

## **Ardyth Gillespie, Ph.D.**

### **Retired Faculty Member from Cornell University Community Nutrition Program in the Division of Nutritional Sciences**

Dr. Gillespie, a retired Professor at Cornell University and former president of SNEB (1996-1997) served on the Board of Directors from 1990-1997. She has dedicated her career in nutrition to collaboration, relationship-building, and innovation. Actively engaged in research and extension/outreach, she developed the Collaborative Engaged Research (CER) methodology with scholars, change agents, and community food system stakeholders. She applied the method in her studies of family and community food decision-making. Notably, her recent contribution to nutrition education includes an updated nutrition communication framework in the introductory chapter, Communication is the Essence of Nutrition book *Communicating Nutrition: The Authoritative guide*<sup>1</sup>. This framework, rooted in Dr. Gillespie's extensive years of investigation and involvement in leadership development projects with community-based leaders including Cooperative Extension, underscores her commitment to supporting transdisciplinary and translational research. In pursuit of integrating research, education, and extension, Dr. Gillespie emphasizes the value of co-learning and co-creating, noting, "We started calling this approach University-Community partnerships. And then I realized it was better described as Community-University partnerships."

"Why are we talking about communication? I thought this was a nutrition project." Dr. Gillespie recalled, reflecting on the resistance she faced when attempting to contribute to communication models as a graduate student in a multi-state nutrition education project. Another challenge she identified in her career was the dilemma between prioritizing community development inclusivity and navigating the competitive academic environment. This dilemma was further exemplified by a thought-provoking question raised by her audience during a conference: "If you were given the option to collaborate with a well-organized community group that would make research easier, or with a community in greater need, albeit requiring more time and effort, which would you choose?" She reluctantly responded, the latter – after you are tenured.

In grappling with disciplinary boundaries and community development dilemmas, Dr. Gillespie realized the importance of allies and understanding broad perspectives. Following her presentation at her first-ever SNE conference in 1980, she became more engaged in the society due to a broadened view of nutrition gained from attendees and members working in diverse settings, including policy, community, non-profit, and for-profit sectors. "That was a really good learning experience for me. I also think it benefited SNE that we could share different perspectives and come to some kind of SNE policy agreement," she added.

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Gillespie co-authored with her former student Barbara Mayfield in the Chapter 1: "Communication Is the Essence of Nutrition Practice" (Mayfield & Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, 2020).

For Dr. Gillespie, involvement in SNEB has profoundly influenced her commitment to partnership development. She expressed respect and appreciation for Dr. Rebecca Mullis, a past president of SNEB (1995-1996), whom Dr. Gillespie described as “a thought leader” with whom she connected through SNEB due to shared interests in building partnerships and thoughtful approaches to nutrition education. In the early 1990s, amid heated discussions regarding the food industry's impact on healthy eating, Dr. Gillespie found particular inspiration in Dr. Mullis's emphasis on the significant potential for public health through collaborative relationships with the food industry, foreseeing broader impacts of health programs. Although Dr. Gillespie primarily focuses on community-university partnerships, her conversations with Dr. Mullis have encouraged her to think deeper and broader about building effective relationships to foster change in food and nutrition behavior. “These are the kind of relationships that make SNE feel like family and allies,” she said.

In reflecting on current practices and trends in the nutrition field, Dr. Gillespie offers valuable insights, cautioning against the pervasive “scaling up mindset” and “tech-forward thinking”. She emphasized that “bigger is not necessarily better”, advocating instead the merit of being small for efficient relationship building, particularly in light of declining SNEB membership. Embedded in an increasingly digitalized era, she recounted examples early in her career when colleagues eagerly embraced new video technology for nutrition education to reach a larger audience. As illustrated in the Nutrition Communication framework, Gillespie emphasizes the importance of defining one’s audience and setting goals (ideally with audience members) before selecting the channel/technology to achieve these goals. She emphasizes that technology “needs to be thought of as a tool, not as the end in itself”. In closing, Dr. Gillespie urged early career professionals to embrace diverse perspectives with open-mindedness and actively engage in translational science to help build sustainable, just, and equitable community food systems that support health and well-being.

In retirement, Dr. Gillespie is learning creative non-fiction writing. She is in the early stages of a family memoir as the fifth generation of Harrises who grew up farming in Cass County Iowa where she now lives and grows food with her husband.

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