

Spreading goodwill

A week of understanding

Burlington County College students learn about hunger and homelessness while helping others.

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MOUNT LAUREL — Peanut butter and jelly won't end hunger and homelessness, but students at Burlington County College are hoping the dozens of sandwiches they made this week will feed those in need and create awareness of the growing problems they face.

The college's Bonner AmeriCorps Leaders program is sponsoring a week of activities as part of National Hunger and Homelessness Awareness Week, which is recognized throughout the county the week before Thanksgiving.

"I believe that you should not just believe in change; you should be the change," said Ravi Tejpal of Burlington City, a BCC freshman who volunteers through AmeriCorps. "I'm hoping we can come together and start something here and really make change."

Tejpal and other AmeriCorps volunteers made sandwiches and recruited other students to help during what they called "PB&J Drives" at the college's Mount Laurel and Pemberton Township campuses Tuesday and Wednesday. More will be made today.

All the sandwiches are being donated daily to Family Service, a private nonprofit group in Westampton that offers a variety of social services in South Jersey.

"They were so grateful and it feels good to give back," said Denea Thomas of Lumberton, a BCC junior who is a mentor for a homeless child served by Family Service. The family lives at a motel in the county, Thomas said.

As part of the group's efforts, it sponsored a panel discussion, "Faces of Homelessness," on Tuesday. Several current and former homeless people spoke about their lives and the difficulties they

have encountered.

"It was really eye-opening. One man was homeless in Washington, D.C., on Pennsylvania Avenue," Thomas said. "People don't think about it, but the president's closest neighbors are homeless people."

Freshman Danielle Clemons of Willingboro said the panel discussion helped break down a lot of stereotypes about homelessness.

"I learned not to put a face on homelessness because it could just as easily be you or me," she said. "It's not just lazy or crazy people out there. In this day and age, anyone can wind up homeless."

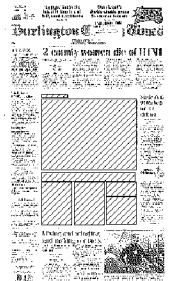
See STUDENTS, Page A6

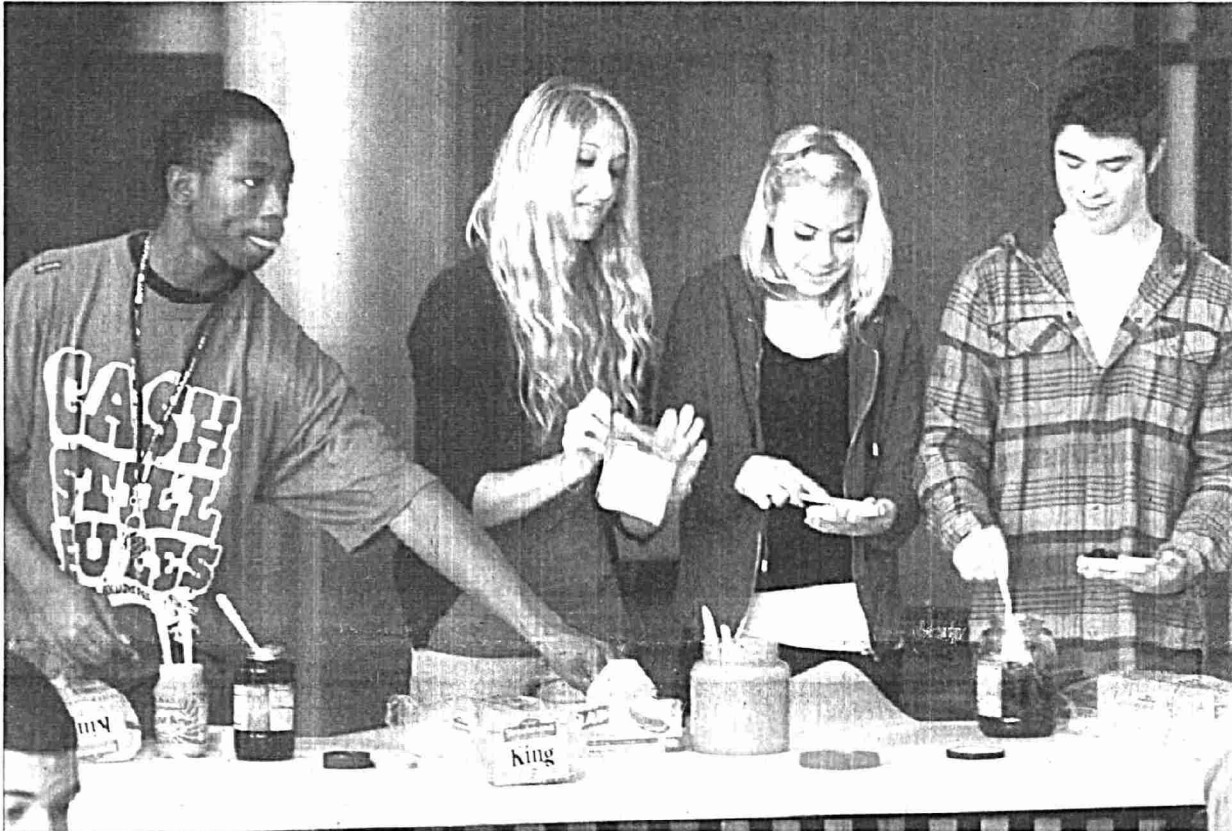
Thomas, Clemons, Tejpal and other students will get to experience life without shelter firsthand Saturday night during the college's first "Sleepout for Homelessness" at the Pemberton campus.

They will rely on sleeping bags and blankets to keep warm, Thomas said. Students also will hold a hunger banquet, at which they will be divided into socioeconomic groups and fed accordingly.

"Some will only get rice, some will get rice and beans, others may get pasta," Thomas said. "It's just another way to experience it and learn what it's really like."

AmeriCorps volunteers earn scholarship money for their assistance in the community and donate their time at several sites in the county. The college chapter of AmeriCorps is funded by a federal grant.





ROSE SHIELDS / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Burlington County College students (from left) Thomas Cordon of Eastampton, Shannon Mayhew of Tabernacle, Katie Reale of Southampton and Ryan Deitrich of Tabernacle make peanut butter and jelly sandwiches Wednesday. The food will be distributed to the homeless by volunteers from the Bonner AmeriCorps Leaders Program.