November 2019 Newsletter

This year seems to be winding down much too quickly. Time for another break for Thanksgiving, and an opportunity to reflect on all our highs and lows during the year. Take a little time to reach out to people you haven’t contacted for a while to let them know they’re still important to you. Be thankful for everything that makes your life special, and plan to share your blessings with others that might need a little TLC.

Hunger in Oklahoma

During this time of year, most of us have more than enough food to load down our Thanksgiving tables, but for many families, food insecurity means there won’t be the traditional feast we’ve all come to expect. Here in Oklahoma, more than 1 in 5 children don’t get the food they need for healthy growth and development, despite our efforts to provide nutrition so vital for good health and academic growth. Many seniors, single parent households and under-employed families also struggle to get enough to eat. Lots of our fellow Oklahomans are one paycheck away from disaster as well.

Muskogee Public Schools is a provider of free breakfast, lunch, and after-school snacks through the USDA Community Eligibility Program, so each child will be able to receive a free, nutritious breakfast and lunch, and participating children may be given a snack during after-school enrichment programs. This is just one way to address the issue of hunger in our state, but there are more ways to provide assistance so our kids will have access to food after school hours.

Brandi Stevenson and I were privileged to attend the Hungry For Change anti-hunger conference held in Norman last week, and came back energized and ready to work towards the goal of eradicating hunger, especially for our students. We participated in some breakout sessions geared towards school-age children, including “Breakfast After the Bell: A Recipe for Success”, “USDA Program Priorities - WIC, SNAP, Summer Meals, Afterschool Meals, School Breakfast & Lunch Programs”, and “Afterschool Meals: Planning, Participation, and Partnering for Success”. One of the most important takeaways was that it doesn’t take a superhero to fight hunger and make sure all of our fellow Oklahomans are well fed, we can all do something to bring about that change. Here are a few simple ways to get involved:

- Stay informed about current issues that affect food security and availability in your area. Go online to find organizations that advocate for food security, such as Food Research and Action Center, Alliance to End Hunger, AARP, Oklahoma Policy Institute, Tulsa Area United Way, Regional Food Bank of Oklahoma, etc. to stay on top of the news.
- Find a local food pantry and give a little of your time, food donations, or money to support the group. Muskogee has a number of nonprofit organizations who may be in need of helpers to collect, sort, distribute and store donated food items, and they could always use a little extra operating capital, especially around the holidays. There is a list of local Partner Programs available on the Community Food Bank of Eastern Oklahoma website (www.okfoodbank.org). Don’t forget them after the rush of the holidays, hunger is a year-round problem. A couple of hours of your time per month, or hosting a food drive or other fundraiser will be a win-win for everyone!
• Be observant. Check on an elderly neighbor or single parent that might be struggling but too overwhelmed or proud to ask for assistance. Sometimes the solution might be as simple as giving that person a ride, doing a little shopping for them at the grocery store, calling a trusted pastor or community leader, calling “2-1-1” to find local assistance, or referring them to one of the many Muskogee County programs that are a source of food distribution.

If we all pitch in a little, we can make food insecurity and hunger a thing of the past!

**Technique of the Month**

Our technique this month is **SMART SHOPPING**. Using a few tricks and tips to get the most for your money can really stretch your food budget without sacrificing quality. It’s hard to guesstimate how much you spend on monthly food costs, as most of us don’t buy a whole month’s worth at a time, but those Walmart expeditions for a loaf of bread & pound of bacon that add up being $75 by the time you impulse-buy really add up. The amounts we spend when eating at a restaurant instead of home can make a major dent in your monthly budget as well!

The easiest, and most important, tip that I can give you is **PLAN AHEAD!** Those last-minute purchases really hit you in the pocketbook. Take a moment, and draw up a rough menu for the month so you can have a battle plan. Look at your favorite store’s circulars and do some comparison shopping before you finish your menus. I’ve also discovered a menu cycle, like we use in the Child Nutrition department, can save lots of time and money; once you get a menu your family likes, repeat each month and you’ll find that you will spend much less while still providing variety!

Watch for coupons, either store or manufacturer’s coupons. Check your store’s website or app to see what is offered. Check out online free coupon sites like Coupons.com, RedPlum.com, SmartSource.com, or look around at your favorite manufacturers’ websites for free coupons. Go through all those Sunday circulars and watch for items you might need.

Plan your menus using items that can be utilized in multiple ways as much as possible. For instance, one store may have a pork loin for $1.49 per pound, so you will want to look at purchasing a larger piece and using it for multiple meals – pork chops, stir fry, barbecue sandwiches, or a roast. A large bag of frozen chicken leg & thigh quarters can make multiple meals such as fried, barbecued, or baked chicken, chicken tacos, chicken and dumplings, or chicken tortilla soup.

Forget that belief that fresh fruits and vegetables are always better for you than canned or frozen, especially during the off-season. Frozen and canned items are picked at their peak ripeness and quickly processed, resulting in a high quality, highly nutritious product. Store brands are often equal or superior to the national brands, and are a source of cost-savings.

Look for unadvertised specials as well. Once you get in the store, check out the meat and vegetable counters. Many times, there will be fresh meats, especially beef, that are marked at a clearance price. These items might be a little browned or dry looking on the outside, but once you’ve checked the “sell-by” date on the label and it’s not expired, you can get a great savings. Ground beef tends to get a little brown looking on the exterior due to lack of contact with oxygen for a few days. Just make sure it isn’t browned all the way to the center and there are no spoiled odors. No one will know the difference once it’s made into chili, spaghetti sauce, or meatloaf. Watch for produce that’s reaching the end of its shelf life as well, as it tends to be cheaper than the picture-perfect fruits around them but are still just as nutritious and tasty as the rest.
Home cooking is a real money saver. I’ve heard the argument that some meals are cheaper to eat out, but that’s not always the case. Here’s a quick cost breakdown on one of my favorite restaurant meals - a cheese enchilada dinner with beans and rice:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Senor Lopez</th>
<th>Home</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cheese 3-Enchilada Dinner</td>
<td>Corn Tortillas (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iced Tea</td>
<td>Cooking spray</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20% tip</td>
<td>Enchilada Sauce, ½ cup</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Cheddar cheese, 9 oz.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Onion, 2 oz.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Mexican style rice, 1 cup</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Refried Beans, canned, 1 cup</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Salsa, ½ cup</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Chips, 2 oz</td>
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<td>Iced tea, unsweet, 12 oz.</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grand total</th>
<th>Grand total</th>
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<tr>
<td>13.49</td>
<td>3.06</td>
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So you can see that eating at home on a regular basis can really make a difference in your food budget!

**Thanksgiving Recipes**

Now for the fun stuff: Thanksgiving recipes! We all have our family traditions that must be upheld (I’m looking at you, French’s Green Bean Casserole...) but occasionally you want something different.

A good holiday appetizer should be like Goldilocks discovered in that 3 Bears story - not too big, not too little, not too sweet, but just right! So pass on those boring celery, carrot and Ranch trays, and make something intriguing to tame your crowd.

**Cajun Bacon Crab Dip**
6 slices bacon, cooked and crumbled
3 green onions, chopped
1 green bell pepper, chopped
8 oz. cream cheese
8 oz. canned or frozen crabmeat, drained & rinsed, shell picked out
¼ cup heavy cream or half & half
1 Tbsp. Cajun seasoning, or to taste
Juice of 1 lemon
Panko or Italian style dried breadcrumbs as needed
Reserve 2 Tbsp. of bacon grease, and saute chopped onions & pepper until softened. Combine with cream cheese, crabmeat, heavy cream, Cajun seasoning, and lemon juice. Add reserved bacon. Transfer to ovenproof dish, top with Panko or regular breadcrumbs and bake at 400° until hot. Serve with crackers or crisp flatbreads. **Note: 8 oz. cooked, chopped shrimp may be substituted for crab.**

My least favorite part of many Thanksgiving dinners is the gooey marshmallow topped sticky-sweet potato casseroles. I like this alternate, which is also a mashed sweet potato, but has a crunchy pecan topping. In fact, I often eat this for dessert! You can fancy it up by adding grated orange zest and a little orange liqueur to the potato mixture before baking, if you wish.

**Crunchy Sweet Potato Casserole**
Yield: 6 servings

3 to 4 large sweet potatoes, scrubbed
Vegetable Oil as needed
4 Tbsp. butter, softened, plus enough to cover baking dish
½ cup milk or half & half
½ cup light brown sugar, packed (Omit, if desired)
1 tsp. Ground cinnamon, or to taste
1 tsp. Vanilla extract
½ tsp. Kosher salt, or to taste
2 large eggs, beaten

Preheat oven to 400°. Lightly oil the skins of sweet potatoes, and bake for approximately 1 hour, or until tender. Remove from oven, and allow to cool to the touch.

Remove potato skins, and place potatoes in mixing bowl. Add butter, milk or ½ & ½, brown sugar, cinnamon, vanilla, and salt. Mash or whip with electric mixer until smooth. Taste and adjust seasonings, then stir in the eggs. Transfer to well-buttered baking dish. Top with Pecan Crumble:

**Pecan Crumble**
½ cup all purpose flour
½ cup brown sugar, packed
4 Tbsp. butter, melted
½ tsp. Kosher or table salt
¾ cup chopped pecans

Combine flour, brown sugar, salt, and pecans. Stir in the melted butter, blending well to make sure everything is equally coated. Spread evenly over potato mixture.

Place baking dish in preheated 350° oven for 25-30 minutes, until mostly set in center & topping is golden brown.

Since I've already gotten a request for it, here's the Swiss Meringue pie-topper recipe that we used in cooking classes. This is a great choice for our humid weather, as it doesn't "sweat" as badly as regular meringue and the egg whites are already cooked, so you can brown it with a torch or broiler or serve as-is! For cleanest cut, use a sharp knife dipped in hot water between cuts.
**Swiss Meringue**
Yield: Plenty for two 9” pies

8 ounces egg whites (about 1 cup in volume)
1 tsp. vanilla extract
Pinch salt
1 lb. sugar (about 2 ¼ cups sugar)
Pinch Cream of Tartar (optional)

Equipment needed: medium saucepan, large mixing bowl, whisk, stand or hand mixer, candy thermometer

Combine egg whites, vanilla, salt, sugar and Cream of Tartar in mixing bowl and whisk well to combine. Pour enough water into medium saucepan to come within 1” of the bottom of the mixer bowl, and bring to a simmer. Place egg white mixture atop simmering water, making sure the water never touches the bowl, and clip the candy thermometer to the side.

Heat egg whites over simmering water, stirring constantly to prevent curdling, until the temperature reaches 165°. Remove from heat, and immediately begin beating on high speed until mixture becomes fluffy and shiny, and reaches medium stiff peak. Meringue can be spooned or piped onto hot pie filling and browned with a brulee torch or placed under a hot broiler for a minute until lightly browned. Allow pie to cool to room temperature, then chill until service.

**Butter Pie Crust**
Yield: Two 9” Pie Crusts

2 ½ cups flour plus extra for rolling dough
1 tsp. salt (reduce to ½ tsp. If using salted butter)
1 cup (2 sticks) cold butter, cut into small pieces
4 to 8 Tbsp. ice water, as needed

Blend flour and salt. Add cubed fat and cut into the flour until small pieces about the size of peas remain. Note: for a less flaky crust for pumpkin, pecan, or fruit pies, continue cutting in butter until mixture resembles coarse cornmeal.

Blend in ice water, 1 Tbsp. at a time, until a rough dough is formed. Dough should retain its shape when squeezed together. Add any additional water a few drops at a time until you get the proper consistency. Turn out the dough onto a sheet of plastic wrap and slightly flatten into a disk. Wrap the disk and refrigerate for 30 minutes to 1 hour.

Remove dough from refrigerator and allow to soften for a couple of minutes. Lightly flour surface and rolling pin, and roll dough to desired size. Use the least amount of flour possible. Gently place dough in pie pan, adjusting to fit, and trim. For best results, place pie shell in freezer for 30 minutes, then fill and bake. You may wrap and freeze the unbaked pie shell, to use when needed.

*If you want to make a half butter-half shortening crust, follow above directions but use ¼ cup chilled shortening and ½ cup + 2 Tbsp. butter as the fat. Or use ¼ cup chilled shortening or lard for a butter-free crust.*