Old LeBlanc church has new purpose

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LEBLANC — Fifty years ago, Dave Baudoin stood on the altar of St. John of the Cross Catholic Church swinging a censer of incense as an altar boy.

Saturday, he stood on the altar again, but instead of a censer, he held an electric guitar and played dance music for the building's new birth as L'Eglise, a reception hall, Saturday.

A crowd of at least 200 people came to applaud the care that LeBlanc resident Merilyn Crain took in restoring the dilapidated church to its former glory.

After nearly a year of renovations, the Italian basilica-inspired building now stands with a fresh coat of beige stucco and a new roof colored a muted red.

Its doors have been stained to a rich mahogany.

Its pine archways and the choir loft look glossy in the light pouring in through the arched windows and the square clear-story panes.

Six years ago, Crain took an interest in the church, which was closed in 1973 because of a shortage of priests.

She tried talking other people into saving the church to her husband, George, he bought it as a gift for her 50th birthday.

"I was all aflutter when I first saw it," Crain said. "It was shrouded in brush and trees with birds darting in and out of the windows. This place kept calling my name."

She had never seen the inside until her husband bought it. Everything was boarded up, and she climbed in through a back door fearing what she'd find.

She found 30 years of pigeon droppings, piles of debris fallen from the water-warped ceiling, and not a single pane of unbroken glass.

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For yesterday's dedication, 50 years of the church's history packed into L'Eglise — the families responsible for the church's construction, the priests who celebrated Mass there, the teachers and students who watched the church built through classroom windows next door and the parishioners who sat in the pews that are now gone.

The people who sat in those pews will continue to be a part of L'Eglise's history, Crain said. Its walls will archive parishioners' memories in black-and-white photographs.

Jeanette LeBlanc Broussard stood before her black-and-white smile on her wedding day nearly 40 years ago.

In the photograph, behind her and her husband, Walter, stood a statue of St. John on the Cross on a pedestal above the golden crucifix placed on a shrouded tabernacle. Another picture taken from the loft shows a time when women still covered their heads and each family sat together in its designated pew.

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