UW-Stout banquet gives insight into world hunger (with video)

By Joe Knight
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If Mickey Stott ever operates a restaurant, he won't seat his patrons on the floor and serve them only fried rice.

That was the dining experience shared by Stott and other participants of the Oxfam Hunger Banquet sponsored by the UW-Stout "International Convention and Meeting Planning" class. The event was intended to show the unequal distribution of food throughout the world, said Stott, a senior at the university who helped organize the banquet.

While the banquet offered students experience at planning an event, the real lessons learned pertained to the unequal distribution of food throughout the world.

The $1,800 in proceeds from the event were donated to the Eau Claire Area Hmong Mutual Assistance Association's rice pantry. The association serves Eau Claire, Dunn and Chippewa counties.

The 115 people who attended the dinner paid $5, but they didn't all have the same dining experience. When they walked through the door, participants received income cards stipulating the types of meals they would be served. Those who received higher-income cards had better meals, while those with lower-income cards ate more basic food.

For instance, the 10 percent of meal participants who received high-income cards ate an Asian meal with many food choices, while the 60 percent designated as low income sat on the floor and received a cup of rice.

Students in the class, taught by assistant professor Kristal Gerdes, gave presentations about various world food issues during the dinner. A representative of the Hmong Mutual Assistance Association also spoke.

Stott said he didn't tell banquet attendees beforehand they may wind up seated on the floor eating rice.

"I just told them it was kind of an interactive experience with world hunger, but I think people ... were glad that they came because it opened their eyes to things they hadn't seen before," he said.
This year marked the third Oxfam America banquet, with proceeds going to different causes each year. Last year, money from the meal was donated to build schools in Third World nations. This year, the group decided to help local residents by buying rice, Stott said.

"There's hungry people in Dunn County and Menomonie. We wanted to do what we could in our area before we solved the problems of the world," he said.

Hmong Mutual Assistance Association director Pa Thao said the organization relies heavily on donations to stock its rice pantry.

"This year donations are down, not just for our agency but area-wide," she said, noting the pantry currently has no rice.

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