Living on a Food Stamp budget with the added challenge of diabetes

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By Chef Karl Wilder,

What began for me as a month long project to live as a diabetic in support of the Harlem Hospital's Stirring the Potdiabetes program also became a commitment to the Food Bank For New York City when I realized just how common diabetes and other diet-related diabetes are in low-income communities – communities that also rely heavily on food stamps to get by.

To truly understand what low-income diabetics go through, I joined the Food Bank's Food Stamp Challenge last week – an experience that for me will culminate in a twelve-hour Chef Challenge Marathon on May 19 in support of Stirring the Pot and the Food Bank.

Last summer I lived on a food stamp budget for two months in preparation for a benefit for the San Francisco Food Bank. I did okay then because I relied on high calorie foods that are filling and provide sustenance. But with the added challenge of a diet restricted by a very serious health condition, this time I sought to create an eating plan that had about 45 grams of carbohydrate per meal and never exceed $4.44 per day.

My morning cup of coffee with a splash of milk cost me forty-three cents, just 6 strawberries sixty cents, two slices of bacon forty two cents. In no time my budget has been consumed.

Now I am just hungry. Every day I am hungry. Thus far I have not been able to get my calories above 1,500 a day, though my goal is 2,200. I just can't afford that many calories while eating the "right" foods. I have managed to stay within budget but I feel weak and have less energy. My sleep patterns have been interrupted because I wake up feeling hunger.

When we think about people on food assistance we don't often realize that many also have serious health issues like diabetes, celiac, heart disease.

We are not powerless. The Food Bank's Food Stamp Challenge doesn't just ask you to try experiencing life as a food stamp recipient for one week – it also asks you to take action by telling Congress to protect this essential program.

You can also host a Virtual Food Drive, where you can shop from aisles of healthy food options to support the Food Bank. Or, you can donate food to your local food assistance program – the Food Bank serves close to 1,000 of them throughout the five boroughs. But instead of pulling that extra pound of pasta or that can of beans from your pantry, head to the store. Pick up some high quality protein; sardines, anchovies, tuna, canned salmon, foods with omega 3 that are appropriate for those with health problems...and while you are at it...get some peanut butter for the kids.