“Who is Hungry and Homeless at the University of Montana?” - An Interview with Kat Cowley

By ANNA POTTER, Neighborhood Ambassador

On November 2nd, Kat Cowley gave a powerful and informative presentation titled “Who is Hungry and Homeless at the University of Montana?” as a part of UM’s annual DiverseU conference. In addition to being an ASUM Senator and a Graduate student, Kat has worked for the ASUM Renter Center for the past six months, on a mission to research the population of homeless and hungry students at UM.

Kat’s passion for sociology and research drove her to compile the statistics of hungry and homeless students at UM. In addition, as Kat says, at UM “there’s a pretty obvious gap in resources available to homeless students.” For example, students do not qualify for some low-income housing benefits. Homeless students can currently get help from the Poverello Center and the Missoula Food Bank, but UM offers few or fails to advertise helpful resources to students in need.

Kat’s work with Real College is just the beginning of filling this gap. Part of the ASUM Renter Center’s five-year-plan, affiliation with Real College, a national organization that advocates for student well-being in higher education, is the foundation of Kat’s research. Kat created a survey in partnership with Real College to determine the numbers of student homelessness at UM; it was distributed and culminated in September 2018. Kat notes, “We need to know numbers on campus. If we don’t know numbers, we won’t be able to provide help. We should know how many students are struggling.” The results of the Real College survey, for UM, and nationally, will be available in February 2019.

In the meantime, Kat has been busy spreading the news of her exciting work, including in DiverseU. Her presentation discussed the widespread stereotypes of couch-hopping and Ramen-eating college students; though these stereotypes are frequently used and satirized, Kat astutely pointed out that these stereotypes normalize the traumatic experiences of hunger and homelessness, when, in fact, hunger and homelessness is a reality for many students. Kat cited a Wisconsin Hope Lab study from 2017: “In 24 states, at 74 community colleges, 14% of students were homeless or housing insecure.” Kat also cited testimonials from UM students who responded to an anonymous survey distributed by the Renter Center about their experiences with homelessness or hunger. The reality of student homelessness at UM and nationwide calls for some solutions.

Currently, homeless and hungry students can refer to the following resources:
- Poverello Center 406-728-1809
- Missoula Food Bank 406-549-0543
- ASUM Emergency Short Term Loans
- SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program)
- ASUM Renter Center

Excitingly, Kat and the ASUM Renter Center are working on establishing food pantries around the UM! Projected to begin operation in February 2019, with Kat Cowley as student coordinator, the main food pantry will be at the West Atrium Desk in the University Center. Food pantries will also be established at Missoula College, the Veteran’s Office, and TRiO. The existing SARC food pantry will also be incorporated.

While the UM Food Pantry is being established and UM’s Real College results are being compiled, Kat offers some immediate action steps for students and Missoula community members to help homeless and hungry students:

1. Fight harmful stereotypes.
2. Check on your friends/peers/neighbors, and ask what “fine” means in their world.
3. Donate to or volunteer for the Missoula Food Bank’s Can the Cats Drive!
On Halloween night, Neighborhood Ambassadors were stationed at the corner of Daly Ave. and Gerald Ave. and witnessed the trick or treating of many witches and ghouls! Glow sticks, candy, and non-allergenic toys (in accordance with the Teal Pumpkin Project) provided for a fun, safe, and worry-free evening of spooks!

Two days later, Neighborhood Ambassadors, in partnership with the Sigma Nu fraternity, hosted a fast and glorious pumpkin smash! Pumpkins, donated from University District neighbors, submitted to the wrath of post-Halloween anger and were collected for composting.

Thank you to Kappa Alpha Theta sorority, Sigma Nu fraternity, and Missoula Compost Collection, LLC for their support of Neighborhood Ambassador festivities.

Griz Nation, it’s time to help our neighbors struggling with hunger & once again beat the MSU Bobcats off the field in this year’s Can the Bobcats Food Drive! Donate food & funds to help Missoula Food Bank & Community Center this Thanksgiving season & be part of outraising our rivals in Bozeman. Learn more at canthecats.com.

ASUM Renter Center- Housing Finder
Looking for a place to live next semester? The ASUM Renter Center website (www.umt.edu/asmus/Agencies/RenterCenter) provides resources to help students learn about renting and find rental properties!

Find roommates, apartments, or home listings on the Housing Finder portal. In addition, access our renter guide to find important information for first-time or experienced renters.

Need more information in person? Visit the Renter Center in the ASUM Office Suites, University Center.