
SANTA BARBARA NEWS-PRESS



Students get lesson on world resource distribution : 'Disparity meal' part of a day-long session in honor of King holiday

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Gillian Hannahs, 15, right, sits on the floor after eating a plate of rice as other students continue to feast on more substantial fare.

MIKE ELIASON/NEWS-PRESS



Students at the 'haves' table at Midland School's 'disparity meal' enjoy a variety of food items for lunch. Meanwhile, above, Estevan Murillo, 18, appears unenthusiastic as he contemplates his simple meal of rice.



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Normally, the students at Midland School might enjoy Mexican food for lunch, fresh sandwiches or salads made from their on-campus organic garden.

On Monday, as part of a day-long educational session in honor of Martin Luther King Jr. Day, some students and faculty at the Figueroa Mountain Road boarding school ate nothing more than a half of a potato and a glass of water for lunch.

Some, depending where they were seated, had a bowl of lentil soup while others only a bowl of rice.

Those lucky to be seated at two of the dining tables ate lavishly on thick steaks, abundant bowls of salad and soup, fresh bread and milk.

The idea behind the so-called "Disparity meal" was to give the approximately 90 high schoolers a hands-on experience illustrating the global distribution of food. Organized by the school's new Common Ground club, the meal included sheets detailing stark facts such as that in 2009, 50.2 million Americans lived in "food insecure" households.

"We want everyone to remember that we're guaranteed three meals a day, which is something an overwhelming number of people don't get," explained Ruby Goldberg, a senior from San Francisco, and member of the organizing group.

A similar exercise had been conducted four years ago, to mixed results, she noted.

"We want people to see how grateful we are through our stomachs," Miss Goldberg said. "We live in a bubble here and we don't always acknowledge the fact that a large amount of the world is not getting the same amenities."

After a morning listening to inspirational readings and songs, as well as a film and discussion by homeless advocate Ken Williams, the hungry students lined up for the noontime meal.

For fairness, the students randomly drew tickets assigning them their meals.

At one end of the dining hall, plates and cups sat on the floor, to signify the greatest disparity.

There sat Gillian Hannahs, a sophomore from Atascadero.

"I was rather taken aback," she admitted. "I was rather shocked. I expected to have at least a table."

With just a large bowl of rice for the group, Miss Hannahs nonetheless felt she had received enough to eat.

"This makes it more personal," she said of understanding the lesson. "I felt I was still better off than a lot of people in the world."

Nearby, junior Gillian Beery-Beesley slunk low in her seat, as she cut a large piece of steak.

"I'm embarrassed," she said. "I have to hide my food. The table next to us only has rice. We have three extra pieces of steak and soup we're not even eating. It's embarrassing."

If she ever decides to become a camp counselor, the Oakland teen said she would certainly do the same lunch for her campers.

"It's a great learning experience," she said.

Mara Gabriel, a senior and member of Common Ground, said the club fully expected their classmates to not be happy if they were at a table with a small meal. Four years ago when the same lunch was held, some students reportedly tried to steal food from other tables.

"It brings out totally different reactions, almost animalistic responses," she said. "I hope this conveys really how privileged they are."

As she spoke, another student -- senior Kaya Lindsay -- left her own rice-laden table and sat down at the steak meal, reaching for a plate.

"I'm really, really hungry," she said.

As she began to take food, the other students protested. After taking a slice of cucumber from the salad bowl, Miss Lindsay left, appearing a bit miffed.

"I didn't eat breakfast," she explained. "I'm leaving a country (table) where my needs weren't satisfied. They (the steak table) treated me badly and kicked me out."

Sophomore Weiler Shafer found the lesson more enlightening.

"I thought it was pretty cool, because we got to experience what somebody less fortunate gets to eat for lunch," the Los Angeles student said. "We're middle class and we are fortunate enough to have a lot of food for meals."

In a nod to the nutritional needs of teenagers, every table was given a large platter of cheese, sliced apples and fresh cookies at the end of the lunch, prompting cheers.

Donna Williams, the school's director of health services, kicked off the holiday session Sunday night with an inspirational talk about the teen years of the Rev. King. She urged the students to "take him off the pedestal and see him as the boy."

"I truly believe the impressions made for teenagers in these small ways help them to look at the world differently," Mrs. Williams said of Monday's experience. "It's about recognizing what they have; that it didn't just come from their hard work, it came from the fact that they were born into this, so they appreciate everything they have."

During lessons such as those Monday, the teens are learning what it means to be a member of their campus community, but also "what it is to be a citizen of this community, which allows them to go on to be a citizen of the world," Mrs. Williams said.

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