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## Kevin Ponce

Kevin Ponce

Institute of Child Nutrition

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## Kevin Ponce Oral History Transcript

A native of Hawaii, Kevin Ponce left the islands after high school to join the US Air Force. After a 20-year career in the Air Force Ponce retired. Having earned a degree in hotel and restaurant management he took the position as an area supervisor for the Oklahoma City Public Schools. This was followed by a position overseeing the procurement of food and equipment. Eventually he took a food service director position, where he moved up to larger and larger districts. Kevin up running a district with over eighty schools before eventually retiring again after another-plus year career.

JB: I'm Jeffrey Boyce and it is September 18, 2020. I'm here in Okolona, Mississippi, talking today with Kevin Ponce, who's actually at his home in Edmond, Oklahoma. Welcome Kevin, and thanks for talking with me today.

KP: Hi Jeffrey. Thanks for inviting me.

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

KP: Well, right now I live in Oklahoma, been here for over 23 or 24 years, but I grew up on an island, on Maui, the town Mahina. That's where I grew up, born and raised there. So I joined the U.S. Air Force when I was eighteen years old. So I did a career of about twenty years in the Air Force before I ventured out into different things.

JB: Hawaii. That's nice. I actually was fortunate enough to go back in 2007 and do some oral histories with some child nutrition professionals there. It was a great experience. What are your earliest recollections of child nutrition programs? Were there lunch or breakfast programs on Hawaii when you were growing up?

KP: It was nice growing up in Hawaii. As far as I remember, there were no breakfasts growing up, but then you could go to the cafeteria and get a toast and milk for a nickel.

JB: A nickel.

KP: Yea. They didn't advertise it, but you could come and have a toast and milk before school. Lunch was always 25¢ as I remember. So growing up in

elementary, right through high school it was 25¢. So as I got older and bigger and growing I used to buy double lunch.

JB: Did you school do the lunch tokens like I see were so popular in Hawaii?

KP: During that time Jeffrey, it was just cash. It was a quarter.

JB: Ok. We've collected a lot of those tokens in the Archives. A lot of them are from Hawaii. Do you remember what some of your favorite menu items were?

KP: Oh yes. During that time we had a lot of scratch cooking obviously. But we had things like mahi-mahi. Other things like fried chicken and rice was a staple. And when we had potatoes it was a cool thing because we don't eat potatoes. When they had mashed potatoes it was like, "Oh man, this is cool." Things like that – island-tasting foods – even with the ingredients, it's just different growing up in Hawaii than elsewhere.

JB: Oh I'm sure. It's a lovely place. I like that weather, what, about 82 to 85 year round, something like that.

KP: Sometimes it gets a little warmer. And here's the thing, there's no air-conditioning. There's a constant breeze, and there's louvers and things in the classroom. You walk outdoors to go to your classroom, so it's not like an enclosed building. So it's kind of neat. We like it.

JB: We actually have a really good photo collection that I was given while I was out there. You'll have to check our website. It's called the Donna Matsufuru Photo Collection. It goes back to the 40s up to the 80s. It's really cool. So after high school, did you immediately join the Air Force you said?

KP: Oh, about a couple of months after high school I was working at a hotel as a pool attendant, cabana boy. Things like that, just doing different things. And then I went to the recruiting office, so they don't have to come look for me. So I just went there. It was tough going to school after high school, because four-year college at that time was off-island. You had to travel, you had to pay, you had to go elsewhere, to another island. So I wanted to do something different, and I think the Air Force was the way to do it. So yes, I joined when I was eighteen years old and I stayed in it for a little bit more than twenty years. And then I

retired, so at the age of thirty-eight, after the Air Force, then I found this career field, and then made another twenty years out of it.

JB: So how did you get into child nutrition?

KP: Well, it's interesting, because bouncing around, my college education was hotel and restaurant management. So I was working in hotels and lodges, state lodges, but I was still trying to find something to do, find a career, actually find something when I grow up, that I wanted to be.

JB: Where did you go to school? You mentioned hotel and restaurant management; where did you go to college?

KP: College was here in Edmond, University of Oklahoma. And I think I gained a lot of experience doing different things in the hotel and restaurant field. But I needed something [better]. I couldn't find my niche. And then I saw this ad in the paper about a travelling cafeteria manager position. I had no idea what it was about. I didn't look it up. I didn't ask questions. I just went for the interview. And it was funny Jeffrey, because I dressed up in interview style with a coat and tie and everything. And then the interview team asked me, "Do you know what you're applying for?" "Well, traveling cafeteria manager." She goes, "Maybe you ought to try something else," because I looked [overqualified]. So I said, "Can we just practice interviewing then?" So we just sat down and talked. So I went to HR and filled out the application and went through that process, and got hired as an area supervisor.

JB: This was in Oklahoma?

KP: That was in Oklahoma City Public Schools, yes. That was my first child nutrition job.

JB: Do you feel like your college experience helped prepare you for the job you were doing?

KP: I believe so, because we covered a lot of things. It was food service in general, so there was nutrition involved, so there was operations involved, just an overall good background on food operations. So yes it helped.

JB: Was there someone along the way, a mentor perhaps, who helped direct you towards this career or helped you out once you got involved?

KP: You know, it was interesting, because it was all 'Let's give it a shot and see what happens,' because there was no person to say, "Hey, why don't you try working for the school?" I had no idea what the schools did. All I knew was growing up eating cafeteria food. I had no idea about how involved they were and how challenging these things were. But then it was fun too as well, because when you first get in you're just like, 'What is this all about?' Then you come to find out it's basically feeding kids, and you find out more things about it, and you get more involved in other things. And before you know it, it's, 'Well, this is my niche.' So I was happy because I was challenged too Jeffrey. I was challenged in a way to make the kids better, make the food better, to make operations better. And the same time you're growing as a person on how to help other people to succeed. So it was just awesome.

JB: Can you tell me about the different positions you've held in child nutrition?

KP: Sure. The different positions I have had is, first, I was hired as an area supervisor. Now during that time the Oklahoma City Public Schools had over ninety schools. So as the largest district, and still the largest district in Oklahoma. So I had responsibilities first covering twenty-something elementary schools. And then I moved to another position to cover all of the high schools. Then after that our systemic person was moving to another office, so they needed someone to handle the food and the equipment and things like that. So the director asked me if I wanted to do that, because I mean I really got lucky Jeffrey, because no one else wanted to do it. So I learned, and that's how I got into bidding, I got into commodities. That's how I learned about the different equipment, and at the cafeteria about bidding and ordering. So it really helped me a lot, and I did that for a couple of years. And then what I did, I had an opportunity, I had a couple of phone calls that said, "Hey, there's an opening for a director position at a smaller school district." And I applied and I got it. And I didn't have to move; it was all in the same area with a fifteen to twenty minute drive. It was a six-school district, and it was a big learning experience, because now you do everything. Now you've got to know applications. Now you've got to know budgets. You got to know just different things that come with it. And it was only myself and another person in the office. I really learned a lot. The good thing about a small district is you get to know everyone, and they get to know you, so it's really, really personable. And not just with the staff, but with the administration, and also with the kids. So it

was great. I spent about three years doing that and learned as much as I could. I even had a review from the state department, which was good. It all turned out well. So I had another opportunity to move into another district, and it was a twenty-six school district. So I said, "Okay." I had to give it a shot.

JB: Wow, that's a big jump from a handful of schools to twenty-six.

KP: Yea, and it was great. So I got the job, but it was different. It was challenging in a way that I had people that were going to actually do the work that I had been doing, so I let them do the work, and all I did was oversee everything. You have other responsibilities as a director, but you have somebody else doing procurement, you have somebody else doing applications, so you don't have to do all of that, even though you learn how to do that. The good thing about that is I could help them if they needed help. And then after seven years at that district Oklahoma City came available again. So this is when a challenge happened. Moving from a twenty-six school district, now going back to almost eighty schools during that time, the challenge was for ten previous years it was under contract management. The board decided to go back to self-op. So they hired me and another person, an associate director, to run the school district child nutrition. So basically starting from scratch, getting the right people in place, changing the behavior – that was the biggest challenge – going back from contract management to self-op, how things need to be done running self-op. And so the challenge was good. The bigger challenge, too, was financial, because now we've got a limited amount of resources, limited amount in your carryover, but we needed to make that grow. And to make that grow was challenging, but getting the right people in place, and have them believe that I give them power to do things and make decisions. The decisions have to be decisions that you make together, involve everybody. I think that was the biggest thing, not just me making the decisions or the other person making the decisions. It was a group effort. So we brought the key people in the department and we had meetings and we talked about things openly, which was good. So it was hard discussion, but it was great discussion. And then we moved the needle to the plus. Not just out of the red, but we had a lot of money, where we could buy equipment, improve the cafeteria, improve the food. It was unbelievable. So the biggest thing I'm proud of is that no kids got sick from our food. The other thing was we had \$36,000 in our budget. In two years we went to over \$5 million dollars. So it was unbelievable.

We renovated two new high schools, new cafeterias. Our kitchen staff were involved. I think that's the biggest thing, communication. Let them know what's going on. There are no secrets. You go out to visit, say hello. Just be who you are. You're not above anybody else and you help them to be successful. So I think that's where the biggest thing that was a plus for us, it was great working with them because they were receptive. It was hard to change behavior. But once they knew our goals and mission were that this is it, you know, this is not how it used to be. So we need your help to go to where we want to be and that's what made it so successful. And I'm so proud of that.

JB: Is there anything unique about Oklahoma regarding the child nutrition programs?

KP: I think that unique part of child nutrition programs in Oklahoma in general, you have Oklahoma City, you have city areas, but the rural people on the rural areas, I think there are challenges like that all over the country. I don't think Oklahoma is an exception, because they find themselves - it's hard to get food, it's hard to get costs down because your supplies are limited and to get your costs down, you need to join a coop, or have a big order, or something that would help drive the cost down. It is harder being so isolated in different areas. The kids travel an hour or more sometimes just to get to school and back. And even groceries is hard. So you get a mom and pop doing a grocery order delivery that is somehow sub-contracted out from a larger distributor. So you get things like that, and those are the challenges for them. Many of them don't have opportunities to even have the option to have commodity items because they're so small. You know, they may be in a K through 12 in one building, you know, maybe with 50 kids or 100 kids. I mean, it's just challenging. The cafeteria manager is many times the person that [inaudible] on the child nutrition programs, or the superintendent of that district. And the superintendent of that district really doesn't have time to know about the program. They're worried about the education part of it. So it's challenging for them as well.

JB: Was there such a thing as a typical day during your career?

KP: Oh, Jeffrey, you never know. You've got your days all planned out, you know, but man, you better be flexible and learn to move when needed. So when we look at different challenges I mentioned about first going back to Oklahoma City

Schools from a contract management to a self-op was a challenge every day. The challenges would be disaster preparedness. Things of the unexpected like the teacher walkout. Who thought about things like that? Or you would have, you know, Mother Nature doing her thing. Something that's not, if there's such a thing as a routine unexpected situation, like a power outage or equipment going out or deliveries delayed. So these things we are not used to, but we know what to do. But some things happen like a teacher walkout or this pandemic thing. It's crazy. It's something never experienced before, and I sort of miss that, but not really. But I know they are having hard challenges out there, I mean it's really, really tough.

JB: You've talked about a lot of challenges. What would you say was the biggest challenge you faced during your child nutrition career?

KP: I would think the biggest challenge, because it was not a one-time deal, it was sustained, the biggest challenge would probably have been going to Oklahoma City Schools as the director, and basically starting from scratch, starting a new program, you know that change of behavior thing, but it was fun, and it was challenging. I'm not saying they were all receptive, but I think because we empower a lot of our cafeteria people, a lot of our staff in the office - you guys coming in, you know, the staff were the same, you know, as were before. The good thing in this area, everybody knows everybody. Everybody knew me. Everybody knew the other person, the associate director, who came from another district. So they knew of us and we became more personable with them, and I think and I think just creating, believing, getting administrators to - to buy in. So the whole thing buying in from every level was important.

JB: You said you spent, what, twenty years or so in child nutrition?

KP: Yes, I did.

JB: What were some of the changes you saw in the profession over the years?

KP: Oh, the changes. Jeffrey, I think, and they may have been challenges too, but not the most challenges. So the changes were the Healthy, Hunger Free Kids Act, that was a huge deal. Changing standards, professional standards, that was changed too. Serving more fruit and vegetables – so the whole pyramid went away and now you've got the My Plate. So that was a little challenging. But



nutrition education, big, big part of it. Where you go out and help the students, help the teachers. This was all changed, the menu changed. The whole way of doing meals changed. And I think it's still an ongoing process. So as kids' tastes change we have to adapt. So the biggest challenge is not for me, it's for the manufacturers as well because, oh my goodness, this spend millions of dollars trying to make that change. But there are good stories too with the kids. I've got a couple of stories that just stick with me.

JB: Well tell me some of those stories. Do you want to share something about special kids or people you worked with over the years?

KP: There's a couple of stories about different kids. One in a previous school district - I'll keep it real short - I just came back to the office from visiting another site. And there's a school close to our office. It's a middle school. And you would see kids after school walking home. So as I pulled into the parking lot, one of the kids that was walking stopped and he waived and he said, "Hi! Do you remember me?" And I said, "Sorry, I don't remember you." And he said, "You ate lunch with me when I was in the third grade." And I said, "What grade are you now?" And he said, "Eighth." I said, "Holy cow." So something like that Jeffrey, just by going out, you know, you just, you don't know you just grab lunch you sit down with the kids and you just talk, you know, and and it's something that stuck with me for the longest time, but you wouldn't think a kid, you know, remember something like that that you sat down, just maybe 20 minutes or less just eating and then talking and I had. So that was, that was a good story. Here's another story. And it's funny because this other kid in a different school was also in the third grade. And I just stood in line was going to get my lunch, and I stood in line. That was the last of that bunch. So the kid turned around and he looked at me, you know, and he said, "How old are you?" I said, "Old enough to be your grandpa." And he said, "I already got a grandpa, but you can be my second grandpa." I spaghetti, a matter of fact. So we sat down and talked and everything. So it was a great conversation. A couple years later when he was in the fifth grade, and that was the last year in elementary school I invited him to our Back to School training and he came with his grandpa. Yes. Funny. So I met his grandpa. He came with his grandpa and I asked him to lead the Pledge of Allegiance. So that was that was really cool. That's kind of stuck in my mind too.

JB: That's nice. What would you say has been your most significant contribution to the field? I'll put you on the spot.

KP: Well that's, I think, that's easy. And I think I touched a little bit on this Jeffrey. I think when you involve people and you try to make them successful then you become successful. It's so true. I think when you help, you show people that you care. When you help them be successful, when you can see that growth, it become a better person, your program's growing, now they're helping other people. So when you see that you say, "You know what? I think I did a pretty good job," because now they're doing what I was doing for them, and then now they can carry out that more whereas they grow too, and maybe one day they become directors or if not to still have that instill in them that, hey, I need to help other people become successful. So I get to become successful in my program gets to become successful. I think that's the biggest thing that I feel that I've done.

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

KP: Sometimes I do that we have dietetic interns that come through and they have no clue about school. All they know is about clinical. But if someone wants to be in the program my advice would be have fun, because you're going to learn a lot. You grow, you know. If you love kids you will love them even more. You make a change in their lives, no matter what you do, having lunch with them or changing the meal. It's bumpy along the way but Jeffrey, it's so well worth it. So I would tell people 'Give it a try.' The field is so wide open. They are always looking for more professionals to join the child nutrition field and it's getting more specialized. So it's not just you do everything. You specialize in a certain thing that you're good at. And there's an opportunity for everyone. And then you can grow and learn other things. So just to come in and do something. There's always another opportunity to grow into a director, to grow even higher, to grow into a state position, so the challenges and field are wide open - being in advocacy, helping with your legislators. I mean, there's more and more that you can do for the program beyond your work area.

JB: Anything else you'd like to add today?

KP: Oh golly, I think it's the – twenty some odd years went pretty quick. And I think this is just all condensed to the end that we talked about. Yeah, I miss it, but

I'm glad I'm here at home and spend some time with that and my wife and now we get to work on projects that we've been holding off for the longest time, and we can do a lot of things that, although the travel restrictions are there, I would still find ways to get out and do the things that we like about getting some fresh air and things like that so I'm happy for a lot of folks that helped me along the way, believed in me, and do this by myself. I want to put a little plug in to ICN as well. And then the School Nutrition Association at the state and national level, because without them too. They are really advocate and they really can help you grow.

JB: Well, thanks for sharing your story with me today.

KP: Well, thank you so much, appreciate it.