Bravo!

A CELEBRATION OF SNA NATIONAL AWARD WINNERS

2020-21
That simple exclamation says so much about the last year. It says, “Job well done!” for creative and spirited ways of engaging with students in virtual learning settings. It says, “Good for you!” for pivoting multiple times to adjust to ever-changing challenges. It says, “Take a bow,” for learning new communications technologies and adapting time-honored approaches to training, networking, fundraising, recruitment and advocacy. Here, in this publication, it’s a heartfelt expression of congratulations to the 2020-21 state, regional and national award winners, and “Bravo!” also acknowledges the immense pride, respect and appreciation we feel for all of SNA’s members.

Winners of the national Employee, Manager, Director and Industry Member of the Year awards were first announced at a virtual event in May, and recipients of the President’s Award of Excellence, Recruiter of the Year and other categories honoring achievements by state association leaders were revealed in their states in June. We offer our heartiest congratulations to all for your dedication and service.

You are receiving this booklet prior to SNA’s 2021 Virtual Annual National Conference—where we hope you’ll join us to meet with and learn from the individuals featured in these pages, along with the many other selfless practitioners in the school nutrition community. We hope you’ll also check out #SNAawards on social media to see the photos and videos of many state, regional and national winners celebrating at home.

We encourage you to share this publication and celebrate these honorees with coworkers, supervisors, Boards of Education, parents, students, teachers, colleagues, family, friends and many others in your community. Join us in a resounding, “Bravo!”

We extend our deepest thanks to all those who took the time to write nominations; to the state and national leaders who served as judges; to the Headquarters staff who manage the complex awards program; to Jarrett J. Krosoczka, our School Lunch Hero Day partner, for the personalized sketches of our national award winners; and to the vendor partners whose advertisements helped to make this publication possible. And most important, we thank all of SNA’s members and friends for everything you do to earn standing ovations every day! Bravo!

Reginald Ross, SNS
SNA President, 2020-21

Patricia Montague,
FASAE, CAE
SNA Chief Executive Officer
These one-on-one connections are a signature of the school nutrition profession. Apoian credits California directors Meg Chesley (“She taught me how to think more creatively”) and Lynette Rock as early mentors, and she has worked throughout her own career to pay their example forward. “When I learn something, I like to share it; I think that makes me a good trainer,” she explains.

“This profession and SNA—right down to the state associations and local chapters—provide a wonderful network,” she continues. “The organization affords us the opportunity for people to improve, learn and become leaders.” Apoian herself has served in many roles in California SNA and its regional and local chapters, including legislative, nutrition standards and marketing and public relations positions. She is currently president-elect of the Southern California SNA.

Paying it forward means investing her time and talent in training programs that are not exclusive to her own 144-member staff. In fact, Apoian has provided training to teams in 28 neighboring school districts and is a well-regarded state trainer. She uses varying formats, including in-person workshops and shorter recorded sessions that are available in an on-demand library.

“I love being with people and picking up on their energy, and school nutrition professionals are the best crowd,” shares Apoian. Her approach focuses on activities that engage adult learners and encourage team participation. “I ensure people are involved with activities where they can practice, and they can play. Activity is an important part of the learning process, and so is playing—make it fun!”

Not even a global pandemic could prevent this Director of the Year from connecting and engaging with her team.
Anna Apoian, MPA, RD, SNS

Nutrition Services Director
Norwalk-La Mirada Unified School District, Calif.

SNA Member Since 2003

Lives In Rolling Hills Estates, Calif.

Education California State University, Long Beach (BS); California State University, Dominguez Hills (MPA)

Family Husband Mark, sons Bob and Jack

Apoian's creativity extends far beyond training—and goes back much further than the pandemic. Her nomination cites her establishment of a Parent Advisory/Menu Committee and her active involvement creating allies among various district parent groups. For example, a meeting with a Korean parent group led to a new Korean Beef Bulgogi Bibimbap lunch dish. She also worked with her district’s IT team to establish parent computer labs at each school site to help facilitate online meal applications.

Apoian also ensures her department is connected throughout the school community. In a monthly newsletter, Your Chew, she highlights the principals that support enhanced meal programs (like Second Chance breakfast), which helps encourage other administrators to do the same. She empowers site staff to prepare special meals for teachers. “This connection with teachers and administrators resulted in Nutrition Service employees receiving 16 Classified Employee of the Year awards during the past three years. The Nutrition Services department is truly a part of the school team,” wrote Roberts.

Her pre-COVID menu innovations included made-to-order sandwich/salad deli bars, signature housemade salsas and dressings for produce bars and a no-bake vegan meal entrée. New breakfast items helped increase participation by 20%, and a popular “Green Monster” smoothie improved consumption of dark green vegetables—and is a recipe families now make at home!

Reflecting on the many challenges presented by COVID-19, Apoian is determined to focus on positive outcomes. “I think the pandemic has catapulted us into the future,” she says. “[My employees] all know how to Zoom; they do it professionally and well. I think we’ve connected far beyond what we dreamed possible.” Apoian plans to build on these new skill sets with her team and with Southern California SNA members because “what’s next” will not be the same as “going back to normal,” she asserts.

“We need to reflect on what skills we gained and how we are going to use them moving forward.” She’s looking forward to streaming Association meetings that, even before COVID, had already grown unwieldy for in-person gatherings.

Even though she considers herself a “change agent” by nature, Apoian concedes that it’s not been easy to lead her team through the pandemic—but she’s deeply impressed by and appreciative of how her staff—and the whole profession—stepped up to meet the challenges. “I get choked up when I think about it,” she says. “As school nutrition professionals, we haven’t had time to reflect on the pandemic yet—it’s been quite a year. We need to rest. It has taken a lot out of us.” Apoian’s instructions to her staff for the summer months? Rest, reflect and return rejuvenated.
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Throughout SY2020-21, this award-winner and her staff have been able to serve meals in person, but there have still been operational challenges to navigate. Serving a technical school that receives students from three participating districts, UBCTS nutrition staff must accommodate three separate district schedules, each operating the spectrum of in-person, hybrid and/or virtual learning models in all of their fluctuations and iterations. As a result, “We are only feeding about a third of our typical number of students right now, and unfortunately that has been a huge financial burden for us,” reports Ott-Underdown. Their popular catering program has also been on hold due to the pandemic, but she remains focused on what she can control: using UBCTS foodservice to create community.

That sense of community has personal resonance for Ott-Underdown. You see, she’s not just an UBCTS employee—she is also a graduate of the school’s culinary arts program. She returned at age 21 to work first as an instructional assistant, then as catering coordinator. When she took over as cafeteria manager at age 26, her approach to managing a staff of veteran school nutrition professionals was to lead with positivity and optimism.
"If I’m excited about something, then my staff is excited about it, and they pass that on to the kids," she reports. "I’m always focused on doing something better than I did the last time."

There’s a lot to get excited about! Over time, Ott-Underdown and her staff started experimenting with new dishes, including scratch-made items that both maximized USDA Foods and earned positive attention from students. One particular “fan favorite” was a Chicken Cheesesteak Burrito—a clever (and a bit risky!) twist on the regional classic Philly Cheesesteak sandwich. “Try It Tuesdays” exposed students to other new menu items and recipes. Not every experiment worked (RIP Chicken Curry Casserole), but students appreciated the efforts and the opportunity to offer feedback. Today, the UBCTS cafeteria offers a largely scratch-cooked menu, from hamburgers to beef chili to whole roasted chickens that end up in salads, sandwiches and soups.

Introducing scratch cooking, increasing participation and leading her staff with enthusiasm—these were just a few reasons Pennridge School District Director of Nutritional Services Gina Giarratana nominated Ott-Underdown for Manager of the Year.

"Everything she does is about the students. They are her driving force and why she goes above and beyond every single day in every single thing she does," says Giarratana, who supervises foodservice at UBCTS, in addition to Pennridge.

Giarratana affirms that an important part of her own job is showing her staff the benefits of SNA national and state membership. "The networking and relationships you make through SNA are invaluable. Being a part of something bigger than your one cafeteria is powerful," she explains. "I feel so strongly about the organization, my district pays for our cafeteria managers to be SNA national members because the training, the networking and the opportunities the Association provides for school nutrition professionals is unparalleled."

There’s another special SNA connection for Ott-Underdown that deserves mention: A notable pre-pandemic highlight for UBCTS’s culinary arts students and school nutrition staff has been hosting the annual SNAPA chapter Christmas dinner. Previously held at a restaurant, this gourmet dinner with all the trimmings was moved to UBCTS. Culinary and baking students help Ott-Underdown execute the event, and providing this catering experience to students is an especially rewarding part of her job. "Over the years, students have come back to thank me for the experience," she reports. "They have used me for a reference, and a lot of them have gone on to college and done really well for themselves." Hopes are high that the SNAPA holiday dinner will return to UBCTS in 2021, along with other popular events like Breakfast with Santa and Breakfast with the Easter Bunny fundraisers that she revived from her student days.

Ott-Underdown has been undeterred by pandemic complications this last year. Her philosophy for professional success is simple and effective: "I go in every single day and try to do better than I did the day before: the appearance of the food, tweaking recipes, asking questions, learning and making sure the kids are enjoying it."
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Winning SNA’s 2020-21 Employee of the Year award was more than a little overwhelming for Christine Edelstein-Dodds, assistant cook at Vincent M. Igo Elementary School in Massachusetts. “Even though I had been through the [state and regional award] process, I was speechless when [SNA President] Reggie Ross called and told me I won,” says Edelstein-Dodds. “I’m grateful to [Foodservice Director] Janice [Watt] who nominated me; I love working for her and could not ask for a better boss. I’m truly honored, and words cannot express how thankful I am to be chosen for this award.”

This humble spirit came as no surprise to Foxborough Public Schools Foodservice Director Janice Watt, SNS, who is one of Edelstein-Dodds’ biggest champions. “Christine is floored and kind of embarrassed, but I want her to embrace it,” says Watt. “Christine has always impressed me. She is an amazing role model and the consummate professional. She is conscientious, tremendously humble and loyal to a fault—to me, to the program and to the manager that she works with.”

Cook Manager Lisa Reilly offered a vivid testimonial in her own support of Edelstein-Dodds, telling Watt, “Christine [becomes] my legs when I can’t walk. She is right there for me for whatever is needed. We’ve had to stand on our heads this year, and she’s adapted to it. Whatever needs to be done, Christine does without complaint. She really is remarkable.”

An avid home cook and baker, Edelstein-Dodds discovered school nutrition after initially serving as a Foxborough cafeteria lunch monitor when her own children—Jared and Emily, now 20 and 16, respectively—were young. The foodservice hours were easy to accommodate for the stay-at-home mom and would allow Edelstein-Dodds to continue to coach youth soccer. Eventually, she began substituting in the kitchen, and when a foodservice position opened up at Vincent M. Igo Elementary, she applied. Just a few months later, the assistant cook retired, and Edelstein-Dodds has held that position ever since. It’s a great job, she says, affirming that it’s one that never feels like work.

“I love the kids. I’m at an elementary school where it’s kindergarten through fourth grade, and that age is just so much fun,” reports Edelstein-Dodds. “They want to have a conversation with you and they’re funny. Whether you talk to them about their weekend playdate, their soccer game or Pokemon, the level of enthusiasm from the kids is infectious.”
and I enjoy it. I always tell Janice, ‘I love my job. I love to go to work every day.’”

At Igo Elementary, meals are prepared by Edelstein-Dodds, working alongside Reilly and foodservice associate Lynne Doolan. “We’re a team,” affirms Edelstein-Dodds. “We get the job done together, and that’s important to me. I played soccer growing up, and I like being part of a team.”

The “job” is far more than prepping and serving meals. The trio also dress up for theme days, write encouraging messages on whole fruit for the kids (swapping in funny pictures for the little ones who can’t read yet) and ensuring a choosy student always has a vegetable option they love every day.

In Edelstein-Dodds’ nomination, Watt illustrated how important each and every child is to the deserving award winner. Not only does Edelstein-Dodds know and address each student by name, she is “hyper-aware” of their individual likes and dislikes, along with food allergies and special diets. “She makes sure their favorite fruits and veggies are available so they have a choice that they will eat and enjoy,” Watt wrote. “In addition, she takes care of a special student who is a picky eater by preparing a special meal for that child. [Christine] is proactive and anticipates the students’ … dietary needs. She takes [this] responsibility very seriously, as if they are her own children. She communicates with the kitchen manager, lunch monitors and school nurse regarding specific allergies, providing a safe environment parents can trust.”

On top of all of that, Watt calls Edelstein-Dodds a “lifelong learner” who consistently exceeds her required training hours. As someone who enjoys learning for its own sake, Edelstein-Dodds credits her SNA membership with affording her the opportunity to seek out as much school nutrition training as possible. She counts herself lucky to be part of SNA through Foxborough’s School District Membership. “There are lots of workshops I like to take advantage of,” says Edelstein-Dodds. “There are always things to learn, and that’s my approach even in everyday life. I try to learn from every situation.”

When employees leverage SNA membership as thoroughly as Edelstein-Dodds has, it reminds Watt of her own early days in school nutrition. “I grew so much personally and professionally from the things I learned at SNA, and I believe so much in what SNA brings to the table—I wish more people would take advantage of it. Christine is a prime example; because of what she’s learned through SNA, she has flourished—and she clamors for more.”
Congratulations to all SNA National Award Winners!

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"I loved recruiting for my alma mater, but I had to get out of the nest—I needed to fly," recounts McDowell, saying that she turned to her deep Christian faith, praying for insight as she considered options. Eventually a call from her best friend connected McDowell with a headhunter for Kyrus Corporation (a school technology outfit no longer in business today). Would she be interested in doing major city sales for their school nutrition point-of-sale system?

"I had no clue about school food or technology," says McDowell. "But I went in for the interview and fell in love with the people. They gave me an offer I couldn’t refuse, and off I went!" McDowell spent two years with Kyrus, learning the ins and outs of the school nutrition industry and building relationships. "I was selling a lot and learning a lot," she recalls. "Relationship-building is something I brought with me from college admissions, where I was helping people decide where to go to college—literally choosing their ‘home away from home’—and it is very important to me."

Opportunity was not done knocking at McDowell’s door. She soon found herself on SNA’s Annual National Conference Exhibit Hall floor in a booth that was adjacent to one for Super Bakery. McDowell’s colleagues were excited to meet someone at Super Bakery named Franco Harris, and they weren’t the only ones—a long line was forming. She placed a phone call to her husband back home for some clarity. “He yelled, ‘Go buy a football and get an autograph, he’s an NFL legend!’” remembers McDowell, laughing.

When Wanda McDowell says she is in, she is all in. Bringing enthusiasm and commitment to all that she does, the 2021 SNA Industry Member of the Year credits family and faith as the driving forces in her life. “It’s my personality to do everything and be involved in everything,” says McDowell. “I grew up in a family where I learned that if you’re a part of something, you support it wholeheartedly. I’m not a person who sits on the sidelines. I didn’t just want to ‘be in’ college, I wanted to be a student ambassador!”

In fact, after graduating from Converse College in South Carolina with a B.A. in Psychology, McDowell remained on campus for another 10 years, serving in the admissions office, eventually working her way up to director of admissions for her alma mater. So how did McDowell find her way from the halls of academia to the school cafeteria? That was faith and fate at work.
At first reluctant to be seen as an autograph seeker, she gave in—and clearly made a great impression when connecting with Harris and his then-business partner Lydell Mitchell. She got the autograph—and then later that evening, she got a job offer! Faith and family once again helped guide McDowell, who was hesitant to leave Kyrus after just two years, but took the leap. “Kyrus gave me my first job; I loved it, and I have to thank them for that,” says McDowell. “Then Franco Harris and Super Bakery gave me another wonderful opportunity, and now I’ve been here for 17 years.”

She’s keenly aware that not all companies allow their employees as much leeway for being deeply involved with an organization like SNA and is grateful that her employer breaks the mold. “My bosses at Super Bakery allow me to learn more about the industry, build relationships and involve myself in areas outside of sales through the Association,” says McDowell.

She is also grateful for her many mentors in school nutrition over the years and credits them with helping her get connected in SNA at both the state and national levels. McDowell cites several by name and influence: “Lillie Bouie took me under her wing and dragged me in!” she recounts. “Lillie and Mary Hill really got me involved in Mississippi SNA. Julie Hedine was a mentor throughout my career. Armer Moore is someone I could go to for advice, along with Joyce Lovett, who saw something in me early on. I also thank Becky Domokos-Bays for nominating me for this award. I could mention 10 other people here!”

Today, McDowell serves on SNA’s Industry Advisory Board, as well as on the School Nutrition Foundation (SNF) Board. She was a key leader of the 2021 SNF 5K Walk with a Purpose Committee, helping to reshape the popular “Party with a Purpose” fundraiser for these pandemic times by turning the in-person cocktail party into a virtual walk-a-thon to help raise money to support SNF scholarships and professional development programs.

McDowell’s commitment extends to the state level, where she has served on Industry Advisory Boards in Tennessee, South Carolina (two terms), and Mississippi (six terms), as well as several steering committees and scholarship committees. To each, she’s brought her talents for engaging with members, planning meetings, fundraising and promoting scholarships. “Scholarships were a major part of being director of admissions at a college, so I understand helping people get to where they need to be,” says McDowell. “People want to give to a cause where they see outcomes, and scholarships make you a part of someone’s journey. That’s special.”

Winning Industry Member of the Year is a huge honor for McDowell, but she is eager to share the spotlight with her colleagues. “When [SNA President] Reggie Ross called me, I cried—I’m a crybaby!” she recounts. “I am totally humbled and honored to be recognized by SNA, but I could not do anything without the support of Super Bakery, my boss and my colleagues. They trust me to do my job and they allow me the freedom to become as involved as I am. I have to share this with them!”

Wanda McDowell
Southeast Region Sales Manager
Super Bakery, Inc.

SNA Member Since
2002

Lives In
Inman, S.C.

Education
Bachelor of Arts, Psychology,
Converse College; attended on a basketball scholarship

Family
Parents Timmy & Carolyn Moore; brother Levar & sister-in-love Katie; niece Holland; niece LaKeisha and grand-nephews Luke & Liam; husband of 21 years Thomas McDowell
Congratulations
National Industry Member of the Year 2021

Wanda McDowell
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Super together
EVEN...WHEN...APART
Congratulations to All State and Regional Employee, Manager and Director Winners!

State Winners

ALABAMA
KATHY NAILOR
Child Nutrition Program Staff, Albertville Intermediate School, Albertville City School System

FLORIDA
CARMEN SWAFFORD
School Food Worker, King Middle School, Santa Rosa County Schools

GEORGIA
JENNIFER GRAHAM
Food Assistant, Matthew Arthur Elementary School, Houston County School System

MARYLAND
MARCIA ROSA
Kitchen Assistant, Elkton High School, Cecil County Public Schools

MIDWEST
DEBRA ROOT
Nutrition Service Assistant, Falcon Heights Elementary, Roseville Area Schools

MISSOURI
ROSEANNE CURLISS
Prep Assistant, Summit Lakes Middle School, Lee’s Summit R-7 School District

NEW HAMPSHIRE
JOAN LANDRY
Kitchen Assistant, Oyster River High School, Oyster River Cooperative School District

NEW YORK
—

NORTHWEST
—

SOUTHEAST
JENNIFER GRAHAM
Georgia

SOUTHWEST
—

WEST
ANNA KING
Utah

Regional Winners

MIDEAST
MARCIA ROSA
Maryland

MIDWEST
DEBRA ROOT
Minnesota

NORTHEAST
CHRISTINE EDELSTEIN-DODDS
Massachusetts

NORTHWEST
—

SOUTHEAST
JENNIFER GRAHAM
Georgia

SOUTHWEST
—

WEST
ANNA KING
Utah

15
SNA NATIONAL WINNERS | 2020-21
Manager of the Year in honor of Louise Sublette

State Winners

ALABAMA
CAROL GIVENS
CNP Manager, East Samford School, Auburn City Schools

CALIFORNIA
KAREN STANIER
Nutrition Services Manager, Mira Monte High School, Kern High School District

CONNECTICUT
KARINE SZYMASZEK
Cafeteria Manager, Lincoln Middle Schools, Meriden Public Schools

FLORIDA
STARR GRIMES
Food Services Manager, Navarre High School, Santa Rosa County District Schools

GEORGIA
WANDA KEENE
School Nutrition Manager, Northside High School, Houston County School System

ILLINOIS
KIM DONATO
Nutrition Services Manager, John J. Lukancic Middle School/Beverly Skoff Elementary School, Valley View School District 365U

INDIANA
TINA CALLAHAN
Kitchen Manager, Edison Elementary School, School City of Hammond

IOWA
CHRISTA ANDERSEN
Manager IV/Foodservice Bakery Manager, Bakery Operations Center, Davenport Community School District

MARYLAND
HOLLY HAZZLETT-HAGGERTY
Kitchen Manager, Bohemia Manor Middle/High, Cecil County Public Schools

MASSACHUSETTS
SHELLY MELLO
Cook Manager, Acushnet Elementary, Acushnet Public Schools

MINNESOTA
WENDY ANDREWS
Cook Manager, Valley View Middle School, Bloomington Public Schools #271

MISSOURI
JANET GRUBE
Nutrition Manager, Cedar Creek Elementary, Lee's Summit R-7 School District

NEBRASKA
CHERYL WITHERS
Kitchen Manager, Aspen Creek Elementary, Gretna Public Schools

NEW HAMPSHIRE
TIMOTHY KENALY
Café Manager, Oyster River High School, Oyster River Cooperative School District

NEW MEXICO
SONIA MEDINA
District Kitchen Manager, Hobbs Municipal Schools

NORTH CAROLINA
CAROL KENNEDY
Cafeteria Manager, Sunset Park Elementary, New Hanover County Schools

NORTH DAKOTA
ALLISON GRABOW
Child Nutrition Manager, Will-Moore Elementary, Bismarck Public Schools

PENNSYLVANIA
AMBER OTT-UNDERDOWN
Cafeteria Manager, Upper Bucks County Technical School

SOUTH CAROLINA
BRENDA CHOICE
Manager, Waterloo Elementary, Laurens County School District 55

UTAH
KAMIE BOREN
Nutrition Service Manager, Silver Ridge Elementary, Weber School District

VIRGINIA
PATRICIA WILLIAMS
Cafeteria Manager, Thelma Crenshaw Elementary School, Chesterfield County Public Schools

WISCONSIN
CONNIE GIESFELD
District Food Production Manager, School District of New Berlin

Regional Winners

MIDEAST
TINA CALLAHAN
Indiana

MIDWEST
ALLISON GRABOW
North Dakota

NORTHEAST
AMBER OTT-UNDERDOWN
Pennsylvania

NORTHWEST
—

SOUTHEAST
STARR GRIMES
Florida

SOUTHWEST
—

WEST
KAMIE BOREN
Utah
Regional Winners

MIDEAST
KELLY MINNICK, SNS
Ohio

MIDWEST
STACY KOPPEN, MS, RD, SNS
Minnesota

NORTHEAST
CURTISTINE WALKER, MEd
Pennsylvania

NORTHWEST
—

SOUTHEAST
MELINDA BONNER, MBA, RD, SNS
Alabama

SOUTHWEST
NADINE MANN, PhD, RDN, LDN
Louisiana

WEST
ANNA APOIAN, MPA, RD, SNS
California

ALABAMA
MELINDA BONNER, MBA, RD, SNS
Child Nutrition Program Director,
Hoover City Schools

CALIFORNIA
ANNA APOIAN, MPA, RD, SNS
Nutrition Services Director,
Norwalk-La Mirada Unified School District

COLORADO
KATIE COSSETTE, RDN, SNS
Director of Nutrition Services,
Englewood Schools

CONNECTICUT
KATE MURPHY
Food Service Director,
Naugatuck Public Schools

GEORGIA
DR. DEBRA MORRIS
Director, School Nutrition,
Jackson County School System

INFORMATION
BETSEY WILLARD, RDN
Child Nutrition Director,
Franklin Township Community School Corporation

KENTUCKY
SCOTT ANDERSON
Director of Food Service,
Madison County School District

LOUISIANA
NADINE MANN, PhD, RD, LDN
Child Nutrition Program Chief Financial Officer,
East Baton Rouge Parish School System

MAIN
WHITNEY THORNTON
School Nutrition Director,
York School Department

MINNESOTA
STACY KOPPEN, MS, RD, SNS
Nutrition Service Director,
Saint Paul Public Schools

MISSISSIPPI
ASHLEY HARRIS, MS, RD, SNS
Child Nutrition Director,
Jackson County School District

MISSOURI
LORI DANIELLA, MSML, SNS
Director of Nutrition Services,
Lee’s Summit R7 School District

NEW MEXICO
SANDRA KEMP, SNS
Executive Director,
Food and Nutrition Services,
Albuquerque Public Schools

NORTH CAROLINA
ALISON FRANCIS, SNS
School Nutrition Director,
Haywood County Schools

OHIO
KELLY MINNICK, SNS
Director, Nutrition Services,
ESC of the Western Reserve

PENNSYLVANIA
CURTISTINE WALKER, MEd
Food Service Director,
Pittsburgh Public Schools

PENNSYLVANIA
MEGAN SCHAPER, SNS
Food Services Director,
State College Area School District

UTAH
KEN CRAWFORD
Director of Child Nutrition,
Ogden School District

VERMONT
HEATHER TORREY, MS, RD, SNS
Assistant Director,
Burlington School Food Project,
Burlington School District

State Winners

Director of the Year

SNA NATIONAL WINNERS | 2020-21
President's Award of Excellence

The volunteer leaders of SNA's state affiliates take up a variety of challenges, ranging from legislative advocacy to membership recruitment to fundraising to dynamic networking events and more. Their efforts are recognized with the President's Award of Service in honor of Thelma Flanagan (page 21). Each year, a few state presidents stand out for their extraordinary leadership in successfully implementing strategies that help advance both the profession and SNA. This year, there are three recipients of the President's Award of Excellence: ERICA BIAGETTI, SNA of Connecticut, TERRI SMITH, SNS, Maryland SNA, and JENNIFER BUJAK-HIRSCH, SNS, SNA of Ohio. SNA applauds the hard work, innovation and commitment to excellence of these deserving individuals.

Jennifer Bujak-Hirsch,
MBA, SNS

Crestwood Local Schools | SNA of Ohio

Tell us which of your achievements as state president make you most proud—and why.

I am so proud of the whole SNA of Ohio leadership team and their dedication to our organization! Each member of our Board and Executive Board was very supportive, committed and thorough. Everyone has such a strong passion for the cause; it truly shows through in their eagerness and willingness to participate. I was so surprised when they announced the award at our conference in June. I’m a super passionate person, so I cried.

How did you and your leadership team innovate throughout the last year?

From the very beginning, we agreed that it was of the utmost importance to ensure we kept members engaged and informed. We decided to host at least four CEU opportunities—all conducted virtually. These included two webinars from the Institute of Child Nutrition, on emergency preparedness and special dietary needs, plus two from consultants JoAnne Robinett and Jon Colby. We were also fortunate to have 34 attendees at SNA's 2021 Virtual Legislative Action Conference, with 43 members zooming Capitol Hill to meet with our two senators and 14 House members.

We also decided early on to plan two in-person events. In April, we held our first-ever Education & Expo Event and had wonderful turnout and all-positive feedback. In June, we held our three-day Annual Conference. It was such an energizing atmosphere to be back together again. Also, in response to popular demand, we made good on our goal to host the SNS Exam at the conference.

How has the experience of being a state president helped you to grow?

I’ve learned so much along the way from vice president to president-elect to president. I learned to communicate with different stakeholders, talking less and listening more. I also learned to appreciate all members and their different ideologies, from young professionals to the seasoned veterans and everyone in between. I’ve really enjoyed the networking of the last few years, meeting so many amazing directors, vendors and other state leaders. It’s been great to collaborate and offer help to others. I’m a giver by nature, so being able to assist anyone who asks is a beautiful blessing!

What advice do you have for state leaders following in your footsteps?

Be engaged! Be engaged with all your members, appreciating their diversity. Set goals that progressively move the association forward but maintain the integrity of the path set by the presidents who came before you. And, in the words of SNA Past President Nancy Rice, always remember to celebrate your successes!

Why is national and state membership in SNA more important now than ever before?

I’ve always found my SNA membership to be an invaluable resource. During the pandemic, it was even more important, providing members with accurate and thorough information, offering ideas and solutions and allowing for collaboration and networking—and this will continue to be essential in the year ahead.
Tell us which of your achievements as state president make you most proud—and why.

Becoming Maryland SNA President in September 2020, in the midst of the pandemic, was truly a challenge! Every one of us on the Board had incredible pressures at work—at my district, we had a ransomware attack that was catastrophic. But the teamwork that our Executive Secretary and Board members exhibited through the year was phenomenal. We all wanted to keep momentum going as an organization and knew we could be a great support for our cafeteria teams. We continue to produce our Serving Spoon magazine, which highlights Maryland lunch heroes. Also, following SNA’s lead, we offered free membership for the year and gained 81 new members! Using Zoom, we held several meetings, events, my induction ceremony and professional development offerings. Each was an achievement in its own right!

How did you and your leadership team innovate throughout the last year?

We gained a lot of expertise in virtual conferences this year. For example, we contracted with Carol Gilbert, a popular area speaker, to provide a 2-hour professional development session on leadership for free, on three different dates. Some 175 people attended, reporting lots of positive feedback. We’re also thrilled with the success of our Virtual Leadership Workshop for up-and-coming local leaders, along with our 2020 Fall Virtual Event that transformed many of the events we typically hold at our convention, including the award ceremony and the election of officers, using Zoom poll technology. We’re planning an in-person convention in October 2021, but we think Zoom is going to be something we will continue to use for many other meetings and events, to reduce travel and improve participation.

How has the experience of being a state president helped you grow?

Throughout my leadership journey, my growth has been directly related to the people around me. Engaging in discussions and listening to feedback helped me to make more informed, well-rounded decisions for our organization. Over the four years of the presidential process, I discovered I really enjoyed traveling to SNA national events. The National Leadership Conference, in particular, was a good introduction to the responsibilities of serving as president, but all the meetings were great opportunities to connect—and reconnect—with people from other states who were on my same leadership path.

Why is national and state membership in SNA more important now than ever before?

COVID has changed our profession in so many ways; we are still navigating the process. From virtual meetings and trainings to changing food product needs from our vendors to the ways we feed children in the future, membership in SNA provides us with critical knowledge to aid us in making decisions in our own states and communities, especially about legislative and regulatory actions that have an impact on our ability to provide cost-efficient, healthy meals.

What words of advice do you have for state leaders following in your footsteps?

Attend every event that SNA hosts and you will gain a better view of the big picture! Every state and county or district are micro-cosms of the entire profession. Together, we can make great strides in feeding children throughout the United States!
Tell us which of your achievements as state president make you most proud—and why.

As simple as it sounds, I am proud that we made it through this year and overcame every obstacle placed in front of us. As president, I felt compelled to get out of my comfort zone and do everything to support and recognize the hard work and dedication of school nutrition professionals across our state. Key to our success was using various methods of communication between the state and our members and between members and our communities.

How did you and your leadership team innovate throughout the last year?

We created “Focus Fridays,” a weekly hour-long discussion group among directors, which was a great resource and an even better morale builder. We also hosted monthly “Worker Wednesday” discussions for managers and employees. This gave our line staff, who don’t get many opportunities to connect with peers across the state, the chance to share experiences and information. Monthly “Virtual Hot Topics” presentations by industry partners to directors were popular. We also replaced our in-person regional training with a virtual version. “Connecting CT” was a one-day event for directors, state agency representatives and industry partners. Overall, going virtual allowed more members to attend these different events.

Another new initiative was a highly successful week-long media campaign: “5 Reasons Why It’s Time to Try School Meals” was conducted in partnership with many other stakeholders across Connecticut, including school business managers, superintendents, hunger relief organizations and others. We relied mostly on social media, but also had a number of radio spots. “School Nutrition Recognition Week” used social media to celebrate the incredible efforts of school nutrition professionals and our partners over the last year. It featured a virtual “honor-palooza” to celebrate our award winners, and included an appearance by special guest Secretary of Education Dr. Miguel Cardona, as well as a proclamation issued by Governor Lamont for “CT School Nutrition Hero Day.”

How has the experience of being a state president helped you to grow?

If I was asked this when I was nominated to run, I’d have a much different answer. I didn’t expect to feel so grateful for how my presidency has helped me both professionally and personally. I’ve gained greater confidence, improved my public speaking skills and learned more communication/marketing techniques. I am still surprised by the level of support and camaraderie there was among our officers, the full board and from across the state. Our executive director was with me every step of the way, supporting each new crazy idea that we came up with. It was so much fun, and I will miss working with everyone on that level, but look forward to new SNACT endeavors.

What advice do you have for state leaders following in your footsteps?

Take the leap into leadership! Continue to push yourself and grow with each new obstacle. We learn every day—and that’s what keeps us moving forward. My favorite quote is attributed to Audrey Hepburn: “Nothing is impossible—the word itself says, ‘I’m possible!’”
President’s Award of Service

in honor of Thelma Flanagan

This award recognizes the dedication and commitment state presidents provide throughout the year to strive to accomplish SNA’s mission, vision and strategic goals.

TONYA GRIER, Alabama
SUSAN LAMPERT, Alaska
STEPHEN PROTZ, Arizona
JO ANNA SPRADLIN, Arkansas
JOHANNA JENKINS, California
KARA SAMPLE, SNS, Colorado
ERICA BIAGETTI, Connecticut
COLLEEN CARTER, MS, RD, SNS, Delaware
ROY PISTONE, SNS, Florida
TESSANY LOCKHART, Georgia
BRENDA NAGASAWA, Hawaii
REBECCA ELMORE, SNS, Idaho
JILL MOSHER, Illinois
LEEANNE KOENEMAN, Indiana
MANDY VINCENT, Iowa
KARLA CAPANSKY, Kansas
TERINA EDINGTON, SNS, Kentucky
ALISA ROMAN, SNS, Maine
TERRI SMITH, SNS, Maryland
SUSAN MURRAY, SNS, Massachusetts
DIANE GOLZYNSKI, PhD, RDN, Michigan
MARY JO LANGE, SNS, Minnesota
JEREMY BERRY, SNS, Mississippi
SARAH CHELLBERG, RD, SNS, Missouri
LOUISE CHANDLER, Montana
KAREE NIELSEN, Nebraska
CORY SMITH, Nevada
AMY CASSIDY, RD, LD, New Hampshire
JAQUELINE MERMER, RD, New Jersey
JANET SANCHEZ, New Mexico
SUSAN BELL, New York
KRISTEN BEALLER, SNS, North Carolina
EMILY KAREL, RD, LDN, CDM, North Dakota
JENNIFER BIJAK-HIRSCH, SNS, Ohio
GAYLE LEADER, Oklahoma
BECKI WICKS, SNS, Oregon
GINA GIARRATANA, Pennsylvania
WANDA KNIGHT, SNS, South Carolina
LYNN DUNKER, South Dakota
VICKIE DUNAWAY, Tennessee
MICHAEL FRANCIS, Texas
KAYLEEN ANDERSON, Utah
KARYL KENT, Vermont
SANDRA STOKES, SNS, Virginia
JANIS CAMPBELL-AIKENS, SNS, Washington
AMANDA MCPHERSON, SNS, West Virginia
Micheal GASPER, SNS, Wisconsin
NATALEE GAYLORD, Wyoming

2020-21 Membership & Professional Development Growth Awards

Membership Division Champions
MARYLAND (numerical increase)
ALASKA (percentage increase)

Membership Goal Awards
NORTH DAKOTA
VERMONT

Increasing Membership Award
WYOMING

Credentialing Division Champions
WYOMING
ARIZONA
SOUTH CAROLINA

Certificate Program Goal Awards
ARKANSAS
DELAWARE
ILLINOIS
LOUISIANA
MAINE
NEBRASKA
NEVADA
NEW HAMPSHIRE
NEW JERSEY
OHIO
How long have you been an SNA member, and what made you decide to join?

My school nutrition career started in 1996, when I worked with Val Artman, a manager who introduced me to SNA, telling me that it had been instrumental in her own career growth by providing training, networking and ways to bring new ideas forward. On her recommendation, I joined the local chapter, the Florida state affiliate and the national SNA. Being a part of the Association has given me the tools to become the director I am today.

How have you put your SNA membership to use to grow your program and your career?

Through SNA, I received scholarships to advance my education. Through its trainings and opportunities to earn CEUs, I accomplished my goal to earn the School Nutrition Specialist (SNS) credential in 2016. Through networking, I ask questions and find resolutions to program concerns, as well as discover what other state affiliates are doing. Webinars are great for gleaning best practices to use in my district. All of these tools are assets to all members.

Why do you encourage your peers in other districts and those coming into the profession to join the national association?

Yes. I encourage any school nutrition professional to join. My memberships have played a big role in my career, and as a result, you might say I have been a cheerleader for the Association over the years. Whenever I conduct training classes, I always promote SNA membership, explaining its value.

Why is SNA membership more important now than ever before?

It’s such an important channel for staying informed with legislative and regulatory updates, such as the waivers and learning best practices for getting through all the new and unexpected challenges. It’s been nice to be able to network with others facing the same concerns. SNA has provided invaluable support and direction.
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