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Joan Williams Oral History

Joan Williams has many years of experience in school nutrition and education. She holds a Bachelor's degree in education from Georgia Southern College, a Master's in education from Georgia College, and an Education Specialist degree from the University of Georgia. After teaching home economics for seven years, Joan served for 27 years as the school nutrition director for Carroll County Schools, a 15,000-student district in Georgia. Joan helped build an effective team that received many awards for increased participation and innovation. She received the USDA Best Practices Award for the Southeast Region twice, was recognized by the state of Georgia for high employee retention, and mentored future leaders within her program and region. Joan has been actively involved with the School Nutrition Association in various capacities at the state and national levels including serving as a trainer, conference presenter, board member, and state president. Joan is a consultant trainer for the Institute of Child Nutrition.

AH: I'm Annette Bomar Hopgood, and I was the state agency director in Georgia from 1979-2006, and we're here today in Savannah, Georgia, at the Georgia School Nutrition Association Conference, and we're going to be interviewing some of the people that had significant roles in the Georgia School Nutrition Program. I have Joan Williams with me today. Joan, tell us a little bit about yourself and where you grew up, and your earliest recollections with school nutrition.

JW: Ok. I was born in Buford, Georgia but have lived in Louisville, KY, Covington, GA and Milledgeville, GA where I graduated high school. Throughout my school years, I always ate school lunch because my mother believed it was necessary to my being able to do well in school. I was really grounded by my parents toward a positive attitude supporting the school meal program and the employees who

prepared the meals. I remember the great hot rolls, the vegetables, and the milk in the little glass bottle which was fascinating to a little elementary girl. Our teacher always sat at our table and ate lunch and encouraged us to clean our plates. When I entered the 9th grade at Baldwin High School in Milledgeville, I recall sitting at wooden tables with old wooden chairs. We only had one choice and it was served on round plates. I also remember being impressed seeing a woman neatly dressed and looking very professional who would visit the kitchen staff. Later on, I found out that she was the director and her name is Sarah Register, who is a revered leader in the Georgia School Nutrition Association.

Due to the influence of my home economics teacher, I decided that I wanted to teach that as well and went to Georgia Southern College in Statesboro, GA in 1972. After graduating in 1976, I interviewed at Mt. Zion High School in Carrollton, GA for a teaching position. While getting a tour of the antiquated room with its treadle sewing machines and meagerly furnished kitchens, I saw the challenge and the opportunity to rebuild the program. The principal informed me that the high school would be moving into a new building in a year and I would be able to furnish it like I wanted. Loving a challenge like I do, I immediately said 'yes' and moved to Carroll County without knowing a soul.

After 7 years at Mt. Zion, I was ready for something a little different. I needed another challenge. One day my principal returned from a county-wide principals' meeting and called me to his office. He informed me that the principals had recommended to the superintendent that a school nutrition director be hired and he thought I should apply. What did I know about school lunch except that I enjoyed eating it? What about all the managers and staff who were old enough to be my mother or grandmother? Would they even listen to a 29 year old as their director? I gathered more information and decided to apply. I was hired and began in August 1983.

AH: This is the first director that they have had?

JW: First director in Carroll County. At that point in time the principals were approving all of the free and reduced applications. They had set the pay scale for their employees, and at different schools employees made different rates of pay, depending upon how profitable or financially stable that school nutrition program would be. The principals had discovered that employees in one part of the county

were making more money an hour than someone else in another part of the county. The system also received a state review(CRE) that year, and the reviewers discovered that schools were being charged different prices for the same items as salesmen called on each individual school which were 16 at that time. The menu quality wasn't consistent throughout the county, and the principals had to deal with all of the day-to-day operations of a school nutrition program. So, that was the reason why they requested that a school nutrition director be hired. It was also recommended by the state reviewers in their report.

AH: This was early '80s?

JW: This was early 1983 when the principals made their recommendation to the superintendent. I had already been asked to teach the food preparation class that summer to managers which consisted of 60 hours of class over a 2 week period. I loved the ladies and the challenge and haven't looked back with any regret on my decision. It fueled my desire of building something from the ground up again. Although I was young and had 2 pre-school children, the managers welcomed me with open arms and taught me a lot about operating the program. I also received great mentorship from you(Annette Bomar Hopgood) during my early years, and one of the best bits of advice that you gave us was the following tidbit. When you go into a new position, spend time building relationships and understand their challenges. Don't make a lot of changes your first year. Change what is absolutely necessary. Let them get to know you first and you can bring them along with you as you make changes. I did that and it paid great dividends. We had a wonderful working relationship!!

AH: So you lasted a few years.

JW: Twenty-seven years! I enjoyed every day and looked forward to going to work.

AH: You were hired also to centralize some of those functions that you mentioned.

JW: Yes. As you know, the State Department gave incentive salary grants to encourage school systems to hire a director and centralize many of the functions. Each manager had to make her own menu, and salesmen from all the companies would call on each school. Managers had to manually record all the foods they served in a big Yellow Book and had to write out their monthly inventory with all the foods/prices. Meal counts were derived by checking off a hand-written roster or clicking a multi-counter. Teachers collected lunch money and sent it to the school secretary who made the deposits. Managers had to keep a purchase journal and a payroll ledger as well as submit tax forms on their employees to the IRS. The principal set the pay rate and hours for the food service staff. Managers would submit all their hand-written paperwork to the system food service bookkeeper, Caroline Duncan, who would write up their state reports and mail them. There were no bids on anything but milk and small equipment. The principals would approve all the applications. They would do all the hiring of their employees and any kind of disciplinary action they would have to take. I even had some principals who loved to go and find surplus equipment and surplus food, and they would go out and get very involved in trying to find the best deal.

Within the first three years of my being hired, we were required to centralize many of the functions and we chose the menu management and accounting to do first. In order to centralize accounting, we had to purchase computers at the office and select a software system. This was new for all of us and we're talking 1985-1986. Computers were not as prevalent then as they are today and of course, they were only 2 companies that really had software appropriate to school nutrition. This move also meant that we needed to hire another person in our office to do the accounting and an elementary manager (Marion Henderson) was selected. We had to interview local banks and get proposals from them about being able to service all 16 schools in all areas of the large county. Only one had branches convenient to all our schools so they were selected. Next, we had to work with principals to write us a check clearing their lunch bank account to be deposited into the centralized bank account. Most cooperated well but there were a few who were hesitant about signing over 'their' money. I reassured them that they would still be a school entity with their own bank balance in our computer system so they could see what their school had. I gave

monthly reports to principals and met with them a lot to build a good solid relationship of trust.

AH: So they still felt like they were involved and didn't lose their ownership as a result of your being there.

JW: Right. They received their own school reports so they could see how much money their school actually had made and how they were doing. I kept in touch with the principals and managers and was a hands-on kind of director. I worked out in the schools the first few years, and my goal was to go and work in the kitchen, on the line or in the back at all of the schools so that I could see what it was like to be in a school kitchen. That was great advice that you (Annette) had given us as well, because I didn't feel that at twenty-nine years old, I could come in and tell someone how to do a program if I didn't know what they were doing.

AH: If they had been doing it for fifteen or twenty years and were thirty years older than you.

JW: Right. So I visited all the schools unannounced, put on a hairnet and an apron, and asked the manager to put me to work with an employee. I asked questions about what they were doing and also about their family and why they chose to work in the school. I also gained first-hand knowledge about some of the equipment or training they could use to make their jobs better. I remember that one manager had a problem with an employee who overcooked broccoli until it was an ugly green color. After a few times of working with her, I asked her if we could try it another way and she agreed. This time, the broccoli was the color it was supposed to be and the employee learned a new technique in a non-threatening manner. When I was able to take care of a problem an employee told me about or provide something they needed, the employees began to trust me and see that I was there to help them and not to 'lord' my title/position over them. I never wanted them to fear me. I wanted to earn their respect.

In order to get the teachers' support, I formed a Teacher Advisory Council composed of a teacher from every school. We met quarterly so that we could get input from them on what they saw that was needed. It also gave me a chance to educate them on our program and policies and what our goals were.

AH: That was very ahead of your time probably to be doing that.

JW: Right. I would take their concerns or suggestions back to the managers and we would do our best to implement their ideas or to address their concerns. During this time, we also had to centralize our menus and I had observed where sometimes menus were not complete enough and needed more variety. Knowing that managers are emotionally tied to their menus, I formed committees of managers based upon their school age groups in order to get their input and buy-in. At the time, we had sixteen schools: five high schools, 11 elementary schools, and no middle schools. There were only 4 schools with breakfast programs.

AH: That was a large school district to have been un-centralized.

JW: Yes, it was. In our initial committee meetings, the managers brought their favorite student menus and we worked together to build a list of suggested menus that we could all agree on and that met the requirements. We field tested these menus in the spring of 1984 and then worked the following year to develop more of a true centralized menu. In the years following until I retired in 2010, it evolved into being three-week cycles with an increase in the choices available. We offered salad bars and then themed salad plates, choices on all food components on the lines, and creative menus such as fruit and yogurt plates, Munchable plates(to compete with the Lunchables at the grocery stores), and peanut butter bag lunches. I always wanted to introduce something new each year to keep our menus fresh and inviting.

AH: You were there for how many years in Carroll County as director?

JW: Twenty-seven.

AH: Twenty-seven years. You had to see a lot of program changes from the time that you were that new twenty-nine-year-old director. What were the things that were most memorable to you to try to change within the program area?

JW: I think one of the biggest changes that I saw in the program area would be going to computers with everything, and seeing the skill level of the managers' increase. Although I had one manager to quit when we changed to computers, the others embraced it no matter their age. I thought that the ones in their sixties and maybe early seventies would have a challenge but they learned quickly and were so proud of themselves for doing so! We began our transition to technology slowly gradually adding another component beginning with programmable cash registers then to point of sale computers. Through the years, we added food orders and inventory, menu management records, bids, on-line USDA foods ordering, nutritional analysis, recipe sizing, and student payment accounts. One of the most thrilling components that I liked about the job was being able to train the employees and the managers, and I did all the training back then. I taught every SL class or School Lunch class.

AH: I remember when I first started working in Douglas County, that would have been in '74, '75 initially, we actually had to send in two weeks of menus to the State Department of Education for them to do what was called a lunch analysis, if you remember doing a manual lunch analysis as part of your review, and so the little area consultants in the State Department of Education were supposed to sit down and for 1,800 schools analyze two weeks of menus. I don't know if they ever got that accomplished. They may still be working on those somewhere up in Heaven.

AH: Explain to me what an SL class is in Georgia.

JW: Ok. SL class, School Lunch class, is the designation of the curriculum that we used to train our employees. These classes were developed by the early state leaders in the Georgia Department of Education such as Dr. Josephine Martin. She and her counterparts realized that managers needed certain courses in order to do their jobs and identified 150 hours of instruction required by managers in order to be a classified manager in Georgia. The first was SL1, Foundations of School Lunch, and the others were Menu Management, Nutrition, and Food Preparation. After completing these core courses, the managers were required to take an advanced 30 hour course once every 3 years that could range from Advanced Nutrition, Purchasing, Leadership, Human Resources, or a locally-developed course. The designation has now changed to TID courses(Training-in-Depth). I enjoyed teaching all the different classes to my employees and designing training to meet their needs. I taught all of the courses until I hired a supervising manager a few years ago who shared the teaching load with me.

AH: Now is she the one that replaced you when you retired?

JW: Yes she did, and that's one of the things that I'm most proud of, is the fact that I was able to mentor someone who had the same vision and love of the program and people that I did. She has been able to assume the director's job with great ease and is taking the program to new heights.

AH: You've received a lot of recognition for different things that you've done throughout your career. Tell me about the ones that you're most proud of.

JW: I think one of the ones was being selected by The National Food Service Management Institute back in 2004 as one of the systems with the highest employee retention at the time. I believe that we had retained 90% of our employees over a five-year period. When I left in 2010, it was still about the same rate so I'm proud that we have an environment where our employees are satisfied.

AH: What do you attribute that to Joan?

JW: I attribute it to building relationships with people and being real with them and listening to their needs and making it a program that they are proud of. I've always felt like that if you take care of your staff, they will take care of the students. And so you've first of all got to empower your staff to be able to make decisions and feel proud, and appreciate, and appreciate, and appreciate your people. I started an Employee Recognition Banquet my first year as director, and we went to the local Western Steer restaurant. I invited principals to come and to pay for their employees' meal, and they all did. This has become an annual tradition and principals and assistant principals come to the banquet to honor their employees. One of the unusual awards that we began is the Friend of Child Nutrition Award whereby each school selects someone that's not a school nutrition employee but has gone above and beyond to give support to the program.

AH: That's great.

JW: Yes, they are recognized at the banquet. We also feature local talent whether it's one of our own employees telling jokes or singing or a student group performing for us. We give out door-prizes and usually have a table decorating contest among schools. Our Board members participate and are usually the judges. We recognize employees with years of service, retirement, safety records, and GED completion to name a few. We just try to find different ways to recognize individuals and schools for their achievements.

So, I think that the reason for our high employee retention is that we have created a culture of caring for and about people. I know all of my employees' names and something about their families. When I'm in the schools, I speak to each one by name and thank them for the delicious meals. Our managers show they care about their employees and alert us to anyone facing a crisis that may need further help or resources. Our school nutrition family goes to work to help where we can. So, it's not me. It's the team that together has created the atmosphere and environment of sincere appreciation and care. In addition, our employees are provided the training needed and the resources to do their jobs. The Association is a big help, and for those of y'all who may be watching this

video in years to come, if you don't support the School Nutrition Association then you're missing a big link. It provides such great networking and training opportunities that make a director's job easier!

AH: And you've had roles at both the state level and the national level.

JW: Yes. I was state president of Georgia School Nutrition Association in 2005-06. I'm proud that I was able to work with Annette to produce the first history DVD because I love history very much and wanted to document what we've done in Georgia. Then I was elected to be the Southeast Regional Director on the School Nutrition Association Board and served there from 2007 to 2009. During my last year on the Board, I was Chair of the Regional Directors and I'm very proud that I was able to gain the larger view of the work of the Association from the national perspective. I am most humbled by the fact that my staff nominated me for the 2003 Outstanding Director of the Year/Josephine Martin Award of Excellence and I was selected as that year's winner. It is something I treasure because it originated from my staff.

AH: You also earned numerous Best Practice Awards from the regional USDA office for your program.

JW: Right. That was something that I was very proud of for our community as a whole. When our county passed the Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax(SPLOST) a few years ago, I realized that all the high schools were scheduled to be renovated within the next 5 years. It was an opportune moment, I felt, to really look at how we structure the cafeterias instead of building them back the way they were in the 60's and 70's. I wanted to do something different that would attract more students and I realized that students were going to food courts in their spare time and on the weekends for food, and they're used to upscale, attractive environments. I wanted to have food court atmospheres in my high schools. Although my Board of Education and Superintendent liked the idea, they told me that they could not give me any more money than what was allocated for traditional cafeterias. If I wanted it, I would have to provide the

money. Well, my challenge hat came on and I decided to develop a partnership giving plan whereby businesses and community groups could participate in their community's cafeteria renovation. There were 3 levels: Gold(\$10000 or more), Silver(\$5000 or more), and Bronze(\$1000) levels. At each level, there was something the partner would get in the cafeteria such as plague recognition or the business name by some artwork.

AH: And I've seen those plaques in your beautiful cafeteria.

JW: Yes. I first began by visiting the bank president where we had our school nutrition account for all our schools. He loved the plan and always liked helping the schools so he gave me \$20,000 for 2 schools. I contacted alumni in the schools. I visited businesses and I went out and drummed up support. We didn't get all the money to pay for it but we used school nutrition funds for the remainder. Oh, I also involved the principals and required that they contribute some money or a service-in-kind such as painting the cafeteria.

AH: How much did you solicit from all of your partners – do you remember?

JW: Our total for five schools – it was probably \$70,000 - \$80,000 total. I had one alumni to give me \$10,000 because he loved that school and the program there. And then I had another alumni give me \$5,000 in honor of his manager, Evelyn Butler. Mrs. Butler made such an impression on his life that he wanted to honor her in this way.

AH: How about that?

JW: Now, we have attractive food courts with fiberglass booths, various sized tables and chairs, attractive signage and artwork. The cafeteria is an inviting place to be!

AH: They're very practical also.

JW: Yes, they are. Although we couldn't do all that we wanted due to the money constraints, the cafeterias look upscale. We did simple things such as different colors of floor tile or simple things like ceiling art. It achieved our goal of increased participation and that is the reason we won the Best Practices Award for the Southeast Region in 2006. The lunch participation in all five high schools increased because of these innovative practices. My lunch participation ranges from 70% to 80% in high schools, and the total system-wide participation for all schools was 84%. The highest participation at lunch is in the middle schools and it's around 93%.

AH: You probably have one of the highest, if not the highest levels of participation in the State of Georgia, and one thing we failed to state is Carroll County is rural and that it's about fifty miles west of Atlanta. However, it's a college town also –

JW: Right.

AH: - with West Georgia College there, so you do have a unique situation, being able to reach your children and their expectations, again because it being a college town it makes it a little bit different.

JW: And I think too that we have great support from our central office, and our superintendent and our assistant superintendent, and our board, and then our principals. Again, you've got to build those relationships with the principals to let them know what you're doing. When they come to the banquet and they see how well their employees are recognized and what quality programs we have they're not quite so lenient to then give in to all the different fundraisers. They really do try to support the school lunch program.

AH: Did you have to deal with competitive food sales and issues of that sort?

JW: We still have that, yes. That's still a challenge.

AH: But you still have that high level of participation.

JW: Right.

AH: Because your programs are desirable.

JW: Right. We do a lot of choices. We try to appeal to the students. One of the things we did back in the mid-90s with the Lunchables that were so popular in the grocery store, we did our own called the Munchables, and we made our own little ham and cheese rollup and a cookie and fruits and veggies in a clear plastic tray. And we still do variations of that today and they're still very popular with the students. We have a pretzel and cheese Munchable lunch that consists of a pretzel with a cheese cup. We did have salad bars, and then eventually we removed these due to health reasons and now offer beautiful pre-plated salads such as Southwestern Charbroiled Chicken Salad and Asian Chicken Salad to name a few.

AH: I want to commend you for the student participation. That's always been such a focus in Georgia, and one of the things now that I think the schools are faced with the new reauthorization bill is increasing sale prices for paying students to the same amount that they get to cover their costs, and one of the things that I think is unique in Georgia, which should influence it somehow, I don't know how, is state money that y'all have been getting over the years is specifically targeted to keep the sale price low to paying children, so that paying children would stay in the program, and that it wouldn't become a welfare program sitting in the middle of the day with all of the free and reduced. But y'all have lost a lot of state money this year. You've left the county, but you know that they have lost a lot of state money this year also. Tell me, looking back, you've talked about you really

enjoyed challenges, and starting with nothing, can you think of some other things that you even felt overwhelmed in trying to accomplish?

JW: There are so many hats that a director has to wear. Early on, in 1983 going forward, I was able to be out in the schools a lot more. But I found that as you add more people to your central office staff, as you know, with more hats being required of us as directors, it took away time from being in the schools as much, and I think that was an overwhelming task. I think all of us directors are multi-taskers, and you have to be to juggle all the parts of the job. That's challenging and that's positive, but sometimes you feel like you're spinning your wheels and you are not making as much progress as you'd like to.

AH: There are not enough resources to accomplish all the things that you want to.

JW: Of course not. I've told Bridgett, who replaced me, "You're never going to get it all done." So you just have to prioritize and every day work toward it.

AH: You were lucky that you were able to bring her in and that she can understand your working philosophy, and hopefully she likes working with tasks that never get done.

JW: Yes. She was a food assistant twenty-something years ago in the kitchen, and then was promoted to being a manager. When I was able to hire a supervising manager, she got the job because of her skills and her ability to work well with people. After working with me for a few years, she came to me and said "I want to be a director one day." I told her "Great. I'll help you do that." I gave her more duties each year and exposed her to various responsibilities for the experience. Her goal also meant that she had to go to college for the first time and get her degree. She graduated in 2010 and was hired for my position. I am very proud of her and so blessed that she is able to build on the foundation we developed. It has been a seamless transition and the whole experience has been very rewarding to know your work will carry on.

AH: Well, we've covered a lot of territory, but how would you entice a new person – I know that you've retired and a lot of the directors that came in under the Supervisory Assistance Incentive Program under the Georgia Department of Education are about to retire and there are going to be a lot of vacancies in the state, which is problematic and concerns a lot of us – if you were trying to recruit a food service director for another district, or to come into the state, what would you tell them Joan?

JW: I would tell them that it was the best career that they will ever have. It's very challenging. If they like challenges, if they like working with people you couldn't have chosen a better career. The support you get from your peers, I think, is just not comparable to any other profession, because you can come to any conference, and call any director within the state with a problem that you've got, and they'll be able to help you, or just listen to you. And I just think the camaraderie, the professionalism – Georgia is a premier child nutrition program state – that you have, it's just not found in other professions. I would tell them that this job would be something very rewarding. I would recommend the career again. I left it still loving it. I loved going to work every day. I loved what I did, loved people, so I think if you come in with first of all a love for other people, and a love for helping people to become better, and also not be tied down to the bottom line – that's important – for you've got to build your people first in order to improve the bottom line. If you go about it backwards you're not going to improve your bottom line, and you're going to constantly be replacing your people. I think sometimes new people come into the program with too much of a hardness approach and they forget that you first have to do it with people skills first and then work on the bottom line or the improvements necessary. I left my program in great financial shape and it's because of the dedication and commitment of the people.

AH: I'm sure that they appreciated you as much as you appreciated the people in Carroll County. Thank you for the interview Joan.

JW: Thank you.

