

Debra Geary Hook, MPH, RDN, FAND, PhDc

Member Spotlight

“If a driver has the courage to create his own conditions, then the rain is simply the rain.”

From the movie “The Art of Racing in the Rain”

All of us find ourselves on a career path where we attempt to have complete control while avoiding conditions which we find less than ideal. When I look back over my career, it was these less-than-ideal conditions that gave birth to growth and opportunities.

My journey as a dietitian and now research dietitian has been anything but linear. I started university at a time when my family’s life was chaotic due to my father’s chronic health which led to numerous surgeries, serious medications, and finally the removal of a kidney and an early retirement. My father had been seriously ill since I was five years of age. Little did I know that understanding chronic illness and its impact upon family dynamics and finances would be the gift that I brought to my work and patients.

In the early 80’s, I arrived at California State University, Chico thinking that I would study social psychology and cultural anthropology. I was interested in how people made choices and decisions, but also had a passion for the world beyond my personal experience. While working on general education, I found that in addition to the social sciences, I loved organic and biochemistry. In the middle of a head full of worries about what type of job I would have after graduation, I found myself double majoring in Social Psychology and Nutrition with a minor in chemistry and another in cultural anthropology. People were confused over the double major, but I felt that there was a connection between people’s culture, values, and what they ate. I chose CSU, Chico because it was close to home, but it was the perfect place for me. I took genetics, anthropology, physics, human development, and additional biology classes beyond the general education of dietetics.

During my senior year, I was a Normal Volunteer at the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, Maryland, which allowed me to work in the Nutrition Research Center and other institutions. I was able to work under world class researchers and became smitten with the idea of working in research.

Upon graduation, I did not have funds to immediately apply to an internship, so I started work as a nutrition aid and took graduate level classes with the focus on “Nutrition Education.” After two short semesters and before I finished the graduate degree, life took me to Switzerland. I did not have a work permit, so I studied languages and did an enormous amount of reading both in and outside the field of medicine. Living in a country is quite different than being a tourist especially when a culture is closed to outsiders. I found this time of my life immensely valuable as I learned how people navigate when only partially understanding the local language and customs. I would use this knowledge when I developed education materials and worked with clients with limited English skills.

After 6 years abroad, I returned to California and decided to work towards becoming a registered dietitian. I had wanted to return to Northern California, but life took me elsewhere. To gain experience, I worked as a diet technician in a county hospital. The work dynamics between the diet technicians and dietitians were less than ideal and driven by a management style that needed overhauling. It was during this time, that I watched and learned how management and communication styles impact the work efforts of an entire team. I had no desire to work in foodservice, but the countless hours spent

checking tray line provided me the perfect learning environment to understand work streams and how to create efficiencies. Ten years later, I would use this knowledge to help manage a program with limited funds.

I decided to attend Loma Linda University with a double major: Health Education and Promotion and Nutrition. Life had rerouted me, but again put me in the perfect learning environment. I could combine my growing passion for clinical pediatric nutrition as well as nutrition and health education. The later uses social psychology theories. During my studies, Loma Linda University had opened a brand-new children's hospital in addition to their large medical and trauma centers. Both provided me with excellent clinical training with a focus on nutrition support. Despite having a love for education, I wanted my initial career as a dietitian to be in critical care.

Loma Linda University has a large international outreach, which impacts how they see healthcare. The people around me, realized that nutrition messages, diet prescriptions, and education need to meet the patient's cultural, health, and educational needs. I completed a masters and Plan IV. At the time, Plan IV were not considered the ultimate internship experiences, but for me it was perfect. I could tailor my experiences to meet my training needs. I was able to do more advance rotations and build upon what I already had learn my various jobs.

I graduated and started my work as a pediatric dietitian in large university medical centers and children's hospitals. Early on, I worked critical care by starting in the Pediatric and Neonatal Intensive Care Units. I loved the intensity of the critical care centers, but after 2 years, I wanted to know my patients and provide nutrition education directly to them and their families. I transitioned to positions which were both critical care and ambulatory and centered around a specific disease state or group of conditions. I worked for many services, but my biggest love and the focus of my career would become Metabolics (Inborn Errors of Metabolism.)

Metabolics provides many facets of patient care beyond traditional critical and ambulatory care settings. I was able to work in advocacy and public policy. Over a five-year period, I worked with various stakeholders to sponsor a state bill to provide services to patients with Inborn Errors of Metabolism. I was part of community engagement; working directly with the local School Nutrition Program and WIC programs to obtain services for my patients. I wrote grants and created educational venues to meet the knowledge and skill needs of my patients at different stages of life. The documentation of patient care as well the paperwork for requesting medical foods and equipment was daunting. It forced me to learn to write code and create a small database which would populate various forms thus streamlining my work. I built upon these computer skills and learned how to write code to develop a cloud-based platform for clinic management, communication, documentation creation and storage. It was these computer skills which provided me with my first national and international conference speaking engagements.

Over the course of twenty years, I would work at four major university based/ affiliated children's hospitals. Some moves were planned, and others were a necessity due to politics and financial support. Each move meant starting over in some ways, but it also brought new opportunities. At one institution and after six months of intense negotiation, I finally signed a contract and became a clinic and program coordinator at a time when few dietitians did this. Instead of being employed through the Nutrition Department, I had negotiated to be within the School of Medicine, which allowed me a job description beyond the traditional duties of a clinical dietitian. I petitioned to expand my position to include

supervisory duties, so that I could grow our staff to include other allied health professionals and students. I started billing for my services as well as those of our entire clinic, so I learned more about reimbursement, setting professional fees, and negotiations with third party payers.

I entered dietetics as a nutrition support dietitian and never saw myself providing educational cooking classes despite my background in nutrition education, but it was the information contained in these classes and the skills they taught which were needed by my patients to manage their chronic conditions. These classes were part of a larger comprehensive education plan and took team to make a reality.

In addition to my work as a clinical dietitian, I lectured at two California State University campuses. Instead of working at one university, I cobbled my desired work experiences between two institutions. Driving back and forth between the medical center of one university system and teaching in another university system was hectic, but my students were wonderful. Over the span of fourteen years, I was able to develop my teaching skills, while my students kept me young.

I loved my students, and it was difficult to let go of teaching to pursue other professional activities such as working with industry on projects and research, volunteering in leadership positions with professional organizations, and speaking. The economic downturn of the late 2000's made the decision for me. I used the new flexibility in my schedule to work in areas which built upon my clinical skills but taught me more about research and industry.

I had always wanted to finish a doctorate in nutrition, but life just kept taking me down different paths. While working clinically and as a lecturer, I had started taking classes part-time until the university told me that I need to formally apply to their doctoral program. At the same time, unforeseen events in the life of the geneticist I worked with, forced us to close our private practice. I found myself at a crossroads. If I wanted to finish a doctorate and I needed to make this a priority, which meant leaving most of my clinical work. I applied to two programs, was accepted to both, and chose the University of California, Davis, Graduate Group in Nutritional Biology. I am an older student, but I defend the idea that dietitians with extensive experience bring many things to the educational table.

Currently I am a PhD candidate with a focus on clinical research. I have 15 units from my first semesters in graduate school and an additional 16 units of doctoral work at another university in addition to two master degrees before coming to Davis, but was required to claim an emphasis and take additional coursework. I chose Davis' Clinical Research Program and became the first dietitian to participate in this NIH funded program. The program built upon my course work and experience working in clinical trials. What started as an obstacle has turned out to be an incredible experience and gift.

As I work on my dissertation, I look back on my career and life. During the middle of a global pandemic, I turned 60 years of age and became a PhD candidate. Many would say that I did things out of order or needed to have taken a more linear path, but I do not agree. I am a girl who grew up in the rural mountains of California with dreams of attending university and traveling the world. Through hard work and perseverance, I became a woman who has spoken at professional meetings on every major continent, speaks fluently three languages, has become a respected expert in a chosen specialty and is finishing a doctoral degree. Each year I run more than eight half marathons and bike in 100-mile cycle tours. I defy the traditional view of middle age.

I have learned many important things during my 60 years on this earth. There will always be obstacles to overcome and plans to change. There are days filled with sunshine and others filled with rain. If one has the courage to keep riding, then the rain is simply the rain. **By Debra Geary Hook, MPH, RDN, FAND, PhDc**