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Christmas on Campus Founder Dies

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A University of Dayton icon responsible for Christmas gifts and smiles for tens of thousands of children nationwide died Friday, Jan. 16, in Oakwood at the age of 82.

Ellie Kurtz, the founder of what is believed to be one of the nation's largest single-day, on-campus community service events — Christmas on Campus — served as director of UD's student union from 1964 to 1994.

There will be a viewing for Kurtz at 9:30 a.m. Friday, Jan. 23, at Immaculate Conception Church, 2300 S. Smithville Rd. in Dayton. A Mass of Christian Burial will follow at 11 a.m. In lieu of flowers, donations may be made to Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, 701 E. Columbus Ave., Cincinnati, OH, 45215.

Kurtz started Christmas on Campus in 1964, saying she wanted UD students to celebrate Christmas with their friends before leaving for the holidays.

"One night I was preoccupied with a sense of disappointment that students would be leaving for Christmas vacation and would not be able to celebrate Christmas with their friends and the UD family," Kurtz said. "I imagined what a wonderful Christmas we could have if we could celebrate Christmas before the students went home for the holidays."

The event took on a life of its own. UD students started adopting Dayton area school children, bringing them to the event, escorting them through a winter wonderland and giving them gifts. UD's conservative estimate is that nearly 25,000 Dayton school children have attended Christmas on Campus during the years.

"Ellie was one of a kind," said Lou Talbott, UD director of student involvement and leadership and current Christmas on Campus adviser. "She was selfless, loyal, loved working with and educating students, always ahead of the curve and never missed a beat. She absolutely loved the University of Dayton."

UD English professor Jim Farrelly, who worked with Kurtz on many activities and committees, called Kurtz a great lady, a good friend and an inspiration to all who proudly wear UD's red and blue.

"She brought to life the Marianist spirit in everything she did, and welcoming, inclusivity, and community were her watchwords when she planned activities, engaged her staff in the Kennedy Union, and in her everyday living," Farrelly said.

"She blessed us with the precious gift of Christmas on Campus, enlightened us with first-rate and transformative lectures in the Distinguished Speakers Series, and exposed the entire campus community to the arts with Arts Series events, special programs and writers' workshops. She was an ever-faithful 'hostess with the mostest' for her colleagues and friends and was always the wind beneath our wings. When she approached St. Peter at the pearly gates, I'm sure he said, 'Step aside; Miss Ellie has earned a free pass for her long and dedicated service to the Lord!'

The spirit of Christmas on Campus went nationwide in the 1990s.

UD alums Brian and Renai Lowry, co-presidents of the St. Louis chapter in 1990, started Christmas off Campus as a way to return to their UD roots. Hoping to find an activity to attract families and younger UD graduates, the chapter planned a Mass and gathered gifts for a needy family at a local homeless center.

"We were very fortunate to have attended UD and wanted to continue the tradition of the University in St. Louis," Brian Lowry said. "We thought it would be appropriate to continue serving in a way that was in keeping with the Marianist tradition."

Eighteen years later, 29 UD alumni clubs in New York City, Atlanta, Boston, Chicago and others hold Christmas off Campus events.

"Christmas on Campus shows the heart and soul of our entire University of Dayton community, and Ellie was the heart and soul of Christmas on Campus," UD President Daniel J. Curran said. "Ellie inspired countless UD students and alumni to be
servant leaders in the Marianist tradition."