

Indie Film: Professor's fifth documentary film turns camera on homelessness in rural Maine

'Hungry Now,' by Alan Kryszak, a professor at the University of Maine-Machias, highlights a variety of Mainers who have no permanent home. The film also hears from 'helpers,' who want to solve the problem, and others who feel no responsibility. It premieres Nov. 13 in Orono.

BY DENNIS PERKINS

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A still from the documentary "Hungry Now," by Alan Kryszak, which explores homelessness in rural Maine. The film premieres Nov. 13 in Orono. Courtesy of Alan Kryszak

In Auburn, where I live, a small tent city has grown around the Unitarian Universalist Church near my house. I first saw it about a month ago and learned on the website Nextdoor.com of the church's support for the local homeless people who've pitched their tents in the shadow of the church's stone walls.

In case you've never checked in on that particular neighborhood-based message board, it's basically alternating lost pet notices and opportunities for the people around you to out themselves as the sort of neighbors you don't want at the next barbecue.

And so the tents and the people living in them have elicited the expected debate, with some neighbors posting helpful ways in which we more fortunate can pitch in to help those neighbors gearing up to survive another approaching Maine winter, and those trotting out various, unoriginal iterations of, "Get a job, you lazy slugs."

OK, that last quote comes from a text message shown onscreen in filmmaker Alan Kryszak's new documentary "Hungry Now," which is showing as part of the Maine-based film series The Right to Food on Nov. 13 at the University of Maine's Collins Center for the Arts in Orono.

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But it's the sort of all-too-common, glib dismissal homelessness routinely receives – from certain people. In Kryszak's hour-long documentary, the filmmaker took to the streets of northern Maine to listen to Mainers dealing with homelessness, Mainers dedicated to helping those people, and Mainers who, as one Machias resident opines, compare caring for those in need to attracting unwanted pigeons with bread crumbs.

As a documentarian, Kryszak – a filmmaking instructor in the Interdisciplinary Fine Arts Department at UMaine-Machias – allows his subjects to speak for themselves. As a viewer, it's hard not to hear the stories of the 58-year-old student who breaks down in tears at finding herself homeless and relying on the local food pantry and decide which side of the issue you'd want to be on.



Filmmaker Alan Kryszak, whose fifth documentary, "Hungry Now," premieres Nov. 13 in Orono. Kryszak also is a professor at the University of Maine-Machias. *Courtesy of Alan Kryszak*

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Kryszak highlights many voices throughout the film. A disabled man tries to recall how recently he was jumped and robbed while living on the streets. A 50-something man named Jonathan in Bangor explains how his abusive parents kept him in their basement until he escaped at 14 or 15, but assures the filmmaker, "I have it bad but there's always somebody worse than you." Jonathan ultimately refuses the filmmaker's offer of aid, instead urging him toward a nearby dumpster, where a couple is rooting for food. A Passamaquoddy single mother relates how she's shielded her kids from the reality of their need by denying herself essentially everything.

Kryszak's camera carefully frames his subjects so that those not wishing to be identified can retain their anonymity. Others are forthright, including a Native man whose own tale of lifelong hardship the filmmaker traces back to Maine's history of bigotry and abuse toward the state's original inhabitants. Especially in the so-called Indian residential schools, where children were subjected to brutal, racist erasure of their culture.

"It was a choice between school beatings and food," the now middle-aged man reflects.

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Then there are “the Helpers,” a nod to Mr. Rogers’ famously apt description. The head of Bangor’s Manna Ministries, which provides everything from a food pantry to job training, explains how he’s chosen to forego a salary for the past several years, choosing to live on Maine’s Supplemental Security Income while he serves his community’s most needy. Teachers at the Cobscook Institute’s TREE program explain how their trauma-informed approach to reaching and educating children from poverty-stricken households can help undo some of the damage done by everything from food insecurity to homelessness to abuse. A representative from supermarket chain Hannaford says that delivering excess food to soup kitchens and food pantries in Maine represents the best part of his job.

Then there are the others. Here, again, Kryszak unobtrusively allows various, less sympathetic Mainers to talk. And they do. Apart from the Red Sox-hatted guy comparing homeless and in-need Mainers to pest birds, one woman decries the supposed laziness of the homeless, noting how some businesses can’t fill job vacancies.

Kryszak’s response is a graphic showing how the federal minimum wage hasn’t risen since 2009, and that any minimum wage job leaves some workers on the brink of starvation and eviction each week. Bringing his camera into a Machias gun store festooned with Trump flags, the filmmaker finds an intriguingly more nuanced take. One man, surrounded by the shop’s weaponry, expresses sympathy.

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“It’s not political, just give people food,” he says, before following it up with a convoluted attack on Democrats for “buying votes” by, you know, actually attempting to help people.

Mainers are, by reputation and experience, no-nonsense people. Maybe it’s the hard winters, or our relative isolation, that make us value self-reliance. But as “Hungry Now” shows again and again, the world is hard.

A UMaine professor digs into the “up by your own bootstraps” roots of societal disdain for those in need, explaining, “The world is actually not a meritocracy,” and noting that equating material success with human worth “legitimizes the difference in status between people.”

Thus the poor are blamed for their misfortune, regardless of the disadvantages they were born into and handed, while Americans all too often celebrate the ultra-rich as also being better people. Kryszak underscores that fallacy with intermittent shots of billionaires like Elon Musk and Jeff Bezos shooting themselves and their luxury automobiles into space. (Bezos, it should be noted, himself once said that he can't think of anything better to do with his untold wealth than creating a private vanity space program.)

Maybe not. Hey, I'm not worth \$200 billion (give or take) on the backs of underpaid and exploited factory workers, so what do I know? Alan Kryszak (who I'm guessing also isn't a billionaire) may not know, either. But his latest film is a powerful examination of the brutal reality of homelessness and poverty in Maine. It also presents two models for those of us fortunate to have a place to live and enough to eat to follow – be a helper, or be an other. I know which one I choose.

“Hungry Now,” is part two of the Maine-focused film series The Right to Food, which kicks off on Sept. 30 at the University of Maine at Machias’ Performing Arts Center with a screening of director Nancy Ghertner’s documentary, “Voices from the Barrens: Native People, Blueberries and Sovereignty.” Look for “Hungry Now” to screen on Maine Public Television after its Nov. 13 premiere.

Dennis Perkins is a freelance writer who lives in Auburn with his wife and cat.
