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Walk a mile in another's shoes

By GINNIE GRAHAM World Staff Writer
9/4/2005

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Politicians and a few of the people they serve check the fit as they try on each other's lives and concerns.

WAGONER -- Alesha Williams explains her food menu for the month to Sen. Mary Easley, D-Tulsa, while shopping at Alps.

On a food-stamp budget of \$381, Williams ticks off prices of food at every grocery store in town. She will visit at least three stores to make the dollars stretch. She has several uses for noodles, will place extra fresh produce in the freezer, and stock up on canned items.

Summer meals tend to be light on meat, and the winter months mean more stews and chilis. But it all hinges on sales, coupons and discounts.

"I have to know this because I cook every day," Williams said. "We don't go out to eat. I have to look for the bargain and know where to go. But it doesn't last at all. It's always hard at the end of the month."

Food stamps cannot buy nonfood items such as soap, detergent, paper towels, toilet paper and toothpaste. Williams has to cover that amount another way, and she has a \$141 electric bill to pay.

Williams does not have extra money for her children to buy books, and school field trips strain her budget. She has not bought new clothes in two years, instead making sure her children have something new to wear. She buys her wardrobe secondhand.

Easley helps Williams compare prices, bag the groceries and carry the sacks to the car. They share recipes for ribs, beans and slow-cooker meals. Easley listens as Williams itemizes her monthly bills.

"I can see how it'd be hard," Easley told her. "I know it would be hard."

The two are spending time together as part of the Walk A Mile program administered by the Community Action Project of Tulsa County. The program pairs elected officials with people from their districts who use government assistance.

Each will invite the other to an event, and the elected official will live on a food-stamp budget for the month. Easley said her budget is a little more than \$200 a month.

"It would be hard because I have a big Sunday dinner with all my children and grandchildren," she said. "I don't think I could do it on that amount. My husband and I might do it, but with kids at home it would be difficult."

Williams is a single mother of three children who suffers from transient ischemic attacks (TIA), or mini-strokes, caused by her pregnancies. Despite working since age 14, Williams was forced to apply for disability income because her doctors would not grant approval for her to continue working.

She cannot drive and has to rely on friends or family for transportation; she helps pay for their gas. Pain is a part of her life because of the effects of the 20 mini-strokes she has survived.

Williams never complains.

Instead, she brags about her children participating in gifted programs at school and spends her day teaching her 3-year-old daughter. She has coordinated a resident association in her public housing community and is trying to raise money for a community center.

"The kids go hungry in my neighborhood," Williams said. "When they knock on my door, I feed them. I can't turn them away. I think they need a community center so they don't become a statistic. They would be able to have after-school tutors and a place to go."

At the end of each month, Williams said she and her neighbors have a barbecue to share the food they have left. A nearby church offers a box of food for \$25 that will last about a week.

"It's hard, but I manage," Williams said.

Easley invited Williams to join her as she toured the Rolling Hills Fire Department and spoke at a nearby senior citizens community center.

The fire chief requested a meeting to talk about grant funding to buy protective equipment for the volunteer firefighters. He gave a tour of the new building, which was constructed mostly by the volunteers.

Easley listened as he explained the growing demands on the department.

"One of the most important things in my job is listening," Easley said. "We need to listen and see what the needs are. The public has lost confidence in the political leaders and don't trust them. That is why really listening to what they have to say is important."

Easley and Williams talked about education needs of higher salaries for teachers, smaller class sizes and a strong curriculum. Easley gives her constituents a newsletter updating the latest proposals and ways to contact her office.

She jokes about living in her car because of all the groups and people she wants to meet. She also depends on her cell phone and carries her daily schedule.

"It's different every day," Easley said. "My job is basically that, as problems come up, we try to fix them. There are varied groups with varied needs that we try to address."

At the senior center, one man would not let up his questioning on a particular budget item he thought would benefit the facility. He did not seem satisfied with Easley's explanation that the money never became available.

Williams said she better understands how elected officials need to know about so many aspects of society. She intends to take the information learned from Easley and present it to her resident association.

"I think this is kind of hectic," Williams said. "I could do it; then again, I couldn't. A lot of people want answers on where the money is going, and she can't answer all the questions."

Ginnie Graham 581-8376
ginnie.graham@tulsaworld.com

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Rolling Hills Fire Chief Bryan Fox talks to state Sen. Mary Easley, D-Tulsa, and Alesha Williams at the fire department. Easley (center) and Williams are in the Walk A Mile program, which pairs an elected official with a person from their district who uses government assistance.

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