



## Eating for a week on \$25

By **Doug Moore**

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**ST. LOUIS** — Greg Lukeman, executive director of Food Outreach, challenged his friends to eat for a week on \$25.38. That's how much a disabled Missouri resident typically would get in food stamps.

The idea: Bring awareness to the challenges poor people face when it comes to eating, as food costs continue to rise.

Lukeman persuaded Attilio D'Agostino, editor in chief of *Alive* magazine, state Rep. Rachel Storch and state Sen. Jeff Smith, all of St. Louis, to join him in the challenge the last week of September as part of Hunger Action Month.

About 28 million people in the U. S. receive food stamps each month, including 1.2 million in Illinois and 824,000 in Missouri. About 67 percent of those eligible for the food assistance program participate, meaning another 13 million Americans are trying to get by without food stamps.

D'Agostino met Lukeman at Food Outreach's office in midtown and took two buses to an Aldi on South Grand Boulevard, where they joined Smith and Storch. Each selected a week's worth of food.

Dietitian Linda Marcinko reviewed the grocery lists of Lukeman, D'Agostino, Storch and Smith. All but Smith got high marks for bringing together a decent balance of nutritional items on a limited budget. Smith, however, needed fruits and vegetables as well as fiber in his diet. He should have substituted apples and carrots for the tub of ice cream, Marcinko said.

The challenge ended at midnight Tuesday. At 12:01 a.m. Wednesday, Lukeman and D'Agostino were waiting for their orders at Uncle Bill's Pancake House in south city; Storch and Smith celebrated by having lunch together on Wednesday at Blueberry Hill in University City.

Ten hours after the challenge officially ended, Lukeman talked about his weeklong challenge and what he learned about the experience.

**Q: So how did you do?**

**A:** The idea of having a plan of what I was going to eat for each meal went out the window. By day four, I was just eating whatever would fill my belly. Toward the end, I had a couple spoons of peanut butter and jelly, a hard boiled egg, a bowl of oatmeal. Not your typical dinner.

**Q: What would you do differently?**

**A:** I would have gotten beans. They are high in fiber, a protein source and relatively inexpensive. I also would have some sweet outlet. The only sweet thing I had was an apple, but it didn't truly satisfy like candy.

**Q: What else?**

**A:** The idea was to buy everything at once to plan my meals, but then I didn't have any wiggle room the rest of the week.

**Q: What did you crave the most?**

**A:** Coffee. The caffeine is the hardest.

**Q: How could you have improved your shopping?**

**A:** I bought baby carrots in a bag out of convenience, but I could have bought carrots and peeled them myself. I also could have bought a whole chicken and cut it up instead of a bag of chicken breasts.

**Q: How much did you spend?**

**A:** I don't know what I was thinking, but I spent \$25.96, which is over the \$25.38 allowed. When I realized that, I returned a can of tuna. (Unlike his initial trip to the market by bus, he drove the can of tuna back to Aldi. The 60-cent refund put him 2 cents under budget.)

**Q: Did you get everything you had planned?**

**A:** Rachel was great. She had a calculator. I was adding in my head, going with my gut. At the checkout, I had (to leave) yogurt, ice cream, and a box of mac and cheese in the cart.

**Q: Did you eat all you bought?**

**A:** I had two frozen chicken breasts left over (out of six), five slices of bread, a quarter jar of peanut butter, one can of tuna, one box of mac and cheese, and about a fourth of the oatmeal.

**Q: What was the smartest purchase?**

**A:** The oatmeal was really a lifesaver. It would expand and I'd feel full. When I'd go out to events, I'd eat two bowls of oatmeal before so I wouldn't be tempted.

**Q: What was the hardest part of the challenge?**

**A:** Anticipating what my hunger was going to be. I'd be out, have to go back home and eat a hard-boiled egg. It definitely cramped my social life.

**Q: What was the first thing you ate when the challenge was over?**

**A:** I met friends at Uncle Bill's. I got there before midnight. I ordered but didn't eat until after the deadline. I had pancakes, sausage, hash browns, tomato juice, a couple of eggs. The bill for that was over \$14, more than half of what I spent for seven days.

**Q: What type of reaction did you get from doing this?**

**A:** People throughout the week kept asking me: 'Why are you doing this?' I told them I am walking in clients' shoes. They said: 'That's no problem. I can do that.' I knew going in that I could do it because I knew that it was only for a week. But it was much harder than I initially thought. It really changes the way you live your life.

**Attilio D'Agostino**

Who: Editor in chief of Alive magazine and former owner of a chain of nutritional supplement stores.

Grocery list: Flour and eggs (to make own pasta), oatmeal, wheat bread, mozzarella cheese, turkey meat, assorted vegetables to put into his pasta, brown sugar, butter. (He made a side trip to Trader Joe's to buy all-natural peanut butter because he does not eat trans fats.) He stayed within budget and said he did not cheat.

On the challenge: "What was most profound for me was I was never satisfied. By planning it out, I knew what food I had budgeted each day. It would take the edge off the hunger, but I always wanted more."

First meal after the challenge: Pancakes, scrambled eggs, hash browns and a Diet Coke. Happy to be off the challenge, "I had a small pang of guilt because, of course, I'm going back to my lifestyle."

**Jeff Smith**

Who: State senator, St. Louis

Grocery list: Pasta sauce, noodles, cheese slices, white bread, a jar of peanut butter and jelly (combined), a box of cereal (similar to Cinnamon Toast Crunch), milk, 5-quart tub of fudge swirl ice cream (20 percent of his budget). He used the ice cream and milk to make shakes for breakfast and, sometimes before bed. Smith stayed within budget but supplemented his diet with a free smoothie he redeemed with a filled punch card and a brownie at a political event.

On the challenge: "The hardest part was the monotony. The grilled cheeses and peanut butter got pretty old."

**Rachel Storch**

Who: State representative, St. Louis

Grocery list: Gallon of milk, dozen eggs, loaf of bread, two small containers of yogurt, two cans of tuna, a canister of oatmeal, two boxes of macaroni and cheese, a box of pasta, a jar of pasta sauce, a jar of peanut butter and jelly (combined), a box of bran flakes, a box of sweetened cereal (similar to Honey Bunches of Oats), one pack of imitation cheese slices, a bag of apples, a small bag of lettuce, one can of chicken noodle soup and a box of ice cream sandwiches. Storch, who is Jewish, had one Rosh Hashanah meal. She threw away her two containers of yogurt after leaving them in her car on a sunny day. With only 55 cents left from her Aldi trip, she could not replace them. She limited her coffee drinking to free cups at political events.

On the challenge: "It was very hard and stressful. I went to bed hungry. I'm a live-to-eat, not eat-to-live kind of person. Not being able to enjoy food on a daily basis because of all a sudden losing variety and some quality takes away from my day-to-day experience. I felt like I was a little more crabby."