

## DO THE MATH CHALLENGE OCTOBER 4-8TH, 2010

### Income: The Fundamental Determinant of Food Access, Security and Health

In this past year in York Region a committed group of organizations, individuals with lived experience of poverty and anti-poverty activists have been working to gain public and political support for the implementation of the \$100/month Healthy Food Supplement for all adults on social assistance in Ontario. An individual on Ontario Works today receives \$585/month, which is not even enough to rent an apartment in York Region, let alone have a healthy diet or pay for transportation. It is interesting to note, adults on social assistance prior to 1995 were eligible for \$660/month. Whether adults are single individuals living on a subsistence income, or parents giving up their own food to ensure their children have enough to eat, the need to raise the rates to allow people to purchase food and maintain their health is an investment that is long past due.

To date, 40 MPPs were visited and invited to complete the **Do the Math Survey**. The next step in this journey was

**The Do the Math Challenge.** During the week of October 4-8th, several high profile individuals across Ontario took the Challenge of living on a diet similar to those on Social Assistance who must rely on food banks each month. The Challengers were clear that they did not believe this one week

exercise would in any way replicate the harsh reality of living in poverty. For them this was an act of solidarity – taking a stand together and alongside those for whom poverty and hunger is an ongoing reality.

The York Region Challenge Team included the following people who were committed to enduring the diet for one week and reporting back on their experience.

- Reverend Robin Wardlaw and his wife Rita More, Trinity United Church
- Debora Kelly, Editor in Chief, York Region Media Group.
- Michael and Christine Way Skinner and family, St. John Chrysostom Church
- Rabbi Martin Steinhouse and his wife Rachel, Am Echad Congregation .

We encourage you to check out our Challengers on our Facebook page [York Region Do the Math](#) for more information about the participants' diet journeys on their personal blogs and also through Twitter.

#### The objectives of the Challenge are to:

- Increase understanding of the experiences of people

who rely on social assistance.

- Raise awareness that charity is not enough – that the experience of people on social assistance is systemic, not individual – and that policy change and social investments are required of the Ontario government.

- Translate public empathy into public action – for people to talk to their MPP's about supporting an

immediate increase in social assistance of \$100 per month for every adult in Ontario on social assistance.



*Michael and Christine Way Skinner. Children are Alicia, Beth, Oliver, Anna and Patrick.*

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**Debora Kelly, Editor in Chief, York Region Media Group**

Not for a second did I ever think five days on a Food Bank Diet would actually let me know what it's like to live on social assistance. But Linda (an individual she met at the community meal) underlined for me that I really can't know what it's like to walk in those shoes. But I can add my voice to those demanding change. I can urge the province to do something about the ridiculously inadequate social assistance rates that not only makes it impossible to eat a healthy diet, but that robs good people of their dignity. Real hunger exists in our communities. My belief in the importance of human dignity and compassion aside, I know a healthy, safe, vibrant and sustainable community benefits us all. That can't be achieved when our neighbours are hungry and without adequate shelter and meaningful work.

**Rev. Robin Wardlaw**

I already knew that social assistance rates in Ontario were too low, but there's nothing like staring at a rapidly dwindling collection of food items on the counter and having all the complicated feelings of anxiety, humiliation, irritation and so on to be convinced that I have not been the advocate for change that I might have been all these years... As for me now

that the Challenge is over, I'm demanding of my fellow citizens and our elected representatives something different, something better than what we have, and I invite everyone who cares to do the same.

**Christine Way Skinner and Family**

If nothing else at all has come of our family's participation in this challenge, without a doubt, five children in Newmarket are far more grateful for the healthy, bountiful food that is placed before them every day. From the conversations we have had, I am also sure that these five children have developed a deeper sense of compassion for people living on the margins and a sense that they need to act. Hopefully, through our writing and conversations with people, others have also been moved to think about the needs of the poor at all times, but particularly when they are voting.

**Rabbi Marty Steinhouse and his wife Rachel**

Very diligent on how I'm using money. The visit to the Food Bank was an eye opener. How lucky people with money are. They can buy "healthy" foods, less sodium, less fat, etc. Not much choice for me. How will I spend the \$10? Really craving fresh fruit & veggies, salad, eggs. I have to make choices now for the whole month! Oh my. (Rachel)

Rabbi Marty conveyed to us in our follow-up meeting to the Challenge that he went through a range of emotions that he had not expected. The diet wasn't just about not having enough food. He experienced anger on the first day of the diet when he didn't have enough food for that day. He talked about feeling embarrassed, even as they walked into the food bank to pick up their items and as the week went on a deep sense of humility. He reminded all of us at our meeting that not one person in the room could live on the amount of money that an individual on social assistance lives on and the kind of diet that people are reduced to when they rely on the food bank for 3 days of food out of the month.

Once again we are reminded of the ISARC Central Message:

***“When anyone is hungry while others have too much to eat, when anyone has no shelter while others live in luxury, or when anyone lives in poverty while others enjoy affluence, justice is not present. Where justice is not present, the quality of all of our lives and communities disappears.”***

## Food for thought

Food connects us all. Aside from being that essential component of good health, it also affects our lives in many other ways. We see in our community gardens all sorts of people connecting over growing food – different generations and different cultures learn about each other through food. All the while they keep healthier because they are outdoors and active. Good things happen around good food - people get together, people talk, they solve problems.

While food banks are the first line of defence against hunger, we also need to go beyond the basic provisions to increasing access to healthy and nutritious food. We need to increase our capacity to produce sustainable food and set policies to ensure that this basic need is available to all.

York Region Food Network's programs stem from two simple concepts:

1. Good food is an essential component of good health (we hear in the news daily the that poor diets are causing obesity, diabetes, and hypertension in epidemic proportions).. food literacy and access to nutritious food are clearly necessary.
2. The root cause of hunger in York Region is poverty...we know people are hungry.. last year, mouths fed through food banks topped 54,000, up a staggering 27% from 2008 levels.

Food security means that we all have enough healthy, nutritious food to eat that we acquired with dignity, that was produced in a sustainable manner... we look after our health and our world. Join us on November 4<sup>th</sup> to watch **Fresh, new thinking about what we're eating** and share in a discussion about food security in York Region.

## Keeping Your Hand in the Soil all Year Around

The winter season and gardening do not go hand-in-hand in our neck of the woods. It can be a long wait for gardeners as they pass the time from the soil freezing in December until the thaw that finally arrives in April. As if this agonizing wait isn't bad enough, along the way nature will tease us by tossing in a few mild days in February. On those days when the trees threaten to bud and the odd Robin is spotted we quickly turn our thoughts again to the coming growing season. But instead of clearing the snow to plant that row of peas, the gardeners can be found huddled at their kitchen table working on their vegetable garden layout, deciding whether to stick to the tried and true row gardening approach or maybe experiment with square foot gardening for a change. Whatever their strategy, it's the anticipation of eating freshly picked greens from the garden in June, enjoying the harvested yellow zucchini in July and savouring the taste of the first miniature tomato of the season in August that keep gardeners coming back to the vegetable patch each year.

Some lucky Ontario growers are able to offset the short growing season by erecting a greenhouse on their premises. The extended growing season that a greenhouse offers is tantalizing, but not realistic for most people. A cold frame is a noteworthy alternative for those people who are wishing to stretch



*Thanks to one of our volunteers who recently constructed this cold frame; romaine lettuce has already germinated.*

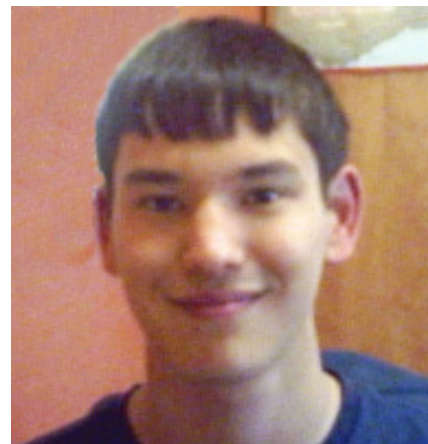
the growing season in the northern latitudes. It takes up far less space, is much less expensive and is not as labour intensive to operate and maintain. The reduced space of the cold frame will of course impact the amount of produce being harvested, but for those gardeners who long for the taste of freshly harvested lettuce in February, even the smallest of yields is appreciated.

As a charity that supports the production of nutritious, locally grown fruits and vegetables, York Region Food Network (YRFN) is trying out the cold frame gardening approach this coming winter season at our Newmarket office. We anticipate a harvest of romaine lettuce in December and spinach throughout the early months of 2011. While some of the produce will be donated to the Newmarket Food Pantry, much of the harvest will be incorporated into dishes for our community kitchen program.

YRFN is looking to connect with anyone who may have old window frames and scrap wood that can be used in the construction of cold frames. If we are successful in obtaining these materials YRFN would like to offer gardeners the chance to keep their hands in the soil all year around by participating in a one-day workshop where they can construct their own cold frame.

Please contact Catherine Cook at [catherinec@yrfn.ca](mailto:catherinec@yrfn.ca) or phone 905-967-0428 ext. 203 to let us know if you are able to provide supplies, help with the preparing the cold frame kits or if you would like to attend a cold frame construction workshop. Cold Frame building instructions are available upon request for those people interested in taking on this project at home.

## Katimavik Participant: Chris Swank



Hello, my name is Chris Swank. I am from Salmon Arm, BC. I am the Katimavik volunteer at The 510 Penrose building.

Katimavik is a youth exchange program where a group of 11 young people from across Canada live in a home together in two different Canadian communities for three months each. The program fosters community involvement, a chance to experience diverse volunteer opportunities around the community and a full time volunteer position, as well as second language training.

It has been just over three weeks since I started my five day a week volunteer service. With all the organizations at 510 Penrose, I have a wide variety of jobs available as a volunteer. Every day is that little bit different, be it breaking down the garden in the back, sorting donated shoes and t-shirts at Street Outreach, emailing community garden volunteers or just doing those menial jobs, folding newsletters, sealing envelopes and sorting nametags; I always have something to do. I have also had the pleasure of sitting in on the planning meeting for The Do The Math Challenge, and formatting the Facebook page for the event.

Everyone I've worked with so far is happy, funny and friendly (not to mention grateful to have some cheap, willing labour around), and I must say that I am having a great experience with YRFN and all the other agencies in the building.

## The Good Food Box Program comes to York Region

Simply put, The Good Food Box is a non-profit system for the distribution of fruits and vegetables. York Region Food Network (YRFN) embraces the notion that residents need access to affordable choices when it comes to the provision of healthy, nutritious foods. In support of this notion, YRFN is launching a Good Food Box program here in York Region in the New Year.

We are setting out to offer the program on a monthly basis, with the order pick-up date to take place the third Thursday of each month. Participants will be able to pick up their order at our main distribution site in Newmarket or at our satellite location in Richmond Hill. Everyone will have the chance to choose from 2 available sizes. Each order will contain a pre-selected



assortment of food, though the contents can change with each monthly delivery, depending on what is in season at the time. In an effort to support our local farmers, the environment and healthy eating practices, YRFN chooses Ontario-grown produce whenever possible.

In preparation for the launch, YRFN would like to hear from residents in our community who would be interested in participating in this program; whether it is to become a customer or to volunteer to assist with assembling the orders. Please contact Catherine Cook or Yvonne Kelly at

905-967-0428.

The YRFN Good Food Box Program is funded by a Health Promotion Grant with the Province of Ontario.

*New thinking about what we're eating*

# FRESH

A film by Ana Sofia Joanes

**PLANT INSPIRATION - SPROUT HOPE - GROW AWARENESS - PRODUCE CHANGE**

**Thursday, November 4, 2010 from 6:30 - 9:00 p.m.**

at Crosslands Church, 47 Millard Avenue West [west of Yonge], Newmarket

Pay what you can (Suggested amount: \$5.00)

**RSVP to Kim by Thursday, October 28, 2010 at [kima@yrfn.ca](mailto:kima@yrfn.ca) or 905-967-0428 ext 201**

### Join York Region Food Network's Fundraising Campaign

*I support YRFN's work to improve access to affordable, nutritious food for all people of York Region.*

I have enclosed my donation of:     \$20         \$50         \$100         Other

*Please make cheques payable to York Region Food Network.*

YRFN will issue a charitable tax receipt for all donations over \$20.

**Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Address:** \_\_\_\_\_

To donate by credit card, visit our website at [www.yrfn.ca](http://www.yrfn.ca) and click on the link to CanadaHelps.org, a secure website where you can make a tax deductible credit card donation to YRFN.

*Your privacy is important to us, and we are committed to protecting and safeguarding your personal information. We do not rent, sell or trademark our mailing list, but rather use it to keep you informed of York Region Food Network's activities, services and programs. Please contact our office to update your information or to be removed from the mailing list.*

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