

Chapter 1

When the Going Gets Tough...

Outrage can inspire. My inspiration came when I opened up the newspaper and read about the posturing of Barbara Lee. She's a state congresswoman, and in June of 2007, she took it upon herself to try to eat for a week on \$21, which is about what the average food stamp recipient received at the time. Her toil and tribulation enjoyed much play in the mass media and there was heard loud lamenting and wringing of hands at how tough the poor really have it trying to attain "food security" on the pittance afforded them from America's taxpayers.

I followed the story as it played out. By the end of the week, I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. Congresswoman Lee has no idea how to eat, probably for any amount of money, but certainly not on a budget! Since she held herself up as an example, so will I, and I'll demonstrate how \$21 is perfectly adequate for a

nutritious diet. Lee reported that she went shopping on Day One and bought:

- 2 cans of beans
 - 1 can of peas
 - 1 box of crackers
 - 1 bag of brown rice
 - 1 package of chicken thighs
 - 1 package of tortillas
 - 1 loaf of wheat bread
 - 1 box of grits
 - 2 bananas
- Total: \$13:37

Her first problem was readily apparent even before she even laid a hand on the shopping cart. She'd marched into the store positively broadcasting a defeatist attitude, to wit: "We want to raise awareness of the difficulties faced by low income people in obtaining a healthy diet." Since she'd pretty much predetermined that a healthy diet wasn't feasible with these funds, my guess is that's why she didn't even attempt to buy much nutritious food. Look at the outsized carbohydrate load in her cart: peas, crackers, rice, tortillas, bread, grits and bananas. Then there's the appalling quantity of convenience food, which lowers nutrition and/or raises price: canned foods, prepared tortillas, crackers and bread.

I could go on, but let me instead offer my list, if I were on this budget:

- 1 lb pinto beans - \$1.09
- 2 lbs brown rice - \$1.70

- 5 lbs white flour - \$3.19
 - 5 lbs whole wheat flour - \$3.99
 - 1 package yeast - \$.72
 - 18 oz peanut butter - \$1.99
 - 1 4-lb whole chicken - \$4.00
 - 1 bunch celery \$1.49
 - 1.5 lbs carrots - \$1.50
- Total: \$19.67¹

Okay, so this first week might seem a bit dull, lacking much in the way of variety, but a human body can thrive on this. The beans and rice combine to make a complete protein and filling meals. One package of yeast and the flours yield plenty of sourdough bread, tortillas and crackers. Nothing will go to waste: bones, giblets, celery leaves and carrot peels make soup stock and rendered fat will grease the skillet. Cooked and raw vegetables provide essential vitamins. Peanut butter on whole wheat is the new breakfast of champions, and another complete protein.

At the end of the week, I'll at least have some flour, yeast and peanut butter left over, giving me effectively more money to spend next week. So, I'll replenish what I need and probably splurge on an onion. In subsequent weeks, I'll keep accumulating extra money until I can work up to afford some savings strategies that require a little capital outlay, such as growing vegetables from seed and bulk-buying groceries, and I'll have even more

¹ All prices were found on Safeway.com 6/3/08, except for the chicken. I regularly find it on sale there for \$.69/lb, but on this date it was \$1.69, so I "compromised" a bit, since it's \$.90/lb at Costco. It should also be noted that food prices had a record inflation run between mid-2007 and mid-2008.

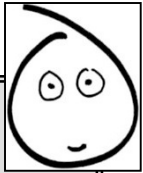
cash for cheese, eggs, oil, and so on. In short, my list considers sustainability.

Our congresswoman reported that after her shopping trip she decided to skip breakfast and go to McDonald's for lunch, where she blew another \$1.10 for a McChicken sandwich. On Day Three, she hits Taco Bell for a \$.79 taco. Day Five, she goes to White Castle and gets a burger for \$1.02. I don't need to tell you she finished out the week hungry, broke and complaining that "people forced to eat on such a budget could develop health problems." Certainly, I'm getting heart palpitations just thinking of the choices she makes with taxpayers' money!

Okay, so Barbara Lee is just one person with her poor planning. I could have dismissed her as an aberration. Then I kept reading. It

turns out several other California congresspersons took the challenge, and from what I could see, they all came to the same conclusions that Lee did. The common "wisdom" from the political sphere and the media is that the poor are suffering much higher rates of obesity than the general population in part because "fatty food is cheap;" therefore, "low family income may be the single

You can read about the Congressional Food Stamp Challenge for yourself at: <http://foodstampchallenge.typepad.com>.



most powerful contributing factor in childhood obesity.”²

My family of five regularly eats for about \$8 a day, and we could definitely do better, so when Barbara Lee’s words were splashed all over the newspapers, I expected to soon be reading rebuttals from the “experts,” but I must have missed them. I then waited for letters to the Editor from savvy home economists, and waited, and waited. And waited. The real kicker was when I got ahold of the USDA’s official “Cost of Food at Home” guide and discovered that our government doesn’t even think a two-year old can eat for \$21 a

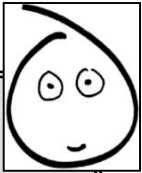
week.

Clearly we’re losing some valuable skills in this country, just when the economy is circling the drain

and we’re going to need them. We’ve forgotten how to plan ahead and think strategically to maximize what our resources can provide, and so to maintain our standard of living, we’re in hock up to our eyeballs, and/or demanding more from the government.

Let’s go back to my list again for a minute. I wanted to show how one person can eat healthfully on what the government provides through the Food Stamp program,

Check out <http://www.cnpp.usda.gov/USDAFoodCost-Home.htm> for a good cry.



² Time Magazine, June 23, 2008, “It’s Not Just Genetics.”

even assuming he/she had pay full price at only one supermarket and didn't get help anywhere else. Mission accomplished, I think. However, there is so much more I could do to stretch those dollars even further. For instance, who's to say you have to go this alone? Why not buddy up with some like-funded friends so we could buy in bulk? This way, those pinto beans and rice would only cost \$.50/lb each, and we'd save at least another couple of greenbacks on the flours, yeast and carrots. Now I can afford a gallon of milk this week. Nonfat is cheaper than regular; so much for the mantra that the poor can only afford fatty food.

Pooling resources to save through bulk purchases is one helpful strategy in making food dollars stretch, but there are more. I could have chatted up the produce manager at the store to see if there are any past-their-prime onions and other veggies to be had for cheap. In soup stock, aesthetics don't matter. If I'd skipped the poultry aisle and stuck to vegetarian protein combinations, I'd likely have more variety, too. Lentils, whole grains and nuts are filling, relatively cheap and very nutritious.

If my every dollar counted so critically, why wouldn't I take advantage of some good old-fashioned capitalism? We have a good selection of grocery stores in this country, all competing for my patronage. If I comparison-shopped at a couple of different stores at least, I would undoubtedly be able to buy some of my market basket for less than the prices I quoted earlier.

Assuming I didn't spend to my last dollar every week and instead built up a surplus of funds, I could also take great advantage of some of those "once in a blue moon" sales that stores have as loss leaders or clearance items. For example, if some store practically gives away peanut butter for \$.99/lb, I want to be ready to buy six-months' worth. It may look a little weird under the bed, but it'll keep, and I'll have saved a lot of money by planning ahead.

Finally, there's the savings strategy I can't stress enough. Look at all the money I didn't spend on junk. Even one Twinkie™, soda or bag of chips would have taken away a significant amount of the resources needed to buy quality food. I remember reading an article in Parade Magazine a few years ago about "Hunger in America," where a chief complaint of the profiled "hungry" families was that they couldn't take their children to McDonald's more often. Somehow, I can't rally behind higher taxes to give the poor more nights out.

So, why did I just spend several pages, proving to the cusp of readership somnolence, that a person in the United States could eat well for \$21 a week? What was the point, exactly? Just this: How much are you spending per week, per person? This isn't an idle question. The difference in monthly food bills between two families of equal size living side-by-side can be hundreds of dollars. Strategically thinking about how

to spend your money in this area will make great strides in your overall financial security, and your health.