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Group links non-profits, owners

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EVANSTON - Three years ago, Pastor Nathaniel Banks got his first look at the run-down, vacant brick house he'd been praying about for years.

Outside, the grass was overgrown and windows were boarded up. Inside the drywall was busted and the electrical system in tangles.

But for Banks, it was perfect..

"We were so grateful to get it and the lay out was just right," he said.

Now - after three years of volunteer work and countless donations -the 11-room home is in the final stages of its renovation into a safe haven for homeless and abused women.

"We've totally transformed it - and every bit has been through volunteers and donations," Banks said.

Named the Swan House, the house is among nearly 20 properties that have been donated across the region to local non-profits and churches through Unify Cincinnati.

Unify is a volunteer donation program headed by Mark Miller, a realtor with Group Realtors and Cincyland.com. It was launched in 1998 to connect needy non-profits with owners of unwanted and empty, but useful properties.

The donors have ranged from the city of Cincinnati - which handed over the Swan House in Evanston in 2006 - to other property owners looking for a tax write off.

"A lot of non-profits or churches will accept anything, but we really try to guide them toward the best property for their circumstances and show them how to get the transaction done," Miller said.

In Madisonville, Pastor David Walker of The Early Church Christian Fellowship just received a half-acre of vacant land off of Kirby Road in Mount Airy. He's hoping the land could potentially house a new church for his growing congregation - which sits now in a storefront between a hair dresser and dry cleaner. Or, he said, the church could use it for leverage down the road to purchase other property.

Walker heard about Unify through his work with the Swan House, where he sits on the board.

"I've seen that building come from nothing to what it is now - a dream come true," Walker said. "The program is such an awesome thing for the community, and really gives people an opportunity to do something with these properties that need to be fixed up."

Miller's work for Unify is totally voluntary, but it's paying off in other ways.

"It's really blessed the work we do because we're networking with so many different people," he said.

During the housing downturn, Miller has honed in on niches such as large land deals, homes owned by the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development, church sales and specialized commercial deals.

He's grown Cincyland.com from two to five employees this year, hiring most recently a Web master and administrator. Since 2006, profits for Cincyland.com have grown by more than 55 percent, and

the group is on pace to beat its 2008 profit of \$141,000, Miller said.

"For us, it's very gratifying," Miller said.
