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## Schools' project fills empty bowls with food, hope

By Jackie Drake  
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Hunger is not just a problem in distant third-world countries — many children in Pitt County worry where their next meal will come from. But hope is equally prevalent in the community as demonstrated by Greenville's first "Empty Bowl Project" to raise money for a local food bank.

The students of Wellcome Middle and Stokes schools hosted a benefit dinner Wednesday night at Wellcome to raise money for the Greenville branch of the Food Bank of Central and Eastern North Carolina.

For a minimum donation of \$10, participants received a meal of soup, salad, bread and dessert. At each table in the school cafeteria was a selection of student-made ceramic bowls that could be taken home at the end of the night.

"The empty bowl is a reminder of those who go without food every day," said art teacher MaLisa Davies, who initiated and organized the event.

Food for the dinner was donated by local grocery stores and restaurants, and a grant paid for the art supplies for the students' bowls, so all proceeds go to the food bank, Davies said.

"This will be a great benefit to the food bank, but it is also a wonderful opportunity to raise awareness about hunger and share the message with young children so they can understand," food bank development officer Mary Esther Baker said.

More than half of the children in Pitt County public schools are on free or reduced lunches, according to the county profile on the food bank website, and more than 9,000 children younger than 17 are living in poverty.

Hunger is a problem that Davies has seen first hand in the schools.

"In my first year teaching, I saw a boy going through the cafeteria one Friday asking for everyone's sandwiches, and some of the other students were making fun of him," she said. "I found out later he was homeless. That day was just before a long weekend, and he was trying to collect enough food to make it through the next few days."

Davies said if those children knew the boy's situation, they would not have made fun of him. She added that though middle school children are at such a difficult age, they want to help and were happy to make and give up their bowls for the cause.

"This project is about them," Davies said.

More than 300 bowls were made by art students in all grades throughout the schools with funding from the "Bright Ideas" grant from the Edgecombe-Martin Electric Corp.

The dinner Wednesday night was served in plastic tableware because not all the ceramic bowls were safe for food, Davies said.

"I think we had a really good turnout," Wellcome Principal Jeff Theus said. "We had a lot of community support for this event."

Wednesday's dinner was the first of its kind at either school, and staff hope it will become an annual event.

“We’re looking forward to the second annual Empty Bowl Project,” Stokes Principal Jennifer Poplin said.

Davies first heard about the fundraising idea at a teaching conference.

The Empty Bowl effort is a nationwide grassroots movement that started in a high school in North Carolina in 1990 to raise money to fight hunger and raise awareness about the issue.

For more information, visit <http://www.emptybowls.net> and <http://greenville.foodbankenc.org>.

Contact Jackie Drake at [jdrake@reflector.com](mailto:jdrake@reflector.com) or (252) 329-9567.

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