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Barbara Gauthier Oral History

Barbara Gauthier is a retired school food service director originally from Thibodaux, Louisiana. After graduating from LSU with a degree in Hospital Dietetics and Institutional Management and working briefly in industry, Gauthier took her first job in school food service in East Baton Rouge Parish. After working for several years and in multiple positions in East Baton Rouge, Gauthier moved on to Lafourche Parish as a food service director in her native Thibodaux. Here in Lafourche Parish Gauthier introduced the Breakfast Program, as well as introducing centralized menu planning and purchasing. At retirement Gauthier left the district with a \$5 million surplus in their school nutrition programs.

MH: It's January 29, 2009, and I'm here at the New Orleans Archdiocese here in beautiful downtown New Orleans, Louisiana. I'm here with Barbara Gautier from Lafourche Parish, a past food service director for Lafourche Parish. Would you please tell me a little bit about yourself and where you grew up Barbara?

BG: I grew up in Thibodaux, and I graduated in 1954 and went to LSU. I got married after my sophomore year at LSU, but continued my education. I went to work in East Baton Rouge Parish after graduation. I got my degree in what they called then Hospital Dietetics and Institutional Management. I went to work for Borden for a little while in their ice cream lab, testing ice cream. And I got a call from Miss Mildred Stringfield.

MH: Oh, wow.

BG: And she offered me a job in what was called school lunch back then, if you recall.

MH: OK. And that was in East Baton Rouge Parish?

BG: East Baton Rouge Parish. That was in 1960. And I worked in that capacity for two years at what was called then Glen Oaks Junior High School. We adopted a child and so I quit working and when I had my third

child, when she started in kindergarten I went back to work. That time I went to Istrouma Junior High School for five years and one year at Sherwood Junior High School and Sherwood Elementary. We did a satellite program there.

MH: Do you recall how many students were at Glen Oaks at the time?

BG: Over a thousand.

MH: You were feeding a thousand at Glen Oaks?

BG: Right.

MH: Now see, I was at Istrouma.

BG: I think Nadine followed me, and then you followed Nadine.

MH: Right. I didn't realize you were there.

BG: Yea, yea. And basically when I went to Istrouma I had over a thousand students there also. Then there was an opening in a supervisory position in Lafourche, and it was offered to me and so I accepted it and went back to Thibodaux.

MH: Now Lafourche Parish as a food service director, and do you call how big was the system there?

BG: Yes. When I went there, there were thirty-three schools, and I want to say twenty-eight cafeterias, and we were feeding about 14,000 to 15,000 students a day parish-wide.

MH: Now you only had lunch, you didn't have breakfast at the time?

BG: Right. And then we started the breakfast program a couple of years after I went there. When I moved to Lafourche there was no centralized menu, there was no centralized purchasing. So I took over the program and there was \$100,000.00 to operate with. And I asked the school board would

they provide me with some funds, and they said they'd loan me some money.

MH: Hmm...

BG: So I said, "Well, you just keep it, and when I need it I'll ask for it." And I never had to ask for it, and when I left I think I left them with about \$5 million. Because they were purchasing at local grocery stores and that kind of thing and they had people who came around trying to sell you equipment you know, and there was no control basically. That was it; everybody kind of did their own thing.

MH: What about your staff at that time? Were you able to ...?

BG: The staff at that time was poorly trained, and a lot of them were very elderly. You know how politics is, and so there was a lot of empathy and sympathy for people who, maybe their spouse passed away and they needed some extra income...and they were hiring these people and it was not in these people's best interest, because as you know when you work in a cafeteria there's a big element of danger, slipping, burning. And now that I've reached that same "golden years" so to speak I realize that I'm not as agile. So what I was alluding to, to them I find to be extremely true, because I see it in myself. So we worked with all of that and I was able to convince the board that we needed centralized menus and bid purchasing, etc., etc., and then we got on track.

MH: So you really had to work from the ...

BG: I had to work from the bottom up, in that people had to have a high school diploma; they had to be able to read and write. And the interesting thing, when I first moved there, there was a lady who was a technician as we call them today, and she had no transportation, and she would cross the bayou in a pirogue to go to work. LFSFA had written a story about her way back when, when I first started. So there were some unique things about the parish, I assure you.

MH: So really, working in East Baton Rouge Parish kind of helped you?

BG: Actually, what I did was I modeled it; I used it as my model. I used a lot of the specifications. I didn't have to reinvent the wheel. I just had to add onto the wheel because as new products, and new technologies, and new ideas...you just instituted those, but you don't have to start from the ground.

MH: So that's how you became involved in the profession?

BG: Well actually, yes. There was this lady who was my major professor at LSU, Maude Ryder, and she had the cafeterias out at LSU. We had to work in them for six weeks, and I shall never forget the first day. They had me doing pie pastry, and I don't know how – I put too much salt in this pie pastry, and I wanted to throw it away. And they said, "Oh, no, no, no, no. We don't throw anything away." I said, "OK. Well what do I do?" And they said, "They won't pick it up because of the sweetness from the filling." I said, "OK." I don't know if they ate it or they didn't eat it. But it was pretty much OK, I mean I tasted it and it was pretty much OK, but I knew, so I might have been biased.

MH: Tell me about some of the mentors you had.

BG: Well, Maude Ryder was one of them. She was a wonderful teacher; just a wonderful human being. And Mildred Stringfield was really my mentor, because I would be sitting in managers meetings and I'd look at her and say, "One of these days. One of these days."

MH: Because you wanted to be a director, huh?

BG: I did; one of these days...and she kept telling me, "Barbara, why don't you go to graduate school?" I said, "I don't have any need for that. I can do this without graduate school." But I think she had something in the back of her mind, and I only realized that so, so many years later, that I should have done that and listened to what she was trying to tell me. She was giving me a message and I didn't pick up on it, I didn't pick up on it.

MH: So you didn't go back and get your ...

BG: I did. I went back when I was in Lafourche. I commuted to Baton Rouge, which is kind of ridiculous. But because of the distance I had to get my Master's in Vocational Home Economics Education, and I promise you God did not want me to be a teacher. I can never think on that effective level. That was hard for me, I mean all the chemistry and biochemistry and all the science we took in Dietetics was easy, because it was something I enjoyed. It was something I understood and I could relate to. But this teaching stuff was not me. God never meant for me to be a teacher I promise you.

MH: So you did finish your Master's degree.

BG: Oh yea, I commuted.

MH: My goodness. How long did it take you for that?

BG: Well, I was ill. And my mother died right after I moved to Thibodaux, which was really sad, because we didn't know she was ill. After that I became ill. I had pneumonia and they couldn't figure out why, so it really pushed me behind, and it took me about two and a half years.

MH: That's pretty darn good. So you've held a lot of positions in your profession. You've been a manager and ...

BG: I have. And I kind of appreciate that fact because I tried all of it. I didn't feel like I could ask someone to do something that I had never done myself. I mean, I've even mopped floors because sometimes people who have never done what they're asking people to do, do not realize what they're asking them to do. And if they've not done that, they could be asking somebody to do something that was totally impossible. I kind of remember doing that one time. I know because you went to Istrouma you know the person I'm speaking of. I had this baker – her name was Idella.

MH: Oh, yes I remember.

BG: She was a great employee, but I wanted to teach her how to laminate bread so she didn't have to slice it when we did buns. And they kept coming

out like a top hat. I'm like, "Idella! The kids can't eat the hamburger because the top is too small. You've got to do better than that." And she said something really smart to me and it made me very irate. So I told her to hit the door and don't let it hit her in the rear. And then I went back in my office and I thought about what I did, and I said, "You know, you're wrong, because you're asking someone to do something that they do well, but you want them to do it different, and you can't treat people that way." And that was a good learning experience for me. I never did that again. I went back to her and I told her, "You know Idella, I'm going to let you do it your way because you have a better product, and I'm not going to ask you to do something that's really hard for you." And I realized that if you're going to be in management or supervision you don't treat people that way. So it was a good learning experience for me. I've had quite a few. I think you know, when you get out of college, you think, "Boy, I know it all. I've learned all of this. I've got all this knowledge. Well, I didn't know much, because in Glen Oaks as a neophyte in the industry, this little girl came up to me. We didn't have the breakfast program; it wasn't a part of the federal program at the time. She was very lean and not well-kept, and she said to me, "Mrs. Gauthier, I'm hungry." And I said, this was before school started in the morning, I said, "Honey, what did you have to eat for dinner?" And she said, "I didn't have dinner." She said, "All we had in the house was meal, and we didn't have any electricity." Well my heart just sunk. I said, "Well OK. You sit there." So I gave her a carton of milk, because I hardly ever drank my milk. And I fixed her some toast and I sent her on her way. That was a learning experience for me because I had never seen poverty. I didn't really know what poverty was until I saw that child. I'd never seen a hungry child. I didn't know that a school would provide a room with clothing for children who didn't have a coat or shoes or whatever. So actually, I knew I didn't know much, because that was just the saddest experience of my life. It was very sad.

MH: Is there anything unique that you have found about Louisiana in regard to child nutrition programs?

BG: I think there was, I can't say now because I've been out since 1995, but there was a great camaraderie among the people in child nutrition in the supervisory positions. I think we shared a lot. I can remember when we first

became computerized in Lafourche I co-wrote a program with the computer person for Lafourche Parish in purchasing. And then I was allowed, Pat Farris was our state supervisor at the time, I was allowed to buy all of the initial software to write the program, and then what we did was we sold it to the school cafeterias, which helped to take care of the cost to produce it. And we sold it for a couple of hundred dollars, which was a nominal fee. But basically it was point of service and purchasing. So that was how we did it. I don't know how they do it today, but if you had an idea like when you start school and these children come in and they're new, particularly kindergarteners and first-graders, you don't have any information on them, so they're not free. Even if they're going to be free, they're not free at the time. Then you don't collect your money, right? Well I said, "I'm going to fix that." So what I did, parents would come to pick up the registration and I had an application and a letter that said they could apply for the lunch and it would be valid for the first ten days of school and then they'd have to reapply. Well that helped to take care of what you would have lost. So naturally I'm going to tell everybody to go do it because it worked. And so you shared. You shared your knowledge and your experiences.

MH: And people were willing to share too.

BG: Exactly. Exactly. They wanted to share because whatever you did well, it didn't necessarily just help you; it helped the bottom line – child – because that's what we're all about.

MH: Right. So what was a typical day there in your career as a food service director?

BG: You never knew. You'd wake up in the morning and you thought you had your day planned, and as sure as you had your day planned something would skew that day. So you could really set your goals for the day, but that didn't mean that you would accomplish those goals because either somebody had an accident in a cafeteria or you had to go and see about getting accident forms filled out or whatever. Or somebody calls up and says, "On my purchase order it says I have XYZ brand, but they delivered

ABC. Do I take it?" You just never know, even though, yes, you had an itinerary so to speak for the day, it didn't mean it would happen.

MH: Constant trouble-shooting wasn't it?

BG: Yea, absolutely. But, you know what? Actually, it was my life because I'd never had another job. It was my career, and I always wanted it to be my career because I loved it.

MH: So what was your biggest challenge that you faced?

BG: Getting people to understand why we had to change the way we did things; that if we don't follow policy we'll lose money. The people in Lafourche had been doing it their way and they considered me an outsider, because they didn't even know I was a native, because I was gone for so long; I was gone from '54 to '77. So I actually was away longer than I lived there. And they thought, "What is this woman doing coming over here and trying to tell us how to do this. We've been doing this like this for...." You know that saying: "I've been doing this like this forever. It works. Why do we change?" Of course when I went to Lafourche they had had a, I think they called it a PAT review. A Professional Assistance Team came in for a week. And you've got to realize in 1976-77 there were so many areas of non-compliance that they would have had to pay back \$100,000 if they did not hire a certified child nutrition person. So I went there and the gentleman who was handling child nutrition was also handling maintenance and transportation. So I thought, "Well, he's going to give me some kind of job description." Right? So I'd know what to do, or what they wanted of me. And nobody gave me anything. So, there was this one lady who was in charge of bookkeeping, and she kind of did everything. So I went up to her and I said, "I don't know what I'm supposed to do here. Could you give me a copy of the review?" And that's what I did. That was my challenge. My challenge was to take all of the non-compliant areas and focus on those first. And believe me, it was everything you do. The first thing I did was inventory the warehouse. And they thought I was weird. And then I focused on writing specifications for food, using what I had and collaborating with those. And I'll be honest with you; I had some vendors who were very, very helpful. If I had questions I could go to them, and I'd say, "Look, I want it to

be grade whatever..." and they'd help me tighten it up. Because there were no brand specifics they had no ulterior motive so to speak to put stuff in. And then I worked on equipment, because I never shall forget the first bid I put out, the FARQs came in; they looked like heavy tinfoil. They were so light and flimsy. So I learned from that: submit a sample. You know, I just had to take it from the ground up. And I left it and I felt like it was my baby. After eighteen and a half years it's hard, but you also know that there's other things left worth doing, so you move on while you still have your health and all the good things in life.

MH: So, what changes have you seen in the child nutrition profession over the years?

BG: Oh Melba! You have to realize I'm so old that I started in 1960. And if you recall the emphasis was on getting all these nutrients in, or at least one-third of the RDA, and so there was no way to give vitamin A, so you had to give them a pat of butter. Every child had to have a pat of butter in what they ate. So we were putting butter in there like crazy. And then they said, "No, no, no, no; too much fat." So that changed, ok? Then we had to put everything on their plate; all the components had to be on their plate. Then, we went to Offer vs. Serve. And I don't know if you were in East Baton Rouge when Miss Stringfield did a pilot program: Nutrient Standards. Colorado University was doing it and East Baton Rouge was part of the pilot. And we had an abacus and we had to figure so many beads of the different nutrients. That was VERY difficult. And then they decided that didn't work, so they threw it out! So then we went back to the Type A lunch. Then we went to Offer vs. Serve, and we added salad bars. And I never could figure that out because that didn't do anything for kids because I learned that they'd come in and they'd take mostly ham, the high-fat items, the ham, the cheese, the whatever, and then when they did take lettuce and all the other vegetables you had up there, they put a pound of salad dressing on it. And then we added different lines so children could have choices between a hot lunch, sandwich lunch, salad bar, you name it. You could go on and on as far as your imagination would let you go. I guess the thing that bothers me most as I was leaving, and as I did some consulting is all of the pre-cooked items. And I guess it bothers me because children get that at home. No one makes bread anymore. And all of this is

because labor is so expensive, and I understand that, but I feel sad about that. I can remember a man calling me one day and he chewed me up one side and down the other, and I just listened, because that's what you do when you're a supervisor, because they're somebody's constituent. This is how he put it, "How can you feel good about serving children hamburgers, hotdogs, french fries, pizza, fish sticks, and things like that? What makes you think that's so nutritious?" I said, "Well, you know what, we serve those things, and we find the most healthy items we can find that you as parents have trained children to eat because today both parents work. And I understand it's hard. So one night you pick up; the next night it's fried chicken; the next night it's hamburgers. So when they come to school..." He said, "When I was in school they had beans and rice, and beef stew, etc." I said, "Sir, when I serve that they don't eat it. So I have to give them a healthy hamburger with soy, and turkey franks, and things that we can find that are healthy that you have trained them to eat." Because that's the bottom line – parents don't cook the way parents used to cook. So children are not trained to eat that way, and we can't change that. If you think about it parents pick up something almost nightly because they both work.

MH: So what do you think has been your most significant contribution to the field?

BG: Well Melba, I can't honestly answer that because in my heart of hearts I feel like I did a good job in training people how to feed children better. Because I was not actually doing the preparation I would have to train them to do the best job that they could do, and hopefully it would stay with them and they would use it.

MH: I am sure they are using it.

BG: I hope so.

MH: I know you have done an excellent job. A lot of people said, "Go to Barbara Gautier. She's done this. She piloted this." You were in the forefront.

BG: I was. I can remember Miss Stringfield, when I first started either Angela Killroy, and I'm not sure about that, or myself were her first degreed people. And if you recall, she would only hire degreed people. She started that in about the early '60s. And I think Gail Johnson had to back off from that because of the money, because East Baton Rouge was one of the higher-paying parishes for managers. And of course if you wanted to hire a degreed person you had to be. It was challenging – and it was fun. Of course I started out – I was the kid and the employees were the adults so to speak is kind of a way to look at it because they were all so much older than me. It's kind of hard when you were brought up in a small town and anybody older than you was 'Yes, ma'am' and 'No, ma'am" in Louisiana anyway. But they were. I was like in my twenties and they were like in their fifties, so that was difficult.

MH: Do you have any more memorable stories that you would like to share, anything that comes to mind other than the lady in the pirogue?

BG: That was unique.

MH: How long did she do that? Did she do that the whole time?

BG: Yes. She was elderly when I got there, so she retired after a couple of years. I also remember things like hurricanes. When you have hurricanes and you live where they hit - I'm right there by Grand Isle. Lafourche goes up Hwy 1 into Golden Meadow into Grand Isle. When you get to Golden Meadow the water is just about level with the road to begin with, so the minute you have any kind of storm your flooded. When we had Hurricane Juan, when we finally could get to the schools we had water in a walk-in cooler. We had to get almost like boots to be able to get in because of the depth of the water. When you got in and you looked out at the playground and those areas it was all like a lake. You thought you were at a resort. [Laughing] It was terrible because you had water everywhere. They had to come in and redo the insides of the coolers and freezers; it was just terrible. And then when you didn't have that the bread people would go down, so you would go to every grocery store you could find and buy bread because now those that weren't flooding, they were feeding the homeless that came in because they had to leave their home. We had quite a few of

those, but not as bad with water as Juan. It was terrible because everything began to smell moldy and nasty and you've got to clean out all those coolers and freezers and throw all of that away and then put bleach on it to be sure that no one would consume it.

MH: What advice would you give someone that's thinking about going into this profession today?

BG: Well, I think to be able to do what we have done you have to be strong, and you have to stand up for what you believe is right. But you also have to have kindness to go with that strength, in that you're dealing with all of these different personalities and all of these different abilities. And then you're dealing with a child. And the thing that I would always tell my employees is 'Remember some of these children have not had food. They have not had a smile. So just remember that they will remember that smile, and it may be the only smile they get.' Because some of those children are just living in such dysfunctional – and it's worse today I would think than when you and I were there. I think there are children out there who are having a harder time today because of all the pressures that are being put upon them than the children that we dealt with.

MH: So how many years has that been now?

BG: Since I retired? '95 so it's fourteen.

MH: Are you enjoying your retirement?

BG: I am, but you know, I did some contracting and I liked that. I even tried working for some of these vendors. That was not for me. God did not make me a salesperson either. He didn't make me want to be in a classroom and He didn't make me want to do sales. It's just not me.

MH: Well, I thank you for coming in Barbara.

BG: Oh, I thank you for asking me.