High Schoolers Fast to Aid Haiti

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
04 February 2010

On Feb 3, 2010 I heard from a high-school teacher who organized a large student group to do the Fast for Haiti. She wrote:

I teach 8th and 10th grade English at a small school in Michigan. We study the Holocaust and read The Diary of Anne Frank in 8th grade. Because of the emotional reactions of a group of students two years ago, we formed an organization called Donate Pennies. Our goal is to collect pennies to honor the victims of the Holocaust and to help the refugees from Darfur.

You can look at our website for more information: donatepennies.org

I read about your fast through a forwarded e-mail with the suggestion that our organization conduct a fast for Haiti to raise money. I presented the idea to members of the Donate Pennies Club, and they ran with it. On January 28th, about thirty students from North Muskegon High School, plus some 8th graders, fasted for the day. Our goal was to fast from bedtime on the 27th until breakfast together at school on the 29th. Many made it. We asked for sponsors to pledge our commitment to fast on an hourly basis, and we simply asked for donations. We contributed our own money that we saved on food that day. Our primary objective, other than fundraising for Haiti, was to gain some understanding about what it feels like to be really hungry; thus, we would gain some understanding about what it may feel like to be a refugee or a victim of a disaster. We were successful! We are continuing to collect pledges and money from Haiti Hat Days here at the school. Our elementary school raised almost $600 last week with a hat day. (Students pay $1 to wear a hat in school.) Our school total for Haiti so far is about $1,500. I'm estimating that the Fasting for Haiti day raised about $900, but we aren't finished yet.

Thank you for blogging about your fast for Haiti. You sparked a successful event here in North Muskegon, Michigan.

As for me personally, I fasted for 36 hours and discovered it to be much more difficult than I anticipated. I've limited food intake without much difficulty in the past and have experienced a feeling of vigor from it. This time, however, I did not partake in my morning coffee ritual, and my head was pounding for most of the day. If I were to fast for health, I would prepare for it gradually by eliminating my caffeine habit first. The 36 hours were a bit painful, but that contributed to the value of the lesson.

Again, thank you.

Sarah Knuth

North Muskegon Public Schools

I answered her on February 3rd:

Amazing, Sarah, you and your students are great! It must have been quite a learning experience. Teenagers react more quickly to fasting than older people, and am sure it did their health good and got them to appreciate where food comes from.

I'm curious, did you or the students get any criticism, or were fears expressed over a one day fast?
I really want to put your letter to me out to our readers. It's a very inspiring story. The youth hold the power for our common future.

Congratulations on the money raised.

I look forward to hearing back from you regarding permission to use your letter as is. Who knows, more schools might try it.

Have no doubt, your 36 hour fast did you good, as your body tried to get the caffeine and other foreign matter out through the elimination process. The important thing is to break the fast carefully and maintain careful eating for as long as you can (that's even harder than fasting oftentimes).

Jan

She answered me in the affirmative, and offered more background that I found fascinating:

I was a bit concerned about parent criticism, but the fast was promoted as completely voluntary in order to gain some understanding about hunger. It was not promoted as a fast for health reasons. That can become controversial as you have experienced. Some students told me that their parents would not let them fast because it was not good for their brains. It does become quite difficult to concentrate and think when hungry—another great lesson. Imagine trying to make life and death decisions in the event of a disaster when no food has been consumed for many hours or even days!

Only 8th-12th grade students were invited to fast. I wanted to avoid any controversy with young children. Some elementary students mentioned to their parents that they weren't going to eat on Thursday, and I was asked to send a mass email to staff to clarify that only 8th grade and up were allowed to fast. Those students involved in extra-curricular activities were told that they should not fast, but some did and discovered that they did not feel well during practice. They ate that night rather than waiting until the morning breakfast. It was a great lesson for them too. I asked for parent signatures on certificates for fasting students. It was difficult to keep track of fasting students, and I'm not sure that it was completely necessary because it was voluntary. I just wanted to try to emphasize that students should have parental permission and involvement. I did not hear of any complaints at all about the idea. Everything was positive. I work in an amazing school with an active and supportive community. I'm very proud of our students and feel fortunate to be part of such a giving community.

Thank you for your kind comments. We all hold the power for our common future, and I have great hope for my students as they show that they are conscientious about the world, not just themselves.

Sarah

This teacher's initiative simply tapped the fertile minds of young people who have realized all is not right with the world that the older generation is passing on to them. The power of just trying to do something in a cooperative fashion for the greater good is immense. Let us always remember that Sarah is but one of the countless true leaders we have, mostly unsung and underpaid despite their crucial roles and excellent performances. Fortunately, people such as Sarah and her students have found that there's more to life than making money and being successful consumers.

* * * * *

Prior articles on the Fast for Haiti:

The Fast for Haiti - in the Context of U.S. Anti-Community Culture

We still maintain the Fast's Participation List, and we urge you to join it. To sign up for the fast and be listed among participants on our website and
in emailed lists, contact me via email at jan "at" culturechange.org.

More background on the Fast for Haiti and donating food-money for key aid groups is at

Fast for Haiti to Raise $ for Aid

Participants in Fast for Haiti to Raise $ for Aid / Relief Organizations Recommended

Day 4 of the Fast for Haiti

My 9th Day of the Fast for Haiti

Fasting for Healing and Inner Peace

Listen to Jan Lundberg interviewed on the Fast for Haiti on KBOO-FM, Portland Oregon.