



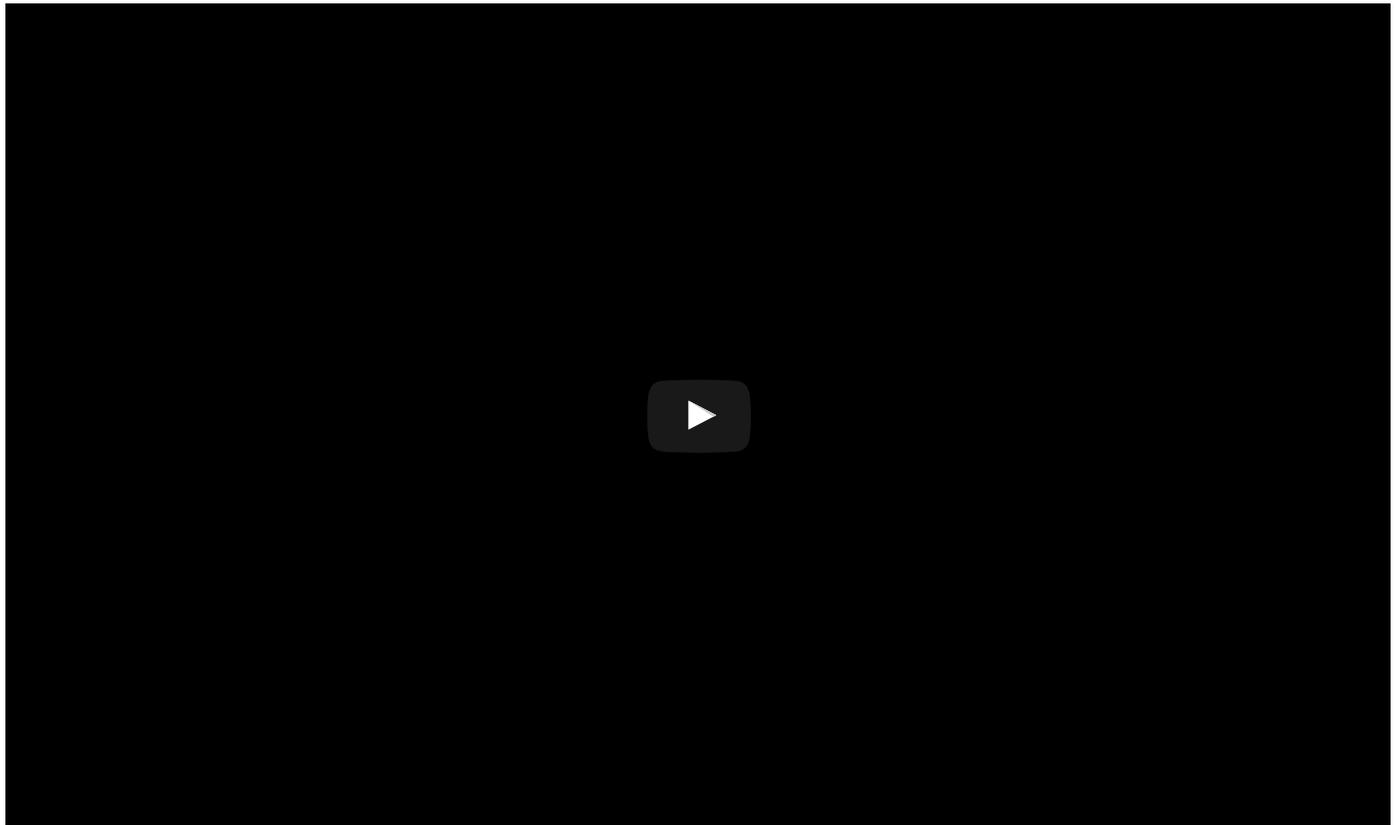
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Part of old St. Clement property in Tarentum converted to offices; owner working on 'Epic Cat Fort'

[mczebiniak@tribweb.com?](mailto:mczebiniak@tribweb.com)

MADASYN CZEBINIAK ([MAILTO:MCZEBINIAK@TRIBWEB.COM?SUBJECT=RE: PART OF OLD ST. CLEMENT PROPERTY IN TARENTUM CONVERTED TO OFFICES; OWNER WORKING ON 'EPIC CAT FORT' STORY ON TRIBLIVE.COM](mailto:MCZEBINIAK@TRIBWEB.COM?SUBJECT=RE: PART OF OLD ST. CLEMENT PROPERTY IN TARENTUM CONVERTED TO OFFICES; OWNER WORKING ON 'EPIC CAT FORT' STORY ON TRIBLIVE.COM)) [🐦 \(https://twitter.com/MaddyCzebsTrib\)](https://twitter.com/MaddyCzebsTrib) | Saturday, March 11, 2017, 11:00 p.m.



Updated 21 hours ago

Phillip Rhodes was renovating the former St. Clement Church and School property in Tarentum last summer when water started coming out the side of the old school building.

He had blocked the sewer pipes in the process of ripping up asphalt that had once been in front of the structure.

On the web

For more information about the "Epic Cat Fort" or The Clement, visit www.epiccatfort.com (<http://www.epiccatfort.com>) or <http://theclement.com> (<http://theclement.com>).

The 49-year-old software engineer put on rubber gloves, got on his hands and knees, and dug around in a muddy, putrid muddle until he found a sewer pipe. He removed rocks that had fallen into the pipe until it drained.

"The people there that were watching me (said), 'Man, Phillip, you're dedicated,'" Rhodes said. "I wanted to wash my hands for three days."

Rhodes bought the West Ninth Ave-nue property for \$50,000 at an auction in 2015.

Since his purchase of the long-vacant property, Rhodes has been hard at work.

The borough recently inspected and gave Rhodes permission to rent out the school building, which he has turned into an office, co-working and hobby space. He plans to turn the church into an event venue for weddings and business meetings.

His ideal office tenants are craftspeople involved in the wedding industry.

"Think of it as a one-stop shop for your business meeting or your wedding," Rhodes said of the property, which has two components: The Clement and Tarentum.Tech.

Anything related to the main event venue, or the church, is part of The Clement, Rhodes said. Tarentum.Tech deals with the property's co-working and crafts aspects.

Five offices are move-in ready on the second floor of the old school building. There will be more on the ground and third floors. Each office is 650 square feet with a going rate of \$400 per month. The rent includes utilities and wireless internet access.

Rhodes is offering shared office space for \$100 a month. Renters would get their own desk and share an office with other people.

"That's a good rate," Rhodes said.

KEEPING THE TRUE HISTORY

Rhodes so far has sparked the interest of photographer Amy Capiross, who is using one of the offices for her studio.

The 35-year-old Apollo resident chose The Clement for her business mainly because of its windows. Her specialty is portrait photography, and she likes to use natural light to shoot photos.

"All photographers love natural light," Capiross said. "Anytime there's an old school, you know there's going to be windows. It's exactly what I was looking for."

She also likes the building's close proximity to Route 28.

"I'm trying to get people from not just the area but from other locations as well," Capiross said. "It'd be easy for them to get to. It's an easy place to get to from all directions."

Rhodes did most of the upgrades and repairs himself. Although he lives in Highland Park, he comes to the Tarentum property at least four times a week.

Rhodes is passionate about keeping the school building true to its history. He has kept it virtually the same, sans some minor improvements.

Rhodes replaced the building's boiler because some people fondly still believe in steam heating, he said. Instead of putting in drywall, he decided to replaster the ceilings and walls.

"I've grown very fond of plaster and how warm it makes something feel compared to drywall," he said.

Rhodes also kept the school's tiled floors, but he did rip out some carpeting that had gotten moldy. He replaced that with colorful tile.

He salvaged what brick he could from the front of the school, where he hopes to plant a garden this summer.

How much has he spent? He really can't answer.

"Even if I gave you a number, it doesn't really represent all the money I spent," Rhodes said. "I do know every time I go to the bank, I have to put money in every week.

"I pay the monster every week."

He has not yet begun work in the roughly 4,000-square-foot church, saying that his focus is on filling the offices. In doing so, he can get a loan to help pay for the church upgrades.

"That would allow us to request the funding the removal of the church, and this would include a new roof, new floors, (repairs to) the heating system," Rhodes said. "All kinds of wonderful stuff."

THINKING 'COMMUNITY'

Rhodes chose to turn the property into an event and office space rental because he thought that would be in the best interest for the community.

He solicited community feedback when he bought the building, asking residents via a website and Facebook what they would like to see done with the property, but he only got 10 or 11 responses.

At least four people were interested in adult day services, but he couldn't afford to do that. So he eventually decided on the office and event venue.

But he's still open to suggestions.

"The good news is, what I'm doing now doesn't mean we can't do these other things," Rhodes said. "I didn't buttonhole myself and pigeonhole myself. We're still looking at these other things so we can pivot."

"The worst thing would be for a building not to be used," Rhodes said, "because it doesn't help anybody having an empty building."

"I'm trying to find out what Tarentum would like to have."

A dogwalker and exercise instructor are among the people who have expressed interest in the space. Rhodes also has been approached about opening a daycare center there.

"These are all excellent uses of a classroom space," Rhodes said.

Carl Magnetta, Tarentum's mayor, was married in the church and his wife went to school there.

Because of those connections, Magnetta was happy to hear of the property's newfound success.

"Anything over there that he's going to do, as long as he keeps it on the up and up, it's fantastic," Magnetta said. "I would back him all the way ... because those buildings sat there idle for so many years, and it's a shame."

CAT FORT TO LAUNCH IN SUMMER

To promote the venue, Rhodes held an open house from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturday.

He also plans to build an "Epic Cat Fort" in the church, which will debut this summer.

The "Epic Cat Fort" is just that: an epic fort for cats to play in.

"I like projects that put people together, and it's something that people haven't done before," Rhodes said. "I thought it would be very fun to do this huge structure. It's sort of off-the-wall kind of crazy, kind of arty. I'm going to run with it and see what happens."

Volunteers will create at least 20 different forts which will be pieced together to form the "epic" one, Rhodes said. He expects the final fort to be at least 16 feet tall and 32 feet long.

At least 20 cats will be able to use the large fort at once. He expects it to cost less than \$1,000 to build.

The cat fort will run from June 29 to July 2, Rhodes said, and there likely will be cats available for adoption at the fort.

Rhodes also wants some live-in cats to roam the buildings.

"You've heard about ... cat cafes," Rhodes said. "I do think it would be very nice to have a couple cats that live there, just make people feel welcome."

Madasyn Czebiniak is a Tribune-Review staff writer. Reach her at 724-226-4702 or mczebiniak@tribweb.com (<mailto:mczebiniak@tribweb.com>).



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