

Telling Missouri's Public Health Stories



Ambassador for Public Health

Brandy Sheehan never thought she would end up working in public health, but a frozen yogurt franchise and the kindness of a local food inspector changed her mind.

Frozen yogurt was trending culturally, and some of Sheehan's friends decided to open several local Orange Leaf franchise stores. They invited Brandy to help them get started. Her background was in retail and clothing, but she says she jumped right in.

"They had quite a bit of experience in the food industry. I helped them from start-up. As soon as one location was ready, I'd help with staffing and processes, get staff trained, and get the store running. They opened five different stores, and I moved along from opening to opening and managing as we went."

Then Brandy got married and things changed. The franchise began selling stores, and Brandy wanted to stay closer to home. She says that's when her relationship with a local food inspector came into play.

"I landed in Jefferson County. I grew up there so I was familiar with it. I always had a good relationship with the inspector. She was always willing to help. She knew I wanted to do the right thing all the time. Our stores weren't perfect, but she was encouraging to teach me what to do to get things where they needed to be. We had a great relationship."

During one visit the inspector noticed Sheehan was feeling frustrated. Their conversation led to a discussion about Brandy's background and experience. The food inspector mentioned a job opening in the environmental department at the Jefferson County Health Department, and Brandy says, "It just took off from there."



She says, "I wanted to learn the public health job. I jumped into it knowing a little, but not understanding what public health does. I had no idea."

Sheehan had done some part-time data entry work for a local public health agency during her college years, so she had a little bit of knowledge of the clinical side of things, but she hadn't interacted with her local public health agency growing up.

She says, "Prior to getting into food service and learning that side of public health, I thought public health was services that help people who are underprivileged. That was my extent of public health knowledge. It didn't affect me personally."

She knows differently now. “Our health department now has so many programs that extend beyond programs for reduced cost. There are so many things that people can get involved in – free services for the community that they can get involved with.”

The Jefferson County Health Department serves more than 220,000 county residents. It operates with an annual budget of more than \$5 million. Along with public health education and clinical services, it offers food handling safety training, food establishment permitting, plan reviews for new food establishments and inspections.

Despite all these programs and services, Brandy says the one question people ask her most often is, “Where should I NOT eat?”

She says, “It kind of makes me laugh. Part of our job as inspectors is to make sure food is safe, but we’re writing these reports day after day, and they are there for people to read, but they seem surprised. They are not secret reports, they are for the safety of everyone. We’re going in and doing our inspections and writing reports, we’re not trying to hide our findings from anyone.”

As a public health employee, Brandy is in a perfect position to be an ambassador for public health. She says she wants people to better understand the role of the food inspector. Food inspectors enforce the Missouri Food Code and local ordinances within their local jurisdictions. They also provide valuable information and education about food safety principles and practices, in order to help ensure the food served in their jurisdiction is safe for the public.

“Every inspector is different. Some inspectors are easier to work with than others, but I want people to have the perception that public health is there to teach and help. Seeing inspectors coming in and out, we sometimes get an enforcement rep that ‘they just want to write a bunch of violations’, but we are all on the same team. We are all just trying to see that everyone is safe.”



Sheehan admits that her focus is primarily on environmental public health, because that is what she does day to day. But, she adds that as she has become familiar with her role, she’s had time to reflect on her data entry experiences and rethink her earlier perception of public health.

“Overall I think public health is huge,” adds Sheehan. “It has changed so much over the years. We now have multiple locations, mobile wellness and dental vans that can go out in the community and reach areas where people can’t travel. We are now going out to nursing homes, daycares, schools. Public health has taken on a whole new life and is maybe getting more positive recognition for that. I think people are realizing there is so much more there. There is a lot of knowledge in public health and people that really care.”

Sheehan is one of those people – a positive influence and an influential ambassador for food safety and the reach and value of public health to every member of her community.

To learn more about environmental public health services and how the Jefferson County Health Department is working to build a #HealthierMO, visit their website at www.jeffcohealth.org.

The #HealthierMO initiative is seeking more stories like this one that demonstrate how partners in Missouri's greater public health system are working together to transform the future of public health in our state and offer every resident the opportunity for a healthier life. If you have a story to share, message us on Facebook @HealthierMO or email Communications Coordinator Jaci McReynolds at jmcreynolds@healthiermo.org. Learn more about the initiative and how you can get involved at HealthierMO.org or on Facebook @HealthierMO.