

HFU Students Serve "Empty Plates" and Full Hearts

by Brittnee Reed '14

Holy Family University's Student Government Association (SGA) not only prides themselves in providing campus unity through their student run activities and events, but they are also constantly on the lookout for outside service opportunities. On Saturday, April 5, 2014, SGA teamed up with the Philadelphia Interfaith Hospitality Network's Northeast branch (NPIHN) to present the community with this year's Empty Plate Dinner, an event created to help raise money for homeless families in the area.

Since 1991, NPIHN has referred to themselves as "the shelter that's more like home," as they have helped over 300 families and 840 individuals make the transition from homelessness to stability. NPIHN puts together numerous events throughout the year in order to produce the finances necessary to continue helping those in need. One event in particular, the Empty Plate Dinner, has always been a community favorite. During this event, attendees are provided an all-you-can-eat meal and refreshments including beer, wine, and soda, while enjoying musical entertainment and family friendly activities. In addition, each guest goes home with a free hand crafted plate designed by local artists and students, signifying the fact that in the city of Philadelphia, over 1,000 children go to bed hungry and are currently experiencing homelessness.

When NPIHN coordinator, Bob Byrne, reached out to SGA in late January, asking if anyone would be willing to volunteer their time to help with the set up and clean-up during April's Empty Plate Dinner, he didn't expect the reaction he received. SGA was beyond excited and wanted to do anything they could to ensure this event would be a huge success. In a matter of minutes, SGA went from volunteer crew members to event co-hosts.

They began by appointing SGA members Taylor Ruso and Ariella Tompakov as student leaders of the event. With this title came huge responsibility: Ruso and Tompakov were responsible for the organization of the event, as well as contacting outside services, and promoting the event to the campus community. Ruso contacted Parkhurst Dining and ordered 250 ceramic plates that the students at Holy Family could decorate and then donate to the event. Their goal was to be able to decorate all 250 plates. In order to reach this goal, they knew they would need a helping hand. The student leaders reached out to Resident Advisor's Orlene Tunacao and Kelly Whelan and asked them if they would be willing to hold a plate decorating program. The RA's agreed and held two programs in Stevenson Lane. In addition, SGA personally ran two programs and Campus Ministry's Buddy Program offered a helping hand. Through these five events, Holy Family was able to donate 175 completely decorated plates to NPIHN. They then gave the remaining 75 plates to NPIHN to decorate.

This year's Empty Plate Dinner was held at St. Dominic Parish's Marian Hall in Northeast Philadelphia on April 5th, 2014. SGA assisted in the set up and clean up as they were originally asked. However, they also served food to guests and provided musical entertainment through their personal speaker system and playlist. Tompakov explained that the best part of the event was walking around and seeing just how many people were carrying a Holy Family University student designed plate: "As I looked around I had that cheese smile on and the giddy butterflies in my belly. Sometimes I even had to stop myself. Watching people make connections with our plates and even remember who made which one was the greatest part. I was so honored to be a part of each and every one of the plates." About 300 people attended the Empty Plate Dinner, bringing in a grand total of over \$6,000, completely surpassing everyone's expectations.

Bob Byrne and the rest of NPIHN were truly blown away by the contributions that Holy Family University's Student Government Association made to the Empty Plate Dinner. SGA hopes to partner with NPIHN again in the near future. "This experience was a blessing for me and I imagine the rest of the committee as

well. Seeing our hard work pay off, and for such a worthy cause, was a feeling like no other," explained Ruso.