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### There's Still Time To Sign Up To Be Hungry — And Poor

Susan Campbell

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A funny thing happened last year when Rabbi Donna Berman cast about for a way to bring hunger home.

Berman, executive director of Hartford's Charter Oak Cultural Center, thought if regular people would try to



live on a food budget of \$3 a day — the average amount a food stamp recipient gets — they might be moved to act and think differently when it comes to issues of poverty.

Participants in her Food Stamp Project would agree to go for a day, a week or a month. They would be forced to eat the food that poor people eat: lots of carbs, scant fresh fruit and vegetables — mostly filling, not terribly nutritious food. They would not accept hand-outs from friends or family, but they would be free to visit local food pantries or soup kitchens to supplement their diet.

Berman shared the idea of intentionally living on limited means with a friend who runs a kosher food pantry in Michigan, but "because I have to better everyone, I said we were going to do it as a community," she said.

About 80 people — some elected officials, some just plain folks — signed up, though Berman estimated far more participated unofficially. It was, by every measure, a local success.

And then word got out.

The nonprofit Food Research and Action Center put Hartford's story on its website, and other organizations and cities quickly followed suit. Whole cities participated, as did several members of Congress and even the governor of Oregon.

Berman went to a food conference last year, and people knew Hartford because of her Food Stamp Project.

If you weren't at Charter Oak Cultural Center on Tuesday for the kick-off of the city's second annual

Food Stamp Project, it's not too late.

This year, Berman has partnered with End Hunger CT, Foodshare, the Jewish Community Relations Council, and the project's target charity, Hands On Hartford. Berman hopes people will donate food and money to Hands On Hartford's MANNA food pantry, which helps 250 households each month.

Again, project participants pledge to keep their food budget to \$21 a week, though Tom Bright of Hands On Hartford says participants can add \$1 to their daily budget if they fill out the complicated seven-page application for the real food-stamp program.

Nationwide, the food-stamp program helps 26 million people. Most participate in for just nine months. More than half of the recipients are children.

Those of us who are doing this a second time do so with some trepidation.

Last year, I said goodbye to fresh fruits and vegetables and drank my weight in water. I was dog-tired and could hardly contain my famous temper over the least provocation. That was after just one week. Others fared worse.

Beyond relearning that I really need some patience, I learned how complicated life can be when you have to devote so much attention to getting adequate food on the table on a minuscule budget.

And I wasn't feeding a family. That was just me.

This year, longtime Hartford councilwoman Veronica Airey-Wilson is participating, as are Lorraine Reardon, registered dietitian with the Charter Oak Health Center, and her husband, Victor Arduini.

Both Airey-Wilson and Reardon say they want to better understand the lives of the people with whom they work. Berman calls that kind of learning a "body experience."

But this is not just for public officials or warm-hearted do-gooders.

Even we sinners might be surprised at what they learn.

Berman says that last year's project moved her in ways she hadn't expected.

"There's a way I live with more consciousness, more gratitude, a greater consciousness," she said. "It really is life-changing. I can't believe it's a year already. It still feels urgent. It didn't wear off."

For more information on the Food Stamp Project, visit [www.charteroakcenter.org](http://www.charteroakcenter.org), or call 860-249-1207.

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