Lizzie Utset

Food Stamps Challenge Journal

**Wednesday, March 25th**

So, I’ve been very conflicted thinking about how I want to go about limiting myself to only consuming $46 dollars worth of food for a week. On a normal day, I might eat some sort of combination of food that I have purchased at a grocery store, usually Publix, for breakfast and lunch. For dinner, I frequently eat out, either at a USC dining hall or a restaurant. However, just thinking about $46 dollars worth of food has made me realize that I spend significantly more money on my food every week. Some days I might average $6.50 worth of food; but, particularly on the days that I eat out at nice restaurants or even the always-classic Chipotle, I spend much more than that. I knew that trying to figure out a system to budget out the total $46 dollars between purchasing groceries, eating at the Russell House, and splurging on extras like delicious burrito bowls or Starbucks would be nearly impossible. Instead, to try to choose the simplest possible option to keep track of, I decided to take a trip to Publix and buy myself $46 dollars worth of food for the entire week of the Food Stamp Challenge. In my head, even though this option seemed the most restrictive, it also seemed like the easiest method to monitor. When I got to Publix, I realized that I had completely oversimplified the task at hand. I am a vegetarian, and also somewhat of a food snob, thanks to my mother’s phenomenal cooking skills, and I always spend little bits of extra money here and there buying the best food products. I usually buy my groceries every two weeks instead of one, but I find myself spending anywhere between $65 and $80 dollars buying food for breakfast, lunch, snacks, and the occasional dinner. I never realized just quite how ridiculously expensive that was until today, when I was tasked with spending $46 dollars to buy myself 21 meals. Even after scouring the aisles to find the best buy-one-get-one-free deals, sales, and generic brands of my favorite products, I was still shocked to see how quickly my $46 dollars went by. In the end, after sacrificing my hummus, Triscuits, organic canned soups, and vegetarian cheese, I felt triumphant and relieved when I realized my total would be right at $46 dollars.

With $46 dollars, I was able to buy “fresh” fruits and vegetables, two boxes of healthier cereals, two cartons of Almond Milk, five canned soups, one container of pasta, one box of granola bars, and two boxes of veggie burgers, or just enough food for three meals a day for seven days. Honestly, I felt elated as I walked out of the store with my receipt for $44.89, which stated that I saved $7.45 during my shopping trip. It was not until I was leaving the grocery store that I realized that my initial plan was far less ideal than I originally anticipated. The more that I contemplated the downfalls of buying 21 meals at Publix with $46 dollars, the more I found myself thinking a lot about the intense pressures on individuals who rely on SNAPS to feed themselves. These pressures are particularly intense for people like me who have never learned to cook, and also might not always have the extra time to spend on cooking and food preparation. I realized that my meals for the next week will be extremely repetitive, and I know that I’m bound to get tired of veggie burgers, which I love, within a minimum of three days of eating them repetitively. I probably did not spend my money quite as thriftily as someone with more experience and practice at bargain shopping; but, I can definitely imagine that the rigid constraints imposed by SNAPs might force recipients to develop a system and structure for knowing which food is affordable and easy, and which is not, and to prevent them from trying a variety of foods, particularly organic products and fresh fruits and vegetables. Additionally, I left myself with absolutely no money to spend eating out, whether it be eating a $2 lunch at Russell House or purchasing a $3 coffee at Starbucks. I have plenty of food to survive the week without feeling hungry. However, I left myself with no money for “social food,” or food to spend on meals with friends, along with money for the extra food items like coffee, candy, or other treats that I rely on for simple “happiness” during my rough moments and to keep my spirits high when I feel stressed out. In terms of beverages, I do not usually drink beverages other than water at meals. However, I’m very nervous to go an entire week without drinking coffee, as I did not leave any additional room in my budget for even one cup of coffee. I often rely on coffee to help me get through my long Tuesdays and Thursdays, and I’m worried that I will break my resolve and buy a cup of coffee at some point this week. This truly made me realize, even more so than I already ever have, that I have so many luxuries and privileges when it comes to the food items that I have the budget to purchase and consume.

Contemplation aside, today I did well at sticking to only eating food that I purchased today at the grocery store. On Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, I do not have class until 1:10, and I always have more time to spend eating a heartier breakfast. For breakfast, I had a bowl of Honey Bunches of Oats with Almond Milk, along with a Golden Delicious apple. For lunch, I was not too hungry, so I just ate a Quaker granola bar. Finally, for dinner, I made myself a bowl of whole-wheat pasta with olive oil, salt, pepper, and spinach, and I also made myself a serving of green beans. My boyfriend asked to take me to Ritas for Italian Ice, and with all of my willpower, I resisted the thought of mango ice and vanilla custard and turned him down. I’m clearly still getting used to this challenge, and every minute I think about the everyday, or maybe “every week” in the case of Chipotle or ice cream, food items that I am “sacrificing,” I realize that these items are luxuries that the millions of adults and children on SNAPs cannot afford to enjoy on nearly the same scale that I can. On normal visits to the grocery store, Russell House, or even several restaurants, I swipe my debit card or my Carolina Card with little worry for the cost of what I am purchasing, unless I end up spending a significant amount more than what I am used to. It was humbling and somewhat upsetting to stand in line at Publix and to wait with baited breath, hoping that I had calculated the total of my food correctly so that I would not go over my limit. When I realized just how stressful grocery shopping might be for an adult that has much higher stakes in sticking to their budget than trying not to do poorly on a class project, I realized that I have never felt food insecure or truly hungry, or even worried about how I would finance my next meals. I am definitely starting to realize that this next week is going to make me think very hard about my privilege, and to also consider, based off of what I experience in struggling to stick to my budget, if $46 dollars is enough money to give to people who rely on government assistance to purchase food that is filling, nutritious, and satisfying. I am nervous, but definitely excited, to see how the rest of the week goes!

**Thursday, March 26th**

On Tuesdays and Thursdays, my first class is at 8:30 in the morning. Since it is hard for me to get myself up before 8:00, I usually do not have the time to get up and to eat a big breakfast. For breakfast this morning, I had a bowl of Apple Crisp Honey Bunches of Oats with Almond Milk. On my way to class in the morning, I usually stop by the Colloquium Café on campus to get a cup of iced coffee with an extra shot of espresso, which comes out to about $2.50 when I pay with my Flex Meal Plan. This morning, I stuck to my determination to not cheat on this assignment, and I did not buy a coffee. Although this felt great at the time, I realized as I struggled to keep my eyes open and pay attention to what my professor was saying for the next hour and fifteen minutes that living without coffee is going to be much easier said than done. I have always thought of coffee more along the lines of a necessity than a luxury. This morning definitely turned into a reality check for me as I realized how impractical and ridiculous spending nearly $3 dollars a day on coffee would be for someone living on $46 dollars worth of food for a single week. Even though my exhaustion lasted the rest of the day, I did not have any other problems with temptation to eat anything other than the groceries I purchased yesterday. For lunch I had a can of Campbell’s Broccoli Cheese soup, accompanied by a glass of Almond Milk. For dinner, I made myself a Morning Star Asian Veggie Burger patty, along with a bowl of spinach with dressed lightly with olive oil, salt, and pepper. I did not feel particularly hungry at any point in the day; however, after eating so much more processed food than I am used to consuming within a given day, I felt like the food that I was eating was not particularly healthy, balanced, or nutritious. Even though I was not eating junk food, I still felt so unhealthy. This made me realize that, to a certain extent, maintaining a nutritious and balanced diet, free from an overwhelming amount of processed food options, requires a much larger budget than those who rely on SNAPs are working with.

**Friday, March 27th**

This morning, I was feeling like I needed to add a little bit of variety to my breakfast. So, instead of having a bowl of Apple Crisp Honey Bunches of Oats and Almond Milk, I had a bowl of Honey Bunches of Oats with Pecan Bunches and Almond Milk. I also ate one of my Bartlett Pears. For lunch, I had one Tomato Basil Pizza Veggie Burger patty, and for dinner I ate a can of Campbell’s Tuscan Lentil soup, a serving of green beans, and a package of baby carrots. Today, I felt a little bit healthier than yesterday, which was due to the fact that I felt like I was eating more fruits and vegetables. However, I still feel like I’m not getting the same amount of protein that I am used to ensuring in my diet. As a vegetarian, I worry a lot about whether or not I am eating a healthy amount of protein, as not eating meat adds a lot of extra pressure to keep my diet balanced. I usually try to make sure the food that I purchase when eating out, from the Russell House or a restaurant, contains tofu, beans, or extra vegetables to supplement the protein I get from eating veggie burgers and hummus. Feeling worried about not eating enough protein during the past few days has opened my eyes to the fact that being a healthy vegetarian, who relies on eating out at least one meal a day to save time and energy, is an immense privilege. I cannot imagine how hard it would be to remain a vegetarian if I living on a SNAPs budget was something I was forced to do for an extended period of time, rather than a conscious choice over a short timespan. I think that vegetarians relying on such a low budget for food over the week would either have to spend a lot of time researching, preparing, and cooking low-budget, healthy meals, or rely on quick, unhealthy fast-food options or frozen and processed meals. It would be extremely hard for an adult working a full-time job and relying on a SNAPs food budget to maintain a sustained, healthy vegetarian diet. Most of the time, maintaining a healthy, vegetarian diet is something that I do not even think about, because I have never had to experience the need to severely restrict my food spending, while also having to cut out meat and spend a comparatively larger amount of money on vegetarian substitutes and fresh fruits and vegetables. I have been a vegetarian for so long and it has grown to mean so much to me, and it is immensely humbling to realize that one of my values is a huge privilege inaccessible to many people that do not have my socioeconomic status and guarantee of food security.

**Saturday, March 28th and Sunday, March 29th**

This weekend was extremely busy for me, and I was not as on top of keeping up with my journal as I should have been! However, I feel that my diet is predictable, and is not really changing much. On Saturday, I had a bowl of Apple Crisp Honey Bunches of Oats with Almond Milk for breakfast, and a bowl of Campbell’s Tomato Soup and a glass of Almond Milk for lunch. For dinner, I made myself a bowl of whole-wheat pasta and a bowl of spinach salad, each topped with a dash of olive oil, salt, and pepper. On Sunday, for breakfast I ate (surprise) a bowl of Honey Bunches of Oats with Pecan Bunches with Almond Milk and a Bartlett pear. For lunch, I had an Asian Veggie Burger patty accompanied with a glass of Coconut Milk, since I drank the last of my Almond Milk with my cereal that morning. Finally, for dinner on Sunday night, I made myself a bowl of Campbell’s Cream of Mushroom soup, and I are a Golden Delicious apple to go along with it. The real challenge of the weekend happened during lunch on Saturday. One of my very best friends invited me to go out to lunch with a group of our mutual friends. I wanted to be social and catch up with our friend group, so I decided to eat my own lunch about 30 minutes before we were scheduled to meet up, with the rationale that I would not be hungry when I arrived, and I would be able to sit around the table and chat, without feeling too pressured to order any food. However, when I got to Cantina 76 to meet all of them, I realized that my idea was actually more naïve than I expected. At first I felt entirely comfortable, just talking to my friends and catching up and enjoying the ambiance of the restaurant. This was not the case when the waiter came to take our orders. When it was my turn to order, I politely declined, and insisted that a glass of water was good for me. The waiter seemed shocked, and asked me if I was totally sure that I was not going to order any food. Even after I insisted that I was certain, he asked me again after he finished taking everyone’s orders, which made me feel immensely uncomfortable. I stole a cursory glance at the menu to see if there was anything under $2 that I could justify purchasing, just to alleviate the awkwardness of the social situation. However, each of the starter dips, guacamole, beans and queso, and salsa, were each $3.49, which felt incredibly expensive! At Publix, I was able to use about the same amount of money to purchase two large boxes of cereal, which I have used all week to be my sole breakfast food. Before participating in the food stamps challenge, I probably would have looked at the menu and thought, “Wow! Guacamole and chips for less than $5, what a bargain!” But, now, I realize just how expensive eating out at a mildly nice, sit-down restaurant is for individuals and families who are already stretching their food budget so thinly to provide filling and adequately nutritional food for every meal. Also, even though this experience was a little awkward for me, I cannot imagine how awkward it would have been for someone who genuinely could not have afforded any of the food items on Cantina 76’s menu to feel pressured by the social situation and the waiter into feeling like they had to buy something. Honestly, I imagine the pressure and stress of surviving off of a SNAPs budget, not to mention the circumstance itself, might be too embarrassing for an individual to even put themselves in a social situation like I did, and to agree to go out to dinner with their friends with the intention of not actually buying anything. This experience was eye-opening in many ways, and even though many parts of sitting at a table, feeling pressured by the waiter, watching my friends happily eat delicious looking food while I munched on the free basket of chips, were uncomfortable, I am glad I decided to join my friends.

**Monday March 30th**

Today for breakfast, I ate a bowl of Honey Bunches of Oats with Pecan Bunches with Coconut Milk and a Bartlett pear. I ate lunch a couple of hours later before my 1:10pm class, and I was not feeling particularly hungry, so I had a Quaker granola bar. By the time dinner rolled around, I ate a Tomato Basil Pizza Veggie Burger patty, a snack-size pack of baby carrots, and drank a glass of Coconut Milk, and I felt satisfied. The strangest thing about this project is that I can tell that I am not eating nearly the same amount of food, or the same filling, savory food, that I am used to eating, but I have not been felt particularly hungry at any point this week. It is strange because I feel like I should be feeling hungry! Compared to the diet I am accustomed to, the food that I am eating is often pretty light, minimal, and does not seem like it should be satisfying me. Like I noted in a previous entry, even though it seems like I have been eating a good amount of fruits and vegetables, I can tell that I have not been eating enough protein. Eating protein is normally what makes you feel full and satisfied, so I should not be feeling nearly as full as I do now. I think that if this challenge were to drag on a lot longer, I would definitely start to feel the effects of being hungry and not getting enough nutrients. I have definitely noticed that I have felt more tired and exhausted during the days, and I have been getting about the same amount of sleep that I normally do. My tiredness and exhaustion could be due to my coffee withdrawals; but, also, my body could be reacting this way to the fact that I am not eating a lot of food. Only two more days to go!

**Tuesday, March 31st**

So, today is the first day during the challenge that I cracked. I woke up this morning for my 8:30am class, and I felt like death. I was exhausted, I could barely drag myself out of bed, and I felt like I could have closed my eyes and fallen back asleep for at least another 4 hours. Like I said before, I do not know if the intense exhaustion I have been feeling is due to a lack of coffee or a significantly smaller diet than what I am used to eating; but, this morning, I felt like I had to act on my tiredness. After eating a breakfast of Honey Bunches of Oats with Pecan Bunches and Coconut Milk and still not feeling any better, I knew that this would be the morning I spent extra money on coffee. On my way to Terrorism and Counterterrorism class, I stopped at Starbucks and bought a tall, iced coffee with an extra shot of espresso. Writing this now, just a couple of hours later, I cannot believe how exhausted I felt at the time. I did not even remember to save my receipt, and honestly I was not even paying attention when the cashier at Starbucks told me the price and asked me for my Carolina Card. I am so mad that I ended up cheating on this assignment. Part of it definitely has to do with the fact that I am extremely determined, and I hate losing or even giving up on anything. But also, I feel so upset with myself because this further demonstrates that I am so out of touch with what people who actually rely on SNAPs to feed themselves must be feeling and experiencing, when the whole point of the assignment is to attempt to see food and eating and nutrition and hunger from their perspectives, or as close to their perspectives as possible. The fact that I was able to casually stroll into Starbucks, buy a comparatively expensive cup of coffee, and not bat an eyelash as the cashier asked me for payment, shows that even participating in this challenge cannot come close to simulating what it feels like to be food insecure. I have not felt the same hunger that people who rely on SNAPs for extended periods of time must feel, I have chosen to eat healthier and more expensive food products than the average person who relies on a strict budget must choose, and I am going to go right back to eating my “normal” diet after tomorrow. The one thing I will say is that this challenge has seriously made me contemplate the high expense of consuming the food that I am used to eating, and has made me reconsider many of my beliefs about the accessibility of vegetarian diets and nutritional food options.

Anyways, for lunch I had an Asian Veggie Burger patty with a glass of Coconut Milk, and for dinner I made myself a can of Campbell’s Tuscan Lentil Soup, and I ate a snack-size package of baby carrots. I have mixed feelings about tomorrow being the last day of the challenge. However, I know that I am going to start think twice about the food that I am purchasing and consuming, particularly in terms of the price, nutritional content, and whether or not certain food is a necessity or not. When I do buy something that is relatively expensive, or not an absolute necessity to prevent me from remaining hungry, I will definitely remember the hard choices I had to make this week, and how fortunate I am to always know where my next meal is coming from.

**Wednesday, April 1st**

This is my last day of the challenge! It is funny, because as I am writing this as I watch Survivor, I realize that I spent eight days instead of seven doing the Food Stamps challenge. I guess when I was originally thinking about the challenge, I was thinking it would go from Wednesday to Wednesday. In my mind, Wednesday-to-Wednesday was one whole week. Looking back on it, now I understand that today, the next Wednesday would technically begin a new week. Oh well. Again, I am so privileged that this challenge is a choice, and I am choosing to participate. Today, for breakfast I had a bowl of Apple Crisp Honey Bunches of Oats with a Golden Delicious apple. For lunch, I had a Quaker granola bar, and for dinner, I made myself a bowl of whole-wheat pasta with salt, olive oil, pepper, and the rest of my spinach. I also ate the last package of my baby carrots for dinner. As I am reflecting on the amount of food that I have remaining compared to the amount of food that I consumed, I am actually quite surprised that I estimated just enough food to last me for a “week,” which actually turned out to be eight days. In the end, I had two leftover Quaker granola bars, one Asian Veggie Burger patty, and two Tomato Basil Pizza Veggie Burger patties, along with a small amount of whole-wheat spaghetti. All of this is food that I can keep, and eat in the next few days. I am especially proud of myself because I have a bad habit of letting perishable food, especially my spinach and some fruits, grow spoiled or rotten before I get the chance to eat them. This week, I consumed all of my perishable food, and none of it went to waste.

As I reflect on what the week was like, I cannot help but thinking back to the stories of the women and families living in Annapolis captured by Schwartz-Nobel in *Growing Up Empty*. This week, I only had to worry about the cost of the food that I was buying, and I found myself incredibly stressed trying to make it work, and to make myself stick to my budget. I cannot imagine being incredibly stressed due to my need to regulate my spending on food, basic necessities, clothing, transportation, and more, all to be able to afford a ridiculously expensive monthly housing payment. My parents paid the lump sum for my incredibly expensive on-campus housing at the beginning of last semester, and I could not tell you how much my housing works out to cost per month. However, but for some people, living in housing that is much less expensive and of lesser quality than mine, that is all they can think about. I particularly kept thinking back to Amy, who suffered an incredibly traumatic experience, and ended up having to take care of herself and a small baby as a result, with no income, no place to stay, and no plans. I remember her describing her conflicting feelings that led her to attempt to steal food from a small grocery store, especially her “mantra” of, “Survival first. Survival with honor second” (129). In a situation where she truly had nothing and was so desperate, Amy valued the kindness of the supermarket owner who forgave her so much, and wanted to keep a small luxury bottle of bubbles for her baby, to solidify her happiness and feelings of hope. When she described how she was forced to take her baby to the hospital after her baby ended up drinking the entire bottles of bubbles, I could not imagine just how high those expenses added up, and how I would have stayed strong in her situation.

Amy’s story is proof of her resourcefulness in the face of extreme desperation, and also in the goodness of people. Thinking about my experience this week, and how it is over and I can simply choose to go to Chipotle and spend $12 dollars on a burrito bowl and guacamole, I cannot help but thinking about how much $12 dollars means to someone who is struggling to feed themselves off of $46 dollars a week. $12 dollars can go so far in a grocery store, particularly a wholesale store like Walmart, and many people could think of so many more resourceful and useful ways to make $12 dollars feed themselves than an overpriced meal at Chipotle. I know that I will never be able to truly understand Amy’s experiences, or the experiences of anyone who truly relies on SNAPs to feed themselves, unless I find myself in a situation where living off of $46 dollars of food a week is not purely a choice. However, I still feel like this experience has made me a much more conscious consumer, along with making me much more sympathetic to the struggles and hardships faced by the food insecure. Even though I can start to spend much more money on food every week does not mean that I am necessarily going to act on every single one of my impulses to eat like this, or to continue to take eating like this for granted. Additionally, the next time my family tries to make an ignorant statement about people who live off of food stamps being lazy and “mooching” off of government support, I will tell them about this experience, and hopefully help to open their eyes to the reality of a world that is very hard for them, as privileged as we are, to understand.

**Shopping List**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Item** | **Price** | **Quantity** | **Savings?** |
| Silk Almond Vanilla Milk | 2.5 | 1 | 0.97 |
| Silk Coconut Milk | 2.5 | 1 | 0.97 |
| Trimmed Green Beans | 2.99 | 1 | 0 |
| Bartlett Pears | 2.56 | 1.72 lb | 0.86 |
| Post HBO with Pecan | 1.94 | 1 | 1.93 |
| Post HBO with Apple | 1.93 | 1 | 1.93 |
| Carrots Snack Size | 1.79 | 1 (4 packages) | 0 |
| Quaker Quinoa Granola Bars | 3.49 | 1 | 0 |
| Campbell's Tuscan Lentil | 3.5 | 2 | 0 |
| Cambpell's Broccoli Cheese | 1.75 | 1 | 0 |
| Baby Spinach | 2.5 | 1 | 0.49 |
| Campbell's Tomato Soup | 1.75 | 1 | 0 |
| Golden Delicious Apples | 3.48 | 1.75 lb | 0 |
| Cambpell's Cream of Mushroom | 1.34 | 1 | 0 |
| Alma's Whole Wheat Spaghetti | 1.89 | 1 | 0.3 |
| Morning Star Asian Veggie Patties | 4.49 | 1 | 0 |
| Morning Star Tomato/Basil Patties | 4.49 | 1 | 0 |
| ***TOTAL:*** | 44.89 |  | 7.45 |