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POCKET WORTHY

My Life as a Public Health Crisis

As a fat woman working in food justice, I see firsthand how even those trying to help continue to spread dangerous stereotypes about obesity and poverty.

Narratively | Harmony Cox

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Illustrations by [Sophie Page](#)

We're at a coffee shop in a “transitional” neighborhood. The shop is new, an ultra-modern storefront that brags about \$7 pour-overs. I hate pour-over coffee because it takes forever and if I cared about nuanced flavor I wouldn't start my day with the

most bitter drink imaginable. I reflect on that, and on how much the neighborhood has changed since I grew up here, and how I used to see possums the size of poodles on the roof of this place back before the professional folks sitting around and sipping their lattes showed up.

My mind is whirling because if I let it dwell on the words coming out of this woman's mouth I might punch her in the face. That wouldn't do anybody any good.

Probably.

We were discussing the neighborhood, and how we could help people here get healthier food. Creating access to healthy food is my job, but it's also my passion. It's how I pay my bills and find an outlet for my frustration with a society that allows the poor to suffer. I was hoping to hear some optimism. Instead I got this:

“Nobody would eat it. Everyone around here is just so... fat.”

I felt the folds of my belly pushing against the table. I felt familiar shame burn the back of my throat, bitter as a \$7 coffee.

She went on, “The kids always eat fast food. It's like nobody loves them.”

I wondered how she could know what the kids around here *always* eat, and what that has to do with how loved they are.

Growing up here never made me question my family's love, but it did make me aware of the tension between what we were “supposed” to eat and what was actually available to us. It wasn't all junk, of course. We had a huge garden in our backyard. We grew so many tomatoes we would beg neighbors to take them off our hands, and I was probably the only eight-year-old hillbilly in Ohio who loved gazpacho. But you can only harvest a garden so many times a year, and you can't grow milk and meat in the backyard. A food budget is more flexible than a set cost like rent, so it's often the

first place a family looks when trying to save money. Junk food is cheap, it doesn't spoil quickly, and it's easy to prepare. Combine pragmatism with a lack of time and money, and the high-calorie, low-nutrition diets of poor people make a lot more sense.

The first meal I ever learned to make wasn't gazpacho, but "chicken parmesan" — spaghetti covered with a slice of American cheese and a processed hockey puck of chicken that could be heated up in the microwave. We loved that awful chicken, and it was \$2 a box at the Save-a-Lot, so we ate it often.

I learned to make it when I was nine years old. One day our sitter left early, called in to cover a shift at her second job. I called Mom to let her know what had happened.

Mom was working as a paid hourly intern, trying to meet a practicum requirement for her social worker's license. She couldn't afford to leave work, so my two sisters and I would need to feed ourselves. She reminded me to read the instructions on the boxes and said to call her if the smoke detector went off. I set about preparing the meal with grim determination, hoping not to let her down.

When Mom came home, dinner was done. She was pleased until she entered the kitchen. Not only had I made an incredible mess, but I had left the box of chicken pucks on the counter, where they'd melted into a brownish mush.

She dragged me by my wrist into the carnage I had wrought, my heels dragging on the linoleum. She pointed at the box.



“We do NOT waste food. You ruined a week of dinners. Be more careful next time.”

I nodded, trying not to cry. Wasted food was wasted money, and neither of those were things we could afford. Lesson learned.

There were resources to help us, like the government’s SNAP and WIC food-assistance programs that many still refer to as “food stamps.” Dad recently told me how much using WIC embarrassed him. He described taking us to the WIC office as babies, where we were weighed each month before he received our benefits.

“They wanted proof I was feeding you.” I flinched at the anger in his voice, even after all these years. “Nobody trusts poor people. They treat you like a criminal just for trying to feed your kids.”

If you get judged no matter what, eventually you stop listening to the judges. Poverty undeniably affected my childhood – everything we owned was second-hand, all my clothes were hand-me-downs from my cousins, and I once punched a boy in the face for a quarter – but my parents would never deprive us of any happiness they were able to provide. Our diet was a mix of whatever healthy stuff was available and the junk food we loved: the chicken pucks, the Bigfoot pizzas at birthday parties, the \$10 meal deal at KFC. When we did well in school, Dad would spring for Old Country Buffet, and we’d eat our weight in ice cream and roast beef you had to soak in ketchup to chew.

In the reality of feeding a struggling family, the food pyramid is irrelevant. Keeping us fed was a source of pride, junk food was a source of joy, and so our diets endured.

I don’t remember parents who didn’t love me. If anything, they loved me too much, and their love language came deep-fried. It may have hurt me in the long run, but that’s never been a sign that something wasn’t borne from love.

A public health expert would draw a line between my childhood and my current size. I am on the “morbid” side of obese, and have been for as long as I can remember. I’ve spent a long time learning to love my body in a world that isn’t kind to it. I can handle the stink eye at the gym, the whispers and giggles at restaurants, the catcalls from passing cars full of (always) young white men. I eat a healthy diet these days and I exercise regularly, but if science is to be believed, it’s unlikely that my body will ever be smaller than it is. And so what? My fat body is still a good body. It’s the body of someone who is loved and worthy of self-esteem, regardless of how much space it takes up.

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Unfortunately, I can’t avoid how my size intersects with my chosen career. I work with some of the most compassionate and dedicated people in the world, but I still struggle with my body and how colleagues perceive it. Whatever else I achieve, I’m still a fat person who grew up in poverty. I’m a walking, talking example of a public health crisis, working to eradicate myself with government funding. It gets awkward.

In every meeting I go to, at every panel I sit on, eventually the conversation turns to obesity. People notice me, because they’re trained to see me as a problem. And so their eyes turn to me, and then I have to breathe through my feelings or I might beat someone to death with my iPad.

Not that I’d feel bad about it, depending on the person. Everybody’s got their limits.

Speaking of limits: One of mine is definitely saying that fat children are unloved. I look my coffee companion right in the eye.

“You’re being unfair. I’m fat, and I grew up here too.”

She tries to jump in, to explain herself. I speak over her.

“I’m not fat because nobody cared about me. People make the best choices they can with what they have. If we can’t give them better options, we can’t blame them for working with what they’ve got.”

We both sense an impasse. What’s professional for her is personal for me.

She shrugs. “I get it. I just feel like something needs to be done.”

And so we change the subject, relaxing as we talk about the thing that must be done. Throughout the rest of the conversation she can’t look me in the eye. And later, when I email a “thank you” for the meeting, I’m not surprised to receive no reply.

It’s frustrating, but these conversations happen far too often for me to ignore. I’ve seen too many well-meaning efforts to help people access healthy food couched in toxic narratives about what a disgusting burden fat people are on society.

Conversations about food access are so often tinged with judgment about personal responsibility and time management, as if every poor fat person is spending their time napping and eating Twinkies when they could be preparing quinoa from scratch. And of course, there’s the endless dwelling on the societal expense of obesity. You would think that fat people were Fabergé eggs for how difficult and costly we are to insure.

The fact is that most low-income people don’t have a lot of control over their diets to begin with, and the resources available to them tend to offer little in the way of assistance with the barriers that stand between them and health. I got a first-hand look at this when I got my first job as a task rabbit at a food pantry. I naively imagined smiling faces, neat boxes of food, and good feelings all around. My illusions were shattered when I was asked to sift through boxes of moldy cake and cookies, castoffs from a local grocery chain. I asked where the produce was, and I was met with a sigh. This was what was donated, so this was what we could provide.

Once I finished that, I had to hand out the go-bags. Go-bags were shopping bags full of food for people living in “unstable circumstances” – i.e., homeless. They consisted of anything that could be eaten on the go. They usually had a piece of fruit, but they were also full of slimy restaurant leftovers and cast-off pastries from the donation boxes. Bad food that fills you up and makes you happy, and a healthy snack when available. My family’s food pyramid, packaged to go.

I handed the first go-bag to a man my own age, a guy in a ratty coat who wouldn’t look me in the eye. He may have been ashamed of his situation, but I was ashamed that I couldn’t give him something better than leftover pizza and a cookie I wouldn’t feed my dog.

What angered me then – and angers me still – is that we didn’t have anything to be ashamed of. We weren’t the ones who made fresh food a luxury and junk food an easily obtained comfort. We didn’t chase the grocery store out of his neighborhood, and we didn’t ask the grocery stores in the suburbs to fill the pantry with their uneaten pastries in lieu of real food. We weren’t responsible for the poverty that was eating the neighborhood like a cancer, leaving a generation of people exhausted and malnourished. We weren’t the ones who had broken the systems that punished us. All he’d done was fallen on hard times, and all I’d done was try to help him. Our shame wasn’t earned. It wasn’t fair.

That was when I decided to work my way up to a position where I could help people like him get something they would be proud to eat.

Food justice is complex work. We want to give people healthy food that is relevant to their tastes and needs, but we work in neighborhoods where it hasn’t been readily available in decades. What they want, what they need, and what they know how to prepare varies wildly. Programs based on stereotypes or one-size-fits-all approaches are doomed to fail.

Just a week ago I was at a corner store that was trying to sell healthy food. We set up out front to demonstrate recipes and offer samples to anyone who was willing to stop by. We stood outside for hours, making tiny cups of vegetable stir-fry and offering them to passersby. Residents trickled over from the abandoned houses, the bus stop, anywhere that they could smell the food and get curious about where it came from.

A small boy wandered up. He eyed me suspiciously. He was right to do so. Free stuff in this neighborhood? Unlikely.

But I saw the way he bit his lip when he looked at the food. You can tell when a kid is hungry. I held a cup of stir-fry out to him, smiling encouragingly.

“What’s in it?” he asked in a whisper.

“It’s stir-fry. Like, Chinese food.” I chirped. “Rice and vegetables. It’s good!”

His face collapsed.

“Nah. I don’t fuck with vegetables.”

Fair enough. When I was his age, I didn’t fuck with vegetables either. Food justice is not about forcing people to eat food they don’t want. It’s about changing the world they live in so they can make choices about what they eat, and believing that those choices will lead them to a healthier and more enjoyable diet. It’s measuring success not in shrinking bodies, but in growing appetites for the food that keeps people happy *and* healthy. It’s trusting people to know what’s best for them and making sure they can access it. It’s the long



game, not the quick fix.

I believe that this is the only way we are going to build communities where food isn't a source of judgement or shame for low-income people, but a human right. So as part of this work I accept that awkward conversations about my past and my size will continue. There will always be another coffee, another would-be ally, another moment of discomfort that I have the option of ignoring or turning into a confrontation. I have climbed my fat ass up this mountain with my past on my back and the world I want to see just out of my reach. I'm not stopping now. I will do what I can to build communities where choice and dignity are a part of the food access picture, and take the chances I get to stand up for people who deserve better. Myself included.

Harmony Cox is a Midwestern essayist and storyteller. She has worked in the public sector for over a decade and is a proud advocate for food justice in the communities she serves. Her work has been featured in The Belladonnas, Story Club, and in the upcoming essay anthology BELT Columbus. You can read more of her work on Medium @harmonycox.

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