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## Debby Webster

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## Debby Webster Oral History

Debby Webster is currently the Nutrition Services Director for Rainier School Districts in Rainier, OR. She holds a bachelor's degree in Food Science and Nutrition from Central Washington University, and has had a passion to feed students her whole career. Debby has worked in all sizes of districts from large to small, and had the pleasure of working as a consultant for the state agency doing nutrition analysis for SMI reviews. Debby is a member of the Oregon USDA Foods and Procurement Advisory committee and is active in several professional organizations. She has been training School Nutrition Professionals for over 27 years, and provides training for the Institute of Child Nutrition.

JB: I'm Jeffrey Boyce and it is January 11, 2018. I'm here at the Institute of Child Nutrition on the campus of The University of Mississippi with Ms. Debby Webster. Welcome Debby, and thanks for taking the time to talk with me today.

DW: Of course.

JB: Can we begin by you telling me a little bit about yourself, where you were born, where you grew up?

DW: I'm from Longview, Washington; I was born and raised. I've been there pretty much my whole life, minus about five years when I went to college and worked in Vancouver, Washington, for a short time, but otherwise I've been there.

JB: What part of the state is that?

DW: It is in southwest Washington, just on the border with Oregon, so from my house to my work is about twenty minutes. We're an hour to Portland and two hours to Seattle.

JB: Oh my gosh – that's perfect.

DW: And its two hours to the beach and two hours to the mountains, so it's a nice place to be.

JB: What are your earliest recollections of child nutrition programs? Were there breakfast or lunch programs when you went to school?

DW: So there was a lunch program. We ate in our classrooms. They did the prepackaged containers in Longview School District, and they still do that today. And I remember them bringing the food to the classroom. We'd get our lunches. And then in middle school I would eat lunch all the time.

JB: You said it was prepackaged. So it was brought in from offsite? Was there a central kitchen or something?

DW: Yes. They have a huge central kitchen that has a conveyer. They put it all in little plastic containers and seal them, and they have foil on the other side for hot stuff. Each kitchen has an oven and a refrigerator so they can just put the stuff when it comes in from the central kitchen into the oven or the refrigerator. Then they take it to the classroom. The teachers take the count. When I was a kid I remember we would walk down the hall and get our lunches and then walk back to class, so there've been lots of different ways they've done it.

JB: Do you remember what some of your favorite menu items were?

DW: I would say – in high school we used to get the dinner rolls, and they would have butter on them. And it would just melt. Those were just twenty-five cents. You'd go get that dinner roll and you were good to go.

JB: Were they from scratch rolls?

DW: Of course. Of course they were.

JB: Nothing better than that smell.

DW: Oh my gosh, those were the best. And that was part of their a-la-carte, but they also had a really good sandwich bar and salad bar, and they alternated it every other day at the high school level. And that was always a good sandwich or a good salad bar, and burritos on the other side.

JB: Tell me about your educational background. Where did you go to school after high school?

DW: After high school I went to Central Washington University – well first I went to LCC for two years, which is our little community college – got my basics out of the way. I wanted to be a teacher my entire life, from my first grade until my junior year in college. So LCC I was getting those basics done, getting ready to be

an educator. Got to Central, I took my first couple of classes. I was going to be a math teacher by the time I was at that level. So I was taking my math classes, and my roommate and I sat down the first year I went to college and just looked through the catalog. And as we did that I saw nutrition, and I said, "You know, that sounds interesting." So I went and talked to the instructor and he's like, "Yea, this is what we're doing and this is what you can do with it – dietetics – it's a growing field. It'd be a great job to get into." I'm like, "Ok, that's what I want to do." So I went down to Math Ed and said, "Ok, I'm kind of on the fence. I've wanted to be a teacher my whole life." And he's like, "Well, if you don't know that this is what you want to do, I don't want you in my program."

JB: Wow.

DW: I'm like, "Alright. Then I'm walking back up to the Nutrition Department and I'm going to go toward dietetics." I changed my degree in my junior year of college and I went to nutrition and now I can do everything I love. I've loved education my whole life and now I get to educate, I get to do food, I get to do everything I love. I've always liked to cook and my grandmother, this is kind of off the topic, but she actually went to college back in the '50s to do home economics. And so I still have her Food for Fifty book from when she went to college when Washington State University was Washington College. So just knowing that we always come from a college background and she always taught me how to cook. So I always knew that's what I wanted to do. I always loved cooking and then I got to do both.

JB: That's great. So what degree did you end up with then?

DW: I have a degree in food science/nutrition with a focus on dietetics, with a minor in chemistry and mathematics.

JB: Have you had any mentors or people who helped kind of guide you as you've built your career in nutrition?

DW: When I first started I started with Inter-Pacific Management, which is like SODEXO, and I would say the directors that I got to know there were real strong mentors as I was learning the business. Dan Beardsley, who is now at state agency in Washington, he's the USDA Foods coordinator, he was the director in Kelso School District, which is the neighboring city to my town. And so I went to him

during Christmas break and said, “Hey, I’m interested in – ” he’s actually the one who kind of got me into school nutrition versus – I was still in college and I was just doing nutrition. He’s like, “Well, let me connect you with the boss.” And so basically I did an internship with them right out of college, and I had a job by March before leaving my degree. And I was like, “Ok, I can do this.” And when I first talked to my professors and said, “I want to go into school nutrition” they were like, “What’s that?”

JB: They had no clue.

DW: They were like, “Why do you want to go into school nutrition? That’s not what you should do with your degree.” And I’m like, “Well, it’s what I’m doing. It feels right.” And lo and behold, five or six years later they did a huge study out of Central Washington University on having recess before lunch. They’re the ones who helped do that study. And school nutrition was just what I wanted to do and I did it anyway.

JB: Does your school still do the recess before lunch?

DW: We do. We do do recess before lunch at our school. We started that about four years ago, and it’s really good for kids. I had a teacher ask, “Why do we do that?” Well, it gets the energy out before they come and eat, and then they’re hungry and they actually eat, instead of just wanting to run out and play.

JB: Tell me about the positions you’ve held.

DW: I did my internship in Kelso School District during the summer. I read every one of the manuals. That was just kind of the thing I did – Eligibility Management from front to back. I was told, “This is what you need to do” and I’m like, “Ok.” But I’m proud I did because I got all the knowledge. I can say, “I’ve read it all at least once.” And then from there I went to Evergreen School District and I worked for two years as an assistant director. And then from there I went to Kelso School District. I was there for five years before I had children and decided that I was going to be an at-home mom. But that didn’t last very long. I love being an at-home mom and I was able to be an at-home mom, because that’s when SMIs were being done at the time. The School Meals Initiative analyses were being done and Washington State decided to hire people to just do the nutritional analysis. And so they would send me all of the nutritional information, all of the

production records, and I would go through them, make sure were they meeting, what was the nutritional analysis looking like for each district. And I probably did eighty analyses over a five-year period. I really enjoyed that. I enjoyed it because I was able to do it from home, be with my kids. I'd have to send my little one to daycare once a week so I could actually work. I could work on it at other times too, so it was nice to be able to work from home. And I did that for five years, and about year four I had a friend who was in Rainier, and she called me to ask me to help her with some nutritional analysis, because that's what I'd been doing. And I said, "Sure, I can help you with that. No problem." And then she calls me like a week later. "I've been hired over at Hood River School District. Are you interested in going fulltime? I'm like, "No." For like two days I said, "I don't think I'm interested because I still want to be home." And then I thought, "But this opportunity isn't going to come again so close to home" and so I worked two days a week for a couple of years with Rainier School District, and then that has moved into four days a week. I now work thirty-two hours a week plus I do Clatskanie School District. So I do two different school districts. I'm also in charge of – I don't just do food service anymore – it's evolved into I do the homeless liaison -

JB: Now what is that?

DW: The homeless liaison, I work with the kids who are homeless in our district, the McKinney–Vento, so I just make sure that they have the things they need. So I help them get food stamps. I make sure they have clothing. I make sure if there's anything that they need. I make sure they get enrolled quickly and all that kind of stuff. I also work with the foster kids in our district, make sure they have transportation to school. That's another thing for the homeless kids, make sure they have transportation to and from school every day. And I'm also the wellness coordinator for our district, so I make sure that all of our staff is well, and make sure that our students are well, and we have different programs that we do with that as well.

JB: How do you deal with eligibility with the homeless or the foster children? How does that work?

DW: So as soon as we find out they're here, the homeless kiddos, as soon as I find out that they're homeless and I have a conversation with them and I can confirm that they are homeless, then I put their names on a list and we get them eligible.

For the foster kids, if we have documentation from the state we immediately get them started. If not, we ask the family to fill out an income application for those students, and then we get them qualified just by them checking the box. Each semester we get that as quickly as possible. As soon as they start they turn in their information and we get them going.

JB: Do you feel that your educational background prepared you for the position that you're doing now?

DW: I think so. The one thing my degree missed was the business side. Sometimes there are people that are really good at marketing and I didn't get that. So I sometimes feel that that marketing side could have been more, but otherwise I think it kind of all fit.

JB: Have they incorporated any business classes into the program since you were there, or do you know?

DW: I don't know. I couldn't answer that. I know we had to take a marketing class. There were a couple of business classes, but there needs to be more focus on it, but then I ended up going instead of more into dietetics I went more into the food service, and I think that might have been part of it as well. But that's probably my weakest side is business side.

JB: So you said you've worked in Oregon and Washington.

DW: Correct.

JB: Can you compare and contrast them? Is there anything special about one or both of them and how they do their child nutrition programs?

DW: You know, when I first started there was definitely a difference, like Washington interpreted one regulation at the elementary level as you could offer one ounce meat/meat alternative and it was ok, but they didn't really want the schools to do that. They wanted them to offer the two. And when I got to Oregon it was like, "Oh yea, you can offer one ounce meat/meat alternative. That's no problem." So for me, since I worked at the state agency, to actually listen to how they made their decisions, it was really an eye opener, because now I was able to say, "Ok, now I understand where they're coming from." And that's why when I'm teaching these classes it's like every state has a different interpretation. The

people in the positions can read the sentence and have three different interpretations. And so you have to know what your state wants you to know and everyone interprets things differently. In Washington they just tried to kind of avoid that one ounce. You had to get special permission to use the one ounce, or less than two ounces of meat/meat alternate, and in Oregon it was like common practice.

JB: How does that work when they're audited, if that's the right word?

DW: That's kind of where it came up. If you had spaghetti and it only came up to 1.75 you had to get special permission from the state prior to serving those meals in Washington, and in Oregon they didn't. There was a line in the regulation that you could do it. It was just a matter of how one state interpreted it versus another.

JB: What's a typical day like for you, or is there such an animal?

DW: I always make a list. That list is never done. It's always twenty other things. I'm not at my desk very often. People think I should always be sitting at my desk. I'm never at my desk. I'm usually out in the kitchen. I'm touching base with staff. I'm touching base with students. When commodities come in I put commodities away. With the two districts if I'm not in Rainier I'm in Clatskanie, so I don't know that you could say there's a typical day. I know when I'm working with my staff I say, "Ok, let's find out what you do for a day." I can't do that. But there are certain things that you do every day, but there is so much variance with our programs that as soon as someone walks in and asks a question you take care of them, because we're always customer service oriented, so we're making sure that whatever other people need comes first, and then I take care of the other stuff.

JB: How many staff do you have?

DW: In Rainier I have eight and I have eight in Clatskanie also.

JB: And now you still operate with the central kitchen you were talking about when you went to school?

DW: So that's a different school district. That's in Longview and they do still do that system. I have – in Rainier it's kind of unique – we are a K-12 on one campus, and so we have one kitchen. So all eight of those staff are in one kitchen and we



are serving from 10:45 in the morning until one, and every half an hour we have a group come through, and we serve our kindergarten/first grade, and then we serve our second and third graders, and then we serve our high school students. And then we have pre-school, and then we have our fourth and fifth graders, and then we have our middle schoolers. So, changing the line between, because we do the full line for our high school. It's not the same as elementary. It's very challenging. We go through our salad bars. We change the tongs out every meal. We make sure they're washed and ready to go. In between our elementary and our high school the girls are getting everything and putting it away, bringing out the high school stuff, and then our preschool comes in right there in the middle, while we're trying to get ready for our elementary again, and then we move it back. So it's a busy kitchen.

JB: So why does it not just follow like in chronological order? Why does the high school fall in the middle?

DW: Because high school has a different schedule than elementary. Elementary schools run in one classroom all day. They have specialists and stuff, but they are pretty much with one teacher. Our high school have periods, so they have first, second, third, and fourth, and so we have to fit their lunch in between times that fit their hour break times. And so if it's fifth period, the first half of the period our high school is at lunch, then they're all in class while we're feeding those other two groups, and then our middle school comes out the second half of that period. And so it's just kind of the way the schedules work.

JB: Are the different schedules staggered or do they all come to school at the same time?

DW: Everyone starts at the same time – within five minutes.

JB: So what I'm getting at, some of those elementary kids have to wait until 1PM to eat lunch?

DW: Our middle school kids eat at 1. They start at 12:45 they have lunch. And then we have elementary students that eat at 10:45, but then don't eat again until they go home. So that's a big timeframe too. Those little, tiny kids, they're going from 10:45 until 3, and then they ride the bus home for an hour. So that's a

long time, but we don't have any other options either, unless we move to eating in the classroom.

JB: You don't do any after-school snacks or anything?

DW: We do have an after-school snack program. For most of our kiddos at the elementary you have to be staying after school to utilize that, and we don't have enough free and reduced to do the fresh fruits and vegetable program. I've applied several times and kind of got to the point that once I realized how they actually give out that money for that grant based on the highest free and reduced, so I kind of have that call in and ok, how close am I and is it worth taking my time to fill it out? Because if I'm at fifty-two and we have people at seventy, there's a lot of people between fifty-two and seventy, so the chance of me getting that grant pretty much, no matter how nicely I write their grant, and say how much we need it, because we have kids eating at 10:45 and not getting home until three or four, there's no way we would ever qualify, which is sad, because I feel like we really need it. I know other people have poverty needs too, but we could really use it to help those kids out, and they would learn better. I think it should be everywhere, but ultimately I think all kids should eat free always.

JB: Universal feeding.

DW: Yes. I would love universal feeding. That's what we do in the summertime and it's great. I love summer for that reason. I love summer lunch program, because I don't care where you're from or who you are I'm going to feed you if you are under eighteen.

JB: Frank Harris was a big advocate for universal feeding. He was in Connecticut.

DW: I love universal feeding.

JB: What are some of the biggest challenges you face?

DW: I would say the biggest challenge is not being able to feed those kids that need it when they're on that borderline and you've got those kids that don't qualify for free, but they're charging a ton, and how do you – you want to feed them, but you can't do it out of your program and have the district add money to your program. You want to break even. So how do you feed these kids? That's probably my biggest challenge. That's probably the part that's the hardest for me,

is when you have these kids and they're struggling and need help, and you can only do so much.

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

DW: I started my career in 1994 when they did the first major change of child nutrition programs, when they did the nutrient analysis. And so you could do nutrient analysis or food based, and so you had those two programs and you were trying to muddle through all of that. I was the new kid on the block when that came, which was really fun. I felt bad for everybody because they were like, "This is so horrible." And I was like, "This isn't bad, no problem." So now fifteen years later and we do that change and I'm like, "Oh my gosh, I'm just dying." So all of these new interns are probably going, "Oh this is great. This is easy." But going from the nutrient standards back to meal pattern I think, when I worked at the state agency and then moved back into the school district, doing those nutrient analyses and doing the analysis of the schools that were on food based versus nutrient analysis based, I really think the food based is an easier route to go, because it doesn't take much to make a mistake in a recipe when you're entering nutrient data. So I think having a food based plan is a good idea. It makes it easier. So that would be the biggest change, is going from nutrient based standards back to food based – and technology. When I first started we had lunch cards, lunch tickets that the kids would bring through, and there was a little clicker, and you'd click red, blue, or pink, depending on what number was the first number on the card. All the cards were the same color. And so the cashier would know which one to push. So going from that point to being able to do our production records online. Where we have done manual production records for years, at least two of my menus are already completely online for production records and I'm fazing the rest of them in throughout the year. The ones that have been doing it this year, it was so nice when I was trying to do forecasting, because I was able to click one button and see what we served every day, where before you're digging through papers, so technology has really helped our programs as well.

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

DW: Being a mentor to other directors. I feel like I know the program pretty well. When I was doing all the nutrient analysis for the state, and that's all I did, really

got to know menu pattern really well, and so even with the changes it wasn't too hard to transition over. But I feel like I could be a mentor to other directors. I will go to their districts and I help them out, help teach them what needs to be done. I'm a resource that they can call and email. I have three or four people in the state that I just touch base with. "How is it going? Do you need anything?" During this training, Orientation to School Nutrition Management, I just love being able to share my knowledge with others and being able to work with them and help them out and give them tools to make things easier. So I think just being that mentor.

JB: Are you involved in your state nutrition association?

DW: I'm a member of the school nutrition association. I have not become an officer at this point. And that's been strategic. I have two children. They are fifteen and seventeen. I eventually want to do an office in SNA at the state level, but I want my kids to be graduated before I do that. I do enough traveling just in my position that I want to be able to dedicate to SNA and not have to worry about taking away from my children.

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

DW: I'll have to finish my story about the earthquake in '94 that we talked about earlier. I dove under my desk and I didn't hear anything. And my staff said, "We checked in on you." All of a sudden I heard the fire alarm go off and we went out, and the whole cord was swaying back and forth for ten minutes after I walked out.

JB: What was?

DW: We had a metal chain on the back loading dock and it just swung for like ten minutes after we came out of the office. And when we came out they were like, "We checked in on you, but you weren't there." That's because I was under my desk.

JB: This must have been right after you started working.

DW: It was when I was in Kelso, so it was somewhere between 1996 and 2001. A memorable person I worked with was Miss Molly. She just retired, but she'd been with Rainier School District for forty years. After being with the district for so long,

and all the changes with the new regulations and stuff, I know a lot of people who retired because of the regulations. They're like, "Ok, I'm done. Not doing it." And she just stuck it out. She just kept doing it. We'd get new ovens. She'd say, "I hate these things." And then she'd turn around and love them.

JB: What was her position?

DW: She was the head cook. She was my lead cook when she left. She started when her daughter was in school and she worked her way up, and she just has that, a fun lady to be around.

JB: What would you tell someone who was considering school nutrition as a profession today?

DW: It's the best job ever, because I love my job. If you love food service and you want to go in the food service direction, it's a good direction to go to, because you don't have to work weekends and evenings. I mean you do on occasion, but it's not every month you have to do month end from midnight to six o'clock in the morning. I worked at McDonalds to get myself through college, and I would watch the managers come in at midnight and work until – I was like, "Oh, I don't ever want to do that." I love working with the kids. I love seeing the kids. I love working with the families. And if somebody were to decide to do it, take it one step at a time, because it's so much information to learn. Take one step at a time and love what you do.

JB: And obviously you're freelancing too, because you're teaching here at the Institute today. Tell me about that. How long have you been a trainer for the Institute?

DW: I've been a trainer for a year. It started with I went to San Diego for a Team-up for Child Nutrition Programs, and my state agency recommended me and said I would be a good person to do a presentation, and so I did a presentation on meal planning. And then I got a call saying, "Do you want to come out to the Institute to be a lead mentor?" And I'm like, "Sure. That sounds like fun." So I came out, learned all about it, and then they sent me an email saying, "Are you interested in doing Orientation for Child Nutrition Management?" I really didn't know what I was saying yes to. I kind of stopped and went, "Do I really have time for that?" And I was like, "Well, it's an opportunity." And so I thought, "I'm going to do it."

I'm just going to do it, because if I say no then I've lost an opportunity." And so I said, "Yes." And I've just so glad I did. I love the traveling. I love the people. You meet so many people and hear so many stories about what people are doing. I take ideas back to my school all the time. And because I only work four days a week in the district technically I have Fridays off. That allows me to be here. Because I can basically do whatever I want on my Fridays and so I just trade days. So I will work several Fridays to make up for the four days I'm gone this week. But I love the people. I love the training. Everyone's always so positive. Even when you have to go in a training and they're there for technical assistance, by the time the week is over you feel like you just have this whole room of new friends, because it's such an intense week. And I've always liked training. That time that I was not working and I was consulting with the state – that was just a consulting position when I did the SMI review – I would do training. I went through a training program with them as well, and so I would do training in Washington on occasion. I did Nutrition 101, and I've done Serve Safe. So I did both of those classes just in the local area. It's fun. I love sharing and teaching and all of that. It just makes it fun.

On the contribution part too, we have a school garden. I wanted to mention that.

JB: Sure, go ahead.

DW: About four or five years ago we had a PEP grant.

JB: Now what's a PEP grant?

DW: PEP grant is a physical education grant, and so it was increasing physical education within our school district. And we got a weight room out of it, and all kinds of studies, and then I got an email saying they have \$15,000 and these are the topics we can get it for. And it was me and the other PE teacher and they asked if we would be interested in this money. And I said, "Well of course. Who says no to that?" And part of it was school gardens and school garden education, and so I put in to get a greenhouse. We ended up with a greenhouse. So my Ag teacher will plant fruits and vegetables for us that we get to use in our kitchen, and we have a farm to school program. Our state has done legislation, so we have mandate to buy local foods every year. And at the time we had the PEP grant I also had a farm to school grant. The beginning of our farm to school legislation was it was all competitive, and so for my food and my education I had to write

grants to get it. And so we did the greenhouse, we took kids out to learn, we do Kids in the Kitchen cooking classes after school. And my biggest dream was to have a group of high school students teach elementary students, and I get to do that next month. This was my dream like five years ago. So I have all the materials. My group of about twelve after-school kids have put together six weeks' worth of lessons and we're going to have fourth, fifth, and sixth graders come in, and my high school students are going to teach them about nutrition. And we're going to do cooking and physical activity. And we only have an hour so it's hard to get a lot in in an hour, but they're going to do all those activities. And they're going to do it and kind of design their own programs given the materials. It's just been a lot of fun being able to use grant money to educate our kids.

JB: What a great idea.

DW: Yes, it's been fun, a lot of fun.

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

DW: Thank you so much.