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Shirli Self Oral History

Shirli Self is an Idaho native who has worked in school nutrition both in Idaho and Oregon, in a unique position. The area where she currently works in Oregon is so rural and remote that Oregon pays for her students to finish high school in Idaho after they complete eighth grade in Oregon, because the nearest Idaho high school is much closer than the nearest Oregon high school. She has twenty-one years of school nutrition experience and is a one-woman show, having no employees and being responsible for feeding ninety-three K – 8 students every day.

JB: I'm Jeffrey Boyce and it is March 13, 2019. I'm here at the Institute of Child Nutrition with Shirli Self. Welcome Shirli and thanks for taking the time to talk with me today.

SS: You're welcome.

JB: Could we begin by you telling me a little bit about yourself, where you were born and where you grew up?

SS: Ok. I was born in 1959 in a little town up in Idaho, Council, Idaho, about a hundred miles north of Boise. I was born in Council, but I lived in New Meadows, which is a little town a little further up north, and I went to school there until about freshman year of high school, and then we went back to Council, and that's where I graduated from high school, is Council.

JB: Ok. Was there a lunch or breakfast program?

SS: There was a lunch program, but it wasn't free or reduced. So I didn't get to participate very often, but I did once in a while. Even if it was only like forty cents, back then people just didn't eat a hot lunch, because forty cents was quite a bit of money, if you had four kids and you paid every single day. There was a lunch, and I remember this heaven of a roll, that when you bit into it there was this meat filling inside. And I can still taste that bread and that meat filling after all these years.

JB: Was it like a ground meat?

SS: Yes, it was like a ground meat with sauce and onions and yumminess inside it. It was so good – I still remember that.

JB: Do you know what it was called?

SS: No I don't. I was like grade school -

JB: Was it like a Sloppy Joe, but it was all contained?

SS: It was all contained, but it wasn't barbeque. It was just a yummy, salty meat taste inside this roll. I can say that was my favorite, and I still remember that.

JB: So how did you get involved in the child nutrition profession?

SS: I didn't choose it, it chose me. I was 30ish years old and looking for something to do, and I had a little boy, and he was in kindergarten, so I thought, 'Well I can go sub at the kitchens.' So I did that for like two months or something, and then it was too hard. You couldn't get up in the morning and be called as a sub and try to find a babysitter all in one time. And so I put that off for a year. And then I went in 1996 and reapplied, and became full-time, part-time. I had to do a split shift, one hour in the morning, then go home for a while, then come back for another hour and a half. And I started doing dishes and I'd walk in and there'd be a big pile of dishes that the cooks made in the morning. And I remember a few times just walking in to those dishes. They'd be back in their little room having their little coffee break and whatnot, and talking and laughing and having a good time. And I'd walk in and there'd be a big pile of dishes. I thought 'I'm not doing this for the rest of my life. This is not going to happen.' So I started listening to them talking about their morning of their fixing their pancakes or their waffles, and what they're going to make for lunch, how many they were going to have to serve, and what was going on. So I started listening to all that and gained as much information and knowledge as I could. And then it took about four years and then I got hired on as a full-time, part-time cook. And so I'd work like four hours a day, and then did that for about twelve or thirteen years, maybe 14ish, and then I came on as a full-time employee, where I got benefits and all that stuff, and I haven't looked back since. And I finally got the job as a manager for Idaho and worked one year there. And then this little job that came up where I'm at now came, and it was another thing that I didn't choose it, it chose me, because my son lives in Weiser called me and said, "Mom, there's a job at Annex School." So I called and said, "Are you hiring?" She said, "Well we are. Why?" And I said, "Well, my son told me that you were hiring." And she said, "Well, we kinda are." And I thought 'What is that kinda are thing?' So I told her who I was, that I was working

at Weiser, and had been by that time for twenty-one years. And she said, “Well, why don’t you come over and fill out an application?” And so I did. I went over and filled out the application and got called back for an interview. Unbeknownst to me they’d already done a round of interviews. When I had made the call that’s why she was like ‘Well, we kinda are’ because they hadn’t chosen anybody yet. So they chose me, and now I’m there.

JB: Ok. And what’s the name of the town?

SS: It’s not even a town. It’s an area, Annex, and the reason it’s Annex is it’s annex to Weiser, Idaho. And so our eighth graders go to high school there at Weiser in Idaho, but they get educated in Oregon in elementary school.

JB: Oh. That’s interesting.

SS: So there’s no post office or anything. We use Ontario, Oregon’s address.

JB: Ok. Has there been a mentor or anyone who kind of helped you along in the field as your career developed?

SS: Not really a mentor – I think I just kind of helped myself along – mentored myself. There were women that came and went, retired and all that, but there was never really anyone that I called and said, “Hey, help me with this idea,” or whatever. I just kind of did my own thing.

JB: Do you have a state association there?

SS: Yes.

JB: And do you belong to it?

SS: ISNA, yes, I did Idaho, and now I’m Oregon SNA, yes.

JB: Is there anything unique about Oregon and/or Idaho regarding the child nutrition programs?

SS: I think what’s so unique is I’ve been up there with these people in the ICN training this week, that have warehouses the size of a city, and I have a back room. I don’t have thousands of students or anything. I’m 93 students. And I don’t have any employees. I’m the only employee in nutrition in my school.

JB: So you’re a one-woman show.

SS: I'm a one-woman show from six to two every day.

JB: And what grades is it you're serving, those 93 students?

SS: Kindergarten through eight.

JB: Ok. So that's in Oregon?

SS: That's in Oregon.

JB: And then they go to high school in Idaho?

SS: They go to high school in Idaho.

JB: Where you used to work?

SS: Where I used to work, yes. And they come to our school in the morning and they get on a bus, and the bus drivers go across the Snake River and right into Idaho and that's where they go to high school.

JB: How does the funding work for that?

SS: Oregon pays their tuition, because the school where we're at is closer than Ontario, Oregon, which is a bigger city. There are like 9,000 people there, so they have a high school. But Weiser is closer. It's like half a mile across the bridge. And the township of Annex has ranches and houses spread around to give us our 93 kids. So they have to be able to go to Idaho and our school has to pay for that.

JB: Interesting, interesting. What's a typical day like for you, or is there such a thing?

SS: Get up in the morning with the chickens, go in and do what every other lunch lady does, just get ready for breakfast, then get ready for lunch. I have no helpers, so I have student helpers, which is kind of fun. I have the seventh and eighth, and now the sixth; they all of them want to come in and help too, and I pair a sixth grader with a seventh or eighth grader and they come in and they help me serve and clean up and do what our 'helper' would do, sort of like if I had gotten the privilege to hiring somebody to come help me, well I just use the students.

JB: What's the percentage of your free and reduced?

SS: We're CEP -

JB: That's Community -?

SS: Eligibility, so we're all free. But the year I got there they weren't, and I think it was a glitch in paperwork or something, so they weren't CEP that year, but everybody still ate for free, because the superintendent paid for the kids that had to pay, and they were all free. But the reason we are CEP is because of the direct certified kids, and the foster kids, and the migrant worker kids, and all of that. That's why we qualify.

JB: So what do you do after you get the breakfast done?

SS: I start doing lunch.

JB: Do you do your own menu planning?

SS: I do my own menu planning, my own ordering. Somebody else does the financial part, because we have an Oregon Department of Education that does the payroll and all that after I input the numbers that we feed, like a thousand breakfasts a month, and two thousand lunches, then that all goes to somebody else after I input the information. But I plan my own menus. I go around and ask them – I do a survey of what they would like to eat.

JB: What are some of their favorites?

SS: Chicken nuggets, pizza, hamburgers. They don't like homemade stuff. I'm having a heck of a time trying to get them to eat spaghetti and so -

JB: Is that because they don't get it at home?

SS: I guess they're used to eating just junk, finger foods. So I started doing instead of spaghetti, I do a thing called goulash. They love it. But it's just changing the noodles, changing the shape of the noodle.

JB: Whatever works.

SS: Whatever works.

JB: What changes have you seen in child nutrition over the years?

SS: Oh my gosh. Lots. When I first started my very first job after dishwasher was the fry cook. And I would stand in front of these three big baskets and just cook fried all morning long, fries and doughnuts, and we could sell all of that stuff. We

had cookies that we sold, and Hostess doughnuts, and pop and candy bars all throughout the day that the kids at the high school – we only had it at the high school – but they would come in and buy it all day long. And I didn't really pay that much attention, but I bet they didn't really eat much lunch after eating all that candy and stuff. Well that went away. And then the whole grains and the fruits and the vegetables and all that, because when I first started we didn't have to do any of that stuff. You could basically cook what you wanted to cook.

JB: What are some of the biggest challenges you've faced?

SS: One of the things is getting the kids to eat homemade stuff. But I don't think there have been any really big challenges.

JB: What would you say has been your most significant contribution to child nutrition?

SS: Well, I think just being me. I mean like I was saying, this job picked me for some reason. I don't know why, but I try to tell everybody that when you're a lunch lady that's not the only hat you wear. You're a nurse, a counselor, a teacher, a grandma. One of the things that I remember is that at Weiser High School there was a blind boy that was there from freshman on to graduating, and he and I became pretty good friends. And he would know every single day that I was going to be in the same spot at the same time with his lunch. And we chatted and talked about what he was going to do after school and stuff. And just about a year ago – he's been out of school for probably five or six years now – he called me and said, "How are you doing Mrs. Self? I just wanted to let you know that this is X, and I'm doing really good and thinking about getting married." It was just so cool to hear from him. Then you go out bowling some nights and somebody comes running up to you and you think you know them, but you're not sure. "Don't you remember me? I'm so and so and I used to help you in the kitchen. I just saw you across the room and wanted to come say Hi." That happens a lot, a lot. And so I think just being kind, and some lunch ladies are not that kind. They're got the old reputation of being haggard and old and mean. So I try to change that perception.

JB: Do you have any special stories about kids you've served or people you've worked with over the years? You just mentioned the young man.

SS: That one, and I do have some stories about when I was working over in Idaho at that little school district, I started this thing called Throwback Thursdays. We would get the old plastic trays out that they got served on as elementary kids – this is high school – and we would make something homemade that day, on Throwback Thursdays, like spaghetti or chicken noodles, things like that. And then we would use the trays. We had three lines, but we only had the one line that day, and everybody got the same thing, like they used to in the old days, and come through. We'd have firemen, police officers, the mayor, the superintendent, principal, coaches, all on the serving line. And they would be serving them their lunch, and that was SO popular. They didn't continue it after I left. I don't know why. The principal and I had gotten together and he said, "I don't know why you don't just serve everybody the same thing." And I said, "Well, how about if we just pick one day a week and do that?" So we started doing that and it was very, very, very popular. It was in the news and everything that we had done that Throwback Thursday. And then over at my new school I started a thing called Grandparents Luncheon. And every year they had a book fair and they used to have two book fairs, but they got cut back to one because they weren't making enough sales in their book fair. So I got this bright idea to do a Grandparents Luncheon and invite your grandparents to lunch, along with the book fair. So here comes grandma and grandpa to have lunch with the kids, that got dragged down to the gym where the book fair was going on. We sold a thousand dollars of books compared to two or three hundred dollars of books in the year before. So we're doing that again this year. And it's actually coming up on the twentieth of March. So that's just going to keep on continuing. And we do No One Eats Alone Day. That's kind of a national thing, and we pair our sixth, seventh, and eighth graders with the first, second, third, and fourth and fifth graders. They all pair up with a little buddy and the lunch is a little bit staggered, so all the big kids get to go eat lunch early, with the little kids. And they do a picnic style and everybody gets the same thing. I usually do a sack lunch with a trivia card and a little card on there that's got three questions to ask who you're eating lunch with and find out a little bit about them. Then they turn them all in and they get a prize for turning in their list of what they found out about the person they're eating with. The first year I went there I did that and the second year I did it, and they ask me now, "When's No One Eats Alone Day?" Because they kind of like doing that. It's funny to see an eighth grader with a little kindergarten kid. They're just chatting away. And quite

a bit of them eat all their lunch because they've got a partner there with them to talk them into it.

JB: That's a nice concept. What advice would you give someone who was considering child nutrition as a profession today?

SS: Go for it. If they really, really want to it's the best job in the world as far as I'm concerned, especially for somebody like me who didn't have any education, because you can get your education along the way. We have to keep up our continuing education credits and stuff, so if you count up all my continuing education credits along with my high school diploma I've got a lot of schooling going on. For twenty-three years of going to classes, and like this week alone I'm getting like thirty-six credits for this class I'm taking. So it's a good way to do something with your time, get paid for it, and be off when your children are off from school. And like I said, you gain, oh my gosh, every day – if you don't mind hugs, hand-written notes, and sometimes snotty noses and cracked knees, tears and problems. Sometimes they'll come to you and say, "Mrs. Self, can you help me with my homework?" "Well, it depends on what grade level it is." I've helped a lot of kids with math and spelling and stuff. Or they had a fight with their sister or their brother and they want to know what to do about it. So as I said, you wear a lot of hats, and I don't know if it's because I'm a grandma and a mom, but I just love kids. And I think that if you love kids this is the job for you.

JB: Well thanks so much for taking the time to talk with me today.

SS: You're welcome.