

## FACE TO FACE



**Ursula Arens**  
Writer; Nutrition  
& Dietetics

Ursula has a degree in dietetics, and currently works as a freelance nutrition writer. She has been a columnist on nutrition for more than 30 years.

**Ursula meets:****GREG LESSONS**

**Nutritionist,  
London Fire Brigade (LFB)  
Associate Lecturer,  
London Metropolitan University  
Caroline Walker Trust:  
Nutritionist of the year, 2019**



*Ursula meets  
amazing people  
who influence  
nutrition policies  
and practices  
in the UK.*

Greg is the one-and-only in many ways. Not least his jump out of the fire into the frying pan. Meaning his career move from active duty as a firefighter, towards the food and wellness terrain of occupational nutritionist. Because he is bilingual (fire-talk and nutrition-talk). And because he has opened so many doors, for future nutritionists to support occupational groups.

He was always going to be a firefighter. Not being 18, he passed the time and completed a BTEC National Diploma in Public Services, while also completing an A-level in Sociology at night school. A lecturer suggested that doing a degree would allow him better prospects. "My father thought this was a work-evasion tactic, but I was lucky: it was the last year of free higher education," said Greg. He completed a three-year BSc in Exercise and Sports Sciences in 2000 at the University of Exeter.

Greg did a short stint as a personal trainer in a London City gym. It was great fun and a way to meet lots of interesting people, but perhaps a bit, in many ways, repetitive. So, Greg did what he had to do and joined the London Fire Brigade.

"You had to pass a difficult really intense 16-week training course," explained Greg. Initially the course leader felt he was too cucumber-cool to join the team. But Greg passed the hoops and loops needed to be a firefighter and enjoyed many years of adrenalin and camaraderie.

He has always been interested in health and nutrition and, in 2014, he decided to do a part-time Masters in Human Nutrition (Public Health/ Sports) at London Metropolitan University. With the juggling of leave days and shift swaps with kind colleagues, Greg managed to continue his full-time post as a firefighter. "It was quite difficult to master complex texts after such a long time away from being a student. I had hoped to learn the hidden secrets of nutrition science, but was surprised that many issues were so debated and up to interpretation. I was very excited by many of the new themes in nutrition research, such as the influence of diet on the microbiome and chrono-nutrition."

Greg was going to do his dissertation on the microbiome, but course leader Dee Bhakta had other ideas. She pointed to the obvious: his deep knowledge and affinity with the Fire Service made this the perfect theme for his dissertation and then found this to be unchartered territory for UK nutrition researchers.

So, Greg assessed the diets and health markers of eight watches (teams) of firefighters. They willingly had their body composition analysed and dietary behaviour assessed. Greg provided individual support and guidance on diet improvement to one group (vs a control group). "I was thrilled upon analysing the data," said Greg, as his pilot trial showed improved dietary behaviour resulting in significant body fat reductions. He presented his project



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to a meeting of the Nutrition Society and won the prize for best delivery – resulting in his study being published in the journal *Proceedings of the Nutrition Society*. The well-deserved holiday after the course was all the better with the revelation that he had passed with distinction.

Aside from jokes and constant ribbing from colleagues about his food focus, several senior staff at the London Fire Brigade heard about the nutrition project. "I had just finished presenting my project to a Borough Commander, when the alarm bell rang. So, I ran into action with the parting words, 'On that note, I've got to go'."

In April 2018, Greg was offered a detachment from professional duty, to test whether an extension of his nutrition intervention could work on a sample of 300 firefighters over a longer intervention period... and it did. He now circuits several London boroughs, delivering nutrition and health education to watches, assessing their nutritional status and offering one-to-one advice, plus general support and encouragement towards better dietary and lifestyle choices. He is delighted with the Nutrition Society's generous donation of a Tanita body composition analyser, and his previous reticence at public speaking and oral presentation is now long forgotten. Only a few months ago, he presented his updated project to the London Assembly at City Hall to great acclaim. "You should be incredibly proud of yourself," was a comment made.

I wondered about diets of firefighters. Were they really so different from Mr/s Average

Londoner? Greg explained that firefighters are a close group who work together and eat together. The convivial mealtimes influence calorie intake and constant alertness leads to speed eating habits. Foods purchased are group choices and so have to be popular, easy and quick to prepare, as well as meet a tight budget. In order to improve nutrition quality, Greg has to offer choices that are realistic and creative, providing small steps towards improvement. "Many watches now use wholegrain cereals, opt for fruits over cakes and biscuits and increase oily fish choices," said Greg. "The best way to find solutions, is to really listen to the problems."

Greg is now signed up to doing a PhD, which he hopes to complete in 2021. In parallel with his official post as Nutritionist for the London Fire Brigade, he lectures part time on Sports Nutrition at the London Metropolitan University. "What keeps me going is the overwhelmingly positive feedback I receive from firefighters on a daily basis."

Greg's achievements are impressive. And he has just clocked another: The Caroline Walker Trust Nutritionist of the Year (2019) award. But behind him, I detect the constant support of his nutrition lecturer, Dr Dee Bhakta and also the really solid encouragement by his employer, the London Fire Brigade. Greg has bashed open doors, firefighter-style, to demonstrate the benefits of nutrition support to professional groups. Others need to follow.