

5-28-2013

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Recommended Citation

"A Joyful Sendoff" (2013). *News Releases*. 427.
https://ecommons.udayton.edu/news_rls/427

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A Joyful Sendoff

05.28.2013 | Students, Service and Giving, Culture and Society, Catholic, Campus and Community

The scene, relaxed. The mood, joyful — and prayerful.

Friends hugged friends. One finished a bowl of cereal, while another munched on a bag of Skittles. Fourteen University of Dayton students held hands for a group photo on the porch of the Marianist community house on Kiefaber Street just moments before taking off in four vans with donated food and clothing for a summer of service in Salyersville, Ky.

Finally, with family and friends, they gathered in a circle and prayed.

"Let us totally immerse ourselves in this experience; let us give freely of ourselves," prayed Danny Gregus, a senior biochemistry major and co-director. "Open our minds and open our hearts to everything we're about to encounter," added co-director Erica Reist, a junior religious studies and sociology major.

For nearly half a century, students have lived among the people of Salyersville during the summers. It's a tiny, rich-in-spirit slice of Appalachia just 227 miles away from campus but worlds apart in way of life. Welcome to the University of Dayton Summer Appalachia Program.

For nine weeks, the students will run a free day camp and teen center and volunteer at a nursing home. They will live simply and learn more than they ever imagined about themselves.

"Protect our brothers and sisters as they travel to Appalachia," said the Rev. Jim Fitz, S.M., rector and vice president for mission, as he extended a blessing over the students. "Walk by their side and be their companion."

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