

## SHOWING NORTHERN IRISH VISITORS AN AMERICAN 'NORMAL'

# Teenagers work toward tolerance, peace



The Enquirer/Amanda Davidson

**Pat Conley**, a volunteer with the Irish Heritage Center, takes a group photo of some of the teenagers volunteering at the center, in Columbia Twp., on Wednesday.

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**COLUMBIA TUSCULUM** - With a Protestant mother and a Catholic father, Ali Duggan grew up in Northern Ireland with a perspective on religious tolerance possessed by few in her embattled homeland.

"I was brought up to see people for what they are and not to judge them on the basis of their religion," said Duggan, a 25-year-old Catholic.

She's one of two counselors who came to Cincinnati

last week with a group of Catholic and Protestant teenagers from Northern Ireland to learn about American culture and to deepen their understanding of how people of different faiths can live together in peace.

The 12 Northern Irish teens from Enniskillen, a small city about 88 miles from Belfast, are living with local families for a month and will be involved in many different community projects and social activities. Their trip is part of the efforts of an international organization called the Ul-

ster Project to eradicate lingering hostility and religious stereotypes in Northern Ireland, which has a long history of violent Catholic-Protestant clashes.

Since 1989, teens from Northern Ireland have been making annual trips to Cincinnati as part of the Cincinnati Ulster Project. Their visit this year coincides with Cincinnati's hosting this week of the annual convention of the Ancient Order of Hibernians.

The 12 Irish teens and 11 lo-

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cal teens spent Wednesday at the recently opened Irish Heritage Center of Greater Cincinnati, the former McKinley School on Eastern Avenue in Columbia Tuscolum. They spent the morning digging weeds out of the center's parking lot, with frequent water breaks from the oppressive heat.

They spent the afternoon working on projects inside the center. One of them involved making and signing Christmas ornaments that will be sold later for the benefit of the center.

"I'm so glad we finally have a place they can have as a base," said Maureen Kennedy, who along with her husband, Kent Covey, led efforts to establish the Irish Heritage Center, a regional focal point for all Irish-related activities. "It's an honor and a privilege to host them."

The visiting teens said that although the tensions be-



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**Teenagers** in the Ulster Project clean up at the Irish Heritage Center in Columbia Township on Wednesday.

tween Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland have eased in recent years, violence and bitterness persist to some degree.

"We're the first generation in Northern Ireland not to grow up in an all-out war," 14-year-old Lorcan said Wednesday, pausing from the sweaty task of removing weeds from the center's parking lot.

To protect the safety of the Northern Irish teens, the Ulster Project does not want the last names of the teens published.

Craig Rolf, a 21-year-old Colerain Township resident, is one of the counselors who prepared the local teens participating in this project.

"I really hope the local teens gain an insight into what people in other coun-

tries go through," said Rolf, a Protestant. "I want them to understand what the Irish kids see as normal versus what we see as normal. Our lifestyle is more free and open in relationships than it is there."

The Irish teens will take what they learn from their Cincinnati experiences and use it to promote greater religious tolerance in Northern Ireland, where some parents still forbid their children from having friends of a different faith.

Jamie Johnston, a 24-year-old Irish Protestant who is serving as a counselor, said he sees positive changes in the attitudes of many youths in Northern Ireland, where he is an elementary school teacher.

"Things have gotten a lot better since I was 14," he said. "My younger brother, who is 17, has a lot of Catholic friends. Hopefully, when this generation grows up, there will be a lot less bigotry."