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Susan Wood Oral History

Susan Wood, a Nebraska native, has spent her entire working career in Alabama. She is a Registered Dietitian and spent a number of years working in hospitals and nursing homes, as well as teaching at the University of Alabama, Birmingham. In her current position Susan is the Director of Child Nutrition Programs for Hoover City Schools, where she has served the district's children for the past twenty-two years.

LG: I'm Linda Godfrey and it's Friday, April 23, 2010. We're at the Hoover City Board of Education and I'm going to be interviewing Susan Wood. Susan, tell us a little bit about yourself and where you grew up.

SW: Well, I'm a Nebraska Cornhusker, so I grew up in Nebraska. I grew up on a farm about twelve miles from our little village that had about 900 people, twenty-two miles from the biggest town, which was about 18,000 at the time. So I guess I've lived in a rural area all my life until I moved to Birmingham after I graduated from college.

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

SW: I went to school in a one-room schoolhouse in the country and of course, because it was in the country we did not have school lunch. So in eighth grade we went to school in town, which they did have school lunch; however, they called it 'hot lunch'. They didn't have breakfast, but they had hot lunch, and so we were all thrilled to be able to eat it because in the past we always had to bring our own lunch.

LG: OK. Did you have a favorite menu? Do you remember any menu items, or any particular thing that you really liked?

SW: Well, I did. One of my favorite meals, believe it or not, was Sloppy Joe, mashed potatoes, and corn, and that was the combination together. So when you hear people talk about us serving too many carbohydrates in our school lunches, that's been going on for a LONG time. And actually my first job was working in the child nutrition program or school lunch program at the time. When I was a junior in high school if we had a study hall period before lunch, and then our own lunch period, we had the opportunity to work either in the dish room, we had that opportunity, or my responsibility was to put the milk on the tray and to tally lunch. And they had tokens they used when they purchased the meal, but we didn't have any other accounting system other than a tally and a check.

LG: OK. I'm just curious. What kind of milk was it?

SW: You know, I can't even remember, but I think it was just regular whole milk.

LG: It was when I was in school; that's why I'm always interested.

SW: And I think we did have chocolate milk maybe, but to be truthful I just can't remember.

LG: You were probably just excited to get a hot lunch.

SW: We were.

LG: How did you become involved in the child nutrition profession?

SW: The child nutrition profession I didn't know about until much later in my life, but I always had a passion for nutrition and cooking and food service. Growing up on a farm we always had a large garden and food preparation, so we were doing the Farm to School Program way before it became popular to do. I was just always interested in food, nutrition, and cooking, so that's how I got my start. Child nutrition came into my life through you Ms. Godfrey, many years ago. Prior to that I worked in hospitals and nursing homes and was an Assistant Professor at UAB, and because you were in child nutrition that's really how I first heard about it and became very much interested in it. And then when Hoover started their own school district the superintendent at the time recruited me to be the Director here, and that was twenty years ago and I'm still here.

LG: He was very interested in having a Registered Dietitian.

SW: He really wanted to start enacting changes in the school lunch program similar to what we're seeing today. We started making a lot of those healthy changes twenty years ago. For example, we removed our deep-fat fryers from our elementary schools nineteen years ago, and removed a lot of desserts and such from the menu at that time, and started adding more fruits and vegetables and salads.

LG: So that was before any mandates were ever even thought of.

SW: Absolutely.

LG: What about your educational background? You want to tell a little about college or high school, and your graduate work and internships?

SW: OK. Well, in high school I went to Battle Creek High School, which we followed in the footsteps of the Nebraska Cornhuskers – we always had a winning football team – and I took Home Economics - that's what it was called at the time – and loved Home Economics. That is what led me to major in Home Economics in college. I thought I wanted to be a teacher until I took the sewing class and designed and sewed my own outfit, and I decided real quickly that I would change my major to Dietetics. And so I graduated from the University of Nebraska and I did my Dietetic Internship at UAB Medical Center, and that's how I moved from Nebraska to Alabama, and got my master's degree at UAB and I've been here ever since.

LG: Do you feel like your educational background prepared you for your job in child nutrition?

SW: Absolutely. Nebraska's Food and Nutrition Dietetics Program was very administrative management oriented, as well as clinical, but it was more a management oriented or generalist program. Therefore, we had to take lots of business and management courses, human resource management, as well as nutrition, quantity purchasing, which all of those courses helped prepare me, as well as my work experience at UAB Hospital. I guess I've always had a passion for administration, or food service management, as well as nutrition, but more general nutrition, not clinical nutrition, so I guess being a generalist in my education and profession, I think prepared me for this job.

LG: OK. I'm just curious. When you were an undergraduate still taking those management courses did you ever have any idea that you might end up in management, or how did you actually feel about taking those courses?

SW: I thought I would end up in management, but only because I've always been more of a natural in the kitchen, and more of a natural working with people, but I didn't know anything about child nutrition at the time. Even though it existed that was not an option that was really even discussed or mentioned to us, so I always thought I would be either teaching or managing a kitchen, but not necessarily in school food service.

LG: Was there someone, a mentor, who was influential in directing you into child nutrition programs? I feel kind of strange asking you that. I've gotten the blame about a lot of these things.

SW: I've had lots of mentors who prepared me for the way. My very first was Muriel Richards, who was my Home Economics teacher in high school and I'll never forget what she instilled in us: 'It was a place for everything and everything in its place', and I'll never forget that. Then when I went to college I had a professor that I just adored, and her name was Dr. Hazel Fox, and she was a true mentor to me. I did a lot of catering for her at the university. She would ask me to cater private parties as her home. She was Chairman of the Food and Nutrition Department at that time, and she was I think a real mentor at that stage in my life. And then at the hospital, Sandra Dillon, who I worked with, she was a true mentor to me too, and guided me a lot in management with my profession. And of course my most recent mentor is Linda Godfrey, because she got me started in school nutrition.

LG: And just being a friend; have you found that having someone as a mentor means they're really a friend also?

SW: I think absolutely, because it has to be someone you feel comfortable asking questions, working with, and you're not afraid to say, "What do you think about this idea?" or "What direction would you take?" or "Would you consider this?" I think it needs to be someone that you respect also, so that if they give you their opinion you'll consider it.

LG: I just think that young people need to understand what a mentor is sometimes, and sometimes we don't explain that to them thoroughly. Would you tell us about the positions that you've held? You indicated that you've worked in nursing homes and in health care of course, and in education, academia.

SW: I've had a wide variety of job experiences, which I think has enhanced my management skills and has really brought me to the place I am right now. Starting in high school, being a farm girl we always had to work and we always had to work hard. That was just expected, that was not even ever an option.

LG: I totally understand that.

SW: So in college I worked in school food service at the college level. I worked in the kitchen and that was a lot of fun, only I would never work on the serving line because I had to wear a hairnet and I didn't want to see all those football players and boys when I was working in the kitchen, so I kind of stayed in the back and had a good time working with all the equipment and actually doing quantity preparation. That was what I enjoyed doing the most.

LG: Wonderful experience.

SW: And then I worked at a hospital. I was a Clinical Dietitian as well as a Management Dietitian consulting for nursing homes; Assistant Professor at UAB.

LG: And what did you teach?

SW: I taught in two different programs. We had a Dietetic Technician program that I taught in as well as in a graduate program in Dietetics and Clinical Nutrition.

LG: Ok. Now let's talk about the state child nutrition program in Alabama. That's the one that I assume you're the most familiar with of course. Can you tell us anything about the state child nutrition program and how you've been involved, or your feelings about the state level?

SW: I think Alabama has been progressive in terms of the child nutrition program. We've moved forward with a lot of issues before they've been required or mandated. I remember years ago when I first started in child nutrition our state department was putting a lot of emphasis on special needs children and preparation of their meals as well as training for our staff, because they realized that professionalism was very important for a child nutrition program staff, as well as with procurement, saving money. We were one of the first to start a statewide bid; that's been very successful in Alabama. And we passed nutrition regulations for our state way before other states have mandated them.

LG: What involvement have you had at the state level, or with various committees and that type of thing? I understand that your input is well respected at the state level.

SW: I guess I've always been involved at the state level with child nutrition programs and what we're doing. At first I was on a lot of taskforces that they had in terms of training, developing training modules, as well as being a trainer for the state during the summer with all of our child nutrition programs, as well as I was one of the original members on our state procurement task force, which then led to a product committee and developing all of the specifications for the foods that we use in our state bid.

LG: And you're still involved in that aren't you?

SW: Yes I am still involved in it and I've really enjoyed it. And I think we've made a big difference in moving healthy foods to be available to all of our students in Alabama by the choices that we've made on the product committee and being some of the first to get new items added to the bid that met our guidelines. And also they were very helpful to me when we were working on the US Healthier School Challenge. We have one of the first schools in Alabama that received that designation, and the state department and myself worked hand in hand in figuring out what all those regulations were and implementing them.

LG: Now let's talk about your position here with the Hoover City Schools. What exactly is your position?

SW: Well, that position had also evolved through the years and it has changed. When I first came to Hoover it was a new school district and they did not have in prior years a Child Nutrition Director. They'd been in existence about a year and a half and some other administrators in the school district were somewhat operating the program. And since it was a new school district, when I took the position there was nothing. There were no job descriptions. There were no evaluations. There were no procedures. So we pretty much had to build the program the ground up. We had seven schools when I first was in Hoover and our free and reduced participation rate was four percent. Now we have sixteen schools and a separate alternative school, and our free and reduced population is now twenty percent, so it's changed.

LG: Oh, the dynamics have changed.

SW: And in between all of that I also have responsibility for eight years of managing our custodial services programs for our school district.

LG: So you've kind of had to multi-task a lot.

SW: Absolutely.

LG: When you first came here you didn't have bid, a food bid?

SW: No, we didn't have anything, so at that time we formed a co-op with Bessemer City Schools and Hoover City Schools, and of course Linda Godfrey you were Director at the

time, and so we formed one of the first co-ops in Alabama. That was very successful; we had a lot of fun doing it.

LG: We did have a lot of fun doing that. Can you tell what maybe a typical day would be for you?

SW: Now as you know, there is no typical day. Every day you have a plan and you try to work that plan, but that doesn't always happen. It changes continually. You may get a grocery delivery. You may not get a grocery delivery. I remember one day early on in my career one of my managers called me and said, "What do I do? What do I do? They've just delivered our groceries, my pizza, in an unrefrigerated truck and it's thawed. What am I supposed to do?" So you know, that immediately had to be taken care of instead of other things that maybe were planned.

LG: So, I'm not trying to put words in your mouth, but would you say a Child Nutrition Program Director has to be able to make decisions and 'put out fires' constantly?

SW: Yes you do. You have to be flexible. You have to be willing to make changes and you have to learn to think on your feet and make decisions quickly, but that yet are sound, wise decisions.

LG: What are some of the biggest challenges that you face in child nutrition today?

SW: Today, some of the biggest challenges I think, are being financially sound with all of the changes, which are positive changes in the integrity of our program, with having limited items to sell with a-la-carte items, with the increased costs and benefits that we're paying for our employees. It's very, very difficult to manage your finances, and I think that has been one of my biggest challenges, is balancing that.

LG: What about working with the community, the community that you work with here in Hoover City?

SW: That can be challenging as well. Every community is different and every parts of the community are different. In Hoover every school has its own personality, so every little community is a little bit different. And I think you have to be able to work with all different types of people and expectations and try to make it win-win for everybody. I do believe that some of the nutrition changes that we've been able to make we would not have been able to make had they not been mandated. And I know school districts don't like mandates but sometimes that's the drive that you need to be able to enact change. Because when we first made those changes we had a lot of negativity, from some of our board members even, in terms of why we had to make those changes, but they still wanted the french fries, the fast food in the schools, because that's what their children wanted.

LG: So, you feel like the changes that have been mandated have really benefitted you more than – I know sometimes we have negative feelings about some of those – but it sounds like to me you've turned it around to be a positive.

SW: They have benefitted me in terms of the integrity of our program and making sure that we are feeding our children healthier and better food. The challenge in that has been how do you maintain your financials, because you're now not able to sell things that you used to sell, and you have to be more creative. And we're finally getting our wellness programs really off the ground in my school district, and I can see big changes. We have two schools that I just found out this week that have received bronze level with the Alliance for a Healthier Generation, and because of that and a lot of those changes their wellness committees at the school level are much stronger. And instead of selling food and using food as fund-raisers they're doing fun runs. And just yesterday I was at one of our elementary schools and they had a Breakfast with Dads, and in years past they had Doughnuts with Dad, and they would of course not have a healthier breakfast, and so now this year, of course they got the food from our child nutrition program, and so they still had their Breakfast with Dads, but it was handled in a different way to where it was in compliance with our Wellness policy. So I think my role has really been to work with the school administrators to show them how they can still do the things they used to do, but within the parameters and guidelines of the new regulations.

LG: You've talked about the financial challenges of operating your program. Have you done any innovative things to be able to make that financial transition?

SW: I think so. I think lately we have done some. Traditionally in school nutrition in Alabama, our employees have pretty much all started and stopped their work at the same time. Now we rotate schedules, rotate lunch breaks, and we're in talks with something really unique that may go into effect next school year where I'm going to be sharing some of my positions with another program, in that they'll work four hours for child nutrition and four hours in another department, because when I really need my labor is during meal service and cleanup, not so much during preparation, and that way we will share benefits and it will also give my employees an opportunity to have more hours. Instead of working six hours they'll be an eight-hour employee.

LG: From a financial standpoint that helps them too.

SW: Yes. It will help our child nutrition program as well as the school district.

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

SW: I think wellness; implementing healthier choices before it was popular, and also then developing a food court concept at our high school to where they had more choices and felt more empowered to make their own decisions in terms of what they wanted to eat.

LG: Do you have any memorable stories, special children that you've served, or people that you've worked with that come to mind.

SW: I don't have just one particular memorable story, but I think one that will always stand out with me is one of my managers, Jan Howard, who is since deceased. She had ovarian cancer and died, but she was known as Miss Food. And I get emotional when I talk about her.

LG: She was a special person.

SW: She came from the hotel-restaurant industry, and she LOVED the kids. If you could just see all the hugs, and the difference she made with those kids with nutrition education, it was –

LG: And she had fun, she had fun with it too.

SW: She loved it.

LG: And you added a lot to her life.

SW: And she was a Louise Sublette winner for our state. Part of it was with the nutrition education that she did. She used broadcast TV sixteen years ago to do nutrition education in the school way before it was popular or other people did it. She taught manners to the kids. She had a certain table where they got to eat as special kids, and she would serve them like at a restaurant, and had some manner classes and such, etiquette classes, which was really good.

LG: She impacted their life – lifelong types of things.

SW: She did. Yes, Miss Food will always live on.

LG: What advice would you give someone who's considering child nutrition as a profession today?

SW: Well, I think it's an awesome profession. I think it's one that's growing and there's going to be more and more opportunities, because it's getting more complicated. And because of that it requires more expertise from a larger range of people, so there are many opportunities that are going to be available. I see a lot more nutrition education opportunities as well as management opportunities.

LG: And you also have dietetic interns who do some work here. Not maybe just the dietetic interns in this area but I know that you indicated at one time that you had some from other schools and that type of thing, so I think people seek you out.

SW: We do. We've had some dietetic interns from some alternate programs and they have done some electives with us for four to six weeks, and that has been very beneficial. In fact, one of the Dietetic Interns who did that was Melinda Bonner, who was a Dietetic Technician student of mine years ago, and then she went back to school and got her BS

degree, and then she did a dietetic internship and then came back as an intern and worked with us, and then I hired her.

LG: Right, so it's full circle for her.

SW: Yes, absolutely.

LG: Is there anything else you would add, and how do you feel about this profession? Are you glad you went into it? I know not every day, but...

SW: I feel like this is the profession that I was led to be in, and I think one of the things that I've enjoyed the most is seeing employees develop from when they first were hired and worked with us, to grow and become more professional and to feel good about themselves, and especially to see them take pride in what they do, and their self confidence grow.

LG: I appreciate your taking time to do this, I certainly do. As always, it's good to talk with you.

SW: I enjoyed it too. Thanks.