

JULY 2020 SPOTLIGHT MEMBER

TERESA TURNER

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Meet Teresa

Teresa Turner, MS, RD, LDN, SNS, FAND, is the Army Child and Youth Services Nutritionist on base at Fort Meade in Maryland. She is the Food Service Manager for three child development centers, two school-age centers, and a middle school/teen center, all operating under CACFP. One short conversation with Teresa is enough to ignite thoughtful conversation, fueled by her passion for equity and justice. We talked about equity and justice in regard to food access and most simply, as humans. The Black Lives Matters Movement and the COVID-19 Pandemic have, in a way, created the perfect storm for us. School Nutrition Programs have been able to feed all children at no cost, no identification needed. Amidst the chaos of the pandemic, the death of George Floyd sparked protests nationwide. Teresa emphasizes the importance of not only continuing the conversation but, more importantly, self-reflecting on how we can be the change every day.

"After all, how can we care about the health of people without first caring about the lives of people?"



What policy changes do we need to see to bridge the gap of food access inequality?

“Equity--it always comes down to money. Corrections need to be made. Generations of Black people worked for free. There were no fruits of their labor, no houses, no property, no wealth, no businesses to show for it. That needs to be corrected or else the wealth gap will always remain and there will never be enough resources to close up the food security gap.” Food deserts are an example of this iniquity of resources that needs to be corrected. Teresa referred to an infographic by DC Hunger Solutions in which there were nine grocery stores in one ward, predominantly comprised of wealthy, white people and only three grocery stores in a combination of two wards where the majority of Black people reside. This is a grave reminder that we need to keep using our role as dietitians to reach communities who need us the most. “A lot of times schools are the only way someone gets hot meals. Some don't eat at all over the weekend or eat things that aren't nutritionally sound due to lack of access. This is why I love the school program so much.”

How can we be the change that we want to see?

“All levels count. Members have been reaching out to the Academy to voice change, but you can always make change on an individual level. There's always strength in numbers. As a DPG, if there is something that you feel strongly about, then do it. But people should also contribute as individuals because it is the right thing to do for humanity. Even if you do not want to look at it on a human level, you chose to be a dietitian. You help people, you save lives, you feed people. What is the point in telling people to eat healthy if they're going to be killed walking down the street, or they won't be able to afford a place to stay because of red-lining and lack of money put into Black neighborhoods? What is the point of what we do if people are still going to die anyway? How can we care about the health of people and not the lives of people?”

How can members continue to voice how they feel?

“A voice is only as strong as the spirit that is speaking it. If you don't truly believe it, efforts will fall short. It starts with self-awareness. Look within, look at biases, look at perceptions and why we have the perceptions that we have. Read books. Learn about what happened, why it happened, and don't deny that it happened. Once everyone looks within and solves those issues, then they'll want to make things better. It is great to go to protests and to partake in the large events, but when it comes down to the changes, when you are faced with an opportunity to do something that will make the difference in everyday life, you have to make that decision to do the right thing. C.S. Lewis said, ‘Integrity is doing the right thing even when no one is watching.’ Only you'll know.”

A big thank you to Teresa for taking the time to let us get to know her. Read more from Teresa in the following article "Equity and Iniquity: The Inedible Portions of our Food"

-School Nutrition Services Dietetic Practice Group

EQUITY AND INIQUITY: THE INEDIBLE PORTIONS OF OUR FOOD

BY TERESA TURNER, MS, RD, LDN, SNS, FAND

Nutrition is Life

Everything we put into our bodies affects our lives either positively or negatively – some having a greater impact than others. My decision to become a registered dietitian was a subconscious one. As a child and adolescent, I wanted to be a medical doctor. That is, until I reached my senior year of high school.

Southern cooking was my family's way of life. My grandfather suffered a stroke, my grandmother suffered from heart disease and hypertension, and my mother and grandmother both received diagnoses of diabetes. These factors developed my sustained passion for becoming an RD.

I knew that becoming an RD would enable me to reach more of the population and allow me to offer more of my zeal. In realizing and truly understanding the bearing nutrition has on overall health, and in order to help improve the quality of life for others, I began the journey. I chose a career in dietetics – rather, it chose me – because, ultimately, nutrition is life.

Justice is Life

From the second grade until high school graduation, I received my education within a predominately white school district in South County St. Louis, MO. When I was 10 years old, I earned the opportunity to complete two three-week summer enrichment program components within another predominately white school district. Each day for two weeks, I would arrive and attend summer school for math. I was a kid and I went where the grown-ups told me to go. I knew I didn't need help with math because I was versed in the quadratic formula at the time and never earned less than an A in any math class I took. But each day, I continued to arrive and go to summer school.

Finally, when the third week began, the person in charge took me out of class, told me I was in the wrong place and ushered me to the summer enrichment program, where I should have been the entire time. It took me years to realize the gravity of that situation. Surely, there were rosters of children for both summer school and summer enrichment, but no one bothered to look. Even though I was not on the summer school roster and was being marked absent day after day on the summer enrichment program roster, no one bothered to check or to call my mother. They assumed I must be there for summer school. They assumed I couldn't possibly have been gifted and earned the right to partake in a summer enrichment program.

I was embarrassed, and I was traumatized. As a 10-year-old kid, I walked into a program that was nearly over – the only Black kid in the room, as usual. Everyone had already bonded. They had been working on nifty science projects together for weeks. So, not only was I the only Black kid, but I was completely alone in all other aspects as well. After the first three-week session concluded, I told my mother that I did not want to go back for the other half. I did not want to feel alone for another three weeks.

Imagine if I had started with the other children. I tried to imagine but never could. That experience, the one I had earned, was stolen from me, all due to the assumption that if a Black child entered the building, it must be because they failed a class and needed summer school.

I did not fully grasp the impact of that injustice at the time, but by 14 years old I knew this nation and the mindsets of its citizens were not right. I knew the state of things needed to change.

Devoted to Dietetics

I was the only Black student in our National Honor Society in high school. I was the only Black student in all of my AP math and science classes. Yet, I knew I was not the only capable Black student. By the time college applications were due, I felt the only option for my emotional and mental well-being was to attend a predominately and historically Black university. I needed to be surrounded by Black valedictorians, scholars and game-changers; because I knew we were capable. As prestigious as Tuskegee University is, I still noticed it was looked upon as less than. Even surrounded by such excellence, I had the constant underlying mentality of needing to prove my and our worth.

On my journey to becoming a registered dietitian, I became active in the Academy. I served on the Diversity and Inclusion Committee (formerly Diversity Committee) for five years – two as a member, then Vice Chair, Chair and Past Chair. I belong to four dietetic practice groups and one member interest group. I was in the first group of FNCE® Ambassadors in 2019.

I advocate for my profession and organization in everything I do because saving and enriching the lives of people through nutrition and dietetics means everything to me; it is part of my reason for being. Even after attending the award reception for one of my DPGs at FNCE® as the only Black person in the room, and being wholly ignored the entire time, I rejoin each year and give my all. I am devoted to dietetics for others, not for myself. I am willing to surmount any adversity to serve the community. But why should I or anyone have to endure such adversity?

Devoted to Justice“...

With Liberty and Justice for all.” We have heard these words all our lives. But who is “all”? All do not have equitable access to fresh produce. All do not have access to safe places to exercise. All do not have access to honest health care. All are not harmed at the same rate. All are not protected at the same rate. All are not ignored at the same rate. All do not receive the same education in public schools. All are not hired fairly. All have not been given just access to generational wealth. All are not equally impacted by social determinants of health. All have not been stripped of their heritage and/or their family members.

Food systems are one of the many systems that continue to create disparities in the health, wealth and success of our nation’s citizens. Until the iniquity is acknowledged, addressed and dismantled, Justice for All is not a possibility. We must all be devoted to justice.

There is Nothing You Cannot Do

The percentage of Black RDNs has remained less than 3 percent for well over a decade, in spite of purported efforts toward diversity, inclusion and growth. The Academy is an organization of tens of thousands of esteemed food scientists, medical nutrition therapists, foodservice managers, agriculturists, epidemiologists, public health practitioners, entrepreneurs, professors, researchers and problem-solvers – all in the form of RDNs. Many members hold advanced degrees that require critical thinking and analysis to compose a thesis or dissertation. We are made to assess, diagnose, intervene, monitor and evaluate via evidence-based practices.

All dietitians must utilize their resources to alleviate the impacts of systemic racism as it relates to food and nutrition. We have great power over the nutritional health of the nation’s population and we have an ethical obligation to use that power effectively and efficiently.

Let me phrase this as a PES statement: Nutritional disparities related to systemic racism as evidenced by the entire food system.

It is implausible that, among professionals, membership, and leadership, we don’t have what it takes to provide effective interventions for this etiology. And the intervention begins with toiling for justice in every facet, on every platform.

As educated, determined, and resourceful as we are, there is nothing we cannot do.
Nothing.