

For a single mother with four sons, the Food Bank of the Southern Tier was a lifeline

by April Bridges

My family knows what it's like to live with hunger.



I raised four sons as a single mother, working two or three jobs at times, but I still couldn't make ends meet.

My boys would not be who they are today if not for the help we received from the Food Bank of the Southern Tier when they were children.

While I relied on the Women, Infants and Children (WIC) program and food stamps to help put food on the table, the boys ate breakfast and lunch at school in the school lunch program. That was a huge benefit – eight nutritious meals a day I did not have to buy and prepare. In the summer, they ate meals in the Summer Cohesion programs.

My sons learned that others were hungry, too, when they were in line with me at our area food pantries. I resisted going to the pantries at first because I was worried that people would see me and my boys. But I wasn't going to let us go hungry because of my pride.

I also realized I had no reason to be ashamed. Millions of Americans are just like us – reaching for help at a time when the government's safety net seems to be shrinking.

Today I work part-time jobs and am a full-time student at Corning Community College. I hope to work in health care to help others after I graduate next year.

I am very proud of my sons. They learned compassion when they were growing up and they are helping others in their communities.

- Chris "C.J.," 30, a bike messenger in Brooklyn, has a bachelor's degree in sociology and is studying for the Law School Admission Test. He volunteers as an advocate for people who may have been wrongly convicted of crimes.
- Justin, 26, an E-5 in the Navy in Norfolk, Va., helps serve meals to the needy.
- Anthony, 20, a landscaper in Alaska, volunteers in a restaurant owned by friends.
- Michael, 19, of Elmira, works in retail and volunteers at his church.

When people tell me they are too proud or embarrassed to accept help that they may qualify for, I tell them about my family.

We struggled together, and thanks to Food Bank of the Southern Tier and other agencies, we survived and thrived.

Now we strive to help others learn the importance of accepting help when it's available. This is not a time to be hungry because you are too proud.

My boys and I have no regrets. Food Bank programs put us on the road to better lives, and must remain intact because they provide a valuable stepping-stone for families seeking a brighter future.