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Annette Derouin – Covid 19 Oral History Project

Annette Hendrickx Derouin is the Director of Food and Nutrition Services for Willmar, New London-Spicer, Montevideo and Community Christian Schools in Minnesota. These four districts offer the Child Nutrition Programs to the fullest extent possible. Annette has worked in School Nutrition for over 25 years. She is a Registered Dietitian and has her Master's Degree in Health and Nutrition Administration. She holds the School Nutrition Association School Nutrition Specialist Credentials and is a Certified Food Safety Instructor.

Jeffrey Boyce

I'm Jeffrey Boyce and it is January 27, 2022. I'm here in Mississippi and today I'm talking with Annette Derouin in Minnesota. Welcome Annette and thanks for taking the time to talk with me today.

Annette Derouin

Thank you. I appreciate the opportunity to talk with you as well.

Jeffrey Boyce

Okay, share just a little bit about yourself with me, where you are and where you work and what your job description is, which I know, none of us do our job description, so what's your job?

Annette Derouin

Yeah, I think the last couple of years, all of our jobs have probably changed a little bit.

So I'm Annette Hendrickx Derouin and I am housed in the Willmar Public Schools and Willmar is about an hour and 45 minutes straight west of Minneapolis-Saint Paul.

And then I'm not only the director of food and nutrition services for Wilmar Public Schools, but I actually oversee three additional districts, so in New London-Spicer, Montevideo, and Community Christian School. So I actually am the director for four school districts.

Jeffrey Boyce

Wow, sounds like you've got a plateful.

Annette Derouin

It keeps me busy.

Jeffrey Boyce

What's the weather like there today?

Annette Derouin

Actually it's above zero, and I think our high today it's supposed to be around 25. Earlier in the week we had 35 to 45 below wind chill.

Jeffrey Boyce

I'm shivering just thinking about that. It was down in the 20s here last night, and I was freezing.

Annette Derouin

Yeah that's generally our highs this time of year, but it's probably like when it gets really hot for you it's the opposite here. In the winter we just stay inside like you would do when it gets really hot and humid out.

Jeffrey Boyce

The only time I spent any real amount of time in weather that cold was I spent two years in Ukraine in Peace Corps.

And it was some pretty cold weather there, but what they didn't tell us when we were getting ready to go was it was just as hot and humid in the summer as it was in Mississippi. Talk about change of weather.

Annette Derouin

Yeah, hopefully they had you pack accordingly with really, really warm weather and cold weather gear, right?

Jeffrey Boyce

No. I was emailing my mother to send me my Texas. I hadn't taken any summer things.

Well we'll get rolling then. The series of interviews I'm doing is regarding the pandemic and how people have had to deal with it and the effects on their programs. Can you tell me about your experiences with Covid 19 and what challenges you've face?

Annette Derouin

Yes, over the last couple of years we've, as I'm sure many people that you've talked with, can share their experiences that started on Sunday, March 15 in 2020 when that Sunday our superintendent gathered all the administrators in the district and informed us that by Tuesday we were going from in person learning to distance learning. So one of the districts, of course I work with multiple superintendents, so in one of the districts I had 24 hours to convert them from serving hot meals to going to cold meals. And then the other three districts, I had 48 hours, so within two days we went from serving children in person to going to distance learning.

And then, of course, those districts did not all use the same model, so one of them chose to do curbside pickup only. Another went with curbside pickup and bringing food to families who couldn't make it to the schools, via the school vans. And then the main district where I work decided to switch to using our bus routes to deliver meals, so one of the biggest challenges with that was we just didn't even have some of the equipment we needed, so within 24 hours essentially, we bought every cooler we could find here in the community and ordered the rest online, so that we could make that conversion.

And then the last school year, the 20-21 school year, was a challenging year in different ways, because we had some schools in person, some where the students were in the school part time in a hybrid model, and then based on Covid numbers, we ended up going to distance learning. And we would go back and forth through in person, hybrid, and distance learning throughout the school year.

I would say that the buzzword that we used most of the year was pivot. Which way are we pivoting now? Are we in person, are we hybrid and then distance learning, so that was a challenge.

This year, all the districts I work with have been in person. It's different challenges, even though we are in person.

And I think the main challenges really now are about labor and supply chain issues. It's just getting the food that we need.

Jeffrey Boyce

Where are the kids eating? Are the cafeterias open or are you doing it in the classroom?

Annette Derouin

Our breakfast in many of the schools is in the classroom. Some are still in the cafeteria.

At a couple of the high schools I work with, we are actually doing second chance breakfast so the students can pick up breakfast in the hallway after their first period of class and then take it to the classroom. And lunch right now is in person for all of them. So that has worked well, as long as we have staff who can prepare and serve the food.

Jeffrey Boyce

With four different schools, there must have been a lot of challenges and coming up with plans. What worked and what didn't work?

Annette Derouin

I think one of the things that worked the best for us is, especially in the main district where I'm at, Willmar, is we have utilized all of the USDA programs that are available. So National School Lunch and Breakfast, of course, but then the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program and After School Snacks and Evening Meal Program and then the Summer Food Service Program, so we were very used to having multiple meal programs running at one time, and so I think we were able to very easily switch from hot food to cold food because we were used to doing that after the school year ended and we went to the summer.

And I think we were very easily able to adapt them from the types of menus where we were using because of the fact that we had trained our staff accordingly to do that, so it made it easier to transition as we were working through the different models.

Jeffrey Boyce

You mentioned some staffing issues. How are you doing with staff?

Annette Derouin

I would say in my 26 years working in school nutrition this current school year has been by far the most challenging.

Last year, when we knew we were going to be in the hybrid model, I intentionally did not fill some positions because we just knew that we weren't going to need to utilize those staff. Coming into this current school year I had 12 openings in the main district, six retirements, and then six additional positions. And today we still have seven openings.

And, therefore, that just makes it very difficult actually every day to staff, because we know that we're down seven positions and then, if any staff are out on a given day we are trying to move staff between buildings. I jokingly told my supervisor last week that I feel like what I've done this year and last year was triage.

Meaning that I come in every day and look at 'Okay, what staff do I have available and where am I going to move them to? How many subs are available?'

And we actually started a volunteer program where members of the community can come in and actually help us serve lunch, and that has been a saving grace on many days, because if we know that we have volunteers there to serve, then we can move a sub or a staff member to a different position to just help even out the sites in terms of how many staff they have available to get out the meals each day.

And one of the unique things, probably being in a smaller community, is we also through the pandemic, because we were using the bus companies to do bus routes, I have gotten to know the managers of the bus companies pretty well and now one of the bus companies has stepped up, because they know that we're short staffed, and some of those bus drivers will come in between their morning routes and their afternoon routes and help us serve meals too, and that has been again another saving grace.

Because right now I have two kitchens that are essentially three or four people short and so just knowing that we have that community support with staffing, it's

been just wonderful, and has made a really difficult situation at least manageable on most days.

Jeffrey Boyce

You mentioned bus companies. Are your buses private contractors?

Annette Derouin

Yeah, in my district, actually in the other districts too, they are private companies, yes, so they're not owned by the school district.

And so they contract with the district, to provide bus services, and therefore we had to set up with them to provide meal service via bus routes.

Jeffrey Boyce

How has your meal planning changed? How has it been affected? You mentioned some supply chain issues.

Annette Derouin

I guess I would say this is the area I feel the saddest about based on the pandemic.

And I always prided our districts on the fact that we offered so many multiple lunch choices and meal choices, and we've had to make significant reductions to the offerings that we give to students. Our elementary school right now, we normally give them at least two choices. We're down to one. Middle school we're down to a couple of choices. And the high school had five choices. We're down to two. And some of it relates to staffing. Just again, because of the number of positions we have open, but the supply chain issues have made it even more challenging.

This past Monday we were shorted 104 cases of products and just trying to then figure out 'Okay, what are we going to do to substitute and continue to provide all of the meal components that we need to in order to put a meal together?'

And one of the things that we were doing anyway was using the USDA Foods to the fullest extent possible, and now they've pretty much been a godsend, because at least we can count on the fact that we're going to get those USDA Foods to help us with menu planning.

We were a pretty much simple scratch or scratch cooking. Districts that I work with, we do a lot of food prep from scratch and so that is helpful and then we do have, of course, some pre made items.

Those pre made up items have been the most challenging, just to find substitutions and then weekly get notices from the manufacturers of how long before another item is going to be available or how long it's going to be shorted. It means that we just continually talk and adapt our menus accordingly. I got a call on Monday of last week from our milk provider saying that this week, we would not be able to get skim milk cartons anymore, and then by mid-February, we would not be able to get some of the other milk varieties in cartons any longer. So we didn't have time to adapt to one of the carton changes, but we are planning for the other ones. They at least had two varieties of milk to give us, but we know that long term that that's not going to be there. They're saying it'll be probably mid-March before we'll see all of the milk varieties back, and it's because of the paper that they need for the cartons. They're not able to get it from their supplier, so we are switching some of the preschool programs to gallon milk and we'll start pouring milk for those children.

Which so far from those programs they feel that that's fine because those children, a lot of them, they put the milk in sippy cups anyway.

I know that there's districts here in the state that are developing plans on how they're going to provide milk if the carton issue gets to be even more significant, like one district is looking at only offering secondary students milk once a day versus twice a day, or however many meals they offer.

I think we all have to be very thankful to USDA for having the foresight to give us waivers. The first week of school I used all of them, applied for all of them and had to use them, because we couldn't get the variety of vegetables or whole grain products. Or one day we only got one variety of milk from our milk vendor.

I read about it all summer that there were going to be supply chain issues, and it actually turned out to be worse than what I feel like they predicted, at least in our area. We pre-booked food six to eight weeks out in advance, and still are not able to get those items.

I'm hopeful that within the next few months that it turns around, but so far it isn't looking like that's the direction we're headed right now.

Jeffrey Boyce

Wow. How long was your lead time before the pandemic for ordering?

Annette Derouin

Generally, four weeks. We would plan our menus and by the second week of the following month, after our changes or the quantities that we needed, and then, of course, with the pandemic it went from six weeks and now eight weeks out, and like I said, we're still not able to get product, because some of those manufacturers are saying 'Well that product is 12 weeks out' or they just discontinue it. And I think the challenging piece is there's kind of been no rhyme or reason to why manufacturers have eliminated some products, because from one of our manufacturers, they eliminated what we considered some of the staples, the items that children like the best. And we were like 'Well why are you getting rid of that?' and of course we're not given the reason behind that.

But I'm sure it has to do with the same challenges we're facing with them and either they don't have the staff to produce those items or again they're not able to get packaging or –

I thought it was getting better and then, when I saw that we were shorted another hundred and four cases on Monday I'm like 'Well we're not there yet. We're not even close to being resolved with supply chain issues.'

Jeffrey Boyce

Obviously the variety of your meals has been greatly impacted. Have you been able to maintain the quality?

Annette Derouin

Yeah, so as I mentioned earlier, I think, because we were doing a lot of scratch, we're still able to do that.

I think it isn't really a quality issue, it's more of a staffing issue, so if we don't have the staff to prepare an item from scratch, then we're making decisions about 'All right, what menus this week can we move around?' From a production

standpoint, if some of my key staff like second cooks are not there, we'll move menus around to make it easier for service that day and then hopefully pick up that item later in the week.

That seems to have worked well for us. Where we struggle is if we can't get some of those convenience foods, like the pizza items or the chicken items that the children will like.

Jeffrey Boyce

You mentioned some volunteers, including your bus drivers, which was pretty impressive. Have you been able to develop relationships with other organizations within your community to help you meet your mandate?

Annette Derouin

I feel like we have. One area that has really helped us is I was on a local committee with our main insurance provider.

And because I was on this committee, they asked me, "Well, how can we help you, especially throughout this pandemic, support your district?"

And one of the things that they did, which was phenomenal, they paid off all the unpaid meal balances in our district, which is substantial, thousands of dollars, and so it helped all of our families, especially in the Willmar community, where we were at 65% free and reduced.

And it just allowed us now to have all of our children on an even playing field in terms of not having any debt, which took care of that, and then the other ask that I had from them was during the summer of 2020 we knew that a lot of us were just trying to figure out how to feed kids.

We knew that there would be challenges for families to get food over that summer, and so they actually paid for us to continue those bus routes throughout the summer months, so we actually had continuity for families from the end of that 2020 school year through the fall of 2020 so that those families could just go to the bus stop where they would normally go and pick up breakfast and lunch meals every day Monday through Friday for the week and then we actually tried to also send meals home on the weekend, so they could pick up meals from the

buses usually on Thursday or Friday for use on the weekends, too. So I was very grateful for that insurance company to step up and help us.

This past summer we worked with the local United Way and in our community education program in the area food shelves, to provide meals in the parks for children. So they would have a reading program where children could come and get books, and then we would provide meals with that program, to have that educational and nutrition component.

I really liked that partnership and, as I said, we continue on with the bus companies now with them helping us serve meals.

And then that volunteer program. We've had many community members step up and help us serve meals on a day to day basis. So I'm very thankful for the support that we've had from the community as well.

Jeffrey Boyce

Have there been positive outcomes that you've discovered in dealing with the pandemic, and do you intend to keep those as we move forward and hopefully see the end of this?

Annette Derouin

Yes, I think one of the things that I am very proud of with my staff is that they adapted to change really easily, and I think part of that was because we were utilizing all of the meal programs, but as long as we explained the why behind why we wanted to make a change, and why we were going from this model to a different model of feeding, they have been very receptive to change. And I think what has come, we had a pretty good method of communicating with our sites, but I think that has even been strengthened through a pandemic, is just having that ability to communicate with staff for smoother transitions.

One of the challenges that we had prior to the pandemic was getting our food service staff to use technology, like checking email and using an electronic time clock system, and doing training for our e-learning days electronically versus through paper methods. And we've switched to pretty much everything being technology-based now, and we still have a few staff who don't have a computer or are not very tech savvy, but it is by far the minority, and I think that has been a

significant change our department. It was a huge learning curve for several staff but I think it's a really positive thing.

And then even doing training I was able to tape a lot of back-to-school training modules that we wanted staff to go through. And then they're allowed to go into a system that our district uses to watch those videos. And so it's made training, especially new hires, easier because they can watch videos and then we have quizzes or assessments that they need to complete with them, so we know that they gain the knowledge. And I think we're continuing that process.

I've seen our kitchens and the staff that they work with in the buildings just form better partnerships and better relationships. So, for example, when we started the bus routes, many of the paraprofessionals would have not had jobs if we didn't bring them into the kitchen and have them help with meal preparation and then take on part of that bus route.

And so what I've seen is that my food service staff have really gotten to know more of the site level staff that they really didn't normally interact with, just because they were in the classroom versus in the cafeteria. Now there is just stronger relationships in the school building.

And whenever I am in a bind staffing-wise I can email a principal now and tell them 'Hey we're too short in the kitchen' and they'll be like 'You know I have this person, this person, I can send down' and they'll help out - even if it's an hour - to serve children. We've just built our relationships in the schools and it's something you would think should have naturally occurred, but we all seem to work in silos. We deal with our own thing.

And now we're more I feel integrated and we understand what each other's roles are and I've been very grateful for that and for my staff to have more ownership, not only to their jobs, but have a better camaraderie with the people they work with in their building. So I'm hoping that, beyond the pandemic, that stays because that has just been - I was at one of the schools last week and we were extremely short staffed because Covid had hit that building - that kitchen only had two of 10 staff in that kitchen, my normal workers, and in walked five paras who helped us get meals out that day.

It was phenomenal it was so nice, because the principal knew that we were really struggling and sent staff down and it seemed like we got those meals out without a hitch that day. And that to me has been a really positive outcome.

Jeffrey Boyce

Sounds like some wonderful cooperation. Is there anything else you'd like to share with me today?

Annette Derouin

You know, as hard as the last two years have been, I feel like school nutrition professionals have always adapted to what needed to happen in school. If the lunch schedules and the breakfast schedules changed, we constantly were adapting to what the needs of the buildings were, and the staff in that building. I feel like I've learned a lot more about crisis management and how to manage day-to-day in just making sure that no matter what we do, that still the focus is about feeding children, and I'm proud of the work that school nutrition professionals have been able to do, because anybody in education is adapting day-to-day, but we particularly, from one model to the next, one thing I've learned is that we can very quickly go from a hot menu to a cold menu and back, and adapt our feeding models just based on what is going on, so I just am really proud of school nutrition professionals across the nation and what we've all been able to do through some very challenging and unique times.

And in how education is delivered now. One of the other things, we have never in this district done the electronic or e-learning days. And I'm in Minnesota, so weather is an issue for us, particularly in the winter months, and we've now set up systems, instead of my food service staff either having to make up work days or lose work time, we've been able to electronically develop training so that they can have that opportunity to get all of their work hours in, roll with whatever comes our way.

Jeffrey Boyce

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

Annette Derouin

Oh, absolutely. I thank you for the opportunity and enjoyed working with the Institute. I am a consultant trainer for the institute as well, and really just feel everything that the Institute does supports child nutrition, so thank you for allowing me to share some of my thoughts today.

Jeffrey Boyce

It's been my pleasure.