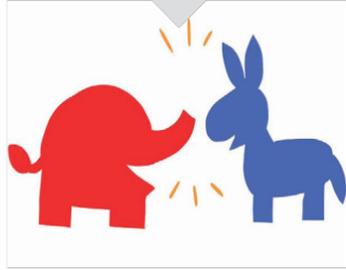


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# Little free pantries feed communities nationwide

Prairie Road Pantry in Madison inspires others

**KELLY FENG**  
 Opinion Editor

When Nicki Stapleton set out a cardboard box on her front lawn two years ago, she had no idea she was starting a grassroots campaign.

The box was filled with canned and boxed food, and leftover donations from her neighbors after she and her husband asked for food for a recently homeless man. When the food started pouring in and they realized they had too much for just one person, they put the leftovers in a box outside their home for anybody to help themselves.

The disposable box quickly turned into a bookshelf, later replaced by a more sturdy and durable cabinet crafted by a donor from a design Stapleton made.

What started as an effort to distribute extras has evolved into a robust daily stocking and restocking of the Prairie Road Pantry to keep up with the



KELLY FENG / CLARION

Nicki Stapleton runs the Little Free Pantry on Prairie Road in Madison.

ongoing food insecurity and growing community involvement.

Stapleton admits it's exploded. The Prairie Road Pantry donations often resemble a Thanksgiving cornucopias. On Sundays, she receives donations from a local Hy-Vee supermarket

and Mondays are "Produce Day." The fruits and vegetables are sent through Instacart by a generous anonymous donor, who's been ordering the produce once a week since shortly after the pantry started.

The snapshot of food insecurity

is not a one-size-fits-all picture, with most people seeking assistance coming from all walks of life. Most recipients utilizing the pantries have overlapping needs. They may have recently lost a job and are learning to adjust to limited income, they might be able to afford food but never seem to have enough or they may be experiencing a usual time of financial need.

Based on the "Little Free Library" system, which promotes neighborhood book exchanges in the form of a public bookcase, "Little Free Pantry" was founded by Jessica McClard in 2016. Since then, back or front yard pantries are growing throughout the country.

In the spring of 2016, McClard installed her first mini-pantry in Fayetteville, Ark. Within two weeks, a stranger found inspiration in her idea had copied the idea and opened a second pantry across town.

To date, there are more than 800 Little Free Pantries registered on the official website, although the founder believes there are many more

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ANDRES SANCHEZ / CLARION

Ousmane Nikiema, center, and Ben Wiest, right, hand out awards at the annual Celebration of Student Success held on April 20 in Room D1630 at the Truax Campus.

## Celebration of Student Success

Student leaders, groups and staff honored at event

**KALEIA LAWRENCE**  
 Editor in Chief

Celebrating some of the good work at Madison College was the goal of the Student Success Awards Program. The annual event was held both in person and virtually this year. Over 90 students were nominated in the various categories.

Four students received the Karen Roberts Student Life Leadership Award, the highest recognition for

student leaders at the school. The winners were Deborah Moreno, Talita Maciel, Sean Green and Kaleia Lawrence.

Moreno served as WolfPack Volunteers Coordinator for the Volunteer Center. Maciel was the Phi Theta Kappa President. Green was the Student Senate President and Lawrence was the Editor in Chief of The Clarion.

Three students were honored for completing the Student Life Leadership Certificate: Maya Greengus, H. Wendyam Ilboudo and Kelsey McGuire. To achieve this award, students must complete 20

hours of civic engagement, hold a leadership position at the college, take part in leadership development activities and interview community leaders.

Other honors presented were: Outstanding Student Employee of the Year – Axl Bradshaw, Jaydn Hayes and Emilio Machado.

Devi Bhargava Award – Ashley Young.

Terry S. Webb Shared Governance Leadership Award – Jack Shockey and Katrina Willis.

Student Senate Merit Award – Ella

» SEE **SUCCESS** PAGE 5

## What will it take to save democracy?

**STUART PATE**  
 News Editor

Many Americans are feeling less than optimistic about the state of democracy. Concerns of failing American institutions are on the rise. An NPR/Ipsos poll from January found that seven in 10 Americans say that the country is in crisis and at risk of failing.

So, is American democracy at risk?

Adrienne Roche, a political science instructor at Madison College, believes that democracy has been stressed but that there is hope. However, Roche says that even being the ideal citizen is not just a matter of showing up at the polls. Preserving democracy begins with education of the state of American institutions.

Roche notes that American institutions have been under stress. Recently with COVID-19 but also going back to the election of 2000 with the role the U.S. Supreme Court

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### About this project

The Clarion is pleased to present a series of articles from the Investigative Reporting class focusing on divisiveness in America. You will find articles from this series on Pages 3 and 4 of this issue along with additional content online at [www.theonline-clarion.com](http://www.theonline-clarion.com)

## PANTRIES

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untracked or unlisted.

With conventional and community food pantries throughout the country, what is the appeal of a small neighborhood pantry where the items might change day each day and there is less of a supply?

Little Free Pantry recipients don't have the burden of filling out paperwork like they would at a traditional non-profit pantry. Also, a Little Free Pantry doesn't have set geographical boundaries so that they can serve a larger population. They are 24/7 resources, unlike traditional pantries with set regular hours, so recipients can access the free pantry any time they're hungry.

For Stapleton, the need to get the word out and build awareness of the food resource is paramount. Every day, after she stocks the pantry, the Prairie Road Pantry founder is quickly to inform her community via the pantry's Facebook page.

While most people or organization post on social media as an opportunity to promote themselves or their brand, Stapleton steers clear of boasting or pridefulness. She uses Facebook to inform and update the pantry's followers.

Her posts are informative and matter of fact. Believing the Facebook page follower have the need and would like to know what the pantry has in stock, Stapleton post at least once and sometimes twice a day. She also knew the key to receiving donations from the community was to maintain visibility.

"It doesn't take much time [to post on Facebook]. I make sure to snap a picture when I stock and quickly post it on the page. It takes just a few seconds," Stapleton said.

To create an area of frequently asked questions, Stapleton created a pinned post that lists the often requested food. Hygiene products, baby wipes and cleaning products are often requested; many families struggle to afford these items and other food assistance programs like SNAP don't cover them. The most popular food donations are: crunchy peanut butter, Kraft or Annie's macaroni and cheese and bagged sides or snacks and meal kits.

While canned and boxed food are her most popular donations, others donate gift cards or cash. Stapleton uses monetary donations to fill in gaps when items are needed.

The line starts outside her home, usually minutes after she posts on Facebook. Regulars drive up, some on their bikes, with some arriving after daylight to remain anonymous.

While she works for the City of Madison full time, with two days working from home, it is often suggested to her that she take her talent and turn it full time into her own not-for-profit. Stapleton dismisses the idea, saying she loves her full-time job and enjoys the flexibility of not being a non-profit and working the pantry into her own schedule.

There have been many vibrant memories during the past two years, but one of the most memorable experiences was running a school supply drive two summers ago. Stapleton says it was a ton of work, with supplies scattered throughout her home. But with community effort, Prairie Road Pantry created backpacks for 70 students, plus leftover supplies and backpacks. It was a huge hit, being able to offer other free things including toys, clothing and books. In addition, The Book Deal, a local book store, donated a bunch of kids books which was a huge hit.

What Stapleton wants the community to know is that food insecurity is a cross demographic need, with recipients coming from all walks of life. The most important thing for people to know is her adamant belief that pantries should be judgment free zones.

"You never know when you might need a little extra help. I have had people message me through the pantry page thanking me for having the pantry available at night as they are embarrassed to come when it is daylight," Stapleton said.

"I would also like people to know that people who are experiencing food insecurity shouldn't be shamed for their preferences. Anyone who follows the page has seen that I frequently request specific brands of macaroni and cheese. I have seen a preference given to those brands and the generic options don't get taken as quickly. And that is OK. I do not like the 'beggars can't be choosers' mentality - everyone deserves food dignity and choice. People using a pantry shouldn't have to settle for food that expired 5 years ago, dented cans and brands they don't like. Food should be enjoyed, no matter where it came from."

## DEMOCRACY

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played in deciding the election between Bush and Gore.

"That was really the first symptom in some ways in American democracy of institutions being challenged in ways they really weren't accustomed to," Roche says.

Since then, Roche says, there has been 9-11, the expansion of bureaucracy, and the war on terror, the response to Hurricane Katrina and the mortgage crisis.

All these events have led to rapid change and with that, backlash movements have risen like nationalism which are the "antithesis to liberal institutions," says Roche.

Roche also looks to involvement and complacency in American democracy. She points out nearly 67% of eligible voters voted in the 2020 election. Roche is concerned that still leaves 33% that didn't

vote. She feels that Americans have grown "comfortable" with the benefits provided by liberal democracy and that plays into lack of engagement. In addition to lack of engagement, Roche is concerned with obstacles to voting.

"Democratic institutions should be marked by expanding access to voting and voting rights. For some voters, it is not complacency as much as it is a lack of political efficacy - essentially the belief that their vote does not make a difference. There are many reasons for this belief - but one reason relates to the way institutions are structured. When institutions are - or become - more restrictive that can affect citizens' feelings of efficacy. This erodes trust between the citizens and their government," Roche said.

Recently local governments have been forwarding legislation that may hinder a person's ability to vote. Roche believes that this type of legislation limits who can partic-

ipate in democracy and hinders the role in deciding who gets into office.

Despite all of this, Roche remains optimistic.

"My perspective is to be hopeful, and I think when I'm actually in the classroom, and I'm working with students and hearing their perspectives on American democracy and the investment that they have and the value like liberty, democracy and equality, that give me a lot of hope"

However, Roche does not rely on hope alone. She feels that hope must be paired with action.

"It's not just voting," she said.

To Roche, participating in democracy is also getting involved in protests, calling legislators, paying attention to what's happening legislatively and in congress, signing petitions and taking stances on issues outside of general elections and "having all of that education to make informed decisions when you get to the polls."



ANDRES SANCHEZ / CLARION

Members of La Raza Unida celebrate being selected as the Outstanding Student Club of the Year.

## SUCCESS

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Jiang .

Student Excellence in Diversity Award - Ashley Young and Pedro Zepeda Samano.

Student Ambassadors of Distinction - Ben Wiest, Noely Bonilla, Deborah Moreno and Valarie Behling.

Club Advisor of the Year - Courtney Dicmas.

Outstanding Student Group for Academic Achievement - Creative Arts Collective and Wolves in Research .

Outstanding Student Club of the Year - La Raza Unida.

Outstanding Student Organization of the Year - Student Senate.

Outstanding Student Group Award for Community Service - Fitness and Recreation Association.

Outstanding Student Tutor of the Year - Albert Mensah, Kynda Zidani, Lyon Chen and Saheed Afolabi.

President's Volunteer Award- Ella Jiang and Katrina Veltrice Willis.

Exemplary Learner of the Year, School of Academic Advancement - Cathryn Abrajan .

Exemplary Learner of the Year, School of Applied Science, Engineering and Technology - Ryder Collupy and Kendrix Mone'.

Exemplary Learner of the Year, School of Health Sciences - Kyle Donovan and Lauren Daering.

Exemplary Learner of the Year, School of Arts, Humanities and



ANDRES SANCHEZ / CLARION

Noely Bonilla, left, and Deborah Moreno were among the student presenters at the Celebration of Student Success.

Sciences - Amy Moreland and H. Wendyam Ilbouda.

Exemplary Learner of the Year, School of Human and Protective Services, Law and Education - Justin Shaffer and Monica Caldwell.

Exemplary Learner of the Year, School of Business and Applied Arts - America Silva and Eli Brunett.

Exemplary Learner of the Year, School of Nursing- Ayele Dossavi and Heidi Hughes.

Exemplary Learner of the Year, School of Technologies and Trades- Chris Hendricks and Midge Cross.

Alternative Break Recognition- Arya Keithreddy, Madalyn Beunig, Zora Smith and Yana Samanta .

International Student Volunteer- H. Wendyam Ilboudo and Kendrix Mone'.

WolfPack Volunteer Recognition- Jay Cho, Julian Morales Grande, Lexie Wilberding, Mariana Barksdale, Nihar Srikakolapu, Rohith Ravikumar, Wendpanga Tapsoba, Ella Jiang, Yana Samanta and H. Wendyam Ilboudo.

Distinguished Teachers of the Year - Dr. Alexis Middleton, Wendy Harris and Teri Gorder.