

Club helps school grow

By Emma Kelly

A COLLABORATION between Canberra's Greek community and one of the capital's most prominent clubs has resulted in the first school development of its kind in the ACT.

St Nicholas Greek-Australian Preschool and Childcare Centre is the territory's first school to be rebuilt and operated by an ACT club.

Not only has the Hellenic Club of Canberra spent more than \$1 million to knock down and rebuild the Yarralumla centre, but it has taken the management reins too.

ACT Chief Minister Katy Gallagher officially opened the new building and playground last Wednesday, February 19.

An ageing building and a growing demand for childcare sparked the need for a larger centre at the Hill Corner site.

Hellenic Club president John Katokekinos said the Greek Orthodox community had successfully managed St Nicholas since its inception almost two decades ago, but a changing demographic had increased pressure on resources.

"It's an ageing community. They are busy managing the church, the aged home, so they needed help. It was a great synergy for the club to be able to step in and do that," he said.

"The club aims to support Greek culture and language. What better way to do that than establish a school?"

He described the development as a community effort with a number of businesses and individuals both inside and outside the Greek community supporting the plan.

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Evangelina Athanasiou at the official opening of the new St Nicholas Preschool and Child Care centre.

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Consequently, enrolments had increased from 20 to 40 children, including children from non-Greek backgrounds, and the centre was almost at capacity.

Hellenic Club CEO Ian Cameron said the rebuild had been five years in the making, with the club stepping in about 12 months ago.

Although running a school is new territory for the club, the process had been a positive one.

"This is a new learning experience for us. [We] are delighted to have made such a significant contribution to the ACT community," he said.

"This investment fulfils two key elements of the Hellenic Club's charter to contribute to

the Canberra community and to promote Greek culture, as well as advancing our strategic direction to diversify the club's income."

In a tasty twist the Hellenic Club will cover catering with a 10-day running menu of food prepared in Woden and delivered to the centre each day.

The club has also employed a new centre director, Annette Chemlin, to oversee day-to-day operations.

She said the new building was fantastic and the children, who were temporarily housed in Griffith during construction work, were settling well into their new surrounds.

"I think the outdoor area is the highlight," she said.

"Having the children play in a natural

environment is ideal. Eventually we will be growing some vegetables.

"We will be putting an autumn crop in."

Parent Catherine Athanasiou said the class of 2014, including 3-year-old daughter Christiana, was excited to enjoy the new facility.

"It's a very positive change for the children. They want to come out and play outside."

"The fact the food is catered for, it's a surprise what they're going to get," she said. ACT Minister for Education Joy Burch commended the actions of the Hellenic Club and the broader community.

She said the club would continue to work closely with the Children's Policy and Regulation Unit to ensure the preschool and childcare centre met current standards.