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WATCHING OUR WASTELINE | Muriel Williman

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Submitted Finder's keepers! Jim Mantyh flashes a \$20 bill he found during a solid waste research project, and Fiona McGuire looks on. They are seventh-grade students at St. Thomas More in Chapel Hill.

St. Thomas More has long been an advocate of environmental stewardship, and it does an excellent job recycling almost all of the paper, bottles and cans used in the church facilities.

Church Environmental Stewardship Committee co-chairmen Bob Weickert and Mark Simon, and Carlos Lima, church business manager, met with Waste Reduction Partners (WRP), a group of retired professionals that conducts free assessments to help reduce energy, water, and solid waste, and County Solid Waste Management staff to assess the current solid waste situation at the church and associated school.

The "low-hanging fruit" is being captured in the well placed recycling containers throughout the facility, so it was decided that a waste sort would uncover where the church could turn next to reduce waste. There is nothing like a hands-on learning experience so the school was also included in the waste sort plans. On two separate occasions, bags of garbage were set aside -- from the church after a busy weekend of multiple activities and meals, and from the school, after several workdays.

Members of Waste Reduction Partners, the Environmental Stewardship Committee, Orange County Solid Waste staff and an energetic intern from UNC Chapel Hill snapped on the gloves and sorted through it all, separating recyclable paper from compostable food waste, from bottles, cans and jars to non-recyclable plastics. It may sound gross, but UNC Environmental Justice Intern Chalice Yehling had a different take.

"Rummaging through the trash of St. Thomas More was a riveting and eye-opening experience that galvanizes my future efforts involving proper waste disposal," Yehling said. "I feel much more knowledgeable about sequestering waste properly."

The team found almost zero conventional recyclables in the trash. It also found \$1. Fully 40 percent were disposable plastic plates and utensils of different styles from food-serving functions, which indicates that single dollar may not be the only money STM is throwing away.

"This seemed the best way to identify in detail what was actually in the waste stream," said Bob Weickert, environmental steward. "We now have the information we need that may lead to a change of buying habits for the church. We'll definitely tell members to stop throwing cash in the trash!"

The school performed its waste sort on Thursday, and not to be outdone, one student found a \$20 bill in the first bag! Amidst squeals and yells of "gross!", "this is awesome", and "jackpot!" fourth- and seventh-grade classes also found that 40 percent of what they throw away is uneaten food, and much of it is packaged in single-use zip-lock baggies, also thrown away.

The children made their own recommendations, to tell their parents that they don't need so much food, or to communicate when they don't like a certain food item, and to use durable reusable containers.

Science teacher Aerin Benavides felt it was a very meaningful exercise.

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