

NEWS

Stewart dedicates half a century educating future healthcare workers at U of M Crookston

Written by Jackie Calderon - March 26, 2024

Dr. Sharon Stewart has dedicated 50 years to educating future healthcare workers at the University of Minnesota Crookston. Stewart, an associate professor and department head in the Math, Science, and Technology department, has taught close to 200 students in dietetics over the years.



She was born and raised in Grand Forks, North Dakota, and four generations of her family, including her great-grandfather who immigrated from England and had a farm in Manvel, her father, Stewart, and her children have called North Dakota home. After high school, Stewart obtained her bachelor's degree in dietetics at the University of North Dakota, and then completed an internship at the University of Florida in Gainesville before returning to North Dakota to obtain her masters and doctorate degrees.

At UND, Stewart started out as an elementary education major but soon realized it was not the right path for her.

"Dietetics was a small program at UND and I got to know the advisor of the program who was wonderful," Stewart shared.

Now, what made her trade green for maroon and gold and begin her teaching legacy at the U of M Crookston? While Stewart's husband was in the Air Force in 1974, a position opened up at the U of M Technical College in Crookston for an instructor in the Hotel Restaurant Institutional Management program. In 1975, she helped develop a dietetic technician program which was accredited by the American Dietetic Association.

The last class of this program graduated in 2012.

"I was very sad to lose that program, it was like my baby," she said. "It was a unique program and filled a niche because it provided rural healthcare workers."

Stewart's love for teaching is evident through the way she lights up at the topic.

"I love teaching that's for sure, I love interacting with the students," Stewart added. "I could have retired years ago, but I get such a thrill working with students and seeing them spark at potential careers."

Dietetics stood out as a career path to Stewart because her brother was diagnosed with Type I Diabetes. She got to spend a lot of time with her brother's dietitian and dietetics piqued her interest.

Today, Stewart is still a practicing dietitian. She lends her talents to a hospital in Warren, Minn., where she has met many people in the region who are alumni of the Northwest School of Agriculture which was in place before the Crookston campus became a university.

When Stewart started teaching she wanted to make sure she never lost her practitioner skills. Between classes, she has consulted at Pioneer Memorial Care Center in Erskine for 25 years, Fair Meadow Nursing Home in Fertile for 30 years, the Stadter Institute in Grand Forks for people with mental health disabilities, and has consulted for Head Start and the Northwest Regional Corrections Center.

Stewart has also worked with wrestlers at Crookston High School to teach them how to cut down and maintain their weight class in a healthy way. In the past, she has also taken referrals of U of M Crookston students who needed nutrition care plans for students with diabetes or weight control needs.

Due to her dedication to the field, Stewart has been able to provide her students with an abundance of real life experiences. Recalling a funny story from a conference, Stewart says all but two attendees introduced themselves as "a Sharon Stewart product."

Her mark extends far beyond the Polk County, Minn. region. Stewart has graduates of her program at Riverview Health and Villa St. Vincent (Benedictine Living Community) in Crookston, the Twin Cities, and more!

When the U of M Crookston was still a two-year university, one of Stewart's graduates, who is originally from Crookston, went on to receive her bachelor's, master's, and PhD in dietetics. This student also worked in Clearbrook, Minn. and is now the director of the dietetic technician program at Northland Community and Technical College. Stewart is especially proud of her student because she began at the associate's level and worked all the way to obtain her doctorate.

Having also worked her way up to the title as department head, Stewart recalls how the times were back in the early 1970s when she began teaching. She says the transition of women in academia and in leadership has been dramatic.

"Dr. (Stanley) Sahlstrom was the Chancellor when I first began at U of M Crookston," she explained. "We wore dresses and suits to class, we had to dress nicely at all times."

When Stewart was pregnant with her second child, there was no maternity leave. She took two weeks off and had to find someone to cover her classes. Stewart was often tired at work because her baby would not sleep through the night.

Stewart also noted that she was often the only female in the classroom. The HRI department was very "male dominated." She remembers only one female in the Equine department at that time.

U of M Crookston had their first female Vice Chancellor in the 1980s when Dr. Rita Meyer arrived.

"She made it sound like if you were going to be a woman in leadership you had to lose your femininity and be 'tough as nails' and she was," Stewart explained. "You couldn't use a soft, empathetic approach at that time in a leadership role, you had to be very blunt."

Stewart also remembers being in high school and having to wear dresses even if it was 40 degrees below zero. Upon high school graduation, she took an interest test.

"I took the dumb thing twice because I was so mad, it kept saying I should be a housewife," Stewart said.

At one point was looking into forestry as a potential career path, but was told they did not accept women. Then, when she did her dietetic internship in Florida, she began applying for jobs only to realize that men were getting double the salary offers in comparison to the female applicants.

Fortunately, a woman named Dr. Shyamala Rajender filed a class action lawsuit in 1973 that became *Rajender v. University of Minnesota*. After a decade-long fight, the case was settled and the University was required to hire more female faculty members. This led to Stewart, and many other women, getting restitution for their jobs, promotions, and pay raises. This class action lawsuit paved the way for increasing the number of women in academia and inspired women who were discriminated against.

Stewart was amazed to see the increasing number of female students after the University began offering new programs throughout the years. She also watched many women transition into leadership management positions.

"The stigma isn't there now when you think of women being leaders," she explained. "Students don't see themselves as 'women in management' but rather as simply a 'manager' or a 'leader.'"

Her advice to students that want to go to graduate school is to "stay with it" until it is over. Stewart says that it is easier if you just "stay in the mode." She also advises going into a field that has good employment opportunities.

On the faculty side of things, Stewart says that for most of her career she has worked predominantly with men. In the past few decades, there has been a shift in women in higher education. Stewart now works in the exercise science department with Anita Gust.

Stewart teaches 18 credits, with nine being in person and nine online. Her favorite subject to teach is nutrition.

"I love teaching nutrition, I think I could probably teach it in my sleep," she joked. "This class mentions supplements for growing your fingernails and getting rid of wrinkles and they don't necessarily work, it's all marketing."

Stewart implements nutrition into her daily routine. She shared that her favorite healthy food is salmon because it is "so good for you." Stewart also loves fruit, and says she likes to live a healthy life because she really believes in nutrition and what she teaches.

Additionally, Stewart teaches Wellness and Disease Management and Aging, First Year Experience, Sports Nutrition, and Community Health and Wellness. Stewart says she loves teaching freshmen because they are so fun.

Stewart has never regretted staying at the U of M Crookston. She says she always felt appreciated here. At one point, Stewart was offered another position at another university for a 600-person lecture.

"I couldn't justify taking that position because there was little interaction with students," she explained. "There would be none of those 'ah-ha' moments."

Stewart, however, did moonlight at UND but didn't care for it because the classes were so big and she was not able to build relationships with her students.

Stewart shared that even though there was so much constant change in her career, that is what education is all about. "Change is inevitable." Nonetheless, Stewart says she feels blessed that she still enjoys her professional career, and feels like she has made her mark throughout her 50 years!

"One of these days I will retire," she teased.

Stewart loves waking up every morning and having teaching be her purpose. She notes that there is longevity in her family, and if she is "going to be around for a while" she needs "something to do." Stewart says she will consider retirement when she finds something else to fill her days, but for now she chooses to take it day by day.

"If you pick something you enjoy, you're never going to work a day in your life," she concluded.

Dr. Sharon Stewart



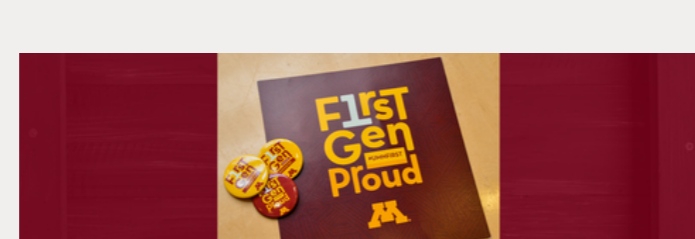
Dr. Sharon Stewart receives an award at the 2019 Faculty Staff Awards.

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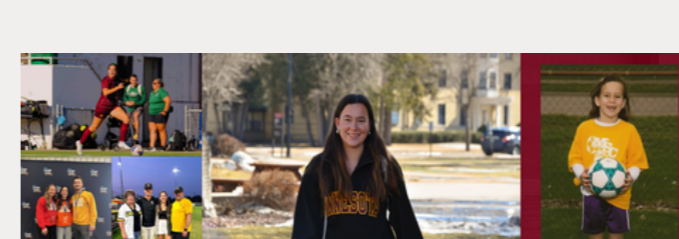
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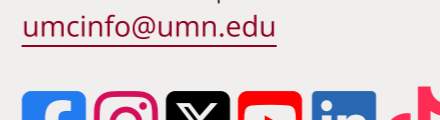


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