



*Rosie Osire, a Wellesley College student from Kenya, gleaned with Ag Against Hunger in a field near Salinas (photo by Rusten Hogness)*

## **International Students Glean for Local Food Banks**

by Rusten Hogness

A dust-devil spins across the field of iceberg lettuce. There's a faint whiff of rot. A tractor in an adjoining field revs its engine as farmworkers stoop to grab lettuce head after lettuce head.

"Everyone grab a hairnet and gloves," calls **Abby Taylor-Silva** of Ag Against Hunger, and everyone does.

Then, netted and gloved, knives in hand, students from as far away as Palestine, Malaysia, Kenya, Indonesia, and Viet Nam swarm with nearly 100 Monterey Bay locals into the lettuce field. These are volunteer gleaners. The field has already been harvested. The gleaners' job is to find the remaining heads of iceberg lettuce that are big enough and healthy enough to collect for area food banks.

"I haven't actually harvested before," says **Nathiyananthan Muthusamy**, though he's helped his grandfather on his small vegetable farm in Malaysia. "Watering, digging ... whatever he tells me to do." His grandfather takes the chilies and other vegetables he grows to the local market.

"It's like a street market," says Muthusamy. "People set up tables on the side of the road and sell their produce. They're selling live chickens that they kill on the spot for you."

Muthusamy squats down. Sliding the knife under a lettuce head, he slices the root just above the soil. He peels off a few brown outer leaves and tosses the head into a black plastic crate. When the crate is full, he lugs it back down the furrows and along the access road to the Ag Against Hunger truck. He hoists it up to other volunteers who dump the lettuce into big cardboard bins and hand him back the empty crate. By morning's end, the gleaners will have salvaged more than 8000 pounds of lettuce for local food banks.

Like the other international students, Muthusamy attended the just-completed summer program in Global Trade and Development at the Monterey Institute of International Studies. All studied at United World College (UWC) campuses around the world before attending four year universities in this country. Gleaning fits well with UWC principles.



*Chirag Sabunani, a Northwestern University student from India, tosses a head of iceberg lettuce to another student in the Monterey Institute summer program (photo by Rusten Hogness)*

"It's about international peace, co-operation, and justice," says **Chirag Sabunani** who grew up in a business family in India. "So I was really drawn to this program." Sabunani attended the UWC campus in Trieste, Italy, before attending Northwestern University.

"We all come from really different backgrounds," say Sabunani. "My background was more in like a business outlook family," he explains. "A lot of people come from like 'we should have a world where everyone's equal.'"

Those different backgrounds mean that discussions among the students on topics like "fair trade" in the global marketplace can get heated. "But we all live and learn together," smiles Sabunani.

**Rosie Osire**, a student at Wellesley College, has been in fields before. But those were her father's tea fields in Kenya. She grew up in an area dominated by huge export tea estates. Her father manages one estate, while her mother is a personal secretary in a rival tea company.

"My father is passionate about tea," says Osire, so he also has his own tea farm. "He does the actual work ... the planting and harvesting and taking it to the factory. The whole process." The family helps out with the planting and weeding. "When we were bored at home," she laughs, "he'd make us go." But harvesting is different.

"He's very sensitive about it," she says. "It's called 'three leaves and a bud.' That's how you pluck it." She laughs again. "He didn't really trust us to pluck it professionally."

So, for her, too, gleaning a field is a new experience. But it fits in with the service ethic of these students and gives them hands-on experience related to their studies.

**Carolyn Taylor** coordinates the students' summer program at the Monterey Institute. "We give them a taste of a graduate level program," she explains.

The students attend classes. But Taylor also makes sure they see local agriculture up close. They visit the big commercial vegetable fields of Tanimura & Antle and the research facility at Driscoll's Strawberries And they glean with Ag Against Hunger: organic pears last year, iceberg lettuce this summer.

Carolyn's father grew up on a farm in Michigan. "But I'm the next generation," she laughs, "where I'm very removed from my food. The closest I get is gleaning."

With local food banks reporting a 30% increase in seniors and working families needing food aid this year because of the economic downturn, gleaning can help make a difference.

"It's for a good cause, we're all doing something fairly different, and it's a nice way to come together as a group," smiles Sabunani. "Change the world one lettuce at a time."

*Rusten Hogness collects the stories of gleaners with the Gleaning Stories Project. You can listen to his conversations with these international students on the [www.gleaningstories.org](http://www.gleaningstories.org) website. Visit the "Glens" page and follow the links to "Iceberg Lettuce: August 8."*

## Organized Gleaning with Ag Against Hunger

In addition to donating several million of pounds of excess produce to food banks, the growers' group Ag Against Hunger organizes volunteer gleaning through the harvest season, from late April through the middle of November.

Last year, according to Ananda Jimenez, who coordinates the gleaning, gleaners picked and gathered over 120,000 pounds of fresh produce that went to food banks instead of getting tilled into the soil.

Gleaning generally happens every other Saturday morning. Volunteers gather at 8:30 or 9:00 and the gleaning is done by noon. The next glean will be on \_\_\_\_\_.

For more information, call Ag Against Hunger at 831-755-1480 or visit their website at [www.agagainsthunger.org](http://www.agagainsthunger.org).



