



Vonnegut's kin back local memorial library

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Three of Kurt Vonnegut's children are working with local fans of the famed author to open a memorial library in Indianapolis.

Mark, Edie and Nanny Vonnegut are on the board of the Kurt Vonnegut Memorial Library, Inc., a fledgling organization that's still scouting possible locations. The all-volunteer group also is planning lectures for high school students and events for writers and fans.

"This is the only endeavor like this," said Donald C. Farber, a New York lawyer who is executor of Vonnegut's estate and a close friend. "And it's in Indianapolis, where it should be."

Founder and Executive Director Julia Whitehead said the organization received tax-exempt status just last week, but already raised some money. She would not say how much.

The group had a presence at the Athenaeum's Germanfest in October. "We received donations of all sizes," Whitehead said. "So many individuals stopped to talk to us that day. People were very excited about it."

Vonnegut fans from around the country have found the Web site, www.vonnegutlibrary.org, and sent in donations, Whitehead added.

The group's fund-raising goal is a modest \$100,000, which Whitehead said would be enough to cover the cost of events and programs that are planned for 2010.

A committee is still investigating potential sites, including the Athenaeum building, which was designed by Vonnegut's grandfather.

The plan is to open what Whitehead calls a "library-center," which would have space for exhibits and events. The group hopes to include a reading room.

The memorial library would not include Vonnegut's manuscripts and correspondence. Those belong to the Lilly Library at Indiana University in Bloomington.

Through Vonnegut's children and artistic collaborator Joe Petro III, however, the library would have access to Vonnegut's personal effects and artwork.

The author of "Slaughterhouse Five" died April 11, 2007, at age 84. Indianapolis had a difficult relationship with its most famous native son, but declared 2007 the "Year of Kurt Vonnegut." He was to deliver a speech at Butler University that spring.

Whitehead, a technical writer at Eli Lilly, said she regretted never writing to Vonnegut, whom she admired as a humanitarian. So, when she realized late last year that a memorial had not been built, she didn't hesitate to look up Vonnegut's eldest child, Mark, a Boston-area pediatrician.

"I had just a skeleton idea of how this would go," Whitehead said.

Nevertheless, Mark Vonnegut was very receptive to the grassroots effort, Whitehead said. He joined the board of directors. His sisters are honorary members.

Also on the board are Farber, Petro, and Vonnegut scholars.

Morley Safer, Howard Zinn, and writers Daniel Wakefield and Sidney Offit are among the honorary board members.

"She's put together, I think, a really impressive group of people," Nuvo columnist David Hoppe said.

Hoppe was part of an ad-hoc committee that formed in the wake of Vonnegut's death to explore a similar venture. At the time, Vonnegut's boyhood home at 4401 N. Illinois St. was for sale. Hoppe floated the idea of acquiring it for a memorial center, but met with a mixed response from the neighborhood.

Another potential partner, the Athenaeum Foundation, also was ambivalent at the time, Hoppe said.

Hoppe, who is now on an advisory board for the memorial library, said the current effort benefited from allowing some time to pass. The site search is ongoing, but Whitehead is working closely with the Athenaeum. She uses an office there, and former Athenaeum Foundation president Phil Watts is on the Vonnegut memorial library board.

Hoppe thinks a Vonnegut center would become an instant tourist attraction, but that raising money will be difficult.

“Based on our foray into this area, I’m not convinced sufficient funds are going to be found locally,” Hoppe said.

Whitehead said the memorial library also intends to become a hub for writers and literary activity in general, a mission that should help gather local support.

The group is starting with educational outreach at Shortridge High School, which re-opened this year as a law and public policy magnet school. Vonnegut attended Shortridge from 1936 to 1940 and was editor of the school’s daily newspaper.

This winter Rodney Allen, author of “Conversations with Kurt Vonnegut” will give a lecture at Shortridge.

Other activities in the works include a book club, starting in January, and a festival of sorts in May.

Whitehead said the May event might include a look-alike contest. “This is going to bring a lot of fun to the community, as well as insight and intellectual discussion,” Whitehead said. “Humor was very important to Kurt Vonnegut.”