

Ashley Powell,

PhD, RN, SNS

A Path to Self-Discovery

After 13 years as the Child Nutrition Director for Auburn City Schools in Auburn, Ala., Ashley Powell, PhD, RN, SNS, knows one thing for sure.

“It’s in you what you will be,” she says.

“When God has a path for you, you just take it. And so, sometimes opportunities are there, and you just need to take the opportunity.”

Ashley’s path to child nutrition wound around education. After earning a bachelor of science in nutrition and dietetics, she ended up getting a master’s in education. In 2018, she completed a PhD in education.



“I laugh because both of my parents are in education. My dad worked for the junior college system before he retired, and my mom was a science teacher and a librarian. So I guess I just grew up in a home of educators. But I just thought, ‘oh, I’m going to go more medical,’ ” Ashley explains. “I enjoyed working with a healthy population for more education and training ... So I ended up on that path. And I laugh because here I tried to veer away from education but just couldn’t do it.”



Waste Not

After completing her BS at Auburn University in December, Ashley found herself with some downtime before her dietetic internship began at Georgia State in the fall. She and a friend decided that if they pushed themselves hard, they might be able to get their master's degree in three quarters – just before the internship started.

So that's just what Ashley did.

"We worked hard, and we really pressed ourselves to take the courses and finished up. Honestly, it just worked out," she says.

"Later I really benefited from that. Having that master's in education, that's how I was able to teach," Ashley explains. "It was not (a path) I thought I was going to take, but it sure did work out well."

The internship at Georgia State introduced her to foodservice management, and Ashley really liked the idea of working in child nutrition.

However, it took her a little while to get there. Ashley's first worked as a renal dietitian for Fresenius Medical. In that role, Ashley again enjoyed education – this time working with adults.

Next, Ashley took an opportunity as a coordinator/supervisor for a school district in Athens, Ga. Working under Paula Framer opened Ashley's eyes to the possibilities of child nutrition.

Waste Not Continued...

After getting married, however, Ashley returned to Auburn, where dietetic opportunities were scarce. She filled in temporarily as an assistant manager in a cafeteria at Auburn City Schools, but still needed a job when the semester ended.

That's when heard about an opening for a consumer sciences teacher at one of the middle schools in the district. Because she already had a master's in education as well as work experience, Ashley quickly earned a teaching certification and was hired for the position. After 3 years in that role, the child nutrition director's position opened up, and Ashley jumped on it. She's been in the role for 13 years.

"I've worked in the kitchen. I've been a teacher in a classroom, and I've worked at the board office. So I have some different perspectives," Ashley says.

Get Connected

Ashely prides herself on the partnerships she's formed. She explains that "those are fun things that keep you excited."

"Dietitians, we are systematic. I mean, we count calories. We are systematic, and we're data driven," she says. "But I do think we have to be purposeful in providing some uniqueness and some fun to what we do in our systems so that others are learning and it's not just a program."

These partnership have helped Ashley inspire and develop her managers. Recently, she partnered with the Extension office connected with Auburn University. The team toured the meat and science lab and learned about those processes and decisions.



Get Connected Continued...

Another time, Ashley connected with local chef and Iron Chef Showdown winner David Bancroft. He gave a talk to the managers and they ate at his restaurant.

The dinner was an “opportunity to give our staff not only education through extension and training but also education on what are trends now? How are people cooking? What are they cooking? Because we have to stay up to date on that,” she says.

“My philosophy is I feel like we have to take care of our managers that are onsite in the cafeterias. And if you take care of your managers, then they can do what they need to do at the school level.”

Providing student education is not always possible in the child nutrition director role. However, Ashley’s partnerships have led to some unique educational opportunities for students in the district.

For example, Ashley worked with Miss America Camille Schrier, who has a science-based platform, to provide a video on the science of cooking that all students in the district could access.

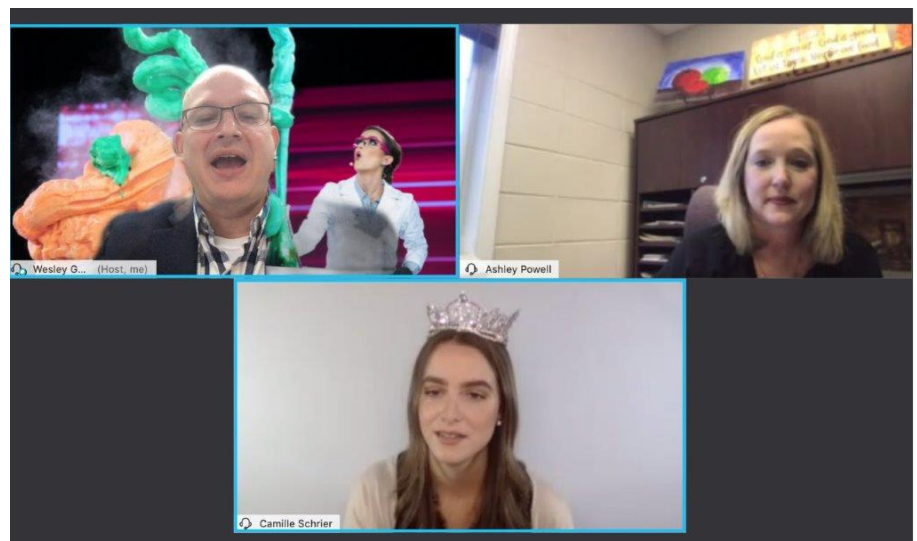
“That’s what our cafeteria does every day. There’s science behind all the things that we do and the meals that we serve and the data that we provide,” Ashley says.

“So here we were promoting our program, Child Nutrition, promoting food and healthy choices and on top of that, it was fun,” she says.

As a member of the Consumer Sciences Board, Ashley also took advantage of an opportunity to partner with the Auburn Dietetic Association. Together, they offered a cooking competition modeled after the Alliance for a Healthier Generation’s Cooking Up Change. Fourteen schools in the area participated.

“We had local dietitians sit on the panel, and we had a local chef. So we had a chef come that had worked with David Bancroft. Well, come to find out, he has since been on the Food Network as well. I hope those students have followed him and know that was one of their judges,” she says.

“The Child Nutrition Department sponsored that, and we had our cafeteria provide lunch... We want students to know that we’re engaged with the community as well, and we’re for the students and providing opportunities for them too.”





Words to Live By

"My dad has always said to me – and my parents are my role models, of course – he's always said, 'Ashley, there's always options and opportunities.' I feel like I've had a lot of those in my life. So, I'm very blessed and thankful to have those. And I hope we can offer those to other people as well."

More than that, Ashley wants other dietitians to know that sometimes the opportunity available isn't the dream job. But that doesn't mean you don't take the opportunity.

"You're not going to get your dream job the first day. It is what it is. Your opportunities will shape you, and help you be ready when the time is right."

Ashley knows that firsthand. Her journey has led her to a position she truly loves that also allows her to be present in her family's lives.

"My kids all go to school in the district I'm in, and that's a real blessing. They eat school lunch every day. They're my first taste testers. I get full reports," she says.

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