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New library to celebrate Kurt Vonnegut's writing

*By Rick Callahan
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Three years after his death, pieces of Kurt Vonnegut's life are coming together in his hometown, where a new library will chronicle the "Slaughterhouse Five" author's harrowing World War II experiences and his works that struck a chord with the Vietnam generation.

The Kurt Vonnegut Memorial Library scheduled to open this fall in downtown Indianapolis at 340 N. Senate Avenue will be part library and part museum, with a collection including first editions of his books, a replica of his writing studio, his Purple Heart and rejection letters that preceded his success.

The 1,100-square-foot space will also house an art gallery featuring his distinctive line drawings and a gift shop that will help generate income for the nonprofit library, said Julia Whitehead, the museum's executive director and founder.

Whitehead approached Vonnegut's son, Mark, in 2008 and proposed the idea of a memorial center. Weeks later, all three of Vonnegut's children signed on.

Vonnegut's eldest daughter, Edie Vonnegut, said her father loved libraries and would have wanted visitors to learn about his perseverance in the face of dismissive publishers. Among the items she's loaning the library are some of his rejection letters.

"We have boxes of rejection letters, letters saying 'You have no talent and we suggest you give up writing,'" she said. "He did not have an easy time of it, and I think for anyone who wants to be writer, it will be important for them to see how tough it was for him."

Vonnegut worked as a reporter, in public relations for General Electric and later sold Saabs on Cape Cod before finding success in the 1960s with darkly comic, satirical works that combined social commentary, science fiction and autobiography.

He was born into an affluent German-American family in 1922 and left Indianapolis for good when he went to college in 1940, but he returned periodically for visits. He died in 2007 at 84.

As a young man, he faced a string of tragedies -- including his mother's 1944 suicide just before his Army unit left for Germany. Later that year he was taken prisoner during the Battle of the Bulge and eventually imprisoned in Dresden, Germany. There, he witnessed the Allied firebombing believed to have killed tens of thousands -- people whose bodies he and his fellow POWs were forced to dig from the rubble and burn in piles.

Vonnegut's account of that ordeal eventually became the cult classic "Slaughterhouse Five," which captured the cruel absurdity of war. Published in 1969 at the height of the Vietnam War, it solidified his reputation as an iconoclast.

The library, which opens in November, will feature items that belong to his three children, including a photo of their father just after his release as a POW, a Nazi sword he brought home as a souvenir, his cigarette-stained Smith Corona typewriter and a portrait of him by artist Joseph Hirsch.

Sidney Offit, a fellow author and longtime friend of Vonnegut's, expects the library to give visitors a sense of his complexity, creativity, his triumph over tragedies and his worries about humanity's future.

"I hope they get a full vision of a man who was one of those rarities, who was like his work. He was a writer who, when you read him, you heard him," he said. Offit is giving the library copies of letters Vonnegut sent him and the bound galleys of two of Vonnegut's books.

Vonnegut lectured regularly and exhorted audiences to think for themselves, warning that modern society was dehumanizing them. The library hopes to carry on those ideals, partly through its writing programs for high school and college students emphasizing Vonnegut's works.

Donald C. Farber, who was Vonnegut's attorney and agent and is now executor of his literary estate, is rounding up signed first editions of his friend's works for the library.

Farber said Vonnegut was complicated, mysterious and prone to periods of depression, but never ran short of humor.

"I never had a conversation with him where I didn't end up laughing," he said.

Kurt Vonnegut Memorial Library: <http://www.vonnegutlibrary.org/>
