

JANUARY 2020 SPOTLIGHT MEMBER

LYDIA WEST

MPH, RD, LD, CC

WHAT THIS ISSUE CONTAINS:

Get to know Lydia
HHFK History & Mississippi's Lead
Current Challenges for SNPs
Food Trends
The Importance of Self-Care



Photo: Lydia, a mentor herself, with one of her favorite mentors, Doris Schneider



Photo: Fresh fruit & vegetable demo

MEET LYDIA

Written by Hannah Carroll, Newsletter Editor

This month we are getting to know Lydia West, MPH, RD, LD, CC. Lydia has always been at the forefront of the school food evolution. From her time at the Mississippi Department of Education to her current career as an independent consultant, Lydia is helping countless districts serve delicious and nutritious meals.

Background

Lydia grew up in Jackson, Mississippi. She completed her dietetic internship at Sarasota Memorial Hospital in Sarasota, Florida. It was through a rotation in Sarasota County Schools, under the mentorship of Beverly Girard, that Lydia was introduced to the world of school nutrition. Lydia reflects back to her short, but memorable week with the district, where they were doing a lot with the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program. I had a sense of mutual feelings when Lydia shared that she did not fully understand all that she was learning at the time. Like many of us, we feel as though the internship experience, especially the shorter rotations, fly by in a blink of an eye. The blur of stress, excitement, and information overload makes it feel like we've only scratched the surface. But, even during the whirlwind of her internship, Lydia knew she was meant to serve her community.

Lydia returned to school to pursue her Master's Degree in Public Health at Tulane University. She graduated in 2010, right at the pinnacle of the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act (HHFK). She then moved back to Jackson, Mississippi. She began her post-graduate career as a Program Specialist for the Mississippi Department of Education in the Office of Child Nutrition. At the time, everyone was trying to learn the HHFK Act and how to adapt to the new standards. Luckily, and unbeknownst to some, Mississippi was already a step ahead of the game in changing what school meals looked like.



Photo: Chef Cyndie's Crew



Mississippi at the Forefront

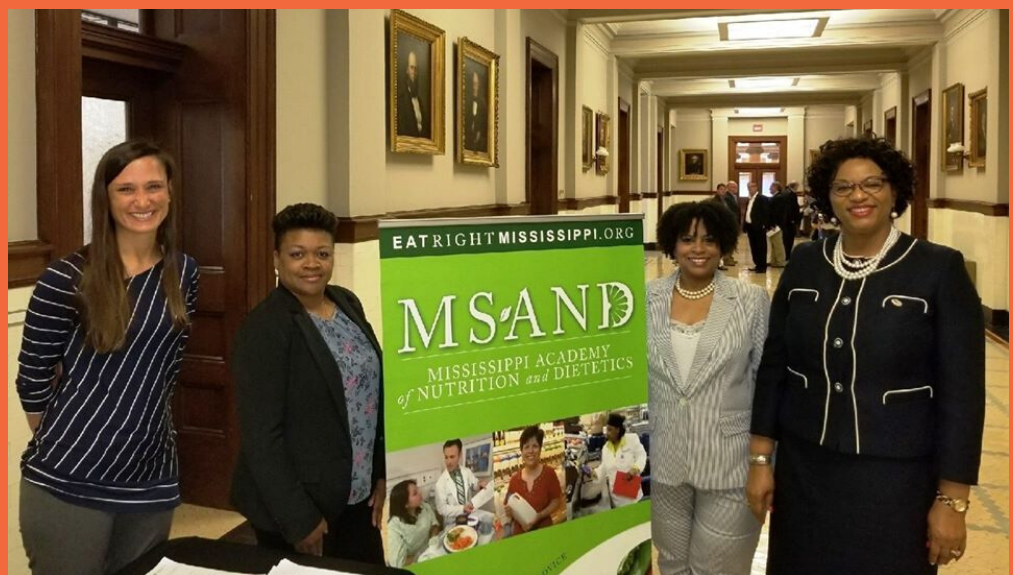
Before the introduction of the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act, the Mississippi State Department of Education created a board policy that contained healthier nutrition guidelines for schools. The policy was innovative and comprehensive, even extending to school wellness policies, physical activity, and nutrition education.

During this time, there was strong leadership at the State's Department of Education. With forward-thinking ideas, like a state-wide purchasing system that was established in 1992, Mississippi's nutrition programs continued to lead our nation. The purchasing system gave a collective buying power to the state, mostly made up of smaller sized school districts. This allowed schools to get more exciting products and collaborate on recipes. One major project that Lydia contributed to was the Mississippi Cycles, a comprehensive menu planning guide for schools to use when creating cycle menus that meet the state and federal nutrition standards. Lydia describes it more simply as a "plug and play" type of system where already-developed recipes can be plugged into a cycle menu. This made it easier for districts to use the products available in the purchasing system, spend less time writing recipes, and ensure that they are compliant with standards. The program was developed through the Office of Child Nutrition, but lead by a task force of school nutrition directors and administrators in the state. The third edition, which was being produced during the introduction of the HHFK Act, was renamed the Mississippi Recipes for Success.

Lydia was present during USDA meetings where states were first learning of the major changes around the corner for school nutrition standards. As a school nutrition administrator myself, I cannot imagine the additional stress that this must present, as you become so accustomed to one way of doing things. It is much easier to adapt to change when you have help, guidance, and tools at your fingertips. This is where the forward-thinking and innovations of Lydia and her colleagues truly came into play. Mississippi became a model for states and encouraged directors that- yes they can do it!



Photos: MS Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics representing at the State Capitol



Lydia's Next Chapter

In 2013, Lydia turned a new leaf when she resigned from the state department and began working independently as a nutrition consultant. She took her experience and leadership outside of the state of Mississippi, traveling to districts across the country helping them to achieve success. She did a lot of work with Chef Cyndie Story, PhD, RD, SNS and her culinary dream team.

When I asked Lydia if she feels like we need to continue to have leaders from schools expand outside of their district and train other districts across the country, she noted the impact of an outside voice. I am sure many of us can agree that after hearing information and instruction from the same source, our ears tend to turn off. Sometimes it is helpful to hear from a fresh voice and new perspective. It may even be the same message, but explained in a different way that captures an audience. This is an encouraging message for our SNS DPG members who aspire to work as school nutrition consultants one day.

From New Regs to New Technology- Current Challenge for Child Nutrition Programs

The big change in nutrition regulations may have become a challenge in the rearview mirror for most schools, but now we have our current hurdle- technology. Lydia made the interesting point that right now we are bridging a population of seasoned child nutrition professionals and a new wave of RDNs/DTRs entering the field. Even on the ground, in the schools, we are fortunate to still have a generation of school managers and leads, with a precious wealth of knowledge, experience, and loyalty. Their careers were not only shocked with new regulations, but they also are having to learn an entirely new system of meal counting and food ordering. School nutrition information systems are rapidly improving and evolving with the tech industry. This is exciting- but daunting for many who are not familiar with technology.

Lydia's piece of advice for schools who are introducing new software or updates is to do site-based trainings. The challenge with this, she notes, is time. Many employees in the school cafes are juggling multiple jobs to reach a full-time schedule. It is the nature of school nutrition— Our day consists of breakfast, lunch, and maybe after-school dinner or snack. Eight-hour positions are far and few between. Part time positions in school nutrition leaves very little time for training. Finding ways to incorporate computer training into the day or during staff workshops must be made a priority.



Food Trend Insight from a Culinary Expert!

Lydia shared some of the food trends that she has seen across the country in school meals:

- Global cuisine
- Vegetables (*more than just green beans!*)
- Spice + hot stuff!
- Culinary programs at secondary schools (*junior chef competitions, student recipe development*)

The Importance of Self-Care & Looping Back to Lydia

Finally, I had to ask Lydia- how do you do it all!? Family, work, and travel seems like a recipe for stress and exhaustion. How do you manage to find time for yourself?

Lydia shared her personal self-care secrets:

1. **Pet therapy:** She gets outside and walks her dogs to release stress and recenter.
2. **A strong support group:** friends, family, and her two dogs included.
3. **Cooking:** The other form of self-care that Lydia finds is in the kitchen, where she loves to do what she does best- cook!

