



All YOU NEED IS Love

The story behind
the amazing
Janice Baker

By Joy Blackburn MSA Staff Writer



Over the last five years, Janice Baker has become one of the MSA’s most popular guest speakers, which – considering she’s in San Diego and can only meet with us over zoom — is remarkable! Of course, she’s funny and smart, and she’s happy to share the spotlight with her cats, turtles, and enormous iguana. But there’s something magical about the record-breaking viewership she attracts. I spoke with Janice recently to find out what that might be.



Registered Dietitian Janice Baker and her sidekick, Spanky, when she was still a mere pup of an iguana at two-and-a-half feet.

“I don’t ‘should’ all over people.” Janice laughed along with me as I enjoyed this turn of phrase. “I listen, then I recommend, but I never tell people what they ‘should’ do.”

Janice explained that everyone, including the two of us, has their own issues going on. “We can affect some of these issues through what we eat,” she acknowledged, “But it’s tricky.” Everyone is different; their experience, their background, their culture and traditions. Janice spends time with patients pulling on the threads of their medical history, but also, and importantly, their personal history. “Food is a source of shared happiness between people, and I want to be careful not to strip that away.” Janice strongly believes that happiness is as important to our health as fiber and protein. “If having, say, a donut once in a while makes you happy, then that donut is an important part of your diet.”



Janice enjoys a little afternoon sun with her rescue turtle, Frankie.

I’ve never heard a dietitian say anything like this. How did Janice Baker develop such a generous and well-rounded view of her work?



“Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo is a beautiful campus! I feel so fortunate that I was able to attend this university!”

“I had no idea what I was getting into!”

Janice grew up as a child of the 1960s and 70s. Her home was stocked with magazines, chronicling the rise of the hippie movement, including the push for natural foods and better nutrition. When it came time for Janice to choose a college major, Nutritional Science felt

like a natural fit. “I just sort of signed up before realizing I would need so much chemistry and microbiology!” She laughed as she remembered how surprised she was. Her bachelor’s degree program was similar to pre-med with food science classes added on top, plus a hospital internship followed by an MBA program. “I didn’t plan for any of this,” she admitted. “But I put my head down and just kept going.”

By the time she passed the national Registered Dietitian exam, the industry had entered a period of rapid change, and Janice now found herself right on the cutting edge.

Into the Fray

Urine tests and insulin as the go-to treatment plan for diabetes were giving way to more accurate and lifestyle-friendly blood glucose meters.

“You know those GLP-1 medications, like Ozempic” Janice asked, referring to the new diabetes drugs that are all over the news. “I was working with those 20 years ago!” Janice explained how scientists identified a molecule in the saliva of a Gila monster that allows the reptile to go for months without food. Glp-1 is made by mimicking this molecule. Her enthusiasm for these topics was infectious.



Janice graduated with her Masters Degree just as the industry entered a revolutionary period of change! It was challenging, exciting, and ripe with opportunities for the young Dietitian.



“Twenty years ago, that first generation glp-1 had to be mixed and injected twice a day. Today they’re so simple that everyone is using them, even people who don’t have diabetes!”

This handsome thing is the inspiration behind the new diabetes drugs that everyone is suddenly using for weight loss. Glp-1 drugs mimic the molecule in the Gila monster that allows the animal to go long periods without eating.

Suddenly, Janice went quiet.

“The thing is,” she said thoughtfully, “medicine is medicine. It’s neutral. But in some people, it can open up

something really dark.” Over the course of Janice’s years in practice, she encountered cases of dramatic excess – including among celebrities. Oprah Winfrey publicly revealed her struggles as she touted one diet plan after another on her TV show. A new term was coined to describe what we were all watching: “Weight Cycling.”

“Karen Carpenter died of anorexia nervosa when I was first working in the hospital,” Janice continued. The coroner found nothing in Ms. Carpenter’s stomach but ipecac syrup – a vomit-inducing drug. “We had other patients with the same condition. Many of them would die too, because we didn’t yet know what to do for them.”

“People want to be heard, not fixed.”

— Janice Baker,
Registered Dietitian

Families who may not understand what they are looking at can inadvertently worsen matters. “I’ve had a front row seat to the shame and stigma in medicine,” Janice admitted. “The mental side of healthcare is so important.”



Janice’s professional mantra is: “People want to be heard, not fixed.” The success she’s had with this simple approach has impressed her peers. “I ask questions. I ask about their goals, but also about what else is going on in their lives. What have they tried before and why did it fail?” The relationship she builds becomes as meaningful to her patients as her dietary consultations.

Janice working with kids at a diabetes camp back in the 1980s. Back then, urine tests and an older form of insulin were the only tools at her disposal.

Distance is a Construct

Janice met Nikki Pfeiffer way back when they were young mothers with elementary school-aged children in a San Diego program for Gifted and Talented students. The GATE program, as it was called, often relied on parents to present ideas that would mentally stimulate the kids.

Nikki adored that program. Speaking to me separately, she recalled dialing up the Salk Institute on a whim and asking for a donation. To her surprise and delight, they responded. “They sent us kits that allowed each child to test their own DNA! The kids were so excited,” she told me. “Years later, my son was furious when he lost his test results during the move to Colorado!” Nikki laughed. “And you know? It was this experience — cold-calling an organization to ask for help — that taught me how to do the job I’m doing today.”

Nikki certainly impressed young Janice with her budding talent! “We kept in touch over the years,” Janice said, “And Nikki called me for advice when she was diagnosed with MS.” Janice admitted she knew little about MS at the time but has been studying neurological conditions since.

Unlike Nikki, Janice stayed in San Diego. “It wasn’t until 2020, when we all started using Zoom, that I was able provide these classes for Nikki. It’s a lot of fun,” she told me. “The MSA members who join the Zoom classes are wonderful. And smart – they ask really insightful questions!”

Janice reflected on her renewed work with Nikki, and how this has been a wonderful but bittersweet chapter. “It reminds me that life is short and that we need to remember what we’re here for. There’s so much despair in the world. If we can do some good and comfort people... if we can share a glimmer of hope... you can’t put a price on this.”

As a young mom, Nikki Pfeiffer cold-called the famous Salk Institute in La Jolla and asked them to donate a project for the elementary school kids in San Diego’s Gifted and Talented program. To her surprise, they complied!



Then Janice Baker, child of the sixties, fittingly ended our interview with a quote from The Beatles: “In the end, the love you take is equal to the love you make.”

And *that right there* is likely the magic behind Janice’s popularity. 🌟

Janice’s classes are well-attended and her class videos are actively reviewed.

