

Food stamp cooking

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One hundred dollars takes on a unique meaning depending on the spender.

It may mean new shoes or a dinner out to some people.

For others, it is a significant portion of their family's monthly budget. Many people in the latter situation are eligible for Supplement Nutrition Assistance Program benefits, better known as food stamps.

Chris and Amber Hinds of Gillette are admitted foodies since he is a chef. The young couple, both 28, decided to live during December as if they were under the confines of a SNAP food budget.

They slashed their food spending nearly in half — down to just \$112 a week — for their family of four.

The Hindses, who don't qualify for SNAP assistance, wanted to take on the challenge for a myriad of reasons that spanned from political and financial all the way to moral.

Since they arrived in Gillette less than a year ago, he took an executive chef job and Amber stayed at home with their two daughters, Nora, 4, and Zara, 1, while maintaining a blog and a freelance website and graphic design career. They decided in November to make a career move, which eventually would mean a different job in Cheyenne. In the meantime, the family had to cut its spending.

Setting priorities

Living on the reduced budget turned a stressful moment into an exercise in simplicity. They started asking the important questions.

“What do we want to have all the time? What can we do without?” Amber asked.

The answers are different for each family. The Hinds' priority was quality over quantity or convenience. Amber in particular is interested in the politics of food and is a major advocate of eating organic and locally. In Gillette, that is easier said than done. They started off by hitting different stores in town to figure out where they could find the right foods at the right prices.

They created a list of staples and went to different grocery stores to check prices. They decided to buy organic items when available, even though organic tends to cost 10 to 15 percent more than non-organic, according to Chris.

“For us, that's something that's worth it,” Amber said.

The SNAP challenge is largely about choices, or sacrifice, depending on your viewpoint.

The Hindses made a few expensive choices in December and alternately gave up things they loved. The couple strayed in the first week by taking up a friend's offer to baby-sit so they could go on a dinner date, a rare opportunity that they couldn't pass up.

The next week, they had to make a trip to Denver. Traveling meant eating out, and they spent \$96 at restaurants.

The first slip-up was written off, but the second stuck. They decided they would have to live with their choice and stick to their \$112 budget. That meant they had \$16 left for the rest of the week. They only spent \$5.77 of it and came in nearly \$10 under budget.

"I did not go grocery shopping that week," Amber said.

The Hindses learned that, for every splurge, there was a reduction elsewhere. They stopped buying fine cheeses, chocolate bars and mixed nuts. Chris drastically cut his meat intake. They stopped going to restaurants after the Denver trip and seriously reduced their snacking.

Outside the box

Creativity was born out of their limitations.

"You're looking at your set of ingredients and you're basically thinking, rather than what do I want ... what can I use up, because waste isn't an option ..." Chris said.

Amber had to put that mentality into practice when she was faced with the challenge of making cookies with no eggs for a cookie swap.

"I was like, well, I can't go to the grocery store and buy more eggs." She looked through her fridge and decided to substitute yogurt. "It worked. Actually, they were really good."

They also made their own tortillas and turned basic staples into meals. One night, they served their friends black bean soup and toppings along with an apple pie with a canola oil and yogurt pie crust (they didn't have butter).

"We were like, well, it's not going to be fancy," Amber said.

"They enjoyed it," Chris said.

Coming up with interesting and tasty meals wasn't the biggest challenge, they said. They saw the most changes in their social life and restaurant habits.

"I think that is something that doing the challenge did make me more aware of — how much we do go out — and the social aspect of food and how you don't have that (when you're on a SNAP budget)," Amber said.

“I think one of the other advantages, though, is it makes you spend more time in your own kitchen,” he said.

Keeping it simple

With \$448 at their disposal, the family of four managed to come in under budget with a total grocery bill of \$388.16 (not including their dinner date early on in the challenge).

The challenge made them acutely aware of their own needs and gave them the chance to analyze the system in place for those who cannot afford to buy food on their own.

It made them question the theory that a tight budget meant a family only could afford unhealthy food.

“In the media, they have this perception that if you have a really limited budget, you can only afford the chips and the pop,” Amber said. “We did this and we did not once drink pop or eat Twinkies or whatever,” Amber said.

Amber believes that people or families on SNAP who think they are limited to unhealthy options could benefit from education about healthy choices and smart spending — not just financial assistance.

“It’s not just giving them a fish, it’s giving them a fish and also teaching them how to fish,” Amber said.

The SNAP budget pushed the Hindses to try new things, to get creative, to form new opinions and ultimately, to simplify. They liked the results so much that they’ve decided to continue working with the strict spending limits (with the exception of some restaurant meals and a few other small things).

For the couple, sacrifice didn’t lead to a feeling of lack, but rather a healthier, sustainable lifestyle.