

Grand opening fit for a Cardinal

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Construction is nearing completion on the Cardinal Ritter Birthplace Home located along Oak Street in the S. Ellen Jones Neighborhood of New Albany.

- Staff photo by Kevin McGloshen
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Highland Roofing employee Carl Ray finishes work on a section of roof at the Cardinal Ritter Center and Museum on Friday in New Albany.

- Staff photo by Kevin McGloshen
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Walking around the property of the Cardinal Joseph Ritter Birthplace at 1218 Oak St. in New Albany, David Hock has trouble holding back a smile.

“It’s really taking shape,” said Hock, who is president of the Ritter Birthplace Foundation Board and one of the driving forces behind the project. “It’s pretty exciting.”

The house has come a long way in nine years, when it was slated to be torn down and in disrepair. The front section has been completely renovated, a community center has

been added in the rear and two organizations — Home of the Innocents and Housing Partnership Inc. — now have offices in the home. The only area of the structure that will not be completed by the end of the month is a small section in the center which will be the future home of a museum in Ritter's honor.

"That is something we want to do professionally; we want to set it up right," Hock said of the museum. "I kind of think that is what Cardinal Ritter would have wanted. He would want the outreach programs and community center open and then have his story be a very small part. He wasn't one to toot his own horn."

The front section of the house was completed in 2007, thanks to a \$220,000 grant from the Horseshoe Foundation of Floyd County. Crews are currently putting the finishing touches on the community center in the rear of the home. The official grand opening will be at 11 a.m. April 29.

The Ritter board was given \$190,000 of the \$6.7 million the city received in 2009 through the Neighborhood Stabilization Program, or NSP, to finish the community center. While the rear section of the home had been built more than three years ago, there was not enough money to finish the interior or for siding for the exterior, that is until the board received the grant.

Hock said it's important for the house to be completed, since it's the centerpiece of the neighborhood which is being rehabilitated. He said the board is looking for more non-profits and hopes groups take advantage of the home's community center.

"It's almost perfect," he said. "I think we may have started a trend [in the neighborhood]. The neighborhood is changing. This is a great example of a neighborhood being turned around."

Ritter board member Letty Walter said the Ritter house caused a "ripple affect" in the neighborhood.

“Great things are happening in this neighborhood,” she said. “I think when we started renovating the Ritter house it planted the seed. We want to have a place that will offer services and help people in this neighborhood. I see kids playing in Ritter Park [across the street from house] ... I just this this neighborhood is on the move.”

In 2002, the Ritter birthplace was nothing to be proud of ... it was in shambles. Historic Landmarks of Indiana saved the house by purchasing it in 2002. Hock said once the museum is completed and the house finished, around \$800,000 in donations and donated labor and supplies will have been spent on the house.

“We’ve gotten a lot of materials and free labor from people,” Hock said. “A lot of people helped. I think people feel like they are putting their money in something that will be used wisely.”

Ritter 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. He also became an influential cardinal in the Second Vatican Council from 1962 to 1965.

Ritter was born in the house in 1892 and attended St. Mary’s Catholic Church. He was ordained in 1917.

Bishop Paul Etienne of Cheyenne, Wyo., will help with the grand opening ceremonies on April 29. He was a member of the Ritter Birthplace Foundation Board when he was the priest at Our Lady of Perpetual Help.

KET also recently filmed a segment on the Ritter house which will be aired April 16-17. And in July, there will be a Ritter family reunion at the house.

“He was so humble ... I’m sure he would be happy we saved his boyhood home and filled it with great agencies who help people,” Walter said of Ritter. “He was way ahead of his time.”