

Maureen Sykes, RD, LDN

Improving Quality of Life with Nutrition



Maureen Sykes grew up in San Jose, California. Her parents bought their house a couple of years before she was born, and they still live there to this day.

Maureen's dad, now ninety years old, was a foster kid and grew up in Texas. His mom passed away at a young age, and his dad raised him and his four brothers for as long as he could. A sister didn't make it past infancy.

"Eventually, the boys got taken to foster homes; they were split up," Maureen says. "Dad told some pretty sad stories about sharing the dog scraps for meals and stealing pies off pie trucks. He was a scrapper. He had a really tough upbringing. He and his brothers managed to stay close. One brother died maybe thirty years ago as the result of a brain tumor, and the other two have just passed recently."

Her Dad's Profound Effect on Her Life

Despite her dad's hardscrabble childhood, Maureen says he has an incredibly positive outlook about life. As a young man, he put himself through training to become a journeyman electrician. He worked for Ford Motor Company for about twenty years. When the plant in Milpitas closed down, he went on to work for Lockheed for another twenty years.

Because her dad grew up in a foster home, Maureen says he had no strong parental role models, and that affected his parenting style. "He never really knew what parental love was since he was passed from foster home to foster home," she says. "As a father, he wanted close relationships and tried very hard to be a good father. He definitely did the best he could given his upbringing. As a kid, he often got into fights over food. To this day, I think he still has food insecurities. Food is a huge part of his life."

Maureen's dad didn't just have a laser focus on his own eating habits; he was also very tuned in to what everybody else was eating. "As a girl growing up in this environment it was difficult to be under constant scrutiny," she says. He might not have said it to Maureen outright, but he was sending her plenty of messages that it's not OK to be overweight or to eat certain things. "I probably got into nutrition in a roundabout way, wanting to show my dad I know more about nutrition than he did" she says. "Back then, we didn't know that much about nutrition,"

Maureen notes. “That was when fat-free food was all the rage, and everybody was eating primarily carbohydrates. And we didn’t know how exercise played into it and how to best fuel our bodies. Friends of mine in the 1980’s took diet pills. I decided I wanted to get educated about nutrition and I found it fascinating.”

She says we have healthier role models today. That is important to Maureen because she does not want her daughter to ever feel any of the insecurities she had while growing up or to have her happiness be defined by a warped body image. When her children lived at home, Maureen focused on a healthy lifestyle, not on dieting. “We’ve never used the word diet, and instead I tried to encourage eating healthy food and getting enough exercise through play, sports and interests. I always tried to have on hand plenty of fruits, vegetables, and non-processed food. But, it was also known that no food was completely off-limits and food should be enjoyed. It’s a message of moderation.”

Career Stepping Stones

After graduating from high school, Maureen completed two years of studies at a junior college and then enrolled at California State University, Chico, and graduated with a Bachelor of Science degree in Dietetics and Food Service Administration. Her path then brought her to Idaho, where her husband had secured a job with the Idaho Supreme Court. Once settled in Idaho, she was admitted to a dietetic internship program at Idaho State University. Upon graduation, her first job in the dietetic field was at St. Luke’s Regional Medical Center in Boise. Soon after she accepted another position as a clinical Registered Dietitian at Valley View Skilled Nursing Facility. It was here that she met her future business partner, Sue Linja whose profile is also included in this book.

Forming a Partnership

“As the in-house dietician at Valley View, I was assessing patients and working in all areas of food service,” Maureen recalls. “Sue was the Consultant Dietitian and also in charge of my training. We formed an instant connection. Soon, I found that her position as a consultant was more appealing than mine in-house dietician. I thought, ‘The pay is better and I’m working ten-hour days. I’m not using my degree to the fullest. I could do so much more.’ I asked if she would consider taking on a business partner to build a company and help her with her workload. Thankfully she said she did. So that’s how it all started.”

At first, Maureen helped Sue out on the weekends, moonlighting while still working full time at the skilled nursing facility. Before making the decision to go into consulting and building a business full time, she talked it over with her husband. “He initially thought I was making a very poor decision to quit a full-time job to work in consulting, where I initially had only one day a week of consulting and that job was in Twin Falls.” But willing and able to take a chance, she quit her full-time job in 1994, and she and Sue established S&S Nutrition Network, Inc., in 1995.

Their mission is to provide quality nutritional care to each individual and group they work with and to raise the standard for care and quality of life through progressive nutrition programs.

“I felt empowered. I was a business owner and making more money than I had in the past,” Maureen says. “I had full control over my schedule. And we had a fun business model.”

As a lawyer, Maureen’s husband, Jeff, advised her and Sue a lot regarding contracts in their early days at S&S Nutrition. He also helped Maureen make a smooth transition from being a salaried W-2 employee to a 1099 contractor. Once she got past the logistical uncertainties, Maureen was thrilled with the partnership.

In no time at all, Maureen went from consulting eight hours a week to working over fifty hours per week. The contracts were pouring in. It helped that Sue was well-known in the long-term-care community. “Sue had been a surveyor, so she been into most of the buildings in Idaho,” Maureen explains. “People already knew her name, and word got out that a surveyor was actually working for the facilities.”

Maureen liked Sue and her personality immediately. “Sue is one in a million. She’s not a scorekeeper, and neither am I,” Maureen explains. “A lot of people get hung up the nitty-gritty details—the mentality of ‘Well, I did this, so you do that.’ We both know we are each doing our best. I think that often, partnerships fall apart because of a lack of trust or because the partners have a different work ethic. Sue and I are really similar as far as those things go. We’re both honest and trustworthy. She has my back, and I have hers. It’s a lot like a marriage. Her reputation is my reputation, and vice versa. We are stronger together, and we try to always build each other up.”

Maureen and Sue won an award from the Idaho Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics a couple of years ago. “The award usually goes to one person, but because of our close partnership, they awarded it to both of us,” she says.

Improving the Quality of Care in Nursing Homes

S&S Nutrition Network, Inc. has achieved an outstanding reputation and loyal customer base due to its hands-on consulting approach. The S&S Nutrition Network team is comprised of nearly fifty skilled, licensed Registered Dietitians who take a personal interest in the facilities they serve. They are known as long-term-care nutrition experts who trained and ready to help facilities better serve their residents while meeting regulatory compliance.

Many of the Registered Dietitian Nutritionist (RDN’s) within S & S Nutrition Network hold advanced degrees and certifications in specialty areas including diabetes, cardiac, nutrition support, geriatrics and sports nutrition. S&S provides a variety of consulting services to more than 120 nursing homes, hospitals, medical homes, residential care facilities, and other nutrition and health-care entities.

A Positive Role Model

Maureen admits that sometimes, women who work together are not willing to give one another the benefit of the doubt, and sometimes hurt feelings result when they feel like they are being slighted. But she and Sue have never experienced that dynamic. Their partnership is a great role model for other women.

“We make sure everyone treats each other with kindness and respect. We do our best to lead by example. Because we behave in this way, our contractors follow our lead.” The environment of mutual caring and confidence building has proven to be incredibly empowering to the fifty contractors at S&S Nutrition Network, Inc.

As a future like goal, Maureen would like to help improve America’s nutritional awareness and overall health through education. She can see herself in many different roles down the road. One dream she has for the future is to save enough money to create an organization to help people without clear job skills receive culinary education and training. “The world of nutrition and food service is extremely important, and we need educated, caring people to work in our food service establishments. Healthy cooking and eating is so important, and people are just starting to see the results of what poor nutrition can lead to in terms of obesity, disease and depression. She hopes to make a difference using her past experiences with food as a child growing up, as well as her experience as a business owner in a partnership working with primarily women. She says,

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