



Single mother Deborah Williamson reads a story with her children, Jennifer, 10, and Christopher, 9. All their recreation is things that can be done free.

# Ingenuity helps mom keep food on table

**By Trish Crawford Toronto Star**

Deborah Williamson's idea of a holiday weekend is to spend the time attending workshops on how to manage money.

And the best part of all for the single mother is that her two kids, Jennifer, 10, and Christopher, 9, also have attended workshops where they learned about the cost of bread and how to make a piggybank.

Money is a big concern in this family. Williamson is the sole breadwinner, taking home slightly less than \$300 a week. Now employed in word processing, she has been working non-stop for 11 years in a series of low-paying jobs which have finally culminated in "some light at the end of the tunnel."

Sometimes, through a series of cost-saving measures, she has \$50 left over at the end of the month — that is if the kids don't get colds and need prescription drugs.

Take ice skates, for instance. Williamson's activities with her children are free things such as walks and ice skating. When she went to a skate exchange in Scarborough and learned they were asking \$15 for a pair, she said, "I know I can get a pair from the Sally Ann for \$2.

"And that's what I did. I was so proud of myself."

She points proudly to the plaid skirt, beige sweater and silk scarf she is wearing and says the whole outfit cost less than \$2 from the Salvation Army stores.

She rarely goes out because, even if she could afford a babysitter, it's hard to find one. There are two beers in the fridge left over from Christmas. The iron-smoking, non-drinking 27-year-old saves them for company.

A closet in her Regent Park three-bedroom apartment is crammed with

pieces of cloth, pine cones and thistles which she turns into cute little dolls and other toys.

An old sheet purchased at a Goodwill store was transformed by her sewing machine into curtains and pillow covers for her son's room.

When strawberries are in season, she makes jam and puts enough in her freezer for the entire year. She only shops for food once a month because she's found "we make things last longer that way" and the only real treat or luxury is the Friday night medium pizza shared by the family before they go out to do the weekly laundry.

The family goes everywhere by TTC, even from downtown Toronto to the Metro Zoo for an afternoon of cross-country skiing. Williamson promised herself she'd learn to downhill ski someday, but it is so costly and far away, she treated her family to the cross-country variety instead.

**Grade 12 diploma**

Williamson has dreams and she's willing to work for them.

Married after Grade 11, her marriage broke up three years and two children later. She went on welfare for six months while she went back to high school and earned her Grade 12 diploma and landed a job one week later.

It crossed her mind many times she'd be better off on welfare-subsidized housing, with medical and drug bills paid and more time for her kids. But she's a product of a working poor family and she learned the lessons of self-reliance.

Her mother, who will be 57 next week, works the night shift in a greeting card factory and has bone spurs on her feet from the 30 years of laboring. Her father works in shipping and receiving.

"I guess it's personal pride and how my family raised me," Williamson says.

She remarried in 1981 and moved to the Maritimes with her new husband who was with the Canadian Armed Forces. When he left the forces but couldn't find civilian work, she took a night job in a pizza parlor on top of her day secretarial job to meet their increased costs.

Because of the two incomes and rising expectations, things such as a microwave oven and black-and-white television were bought with credit cards. With her husband's unemployment, those debts just gathered interest while Williamson worked to meet their daily living costs.

The family moved back to Ontario and the marriage ended. Williamson receives no support from her second husband or her first and she's still paying the debts off today. She hopes to have them cleaned out by the end of the year.

She's now in a \$318-a-month apartment in Regent Park after paying more than \$500 for smaller places in other areas. She lived in a basement apartment in Scarborough that was so damp, mould grew on their clothes and furniture. She stayed only one weekend in a \$525-a-month apartment on Bloor St. because it was swarming with cockroaches.

She's launched an all-out battle with the cockroaches in her current apartment by caulking around the baseboards.

"The kids play a game of seeing how many cockroaches they can kill," she says.

"It's funny, Regent Park has such a bad reputation, but this unit is one of the nicest places I've ever lived. It's great."

Her children never ask for toys and treats and she said it gave her a pang to hear her daughter say, "We can't afford it" when another child asked her why she didn't have a particular toy.

"We've mostly lived in middle-class neighborhoods where the kids were all going to ballet or karate class and mine weren't. But they never complain."

She's anxious to take a university preparation course next year and is hopeful she can line up a babysitter for two nights a week she must commit to that program.

**Loneliness**

"My dream is to get a university degree."

Sometimes the struggle, heartache and loneliness seem never-ending and that's when Williamson feels, "I've been cheated. I sometimes feel I should have gone on welfare until the kids went to school because it was so hard then."

Activities for mothers in her area are almost totally geared to those on welfare, she says, citing daytime programs when she is still at work.

Her children attend a summer camp in Bolton run by the Metro Family Service Association, but Williamson hasn't had a holiday in 11 years. She mostly uses her vacation time to move the family to yet another apartment.

"I'd really like to take a nice holiday, one where it doesn't matter how much you spend and you're not coming back worrying about the rent."

But she's optimistic things will improve. She's been earning steady increases at her job and she's always finding new ways to save a penny or reuse a household item.

"I was a Brownie and I just never quit."

# Lack of food for children 'real problem'

Many mornings every month, children throughout Metro start their day hungry.

They show up at school with no breakfast in their stomachs and no nourishment to fuel their day. When their teachers ask why they haven't eaten, they admit there's no food at home.

"Without a doubt hunger is a real problem for children here," says Deanna Wong, vice-principal of Rose Park Public School in the Regent Park area. "We're always seeing children who haven't had any breakfast."

"Our day care workers end up whipping together something to eat for some child almost every day. When we ask the children why they haven't eaten or phone the parents, they're very honest with us — they tell us they don't have enough money left to buy food."

## Distressing problem

The spectre of thousands of hungry children is one of the most distressing problems in Metro, says Donna McDonald, co-ordinator of the Metro-funded FoodShare program. But neither the extent of the problem nor the long-term effects are known, she said.

"We know there are many children who are hungry and malnourished, but we don't really know how many. One of the things FoodShare would like to accomplish is to get public health departments throughout Metro to look at the problems of hungry children."

Wong doesn't need studies to tell her the problems of hungry children — she sees them every day.

"When children come to school without any food it affects their academics and their behavior. More often than not, when children are sent to my office because they're underachieving or misbehaving, I find there is a hunger problem at home."

## Steal to get food

"When children don't eat properly, they're too tired to pay attention."

Hungry children will steal to get food, she said.

"At lunch time, children who didn't bring a lunch will steal other children's lunches. We have one little boy in Grade 4 who was caught stealing at the Dominion Store nearby.

"He was just hungry and was taking something to eat."

Almost four years ago, the Toronto Board of Education recognized there was a hunger problem and began a charitable foundation to help feed children in schools.

The Toronto Education Opportunity Fund now provides snacks and meals for children in 34 elementary and secondary schools, most of them in inner-city areas where poverty is high. Rose Park School is one of them.

"We've known for some time that many children arrive at school without having eaten, but more recently this has become a greater problem," says Linda Latchford, co-ordinator of the program. "Teachers first saw the need and came to us asking if something couldn't be done."

## Teach proper nutrition

"We're in the education, not the feeding, business, but if children don't eat they can't learn."

The program, Food for Thought, provides either breakfast, midmorning snacks or lunch. Most of the participating schools hand out snacks and at the same time teach the children about proper nutrition.

At snacktime, students receive such foods as bran muffins and cheese, peanut butter and whole wheat crackers, tuna sandwiches, or a variety of fresh vegetables.

"We're just trying to give them some calories and nutrition and help them through to lunchtime," Latchford says. "The children really look forward to it."

"We're seeing little children whose faces light up when the food arrives."