

ONE QUARTER, ONE DIME, ONE NICKEL

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Some of my earliest memories are of my single, divorced mom of 5 working multiple jobs. I remember falling asleep to the sound of her word processor printing out the medical transcripts she typed for local doctors.

I remember the sickly-sweet smell of the lotion she rubbed into her aching feet after pulling a full day of selling perfume at the mall. I remember listening to her verbally study her nursing class notes at all hours so she could one day fully provide her family with a healthy and happy life.

One day my brother came home with a bill for school lunches (he forgot to bring the lunch my mom packed), and the school counselor informed my mom that our family qualified for no-cost meals at school. **My four brothers and I enjoyed eating breakfast and lunch in the cafeteria**, and I was grateful that it took a burden off my mother. Eventually, my mother's hard work culminated in us no longer qualifying for free meals at school but instead reduced. So each day, my mom thoughtfully stacked **one quarter, one dime, and one nickel** on the kitchen table for each of us, enough to cover the cost of our reduced-price lunch.

As an insecure 9th grader, terrified that my peers would discover that I qualified and paid for reduced-cost meals, **I carried my three coins –my shame–** in my pocket every day and stood in the lunch line, squeezing my coins as tightly as I could. I didn't want to lose them, but more importantly, I didn't want my peers to discover the truth about me: I was poor. One day, unfortunately, in my discreet handoff, I missed the cashier's hand, and my forty cents fell to the ground. Panicked, I corralled my three coins and swiftly surrendered them to the cashier, but not before the boy behind me in the lunch line noticed and loudly declared that I hadn't paid enough for my food.

Seeing the desperation in my eyes, the compassionate school nutrition professional returned all three coins to my hand and quickly replied, "No, actually, Leah gave me too much money. Here's your change," and she pretended the money I handed her was my change. **She did not hesitate to rescue me-- a child standing hungry before her with no power to change her situation** while hungering daily for that exact change.

That day, this **school nutrition professional became one of my heroes**. She showed me kindness which came so naturally to her, an educator who sees children from all walks of life standing hungry before her day after day and year after year. She knows the hungry students. She knows the students who feel shame daily. Yet, even 20 years later, **her small act still inspires me to look for ways to rescue the students in my classroom every day**.

As an adult, I recognize that there is no shame in being poor. I'm grateful for my upbringing and the example my mom set for **working hard and valuing education**, which helped me realize my potential to become a teacher. However, I also recognize that I was a teenager years ago. **Being a teenager is hard enough without enduring burdens like feeling inferior to our peers daily while just trying to get fed**. We can eliminate this specific burden.

In North Carolina, our policymakers can be rescuers this session including no-cost school meals for all in the state budget regardless of a student's background.

They can exhibit grace and kindness while reaping the benefits of a fed and focused student body. By providing school meals for all students at no cost to families, we will feed hungry children and help them reach their greatest potential. Hungry students are distracted students. They're more likely to act out in class, fall asleep, be quick to feel anger, shut down, and not give 100%. Hungry students need help to actualize their potential. We must feed their bodies so we can feed their minds.

Think about all the students who, right now, are sitting in North Carolina classrooms hungry for change, and ask yourself if you can be a rescuer. After all, one of those students might become a North Carolina Teacher of the Year.

www.schoolmealsforallnc.org