

Food stamps lend helping hand to students

The program helps stabilize students' precarious money situations with the extra monthly income it provides

BY JARED PABEN
NEWS EDITOR

University student Spencer Finnan makes two "fairly big" trips to the grocery store each month, buying enough food to last him about two weeks. Sometimes he makes more trips, but he's always sure to spend a full \$150 per month, he said.

Finnan, a senior who will leave the University this term with a music degree, pays with food stamps. And he's paid at the register with a swipe of his plastic Oregon Trail card since January.

His only regret: He wishes he had signed up for food stamps earlier.

"I didn't realize how much money it would help me save," Finnan

said. "I just kind of wished I would have realized it sooner ... That's \$150 I used every month. That's good because I was coming up a little short each month on my bills."

Finnan is one of the approximately 1,550 college students in Lane County and 7,715 college students in the state who are currently using food stamps to help make ends meet, according to the Oregon Department of Human Services.

Those people join the approximately 200,000 students, or about 1.1 percent of total benefit recipi-

ents, who got food stamps in the nation in 2002, according to a United States Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service report. About 63,000 of those students were heads of their households. About 158,000 participating households had both a student and child or children present.

Carolyn Ross, food stamp program manager for DHS, said that only 2 to 3 percent of those who get food stamps in Oregon are students, but the number has increased a percentage point over the last year. Ross said she has two theories for the increase: Some universities are now dividing the costs of housing and food for students interested in moving into dormitories, prompting many students to only pay for the housing and get on food stamps to cover the costs of food; and the increasing cost of attending college is prompting students to get on food stamps to help cover living costs.

"That's just our wild guess. We just think it's the rising costs of tuition, so you just don't have the extra money for food," said Ross, who graduated from the University in 1982 with sociology and business degrees.

Ross said food stamps help students stretch their income given the high cost of tuition, fees and textbooks.

Adam Petkun, former chairman of the Oregon Student Association and former ASUO president, said he doesn't find the trend of more students getting on food stamps surprising given increasing college costs.

"It underscores the need to address the cost of education in the state," Petkun said. "This is what happens when the state balances books on the back of students. It was only bound to start affecting students' bottom lines."

The OSA works with the Student Childcare Program, which helps support students with children. The waiting list for that program is growing and there are hundreds of students who would like to get those benefits, Petkun said.

"I think there is a problem that so many students whose futures are so bright have to rely on social services to get by," Petkun said.

Nancy Weed — food stamp outreach coordinator for the Oregon Hunger Relief Task Force, an advisory body with members appointed by the governor that works with DHS — said food stamps were crucial to her when she was working and making less than \$200 per month, all while studying as a graduate student at Portland State University.

"It just makes such an incredible difference in the world," Weed said.

"I kind of think I wouldn't (have made) it through the program without help like that."

Weed said food stamps allowed her to make it through the expenses of college with children. She is adamant about helping students get on food stamps partly because food stamps helped her get through school on her way to a master's degree in social work in 1999.

More students using food stamps is actually a good thing, Weed said, because it shows they're using a service that is available to many of them. Also, using food stamps brings federal dollars into the local community and supports the local economy.

But Weed said students don't utilize the program enough because they often think they can't get food stamps because they're students. Some DHS caseworkers don't even know that students can get on the program, she said.

"(Students) don't know they're eligible," Weed said. "It sounds obvious, but it's true."

Weed said students can make up to \$1,435 per month and still qualify for food stamps.

"People are often really surprised to find out how much you can make a month and still get food stamps," she said.

Students are generally eligible to receive food stamps if they qualify for a state or federally funded work-study program, work at least 20 hours per week, have a child under the age of 12 or are taking employer-sponsored job training classes.

Weed said the task force and DHS haven't done a massive outreach efforts on college campuses and food stamps branches are often over-

worked, understaffed and don't have the resources to do outreach.

Ross agreed that she's never seen outreach done

at universities. In fact, her nephew, who will be graduating from the University after this term, could potentially get them but is not, she said.

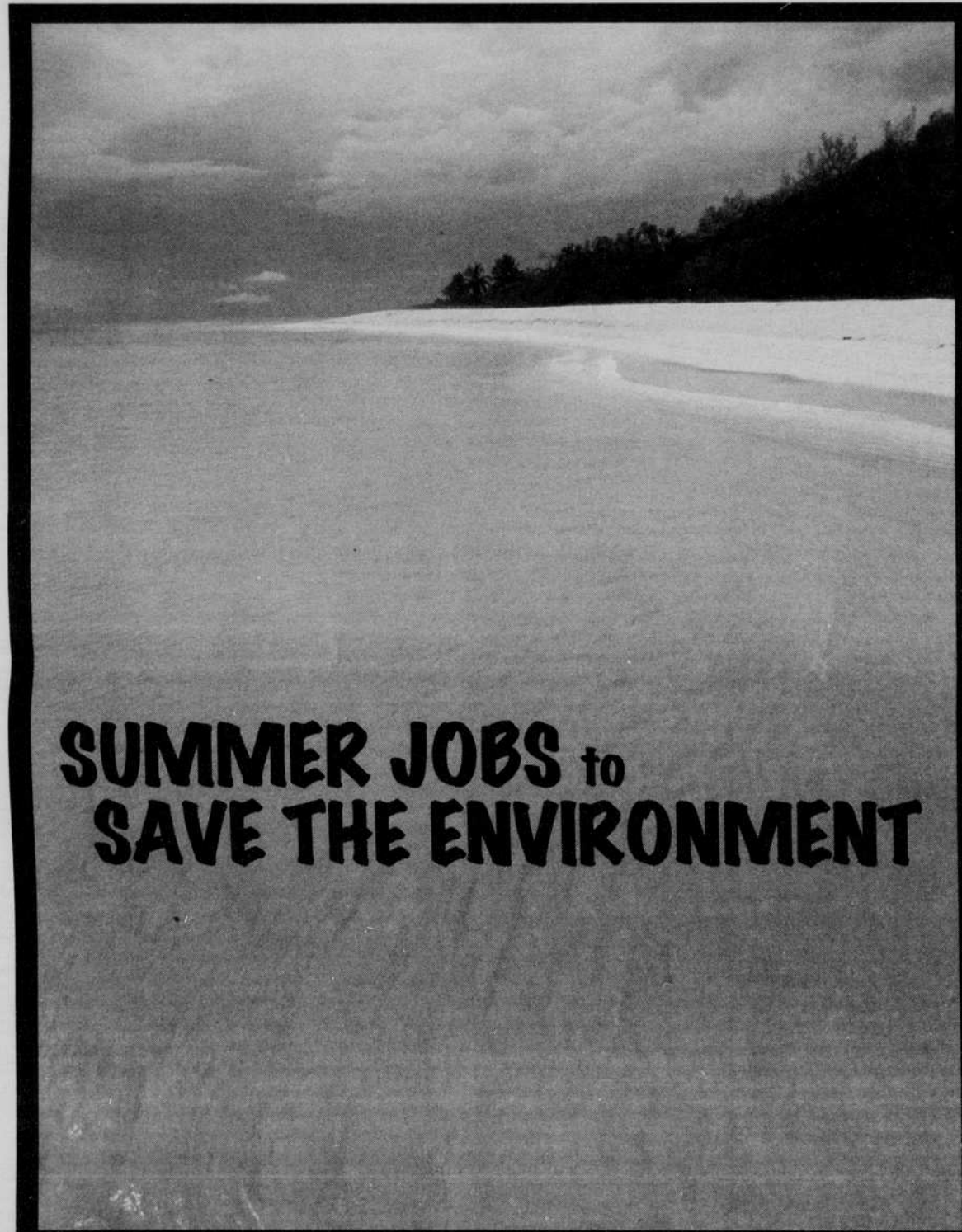
Weed wrote in an e-mail that the Hillsboro food stamp office in Washington County does engage in direct outreach to students at Pacific University by providing information and a sign-up booth twice per year during enrollment times.

Petkun said it's difficult to prioritize an advertising campaign aimed at informing students about food stamps over the costs of the program itself, especially during bad economic times. However, he said he knows students who hear second hand about food stamps from students who are already on them.

University senior Eric Wise, who was on food stamps for about six months during his junior year, is one of them. Wise applied for food stamps after his roommate started using them. He said he used to think that food stamps were only for people on welfare with eight children, but once he got on them, he found the support helpful.

"We're all poor and anything to give us a leg up is very much appreciated," Wise said. "I've worked jobs since I was young, and when I'm in school there's only so much money that I'm able to earn from my job, and having that support is nice, and I know that eventually when I get out I'm going to be making money and putting money back into the system that fed me when I was in college."

jaredpaben@dailyemerald.com



SUMMER JOBS to SAVE THE ENVIRONMENT

\$3000-\$5000/Summer

- Work with OSPiRG on a campaign to ensure Oregon's coast & waterways remain protected for us & future generations
- WORK WITH GREAT PEOPLE
- MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Career opportunities and benefits available.
Call Erin @ 541-686-2771

AUDITIONS • HIP HOP COMPANY

Musical Feet's new Hip Hop Company, **Phenomenon**, is holding auditions for new members
June 11, 4:00 - 6:00 pm at Musical Feet, 420 West 12th, Eugene.

Phenomenon is directed by Vanessa Fuller & Nissa Lund.

Intermediate & Advanced Dancers may call 485-2938 to receive an audition packet in advance, or may show up on the day of auditions.

Musical Feet
420 West 12th