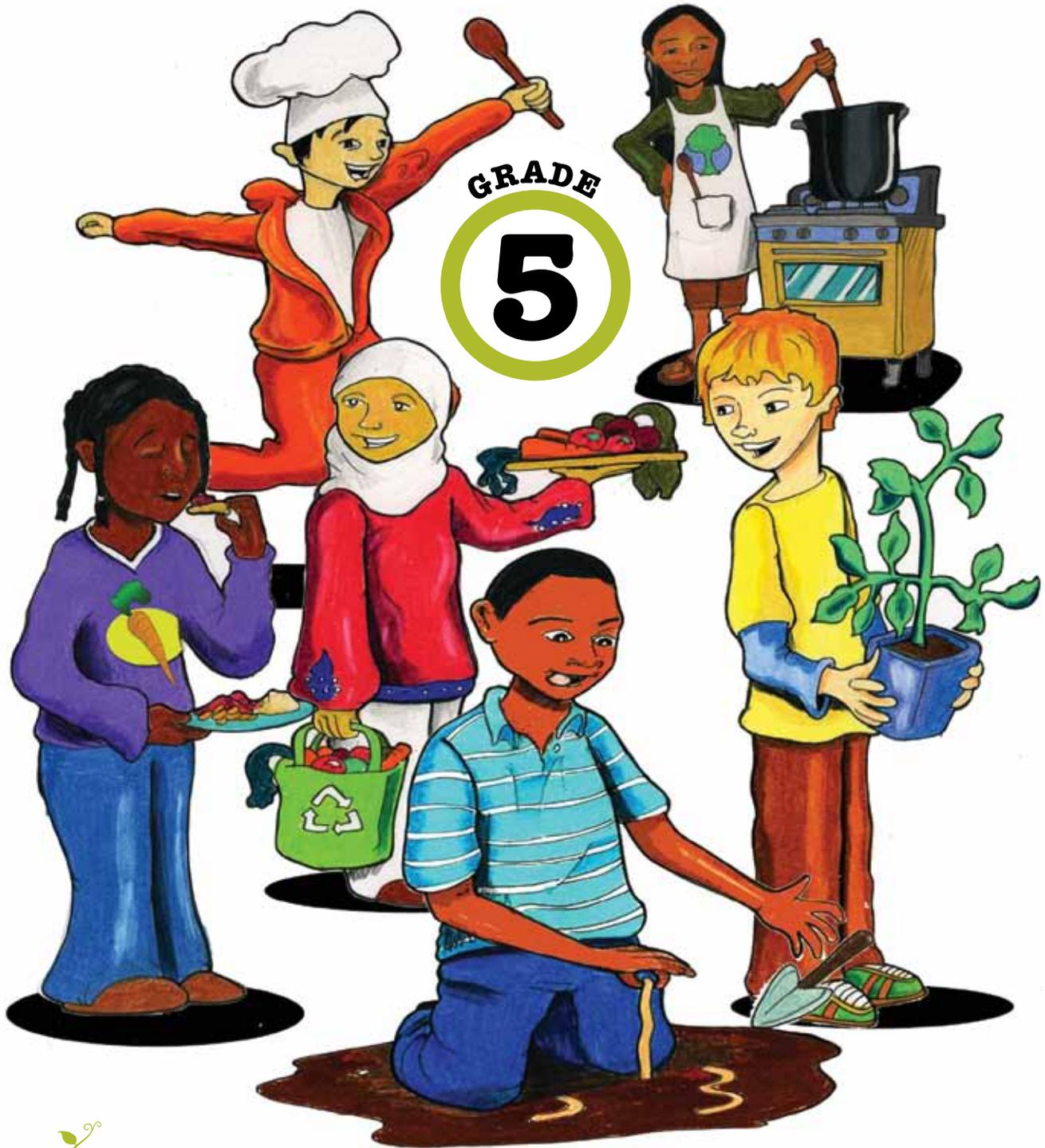


**sustainable food systems**

# Education Guide



GRADE

5



## **Mission**

The Stop Community Food Centre strives to increase access to healthy food in a manner that maintains dignity, builds community and challenges inequality.

## **What we do**

The Stop has two locations: at our main office at 1884 Davenport Road we provide frontline services to our community, including a drop-in, food bank, perinatal program, civic engagement, bake ovens and markets, community cooking, community advocacy, sustainable food systems education and urban agriculture. The Stop's Green Barn, located at 601 Christie Street, is a sustainable food production and education centre which houses a greenhouse, food systems education programs, a sheltered garden, community bake oven and compost demonstration centre.

## **Philosophy**

We believe that healthy food is a basic human right. We recognize that the ability to access healthy food is often related to multiple issues and not just a result of low income. At The Stop, we've taken a holistic approach to achieve real change in our community's access to healthy food.

We strive to meet basic food needs and, at the same time, foster opportunities for community members to build mutual support networks, connect to resources and find their voices on the underlying causes of hunger and poverty.

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# credits

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To the teachers who work tirelessly trying to provide an alternative, hands-on approach to learning for their students, thank you for giving me the space to implement this program in your class and in your school. Your feedback on activities has been invaluable. To the students who take part in the program, your excitement and enthusiasm for our education team keeps us motivated to ensure you have fun each and every single time.

Special thanks to Kathryn Scharf, Rhonda Teitel-Payne and Pat Saul for their editorial feedback that has greatly strengthened the guide while keeping it simple and accessible.

Thank you all,

Kamla

# letter to teachers

## Letter to teachers

The Stop Community Food Centre is committed to teaching students about sustainable food systems and our education program for grade 5 students emerged after many consultations with staff, volunteers, teachers and students. 'Good Food for All' is the program's motto because we believe in the importance of nutritious, sustainable food and everyone's right to access healthy food.

One of the most important ingredients for achieving 'Good Food for All' is the right mind set for doing simple things, like digging, planting, smelling, tasting and eating. Children have great fun accomplishing these tasks and it is our hope that our program will pique their curiosity about food and food issues in general. The activities in the program are designed to introduce children to key life skills while reinforcing the goals of the Ontario curriculum. We use popular education methods and hands-on learning techniques that recognize and validate students' experience around food and help build opportunities for collective action.

The purpose of this education guide is to provide you with the background information on which our education program is based. While it was originally designed to assist classroom teachers in our program, we hope that educators in community centres and organizations across the province are able to use this guide to start or improve their own activities. Although we are not able to reproduce our activities in their entirety, we have included activity ideas that are complementary to each unit; they are highly adaptable and have been used to teach younger students, teens and even adults.

Please note that the education programs at The Stop's Green Barn are only available to schools in our catchment area to ensure high quality programming and maintain our community focus. The Stop's Green Barn offers a variety of spaces – a teaching kitchen, classroom, greenhouse, compost area and sheltered garden – designed to stimulate and nourish children's interest in food issues.

If you have questions or concerns about this guide, let's talk. The education program, like all other programs at The Stop, is always a work in progress and we welcome new ideas and suggestions.

Thank you for joining our efforts to increase good food for all. Enjoy!

Sincerely,

**Kamla Ross McGregor**

Education Coordinator

The Stop Community Food Centre

# program goals

We support the learning goals of the Ontario curriculum by:

1. Teaching children where their food comes from.
2. Creating a positive experience around growing and eating healthy food.
3. Exploring how our well-being is interconnected with the health of our communities and with nature.
4. Empowering kids to become active agents of social change.

## learning units

The program offers five learning units that give children a chance to build on concepts throughout the school year.

### **1. The real dirt on food systems**

Students explore the steps involved in getting food from field to table while learning about some of the challenges of various food production methods.

### **2. The more we get together!**

Students are encouraged to challenge the idea of charity and investigate a social justice model that focuses on building healthy communities through democratic solutions.

### **3. Growing back to our roots**

Students examine traditional and modern methods of food production, looking at the interconnections between biodiversity, sustainability and indigenous practices.

### **4. Cooking traditions**

Students build confidence in the kitchen while they cook a meal together, share their own food traditions and explore how the media influences their food choices.

### **5. Scraps to snacks**

Students investigate the process of vermicomposting from start to finish: adding their own food scraps to the compost pile, creating a worm bin, assessing decomposition, planting seeds, and finally snacking on fresh greenhouse produce.

# ontario curriculum connections

	Unit 1	Unit 2	Unit 3	Unit 4	Unit 5
<b>Science</b>					
Grade 5 (Grade 6)	✓		✓		✓
<b>Health</b>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
<b>Social studies</b>					
Heritage Canada (Grade 6)		✓	✓	✓ ✓	
<b>Math</b>				✓	
<b>Language</b>					
Oral Media	✓	✓ ✓	✓	✓ ✓	✓
<b>The Arts</b>			✓		
<b>Workshop Offered In</b>	Oct-Nov	Dec-Jan	Jan-Feb	Mar-Apr	May-Jun



# program poster

The grade 5 program poster was designed to help your students imagine what their neighbourhood could look like if children worked at ensuring good food for all. Good food that is accessible can involve many programs and activities: local farmers' markets, backyard and community gardens, cooking programs, sharing recipes with family members and promoting good food principles to others in schools and the broader community.

## classroom questions

After completing each unit, use the poster to ask your students the following:

**Unit 1.** In the middle of the poster, kids are playing in a farmers' market. What is the difference between a supermarket and a farmers' market?

**Unit 2.** What kind of food do you think you can get at a food bank and why?

Can food served at food banks be considered the most healthy and nutritious?

How can children work with adults, politicians and the broader community to help ensure good food is everyone's right?

**Unit 3.** The Three Sisters is a lesson on First Nations' culture about companion planting. Are there any planting or gardening stories in your family?

**Unit 4.** Is there a recipe that is traditional in your family?

Do you get to cook at home? If yes, what kind of food do you make?

**Unit 5.** How can growing and cooking whole foods help reduce waste?

## general questions

How many food related activities can you find in the poster?

Do you/your family do any of the food-related activities shown? If so, which ones?

Can you find examples of cultural diversity? List them.



## 1

# the real dirt on food systems

## in this workshop:

Students will be encouraged to imagine the food system by playing a farm-to-table game. They will learn the names of common ingredients made from processed corn and read food labels to spot clues about where their food comes from, how it was grown and how it got to their table.

### Unit objectives

- ✓ To illustrate where our food comes from
- ✓ To highlight the differences between local and industrial food production
- ✓ To demonstrate how food is produced, distributed and consumed
- ✓ To highlight the challenges farmers face in growing food, the unsustainable use of fossil fuels and how it affects our health and the planet
- ✓ To present food production alternatives



## ontario curriculum connections

### Health and physical education

- ✓ Explain how to use nutrition fact labels and ingredients lists to make healthier food choices
- ✓ Apply their knowledge of societal factors that influence eating habits and food choices to develop personal guidelines for healthier eating

### Science and technology

- ✓ Assess the effects of social and environmental factors on human health and propose ways in which individuals can reduce harmful effects on these factors
- ✓ Evaluate the environmental impacts of processes that change one product into another
- ✓ Analyze the long term impacts on society and the environment of human uses of energy and natural resources, and suggest ways to reduce these impacts

### Language

- ✓ Demonstrate an understanding of ideas and communicate in a clear, coherent manner, presenting ideas, opinions and information in a readily understandable form

# 1

## background:

Throughout North American society we are becoming increasingly disconnected from our food sources. Less than a century ago, many people lived on or near a farm and were somehow involved in food production.

For example, in 1921 agriculture was the single most common occupation, accounting for 33% of all jobs and almost a third of all Canadians lived on farms (Statistics Canada, 2009). By 2006, only 2% of Canadians lived on a farm and this number continues to drop as more people move to urban areas and buy their food in grocery stores, restaurants, and even in places like drugstores and gas stations.



A local farmer sells his produce at a farmers' market in the city, thereby getting to know his customers directly.

### The significance of corn

Corn originated in Central America from teosinte (“mother of corn”), a wild grass, which looks much different than the corn we know today. Through centuries of selective propagation by humans, corn has become one of our most versatile crops. Today, most farmers only grow three types of corn: sweet corn, popcorn and dent corn. Most of the corn produced is dent corn, which is used to feed cattle and make a wide variety of food products and non-food items, such as house wares, kitty litter, industrial solvents, de-icers and more.

North Americans eat a lot of processed corn. In fact, the amount of corn in our diets can be measured using isotope analysis, which shows the amount and types of carbon present in our cells. Hair samples are tested for this type of analysis, since everything our bodies have taken in eventually ends up in our hair. Because plants take carbon dioxide from the air during photosynthesis, the carbon becomes incorporated into their cells. Corn stores the carbon in a slightly different form (C4) than most other plants (C3), so scientists can tell by looking at the types of carbon present in our hair, just how much corn we have been eating.

In North America, there is so much corn in our diet that one American biologist has said that from a scientific standpoint, “we look like corn chips with legs!” (Pollan, 2009, p.13)

## questions & answers:

### What about the environment?

Because our present day food system aims to produce ever larger quantities of food with greater economic efficiency, vast areas of agricultural land are being devoted to monocropping (growing one crop on the same land repeatedly). While allowing for greater specialization of equipment and labour, and a reduction in the amount of time and human effort required to produce food crops, this system's reliance in man-made chemical inputs, such as synthetic fertilizers and pesticides, has serious consequences in the natural environment. Our heavy reliance on these chemicals began after World War II when companies that made ammonium nitrates to produce explosives realized that they could sell the same product to farmers to increase their yields (Pollan, 2006, p.41-2). In addition, our practices of transporting these crops over long distances, and processing them into "food products," involve a great deal of energy, most of which comes from non-renewable pollution-causing fossil fuels.

### What about our health?

Over the same period of time that North Americans have been consuming increasing quantities of processed foods, the incidence of diet-related health problems has also been on the rise. Type II diabetes, cardiovascular disease, some forms of cancer, and other conditions all have known links to the foods we eat. Particularly troubling, perhaps, is the marked

increase in childhood obesity – one in four Canadian children between the ages of 2 and 17 are either overweight or obese – and the numbers continue to rise (Ministry of Health Promotion, 2010). In order to combat this trend, we all need to be aware of what we are really eating, so that we can make informed healthy choices.

### What about farmers?

Farmers have found it increasingly difficult to make a living. Many small farms have not survived the push to grow and buy new, expensive equipment required for larger yields. They have been bought out by large corporations that can better compete in the global market place. Government programs have aided this growth by subsidizing farm modernization activities that have mostly benefited the largest players. Retailers, who have grown in size, use their power to pressure producers to offer their crops at the lowest price. Competition and cheaper labour in China and the U.S. have also driven many farmers out of business (Winson, 1993, 129-212). When farm land is no longer viable it is often paved over and turned into sprawling suburbs with big chain stores. With these conditions, our ability to feed ourselves locally in the event of a global food crisis may be lost.

In addition to international pressures, when a farmer is able to sell her/his farm's produce in its natural state to



consumers, a much larger proportion of the price paid for the food goes to the farmer. If, instead, that produce is sold as a commodity to be processed, the farmer receives a smaller portion of the price paid for the final product, while the rest goes to processors, transporters, and marketers who are part of a network of multinational food companies. In fact, for every dollar spent by consumers on whole foods (e.g. eggs), roughly 40 cents goes back to the farmer. In contrast, for every dollar spent on processed foods (e.g. breakfast cereal), only 20 cents goes back to the farmer (Pollan, 2009, p.72).

# 1

## putting it all together:

Throughout the course of this workshop, we aim to expand students' knowledge and enhance critical thinking regarding our modern day food system. It is important that students ask questions about where their food comes from, who grows it, in what manner it is grown and how it gets to their table. By increasing awareness of what is in the food we eat and what is involved in its production and distribution, we hope to help students identify healthier food choices that will also contribute to a healthier and fair food system.



### How to build a healthier food system?

- ✓ Eat more whole foods
- ✓ Buy foods from local farmers
- ✓ Learn how to grow food

### How much processed corn do you eat?

Below are some common ingredients in processed foods that come from dent corn...

- ✓ maltodextrin
- ✓ dextrose
- ✓ glucose syrup
- ✓ hydrolyzed corn protein
- ✓ modified starch
- ✓ unmodified starch
- ✓ monosodium glutamate (MSG)
- ✓ xanthan gum
- ✓ lecithin
- ✓ mono-, di-, & tri-glycerides

Sourced: The Omnivore's Dilemma: The Secrets Behind What You Eat by Michael Pollan

## activity ideas:

### **Use images to describe the food system**

Find images that illustrate the production, distribution, sale and consumption of food, whether it be food that is locally grown or from another country. You could turn it into a puzzle/game by asking your students to organize the images from field to table.

### **Host food tastings!**

Buy a variety of whole foods for students to sample. Have them describe the flavours, texture and scent. Apples are an easy food to start with as they come in many colours and are available year-round. The more children can sample whole foods, the more open-minded they will be towards making healthy choices.

### **Visualize the journey of food**

Ask students to imagine the production and distribution steps of one of their favourite foods and draw it on a sheet of paper. Alternatively, they could do this as a research project. If they like pizza, they can choose cheese or wheat. If they like ice cream, they can focus on sugar or milk. Just charting one ingredient from their favourite food will be complex enough. Have the students draw a chart that starts at the beginning of the food chain, i.e. a farm, and ends at the dinner plate. Make sure the students draw all the trucks, planes, factories, etc. that would be involved in the making of that food ingredient. Discuss the environmental consequences of eating foods with long and complicated production chains and the benefits of eating foods with shorter ones.

### **Grow sprouts**

Growing food may seem difficult in an urban environment. But sprouts are very easy to grow and can get children to start thinking about growing their own food. You can start with sunflowers, lentils, and peas, which need very little soil and sunlight. Alfalfa sprouts can grow in water alone and can be ready to eat in just four or five days!

### **Make a salad bar**

If you can grow sprouts in class, why not also make a salad bar? Ask your students to bring whole foods they would like to use in a salad – fruits, vegetables and even cheese. In class, have students cut their own fruits and vegetables and put them into different bowls so that they can pick and choose the combination of foods they like best for their salad.

### **Draw a neighbourhood food map**

Have students find out where people can buy and eat food in their neighbourhood. Is food in the neighbourhood affordable? Is there easy access to fresh fruits and vegetables? If someone did not own a car, could they readily access fresh local food? Have students come up with their own questions, help them identify gaps and solutions they could pursue in a realistic time frame.



## 2

# the more we get together

## in this workshop:

Students will play **The Game of Real Life**. They will have to budget for the monthly needs of a single adult based on a minimum wage salary or social assistance rates. They will work in teams to try to figure out, in very practical terms: what is the minimum a person needs to have health and dignity and, how would they manage in the event of unforeseen circumstances? This game will help deepen their understanding of poverty and combat stereotyping. See appendix on page 50 for more information.

### Unit objectives

- ✓ To demonstrate how poverty can happen to anyone and to challenge stereotypes
- ✓ To highlight the concept of basic human rights (i.e. to ensure fairness and respect for everyone)
- ✓ To inform students about documented realities of poverty in Ontario
- ✓ To demonstrate the difference between charity and social justice
- ✓ To encourage critical thinking regarding the strengths and limitations of government programs, charitable and community-based solutions to poverty and hunger
- ✓ To show how kids can become actively involved in positive social change



## ontario curriculum connections

### Social studies – Canada and world connections

- ✓ Identify concrete examples of how government plays a role in contemporary society
- ✓ Describe basic rights that are specified in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms
- ✓ Identify responsibilities that accompany particular rights, e.g. the responsibility to treat people with fairness and respect
- ✓ Identify services provided by the federal, provincial and municipal government, e.g. social assistance

### Health and physical education

- ✓ Apply their knowledge of practical and societal factors that influence eating habits and food choices

### Language

- ✓ Demonstrate an understanding of ideas and communicate in a clear, coherent manner, presenting ideas, opinions and information in a readily understandable form

# 2

## the background:

Imagine a world where everyone got together to help one another through difficult times. Family and friends were always there for each other, everyone had a decent place to live, meaningful work and enough healthy food to eat.

Unfortunately, we are far from a world where everyone's basic needs are met, but as humans, most of us strive to help others less fortunate. Helping others not only shows empathy, but is also in our best interest as the costs of poverty can affect us all (Laurie, 2008).

Yet, despite Canada's status as a wealthy nation, many Canadians are doing without: 35.8% of new Canadians (Laurie, 2008), 24% of Canadian single mothers (Townson, 2009), and 17.7% of Canadian children (Hunter & Douglas, 2006) live in poverty. The 2005 *Campaign 2000* report on child poverty showed that almost half of all children living in poverty belong to poor working families (Jackson, 2006).

At The Stop Community Food Centre, we are concerned about the effects of poverty because we see how it affects people's access to healthy food. In Ontario, people without secure, full-time, decent-paying work, and people on social assistance programs frequently go without the food they need to be healthy. Benefits have fallen so low, that it is basically impossible for people on social assistance in Ontario to afford the cost of nutritious food that is recommended by public health units.



A group of children help to advocate for human rights and food security for people in their neighbourhood. School staff, parents and caregivers can help children organize and advocate alongside adults.

Despite the hardships many in our city are facing, resources are not being effectively used to solve the problem due to gross misconceptions about people who live in poverty. "Poor people are too lazy to work; have too many children; want an easy ride; lack financial know-how; and overspend on frills" are some of the reasons many people use to explain why a certain segment of society is in such a precarious situation. Yet, the causes

of poverty are complex and the faces of those experiencing it are as diverse as the people who live in our city. Until we start asking more in-depth questions about what causes poverty – questions that go beyond preconceived notions – we will not break its cycle. To address the causes of poverty, we need to move beyond simple charitable activities, ones that provide temporary relief, towards developing solutions that help people help themselves.

*"The more we get together,  
together, together,  
the more we get together,  
the happier we'll be."*

—Marianne

## questions & answers

### Who are the poor?

When children in schools are asked "Who are the poor?" or "What do the poor look like?", they often talk about the homeless men they see on the street, a homeless man, with ragged clothes, who looks out to have to earn change. But the men the children speak of are a small fraction of the individuals and families that poverty affects.

The truth is that 24.4% of people in Ontario live in poverty (Living Wage for Toronto, 2016). Many are the wage earners who support extended families and are having a difficult time making ends meet (Pan Shun, 2017). Poverty disproportionately affects single mothers, newcomers, Aboriginal people with disabilities and children.

Despite a growing economy and a number of social programs, between 2015 and 2017, food bank use in Ontario increased by 14% (Living Wage for Toronto, 2016).

Based on the growing number of people experiencing poverty, it is clear that neither the current job market nor the social safety net secure people with the most basic necessities of life.



### Keeping the Poverty Trap: Mike's Story

After working his way up in the hotel industry, from dishwasher to head office manager, Mike lost it all in 2010 when he was diagnosed with cancer. He was just 37 years old.

But, it wasn't the cancer or the diagnosis that broke his spirit. It was the poverty.

To learn more about Mike and others affected by poverty, go to page 24.

*"Poverty means not having...the basics: good housing, education, childcare, transit, health services, dental care, and extra-curricular activities. Not having the things that prepare us for life, keep us well connected with others. When the basics are unaffordable, poverty means isolation and desperation."*

—John Wilson, Executive Director, Centre for Policy Alternatives

# 2

## questions & answers:

### How do people end up on welfare?

People end up on welfare for any number of reasons, including family breakdown, sickness or injury, caring for a sick family member, receiving sickness, high child care costs coupled with low wages, and being without work or eligible for Employment Insurance benefits. The recession in recent years has made the situation worse, not to mention that in 2008, when the recession hit, one in ten families were already living in poverty (Campaign 2010, p. 2).

Today, despite an improvement in the economy, the recession is still being felt. In 2008, one in ten workers earned less than \$10 per hour and between 2008 and 2010 there was a 20% increase in the total number of part-time workers seeking full-time work (Campaign 2010, p. 2). As full-time jobs with benefits become harder to find, many families end up relying on welfare as they cannot get by with part-time work or have exhausted employment insurance benefits.

For those who cannot find work or have a disability that prevents them from working, there are two social assistance programs in Ontario. One is called Ontario Works (OW), and the other is the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP).

Tough eligibility criteria mean that people waiting for OW must exhaust all assets before they are able to join the program. This ensures that only people experiencing the most extreme hardship are able to access benefits and that they have very few resources to fall back on.

Despite many common assumptions, most people do not want to be on welfare. Social assistance rates, which suffered a 25.8% cut in 2008 and have not been raised to reflect, do not cover people's basic needs (Stephen & Brown, 2010). People who are on welfare often have to choose between housing and food, but often cannot have both, making welfare a stigmatizing and demoralizing program.

If you were a single parent, without children, the most realistic \$600 per month on Ontario Works = \$1,000 in Ontario Disability Support = \$1,800 to survive minimum wage work (Cameron 2010)

\$600 monthly assistance rate for a single parent on Ontario Works, i.e. social assistance  
\$700 average monthly cost of a two-bedroom apartment in Toronto  
If you could not afford the rent for an adequate period of time, what would be the lasting impacts?

**ONTARIO'S MINIMUM WAGE** increased to \$10.25/hour in March, 2010. But the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives estimates that, based on current living costs, the minimum wage needed for families to avoid poverty should be \$15.50/hour.

**ONTARIO WORKS** (OW) is the income support program of last resort for people without paid employment. It is an emergency program intended to support low-income, family and neighborhoods when something goes seriously wrong in their lives.

**ONTARIO DISABILITY SUPPORT PROGRAM** (ODSP) is an income support program for people who are unable to maintain full-time employment due to a medical condition.

## Charity - Are we doing enough?

At The Stop Community Food Centre, we provide emergency food programs for our food bank, but we know that no amount of charity can bridge the gap in people's income or eliminate the roots to their problems when they are forced to stand in line for food. The stress that poverty puts on people's physical and mental health is significant and cannot be ignored.

Charity has been about empathy when they are asked to raise money for charity or donate food to those less fortunate. But there are so not enough children in their neighbourhoods, but good solutions that cannot, on their own, address the complexity of poverty or prevent others from falling through the cracks.

Tomasek and The Wellesley Institute, two respected Canadian research institutions, indicate that time is getting evidence of the strengths and limitations of various initiatives

carried out to address poverty. In a recent paper titled "Comprehensive Community Initiatives: Lessons Learned, Potential and Opportunities Moving Forward," which gathered 300 submissions from across the country, the report's key message was that successful programs were "cross-sector collaborations of various providers, residents, advocates, businesses, governments and other stakeholders" (Gardner, Labin, Plamondon, 2016). While increasing people's access to full-time jobs with living wages and raising welfare rates could do a lot to help alleviate poverty, these solutions alone would not address the structural and systemic foundations of poverty and inequality. Programs need to be comprehensive and run across different sectors. They must be placed within the community

being addressed and demand both short and long-term solutions.

At The Stop, we believe that when people's basic needs are met, they will be better equipped to pursue opportunities that will lead to full-time employment. We need to ensure that when people are able to work, they have access to childcare, healthcare, education, and job training, and that people who are educated have their skills adequately recognized and compensated. If we increase our investment in people in the short term, it could do a lot to help people but without welfare permanently.

**"Since 1999, inflation has increased by 18.8% in Ontario, making the real value of [welfare rates] now over 87%. In Ontario, the average cost for a two-bedroom apartment has increased by 84% over that period while in Toronto, for example, the cost of food has increased by 12% since 1999. With inflation eating into stagnant welfare rates, the real value of welfare recipients' money is in sharp decline."**

Source: Tom Tomasek, "Tapping the Stop Community Food Bank's Potential as a Model of Community-led Food Security Research," in The Canadian Journal of Public Health, November 2017



# 2

## putting it all together

Very young children can understand and articulate the meaning of social justice. Social justice simply means fairness for everyone in society. Children are taught about fairness at home and at school and know that equitable sharing of resources makes for a happier community.

As citizens, it is everyone's responsibility to help others in our community. We can involve children in citizenship by engaging them in critical thinking about what causes poverty and how they can work together with family, friends and neighbours to address the issue.

### How to build a healthier food system?

- Listen to personal accounts of people who have experienced poverty
- Ask parents to talk about family or friends who are going through tough times
- Write letters to the local Member of Provincial Parliament (MPP) to ask questions about what is being done to address poverty and social welfare
- Talk with others about different food-related solutions



## activity ideas

### Take students grocery shopping and make a meal

If you had to live on welfare, what food would you buy? Knowing that a single person on welfare in Ontario receives \$150, try to calculate how much the person would have to spend on food after paying rent. Use this money to go grocery shopping and make a healthy meal. Was healthy in this meal? If you had to live like this for a long period of time, how would your physical, mental and emotional health be affected? Other than food and rent, what other expenses would you have to cover?

### Host a guest speaker from an official speakers bureau

Invite guest speakers who can talk about their experience living in poverty. Ideally it should be someone who has been harmed and can speak about the issue with dignity and respect. Ask students to develop questions about what they could do to help people who are currently living in poverty – solutions that can help break down stereotypes and address underlying causes.

### Do research on a specific topic related to poverty

Find out from students what interests them the most and help them carry out a research project by using primary and secondary sources. They could use personal stories and experiences from people they know, family and friends, and use secondary sources to help develop a thesis or make a claim.

### Learn about services that are offered in your neighbourhood

Have students find out what services are offered in their neighbourhood that help fight hunger and address issues of poverty. Are there any food banks, drop-in centres or cooking and gardening programs? What about programs that help people find affordable housing, information on family doctors and other services? If there are no services, how far would someone have to travel? If there are services available, are there any waiting periods?

### Carry out an anti-hunger action project

After students have done some research on a specific topic, they can make short videos or develop a presentation they can show to other students. They can develop a petition to collect signatures that can be sent to their MP, or post colourful banners and placards and go on a hunger march around the community to raise awareness.

### Visit your local MP's office or go to Queen's Park

Students can write letters to their MP's but actually visiting them in person and talking with them face-to-face can help students feel more empowered to take action and make people in power more accountable.

## personal stories

### Escaping the poverty trap: Mike's story

How hard is escaping poverty? For Mike Christensen, on 10/10/2012, it wasn't all that hard. - Mike Christensen

After working his way up in the hotel industry from dishwasher to head office manager, Mike lost it all in 2000 when he was diagnosed with cancer. He was just 37.

But, it wasn't the cancer or the depression that broke him apart, it was the poverty.

With no workplace disability benefits, he clung to Employment Insurance while enduring six months of chemotherapy, ten surgeries, blood tests, seizures and going into rounds that wouldn't heal.

When he finally got out, he worked up in a welfare. Within a year, he had lost his downtown Toronto apartment, surrounded his wife with friends and was sleeping in homeless shelters. Eventually he ended up in a subsidized apartment in a group Home Support Program. He was frightened, depressed and alone.

"I was very sick," Mike recalls. "Eventually, I was just waiting to die."

During 12 years on welfare and Ontario's Disability Support Plan, Mike lived on about \$800 a month. With no money to go out with friends or to entertain at home, he became a recluse.

In early 2007, Mike saw a poster in his doctor's office inviting people with a history of homelessness to participate in a new outreach program. The 12-week program, known from the Street, provided a 700-page manual

and a weekly remuneration of \$60.

Mike signed up and soon learned he was not alone. He met others who had been set on the pathway to poverty by mental illness, addiction and domestic assault. And he began to understand how government programs for the poor became a trap.

When the program coordinator's position became available in early 2008, Mike applied. He got the job and soon was earning \$40,000 plus benefits.

When the first Home Support program went on the market in February 2008, Mike was the fourth in line. He saved \$1,000 a month for almost a year for the \$100,000 fee unit. The time in his new place had helped his spirit and also improved his health. He had shed about 60 pounds since he began regular workouts in the center's exercise room. He also started an acting and he had lost 600 lbs in 6 months. This led to the first time in more than a decade.

He made good

health by the better living conditions and access of financial and personal security.

His personal journey has reinforced his passion to push for change.



## personal stories

### Why do they make it so tough to get ahead? Ali's story

Excerpt from "The Cost of Housing in Ontario" in the Ontario Book of Housing & Shelter, page 28-31.



Ali and his family came to Canada in 2004 as refugees from Somalia. He grew up in subsidized housing with his parents and younger sister and brother. Ali's family received Ontario Disability Support Plan (ODSP) payments as his father is disabled and his mother works part-time but makes very little. Ali had dreams of going to school but only after graduating from high school. He had had a part-time job since he was 17 and as a child none of his earnings reduced the family's ODSP payments and he was able to help a bit with household expenses.

When Ali turned 18, the family lost the \$1200 monthly payments from the government federal Canada Child Tax Benefit. The family needed the money and Ali was able to make it up by getting more hours where he worked. He felt approached. Ali and his family realized that it was not going to be possible for him to attend school full-time. It was not just the absence of savings or the loss of the \$1200 in child benefits. He just needed more money to make ends of it. He also discovered that 50% of his net earnings of about \$1000 a month would now be deducted from his father's ODSP cheque as Ali was no longer a dependent child and was no longer in secondary school. At

the same time, the Housing Authority notified Ali's parents that their rent would be increasing given that Ali was now age 18, had graduated from secondary school, was no longer in school full-time, and was making over \$10 a month. The rent increase effective immediately was another \$50 a month.

The cumulative loss of \$400 a month in tax child benefits, deducted earnings, and increased rent was too much to bear so he made two plans to go to school part-time and perhaps make some more money to make up the losses. Ali tried to access ODSP but they were not forthcoming about providing loans for people who are living with family or within.

At the end of the summer, Ali came to the student realization that he could not remain at home with about \$1000 of his net pay coming off his family's ODSP payment along with the \$50 increase in rent. Life so many others in his situation, Ali moved out and established his legal residence at a friend's house.

He became what is known by many public housing kids as a 'couch rider,' named after the place where they normally sleep in their friends' homes. The good news, Ali's father's ODSP cheque went up to a net amount of

\$1200 the next month and the rent went down to a net amount of \$50. Ali's best possible contribution to the family home at the point had been to leave.

In the ensuing months, couch riding did not prove too conducive to studying and working at the same time so Ali gave up his courses and started to look for another part-time job to combine together with his existing job, but about the time he got a letter demanding that the small amount of ODSP he received be repaid with interest, his mother got a letter from 'housing' saying that without Ali in the house, the family was 'overhoused' and no longer qualified for their apartment. She had turned down two moves to much smaller apartments because of the stress of moving for disabled husband and her two children during the school year. The move refused and the family would be evicted. She begged Ali to come back. Ali moved back for a short period to get the housing reinstated but moved out again shortly after. He would arrange a loan from his job for a month so that ODSP would not reduce the cheque and use his small savings from 'couch riding' to pay off ODSP.

## personal stories

### The system should encourage people to fulfill their dreams: Teisha's story

Source: First Things, "The system that got us here is broken," by Sarah Washburn, November 24, 2011. Reprinted with permission. For the complete story.

After growing up in poverty and spending a decade working through "vocational training" and low wage jobs, Teisha single mother Teisha Jones is trying to make a better life for her daughters Shantel, 13, and Cash, 2. "I am glad that these programs don't help people escape poverty," says Jones, who struggles to survive on about \$1,000 a month in welfare and child benefits.

The determined Washburn, who has just completed a two-year program to help single mothers access post-secondary education, has set her sights on a social work degree from York University. But welfare is not available to university and college students. And Jones is reluctant to take out student loans she fears she may never be able to repay.

"The system should encourage people to fulfill their dreams," she says. "But instead it traps us in dead-end, low wage jobs."



# personal stories

## Save Ontario's diet allowance: Melissa's story

Reprinted with permission – Melissa Addison Webster.

I am a woman with quadriplegia.

Growing up in Ontario, I always thought Canada was a fair and compassionate country. I thought wealth, social programs and resources were distributed in an equal manner.

I have since learned in a very personal way that Canada's social safety net has been torn asunder by lack of funding.

In 2000, I sustained a spinal cord injury and became a wheelchair user as a result of a car accident.

When my insurance company was no longer supplementing my income, I began receiving the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP). I was thankful for the assistance, but struggled to survive on the limited amount of \$930 a month.

Very thankfully, I began receiving \$230 through the special diet allowance in 2004. It changed my life dramatically, enabling me to shop and purchase healthy nutritious food and supplements that assisted with health issues such as osteoporosis.

Although the government said it was helping people suffering in poverty, it failed to significantly increase amounts of social assistance for individuals. In 2005, I co-chaired the Walk, Wheel and Ride for Dignity, a campaign demanding increases for social assistance.

Ultimately the levels of assistance increased by 3%, an amount only keeping pace with inflation.

Due to the lack of action by the

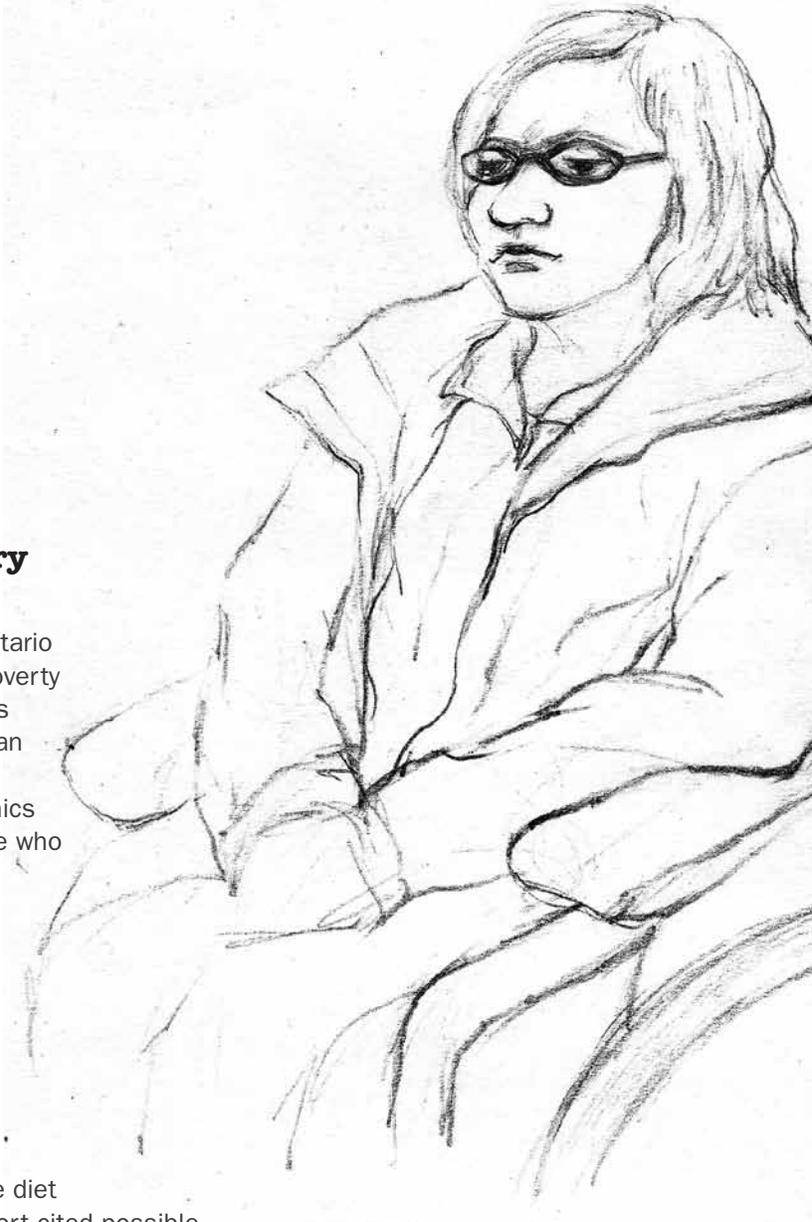
government, the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty and health providers around Ontario began running special diet "clinics." These clinics helped some people who were living on \$536 a month to receive up to \$250 more on their cheques.

In 2009, an auditor general's report questioned the legitimacy of some people receiving the diet allowance. This report cited possible abuses, yet it failed to recognize the difficult situations people were attempting to survive in when rates were so low.

The government decided to eliminate the diet allowance, and is working to replace it with a nutritional supplement program, yet it refuses to release information about the changes.

For many days after the decision to eliminate the diet allowance I felt numb, wondering how all the people I care for will survive.

The Medical Officer of Health for Toronto, Health Providers Against Poverty and the Registered Nurses' Association of Ontario are all requesting the government re-examine the diet allowance cut. Many of these groups have encouraged the government to immediately give a



\$100 nutritional supplement to all people on social assistance.

When the government cuts the diet allowance, I will lose \$67 a month that still enables me to buy healthy food and vitamins to treat my health conditions. This is preventative medicine, which also gives me a sense of peace.

Some may argue that, because of the deficit, programs must be cut, but this burden should not be placed on the backs of the poor. I plead with Premier McGuinty, Madeleine Meilleur, the Minister of Social Services, and Deb Matthews, the Minister of Health and Long-Term Care: Please re-examine the elimination of the diet allowance and increase benefits to a healthy level. You have the power to prevent more suffering and sickness for some of the most vulnerable people in our province.

**This is a preview only.  
The entire guide is 54 pages.  
To access a full print copy, contact:**

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**Thank you!**

