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Shelia Brown and Mike Harris Oral History

Shelia Brown and Mike Harris have worked in school nutrition at the Maryland School for the Blind since the 1960s. Shelia is now a supervisor and Mike is an assistant supervisor.

Interviewed by Amy Casteel on May 15, 2008, in Nottingham, Maryland.

AC: Mike can you tell me about who you are and your name and a little bit about yourself?

MH: My name is Michael Eugene Harris. I was born and raised in Silver Spring, Maryland. That is where I started my education in elementary school. I came over here to Baltimore, Maryland to Maryland School for the Blind in 1957. That is where I finished my education. In 1965, I graduated, went home for a month and then back to work here at MSB, and I have been here ever since.

AC: Shelia, can you give me some information about yourself?

SB: My name is Shelia Brown and before I came here, I worked at a bakery shop and I made buns, made cakes and then in 1965 I left there, at the bake shop, and came here to the Maryland School for the Blind and this is where I met Mike Harris and they put us two together and we started working together and we have been doing real well together, Mike and I.

AC: A long working relationship.

SB: Yes.

AC: Can each of you tell me, thinking back to when you were in school, what were your early memories of eating school lunch? Did you have a memory of eating school lunch?

SB: In school, we did not eat many school lunches. My mother and father didn't have much money, we didn't eat in school. We took bag lunches, and I used to work at a drug store. When I was about 12, I would work in the drug store and then she would give me lunch there and then I would go back to school from the drug store. We never ate lunch in the cafeteria until I got in like, 10th grade. We didn't have that much money back then.

AC: What about for you, Mike?

MH: Me?

AC: Mike what was your earliest memory of eating at school?

MH: Well, in public school over in Montgomery County, we were about the same. We didn't have much income back then. So, my mother would pack us a lunch, but, like when the holidays came up, Thanksgiving, and lunch back then was 25 cents, so if we had it, you bought lunch like Thanksgiving, Christmas, and stuff like that. Other than that, you took a lunch box to school.

AC: What was your favorite thing to eat?

MH: Back then?

AC: Back then.

MH: My favorite thing to eat...let me see...bologna sandwiches, cold cuts.

SB: Right...bologna sandwiches, cold cuts, peanut butter and jelly.

MH: Yeah.

SB: Sardines.

AC: Very good. Okay, can you each tell me a little bit about your involvement with the school nutrition program? How did you get interested in the profession?

SB: Well, when I first came here, I was a salad maker, when I first came here, I was the salad person. And the other lady left, and they just said, "Would you like to be Cook?" And I said, well, I don't know much about cooking and they said "Well, you can learn as you go." I was practicing behind the lady that left, though, and the first thing I made was oatmeal and I cooked a whole bunch of oatmeal...12 boxes, and when we made the 12 boxes (laughter) they were taking them out by buckets...it was so much (laughter)...it was so much oatmeal that I made, but that was what I thought you did. I guess they took out about eight boxes...eight buckets...it was so much.

AC: So how many boxes were you supposed to make?

SB: Three.

AC: Three. And you made 12?

SB: (Laughter) I made 12. (Laughter)

AC: That's a lot of oatmeal.

SB: (Nodding). Right. And another time, I think I burnt up the hamburgers one time. I left them in there too long. And, you learn as you go, and that is what I did, I learned, you know, on hand.

AC: How about you, Mike?

MH: About me?

AC: Um, hm. What got you interested in working in the program?

MH: What got me interested in working in the program? As I say again, over in Montgomery County, I went to school over there in elementary school, and I used to go into the cafeteria, I mean in the kitchen, in the school where I went at, and I got to talking to the cooks and the servers and all that. I used to help them out a little bit, clearing the trays and stuff like that, and I would maybe get a free lunch once in a while. And then when I come over here to Maryland School for the Blind, after school, I would, like, go to the different dorms, they had cooks in each dorm. They didn't have a centralized kitchen and dining room then when I come here. They had a cook in each dorm and they were responsible for that dorm. And I would help them out, like, washing dishes, clearing tables, and stuff like that. And then, after I did that, sometimes when I got out of school, I would work in the storeroom. They had a centralized storeroom where everything was delivered there. I would, like, when the stuff come in, I would take the stuff out of the cases and put it up on the shelf where it go at, mark it, the price, because back then, the staff, a lot of the teachers, lived here. Also, they were allowed to purchase stuff and I used to fill orders and stuff like that, slice lunch meat. I used to wait on tables for the Lion's Club and stuff like that. That's what got me interested...interested in working in the centralized kitchen.

AC: Did each of you have a mentor? Someone who you admired when you first started working here and through the years of your service?

SB: Well, I had my husband. He worked here, too. And...that's how I got here. He was here and then he brought me here as the salad maker

because they used to make the salad, they didn't make the salad...they just mixed it in a bowl. They just put everything in, even the dressing, they would just put it in. And he said that wasn't right, so we stopped doing that and we would just make the salad and cut up the tomatoes, and the pickles, and the onions and stuff and had it separate. But, before, they used to just put it all in one bowl and mix up the dressing with that. And he brought me in as the salad person.

AC: How long did you work alongside with your husband here?

SB: 22 years.

AC: Wow, that is a long time.

SB: (Laughter) 22.

AC: How about you, Mike? Who would you think would be mentor to you when you first started and through the years that you have worked here?

MH: Shelia and her husband. That is who I really, really worked closely with. They showed me everything. I was a dishwasher when I finally got employed here. I washed dishes for about 10 years. I mean, I did other things, too, but mainly that was my job, washing dishes. And, I just worked my way up, as they taught me what to do.

AC: Shelia, what was your husband's name?

SB: Otis Brown. (Smiling) Otis Brown.

AC: Mike, you just mentioned a little bit about the different positions you worked in. What are the different positions you've done over the 42, 43 years you have been here? Everything?

MH: Everything.

AC: How about you, Shelia?

SB: All of us, really, has done everything. I have been a dishwasher. I have been in the storeroom. We go into the freezer. We have done really everything. Everybody here, as a team, do a little bit of everything. No one person does one job. Sometimes we have to call on, even the dishwasher, to come out and give us a hand, sometimes.

AC: Now, are you guys both head cooks? First and second cooks?

SB: I'm the supervisor. And, Michael is the...

MH: Assistant.

SB: Assistant Cook. Right.

AC: So, you have really worked your way up, Mike, haven't you?

MH: Yes I have...I come a long way.

SB: (Laughs).

AC: What were they paying you in 1965?

MH & SB: A dollar and twenty five cents an hour.

MH: That was a lot of money.

SB: Right. Back then, it was. (Laughter).

AC: How many hours in the day did you work?

SB: We used to work, like, on shift /off shift. We used to come in at 6:00 and would leave at 10:00. They had a place over here , where Morrison is?

MH: No, Bledsoe, Bledsoe.

SB: Well, I used to stay at Morrison, I am telling you where I used to stay (laughter). At Morrison, they had rooms in the bottom in the basement,

and you could go off and stay over there until 10:00 and then you came back to work, and then you didn't leave until about 6:00, after dinner.

AC: All right. Just a couple of more questions. What things have changed over the years?

MH: Oh man!

AC: Mike, I know you had a story you were telling us yesterday about the milk and the bread.

MH: Yeah (laughter). Well, like, you know as I say, back in the late '50's, Maryland was known for snow on the ground over to about April. And...I mean we had some large snowstorms. Maybe about...ooo...anywhere from 20 inches maybe to 30 inches of snow. And the bread man could not get on the campus. We didn't have the snow removal equipment then like they do now. A lot of stuff was done by hand. We didn't have that many ground crew at that time. So, when the bread man would come, I would take a sled. I knew what time he came. I would take a sled and go out there to the main gate out there, at Taylor Avenue there, and wait there until he come there. And I would put the racks of bread on there and bring it right over through the snow here to Newcomb, which is the building behind here in the basement, and over to the main storeroom. Same way with the milkman.

AC: How many trips did you have to make back and forth?

MH: Let me see...I made about four trips.

SB: (Laughs).

AC: You got your exercise!

MH: Yes I did! I have another story to tell you, too. Okay, there was a science teacher here named Doc Johnson. We called him Doc. I don't know where that name come from. Somebody told me how he got his name, but he was really good. I learned a lot from him, too, because I used to work, like I say, after school a lot of times. If he had some work to be done, I would do it. But, we used to have pianos up here in Newcomb on the top floor. We had piano rooms up there. We had grand pianos. We had a freight elevator, and it ran by rope. I used to put them big grand pianos on that elevator. I didn't have no gloves on. I would take that grand piano right down to the bottom floor there, or even up. It would take me almost a whole hour to pull that grand piano up and down on that freight elevator.

AC: You were strong!

SB: (Laughs)

MH: Yes I was, because I lived out in the country when I was living at home, going to elementary school, we didn't have running water, we didn't have, like, furnaces, and stuff like that. We would go to the woods every week and cut wood, logs down, and you brought them back to the wood pile. That was the thing you had to do after school. When you got out of school, the first thing you did was change your clothes. You checked the front porch to see if there was enough wood there for the week. If there wasn't, you know you had to put your gear on. If it was cold, snowing, you had to go out there in the woods, cut these logs down, drag them up to the wood pile. And my stepfather would have a rule, "I want to see the wood pile on

the front porch, I want to see it over the living room window before dark, and then you can quit and come in and get ready to eat.”

AC: What other changes have you seen, Shelia, here at the school over the years that you have been here? I am sure you have seen LOTS of changes.

SB: It used to be...we used to have to go down and pick up the children at the train station. I guess they would have 15, maybe, 20 kids on the train. But they wouldn't have them all in the same section. There would be about four of us that would go down there. You would have to get those children off before the man would holler “All aboard!” (Laughter) And you would have to run from one end of the train to the other to getting each one of those kids off. I never could understand why they didn't put them all in one section. And you would have to run all the way down to each place and pick them up, put them on the bus and bring them here and give them to their supervisors. And then there was another time when we had, in Maryland, 29 inches of snow. And, about six of us got into the kitchen. We came in. It was me, my husband, Mike, and about two more people. And, a lot of people did not get in. And, we had to go around in the dorms and dress the children, wash them up first...dress them...put their clothes on...then wheel them back around here. And then we had to go in there and start cooking for them because they didn't have enough people in, they didn't get in, so we had to help them out.

MH: That was in 1978, by the way.

SB: Laughs.

AC: 1978. It's not just about making sure the children are fed...it is about nurturing the whole child.

SB: Right.

AC: So, when you are needed to do that, you step in and do your part.

SB: Right. Yeah. It's just like when they have the fire drills here, Mike and James go upstairs, to help them, and if they have wheelchair kids, they have to help them down the steps with the wheelchairs...to make sure that they get out for the fire drill.

AC: Mike, I know you said that when you first came to the school, it was an apple orchard and peach orchard, correct?

MH: Yes.

AC: So, can you kind of explain to me about that, what you used to do?

MH: Okay. I think where we are sitting at, it was all apple orchard. From where the swimming pool is, which is over to our right, it's to your left, it was all apple orchard all the way over to my left. And then on the other side, behind the physical facilities building, it was all peach orchard, and then across the road, were apple orchards.

AC: Did you sneak out and pick you some every once in a while?

MH: Oh man! I tell you, like I said, if I didn't have no money to go to the candy stand at night at 8:00 when I got out of study hall, I would come out of Newcomb, out of the west door. You see, back in them days, you didn't go into the same door where the girls were going in. The guys come in the west side of Newcomb Hall and the girls come in the east side. I would come out of study hall at 8:00, I would come out of the bottom door there and sneak right out here in the orchard and get me some apples and take them in the dorm and wash them off and eat them.

SB: Laughs.

AC: Probably the best apple you ever had, huh?

MH: Oh man! Wasn't it? And then when they started making the cider, they used to give us cider like for dinnertime. Man, I used to tear that cider up! (Laughs).

SB: That was the best cider they made on the campus. The cider was really good.

AC: Can you share with us what you feel is your most significant contribution to school nutrition?

SB: To make sure that the kids get nutritious meals, and make sure the food is appetizing and delicious to eat, and food is cooked correctly.

AC: We saw in the kitchen a little bit ago how you taste test what you cook.

SB: Yes. I taste test, but I try to get some of the other people to taste test. Sometimes, you taste a lot, you know you say "It's good, it's alright." But, you want to make sure it is alright for everybody. I have two or three people to taste test to make sure.

AC: How about you, Mike, what do you think is your most significant contribution to what you do?

MH: I just love working with people...no matter where I worked at. Because, I worked in a restaurant, too, for 13 years. I just like working and I like getting along with people.

AC: Are there any other stories that you would like to tell? Is there anything that comes to mind over the last 42 or 43 years...anything that is funny...anything that has happened to you, working in the nutrition department? Is there anything that you would like to share with us?

SB: I remember (laughs) when we had a new hire, a salad maker, when she first came here, we used to tease her a lot...you know...sometimes she wouldn't pronounce her words right, and one time, she went into the refrigerator, and we closed the door. We didn't know she didn't know that there was a knob that you just pushed out...and she thought we had locked her in the door in there and she was just screaming. And we just said, "Open the door!" and she said "I don't know how! I don't know how!" And so, we showed her how to push the thing in and the door just comes open. But she thought she was in there for good.

AC: She thought you locked her in there for life, huh?

SB: (Laughs) Right.

AC: Anything else that you can think of while working with the children? I know that someone had mentioned that when it snows, still, your dedication to the job is to be here for the children. Sometimes, when you get the message that there is going to be snow, that you take turns spending the night here?

SB: Well, I spend the night all the time. When they say SNOW, I'm here, because, I don't drive in snow. I try not to. One time I was going home, and I lived on the west side then, and I was going home and I heard on the news it might snow three or four inches, and I turned my car around and came right on back. I said, "Y'all have my room ready?" And they said, yes. I went right down to my room

AC: And Mike, I know you told us that there were times when you walked to work in the snow.

MH: Yeah, from Washington Boulevard, which is southwest Baltimore. I had a route. It took me about 3 ½ hours, but I got here...same way going back...3 ½ hours back. Six hours.

SB: He would stay sometimes, but Mike wouldn't stay all the time, but when he went, he came back. He made sure he got back whether he walked or rode.

AC: Why did you come back? Why did you walk back through the snow? Was it for you or was it for the children?

MH: For the children. For the school.

AC: Because you knew that they needed you, right?

MH: Right.

SB: Nods. Most of it, all of it, is for the kids, anyway.

AC: Anything else you would like to share with us?

MH: It's a whole lot, but I'd be taking up y'all's air time. There's a whole lot I could tell you about this school, and all.

AC: But we may want to come back and talk to you again, Mike, you never know.

MH: You can.

AC: Okay. Thank you so much, I appreciate it.

MH: Thank you!

SB: Thank you!