

An Interview with Jeff Novick

By: Mary Liro

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Jeff Novick, M.S., R.D., L.D./N., is the Director of Nutrition at the Pritikin Longevity Center and Spa in Aventura, Florida. He has taught nutrition at Indiana University and Indiana State Medical School. In September, his alma mater, Indiana State University, named him the Graduate-of-the-Last-Decade for his outstanding contributions to the field of nutrition.

Jeff is a frequent contributor to Health Science magazine and a member of the magazine's Scientific Advisory Committee. He is frequently quoted on nutrition topics in a wide range of popular health magazines.

He is also a frequent lecturer at NHA events. His new video contains two lectures that he presented last year at the NHA seminar in Chevy Chase, Maryland.

Why did you want to study nutrition?

Nutrition has been a hobby of mine as far back as I can remember. Growing up, I was always interested in food, nutrition, and cooking. I used to be fascinated by the early cooking shows like The Galloping Gourmet. I also used to love to be in the kitchen helping my grandma prepare food. In the early 1980s, I went to culinary school and received a degree in culinary arts and food service management. I then worked as a chef for several years. In 1985 I went to work for Kraft Foods, but over time I began to have personal, internal problems from working for a company like that. So in 1992 I went back to school to study nutrition.

Did you hold many of the nutritional philosophies that you have now when you were a student?

Yes. By the time I went to school in 1992, I had been living hygienically since 1983.

Did your beliefs put you at odds with some of your professors?

Right from the start I was upfront with them about my personal beliefs and lifestyle — but not in an antagonistic or obnoxious way. I knew that to do what I wanted to do, I would have to go through their program and classes and I was willing to do that. So, we were never at “odds.” We just had a mutual respect for each other’s opinions and agreed to disagree on several topics. One of the professors in the department was a lifelong vegetarian from India, so that also helped.

How were you selected as the Graduate-of-the-Last-Decade at your alma mater?

The purpose of the G.O.L.D. Award is to provide recognition for the outstanding achievements of graduates of the past ten years of Indiana State University. I was nominated for the award by my graduate advisor Dr. Sarah Hawkins. The nominations were reviewed by a selection committee and then went to the Alumni Board for review. The criteria for nomination was based on three areas. First, the nominee should have been outstanding in his/her profession. Second, the nominee should have made significant contributions benefiting his/her community, state, or nation. Third, the nominee should have exhibited interest in the University and/or the Alumni Association since leaving the campus. It was a great honor to receive the award and the weekend was a big event. Besides several luncheons and the evening awards presentation, I gave several talks to the students in the nutrition department, was interviewed by the university TV program, and was introduced on the field before the football game.

The biography on the back of your video makes reference to some of the classes that you’ve taught. Do you teach your students that the food pyramid that they’ve been studying is erroneous?

It’s not so much that the pyramid is erroneous; it is the erroneous way it is interpreted. Everyone has their own ideas on how to teach nutrition or what is the best way or system to do that. The pyramid is just one of those methods. Like many other systems, it tries to convey basic concepts. The real problem is in the way it has been interpreted. As you may know, many groups, even vegetarian and raw food groups, have come up with their own “versions” of the pyramid and have been able to use it as a teaching tool. In one class at the Pritikin Center, I actually use a very similar system as a basic teaching guide for those who are looking for some kind of guide like that. There are many

people who look for a “system” or “guide” like that for them to follow. But I interpret it much differently. For instance, under the bread/cereal/grain (or carbohydrate) group, I emphasize that only whole, unrefined, unprocessed whole grains and starchy vegetables are acceptable (like peas, corns, potatoes, brown rice, oatmeal, etc). Under the vegetable group, I emphasize fresh, whole vegetables raw and/or lightly steamed. The same applies to the fruit group. The dairy group I changed to the “calcium-rich food group” and give examples of many plant foods that are calcium rich. In the protein group, the emphasis is on beans, peas, legumes, nuts and seeds along with some soy products. I eliminate the fats/sweets groups. Now we have a much more “hygienic” pyramid that can actually promote healthy eating and health.

Do some of your students have a difficult time accepting the concept that meat and dairy products should not be part of that pyramid?

Our culture and society are heavily meat and dairy based and maybe some of my students have been immersed in that for a long time. So, yes, the concepts of healthy eating are new and can be challenging to them, and the issue that meat and dairy, if consumed at all, should make up a very small part of the diet can be especially challenging. I don't teach a 100 percent vegan diet to people. While it might be my choice, not everyone is willing to make that choice or go that far.

And for me, my job is to help people and take them as far as they want to go. And, while greatly reducing the amount of meat and dairy most people consume is critical to getting healthy, I am not sure that completely eliminating it is always necessary. For some people, allowing them to keep a small amount of these products in their diet may be the key to what gets me to have them follow the rest of the diet. I find it is a better approach to first work with people on what they need to include more of, rather than focusing on what they need to take away or have less of. The first thing most people need to do is to learn how to include more fresh fruit, vegetables and unrefined, unprocessed carbohydrates in their diet. If they do that, they will have less room for the unhealthy foods.

As the Director of Nutrition at the Pritikin Longevity Center and Spa, what does a typical day include for you?

On a typical day at the Center, I will teach two or three classes. Each one is usually about one hour long and covers a variety of topics — understanding food labels, dining out, the controversies around fat, losing weight safely, and so on. There are 14 nutrition classes here and it takes two weeks to go through the full cycle. I also usually have several individual counselings scheduled with the participants. I also sit and have meals with the participants where we can all interact in a more informal setting and I can answer more of their questions. In addition, each week I lead two outings, one to a local restaurant and one to a local health food store. On each trip, the participants learn how to make healthy choices and survive in the real world. Behind the scenes, I attend several management meetings. I sit on the Pritikin Scientific Committee and we meet regularly to review all the latest studies. We have regular medical meetings with the team of medical doctors where we review the participants here as well as any recent research. I spend a lot of time reading all the latest health and medical journals, as well as writing and reviewing articles, because I am always updating my presentations. I also oversee the daily program schedule-making.

I've had many calls from people over the last couple of years wanting to contact you. Do you have a website where people can find out what you are doing or communicate with you?

The best website right now to find out what I am doing is www.pritikin.com. I have one at www.jeffnovick.com but it isn't updated often. Pritikin is more than a full-time job for me and right now I don't have a lot of time outside of my work to do other things.

Do you have any plans to begin an online nutritional counseling program or a newsletter?

Not currently, due to time limitations. After seven years, my weekly newsletter ended about two years ago mostly due to time constraints at the Pritikin. I do write for the Pritikin newsletter, which you can find more about at www.pritikin.com. I also write for Dr. Joel Fuhrman's newsletter.

Do you lecture in your community?

I do lecture regularly in the community. There are many country clubs and condominium associations in South Florida, and I am a regular speaker at

those places. There are several health groups in this area that I lecture to also. I travel around lecturing for various health organizations, groups, conferences and businesses, too.

Is your video the first in a possible series of videos?

I hope so.

What other topics might we hope to hear you lecture on next?

The other videos will be on the other topics I already lecture about. Examples are, “Diet Fat Fads and Facts — What Really Works and Why,” “Calorie Density: The Secret to Lifetime Weight Management,” “Body Composition: How to Win at Losing,” and “Dining Out: It Doesn’t Have to be a Food Fight.”

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