

healthy living

Campus Kitchens

Augustana students work to feed those in need

By Benjamin Payne

It was just another Friday lunch in Rock Island at the student dining center for Augustana College roommates Ninna Mendoza and Mary Therese Thomas, until something caught their eye: a bowl filled to the brim with ruby red strawberries.

Ripe for the picking as those strawberries were, the bowl wasn't sitting on the produce cart — it was inching toward the trash on the dirty-dish conveyor belt.

"We were dying inside," says Mendoza, who double-majors in pre-med and Spanish. "Why would you waste all that food?"

Says neuroscience major Thomas, "It broke our hearts."

But it didn't break their resolve.

Determined to find a way to cut down on food waste at Augustana, Mendoza remembered a group that her friend back home in Janesville, Wis., told her about: The Campus Kitchens Project. The Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit partners with colleges across the country to recover unused food from campus cafeterias — of which there's a lot. The average residential college student generates about 142 pounds of food waste per year, according to Recycling Works, a recycling assistance program in Massachusetts.

Campus Kitchens Project chapters then repurpose the recovered food into meals that meet the nutritional needs of the local community.

All of the cooking, packaging and distribution is done by student volunteers. But before any of that can be done, a student representative must establish an official chapter on their campus.

At Augustana, that's where Mendoza and Thomas come in.

"We didn't realize how much it entailed," Mendoza says.

First, there was the rush for the roommates to make a video in just two weeks about why Augie deserved a chapter and one of three \$5,000 grants from Evangelical Lutheran Church in America World Hunger.

Then, there was the online voting period in May. Despite representing the smallest college by enrollment in the competition — with about 2,500 students — Augie finished second, beating Casper College in Wyoming, with about 5,000 students; and the University of Nebraska Omaha, with about 15,000 students.

Finally, after hours of phone calls and hundreds of email threads with the D.C. office, Mendoza and Thomas were cleared last November to open the 58th Campus Kitchens chapter — the only location within 120 miles.

"Augie is a very well-funded, private college," Mendoza says. "You wouldn't expect students to struggle with (hunger), but they do."

An estimated 5 to 10 percent of Augustana students are food-insecure, according to a statistical analysis conducted by Mark Salisbury, Augustana's director of institutional research and assessment. To help these students, Mendoza and Thomas coordinate a three-week food-reuse process.

During the first two weeks of the cycle, dining center staff members gather excess food that had been prepared but never set out at the self-service cafeteria, and store it in a freezer.

In the third week, student volunteers transport the food into refrigerators over



Submitted

Augustana College students Mary Therese Thomas and Janelle Norden prepare food for the Augie chapter of The Campus Kitchens Project, an organization that repurposes recovered food into meals for those in need at the college.

the weekend, and draw up meal plans based on the available ingredients, which also are donated by the Rock Island Hy-Vee.

A few days later, the volunteers reheat and repurpose the food into meals and deliver them to the Brew by the Slough, a bustling student lounge in the library that overlooks the Augustana slough.

"Having the food in populated areas like the Brew helps with confidentiality," says Thomas, who explains that because the Brew is occupied by dozens of people at any given time, food-insecure students can pick up what they need without fear of being branded as poor or needy.

Even with this shield from the stigma, students may be hesitant to take advantage of free meals. That's why Mendoza and Thomas have plans to add dorm delivery, which was suggested by a member of their faculty advisory board.

The two also have plans to expand the Augie chapter's reach off of campus to Quad-Cities food banks. For now, though, Mendoza and Thomas are focused on recruiting more student volunteers at Augustana, and managing their time between school and service. Running a Campus Kitchens chapter, they say, is as time intensive as adding another course to their already full loads.

"If there's something you're passionate about, you're going to make time for it," Mendoza says. "You're going to make it work."

Benjamin Payne makes his Radish debut this month.