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Irish center 'starting to glitter'

BY STEVE KEMME • SKEMME@ENQUIRER.COM • OCTOBER 30, 2010

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COLUMBIA TUSCULUM - A year ago, Kent Covey and his wife, Maureen Kennedy, faced the daunting task of transforming a massive former school building that had been vacant for almost five years into an Irish cultural center.

The Hyde Park couple had just closed the deal on their purchase of the old McKinley School building on Eastern Avenue in Columbia Tusculum for \$180,000. The brick building, whose back section was built in the 1870s by Civil War veterans and whose front section was built in 1917, had an extremely solid structure, with strong wooden floors and thick walls.

But it needed an enormous amount of cleaning, re-painting, repairing, decorating and updating before it could be opened to host public events.

"I had no idea the project was going to be so all-consuming," Covey said.

With the help of volunteers, the Irish Heritage Center of Greater Cincinnati was ready for its inaugural event - the play "Moll" by John B. Keane - at the end of February. All six performances sold out.

Since the opening of that play, more than 2,000 people have come to the center for a wide variety of Irish-related cultural events and classes while volunteers continued to work on various parts of the building.

On the evening of Nov.13, 11 days before the one-year anniversary of the closing of the building's sale, the center will host its grand opening celebration called "A Little Bit of Heaven."

For the past year, Covey, who owns plastic products manufacturing business in Hamilton, has been spending about 30 hours a week working at the Irish Heritage Center. Kennedy estimates she spends about 50 hours a week there.

They're pleased with the results of the work they and their many volunteers have put into the center.

"It's like a diamond in the rough," Covey said. "It looks brighter with each polishing. It's starting to glitter."

Covey and Kennedy have spent about \$40,000 on the building since buying it.

They've completed work on the building's auditorium, front office, entry hallway, and social room, which has been made to look like an Irish pub.

They're assembling a library from donated books and are preparing a music room and a dance studio. Some former classrooms on the upper floors will become art studios available for renting by the month or the year.



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The Enquirer/Amie Dworecki
Maureen Kennedy, founding member of the Irish Heritage Center in the 3900 block of Eastern Avenue, stands in the social room of the center.

IF YOU GO

What: "A Little Bit of Heaven," a gala opening celebration of the Irish Heritage Center of Greater Cincinnati

When: 7:30 p.m. Nov. 13

Where: 3905 Eastern Ave., Columbia Tusculum

Cost: \$50 per person.

Reservations: Deadline is Wednesday. Call w ith credit card at 513-533-0100 or visit www.irishcenterofcincinnati.com.

Festivities: There w ill be a keynote address by former local TV new s anchor Nick Clooney. Entertainment w ill include the Celtic Rhythm Dancers, the Friendly Sons of St. Patrick Glee Club and a theatre presentation of a short section of "Moll." There w ill be complimentary wine and hors d'oeuvres and a cash bar.

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Rental space will provide the center with revenue to pay for the building's high operating costs, Kennedy said.

Next year, they want to provide more programs for children and teens.

Sean Flanagan, an Irish native who lives in Hyde Park, has donated some of his artwork to the center and is painting the exterior wall of the social room to look like the outside of an Irish pub.

"I've always felt proud to be Irish," he said. "This is a cultural entity that's into everything Irish. I'm proud to have my paintings here and to help out."

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