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Clare Miller Oral History Transcript

Clare Miller

Clare Miller spent her career first working for the Louisiana State Department of Education as an Area Supervisor before becoming the Food Service Director for the Diocese of Lafayette. She then went to work for the United States Department of Agriculture in Washington, DC, from where she retired.

Melba Hollingsworth: We are here December 3, 2008 at the National Food Service Management Institute with Clare Miller. Clare, will you tell us a little about yourself and where you grew up?

CM: I am from Livingston Parrish in Louisiana. I went through the 11th grade to Albany High School and finished my senior year at Denton Springs High School. My dad was the Ag teacher and my mother was a first-grade teacher.

MH: What is your earliest recollection of child nutrition programs?

CM: Actually I am one of those dinosaurs that was in school when the National School Lunch Act was signed into law in the first grade. Up until that point we brought our milk in a pint jug and our sandwich and put it in a cooler at the school; it was in Holden, Louisiana. During that first year we started getting hot food. So I am one of the originals from that initiation.

MH: How did you become involved with the child nutrition profession?

CM: Well back in those days, the Ag teacher ran the canning center during the summer. And the Home Ec teacher planned the school menus and supervised the school lunch. My high school Home Ec teacher was my hero. I thought she was wonderful. I knew I wanted to major in Home Economics, but I started thinking that I wanted to do a specialization and went into Dietetics. But it was years later that I moved into the child nutrition programs. I first thought that school lunch, what a boring job. One meal a day and you're done but I soon came to realize what a diverse career that could be and how many challenges people face, and moved into that in the 70's.

MH: Would you tell us a little about your educational background and how that prepared you for your career in child nutrition?

CM: I majored in Dietetics and Institutional Management at LSU. And then did a Dietetics internship at the VA Hospital in Houston, Texas. But we only had one week of exposure to School Food Service. So I really didn't have a good introduction to School Food Service. It was only later that I started graduate school and got my Masters that I became interested in School Food Service, because in Louisiana, to be certified as a child nutrition Supervisor you had to have a Masters Degree. So I really was not qualified to

move into one of the positions in Louisiana until I got my Masters. And then I thought that I might like to try that angle of food service.

MH: Was there someone, a mentor who influenced you directly as you entered the child nutrition field? I know you already mentioned some but tell me about them.

CM: Yes, I think at different levels. As I mentioned before my Home Ec teacher got me interested in Home Economics.

MH: And her name was again?

CM: Ms. Holden. And then my senior year I had Ms Hornsby. Sylvia Dunn from Louisiana was her mother and she was my teacher, and was a big influence too. And then I think I have had different levels because I have worked at different levels of the child nutrition programs. At the local level there were some dietitians that were working with the Louisiana Department of Education. There was Jane Mandell, Joann Pulls, Sylvia Dunn, and they kept saying, "You need to work in School Food Service." I went first to the State Department of Education as a consultant, and then after 11 years I thought I would really like to get out there in the local and see.

MH: Do you remember what year you went to the State Department of Education?

CM: I went to the State Department in the spring of 1979, right as I was finishing my Masters. And then in 1989 I went to work for the Diocese of Lafayette as a local Director with thirty-seven schools, and my mentor there was Gladys Richea from the Southwest Region. She was a Supervisor in the Diocese of Lafayette and was retiring and had talked me into taking her position there. And I went there for another ten years, and then Dorothy Caldwell went off to Washington. She was appointed as the Special Assistant to Shirley Watkins and she called me one day and said. "You know, they are going to have a lot of new openings for senior level dietitians or nutritionists at USDA. I think you ought to apply. I would like to see some people with program experience go to Washington." So just two months shy of sixty I applied for a job in Civil Service in Washington, and interviewed and took the job. I got to spend the last 8 years of my career in Washington with a new policy focus and I enjoyed doing that until I retired.

MH: How was your boss up there?

CM: Stan Garnett, and he retired a week after I did.

MH: Do you remember how much student participation you had when you went to the Diocese?

CM: We had almost all of our school children participate in the school lunch. We served about 15,000 meals a day, and because we were a private school system we had a policy that said that all children had to participate in the school lunch program. And so we

served anywhere from 99 to 100% of the elementary schools and probably almost that in middle school and then of course in high school we served about 80%.

MH: Is there anything unique about Louisiana in regard to child nutrition programs?

CM: I think Louisiana is a unique state. And I hope they never lose that. They have had some wonderful criteria that I think is reflected in the fact that Louisiana has always had one of the highest participation rates of any state in the nation. And some of the things they have always emphasized are first of all certification for the Supervisor or Director with a Master's Degree and so many hours in nutrition, accounting, and institutional management. They have had certification for their Managers. They have to pass a state exam showing that they have expertise in areas because the state subsidizes part of the school food service salaries. Louisiana puts money in the school lunch program. They also for a while had a law that excluded food management companies that had to be self run school food service operations. They also had for a long time no competitive foods could be sold during the lunch period and I think all of that influenced high student participation. Cooking from scratch and offering really good food to students.

MH: So what was a typical day like in your career?

CM: I guess depending on what level I was. But at the local level one of the things I liked about working at the local level was there was never any monotony. There was never a dull moment. You had to stretch yourself because you got into areas you had no background on. We went to a central warehouse and we wanted to go vertical storage in our warehouse with bays and fork lifts that would reach up and pull things out. I had no experience in material transportation. So I had to become an expert on that. Like how to buy a fork lift and how to buy a central freezer, so it was always a challenge. And then at the state level, I think the part I liked so much there was providing technical assistance. I guess from my parents my love for teaching came forth and I enjoyed training and teaching. And then at the federal level, it gave me a new opportunity to really influence policy, to bring the local perspective and the state perspective into policy decisions. So that was a great treat.

MH: What were some of the biggest challenges you faced? And tell me some of the years you were assigned to different positions.

CM: Again, different at each level. From 1979 to 1989 I was with the State Department of Education as an Area Supervisor. I had the Southwest Region mostly, that interesting lovely area. One of the things we did when I was the Area Supervisor was we set up a Southwest area purchasing co-op. We came together and decided on the same specifications for food and when we went out on bid we referred the vendor to the Southwest Regional Purchasing Guide, so that we were able to get better prices. That was one of the highlights of my career working at the state department, was working with them and developing that purchasing guide. And then at the local level it was moving our system into a central warehouse and freezer. It was a big challenge in learning new things; and then putting computers in all the schools. Ladies that had never sat in front of

a keyboard before and all the sudden you bring a computer and you say put inventory, point of service, recipe adjustment. I always tried when I was at the local level to take as much responsibility off the Manager as possible; to do it in the central office as much as we could so that we could free the Manager at the school to concentrate on quality food. They had a tremendous job at the school to make sure the food was at the right temperature, looked good, tasted good. So we thought of ourselves as support people at the central office; supporting the schools. We had monthly Manager meetings and we used to ask the Manager to bring in a certain food item. We would put them all around and then we would blindfold; then we would get everybody to judge. You know this was supposed to be the same recipe, but look how its different from school to school and then we would pick the best roll or cookie and that person would become our trainer and we would send them around to other schools to make sure they were all learning to prepare that dish in the same way. And then the challenge in Washington was working on policy and trying to interject in the conversation what that means at the local and state level and how that's going to impact the program at that level.

MH: What changes have you seen in the child nutrition program over the years? I guess you have seen a lot in how many years?

CM: It's been about thirty years. I think the complexity. The school lunch program has become so complex now with all the different menu planning structures. It is very difficult to give technical assistance or answer a question because it depends are you on standard menu planning, enhanced, or traditional, that I think we have over-complexed the program. I would love to see a simplification of the program and get right back to the basics.

MH: Other changes you have seen in the program?

CM: I think it is much more demanding of our Managers than it ever was. They have more responsibilities to the point of service, to accountability, to meeting the nutrient requirements. It is really taking much more skill to operate the program than it ever has before.

MH: What do you think has been your most significant contribution in your field?

CM: I think trying to make an impact on whatever area I was in. Whether it was the local, state, or national, trying to do the very best I could. And still after retirement I am trying to make a contribution to training, decision making, to the national policy on school food service. I want to continue in that effort. I have just now moved back to my home state of Louisiana after retiring from USDA, and I am active again in the district dietetic association, and just accepted Legislative Chair for our district, and will be going to Washington in about a month with some things on my agenda for the child nutrition programs to make sure that our lobbying group in Washington understands some of the issues.

MH: Do you have any more memorable stories; anything that happened along the way that comes to mind; any more that comes to mind as you think back over the profession?

CM: I think one of the most interesting things I heard and I didn't witness this either. But when I went to work for the State Department of Education in 1978, they told me that in years past the state supervisors, when they would go out to review schools, always wore hats and gloves. Very formal, you know you dressed up with a hat and went out, so I think about the change that has happened since then. When we were with the Department of Education, I remember when we used to have a review bag. It was a sports bag and it was filled with weights and cups and scoops, because when we would actually go out to do a review we would take apart a meal and weigh it to see whether it met the quantity requirements. I am pleased to see we aren't into that anymore, but I think we have lost a little bit of that guaranteeing that every child gets a certain amount of food.

MH: So you didn't have to do that did you?

CM: Well I did it at first. We took our review bags with us. We would take the meat off the bone and weigh it and make sure there were 2 oz. of meat and make sure there was an oz. of grain bread. And if not, we would challenge whether the school was serving adequate portions. Now we are very conscious about over-feeding.

MH: What about a memorable story while you were a Food Service Director?

CM: Well, one of the things that just popped in my head, just then. It was a scary moment and it showed a little bit of my ignorance of what I was doing. We had a forklift in our warehouse and our warehouse man would go in and out of our warehouse and into the freezer and it was propane. Somebody bought it and I didn't realize that a propane-driven forklift could be very dangerous. And he had gone into the freezer and shut the door. Finally he made it out. I was at one of the schools, but my secretary said that when he came into the office he was gray. They called 911 and got an ambulance to him and took him to the hospital and gave him oxygen. But I realized how something could happen so quickly in school food service that you are responsible for. Those local Directors have so much responsibility. It is not a funny incident but it is one that has stuck in my mind for eternity. How close we came to having a disaster there.

MH: What about memorable stories in Washington?

CM: Well, coming from Louisiana, I remember one of my stories was the first snow. I went in October and one January morning I woke up and I looked out the window and it was snowing quite heavily and I thought, "My gosh, I have never driven in snow in my life." And I stayed there awhile looking out the window to try to figure out what people did and they came out with brushes and brooms getting the snow off their cars, and then I could see them driving out and leaving, so I thought, "I should be able to do this." So I wrapped up with my gloves and everything and took a broom down and got all the snow off and took off. Instead of going, which I now know was a mistake, I should have gone the way that they were making sure they were clearing the roads, but I went the shortcut I

had learned only about a month before. Alexandria Virginia is very hilly so I came down to the end and had to stop at a red light that was in a low spot and had to accelerate after the red light up the hill, to get to the office. When I accelerated, my car started going out of control...just spinning in the road. I have never been so frightened in my life. I just stopped there and all of the traffic went around me. Finally, when everybody was gone, I thought, "If I land in a ditch, I land in a ditch." But, I had to try to get out, so I put it in low, and after swerving a while, I got enough traction to get to the office, and when I parked and got out, I thought my legs were going to fold. They were so wobbly. When I finally got upstairs, I remember somebody from the office said, "Oh my God, the one from Louisiana is one of the few who came in today." And I said that I probably didn't have enough sense to realize that I should not have tried to come in today. They told me how to weigh down the back of my car, so it wouldn't happen anymore. The next year, I bought a four-wheel drive. I was not going to have this happen anymore.

MH: Is there anything else that you would like to add?

CM: It is just that I think school food service is a wonderful career choice for anybody. It has been a very fulfilling career and one of the reasons that I stay involved is to visit friends when I go across the country. You do develop lifetime friendships with people who are as equally committed to the profession as you are and that is a real treat.

MH: Well, thank you. Thank you very much.