

ARKATI

THE VASSALLO GROUP PUBLICATION 2021



GOLD AWARD IN A DIAMOND YEAR



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


VASSALLO GROUP

75
YEARS
1946 - 2021

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 Vassallo Group Malta

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EDITORIAL

Celebrating a diamond jubilee always calls for a celebration, be it a birthday or anniversary. This has been the year where Vassallo Group celebrates 75 years of its existence and success.

We would have loved to celebrate this anniversary in the way we usually mark such occasions; however, due to the pandemic we had to scale down a number of the events – yet consciously opted for initiatives whose benefits we can still reap in the years to come.

One such initiative was ZVART (Žaren Vassallo Art Initiative), the brainchild of Group chairman Nazzareno Vassallo who wanted to mark 2021 with a contribution towards the arts by each company within the Group.

Through this initiative, an impressive number of artworks of various forms will adorn the Group's properties. In this issue of *Arkati*, we are featuring a number of these works and the artists behind them.

We also dedicate space to other events the Group managed to hold this year, particularly on and around June 4 – Foundation Day. These included a different Shine Awards celebration, which saw our senior executives visit staff at their place of work to distribute the special and long service awards.

Through our interviews in this magazine with the chairman, shareholders and different CEOs and senior managers, we gain an insight into the different sectors we operate in – construction, care, catering, hospitality, property, education and energy among others – as well as what the Group has been doing throughout 2021 and what is brewing for 2022 and beyond.

The cherry on the cake in 2021, however, has been the EY Entrepreneur of the Year award presented to Group chairman Nazzareno Vassallo, who also features on the cover of this edition. This award is deserved recognition not only of our chairman's invaluable contribution to the Group for at least 54 of the past 75 years, but also of all past and present individuals who have contributed to the success achieved by Vassallo Group throughout this period.

We take this opportunity to wish our chairman a memorable birthday, and may you and your family have a serene Christmas and New Year.

Charlo Bonnici

Editor

The values of opportunity

NAZZARENO VASSALLO

CHAIRMAN , VASSALLO GROUP

The interview is over. But one curiosity lingered in the cool conditioned air: “How did you acquire Villa Amodeo?”

The villa in Mosta has for some time been the seat of Group chairman Żaren Vassallo, and he smiles, as he did at several points during this encounter, and proceeds to recount the story.

Upon receiving a call from a friend telling him that the former Italian owner of the property was keen to sell in a hurry as he had decided to leave the island, potential buyer and vendor met. But the conversation took an unusual turn: “If I don’t sell to you,” the Italian said, “I’m not going to sell the property to anyone.”

Żaren thought little of it at the time and proceeded to conclude the deal. It was only when the vendor invited him for dinner at his home in Italy that the significance of that remark became apparent: “I haven’t even told my wife this,” the vendor told a shellshocked buyer, “but I will no longer be on this earth in a few weeks’ time.”

The vendor died shortly after. “That’s why he wasn’t going to sell to anyone else,” Żaren muses.

Opportunities for the Group chairman have come in various guises, and he has certainly had more than his fair share as the company he made his own – after buying out his siblings – achieved one success after another in various sectors. But he passionately insists that in his 54 years at the helm, he has been governed by principles not money.

“We relish new opportunities but we don’t take on everything. We had the chance to get into the gaming sector, for example, but I couldn’t reconcile it with our involvement in the healthcare sector – so I said ‘no’.”

He offers a candid response when asked what money means to him: “I have worked hard to get a financial return but I also want to feel good about where that money comes from. In the care sector, we are improving people’s lives and making a profit. So that’s great. But I don’t want to earn money from things that have no value.”

Żaren is also a great believer in using some of that money to support his local community. His hometown, Mosta, is etched on his heart and has therefore benefitted from the Group’s success. “Many come to us for assistance and I think that’s a beautiful thing. It also gives me great pleasure to support the Santa Marija feast. That’s what values are in my book and that’s the message I transmit to my children.”

The Group chairman plays a paternal role in the company; quite literally since his five children all occupy different roles within it. They also embark on one pursuit their father never had time for – sport – both in terms of personal challenges and now with the setting up of the Mediterranean College of Sport (MCS) in collaboration with St Aloysius. “I believe that sport helps people take better business decisions. These initiatives are very much their own achievements and I’m very happy about that.”

Żaren has talked about retirement several times, but never acted upon it. However, he feels that having turned 70 and with the Group celebrating its 75th anniversary, now really is the right time.

“I am 14 years overdue in reality,” he laughs. “My children aren’t young anymore and they’re at their peak, so it’s important they have an open runway to do what they want to do. I would still take an interest, of course, but I can take a back seat and dedicate more time to other pursuits.”

Like what? “I enjoy going abroad and want to do that more. I spent most of summer in Sicily and would also like to spend more time in Gozo. I will still offer my input and probably even spend more time with my children in their respective roles – such as going on site – which is not something I have time for at the moment. And of course, I look forward to enjoying the company of my grandchildren.”

One of the legacies he wishes to leave behind is for the public to continue to perceive the Group as an organisation that does things in the right way.





“I believe public perception of us is largely positive because of our approach and having that credibility is very important to me. People tend to say that we work in a professional manner and that we’ve made a positive contribution to the care sector. That pleases me enormously and, again, relates to our values.”

As well as doing things well, Żaren is also known as a pioneer with razor sharp business sense. Diversification of the Group has been key to his outlook, and if ever there was a period when this strategy paid dividends it was with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic – which the Group has weathered relatively well. “We would have hurt more had we not diversified,” he says.

So, which projects have pleased him most?

“When it comes to construction, the Danish Village was a dream come true and today I am still proud of it as a development. We did something special there.

“I am also delighted that I managed to put together the first real local consortium to build Malta International Airport. Big foreign contractors were vying for that tender and instead of being used by them, I decided to contact other Maltese contractors to ask if they’d be interested in getting together. They reacted positively and we formed Novita. At one stage, there were 700 workers on site and I was running it. Those were two of the best years of my working life.”

Another of Żaren’s bold decisions – which today can easily be taken for granted given the sector’s exponential growth – was to turn Casa Arkati into a residence for the elderly when such a thing did not exist in Malta.

“We studied various options – such as a private school and private hospital – but took the plunge into the care sector. People thought we were crazy to invest in a ‘five-star’ hotel for elderly because it involved a huge culture change. Almost 30 years on, I’m proud to say CareMalta has become the first choice for many and it also brought a welcome social care dimension to our company. That gives me great satisfaction.”

The Group also has an interest in five hotels despite selling its joint shareholding in a leading hospitality business in 2009. “Today we are getting into education,” Żaren says. “These are what I consider to be our towers.”

The chairman has always been a big believer in buying in expertise, assessing proposals carefully and forming partnerships to develop the business – which he admits has enabled the Group to create things that would otherwise not have proved possible.

“I can spot straight away whether I want to do business with someone or not. There has to be total trust between partners – 90 per cent



won't do. Not all our ventures have worked out, of course, but my philosophy is clear: in Year 1, you need to support the business; Year 2, it needs to stand on its own two feet; and in Year 3 it has to contribute. If this isn't happening, then you're in the wrong business. The 6PM software company was a great investment for us. We got a good return and I want to do it again," he laughs.

The Group was not able to celebrate its 75th anniversary in the way it originally intended due to restrictions imposed by the pandemic. But one initiative that did make it off the drawing board – quite literally – was ZVART (the Zaren Vassallo Art initiative) through which the Group's respective offices showcase local artists. "We came up with an idea for our properties to feature local art, which I must say has created an element of healthy competition and left a mark which is hopefully here to stay."

All this is a far cry from the simple construction business his father started just after World War II. So, what does Žaren think he'd say if he were alive today? "I wonder that myself when I see 55 different nationalities at our Group's social events and awards ceremonies. "He could never have conceived what we have become."

Which, loosely translated, means what Žaren turned the company into after taking full control in 1985.

Today, Žaren is the one on the receiving end of an award: being honoured by EY Malta as its Entrepreneur of the Year for 2021.

"Awards have never meant much to me but I was encouraged to accept this and have been overwhelmed by the positive reaction from different quarters. It's a shame I didn't get to go to Monaco for the EY global event [due to coronavirus restrictions], but must admit it's nice to receive some recognition in the final year of my working life."

Well, much like the story behind his acquisition of Villa Amodeo, they couldn't really have handed it to anyone else, could they? 🍷

"I have worked hard to get a financial return but I also want to feel good about where that money comes from"





Time to shine

PIO VASSALLO
CEO, VASSALLO GROUP

The first thing that greets you when setting foot inside the office of Pio Vassallo is a painting of a sailing boat in rough seas, sailing against the wind.

Battling against strong currents is something the CEO of Vassallo Group has weathered over the past months, as together with the rest of the team he worked to keep a steady keel when the COVID-19 pandemic threatened to batter the business.

“The painting is a constant reminder to hold strong in the face of adversity and to believe that calmer waters are in sight,” he says.

And, thanks to the Group’s philosophy to diversify the sectors they operate in, Pio feels buoyant about the future.

One of the projects which fuels his optimism is the new sports college, which will be developed on the site of the St Aloysius College Sports Complex in Birkirkara, following an agreement between the Jesuits and Vassallo Group’s education and training subsidiary, Learning Works Limited.

The Mediterranean College of Sports will include indoor football and basketball pitches, an outdoor 7-a-side football pitch, a swimming pool, a dormitory with 63 beds, 28 new classrooms, a childcare centre, offices and a two-storey car park for 193 vehicles.

Being an old Aloysian, this project has a deeper meaning for Pio, who growing up, took part in numerous marathons to help his school raise money for a swimming pool, which was forever elusive.

The college, which will specialise in four disciplines – football, water polo, athletics, and swimming – can take up to 380 students from the age of 11 and will continue to offer an education right up to Sixth Form, something, which the existing national sports school does not cater for.

Geared to open at the start of the scholastic year in 2023, the school’s motto is *Tempus ut Lucent* (Time to Shine).

The Group has also secured the commitment of leading sports scientists – part of the project will see the creation of Malta’s first state-of-the-art sports science centre – consultants and a sports psychologist to ensure future students will have every chance and support to excel in their field.

Another reason for the CEO’s optimism is the rapid pace with which the University of Malta’s Campus Hub and Vassallo Business Park in Burmarrad are moving.

Despite facing numerous challenges with freight, deliveries, increasing costs, shortage of labour and the global shortage of raw material, Pio was upbeat to see that everyone had come on board to deliver the first phase of the Campus Hub by October 1; in time for the start of the scholastic year.

“The bigger challenge is completing the first two accommodation blocks, as we plan to take in the first batch of students in January. Everyone is working like clockwork and our supply chain has inbuilt contingencies to deal with the current global situation.

*“Pio feels
buoyant
about the
future”*



“Every day, the project takes on a new shape and it’s rewarding to witness. The project team is doing a fantastic job to meet the targets.

“The Hub is going to be an exciting destination and for the first time, we’ll have a proper campus that will provide students with an incredible experience and the chance to really get a taste of student life.”

Concurrently, work is also entering the final phase of the Vassallo Business Park, which is garnering a lot of interest from potential tenants seeking to secure a spot in this coveted space.

The next steps for 2022 are extending the business park, and opening the Lands End Hotel in a prime spot along the Sliema seafront before next Christmas. The biggest target for growth next year is education as the Group seeks to add another pillar to its diverse portfolio that has been instrumental in braving the storm brought about by the pandemic.

“Maintaining the status quo is not in our DNA. We keep moving; seeking to tap new niches to diversify the Group, to remain relevant and strong.”

Another sector Pio plans to grow is solar power after the successful implementation of a €1m investment in a 1.3MW solar plant in Burmarrad – that can generate enough electricity to power 570 households – through its subsidiary Powerezi.

In 2022, the Group will also be looking at moving towards LEAD certification and exploring the potential of carbon neutral construction.

“I’m looking forward to the challenges ahead. As a Group, we are using our experience as a family, maturing in the business



and working together to strengthen our unity, while at the same time empowering enough non-family members to help us grow our business...

“I’m very hopeful the economic recovery will be quick, and I believe 2022 will be a better year. There will be challenges, but also numerous opportunities the country can grab.

“Being small means we’re more agile... the appetite is there and the confidence too, so we’ll pull through.” 🍷



Campus Hub

Environment-friendly technology adds value

CHRISTIAN VASSALLO

CEO, CAMPUS HUB

The Campus Hub of the University of Malta is the Vassallo family's largest investment so far, but more importantly for Christian Vassallo, it is also one of the Group's most environment-friendly ventures.

"Throughout the construction process we opted for technology that favoured the environment, such as the bubble deck system, which reduced our concrete footprint by 40 per cent; the equivalent of 1.5 million gallons of CO₂.

"We also opted for prefabricated items, such as stairs and toilets that were delivered in one consignment, cutting down on a large number of consignments for separate items, such as tiles, shower curtains and toilets, and in turn further reduced our carbon footprint. We've also installed energy-saving windows and built a water-catchment reservoir system."

While these greener measures increased the Group's immediate costs, the expenses will be recovered in the long run because the project was completed in a shorter time.

Meanwhile, most of the trees uprooted before excavation are being replanted.

"We tried to save as many trees as possible, not only because incorporating a 60-year-old tree in the project adds value to the investment, but because respecting the environment is the right thing to do.

"While from a contractor's point of view such environment-friendly measures seem a bit of a hassle, I am sure by time it will all make sense. I'm very proud of how we were able to respect the environment. I'm also proud of how we managed to save and restore a 150-year-old building on site."

The Vassallo Group had been granted a permit to excavate the whole site in preparation for the construction of the Campus Hub and underground parking. However, when the works started, the team behind the project stumbled upon a farmhouse that had been built well over a century ago.

"My father Žaren insisted that we could avoid excavating the area in close proximity to the farmhouse so that we don't damage it and proposed incorporating the building into the design of the project.

"It set me thinking: our lease is for only 60 years, so who are we to decide that we should remove a 150-year-old building? And as the project started approaching completion, we realised it could be turned into a main attraction and eventually serve as a wine bar, eatery or cafeteria."

The €40million investment, spread across 65,000 square metres is now nearly finished.

The lecture building was completed months ahead of schedule and is already hosting University students. Several



commercial spaces have also been rented out to provide, among others, dry-cleaning, pharmaceuticals, grocery shopping, coffee, dining and stationery services.

Two of the four accommodation blocks within the Hub will open their doors to student residents from January 1, and negotiations about hosting a medical school in a separate building are ongoing.

As the first and only university residence on campus, the Msida hub will not only afford students the convenience of waking up minutes before their lectures, but residents will no longer have to deal with traffic congestion at peak hours.

The project in itself will alleviate the huge parking problem for the whole area through the provision of 500 parking spots, some of which have already been made available to motorists. Eventually, the parking lot will also provide direct access to Mater Dei Hospital.

Christian adds that there has been a high demand for residential units, including from people living in Malta, with the Group expecting a surge in requests in the coming months.

But while COVID-19 did not dampen demand for residential units, the pandemic did cause some delays in the delivery of construction material and impact the cost of some

“We tried to save as many trees as possible, not only because incorporating a 60-year-old tree in the project adds value to the investment, but because respecting the environment is the right thing to do”

items. The project only remained on track thanks to the very strong project management team, Chris explains.

The pandemic also brought a lot of pain for Christian, as the Group had to downsize some operations and lose great teammates. He hopes the worst is over and is looking forward to 2022... and beyond.

After being entrusted with the Group's vision for 2020 in 2015, and seeing the targets being achieved by July 2017, Christian is now focusing his energy to ensure the 5X vision is met by 2023. ■

Sustainability is the only path to a green future

NATALIE BRIFFA FARRUGIA

CEO, CAREMALTA GROUP

It's dress-down Friday at CareMalta Group, but the relaxed attire never seems to translate into an easier schedule for Natalie Briffa Farrugia, who towards the end of the day is still flitting from one meeting to another.

However, this year there is a different air about her, and the steps of the CareMalta CEO seem more paced after close to two years of having to juggle the delicate job of ensuring the services under her wing ran smoothly, and that the staff remained strong in the face of the challenges posed by COVID-19.

"I have to say that the pandemic has made me more grounded; quieter. It has made me somewhat wiser and I've learnt to appreciate time more," she says.

Apart from allowing her to savour more time with her children, this newfound appreciation has cut through the noise of her packed calendar and allowed her to recalibrate and give birth to a wellbeing strategy that puts the spotlight on its 1,300 employees.

This seamlessly weaves in with the Group's ICare concept and is geared to restore the physical and mental wellbeing of each individual – which took a pummeling when the pandemic swept the island – and to sustain them to face future obstacles.

This Wellbeing Strategy and Policy is intended to guide employees through the healing process with a focus on several dimensions of wellbeing including: spiritual, emotional, physical, intellectual, social, vocational, environmental and financial.

"Apart from receiving a wellbeing message every day, we are also devising initiatives to restore a team spirit and reignite the

social aspect that was lost when the pandemic forced us all to isolate."

Nurturing workers' wellbeing also leads to employee retention, a crucial element for any successful business, more so in the care sector where Malta is witnessing an exodus of foreign nurses who are being poached by the UK.

So far, CareMalta has succeeded in juggling the situation to continue its operations, even though for a while it was feeling the pinch when the government was offering those who joined its health services different conditions from those opting to enter the private sector.

Thankfully, since the care homes came together under the umbrella of the Malta Chamber of Commerce during the pandemic, the joint lobbying persuaded the government to offer foreign nurses the same contractual terms.

As Vassallo Group marks its 75th anniversary, Natalie believes that if the country and the world do not learn from the pandemic then everyone will be in trouble. Every individual and entity should work towards a common vision of sustainability and a green future.

"During the pandemic, when humankind had to slow down and was forced into lockdown, the world started to heal – we should





“Ultimately, our goal is to leave a legacy of care”

take that as a snapshot of what the future can be. If we continue to pursue greed, then we will be living in an unsustainable world, together with the hardships this will bring.

“My perspective on the future is that any business model has to incorporate the aspect of sustainability to make long-term sense, otherwise, it’ll come back to haunt us. We need to pre-empt situations and be proactive.

“The same way companies today measure their success through revenue and profits, one fine day our progress will be assessed by how many trees we’ve planted.”

This is the perspective CareMalta is adopting for its homes as it seeks to diversify its services, while ensuring it gives back to the community.

One area it will be venturing into is Gozo and it has signed a 65-year lease agreement with La Stella Philharmonic Society to convert the former Astra Disco – located at the foot of the Citadel – into a 60-bed facility.

Guided by her father’s principles – Nazzareno Vassallo always believed in researching the sector before venturing to offer a service – Natalie has commissioned the University of Malta’s Faculty for Social Wellbeing to understand the exact present and future social needs of Gozo through evidence-based data.

The study is envisaged to take six months, and researchers will be speaking with families, holding focus groups and seeking NGOs’ perspectives to better gauge the vacuum in social needs.

Whether it is drug rehabilitation, disability, mental health, alternative care for children, or rehabilitation, CareMalta will be expanding its social net to provide the top-notch care it has become renowned for, in the heart of Gozo.

In the past year, CareMalta has also been busy running the new mental health facility, Casal Nuovo in Paola. This provides a home for those who have resided at Mount Carmel Hospital for more than 40 years.

“It was touching to hear that one of the residents who was transferred to Casal Nuovo had been living at Mount Carmel since he was four years old; today he is 64. Overnight, he went from being a patient to a resident living in the community. These are the stories that make this work so rewarding. Ultimately, our goal is to leave a legacy of care.” ■





Cautious optimism for 2022

JONATHAN BUTTIGIEG

CEO, VASSALLO BUILDERS

To commemorate Vassallo Group's 75th anniversary on June 4, 2021, Vassallo Builders commissioned an impressive work of art to be installed in the new reception area of the Group's head office in Mosta.

The concept was a unique one since Jonathan, together with his executive committee, wanted a theme that captured the past, present and future of the Group.

"We decided that the stone for this work of art should come from a part of our past; the concrete from a part of our present; and the steel from something still to come, representing the future. I managed to get permission from one general manager of the Mellieha Holiday Complex, also known as the Danish Village, to give us a few stones from the building," he says.

"As CEO of the founding company of Vassallo Group, I felt a tremendous responsibility to commemorate the occasion with the perfect work of art."

Visual artist Rupert Cefai was chosen to deliver the concept. Armed with a copy of the publication *Vision*, which traces the Group's rich history, Rupert sat down with founder Nazzareno Vassallo to get a deeper understanding into his humble beginnings. He discovered that Nazzareno had gained his first business experience selling eggs from door to door.

Moved by this, Rupert was inspired to create a painting around the egg form – more specifically, by creating shapes which depicted the negative space between eggs in a basket.

The Group's past, present and future were laid out in a triptych format, with stone being incorporated to reflect the Group's roots, concrete to depict its evolution to the present and steel to symbolise the yet unwritten future.

The stone was sourced from The Danish Village, regarded as a milestone project for Vassallo Builders in the 1970s, since it was the company's first large-scale project that served to propel the Group forward into growth.

Jonathan made sure to involve as many Vassallo Builders workers as possible in sourcing the three materials. Masons ground the stone into dust, while fresh concrete from the Campus Hub and the Vassallo Business Park projects was cast into blocks, cut by the company's shutterers and steel fixers and then crushed into dust to be mixed with Rupert's paints. The blacksmiths cut out raw steel plates, while carpenters prepared the structure of the painting and scaffolders helped mount it.

Since joining the company in 1993, Jonathan is well aware of his responsibility in leading a company so rich in heritage.

Over the years, Vassallo Builders has cultivated an excellent track record in successfully developing difficult projects, such as Wasterserv's Mechanical Biological Treatment plants and the construction of the airport's air terminal in the 1980s.

"Over the past 75 years, we developed a reputation for deliverability and dependability, by honouring the agreed prices and timeframes. This is a very big reason why clients choose to



“We wanted a theme that captured the past, present and future of the Group”

work with us. Žaren and also Pio have always operated on the ethos that our word is more important than the contract we would have signed.

“And this is also reflected in my behaviour and values.”

Jonathan also ensures the company’s own employees are recognised and appreciated, regardless of their nationality, age, culture or background. He even knows all the long-time employees by their first names and ensures they feel a sense of belonging.

“Employees are our backbone. We cannot carry out such projects without them. Happy and satisfied employees are more productive than disgruntled ones,” he points out.

Ever since Jonathan was appointed CEO four years ago, he has made it a point to always block off Friday mornings for site visits, where he updates staff on the problems encountered and the solutions being implemented, while offering employees general support.

That is why the company constantly implements various policies to respect diversity, promote equality and support career development.



As 2021 draws to a close, Jonathan describes it as a good year under the circumstances and reflects that the company will be able to meet most of its targets, which had been somewhat toned down due to COVID-19.

Yet he is approaching 2022 with a degree of caution, as the construction industry is increasingly plagued by inflation, with the cost of building materials and shipping constantly on the rise.

The company will be focusing on its internal projects, including the Vassallo Business Park in Burmarrad and will look to wrap up the Campus Hub at the University of Malta.

One exciting project that will kick off in 2022 is the building of the Mediterranean College of Sports within St Aloysius College’s sports complex.

Although construction prices remain a concern, Jonathan predicts 2022 will be a good year for the joinery, scaffolding and mobile unit hire divisions, and looks forward to the year with a healthy dose of cautious optimism. 🟡

When the paddling gets tough...

RUBEN VASSALLO

CEO, VASSALLO GROUP REALTY

“It’s important to rely on your colleagues, understand what’s going on, encourage one another and trust those supporting your quest,” according to Ruben Vassallo, CEO of Vassallo Group Realty.

Ruben seems to have a refreshingly fresh recipe for success. Yet he is not talking about his working life, but his recent challenge to kayak the 96km of cobalt blue sea separating Malta from Sicily.

“We basically split up the trip into three 30km sections. The final leg was undoubtedly the toughest. You’re paddling during the hottest part of the day and exhaustion strikes – so you need to fight against fatigue and the mental games at play as you wonder whether your first sight of land is actually a mirage. That’s when you have to summon all your mental strength and keep going.”

Hard work and dedication played an important role too: “My buddies and I trained for months before taking this on – going out at irregular hours to paddle to various places. The first big challenge was to complete a kayak trip around Malta. If you fail, you can forget about Sicily. Once we managed that, we knew we were ready.”

As with several momentous occasions in Ruben’s life, his Malta-Sicily challenge started with a blessing from Archbishop Charles Scicluna after a chance encounter in a parking area. “He blessed me before I got married, blessed my wife two days before she gave birth and imparted his blessing on my kayak. I believe in blessings and his work for me!”

Ruben and his buddies earmarked a week during which they were ready to go at a moment’s notice should the weather conditions prove ideal. “The sea was rough almost every day but there was a window of opportunity just before the Euro football final so we set off from St Paul’s Bay at 3am.”

He was going too fast at first, as dolphins were springing out of the water beside him, and needed to be told to calm his pace.

“Adrenalin is high when you leave. I was all over the place till the support crew started to settle me down. Being in the middle of nowhere was a great feeling and the people accompanying us on a sailing boat were fantastic: offering words of encouragement at the right moments. You’re constantly asking yourself if you can really make it and have to dig deep when the going gets tough.”

Back on land, business has not been plain sailing either. The rental market has seen a dip due to the COVID-19 pandemic and faces more challenging economic conditions from overseas, which means it is taking “weeks” rather than “days” to rent out properties.



But Realty, Ruben explains, is also about offering support to clients. “We are not just here to make money. We prepared for changes in the market before the pandemic and are now able to react to changing market conditions.”

New projects are also in the pipeline, such as Casa Santa Rosa in Mosta, where Realty is pushing architectural boundaries to blend the old with the new, and – above all – create an environment where residents feel they are independent rather than living in an institution.

Meanwhile, the Vassallo Business Park in Burmarrad – designed with medium to larger companies in mind – is “really advanced” and nearing completion.

The facility is likely to serve as a distribution centre and also has a number of green features, with a fully-fledged PV park on top that is already generating electricity and feeding it back into the grid.

“The similarities between physical challenges and business challenges are uncanny”

“In partnership with our cousins, we have basically got rid of the cement and crushing plant at the site and replaced it with a much cleaner operation that will also comprise an 8,000sqm green belt with olive trees – separating the industrial area from the valley.

“We are now in the last 30km of it, so to speak,” Ruben says as he draws on his kayaking experience, “and the challenge now is to get everyone functioning so clients can move in”.

Ruben also praises the collaborative nature of the Vassallo Group as it celebrates its diamond jubilee this year.

“My grandfather wouldn’t have expected to see us where we are today, that’s for sure. Yet as well as the inspiration from my father, it’s the thousands of employees who have been involved with the Group – some of them for their entire working lives – who have helped us develop and maintain the desire to keep growing.

“It will be interesting to see where the next 25 years take us,” Ruben muses, as he returns to the one-third rule of his Malta-Sicily challenge. “In fact, the similarities between physical challenges and business challenges are uncanny. I suppose that in both you’re always hoping you make it to your destination in one piece.” ■





An evolving Group that inspires passion

ALEX TRANTER
CEO, CATERESSENCE



The COVID-19 pandemic wiped out half of CaterEssence's activity overnight, with the company being at the receiving end of one of the biggest blows dealt to the Vassallo Group in recent years.

But CEO Alex Tranter believes the catering company has taken the challenge in its stride and by the end of the year will emerge even stronger.

"The pandemic brought about a tsunami in the hospitality and contract catering sector. CaterEssence was devastated as seven hotels that relied on the company for tailor-made food services were shuttered, along with retail stores, including our own Cake Box outlets," he says.

The only part of the business that survived during the pandemic was the company's contract to provide catering services of some 30,000 meals a week to elderly residents at the various care homes operated by CareMalta and the Archdiocese of Malta.

"Measures implemented to curb the pandemic saw half of CaterEssence's business coming to a halt, but thankfully, the government's COVID-19 supplement helped us retain most employees.

"The Group's stability and diversity also helped cushion the blow as it allowed us to temporarily find alternative opportunities for others, redistributing workers among other companies within the Group.

"Those who were willing to work in a completely new sector were assigned different responsibilities, but regretfully there were some contracts that couldn't be renewed."

The pandemic pushed the company into restructuring itself, with the Group helping the team behind CaterEssence rebuild itself within a few months. By summer, the company had started to pick up where it had left off pre-pandemic and started registering growth.

Alex feels the worst is hopefully over, and looking ahead, the company will be opening a third Cake Box outlet at the Campus Hub at the University of Malta – one of Vassallo Group's biggest projects ever.

The Cake Box enterprise was launched in 2014 after CaterEssence decided to develop its own range of branded pastry and savoury food products, with the first outlet set up at the Landmark Complex in Qormi. Over the years, the cake and pastry business grew, with the company opening a second shop in Mosta's main square.

"Quality, consistency and a competitive price all wrapped up in a nice brand, have guaranteed demand for Cake Box products

over the years, ultimately ensuring the enterprise survives a worldwide pandemic."

"We knew we had huge talent, so we set about building a brand around our pastries... and we never looked back. We moved from a completely business-to-business activity in this food retail sector to a business-to-consumer model. Cake Box soon became the showcase of CaterEssence's pastry strengths and talent."

Following the devastating pandemic, CaterEssence recently managed to win two government tenders linked to the supply, packaging and delivery of food items to various distribution centres in Malta and Gozo for collection by eligible families.

This new business activity will see CaterEssence supply over 12,000 families in need with a range of packed essential food items.

For Alex, the company's growth over the past months is a reminder of Vassallo Group's ability to evolve over the years.

He joined 28 years ago, aged just 28, as Nazzareno Vassallo's personal assistant after graduating in engineering. After just one year, he was appointed managing director of Healthcare Services Ltd, which eventually went on to become CareMalta.

He led CareMalta during its initial 18 years which started from operating Casa Arkati, Malta's first purposely built home for the elderly in Mosta, further developing into providing innovative public-private partnerships with the government in elderly care, and new Group-owned, private care homes.

Following a sabbatical abroad in 2010, during which time he maintained an active link with the Group through a non-executive directorship role, he returned in 2014 on an executive basis leading CaterEssence.

"Despite the huge differences between the care and catering sectors, I had already built a strong trusting relationship with the Group's executive management team over the previous two decades, and there were enough resources for me to pick up the sectorial speciality.

"One thing I continue to cherish, having formed part of such a dynamic and distinctive Group, is the Group's ability and culture to allow people to grow and progress within its ever-evolving business activities. This ensures employees remain involved, motivated and excited.

"The best part of my role within CaterEssence is being surrounded by a team of amazingly talented and energetic people who provide constant support to embrace change and build exciting opportunities for the company's future." ■

"Cake Box soon became the showcase of CaterEssence's pastry strengths and talent"



Seeking alternative care for children



CHARLENE VELLA VASSALLO
VASSALLO GROUP LAWYER, SHAREHOLDER



Some 30 years ago, Vassallo Group were pioneers in the provision of care for the elderly and went on to become leaders in residential care for people with a disability and the provision of early intervention services for children with autism.

Now, in its quest to share the stability acquired through 75 years of conscientious business, Vassallo Group is looking into offering protection and care to children when this can no longer be provided within a family set-up.

Over recent years, the State entered into several partnerships with the Church over residential homes for children. But with the former gradually running out of human resources, it is time for the private sector to start providing alternative care for children.

"This new social venture is still in its initial phase. Right now, we are at the drawing board, drafting plans for residential care for children aged up to 18," Charlene Vella Vassallo explains.

"We would like to run a residential home and have professionals on our team who can act as guardians to these children. They could be their role models and mentor them during the first years of their life. We would do our utmost to give them the very best, making sure we move away from the feeling of an institution towards that of a family home.

"Just like CareMalta opened the first home for the elderly within the private sector, Vassallo Group hopes to lead in the alternative care sector, following the success it registered in the social sector through HILA and Hand in Hand Ltd."

Charlene believes the Group has a responsibility to send a positive message to the world by using its own stability to provide stability to the most vulnerable.

"People are becoming increasingly egoistic and greedy, and the more human beings evolve, the more they are finding it difficult to share with others.

"Take social media... its very essence revolves around the self. Sadly, virtual reality is mirrored by the



real world, and it is making it more challenging for those who have vowed to defend human rights.”

A lawyer by profession, a good chunk of Charlene’s work is made up of civil and commercial cases; however, she is hoping to put her most recent human rights’ specialisation into practice through the new venture of alternative care for children.

Charlene’s interest in human rights advocacy and social welfare dates back to her teenage years when she carried out philanthropic work with her older sister Natalie Briffa Farrugia in Africa. Soon after graduating as a Doctor of Law, she enrolled for a Master of Law in Human Rights of the Child at the University of London.

“The Group is made up of human beings and upholding workers’ rights should be at the core of any company’s relationship with its employees.”

“By striving to uphold human rights and fulfilling basic needs, the company is consciously opting for clean business”

Among others, in her capacity as company lawyer, Charlene has assisted employees in their attempts to reunite with their relatives and supporting them in their application for family reunification; a basic human right.

“There are those who have been working with us for a very long time and would have settled down, yet their life still depends on a series of paperwork. We try to support them as much as we can and also make sure all are registered with the local authorities so that they do not suffer precarious work conditions.”

As an entrepreneur, she understands the Group needs to make a profit, but this should not come at the expense of human rights.

“By venturing into the social sector, we’d still be running a business and earning a profit. However, by striving to uphold human rights and fulfilling basic needs, the company is consciously opting for clean business.” 🍌

The Arkati Foundation

Financial Statements

30 November 2020

Income and Expenditure Account

Year ended 30 November 2019

	Note	2020 €	2019 €
Income			
Investment gains		14,739	13,135
Donations		59,926	57,367
Gross income		74,665	70,502
Fees and charges		(118)	-
Tax at source		(1,997)	(1,875)
Excess of income over expenditure		72,550	68,627

Allocated to:

Accumulated funds		36,275	34,314
Distributable fund	4	36,275	34,313
		72,550	68,627

Statement of Affairs

30 November 2020

	Note	2020 €	2019 €
ASSETS AND LIABILITIES			
Non-current assets			
Financial assets	5	329,822	314,824
Current assets			
Loans receivable	9	100,000	-
Other receivables		6,294	19,688
Cash and cash equivalents	6	45,049	88,015
		151,343	107,703
Total assets		481,165	422,527
Current liabilities			
Distributable income		66,392	60,235
Net assets		414,773	362,292

Represented by:-

Capital Fund	7	11,647	11,647
Distributable fund	4	66,392	60,235
Accumulated fund	8	336,734	290,410
		414,773	362,292

These financial statements were approved by the board members, authorised for issue on 31 August 2021 and signed on its behalf by:

Joe Saliba
President

Pio Vassallo
Member

ZVART

A celebration of art

Vassallo Group chairman Żaren Vassallo came up with an innovative and lasting idea to celebrate the Group's 75th anniversary this year – introducing local art into the Group's properties.

ZVART, the Zaren Vassallo Art Initiative, encourages companies within the Group to acquire works of art to adorn their respective properties, as well as celebrating local artists.

The initiative has been a huge success since it was launched by Nazzareno Vassallo last December during an event in which he unveiled a painting by Mosta-based artist Dione Borg of his late brother Guzeppi Vassallo at Villa Amodeo, the Group chairman's office.

Since then, the Group's companies have followed suit, introducing works by artists such as Luciano Micallef, Paul Haber, Wallace Falzon, Rupert Cefai, Jeffrey Galea Jessica Debatista and Joe Baldacchino.

Learning Works CEO Charlo Bonnici, who is also the chairperson of ZVART, said the Group wished to convey the message that art and the appreciation of art was intrinsically connected to the intellectual growth of individuals.

Nazzareno Vassallo said: "We came up with an idea for our properties to feature local art, which I must say has created an element of healthy competition and left a mark which is hopefully here to stay." ■





‘We are focused on having an even better 2022’

STEPHEN BORG

FINANCE DIRECTOR &
COMPANY SECRETARY
VASSALLO GROUP



Nazzareno Vassallo's first manual ledger accounts held at the Group's head office in Mosta are not just old artefacts that have been kept for posterity. For Stephen Borg and his colleagues, they are a reminder of the good governance the company exercised from the very beginning.

“Our chairman always wanted business to be done in a professional manner; one could say he was the Group's first accountant. He kept a record of everything, which shows he always understood good governance.

“Knowing the Group has always had its finances in order, and that it wants things done in a proper manner is one of the things that enticed me to work here.”

Stephen Borg joined 22 years ago, after spending four years as part of the team building Terminal 2 at the Malta Freeport. He had been asked to take on the Freeport job in 1995, just two years after graduating in accountancy from the University of Malta.

The first time he saw his new working space at the Freeport – a mobile office on site measuring four by two metres – he swore he would never work there. So he was incredulous when

someone suggested he would fall in love with construction and never join another sector again.

“I spent four years at the Freeport. It was a fantastic experience; land reclamation at its best. As financial controller I was part of the team that brought to life one of the largest contracts awarded in Malta (Lm50million/€120million).

“Notwithstanding the negative publicity that construction sometimes gets, watching a building come to life before your very eyes is an incredible experience.”

By 2000, Stephen was hooked, so when Nazzareno offered him a position at Vassallo Group's head office, he immediately took it up. Despite joining more than two decades ago, Stephen feels he still learns something new every day.

The pull factor remains the fact that the Group takes financial information very seriously, meaning it is not just collated to meet statutory requirements, but also serves as the basis of all decision-making.

“We sit down and make sure the numbers add up before announcing an investment... I feel my work and that of my team is not just intended to make us look good on paper, but is valued as an integral part of the business.”



The George Urban Boutique Hotel



Malta Freeport

The Group plans to continue growing and diversifying in the coming months, including in untapped areas, partnering up with experts in the field to ensure a successful venture.

The group is currently running the Labranda Riviera Hotel in Mellieħa, the George Hotel and Number 11 urban hotel in St Julian's in partnership with others.

"If you want to invest and have a keen interest in something, but lack expertise, you need to enter into a partnership until you gain that expertise. That is how CareMalta kicked off.

"Partnerships are like apprenticeships. The Group appreciates that it is not an expert in everything and knows it needs support when venturing into a new area. That's how the Group will continue growing; gradually, but steadily."

Reflecting on the past months, Stephen says that finances played an important role in the survival of the Vassallo Group over

the past two years, when the pandemic ravaged whole industries. While construction projects continued, the impact on the tourism sector was devastating.

"We employ some 2,000 people and making sure they all retained their job during the pandemic was challenging. Some people were moved from one sector to another and asked to do a completely unrelated job. Thankfully, only a few had to be let go."

The pandemic also negatively impacted the rental market. Several people vacated their offices and started working from home, while commercial enterprises and retail shops were shuttered for several months. In most cases, the Group maintained a good relationship with the tenants rather than imposed conditions.

"In the long term, it worked out for the best. We retained a relationship that had taken months or years to build, and tenants reciprocated from their end since their own finances were dealt a blow by COVID-19."

"We're now hoping all this is behind us. We had a good 2021 and we are already focused on having an even better 2022. Tourism and the rental market are gradually picking up, providing a positive outlook for the Group for the coming years." ■

***"Watching a building come to life
before your very eyes is an
incredible experience"***

Working on a dream

CHARLO BONNICI
CEO, LEARNING WORKS



As dawn breaks, Charlo Bonnici will be outdoors pounding the streets – rain or shine.

“Jogging makes a huge difference to me. It means I come to the office fully energised.”

His waking routine did not always include a morning run, but Charlo admits he cannot live without it today.

Charlo is accustomed to being put through his paces. The one-time politician – who served as a Member of Parliament for nine years – headed the Group’s human resources department, as well as handling communications. But he is now firmly embedded in a newer challenge as CEO of Learning Works.

“When we started Learning Works, the focus was very much on training carers because the Group had

established itself as a leading provider of services in the healthcare sector.

“Today, we offer a range of courses and find that both Maltese and other nationalities trust Learning Works to prepare them for the working world and beyond.”

In 2021, Learning Works branched out into providing courses for the construction industry, which remains a strong feature of the Vassallo Group.

Charlo explains that candidates will be able to obtain VNFIL skill cards for every level of the building trade, which is basically the validation of non-formal and informal learning as a pathway through which learners can obtain an award for their experience – validated against defined occupational standards – without completing formal studies.

Learning Works has also been accredited a BSc in Management, with courses beginning in March 2022, and this year held its first graduation ceremonies for graduates in management.

Additionally, the facility completed its first-ever Malta Further and Higher Education Audit – MFHEA – which needed intensive preparation, and although the official report has not yet been published, Charlo is satisfied with the results, although adds that there is always room for improvement.

The COVID-19 pandemic has naturally presented a huge challenge for educational institutions, and Learning Works is no exception, but Charlo says the situation presented an opportunity to instantly introduce online learning,



which had not previously been considered as an option.

Learning Works recently obtained a licence to offer online classes on a permanent basis, and certain students are specifically requesting this mode of learning, but Charlo believes no experience can match being in the physical environment of the classroom.

“In reality, it has been missed by many students and it’s good that we are slowly returning to normality – naturally

by utilising more space on our premises to practise social distancing.”

Health and social care are, of course, still very important features of Learning Works’ courses and its portfolio has been broadened even further. “By early 2022,” Charlo explains, “we will be offering a higher diploma in healthcare, which is just under nursing level. That is a dream come true for us.”

The institution has also partnered with Liverpool John Moores University to offer an MSc in international sports coaching.

“This has required a great deal of work to set up, but the result is that we have a giant on board to lend its

expertise – their teaching staff will come to Malta twice a year – to this initiative.”

Charlo says an objective is to attract those already involved in different sporting disciplines who wish to get into the academic side of coaching, which is a science in its own right.

Meanwhile, another dream – conceived by Group CEO Pio Vassallo – is in the making: the Mediterranean College of Sport (MCS), a co-educational independent school falling under the responsibility of Learning Works, providing education from Year 7 up to sixth form, which will also seek to train budding sportsmen and women in various disciplines including football, athletics, swimming and water polo.

“In preparation, we have set up focus groups with the regular participation of local experts in sport and education, with a view to taking our courses to SEC and Matsec level, and are seeking more partners abroad because we want to have on board real professional expertise.”

“Our objective is to tap and develop the potential we know is out there”

The school has engaged the services of renowned coach Richard Allen – who was at the English FA, Tottenham Hotspur and Queens Park Rangers and is now director of football at Loughborough University in the UK. It has also engaged Dr Christian Vassallo, a Maltese national based in the UK as a sport science consultant.

“We are aiming for the highest standards and have already received a number of enquires. Our objective is to tap and develop the potential we know is out there. National associations in Malta have welcomed our initiative and are collaborating, which is encouraging.

“The Mediterranean College of Sport has been a gamechanger for Learning Works, which makes me extremely proud because I have been here since the beginning and it’s great to see it grow in this way.”

Seems all that jogging is paying off. ■

‘The small wins that keep us going’

JANET SILVIO

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, HILA HOMES

As executive director of HILA Homes, Janet Silvio has to care every minute of every day, irrespective of whether her reserves of compassion are running on empty or not.

Thankfully for the residents of the three homes she leads, Janet’s sense of altruism is replenished daily, having been born with a high level of empathy that can stretch a long way.

Having qualified and worked as an accountant, Janet satisfied her yearning to help the vulnerable by doing voluntary work in Malta and abroad. But that call was too strong, and in 2007 she decided to make a drastic career change, and after backpacking for 18 months she returned with a keen drive to do something more meaningful.

“I’m very retrospective and an introvert; I was always one to feel the hurt of others and I wanted to make a difference in the lives of those who are overlooked... I actually feel I am more fortunate than them to have entered this sector,” she is quick to add.

The past months could have been potentially draining with the transfer of residents from Mount Carmel Hospital to the new Casal Nuovo residence in Paola, but for Janet these situations are an everyday reality – the emotional journey started when she joined HILA and never stopped.

The move to Casal Nuovo, which was officially opened by Health Minister Chris Fearne in May, forms part of a national strategy to deinstitutionalise mental health and HILA felt privileged to be a part of this.

The transfer was especially challenging because most of the 50 residents had been institutionalised in Mount Carmel for many years.

“We didn’t know how they would react to their new environment, nor did we know what the triggers to certain behaviours were.

“We have a lot of care to give and exciting projects to look forward to”



“Thankfully, our research and attention to design detail led to a soothing welcome. Every day we discover new things. The most rewarding aspect was seeing them arrive on the first day – they couldn’t believe this was their new home it was so touching.

“We’ve been taking them to outings and working to develop a rapport of trust. Now, they have learnt to call us by name... and it is these very small wins that keep us going.”

Will there be a second Casal Nuovo in the near future?

Janet does not rule this out, but points out that HILA has only just started to make baby steps into the realm of mental health and the first Casal Nuovo still had space to grow.

In the meantime, Janet and her team have their hands full as the other homes HILA manages enter exciting chapters.



With Dar Bjorn – a residential community home that caters for people with ALS, MS and other neurological conditions – HILA is waiting for the opening of the second home in Zebbug, having been entrusted with its management by the ALS Foundation.

There are also plans to refocus the services offered to persons with disability at Casa Apap Bologna in Mosta. The home, which offers housing, learning and respite for children as young as five and adults up to 60, has witnessed such a substantial increase in demand, that the plan is to split Casa Apap Bologna into two to concentrate on further specialisation for children and adults.

“This will allow us to offer more specialised care,” she said.

Another exciting project in the offing is CareMalta’s decision to venture to Gozo where care and respite services remain limited.

The Group has signed a 65-year lease agreement with La Stella Philharmonic Society to convert the old Astra disco in the heart of the island’s capital into a 60-bed facility.

“This is a first for the Group, and we look forward to transforming the space into a facility that will cater for the Gozitan community’s needs.”

At the moment, the University of Malta is carrying out a study to establish the present and future needs of the sister island, and once this is wrapped up, HILA can be better equipped to start filling in the gaps.

Looking ahead at 2022, Janet is buoyed by a sense of positivity: “We have a lot of care to give and exciting projects to look forward to... I look forward to seeing the pandemic become a thing of the past.” ■



Celebrating authors who brought joy to elderly during pandemic

The Nazzareno Vassallo Award this year celebrated the work of four Maltese authors who imparted their creativity in a way that brought joy or solace to older persons during the lonelier days of the pandemic.

Charles Casha, Joseph Debono, Rita Saliba and Trevor Zahra were recognised for their work during an award ceremony organised by CareMalta as part of Vassallo Group's 75th anniversary.

Held at San Anton Palace under the patronage of President George Vella, the award honours the achievements of individuals or organisations whose initiatives improve the lives of older persons physically, emotionally and psychologically.

This year's edition focused specifically on initiatives that made a difference to the lives of older persons during the pandemic.

The four authors were chosen because they left a positive impact on the lives of older persons through the wonderful

world of books and literature. Some of the stories, which the authors narrated online, were read with a humorous touch, or written specifically for COVID-19 times.

Chaired by former prime minister Lawrence Gonzi, the selection board included former journalist Keith Demicoli, Mcast lecturer Sharon Balzan, Mater Dei Hospital chief nursing manager Rudolph Cini, and Maltese Association of Gerontology and Geriatrics president Claudette Gauci.

In his report, Dr Gonzi said there was a particular emphasis on reading in this year's edition.

"This is a reflection of the fact that books and literature provided vulnerable older persons with solace and company during the difficult moments of solitude, when they were physically separated from their loved ones," he said.

Sadly, just days after being recognised for his novel *Iz-Ziju Manwel*, which covered the period before and after World War II, Joe Debono died after losing his battle with the neurodegenerative disease ALS.



Fondly known as James Bondin for his comic stints on *Xarabank*, Joe had given an interview to *The Times* one week before his death where he shared his feelings of helplessness after losing his ability to speak.

But in the interview, conducted via e-mail using Eye Gaze technology, he also spoke of his soft spot for the elderly and how honoured he had been when Dianne Giordmaina, the coordinator for reading to the elderly from Malta Libraries, asked him to take part.

To him, the Nazzareno Vassallo Award meant recognition, and his last parting words about his participation resonate as a lesson for all: "I was thinking more about what I could do, rather than what I couldn't." 🍷

Nominees

The other award nominees and organisations were Kenneth Abela from Naxxar's parish centre; Tarxien mayor Joseph Abela Galea; Dianne Giordmaina from Malta Libraries; the Department of Active Ageing & Community Care; Connie Bonett from Siġġiewi's Active Ageing Centre; Missio; Dar Saura manager Josiah Grech; Malta Libraries; Mission Fund; Simblija Care Home; the University of the Third Age; and WasteServ Malta Ltd.



‘How people perceive us will attract talent’

LEE XUEREB

CHIEF PEOPLE OFFICER,
VASSALLO GROUP

Lee Xuereb's first year as Vassallo Group's Chief People Officer came as a baptism of fire.

Not only was he responsible for a group of companies spanning five widely varying sectors, but he also had to navigate the minefield of restrictions brought about by the pandemic, as well as its by-product: wellbeing and mental health issues among staff.

“It's been a rollercoaster,” Lee says with a laugh.

Having previously served as the HR Manager of CareMalta, the Group's size did not faze him.

“But there was a lot to wrap my head around. The first challenge I faced was to get an in-depth understanding of each sector and the respective policies and regulations they operated under, so that I could be effective in my role.”

Moreover, no sector was spared the challenges wrought by the pandemic. Being in the business of providing care to society's most vulnerable members, the staff at CareMalta bore the brunt of

the pandemic's impact. To counter this Lee, as part of a purposely set-up committee, got to work on a wellbeing strategy, initiated in CareMalta but from which parts were lifted and transposed across the rest of the Group.

Data was first gathered from staff members at all levels to fully understand how the past year had impacted them. The next step was to provide the management and operational staff at CareMalta with an ‘intervention’, where people were given the space to vent and express themselves in groups, as well as learn different coping mechanisms.

For Vassallo Builders, communication was also key, although the approach adopted was somewhat different. Together with the CEO, Lee visited the different sites, bringing the workers breakfast, while briefing them about the current situation and how the company was going to address the challenges. Employees were also given the opportunity to openly express themselves. This helped render the

company more accessible to workers from the operational ranks, Lee notes.

CaterEssence is the next company on the list, with the HR team currently working on providing more support to its employees.

Recruitment remains an uphill struggle, Lee admits, as the country haemorrhaged manpower following the outbreak of COVID-19. Staff shortages meant the Group was thrown into firefighting mode, and quickly moved to deploy a variety of techniques to address this, ranging from marketing and PR to using foreign recruiters, as well as transferring its own people from abroad.

The Group takes the development and growth of its employees very seriously. One of the most important aspects is the obligatory and regulatory training required to perform their role properly. This, Lee explains, is meticulously planned before the start of each financial year so that such training can be delivered effectively without disrupting operations.



Succession planning is another important aspect, aimed at helping employees move up to the next rung of the career ladder. Lee and his team promote individualised plans, determining parameters such as timeframes and budgets, and setting employees a goal, as well as carving out a pathway to help them achieve it.

On a national level, there has been plenty of discussion centring on the need for regulation and certification within the construction industry.

“We aim to be at the forefront of this even before such a need starts being enforced,” Lee says.

In anticipation of this, Vassallo Builders has partnered up with one of the Group’s subsidiaries, Learning Works, to offer all its staff the required training.

And keeping to the topic of construction, what is the situation among foreign workers, particularly in light of the exploitation that is often reported in the media?

“Exploitation happens not only within the construction sector, but also across the board,” Lee points out.

Vassallo Group employs some 900 third-country nationals across its multiple companies.

“As a Group, we have always followed a very basic and simple strategy: salary structures are set according to role and performance. There is absolutely no difference between a builder who is Maltese or one who is, say, an Indian national.”

Lee has recently finalised the first project that he was tasked with by the

“We take the development and growth of our employees very seriously”


Group CEO: that of creating an HR strategy. This was drafted after taking on board input from various internal stakeholders – including senior management, finance and health and safety – and then coalesced into one coherent strategy.

The strategy is buttressed by nine main pillars. These include capacity planning (encompassing all aspects of recruitment), strategic thinking and planning, and growth and development.

It also covers performance and compensation, policy communication, and employee relations. Two relatively new areas are included: risk management, and analytics, which looks into how the company could make intelligent use of the rich data available to it.

The final pillar is that of the company and employer branding.

“How people perceive us – internally and externally is very important. This also feeds into attracting of talent,” Lee concludes. ■

A man with a beard and mustache, wearing a dark blue suit and a white shirt, stands with his hands in his pockets in front of a modern building with large glass windows.

Giving birth to a 12-year-old dream

DENNIS VASSALLO
CEO, VASSALLO BUSINESS PARK



A dream that for the past 12 years lived only on paper is coming to life in Burmarrad, where the Vassallo Business Park has started welcoming its first tenants.

The park, which consists of 30,000 square metres of industrial space spread across two floors, has been built in a way that allows tenants to combine units, divide or extend storage space or even set up offices there.

With the project's completion planned for next year, most of the park is currently in shell form, as the company weighs the market demands for office, warehousing, and storage space. Once a tenant rents out a space, the company then finishes it in line with their needs.

"COVID-19 has changed demand and supply exponentially: consumer patterns have also changed over the past few months, impacting companies' storage needs and requirements," Dennis Vassallo explains.

The park has already leased out some space to pharmaceutical companies, which will soon start operations.

There has also been keen interest from businesses within the film industry and logistics sectors.

"We plan on keeping the park free of emissions and debris. Rather than mechanical engineers, panel beaters, sprayers and construction companies, the park will host food suppliers, clothing retailers and pharmaceutical companies, to provide a value-added clean environment to tenants."

Dennis notes that the Vassallo Business Park stands out among similar parks as its access roads are quite wide, making manoeuvring for trailer drivers easier. Additionally, a two-floor parking lot and round-the-clock security will provide tenants with additional comfort and peace of mind.

"Comfort and cleanliness remained at the forefront of our plans since 2009, when we applied for permits. Construction eventually kicked off in September 2017 and we are hoping it will be ready by the beginning of next year.

"We plan on keeping the park free of emissions and debris"

"With the completion of a separate wing at the beginning of 2022, the park will see the dream of Vassallo Builders and Vassallo Concrete come true."

The two joined forces to form Vassallo Concrete Services Ltd more than a decade ago. It has now been dismantled, along with the concrete batching plant – this is what started it all for Dennis – that was sold in mid-2021.

"The last day of Vassallo Concrete Services was very difficult for me. I bid farewell for the very last time to something my father Ćikku had helped start so many years ago.

"Even though my father had thought of starting a project of the sort, through which he could lease out warehouse space to businesses, it was personally very challenging to take the plunge. I was born into the world of construction and from a very young age I wanted to follow in my father's footsteps.

"After 35 years in construction, shifting to managing a business park was rather challenging for myself and my brother Jesmond, however, at the same time we are very excited about the new venture."

The success of this project also mirrors the healthy relationship between Dennis and Jesmond, and their cousins Pio and Ruben, sons of Žaren Vassallo.

The building of the park was only possible after the two families linked their adjacent land and joined forces to give birth to the park.

"The good relationship our fathers Žaren and Ćikku had – reflected in the good relationship us children have – is part of the success behind this venture.

"It has kept us strong for the past 13 years when we led Vassallo Concrete Services Ltd, allowing things to progress smoothly. We have now invested this synergy of different ideas, from four very different people, into the new park.

"We're looking forward to bringing a 12-year-old dream which in the coming years might grow even bigger if we extend the park by developing another parcel of land adjacent to the current development." ■





Supporting mental health

One year ago, when Vassallo Group had to do away with its traditional December events, a decision was taken to donate part of the budget allocated for these activities to the Malta Community Chest Fund Foundation. Group Chairman Nazzareno Vassallo, CEO Pio Vassallo and director Charlo Bonnici presented the donation to President George Vella. Furthermore, the Group committed itself to donate €2,000 every month throughout 2021 as part of the Employee Contribution Scheme in support of Dr Vella's initiatives in the mental health sector.



A sports dream in the making

St Aloysius College and Vassallo Group, through its subsidiary Learning Works – a company providing education and training – reached an agreement to renovate, modernise, and expand the college's sports complex. Learning Works will also develop and operate a new private college specialising in sports, which will be named the Mediterranean College of Sport (MCS). It will provide various sports facilities, including a new football ground, swimming pool, various gymnasiums, and a new sport science centre, all of which will be served by underground parking.



Breakfast with the CEO

Vassallo Builders CEO Jonathan Buttigieg visited different sites every week to catch up with his team over some delicious cupcakes. This initiative was introduced since the interactions between workers and management was drastically reduced due to the pandemic.

CareMalta Group to extend its services to Gozo

The CareMalta Group has ventured to extend its services to Gozo and signed a 65-year lease agreement with La Stella Philharmonic Society to develop a property in Victoria into a 60-bed facility. Formerly known as the Astra Discotheque in its heyday, it will serve as a base for CareMalta to increase its presence in the heart of the community.



Light it up blue

Casa Apap Bologna, located in the heart of Mosta was lit up in blue throughout April to mark World Autism Month. The home is operated by HILA, the specialised care arm of the CareMalta Group.





CareMalta's focus on wellbeing

CareMalta Group kickstarted a company strategy to put a spotlight on employees' wellbeing after the pandemic turned everyone's lives upside down. Natalie Briffa Farrugia, CEO and chair of the newly established wellbeing committee, said this move formed part of the Group's vision for mental health in the future and added that "without a sense of wellbeing the Group was dysfunctional".

Protecting against COVID-19

A team of nurses from CareMalta Group was set up to vaccinate residents and staff against COVID-19 and to oversee the entire vaccination process within all the facilities. The team of professionals worked in close collaboration with the Active Ageing and Community Care Department and the Social Care Standards Authority, ensuring the necessary precautionary measures and guidelines were followed.



End of a busy summer

A staff party was held at Mehriezu farmhouse in San Martin in October for Vassallo Group Realty staff as a thank you for all their hard work.



Porky time

A traditional *majjalata* lunch was held in August for Vassallo Builders employees and the management at Vassallo Business Park to thank them for their hard work and to augur a relaxing break during the Santa Maria shutdown.



Praise for Vassallo Business Park

Environment Minister Aaron Farrugia praised the Vassallo Group's commitment to alternative energy during a visit to the new Vassallo Business Park in Burmarrad, which features an extensive 1.3MW solar project installed by Powerezi. The Minister and Parliamentary Secretary for Lands and Construction Chris Agius were given a tour of the facility by Group Chairman Nazzareno Vassallo and Group CEO Pio Vassallo. Mr Agius congratulated the Group for its success in the construction industry over the past 75 years as well as for diversifying into other sectors, while Mr Farrugia praised the project for maintaining a balance between development, planning and the environment.



Women in leadership

Women in Leadership was the theme chosen by Learning Works, Vassallo Group's education arm, to mark International Women's Day. The Group's long-standing tradition to mark this day by hosting a lunch for over 100 women was not possible this year due to the pandemic, but the launch of this programme was an alternative way to celebrate women. Apart from the CEOs and directors, the session included contributions by Sandra Hermitage, an expert in management and coaching, European Commissioner for Equality Helena Dalli, and European Parliament First Vice President Roberta Metsola.



CareMalta key partner in Sonar-Global project

CareMalta Group has been chosen as one of seven key partners contributing to local research on the rise of emerging infectious diseases and antimicrobial resistance over the last two decades, including the COVID-19 pandemic, which has necessitated improved prevention and response strategies. The Sonar-Global project, led by a consortium of social scientists, has received funding from the EU's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme. The research conducted in Malta is being led by Prof. Jean-Paul Baldacchino, head of the Department of Anthropological Sciences at the University. The aim of the project is to develop a global think tank of scholars working on applying insights, from social science to health science, with a focus on infectious diseases and antimicrobial resistance.

Milestone moment

Three generations joined forces to plant more than 30 olive trees at a family event held in the north of the island. This ceremony was one of the many initiatives held by Group chairman Nazzareno Vassallo to mark the Group's 75th anniversary.



Dressing down for charity

Vassallo Group organised a Dress Down Day in October to raise funds for Hospice Malta, which provides palliative care for those suffering with cancer, motor neuron disease, end of life respiratory, cardiac, renal and liver disease. Employees donated hours of leave or money for this worthy cause.

Top UK academics observe Maltese coaches in action

Students following a Master's degree in international sport coaching, were observed by senior lecturers from one of the top universities in the UK for sport – Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU). The students are enrolled in the new MSc International Sport Coaching, designed and run by the University in conjunction with Learning Works, a further and higher education institution in Malta. Learning Works is also preparing to open the first private sport school in Malta – the Mediterranean College of Sport – in Birkirkara in 2023.





NOEL BORG

**SENIOR NURSING MANAGER,
CAREMALTA**

MARTIN BONDIN

**HEALTH AND SAFETY MANAGER,
VASSALLO GROUP**

Focusing on returning to the essence of ourselves

Noel Borg and Martin Bondin's experiences in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic couldn't have been more different.

"From a Group perspective, we were not badly hit overall," Martin says. The core focus was on prevention – temperatures were monitored, workplaces were equipped with sanitising facilities and workers were urged to maintain social distancing.

No noticeable disruptions plagued Vassallo Builders, the factories or joineries, despite the odd person who contracted the virus.

Conversely, CareMalta faced disruptions on a day-to-day basis, as were all entities operating within the healthcare industry across the board, Noel explains.

Once the vaccine was announced in January 2021, the organisation ran its vaccination drive like clockwork, running against time to inoculate all 1,600 residents and 1,000 employees in a span of less than three months.

This helped create a feeling of safety and reassurance, which in turn positively impacted their wellbeing and enabled the organisation to change strategy.

"In a span of 10 days, we gave the booster to all our residents and are moving towards some semblance of normality," Noel says sanguinely.

What are the plans for 2022?

"COVID or not, we still need to meet the health and safety obligations," Martin says. CareMalta will see its fire and occupational health and safety risk assessments being updated, together with continuous training for all employees.

Meanwhile, Vassallo Builders will likewise benefit from an investment in training, as well as an upgrade in the welfare facilities and an improvement to the environment and air quality on the workplace.

The company has also introduced skill cards, requesting its employees to have the required qualifications in health and safety, as well as in their particular trade.

Between the end of 2021 and the beginning of 2022, some 120 Vassallo Builders employees will be trained in obtaining the relevant health and safety certification. The plan is for the remaining skill card training to be carried out by the end of 2022.

"This will make us leaders in the sector," Martin says proudly.

For Noel, COVID will still have its implications. The organisation is looking at the situation on an international level, particularly when it comes to the cut-off line towards normality. The focus will therefore be on people's wellbeing, which will be fostered through the concept of creating a community within the care homes and by engaging in meaningful activities.

"We hope that the science guiding us will wipe out the implications COVID has had on us, and enable us to return to the essence of ourselves." ■



Vassallo Group marks 75 years

Vassallo Group celebrated its 75th anniversary on June 4 with activities spread over two days to thank employees for their hard work throughout the years, which was instrumental in building the Group's success story.

The Group marked this milestone by adhering to its motto: Tradition, Innovation, Diversity.

For a number of years, June 4 was reserved for the employees' Shine Awards, where the Group turned the spotlight on hard-working employees and acknowledged their

dedication. Unfortunately, due to COVID-19 restrictions this year's event had to be postponed for the second year running.

But this did not deter the Group from recognising its team. Chairman Nazzareno Vassallo, together with CEO Pio Vassallo, various shareholders, directors and top management visited employees at their place of work to present them with long-service award trophies and retirement bonuses, which form part of the Vassallo Group loyalty and retirement schemes.





of success

The visits were spread over two days and covered CareMalta's elderly homes, the newest home for HILA – Casal Nuovo in Paola, Campus Hub at the University of Malta, Vassallo Business Park in Burmarrad, CaterEssence, Learning Works at the Landmark in Qormi, as well as the Group Head Office in Mosta.

In addition to the long service awards, June 4 included an inauguration of the administrative block at Vassallo Business Park, the seventh birthday of The Cake Box, Learning Works' anniversary, as well as two ZVART (Žaren Vassallo Art Initiative) events. ■



APPOINTMENTS & PROMOTIONS

VASSALLO GROUP

Olga Soboleva Digital Marketing Executive

VASSALLO BUILDERS

Bryan Deguara Junior Accounts Executive

Suzana Stankovic Accounts Clerk

Mario Scicluna Joinery & Metal Section
Project Manager

Nerissa Mayubay Magsombol Senior
Quantity Surveyor

Arlene Catam Villena Senior Quantity
Surveyor

CATERESSENCE

Danijel Senk Outlet Supervisor
(The Cake Box)

Cecilia Martinetto Internal HACCP
Coordinator

David Galea Procurement Executive

Gabriel Buhagiar Cost Controller

Christopher Bonnici Catering Executive
(Homes)

Michael Baldacchino Catering Manager

Elizabeta Prodanovikj Café Supervisor
(The Cake Box)

Christopher Debono Logistics Coordinator

Mark Bone Sous Chef (CPU)

Mariah Brincat Accounts Executive

VASSALLO GROUP REALTY

Ice Kitanov Security Officer

Edwin Gatt Security Officer

Goran Andovski Security Officer

Emanuel Bello Franchi Security Officer

LEARNING WORKS

Adriana Cortis Sales and Business
Development Executive

Mikele Vella Administration Clerk

Behind the workings of CareMalta

CHRIS GAUCI
FINANCIAL CONTROLLER,
CAREMALTA



On the face of it, CaterEssence and CareMalta seem like two distinct industries. Yet when Chris made the leap from one to the other, he found that the differences between the two were not as stark as he initially imagined.

“An elderly care home isn’t a hotel, but it offers very similar services, such as those for food, accommodation and housekeeping,” Chris reflects.

“The novel factor for me was that of nursing and care. However, after three years in the role and with the help of James Sciriha, Noel Borg and the senior management team, I feel I have adjusted to the position.”

In comparison, CareMalta is also a larger company than that of CaterEssence, encapsulating the elderly care homes, HILA homes and other subsidiary companies, all of which are spread across multiple sites.

Keeping tabs on such a company is very much of a team effort, Chris says. Everyone is informed by the budget – which sets the targets for the next financial year – and the need to abide by it.

Moreover, there is an amount of reporting that needs to take place regularly throughout the year, such as the

manager’s report, which is compiled every four weeks and measures the company’s performance against set targets.

Such structure, Chris says, is key to keep spending under control within such a large organisation.

The central accounts team at CareMalta has eight people in total. Chris has two assistants, who in turn are in charge of the rest of the team and ensure all the deadlines are being met, especially when it comes to reporting back.

Four clerks report directly to the assistants, with separate but complementary duties ranging from looking after the suppliers and handling cash, to issuing of invoices to government and private clients, as well as posting of invoices and balancing petty cash in the case of suppliers.

The final team member takes care of HILA Homes Ltd, including the postings and management accounts.

When not working, Chris has his hands full with his family, including ferrying his three children to extracurricular activities, as well as organising family events with his siblings.

When he is not with his family, Chris enjoys playing the odd football game, as well as cheering on his favourite team: AC Milan! ■

“An elderly care home isn’t a hotel, but it offers very similar services”



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