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**Wanda Salley**

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Institute of Child Nutrition

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## Wanda Salley Oral History

An Alabama native, Wanda Salley holds degrees from Auburn University and Mississippi State University, and is also a Registered Dietitian. After beginning her career in hospitals she transitioned into school food service, first becoming a food service director in Houston, MS, followed by stints in Greenville, Pass Christian, and Harrison County, MS schools.

JB: I'm Jeff Boyce and it's November 5, 2010. I'm here at the Beau Rivage Hotel & Casino. I'm here with Wanda Salley, who's down here for the Mississippi School Nutrition Association's annual conference. Welcome Wanda and thanks for taking the time to talk with us today.

WS: You're welcome.

JB: Could we begin today by you telling me a little bit about yourself – where you were born and grew up?

WS: I was born in Alexander City, Alabama, and I lived there my whole life until I moved to Auburn, Alabama, and went to university at Auburn and got my degree in Nutrition Food Systems there. And then I went to work for Morrison's Custom Management Services. I went to their training program at Caraway Methodist Hospital in Birmingham. While I was there I got a job assignment in a little bitty hospital in north Mississippi.

JB: Where was that?

WS: Webster General Hospital.

JB: Webster County?

WS: Yes. And I thought I had died and fallen off the face of the earth. I mean literally. Moving from Birmingham to Eupora – everything closed at five o'clock. Every person my age was married with children, so it was a - it was a shock.

JB: A bit of culture shock.

WS: Yes. But it ended up being a good move for me. I enjoyed my time there. I met my husband in Eupora, Mississippi, married a Mississippi boy. I guess it was probably 1981-2, I went to work as a child nutrition director in Houston, Mississippi. I got my master's at Mississippi State in Nutrition and did the six-month qualifying experience and got to be a Registered Dietitian.

JB: What did you do for the qualifying experience?

WS: It was a six-month qualifying with a Registered Dietitian with a master's degree. They don't have that program anymore, but she was with Morrison's so she helped me with that; got that done, took the exam, passed, and I've been an RD ever since.

JB: Before we get into your career now, tell us a little bit about your elementary and high school experience. Were there lunch or breakfast programs?

WS: Lunch programs yes, there was no breakfast program. Benjamin Russell High School is where I graduated from in 1976.

JB: And did you participate in school lunch?

WS: Sometimes I did. I really didn't care for the cafeteria food at the time.

JB: Were there any menu items that you did like.

WS: Beets – I like beets now, but I hated beets back then. We used to have them a lot.

JB: Beets – you either love them or you hate them. I didn't eat them forever until I was in Peace Corps and they are a big staple in Ukraine, and I got to really liking them, and my mother told me after I got back that I loved them as a small child.

WS: See. They're delicious. I just didn't for a while didn't care for them I didn't think.

JB: What was your job in Webster County?.

WS: I was the Dietary Director at the little hospital.

JB: And then you got your master's and you became an RD. So how did you get involved in child nutrition?

WS: Really it was the superintendent in Houston, Mississippi. He just called me up out of the blue one day and said, "We're in need of a child nutrition director and would you have any interest in that?" And I thought 'No, not really'; never even crossed my mind. But he invited me to come talk to him about it so I did and he told me a little bit about it and how it all worked, and I decided I would give it a try, and I've been in child nutrition pretty much ever since.

JB: So you started in child nutrition at Houston Public Schools?

WS: Houston Separate School District.

JB: And where did you go from there?

WS: From there – my husband was a banker for seventeen years – so he was transferred to the Delta, Greenville, Mississippi. And I was six months pregnant at the time, and ended up getting the – the lady who was at Western Line School District had been there for something like thirty-something years and she was retiring. So I just happened to come at just the right time, so I ended up getting that job. And I was there for a year. Then he was transferred again, so we moved to Cleveland, Mississippi, and I couldn't get a child nutrition job in Cleveland. The lady that was there had been there for a while and she wasn't going anywhere, so I went back to work in a hospital, for Morrison's again. So we were there for about a year and a half, and I really enjoyed my time there at the hospital. Then, my husband was transferred to the Coast back in 1988. My son was a month old; my baby was a month old. So we moved down here and I was going to

try and stay at home for a while. I had a two-year-old and then the baby. And my husband was at the bank and he had to work pretty long hours. So my oldest was a very strong-willed child, very stubborn, very difficult to say the least. So one day she and I had been at odds all day long, and I called my husband at work and I was crying my eyes out and I said, "I have got to go back to work. I can't take this anymore." Don't tell her I said this. So I ended up working for the Health Department for about six months part-time. And then a position opened up in Pass Christian, Mississippi. So I went over there as the Child Nutrition Director there for seven years.

JB: What period was this?

WS: I started in 1989 and I left there in '96. I left there in March of '96 to come over to Harrison County, which is where I am now. I've been there for a long time.

JB: And you're the Director there?

WS: Yes.

JB: What's a typical day like for you there now? Or is there a typical day?

WS: There is no typical day, not in child nutrition. You just never know. It's parents that you're dealing with; it's the boss that you're dealing with; employee situations. I have twenty-one cafeterias and about 148 employees, so on any given day you never know what's going to happen, which makes the job interesting, but it makes it very difficult when there are things that you have to do. I find that I get a lot of my best work done late in the afternoon, like between four and five o'clock, because it seems to be quiet then. It's Grand Central Station most of the time, but I love it. I love what I do. I've got great folks that I work with every day, and child nutrition folks – managers, employees are some of the best people you'll ever want to meet. Of course I don't get to be right there with the children like they are, but I feel like what we do is so important and I know and they know that there are children out there with situations they don't have any control over, and we like to be the bright spot in their day. And I think we

do a really good job preparing healthy, quality meals, and we always strive for that every day, and we have real good participation from our kids.

JB: What are some of the biggest changes you've seen in child nutrition over the years?

WS: Financial; financial is the biggest thing. Whereas back in the day it was relatively easy to make ends meet, now I find I have to focus so much on cost control that it takes away from the fun parts of the job, because literally we are self-sufficient. If you have things going wrong in three or four schools out there and money is just basically going down the tube, then you've got to keep a handle on it because we have to have that money to buy groceries with. We have to have that money to pay our staff with. So it's hard, it's really hard, especially with all the requirements we have now with what we have to put on the tray, the fresh fruits and vegetables that we have to serve so much of now, which is wonderful, but they're expensive. My understanding – groceries are on their way up again come the first of the year. I'm starting to see those increases again like we had a couple of years back. There were about three years in a row that we actually lost money. We had a relatively large fund balance that we were eating away. So last year was the first year that we were actually in the black at the end of the year, but we had made drastic, drastic cuts last year. Whereas my employees had been getting five paid holidays a year we had to cut that out. We had to streamline all of our staff down to the bare minimum. We haven't had raises in two years now. You just had to be real careful what you were buying. I do a profit and loss every month and I send it out to all the managers and I let them see where they stand financially. Unfortunately I have three schools that are really, really, really small, and there's nothing you can do to make them generate a profit; there's nothing. They're always going to lose money. The only way we can fix that problem would be to satellite food in from another location, and I have been suggesting that to the Board and the superintendent, but that's not something they're really interested in at this point in time. All you can do is let them know 'this is what we need to do' but small schools are very hard to make ends meet. Really impossible, because you don't generate enough revenue from the kids that you're feeding. Doing meals per labor hour from one of those kitchens that I'm talking about, it would literally be one person

for four hours a day and there's no way. You couldn't possibly do it like that. I have cut back my office staff; whereas I had four people that worked in there with me, now I only have two. One of the girls has gone back to the kitchen, so we've cut back that way, eliminated working in the summer for one of those staff people, you know, just anything we can do. At this point I don't know what else we can cut.

JB: Did Katrina have anything to do with the financials?

WS: The year before Katrina we had an excess balance at the end of that year. And then Katrina hit and it seems like we haven't been able to catch up since then.

JB: Tell me about Katrina, your experience in your schools. What happened?

WS: It was probably the worst experience of my life.

JB: I understand your county was quite hard hit.

WS: Of course; it was. My folks, my actual employees were not hit nearly as hard as some of the surrounding districts were; for example Pass Christian, where I used to work. Sandra Isabelle works there. They were literally wiped off the face of the earth just about.

JB: I just interviewed her. She said that was devastating there.

WS: It was horrible – Bay St. Louis – as a matter of fact, the child nutrition director in Hancock County, she was relatively new to that job, and the storm hit, and she walked. The poor girl that had been working for two months in her office had to take over, pick up and go with it, and she had nothing to work with. It was awful. So I mean we were in relatively good shape. I had a few employees who lost their homes completely, but the vast majority of them had damage – everybody had damage. You didn't look as a single building that wasn't damaged, but no one was washed away, or lost their lives or anything.

JB: So you didn't lose any schools?

WS: We did lose a school, yes. D'Iberville Middle School went under water, and they have since torn that school down. That school moved to the old high school; we have since built a new D'Iberville High School, which is north of the interstate, on higher ground. And it is a storm shelter; it's built to all these specifications so a Category 5 hurricane shouldn't bother the structure.

JB: So that's where people would evacuate to, the new high school?

WS: Yes. They have large generators to operate the equipment as all, so we'll be better off than we have been if we ever have anything like that again. I mean you know it's bad when you go into your superintendent's office for some sort of direction, and he's just sitting there just basically numb. It's like 'I have no idea', you know? We were just 'What do we do? Where do we start?' you know? It's like total chaos, and all the rules and regulations are out the door, because you're just trying to survive.

JB: You just go into survival mode.

WS: Exactly. Now USDA did grant us an opportunity to feed all of our children for free for I want to say it was a month, maybe two, because we had so many kids that were homeless, so many. And then they wanted us to start back business as usual, but business couldn't be at usual, and it could be more so for us than it could be for districts like Pass Christian for example. It was hard.

JB: How long did it take you before you felt like you were back to business as usual?

WS: Probably until last year.

JB: Wow.

WS: I mean it just really affected everything that we did for the longest time and we just could never get our feet back on solid ground.



Fortunately, the reimbursement rates last year went up significantly more than it ever had before, which helped out. It was very much needed. But then this year we got very little. And see, prices are going up again so -don't know how this year's going to pan out. But we all have to be really, really good business managers now, where years ago it wasn't that hard.

JB: What would you say has been your most significant contribution so far to the field?

WS: Oh my goodness, I don't know – doing the best job that we can for children every day. I don't know that I've done anything that fantastic.

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

WS: Well, I would say that it's a very rewarding job. It's a good opportunity to really be of service to children. It's one of the quote-unquote welfare programs that really does what it's supposed to do, and that's feed children. And when you see a child that you know is hungry, that you know needs that nourishment, then it makes what you do so worthwhile, it really does. And you see those little happy faces out there, and with the wellness that we have going on now, that has been FUN.

JB: Tell me about your wellness program.

WS: I will have to say that wellness is really one of my passions. I think that it is critical to the needs of the children and I think that the whole thing that the principals and the administrators are trying to do – always trying to improve test scores and making sure the test scores come out like they're supposed to so the district won't look bad – I try to every opportunity I have, let them know how important it is that the children are well-nourished, that they're healthy, that they're physically fit, because of all the research that's out there available to them, letting them know, but yet they feel like if they miss one minute of instruction time, that it's going to be bad and the test scores are going to go down. The principals are such a hard sell. Once you ever can convey that message to them and they actually see the importance of health and wellness as it pertains to academics, then

they're onboard. But that's been my biggest challenge, it's trying to get them to see that, and some of them do and some of them don't, and they're test scores are not good, their school doesn't do well, and they don't allow them to have recess, and they don't care about wellness – they don't care about any of that, and you just want to shake them and say, “I told you. Why don't you listen to me? You need to do this.” There are a lot of principals in my district and a lot of different personalities. Some are believers in it and some are not, so that's my challenge, to get them all onboard. Bet we've come so far, so far, and we've got – we've got three, four schools in our district that are just – the have fabulous wellness programs going on at the schools. The kids are all engaged, the teachers, the principals, the cafeteria, they're all working together to promote it and it's making some difference. So I'm very proud of those schools, and I tell you what, whenever a school has a really good school nurse who's very interested in health and wellness, it makes a huge difference. My next thing is to try and get certified PE instructors in all the schools. That's what I would like to see. I hope that somehow, somewhere we can come across a grant, because that's one area that they can cut, they can get by without that, and that's one thing that all schools need in my opinion. When I grew up in Alexander City, Alabama, we had a FABULOUS PE program. We had a pool; we did swimming, we did baton, we did tap, we did square-dancing, we did tumbling, we did trampolines, we played dodge ball, we played softball, kickball, I mean we were forever doing something. Gymnastics – we did gymnastics. We had a great program. And children back in the day, you didn't have the obesity problem that you have now. And these schools have to realize they've got to take time to let these children become physically fit and healthy as well as learn math, algebra, English, reading, whatever. It all has to go together. And educating parents is also important, because we have a lot of parents out there that don't have a clue about being physically fit or having an active lifestyle, and the importance of it, or good nutrition. They don't have a clue.

JB: Are you able to do any outreach to them?

WS: We have the school health councils, and they're supposed to be in all the schools, but they're not, but the ones where we do, we do get the community involved. We have community on the health councils and we

have Parent Nights where they come in and now they're doing more things as far as physical fitness when the parents are there, and showing them; newsletters and information on the website, and every opportunity we have to reach out to the parents we do so.

JB: Anything else you'd like to add today?

WS: No. You need to shut me up because I'm talking too much I'm sure.  
*Laughter*

JB: Well thank you for taking the time to share your story with us today.

WS: You're welcome. Thank you for having me.