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Students Get a Taste of Global Food Inequities

Nov. 7, 2014

Forming three clusters around the Davidson Room of the Memorial Center, Illinois Wesleyan students at the Oxfam America Hunger Banquet were not grouped by class year, major, athletic team, or fraternity.

Instead, students were given a slip of paper that assigned them the identity of a person they had never met. The 50 participants were proportionally divided based on how many people around the world are from low-, middle-, or high-income backgrounds. The students' adopted persona and socioeconomic status would determine what—and how much—they would eat this evening.

“My name is Ranjani, and I’m a 40-year old woman living in India with my husband and two children. I’m a doctor and my husband is a businessman,” said Molly Willeford ’16, as she introduced her persona for the evening.



Students experienced how others eat at the annual Hunger Banquet.

But Willeford, who represented 20 percent of the world’s population with the highest per capita income, was one of only 10 students seated at a table during the event. Fifteen students were seated at chairs with no tables, while the remaining participants sat on the floor.

“If you are sitting here on the floor, you represent the majority of the world’s population,” said Ilaria Ossella-Durbal, chair and associate professor of economics. “Every day is a struggle to meet your family’s basic needs.”

The 25 students on the floor represented 50 percent of the world’s population that earns about \$3.09 per day. Students were assigned identities of people from Ethiopia, Zimbabwe and Nigeria, and were given a bowl of rice to eat with their hands and a cup of water to drink.

While their peers dined on rice, some of the students representing the more fortunate, high-income earning population said they felt guilty. For them, dinner consisted of salad, fish, broccoli, rice and chocolate cake.

Emily Potosky ’15 said, “I’m surprised that only 20 percent of the world is like how we live.”

“This is what we would eat on a normal, everyday basis,” added Megan Nelson ’16. “But now we’re in this situation and we feel guilty for eating in front of them, and we wouldn’t have given it a second thought on any other day.”

According to Associate Professor of Health and Environmental Studies Laurine Brown, the Oxfam America Hunger Banquet gives participants an opportunity to experience how the world eats.

“We’re here today because about 2.4 billion people live in poverty around the world,” said Brown, an organizer for this year’s event. “A child dies from malnutrition and preventable disease every nine and a half seconds.”

Following dinner, students from various classes presented information on hunger in the U.S. Latino and African-American populations, and on hunger in Bloomington. Brown then discussed the cycle of malnutrition, followed by a presentation by Betty Ritchie-Birrer ’47 and Ivan Birrer, Ph.D. Endowed Professor William Munro about the connections between the Ebola outbreak, child labor, the world cocoa supply and malnutrition.

First held at Illinois Wesleyan in 2003 and sponsored this year by the Development Studies team of the International Studies Department, the Oxfam America Hunger Banquet was designed by the international charity Oxfam America to spread awareness of hunger and poverty and their impact on the world.

Students from Assistant Professor of Nursing Wendy Kookan’s “Nursing and Society” course voted to allocate the \$250 raised from this year’s Oxfam America Hunger Banquet to Midwest Food Bank, which serves over 750 organizations across the Midwest and South. Each month, the food distributed by Midwest Food Bank reaches over 500,000 people.

To close the presentation, University Chaplain Elyse Nelson Winger and students shared ways those assembled could help make a difference by volunteering at the Nov. 10 Clare House Thanksgiving Drive, donating a Sodexo meal toward the purchase of an IWU student-prepared meal at Home Sweet Home Mission on Nov. 16, donating a kid-friendly snack with the Promise Packs Program during the week of Nov. 10, or participating in Harvesting Help: An IWU Interfaith Service Day on Nov. 22.

“I think the main point is just making sure that we’re aware of what is happening around the world, and not stopping at just feeling guilty, but actually realizing that something needs to be done, and that we need to do something about it,” said Hannah Eby ’15.

By Tia Patsavas '16