

Hometown Hero

FILLING EMPTY BOWLS

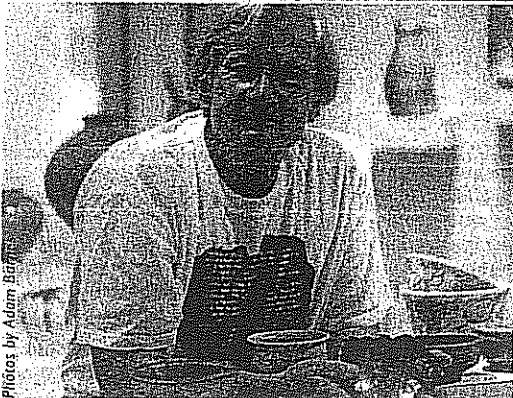
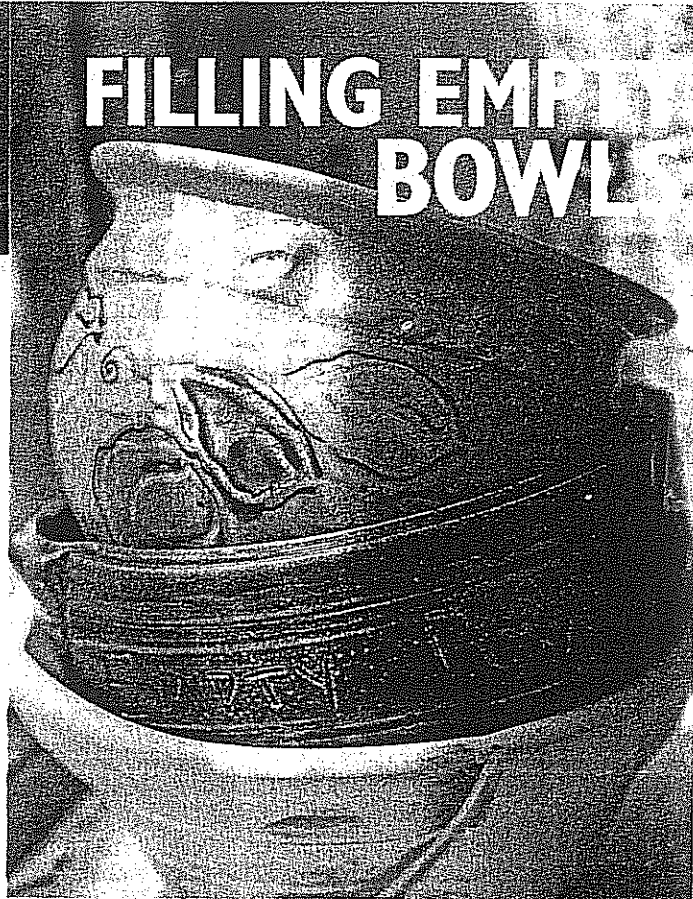
In November 1990, art teacher John Hartom wanted students at Lahser High School in Bloomfield Hills, Mich. (pop. 3,940), to participate in a local food drive, so he came up with a unique idea—students would craft ceramic bowls, invite the faculty to a soup lunch and request donations.

Students loved the idea, and on the day of the lunch, Hartom and his wife, Lisa Blackburn, also an art educator, spoke to the group about hunger. At the end of the meal, they related how students and teachers weren't hungry because they had just eaten, while many in the community still had empty bowls. Hartom then invited the staff to keep the empty ceramic bowls as a reminder of those less fortunate.

"There was a moment of stunned silence, and the whole environment changed," says Hartom, 59. "In that moment, Lisa and I knew something special had happened—and that we had a responsibility to make it happen again."

By the following year, the couple had created an information packet of materials, using that first event as a model for others to emulate, which they presented to art teachers and at pottery shops and conferences during their summer travels throughout New England. They also created Empty Bowls, a non-profit organization, and helped raise more than \$1 million that year for World Food Day, Oct. 16.

Over the next few years, the Empty Bowls idea spread, and Hartom eventually retired from teaching in 1999 to devote more time to the cause.



Photos by Adam Berry

John Hartom, of Burnsville, N.C., created Empty Bowls to help feed the hungry.

Today, schools from elementary to college level, civic organizations and individuals sponsor community Empty Bowls events in almost every state.

Although the Empty Bowls organization provides guidance to those wishing to hold a fundraising event, they are primarily hands off. "We only ask organizers to use the Empty Bowls name and to distribute money locally,"

says Hartom, who now lives in Burnsville, N.C. (pop. 1,623).

Overall, tens of millions of dollars have been raised through Empty Bowls events around the country. "Each sponsoring organization decides where to donate funds," he says, "so all money raised benefits local food banks, soup kitchens and shelters."

Bridget Hauser has spearheaded an annual Empty Bowls fundraiser for 10 years in Dripping Springs, Texas (pop. 1,548). "There's such great community support that

we often have more volunteers than we need," she says. More than 1,000 colorful bowls, made by area potters, were donated for last year's event.

Hauser even contacted Hartom about attending her Texas fundraiser. He politely declined, Hauser says. "John said, 'It's not about me.' He didn't want his presence to detract from local workers."

The soup lunch raised \$25,000 last year for the Dripping Springs Helping Hands food pantry, more than half its annual budget. "These funds let us supplement donations of canned goods with fresh items like eggs, cheese and meat," says Mike Cave, president of Helping Hands. "With this money we're able to offer a variety of groceries at no cost, so we can let families 'shop' for foods they actually want and will eat."

Events in larger cities often include silent auctions or art sales, and can bring in donations totaling up to \$100,000. But wherever an Empty Bowls event is held, the basic concept remains the same: In exchange for a donation—usually between \$10 and \$20—participants get a meal and a bowl to remind them of hunger.

"Empty Bowls events educate people and provide a means to create positive and lasting change in their own communities," Hartom says. "The empty bowl has become a metaphor for the power people feel when they help erase world hunger."

Hauser embraces that powerful feeling. "All I had to do was act," she says. "Now I don't think I'll ever stop." ★

Story by Beverly Barneier of Austin, Texas.

Click on this story at americanprofile.com for a link to Empty Bowls' website.

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