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Draft case study – Martha McCulloch

Being diagnosed with cancer can affect people in all sorts of ways. But prompting a life-changing decision to train to become a food scientist is not the most common outcome of receiving such devastating news.

Martha McCulloch was just 32 when she was diagnosed with skin cancer four years ago. The single mother-of-two from Cumbernauld, near Glasgow, was working in catering at the time, but had never really settled in to any job. “Falling ill made me think about things quite a lot,” said Martha. “I had left school with no qualifications and spent several years working in supermarkets and shops.

“Eventually I did a course in catering and hospitality because I wanted to work with food. I love cooking, it has always been a real passion of mine. But with two teenage children, the hours in catering were often difficult and things never seemed to work out.”

After making a speedy recovery from her illness, Martha decided the only way to get her career kick-started was by going back into education. “I’d had a job for about six months working in a nursery,” she said. “I was asked to come up with a healthier menu for the kids and I loved it. I learned all about nutrition and allergies, but unfortunately the nursery was short of money and couldn’t keep me on.

“Being ill made me more aware of my own health and I decided working with food and nutrition was what I wanted to do full-time. I’d also worked with an environmental health officer who told me a lot about food safety. The way he described his job really appealed to me, so I decided to just go for it and go back to college to get the qualifications I needed.”

Martha enrolled at the Glasgow College of Food and Technology – now part of Glasgow Metropolitan College – to do an access course in food science and environmental health. “At first my aim was to be an environmental health officer,” she said, “but I enjoyed the food science side of things more. So after that year I decided to stay at the college for a further two years to complete an HND in food technology. After that, I found out I could do one year at university to get a degree. I decided doing that would leave me with more options going forward.”

After four years of study, Martha is due to graduate this summer with a BSc in food and consumer science from the University of Abertay in Dundee. Juggling her studies with working to support her son, now 19, and daughter, 16, has not always been easy – for the past year, as well as travelling to Dundee every week day, Martha has worked every Saturday and Sunday in a local garden centre. But she insists all the hard work has been worth it to get a second chance at a career.

“I’m really excited about the future,” she continued. “What I’ve learned over the past four years has given me so many options for the future. I’ve studied food safety, nutrition, food production and food marketing. I’ve also got valuable work experience under my belt from a 10-week placement I did at Nairn’s Oatcakes factory in Edinburgh, as part of my final year degree course. I was asked to go in and come up with suggestions for measuring efficiency and reducing waste, which was quite a daunting challenge. But it was great to put a lot of the theory I have learned into practice and see how food science can be applied in the workplace.”

Looking beyond her graduation, Martha is confident she has picked a profession in which she will never be short of work. According to Improve, the food and drink sector skills council, one in four vacancies for food scientists and technologists in the UK remain unfilled because of a shortage of people with the right qualifications. “If you are looking for a change of career,” says Improve chief executive Jack Matthews, “food science is full of opportunities. There are all sorts of training routes available, including part-time degree courses for people who need to keep working. Job-wise, it’s full of exciting opportunities - you can take your pick from being a nutritionist, marketing consultant, food safety officer or even inventing new variations of your favourite foods. Salaries start at around £25,000, with the top earners commanding salaries of up to £70,000.”

Having been bitten by the learning bug, Martha admits she is not quite ready to leave her studies behind, and is now considering doing a teacher training course to become a food technology teacher. Encouraging more young people to take up food science and technology is a priority for the food industry, and Martha believes she act as a positive role model to demonstrate the wide range of opportunities the subject offers. “And if I go into teaching and don’t like it,” she says, “I know there are plenty of other things I can do with my qualification. Having had the experience at Nairn’s, I know working in food manufacturing is something I can now do. When I just had a catering qualification, I could only get jobs in kitchens, but now there are lots of doors open. It is very exciting and I really feel like I am finally getting to where I want to be.”

Food scientist fact file

- Food scientists and technologists are in demand. There are 2,000 vacant positions for food scientists in the UK’s food and drink manufacturing industry and targets to recruit up to 10,000 more by 2014.
- Food scientists and technologists are responsible for everything from ensuring food is safe to eat to developing and marketing new products. So if you have ever fancied inventing your own range of chocolates, smoothies or ready meals and getting them on to supermarket shelves, food science is the thing for you.
- There are more and more ways to become a food scientist. Traditionally, a solid scientific background, with at least two science A-Levels, was required to get on to a degree course in food science. But many leading colleges and universities now offer access courses and foundation degree courses for people with little or no scientific background. NVQs and other vocational qualifications allow people to study food science in the workplace and many courses are offered part-time to encourage more mature students to consider a change in career.

For more information about training, jobs and career opportunities in food science and technology, visit www.improveltd.co.uk.

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Note to editors

Improve is one of 25 sector skills councils established by the government to take the lead in driving up skills in the workplace in order to promote higher productivity and stronger competitiveness for UK businesses in the global market. Funded primarily by the government, sector skills councils are also supported by employers in their sectors, whose needs they represent when stimulating change among the providers of education and skills. Sector skills councils work closely with employers to promote greater commitment to improving skills in their workforces, and with schools, colleges, universities, and private training organisations to improve the provision of basic skills training and to make vocational and occupational training more relevant to the modern commercial climate.

Issued on behalf of Improve, the food and drink sector skills council, www.improvetd.co.uk, by Nexnet PR, Leeds, www.nexnet.co.uk. For further information call Nexnet on 0113 247 0029 or email katrina.gill@nexnet.co.uk or paul.newham@nexnet.co.uk.