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OMA Remains Operational in Midst of COVID-19 Epidemic

Logan Gilbert, Investigative Editor

Through these times, it is more important than ever to have spaces for those in need to come together. The Office of Multicultural Affairs (OMA) is trying to do just that amidst the pandemic. While campus lays quiet and empty, OMA continues to work to support students, especially students of color and of marginalized identities.

One of the projects that OMA has continued is their Moral Mondays event series, though they are now mostly conducted through social media. This project is in support of the Black Lives Matter movement and was started in 2014 after the death of Michael Brown.

It is still running through OMA's Instagram page, which aims to support the movement—especially in the case of the recent killing of George Floyd. With the pandemic in mind, Ashlee Day, Assistant Director of OMA, stresses the importance of continued activism.

“I think what I have been most impressed with during this time is the commitment of community leaders to having impacts in their community,” Day said. “There has been a lot of bad news this week, but the work doesn't stop, and we need to continue speaking out.”

Another function that OMA has continued is community gatherings, which they call affinity spaces. Each meeting is centered around different groups, like the black affinity space, the queer affinity space and a general students of color affinity space.

“Just creating space, sharing conversation, regularly checking in on people is really where we can serve our community best,” Day said. “With not everyone being on campus, people are coming from this from different places, mentally and physically so the most we can do is just give a space for people to hang out and connect with people.”

Michelle Kim, Director of OMA, explained why these spaces are so important during currently.

“With the stay at home order and the social distance, people need a space where they can feel seen and so we knew we would need an alternative to in-person meetings,” Kim said. “We all feel the need to connect and feel heard, and in a time that affects those that are most vulnerable we need to be there for each other.”

OMA has also kept up their fight against food insecurity by continuing to run the food pantry throughout the pandemic. They serve between 25 to 30 people each week, according to Assistant Director of OMA Karina Saunders.

In order to make sure they are following safety standards, people fill out applications for order on their website. All donations received by the pantry sit untouched for several days to ensure they are not contaminated. Only one team member is in the building at a time filling order requests and leaving the bags outside for contactless pickup.



"I think it's important that we continue to offer any support we can," Saunders said. "I've heard feedback from students who can come to the pantry that it has been a big help and support for them. Some folks were relying on food sources that are no longer available and we are trying to fill that gap with this."

There are, however, limitations to the types of food they can provide. The pantry cannot accept or distribute fresh food because it can't be refrigerated. They also can no longer be a part of the food recovery network, which means they no longer get the unsold food from Chartwells. Luckily, says Kim, they got a large amount of donations at the end of last quarter, and with the reduced number of students, they have the funding to supply people with the food they need.

"We want to make sure that no one is busy focusing on hunger while trying to take their classes," Saunders said. "There is also an element of community we create with it, knowing that there is someone here in the office and other people using the pantry. People that are there for you is a relief in a time when we can't be as social."

OMA is also still celebrating its 50th anniversary by engaging the community with posts about their history and the events they have done over the years. The end of this anniversary has allowed Kim to reflect on the work she has done during the pandemic.

"I'm so happy with what we have been able to do with this program despite the limitations that we face," Kim said. "It really shows how much we can do when we come together to help support one another even in these hard times."