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1-19-2022

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Becky Landes

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### Recommended Citation

Landes, Becky and Institute of Child Nutrition. Child Nutrition Archives., "Becky Landes - Covid 19 Oral History Project" (2022). *Oral History Project (all interviews)*. 108.  
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## Becky Landes - Covid 19 Oral History Project

Becky Landes is a current Food Service Director for Manchester Community Schools in Indiana. For over 20 years, Becky has been in Child Nutrition. She holds a Level 4 Certificate from the School Nutrition Association and is pursuing a Bachelor's degree in Business Administration and Management. Becky is involved in Farm to School in Indiana. She has collaborated with the Indiana Department of Education, Indiana Grown for Schools, and various other stakeholders in procuring and serving local foods in schools. Becky likes to be involved in the many facets of Child Nutrition. She participates in and is a member of several committees committed to helping child nutrition professionals. She is also a consultant trainer for the Institute of Child Nutrition.

Jeffrey Boyce

I'm Jeffrey Boyce, and it is January 19, 2022. I'm in Mississippi today and I'm talking with Becky Landes and Becky's in Indiana. Welcome Becky, and thanks for taking the time to talk with me today.

Becky Landes

Thank you. It's an honor to be here.

Jeffrey Boyce

No, it's an honor to have you. Could we begin by you telling me a little bit about yourself, where you work and that sort of thing; your job position?

Becky Landes

Okay sure, yes, so I am currently a food service director at Manchester Community Schools. It's a smaller school of about 1,500 students in rural northern Indiana, and it's cold here today.

Jeffrey Boyce

Okay. It's actually 61 here today, but it's supposed to be 19 and a couple of days.

Becky Landes

Yeah, well we're there already.

Jeffrey Boyce

Okay, well, you can have it. I'm not used to this. Tell me about your experiences with the Covid 19 pandemic. What challenges have you faced so far?

Becky Landes

Well, I've used this phrase so much that I say that it's probably worn out, but it's definitely unprecedented. I've been a food service director, this is my 21st year, and I've never seen anything quite like it.

So it has changed a lot of things. It has changed how we serve kids. It has changed the dynamics of our population, the dynamics of the staff, of our supply chain, of the way we do things. Everything. Things I never would have thought about.

Jeffrey Boyce

It's a whole new world then.

Becky Landes

A whole new world. We shut down school in March, I believe it was the 13<sup>th</sup>, in 2020, and by Tuesday of that following week we were up and running and serving meals curbside. We did that for four days, every day, and then we went to bulk distribution once a week. And in that time we served more meals than we served during a normal school week.

Jeffrey Boyce

Wow, well tell me some ways you met these challenges. How did you make those things work, the pickup once a week?

Becky Landes

Everybody working together. It's the only way that it could have happened. We have volunteers that helped the first 15 to 18 weeks of the pandemic from March and through the summer, until we started school up again.

Community. We are a small community, and this time, I think that was a plus.

Because we all just pulled together as community members. It was teachers, it was staff, it was custodians, it was parents. A lot of people stepped up the plate and said, "What can we do to help?"

And so, when we decided to do - Indiana allowed you to send out five breakfasts and five lunches at one time - I know states varied according to the waivers and how they wanted to structure it.

We thought, How are we going to do this? I had visions of some poor mother opening or father opening the refrigerator in 40 little milk cartons falling out at him, because he had four kids and each one of them got ten.

And so I thought You know what?, and some other people as well, a gallon of milk was going to work, and so I got on the phone and called the dairies, and they would deliver us 400 gallons of milk a week. And yeah, we really had a huge, huge response to our meals.

I could talk forever.

Jeffrey Boyce

Oh please, tell me anything you want.

Becky Landes

We'd be here until tomorrow.

And we also realized that we were going to have to put all these meals, being a rural community, most of our people would be parents, probably at home with children, maybe some parents would be working still, because the RV industry was ramping up as well, and that's a big employer in our area, but is still an hour from where we live. But we don't have industry where I live.

So farmers pretty much, and so it needed to be meals that were easy for children, that they would like, that they could microwave, that didn't require a parent to help them to do it, that I felt like it'd be safe. I didn't want them turning on the stove or anything like that. It needed to be warm, not a Bologna sandwich, if I can help it.

And then, all of a sudden, that's a lot of food and there's no bags and so, wonderful. We do have one large employer and I'm just gonna name them. They're MPS Eggs and they employ a lot of our population.

First of all they said, "We want to help out, so we will donate one dozen eggs for every box that you give out." So every box that went out had a dozen eggs. That was 15,000 dozen that summer, that they donated free of charge. So families got a lot of milk and a lot of eggs.

We gave out tips on what you can do at the eggs, and you can make yogurt with milk and you could freeze it.

And we said, "You know what? The boxes that those eggs came in, there were 15 dozen brown boxes, that the egg cartons sat in, were perfect. They had handles. You could put a gallon of milk in one corner, and pack all the frozen stuff on the bottom and just kind of layer it on

up and it very nicely contained all the food. It was very easy for families to handle.

They donated, again, boxes to us last summer and so probably not factoring in the cost of the eggs, but the cost of the boxes, they probably have donated a good \$10,000 just in boxes to our community. No cost. That's huge.

Jeffrey Boyce

Wow. Nice to have people like that in your community. Were there any things you tried that just didn't work?

Becky Landes

Yes, yes, there was one big thing. So I wanted the families to eat healthy, and I managed to contact with our big supplier, our main supplier that we use. We do a lot of local, but this is our main supplier.

And I wanted to send out salad, so I thought we could send out some lettuce and eggs and cheese and croutons and do all these things, because people might not be able to get fresh produce, and may not be able to go to the grocery store, at the time when we were really shut down.

But the smallest that they could get me was a two pound bag of lettuce, and again if you have four children eight pounds of lettuce is a lot of lettuce.

So I didn't do that very many times, because they were all like, "That's too much. Stop. We don't want any more lettuce."

Jeffrey Boyce

Then when you shut down, was school cancelled, or did you go to remote learning? How did it work?

Becky Landes

We went to remote learning and that was a whole other thing because we'd never done that really before. I know a lot of schools have done e-learning, but we were just getting started thinking about doing e-learning for our snow makeup days and things, so we were a little behind it then.

Jeffrey Boyce

What's the situation now? How long did the e-learning run?

Becky Landes

E-learning only ran that school year and we went back to in-person for the school year of 2021, and we didn't shut down the entire time. And then we were in person again this fall, and one of our elementaries had to shut down for about a week and a half, but otherwise we've been in-person and the kids have eaten in the cafeteria. We've not done any meals to the classroom.

Jeffrey Boyce

Wow!

Becky Landes

I know. That brought up some challenges too.

Jeffrey Boyce

Do you social distance in the cafeteria?

Becky Landes

We did social distance. We don't as much. I mean it's still kind of, but you know, you get tired and get lax a little bit.

So yes, only so many people per table.

They had to sign up for a table, and they were there for the semester, so that you could contact trace.

Jeffrey Boyce

That would take a large lunch room I would think.

Becky Landes

It did, and, you know how many kids can you get through in how many minutes? How long are we going to make our lunch period, so we can get everybody through? A lot of logistics.

Jeffrey Boyce

How has your operation changed or adapted since the pandemic? I think you said this is a year and a half you've been back in the cafeteria?

Becky Landes

Yes, so we used to have quite a large salad bar, especially at the high school level.

But when we went back, salad bars, even if the health department would have allowed us, the state did not.

I couldn't see everybody touching the same thing. We look at everything so much differently.

We went to prepackaged salad, and that means you find a very nice, clear clamshell, and we do a chef salad.

At the elementary level they've never really had salad there so unfortunately that's mostly just for staff.



At the intermediate, which is grades four through six, there they have a salad each day, a chef salad three times a week, and then what I call a special salad.

And at the high school they have chef salad every day, plus our special salad. And that special salad can run - right now we're currently doing like a California pasta. We've done an apple-bacon feta on spinach.

We do a regular taco salad, a Southwest salad.

And that has gone over extremely well.

Jeffrey Boyce

You're making me hungry, I can see why it went over like that.

Becky Landes

And I don't know that we will ever go back.

Jeffrey Boyce

Do you think the salad bars will ever come back or is that a thing in the past?

Becky Landes

I don't know. Two things I think - salad bars, when I think about all the germs, and you watch kids, you stand there and watch them, they lick their fingers. You aren't sure, when they came in, if they really did wash their hands, or they just punched their best friend on the arm and, yeah, I don't know, yeah anyways, or they've chewed on their pencils, and now they're - anyways, so I don't know. And the other thing that I see with the cost of food becoming so much more - the USDA did give us 25 cents more per lunch - I definitely feel like I have to - what I would say? - use my resources wisely.

And with salad bars there's tons of waste.

Jeffrey Boyce

It sounds like you've come up with an excellent alternative with those ready-made salads.

Becky Landes

It seems to have gone well and we can control the waste that way.

Jeffrey Boyce

That's one way that your meal planning has changed. Have there been other ways?

Becky Landes

Yes, so supply chain. Ahhhhhhhhh. Supply chain. Supply chain. Need I say more?

Jeffrey Boyce

I think we all feel that pain.

Becky Landes

Yeah, so menu planning, yes, I've gone to a lot more local, a lot more scratch.

Jeffrey Boyce

Oh, Okay.

Becky Landes

Greens are things that I can get and I'm very, very fortunate.

For one thing, we're a very lean staff, but we're mostly fully staffed.

Jeffrey Boyce

Does every school have a kitchen?

Becky Landes

Yes, so we have three schools and every school has a kitchen in it and my staff is very, very, very experienced. I can't really stress that enough. We have over 100 years of experience, just in the high school among 10 people.

Jeffrey Boyce

Wow.

Becky Landes

So yeah I'm very fortunate, and so cooking was something we did prior to the pandemic; we just ramped it up a little more.

Jeffrey Boyce

Has the quality or variety of your meals changed?

Becky Landes

Yes. I don't know if the kids like it. They hardly ever see a chicken nugget. It's quite a day when we actually can get those.

I feel like the variety has changed. I have to search out for items that we can get. I mean I plan my menus, and then just for instance on Monday and Tuesday of the two hot items we have as entrees, I can only get one of them each day.

So I'm searching out a lot of recipes again since I have an experienced staff, or just doing a lot of scratch and we're trying new things. And I'm very fortunate. The kids receive it pretty well.

Jeffrey Boyce

You said you'd gone to more scratch and to more local sourcing. How do you source the local products? Do you go to the farm?

Becky Landes

Sometimes. We already did local prior to, and I have farmers and people that I take bids from. I have enough interest that they actually approach me because they know this is what we do. In fact I just had somebody else saying, "Hey you know what? If you're having trouble getting hamburger, we sell hamburgers. So it's been fairly easy to procure that kind of thing.

I do have rules about home butchering and all those things, of course. We have to follow the USDA rules and we were already set up with some greens and some fruits. I can get some. I did go to another farm, a meatpacking plant, or maybe it's their own local operation. I'm not completely sure on whether it's theirs, or whether someone owns it and they use it.

And it's close to Indianapolis, which would be about two hours south of us. That's where all of our ham is currently coming from. It's where all of our turkey came from for our Thanksgiving meal, raw turkey, so that was something new for us. We did turkey cutlets.

It's not something we could really readily get. Ham is something we can't get. So ham, what we get, which it's the real deal, it's the bone, the ham off the bone. It's cooked obviously but it's not pressed and cut and chopped to form into the whole thing that looks like ham slice.

Jeffrey Boyce

Well I'm sure it's a lot healthier.

Becky Landes

Well, I would like to think so anyways.

It definitely tastes different and they like it.

Jeffrey Boyce

Good. I mean that's the most important thing, that it's good for them and they like it.

Becky Landes

Right. And we can get it.

Jeffrey Boyce

Exactly. You mentioned people stepping up to the plate to help you out. Have you been able to form any partnerships with other organizations within your community to meet your mandate?

Becky Landes

Well I already mentioned about the boxes, as far as that part goes.

Same way with finding this other company. We're the first school that they've ever partnered with.

Obviously we purchased from them, but I give them an order for 1,200 turkey cutlets, for one day. I would like to have this all delivered in one day. I would like to have 600 ham slices, quarter inch thick, all in one day.

Jeffrey Boyce

And how much time do they need for that.

Becky Landes

I gave them a lot, because I have experience in this and I gave them at least a month to six weeks. I started talking about it, said, "Hey, you think this is something you could do? Talk it over with your people, that you can provide this. If you can't I'll have to look elsewhere."

So those are the main partnerships I can think of right now. We try to be as transparent as possible with the parents. Our menus are subject to change. It might not be what's on the menu. We're doing our best.

Definitely building relationships with our suppliers, with their reps, talking to people just to see what's out there and what's really possible.

Just thinking about relationships.

Jeffrey Boyce

Do you have a strong state organization in the food service?

Becky Landes

We do have a school nutrition association, we have an Indiana chapter, and, I would say it's moderate as a strength. We also have an Indiana Grown. We've had a couple of USDA Farm to School grants, and I sat on the procurement committee for the tool kit for that, so I choose to be involved.

Jeffrey Boyce

What positive outcomes have you had from your experience with the pandemic and your results from adapting to this whole new world?

Becky Landes

We realized that we really need to work together to make this work.

And I suppose that's going to slip away over time. I don't really know how that's going to play out. That's a feature that remains to be seen. I know that when we set out to start feeding all these students in a totally different manner than we were used to, we needed refrigerated trucks, we were able to rent a refrigerated semi-trailer for part of our needs. We had some local people that had refrigerated trailers that they let us either use, or at low cost.

All those volunteers, I mean just volunteers everywhere. All walks of life, basically, that said, “Hey, we want to help. What can we do to help?”

And whether it's spread the word, or come in and pack boxes, because it would take three or four hours to pack that many boxes in one location.

And we had bus drivers who came in and drove buses, so that we could go out to outlying areas that were areas of need. Just the working together was really, really cool. It was an awesome experience.

Jeffrey Boyce

Sounds like you live in a good community.

Becky Landes

I do, but we fight too, and we were kind of doing that prior to the pandemic, so I'm kind of like, “Oh well, I hope it doesn't go back.”

Jeffrey Boyce

When you mentioned the salad bars going away and you were making salads now, are there other changes in your program that you anticipate keeping that you've done to deal with the pandemic?

Becky Landes

I hope disposables - we've never used disposables before as far as disposable plates. We always use real plates, real silverware, and now we're back to disposables, and I hope it's not one we keep.

I just don't know - that's one - that I don't know.

The salads definitely we're going to keep. We do like the way our students come into the lunch room now to pick up their meals. It's a lot less chaotic. It's more single file, a little more order to it.

That's really nice. We do a lot more serving instead of self-serve, and frankly it cuts down theft.

Jeffrey Boyce

Has that been an issue?

Becky Landes

Sometimes; little things, little gummies and things can go in pockets. I know, and I'm going to just talk about it, because it just happens.

And I almost think that we interact with the students more.

And there are those students who need that, need some adult interaction in a positive manner. We're not going to yell at them because their homework isn't done or they have a bad grade, and we say, "Good morning," and "How are you doing?"

Jeffrey Boyce

Have you seen changes in the students during the pandemic?

Becky Landes

I have. And I don't know if it'll go back. Especially at the beginning, they were much more tolerant of each other when we came back in the fall of 2020.

They were just so glad to be there because they hated e-learning. We are a rural community and internet's not great.

And that was just a struggle.

Jeffrey Boyce

Is there anything else you'd like to share today?

Becky Landes



I would like to see the spirit of cooperativeness remain. I don't know if it will.

And I think we have learned to do a lot more with less.

Not because everybody's telling us to. It's because we have to. It's simply the shelves are empty compared to what we're used to in my history. Probably back in the Depression that would have been a different story.

One thing I guess I'm going to go on record for even, I really like the universal meals. I realize they have to be paid by somebody. That's usually us taxpayers.

But prior to the pandemic there was a family, and you can edit this out if it's not appropriate, there was a family that I had to - they came up under verification and they literally missed it by six cents.

And the husband was in the military and he's getting ready to be deployed. And you know what? I don't miss that one little bit, having to say, "I'm really sorry."

And so, universal free meals definitely resonates with me.

I know there's some out there, and there were some that say, "We can afford to pay." I said, "Then go help somebody else out. There are plenty of other places. Just take that lunch money that you would have spent on your children and help someone else."

Yes, so I don't know, I guess that's my take on all this. I hope the universal meals are here to stay.

Jeffrey Boyce

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

Becky Landes

Awesome, ***thank you.***

Jeffrey Boyce

You're welcome.