

Life Lessons: How an Ordinary Dietitian from Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan, Became President of the First Canadian University in Egypt

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ABSTRACT

How does an ordinary dietitian have an extraordinary career? What is the most important asset that a dietitian has? Why is it important to take risks, be resilient, and challenge the status quo? In this article I answer these questions by sharing the highlights of my career and describing how I was socialized into the dietetics profession and ended up as the first female President of a Canadian university in Egypt.

(Can J Diet Pract Res. 2021;82:140–143)

(DOI: [10.3148/cjdpr-2021-026](https://doi.org/10.3148/cjdpr-2021-026))

Published at dcjournal.ca on 19 August 2021

RÉSUMÉ

Comment une diététiste ordinaire peut-elle mener une carrière extraordinaire? Quel est l'atout le plus précieux d'une diététiste? Pourquoi est-il important de prendre des risques, de faire preuve de résilience et de remettre en question le statu quo? Dans cet article, je réponds à ces questions en relatant les faits marquants de ma carrière et en décrivant comment j'ai fait mon chemin dans la profession de diététiste pour devenir la première femme présidente d'une université canadienne en Égypte.

(Rev can prat rech diétét. 2021;82:140–143)

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Publié au dcjournal.ca le 19 août 2021

INTRODUCTION

The online presentation of this Ryley-Jeffs lecture began with an acknowledgement that the land on which I live is the traditional and unceded territory of the Abegweit Mi'Kmaq First Nation. I also acknowledged my white privilege and vowed to listen, to not remain neutral, and to stand in solidarity with human beings who are suffering from the impact of white privilege. I have been blessed to have had a rich and fulfilling career, but I recognize that not everyone has access to the opportunities and resources that came my way.

I was given several prompts to help me prepare this speech—one of which was “How did you advance your career as an ordinary dietitian doing extraordinary work?” Talk about a daunting prospect! However, the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic meant that I've had extra time to prepare and reflect a great deal on this question and my career. Although it has been hard to look back and realize that all of that is behind me now, it has made me realize that I have made a difference in many ways. In this paper I will share some of the highlights of my career, give credit to the people who have mentored me along the way, and describe how an ordinary dietitian from Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan, became the first female President of a Canadian university in Egypt. Drawing on my research, this paper is divided into the three phases of professional socialization that were identified in a review I co-authored with my colleagues Daphne Lordly and Jacqui Gingras: pre-socialization, formal socialization, and post-socialization [1]. Professional socialization is the process

of internalizing the norms and ideologies of a profession and thus by applying this framework to my career I hope to illustrate that it is still possible to call yourself a dietitian and not do what we consider “traditional” dietetic work.

PRE-SOCIALIZATION

Presocialization is an association between an individual's preconceived notions and expectations of their chosen profession and their subsequent socialization process [1]. In our review [1], we found that individuals come into professional programs holding “... a wide variety of attitudes, beliefs, values, and experiences that influence their views on their future roles” (p. 39). So I thought that it might be important to tell you a little bit about my life prior to going to university to give you an idea of the attitudes, beliefs, values, and experiences that eventually led me to a career in dietetics.

I am the eldest of four children from a middle-class, traditional family. Because of my dad's work with the federal government, our family moved frequently when I was growing up which meant that I had to adapt to making new friends every three to four years. When I was all set to start high school with my friends in Winnipeg, I was told that we were moving to Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island (PEI). My mom was excited because she thought we were moving to the Queen Charlotte Islands on the west coast. Imagine her disappointment when she landed at the Charlottetown airport on the east coast (then little more than a double-wide trailer) and drove through “the city” (down the one main street) to

look for a house. Although I initially thought that we had moved to the end of the earth and that my life was over, our family quickly adjusted to the slow-paced, quirky life on PEI and we all grew to love it on “the Island”. In fact, I loved it so much (and the boy who later became my husband), I decided to stay and go to university here when my dad was once again transferred back out west to Saskatoon.

Looking back on those early years, I realize that my ability to adapt quickly to new situations, be flexible and friendly (despite being an introvert), and willing to try new things was a result of not living in any place long enough to set down roots. It was not easy to make new friends in Grade 10 with people who had known each other since they were toddlers. Most of my friends had never been off the Island let alone moved halfway across the country to a new place. Being “from away,” meant that I had to try harder to fit in. I had to push myself outside of my comfort zone to make friends. But doing that provided me with a group of lifelong friends whom I cherish. And living on PEI definitely shaped the person I have become.

The reasons that most people choose a career in dietetics are the desire to help people, to make a difference to the health of the population, to care for others, or because it generally fits with what they like to do [2]. Many students entering a nutrition program express an interest in food and cooking stemming from early experiences with their mothers and grandmothers in the kitchen [3]. However, this was definitely not my experience. My mom cooked because she had to, but unfortunately she was not very good at it. As a result, I didn’t have much of an interest in cooking and had no preconceived notions about dietetics. I drifted into the Home Economics program at the University of Prince Edward Island (UPEI) because my roommate was in the program and seemed to enjoy it. I was in the Biology program at the time, heading for a medical career, when I was persuaded to drop that idea and take more interesting courses in food and nutrition. And thus my formal socialization process began.

FORMAL SOCIALIZATION

In the nursing literature on professional socialization, it has been suggested that student nurses go through a six-step process in becoming a Registered Nurse: initial innocence, recognition of incongruity, psyching out, role simulation, professional internalization and, eventually, stable internalization [1]. Although dietetics education is not the same as nursing education, there are some similarities in the process that dietetic students experience. In the initial innocence phase, students come into our professional programs expecting to start learning about nutrition and dietetics and having hands-on experience with clients during their first year. This is often not the case. In fact, many students are not exposed to direct patient care until their internship practicums. Rather, they spend most of their time observing others doing what they want to do. The result of this lack of direct experience is disillusionment and frustration for nutrition students

who may decide to switch programs at this stage to find something more hands-on to do.

In the second phase, students start to recognize a lack of congruence between their expectations of the program and their university’s expectations. Universities put a high value on grades and a lower value on community experiences (although the emphasis on experiential learning in many university strategic plans across the country are changing this). Further, dietetic educators put a high value on volunteer experiences directly relevant to dietetic practice and don’t always recognize the transferable skills that students gain from other types of volunteering. This may lead to students vying for their professors’ attention by doing what they think their professors want them to do or behave or “to psych out” [1, p.39].

When students start to recognize what is valued by their professors, they attempt to imitate them and internalize the values and beliefs that those professors hold; in other words they start to role model those professors they believe will be most influential in getting them into an internship program.

In the final phase of formal socialization, students start to develop more self-confidence and become less rigid in their thinking as they transition to becoming a dietitian. Unfortunately, this often depends on who they have chosen as role models and their expectations of what “being a dietitian” means.

In my case, I did plan to apply to a dietetic internship program and was accepted into the integrated program in Halifax. However, when I went to talk to the Chair of the Home Economics Department, I was told to turn it down and that “I was too smart to become a dietitian.” She thought that I should go to grad school instead. Being the compliant student that I was, and because I valued her opinion and saw her as a role model, I ended up applying to and being accepted to the Master of Science in Nutrition program at the University of Alberta. Here I studied the effect of high and low erucic acid rapeseed oil (now known as Canola oil) on the liver of the chicken. Although I loved Edmonton, my Master’s experience is better left untold. I can say that I left that program with some valuable lab skills, increased determination to finish whatever I started, and the knowledge that I never wanted to work in a lab for as long as I lived!

My fiancée and I moved to Saskatoon, got married and, despite my vow, I got a job in the Biology Department at the University of Saskatchewan dehulling and analyzing the oil content of wild oats. The best part of that job was working on the beautiful University of Saskatchewan campus and being around academics who were passionate about what they were doing. Although I knew being a research technician was not what I wanted to do with my life, I did know that I wanted a career that I felt as passionate about as they did.

POST-SOCIALIZATION

MacIntosh [4] stated that professional socialization is a “career-long iterative process of reworking professional identity” (p. 739), and I can attest to that. I started my professional

career when my family (newborn son in tow) moved to Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan, and I became the food service supervisor at the Providence Hospital. It was a good thing that I had learned early on to be flexible and adaptable and to search for answers when I didn't know something. The first week on that job I was left alone when the Head of the Department went to a dietetic conference. That was also when I first realized that you can do anything if you want it badly enough and are willing to work hard to achieve your goals. I quickly learned how to work the beltline (without having trays drop off the end), bake in large quantities (our baker was often off sick), calculate a diabetic diet, make "corrective food," and take inventory of everything in the department. I loved the work but was woefully unprepared to supervise my staff.

I had three more babies in quick succession in Moose Jaw and, in a moment of desperation, signed up for a Parent Effectiveness Training (PET) course to help me manage my growing family. If you are a new parent and feeling a little lost, I highly recommend the book by Dr. Thomas Gordon [5], a Nobel Peace Prize nominee. He first developed the PET program in 1962 but his book has been updated several times and I believe that it is just as relevant now as it was then. Little did I know how much that course would help me during my career. It taught me a lot about how to be an effective parent, and it taught me a whole lot more about how to treat people in all walks of life. The lessons I learned from that course helped me to gain confidence, first as a food service supervisor and then as a dietitian. They also gave me the confidence to apply for a job at a long-term care facility in Charlottetown when my husband decided it was time for us to move back east to raise our young family. I have used these lessons throughout my career to try to create compassionate and effective workplaces where staff feel valued and respected. Although not always 100% successful, I think that I can say that while my staff may not have always liked the decisions I made, they respected them, and they respected me for listening to their concerns and doing my best to address them.

Working at the Providence Hospital made me realize that my mentor at UPEI was wrong and that a career in dietetics was something that I wanted and that "being smart" really was important. In the early 1980s it was possible to become a member of the Canadian Dietetic Association (now Dietitians of Canada) by working under a dietitian for two years and then writing a national exam. The day that I received my membership certificate was one of the proudest days of my life. I was no longer on the outside looking in. That sense of belonging to something bigger than yourself is important—at least it was to me.

I spent three very interesting years at the Prince Edward Home in Charlottetown. My title was Head of Nutrition Services, but I was responsible for everything related to food and nutrition at the facility—from food purchasing and production to resident assessments and counselling and everything in between. I also did a little bit of community outreach, teaching seniors how to stay healthy by eating well.

I say that these years were "interesting" because they tested my abilities to create that compassionate and effective workplace that was important to me as an administrator. My staff were all older than I was and had been there for many years. They had certain ways of doing things that were outdated and, in many cases, unsafe. I learned to take baby steps towards improving the meals that we were delivering to our residents and following basic sanitation guidelines to ensure food safety in our facility. Fortunately, there was a group of dietitians who worked in long-term care on PEI who met regularly to discuss issues and "vent" about the problems we were facing. That group is still an important part of my life. We now call ourselves the Sisters of Elderly (given that most of us are now retired) and get together for dinner once a year to catch up and reminisce. Never underestimate the value that your colleagues bring to your work and your life.

There were many times when I thought about leaving the Prince Edward Home and going to work at a coffee shop—but those wonderful women (and one man) were always there to lend an ear and talk me down off the precipice. During this time, I became involved with the PEI Dietetic Association and the Canadian Dietetic Association. The networking opportunities that came out of these experiences led me to a teaching position at my alma mater—the Department of Home Economics at UPEI. What was supposed to be a two-year secondment turned into an almost 30-year career in academia as a dietetic educator, Department Chair, Dean of Science, Co-Chair of the Strategic Planning process working with the President's office and, ultimately, to Cairo where I was the first President of the Universities of Canada in Egypt. I had found my passion!

So fast-forward to the year before I retired. There is no easy answer to the question of how I ended up in Cairo at the end of my academic career. When the President of UPEI first ran the idea by me, I thought he had lost his mind. What qualifications did I have for being a university president, let alone a university president in a foreign country?

I was told I was to be the "face" of the University of Canada and a figurehead leader. What I didn't know was that I would be giving interviews on national radio and television, having my picture in newspapers across the country, and talking to government officials in the Department of Higher Education—before I even started the position. I was also not prepared for the challenge of starting a brand-new university in the middle of the desert! I soon found out that being a figurehead was only a tiny amount of what I was responsible for. I had to write policies and procedures, develop timetables and allocate classrooms, do orientations for our students and faculty, try to understand the technology we needed to implement to have a state of the art campus, . . . the list goes on. I was also dealing with a completely different culture where things get done at a different pace and in a different way than in Canada.

Interestingly though, it's not the work, or the challenges, or the disagreements that I had during my year at the University of Canada that I really remember. Once again it is the people.

The people we lived and worked with, our tour guide who became our friend and kept all our guests busy seeing the amazing sights, and of course, our students at the University of Canada who made me laugh with their antics. It truly was an experience of a lifetime and a great way to cap off my career.

CONCLUSION

At the beginning of this paper I said that I was going to talk about my career, the people who have mentored me along the way and how an ordinary dietitian from Moose Jaw became President of the first Canadian university in Egypt. In summary, I'd like to leave you with some key learnings that shaped who I am and what I was able to accomplish during my career as a dietitian. You will notice that these are not new ideas—but I think that they bear repeating.

People are important

To be a good or even a great leader you need to understand that people are important—as a leader you need to surround yourself with great people and let them do their work. Be there for them if needed, but don't hover over them. Your main job is to facilitate an environment where people feel appreciated and respected—in turn they will appreciate and respect you.

Don't be afraid to take risks and make mistakes

Sandra Matheson [6] encouraged everyone to “be more of a risk taker, to be prepared to put yourself out there and turn up the volume on your life” (p.146). I can say that, without a doubt, the risks that I have taken during my career have all “turned up the volume on my life.” They have made me a better leader, a better teacher, and a better person. And yes, I've made lots of mistakes. The important thing is to acknowledge those mistakes, own them, learn from them, and move on.

Don't accept the status quo

In Shawna Berenbaum's Ryley-Jeffs lecture she said that not accepting the status quo is easier said than done, just as change is not easy [7]. But accepting the status quo means accepting the way things are now and not moving forward. It is scary to “take the path less travelled” but it is so worth it.

Get involved with your professional association

I got involved with Dietitians of Canada (DC) early on and continued to be involved throughout my career. I had a busy job and four children, but I always found the time to stay involved. It was so worth it. The more I learned about our

national organization the prouder I was to be a dietitian. Being a DC member has enabled me to meet an incredible group of dietitians from across the world. I have learned so much from these individuals and I strongly believe that this has made me a better person as well as a better dietetic educator and leader. Although I may not have always “worked as a dietitian”, being a dietitian was part of my identity and the knowledge and skills that I brought to all of my positions came from being a dietitian.

Really listen and don't be afraid to show emotion

I was often told that I was “too nice” in Egypt. I started to think that nice was a four-letter word! Showing empathy is important in the work of a dietitian. Our clients live complicated, messy lives. For me, it was also important in my administrative roles. There are so many reasons why individuals might be behaving in a certain way. Listen to them, look at them, and let them know that you care for them.

Eleanor Swanson, in her 2010 Ryley-Jeffs lecture, talked about coming full circle in her career as a dietitian [8]. As I reflected on my own career path, I was also able to see how everything you do along the way is connected and influenced by “the special people who have inspired and influenced” (p. 154) your life. To conclude, I want to thank each and every one of those special people, especially Dr. Jennifer Taylor, Dr. Kathy Gottschall-Pass, Dr. Shawna Berenbaum, Dr. Cath Morley, and Dr. Jayne Thirsk who nominated and wrote letters of support for me for this award. You are all truly amazing and I am proud to call you my friends.

Conflicts of interest: No conflicts of interest to declare.

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