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2-18-2016

## Tanya Dube

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Institute of Child Nutrition

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### Recommended Citation

Dube, Tanya and Institute of Child Nutrition, "Tanya Dube" (2016). *Oral History Project (all interviews)*. 161. [https://egrove.olemiss.edu/icn\\_ohistories/161](https://egrove.olemiss.edu/icn_ohistories/161)

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## Tanya Dube Oral History

Tanya Dube was born and raised in Massachusetts, and after high school joined the military, serving in the U.S. Marine Corps. She is now a school food service manager in Alaska.

JB: I'm Jeffrey Boyce and it is February 18, 2016, and I'm here in Anchorage, Alaska, at the AKSNA meeting, and this morning I'm talking with Tanya Dube. Welcome Tanya, and thanks for taking the time to talk with me this morning.

TD: Thank you.

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

TD: Sure, I grew up outside of Boston in a small town called Norwood, Massachusetts, about twenty-two miles southwest of Boston. After I graduated high school I joined the military. I was in the Marine Corps. I went a little bit down your way there. I was in South Carolina and Tennessee for a little bit, and that brought me to Southern California, where I lived for about twelve years, and I've been in Alaska for the last thirteen years.

JB: You get around! Let's start by you telling me about your first recollections of child nutrition programs. Did you go to elementary school in Massachusetts?

TD: I did. I did go to elementary school. My mom was a single mom so we received free lunches. That was kind of the highlight of my day. I got to go through the lunch line, and back then it was a little bit more overt. 'I'm a free kid' and I would get the chance to get the meals. I remember the little cartons, and back

then you could have ice cream and cookies and all that with your lunch. Not quite so anymore.

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

TD: Just probably like most kids, Pizza Day was the best day, those square pizzas that they used to serve back in the day.

JB: On those sheet pans?

TD: Yep.

JB: So after high school you joined the military?

TD: I did. I was in the Marine Corps.

JB: You moved around a bit, huh? So what brought you to Alaska?

TD: I met my husband, and he lived in the interior of the state, and I was going to be here for nine months and we were going to move back east and live happily ever after. And that was thirteen years ago, and here I still am. We're still happy, but just in this part of the world.

JB: So how did you get into child nutrition?

TD: Quite by accident, actually. My professional background is in food service, restaurant management, and after I did get married we had a family and I stayed home with my kids. And we moved around a little bit in the state. And now I'm out in Bristol Bay, Alaska, in Naknek and King Salmon.

JB: What part of the state is that?

TD: Bristol Bay is the salmon capital of the world. We're about 300 miles west of Anchorage on the Alaska Peninsula. So I was there for probably about two years,

and I went to school a couple of times to eat with my kids, and the food was quite atrocious. Everything came from a package or a can and I said, "Gosh, I could do better. I could do better." And the cook left, and my son was still kind of young, and I was like, "Oh, I don't know." And then that cook didn't work out and it became a 'Well, be careful what you complain about' type of situation. And so before I knew it I had a set of keys and I was the new cook at the school. And that was quite an experience.

JB: How long have you been doing that?

TD: That was five years ago.

JB: And so you're in the same position that you started in?

TD: Yes.

JB: And do you feel like your life experience, you said you had a culinary background, did that help prepare you for what you do now?

TD: In a lot of ways, yes, because obviously child nutrition has all these rules and regulations, the paperwork. You just want to cook good food for the kids, and really that's not the biggest part of your job. But I definitely enjoy being with kids and around kids, and kind of getting to play the mama role for all the little cubs. I'm just the nice lady that gives them food. I'm not really ever yelling at them or making them follow directions. I've got the best job in the school, I really do.

JB: How many kids do you serve in your school?

TD: We have, preschool through twelve, we have about 125 kids, and on an average day about 90 to 100 of them eat school lunch.

JB: What's the population in your town?

TD: There are actually three towns. We are in kind of a small area. There's a town called Naknek, and then over the river there's South Naknek, and then up the road is King Salmon. And between the three villages we have about 300 people.

JB: And the one school serves all three villages?

TD: Yes, one school for all.

JB: Is that common in Alaska?

TD: Yes, kind of, for some of the less remote villages like us, where we have a lot of communities all together like that.

JB: Are you on a road?

TD: No, we are not on the road system.

JB: Are you near the water so it's barged in then?

TD: No, where we live it's a little bit different. We live on the water, but the barges can only come seasonally really, because we get iced in. So our food has to come by plane most of the year, so transportation costs are quite high.

JB: I've heard that a lot while I've been here. I know there are many unique things about Alaska regarding child nutrition programs. Do you want to share some of them? You mentioned flying the food in.

TD: Mine is a rural district, but we're fortunate. We have an airport, so we have at least one flight a day

coming in from Anchorage, so it's pretty easy to get things. It's expensive, but it comes in. But then other districts, they're the size of South Carolina or Virginia to get from one site to the next to the next. So it's quite challenging to explain to people that aren't familiar with the fact that to get your food you might need to get it off a boat, and then put it on a truck, and then put it on a snow machine, and then have guys carry it. There are some really unique challenges as far as getting the food for the kids.

JB: Do you all participate in the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program?

TD: We do, yes. Our kids love it.

JB: It must be a big challenge too though.

TD: Yea - again we're pretty fortunate, because we do have the plane that does come in every day. There's a great company here in Anchorage, Charlie's Produce, so they're able to get us some really neat fruits, and I've been able to take advantage. Our children have had some Ugli fruit recently, dragon fruit, some cherries, blueberries. It was kind of shocking, when we first started getting fresh fruits and vegetables I got a case of pears, because it's relatively inexpensive. You'd be amazed at how few children knew what that piece of fruit was, didn't even know what a pear looked like in its natural state. It was quite surprising to me. I said, "That's a pear." "A what?"

JB: Someone mentioned that yesterday.

TD: Pears come in cans.

JB: It was the lady from the state agency.

TD: Oh yea, Jo.

JB: She said there were two different emails from the same day about the children loved the pears and were just shocked. It's my favorite fruit by the way.

TD: Just recently we got some clementines and some of them had the leaves still on them. It blew the kids' minds. They couldn't comprehend that it grew on a tree. I'm pretty fortunate. I have a supportive administration and I've been able to get the kids [some things]. We've had some community donations. The Catholic Church gave us a donation, a cash donation, so I am fortunate that I can offer the kids more fresh offerings than some of the other people can.

JB: That's great. So I'm assuming they had fruits and vegetables. They just came out of a can.

TD: They came out of a can, yea.

JB: So what's a typical day like for you, or is there such a thing?

TD: Well, I usually get to work about seven and get ready for breakfast. We have hot breakfast in the kitchen or we also have a cereal area where they can get cereal and milk and fruit, so that they have a choice between the two. We serve breakfast from eight-thirty to nine. And then from nine until eleven, eleven-thirty I'm cooking lunch. I try to do a lot of our cooking from scratch, not all of it, but if I'm cooking from scratch it might be time to start the bread dough.

JB: So you make bread?

TD: I bake bread. And I make pizza from scratch, so Pizza Day is the best day for the kids and the worst day for me. And I make the dough, and I make the sauce,

and then we have to roll it out. So I put a lot of love into the food. That's why I do the job. I guarantee it's not for the salary. So I try to make as much from scratch as possible.

JB: Do you have anyone who helps you?

TD: I do have a helper, and so that makes it a little bit easier. She's been pretty excited since I started because she's taking a little more pride in her work, because it's not going into the freezer, opening a cardboard box, putting something from a package on a sheet pan and heating it up and serving it. We're actually giving the kids delicious homemade food.

JB: That's wonderful. What are some of the biggest challenges you've faced?

TD: Obviously financial. Jo Dawson, the woman you spoke with earlier, she works for the state, about two or three years ago she did a little spreadsheet on how much it costs to serve a school lunch to a student in Alaska. And on that spreadsheet it went from about \$3.85 to serve a meal tray to \$16.55 for the same lunch tray.

JB: Wow.

TD: And so costs can really be prohibitive. Especially like for example our USDA shipment was delayed, so I had to purchase milk, because we have to offer milk, and so a carton of milk costs me \$1.00 by the time it gets from where it leaves to me.

JB: You're talking about the half-pint?

TD: Yea, it costs me \$1.00, and there are some schools that it costs even more. So if you're thinking you're supposed to put out a whole tray of food for \$4.00 and



your milk is already \$1.00, you're WOW! And again, transportation, it adds about thirty percent or more to the actual cost of the food. And depending on what time of year you get it, because in summer months it's more expensive to ship things by air, because it's more popular. Where we live it's a fishing community, and so come about March fishermen and processors are coming in. So it becomes more expensive to ship things in.

JB: Tourists bring money but they cost you more.

TD: We don't have tourists, but we have the fishermen. It's kind of like tourists I guess. They crowd up our town. And the fact that here in Alaska we don't really grow much food - ninety-five percent of our food is brought from elsewhere.

JB: Wow, that's a big percentage. What changes have you seen over the years?

TD: I was pretty fortunate, as when I came in is when they were rolling out the Healthy, Hunger Free Kids Act, so whereas a lot of people complained of all this whole grain nonsense and this fruit, it was kind of the perfect storm for me, because I was taking over and I wanted to move the program in a different direction anyway, and so I could just blame the government. "Well, the government says I've got to do this." A funny story, I have this one student, he has quite a healthy appetite, and he always wants second, third portions of a meal. We do allow students to take seconds but not thirds. And he came in for thirds and I said, "You can't have that." "Government, I hate the government." This boy's about ten years old. So all the rules and regulation changes I think worked to my benefit. I was able to start and rebuild this program and the kids just love it.

JB: So they're accepting of the whole grains and the fresh fruits and vegetables?

TD: Oh yea. It doesn't bother them a bit, except beans, and what kid likes beans?

JB: Beets?

TD: Beans, the legume requirement. That's been a little challenging, but that's been the only resistance.

JB: You could make hummus.

TD: I have. I make hummus. I make black beans. I make pinto beans. I've done beans almost every single way you can imagine and they still won't take them. But I'll keep giving them because I have to.

JB: It's one of my favorites.

TD: Mine as well.

JB: Do you have any more memorable stories about the kids you've served or people you've worked with?

TD: Oh my gosh, I could talk forever and ever. I just love my kids. They come from a high needs area. We have about fifty-seven percent free and reduced. A lot of the kids I feed, it's the only food they are going to get for the day. So we make sure that we take care of them. And because I'm in such a small community you know the kids, you know their families, and you just want to take them all in and save them all. But you can't, so the best I can do is put all my love and effort into getting them some nice, healthy meals in the morning and the afternoon. We're fortunate we have an Afterschool Snack Program, so they are pretty well taken care of, from my end anyway.

JB: What would you say - I'm going to put you on the spot - has been your most significant contribution so far?

TD: I would say probably just reaching those kids. Sometimes there are kids that are a little more challenging. They make it a little tougher to kind of love them. And they get not treated as well, or with as much respect at the other end of the building, so I try to make sure to let them know that they are loved and that they are welcome and that they deserve to be taken care of. And I usually don't have problems with those kids. They are usually pretty kind to me because I've treated them with love and respect, because really at the end of the day they're all just little kids that just want to find their way in the world. And I just love them all, even the rotten ones, especially the rotten ones I think.

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

TD: To run! You have to have a lot of heart and soul and dedication, because in a lot of ways it is a thankless job. It's very hard work for not a lot of money, so you kind of have to have a little bit of altruism in you to just want to make a difference in the lives of children. If you have a big heart and you don't need a lot of money - I tell all the teachers and the principal, I do - I have the best job in the school, because kids are always happy to see me and I'm always happy to see them. It's the greatest job. I really, really love it. But it's a hard job too.

JB: Thanks so much for taking the time to share with me.

TD: I appreciate you taking the time too.