

Excellence in Innovative Service Award

Nomination for Katie Bark

Introduction

Katie Bark is the Program Director of Montana Team Nutrition, within the College of Education, Health and Human Development at Montana State University. Serving at the helm of the successful Montana Team Nutrition program for 25 years, Katie has led the development and implementation of innovative approaches, transforming best practices in schools and communities on both state and national levels. Katie is a lifelong advocate for healthy children, approaching her work with enthusiasm, creativity and an infectious passion. Her natural inclination toward innovation is one her greatest strengths, propelling her to try new things and earn a much-deserved reputation for being on the cutting edge of community and school nutrition progress locally and nationally.

With curiosity, Katie explores and identifies where unmet needs exist, while simultaneously looking for opportunity gaps that could serve to elevate nutrition education in Montana schools and beyond. For example, after identifying a rushed lunch period as a barrier to healthy eating in schools, Katie led the charge to explore the concept of recess before lunch, an innovative yet simple concept that has been nationally recognized and implemented following its inception here in Montana.

Katie built Montana Team Nutrition into a reputable and impactful program over her years of service at MSU. What began with just a single position, has grown to employ 5 staff members, thereby creating meaningful employment. She is renowned within the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Team Nutrition Program as being a professional mentor and exceptional grant specialist. According to MSU's Office of Sponsored Programs, since August 1999, Katie has successfully received grants totaling \$9,432,503.

Katie models a progressive, proactive approach in all that she does. This includes mentoring her staff with kindness, humor, and motivation and elevating her entire team through a sincere and inspirational shared leadership approach. With her open mind and generous spirit, she truly goes out of her way to support and encourage her employees and the people around her. Under her leadership, her employees feel empowered and inspired to reach their greatest potential, which speaks to the culture of work that Katie creates as a program director.

Katie uses the power of collaboration in all aspects of her work. She facilitates new partnerships, expands existing programs, and builds up everyone around her to maximize resources and potential. She regularly works with dozens of local, state, and national partners to carry out projects efficiently in our large rural state. National and statewide partners include: MSU Extension Food and Nutrition Program, MSU Extension Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) Education, Montana No Kid Hungry, Montana School Nutrition Association,

Montana Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, Montana Partnership to End Childhood Hunger, Eat Right Montana and many academic programs within the College of Education, Health and Human Development. Local community partners have included: Child Care Connections (Board Member), Gallatin County Head Start Health Advisory Committee Member, Human Resources Development Council (HRDC) and Bozeman School District Wellness Advisory Committee Member.

Key Areas of Innovation

While the list of Katie's contributions is long, three of her most innovative and wide-reaching programs include: Recess Before Lunch, Farm to School, and the Montana Cook Fresh Leadership Institute.

Recess Before Lunch

A recess before lunch policy is used by schools to improve the mealtime atmosphere, decrease food waste and increase food consumption by students, and improve student's behavior. In 2002, Katie Bark was one of the first to study recess before lunch in Montana schools and nationally.

In the 2002-2003 school year, Katie led the Montana Team Nutrition in completing a pilot project with four Montana elementary schools to determine if a recess before lunch policy at lunchtime impacted student's food intake and food waste. Results from the pilot showed that food waste decreased and student consumption (and healthy nutrition) increased. Katie connected this simple schedule change to the potential for the enhanced ability for children to learn in school. Focus group interviews with students indicated that they felt better in the afternoon and were ready to learn. Interviews with staff also indicated that teachers gained additional teaching time with this policy. The impact of this simple change also proved to be an innovative solution to reducing food waste. The U.S. Food Waste Challenge specifically recommends recess before lunch and extending lunch periods to allow students more time to eat as two important strategies for reducing food waste in schools.

A 2008 survey of Montana school administrators reported improvements in food waste, student consumption and behavior with a recess before lunch policy. Comments from administrators and teachers showed that student behavior improved in the cafeteria, the playground, and upon returning to the classroom, as evidenced by a decrease in the number of discipline referrals during the recess/lunch block.

In 2003, Montana Team Nutrition developed a *Recess Before Lunch Guide for Success* (revised in 2018) which has been used throughout the state, across the country, and around the globe. It has served as the basis for toolkits developed by state level Education Departments in Hawaii, Iowa, Missouri, Vancouver (Canada) and beyond. The U.S. Department of Defense's Healthy Base Initiative also used the guide in a demonstration project to reduce the prevalence of obesity at military installations worldwide. Thanks to Katie's innovative spirit, the practice of recess before lunch has taken hold, with 62% of schools nationally implementing the practice in 2014.

Farm to School

Since 2008, under Katie's leadership, Montana Team Nutrition has led the statewide effort to expand farm to school initiatives by providing training and technical assistance on the benefits of farm to school to children's health. Farm to school enriches the connection communities have with fresh, healthy food and local food producers by changing food purchasing and education practices at schools and preschools. Students gain access to healthy, local foods as well as experiential education opportunities such as school gardens, cooking lessons and farm field trips. Farm to school empowers children and their families to make informed food choices while strengthening the local economy and contributing to vibrant communities.

Montana Team Nutrition has developed and distributed farm to school resources, including: a local food procurement guide, list of seasonal Montana foods, local food fundraising guide, and farm to school mini grants. In 2008, a part time Farm to School Coordinator position was developed, and as of 2020, this position has grown to a full-time position with Katie's steadfast commitment to this program. Under Katie's leadership, Montana Team Nutrition has been instrumental in directing farm to school activities throughout Montana communities including: 1) collaborating with partners to annually host Montana Crunch Time. During this event, students and adults crunch into locally grown apples on a designated day in celebration of National farm to school month; 2) Delivering training and technical assistance both virtually and in-person to school personnel, parents, FoodCorps service members, and food producers; 3) Hosting three successful Montana farm to school Statewide Summits in 2012, 2016, and 2018; 4) Developing and managing the Montana farm to school webpage and social media accounts as central resources for farm to school in Montana; and 5) Creating and launching the Montana Harvest of the Month (HOM) program, which features Montana foods in K-12 schools and afterschool programs in at least one school meal or snack, taste test, and educational activity each month. Over 130 K-12 sites are participating in the program which began September 2016.

Again, Katie's innovative approach has had a large impact. According to the USDA Farm to School Annual Report of the 2019 school year (included as an attachment), 54% (447) of Montana schools participated in farm to school with 47% of schools procuring local foods in school meals, with 22% conducting farm to school educational activities and 17% tending to school gardens.

Montana schools have embraced farm to school and passionately voice their support for the training and resources provided by Montana Team Nutrition:

"Montana Team Nutrition has been essential for our farm to school program successes; they have impacted our program by providing grant funding, education, marketing, and professional development. Their programs have helped to develop our people, health, planet, and wellbeing, not just for today but for future and for life!"

~ Patti Armbrister, FFA Advisor, Agriculture Education Teacher, Hinsdale School

Montana Cook Fresh Leadership Institute

Additionally, under Katie's leadership, Montana Team Nutrition has conducted 25 years of research and training to influence high quality school meals in Montana. Since 2008, training efforts focused on meeting new meal pattern standards through menu planning and "from scratch" cooking with positive impacts. From a 2014 Montana Cook Fresh Pilot Project (four-hour culinary workshops), pre/post survey results indicated that participants' knowledge, confidence, and intentions to use whole, fresh foods increased significantly. In 2018 and 2019, these workshops were expanded for school nutrition directors and managers by offering a comprehensive Montana Cook Fresh Leadership Institute (30-hour workshop) covering both culinary techniques and food service management topics.

These workshops were innovative in content and structure. Not only did they feature a unique combination of management and culinary skills in one training, but they also incorporated cutting edge principles of behavioral economics. These workshops were intentionally planned to create statewide support for Montana's school districts and open the door to years of successful interaction, relationship building and ongoing support. Children across the state of Montana have enjoyed more healthy and delicious school meals thanks to the skills and knowledge gained through this institute, another innovative brainchild initiated by Katie. It should be noted that in the summer of 2020, Katie quickly led the pivot of this valuable institute to be delivered entirely in a virtual format due to COVID-19. Again, she courageously and decisively faced challenges and figured out innovative solutions, allowing school foodservice staff from across the state to learn new scratch cooking skills and techniques from the safety of their kitchens.

"[The Institute] was more accessible for me and my family; [I] could step away if needed for a few seconds."

Additionally, 100% of participants agreed or strongly agreed with the following post Institute evaluation statements: *"I feel more confident in my ability to participate in remote or distance professional development in the future."*

The COVID-19 pandemic amplified a pre-existing need for distance learning for school nutrition professionals in a large, rural state. The fact that the structure of the 2020 Institute was quickly changed to virtual was indeed innovative; but the training itself is an example of Katie's keen ability in assessing what school food service directors needed to be successful.

Creating Student Connections

Katie is always eager to mentor MSU students and provide them with beneficial service-learning opportunities. She and her staff regularly engage students in research opportunities, such as conducting plate waste studies, implementing behavioral economic strategies, testing the reliability of a taste test survey for children, to problem solving logistics of a recess before lunch policy in a large school district. Katie always welcomes collaboration with faculty to support master's program students with their thesis or project. For example, as her Master's project, Lacy Stephens, one of Dr. Carmen Byker Shanks's graduate students, worked with Dr. Byker Shanks and Aubree Roth, Montana Team Nutrition Farm to School Coordinator, to help develop the original 4-hour Montana Cook Fresh Culinary Workshop, which has been offered over 10 times in reaching school district staff across Montana. This workshop also helped to shape the Montana Cook Fresh Leadership Institute agenda. Dr. Byker Shanks, Ms. Stephens, Ms. Roth and Ms. Bark published two articles on data from her research component of this project contributing to the scientific body of knowledge on cooking from scratch in school foodservice programs.

With Montana Team Nutrition's mission focused on professional development for K-12 school staff, MSU students have access to involvement in the planning and coordination of statewide or regional trainings and conferences. For example, Team Nutrition has co-hosted numerous conferences from Ending Childhood Hunger (2010), to Farm to School Summits (2012, 2016, 2018) at MSU which both undergraduate, graduate and interns have been able to apply a variety of skills to in helping with organizational tasks. Katie also served on the Planning Committee for the Montana Behavioral Initiative Summer Institute for over 15 years which provided opportunities for students and faculty to be involved in statewide presentations or to obtain service-learning opportunities in this large conference that attracted over 1000 attendees from all over Montana school communities.

Since the inception of the Montana Dietetic Internship, Katie has been a committed preceptor, and through her role in the leadership of the Montana Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics (MTAND) played a key role in securing scholarship funds for interns. Katie makes it a point to involve dietetic interns in board meetings and projects to impress the importance of being involved in their professional organization to help direct its future, network with peers and obtain leadership experience to advance their own skills. Katie's motto is *"If you don't invest in your own professional organization and help shape its future, who will?"*

Katie embodies the MSU mission statement through her efforts; she "...integrates education, creation of knowledge and art and service to communities." In her role as MDI preceptor/mentor, Katie provides opportunities for emerging nutrition professionals to truly, "transform lives and communities" with the intent to create healthy futures for children and families in Montana. Perhaps what speaks best to her excellence, integrity, inclusion and collaboration are the words of MDI interns.

Excellence

“[Montana Team Nutrition] is a great place to[send] interns, there is so much to learn and all of it is so relevant for future dietitians. [Katie] gives a great peek into what life as a community dietitian can look like... I think [community] is a key place for [dietitians] to be making an impact in the lives of US children.”

Integrity

“My rotation with Team Nutrition offered many valuable learning experiences that will benefit me in both my future rotations as well as my future career... Katie gave me the opportunity to give my own presentation to the [Butte School District] cooks about the vegetable subgroups, which was a great experience, both in the preparation process as well as presenting. Katie was very encouraging and made sure I was meeting my goals and competencies.”

Inclusion and Collaboration

“Katie, Molly, and Aubree [Team Nutrition Staff] are marvelous preceptors... Their encouragement and the opportunities for the different activities/projects they provided have allowed me to meet my competencies. In addition, this has also allowed me to develop a better knowledge of the key steps that are involved when working with school foodservice staff in improving meal programs and promoting school nutrition. Thank you, Katie, Molly, and Aubree, for this valuable experience!”

Service to MSU and Montana Communities

Katie’s service to students, colleagues and communities across the state is notable, sincere, and effectual. She is most deserving of an award that recognizes an individual’s efforts that have a broad and positive impact. She has worked at the national, state and local levels to create positive changes in the school nutrition environment and serve in leadership roles or through mentoring to grow leaders in the dietetics or school foodservice profession.

Katie designs projects with sustainability in mind with her knowledge of unique school cultures, funding structures, and access to resources. Her innovative work has been implemented broadly throughout Montana and replicated across the nation. Efficiencies gained include: 1) creating a robust, active partner network spreading the same message and working towards the same goals; 2) securing additional funding from partner agencies, allowing Montana Team Nutrition to further its potential, service and resource development); and 3) building a nationally reputable program which, in turn, helps secure grant funding year after year. With her staff, she has established a culture of service to the broader MSU community, acknowledging the importance of experiential education and community engagement in educating future nutrition and food system professionals.

As a longstanding member of Eat Right Montana, she identified a specific need to create a group to work specifically on supporting children's health. With her accurate assessment, innovative idea, and tireless drive, Katie single-handedly started the Montana Action for Healthy Kids (AFHK) group in 2004. In addition to her leading the statewide Montana AFHK group as the Director, she found health champions in four Montana communities to start, lead and inspire action as their own local branch of the AFHK team, which are still active today.

Katie is an engaged MSU staff member. She can always be counted on to participate in a search committee or lead a department work group or subcommittee; always representing MSU and EHHD with the utmost of respect and professionalism.

Possibly the best way to showcase Katie's service to MSU and Montana communities are statements from people who collaborated with Katie over the years.

Statement from Ninia Baehr, Ph.D., RN, speaks to Katie's inclusion and collaboration skills.

"I met Katie Bark in 2004 when she accepted responsibility for serving as the Principal Investigator for a CDC-funded project to establish the statewide Montana Nutrition and Physical Activity Program to Prevent Obesity and Other Chronic Diseases (NAPA). She hired expert staff and guided and supported us as we collaborated with schools, farmers, community leaders, elected officials and other stakeholders in every county in Montana. I served as Program Manager, and Katie introduced me to the idea of Recess Before Lunch as well as Farm to School efforts. She encouraged our team to collaborate with local communities to develop strategies for cooking fresh that made sense for their populations. Under Katie's leadership NAPA offered technical assistance and small grants as a service to large and small towns and reservations. She played a key role in identifying and engaging stakeholders who implemented policy and environmental changes to support eating smart and moving more, most of which remain in place today. She oversaw us as we collaborated with experts to conduct community-based research, the results of which have informed articles, textbook chapters, and presentations at national public health conferences. With her positive outlook, "can do" attitude, and superb interpersonal skills, as well as her years of experience working successfully with schools, Extension, and public health professionals, Katie was an outstanding role model not only for our staff but also for the many interns and work-study students who came to NAPA to participate in interesting, meaningful projects. I remain in touch not only with Katie but also with many of these students who have gone on to careers in public health in large cities, frontier towns, and on reservations, and who cite their time with NAPA under Katie's leadership as one of the forces that helped mold them into the practical, forward-looking, and community-serving professionals they are today."

Statement from Louise Chandler, President, Montana School Nutrition Association, speaks to Katie's stewardship.

"Katie Bark has been a tremendous resource for Montana School Nutrition Association in several ways. First off, she's a wonderful facilitator for our conferences, bringing relevant class topics that she delivers with enthusiasm. Over the 25 years that Team Nutrition has partnered with MTSNA, Katie has developed and grown the Peer Mentor Program, effectively ensuring our new directors have the support and tools necessary for success in their schools. The Cook Fresh classes allow hands-on learning, creates a collaborative work environment, and allows connections that will last beyond the classroom. On a personal level, I appreciate that Katie has been a sounding board for conference class development and pointed me in the right direction for speakers, topics, and teachers. Katie brings excellence to her work that reflects in a joyful attitude, exceptional programming, and commitment to the professional development for all nutrition employees throughout the state."

Statement from Nonie Woolf, MPH, RDN, former Public Health Nutritionist, Blackfeet Community Hospital, Indian Health Service, Browning, MT, speaks to Katie's integrity.

"My relationship with Katie Bark began as a professional one and I consider her my friend. I am honored to share how Katie's work has impacted our community on the Blackfeet Nation. Back in 1989 when I was new to Montana working as the Indian Health Service Diabetes Nutritionist in Browning, I attended the MT Dietetic Association meeting in Bozeman. I met Katie in the hallway while trying to find directions and her first wide-open arms welcome and inclusive nature, drew me into 23 years of work with MDA/MTAND. As a Public Health Nutritionist, I established partnerships with the Child Nutrition Directors at the Browning School District. We relied on Katie's 25 years of Team Nutrition leadership to call forth opportunities that helped us train the entire foodservice staff through Healthy Edge and offer numerous events that positively affected eating of fresh produce and balanced meals in our community. Today's Team Nutrition Program continues to provide guidance to Browning Public Schools. Katie's enthusiasm that positively impacts the nutritional health of our Blackfeet community children, has opened doors for our local staff and leaders to provide nutrition education opportunities through the foods eaten at School Lunch.

I retired from Indian Health Service in 2010, yet my relationship with Katie continues -- through Eat Right Montana and The MT Partnership to End Childhood Hunger Coalition. As the Board Chair for a nonprofit, FAST Blackfeet, that focuses on decreasing food insecurity, I totally trust and can rely on her perspective in leadership and her ability to move groups toward providing the best nutritional care for children and their families statewide."

Conclusion

Katie Bark is a powerful force for good – for health – for the betterment of society. She has positively impacted schools and communities across our state for many years while continually embracing change with a positive attitude, new approaches and inclusion of student mentees with enthusiasm. She represents MSU and its land grant mission with her passionate drive to realize positive change in the realm of school nutrition. She is a shining star, a kind and mighty innovator with a huge heart, great sense of humor and a big smile.

This last statement from Dayle Hayes, MS, RD, President, Nutrition for the Future, Bozeman, Montana, summarizes Katie's innovative contributions reaching up to the national level.

The impact of Katie Bark's work with Montana Team Nutrition extends far beyond the MSU campus and the borders of our state. I know directly this because, as a child nutrition consultant, I travel, train and speak across the U.S. I have presented to child nutrition audiences in all fifty states – and, invariably, Katie's peers and colleagues mention the great work she has done with Montana Team Nutrition.

Under Ms. Bark's leadership, Montana Team Nutrition has produced cutting-edge school nutrition programming for newly two decades. I was privileged to work on the 2003 Recess Before Lunch Guide and on the 2018 update to the Guide. These guides have formed the basis of trainings that I have done from Iowa to Nevada – and I know that 2018 Guide is one of the top resources on this topic, providing a basis for policies at both local and state levels.

Research has been part of every project that Katie Bark has overseen. From Healthy Mealtime videos for childcare and schools to guides for School Wellness Policy implementation, Montana Team Nutrition materials are based on a solid foundation of academic and community research. In turn, the Montana-based projects have been rigorously evaluated and the results presented at national meetings of the School Nutrition Association and the Society for Nutrition Education and Behavior.

*Perhaps the most consistent thread running through Katie Bark's years of work is **service**. And her dedication to service extends far beyond Montana: She has long-standing relationships with several state school nutrition directors, especial in USDA's Mountain States Region, and is a sought-after resource for other Team Nutrition grantees across the U.S. Katie is always ready to share resources and help other states figure out how to design and implement programs at the local level.*

In summary, Katie Bark is a school nutrition treasure, not only in the Treasure State but all across the country.

Attachments include:

Letters of Support

1. Adrian Advincula, Administrator, Meadowlark School, Bozeman School District
2. Carmen Byker Shanks, Faculty and Research Partner, HHD, MSU
3. Rebecca Koltz, HHD Department Head, MSU
4. Christine Emerson, Director, Montana Office of Public Instruction School Nutrition Programs
5. Aubree Roth and Kelsey Egan Professionals/MSU graduates mentored by Katie Bark

Supporting Documentation

6. Success Story from Phillipsburg School District
7. Montana Cook Fresh Institute Success Story
8. Farm to School Annual Report