



Poly Pantry Fills Plates

By **MARTHA GROVES**

While a student at Cal Poly Pomona, **Alyssa Jane Christiansen** ('11, sociology) occasionally slept in her car to avoid the cost of commuting to the mobile home in Upland she shared with her sister and their mother.

She ate a lot of ramen – and never once bought a meal on campus.

"I often skipped meals, ate less than I felt I should and went hungry because there was not enough money for food," she said.

Instead of buying groceries, she put gasoline in her car or paid for a textbook.

Her life would have been different had the **Poly Pantry** existed during her time on campus. In an ideal marriage of person and job, Christiansen is the founding coordinator of the pantry, which opened last spring in the Bronco Student Center.

Food insecurity has become pervasive on college campuses across the country, and many students are reluctant to ask for help.

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In recent years, the University of California and the California State University systems found that 4 in 10 students were not getting enough to eat or were worried about access to food. At Cal Poly Pomona, nearly 36 percent of students reported food insecurity, and nearly 15 percent reported having been homeless one or more times in the previous 12 months.

The Poly Pantry is one of many initiatives of the **Cal Poly Pomona Broncos Care Program**, which aims to provide students in need with food and toiletries, housing support and emergency funds.

The university took its initial step to address food insecurity in 2016 in forming the food & housing security committee. The campus partnered with Sowing Seeds for Life, a La Verne-based nonprofit, to create a monthly mobile food pantry program. The student government also passed a resolution to establish the permanent pantry.

Student fees cover most of the costs of operation. Christiansen, who is the care coordinator for **Associated Students, Inc.**, and student staff make the most of the Poly Pantry's 273 square feet, stocking shelves with donations from two sources – the public and the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP), which is managed by the Los Angeles Regional Food Bank.

Every week, each student may select five to 10 items. These can include fresh fruit, canned vegetables and toiletries such as toothpaste and tampons. Perishables such as milk, cheese, grapes and potatoes go fast, Christiansen says.

On a recent afternoon, **Jamie Tierrablanca**, 21, a sociology senior, stocks up on chickpeas, corn, canned pork and chicken soup.

"Without the Poly Pantry," she says, "I would be concerned about having to spend more money at the grocery store."

She also pays it forward by encouraging other food insecure students to take advantage of the CalFresh program, which provides monthly food benefits to individuals in need.

Donations have come from the campus community and beyond, including:

- Alumnus **Jose A. Gomez** ('93, sociology) created a \$50,000 endowment. Gomez is the executive vice president and chief operating officer at Cal State LA
- Alumna **Ginny Mendes** ('86, accounting) matched the first \$5,000 in a crowdfunding campaign in fall 2019 and will also match an additional \$5,000 during the upcoming Giving Day on April 22-23
- **Northrop Grumman** donated \$5,000 and is encouraging its employees to support the pantry
- The **Boiling Crab** has donated \$800, as well as \$1,500 in gift cards
- The Claremont chapter of **The Links, Inc.** donated \$1,000
- **Kroger Company Foundation** donated \$10,000
- **Bradshaw Home** donated gift-in-kind items, including much-needed cookware and supplies

Christiansen has vivid memories of being called "trailer trash" when she was growing up. She never invited friends to sleep over. And, once she got to Cal Poly Pomona after transferring from a community college, she spent countless hours using the library computers because she did not own a laptop.

She credits her mother, **Candace Groeschen** ('77, liberal arts), a social worker, with instilling in her the value of an education and the importance of helping others.

"Now that I'm older," Christiansen says, "I am able to say I'm proud of where I'm from."

Even though she is paying down her student loans, Christiansen is delighted that she and her fiancé, Brendan Joyce, a planner for Southern California Edison, have bought a house in Fontana and plan to wed this spring. She says she is grateful for her own experience with food insecurity because it led to this chance to help other young adults who are struggling.

"I tell them, 'Your student fees pay for the pantry's operation, and you deserve access to nutritious foods to be healthy and successful.'"

To give to the Poly Pantry, visit <http://bit.ly/polypantrydonate>.

Visit <http://bit.ly/polypantry> for more information about the program.