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Cynthia D. Ruffin Oral History

Cynthia Ruffin began her school nutrition career in Louisiana more than 35 years ago. She received a B.S. in Dietetics from Louisiana State University and an MBA from Southeastern Louisiana University.

Cynthia has worked at the local school level, with the Louisiana Department of Education, and as the Director of Child Nutrition in St. Charles Parish Public Schools near New Orleans. Some of her career highlights include developing the Louisiana School Lunch Cycle Menus; expanding Breakfast-on-the-Go programs, implementing The Main Course, a culinary training program for food service technicians; and contributing significantly to district recovery after the devastation of Hurricane Katrina. She was the recipient of the SNA of Louisiana Child Nutrition Director of the Year award in 2013.

Cynthia often says that once you've been bitten by the school lunch bug, you're infected forever! Her desire to remain involved with the school nutrition profession has led her to training in her post-retirement career. Cynthia is a consultant trainer for the Institute of Child Nutrition.

MH: Well here we are January 28, and it's a Wednesday, 2009, and we are at the New Orleans Archdiocese in New Orleans, Louisiana and I'm here with Cynthia D. Ruffin. Cynthia, would you tell me a little bit about yourself and where you grew up?

CDR: Ok, I am a native Louisianan. I was born in a very small town in Louisiana by the name of Batchula, Louisiana. You'd bat your eyes and you'd drive through the city and you'd just pass it if you didn't keep your eyes open. Ok, but I lived there with my grandparents until I was about nine years old, and then I moved to Baton Rouge, where I remained until about

eight years ago, and that's when I took position in Saint John's Parish and moved to Destrehan, Louisiana.

MH: Wow. So what is your earliest recollection of child nutrition programs, and was there a school lunch or a breakfast program then? If so, did you participate and what are some of your favorite menu items?

CDR: Well, I can remember school lunches for as far back as five or six years old because I was very fortunate to have our next door neighbor to be the Cafeteria Manager. I attended a school that was first grade through twelfth grade and we call her Aunt Duck. In fact I really thought she was my aunt, but she wasn't. But Aunt Duck knew me and as I would go through the cafeteria line of course she was always looking for me. I also had a cousin Helen that worked in the cafeteria as a cook. So they all looked out for Baby Sister. That was my nickname. And I remember, the one thing that I remember most of all is that as a child I did not like moist or wet bread and so as I would go through the cafeteria line I would beg them, "Please don't put my roll in the gravy!" and so I can remember that. I think my favorite food back then was white beans and rice.

MH: White beans and rice!

CDR: White beans and rice!

MH: Not red?

CDR: Not red! It was white beans and rice.

MH: Ok! And were they served on Monday?

CDR: I don't even remember what day of the week but I do remember that I paid a nickel for my lunch.

MH: Aw... and that was your favorite?

CDR: That was my favorite.

MH: So tell me a little bit about your educational background and what schools did you attend and what degrees did you earn?

CDR: Ok, well I finished at Robert E. Lee High School in Baton Rouge in '73 and immediately started Louisiana State University. I began with a desire to get a degree in Fashion Merchandising. But when I was a sophomore I fell in love and I got married in my sophomore year. So when it was time to look over my class schedule my advisor, he was a gentleman at the time, and he said, "Cynthia, have you thought about giving this some thought because you're married now. Things have changed. Do you plan to have any kids?" And I said, "Oh yes, I'm going to have three kids and a station wagon." He says, "Well, I think you better think about this. Is your husband prepared to move to New York so you can pursue this fashion career?" And

I went, "What?!" He says, "Oh yeah, you're not going to be able to stay here in Baton Rouge and really succeed in this field if that is what you want to do." I said, "Well, what do you suggest?" He says, "Well, do you like to cook?" I said, "Oh yeah, I love to cook." And I did. It was the truth. He said, "I think you ought to consider Dietetics. I think this could maybe be more in line with your future goals. And another thing Cynthia, if you get a degree in Dietetics I don't think you will ever be unemployed. You'll always be able to find a job." He was absolutely right, but he didn't mention the chemistry. Ok, that was the only thing. So that is how I got into the field of Dietetics; through some advice and some very very hard work. Shortly after graduating, that's when I got a job in School Food Service in East Baton Rouge Parish Public Schools. In fact I got a call because I had done some work in school lunch and had done some projects while I was at LSU on the Type A school lunch.

MH: Oh, do you remember who your teacher was?

CDR: I think Beth Andrews, Dr. Beth, no, it wasn't Dr. Beth, but Beth Andrews, and then I can see her face but can't remember her name. If you called out some names I'm sure I would remember.

MH: Paula Howard, no?

CDR: No, go a little bit further back.

H: A little further back.

CDR: A little further back, yes, yes.

MH: Not Martha, uh Jonathan, Dr. Yonathon?

CDR: I had Dr. Yonathon.

MH: Dr. Margaret Yonathon.

CDR: Yes, yes, Dr. Yonathon taught me, I want to say the History of Foods or something like that. Dr. Lewis! That's who it was. Dr. Lewis.

MH: Ok, alright.

CDR: So I did some projects on Type A lunch and shortly after that I was offered a position as a Manager, and it was with Mary Eleanor Cole and she called me in East Baton Rouge Parish and she said, "Well, can you start work really soon?" And I said, "Like when?" And she said, "Like next week." And I said, "Well, I've got to graduate." It's time to graduate from college you know after all those years. And she said, "Well, I will tell you what, I will let you off for a day of graduation if you'll come to work right now." So I started working as an Assistant Manager and I did that for twelve years and during this time I kind of just thought of things I would like to do if I was

Director. I started thinking then, "If I was director I don't know if I would do it quite this way, I would like to do it that way." And then that's when I realized that, "Cynthia, you're going to have to go back to school and get a Master's Degree if you ever want to be a Director." Well, it took about twenty years, but I did get that Master's in Business.

MH: Did you?

CDR: Uh huh. And for some reason I did not want to go back into Nutrition because I just felt that school lunch at that time was about 25% nutrition and 75% business.

MH: That's correct.

CDR: And so I felt like I had a good grasp of nutrition so I went back and got a Master's in Business from Southeastern Louisiana State University. And that was about five years ago.

MH: Really?!

CDR: It took that long, but I stated working on it before then because at that time there were not that many business courses. So to get that Master's it was almost like getting a doctorate because I had to go back and take the 24 hours of business courses that I did not get at the undergraduate as well as the 33 hours. So when you add 24 and 33 I think

that's like 57 hours to get that Master's. But I was very fortunate to be able to do that.

MH: You were diligent weren't you?

CDR: Yes, and I am really proud of that.

MH: Oh, fantastic. So how did you become involved in the child nutrition profession as this went further down?

CDR: Well first of all, like I said, I started as a Manager. I did that for twelve and a half years.

MH: Now what schools were those?

CDR: Let's see. I started out as an Assistant Manager at East Baton Rouge Parish. It was at Sherwood Middle with Grace... I'm trying to think of Grace's last name, I can't think....Uttman! Something like that. With Grace at Audobon Elementary. We had a satellite. So I was very fortunate. At my first job not only introduced me to school lunch and production because that's what I did a lot of the production and the ordering and that type of thing. But we also had a satellite system so I learned how to ship food, you know, to a neighboring school. So that was my first position and then someone was out having a baby and needed someone to take her place. So then I was asked to go down to South Downs Elementary. So I spent about

a year and a half at South Downs because that Manager never returned after having that sweet baby. I don't think she wanted to come back to work. So I got to stay there, and that school was closed in a desegregation case that was ongoing in East Baton Rouge Parish. That site was closed so I had to be moved again. My third school was Mayfair Elementary and that was a true test of time. That one was a difficult school. That's when I really had to learn to be a Manager. I had to do a lot of human resource work with the Food Service Technicians. From Mayfair I went to Capital Senior High School and from Capital Senior High School I went back to an elementary, Magnolia Woods Elementary.

MH: Really?

CDR: Yes, and so all of that took place in twelve and a half years. At this point my daughter is, I had a daughter, one child, and she's old enough now to open the door and let herself in. So I just decided, hey, now is the time to start thinking about advancing your career. And so someone told me about a grant that was going on and that it was a study. It was called CATCH. It stood for Child and Adolescent Trial for Cardiovascular Health. And I had a friend who was working on a Master's at LSU and evidently someone came and asked the class if anyone was interesting in working on

this study for about two to three years, which was going to be the length of the study. And she said, “Cynthia, as I listen to this description, it’s perfect for you. You love to cook, you love school lunch, you love to talk to people, it’ll be great”. So I applied for the position and was hired by Dr. Theresa Nicolas. Dr. Nicolas hired me. We were at the Tulane School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine in New Orleans. So I did that for two and a half years. Loved it. I got a chance to work in school lunch in Livingston Parish. I was an interventionist and I would go in and work directly with the technicians. We would try to find ways to cut fat and sodium in the meals. I would actually go in and look at their recipes and we’d talk about things we could do, maybe prepare the spaghetti without salt and oil. You know, whipping the butter because you use less as you spread it because it’s whipped. Just places where we could take fat out, making sure we cut all the fat of the stew and that type of thing. And we would file reports and do a lot of training. In the process the State Department of Education would attend some of those meetings and trainings that we would have. In the CATCH project there were more than one, it was multifaceted. There was nutrition, there was nutrition education, there were physical activity components. So there were different components and I worked in the

school lunch component of this study. So we got to present to the State Department of Education and when that job ended, because the grant ended, I applied for a position with the Louisiana State Department of Education.

MH: Do you remember what year that was?

CDR: That had to be somewhere; I want to say in '92. 1992 give or take six months. I then got to see school lunch with whole new eyes. Entirely new, you know, responsibilities and some of the things I was asked to do when I was a Manager. I learned why I was being asked to do that. Sometimes you're like, "Why on earth are they doing this?" And then you learn all of the policies and the regulations and I did a lot of technical assistance and I traveled the entire state of Louisiana. So I got to see school lunch in different parts of the state, I got to meet a lot of nice people; you know dedicated technicians as well as Managers and Directors. I also conducted reviews similar to audits of the school lunch program. I did that for about six and a half years, and during this time I had started working on that Master's. And so I was then qualified to get a temporary certificate to begin to apply for positions as a Director. I started that maybe in the sixth year and then by my seventh year I was very fortunate to be hired by Saint

John's Parish Public Schools and that's where I am now and will have been there eight years next month.

MH: Can you believe that?

CDR: Yes, 29 years in this business Melba. That's a long time.

MH: That is fabulous. So I know you already mentioned some mentors, but what about some mentors further down.

CDR: Further down...I think someone who really helped me a lot was a lady...a Cafeteria Manager at the high school. Her name was Gale Gysinger. I want to say Gale was maybe an RD; she was a Registered Dietician. When I was hired in East Baton Rouge Parish a degree was required because we did do some nutrition education at that time. We had the NET grant, the Nutrition and Education and Training grant, where school districts received funds for that. Gale was very important because...

MH: Gale Johnson...

CDR: No Gale Gysinger...

MH: Oh Gale Gysinger...

CDR: Gale Gysinger was the Manager and kind of mentor because when I was struggling with what I was going to do, was I going to go away from the fashion and stick with the dietetics, I went to Gale. Because Beth Andrews

was telling me, she was an instructor and Dr. Lewis was my advisor once I became, I guess after 60 hours you moved from junior division to something, you know. So anyway she suggested school lunch to me. First it was Dietetics and it was very broad. I didn't know whether it would be a school, a hospital, a nursing home, but when I spoke with Mrs. Andrews she said, "I suggest school lunch," because I was going to raise a family and, "I think it's going to be a perfect match for you." So I went to Gale Gysinger. She was still the Manager at the high school where I had graduated and she actually shared information with me, materials, she introduced me to Type A lunch at the time, and I think had it not been for her mentoring maybe I would have said school lunch is not for me. But I would say that Gale was very instrumental in that.

MH: Do you remember somebody else?

CDR: Further up...mmmm there were so many people...I guess some of the people that I really admired were at the state.

MH: Oh really?

CDR: When I worked at the state we had just an awesome group of women. Tosan...Mary Tosan was the head of the department at that time. Now its called the Division of Nutrition Assistance and although Mary did not have a

thorough background in nutrition she had a vision for assisting school districts throughout the state. She was really into a lot of technical assistance and so there were about eight of us. Patricia Hosman, Thelma Bibbs, Cindy Nobles, Linda Fletcher, Sherri Brokenberry, I don't want to leave anyone...Tina Stevenson...

MH: Right!

CDR: ...and Patricia, she was our section head; Patricia did a very good job in managing us. Each, I guess we would call it Program Managers at that time; each Program Manager had some expertise in some specific area. Because when I worked for Tulane I got a lot of experience doing dietary recalls, where we would go in and sit down and actually ask the students what they had consumed and we would put it into software and determine what the nutrients, calories, fat content were. So I had a lot of experience with that and Nutrient Standard Menu Planning was just coming into play. It was just being introduced. So that was my area that I kind of concentrated on. I learned all the other things but that specifically is what I did. I know Thelma handled the free and reduced lunch applications and that process. So she became that specialist. I'm trying to think. There were so many different areas. You had special diets, everybody did something

differently and I was the new kid on the block and they just took me under their wings and they really trained me in each of the areas so that I would feel confident and could be productive as I moved across the state. So I would really like to give a hats off to that group.

MH: Is there anything unique of Louisiana in regards to Child Nutrition Programs?

CDR: Well I think we are a proud bunch of people because food is very important in our culture. You know most people eat to live, we live to eat. But I truly believe that we have nourished kids with some of probably the best foods. Not always the healthiest, I think we've improved on that as we have learned more about nutrition but I think our meals have been hot meals, they've been wholesome meals; that a majority of the people who work in our department are dedicated. Once you've been bitten by the school lunch bug in Louisiana it's hard to get away from it. And so I really think that as a state we try to change when necessary. We changed as we've learned more about nutrition and we don't skimp, we don't skimp. There are still many of us still baking bread from scratch, we're still nurturing kids as they come through the lunch line. It becomes a family

affair in Louisiana, and I saw that as I traveled the state and still see it. I see it right in my parish, in my district with my twenty schools that we have.

MH: How many students are in the...

CDR: We have about 9,600 enrolled and we have about 7,300 lunch participation and 3,200 breakfast participation so we do really...50% of our kids who eat lunch with us eat breakfast with us also so that's pretty good. We enjoy that.

MH: That is very great. So what is one of your typical days in your career you might want to say now?

CDR: Oh wow. Well it depends on what day it is. You know I worked...today I'm the Personnel Director; you know I'm the nutritionist. Let's see, today what was I? Today I really worked with the state because we are currently having a Coordinated Review Effort Audit going on right now.

MH & CDR: a CRE...

CDR: Yes, we all know those and so I've got a CRE going on. So today like most days I usually arrive at work around 7:30am or a quarter 'til eight. I'm one of those Directors that has five ladies in my office. The last one arrives at 7:30am so I try to arrive a little after 7:30am because I'm a workaholic.

So I try to give them that ten or fifteen minutes to get that cup of coffee or if there is anything they want to share they have that little time to get that done because when I hit the office I go running, so they're like, "Oh she's here." And so I usually go down the cubicles, "Good Morning, Good Morning, Good Morning, Good Morning!" And I get my coffee and I then hit the emails. I check my calendar and hopefully the program is giving me reminders of where I need to be. And so today was a pretty easy day because the auditors are pretty much running the show. So I just ran back and forth getting them the forms, the information, the reports, and things that they needed. But on a typical day I usually hit the office the same way. I check my emails, I check my calendar. Usually I prioritize. Yesterday I did a little prioritizing and let's see what I have to do. I have to finish the March Menus because some commodities came in and I want to fit those in. The newsletter is due in February and the CRE auditors are there so I had to put that off. So I need to do that. I'm completing my commodity processing orders because that truck is due February 2, as well. My strategic planning is due and I need to meet with the Assistant Superintendent as soon as the CRE is over. So it goes on and on, so I try to prioritize what needs to be done right away. Today and yesterday I did get a chance to work on March

Menus and fitting in those products, because inventory management, we have our own warehouse, so it's very important that I keep that inventory rolling and turning over.

MH: First in, first out.

CDR: First in, first out. Yes, and trying to get that done. There's some days too, like yesterday for example, some counseling with employees, returning some phone calls from principals, "The lunch line is moving kind of slow can you check on it?" Those kinds of things and so...

MH: And that brings me to my next question. What are some of your biggest challenges that you face?

CDR: Yeah, when I was younger the biggest challenge was managing personnel because you're younger and usually everyone in the kitchen was older than I was, and so trying to earn respect was probably the biggest challenge - to prove to them that I was worthy of the position and respect. So that was my earliest challenge. But the challenge today I think would be...what would be my greatest challenge...there're several...but I think the greatest one would be having my peers in administration, in the school administration buy into the importance of nutrition, and nutrition education in particular, because I am the Chairperson of the Wellness

Committee. And so usually when I come around its kind of like this (makes gesture) right now because I don't want to be...I'm a little zealous of what I do, but at the same time I don't want to be overbearing but I think the biggest challenge is for educators across the board to understand that it's great to acquire knowledge, but if the body is not working properly and children are not healthy and they are not growing into healthy adults, then what good is the knowledge if we cannot accept the fact that nutrition education is important knowledge throughout the years of growth? You know, we don't want to wait until you become an adult to teach it, so I think that's my biggest challenge, is convincing others how important nutrition education is in the field of education.

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

CDR: So many...so many come full circle. Stared out with nutrition education and now we realize how important it is. So that's one that came full circle. Then when we look at food production, the kinds of foods that we served, it's almost coming back around full circle because we started off with you know raw products, not a lot of processed items and now we're trying to get back to...

MH & CDR: conventional foods.

CDR: So that one's coming full circle but it was a change in there. I think the employees have changed - just not having as many knowledgeable employees, technicians who are knowledgeable about cooking because we don't cook at home, so I find the need for training more and more important. And not training where you go in and you watch a video, I'm talking about actual hands-on training is more important now if you want to have the kinds of meals that we want to have and do some scratch cooking and do some basic cold muscle meats and that type of thing. Everybody can't cook and so that's definitely a change that we need better-trained employees, whereas before you could assume someone could bake or season something.

MH: Oh, they were still cooking at home.

CDR: Yes, they were still cooking at home.

MH: That was just the norm.

CDR: Yea. I have had to do that. Let me think if there are any other changes that have taken place. I think as a whole I think our profession is getting more recognition than before. I really do. I think again its just knowledge, again, of the importance of nutrition. That's all I can think of right now.

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

CDR: Mmmm...well possibly I believe that I have been a great spokesperson for the school lunch program. I take pride. I think that God gives us all talents and my talent I think is one of motivating and so I've had an opportunity to motivate others to come into the field of nutrition and child nutrition. I think that I have, whether students recognize it or not, I'm a marketer and I think that I have made school lunch fun for a lot of kids. So I like the fun part because we're not just boring; you know we really think of things. This week it's leading up to the Super Bowl and so for the past few years we have Super Bowl week and we try to serve those foods, lower fat versions, but the same foods that they would get at a ball park. We call it Super Bowl Week. This year in the high school we tried something a little different because they get those types of foods anyway because they have so many choices. We're calling it Souper Bowl Week and so we have a different soup every day this week. And we introduced some new soups. I believe one was a Chicken and Broccoli soup that they hadn't had before. I've already gotten emails from one of the Managers saying that the kids said that they really liked it, could you serve it with breadsticks next time. I

think I have really made school lunch...I remember my best...one of my stories that I love...I was working at Capital Senior High School in Baton Rouge and we had gotten a lot of ground beef this particular year and we didn't know what to do with it. I mean it was just so much. There was only so much meatballs and spaghetti that you could make and hamburgers, later ground beef came out in these long rolls and you could slice it and slice it but at this time there were these big fat packs and Wendy's was just starting. It was a new fast food restaurant and they made square burgers or rectangular shaped burgers and so I came up with the idea, why don't we make a hamburger that looks like Wendy's, because the ladies patting out 750 hamburgers was a lot of work. So we came up with a recipe where you added just a little breading and some eggs and we would pat the meat out in the 18 X 26 inch pan and we would score it and bake it and we would have stacks of square burgers. So then I go to the bakery and I said, "Ladies look, we got to have a hamburger bun that is really light and fluffy and big enough for this square burger and we're going to call this the Capital Burger." And so one lady came up with the idea - the Capital colors were red and gold. She said, "What if I put just a little yellow food coloring in the bread dough and we make it kind of a golden bun?" We wanted to set it

apart from the regular hamburger. The kids were knocking doors down every Wednesday because it was Capital Burger Day. And so I think that's my greatest contribution, is making school lunch fun for the students.

MH: Absolutely. Well, you already said a memorable story but can you think of other memorable stories?

CDR: Well I think that's probably...you think of...that's just human nature...we think of all the bad things before we think of all the good things so I'm trying to just think of all the good things and if I think too hard I'd cry and I don't think I want to think anymore.

MH: Well what advice would you give someone who is just entering the child nutrition profession today?

CDR: I think possibly to celebrate more. Celebrate each and every accomplishment. Just like I mentioned, it's easy for us to remember some of the not so pleasant things. I think we've learned, at least I have as an individual, that you have to celebrate the small successes and not always wait for the big things, because this job is a difficult job if you're going to be a Director; for sure you have got to have lots of patience, you've got to agree to disagree, you've got to know when to give up the fight and wave

the little white flag, because you are not going to get your way all of the time, and nobody is always going to see things the way you see them. And that's advice you'd probably give anybody in any profession. But I do think that it's a field that they can be proud of working in, that it is sometimes an unappreciated position, but it's one that you as an individual can feel good about.

MH: Absolutely.

CDR: It's also a great field for women. Men are recognizing that now because I see a lot of men coming through, because I do work with a lot of the interns with Tulane right now and also with Nichols State, I get the interns. They'll do a cycle with me, the Dietetic interns and I have seen a couple young men come through. I just think it's a wonderful job for any young person right now who is wanting to make a difference in the lives of young people.

MH: Well that's wonderful. Do you have anything else to add?

CDR: No, it's just great seeing you Melba because we go way back, and I wish you the best with this project and I'm sure that Louisiana is going to come out on top again.

MH: Thanks for coming.

CDR: Alright, great seeing you. Thank you.