



A Proud Canadian Legacy

The new student centre at L'Aquila University - photos: DFAIT



It was a gesture of support for the Abruzzo region of Italy, which had been devastated by a major earthquake three months earlier that killed 297 people and left 65,000 homeless. Standing amid ruins in the historic town of L'Aquila at the G-8 Summit in July 2009, Prime Minister Stephen Harper pledged that Canada would construct a new student centre at L'Aquila University, where 13 students had died.

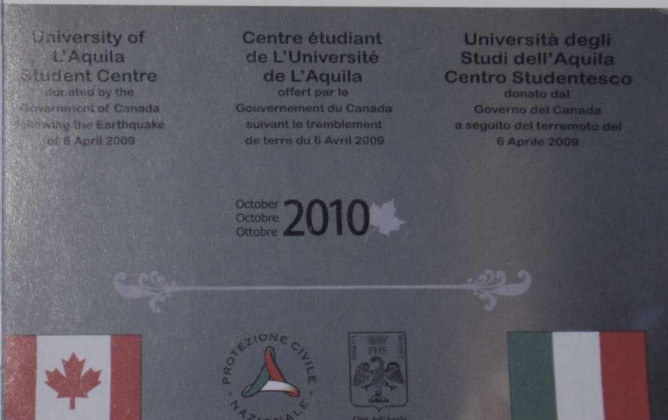
The building officially opened just over a year later, the first of the G-8 projects delivered, and an act of solidarity between Canada and Italy. Its completion—on schedule and under budget—was also testament to the dedication of two DFAIT colleagues and a spirited team of others on the ground.

“We wanted this done right,” says Brad Bergstrand, a program analyst in the Stabilization and Reconstruction Task Force who had overall responsibility for the project. “This was a high-profile assignment and it represented Canada. We wanted to be proud of it, we wanted the Italians to be proud of it, and we wanted it to be useful to the students of L'Aquila.”

Bergstrand, a former military engineer, says the L'Aquila project went well beyond the usual scope of his position with the Global Peace Operations Program, where he focuses on increasing countries' capacity to deploy to peace operations, especially in Africa. For guidance and technical assistance he turned to Patrick Matthews, a senior adviser in DFAIT's Real Property Bureau with an extensive background in real-estate development.

Matthews had actually been on embassy business in Rome, about 100 km from L'Aquila, when the earthquake struck on April 6, 2009, and was awakened by intense shaking in the dead of the night. He says it was “like completing a journey” to be involved in creating the student centre.

“You knew every step of the way that you were making a difference, not only in terms of the final product, but also just by being there, among a community of survivors, volunteers and responders, who were rebuilding the very fabric of their lives,” says Matthews, now acting director of the Capital Project Delivery Division. “What a privilege it was to play a part in the story as it unfolded around us.”



Above: Brad Bergstrand and Patrick Matthews supervising construction of the student centre

Below: Plaque at the entrance to the student centre marking the Government of Canada's donation