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Arlene Colston Oral History

Arlene Colston is a food service manager at McAdory High School in McAdory, Alabama.

Arlene Colston was interviewed by Linda Godfrey in McAdory, Alabama, on January 27, 2012.

LG: This is Mrs. Arlene Colston and she's the manager at McAdory High School in McAdory, Alabama. Thank you very much for letting us get up early this morning and interrupt what you're doing before your students come in for breakfast. The first thing I want to do is ask you about your family. Tell us a little bit about yourself and where you grew up and went to school.

AC: Well, I'm from Bessemer, Alabama, in this area, but I finished school at Bryson High School, because during desegregation we moved to Brighton. A lot of my family came to school here at McAdory. There was the elementary, middle, and high school, but I attended Brighton High. My husband is Forrest Colston, and we live in the area on Bradford Road. We have three children together, a son and two girls.

LG: What about your family? How many siblings do you have, how many brothers and sisters?

AC: I have two brothers.

LG: Did they go to school here at McAdory, or did they go to Brighton?

AC: All of us finished at Brighton High School.

LG: And how did you get involved in child nutrition?

AC: That's because I was looking for a job and I wanted a job where I could work while my children were in school and where I could be at home with my children in the summertime. That's what I was looking for, and it came up with subbing. So I started in September subbing and in February I became a fulltime employee with the school.

LG: Now when you started working in child nutrition; was that after desegregation or before desegregation?

AC: After, because I was in school during segregation.

LG: Do you want to tell us anything about that, when you were in school, and how you felt, and about the cafeteria?

AC: When I was in school during desegregation I was at an all-black school, and that was Brighton. I didn't get a chance to come to McAdory where they did desegregation, but I did have relatives in the school at the time.

LG: Ok, so McAdory had already been desegregated when you went to Brighton, or was it not. You'll have to tell me a little bit about the time.

AC: It wasn't. We all came together in '69, '70.

LG: So you weren't allowed to come to McAdory High School?

AC: No we weren't. We went to W. A. Bell, which was in West Highlands.

LG: What about the child nutrition program, food service program when you were in school? What can you tell us about that?

AC: Oh, they had the best food. It was good, and mostly on Friday's - they had maybe hamburgers or fish every Friday – and cinnamon rolls, the homemade cinnamon rolls were the 'bomb', as the children say now. Everything was good – I think because of the love that the employees put into the cooking. In order to give the best you have to put your best into it, so I think that's what they did.

LG: What was your favorite thing to eat when you were in school? Did you have a favorite?

AC: I really didn't because I love food anyway.

LG: Did you get to eat at school all the time?

AC: Yes.

LG: I know sometimes people didn't get to eat at school all the time because they didn't have the money to pay for it.

AC: Well, you know lunches back then were a little cheaper than they are now.

LG: I know, but money was still tight.

AC: It was. It was. And I did eat.

LG: Do you remember the ladies in the cafeteria?

AC: Some. I don't remember their names, but I remember their faces.

LG: So you started out as a sub, and tell us how your career has gone from there.

AC: I started out here as a sub at McAdory under Mrs. Roy, and after Mrs. Roy was Mrs. Bailey. It's been an experiment. You learn a lot of different things to help. And we talked about that, how different things [are] as times have changed. Back then here at the school we had maybe twenty-five people working in the cafeteria, and it was a close-knit family. We had so many, from the elementary to the high school we had to feed. And it was a challenge because of the different amount of food you had to prepare for. Now it's different in the kitchen because everything is pre-prepared.

LG: We have a lot of convenience foods.

AC: Yes.

LG: Tell us about the scratch cooking, because that's what you used to do.

AC: Yes, scratch.

LG: Especially when Mrs. Bailey was here.

AC: Exactly. We used to have to make the buns, the hamburger buns, especially when we had fish. And we had to make homemade cinnamon rolls, the doughnuts, everything was scratch cooking.

LG: What about the vegetables?

AC: Some of those were fresh at the time, not frozen. I think back then it was healthier. And it still is healthy. It all depends on what you put in it.

LG: Right. I remember hearing somebody say when Mrs. Bailey was here you had a cookout in the spring.

AC: Oh yes.

LG: Do you want to tell us about that?

AC: That was for the seniors. We would have Steak Day. Steak Day consisted of ice cream sundaes, the banana splits. And we had people from all of Jefferson County coming by getting plates. It was hard work because we had to feed from elementary to high school, the twelfth graders, and all the adults, but it was fun to see the smiles on the people's faces.

LG: You had grills actually set up outside. That's what I remember.

AC: Yes, grills.

LG: Did you have other people helping you with it?

AC: Yes. Mrs. Bailey had her husband to help, and like I said, instead of two people that we have on meats now, there were five or six people then. Those were the best days – especially grilled steaks, baked potatoes -

LG: I bet you had good participation on those days.

AC: Yes we did.

LG: Probably close to 100 percent.

AC: Or more!

LG: Or more, because I know I heard about how people came from everywhere for that.

AC: Yes.

LG: When you think about child nutrition in Alabama do you think about anything in particular that is outstanding, or needs improving?

AC: When we think about child nutrition in Alabama we think about the children that we feed. We try to give them our best. You wouldn't serve anything that you wouldn't eat. You want to give your best. They might not like different foods but you encourage them to try it because it's healthful to the body.

LG: Tell us a little bit about how you do that. How do you get them to try things? Let's just say you have Brussels sprouts one day and I've never had those little tiny cabbages – that's what my students used to call them – and you wanted me to try them, what would you do?

AC: Well I would just encourage you to try it for the first time, and if you don't like it you don't have to pick it up, but it may put a little hair on your chest – that's what I tell the boys all the time – "Try it. It'll put a little hair on your chest." Make it look presentable. Give it a little cheese or something and tell them to try it. We have done samples to give the children. Cut it up and say, "Let's try this. It's a new product that we want to try and see if you'll like it." We have done that a lot since I've been here.

LG: When you do that do you see an improvement in them accepting the healthier products?

AC: Yes. They'll accept it. They'll say they like it and so that's how we bring the new items to the school, by them trying it.

LG: What would you say a favorite meal is for students?

AC: Taco salad. We had that this week.

LG: The students like that?

AC: They LOVE taco salad.

LG: Now what all do you put on your taco salads?

AC: We have the lettuce, tomatoes, corn, and sometimes Mexican beans. The children really enjoy taco salad?

LG: Do you use ground beef or ground turkey?

AC: Ground beef with the taco seasoning. It's amazing. You can put something you think they would pick up too, but they go for the taco salad. Or they'll pick that up and want to buy an extra dish of taco salad. But it is a lot of work, and it does have us late in the afternoons cleaning up. More children want to eat because we don't have it that often, maybe once every month or two. It all depends on the cycle we're running.

LG: How does that make you feel when you have a lot of students that eat?

AC: It makes me feel good, proud, because it's something that they really want to eat. We have fast food in our area, so it makes you proud that they didn't go to that place that day to eat.

LG: Can they go off campus to eat?

AC: They're not supposed to go off, but you know how that is.

LG: Yes, I do.

AC: They're not supposed to go off.

LG: Ok. When you come in in the morning what do you generally do first thing in the morning?

AC: First thing in the morning I take the temperatures of the equipment and then I get things together for breakfast – turn on the machines, because sometimes the line serving machines are down. We have to take names and numbers – some of [the students] do not remember their numbers; they'll tell you something different.

LG: Only the high school students; the elementary remember theirs don't they?

AC: Yes.

LG: It's amazing.

AC: It is amazing. And I tell them that too.

LG: You do that first, and then what?

AC: You prepare the food for that morning.

LG: You have a breakfast program.

AC: Yes, we have breakfast.

LG: What kind of participation do you have at breakfast?

AC: It all depends on what we are serving.

LG: Oh really?

AC: They love biscuits and sausage. They love a chicken biscuit, and they love pancakes and sausage. Now eggs and the bacon they will eat, but - they want juice every day – the juices.

LG: Do they have a favorite kind of juice?

AC: A lot of them like apple juice, but they drink it all.

LG: What about milk?

AC: They'll pick up the milk if they have to for the reimbursable meal, but they prefer the juice.

LG: And do you do the hiring of the people who work here or does somebody else do that?

AC: We are part of the interviewing and we make a suggestion on who we would like – it all depends on how the interview went – but yes, we are part of that, along with the principal and our supervisor of the child nutrition program.

LG: Do you ever talk to parents – parents ever call you?

AC: Yes. A lot of them when they call want to know if their child could charge, because they forgot their money. That's pretty much the majority of the parents calling is to ask for their child can charge. We are only supposed to allow the students to charge so much, and we tell them when it gets to five dollars that they do need to bring their money, because they are low – but they still forget.

LG: Has there been a student over the years that you can think of that you did something for, or that really needed your help? We kind of all have our special students or special memories. Do you have anything like that that you'd like to share with us?

AC: There are so many students that have been through, or are coming through, and they all call me Mom or Grandmother – all of them. And I accept that because to show love you have to be responsive to what they are saying. We have a lot of students that may be hurting and you can bring that out by caring for them, and saying kind words to them. I don't have a specific student, but they're all, even when they're grown and with children, will say, "I know you're alright down at McAdory because Mrs. Arlene will get a hold to you." And they will also say, "If you see my child doing anything that you don't think they should do get on to them." And that makes me feel good to know that the parents don't mind me saying something to the children.

LG: And they trust you.

AC: And they trust, yes.

LG: Ok, well I have to ask about this, because I'm a football fan, and we have kind of our pride and joy of Alabama in this area, Bo Jackson went to school here.

AC: Yes.

LG: And he's been a spokesperson for child nutrition in Alabama. Do you have any memories of him as a student?

AC: Well, Bo was quiet in my opinion. He didn't do a lot of what would you say - ?

LG: He spent all of his energy playing football.

AC: Yes, he did. I wasn't on that team at that time – we feed the football boys.

LG: Oh, you do?

AC: On Fridays, every Friday. We still have that program going where we feed the football boys during football season. Bo was good. He was along with my stepson. [They] went to school together.

LG: We were talking just a few minutes ago that you've had an illness, and you really kind of worked through that rather than taking time off, and why is that?

AC: Because I love my job. That's the most thing. I love what I do. I did take off in October because I was very weak at the time. But I came back November 7th and I've been back since. Some days I'm weak, but Mrs. Anthony allowed things to work with me, she worked with me during my illness.

LG: Now that's your director?

AC: That's my director, and I appreciate everything that they did for me. They were very concerned, and that's why you can love your job – because people are concerned with what you are doing and how you feel. She's a good director. She and Nathan both try and give us what we need to help the program work as a success.

LG: I definitely agree – of course she's a good friend. Let's talk about the civil rights era for just a little bit. You had stated that you weren't allowed as a student to come to school here. When you started working here how did you feel about coming here to work, and did you ever think about 'Well, they wouldn't allow me to come to school here, but I can work here.'?

AC: No, because that was all in the past – because I didn't go to school here, I didn't have any problems with that. All I was looking for was a job, and that's all I wanted, a job. They allowed me to get a job. They saw that I had the potential of working. And at the time [the] only time I would take off is if I had an illness – there was sickness in the family with the children - I didn't abuse my days, and I don't now.

LG: Did you ever feel that there was a difference, that you were treated differently because of your color?

AC: Maybe a time or two, but when you know who you know, which is God, that has everything in perspective, in charge, it allowed me to go on, look at the person, now what was in their heart, because if we do that we're in trouble.

LG: Right. That's right. When you applied for the job as manager how did you feel about being selected for that?

AC: Coming back here?

LG: Yes.

AC: Well, I was at Pitman and there was an opening. They said, "McAdory's going to have an opening." I said, "Oh, I'm going to try because it's closer to home." And that's what I was thinking of, much closer to home. You know you always want to be closer to home for your job, especially with the economy and stuff. And there was a janitor that said, "I believe you can get those ladies straight down there." But it was just coming back home to the job, and them accepting me back, because I worked with them before I left going to the elementary and to Pitman. So they accepted me back, and it was a good challenge.

LG: And how long have you been here as the manager now?

AC: About fifteen years now.

LG: And you still enjoy it?

AC: I still enjoy it.

LG: You still enjoy it and you have all those children around here. When you look back over your profession, at having a job and working in child nutrition how do you feel about that? How do you feel about your life in general when it comes to your job? And how have your children felt about your working here?

AC: They enjoyed it, because they could ride with me to school in the morning time instead of riding the 'Big Cheese'. *[Laughter]* But to work here, as far as my

profession, is wonderful. I enjoy the work because it's much better. It's different from back then, because like you said, we did scratch cooking all the time. Now it's better, because if you run out you can go grab something and cook it. You still have to prepare for what you think they might eat more of, for instance the taco salad. Taco salad takes a lot of meat – ground beef – so you have to make sure you have all of that out before cooking, because you can't run and try to grab it while it's frozen.

LG: You can't thaw it, right.

AC: Exactly. So you really have to have your thinking cap on to what you think the children may accept.

LG: Did you find it difficult to plan when you became a manager, or did you already have enough people that had helped you out with those types of things?

AC: By working with the elementary – you know I started here at the high school – and just seeing the different times where you have to so much meat, this takes so much, and it just stayed in my mind what I needed to do. Plus we have this new technique equipment that helps with the planning too. You can go in and use those. You do have different [employees] to help with how to do things until you learn, with such things as increasing and decreasing servings.

LG: When you think about all the opportunities that you've had and the things that you've done is there somebody that was a mentor to you, that kind of helped you along and guided you, and that you felt going to and asking questions?

AC: When I started there were a lot of mothers, ladies in the lunchroom. I remember Mrs. Ruth Sanford, and she called me her daughter, so that was my adopted mother. She would help me a lot. It's just amazing what you can learn from older women – people – as long as you want to learn, if you want to do better. And just following under Mrs. Bailey, what she did for the school, and how she worked with different ones, to get the plate counts. Because that was the most important thing, was the plate count.

LG: Right, getting those reimbursable meals.

AC: And it's still the plate counts.

LG: right, right. Now I understand you do some work with the Family and Consumer Science students that are in school here with Mrs. Dallam. Can you tell us anything about working with students, and how you feel about that, because I've heard through the grapevine that you do a lot of excellent training with the students here?

AC: Well, you know they have to have their food handling card?

LG: Right.

AC: And so Mrs. Dallam works with us with that. When we needed [students] last year she would send them over, but we did have one to step to the plate on taco day, which was Wednesday. And he came up, he saw we were in the kitchen trying to prepare more tacos, and we had a window full of trays. So he came by, and went to the window and started pulling dishes for us.

LG: Oh really?

AC: And that really helped us because the dishes would have hit the floor. And Mrs. Dallam said if we ever need them to let her know. I'm glad that he stepped to the window – and his name is James – he came to the window and I said, "Let me get you an apron." And he pulled dishes the rest of the day for us to help us get caught up. And then he came back and helped in the dining room.

LG: Oh really?

AC: And we do have kids in the special class that will come to help in the dining room when we are short, because a lot of times we are short. We can't find a sub.

LG: That happens a lot everywhere I think, doesn't it?

AC: Yes.

LG: Well, you're really fortunate. And they're fortunate that they have you. You've taken time to help train them and they know you care about them. Otherwise he would never have done that, right?

AC: Exactly. And Mr. Staggs, the principal, encouraged Mrs. Dallam to let them come and help us when we need it, so I thank Mr. Staggs for that too.

LG: Sure. It sounds like a lot of teamwork.

AC: It is.

LG: What do you say to these students when they come and they're working with you and if they say to you, "I'm really interested in doing this. This is what I want to do with my life. I'd like to work in child nutrition."

AC: Well, I tell them it's very – it's a good job. Child nutrition is a good job because you're caring for so many children and you're giving them what they need, because they might not receive it from home, and they can get a full meal here for breakfast and lunch. Some of them will be so anxious to get here for breakfast that I'll ask them, "Did you not eat supper at home?" But it's good to know that they are interested enough to come and eat out of the cafeteria. Like I said, there are so many fast food places in the area. And James did say that when he graduates he's going to open up his business and run me out of business.
[Laughter]

LG: I doubt that's going to happen.

AC: I doubt it too – he wrestles – and he says he's going to open up him a business.

LG: Good for him. So you've given him a good background then.

AC: Yes, yes.

LG: Good, good. You were talking about how when some of the students come in they act like they haven't eaten and you ask them if they have eaten dinner. Do any of them every say no?

AC: No, it's just a scenario because they are so anxious to eat. They can't wait for the food to come out.

LG: Do you notice that any of the students are hungrier on Mondays than they were on other days of the week?

AC: I really can't tell because they don't pick up the food like they're hungry. Some of them just love to eat, and they love the different varieties of the food. Some of them don't like the fast food. For instance if we have meatloaf, green beans, mashed potatoes, they will pick up that instead of pizza. The majority of them like fast food, and some of them like the country cooking.

LG: Have you seen a change in the way students are eating over the years?

AC: Yes. It is a change, because at one time they would eat pizza and a sandwich. Now if you put a pizza compared to maybe meatloaf they pick up the meatloaf. They say they get tired of fast food.

LG: That's kind of nice to hear isn't it?

AC: It is. So now we don't serve pizza three times a week – maybe once a week, because I want to give them a variety of food, a good, healthy meal.

LG: So are they beginning to eat more vegetables and fresh fruit and things like that?

AC: Yes, they are. And a lot of them will pick up fresh fruit, and not cake, especially they boys, they will pick up more fresh fruit.

LG: That's nice to hear. Is there anything else you'd like to tell us?

AC: All I can say is child nutrition in the schools is good for the children. It's a healthy meal, plus it keeps us in contact with the children. I ask them what they prefer, because I do a lot of asking other children what they would like to eat. That's how I plan my meal – based on what they prefer – and I try to get that. They love the hot wings, and they will buy extra when it comes to hot wings. But it's a seasonal food I say. I try to plan my menus according to the season.

LG: Thank you so much. I really appreciate you doing this.

AC: Thank you.