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Healthy for Life

MU alumna wins young dietitian of the year award.

Story by Kelsey Allen

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Jessica Ellis Myers was driven from a young age. Instead of completing her junior and senior years of high school with her classmates in Leeton, Mo., she transferred to Northwest Missouri State where she completed an associate's degree in science.

"My school didn't challenge me how I wanted," Myers says. "To be able to do well in college, I knew I would need some additional skills."

With Leeton's 2012 population of 578, it made the transition to Mizzou a little easier.

Studying dietetics at MU was a simple choice for Myers. She has always loved to cook and values a

Jessica Myers

Jessica Ellis Myers, BS HES '11, was named the 2013 Recognized Young Dietitian of the Year by the Missouri Dietetic Association. She is a clinical dietitian at MU Health Care. Photo by Justin Kelley, University of Missouri Health Care.

healthy lifestyle. Then her mom developed food allergies. She knew with her background in science and her personal connection to dietary restrictions becoming a registered dietitian would be a good fit.

After a brief stint as a dietitian at Hy-Vee — "I would help bag groceries every now and then, and when people would notice I was the dietitian, they would say, 'Oh, don't look at what's in my cart!' " she recalls. — Myers, BS HES '11, is now a clinical dietitian at MU Health Care and was named the 2013 Recognized Young Dietitian of the Year by the Missouri Dietetic Association.

Since 2012, Myers has worked in pediatric genetics at Children's Hospital. No longer explaining the difference between a pomegranate and a plum, Myers works with patients who have metabolic disorders. She'll talk to the parents of a newborn diagnosed with phenylketonuria (PKU), a metabolic genetic disorder that makes it so the body can't break down the amino acid phenylalanine (Phe). Without treatment, the amino acids build up in the blood stream and can affect brain development and cause seizures.

"Most people think the solution is a simple, low-protein diet," Myers says. "In reality, you have to restrict the Phe that causes the problem."

That means Myers spends a lot of time teaching people how to count the amount of Phe in fruits and

vegetables and to eliminate foods with high levels of the amino acid, such as meat, dairy and nuts.

But rather than be overbearing, Myers prefers to empower her patients to manage their disorder.

"As kids get older, I'm trying to help them understand why they have to be on a diet," Myers says. "It's important to not be an enemy and be super stringent but to guide them toward making changes they want to make and realizing on their own what they need to be doing and what is motivating them."

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