

Creating a *Vibrant* Campus Life

The Mercy College Office of Campus Life is thriving under the direction of two new leaders who know Mercy from all sides. Both Alena Kush, M.S. '16, and Romessa Azhar '21, have a long and deep involvement with the College, first as students and more recently as employees who are passionate advocates of a student experience that fosters well-being, connection and access to all that Mercy provides.

As director of Campus Life, Kush oversees the student life activities at Mercy's three campuses, with a staff that creates and maintains a full roster of events, clubs and activities. The magnitude of the job — keeping track of dozens of student groups and hundreds of student members, promoting events on three campuses, and constantly creating new ways to engage students — keeps the team at high performance. "I love my team," said Kush, ticking off names along with words of praise. At Dobbs Ferry, Associate Director of Student Life Victoria Costa and Campus Life Specialist Marlina Taveras; in the Bronx, Campus Life Specialist Sodary Castillo Guerrero; and in Manhattan, Campus Engagement Specialist Azhar.

It is their job to create what President Tim Hall once described as "sticky" campuses — where Mercy students, more than 90% of whom commute to Mercy, will want to stay and enjoy what the College offers long after their classes end.

"Off-campus living has many benefits, like privacy and



Alena Kush, M.S. '16

independence. But it has a downside, too," says Azhar. Commuter students sometimes struggle with isolation or a feeling of not fitting in with the residential community. Azhar adds, "I want to build a community where all students feel safe and welcome, because then they are more likely to participate." This, she says, involves "getting student input, then getting them Involved and engaged."

And leading the student life charge is Associate Dean, Student Affairs, Nick Canzano, M.S. '13. "I'm excited for the opportunity to collaborate with Alena and the amazing Campus Life team as we continue to build a strong sense of community and provide fun and engaging activities for Mercy students. In my various roles at Mercy, I've learned how important feeling connected can be for students to be successful, and

I'm proud to be part of a team that helps create these opportunities for students."

Ensuring that every student can find at least one group where they feel comfortable is another goal, but it's the students themselves who have been expanding the options at Mercy's three campuses. "A group of graduate students wanted to bring multiple cultures together for celebrations," said Costa. Last year's multi-holiday gathering featured members creating a potluck meal of dishes and customs from the culture they know best. "It was great to have one celebration for Christmas, Hanukkah, Kwanzaa and Diwali all in one," she said.

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Longstanding clubs and groups like the Black Student Union, the Association of Latin American Students, and groups created for South Asian, Muslim and Caribbean students have been growing in numbers and visibility. The club Mavericks for Change creates opportunities for students of every ethnicity and culture who are eager to give back to the community, such as assembling and delivering care packages to a homeless shelter in the Bronx.

“Every member of the Campus Life team goes out of their way to reach every segment of the student population, finding ways to celebrate who they are and what’s important to them,” said Kush. “Even if a student is not doing well academically but they are active on campus, there’s a much greater likelihood they’ll come back next semester, and things will probably be better by then. I don’t want any student to give up.”

After spending the past year creating ways to encourage every student to make the most of their Mercy experience, Azhar concurred: “In the end, whatever their faith, ethnicity or identity, I hope students will graduate from Mercy knowing their voice matters.”



Student leaders and staff at the Leadership Conference at the Dobbs Ferry Campus



Students gather at the Activities Desk at MercyManhattan for a “Thankful for you event” to create thank you cards for friends, family, staff and faculty.