Choosing to Tackle a Very REAL ISSUE

Posted At : May 18, 2012 2:57 PM | Posted By : Food Bank Staff
Related Categories: Food Bank Friends

My name is Marcellus Wiley. In a single lifetime I've answered to ivy league graduate, professional athlete, sports commentator, friend and father. When you're in the public eye there's an assumption that the real you is known by all based on various television and radio interviews. When I saw Mario Batali in the news recently, it brought me back to the first title I ever had and that is "SON."

As a teenager I was often sent to the store by my mom to shop for the family. Whether it was for an extra ingredient needed for a certain dish, a gallon of milk...you name it and I was probably the one sent to get it. The journey I took to the store was not unlike that of countless kids all over the country. My team jersey was the same as most. My Chuck Taylors weren't too different from anyone else's and I gave the same "pound" to friends I saw along the way. The only thing that I was pretty certain set me apart from others was the currency burning a hole in my pocket. **I knew that at the end of my shopping trip I would be paying the cashier with what I called "funny money", properly known as food stamps**.

As a kid, I hated it. It's not like I was walking around like I thought I was better than others or some kind of Richie Rich but that didn't mean I wanted everybody to know THAT MUCH of our situation. **In fact, sometimes I was so embarrassed that I would walk around the store in circles, up to 45 minutes in hopes to significantly delay the checkout process just so NO ONE would see me paying with those food stamps.**

When I heard that the Food Bank For New York City was doing a Food Stamp Challenge where people were actually CHOOSING to live on $31 for the week, I was intrigued. In all of the rhetoric today it's great to see people walking a mile in another's shoes in order to better understand their situation. When you're on any form of public assistance like food stamps, you're never thinking about the fact that you are one of almost 50 million Americans who are ALSO requiring assistance.

In my conversations with the Food Bank's president I learned that almost 80 percent of people on food stamps are mothers and their children. That's not different from my story. I also learned that many times teens would rather avoid using programs like free and reduced lunch assistance to keep from being embarrassed in front of their peers. That too is not different from my story. **What's different for me now is that as an adult I better understand the necessity of a safety net for any family in need.** Being needy doesn't mean anything about your character and certainly it doesn't say anything about your potential.

My mother firmly placed me on a path of success. The fact that part of that journey included walks to the store carrying food stamps makes me admire her even more. My sincere hope is that each person who has taken the Food Stamp Challenge will walk away understanding that what was an experiment for them is just called life for so many others. **We live in a world where it's better to be called anything but poor.** The Food Stamp Challenge reminds us that it's important that we use our voice and circle of influence on behalf of those who could truly use it. Food Bank For New York City is using this challenge to increase awareness and encourage all of us to act by letting our elected officials know that we care about those in need and expect them to do the same. If you'd like to join us in this effort just click here and let your voice be heard too.