

Numbers don't add up for York's hungry

Proposal calls for \$100 monthly increase for poor

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Humiliation, hurt, hunger. Anger, pain and fear.

Ordinary York Region citizens reported an extraordinary orbit of emotions as participants of last week's Do The Math Challenge; five days on the diet of a person living in poverty.

"I was very angry," Newmarket Am Echad congregation Rabbi Martin Steinhouse said of his 120-hour experiment. "There's no way on God's green Earth that anyone can live on the amount of food from a food bank. Nothing is nutritious. Vegetables are rare. You live on carbohydrates."

Rabbi Steinhouse and his wife, Rachel, accepted the test designed to build community support for the Put Food in the Budget campaign, which demands an immediate \$100 monthly increase for each Ontarian on social assistance.

The experience left him indignant.

"Do you know how humiliating it is to have your \$10 food voucher OK'd by the grocery store manager?" he asked. "I hate to say it, but people look at you as if you're not as good as they are. It's embarrassing to have to go to a food bank. It angers me that people can't get enough to survive."

Ms Steinhouse felt the gnawing hunger.

"It was despair," she said of her foray into the world of the marginalized. "I craved fresh fruits and vegetables. I bought some meat and eggs with the voucher and realized that was it for the month."

"After the second day, I felt what it was like to have to live as so many people do."

At the conclusion of the challenge, she came down with cold symptoms. She cited a lack of vitamins and proteins and abundance of stress.

The same fate was suffered by Christine Way Skinner, husband Michael and their five children, ranging in age from eight to 16.

The family opted to participate for two reasons, Ms Way Skinner said.

"We do need to raise awareness and, as parents, we want our children to learn gratitude and compassion."

Living without their normal means for the week was difficult and insightful, she said.



STAFF PHOTO/SUSIE KOCKERSCHIEDT

Newmarket single mom Kristine Carbis relies on less than \$1,500 a month in social assistance. She has a banana for breakfast and no other food until dinner.

"There wasn't enough food, especially healthy food," she said. "There was very little meat, a lot of carbohydrates and high sodium in the canned food."

"Everyone was very hungry and cranky."

A curious and disturbing phenomenon arose in the Way Skinner household.

"We got competitive for food," she said. "Everyone got stressed out trying to make food last."

The voluntary trial was illuminating, she said.

"It was worse than we realized," Ms Way Skinner said. "My husband is diabetic. If he had to be on this diet, it would cost the health system a lot of money."

The most poignant moment was during the family's community meal at a local church.

"It was striking," she said. "There, people who have far less are willing to share their bread. It was humbling and compelling."

Kristine Carbis, 48, knows only too well. A Newmarket single mom raising a 14-year-old son, Ms Carbis' severe arthritis confines her to an electric scooter. She receives no child support and relies on \$1,100 from Ontario disability and a \$375 child tax benefit each month.

She and her son have to do the math each day.

"And it definitely doesn't add up," she said with a good natured chortle. "You often have to go without, especially as a parent. At the first of the month, you buy what you can and try and stretch it out. From mid-month to the end, there's not a lot of fresh stuff. I have a banana for breakfast and nothing

until dinner.

"You do what you have to do."

That, for Ms Carbis, includes reluctant treks to food banks, where she feels the searing sting of poverty's stigma. She shops the reduced grocery store aisles, participates in communal meals with her rent-geared-to-income neighbours and shares damaged goods donated by regional retailers.

She, like others living below the line, served as mentors to challenge participants during the week. She shadowed York Region Media Group editor-in-chief Debora Kelly.

"It's a great exercise," said Ms Carbis, a Poverty Action for Change Coalition volunteer. "It's opened ideas. We're seeing emotion. Everyone agreed there's not enough food."

'Do you know how humiliating it is to have your \$10 food voucher OK'd by the grocery store manager?'

The goal of the project is to revise social assistance rates based on actual living costs, including housing and food. In York Region, poverty is pervasive, she said.

"More than anyone knows. The majority of people don't recognize it. It's hidden. People don't want to see it."

Strategies are available, but solutions are glacial, she said.

"The government has to make it right," she said. "If people don't start eating healthy, the costs will be outrageous down the road."

The healthy food basket protocol under the Ontario Public Health standard has to be available to the indigent, Ms Carbis added.

Ms Way Skinner recommends awareness and policy enhancements.

"Keep those on the margins of society in mind when you vote," she said.

Rabbi Steinhouse endorses the call for a monthly \$100 healthy diet food supplement and more vigilance of the social assistance system, suggesting many unqualified applicants drain resources by stealing support.

Ms Carbis and challenge participants will discuss their experience as panelists at International Day for The Eradication of Poverty at Fairy Lake Park in Newmarket today.

The 1 to 7 p.m. event features entertainment, hot food, information booths and forums. An international event, the day was first recognized by the United Nations in 1992.

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