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Becky Landes

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Becky Landes Oral History

Becky Landes is a current Food Service Director for Manchester Community Schools in Indiana. For over 20 years, Becky has been in Child Nutrition. She holds a Level 4 Certificate from the School Nutrition Association and is pursuing a Bachelor's degree in Business Administration and Management. Becky is involved in Farm to School in Indiana. She has collaborated with the Indiana Department of Education, Indiana Grown for Schools, and various other stakeholders in procuring and serving local foods in schools. Becky likes to be involved in the many facets of Child Nutrition. She participates in and is a member of several committees committed to helping child nutrition professionals. She is also a consultant trainer for the Institute of Child Nutrition.

I'm Jeffrey Boyce and it is May 17, 2022. I'm here in Mississippi and I'm talking today with Becky Landes, who is in Indiana. Welcome back and thanks for taking the time to talk with me today.

Becky Landes: Thank you Jeffrey. I appreciate you inviting me to be part of this Oral History Project.

Becky Landes: You know it's there's been a lot of food service professionals, also known as lunch ladies and lunch men, and over the many, many years I think that each one of us probably has many stories that we could tell, especially if we've been in this business for very long.

Jeffrey Boyce: Well that's what we're trying to do over the years with this project, to capture those stories.

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

Becky Landes: Okay, so I was born in northern Indiana and it's actually where I currently reside as well, right now. I did move away for a few years to Ohio, and then came back. It's a very rural community.

Becky Landes: And we have two stop lights in our town, that's all. And you know what? It's a great place to raise kids. Not really big on amenities; we don't have much.

Becky Landes: Forty-five minutes to Walmart.

Becky Landes: But still it's a great place to raise kids because it has a small town atmosphere. I know people in this town; I knew their aunts and uncles and their grandparents or great-grandparents, their children, their grandchildren, wherever you are in that generation.

Becky Landes: You know all the people. You know what's happened in their lives. There's not a lot of secrets. And when my children were teenagers I just simply told them that you need to let me know if you've done something that you shouldn't have, because I will hear about it.

Jeffrey Boyce: Sounds much like the place where I grew up and live now. You're two stop lights ahead of us. There used to be like a half a dozen in this little town, but then they made them all 4-way stops.

Jeffrey Boyce: So you went to elementary school there where you live now?

Becky Landes: I did. I started in kindergarten and I walked to school. No joke. We didn't live that far away, and they didn't run a bus route to everybody in town. It seems like they do now, but I had to walk for the first six years, seven years including kindergarten, of my school career.

Jeffrey Boyce: Was there a lunch or breakfast program at the school?

Becky Landes: There was a lunch program. I don't know if there was a breakfast. I would have eaten breakfast at home.

Becky Landes: My mom is a registered nurse, so she's big on nutrition.

Jeffrey Boyce: Oh okay. Did you participate in the Lunch Program?

Becky Landes: Yes, I did.

Jeffrey Boyce: Do you remember and of your favorite menu items?

Becky Landes: I can remember that if you cleaned your plate you could go back to the extra table, and sometimes there would be peanut butter and jelly sandwiches that you could get extra, maybe an extra milk, maybe they might have chocolate pudding. What else? Whatever that they were trying to use up and the extra table was always pretty special.

Jeffrey Boyce: I've never heard of the extra table before. That's interesting.

Becky Landes: That's before you had to count calories and sodium.

Jeffrey Boyce: My favorite meal was always on Friday. There was a vegetable soup and half of a peanut butter and jelly and a half of a pimento and cheese sandwich, and that was every Friday.

Jeffrey Boyce: I was telling someone one time when I was doing an interview, it was actually Shirley Watson, who ended up going to USDA after being the director in Shelby County Tennessee.

Jeffrey Boyce: I said, "You know, I think that soup had every vegetable left over from Monday through Thursday," and she said, "You're probably exactly right."

Jeffrey Boyce: That was the best soup.

Becky Landes: I like to hear your stories, because you know, there's differences regionally, but yet it's still the same. I feel like that probably our extra tables came from commodity peanut butter that they had.

Becky Landes: They might have had some leftover milk of some sort, so they made chocolate pudding, and so I feel like that's how those extras came about. But I can even picture the table. It was at the end of the lunch line over against the wall. It was a long, low metal table. That was where all the extras were.

Becky Landes: The lunch monitor would have to make sure your plate or tray was clean before you could go over. I wasn't really fond of spinach, because we

had spinach, and I was a very picky eater, and so you learn to drink your milk carton really fast and when they weren't looking you put your spinach in the milk carton.

Becky Landes: But then the lunch monitors got smart. Somebody must have clued them in, and they would shake the milk cartons.

Jeffrey Boyce: Oh, my goodness.

Becky Landes: But I do remember their cornbread. I really liked theirs, because I'm sure it was homemade corn bread.

Becky Landes: I don't remember a lot of the other things. I don't think food was really on my radar too much, except for the things I didn't care for. I do remember one story.

Becky Landes: When I was in fifth grade; if somebody looks it up they'll tell my age. We had the energy crisis back then, and so I don't know who decided, but they decided that one of the ways that the school could save energy was we would only have one hot food that day.

Jeffrey Boyce: Interesting.

Becky Landes: I don't know who got to decide, but believe me, I wasn't very happy to have a cold cheese sandwich and warm peas, because I didn't like peas.

Becky Landes: I would much rather have had cold peas, because I wasn't going to eat them anyways, and had a warm cheese toasty.

Jeffrey Boyce: There was only one warm item every day? Not even one warm meal.

Becky Landes: No, one warm item. So I don't know who decided that. I was very disappointed. I do particularly remember that particular meal, because I did not care for peas.

Jeffrey Boyce: Did you go on into high school with the lunch program? Did you participate then?

Becky Landes: Actually I did not. In the high school I actually homeschooled for my high school years, so I did not participate in the lunch program. But I'm back in school again in more ways than one, because that's one of the questions further down the list. I'm actually currently working on a bachelor's in business administration and management.

Jeffrey Boyce: Oh, good for you. So you waited a while before going.

Becky Landes: Well, yes, like 30 some years.

Jeffrey Boyce: Well, what brought you into child nutrition? How did you end up making that a career?

Becky Landes: Serendipity. I needed a job, and there's nothing glamorous about this. I just needed a job that suited my children's schedule, because at that point I was a single parent.

Becky Landes: I started in the dish room and I served vegetables for the first year, and it really intrigued me.

Becky Landes: And it just so happened that the manager retired that year and the next year I was manager.

Jeffrey Boyce: Oh wow.

Becky Landes: I did move up fast, and I was manager, and this was the high school. And I was manager there from 2002, and I became director in 2011, so I was a manager for almost 10 years.

Becky Landes: I was manager at the high school and then my director, unfortunately, was young, but she passed away from cancer. She kind of trained me ahead of time.

Becky Landes: She knew I had interest in that direction, and so I was very fortunate. You mentioned about a mentor and I wasn't really sure about a mentor, but she would have been my mentor, because she knew she was ill.

Becky Landes: And I think on some level knew she probably wasn't going to get well, and she taught me a lot of stuff.

Becky Landes: And I needed to learn a lot more after I became director.

Jeffrey Boyce: She sounds like a really special person.

Becky Landes: She was, she was, yeah, so I think she sent me on to success; she gave you that foundation.

Jeffrey Boyce: So you spent a year as a dishwasher, and then a decade as manager, and now more than a decade as director.

Becky Landes: I used to be able to say there wasn't very many jobs that I couldn't do.

Jeffrey Boyce: Mm hmm.

Becky Landes: The more time I spend as a director the more that I get involved with director things and with ICN and with SNA, and the things that directors do.

Jeffrey Boyce: Well that was going to be one of my questions. So you do participate in SNA?

Becky Landes: Oh yes, yes. So I'm currently Level 4 certified. I'm the highest in the certificate program and as soon as I get my degree I'm going to sit for SNS.

Jeffrey Boyce: Oh, good for you.

Becky Landes: That's one of my goals.

Jeffrey Boyce: Good for you.

Jeffrey Boyce: Is there anything unique or special about Indiana regarding child nutrition programs?

Becky Landes: I feel like our program is a little bit unique. We try to purchase local foods. It's a small part of our budget, but nonetheless, I do even proteins as well, hamburger and pork regionally. You know, we will even serve gumbo here.

Becky Landes: I always talk to the fifth grade, and I talk about the food groups, and say of the dark greens, "How many of you would like to have collard greens on your plate?" And I can tell they don't have a clue what I'm talking about.

Becky Landes: Or we just have some gumbo, or maybe some shrimp and grits.

Becky Landes: We have local pork, so we do biscuits and gravy for breakfast. We have that every week at the high school, a biscuit and sausage gravy.

Becky Landes: We're rural so we make potatoes. Ethnic groups are starting to come in, as far as food groups, and serving more hummus and those kinds of things now, but when I first started I don't believe anybody would have taken any hummus.

Jeffrey Boyce: How many schools do you have, do you oversee?

Becky Landes: Three. So it's just K through 12, plus a preschool and they just go through each one of the schools on their way. So one elementary, one intermediate, one high school.

Jeffrey Boyce: Okay, and for a total of how many students.

Becky Landes: For about 1500 students.

Jeffrey Boyce: So that is pretty good size.

Becky Landes: Well, yes and no.

Jeffrey Boyce: What's your participation rate?

Becky Landes: I haven't done the numbers recently, but it really does help that our breakfast participation has doubled at the high school, and half of our students will eat breakfast now, which is really crazy, because they didn't used to.

Becky Landes: I figure it's a second breakfast for some of them. They eat at home, and now they need snack. But anyways participation is somewhere between 80 and 90%.

Jeffrey Boyce: Wow, that's excellent.

Becky Landes: It's pretty high.

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

Becky Landes: Flexibility is always key. So I cashier still, every day, at the high school, breakfast and lunch.

Becky Landes: Currently, I don't really help much with prep unless I need to, because they're very - I just kind of mess up things when I do.

Becky Landes: They have their system and unless they're really in dire need they prefer I do my own thing.

Becky Landes: So I arrive at school and typically just see how everybody's doing in the high school, because I actually have two offices. I have one in the high school and one in the administration building, but I'm not in the administration building that much.

Becky Landes: And I see how everyone is doing and how breakfast is coming along and any questions that I formulated after they have left for the day, because I'm still here, that I usually answer those, and we talk about our day and what's going to happen. Love events! We do a lot of in-house catering and seems like everybody needs something food wise.

Becky Landes: And then we serve breakfast and I cashier that, and then we start the rest of our day, so they're working on lunch prep.

Becky Landes: If I have a new recipe I'll be working with somebody on that new recipe that I have, and we'll be talking. It might be showing them how to do it.

Becky Landes: Or I might be talking to them about what do you think about this? Can we put this on the menu? I'm very interactive with my staff because I need their input. I don't have all the answers. So we'll talk about a new recipe, or like, for instance, well, I can't get chicken quesadillas. So what do you think? Do you think we could actually just make our own?

Becky Landes: That was a question that I recently asked, and we all decided that, yes, we have USDA cheese and USDA chicken and we have USDA salsa. We can make our own quesadillas.

Becky Landes: And so it will be any kind of things that I might encounter. I have one staff member who takes care of the freezer, so I might be talking about the orders.

Becky Landes: What do we have? So we keep our inventory at an optimal level, which I don't want that anymore, because I think I still have 20 cases of peanut butter and jelly, but, just in case, because I might not be able to get any for the next three months.

Becky Landes: You know, it looks very different now.

Becky Landes: And then it goes into planning, planning the menus for all the schools. Right now I just finished up planning, mostly, the Summer Meal Program, because we do that.

Becky Landes: It might be talking with other staff members on whatever their need is, whether it's an Employee End of the Year Breakfast, or retirement cakes for a retirement party, for here in the school, staff members, or going to the fifth grade class and talking about nutrition labels.

Becky Landes: Or I might be meeting with a group of students and 'What would you like to see on the lunch menu? What do you have to say?'

Becky Landes: And typically the question I ask them is, "So, if you were going to go out to eat with your friends, what would you eat?"

Becky Landes: Because I tell them I might be able to recreate that.

Becky Landes: And so I spend a lot of time in menu development. Probably yeah, that's my passion.

Jeffrey Boyce: Sounds like it; I can tell when you talk about it.

Jeffrey Boyce: What are some of the biggest changes you've seen in the profession over your career?

Becky Landes: Oh lots. Sometimes I think if I was a young person coming in, or even an older person coming in, as a food service director, I don't know how you could have started out with the knowledge that I had when I started.

Becky Landes: The amount of things that you need to know is just tremendous, I feel like, to really do a really good job.

Becky Landes: I've also seen trends in eating habits, because I spoke earlier about the hummus. They would not have taken it. So a few years ago, when the Healthy Hunger Free Kids Act came into being it wasn't a problem much in our schools. It was a little bit. They weren't responding to the whole grains. But we were already transitioning into that, and simply because that's what the kids wanted.

Becky Landes: It was listening to what they wanted, and so we were already doing fresh vegetables, we were already doing some scratch cooking, which we do a good bit, or speed scratch. That controls your sodium right there, because you can control your ingredients.

Becky Landes: So a lot of fresh vegetables. Yeah, a lot of dip, a lot of ranch went with it too, and this year we make a lot of salads. So 25% of our high school kids eat a salad every day, which is a pretty high percentage I feel like. We do a prepackaged salad and we have a vast array of those, it's not just chef. And so they'll say, "Oh, I don't want the ranch."

Becky Landes: And I just find that very fascinating. It might be pepper strips that we had left that we didn't need for our salad recipe. It might be cucumbers. We'll just chop them up.

Becky Landes: It might just be 10 pounds of something, five pounds, or two pounds, and they'll take that as a vegetable side if we do it in the cut portions, and they don't necessarily want ranch.

Jeffrey Boyce: So they're eating just the plain vegetables?

Becky Landes: They're eating the plain vegetables.

Jeffrey Boyce: Wow! Well that's good.

Becky Landes: So I find that very fascinating, because we didn't tell them that they should cut back on the ranch. It's not a food group.

Jeffrey Boyce: What have been some of your biggest challenges so far?

Becky Landes: Covid, supply chain have probably been the biggest challenge, probably eclipsed anything else. So we went from a Summer Meal Program serving approximately 10,000 a summer, 10,000 meals over the whole summer.

Becky Landes: But from the time we shut down on March 13th of 2020 until we ended the program, because at that point we were going into Summer Meals and doing full distribution, till the time we quit three weeks before school started, we served 150,000 meals.

Jeffrey Boyce: Wow.

Becky Landes: That was more meals than we served during the school year.

Becky Landes: And I had a group of 42 volunteers to manage; never had anything like that before, had rented semi-trailers to store our food, so that we would have enough food.

Becky Landes: We bought our milk in gallon size, rather than little milk cartons, because I had this picture of some poor family opening the door and 40 milk cartons falling out at them if they had four kids.

Becky Landes: So that and the supply chain issues; so we prepackaged, we put food together; spaghetti, meatballs, and sauce. Put it in a microwavable bowl, all precooked stuff of course, so that the kids could just put it in the microwave; had directions for them, you know.

Becky Landes: And then, thought that would be the hardest year ever, and then we have this year.

Becky Landes: And this is the hardest year ever.

Becky Landes: Before the summer I thought, possibly, I didn't know, maybe I was going to lose my mind before it's all over. I could pretty much count on 40% of my menu items not being available and having to change that on the fly.

Jeffrey Boyce: And is that still the case.

Becky Landes: No, thankfully it is not. I say yes and I say no. You heard me say about chicken quesadillas; so now we make our own chicken quesadillas.

Becky Landes: We learned how to make kind of our own version of hamburger helper. It's healthier, of course, because I have USDA beef in my freezer.

Becky Landes: We couldn't get our enchilada sauce so we now make our own enchilada sauce. And we've always made our own pizza, so even if you can't get that it's not a deal.

Becky Landes: And we do our own biscuits and gravy, so we just make more scratch stuff. And so I don't know, maybe those things are available, but unfortunately the kids now like this food better.

Jeffrey Boyce: Will you continue to do the scratch cooking then?

Becky Landes: As long as I have employees. Now my next problem is I have a bunch of people retiring this year. And up until now I've been fully staffed, but I now have 25% of my workforce I will have to replace for next school year.

Jeffrey Boyce: Wow, that's a big percentage.

Becky Landes: It's only five people.

Jeffrey Boyce: Well, I guess that's a little bit better perspective.

Becky Landes: It's still 25%.

Jeffrey Boyce: What would you say has been your biggest contribution to the field so far?

Becky Landes: In my own home state, procuring local food. I've actually sat on many committees and helped write a toolkit for schools to procure local food, and trying to be a liaison between the farmer and local food in schools, so that's what I'm known for in Indiana.

Jeffrey Boyce: That's a big thing.

Becky Landes: Oh, I don't know. It's just what I do.

Jeffrey Boyce: Do you have any special stories about people you worked with or children you served over the years?

Becky Landes: You know I have a heart for kids; just do. Love teenagers. They're my favorite age group. And I think that's - a lot of people that's not their - they're not always nice exactly, and that's okay. Some of us have to do the kindergarteners and some of us have to do the teenagers, and the teenagers is where I like to be.

Becky Landes: And just over the years I've had students, college students email me, "Hey Mrs. Landes, I don't know if you remember me. I graduated in this and this year. You wouldn't possibly give me the recipe for corn chip salad would you?"

Becky Landes: Or, “I’m going to graduate this year and could I have the recipe for – “ you know, fill in the blank, and so that always kind of means something to me, because I feel like maybe I’ve made an impact somewhere along the line.

Jeffrey Boyce: Yeah. They remember that food and appreciate it. That is a compliment.

Becky Landes: I think salads are a big deal for us simply because I do remember a summer program and a little boy from the Y being part of one of the programs at our elementary, and he told one of the ladies there that he just loved salads, because he didn't get those at home.

Becky Landes: So being able to provide something like that. And then also we do asparagus once a year just simply because the first time we served it after the students had requested it, there were several students who thought they were funny looking green beans. So it's also been my mission. We’re teachers and I like to expose them to a wide array of foods. We've had jicama and some different things, dragon fruit, and show them what it looks like. So I think kids remember that. I want them to be able to go out and be comfortable dining out almost anywhere.

Becky Landes: So it was time to educate some kids and they really like it, but usually I can only afford it on the school lunch budget once, and I buy local of course.

Jeffrey Boyce: Oh wow, you can get local asparagus?

Becky Landes: Oh yeah, we're for Indiana. We have lots of asparagus up here. Grows in side ditches.

Jeffrey Boyce: I don’t think I’ve ever seen asparagus grow, wow.

Becky Landes: It’s very nice, very frondy and very pretty.

Becky Landes: And I’ve met with a lot of kids over the years and there's just something special about going to maybe the local grocery - we have one - and

the kids saying, “You know, I really think we ought to have waffles on the menu.” I like that, where I have a breakfast menu, and so, then I started involving them. “Well what would you like to see? If you have waffles that’s your grain, but you need some protein. So what kind of protein?” In that process I’m trying to also educate and help them figure out good choices. So being accessible to the kids.

Jeffrey Boyce: Oh, that's great.

Jeffrey Boyce: Sounds like you're doing some great nutrition education, along with feeding the kids.

Becky Landes: Well it's not formal. It's in those conversations that you have that I think sometimes you can make the greatest impact because they're not having to listen to you.

Jeffrey Boyce: Exactly, so it's probably more effective. What advice would you give someone who was considering child nutrition as a profession today?

Becky Landes: Education. Learn as much as you can. We’re an industry that helps each other, so rely on your colleagues until you feel like you're comfortable with it. We're not in this alone, like you might be in a commercial restaurant setting where you have to have your secrets, so you can have an edge on the competition. We're not in competition with anybody.

Becky Landes: So ask for help. I did. When I started out there were people that helped me that gave of their time. I’d call them. They’d pick up the phone and they'd walk me through something.

Becky Landes: And learn the regulations as much as you can, inside and out. When I go to a restaurant I’m never off the clock. I go to a restaurant, I look at the food, and I’m like okay let's see.

Becky Landes: What seasoning is in that, and do I think that there'll be two ounces of protein in that, or would I have to do that for an elementary kid, because they can have one ounce that day.

Becky Landes: Be approachable. Connect with your kids. They’re your customers.

Jeffrey Boyce: You said you're about to complete a bachelor's degree. What made you decide to do that?

Becky Landes: Well, it's always been a dream of mine, for a long, long time. Covid came along, and we couldn't go anywhere, so I might as well study.

Becky Landes: That was part of it. Part of it was that another dream was to become an SNS, and so I went for that. And while I love menus, there's another side of this business and it's becoming more and more evident all the time, and I feel like this next year is really going to be super important, and that's the financial side.

Becky Landes: With the rising prices and the uncertainty, I mean we can hardly get contracts, and there are companies all over that are backing out and say, "We're not going to service schools anymore," and it's making us scramble to try to find things. I think it's going to be really, really important that we have a good financial grasp of what we do.

Becky Landes: That way we can stay in the black, I hope. That's my goal.

Jeffrey Boyce: Anything else you'd like to share with me today.

Becky Landes: I love what I do. The kids are great. All through the years they change, but there's just something about kids. They're our next generation.

Becky Landes: And I just feel like that we as school nutrition professionals need to do our best to make good, healthy food that kids will eat, because if we just feed the trash cans, nobody wins.

Jeffrey Boyce: Well, thank you so much for sharing with me today.

Becky Landes: Thank you for inviting me.

Jeffrey Boyce: Oh I'm glad to have you.