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**Donna Martin**

Donna Martin

Institute of Child Nutrition

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## Donna Martin Oral History

A Miami native, Donna Martin then went north to the University of Georgia for her post-secondary education. Donna ended up settling in Georgia and building a solid career there in child nutrition, picking up a strong southern accent along the way. Donna is currently the nutrition director for Burke County Public Schools.

Jeffrey Boyce: I'm Jeffrey Boyce and it's August 4, 2022. I'm here in Okolona, Mississippi, and today I'm talking with Donna Martin in Waynesboro, Burke County, Georgia. Welcome Donna and thanks for taking the time to talk with me today.

Donna Martin: Well, thanks Jeff for reaching out. I'm thrilled to be talking to you.

Jeffrey Boyce: Well I understand you have quite the story to tell, so let's get started. Could we begin today by you telling me a little bit about yourself, where you're born, where you grew up?

Donna Martin: We can. So I was born in Miami Florida, which is really I was a Yankee. And I didn't know that growing up.

Donna Martin: And I decided to go to the University of Georgia, and that's when I found that I was a Yankee, because I was saying you guys and they quickly told me that I needed to say y'all. So within six weeks of going to the University of Georgia, I had a southern accent, and I have kept that southern accent ever since.

Jeffrey Boyce: Well, I was gonna say you don't really sound like my friends from Miami.

Donna Martin: No, I picked up that southern accent really quickly, and I have embraced it.

It's funny Jeff, I do a lot of public speaking, and when I talk, several times on my evaluation, they said, "She said y'all too much. We say you all." So now, if I'm not speaking in the South, I say, "By the way, I'm from the South, and I'm going to say y'all a whole lot."

Donna Martin: And I say, "We're nondiscriminatory, we got the discrimination thing down really quickly you know. And you guys is not politically correct. Y'all is politically correct." And now I get on my evaluation, "I love the y'all" so I just kind of headed it off at the pass.

Jeffrey Boyce: I'm the same way. When I was in Peace Corps I told people I was bilingual, I spoke English and southern.

Donna Martin: That's right, that's right, that's exactly right.

Jeffrey Boyce: Well, before we get to your college career, tell me about growing up in Miami. You went to elementary in high school in Miami?

Donna Martin: I did. I went to all schools and what I didn't appreciate about growing up in Miami is that the weather was kind of the same year round, so I rode my bike to school all the way through high school because it was really flat down there and the weather was always really nice. I rode my bike everywhere. I could ride my bike to the beach, so I could go to the beach anytime I wanted. And we had a real small lake house, so I started waterskiing when I was like five years old, and slaloming at nine, and so just did a lot of water sports. And my dad built me a dune buggy, and he added an airboat, and it was just a really different lifestyle. And it was the only lifestyle I knew.

Donna Martin: And I didn't understand until I went to the University of Georgia that you needed sweaters, and coats and jackets, because I didn't own any of those things.

Donna Martin: And when I was in high school was a long time ago, but as a girl, you had to wear dresses and we could only wear pants if it was 55 degrees or less. It got 55 degrees or less one time in my four years.

So I got to wear pants one time. But that just shows you the difference in time. But in our yard what was so neat is we had avocado trees and lemon trees and orange trees and cumquats and grapefruit and mangoes and all these things that I didn't appreciate being able to go out and pick an avocado and just eat it for lunch or a snack or anything like that and so there were a lot of really awesome things about growing up in Miami. And then you know when the Cuban movement infiltrated I actually got to learn a lot of Spanish, so I felt like I got the part about working with other countries and other people. I learned that in a unique way with kids coming to school that didn't speak English, and joining our community so.

Donna Martin: But I lived through the Cuban missile crisis. We had a basement, a bomb shelter at my house that we dug.

Donna Martin: And I lived through a bunch of hurricanes, so you know all those experiences have really helped me in my job, because hurricanes, I understood what hurricanes were like and what it was like to live without electricity, without water, and how to be prepared for all those things. So hurricanes and other things don't really scare me anymore, because I lived through those things. The worst one was named Donna, and so I got teased a lot in school, because that was my name.

Jeffrey Boyce: Were there lunch or breakfast programs when you go into school in Miami?

Donna Martin: There was just lunch, and lunch was 25 cents, and milk was a nickel.

Donna Martin: And I remember that when you went through the lunch line they just handed you a tray and you sat down and you ate it.

Donna Martin: And so that's so different than what my kids experience in lunch in my school district where it's like the SNS cafeteria where they have so many choices.

Donna Martin: We don't have any mystery meat anymore like they had when I was in school. But yeah, lunch was a quarter and milk was a nickel.

Donna Martin: I ate lunch a good bit at school, but I also packed my lunch, and I think my family was probably one of those families, my dad was a fireman, and there were three little girls in the house, and I think we were probably one of those families that was on the borderline that maybe could have qualified for reduced meals, or something. There were times when Mother didn't have lunch money for us and we packed our lunches.

Donna Martin: I remember sometimes we didn't have bread for a sandwich. I remember one time being horrified that I had to pack my lunch with a pita bread and make a peanut butter and jelly sandwich out a pita, and I was just embarrassed to go to school.

Donna Martin: So I'm a big proponent of universal school meals, to take away that stigma and just to allow everybody to have healthy meals every single day.

Donna Martin: I have positive impressions of school lunch, but then, when I got to high school, I was in a high school that had 5,000 kids. We had split shifts.

Jeffrey Boyce: Wow.

Donna Martin: Because it was one of those white flight things where the kids were moving out of town, because all the Cubans were moving in. And so my parents moved. My dad built this house, and so we were actually going to a school where we really didn't fit in. Economically we were at the bottom of the totem pole

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Donna Martin: It was a wealthier school district, and the kids were moving in so fast I couldn't build schools fast enough, so you went to school from 7:30 to 12:30 or 12:30 to 5:30.

Donna Martin: And you went 7:30 to 12:30 if you are on the football team or cheerleader in the band, because you needed to practice after school. Well, I tried out for cheerleading and they just laughed at me.

Donna Martin: I didn't get very far to any of those things, and so I went to school in the afternoon. And so, nobody ate lunch at the school, because we would eat before we came to school, or you would eat when you got off at 12:30. So the poor school nutrition director - I think about that poor school district; how did they survive with these schools, because nobody ate lunch?

Donna Martin: There was no incentive, you know you can work, you know, so I worked at Publix in the morning, from nine to 12 and then I went and grabbed something to eat and went to school at 12:30.

Jeffrey Boyce: Oh wow.

Donna Martin: So I don't have any high school memories of school lunch, I never once ate the school lunch.

Jeffrey Boyce: Oh wow. Well what about earlier when you were in elementary. Do you remember any favorite menu items that you had?

Donna Martin: I loved the Salisbury steak with gravy and mashed potatoes; that was the menu that I remember the most, and I seemed to really like that menu.

Donna Martin: BI liked the milk a lot too. I'm a big milk drinker and I always liked the milk a lot too, and the homemade rolls. I'm a big bread person, so I did love the homemade rolls.

Jeffrey Boyce: The homemade rolls - everybody talks about the homemade rolls.

Donna Martin: I know, and you could smell them in the school. And we still in my district make homemade rolls almost every day. Today we made homemade whole wheat cinnamon rolls.

Donna Martin: So I love when you walk into school that you can smell our homemade rolls, so we have continued that tradition and I'm hoping that will stay.

Jeffrey Boyce: Well, your assignment is to email me that recipe as soon as we finish this interview.

Donna Martin: I'll be glad to.

Jeffrey Boyce: So after high school, why did you pick the University of Georgia?

Donna Martin: Okay, so I was kind of one of those skinny little kids that was a late bloomer in high school, and I was in such a big school and I just never felt very popular, never felt like I fit in or anything, and I was going to go to Florida State where my mother went.

Donna Martin: And at the last minute, I knew this football player who had been recruited, who was at my high school a year ahead of me, he'd been recruited and had scholarship offers at 22 schools.

Donna Martin: And out of those 22 schools, he picked the University of Georgia. So in my mind I said, "There must be something special about the University of Georgia."

Donna Martin: My parents had bought some property and North Georgia, up in the Blue Ridge Mountains up there.

Donna Martin: So I thought 'They're eventually going to be moving there. Why don't I go someplace new and just start new?' and so I went to the University of Georgia. In those days you didn't go visit schools like you do now; the kids all go visit all these colleges.



Donna Martin: I showed up for the very first time right before school started. I had never been to the campus. I didn't know one single person at the school. I just showed up, and there I was as a freshman with a northern, Yankee accent.

Donna Martin: And I remember wearing really short shorts, because that's the kind of stuff we wore in Miami. So my clothes did not really fit in or anything. So I had to kind of adjust a little bit to college, but I love the University of Georgia. It was a great school.

Jeffrey Boyce: What did you study there?

Donna Martin: I studied dietetic, foods and nutrition, and I'd love to tell you the story why I chose that professional if you'll indulge me.

Donna Martin: So in Miami my neighbors, like I said we lived in this wealthy district, and my neighbors worked for Eastern Airlines; you probably don't remember Eastern Airlines.

Donna Martin: Okay, so she was a stewardess and he was a pilot. So they were the most glamorous couple. So she was gorgeous and he was this nice looking man. They had a lot of money. And so I would babysit for them on Saturdays, and I just looked up to them so much, and I said, "When I grow up, I want to be a stewardess." and she looked to me and I was skinny scrawny little kid.

Donna Martin: And she said, "Donna, you'll never be able to be a stewardess." Well, my mind, it was because I wasn't pretty enough, you know, because all the stewardesses those days were gorgeous.

Donna Martin: And her mind, I was never going to be tall enough, but I didn't understand that. So she said, "You ought to become a dietitian, because if you become the dietitian you can work for the airlines and fly for them, and you plan menus, and all this kind of stuff, and I said, "Well that's a great idea." So I went to the University of Georgia to become a dietitian so I could work for Eastern Airlines. Needless to say, I never went and worked for the airlines.

Jeffrey Boyce: I've heard some roundabout stories about how people got into child nutrition, but I think that's one of the better ones.

Donna Martin: I always think it's the funniest story. I'm sure she's probably not alive anymore, but I wish I could go back and say thank you for telling me that I could never be a stewardess.

Donna Martin: But I did get to be a dietitian, when I was president the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, I did get to travel a whole lot. I have gotten to travel a whole lot. I've done plenty of flying and wasn't because I was a stewardess, but she pushed me in that direction, which is something that is hilarious.

Jeffrey Boyce: Most people even who major in diabetics don't end up in child nutrition. What steered you in that direction?

Donna Martin: So I went here to Georgia, and then I went to the University of Alabama-Birmingham to do my dietetic internship program, and I fell in love with Birmingham. It's a really pretty town and they have a really big nutrition program there. And they offered me the opportunity to stay on and get a Master's degree in clinical nutrition, and they would pay for it. So I knew that I was going to eventually live in Augusta and there wasn't any master's program, so I stayed on and got my master's degree there and clinical nutrition there. So I went on and got married. My husband was from Augusta. That's why we wound up in

Augustus, where I live. And came to Augusta and there were job openings everywhere Jeff, I mean every hospital needed a clinical dietitian, so.

Donna Martin: I was about the only person in town that had a master's degree, and there was this one job that needed somebody with a master's degree, and the pay was like 50% better, and it was no weekends and no holidays was in pediatrics, a pediatric clinic.

Donna Martin: So I took the job in the pediatric clinic and worked there for two years and really enjoyed that and then University Hospital called me and said, "We need somebody to start a dietetic internship program and we need somebody with a master's degree and you're the only person in town with a master's degree."

Donna Martin: So I said, "Oh my gosh, I'm just two years out of my internship," and they said, "Please, please." I said, "Whatever." So I started the dietetic internship and for nine years I had dietetic interns.

Donna Martin: And they rotated. I picked the nutrition is a rotation for them. We have had a big school district and had 58 schools and 38,000 kids, and they had like the four people, a director and three coordinators working in that school district, so I got to know the dietitian there really well and I would send the interns there. And I had never rotated through school nutrition when I was in my internship. We didn't do school nutrition. But I just thought it was a new field, and that it was something I wanted the interns to be exposed to. So I wound up having a couple of kids, and I was struggling with my job, with having to - getting to after school activities and getting them to events, and having time off around holidays and summers, and this, that, and the other, and I mentioned to the school nutrition person, who was the coordinator, that was the dietitian. I said, "Marsha, down the road if there's ever an opening in school nutrition, will you call me.?"

Donna Martin: She said, "Sure." So she called me one day and said, "The director after 33 years is retiring." She was not a dietitian but she was retiring.

Donna Martin: And Marsha said, "I'm going to apply for the job." And she said, "You know in this school system they never hire people outside the school district." So she said, "Why don't you come interview for the director's job? And then, when I get the director's job, come back and interview again, it will be like the second time of the meeting you, and then I can hire you as a coordinator."

Donna Martin: I said, "Oh that would be great. I'll have holidays, Christmas and Thanksgiving off, some time off in the summer." So I called my friends that worked in school nutrition for the state, Ruth Gordon, you may know her.

Jeffrey Boyce: I do know Ruth.

Donna Martin: Yes, I called Ruth and I said, "Well, I'm going to interview for this job in school nutrition, and this is how much I know about school nutrition, nothing.

Donna Martin: I said, "Tell me what's going on." So she gave me all this stuff and advice and information, so I went into interview. It was like an eight-person panel.

Donna Martin: They were asking me all these questions, you know, what I would do and what ideas I had, what I would do if I had my way, and I just spouted off all this stuff that Ruth told me. So that night I got a call from the superintendent and he said, "We would like to offer you the director's position for school nutrition."

Donna Martin: I don't want the director's position, what do you say, what do you say? So, I took the job, not knowing a thing about nutrition and the lady, Marsha, who applied for it immediately quit because she didn't get the job.

Donna Martin: So, here I am going to school nutrition, and my only friend has left the job. I didn't know anything about nutrition, so there were like two openings so I called up two of my best dietitian friends and said, "Hey guys, how would you like to come and work for me in school nutrition?"

Donna Martin: They said yes, and then we just did a total turnaround with this program because it was a program that was very stagnant. They didn't have one single breakfast program in their 58 schools. I take that back. They had two breakfast programs in their 58 schools.

Donna Martin: Within two years I had 100% of my schools having breakfast programs. They didn't have any cycle menus. They didn't have computers. They didn't have anything.

Donna Martin: I always say going into a job that is it's either a good idea to go into one that is so terrible that anything you do it's an improvement, which is what I went into. They just didn't have anything.

Donna Martin: Or go into a job, where it's so good that you just kind of get to keep maintaining it. But I went into this job where they didn't have -

Donna Martin: They were buying Krispy Kreme doughnuts on Fridays. That was their dessert on Friday, and as a dietitian I'm like, "Oh my gosh, we just have such a huge opportunity here with these kids."

Donna Martin: So these dietitians came with me and the three of us just made an amazing team. And so we were one of the first school districts to get the Healthier U.S. School goals; we just really made something of that program and standardized everything, got standardized recipes, and it was just a great job and I loved being in the school system where my kids were going to school, because I got to know the principals, I got to know the teachers. It really made for such a nice work/ life balance.

Donna Martin: I have never regretted going into school nutrition. My son, who's an attorney, said, "Mom, you get to do something that makes a difference every single day."

Donna Martin: And he said, "I don't." But he's actually started doing some pro bono work, and he said, "I want to not look back, and feel like I didn't make a difference," so now he's starting on this pro bono work and he says it really does make him feel really, really good.

Donna Martin: I think that's one of the most amazing things about school nutrition is that you really do get to make a difference in the lives of children and families come to the extent you know when I teach a kid to eat kiwi they teach their parents how to eat kiwi. So it just goes on and on and on and as a dietitian, it is a - prevention is the best at the work in and that's what school nutrition is. We're working in prevention.

Jeffrey Boyce: It sounds like you had a big learning curve going in as the director. Did you have any mentors along the way that you were able to ask advice or who kind of guided you?

Donna Martin: Oh absolutely. So I was really involved in the Georgia Dietetic Association, so I had Ruth Gordon, who had kind of got me started on this path,

and I would call her a lot. But I had other huge mentors. I got immediately involved in the school nutrition dietetic practice group. The Academy of Nutrition and Diabetics has like 75,000 members and they have all these different practice subsets like for diabetes or management or home health, nursing homes, and so there was one for school nutrition. I immediately joined that practice group.

Donna Martin: And immediately Ruth called me up and said, “Would you be the newsletter editor?” And I’m like, “I hate writing I hate writing.” She said, “I promise it’s not that much writing.” So I immediately started doing that.

Donna Martin: So it immediately gave me a group of people that I could call and email and talk to. And we had listserves and we had monthly meetings and I just constantly reached out to them. And I met somebody who I’m sure you know, Dale Hayes.

Donna Martin: And so Dale became my all-time biggest mentor and my all-time go to person for any questions, any ideas, any advice She is just my hero, in terms of what she has done for school nutrition over the years, and she has always supported me personally and professionally, and so I would say that she really was a true mentor to me. But that practice group gave me an access to an instant group people that –

Donna Martin: Know I’m a little partial the dietitians because you know we’re real strong on nutrition standards and real strong on making sure that we teach the kids eat healthy and stuff like that, so we always kind of have the same philosophy about what we are trying to do in programs.

Donna Martin: Some other people are just all about making money or just making sure the kids have something to eat. They don't really care that it's good, healthy food. What are we really teaching the kids?

Donna Martin: You know if you buy one of those sugary, powdery doughnuts that meets all the requirements, is that really what we want to teach the kids? I mean it's cheap and it's easy, but I never would buy into things like that, and you know I know you can get pop tarts that meet the guidelines, but I'm not going to serve my kids pop tarts. So this group was just a group that I felt like had the same values and thought processes that I did.

Jeffrey Boyce: That sounds great. So, usually, some people say, "No, or a little," but I'm guessing your educational background was a real asset when you went into child nutrition.

Donna Martin: It was, and I think the thing about dietetic is in my internship in particular, was you rotated through a lot of different areas and kind of learned that - by the time I got out of that internship and I'd gone through all these hospitals and all these different rotations that I'd learned so much.

Donna Martin: So I kind of felt like every job, honestly Jeff, I'd ever had I didn't have the background for it, so my first job in pediatrics I didn't have a pediatric rotation.

Donna Martin: I just jumped right in and I figured it out and then, when I had to write an internship self-study and get an internship accredited, I didn't know anything about how to do that.

Donna Martin: But I did it and it was successful and that internship is still going this day. So I kind of, in dietetic you kind of learn a little bit about so many different things, that I think you really have the skill set to do child nutrition, because I'd had menu planning and I knew the nutrition background. I had management background. I knew about writing specifications. I knew about ordering food. I knew about quantity cooking.



Donna Martin: I had the wellness piece down, so really in diabetics you know your skill set is there.

Donna Martin: And it was so easy. But also I've had four different jobs in my life and all of them I felt like I was not trained for, but I was able to be successful at, but I think it's just the background in diabetics that gave me the guts to go in and just do it. What is the best about school nutrition is we share, we share with anybody and everybody, so you could pick up the phone and call somebody and say, "How do you do this?" and they would help you. "Do you have a recipe for this?" "Yes, I do." "Do you have a vendor for this?" "Yes, I do." And that's what I have tried to do.

Donna Martin: Now that I'm a seasoned veteran and I always say that I don't ever say, "No." So people call me and want help starting supper programs and I help them. Or, "How do you do you know run your summer feeding program?" Share recipes, and share bids, and that is the best thing about school nutrition. We're not in competition with each other, so if I look bad you look bad.

Donna Martin: If I look good you look good. If you look good I like good. So it's all in our best interest to do a really good job. And I'm not competing. Your kids are your kids and my kids are my kids. So it's not like if I have good meals your kids are going to leave Mississippi and come here and come to my school, so why not give you my Congo Chicken recipe, you know.

Donna Martin: Which is one of our most famous recipes. It's called Congo Chicken.

I shared it with someone who has recipe database for school districts all over the country and she asked me for some of our recipes and I sent them to her and that

Congo Chicken recipe is usually the number one most downloaded recipe, out of all of her recipes she has on the Internet.

Donna Martin: Somebody downloaded it and somebody from our district said, "Oh it's my favorite recipe, when I was in school, when I went through Burke County Public Schools," and it just went viral on Facebook one time.

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Jeffrey Boyce: Is there anything special about Georgia regarding the county interesting problems.

Donna Martin: Yes, we have a really strong State Department. We have a really strong State Department, who is very, very supportive. And you never feel like they are out to get you. You feel like they are there to support you. And we also only have one district that has contract food service in the whole state. We have 159 districts, and only one has contract food service. So we have some of the strongest nutrition programs in the country in Georgia. We also have a lot of registered dietitians working in Georgia.

Donna Martin: So I think that brings a lot of strength to the program, because a lot of times you get a principal that doesn't do a good job, and then now the school nutrition director. But in Georgia we have a lot of really strong school nutrition directors.

Jeffrey Boyce: At one time Georgia required directors to have master's degrees. they still do.

Donna Martin: They still do. If you're a certain size, a master's degree and three years' experience. So I had to get certified and I had to take some extra education courses and stuff. So like if you're principal and you want to become a school nutrition director you've got to go back and get certified. So you've got to go back

and take all these nutrition classes and food service management classes, and do all the stuff at the University of Georgia.

Donna Martin: Josephine Martin, I my kissing cousin, we're not related, but I would have loved to have been related to that woman, I idolized her.

Jeffrey Boyce: I was just about to ask if you worked very closely with here.

Donna Martin: Oh gosh yes, she came down to my district and visited several times. And she and I were very, very close. She was the reason that we have to have a master's degree and three years' experience, and all these strong school nutrition standards for directors, absolutely.

Jeffrey Boyce: And then, when she retired, was it Annette Hopgood that replaced her?

Donna Martin: Yes!

Jeffrey Boyce: Did you work with Annette?

Donna Martin: Yes, I worked with Annette, I certainly did, I certainly did.

Jeffrey Boyce: Annette eluded me. She was always supposed to do an old history with me and kept procrastinating. In fact she had me down and they sponsored me a Georgia State Convention once to come to Savannah, and I want to say I did 14 oral histories, with her there, but I never got her actual one. She kept finding excuses.

Donna Martin: She's still alive isn't she?

Jeffrey Boyce: Oh yeah, yeah. But the last time I talked with her, she said she'd moved down after retirement.

Donna Martin: Oh gosh yeah, yeah, I get that.

Jeffrey Boyce: What's a typical day like for you, or is there such an animal?

Donna Martin: No, there isn't, and that's the best thing about working in school nutrition Jeff, is there is no typical day. So you come in and you think that this is what you're going to do, and then the phone starts ringing.

Donna Martin: You know, today, keypads we're out at one of the schools. Our meal viewer TVs weren't working at another school. I went to another school and they just redone all the cafeterias, and they got new floors, and the staff said that the floors were hurting so bad. "I can't stand on them. We've got to get mats."

Donna Martin: The ice machine is broken at a school. We had to go today and I had to direct somebody to go out and pick up these whole grain grits. We needed more grits, because we do a huge farm to school program. So there is no typical day and that is the best thing about school nutrition. Now is it stressful? Yes, it is. And many nights I go home and I go, "I just can't keep doing this."

Donna Martin: We just have so many programs going on here and so many moving pieces, so there's so many things that can go wrong, but there is never a typical day.

Donna Martin: It's seasonal things that you do. Right now we open school this week, so this is the first week of school, and so it's making sure the cash registers are running and we have food and the kids know what they're doing.

Donna Martin: And our new employees are in place and on the payroll and it's just every single day is different. And all day long everything I do is different and that's the best thing about the job.

Donna Martin: When I have time I'm out in the schools. But when I'm in the schools it's like I'm bombarded with, "Can we do this, can we do that?" It's like, "Okay, I'm gonna go back to my office, and then I won't get so many more things on my to do list."

Donna Martin: I laugh about my to do list. It just grows and grows and grows and grows, so I feel like sometimes a little bit of a fireman putting out fires all day long. People call and it's an employee problem that that I need to come and arbitrate.

Donna Martin: Or the freezer is down, and they're trying to get it fixed, or there's something broken, whatever. Or the cookies aren't rising, can I come look at them? What is the problem?

Donna Martin: Today it was, "We don't like these new gloves that we're getting. Can you come look at them?"

Donna Martin: These are not the gloves that we're used to getting. I don't like them. Can you get me the right kind of disposable gloves? I feel like I do a lot of problem solving all day long.

Donna Martin: We have two pizza ovens at the high school we make our own homemade pizza. And one of the pizza ovens was down. And they're under warranty, so I had to track down the vendor.

Donna Martin: I had to get the serial numbers off the pizza machine and get them to this guy, and call in the work order. It's crazy, and it's just like that all the time, constantly.

Donna Martin: Yesterday, the homerooms weren't coming in to the new point of sale systems, so they couldn't run the student listing, so I was on the phone with Hartland, which is our point of sale people, on hold for two hours with the music going on in the background, while I'm working. It's just crazy, but there's never a dull moment.

Donna Martin: You've just got to keep your eye on the prize and know why you're doing this.

Donna Martin: You just keep at it, but there is a sense of accomplishment when you fix things, that you can help people out.

Jeffrey Boyce: It sounds like you have a lot of day to day challenges. Have there been any major challenges that you've had to face? Not the things day to day ones aren't major.

Donna Martin: Constantly looking for staff and finding staff, I think finding staff, because we do scratch cooking and we need people that are willing to come in and learn how to cook.

Donna Martin: The jobs are pretty low paying jobs, and so I think finding staff is certainly a challenge, finding people that have a work ethic.

Donna Martin: Those I think are the main challenges. I think constantly the financial challenge of making ends meet is always in the back of my mind.

Donna Martin: This year with the cost of food going up so much and gas, and all that kind of stuff, I'm like, "Oh my gosh, this is going to be a really, really hard year."

Donna Martin: I think the challenge of the job is constantly innovating. I'm just constantly innovating. We did breakfast in the classroom for all my elementary schools and now I'm wanting to convert them to grab-and-go. It's just constantly innovating.

Donna Martin: For the summer feeding program we always did it on the buses with the kids getting on and eating every day, and now this year we did the meal boxes, because we didn't have enough bus drivers to go out and deliver the meals every day.

Donna Martin: So it's just constantly innovating. We started a coffee program at the high school to get the kids in to eat breakfast, and we got a new principal that said, "There's too much caffeine in that, so I'm not gonna let you sell it."

Donna Martin: I just looked at the caffeine and I'm gonna have to go back to [him]. There's hardly any caffeine in it. But it's just a lot of little challenges, but I think the biggest challenge is the employees, and I think that's the hardest, day in, day out, is dealing with 50 employees and keeping them and their supervisors happy and keeping everybody happy. They're not financially rewarded real well, so making sure they they're happy in their jobs.

Jeffrey Boyce: Are they fulltime? Do they get benefits?

Donna Martin: Yes, they all get benefits. All my employees are seven and a half hours, because we do breakfast, lunch, after school snack. We get a fresh fruit and vegetable grant at all my elementary schools.

Donna Martin: They're all full time and they all get benefits. Health insurance is \$12,000 a year per employee that I have to [cover].

Donna Martin: So I have 50 employees. That's over a half a million dollars out of the gate right there, poof, health insurance, before I do anything. So that is always a challenge, the financial things.

Jeffrey Boyce: What are some of the biggest changes you've seen in school nutrition over your career?

Donna Martin: Well, I think, starting from not giving many choices, to my kids like I said, it's like the S&S Cafeteria. They have a salad, a big salad every day, they have a sandwich every day, they have a Lunchable every day, they have one to two hot items every day, they have at least three vegetables, at least two fruits, and they have leftovers every day.

Donna Martin: So all the choices, whereas when I went to school and when I first started out, we just gave them one or two things. But it's the myriad of choices. And then it's from the canned fruits and vegetables to the fresh fruits and vegetables, and that has been a huge change.



Donna Martin: The no frying – that was a big deal. Fried chicken, fried French Fries, fried nuggets, fried chicken strips. No frying – that has been a big change.

Donna Martin: And the breakfast, and now we do suffer. I always said once you start doing breakfast in all the school, was that if we ever started during supper I'm going to quit. Well here I am. I've been doing separate since 2012 so 10 years supper and I have not quit. That is a huge change. Summer feeding, that is a huge change. I went into this so I would have summers off. I don't have summers off. It is my busiest, hardest time of the year. I have over 150 employees working for me in the summer, trying to do our summer feeding program and getting all those employees in place, getting the food and the bus routes, and the parents calling.

Donna Martin: "Where's the bus? I'm missing the bus. I missed my meal." So those are huge changes, just huge changes, to go from just serving lunch and handing a meal off, to all the choices.

Donna Martin: And then a lot of people are doing food trucks, and the innovation, the salad bars.

Donna Martin: There's just so much innovation; kids are different. I didn't eat out a lot as a kid. My mother cooked every night and I didn't eat out, so I didn't expect a lot of choices. These kids eat out every single night and they want choices, and they want all these things, so the kids are a total different animal than they used to be.

Jeffrey Boyce: I'm going to put you on this spot. What would you say has been your most significant contribution to the field so far?

Donna Martin: Two things – number one buses. I was the first district, I have been doing buses for 17 years for summer feeding. Nobody did buses when I did buses.

Donna Martin: They came in and said, “We want you to do summer feeding,” and I said, “My kids live 20 miles from the school. How are they going to get there? They don’t have transportation.”

Donna Martin: So I started with the bus program, and everybody in the country now does buses and acts like it's no big deal, but I was the first district. I won a big national award for that. The other thing is I was the first ever president of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics that was a school nutrition director. So I got to go around the country and talk about the Academy and talk about school nutrition, promoted school nutrition to dietitians, and we have seen a huge influx in dietitians getting into the field of dietetics.

Donna Martin: My other big thing – do you want me to keep going or should I stop?

Jeffrey Boyce: No, no. Share whatever you want to.

Donna Martin: Okay, I think my other biggest thing I’m most proud of is I got to testify before Congress twice about school nutrition standards, and why we need strong school nutrition standards.

Donna Martin: And I’ve felt the most success about that; that I feel like impacted the future of children's lives. I took local blueberries and local peaches up there and sat them on all the Congressman's desks and said, “Tell me a kid wouldn't eat this peach and wouldn’t eat these blueberries, and you're sitting there telling me that we shouldn't tell the kids that to pick up a fruit or vegetable and this is what I’m giving them for fruit or vegetables? You're crazy.”

Donna Martin: And then the next time I went and testified I took our homemade bags of whole grain grits.

Donna Martin: And I said, "You're telling me that kids won't eat these grits? You take this home and try them and tell me that they're not the best thing you've ever had." So I've fought for the kids and I felt like that was a huge accomplishment, because SNA was in there going, "Roll back the standards. Don't make them have to have whole wheat bread and don't make them have to have low fat chocolate milk, and don't make them have to pick up a fruit and vegetable." And I'm like, "You know, this is our one opportunity to get to teach these kids good nutrition and we need to do it." And out of all that, Michelle Obama called me to the White House and interviewed me, picked five people around the country to come talk about the school nutrition standards. And it was New York City Public Schools Los Angeles Public Schools, a big school district in Maryland, and little old me in Burke County.

Donna Martin: And I got to sit there and tell her about why this is working and why we needed to stay strong with the standards, and then she came to my district and planted in my garden, and I was the first district she came to outside of Washington DC.

Donna Martin: And then she invited me to come to her capstone event at the White House, and she asked five people to speak, and I was one of the people that got to speak, and I got to speak about school nutrition to 200 reporters, and tell them about why what we're doing is important, why what she's done has been so important. So I was there with Pete Buttigieg. Do you know who Pete Buttigieg was?

Jeffrey Boyce: Yes, yes.

Donna Martin: He was sitting right next to me, and this was way before he started running for office, and I introduced myself, and he told me who he was. So when

he started running for President I'm like, "Oh my gosh." A basketball player, Alonzo –

Jeffrey Boyce: Mourning?

Donna Martin: Yeah, yeah. He was there. He was on the panel, and then the physician that was head of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, and she was retiring. And then the lady that's head of the Public Produce Association – I'm terrible with names – and then there was little ole me.

Donna Martin: So I have gotten to do some things that I think [helped], my contribution in terms of the buses and holding strong on the standards and testifying before Congress and stuff like that, I think would be my biggest contributions.

Jeffrey Boyce: What advice, I know you said you started an internship program, what advice would you give someone who was considering child nutrition as a profession today?

Donna Martin: Well, I would strongly encourage them to get a degree in dietetics if they were thinking about it, because that just opens many, many, many more doors, because if you're in a big district they always want a registered dietitian to deal with special diets or to deal with the wellness policies and things like that, so it always gives you a leg up and always gives you such a great background, going into the job. But if you didn't do that, I would still go and look for a job in a large district.

Donna Martin: Because they always hire a lot of people, where you could start doing something like the farm to school dietitian, if you have some background in ag.

Donna Martin: Or you could do menu planning, or you can do procurement, but you could do a little niche kind of thing and then, once you get in there, doing the niche job.

Donna Martin: Then you can kind of learn the rest of the jobs and kind of work your way up into a director position, but I think getting a degree in dietetic is just invaluable and would serve you really, really well.

Jeffrey Boyce: You have any special stories about people you work with or kids you served over the years?

Donna Martin: I'll tell you the one story. We do the fresh fruit and vegetable grant and we do 65 different fruits and vegetables, so I mean lychee nuts and dragon fruit and blood oranges and all this really weird stuff. Are you familiar with the fresh fruit and vegetable grant?

Jeffrey Boyce: Some, yes.

Donna Martin: So the kids get their snack in the afternoon. So the director of finance called me into her office one day and she said, "Donna, we just got back from vacation," and they'd gone down some place in the Caribbean and they'd gone into this hotel room and on the table there was this big bowl of fruit and she said, "All of us adults looked at each other and we said, 'What the heck is this fruit?'" And her five year old said, "That is papaya, mango, kiwi, persimmon." He knew every single fruit in the bowl. And I thought 'You know it doesn't get any better than that because that's exactly what we're what trying to do.'

Jeffrey Boyce: That's wonderful.

Donna Martin: I also have a story of our standing in the line recently giving out our meal boxes, and this was during Covid when our kids were virtual, and I was handing out meal boxes and when I'd give them the boxes I'd always say, "So what did you like the most about the meal boxes?" because I was always dying to hear, and this middle schooler said, "I like how healthy the food is in the box." And I'm like, "Can I give you a kiss?"

Donna Martin: I mean that just made me realize that what we were doing can really make a difference. Now are we teaching everybody to eat good? No, but we are reaching some kids that just love that the food was so healthy. And I'll tell you another story. It was really hard when we gave up fried chicken and French Fries and all that kind of stuff, and every time I would walk in school, the kids were like, "When's the fried chicken coming back? When's the fried chicken coming back?"

Donna Martin: And so every time I'd see somebody they'd say, "I want to talk to you." And I go, "Okay, here it comes, when's the fried chicken coming back?" We had this assistant principal at one of the elementary schools and he said, "Donna, could I have a minute to talk to you?" And I went, "Okay. Here they come."

Donna Martin: He said, "I just want to tell you, when you started all this healthy eating a few years ago, I was just not on board with it." And I wanted to go, "Yeah, no kidding. Who was?"

Donna Martin: And he said, "But I love it now." He said, "I've seen such a difference in the kids and I want you to know that I've changed the way I feed my family at home. I've changed the way I eat."

Donna Martin: And he just went on and on and on, and I mean I thought, "Okay, we, you know, really, this is working, and this is making a difference."

Donna Martin: He said, "We bake our chicken at home now and we're eating more fresh fruits and vegetables."

Donna Martin: I'll share one more story with you. This didn't happen to me, but one of my dietitians that works for me, was doing a Charlie Cart demonstration at my school. Do you know what those are, those cooking carts?

Jeffrey Boyce: I'm not really familiar with that.

Donna Martin: They are a cooking cart and they're like a portable cooking cart, and we have them in all of our schools. I'm very proud of them, and so we do cooking classes for the kids because I'm real big on that – you need to know how to cook. So it was a bunch of middle schoolers, and they were doing a recipe, I think they had little soft taco shells and they had stir fried or roasted some asparagus and some zucchini and some vegetables that like no kid would ever eat if it wasn't in a cooking class or whatever, and the kid came up to her after class and said, "This was the best day of my life."

Donna Martin: just doing that cooking class, he just loved it, loved it, loved it. I thought that was so cool that that we could have an impact on teaching kids how to cook, that that was the best day of his life.

Jeffrey Boyce: It's a lost art, unfortunately.

Donna Martin: It is, it is.

Jeffrey Boyce: Luckily I know how to. I've been cooking for decades.

Donna Martin: I know.

Jeffrey Boyce: Last time we talked, we talked about Covid and the supply chain issues. How does that stand now?

Donna Martin: We're still struggling with supply chain issues. Just this week we're starting school, and one of the things our kids look forward to the most in our upper grades, is our smoothies that are made with these bags of yogurt. And so we ordered our food two weeks before the start of school, and one of the first thing we got was that they didn't have the bags of yogurt.

Donna Martin: And I told my staff, I said, "I am not going to have a kid go home and Mom say, 'How was your first day of school?' and they say, 'It was terrible because I didn't get a smoothie for breakfast.'"

Donna Martin: So we had to go out and buy 100 buckets, you know 32 ounce buckets of yogurt, so I know everybody in town that was looking for that yogurt didn't get any. Because we got it all and I had to tell my managers, "I'm sorry this will make it a lot harder to do to make these smoothies, but please make these smoothies.

Donna Martin: I'll give you some more examples. We just today, found out that we ordered, we do a lot of boneless chicken. On every other Friday we do chicken for our kids and our kids come to school, and four year olds that have never eaten bone-in chicken, they've only eaten chicken nuggets chicken strips and they go, "AAHHHHH, there's bones in my chicken!" They don't get it. But anyway, we had Congo Chicken coming up on the menu next week and we just got the outages that they don't have any chicken quarters so they're going to sub with chicken thighs.



Donna Martin: So we immediately knew that sometimes when they serve with chicken thighs that the chicken thighs shrivel up so much that it's not enough for the kids to eat so we had to go back and say, "We need to double up on the thighs, and make sure the thighs are big enough," because one time they were out of something, chicken breasts, and they sent chicken legs, and the legs were so teeny that we had to double the chicken legs and then we didn't have enough chicken for the kids in school.

Donna Martin: So that kind of stuff. They sent sausage dogs that we normally have 80-count per case.

Donna Martin: They subbed with a different sausage dog, and it was 40-count, and they sent the same number of cases, so half the kids didn't get sausage dogs that day. If you come to school wanting a sausage dog and they don't have them and then you're mad, so you don't trust anymore.

Donna Martin: It's every day. They don't have this, they don't have that, they substitute this, they substitute that.

Donna Martin: It's not slowing down, it's not going away, and the prices have increased 25 to 40%, so it's going to be a rough year. But I also feel sorry for the vendors, because they're struggling with it, too, I mean they're getting price increases, they have to pass it along and they also can't get product. This summer for summer feeding, we asked the vendors, "Tell me what you have, so we will plan our menus around what you know you can get."

Donna Martin: We played our menu to do these Jif peanut butter cups in our meal boxes. Well, then the Jif recall hit and they couldn't give us just peanut

butter. So we called back and said, "Can you do cheese cup?" "Let me check."  
"No, can't get cheese cups."

Donna Martin: So I called the manufacturer and they drop-shipped pallets of cheese cups to me.

Donna Martin: But then it made my vendor mad because he couldn't get them, but I could get them.

Donna Martin: But you gotta do what you gotta do. We needed something that was shelf stable to go into boxes, that the kids would eat and like, and.

Donna Martin: We're so short on labor that we couldn't make anything. We're already making salads, making a lot of things to put in the boxes, and I couldn't ask them to make anything anymore so we did cheese cups. But it's just constant substitutions and there's things that we can't do. We wanted to sell a-la-carte. Our kids love the little rice krispies treats. We can't get them.

Donna Martin: It's a lot, it's a lot. It's a day in, day out struggle, and I go to Walmart a lot and Sam's a lot and grocery stores a lot and do the best that I can.

Donna Martin: But it's going to be around for a while.

Jeffrey Boyce: Anything else you'd like to share with me today?

Donna Martin: I think I've shared PLENTY with you today.

Donna Martin: I guess I would just encourage people that are thinking about if they want a rewarding career to take about school nutrition, because it is a very rewarding career.

Donna Martin: And no day is the same, and you have a lot of challenging moments. I will not minimize that but you also have a lot of really, really rewarding moments, when you solve a problem or you see a kid eating a meal.

Donna Martin: Or like my staff said when the kids came into the high school, they all came in saying, "We have missed you. We're so glad to see you. We're so glad to be back." And that, you just can't, money can't buy that kind of rewarding experience.

Donna Martin: I think probably the only think I'd like to add.

Jeffrey Boyce: Well, thank you so much for taking the time to talk with me today.

Donna Martin: And I don't envy you, because I hate writing like no other, so I can't imagine having to take this and put a story together, but thank you for interviewing me. I'm going to send you that Congo Chicken recipe.

Donna Martin: Okay, and then, would you like our homemade whole wheat cinnamon roll recipe too?

Jeffrey Boyce: Yes, thank you so much.