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Gay Anderson – Covid 19 Oral History Project

Gay Anderson

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Jeffrey Boyce

Gay Anderson has many years of experience in food service. She has worked in school nutrition for the past twenty years and previously working in the restaurant and hospital settings for over 18 years. Gay is the School Nutrition Director in the Sioux Falls School District in South Dakota. Child Nutrition has become a passion along with training and helping others succeed in the profession. She believes she has found her niche in life. Gay has been very involved in the School Nutrition Association serving on the National Board of Directors eight years, with two of them as President.

I'm Jeffrey Boyce and it is January 24, 2022. I'm here in Mississippi talking today with Gay Anderson who is in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. Welcome Gay and thanks for taking the time to talk with me today.

Gay Anderson

Well, thank you. I appreciate you having me.

Jeffrey Boyce

I'm happy you're willing to participate in the project. Could you tell me just a little bit about yourself, what your job is and how long you've been doing it?

Gay Anderson

Okay. So I've been in the world of school nutrition for a little over 19 and a half years or so, and in my present position with the Sioux Falls School District, for the last year, plus.

I jumped ship from my previous district, Brandon Valley, which is a bedroom community, to Sioux Falls last year at Christmastime to take on a bigger challenge.

Jeffrey Boyce

How big is Sioux Falls?

Gay Anderson

The school district is just shy of about 25,000 students, and I believe the size of the community, just to throw that in, I think I heard that we're just right around 200,000 right now.

Jeffrey Boyce

Wow, that's larger than I realized. Well we're here today to talk about the pandemic. Can you tell me what some of your experiences with Covid 19 have been, the challenges you faced?

Gay Anderson

Sure. The ones that stick out in my mind actually are really right from this present school year.

They are more significant than anything, and what I've been dealing with is probably, and what I hear from colleagues all across the country really, we're dealing with the food supply shortages.

The supply chain issues with paper and other different items like that and it's been basically a daily battle for the whole school year so far in wondering what we're going to get and kind of playing a little bit of rolling the dice each day for it.

Jeffrey Boyce

Interesting. Are your schools fully back into the classroom one hundred percent?

Gay Anderson

So, interestingly enough here in South Dakota, we did go remote immediately back in March of 2020, so students were virtual the whole time. And when the school year began in the fall of 2020 we have in the whole state basically all been in school in session the whole time. Maybe a classroom at a time shuts down on various school districts, but we have kept our schools open.

Jeffrey Boyce

How have you been able to overcome some of the challenges you just mentioned?

Gay Anderson

I think a lot of it, and I have to give credit to my past district allowing me to serve on the National Board of Directors with the School Nutrition Association, where I was able to make so many contacts and relationships with colleagues across the

country, that a lot of that has been able to work connecting with people, knowing who to reach out to, who to talk to.

Knowing that we can utilize our emergency procurement procedures without having to worry about what process do you have to go through with bidding things.

But in the end it still comes down to keeping our eyes and ears open to what the district here, and maybe Mississippi or California, or whatever these districts are, some other great best practices that they've come up with. And it's like we like we say in the world of school nutrition, we like to do a lot of R and D, rip off and duplicate.

Jeffrey Boyce

That's a new on me. I'm gonna have to remember that. I completely relate with what you're saying about networking. I've been doing these interviews in some form since 2006, and I still marvel at how generous school nutrition people are and how they're willing to share, because they don't see people as a competitor, they seem them as a compatriot.

Gay Anderson

So true.

Jeffrey Boyce

So what's worked so far and what hasn't? Tell me some things that were successful and some that obviously didn't work.

Gay Anderson

Knowing that I started in the district about six months after the pandemic started, I know that they were able to flip on a dime, like many of us did, over a weekend, and come up with ways to continually be able to feed the kids. There wasn't ever a day that 'Oh, we can't do this.' And so the successes there were having dedicated professionals in our departments that go and say, "We're going to find a way to feed the kids, no matter what, be able to do what's expected of us," and still make sure that our students are all well fed and all that. To me that was a

huge success, and I have to give that credit to my predecessor here, and knowing that that's something that took place before I started here.

Some of the other successes would be coming up with finding that there's different food that we can actually try and do differently, maybe it's just in the way that it's prepared, and we can hold it differently as we were sending some different things home. Currently now, I guess back then too, realizing that - shelf stable meals weren't a real big thing at that time - and now we've found out that the shelf stable meals that are being prepared, since then they've really worked on that to try and improve the quality of the shelf stable meals.

And so, some of those in the beginning weren't the best, but we've learned from that and that we can come up with things that are still really neat and culturally different for the kids too, even in our shelf stable meals and those are still kind of neat things that worked out.

Another success, in a roundabout way, through the pandemic and through all this, the great success that we've had for the last year and a half and remainder of this year is just being able to offer kids free meals and not have to worry about where their money is coming from, or collect money on that. That's a huge success, I think, in my book. And I would love to say it would be so nice if we could continue that on, but rumor has it it's not going to be continuing on.

Jeffrey Boyce

We can always be hopeful.

Gay Anderson

We have to be hopeful.

Jeffrey Boyce

How did you get the meals out in the early days? I think you said from March until the end of 2020 school year you were completely remote. How did you get the food to the students?

Gay Anderson

So, speaking from what I know in my current district and then the district I was in, literally creative ways. We had families coming and picking meals up, where they could pick up, in maybe a situation you pick up five days' worth of food at a time.

I know here in Sioux Falls they went to some bus routes and were able to go and bus the food to the students - any way possible to make sure that food was getting out to all the kids.

Jeffrey Boyce

I think it was a mixture throughout the country. You're the first person that said they actually used the buses to get the food out, but I had seen that on the national news. How has your meal planning changed since the pandemic?

Gay Anderson

Well, with that, one of the things I wanted to do when I was hired is to look at making some changes, we want to add different varieties into our menu planning and all that. And so I'm having all these visions of grandeur the first six months I'm here, and then, when school starts and it came down to 'What are we able to get and what are we not able to get?' that changed a lot. And I think the menu planning probably, I'll use a word I used a lot in my School Nutrition Association days, we have to be nimble.

We have to be flexible, we have to be able to accommodate and flip on a dime to whatever changes we need to.

There are some situations where we buy so close and assuming that when the truck shows up we're pulling some of it off for maybe that next day's meals, and we have to say, "Oh now it's not on the truck, so what are we going to do?" And I think the other thing that changed with that a lot is we came up with a new menu program through some technology, and our meal planning communication we started nice and early as soon as we heard about the supply situation, that we started communicating to families saying the menu is going to change and it's going to change often.

And keeping that communication out there, so that families would not be so startled and then getting the phone calls after the fact, so we tried to get out in front of it right away.

Jeffrey Boyce

How do you communicate with your parents? Is it Facebook, is it list serves, how do you do that?

Gay Anderson

We have a great communications department that takes care of it for us.

Jeffrey Boyce

Oh, that's great.

Has the quality or variety suffered of your meals?

Gay Anderson

It's probably a yes and no answer with that. Again, my goal is to improve the quality, increase the variety here within the district.

And so in my bids that I had put into place for this school year I was expecting higher quality foods, along with some certain things, and we haven't been able to get all of it, and so you kind of have to go 'Okay, now let's go with the next best we can get,' so there are times where you struggle getting some of that quality products in.

Variety, variety is definitely changed. We actually struggle on a daily basis to know what we're going to be serving for breakfast the following week. A lot of the manufacturers have dropped lines right now, so that we can't purchase some of those premade, individually wrapped items.

And in our school district, we have a central kitchen that services all of our elementary schools that really don't have any kind of a kitchen. They have a refrigerator and their milk coolers, and so what we send out for breakfast has to be something that's going to be able to be shelf stable overnight, because we send the breakfast out a day in advance.

Jeffrey Boyce

Okay. Has your lead time for ordering changed? Have you had to step that out to where you're having to plan longer?

Gay Anderson

You can only take your lead-time and plan longer if you have the space to store the food and literally, our freezers are packed to the gills.

I do have about five days of emergency food that we're keeping on hand, no matter what, in case we run into a situation that we will struggle. But otherwise we are buying still pretty close to what it is because of the space issues.

One can never have enough freezer space for school nutrition.

Jeffrey Boyce

That's true. Have you been able to form any partnerships with other organizations within your community to help you meet your mandate?

Gay Anderson

You know, I think what I'd probably say is one of the critical things that's been so, so neat and important is the fact that the community of Sioux Falls is a very giving community. They are generous. They care about things and there's a lot of philanthropic donors out there, so they want to make sure that – “Can we help in any way? Can we help?” So that's one of those ways. I think the other I'd probably say as far as other organizations, we've kind of worked a little bit with some of the Feeding South Dakota, some of those types of groups, if they've got an overflow of things.

And then I think when you say organizations I'm going to just turn it around to other school districts and we collaborate with each other locally and it's like what can we do to help each other out? Who are you getting your food from? And one of our biggest struggles, I'll bounce back a little bit too, in the beginning of the school year when the food supply chain became an issue, our main supplier dropped about 190 some customers in the North Dakota, South Dakota, Minnesota Region that were all schools, because they could not keep up, due to staffing, the whole saga with the supply chain. And we were one that they kept.

Some of that was ‘Okay, how do I keep that communication piece going and also work with other suppliers in case I run into another situation where I need to reach out to them and say, “Hey, I need to get some backup food from you guys,”’ and so it's really continually working on relationships with other districts, other distributors, our brokers that we deal with.

And again, I'm thankful for the people from all across the country that have shared so many wonderful ideas.

Jeffrey Boyce

Is your state association active?

Gay Anderson

They have met. They've had a face to face conference at our state association.

It's pretty small, slim pickings there. And with it a lot of what we have there is people who you know volunteer, not sure what they're getting into, but they're great volunteers. It's just something where we all need to work together on it and communicate those things. But our current state president, he's doing a great job, asks a lot of questions.

In our state association, we've had some presidents that are coming from a district of maybe 161 kids. They lead the state too, so we've got all kinds of different variables there.

Jeffrey Boyce

I bet that would be a lot of different kinds of districts to deal with.

Have there been positive outcomes in dealing with Covid, things you've learned that have been a plus?

Gay Anderson

You know, again I have to just say it's been wonderful having the free meals for our kids, knowing that some of these families have not had to struggle, the way they could have struggled during some of the worst of the times.

The reimbursement rates have been wonderful. The way that USDA has worked with us really has truly helped knowing that we have had our reimbursement rates taken care of and increased and they're making sure that we can try to be financially sustainable.

On the flip side, one of the things, a great thing that's taken place is, we have had significantly increased participation here within the district. And so matching it, I just recently looked at our numbers from September through November and

we're up 97% in the breakfasts that we were serving, and we're up 47% in all the lunches we were serving, over last year at the same time. And I think some of that came with it, yes, we were offering some different variety in meals, especially with breakfast.

And I think also maybe students that weren't going to eat with us, or typically didn't, now their parents are saying, "Hey it's free. Just do it." And they're finding out, 'You know what? School lunch isn't all that bad.'

Jeffrey Boyce

I still have very fond memories of it.

Gay Anderson

Mm hmm.

Jeffrey Boyce

Anything else you'd like to share with me today?

Gay Anderson

You know, I think it's just really important that we all know in the end, it's not about just feeding students. We make a difference. I have said this for years, I've advocated this for years, we a huge difference in the lives of the kids that we feed.

We're part of the educational process and we have to keep that in mind, we have to keep advocating for ourselves.

Within our own school districts, to talk about our programs and promote our programs, so that people understand that it isn't just about feeding kids it's nurturing them through many, many ways.

And, if I can just share a quick story with you, if you don't mind.

Jeffrey Boyce

Sure, sure.

Gay Anderson

I have a former employee of mine in my former district; she was 81 when she retired for the umpteenth time, and her name is Liz.

And she spun circles around the other 10 high school staff, I mean she was just a go getter and got things done, and when she'd be on the serving line the kids would actually go to her line and stand and wait. It's like 'Hey, you can go over to this line. No, we want to wait for grandma.'

Or she'd be cashiering them out and it's like 'Hey, there's no waiting over here. No. We'll wait for grandma.'

And they were even known to help her clean up their trash if she was out wiping down tables. And I knew what she was doing. I could see it and it's like - I put her on the spot in front of her coworkers, one day, and said, "Liz, I want you to tell us what is it about you that the kids just flock to you." She goes, "I try to let every one of them know that I care. They make a difference to me too."

And she goes, "I know that I can make or break their day one way or the other, and a little bit of kindness goes a long way."

And her last day of working for me, she was given a standing ovation by a student body of 1,200 kids, and flowers just to thank her for what she did.

And I think that's to me, one of the reasons why I continue to do what I do, and why child nutrition is so important.

Because we make a difference in the lives of the kids that we feed, day in and day out.

And actually right now I share that story in every one of my interviews, saying this is what I'm looking for in raising the bar. This is what we want our customer service to be.

And yeah, we make a difference in the lives of the kids we feed and we're still an important piece of the educational process.

Jeffrey Boyce

Well, thanks so much for taking the time to talk with me today.

Gay Anderson

Yes, it was great seeing you again.