

Food waste to food recovery: A budding partnership with Dining Services

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Courtesy of Jamie Renman

Student chapter of the Food Recovery Network (FRN) gives excess dining hall and local restaurant food back to the community.

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Throughout high school, Jaime Renman worked at a local Acme, a supermarket chain in the Delaware Valley and New York City metropolitan areas.

"I worked in produce management," Renman, a sophomore public policy major and president of the university's chapter of Food Recovery Network (FRN), said. "I called my job 'food ninja,' because I sliced fruits and vegetables."

While working at Acme, Renman became acutely aware of the food retail waste crisis. To woo shoppers, supermarkets present large displays of unblemished, fresh produce — causing many retailers to dispose of a mountain of edible food. In supermarkets, presentation is paramount, so fruit deemed "too ripe" is culled.

Last year, Renman participated in the Urban Hunger Trip, a Blue Hen Leadership Program alternative break trip that works with Gather Baltimore, a small non-profit organization in Baltimore. Gather Baltimore seeks to mitigate the pervasiveness of food deserts in the city. This year, Renman served as a Trip Leader for the Urban Hunger Trip.

"The Urban Hunger Trip sparked my interest in furthering food-based service programs," Renman said. "I looked at Food Recovery Network, and it made total sense to me. It just really met my passion."

FRN is the largest student movement aimed to fight waste and feed people. The goal of the student movement is to change “the norm from food waste to food recovery,” according to the movement’s website. The movement boasts a nation-wide network of 226 chapters. As stated on the movement’s website, FRN aims to “fight food waste and hunger by recovering perishable food that would otherwise go to waste from their campuses and communities and donating it to people in need.”

The university’s chapter of FRN is only one-and-a-half years old. In the previous year, FRN mainly recovered from El Diablo and Primo Hoagies. Recently, FRN launched a pilot program, in partnership with University Dining Services, to recover food from Kent Express Lounge, the university’s oldest dining facility.

“Over the winter, we were able to move forward with a partnership with university dining services,” Renman said. “We are just working with Kent Dining Hall. This semester, we are focusing on setting the ground, so we can expand into the greater university dining scene. We want to recover from Caesar Rodney Dining, Russell Residential Dining and other establishments like Einstein’s Bagels.”

FRN is currently donating to a food pantry affiliated with Holy Family Parish, a Catholic church in Newark. For now, FRN is recovering small quantities of food from Kent Express Lounge, but if FRN expands, the Registered Student Organization will need to look into other possibilities, such as the Food Bank of Delaware, according to District Executive Chef Andrew Cole.

“We recover perishable food from Kent Express Lounge, but not the food that is put out to students, so people cannot contaminate the food,” Renman said. “We recover a lot of chicken, rice, vegetables and pasta.”

An internal company, Food Donation Connection (FDC), enables university dining services to transfer leftover food to FRN, according to Cole. FDC is a privately owned American company serving as the liaison between food service companies and local social service agencies. FDC assists food service companies with the development and implementation of programs designed to provide an alternative to discarding surplus food.

“There are rules...we would never donate food we would not feed to our own families, or food that is out of code or has passed the use by date,” Cole said. “We only donate unused portions...never frontline food.”

FDC equips University Dining Services with tracking programs and liability insurance for donated food, Cole said. Upon receiving unused portions from Kent Dining Hall, FRN continues the FDC’s tracking program for donated food; all members of FRN are trained in the tracking program, which includes tasks like taking the temperature of the food and ensuring it is a “hold temperature,” or over 145 degrees fahrenheit, according to Cole.

As the university continues to expand and refine their sustainability goals, Michelle Bennett, the university’s sustainability manager, hopes to expand the efforts of FRN to other on-campus dining halls.

“The state of Delaware has a goal of 60 percent of waste diverted from landfills by 2020... we just wanted to move in that direction.” Bennett said. “We are currently at 30 percent, when you include all waste which includes food, construction and recycling.”

The university’s chapter of FRN situates the educational aspect of service as the foremost way to decrease food waste throughout the university.

“We think it is incredibly important for people to be aware of FRN when choosing what to eat at the dining hall,” Renman said. “When they, or someone they know, place a full plate of food on the conveyer belt, they should think ‘that is a lot of food waste,’ and start a dialogue about how to reduce food waste in future visits to the dining hall.”

FRN responds to the dilemma of many college campuses: the privilege of a meal plan, the endless options at on-campus dining halls and a college town littered with endless options for restaurants. It’s a foodie’s dream — and often drastically differs from the need of the surrounding community, as demonstrated by the plethora of food banks and pantries in Newark and Wilmington.

“Hunger and food waste is not always in the spotlight, but if students can just see besides themselves and the eight stations at Caesar Rodney Dining, it is easy to acknowledge that this problem exists for many people,” Renman said. “Food seems so accessible to everyone, but it really is not. FRN is hoping our energy and enthusiasm is apparent...we want to cause a ripple effect in the student body.”

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