

Family of Cardinal Ritter gathers at childhood home

First Indiana-born cardinal to serve Catholic Church

CHRISTINA AVERY

CHRISTINA.AVERY@NEWSANDTRIBUNE.COM

Guy Tedesco wants to sculpt something holy.

Standing in the childhood home of Joseph **Cardinal Ritter** — the first Indiana-born **cardinal** to serve the Catholic Church — Tedesco, an artist and sculptor who lives in Mount St. Francis, Indiana, displayed a small-scale model of one of his latest artistic pursuits: bronze sculptures of **Cardinal Ritter** and a Black mother.

The model depicts the figures pushing over a wall of glass blocks, each of which is etched with a different word representing positive and negative aspects of humanity — Racism. Sexism. Ignorance. Justice. Peace. Unity. On the other side of the wall is a Black girl and a Jewish boy, carrying the bricks to a Protestant girl laying them into the ground.

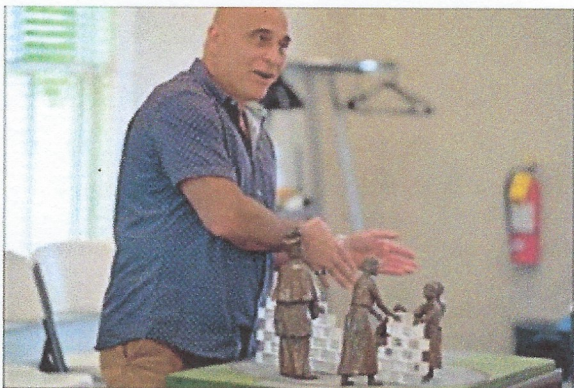
With those words etched in glass, Tedesco's statues symbolize building pathways with one another instead of barriers. The sculptures, cast in bronze, are meant to represent the unity of different cultures that **Cardinal Ritter** spent his life advocating.

"He was just this force," Tedesco said. "He fought kind of against human personality. All of these things are going to exist within us at all times, for now and forever. It's a matter of what you do with all of that."

Tedesco was one of dozens of people gathered July 29 at **Cardinal Ritter**'s birthplace in New Albany to celebrate his life and legacy. Admirers of **Ritter**, local historians and descendants of **Ritter** spanning four generations ate lunch, mingled and toured **Ritter**'s former home, which was restored in recent years and now serves as a museum and community center. Guests drove from as far as Pittsburgh to attend the reunion, which was the first large gathering in honor of **Ritter** since the last reunion at the house in 2011.

Cardinal Ritter was born in the house, which sits across the street from **Ritter Park**, in 1892 and died in St. Louis, Missouri in 1967. He led dioceses in St. Louis and Indianapolis, and kickstarted desegregation efforts in Indianapolis and St. Louis 17 years before school segregation

See **RITTER** on A3



Sculptor Guy Tedesco talks about his sculpture honoring **Cardinal Ritter** during a family gathering at **Ritter**'s birthplace July 29.

RITTER

Continued from A1

was declared unlawful nationwide.

Despite death threats from the Ku Klux Klan, threats of excommunication from the Catholic Church and hundreds of protesters, **Ritter** spent his life fighting racial injustice and discrimination against other religions, approving a mixed-faith marriage in the Catholic Church and withholding communion from Catholics who practiced racial discrimination.

Tedesco, who also completed a bust of **Ritter** that sits in the museum room of **Ritter**'s birthplace, said he's working on the sculpture presented at the gathering to honor **Ritter**'s powerful legacy, which he believes could rewrite history books.

"Not so much just, 'oh look at this guy who grew up and was born here,' but all about the legacy and, hopefully, teaching that legacy and inspiring people to continue it," he said.

Tedesco is working to gather funding to build a bigger final version of the model, which will include a life-sized figure of **Ritter**. He said he wants to enlist the help of children at New Albany's Providence High School, **Cardinal Ritter** High in St. Louis and a Jewish community center to help him complete the piece.

While **Ritter**'s home at 1218 East Oak Street now includes a museum, a rose garden and a restored 1890s-style birth room, it wasn't until the last two decades that the building came to be what it is today. After years of neglect, the formerly dilapidated home was on its way to being demolished by the City of New Albany, which in 2001 deemed it an "unsafe building." But in 2002, Historic Landmarks of Indiana purchased the house and took on the project of renovating and restoring it.

Community organizations, private donors, local businesses and individuals have supported the work through grants and donations. In 2004, the nonprofit **Cardinal Ritter** Birthplace Foundation was established, and today the **Cardinal Ritter** Birthplace offers group tours, a coffee and lecture series and a neighborhood festival.

A section of the building has also been reserved as a Neighborhood Resource Center, which offers free spaces for nonprofits in the community to meet and work. The Homeless Coalition of Southern Indiana occupies office space on the first and second floors, and the Community Music Alliance regularly rehearses at the home. A local Girl Scouts of America troop also uses the home as a meeting space.

Mary **Ritter** Scales, a greatniece of **Cardinal Ritter**, said she remembers seeing the home before it was renovated and how run-down it was. Since it's been restored, she said members of the **Ritter** family stop in periodically, and she's met many relatives she didn't previously know.

"It's really wonderful to come back," she said. "It's really neat. We're proud of the family history."

Veronica Riggs was at **Ritter**'s home with her daughter Natalie. Riggs said **Cardinal Ritter** was her great-great-great-great uncle. "I thought it was really interesting to hear how he desegregated the schools," Riggs said. "I think that's amazing. It's awesome to be a part of that history."

David Hock, vice-chairperson of the **Ritter** Birthplace Foundation Board, is not a relative of **Ritter**'s. However, as a lifetime Catholic, he remembers meeting **Ritter** at St. Mary's Catholic Church in New Albany when he was just 10 years old. He's been inspired to learn about and share **Ritter**'s work ever since.

"He would meet with everybody because he said we're all on the same boat, or we're all trying to be on the same boat and get to the same place," Hock said. "Back then, the church was a little stuffy. He changed things."



Guy Tedesco's sculpture of Cardinal Ritter, a Black mother, a Black child, a Jewish child and a Protestant child at the Cardinal Ritter birthplace July 29.

Christina Avery | News and Tribune

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