



W.A.T.C.H. out for Ellyn Elson

by Ursula Arens

The profession of dietetics spans a diversity of jobs; never more so than today where dietitians contribute to decision-making in arenas such as education, sports, food industry and media. There is a lot to learn from pioneer dietitians blazing trails for others to follow, and hopefully the dietetic touch will contribute to sounder decisions and judgements in these fresh fields of practice.

There is a lot to learn from one trailblazing RD. There is no single secret for professional success, but one that Ellyn Elson works to is WATCH (Watch Achievers, Then Copy their Habits). With an amazingly successful career as a dietitian in the world of software development, there is a lot to be gained by watching Ellyn.

Ellyn is the freshly retired chief exec of Computrition, an international food and nutrient software company, based in Los Angeles in California. She remains engaged with Computrition as 'coach and cheerleader supporting marketing and promotion, but has also just started a new business venture specialising in supporting entrepreneurs selling their companies (so if you have a company to sell...). Retirement for Ellyn does not seem to involve looking through cruise catalogues or watching daytime TV.

However her 'overnight success' started 40 years ago when she graduated with a degree in Dietetics from the University of Alabama in 1968. She then completed her dietetic internship at the Veterans Administration Medical Centre in Los Angeles (providing medical care for people who had served in the military). It was during this very early start to her dietetic career that the Chief Dietitian Jean Sturdevant became her mentor, and bounced her into the significant heavy responsibilities of 'Acting Assistant Chief Foodser-

vice Director'. There were 21 other dietetic interns, but there must have been some administrative talent in the young Ellyn that her dietetic mentor identified.

On qualification, Ellyn tried unsuccessfully to get a job in food service administration; it was felt she did not have the experience for such responsibility, and her first job as a clinical dietitian only lasted for half a year.

If you can't go up, go sideways. Ellyn found out that new regulations in long-term care and nursing homes made some provision of dietetic services mandatory, and so for the next 15 years, Ellyn worked as a freelance consultant dietitian in this sector. During this time Ellyn set up the American Dietetic Association (ADA) special interest group 'Consultant Dietitians in Health Care Facilities'.

During this time Ellyn also developed the concepts of the 'liberalized diet' as the basis for feeding the elderly in nursing homes. This scheme softened many of the previous restrictions of strict therapeutic diets that were often so burdensome to patients and dietitians, so that basic healthy menus could be used in most cases. Patient-centric menus meant that patients eat better if they can choose what they want to eat, within reason, and were more likely to recover. The Liberalized Diet Manual is now widely used by American dietitians, (and has just been extended by the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center dietitians to include feeding of acute hospital patients).

In the late 70's Ellyn was asked to calculate the nutrients of 250 recipes for a project at the UCLA. Ellyn felt overwhelmed, and found a gentleman who had developed a nutrient database for PKU research. After the project, Ellyn was asked to market that database, and together with a friend with a software and engineer-

ing background, Computrition was born. Ellyn was confident that nutrient databases would be huge help to dietitians, and could do much to improve the provision of dietetic care. And so the world's largest nutrition database was developed. And with the further development of nutrient analysis, inventory control programmes, and menu planning systems software, Computrition grew into a company worth \$20 million, and employing 65 people (including more than 15 dietitians). The latest software to be developed by Computrition cost over \$17 million, so clearly there is confidence in the further expansion of this market.

The use of diet and menu planning systems is promoted on the basis of reducing costs and tedium, and increasing the quality of data to allow dietitians more confidence of the right foods going to the right patient, and more face-to-face time with patients rather than menu admin duties. The patient admitted into hospital and booked in, for example, as 'allergic to eggs and should not exceed 2,000 calories per day' will get menu choices to those specifications. Ellyn supports greater dietetic focus on seeing patients in regular clinics to optimise nutrition status prior to or after hospital admission, rather than the micromanagement of nutrients in the acute care setting.

Ellyn Elson has managed to apply her dietetic knowledge to a sector that has seen massive growth and development; without her or other dietitians, no doubt much of the foodservice software developed would have been biased entirely to the focus of financial controllers or catering practicalities. Thankfully Ellyn's dislike of manual nutrient analysis led to her jumping at the opportunity to make things easier for herself, and 30 years later, easier for thousands of other dietitians as well.



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COMPUTRITION
HOSPITALITY SOFTWARE SOLUTIONS

- Schedule**
- 9:30am - 10:00am
Registration
 - 10:00am - 10:50am
Making Life a Little Easier...
Technological Advances in Foodservice Management
Scott Saklad, CEO, Computrition, Inc.
 - 11:05am - 12:00pm
Nutrition and Patient Care Management...
Automated Solutions for Today and the Future
Ellyn Luross-Elson, RD, Coach and Cheerleader, Computrition, Inc.
 - 12:00pm - 12:40pm
Lunch (catering included)
 - 12:40pm - 2:00pm
Computrition Software Demonstration**
 - 2:00pm - 3:00pm
Questions and Answers
- **(Optional)

***Kindly RSVP to Aaron Ganz by April 29th - aganz@computrition.com or +1 818 701 5544 ext. 262**

Ellyn Elson quotes . . .

In the late 1970s, when I decided I wanted to start a foodservice software company, my brother told me I was crazy – that I didn't know the difference between hardware and software. My reply to him was, "Neither does anyone I will be selling to."

It all started because I hated doing nutritional analysis, and I figured if I hated doing it, other dietitians disliked the process as well.

I listen to the advice of others, but I keep it in context – it's their opinion. I had a lot of critics in the early years, but I listen to my heart and my gut and ultimately I believe in myself and what I am trying to accomplish.

Certainly I could not be where I am today if I had not had a mentor (during her dietetic internship this was Jean Sturdevant, who later became president of the American Dietetic Association, ADA).

I believe that being involved in ADA

is the single most important thing I did (in helping develop the skills and contacts needed to found Computrition).

My customers always felt they got their money's worth. I always gave them more than they expected.

Dietitians are nurturers by nature. As a group they do not value what they do, and therefore they undermine their capabilities and their power.

There are so many exciting things that dietitians could be doing in their own hospitals or clinics. Most just don't do the planning that is necessary, nor are they willing to take risks. I say take risks, to propel yourself to positions with increased authority and autonomy.

Perfectionism doesn't do anything for me. Most dietitians want to be perfectionists. They tend to want to treat nutrition as a science, when it's really an art.

Marketing (nutrition) to the public takes finesse and know-how; most dietitians are novices and therefore lose out to diet centres and nutrition stores.

Success is about hiring very intelligent people who are smarter and better educated (than yourself) and using those people as resources to advance the business.

I don't do anything that won't promote my personal or corporate goals; I don't make commitments that I can't keep.

As dietitians, I believe we have a responsibility to give back to the profession. Helping others achieve their goals can be one of life's greatest rewards.

Information Sources:
Live Like You Mean It. By Ken Wasco and Ellyn Luross-Elson. Helm publishing, 2006
Phone interview, 6th March 2008