



# THE PROJECT J.O.Y. STORY



In the fall of 1999 the High School Youth Group of Priest Lake Presbyterian Church, Nashville, TN decided they wanted to do something different for a Christmas service project... something that really mattered. It had to be more than a new doll for Suzie. It had to help the poorest of the poor. People that struggled to have the basics...food, warm clothes, coats and shoes. The group decided on Appalachia.

As we started research on Appalachia one community showed up time and again. Harlan, Kentucky is an old coal mining town that thrived in years past. Mining was the only industry in the area, especially since the mining companies made certain that not other industry came into the area to control salary competition.



Downtown Harlan



But that also meant that when that when coal mining declined there were no other jobs available. This brought about huge unemployment and the population of Harlan County dropped by 50%. Medical issues brought on by work in the mines are made worse by poor nutrition causing high blood pressure, wide spread diabetes and black lung disease. For those who stayed, life in Harlan was bleak.

We contacted Pastor Fred Griffie at Harlan Presbyterian Church. After explaining our project idea he agreed for us to use the church as a distribution site. He would also advertise the distribution date in the local paper. The kids decided their project needed a name. They settled on Project J.O.Y. (*Joyous Offerings of Youth*).

Now the work really began. The teenagers set a goal of 40 food boxes. They did door to door food drives; they did set about raising money to purchase more food. They had a pancake breakfast, car wash and a theme dinner. Warm clothes, shoes and coats were collected, sorted by size and bagged for transport. As our collection process progressed, we were approached by a church member with a proposal. During the year she collected items for gift boxes for children. Things like school supplies, toiletries, mittens & caps. She suggested we join forces and take the gift boxes with us to Harlan and of course, we said yes!



Project J.O.Y. Founders

## MISSION STATEMENT

*Project J.O.Y. is a youth based Appalachian Ministry of Priest Lake Presbyterian Church, Nashville, TN. Project J.O.Y.'s goal is to improve the lives of families and keep children in school in the impoverished town of Harlan, KY by providing school supplies, food boxes, clothes, shoes, blankets and toiletries.*

[www.projectjoytn.org](http://www.projectjoytn.org)

A semi trailer and a driver were donated by a church member's employer. Even though it was tremendous overkill we took it. After all it was free and that definitely fit our budget.



Gaining insight into the people was the next task at hand. Several church members raised in the mountains of Kentucky helped to prepare us. These were prideful people from a tight-knit community. Accepting help would not be easy for them.

The morning of the project was cold, damp and foggy. People had been standing in line in the cold for hours. We opened the doors to a flood of people, and it wasn't long before **we realized how unprepared we were and how little we**

**really knew about poverty!** As the first group came to the truck for food boxes they also asked for blankets. They said they weren't sure if they would have heat that winter. But, blankets weren't something we thought to bring. Many people asked for toilet paper. We quickly learned that toilet paper can't be purchased with food stamps. But, again we didn't think to bring toilet paper, after-all doesn't everybody have toilet paper??

We were amazed at the people waiting in line with no coats. There were barefooted kids and babies in nothing but pajamas. The temperature that day stayed in the mid-30's.



From the little girl burning up with a fever because her grandmother couldn't afford Tylenol to the boy that needed shoes because his family lost everything in a fire. The people we met that day were so needy—almost desperate.

All in all the day was a success. We learned so much more about the people of Harlan and the generational poverty that grips the community. One thing was certain—Project J.O.Y. had to continue!

Over the next several years Project J.O.Y. began to grow. Within two years we had grown to 150 food boxes, blankets, toiletries and almost 300 gift boxes for kids.



By 2003 the Project exploded with growth. Twelve other churches joined the project, and we distributed 300 food boxes and 570 gift boxes.

In 2004 we moved from the church to a local high school gym. With 21 churches participating we expanded to 400 food boxes and 800 gift boxes. Four trucks transported Project J.O.Y. Pond Presbyterian, a tiny church in Dickson, TN, took the lead on collecting blankets, linens and towels. By 2005 they bring 1200 blankets for distribution.

2007 was a year of changes. Bill Higgins, our beloved project coordinator, passed away. In an effort to re-group, we took the time to evaluate Project J.O.Y. We made certain we were still meeting the needs of the people, and reaching the people who needed help the most.

Research into the school system statistics revealed almost 70% of High School students live below the poverty level. Teachers told of students that came to school without even a pencil. The decision was made to replace the gift boxes with school supply bags. Almost 1200 school supply bags for kids Pre-K thru High School were distributed. Pre-K school bags went to the local Head Start Program.

Project J.O.Y. continues to reach over 1500 people with food, clothes, coats, shoes, blankets, linens and school supplies.

