

Three Guys, Someone Else's Fries

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By *Margarett Purvis*,

I love the holiday season. For me, it always means longer time spent with my mom and more quiet time to reflect on the New Year. This year because of my recent move to the city I was excited to return to the South and find new things to add to my "to-do" list. I decided to hit up places that I've missed over the last three months. So I went to my favorite walking trail to take in the beautiful trees and etched mountain. You would think of all places, here is where I would find holiday enlightenment. Not so, I found it where you'd least expect.

But before anyone tries to outfit me in bedazzled Birkenstocks...I should probably be clear. I only went to the trail ONCE. It's the South and what you've heard is true: The food is ridiculously yummy! It should come as no surprise that much of my holiday "to-do" list was about what "to eat." I received great joy from a tour of my favorite FOOD JOINTS. Because the Food Bank is a proud provider of healthful nutrition [education services](#) to a citywide network of [charities](#) and [schools](#), I'll spare you the details of my indulgences. Just know, that I went, I saw, I ATE.

It was at one of my final stops that my life was forever affected. This particular place not only has my favorite French fries, the owner is someone who I truly respect and he provides some of the best customer service around. It's also a hot spot for youth from the community. While sitting there, three teen boys walked in. I noticed them because they arrived carrying empty cups (from the restaurant and the nearby Target) and parked themselves next to me and the soda fountain. When I saw them I smirked a little. My mind went back to being a teen at a local donut shop in Nashville. I remembered hanging with kids named Jeff and Stuart, who didn't look too different from these boys, and the mischief we would get into after school.



Anyone looking at these boys probably thought they saw characters from an Abercrombie or J. Crew ad. They were scraggly haired, green- and brown-eyed All American teenagers. They were no different than any group you may find at any burger joint...except for one thing. I noticed that these boys never bought any food. They walked in with empty cups and proceeded to eat the free peanuts. They were missing the bravado of the boys I knew as a kid. They seemed too nervous to get the "free refills" as my childhood friend Peter named it. They ate so many peanuts that they kept my attention. Watching them made me think of my eleven-year-old godson, who as a growing athlete can put away so much food it boggles the mind. My godson is about three years younger than these boys, and ***he would NEVER be satisfied at 1pm with a bowl of peanuts.*** As I looked back at them, I heard one ask, "so what did you have for Christmas?" His friend, who looked no older than 13, said, "nothing...she didn't have it." I looked away from my BlackBerry and thought ***"Why haven't they ordered something?"***

As one of the boys caught me looking at them...they all decided to get up to leave. I watched as one placed his never filled cup in the garbage and almost looked away as the second boy joined him. ***And THAT'S WHEN I SAW IT: The second teen pretended to throw his cup away and instead reached in and GRABBED FOOD OUT OF the GARBAGE.*** I wasn't the only person to see it. Across the room, another woman looked...stunned. I watched her grab her chest as we both stared at

each other, blinking for a second. When I looked outside there were two of the boys, looking inside of the "rescued" bag and shoving the contents into their mouths as they hurriedly walked away.

I ran outside to get their attention and they nervously ran (without coats) between the cars as if they'd done something wrong. **They had not, but I wasn't sure if I had.** Holiday haze or not, I know a simple fact: **Millions of families rely on school meals to supplement their food needs and this was a REALLY LONG BREAK for families with little to no food.** Hunger does not take a holiday and it does not discriminate. The needs of "growing boys" are the same in every household regardless of whether mom and dad can afford to meet them.

As I reflect on the New Year and the ideas and programming that I soon hope to share with our supporters and partners, I keep coming back to the notion of a "communal gift." Whether you celebrated Christmas, Hanukkah or Kwanzaa there are lights involved. There was the light from the North Star, lights from the menorah and lights for Kwanzaa symbolizing direction for community actions. During my holiday break, I didn't see a major light but I found ENLIGHTENMENT from three boys. Three hungry boys in a room filled with adults demonstrated how people can struggle in plain view. *Three boys showed the leader of a Food Bank what the stigma around being an impoverished adult looks like in **their children**.* These three boys did not "reveal" to me that hunger exists. I already know that. But these boys gave me a REMINDER of the URGENT NEED to help as many of us give the best gift to the neediest among us and that is our ATTENTION. Families are struggling all over this country. **We can never say that we're willing to ACT if we have not first trained ourselves to truly SEE.** In 2012, I'm looking forward to launching new, dynamic programs to help as many New Yorkers SEE hunger for what it is and then CHANGE how many of our neighbors and friends experience it. We'll keep the light on and hope you'll keep an eye out and choose to join us!