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Barbara S. Belmont

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Barbara S. Belmont was interviewed by Dr. Katie Wilson in Washington, DC on April 6, 2011.

Barbara S. Belmont has spent most of her career in association management. She was with the National Association of Home Builders (NAHB) before becoming the executive director of the American School Food Service Association/ School Nutrition Association for eighteen years.

KW: Barbara, I'd like to welcome you to the Oral History Project for the National Food Service Management Institute. We have with us Barbara Belmont, the CEO of the School Nutrition Association. Barbara, you've been with the School Nutrition Association for eighteen years, which started as the American School Food Service Association. What I'd like to start with Barbara is for you to tell us a little bit about your background, your career, and then how you got into association work.

BB: I would love to Katie. I actually started my career as a teacher of American History and Civics many years ago. And then as a young, divorced mother with two young children, I decided to make a career change that would be more financially rewarding. I enrolled at a local university taking several marketing courses while working for a veterinarian to support my daughters. I sought a career in marketing; however, like many people in the Washington, DC area, I magically fell into the world of association management when I was hired by the National Association of Home Builders (NAHB) to help market their magazine. I never planned a career in association management, but from the moment I started working for NAHB, I absolutely fell in love with association management.

KW: OK. And so from the National Association of Home Builders how did you transition to the American School Food Service Association?

BB: Well, this is really going to tell you how old I am, but I was with the National Association of Home Builders for seventeen years and had a wonderful career with them. I started on the editorial and marketing staff of their monthly magazine and rose to Staff Vice-president, Builder and Association

Services, within 5 years. After many more years of taking on additional responsibilities and earning my certification in association management (CAE), I felt prepared to become a chief executive officer of a national association. I learned about an opening for an executive director at the American School Food Service Association as I began my search and immediately applied for the position. Having always been a strong advocate for school meals, I felt this might be a perfect match - an association with a mission that I believed in with all my heart.

My research of the association exposed some serious problems such as churning through 11 executive directors in 14 years and dwindling financial resources, but from the time I interviewed with the Search Committee, Executive Committee and the Board of Directors, I felt that we were a good match for each other.

KW: OK. Then the rest is sort of history. Barbara, you've been with us for eighteen years. You've really seen a lot of challenges and successes in the School Nutrition Association, and you've been a part of all of that and you've really put the School Nutrition Association in a very strong professional position at this time, so the next thing is I'd like for you to talk to me a little bit about some of the skills you brought to the leadership of the, at that time, the American School Food Service Association, that helped bring us through challenges and still bring us through challenges today.

BB: Katie, just as you were involved in ASFSA early on in your career, I became involved in the American Society of Association Executives, which I'll refer to as ASAE. I knew that I had a lot to learn beyond NAHB. I knew that there were association executives out there that were outstanding mentors and teachers. The experience and knowledge I gained from ASAE educational programs and networking, as well as being elected and serving as Chairman of the Board of Directors, really enhanced my leadership knowledge and training skills, as well as broadening my knowledge of association management. I must

give my participation in ASAE, my professional association, much of the credit for helping to prepare me to lead a national association.

One critical lesson I learned from ASAE was how to transform a divisive Board of Directors into a strong, cohesive group focused on priority issues and future planning. With the help of forward looking presidents, we introduced some new ways to conduct Board business, such as knowledge-based decision making that provides directors background information and time to hold open dialogue on issues before debating and voting. In a trusting and open environment for open discussion, directors focus on reaching the best decision rather than taking sides and debating. The Board quickly adopted the whole knowledge-based decision making. And the use of consensus building through mega issue discussions. It was wonderful to watch over the years the transition from directors who were anxious to put their Board experience behind them to directors saddened when their terms were over. And many directors began putting their names in for vice president or other Board seats. And that was very rewarding for me to see. So I think the whole governance area is something that I feel really good about.

Strategic planning is another area I helped make a difference. I know the association had a long history of planning, but things were changing very rapidly. The rate of change happens at a much faster rate today than 30 years ago, and so we introduced a new way of strategic planning, a 3-year cycle for establishing goals, objectives and strategies. From 3-year plans, we have now moved on to strategic issues management planning which is best for dealing with a rapidly changing environment. With strategic issues management, we focus on the priority issues confronting or about to confront school nutrition programs, members and the association, and annually reevaluate these issues. And set new priorities. And this, I believe, has really helped keep the association focused on the right priorities and putting our resources behind those issues that are most critical to the association.

There is one final item that I wanted to mention to you. I found it interesting that the national leaders had a very regional focus. And rather than thinking of themselves as being responsible for the good name and well-being of the national association, they thought their primary job was to represent the views of the people back home like the House of Representatives. And so we worked very hard to create a national leader perspective responsible for the name, the reputation, the fiduciary responsibilities that a board has, and that they had to make decisions that were best in light of the School Nutrition Association. So that was a major milestone.

KW: I truly believe so. I think that as we look at all those leadership skills that we learned along the way, that like I said, today we're still using those same leadership skills to get through any challenges that face us in this organization. And so let's then transition from using those leadership skills to the fact that now we can look back over the years and look at a number of success stories that the School Nutrition Association has been able to celebrate under your tenure, so talk to me a little bit about some of those stories that were very prevalent in your tenure.

BB: Well, let's begin with finances, because you can't grow an organization, you can't enhance what it's doing, unless you're financially sound. And when I first took this job the association was going through a difficult period. They had moved from Denver to Washington, DC. Expenses had increased, and the auditors had expressed a great deal of concern about the financial picture, and that ASFSA needed to take some serious steps if they were going to continue to operate. Obviously, good financial practices had to be the number one priority. With the help of O.J. Byrnside, and outstanding leadership, we initiated financial practices that have put us into the good position we are in today. And we continue to do well, even as we've gone through the worst of economic times. At the end of every year we've had a net profit on our operations budget. And yes, we've made a few cutbacks in areas, but in no way have our members been affected by any cuts. That to me is really important.

Secondly, what comes to my mind is the growth of trust and transparency between SNA and the state affiliates. We have worked hard to provide support services for state leaders and staff so we can work together more effectively. Beginning with a National Leadership Conference and leadership training for state leaders such as Future Leaders and the annual conference for state association executives, we have worked hard to enhance federation relationships. I think one of the nicest things that ever happened to me is that one year the state presidents did a presentation in which they gave me a big metal-like lunch tray and then each state president presented me with a magnet from their state. They each came up, one by one, and put their magnet on this metal tray, and I still have and cherish it today.. Without the strength of strong state affiliates, SNA is not going to be a strong organization. So I love it that today state and national leaders all get together, and the feeling of harmony and working together really is there. So that was really important. I think the expansion of services to members and what we can provide to members has really grown and expanded over the last eighteen years. A lot of that has been helped by the fact that we've been a pace-setter in terms of technology, and utilizing technology to get services out there, because so many of our members are unable to travel. So you have to think about 'How do you get the news, how do you get education and information and knowledge to the people that need it?' I think we have an award-winning web-site. We're doing all kinds of wonderful things with it, including webinars and we have the School Nutrition University. We've now started a learning center. We put tools up there that our members can use, like the Supply Chain Toolkit. Anytime there is an uproar in the media we put up talking points for our members that they can access immediately. So I think that we've come a long way in how we support our members. And then the expansion of what we're doing in education – education is integral to associations, and so moving that forward and going beyond just ANC and CNIC in providing educational opportunities is really critical, so I think we're doing a really good job there. Those are sort of internal things that come to my mind, but then there's the whole external part of what we've done. I guess most people, maybe when they think

about this particular period of time, will think about the re-branding. That was huge. And by the way, let me just say that anything that happened during this period is not me. I'm just a part of it. We had such outstanding leadership, such outstanding presidents, such outstanding staff, who had to implement a lot of these wonderful ideas. That's what made this all work, and I just would keep coming back and saying that over and over again, because when I think of re-branding for example, I can't think of it without thinking of Karen Johnson, who had to get up there and really sell the brand. And then the leadership of the states who so embraced it and loved it and what it has done for this association. And so to move from American School Food Service Association to the School Nutrition Association – I think some people are still on a high from it, but we have outside people tell us all the time it's the best thing we could have ever done. So I think people totally looked differently at the association from that point on. Secondly, I think one of the greatest success stories in advocacy obviously was the defeat of the state block grants, and I was still pretty new when that all hit. And I will tell you, I was amazed at the leadership that got involved in this. For example, Gene White coming and living in Washington for five months, to educate the media so they could understand what block grants meant - Dorothy Caldwell and Penny McConnell and others who lived through that period and who really helped lead this association. But to have 'school lunched' Congress, to have prevented that from happening, when we came so close to losing these programs was just frightening. But that was one of the greatest victories, and to be recognized by The Washington Post for what we had pulled off – I think this association should always feel very, very proud of that. I think from the beginning when we started strategic planning, our members we would survey, and the leadership, they all talked about image, and improving the image, and they wanted to be the voice of child nutrition, because we didn't even have anybody working the media when I first got here. And so we had a capital campaign and we raised \$3,000,000, and I think it shocked everybody that we were able to do that. But with the support of our industry partners who stepped up to the plate, that we were then able to begin to have this whole media program and be

proactive, and this led us to become today the voice of child nutrition. We have become so much the voice of child nutrition that we can barely keep up with all the demands on the association in terms of media, in terms of government, in terms of organizations out there who want to partner with us because we are the voice of child nutrition. So that's very, very exciting. They turn to us first when questions come up, and that gives us all kinds of opportunities to get our message out there. This last year we launched Tray Talk. Now we're reaching out directly to parents and that is phenomenal. And we're getting success stories about what schools are doing and the number of moms out there, and dads, who are coming to the site just keeps growing. And I think the potential for that is wonderful. And there again I want to talk about the fact that we can never just do this by ourselves. Once again, our industry partners stepped in and helped, and in this case, especially MilkPEP, who made this possible. So partners are such an important side of building success for an association, and we've had really many good partnerships over the years. And whoever thought that those partnerships would then lead to Let's Move and being a partner with the White House? And that's been one of the most exciting outcomes, I think, activities that we have been asked to be involved in by so many organizations. Just last week SNA president Nancy Rice, was invited to the White House, met with the First Lady, and was able to participate in one of their call-in conference calls that they do. This administration has really reached out to the School Nutrition Association, and I think our membership is very, very proud of the role that they have played with the Obamas, with this administration, and the way they are viewed in Washington, DC. I know that we have moments where members get discouraged because somebody like a Jamie Oliver, but there is so much more good in the press today than there is bad, and I think we just have to keep focused on getting our really good messages out there.

KW: You know Barbara, the success stories are many, and we could talk about many of them throughout your tenure, but as you have now announced your retirement from the School Nutrition Association,

looking back you will take many memories with you. Just share with me a couple of things that will truly be memories that you will hold close to your heart as you move on.

BB: My problem when I start thinking about memories – there are so many wonderful moments that I have had with this association. I have been so privileged to work with the leadership, and what I didn't expect and what I didn't know would happen when I took this job was the friendships that I would make. And so when I think about memories I think about the friendships that I have made, the people that have had such meaning in my life, and I hope are going to continue to play a meaningful role through friendship and staying in contact. The presidents are just an incredible group of people and they have provided me such wonderful memories. And Katie even as we talk about memories I think of the time you and Mary and myself getting lost in San Diego and almost getting run over by a train in a car, but those are fun memories to look back on. But there were serious memories as well. It's hard for me to even pull one or two of those out, but I can only tell you it's all about the people. And I could separate them in different groups because that's the most of what I will take with me. There are special moments. There was that moment when the House of Delegates voted for the re-branding, and we became the School Nutrition Association. That was just a very special moment, and there have been many of those moments. Another special moment that I don't want to overlook is that over the years, going back to 1995, SNA started to take the attitude that any hungry child is one hungry child too many, and that we need to look beyond our borders and see if we can help others. And that was a long road to the day in 2006 when SNA launched the Global Child Nutrition Foundation because the demand and the needs out there were so great and our members have so much knowledge, so much information, and they care so deeply.

KW: Barbara, if you had someone just coming out of school looking for a career, and they were considering child nutrition, what advice would you give them today?

BB: Make sure you are passionate about feeding children because it's going to be very difficult and challenging career. It's one of the hardest jobs there is, so you have to deeply care about feeding children and seeing that they are well-nourished. And if the passion isn't there, this is not the right career for you. If it's there, you are going to be so surprised to by the many personal rewards that will be yours.

KW: Thank you.