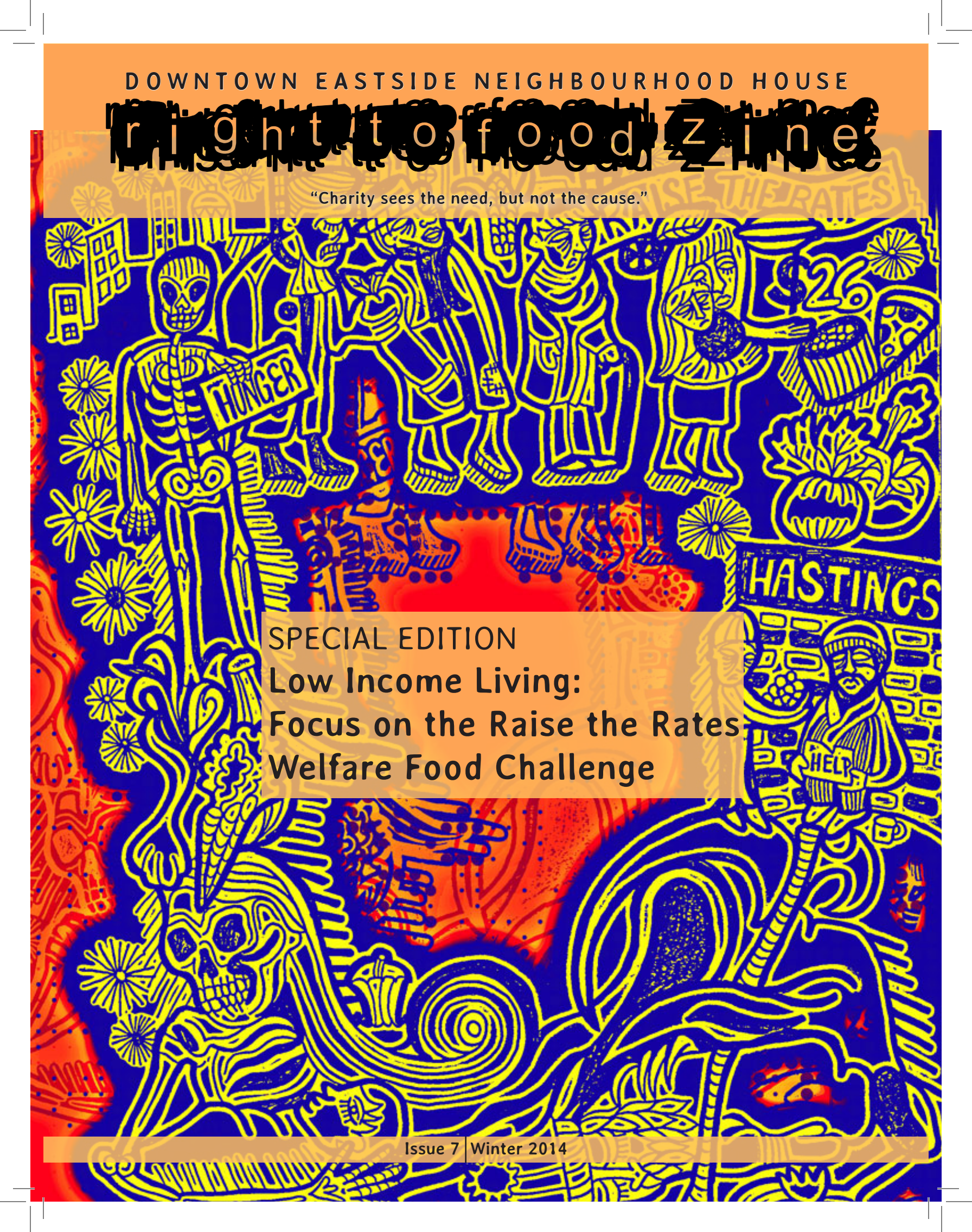


DOWNTOWN EASTSIDE NEIGHBOURHOOD HOUSE

# right to food zine

“Charity sees the need, but not the cause.”



SPECIAL EDITION  
Low Income Living:  
Focus on the Raise the Rates  
Welfare Food Challenge

Issue 7 | Winter 2014

## MANDATE

The *Right to Food (RTF) Zine*'s mission is to promote the human right to food that is healthy, nutritious, affordable, and presented with dignity. Our voices reflect the diversity that is the Downtown Eastside. Our articles, research, and recipes will speak to DTES residents, social justice groups, and beyond. Our readers will be kept informed, yet hungry to know more and to become more engaged. We are part of the local community and strive to act as a community-building tool.

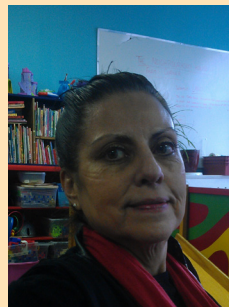
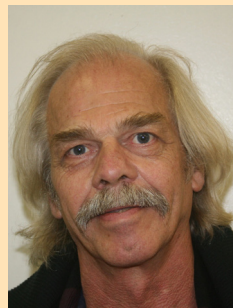
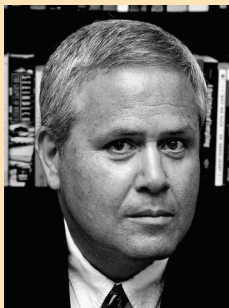
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## CONTENTS

Introduction .....	2
Why \$26? The Break Down .....	3
Welfare Food Challenge Daily Journals .....	4
Transitions ... ..	12
Haenna's Recipes ... ..	13
Poem by Janice Jacinto .....	14
Learn More and Take Action .....	15
Publishing Information .....	16

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## DISCLAIMER

The views and opinions expressed in this publication are those of the original authors and contributors, and do not necessarily reflect the views and opinions of the Downtown Eastside Neighbourhood House.

# Introduction

Thank you to Right to Food zine for covering this important issue. The 2nd Annual Welfare Food Challenge was from Wednesday, October 16th, World Food Day until Wednesday October 23rd. The Welfare Food Challenge is organized annually by Raise the Rates to highlight the reality of living on welfare in BC. For one week people are invited to live only on the food they could purchase with \$26 dollars. This is the amount of money a single able-bodied person on welfare has for food – every week.

Raise the Rates thanks the many people across BC who took the Welfare Food Challenge. People of all ages took the Challenge across the province, on Vancouver Island, in Prince George the Kootenays and greater Vancouver. Some people blogged, posted to Facebook and spoke to the media. Others quietly took the Challenge with no publicity talking to family and friends. Thanks to all of you.

The people who took the Challenge were all hungry, many lost weight, suffered from a lack of nutrients, felt tired, stressed and irritable, and were not as able to focus as usual. All of this after just one week of eating on a welfare diet. Imagine the long-term impacts of this diet on people.

A group of dietitians and nutritionists took the Challenge and, in spite of all their training and skills, none of them managed to work out a healthy and filling diet. No amount of planning and careful shopping can stretch \$26 to provide healthy food for a week. It is impossible to stay healthy on welfare; poverty makes people sick.

As well as the physical problems of eating a welfare diet, there were social impacts. Food, which is so important to human relations and culture ceased to be a pleasure. The Challenge takers thought about food most of the time, but even when they ate it was not a joy. Their social life suffered as they didn't meet people for a coffee or share food. Poverty can increase social isolation, which is detrimental to mental health and finding a job.

Keeping people in welfare in such poverty actually makes it harder for them to get a job. They spend a lot of time just to get food, and are not in the best of emotional and mental states. Think of the impossible choice for someone who has a job interview near the end of the welfare month when money has run out. Do they try to get some food to eat or get a haircut before the interview?

People on disability get a bit more money but have higher expenses as they have a disability. For many on disability this is the income for their life. They face a grim future of constant poverty. People are on welfare because of misfortune: they lost their job, they had a serious accident or physical or mental illness, or they are escaping abuse or violence. People don't choose to live on welfare.

Poverty has a real mental and physical cost to people on welfare. Poverty also costs society; it costs the BC health system over \$1 billion a year. The total cost of poverty in BC is \$8 billion, and the cost of ending poverty is less than \$4 billion. The refusal to act is an example of being "Penny wise and pound foolish". As well as saving money, tackling poverty would have real social and human benefits. Why won't the politicians act to end poverty?

There is a moral saying, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you". Clearly BC's politicians do not follow this advice, as none of them were willing to live on the welfare diet even for one week. Yet they make the 175,000 people on welfare live in poverty. A common response to poverty and hunger is to give to charity. Charity addresses the symptoms of poverty but it cannot tackle the roots of poverty. Charity has gaps in coverage and relying on charity can reduce people's self esteem. The community tries to do its share to end poverty, but the government needs to do its part by raising welfare and the minimum wage.

*By Bill Hopwood  
Raise the Rates Organizer*

## Why \$26.00? : The Break Down

**Where Welfare Money Goes:** The BC government provides \$610 a month in welfare to an able-bodied single person who is expected to look for work.

**Rent:** The amount provided for rent is \$375, but it is almost impossible to find anywhere for this money. Even in the Downtown Eastside most single rooms (about 120 square feet, no kitchen and a shared bathroom) costs \$425. Even if you manage to pay less than \$375 in rent, you don't get to keep the difference.

**Room Deposit:** You have to pay a damage deposit; usually ½ of a month's rent. Welfare takes this off your cheque at \$20 a month until the deposit is paid, usually in 10 or 11 months.

**Look for Work:** To look for work and contact the welfare office you need a phone and to be able to get a bus, so \$21 is included for a book of 10 bus tickets. If you live in a rural area, you may have to pay for gas.

**Hygiene:** You need to spend something on keeping yourself and your clothes clean.

Total welfare	\$610
Rent (realistic cost of an SRO)	\$425
Damage deposit	\$20
Book of 10 bus tickets (to look for work)	\$21
Cell phone (to look for work)	\$25
Personal hygiene/laundry	\$10
What's left for food	\$109

\$109/m \* 12 months = \$1308 a year

\$1308/a year / 365 days = \$3.58 a day

\$3.58 a day \* 7 days = \$25.09, rounded up to \$26

No money for clothes, a coffee, haircuts, or any social life or treats.



*This is a selection of the daily journals that were kept by participants of the 2013 Welfare Food Challenge. We would like to thank everyone who generously gave us permission to print their work in this issue of the zine.*

## DAY 1: Anxiety Sets In

**Seth Klein, BC Director at the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives**

On Monday, just before going to a beautiful and bountiful Thanksgiving dinner, I went to do my grocery shopping for the Challenge. I went to the Buy-Low supermarket at Kingsway and Broadway, which I was advised has some of the cheapest food in Vancouver. Notably, that's not walking distance from my home, so I drove, but assume many on welfare would need to use precious transit fares to do that.

I have rarely shopped so carefully. This voyage through the grocery aisles took much longer than my usual shopping trips. The truth is, I don't normally pay much attention to the cost of grocery items. Sure, I do a bit of comparison shopping, and if something's price seems exorbitant I take a pass. But I make a good income, and so when I shop normally I do so without much thought to the total bill I will put on my credit card.

Here's what I could buy for \$26:

- A large can of pasta sauce on sale for \$1
- Spaghetti (the cheapest package available)
- A jar of peanut butter (on sale)
- 7 apples (cheapest I could find)
- Oats (carefully measured out in the bulk section, so I had just enough for breakfasts for seven days)
- 2 liters of milk
- A large loaf of bread
- A bag of dried chick peas (which I cooked the night before the Challenge)
- A bag of dried soup mix, largely peas and lentils
- 2 potatoes
- 2 carrots
- A bulb of garlic
- An onion

(I cooked the last 5 items into a large bowl of soup the night before the Challenge.)

Total bill \$25.87

Some of the things I really, really wanted to get but couldn't afford, and left at the check-out till:

- Coffee (I better get some good sleeps!)
- Brown sugar for my oatmeal
- Bananas
- Tuna fish
- Eggs
- Tomatoes
- More bread
- Butter
- Jam
- Some more fresh or even canned veggies

This morning I ate some very plain oatmeal with milk. I really miss the coffee. I packed two peanut butter sandwiches and an apple for lunch.

I like a challenge. But I can see already this is going to be hard.

## DAY 2: Sacrifice

**Marjorie MacDonald**

To prepare for the Challenge, I bought some mixed beans and oxo cubes to make soup, a small bag of black beans, a small bag of brown rice, a bag of mottled apples on the discount shelf, two onions, a bunch of spinach, a small bag of skim milk powder, a loaf of whole wheat bread (the cheap kind), a dozen eggs (not free range, free run, or Omega 3) and the most inexpensive small bag of ground coffee I could find. I wistfully passed over the fair trade coffee beans I might otherwise purchase. As I walked to the checkout, I saw a bunch of bananas on sale and got very excited that I had just enough money left to buy them.

If I had children to feed I would likely not have purchased coffee at all – it would be an unjustifiable expense. The sacrifices necessary of parents on welfare are a stark reality when there is only \$26.00 in your pocket. It also immediately became clear to me that people on welfare do not have the opportunity to take advantage of the benefits of bulk purchasing to get the better prices. Small bags of beans and rice cost more per unit than large bags that will feed more mouths and last longer, but buying the large bag uses up too much of the food allowance. I can see this becoming a vicious cycle and never allowing one to get even just a wee bit ahead. You have to have money to save money!

Yesterday, I was consumed with sorting out the details of how I was going to engage in this challenge, so I did not have much time to confront and consider the meaning of this experience or why I was actually doing this. Today, with the details taken care

**No one should have to sacrifice their own food and health to feed their children.**

of, I had time to think about all of this and to confront some of the emotions that were just below the surface yesterday. I was reminded of something I had not thought about in many years – my own childhood growing up in a family of 8 children. We did not often go hungry, but the cost of food was an issue for my parents, at least when I was quite young. We drank powdered milk, ate primarily hamburger for meat (or fish sticks on Friday), sometimes had a “bologna roast,” and rarely had fresh vegetables.

There was almost never enough for seconds, but when there was, the first one to finish got the seconds, so I learned to eat fast and that unhealthy habit remains with me today. My mother had to intervene to make sure that everyone had a turn for seconds over the course of a week. What dawned on me suddenly yesterday was something I had never realized or considered as a child. My mother would sometimes say – when we told her to sit down and eat – “No, you go ahead, I'm not hungry. I ate something awhile ago.” And we would jump in and eat her share. She was sacrificing her food so that we would have more and I was completely oblivious to this. I know that this is a common experience for those living in poverty. No one should have to sacrifice their own food and health to feed their children.

## DAY 3: Confronting Privilege

*Denise Swanson*

My vantage point – more aptly called ADvantage point – makes it seem highly unfair to compare me, briefly attempting to live off a \$3.72 daily food budget, with those on welfare who have countless disadvantages.

I have a car. I work only part-time (freeing time and energy to do these endless budgeting calculations). I have a spacious, warm house with all the amenities most people take for granted, such as private full bathroom, where I can soak quietly in the tub to de-compress, any time I like. More importantly, I not only HAVE a kitchen: it contains a gas stove and oven, a full-sized fridge, dishwasher, toaster oven, hot water dispenser, rice cooker, slow cooker, spice grinder, espresso maker, milk frother, and on and on. Things that make life CHEAPER in the long run. Food costs way more if someone has to make it for you because you can't afford the basic equipment

Being financially, nutritionally, and otherwise stressed makes it hard to focus depleted and scattered energy on something that ought not to be very demanding: feeding oneself on a basic level. As someone who went vegan 10 years ago to permanently boycott extreme animal cruelty – and only later learned the stunning array of health benefits a well planned vegan diet offers (as well as reduced environmental degradation) – I have had plenty of time to become an amateur nutrition expert. The average person, however, is appallingly ignorant on basic nutrition; therefore, living on an extremely constricted food budget puts them at very major risk of malnutrition. Which, of course, would only serve to escalate other life struggles, such as parenting, working, and resisting addictive substances.

**Being financially, nutritionally, and otherwise stressed makes it hard to focus depleted and scattered energy on something that ought not to be very demanding: feeding oneself on a basic level.**

*Marjorie MacDonald*

I have thought a lot about how challenging it is to eat a healthy diet on such a low income. Although I have been able to include some fruits and vegetables, the most nutritious foods seem to be out of my price range. There is no way to eat “organic” and if you want to eat meat, forget about buying meat that comes from animals not raised with hormones and antibiotics – you pay a premium for that. Meat, in fact, is a luxury that would be pretty difficult to afford on a daily basis. If you have any kind of health problem, it actually does become impossible to eat appropriately. Cheaper foods are often calorie dense, with low fibre and nutrients. Anyone living in poverty with a chronic condition, like diabetes, is going to be at very high risk for adverse health

consequences. No wonder the illness and death rates are so high among the poor.

On Saturday afternoon, I dragged myself out of my sick bed to make some bean soup for dinner, thinking it would be a good nutritious meal that I could eat for several days. Variety on \$26.00 a week? Forget it. My soup included mixed beans, water, two Oxo cubes, onions and carrots, and on preliminary tasting, was quite delicious. The Oxo cubes I used were pretty high in salt content - not so great for my high blood pressure - but did contribute to the good taste. Being sick, I laid down to rest while waiting for it to cook. This was a big mistake because I promptly fell asleep, waking up to the odour of something burning – it was the soup! And yes, it was badly scorched. I managed to scoop off the top layer of the soup and put it into another pot. It was heartbreaking to have to throw out about half the soup. What was left tasted scorched. There was no longer enough to last for 3 or 4 days, but I could still get about 2 meals out of it. This kind of an event for those who are not poor might be annoying and frustrating, but for a person living in poverty, this would be a disaster that could mean hunger for the rest of the week. For me, I can look forward to Wednesday when this Food Challenge will end, but there is no end in sight for those living on social assistance.

*Sarah Carten, RD*

After eggs and rice for breakfast, I picked up three new ingredients to help balance out my meal plan for the remaining 5 days. A box of Garam masala for flavour (\$1.50), a bag of carrots as my versatile veggie (\$1.89), and peanut butter (\$3.89). I chose the cheapest peanut butter I could find, which of course meant sugar and trans fats were added. This was yet another reminder of how often someone living on low income would have to compromise the nutritional quality of the food they eat. I've thought a lot about one of the men at the launch of the Challenge who lives on income assistance. He mentioned that he did his shopping at the Dollar store. I had never thought about shopping for food at the dollar store; I'm generally of the belief that anything that costs \$1 will not be good quality. The most disturbing part of learning that the Dollar store served as this man's grocery store was when he told us that meant that when the Dollar store price increased from \$1 to \$1.25, his cost of eating increased by 25% (!).

I was then compelled to visit a dollar store to see if I could get my groceries for the week and how that would look. I calculated that \$26 would have given him 3.7 food products per day when they cost \$1, but at \$1.25 each, he would now only be able to eat 2.85 items per day. The food options were depressing: packaged and heavily processed. I had initially thought I would be able to buy some rice and lentils there, but neither was for sale. Instead, there were processed small meal mixes. The only foods that were gluten free that I could have purchased were cans of tuna, beans, corn, and tomatoes. Those four items would already have cost 35% more than my daily allowance of \$3.71 per day and would still certainly not cover my meals and snacks for the day. Even without food restrictions, I can't imagine trying to stretch dollar store foods over one day, let alone a week, month, or year.

*Jenna Drabble, MA Candidate*

**A list of things I take for granted:**

1. That I can go to the grocery store and do all of my shopping without experiencing panic, anxiety or shame.
2. That I don't have to choose between buying 'the basics' and more indulgent food items; I can have both.
3. That I can shop at the grocery store closest to my house, not because it has the best deals but because it is convenient.
4. That I build relationships and show care to others by preparing healthy and delicious food for them.
5. That when my friend wants to go to a restaurant or out for coffee, I will usually join them.
6. That when I am invited to others' homes for dinner I ask, "what can I bring?" without hesitation.
7. That I have never worried about finding housing with a kitchen and working appliances.
8. That I have the time to read about and prepare food, to educate myself about cooking and nutrition, to access the internet if I want to find a new recipe.
9. That the happiness and inspiration I derive from cooking comes from the fact that I have an array of ingredients to work with.
10. That I can choose to participate in the Welfare Food Challenge, knowing full well that once it is over I can go back to buying goat cheese and drinking \$3 Americanos.

**I build relationships and show care to others by preparing healthy and delicious food for them.**



*Photo: dm gillis*

## DAY 4: Exhaustion & Cravings

*Melissa Baker, RD*

It's day 4 of the Challenge and I am ready for it to be over. My grandparents who I adore and only see a few times a year (they live in 100 Mile House) have surprised my sister and I with a visit today and I am sad I can't share a meal with them. The social aspect of this way of living is definitely the most challenging for me. My social life usually revolves around food. Making meals with family and friends and going out to try new restaurants are very frequent events. I have a friend's birthday dinner tonight I have decided not to attend as well (going but not eating would be pure torture). Yesterday, my meals consisted of oatmeal, a little yogurt, an apple, barley, beans, squash, carrots, onion and a peanut butter and banana sandwich. Pretty much the same as the 3 days before. The lack of variety and flavor makes me eat just so I am not hungry, not because I am excited about it or enjoy the food. When I go to bed I think about what I have left to eat tomorrow and meticulously plan it out in my head.

It's interesting how my food preparation has changed too. I have never been so careful peeling a hard-boiled egg, I stopped peeling my carrots and I definitely scrape the pots and pans clean. I have also been a lot less motivated to keep up my exercise routine as I don't want to burn extra calories. I don't know how a male or someone with a bigger appetite could survive.

Working as a dietitian, I find many people who are food insecure binge eat when given the opportunity. These foods are usually high fat/carb and contain few nutrients. Given the chance to eat a large bag of chips right now (estimated at 1500 calories or more), I'd probably finish it. At this point, there is no way I would choose to eat a fruit or vegetable over chips/pastries/muffins etc. That's saying a lot for me because I LOVE fruits and vegetables, they just seem a lot less appealing this week. Food insecurity, along with no desire to be active, definitely increases ones risk for many chronic diseases.

*Colleen McGuire, MA RD*

It is now day 4 of the Challenge, and it is definitely a challenge. I did not plan ahead and bought Woodward's Peanut Butter, a loaf of whole grain bread and a dozen eggs at Nester's the day before the Challenge because I happened to be downtown. Because of this, my first day of the Challenge consisted of toast and peanut butter and egg sandwiches. I had the hardest time not having coffee and instead had weak tea (which I costed at \$0.10 per bag – this price came from a colleague also taking the Challenge). I woke up on Day 2 with a terrible headache and wondered how people on social assistance would afford the Advil that I took to alleviate the pain. I must confess that I had a cup of coffee that morning.

I have stopped taking the vitamins that I usually take, like Vitamin D and omega-3s. My food choices contain all the food groups, but are very deficient in vegetables. I seem to be craving foods that I know will fill me up – foods that contain high amounts of protein like eggs and peanut butter and high amounts of fiber like beans, brown rice and whole grain breads.

So far, I have been eating toast and peanut butter and banana, egg sandwiches, some fruit and carrots and a simple red lentil soup with rice and onions. I plan to add some yams to the rest of the soup for tonight's meal and am soaking chickpeas for a different soup tomorrow.

It is always in the forefront of my mind that many on social assistance do not have fully functioning kitchens to even make a simple soup, which is probably one of the most economical and healthy ways to eat.

I realize that it is impossible to have a social life on \$26 per week. Any venture out for a coffee or lunch is out of the question. I have not planned any social events this week, but have still had to attend meetings. Yesterday, I had a meeting downtown at 5:30 p.m. and had to come up with a way to take food with me – something that I could eat in the car before the meeting. I ended up with a hard-boiled egg sandwich and a cut up apple. I have had to catch myself before I say: “Let’s meet for coffee or lunch” or “How about a quick dinner?”

### **Jenna Drabble**

I must start with a reluctant admission: I cheated (twice). I was really intent on playing by the rules but yesterday, after walking for hours and coming home exhausted and chilled, I decided to roast some potatoes in the oven (about as close as I’m getting to comfort food). I realized that this would be difficult without a dash of olive oil, so that was my first cheat. Let me tell you, those potatoes were delicious. I basically shoved them all into my mouth at the same time. It was something about that little bit of oil that made a big difference, and I could feel the way that it satisfied both my body and mind. My mood was lifted, which is something that I have not experienced from any of the meals that I’ve been eating during the Challenge. I know the dieticians participating in

**dietary fat + your brain =  
happiness.**

the Challenge would be able to explain this better but I think it’s something like: dietary fat + your brain = happiness.

My second cheat is happening now, as I write this. I’ve got a full day of work ahead of me and the thought of doing this without coffee was too much and I succumbed to brewing a pot. Obviously I realize that these options would not be available to me if I didn’t have olive oil and coffee already sitting on the countertop in the kitchen, and I would just have to push through the mental and physical exhaustion to get on with my day. This is teaching me about the power of food, not only as a source of sustenance and pleasure, but also as something that is embedded in my routines, that I count on to carry me through the difficult days.

When I remarked to someone who lives on welfare that I wasn’t able to get everything that I’d had on my shopping list, particularly some things that I really wanted, she told me that this is her typical experience. Learning to live without. Knowing that the foods that will not only sustain you but pick you up and carry you are not within your budget.

I try to imagine feeling that way week after week, and I can’t. I can’t even live without for one week. I clearly have a bit of work to do on willpower, but I still plan to see the Challenge through without (too much) cheating.

### **Melaine (RD)**

Having to eat on such a limited budget means that I am compromising my values, my knowledge and even my identity (that’s right, my identity - look up food and identity and you’ll get what I mean).

Case in point: the awful pasta sauce we had for lunch. I never buy jarred pasta sauce but since we only permitted ourselves to use three spices, Jawad thought it best to buy the jarred stuff – and not just a small jar, but 1.8L of crap! I couldn’t bear not reading the label any longer and was shocked (why, I’m not sure) to find that ½ cup of pasta sauce has 9g of sugar in it! For comparison, ¾ cup of Fruit Loops has 12 g. Not to mention that ½ a cup of pasta sauce provides you with a whopping dose of sodium too.

I then looked at those gross granola bars that Jawad described as a petroleum-based product, and their first ingredient is sugar! As a dietitian, this doesn’t surprise me but what it makes me realize is that when I went grocery shopping, money came first. I put aside my values around eating high quality, sustainable and healthy food. I didn’t read a single label, I didn’t fill my basket with veggies and fruit and whole grains; I was too busy making sure I bought cheap food that would fill us up and keep us in our budget (and there was that compromise bit with Jawad, I don’t think I would have bought the pasta sauce!!).

Is it any surprise that the people who are most food insecure are also those with highest rates of diabetes, heart disease and cancer? Look at what people have to eat.



*Photo: dm gillis*

## DAY 5: Justice, Not Charity

*Seth Klein*

Some may read these articles and point out that people with a recognized disability (those with PWD status in our welfare system) receive marginally more on welfare (a single person in the “Expected to Work” category receives \$610 a month, while someone on PWD receives \$906 a month), and that a majority of welfare recipients have PWD status (in 2012, just under 4% of British Columbians were on social assistance, of which about 56% were in the PWD category).

However, as someone pointed out to me, people are often made to wait years before finally being granted PWD status. This is a major problem we found in our Living on Welfare\* report in 2008. And during that time, a disability or illness that should be obvious is actually worsened while people are forced to live on the basic allowance.

Moreover, even once PWD status is gained, life is no picnic. The extra dollars are often needed to cover extra costs associated with the disability, leaving not much more for food. Indeed, this too was a finding in our 2008 report; while many people we followed over two years did finally have their disability recognized and PWD status granted, they still reported a heavy reliance on food banks and other charities in order to meet basic food needs.

Is this really what we want – a welfare system, including for those with disabilities who live on welfare for many years, that is structurally dependent on charities for people to meet their basic food needs?

It’s the little things that drive home how hard this budget must be in real life, and which have made me very conscious of the cost of things this week:

- Not being able to duck into a café for a coffee or treat.
- Money for a parking meter.
- The trip to the pumpkin patch (simply not on if I were really on welfare).
- At my daughter’s soccer game on Saturday, I was glad it wasn’t my week to bring snacks for the team, as this budget certainly wouldn’t allow for that.

I note all the continuing comments that people have made to me with shopping advice, or ideas for creatively meeting one’s food needs in various ways. But I think some of these comments miss the point; of course people on welfare manage to survive in all kinds of creative (and often desperate and harmful) ways. Many have done so for years. But doing so takes up a huge amount of time (time the government says they are supposed to be spending looking for work). And we know living this way is not good for people’s health.

People make ends meet by turning to charity, or friends, or picking food. But the government claims a welfare cheque is supposed to be sufficient to meet your food needs. The object of the exercise in the Welfare Food Challenge is to show that this is not so – people only make ends meet by creatively and time-consumingly pursuing other options (often at great cost to their dignity).

As I approach the final two days of this challenge, I suspect I can make it to the end (although I continue to bend the rules treating my cold). But it sure is miserable, eating the same things day in and day out.

\*[http://www.policyalternatives.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/publications/BC\\_Office\\_Pubs/bc\\_2008/bc\\_LoW\\_summary\\_web.pdf](http://www.policyalternatives.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/publications/BC_Office_Pubs/bc_2008/bc_LoW_summary_web.pdf)

**Is this really what we want – a welfare system, including for those with disabilities who live on welfare for many years, that is structurally dependent on charities for people to meet their basic food needs?**

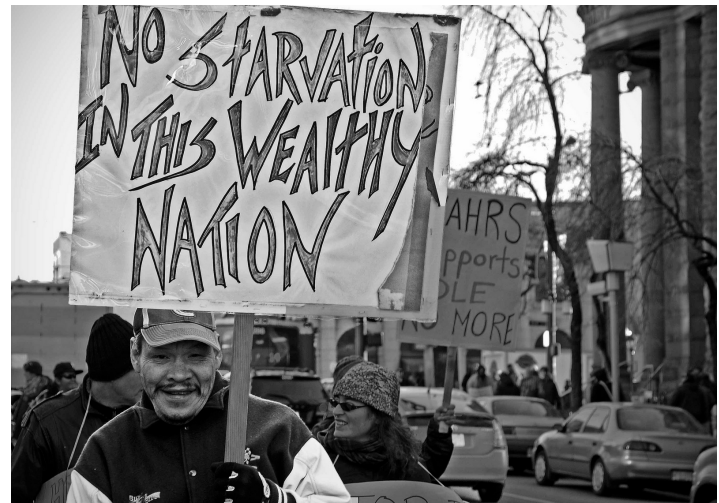


Photo: dm gillis

**“Anyone who has ever struggled with poverty knows how extremely expensive it is to be poor.”**

**-James Baldwin**

## DAY 6: More Than Hunger

*Sarah Carten*

Most people this week have asked me this week how hungry I am. That question doesn't get at the heart of the health impact of living on such limited funds. This issue isn't just about hunger. Living in constant worry about food would likely impact my health far more than hunger itself.

As a dietitian, I could also analyse the health impact of my food choices (negligible in calcium and vitamin D; no omega-3's; excess sodium; etc). But I also think that the stress of worrying that my poor quality diet isn't good for me would likely impact my health more than my lack of nutrients. Beyond these two significant worries, the lack of social contact would be the next strike against my health.

I had a quiet weekend because of the Challenge. I wasn't going to invite anyone over for brunch or dinner to share in my meagre rations. I wasn't going to suggest meeting anyone at a restaurant, bar or coffee shop where I would be unable to buy anything. For one week, this lack of camaraderie, social interaction and support is fine. But it would definitely hurt my psyche over the long term. This week has been useful for me to understand at a much deeper level why it is that poverty has such a significant impact on health, well-being and use of the health care system. If we want to have any hope of addressing our over-burdened health care system, we need to reduce poverty.

**I also think that the stress of worrying that my poor quality diet isn't good for me would likely impact my health more than my lack of nutrients.**

*Rev. Margaret Marquardt, St. Thomas Anglican Church*

I am aware keenly that I will be done the Challenge soon. I know that I do not have to endure this without an end in sight. My experience of this challenge is more of one of a fast. In the Christian tradition as well as other religious traditions, fasts are part of religious discipline and insight. Because I know that this is a set time period, the Challenge is within this framework for me. The experience of having less, of being hungry, of knowing that there isn't any money to drop into a shop and get a scone or take a friend out - it has deepened compassion within me. I have been close to those on Social Assistance for years and am fully committed to having justice in our society. There is nothing glamorous about being hungry. The hidden poor are indeed hidden, struggling on their own. This experience has allowed me to pay more attention to all those who are hidden and who end up struggling on their own.

What this challenge has meant to me is that the experience itself has led me, pulled me, more closely to the humanity of those caught in the web of poverty. There is so much shame heaped upon those who have lost their job or other things have happened in their lives that have led to the need to be on Social Assistance.

And people internalize the shame. We as a community of neighbours (which is how I see our need to be as a society), need to support those caught in the web of poverty providing the kind of financial and social support needed so that there can be stability in lives.

This support includes raising the rates on Social Assistance, training programs, education upgrade, increase in the minimum wage, working towards a Living Wage... these are all the kinds of supports that end up treating any caught in poverty with the humanity deserving a neighbour. It is also economically sound as people get a strong foundation to go forth into new possibilities for their future.

It all comes down to seeing one another as neighbour. What we ask for ourselves, we ask for all. Social Assistance as it presently exists is punitive. It provides such a bare minimum catching people in an impossible situation of not being able to climb out. I support the kind of Social Assistance in our Province of British Columbia that gives people a foundation that they live in dignity and able to plan for their future. I support us being neighbours in having the kind of policies in our Province that support people to get out of poverty.



*Photo: Jenna Drabble*

**Social Assistance as it presently exists is punitive. It provides such a bare minimum catching people in an impossible situation of not being able to climb out.**

## DAY 7: Looking Forward

*Marjorie MacDonald*

Over the last week, I thought continuously about the Food Challenge, what it means for me, and where I go from here. Even the fact that I was too busy to blog was an indicator of my privileged position with a well paying job. I might complain about how busy I am, but the opportunity to be busy with work that I enjoy, that provides me with satisfaction, a sense of accomplishment and a conviction that I am making a contribution to society is a privilege that comes from a fortunate configuration of circumstances that so many do not have access to.

Over the past three days, I found myself wondering – has this been a useful thing for me to do? And where do I take it from here? Clearly, the entire thing has been an artificial exercise. Poverty and food security are not issues I will have to deal with and now that the Food Challenge is over, I can go right back to eating what I want to eat without worry about the cost, the nutritional value, or the availability of food. So did this do anyone any good at all? Can I sustain the sensitivity I have developed this week to food security issues in a way that I can contribute to finding a solution? Will my efforts and those of the other participants in the Challenge result in government “raising the rates?” Sadly, I am not optimistic. So much more needs to be done.

**How useful is one person's charity and what can it accomplish? Frankly, not much. A charity response to the huge food security issues we have in this province will be a drop in the bucket that does nothing for the entire population of those affected and it does not solve the problem.**

Many of my colleagues tell me that even though they did not participate in the Challenge themselves, their conversations with me about it raised their consciousness about food security, poverty, their own relationship to food, and to a recognition of their own privilege. All well and good, and it is a start, but it isn't enough. Some tell me they are prompted to contribute more to charity. Many seem to think that this might be part of the solution. But how useful is one person's charity and what can it accomplish? Frankly, not much. A charity response to the huge food security issues we have in this province will be a drop in the bucket that does nothing for the entire population of those affected and it does not solve the problem. So what can we do to address the crisis of poverty in the province?

As public health professionals, we know that making significant change requires a broader, structural response. We need to change the social, environmental, and political structures that promote and sustain poverty in BC. It seems a tall order in a

province that refuses to join all (but one) of the other Canadian provinces in developing a poverty reduction plan. We do have a voice and we understand the importance of advocacy. Many of us have connections in high places. We can use our voices and our connections. We just need to get ourselves up from our comfortable living and working situations and do something, anything. However, a coordinated, collective response is likely to be more powerful than a response from one of us working alone. Join a group that is working toward poverty reduction or food security. Talk to your MLAs. I encourage all of you to do this.

*Jenna Drabble*

When I finished the Welfare Food Challenge, I had a number of things on my mind. I was anxious to get to the grocery store and stock my pantry with more interesting and varied foods and I looked forward to cooking satisfying meals, instead of being bored by yet another variation of beans-rice-lentils that were my staple foods for the week. I could let go of the anxiety that had characterized all of my meal planning and grocery shopping. Most of all, I looked forward to seeing my friends again.

There is no doubt that living on welfare or a limited income restricts one's ability to connect with other people. I didn't leave the house much during the Challenge. Being a grad student can be an isolating experience in itself, so I often work in the coffee shop by my house to maintain contact with the outside world. Somehow, I didn't think they would take too kindly to me ordering a glass of water and then setting up camp for several hours. I realized that my inability to buy a coffee made me an outsider, limiting my mobility and experiences within my community. This speaks to something that many people can take for granted: the sense of belonging that accompanies material wealth.

A friend reminded me that talking to people about the Challenge could serve as a source of support throughout the week, while it is a vastly different experience when one is actually living on welfare. The shame and stigma that accompanies poverty in our society makes it very difficult for people to feel safe talking about their challenges, which intensifies feelings of social isolation. I have a deep appreciation for the courage that is required to speak about lived experiences of poverty, and I am making an effort to truly listen and take action.

The conversations that started and the stories that people shared with me as a result of my taking the Challenge made the experience worthwhile. It was an opportunity to reflect and think critically about the ideas and assumptions that shape our policies and social environments. Many people questioned the \$26 figure at the beginning of this challenge, stating that people on social assistance can access food banks, so they are actually able to get more food than what \$26 will buy. This may be somewhat true (though not everyone does have access to a food bank) but I think we need to start asking different questions altogether. Let's start by asking why we have normalized the fact that so many people rely on food banks, and why so many of these people are women, children and Indigenous peoples. Let's talk about how our government has made a commitment to fulfill the Human Right to Food but has done an embarrassing job of keeping this promise. Let's ask why there is hunger in a country with so much wealth. Let's ask why welfare rates haven't risen in almost 7 years and why, even 7 years ago, these rates did not reflect the cost of living in B.C. Let's ask why we don't have a national food policy. I



# TRANSITIONS

by Hendrik Beune

Canada had progressive political and social policies prior to the neo-liberalism of the 1980s. Our country was respected internationally, primarily because of its great natural beauty, beneficial social policies and commitment to peace-keeping. This was not so long ago. When I immigrated here in the early seventies, Canada was a land to be proud of, and the country was trying to correct the mistakes of the past by implementing sound environmental laws and constructive social practices. Certainly this was influenced by a younger generation who had basically given up on working with the status quo and rejected most of what they saw around them and preferred to live in closer harmony with nature, much like the people who were here before them had done for thousands of years. Then people started working together with their governments to set things right and as a nation we set a conceptual and cultural example for the world.

It just isn't so anymore; maybe these hippies were right, for governments changed and things got a lot worse in society. In a very short period of time we have moved towards a global economy, which is a rat-race for riches led by greed, and in their greed governments and corporations have eroded nourishing social and cultural systems not only here, but all over the planet and endangered the very survival of many species while upsetting the natural balance that we all deserve and need. There is so much waste in this society that many can live on the margins and survive there by dumpster diving through toxins and earning far less than a living wage. But this is only a very temporary solution for some and many suffer from family breakups, disease and addiction, while the gluttonous over-consume and ultimately don't fare much better themselves. There should be a lesson learned from such a system that bursts at its edges: the present inequitable system is simply not sustainable.

Instead, we need to transition to a way of life which we already know works: a harmonious system with clean air and healthy waters and naturally productive lands, one where many creatures can thrive for all generations present and for many more to come. We've arrived at a pivot point where transition is simply necessary and permaculture principles become paramount. What does that mean and what would it look like? There is not one simple solution but rather a broader concept of solutions to be learned from how nature functions. This ties in with the unifying position of this Zine: that not only do we all have a right to food and a safe food network, but we also deserve to live in a healthy environment, in a dignified and ecologically sound way. This in essence dictates a revision of our entire social fabric, and a lot of remediation, so we can have a future that works for us all.

I have arrived at this point of view after some 40 years of observation, mapping of resources and survival in a debased culture. Now in my second year of permaculture design studies and involvement with the transition movement, I can finally say that I believe again that there is a solution: that we can design this new system together, after careful observation, within a caring community. We will use sound place-based practices guided by wisdom and lessons learned from the past. We can continue redesigning in this way as necessary to survive as a species on a planet that evolves and regenerates, like nature does, with no waste at all. Without this change we will be doomed to live in what has become a prison, imposed on us by the indifferent wealthy. People of all ages around the world are rising in protest, realizing we don't have to live with poverty of spirit, imprisoned in a world we don't want. The real thieves of this planet, whose ideologies are imposed on us, have led us astray and instead of following them into further destruction, we can work together to create a wholesome society. I wish all of us to believe in this possibility: a harmonious existence for all living creatures, great and small. So let's do it together, and a Happy New Year to us all!

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## Here is some background information about Permaculture:

*For those of you interested in Permaculture Design I highly recommend the many free, open source learning tools that are available from local (Sunshine Coast) designer Delvin Solkinson. You can find many fascinating bits of information on his website: [www.gaiacraft.com](http://www.gaiacraft.com). The word 'Permaculture' was invented by Bill Mollison in the mid 1970's and the text "Permaculture, A Designers Manual", published in 1988, is a classic monumental piece of work and a must read. There are many people who teach permaculture design all over the world nowadays and we are blessed to have many living nearby, so search out a course that suits your likes and interests. Consider taking the free introduction to permaculture day, which is offered most months. Details can be found on the 'Gaiacraft' website. The 'Transition Movement' relies strongly on adapting Permaculture Design principles into society at large. The local transition movement is led by a group called Village Vancouver. They are easy to approach and host many local social events. For information go to their website: [www.villagevancouver.ca](http://www.villagevancouver.ca). A group of people with a common interest in organic farming and permaculture came together through local designer Sara Dent: "The Young Agrarians" meet regularly for farm-tours and potlucks throughout the lower mainland.*



## Haenna's Recipes



Haenna has been working at the Downtown Eastside Neighbourhood house as the Drop-in Kitchen Facilitator since October 2013 and is usually found working tirelessly over the stove, creating inventive and tasty dishes. Haenna is from Germany and in addition to his impressive culinary skills he has degrees in both Law and Social Work. He enjoys working at the Neighbourhood House because of the friendly atmosphere and his helpful and easy-going coworkers who make him look forward to going to work every day. Here are some of Haenna's favourite, crowd-tested recipes which are simple to make and perfect for eating on a budget.

### Vegan Chili

- 1 package of tofu
- 1 can of kidney beans
- 1 can of corn
- 1 onion
- 1 clove of garlic
- 1 can of tomatoes
- sugar or agave syrup to taste

In a large pot, cook onions and garlic in oil until onions are translucent. Add kidney beans, corn and tomatoes and bring to a boil, then simmer for 20 minutes. Add sugar as desired and season with salt, pepper and chili as desired. Serve with rice.

### Swiss Chard and Potato Bake

- 1 bunch of swiss chard, chopped
- 3-4 medium size potatoes, cut into bite size chunks
- Sauce:
  - 1 cup milk
  - ½ tsp salt
  - ½ tsp pepper
  - 1 tsp curry powder

Combine swiss chard, potatoes and sauce together in a baking dish and bake in the oven at 400° C for about 30 minutes, or until potatoes are cooked through.

Acerbic, the opposite flavour of mild or honeyed  
Quite bitter tasting especially for a child's tummy  
The after-taste can be sour and bitter like gourd  
Even though it is not too expensive to afford  
A big mouthful of unsweetened dark chocolate is another kind of bitter  
That people usually take much delight in instead of dispose or litter  
Ambrosia is the food of the gods, savouring grapes and wine  
Mouthwatering and heavenly, a divine trace it leaves behind  
An interesting velvety texture, the skin of a kiwi  
Something that's more appealing than the junk food seen on TV  
A better alternative to plain sugar is eating fruits  
Even if the craving is obviously high for a sweet tooth  
Strawberries, melons, bananas, and papayas  
A healthier start to a good complete diet  
What are also appetizing are the hors d'oeuvres  
Finger food, carrots, and crackers with lots of herbs  
It's wise to have condiments and spices to go inside your kitchen  
Especially when friends and family come over for a luncheon  
Red wine vinegar, great to add onto steamed kale  
Especially when both of these things are on sale  
Teas like chamomile can make you feel pleasant  
Or peppermint that can spark up your essence  
Adding some wasabi to sushi can bite the tongue  
Too much of it will likely make you cough out a lung  
Be careful not to make your soup too salty and brackish  
Rather it's better to sprinkle it with chunks of radish  
A fine scrumptious meal is something tasty with linguine  
Enjoying these types of pastas such as fettuccine  
Caviar is an expensive kind of food that's fit for a king  
If we can't afford this, we can settle for chicken wings

Prunes can certainly help with our digestive tract  
Especially when we've had too much cheese and mac  
Dulcet is something in harmony with your taste and likings  
Such as taking a granola with you while you're hiking  
A full-bodied meal is having meat or roasted potatoes  
Or having some rich stuffing in your oven-cooked tomatoes  
If you put in the time to make something good on your plate  
You can then have leftovers when things are running late  
A sizzling cuisine such as a vegetarian stew  
Followed by a bellowing burp that is never quite rude  
A quick juicy snack such as a ripe mango  
Luscious and moist, it makes you want to tango  
A stimulating boiling drink such as brewed coffee  
With a kick in flavour such as chocolate or toffee  
Canning is a great way to preserve food into jars  
It is similar to being creative like the arts  
A highly seasoned recipe is quinoa with a bit of spice  
Another healthy alternative that is faster to cook than rice  
You don't need to be a food connoisseur to know what tastes great  
Everyone has specific flavours that they enjoy to take  
Even eating some exotic food such as octopus or eel  
And with a bit of dessert, you can say you've had a good meal!

*Janice Jacinto*



*Photo: Jenna Drabble*

# Learn More and Take Action

Raise the Rates:  
[www.raisetherates.org](http://www.raisetherates.org)

Welfare Food Challenge:  
[www.welfarefoodchallenge.org](http://www.welfarefoodchallenge.org)

Sign the online petition to raise the rates in BC:  
[chn.ge/19Xv1ba](http://chn.ge/19Xv1ba)

Write to MLAs demanding that they act, find your's here: <http://www.leg.bc.ca/mla/3-1-1.htm>

The Cost of Eating in British Columbia by the Dieticians of Canada:  
<http://www.dietitians.ca/Secondary-Pages/Public/The-Cost-of-Eating-in-British-Columbia.aspx>

The Cost of Poverty in BC by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives:  
<http://www.policyalternatives.ca/costofpovertybc>

Permaculture and the Transition Movement

Permaculture information and courses:  
[www.gaiacraft.com](http://www.gaiacraft.com)

Village Vancouver  
[www.villagevancouver.ca](http://www.villagevancouver.ca)

The Transition Handbook: From oil dependency to local resilience by Rob Hopkins, 2008.

The Transition Companion: Making your community more resilient in uncertain times by Rob Hopkins, 2011.

## About the Downtown Eastside Neighbourhood House

**T**he secular, grassroots Downtown Eastside Neighbourhood House (DTES NH) embraces people of all ancestries, genders, ages and descriptions, annually welcoming almost 9,000 DTES residents in a community where 70% of our neighbours have low incomes, 700 are homeless and 5,000 are under-housed.

Those who built the DTES NH put the right to food at the heart of our work, as nutritional vulnerability is a theme familiar to all. Our goal around the right to food is to reform the nutritional impact, quality, abundance and delivery of food in the DTES in consultation with residents, community food providers, non-food community organizations, healthcare professionals, policy makers, growers/suppliers, food/beverage industry professionals and researchers.

Visit our website for more information about the Neighbourhood House: <http://dtesnhouse.ca>

## Contributing to the Zine

Interested in contributing to the *RTF Zine*? We're always looking for articles, artwork, or ideas that reflect the right to food. Find us online at <http://dtesnhouse.ca/zine> or let us know who you are at [zine@dtesnhouse.ca](mailto:zine@dtesnhouse.ca).

The Right to Food Zine relies on generous donations from the community to produce each issue. If you like what we are doing and want to show your support by making a donation to the zine, please contact Carol White, the Executive Director at the Downtown Eastside Neighbourhood House at [carolw@dtesnhouse.ca](mailto:carolw@dtesnhouse.ca).

*Visit the RTF Zine website for more stories, references, and the podcast: <http://dtesnhouse.ca/zine>*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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*Front / Back cover: Janice Jacinto*

Raise the Rates

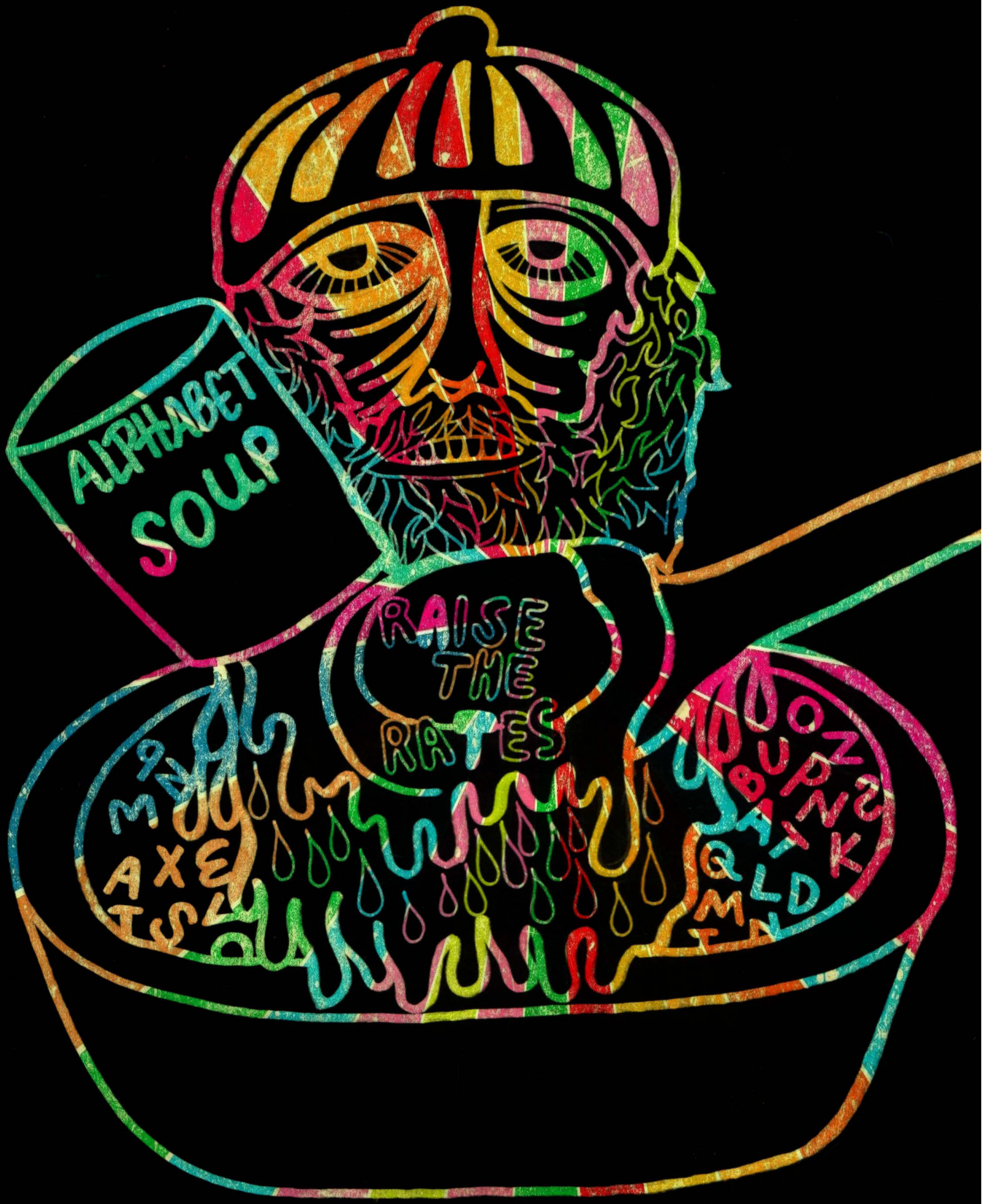
# TAKE THE WELFARE FOOD CHALLENGE



Could you live on the welfare rate of \$610 a month?  
Could you live on \$3.70 a day for food?

<http://raisetherates.org/>

**POVERTY COSTS B.C. TOO MUCH  
END POVERTY**



ALPHABET  
SOUP

RAISE  
THE  
RATES

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