Mary Wilson knew from a very early age that she wanted to teach people about nutrition. She just always thought she’d be doing it from behind the counter of her father’s supermarket.

Wilson, a nutrition specialist for university of Nevada Cooperative extension since 1989, grew up in tiny Buffalo, Wyo., where her grandfather started the store in 1927 and her father took it over in 1962.

Growing up, Wilson worked almost every job in the place—from keeping the books to stocking the produce section. Even after she’d moved away to study nutrition at the University of Wyoming and later at the University of Arizona, she always figured she’d return to Buffalo, a ranching town of about 3,900 residents, and run the supermarket.

But after her dad retired, Wilson’s career path took a sharp turn and she found herself working for Cooperative extension, where over the years she has developed dozens of programs that have reached thousands of Nevadans with important information about nutrition and food—what to buy, what to avoid and how to make sure your diet is healthy.

Looking back, she feels she made the right choice.

“I feel blessed to have had the opportunity to work with Cooperative Extension,” Wilson says. “I have always enjoyed getting out in the community and helping people. I never grow tired of that.”

While developing such long-lasting programs as “Calcium, It’s Not Just Milk,” “Apple a Day” and “Eat Smart Live Strong,” Wilson has touched the lives of tens of thousands of Nevadans, from senior citizens to young children and from Clark County to Washoe County.
**Sharing expertise with colleagues and consumers**

Wilson’s programs, classes and online courses have taught Nevadans about a remarkably broad range of topics, from coronary heart disease to wellness to food safety. In many cases, her work has reached the people who need it the most, including seniors receiving commodity foods and low-income families.

What’s more, Wilson has generously shared her expertise with nutrition experts around the country and within Cooperative Extension. Since Wilson took over in 2005 as the administrator of Cooperative Extension’s Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) Education grant, formerly known as Food Stamp Nutrition Education Program, the number of federally funded extension programs has grown from six programs to 16, and the amount of grant funding has jumped from $427,742 to more than $1.22 million.

As the state coordinator for the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program, she has taken a national leadership role, such as when she coordinated pilot research in five states to test a new evaluation strategy for the program. Her close examination of the geographic areas being served by the expanded Food program led her to recommend hiring paraprofessionals for the program.

**Partnerships are central to her programs**

In addition to her leadership and skilled management, Wilson also enjoys collaborating with University experts from other disciplines. One example is her 20-year-old “Apple a Day” program, in which she has partnered with the School of Medicine to deliver free educational materials through physicians’ offices about proper nutrition. She also recently worked with extension exercise physiologist Anne Lindsay on a training program called “Eat Healthy Be Active”, an online chronic disease and injury risk-reduction program that emphasizes good nutrition and physical activity to improve employee health and decrease absenteeism and health care costs.

One of her favorite programs, and one that surprised her with its popularity, is called “Eat Smart Live Strong,” where she teams up with extension horticulturist Angela O’Callaghan to teach seniors how to grow herbs indoors and then use those herbs to prepare tasty meals from the commodity foods—such as canned vegetables and fruits, canned meat and whole wheat pasta—the seniors receive.

While doing research prior to developing the program with O’Callaghan, Wilson interviewed several seniors and determined that many were at risk of malnutrition. They didn’t understand how food expiration dates worked, and they were frequently tired of eating the same commodity foods over and over.

**Secret ingredients of success**

Wilson and O’Callaghan have conducted the class several times since launching the program, and they are enjoying great success. O’Callaghan shows seniors how easy it is to grow herbs and small vegetables in their homes, and Wilson demonstrates recipes using the herbs and the commodity foods. Usually there is a tasting, and one of the seniors’ favorites is glazed carrots with mint grown on the windowsill.

“Seniors love to come to this class,” Wilson says. “People generally aren’t that receptive to nutrition classes because no one wants to make the kind of changes I’m usually asking them to make.

“But this class is different,” she adds. “After the first session (of a five-week program), they’re hooked.”

Wilson’s analysis found that participants eat more fruits and vegetables after completing the program. She also found that the potential risk for malnutrition among people who have completed the program declines dramatically. But just as importantly, seniors come away from the class feeling that they have more control over their lives and are less helpless in dealing with problems, Wilson says.

“I threw away a million bad habits,” says one participant after a class at the East Valley Family Resource Center in Las Vegas. “This is one of the best things we’ve ever done here.”

**Looking for new ways to reach more people**

Wilson says the need for getting good nutrition information to low-income families has never been more important. She says that more than 310,000 Nevadans were receiving supplemental nutrition benefits in 2010—a 61 percent increase since 2009—and people are signing up for help at a rate of about 5,000 participants a month.

These difficult economic times—exacerbated by increasing health care costs—have prompted her to find more efficient ways to reach more Nevadans with vital information about their diets. That’s why she and Lindsay worked with Jill Wallace, a University instructional design expert, to develop the 12-week online education series for “Eat Smart Be Active,” which encourages worksite wellness by emphasizing nutrition and exercise.

Meanwhile, her “Calcium, It’s Not Just Milk” program uses a “train the trainer model” in an effort to reach even more middle school students in low-income areas about the importance of adequate calcium intake. By going into schools and training health instructors to deliver her curriculum, that program was able to reach 1,650 students in 10 schools last year.

This kind of work prompted her colleagues to nominate Wilson for the Extension Committee on Organization and Policy Award of Excellence.

“Mary is known for her professional skills and standards, but also for her kindness and concern for others,” says Jamie Benedict, an associate professor of nutrition in the College of Agriculture, Biotechnology and Natural Resources who has worked with Wilson on several programs. “She’s a great team player. She’s the team member who takes up the slack and inspires others to persevere.”

Extension Southern Area Director Jerry Buk agreed.

“She’s one of the hardest working, most passionate teachers I’ve ever worked with,” says Buk. “Her programs have made a huge difference over the years in the health of Nevadans. I shudder to think where this state would be without her work.”