

THE DEARBORN COUNTY  
**Register**  
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## Focus on potential

**By Denise Freitag**  
**Staff Reporter**

For Hidden Valley Lake resident Gale Smith, 67, transforming a run-down block in Cincinnati's Over-the-Rhine is simple.

When he finds something worth doing, he just does it.

But it is not going to be easy.

"One of my greatest assets is I don't know something can't be done," said Smith, who purchased a 12-building block for more than \$1 million in July.

Many of the buildings are abandoned and condemned, but he focuses on the potential.

"The project was taken on to help revitalize and stabilize the neediest neighborhood in Cincinnati," said Smith.

He wants to help Over-the-Rhine become a place where people of diverse social, economic, racial and religious backgrounds can come together in a value-based environment, said Smith.

If enthusiasm, heart and the ability to pull a talented team together count for anything, he just might get it done.

### **Diverse background**

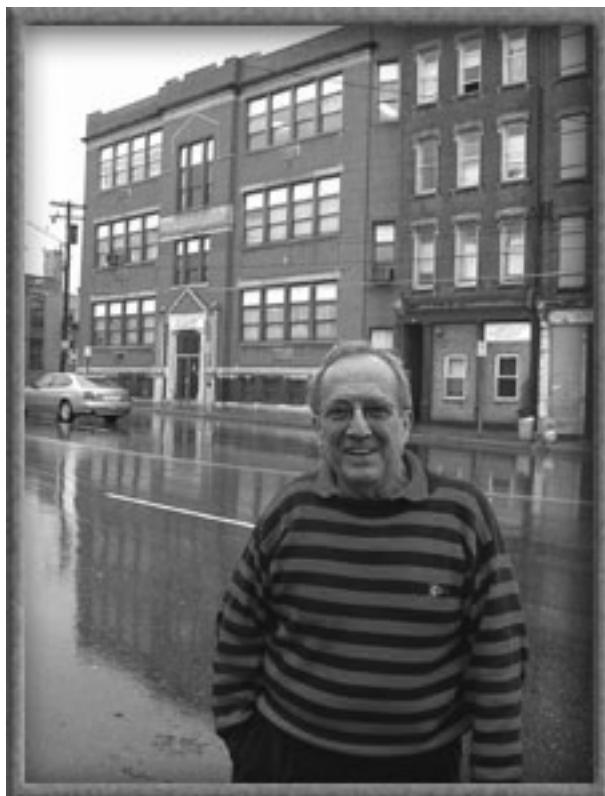
Smith moved to Cincinnati in 1972 while an equipment company sales manager. He lived in Loveland and Montgomery before moving to HVL 24 years ago.

His many Cincinnati business undertakings have included Motion Savers Inc., Wellington Industries and Toot's restaurant, all of which he passed on to his four children to run.

He also is president and founder of the Smith Family Foundation, Cincinnati. The nonprofit organization, founded in 1996, provides business planning and financial assistance to Greater Cincinnati nonprofit organizations that focus on helping youth.

A request made by a couple gentlemen, who helped him with a foundation fund-raiser, led him to purchasing the block bordered by West Liberty, Elm, Green and Logan streets, a few blocks from Findlay Market. The men asked him to become involved in the "popera" *Blues Alley Cat*.

The production told the story of Over-the-Rhine in its heyday, what it became and what the future holds, said Smith.



He helped invest to stage the production at a renovated Empire Theater, and lost \$15,000 when the developer allegedly skipped town.

But he did not give up. The venue was changed to Cincinnati's School for Creative and Performing Arts where 16 performances drew 5,000 people, said Smith.

During his involvement with *Blues Alley Cat* he met the block's former owner, Tom Denhart.

Though PNC Bank was interested in purchasing the property, Denhart became frustrated and sold him the block, said Smith.

The chance to purchase an entire block is rare. He did not have an exact plan but knew the purchase would be a chance worth taking, he said.

"If you're not living on the edge, you are taking up too much space," said Smith.

**continued**

Everyone is blessed with talents. His talent is the ability to put a team together. He likes to surround himself with brilliance, said Smith.

The Smith Family Foundation is committed to several key issues in Over-the-Rhine. The block's ownership is officially listed by Smith Foundation Properties LLC, a wholly owned affiliate of the foundation, he said.

The issues include:

- \*quality housing options for all income levels;
- \*introducing higher income residents to the neighborhood without displacing or diminishing quality of life for existing residents;
- \*stimulating business development and creating job opportunities for residents;
- \*eliminating crime and improving the perception of safety in the neighborhood, and improving community/police relations;
- \*encouraging old and new residents to respect each other in a diverse community.

He already has leased space in one of the buildings for eight families to live through Sign of the Cross Housing. The group helps find apartments for families who may have trouble finding a place to stay, said Smith.

### **Taking shape**

But it is in the building at 220 W. Liberty that his vision and commitment has started to take shape.

He hopes by the end of January or February the building will be ready for occupancy. A steering committee is at work deciding which organizations will plant roots there.

"There are going to be a lot of things in this building. It's going to be special," said Smith.

The name of the building, Dirigar Center, reflects the message he is trying to convey. In Latin, dirigar means "for reaching out and sending a message across boundaries," he said.

The building is in great shape. There is no lead or asbestos, the electricity system is up-to-date, each floor has a bathroom, and there is a new boiler, he said.

Work continues, however, to prepare the building for occupancy. Windows must be replaced, old cabinetry removed and original hardwood floors restored.

On Saturday, Jan. 10, Smith will partner with Give Back Cincinnati, a nonprofit organization of young professionals focused on enhancing the city's communities through volunteerism.

Volunteers will help repaint the interior of the building at 220 W. Liberty Street.

Among the organizations waiting to move in is LearnIT, a nonprofit organization that will provide job training for adults.

When people see what happens with this building, they will not believe it, said Smith.

This is the first of a two-parts focusing on Hidden Valley Lake resident Gale Smith and his work and nonprofit foundation.