An Inside Look at the DBC Mentor Program

By Jamie Schwartz, MS, RD, and Roberta Duyff, MS, RD, FADA

The Mentor Program gives DBC members who are looking to focus their career paths toward business and communications, an opportunity to be paired with skilled members who have an expertise to share and tutelage to offer. Here is an example of a relationship between a new member of DBC and the dietetics profession, looking to get her foot in the door, and a seasoned professional who helped guide her on her way.

The Mentee: Jaime Schwartz, MS, RD

I completed my Dietetic Internship in May 2002 and was ready to jump head first into my career. I was full of energy and optimism for my future in a non-traditional RD role, but the inevitable catch-22 of “it takes experience to get experience” was a major obstacle. As a student member of ADA, I was just learning about the resources available to me and came across information about a group of RDs who were in positions I hoped to hold one day. I was so excited to learn that DBC existed and that I had the opportunity through the Mentor Program to be paired with someone who could answer my millions of questions and give me advice. I emailed Linda Schuessler, Mentor Chair at the time, who provided me with the name of a member who had signed up to be a mentor whose interests were similar to mine.

In my first email to Roberta Duyff on June 15, I introduced myself and my goals, asked for her perspective on what step I should take next, whether I should go to graduate school, and requested she share a little about her own career path. I did not know exactly how or even if she could help me, but it was comforting to know that I had someone to whom I could ask questions. Roberta’s encouragement and outlook was just what I needed! She reassured me that even in my clinical position, there would be lots of opportunity to start writing and be entrepreneurial and that being in a traditional setting would give me context for my future direction. She suggested that I join groups and participate in activities that bring together careers that appealed to me and that would give me an opportunity to begin to network with others. Roberta reminded me that getting well grounded in my first job while starting to position myself by networking with other industry and communications professionals would prepare me to make the move when the right opportunity came along.

There wasn’t any formal structure to our relationship. I would email Roberta for advice and she would respond with supportive words and guidance. She even sent me a cute congratulations e-card after I passed the RD exam that September. We’d keep in touch over email and she always seemed to have an ear out for opportunities that would allow me to get more involved. When the Food & Nutrition Conference & Expo (FNCE) was around the corner, she forwarded my name to a colleague who was looking for an extra set of hands at an event. When Roberta (from St. Louis) was chatting with a colleague (from New Jersey, where I lived) who mentioned she was looking for a graduate research assistant, she recommended me. Two years later when I was graduating with my master’s degree, Roberta checked in to see how my job search was going. And now, two years later, we cross paths from time to time through our professional roles.

The DBC Mentor Program provided this motivated yet naive dietetic intern with hope and encouragement for my career. I likely would have eventually found my own way on my desired path, but having a mentor who provided such incredible perspective certainly was a critical piece and will always be invaluable to me.

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The Mentor: Roberta Duyff, MS, RD, FADA

What a joy to mentor the next generation of nutrition professionals—and how exciting to help a young professional follow her passion and take those early career steps in today’s world of nutrition!

When Jaime Schwartz asked me to be her mentor, I was honored and impressed. Her goals were focused. She was taking charge of her career. Not only was she open to advice, she was ready to listen, to act, to take risks and opportunities, and to look at...
the big picture of her career. As her mentor, it’s been rewarding to offer perspective, provide guidance, and watch Jaime’s career evolve and blossom … as she walks in her own shoes.

As professionals, what a satisfying opportunity mentoring gives each of us! As part of a professional support team, we not only help other professionals reach their potential and goals, but also take moments to reflect on our own career path, knowledge, skills, and insights—and perhaps the bigger context of career opportunity—something we often overlook in our busy workdays. Our network can help open professional doors for mentees. (What fun I had knowing that Jaime’s graduate assistantship that I’d suggested was so successful for her and the university.) The advice and resources that mentors share can be leveraged in so many new ways, in helping mentees gain a better foothold for establishing their career paths—especially when they are as enthusiastic and have the “can-do” perspective that Jaime has.

As mentors, we easily get back as much as we give … and likely much more! As mentees learn from our experiences, we also learn from their fresh perspectives. Together we grow both professionally and personally.

Jaime and I have been each other’s “cheering squad” as we’ve both celebrated professional milestones. And what could be more rewarding than knowing that the passion we have for food, nutrition, and dietetics will continue to grow and develop in the accomplishments of others!

My relationship with Jaime has come full circle—not only as mentee-mentor. Four years after our first conversation, our paths cross in different ways. In her new professional position, Jaime has become my client—currently working as a nutrition expert in a public relations company with whom I consult. Now as professional peers—and supportive friends—I look forward to our relationship developing in many new directions throughout our careers. I suspect Jaime and I will always be mentee-mentor … but as the years go by, who will wear which hat? Thank you DBC for this wonderful opportunity!

Roberta, Duyff, MS, RD, FADA, is a food and nutrition author, spokesperson, and consultant to the food industry, media, educational and government organizations. Roberta has written for ADA, including the ADA Complete Food and Nutrition Guide and 365 Days of Healthy Eating.