Shedding Light:
The Stars Behind UMass Dining

presented by:
Transforming Your World:
Introduction to Community Engagement
(Environmental Design/Public Policy and Administration 195c)

in partnership with:
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UMass Amherst is a small city. There are always lights on, illuminating the way for committed students, busy with work and play. Too often, however, these lights and our busy lives prevent us from acknowledging the stars, the stars fuel us, so that we are able to pursue all of the great endeavors we wish to take on. What stars are these? They are the stars of the UMass Dining Services: the chefs, the bakers, the people who serve us our food, the people who order our food, the people who wash our dishes, etc. These individuals are an essential part of the UMass community and deserve more recognition for their dedication, hard work, and enthusiasm on campus.

In the broader context of the United States, the U.S. Dept of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics indicates that in 2012 food and beverage and related workers involved with customer service, food preparation and cleaning duties in restaurants and cafeterias have average earnings of $8.84 per hour. Approximately half work part time. This amounts to average yearly earnings no higher than $22,000 per year, making them the working poor. Low income can often bring with it stress and insecurity that leads to tough choices when it comes to making family decisions about schools, illness and family time.

Closer to home, in the hierarchy of service workers on the UMass Amherst campus newly employed service workers start out at the dining commons. Once they gain entry into the union they move to residential custodial and then education building custodial jobs. Fifteen years ago there were fewer than fifty service staff with 03 union status, allowing them to have job stability and benefits. Now, in 2015, there are over nine hundred! This project in no way replaces the need for a living wage. Without it workers’ attention is distracted by background concerns that reduce their ability to fully engage and go home with job satisfaction. Nonetheless, acknowledging dining workers’ contribution to students and the UMass campus’ overall well-being plays an important role. Our project is an effort to overcome the context that the
best way to treat people badly is to strip them of their humanity. We attempt to bring that human element back into this work arena.

This past semester the Labor Management Workplace Education Program (L/MWEP) teamed up with Anthropologist and Associate Professor of Regional Planning/ Public Policy and Administration, Dr. Ellen Pader and her class of undergraduate and graduate students to find a way to bridge the gap between dining workers and students. The concern has been that dining workers are often underappreciated and not understood by the student body. Whether they are working behind the scenes in the kitchen, or out in the open cleaning tables, or serving food, there seems to be an invisible boundary between students and dining workers. Our class, formally titled Transforming Your World: Introduction into Community Engagement, has sought ways to break down this boundary and replace it with a free flowing wave of communication and gratitude. Spending the first half of the semester learning about social divisions, the processes of socialization and liberation, cultural hegemony, and observation techniques we were then in a position to blend theory with practice, reflecting what we learned in class in the process of the dining worker interviews. By exploring the techniques of oral historian Studds Terkel and David Isay’s Story Corps we were better able to hear the speaker’s message. Our intention has been to highlight individual dining workers, showcasing their life stories and interests to students passing through the dining commons. By engaging in this project, we found many of our assumptions were incorrect, while the goals we set were exceeded. With 22,000 undergraduate students to feed, UMass Dining Services is the 2nd largest campus dining operation in the country. It has 16,500 students on various meal plans, and serves over 40,000 meals a day. Approximately 1,000 of the 5,000 staff are dining workers, including some work-study students. With that much activity going on it is easy to understand how dining workers’ life stories get sidelined. Our hope is that these pictures and short biographies of individual dining workers will shed light on how dining workers feel about their jobs and what their lives are like outside of work. We hope that this is the start of an ongoing project that will illuminate a path towards an acceptance of, an understanding of, and thanks for these vibrant members of the UMass community.
Growing up, my parents socialized and raised me differently from other children my age. When I came along, my parents did not stop their adult lives, they included me in everything they did. Together, we went to the zoo for concerts and out to restaurants. It wasn’t ‘we’ll get you a babysitter and we are gonna have a nice dinner,’ they always took me with them. Living in Portland Oregon at the time, my mother decided to leave retail for cooking school. She would come home everyday and teach me what she had learned in school, which, for most children, that is not what you learn at that age. Instead of my mom saying, “hey, we are making meatloaf to-night,” it was, “we are going to grill salmon and make orzo pasta salad.” This led to my love and knowledge of food. As a ten-year-old, you normally go, “Ew that’s disgusting, give me mac and cheese.” I began to really appreciate food, to really enjoy it. This appreciation continued throughout my early adult life and eventually developed into my career. I grew to be an educator of food, especially with food safety.

I came to UMass as a Pre-Vet student, which really had nothing to do with what I am doing now. It sounds terrible to say, but I got bored with school, so I decided to get a part-time job. I worked at the Co-Op in Northampton when they first opened. This is where I really got into the food scene. I loved working in a community-based environment. A lot of people who came to the Co-Op had special dietary needs, and I really enjoyed educating the public about foods that would be okay for them to eat. This is the case here at UMass, too. Lots of students and faculty have dietary restrictions, and I make sure they know what they can and cannot eat.

I began working for UMass Amherst Dining two years ago. I am a full time staff member as of last fall and hope to stay here for a long while. I really enjoy working here and I like the people I work with. Working with students is a delight.

My typical workday has changed a lot over the last year. I had a little boy recently, so my day starts pretty early. I normally get myself ready for work and then he starts waking up, so I have to get him and burp him, and then my husband gets up and ready for work. Once my husband is set with him, I run out the door. I’m one of those people for which being on time means being early.
I’m at work fifteen minutes before I start. This way, I have time to get ready, I have time to get my stuff together, and I can move through everything I’m going to have to do for the day. Then, I’m ready to go. That’s something I learned here when I was in college: If you’re on time, you’re late, if you’re early, you’re on time; do your job and be there. And I’m a go-getter. I like to be involved with stuff. I can’t sit still. If I’m done with one job, I go and find another. Working in any kitchen is all about teamwork. It’s not just a “you do this and I’ll do this,” it’s, “Hey, I need a second set of hands, I can’t lift this pot by myself.” That’s something I like about the job though, because I’m a people person.

Much like the layers of the onion I might prepare, I have many layers. I am a food connoisseur, and for me that represents not only my appreciation for food, but also an understanding of the intricate process through which food travels from farm to table. My love for food took root at an early age through the maternal guidance I received, and I am now passing that along to a new generation of food lovers and aspiring chefs. I am encouraging them, not only to learn culinary skills, but also to understand more about the food they eat and serve. I have a passion for food that is firmly placed in the process of food preparation and serving. For me, food service is complex, but not in a way that creates difficulty. The complexity lies in the many steps that must be taken in order for a final food dish to meet my standards of service. I am also a mother, preparing for the immense responsibility of raising a child and hoping that my son has as great an experience growing up as I did. I am a chef with a strong work ethic that pushes me to improve my knowledge, skills, and abilities. I am a driven employee with goals to finish my degree and continue rounding my experiences in the foodservice industry. I am a lover of dogs, music, and gardening. Each of these interests contributes to who I am and that combined package allows me to dedicate myself to creating and serving top-quality food to the students and staff at UMass. I am a team player and happy to be considered one of the stars of the UMass Dining Services.
As a young girl I spent hours in the kitchen learning new culinary techniques and recipes from my mom. In 2004, I came to UMass Amherst as a Pre-Veterinary major, and participated in the marching band. I worked at the Northampton Co-Op, and now I am a chef in Worcester Dining Commons. I love to garden and grow fresh food that I can share with my young son and my husband. For me, food is not just a source of fuel, or simply a way of making a living; it is something to be celebrated. I enjoy serving the UMass community, and look forward to hearing your feedback about the food of the day. I love hearing from you!

Go UMass!

A class project of Transforming Your World: Introduction to Community Engagement
In partnership with the UMass Labor/Management Workplace Education Program, Spring
I’m a head cook here. I supervise all the other people that work with me. I check in to make sure everyone’s on task and following the specific guidelines and safety practices of food handling. That’s what I do, and we have to maintain that. We have to make sure that the food is safe to serve to our customers. It’s important to me that the job is done right every time, and I do whatever I can to make sure it is.

Sometimes that means working a lot; I work 5 days minimum. Could be as much as 7 days. Usually I work 6. It’s okay; it’s a good thing. It’s not a bad thing at all. I work a lot just to stay busy. I like that; I like that drive. Usually on my days off, if it’s winter and snowing, I’m here shoveling for the kids. It’s just like when I was a kid, growing up with seven siblings. Sundays were the days we all did our chores, and if I finished mine early, I would help someone else out who wasn’t done with theirs. We all pitched in to get everything done.

I work a lot. But I enjoy working. I enjoy what I do. I love the staff that I have working with me. There isn’t anything I wouldn’t do for them, and I don’t look at them as below me. I look at them as peers that work alongside of me. I really like interacting and getting a chance to work with everyone, to know everyone.

Growing up, I was too active to sit behind a desk, so I knew that being interactive with people was sort of my forte. I had a lot of friends in school you know, I like that busyness. I’ve always been really outgoing and outspoken, I mean I had seven siblings! You have to like where you live and the people you live with, and, if not, you had to figure out a way to get along. You try to find the best in someone, one thing that someone does good. Of course there are some people I don’t care for, but I still make the best of it.

I studied in a culinary arts program in Northampton. When I first started at UMass twenty-nine years ago as an assistant cook, I was the new girl, starting low. I was like, “Why do people have to talk to each other like this? I don’t know if I’m going to survive this.” There were some people who were really tough to work with. They didn’t treat me the way I think I treat my new staff coming in. I don’t like that. I want people to have a good time here. I want to welcome them. I make an effort to be supportive and to help the staff feel like they can come to me if they have a problem, and I’ll help them work it out. I’m working with a coworker right now to try to bring her to another area in the dining hall because she doesn’t feel welcomed.
right now, so I’m bringing her on my team. She was so thrilled, and that makes me feel good. She felt like she had a purpose, and she was needed.

Our students are a big part of our operation. We fill in a lot of gaps with our students. I always try to say “good morning” and welcome them in because I want them to come back. I don’t look at them as just students. Without them, we can’t do it. I’ve been working on getting students cross-trained at different stations to keep their work fresh and their minds active. I want them to be a part of our group and be proud of what they do. I want to see that spark. When you see it, and it’s like “Yes, nice!” That’s where I get a lot of the enjoyment.

We’ve changed a lot since I first started working at UMass Dining Services. We have a lot more students than we used to. But that took time, and that took everybody’s input and hard work. It took dedication from the top to get kids to UMass, and it takes just as much dedication from us to supply a good experience for the kids and their parents. When I serve students, I talk to them like they’re my kids, that’s just who I am. I think a lot of students are really paying attention to the way that they eat and trying to make better choices. They want to know where their food is coming from, how it’s grown, how it’s getting to and from, how it’s prepared, things like that. So it has changed incredibly. We just cook differently. We’ve advanced. It’s fresher. It’s a better product. It looks nicer. Even myself, I mean I’ve changed the way I eat; otherwise I’m going to go very hungry. It’s wonderful though. There’s a lot to choose from, so I guess if I go hungry I’m not very hungry to begin with. Parents are like, “Whoa, I can’t believe the food you guys get. It’s incredible,” and I hear that a lot, and it does make me feel good that I’m a part of that. I like what I do. Its different every day and you know, I have a friend who’s like “you got to make more money,” “get this other job,” “you should be doing other things.” and I’m like “No, I don’t. I like what I do. I like it here. They’re good to me here.” It’s different every day.

“I enjoy what I do. I love the people that I work with. Every day is something different.”
Meet Hampshire Dining Common’s Star Worker

Head Cook

Diane Wentworth

“I enjoy what I do. I love the people that I work with. Every day is something different.”

Diane Wentworth is a head cook for Hampshire Dining Commons. She cares about her staff and her students, and this becomes clear after spending any amount of time with her. She loves her job and is proud of the healthy, fresh food served here. Diane works hard to ensure that her staff has a positive experience: she remembers how intimidating the job was when she first started out, and she ensures newcomers feel welcome and experience the supportive environment that she promotes. Diane goes above and beyond what is asked of her because she truly cares about the people at this university. Whether Diane is shoveling snow after a storm “for the kids,” picking up extra shifts to make sure the kitchen is running smoothly, or preparing a dynamite dish, she has the wellbeing of the UMass community on her mind.

If you see her today, say hi!

A class project of Transforming Your World: Introduction to Community Engagement in partnership with the UMass Labor/Management Workplace Education Program, Spring 2015
I miss Nepal’s soil. I lived in Nepal all of my life until I left for the United States November of 2011. In Nepal, I enjoy going to my home and laying on the rooftop and enjoying the little things that Nepal had to offer. I grew up in Dhapasi, Nepal, which is a village just north of Kathmandu District. One can imagine the culturally differences between Nepal and America. A country of about 27 million people, Nepal is located between India and China. Nepalese culture contains many differences from western culture, such as the main religion (Hinduism), a religion largely focused on morality and the concepts of Karma and Dharma, and different food and music. Back in Nepal, my first job was to drive Nepal’s Prime Ministers car. During my career as a driver, I drove around 5 former prime ministers’ cars. During the South Asian Federation (SAF) Games I was trained to drive a special Mercedes Benz car. After the game, that car was given to King Birendra. I drove that car every time the King needed me to. The next King who succeeded to the throne did not use the car. As a result, I was transferred to the Ministry of Finance. I usually worked in the airport screening items but sometimes I would work at the office. I worked for 32 years before I decided to retire and move to the United States. I receive pensions from my work at the ministry.

Most of my family lives in the United States, including one of my sons, my daughter, and my wife Sita. My son was the first of my family to move to America. In 2000 he went to study in Los Angeles, California. This son of mine has started a family and now I have grandchildren in the United States and my daughter is also studying to take her residency exam in gynecology. This was the perfect incentive for me to travel halfway across the world to move to the United States as well.

I enjoy America so far. It has a lot of things that Nepal does not, such as more responsive doctors, and insurance for me and my family. Since I only work seven months of the year, I go back to Nepal for the summer. So far I have been back twice. I studied some English till the 10th grade when I was in school, but never used it afterwards since I started working in Nepal. When I first came to America, I did not start working immediately. Since I receive pensions, and it was a new country, I wanted to take time with my family before working again. On my off days I do chores around the house, and look after my granddaughter. I found out about the ESL classes in Westfield Lutheran Office. I am currently taking ESL classes through Umass’s program for the past three years (LMWEP-Labor/Mgmt Workplace Education Program). The classes have been helping me greatly to improve my English. Even my manager noticed! My English was really weak and students couldn’t understand me or I couldn’t understand them. Now, I have improved a lot because of the class and I can understand lot more now.

Currently, I am a dishwasher at Worcester Dining Commons. My job is generally fine. There are only a few problems. I do not like that there are no benefits included with the wages. Sometimes if there is a big snowstorm there are a lot of
people who do not show up. If I were to call in sick and I did not come in for a week, I would be replaced. I do not receive vacation days or insurance through work. This is a big problem not only in my eyes but the majority of the workers. My managers have told me to apply in housing to receive benefits, but I do not want to. I don’t feel comfortable because I have already learned the job here. I like having only 7 months of work. I don’t need to earn a lot of money. If I work in housing, I will have 12 months of work and I won’t be able to go to Nepal. I worked in mail services for a little bit before working with the dining commons, but I had to take lunch/food with me and my wife had to make it and it was a hassle for her. Sometimes during midterms and finals, a lot of students call out and the dining commons become extremely short staffed.

I work 5 days a week, 8 hours a day. I always wake up at 5:30 AM, I pray a little for about 30 minutes. If I have a little time, I try to do some yoga or some exercise, or if the weather is nice, I run outside. If I have work at 6:30 AM, I leave the house before 6, and if I have work at 8, I leave by 7. There are a lot of responsibilities. I usually start my work at 6:30. I put away plates, silverware, cups and glasses. I fill up my milk and juice at each machine and student workers come in at 8 AM. I do not mind doing dish work and operating the machine. I get up 15 minute breaks for every 2 hours, 30 minutes in middle and 15 minutes for the last 2 hours. I have to stand up all day- It’s tiring. It was really hard at the beginning but I am used to it.

If there is students, I have to let them know their job and tell them what to do. I put away all the dishes and set up all the machines around the dining commons. I divide up the work between student workers. I put some of them into the window where they collect dishes, some to wash small bowls and some for silverware. I go to Oak room after and finish in the Hill Side room. I find that the students enjoy working with me because I am caring and comfortable to work around. Other’s like to order them around but I like working along with them. There used to be a lot of student workers here- two years ago. There used to be more than 10 positions per hour and now there is only 4. They cut a lot of staff everywhere- janitorial, line, kitchen, even supervisors. At the beginning of the semester, a lot of them come to work because they all need money but towards the finals week- students call out. It gets hard during those times because I have to take on more responsibility. If one person calls out, everyone else feels the pressure.

I like it here in Massachusetts and at my job. My job allows me to see my family and travel to Nepal as well as have a routine for myself. The money I earn lets me go home to Nepal for the summer. Although there are some hardships in my occupation, overall, I enjoy my work in the dining commons. Nepal will always be my home, but I have found a community here in Amherst, MA.

*Due to language barriers (Mr. Magar was much for comfortable in Nepalese), translations may be revised to make grammatical sense and communication more clear. Thank you Jenny for interviewing and translating.
Worcester Dining Common Star Worker

Saphal Rana Magar

Saphal Rana Magar is a dining worker from Nepal who works at Worcester DC. In Nepal he worked as a driver for heads of state and enjoys returning to Nepal most summers. Here, he likes to run and take care of his family, including his grandchildren.

Stop by and say hello to him if you see him!

A class project of Transforming Your World: Introduction to Community Engagement in partnership with the UMass Labor/Management Workplace Education Program, Spring 2015
As our years progress, we develop and change our perspectives on life based on experiences, and on occasion changing our previously held prejudices. Each project and assignment we undertook in Transforming Your World: Introduction to Community Engagement prepared us for this final project. The result is that each one of us understands our own meaning of service a great deal more now. We came to realize the reactions of others’ influence and modified our behavior as a continuous process throughout our whole life cycle. Interacting with people from different cultural backgrounds gave us the opportunity to expand our horizons, bringing with it changes to our previous relationships with dining workers. Having opened up our ability to really hear their stories from a place of reflection and awareness, the foundation was laid for each of us to promote change as we saw fit. Recognition of dining workers’ cultural backgrounds is a necessary skill in the interview process which was greatly enhanced in each of us by doing this project. We learned we can not make assumptions about someone just by knowing their occupation. Ignorance leads to disrespect and the goal of the class has been the antithesis of that.

After such an illuminating journey, what is left to be done? We can reflect on our intersectionality in relationship to our community. We can ensure that dining workers are portrayed the way they see themselves, by having their agreement in each step of the process. As we have learned by the end of this class an act of kindness can be given to dining workers in the form of gratitude with a simple “Thank you!” This simple, straightforward gesture has the potential to become a habit in our daily exchanges with dining workers. In large, this concept can be universalized to not only dining workers but to anyone and everyone. Especially to those who provide a service to our community, this act of gratitude acknowledges the hard work that individuals put into providing a service.
Objective:
To bridge the gap between students and the community that supports them at umass.

Discussion:
Why is this important?
Perception
Respect
Appreciation/Gratitude
Support
Acknowledgment

Conclusion:
Many assumptions were incorrect
Interpret their story on their terms
Taking action and making change

Methods:
Interview 3 workers
Learn personal stories & individual backgrounds, incentives and attitudes
Highlight 3 individuals who are part of the larger operation

Shedding Light:
The Stars of UMass Dining

40,000 Meals/Day
5 Dining Areas
23,000+ undergrads
1000 Dining Staff

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