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4-15-2011

## Jimmie Barnett

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Institute of Child Nutrition

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### Recommended Citation

Barnett, Jimmie and Institute of Child Nutrition, "Jimmie Barnett" (2011). *Oral History Project (all interviews)*. 151.

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## Jimmie Barnett Oral History

Jimmie Barnett is from the state of Georgia, where she worked in school nutrition with the Muscogee County School District for many years. She holds a Bachelor's degree in Home Economics, a Master's degree in Education, and a Specialist of Education in School Nutrition, all from the University of Georgia. Jimmie began her career as a home economics teacher. In 1992 she was appointed as the Assistant Director of School Nutrition for the Muscogee County School District and later became the School Nutrition Director. She is a member of the School Nutrition Association and has served in leadership roles at both the state and national levels. In 2007 Jimmie received the Thelma Flanagan Gold Award of Service. She is ServSafe certified and has been a ServSafe instructor. Jimmie currently serves as 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. Today I am interviewing Jimmie Barnett. Jimmie, tell me a little bit about yourself and where you grew up.

JB: I grew up in Atlanta, Georgia. I went to Frederick Douglas High School. I am the daughter of Jordan Coleman. He was the city editor of the Atlanta Daily World, and my mother was a bookkeeper.

AH: I did not know that about your dad.

JB: He was the city editor there and he retired there. He was quite famous in Atlanta. I had two sisters and a brother, and we didn't have a lot, but our parents

had real high expectations of us. They wanted us to do something with our lives. My father had fought a lot to have the same rights as everybody else and -

AH: He wanted you to exercise those.

JB: That's right. Failure was not an option in my family. We all went to college.

AH: Is your dad still alive?

JB: No, he died about three years ago.

AH: I bet he was so proud of you -

JB: He was.

AH: - for what you have been able to accomplish, because you've so many great things here in the state, both with the program and with the state association. I want to ask you first what's your earliest recollection of school nutrition? What was it like for you as a child?

JB: I really have a good memory of the school nutrition program early and the reason why is because I went to a Catholic school, and I was highly allergic to seafood. Well, the school food service program there had to prepare fish every Friday because we were Catholic, and being allergic to seafood I had to be isolated the whole day, because the smell went through the school and I was severely allergic to it. So I stayed in this little room all day long, and the school nutrition staff would prepare my lunch and bring it down to me, and they set up the little table for me with a mat and special napkin and fork and spoon and

everything, and I just got royal treatment. Everybody thought it was so awful that I couldn't -

AH: Any you were sitting there loving it!

JB: I was thinking 'I'm the queen'. But they were very good to me and I have always had a love for that staff because I just felt that they realized how important it was that I not get that seafood and get sick.

AH: Did you ever imagine as a little child like that that you'd be engaged in school nutrition to the degree that you have been?

JB: I never did, I never did. I have lots of good memories of good smells and the smell of rolls going through the school, and not being able to wait all day long until it was time to eat.

AH: Tell us a little bit about your education background so people will know, and also about the positions that you've worked in throughout your career.

JB: I went to the University of Georgia in Athens, Georgia, and I did my undergraduate work there. I started off actually in Clothing and Textiles, and when I finished my studies I had not taken all of my electives, so I decided to go into Home Economics Education. And from that – there's a section of course in Food and Nutrition, and I got really interested a little bit more in food than I did in clothing. So when I came out I started teaching Home Economics - they call it Consumer Sciences now – but I started teaching Home Economics and I taught for maybe twelve years. Then the position came open for the school nutrition assistant director. Well, things were different then.

AH: Now this was where, where in Georgia?

JB: This was in Columbus, Georgia, and at that time the Home Economics teachers fell under the leadership of the school nutrition director in our county.

AH: Oh really? I didn't realize that.

JB: Our school nutrition director was also the supervisor over Home Economics teachers, so Ms Catherine Cary was our director, and she was my supervisor while I was a Home Economics teacher.

AH: Is Catherine still alive?

JB: She's still living.

AH: We need to interview her.

JB: She's wonderful. She's Catherine Knopf now. And so when the position came open for an assistant director, of course she recommended that I apply for it and I did and I got the job, and the rest is history. It was just a perfect match.

AH: So she was your mentor then I am assuming.

JB: Yes, she was.

AH: And very influential in everything that you've been able to accomplish.

JB: Yes, she was.

AH: Tell me some of the biggest challenges that you faced when you were working as - well you didn't end up just as assistant director in Muscogee, you went further.

JB: That's right. I ended up taking the position as director my last few years there, and I faced lots of challenges but I guess the biggest challenge I faced was getting support from maybe the administration, maybe from the teachers, maybe from the community, for so many things that I wanted us to do. I dream big – I dream big, and I guess I had to realize there were a lot of barriers in the way. But that doesn't of course stop you from trying to accomplish your goals. I think most of my biggest challenges were from outside of the program, not inside of the program. I found that inside of the program people wanted to grow. They wanted to develop. They wanted to have pride in their positions in the school nutrition program. They just needed voices for some of the things they wanted to do and I felt that my role was to be their voice, and I tried to speak very loudly, but I was not always heard.

AH: Do you think there was anything in particular that you could have done differently in your job to have gotten more support, because I can't imagine people not supporting things that you would initiate, because you're so very competent in how you have proceeded in everything I have ever seen you do?

JB: Well, a lot of times I think there was a lack of understanding of our program. Things have changed a little bit today. People look on us as being more professional than they considered us before. And at one time we were just considered the feeding place. You just feed the children and be quiet and we'll take care of other things. So I think getting people to understand more about our program early on, before I tried to initiate some of the things that I wanted to do would have helped me a lot. I know that now, and so I try to help those who are

in those leadership roles know that you have to work with your administrators. You have to work with your teachers. You have to have them on your side. And getting them on your side, and the parents on your side, then you can move a mountain when you've got everybody on your side.

AH: Right, all your advocates. Well I think we all, professionals within child nutrition, think that everybody else understands the program and has the same level of appreciation as we do, and I asked you that because I found that as a barrier myself for so many things that I would like to have accomplished in my career. It's just that how do you rally all those people around you, and it's very hard to do, and very resource intensive to do.

JB: Well once they realize without us school cannot go on it sets off a little light bulb in their head. Yes, if the school nutrition staff doesn't show today we might not be able to have school, because children can't learn without being well-nourished. It's such an important part - in fact it's such an important part in everything that you do.

AH: I think so many of us are old classroom teachers, where we even feel that more strongly because we've been there and have seen that. You've been very active in the Georgia School Nutrition Association. You were president when?

JB: I was president in 2006-2007.

AH: Not too long ago – tell me about your experiences there. I know many of the roles that you played. What kind of support did you get from the association in helping you to accomplish things in your job?

JB: The association has been the best thing that has happened to me in my life. I have grown more as a person both professionally and spiritually and in every way

because of this association. I was very content with what I was doing at home on the local level. I mean I was always one who motivates others, but once I got involved in the association I realized that I could be a voice for more people. I have been places I never would have gone in my life had it not been for the association, and met people I never would have met. I have just burst out of my shell. I have just blossomed so much because of the association. I'm still very anxious about things that I do, but I'm not afraid. I'm not afraid to speak in front of people. I'm not afraid to go places and do things. The second time in my life that I flew on an airplane was through the association. Until I got involved I'd never been on an airplane but once in my life and I was terrified. And after I got involved with the association, oh, I have frequent flier miles now. I mean I have just grown where I can go and do anything on my own.

But I guess the biggest thing that I've got out of it is being able to see what I've been able to do for other people. I mean there are so many gifted people in our program that have skills that will never be recognized if somebody doesn't pull them out of them, and I was in a position where I was able to help people shine, and help people come out of their shells and blossom by telling my story and how the association helped me I was able to help them. I've been working with Leadership Academy the last two years, and that's just an awesome program that the association has. And to see people come in afraid to even say their name in front of the class, and then leave being able to stand at a podium and conduct a meeting after a year being involved in that academy – that's one of the most rewarding things I could ever feel from being involved.

AH: I think that's such a great thing that the state association has done – providing opportunities for those individuals, and I know some of the programs that Georgia Power Company was sponsoring, the class this year, the one that's going on here at the conference, so I want to commend you for that effort. And no one would ever know that you had a shell.

JB: Oh, I had one. Thank you.



AH: I was always impressed with not just your presence, but when you worked so very hard on membership within the state organization.

JB: I was Membership Chair for several years and I was always trying to get people to join. I mean it's just a fun and exciting role to play as a member of the Executive Board just to get people to join. And once I became president and I was able to go around the state I still carried that same encouragement with me, and I was able to say, not just because I'm president, but you can do this, you can get involved. I could tell my story statewide and get people more involved.

AH: You've been such a role model for so many people. I know that's a fact. And you've also been involved at the national level.

JB: Yes. I was on the membership committee on the national level and so I had a little hand in making some decisions about what to do to increase membership nationally. I was able to share lots of things that we're doing in the State of Georgia with other states to get them excited and get them involved about membership.

AH: I think your reputation about membership preceded you because you can get people so enthused. You know that level of enthusiasm that Mary Nix would describe as contagious I think.

JB: I get excited about the association. I love the association. I know what it's done for me and I feel sometimes if I could just get people to stick their foot in the door, just to try it. Once you get involved it gets in your blood and you'll love it. I know if I could just bring people to know it that they would grow to love it.

AH: I have a special affinity for your son, who provided some of the music at one of my retirement sessions. Tell me a little bit about where he is now and what he's doing.

JB: Well, my son youngest son, Norman Barnett had actually finished law school, he's passed the bar, he's working at a firm up in Atlanta, and he is just such a joy. We're so proud of him. I have two sons, and my other son is doing just as well. Norman is still playing the piano. He's in a jazz band. He loves music. Music is his first love, but we are so very proud of him.

AH: So very talented, so very, very talented. Are there any stories or things that you would like to just share about the program and your experiences that we've not covered?

JB: Well you know, we've talked a lot about how we've helped the staff members and the members at the association, but I remember lots of things that I've seen related to some of the kids, and I've had an opportunity to do some nutrition education, and just to see the children get excited – one of the funniest stories I have is about a little girl who would never, ever eat broccoli. I mean she could not even bring herself to put it to her mouth and taste it. And we did nutrition education and we had taste-testing. And you know peer pressure is something else. And so all the little children were tasting the broccoli and so she finally tasted it. Well, she wrote me a letter to thank me for introducing her to broccoli and how much that meant to her. And although that's a very small scale, it just reminds me of what we're doing. We're not just serving kids food, but we're introducing them to nutrition and habits they will have the rest of their lives, and if we can get them excited now at a young age to have good eating habits and good nutrition habits, that that will follow them through their lives.

AH: And so many of these kids need us because they don't have the parents readily there to coach them about what to eat.

JB: Absolutely.

AH: Well, you've been an inspiration for so many people here in the state, and I know that Muscogee County misses you, but I know that the National Food Service Management Institute is enjoying you working with them now. Tell me a little bit about what you're doing with them.

JB: Well I've been working as a consultant for NFSMI and it's really exciting because I've been doing some training. I've done Healthier US School Challenge training and the Financial Management training.

AH: Have you gotten to travel?

JB: I've gotten to travel a lot. I've been to Mississippi. I've been to Montgomery. I'd never been to Mississippi or Montgomery before

AH: Or really? Great!

JB: And I got to do some training there and I'll be doing some training at the pre-conference session at the national conference in Tennessee. So that has been really exciting. I always knew about the Institute. All of the materials that we've used for years were from the Institute, and the first time that I got to actually go to Oxford, Mississippi, and see it – it was just amazing.

AH: Very impressive.

JB: I was so impressed, and so proud that we had that in place for our national food service program. It's just awesome. And the Archives there – just to see the

history there, and all of the people that came before us and how hard they had to work to get us to where we are today, and how that history is being preserved – it's just a great organization and I'm really excited to have been selected as a consultant to do some of the training.

AH: Well, you're a significant part of Georgia's history and I want to thank you for coming in today for this brief interview, and we'll do it again, because you'll be adding a lot more history I know throughout the rest of your career, so thank you so much Jimmie for coming in today for the interview.

JB: Well thank you for having me.