Welcome to Studenting, your favorite podcast for all things McGill hosted by students working in student services. I'm your host, Margaret. Each season we dig into a facet of the student experience, talking with people across campus about life beyond the classroom.

This season is all about community - finding it, building it, and helping it grow. Today, Patricia Kamara, VP Internal for the Dietetics and Human Nutrition Undergraduate Society (DHNUS) and Peer Health Supporter at the Student Wellness Hub; and Shannon Walsh, Local Wellness Advisor to Macdonald Campus join us to talk about community on Macdonald Campus.

Welcome to the Studenting Macdonald Campus episode, everybody. We're very excited to have the three of you today and learn all about Mac Campus. If each of you could just introduce yourselves and tell us a little bit about your role on Mac Campus, or your relationship to it, that would be a lovely way to kick this off. Shannon, could we start with you?

Sure. Well, thanks for having me first off. My name is Shannon Walsh, and I am the Local Wellness Advisor at Macdonald Campus. I feel like it's a real honor to get to be part of the Mac community, and I'm also a part of the Student Wellness Hub's mental health team.

Awesome, we're really excited to have you, too. Thanks so much for joining. Welcome.

Hello, I am Patricia Kamara. I am a U3/U4 student at Mac Campus studying Concurrent Food Science and Nutrition. And I am VP internal at the DHNUS, Dietetics Human Nutrition Undergraduate Society. Currently, I am a peer supporter and I just started.

That's really exciting, we've heard a little bit about the hub peer supporters on our fall season. And they do really awesome work, so that's really exciting. And then Meha, last but not least.

Hi, my name is Meha Sharma. I'm a PhD Plant Science candidate and Macdonald Campus Commissioner in PGSS, which is liaison between the Downtown Campus and the Macdonald campus. So, we try to fill up the gap and gather the information from PGSS and translate it here to my campus.
Mac campus is home for me, so I'm very excited about it.

Margaret
And we're very excited to hear about it. Thank you so much each and every one of you for being here, and you already sort of got into it with your response Meha, about bringing PGSS and Mac together?

But to get us oriented when talking about Mac Campus, we're just curious what you would say the main differences are between student life on the downtown campus and student life in Mac Campus.

Patricia
I can. I can give a little insight. Well, I lived my first two years on campus at Mac and have lived my most recent here downtown. I would say the main difference is that, you know, everyone, at least on the face like you could recognize everybody.

Obviously, that's a little different after the pandemic. I remember coming back, I was like, who are all these people that I do not know? But now I know them. So that's one. And also, news travels fast. That's another nice thing about my campus.

So whenever there's an event of some sort, it's normally pretty easy to like, let everyone know that it's happening because we're all sort of together. And another thing I'm not sure if it's exactly reflective of how downtown is, but Mac is less intimidating for me anyway. Just because everyone is still my Prof or still my TA but they're very approachable I feel for the most part, especially in your first two years, and they're very involved in student life itself.

Shannon
I'd like to echo what Trish just shared. I know that my experience I was a student at McGill many, many years ago did my undergrad and grad downtown. Born and bred West Islander, Montreal. So, I had lived the West Island experience, but was a student downtown and now have worked on the West Island and Macdonald campus definitely has that vibe of small-town feel. Lots of students will say that it's not too big a stretch from their high school experience, so profs and advisors and administrative staff and Student Services, it's not unusual to see people having lunch together and people who know each other and saying hello as we walk around campus.

Lots of collaboration. And that's something that when I think about, you know, some of the other Local Wellness Advisors and many do get to collaborate with student groups and with go into classes and stuff like that. But I would give myself probably the sweet spot of having a lot of that.

I'm not going to say I have the most because maybe one of my teammates would be like, “No, that's not true”, but it's super common practice to be invited into classes. Very common for me to get to hang out with our awesome students and be invited to events that touch on wellness.

So, there's less delineation. It's a little bit more of a flattened hierarchy, if you will, which I love. So, I would say those are some of the benefits of Mac Campus.
Meha
Yeah, definitely. Mac campus is that close knit society. If you walk in the hallway, you'll end up talking and meeting people and you'll definitely lose the time as well. But it's really rewarding. Yeah, I miss talking to people these days. There's nobody here, but before there pandemic, we were a close-knit society.

Margaret
That's such an awesome thing to have as part of your undergraduate education, and I think that that makes a lot, lot of sense, Patricia, when you said it's less intimidating and there is this sort of flattened hierarchy.

So yeah, that's really awesome. I like the small-town comparison. And when it comes to that small town, I mean, Patricia, you mentioned that the word travels fast in terms of events and activities happening around campus. But what would you say to students looking to make the most of their time on my campus and really getting involved in this in this small community?

Patricia
I'd say the best way to enjoy community, non-academic life on campus would be to join a group. There are not that many, but there are enough on that campus. It may or may not be associated with what you're studying, but there's DHNUS in us which I'm a part of, but they are also sports.

There's also a lot of other things like the tree climbing club or the music club. I don't know if they still do this, but they used to just meet up and sing. But there's a lot of groups, and it's also less strict for most of them when you can join. So, contact the person in the group, like shoot them a quick message and you can normally tag along. Another good way of getting more involved or feeling the community more, if you don't necessarily want to join a group is to look at your resources.

One way is if you live in residence, talk to your floor fellow. They've always been pretty helpful. I've met a lot of my friends through Floor Fellows, actually. They always have a lot going on. Or talk to a Peer Hub Supporter like me.

But yeah, look at your resources or join a group, I'd say, are the two go-to ways.

Meha
Yeah, I would definitely echo what she just said. There are many opportunities. It's just if you want to get involved by participating in activities organized by a student society be it graduate and undergraduate societies or clubs taking part in indoor and outdoor sports.

There are if you really like sports, there are intramurals or friendly badminton. To me, I feel like sports was a big icebreaker, so I could make many friends and there is a Macdonell Campus community garden. So, if you are into gardening, you can rent a plot for the summer and you can have it for the Summer and grow your plants.

So, these are the some of the ways to get involved in the community.
Shannon
I feel like there's a lot of really awesome, of course, clubs and groups, you know, MCSS our undergraduate student society and MGCSS that Meha is a part of of our graduate student society.

I always say that that's like a good place for students to start, right? So, follow them on Facebook and Instagram. Mac is a little bit more Facebook-ey, than downtown. So that's something worth mentioning. Downtown is very Instagram. And please, you know, tell me if I'm wrong, Patricia and Meha.

But my sense is that you can rely on what needs to be shared to be shared, at least on the Facebook pages. So, there's lots of great stuff. Not only that they do and organize so like movie nights or, you know, coffee breakfast. Some of it has had to move virtual, of course, over this pandemic, but there's still opportunities for connection. But they also share so when there are other groups or other events happening where people could come and connect. So, there are two really good places to start.

And DHNUS that Patricia is a part of is really one of the very active groups on campus and even students that are not in dietetics and human nutrition often attend things that DHNUS organizes. But there's tons of other awesome groups.

We have Rainbow Mac. We have, you know, the Music Club, as you mentioned, which is super active. We have the Woodsmen, very popular. They get up at literally the crack of dawn to practice. And of course, the intramurals. There's lots of great winter activities, too. So even with the restrictions that we've been experiencing there's still skating and cross-country skiing and snowshoeing that you can do. So sometimes it's just knowing like, what can you do? And I think Floor Fellows is another great place if you're, you know, living in residence to just say, “Hey, what's up? What's going on? What activities do people do?” And to ask for years because they've lived, you know, the transition being a new student at McGill. And but there's so many different opportunities, even in our current situation.

Patricia
I also just remembered something based on what Shannon just said, the MCSS has, this newsletter is also a good place to look at. Everyone ignores it except me, I guess. But read it for my first in university, to be brutally honest, it went to spam. But now I read it every single time because it keeps me very informed. So, yeah.

Margaret
Newsletters always have a wealth of information and I agree with you. They go unloved, and a lot of love goes into them. So, it's a labor of love. So, yeah, there is always really good tips in there, and I'd never heard about the gardening plot rental thing at Mac campus.

That's really cool. I know about the apple picking, of course, famous for all the right reasons. I remember my dorm mate coming back with like a ten-pound bag of apples in her first year and they went to good use.
But that's awesome to hear that there's also winter activities for the current predicament, given that going inside has been a little touch and go there for a while. But yeah, what awesome advice Floor Fellows, newsletter, all great, great places to start.

And of course, like the pandemic, has been a bit of a wedge in terms of finding community building community, reaching out to people. But outside of that, is there any difficulty finding or building community in the Mac Campus context, particularly that you find?

**Shannon**
I mean, one comes to mind right off the bat. And I'm the non-student here, so I'm eager to see what the two of you say about this. But Mac doesn't have a lot of spaces to eat communally, and our res students don't have a cafeteria. They have a kitchen space that they during the pandemic had to schedule times to use and cook their meals. So, I think a big challenge is students coming in, particularly to residents or spending a lot of time in their rooms.

They're not going down at mealtime and sharing meals, and they're often going in the kitchen to cook a meal and then bringing their food back to their room. And even those not living in residence, even our grad students will say to me, like, there's not a lot of space to go and share a meal and have that time for connection. And I think meal sharing is a really important opportunity for connection. So, I could see that's maybe one downside is that we don't have, and I downtown has lots of those opportunities. So, I think that was something that comes to mind right away for me.

But I don't know. Patricia and Meha I don't know what your thoughts are on maybe some disadvantages.

**Meha**
Yeah, definitely food brings people together, and our cafeteria is small and very expensive, too, so not a lot of people can afford it. It's just like if you didn't get anything, either you end up eating chips from the vending machine or just nothing because it's very expensive. I'm sorry to say, but yeah, as other than that, I would say that as a graduate student, and especially if you are in a thesis program, initially you will definitely find yourself a bit isolated. You have your friends as your lab mates only. That's I think with all the thesis students. But with time, if you allow yourself to open up, Mac Campus does have resources. A graduate peer support group for the students and specifically there are other resources: Women in Science.

So, if you want to be inclined towards academia, there are like many things that you can do. But yeah, definitely like you need some time to adjust yourself.

**Patricia**
Yeah, I would just echo what both Shannon and Meha just said. Another one that comes to mind is study spaces, which is kind of similar to the eating spaces. One beautiful thing about downtown is that there are many spaces for studying that you can still socialize and like, you don't have to be quiet to be there. And that's something that's always missing out, Mac. Also, when they're there, they do close pretty early, so you don't always have access. I do remember in my first year, I don't know if... in my first year, we used to go to like the main buildings and just find a classroom that was open to sit down and socialize in because it was a space that was not the library. You also got
a lot of library fatigue because you're going to the same place over and over again. You need something new. And that was actually a good way of finding a space to go.

I don't think that's available anymore, so that would definitely be, a thing. Also, within residence when I was in residence, because a lot of the time you do spend on your floor and in your kitchen, you do isolate yourself from the rest of the residence. So, unless you have friends on different floors, it was very easy to not know other people or not know them well. In other floors, just because you would never have a reason to go upstairs and you never have a reason to go downstairs, you only come in and leave. That can be pretty isolating, especially in the winter or the second half of the fall, I'd say when your grades hit, especially in your first year and you're feeling kind of like it's all a little uneasy kind of so you're like, I should get back to studying properly. But everyone's thinking like you so the isolation can get too much.

**Margaret**
That's absolutely true, and I think it's really funny that you bring up the residents floor divide because that is very real. I stayed in the downtown campus residence my first year, and I remember the only time I would leave my floor is if the washer and dryer was broken and I had to find a different one. But other than that, it was like my little lateral bubble. So, I think that's a good point that you bring up. And of course, all of these problems people have noticed across student services have just been exacerbated by the pandemic. So hopefully the very small light at the end of the very long tunnel is that eventually these common spaces and things like meal sharing, which is I agree is such an important part of making friends and meeting people. Hopefully, those things become more accessible somewhere in the future.

And then I was really curious actually to hear from each of you what community spaces you're involved in. You've already mentioned your roles in the introduction. But I was just curious what that looks like for you. Are you hosting sort of Zoom events? Are you participating in peer support? What does that look like? What are your specific community ties and how are those faring?

**Patricia**
In pandemic times, we do have, I would say, a big variety of things that we're still doing as part of DHNUS, for example, we do online workshops. We normally collaborate with student services in some shape or form. So, whether that be CAPSs or Shannon, we always want to invite people. We've done a lot of reaching out to alumni and them talking to us or reaching out to different communities and them talking to us. Like this week, for example, we have dietitians who work in indigenous communities come to talk about their experience.

Those are all very academic and wellness related. We also have a lot of social media content. So, lots of reels, lots of TikToks, lots of stories, and they are getting a lot of engagement and they are very fun to make. And for me, I found it really good because I've learned a new skill set. Like I would say pre-pandemic, I've not been deeply interested in social media or content creating. In that sense, I'd say, like I was always just going to write an article. But now I find TikToks, the Reels and all that stuff like it's my it's like my passion currently. So, and that was because of the pandemic, and it was because of DHNUS. And that's really exciting. So, yeah.
Meha
I would like to add that for, more specifically for, graduate students, it's sometimes hard to get their involvement. So, during the pandemic and NCGSS tried to host virtual game events Halloween costume event. We had like various orientation activities; students did enjoy them. During the fall semester we had the chance to go for kayaking and the like. So, it was fun. So, we tried to have a bit of this. But definitely involvement is a big issue with graduate students, I would say, because I think they are always burdened with their thesis work.

Shannon
And MCGSS, the graduate student society was pretty famous on campus for their bagel breakfasts pre-pandemic. And like we all know, any time you've got like free food to give away, you're going to get people eating, lots of foot traffic and like it was, everybody would be talking about it, “Oh, it's big breakfast. Did you hear this bagel breakfast?” But unfortunately, that is one thing that has had to be kind of adjusted right? And hopefully it will make its return sometime in 2022. But yeah, I love, Patricia, what you were saying too, about reels and TikToks and content that's being shared because sometimes community is created in those ways too, right? And we've all had to diversify, myself included. And I'm like much older than all of you and not as savvy when it comes to some of this stuff. But I've enjoyed participating in it. I've enjoyed working with students who tell me that they heard about something that was going on through some online platform or learn some tips and tricks that way. So, another way for really trying to build that community is like, try and be sure to follow the pages where you're going to see some of that good stuff, right? So, of course, Healthier McGill is like, you know, the place to go for all of McGill. But McGill Mac has so many great pages that I follow that I encourage students to follow. So, besides the student societies and DHNUS like, check out what's going on with Mac Athletics, check out what's going on, you know, McGill campus, Instagram, and Facebook page, because sometimes that's where you're going to find out that there's something fun coming up, that there's a game tonight or a movie site or, you know, some maybe in-person outdoor activity. So, to try and make the most of what we're currently dealing with and to really understand that there is a part of it that has to do with making sure that you have access to the information by following the key people so that you know what's up when it's up.

Margaret
That's a great point. I love that you brought up video content creation, Patricia, because I agree. I think it's like a great equalizer in terms of involvement for students who might have barriers to accessing or participating in Zoom or outdoor events. For whatever reason, consuming information from social media can be a lot lower stress and an easier to find. So, I appreciate that you both brought up the Instagram, Facebook, and video content that Mac Campus is making accessible.

And that actually segues really well into our next question. There are also students who can find the social aspect of university life intimidating or difficult for a variety of reasons. And now with the pandemic, we're not only seeing one year of students who have never experienced campus life are incoming freshmen, but multiple classes who've been an online school for upwards of two years. So, what would the three of you say to new or returning students who are feeling concerned or anxious about putting themselves out there and taking advantage of clubs and groups?
Meha
Yeah, I just want to ensure them they are in this safe environment to express themselves. Everybody is going through the same boat, and they are your fellow. So, try to express yourself, and communication is the key to break anything in between.

So, communicate more and look around. You will definitely find people like you.

Patricia
To add on to that, I'd also say, even though we may not always feel like it, whenever you do join a group activity or whether it be online or in-person, there is no pressure to actually participate. If you're not comfortable, it's OK to simply just like, sit down and watch, and it may be through going, you may pick out one or two people that you're like, oh, like, they were really cool and to be honest it's also very likely that someone might reach out to you and be like, “Hey, what are you doing later? Do you want to do x y z?” Or if you would like to, you can always reach out to someone who was in the group and be like, “Hey, what are you doing later? Would you like to do x y z?”

Another thing is I know it's not exactly the same because we don't even have roommates anymore at McGill sometimes. But if you do know one person, you can go with that one person. So, it's a little less intimidating, a little less you against everybody else? It's you and your friend. And that would be my advice.

Shannon
Just going to, you know, kind of build off of what Patricia and Meha were saying about, you know, pursuing new students connecting or if there's any kind of, you know, feeling of discomfort to, let's say, join a group or a club, how can you feel connected? How can you really engage? I think sometimes that's why students book appointments with me. Sometimes it happens that I'll meet with a student who is maybe struggling to connect but doesn't necessarily want to connect with a group or club. But they are feeling maybe some homesickness or feeling isolated. And so, they might book a wellness planning session with me where we're really going to focus on what some what are some baby steps that can be taken towards connection?

And you know, I really try and emphasize the value of buddying up when possible. This has already been touched on, right? So, if there's someone that you've had some familiarity with, you've exchanged hellos or you've, you know, connected a little bit, you've had some conversation to use that person as the starting place to say like, “Hey, do you want to go for a walk today or did you hear that there's badminton? And would you like to try that out?” versus feeling this pressure to be as connected as you were pre-pandemic or as connected as you were, let's say, in high school, if you're a new student.

The pandemic has definitely also affected people's confidence in socializing. So, we can't ignore the fact that we're all kind of learning how to navigate, you know, conversation and small talk and relationship building. Right? So, start small and reach out to an individual if there's someone in your circle and if there's not, another student that you can reach out to, not to hesitate to reach out to your local wellness advisor because we do play that role as well.
Margaret
This has been a really awesome conversation. Unfortunately, Patricia had to leave us. But before we conclude Shannon and Meha, I wanted to know what your favorite part of being a member of the campus community was. What do you like most?

Shannon
Sure. My favorite part about being part of my campus is just the feeling of being connected to other people. That familiarity and the smiles and the hellos, even with our masks on, our eyes say hello to each other when we see each other. So that's definitely my favorite part is just that sense of belonging and that we all matter, that it matters, that we show up and that we're part of the bigger picture. And that's my absolute favorite part.

Meha
Yeah, my favorite part is the community, the close-knit community we have at Mac. Professors are very approachable. Help is very approachable. So being treated as a family as well. So that's the biggest asset being part of my campus.

Margaret
Thank you so much for sharing your perspective on that campus this episode. I learned a lot, and I think that our listeners will gain something from our conversation as well. Again, Shannon, Meha, Patricia, thank you so much for taking the time to talk with us today.

Meha and Shannon
And to thank you so much. Thanks so much. Thank you.

Margaret
Thanks for listening to Studenting. If you have any questions, comments or feedback about this episode or the show in general, you can reach student dot services at McGill dot ca (student.services@mcgill.ca). If you want to know what resources are available to you as a McGill student at the link on our show notes for Ask McGill.

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