Extending a Hand into the Shadows: Michael Brown’s Practicum

By ANNA POTTER, Neighborhood Ambassador

Michael Brown is the visionary at the ASUM Renter Center while he completes his Masters in Social Work at UM. Continuing the legacy of understanding homelessness from Kat Cowley’s work with the #RealCollege Survey, Brown envisions creating a more interconnected resource and referral program for homeless students at the Renter Center.

With a background in working with children in the foster care system, studying the psychology of homelessness, and caring about social justice, Brown has a rich experience to draw on for his practicum. Brown’s research and intellectual development have always been centered around social justice. Brown completed an undergraduate history and African American studies degree at the University of Northern Colorado. Brown is also entrenched in an understanding of the struggles that homeless students and minors face, ranging from having to deal with the costs of living in Missoula and the cost of education, to lacking practical education about being a suitable renter, to having psychological problems resulting from the trauma of losing secure housing. Students that age out of the foster system are especially at risk for homelessness.

The ASUM Renter Center is a unique place to enhance Brown’s project; referred to the Renter Center by the social work department, Kat Werner suggested to interact with students and faculty because of the proximity, quality personnel, and to get paid for the work! Due to the low amount of practicums that offer hourly pay, Brown was specific about his need to support a family of six. Finishing the practicum with the social work program is difficult—Brown admits that it is a challenge to balance family and work balance as a nontraditional student. The Renter Center provides a unique setting for Brown’s work, but also professional support.

Students facing homelessness and housing insecurity come into the Renter Center frequently, but the majority of them either have a preexisting knowledge of how to “navigate the system” or are seeking emergency services. Brown wants to strengthen the services that the Renter Center can offer for students in crisis.

Brown also understands the risk factors and problems that lead to homelessness, but his practicum is more focused on students experiencing homelessness. Brown wants to collect the stories of students who come to ASUM to seek out help. Brown says, “I want to bring this population out of shadows. I’ve named a couple factors of homelessness, but I actually want to know what that means on an anecdotal level.” Stories and experiences from students who have experienced homelessness add so much meaning to devising actions to help other homeless students.

After collecting stories, Brown envisions enhancing the “holistic response” capabilities of the Renter Center for student homelessness. Brown states from experience, “Students don’t have time to be referred to multiple locations.” People who seek assistance statistically avoid following through with referrals if the different agencies are geographically far or require work to arrange. Ideally, the ASUM Renter Center can be the hub of assistance for students who face home insecurity—there, students can easily access counseling, other Missoula housing information, or legal services.

Brown is calling for stories from students with lived experience of homelessness and community partners. He implores, especially to students facing home insecurity, “Don’t be afraid to reach out and step out from the shadows—homelessness is not a character flaw, it is a social reality we all have to deal with. Given this day and age, with the challenges that some people face, some people slip through the cracks.”
The UM Food Pantry Hard at Work

Photos courtesy of Jordan Lyons

A large group of student volunteers met on November 9th to pack up over 50 meals for students in need this Thanksgiving! After receiving a grant from Albertsons to purchase nutritious Thanksgiving fixings, students packed bags to the brim.

The Food Pantry has a busy November - not only are they preparing for Thanksgiving, but also arranging the UM Thanksgiving Feast and calling for donations for Can the Cats. Pledge your support in person or online. The UM Food Pantry is located in the UC Room 119, and open 12 - 5 PM on Tuesdays and 10 AM - 5 PM on Fridays. Donate online here: www.umt.edu/asmus/agencies/food-pantry/donations.php

The Missoula Food Bank is celebrating the 20th anniversary of the Can the Cats Food Drive in 2019! From November 9-23, donate nonperishable food items at a variety of locations around Missoula. Grocery stores, the UM Food Pantry, and the Missoula Food Bank will accept donations during this time, hoping to reach a total of 406,000 pounds of food! Learn more at canthecats.com.

Snow Work Ahead

The snow...yes! The snow is coming! Are you prepared for a Missoula winter?

It is the law to shovel the sidewalks around your home each morning. If the walkway of a residence isn’t clear by 9:00 a.m. the next day following a snow fall, then residents can be ticketed by the City of Missoula!

The ASUM Renter Center annually provides a fleet of snow shovels for students to rent for FREE from November to May. Go to umt.edu/neighborhood and the Free Snow Shovel Rentals Page to fill out a rental form.

Neighborhood Ambassador Update

Neighborhood Ambassadors have been busy this month! Marley applied for and received a grant from the city of Missoula to cover the costs of our traffic circle project last month! Check out our October Newsletter to see the results of our traffic circle maintenance project.

Sunday Sweeper clubs have been bountiful and busy in October and November! Thank you to the hard work of Panhel- lenic, Lambda Phi Eta, Russian Club, the Honors Student Association, and Mortar Board!