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NEWS RELEASE

(Editor's Note: The University of Dayton's fall semester begins Monday, Aug. 20.)

WHERE DOES THE UNIVERSITY OF DAYTON'S NEW DEAN OF STUDENTS LIVE? RIGHT SMACK IN THE MIDDLE OF STUDENT LIFE

DAYTON, Ohio — A bag of sand sits propped in the corner of Sister Annette Schmeling's front porch on Irving Avenue, an impromptu gift from a student that made the University of Dayton's new vice president for student development feel right at home.

"I was sitting one evening talking to a group of students and they asked what I enjoyed most, what were my favorite things to do. It's beach ministry. That's where I feel closest to God," she says.

"When I came home the next night, one of the students had left a bag of sand on the porch. Beach ministry was giving way to porch ministry. I was here to stay."

This summer, Schmeling moved into UD's close-knit student neighborhood, joining more than two dozen Marianist brothers and priests who live in homes scattered among student residences. For the past 25 years, Schmeling, a member of the Religious of the Sacred Heart congregation, has lived in residence halls as part of student development positions at Creighton University and the University of San Diego, but that didn't prepare her for life here.

She's been surprised by the "level of friendliness, the level of kindness" in her new neighborhood. "If I'm sitting on the porch, inevitably somebody will come by and stop in. If I'm watching the evening news, it's not unusual that someone will come up and knock on the door just to say 'hi.' You're part of this neighborhood."

For decades, that friendliness has been a big part of students' attraction to the University of Dayton, which now owns more than 300 houses, creating the aura of a small town. No other university in the country can match this type of residential experience. "What's your porch like?" may rival "What's your major?" on this campus.

"Overall, it's a very positive experience," says Brother Raymond L. Fitz, S.M., former

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UD president who lives in one of the Marianist community houses in the middle of the south student neighborhood. "You get to meet students in the classroom and in their living situations. They'll come over to the house for a meal or to share in a liturgy – or to just hang around and talk. It can be everything from talking seriously about their vocation in life to borrowing our stepladder."

Fitz, UD's Ferree Professor of Social Justice, and Chris Duncan, chair of the political science department, will team-teach a fall course, "Christianity, Citizenship and Society." They'll invite the class for pizza and a viewing of the movie "The Village" at ArtStreet, just around the block from Fitz's home.

The Rev. Gene Contadino, S.M., director of University Marianist outreach, has lived in the neighborhood bordering Woodland Cemetery for more than two decades. It's not unusual for him to invite students over for dinner or to walk out his front door at midnight to politely ask a group to lower the volume on the music.

"This is an extension of the University. We're doing the same thing in the classroom as we're doing here," he says. "If you live in one of the neighborhoods, you commit yourself to engaging with the students."

From the perch of a comfortable rocking chair, Schmeling catches glimpses of a student's view of college life. She watches spirited cornhole games, even joining in on occasion. She's bemused by the antics of football players horsing around in a child's wading pool. Students join her for nightly walks to Starbucks, where coffee and conversation flow.

She's reaching out to students in their world.

"I'm always conscious of meeting students where they are," she says. "My undergraduate years at Marquette University were a time in my life when I came of age. I started out as a journalism major, got engaged and had the dog, house and Volvo all picked out. I toyed with becoming a professional tennis player. Religious life was a distant third."

As Schmeling discovered her own calling, she found out that life's lessons are often learned outside the syllabus. At UD, she oversees such areas as residence education, substance abuse prevention, student involvement and leadership and counseling and health services.

"It's an exciting time to be engaged in students' lives and help them on the journey of figuring out who they are," Schmeling observes, glancing around the streets of porch-filled student houses. "It doesn't always happen during the confines of the traditional workday. Often, the conversations are at night or out on walks in the morning.

"It's a Norman Rockwell experience of living in this neighborhood. Community is not the right word. It's a much deeper kind of connection."