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## Sandra Fisher

Sandra Fisher

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Sandra Fisher, a graduate of Penn State and Hood College, has spent her career working in Pennsylvania and Maryland. She started out as a hospital dietitian before getting involved with the development of the NET Program in Pennsylvania. She later spent twenty years in Maryland as a Processing Specialist for the Commodity Program.

### **Sandra Fisher Oral History**

JB: I'm Jeffrey Boyce, and it is July 22, 2008 and I'm here in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania at SNA's annual conference with Sandy Fisher. Thank you Sandy for taking the time to be with us today and sharing your story.

SF: Well, thank you. I am certainly interested in this project.

JB: Oh good, good. We are trying to preserve as many histories of child nutrition professionals as we can. Could we begin today by you telling us a little background about yourself...where you were born and grew up?

SF: I was born and grew up in the small town of Waynesboro, Pennsylvania.

JB: So you are a local for the convention this year.

SF: Yes, yes.

JB: You went to school there, elementary...secondary?

SF: I went to school there.

JB: Can you tell us about your education, your background?

SF: I graduated from Penn State with a degree in Food Science and I have a Master's Degree from Hood College in Nutrition Education.

JB: And where is Hood College located?

SF: Hood College is in Frederick, Maryland.

JB: Oh, Okay. What about your earliest recollections of child nutrition programs. Were there school lunch or breakfast programs when you were going to school?

SF: There was a very, let's say, brief school lunch program. In those days, the students were allowed to help in the cafeteria to earn money. They could help serve and help wash dishes.

JB: Did you work in the cafeteria?

SF: No, I didn't at that point.

JB: What was your favorite item on the menu back in those days at school lunch?

SF: I have to say that I can't tell you other than macaroni and cheese is probably the one I remember the most.

JB: That was my favorite too...that and the homemade rolls. So what brought you into child nutrition as a profession? How did you get involved in the field?

SF: I was mostly interested in foods and nutrition. I kind of lean toward the chemistry side of things...and so actually, nutrition really is a science-based program, so that is where I got started.

JB: Of course.

SF: And so, as I say, when I went into food science, I was more interested in how foods, the interaction of foods I guess or the ingredients of foods...that is where I really started.

JB: Well, tell us about the early days of your career...what was the first position you held?

SF: The first position I held was Dietician at the local hospital...which I obtained three days after I graduated from college because their dietician had died.

JB: Oh my goodness.

SF: So, I had not planned to go into that area. I was going to do more laboratory work and more in the R and D (research and development) for manufacturers but I ended up being a dietician and from there, I became much more interested in nutrition per se, and also nutrition in the foods that you serve. So from there on, I went on to stay with nutrition and then with the NET Program (The Nutrition Education and Training). About that time, the federal government was developing that program and I went to some of the first meetings that Pennsylvania had. Each state could have their own program, so I attended the very initial programs that they were doing. And was able to get a grant so that I could work with the schools in teaching primarily, we did not teach the children, but in the NET program, most of the time I taught the Food Service people in the kitchen.

JB: And who supplied this grant so that you could do this training?

SF: The federal government.

JB: Okay. And tell us about the program that you developed?

SF: Well, actually, we developed numerous programs. We were able also to buy supplies and books. So I worked with a variety of schools, and depending on what their greatest needs were, we did do some curriculum development. So that the children could, as we are now...that is the big focus...that we should learn about the foods so that we can appreciate them and perhaps be more likely to eat them ...that was one of the focuses. The other was for training for the cafeteria in how to change their recipes and how to focus more on things like whole wheat, which after all these years now, has become one of the most important targets.

JB: It has become a high priority. I think that is a good thing. So you were educating students about the importance of nutrition and you were training people who were preparing the foods as to how to make them more nutritious. Tell us about some of those training programs. It seems that training is a big emphasis in this field and I think it's very important.

SF: I had a very good relationship with the Food Service Director in my home town, so I convinced her that we would have a "Good Nutrition Week." All the menus during that week would be improved from the nutritional standpoint. And the biggest one that we wanted to do was to serve a whole wheat pizza. That was totally unheard of.

JB: When was this?

SF: This was about 1978.

JB: Wow...that is early days for a whole wheat pizza.

SF: I still have the article from the paper, "Whole Wheat Pizza". It definitely did not go down well with the students.

JB: Oh really? They weren't crazy about it?

SF: No.

JB: Maybe you could share a copy of that article with us.

SF: I could do that.

JB: So, how did they react to the pizza?

SF: As I say, that was definitely not asked for again. That was not to be repeated.

JB: Did they at least enjoy some of the healthier products?

SF: Oh, they did.

JB: So you were able to, overall, improve the menu?

SF: Yes.

JB: What were some of the other trainings that you did?

SF: Gee. Well, as I say, we were able to purchase nutrition education kind of materials so that they could, in turn, use those materials within the schools to teach the children. I did write a curriculum using mathematics and rather than counting numbers, counting oranges, and we did some things like that trying to integrate the nutrition into other areas of the curriculums. So they were kind of learning nutrition, but not realizing it.

JB: [Laughs.] Whatever works. So after the NET program, what did you move onto after that?

SF: Well at that point in time, I finished my Master's Degree and I did teach some college level nutrition at Penn State off campus. I wanted to get a job in Maryland as the State NET Coordinator. But at the time, that job was not available, so a job in food distribution in the Commodity Program was available. So, I became the Processing Specialist, and spent 20 years there trying to improve the Commodity Program nutritionally.

JB: Tell us about the Commodity Program for some people who might not be as familiar with it.

SF: The government purchases food for the use of the schools and other programs. The purchases are based on whether it can be on a surplus by crops depending on that type of situation or if they make a direct purchase of good, wholesome items like protein and cheese and flour, etc., so that the schools can use that to turn that into products that they can use in their operation, and the food is technically free. So that helps support their operations. When I started, butter was one of the biggest commodities. It was free because the government had millions of tons of it in storage. Butter is not one of the nutritionally preferred foods. And cheese was another very big one. So, there was no such thing as whole wheat...it was not being used anywhere in the program. So over the years, that program has improved immensely. Needless to say, butter is no longer on the list.

JB: So those are some of the bigger changes you have seen. What are some of the biggest challenges you face in developing your program or trying to improve your program?

SF: The biggest challenge, really, is the resistance of people to want to try things that are more nutritious because most people have developed a taste for sweet and high-fat and fried foods.

JB: Like in the South where I'm from. So what were some of the ways you overcame some of this resistance?

SF: Just persistence, I guess. If at first you don't succeed, try, try again. Time helped.

JB: An excellent attitude. Has there been a mentor or anyone special in your career who has guided or influenced you, or helped you along the way?

SF: Well there were several people. One would have been Helen Guthrie who wrote the nutrition book that we kind of call our Bible at Penn State. She always emphasized nutrition and so she would have probably been my mentor I remember most.

JB: Any special memories that come to mind when you think over your career...and special stories or incidents?

SF: No, but I have so many of them, I guess I really probably couldn't point out any one...but I certainly made a lot of friends and really, really enjoyed working with the people and the school directors.

JB: It seems that people are the key to these programs and there are some really special people.

SF: And they were always responsive. I really didn't have a lot of big resistance when we wanted to try new things.

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

SF: As I say, I have thoroughly enjoyed my career. That's why I'm not totally retired yet, because I still want to see the improvements that we started continue. And right now we are in the best time, I think, of all because there are big, big changes taking place.

JB: Can you talk about some of those changes?

SF: Well, I've already mentioned the whole wheat, but the one story that I can say, back in 1978 when I was teaching nutrition, I taught about, I knew about trans fats.

JB: Wow, a hot item today!

SF: I mean that was in the textbooks and now today, all of a sudden, someone finally woke up to the fact that trans fats were no better, perhaps, than the butter. So I am really pleased to see that has come around and those changes are being made. But particularly that we are getting away from the high fat foods and fried foods and that we are looking at more fresh fruits and vegetables.

JB: Thank you so much for taking the time to share your story with us today.

SF: You are very welcome and I enjoyed talking about it.