

## Arts Beat

### Coming to Life

By [Steve Ramos](#)

The formula for transforming a long-shuttered funeral home into the Kennedy Heights Arts Center can be found scrawled on a message board hanging in a second-floor kitchen. The slogan reads, "You + One Hour = \$16.45," and board president and overall workhorse Kathy Spoon laughs when I point to it.

It's a warm February morning, and Spoon gives a tour of the sprawling house at the junction of Montgomery Road and Kennedy Avenue.

"This was the family home for the first Kennedy Heights mayor," she says proudly. "The Douglas family operated it as a funeral home for many years. There's an embalming crypt in the basement, if you want to see it."

The first floor became vacant after the funeral home closed, but the Douglas family continued to live in the house's upper floors.

News of the building's sale and its 2.2 acres of property jolted Spoon and a group of volunteers from Kennedy Heights and the surrounding neighborhoods of Silverton, Pleasant Ridge, Amberley Village and Columbia Township into action. Plans called for building a storage facility or discount store on the site, but Spoon and her volunteer army shared a different, grander vision for the real estate.

The funeral home would become an arts center in a neighborhood in need of a community space. Rooms could become galleries displaying art created by people in the neighborhood. Arts classes -- including sculpture, pottery, knitting and jewelry-making -- would be held on-site. An outdoor amphitheater is planned for the northern edge of the property.

Spoon and her volunteer army have a vision. She sits with committee adviser Jeane Goings in a second-floor sunroom that's also the center's volunteer office. They admit that no one is reinventing the wheel in Kennedy Heights, saying their plans follow the paths of other neighborhood centers like The Carnegie in Columbia-Tusculum and Westwood Town Hall on the West side.

They argue that cultural development isn't just for massive performance arts centers and downtown museums. If a neighborhood is to thrive, it too needs an arts anchor.

Mike Kull, owner of The Dubliner restaurant and Ridge Market in Pleasant Ridge, joined Spoon and her group as an early supporter. The Kennedy Heights Arts Center would be located on the hill just past his retail stores, and Kull immediately understood how an arts center could complement his businesses.

Throughout all of 2003, Spoon and other volunteers knocked on neighborhood doors and delivered mailings. They set up information booths at neighborhood events. Word spread about the arts center plan. The city of Cincinnati provided \$50,000 in funding in April 2003.

In order to secure a loan, 40 supporters deposited \$1,000 each as collateral at Columbia Savings in Clifton.

The grassroots efforts paid off. In December, the Kennedy Heights Arts Center purchased the house. The latest funding goal is loftier: \$1.2 million to complete renovation of the building and to staff and operate the center for three years.

It sounds impossible. Yet who would have imagined that a grassroots group could have come this far?

Spoon and I meet again on a brisk Sunday morning. A group of volunteers have already arrived to chop wood and clear brush from the lawn.

"We have a building," Spoon says, walking the steps to her makeshift office. "This is the turning point for us."

A gift shop and coffee bar are planned for the first floor. Seven artist studios are planned for the upper floor. Three first-floor rooms are nearing completion, and they're a tidy contrast to the rest of the building.

Floors are being refinished. Patchwork is applied to ceilings. The center is a work in progress, and the priorities change on a daily basis.

"Some of the volunteers don't live in the area," Spoon says. "The underlying commitment on everyone's part is that this is a charming house that needs saved."

Spoon and close to 200 volunteers -- a diverse group of cheerleaders, tree choppers, check writers and money raisers -- continue to move the project closer to the ultimate goal, an arts campus stretching to nearby buildings. The weather-worn banner hanging between two overgrown trees doesn't do the project justice.

There is indeed magic behind the elbow grease.

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