The Do the Math Challenge

The Do the Math Challenge is an opportunity for students to raise awareness about the challenges of poverty and hunger in Hamilton. Participants are challenged to eat only the contents of a food bank sample bag for one week to mimic the circumstances facing many citizens living on social assistance.

The Do the Math Challenge is organized by the McMaster-Community Poverty Initiative.

Arts & Science participants in 2014-15 were Asha Behdinan, Kate Dye, Joshua Feldman, Sara Pesko, and Sahar Raza.

Arts & Science participants in 2013-14 were Rachel Brain, Eileen Church Carson, Alon Coret, Liana Glass, and Gali Katznelson.

Arts & Science participants in 2012-13 were Michael Gallea, Rachel Shan, Lexi Sproule, and Vivian Tam.

Please see below for one student's account of the experience.

**Doing the Math: It Doesn't All Add Up**

*Asha Behdinan*

How much can you really buy for $656? After rent and utilities, how would you allocate what little is left? While this question may seem like a simple thought exercise to most, it is a daily struggle for over 1 million people in Ontario, where the current social assistance rate for a single person is a meager $656.

On October 18th, a group of McMaster students participated in the “Do the Math” campaign, hosted by the McMaster Poverty Initiative. We were asked to solely eat the contents of a typical Food Bank hamper for a week, to give us a small taste of the challenges faced by many individuals who require social assistance.

In the days leading up to the challenge, I began preparing myself for my sudden change in diet. Having spoken to some friends who had done the challenge in earlier years, I worked on developing a strategy to make my food last the entire week. Yet while the advice I sought definitely helped me with my meal planning, none of the questions I had initially thought to ask shed light on the social consequences of the challenge. I anticipated the hunger. I expected a decline in my sense of physical wellness and mood. But I was completely caught off-guard by the feelings of isolation that persisted throughout much of the week.

I had never deeply considered how the simple act of sharing a meal could be such a strong social catalyst until I found myself in a position where I could no longer participate in breaking bread with friends. Quick coffee dates, watching a soccer match while sharing a plate of nachos, and fourth year fun night at The Phoenix were seemingly off-limits. Under the rules of the
challenge, I could *only* rely on the contents of my Food Bank hamper, and there simply was not enough to allow me to prepare meals to be shared with a guest.

But aside from the limited quantity of food available, I also felt embarrassed at the idea of inviting a friend for dinner and serving them boxed macaroni and cheese with a side of canned vegetables. While this may seem trivial given that the challenge only lasted a week, the experience gave me a glimpse of the isolation that many who require social assistance must feel on a daily basis. And while I was able to justify my inability to participate in such food-sharing events with a brief description of “Do the Math,” I began to realize the level of exclusion faced by those who must live this reality.

This issue is only further compounded by the stigma society often places on individuals needing social assistance or facing food insecurity. Unemployed, lazy, mentally unstable – these are a few of the labels tossed around that bring shame to those who are in need of assistance. But in reality, there are a number of reasons why someone is facing financial struggles and the current pattern of devaluing such circumstances only heightens the challenges such individuals face. Had this challenge lasted the whole year, would I be comfortable joining my co-workers for our weekly coffee meetings knowing that I would not be able to afford a cup? Would I have been able opt out of events by admitting I didn’t have enough money? Or would my embarrassment of my financial circumstances stemming from these stigmas prevent me from telling the truth, rejecting invitations with a simple “Sorry, I have a very busy week ahead”?

While the “Do the Math” initiative did not fully replicate these nuanced experiences of those requiring social assistance, it nonetheless opened my eyes to the multi-faceted challenges and societal repercussions resulting from the current treatment of poverty. I finished this challenge with a profound feeling of empathy and understanding, and I look forward to continue working with the community in taking steps towards social equality.