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Guinness World Records on board with NCSSM food drive

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DURHAM -- Guinness World Records could give the North Carolina School of Science and Mathematics a place in history this spring.

On Tuesday afternoon, Guinness e-mailed the Science and Math student life instructor who is organizing a March 20 event to say that it would examine documentation of the attempt to set a record for the world's largest single-day, single-site food drive.

Sue Anne Lewis, a mentor to 34 female students in the school's Reynolds 1E-2E-2D dormitory, saw the message on her work computer.

"I pretty much started screaming in the office," Lewis said, laughing.

She quickly set about notifying her partners of the news, calling school officials, e-mailing student organizers and posting on her Twitter and Facebook accounts.

The vice chancellor for student life at the School of Science and Mathematics said that there is a lot of support for the food drive.

"As a school, we've just become super-energized because our students are so competitive anyway, and then we're known across the state for our community service," Joan Barber said. "And this gives us an opportunity now to mobilize our faculty and staff, our parents, our alums and hopefully community, Durham community, to participate so we can break the record, but most of all so we can be giving to the Food Bank and the state."

All donated food will be distributed by the Food Bank of Central and Eastern North Carolina. The organization estimates that more than 26,000 children in the eight-county area served by its Durham branch are at risk of hunger.

The whole effort began last summer when Lewis and her four student assistants settled on "world records" as the 2009-10 theme for their dorm and then decided to mount an actual world record attempt. Guinness nixed a proposal to assemble the world's largest gathering of nerds but approved the food drive concept. That idea came from Kevin Cromwell, Science and Math's director of student services, and was crafted for Guinness' consumption by school grants writer Brian Faircloth.

The school should launch its food drive Web site next week and will soon start asking local businesses for support. Lewis, 28, has already obtained verbal commitments from two former local college basketball stars to sign items that will be raffled off to people who donate food on March 20.

In its e-mail, Guinness told Lewis that the current record, set Sept. 21, 2008, by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints in collaboration with the Calgary Inter-Faith Food Bank is 509,147 pounds or nearly 254.6 tons. That's significantly higher than the 388,000 pounds Lewis had believed to be in effect.

Two students whom Lewis recruited to publicize the food drive said they were enthused by Guinness' consideration of their efforts but not too intimidated by the high bar they must pass.

"I think that now that they have approved it, it's going to be a lot easier for us, because attaching the Guinness tag to anything we do is going to generate quite a bit more excitement," said Patrick Yang, a senior from Cary.

"That's obviously a lot of food, and we're going to have to do a whole lot of advertising and publicizing to even get close to breaking that," said Josh Chappell, a senior from Goldsboro. "But even if we don't break that threshold, that's not our key goal. Our key goal is to help our community through what we're doing."

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