

EXPOSURE



RECLAIMING CONFIDENCE

One student's journey toward healthy living

Story by [Fresno State](#)

August 4th, 2020

As a recent graduate, Allyson Hildebrand stands tall, confident, and ready to conquer the next chapter of her life. Although her journey to this point has been messy and challenging as she continues to heal from childhood obesity and years of depression, Allyson's confidence shines bright, hoping to light a flame within others.

Throughout her childhood, Allyson struggled with her overall health, facing food insecurity and often shaming herself for her weight. As she got older, the amount of criticism and judgement she received from others continued to grow, including the criticism she received from her

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During her time at Fresno City College, Allyson suffered a minor leg injury and sought medical help for the pain. Despite her concerns, her doctor dismissed the severity of the injury, ruling it as a product of her size.

“It was like, ‘Oh, well, you know, it's because you're obese, like lose some weight. You're going to have a miserable twenties if you're this size,’” Allyson recalls. “She didn’t give me any sort of something to boost me up and push me towards...losing weight or getting better, and this is a doctor who knew that I had struggled with things like depression.”

Allyson’s experience with her doctor became a turning point in her journey toward healthy living. It allowed her to challenge the judgement she had received from others and confront the unhealthy ways she had treated herself.

“It really made me realize I don't deserve to be told these things, and I definitely did not deserve the way I was treating myself and the things I was telling myself and the self-hatred that I had,” she says.

During her gap semester before transferring to Fresno State, Allyson began working to be kinder to herself and sought out resources that could point her in the right direction.

As a Bulldog, Allyson gravitated toward the Student Cupboard and eventually began working there as a student assistant — a role she describes as “one of the best things to happen in [her] life.”



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FINDING SUPPORT

The Student Cupboard, established in 2014, is a free food and hygiene pantry that is part of Fresno State's multi-initiative Food Security Project.

For Allyson, the cupboard gave her the chance to continue building healthy food habits and support fellow students.

"I was blown away by how established [the Student Cupboard] was and how much was offered to students," Allyson says.

"After seeing both its impact on other students and knowing how much it helped me, I always kept the cupboard in mind as one of the best resources on campus."

In her role, Allyson has been amazed at how comprehensive and student-centered the program is, providing more than just free food.

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“While that is a big part of what we essentially provide, we also offer assistance for those interested in applying for the CalFresh program, give out hygiene bags on certain days of the month, provide diapers to those students with a child in their household, and do our best to find other services for students if their need goes beyond what we can provide,” she says.

→Did you know? CalFresh is a federally-funded nutrition assistance program that helps people stretch tight food budgets and afford to incorporate healthy foods, like fruits and vegetables, into their diets.



LOOKING DEEPER

Although Allyson was aware of food insecurity as a growing issue both statewide and nationwide, her time working at the Student Cupboard opened her eyes to its prevalence among the college demographic.

“College is not only a time to grow academically but can be such an important time to facilitate overall growth. I think we often make the mistake of only looking at [students’ health] from one angle, whether it be physical health, mental health, emotional health, etc.,” she

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Ensuring access to food, according to Allyson, is one of many ways universities can support students' most basic needs and "is just as necessary as some of the other health services provided."

Mary Castro, Fresno State's first lady and volunteer who is the visionary behind the Student Cupboard, wanted to create a program that empowers students to reach their academic goals.



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“Fresno State students already beat the odds by making it to Fresno State. They represent hope, and we aim to support them by assisting in their nutritional needs,” Mary says. “The Student Cupboard demonstrates how much we believe in their potential to positively influence our region.”

As someone who has faced the reality of food insecurity and struggled to establish a healthy relationship with food, Allyson knows first-hand the importance of comprehensive wellness and has learned to trust herself — something she hopes to encourage others to do as well.

“I know that, one, you can't have a healthy relationship with food, if you just straight up don't have it,” she says. “No matter what you're going through, just know that your food is important...and if you need to use the resources, please use them.”



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→Did you know? Since its inception, the Student Cupboard has had over 200,000 visits and served over 17,000 students.



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STAYING THE COURSE

Over the past few years, Allyson has been consistently improving her overall health, which she says includes “better food, cooking, working out and just giving myself a break sometimes.”

Taking the steps to prioritize herself hasn’t always been easy, but with commitment, determination and a little help, “the act of trying to be a better version of myself became a part of my day-to-day life.”

“Services such as the Student Cupboard — even if the help was as small as a jar of peanut butter and some pasta each week — allowed me to allocate that much more into focusing on myself instead of stressing about my grocery budget,” she says.

With access to healthier food options, Allyson now regularly cooks meals at home and has seen its direct impact on her confidence and overall well-being. Not only does cooking help

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her relieve stress, but it has also played a major role in helping her lose over 100 pounds in the past few years.

“I still have a lot more to learn and a long way to progress, but I’m glad that I could set some of these lifestyle habits in place as I head towards the future,” she says.



CREATING COMMUNITY

Although Allyson earned her bachelor’s degree in art with an emphasis in animation and a minor in Japanese, she still hopes to incorporate advocacy for better nutrition practices into her future career and use her own experience to inspire and uplift others in similar situations.

“I’m still learning how to overcome these issues and to be confident within myself, and as I do that, I realized I also want to give back to other people,” she says.

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“That's what motivated me to get as strong as I can so that I feel like I'm in a place where I can confidently go do that and just be the support for someone else who *was* like me and who *is* like me.”

Now, when Allyson talks about her journey, she speaks collectively, as both her former, current and future selves. She also speaks in support of those who she hopes to inspire, emphasizing that although everyone's journey toward healthy living is different, no one is alone.

“We can do this. We can be an amazing person,” she says.



WHERE BOLD BEGINS

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Footnote: *Photos by Cary Edmondson, Story by Victoria Cisneros — University Brand Strategy and Marketing*

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