From Sprout to Scholar

Kelsey Donnellan’s Journey

By Chrysandra Medley

If you are connected with the Interdisciplinary Studies Program, you have likely heard of Kelsey Donnellan. With her participation in the Interdisciplinary Studies Committee (ISc), The Garden, SUCCESS, and JustFood UMBC, Kelsey’s accomplishments and projects abound. A senior at UMBC, Kelsey will receive her degree this spring in INDS with a focus on Community Health and Nutrition. She’s traveled a long way, however, since where she began.

Kelsey, a native Californian, first learned about UMBC when she came across a talk by President Hrabowski about the presence of minorities and women in the sciences. At the time, she was the only woman in her science lab. She was so moved by his words that she decided to check out UMBC, and ultimately decided it was the university for her. She had always wanted to move to a different state to find new experiences and different perspectives. College seemed to be the ideal time to do this.

Kelsey came to UMBC as a Biological Sciences major with an interest in attending medical school. She wanted to advocate for the children of the farm workers located in her local community. Two hours south of her home in California, 25 percent of the produce that feeds the United States grows.

However, 29 percent of the farm workers can’t afford to eat, relying on soup kitchens and emergency supplies. Most of these farm workers are immigrants or migrant workers, some of whom are undocumented, and they are forced to work in severe conditions for low wages. This was upsetting and frustrating to Kelsey, and she was determined to take action. “The nutritional disparities kept me up at night reading, because I wanted to learn more about the context. The more involved I got, the more I realized the structural and systematic issues related to community health and nutrition fed my internal passion,” Kelsey reflected, “Jill Wrigley [an INDS advisor and instructor] helped me bring that to fruition at our first meeting. I don’t really remember how I ended up in her office, but at the end of our meeting I was signing paperwork to change my major.”

Today, Kelsey is one of the most involved students on campus. She is a McNair Scholar, McNair Fellow, URA Scholar, Truman Scholarship Candidate, and a Shattuck Family Intern, as well as being a student representative for the ISc, INDS CoM, and the Academic Themes Committee. She has also won three grants through Breaking Ground and Prove It! for The Garden and the SUCCESS program, as well as having two funded independent research projects. She has also won three grants through Breaking Ground and Prove It! for The Garden and the SUCCESS program, as well as having two funded independent research projects. Kelsey is also one of the co-founders of The Garden, and is involved in the leadership of JustFood UMBC and the SUCCESS program, a four-year program aimed at teaching skills for independence to students with disabilities. Twice a week, Kelsey teaches a gardening and cooking class. During the Fall 2014 semester, the students grew their own vegetables in The Garden and went on to cook six meals throughout a week.

Just Food UMBC is another one of her passions. She describes the organization as “a group of students that is looking to get a place at the table when UMBC decides on its next dining contract.” They hope to shift the market to more local, organic, humane, and fair-trade companies. This in turn would encourage farmers in Maryland to shift to those practices and ultimately result in economic development for the state.

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