

Sun Youth: a local portrait of the food crisis

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Good evening everyone. My name is Nicolas Carpentier and I'm responsible for communications at Sun Youth.

I'd like to start off by reading a passage taken from the Communiqué released for this conference on June 19th.

The world is currently facing one of its most serious challenges in ensuring there is enough food for everyone. Changing dietary and food consumption patterns, rising energy prices, climate change, and dramatic natural events like floods and storms are all contributing to critical food shortages and sharply higher prices.

The world's poor are the hardest hit.

How does this apply to Sun Youth, a Montreal community organization helping its fellow citizens in need? Here's what I think:

In Montreal, underprivileged families are facing one of their most serious challenges in ensuring there is enough food for everyone, especially for children. Rising energy and food prices, along with life's little disasters are contributing to critical food shortage in their fridges and cupboards.

In Montreal, as in the rest of the world, the poor are the hardest hit.

As part of its 40 different programs, Sun Youth operates an emergency food bank available 24-7, 365 days a year. Sid Stevens always says that we're "the 911 of social services in Montreal". Sid and his childhood buddy Earl De La Perralle founded in 1954 what was to become Sun Youth.

They started putting out a hand written newspaper called the Clark Street Sun (most of them living on or around that street). They would charge 2 cents a copy to families in the neighbourhood to read it. Most families were interested in reading the paper because our young journalists would write stories about their friends: who hit a homerun at the last baseball game, who was elected school president, and countless other scoops and headlines. The money they would raise would be used to purchase sports equipment and organize activities for the children in the neighbourhood. Poverty was very much present in the area of the *Main* (St-Lawrence Blvd - now Le Plateau) and there were minimal sports and recreational activities available to them and the majority of youths in the

sector. Thus was born a **youth** organization called “The Sun” (the eventual name of the newspaper, hence the name “Sun Youth Organization”).

It’s when looking at children playing sports that the idea of distributing food to families in need came to our founders’ minds. The “poor kids” always have seemed to have less energy than the other ones. A quick talk with them led them to discover that these children weren’t properly fed.

Things haven’t change that much in over 50 year... There are still hungry children in Montreal. In fact, 1 of 5 recipients that comes to Sun Youth Organization is a child under the age of 5. In Canada, 1.5 million children go to bed hungry every single night. We’ve noticed that in all of the inner-city schools where Sun Youth is located, they give exams in the first 15 days of the month because children, in the latter part of the month have problems concentrating because they’re not properly fed.

This is where we come in. Up until the early 80’s, Sun Youth was only distributing food in certain occasions, such as Christmas, and to a limited number of families in the district. In 1981, Sun Youth founded the first food bank in Montreal as our organization moved to its actual location: the old Baron-Byng High School building on St-Urbain Street.

As you know, Sun Youth is still distributing Christmas Baskets. We have already started preparing for this year’s distribution where we’ll see 20,000 people lining at our doorsteps to get food for the Holidays. Families will also get brand new toys their little ones, wrapped up by the volunteers of our Seniors Club. Our organization relies solely on donations to bring these people a brighter Holiday season but also to feed them the rest of the year. As I like to say, poverty and hunger never take any vacation. Not in the summer and certainly not at Christmas. The food that we collect during the Holidays generally lasts us until the end of April.

Most food drives are organized in the few months preceding the Holidays, generally starting in late September. Just last Sunday, the Montreal Alouettes and Purolator organized their annual food drive at the Molson Stadium. As part of the “Tackle Hunger” program, fans were asked to bring non-perishable food or make a donation. They could get their picture taken with the Grey Cup and had a chance of winning prizes. The people’s response was excellent, probably the best turn-out we ever had for this event. It allowed us to collect the equivalent of 17,500 pounds of food. This includes a matching gift from CN.

I spent last Sunday collecting food and money with the Players’ wives, Purolator’s volunteers and of course, our own. I had a chance to talk with our Warehouse Manager, and truck-driver-for-the-day, Bob.

Bob confirmed that the food we had just collected would be of great relief for him. He said that our warehouse shelves were getting close to empty...**once again!** Early this summer, I also learned from Bob that our warehouse stocks were at their all-time

lowest... in the summer! This was something unseen for Sid Stevens in 54 years on the job.

With the help of the media, we launched an urgent appeal to get non-perishable food donations to replenish our empty warehouse. Within the following months, the response from the public and companies was tremendous and allowed us to collect over 90 bins of food (that's up to 1000 lbs each) and over \$90,000 in donations, both individual and corporate. Foundations such as the Bombardier Foundation, the RBC Group Foundation and many more made it possible for us to avoid a crisis. Our own "global food crisis"...

For us, summer has always been a very quiet period, both for the demand and the quantity of donations we usually obtain. As I mentioned before, this summer was different. When the public appeal was made in June, we were assisting 2000 families on a monthly basis. 225 additional families per month compared to the same period last year. We did notice an increased number in the people walking-in without having an appointment. "Walk-ins" are mostly emergencies or referrals from CLSC's or other organizations. The fact is more and more people are lining-up at food banks in Montreal.

Sun Youth isn't the only food bank that cried for help this summer. Montreal Harvest noticed 30% less donations this year compared to last year. In an interview on LCN, The General Director, Mrs Th  roux was explaining that this was especially true with perishable food items such as fruits and vegetables, with fewer surpluses given to their organization. She was attributing this fact to producers generating fewer losses, probably because of financial reasons. Montreal Harvest is responsible for supplying food to over 200 Montreal organizations which in turn feed 110,000 people every year.

What we know is that donors are also feeling the price increases. For example, donors that had a budget of \$100 to buy groceries for Sun Youth would be able to purchase, let's say, 100 items. Now, with the same budget, they can only buy 70 items. This makes a tremendous difference at the end of the day. The middle class feels suffocated, especially when shopping for groceries.

I read an article published by Elyse AMEND in the Chronicle newspaper. In April of this year, she interviewed Eric T  treault, the General Manager of the West-Island Mission. This organization provides assistance to 400 homes in the area. He was saying that they were very worried they wouldn't be able to keep up with demand as food prices kept rising. He gave examples such as the price of a 2 litres milk carton going up 20% and their anticipated bread costs being increased by 30% soon. As it is the case for all food banks, the West-Island Mission has to purchase food to complement the donations received from the public and from companies. For instance, while shopping for macaroni and cheese boxes, they noticed that the price for a "no name" box had gone from 47 to 67 cents.

It that same article from the *Chronicle*, and independent grocer who owns stores in Pierrefonds and NDG said that he had no choice but to raise his prices because his costs had gone up. For him, the price of flour had tripled in that past 6 months while canola and

corn oil had doubled within the last 3 months. As for rice, some varieties had doubled in price and American kinds were up at least 20%. He explained that some products such as rice were still at a reasonably low price because of the stocks they had purchased before the prices were raised by distributors.

Two weeks ago, there was an article in the Journal de Montréal newspaper about rapidly increasing food prices at supermarkets. This article by Marie-Ève Fournier highlighted that the price of food had increased faster than inflation itself. Based on figures from Statistics Canada, it featured a breakdown of prices found at groceries between 2002 and 2008. Some products such as bread had seen their prices go up 39.4% in the last 6 years. And compared to July 2007, bread was 13.2% more expensive in July 2008. Cereals had gone up 17%, vegetables 10.6% and oils 17.1%.

With Christmas approaching, we are now in the process of shopping for food with our distributors. My colleagues from our food bank told me that they have seen such increases in food prices, mostly staples. Some products have doubled in price but they noticed an overall average increase of about 70%.

The winter hasn't even started yet but we anticipate that most food banks in Montreal will have a hard time dealing with the situation.

Thanks to people like you brought in donations, we'll have a better chance to achieve our mission of feeding 20,000 Montrealers in need this Holiday season. So we thank you for your generosity. I hope you enjoy the rest of this conference and that you make a giant leap towards solving the world's global food crisis.

I will leave you with a quote from our Executive Vice-President Sid Stevens:

We don't have a surplus of food in this country, but a surplus of poverty. In the work that I've been doing at Sun Youth, it's hard for me to accept people being poor. Poor AND hungry is even harder for me to accept.

Thank you for your attention.