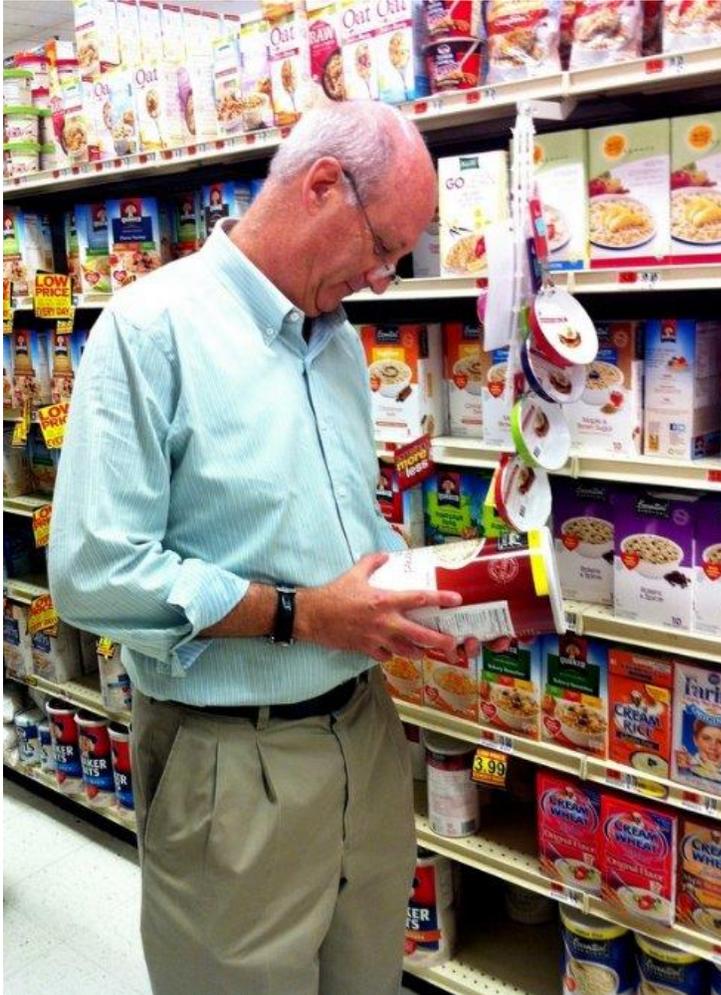


LinkedIn

Challenging Myself to Experience Hunger

September 09, 2013



Last week, there was an article on the front page of *The New York Times* entitled, “[On the Edge of Poverty, at the Center of a Debate on Food Stamps.](#)” The article sheds light on the reality of food insecurity in America – millions of families that “look like we are fine,” according to one man, but in reality, “live on the edge of poverty, skipping meals and rationing food.”

The families featured represent only a handful of the nearly 49 million people in America who, very simply, are hungry. We live in the “land of plenty,” and yet nearly 48 million people receive food stamps and 16 million children go to bed hungry.

Whether or not we talk about it, acknowledge it or pay attention to it, hunger is a serious and real problem in the United States.

And yet, despite everything I have learned about hunger and the various efforts I've undertaken to try to make a dent in the problem, I have never actually experienced hunger firsthand. I'm not talking about the hunger that comes after skipping a meal. I'm talking about not knowing when or where my next meal will come from on a regular basis. I'm talking about having to decide between paying for an unforeseen medical or housing expense versus buying food to feed my family for the month.

That's why, as part of Hunger Action Month, I decided to take the SNAP Challenge. For one week, beginning Saturday, September 14, 2013, I will live on just \$4.50 a day, the average daily benefit per person provided by the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP; formerly known as Food Stamps). I am also extending the challenge to Panera's Societal Impact Steering Committee, the group responsible for helping Panera leverage its core competencies to help create real change and lasting solutions against hunger. Another partner of mine in this challenge will be Bob Aiken, the CEO of Feeding America.

To be perfectly honest with you, I'm nervous. As the SNAP Challenge week approaches, I feel a sense of fear about my budget, what kinds of food I'll be able to afford, the impact that the Challenge will have on my work and ability to concentrate. However, as the CEO of a company that is committed to making a difference in our communities, it is critical that I understand this problem in a deep and personal way.

I am aware that this challenge only lasts one week. And I understand that many millions of people, including some of Panera's own employees, have encountered more prolonged and painful bouts of food insecurity. My week is merely a simulation of what so many millions deal with every day. To be clear, I don't mean to trivialize anyone else's experience or claim mine as an authentic representation of what food insecurity looks like. Rather, my hope is to inspire other leaders – in business, government and the nonprofit world – to take on the challenge of food insecurity as their own. In the process, I also hope to inspire myself to continue to innovate and find new solutions to the problem of hunger.

Throughout my Challenge, I will be posting updates on LinkedIn. I will walk you through my shopping experience on the \$31.50 weekly budget, my meals, my feelings, my energy level. I also hope to share information about the different solutions out there – from federal assistance to food pantries. And I'll share insights gained from Panera team members taking part in the challenge.

If you feel inspired to take part in the challenge yourself, visit www.hungeractionmonth.org for more information. As ever, please share your experiences on the SNAP Challenge or with other Hunger Action Month activities in the comments section.

I'll be back on September 14 to start sharing about my Challenge. As my friends at Feeding America say, Together We Can Solve Hunger™.