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## Beth Rice

Beth Rice

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Beth Rice Oral History

**Interviewee:** Dr. Beth Rice

**Interviewer:** Jeffrey Boyce

**Date:** January 8, 2020

**Description:** Beth Rice is a native of Tennessee and studied at University of Tennessee Martin and University of Tennessee, Knoxville, before entering the field of child nutrition. Beth worked in a residential child care institution, for the Tennessee State Department of Education, and as a child nutrition director for Lake County, Tennessee, before joining the Fulton County School District in western Kentucky, from where she retired. Beth now works as a consultant for the Institute of Child Nutrition, instructing other directors in a course called Orientation to School Nutrition Leadership.

JB: I'm Jeffrey Boyce and it is January 8, 2020. I'm here at the Institute of Child Nutrition with Dr. Beth Rice. Welcome Beth, and thanks for taking the time to talk with me today.

BR: It's great. And I enjoy being at the Institute.

JB: We're glad to have you. Could we begin by you telling me a little bit about yourself, where you were born and where you grew up?

BR: I grew up in a small town in West Tennessee, right outside of Jackson, called Bells, Tennessee. It's about an hour from Memphis, so what we did growing up we mostly did in the city, in Memphis. And I went to college at the University of Tennessee Martin, and then transferred to Knoxville as a junior, which many people in western Tennessee did at the time. So I did a dietetic internship there at UTK, and began working in child nutrition shortly after I graduated.

JB: Ok. Well before we get into your career let's talk a little bit about your undergraduate. In elementary or high school was there a lunch or a breakfast program?

BR: Oh, there was a school lunch program, and I have fond memories. I think when I started to school lunch was maybe a quarter a day. But my favorite

memory was, my dad was kind of a picky eater, and he didn't like white beans, so when white beans were on the menu the ladies in the cafeteria would fill the big part of my tray with white beans and big, fluffy rolls. I was always a school luncher; have been since the beginning.

JB: Do you remember some of your other favorite menu items from those days?

BR: Vegetable soup is one I remember with peanut butter and something sandwiches; probably peanut butter and honey. I don't really remember exactly. But those were always good days. And hamburgers or hotdogs on Friday.

JB: Ok. It's funny you mentioned the vegetable soup. We had peanut butter and jelly and pimento and cheese, half of each with the bowl of vegetable soup on Friday, was our lunch.

BR: That's fun.

JB: So, then when you went on to college, what did you say you majored in then?

BR: I started out in home economics in education, but one summer took a quantity foods class, and was like, 'You know, this is something I could see me doing.' And my instructor said, "If that's what you want to do, then you need to go be a dietitian." So I went into the – at that time it was the coordinated undergraduate program at UT. And I always wanted to do food management, and school lunch was a great place to be able to practice that.

JB: Tell me about the different positions, then, that you've held in school lunch.

BR: Well, my very first job out of college was in an RCCI in Chattanooga, Tennessee.

JB: Now for those of us who don't know, what's an RCCI?

BR: Residential Child Care Institution, and at that time those types of facilities were actually administered, not by the state agency as they are now, but by the regional USDA office out of Atlanta. So I worked with menu planning, and we had students that we placed in independent living situations, and so I did a lot of life skills education. I was only there a short time, and then was drafted by a state director to come and work on the Tennessee state staff.

JB: So you were with the Tennessee State Department of Education?

BR: I was with the Tennessee State Department of Education for a few years, and probably the person who taught me the most about the school nutrition programs, Mary Louise Richardson, who was the state director in Tennessee at the time. Unfortunately, she passed away and I decided that a local school district would be easier to manage. And so I went and worked in Lake County, Tennessee, which is the very northwest corner of Tennessee.

JB: Up near the Kentucky border?

BR: Up near the Kentucky border, Reelfoot Lake area, very rural, very much Delta kind of farming community.

JB: What was your position there?

BR: And I was the food service director.

JB: Ok. How many schools did you have?

BR: Just three, just a very small, rural school district. But it was a great experience and some great people I worked with. And then I took about three years off when my son was born, and then took the food service director's position in the local school district where I live in southwestern Kentucky.

JB: And what was that district?

BR: It's Fulton County, a county that's right on the Mississippi River, right on the Tennessee border. So I was there for some twenty-five or so years.

JB: Did you retire from there?

BR: I did retire from there and got really bored really fast, and taught at an area regional university in Murray, Kentucky, Murray State University, and taught food service management. It's been very nice to travel around to school districts in my area and find some of my former students who actually did listen that school nutrition was a great career. So that's been very rewarding to see some of our young, upcoming professionals that I actually had in class as a student. It's been fun.

JB: I'm sure. Has there been anyone, a mentor or mentors perhaps, along the way that sort of guided you through your career?

BR: Well, I mentioned Mary Louise Richardson. I've had the great privilege of working with some great people. For a short time I worked for the Tennessee School Nutrition Association; did a lot of work with Shirley Watkins in Memphis City. She was the state president.

JB: She's a great lady. I love her.

BR: She is a great lady, and just recently had a birthday I think. She's one of the people that really stand out. Another one is Janey Thornton. She's the person who really reached out to me and encouraged me to pursue a terminal degree. She and I went off to Iowa State and spent some great summers together working to complete that PhD degree, with a good many great school nutrition leaders. There were some great people in that group, and we've really stayed connected through these past over ten years now.

JB: So you've sort of mentored each other then.

BR: We have. We have. It's been a great group to be associated with.

JB: Do you feel that your educational background really helped you prepare for your career?

BR: I do think it did. Being a registered dietitian gave me a little bit of a different focus, and really helped me to see and navigate those nutritional waters that are difficult for some of the people, as we try to provide healthier meals for children. The PhD degree gave me the opportunity to mentor some young people, and make sure that we were passing off to well-prepared students our jobs in the child nutrition programs. So that's been good to see.

JB: Is there anything unique – I think you said you worked in Tennessee and Kentucky as directors – could you compare and contrast those two states. Is there anything unique or different about either one of those states?

BR: They're very, very similar, especially in our geographic areas. Tennessee is very progressive, because they've had some excellent leadership at the state agency through the years. That's where I learned to do production records and full cost accounting and some of those things that it's hard to believe that now when we look back that there were times when we didn't do those, we didn't have those. One little bit of trivia that is kind of unique to me is that I remember

as a child, I didn't realize it at the time, but as I look back now I remember Louise Sublette, who our single unit award is named for, coming to visit our school. We were one of her – she was an area supervisor for the Tennessee Department of Education, and she would come and visit and inspect our school. And the ladies would get all excited about her coming. And then years later when I went to the Department I actually followed her. She had passed away, but I actually was the next person in her position. So that's kind of really unique, and I learned a lot from a lot of the people that she really touched and mentored and came along, and so I'm really kind of proud of that.

JB: Doesn't SNA give away a Louise Sublette Award?

BR: They do. It's to the outstanding single unit manager every year.

JB: Ok.

BR: And she was the president of the national association back in some of its early years.

JB: Ok. What was a typical day like for you, or is there such a thing?

BR: Oh, I don't know that there is a typical day, but the thing that I enjoyed most was interacting with the students, being in the schools when they were serving meals, and being able to talk to the students and see what they enjoyed, and how important that mealtime was to them to get a few minutes out of the classroom. I have some adults now that come back and say, "Oh, I wish you could tell me where I could buy this product or that product," that was a favorite of theirs when they were in school. But I also did things like I was actually for a period of time the finance officer for our school district. I think the school nutrition program helped me prepare for that position as well. So being able to crunch the numbers and manage a budget in a program where the revenue was limited opened some doors for me as well.

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

BR: Oh, I think personnel is always a challenge, trying to find the right people to fit that really would interact well with the students. Lots of things that I could teach them, but their ability to interact with the students was a skill they had to bring

with them. So working with the people, and through the years I've developed some great relationships that even I keep up today.

JB: I think the child nutrition people have a special bond.

BR: Oh, they do, they do. It's always good to come and visit here at ICN and the people I've met through the opportunities here. I enjoy seeing what's happened to them.

JB: What are some of the changes you've been through and witnessed during your career?

BR: Ok, well, I mentioned earlier that since I've come to child nutrition we've learned to do production records, and we've learned to do full cost accounting. Of course I've been through a time when breakfast was still just a pilot program. It's hard to believe that now when we look back, 'You mean there was a time when we didn't have school breakfast?' But that was not so many years ago. And of course we've had a couple of different menu pattern changes since I've been in. Of course the Healthy, Hunger Free Kids Act is one of the biggest changes we've seen. But it's been good changes and I think has really elevated our program to focus on the nutrition and health of the students, not just having them a meal once or twice a day.

JB: By the time you retired was there still any scratch cooking in your district?

BR: Very, very little. We still did some. We figured out a way to still make cookies and bake bread. Several years before the Healthy, Hunger Free Kids Act we had begun to move to whole-grain products and trying to introduce those in small bits to our students so that when and if the changes came they would not be so drastic. So we still did a fair amount of scratch cooking. Some of ours was kind of a blend of scratch cooking and pre-prepared. For example we would buy ground beef already browned and then mix all the products together to make spaghetti and chili and things like that.

JB: You mentioned personnel being a big issue. Was it hard to find labor?

BR: Oh, SO hard, so hard. And some of it I think because the pay wasn't great. We were very fortunate in Kentucky to have a person who worked only four hours was considered full-time, so they got full benefits.

JB: Oh, wow.

BR: And the state provided that for our employees, so that was REALLY something that we used to advertise and attract people to our program.

JB: I'm sure.

BR: And we got a lot of moms. We advertised on our menus. A lot of moms would come because they could be on the same schedule with their children. And that was very attractive.

JB: I've heard that frequently doing these interviews. I'm going to put you on the spot. What would you say has been your most significant contribution to the field so far?

BR: I've done a lot of work with cooperative purchasing, and hopefully, I've done some research there, and left a little bit of a legacy hopefully, or at least some information that people can use for decision making. But my hope is that I have helped to prepare the next generation of school nutrition directors, either through my teaching or mentoring dietetic interns, and letting them know that school nutrition is a great opportunity for people who are interested in children and in nutrition.

JB: You mentioned the purchasing. How did you do your purchasing when you were director?

BR: Well, when I first came as a director was the first day of July, and I had to have food August 1<sup>st</sup>, so I had to get a bid on the street really fast. But myself and a couple of other school nutrition directors in our area banded together. We were all really small, and didn't have enough purchasing power to really impact our pricing. So we put together the West Kentucky Educational Food Service Cooperative and began to buy together. And we started with about four school districts and ended up with twenty-four by the time I left, and was one of the more significant purchasing groups in our state. And it really did impact – gave a lot of us some extra cash to do some fun things we wanted to do in our kitchens and for our students.

JB: And probably influenced the quality of the products too.

BR: Oh, tremendously, yes.



JB: Do you have any memorable stories of special kids you've served or people you've worked with over the years?

BR: I had a student who was a little bit of a troubled young man in middle school, and at the time my office was there in the middle school cafeteria, in one little corner. And I was friends with his grandmother, and he was just so troubled, and so I just began talking to him. And then he got to where he would come, and instead of standing in line, he would come and sit in my office. We had conversations just about everything. But I'm so proud of him because he buckled down and he finished high school. He's now the funeral home director in our community and he's doing so well. But he's always so glad to see me and I'm glad to see him and see him doing well, see a few of those along the way. But there also were those students who were challenged. There are a few that I wish I had kept up with. A little girl that was from a very, very impoverished background that came to us, and didn't know how to eat a sandwich, didn't know what a taco was. And so teaching her how to navigate those things that were so unfamiliar to her was quite rewarding.

JB: And since you've retired, you talked about getting bored and going back to work. Tell me about what you're doing now.

BR: Well, pretty much now I'm training for the Institute of Child Nutrition. I love teaching the Orientation to School Nutrition Leadership, which is the new title. It's been in the course of revision over the last year. It's a great course, kind of a signature course for the Institute. You get to meet a lot of new, upcoming directors and spend a week with them, very frequently here at the Institute on campus, because I'm not too far away. I really enjoy teaching the school nutrition staff, because you just see the lightbulbs come on in the classroom and they really get it, know how to take the information and use it when they get back home.

JB: And who is this course geared toward?

BR: This particular course is geared toward new school nutrition directors, but I find that the classes are always very varied in terms of who's attending. Oftentimes here in January they offer the class for actual college credit for students here on campus. And many of their dietetic interns take the course, so that's their first, oftentimes, introduction to school nutrition as a career. New directors, some are very experienced in doing things a long time during their

careers, and then just have never had the opportunity to have the formal training. So we touch on topics like meal pattern, procurement, financial management, food safety. So all the big topics we kind of introduce to them so that they hear kind of what's expected that they need to go home and work on.

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

BR: Oh, it's just been so rewarding for me. It's an opportunity to serve children, to work with great people, affect the lives of many children in very subtle ways. It's just been a great career for me and that's what I share with people who are considering that.

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

BR: Oh gosh, I just appreciate the opportunity, Jeff, to get to share a little bit of my thoughts about school nutrition with you.

JB: Well, we're very grateful for your doing that today.

BR: Thank you.

JB: Thank you.