Studenting Season 2 - Residence Life Episode (Transcript)

Guests: Megan Uderian (floor fellow), Cyndi Owen (Local Wellness Advisor) Host: Rosa!

ROSA: Hi, would you both be able to introduce yourself by telling us your name, pronouns and position in residence?

CYNDI: So sure, my name is Cyndi Owen, I'm a social worker and the local wellness adviser for downtown residences. I've been working at McGill for going on three years but this will be my fourth year here and it's my second time doing a podcast. So thank you for having me.

ROSA: Thank you for coming back.

MEGAN: Hello, I'm Megan Uderian. I go by she/her pronouns. It is my second year as a floor fellow in residences. My first year was in New Residence Hall and this year I'm in Douglas Hall, and I'm very lucky to be part of the 'upper' team.

ROSA: Thank you. Would you both be able to tell us a little bit about how you build community in residence, and residence life for students?

MEGAN: So as part of my job, I'm required to plan events in residences, but I get a lot of flexibility in how I choose to plan those events. I try to plan things that refresh the brains of our students so they can get back to studying after that. For example, we did a hike up Mont Royal, and we did a movie night with hot chocolate and popcorn. Just fun things so that they can get to know each other.

CYNDI: It's interesting because building community in residences has always been a bit of a challenge on the professional staff side in residences. Because I found in my first year I did a lot of just recon; what is the community of residents, and what's happening here? So I would just spend a lot of time in common rooms and just be like, please talk to me and tell me what you're like and who you are.

When I started to introduce programming, though, I found I was in competition with my floor fellows where I was doing things the same night as them. But they were getting better turnout, because I am not cool enough to bring people to my events. And so I tried to figure out a way to build community without being in competition, but more to support and help.

So, I began either attending events as the mental health specialist with floor fellows or with our "lifers" who are students who live out (of residences) but bring programming. I used to also do weekly painting events in my office where students would just come and paint.

Finding students that you can hang out with outside of school is very, very important for mental health and doing well in school.

CYNDI: Also to add to that, too, is that this really adds to the idea of being open and not rigid, you know? Because you can find yourself in some connections that are maybe not the best for you. But, you know, it's not to say don't be open to new connections because they could, you know, maybe not be the best for you or maybe not even get your sense of humor.

But this is about being open to connections because sometimes people find that one connection and they're, like, "There, done. My job's over, it's September third and I'm good." When really, it's about continuing on with the collaboration of finding that connection and community.

And also, I will respond to the very difficult problem for those who are in hotels. Keeping the door open is impossible for anyone who's stayed in a hotel, they're literally built for privacy. That's actually year-after-year one of the bigger issues that we see, is that ability to build connection--as Megan knows--having done hotel the year before and now Upper and probably seeing that difference.

ROSA

I would also say for those who are shy, sometimes having something to do is the ultimate tool. It gets you over that awkwardness of your own hands, and having nothing in them. Get a little bit of a job, or volunteer, or have a task oriented role. Then you can actually talk to people more casually there, because you're both doing things that you're engaging in. I agree, clubs are a great place for that. Also, just getting involved in community in general.

Even in the Montreal community in terms of volunteerism, or even in the residence, help your floor fellow even if you can. Then say, "OK, I'm going to try and get everyone to come to this event," as if you are a really brave person, because now you have a job to do. Now it doesn't feel like coming from the pit of your soul hoping someone likes you, it's coming from a job to complete.

ROSA: Yeah, that's a great segue into our next question about how students can get involved and create community outside of residence as first years, and how they could become a part of the broader McGill community or Montreal community. If you guys had any tips or ways that students could do that?

CYNDI: Well, we have to acknowledge the overwhelming factor that is: Montreal is in a French province. So I think there's an initial intimidating factor there for anyone who's tried to really practice their French and order coffee in French and they're like, "Uhh...un petit café, s'il vous plait?" And the other person goes, "What?" And you're like, "Never mind!" I actually saw it the other day, I saw someone try in French and the other person responded with 15 lines of French back, and the person said, "I'm just practicing, I have no idea what you're talking about."

It can be intimidating ordering your coffee, let alone getting involved in the Montreal community. So the first thing to do when you're trying to get involved in order to build connection, is not to push yourself too hard and be like, "I don't know much French, so I'm going to join a French organization to really practice and ALSO build connection." You're doubling anxiety there and really torturing yourself, go easy on yourself. There are so many places to get involved in Montreal, and there're so many neighborhoods and areas that also just need connection and need involvement.

One of my favorite organizations is DESTA, which is the Black youth organization right in Griffin Town. It focuses on Black youth who are 18 to 25, who maybe need help with their CV, or help with tutoring, or even just building connections in that neighborhood. The Montreal downtown area is actually tiny in comparison to a lot of places, but has a plethora of English organizations that are good to get involved in. And then we get the benefit of feeling like we're giving back as well.

MEGAN

comfortable just going out into the community and finding volunteering, they can go to the

be able to relate to them in my own head, as well as understanding the differences and the changes, and that kind of draws out a deeper understanding of the community as a whole.

Also, I love learning about classes I never took and understanding the difficulties. I love learning that physics this year is really hard, that's super interesting for me to learn about, and then also to be able to relay that information back. When a student thinks only they did bad in physics, I say, "Five people really hate that physics exam. No, no, no, it's not just you." So I love learning and having the opportunity to learn about so many different things through them, and also just so many different experiences.

I'm used to working with just Montrealers, I've never worked with so many students from the U.S. in my life. It's just so many, you know, nuances and differences that it's just really a cool privilege to be able to see.

ROSA: I think it's really cool hearing from both of you that you actually learn and gain a lot from working with the students at rez, although they're first year, and they're fresh, and there's a new batch every year. I was wondering if you guys had resources that you could recommend for students if they were in need of help, be that for mental, physical or other reasons.

MEGAN: We have a local wellness adviser sitting with us right here, Cindy, as we call them, "LWAs." I would totally recommend every student to go see their LWA, whether it be residence specific like Cindy, or specific to their own faculty. I think they're great resources for mental health support. For other things such as physical wellness, the gym at McGill has so many resources and so many free options such as the swimming pool, the squash court, the track.

A lot of students come into university and they don't realize the cost of all of their expenses and they're suddenly inundated by, "Oh, I have to pay for rent and I have to pay for food." So there's the Scholarships and Student Aid office that helps students in financial need, for bursaries and loans.

CYNDI: Thank you for that endorsement, Megan, I really appreciate it. And no, I did not bribe her to say that she's just very genuine, and it means that I'm going to say this: I will have to acknowledge something, and I think Megan can also confirm this just because of the field she's in as well, which is that Quebec right now is in a difficult spot when it comes to physical and mental health.

COVID has really put a strain on the health system that was already really fragile. We are seeing it today. I can personally say that it's really challenging for me to watch our system become much more privatized today than it was even three years ago, and so I think students are feeling this impact. When I started this job, I noticed a lot of frustration with resources and services, which I understood because Quebec has a unique way of working.

However, I've seen it, and then I saw it kind of dissipate a little bit as people understood how to navigate it and people understood how to utilize it best. However, I'm seeing it come back, especially as the needs have grown exponentially since COVID has begun. The impact on mental

people leaving a little bit surprised, you know, they come in a little bit nervous or a little bit unsure, and they always leave really stoked. So I have to kind of emphasize those.

ROSA: I have to say these are a wide range of resources, and I personally have attended a workshop held by Cyndi and I've learned a lot. It really made me awaken from my view of the Quebec health care system and understand why things were happening the way they were.

I was wondering, with the focus on wellbeing, how inclusivity, diversity or safer spaces for students are being made in residence, or how you see students kind of working toward that within their way of building community in residence?

CYNDI: That's a really good question. I think the first thing we have to acknowledge is that building a community right now, although better than last year, is difficult for anyone. Last year was really difficult due to COVID, a lot of restrictions and much less students.

You know, sometimes it is a numbers game. So when you have literally a third of what you're used to having, you just have less opportunity and you don't even know how many people are on your floor. It's quieter, it doesn't feel as safe to just be like, "What's up?" It's not the same when passing in the elevator. Also, a lot of anxiety, just from eco anxiety or environmental anxiety. So, very difficult, but a lot better this year.

In terms of equity and inclusion, though, it's difficult because a lot of the things that we have to first acknowledge are invisible disabilities, things that are not seen immediately due to mental health and due to different capacities. So in terms of inclusion around that, I think making equal come out, there's no one else, and then other people would join me and I didn't even have to say anythi

one of the best ways to talk and study at the same time and hang out.

ROSA: Yeah, I think also Cindy mentioned, it was difficult for students living in hotel residences to have the door open. I was also actually at Carrefour Sherbrooke and I think like you, I sat a lot in general areas waiting for someone to come, or like pass by just to strike up a conversation and get to meet people. Kind of just being proactive, putting myself out there. I was wondering if you both knew if students that were not in residence were able to kind of partake in the events that are being held, or whether first years that aren't living in residence are able to become a part of that first year community that is being built around residences.

CYNDI: I mean, technically, no, right? So technically right now, they just allowed it so that you can enter a residence as a guest, one single guest, and another resident student brings you in. In terms of attending any kind of programming or events, the answer is a definite no. So it becomes a real difficulty. In fact, the wellness advisors and myself, we're talking about this gap in other first year students in terms of, you know, there's usually 3,600 students in residence that myself and the other wellness advisor try to support and help, which is a huge amount. But then there's still another, you know, 2,000 to 3,000 first year students.

And don't get me wrong, some of them are in Montreal and have lived in Montreal and live with their parents, but they still want to be a part of a community. They may have had friends their whole lives, and now there at a university where their friends 0000091t3p6(t)7(y)g Sre athillo4c /F

make friends immediately, and it's going to be insane, we're going to have a rivalry with the

not the truth at all. In fact, it actually is much more difficult. So, I think although residence can be really helpful and can build really good friendships, it doesn't always automatically mean that you're now just in the zeitgeist and you're just a part of it, and it was just so easy. It's difficult everywhere.

MEGAN: I don't think I have anything to add, Cindy is very wise.

laughter

ROSA: To end off the episode. I was wondering if you both had a community that you would really want to kind of get out there for students in res to become a part of that could help them join a community, or just for their wellbeing.

CYNDI: So I'm going to highlight MORSL, which is the McGill Office of Religious and Spiritual Life, not because there's a particular reason except about how vital I think they are to the McGill community. People think that they need to be particularly religious to join this community or go to their events, it is not true whatsoever! MORSL has put on some of my favorite events in residences, one in particular which is giving out free plants, which I can admittedly say I have gone to and stolen those plans and acted as though I was a student, even though they knew I wasn't. That is just something that brings wellness, and just kind of a feeling of connection. And it's just such a good, strong community group here at McGill and one that I think is so vital and really needs to be utilized more, honestly.

They have yoga, they have meditation. You do not need to be a part of a religious group, but if you are also, it's really an important place to go to to have that cultural wellness and have that sense of connection, especially when unfortunately sometimes major events happen and we can feel quite isolated. As I mentioned earlier, Montreal is a very French place, really we have to be acknowledging that. So even sometimes when we have our community or cultural group here, there might be some kind of barriers in terms of even though we might identify more as a Quebec person of that community, or they might not even speak the language, or they've been here a very long time so yo

MEGAN: On top of being a floor fellow, I'm also a third year nursing student, so I have to promote some health and wellness resources. I'm really going to advocate for students to go to the McGill athletics complex. There are so many things that you can do, and to be active and to exercise makes you feel better. It improves mental health and improves your overall well-being. At the start of the year, it was my first time going to the gym, to the fitness center in the complex, and I was very intimidated. I wasn't sure if people would be staring at me being like,

But it's not at all! People just focus on themselves trying to do their own exercises that home and then they rest, so it's nothing to be intimidated by. It's a great place to also make friends. If you just go to the pool and go

that are not at McGill, and it's a great place to meet new people.

ROSA: Yeah, I have definitely gotten one of the MORSL plants and have gone to the gym wondering if people are going to give me dirty looks or care about what I'm doing.

I just want to thank you both so much for coming on this episode. I think these are some great insights that we were able to gain into residence, and kind of coming out of COVID and having the student experience. Again, thank you, and we look forward to hearing from you guys and future seaso