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Student-inspired program helps feed the hungry

By Eric Reikowski, media relations assistant

Chartwells, the official food service at Oakland University, has formed a local partnership with Forgotten Harvest, a community food rescue organization serving the Detroit metropolitan area. The initiative was spearheaded by OU students Joel Baetens and Stefanie Bair, who met as members of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship on campus.

Baetens conceived the idea while eating a late night meal in Vandenberg Resident Dining Hall. "At the end of the night, I saw them sweeping pizza into the garbage and it broke my heart to see all that food go to waste."

As someone who has experienced the challenges of hunger and homelessness firsthand, Baetens decided to take action. He and Bair put together a proposal and submitted it to several university leaders, including OU president Gary Russi, in an effort to garner widespread support. "We wanted all these individuals to help persuade each other to support our proposal," Baetens said.

The plans began to materialize when Chartwells generously agreed to donate leftover, prepackaged food items such as sandwiches and salads to Forgotten Harvest prior to each semester break. The two organizations also partnered for Project Clean Plate, an initiative encouraging students in Vandenberg Resident Dining Hall to reduce waste by taking only as much food as they could eat.

Weekly waste benchmarks were established to track waste reduction and monitor food savings as a result of increased awareness. The program ran for 14 weeks with weekly results posted next to the dish return so students could see their impact on waste reduction. At the end of the semester, food savings totaled 385 pounds, which Chartwells agreed to donate in dry goods to Forgotten Harvest for the upcoming holiday.

"Not only is this a wonderful opportunity for Chartwells at Oakland University to support the local community, but we have also been able to synergize our efforts with Forgotten Harvest for food waste awareness on campus," explained Andrew Willows, manager of Chartwells at Oakland University. "The partnership is simply the right thing to do, and I look forward to working with Forgotten Harvest next year."

For Thanksgiving, Chartwells donated several cases of prepackaged food items to Forgotten Harvest. It also gave 370 pounds of dairy products and 60 pounds of non-prepared food items such as meats and vegetables at the end of the semester.

The partnership is expected to grow in 2009, as Chartwells has pledged to donate surplus food items from catered events, as well as prepared and prepackaged foods left over on Friday of each week.

Baetens called these efforts "a great first step" and said the ultimate goal is to facilitate food donations on a daily basis.

Bair is also pleased with how the initiative has evolved, noting that it has helped nurture her desire to pursue a career serving the underprivileged. "It has been a good experience for me," she said. "It was amazing to see the progress we've made from summer to the end of this fall."

SUMMARY

Chartwells, Oakland University's food service provider, has partnered with Forgotten Harvest, a food rescue organization serving the Detroit metropolitan area.

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