How My Mother and I Got By, on Food Stamps

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By Lisa Hines-Johnson

Today, Mother's Day, is the third day of the Food Bank For New York City's Food Stamp Challenge – a call to supporters to spend just one week experiencing what it is like to have to rely on a food stamp budget of $1.48 per meal.

As I reflect on the challenge and how powerful it will be for people who participate, it has struck me how fitting it is to have this experience on one of the most important days celebrating mothers – as the face of poverty is overwhelmingly that of a woman and her children. I am also reminded of my own mother and our experience, as a single mother and her only child, having to rely on food stamps.

It was the early 1980s when my mother lost her job after fourteen years of dedicated service to her company. I was young, yet old enough to know that something was different. My mother still got out of the bed we shared in our one-bedroom apartment in the Bronx well before the sun came up, but she no longer put on her work clothes or those high-heeled shoes that I slipped on while playing dress-up. My mom was now home when I arrived from school. We spent more time together. That was good. Nothing seemed wrong….at least for a little while. I found out years later that my mother was able to provide for us for some time with the severance package her company had given her. Once that money was spent, things changed.

I asked my mother how she felt during this time of transition from a life of modest comfort to trying to stretch a dollar until even *it* begged for mercy. She shared that she did what she had to at a time when her options were limited. It was hard. She talked about the embarrassment that quickly turned to anger when she noticed disapproving stares as she paid with her food stamps. She wanted to yell out "I've worked. I didn't plan for this!" She felt defeated yet thankful for the neighborhood grocer who was kind enough to allow us to get food that we needed and pay him later. And worried about the how we'd get through the next week with the stamps – which were actually stamps back then – and other support running low.

I remember when I first noticed that our food supply was dwindling which, of course, always happened towards the end of the month. Those meals always consisted of scrambled or fried eggs, French fries and a canned vegetable, usually beets. I remember sharing in my own little girl version of my mother's shame, anger and sadness that resulted in an inescapable resilience.

I also remember that, despite her situation, my mother always tried to do things that would improve our reality even if only temporarily. From odd jobs in local shops, to babysitting for children in the neighborhood, to taking courses to become a dog groomer and grooming the same 3 dogs every month, my mother tried with everything she had to ensure that I still had gifts to open at Christmas, parties to celebrate my birthday and a new outfit to wear on picture day at school.

As a mother of three, my heart aches for what I can now fully comprehend was my mother's struggle during this period in our lives. As someone who ***lived*** the Food Stamp Challenge and never thought she'd have to, my mother told me how important she feels it is for people who participate in this experience to talk about it so that others might know how urgently the people who rely on food stamps need this support to get through the next month, the next meal. So they might join the larger discussion around poverty and what needs to be done to truly move people back into the lives they had or the ones they dream of having.