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George Sneller Transcript

JB: I'm Jeffrey Boyce. It's June 17, 2007. I'm here in Olympia, Washington, with Mr. George Sneller of the Washington State Child Nutrition Program. Thank you for being with us here today George.

GS: You're welcome; nice to have you here.

JB: Thank you. It's a beautiful state, my first visit here. Could you start by telling us a little bit about yourself, where you were born, where you grew up?

GS: I'm a native of Florida. I was born in Jacksonville, Florida, and spent most of my adult life living in Tallahassee, Florida, working for the state of Florida.

JB: That's the state capitol?

GS: Yes, the state capitol, and home of the Florida State University Seminoles, of which I'm a graduate. I worked for several different state agencies. All in all I worked for the state of Florida for thirty-five years before I retired. My undergraduate degree from Florida State is in accounting. I started off with the Department of Transportation in their Accounting Department, and went from there over to the Department of Education, where I worked as an accountant for the ESEA Title 1 Migrant Education Program, which was probably that influence that gave me the biggest love of kids, because I got to go into labor camps where these kids lived.

JB: These were migrant workers?

GS: Yes, migrant workers in Florida. Florida was, at the time, about the third largest state in funding for the ESA Title 1 Migrant Program. We had many, many great programs way back in the late '60s. We started the first pre-kindergarten program in the state using federal dollars. We started the Right to Read program for migrant education. We started a

Learn and Earn program for the older kids to teach them different skills. We bought many mobile homes and had them made into classrooms, and manufactured as classrooms as a matter of fact; put them close to the labor camps where the kids lived. The pre-K program kept kids from seven in the morning until seven at night while the parents were in the fields. The childcare food program helped feed those kids while they were in those pre-kindergarten mobile home classrooms. It was a wonderful program. And so I worked in that for a while and then I left temporarily and went over to the Department of General Services and I was the head of their Program Planning and Budget System office. I was kind of disillusioned with that because at that time state was implementing PPBS. It was a planning, programming, and budgeting system which was a brainchild of Secretary of Defense McNamara back in the Kennedy administration. It was a performance-based budget. It was really good if the legislature would have let us do it. But the legislature, as you might imagine, we had to do that in the program format and then we also had to do a line-item budget. One kind of over-ruled the other. It was kind of business as usual for about a year and a half, and so I decided that that wasn't something I really wanted to do. During that time I got my Masters degree from Florida State.

JB: In?

GS: Public Administration. And I was hired back by the Department of Education in the Migrant Education program. From there I moved to the ESEA Title One Basic program then on to Child Nutrition. I can't remember how many years that was before I finally retired from Florida, but it was another thing that got me back to where the kids are, got me back in the schools. I started off in the financial part of child nutrition, and I moved from there to the monitoring part. Back then we had AIMS. I can't remember what

happened before we had AIMS, what it was called. That evolved into CRE, what we have today, coordinate review, for monitoring the school nutrition programs. I started off in the financial, paying claims, overseeing that, and expanded from there, continued to deal with the financial part and the reporting, and then on into the review part of the program and then my boss decided to retire, so I applied for his job, and that's how I became State Director.

JB: In Florida?

GS: In Florida. I stayed there until I was, well, I was eligible for retirement five years before I retired, but I didn't really want to do that at that time. I was too young to do that. Florida had started a program, that if you were eligible to retire when they first started the program, you could go into what they called DROP, which was an early retirement system. So you could elect to retire, but you would still work for five years. You would do your same duties that you did before you retired. You'd get all the same benefits and all the same salary, and your retirement benefits would go into a tax-deferred trust. Plus, they would pay interest on it and give you a raise every July 1st.

JB: So, you started drawing retirement, but you couldn't access it for five years, before you actually retired?

GS: Correct. The agreement you had with the state was that at the end of five years you would terminate. I was thinking along that time about what I wanted to do when that five years was up. I didn't really want to quit working, because I was still too young. Two and a half years into that five years, the position came up out here, the State Director for Washington state. I thought that would be a nice change, and so I applied for it came out here for an interview, and the Superintendent said she wanted me to take the job.

JB: That's about the longest move you could make, unless you went to Hawaii or Alaska.

GS: That's what everybody says. People say, "What brought you out here?" and I say, "Well, I retired from Florida and moved out here to the same job that I had in Florida." and they say, "Well, you did it backwards. You're supposed to retire from Washington state and move to Florida." It was the best move I think I could ever make. The people out here are wonderful, the staff is great.

JB: And it's a beautiful area.

GS: It is beautiful. You've come at a really good time of year. The winter and the fall is not like this..... It's still kind of cool for June. I think it was 45 degrees this morning.

JB: It was very chilly.

GS: And here we are the 19th of June or whatever the day is. But the summertime, we have very little rain over here on the west side of the state. The state is very unique and quite different from Florida. I was used to a state with very large school districts. In Florida there are only 67 school districts, which is the county school system. Out here they have 296 school districts, so you can imagine.....we have some districts that have only eighteen students.

JB: In the entire district?

GS: In the entire district, and then we have Seattle, which is the largest one, that has around 40,000 student enrollment, and a 40,000 enrollment in the school district would be kind of a medium to medium-large school district in Florida. The school districts here, like I say, I've got 296 customers instead of 67 customers, so it's that many more people that we have to interact with to run the programs. It's a challenge, but also it's very

rewarding. There's a lot of local control in this state. The state allows local school districts to make decisions that fit the needs of that particular school district.

JB: So, it's not a cookie cutter that the state says everyone does the same thing.

GS: That's correct. In Florida, on the other hand, there were very state-mandated rules. The Board of Education, for instance, dictated competitive food rules and things like that. We here in the state of Washington allow the districts to make up their own policies; to do what they think is best. I don't know which is the best system. I know what I would like it to be.

JB: There are probably plusses and minuses to both.

GS: I think so. We have school districts that are so small. We just have one school district this year that's kind of going out of existence because they didn't get their local funding support. Instead of 296 we'll have 295 next year. The students in that district will have to go to other schools in the area. It's very expensive administratively in some cases; a lot more superintendents' salaries, a lot more other administrators' salaries. Comparing that to Florida you would have one superintendent for a very large school district such as the Miami-Dade School District. They have assistant, area superintendents under that, which I am sure are not inexpensive, but the economies of scale, I think, in the child nutrition program were evident in looking at the financial picture of the school districts' child nutrition programs in Florida vs. what we have here in Washington state.

JB: What about your first experiences with school lunch, when you were in elementary was there a school lunch program in effect in your school?

GS: Yes there was. It's an interesting story and I have very vivid memories of my first days in first grade. I went to kindergarten at a private kindergarten, but the first grade I

went to the same elementary school that my mother and father went to in Jacksonville, Florida, and it was called Norwood Elementary. I recall it was a two-story old brick building. We had to go outside of the building and walk around in front of the building and go down this walkway to the cafeteria, and we lined up outside the cafeteria behind the screen door that kept the bugs out; you can imagine Florida.

JB: Pretty warm I would imagine.

GS: Yes. And I remember the aroma of what was coming out of that cafeteria. It almost made me sick. I was thinking “This is not a good smell to me. This is the food I’m going to have for lunch.” I think the first experience I had when I walked in there and looked at that, it was peas and carrots....

JB: Oh, goodness, every kid’s favorite!

GS: And I thought “Oh my goodness, what’s going on here?” That wasn’t a very good experience. The school [where] I was supposed to start first grade was under construction and wasn’t finished yet. I can’t remember how long I was in Norwood Elementary School, but eventually the new school was ready. It was closer to home. We could walk to school. I went to that school, and for whatever reason, I don’t remember, the cafeteria equipment might not have been installed yet, and so every day the volunteer mothers would come in and we would have hotdogs and chocolate milk every day of the week, and I thought, “I have died and gone to heaven.”

JB: So that was the child’s dream.

GS: Going from peas and carrots to hotdogs and chocolate milk was wonderful.

JB: Oh what a great story! Then you went on to Florida State, you said. How did you get into child nutrition, it just happened to be that that opened up after you were working for the state?

GS: Right. It was interesting how that happened. I had spent quite a number of years working in the ESEA Title One regular program and the ESA Title One Migrant Education Program, and I reached a point where I needed to grow in a different direction I think. 'Most all of my professional life I had dealt with federal regulations, and so here's another program full of federal regulations. A position came open in the child nutrition program and I requested it. It was a lateral transfer; I got my same status. That's kind of what started it all off.

JB: This was all I Tallahassee?

GS: Right.

JB: You said, I believe, accounting and public administration degrees. Can you talk about how that prepared you for your career and how it developed?

GS: Well, I think it gave me a good background and foundation for the business side of school districts and how they use their resources to reach the goals that they want to reach organizationally. I am always interested in how a program is managed from the financial standpoint; public administration as well has to play a big part in that.

But, I think if you can really manage the program well financially and have a good business plan, you can provide the highest and best products to the students, which they'll want to eat. If you really watch your pennies and do the analysis that you need to do on your plate cost, your meals per labor hour, and all this kind of thing, and you do proper bidding and procurement, you get the best products for the best price. The more kids

eating, the more federal dollars you have coming into your program, the more revenue you have. We have a difficult time here in Washington State, because probably ninety percent of all our child nutrition programs lose money every year.

JB: Really?

GS: Yes. And they are supported tremendously by local tax collections. The people in Washington State have to periodically vote on what they call a local levy that supports maintenance and operations, those costs are outside of direct education services. That's a good sign, because people know that the program is poor and are willing to provide extra tax dollars to keep it going.

JB: Is it because of not enough participation, or what causes the shortfall?

GS: There are so many factors. I've sent one of my staff, who is no longer here, but I've got a replacement for that person, to the Institute's financial management training, the Train the Trainer.

JB: At NFSMI?

GS: Yes. And we put on a dozen workshops last year around the state to try to help the school districts look at their business plan and see how they were operating, and expose them to what's considered best practices. Hopefully, they'll improve with that as a resource. But the person left me and went back to the State Auditor's Office. So now I've hired a replacement, and he's also been to the training that NFSMI provides.

JB: Oh, good.

GS: He hasn't done workshops yet because he's still learning everything about the child nutrition financial world. It's a challenge.

JB: Well, maybe you can mentor him.

GS: I try.

JB: Did you have a mentor, someone who especially influenced you in child nutrition?

GS: I think that I had a great boss in Florida before I left. He recognized that I was kind of a person that would always stretch the limits to be creative and he allowed me to be creative.

JB: That's important.

GS: Yea. While I was there we developed a computer management information system from the ground up, using graduate students at Florida International University Computer Science school, and I think we built a really good program back when you didn't have all the national programs that are available today. He just kind of gave me a free hand on the development of that system, which I was really happy that he did. That was probably one of the best experiences that I've had in all the years that I've worked in government.

Other people that inspired me were local Food Service Directors. Jane Wynn in Florida was one; she is a great lady that had a fantastic program; managed it very, very well, and when I moved out here Carol Johnson, who was the Seattle Food Service Director; similar makeup people. Both of those have retired now.

JB: I spoke with Jane Wynn last week. I was trying to set up an interview with her in Ft. Lauderdale sometime this summer.

GS: I was going to ask you if you got a hold of Jane or if you were ever able to get up with Carol Johnson.

JB: Carol, no, but Jane I did talk to.

GS: Well, good, Jane's like the Energizer Bunny, she just keeps going and going and going, and she just does a wonderful job.

JB: Well, I look forward to meeting her.

GS: That will be a good experience for you.

JB: About this computer program, how did it work; the one that you talked about that you developed?

GS: The one that we developed in Florida; it was a PC based system. What we did, we first put out a request for proposals. And in Florida they required us first to go to the state university or higher Ed community. So we put requests for proposals out to community colleges and the university system and we got several that were very good. And at that time we didn't know if we wanted to go what they call PC-based platform or a higher level, more expensive work station based platform. So the university representatives came to visit us and they looked at what we did, what our requirements were and how we operated. The decision was made that we could get a system that would work really well that was PC based, and it was less expensive. This was back before we had all those sophisticated tools that we have today. Access, as a tool, might have been in its very beginning stages. We had Excel and we had Word. So we decided to go with the proposal, and I can't remember how much that cost us. It was very little money in today's dollars, \$15,000.00 maybe, to do the study as to how will the system look when it is designed. Once they did that and said "Ok, here is what we have, and this is what we would recommend, and this is how it would architecturally look" then we decided Ok, we'll go with the PC-based system. And because Florida International University had done such a great job in doing that analysis, we contracted with them to actually develop the system, because they knew our business rules and they knew how we processed things. Before all this we had an internet-based reimbursement claim system that was run

through the Florida Information Education Network, which was a series of regional databases around the state tied together electronically. It was a closed system; it wasn't like the internet. It was a closed system and so the person would dial up on a telephone modem and they would connect into a regional database, and then they would enter their passwords and go to our part and submit their reimbursement claim. That was getting old and slow and failing often, and so we decided we needed something better. So we used the internet; the whole thing was internet-based.

JB: Wasn't there a story you shared with me about a lady at one of the private schools?

GS: *Laughing.* That was a good story. I was going around the state training folks on how to sign on to the internet and put their claim in. This was a small Catholic school. I went that morning and introduced myself to the sister who was in charge of doing all this. We sat down at the computer and first, I showed her how to sign on, and this is what the screen looks like, and this is how to get to where you need to go, and this is what you need to do to put your data in. After I did that I said, "Now you sit down and we're going to do it live now. We're going to put in you month claim. It's ready to go." And so she did. She signed on and put in the numbers of her meals. And I said, "Does that look good to you?" And she said yes. And I said, "Ok, push the send button." And she did and in a few seconds it came back and said her claim was accepted, and she was going to get paid X dollars. She said, "Oh boy, that wasn't hard; that was really easy." And she walked over to the other part of the room and I thought, "Where is she going?" She went over and she stood in front of the printer. And I said, "Is something wrong?" And she said, "Well, I'm waiting for my check to come out." And I thought, "Wouldn't that be nice?"

JB: Not quite that speedy.

GS: Maybe someday we can get there. “Oh, I’m sorry. You’re going to get a warrant probably in two weeks or ten days.” She was really impressed with our technology of the day. It would really be nice if we could do it that way.

JB: What a great story! Talk a little bit more about the different positions you’ve held. Maybe you could compare Florida experiences to Washington experiences, or is there anything unique about one or the other in the systems?

GS: One of the differences today between the two states is in Florida, when I first started in child nutrition, we administered the Childcare Food Program. We had the Summer Food Service Program, and we had National School Lunch and Breakfast Programs.

JB: When did Florida start the Breakfast Program?

GS: Oh, before I started in child nutrition; I don’t know exactly.

JB: So they’ve been doing it for quite a while?

GS: Oh, yes. And Florida also had some state supplement to support the Breakfast Program. Florida requires every public school to have a school lunch program, and that includes charter schools. They require every public elementary school to have a breakfast program, including the charter schools. And so I think when they made the requirement that everybody have a breakfast program, they supplemented it with some state dollars. And so we had to pay out the state dollars as well as the federal dollars each year. Washington State does not require any district to have any program with a few exceptions. Until just recently since I’ve been here, I think it was maybe two years ago, the legislature said that any school that doesn’t have a USDA Child Nutrition Program in an elementary school is required to send out free and reduced application forms to the parents. And if it comes back at least 25% of the students in that school are eligible for

free or reduced, they must have a lunch program. And they also require something similar for breakfast programs. If they already have a lunch program, if they don't have a breakfast program, if they meet the 40% eligibility requirement, they must have a breakfast program. So Washington State has been very good in giving state support to breakfast, as well as lunch, and they also support the meals in the summer program for about \$100,000.00. In addition to the federal reimbursement, the state gave us an extra \$100,000.00. We also have a program here in Washington State they call Meals for Kids, and that program has become an umbrella. The Meals for Kids provides incentive grants for school districts that don't have a program, whether breakfast or lunch, to either start a new program or enhance a program that they have. In other words, they may operate a program, but they're small and don't have the resources to replace a piece of equipment in the kitchen, this grant program can assist them in doing that. It's a competitive grant program, put out via advertisement every year. A committee reviews the grant proposals and selects the ones that we think will give the best bang for the buck. This year, the first year that the legislature appropriated \$70,000.00 for Meals for Kids for summer programs, and so the same thing; we received the grant proposals and reviewed them, and awarded them to those school districts that either wanted to start up a new summer program or expand one that they have. And so that's been a big help in getting the summer program going. The summer program is very hard to administer, because in many cases people don't want to work in the summer; they don't want to have the headache of administering it. They want to be off in the summer.

JB: I was wondering how that worked. Do the kids just come for lunch at the school?

GS: They can have lunch or breakfast or they can have a snack, and it's in any area that has 50% or more free or reduced eligibility, and the kids have to be 18 years of age or under. That's all; I mean they don't have to be poor. The feeding site just has to be in a geographic area that meets those economic conditions.

JB: Ok, so it's not at the school in the summer?

GS: No. It can be at a school. It can be at a park. It can be a program operated by a school. It can be a program operated by a church; or it can be operated by the Boys and Girls Club. We've had really, good support out here from our Washington State Dairy Council. They have provided radio spots all around the state that are worth, if the radio stations didn't donate the time, thousands and thousands of dollars. What they do is they advertise the program and they give a toll-free number that people can call to tell exactly where these programs are operating and on what days and what times.

JB: That's great.

GS: They have also, you might have seen on the table out here, given us big banners, they're about as long as this table, that people can put up at the feeding sites; kids under 18 can come and eat for free. Hopefully, that will increase the participation. Another big problem in summer is you don't have the school bus transportation to bring the kids to the site to feed them. We try to put [the sites] in neighborhoods where the kids are concentrated. We have a really innovative school district up north of here, the Kent School District, took an old bus that they got for free, painted it up on the outside like a big sub sandwich, installed trays on the back of the seats, just like on an airplane, took the bus around to where the kids were, put them on the bus, they sat there, ate their lunch, packed up and went to the next site.

JB: What an innovative idea.

GS: Yea, very good. I think we have another couple of school districts thinking about doing that.

JB: Oh, what a great idea.

GS: That's one of the great things that are going on out here.

JB: That's a lot of changes. Thinking back from early in your career until now, what have been some of the major changes that you've seen in the program?

GS: The major change is technology, and increasing federal regulations. We have new programs that weren't in existence before. The after school snack program is new. We have the fresh fruit and vegetable programs, that we've been BLESSED to have. We're in our fourth year starting next year in the fresh fruits and vegetables program.

JB: How does that program work?

GS: Oh, it's wonderful. The bad part about it, we only have 25 schools. We were one of the permanent states funded. We're funded through 2009, unless the farm bill carried forward with what they're thinking about doing now. We select 25 schools in the state to get funding through the special grant program to provide all the free fresh fruits and vegetables to kids in whatever manner is best suited to the individual schools. What we try to do here is go to great lengths to get schools, very small schools, medium-sized schools, and large schools, in areas that have limited access to fresh fruits and vegetables. We also consider high poverty, a high percentage of the free and reduced. We limit our schools to any that have the grades K-8. We have had a few, and we still do for next year, K-12 schools, but we don't have any just high schools. Our thought there is that if we can get these kids at an early age, we can improve their eating behaviors early so that they

will continue into their later years. And we do have some great anecdotal data on that. We have one middle school over in the Spokane area that had the program for two years, and what we found from the high school, where the kids leave the middle school and go to the high school, that the kids from this particular middle school were consuming about, I think she said, 20 or 30 percent more fresh fruits and vegetables at the high school, than the kids that were coming from other middle schools.

JB: That didn't have the program?

GS: That didn't have the program. That's right. As a matter of fact the manager of the high school was saying, "They're eating me out of house and home. I can't keep up and I don't have enough budget to buy the extra fresh fruits and vegetables. The other thing that we have that's a difficulty in this program is that our growing season here in the state is not consistent with the school year. In other words, the major things we have as far as fresh fruits and vegetables, apples and pears, are harvested in the summertime. We are unlike Florida or California, or Arizona, or Texas, where they have a higher propensity to have those vegetables, but we try real hard to encourage our schools to buy locally. When you're trying to introduce new things the kids aren't used to eating, and develop new tastes, it's hard to buy locally to cover all the possibilities, and so we end up buying from out of state.

JB: How does Washington handle the procurement from out of state?

GS: It's up to the districts.

JB: So each district does its own purchasing?

GS: Yes. They of course have to follow state procurement regulations, which are stricter than the federal. We have a requirement to bid if the expected cost will be \$75,000 or

more and then it goes down to getting quotes if the cost is less than \$75,000. I think the federal level is \$100,000 or more but the state is more restrictive on that. And you know people want to buy locally and give preference to local producers, which I can understand. The food would be fresher; it doesn't have to travel as far.

JB: Exactly.

GS: But then USDA's got a prohibition against awarding bids using geographic preferences. I think Congress and the Farm Bill's probably working on that one as we speak. It will be interesting to see when it comes out what's in it. One of the great things that I see in the Farm Bill now is that they still have a provision in there, I think for \$100,000,000.00 over I don't know how many years, to expand the Fruits and Vegetables program to every state, instead of just the few states that we have now, which would be great.

JB: That would be wonderful.

GS: Yea.

JB: That might be one of the answers to the child obesity problem.

GS: That would be a step in the right direction I think. Child obesity, as you mention, has been on everybody's plate for some years and people want to fix it now. But it took 25 years to get to where we are now, so it ain't gonna be fixed today or tomorrow, or even next year. But I think as far as that issue is concerned, everybody knows about it and everybody's aware of it. Many people think it's all the schools' issue to fix it but it's going to have to be a cooperative effort between not just the schools; you're going to have to have a lot of family involvement, you've got to reach the families. When you go into a restaurant and you see a baby in a high chair and they're feeding him French fries,

they're developing those early tastes very early in their life, and when they go to school that's what they want.

JB: Lots of salt and grease.

GS: French fries and pizza.

JB: Exactly.

GS: It's something the schools can help; the schools can go a long way, but there's got to be a cooperative effort I think.

JB: Everybody's got to do their part.

GS: The whole health community, right, the PTA's going to have to get on board.

JB: Thinking back over your career, if you had to come up with one thing, what would you say is your biggest accomplishment or the thing that you're most proud of that you've been able to enact or to do?

GS: Hmm. I suppose that the development of the computer system and making it work. Whenever you bring something new to people that work for you, or your customers, it will forever be a big challenge, because people will resist change; most people will resist change.

JB: Human nature.

GS: Most people will resist change, and the system that I changed, or assisted in changing in Florida, it was typical. Everybody thinks that what's been working for years, why do we need to change it. We had the same thing here. When I first came to Washington State, the state agency, in August, before I got here the following January, had purchased a computer system. Nothing had been done with it; it was just there. I said ok we are going to start with this program, we'll start with the Summer Food Service

program, and we're going to implement this program, and then we'll go from there to Child Care. It's difficult because number one, like I said, people resist change. Number two, you are responsible for doing two different systems at the same time. You have to run parallel because you rely on this one that's worked for years and here's something new that's going to change the way you work; are you getting the same results? The old system is giving you what you think is correct results; will the new system do that? And it won't; invariably it will not. And so you have to keep fine-tuning that new system until you've operated long enough, and so now you can say Ok, I can close down this old one and start this new one and this will be our official system. I can't say there's any one thing, but I think both of those experiences, what I learned in Florida, how to do and implement change, in a new system, because the system really drives, for the most part, how the system is designed is going to kind of dictate, in many areas of our administration program, how we do our work. And it was amazing. I've got positions here that I don't need anymore, because there's not the paper that used to come through. The system does all the calculations correctly. The system tells the customer if something's wrong because it won't accept it. So we're not here constantly sending documents back because they're incorrect since they know immediately if something's not correct. So it saves a lot of time, it saves manpower, it saves us money. That being said, the system cost us over a million dollars. That's over six years.

JB: It better work well then.

GS: Any system that you have that's going to assist you in the management of the program, not only in paying out reimbursement money, but all the management reports, and not just the report you need to meet USDA requirements, but your internal

management reports that you need just so that you can know what's happening out in the outside world.

JB: But that money was spread over, what, 246 districts you said?

GS: 296. That's the school districts, now, that's not talking about Child Care or Summer. Another thing that I didn't mention before, differences between Florida and here, Florida, while I was there, moved the Child Care program out of the Department of Education over to the Department of Health. They moved the Adult Care program out of the Department of Education over to the Department of Elder Affairs. In Florida the Commodities Distribution Program was administered by the State Department of Agriculture. So I had no experience in operating, or managing, or administering the Commodities Distribution Program when I came out here. Here in Washington State we administer all of the USDA Child Nutrition Programs including the Commodity Distribution Program..

JB: Oh goodness.

GS: And so it's another difference between the two, and another challenge. And if I didn't say it before, I've got excellent staff. The staff here knows their job and they do it very well. For the most part, concerning our customers' needs, you know when you're running a federal program you have to follow the regulations, which doesn't always make the customer happy, but in following the regulations and making sure that they know what those regulations are, we keep them out of trouble so to speak.

JB: And it makes everyone's life easier.

GS: Oh yea, oh yea. You know, it's not easy, to make sure, you try to know everything, you try to know the requirements, you try to exceed the requirements for the best possible

program delivery, but once you've been working in federal environment like I have, even though it's at the state level, it's administered based on federal requirements, those requirements change frequently. And so your computer system that you develop, or your management information system that you develop, is never finished. It always has to be fluid and you will always be finding, at least I do here, find things that you didn't think about, things that need to be changed, whether it's due to a change in the regulations, or a new program, or just something that would be another edit check that will alert you something that might be going on the shouldn't be.

JB: Catch the problem early.

GS: Yes. Catch it early and fix it early. You should manage the system, you should control the system, but sometimes the system manages you.

JB: Well, none of us are perfect, including computers.

GS: Oh no, oh no. You know the good thing we have over the system is we can think and be innovative. The system does exactly what you tell it to do.

JB: Exactly. Any other memorable stories you'd like to share with us today?

GS: I'm trying to think. I've had a really good experience with this Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program. I'm not able to visit as often as I would like. I'm not able to get out to schools as often as I would like.

JB: One thing you did mention, I wondered earlier. I meant to ask, you talked about the manufactured housing with the migrant workers in Florida. Was that not a problem with hurricanes?

GS: Oh definitely, definitely. The time I was there, we didn't have any major disasters.

JB: That's fortunate.

GS: And I left that migrant education program and went into child nutrition. You know those manufactured classrooms which came on wheels might have used up their useful life before any of those major hurricanes. Since I have been here and not in Florida, they have had a terrific hurricane season or two down there.

JB: I think we both got out of Florida just in time!

GS: Well, you're in Mississippi. You're close to it too, much closer than I. am. A memorable story, I came here on January 1, 2001. On February 28, 2001, I was in the building over here next door.

JB: The earthquake?

GS: It's a big castle and it's made of sandstone. Our office was on the 4th floor of that building; wooden floors and a roof that is made of copper, I think. And I was sitting in my little office and my desk started shaking. It was about 10:45 in the morning. And I had this big window right by my desk that's old, it's old glass and so it's rippled.

JB: Was this the old capitol building?

GS: This was the old capitol building, right. And so I'm thinking if I should be this close to the tall window in case it came down on me. Next to my office was a conference room with a big, round, stained-glass picture of George Washington. And there was a conference table in that room, and everybody's saying get under your desk. This is a standard procedure for earthquakes: drop, cover, and hold. And I didn't have any earthquake training.

JB: No experience with earthquakes.

GS: I had hurricane training. And so I looked and thought to get under that conference table. And I looked up there at George and I thought Oh goodness, if that big stained

glass comes falling down I don't want to be around all that glass, so I went out to the reception area and I got under the desk with one of the secretaries. And that was probably the longest forty seconds I've ever spent in my life. The building was, floor was almost like you were out in a boat in the gulf. It was moving that much; terrific noise. The building was shaking. I guess the copper roof might have had something to do with all that noise. Filing cabinets were turning over; PC monitors were falling on the floor; a lot of loud noise. So finally when it was over and stopped, an alarm went off in the building and everybody thought well, that's the sign to get out. And so we got ourselves together and stepped over the fallen bookcases and everything and got outside. The evacuation plan is to go to the park across the street, so everybody went over there. That siren, or that horn that was blowing, was not a sign to get out of the building. It was an alarm that said the power has failed, so the exhaust fans don't work. But the generator was still running in the building; and it was putting carbon monoxide in the building. It was hooked up incorrectly. Fortunately, everybody was out anyway. I think that was probably on a Thursday or a Friday. I was going to have to take a trip back east on that weekend or on Monday. So I had to go back and get my briefcase and my travel arrangements. And so when I got back they were letting people in the building about three at a time, still had no power, with an escort, with a hardhat, so you could get whatever you needed. And so I went back up there and that conference table that was in that room, that I was going to get under, about two seconds from getting under, but didn't want to because of the glass, about three or four hundred pounds of rock fell down from the wall and crashed into the table and drove it right into the floor.

JB: Oh my goodness.

GS: When I saw that my knees kinda buckled.

JB: No doubt.

GS: I was this far [holds his fingers very close together] from being under that table when that thing came crashing down. That's memorable.

JB: Did George make it through the earthquake, George Washington?

GS: Yes.

JB: Good, good.

GS: I was not able to get into that conference room for over a year. They maintain the building in an architectural, a historical [manner], so they had to find just the right brick. They did put some angle iron up there on that wall to keep it from falling down again. That was the major damage in the whole building, was that coming down.

JB: What a way to welcome you into the new job.

GS: And I thought well it was good I was in Florida and had hurricane training to get away from the windows and so that kept me from being squashed under the table.

JB: Well it did pay off then.

GS: Yea, yea. That was scary. I don't ever want to have to do that again.

JB: Well, we're glad you made it through so you could continue your career in child nutrition.

GS: I'm glad I made it through too. Speaking of my career in child nutrition, I'm on a ten-year plan. It's a self-imposed ten-year plan that when I took the job out here my plan is to finish ten years, which I've got about three and a half left to go, and then I move back to Florida.

JB: Back to Florida.

GS: Where the family is, yea.

JB: well, we wish you the best in those next three and half years and afterwards.

GS: It's a wonderful place. Like I said, and success we have is due not to what I do but what my staff does.

JB: I'm sure it's a combination of the two.

GS: They're absolutely wonderful people, and I try to give them the same opportunities and tools that I had from my boss, being open and flexible and encourage any kind of innovation or ideas; think outside the box is what we all try to do. Sometimes it's hard.

JB: Because we all resist change.

GS: We get bogged down keeping up, keeping up with what you have to do. It's a great place.

JB: Well, thank you so much for taking the time to share your story with us today.

GS: You're welcome. Thank you for coming.

JB: I'm happy to.