Who Tossed You That Lifeline?
The Story of UMass Maintenance and Dining Staff

By Transforming Your World: Introduction to Community Engagement
Fall 2016
Sustainable Community Development/Public Policy and Administration 110

In Partnership with UMass Labor/Management Workplace Education Program
Introduction

The life of a student at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst can be time-consuming, pressure-ridden and incredibly stressful. You, the students, know how that feels and are all too aware that, often, the only breaks from class and studying are eating and sleeping. These moments of rest can feel like life-savers among the intense academic demands. Those days when you feel yourself drowning in the vast sea of expectation and due dates, to sit and have lunch is sometimes the one inflatable float that keeps your sanity above the surface.

However, who tossed you that lifeline? Who is it tossing you little lifelines throughout your day? Who maintains the comfortable study-areas that offer you peace, keeps your building clean when the chaos in your head is anything but, and makes you that lunch that came with a side of ease? It is the unsung heroes of the campus; the workers and maintainers of UMass. You know, the ones you see but don’t see? Well, we, the students of Transforming Your World: Introduction to Community Engagement (with the help of the UMass Labor/Management Workplace Education Program), have had the opportunity to interview some of the people who dedicate their time and efforts to our happiness. We would like to invite you to put on the glasses we offer, so that you, too, may see what an incredible service they are.

Think about your UMass community. Did you picture the dozens of classmates whose names you’ve come to know? What about the other essential parts of your campus community such as the ones who keep your housing beautiful or the person who served you food yesterday? Do you know their names? You’re aware of all of the hardships of your friends, but consider the difficulties of the workers, too. Think about their stories, such as why they’ve chosen UMass, what journeys brought them to where you are, and how they feel about what they do.

The dishwashers, food servers, chefs, and the members of the Housing Services Custodial Staff (who upkeep the public areas, replace the trash cans, and clean the lounges, stairwells, bathrooms and corridors in the residence halls and academic buildings and classrooms) care about your life. They deserve to receive back the care they offer by being recognized, acknowledged and appreciated.

This project aims to initiate a round of applause for the workers as well as an understanding that the workplace involves humanity just as much as a classroom does. Dr. Ellen Pader, Anthropologist and Associate Professor of Regional Planning/Public Policy and Administration, has guided us to abolish the ignorance of students regarding the dining workers and maintainers, and has inspired us to implore others to recognize the invisible boundary and knock it down. You have the power to
reach out to them and offer gratitude and communication, and we encourage you to take initiative.

Throughout our semester, we have been learning about social divisions and how to observe and prevent them. We applied our new knowledge and techniques to these interviews by studying the story-telling talents of Studs Terkel (an American broadcaster who offered oral histories of everyday Americans on the radio). By highlighting individual workers and giving their unique journeys, experiences, and feelings a chance in the spotlight, we aim to reveal that everyone within the campus community has a story worth knowing.

It is time to begin to recognize those who maintain and serve. They are, after all, not so different from you. You feel stress? They feel stress, too. You’ve laughed and cried? They’ve laughed and cried, too. You have a journey that brought you to UMass and a life outside of school? They have those, too. Again, we understand that the life of a college student is hectic and time-consuming, but we hope you begin to notice the moments that make it easier and who is responsible for them. So don’t wait until you feel an inflatable float land next to you when you need it most. Start looking at the faces of the people around you, learning their names, building relationships. That way, the next time you are rescued from a tidal wave of stress, you can look up and say “thank you” to someone who is already your friend.

Website link: https://blogs.umass.edu/tyw/
Smiling Through Adversity

“I love everything about my job, everyone treats me great here. It’s just a great place to work, it’s the best job I’ve ever had…”
-Diane Redman

I have been living with my husband and my grandson in Northampton for ten years. My husband was an auto mechanic. He was there for almost 20 years and my grandson is 9. Now he’s semi-retired, we own apartments and houses that we rent out. I did have a son but he passed away unexpectedly, it will be a year next month, he was in a car accident on December 5 of last year, he was only 34 years old. Now I have custody of my grandson, he’s been with us for 8 years, he’s my little boy now. I have my good days and my bad days, he was my only child and we still don’t know what happened to him. Was it the accident that killed him? We are still waiting on the autopsy. I mean I’m hanging in there and Ian keeps me going, that’s my grandson. I take him go-karting A LOT, he just joined a go-karting team every Sunday. We do that and I spend a lot of time with my family.

I used to work catering a lot and I used to do Bar mitzvahs, until a fire alarm went off and we had to walk down 11 flights of stairs, we got all the little kids out and they were running around, they were great, it was great. I worked at Big Y in Northampton, for 10 years, I worked at E&J Trico, I worked at an answering service and I worked at Cumberland Farms. Because I had children then, and I had to work around his daycare, and now I have my grandson now, so I had to get a job between 9:30 and 5:30 so I can bring him to school and my husband picks him up. I love this job because of the kids. It’s just a great place to work, it’s the best job I’ve ever had, I wish I found it a long time ago. I love everything about my job and everyone treats me great here!
A Family Man of Bhutan

I moved to the U.S. on December 3rd in 2008. I like living here because it is good. In 2011 on October 26th I started working at UMass. Currently, I am working in Goodell. I moved to this country because I like it.

I have five people in my family, a wife, two daughters and two sons. The oldest daughter is twenty-six years old and married. My son is twenty-four years old and working at Yankee Candle. My sixteen-year-old son goes to high school and is now in eleventh grade. My smallest daughter is now seven years old and goes to public school.

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eleventh grade. My smallest daughter is now seven years old and goes to public school.

I speak Nepali and my family speaks English. My sons and daughters speak better than me and my wife. I have no time in my house for English learning. I come to work for a week and I learn here. When I work second shift I leave my home at 1 AM and get back at 2 PM to sleep. I work eight hours a day, five days a week.

On the weekends I stay home, I clean my home sometimes. Sometimes I use the lawn mower and go to the supermarket to buy for my home. I like working at UMass. On March 11th, 1979 I started to police for my country. I did it for 10 years. I did not have to arrest people; I just did traffic duty.

I like everything about UMass and the people are very nice. I come in 2011 and all the students are not bad people. They are nice students and all are good.
Keep Saying Hello

I'm married and have 3 kids and between them there is 11 grandkids. 8 boys and 3 girls. I start at six in the morning and finish at two. I’m up at four to be here. Working on the line, behind the warmers, serving your food.

I work in the kitchen cutting fruit, running in the back bringing the food from the waiter to the warmer. I make sure things are out there, things are hot, stuff is clean. The other days where I supervise I gotta make sure everybody else knows what their job is and what they’re doing and keep everything going.

You do get physically tired. It is a lot of running, and it gets warm downstairs in the kitchen. I mean, they have fans and everything else, but it still doesn’t take a lot of the heat out. Even when it’s cold out, we’re in there going- It’s hot. There are some days that it gets to be really hectic, when you are short people, that makes it a little bit harder because you’re thinking so much, and trying to make sure everything is done.
But, for the most part it's good. We get along really good. You know your morning shift people better, the people you work with. You become your own little group. The morning shift everybody gets along good, works together, helps one another out. It can be fun. You know, you come in, you meet a variety of people, and you meet many different cultures, so it's fun to talk. You can learn different things.

A lot of kids come in here, and they just seem to feel that you’re here to wait on them or pick up after them. Some of the kids don't appreciate anything. But I think there are some that really do, are very appreciative, some will say it.

I’ll have some that will come in and they haven’t seen me for a while. One girl I haven’t seen for a while, she’d come in and she gave me a hug and you know, it’s nice. The kids are glad to be here and see you and talk to you. I try to say hi to people and talk to them.

There’s a few of them that I always say hi to. There was this one kid that came in and he never smiled. So I kept saying hi to him. Finally, he looked at me, he says, "I'm not gonna say hi back to you, so why do you say it?" I say, "because I wanna see a smile on your face, and I want to hear you say hi." And I kept up. Finally, he started saying hi to me when he came in. And then towards the end of the semester, it got to the point where sometimes he looked for me. And would say hi. And he always was dressed in black. Always in black, always looked sad. The next semester he came in, came up to me, and said hi. I had to take a double look. Complete change. He thanked me for being persistent in talking to him. So, you know, I try to talk to a lot of kids, ‘cause this one kid, I changed what he was feeling. So I always say hi, have a good day, or something.

Outside of here, I like to hike and fish, as much as I can go out. I’m a hunter. I like go out hunting. I go in Ware. Actually, I walk out my backdoor. Into the woods. That’s my outlet. I don’t have to think about anything but what I’m doing out there. And it’s just, peaceful.
Now, I’m looking for maybe three more years and I’m done. My husband is gonna retire. I’ll give him three years alone, and then I wanna be home. I’ll be happy when I’m home with my grandkids.
A Journey of Gratefulness

I finished school after 10th grade because I needed to look after my siblings. I was born in India but I’m Tibetan. I grew up in India. My parents still live in India. My mom was working in a factory that makes carpet and my dad drives a taxi. My siblings are in India still. We didn’t have electricity in my village. I came here 14 years ago, in 2002, because I was married to my husband. He came in 1992. He was born in Tibet. It was an arranged marriage. He came to India to meet with my family before 2002.

I was scared but it’s fine after that. We have one daughter. She is nine, she is very young. We live in Amherst and that is where she goes to school. My husband wants her to speak more Hindi, but she primarily speaks English because of school.

I didn't have a job in India. My husband works at Whole Foods, so when I moved to America I started working in Whole Foods with my husband. We worked in different departments. He works in the produce section.
I started working at UMass in 2013. I like it. I worked for Dining Services in Hampshire Dining Common. I was working there for two years and I don’t have benefits, that’s why I moved to the Physical Plant. I’m in a union now; it is good. I worked in the Honors building for two months. I don't like the time schedule there, especially since I have to work on weekends. I liked dining; I like to work with food. You can interact with people in the dining hall. And now I work by myself. Sometimes it’s scary especially once someone told me about ghost. I like to work with someone else, especially at night. Right now I’m working in Lederle tower. I have to pick up the trash, clean the classrooms. On the upside, I’ve lost like eight pounds since I worked in dining.

I left Whole Foods because I thought that in the future if I work a long time at UMass I will receive good benefits and it will be better if my daughter chooses to go to college. My daughter loves to read books, I wish I could do that too. She gets upset if school is cancelled and she doesn’t know what to do. I would like to do all I can to support her. My new schedule is better for my daughter. My husband, he likes to work at morning, so I work night. I like the schedule here and the benefits. My husband is happy for me. I visited my family in India for two months, and then come back. My daughter loved it. It’s a lot easier now to talk to my siblings with Skype. This job helped me learn computer and English. I took morning basic computer class at UMass. I am taking English right now as a class provided for by my job.

When we asked Sangye Chodon if she would change anything about her job she said no. She explained, in many brief ways, that she needs a job to provide for her family and is extremely grateful to have found one at UMass. As we said, her husband is happy for her and she gets to spend time with her daughter. Her family is the most important thing in her life. She has grown through many challenges, but has come out on top of every single one.
Kiki is easy to remember, so everyone call me Kiki. I was born in China and my husband was born same hometown. When I was young everything's very easy because I have very nice family, and so my parents very take care for me, so I just is very happy.

My husband is here so this is why I came to here. We came here maybe 8 years ago. My son’s here, he really enjoy for here. When we came here maybe 8 years ago, he only 5 years.

For the child it's very easy quickly to learn another language, so he's very well. He always help me. Sometimes where English is broken he just joke and say "Mom your English is so broken English, does not make sentence". He helped me a lot. For Chinese family only just get a one kid. So, he's fine. My son, he very enjoy the school and every week he think before, “my classmates, nice with me, so this is why now I be very patient with another classmate too, because the student, moved different
country, also for the immigration. They can't speak English more”. So he can play with
them and help them. So I'm very proud with him. He really enjoy for here.

First when I come to UMass I work dining. My friend, she worked here. After she said
'did you want to come to here?' and I said 'sure', so just worked same dining commons,
Blue Wall. Dining is so hard can get very fast. After three years I just went “oh so
hard to get benefit” so I just applied on computer and just check where can get
benefits, so I moved to the housing. Best thing about the job just I think I can get
benefit.

Now, I work the housing in Southwest. Every day we just clean the lobby and after
with the bathroom, hallways, everything, we just- want to do my best. So I want
everything to look very clean and make the students very comfortable. Before, I work
weekend so I know it’s a lot of work. Sometimes, for the weekend, the students too
much drink. So I work 5 days, Monday to Friday, it's fine.

When I worked in MacKimmie, which is a small building, the students they always
they say you do a very good job, they just very appreciate it. So when the schools
finish it, they gave me a lot of thank you card, every room, so I'm so happy. They just
say 'oh, Kiki, we really appreciate it'. I'm very enjoying it 'cause for my supervisor and
high maintainers, everyone's been nice. I really very appreciated.

I really like the children. So when little I just thinking I wants to be a teacher. If I can
prove my English, maybe I can go to the school again, so I can find a better job than
housing. But for now, everything just is okay for now.

I'm just happy now.
The Power of Appreciation

When I meet with the students over here I feel like they're my kids. I care about them. Every morning when I start, I start my work at seven o’clock in the morning, the kids are sleeping and I try to be quiet and not wake them up. And until eight/eight-thirty I will try to do things that are not noisy to let them sleep. They gave me a note saying “thank you for doing that.” I like working in dorms, especially at the Honors College. I’ve been working here for fourteen months and I don’t have a lot of experience so to say.

Before that I worked for a cleaning company. I worked like for eight months in housing and after that I came to the physical plant. Because housing was part time and I wanted full time and they offered it to me here for a full time position. Last year I applied for a position in housing in CHC, Honors College, and they approved me over there. I like it. First of all the shift is better, it's from 7 a.m. until 3 p.m. and after that I've met the students over there and they are so nice. When my supervisor is saying: “Thank you for doing that.” or “I appreciate you doing that.” I feel like somebody appreciates what I am doing. My favorite part is the people and students because I have two boys.
I was not born here. I am from Moldova. I’ve lived in Massachusetts for eight and a half years and currently I live in Greenfield. The first two years was a hard time for me. I have my parents there and I have a sister and a brother so that’s why I wanted to go back to my country to visit them, but here it’s like my place to live because of my kids. I got married at nineteen. So my husband, he had always asked me to come here to work because he likes to work over here. We were from the same church so I met him over there.

He’s been working over here for eight years and I wasn't sure whether to come or not. Because when I need to make a decision I am bad at that. I can do fast decisions but sometimes I need to take some time. Sometimes I want to move, I don’t know where or what I’d do, something else. I don’t know, maybe I will stay here.

My kids have already lived over here half of their life. They are more accommodated over here. My oldest son he is twenty-one and he is in college. He’s in Holyoke Community College. He is studying for hospitality management and sports management. The other one is in high school right now. He has a soccer game in South Hadley. I always tried to be at my kids’ games, some nights I can’t, but he had a game this week, on Tuesday, and I went to that game. They won so they are now in the playoffs, so it’s why they are playing tonight.

Every Sunday I go to church with my family. After church service I always invite some friends over to my house, or some friends invite my family to their house and we have a good time together.

The culture is different. Everything is different.
Inspiring Change

I had to move here because I was a political prisoner. I am from East Tibet; I grew up in a village on a farm. It’s different than here; we had only 300 people. It’s painful when I see America has opportunities because when I was born I had no opportunities, to go to college or just do anything like that. We don’t have schools and I never had school when I was young.
The fighting in Tibet has gotten worse. Everything in my life changed after that. Fighting with the government puts a lot of people in jail. People die, and people are not getting educated and don’t have opportunities. They’re fighting and they take over all of Asia. They take away little kids. Then the government was deciding to spare my life or to kill me, so I had to run away to try to save my family and friends, because with adults they’re going to punish you too, you know, so I just left. I went to India. I crossed the mountains and went to India. In 1992 I won the lottery to come here.

When I was a prisoner, people told me “when you’re free, please do your best and help us.” I can’t sleep, I have bad dreams and I get sick, I can’t even get up. If I don’t do anything like this [sharing my story], it hurts inside. If I forget something it seems to always come back to me in my dreams. I promised my mom that I’ll try my best to make peace, because when the Chinese came to our country they were teenagers. When I left from my parents I was like 14 or 15, and they never seen me again. I got mad and asked myself, “why?”

Sometimes I work at night or do things with human rights advocates, activists, and
people, and I want other people to watch what I do. I want people to understand the two governments.

Everything is so hard. A lot of people just go too slow, you know, working, but people, they can really make things work. It takes lives, mothers, children, husband, families, protests and such in Tibet [to make change]. I would like to help out more people such as the elderly or even students who need it. I enjoy making an impact on the community. Hopefully one day, since China and Tibet are neighbors, I want to see people free and come together. I want to see business created everywhere else around the world. I would like to see no more fighting. Sometimes it’s hard. Last night 120 Tibetan people had shops burned in India. Now they have no money because they put everything they had into the shops. I hope that the Chinese and the Tibet governments can make peace soon.

They might pardon me for my previous history. I want to go back and help my family and even others. I think the world needs more focus on peace because I think the world would be much safer. We could prevent all these unnecessary wars and conflicts that take the lives of many people. I want others to understand.

I talk to a lot of people. They say that my life is hard but it’s not. Other people have this problem. If you fall down you have to get up. At home in the daytime my parents used to say “don’t work too much,” you know. When I was younger my parents would give me a job, and now I think they should have given me more jobs because when we were young we didn’t have much to do in the house, and when you were done you got to go outside.

I live in Amherst now. I live in a condo. My husband drives me here sometimes and he works in Whole Foods. I drive other times too. I used to work at Franklin Dining Hall for about eight years. Then I worked a little around cleaning houses in Amherst. Now I work here, in maintenance work. We have to clean the offices and take out the trash, there’s cleaning and mopping to do, and we clean bathrooms sometimes and check that everything is okay in the offices and outside in the aisles. Everyone is really touching here, and it’s like community. Students, they come from around the world. You get to volunteer, and hear stories from other places. I like working here; it’s sheltered. Your mind is always tired, but when you come here, it’s accommodating.

You see different people and it's like a home for me.
I was born in Cairo, Egypt where the situation was very bad. Almost four years ago I moved to the United States. I moved here with my husband and my two sons, Yousef and Mikal, who are twelve and fourteen years old. At home, my boys went to an American school, which is very expensive but allowed them to learn English well. In America they can continue their education safely. In Egypt, I finished high school and then shortly after that I got married to my husband, Sameh.

Because I had children, I waited about four years to start college. I finished college with a degree in mass communication. Mass communication in Egypt means that I study media. I can work in TV or I can work for magazines and stuff like that. After that my husband and I had a small office for printing and graphic designing for ten years. I really love printing and designing and I feel like myself when I am doing it.

When I came to the United States, I started to work at Stop & Shop. I thought that it was a really good place and that it had a good manager, however I only got paid $8.00 an hour, and it was a part time job. A part-time job was not a job I wanted. I actually wanted to work full time. During this time, my brother-in-law worked at UMass. He
told me that they needed workers, and I sent in an application. It’s good money, At UMass, I started working in Blue Wall, and

then I changed to work in Harvest Market; I now work in Green Fields, which is very busy. I work about thirty hours a week, nine to three Monday through Friday.

Working in food is not my husband’s nor my career, we only work because we need money. My Husband, Sameh, is now working in design again from home. On the other hand, I like the people I work with and I have made a lot of friends. I also enjoy the students; they are very nice to us. I talk to them a lot and they help me learn English, I talk and talk and talk to them. In Egypt, English is the second language, but we don’t use it much since it is much different than Arabic. I started the English language learning class because my husband saw it on a computer, and he applied for me. He came here and talked with my manager to see if I could go or not. We got the information about the program, and I got the okay from my manager. I have been taking the class now for two semesters, we meet on Mondays and Wednesdays. The classes are free, which is very good. In fact my manager lets me stay clocked in while I go to class. During class, we talk and write a lot, and listen to stories. We then talk about the story and learn some grammar. This helps me a lot for when my manager ask questions because sometimes I don’t understand.

Overall, I would like to go back to doing graphic design and working with my husband. As I said before, I really love printing and designing and I feel like myself when I am doing it.
My name is Stephen Matos. Just this semester, I started working here as a kitchen staff member. My cousin works at Franklin and he’s been here two years. He told me about it—said “come join us”—and I got hired on the spot. I do a lot of things, but generally just prepping related: preparing food, mixing ingredients, cutting things. It’s kind of, I don’t know, they throw you in and you gotta start picking up things right from the get go.

My first day here, I was trying to pick up this big heavy tray full of, I think, chicken wings. It was way heavier than expected, and I dropped it and got juice all over some lady. She was right across from me, and it splashed in her face. I was like “Oh, I am so sorry!” It was chicken juice so I felt terrible, I got it all over her. But that was the most embarrassing thing.

I like to talk to other people and meet new people and learn their other backgrounds. My family’s from Puerto Rico. And also I like the different nationalities, it’s completely different from HCC by like tenfold. Oh yeah, a lot of the students are
workers, too. They always help us throughout the week and stuff. And it’s usually
different students on different days so it’s a
different face, so it’s pretty cool. I’ve clicked with everybody since I’ve started and it
really helps the day go by faster.
I work eight hours, so from 4:30 to 12:30. When it gets very busy, during late night, it
can get hectic trying to keep up with keeping food on the line and making sure it goes
smooth.

Especially in a kitchen setting where you have to prepare a 1,000 things in a couple
hours, you gotta be patient. But that’s about it. It can be hectic sometimes but I
manage it pretty well. I’ve been working since I was 14 so I’m used to it. For a year I
worked at CNS, that’s in a warehouse. It was tough, like if I had a moustache it would
be white literally being in a 20-degree freezer. As a kitchen staff member, it’s pretty
flexible. As long as you’re upfront with the boss, he’s pretty good. He gave me the
weekends off so I can't complain. I don’t really have anything negative to say. We all
work together pretty good.

Criminal justice is a dynamic career path. I'm going back in the spring to Holyoke
Community College. I took this one off because I was transitioning to the job. I played
everything by ear to see how it went, so now I know I can definitely do it. I want to do
a little bit of everything. I’ve got three brothers and two sisters (I’m the youngest);
four or five cops in the family. My brother is 38, and a federal officer for the VA. He
just graduated and became one. I’m very close with him. He was a Springfield police
officer for 12 years and was also in the military. I tried to join but I couldn’t because
of medical reasons. I had a kidney taken out so I couldn’t join.

I have two other jobs as well. I’m a home health aide so if I need the extra hours I can
just call, pick up clients, and then work the extra hours. Both of my parents don’t
work. I’m the only one working in the house so it’s a little tough, but it’s okay. I make
sure to stay in touch with my friends and family daily because if not then I start
missing them a lot and I really want to see how everyone's doing. I make time for
everybody but I somehow manage. I go to the gym; I make sure to get enough sleep:
keep taking care of myself.
THANK YOU!
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Stories
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