



**CAN YOU FEED**

**YOURSELF WITH \$2.55 A DAY**

BY KRISTEN DE DEYN KIRK

The Virginia Interfaith Center for Public Policy believes that to help the poor, you must do more than understand their struggles. You must live them. To encourage Virginians to do that, they're introducing the Poverty Diet statewide this month. Are you up to the challenge?

**THE VIRGINIA** Interfaith Center for Public Policy is inviting Hampton Roads residents to follow the Poverty Diet for three days this week. Spend only \$4.05 a day on food and beverages (the average amount an in need Virginian receives in food stamps, \$2.55, plus a bonus of \$1.50) and don't dip into food pantry supplies.

Then join fellow dieters Monday, Nov. 15 at St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Norfolk, 201 St. Paul's Blvd. A bean dinner will be served at 6:30 p.m., and volunteers will be asked to share their experiences with the group.

The Center suggests that participants keep these questions in mind while following the diet:

What was the most difficult aspect of eating only \$4.05 a day?

What was the nutritional content of what you ate as compared to your normal diet and how did your diet compare with the recommendations in the USDA Food Pyramid?

What insights have you gained through your participation in the Poverty Diet?

Sally Miller, the Center's local chapter facilitator, says the

idea for the diet — happening statewide this month — came from a Charlottesville legislator who put his family on the diet for a month.

"Our hope is that people will see what a challenge this is," says Miller, "and then have compassion for those who live in poverty."

Miller hasn't tried the diet yet, but she said it was hard to just prepare the meal for the picture she took for *Port Folio*.

This is what she is looking forward to if she follows the sample menu offered at [www.virginiainterfaithcenter.org](http://www.virginiainterfaithcenter.org):



Sally Miller, a chapter facilitator for the Virginia Interfaith Center for Public Policy, will try the diet this week.

**Breakfast:** Oatmeal or banana or grits.

**Lunch:** Peanut butter and jelly sandwich or Ramen noodles or Chef Boyardee or canned lunch meat.

**Dinner:** Macaroni and cheese or rice and beans or baked beans and hot dogs or tuna fish.

**Beverages:** Tap water

Day after day, this is the diet for many Virginians. In 2003, more than 195,000 residents received food stamps.

Who are these people?

According to the United States Department of Agricul-

ture Food and Nutrition Service:

- Two times as many working-age women receive food stamps than working-age men

- One third of the households are headed by single adults with children

- Over half of the recipients are children
- 27 percent of households also have earned income

- 14 percent receive welfare (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) benefits

—KRISTEN DE DEYN KIRK

## TRY THE POVERTY DIET

**IT'S NOON TUESDAY**, and the countdown has begun. I look at the living room clock.

Twelve hours to go.

*Tick faster, tick faster, I think.*

At least I had something to distract me earlier today, my last day.

I spent the morning with my son Colin at the allergist's office, waiting for her to tell me I'm doing a good job keeping him away from milk, eggs, peanuts and shellfish.

What she didn't know is that I've been keeping him away from a lot more.

Since Sunday morning, I've been denying him cookies, lollipops, French fries and potato chips.

This was the scene at 11 a.m. Sunday in my kitchen:

Colin clutched the door knob of our pantry, pulled on the childproof lock and screamed like only a redheaded 3-year-old can:

*I want chippies, I want chippies. I want chippies.*

He scrunched his face and stomped his feet. *I want chippies. I want chippies. I want chippies.*

He knew the Utz salt and vinegar potato chips were in there.

My husband Murray and I had bought them the night before, along with a pint of Ben & Jerry's Di's Candy Drawer Ice Cream. They were our last hurrahs, along with a \$60 dinner at

Norfolk's Empire Little Bar Bistro, before we started the Poverty Diet.

**THE DIET IS NOTHING** like Atkins and has nothing to do with losing weight. Introduced by the Virginia Interfaith Center for Public Policy, it is instead designed to help people gain a better understanding of being poor and hungry.

The Poverty Diet is simple: For three days, spend only what a Virginian receiving food stamps would spend. The average person gets \$2.55 per day, so my family of four — Murray, Colin, 5-year-old Katie and I — could spend \$30.60. (The Center added \$1.50 extra a day per person, but I stuck to just what we'd get with food stamps.)

We were allowed to eat only what we bought with that amount. Any food already in the house was not permitted.

I wrote out my shopping list late Saturday night, my stomach still happily filled with shrimp, chicken and steak tapas from Empire and junk food from Farm Fresh. I listed what I thought we'd need, based on my children's tastes, and added a couple of treats:

Milk, juice, cereal, bread, peanut butter, jelly, yogurt, grapes, strawberries, beans, pasta, spaghetti sauce, eggs, bacon, ham, butter, lettuce, salad dressing, hot dogs, ketchup, tuna fish, chicken, tomato soup, mayonnaise, and two kinds of cookies, one for Katie and one for Colin.

Next to each item I noted its approximate cost. My total came to \$59.75.

I crossed off grapes (\$2), mayonnaise (\$2), cookies (\$5.50) — which got me down to \$50.25, still way over my goal.

*Yogurt*, I thought. I could do without yogurt because I was the only one who ate it anyway.

But that only \$2 saved. Bacon and eggs, our Sunday morning ritual, would have to be sacrificed.

*How was I going to trim another \$14?*

A quick look through the coupons in the paper didn't offer any help. Maybe where I shopped would.

I prefer Farm Fresh, but I knew I could find cheaper prices at another store where the selection and the service weren't as good. I didn't really need to be tempted by lots of brands anyway. The price printed on the pack-

ages, not the name, was the only thing that would matter.

Other bonuses about stepping into my less-than-favorite store: They don't have a salad bar with delicious-smelling prepared foods.

They don't have a deli with gourmet salads and seasoned cold cuts.

They don't have a meat counter with thick cuts of New York Strip Steak or a fresh seafood section with crab legs.

They did, however, offer a discount card that could save me a couple of dollars.

**I USED THE CARD** often three years ago after Colin was born. Murray and I always knew we wanted more than one child, and we were thrilled to have two just 21 months apart. And a boy and girl to boot!

That joy was all we thought about when we found out I was pregnant. The word "budget" didn't enter our minds — even though we knew our daycare costs would double to nearly \$900 a month. We forgot all about the cost of formula, diapers, clothes and boy toys — and extra food for me as I breastfeed.

At least until Colin was born.

Our finances were tight during my maternity leave, but that was to be expected because I wasn't getting a paycheck. Reality hit just before I returned to work: When I sat down and listed our expenses and compared it to our two-paycheck income, I found a \$76 monthly deficit.

I felt like I had been kicked back to my college days. I had two criteria when buying food then: How cheap was it and how light was it?

Murray and I didn't have a car and a roundtrip bus ride to the grocery store took hours so we'd walk the four miles, fill up our backpacks with food and walk back to our apartment.

Then we ate our Lipton soup.

Three years ago, I turned to Ramen noodles, which cost about 16 cents a cup. I'll even admit I liked those Ramen noodles. There's something about the way they pop back up when you stuff them down in their Styrofoam cup with a fork that makes them fun.

Yet that thrill wore off after a few weeks of Ramen noodle lunch after Ramen noodle lunch.

I missed having lunch with Murray. Noon was our new date time after Katie was born. We didn't have to pay a nighttime babysitter like for a "real" date, and we weren't too tired to talk like we'd be on a "real" date taking place after 6 p.m. — when our lack of sleep the night before caused our eyes to droop.

I also missed eating at a nearby salad bar with its variety of foods — fresh watermelon and strawberries, tuna fish, pasta salad, crab salad, cauliflower and broccoli with a creamy dressing.

After I ate a lunch like that, I felt energized. After my Ramen noodles, I felt hungry.

Sticking to our new budget back then, I also felt embarrassed. Friends would ask us to do something — meet them for brunch or attend their church spaghetti dinner — and I'd have to say no. At first I kept my explanation simple:

*No, we can't make it.*

Then I got scared that they were going to think I didn't like them anymore so I told the truth:

*We can't afford it. Money's tight right now. We're watching our pennies.*

*Oh gosh, really?, a friend replied. It's only \$25.*

Then I got mad. Maybe she wasn't intentionally putting me down, but I felt judged me. *Why didn't we have enough money? Why didn't we earn more?*

I heard these questions in my head, and I wasn't sure if it was my friend or me asking them.

**THE BELIEF** that anyone should be able to pull himself up by the bootstraps runs deep in our society, this land where the American Dream is implanted in youngsters' brains.

Work hard, rise high.

Problem is, we forget that rising high is easier when you're born bouncing on a trampoline of money, even if it's a mini version.

A few months back, a friend sent me a news story about a family struggling to pay for their child's medical bills. They hoped generous people could lend a hand. Instead, someone robbed their home while they were at the hospital.



**Katie checks out the food supply for the next three days. How could it take more than an hour and a half to buy so little?**

I wondered how many other people have been beaten down by the daily grind.

**MURRAY WATCHED** the kids while I went grocery shopping Sunday morning. If I had taken them, I would have faced the usual whining about this candy and that cereal and this toy and that coloring book.

Before I left, Katie yelled from the living room:

*Mom, will you get me some Oreos?*

I thought shopping was going to be tough, and I was right: It took me an hour and a half to buy seventeen items.

My budget set the pace.

I hadn't shopped that way in a couple of years. About a year after Colin was born, Murray and I started bringing home a little more money. We don't look at the price on every food item now, except occasionally near the end of the month when we wait for our paychecks.

I quickly realized I was out of bargain-hunting practice. I agonized over whether it was better to buy strawberries or grapes for the kids. I complicated the decision by considering bananas. Which would they be most likely to eat? This was the only fruit I was buying so I had to get it right.

I chose the out-of-season strawberries, even though they were overpriced at \$3.49. Katie and Colin *always* said yes to strawberries.

My only vegetable — lettuce — technically couldn't qualify as one. I wanted to buy our



**Pasta and iceberg lettuce — again.**

*I kind of want to do something for them,* my friend wrote in an e-mail.

*But then again, I did it for myself so maybe they should, too.*

I'd guess this friend earns \$70,000 or more. Her childhood was not perfect, but she was nurtured by one parent in a middle-class community. She was always sheltered, clothed and fed.

Her comment didn't surprise me, though. She enjoys listening to Rush Limbaugh and Sean Hannity.

But I was shocked when my husband said something similar. Sitting at Empire the night before starting our Poverty Diet, he said he didn't feel sorry for poor people.

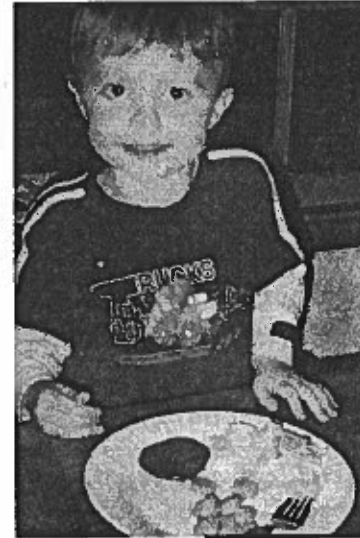
He'd seen a man using food stamps to buy steaks.

I argued that it would be hard to do with limited resources, but so what if he had? Didn't he deserve an occasional treat?

Murray said no, not if it was a stretch for us to do the same when we worked hard.

We didn't know that he wasn't willing to work hard, I countered. We didn't know his life circumstances either. Maybe he didn't have a good role model to show him how to work or how to manage money or how to get an education. Maybe he had physical or mental problems.

My voice got loud, and Murray got mad. I was judging *him*, he said. How couldn't he be a little hardened?, he asked. He had seen so many people working the system, cheating both the government and businesses to get ahead. They didn't get reprimanded, and here he was obeying the rules and not getting anywhere. He couldn't worry about anyone else anymore: He simply only had enough energy left to take care of himself and his family.



**"Don't look so happy about it," Murray told Colin when he got his 10-cent hot dog.**

usual bag (convenient for the Working Mom and Dad!). It's a mixture of Romaine and other dark green lettuces, which are supposedly so good at fighting cancer. That was \$2.79. Another one with carrot sticks, which would have been even healthier, was \$3.29. The white head of iceberg — packed with water I've heard — won out at \$1.19.

*I had to, I reasoned to myself. I had \$14 to trim from my budget.*

I made shrewd decisions in every aisle. I looked at the weight and price of every brand and checked labels to make sure no food would activate Colin's allergies.

The purchases I was most proud of: Two pounds of pasta for \$1; a combination peanut butter and jelly spread for \$1.99; and eight hot dogs for 83 cents.

I couldn't believe the hot dogs we usually buy — Oscar Meyer XXL Delistyle Beef Franks, especially delicious cooked on the grill — were \$3.70 for a pack of five.

Bread (store-brand loaf for 99 cents) would have to replace hot dog buns — and maybe serve as breakfast, lunch and dinner for one of our three diet days. I originally had a loaf with tasty sesame seeds on top that cost \$2.19 but I put it back on the shelf.

I also realized I wouldn't be able to get any chicken.

A few items I just had to get — regardless of the price: Welch's White Grape Peach Juice (\$2.99 on sale, regularly \$3.59) which Colin drinks every morning and every night; Prego pasta sauce, the only kind the kids will eat, for \$2.79; and Smart Balance Light Spread, the only "butter" Colin can eat, for \$2.19.

My purchases in the end: bread, tomato soup, juice, milk, cereal, peanut butter and jelly, strawberries, baked beans, pasta, sauce, butter, lettuce, salad dressing, hot dogs, ketchup, tuna fish and ham cold cuts.

I calculated my total on a sheet of paper and wanted to cry when it came to \$29.13. I had \$30.60 to spend, and the tax would take me close to that amount.

*How was I going to keep Murray happy?*

After learning that he *had to* have two cups of coffee in the morning, I dropped my budget to \$29.10. That would leave him \$1.50, enough for six cups of coffee at 25 cents each. We cheated and figured the price from a bag of coffee we already had in the house.

**I SHOULDN'T HAVE WORRIED** so much. My total with tax came to \$30.30 (the discount card saved me \$2.69), and Murray would have been allowed only one cup of coffee over the three days.

*But he only lasted 12 hours.*

*The hot dogs did him in.*

No amount of ketchup helped the links of warm mush. I did my best to focus instead on the leaves of iceberg lettuce. I couldn't call it a salad because I just had lettuce, no tomato, no cucumbers, no carrots, no peppers, no cheese.

Fortunately, Katie was happy: She thought the hot dogs were the best ever.

My heart was lighter hearing that. At lunch she begged for parmesan cheese to go on top of her spaghetti and sauce, and I said no.

*We're trying to live like poor people. We have to stick to a budget, I told her.*

*I don't want a budget, she yelled. I want cheese.*

We were only a few hours into the diet, and just like with Colin and his "chippies," I wanted to cave. How could I deny my children something I had? I was using them in an experiment. They were forced to be guinea pigs, and they weren't going to learn anything except that Mommy is mean.

Murray was lucky in comparison. He could reach whatever he wanted in the fridge and open every childproof lock. After complaining that the dinner hot dogs merely got his stomach "going," he repeated what he had already said four times earlier:

*This is not a good idea.*

In the morning, he confessed he had a midnight snack of cookies and chips.

I'm the only one who made it through Day One without cheating. The kids had taken an apple off the kitchen counter and bitten into the forbidden fruit twice. Murray, trying to support me, told them to stop. I pretended I didn't see anything.

Day Two was a little easier as Murray and I headed off to work and the kids went to school and daycare. After a breakfast of sugar-coated cereal and her homemade snack of half a peanut butter and jelly sandwich at kindergarten, Katie got "free" food at daycare. I made the most of a free supply as well. Our receptionist had a bowl filled with Halloween candy. I took handfuls of chocolate all afternoon until the supply ran out. *I had to, I told myself. How else would I have energy to work? I had lettuce, dressing and two slices of ham for lunch. As Murray would say, it only got my stomach going.*

## HELPING THE HUNGRY

**SOUTH HAMPTON ROADS** experienced a 22 percent rise in requests for emergency food in 2003, which is slightly higher than the national increase. Researchers attribute the local rise to unemployment, high housing costs and high energy bills.

With this increased demand, the Foodbank of Southeast Virginia (FSEVA), whose distribution area includes the state's highest poverty regions, has become more important than ever in supplying food to the hungry.

The poverty level has been shown to be a reliable measure of hunger: Norfolk has nearly 47,000 people living below poverty, or 19.4 percent of the total population, the region's highest number. Portsmouth is not far behind with 16.2 percent of total population, followed by Chesapeake and Virginia Beach, at 7.3 and 6.5 percent respectively. Many of these people are chil-

dren, and men and women over the age of 65, the "invisible" poor. As we approach the holidays, FSEVA must meet an increased need for food and turkeys.

To assist them in their holiday food drive, five area singer-songwriters will perform at "Songs for Suppers," a

fundraiser to be held Dec. 2 at Norfolk's New Belmont, 2117 Colonial Avenue. (Call 623-4477)

In addition to the performances, items and gift certificates donated by area merchants will be

raffled. There will also be a visual art show, a silent auction, free food, and drink specials. The cost is \$5, and food donations are welcome. All proceeds will benefit the FSEVA. Visit [www.geocities.com/songsforsuppers](http://www.geocities.com/songsforsuppers) for information and preferred food donations.

—CESCA WATERFIELD



Mercy Creek will be among the performers at "Songs for Suppers."

He later told me he had Mexican, my favorite food, for lunch. He also told me I could pretend I was a single mom trying to raise two kids on my own. I didn't laugh. Once again, I lacked energy. My dinner had just been a small bowl of pasta.

The kids had the same, along with half a can of tuna, two pieces of ham and bread and butter. I wished Murray hadn't eaten two ham sandwiches the day before for lunch and then again for this dinner. I was confused: Should I subtract his daily allowance from our total and live on that? Or was it more realistic to have him keep eating from the sacred food supply? The tension his hearty appetite caused me was probably what many women face with their spouses and male teenagers. Most women are used to starving themselves, most men aren't. I was judging Murray again: *Can't guys just stop eating?!*

I was agonizing over every bite everyone took: On Sunday, Colin carried a half-eaten strawberry into the kitchen, probably to throw it away. I took it from him and put it back in the fridge.

My worst moment came today, Tuesday, after the allergist's. Colin was so disappointed when he got a sticker and not a lollipop as his treat for being a good boy.

*I'm hungry. I'm hungry. I'm hungry,* he repeated all the way to the bookstore, where I needed to buy a book for my daughter's class.

I offered him some strawberries from his lunch box but he wasn't interested. He had eaten them four times in three days.

The little guy was so frustrated that when I unbuckled his seatbelt to go into the store, he cried.

Then he looked under his car seat, his sister's and a stack of junk in the car.

I asked him what he was doing, and he looked up at me with a red, puffy face. *I finding candy,* he said. ●

**AFTER A LUNCH** and a dinner of pasta and sauce, Kristen made it to midnight. She stayed up to eat the pint of Ben & Jerry's Di's Candy Drawer Limited Batch. The chocolate ice cream with chunks of peanut and crisped rice fudge bars and swirls of caramel was almost as satisfying as a conversation with her husband early that night. Wanting to be sure the house was restocked with food after the diet ended, Murray had gone to the grocery store after work Tuesday. Although he was in a rush to get the shopping done and pickup the kids at daycare, Murray noticed a couple sorting coupons and reading price labels. *I felt bad,* he said about them. *I'm just grabbing food, not thinking about the price. You could tell they were struggling and trying to figure out how to get the most for their money. They were comparing blocks of cheese, looking at coupons. The guy said 'oh damn, that one's expired.' I never think about that anymore.*