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Walter D. Williams, Jr. Oral History

Born in Alabama and reared in Florida, Walter D. Williams, Jr., then joined the U.S. Air Force and served twenty years all over the world before retiring and settling in Alaska. He now works as a nutrition specialist in rural Alaska.

JB: I'm Jeffrey Boyce and it is February 17, 2016. I'm here at the Alaska School Nutrition Association in Anchorage with Walter Williams. Good morning Walter and thanks for taking the time to talk with me today.

WW: Good morning.

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

WW: I was actually born in Selma, Alabama, spent one month there, and was transported to Orlando, Florida. I was born the 16 of January, 1959. I am a grandfather. There are four of us still living, Walter D. Williams, Jr., and my dad, and I have a grandson all the way to the fourth of us, Walter D. Williams, IV, and nine grandkids, all total.

JB: Are they here in Alaska?

WW: One more to be born to make ten, so that will be five grandkids in Alaska and five in the Seattle, Washington, area.

JB: Where did you go to elementary school, and was there a lunch program there?

WW: Yes there was, Eccleston Elementary in Orlando, Florida, it still exists. There was a lunch program

back in '65, thirty-five cents for your lunch back then.

JB: Do you remember some of your favorite menu items?

WW: I kind of liked the bread pudding. I liked the Sloppy Joes back then.

JB: I remember those. Tell me about your educational background. Where did you go to school?

WW: I actually went to Maynard Evans High, same school that Darryl Dawkins graduated from. I went to Carver Junior High for my middle school. I did attend Troy University. But my military background, security police for my first four years in the Air Force, and then my last sixteen years was nutrition medicine service in the Air Force. I retired 1 August of '97, so I stayed twenty years and eighteen days in the U.S. Air Force.

JB: Where were you stationed?

WW: I was stationed Lakenheath, England, Kirkland, New Mexico, Tampa, Florida, and then to Cannon Air Force Base in Clovis, New Mexico, and then there to Shaw Air Force Base in Sumter, South Carolina, and then Kunsan Air Base in Korea, and then made my way here to J-Bear now, but back then it was Elmendorf, back in October of '92. The last twenty months before retiring I was sent to Wilford Hall at Lackland Air Force Base, the same base that I took my boot camp at, and retired and chose to come back to Anchorage. So I got back here 15 July of '97.

JB: Well how did you get involved in the child nutrition profession?

WW: Actually I never even thought I would work for a school district. I was working on the North Slope here

in Alaska in the oil field, and I was on duty one Sunday, and me and a guy that were working together and were just looking at classifieds, and they had an ad in there that was saying that they wanted a nutrition specialist in Dillingham, Alaska. And he said, "You know, I know you don't want to continue to work out here in the oil field out in the middle of nowhere. Just send your resume to the school district that's enquiring for a nutrition specialist just to see if you get a bite on your resume." I said, "OK, I'll do that." And I sent it in, and we have changed out on Mondays, and on a Tuesday morning I got a phone call from Southwest Region School District in Dillingham, Alaska, and it sounded real interesting, and it was a state job too. And back then it was taking four to five years to even get into the system. And I said if I can just go to bush Alaska I probably can get in there quickly. So out of twenty-six people interviewed I narrowed it down to six, and then I was the candidate that was chosen. I did have that background in nutrition medicine.

JB: And what's your title, what were you hired as?

WW: I was hired as a nutrition specialist. I worked closely with registered dietitians in the Air Force, and a lot of people that were applying for the job were just cooks, but I had the background working with dietitians. I could do the mathematics of calorie count and things like that, so that gave me an edge. And then I had my documentation of doing it for sixteen years in the U.S. Air Force.

JB: What did you do while you were doing it in the Air Force? What were some of your duties there?

WW: Some of our job duties were we took regular food and modified it to accommodate diabetics, people with

high blood pressure, sodium restricted, different special diets. So that was the edge I had on most people, that I could modify regular food. Take the salt content out, and I know what to do to keep the flavor there.

JB: Reduced sodium, reduced fat?

WW: Yes.

JB: Has there been a mentor or anyone who kind of helped guide you in child nutrition since you've been doing this?

WW: I guess the greatest person I would have had was a dietitian that I worked with named Major Vivian J. Baker and that was where my start was at, MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa, Florida. She was one of the first dietitians I worked up under.

JB: What's a day like now for you, or is there a typical day?

WW: My day starts out at the computer checking emails. Sometimes ever before that I get bad news that I might have a freezer out. Out of seven sites you just never know. Everything's going fine, you're doing paperwork. All of a sudden 10,000 pounds of frozen food comes into the district office and it's time to put it away in the freezer. And then you start putting that away and then you find out that you've got a busted freezer right there at the district. You're trying to get that resolved and then another school calls you and tells you that their freezer is not working right.

JB: How spread out is your district, those seven schools you mentioned?

WW: Twenty-three thousand square miles.

JB: My goodness! So I'm guessing you face some particular challenges in food distribution and all sorts of things. Tell me about that.

WW: Yes we do. One of them Aleknagik, before they built the bridge, we had to boat things across. We had a choice of sending it across with Bran Air, and they only flew into the village on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. Or either we had to drive twenty-five miles on a road to get to the boat dock, and then another couple of miles with the boat. Then you loaded into the trailer of the four-wheeler and proceed on to the school, which is probably about a mile away. So by the time that you get this food from the district office into the freezer on the shelf at the school it's been picked up like eight times, putting it here, there, transporting.

JB: That transportation must add a whole lot of cost to your feeding program.

WW: It's quite a bit and the manpower as well. Other sites that I have it's mainly Bypass. We deal with Span Alaska, and they cruise in here by ship twice a week. And then from there it gets taken to the airport and turned over to Northern Air Cargo or Everts Air, and then they fly into Dillingham. And then from Dillingham it gets handed over to Grant Air and they transport it to the village. And right now Grant Air is the only carrier that takes food to bush Alaska, to any of the sites that we deal with. And they have had some problems with Caravans crashing, maintenance problems with them. Now they're down to a 207 aircraft and it only holds about 1,200 pounds, and it's an all-day affair just to transport the food. I mean in some of these villages I have anywhere from 5,000 to 10,000 pounds, depending on which village we're talking about.

And the school size that I'm dealing with, I have one school site that has fourteen students in it, all the way to 212. All total it's about 600 students, but we feed about 125 elders, people that are over 60, they feed them, BBNA, which is Bristol Bay Native Association; they pay the school district to feed the elders.

JB: Wow, that sounds like a great program.

WW: Yes.

JB: So you've got a total of 600 students, but they're spread over 23,000 square miles?

WW: Yes.

JB: I can't imagine those logistics. I'm sure there are a lot of unique things besides just the transportation. Are there other special things about Alaska's child nutrition programs?

WW: It's pretty challenging because everything doesn't always go as programmed. Sometimes I find myself, if the food starts getting low at one school site, and there's another one is kind of close by, like in the case of Togiak and Twin Hills, sometimes I would fly over to Togiak and I would pay someone to take me by snow machine to transport food out of the bigger school to the smaller school, which is a seven-mile journey by snow machine.

JB: Now tell me what a snow machine is for someone from the southern United States.

WW: Some people refer to them as snowmobiles.

JB: Does it have a cab?

WW: It's just like a bobsled basically, and then they have a sled that they hook behind it and you put the food in there. And also myself, I would get in there and ride in that, or either I can piggyback on the snow machine with the individual that's transporting me over. Also keep in mind that you have to wait until the tide is right, and you need to make sure that the lake or the creek that you're going across is frozen solid enough too.

JB: And how do you determine that?

WW: Well, I just trust in the individual that's transporting me, and they're real good about reading the ice. They look at cracks and they can determine that. And so far I've never broken through.

JB: You're a brave man. What changes have you seen in child nutrition programs since you've been doing this?

WW: Quite a bit. I've seen the menu patterns change quite a bit. Now we're dealing with this whole grain, which I don't like it. I like it in one way, and I dislike it in another, but I liked the menu pattern that we had in 2012, where fifty percent of your bread could come from a white bread source. It didn't have to be 100 percent whole wheat. In the grain area it could be white bread, but you needed to make sure in a week's time, a five-day window, that you had fifty percent of your product came from a whole wheat product, but then the other could be just wheat or it could be just regular white bread, and you could count it and you got your credit, it could be a reimbursable meal. That's one of the biggest changes that we've seen. They've pretty well stuck with the two ounces of meat and the milk.

JB: Speaking of meat, I understand there are some interesting kinds of meat served in Alaska.

WW: Yes. There have been times that we have served moose, but I haven't gone out on the limb and served any seal meat or anything like that.

JB: But some people do?

WW: There are some school districts that incorporate the seal and the walrus and items like that. I've eaten it, tasted it and tried it, but the only one I've ever put on the menu is I've had caribou burgers, moose burgers, after having the meat processed and ground up into the same consistency as ground beef. Or either we would have moose roast or caribou roasts.

JB: Where do you get your food from?

WW: I actually deal with Span Alaska, a company that's in Monroe, Washington. I've been with the district coming up on seventeen years in August of this year and I've been dealing with them for about the same amount. They specialize in villages and locations with no road service.

JB: They fly it in then I take it, or by barge?

WW: They boat it in. They barge right into here in Anchorage. And the waterway stays open from Seattle to Anchorage year round. And then from there they transport it by truck out to the international airport right here in Anchorage, and then from there they fly it in. And then they transport it to other aircraft and proceed on to flying it into the village.

JB: What do you think has been your most significant contribution to the field so far?

WW: Introducing some foods that kids frowned about or didn't ever want to try. Some of the changes I made was squeeze type ketchup. They were so used to the bottle type and it was just so messy. And also introducing them to rice pilaf; instead of just saturating stuff with soy sauce, that you can cook with chicken broth and season that way. The cooks that I have, I've seen times that the lingo when you speak to them, what you think that they're going to just grasp and it's going to mean the same, it's not that way. I questioned them one time. Manokotak was having a new school; they were in the process building a new school, so they said, "Well, we're just going to throw some sandwiches at them and let them eat it. We're not going to be able to get a reimbursable meal out of it." And so when I came onboard I said, "I can make probably about ten different sandwiches, and I can put some fruit and some veggies like lettuce and tomato, and make it become a reimbursable meal, and we'll still get some money for these sandwiches." And I said, "Every now and then we can put a hotdog in there, and maybe get some canned chili, and even though we won't have a full-fledged kitchen to accommodate all this, you're going to have to monitor your bread, and when you get down to four cases of bread that's your par level. And that means that you're out of bread. You're really not out, but that's going to be your level that you don't ever want to get below." And they let that bread get down to one loaf. And they're feeding 150 people every day. And I say, "I haven't heard anything from you ladies about your par level. How are you doing on bread?" "We're doing great, fine." So the next day I get a phone call. "You've got to do something for us! You've got to send us some bread! We don't have enough to make sandwiches for everybody!" I said, "You told me yesterday you were

fine." "I've got one loaf." So they're kind of, the way that they interpreted something, it's totally different than what you meant. They don't get it until it's a disaster. When it becomes a crisis you get notified.

JB: Is English not their native language?

WW: They do Yupik but the ones that we deal with, the primary communication is English. They speak English in front of other people and when they talk among themselves they speak Yupik.

JB: Do you have any memorable stories about special children you've served or people you've worked with during your career?

WW: I have stories like being a black individual and having freckles, and a second grader coming up, and he comes up just above my waist, and I kind of feel a jerk. I feel a punch in my chest. And the question is, "What happened to your hair?" because I'm bald, and "Why do you have so many spots on your face?"

JB: These aren't bashful children are they?

WW: No they're not. It's just curiosity. It's nothing harmful. It's the first time in their life they've ever seen anyone look like me, or seen the features, and it's just a sharing thing. They like it. Another story, at the school of Togiak, I go there my first visit and I said, "How well do the kids like green peas?" "They don't like them. They just take a few bites. Some of them don't even do that. They just look at them and trash them." So I asked the cook, who is Mary Wilcock. She's still there. So she's been with the district since 1980. So that's a long time. So she's past sixty years of age. So I said, "Go ahead and tell me how you cook your green peas." So she said, "We cut the can

open. We dump them in the pot." And I said, "And?" And she said, "And we turn it on and we begin to cook." And is said, "What else." She said, "What else you want me to say?" I said, "I just want you to tell me what else you do. Do you put any seasoning?" She said, "NO." I said, "I wouldn't want green peas either." So I said, "Let's put some butter in there. Let's put some dehydrated onion and some garlic powder, salt, pepper." So we went on ahead and added that. The first group came in, second graders. One girl comes back for seconds on green peas. And she said, "Can I have some seconds on those green peas?" And they were just blown away that the kids would eat them. I said, "That's the difference. You're not seasoning the food. What do you think all of these spices are?" And I had another situation at Manokotak. The cook felt for some reason she would save the district lots of money by - the menu pattern says to serve a minimum of two ounces of meat, a half a cup of veggies or a half a cup of fruit, and a serving of bread and eight ounces of milk. She said that they didn't need all of the food. She felt it was fine to give them a fourth of a cup of veggies and a half of a cup of fruit, because in most cases with the sweet taste of the fruit they would eat that. And it even got worse than that in some cases. It was like she was giving them a couple of teaspoons of peas. So I subbed for her. I found out about that and I said, "I'm going to transport you over to Koliganek to work with the cooks there. I'm going to come in the week that I send you for cross training and train with another group of ladies in a different school environment, kitchen and everything, and I'm going to go ahead and become you. I'm going to be the cook at your site. So I go and cook a whole week there. That particular day we had green peas, and I put the dehydrated onions, the

butter - seasoned them and served them and gave them their full half cup of peas. So a first grader comes through and she says, "Praise the Lord! I've got so many peas today I can't even count them."

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

WW: I would tell them to go for it, go for it with an open mind. And when I say open mind, go in there not looking for everything that you introduce to them that you want to lay out to them is going to happen. There are some things that I tried to incorporate and do differently, and it was five years before it took off. And I just kept being persistent about it. And my deal too, I go and camp out with the cooks. I go and spend a solid five days and I work side by side with them and prove to them that it works. But for some reason, and I don't know, I guess it's just the culture in this area, and it just might be that way throughout the USA, that people are just set in their ways. And in my case, I fly in there on an aircraft and when I board the plane and go back, it's like, "Well, we're going to go back and do things the way we've been doing them, even though what he showed us and proved a point, that it's easier to do it his way, it's better to do it this way, and the food tastes better." And for some reason they just get stuck in their mind, and then one day the light bulb comes on and they actually start doing things the way that you showed them. And all you can do is just stand back and clap your hands and say, "It's working." But sometimes the reward is very slow. It could be five days from seeing success with one person, to five years.

JB: You're a man of patience.

WW: Yes.

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

WW: It's been a great opportunity today to get interviewed by you and maybe one day I'll have great-grandkids to look at this and say, "That was my great-grandfather."

JB: It'll be on the web. Thanks for taking the time to talk to me.

WW: Thank you.

JB: It was a pleasure.