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CHRIS VOGLIANO Promoting Food Principles Good for People and the Planet

By Juliann Schaeffer

Chris Vogliano, MS, RDN, has a passion for food sustainability. But he didn't exactly enter dietetics with the intention to save the planet from food waste while ensuring every person has access to healthful food along the way; that fervor found him.

"I have always had a passion for creating a sustainable and waste-free food system that's healthful for both people and the planet. But I went into dietetics expecting to be a clinical dietitian," Vogliano says. "Boy, was I wrong. After seeing the immense amount of food being wasted, learning about food insecurity, and beginning to understand the pressure our current agriculture system puts on our planet, I knew I had to focus my attention on sustainability. To me, it really didn't seem like an option."

Thus far in his career, Vogliano's food sustainability focus has taken many forms, including working as the nutrition manager at the Greater Cleveland Food Bank, serving as a sustainable agriculture research fellow for the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics Foundation, and teaching a sustainable food systems course at the University of Washington this past spring.

"Whatever the role, my primary motivation is to help improve global food security while lessening our environmental impact on the planet," he says.

What does improving global food security look like on a daily to-do list? It changes with the day, but it could be

Vogliano working on a food waste presentation, assisting with literature reviews for Cambridge researchers assessing local food systems of developing island nations, or even consulting with companies on sustainable nutrition initiatives.

Though the projects may vary with the season (and season of life), the endeavors Vogliano takes on have a common thread: improving food systems. Speaking of seasons of life, Vogliano is set to start a brand new one—halfway across the world. Keep reading to find out what has him relocating to New Zealand and what goals he seeks to accomplish there.

Today's Dietitian (TD): What were the biggest obstacles or challenges you faced in your career, and how did you overcome them?

Vogliano: One of my biggest challenges was an internal obstacle more than anything else. Growing up in a middle-class family, I was never faced with living in poverty. When I first started my career, I had idealistic ways of eating, purchasing, and preparing foods. I learned quickly that life isn't always so simple. Working with low-income clients was one of the best things that's ever happened to me. As dietitians, it's easy to assume that our clients can afford or have access to fresh fruits and vegetables or even a refrigerator.

I figured there was only one true way to empathize and try to understand the struggles of these clients: sit down and start having conversations with people. I shared many meals at soup kitchens and food pantries, simply listening to clients about the struggles they were faced with on a daily basis. While I may never know what it's like to be food insecure, at least I can now better empathize with people who experience this reality.

TD: What led you to focus your career on sustainability issues?

Vogliano: It wasn't until earning a master's degree at Kent State University that I started understanding the complexities of food security and food access. I began volunteering at the local chapter of The Campus Kitchens Project, which helped recover food from the local community and repurpose it into meals for low-income community members. Up until this point, I was unaware of the troubles many of my community members faced by not being able to afford healthful food. This is when my eyes were opened to the complex issue known as food insecurity.

I was astounded by the passion and dedication of those volunteering for The Campus Kitchens Project. After volunteering a few times, I began noticing that the food being served—while delicious—was not the healthiest. Surely there had to be a way to serve both tasty and nutritious dishes. This is what led me to begin a nutrition outreach program at Kent State, where I was able to recruit undergraduate and graduate nutrition students to teach nutrition education lessons at local food pantries.

TD: What is your proudest career accomplishment?

Vogliano: While I could spit out my résumé here and list various presentations and publications, I think my proudest career accomplishment is much more simplistic. I remember working at the Greater Cleveland Food Bank and having a massive amount of eggplants shipped to us for distribution. Let me tell you, inner city Clevelanders are not highly exposed to eggplants, and many of them do not know how to prepare them. I knew if I didn't take action that there would be a significant amount of food waste and lost nutrition potential.

Traditionally, sustainability may not have overlapped with nutrition, but I strongly believe dietitians are one of the best-suited health professionals for the job.

I quickly teamed up with my nutrition educators and volunteers to help teach program managers and clients how to easily prepare and cook these purple beauties. Before you know it, they were one of the most popular items at many of the pantries throughout the community. It's amazing how reducing a small barrier can have such a profound impact!

TD: You're moving to New Zealand to pursue a PhD in sustainable food systems. What spurred this next career step, and what do you hope to accomplish through this new educational effort?

Vogliano: Yes, it's crazy to think about, actually. I have never lived abroad and am very much looking forward to it. Having worked on a variety of sustainable nutrition projects, I personally find this to be the most fascinating area of dietetics. Traditionally, sustainability may not have overlapped with nutrition, but I strongly believe dietitians are one of the best-suited health professionals for the job.

It surprises me to see global health organizations making nutrition policy decisions without the consultation or advice from registered dietitians. We are the food and nutrition experts, and I believe we absolutely deserve a place at the table when these important decisions are being made. My main goal in pursuing my PhD in public health and sustainable food systems is to better prepare myself to confidently enter the global health sector.

As our world becomes increasingly global, and lower-income countries rise to the middle class, diets begin shifting toward that of our own American diet (eg, more processing, more meat, fewer plants). We've seen what our diet has done to us, and I hope to help prevent other countries from making the same mistakes we have.

TD: What are your top three recommendations for making your diet more sustainable?

Vogliano: While there are a variety of ways to tweak our diet toward a more sustainable one, my top three recommendations would be:

- **Waste less food.** This one is huge. We currently waste 30% to 40% of all food produced, and the majority of that happens with us: consumers. Food takes up an abundant amount of resources, and it's frankly too good to waste.

- **Swap the beef with beans.** Beans, or legumes, are not only packed with abundant protein and fiber, but they also help fix nitrogen in the soil, which is excellent for the health of the planet.

- **Cut back on portion sizes.** This message is consistent with what we have been saying for a while now, but now we have even more reason to do so. Overeating is technically a form of food waste, too, and contributes to disease and a waste of resources used to produce the food.

TD: What advice do you have for nutrition professionals who want to be more sustainable eaters (and consumers) or promote sustainable efforts in their community or nationwide?

Vogliano: I truly believe that any dietitian, whether working in long term care or in schools, can make a difference. Any little step to reducing the amount of food waste—such as adjusting meals to being eco-friendlier or simply swapping out Styrofoam cups for a more sustainable option—can all collectively make a major impact. Just think what would happen if all 100,000-plus dietitians made one small change in their practice.

TD: Describe your nutrition philosophy.

Vogliano: Nutrition can seem overly complex, but it doesn't have to be. As long as we are listening to our body, eating the appropriate number of calories, and sourcing most of our food from fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and legumes, we shouldn't sweat the small things. It's okay to have that piece of chocolate cake.

TD: What brings you joy outside of work?

Vogliano: My friends and family are everything to me. I cherish the relationships I have built over the years and wouldn't be where I am today without their love and support. As I continue to move around, I try my hardest to stay in touch with my best friends—whether I'm across the country or across the world.

TD: What's one thing people might be surprised to learn about you?

Vogliano: I was a wedding photographer in my past life. And I love hula hooping—sometimes even while it's on fire!

— Juliann Schaeffer is a freelance food and health writer based outside of Allentown, Pennsylvania, and a frequent contributor to *Today's Dietitian*.