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Beverly L. Girard Oral History

Beverly Girard is a licensed and registered dietitian with almost 35 years of experience in school and clinical nutrition. She holds a bachelor's degree in Nutrition in Business from Purdue University, a master's in Dietetics and Nutrition from Florida International University, an MBA from Nova University, a graduate certificate in Social Marketing from the University of South Florida, and a PhD in Curriculum and Instruction from the University of South Florida.

Girard is the Director of Food and Nutrition Services in Sarasota County, Florida, a district of 42,000 students with a budget exceeding \$18 million annually. She directs nearly 400 employees at 50 base schools, satellite schools, and charter schools. She oversees summer feeding programs and feeding for emergency shelters. Sarasota County Schools is a District of Excellence with 30 Healthier US School Challenge Schools.

She is an active member in professional organizations including the Alliance for School Food Service Leadership, School Nutrition Association, and the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics. Dr. Girard has extensive experience as a speaker and instructor. She has numerous published articles and serves as an editorial reviewer for several journals. She is a certified School Nutrition Specialist, ServSafe instructor, and consultant trainer for the Institute of Child Nutrition.

JB: I'm Jeffrey Boyce and it's March 6, 2011. I'm at the LAC conference in Washington, D.C. with Beverly Girard. Welcome Beverly and thanks for taking the time to talk with me today.

BG: 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?

BG: Sure. I was born in rural Indiana. I was raised on a beef farm in rural Indiana. Actually the name of the town is Roachdale. I was raised five miles outside of this little town of 1,000 people. So Putnam County is my first county; that's where I was born.

JB: And is that where you went to elementary school?

BG: That's where I went to elementary school and junior high and high school – in Putnam County.

JB: And were there lunch or breakfast programs there?

BG: There was a lunch program, no breakfast program.

JB: And did you participate?

BG: I did.

JB: Do you remember any of your favorite menu items?

BG: I liked the chef salads when I was in high school. But I have to be honest and say I used to spend my lunch money sometimes on getting a Diet Coke, or actually it was Tab back then.

JB: Tell me a little bit more about your educational background. Where did you go to school and what degrees did you earn?

BG: Sure. I went to Purdue University for my undergraduate. That was a degree in Food, Nutrition, and Business, with a minor in Communications. And from Indiana I moved to Florida and I got my first master's degree at Florida International University. That was my master's degree in Nutrition. I became a Registered Dietitian after that. And then I got a Master's of Business Administration in '91. And then I just recently finished my PhD at University of South Florida; actually I just graduated in December.

JB: Excellent. Congratulations. So it's Dr. Gerard now.

BG: Yes.

JB: That's wonderful. How did you become involved in child nutrition as a career?

BG: Actually I didn't ever know about child nutrition and only through a conversation with an old roommate of mine when I lived in Ft. Lauderdale, told me her mother had been a food service director and it might be a good career option for me. At the time I was twenty-five years old and I didn't even think I would be interested until I started learning about it, and then I desperately wanted to be a part of it. I think that often happens. If we don't know much about the field we assume it's not for us, and it certainly has been for me. So that's how I found out. I actually found out through my old roommate.

JB: The serendipitous paths our lives take.

BG: Indeed.

JB: Has there been a mentor or someone special how sort of guided or influenced you in your career?

BG: I think there've been many. I've been very blessed to have been around a number of leaders in child nutrition. Probably the first person who got me involved in the association was Frank Higgins, Clarice Higgins husband in Florida. Jane Wynn from Broward County, Florida has been a big mentor. Joy Miltonburger, who's no longer in child nutrition, but she hired me into child nutrition in Palm Beach County. And then I've been fortunate enough to be around so many leaders in the profession they're almost too numerous to mention. In this field everybody

looks after you and I feel that because people have known that I was serious about the field they've taken a special interest and they've helped to guide me.

JB: Wonderful. Tell me about the positions that you've held.

BG: I started out as a clinical dietitian in Ft. Lauderdale, and then I became an area supervisor at the ripe old age of twenty-five in Palm Beach County, stayed there six and a half years, and then became the director in Sarasota County in 1991, and I'm there to this day.

JB: Do you feel that your educational background helped prepare you for a career in child nutrition.

BG: Absolutely. Absolutely. I know it did. Marcia Smith is another mentor of mine, from Polk County. She's a past-president of SNA and a director in Polk County. She told me – almost as soon as I finished my master's degree in Nutrition I asked her what I would need to do to become a director, and she suggested that I get an MBA, so almost as soon as I was finished with one, I started up in my MBA program, and took her very seriously. And I think an MBA and being a Registered Dietitian in this field is an awesome combination.

JB: Because it is a business today.

BG: Because it is a business. It's finance, it's nutrition, you let one of those slide for the other – it's all over. So I'm delighted to have the combination of degrees that I have.

JB: Is there anything unique about Florida with regard to child nutrition?

BG: Well, I think we've been a national leader in child nutrition. We've had people like Clarice Higgins, Thelma Flanagan, Jane Wynn. Today we have leaders in the association – we have Mary Kate Harrison, Marsha Smith. I like to consider myself a leader. So we have great people from Florida. We have a nice strong history.

JB: What's a typical day like for you?

BG: I start with answering e-mails, and actually there are usually staff lined up outside my door asking questions and so forth. I'm a huge believer in having an open door policy and making sure that people have access to me pretty much whenever they need it. So I answer telephone calls, I go through emails, I counsel employees, I call schools. Actually the events of the day usually dictate what I do. I don't like to come in with a very concrete idea of what the day will hold, because it will be sure to be blown to pieces, so I respond a lot to my employees. I'm there for them.

JB: What are some of the biggest challenges that you've faced?

BG: Well, the biggest challenges are – and this is more recent – we have parents who are on both ends of the spectrum when it comes to childhood health and so forth, and what the child nutrition program should be. Sarasota, because it's a bit more of an affluent area, a bit more artsy and so forth, we attract maybe a different parent base than some districts do, so I have some parents that think we should have a very restrictive environment when it comes to child nutrition. I have others who think that they're the parents – obviously they are – they're the parents, they should be the decision makers about what goes on in the child nutrition program, even at school. So, that's a challenge right now, trying to keep everybody happy. And I try to do it, but it's not always possible. So what I try to do is be politically savvy and get all of those opposing viewpoints to be my partners, one way or another.

JB: What would you consider your biggest accomplishment to the field so far?

BG: I would consider the fact that I pulled a program that was half a million dollars in the red out in three years and had a million dollar fund balance within three years, that's a major accomplishment.

JB: A major one.

BG: But that was many years ago, so you can't rest on your laurels of many years ago. My single biggest contribution to the field is the fact that I have one of two dietetic internships in the nation that prepare future school food service directors that's actually based in a school district.

JB: Tell me how that works.

BG: We're preparing future leaders for the child nutrition field. It's actually a dietetic internship in which students apply to be an intern in our department. They're with us for ten months, and at the conclusion of the internship they're eligible to sit for their registration exam to become a Registered Dietitian. The people that we've placed in the field already are directors, nutrition educators, area supervisors, and then we have others who've gone into fields such as pediatric nutrition, sales, so I really believe that that's my biggest single contribution to the field, is preparing future leaders.

JB: What schools do you partner with in this internship?

BG: Actually it's a national selection process, so the majority of our students have come from the Midwest and Florida State specifically, because we've had a great relationship with them, but we get students from all over the nation. This year we have interns from California, Montana, and Florida.

JB: And how do they apply?

BG: They apply online with the American Dietetic Association's matching agency.

JB: Excellent.

BG: It's our biggest contribution. I've actually had it going on now for I believe we're in our twelfth or thirteenth year.

JB: This should be an easy question then. What advice would you give someone today who was considering child nutrition as a profession?

BG: Whatever you do, get your foot in the door, in whatever capacity it is. Whether it's an area supervisor, or if there's nothing available get your foot in the door as a general employee. Get in, get started, get your name established, start your seniority possibly in a state, so that people know you're very serious. I've talked to students before and said to them, "Just go ahead and whatever the job is, get into school food service, let people know you're serious, and you'll be taken care of after that, because people will notice – people notice rising stars - so if you're serious about it, it doesn't really matter what the entry level job is – just get in the door."

JB: And this profession is like a family isn't it?

BG: Absolutely it is. One of the things that is most beautiful about the School Nutrition Association and being in child nutrition in general is we don't compete with each other, we complement each other. We give each other ideas. It is very much a family. Again, I stated at the beginning I've been taken care of my whole career. There's always been somebody looking after me and encouraging me, which is a blessing. It is very much a family.

JB: Looking back, are there any special stories of children you've served or people you worked with as you think about your career?

BG: Numerous, numerous stories – I mean I've got some really funny ones.

JB: Share a couple with me.

BG: OK. When I was an area supervisor in Palm Beach County I was really young. And the little kids in school just love it when they're not necessarily familiar with you – you're kind of in and out. I was at a school one day where these little girls kept coming through the serving line, and I was being very expressive in the way I was talking to them, and so forth. They were coming through the serving line and they said, "Oh, I wish you could stay here. We want you to work here", and "Oh, you're so pretty", and all this good stuff, and this little boy comes through and says, "I don't think you're pretty. You've got these great big bug eyes." And I'm like 'OK, stop being so expressive.' But it was hysterical, but kids are so real. It doesn't matter what you think about yourself or don't think, they provide a clear picture, and I love that. That's one of my favorite stories, because kids are the real deal. Other stories are about employees, who are not just dietetic interns, but employees who didn't get a fair shake elsewhere in life and they came to child nutrition and they found a family. I've worked with people who never thought they'd

graduate from high school, and as a thirty-five year old or a forty-five year old got their GED. I consider that a victory; working with people who have been in possibly abuse marriages and so forth, and finding that there's another way to make a way in this world – I think that's phenomenal – so I love that. I very much consider what I do my mission. I'm a believer in God and I very much consider this my mission. I don't think you have to go overseas to be a missionary. I think you can do it right in your own community, and that's the way I feel.

JB: Excellent. Anything else you'd like to add?

BG: I just love my job, after twenty-five and a half years of being in the same type of job I still love it. And when I retire I want to be a professor so I can continue to contribute to the field. That's my goal.

JB: The best of luck with it.

BG: Thank you.