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Park dedicated to Cardinal Ritter BY BRADEN LAMMERS A park in New Albany behind S. Ellen Jones Elementary School, between 13th Street, Oak Street and Culbertson Avenue, was dedicated Saturday as Cardinal Ritter Park.

Cardinal Joseph Ritter — the only Roman Catholic from Indiana to be elevated to the level of Cardinal — is known as a progressive member of the clergy and fought for racial integration. In 1947, Ritter integrated five Catholic high schools amid protests in St. Louis.

His birthplace, at 1218 E. Oak St., is across from the park named in his honor, and he was a member of St. Mary's Catholic Church, just around the corner on Eighth Street. Despite the status he reached in the Archdiocese, Ritter was known as being a unpretentious person.

"We called him Uncle Cardinal," said Virginia Lipps, Ritter's niece and New Albany resident. Though she was very young — she is now 77 — when Ritter was active in the area, Lipps remembers some of what Ritter did for the community.

She also remembers him just as her uncle.

"He very much loved to work in the garden, he gardened all the time," Lipps said. "You would've never recognized him as a bishop [if you saw him in the yard]."

That kind of commonality and willingness to accept all people is the spirit the Cardinal Ritter Birthplace Foundation has tried to evoke in revitalizing his former home and park across the street.

"In trying to restore this house and give it back to the community, we've kind of learned more about Cardinal Ritter, and we are trying to do it in the spirit of what we think he would do," said David Hock, foundation chairman. "He would want outreach to the community."

That outreach has gotten the neighborhood association involved.

The dedication ceremony coincided with the second-annual S. Ellen Jones community festival.

"Since the [New Albany] redevelopment commission acquired the funding to do the park ... it's a very positive asset that we have, but we had never really taken advantage of that asset to do a festival like this," said Ted Fulmore, S. Ellen Jones neighborhood association president. "That's really the driver behind this, is to utilize that park in a positive way."

The project has been ongoing for about seven years and has cost between \$550,000 to \$600,000 for rehabilitation of the house, Hock said. The house is about \$150,000 to \$175,000 in work from completion.

“Just to keep the house from not falling down was a major job,” Hock said. “Unless it was a labor of love, this house would have never been saved.”

A large portion of the funding to save the house came from a \$200,000 grant from the Horseshoe Foundation of Floyd County. The foundation also has donated another \$45,000 for construction of a library at the site, news disclosed at the dedication ceremony.

The Cardinal Ritter Birthplace Foundation is searching for a nonprofit organization to move into the home, with another portion of the house being used as a museum.

“It’s more than just the building and the park — it’s the continuation of the legacy that Cardinal Ritter left,” said state Rep. Ed Clere

R-New Albany. “Honestly, a lot of folks wouldn’t have believed three or four years ago that you could have a neighborhood festival here — in what is now Ritter Park — and have hundreds of people come out.”

“This is what a neighborhood is supposed to be like; that’s why the park was built.” Fulmore said.