

profile

Madie McLean

COMMUNITY EDUCATOR/SUPERVISOR, NUTRITION AND HEALTH

I came to work for extension in 1971 when they started the first EFNEP [Expanded Food and Nutrition Education] program in East Harlem. I was recruited by a neighbor. She heard about the job through the community agency, and she asked me would I like to work in my community? I said, “Doing what?” I knew nothing at all about extension before coming to work for them. She explained that there was a new program starting in East Harlem. It was a three-year project to work with low-income families in East Harlem communities. You needed to be a mother and live in East Harlem and be willing to go out and share information that we, hopefully, already knew. She explained what it was, and I said, “Sure.”

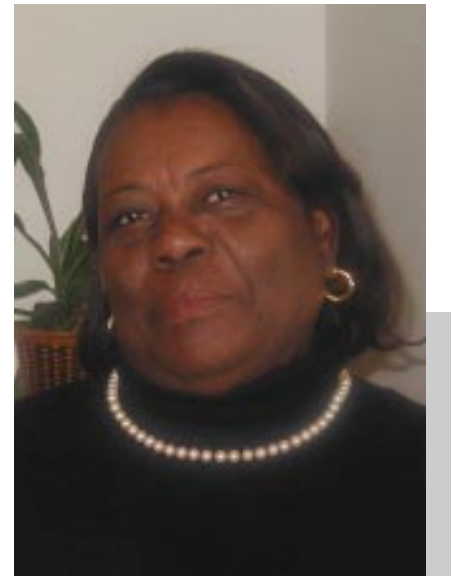
When we first started, we were trained for three weeks, and then we went out into the community. Sometimes we knocked on doors. Sometimes we got referrals from Metropolitan Hospital or other community agencies to go follow-up on these particular young moms or grandmoms who were taking care of the children. We had some special parents that we worked with — moms over thirty-five-years-old who were having their first child. They were referred from Metropolitan Hospital also.

The families we worked with were on welfare at that time, and they were getting very little money. And, believe me, that little money they got did not last from one check to the next. So part of our job was to help them stay within that budget so they would have a decent

diet and food to last until the next check.

I never in a million years would have thought I could go to somebody’s house, knock on their door, just tell them my name and about the program, and have them say “Come on in.” It was easier with the ones who had already heard about us or had been referred from Metropolitan or a doctor. But we also had the ones who were not referred and would open their doors and let us in. That amazes me to this day. There was just something about the times, I guess, and us, that they just let us in. I think being from the community helped 99 percent of the time. It was the foot in the door. So I think — actually I don’t think — I *know* that was a big part of it. Living in the community, identifying with them. We, too, have children; we come from the same community and similar background. They could identify in that particular way with us.

A typical day for me then was I would get up probably around 7 o’clock because I had two young children. I’d have to feed my two children, think about what I was going to have for dinner. Feed them, get them dressed or see that they got dressed properly because they were old enough to dress themselves. Get myself dressed, get out the door, and be over at 106th street and Lexington Avenue by 9:30. I only worked until 1:30. It was part-time — about four and half hours in the beginning. I would sign in. If it wasn’t an in-service day, or some new training, or somebody coming from the outside to train us, I would get my assignment, know how



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many families to see that day and what I would teach. Then my partner and I would hop on the bus or walk to do the home visits. Usually we'd be in the same area, sometimes the same buildings.

If we had not made appointments with the homemakers, we would call and make sure they were home and expecting us. Sometimes their schedule would change. I always tried to show a lot of respect for that because just because you're in this position, or predicament, or whatever you want to call it, and living in this place doesn't give me the right to not respect your time and your space that you were giving me. So, I would try to call them if it was possible. Many times, they did not have phones so you would just have to take your chances and go there. Hopefully, they would be home and remember that you were coming. If they didn't or their plans had changed, I would leave a note under the door to say "I'll come back later on" or "I'll come back next week."

Now, we've moved from doing one-on-ones to doing group work. Most of the group work is done in agencies, churches and schools. We are working with a new audience. It is similar in that they have limited resources still, but a new emphasis in that we are working with the ESL, GED programs, Welfare-to-Work, homeless people and people living in shelters. We're doing some work with children and people who are in mental institutions. I am working with some five-year-olds, which at that time we were not doing. We've just now started to work with the five-year-olds. Five and up to nineteen years old.

We were well-trained to do group work. We would go to Cornell for the workshops, and they would come down here to us. Most of the training, we got here in the city, at our site, and new information that they thought beneficial comes from Cornell. We used to go up maybe a couple times a year, but we haven't been up in awhile. But I

thought the things we learned up there were helpful toward what we were doing and what we were trying to do. We still get information from Cornell that helps us do our job.

We do set up some workshops from time to time. We have the Pictel teleconference, in-services, conferences, and speakers. The last one we had talked about the dietary guidelines, and he was fantastic. We were all so excited. We were in the afternoon session. Fabulous, fabulous! The new dietary guidelines are coming out so that's what he was talking to us about. We will incorporate that with the food guide pyramid, and other lessons. I think these guidelines may be little more relevant to the audience that we are working with.

The more people know about us, the longer we can continue helping build and change families and communities. The things we do — eating, playing, being together — it's a combination. Food, by itself, is not going to get it; it's a combination of things. When people are in a situation and they feel nothing is going right, nutrition and health is not as important to them as how do I get out of this rut? How do I get some shoes for the kids? How do I get a coat or a jacket or whatever that child needs? How about me? How do I get the help that I need? You have to know the difference at that point about whether you are going to talk about nutrition or listen to whatever it is that is on their mind at the moment. That is part of building families because they will think "She cares about me as an individual." I think being a good listener is very important. I try not to give solutions unless I really know what I am talking about. We refer families all the time to other agencies if necessary.

I think one of the keys for motivating a person to learn and to change is that, first, the person wants to change. They want to learn, they want to

change, and they want to be healthy. I think you have to set yourself as a bit of an example and share a bit about yourself. Maybe I've been there and gone through some of those things and changes. Explain that you understand that change is not easy, but it's very important. We're talking about health and children. Most families want to be healthy and want their children to be healthy.

I stress the benefits, rewards and consequences hoping to motivate the desire to learn and make changes. I will present research information as it relates to the health problems of high blood pressure, heart disease, and cancer. They may not be doing the things that are going to help them stay healthy, but they will do the things that are going to help their children be healthy. The nutrition and health sessions promote and help motivate people to learn and make changes that will benefit them and their families. So I try to talk about the children and how hard it is to change, but that one step at a time, we can change things.

In terms of community building, I think the home-based program might have been better because you were doing the one-on-one. But the problem with that is that we didn't get much feedback on how much community building happened. It takes time, but there certainly was success. I am meeting people who were the children in the home-based families. These children are now twenty-five, twenty-eight, and they remember me, and they remember their moms are still doing the things that she learned from the program more than twenty-five years ago. That is amazing feedback. It's always surprising to me because I don't remember, but they do: "Oh, Ms. McLean you haven't changed. You used to come to my Mom's house and talk about nutrition. You had that recipe, and she's still doing it twenty years later." I met some-

body at the manicure place, and she leaned over and said, “I know you, I remember you.” That happens often now because I am still in the same community. I do often run into people who say, “I remember you at my mom’s house.” That, to me, is pretty amazing; it’s great feedback. I usually come back and talk to the ladies about that and say, “You know, I’m still bumping into people who we worked with twenty years ago, twenty-five years ago, and they remember the program. So we must have made some big impression on them.”

I think it’s working with the groups, too. You know you can’t reach everybody, but there are some people you will reach and see change in eight to ten weeks. It may seem very simple and not important, but if somebody comes and they don’t know basic cooking skills, but they want to learn, that’s the key thing — they want to learn. They go home and come back within those ten weeks and show you or tell you that they have done it, to me, you’ve made some impact on those people. You have reached other people, also. Some will come back and say it, and others will keep quiet, but you know they have learned something that is going to be very useful to them.

I was teaching a group last week, and we were talking about food safety. I have this one young man who really likes to impress that he knows everything. I gave a short food safety quiz done in a non-threatening way. It turns out he really didn’t know what he thought he knew, but I thought he was so brave and open. And I appreciated it because he shared with the person he was sitting next to that he changed his wrong answers; he admitted that he changed them. When it came his time to read, he read it the way he answered them. He wasn’t embarrassed or ashamed to say, “Hey, I didn’t know that.” So I think you can make an im-

pact with the groups. I *know* it’s happening. We make a difference.

We won’t know the full impact that it has on the community building, but the people we work with go out and tell other agencies, or somebody else in the community, and they struggle to come to the groups after they find out about what we do. That means a lot. I think that says a lot about community building. You never see that person again, but you know you made an impression, and they are telling somebody else about EFNEP. I’m always reminding them to share with your neighbor, share with your friend, share with the children,

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and have the children share with somebody else. I may not get that feedback, but you see down the line maybe ten or fifteen years from now that the children from that audience will be healthier and have better food practices than what people are doing now. Like I said, it’s not easy to change adults or change our behavior because you’ve had those habits for so long, but maybe one little thing will happen to change that person. And to me, if they don’t change themselves, but do pass it on to the family and there’s some kind of change in the family, it’s fine with me. I think that’s good; I think that’s important.

One of the challenges of this work is when people have a problem with reading and understanding what they are reading. Remember, the audience is still from the same area, but this audience is different. Let’s take the GED audience. Many of them have gone to school, but they are not really function-

ing at the level that they should be. You don’t know that until you are there for a few weeks. Even though they might have gone to sixth, seventh, or eighth grade, they really can’t read or do not understand the materials or the recipes. So that’s a little different. I’m not saying that we didn’t work with an audience that had this same problem before, but it didn’t come out then the way it’s coming out now because we are in a group setting, and there is a different kind of interaction with the group.

Somebody who cannot read will try in a group of other adults — that happened last week. I always tell my co-workers that it takes a lot to blow my mind, but that really did. This woman sat next to me for three weeks or more being very quiet. When you have ten people or more in a group, you don’t always notice everybody, but I remember she was very quiet. She had a

problem tasting the recipe when we did food prep, but that’s not unusual. A lot of people are raised not to eat other people’s cooking, but usually, when they do food prep themselves, they are at least willing to taste it. If they don’t like it, I tell them, “You don’t have to eat it. But you shouldn’t say you don’t like something unless you taste it.” And she would say, every week, “No, no,” and I’d say “Okay” and just leave her alone. Last week I found out what the problem was.

I asked, “Who would like to read,” and everybody took turns around the table. When it got to her, she didn’t say she couldn’t, she tried. When she started and she couldn’t get the three- and four-letter words, I realized that she could not read. So I just moved close to her, and I helped her through it. She did not stop, she stumbled, but she did the whole sentence. To me, that’s a big challenge, and that moved me to tears.

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Every time I think I am going to retire because I've been here long enough — it's time for me to travel the USA — something like this happens. I know that I'm still needed because I don't know if she would have done that with somebody else, or if she would have ever have done it. Was it the way it was handled? What was going on in the room? She just did it. I could see ten people saying, "Oh, I left my glasses" or "I really can't see," but she didn't bail out. And I thought "Yes! She is really part of this group now." I don't how many people would have done that or could have done that. She was very brave, and I told her that afterwards. I was proud of her.

I think she would be willing to do this every time because nobody said a word, nobody snickered. They just waited for her to finish, and I thought that was good of the group. That's what keeps me wanting to stay with this job, this program. Because every group is different, but I've touched one person today. Now I can ask her if she would maybe go back to school. This woman is not a GED; she's just in my regular parents morning group. So it wasn't like she's already in the program. I have her for three more weeks. So now, I'll find a way to maybe see if she would like to do another program. I would ask her if maybe she's in one of those programs, because if not, I'm sure we could get somebody who would want to tutor her. In other years, we had students come down and tutor other people and tutor the children. I'll find someone who may want to tutor her. Maybe someone in another group who she doesn't know will want to do that with her. I'm thinking about doing that with this one person who loves to read and has her hand up all the time. To me, those are the things that make this program worthwhile.

Another challenge is when somebody is very shy and quiet in the group, and you want to bring them in to be a

part of the group activities. I love that challenge. When I see that person change within three to four weeks that they are there, I know, at that moment, that I've made a little difference because you have got somebody speaking up for the first time, asking a question for the first time, being a part of a group and sharing with them what she has learned from the nutrition lesson. They may know something or have some great thing that they do at home or something they can contribute to the group. I love that kind of challenge: get them to come back and say, "Gee, I did it. What are we doing next week?"

When we have the graduations, I learn that some people have never got any kind of certificate or any recognition their whole life. The pleasure and the joy that the people show tells you that it was all worth it — even going up those five or ten flights of steps, finding them not home, and having to go back many times. That was in the early days. Even now, it was all worth it to see those people's reactions, their faces, and to know that they genuinely are thrilled. This is the first time they've received any recognition. Even though it's a ten-week or twelve-week series, that certificate means a lot to them. Sometimes, I think it encourages people to want to go back to school. If you don't have your GED or your college degree, go back; go back and do it. They've got that one accomplishment; they think, "Gee, I can do this. It wasn't that painful sitting in a group, listening, participating in the discussion, or getting up to do some activity." I think that we have encouraged and gotten people going and doing things that they probably never thought they could. I just know it happens.

I would describe the work of a community educator as just that: an educator who works in the community and shares information that is important to all of us. We have common

goals: healthy families and a better life. We all need to have certain things in life just to function, just to get along, just to exist — food, water, shelter, clothing, and good health. We all need that. So we are not all that different; we are more alike than we are different.

The community educators have different personalities. They all have different styles, different levels of education and teaching experience. Some came from different cultures, but we're pretty much all doing the same thing. Maybe we have a different style, but the goal is the same. They are mothers, grandmothers who care about people and their communities.

I think most of the community educators — and I can especially speak for myself — have had great personal growth. It's not just helping other people, it's helping us too. When I started, I had never thought about working this closely with people. I never even knew that I could do this sort of work — go out and teach just like that. You think of teachers as having a degree and training. You go to school and learn a lot of stuff you never have to use again, but everything that we share with the people, they are able to use somewhere along the way. It did a lot for me because I was learning for myself along the way. I needed to know about health benefits, nutrition, teaching children, and parenting because my children were growing up at the same time.

When I came in, I didn't know that much. I did know how to cook, but I wasn't a great cook; I am now. I was able to share, and that's all they asked. You go out and share what you know as a mom. That's all they asked. Shopping, cooking, stretching your food dollar, and meal planning — that was it. From that time to now, I can't even tell you what I've learned as a person. I share it with my family, my daughter, my daugh-

ter-in-law, my grandchildren. So it went on down the line; it didn't just stay with me. I found out that I had a lot of good things going that I could communicate with someone else. I just feel that it was a great thing.

I try to be just me. I don't try to put on airs. I don't try to be above anybody else. I think that I am able to relate to any kind of audience — to children, to adults, even the sophisticated ones, the educated ones or the ones who feel like they are on a different level. I try to make it fun. I have a sense of humor, and I think that can get you through many situations. I am a resident of Harlem, mother of two adult children, four grans, have thirty years experience of community work with families and children sharing real life experience. I'm a good listener, I'm dependable, and I'd like to think that I am very good at what I do. I am very proud of the fact that I have lived and worked in Harlem most of my life. I come from a family of ten children and, by the grace of God, they all turned out to be good people. I love helping people. I'm crazy for sharing information. Anything that I have learned that worked for me, I come back and share with my co-workers.

I get very excited when something that happens in the group moves me or moves the other people, and you see some change going on. Somebody comes back and tell me "Oh, I tried that recipe," or "I planned a balanced meal." That's very important if what you're trying to do is to get somebody to move from negative to positive habits. It's one step, and it's something that is going to be helpful to that person. If you say you can't cook beans or rice, and you come back within that two weeks or three weeks and say, "Yes, I cooked those beans, I cooked that rice" or "I used that coupon" or "I made a shopping list"... Whatever the little change you made, I think it's great. I think it's important.

I always try to stay up on the current events of what's going on in the nutrition world and health and share that with other people and encourage them to do the same.

It can be done; I did it. It wasn't hard. I always said I had great fun. I don't talk about family too much because I'm not there to talk about me, I'm there to listen to them. But once in a while, I would make a joke about my husband. He was a man who worked in the evening, and when I did the part-time, he would want me to come home and warm up his food. So I would say to them, "You imagine that? I'm working, and I had to come home and warm

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his food. But as soon as I got smarter, I would say, 'Gee whiz, I cook it. You can warm it up!' You know, sometimes you have to retrain them." And they just thought that was great. I try to make it fun, and I have a great time too. It's no big deal, maybe, to someone from the outside, but it's a big deal to us and to the people we work with. It really is.

If someone was going to start this job tomorrow, I'd tell them be in good health — physically and mentally — because you are going to come in contact with different personalities and different kinds of people that you probably never thought about or know anything about. That is great. Have good feet and good knees. Make sure you have good comfortable shoes and a great personality. Don't be too serious, and make it fun. If other people see you having fun, it makes things lighter. Life is too short

to be too serious about everything. And be willing to listen, be willing to be a good listener. Don't be too free with the advice. Even if you think you know the answer, sometimes the advice that you give might not be received the way that you intended it to be. So sometimes, it's just better to listen and say, "You know, I really don't know how to answer that, but I'll try to see what I can find out." That works every time. You will survive as a community educator if you are willing to go out in any kind of weather, in any kind of community, and be ready for the surprises because you don't know who you are going to encounter in that day's work.

I think EFNEP is all about sharing, sharing information that is relevant to the audience that we are working with. Building community, making them stronger. Giving them the tools to do things for themselves. Simple, everyday things that they can relate to that is going to make

their life a little easier and a little better. Doing that through people that you can relate to and respect and can say "Yeah, I've been there. That happened to me and look, I came from there to here." I often tell them about how I raised my two children. I lived in Harlem all their lives until they went off to college, and I went back to school. It was a struggle, but I did it because I wanted to do better. I wanted to set an example for my children and for the community, for the people that I'm working with. I'm not there to look down on you, to make you feel any smaller. We're on the same level here, and if I did it, you can do it if you want to and you feel like you need to. It's about encouraging, building people up, helping people to succeed. Helping people to just think, "You can do it." To be independent and not dependent.