements were approved by the board members, authorised for issue on 20 October 2020 and signed on its behalf by:

Joe Saliba
President

Pio Vassallo
Member

I spent sleepless nights fearing the unknown

NOEL BORG

SENIOR NURSING MANAGER, CAREMALTA GROUP
NON-EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, HILA HOMES

When in March several people bid their colleagues farewell and isolated themselves at home to help curb the spread of the pandemic, hundreds of CareMalta employees bid farewell to their families and locked themselves up at the homes for the elderly.

The plan to go into lockdown was drawn up over a weekend, but with 1,678 residents under their care, Noel Borg, a nurse by profession, knew CareMalta could not get it wrong.

"I never thought that I would need to apply in real life all I had learnt about pandemics at nursing school. Back then I thought it was a waste of time, but I was proven wrong and found the information quite useful."

CareMalta managed to avoid an outbreak at all its nine facilities and is even caring for residents who were moved out of an elderly home run by a separate company, after it experienced an outbreak in summer.

For Noel, who is responsible for the Group's clinical practices, 2020 has been all about COVID-19.

"We started evaluating the situation in February, following what was going on abroad. By March we realised we were at a point of no return. Back then, drawing up mitigation measures

was quite challenging because we had a much poorer understanding of what we were dealing with."

To make matters worse, China, a main producer of personal protective equipment, was blocking exportation as it needed the items itself. Testing kits were also stuck in the mail.

But with CareMalta caring for the most vulnerable, there was no time to lose, and the team introduced control measures over and above those implemented during the influenza season.

Restricting access in and out of the homes was implemented over a couple of days.

"It might sound easy, but it was a nightmare to organise because we had to overhaul a system that involves more than 800 employees. Even the littlest things – such as acquiring enough mattresses for our live-in workers – proved challenging in such a short span of time.

"Once under lockdown, I spent sleepless nights fearing the unknown – what happens when someone returns from hospital? How easily can it be transmitted? Did we miss something? My mind kept wandering."

The strategy ultimately proved successful as CareMalta had zero COVID-19 cases throughout the first wave. The clinical decisions taken by CareMalta always ran parallel to what was happening in the community, and the lockdown was lifted once the country started reopening for business.

When the second wave of the pandemic hit Malta's shores, CareMalta again implemented strict infection control measures.

And when he was asked to help out in directly fighting the virus, Noel could never say no to supporting the most vulnerable.



“I never thought that I would need to apply in real life all that I had learnt about pandemics at nursing school”



He practises what he preaches and his focus on the residents sheds light on all he does, even if this means risking his own well-being.

Noel not only managed to lead Casal Nuovo, taking over those coronavirus-free residents who were being moved there from another home to avoid further contagion, but also cared for residents who tested positive at Zammit Clapp until they all recovered safely.

The strategy Noel implemented in both cases was an extremely cautious one, where everything that could come into contact with the residents adhered to the highest infection control measures at all times.

Meanwhile, all homes for the elderly adopted the concept of ‘bubbles’, where residents are assisted by the same carer until a COVID-19 vaccine is released.

If a relative or friend drops by for a visit, residents are accompanied by their carer from the moment they leave their room, to the moment they meet their visitor from behind the Perspex, and back.

As Noel braces himself for influenza season, over and above the challenges brought about by the pandemic, he is also taking on the role of non-executive director at HILA Homes.

His background in bioethics, which he also teaches, will come in handy as he joins the board to come up with ideas on the way forward. He believes more has to be done when it comes to providing good quality of life and dignity to people with learning disabilities.

Noel, who joined CareMalta as a nurse in 2005 and moved his way up along the years, looks forward to seeing the gradual and conscientious growth of the company, reflecting the ethos of the Group and CareMalta’s values: quality, dignity, integrity, safety and development of the clients and the staff. ■





We are ready for the challenges ahead

MARTIN BONDIN

DATA PROTECTION OFFICER AND
HEALTH & SAFETY MANAGER, VASSALLO GROUP

When the pandemic reached Europe at the beginning of the year, several were overwhelmed by fear and uncertainty.

But with 27 years of experience in the army, Martin Bondin was prepared for all scenarios. Whether it was flash flooding, a rubbish-collection strike or transport shortage, the country had always turned to the army for help.

This year's national health emergency brought back memories of his time in the army and filled Martin with adrenaline.

"Things were changing overnight. We followed what was going on in Spain and Italy and knew it was just a matter of time before the pandemic reached Malta. It was a matter of when, not if.

"My concern was that it would impact the Group's operations, but, so far, apart from a handful of employees who tested positive to the virus outside of the workplace, the pandemic did not impact operations across any of the sectors."

Martin said the success boiled down to commitment from the very top. There was a concerted effort across the board and all he did, Martin says, was coordinate it. Increased financial resources were this year injected into operations across the Group to further ensure the health and safety of employees.

When the pandemic hit, CareMalta and CaterEssence had their own protocols and went immediately into lockdown. But

work on the Campus Hub at the University of Malta, the Vassallo Business Park in Burmarrad, the Malta International Airport car park and Casal Nuovo in Paola had to continue, so the company had to come up with mitigation measures that would not hinder the progress of the projects.

"The company could not risk halting work because of lack of resources. Missing deadlines would mean loss of revenue that would impact the company and the employees themselves.

"Apart from safety at the place of work, we always look out for the health of our workers. We ensure employees do not develop health issues because of work, such as backpain as a result of bad posture and lifting. With coronavirus on the way we needed to increase awareness among our workers on construction sites."

This was no easy feat. The challenges included dealing with diverse cultures who each have their own hygiene ideas and ensuring social distancing among large groups of people. At any one point in time there are between 60 and 100 employees on site, apart from workers contracted from other companies to lay tiles or pass utility connections, for example.

"We organised 'toolbox talks', but instead of speaking about harnesses and helmets, we harped on about the importance of hand hygiene – from the moment we travel to work and punching in, to when we arrive back home."



“Apart from safety at the place of work, we always look out for the health of our workers”

Workers' temperatures were taken upon entry at the site, where water basins were installed next to punch clocks. Palm reading stations were eventually replaced with face recognition clocking stations.

Teamwork was imperative. While the procurement department provided items to help maintain good hygiene at the construction site, the HR department grouped workers in 'gangs' according to the nature of their work and shift, to avoid mixing one cluster with another.

Employees were monitored and anyone who showed symptoms was swabbed.

“We also built a relationship of trust with the employees, who supplied us with information about their household and whereabouts to make contact tracing easier.”

Meanwhile, teleworking was introduced for office-based employees, and although they started to return to the office when the country lifted mitigation measures, these employees were segregated by floor. Each floor has its own entrance door and employees are urged to avoid interacting with colleagues from other floors.

The workforce has also been split in two teams, alternating between the office and home. This ensures that in the case of recommended quarantine,

only half of the workforce is affected.

Apart from the physical wellbeing of its employees, Vassallo Group has always cared for their mental health.

Some years back it had teamed up with the Richmond Foundation to provide employees with support that they can seek anonymously. Over the past months, the service was mostly sought by CareMalta employees who had locked themselves up with vulnerable patients, leaving their families behind for weeks on end. ■



CaterEssence turns 10

CaterEssence, a subsidiary of Vassallo Group, marked its 10th anniversary with a symbolic virtual celebration linking the company directors and management team to its central processing unit where a team of chefs was on a live-in to provide an uninterrupted service in a safe environment. CaterEssence, which operates from a state-of-the-art, central food processing unit at The Landmark in Qormi, was preparing some 5,000 meals a day for numerous care homes across Malta, during the early days of the pandemic.



CareMalta's magazine a record for posterity

A special edition of *CareNet*, a magazine featuring CareMalta's COVID-19 lockdown journey from March 16 to May 25, 2020, was officially presented to National Archives CEO Charles Farrugia, as a record for posterity. The idea to collect and document CareMalta's personal experiences of the COVID-19 crisis was especially inspired by *Memorja – The Pandemic 2020 Experience*, a project launched by the National Archives.



A touch of glitter

Last year's Vassallo Group Christmas party was held at the Xara Lodge in Rabat, where the theme was to sparkle with a touch of glitter.



CareMalta CEO chairs new Chamber of Commerce section

CareMalta CEO Natalie Briffa Farrugia has been appointed chairperson of a new business section dedicated to the growing sector of care homes for the elderly, within the Malta Chamber of Commerce, Enterprise and Industry. The six-member executive committee includes: Sarah Cassar as deputy chairperson (Casa Antonia), Charmaine Attard (AX Care), Marie Eleanor Farrugia (Prime Care), Angelle Falzon (Caring First Ltd) and Fleur Balzan (Age Concern Company Ltd).

Frontliners thanked for 'act of love and selflessness'

All the employees who selflessly gave up their freedom for the safety of residents whose care they were entrusted with, were celebrated during Vassallo Group's 74th anniversary in June. Group Chairman Nazzareno Vassallo, Group CEO Pio Vassallo, and CareMalta CEO Natalie Briffa Farrugia personally thanked all the employees for their hard work, sacrifice and dedication shown throughout the COVID-19 live-ins.





Solidarity with each other

Vassallo Group's traditional Arkati Foundation Day was held in February to raise awareness and thank employees for their participation and support. Chaired by Joe Saliba and founded in 1991, The Arkati Foundation is an employee solidarity fund that aims to safeguard the wellbeing of employees going through difficult times. The employees themselves donate a day of leave or a small fee, while the company contributes a substantial sum each year.

Fire awareness sessions

Fire awareness training sessions were held for all CareMalta employees to equip them with the necessary skills to handle an emergency situation if the need arises. The three-hour sessions, based on theory and practice, were conducted by Martin Bondin, Vassallo Group health and safety manager.



Learning Works goes online

When the pandemic hit and schools closed, Learning Works, a subsidiary of Vassallo Group, immediately acted to ensure classes carried on with as little disruption as possible. As part of Learning Works' strategy, an online application and payment system was rolled out to make the processes for online courses much easier. By adapting to the 'new normal', Learning Works is providing opportunities to students to learn from the comfort of their home, within their schedule, while focusing on the most important aspect of their lives, health, education and happiness.



Readapting after lockdown

The mental well-being of CareMalta's staff after the COVID-19 pandemic was discussed in sessions intended to help participants adopt positive self-care practices and readapt after long, voluntary isolation at work due to the pandemic. The sessions, conducted by the Richmond Foundation, wrapped up with a report on the common trends and issues across all care homes to help CareMalta mitigate any potential problems in the future.

Celebrating undying love

To celebrate Valentine's Day, CareMalta treated couples from its nine facilities to a morning of love, joy and merriment at the Mellieħa home for the elderly. The event served to bring everyone together to spend quality time in the company of family and friends, pouring over old photos and love letters and reminiscing about their romantic encounters.



A festive spirit

Casa San Paolo in Bugibba – *Festi Irġula* – allowed elderly residents to relive that cherished time of the year when they would celebrate their village feast and patron saint with friends and family. This year, the event meant so much more to the residents, having spent four months of lockdown inside the home and not being able to see their loved ones. The highlight of the evening was a surprise visit by the Nicolò Isouard Band of Mosta, of which Vassallo Group chairman Nazzareno Vassallo, is president *ad vitam*.



Sensitivity to LGBTIQ needs

The needs of older LGBTIQ persons using social care services were addressed in a series of awareness sessions for CareMalta's staff members, in conjunction with the Justice Ministry's Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, Gender Expression and Sexual Characteristics Unit. The sessions addressed topics such as LGBTIQ identities, the legal framework, barriers to good practice, as well as ways to make a difference at the workplace.



Stopping the spread

A reinforcement exercise of CareMalta's infection prevention and control campaign was carried out in all its facilities to reemphasise the importance of minimising the spread of infection. Basic infection control practices are implemented at all levels, from management teams, to employees, residents and relatives, all the time. Acting responsibly during work and out of work is also crucial.



Business Intelligence successfully implemented

Vassallo Group successfully implemented an Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) system, along with Microsoft Power BI, securing an efficient and productive system across all its companies. ERP is modular software designed to integrate the organisation's business processes into a single system running on central databases. The finance module shares data with other core business functions, including purchasing, stores, among others.

Supporting the President's mental health initiatives

Vassallo Group's long-standing Chairman's Lunch was held last December at the Casino Maltese in Valletta, where President George Vella and his wife Miriam were guests of honour. Group chairman Nazzareno Vassallo announced that the Group was committing a monthly contribution of €1,000 to the Malta Community Chest Fund Foundation for the duration of Dr Vella's presidency, in support of his mental health initiatives.





#EachForEqual theme for International Women's Day

More than 100 women attended Vassallo Group's International Women's Day event, which was held at the Malta Chamber of Commerce, Enterprise and Industry, and had as its theme #EachForEqual. The Group is proud that 60 per cent of its workforce are women. It works hard to fight the challenges around stereotypes, create new opportunities and constantly strives to achieve more for women within society.



Libraries to be set up in seven elderly homes

CareMalta joined forces with Malta Libraries to set up seven libraries at Roseville, Villa Messina, Casa Arkati, Casa Marija and Casa San Paolo, as well as Żejtun Home and Zammit Clapp, to encourage older people to rediscover the joy of reading. To further push this initiative, Horizons, the book arm of Outlook Coop, recently donated over 600 books covering Melitensia, novels, short stories and poetry to the homes run by CareMalta.

All eyes on the ball

Vassallo Group CEO Pio Vassallo was presented with a memento from the Malta Football Association president, to mark its 120th anniversary. It coincides with Pio's appointment as president of the Malta Beach Soccer Association, and his election on the main executive committee of the Malta Football Association.



Traditional builders' rite

Topping out, the builders' rite traditionally held when the last bit of concrete is poured atop a structure during its construction, took place at five projects entrusted to Vassallo Group during the past year. This tradition was carried out at: Mayflower Hotel in Qawra, Lands End in Sliema, Casal Nuovo in Paola, the MIA carpark, and Mehriezu in San Martin.



Timber lantern in St John's Co-Cathedral replaced with studier replica

The 75-year-old timber lantern lighting up St John's Co-Cathedral's oratory, where Caravaggio's *Beheading of St John the Baptist* hangs, has been replaced by a sturdier replica. The project was entrusted to Vassallo Joiners who created a solid Iroko lantern, which is an exact replica. It was installed during a four-hour operation. Vassallo Joiners was established in 1974 and their craftsmanship caters for domestic, commercial, restaurants & hotels, furnishings, apertures, structures and wrought iron/steel structures.

2021 will be a special year for Vassallo Group

CAROL CASSAR

FINANCE DIRECTOR,
VASSALLO GROUP

Carol Cassar was only 22 when he first joined Vassallo Group as a credit controller in 2001, “still a kid” as he puts it.

Fast forward to nearly 20 years later, and he is now Finance Director and a director of Vassallo Builders and of Vassallo Group Finance.

The latter company is a new one, Carol explains, having been incorporated three years ago. Its function is akin to a bank for the entire Group, where it takes loans from banks and invests the funds in other companies. He is involved in all the Group’s companies, except for CaterEssence and CareMalta, attending boards and reviewing the accounts before they are presented.

One of his challenges is to mitigate and control costs while keeping the sales constant to maximise the return of investments to the shareholders.

Then, COVID-19 reared its ugly head in Malta last March, causing widespread disruption.

“As soon as we saw the increase in positive cases in the second and third weeks of March 2020, the chairman called an extraordinary board meeting involving all the CEOs and finance teams to see what action we needed to take,” Carol explains.

“The first immediate measure was to write to the banks requesting the deferral of loan repayments, securing a six-month grace period.”

All budgets were revised, and Carol was involved in most of them, dissecting each project and determining what drastic measures had to be taken.

“Most of the cost-cutting measures planned in the revised budgets have been achieved.”



“All budgets were revised and we had to dissect every project”

“It was very challenging,” Carol admits. “We have now prepared the budget for 2021. We’ve had to make some assumptions, and I’m now keeping my fingers crossed that we can continue with the projects and that the Group won’t be affected.”

2021 will similarly continue to be a challenging year, he adds, with the after-effects of COVID-19 also spreading to

the construction industry. It is already evident that new investments are not as readily available as before due to uncertainty in number of sectors. A case in point was a €25 million tender which has been temporarily shelved.

Yet, the Group does not depend on one sole industry and has, over the years, diversified by adding divisions such as real estate, catering, care homes, and PV panels to mention some.

“In 2021, I will celebrate 20 years with the Group; the same year that the Group celebrates its 75th anniversary. It is a massive milestone and I’m certain it will be a very special year for the Vassallo family and the rest of the Group.” ■



The key is planning ahead

LEE XUEREB

CHIEF PEOPLE OFFICER,
VASSALLO GROUP

Lee Xuereb, Vassallo Group's new Chief People Officer, could not have taken up his appointment at a more difficult time. In his own words, companies have never been faced with so many issues – financial difficulties, mental health problems among employees, lack of stability – all at the same time. Undaunted, however, he describes the challenge as “exciting”.

He says he is trying to do “everything” to combat the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. “We have a number of structures geared towards the wellbeing of our staff: from providing monetary assistance to counselling, thanks to the Group's Arkati Foundation and its collaboration with the Richmond Foundation, which was in existence long before this problem hit.

These facilities have been used well: CareMalta, where Lee was HR Manager before assuming responsibility for the whole Group, held thorough debriefing sessions for staff after they opted to live-in at the care homes for over two months to safeguard the health of elderly residents.

Teleworking has also been introduced where possible. “That brought its own

challenges as most of our companies were not geared to such an extensive use of this approach, but we have managed this and can still continue to work efficiently even though the set-up has changed drastically.”

Lee is no newcomer to the company, joining 12 years ago and assuming control of the Group's payroll early in 2019. He intends to carry over the Group mentality he developed in that area into his new role.

“Once I finalise my handover at CareMalta, I will spend time understanding how the other companies work. Once you gain that knowledge, it is easier to take a broader perspective for the Group as a whole.

He acknowledges the differences between the varied elements of the Group's staff. “Care workers want to provide a service, whereas the construction sector wants a good

finished product. Our workforce is also extremely diverse as it is made up of so many people from different backgrounds and cultures. But ultimately we are all human beings.

“HR is about providing a service to the company by providing a service to employees. You need to understand what makes them tick and what might irritate them in the working environment.”

Lee says he is a strong believer in team building. “There is no doubt that relationships improve when people get to know each other. I have been thinking about what we can do as a Group in this climate, especially at Christmastime to keep a sense of connection while sticking to social distancing rules and, hopefully, once this pandemic is over we can do things to foster an even stronger sense of what it is to be part of the Vassallo Group.”

He is certainly enthusiastic, saying his background in psychology and a genuine interest in people drive him to embrace the challenges ahead. “One lesson we have learnt from this pandemic is not to take rushed decisions and that planning ahead is important.” ■

***“Relationships
improve when
people get to know
each other”***

VASSALLO GROUP

Charmaine Carmela Formosa Office Assistant

Lee Xuereb Chief People Officer

VASSALLO BUILDERS

Kevin Drew Civil Works Foreman
Mario Gigante Civil Works Foreman

Terence Schembri Civil Works Foreman
Siva Prasad Penumastasa Civil Works Foreman

CAREMALTA

Robert Grech Human Resources Manager
Roberta Aguis Facility Manager
Zvetlana Farrugia Facility Manager
Joe Vella Facility Manager
Stuart Caruana Facility Manager
Nicolette Sant Facility Manager
Maria Xuereb Nursing Manager
Paul Sceberras Mental Health Services Manager
Karina Debono Assistant Facility Manager
Eleanor Demanuele Farrugia Assistant Facility Manager
John Sciberras Assistant Facility Manager
Edel Borg Assistant Facility Manager
Renata Zahra Assistant Facility Manager
Miriam Scerri Accounts Executive
Amanda Tonna Services Executive
Simonne Schembri Communications Executive

Lourdes Marie Ciantar Senior Accounts Executive
Jacqueline Al Yasin Facility Administrative Assistant
Kayleigh Caruana Facility Administrative Assistant
Cristina Muscat Facility Administrative Assistant
Yasmin Seguna Active Ageing Coordinator
Anna Curmi Active Ageing Coordinator
Josette Muscat Housekeeper
Katrin Maslov Housekeeper
Doreen Galea Housekeeper
Sabrina Farrugia Housekeeper
Matthew Vassallo Lead Nurse
Kevin Raj Lead Nurse
Marija Cekic Lead Nurse
Sandra Mladenovich Lead Nurse
Kurt Balutan Lead Nurse
Noel Borg Non Executive Director (HILA Homes)

CATERESSENCE

Daniela Bugeja Senior Accounts Executive
David Jaros HR Assistant
Manuel Borg Stores Supervisor

Nenad Srdic Storekeeper
Sean Vella Jr Sous Chef
Adriana Cortis Product & Relationship Manager

VASSALLO GROUP REALTY

Jason Anthony Saliba Security Officer
Sasa Nikolic Security Officer
Ivelin Storanov Velikov Security Officer

Ronald Spiteri Head of Property Maintenance
Mark Ciantar Sales and Property Manager

LEARNING WORKS

Charlo Bonnici Chief Executive Officer

Yana Seychell Administration Clerk

HAND IN HAND

Natasha Attard Clinical Director

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