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## Danny Seymour

Danny Seymour

Institute of Child Nutrition

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## Danny Seymour Oral History

Danny Seymour has been involved with school nutrition programs since 1971, beginning with a small suburban Philadelphia school district. His career path led him to direct four different school nutrition programs and to become director of the second largest school district in Pennsylvania - Pittsburgh Public Schools.

Throughout his career in schools, Danny built each program on strong fundamentals of procurement as well as human resource management. While in Pittsburgh he developed the department's Standards of Operations, outlining almost every policy and procedure for implementing a successful school nutrition operation.

From 2007 to 2015 Danny held a position with the School Nutrition Association as Dean of Education. The newly created position afforded the opportunity to create professional training programs for both school nutrition employees and industry colleagues.

Danny has a passion for dogs and in particular, Pointers. Danny is approved by the American Kennel Club to judge seventeen different breeds of sporting dogs. When not involved with the professional development of school nutrition programs, you can most likely find him at a dog show.

Danny is a consultant trainer for the Institute of Child Nutrition.

JB: Good Morning. I'm Jeffrey Boyce, and it's October 7, 2010. I'm here at the National Food Service Management Institute with Mr. Danny Seymour. Welcome Danny, and thanks for taking the time this early in the morning to talk to us.

DS: You're welcome Jeffrey. Nice to be here.

JB: Tell us a little bit about yourself. Where did you grow up?

DS: I'd be happy to. I grew up in a little town called Hockessin, Delaware, which is about ten miles west of Wilmington, northern Delaware; was

fortunate that I went to school just across the street from where I lived, thirteen years at the same school. Great experience, wonderful experience.

JB: What was the name of the school?

DS: The school was called Sanford School, and it was a private school. My sister and I both went there for thirteen years. My mother's family and the folks that owned the school were neighbors, and that's how the association became, and that's why we went to school there. We were good friends with the owners of the school, the headmistress, and remain friends. It was just a wonderful experience. You just couldn't ask for anything better growing up, that you could go to school across the street from where you lived.

JB: You said thirteen years, so I take it there was a kindergarten program there?

DS: There was a kindergarten, kindergarten through twelfth grade.

JB: Did they have a lunch program?

DS: Sort of. That probably was my first exposure to lunch, but it was a different type of lunch because in the elementary grades we all sat at different tables by grade, and our teacher served us. Every day we would have a soup. We were asked to try everything and usually we did. So it was a good experience. It gave us some table manners and also gave us an opportunity to try different foods.

JB: So what were some of your favorite menu items?

DS: Well, it's funny. As I got into high school we took our lunch. But I can remember, even going to high school, I used to trade my lunch with the students that lived on campus – and it was a boarding school as well – so I would trade my lunch – particularly the hoagie, I loved the hoagie.

JB: Did they have a breakfast program?

DS: They had breakfast programs just for the resident students, not for the day students.

JB: How many students were in the school?

DS: At the time there were probably close to two hundred and fifty students, and probably sixty percent of those students were boarding students. A lot of their families were involved in the diplomatic corps. They were from all over the world, so that too was a great experience.

JB: Tell me about your educational background. What schools did you attend?

DS: Actually, my interest in food came about very early. I was pre-teen I guess, because I was active in 4-H, and one of the projects that I took was cooking, and it was nutrition. And I had a real interest in nutrition and cooking. And I had an aunt that said, "Well, if you're interested in cooking and the culinary arts, here's a school called The Culinary Institute of America. Maybe you ought to look into this." And I was in eighth grade at the time, and when I saw that pamphlet on The Culinary Institute of America I said, "That's what I want to do, I want to be a chef." So, I think it was 4-H that actually started it, and interestingly Jeff, I've told this story before too, they still do, if you're familiar with the 4-H program, they have the National 4-H Congress every year, and I was the first boy to win a state nutrition award, and went to National 4-H Congress. And that was sponsored by General Foods, and General Foods brought me to their home office in White Plains, New York, and we had a little tour, a little press conference and everything, and so for a seventeen year old kid that was pretty exciting.

JB: What did you have to do to win that competition?

DS: You do projects. You have to do all types of things and you keep books on foods that you prepare. You do some nutrition. You know, back in that time – we're talking the late '60s – it wasn't that involved, but you know, fruits and vegetables and protein items, you keep a record of that – how many meals you prepared, who you prepared them for – and then you got

into food competitions – sort of like the old Iron Chef – but it was fun. It was interesting and I enjoyed it – got razed a lot, you know, because you were surrounded by women, but I think that’s now pretty indicative of my entire career.

JB: Exactly. So what were some of the specialties that you prepared?

DS: Here’s an interesting one; you’ll like this. We had a competition, and it was at our state fair. And the Delaware State Fair is held in Harrington, which is mid-state, in July, and it can get pretty hot in July. So this was called the Ready Foods Contest, and I had won the county level; was going to compete on the state. And my recipe was for strawberry cream puff. And I went and I had to prepare this in front of the judges there at the state fair, and it was so hot – this is no lie – so hot that day that the cream that I was whipping turned to butter. That is the truth. Of course, I didn’t win the competition.

JB: Not for the strawberry butter puff? [Laughter] Has there been a mentor or anyone who helped guide your career and the decisions you made? You mentioned your aunt.

DS: My aunt was instrumental because she knew I had an interest in food. Upon graduation from high school I went to the Culinary Institute in New Haven, Connecticut, with the intention of being a chef, and was there for probably the first half of the school year and decided you know, I don’t think I want to be a chef, because I like the administrative part. I like telling people what to do. So I thought I’m going to continue on because I like the hospitality industry. This will be great experience, background for me, so I’ll continue on and study Culinary Arts, and that’s what I did. I completed the program; it was a two-year program, associate degree program. And then I decided that I wanted to continue on so I came back to Wilmington, and there was a college in Wilmington called Brandywine College, which is now Widener University, and studied Food Service Management, and went two more years and got another associates degree. And at that time when I came out I actually had three job offers when I came out of college. One was at Disney World in Orlando, Florida. It hadn’t even opened yet. I had gone through the interview process, and it was a position as the second

cook in one of their theme parks. And I actually went down to Orlando to see what Orlando was like and if I wanted to move down there. And at that time, it was 1971, there wasn't too much in Orlando.

JB: Still orange groves?

DS: Yes. Twenty miles south and twenty miles north, you were still out in the country so to speak. There just wasn't anything there, so I sort of put that decision on hold. The other offer I had was an assistant dining room manager at the University of Delaware. And the third was this director of food service for a public school district just south of Philadelphia, near the Philadelphia airport. I had no idea what school lunch was about, because you asked if I was involved with it where I went to school, and I have to say honestly, "No, it wasn't really what we consider a national school meal program." So that was new to me, and I looked at that and I thought, "Well, that's a pretty big job" - and I was twenty-one years old at the time - "I'm not quite sure." There were forty-eight employees, and a budget of at that time I think probably about \$400,000. "I don't know." But, it was interesting because I had teachers' hours. It was like eight to three, and 190 days a year, and summers off, and I thought, "Well, that's pretty neat, pretty cool for a 21-year-old." So I took the job. And that's how I got into school nutrition.

JB: How long were you in that position?

DS: I was in that position for fourteen and a half years and decided I needed to do something different. So I went and managed a country club. And that was interesting too Jeff. The interview process for the country club position - I had to go and I sat before the board of directors, and one of the board of directors said to me, "Mr. Seymour, do you play golf?" And I thought, "Oh Lord, this is it, because I've never played golf. I wouldn't know anything about golf." So I probably thought, "Well, this is the end of this job interview." So I said, "No sir, I do not." So he said, "Um-hum. Did you ever play golf?" and I said, "Oh, this is it for sure." I said, "No sir, I've never played golf." And I will never forget Jeff. He just sort of rolled his eyes back and said, "Well it's a good thing, because the last manager spent too much time on the golf course." And I got the job. So I stayed there just short of

three years, which was a wonderful experience. In fact, I was so fortunate that the president of the country club and what they call the house chairman both very astute businessmen, knew finances in and out, and I learned so much from them, that as I went on and went back into school nutrition, I really think that my experience working with them helped me tremendously later on in school nutrition programs.

JB: So, how did you get back into school nutrition?

DS: Well, I got back because friends and family said, “Danny, you’re crazy. You’re doing 24/7 and this is just absolutely nuts. You’re still a young man; you need a life.” And I said, “Well, it’s not that bad.” But there was an opening of a school district in suburban Philadelphia. It was a little larger, so it’s going back into the area where I came out of, and I applied for that job, and got the job. And the gal that I replaced did such a wonderful job – she was just absolutely meticulous in her finances, her policies, procedures – that it was like ‘what else is there to do?’ So it wasn’t a great challenge, and just a year after I was there the third largest district in Pennsylvania became available and I applied for that and got that. I spent five years there, which was Allentown School District, and that was wonderful too – gave me the experience of a small city school district. And then as you know, five years after I was there in Allentown, Pittsburgh opened up. I applied for that job, and moved from the third largest district in Pennsylvania to the second, and remained there until 2007.

JB: What was a typical day like in some of these school districts, or was there a typical day?

DS: I think there pretty much is a typical day. I think from a director’s point of view the interesting thing is always menu development. It’s constantly changing. And in the smaller school districts, like the first district I worked in, you had greater flexibility to change your menu. We would do it month to month, but even with in that month, for instance back in the ‘70s, late ‘70s, and even a little bit of the early ‘80s, you would receive commodities. They may come in once a month, or sometimes twice a month, so you looked at the availability, and what those products were, and you incorporate them into your menu. When you go to a large school district

that's a lot more difficult to do, because you usually go on a cycle menu. But I think – typical – all the districts that I've been in, all four, I've found that what consumes most of your time are the human resource issues. 'This is not my job' and 'I don't know how to do that', so there's a lot of those things. Then two of the districts that I worked in had bargaining units, and that's always interesting and challenging.

JB: Is that like unions?

DS: That is like unions, correct. So you're dealing not just with the personnel issues, but then you're taking those issues and working with representatives from the union to come to some type of resolutions, sometimes good, sometimes not so good; and sometimes you resolve it, other times you don't, but it's always challenging and always interesting.

JB: What are some of the biggest changes you saw over the years?

DS: That's a good question Jeffrey. Just thinking about that, I think the most remarkable changes we've had in the child nutrition programs have come about through technology and keeping up with that, because as we discussed a little earlier, when I started we were doing preparation; almost all of our meals were prepared from what we call scratch, or homemade, whatever you want to call it, utilizing commodities that came in, such as frozen chicken, frozen ground beef, those type of things. So we had to be resourceful, had to do a lot of training. Today – we went full circle – because probably from I would say in the mid-70s, when commodities became more available, we did a lot of processing. Labor costs became very high. Even the labor force changed. We used to have a lot of mothers who had children in school, so the timing to work in school lunch was ideal. That started to change. The workforce started to change. More women became involved in the workforce. So the labor pool was a little more restrictive. The skills were not there, so we went to pre-plated items, items that were pre-prepared for us. Now we're going back. It seems to be that there's a flow of interest to go back into preparation, so we'll probably go through that cycle one more time.



JB: What were some of the biggest challenges you faced during that time? You mentioned the labor problems.

DS: I'll probably go and use Pittsburgh since I spent the last thirteen years there. And in Pittsburgh we had a central commissary. We were doing pre-plated for our elementary program, which was a challenge because in pre-plated it's not always the most acceptable things for children. In fact, when I first went there they were serving them out of little aluminum tins that looked like the old TV-dinner type thing. That wasn't too popular, and they only had one choice a day, so as we moved forward we did renovations – we went from the aluminum to the paper containers. We put more variety into the menu. And the last couple of years I was there we actually changed that. We offered the children two choices a day. And then we got into – we always had – all five of the components had to be offered with the pre-plate, so you had a hot pack and a cold pack and the milk, and everything was there. We changed that. So then we went into Offer vs. Serve. We offered them the pre-plate items, but some of the other items that they had were fresh fruit and vegetables, even some yogurts and other products like that, then they could go back and offer the Offer vs. Serve just like they did in the middle and secondary school. That was a challenge, and we did that because we had to increase participation, we had to respond to the community, particularly after wellness, when the wellness policy was passed. And internally there were some changes when you begin to downsize schools because of enrollment going down and consolidation. That's always a challenge too. So we had to do a lot of community outreach, a lot of involvement, a lot of education, even with principals, to inform them about the program scheduling, etc. So I think those were the greatest challenges – particularly in a school district like Pittsburgh, who did like many urban districts had declining enrollments, and it was a challenge how to manage those declining enrollments, particularly when you consolidated. You're increasing enrollment in schools, which put a burden sometimes on our buildings, because now when we're used to serving 100-150 in a cafeteria in twenty minutes, sometimes now we have 300-400 kids in the same period of time. So it's a challenge. We had to do a lot of changes. We had to look at facilities. And I think probably that Jeff was a challenge in itself, and of course every time you do that – Pittsburgh was a bargaining unit – and you're looking at going back to the bargaining unit

because when you consolidate you have to lay off labor, so you go through seniority and go through that process as well. So those were some of the challenges.

JB: How many students were in the district? You said it was declining.

DS: I went there in 1994, and in 1994 the enrollment was 40,000. And I left in 2007, and the enrollment was 28,000.

JB: Quite a drop.

DS: It is quite a drop, and it was a lot internally going on as I said, because Pittsburgh is a very old city. Many of the buildings were very old. The topography of Pittsburgh is a little like San Francisco, a lot of hills up and down, and rivers to cross; you just can't get there from here. So that's a challenge on transportation, and as I said, consolidating the many schools, and keeping the communities happy, because it was also a diverse city, various communities, so you had to make a lot of people happy – or try to.

JB: What was your participation rate?

DS: Participation was good. We were really pleased with participation. On the average it was sixty-five percent. We had some schools that were 90-, 99-percent participation. So we were pleased with that, but you always look at that and you always try to improve participation. And one of the things, again, as you do consolidation, is scheduling, trying to match the instructional side with the service side, and that's always a challenge too. As I said, now you go from three lunch periods a day to four or five. And that of course operation-wise can increase labor, and can bring about many more challenges, so it's interesting.

JB: Tell me about what you're doing now.

DS: What I'm doing now – I left Pittsburgh in 2007 and came to School Nutrition Association as the first Dean of Education, which is great. It's an interesting position. I have the opportunity now to help develop what we call the Education Center and within the Education Center is developing

SNA's education program, plan of action for education, and then implementing those programs, that are helped develop by the board, our education committee, and we get a lot of input as well from our members. In fact they are probably the best resource we have they're out there in the field. Through surveys and reports we get from them they share with us what's going on out there, what their needs are, particularly in professional development. In the Education Center at SNA we're responsible for all the Annual National Conference meetings. Last year we had over ninety education sessions, and in SNA we have as you probably know, what we call the Keys to Excellence. It's the foundation to our education program – the four various areas – and last year the Annual National Conference Steering Committee decided that they'd like to take those four key areas, to make those four key areas the four tracks at ANC, so that when our folks went to Dallas last year for Annual National Conference, they had a track on communications and educational sessions that dealt directly with communications and marketing, that was one track. Nutrition's a track. We also have in there the other two tracks of organization and administration, so they get a whole flavor for the keys and they have opportunities within each one of those areas of various different types of education sessions. That's a challenge, but it's fun. We put that together. We start that immediately following the – for instance at ANC in Dallas in July we began planning for ANC 2011, and we're in that process now.

JB: And that'll be in Nashville?

DS: That will be in Nashville, yes, in July, and we're looking forward to that. It will be exciting, and once again we are offering the four key area tracks, and then concentrating too on what we call Leadership Skills, so that we can provide those to members as well. So we're looking forward to that.

JB: What is SNA's membership numbers now?

DS: They're around 53,000 people across the United States.

JB: And how many, roughly, make it to the conferences each year?

DS: Each year, and depending too on where it is, last year we had about 3,100 of our members that attended. We look forward to Nashville in July 2011, because that was our largest conference when we were there before, and we anticipate hopefully that we'll get a lot of people coming in for 2011. We keep our fingers crossed, because as you know too, there's a little bit of a wave gone across the country with use on travel, and restrictions, but we're hopeful that the program will be strong and there's an interest in Nashville, and people will still come.

JB: What would you say has been your most significant contribution to the field so far? I know you're still quite active.

DS: I think one of the things personally for me which was important was just the interest, and sustaining that interest in child nutrition programs. I mean, once you get into it you're hooked. And I know you've heard that a thousand times, but it's absolutely true. And I think for me it was a bit of a personal challenge too, because when I entered the field I really didn't know that at the time – I told you I was twenty-one years old and knew nothing – still many would say today I know nothing too, but – but I think getting into this field, nutrition, and combining my culinary background, it was a challenge to there were very few men, and I think what was challenging was to be able to go in and run a program, work with other people and learn from them, and keep that going. I think for me to show that it's a field that's not gender-specific. It's a wonderful opportunity for both men and women to enter. It's a challenging field. It depends upon the individual what you want to do. If you're comfortable doing very small programs that's wonderful. If you like the challenge of moving up and going into large programs, major cities, county districts, the opportunity is great. So to me, to sustain that, and to be professional, and to hopefully get that message out there, particularly for the future, it's a great opportunity, it's a wonderful field, it's a diversified field, so that just like I was very young back when I went to the Culinary Institute thinking I'd be a chef but I didn't end up being a chef, I think school nutrition's the same way. You don't have to be a director, you don't have to be a cook, and you don't have to be a manager. You can be a dietitian. You can deal with finances. You may love accounting and you may love working for a large program that does the accounting and the meal participation, so there's opportunities within this

field that are just wonderful. And I think to get that message out – if I can do that I'll be happy.

JB: Well I think you've kind of answered my next question, but maybe you can elaborate a little more. What advice would you give someone who is considering child nutrition as a profession today?

DS: Look at the total child nutrition picture, and as I just said, it is so diverse. It's a wonderful field to go into, but everybody is not suited to be a director. Everyone's not suited to be a dietitian. So take a look at the programs, take a look at the structure of child nutrition programs and decide for yourself where your particular interest is there. I particularly loved being a director because I like all facets of it as I said. I like the HR. People used to say, "You're crazy." I said, "Yea, I could be." But I even liked dealing with bargaining units. I love negotiations. It was just an interest of mine. And then I like working with people. I like the training facet. That's why I like what I do now, because it's an opportunity for professional development. That interested me, but I have a lot of colleagues that are dietitians and love that side of it too. They love the nutritional analysis and putting together menus and breaking them down, which is great. There's a need for that, particularly now with the onset of national nutrition standards. So that would be my advice – look at it – and you may not decide right away where your niche is, but you'll find it. And I would probably say you'll stay in this profession once you get into it. It's a great profession.

JB: Speaking of challenges in the present, what is SNA doing, or what is their take on the childhood obesity epidemic? How are you trying to address that?

DS: SNA is a very large advocacy group. Sometimes we don't think of that, but I think we are, and we're advocates in various areas of child nutrition. Obesity is a key issue for us. It's a key issue for any of us that even belong to SNA, because even on the local level we see it every day. Every single day you see it not only with children, but I think the thing that's concerning to me and particularly to a lot of people in SNA, you see it in the adults, and we've got to get that message out there. We have to start educating about

nutrition, right choices, the types of foods parents need to choose, not only for their children, but for themselves, and combine the physical activity in there too. And it's so important. I think in 2004 with the reauthorization and wellness policies we had a tremendous opportunity. And part of the discussion here this week has been 'Let's go back and look at those wellness policies'. There were some excellent policies put together in this country. Where are they now? Were they implemented? If not, why not? Because so much of what went into those wellness policies go right back into what we are facing to day, and that's obesity. And getting that message out there about the right choices on nutrition and physical activity – you can't just have one without the other – and then the other thing which is so important, which is the health of children – and when you're in public education, particularly in a large school district, but I know some colleagues who are in small, you see some children that have serious health problems. So the combination of wellness is so important. I hope we can carry that on. I hope we can take that and move it forward so we can get the country to understand just how important that is. And for the future of this country, because academic achievement is important, and if our children are not well-nourished, physically fit, and healthy, it does a disservice to this country.

JB: Exactly. Anything else you'd like to add?

DS: It's been a pleasure. I always enjoy coming to the Institute. You folks do a wonderful job. You've done a tremendous job on the Archives.

JB: Thank you. I appreciate it.

DS: And I think history is so important and I appreciate that you've involved me in this. Thank you so much.

JB: Thank you for sharing your time.

DS: You're welcome.