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HOUSE HAS NEW LIFE AS BUSINESS RETREAT OWNER ENVISIONS THE CENTER AS A GATHERING PLACE FOR COMMUNITY

by KIRSTEN VALLE, KVALLE@CHARLOTTEOBSERVER.COM

A century-old house, tucked on a wooded lot off Sardis Road, has recently hosted some of the biggest names in Charlotte business. In coming months, it will reach out more to neighbors, too.

The **Whitehead Manor** Conference Center, a Victorian-style home that has been a pastor's house and a bed-and-breakfast, is now a destination for business retreats, training sessions and events. Mike **Whitehead**, 42, of the Charlotte-based leadership consulting firm **Whitehead Associates Inc.** bought the house in 2004 and spent two years remodeling it. Groups that have used it since include Bank of America and Presbyterian Hospital.

The house has also hosted political fundraisers, a Fourth of July picnic, a neighborhood gathering and a 60th birthday party.

"We want to be a powerful influence in the community," **Whitehead** said. "There aren't many places in south Charlotte where you can go and retreat. This is a place people can relax."

The house, built in 1895, once belonged to the pastor of Sardis Presbyterian Church. About 25 years ago, it was restored and operated as the Homeplace Bed & Breakfast by Frank and Peggy Dearien.

Whitehead decided to buy the home after the Deariens retired. A jogger who lives nearby, he used to cut through the property to look at the house during runs.

"I thought I wanted to have a retreat center in Asheville," he said. "I never thought it'd be in my backyard."

Whitehead has replaced the wallpaper inside with bright paint. He installed a brick patio, and with the help of his wife, Beth, and children, updated the landscaping. Including the price of the home, the project has cost about \$1.2 million, **Whitehead** said.

The conference center isn't finished. **Whitehead** plans to add Japanese- and French-themed gardens outside and build a 5,500-square-foot business training center, built in the same style as the original house, on the Rama Road side of the property.

He hopes to begin construction this spring and have the center finished by December 2007.

Community-related events are also in the works. By the beginning of the year, **Whitehead** hopes to invite neighbors to an on-site French-inspired cafe where they'll serve fresh fruit and coffee.

He also plans to host after-work gatherings for neighbors to have meaningful conversations about their community and organize a neighborhood run and breakfast gathering at the house.

Such events will help brand **Whitehead's** company and promote the center, which showcases history while looking forward, he said.

"It's a good cross between an old-fashioned place and a high-tech place," he said. "People like to sit on the rocking chairs while they're using the high-speed Internet."

Want to Hold an Event There?

The **Whitehead Manor** Conference Center, 5901 Sardis Road, costs \$2,000 to \$2,500 a day to rent.

Mike **Whitehead** encourages small business meetings and executive retreats but is more selective with social gatherings.

The facility can accommodate up to 150 people for receptions and 25 for meetings.

To rent, call 704-366-5335 and ask for Yvonne, the event coordinator. For more information or to suggest community events, send an e-mail with your contact information to info@WhiteheadAssociates.com.

OWNER: Mike Whitehead
AGE: 42

BUSINESS: Whitehead Associates Inc., a consulting firm that specializes in leadership and corporate culture development. Clients include Harris Teeter, Wachovia and Ameritrust Mortgage.

FAMILY: Wife, Beth; son, Austin, 13; daughter, Leah, 11.

HOBBIES: Include jogging, basketball, family bike rides, travel and cookouts.

OTHER FACTS: Whitehead was a torchbearer in Charlotte for the 1996 Olympics and has been named one of Charlotte's 40 under-40 high achievers.

1. KIRSTEN VALLE - KVALLE@CHARLOTTEOBSERVER.COM. Mike **Whitehead**, president of **Whitehead** Associates Inc., created the **Whitehead Manor** Conference Center. The site hosts business retreats and community events.