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## Alberta Frost

Alberta Frost

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Interviewee: Alberta Frost  
Interviewer: Meredith Johnston  
Interview Date: July 21, 2005

Alberta Frost has worked for the USDA's Food and Nutrition Service since 1967. She started out working in the Food Stamp Program for several years before moving into child nutrition programs. She has in fact worked in all of the FNS programs at some point or another, including food distribution, child nutrition, and the WIC Program.

MJ: And we are here at the USDA's Food and Nutrition Service with. It is July 21, 2005. Thank you very much for taking the time to talk with us today.

AF: My pleasure.

MJ: Would you tell us a little about yourself and where you grew up?

AF: Well, I was born in Fargo, North Dakota, but didn't live there for all that long. I'm actually a second generation government employee. My father worked for the National Weather Service. So in my younger years we moved around quite a lot all over the west. So I've lived in New Mexico and Washington State and Oregon. Montana. We finally ended up when I was about 12, I guess, in Denver, so I sort of call myself from Colorado, was raised. Went to middle school and high school there, and college as well.

MJ: And what time period would this have been?

AF: Well, gosh, I have to confess all this? Hmm, I was born in 1944; I am a World War II baby and so during the late '40s and into the '50s. Graduated from Aurora Central High School in 1962.

MJ: What is your earliest recollection of Child Nutrition Programs?

AF: Oh, gosh, I think it was probably when I was a kid. Maybe in the Third or Fourth Grade, I think I remember spaghetti and meatballs, which I was quite fond of. But I did, I typically did eat school lunch when I was growing up.

MJ: How did you become involved with Child Nutrition Programs?

AF: I became involved in them originally because I became the director of the, an organization that doesn't exist anymore here at the Food and Nutrition Service, but the Nutrition and Technical Services Division in 1984. Before then, when I first came to Food and Nutrition Service, which was in 1967, I worked for the Food Stamp Program. So I started my acquaintance with Child Nutrition after I had been here for a while and knew quite a lot about Food Stamps and not very much about the Child Nutrition Programs. But that division, Nutrition and Technical Services, at that time, had all the nutritionists that provided support to the School Lunch Program, how to staff the Child Nutrition labeling, and at that point we were actually running National Commodity Processing. Those were in the days when we had lots and lots of

surplus dairy products in particular, so we were running our own processing programs here in addition to the ones that the states had. So I sort of had those responsibilities and I had to learn particularly about School Lunch Meal Patterns and about some things about food processing kind of in a hurry because they were completely new to me. So that was my first brush with Child Nutrition.

MJ: Was there someone, a mentor who was influential in directing you in this field?

AF: I would say probably I had several. At the time that I came into Nutrition and Technical Services and then a couple of years later I went on to the Food Distribution Program which also of course has a lot of interaction with the Lunch and Breakfast and Child Care programs. George Braley was actually in charge of the Special Nutrition Programs and he actually hired me into those jobs, so I would say he certainly was a, and helped me learn a lot of the things that I didn't know, so he certainly was quite an influential mentor. Once I got into the programs, I have to say that Bob Freiler probably was, became a very close friend and mentor. You've probably, maybe even interviewed him for this, but I am sure his name has come up. He was the program director in our Mid-Atlantic Region for years and years, and prior to that had worked as a state distributing agent in Pennsylvania. There was very little about the programs that he didn't know. So he was very welcoming to me when I came and very helpful throughout the years in helping me understand issues and state concerns and local concerns. He was particularly good at kind of putting you in touch with local School Food Service people. And I think that another person was Isabelle Culley. She was originally the first Food Stamp Director that we ever had in the Department of Agriculture, but she later moved into our administrator's office and dealt with all the programs. She was very influential on all of the statutes that had been written and all of our programs and was an agricultural economist, and there was just, she just had the broad picture of everything. And after she retired, we stayed in touch and became personal friends. But she always was very helpful and kind of giving you sort of the history and the long perspective on things. So those three people, I'd say.

MJ: Would you tell us a little about your educational background and how that prepared you for your job here?

AF: Probably, it didn't prepare me at all. I have a bachelor's degree from the University of Colorado and it is basically in political science and American history. I'd always wanted to work for the government for some public program, so those seemed like the subject matter that I should study. I have a Master's Degree in Organizational Development, so I was kind of aiming, in doing that, to understand better how organizations work and how to motivate people and how to run an efficient organization. So I did that here from American University in Washington. I guess you would say that I have gotten a lot of on-the-job training in various and sundry food and nutrition issues as I've gone along.

MJ: Could you tell us more about your career and the positions that you have held?

AF: Sure. As I said I started in Foods, I've actually worked in all of the FNS programs at some point or another. So I started in Food Stamps and those really were in the early days when it was quite a small program and we were really trying to encourage counties to actually sign up for the

program. It wasn't a nation-wide program at that point. And I went into the, into working with the Child Nutrition Programs in 1984. I stayed in the nutrition arena for a couple of years and then I went on to food distribution. I think that is probably been the job that I've held the longest here at FNS, but I was the Food Distribution Director for about six years and then I was in WIC for a brief period of time. Just about a year. I was the Director of the WIC program, and then I was the Child Nutrition Division Director from '93 to '96. I left the agency actually for a while at that point. I went to the Food Safety Inspection Service, which is another agency in USDA that does food safety, meat and poultry inspection, and was there for a couple of years and decided that just really wasn't what I wanted to do. So I came back here and in my current position where I am the manager over the research and evaluation functions for the agency as well as nutrition policy for all of the programs and strategic planning. So it is kind of, it is a mixture of things and I get to deal with all of the programs, so that is quite pleasing to me.

MJ: What changes have you seen in Child Nutrition Programs over the years?

AF: Goodness. Lots. Well, I guess just sort of as a general statement, it seems to me that things have gotten increasingly complicated over the years. Not just, and I don't mean just the programs themselves as they have gotten bigger, and you know, every change in law we have seems to bring some new facet or some complexity. But it seems like the world has just gotten more complicated so the environment in which the programs have to operate is perhaps sometimes not as supportive as one would like it to be or it could be. On the positive side, I think over the years I have seen an increasing focus and concern over the programs on low income children, which I think is good. We clearly want everyone to participate in the Lunch Program, but those people who have a particular economic need, I think it is important that we really reach out to them most, and I think I've seen that happen. Growth of the Breakfast Program and the growth in Child Care and the Snack Program, all of these are all intended to help low income families. The bigger attention I think to nutrition; at the beginning of these programs we were really worried about people not getting enough to eat. Now, we are really concerned about quality, diet quality, and I think that's all to the good. But I do worry, I think, about some of the things that are going on in society which I think tend to make it harder to run the programs. There is not a, I don't think there is as much of a constituency in this country any more, as much of a lobbying group for children's issues, for children's health issues, as we really need. And I think it makes it harder to run the programs. It makes it harder for the schools. Schools have more financial pressures on them as a result of that, I think, and so issues about competitive foods, about how much attention, you know, children's health issues in the schools actually get, those are of real concern to me, I think. So some good changes but I think maybe some things, some trends I worry about, too.

MJ: Would you like to elaborate on any, any more of the trends that you are worried about?

AF: Well, it is kind of hard. You know we are all doing a lot of talking these days about how we need to combat childhood obesity but it is hard to see a movement or a set of actions or a program that is actually doing something about that and I do think that a part of that is that the schools, communities, states, themselves are so pressed for money that some of the things that really need to be done, I think it is hard for people to do. As an example, getting unhealthy competitive foods out of the schools, which I think would be an important thing to do. Some

communities, some states are making an attempt at that but as a nationwide trend it is really not happening. I think if there was more money or more public pressure, more public support for children's health issues it would be easier for the schools to do, or it would be easier say for Congress to pass a law that would kind of require people to do these things. But there is not, there doesn't seem to be that sort of movement, either at the national or at the local level that is making that happen. I think it is something that we all need to keep working on.

MJ: What do you think has been your most significant contribution to Child Nutrition Programs, so far?

AF: Well, it is nice of you to say "so far." I think I would say, if I can say two things. When I came into the Food Distribution Programs, the Commodity Program had a terrible reputation in the school community. It was not providing the food that people felt they need on a timely basis packaged in a way that they could use. There were just pages and pages of complaints about the program and up to that point there had been kind of a general response in USDA that we, the Commodity Programs were in the business of serving producers and farmers and the schools just sort of needed to accept the food in the way that it came from the agriculture sector. And I feel that I was really a big, - and we made a lot of changes over the next decade and they actually continue to be made. Now I think the program is kind of on a sort of a continuous quality improvement course. But at that point in time, I feel like I really was one of the people who was instrumental in getting a different mindset going, that there were things that we could do, that we should do, that we, the Food and Nutrition Service could be more influential with our agriculture partner agencies, Agriculture Marketing Service, and that at point ASCS, it is now called something different. Those were the agencies that were representing the producer interests and they had had more power in our three-way partnership, and I feel like I was one of the people at least that kind of changed that dynamic and got a lot of improvements in that program.

MJ: Could you talk a little bit more about the changes in Commodity Distribution?

AF: Well, we started getting things packaged in ways that were easier for the School Food Service people to use. We started getting more variety in products. Options to have lower fat ground beef, options to have chicken come in different forms, improvements in the specifications of products that people had been complaining were of a lower quality. We started working on a more timely delivery. So things of that nature. And also to really start, the issues were not just with the federal government's delivery of the program but also with the state distributing agencies and how responsive they were. So we also did really a lot of work with state D.A.s to get them to listen to their customers more and give them, in a lot of states we might be offering a hundred products but the state D. A. only wanted to handle 40, so that was all he was offering to the local school districts, as an example of poor service. So we really worked a lot with states trying to get them to be much more customer focused.

MJ: Do any memorable stories or events come to mind when you think over your years involved with the program?

AF: Well, maybe I shouldn't tell this story. But my first week on the job I got a call from our Mountain Plains Regional Office to tell me that they had found a human finger in some ground

beef that had been delivered to a school, so that was my introduction to the world of food processing. That only happened once, but that definitely was memorable. It always used to strike me, and this was very gratifying that when you do things right that people are appreciative. When I would go out to state meetings and talk about, as an example, I think I was in Iowa once and I was talking about what foods were coming up, this would have been in July or August, what foods people were about to get for the upcoming year and I got a standing ovation over chicken nuggets. And I thought that, boy, this is really nifty that people care about these products that much. So that is one thing that sticks in my mind.

MJ: Anything else that you would like to add?

AF: Well, I suppose on the other side of the equation, when I was the Child Nutrition Director, one of the major things that we worked on at that time were the changes in the regulations surrounding the Meal Pattern, so the School Meal Initiative was completed during that period of time. And I think now people generally regard having these nutrition standards in the program as a positive thing, but at the time it was greeted with great suspicion. People were concerned that they weren't going to be able to meet the requirements so I had lots of meetings and lots of encounters that I remember, pretty memorably with people standing up and saying "you are about to ruin the program," or "we don't believe your analysis," or "have you thought about this," or "have you thought about that." In the end, I think that all of the input turned out to be useful but there were some memorable meetings, I think, that, where everybody was speaking their mind. But I think it's all worked out alright in the end.

MJ: I want to ask you about the period, the periods when there are budget cuts. Uh, talk a little bit about the decisions you have to make at those times, the challenges.

AF: The challenges? Well, you know, generally speaking, during the period of time that I've been involved with these issues, there have been times when we've had to hold the line and not be able to spend more money, but I really haven't been with the programs at a time when we actually had to take cuts. I certainly have in other programs and you really do, you have to depend I think at that point on the facts and the figures and the analysis that you have and try and figure out things that would be the least harmful to the least number of people, or something that all of, everybody deserves the benefits that we offer, but if you've got to take a cut sometimes you've got to do it with the people that have the most money, not the people that have the least money. So you really do have to look, I think, at the data that you have and try and figure out what, what, how you are going to do the least harm.

MJ: I have one question that I didn't have on the list, but could you describe a typical day for you, if there is one?

AF: Oh, well, let's see. A typical day always has a lot of meetings on the calendar and one of the reasons for that I think is that these programs are complicated. They require the knowledge that comes from a lot of different people. When decisions are made around here they frequently might involve the people who, say, do the program regulations, the people that might do research, the nutritionists, the financial people. So you do end up spending a fair amount of time trying to bring all of these disciplines together to make sure that you are considering everything

that you need to consider; or if you are telling people things that are happening, everybody so, because they've got things that they are going to have to do as well as the things that you have to do. So typically, there's a lot of meetings on the agenda. Since these programs are so visible, a fair amount of time is taken up with answering phone calls, answering letters, helping people get ready to talk to reporters or to testify on the hill. I would say a fair amount of my time is taken up with getting my bosses, my political bosses, ready to go speak to some group or another. And then there is just the time that you need to supervise your staff and kind of try and make sense out of what is going to happen the next day or the next week. But you have to, you have to be able to do things in fairly short frames, time spans, because you are always moving from one thing to another.

MJ: Well, thank you very much for meeting with us today.

AF: Well, thank you. It is fun to think about things you haven't thought about for a while.