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Rene Weber

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Interviewee: Rene Weber
Interviewer: Meredith Johnston
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Rene Weber became Director of Lunch Program for the Catholic Diocese of Cleveland, Ohio, in 1978, after working as a teacher for eleven years, and remained in this position for 22.5 years, starting with five schools and ending with 119. An active member of both the Ohio School Food Service Association and American School Food Service Association, she served as Legislative Chair for Ohio for eighteen years and three terms on the National Advisory Council for the USDA.

MJ: We are here with Rene Weber at the Ohio Department of Education to record Rene's oral history. Would you tell us a little about yourself and where you grew up?

RW: Sure. First of all I would like to say how humbled and honored I was that you even asked me to do this. I grew up in the inner city of Cleveland, the youngest of nine children. I was the last, Irish Catholic family, and went to school, Catholic schools only. There were six girls and three boys in my family.

MJ: What is your earliest recollection of child nutrition programs and school lunch programs then?

RW: It is unusual in the fact that when I was in grade school at Immaculate Conception, every morning, this was in maybe first, second, and third grades, the nuns would take about seven or eight of us into their kitchen, which was like the inner sanctum, you know, in those days nobody went in there. And they gave us breakfast. They had toast and jelly and milk. And the group of us felt really special. And it wasn't until later that I realized that it was because we were the poor kids. And that's what they were actually doing, the Breakfast Program before the program even existed.

MJ: And what time period would this have been?

RW: It would have been 1944.

MJ: That was even before the School Lunch Act, then.

RW: Oh, yeah.

MJ: Well, could you tell us a little bit about that? What would they serve?

RW: Whatever they had in their kitchen, but it was just interesting that we thought that we were just really special and had no idea that it was because we were the poor kids that they were doing it for. And then when I look back, you know, starting at the Diocese and looking back on that, I thought, you know, what a wonderful thing they did. And they were ahead of their time before there was ever a program to do it.

MJ: How did you become involved in the child nutrition profession?

RW: Well, I think I told you, I think I am probably the most unusual interview that you have. I entered the convent and was a nun right after high school. I became a teacher, became a teacher of teachers. And I eventually left in 1965, not that I wasn't happy. I enjoyed my years very, very much. But I didn't want to do it forever. And so, I eventually got married and one of the nuns, Sister Bernadette, began the Lunch Program in the inner city with five schools. She did it herself. She found out about the program and began to take care of all the paperwork to help those inner city kids to get the Lunch Program. So I was home minding my own business watching two little boys, and she, a very strong women, she said, "I need you." So she asked me to come down and become the assistant director to the director that she had at the time. And my first job was to write, with a few other people, a nutrition curriculum for grades one through three. And we called it "Nutree," and we had all kinds of manuals and workbooks for the children, and we piloted it and it did get published. So it was used in the schools for several years. And then, she took me to a USDA meeting, threw the regulations at me, locked me in the room, and said, "Learn these." And I did. We were directly under USDA at that time. States had a choice of handling the private schools, and at that time Ohio wasn't, so my training started directly under USDA out of Chicago for at least three years. And then, we finally did go under the state. So actually, she's the one that I would call one of my mentors.

MJ: What time was it when you went under the state?

RW: I started the job in 1977, and became the director in 1978. And the state took us over in late 1980. So it was a couple of years that we were directly under the Midwest Region in Chicago.

MJ: Now, did they handle the private schools differently than they handled the public ones?

RW: No, the program is the same for everyone. Same rules, same everything. But in the Catholic school structure, it is not a Catholic school system; it is a system of Catholic schools where they are all individual. And what she did was bring them under our Diocesan wing and do the menus and the claiming and everything, and she started with these five schools. When I left, we had 119. And I could never hire anybody until I gained a certain number of schools, so she was extremely budget-conscious because we had to be self-supporting. There were no ifs, ands, or buts about that. The bishop wasn't going to pay our bills. He said, "You can have the program if you can do it this way." And it remains that way to this day.

MJ: Well, you talked a little bit about who your mentor was. Would you tell us a little bit more about your educational background and how that prepared you for the child nutrition profession?

RW: Could I mention a couple of other mentors?

MJ: Sure, sure.

RW: Sister Bernadette was the one because she had the foresight to start that and taught me how to go forward. The second one was my husband who has been just unbelievably supportive through my entire career. And the third one was Jean Harris from industry. She is from P. R. Foods. You will probably hear more about her from other people. Highly encouraging and hired me when I retired as a consultant for their company. Unbelievable lady. My educational background, as you can imagine, was in education. A Bachelor's in Education and then my Master's is in Education Administration. So I came from the education component obviously. I was a teacher for 11 years also.

MJ: Okay. And you think that really helped you in preparing you for the field?

RW: Oh, yes, the administrative part. And obviously they were leading me toward being a principal and an administrator, and all those kinds of things really helped in managing a staff of 248 by the time I left. Then, oh yes, I think it did, very much so.

MJ: Would you tell us about your career, more about your career, and the positions you have held in the profession?

RW: Okay. I was in the position of Director for the Diocese for 22 and a half years, again, starting with five schools and ending with 119 schools spread out over eight counties in northeast Ohio; the whole upper part of Ohio. One of the first things I did was, I joined OSFSA, Ohio School Food Service Association, and then, naturally, American School Food Service Association, and within a short time I became their Legislative Chair for Ohio, and did that for 18 years. That is where you set up the whole Legislative Action Conference. I was asked to be a part of a National Advisory Council for the USDA and I served three terms on that. That was a council that prepared a biannual report to the President, and people were from all over the country. A small group, but it was an extremely interesting experience.

MJ: Do you have any memorable stories from that experience, or anything else you would like to add?

RW: Just meeting people from, you know, this was before my big involvement in ASFSA, so meeting people from all over and they weren't all, it was, it was a nutrition advisory council so it wasn't just schools. So you had superintendents, you had, you know, a variety of people. So, serving three terms on it, that was how I really got to know a lot of the people at USDA. There are some of them still there today, Stan Garnett and those folks.

MJ: He is on our list to interview.

RW: I do have a story about it. We had to prepare quite well for that, those meetings, as you can imagine. And John Block was the Agriculture Secretary at the time. And the question came up something about Ronald Reagan being against child nutrition, and they quoted something and I had really done my homework and had all this stuff with me, and I, being innocent and not having been in that

arena before, I wasn't bashful. I just said right out, "When did he say that, because here it says da da da da da." And the whole room, all his entourage just went, [gasp] and some of them ran out of the room to get it. And Stan Garnett still tells that story because it was amazing. After that I learned to watch, but you shouldn't. You really have to be yourself in those environments anyhow. So then with OSFSA, I was in the line to be president, I was president of that organization, and ASFSA, I was on Public Policy and Legislation Committee for a year. And then they asked me to take the Chair of the Bylaws Committee in the year that they were revising them. So I had a wonderful group of people and we did the revision of the Bylaws and that was 1993. They passed and of course, changes since, they will probably redo them again and again and again. But that was quite an experience because bylaws had not been something that I had worked on before, but it was a good experience. As far as at the Diocese in the last few years that I was there, I was made Executive Director of the Head Start Program in addition to taking on the Summer Lunch Program at a hundred sites that had been managed by another agency, so that, you know, three hats by the time that I left.

MJ: Could you tell us a little bit more about your time there as head of the Head Start?

RW: Head Start had a Director and I was like the Executive Director over her, just to keep it on track, because they were under the Counsel of Economic Opportunity of Cleveland, and then eventually they did get moved into Catholic Charities which was a better fit, but it was an interesting experience. A whole new world for me; it had nothing to do with the serving or anything; it was the program itself. And Summer Lunch, I just can't say enough about Summer Lunch. It is awesome. We were unique in the fact that it wasn't in schools, it was in store-front churches, urban housing. Schools did not want to do it, so the outreach had been done by someone before us, but we inherited a hundred sites overnight. And it was quite a challenge but it worked out very well and it is still going very well.

MJ: Do you have any thoughts on how Ohio would be different from other states with regards to child nutrition programs?

RW: With making friends throughout the country like you do in ASFSA, you see how different, it seems to be more like state policies that are not the same, you

know, relative to competitive foods or different guidance from USDA. The claiming structure may be more streamlined in some than in others. Bottom line, we all had the same concerns, problems and challenges, but I would say it is the state policies that differ. Some, like California, are way ahead of everybody else in those areas.

MJ: What changes have you seen in child nutrition profession over the years?

RW: I feel like a dinosaur; technology for one. All of the manual papers are gone. Technology and then the changes in and the emphasis on the menus. You know lower fat, lower sodium; Obesity, the emphasis on obesity. And so much from the scratch preparation to prepared foods, those are big; difficulty in finding labor.

MJ: What about training? What changes have you seen?

RW: At what level; at what I did?

MJ: Okay.

RW: We had constant training. We had worked with my supervisors. At least twice a month we had an off-site meeting relative to menu, commodities, and what they were finding in their schools and such, and for the managers we had elementary schools once a month, and that was difficult because of the, as I said we were spread out over eight counties. But there was a different training at each one of those. High schools I met with at least bi-monthly some months and other months monthly. And those, too, were off-site, often at a location where we could test new foods, new ideas. We did sanitation, you know, every kind of. I needed a point to bring, we, I used to get two buses to take them to the Ohio School Food Service conference, so they had the opportunity to take the extra classes there, too. So that was, you know, a big thrill for them to be able to go to a conference, and we had contests to see who could go to the national because it was much more expensive. But training, training, training, yes. We were also really big into marketing and promotions. That's probably where we got the most notoriety nationally.

MJ: What do you think has been your most significant contribution to the child nutrition profession?

RW: This was the hardest one because I don't, I think every director that you interview is going to say you can't do it alone, obviously, because it is a combined type of, you know, contribution, but I think bringing those Diocesan schools together in not in their own little, you know, trying to struggle on their own, under one sponsorship where they, one menu, one training. We became nationally known for some of the things we did accomplish. And I don't think that would have happened if they weren't under one umbrella. I always say, if I had another life I would try to do that for other Dioceses because working here at the state all the other ones are still one little school on their own. And that and legislation; legislation has always been my passion. And being Legislative Chair for our state for so long really, I don't know, kept, always kept, wanted to keep my staff in the loop on that and regulations, so those two things, I would say.

MJ: Could you give us some examples of the types of legislation that you were involved with enacting?

RW: Well, all of us. It took a combined effort and especially ASFSA leading that charge, because the Omnibus Reconciliation Act in 1981 took us from 18 cents for a paid lunch down to 10, and if you look at the history it took years to get back to that amount. So we were cut with one-third of our funding at that time, so that really sent, I think, our association forward to "This will never happen to us again." And the lobbying efforts and the letter writing and all that we have done as a nation, not just Ohio, but being Legislative Chair for that many years, I mean, I just found it, and I always, as President, encouraged more people to go, because once they go they are convinced of the worth of it and become a part of the process. So we had letter-writing campaigns and all kinds of things each in their own districts, and you know, again, as a nation you make a difference, but if everybody doesn't do it, you know, it could happen again, so we've been very proactive. And it's been, and then relative to legislation in a sense are the regulations. Really, maybe it is because we were under USDA to begin with but it was like we were following everything, maybe it was because I was a nun, I don't know. I do what I'm told. But it was fun and it was exciting, and it was always wonderful to see the people who went the first time, how their eyes just, the first timers...

MJ: Do you have any more memorable stories that come to mind when you think about your years in the profession?

RW: Yes. I, we were constantly doing marketing and promotions, and one of the ones was the National Frozen Foods. It was a month-long promotion, so we got all the schools to participate. And they all did different activities, and we did win for three years in a row. But one of the things we did is, I dressed as a penguin and went out into the schools. And the kids just went crazy, you know how that is. But then we went, I got my brokers involved, because they could help with the prizes and such for the schools that won, or the people that won, but I took one broker who dressed up as the Pillsbury Doughboy, and I thought it would just be a little costume. It was this eight-foot tall thing, Doughboy, that had a fan inside that blew him up. And I was the penguin. And we went to a nursing home. We took kids to the nursing home; they had little penguin faces and they made placemats for the residents. But this, I'll never forget it, this one Alzheimer's patient, she went over to the Doughboy and myself, or we went over to her, and she poked him in the belly, you know like they do, and she said something, and the nurse said that was the first she had spoken. So he's in the Doughboy crying and I'm in the penguin crying. And then another year, we went to a hospital and there again, too, when you are in that costume, and we brought the, one of the schools made baskets for the kids in the hospital, and that was really an emotional, inside this costume, to see these little kids, but they were so excited. We did a lot of that. Two brokers dressed up as a tiger and a bear, and I was the penguin, you know, we just did all kinds of stuff like that. After we won three in a row, you have to get out and so they put me on their board. National Frozen Food Board, I was the head of their school committee and on their board for three years. It was a very interesting experience also, because it is not just schools, it is the whole industry. And then the other story that I would like to tell is about one of my Summer Lunch ladies, her name is Lena, and it was probably the absolute worst area of the city of Cleveland that you would ever see. And when we went to visit her site, you know, for her review, and see, I was just amazed. She had people at the door, volunteers at the door, and when the children came to the door, she said, "Party of five?" and they were ushered to a table. They were treated like they were going to the finest restaurant in the world. She's dead now, but I will never forget her, Lena Hamilton. And it wasn't because we were there. She did that all the time and they would just walk in so proud. It was amazing. And I have to say I had an awesome staff. There wasn't anything that

we couldn't do together, and I have to give them a lot of credit. So, as they say, it's been a wonderful life.

MJ: Well, tell us a little bit about what you do now.

RW: Oh. After, right after I retired, the State of Ohio received a grant to promote Provision Two in the schools. You are familiar with that.

MJ: No, I am not.

RW: Provision Two is where you feed all of the children at no cost, but it has to be in an area pretty much where you can support that because you lose, you know, the other reimbursement. So the grant I was then assigned, I was hired on as a contractor and I was assigned three major districts: Cleveland City, East Cleveland, and Lorraine, to help them begin their program, stay with them throughout the two-year grant, helping them through the entire process. And then we decided to move, my husband and I decided to move to Columbus to be near the grandkids and Lorita Myles, who is the State Director, called and said, "You're moving here. I need you." So she asked me to come here and finish the Provision Two grant, and the area she needed me in was Child Care. So I always tell everybody I gained some more brain cells because I learned everything brand new with family day care and child care, and now I am the, I guess you would call it, the Licensing Co-Coordinator for about five to six thousand home care providers under 17 sponsors throughout the state. So I work with those sponsors insuring each one of those providers have the proper licenses. I approve them. I train them. I do all of that. So then at school crunches, of course my passion is schools, so this was different, but you gain a new passion. But at application time when all of the applications are coming in, I jump to the school side and do the on-line approval of applications in the schools because I don't need training. So it has been fun and it's flexible, which is wonderful. I have been encouraged to go back full-time but at my age, I don't think so.

MJ: Anything else that you would like to add?

RW: Just that this is really nice that you are doing this on so many people. Again, I was shocked that I was asked, but very, very pleased. It is a wonderful thing that you are doing because the stories that I read on-line when you showed them to

me, they were wonderful, wonderful stories. And hopefully, you know, the people that see them will be inspired to do what they do, because it is the best profession in the world.

MJ: Well, we thank you for giving us the opportunity to interview you, and I am sure, when we get yours on-line, we are going to have a lot of the same comments from people about it being inspiring. So thank you.

RW: Oh. Thank you very much.