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## Beth Hanna

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## **Beth Hanna Oral History**

Beth Hanna, PhD, RD, LD, SNS, is a registered dietician who received her PhD in Food and Lodging Management from Iowa State University.

Her work experience includes serving as Director of Nutrition Services for West Des Moines Community Schools where she managed all aspects of the school nutrition program in compliance with federal and state regulations.

Dr. Hanna also served as an instructor with Iowa State University and a consultant for the Iowa Department of Education, Bureau of Food and Nutrition. She reviewed child nutrition programs and offered specialized support in equipment layout and design.

In addition to being a trainer for the Institute of Child Nutrition, Beth is a ServSafe instructor.

JB: I'm Jeffrey Boyce and it is February 5, 2015, and I'm here at NFSMI with Beth Hanna of Iowa. Welcome Beth and thanks for taking the time to talk with me today.

BH: You're welcome.

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

BH: I was born in Mason City, Iowa. I grew up on a farm just north of Mason City, Iowa, which is in the northern part of the state, just about twenty miles from the Minnesota border. I went to school at what was at that time North Central, and from there I went to college at Iowa State.

JB: What did you study?

BH: I received a BS in home economics education at that time, which is now family consumer science – thought I wanted to be a teacher – and actually got married while I was in college and my husband was in the service so we moved to Norfolk, Virginia for a while, and then I came back and finished my degree after he got out of the service. So then we tried to farm for a while, so I was on farms in Iowa for several years, then decided farming in the '80s wasn't necessarily what you wanted to do if you wanted to have any money, so went back to school at Iowa State and received a master's in institutional management. At that time I had been working in hospitals and nursing homes, and thought I wanted to run a food service department in a large nursing home. However, when I graduated there weren't many jobs like that around. And my major professor looked at me one day and said, "Have you ever thought about school food service?" And I looked at her and said, "No, never." And within six months I was working for the Department of Education in Iowa as a consultant over the child nutrition program. So I was reviewing schools in Iowa and I did that for three years. After that I applied for and became the director for West Des Moines Community School District, which is the western suburb of Des Moines. At that time we had about 5,500 students, and we had less than five percent free and reduced. So it was an interesting program, but it was a growing district. Twenty-seven years later I left West Des Moines Community School District, and it had 9,000 students and almost forty percent free and reduced.

JB: The economy has changed.

BH: The economy has changed a lot in that time. During my time at West Des Moines I also went back to Iowa State and received a PhD in food and lodging management with an emphasis in the child nutrition area.

JB: OK. Well before we get too deep into your career, tell me about your elementary and high school experiences. Was there a food program there, and did you participate?

BH: Unbelievably, yes. When I went to elementary school we had school lunch, and if I'm not mistaken, at that time we paid about thirty-five cents for a lunch. Mother looked at us and said, "I can't afford to send you a sack lunch, so you will

eat at school.” And we all ate at school. In 1966 Iowa became one of the pilot states for the Breakfast Program.

JB: Wow, that early?

BH: That early – 1966. So consequently we started eating breakfast at school. And at that time it was ten cents for breakfast. My favorite story is about my younger brother, who at that time was in elementary school. And Mother fed him breakfast at home. He got on the bus and he went to school and he ate breakfast at school again. But not only did he eat his breakfast, he ate everybody else’s breakfast around him. He was a growing boy and he had no problem eating. He just loved it.

JB: What were some of the menu items they were serving for breakfast in the ‘60s?

BH: For breakfast, I think we had hot cereal, we had eggs, we had toast. I remember lunch better than I remember breakfast, because in the ‘60s I was in high school and I soon graduated, and so I remember more of what my brother was eating, and I remember that because I was taking a nutrition class in college and one of my projects was to talk about school meals, so I brought my younger brother in and he talked about it, and I got an A in that assignment.

JB: What were some of his favorite menu items?

BH: My brother – he ate everything. He ate the spinach that nobody else would eat. For lunch the school cinnamon rolls were outstanding. We always had chili and cinnamon rolls. I know other places they would serve chili and cornbread, but not in Iowa. It’s chili and cinnamon rolls.

JB: Together?

BH: Together, and actually the state had to get a special dispensation to serve cinnamon rolls as the bread component for lunch, but it was popular.

JB: They were frosted and all, just like a normal cinnamon roll?

BH: Oh, VERY frosted well frosted, and they were HUGE.

JB: That's an interesting combination. Do you know the history behind it?

BH: No, I just know that since school food service started that's what they've served. And it's not just in our school district. It was pretty much across the state.

JB: An Iowa thing.

BH: An Iowa thing, yes. Most people look at us like it's crazy, but you know what? A bowl of chili and cinnamon roll, they were high-count days. I think it was the cinnamon roll.

JB: My favorite was on Friday, we joked and it's probably true, that everything that was left over from Monday through Thursday went into the vegetable soup, and we got half a half of a pimento and cheese and half a peanut butter and jelly sandwich with it, and that was the day I was always participating.

BH: My husband's favorite story about school lunch was we always had bread and butter sandwiches, because in the early program you had to have visible butter, so you put butter on bread. Well, nobody liked the crust, so the cooks would put the crust on the inside and it looked like you were getting peanut butter. And the kids would fight over it, thinking they were getting a peanut butter sandwich, and they were just really getting the crust.

JB: That's another good one. Ok, tell me a little bit more about how you got in the profession. You said there were no jobs in the field you thought you wanted, but you ended up in school lunch, and tell me a little bit more about that.

BH: Well, when I graduated with my master's my husband was working and I was in a set locale, and I couldn't move very far. And I went to a job fair, and the director of child nutrition programs for the state of Iowa was there. He was looking for consultants to come in, and it required a master's. And I had had some hospital, nursing home food service experience, so I had worked in a kitchen. So he was interviewing people and he accepted me as one of the five new consultants he hired that year. And so I was one of those consultants that came in, and every week we came into the office and got our assignments and went out and visited schools three days a week and we'd be back in the office to write our

reports on Friday. We travelled the whole state of Iowa at that time. We didn't have regions, so sometimes I'd be up in the northeast corner in really small schools, and the next week I might be in the center part of the state in a really large school, with a group of consultants doing the reviews. We actually tried to do a lot of consulting helping. At that point the review forms and what we had to do for a review was minor compared to what they have to do today for the reviews and all of the paperwork. We received no information ahead of going other than what we had in the office that said this is their participation and things like that.

JB: And what were you checking? What were the goals for the reviews?

BH: We still looked to see if they had the meal components on the trays. We did a lot of looking at their financials to make sure that they were categorizing things right, were being charged correctly. Back then in the state of Iowa school districts were actually paying more of the child nutrition program expenses than they are today. It was nothing to see that the director's salary came out of the general fund, because she was an administrator, or that at that time a lot of schools paid for labor hours, the actual salaries that they worked. But they didn't pay any of the benefits, and things like that. So we checked to see what they were being charged, but we also spent a lot of time in the kitchen helping the cooks, just looking to see what they were doing - how they were thawing food, if the food was safe when they served it. We spent most of our time in the kitchens watching what was going on.

JB: And you did that for three years you said?

BH: I did that for three years, yes. It was interesting. It was neat because I met the most wonderful people out in the field and could talk to them about what they did. A lot of times I would get new directors that hadn't done it before. One of my favorite stories is somebody who was a printer by trade that was hired as a food service director. And I walked in to do a review for her in the first month she was at work. She had no idea what she was doing, but she was somebody in the community who needed a job, but they liked her and they hired her as the director of child nutrition programs. I spent a lot of time educating her. We sat

down and we had to work staffing schedules, we had to work menus, we had to talk budget. So it was actually taking a person that knew very little about child nutrition and food service, but had wonderful people skills.

JB: So you spent a lot of time mentoring then.

BH: Yes, spent a lot of time mentoring her.

JB: And then after those three years how did you become a director, and where?

BH: At that point in time, about three years into it, my children were in grade school, junior high, and I needed to be home at night. When I was with the state I was away three or four nights every week, and that was becoming very difficult. So I started looking for a director's job, and interviewed for and was hired at West Des Moines Community Schools, which as I said had 5,500 students and a population of about five percent free and reduced. And it was quite an interesting experience. The director had left in January and they hired me in March. So the district had been without a director, and before the director left the high school manager had left. So I had the high school - at that point in time they transported, so they had a production kitchen, a base kitchen, and they satellited out to half of the district.

JB: How many schools was that?

BH: At that point in time there were seven elementary, two junior high, and one high school. And the high school was preparing half of those elementary meals too. So they were doing about 2,000 to 2,500 meals a day with no kitchen manager and no director. The secretaries in the office were ordering the foods. The menus were written. It was real interesting, and on my very first day - I started the week of spring break, so I had a week to be in the office - very first day that we had school we had had a blizzard on the weekend. So I walk into the high school kitchen not knowing any of my staff, because they hadn't been there the week before, and finding out that a third of them were sick or stuck someplace in this blizzard.

JB: Snowbound.

BH: Snowbound, and I was kind of like 'How are we going to get meals out today?' because I didn't have the staff. Believe it or not the ladies all pulled together and said, "We can do this." And they truly did. The challenge with it was that they needed to take extra food to one school, and one lady looked at me and said, "Here's the pan. Go to Western Hills." And I looked at her and said, "Where's Western Hills?" And we made it through. So I was director and manager for the first three months at that school, because there wasn't anybody else. And we hired a manager by the next fall so we had things rolling.

JB: Did you have any mentors during this time, anyone that helped you? Were you active in the state association?

BH: I knew about the state association because when I worked at the state I had been to state meetings, but I didn't have mentors because I had the state experience, I had been in schools, I had reviewed schools, so I knew what that process was. And actually during my training when I was with the state our state director sent us to a school and we actually had to work in a kitchen for a whole week during our training period. So I kind of knew how kitchens worked in schools. I knew how kitchens worked overall because I'd been a kitchen manager. So I was fairly comfortable. I knew the federal regs. And I really had wonderful staff that knew their job. They had been holding it together during our transition time. I wouldn't say that it went smoothly but I would say that we made it through that period. No, I really didn't have a mentor at that point in time.

JB: How did your educational background prepare you for this, or did it?

BH: Oh yes. I guess of all of the jobs that I could have had coming out of my master's as a registered dietitian, and having worked in schools, I selected classes because I knew kind of where I wanted to go back into management. When I selected classes for my master's program I had a procurement class, I had at that point in time a computer class, which was very rare, I had an equipment class, a layout and design class, in addition to food preparation classes and personnel management classes, so it really did prepare me. I've told a lot of my friends that of all of the jobs I could have received out of college this job probably used more of my education than any of the other jobs I would have had, because all of my



teaching classes were used, because I did nutrition education in the classroom. So because I had a teaching certificate it gave me just a little bit of clout with the teachers. They weren't afraid to let me in their classroom to do nutrition education. And I spent about twelve percent of my time during my career in the classroom actually teaching classes.

JB: Wow, that's good.

BH: I thoroughly enjoyed that and some of the teachers I did it every year for every year that they were there. We started in about 1990 and I did it every year after that. We actually got a Team Nutrition grant back then and we wrote a curriculum for nutrition education from K through sixth grade. And they put it into our curriculum so there was a nutrition lesson for all of the grades. And they used that for many years. It's been modified since then, but some of the teachers still use some of the sections.

JB: Is there anything unique about Iowa in regard to child nutrition programs?

BH: Yes. Iowa is extremely unique I believe in the fact that we have a state law that mandates that all public school buildings have a food service program that's approved by the Department of Education. The Department of Education only approves one, and that's the National School Lunch Program, so every public school building is mandated to be in the National School Lunch Program. We don't have the option of opting out if our students don't like the meal pattern or anything. We're there for the long haul. So I think that makes it quite unique.

JB: So you get a lot of support from your state legislature.

BH: No. We get the mandated support, the thirty percent, but we don't get extra support. We just get those unfunded mandates. That's what they are.

JB: What was a typical day for you as a director, or was there a typical day?

BH: I think the typical day was non-typical. You never knew what was going to happen on a given day. I might wake up in the morning and have a plan and I guarantee you by the time I got to work the plan probably changed. But I did generally try to plan out my day. On a typical day I would arrive around 7am. I'm

the type of person who likes to get to work prior to anybody else, because I can sit down and organize and get the emails out of the way and those kinds of things, when the phone's not ringing. So I would come to work early. That didn't mean I got to go home early though. I did spend ten to twelve hour days a lot of times at work; sometimes nights, sometimes weekends. But I guess that was my choice. It's what I wanted to do. A typical day was administrative things. We always checked in with our schools. When I was smaller I actually personally called all of my managers to check in and see what their issues were. The central office where I was was responsible for getting subs for them, because we didn't have a large sub pool. We controlled those out of the office, so the manager would let us know who was going to be gone and we would then assign a sub to them if we had a sub to assign to them. Administrative meetings that everybody has – we did have those normal ones. I did spend a fair amount of time out in the kitchen, a lot of times because we were short staffed. I believe in the 27 years that I was there I probably had full staff one or two years. Typically people who worked in school food service when I first started were a mother, because it was great mothers' hours. They could get the kids to school and then they could come to work and they'd be home before the kids would. West Des Moines was a very professional suburb where a lot of our mothers were doctors and lawyers or professional people who already had jobs, or they were mothers who didn't need to work, so working in school food service wasn't where they really wanted to be, so getting staff was hard. So I spent a lot of time hiring staff, and when we didn't have staff I actually went out to the kitchens and worked. People used to get mad at me when I said it, but my favorite place was the dish room. I could move those dishes through there really quickly. A lot of people didn't like that - didn't mind working on the line. I cashiered a lot – did those kinds of things, and then came back and did the routine paperwork, talked to parents, talked to principals, talked to teachers. And like I said I spent about twelve percent of my time in actually classrooms.

JB: So you were a very hands-on director.

BH: I was a very hands-on director, yes. Some people say maybe you should have been a little bit more hands-off, but I missed not seeing the students. That was

hard. As the program grew and the district grew it was harder to be as hands-on because there were so many more administrative things to do as procurement became more important, as food safety became more important, there were a lot more administrative things we had to do, like developing HACCP plans and updating those, and doing our procurement. Iowa had an incident with a couple of lawsuits over procurement, and so consequently procurement was very high and we were watched very much. So we started developing RFPs and working in co-ops for purchasing food, and that took a fair amount of time.

JB: What were some of the biggest challenges you faced during your career?

BH: On day-to-day operations my biggest challenge was staffing, and then managing staff. Staffs have changed over the years, and so we spent more and more time with staffing as time went on. The biggest unique challenge I ever had was the flood of 1993 in Des Moines, Iowa. That was the year that about – it was slightly after July 10<sup>th</sup>. July 10<sup>th</sup> they said, “We’re going to have a flood,” and so they put the district in an emergency status, and they called me and said, “Come in, because we’re going to have a shelter and you’re going to have to feed the people, so come in and get ready to do that.” That was on a Saturday morning. And on Saturday we didn’t feed any people, although they told us there would be 3,000 there for supper, but there weren’t. But by Tuesday I believe it was, somewhere in that area, the Des Moines water works, the water plant for that area, had flooded. And West Des Moines is on their own water system, so the school district in West Des Moines had water. The town of West Des Moines had water, but nobody else in the area had water. There were 200,000 people without water. So we had a large kitchen and we became the food center for this whole area. So we went from feeding zero people on July 10<sup>th</sup>, the day they said we were going to have the emergency, to by Wednesday of the next week, which was probably about July 15<sup>th</sup>, something like that, we were doing 23,000 meals a day, out of a kitchen that was meant to do less than 3,000 meals. This is in the summer, and it became very interesting, because some of my staff could come in and work, but not all of my staff could come in and work, because they were flooded. It was a huge flood. We started, and then the Salvation Army came in, and then we fixed meals for the Salvation Army. And then the Red Cross came in

and we fixed meals for both of them. And at one time we had I think something like 43 ERVs, emergency response vehicles, trucks that took food out into the area for the victims.

JB: For the geographically challenged like myself, what river is Des Moines on?

BH: There are two. One is Walnut Creek and the other is the Raccoon, and what they do is they meet in the southern part of the state, and what happened was there were torrential rains north of us that hit both rivers and they collided in this area. There were softball fields that were 20 feet under water. To get to the airport you couldn't go the normal way because there was water over it. It flooded the whole area. I have some pictures if you want them. It was unbelievable. They said it was a 100 year flood. Since then they have done some things so hopefully it will never flood like that again. That was an interesting experience, because I had been through one emergency similar to this. I had worked at hospital and there was a fire, and we had to move patients and feed patients, and things like that, but this just kept going on, and you kept going, 'Ok, how am I going to feed them?' And so I had to take inventory – luckily we had a warehouse, so I had some food in the warehouse, and it was in an area that wasn't flooded, so it was good that we had access to our food – but I didn't have paper supplies or anything like that. Some of my food service director friends from the area came to help us. We pulled all of our resources of who we knew, what we knew, to call and get things coming in, and then once the flood started hitting, then donations started coming in. And I am very thankful for the support I had of the district. And that point in time I had my school board in my kitchen working. One of the school board members came in, and the phone was ringing off the hook, and everybody was going every which way. It looked like chaos. And she looked at me and said, "Is it OK if I sit and answer the phone?" I said, "Oh, please." That was a blessing, because she was alert enough to say 'OK, I'll just sit down and answer the phone, and I'll write down who calls, and I'll decide who that message should go to', and she did it. The school board president came just about every day, and washed dishes in the afternoon for me. They ran our dishwasher. Luckily I had food service people that came in and cooked, but local chefs showed up. And then our PR person got involved and coordinated our

volunteers for us, because people would walk in and say, “We want to help”, and you’re trying to get out food and you’re going ‘What do I do with these people?’ I have a few fun stories with that. One time we were going to do mashed potatoes, so what we had to do was take our cafeteria, take all the tables out and made it a storeroom, and then put a couple of rows of tables to do food prep on, because we didn’t have enough room for food prep. And we said, “Open mashed potatoes for supper.” Well, we didn’t tell them how many to open. We were still using the open potatoes in November. We had pans and pans and pans of potatoes open. So we learned how to do things like that. We learned that non-school food service people didn’t know how to run our big can openers. It became real interesting what people did not know what to do.

JB: How long did the emergency go on?

BH: We finally closed down on August 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> I believe, so we were 3-plus weeks into the process. Getting it organized, I think was the hard part, because everybody wants to come and do the glamour things, they want to come and cook, because that sounds fun. I was extremely thankful for a church group that I belong to, because they came and did dishes for me in the evening. Because otherwise there wasn’t anybody there to do dishes, because the cooks were exhausted and they had to go home. I would get to the kitchen at 4am and many nights I left between 10 and 11. I’d go home and take a shower and go to bed and get back up the next morning and do it again. By the end of the three weeks I was exhausted. But one thing I learned is you never want to let anybody else take over your kitchen. The Red Cross showed up and they said, “We’re here and you can go home.” And I said, “Oh no, I’m not going home. This is my kitchen. I will prepare whatever you want me to prepare.” The other thing we learned is that – we have steam jacketed kettles. They are 40 gallons and we used them all the time for our scratch cooking at that point in time. But we put things in, we would do hamburger and cook it off, and then add some noodles, or add the vegetables or whatever, and we added them slowly. And when we had to do large quantities, because if you are cooking for – at that time we were probably sending out 15,000 meals for lunch – and if you’re trying to put them in kettles, and all the Red Cross wants to do is open up beef and noodles, or whatever they could get in

a can, and they would open them up and dump them in the kettle – and our kettles wouldn't cook them fast enough. And we finally realized that the reason we could do it at school was we put in a little bit at a time and heated that up, and then put in some more and heated that up, it worked much better that way. And when you put in a large mass out of a can in there and fill it all the way to the top it just doesn't work. So we had to learn different ways to use our equipment. It was an experience all the way around for Red Cross, for Salvation Army, for the school district. Actually, we even had the National Guard there. About a week into the operation we had to look at the group of people there, and we had to sit down and say, "We've got to figure out a chain of command." So it took the person from the National Guard, somebody from the Red Cross, Salvation Army, and myself, and a production manager, and we went into a room and actually drew up a chain of command across the big chart on the wall so we could figure out who was going to do what. And the National Guard person took dispensing food, and the production manager took over production, and then I took overall management and running volunteers and doing PR stuff, so we had somebody in charge of each of those areas, because otherwise it was too large for one person to handle.

JB: It would have been chaos.

BH: It was chaos. It really, really was – we called it controlled chaos, because you had volunteers that had no idea what to do. A health inspector kind of lived with us. When he wasn't visiting the other places he stayed with us. They were extremely helpful. That's before sanitizer was popular, and so we got sanitizer put up by our hand sinks. Just because yes, you had hand sinks, we didn't have very many. That was a very large kitchen that had one official hand sink in the dish room. That was prior to our new kitchen which has 13 hand sinks in the kitchen. This one had one.

JB: Well that's one big change. That was my next question. What changes have you seen in the child nutrition profession over the years?

BH: Oh – from meal patterns to food safety to wellness. It's just grown; it's evolved into a totally different program. I'd say, if I had to compare it to

something, it would be going from like a mom and pop restaurant to a large chain restaurant. Food safety – we took temperatures in the early beginning. We didn't record them, we just took them. We knew kind of where they were. Even the temperature has changed. It used to be 40 to 140. Now it's 41 to 135. We had to develop a HACCP plan. Nobody knew what HACCP was. It wasn't in the books. Actually I believe e coli came about in '85, and so I started in child nutrition in '84 with the state department. So you look at that and go we didn't have the food-borne illnesses that we have now that we're talking about. Wellness – we met the meal pattern. Overall the meal pattern has changed drastically in that time. We went from trying to feed the kids, and having visible butter on the tray, that was a little bit before my time, to having no fat and no salt, and cutting it out, to coming back to a more reasonable model. So those have changed. We went from scratch cooking to everything bought. Now we're back to more scratch cooking. We went from mostly canned fruits and vegetables to a lot more fresh fruits and vegetables. So actually preparation techniques have changed. In my area a lot of places have gotten away from baking bread, but we were still baking our own bread. We had a central bakery that baked for the district - went from no whole wheat to whole wheat products. So it really has changed a lot – went from putting everything on the tray for the kid to Offer vs. Serve, and the kids choosing what they want, from no choices to lots of choices. So what else could have changed?

JB: A lot of changes.

BH: A lot has changed.

JB: What do you consider your most significant contribution to the field?

BH: I think my most significant contribution is in the number of people that I have mentored that have grown up and have taken the profession to another level. I have five former employees that are directors. I have a former employee that's now an assistant director in another district. And I have mentored a lot of other food service directors in the state. A lot of times people would call me and ask me questions if they didn't want to call the state and ask the state a question. And then I think I have done a lot of training, so I think that in addition to touching the

lives of those people, it's training throughout the state. I've conducted many training sessions there.

JB: Any special stories or memorable people you've worked with or children you've served?

BH: The story I remember most about a student was when we first started the Breakfast Program. We had one student in first grade, a little boy that came in. He was the first person to come across the door for breakfast every day. He would come, he would get a tray, he would get exactly what he was allowed, he would take his milk, pour it on his cereal, and his juice, and when he ran out of cereal in his bowl he would go back and get another cereal, and pour the rest of his milk on that cereal. And about that time he would run out of juice and he would go back and get another juice. By the time he got done he usually ate about 2 ½ meals. He didn't complain. He didn't say anything. He didn't talk to many people. He came in and he was actually very hungry and very appreciation. It was the one reason I'm going 'That's why you have programs, because now he's ready to learn.' So I think that is one of the things I remember the most, in addition to my training in the classroom and actually getting to see the students, working with students to figure out what are their favorite foods, or the advisory group that might have looked at it and said, "This is the foods we like. This is what we tasted." So I think those are memorable, but I think it's the students – and the great staff – people that I worked directly with, but also the other colleagues that I worked with. We made some great friends there and learned a lot from each other, and shared and worked with each other.

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

BH: First of all it's a great field to be in. As a dietitian you get to work with healthy, normal children, and that's great. You've got some with health issues, but it's great to work with them – to enjoy it. I guess I would tell them to be energetic, but also be very flexible, and to be able to work with a wide variety of people, whether it's administrators, whether it's the community, whether it's outside



organizations, to remember that they're your friends, and to work with those other groups. You don't know how many times they will bail you out.

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

BH: It's a great place and just be flexible, because the changes are there and who knows what's coming?

JB: Thank you so much for sharing your story with me today.

BH: You're welcome.