



EPISODE 1: Jana Nicholl: A Dietitian's Journey

Transcript

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Physics was the determining factor on which school I'd ultimately choose. If the program required physics, I not only scratched out the program as a possibility, but I crossed out the entire state. Well, the weather also had some influence. If I was going to leave my home town in Canada, I definitely wasn't gonna go somewhere even colder. In this episode, I share my journey so far as a Registered Dietitian. I think you'll find we're a lot more alike than we are different.

[Music and Intro]

Hey there. Since we're gonna be spending time together, I thought I'd share a little more about me so you know who're your listening to.

I was born and raised in Canada and never thought I'd move away from home. I had my future all planned out. I was gonna become an elementary school teacher and teach grade 2. Very specific. I had paved my path. Done. There was never any plans to do anything but that. I loved kids and teaching so it just made sense to teach kids. I should've known that things wouldn't go as planned because I've always had this flame inside me, this curiosity, this need to learn and understand more and more. And that's exactly what happened. Everything changed when I took a Nutrition class as an elective at my local community college. I found it fascinating. My instructor wasn't a dietitian but her sister was and she kindly spent time speaking to me about what she does as a dietitian. She worked in geriatrics and I can't say she sold the profession to me. She liked her job and maybe she just wasn't an animated person by nature but I was able to hear through her words that there was something great about her job and about how she was helping others. I think that's what sold me because it certainly wasn't the way she talked about her job. But she said enough. I heard enough to get that flame shining a little brighter inside. While I didn't think geriatrics would be my path, I was fascinated by the potential and opportunities dietitians had. The combination of how excited and intrigued I felt every time I'd go to my nutrition class plus the subtle but yet powerful words my teachers sister shared with me lead me to make an appointment with my counselor at the college and change my major to become a Registered Dietitian. The counselor looked at me a little confused and asked "what's that?".

Obviously the college didn't have a dietetics program so I ultimately would need to transfer to a larger university in order to pursue my new dream. The programs in Canada weren't that appealing to me so I started looking south. Like I said, the exclusion criteria was physics. In high school, my friend Gary helped me get through physics but I wasn't so sure I'd have another Gary to help me through college physics. I wasn't gonna take the chance. If that course was on the list of courses I'd need to take, I crossed off the entire state. Wasn't gonna happen. I've never understood physics. For you physics fans, I appreciate you, because it's never made sense to me. I ended up in Southern California at a fabulous school, California State University, Long Beach which is where I completed my Bachelors degree, Masters degree and Dietetic Internship.

At the beginning of my internship, I was super excited. I knew the campus well because I'd already completed my bachelors and masters degree at Cal State Long Beach. I had formed a great group of friends and had some wonderful mentors. It made the internship a much easier transition.

So on that first day of my internship, I was feeling really good. I don't recall feeling nervous. I was honestly too excited to have landed an internship and was looking forward to the next chapter. Orientation week was overwhelming. I got all my rotations and realized how much work it was gonna be and how far I'd have to drive to all my rotations. For those of you not familiar with Los Angeles County, a 30 minute commute during rush hour is an easy 2 hour plus commute. When I did my internship in 2006-2007, GPS on phones wasn't yet a thing. I know, hard to believe. So I had to rely on printed directions from Mapquest. My first rotation was clinical. I was so excited because I KNEW I was NEVER and I mean never gonna work in clinical. I'm a hypochondriac so there was no way I was gonna work in a hospital. The stories my mom would share with me growing up were fascinating and I'd always ask to hear more and then I'd worry about it. No logic but I knew enough that it wasn't for me. So I was really excited to get that rotation over with.

One day, during my critical care rotation, I was with my preceptor in the ICU and I started to feel like I couldn't breathe. All the beeping sounds from the machines, seeing people intubated and hearing report outs from the doctor on who probably wasn't gonna make it was too much for me. I had to ask my preceptor if I could leave for a moment. I walked as fast as I could out of that ICU, found a window to look out of and tried to breath. That day was confirmation for me that ya, clinical was not my jam.

But I went to my rotation with a positive attitude, ready to learn and excited to meet new people. And no one knew this but I had a pocket calendar in my purse that had a countdown until my last day of clinical. Everyday, before I walked out of the hospital, I crossed off another day. Only 35 more days to go. I was very certain and confident about what I could and could not handle. And I knew clinical wasn't for me. As the internship

progressed, every rotation was cool. I met fun people but I just didn't feel strongly that I could do any of those jobs every single day. That is until my last rotation which was community nutrition. I really enjoyed it. It definitely helped that I did the rotation with another intern who is one of my best friends to this day. We had a blast. We learned a lot and laughed so hard. I was feeling good after my community rotation but I still had a feeling in my stomach that I just couldn't shake.

At the end of the internship, I was nervous. But I wasn't just nervous. I was confused. None of my rotations made me want to scream "Yes, I love this. I've found my one true passion". That's what I was looking for. I was looking for fireworks and magic or at least that's what I was expecting to happen after being in school for so many years. I felt like maybe I'd made the wrong decision to become a dietitian.

Looking back, I think a lot of my feelings were fear. And fear is one of the most powerful feelings we have. It often drives our behavior. For years I had been a student, studying and taking courses. I was a good student and I was good at studying. If I could be a career student, that's what I'd do. But working in a job that I'm not familiar with and under someone I don't know, that's scary. I needed a job though and decided that community nutrition was a great place for me to start. And as luck would have it, there was a dietitian position available where I did my internship rotation so I applied and got the job. The hiring and onboarding process took forever so I used the waiting time wisely and studied for the RD exam.

A couple months in I realized, this job is not for me. It turned out to be a cubicle job. I was bored, I wasn't challenged and I couldn't work in a cubicle all day. I had way too much energy for that. I remember looking around at everyone in their cubicles and would question myself, "Jana, what's wrong with you? Why can't you be content like everyone else is?" And so, I did what I do best - I talked to people and asked a lot of questions. "So what do you do here? How long have you worked here? What projects are you working on? Where are you from?" I was a little thrown off when several people told me that they love the slow pace of the job, how they can stop what they're doing, look out the window at the birds flying by, and liked how much time they were given to complete their tasks. It shocked me because those were the exact same things I was struggling with. I thought, "I have way too much energy for this type of job. I don't want to look at the birds out the window." Not that I have anything against birds. They're lovely. But I was a new dietitian and was eager to do things. I would try to figure out ways that I could go out into the community and talk to people or teach classes - anything besides sitting in a cubicle all day, drinking coffee and brushing my teeth to waste time.

As you can probably tell where this story is going, I didn't last long. Within 6 months, I left. And I left for, can you guess? Yep, a Clinical Job. Yes, my friend, I went to a clinical job. In a hospital. You know that job I was NEVER,

EVER gonna have. That's where I went. And not only was it a clinical job, I was working at a Level 1 trauma center, teaching facility, county hospital. But I told myself that it was just an in the meantime job. It was closer to home and would keep me busy and would give me a paycheck while I continued to look for something else. That first week, I sat at a computer on the 3rd floor and I cried - EVERY SINGLE DAY. I sat with my back facing the nursing station because I didn't want anyone to see me crying. I had my white lab coat on, the air conditioning was cranked up so high, my hands were freezing and couldn't stop the thoughts in my head, "What the heck did you just do Jana?" I knew I didn't like clinical but I didn't enjoy community either and at least the clinical job was much closer to my home. But those first few weeks were terrible. I had knots in my stomach. I was feeling so lost and would go home every day frantically looking for better jobs.

But then something funny happened - I got better. With every note I wrote, my documentation improved. I started meeting cool nurses, there were lots of incredible doctors that were fun to talk to and the group of dietitians I worked with are still my friends that I see on a regular basis. They are the best people, the best dietitians and will make you laugh so hard you can't breathe. Things started to come together in my job. I ended up taking the Certified Nutrition Support Clinician or CNSC exam and worked full-time in critical care, particularly in medicine and trauma. Yes, trauma. Remember back in my internship when I was never gonna work in a hospital and certainly never in the ICU because the beeping machines were too much for me? Never say never my friend. Because that's where I ended up and get this, I LOVED it. After 4 years of covering critical care and some outpatient clinics such as Pediatric Cardiology was my clinic for many years, the pediatric specialist position became available so I applied. I had already been the cross-cover for pediatrics and felt that my learning had plateaued in critical care. I wanted to dive deep into another specialty of dietetics. I fortunately was offered the job. My new assignment was the neonatal ICU, pediatric ICU and the pediatric ward. I also covered several pediatric clinics including nephrology, Failure to Thrive, Genetics, Cardiology and High Risk Infant. The learning curve was steep which put me right back into my element. Learning. I was back learning and growing.

It's important for me to mention that throughout my years of clinical experience, I had the best mentors. I worked with the most brilliant minds. The physicians were inspirational. There's no other way to put it. That's one of the best things about working in a teaching facility. Physicians, nurses, PT, OT, Speech, dietitians - people are much more open and ready to share their knowledge and help you grow. And I took full advantage of that. When I was the critical care specialist, I had the opportunity to teach medical students and interns about nutrition every week and because of the culture of learning, I would also ask questions and for lessons on all different topics from the attending physicians. One physician, who I truly adore, was a walking google search engine. He was a wealth of knowledge. He spent time with me at the end of my shift teaching me about topics I

felt I needed more help with such as acid base balance or fluid maintenance. I'm so grateful to this day for his time and dedication to helping me grow as a clinician.

Once I jumped into pediatrics, I became an International Board Certified Lactation Consultant, something I've always been interested in. And I knew I could use my knowledge as a Lactation Consultant to help me be a better pediatric dietitian. I again worked with so many intelligent people in pediatrics but I gotta tell you, geneticists are on a whole other level. I felt smarter just being in their presence - almost like I was absorbing their knowledge through osmosis. But it wasn't osmosis. When you're surrounded by people operating on a high intelligence level, you learn from them. I also asked lots of questions and often got really complicated answers that I was eventually able to break down into something I could make sense of. After 2 years of working full time in pediatrics, the clinical nutrition manager position became available and I decided it was time to give management a try. And surprisingly, I liked it more than I thought I would. It was great being able to take my ideas and implement protocols that would help the dietitians and our profession.

Around the time I jumped into management, I was offered a college instructor position. I had been applying for a couple years with crickets on the other end. The email inviting me to an interview came through one evening and I thought I seeing things. I couldn't believe it worked. I'd been noticed. I was so excited. Remember, my original plan, the path I had paved for myself, was to teach and now, I was officially teaching nutrition.

I share my story because I hope it helps create a connection with me and helps you get to know me but also because I think there's a lot of dietetic interns and new dietitians who are just like me. Those of you who aren't sure exactly what you want to do or where you want to work and maybe you too are wondering if you went into the wrong profession. I want you to know you'll find your way. The best piece of advice I can give you is to make sure, when doors open for you, that you consider the opportunity and walk through that door. Because remember, you never know what you'll learn. I was never gonna work in clinical but that job was one of the best jobs and learning experiences I've had in my career. It also gave me experience that helped open new doors for me. The lesson learned is to never say never. You never know where your journeys gonna take you. Where you start isn't necessarily where you're gonna end up. Where you end up might be far better than anything you could ever have imagined. That's my hope for you.

Now before I go, I thought I'd share a couple personal things about me. You now know my professional journey this far but there's more to me than work. So what gets me going and brings me joy? Well, first and foremost I'm a mom which is by the far the best informal education you could ever have. I've learned more from my kids than any textbook could ever teach. And they bring so much joy to my life. I also love me some 90's and early 2000's

R&B. If you were to hop in my car, guarantee something would be playing from that era. I was a dancer growing up. I did Jazz, Tap, Theater, Hip Hop, Ballet - I did it all. Chocolate is a food group. I favor sweets over salty foods any day. I don't watch much TV but will watch Friends, New Girl and Schitt's Creek on repeat and still laugh to the point my stomach hurts and my eyes fill with tears. I pretty much only watch Rom Coms. I'll politely leave the room if anything scary is on the TV. No FOMO here. I enjoying watching something that leaves me feeling good. I cook because I have to, not because I enjoy to. If I win the lottery, the first thing I'm gonna do is hire a cook. And lastly, I'm a sucker for a good inspirational quote so I just might share some of my favs with you from time to time. We all need a little encouragement. So before you go, please remember to Never say Never. There's no rules to finding your path. Some experiences you'll love and others you will gladly leave behind. Try to learn as much as you can from each experience. You never know where it'll lead you. Now go out there and do your thang. Until next time.

[Outro and Music]