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Jo Dawson Oral History

A lifelong Alaskan, Jo Dawson attended fifteen different schools growing up, as her family followed her father's career as a state trooper. Having worked as the National School Lunch Program Coordinator, the Child and Adult Care Food Program Coordinator, and the USDA Foods Coordinator, she now is the Alaska State Director for nutrition programs.

JB: I'm Jeffrey Boyce and it's February 17, 2016. I'm here in Anchorage, Alaska, at the AKSNA annual meeting and I'm speaking this afternoon with Jo Dawson. Welcome Jo and thanks for taking the time to talk with me.

JD: Thanks for inviting me.

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

JD: Sure. I'm a lifelong Alaskan. I was born and raised in Alaska, in Sitka, Alaska, and my father was a state trooper.

JB: Where is that?

JD: Sitka, Alaska. It's in southeast Alaska. It's in the islands along Canada. And my father was a state trooper, so we actually moved quite a little bit. I went to fifteen different schools growing up.

JB: Were there lunch programs at any of those fifteen different schools?

JD: At all of them, absolutely.

JB: Did you participate?

JD: Absolutely, I did. I grew up with the lunch program. I have lived in very small fishing communities

in southeast Alaska. I lived above the Arctic Circle. I've lived in just a variety of places in rural Alaska, as well as Anchorage and Fairbanks, Alaska, so growing up that way gave me a real appreciation for the diversity of our state and the different, unique challenges we have across the state.

JB: Do you remember any of your favorite menu items from any of the schools?

JD: Well in Kotzebue, which is above the Arctic Circle, I remember not only did we have school lunch, but we also had a snack program, which was well before snack programs were part of the nutrition programs, and we would have juice and a snack every day. And I remember that. It was kind of a community building thing with the kids. I think I was in first grade then and I remember that distinctly, because what kid doesn't love snack? But favorite menu items, like most kids I liked my Pizza Day, burritos. I remember school lunch fondly, that warm place to be.

JB: What's it like to live above the Arctic Circle?

JD: You know, to a kid it's just another place. One of the things about Alaska, people say, "How can you deal with the darkness?" But what I say is, "How can you have summer without all the daylight?" It's a tradeoff.

JB: It's what you're used to. I remember getting sick of sunshine when I lived in Florida.

JD: Oh yea, I can see that. Where we live in southeast Alaska is a rain forest and it rains quite a little bit. And when I've lived places that don't rain as much I start missing it, so it's what you're used to.

JB: So what did you do after high school?

JD: After high school I did not go to school right away. I worked. I did a lot of food service work and different restaurants and whatnot. And then I started working with the State of Alaska and then I started going to school, so I've always done everything backwards. I've been with the state now for twenty-three years. Thirteen of those years have been with child nutrition. I have worked as the National School Lunch Program Coordinator, the Child and Adult Care Food Program Coordinator, and the USDA Foods Coordinator before I became the State Director.

JB: For the entire state?

JD: Yes, for the entire state.

JB: So has there been a mentor or someone who kind of guided you through this process along the way?

JD: You know, I really have looked towards the Alaska School Nutrition Association. Several of my mentors have retired now, but the school food service directors bring so much wealth and heart to the business, and every time I get a crazy idea I like to run it by them. Is this farfetched? Would it help? And they really are just an amazing bunch of people to work with.

JB: So the state agency in Alaska has a really close relationship with the state organization then?

JD: We really do. Alaska is the largest state. We could fit a couple of Texas in Alaska. We have almost no road system so we're flying around. And we would think that the size and the distance would leave us apart, and it's not like that. We're actually very close and small in that way. We know the directors. We sometimes know their families. We know their history, because we only have roughly forty-eight districts right now on

the program, and you get to know them really, really well over the years. You're at conferences together. You're at training together. You support each other. Our state agency has a real customer service attitude towards being a bureaucracy. We look at ways that we can support them and what can you do to help them succeed. And that's a philosophy that we really believe in, and I think that the districts understand it and know that we're there to help them.

JB: So you're not there to punish.

JD: We're not.

JB: You're there to lend a hand.

JD: You know, regulations are regulations, but there's so much that comes out that needs tweaked for Alaska because of our unique situations, the extreme conditions we have here, the distance between sights. We have some school districts - they have no road system to them, and between all of their sites their district can be larger than many small states, just in the size, but their enrollment might only be 200 children.

JB: I spoke with a gentleman this morning that had 600 children, but they're spread over 23,000 square miles, so I see what you're talking about.

JD: Right, and so they're taking little bush planes to go do their site visits. They have to - just trying to get the food there from their central site. So those are really unique challenges and we're always looking for ways that we can help support them to be successful.

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

JD: There isn't, and I love that. It's always ongoing. The changes are ongoing, so the work is always evolving. We write a lot of grants to see if there is different training that we can be able to provide, or different opportunities, so we're always looking at that. But there honestly is not a typical day. We have a really small state agency. We're only eleven people. That's for all the programs, not just National School Lunch. That's Child and Adult Care. That's Summer Food, Fresh Fruit and Vegetable, USDA Foods, and TFAP, so we're busy nonstop just working with the programs and keeping everyone up to speed on things.

JB: And you work out of Juneau, the capital?

JD: We work out of Juneau. Again, there's no road system there either.

JB: That just amazes me.

JD: It's just a part of life, so our site monitoring is fairly - I don't want to say burdensome, because it's our job - but it takes a lot. It takes a lot of money and it takes a lot of time to be able to travel across the state. All three of our major programs are on a three-year review cycle, so staff are travelling a lot. We're going into very small communities. Many of those communities don't have stores or hotels or bed & breakfasts. So you're packing your food, sleeping bags, everything you need to sleep in the gym or in the library. You're going to some communities where there really is no airport, so you HOPE someone will pick you up at the tarmac, because it's freezing out, or well below freezing. You're picked up on snowmobiles. You

take ice rivers. Our experience with school nutrition is much different than almost any other state.

JB: I've learned that today. How is cell service once you get out of the major cities?

JD: There isn't. There are some communities where there is and there are many communities where there is not, so you are cut off.

JB: So what does one do when the plane lands and no one shows up to pick you up, to meet you?

JD: You wait, or you flag someone down. But no, a lot of the very rural communities do not have cell service or internet.

JB: I've only been here a short time, but I've been really struck by the friendliness of the people in Alaska. Is that - because I've only been in Anchorage - is that throughout the state?

JD: Alaska's pretty awesome, yea, the people are really great. It's a giant melting pot of different types of people, people who were born here, a lot of people move here. We have a lot of transition into Alaska. But just really nice people, very open and caring people.

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

JD: That's a hard question, because there've been so many changes. I think with the nutrition standards from the Healthy, Hunger Free Kid Act we've seen a lot of changes to the menus, but we've also seen programs that people are so proud of. They were proud before, but now, if you have to defend your program, it's not because of the reasons previous, that it was too high in fat or too many calories. Now it's that it's too

healthy, and what a great side of the coin to be on. I think that that's been really wonderful. It's been hard in Alaska, because the costs have increased, and the reimbursement rate is not completely adequate in Alaska, given the high cost of transportation. And so then to have the cost increase more just because of the meal pattern, it has been a struggle for the schools to find that balance. So we're hoping, we're seeing some real positive trends. The recent report from FRAC showed us with a twenty-one percent increase in school breakfast in the last year and a six percent increase in school lunch, which is really awesome about school lunch, it's only six percent, it seems small - it's actually top in the nation, which is kind of thrilling. But what's really great about that, it recovered all the decline we had in the years since we started the Healthy, Hunger Free Kid Act meal pattern changes. So we've completely recovered in one year. And that's a really great thing to see the nutrition standards now be the new normal. To see that kids are starting to accept it more, that it's part of their everyday meal program. So that's really exciting to see happen.

JB: What would you say - I'm going to put you on the spot - what would you say has been your most significant contribution to child nutrition so far?

JD: Well, I think because of my background just in living across Alaska, that I really have a very, very strong respect for rural Alaska. You're here in Anchorage. You see it's a big city, like any other big city pretty much, but beautiful mountains and a little cold.

JB: Some gorgeous mountains.

JD: But rural Alaska is nothing like this. It's plenty cold and it has mountains. There's a real tendency in some programs to really meet the needs of your larger communities. And I'll tell you, eighty percent of our kids go to school and live on the road system, which goes from about Fairbanks through the Mat-Su School District through Anchorage and back into Kenai. So we've got this one big road. Eighty percent of the kids are in those districts, but about eighty percent of our districts, a little less than eighty percent, are not on that road system. What we have are teeny, tiny school districts all across southeast, southwest, northwest Alaska, where there is no road system, where it's just the bush planes. In having lived in some of these communities I really try to make sure that when we're doing decision making at the state agency, that again, and it's customer service oriented, and that we're not making big city decisions, that we're not meeting the needs just for those large districts. That everything we do, that we're always looking at how we can help those rural districts succeed. They're so small, but they incur so many more expenses, and we have to be able to find a way to make these programs work there too.

JB: Any memorable stories about special kids you've met or people you've worked with along the way throughout your career?

JD: When we got the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program, it's an amazing program; I love that program, because as a said, I lived in communities where you didn't get produce, and that still happens. We have a lot of places without stores. Now our counterparts across the United States, this money goes very far, into a daily snack for kids. In rural Alaska it does not. We have

some communities where that allotment allows for one snack every two weeks, because of the high cost. I got to administer the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program the first few years, and in one week I remember getting emails from two different districts, one in the very northwest corner, and one in the very southeast corner, and they both thanked us for the program and they told a story about the kids having pears - it was ironic it was the same fruit - and how excited the kids were with these pears. Now that's not exotic. It's not like a kiwi or a dragon fruit. It was a pear. But these kids had never had a whole pear. They'd only had canned pears. And the difference between a canned pear and a whole pear is just night and day.

JB: Exactly.

JD: It's so feel good. How can you not just be tingly to be able to provide that? And because it's grant funding they are less worried about the portion sizes and who's free and reduced price - just being able to provide this fresh produce to these kids - so it's pretty amazing. I love that. I love getting the FFVP stories.

JB: What advice would you give someone who was considering going into child nutrition as a profession today?

JD: Well, first off I'd say, "It's not as easy as it looks." Everyone has opinions on how it can be and should be, and you get into it, there's a lot. My friend Dean Hamburg, who I know you've spoken to, always says we're expected to make a very intricate meal for less than the price of a cup of coffee, and it's true. All of the work that goes into it, the most highly regulated meal, I think, out there, for less

than the price of a cup of coffee. And I love it. I love the people who do it. They're amazing people. Philosophically I believe in public service in my profession and community service in my private life, and these are people who embody everything I hold dear. There's no greater gift than to be that support for these kids and give them that foundation that they're ready to go learn. And if they didn't eat, if they're food insecure, they're not thinking about their education. And without their education how are they going to be contributing to our state in a meaningful way? So it's very feel good. I love what we do.

JB: Well thank you so much for taking the time to talk with me.

JD: No problem.

JB: It's been great.

JD: Thank you.