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John Dupre

John Dupre

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Jeffrey Boyce: I'm Jeffrey Boyce and it is May 16, 2022. I'm here in Mississippi, and today I'm talking with recently retired state director of child nutrition programs for the State of Louisiana, John Dupre. Welcome John, and thanks for taking the time to talk with me today.

John Dupre: Good morning, happy to be here.

Jeffrey Boyce: I'm glad to have you. Could we begin by you telling me a little bit about yourself, where you were born, where you grew up?

John Dupre: Absolutely. My name is John Nasen, N-a-s-e-n, Dupre. It's an old French name I'm told. My father and mother were Louisiana born and bred natives. They grew up here speaking only French, and they learned English in school, so the community they were in, it was extremely Cajun and French Cajun.

John Dupre: I was born in an area called Plaisance, Louisiana, just north of Lafayette, Louisiana. And I grew up speaking French and English together, so I've never learned French in school. The men only spoke French in the fields. And I grew up on a sweet potato farm. So I laugh, I can mess up two languages, rather than one.

John Dupre: So yeah that's kind of where I'm from in Louisiana, very much in the Cajun culture, that heritage, that sense of community and everyone supports everybody. You grew up living off the land, you raised everything you need, pretty much, to exist.

And the whole community does similar, so it's a very, very tight knit culture and community, which was fantastic to grow up in.

Jeffrey Boyce: Sounds like it. What are your earliest recollections of child nutrition programs? Were there breakfast or lunch programs when you were in elementary school?

John Dupre: Unfortunately, I did not attend a school that had the Lunch or Breakfast Program. So it was very new to me when it actually started as a career option for me later in life.

I went to a very small school that was very poor in the local community that the local residents supported actually.

John Dupre: So it was kind of different. You brought your own lunch to school every day and usually was a slice of frozen ham and two slices of bread, and very little. I mean that was pretty much what you ate in the day.

John Dupre: And so, when I realized the options that existed out there to make things so much better for kids, it really excited me, the thought of expanding these programs, that all kids could have access to a wonderful meal every day at school.

Jeffrey Boyce: So all through K through 12 there was no program for you?

John Dupre: No, Sir, no Sir, you brought your own bag lunch every day to school.

Jeffrey Boyce: Okay.

John Dupre: And as I said, we were very rural.

Jeffrey Boyce: About how many kids were in the school?

John Dupre: Oh, there was just a couple of hundred, not many. That's K to 12.

John Dupre: And back then a lot of people went to K-12 schools in rural communities so you knew everybody in the school. You knew everybody, whose brother and sister they were. There was no one who was unknown in the school.

John Dupre: And a lot of advantages to that, like I said, that tight knitness and also with that it's like you have a lot of brothers and sisters, so they get on you a lot. You learn to become part of the family, very quickly, so to speak.

Jeffrey Boyce: Well, after high school, did you go on to college.

John Dupre: Actually, my goal out of high school was to continue on the family farm. I didn't want to do anything but be a farmer. And so I had been farming small acreages throughout high school for myself, in addition to what my father and family did.

And so I had a herd of cattle, believe it or not, by the time I got out of high school. I started buying very young and raising cattle and selling calves and the whole nine yards. I was breaking horses, I did the normal country farm boy, cowboy type existence.

And my older sister went to college and she went into business and came back and decided that you wanted to marry and go back to school to become a school teacher.

So when she returned, I had a bad year farming with some of the Louisiana weather, where floods, I had to replant three times, so just to have a crop.

And I lost a lot that year. Let's say I lost everything except for the land that I had and that convinced me to try something else. And my older sister wanted me to go to college with her, take night classes at the

University of Southwestern Louisiana, now known as University of Louisiana at Lafayette.

And so I tried a class in college and I loved it. I absolutely loved college. It was unlike anything I had ever experienced. I was older and it was just a completely different way of thinking and learning than anything I had experienced in K-12.

So I went on, and I didn't know what I wanted to do, but I had a lot of friends who were into a weightlifting, bodybuilding, different things. Older people; so I knew I was interested in human nutrition.

So I got into the one area there, which was a dietetics program and completed my dietetics program there, got into food service to have jobs to support myself through college, and ended up at Lafayette General Hospital, working as a diet tech, running the kitchens on nights and weekends, stuff like that, and overseeing the patient menus that went out, and so it went from there.

I graduated in diabetics. I thought I would continue working at the hospital, get into some kind of management, hopefully, at some point, and I applied to Louisiana State University, hoping to take a graduate course at night maybe, just to try it.

And when I showed up, it's kind of a funny story. I borrowed a suit. I borrowed some boots. I borrowed a briefcase which I had nothing in it, to carry with me, because all the things I thought I should look like I didn't possess.

But luckily I had family and friends who possessed those things. And so I was kind of a coat of many colors from the borrowed stuff I had and showed up at what I thought was an interview to get into graduate school at Louisiana State University.

And I realized a couple outstanding faculty members and the head of the department I was applying to were talking about where they could put me, after they talked to me a while, where they could put me to teach and who I could do research with.

And I sat there quietly thinking 'I think they're about to offer me a job.' I mean I was, I was just shocked. And I guess, because I was older and maybe some of my experiences, especially with food service background in Lafayette.

And so I ended up going there as a graduate student and I worked, I taught classes, basic food preparation classes to kids coming into dietetics. I did research, a lot of lab research with tissue cultures, rats, all kinds of different things. And I stayed there and got my graduate degree in human nutrition and foods.

Jeffrey Boyce: And that would be in Baton Rouge?

John Dupre: Yes sir. Louisiana State University, LSU Tigers.

Jeffrey Boyce: Well, so how did you go from there into a career in child nutrition?

John Dupre: That's not so long a story. I left research. I thought I'd stay and get a PhD and do research, and I guess I burned out for a little bit.

And so I just went into the workforce and worked in food services, in different types of food service from fast food to evening - I won't name any chains, but different types of food services.

And I enjoyed it because for me it was almost thoughtless for a while, because I was very into food service and it wasn't the intensity of the research.

And so I did that for a while, and I got a call from the University, by a wonderful, the Vice Chancellor Norman Moore, who was over student services, asking if I was interested in being an assistant to him in student services, to oversee student services, assistant to the Vice Chancellor.

And so I thought about it and I said, "This is fantastic." I mean they were over everything from food services to student housing to career planning and placement, all student media, the health facilities on campus. So I went back there, and they were doing a massive reorganization in food services at the time, and they put me over it.

And so we went and did our studies and did all our research and we ran food services at the same time, did a massive reorganization and restructuring.

And I knew that was probably the end of that career. It was a set period of time to accomplish certain things and then move on.

And very fortunately during that time period, I had a fantastic woman who sat across the hall from me, who worked for Vice Chancellor Moore, named Barbara Jackson.

And Ms. Jackson was wonderful. We kept our doors open and we talked throughout the day about things.

And one day she said, "You know, there's a job opening for director of child nutrition programs in the State Department of Education."

I said, "Well that's nice." And I said, "You know, I'm sure they have someone selected already, and you know, it's wonderful."

She said, "You should apply because you'd be fantastic at it." And I didn't have the confidence in myself that Ms. Jackson had.

But she kept at it. Every day she asked me, "Are you going to apply?" "Are you going to apply?" Every day. So finally one day, I sat down and put together a resume.

I drove it over, hand delivered it to the human resources department, and I got a call and I interviewed with a fantastic human being, one of the most brilliant people I've ever met, Cecil Picard, who had just become, well about a year before, the state superintendent of education, he was a state senator I believe or representative also. He was a local coach. He had done it all in education - brilliant man.

Jeffrey Boyce: What was his name?

John Dupre: Cecil Picard. And Superintendent Picard was from near Abbeville, which is near Lafayette, very Cajun country. And so, he and I would joke about the culture of the Cajun, and we would debate and argue over the meaning of certain Cajun words, in the history of it.

And it was always fun, because he never lost an argument, because when I would win, he wouldn't acknowledge it.

And we would even go so far as to buy foods or to go into very rural areas and get stuff to prove that our definition of the word was the true definition. And so it was a beautiful relationship.

We used to laugh. When people used to say, "Man, that guy sure has a Cajun accent," which superintendent Picard very much did, I said he kept me around because he always said, "Yeah that Dupre certainly sounds like a Cajun," instead of admitting he had the accent.

But a wonderful human beings, a brilliant man. They hired me into the Department of Education to oversee the child nutrition programs. And that was my first real immersion and it was a crash course. It was like five in the morning till 10, midnight every night, weekends.

For two years, basically, I lived that way because I had to develop the history that I didn't come in with. And so I had to do it through files, through talking to people, through any means possible. And we ran the program pretty successfully. And I'd say after five years is where I kind of in my mind put the landmark that I really became comfortable with what I knew, because I had enough history to really not have to go back and research all the things that I was trying to accomplish and things people would ask me, etc.

So that's kind of how I got into the child nutrition programs, and very, very fortunate person to have been around so many great people who gave me great opportunities to succeed and I felt I owed them, you know the world, to try to accomplish that because of their trust in me.

Jeffrey Boyce: Well, one of the questions I had, but I think you just answered it, was about mentors. I assume Superintendent Picard was. Were there others?

John Dupre: Yes, Vice Chancellor Moore at LSU before him was absolutely a mentor. One quick note about Vice Chancellor Moore; he had a masters of fine art and he was overseeing student services.

John Dupre: And he was a fantastic artist. He would draw and sketch during meetings and remember everything that was said while he sketched.

John Dupre: But he was very temperamental and very brilliant and he just demanded excellence. He didn't ask a lot when he talked to you

about what you were doing. He expected you to talk to him about what you needed.

John Dupre: His saying was, "If you came into work today, felt you did a great job, pat yourself on the back and come back tomorrow and do it again."

John Dupre: And I love that saying, because he didn't hire anyone and get surprised if they had achieved excellence. He hired people because he saw excellence, so you only did what he expected of you from the start.

John Dupre: So he didn't pat you on the back. The mere fact that you worked for him meant that. Beyond Vice Chancellor Moore and Superintendent Picard, when I got into the child nutrition programs, unfortunately he passed away years ago, and I believe he's in the archives of the oral histories himself, Mr. Paul Schmitz, from the Southwest Regional Office, I cannot tell you enough about what Paul Schmitz did for me, especially related to child nutrition programs, the way I think about them, the way I view the value of them, everything that is part of me really to child nutrition, is partly in relation to what Paul mentored me into understanding and believing because the way he lived it and the way he perceived those programs.

John Dupre: So Paul Schmitz, I can't say enough. He came into Louisiana and taught me that it's about what you see with your eyes, not necessarily what's on paper always.

John Dupre: In other words, a lot of people struggle with the paperwork, but they're fantastic at what they do for the children in the state, and you always try to save the programs where people are struggling to document their great deeds; you don't just dismiss that.

John Dupre: And you go further than the paperwork to see, and that became something I always asked the people who work for me. “What does it look like? What do the meals look like? Does it look like they're trying to do a great job for the kids?”

John Dupre: Because if they did there's always an opportunity to fix paperwork. Paperwork, just as I say, to prove that something probably happened when no one was looking, and that's what it is. Because I always asked if we could see everything every day and everybody look at everything, do we need a document anything?

John Dupre: And I learned from Paul's mentoring, and this became my phrase, what was the intent of Congress?

John Dupre: Always ask yourself what did Congress intend when they put this? Was it to have a bureaucracy? Was it to have paperwork?

John Dupre: Or was it to feed children, an opportunity for kids in need to have something great and to help them to be great at some point in their lives?

John Dupre: So I learned to really ask myself that question, what did Congress intend? And sometimes I probably had some USDA findings in some of our program operations, because I went too much on what Congress intended; not enough what the regulations said as they came down the line.

John Dupre: But because we were always trying to do the right thing, and in Louisiana you can put your finger on the map anywhere, I can probably qualify for free eligibility and Summer Feeding and probably the at-risk program, because it's that poor. Even if you have wealthy pockets there's a lot of poor people, unfortunately, in Louisiana. And

these programs are designed to serve those people in those communities, and those children especially.

John Dupre: So I know I'm talking a good bit, but that's kind of how I developed my sense of viewing and administering the programs, from Paul's outstanding way he lived it and the way I saw him approach monitoring things and issues and trying to help people in all phases.

John Dupre: You know, bad is bad, you call it that, and you deal with that, but when you don't look beyond just the surface, to see if it's really bad a lot of times you're going to miss out and hurt children in need, just because someone didn't necessarily dot the i's and cross the t's in their paperwork.

John Dupre: So we've tried to focus on that a little bit more at the time that I was in that position, which was a quarter of a century I sat in that job, which is a quite amazing to me to think back.

Jeffrey Boyce: So you came in as state director and stayed in that position.

John Dupre: Yes, yes, at 30 years of age, I became the state director for child nutrition programs in the State of Louisiana, which Paul told me at the time I was the youngest one in the nation. I don't know how that works now but I guess once I got in I liked it enough that I refused to leave.

Jeffrey Boyce: What was a typical day like or is there such a thing?

John Dupre: The second part of your statement is exactly it, that there was never a typical day, and if you talk to the people that worked with me, I'm probably not typical at all in any way that I administer or manage things, so that fed me that it was never the same day twice.

John Dupre: Because I'm the type of person in restaurants and food service, I love working food service, but once I understood the routine and the flow, I could walk through a store room and I knew everything that was short, what needs to be ordered, just by walking through glancing.

John Dupre: I needed to move on to another place, because I felt like I was now in a routine.

John Dupre: And even teaching classes at the Louisiana State University when I taught a class a few times, I felt like I was - I could hear myself. "Didn't just say that?"

John Dupre: So I needed to do something else that challenged me, and these programs never stopped challenging me for a quarter of a century.

John Dupre: I never repeated the same day and that was the beauty of it, because even though you hit landmarks you know your federal years, your state years, your reporting, stuff like that, that's routine.

John Dupre: The operations and the needs and the communities to serve and the challenges and the excitement never, never repeated itself. It was always something new and interesting.

Jeffrey Boyce: What were some of the biggest challenges you faced over your career?

John Dupre: Some of the biggest challenges I would say, one was not necessarily on the positive side, when I came in there were a lot of integrity issues that USDA was addressing nationally, and Louisiana had some also, and we spent a few years really trying to, especially in

the daycare home program, create a program that was a very outstanding program. Everyone there was trying to actually serve kids the best they could and it just took a lot of legal processes I would say.

John Dupre: Really, from a going forward standpoint, when I walked in we were 100% paper; everything came in paper before the Internet.

John Dupre: I'm one of those that crossed the line with the Internet. When I grew up you didn't have it. When you went to college, you had to borrow from other universities. That might take longer than the semester to get the documents or the book you needed.

John Dupre: So your paper was due before you got the book, and that kind of stuff, which is very interesting. And nowadays you click on line and you have access to everything. It's so amazing, it's just so incredible your speed of information nowadays.

John Dupre: That was the biggest burden. We almost needed forklifts to move paper. And every year, at that time, you had to repeat your agreement with every organization every single year, a new one, so everything started over, everything in paper, and we had an entire floor of a building that was file cabinets, just for this program.

John Dupre: And we had a bunch of student workers. Talk about a bad job for students workers, we had student workers who had to go through every single file in every filing cabinet and look at the documents to make sure they weren't misfiled, and there were always things that were cross filed. Pull those out and refile them.

John Dupre: Because if we didn't we would have lost things forever, because we had rooms full of paper. You can't just find one document when you're looking for it.

John Dupre: And I mean that was just the terror of operating at that time.

John Dupre: And the first thing I did was I said, "We cannot do this." And I always talked about 10 years when I talked about doing something new. "If we can't see the benefit 10 years down the road where this is still going, and needed strong, then why are we doing it?" So I immediately started writing an RFP for a software development to build the software applications, online applications, claiming system, etc.

John Dupre: And we did some small contracts and I kind of did almost like a risk management assessment of what was the greatest burden, and it was the claims for the daycare home program.

John Dupre: Because we had nearly 10,000 providers every month that were on paper claims, each one of them listed, and every time new ones were coming on and off, all that had to be reconciled every month, just that one piece of a program, of CACFP that is, and so we started with that and over a few years we built a complete online application and claiming system.

John Dupre: And that to me was so amazing, and what it did for everyone locally, and it kept people from just making mistakes. Because you can't claim a supper if you don't have supper whereas if you fill out the block for supper by accident instead of lunch, and you might get the same rate of reimbursement, but it's still not correct, or accurate, so the online application system development in house was amazing and it's still running today.

John Dupre: Right now they're in the process of looking at some of the USDA grants in terms of upgrading it all.

John Dupre: But for a good 20 years it's served the state pretty well, and you know hundreds and hundreds of millions of dollars have been transacted across there, transactions have occurred, and I'm proud of that. I'm proud of the people that worked on it.

John Dupre: And that was probably the biggest challenge, that and bring everyone up to accessing information via the internet.

John Dupre: Because I mean we had people that would call and say, "My daughter works at a hair salon and she can get in at five before they open. I can use their computer."

John Dupre: We were finding sites in every community, libraries, regional centers. We found so many points of access that we would list the people and say, "If you don't have one you can go here and use their computer, but we promise you, and our doors will always open in Baton Rouge or any of our regional centers. We had regional centers across the state at the time.

John Dupre: Our doors are always open for you to come sit at one of our desks and use our computers, but we have to get information through this online system.

John Dupre: And that's kind of amazing to think about now because everyone walks with a computer in their hand pretty much, that's capable of doing the work that we do online, but that was an amazing leap forward.

John Dupre: And then, a lot of things happened along the years. Covid probably was the next major thing that made the next great leap forward in terms of communications and training in terms of requiring everyone to learn about distance learning and have that capability.

John Dupre: And that put us probably 30 years down the road of where we could have been, and would have been. So that gives fantastic opportunities going forward, in terms of accessibility and not having to make someone drive half a day, and maybe spend a night to go to a half day training and lose a couple of days of work. Now they can just sit at a desk, click, and they're in there, and click when they're out. So those things have taken us so much forward in terms of where we were and where we are headed in Louisiana.

Jeffrey Boyce: What are some of the biggest changes you saw in the programs over your 25 year tenure?

John Dupre: So the biggest changes in the program, some of them were accessibility I'd say.

John Dupre: When we started, again, everything had to be formally written. USDA had a much more stringent process of approving things, small things, and operations.

John Dupre: And nowadays they empower the states so much more to act to provide the services needed. So that has been fantastic in terms of being able to operate and address the needs of the communities, I think, within the state.

John Dupre: it's hard to explain, like some of the nutrition standards that have moved forward, with the Institute of Medicine, I believe it was in 2010, somewhere around there, that push some of the new standards for the National School Lunch Program.

John Dupre: They're wonderful, but they don't fix the ills of society, I mean it's wonderful to have a much higher standard to offer our children because they deserve it.

John Dupre: But when I look in Louisiana at some of the problems, it goes beyond the school day, and you hope that some of that carries forward.

John Dupre: But we need to go so much further. That's a good start, but it's only that. It's only a very small start to what's needed for our children long term, in terms of really helping them to live the healthiest life they can live, and to try to defeat the poverty cycle that so many are born into, and they feel trapped in, and you have to give that child hope, a belief.

John Dupre: Someone they encounter somewhere along the way has to give them that feeling that I can be anything I want, and whatever I want to be is fine, whether I want to mow lawns, I want to be a surgeon, I want to be a physicist, I can be any of those things.

John Dupre: It's not limited by my own thoughts because of what I grow up in, and then I think that I am just what I am surrounded by.

John Dupre: So I applaud so much the federal government's efforts, but I don't want to stop pushing.

John Dupre: It's not to be negative towards anyone, but I don't want them to stop and think 'We did something great' at any point in time.

John Dupre: We're in the process of doing great things and we're just on that path somewhere along it and each one of these things are just another little step of getting us towards where we hope to be someday.

Jeffrey Boyce: Is there anything unique about the state of Louisiana regarding child nutrition programs?

John Dupre: Oh, my gosh. There's so many differences as you drive throughout the state, in terms of culture and residents, and it's beautiful, because it's not like you go and there's one state of Louisiana.

John Dupre: Everyone knows New Orleans, and New Orleans is almost spoken of as a separate state, because it's so unique in terms of its culture and the things you experience there, and you go for.

John Dupre: But then you come to the Cajun culture where I'm from, and I used to tell people no one ever got food poisoning when I grew up because everything was cooked for three to six hours.

John Dupre: There was no such thing as quickly cooking Cajun food, because it's just never happened. Food was cooked in the morning, when you went to a field. You might eat a 10 o'clock lunch, and then you didn't eat again till nine at night, and that food was on a stove with the big pilot light that would keep the whole top of the stove hot, in the danger zone, so to speak, nowadays we call it.

John Dupre: And no one ever got sick, but you know they cooked everything to death.

John Dupre: But they were obsessive about cleaning while they cooked. Everyone washed everything thoroughly and some people washed every time they put a spoon in a pot, they got washed again before it went back in that pot. So it was very unique. Then you head up to North Louisiana, which is a different culture again, from the Cajun culture and New Orleans.

John Dupre: It's very diverse state. It has a lot of the wonderful ruralness to it. The people are wonderful. I like the fact that wherever I've been people come talk to me and invite me into their families and

their community, just because it's kind of the nature of the state in general.

John Dupre: So I think the uniqueness that I feel is just that family feeling that you get if you're in Louisiana, kind of like you could settle in here, and you wouldn't have to develop roots, you just join in with the roots already there and immerse yourself into it. And if you've been to festivals in Louisiana, I know there are wonderful events all over the world, but my gosh, if you've been to a little, small, rural festival you'll experience some things like you've never before.

John Dupre: Anthony Bourdain, who unfortunately passed away some time back, did a wonderful segment on Louisiana, especially in Mamou, regarding some of the Cajun culture and the boucherie, which is the butchering of the hog, and the processing of everything from start to finish.

John Dupre: And I grew up doing that, and a good relative of mine, I call him Little Cousin, he's just a couple years younger than me, and he's very successful. He lives in Texas.

John Dupre: He used to tell me, he said, "John," he said, "If people would have just followed you around with cameras when you were young, you could have been rich, just like all these people on TV, because you, you know walking in canals looking for turtles, or standing in ponds, and just the lifestyle of what you see that people like so much." But all those things make Louisiana very unique and the people kind of just, as you watch TV, it's an overused term around here, but it's the joy of life, and people just live with that.

John Dupre: I could tell you a quick little story. My father, when he grew up, there were no cars, no paved roads; horseback was everything. They plowed with horses and mules.

John Dupre: And they were moving one of his old aunts in a wagon, he told me, and they had only a couple of pieces of furniture in their house.

John Dupre: And she had an armoire, a little armoire with a mirror in it. And as they were moving it the armoire flipped over and the mirror broke, which is the only good thing she possessed. Of everything, that's the only decent thing she possessed.

John Dupre: And she said something to the effect, “Ceux qui ont parfois à perdre,” which means ‘Those that have must sometimes lose.’ So she took it all in stride, that I was lucky I had to give, so that's why I lost a little bit, not in a negative sense, but the joy that she had had that.

John Dupre: She was so fortunate to have had that, whereas others didn't even have that much, so that's kind of the attitude that I grew up around, that positive.

John Dupre: You always have more than someone around you, so always be joyful and grateful and always share, because you always have more than you need, whether you realize it or not. In my father's words, “We give because we can.”

John Dupre: That's it, and there's never a situation you could name that what you couldn't give more than you gave already. So it's a beautiful, beautiful existence of beautiful people that support each other, and you know, it's community, it's family.

Jeffrey Boyce: I'm going to put you on the spot. What would you say has been your most significant contribution to the field over your career?

John Dupre: The most significant contribution that I've made to child nutrition programs in the state of Louisiana, in my opinion, in the 25 years I've been there, was the hiring of a lot of outstanding individuals that really carried these programs for many years. And some of them went on to work in local environments in child nutrition. Some of them went on to other areas of child nutrition. Some went on to work for USDA.

John Dupre: And I feel the most significant thing I did was recognizing outstanding individuals and giving them the chance to succeed and fulfill their potential.

John Dupre: And seeing them move on, which was always a heartwarming thing. At the university, when people came to raid your staff, that was the highest compliment from other universities.

John Dupre: Because they knew the person in charge, probably wouldn't go. But if you gave wonderful opportunities to people around them, they probably would, and they were the people who understood that process and that system that was so excellent and achieving at a high level. So I always felt that when people moved on to other great opportunities it was almost a compliment to me, not because I made them great, but just because I was smart enough or lucky enough to recognize the talent and unleash it and let them have that opportunity they might not have had otherwise, had I not given it to them. Similar to people who took a chance on me, throughout my entire life, and even today I feel blessed that you were even considering talking to me about this. I don't see myself, believe it or not, in this capacity, as someone who's deserving of such a high honor as I believe this is.

Jeffrey Boyce: Well, those are the kind of people that really did good work, in my opinion. Do you have any special stories or memories of kids you served or people you worked with over the years?

John Dupre: Oh gosh, to narrow it down it's so hard. I'll tell you one about a fantastic person who was already great on her own, and you know very well, Dr. Nina Cross.

John Dupre: Dr. Cross was at Louisiana State University when I went there. She was over the dietetics program internship whenever I went through that at Louisiana State University and I became a registered dietitian.

John Dupre: And years later, I had the opportunity, when we needed some HASAP training throughout the state, child care centers everywhere, they needed this as part of their fulfillment for the Department of Health and Hospitals to meet their health permit requirements. And so I called Dr. Cross and she was just, she's always a wonderful, fantastic human being, and I told her, I said, "Would you like to come and do some training throughout the state?" And I kind of explained it to her what was required, and I gave her a price that I thought was very, very fair, not excessive, not low, and she just laughed and laughed. To hear that in her voice, that we come back and recognize her as such an outstanding individual.

John Dupre: So capable, and what she meant to us, and could do for other people throughout the state. That was one of the greatest experiences I ever had for someone who I admire so much.

John Dupre: To just find that joy to think that I would think so highly of her at that point, because I always wanted her to think highly of me when I was coming up through the ranks.

John Dupre: And then I achieved the title of state director. I was supposed to be somebody, I guess, but I never looked at it that way.

John Dupre: And so when I called her I just looked at it as a friend at that point in life, as someone I knew that I really thought the world of, her knowledge.

John Dupre: Her joy and passion that she brought to work every day was unmatched, and to have her just so touched that I would call her to come and do some great things for the people of Louisiana just touched my heart as much as anything I've ever done.

John Dupre: And the other side, the other part, not to leave out, every time we went to a school system at the school level, a lot of people say, "Well, I feed kids. I feed all these." We don't feed anybody. We are part of the process of wonderful programs to help people administer and serve children. But those who serve children should never be overlooked.

John Dupre: The people at the school level who make it all happen, the people at the childcare level who make it all happen, the community centers, the churches, the local governments. The endless organizations and the people who work within that who actually show up every day to make those meals happen, to work with those kids to see the suffering of those kids, those who go the little bit extra to give those kids a little bit extra needed. Sometimes it's just someone to talk to, a friendly face to show up to every day, because they're sad and depressed or the terrible things that are happening in their lives that no one else knows about.

John Dupre: And so those people who live it every day. When you get a chance to go into a school, childcare center, etc., and see that happening and to see those individuals, and they're never sad.

John Dupre: They would probably tell you, most of them, the joy they get from doing that job is greater than what they give.

John Dupre: And that's the most beautiful thing when you can see it on that level, that we think we're doing something for someone else, and then we all of a sudden, if we sit back and realize, we got more than we gave through this process.

John Dupre: That we became whole because of the love and joy that we saw that was coming back to us from the simple things that we do.

John Dupre: So that's been so amazing to see and be a part of. I can't explain it to you in better words. I wish I could kind of narrow it down and encapsulate better but it's literally a sense of joy and gratitude for having had the opportunity to be in all these places for so long and to be given so much each and every day of my life by the people around me and those who serve the children around them.

Jeffrey Boyce: What advice would you give someone starting out who's considering a career in child nutrition today?

John Dupre: Do it. Just do it and you'll achieve things and see things and opportunities that you never imagined. It's far bigger than any of my words can say, the opportunities in child nutrition, from the federal government and policy and all the things that could happen there and how these programs work, to state level governments, it's in every state in the United States. You want to be mobile?

John Dupre: Be a child nutrition professional and you have mobility. And that doesn't even begin to talk about the local level. If you want to run a program or help people really serve in the community, it's

infinite how many opportunities you have. So from a work perspective just do it and you'll find whatever you want to do, it's there.

John Dupre: And the opportunity is there within child nutrition. You want to be in finance it's there. You want to be a nutritionist it's there. You want to be a food service professional it's definitely there.

John Dupre: So that's the first and foremost, and the second part of it is just like I said earlier. You will get back if you really open your eyes and your heart to what's happening, beyond just your job, and see what Congress intended, which is the children being served, and those kids receiving and eating those meals, it's phenomenal what you'll walk away with, and you might just find you're hooked into it for a quarter of a century.

Jeffrey Boyce: Anything else you'd like to share with me today?

John Dupre: Just that I wish I could name all the people that I worked with throughout the years and the people that I worked with through the end when I left the department, and for not wanting to slight anybody I won't start down that list, because there were so many great people that mentored me in every way and taught me and helped me to grow.

John Dupre: And that's really I think what defines a great career, is if you find yourself, if you never stop growing as a person.

John Dupre: My dear old mother who passed away last year at the age of 96, incredible human being, she used to try to encourage me to stop working so hard on the farm. She said, "You got an education son. You don't have to work so hard all the time."

John Dupre: And I used to make her laugh and I'd say, "Mom, when you're born stupid you die stupid" I said, "You can put all the plaques on the wall in between for education and everything else. It's just that way." And she'd just shake my head and laugh at me. And it was my way of deflecting her point to say I did good, because to me, I'm trying to do good. That somewhere in the future I'll look back and say, hopefully, I did good, but for now I'm still a work in progress and I hope I'm still on that path to becoming good and I'm still working towards that. I hope I never stop.

John Dupre: So that's kind of my journey and where my goals are, and being here sitting here talking to you, if you told a little boy speaking French in a sweet potato field, 45 years ago that he would be doing something like this, I'd have told you you were crazy, because first of all I would have told you, "I'm not wearing a coat and I'm not dressing up; that's not happening," because I was barefoot all the time, wearing white T shirts every day and to say that I come to this point.

John Dupre: I'm not a better person for being here or for having the jobs I've had, but the opportunity, that comes through another path. But the idea that someone in that situation could end up here, it just to me speaks to if I can do it, anyone can.

John Dupre: Just work at it, because all I did was be raised by parents who never accepted quit. They were easy to work for, but you worked every day.

John Dupre: Because work was your life. It wasn't a job. You lived it. And that's how we sustain ourselves, through work, and so you realize, even when you feel you can't, you shake it off and say, "But I have to."

John Dupre: And what you realize about yourself is you're much stronger, much more capable than you ever dreamed, by just pushing yourself a little bit beyond what you think you can do today.

John Dupre: And when you know something you look back and you say, "My word, I've come a long way, I've come such a long way," and it's simply by working at it, and you'll find along the way that wonderful people are everywhere willing to help you. Just don't close your mind off and your heart to those around you to see all the people that will support to achieve things beyond what you've ever dreamed. So life has been fantastic for me and hopefully it continues to be so, and I thank you so much for this opportunity.

Jeffrey Boyce: Well, thank you so much for taking the time to talk with me today.

John Dupre: Absolutely sir, any time.