

last word

My job in paradise

by Jennifer Harris

When I was diagnosed with celiac disease more than 10 years ago, I couldn't have imagined it would lead me to a new career.

I am the gluten-free product specialist at Return to Eden, a health food store in Atlanta. And it's the most fulfilling job I have ever had.

Like most newly diagnosed celiacs, I struggled to find gluten-free foods at the local grocery store. A typical shopping trip took about an hour and a half. I usually came out with about four items and a pounding headache from all the label reading.

Hungry and frustrated, I turned to the Internet and started reading and researching to find food that was healthy, tasty and gluten free.

As many of you know, this is not an easy task today, and it was even more difficult a decade ago.

Times change

Fast forward ten years and I am able to put my product knowledge to good use as a gluten-free product specialist. I was hired when the owners of Return to Eden decided that a significant number of their customers wanted someone with gluten-free expertise to research, recommend and taste gluten-free food.

After all, all gluten-free food is *not* created equal, so it needs to be evaluated before hitting the shelf.

Through my job, I get to be the person I desperately needed ten years ago. Someone who could help me grocery shop, find recipes and give me cooking tips. Someone who could help me find restaurants with gluten-free menus, direct me to local support groups, and most importantly "hold my hand" and guide me as I negotiated the gluten-free diet.

I can't describe the joy I feel when a customer's face lights up after having discovered there is *good* gluten free food at their fingertips. One man was as delighted as a kid in a candy store as he loaded his cart with new gluten-free foods. He even went next door and bought a cooler and ice to pack up frozen items for the hour and a half trip back to his home. He now comes back twice a month to restock.

What a product specialist does

I do a lot of things at the health food store to help gluten-free shoppers, but most importantly, I mark all of our gluten-free grocery products with a little green "Gluten Free" sign. This sign makes it really easy to find gluten-free food while eliminating all the tedious ingredient label reading (unless there are more allergens to avoid).

The second most important part of my job at Return to Eden is giving guided store tours. I point out all the gluten-free products we carry while walking a customer through the store. I personalize their shopping experience.

Meanwhile, the kinds of things I do continue to grow as the needs of our gluten-free shoppers evolve.

I recommend product lines based on my own research and customer requests. I participate in support group meetings, coordinate store events and go to trade shows. I contact local doctors' offices to give them a gluten-free product list and a fact sheet about what I do at Return to Eden to give to their patients.

To stay current on gluten-free topics, I do research using magazines such as *Gluten-Free Living* (www.glutenfreeliving.com) and groups such as the National Foundation for Celiac Awareness (www.celiaccentral.org).

When I talk to people with celiac disease about the gluten-free diet, I always advise them to do their own research. There is a great deal of misinformation out there, so it is important to form your own opinion based on factual research.



I feel so lucky to have found my calling as a gluten-free product specialist. I suspect there aren't too many others out there with a job quite like mine. It would be great if other health food stores and groceries would consider hiring someone like me to guide their customers through the world of gluten-free products.

I also hope more people like me, who are passionate about gluten-free food and helping others, will market themselves to their local stores. As the number of people being diagnosed with celiac disease continues to grow, it shouldn't be too hard to convince them how important someone who knows about the gluten-free diet can be.

As you can see, Jennifer Harris loves her job at Return to Eden, a Natural Foods Market that has been in business for more than 15 years. It is co-owned and family operated by Josh and Jodi Wittenberg. They strive to support those who are on restricted diets, especially the wheat-free/gluten-free diet. They have made it their mission to provide pure foods and supplements, support organic products, and encourage health education. You'll find more information at www.return2eden.com.