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Sue Uyehara Oral History

Sue Uyehara is a Louisiana native and a registered dietitian. She worked with the Women, Infants, and Children Program (WIC) in Louisiana, before relocating to Hawaii, where she works with the Office of Hawaii Child Nutrition Programs.

Interviewed in Honolulu, Hawaii, on March 15, 2007, by Dr. Josephine Martin.

JM: Aloha. I'm Josephine Martin. I'm here with Sue Uyehara, State Director for the child nutrition program for the state of Hawaii. Sue, I'm so delighted to have an opportunity to have you share with me some of your experiences and share in the Oral History Project of the National Food Service Management Institute. So I'll just start out by asking you to tell me a little bit about your background. Where did you grow up? How did you get to Hawaii?

SU: I'm a southern belle. I'm from Louisiana, born and raised in Louisiana all my life. I married an Okinawan, who was born and raised in Hawaii. So I'm transplanted to Hawaii, been here almost twenty-plus years. My

background is as a Registered Dietician, with a degree in Nutrition, Dietetics, and Nutritional Management, master's degree in Public Health and Nutrition from Hawaii. That was my basis that helped me orientate to this very diverse, multi-ethnic community, which was quite an awakening for me.

JM: I bet it was. Well, tell me, how did you go to work for the supplemental program for Women, Infants, and Children?

SU: I had experience in WIC, Women, Infants, and Children back in Louisiana. And then when we transferred here - my husband was in the military - it was an automatic draw. I love women, infants, and children. I love the target audience, so it just kind of pulled me into it.

JM: Tell me about the exciting things you were doing in the WIC Program. It has such a wonderful history of progress and being able to show the impact that it has had on the birth of children.

SU: Right. The program in a federal level is so structured in its regulations and whatnot that you can really see outcomes as a result of it.

Breastfeeding in Hawaii is very supported, and so that was one of the fun areas that I got to work in while I was there. My oversight there was focused at policies and procedures and staff development and whatnot.

Luckily, the work that I did in that USDA program was an easy transfer to my current position with the Office of Hawaii Child Nutrition Programs, in the sense that I had a strong toolkit if you will that had a mindset for policies and procedures and how to link that to child nutrition and child nutrition programs, so that helped me. I have so much to learn about child nutrition programs, but I can reflect back on some of that WIC experience.

JM: Now let's see, you have been with the child nutrition program for a little more than a year now, or has it been your first anniversary?

SU: I just had my anniversary; February 1, 2006 is when I came, so I have survived.

JM: Do you see some ways now you're in child nutrition and you came out of WIC, do you see some ways the two could work together in the community to build that continuous stream of information and behavior change?

SU: Absolutely. WIC is strongly rooted in nutrition education. It's a very focused target audience of low-income, but you have very similar messages in child nutrition programs, because it's also rooted in nutrition education, and is a continuation, because WIC is targeted at 0-5, child nutrition programs have almost a life cycle, right, because of pre-K, preschool, all the

way up to twelve, and then the adult audience later in life. So, for me it's just like, oh my goodness, it's just a continuation.

JM: And do you see some ways that state agency personnel, such as yourself, could help other state agency directors understand that it is a continuum of nutrition services and that we need to be out in the community working with the CACFP, if they're not in your agency, and with the WIC, so that the recipients of those agencies see the connection, and they're getting consistent messages?

SU: Yes.

JM: Of course I know you're new so tell me what is the significant difference right now that you see between child nutrition and the WIC Program?

SU: I guess for me, because I am so new, in my past life in WIC, I knew my federal regulations intimately, and could be able to almost site them chapter and verse. And the challenge for me at this moment is the CNP program has more like eight sets of fed regs and is quite a challenge for me to feel comfortable and confident that I'm well versed in all of them, because I think you need to have that solid rooting to be able to assimilate

and to make good judgment calls and to put it into application and whatnot. So that will take time.

JM: But I think one of the points that you just made that's very significant is that these are child nutrition programs. That what you're doing now, you came out of a single program, which was the WIC Program. Now you're in a conglomerate of child nutrition programs, and it's more as if you were administering the school meals program, that's the School Lunch, the School Breakfast, you administer the Child Care, the Summer Food Program, the Donated Food Program, the Fruit and Vegetable Program, and have I missed one? That's six independent programs that you are administering now, with six different sets of regulations. That is a very unique difference.

SU: It is very, but it's fine, it's exciting, it's multi-tasking to the max. It is using federal dollars as efficiently as possible.

JM: What was your first experience with child nutrition programs way back when, even when you were in elementary school, when you were growing up?

SU: You know, coming from the South, in Louisiana, I have memories of the hot, fresh rolls made directly right there from scratch. And kids would have

the privilege - it was an honor to be able to help in the kitchen, and pinch, we would be allowed to do the pinching of the rolls. We would place them out on the pans. And we kind of flubbed up, because the staff had done it almost in their sleep, they could just pop them out so perfectly. I can remember that. And the meals were scratch. I mean they were real quality meals.

JM: Well Louisiana has always ranked among the top, if it hasn't been at the top of school nutrition programs. Was that work that you did in the kitchen a part of a Nutrition Ed program, work between the classroom and the cafeteria, or did they let you go down there and work to pay for your meals? Because before we had the free and reduced meals program, it was not unusual for children to work for their meal. Tell us about that.

SU: Actually from what I remember, we were just allowed to volunteer and participate, and I just enjoyed that activity. I guess even as a little one I was just sucked into the kitchen, not really realizing it. I did later on in life work in Louisiana as a school food service instructor for their managerial program in Caddo Parish.

JM: Oh, in Shreveport.

SU: That's right, in Shreveport. Correct. The director there was Opal Blake.

JM: Oh my. Opal was wonderful.

SU: She was a wonderful lady, wonderful. We were one of the first states back then - that must have been back in the 80s - that had a state school food service managers program. And it was set up kind of like a lab such that we were onsite in the school cafeteria and we would have three to four hours academics in the cafeteria dining hall, and then we would break out and scurry back to the kitchen and do application of whatever it was we had talked about in the class.

JM: Now was this something that was offered through the junior college or a community college, or was this something that Opal had.

SU: It was something that Opal had developed. I was like the second instructor that she had. My predecessor had set up a lot of the substance of that curriculum. But it was taking in-house staff that were chosen, that were interested in becoming school food service managers.

JM: It was a manager training program for Caddo Parish.

SU: Yes.

JM: So you did have early experience.

SU: I did, and I loved it. The ladies were so fun to work with and real.

JM: And what kind of food were they serving in Caddo at that time?

SU: I remember turnip greens, yes. And at that time we were still working on 'How can we reduce the fat?'

JM: And the 80s was the time that we began to be very cognizant of the fact that we had meals having too many calories coming from fat and the first dietary goals had come into being, and so that was the time that we began to be aware of the relationship between fat and vascular and some of the other chronic diseases.

SU: Right.

JM: So, you went in the WIC Program and you were a specialist working with the policies and procedures. And one of the things that was unique to WIC that I've always heard about is the evaluation that's built into the legislation and also the professional standards for personnel.

SU: Correct.

JM: Tell me a little bit about that. You don't have those things in the child nutrition program.

SU: That is correct. There are standards in the WIC legislations that talk about what the program director should have as a nutrition degree. They

also have a breastfeeding coordinator at the state agency level and it defines the number of years of experience that you should have.

JM: Now is that in the law or the regulations?

SU: It is in the regulations. Unfortunately, in the sense of the breastfeeding coordinator, it does not state that you have to have like an ICLC, Internationally Certified Lactation Consultant. But at least the nutrition program director, program type at the state agency level, it did specify a nutrition degree and I can't remember the number of years in experience, but it did qualify it.

JM: I've always thought that was one of the unique differences between the WIC legislation and child nutrition, that they do have a basic professional standard there for child nutrition personnel, which is very outstanding. And then I don't quite understand the requirement that WIC must show the outcome of what they do. Talk just a little bit about how they measure the outcomes and the progress.

SU: Right. We had benchmarks and we had performance measures if you will. Each, we called them local agencies, that would be sort of like your SFA. In the WIC world a local agency would have a nutrition education plan. And so in this plan they would say for the target audience of X women, X

percent of women will breastfeed within up to six months post partum or something to that effect. You set performance measures so that you can measure duration of breastfeeding, or incidence of breastfeeding, so that you can correlate the education that we're providing along with their behavior and lifestyle changes and outcomes to show evidence that the program is making a difference. I mean hemoglobins, you had to measure anemia, the iron-rich foods -

JM: Birth weight?

SU: Birth weight. We actually collected a lot of data. Probably in Hawaii we serve 36,000 participants. And it was such a data- rich pool of information that you could draw from to measure outcomes.

JM: Sue, do you think there are some things that we could learn from the results of WIC that would be beneficial if we had something similar in child nutrition programs?

SU: Absolutely, particularly with just very simple ones, height and weight. You're trying to correlate in school environment the relationship to healthy eating habits; even verbal recall, food recall. There are so many ways that you could measure things, even if it was observational in the cafeteria as to the X amount that was eaten or whatnot. And possibly correlate that to the

education that was provided in the schools, or various local wellness policies that were put in place. Yes, there are lots of ways.

JM: Are there some things that maybe down the road - right now you are a new state director, and there are many things that are high on your priority list, from day to day - but down the road do you see some things that maybe the state of Hawaii could put in some policies and standards about Nutrition Ed and the qualifications of people and training? What are your goals for the program as you look down the road?

SU: Local wellness would certainly be a goal of mine, to ensure that that is fully embraced at all schools and that it is embellished, and it becomes a lifestyle change, an environmental school health change that is embraced by multiple facets.

JM: Now what are the strategies that will be needed to have that happen?

SU: think we need to take baby steps. It will take time.

JM: But what are some of the baby steps that the state agency could take?

We know that legislation is a little, I hate to use the word soft, but it is not as rigid as some of the federal legislation, so it's a little soft, but what are some steps that state agencies could take to help with baby steps to begin to move it forward?

SU: Education, education, education. Visibility increases ability. I think we need to look at a systematic way to target our message from the top down. If we can get our principals and teachers on board with the message it will filter down. It's a combination of efforts, because it's such a complex topic. I mean it happens from all directions. You've got the community who is interested in the topic because that's their children. They value the health and wellness of the children, as they should. And we want their participation and involvement, but we both come with different agendas. The community has theirs and the Department of Education and management have their own agendas. Somehow we have to mesh them for the best interest of the child.

JM: Your organization in Hawaii is very unique. Tell me a little bit about the organization of the child nutrition program in Hawaii.

SU: Hawaii is the only state in the nation that I'm aware of that has one large SFA that encompasses the entire state, so that would include all islands, which is driven by a Board of Education that directs it. It's a centralized Department of Education, so everything is driven through this one central office for the dissemination and implementation of its services.

JM: In the State Department of Education, you have two major divisions or units. Tell me about those two units.

SU: You're referring to the Office of Business Services and -

JM: Well, I'm thinking about the office of the administration of the program from a state agency level, your job, versus the operational.

SU: Oh yes. We call the operational side in our state School Food Services Branch, and that's headed by Glenna Owen as the director, and her position is quite challenging in the sense that it oversees all islands within the Department of Education for the food services of all islands. So that alone is quite substantial.

JM: Now her job is to oversee the operation.

SU: Correct.

JM: And your job is to oversee? What is your job?

SU: My role is the Child Nutrition Program Director for the state agency and I'm overseeing policy compliance.

JM: So you're overseeing what Glenna and her staff does.

SU: That is correct.

JM: She sees the operation and you see it from a policy point of view. Tell us about your connection with School Food Services Branch and what your staff does with them. They provide technical assistance?

SU: Yes, we support them in every way that we can with technical assistance, education, be it informal or formal. Hawaii is pretty laid back, so in some ways I think that is a positive asset in the sense that, we call it 'talk story'. We can sit down and chat. Our schools within Glenna's operation, there are 258 schools, and we have the opportunity to pretty much know them intimately and have that close working relationship, and I think that's very positive for both sides.

JM: That's good. But now in addition to the School Food Services Branch you also have some other schools out there. Tell me about those other schools.

SU: Forty-six other schools, other non-DOE schools in a generic way known as public charter schools and private schools and that's statewide. And usually they're much smaller in size and in context but they are certainly very valuable customers for us and do a wonderful job. I can't remember the numbers and the distribution of them right off the top of my head, but

we certainly monitor them and all standards are applied in an equal fashion.

JM: But now just as Glenna is responsible for the two hundred and fifty eight schools, in those charter and private schools, non-DOE charter and private schools, the principal basically is the administrator that you look to for the operation of the program?

SU: Yes. The principal is usually the person that is the signator, or the authorized person with the school lunch agreement.

JM: Do any of those units have multiple schools under their jurisdiction, or are most of them just single schools?

SU: All of them are single. It's easier for us I guess in that capacity, to have that one site to monitor and to work with. They have done a wonderful job. We look forward to actually expanding in that area. There are many. Hawaii has a high rate of private schools. A high number, maybe rate's not the right word to use, but that to me, in my mind, is a good target audience that we could look toward and to explore, and consider expanding.

JM: One question that I'd like to know is how did you find out about the National Food Service Management Institute so soon after you became director?

SU: That's a good question actually. I kind of just, my peers within this office, you quickly learn who are the gurus and that was just the #1 reference that I was always pointed to and being the newbie it was just like I've got to fast-forward this learning curve and NFSMI was certainly the point of contact that I was directed to. Basically by my peers, I believe, is how I heard it. I'm also one that loves the internet and so I'm looking and searching for resources, and that was another source, a confirmation that the website there is excellent. And so when I became a new director, also Western Region put a bug in my ear. So it was kind of the puzzle pieces, it came from several different facets. It was clear very soon that NFSMI was the forefront and the leader and so I jumped quickly in that direction.

JM: Well, it really is a wonderful institute, a wonderful resource for not only state agencies, but for personnel leaders throughout the child nutrition program, because they are doing research, and education and training, and providing information. What has been your most challenging experience in your long career in child nutrition programs, of one year and one month?

SU: Well, when I first came February 1, 2006, we were going through a siege of reviews that were unfortunately putting us on the verge of

withholding 100% of our federal funds if we were not in compliance. So that kind of scared the socks off of me.

JM: That was quite a challenge to come into an organization that had some quote unquote real problems.

SU: Yes.

JM: But it was also an opportunity wasn't it?

SU: Yes.

JM: It helped to make some changes that you might have wanted to make anyway.

SU: Oh, absolutely. I mean it so fast-forwarded me and quickly helped me build relationships and high visibility with my customers, whether that be school principals, I mean I was immediately jettisoned to all islands doing briefings and spreading the word of Coordinated Review Efforts, and the purpose, and this is what we have to do. We can do this. And what we had to do to jump through the hoops to pass the reviews and to meet compliance standards.

JM: So, it was a blessing in disguise?

SU: Yes, it really was. It was kind of, I hate to use my southern term, but how would you say, baptismal by fire, or something to that effect?

JM: That's a pretty good southern expression. That is for sure. Let's see then, you have shared some of your goals with us for the state agency in Hawaii, some of your most memorable experiences as a state director, some ways that programs like WIC could connect with the multiple programs under Child Care. Now as you think back to your early experiences as a child in New Orleans, in Caddo Parish, can you think of one REALLY outstanding experience when you were eating school meals? Was it that time when you could go in the kitchen and work with the food service workers and become an active participant?

SU: I can remember making a peanut butter log. It was using commodities and I still remember the taste of that to this day. I wish I had the recipe, and I don't. But it was a peanut butter, almost like the inside of a Reese's Peanut Butter Cup, but like a half an inch thick and you would roll it and wrap it was paper and it would be chilled and you would be just so privileged to get a nice little slice.

JM: And I think it had some non-fat dry milk in it if I recall correctly.

SU: Yes, yes. Oh my goodness it was so good.

JM: It was good. It was good. And kids loved it.

SU: They loved it.

JM: They loved it. That was a very popular dish. Is there anything else that you would like to share with us as we bring this interview to a closure?

SU: I would just say that I am very happy to be here as the director, and I'm very fortunate to have staff that are so experienced to build on, to help me pull our program together. And that is such a strength and an asset. Hawaii has lots to offer. Its diversity is wonderful and people coming together, different opinions, different input. I think that is one of the things that is a joy. Some people may see it as a challenge, but it actually is a very good, positive experience. And it makes us rich.

JM: And most every time that we have a challenge, if we see this as an opportunity, then it's going to help the program grow.

SU: Right.

JM: That's a wonderful way to sum it up and I really do want to wish you well as you continue to move this program forward into this new century that we're into, because I am sure under your leadership it is going to continue to move forward and as one of the gurus, I think it was Albrecht that said, talks about getting on the northbound train. So it sounds like to me that the state of Hawaii Child Nutrition Agency is on the northbound train at this point and I hope you reach your destination in great shape and

it's a wonderful trip for you. Thank you so much for taking this time to share your story with the National Food Service Management Institute. It has been a pleasure. And that kind of brings us to a close and I would like to say to Sue, Mahalo.

SU: Thank you Josephine. Mahalo.