

SNAP Challenge Day #7: Reflections as my SNAP Challenge Concludes

September 20, 2013



Now that the end of my SNAP Challenge is in sight, I have begun to contemplate what I will take away from the experience.

Eating on \$4.50 per day not only helped me to appreciate the constant struggle of those facing food insecurity, but also served as a stark reminder that, while I can go back to a “normal” diet, so many other people – millions – simply do not have that option.

As I reflect on the week, I have come to realize that what the SNAP Challenge meant to me evolved with each passing day. I originally assumed that I would be blogging about how horrible I felt and how hungry I was each morning and night. The truth is that one week isn’t nearly sufficient to truly feel the pain of hunger. It has worn me down and, yes, I’m beyond bored with lentil soup and my Cheerios knockoff. But really, it’s not the fleeting sense of hunger that I’ll take away from the SNAP Challenge; rather, it is the understanding of just how much food

dominates your life when it's not readily available. Indeed, for those facing food insecurity, food quickly becomes a constant source of worry – and even a source of shame – when its availability is in question.

As the week evolved, I came to realize that one of the greatest benefits of the challenge was the increased empathy I now feel for those living day-to-day with food insecurity. And it makes sense. Indeed, it's how we operate our business. When an individual joins Panera, we ask them to walk in the shoes of our cafe associates and our customers. Those who are hired in the corporate offices are expected to put in hours in the bakery cafe and at our other manufacturing facilities. They're expected to regularly visit our locations as guests. We do this so that all of our associates truly understand the customer experience. My participation in the SNAP Challenge was no different. It gave me a small taste of what those confronted by food insecurity (for months, if not years, on end) experience.

The SNAP Challenge also provided me with the opportunity to learn and share the life stories of so many people fighting food insecurity. These personal stories, which have touched my heart, provide a real-world voice to the stark reality of food insecurity and serve to give hunger a face. The hundreds of notes and emails I received have come from real people, most of whom have worked hard all of their lives, yet currently find themselves in extraordinarily difficult circumstances.

A woman wrote me yesterday describing how she and her husband, who don't receive any assistance, eat with a daily budget under the \$4.50 allotted in the SNAP Challenge. They both worked their entire lives and now rely largely on senior discounts to eat.

Another gentleman wrote me to tell me that he had served as a CEO before a tragic accident that left him disabled. He has since lost his job and has had to count on disability and the SNAP safety net to survive.

I recall the couple who worked at HP for many years, but were ultimately laid off and unable to find new jobs. They shared with me their strategies to enjoy nutritional food while getting by on just a few bucks.

One woman, who volunteers at a local food pantry, told me in an email that she encounters many people who can't work because they're "too old, too young, too sick and too disabled." She sees other families in which two parents may hold as many as four jobs.

Finally, I recall the note from the woman who asked me to think about what it must feel like when her children come home from school in the afternoon and there is no food in the cabinets or refrigerator for a snack or even dinner.

These aren't just outliers, either. If you look at the statistics, you begin to realize that hunger isn't a "far away" problem that resides in the shadows outside of our own communities. This week, the Census Bureau reported that 45 million Americans are living below the poverty line. USDA data indicates that food insecurity impacts one in six Americans and, of those, roughly a quarter

went to college and greater than a third live in a household with one or more employed adults. Only 10% are homeless.

No matter how you cut the numbers around hunger, it paints a grim picture...and it only seems to get worse. According to the Census Bureau's data, 13.6% of US households received SNAP benefits in 2012. That's up slightly from 2011, but significantly higher than the 8.6% who received benefits in 2008. Over half the recipients of SNAP benefits are families with children or senior citizens. Folks, these are our neighbors, our friends, our family members. We are them and they are us.

All week I have heard people rationalize their opposition to programs that help those struggling with food insecurity by talking about the people that "game" the system. I have no doubt that there are people out there "gaming" the system. But the simple and stark truth that cannot be contested is that tens of millions of Americans are hungry. Food insecurity shouldn't be a political football or an ideological battle ground. We are talking about people's lives here.

Let me conclude with this final thought. In my view, a discussion of food insecurity can be reduced to two simple questions. The first question that we all must answer is this: what kind of society does each of us want to live in? And the second question I ask you to consider is: when there are upwards of 48 million Americans who go to bed hungry, how can we stand back and refuse to help those genuinely in need?

These are the questions for each of us.