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Wilson senior rallies Florence 1 to make significant Harvest Hope donation

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By: [JOHN D. RUSSELL](#) | SCNOW
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A 17-year-old young woman in Florence has Florence School District 1 students, faculty and staff pulling together to help those in need.

Wilson High School IB student Aryana Derakhshan collected more than 7,000 pounds of food by organizing the Peanut Butter and Jelly Drive to benefit Harvest Hope Food Bank.

It's the second-largest donation made to Harvest Hope during the past two years and the largest this year.

McLeod Health has the largest donation during the past two years to its credit while Johnson Controls and Walmart each also have large donations to their credit.

From Feb. 27 to March 2, Derakhshan enlisted the help of elementary school students in Florence 1 to collect as much food as they could to help those in need.

She got the idea to do the food drive after she was chosen as one of 13 students statewide to participate in the Furman University Emerging Public Leaders Program last summer.

The program is offered to a select group of rising high school seniors who want to get involved and make a difference in the world. During the weeklong program, students develop a plan for a student-led project to address a need in their community and then return home to implement the project.

In her research for a project she discovered that 25 percent of children in the Florence area are food insecure and said she knew she had to do something to help.

"Walking around Florence you wouldn't think one out of four kids might not be getting enough to eat," Derakhshan said. "It really impacted me that this existed in my own community but I didn't see it."

With school district support she went to each elementary school and put up posters advertising the Peanut Butter and Jelly Drive and added an incentive -- classes that collected the most canned goods won an ice cream party.



Credit: MORNING NEWS/JOHN D. RUSSELL

Wilson High School student Aryana Derakhshan loads canned food into her car at Timrod Elementary School in Florence, while collecting for the Peanut Butter and Jelly Drive she organized to benefit Harvest Hope Food Bank, Tuesday, March 6, 2012.

The winning school, based on donations per capita of student population, will get a visit from Harvest Hope's mascot, Cool Can Sam, who will share his message about fighting hunger.

Monday and Tuesday, Derakhshan collected the donations and said she wasn't quite sure what turnout to expect but found the schools went above and beyond. Timrod Elementary School alone collected more than 600 items and altogether Derakhshan said she picked up more than 4,000 items.

"I think it's awesome that young people care enough to make an effort to help the needy. A lot of people don't think to help outside of their homes," Henry Timrod Elementary School Principal Carol Schweitz said.

Harvest Hope Food Bank Community Development Coordinator Nicole Echols said it's great to get support collecting food and, "it's to be commended that someone so young is helping those in need."

Derakhshan said that she learned from this experience that if you have an idea people will do whatever they can to support you if they feel it's worth it.

Harvest Hope estimates her donation will feed more than 1,000 people for one day.

"I think it went really well and all the school's really made a contribution," she said. "This affects people we know and everybody should be willing to fight this."

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