

TD10

Today's Dietitian's Sixth Annual Showcase of 10 Incredible RDs Who Are Making a Difference

By **LINDSEY GETZ**

The face of dietetics is changing dramatically. Gone are the days when dietitians' career choices were limited to working in a hospital setting. While many RDs still take the clinical route, these days more dietitians are going into private practice, media, teaching, consulting, the military, the corporate world, and more. For the past six years, *Today's Dietitian* (TD) has asked readers to nominate their peers who they believe have accomplished incredible achievements in dietetics—those who go beyond what's expected of them to educate clients, patients, and the general public about nutrition, health, and wellness.

In honor of National Nutrition Month® and Registered Dietitian Nutritionist Day, TD has chosen 10 amazing RDs who deserve recognition for the awesome work they do each day.

These dietitians exemplify the variety of career choices available in the nutrition field, and send the message that the sky's the limit. And while they specialize and serve in different areas, they all share one thing in common—a passion for helping others. Please enjoy the following profiles of this year's top 10 winners. And give yourself a pat on the back as well for all you've accomplished in the field to help improve the quality of life of clients and patients.

Kellie Glass, RD, LD

Co-owner of *NutriSense Nutrition Consulting*

Mingo County, West Virginia, is home to the mine wars, poverty, drugs, and addictions, and it's where Kellie Glass' Appalachian roots began. After graduating from the University of Kentucky and becoming a dietitian in 2001, Glass chose to stay true to those roots and dedicate her dietetics career to the people of West Virginia and Kentucky. It's certainly not the easiest place for a career in nutrition. West Virginia is the second most obese state in the nation and considering the lack of jobs in the field, it's a region where dietitians may not be as valued as in other parts of the country. But Glass was determined to give it a go.

"When I first got out of school, all I could find were part-time jobs in nutrition," Glass says. "My business partner was in the same boat. So we decided to go into business together and create a nutrition consulting company."



In 2009, with the publication of *How to Eat Fried Chicken and Be Thin Too*, Glass and her business partner decided to not only pay tribute to their grandparents but also to inspire others in the region, informing them that they didn't have to completely give up their favorite meals. The book features family recipes modified to be healthier while still maintaining taste.

"Food is a really important part of life around here, and I wanted to take some of those foods that I grew up with and make them healthier so others could do it too," Glass says.

Glass also works in a number of community settings including long-term care, acute care hospitals, behavioral health hospitals, and hospice. She's constantly on the go and yet she suffers from daily pain and fatigue due to psoriatic arthritis. Despite the pain, she loves keeping busy, and she says that the arthritis actually has made her more relatable to her patients.

"I can understand where people with other chronic conditions are coming from—why it's easier for them to get off track with diet or with exercise," Glass says. "But we can work together, and I can educate people on ways to better manage that pain. A healthier lifestyle has helped me manage my own condition, so I'm living proof."

Kelly Stellato, MS, RD, LDN, CLC

Private Practitioner and Consultant

Kelly Stellato says that after learning about healthful eating in her ninth grade health class she was completely hooked on the field of nutrition. She was fascinated by the fact that certain foods not only influenced how she felt but also affected her mood, thinking, energy, and even her hair. After learning about these connections, Stellato says there was "nothing else in the world that she wanted more." In fact, she was so passionate about pursuing her career choice that she started college while still in high school, attending college classes at the end of her high school day.

"I was simply too excited to wait another year before starting the journey I knew was meant for me," Stellato says of her decision to pursue dual enrollment as a high school senior.

Today, in the field of pediatrics and behavioral nutrition, Stellato not only runs a successful private practice but also consults for a number of groups and organizations, including Smith College Health Services, Pediatric Services of Springfield in Massachusetts, and The Baby Sleep Site. Though it keeps her extremely busy, Stellato says she enjoys wearing many hats.

"I can't picture my life any other way," Stellato says. "I actually have never worked as an RD at just one place at a time. My



vast interests and need for variety are what keep me going."

With a focus on behavioral nutrition, Stellato often works with patients who have eating disorders, and amid her long list of personal accomplishments, names their successes as her greatest achievements. Stellato also is a certified lactation consultant and works with many mothers and children. She says their success stories keep her going.

"My greatest accomplishment by far is seeing [clients] be able to make peace with food and their bodies, and decrease the distress that food decisions cause," Stellato says. "Or seeing a previously failing-to-thrive toddler running around. Or a mom who was unable to breast-feed due to postpartum depression medications come to a place of peace with the formula decision we arrived at. Or the previously anorexic client who e-mailed me to tell me how she was able to eat cake on her birthday this year. My clients are my biggest accomplishments."

Judith Porcari, MBA, MS, RD

Assistant Director, Nutrition and Dining Service Department, North Shore University Hospital

Judith Porcari says that growing up with a nurse for a mom was her inspiration for pursuing a career in nutrition. Her mother always was focused on patients' food intake and knew that nutrition was an essential component of their recovery long before the role of a dietitian was valued in the way it is today.

"As a child of the Depression, she also had a real concern about food accessibility," Porcari says. "But in general, food was just a central part of our lives growing up. We would go grocery shopping together and cook together. And by fourth or fifth grade, I can remember thinking more and more about food in terms of nutrients."

Although Porcari currently works in management, she began her dietetics career in nutrition research and even had the opportunity to work alongside some world-renowned physicians. "I loved that role and absorbed everything I could," she says. "It's why I continue to focus on clinical nutrition and also why I encourage students to become more comfortable with public speaking. I used to do a lot of lectures and became very comfortable speaking, but these days many students lack that skill. I believe it's important for new graduates to get more comfortable talking about nutrition."

More than two decades ago, Porcari began promoting a dietetics internship at North Shore University, and though it took a long time for the program to take off, it's now in its 11th year. The program began with four interns and



has expanded to 12. Porcari also was a champion for a new program called MealTime Mates, which serves as a collaboration between Nutrition and Dining Services, Volunteer Services, and Nursing Education. Volunteers are trained to feed patients; this has improved the quality of stay for patients and their families.

These are among many group projects for which Porcari has been a key voice and advocate, and yet she has never taken credit. Even in speaking with *TD*, she continually asked that any credit be given to her team. Though many of these programs may not have gotten off the ground without Porcari's help, she remains humble and still deserving of recognition among her peers.

Apameh Bashar, RD, CDE, CNSC

Assistant Director of Patient Services, Dietetic Internship Coordinator, Food and Nutrition Services at The University of Arizona Medical Center

Apameh Bashar says her interest in dietetics began when she was a child. She always was interested in diet and exercise. So when she graduated high school at the young age of 16, her father suggested she pursue a degree in nutrition. After speaking with a family friend who was an RD at a local hospital, Bashar says she knew it was the path for her.



Bashar enrolled in the University of Arizona dietetics program at 16 and went on to graduate school at 19. She says her passion for the field was strong. But despite her early successes, good grades, and enthusiasm, Bashar was shocked when she couldn't secure an internship when the time came. She made five attempts before she finally got a job. "I felt like the field had failed me despite my passion for it," Bashar recalls.

Though she went on to have a successful career in the field, Bashar says she has never forgotten that experience and always has wanted to be an advocate for interns. As fate would have it, two years ago Bashar had the opportunity to become the manager of the internship program at the University of Arizona Medical Center.

"It's interesting that after I had such a hard time even getting an internship that I am now managing this program," Bashar says. "But it was my legacy, to help educate young kids and open their eyes to the field of nutrition. It's my life now. I love it. I see them when they first start out doing patient interviews or standing in during rounds, and I see them at the end when they're graduating and getting jobs. I feel so fortunate to have the opportunity to empower young people. We as dietitians have strong voices and are incredibly powerful."

Nyree Dardarian, MS, RD, LDN, CSSD, FAND

Faculty, Director of the Center for Integrated Nutrition & Performance, and Coordinator of the Individualized Supervised Practice Pathway program at Drexel University

Though she says she attended one of the best schools for dietetics, Nyree Dardarian didn't initially know anything about the profession—or even realize she was at a school that had such a strong program. But the minute she started a required nutrition class, Dardarian says she fell in love.



"It was the only thing that had piqued my interest and though I didn't have the best grades, since I hadn't been passionate about anything up until that point, I was determined to become a dietitian and turn things around," Dardarian says. "I never had a solid plan. I just went for it."

With passion driving her, Dardarian started off as a clinical dietitian in a nursing home and then moved on to a hospital job. From there she was offered a position as nutrition clinical manager. "In the role of manager, I realized I could have an impact on a larger scale reaching all the patients instead of just those on my list for the day," Dardarian says. "That invigorated me and inspired me and eventually led me to a position as foodservice director."

From there, Dardarian was sought out by Drexel University, where she had done her graduate coursework and research. Drexel's department of nutrition sciences was the first in the country to pilot the Individualized Supervised Practice Pathway program, developed by the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics. Today, Dardarian serves as coordinator for that program while simultaneously directing the Center for Integrated Nutrition & Performance—and she's teaching, too.

"Having held a number of positions in the past and now also holding several titles has given me a diverse background and that's what I enjoy so much about this field," Dardarian says. "Nutrition is a growing science. In addition to traditional career opportunities, fresh and modern alternative paths are endless."

Rebecca Bitzer, MS, RD, LD, CEDRD

Founder of Rebecca Bitzer & Associates: The Nutrition Experts

As someone who always was drawn to helping people, a career in nutrition was the obvious choice for Rebecca Bitzer. And with a successful private practice, she's been able to do just that on a daily basis for the last two decades. Bitzer has combined her nutrition knowledge and business savvy to create a counseling practice that has grown to three offices, 13 employees, and five RDs. As someone who has seen much success in private

practice, Bitzer also is passionate about advancing the profession and currently employs 10 dietetics interns, giving them her time and a taste of her passion.

"I'm hoping to give future RDs who are employed in my practice a chance to experience what really happens in a dietitian's office," Bitzer says. "Nutrition students learn how to take their formal nutrition education and learn both counseling and entrepreneurship skills in our busy nutrition offices. An ability to work well with others, to be able to juggle multiple tasks, and learn to prioritize is among other tasks I had to learn the hard way."

In addition to helping future dietitians, Bitzer also has successfully coached fellow dietitians and health professionals on taking their business to the next level. This has included coauthoring a workbook on building a nutrition practice.

In 2011, Bitzer launched the Empowered Eating Program, designed to provide hope for people with eating disorders. Bitzer says she just felt like traditional nutrition counseling wasn't always enough for people with serious food struggles. This more intense program includes nutrition counseling for six months with some sort of daily communication. It also includes "above and beyond" measures such as going out to eat with clients or accompanying them to the grocery store.

"I decided to create an ideal program to help clients confront and conquer eating issues that would allow [them] to get care from not only nutrition experts but also from eating disorder experts," Bitzer says. "It lets current and future clients know that we are with them throughout the journey of repairing their relationship with food. We're knowledgeable, patient, trained, skilled, and compassionate."

Laura Serke, RD, LD, IBCLC

NICU/Women's Care Dietitian and Lactation Consultant at the University of Louisville Hospital, part of KentuckyOne Health

In school, Laura Serke loved math and first decided to go into the field of engineering. But she realized she was happiest when she was at the nutrition center and learning about how to live well. So she switched to exercise science and started her career working in a gym and becoming a personal trainer. But as clients began asking her for nutrition advice she realized how closely connected exercise and nutrition were and decided to also pursue a degree in dietetics.



"During my internship in a hospital, I passed out on the first day," Serke chuckled. "So never would I have imagined that I would end up working in a hospital."

After holding several titles in an 800-bed facility in Florida, a position became available in Serke's hometown in Kentucky in the neonatal ICU (NICU) that also involved some research. Serke jumped at the opportunity and says she has loved being in a teaching environment. But she also loved the inspiration that comes from working in the NICU and obtaining her lactation consultant certification.

"I had learned about breast-feeding in college, but it wasn't until I was immersed in it that I really understood it," Serke says. "It's inspiring. On more than one occasion I've stayed late to help a mom feed her baby. After a new mom successfully breast-feeds her 3-lb baby and you see that joy, you're as on top of the world as she is."

Serke says she feels fortunate to be a dietitian in a time when there's constantly new research emerging—particularly in the neonatal world. "It's fascinating to read what the literature has to say about different diets for youth and how that correlates to adulthood obesity," she says. "This is such an exciting time to be a dietitian. There's so much research out there and so many people are actually thinking about what they're eating. Dietitians are in a unique position in a time like this. We have so much potential on the horizon."

Juliet Rodman, RDN

Chief Wellness Officer at Wellness Corporate Solutions

Seeing a dire need within the workplace for a healthier corporate culture, Juliet Rodman returned to school to become a dietitian. Once she was out of school, one of Rodman's jobs involved giving seminar presentations during which she realized that plenty of people in the corporate world were overweight and ultimately unhappy. She became passionate about teaching health and wellness on a larger scale and reaching even more people, but she didn't know how to execute a business plan. Fortunately, she found the right partner.

"It started out of my kitchen," Rodman says. "I had this great plan, but I needed some help seeing it come to life. We started our website then began cold calling and booking seminars—and ultimately health fairs. It started locally, but many of the bigger companies weren't just local and it grew from there."

From the start, Rodman's mission included hiring RDNs as the cornerstone for health education. Today, there are more than 1,200 of them working with the company across all 50 states, with six RDNs working at headquarters in Bethesda, Maryland.



"Paying it forward is so important to me," Rodman says. "I think a lot of dietitians want to be able to work in a variety of settings, and I want them to know they can. The world is really open now to dietitians working as health professionals and in settings outside of hospitals—including the corporate world. We can fit into so many different roles."

Rodman says she's also inspired by the "never-ending nature" of the field. "You can never stop learning when it comes to nutrition, and I find that so exciting," she says. "The topic is never ending. There's room for so much passion and so much opportunity in this field. It's inspiring."

Wendy Phillips, MS, RD, CNSC, CLE, FAND

Director of Nutrition Systems at the University of Virginia Health Systems, Regional Clinical Nutrition Manager at Morrison Healthcare, and President of Virginia Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics

The first half of Wendy Phillips' nutrition career was spent in pediatrics. Phillips says she found it professionally rewarding to see positive changes in a child's life lead to better health-related outcomes. In the second half of Phillips' nutrition career to date, she has been working in nutrition support in both adult ICUs and NICUs—intense but rewarding work.



"As a clinical nutrition manager [CNM], I have the challenge and the pleasure of [developing] relationships with a diverse group of people from several different health care disciplines," Phillips says. "Learning how to motivate others and help them create a network of support to further their own professional growth and make a difference in the lives of others is the main reason I chose to be a CNM."

In this role, Phillips says that no two days are ever the same. But that's also why she loves it. In addition to managing 48 RDNs and running a dietetics internship program that enrolls 12 interns per year, there's never a lack of work. As a CNM, Phillips says it's also a joy when patients tell her of the impact one of her dietitians has made in their lives. "I'm filled with a sense of gratitude and pride for the difference they make," she says.

Phillips also has a passion for teaching and enjoys working with patients, families, interns, RDNs, and other health care professionals. "The diverse learning styles of those I'm teaching motivates me to create new and engaging teaching methods, which further enforces my own learning and professional growth," she says.

But it's those moments when she's teaching school-aged kids in her sons' classes each year during National Nutrition Month® that she finds most endearing. She began speaking in her sons' classrooms when the boys were in elementary school; one is now in middle school, the other in high school.

Phillips adds: "At least one student each year has decided they want to become a registered dietitian because of me—it's truly the ultimate compliment."

Nora M. Patterson, MEd, RD, CD

Site Coordinator of US Military–Baylor Graduate Program in Nutrition at Madigan Army Medical Center

Ever since reading the biography of Elizabeth Blackwell, MD, while in sixth grade, Nora Patterson had the desire to become a doctor. And while she was premed in college, after taking a course in nutrition and volunteering for Meals on Wheels, she was drawn to the field of dietetics instead. "One of my texts had a quote from Hippocrates about letting 'food be thy medicine and medicine thy food,' which really resonated with me," Patterson says. "I was inspired by how the dietitian at the senior nutrition program used her passion for health, her love and respect for the seniors, and her problem-solving skills to pull together resources to promote good health and independence. It seemed like such a good fit for my interest areas that I changed majors."



During Patterson's 34-plus years as a dietitian, she has served in a variety of positions in the US Army. She was one of the first dietitians to deploy to Operation Desert Storm and was part of the attack force into Iraq with her Combat Support Hospital. Before her retirement from the Army, she oversaw the training of all military hospital diet technicians.

Following her retirement, Patterson was diagnosed with breast cancer, linked to exposure to (still unknown) substances while in Iraq. Patterson fought—and beat—the disease while still holding the position of nutrition advisor for McChord Air Force Base. Today, Patterson is site coordinator for the US Military–Baylor Graduate Program in Nutrition's second phase, which is the dietetics internship at Madigan Army Medical Center in Tacoma, Washington.

"This is my dream job and one I had hoped to have as an active duty officer," Patterson says. "I have four young officers, and it's my job to make sure they have as much opportunity as possible to learn from excellent dietitian preceptors and make the transition from successful student to competent practitioner with real-life clinical, community, and foodservice experiences."

Patterson says she would tell future dietitians to never grow tired of promoting the truth, including evidence-based nutrition information. Patterson adds: "Be a lifelong learner and keep an open mind."

— Lindsey Getz is a freelance writer based in Royersford, Pennsylvania.

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