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Don Williams Oral History

Don Williams is a retired school nutrition director, having worked for twenty-six years in the State of Georgia. He is now involved in a second career working in school nutrition software.

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. We're pleased to have our first interviewee as Don Williams. Don, tell us a little bit about you personally.

DW: OK. I live on the west side of metropolitan Atlanta, and retired from school nutrition in 2004. I retired from Douglas County School System as their school nutrition director, which I got into quite by a fluke, and I now work within the industry with school nutrition software, which keeps me in touch with the school nutrition program, and I love it.

AH: I'll have to admit that Don and I have some pretty close ties, because Don is in the school district where I was born and raised, and was food service director for a few years. Tell me about the fluke that got you into school nutrition, because I think that's sort of an interesting story.

DW: I was a latecomer with college. I was married and had a family when I decided to go back and get my degree. I had joined the army – I went one quarter of college after high school and then joined the army – and things evolved. Anyway, I was married and had a family when I decided to go back to school and get my degree. In that process I had met and become friends with your successor in Douglas County, Annette Stafford, knew her quite well. And under your direction the State of Georgia had been approved for a developmental grant to

develop a centralized purchasing plan for school nutrition to be used by other systems that wanted to go that route.

AH: At that time everything was pretty much decentralized around the state.

DW: Everything was decentralized – all purchasing, all functions were decentralized at the time. I was nearing my last year of school, and prior to going back to school I was in institutional food sales, so I had been in contact with schools and colleges.

AH: You knew the procurement system.

DW: Exactly, so I was hired for one year to develop that program, and at the end of the year I was supposed to go my way, but instead Mrs. Stafford's husband was transferred to North Carolina, so she had to move and there was nobody to carry the program on, so I was hired temporarily, and then twenty-six years later I retired.

AH: And you were a godsend. I have to tell a funny thing that happened a few years before I retired. You remember Jean Wright was at Eastside Elementary School in Douglas County, and Jean just said whatever came to the top of her head usually. So we were at a conference going through exhibits, and she walked up to me and I was asking her about how things were, and of course I said, "How is Don?" and she said, "Don is the BEST coordinator we ever had." It was so funny because I just love all those people. They were just great. But tell me, what was your earliest recollection of child nutrition programs from your childhood?

DW: I remember back in early elementary school and I lived in a rural, farming area, and back in those days everything was made from scratch – all the cooking was from scratch. There was no such thing as heat-and-serve. So what I had to

carry to school as a lunch was kind of meager, and I really looked forward to school lunch. Even though in those days there was very little regulation, still it was usually a hot meal, and I liked it. It was twenty cents, I remember that. And I guess this was before the free-and-reduced priced meal program started because if you didn't have money to pay you could work in the lunchroom, changing out the milk and things.

AH: Where did you grow up and go to school?

DW: I grew up in an area actually in north Florida, near the Georgia line, and it's just a farming area, or was then.

AH: And you were in Douglas County for twenty-six years?

DW: Yes.

AH: That's a long time. Tell us about the job that you had there, the things that you liked about the job, and the challenges that you had as a director in Douglas County. You had to have some over twenty-six years.

DW: It changed over time. In the early years when I came, as we've already said, everything was decentralized, but there was a move towards centralization of purchasing and accounting, personnel actions, those kinds of things. We would get one under our belt and go to the next one, so those were the kinds of challenges, which were really just a matter of working through and dealing with boards of education to get approval, and sometimes that could be a little bit difficult because at that time it was new stuff, it was cutting edge.

AH: At that time principals really owned their programs.

DW: Exactly. All responsibility rested at the school level, and the principal and the manager. So those were the primary challenges back then. In the latter years I think that personnel would have to be the greatest challenge.

AH: What kind of issues did you see at Douglas with personnel?

DW: Well number one, in the early years the labor pool that we had to choose from were primarily stay-at-home mothers whose children – empty nest – and they wanted to get back into the workforce - a lot of them just so they could get insurance, but they knew how to cook, they knew how to read recipes, and then in the latter years they were extinct. You just could not find that kind of personnel. Also the labor laws, the workers' compensation became a real issue. We actually had to develop a plan to try to control the cost of the workers' comp and medical. But by far I consider that to be the biggest challenge in my entire career.

AH: Really?

DW: Yes.

AH: How did you arrive at the point where you decided to retire? Was that a difficult decision?

DW: Actually I determined four years in advance when I was going to retire. I had always said that if I ever got to the point that I was resisting change it was the time for me to go, and I was at that point where I resisted change. As new people come in, new administrations come in, they have new ideas, and as the old whippersnapper you kind of get set in your ways, and it works and you don't want to change, so I decided it was time for me to retire.

AH: You didn't want to go there.

DW: I didn't want to go there. My attitude became 'We've tried that. It don't work', and so really, seriously I decided at that point I should retire.

AH: Was your environment very political within the school district? Did you find that just pure politics hampered your ability to do things?

DW: At times. There were highs and lows, and you just had to go with the flow, whatever it was. There were times that it was highly political. There were other times that politics had very little effect on what we did. I would have to say that we had one superintendent who was a staunch supporter of school nutrition, a female, and her name was Kathryn Shehane, and she was superintendent for twelve years. And so those were twelve – she was really strict and really tough, but she supported – and those were twelve of the best years of my career.

AH: She taught me Social Studies at Douglas County High School, so I know about that 'strict'. But she was also an honorary life member for the Georgia School Nutrition Association because of the support that she gave, and speaking of the association, you were the second male president of the association.

DW: Yes.

AH: Tell us a little bit about your experience with the association, because I know you did an excellent job that year as president.

DW: I served 1992-93, and I served on the heels of an excellent president so things were in good order. The most significant thing that happened that year is

that our Executive Director, who had warned me that she would not be going anywhere, called me about two weeks after I took office and said, "I know what I said, but I've got to go to Texas."

AH: And that was Linda Williams –

DW: Linda Williams, right.

AH: - formerly with USDA Food and Nutrition Service in the Atlanta office.

DW: So we had to go about the task of recruiting and hiring a new director. All of the plans that we had made, we had to go through. We had to do site visit for conference again, and the industry seminar, so I spent the first several weeks and months, actually, trying to get her in tune with what was going on; but it turned out a good year. As a result of that I learned a lot more than I would have, had I had someone doing it for me.

AH: About the association?

DW: Yes – but we had a successful year – that was the important thing.

AH: The people that you worked with in the schools in Douglas County – are there special people that really had impact on you that you worked with at the school level? Do you remember any of those folks?

DW: You mentioned one of them – Jean Wright. Jean Wright was probably if not the best, one of the best managers that we ever had. She was a perfectionist. She believed in the school nutrition program. She believed in nutrition, and she was

an excellent financial manager, personnel manager, and I looked up to her quite a bit.

AH: Now when I was out there her school was right next door to the central office, so I got to visit a lot, but I think your office moved a little further away.

DW: No, she moved.

AH: Oh, she moved to another school?

DW: Yes. She moved about fifteen miles away as a matter of fact.

AH: Now you started off with how many schools in Douglas County, and how many did you end up with?

DW: We had seventeen schools, but we had sixteen cafeterias. Chapel Hill Middle School and Elementary were on the same campus and shared a dining room. When I retired we had twenty-nine schools, twenty-eight cafeterias.

AH: We need to explain that. Douglas County is right on the west side of Atlanta, about twenty miles west of Atlanta.

DW: Right. Right on Interstate 20 and I read recently that the projected growth in the next ten years is supposed to almost double in population again, so they have some real challenges ahead of them.

AH: Oh yes, most definitely. We were talking about yesterday – we did a session of food service management companies – and we were talking about the number of school superintendents and administrators that are coming in from other states, states that have experience with food service management companies, and the kind of impact it's having in the state, because I think there are only two contracts now in the state, and the last one was a small school district. That surprised all of us there.

What would you tell a new person – I know right now a lot of the directors in Georgia came in at about the same time as a result of the state Supervisory Incentive Program, probably a little bit later than you did, and now they're retiring, and they're really needing to recruit a lot of new people in the program – what would you tell a new person to try to encourage them to come into the profession, if you had the opportunity to do that? And I know you went to Georgia State University, and that's a good resource for people coming into the profession too.

DW: My advice I think would be – being a food service director covers a lot of areas. You have to be almost a dietitian, you have to be a financial manager, you have to be an accountant, and you have to be a personnel person. In the larger districts it's more departmentalized, but in the smaller districts one person has to wear all the hats, and my advice would be to identify your strengths and weaknesses, and in those areas that you're weakest in, by some method, either going back to school or whatever, but to hone up those skills. It takes a pretty well rounded [person].

AH: Right. Your experiences on a daily basis can just go anywhere in the map.

DW: Anywhere. And that would be my advice. The other thing is that, and this is a philosophy that I always used to give to new managers, is before you move a trashcan you find out why it was sitting where it is. Get comfortable and find out why things are being done the way they are before you start making changes.

AH: Very important. Very important. Now you and I had another connection, and that was your wife. Your wife was principal at the elementary school where I went to school.

DW: Exactly.

AH: So, did she give you good advice as a principal, from her perspective?

DW: Oh, she always gave me good advice, sometimes solicited and most of the time not. No, seriously, she was really a solid supporter of our program, and I have nothing but good things to say about her tenure there. She retired three years after I did, and she's in Europe right now. She was just a real supporter of our program, and she was the principal, as you said, at the school where you went to elementary school.

AH: And where my dad even went – there was an old building adjacent, next to the old, older building of Mount Carmel Elementary School that was there. He used to tell stories about carrying coal inside the school building for the heaters. That school has been there for a very long time.

Now, you're doing something a little bit different now. You are retired from the program, but you're doing a little bit of work with industry. How did you get into that particular area of industry that you're working in right now Don, because I think that's an interesting story too.

DW: Well, I came into the school nutrition program as we've already discussed in the late '70s and that was just before the technology explosion. In the early '80s we had no computers. The only thing we had in the way of technology was if you were lucky you had an electric typewriter. Especially after we set up this centralized purchasing program and we had to manually process all the food orders and I usually ended up taking those home with me at night and the Apple

computer was kind of becoming popular in schools. And so I decided it was time for us to start looking at technology.

In late 1984 I contracted with a company – I went out looking for software and there was none there, absolutely nothing there. And back then it was not really bids, it was what we know today as RFPs. So I put those out and I contracted with a company to develop some software that would actually allow me to input the orders, the grocery orders, etc, and then it would sort them and print them to the vendors. And also we had centralized the accounting process – we were doing it manually – sixteen sets of books – so we also used technology to do that electronically, and we had to have that software written also, because our program – there was nothing else around that was close enough to adapt it – so we actually had the software written. So I really got interested. I saw what technology could do for our program, and that was probably one of my strongest areas, in finance. I had a background in accounting and management. So, over the years we developed that, and then we developed the perpetual inventory system for schools. It would do production records that were in accordance with the manual records that the state [required]. It progressed from there and then we went to point-of-sale, and all of these areas. We either had the software developed or we were able to get software. Most of it we developed.

That was really probably my greatest strength in the program, and so when I started to retire the company that had developed most of this actually asked me to come to work for them part-time, and so I did that. And they were eventually bought by a company called Data Futures. And so they took me with the purchase.

AH: It was a big national company.

DW: Yes.

AH: I know that you were around when the Georgia Department of Education talked about all of these things that were done manually, which was the way it was done when I was in your school district, but I remember back – I guess you do to – when the Department of Education first electronically uploaded files. I don't

know if you remember that, but that was I think in the mid-80s, and we had a black box system, black box school districts.

DW: Oh yes.

AH: This was pre-internet. It was funny because we've gone through that system, and then we went through an internet version 1 and an internet version 2, and now they have a totally new system, also, for uploading files to the state. But it's interesting that all of that financial information that comes into the state was actually based on a skeleton of financial information that was developed back in the 1960s when Dr. Josephine Martin was state director, and so it's all evolved, but it's very much still the same, and Georgia I think has some of the best data that they get from the school districts of any state, and also is one of the first states to use the internet.

DW: Yes. Dr. Martin I think should be called a legend, especially in Georgia, but also nationwide. And we have been so fortunate in Georgia to have her. And then you stepped in and followed her philosophy pretty much, and Georgia is if not the top, then among the top states in the school nutrition program.

AH: So you'd invite anyone around the country listening to this to come to Georgia to work, because they're going to need a lot of new directors very soon.

DW: Absolutely.

AH: Is there anything else you'd like to share Don?

DW: I try to stay in touch with the program. Although I got into school nutrition kind of as a fluke, if I had to re-plan it knowing what I know now, I would plan to

go into it. It was probably the most rewarding career that I could have been in. If I had gone to elementary school saying, "I want to be a food service director" I don't think it could have been any more rewarding. I like to stay in touch with it. That's one of the main reasons I work part-time in the technology area, because it allows me to stay in touch with the people that I've known and worked with all these years, and I love it.

AH: Well, you may have found the profession very rewarding, but I think the profession has truly benefitted greatly from your involvement, so I want to thank you very much.

DW: Thank you.