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5-12-2017

## Barbara Cole

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### Recommended Citation

Cole, Barbara and Institute of Child Nutrition. Child Nutrition Archives., "Barbara Cole" (2017). *Oral History Project (all interviews)*. 37.

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## Barbara Cole Oral History

An Arkansas native, Barbara Cole has worked in child nutrition for the Arkansas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired for forty-one years. She was also a longtime member of the National Advisory Committee of the National Food Service Management Institute/Institute of Child Nutrition.

JB: I'm Jeffrey Boyce and it is May 12, 2017. I'm here in Little Rock at the Arkansas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired, and I'm talking this morning with Barbara Cole. Welcome Barbara, and thanks for taking the time to talk with me today.

BC: You're welcome Jeffrey. Thank you.

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

BC: Well, I'm from a small town here in Arkansas called Fordyce. The population is about 5,000 people. I worked in the cafeteria when I was in the 9th grade and of course my pay was a free lunch. I'm not going to tell you my age here, but I stayed there eighteen years before moving to Arkadelphia, where I went to college for four years, and then after that I've been in Little Rock ever since.

JB: Where did you go to college?

BC: I went to college at Ouachita Baptist University in Arkadelphia, Arkansas.

JB: Ok. And what did you study?

BC: I studied dietetics. And after the completion of that degree I went and did a dietetic internship here

in Little Rock at the University of Arkansas Science and the Veterans Administration Hospital.

JB: Ok. How long was your internship?

BC: It was a year - or nine months really.

JB: And so after that where did you go to work?

BC: I came here.

JB: Oh.

BC: Yes, I've been here ever since.

JB: So how long have you been at the Arkansas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired?

BC: August 15<sup>th</sup> of this year it will be forty-one years.

JB: Wow!

BC: Yes.

JB: You don't even look forty-one.

BC: I started when I was very young, very young.

JB: Well, tell me about your studying dietetics. I'm assuming that was really helpful in what you do now.

BC: Yes, I guess. When I was doing that study I always thought I was going to be in a hospital setting. And doing the dietetic internship I kind of fell in love with the pediatrics part of the program, and really thought I wanted to be a pediatric dietitian. And then after visiting the intensive care and seeing the little babies with the needles in their heads, or IVs, I was kind of - I don't know - it was just heart wrenching. And so I didn't really know after the internship what I was going to do. And then this position became

available and I applied for it, and I guess the rest is history. I've been here ever since, and have just fallen in love with the program and the kids.

JB: Well tell me about that. What are some of your responsibilities?

BC: Well, I am the director of the program, and I guess I'm kind of doing it all. You know, paperwork is a major, major part of it. But I do the hiring of personnel, plan the menus, do procurement, and just the overall function/operation of the department.

JB: Has there been a mentor or anyone who sort of helped or guided you along your way in your career - or did you start as the director here?

BC: I started as the director here. I think I spent one hour or maybe less with the prior dietitian that was here, and the job description has just kind of fallen on me of what I was going to be doing, and all of that. I will say that my co-counterpart at the School for the Deaf - her name was Cleta Looney - and she was instrumental in helping me whenever I needed any guidance sometimes.

JB: So she was sort of a mentor to you.

BC: Yes, she was a mentor.

JB: Is she still there?

BC: No, she's not there. She's been retired I guess fifteen, twenty years ago.

JB: How many students do you serve?

BC: Currently we have about ninety-seven, and we do the three meals a day with them. We do breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

JB: They board here then, at the school?

BC: Yes. When I first started probably seventy percent of them were residential students. And now it's about forty percent of them stay on campus.

JB: And the others come from the area?

BC: The others come from the area, maybe within a twenty-five mile radius. And they all go home on weekends and come back on Sundays, and we have the dinner meal for them on Sundays. When I first started they were here seven days a week, three meals a day, but since then they go home on Fridays.

JB: Do you participate in the Arkansas School Nutrition Association?

BC: Yes. And that's how I really got started. My first year here some type of communication came across my desk, and I saw that the Association was having a state conference. And I registered for that, and I guess ever since then, forty years, I've been associated with them and the School Nutrition Association as well.

JB: Well, if you've stayed forty years, I'm guessing you find it useful. How has it helped you in your career?

BC: I will say that the Association has been a big part of that. I guess the monotony that could have been on the job is not there. Even with that, every day something is different. You come in with an agenda. It may not always work that way. But being a part of the Association has really made me grow professionally. I've had the opportunity to serve in many capacities on the national level and on the state level.

JB: Tell me about some of those positions you've done.

BC: My first position on the state level was the Membership Chair of the Association. And I think right from that I moved to be President-Elect and President. And I've held other chair positions, Resolution and Bylaws Committee, and currently I'm the Public Policy and Legislative Committee Chair.

JB: So you're quite active in the state association. How many members do you all have in Arkansas?

BC: We probably have 1,600 at this time, a small organization. And because of that I've also been on the national level. I have held the position of Secretary, and I've been Southwest Regional Director twice. I guess that was kind of a precedence, because no one has ever done it twice. But that was maybe a slipup the second time around.

JB: Was that with the School Nutrition Association?

BC: Yes. And I've also been on the Resolution and Bylaws Committee, and also Chair of that committee. And we also had a Public Communications Committee, and I've been the Chair of that committee, and the Membership Committee, and also had a run as Vice-President of the Association. I wasn't successful, but have been on the ballot for Vice-President.

JB: Now does your school follow - just like a mainstream school - the same regulations and everything with the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs?

BC: Oh yes, we do. All of our students are eligible for a free meal - well, let me say they get a free meal - but as far as our reimbursement, then they have to qualify like other families have to qualify, and for us to get the reimbursement for it.

JB: Is there anything unique about Arkansas regarding child nutrition?

BC: Maybe some of the likes and dislikes, some of the food preferences. It's a little different. We're still Southern and we like the beans and cornbread, some of us do. And getting the students acquainted to that, and some of the families that they come from are used to those kinds of things. So I guess the food preferences would probably be unique about it.

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

BC: It's not one. I do come in here with an agenda. I guess paperwork is a lot of it. You've got reports, and you have meetings. And you may come in here with an agenda, ok, I'm going to get this done today, but a typical day would be ordering procurement, and as much as I can I like to get out and talk to the students, and sometimes that's hard, because of all the paperwork that we have to do.

JB: How many do you have on your staff?

BC: We have nine, ten with the administrative assistant. When I first started we had twenty, and I had three serving sites. And now we're down to one serving site and nine employees, so we downsized and only have one kitchen now, one serving site.

JB: Do you do much scratch cooking?

BC: Oh, we do. Yesterday we just had meatloaf. You should have been here.

JB: I wish I had. I love meatloaf.

BC: We do do a lot scratch cooking, as much as we can.

JB: That's good to hear. What changes have you seen in your profession over the years?

BC: Well, the meal pattern and the requirements. You know we've always had a meal pattern, but I guess there's more accountability and more verifying, and needing nutritional analysis on things. The pattern itself has changed a whole lot.

JB: Does Arkansas have a procurement program, or do you have to do all your own?

BC: One thing about the School for the Blind is that we are a state agency as well, so the state has the purchasing department, so we piggyback the bids that they put out for all the other state agencies. But of course some items are not on the state contract, that we are able to go out and buy on the open market, as long as we stay in that threshold of purchasing amounts. That's one good thing about being a state agency. It kind of depends on what day it is. One day we may be a state agency and one day we may be a school and then one day we may be both, so it kind of depends.

JB: Neither fish nor fowl. What are some of the biggest challenges you've faced over the years?

BC: I guess when I first started personnel, or labor, was pretty permanent. And over the years you get, as those particular employees leave or retire, getting and keeping someone has been an issue, a challenge, I would say, mainly because the starting salary isn't the best. We do not pay our personnel out of the child nutrition funds. Ours comes from the state. And the salary isn't quite the best. It's kind of low, and keeping someone at that salary has been a challenge. Turnover has been a challenge because of that and sometimes you can't



even get an applicant to say, "Yes, I'll take the job" because of that. But I will say we just got a new state plan and the salary in that level has increased tremendously, so hopefully if another position does become available I won't have that challenge of trying to hire someone in that position. But I would say keeping someone committed and dedicated and just loving their job for what it is other than the salary, because you have to LOVE what you're doing. You know.

JB: I was just about to say I've heard that a lot. You have to be really committed, because it's not the highest paid career. What do you think has been your most significant contribution to the field? I'll put you on the spot.

BC: Well I do think that over the years of my learning and networking that I've seen - just our program and thinking of it - changing from what it used to be in the seventies when I first started, up until now. When I came in the seventies we were eating in family style settings, which is ok, we enjoyed that, but now all of the students are treated not that they have a special need. They all go down the cafeteria line, and we just acquaint them, because some restaurants they may go to they may have to do that, so it was like acquainting them to going down the cafeteria line.

JB: More mainstreaming them.

BC: Yes, and just treating them as a normal individual, even though they're visually impaired. I was doing salad bars long before the encouragement of fresh fruits and vegetables were a requirement or recommendation. We were doing that a long time ago.

JB: We talked about several things in your career, but I didn't mention you were on the National Advisory Council for the Institute of Child Nutrition.

BC: Yes. I have been for two years so I'm working on my third year here and thanks to Dr. Katie Wilson for the opportunity to be able to do it.

JB: Do you find that helpful in your career, or useful?

BC: Yes. Any opportunity to network, and you can steal ideas, and get ideas from other districts. And even though we are at a small district, and maybe some of the challenges that the larger districts have are different, but we still have challenges as well, and so it's a good opportunity to share and network with other districts, so this has been a good experience as well.

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

BC: I would say that all of them have been special. I guess one touching moment was about six or seven years ago when a parent brought her child here for the first time, and the child was crying because she didn't want to stay. And then the mother was crying because she didn't want to leave her, because she was a stay-at-home mom and she didn't want her to stay. And I saw they were crying and then I started crying. Now that child is in the seventh grade.

JB: So she started here as a first grader?

BC: She did, as a kindergartener. I've seen them from knee high all the way to graduation. I've seen several. There's one little girl now who I can just see in the room with her little pigtails, and she's getting ready

to graduate this year. But they're all sweet and special.

JB: So you serve K-12?

BC: Oh, we have some three-year-olds here.

JB: Wow.

BC: We do. They are really, really tiny. We service them.

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

BC: First you need to love children I think, and just have a passion for what you do, and put your love in it and forget about the money. I think it's a reward being about to see the smiling faces, especially when they come and say, "Well Ms. Cole, I really did like that menu today," or "I liked that. Let's have that more often. This is my favorite." Just seeing a smile on their face, because we're part of the educational process, because they can't learn without a full tummy, so just the reward of knowing that you're a big part of that child's life.

JB: Anything else you'd like to add today?

BC: Well, I will say that these forty-one years have gone by real fast. They really have. And it's been a reward. I will say that when I first started I thought - about a year or two after starting - I thought I was going to go and pursue something else, but I did not. And I'm glad I did not. Like I said, the Association, the coworkers, just the whole child nutrition family is just marvelous I would say. You make friends for life. I've got friends all over the country. I'm kind of getting to where a lot of the people I did know are no

longer around, or they are retired, or something, but it's just a rewarding. One of my roommates from pervious conferences, we room every year at state conference, Mary Hill from Mississippi.

JB: I know Mary. She's a sweetheart.

BC: I can remember just meeting her in San Diego, California, and we have been friends since. And like I said, it's a real neat organization and profession to be in.

JB: And I think they've been lucky to have you.

BC: Well, thank you, thank you.

JB: Well thanks for taking the time to talk with me today.

BC: Oh you are so welcome. You are so welcome. And I'll be here another forty years.

JB: Good luck with it. Thank you.

BC: You're welcome.