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Going Hungry During Lunch Hour

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by Anna Kramer

A Boston law firm celebrates the holiday season with an Oxfam America Hunger Banquet--part of the fall 2007 Fast for a World Harvest--where participants get first-hand experience of the vast differences between those who have plenty to eat and those who have none.

When about 50 employees of Goulston & Storrs gathered for lunch one drizzly Monday in December, they didn't imagine that anyone in the group would go away hungry.

After all, staff in the downtown Boston office of this international law firm are well taken care of. The firm has an in-house chef who cooks meals for employees in their office's first floor dining room—an elegant, softly lit space with windows overlooking Boston Harbor.

But that day Goulston & Storrs's employees arrived to find the dining room transformed. Framed images of people from developing countries lined the walls, while a slideshow about Oxfam America played out silently on a big screen. All of the usual dining tables had been cleared away, except for one.

Some of the firm's staff were already familiar with Oxfam, because Goulston & Storrs has provided

the agency with pro bono legal support for many years. But that day they were about to experience a different kind of connection—the [*Oxfam America Hunger Banquet*](#).

Over the past 30 years the *Oxfam America Hunger Banquet* has become one of Oxfam's tried and true awareness-raising tools. It is based on a simple, but powerful, idea: people come to a banquet and learn about hunger and poverty. Upon arrival, each guest randomly selects a card upon arrival assigning him or her to a different tier of the world's population—high, middle, or low income. Each guest is then served a meal corresponding to the chosen income group.

At Goulston & Storrs, 12 employees took their seats at the single dining table as members of the high-income group. As the banquet began, they were served a gourmet meal of grilled fish and sautéed vegetables.

By contrast, people in the so-called middle-income group were told to help themselves to plain rice and beans from buffet tables in the back of the room. They were directed to sit on folding chairs to eat, their plates balanced in their laps.

Finally, another 20 or so people in the low-income group were told to sit on the floor of the dining room. They were given cups of water to share, and a communal bowl of rice from which to scoop out single servings. Each person received a small amount of rice, but there was not quite enough to go around.

To those seated at the high-income table, this unequal dining was especially disconcerting. Although their food looked and smelled delicious, no one wanted to be the first to dig in. "It was awkward to see others sitting there with so little. We were uncertain if we should even eat," said Dan Hampson, who works on new business development for Goulston & Storrs.

As the guests contemplated these differences, Oxfam's senior vice president of programs John Ambler spoke about the meaning of the *Oxfam America Hunger Banquet*.

"You might think that hunger and poverty are about too many people and too little food. But in fact, this planet produces enough food for everyone," Ambler said. "Instead, hunger is about power. Its roots lie in unequal access to education and resources, and in unjust policies that deny people their human rights."

Still, he added, hope comes from the people who dedicate their time to fighting poverty and injustice, both at Oxfam and at places like Goulston & Storrs.

“Poverty is a problem we can solve if we do something for others, not just for ourselves,” he said. “This is something we should all remember, especially during the holiday season.”

Although Goulston & Storrs employees are for the most part unaccustomed to going hungry at lunch, they didn’t feel disappointed by the experience.

“I’m glad that my colleagues had a chance to learn more about Oxfam America,” said attorney Martha Frahm, who provides pro bono legal assistance to the Oxfam America Advocacy Fund. “Working with Oxfam is my favorite part of my job, because it reflects my own values.”

Dan Hampson agreed. “It speaks to what type of institution Goulston & Storrs is that they work so closely with Oxfam, and that they were willing to do something like this to show us what that work is all about.

“It was strange to see some of my friends and colleagues going without food, while others had plenty,” Hampson added, looking over at the group of people who now stood chatting in the center of the room. “To have such a gulf between us left a huge impression.”

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