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Kris M. Chustz Oral History Transcript

Kris M. Chustz, a native of Baton Rouge, Louisiana, is a recently retired school food service professional, having worked as a Manager, Area Supervisor, and Computer Training Coordinator for the Eastern Baton Rouge Parish.

MH: This is Thursday, November 13, 2008, and we are in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. My name is Melba Hollingsworth, and I am interviewing Kris Chustz from Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Can you tell me where you went to school and a little bit about your family and how you got into child nutrition programs?

KC: I am originally from Baton Rouge, and I graduated from Redemptorist High School here in Baton Rouge, and went straight to LSU my first summer out, and finished LSU in 1978.

MH: What is your earliest recollection of child nutrition programs?

KC: I remember being in school and my first-grade class was over the cafeteria. I remember the smell of the rolls being baked. You know that is what everybody says. That is probably my earliest recollection of anything, going through the years, changing grade schools, and paying three cents for a carton of milk. At recess, we could buy milk. That was so long ago. That is probably my earliest recollection. Going through high school, I did eat lunch in the cafeteria most of the time because, for my parents, nutrition was a big deal to them. We had to eat lunch every day at school and they would ask us what we had. I got familiar with the program. Through college, of course I can't say that I ate healthy during college, but I did better as I got older. I went to LSU and finished in,

at that time, it was called Family Life and Environment. When I graduated, I was actually going to try to get my Master's in Social Welfare. I started a couple of the classes and realized it wasn't for me. I went back and took some nutrition classes, and a friend of mine was in the child nutrition program. She had started here, and I thought, "You know what? Let me see if my degree will transfer so I can do that." I did. I applied and got a job as an Assistant. Actually at that time, they were called Food Production Managers...as an Assistant at a middle school, Broadmoor Middle School, and then from there, went to a couple of other elementary schools, Delmont Elementary, Claiborne Elementary. From there, I was a Multi-unit Manager at Baker Middle. While I was a Multi-unit Manager there, we started using computers. I really got interested in that and actually helped the Training Coordinator at that time, and I worked with her at a help desk out in the field. When we started putting the schools on with the computers, I went to one school that she couldn't go to, and while I was there, Ms. Johnson came in and said, "You're interested in computers?" And I said, "Oh, I love working with them." And so she kept that in mind and eventually had me actually become part of the Help Desk and help with the computers. So, when I became Area Supervisor, after being Manager, that was one of my projects, was to be Help Desk. And then from there, when our Computer Training Coordinator retired, I became the Computer Training Coordinator. That's pretty much how I got into all of this...and where I ended.

MH: So, what made you get involved with child nutrition program? Did you have specific mentors?

KC: Well, I had a friend, and she and her mother were both in the program - Kathy Cremion and Josie Cush. She enjoyed it and the hours were great. I always wanted to be

in the school system, but I didn't think I was a good teacher. So I decided to check to see if I could transfer my degree to something else. And, my dad actually knew a school board member who said, "You know, they have the child nutrition program in the school system. Maybe she can apply there and see." So that is when I applied. So I really didn't know this is what I wanted, but once I got into it, I really liked what I did. I liked serving the students. I liked getting to know the students. I got to see both the elementary and middle school levels of the kids. It was really interesting to me to see these kids and watching them grow through the years. And then afterwards, seeing them later out in Baton Rouge, they would remember who I was - the Cafeteria Lady. So, it was fun.

MH: Well, you have been here now for 30 years, and you have just retired, as a matter of fact. What unique things, or what changes have you seen from the time you started out in the schools and now as you end as a Supervisor/Coordinator?

KC: I think the two biggest things I have seen, of course, are the changes in the wellness program. When I first started out 30 years ago, nobody was really paying that much attention to the fact that serving bacon was probably not the best thing to serve children for breakfast every day, or even once a week. Having pork in the beans and having fatty meats wasn't probably the best thing. We also, before we implemented Offer vs. Serve, you had to give the child everything that was available, and there was lots of waste. And that used to be a big concern of mine. So when the systems started with Offer vs. Serve, I thought, "This is a great thing. This is wonderful. Then, the kids will choose what they want, and we won't have all the waste." I guess the one item that sticks out in my mind most is green peas. When I was at Baker Middle in Parkridge, I was Multi-unit Manager

then; we would fix four cases, 24 #10 cans of green peas before Offer vs. Serve. After we implemented Offer vs. Serve we would only have to fix nine cans. You can see the amount of waste that we probably had, just on that one item. The students didn't care for it. That was a big, big change, I thought. And then, of course, like I said, the wellness - getting into that. The reduction in waste. Using the milk pouches as opposed to the cartons, the amount of waste that reduced. Those things seem to stick out in my mind the most as the changes that were for the better. Of course, the wellness program that we have now, implementing using the lower fat meat, no transfats, the fresh vegetables, brown rice, whole wheat rolls. That has made a difference, I think, in our programs. Fast food - you know we used to cook everything. We have seen that change over into a lot of what we call "shake and bake." You take it out of the bag, put it on a pan, and bake it. And, that's what the kids like. So, we had to find items that were low in fat, low in sugar, low in transfats, so that it would be healthy and yet still something they were familiar with and liked.

MH: So, what other things can you think of that were unique? I know you were here for those past two storms, weren't you?

KC: Yes, I was.

MH: What was your experience in that?

KC: Well, you know for Katrina, we were affected. Lots of our schools were without power for a while. We lost food. But, we had such an influx of kids and teachers and parents that needed us, that needed our help. And we had to do whatever we could to feed them. And it was really heartbreaking at some points, to hear some of the stories of some of these families. That was bad. This past storm that we had, Gustav, it affected us

more so in Baton Rouge. You know, we saw a lot of the same thing, but it was our own. We didn't have the influx of people like we had with Katrina. We, again, had to try to find whatever food we had to feed them. We had to set up the computer programs differently because we were allowed to feed the children free for two weeks because of the disaster. It was just really interesting to see how everybody pulled together to make it work, and to do whatever we had to do to feed the students. You just did what you had to do.

MH: Now, you said that they had put you to work with computers. Can you tell me how it was implementing computers to the folks out there?

KC: You know, you have different age levels. It was interesting to see that the younger Managers accepted it and received working with the computers a lot better than the older Managers. And so it was a challenge, but you have to be patient and help them get through it. It was really difficult. We usually put the younger Managers on the computers first. We did it in steps. We had to pilot it. We did ten schools and then ten more schools until we got everybody on. So, we saved the ones that we knew were going to be a little bit of a challenge for the end. But we worked with them in the meantime, to try to get them used to what they were going to have to see. I would go out there. Of course, they had been in the training classes. After training, we would go out to the school. We would talk to the principal and let them know what was going to be happening, talk to the teachers and let them know what it was going to be like, and then have to get the clerks and the Managers to actually implement it at the school. It was hard sometimes. Principals would get very upset with us because we were taking too long, because the kids wanted to look at it. Kids are interested in computers. They

wanted to see what was going on, what was on the screen. Not only was it a challenge to get them to learn their point of service number, but it was a challenge because they wanted to sit there and see - the cafeteria has computers. It was an interesting challenge, but it was one that I enjoyed. There was one particular Manager that just didn't want to touch the keyboard. That was really difficult because I would actually have to take her hand and move it to the keyboard and make her press the "enter" key or make her press the numbers on the number pad. So it was interesting. But once we did it, I felt like we had accomplished something.

MH: That's great. Can you think of any other things?

KC: Oh gosh...the students. I worked at two schools, Belmont and Claiborne, which were in pretty bad sections of town. You would see these little bitty kindergarteners and first-graders who would come in, and you could tell they probably were starving, and to be able to feed them and know that I was doing something to help them was a big thing for me. We actually had our principal go to one of their homes to take one home one day, and there was no food in the house. I thought, "Okay, when I see this child come through..." At the time, you know, we were preparing from scratch, basically, so when I would see that child come through, I would make sure my employees all knew to give that child a little bit more because I didn't know what was going to happen when he got home. So, those kinds of things were the things that really stuck in my mind...knowing that I could help somebody, nurture their little bodies. One little girl would come in with blonde hair and blue eyes and look at you with those great big eyes and say, "Today is my birthday." every day when she would come in. We would say, "Happy Birthday, Kathy." I think that was her name. She would get so excited...just to see them smile.

That's one thing that I used to tell my employees, "Make sure you just smile because you have no clue what these kids are going home to, or what they have come from in the morning, or what kind of bad morning they have had." That's something I will always remember, trying to take care of the kids.

MH: What is the enrollment here now versus when you first started?

KC: When I first started it was probably 60,000. As I am leaving, I am thinking it is more like 45,000. We had Baker Middle; you know the Baker schools separated from us. We had the Central schools and the Zachary schools separated from us. We actually lost 20,000 students probably. We did, with Katrina, gain some, but we did lose some. Also, after New Orleans settled in again...so there were about 45,000. We fed about 35,000 a day.

MH: Have you seen a lot of changes in child nutrition profession over the years? Can you tell me a little bit about that?

KC: When we first started out, we had to have a degree to be a Manager. As we saw the changes, probably in demographics, we saw a change in professions that people chose, and it was that there were not many women out there anymore who were choosing school food service as a profession. We had to change that, so we no longer require degrees in our system. We still honor that and would like to have Managers with degrees, but that is the biggest change we have seen. Because of that, we have had to implement a lot of training, because they don't go to college level courses to get the kind of nutrition training that they need. That is the biggest change that I have seen is the profession, itself, as far as our district has changed in that way. We just don't require the degrees like we used to. I think that is a sad thing, because there is something to be said about

having that degree, and knowing the basics of nutrition, and getting them in a four-year curriculum, as opposed to getting them in a semester class, or two semesters of classes. I find that the Managers that we are pulling from the schools, the ones who are working their way up through the kitchen...they make good Managers. They know the equipment. They know the work. They know how to treat the students. Some people that you get off the street sometimes don't always have that background. So, it might be harder for them. They may come from a restaurant background, or some kind of sales management background, and it's not quite the same as coming up through the kitchen and actually being a part of the entire program. I do see a difference in those Managers as opposed to those there from within the system.

MH: What do you think has been your most significant contribution to the field?

KC: I am not one to toot my own horn. This is a hard one for me. I guess it would be just the knowledge that I have had with school food service and with the computers and being able to pass it on and train Managers with the knowledge that I have had and the things that I have learned. I guess my biggest contribution was that I have never considered myself a teacher, but in the training position that I am in, that is what I became, and I really enjoyed it. So, my passion once I got into this position was teaching. As a Supervisor, I actually did some of the classes because the Training Coordinator, it was just the two of us, and I was kind of a helper, so she would have the office by herself, and I would do her training while she was working the Help Desk. I really enjoyed doing that training. And that is the one thing that I have had people tell me since I have retired, that they enjoyed being in my classes. I guess that is my contribution, my training.

MH: Do you have any memorable stories?

KC: I do remember the very, very needy children that needed us to be there for them.

Those are the two things that stick in my mind the most often...the little blonde girl...wondering what happened to her, and the little boy who was in the house with no food. I wonder about him. That is probably the two that stick out the most.

MH: What about memorable stories about the folks that you worked with, Managers, or folks that you had to work all of the shifts with?

KC: The people that I have worked with have been great. I don't think there is anybody here that I have come across in all my years that I couldn't work with. I had one lady who worked for me who couldn't read. I didn't know it the entire first year that I was her Manager. I would put out the production sheets for them to work on, and I would ask if there were any questions. I would go over each one with them. She would stand there very seriously, and it didn't dawn on me that she couldn't read. One day, I went out there after I had put out the production sheets, and I went back to the kitchen to tell them something that I had forgotten, and one of the other ladies was reading it back to her. I didn't say anything then, but I called the other employee in and said, "Can she read what I have written on that board?" And she said, "No." I said, "I have been here a year and I didn't know." And she said, "I know. She remembers very well. If you tell her something, she remembers what she has to do." So, after that, I really made it a point after everyone had gone over the production report, to go back over it with her, and make sure she could understand what I meant. I would work with her during the day. I just didn't know it. That is one of the stories. And then, I had one lady who says she raised me because she could have been my grandmother. We are still friends to this day. She

worked for me and was a great lady and I still keep in contact with her and her children. She has had some tragedy in her family that we have gone through together. There has not been anyone that I have worked with all of these years that I would say it was really difficult to be with. We had some really good people. I find that the people that I worked with in the very beginning of my 30 years were better cooks simply because we had to cook things from scratch. I find now, as the years passed, I find that not everybody cooks anymore, so it was more difficult to find people who did that, so that is why we had to come up with the pre-packaged items that we had to use. The older people, to me, were easier to get along with. I did find that the young people did not always want to do what you asked them to do. But I guess that is just being young. It was great. I had a great 30 years.

MH: How about your networking with other Managers?

KC: I still have a group of friends that were Managers. We would share ideas all the time. In fact, I still keep in contact with some who have retired since. We would share ideas. We would share recipes when we could. We would share stories. I actually got to know some Managers from other states when we would go to conferences. We kept in contact with e-mails. It was really interesting to see how other areas were doing things compared to our area. It was great to have that network of friends here that you could take with you when you left.

MH: It was encouraged for you to go to the annual conferences?

KC: We were encouraged to go to the conferences. We were able to go to several national conferences. It was an experience that everyone should take, because you learn so much, not only from the keynote speakers and the breakout sessions, but from the

other people there. I found that when I did get in small groups with other people, it was interesting to see and to learn some of the ways that they did things, and they would learn from us, too. It was a great thing to do and I would encourage anyone who could go who had never been to a national conference, to seek out a national conference to go to.

MH: What advice would you give to future people going into the child nutrition profession?

KC: You have got to have interest in children. To me that is where it starts. That's why we are here. You have got to want to serve people, because that is what you end up doing no matter what capacity you are in. With the childhood obesity that we have nowadays, this is an area that we can serve our nation. We can really do our part to help the kids of America. I do hope we have some people out there who will continue this. I find that we don't have as many people as we used to apply for these jobs. And so, it is going to take very special people with commitment to the system, to kids, to schools...to be in this position. I would hope that we have some people who want to be advocates for good nutrition and they would continue on with the work we have done for all of these years.

MH: Thank you. I appreciate your coming.

KC: Oh, you are welcome.