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## Gail S. Kavanaugh

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Institute of Child Nutrition

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## Gail Kavanaugh Oral History

Gail S. Kavanaugh has served as a child nutrition director in Mississippi for over twenty-five years. She has also been very active in the state and national school nutrition associations, including testifying before Congress in the early 2000s.

JB: I'm Jeffrey Boyce and it is October 7, 2010, and I'm here at the National Food Service Management Institute with Mrs. Gail Kavanaugh. Welcome Gail, and thanks for taking the time to talk with us today.

GK: You're welcome. I look forward to it.

JB: Could you begin by telling us a little bit about yourself – where you grew up and went to school?

GK: I am from Mississippi. I was born in Vicksburg, and I've lived most of my life in Vicksburg, although my dad worked for the Corps of Engineers, so we moved periodically, and then we would always come back to Vicksburg. My husband and I lived in Jackson and Hattiesburg for a while and now we're back in Vicksburg, so Vicksburg's home, and I guess that's where we'll be from here on out.

JB: Is that where you went to elementary and high school, Vicksburg?

GK: I went to elementary school in Vicksburg at Jett Elementary School. I had a brief stay in San Juan, Puerto Rico, when my dad was stationed there for two years with the Corps and I went to a military base school and then came back and finished at Jett Elementary and went on to Warren Central High School, which is pretty well known here in Mississippi. I continued my education at Hinds Community College and then went on to the University of Southern Mississippi and did my undergraduate and graduate work there.

JB: Was there a breakfast and lunch program at the elementary school when you went?

GK: Well, not a breakfast program; you know, you're dating me. We're going quite far back, but at the time I went to elementary school there were no breakfast programs, but we did have a lunch program. I have some really great memories of the lunch program at Jett Elementary School. In fact one of my mother's cousins was cafeteria manager at the time at Jett Elementary, Mrs. Carlisle, and so it was nice to see a familiar face when I came through. And I can remember being in the first grade, and I had a teacher, Mrs. Bell. She made sure we all had our little lunch tickets, and they were punched. I was looking downstairs and saw some of the memorabilia that you have, the tokens, and I can still remember those grey lunch cards with 'Jett Elementary Lunch Ticket'. It would have the five days, and you would buy them at the first of the week, and then they would actually punch your days that you had eaten on them. I do have some fond memories of that. A little bit changed when I went to the military base. Of course the cuisine in San Juan was a little bit different, and the delivery of milk was different because they were still using the old glass bottles. I was not accustomed to that. Just the difference in environment; what they probably had access to at that time in San Juan; but I have a lot of good memories of elementary school.

JB: Do you remember some of your favorite menu items from Jett or from Puerto Rico?

GK: I think you know in Mississippi chicken is always one of our favorite things and I remember the fried chicken, and that goes all the way through to high school. And of course we've made quite a few changes in how we do preparation now, but at that time fried chicken was probably one of my favorite meals.

JB: What was something from San Juan that you remember that was different?

GK: We had a lot more rice and beans; probably a lot healthier. They also had a lot of poultry in San Juan, but we had a lot more rice dishes; just from the ethnic background they prepare a lot more with beans, rice - those staples.

JB: I found that when I was living in central Florida – the Cuban influence, it was very similar. So you said you got your secondary at Warren Central. Then you went on to Sothern Miss?

GK: I went two years at Hinds Community College. That was in Raymond, Mississippi. And then my husband and I got married, we moved to Hattiesburg and I finished my undergraduate at the University of Southern Mississippi.

JB: And what was that in?

GK: That was in Institution Management and Dietetics. I completed that degree and we moved back to Jackson. At that time I wasn't working in my field. When I was in school I worked for a cable television company doing their accounting, so I transferred with them until I could find an opening in my field. I went from there to Jackson Public Schools as a foodservice supervisor – Jackson Public Schools in Jackson, Mississippi.

JB: Was Mary Hill there then?

GK: Actually, when I first started I got my first position as the foodservice accountant, because that's where I had more experience from my background when I was going to school. So I actually did the accounting, and then when Mary came onboard another position came open and she pulled me in because of my education, and I actually did work under Mary for two years before I took the position in Vicksburg with Warren County Schools at that time. After I worked with Warren County for a couple of years they consolidated with the city schools and it became Vicksburg Warren School District, so I have been with them ever since – I have been with them twenty-five years.

JB: We've talked about Mary Hill. Were there other people, mentors who sort of guided you into the field?

GK: Actually, there were a couple. I had a Home Economics teacher at Hinds Community College named Robbie Duke and Robbie really felt like Dietetics

is where I needed to be, not that she so much guided me into the field of child nutrition, but she guided me to the field of Dietetics. From there once I got to Southern, Dr. Margaret McCarty and Verne Hesson. Verne Hesson operated the Charcoal Room at the University of Southern Mississippi, and she was passionate about school lunch. And so when I worked at the Charcoal Room with Mrs. Hesson I said, "This may be something I may find interesting." And so when the opportunity presented itself in Jackson to work with Jackson Public Schools, I took the opportunity, and here we are. It's been a wonderful career.

JB: That's great to hear. Tell me about the Charcoal Room. Was that a training at Southern?

GK: It's very much like the Lenoir Hall here. It was a training for their students. It was a private dining hall for faculty and staff, and doing our institutional food production of our BS degree we took one week where we had to be the operator/manager of the Charcoal Room. We would go in and plan the menus, work up the food order, do production work, and supervise the staff – we were the production line manager for that week. It was very interesting. Of course we had a lot of assistance, because when you have head cooks working for years in that position, they understand that you're new and it's going to take a lot of guidance. And so just like our managers in schools today, their staff is what really makes them – they're the nuts and bolts of this operation, and so without those key staff members, those cooks and those foodservice assistants – they are actually the people that do the work. And a lot of times they don't get the glory, so we need to take any chance we can get to give them accolades and give them credit for what they do, because they are the true heroes of this program.

JB: They certainly are. Do you feel that your educational background prepared you for what you're doing now?

GK: To some point, yes, but to some things you just have to get in and learn the job and learn the position, and I think the best teachers are those people out in the schools. Many, many times they've called me at work as a young foodservice director – I've had a head cook call me at home and say,

“Miss Gail, don’t put chicken on Mondays anymore.” Because, not thinking, - years back we did not have processed chicken, and it would take thawing and then cleaning chicken, and that would really put them under a hardship if they had to have it thawed and then cleaned and then prepared on a Monday. So I learned a WHOLE lot from those seasoned, professional cooks out in the schools. They guided a young person. It was just things that you weren’t taught in school.

JB: And you were smart enough to listen to them.

GK: You have to listen to them. It will not work if you do not listen to them. So take my little bit of wisdom that I’ve learned over these years, that the best thing to do is to listen to your staff, listen to those people that are actually there every day trying to carry out the work that you give them to do, because they can tell you a whole lot.

JB: Tell us what a typical day is like for you now.

GK: A typical day – that’s the best thing about this job – there are no typical days. You walk in and every day is so different. You can come in and have your day lined out and know exactly what you plan to do, but you may have a freezer down, somebody that did not come to work, who was ill, so you’re trying to find someone to place in there to substitute, or you may have an emergency out at a school. A principal may call you with an emergency and you have to go out and look and see – and sometimes it is an emergency and sometimes it isn’t – [the job] has versatility with the types of things that you’re allowed to do. I highly recommend this. It just opens many doors. I will have to say this – I feel like so much of my leadership skills I have gained through participating in the School Nutrition Association. Just the opportunities they have presented to the membership, if you take advantage of those opportunities it will serve you well. It serves your district well. It serves you personally. SNA has truly opened many doors for me. I never would have thought that I would be doing the role that I’m doing for the state right now – the public policy chair for Mississippi – and with that role I am able to go and actually influence legislation that will benefit foodservice people and children for years to come. Those opportunities, if you take advantage of them, you can equip

yourself and your school district with a lot of information and a lot of opportunities if you will open that door. That's all it takes. It's out there for anybody that just wants to try. I had the opportunity to be the state president of the Mississippi School Nutrition Association, and from there with the PPL position it has truly been a benefit to me. It's been a benefit to the people that work around me because it's opened doors for them, it's opened scholarship opportunities. It's just done a whole lot. It is a wonderful professional organization.

JB: And PPL stands for?

GK: Public Policy and Legislative Chair. Each state has one through their state affiliate. But this particularly influences the legislation that we all, including the National Food Service Management Institute operates under. I can remember back even when I was in school Dr. Margaret McCarthy, her dream was to see this institute come about, and she talked about it then. So this has been forty to fifty years in the making to see the national institute developed. And this is the third decade that it's entering, so we feel very fortunate to have been a part of that in Mississippi, and to see it from the ground up.

JB: What are some of the biggest changes you've seen in the profession over the years?

GK: Of course with the menu patterns changing; I think the push with nutritional analysis that was one big change. I think the first big change we saw was probably the financial management into this, the accountability module; getting computerized, technology really coming into the forefront, us being able to use technology daily out in the schools. I think that is a big part of our operation now. I think the menus have changed quite a bit; I think probably some of the biggest changes we are going to see will be yet to come. We have just started using the online free-and-reduced application, and we see that's going to be an advantage to parents. If I would have thought years ago that we would be using biometrics, that we were using free-and-reduced scanning, if we would have the capability to go online – this online food buying guide that's being developed now for USDA and NFSMI – it's awesome, it's going to be a tool that will really

benefit every school. So it's some of those technologies that are being used now that have truly made our jobs a whole lot easier. Now when technology goes down we can really have some problems. Is it a blessing or a curse; but it has truly made a whole world available to us that we didn't have before – when we were doing manual lists of checking children off – and now with the biometrics and the computerization of our accountability systems and the menus and the nutritional analysis – actually change has been a part of this job – to change always – so that the new IOM recommendations that are coming down, if it's for the benefit of the children you are bringing it to the right people. The people here are the most passionate about children, wanting to do things for the right reason – and we may have to sometimes pull other people along kicking and screaming, because they may not see the vision we have. I think you have a lot of visionary people in child nutrition. I think they can see things growing and progressing, and it's just been an exciting career, a lot of fun. I know when you say this career to some young people; they can't envision that it would be an exciting career, but I promise you there's a lot of passion that goes into this and it can truly, truly make a difference in your life.

JB: And IOM stands for?

GK: Institute of Medicine. The Institute of Medicine is coming down with their recommendations for our meal patterns and for some of the things that we do day-to-day for the children, so I'm looking forward to it. I know that it's going to be a challenge, some of the restrictions that are going to be placed on us as far as sodium content and those types of things, but we've never had a challenge that's been given us that we haven't met the challenge and exceeded the expectations, so I think this is all good. We look forward to implementing it, working with it. We'll have challenges but we've had challenges before.

JB: Speaking of challenges, tell us about some you've already faced and how you dealt with them. What were some of the biggest ones you faced in your career?

GK: Some challenges on a local level would be when you have new superintendents come in, those types of things, but those are little



operational things. Your department operates under the same rules and regulations when you have a new superintendent or not, so you just have to learn that person. I think some of the challenges that we had in Mississippi are looking at things like when Katrina came through, just the devastation that we all experienced. It has taken us quite a few years to recover from that, and even though we weren't directly hit we did have quite a bit of damage in Vicksburg, and it did take us quite a while to recover from that, but not nearly as much as our operations that were down on the coast, and so we as a state had to pull together and do for each other and do what we could for those down on the coast. So I think that was probably one of the big struggles that we've had. I would also say some of the financial barriers that we've had for operation. We're really having to think outside the box now look into areas that are maybe untapped. I really tried using some contracted labor to avert some of the financial problems that we were having, and that has worked for me. It doesn't always work for everybody, but that's one of the struggles that we have. In Mississippi, as I think back over the years, when we went to what we call the Mississippi cycles, which was trying to use a new type of recipes, and trying to train staff to move toward standardized recipes and get away from those homegrown recipes, and actually use standardized measurements in recipes, I think that's ongoing training that has to be done, and I think that that was a struggle. It was a struggle getting the children to be receptive to those recipes because they were different. We started those all at one time and we had a LOT of complaints from parents and children, and from staff, because it was resistance to change. But through change comes some good things, and so you work that out, you learn how to modify those recipes and adapt them, and you still have your standardized recipes and are able to train people to use them, and go on from there. One of the things that stands out in my mind as one of those growing experiences that I had, I can remember I went to LAC in 2003 or 2004, and being the PPL Chair, I roomed with the MSNA President, Margie Green.. Margie was scheduled to do some appearances while she was in Washington, and she had a family emergency that came up and she had to go back home. Marshall Matz called me up and said, "You're going to have to testify before the Congress and go before the Senate Ag Committee and testify in Margie's place. And we're going to do that tomorrow morning. Can you meet with us?" I didn't have a whole lot of prep time, but it was a

growing, learning experience. It was probably a good thing I didn't have a whole lot of time to worry about and to also know that you were going to be filmed on C-Span didn't help my nervousness. But Theresa Neese was a very calming effect – to know that Theresa was sitting by me and she also was going to testify – Marshall prepped us very well and we were able to go on and to give our testimony. At that time we were really focusing on the elimination of reduced price, and as you know we still have the reduced price category, but every year we still take that issue back to Congress. We feel like those families are really the families that are left out, and they really need some help financially. It poses some problems for us as the operator trying to come up with financial plans to assist them to take care of their children and get their lunches paid. Sometimes it's still very, very difficult. Those types of things that come up – we're not going to let a child do without. We're just not going to let a child do without, and if we have any control over it we're going to do something about it. So I think that's the type of passion you find – people that take jobs like this – is that they are truly an advocate for the children.

JB: I don't want to put you on the spot, but what would you say has been your most significant contribution to the field?

GK: I guess in our state, me being one of the older generation of people that have been around a while, just trying to mentor younger directors that come into the program, being able to assist other directors, having the background and the knowledge to be able to help somebody else, and if I can prevent them from having to go through some of the learning curve and the struggles that I've had, I think that that's satisfying to me, hopefully helpful to them. It is almost the family – the foodservice family – as you can see from some of the meetings that you attend and you see us, we are so glad to see each other, and those connections that we make, the ability to help each other, the ability to offer suggestions to people when you see them struggling or they're having problems, maybe you've been through that before and you can assist. I think that that's one of the things, that I hopefully have been able to assist some of my fellow directors and managers and other people. As my staff says, they have a phonics lesson with me all the time – 'We're going to learn how to say *no*' – and I just

don't know how to do that very well. When I see a need I'm available. God gives you a talent; He expects you to make good use of it.

JB: Any memorable stories – special children, or people that you've worked with over the years – that come to mind?

GK: I have a character that is known throughout the state of Mississippi – my bookkeeper is so well known and entertains everybody – Mrs. Joyalene Oakes. She has been in Vicksburg with me – she was there when I came – she says she started the department when it was a pen and pencil operation – she truly has been a significant influence, and very helpful – and very helpful across the state. She's right at retirement now, and so she's not as involved as she was at one time, because of her age and her health, but they all want a Joyalene story when I come to conference or I come to a meeting, or they keep up with her, they want to know how she is. She truly has been an inspirational person in our office, and a force to be reckoned with if things don't go right. She's a character. She's probably one of those people that will never be forgotten in Mississippi school foodservice. Also memorable are some of the catering experiences that we've had locally where we've done things for children – teaching children in madrigal programs and special events how to serve tables with us and give them a skill and make them feel like they've learned something and they've been successful at something, I think that's wonderful. I think another experience that I had one time, it was with a parent that requested a hearing. She was actually requesting a hearing because she had been denied free meals. I probably can't tell this without tearing up a little bit, but she had a little boy and the daddy was in prison. She had pulled herself up by her bootstraps. She had bettered herself. She had gotten an education, had actually moved up in her job, and they saw such a good employee that they gave her a raise. When they gave her a raise she lost her free and reduced status, she lost her subsidized housing, everything that was her safety net. So she asked for this hearing because she said, "I just don't know what I'm going to do" and she said, "It's just me and this child." And so the superintendent and I, had a formal hearing and as she was telling us all this and we sat there we listened to it, and I said, "Well, these are the regulations" and there's not a whole lot we can do." These regulations are set by USDA, and by the government." So the

superintendent agreed with me and he said, “We hate to rule this way, but this is truly how it is.” And so we ended the hearing and she cried when we told her that. As we were leaving I looked at the superintendent and I said, “There’s an organization somewhere out there that’s going to help this lady.” So as I walked toward the office I said, “Shoot, organization nothing. I’ve got a checkbook and this kid’s going to eat and she’s not going to have to worry about it” and I paid for his meals for the rest of the year. It’s those type of things Jeffrey, that we have to be advocates for children. You can cut this out if you like, because they call me the ‘town crier’. But it’s those parents that are struggling that truly need our help, and while we’re in the positions that we’re in we have to, as directors, address those issues every day. It’s very easy to sit behind the desk – even more difficult to be that cashier or that manager, and look at a child in the face and take a tray away from them – that’s difficult – and sometimes that’s what we tell them to do, and that’s not fair, that’s not fair to them. It’s easy if you’re not facing that person, but if you have to face that person and tell them that, it’s even harder. Think about having to tell that to a child. So these are the difficulties and some of the rewards. I was truly rewarded by that experience because it opened my eyes to be compassionate, my eyes to realize there are people out there that are really hurting. That’s been years ago. You can multiply that by many, many experiences that are still to come, and are happening today with the economy like it is. Happy experiences – I’ve had children boycott the tuna. They don’t like tuna pie. It’s very exciting to look – and this could be elementary age children – they get a passion for something, and it’s good to see them be able to voice that passion, and to actually want a meeting with you, and experience how they can use their voice to change. So it’s fun to watch children grow. It’s also fun to be on the line with little children that come through for the first time and they see something they really like up on that line, and they’re so excited about being in school and wanting to make their choices, and to get something and to make the choice by themselves. I can’t tell you another career that would have offered such a wide variety of emotions to you or the experiences to you with personnel, and just people in general.

JB: What would you tell someone today who came to you and is considering child nutrition as a profession?

GK: I've taken several interns from universities. I've had some from Southern Miss. I've had some from Ole Miss. I've had some from Utah State. Those that come to me and work with me, I tell them I'm not going to sugarcoat this. It's not going to be always easy. Is it a rewarding profession? I can tell you, you will not be disappointed. It will be a very rewarding profession. It will be challenging. There's nothing dull about it. It is what you make it. And for a young person that wants opportunities, the sky is the limit with Child Nutrition. If you want to be involved in your community, it has opened a whole different avenue of being involved in the community, particularly now that the wellness and obesity issues are in front of us. It opened the opportunity for me to belong to the Chamber of Commerce and their leadership programs. So this career is what you want to make of it. The opportunities are there; all you have to do is ask and people will open doors for you and will want you to succeed. You will have people around you that will want to see you succeed, and they are looking for leadership. The people in these careers are looking for people to mentor, and to have the next group of people to succeed them. And I think that's one thing we need to be looking at, is really concentrating on succession planning, with the age of our directors in the United States.

JB: Anything else you'd like to add?

GK: I have truly enjoyed being here. The national institute is a treasure I think everyone needs to discover. I'm appreciative of y'all making the Archives and the oral histories. This is going to be something that will be great to look back on so that we don't forget where we've been and how far we've come, because when I started out as a child we started out with that single Type-A meal, and we've grown to all the choices and variety, and the skill of the people is just increasing. It's just been a wonderful, wonderful life.

JB: Well thank you so much.

GK: Thank you for having me.