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10-12-2007

## Ann Nicholson

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### Recommended Citation

Nicholson, Ann and Institute of Child Nutrition. Child Nutrition Archives., "Ann Nicholson" (2007). *Oral History Project (all interviews)*. 189.

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## Ann Nicholson Interview

Ann Nicholson is a role model to all who may want to work their way up through a system. Ann started out in the Okolona Public School System as a cafeteria worker, moved up to be manager of the Okolona Elementary School cafeteria, and has been food service director since 1980. A firm believer in on-the-job training, she is an inspiration to all who work with her.

I'm Jeffrey Boyce and it is October 12, 2007. I'm here at the Okolona Elementary School with Mrs. Ann Nicholson. Thank you Ann so much for agreeing to be with us today and share your story.

AN: Well, I'm just glad to do it Jeffrey.

JB: And you're the Food Service Director for the Okolona School District?

AN: I am.

JB: Can you start by telling us a little bit about yourself, where you were born and grew up?

AN: Well, I was actually born in Houston, Mississippi, which is also a part of Chickasaw County, but I have lived all of my life in Okolona, from my memory as a little child growing up. I was educated in the Okolona Public Schools and I have two years of college from Itawamba Junior College.

JB: OK. What's your first recollection of child nutrition programs or school lunch?

AN: When I became an employee of the Okolona school cafeterias. I started to work as a worker, just working and learning all about it. One of the major issues, I've always liked to cook, and I think I'm a pretty good cook, but learning the measurements from a cup to everything was either a quart or a gallon of something, was a major step in learning how to cook in the cafeteria.

JB: So it grew exponentially?

AN: That's true, very true.

JB: Well, even before that, what about when you were a child? Was there a school lunch program then?

AN: There was. And my family, my sisters and I, we always ate in the school cafeterias and we enjoyed the meals that were prepared. I believe in the era when I went to school though, more parents, or at least mothers were at home and managed to cook meals at home, so the meals that you ate in the cafeteria were not too different from what you ate at home.

JB: How did you get involved in child nutrition, in working at the cafeteria? What made you decide to apply?

AN: The reason that I wanted to work in the school cafeteria was because I wanted to be able to work when my children were in school and enjoy the holidays when they were off so that we could have more time together.

JB: And you said that you started out just as a worker?

AN: Right, I did. Then from being a worker I progressed to managing the elementary cafeteria. Then I progressed from that when the lady that was Director retired and I became Director in about 1980.

JB: So you've been the Director now for a number of years.

AN: Right, I have.

JB: How do you all train your staff here?

AN: We sort of have an ongoing staff training program. When you hire a new worker she comes in and she works with a person is doing a job that is similar to the job you want her to do. She just gets on the job training, and I've found out that that's pretty well the best way to train somebody; give them on the job training. And then they learn their speed and they learn to work with the tools and to work with children. Whatever position they are in they learn to do that. As I said a moment ago the speed will come and they will become a very productive worker.

JB: So the new person shadows the experienced worker?

AN: Right.

JB: Are there any other kinds of trainings that are required for the different positions, like when a worker becomes a manager?

AN: In our school district, and most school districts, we have a manager and we try to have an assistant manager to help the manager. And the state Office of Child Nutrition offers training for them and they go to Jackson for a week when they first become a manager or assistant manager, and learn the more intense workings, the rules and regulations, and how to fill out what we call the red book; how to fill out the book about how they serve the food, the amount of food they serve. It's a pretty intense program that they have to go through in a week's time. Their head's swirling when they get through with it pretty much. But it's a very good training, and when they come back and they start applying it, they understand what they've learned and how to use it. Once you become a certified manager or assistant manager, every three years you have to go through a training again, and it's a subject that's been chosen by the Office of Child Nutrition, that is a necessary in continuing to make good managers.

JB: And who is the certifying agency?

AN: The Office of Child Nutrition in Jackson. They work with the Mississippi Department of Education Office of Healthy Schools. That's our office that trains us and where we file all our papers. We're a federal program. All of our rules and regulations are under USDA guidelines.

JB: How many students do you have in your district?

AN: We've fallen down in the last few years. We have right at 800 students K-12 right now in our school district.

JB: That's still quite a few meals. What's the percentage of participation?

AN: At our elementary school we're almost 97% participation at breakfast and at lunch, and we're really pleased with that. At our high school we feed about 79% of our students at lunch, and about 45% maybe at breakfast.

JB: So, you're still talking roughly at least 700 meals a day.

AN: Oh, every bit of it.

JB: What are some of the biggest changes you've seen over your career in the program?

AN: Well, when I first started we fixed a meal of the five components of a school lunch and you put everything on that plate and the student picked it up. They couldn't tell you, "I don't like that. I don't want it." You put it on the plate and the child had to go out and eat what they wanted off the

plate. In the last 15-20 years we've come up with Offer vs. Serve. It started in your high schools at first to give them an opportunity. We still offer the five components of a regular lunch, but they have an opportunity to refuse at least two of them as they go through the line. We have Offer vs. Serve in all of our schools now, K-12, where the children are able to choose the products that they want to eat. Also, in the last ten years we've offered more choices. Whereas I said in the beginning we offered them a one-plate lunch and that was all, now we offer them choices. At our school at this time at lunch we offer them three entrees, two vegetables, and two fruits. Then we offer them a dessert three times a week. And that's just an extra. Always we offer milk for them to drink. We offer no alternatives to the milk to drink, because we really want to encourage them to drink the milk; it's important.

JB: So it's milk or nothing?

AN: That's about it. Sometimes we offer juice as one of our fruit choices, but we don't offer it every day.

JB: Has there been any special person, a mentor perhaps, that sort of guided you or helped you along through your career?

AN: Oh, we have a wonderful mentor program through the state with our people that are in supervision. When you become a Food Service Director there are people that you can call. The state department's very good at mentoring you too. You can just call them and say, "I have a problem, or this is how I see that you want me to do this, but I need some help; I don't know exactly how to do that." So they have been mentors all though. One of my first memories of someone that helped me, she's not in our program anymore, is Debbie Herman; she was in the West Point School District. And whenever I had a problem about being a director, I would call Debbie, because she had been doing it, and she would always give me great advice. I would use that advice and I would feel like it had solved the problem that I had at hand. Another lady that I've always felt comfortable to call is Mary Hill, from the Jackson Public Schools. Mary Hill is presently the president of our national association, and we're so proud of her in Mississippi. Mary does such a good job, and she just never says she is too busy to talk to you or help you out with your problems. So those are two people that stand out in my memory as people that have helped me. There are others, but those two stand out in my memory.

JB: Mary is currently the president of the School Nutrition Association?



AN: Yes. She was installed in Chicago this year.

JB: And I know you are very active in the national association because I saw you this year in Chicago. How does your participation with the national association help you to do your job?

AN: Well, when you go to the national conference they have so many food vendors there. And you are able to look at new products. We're on state purchasing in Mississippi, but if we go to the conference and find a product that we want to try, the state purchasing department allows us to try these products and if we find them good they will get other people in the state to try them out and see if they are worth putting on the list. And always we are looking for better nutrition – lower fats, lower sugar – everything that we can do to fight this obesity that we've found in our children in Mississippi.

JB: Is obesity a particular problem in Mississippi?

AN: You know, we always want to be number one, but we are number one in obesity in the nation, and we're trying to combat that and bring it down. We're trying to do it in our schools through education, through offering [nutritional] foods and encouraging the children to make better choices, so that they will, as time goes by, become less obese. I know you've heard this

before, but some of the children that we're raising now, their parents will outlive them because of health issues that they will have when they become young adults.

JB: Well, it's good to know you're trying to do something about it. What are some of the other changes you're seen over the years?

AN: I've seen the growth of fast-food restaurants, and the children's choices of what they were eating because of the fast-food restaurants; more mothers going to work and not being at home to prepare meals like my mother prepared for me. That's one of the things, where fast-food became the meal of the day. The children learned that they wanted a hamburger and french-fries instead of a home-cooked meal of peas, and potatoes, and cornbread. That was one of the major things that I saw. It started in the '60s, but in the '70s and the '80s the McDonalds, and Wendy's, and Burger Kings of the world became very strong and very popular places for people to go out and eat. If you were going out to eat you chose McDonalds, or Wendy's, or Burger King instead of choosing a restaurant. And that just became a trend, and that's how most of our young parents of today were raised. They were raised in the fast-food environment and they will raise their children in the fast-food environment.

We have to change their mind about eating and cooking, and where to go to eat. I think McDonalds, or Wendy's, or Burger King is a nice place to go for a treat. Most of them are now trying to offer more healthy menus, but the choices we are making are not the healthy choices they are offering us. Everybody has to work on this goal of combating obesity for a healthier nation. It doesn't happen overnight, just like McDonalds didn't become the most popular place to go eat overnight. Obesity is not going to go away overnight, but I think in ten years that you will see a definite trend that McDonalds will offer more healthy choices, and that the students and parents will be making more healthy choices, but it's going to take a while.

JB: Because it didn't happen overnight, it's not going to be fixed overnight.

AN: That's right. We can't fix it overnight.

JB: What are some of the other challenges that you face in your job?

AN: It's challenging to make menus that are appealing to the students.

When you offer a new product to the students you get mixed reactions with it. When I was in Jackson for a supervisor's meeting last summer, they showed us a new product that they were putting on purchasing. It was a cheese omelet, cheese-egg omelet, and they wanted us to try it for breakfast. Well, we're always skeptical about trying something new

because we always say, "They're not going to eat it." But my elementary school brought it in in September, and just last week my manager called and said, "I must tell you that I made 100 servings of that omelet for breakfast and every one of them got picked up!" So we were real pleased. They're accepting a new product. It's a good product. It's a healthy product. And we're real pleased that that's what happened. That's what we like to see happen, but that's our biggest challenge, to be able to bring a new product in and find acceptability with the students, and it's all because of their prior eating habits.

JB: Does the high school and the elementary school serve the same menu?

AN: They basically do serve the same menus, but at the high school we offer an extra entrée. We have four choices in entrees at the high school. That's just to give them more choices, because they are the hardest students to bring in to eat. We try to offer more choices, more of the foods that we know that they like. That's what we try to do with our menus. We try to offer the products that we know that they like. You can just pinpoint - pizzas, hamburgers, and I'll tell you one that surprised me, but it's because I don't eat spicy foods, but it's the spicy chicken sandwich that we serve. And we also make some good cooked dishes like chicken and spaghetti, and

that's very popular with elementary and high school. We learn their favorites and we try to keep them out there, plus at the same time we're introducing something different. This year we are introducing the wrap sandwich. They are popular at some of the fast-food chains, and we have offered them, and we've seen an increase in the number of those that they pick up as we prepare them for meals, because they're becoming familiar with them.

JB: What percentage of your preparation is scratch?

AN: I would be willing to say that half of it is, because we always offer in our menus one cooked entrée, plus we always offer a sandwich, because the kids like the sandwiches. Then we offer a salad, either chef salad, tuna, or chicken salad. That's why I say fifty percent. We make our salads from total scratch. We make our own tuna and chicken salads and we make our own chicken spaghetti, the regular spaghetti, and lasagnas. So when we do a menu, pretty much half of it is from scratch.

JB: Do you still bake bread?

AN: I must tell you no. Through this purchasing program they have found some good frozen rolls that the students find acceptable. Now those who don't find it acceptable are my old students who come back to eat with us.

They ask about the homemade bread, and I do have to say that in one of the memories that people tell me that they have of the cafeteria, the homemade rolls and homemade soup that they had, the soup and sandwiches that they had in the cold wintertime, and the peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. Those are the three favorites I still hear from; “Are you still serving those things?”

JB: I think that’s pretty universal with us older students that remember those days. We’ve talked about some of the challenges. What are some of the highlights that you’ve experienced in your career?

AN: One highlight that I felt real good about is when we first introduced broccoli into the school system. Most of the children had never heard of broccoli, had never really seen it, and it was a rejected item. But we continued to offer it to them until now broccoli has become very familiar and it’s one of their favorite vegetables to choose. It’s broccoli with a cheese sauce on it of course, but they’ve learned to eat a new vegetable, and it’s very acceptable. So we’re very excited about that, when we give them something new and they learn to eat it. But I won’t tell you it happened in a year; it happened because we just kept offering it to them. You have to try it. I tell you a personal note. My sister was a first-grade

teacher. And they had rules that the children had to eat a bite of everything on their plate before they could have their cookie dessert. And this one child was crying out there one day and I walked out there and I sat down beside him and I said, "Well what's wrong, can I help you?" And he said, "My teacher said I have to eat this spaghetti stuff." It was a chicken spaghetti. And he said, "I've got to taste this before I can eat my cookie, and I sure do want my cookie." And I said, "Well listen. I know your teacher real well, and I believe if you'll taste that, she'll let you eat your cookie. But would you, for me, taste it?" He tasted it, he looked at me and he started grinning, and he said, "My Grandma makes this all the time." He ate the whole thing and then he got to eat his cookie. So sometimes it's tasting, testing; it may not look like Grandmother's but a lot of times it will taste like something you've already eaten, and they will accept it. But it's that unfamiliar thing sometimes where they find it difficult and don't want to taste something new.

JB: Anything else that you'd like to share with us today?

AN: I think that food service in schools is a very wonderful vocation if someone wants to seek it out to go into. It's very rewarding because in my school district especially, because we're small, I see my children grow from

kindergarteners and graduate from high school and go on to bigger and better things, and it's always a joy to me when they make a success in their life, and it's always a joy to me when they come back and say, "Mrs. Nicholson, are you still here? We miss your good cooking." So I find it a joy to see my children grow up and go out into the community. And I feel that they are my children because I've helped raise them.

JB: Well, thank you so much for being with us today. It's been a pleasure.

AN: I appreciate you asking me.