



Fall 11-23-2014

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Tia Patsavas
Illinois Wesleyan University

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Recommended Citation

Patsavas, Tia, "Students' Volunteer Efforts Harvest Help for the Holidays" (2014). *News and Events*. 2437.

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Students' Volunteer Efforts Harvest Help for the Holidays

Nov. 23, 2014

During this season of thanks, Americans are grateful for bountiful harvests and opportunities to gather with family and friends. Illinois Wesleyan students have come together in recent weeks to harvest in a different way – to help make it possible for others to have plentiful food as well.

Illinois Wesleyan student athletes collected over 5,100 cans of food to be donated to Clare House, a food pantry and soup kitchen in Bloomington. A week later, IWU students and other community volunteers sorted and boxed 16 pallets of food for the nonprofit organization's annual holiday food drive.

Students also regularly volunteer at Home Sweet Home Ministries, a nonprofit serving homeless and low-income people. Through a donate-a-meal program with Sodexo, the University's food service provider, students could donate a meal from their meal plans toward the purchase of ingredients for an Illinois Wesleyan-prepared dinner at Home Sweet Home. Sodexo Executive Chef Mark Tylk and students Kimberly Mensah '16 and Nitesh Kumar '16 prepared dinner for 144 Home Sweet Home residents in November.

Kumar, a biology and chemistry double major, recently started volunteering at Home Sweet Home. According to Kumar, seeing residents start anew has been a rewarding experience. "You know you are making a real difference," said Kumar, referring to residents Home Sweet Home residents who have made fresh starts.

Students had another opportunity to donate their own resources with the Promise Packs program. Through an agreement with Sodexo, students could purchase and donate kid-friendly, non-perishable food items through their meal plans. These donations of granola bars, cereal cups and other snacks were used to supply students at Cedar Ridge Elementary School in Bloomington with backpacks of food for the weekend.

Bridging volunteer service with learning, about 30 students participated in Harvesting Help: An Interfaith Day of Service. Students began the day by re-packaging 1,000 pounds of rice through Illini Fighting Hunger, which aims to make meal-packaging events more frequent, accessible and effective. The packages will be distributed through Illini Fighting Hunger's food pantry system.

Participants also learned about the work of the Western Avenue Community Center's food pantry, and heard presentations about religious and non-religious understandings of food justice from several community leaders. The same day, they volunteered with IWU's Peace Garden, which is dedicated to providing education and fresh produce for the Illinois Wesleyan and Bloomington-Normal communities.

In the busy weeks leading up to Thanksgiving break, students made time for their priorities. Kumar said he plans to volunteer every other week at Home Sweet Home Ministries. "The one thing I have learned is everybody is busy all the time," he said. "You just have to make time for what you want to do."



Aaron Woodstein '15 and Molly Lessen '16 cheer after filling a box with bags of rice that will be distributed through Illini Fighting Hunger. (Photo by Carlos T. Miranda)



Kimberly Mensah '16, Sodexo Executive Chef Mark Tylk, and Nitesh Kumar '16 prepare dinner at Home Sweet Home Ministries.

By Tia Patsavas '16