

Alumni Spotlight: Interview with Tara Mardigan, MS, MPH, RD '02

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By Rachel Zavala

One job is not enough for Mardigan, whose passion for food and nutrition has spurred her to pursue four different jobs. She currently works at Dana-Farber Cancer Institute, is the registered dietitian for the Red Sox, consults with Harvard Athletic teams, and works at a private practice in Copley Square. She received her bachelor's degree in nutrition from the University of New Hampshire and completed her dietetic internship at Yale-New Haven Hospital. She received her dual master's degrees (MS, MPH) in nutrition communication and public health from the Friedman School in '02.

1.) What first sparked your interest in nutrition?

I think it was a combination of two things. First, my love of food growing up. I come from a family where food is very important to us. We always sat down and ate at the table together. My father's family is from Armenia, so we had lots of great Mediterranean food. Food was always something that was a good experience in my family.

Second, I was a gymnast growing up, and I always wondered how to improve [performance] with food. It's funny how sports nutrition interested me at quite a young age when I didn't even know the field existed back then! I just wanted to figure out how to be a better gymnast with what I ate.

2.) Why did you choose the Friedman School to continue your nutrition education?

At the time I was working as an inpatient dietitian at Massachusetts General Hospital, and I distinctly remember my mom asking me something she heard about trans fat on the news. This was in the mid- 90s, so trans fat was not a household name back then. And I did not know how to answer the question. I thought to myself, I can do specific clinical calculations and make sure a sick patient gets well, but what interests me is how to help people eat better day to day.

I figured there has to be a better way to translate the nutrition science, and after doing research, I saw that Tufts was doing just that. Luckily I was living in Boston at the time, and it is a top nutrition school with a one-of-a-kind Nutrition Communication program, so the reputation was an added bonus. I was so excited for the opportunity to go to a school with such a great nutrition reputation.

3.) What skills did you learn at the Friedman School that you find most useful?

The skill of being able to communicate with someone, especially if you don't know the answer or if the science is still evolving. When the answer is unknown, you have to respond in a way that is honest and credible. How do you explain nutrition science, which is constantly changing, to a public who wants a direct answer?

You have to engage clients and teach them how to be their own mini-epidemiologists. Tell them what to look for when they are evaluating their diet, or reading a news article about nutrition. When [dietitians] are first starting out [in the work force] we tend to shy away from doing this because we feel like we should know the answer. Instead, we have to learn how to be effective communicators when dealing with the unknown.

Another skill is helping people to implement the "overall" recommendations for the public into their own lives. People can easily tune out these broad recommendations because they don't think it applies to them, so [dietitians] have to figure out ways to help them implement what is most appropriate for them.

4.) How did you end up at your current job?

Well I have a few jobs! I work part-time at Dana-Farber Cancer Institute with adult cancer patients. I was working full-time, and then the opportunity to work for the Red Sox presented itself through volunteer work I was doing. The organization, Sociedad Latina, invited me to a breakfast to raise money for little leagues in the inner city. I ended up meeting Larry Lucchino (President and CEO, Boston Red Sox) and began working with him. I became very interested in what the team needed and proposed a couple reasons why the team would benefit from

having a dietitian.

I stopped working full-time at Dana-Farber to accommodate working with the Red Sox, and luckily they have a great relationship with the team so I was able to reduce my hours. I also work with the Red Sox's minor league teams, the Lowell Spinners, Pawtucket Red Sox, and Portland Sea Dogs. This is where I really make changes. I work with young guys who are interesting in learning about how nutrition can improve their performance. They are hungry to get to the big leagues. It's great to see them move up into the major league, and then become someone like Jacoby Ellsbury (Left Field/Center Field) who is now well-versed in nutrition.

We (Tara and other Red Sox employees) also try to change meals that the players are eating as a team, and change the food environment at the minor league and major league level. Good luck finding a candy bar in the clubhouse, because I got rid of them! Occasionally we might have pizza, but we also have much healthier options so the players have a choice. I don't want the athletes to have a strict view of eating that prevents them from enjoying food, but I want them to know that there is always a better choice. This is more challenging in the minor league because of their smaller budget, but we get creative. In Portland we are trying to work with local farmers markets to make more fruits and vegetables available to the players for a good price.

I also work with the Harvard Athletic teams, and have a private practice out of a Cardiologist's office in Copley Square. In private practice I can see anything, including people who want to lose weight, people with diabetes, as well as athletes.

5.) How often do you work at your various jobs each week?

Dana-Farber is 20 hours a week, and the Red Sox flexes depending on their schedule. Some weeks its 10-12 hours, and other weeks it is 20. Players, staff, and coaches e-mail me as well, so it feels like it is an ongoing job, which is fine. You have to allow yourself to have an open schedule if you want to get the ball rolling with a nutrition discussion. Since athletes have odd schedules, I normally see them very early in the morning or late at night. Being a sports nutritionist is not a 9 to 5 job, but I like that part of it.

6.) What do you find most surprising when counseling athletes?

We make an assumption that athletes are well versed in nutrition, and some of them are. They want to do the best they can for their bodies, but they are just like the rest of us; they have challenges balancing their time, sleep, and job. And the players who do not make millions of dollars do have budget concerns. So athletes struggle with implementation issues just like the rest of us.

Half of my time I am helping the athletes find credible resources about supplementation use. They see great [supplement] marketing that can lure them in and make them believe they can hit the ball farther; but it may not be the best choice. I try to get them to choose food before supplements, and only supplements when necessary. Athletes are vulnerable and think [supplements] are well made and well regulated, and they are shocked when they find out they are not.

7.) What are your plans for the future?

I would like to continue to try to engage people in discussions about where food comes from and what it means. I think people improve their nutrition when they know more about what they are eating. I would love to consult with food industry to help make that happen. We tell people grilled chicken or turkey sandwiches are healthy, and then they walk out of Panera with a 900 calorie sandwich with 2000 mg of sodium. I would love to be more involved with companies to recreate products or make them more healthful. I want people to cook at home more, a great goal of mine!