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Theresa Stretch Oral History

Interviewee: Theresa Stretch

Interviewer: Jeffrey Boyce

Date: November 19, 2019

Location: Institute of Child Nutrition, University of Mississippi

Description: Theresa Stretch is a native of the State of Illinois. After working as a food service director in both rural and metropolitan districts in Illinois, Theresa accepted a position as an Education and Training Specialist at the Institute of Child Nutrition, where she has been for the past twenty years. Theresa will retire on March 31, 2020.

JB: I am Jeffrey Boyce and it is November 19, 2019. I'm here at the Institute of Child Nutrition with Theresa Stretch. Welcome Theresa, and thanks for taking the time to talk with me today.

TS: Thank you Jeff for inviting me to provide this information.

JB: I thought this would be a good time to get your story since you just passed the twenty-year mark at the Institute, plus you had a whole career in child nutrition before that, so we'll try to talk about all of that today. Could we begin by you telling me a little bit about yourself, where you were born and where you grew up?

TS: I was born and raised in Illinois. I have a pretty large family – three brothers, one sister. I grew up along the Mississippi River in Illinois, home of John Deere. And then as I got older I moved to the east part of the state by the Urbana-Champaign area.

JB: What is your earliest recollection of child nutrition programs? Was there a school breakfast or school lunch when you went to school?

TS: When I was in school early on, up until about fourth grade, we didn't have school breakfast or school lunch. I went to a Catholic school, and what we did have once a month or once every so often was Sloppy Joes, carrot sticks, chocolate milk, and doughnuts. Of course, they did not really participate in the National School Lunch Program. And then when I transferred into a public school we did have school meals, mostly just lunch, not breakfast, but I do remember some of my school meals there.

JB: Any favorite items?

TS: Oh, we had something we called 'cheese sauce over toast', and they took white bread and they had some type of cheese sauce and poured it on top. And of course they had vegetables and other things to go along with it. But for some reason it was a different form in my mind of macaroni and cheese, but it tasted similar to that, but it was just served over toast.

JB: Plenty of carbs there.

TS: That it was.

JB: When you were at Catholic school what did you do for lunch? Did you bring your lunch or go home for lunch?

TS: We brought our lunch for most of the days, and they did serve milk, but we did bring our lunch.

JB: So after your secondary education where did you go to college?

TS: I went to school at Eastern Illinois University, both for my bachelor's and my master's. My major was nutrition and dietetics. At some point when I started my graduate work I actually went into gerontology for one semester, and decided I really wanted to go back into nutrition and dietetics.

JB: So what pointed you in that direction? What was your interest in that field?

TS: When I was in high school I had a part-time job at a local hospital, and Mrs. Cecil, she was a registered dietitian and the director on the nutrition department, encouraged me to go into this field of nutrition and dietetics. The school I began my education at was about ninety minutes away from my home, and I could go ahead and come home on weekends and work or come home for the breaks, and

go back and work at that part-time job. Mrs. Cecil actually ended up being over a fifty-year member with the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, so she was very, very passionate about this particular field.

JB: How did you get into the child nutrition field as a profession?

TS: So for child nutrition I actually started off as a volunteer with WIC. And I wanted to learn how to write a grant so I wrote a very, very small grant for the local health department for WIC to help them promote breast feeding. And then after that a friend came to me and said, "Hey, would you like to go into school nutrition?" And I knew nothing really about it, but I said, "Yes." I had some experience that was complementary. I worked in a pretty popular restaurant that was fine dining. They called me a pastry chef, but I truly was just someone who enjoyed baking. I'm not a chef. I'm more of a culinarian. And so with that experience I went into school nutrition and I started working as a director.

JB: What was your first job?

TS: As a director?

JB: Uh huh.

TS: I was working as a director in Charleston, Illinois. We did a lot of scratch cooking back then. We had schools where we had kitchens in every single school. After a while, then I transferred up to the Chicago metropolitan area and I worked in a suburb of Chicago. So I really like to say I've got the best of both worlds. I've got the rural school district as well as having worked in a metropolitan area.

JB: Well, compare and contrast those two. What was a day like maybe in the rural area and then in the suburbs of Chicago?

TS: So in the rural area, of course it was my home community, and I knew a lot of people up there and I was very active in the community. I wrote for the paper. People knew me. They knew my family. So it was family – we knew each other. The Chicago suburbs – it was nice. It was very progressive. We had a lot more funds to deal with, so we were able to do a lot more creative nutrition education and things like that. But overall the message was the same from the workers, and that was the employees really were passionate, whether you were from a rural area or whether you were from the metropolitan area, but employees and staff

and everyone involved really had that passion that they knew what they were doing really was providing safe, healthy meals to children.

JB: How many schools did you have in the rural area?

TS: I want to say maybe four or five, and then when I moved to the suburb I actually had eight. But then in the middle of the school year that was a big challenge. We actually received another school district because of redistricting. So it helped with participation numbers from the year before, but it was different because different schools, different principals, different things like that were going on.

JB: What was a typical day like?

TS: A typical day – you never knew what the typical day was going to be. I can remember coming in expecting to get all this done, and someone who was my mentor once told me, “It’s really more important to recognize what you’ve accomplished instead of making a list of what you did not accomplish. So go home always feeling that you did achieve something even though when you came in you may have had a list of things you wanted to get done, that probably didn’t happen. You never knew if there was a principal meeting, or some equipment may not work, or maybe you had someone call in sick that day.” I can remember one day coming to work and there was black ice all over the road and people were driving in, and of course people were late, so you had to kind of accommodate and school nutrition professionals are great at recognizing how to step up and accommodate the situation. We served those meals, and we made them breakfast, we made them lunch, and nobody, even though everyone seemed to have a hard time getting in with that black ice all over the roads, it was something that you’ll find with school nutrition professionals, is that their heart is with the children. And even though they have many challenges and obstacles, it is the staff that continually will help provide those meals.

JB: Did you have any mentors along the way as you developed your career?

TS: I had a lot of good mentors. One of them was Roberta Duyff, who is very active with the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics. And what she told me, my lesson from her was two things. Remember the school of what if. What if this happens? What if that happens? So when you’re getting ready for something, no

matter what it is, try to plan ahead about all the possibilities that could happen on the what if. And she also taught me about the School of Hard Knocks. No matter how well you plan something, no matter how hard you try to make it right, something may not go exactly the way you would like to do it. So the School of Hard Knocks is just keep learning your lessons, and you learn and grow from those lessons. And I must admit over the years I still have not graduated from the School of Hard Knocks.

JB: How long did you serve as director, how many years?

TS: I want to say it was about five years total that I served as a director in the combined school districts.

JB: What were some of the biggest changes you saw or challenges you faced during that time?

TS: The biggest changes I saw within the school district was that I was really committed to providing nutrition education. And once I started doing that there was a great increase of participation, community involvement. And prior to that time school lunch was just school lunch. School breakfast was just school breakfast. And people in the community really didn't understand the benefits, or what it was. It was one of those programs back in the day people took advantage of. It was there. You did it, and not understanding what it really provided. And being involved in the community and doing high, complex nutrition education campaigns throughout the community opened the doors and opened the eyes. I can remember one time when I was working in the rural area I was doing a nutrition education campaign in February for the American Heart Association. I worked with them. And one of the things, I went to the local florists and asked, "Could we please have pink and red carnations?" And they donated enough for the high school students. And regardless of whether or not they bought the lunch that day, those high school students received a pink or a red carnation. And it was just one of those after being very visible in the community, getting individuals to understand all the importance, and that school lunch is really a wonderful way to provide healthy communities in the areas that you live in. And once that message got out it was pretty easy to continue to do education campaigns to help the community understand the program.

JB: Is there anything peculiar or particular to the State of Illinois regarding child nutrition?

TS: I think the State of Illinois is just like the other states. We follow the Federal guidelines. We continue to work with the State Department of Education, all of that to be in compliance. I don't think it's the state that makes the program. I really believe it's the people in the program who make the program. You can't always just do it by yourself. After the Valentine's when I was planning for a National Nutrition Month campaign, at that point the teachers got involved. So I think it's really the people. I don't know a state that has any different outcomes or missions or goals. They really want to help provide that healthy meal in that healthy environment, because what students do early on in life really can help and impact them later on as they get older.

JB: Were you active in the state or the national school nutrition associations?

TS: I was very active with the Illinois Dietetic Association before I came to the Institute. I served in a lot of capacities with them. I also was active with an organization called the Illinois Council on Food and Agricultural Research. And what we did is we as a group individuals – I represented the Illinois Dietetic Association – but there were all of our commodity producers in the State of Illinois, from the big ones that we normally think of, like corn and soy and beef and dairy. Illinois produces horseradish. They have wineries. All of these agriculture stakeholders got together and we went to our legislators to seek funding for agriculture research. We started off receiving \$3,000,000, and by the time I left we had \$15,000,000 of state funds for agriculture research. And I was the chair of the Food and Safety research sub group. So the money was divided and we decided what type of research to fund. And I also had a small farm in Illinois, so it was very small. I called it a big garden, compared to the real big farms that are out there. But agriculture – I grew up in the hometown area of John Deere and International Harvester – and then just having that agricultural background, I think it was a perfect match being in school nutrition programs.

JB: What did you grow on that small farm?

TS: We grew corn and soy, but mostly feed corn, not corn that we would normally eat.

JB: So after that, is that when you came to the Institute?

TS: So I did come. I came here in May of 2000 is my official twenty year, but with the books and the University calculation, it's my twenty year mark now. But yes I came down here, and I can remember my first project. I can remember some of the questions on my interview. It was a wonderful move from Illinois to come to the State of Mississippi. I was never actually in the state before I took my position and it was a very warm and welcoming state to be here.

JB: What was the first position you had?

TS: My first position here was a Food and Nutrition Specialist, and then over time they just changed the title. The duties pretty much stayed the same, and now I'm an Education and Training Specialist II.

JB: How did you learn about the job?

TS: Through the, it was the American Dietetic Association. It was published in their journal. There were two positions published. One was a food safety position, a Food Safety Specialist. And the other one was the food and nutrition. And I actually applied for the Food Safety Specialist, and Dr. Logan indicated that I was well qualified, but they were not going to hire that position. So she said if I was still interested to reapply for the Food and Nutrition Specialist. So I did and here I am.

JB: Tell me about some of the projects you've worked on while you've been at the Institute.

TS: My first project was the grain poster. That was my very first project and then shortly after that I did nutrient analysis for I believe it was More Than Mud Pies. And back when I started, when we answered Helpdesk questions, we would fax the information, or we would mail the information back to the individual that requested the information. So of course that's one major change now, is we hardly ever use the fax machine. We will if it's needed, but everything is done electronically by email. When I first started we had a much smaller staff. I can remember one of my coworkers, and she was from New York, and made scones that were really delicious. Our staff was the size that one pan of scones would actually feed us. And when she retired we were way past that one pan of scones. And now I believe we have over forty people here, forty staff, and what a great

group of dedicated professionals. Here are some of projects I have worked on over the years. For years, I managed the food safety initiative and developed resources like *Wash Your Hands: Educating a School Community*, *HACCP –based Standard Operating Procedures* interactive website, *Developing a Food Safety Program with HACCP-like principles*, *Developing an Emergency Readiness Plan*, and *Developing a School Nutrition Biosecurity Plan*. Then I moved into developing procurement resources like *Procurement in the 21st Century*, *Procurement of Foods: Cooperative Purchasing*, *Procurement of Foods: Forecasting*, and *Buy American: U.S. Agriculture Supporting Healthy School Meals*. Of course, there was *Healthy Cuisine for Kids*, *Reimbursable School Meals*, *Financial Management for Managers and Summer Feeding*. I was instrumental in the S.T.A.R. and E-STAR curriculum development and in organizing and hosting the S.T.A.R. webinars.

JB: So what's a typical day like for you now at the Institute?

TS: So the typical day here is you just really don't know. Some days you plan things, like maybe there's a meeting or a conference call. We do live webinars. We did one last week on the webinar. We just do a lot of things here, and you just kind of come in and we have projects that we work on and you set goals and try to get those milestones accomplished. To go back to your previous question, there are so many things that we did that we've grown so much. The number of trainings – when I first worked on *Healthy Cuisine for Kids* I was not only part of writing that particular project. I had to make copies of the materials when we went on the road. And now we have a training team that provides everything you need when you go on trainings. So not only did we write the material and go out and train on it, we had to actually physically photocopy that material to get it out to the individuals. The food safety – we started – when I was working on the food safety initiative that was when the schools needed to have a food safety program that included HACCP principles. We were working with them and that's when we started working with the Process Approach, and now our food safety initiative has just grown into norovirus and childcare and so many different areas that we have expanded into. And then of course procurement is something that I've been working on. With the Institute, things change, because there are better ways of doing things, one, and also due to regulations, so we are constantly reviewing those regulations and trying to keep those materials up to date.

JB: What are some of the biggest challenges that you've faced?

TS: At this job it's probably that I try to put a lot on my plate, and sometimes that can be very complimentary, and sometimes I can be my worst enemy.

JB: What changes have you seen in the child nutrition profession in general over the years?

TS: I've seen some changes, like I mentioned when I was in school and had my first school meal, they did a lot of scratch cooking. And over the years, now we're moving back into scratch cooking. And also the cultural foods that we offer now. In the past we may have offered just a few different items, but now rural and metropolitan, medium districts, small districts, large districts, if you look at their menus across the board you're going to see a lot of different foods, and I think it's because of our students. Their tastes are becoming so much more sophisticated. And in order to keep up with what others are doing in the community the school nutrition program has had to kind of do the same thing. And I think that's good to introduce cultural foods to different students across the nation.

JB: What would you say has been your most significant contribution to child nutrition over the years?

TS: That's a hard question, a really hard question. I can talk about all the different things I personally have achieved and accomplished -

JB: Well tell me about those.

TS: Like writing two position papers for the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, or serving on numerous boards for the American Commodity Distribution, the School Nutrition Association. All of that are good leadership roles. What really is the contribution I believe personally is that I'm mentoring and trying to encourage others to join the field of school nutrition and child nutrition programs.

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

TS: The most memorable stories I have is for the staffs of the school nutrition programs over the years. And that's because these individuals, they may be working two jobs, but when it comes to coming in in the morning and feeding those children, whatever's happening in their world outside the school nutrition

program, you can't tell it. The staff are focused. They want to make the school meal experience so positive. And the staffs throughout the school nutrition programs that I worked with, they're the ones who really made the school nutrition program. I may have come up with some school nutrition campaign, but when it came to actually launching that campaign, or working with it, it was the staff who always made it happen. And I can remember in my interview here at the Institute and one of the questions was "How do you feel successful?" How do I feel successful? And then I thought, "I feel successful when I can walk in to an operation and they didn't know I was coming in, and they're washing their hands correctly." And that's when the school nutrition staff understand and they apply, and they do it because it is within their hearts and their souls and this is where they want to be. It might be their children, it might be their grandchildren, it might be someone next door, or it might be someone that just really needs a hot meal, because that's the only meal that they're going to get that day. And when you have such compassion over and over again that's what really makes the program's success, so what I've contributed to the field is so minor compared to what school nutrition staff really contribute.

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

TS: Absolutely go ahead and do it. It is the most rewarding field that you can get in. And in today's world, you asked earlier about the changes, we have school gardens now, we have wellness programs, we have so many different opportunities. And if you have creativity and you have commitment to serving and making a difference into those meals of children, then it's the field for you. You're working with children, you're making a difference, and you're also using the ability of your mind to reach the community, and overall you're impacting the health of that particular community. So it's a wonderful, wonderful area. There is so much out there you can do. There's a place for you in school nutrition or child nutrition programs. Just open the door and look for it.

JB: What hopes do you have for child nutrition in general and the Institute in particular in the future? What would you like to see happen in both areas?

TS: With child nutrition we're moving in the right direction, and the hope is that we continue to move in that direction and people recognize the importance, and

more people just become involved in it – farm to school programs, local community programs. That is really a very positive way of moving and the hope would be that we continue to move, and as we change, whether the dietary guidelines change, or something else changes, the school nutrition and child nutrition programs follow that direction. With the Institute I'm just amazed. Last week we celebrated our thirtieth year anniversary, and to see where we were and where we are, I cannot imagine where we're going in the future. It's just so remarkable, and of course the staff here, they're just as remarkable as the celebration was.

JB: Thank you so much for taking the time to talk with me.

TS: Most certainly.