

AMERICORPS VISTA LEADER SERVES WESTMINSTER COMMUNITY THROUGH THE PURPLE BASKET

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STAFF REPORTER

Nayethzi Hernandez, an AmeriCorps Volunteers in Service to America leader, has served the Westminster College community through The Purple Basket since the start of the 2020–21 school year.

“The Purple Basket aims to basically meet students’ needs at Westminster,” said Fatima Santos, a senior justice studies major and student worker at The Purple Basket.

Although The Purple Basket is a campus resource for students, Hernandez said her role as the food insecurity volunteer is through a Utah Food Corps grant the college applied for. VISTA manages the financial transactions between Westminster and the Utah Food Corps, according to Hernandez.

“One of the things that’s really inspiring is the way [Hernandez] talks about projects that we’re doing and the amount of effort that she puts into projects,” Santos said. “She’s been very supportive and I’m thankful for all the work that she does here.”

The Purple Basket provides food consciously gathered as well as personal hygiene and household items, according to Cleo Walker, a sophomore interdisciplinary utopian studies custom major and student worker.

Forum Reporter Vanessa Eveleth spoke with Hernandez about community service and The Purple Basket.

The following interview has been edited for brevity and clarity.

Q: Why did you choose to become a AmeriCorps VISTA leader?

A: I chose to become an AmeriCorps VISTA because I was evacuated from my Peace Corps placement — that happened in 2020, with all of the COVID stuff. I had told myself that I would commit my life to two full years of service, and I only got to make my way through

one. So I told myself I needed to find something to contribute to my community. And this kind of fell in line with what I wanted to do, and a little bit of what I had familiarity with.

Q: Have you always had a passion for service work?

A: I’ve always loved service work. I grew up in a religious household and so service work has always been just the way of showing love to your neighbor. I think that is truly something I like to carry with me in life — if I have the time and energy to lend a hand to someone else, then that’s something I’m going to do.

Q: What does community service mean to you?

A: I have a value acronym that I lead most of my life through — HECK: holistic, environmental, ethical, community-based and kind. So community service to me really does center around community: knowing my community, feeling connected with my community

and contributing as much as I can from my person into the community. As much as it sounds very altruistic, I benefit when my community thrives. And if I ever needed help, I want there to be a community where they can rally and support me. What’s at the heart of community is understanding one another and understanding potential avenues of help.

Q: How does The Purple Basket help meet the needs or wants of students on campus?

A: A lot of the time, students will minimize their needs to very bare bones and forget it’s okay to have some wants too. The way we get to meet these desires is by simply providing the space for them to be there and trying to make it as de-stigmatized as possible. We want to reach the point where people can request what they want when they’re comfortable enough and feel respected and empowered. Thankfully, students are getting to the point where it is a norm

of “Hey, I would like this kind of milk,” because people deserve to be cared for in the form they want to be cared for.

Q: Is there anything else you would like to share?

A: The Purple Basket is not a school-sponsored project. Everything we have, we fundraise for. Students sometimes want to support one another, and that’s a form of mutual aid and that’s great. But, we never ask students to directly fund us. I do not think it’s students’ job to look out for other students necessarily, but it can be a form of mutual aid if that’s the way they want to interact with and contribute to The Purple Basket.

Food insecurity can be anything from “I skipped this meal,” or “I made my portions smaller so they could stretch.” That is still less than you deserve and you deserve to have all your needs met and cared for. And so that’s when The Purple Basket begins to come in at any point in that experience.



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AmeriCorps Volunteers in Service to America leader Nayethzi Hernandez tables for the Student Emergency Support Fund during One Westminster Day in the Shaw Student Center March 2. Hernandez initiated the Support Fund where people can apply for specific needs that cannot be carried on hand like car parts or access to sexual health, according to Cleo Walker, student worker and sophomore interdisciplinary utopian studies custom major.