

## MELISSA RINEHART

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, WELLSRING INTERFAITH SOCIAL SERVICES

When listening to Melissa Rinehart talk about her beginnings in social services, it's hard not to think that the chapter title in her life story for the past decade should be *The Accidental Activist*. Her ascension to executive director of Wellspring Interfaith Social Services says more about the need for organizations to weigh the intangibles, rather than relying solely on previous paradigms.

Interestingly, if not earnestly enough, Rinehart's career path began in 2007, after earning her Ph.D. in cultural anthropology from Michigan State University, when she moved away from the familial atmosphere of Fort Wayne for a tenure-track position at Valdosta State University in southern Georgia.

An expected route for an academic to take, however, Rinehart's path had both an emotional and professional pivot on January 12, 2010—the day Haiti was leveled by a massive earthquake. Watching the unimaginable devastation drew out not only her empathy, but also her strong need to do something to help.

"I'd never been to Haiti, nor had I studied the Haitian people or culture," said Rinehart. "But that night, I couldn't sleep that night and the next morning I called the American Red Cross and told them I wanted to help. What they heard was that there was a professor interested in a relief effort, and soon there

was a TV crew interviewing me. I was like a deer caught in headlights."

But in the end, her university's impromptu relief effort accumulated more than 10 tons of rice, beans and bottled water that was transported to Haiti with the assistance of the State Department and the generous donations from her local community.

In a matter of days, Rinehart began to challenge her own destiny as a young academic. "Social anthropologists aren't cold, or indifferent," said Rinehart. "They are what they are—observers, measurers and chroniclers of human nature. Think of it as kind of like Star Trek's Prime Directive, but with exceptions—relief drives, for example. (If you don't know the Prime Directive, well, don't think less of me and look it up.)"

Rinehart began wrestling with the duality between being an academic, which can be economically comfortable and intellectually prosperous and pursuing a new career path that would have less certainty and security.

By the time she took the reins at Wellspring in March 2019, Rinehart had served as a nonprofit consultant and directed the Visiting Nurses' diversity and inclusion program. She'd lived frugally and, at one point, had to rely on public assistance and a food bank to get her and her family through tough times.

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It's the idea of living life on the edge that Rinehart said she wants people—even friends and family—to understand about the people who Wellspring assists. At its core, food insecurity is prevalent even in a land of plenty. And having a job doesn't necessarily translate to making a living wage, even in a city like Fort Wayne that defines itself as having lower costs of living.

"I hate to use the word poverty because it is a label that fixes an image that isn't based in reality," said Rinehart. "We serve the homeless, people living in group homes, single-parent homes and professionals. There is no typical client of our services."

As executive director of Wellspring, Rinehart said one of her main goals is to have the organization adapt to the changing needs of Fort Wayne. This includes meeting its clients where they are, rather than just supporting them from its offices. With the right infrastructure and partnerships, Rinehart mobilized Wellspring to have three vans that serve Wellspring on Wheels.

Yet, rather than just drive-up and open its doors, Rinehart used her academic background to research and develop support systems that are not only culturally appropriate for the communities Wellspring serves, but also to help reduce food waste. For example, on the last Thursday of the month, Wellspring on Wheels provides food and services

targeted to the Burmese community at the Autumn Woods apartments.

"I did my due diligence," she said. "The Burmese were not taking the classic macaroni and cheese. It was suggested that we provide fish and rice and, when possible, leafy greens. Now, we always run out of food."

Rinehart is also finding that more and more college students are facing food insecurity. Wellspring works with Indiana Tech to provide food assistance to its students. Rinehart said she is excited to be working with institutions of higher learning to be able to highlight that food insecurity is a systemic problem faced by many different types of people, and not just the typically stereotyped individuals. "Hunger is not a single image, but a menagerie of individuals suffering," she said.

As someone who'd been part of the food insecurity menagerie, Rinehart knows her empathy and her academic training afford her the skill set that allows her to be sensitive, as well as strategic, to Fort Wayne's need for the services Wellspring provides.

"I feel honored to go to work every day and be able to put Wellspring on the front lines to solve problems through its great programming and services," she said. Rinehart's working in the world of nonprofit social services may have been by accident, but her sense of purpose and intention are clearly established. ▲

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MATTHEW OWEN



