



Sarah's Story

Sarah Crulcich, MPH, RD, LD

Health Promotion Coordinator at Houston Food Bank

When I reflect on major turning points in my life, there is always a light bulb moment. By that, I mean I can pinpoint the speaker, phrase, event or feeling that resonates with me to this day.

I knew I wanted to be a dietitian during my sophomore year of college. I remember feeling intimidated everyday sitting in a class full of high achieving students and wondering how I would fit in to the dietetics major. One day, a professor looked me straight in the eyes and asked me why I wanted to be a dietitian. With a lot of “umms” and stammering I finally managed to say that I wanted this career because many people know fruits and vegetables are good for them, yet they choose less healthy options, and that I thought dietitians were the solution to this problem. Without pause he replied that I am interested in behavioral nutrition. **Light bulb #1.** Would you believe that after that moment I switched majors to behavioral neuroscience to study eating disorders? I did so for many reasons, for which you will have to read my guest blog to find out more. 😊

I am now a proud registered dietitian with a Master of Public Health in Health Promotion & Health Education. My realization of my passion for public health I owe to one of my most influential professors, Ms. Barb Mayfield. Everything I know about focus groups, tailoring information, and different presentation styles began in my nutrition communications course with Barb. I spent the entire semester determined to wow my classmates with my thorough research on Asian Americans and undiagnosed diabetes. Throughout the process I learned a few key lessons: new medical recommendations and policies move slowly, dietitians play a vital role in bridging the gap between clinical and community health, and my presentation had very little to do with nutrition. Yes, I have a passion for nutrition and an even greater passion for understanding how the environment and policy impacts a community's access to nutrition. **Light bulb #2.**

The more I learn about myself, the more I find things simply falling into place. I was selected as an Archer Fellow in Public Policy during the summer of 2019. The fellowship meant that I would spend a summer in Washington, D.C. writing a policy paper, learning from world-renowned journalists and former congressional staffers, as well as completing a full-time internship. I was selected to intern at the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics - Policy Initiatives and Advocacy Office at a time when Child Nutrition Reauthorization (CNR) was gaining traction in the Senate and new proposed rules for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) seemed to come one after another. My supervisor, and now friend, took me under her wing and gave me the opportunities of a lifetime. These opportunities were sometimes frustrating. Before I proceed, let me share that the individuals who work in the Academy's D.C. office are of outstanding character and brilliance. I would not change my memories with them for the world. But remember, I need to balance my passion for nutrition with public health and it was challenging to stick to the scope of the Academy. I wanted to call out systemic racism, discuss the negative implications of gentrification, demand better access to health care for the

LGBTQ+ community, and so much more but I needed to learn to do so in the right space and at the appropriate time. I had known it for a while but finally admitted to myself that the traditional role of an RD was just not for me. **Light bulb #3.**

While in the middle of a meeting at Feeding America, I was contemplating what I would do when I returned to Houston. I remember thinking I enjoyed the atmosphere of Feeding America's office. It was professional but playful and progressive. I then found myself scrolling through the website of Houston Food Bank, Feeding America's largest food bank. On a whim, I applied for a job opening, was offered a position which I accepted, and I never imagined loving work so much. In my current role, I split my time between two departments: Nutrition Education and Food for Change. The first is a slightly more traditional community role with fiercely passionate nutrition advocates and the latter operates like a think tank where we seek to address food insecurity through strategic health care partnerships, economic partnerships, food system collaboratives, coalitions, and more. Every day I get to serve the most diverse community in the nation by addressing the social determinants of health and help move the needle towards greater health equity.

Each day is an exciting new challenge to effectively communicate with others. Sometimes it is presenting a new idea to my colleagues, teaching difficult concepts in nutrition ed classes, or educating clinicians on food insecurity and how partnering will help close the gap between clinical and community health. Other times it is learning to be uncomfortable talking about the dichotomy of poverty and privilege. I think back on the summer and how I would present the same information to staffers on the Hill, practicing dietitians, and my classmates at different times using completely different words, tone of voice, and presentation style. As someone who really struggles with words, I am quite proud of how far my communication skills have come. I feel most energized and creative when I get to fuse nutrition, social entrepreneurship, and policy all into one idea; and when I truly believe in the purpose and mission. My light bulb moments show me how far I have come and my communication skills keep me moving forward.

Connect w/me:

www.linkedin.com/in/sarah-cruclich
scruclich@houstonfoodbank.org