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### **Joshua's Story on Becoming an Advocate, a Voice and an Ally**

It was not until I started volunteering at Partners for a Hunger-Free Oregon that I discovered my passion for food justice. Raising awareness about hunger and connecting people to nutrition programs led me to reveal my own personal connection with food insecurity. The safety net that nutrition programs provided for my family is why I'm passionate about supporting these programs.

Born in Galesburg, Illinois in a working class family, my parents lived paycheck to paycheck with virtually no savings, to provide for my brother and I. At ten years old, my parents divorced and my mom, brother and I moved from a three story townhouse to a trailer. To help make ends meet, my mom applied for food stamps and housing vouchers. Since my mom was receiving child support making seven dollars an hour as a home care assistant, we were only eligible for a small amount of food stamps, which barely covered our food budget.

Although we still struggled time to time, food stamps and the housing vouchers contributed to keeping us afloat. We were able to pay for our basic necessities to live a semi-healthy life. After living in the trailer for two years, the housing vouchers made it possible for us to move into a three bedroom house. My mom was even offered a full time job as a Certified Nurse Assistant at a local hospital. At the moment, everything seemed to be looking up for my small family.

As a result of my mom getting a new job, we lost the safety net that had kept us afloat. We were no longer eligible for food stamps and housing vouchers, although we were only a few percentages above the poverty income level. And since we lost the vouchers, my mom struggled to pay the rent for the house. On occasion, she had had to choose between buying groceries and paying rent.

After we lost food stamps, we began going to a local food pantry to receive food boxes. As a teenager at the time, I felt ashamed and embarrassed that we received food assistance. To prevent my friends and other classmates from finding out that we were food insecure, I avoided having friends over to our house. It was bad enough that my brother and I wore donated clothes from family members and clothing closets.

Now, as a Hunger-Free Leadership Fellow at Partners for a Hunger-Free Oregon and a staff member at the Oregon Food Bank, I am often reminded of my own personal story that has led me to this career path of being an advocate, a voice and an ally to the many people experiencing food insecurity. The importance of these nutrition programs that have been designed to assist struggling individuals and families is the driving force that keeps me inspired, curious and hopeful in this fight to end hunger.