

University of Mississippi

eGrove

Oral History Project (all interviews)

Oral Histories

2-16-2016

Carlee Rae Johnson

Carlee Rae Johnson

Institute of Child Nutrition. Child Nutrition Archives.

Follow this and additional works at: https://egrove.olemiss.edu/icn_ohistories



Part of the [Food Science Commons](#), [Other Education Commons](#), and the [Teacher Education and Professional Development Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Johnson, Carlee Rae and Institute of Child Nutrition. Child Nutrition Archives., "Carlee Rae Johnson" (2016). *Oral History Project (all interviews)*. 8.

https://egrove.olemiss.edu/icn_ohistories/8

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the Oral Histories at eGrove. It has been accepted for inclusion in Oral History Project (all interviews) by an authorized administrator of eGrove. For more information, please contact egrove@olemiss.edu.

Carlee Rae Johnson

Carlee Rae Johnson was the 2016 President of the Alaska School Nutrition Association and the food service director for Petersburg, Alaska.

JB: I'm Jeffrey Boyce and it is February 16, 2016, and I am here in Anchorage, Alaska, at the BP Energy Center for the Alaska School Nutrition Association annual conference, and I'm here today with Carlee Johnson, who is the president of the Association this year. Welcome Carlee and thanks for taking the time to talk to me today.

CRJ: Thank you.

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

CRJ: I was born in Bozeman, Montana. I am the youngest child of five. I moved outside of Billings, Montana, when we were young. I have a twin brother. I was the baby, but only by ten minutes. I was in the military for a couple of years, but ended up being chaptered out because of severe allergies, so I went to cooking school instead. Then after that I taught culinary arts in conjunction with the women's prison in Montana. And then I came up to Alaska and became the director of food services.

JB: Ok. This is all fascinating. I can't wait to get into it, but let's start by your earliest recollections of child nutrition. When you went to elementary school where did you go, and was there a child nutrition program?

CRJ: There was a child nutrition program. I went to Shepherd Elementary and our lunch lady's name was

Katie. She was a great lady, a little older lady. She would make these homemade cinnamon rolls with chili. So chili and cinnamon roll day was the best ever.

JB: I had never heard of that until recently, and there's someone at the Institute that will love that I get to share the story that she's not the only one that eats cinnamon rolls and chili. That sounds like an interesting item. Were there other favorite menu items you had?

CRJ: They introduced the salad bar when I was younger. I always loved the veggies and veggie bars so I went to that a lot.

JB: And did you go to high school in the same place?

CRJ: Yes.

JB: Tell me about your educational background. You mentioned the culinary school. Go from high school and tell me what you've been up to.

CRJ: I graduated high school in Shepherd. I graduated with honors. Then I went to the Le Cordon Bleu, Portland, Oregon, and I graduated there with an associate's.

JB: That's a two-year program?

CRJ: Yes. And then I will currently graduate with my bachelor's in culinary management this May.

JB: And that's where?

CRJ: Through Le Cordon Bleu in Scottsdale, Arizona.

JB: And you mentioned working in the prison system?

CRJ: Yes. That was really interesting. I started off just working in the kitchen cooking for the halfway

houses. It's when they are not quite released into the population, but they are transitioning. And so I cooked for those facilities, and then they had an opening for the culinary arts manager, because they began this whole new program. I jumped into that program. It's the first accredited pre-apprenticeship program for culinary arts. And it was pretty awesome that it was accredited - and did that.

JB: And that was where in Montana?

CRJ: Billings, Montana.

JB: And then how did you become involved in child nutrition?

CRJ: So I saw the posting in one of my random emails that I get and I was like, "What the heck? Let's apply for this job." They flew me up here and I interviewed and I liked it and I moved up here.

JB: How long have you been?

CRJ: This is my fifth year.

JB: You're the director?

CRJ: Yes.

JB: Where?

CRJ: In Petersburg, Alaska.

JB: And where is that from Anchorage?

CRJ: If you know where Juneau is, and you know where Bellingham, Washington, is, you go halfway up, and it's an island closer to Canada. So it's small. It's about three thousand people. It's a fishing community. It's been built on fishing and logging. It's a Norwegian

settlement and so it's very Norwegian, it celebrates the Norwegian tradition.

JB: Sounds like a great place.

CRJ: It's great.

JB: How do you reach it? Is it by ferry or are there roads?

CRJ: You can use the ferry or you can use the planes to come. We have the morning and afternoon jet, and then you have the ferry that comes every so often.

JB: And how far are you off the mainland?

CRJ: By ferry it's twelve hours. By plane it's half an hour.

JB: A big difference. Well, tell me about your career since you've been here. Has there been a mentor, someone who helped you or was influential in directing you in your career?

CRJ: When I started off it was just the beginning of the transition to the new meal standards and nutritional standards, and so when I interviewed I basically said that I would not continue the meal how it was going, because it was all pretty much processed stuff. So I wasn't a fan of that. I know how to cook. I want to cook. So I kind of took on this role and the first thing I did was bring in a salad bar, and start making our own things. We have very, very limited - we don't actually have a real kitchen. We have two ovens, and I was able to purchase a big steam kettle, where we make soup. We do a lot of stuff in that. And then I introduced an afterschool meal program and a summer feeding program, so I've kind of helped grow the whole nutritional program. The superintendent was very

supportive of that. And then he has since retired, and the elementary principal has become the superintendent, and she's super supportive, so we continue to make awesome, healthy choices.

JB: So I am assuming this is a single district on the one island?

CRJ: Yes.

JB: And how many schools?

CRJ: I have three schools. There are about 450 students total.

JB: And what's your participation percentage?

CRJ: In the elementary, we get about fifty percent in the elementary. Middle school kind of goes to 30-40, and then high school drops off because we have an open campus. But our breakfast participation has increased because we now do breakfast after the bell, and the same with middle school. We went from having like three kids eat breakfast in middle school to we have thirty kids eating breakfast this year.

JB: That's a big increase. So you've been director the whole time you've been there?

CRJ: Yes.

JB: How do you feel your educational background prepared you for this, or did it?

CRJ: The fact that I had so much military, working with the prison system, and working in the restaurant industry, the restaurants I worked in I kind of knew how to piece things together and how to make something out of nothing, and so that's kind of how we've grown our program. It's interesting getting good produce up,

because it sits on a barge for three days, and you have to order a week in advance. You can't order for the next day. So that past training of kind of flying by the seat of your pants helped to create a program where you can change things on a dime, and you're easy to change with the regulations and willing to make the changes, and you see the thought process of why these are good changes, and not fighting it so much.

JB: Where do your supplies come from?

CRJ: They come out of Kent, Washington.

JB: And you said it takes three days to arrive?

CRJ: Yes.

JB: Well, my next question was going to be is there anything unique about Alaska in regard to federal child nutrition, but you've already mentioned several unique things. Anything else you'd like to share.

CRJ: You know, it's really great. I live in a community where I serve fish once a week and my students participate in the fish extremely high. I have some of the highest participation rates on fish day. If I did that in the forty-eight states that probably wouldn't happen. The fish that we serve has been caught in our waters, so it's an Alaskan fish. Last week we had halibut. So having halibut on the school lunch menu, you don't see that very often.

JB: That is impressive.

CRJ: It's because we can catch it. We can get it. It was a bycatch or it was an overcatch or whatever, so we have that availability and I have that relationship with our fishing community to say, "Yes, we want that." We also serve moose. I have a relationship with the

fish and game warden, so when we get illegal kills that are still good quality meat we pay for the processing and we get the animal for free, so we had moose roast for Thanksgiving and then we had moose chili last week, and it's awesome.

JB: Interesting. I'll take your word for it. So what's a typical day like, or is there such a thing?

CRJ: You get in and you try to get everything done really fast. We serve breakfast, so I go in and I bake breakfast, and I make the muffins and I get it all ready. So I serve the elementary, and then I serve the middle school and high school. And then I come back, so I'm traveling between the schools, and then I serve high school and middle school lunch as well. Then we have a fresh fruits and vegetable snack we have to get out, so it's very hectic. And then you have the afterschool snack.

JB: How many people do you have helping you?

CRJ: I have one fulltime person, I have one 6-hour person, and I have one 4-hour person.

JB: Among all three schools?

CRJ: Yes.

JB: My goodness.

CRJ: My office is in the storage room, so I'm there.

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

CRJ: Funding is the biggest challenge. There are very high shipping rates. I pay more for shipping than I do most of my stuff most of the time.

JB: So the shipping is more than the product itself?

CRJ: Sometimes yes, depending on what it is. In the wintertime you have to pay so it doesn't freeze. So you have another surcharge so it doesn't freeze coming up on the barge. Flying it in - you have to do that sometimes because something's bad, but you try to avoid flying because that's ridiculously high. It's the biggest challenge, and then in the nature of the school district, they're always trying to cut funds, but they want to feed every kid, and want to make sure kids have fruit snacks on test days. My big push is that we should have fruit EVERY DAY, not just for testing.

JB: What about milk products? How do you get those?

CRJ: Those come up also on the barge. I have personally called the warehouse and worked with the warehouse to get better dates on my milk so that it's not coming in and it's already expired, or coming in and I only have three days to use it. So I've actually had to call their shipping warehouse personally and be like, "Hey look, it takes me three days to get this. Please send me a product that's going to last."

JB: And they worked with you?

CRJ: Yes.

JB: Good. The reason I asked how you get it, several years ago I did some interviews in Hawaii, and on the outer islands like Lanai, most of their food came by barge, but they flew the milk in so it would be fresh.

CRJ: A lot of the communities I know up here have powdered milk; you have some shelf-stable milk, which is really nice to have.

JB: Have you seen many changes so far in these five years in child nutrition?

CRJ: Yes.

JB: Tell me about those.

CRJ: I kind of revel in the changes, because it's something new, it's something challenging. I don't have the same mundane job every day, so I kind of enjoy the changes. I like seeing the new regulations of having healthier products available, the more restrictive sodium counts and like that. I've always been a scratch cooker and my family has always eaten low-sodium diets anyway for health reasons for my parents, so I kind of grew up with the low sodium, so it helps the transition into, "Oh, we can do this. We can substitute this." So I think that helps with changes. And just being a big pusher of farm to school, and getting our school garden involved, and we get some produce. The bulk of their produce we actually put in our summer food program.

JB: So you have a school garden?

CRJ: Yes we do.

JB: Tell me about that. Did you start it?

CRJ: No, I did not. I tried to be the coordinator one year, but the time the kids are available are like lunch, recess, and I'm serving food, so it really didn't work out very well. But I have been involved in it. We have worm bins. We feed the worms our leftover scraps and our leftover salad bar on Friday, and all that stuff, so they compost it. It's really great. We have about eight beds that are about nine feet, and we get greens in there when it's warmer. We get some hardier vegetables such as cabbage and kale that will

survive our weather, our rain. We do have a greenhouse now that we're getting some tomatoes and peas out of, which is kind of fun. And we do have a fruit house which is on its way. So we're hoping we'll just get more and more.

JB: It sounds like a great project.

CRJ: It's really fun.

JB: What do you think has been your most significant contribution so far to the field?

CRJ: In our community my biggest contribution is that I walked into it willing to change and willing to not to do it the way we have just always done it, or have that thought process. I look at the situation from 'Oh, well we can try this,' kind of like the problem solver. Not so much like throwing in my towel and being like 'No, I can't do that. I don't want to do that.' So especially in our community it's been great to build these partnerships - with the health nurse - we have a health fair that we do every year, and last year it was the children's one, and I did a little presentation there. And this year I want to teach some healthy cooking classes for adults. So it kind of builds this whole community wellness, rather than just school. It starts at the school and then will spread out.

JB: And you said there are how many in the community?

CRJ: About 2,000 - 3,000.

JB: Do you have any memorable stories about special kids you've served or people you've worked with?

CRJ: I've got a lot of great kids. Just recently I had one of the high school kids, he ended up being homeless so he ended up living with me. Who do you ask but the

lunch lady if you can come live with them? That was kind of interesting how that morphed, because I kind of have this safe environment where kids can hang out and can talk and they feel comfortable and we try to feed them. So that was kind of interesting how I ended up being a foster mom to this child. And another one of our kiddos, his dad is actually a fisherman, and he was talking about how the fish sticks that we have are better than a thousand popsicles. I was like 'Oh God, I love this kid.' So I think we just continue to have that community support, and they see that.

JB: Do you make the fish sticks?

CRJ: We actually buy from Trident, and they're just like the Baja fish sticks with the cornmeal on them, but they're local pollock fish.

JB: So they're fresh?

CRJ: Yes.

JB: Wonderful. And with the limited resources you're able to cook halibut and moose and the fish, wow. How do you prepare the halibut?

CRJ: So what we do is we take our leftover breadcrumbs, our bread from whatever meals, and we freeze it, and then we take that all and we bake it and then we grind it up to make our own breadcrumbs. And it's like a mayonnaise sauce with lemon and you rub the halibut in that and then you roll it in the breadcrumbs and then you bake it. It's great.

JB: And now you're president of the state nutrition association. How did you get involved with Alaska SNA?

CRJ: I started because I thought it was a really good outreach to continue helping kids. And I like the idea

of starting with young children, because when I worked in the prison system I saw a lot of women who, part of the reason for doing meth and other drugs was because they just had these body images, and this whole idea on nutrition and taking care of yourself was kind of lapsed. And I saw that, so when I got this opportunity I was like 'I can teach kids from a young age how to better like themselves, how to better nourish themselves.' And so I kind of like the idea of outreaching more with that. So they had a position open and I was like heck, I'll jump on, I'll try this. And I didn't know I was going to be president this fast. We had a lot of people leave the state and I kind of jumped up the ranks really fast, a little faster than I should have. It's been an interesting growth spurt, and I would have liked more time before I became this person, but ultimately we overcome and we adapt and we keep going forward.

JB: What are your goals for the next three to five years in the program?

CRJ: In our community I want to continue our little outreach. I want to get into the grocery stores and doing things so kids can associate healthy eating in the grocery store and at school, and so it's kind of a total community wellness, and continue with that. In the School Nutrition Association I'd also like to get involved in the national organization a little bit and dabble in that and see where else we can go, because we all have different ideas. It's nice to gather and share those and see what can come of them.

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

CRJ: It's really rewarding. Those who like the food industry, we work really ridiculous hours, no holidays, so now I have seven weeks off in the summer and Christmas off. Besides the great hours, besides working forever during the week, I really see the happiness that's in the kids when they know they can come to the cafeteria and get food. They know that if something's wrong they can ask us. You kind of build this rapport with the kids and I have a great rapport with kids all through the grades, just knowing our cafeterias are a safe environment for them and they can come and they can eat. They can enjoy their time and know that they have their needs met. So that hierarchy of needs, that's kind of great, so it's rewarding.

JB: Thanks for taking the time to share with me today.

CRJ: You're welcome. Thank you.