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Of Cardinal Importance: Community center addition of Cardinal Ritter birthplace open
By CHRIS MORRIS

Larry Timperman remembers what the Cardinal Ritter birthplace home at 1218 Oak St. in New Albany looked like in 2002. As a community member, he had hopes the structure could be saved. But as an architect, he couldn't help but have doubts.

Eleven years later, hope won out and 80 percent of the house has been totally renovated. On Friday morning, the community center addition at the rear of the home was officially opened.

"I think it turned out quite nice, especially to think what we started with was about nothing," said Timperman, with the New Albany architectural firm Michell Timperman Ritz. "At the very beginning, we just had to get the building stabilized to get us back to zero. It's definitely a labor of love."

All the patience, hard work and love so many had for the project were celebrated at Friday's event inside the new community center. The front section of the home has been completely renovated and two organizations — Home of the Innocents and Housing Partnership Inc. — now have offices in the facility. The community center will be available for organizations and individuals to rent for functions and meetings.

"This is a gift to the community," David Hock, president of the Ritter Birthplace Foundation Board, told a large gathering at Friday's event. "We wanted to have a community center and have organizations use this facility to continue the work of Cardinal Ritter."

Ritter was born in the house in 1892 and attended St. Mary's Catholic Church. He was ordained a priest in 1917 and rose through the ranks of the Roman Catholic Church to become the only cardinal from Indiana. He led the dioceses of Indianapolis and St. Louis and championed the cause of desegregation during his career.

The Rev. Troy Overton, who was involved with the Ritter board through the renovation process, remembers bringing students from Cardinal Ritter High School in Indianapolis to visit the home in 1998. It looked much different than it does today, Overton said.

"This was a scary place in 1998," he said. "We didn't know if it would hold us up when we walked in here."

The front section of the house was completed in 2007, thanks to a \$220,000 grant from the Horseshoe Foundation of Floyd County. The Ritter board was given \$190,000 of the \$6.7 million the city received in 2009 through the Neighborhood Stabilization Program to finish the community center, which officially opened Friday.

Bishop Paul Etienne, of Cheyenne, Wyo., who was a member of the Ritter Birthplace Foundation Board when he was the priest at Our Lady of Perpetual Help, spoke at Friday's event and praised the work and dedication of the community.

"It's wonderful to see this project reach some kind of conclusion. It's been a long haul for those involved," he said. "Lives continue to be touched through the name of Cardinal Ritter."

Historic Landmarks of Indiana saved the house by purchasing it in 2002. Hock said once the museum in the center of the home is completed, about \$800,000 in donations and donated labor and supplies will have been spent on the house.

Etienne said the home is where Ritter was first called by God, and where he came to know himself. Overton and Etienne thanked Hock for his dedication to the project and for helping it reach fruition.

New Albany Deputy Mayor Carl Malysz is a Ritter board member and has also been involved with the project since the very beginning. He said it's important the community center on the rear of the Ritter home be completed as the S. Ellen Jones neighborhood around it is being revitalized.

"This sat for a couple of years and it was becoming difficult to ignore," Malysz said. "It was becoming a blight on the neighborhood. We had to do something and thankfully we were awarded NSP funds so we could complete this project."