

Hunger project raises awareness

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Do you know where your next meal will come from?

Often considered to be an issue in emerging or developing countries, food insecurity is a growing problem in our own country. According to Feeding America, 36.2 million Americans, including 12.4 million children, are often unsure where they will receive their next meal.

Inspired by President Obama's call to end child hunger by 2015, the Oregon State University chapter of Students in Free Enterprise (SIFE), an international service organization, launched a "Fighting Hunger in the Homeland" campaign. The result was a 7,000-mile cross country road trip to study innovative solutions to hunger.

Through the aggressive use of blogs, Twitter and the news media, OSU SIFE sought to increase awareness of the issue of food insecurity and some examples of ways people are solving the problem. The students also intend to help implement some of the most innovative ideas in their own community.

I was fortunate to be chosen as one of eight students who participated in this journey. To date, we have visited 16 states and 48 different sites. Our efforts ranged from working in soup kitchens to teaching nutrition education to children. We examined food banks, farming programs and soup kitchens, learning how each provided food assistance or delivered programs to help recipients develop personal and professional skills. At each location, we were privileged to spend time with dedicated individuals determined to find a solution to hunger in their local community.

In our travels, we learned three lessons. First, the vast majority of the hungry are the working poor — people who have homes, have families, but simply cannot make ends meet. From former business owners to single working parents or former foster care teens, it is clear that there is no one face of hunger.

In addition, many agencies expressed their concern with the current food stamp program. While food stamp programs assist one in nine Americans, only about half of the eligible households seek benefits because of lack of awareness, language barriers or stigmas associated with receiving public aid.

Second, we learned there is no shortage of people willing to help. In fact, many of the agencies reported an increase in both volunteer hours and private donations during the past year, despite the economy.

Finally, we were impressed and inspired by the passion and dedication of the individuals who lead, manage and coordinate these amazing programs. Initiatives ranged from classes in shopping and cooking in bulk, financial literacy, organic or container gardening and how to manage a restaurant kitchen. Many spoke highly of local farming programs, which encouraged farmers to "plant a row for the hungry" and donate the harvest to local agencies.

In short, our journey was one of discovery of the highly dedicated individuals throughout this nation committed to solving hunger.

OSU SIFE was pleased to be a small part of this effort.

Andrea White is a senior majoring in business administration at OSU. She is president of OSU's chapter of Students in Free Enterprise which can be reached for more information through their blog at www.hungerinthehomeland.blogspot.com.