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Adrienne Schwartz Oral History

JB: I'm Jeffrey Boyce and it is February 17, 2016, and I'm here at the BP Energy Center with Adrienne Schwartz. Good morning Adrienne and thanks for taking the time to talk with me today.

AS: Good morning. Thank you for taking the time to talk with me as well.

JB: Could we begin by you telling me a little bit about yourself, where you were born and where you grew up?

AS: I was born and raised in Petersburg, Alaska. Petersburg is a relatively small community, less than 3,000 people in southeast Alaska. So I was born and raised there. I was raised in a family of school teachers and commercial fishermen. My family also owned the school bus company and my dad ran a school boat, they called it, because there was another island relatively nearby that he saw there were children and families there that needed to go to school, and they didn't have a means to do that, so he actually started a school boat company as well.

JB: How interesting. Petersburg, that's an island also?

AS: It is.

JB: And what's the population?

AS: Right now I think it's about 2,700. It hovered around 3,000 when I lived there, but the population has actually decreased a little bit.

JB: What's your earliest recollection of child nutrition programs? Was there a program in your elementary or high school?

AS: There was actually a program in our elementary school. I don't believe that our high school had one. In the elementary school how I look back on it is we always had the warm homemade meals, and we had the lunch ladies that we loved dearly, and they loved us too. We weren't overly thrilled with the food. It was a lot of meatloaf and mashed potatoes and gravy and things like that, but it was a nice warm loving environment where we felt like we could get a meal when we needed it.

JB: And then after high school what did you do?

AS: After high school I moved down to Bellingham, Washington, and went to Western Washington University, and I got my bachelor's degree in education. I had planned at the time to teach, like the rest of my family. During my college career I worked in food service to help pay for college. That's kind of how I ended up down that path, and then continued on, enjoyed food service, and actually made the decision to move back to Petersburg, where I owned and operated my own restaurant.

JB: How did you get involved in the child nutrition profession?

AS: Ok, so from there I ended up moving to Juneau. I sold the restaurant because I had small children and it was just a lot of hours to be working. I had a one-year-old and a three-year-old at the time. And so I made the decision to move to Juneau, and when I moved to Juneau I originally got involved working with the Juneau School District as their afterschool program coordinator, director, and then the food service supervisor position opened and that was like right up my alley with all of the experience I had with food

service. And so I applied for that and I've been working in that position since 2008.

JB: And Juneau is the capital, right?

AS: Yes, Juneau's the capital.

JB: And I'm told you are unable to drive to Juneau?

AS: That is true. So, Juneau, there is no road that connects to the mainland to Juneau, and that's been a matter of discussion for quite some years as to whether a road should be built or not. So you can get on a ferry and you can go to Skagway or Haines and there are roads from there. You can also take a ferry down from Alaska to Bellingham, Washington, or Prince Rupert in Canada, and then you can drive.

JB: How long is the ferry ride from Juneau to Bellingham?

AS: The ferry ride from Juneau to Bellingham is over 48 hours. I want to say it's two and a half days, like 60 hours.

JB: I assume there are sleepers as well as parking spaces on the ferry?

AS: Yes there are. They have staterooms. They have a lot of people that camp out. You can bring your cars on. It's not very affordable anymore. It's actually a little more expensive to take the ferry trip than it is to fly.

JB: Have you had a mentor or anyone who was influential or helped direct you in child nutrition since you started in that field?

AS: Oh yea, there've been lots of mentors along the way. My first couple of years, even though I had

experience in education, I had experience in food service, it wasn't directly in child nutrition under the USDA, and so of course I attended all the annual training conferences, and as I attended those I naturally came across wonderful mentors in the child nutrition program office, Jo Dawson and her staff. And I also met folks like Dean Hamburg, the food service director in Kenai Peninsula, and some other directors throughout the state that had been in child nutrition programs for many more years than myself. And so naturally I got to know them, because they are just great resources and they were able to answer any questions that I had.

JB: Do you feel that your educational background helped prepare you for what you are doing now?

AS: I do. Some people ask me how. You know I originally planned to be a teacher. My background's in education, but along the way, I didn't mention that I got a two-year degree in business, and when I was in college I was very interested in business and psychology classes so I took a lot of those and actually was endorsed in those areas to be able to teach in those areas. The business part definitely has helped me, and then my experience in life with the food service. I worked for years and I did everything from bussing, waitressing, prepping, cooking, even the inventory.

JB: And your job title, you're the director?

AS: I am currently the food service supervisor for our district, and we have a situation that's unique to some districts in Alaska. We contract with a food service management company. Quite a few of the larger districts in Alaska do all of their own food service. So we contract and we have a director of that company as

well. She's in charge of the menu development. We do it together, but she's in charge of the menu development. She orders food. She supervises all of the staff in the kitchens in terms of the daily operations. And then my office, I'm the food service supervisor for our district, and we are primarily responsible for all the management pieces, processing school meal benefit applications, verification. We review menus. So we do more of the managerial work.

JB: Is there anything unique about Alaska in regard to child nutrition programs?

AS: Well that's an interesting question. For me, because I was born and raised in Alaska, I worked in the food service industry in Washington, but other than that my experience is here, it talking with folks, and from my food service experience in Washington, I would say what makes it most unique is the challenges we have with getting food here.

JB: Transportation.

AS: Transportation. You have to plan way ahead. It takes a long time to get the food here and it's very expensive. So that's a huge difference. And then labor's a bit challenging. The cost of living's higher here, so typically I think we're paying a little bit more.

JB: What's a typical day like for you, or is there such an animal?

AS: Well, that's a good question. Every day changes from what I think it's going to be and what it actually is. All good managers and directors I think do their best to have an idea of what their day is going to look like, and we do a pretty good job. But we are serving

1,500 lunches a day, three, four hundred breakfasts, so we're serving over 2,000 students a day. We don't have a huge district, but here that's still a large number of students that we're feeding, and that means everything needs to be in place. We need to have all of our food ready and prepped, and of course we have the milk requirement that we have to have the two types of milk offered with every meal, and it can be challenging, primarily because of our issues with transportation. And then we have limited storage space. And so on a daily basis my phone typically starts to ring at six in the morning because somebody may not be able to come to work, and so trying to figure that out. And then just making sure each of our schools is staffed for the day. I work with our food service director from the outside company on all of those issues before I go into my office, and then I typically spend as much time as I can in our office processing school meal applications and working on projects to make sure we're meeting all the federal regulations.

JB: How many schools do you have in your district?

AS: Twelve.

JB: Elementary, junior, and high?

AS: Yes. And then though I should add I go to my office but then typically the same thing starts around lunchtime, needing to make sure everything's covered for lunchtime, so before breakfast and lunch I'm in and out of the office quite a bit making sure all the schools are covered and have what they need, and then mid-morning, afternoon a lot of the managerial part with the paperwork.

JB: What's been some of the biggest challenges you've faced?

AS: I feel like overall things are going pretty good. My very first year we brought salad bars into the schools, and to me I didn't think that was going to be a big challenge, but it was, primarily because staff were very apprehensive about letting the young students serve themselves from salad bars. But once we convinced them that the students are excited and they're more than capable, then everybody got really excited too, because it's fun to see a kindergarten, first, second grade student with the ability to go through the salad bar, serve themselves up a bunch of fruits and vegetables. They all serve themselves. There's a little bit of a learning curve, especially when they're first starting in kindergarten, but they all get the hang of it in no time.

JB: What changes have you seen in child nutrition over the years?

AS: Significant changes. I think we all are always trying to stay on top of this. So I started in 2008 and the Healthy, Hunger Free Kids Act came about in 2010, so there were some significant changes with that in terms of the nutritional requirements, and initially there was some apprehension and I think our district had more food waste than we wanted to see, but as students have gotten used to those changes it's been positive overall. So that's been a big change. And then the Smart Snacks came out, and that required us to do some revision on our wellness policy. I would say those were two of the biggest changes.

JB: What would you say has been your most significant contribution to the field?

AS: Wow, OK. I would say my most significant contribution, and I was fortunate enough, when I came on the Juneau School District had made the decision to change from a sack lunch type program. Our meals were made offsite and they were delivered to the schools and they were in paper sacks. We were actually charging more for those meals. The school district realized they needed to make some changes. The community really wanted a better quality program. And so the year I was hired that was one of my roles. We went out with a request for proposals. We found a food service management company that was willing to prepare food onsite. And they added the salad bars. And the cost of our meals actually decreased because we anticipated such a huge increase in participation. And it skyrocketed. We more than doubled our participation that first year. I'm very proud of that because it was such a huge change, and the quality of food changed drastically for the students.

JB: And so you put kitchens in all of the twelve schools?

AS: The majority of the schools had kitchens already. We still have a couple that don't, so the food is prepped offsite and delivered, but it's still not bag lunches. We have steam tables and salad bars, and so the students are getting a hot entrée and fresh fruits and vegetables. But the other ten schools have kitchens and they just weren't being used. So starting in 2008-9 all of our school kitchens have been used to cook food onsite.

JB: Do you have any memorable stories about special children you have served or people you have worked with over the years?

AS: Oh yes, probably too many. Having the students come up to you and just tell you how important their meal is to them that day. Sometimes ours let you know that the meal they have with you on Friday is going to be the best that they have until the next Monday. It just makes you realize the importance of your job. And we have a lot of fun stories. We have students helping us serve this year, and we had a student the other day who was so excited. She was invited to the kitchen to serve, and we get them their little aprons and we make sure they wash their hands and put their gloves on and have their hairnet and everything. She just was so thrilled about it. And so she was telling me her dad is the manager of the bakery at Fred Meyers, and so she felt like she was just like him. She was singing and dancing the whole time she served the students and she was interacting with them. So that was a great experience for me and for her.

JB: Wonderful. What advice would you give someone who was considering child nutrition as a profession today?

AS: I think it's a great program. My best advice would be you need to be aware of all the federal regulation and everything, but not to get too wrapped up in that. You need to be following all those rules, but don't let it intimidate you. Don't let that keep you from getting involved. If people have the love for food, and they want to be helping students get the nutrition they need, I would say, "Don't be intimidated by all the rules and regulation, because what you'll find if you get involved with child nutrition is there are many resources out there that are more than happy to help." That's what I found. In the beginning it was a little bit intimidating, but I went to my first conference, I

met lots of great folks, and it hasn't been an issue at all.

JB: Anything else you'd like to add?

AS: I just really enjoyed talking to you. Sometimes I don't take the time to reflect enough on the kind of questions that you're asking, and it makes me even happier to be in this position, so thank you.

JB: Well thank you for taking the time to talk with me.

AS: You're welcome.