

# 'People could not tell that I was homeless'

## STUDENTS AT MCTC EXPERIENCE HOMELESSNESS MORE THAN NINE PERCENT ABOVE NATIONAL AND STATE FINDINGS. MANY CASES OF HOMELESSNESS GO UNREPORTED DUE TO STIGMAS ASSOCIATED WITH THE TERM AND DIFFERENT DEFINITIONS.

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"You fall into it just as easy as you get out," recent MCTC graduate Shannon Beelman said. It is homelessness.

Beelman, who has experienced homelessness, is not alone. According to limited statistics, many other students at MCTC have experienced homelessness, likely more than 10 percent. Students, faculty and staff are working to run what former Director of Resource and Referral, Mary Ann Prado called "an underground railroad of support." They are also working to break through stereotypes and to assist institutions and people better help students experiencing homelessness succeed.

### HOMELESS IN COLLEGE

For two years, from June 2009 to May 2011, Beelman lacked what she called "a stable, solid environment to go home to everyday. [A place] to walk in and feel that security that we're supposed to feel - that's part of the 'American Dream.' You have this place whether it's large or small, where you can shut your door, lock it, and call it yours."

During those two years, she was living in a mobile camper with her two sons. While homeless she also had surgery for breast cancer.

Beelman began her studies at MCTC in August of 2011, two months after finding stable housing. She graduated from MCTC this past spring. She and her daughter then shared an apartment.

Then, Beelman was forced to move out when her daughter, an Afghan war veteran, was recommissioned into active duty. She slept at a friend's home until she was kicked out in September. Beelman then slept in a tent until October. She eventually found an apartment that she described as "miraculously ... available within our budget."

Other students have similar stories.

Brady O'Neel is currently an MCTC student studying math and web development. After his parents kicked him out at 19 he lived in his car, in the breakroom at work, and in shelters. "I was having very stressful and suicidal thoughts. I didn't want to die living on the streets," O'Neel said.

O'Neel did not have a good experience living in the shelter. It was hard to be there early enough to get in because of his job and there were bed bugs. A manager at the McDonald's he worked at found him sleeping in the breakroom one day and took him home and let him sleep there that night.

"People could not tell I was homeless. No one would know if I did not identify or come out," O'Neel said. After a four year search for his birth family, O'Neel, who was adopted, found them through a simple search on a website suggested by a friend. Finding his family led to his current home with his uncle.

Demarco Staggers, a student who once lived on the street and in shelters, now holds a 3.5 gpa. He said, "People don't want to walk around with the label of 'homeless student,' when they're just a student who needs some resources."

Staggers credits MCTC student club Students against Hunger and Homelessness (SAHH) and Prado for supporting him in improving his situation. Staggers, a human services major, said his goal now is to be an example and to serve others.

### THE NUMBERS

Approximately 10 percent of students surveyed at MCTC in the fall of 2010 reported they were homeless. The survey, which was informally conducted on campus, only surveyed 1,000 students. There were approximately 14,500 students enrolled then, suggesting there was 1,400 students experiencing homelessness at MCTC in 2010.

Prado, who was Director of

Resource and Referral from 2007 to 2013, believes the survey undercounted the number of students experiencing homelessness because students may not have realized they met the definition of homelessness. Couch hopping, or being doubled or tripled up with friends or relatives, in addition to sleeping in a shelter or outside, meets the definition of homelessness. Because of stigma, students aware they met definition of homelessness may also have chosen to say they were not in that category.

This semester, approximately a third of students who access the Resource Center at MCTC are homeless or highly mobile. Others don't self-identify as homeless, but instead list a shelter address or general delivery, according to Maya Sullivan, Interim Director of Resource and Referral.

There are no numbers breaking down the reasons people become homeless, but Sullivan says many women become homeless as a result of mental illness. Prado names job loss, mental illness, chemical dependency and medical issues as causes. Both cautioned that everyone's reason is different.

### 'AN UNDERGROUND RAILROAD'

A group at MCTC, Students against Hunger and Homelessness, directly serves homeless students, including running the food depot in the Resource Center (see sidebar). They also raise awareness about students and the issue on campus, and are working to expand their programming.

In addition, the Resource Center provides bus tokens and clothing. The center partners with a few outside agencies that meet with students in the center to help find housing and apply for government benefits. The center helps guide students to other resources (see sidebar) that may be helpful.

Prado was the face of the Resource Center for six years. Even now when she is in a new position on campus,

she still receives phone calls from students and faculty asking for help. "I don't mind if I have the opportunity to give information," she said.

### CONCERNS AND SOLUTIONS

Prado said there's a "disconnect between higher education and the community" in addressing the needs of students experiencing homelessness. She hopes MCTC will partner with an affordable housing developer to build housing for students, in addition to forming partnerships with landlords to set aside units for students.

Prado said that students need to be working at least 20 hours per week to be eligible for SNAP, the program once called food stamps. Also, students need income to be eligible for Section 42, a federal affordable housing program. Offering more work study positions would solve these problems.

Previously, the Resource Center was located in the space by Dunn Bros in the T Building. According to Prado and Chester Neese, President of Students against Hunger and Homelessness, it was a casual place where students could hang out. Prado regrets that the space is more formal now. She also hears from students who can't find the new location.

The new Director of Resource and Referral has not yet been hired. Prado left the position in November 2013. Sullivan, who that new hire will report to, says that the hiring process is progressing, but she is unable to say much about it due to confidentiality.

### CLASS FIGHTS STIGMA

Sullivan said homelessness "... looks a whole lot of different ways. You never know what a student's story is."

Student stories of homelessness were at the center of a student documentary created in the spring semester of 2013. Peter Koeleman's Advanced Visual Journalism class created the film. Koeleman says

the overall goal of the film was to challenge the ordinary stigma surrounding homelessness.

"The film had the effect we wanted, which was to broaden how people look at homelessness," Koeleman said. "They're not all scruffy-looking drunks standing on an on-ramp."

Beelman was one of the students involved in making the documentary and she conducted the interviews for the film. Because she had been homeless she had a window into the lives of the four featured students. Still, she was struck by the stories shared and the different levels of homelessness people have experienced, including not having any shelter at all.

"Every time I've been homeless I've had a camper or a tent, some sort of shelter," she said. "Even though it wasn't home, I knew that I had some place to cook while I had breast cancer."

The film was shown at MCTC to the college community and the public. Minnesota Public Radio and MinnPost both covered homelessness at MCTC afterwards.

"People profile homelessness," Prado said. Instead, she argues that students who've experienced homelessness are "resilient, brave, resourceful, more resourceful than people with money. It takes a sophisticated person to survive."

Of the students featured in the documentary, Koeleman said, "They all saw education as a way of crawling out of this abyss they're in."

"When we were in the tent this term, I'd use my little tablet and I'd go on D2L and pull up all my readings," Beelman said. "You do what you [have] to do and you find your ways. I couldn't imagine being a homeless student 20 or 30 years ago."

Beelman now attends Metropolitan State University, manages her own photography business and has an apartment in Plymouth. She said the documentary and students' stories may open peoples' eyes. She hopes that people of privilege will "...take off their blinders and look around at the other people."

A Degree  
of  
Homelessness

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