Walking a Mile in Another Person's Shoes

Posted At : August 1, 2013 10:51 AM | Posted By : Food Bank Staff
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by Leonie Oostrom

I was in for a bit of a rough ride when I decided to try the Food Stamp Challenge and live on $31.50 for a week in New York City. I'll be the first to admit that my cooking skills are pretty low-level. As a college student, I've been on an unlimited meal plan in student dorms for two years. The closest I get to cooking in a given week is attempting to wilt spinach on the dining hall panini press.

With my lack of cooking expertise, I turned to Google for advice. I found some affordable recipes that seemed relatively healthy. The only problem: they required a slow cooker, six pans, a variety of spices, not to mention hours of time. I had none of those things, so my menu for the week consisted of oatmeal for breakfast, tomato and mustard sandwiches for lunch, and pasta with a sauce full of frozen vegetables for dinner. Sometimes I made eggs; an apple was a treat. It was difficult planning meals on just $31.50 a week and my culinary creativity seemed to diminish because of it, especially as a vegetarian. Fresh produce is expensive and I couldn't figure out how to work lots of it into my budget.

How would I sum up the week? Hard. By day four I was sick of oatmeal. I felt sluggish from the lack of produce. I gained a few pounds from all the processed carbohydrates I ate to stay full. And when I messed up a meal (which I did often), there was no throwing it out and ordering a pizza; I ate it.

This was all expected. What I didn't expect was the way my mental space was affected. Thoughts of food constantly filled my mind. They say that to understand someone you should walk a mile in his or her shoes. And that's what I did. I walked a mile. Just one mile, and then I stopped. When the week ended I was able to buy the food I'd been craving. People who rely on food stamps to feed themselves and their families don't have this luxury. To really understand their struggles, I would need to run a marathon in their shoes.

After this challenge, I'm filled with such awe for the mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers who live, week after week, on this budget. Their resilience astounds me and also pains me, because it shouldn't be necessary. We must do more to end hunger in New York City.

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