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Play by New Albany native brings *Color-blind Cardinal* to life



Sharon Gullett and Brent Freiberger visit the room in which Cardinal Joseph Ritter was born in the restored home at 1218 E. Elm St., New Albany. The two collaborated on a play about the cardinal's life. A rare portrait of Ritter hangs over the mantel behind them. (Photo by Patricia Happel Cornwell)

By Patricia Happel Cornwell (Special to The Criterion)

NEW ALBANY—New Albany native Sharon Gullett has written a play about another New Albany

native, Cardinal Joseph E. Ritter.

"It was so hard to write because he did so much," she said. "You'd have to do a 10-act play to cover everything he did!"

The play, titled *Color-blind Cardinal*, took five years to research and three months to write. It was completed in December with the help of Gullett's cousin, Brent Freiberger.

Letty Walter, a board member of [Cardinal Ritter Birthplace Foundation](#), asked Gullett to write the play. Ray Day, another board member, edited and critiqued the play. The board hopes to send the script to parishes throughout the archdiocese to encourage schools to perform the play, and to make the cardinal better known.

"People need to know about Cardinal Ritter," says Gullett, a member of [Our Lady of Perpetual Help Parish](#) in New Albany and a retired social studies teacher. "He did so much. His life was threatened several times. He should be a saint."

Cardinal Ritter was born in New Albany in 1892, and grew up in the house at 1218 Elm St., now the home of a neighborhood resource center and the Cardinal Ritter Museum. He attended the former St. Mary School in New Albany and Saint Meinrad Seminary and School of Theology in St. Meinrad. He served the Indianapolis diocese and archdiocese from 1933 to 1946 as bishop and later archbishop when the diocese became an archdiocese in 1944. In 1946, he became archbishop of St. Louis, where he died in 1967.

The cardinal is most noted for his desegregation of Catholic schools in both Indianapolis and St. Louis years before it became law in the United States.

While his fight for racial justice was the inspiration for the title of the play, Gullett said the cardinal actually was color-blind, as were all his brothers. "He was also color-blind," she said, "in his attitude toward those who were 'the children of God.' "

Cardinal Ritter also participated in the Second Vatican Council from 1962 to 1965, serving a vocal advocate of "Dignitatis Humanae" ("Declaration on Religious Freedom").

Gullet's play deals with the cardinal's family life in New Albany and his time as archbishop of Indianapolis, but also touches on his time in St. Louis and Rome. It has a large cast of 28 characters, 10 of which are family members. The action takes place before a backdrop of projected photographs. It begins with 12-year-old Elmer "playing Church," preaching to his friends, and ends with him as cardinal, giving an interview to a reporter in St. Louis in the 1960s.

David Hock, chairman of the Cardinal Ritter Birthplace Foundation, said, "I think Sharon's play will be an inspiration for young people who can see, from an easy-to-understand play, that you can start from anywhere and go as far as becoming a national and world leader by believing in yourself and God."

Hock feels that because Ritter left for the seminary at St. Meinrad after eighth grade, many New Albany residents have not heard of him. He hopes the play will be staged by both Catholic and public school students around the archdiocese, "since Cardinal Ritter was a famous local citizen who did pioneering social work such as desegregating schools."

(Patricia Happel Cornwell is a freelance writer and a member of St. Joseph Parish in Corydon. †