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Debbie Chatagnier Oral History

After working in hospital dietetics for twenty years in facilities in Gulfport and Biloxi, Mississippi, Debbie Chatagnier has been the child nutrition administrator for Gulfport City Schools for the last fifteen years.

JB: I'm Jeffrey Boyce and it is November 5, 2010. I'm at the Beau Rivage Hotel & Casino with Debbie Chatagnier, who's down here for the Mississippi School Nutrition Association meeting. Welcome Debbie and thanks for talking with me today

DC: Thank you.

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

DC: I was born in Biloxi, Mississippi and have lived here my whole life, except for when I went to college, been through everything from healthcare food service to teaching at the junior colleges, done some consulting, came to work for the Gulfport schools about fifteen years ago.

JB: What do you do there?

DC: I'm a Child Nutrition Administrator.

JB: What are your earliest recollections of child nutrition programs? Was there a lunch or breakfast program when you went to elementary school?

DC: Yes there was, and I went to several different elementary schools in Biloxi. I think my earliest recollection was – we did not live here for just a few years, I was about three years old – so I had never eaten a lot of local food, like grits and cornbread, and I remember we came back and I had already been to school in Germany for a year and we had cornbread and I cried and told my mama that they didn't have bread. That's probably the first thing that I really remember, that and getting to have Pushups for lunch and snacks and that sort of thing at the elementary schools in Biloxi. And then when I went to Southern to college, we of course had a semester of child nutrition, and most of what we did was plate-waste studies.

JB: Speaking of waste, you said some of the things you didn't like. What was some of your favorite menu items in school?

DC: From elementary school, probably the spaghetti. And I was not a vegetable eater my whole life until I got out of college. I liked the rolls.

JB: Everyone likes the rolls.

DC: And I wasn't a milk drinker so that didn't happen either, and back years ago that was all you got to drink, so – and then in high school I was one of those that didn't eat, so I can't really speak about what they had in high school because I don't remember. To my knowledge I probably never even ate school lunch [in high school] and it had nothing to do that is wasn't good. I was busy.

JB: So you went on to Southern after high school?

DC: I did.

JB: And what did you study there?

DC: I have a degree in Dietetics and I have a master's in Institutional Administration from Southern.

JB: Do you feel like that educational experience helped you when you got into child nutrition?

DC: It had been so long – I had been out of school twenty-something years before I came to work in child nutrition – that I think that just my basic background of having worked in food service was the big thing that gave me a little bit of an edge to begin with.

JB: Tell us about what you did those twenty years before.

DC: I worked at two hospitals. Starting back in 1975 I worked at Garden Park Hospital and I was the Clinical Dietitian and Foodservice Director.

JB: And that is here in Biloxi?

DC: It is actually in Gulfport, a small 120-bed hospital. And then I left there after fifteen years and I went to Biloxi General and I did nothing but clinical dietetics – a little bit of foodservice, a little bit of the operation part, but not much at all. And then I had the opportunity to go back and go to work for Gulfport Schools. They wanted an RD and I was fortunate enough to be able to do that, but it did take me – I will say after fifteen years I'm still learning the child nutrition program. It's a very involved program.

JB: So what's a typical day like for you? What do you do?

DC: There's a lot of technology today. That's a big part of it. The first thing is to make sure that everybody is a work. I have eleven schools, so to make sure that everybody is at work and everything is up and running so basically that we are able to feed children that day. That is my priority when we get there, no matter what else is happening. Then,

talking to the managers, going to the schools, checking on how things are running, what concerns there might be, the good things that might be happening, making sure that all the food gets ordered, that the invoices and bills get paid. We're able to see where we are monthly financially. All of that stuff has to start at the beginning of the month so that at the end of the month we should be able to see where we are. And when I first came to work for the school district I was not able at the end of every month to analyze anything to find out where we were financially. And finally, within the past five, six years our computer systems, with the system that the school district uses, we've been able to extrapolate information of where we are at any one time. I feel like that's something that we have to know very early, and we did not. And having worked in healthcare, you practically knew where you were every day financially. It was a much more sophisticated environment as far as computer systems and those things than fifteen years ago when I came to work for the district.

JB: What are some of the biggest changes you've seen over those fifteen years? I assume the technology would be one of them.

DC: Oh, the technology is definitely a huge one. Going to a lot of pre-prepped items, items that we order that come in and all you have to do is bake it. There's not a lot of scratch cooking anymore. The purchasing program is an excellent program where the districts do not have to bid items every summer and spend all of that time on bidding items. Those have been really, really positive things, and technology itself has helped in that [we have] Excel spreadsheets and things like that which we never had in the past. So it's freed us up to do more of the oversight of the child nutrition department versus having to sit down at a calculator and spend days doing the financials. We are really computerized throughout our district as far as child nutrition is concerned. My personal goal before I retire is that the managers will be able to a red book online. We already have all of our inventory online, and all the production will be able to be done on the computer system, and the red books and those things that so many of them hate immensely will basically be done at the end of the day.

JB: So what is a red book?

DC: A red book is a book of blank pages that the managers must fill out every day. With USDA they have to keep track of the menu, what they're producing, how much they're producing, what's left, what goes back in inventory, what happened that day that maybe an item didn't get used, maybe it was freezing cold and the kids would have normally gone outside if it had been warm and all of a sudden it wasn't, so our numbers showed up in the cafeteria, like in high school where the kids go out for lunch, like I did when I was a kid – go visit with your friends in the nice sunshine and they may not eat. They write things like that down in there. They put all the snacks that we do in there, all the breakfasts. It's basically something that all of them hate and I understand it's not a fun thing to keep up with.

JB: So what are some of the biggest challenges you've faced over your career?

DC: You know, I will truthfully say that the first ten years of child nutrition were an absolute pleasure. It still is a pleasure to work with the people that we work with, but the first ten years were absolutely wonderful. We were making money and had plenty of money in our fund balance. We had enough employees. We were able to send people where they needed to go, to conventions and that type of thing. And then of course we had Katrina hit and it financially has basically been downhill since then. So it's been a very tight economic strain on everybody and particularly the last year, year and a half.

JB: Tell me about your experience with Katrina.

DC: Well, it was something I never thought I would see again, having been here for Camille in '69. I was a junior in high school. And it was bad, it was very bad, Camille was. I was fortunate that nothing happened to my home as a child, but I had so many friends that lived on the bay that had eight feet of water and mud and everything else in their home. The lady that used to make – I was in the band and a majorette – the lady that used to make our uniforms lived across the bay and had eight feet of water in her house, and she was making all of the band uniforms and all of that kind of stuff. I still have the piece of red velvet that she had that was full of dirt that I washed it and use it every – every Christmas I put it under my Christmas tree, because it was that piece of velvet. She was so worried for all the kids, all the material – she wanted to make sure the kids got it back. It was really sad.

JB: School was just about to start wasn't it?

DC: Yes, and we were getting really close to being ready. But I don't remember us being out as long as we were with this one. But back then they didn't have air conditioning in schools so they didn't have to get air conditioning back up and running. All they had to do is make sure they had clean water and those kinds of things. There've been storms since then, and all the storms when I worked in healthcare, it was interesting, because I always had to be at the hospital. So every storm that came through, I could never be with my family. I was always at the hospital, and hospitals pack up during storms with people that have to be on oxygen [or] some type of life support. You're just packed. So when Katrina came in it was the first really big storm that I had been at home, and my husband will now leave under any circumstances, and I'm not going without him, so we stayed home. Fortunately, we convinced my mother, who lived on the beach at Gulfport and had five feet of water in her home; she came and stayed with us. And she never went back to that home. We were able to add onto our home for her to be able to have a mother-in-law suite with us.

JB: So you didn't have any problems at your own home?

DC: I was very fortunate. North of the railroad track, maybe two and a half miles, it's in Biloxi on the peninsula. We are more than 1,500 feet off the bay, and the only reason I know this is because of insurance, but we are less than 2,000 feet off the bay. So we were fortunate that it goes up high enough that we didn't have any problems. And we had a few shingles and a fence – but we were just so lucky. People at the end of our street that live on the bay, they all had five to eight feet of water, so they all got hit that were real close to the water. School-wise, we had one school that, pretty much because of the roof, we lost it. And then we had a school that was being used for technology, and it was on the beach in Gulfport, and eight feet of water washed everything out of there, so we came back and virtually had no technology. All of our servers and everything were in that building, so everything had to be re-built. And that was really difficulty when we first got started back in school, which was about the end of September. We were only out for about four weeks. The superintendent was adamant – 'We're getting them back in. We're getting them back in' so we were back in, but fortunately USDA let us do everybody free, because we had no systems to keep up with anything, and that would have been a fiasco. And that part was nice that we were able to feed everybody free, but it was very difficult on down the line when people that were making rules and guidelines didn't realize what we were really dealing with down here. That first day that I went back to the office, which was the first day after the storm, for some reason we still had phones. And I called and I said, "Look, we have nothing. We need water." And it just wasn't that sense of urgency initially. And it took a week or two for people to really realize that things were bad. I mean things just weren't here. And people had survived through it all - and if you've never been down here before to see what was on the beach, there's just virtually - today you see some things going on – but it was decimated. And that happened to a lot of the schools in Jackson County, and Biloxi had several that went under water. And Hancock County, all of them had things that were really drastic. One thing that we did that I admit to now – when we realized, when I went in the day after the storm and I realized how bad it was and that we were not going to have any power for ten days, maybe longer at a lot of different places, I called the superintendent and I said, "Everything in the freezers is still frozen, but it won't be in two days, and my recommendation is that we take it out and give it away." So we did. We gave some of it to the jail. We gave some of it to the police department that had set up a command center. We gave some of it to a nursing home. Their food order was supposed to come in the day that the storm hit and they didn't have any food – because I knew if we did not, it was going to sit there and rot. So I did a bad thing that you're really not supposed to do. But that's the way it goes. It was either that or let it sit and rot. Decisions need to be made prior to something like this to where I shouldn't have had to make that decision, and my superintendent. It should have just been understood that at a certain point in time that these kinds of things do not need to sit and rot, in a catastrophic situation, that people need it.

JB: Are those decisions not covered in your disaster plans?

DC: No. To my knowledge there was no disaster plan for this type of thing. If there is, I've never seen them. We had a dietetics student whose mother worked for Hancock County Schools, Bay/Waveland Schools, and she was a graduate student in Dietetics, and did a really good thesis on disaster preparation because of what happened with Katrina and that type of thing, so now maybe somebody's more along the line now and got something out there. But it's like any other thing when you're dealing with the federal government, which the biggest majority of our funding is federal, so you have to go by their guidelines, and I don't think that there was really any at that point in time.

JB: It's amazing that you were back in by what did you say, the end of the month?

DC: The end of September. We opened up the elementary schools by, I believe, I don't want to quote the date, but October 5th really sticks in my mind, so it wasn't but four or five weeks before we were back in school.

JB: Did you lose many students that were relocated?

DC: Absolutely. We had about 6,500-6,600 pre-Katrina. When we first came back we had about 5,000. But by the next semester, by January, the numbers had picked up, about 500 came back. And right now we are very close to pre-Katrina.

JB: Is that usual for the coast or are you all more fortunate than a lot of the areas?

DC: We in Gulfport are more fortunate than a lot of the other areas because we did not get as much damage.

JB: Structurally?

DC: Structurally. Except for the beach area and some of the bay area – anybody that lived on the beach in Gulfport, the biggest majority did not have children in school. They were older homes that had been there – I'm sure there were a few, but not many. We had a few, but not that many that lived on the beach at that point in time. So losing all that, we didn't lose the numbers of children that they lost – the whole Point in Biloxi where we are right now, and further east was just completely flattened, and their numbers are still not up where they used to be. I don't want to quote how many they have but because there's been some situations going on with some school closings in Biloxi, they have said that they've down about 1,500, and they're still down the 1,500, and that's because there's no moderate-income housing coming back to the Point area. There is a little. I won't say no, but not near what would be needed to get their numbers back up. And so you're down that many students, you can't keep a school open with 100 kids in it.

JB: Right. Sounds like you went through an ordeal.

DC: I don't feel like personally – we were so lucky. Not like the people on their roof or hanging onto a pole to save their life – we didn't have anything like that. The only time I really got scared was when I thought the chandelier in the living room and the kitchen start swaying and I thought 'Oh Lord, this room is going to go'. I was terrified, I was absolutely terrified, but nothing like most people had. My husband works for a bank though, one of the VPs at Hancock Bank and they opened the bank up two days after the storm, and he actually ended up being the security guard at the door, because they knew people needed money, so Hancock really got in there and did that. I was afraid for him keeping people in and out of the bank. It was an experience. Getting a shower and all that – funny story that I don't want you to put on here – but we left the house one day because we found out that there was a fire hydrant west of the lighthouse, so the whole neighborhood piled in the back of my husband's truck, and we all had bathing suits on, and we went down with our shampoo and took a shower right at the beach by the lighthouse. The police came riding by and all they were doing was taking pictures, like 'Oh, my gosh'. All we'd had was the people with a pool next door, and we were lucky having that, but then when we had real water to take a shower!

JB: That's a great story. What would you say has been your biggest contribution so far to the field of child nutrition?

DC: I think the computerization of the department has been one thing. And I mean it's a have-to now, but fifteen years ago we only had the high school with any kind of point-of-sale computer or anything like that. Bringing us into the real world, of where we really need to be, it's going to be a must from here on out. There's just no question about it. You're not going to be able to run a child nutrition department without having everything computerized. It will almost be impossible. That, and being fortunate enough that we've gotten to build a couple of new schools. I wish that as an RD I could have had more influence on USDA and the feds, and the guidelines. Their guidelines do not match up - they're getting a little better – with anything in the area of nutrition. It doesn't agree. There's no counting a potato as a vegetable. Yes it is a vegetable, but it is such a starchy vegetable that it should just be counted as a starch. So those kinds of things I think we need to make changes in. Corn is a starch too, and so are peas, and it hasn't happened. It's beginning to happen now that they have the IOM and whoever involved. We need some consistency from healthcare to any kind of nutrition, whether it be child nutrition, or nutrition in nursing homes, or anywhere. It all needs to basically be the same. Nutrition is nutrition. We need to be talking the same language. And with all of the new regulations that have come out about fat content and about fiber content and etc. They don't want us to fry. You can't have a couple of French fries. Well, when you do the nutrient analysis of the meal and you've got a half a cup of French fries that have been fried, well sure there's a little more fat in there, but a certain percentage of the meal has to be fat. So what we're doing instead of giving the low-fat or fat-free dressing where they can have the French fries, now we have to give them regular salad dressing. This whole hoopla about fat and sugar and let's lower the calories – we're still mandated to give them a third of their calories at the lunch meal. We can't lower their

calories and still meet the guidelines. That's a farce. All of the chefs and everybody that are going in – yes, we don't need to fry everything and they don't need to have pizza every day, but really and truly, what's the difference between the pizza and anything else – Shepherd's Pie – you've got potatoes and meat and gravy and a few vegetables. Well, that's basically what's in the pizza too – starch, vegetables, a little bit of meat.

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

DC: It's a wonderful, wonderful opportunity. I am just so thankful that I personally worked in healthcare first. If I had never worked in healthcare I don't know that I would have appreciated what we have today in child nutrition, and where we are in child nutrition. There is so much more time off. There is basically no nights and weekends. Sometimes there are, but not very often. It's not 24-7 like healthcare, or a restaurant, or anything like that. If you're interested in doing this, do something in the real business world for a little while before - see what it's all about, so that when you do come into child nutrition you'll really appreciate what you have, all the time off and all that. But if you just come into it, I think sometimes teachers – they have a hard job, yes, they have a hard job – but so do people that work out in healthcare, so do nurses, so do doctors, so do administrative assistants, so do lawyers, everybody, they work lots and lots and lots of hours, and they work just as hard as a teacher does, and they work 260 days a year, and teachers only work 185 or 187. I think sometimes that is forgotten when we talk about salaries, and it's kind of the same way in child nutrition. You only have to work that number of days, but you're making more money for the days that you're working. Most of us love those days off, so you have to think about that. A negative is that there are not that many child nutrition administrator positions. So a lot of times people are waiting on people to retire. Districts that are larger of course usually pay a little more money than smaller districts. And I'm sure in other parts of the United States there are many more than there are in Mississippi, because the school districts are just so many. So you probably have a lot opportunity, but most of the time there's only one person – the dietitian or food service professional within a school district. So, if you get in, most people don't leave.

JB: Is there anything else you'd like to add?

DC: I just think this is a great project y'all are doing and maybe somehow it can initiate change.

JB: Thank you for sharing your time today.

DC: Thank you. It was very nice to meet you.

JB: It was nice meeting you.