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**Linda Erwin**

Linda Erwin

Institute of Child Nutrition

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## Linda Erwin Oral History

Linda Erwin, an Arkansas native, began her career as an elementary and then a home economics teacher. She later moved to Tennessee and taught adult vocational home economics classes. She eventually went to work for Shirley Watkins, the school nutrition director for Memphis City Schools, who introduced her to child nutrition. Erwin eventually moved to Georgia where she continued her career, becoming a food service director, and became very active in the Georgia School Food Service Association. She retired after twenty-eight years in the Georgia child nutrition programs.

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 Linda Erwin. Linda, tell me a little bit about yourself and where you grew up.

LE: Alright. I was born in Pine Bluff, Arkansas, and completed high school there – never thought I'd go to college – and through a Home Economics teacher my senior year – she said, "I think you need to go to college and major in Home Ec." So I went to Henderson State Teachers College at Arkadelphia and graduated in Vocational Home Economics. My first husband was a football coach and so we went to Clarendon, Arkansas, which is a real poor county on the White River, and I taught elementary school until I could teach Home Ec, and that was in the years when you actually had a little Home Ec cottage, so that was real special. And then we moved to Memphis, and I divorced, and had one son, and I taught adult Vocational Home Economics classes. And that was like community school classes – no tests – and that was wonderful. And I started out as a part-time teacher, and then went in to be the only twelve-month vocational adult teacher in the State of Tennessee. And I had six hundred students a semester and had twelve teachers teaching at our vocational center. So -

AH: That's the reason you're such a good teacher of adults.

LE: Yes, because I had that experience with adults, because I had ladies anywhere from actually probably in their twenties to their eighties. And so in Memphis at that time I went to – I had gotten my master's at the University of Arkansas – but then I started post-graduate work at Memphis State, and in Tennessee and in Memphis the only way you made more money was to go into administration. So fortunately for me Willie Harrington, an African-American man, he was superintendent then, but he also became mayor of Memphis, but when he came in, he purged all the files, because at that time most of administrators in Memphis City Schools were white men. So he opened it up to minorities, and being a woman I was a minority, and so we took psychological tests and everything, and out of three hundred people I was one of twenty-five that got to go through a year program with Memphis City Schools to find out how it worked, with the intentions of becoming a high school principal. And at the same time, through Title 9, the University of Tennessee at Knoxville took ten women from four of the largest cities in Tennessee, and we had two summers of sex equity training where I learned karate and all kinds of things like that. But after all that study Dr. Harrington walked in the last day of the leadership class and said, "We are closing nine schools. There will be no administrative principal jobs."

AH: Oh wow!

LE: So that door was closed.

AH: And that's what you'd been working up to all that time.

LE: But then doors get closed and new doors open. One of the first administrative positions was with Shirley Watkins in school nutrition, so I applied for it. Shirley was from Arkansas, my home state, and she later became Under Secretary of USDA with Bill Clinton, and so she hired me and my first project was to do a

merchandising manual where we took pictures of foods and how they should look.

AH: Don't tell me you were responsible in part for that.

LE: Yes I was. It has a little green cover.

AH: Yes. I remember that because in fact I think we had Shirley down one year to our directors' conference before you arrived in Georgia to demonstrate that, and it was wonderful. I thought it was the best thing I had ever seen.

LE: And working with her was a real education, and she not only introduced me to school nutrition, but the national association and the Tennessee Food Service Association. After the first year I made a comment to her secretary that, "I think I'm understanding my job and I think I'm going to like this job." And she said, "Well Linda, I'm sorry to tell you, but as soon as you know how to do it they're going to change it." She was right, so I learned that USDA has a lot of changes in store for us. So from that then I came to Georgia. My husband wanted to relocate so we came to Georgia and that changed my whole life.

AH: For the better I hope.

LE: For the better. When I came into Georgia was when we had people like yourself, and Dr. Martin, and Mary Nix, and Dot Doonesbury, and Joy Huie, and y'all were all of our mentors. And of those Dr. Martin had gotten the SAI Program, where districts were enticed to hire certified directors.

AH: Let me tell you how that started. We were sitting around the office - I think the first year I started working with Dr. Martin as her assistant - and she was

promoted the second year out of that job – and we were sitting around the office – Don Williams was interviewed earlier and he was talking about a program where we had given some money to Douglas County to help them centralize their procurement, and what I had learned at the state level is there's a provision in the law – special developmental projects – where you can take the reimbursement where you normally pay out to all your school districts and you can adjust those reimbursement rates as long as you continue to pay out an average rate. We actually for Douglas County adjusted reimbursement rates statewide so that we could give them a little pot of money to do that particular project. Well, after we had done that we were sitting around one day talking the need for supervisors in the State of Georgia at the district level, because when I started working and was in Douglas County we'd go to a conference for directors and there'd be like thirty-five people there. And even then there were 180 counties in the state, or something like that. So we started talking about it and we brainstormed one day and came up with the idea that we could adjust reimbursement rates across the whole state and maybe take just a small fraction of a cent, put it into a pool of money to provide the school districts who wanted to participate, and bring in a certified school nutrition program director. At that time even the certification was optional, but it was there in place, but it was optional for the district level. And the incentive money that we put into this pool would be used to hire professional people like yourself. And we did a pool of money for supervisors and we did a pool of money for training that would also help with some of the cost of paying people when they came in for training. That was called something else. I don't remember the name of that. In-service Incentive (ISI) was the name of that. But the SAI, the Supervisory Assistance Incentive and ISI came about as a result of varying those reimbursement rates. And that was interesting because other people have mentioned that here this weekend because so many directors are retiring now, because that was started about twenty-five years ago when a lot of people we brought in are retiring now like yourself. So tell us about your coming in to Georgia.

LE: It really opened the door, because my first position was at Buford City Schools and I was paid part-time, worked full-time but paid part-time, and I was there five years and I was their first director

AH: Buford City is on Lake Lanier, just to the northeast of Atlanta.

LE: In Gwinnett County, which at that time was the largest county. In Memphis I was responsible for sixty-eight schools and we had 148 schools. In Buford there were three schools, so I just thought that was wonderful.

AH: You went from sixty to three?

LE: Right. And so that was wonderful because you really got to know your people. But the other thing that was so good about Buford City, the timing of the SAI and the encouragement that we got from the state department really was the beginning of directors being hired as directors and being recognized as part of the educational team. But that was also the era where breakfast programs were being started, and self-serve salad bars, so there were a lot of new things on the meal pattern and the way we produced foods that was real encouraging. And then that was when I got a real introduction to Georgia School Food Service Association.

AH: Well, you certainly had an introduction to the association because you had a significant role for – how many years did you work in school nutrition in Georgia?

LE: Twenty-eight years.

AH: Twenty-eight years. So of that period of time you were actively involved and still obviously actively involved in the association. Tell us a little bit about that experience because I think that reflects a lot of your leadership style and your leadership success – your involvement in the association.

LE: Well, coming from - my dad was an army cook in World War II and he had his own barbeque place for thirty-five years, and then he and my mother divorced

when I was nine, but my mother actually raised me as a waitress – so I had slept in kitchens before and I knew how hard the work was, and in my affiliation with the association it just opened up new friendships, and where people could be recognized for their efforts. And I think one of the real pluses for the association on the national and the state level is that small systems can compete and get awards just like large systems. So it's not based on the quantity of schools or how many students you feed, but the quality programs. And I think that's a real encouragement to where food assistants and managers of small schools can receive scholarships and recognitions just like everything else. For me personally the affiliation with the association opened up a whole new world of travel, because we did not have the means to travel. When I was a little girl, Sunday afternoons after church we went to the river to swim and we made home-made ice cream.

AH: That was your trip, huh?

LE: That was my trip. And so got to travel, and through that, in bringing particularly food assistants to state conferences, I have always had women in their forties to their sixties who have never spent the night in a motel room. When we went to Jekyll there were many who had never seen the ocean. And it's like taking Girl Scouts camping for the first time, or little Brownies. They will try to make up their own bed, because they're never been anywhere where someone made up their bed, and so that's the joy to me, is just seeing them grow professionally. Years ago I used to interview husbands along with the applicants -

AH: Oh, you did? Interesting.

LE: - so that the husbands understood that when we went to conference that we didn't do anything illegal, -

AH: They didn't have to worry?!

LE: - that she would be tired, and that when she got home there wouldn't be supper, and there'd be no sex that night. [Laughter]

AH: Did they accept that?

LE: Yes. One of the things I think everybody is just amazed at, our conferences, is how extensive they are, that there's a lot of learning activities, but there's no play time. I mean they are packed full. Another thing that I've learned from the association - that every time I pack a suitcase I think about it - I've learned that I can pack a suitcase in thirty minutes, I can make motel reservations, I can make airline ticket reservations. A couple of years ago I left my beloved twelve-year-old chocolate lab on the operating table for exploratory surgery and got myself to the airport with all my tears and went to my step-mother's funeral in Arkansas. And so I contribute all of that to things that I have learned personally.

AH: To be able to just get in there and do what you needed to do and to get where you needed to be, and that is a skill that a lot of people don't have, a lot of women who grew up I guess at the time that we grew up, don't really develop the self-sufficiency that you do as a professional.

LE: And what I have learned along those lines is that you never unpack some of the suitcase. You always leave your makeup and certain things in there -

AH: You don't want to be without that makeup!

LE: - to where you're half packed before you decide what you're going to wear. And when I start to go to a conference - I did this yesterday coming down here - I take the program and I write out beside what I'm going to wear, and so I don't



bring a whole lot with me. Don Williams taught me that when he said I had too many clothes in that suitcase he was trying to carry for me, so I scaled down.

AH: Well, I need to learn that because that's something I'm really bad – I'll bring everything that's in the closet, so that I can duplicate my closet wherever I'm going. You talked about being in Buford City, but you left Buford City.

LE: Yes.

AH: And you went somewhere else.

LE: Yes. When we were in Lilburn, in Gwinnett County – my husband had been raised on a lake in Memphis, and so he always wanted to be back on the lake. So we took a Georgia map and started looking at lake property, and we bought a lot on Lake Oconee. So we said, "Well, whoever can get a job first will go." And so I got a job first, and that was in Jones County, which is a neighboring county to Putnam County, where our house lot was.

AH: Where Oconee is.

LE: So I went there. My baby son went to college, and my husband was transferred to South Carolina, and me and the dog rented a house on a dirt road. And I was at Jones County for three years and just loved it.

AH: So you stayed there while your lake lot sat for you to develop? Did y'all build on that lot?

LE: We built. My husband designed the plans. He's a mechanical engineer. And so while we were in Jones County we built our house. The last semester that I worked in Jones County the superintendent let me bring my chocolate lab to work. We had a pen for him outside, because I didn't have a pen for him yet while we were building the house. And that was a wonderful experience, not only with the school nutrition program, but my superintendent was Linton Jordan and he had thirty-three in Jones County as the superintendent. He's the reigning length of superintendents

AH: That is so rare, because more recently superintendents may last for a couple of years, so to see someone like Mr. Jordan last that long, it's really rare.

LE: And he would shake his fingers at the principals and say, "Y'all stay out of the kitchen. I hired her for this program." And then he would turn and shake his finger at me, and he said, "You better do it right, 'cause I'm not going to jail, you are, if we don't meet guidelines."

AH: Well, you always did it right!

LE: He was from Jasper County, from Georgia, but he had played football on a football scholarship under Bear Bryant at Alabama. And what I learned from him was truly trusting your boss, because he was superb. And anything – if you messed up it was confidential, you took care of it, he loved you anyway, and you just do a better job tomorrow. But he gave a lot of support for the school nutrition program in Jones County. At Buford City and Jones County of course we started a local chapter, and Jones County is still winning legislative awards and gold scrolls, and so they continued. Marian Washburn is their director now and she is very supportive. I had a minister one time that said, "Don't judge me by what happens while I'm your minister. Judge me what happens when I leave." And so that's a real star for me, is how active Jones County has stayed in the association.

AH: That they've been able to continue to meet those standards and that's wonderful. Let's talk a little bit about the association, because you've brought some things that really represent pieces of the state association, the Georgia School Nutrition Association. Talk to me a little bit about that. You were president in '93-94?

LE: Well, I think one of the fun things of the association is that every president chooses her theme, and so my conference was going to be at Jekyll Island, so I chose the lighthouse as my theme and it's 'Future Visions Light the Way'. And the rocks (in the graphic here) also have the different areas in the plan of action. And a food assistant from Griffin drew the design, and then in Georgia we've always had t-shirts and two unique things that I did that was different is that we always get tote bags at conference, but since we were at the beach I wanted a beach bag. And each president usually chooses a color, and I love purple -

AH: PURPLE!

LE: - and when I was in Arkansas visiting relatives I found this beach bag, and it was in multi-colors at a kitchen store. And so I gave the information to Susan Cheshire and she called, and so for six months they pulled all of the bags, the purple bags, and then we shipped them. So when conference came, because we had a thousand people at the banquet my year in Jekyll, and so Susan had always brought the cloth bags down, like we normally have. But these suckers weighted a ton -

AH: And they take up a lot of space!

LE: So she said, "We got a little problem of getting them to Jekyll." And so one of our vendors, one of our industry partners put them on his truck and brought them down. They do last.

AH: I think I still have mine, but I had forgotten where it came from, so I'm glad you reminded me. I should have recognized the purple.

LE: And I also that year – we had a commemorative plate. National had always done this, and so I had this idea that I'd love to have a commemorative plate with the logo on it, and Pat Eason, who was with Toni's Pizza at that time, I called her and she actually took half of her year's marketing money and purchased, and had these plates made, so everyone that came to the banquet got a plate, and that was just emphasizing our theme of the lighthouse.

AH: Well, that was two perfect examples there of working with industry, which I think has also been a real strong point of the state association, and making them feel a partner with what's going on in our program.

LE: They really do. Two other things that have been real significant I think through the years is districts have different themes sometimes.

AH: Right.

LE: And I'm in 10<sup>th</sup> District and one of the years that we did this I had – Juanita Maddox was our district president and we developed this [holds up a t-shirt] – 'Students First' – and it has ethnic children [and a] handicapped child, and we also had a pin that went along with that. And that message was that we serve all children.

AH: Right.

LE: And we welcome all children.

AH: Right, right. Well, tell me about this book over here. What is all this?

LE: That is the association plan of action. Every association president writes a plan of action and it correlates with the national plan of action because there are gold scroll, and the silver, and the bronze scrolls that are earned by the activities that you do on the state and national level. And that is a competition, and so every year, like after our conference this year, Malcolm Quillen, the incoming president, will go to the national association leadership, where the theme is announced. So that also, whether it's on the local level or district level, state level or national level, it's all tied in to nutritional goals for our program that we seek to accomplish through the year, with ideas, and through conferences and training. Then we share ideas and network of how to accomplish those goals. But it also lets everyone in school nutrition understand that we are national, that you may be a cook in the kitchen, but you are connected on the district, and the state, and the national level, and it does make a difference. We can make a difference with children and their health.

AH: Well, you're still actively involved in the state association.

LE: Yes.

AH: Now, do they get you to volunteer very often?

LE: I got to be a judge this year.

AH: Good.

LE: For Director of the Year, so that's always fun to see. And one of the beauties of, as you stay active in the association, and then when you retire, is every year

gets better. Every new president has new ideas. Now it's so technology advanced that I have a hard time picking up on facebook and those things, but it's just wonderful to see people grow, and it's wonderful to see people who never thought they could speak in front of a group, like when our local presidents at the House of Delegates [meet]. That's such a learning experience for them. And for people that are so afraid to speak out, or to voice their opinion, the association gives them that chance, but, it's in an environment of family love.

AH: It's in a friendly environment.

LE: We're friendly, we're supportive. We're real proud of what you do. And one of the things that our association still has is 'For the Good of the Order', and that's where any member can voice a concern or a request, and that request goes immediately to the Executive Committee, and it has to be acted on by the Executive Committee, and reported their findings at the next meeting. So to me that is so significant, because of the way the structure of the association – that individual member has a lot of power – because that's the one thing that has to immediately go to the Executive Committee. It cannot be tabled and it cannot be postponed. It has to be acted on and an answer given by the next meeting.

AH: Do you remember any that came up that were particularly interesting? I'm trying to recall myself any that came up.

LE: Yes. I remember one.

AH: What was one?

LE: One was, and I understand how it came to be, but one was that if you were on the Executive Board, or an officer, your mileage reimbursement was more than a food assistant, or a non-officer.

AH: Like coming to an Executive Board meeting or a House of Delegates meeting.

LE: Or a training or whatever. And so that was a question. And the reason it was put in I would think – I wasn't there when it was put in but I would reason those people give so much of their personal time that they're never paid for, that well, we could help them a little bit financially this way. But it was changed, because those that requested that to be looked into felt like a status and pecking order was being created and that was not fair. It wasn't what needed to be projected from the association, because we're all volunteers in the association.

AH: So it goes back to your equity training, your Title 9 training doesn't it? You've done so many things. To have your experience in Memphis and then two school districts in Georgia – what do you think are the most significant changes in the program that you saw over the years – acknowledging that the association brought people along – but what would you say were the biggest changes or maybe the biggest challenges you saw as a program director?

LE: I think the biggest change was giving students choices - to where we empowered students – that they made nutritional choices themselves. I was on the scene when offer vs. serve was put in so we had less wasted food - but rather than just putting a tray out for a student to pick up, they'd make their own decisions. And I think in the scheme of things in growing up so often we adults try to make all the decisions for children, and then when they become adults and they can't make decisions we wonder why. And so I think it's really a learning laboratory each day for them to make choices, and then they'll enjoy the food that they have. The breakfast program has just meant so much to students. More recently the food and vegetable grants – that has just been wonderful for students to choose their own fruit or vegetable of the day.

AH: Now was that in place before you left Jones County? Did they have that in place before you left Jones County?

LE: Not the fruit and vegetable grant, but we've had it for two years in Putnam County and we got it the first year. The way we chose to do it was that the students – there's always two fruits or two vegetables out each day for them to choose one of and at the end of their lunchtime, then on their way out of the cafeteria we have little mobile units set up and they would choose and then take that back to their classroom for their afternoon snack. We preferred to do it that way rather than taking a single snack in the afternoon to the classroom, again because we wanted the child to make their own choice. Something that really happened funny last year, our second year with the grant, was we contracted with a local strawberry grower, in Jasper County, our neighboring county, and so when we had fresh strawberries we really publicized – 'We're going to have fresh strawberries and they will be picked that morning, right when the sun comes up' and everything – and we had posters and we publicized and we had costumes and all. Well the little children when they came through were just thanking the nutrition assistants like everything, because they thought our staff had gone to the strawberry patch and they had picked the strawberries that morning. So that was real special.

AH: That's wonderful.

LE: And I understand there's more funding going into that nationwide, and that's a beautiful program.

AH: That's a great thing. One thing that you mentioned that probably distinguishes Georgia a little bit different from other states, and that was implementing offer vs. serve the way that our schools had chosen to implement that, because I was commenting on the new meal pattern regulations this week and I looking at the discussion there about offer vs. serve, and when offer vs. serve was put into the legislation it was for the purpose exactly as you said of reducing plate waste, so that a child would not have to take an item that was offered. But in so many states how it ended up being implemented was that they would put five items out for the child to accept, and they could refuse two of



them, which means they walk out of the cafeteria with only three food items. And with the evolution of nutrition standards, if you plan a meal to meet your nutrients with five items and they only take three, then chances are you're not going to meet your nutrient standards. But in Georgia what happened is that when offer vs. serve became a requirement and this was back in the late-70s I think, or early-80s, it's been there for a long time, people like yourself started offering choices to school districts, and so you'd have choices of meal, and then your choices of food items within a meal, and I think that really set Georgia apart, because we went beyond what the pure federal requirement was, and hopefully have caused a lot of children, like you said, to be able to make those decisions.

LE: Well, and I think that is what makes Georgia stand out, is that we still have high standards for nutritional integrity, and that starts with the State Department of Education, with people like yourself and Ruth Gorgon and Dr. Martin and others who encouraged that – that we are a nutrition program for children. We're not just feeding stations. We truly want that child to get a healthy meal and we can be a resource for the community and administrators and parents, because what I found was we're going into second generation of parents who have lived on fast foods – mothers who don't know what a tomato is, what a potato is. Is it a fruit? Is it a vegetable? Can you do anything with it other than fry it?

AH: That's the old Home Ec teacher coming out in both of us!

LE: And many of our schools now are getting gardens, fresh gardens, and so that's been real interesting. You mentioned challenges. I think the challenges have always been competitive foods. But I'm so glad that I have lived long enough to see a national emphasis put on nutrition and exercise and being healthy, because in the State of Georgia Coca-Cola was king, and so that's been a real significant change - through President Clinton – he has a board where he works with Pepsi and Coca-Cola to produce more nutritional beverages. And they've done that, so we've seen how when people stick together, and we do have large numbers in our membership, but when we can partner with our legislators and our industry partners we can make a difference in this country of what is offered for children.

AH: That - a partnership and having a program advocate, because you've always had program advocates, people that you could go back to within the community, because you had ties with the community. We had a session yesterday morning on food service management companies, because we have a second school district in the state now to be run by a management company, and when you read the literature about management companies what happens is that - there are a lot of reasons - but if a board does not see the program as being integral to its core mission of educating children, that sets the program up as a target for contracting out, and when you have those community ties that you have developed, and you have partnerships, whether it's with industry or whether it's with your parents or whether it's with that local farmer down the street, then you can survive a lot of those challenges that otherwise would probably destroy a program. Competitive foods has always been such an issue here in Georgia and I'll share with you that we have tried to have state standards on competitive foods, and I have been told by more than one state superintendent, "Don't bring this issue to our State Board of Education again." And it's real frustrating when you see something that you know needs to be dealt with, and at the state level so you have consistency, but we depend on people like you to get the support at the local school district to have local standards to the degree that they can, because it's very political and our program operates in a very political environment.

LE: I think too, a real challenge for directors this day and time and particularly new people coming in is that I've been told a normal tenure of a superintendent in Georgia is three years, so you're getting superintendents that are new - a lot of superintendents coming from other states that don't have the nutritional integrity that Georgia has, and so it's just real important for that director to make ties within the community. It also goes back through your leadership and Dr. Martin's leadership, directors in Georgia are certified through the Professional Standards Committee and that's the same agency in the state department that certifies superintendents, administrators, councilors, and so forth. So that alone, because I have had a superintendent before who I had to educate on the fact I was certified, just like he was certified, and so I think that's a real reason why directors always need to like where they work. And recently a neighboring county, their director is retiring, and that's one of the things that I counseled an applicant of. I said, "You've got to live there. It's not fair to the program or you, because they

have got to see you at church, and walking down the street - riding that school bus." We have to know where our children come from.

AH: Be part of the community. The certificate that's issued by the Professional Standards Commission here in Georgia to our directors does require a master's degree, and it does require a combination of coursework in education and food service or nutrition and management also. That certificate's been around a long time, actually since the 1960s, because when I started working in the program in '74 my school district opted to require me to have the certificate. It was not actually a requirement, it was optional. It was optional under Dr. Martin, and it was established under Dr. Martin, but I had the I guess you would call it opportunity when I was state agency director of putting that into the form of a requirement at the state board level, so we in Georgia sort of have a tendency to move from voluntary kinds of things - we set up the infrastructure for requirement and we get people to volunteer to implement the requirement - and then gradually move it into something more established, in the form of either a state board rule or state law. There are many states that look at Georgia and use us as a model. Our certification program is a model for their own program. And I think it's great that SNA has their own credentialing program - you're probably credentialed, SNS credentialed.

LE: Yes ma'am.

AH: And I think that's wonderful, but I think it's great that we have our own program here in the state so that our directors can be recognized just like as you said, our classroom principals and our superintendents and our teachers.

LE: And let me say for the Archives, "Thank you for all that support that's been given us." Another thing I think that Georgia has really groomed us and supported us is on legislative issues - and I know you were national Legislative Chair one time. But to be on an airplane and fly into Washington, D.C., and see those monuments just takes your breath away. And one of the things that Marshall Matz has always taught us is that if we don't tell our story nobody will. And the

children that we serve don't have a voice, and we have to be their voice. And so part of the joy of this profession is understanding our country, and where we live, and the democratic process – that everybody does have a voice.

AH: And you've got an excellent voice. You brought something here that I want you to read, because I think it's just wonderful, and explain what you brought and we'll let you read it into the Archives.

LE: Alright. This was a poem that was written back in the '70s by Betty Delozier, from Lakeland, Florida, and it was in our School Food Service Journal of 1995, and I think it really tells us what we're about. It says:

Hey Lady, I wrote you a letter. Did you see?

It said 'I love you. Do you love me?'

Would you love me just a little today?

We don't got much food on our table 'cause my dad don't work. He ain't able.

Hey Lady, I sure am hungry today.

I didn't get very much sleep last night, 'cause Mom and Dad, well they had a fight.

Hey Lady, would you smile at me today?

My dad got drunk and so did my mother.

Then he beat me and my little brother.

He Lady, would you say Hi to me today?

My face is dirty and my hair ain't combed,

'cause Mom, she was asleep when I left home.

Hey Lady, would you hug me today?

The other kids, they make fun of me.

My clothes is dirty and I got a hole in my knee.

Hey Lady, would you be my friend today?

Well Mom and Dad, they always yell.

My life as home is a living hell.

Hey Lady, please love me today.

Hey Lady, won't somebody love me today?

That tells it all.

AH: It tells it all, and you've been one of those people that loved all those children back.

LE: And I think one of the things that we always keep in our heart is school is tough, life is tough. I just read a book called 'Breaking Night', and it's the life story of a little girl, nine years old, was homeless, and she eventually went to Harvard. And every teacher, administrator, medical doctor, social services, needs to read that book, because the person that made a difference in her life was a teacher. And I think because throughout life children - we all as human beings - associate food with love. Those that give us food and nurture us give us love. School is tough. They've got to pass those tests. They've got to do homework when they don't have any notebook paper at home. But the one place where they're not judged by their brain or their physical appearance is in that lunch line, and that's what we can do best. We want to give them a nutritious meal, but we want to do it with a smile, and we want to do it with love.

AH: Thank you Linda.

LE: Thank you.