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Robert Kearney and George Williams Oral History

The Georgia School Food Service Association has a category called Georgia School Food Service Association Industry. Robert Kearney and George Williams are members of this division.

AH: I'm Annette Hopgood and I'm here today with Robert Kearney and George Williams, who are members of the Georgia School Food Service Association Industry. We've asked industry members to come in and we tried to find the two oldest members in the exhibit hall today to come in and share with you some of their recollections of the school nutrition program and maybe tell some tales about their involvement in the program, one, for us to be able to show to them how much we appreciate them as part of our history, because you truly have been part of our history, and the first thing that I'd like to do, and we'll start with Robert, is tell a little bit about what your company does, and a little bit about you personally.

RK: Ok Annette, thank you. Well, my company now is Plas-Tique Products, and we make the compartment reusable trays for the school food service program. And that's all we do now. My son's in the business with me now and hopefully one day when this old man is out of here, he can take over.

AH: Good, that's wonderful. And you live where Robert?

RK: Live in the Gainesville, Georgia, and have been in school food service, associated with the Georgia School Food Service now since 1975. As a matter of fact the first show we came to was at Jekyll Island, and being a young rep at the time for equipment lines, had a little bit of a trucking problem, like the fellow next to us there today had. Our equipment didn't arrive in time for the show, so I had about ten pieces of literature on that one little silly rack and heated storage cabinet that I had. Mary Nix took me under her wing. She felt sorry for me that day. She introduced me to all of her friends. We sold more warming cabinets that next year than if I'd had a full booth of them – so that's how we got started.

AH: That's wonderful. Mary Nix could do that for people. She could talk them into doing anything whatsoever.

RK: Yes she could. She was a good friend for a lot of years there, and still is.

AH: That's interesting - so the first one was in 1975 then that you went to.

RK: Yes, in Jekyll Island – be glad when we can go back there.

GW: Oh, I do too. Everybody likes Jekyll Island. That's probably about the time I started working with the program in Davis County.

AH: George, what's your history? Where are you from? Tell us a little bit about your company.

GW: I live down in southwest Georgia, a town called Colquitt, Georgia, and I've been in the business since 1972. My first show was Calloway Gardens with the Georgia School Food Service Association, so that was a while back. We were in one little meeting room much smaller than where we are today. And at that time I was working with Medley Hotel and Restaurant Supply, which was located out of Albany, Georgia, and I worked for them for about twenty-something years, and then I went into the rep business, and now I work with Chuck Pace, Charles Pace & Associates, and I have a little interesting history about how I got introduced to school food service. My grandmother retired from the school lunch program in Colquitt where I live -

AH: Oh, she did really?

GW: - and it was always interesting. We never came home and complained about school lunch. We never had an option of choice. The choice was you either eat or you don't eat, so I've told the story about her that all my friends wanted to be in line with me because they knew that my grandmother was going to make sure that we got that 'right' piece of chicken every time

AH: And big portions probably.

GW: And I remember when they bought their first convection oven, and they were cooking in deck ovens – Robert knows what I'm talking about, those little deck ovens – they would turn them on in the morning and hope they heated up. And it was hard to convince her that that oven was not going to cook like she thought it should – but it was real interesting having her there. And so from that I've been here ever since and it's been a great industry for us. It's been a lot of changes. I know Robert will agree with that. The industry has been changed from what they're eating now to what they used to eat, and how we've had to change the way we present it to them, and realize that the students are our customers. But you know, I think one of the biggest drawbacks we have going on in our industry right now is that our program is a nutritional training program, and if we don't watch it, if we let privatization or somebody else come in there like that, they're not interested in that. They're interested from a dollar standpoint.

RK: Strictly profit.

GW: I don't think some of these kids get any nutritional guidelines at home. It's all about McDonald's and fast food, so it's been a challenge there for us.

AH: And they're lucky if they have a home environment, plus they're lucky if they have parents to raise them. Usually it's a grandmother or someone who probably doesn't have enough energy to be doing that anyway. Robert, you started off with big equipment and you're sort of merged around in different markets. What are

some of the major changes that you see, and what are some of your concerns, like George just expressed, about the future of the program?

RK: I certainly share that concern with him. One of the biggest concerns I have about it is what direction we are going nutritionally. What is it all about? We used to come to this show – and I was mentioning to my son earlier today – it was mostly equipment and supplies and educational booths and little training rooms and this and that – very few food companies in there. Now we've got everything under the sun from pre-packaged to Frito-Lay, and no offence to anybody here, but for goodness sakes, where does it stop? When I was in school like George – that was a wood-burning deck oven by the way – we used to have the meal prepared from scratch in the kitchen, and it used to be such a pleasure. That was one of the highlights of the day, was to go into that lunchroom. You could smell those yeast rolls cooking from a block down the hall there, and all the homemade food that they prepared for you. And today it's grab-and-go is pretty much what it's evolving into.

GW: Dr. Martin made the comment to me one time that she hoped that she would never, ever lose the smell of those rolls coming down those hallways.

AH: There are probably a few rolls that are being made these days.

RK: They're gone.

GW: I had a problem with a convection oven over in Dothan, Alabama, and I thought I'll just come the next time you make rolls, which we used to make rolls every day, and she said, "Well, you'll have to come back in two months. I don't make them but every two months." I said, "Wow."

AH: I think it's interesting, to me, that as industry representatives y'all brought that up as something that does concern you, because I think if anything has changes over the years, and I think a lot of it maybe came about – I know employees are different now than they used to be, and I know there is more need for training, especially in the area of food preparation – production scheduling and food preparation – but the proliferation of a variety of foods that I didn't even know about when I started off as a director is sort of amazing. Last week I was doing a class on hummingbirds for first-graders in Towns, Union, and Fannin County, and the kids had come back from lunch, and one of the things I was pointing out was what they eat versus what a hummingbird eats. And I said, "So what did you have for lunch?" And they said, "Inaudible." And I said, "Chicken wings?" And they said, "Inaudible." Finally it came out it was a chicken ring, and I said, "What is a chicken ring?" because I didn't know what it was.

RK: Shaped like an onion ring.

AH: It amazes me that foods have, for good or bad, - we're captive to an industry – of course y'all don't represent food per se, so the food people might have a different perspective on all this.

GW: What really made a big impact on the industry, when the old trays that were out there, the Dallas Texas? P71 trays that were taking up twice as much space and Robert was the first one that said, "We don't need that much space. We could dump them in the dish rack." And so he really changed the industry as far as the tray was concerned, and nobody had ever even touched it until he looked at it.

AH: And I think also the perception of portions changed when he changed that too, because you have a tendency – if someone saw a part, a section of your tray that was half-empty they thought well, you haven't given me enough food. You have to fill it up.

RK: And kids would complain about it too if it wasn't full.

AH: Now, visually you've adapted to what the portions should be so I think that went a long way toward teaching kids about portions.

GW: Well not only that, but from the energy standpoint, and now we're all more energy and water conscious. When he can put two of those in a rack instead of one big one it's really made a big difference there. And those kinds of things have really – you look at them like that was a big impact. We didn't really know that it was going to be as big as it was because we didn't realize we were going to be as water shortage and energy shortage as we were.

AH: Usually in retrospect you can see the value of those kinds of things. Well both of you I know have served on the Georgia School Nutrition Association Advisory Board.

RK: Right.

AH: Talk a little bit about the relationship you've had with the association itself as opposed to your working with the program. What kind of experiences have you had?

RK: Let me take that one first George. The first two years that I school food service show it was an absolute logistical nightmare working with equipment, to bring it into like a Jekyll Island exhibit hall or whatever, and to get your equipment in and get it uncrated and to get it set up in your booth. There were no facilities. In other words, they didn't provide like forklift services for us unless we paid \$1,000 or something. So it was a real challenge just to get your booth set up back then. And getting fortunate enough to be on the advisory board then, that's one of the major issues that we attacked right off the bat – Let's take care if the

exhibitors, because without them you don't got a show. And it's turned around so beautifully now, because not it's whatever you need, they'll take care of you generally. The booth size got better. The table size got better to display on. They carpeted the hall better and the facilities in the back are so much better now to get your equipment in. Of course with ours we roll in on little modules that we carry and we're out of there in five minutes, but for the equipment people today, like George still is, it's a big deal. So I think that's major, major change right there. We hopefully had a little effect on it.

AH: That you helped facilitate it.

GW: I remember when I served on my first industry advisory board Jimmy Griffin came on with me and he understood Robert and my problems because he came from the maintenance standpoint into the school system and he understands one of the things that's happening to us now, and I think we're going to see this show totally change, is that the cost to hook up a piece of equipment has gotten extremely high, and you're really got to value that, and so I think in this show today you see more videos, more big screens, and that kind of thing. But we're partners you know, and we're real fortunate, because I serve Alabama too, and it's not the relationship over there with industry like we have here in Georgia. I think you all respect us and we respect y'all because we're all in this together. The shows have gotten better and better every year and I hope that we can continue. I think moving them around from place to place has been a good thing, and not getting locked in one place, even though we did all like Jekyll. He hated the loading dock, but we liked Jekyll.

RK: Loved Jekyll – looking forward to going back.

AH: There is no doubt about that. I think everybody loves going to Jekyll Island. You know I remember working with people like Ted Daniel and Randy Womack and people like that when I started with, and y'all played such a huge role in educating our food service directors and their employees, so I wanted to acknowledge my appreciation for that, and I think as an industry I would like to

see you express more of those concerns that you have like you expressed here today, through the advisory board or however it is, because I do think that – you see more people going back in the retail sector to food based, food based, they're going to prepare everything from scratch. I had lasagna last night and it was actually layered right before it went into the oven. I think a lot of people that are saying derogatory things about the program are saying those things base upon the influence of fast foods, or pre-prepared foods, convenience foods in the program.

RK: Right. I think you're exactly right. I think another big change that I'm seeing or have seen, especially in the last ten or fifteen years, is more food being served on disposable products, and that's a big concern. As a human being, to me that's a big concern, especially with Styrofoam type products. How long can you build – you know, there's just not supposed to be mountains in Florida, and I can't drive down there and see my sister-in-law anymore without going by mountains of trash.

AH: Mountain trash. That's scary is what it is to me.

GW: Of course the food people would be better to entertain this talk about it but for a while we thought we were going to go to commissary type kitchens and we would have one located in all these counties – we'd buy from it. Well the food people got smart. At that time you could buy precooked products but they were too expensive. And they saw right quick that their market was going to go away so they started creating more and more and more of these products that are out there that are supposedly as good as what we start with from scratch, but I think you're right. I think some of the things that come out negative against the school lunch program is that they walk in and see different things on that menu and they don't really say, "Well, that's not a nutritional meal." We had something happen this week that I thought was real interesting. I was over with Kaye Joyce over in Lanier County and they have a program that her church started called The Peanut Butter Wagon. And every Saturday morning they fix peanut butter sandwiches and a juice and they go out into the community. Said they started it was 200 and now it's like 750 children. I said, "You know, we wonder. Our free and reduced

lunch program is one of the best programs we have.” The government has some welfare programs that are not good, but that is one of the best. And sometimes we lose focus. What happens to that child on Saturday and Sunday if they’re not eating? They’re getting a breakfast and a lunch, and that’s about all they’re getting. She told stories that would just break your heart. These children stand beside the road waiting for that breakfast.

RK: Let me tell you one George that ties in so perfect, and it made a big impact when I was a young rep out there. You remember Cheryl Calhoun in Fayette County. I called on her one day and we went out to an elementary school real early in the morning. We probably got there at 6:45 – 7 o’clock. The kids were just getting off the buses coming in. And there was this little girl there. Her name was Lisa. I can’t I remember that after all these years.

AH: She had a big impact on you.

RK: A big impact. She was sitting over in the principal’s office, out in the reception area there, and she sitting over in the corner kind of crying. They couldn’t get her to talk to them and tell them what was wrong. Well, they finally got it out of her. She was crying because her stomach hurt – because she hadn’t had anything to eat that day. And that they told me their story that yes, that was probably the only meal that kid was going to get that day. Lisa made a big impact on me.

GW: You remember Ray Eikward in food service?

RK: Yes.

GW: Ray was up in Dooley County. Ray told me this story. He started in Thomas County and he moved to Dooley County. He’s a retired minister too. He was a Methodist minister. He told me a story similar to that.

AH: Those ministers tell stories like that.

GW: He said this little girl came up to him, and they were serving breakfast, and they were serving lunch, and they were serving a snack. And she said – she came up to him and she said, “Mr. Eikward, if we had supper here what would we have?” And he said, “You know what that told me George? She wasn’t getting supper.” So I don’t think if we look at somebody coming in and privatizing our school lunch program they’re going to have that concern for that student, and I think that’s where we’ve lost focus. We’ve got to let people know we’re not just going and cooking and eating and sending that child -

AH: You have to distinguish yourself from all the other places that are out there, from the convenience stores and from the fast food establishments, and I think that has enabled us to become what we are in a program, but I can also see how we could easily turn the tables back – we have budget cuts and you don’t have trained employees, and you’re talking about management companies – as you well know we have the second school district in this state to be privatized and I understand that there is at least one RFP that’s already gone out for another school district, so I think we’re on a roll towards something that – I think that y’all have always worked with local directors to make sure that they can do the best they can do within the budget that they have to prevent that – but ideology plays a lot into that also. We also have a lot of directors who are retiring and that’s an opportunity that management companies love to have to go in at that time. So it’s interesting to see your take on that because I’m sure you work with people that do have management companies operating their program.

GW: Back several years ago when it all came out Cathy Cox was running for governor at that time. She’s a very good friend of mine and so she and I were discussing that, and one [reflection that] she made, she didn’t think it was right for the state to fund all this equipment that we currently have in place and then let someone come in behind you and use it for no money.

AH: Not lease it or anything else that they would in any other [situation].

RK: That made it even easier for them to come in

GW: And I said this, I said to the superintendent in [illegible], “If they can do it, why can’t we do it?” The only way they can do it is they’re going to have to loosen the guidelines, and that’s what we’ve worked so hard to get, the guidelines to keep these meals where they are.

AH: And the standards. We had a session yesterday morning a little bit on privatization and especially focused on the food in New York, the \$20,000,000 food that New Jersey is falling behind on not giving rebates back to the programs, management companies that don’t rebates from purchased foods back to the programs. Those kinds of things to me would be devastating, and I can see that one of the things about privatization – once a school district goes there it’s very difficult for them to say, “We made a mistake and we’re going to go back” because those policy makers don’t want to ever admit that they have made a mistake and then go back.

GW: I have a big county. I’m not going to say where it is, I’m not going to say who it is, but they’re privatized. And I go into their school systems, and they’re a very good customer of ours. From Colorpoint– they buy a lot of Colorpoint serving lines from us, and I can tell you right now today, you go into that dining room; it looks just like going into a convenience store. I mean it is a convenience store. And they’re not interested in what they’re getting on that regular meal. They’re interested in what they can sell them a-la-carte.

RK: They’re interested in what they can sell a-la-carte, exactly.

GW: That’s where they make their money.

RK: That's exactly where they make their money.

AH: We talked a lot about that yesterday too. So that is a fear that I have and one of the things that we have suggested to the association – and industry could play a big role in this – is that that several years ago when some issues were going on in Bibb County prior to the commissary that she built, we tried to get the association to develop an intervention plan so that we would have regular visibility with superintendents and administrators on those particular topics. We used to like to sort of put our heads down and ignore the idea of food service management companies, but I think it really needs to be dealt with head-on.

RK: Yes.

AH: And let them see some of the things that you do see coming out of audits and out of like the suits in New York and New Jersey, and help them understand that if the milk equivalents aren't set right then they're going to make a chunk of money off your a-la-carte, they're going to make a lot of money off of you a-la-carte and things of that nature.

GW: And the benefits that they school lunch people have right now under state guidelines will go away when that privatize comes in. They won't pay insurance. They're not going to do that. That labor's going to go away.

AH: And that's a good way to cut the state budget also. All of these people that are here at this meeting – Joy Hueys and Dot Doosenburys and Mary Nixes and Josephine Martins worked to get that funding, and we have has such wonderful success with state funding, but with everything, with them losing state money now and with the pressure to contain the cost of health care and everything there's a real chance for these school districts to look at privatization.

GW: Oh yea. No doubt about it.

AH: The time is right. Any other stories that you guys would like to share. It's been interesting just getting your perspective on some different things in what we've talked about today.

RK: There's a million stories to be told but you don't have time for that now.

GW: One of the guys that was in our group today – our chef – was telling me, he said, "You know", and my wife has said this, because this is the only job I've ever had,

AH: Your wife is a teacher, right?

GW: No, no, no, she's a nurse, but this is the only job I've ever had. Robert knows, he brought me up in the dealer end of it, or I was already there, and then he came in as a rep, and then I went into the rep end of it, and of all the people I call on the food service people are the nicest people – yea, you're going to find one of two maybe – but overall we all stick together and they're friends forever. You don't ever lose that friendship.

AH: There's no competition – even what I see from the industry – you do so much collaboration even though you are competing businesswise.

RK: Right.

GW: Most definitely.

AH: We appreciate your time.

RK: Absolutely. It was a pleasure. Thank you.

GW: Thank you.

AH: Thank you for being here.

RK: Thank you for having us here.