

# The Mount Observer

“Voices of the students of Mount Wachusett Community College”

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8 PAGES

## Empty Seats in Empty Classrooms The Troubling Decline of Community College Enrollment

By Luke Guertin

OBSERVER CONTRIBUTOR

Enrollment numbers at community colleges across Massachusetts have plummeted, with many factors — including the COVID-19 pandemic — contributing to the decline. The Mount is no exception. “We are down, like every community college,” said James Vander Hooven, President of Mount Wachusett Community College. “I know we are in a challenging time.”

According to The Boston Globe, from the fall semester of 2019 to the beginning of the fall in 2022, 13,000 dropped out of community college, and it is



feared most of those students will not return. The article also states that most of those students were parents who are unable to attend school while also caring for their family. The

largest drop in all community colleges came between the fall of 2019 to 2020, when 8,600 dropped out to work or take care of family. The number of students who enrolled from

2012 to 2022 fell 37%, which has left roughly 6,000 students in the state left attending community college. Data from the Massachusetts Department of Higher Education indicates that MWCC is smaller than most other community colleges, so even as all other community college enrollment numbers decline, the impact on the Mount is especially noteworthy.

Community colleges all across the state are working to bring students back to school. For example, North Shore Community College gave students \$500 credited to their student account if they enrolled in 9 credits before December

30th of 2022. They are also holding enrollment events on weekends to allow more people to attend.

Cape Cod Community College is returning to visiting nearby high schools after the pandemic ended them. The visits are how the school reaches students and raises interest in the college’s program offerings. With community colleges usually having small marketing budgets, meeting students face to face being the best method to bring them in.

“A lot of students come on

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## Writing, Self-Care, and Finding Peace Multitalented Editor in Chief of the Observer Isabelle Mascary Emphasizes Creative Expression

By Elysian Alder

ASSISTANT EDITOR

Thirty-five year old Editor-in-Chief of the Observer Isabelle Mascary is a professional writing major and longstanding student at the Mount. Prior to majoring in professional writing, she earned a degree in Allied Health, as well as a certificate in Practical Nursing. Even before starting at the Mount, she obtained a nail technician certificate and another in massage therapy. As a result of being local to the area, the Mount was familiar to her, and it seemed like the natural choice of college. “It’s almost like home to me,” she said. In addition to being part of the Observer staff for the past two semesters, she has also contributed to the Mount’s literary magazine, *A Certain Slant*.

Journalistic reporting isn’t

Mascary’s only writing medium, however; she is also an enthusiastic poet and has submitted poetry to the creative writing section of the Observer, as well as having pieces featured in *A Certain Slant*. “I’m not sure what got me into writing, but it was always something that I just found myself doing,” she explained. “I started really investing in writing in around the 6th grade. I remember sitting on my front porch on King Street, writing in my little journal.”

During her childhood, if she had been asked what she wanted to be when she grew up, her answers would have been to become a singer or rapper. “I think I’ve really been inspired by Tupac,” said Mascary. These days, she prefers to be the writer, rather than the performer, though she has had



Photo by Eclipse Boudoir

Isabelle Mascary

friends and classmates perform her songs in the past. “It was flattering because they were

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# Empty Classrooms

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recommendations of school counselors and family,” said Marcus Williams, a Senior Admissions Counselor at MWCC. Other ways the school recruits is through phone calls, emails, and visits to schools in the nearby area, such as Leominster, Fitchburg, Westminster, Millbury, and Keene, as well as other local towns and cities up to an hour away. Visits to community events in surrounding towns are beginning to come back after they were canceled because of COVID-19. Once more contact information is acquired, emails can be more personal toward certain courses and events.

“Communication has grown since the pandemic,” said Williams. “It was a hurdle, an obstacle, but it’s a benefit.” Since COVID-19 ended in-person events, Zoom has been the primary tool utilized to meet with counselors and schools without having to make a long trip.

“There are resources here to get students can use to get back

on track,” said Rhona Bettez, an Administrative Assistant. The Mount has options for financial aid and students are encouraged to apply for scholarships that are available as well. Single parents who are afraid they won’t be able to find child care can have their children cared for at the Garrison Center if they qualify. Hybrid and online classes are pushed for those who feel time prevents them from starting or returning.

“Whether it be sending emails, being out in community events, making phone calls, we are in constant communication,” Bettez said.

In addition, the state is trying to pass the Cherish Act. This will establish a more stable budget set by the Board of Higher Education. Along with fairer and more consistent financing, it will help the decrease in funding for colleges across the state, address some of the causes of debt crushing students, make it easier to hire full-time educators and improve working conditions for adjuncts and professional staff.

“The number of students is going down, but the need for

support is about the same,” Vander Hooven said. As many resources as the school has, there are money factors outside that hinder students, including the decline of financial aid funding. According to a recent study conducted by Hildreth Institute financial aid has declined since the early 2000s, mostly because of a lack of funding. The study also revealed the number of students taking out loans for community college has increased by 45% in the past two decades. The number for four-year institutions is a staggering 105%. Students also receive half the amount of financial aid compared to those attending four-year institutions, which only covers 12% of the cost. Massachusetts is ranked 37th in the nation in state funded financial aid.

President Vander Hooven also cited another issue that is hurting enrollment and that is that there are fewer kids in general. And there are studies to back the claim. Along with meaning a decline in enrollment, it meant that there was a warning sign long before COVID-19 made it worse. “We

expected a decline, as the number of kids is in decline. What we weren’t prepared for was the double effect of COVID,” said Vander Hooven.

Although numbers before the 2010’s are hard to find, there has been a steady decline since the Great Recession. That number was a record low in 2020.

Over the years, the perception of two-year and four-year institutions has fluctuated greatly. A survey conducted by Higher Ed Dive, roughly 66% of college students believe college is not worth the price. That is up from the last survey, and the number was comparable among high school seniors. Students were afraid of the pandemic’s effect on schooling. Almost 75% were scared of finding a job after college. Close to 66% express worry about being able to pay tuition and non-education payments. In all of that, 20% said they were more willing to attend community college, up from 13% when the survey was last taken.

With costs rising, the wages for hourly jobs have increased

as well. NPR has found that more students coming out of high school are more likely to take the paycheck rather than face the prospect of student debt. Students see less value in a college degree because of the fear of debt and see more security in making money as minimum wages increase. However, a study from Georgetown University found that people who obtained their bachelors degree earned an average of almost 3 million dollars, up by almost 3 quarter of those with only a high school diploma. It also has a direct impact on the economy, as more and more jobs require skills associated with a degree. Community colleges try to help and close the gap, but with enrollment declining, the gap continues to grow.

As bad as the situation may seem, Vander Hooven said, “I have this thought it might take a while to reach your goal. Five years from now, you will care less about how long it took. Ten years, you will care less. You just have to stick with it.”

## Profile: Isabelle Mascary

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actually singing the lyrics that I wrote and the way that I wanted them to. I was more of a little Missy Elliott,” she joked.

Her creative process is somewhat complex. “I don’t plan anything out,” she admitted. “I’ve learned that planning things out does not work the way I would like it to.” When it comes to her reasons for writing, she writes for herself, but thoroughly enjoys seeing the way that people react to what she’s written. “I was surprised to find that I was even able to invoke a lot of emotion. I’ve made people cry. I’ve made them happy. I’ve made them pissed off. And I just sit there like, ‘Wow.’”

Mascary is not only enthusiastic about creativity in her own life but also in sharing it with her children. According to her, her children each have their own unique creativity and ways

to express it. Her 15-year-old daughter is currently working on her own book, while one of her sons loves to read, and the other loves to write but tends to be shy

**“Part of my self-care was also healing myself. Now, my self-care journey is still developing, and I plan on doing everything I was told I could not do and then some.”**

**– Isabelle Mascary**

about it. Mascary emphasizes the importance of staying involved in her children’s lives, as she doesn’t feel at ease when they’re away from her. She joked, “But they cannot wait to get to college and go to another place.”

Outside of her life with her children, Mascary’s relationship with her family is complex,

marked by a history of loss, trauma, and difficult times — all of which have required tremendous strength and self-forgiveness to move forward

from. “I didn’t want to victimize myself. In a sense, I had to learn to forgive. I got to the point where I was like, ‘These things happened to me, but it doesn’t define me.’ And the people that did these things to me are the ones who will have to deal with the regret,” she said. “It’s not my regret to keep.”

“Self-care is very important to me,” she continued. “During my teenage years, I was put to shame and told that I need to accept certain things and turn a blind

eye to most things. My boldness had become a problem for many when it was not convenient for them. I was becoming who they wanted me to be and not who I wanted to be. I didn’t have much of the support that I needed because within the Haitian community, they like to handle things internally as opposed to

getting external people involved. Part of my self-care was also healing myself. Now, my self-care journey is still developing, and I plan on doing everything I was told I could not do and then some.”

In addition to writing, which Mascary also considers a form of self-care, she enjoys helping others and has a passion for art and music. “That’s where I find peace,” she shared.

Lastly, when reflecting on her time working on the Observer, Mascary says that her favorite part of being involved is having the opportunity to read submissions from contributors and see their material, their style, and learn something from every single one. When she was offered the position of editor-in-chief, she was overjoyed. “I’ve never been in that type of leadership role before, and I never expected my writing to open doors like that,” she said. “It made me feel honored.”

# A Poetry Slam Dunk

## Literary Magazine ‘A Certain Slant’ is a Certain Success

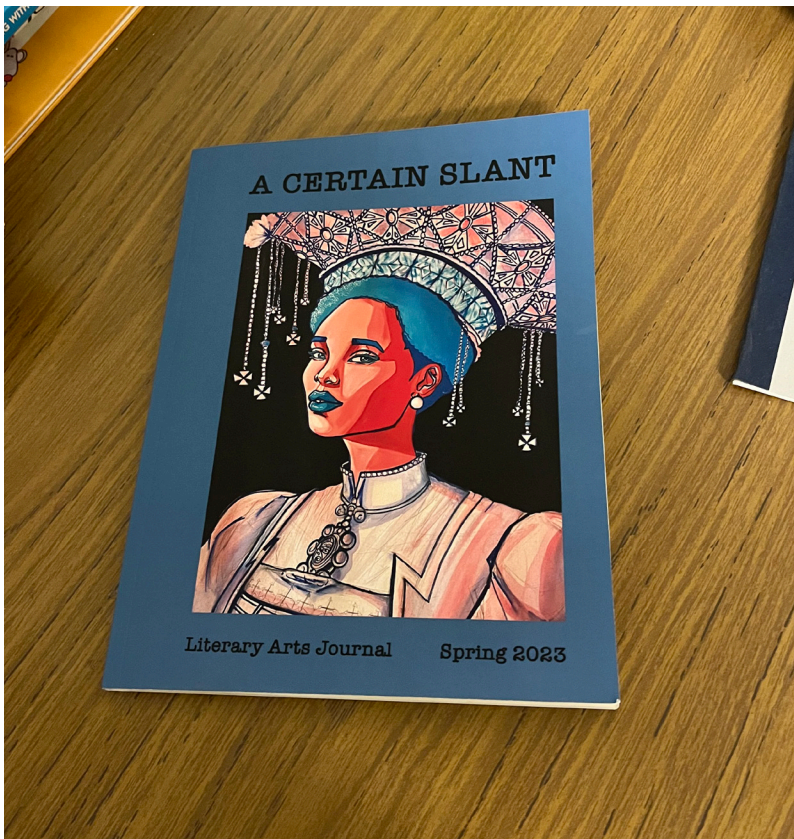


Photo by Tom Hill Jr.

**A Certain Slant**

**By Annabelle Kennedy**  
OBSERVER CONTRIBUTOR

Spring has sprung at MWCC and that means it is time for our own literary magazine *A Certain Slant* to come out by the end of April. *A Certain Slant* is a celebration of poetry, short fiction and paintings created by MWCC students themselves. Michelle Valois, a professor in the English department, edits and puts them together in a print magazine style.

For the past 20 years, Valois has been heading up the literary magazine. “I took it over from Professor Arthur Marley who started the magazine, sometime in the 1980s,” said Valois. Being a writer herself, she knows the excitement of seeing your name in print for the first time.

“I want to give the students the experience of publishing. To work with someone else and take pride in it,” Valois said. It is

a great opportunity to experience sending your work to be selected and then edited. Anyone from MWCC is eligible to submit writing to *A Certain Slant*, not just English majors. Valois is even considering opening the submissions to local writers as well soon.

Over the years the magazine has changed in its presentation, but it is always full of talented writers from the MWCC community. “The students get to have physical evidence of what they have written,” said Valois. If you would like to see back issues of *A Certain Slant*, many of them can be found at the LaChance Library.

You can get your copy of *A Certain Slant* also at the LaChance Library on the Gardner campus. The Library will have a display of them. But you better be quick, they go fast.

# Veterans On Campus

## How Veteran Services is Trying to Help Out on Campus

**By Devon Gaughan**  
OBSERVER CONTRIBUTOR

At the helm of the Veterans Services Center located on the Gardner campus of Mount Wachusett Community College is the Director of Veteran Services, Bob Mayer. Mayer himself is a veteran of the Army and the Army National guard, a man who cares and a man who definitely makes a difference. Currently, Mayer is dedicated to assisting veterans in navigating their GI benefits, which they have earned through their service. “GI benefits is an all encompassing term that can mean several different things,” said Mayer. “We try to help them navigate through the GI Benefits and protect their money and to help them maximize it.”

Providing an example, Mayer said, “For a normal student if you withdraw from a class, you would lose out on the money you spent for said class. But if a veteran would withdraw from a class, they would lose not only the money for the class but also any other benefits, such as a housing allowance which veterans would be responsible for paying back due to withdrawal.”

One thing Mayer sheds a light on is how veterans are held to different standards when it comes to being considered full-time students. Mayer explained, “Say if you take three full time classes and one cycle class, then you’re a full time student. But if you’re a veteran, the Department of Veteran Affairs (VA) doesn’t think so. The VA would adjust negatively for veterans the money they would be paid.” With differences like these, Mayer really tries to help veterans navigate through them in order to get the most for his applicable students.

According to a 2020 census done by the Students Veterans of America, more than 1 million Americans currently receive GI



Photo by Patricia Hoxie

**Bob Mayer, Director of Veteran Services**

Bill benefits for higher education programs. In 2020, 80% of student veterans pursuing higher ed degrees or credentials were full-time students.

Student veterans are often older, married, and work full- or part-time jobs while in school.

Another important thing Mayer does for veterans is help them navigate this new civilian and college lifestyle. “Many of our veteran students join the military right out of high school, so the only adult culture they know is the military, and the military is much different from any civilian culture.”

Mayer believes it’s part of the duty of Veteran Services to help not only to help navigate and advise but also to help with everyday life. Mayer also believes that it’s important that he helps veterans feel that sense of belonging on campus in addition to helping acclimate them to civilian life. The Veterans Services website outlines eight essential factors for the success of veterans. These include: “creating a culture of trust and connectedness across the campus community; ensuring consistent and sustained support for veterans from campus leadership; implementing an early alert system to ensure

all veterans receive academic, career, and financial advice before challenges become overwhelming; coordinating and centralizing campus efforts for all veterans with the creation of a designated space (even if limited in size); collaborating with local communities and organizations, including government agencies, to align and coordinate various services for veterans; utilizing a uniform set of data tools to collect and track information on veterans, including demographics, retention and degree completion; providing comprehensive professional development for faculty and staff on issues and challenges unique to veterans, and developing systems that ensure sustainability of effective practices for veterans.”

When asked what he wants people to know about Veteran Services, Mayer responded: “I think and I hope we have a reputation for caring and I hope that is what would come across because that’s the number one thing. All the efforts that we make and everything we do I would like to think is based upon the fact we care, not just about the veteran population but also their families as well.”

# Profile: Candace Shivers

## Professor Talks Leadership, Social Justice, and Empowerment

By *Isabelle Mascary*  
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Professor Candace Shivers Talks Leadership, Social Justice, and Empowerment

Candace Shivers, a seasoned professor with nineteen years of experience at the Mount, started as an adjunct in 2003 and became a full-time professor in the following year, teaching Sociology, human resources, and psychology classes. She holds a Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Science from American International College, as well as a Master's degree from Assumption College. As a member of the Union and Board of Directors of the National Education Association, the largest labor local in the United States, she is deeply committed to her profession. What she enjoys most about being an educator is engaging with her students and having conversations about current issues. "I enjoy the process of learning together, and if I could just be in front of the class,

having these conversations, I would be happy," she said.

As she reflected on her journey with the Mount, Shivers noted that there was a lack of diversity and representation in terms of people with different skin colors. "There was ancillary involvement, but no one would say, 'No, I'm not doing that' or 'No, that can't happen.'" However, when Shivers decided to challenge this lack of diversity, she encountered resistance. "When I started questioning [authoritative figures], some people were taken aback by my boldness. They were like, 'Wait, is she questioning us?' Like, 'how dare you question authority?'" she shared.

Born on an army base at Fort Dix in New Jersey, Shivers developed a tendency to question authority at a young age. Even as a child, she would raise questions on the "who, what, when, where, and why" of things. "My parents learned early on that I'm going to question everything, good or bad," she said. While having the

ability to question authority may come naturally to Shivers, she recognizes that others may find her inquisitive mind offensive. "I'm just a curious kind of person. You can't just tell me to do something and expect me to do it. I've never been that way," she explained. "I don't trust myself sometimes, so I'm going

to question everything." have pigmentation to be a part of racial and social justice," she said. "We need someone where it's not rehearsed, but it's in their language, mannerisms, and answers — and that's something that you can pick up on."

According to Shivers, a good leader actually takes some burden off one's plate. She has

with pigmentation in their skin than those without. "When I hear people saying that, I know that I'm making a difference." For Shivers, being in a leadership role is about adding to the Mount, making the Mount better, and being the person who's not just going to sit down and complain. Shivers recognizes the

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**"I'm just a curious kind of person. You can't just tell me to do something and expect me to do it. I've never been that way."**

**– Candace Shivers**

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to question everything."

Shivers believes that Mount has made some progress in terms of diversity, but there is still a long way to go. While the student body and faculty have become more diverse, the leadership has not. She went on to explain, "We have Stephanie Williams, who is the only person that I believe identifies as not Caucasian on that leadership team, and that is not diverse at all." Shivers thinks that it's concerning that people who do not look like her or have not had conversations with her are making decisions that affect her and others' livelihoods. Hiring individuals who are passionate about advocacy is one solution, according to her. Shivers mentioned that they will be hiring a Vice President of Academic Affairs and endeavored to be a part of the search committee for two reasons: firstly, she will work closely with this person not only as a faculty member but also as the chair of the Union for the faculty and professional staff. Secondly, it's important to understand that when she is passionate, it doesn't necessarily mean she's angry. "You don't necessarily have to

told multiple people, "I'm not going to follow a person because they have a title. I'm going to watch you and you're going to earn being my leader." She emphasized that having someone in front of you telling you what to do doesn't make them a leader. "But we have some really good leaders on campus, and it makes my job easier as a person that works at the Mount."

Shivers also explained the empirical quality that comes with leadership. "Being able to be in a leadership role and push issues that people are not going to talk about, especially for me, is important because that's how you move the needle. I think of situations where we call it the third rail; no one wants to touch it but we have to move it," she said. "I don't take up every battle, but when it's interracial and social justice and because I'm in a leadership role, people listen a little more. Even if they don't want to believe that they're listening to me, they are."

Shivers wants to change the narrative. Instead of saying "minority group," she says "global majority" because there are more people in the world

importance of professors who take an interest in their students outside of the classroom. "When I was in college, I didn't know my professors well, but the ones I did know really shaped me. They were able to help me and find the holes that I didn't even know existed," she said, explaining that she strives to be just as involved with her own students outside of class. "I'm probably not a typical faculty member. I try to be as involved with the students outside of the classroom because I know that was an integral part of me becoming who I am."

Shivers has three pieces of advice for students. The first is to read as much as possible because it opens doors to language, information, and knowledge. One thing she regrets is not reading more when she was younger. The second advice is to travel to a different place where one can experience being the minority. According to Shivers, "It's a humbling experience." And lastly: take chances and step out of your comfort zone. "I've never regretted the things that I did as much as I regretted the things I didn't do."

Join the *Mount Observer* crew and get your writing, photography, artwork, or reviews out into the world! Or maybe take on a behind-the-scenes role and help run the *Observer's* website or social media. Whatever your interests, you can find a place on our team!

# Overcoming Adversity

## Observer's Incoming Editor-in-Chief Shares Journey of Self-Discovery and Creativity

By Isabelle Mascary

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Elysian Alder is twenty-six years old and began their journey at the Mount in the fall of 2022. She's currently a professional writing major and the upcoming editor-in-chief. Her pronouns are: they/them, she/her or anything used with respect.

After a year of soul-searching, extensive research, and surrounding herself with more LGBTQIA+ people, Alder began her transition on July 16th, 2021. "It began with me exploring my non-binary identity, and then, while researching for a transgender character I was writing - and still am writing - it all clicked for me," she explained. During the process, and after feeling uncomfortable with her given name, she chose her own name: Elysian. Derived from a concept in Greek mythology, the name means "a place or state of ideal happiness."

The signs of them being gender nonconforming were always present. Alder shared that, during her childhood, there was a huge contention between her and some of her extended family members because she never wanted to do the things that girls were doing, nor did she want to wear what she was being told to wear. It never felt right to be told to act 'more like a girl.' After discovering and embracing her true self, Alder identifies as agender, which they describe as falling under the transgender or nonbinary umbrella. Being agender means "I don't really have a gender identity," she explained. "It's not important to me to decide, and I don't feel connected to the idea of gender. I'm very gender-apathetic."

For Alder, Pride Month is about advocacy and awareness. When it comes to embracing queer people, "It's important to realize that it's not your business unless you're the person. Just



Photo by Elysian Alder

Elysian Alder

leave queer people alone. We just want our rights and want to be respected," she said. "We've gone through so many struggles and fights for rights and enough is enough. It's tiring to see the violence and persecution that trans and queer people face every day."

As the incoming editor-in-chief, it may come as a surprise to some that at first, Alder didn't think she would enjoy journalism due to her reservations about interviewing others. "I went into it just to fulfill a criterion on my degree and the other options didn't really seem like my style," she said. After taking some time to consider the course, she said, "I figured I could probably write a pretty good journalism article, and I like being able to get perspectives on things that maybe I originally wouldn't have unless I was doing a story for it." When the opportunity arose to become assistant editor for the Observer, they accepted. Through firm and constant reassurance - from her advisor,

Professor Fuller, and her peers - Alder was motivated to take on the editor-in-chief role for the fall semester of 2023.

Alder shared a few obstacles she has faced. She was born and raised in New Jersey, but during COVID, while living with a childhood best friend, she was unexpectedly facing eviction. Despite having had no plans to leave, the room she was renting in the house she shared with her friend's family was promised to someone else. "It came out of nowhere, and it was stressful. I was tirelessly looking for rooms to rent, basements, attics, wherever I could find for myself and my cat. My cat is non-negotiable. He goes where I go; he's my little guy," she shared. With her options slimming and pressure mounting, Alder had to leave the house. Fortunately, help was just a few phone calls away. After explaining her situation, her current roommate (who is also her writing partner and friend of 8 years) provided reassuring words and helped her

find a new place to call home in Massachusetts.

Alder shared that she struggles with imposter syndrome. "I'll be interested in something, but then it comes down to doubting if I really deserve to do it," she said and added that even though someone may compliment her work, self-doubt tends to rear its ugly head. "It's a really terrible thought pattern to be in." Realizing that it has had some impact on the careers they have considered going into, they knew healing was key to knock down barriers.

On the topic of careers, she has recently been considering early childhood education. "I love kids, and I do love teaching," she shared. "Superficial things that matter to adults don't matter with kids. You just have to guide them along the right direction because they don't know any better. They're not out here to maliciously judge people." Alder has a love for teaching children, but she wishes that underfunding wasn't an issue, because compensation matters. "As much

if it's me who does it, maybe I will write an autobiography." As for her five year plan, Alder and her roommate might relocate to Washington, and she hopes to finish a screenplay or novel and become a college graduate.

A piece of advice that she has for students is to stay organized and to find what organization style works for you. "What works for me might not work for someone else."

Her next piece of advice is to get involved on campus. "Getting involved has been a good thing for me and being part of the Observer really helps. Not only does it increase your ability to take on responsibilities, but also gets you involved with the community."

Lastly: Alder emphasizes being kinder to oneself. "It's really important. Mindfulness and being aware of how you're treating yourself can really boost your productivity, your efficiency, and your happiness. It can positively impact every aspect of your life."

Despite experiencing traumatic

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**"Mindfulness and being aware of how you're treating yourself can really boost your productivity, your efficiency, and your happiness."**

**– Elysian Alder**

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as it sucks to focus on, I don't want to be doing something that's not going to compensate me, and it's so sad that teachers are not compensated well."

Alder's hobbies include hiking with her roommate, reading, and writing. She primarily gravitates towards fiction novel writing, but she is not opposed to short stories and has recently developed an interest in screenwriting. "My roommate and I joke about 'dethroning J.K. Rowling' someday, and

events in her childhood, including childhood homelessness, the loss of her mother at a young age and dealing with the consequences of her brother and father's poor choices, Alder has not let those experiences prevent her from achieving her goals and finding herself through freedom of expression and creativity. What could have derailed her in life set her up to become a pillar of resilience and responsibility. Like the meaning of her name, she is in a place of happiness.

# Why I Am Excited to Get Older

## Student Gives Her Thoughts on Turning 40 Years Old

By *Annabelle Kennedy*  
OBSERVER CONTRIBUTOR

With less than a month to go until my 39<sup>th</sup> birthday, I have a confession: I am disappointed that I have to wait another year before I am 40.

Growing up in American society as a woman, you are constantly diluted down to your body. God help you if you do not fit the accepted beauty standard, whether you are a woman, man, or Alphabet mafia. In the late 80s and early 90s, as a woman you were indoctrinated early to want to be beautiful because if you are beautiful, you are worthy of love. If you don't fit the heroine chic look of fashion or have a skinny waist and big butt like

that lingered beyond my late 20s because I had no sense of self or boundaries. I was completely disconnected from my emotions and reactions.

I used my 30s to disentangle some of my trauma. Trauma is rarely one thing. It all gets tangled together into a knotted ball. Some of it was of my own making, and some was of other people's making. I lived, I loved, I got hurt, and I hurt other people. It took a long time to learn lessons from that pain, but I did eventually. I forgave people, and some people have forgiven me. I have apologized for the hurt I have caused other people and accepted responsibility for causing their pain.

**“I am not saying everything is going to magically be solved when I turn 40, but I do think I am better equipped to handle the bad times better than I ever have.”**

**– Annabelle Kennedy**

J.Lo, you are not worthy of love.

So you may be wondering with that kind training how would I be excited to be a part of the old and worthless. Women are told that once you are past your 20s, you don't really have anything left to offer the world. If you are past 40, you are just waiting for death. Wrinkles, white hair and boobs down to your ankles is all you have to look forward to.

Like many women in their 20s, I struggled with impulsive decisions, depression, and anxiety. I was trapped in survivor mode due to my upbringing, unaware of it. I was also involved in toxic relationships

The person I have forgiven the most is myself. I have learned grace and understanding for other people and what life can do to them. I have never been the type of person to give myself a pass. I can always be better, nicer, more helpful to people, kinder to people. I am usually never enough for myself and therefore I would never be able to be enough for some else, which allowed me to accept my relationships on any terms that the other person would give. The best lesson from my first 38 years is that the person who needs your forgiveness the most is yourself.

If life came at us one problem at a time and came with an instruction booklet (much like the Handbook for the Recently Deceased but less confusing and you know... for the living), we might not have many excuses to make mistakes. But life doesn't work like that. It doesn't wait for you to catch your breath. Sometimes you do the wrong thing with the best intentions. You mean to protect yourself or someone else and you go about it the wrong way. You tell a lie so you don't hurt someone's feelings.

Forgive yourself. Know that you are doing the best you can. Yes, you made some mistakes that felt like an atomic bomb going off, and sometimes when you look back, you see the better path that was there. When you are in that situation, you can't always see the way you need to go. Understand that you went down the best path you could see at the time. Sometimes there are road signs to help, and sometimes you are just on your own.

Another thing I've learned in my 38 years is that everyone is making it up as we go along. No one feels like an adult. No one knows what they are doing. You may think the woman working next to you has it all: a beautiful family and loving husband, so many smiling pictures of her wonderful family and life. What you don't know is that she also takes care of her elderly mother and tries to make her family life normal at the same time. You don't see her crying in her car for 10 minutes before she goes inside her house because she feels alone and scared. She doesn't know how to keep it all together any better than you. Every year that passes I discover more and more that people are mostly just trying to get through their day.



Photo courtesy of Annabelle Kennedy

Annabelle Kennedy

Every year that passes makes me realize that I am responsible for my actions and reactions only. I cannot control other people's actions. I can only choose how I react to them.

So why would I be excited for my 40s? Making it to my 40s makes me feel as if it was all worth it. The pain and the self-exploration were all for a reason and purpose. I know myself so much better now. I have never been happier. I am ready to be myself and not apologize for it. I know how to draw boundaries and stand up for myself. I am no longer satisfied with being in the background. I am ready for some adventures.

I am not saying everything is going to magically be solved when I turn 40, but I do think I am better equipped to handle the bad times better than I ever have. I will still have to battle and maintain my depression/

anxiety. I know that asking for help quickly when I see the signs is not weakness, but bravery. Taking care of myself is loving myself. I think the next 10 years I will keep growing, exploring and being myself.

I encourage you to look forward to knowing yourself better. Learn what you love and what you don't. Take the time to help yourself understand why you react the way you do to different circumstances. Learn how to roll with the terrible times and milk every ounce of joy from the good times. I'll leave you with one more lesson I have learned over my years: those small good times can still be found in the terrible ones. They are harder to find but they're still there. Don't worry about getting older. Be excited that you get to have the experience and wisdom of those years.

Have your own opinions on current events, hot-button issues, or events on campus?  
Write an opinion piece and send it to [mountobserver@mwcc.mass.edu](mailto:mountobserver@mwcc.mass.edu)

It may just end up in our next issue!

# Suffering in Silence

## The Toll Mental Health Stigma Takes

By Elysian Alder  
ASSISTANT EDITOR

At the age of 14, my mother passed away after a battle with lung cancer. I vividly remember being ushered into an office in my high school that was too strategically decorated, too warm, and too dimly lit. The placard on the door said: “crisis counselor.” I remember thinking that if anyone was in a crisis, it had to be my brother, not me. Despite suffering the same loss, I was led to believe that mental illness and trauma was only legitimate if my brother, who was always considered “at-risk,” was experiencing it. This belief perpetuated the stigma surrounding mental health and effectively prevented me from using the resource I was being provided. I felt that I had to navigate my sessions with the crisis counselor in a way that would lessen stress for my father and brother and would not indicate that I was also in need of help. My brother was the only one who received diagnoses and treatment while I was advised against seeking the same because it “wouldn’t look good for me” and could not possibly be legitimate anyway. I was meant to be the responsible one, the smart one; it was inconceivable for me to also be mentally ill. This experience was my first encounter with the stigmatization of mental health.

It’s time to break down the barriers of stigma and start having an open, honest dialogue about mental health. In fact, these conversations are long overdue. With nearly 1 in 5 adults in the United States experiencing a mental illness each year, social stigma remains a pervasive barrier to mental health care. Individuals who face mental health stigma often encounter discrimination and social exclusion, struggle to access



appropriate care, exposure to inaccurate representations of mental health disorders in popular media, and experience worsening of symptoms. Studies have shown that the stigma associated with mental illness can lead to a complete avoidance of treatment altogether, and I can attest to that. This avoidance, however, can have dire consequences, including an increased risk of suicide or a decreased quality of life for those living with untreated mental illness.

As soon as I was no longer legally dependent upon my father (and after a series of additional traumatic events, stressors, admittedly reckless patterns of behavior, and then intense bouts of self-isolation), I finally sought the treatment that had been denied to me for so long. It was jarring to realize that receiving care as an adult was not as easy as it had seemed when I was a minor. The first several therapists and psychiatrists with whom I attempted to schedule appointments offered to add me to a waiting list, while warning me that there was a chance that I would not be able to be seen for at least another year. Receiving care would be costly, too, ranging from \$75-\$300 per

session, not including the cost of any medications that would be prescribed, and many of the providers I contacted strongly advised weekly sessions for the first three months. It took time and financial planning, but eventually I was able to be seen. The first treatment plans I received were aimed at managing my attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and anxiety. However, when the psychiatrist gave me one more diagnosis, it was done with hesitation. The diagnosis was borderline personality disorder (BPD), and only two sessions later, my psychiatrist referred me to another (more expensive) practitioner and ended our relationship.

Borderline personality disorder is sometimes referred to as the most difficult disorder to treat, and many who are diagnosed are at a higher risk of being dispreferred or excluded from treatment. A study published in the *Journal of Personality Disorders* found that a significant proportion of mental health professionals held negative attitudes towards those with BPD, including the belief that we are manipulative and that the diagnosis is untreatable. However, research indicates

that labeling individuals with borderline personality disorder as difficult is a result of specific interactions between staff and patients, and not any inherent trait of the disorder. Despite the need for treatment, stigma can make it difficult for individuals to receive care. Research from New York Presbyterian found that about 70% of people with borderline personality disorder will attempt suicide at least once in their lifetimes, and about 10% complete the act, with suicide rates higher than any other psychiatric disorder and the general population.

Once I became more aware of the stigmatization of mental illness, I started to notice how rampant it is. It became inescapable, and for a long period of time, it seemed like inaccurate depictions of mental illness in pop culture and media were extremely profitable. The thing that many people don’t ordinarily consider as they consume content that equates mental illness to villainy is that these depictions have a significant impact on how society views and treats individuals with these conditions. Many portrayals of mental illness in movies and television perpetuate harmful stereotypes.

A survey conducted by a UK-based mental health campaign found that 50% of respondents had seen violent mentally ill characters in TV documentaries or films. The reality, though, is that most people with mental illness are not violent, and only around 3-5% of violent acts can be attributed to individuals with serious mental illness. In fact, individuals with severe mental illnesses are more likely to be victims of violent crime than the general population.

In my adult life, I frequently tell people that mental health is one of the things I take very seriously. My alphabet soup of conditions has made me do so much soul-searching and introspection because the truth is that for me, living with borderline personality disorder especially requires constant self-awareness. In addition to a plethora of other symptoms, the hallmark of borderline personality disorder is emotional instability and unpredictable relationships, coupled with a fear of abandonment. Although it can be exhausting and an ongoing struggle, my biggest priority is preventing my personal relationships from being negatively affected, and I believe that being able to take accountability while remembering to be realistic and kind to myself is a crucial part of that.

Managing mental health is a Sisyphian, lifelong endeavor. Stigmatization only serves to make it so much more difficult. But the fear of judgment, rejection and shame that comes with admitting to having a mental health condition feels just as daunting as the condition itself. Stigma often makes it feel like we are not allowed to be vulnerable or ask for help—even when we need it the most.

## Creative Writing

### The Stain

By Isabelle Mascary  
You're the load of laundry  
I grew tired of washing.  
The stain, I grew tired  
of trying to remove.  
Throw it in the trash.

## The Dunks Line

By Reed Fitzgerald

Wrapping right to left,  
Never left unattended  
People will always come  
For coffee and doughnuts.

Do not worry if they run out  
Of rich frosted rolled in sprinkles,  
There is an array of others  
To choose from.

From coffee swirled with pumpkin  
Perfect for the promise of cold

Evenings, even though the coffee  
Is cold itself.

When you reach the bottom  
Of your cold or hot morning in a cup  
Or take you last bite of sweet  
Relief from bitter and think  
Is there not a bit more?

Do not worry. The line still wraps  
From right to left. There is still coffee  
To be poured and doughnuts  
To be devoured.

## May Commences!

By William A. Lefrancois

Four months have come and gone; the new year marches ahead.  
May arrives with flowery blooms; in verdant splendor it is met.  
As the sun rises higher and brighter; no longer the cold to dread.  
Spirits soar with the daylight; suddenly surreal surroundings set.

In each person hope rises; sorry frowns turn to happy smiles.  
Friendships blossom as the buds bloom; anger and malice take a holiday.  
Driving along country roads brings joy; dazzling colors light the miles!  
Fear and dread lessen; weary wonder's witnessing way.

In colleges near and far; the procession of diplomas soon to start.  
Final exams and projects to do; a flurry of anticipation in the air.  
Students and teachers share this time; each hoping in their heart.  
To join in a sea of caps and gowns; fantastic fulfillment famously fair.

With degree in hand life changes; an ocean of hopes and dreams.  
Proud families encourage the graduate; smiles beam from ear to ear.  
Faith fulfilled at last; anticipation rewarded as life swells at the seams.  
A rewarding future in sight; never neglecting newsworthiness near.

Life and nature tune to the future; each blossom a certificate!  
Cap and gown mimic leaf and flower; tremendous potential in every seed.  
Student and teacher meet as one; working together ahead to get.  
The College's stony exterior grins; future fascinations fervently feed!

## Becalmed

At dusk, the sinking sun cast long shadows across the ship's deck, and a creeping sense of melancholy knotted itself tightly in Donovan's chest. The sea lay placid, as still as a pond, and seemed just as unmoved as it had been the past two days, leaving their ship adrift on the endless waters, motionless and alone. Stagnancy had led most of the crew below deck to seek shelter from the scorching sun, and the lack of wind or motion had rendered the elements unbearable.

Donovan, unable to bear the weight of his thoughts, leaned over the railing of the stern deck. Resting both of his elbows on the timber, he nestled his fingertips in his hair and closed his eyes, his head cradled in his hands. How had it all gone so wrong? Ordinarily, he would have found it all too easy to overcome the predicament, to draw his staff and force the ship out of the still waters, but the sea had other plans, holding them captive in what seemed to be the only stretch of sea cursed with a magic negation field. How had he failed to detect it before they steered into it? He was no pirate captain or sailing master, so certainly the actual skill of navigation was beyond him, but the value of him being there was in his prowess as a mage. So how...?

– From *The Poet's Treasure*, a work-in-progress fantasy novel by Elysian Alder

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