

One dream castle for sale:

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

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FULL TEXT

MORGANTOWN - A castle is for sale in Morgantown.

The Good Counsel Friary, which has been used as a training facility for Catholic friars for over 30 years, is priced at \$2.8 million. It has been on the market for about a month.

The castle-like structure is surrounded by 14 acres of beautifully landscaped land. Various buildings on the site include more than 25,000 square feet of space.

The Rev. Jude Mili, who had lived at the castle since 1968, passed away last year. Other friary officials decided the large property in Morgantown was too expensive to keep, so the property was placed on the market.

Over the years, the friary has touched the lives of many individuals who remember it as a spiritual location that changed the course of their lives.

In the 1890s a young Ferdinando Pitassi moved from his home in Italy to the Pittsburgh area to live with his brother and work as a stone mason. Immigration officers could not pronounce his name, so Ferdinando told them to call him Thoney Pietro. The last name means stone in Italian.

In Italy, Pietro had been an apprentice to a stone mason since he was a boy of only 7. He showed "great promise at working and designing stone and with the originality of his work," said Kenneth Carvell, a retired West Virginia University forestry professor with a passion for history.

The talented young Pietro would enter stone-laying competitions. As word spread about his skills, he was hard-pressed to find competitors, Carvell said.

In 1899, after years of hard work in Pittsburgh, Pietro and his wife decided to take a vacation. They took a riverboat down the Monongahela River to Fairmont.

Along the way they saw Morgantown, and it reminded Petro of the small Italian town of his boyhood. Pietro told his wife that one day they would move there, Carvell said.

Pietro was true to his word and soon moved his family to Morgantown to start a new life. The oil, glass and gas industries in Morgantown were booming, and lots of stone construction work needed to be done.

Pietro, along with his three brothers, worked hard in Morgantown, and they were responsible for many of the old stone walls and buildings that line the streets of the South Park section of Morgantown, Carvell said.

"The house that Thoney and his family lived in is still in South Park. That it still stands is a testament to the work that he could accomplish."

During the 1920s, Pietro decided to build the castle on the outskirts of Morgantown. By 1928, the plan for the structure was well underway, and he brought in a large crew to work with him on his fairy tale home.

The castle construction took place during the Great Depression, but Pietro did not let this affect the work. He paid his men \$2 a day, a dollar more than they could have earned elsewhere, Carvell said.

The castle took five years to finish, complete with designed arches, stone patios, two turrets and parapets, a wrought iron staircase and a magnificent marble fireplace.

"The most interesting thing about Thoney is that he built the castle without any blueprints. It resembled a castle

that he had seen as a boy in Italy, but he didn't actually have any real architectural plans to build it," Carvell said. Pietro added special touches. He broke small pieces of glass and mirror and embedded them in the concrete between stones, so that light reflected off the house, Carvell said.

The family lived in the structure until Aug. 24, 1949, when they donated it to the Franciscan friars. A stone cross was erected between the castle's two turrets in honor of its new purpose.

"The friars originally planned to use the facility for training priests and monks for missionary work, but by the time the conference center was built on the property, the training that priests had to go through had changed, and the property in Morgantown was no longer needed," Carvell said.

The Friary had decided to sell the castle when Father Jude Mili of the Good Counsel Friary convinced them the property should be turned into a religious retreat and conference center.

Religious callings

Father Mili began living in the castle in 1968. He made it his mission to turn the Friary into a retreat for anyone who felt the need to be closer to God's presence.

Over the years, Mili touched the lives of many people who came in contact with him and with the majestic quality of the Friary.

"Franciscan friars vow to poverty and chastity, and as a result, Father Jude never thought about himself," said Bob Carubia, one of the leaders of the Light of Life community and the man who cared for Mili in his deteriorating health.

"He was so inspirational, and he created what is seen as a real, spiritual place to be. Many people have come to know the Lord by coming to retreats there," Carubia said.

Carubia himself was brought back to the Catholic Church after a weekend retreat at the Friary in 1978.

"I went to a retreat because a girl I liked was going. It was one of the greatest weekends of my life, and that place really brought me closer to my religious self," he said.

So many people have expressed their thanks to Mili and his work at the castle that Carubia decided to compile a book of their stories about how their lives were changed.

"We wanted Father Jude to know how many people he touched and to let him know that the Lord's work had been done at the Friary," Carubia said.

The book, called "For the Glory of God," includes people from all walks of life and from all over the country.

West Virginia University football coach Bill Stewart, who was an assistant coach when he met Mili, wrote:

"Thank you so much for your celebration of Mass for our football team last fall. Your time, effort and enthusiasm were very well appreciated by our players and coaches. Our numbers attending Mass this season continued to increase, and I expect even greater participation next year. That is a special tribute to you!"

The Rev. Fr. Jim E. O'Connor of Blessed Sacrament Church in South Charleston lived at the castle in 1974 and 1975.

He worked on the grounds and in the kitchen for room and board.

"The Franciscan order wanted to close the castle, but Father Jude convinced them that the Lord wanted it open, and that he would find a way," O'Connor said.

Many students who had gone to the friary for retreats wanted to help keep the place open, and some, like O'Connor, went so far as to move in.

"I was 23 years old, and just back from two tours in the air force in Thailand. I was searching for who I was and what I was going to do with my life. I wanted to know what purpose I would fill," O'Connor said.

His time at the Friary helped to point him in the right direction.

"The Friary became an anchor for me as far as my faith goes. It represented a charismatic renewal in my Catholic faith. It jump-started my vocation for priesthood. I had finally discovered an outlet of expression of my faith that suited me," O'Connor said.

Mili presented the Catholic faith in such a way that O'Connor believed his eyes had been opened.

"The message had always been there. No one had changed a word, but I was finally paying attention," O'Connor

said.

He had finally decided what he would do with his life.

"I know that my calling to the priesthood was a work of divine mercy and the work of the Holy Spirit, but the revelation of that calling came largely through Father Jude and his ministry at the Good Counsel Friary. I wouldn't be a priest today if it hadn't been for the Friary."

Future in doubt

Now that the castle is on the market, many community members and people who have been touched by the Friary are hoping the land and the buildings aren't ruined by some new use.

"We are trying to avoid having something else built on the property. I have been working with the Monongalia Historical Society to keep the castle as it is," said Elsie Carvell, wife of the retired professor who has researched the castle's history.

She hopes that if the Monongalia County Commission approves the castle's placement on the historic registry, then nothing else can be built on the site and it can't be torn down.

"I've been working on this for two years, but already some of our efforts aren't working. The Franciscans came down and removed a lot of the statues and stone lanterns from the property and took it to other places. The chapel on the property was gutted except for what's embedded in the walls," she said.

"We want to make sure that nothing else is taken away and that it is preserved."

She and other advocates will attend a second public hearing being held by the commission in early May.

"At this point, anyone can stand up and say "yeah" or "nay" to keeping the castle as is and having it on the historical registry," she said. "I can't think of anyone who wouldn't want it preserved."

She thinks the property could be used as a green space, or the castle itself could be turned into a bed and breakfast.

Others are more concerned about the property being kept in the religious realm as opposed to the commercial.

"The Franciscans decided to sell the place, but it really needs to be kept for religious purposes," Carubia said.

O'Connor knows it might not be possible for a religious group to buy the land at such a high price but hopes the site can at least be used for a good cause.

"It is a historic site, and it would be a crime not to preserve it. My biggest fear would be that a new owner would tear it down and build something new on the land. It would be nice if a religious group could use it, or that at least some good could continue to come out of it."

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