

New library will showcase Vonnegut's life

Written by

Matt Gonzales
Star correspondent

Seventy years ago, Kurt Vonnegut moved away from Indianapolis to attend Cornell University at age 17. On Friday, the late literary icon will finally, in a sense, come home.

A special open house will introduce the Kurt Vonnegut Memorial Library to Indianapolis from 6 to 8 p.m. In addition to giving the public a sneak peek at the partially completed library, board members hope the event will help raise funds.

The library is in the Emelie Building at 340 N. Senate Ave., the former home of the Indianapolis Museum of Contemporary Art. Grants to fund its future have come from the Allen Whitehill Clowes Charitable Foundation, Lilly Endowment and the Indianapolis Foundation, but volunteers have done all the work to get the library up and running.

The Vonnegut children have been crucial to the library's evolution. They've donated artifacts -- including rejection letters, Vonnegut's Smith Coronamatic typewriter from the 1970s and his World War II Purple Heart -- and suggested programming ideas, including an upcoming writing competition for seniors at Shortridge High School, Vonnegut's alma mater.

But most of the credit belongs to Whitehead, a medical writer for Eli Lilly and Co. and a passionate Vonnegut fan. She had the idea for the library in November 2008, after learning no similar memorial existed for the author of such influential 20th-century works as "Slaughterhouse-Five" and "Cat's Cradle." At the urging of her husband, J.T. Whitehead, a poet and short-story author, she called Mark Vonnegut, who lives in a Boston suburb.

"He was very excited about it," Whitehead said. "He gave me the names of a few people in Indianapolis who had tried to get something similar going before, but hadn't formulated the right plan."

Advertisement



Among the people Mark Vonnegut put Whitehead in touch with was New Yorker Donald Farber, the executor of Kurt Vonnegut's estate, and a close friend of the writer, who died in New York City in 2007.

(Page 2 of 2)

"He would be absolutely thrilled with the library," Farber said. "This guy was a man of books. And he would love it in Indianapolis. That's where it all started, and he had a feeling of loyalty for it."

Edie Vonnegut, who lives in a barn on the property of Vonnegut's old Cape Cod home, has also been a strong supporter of Whitehead's efforts. She had considered doing something similar with her father's former Massachusetts house, but she says Indianapolis is the more appropriate location.

"That it's in Indianapolis is a no-brainer," she said. Her dad, she added, would likely agree. "I think he would consider it right. He was very Midwestern, and as crazy as his writing is, it is also very traditional and formal in many ways. He is a son of the culture of Indianapolis."

Whitehead describes the five-room, 1,100-square-foot library as "a library, a museum, a reading room and a gift shop." A small collection of original artwork by Vonnegut will be on display at Friday's

A large mural depicting a timeline of Vonnegut's life will be unveiled. Titled "Star Time," it is 5 feet tall and 18 feet wide, and alludes to several Vonnegut works. The mural is the collaboration of library board member Rodney Allen and visual artist Chris King.

Allen, a Vonnegut scholar and author of "Understanding Kurt Vonnegut" and "Conversations With Kurt Vonnegut," said the library belongs in Indianapolis, even if the author was at times at odds with his hometown.

"He sometimes had a problem with Indianapolis because of its Midwestern conservatism," he said. "Vonnegut was openly an atheist, and that isn't going to sit well with some people."

But the library won't sugarcoat Vonnegut's liberal and humanist world view to placate a conservative audience, Allen said. "We hope to be welcoming to anyone who has any interest whatsoever, but we also want to present an accurate view of what he

Advertisement



stood for and who he was."

Allen says the library, tentatively scheduled to open in January, will become a popular destination for Vonnegut fans worldwide.

"Kurt's influence continues to be extremely strong, and I think Indianapolis will benefit in all sorts of ways from the library."

Edie Vonnegut agrees. "I've already seen where people are planning on making treks there," she said. "It's going to be very much like a pilgrimage for a lot of people."

Advertisement



