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Interview with Nancy Bevan

Audra Ransburg

Nancy Bevan

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Researcher's Name: Audra Ransburg

Event: Interview with Nancy Bevan

Place: Mount Vernon High School

Date: February 22, 2001

AR: This is Audra Ransburg with Nancy Bevan the morning of February 22 at the Mount Vernon High School cafeteria. Basically, what's your job here?

NB: My title is food service coordinator and I'm in charge of the operation of the school foods program for the district for the school district.

AR: So what schools do you-

NB: All of the schools in the Mount Vernon city schools. The elementary, middle, high school. We also service the alternative center over on Sugar Street. That's basically it. My job is basically to insure the smooth operation of the system's food service and that includes ordering the food, hiring the employees, training the employees, doing the state paperwork, submitting the paperwork for the reimbursement for the free and reduced lunch program. Administering that too, we do the free and reduced applications, we approve them here in my office, so we do that sort of thing too.

AR: Do you make the menus?

NB: Yes, I make the menus. I do the whole nine yards, I guess.

AR: What factors do you take into account when you make the menus?

NB: Acceptability to the kids. We also have to follow the USDA guidelines for writing the menus, as far as how they're balanced. They have pretty specific things that you have to have on there. That would include your protein. Which for them, they have a pretty narrow definition of that. It's either meat, cheese or nuts. That's about it. They throw beans and legumes in there, but you have to do a bit of juggling around with the menu for them to be accepted like that. Then you have to have your fruit and vegetable and dairy product, which is your milk and then your bread. And their grains, they've really made that the base of that new pyramid. You have to have so many- six to eleven servings of that per day. And we're required for elementary kids to have twelve servings per week. And high school and middle school has up to fifteen servings per week. Of course that's one ounce of something, but that makes it interesting to get it in there in one five day cycle.

AR: Is there an a la carte line as well?

NB: Yes, we sell lots of a la carte in the middle school and high school, not so much in the elementary. In the elementary we try to keep it simple to cookies and ice cream and they do fruit roll ups and stuff like that. High school, middle school they have nachos and

cheese sauce, pizza, french-fries and all sorts of juices and drinks and cookies and all sort of wonderful stuff. We also sell a lot of salads too, I guess I should throw some health stuff in there.

AR: So with the a la carte, how does the USDA insure that the kids are getting a good-

NB: They don't concern themselves with the a la carte sales. They are strictly interested in the plate lunch- we call it plate lunch or type A lunch. That is what we mostly promote, but we also give the kids the option of buying something else if they would like it. And they do a lot of pizza and stuff like that.

AR: Can I ask your home life? Do you make the same kinds of choices at home?

NB: I have a teenager at home. He's fourteen- I'm sorry, he just turned fifteen. And we go through stages and I tried to broaden his horizons. We don't eat the same things at home that we eat here because we're more adventurous than most kids- he's more adventurous than most kids. We eat a whole range of things at home. He's trying to be a vegetarian right now.

AR: How would that work at school?

NB: It's difficult. I do a vegetarian menu occasionally. We do vegetarian chili or we put garden burgers on. The USDA looked at my menu at that particular time and told me I had to put some cheese on the side just because they don't think it fulfilled the protein requirements. I shouldn't say the USDA, but it was the Ohio Department of Education, their child nutrition services. So they're not well versed in what a vegetarian diet is. They don't have a system in place to evaluate it- that's how you put it. They would prefer you to stick to more traditional menus because it's easier for them to track your nutrient content and what not. Last time we were evaluated, we got an excellent rating on our menus because they take a whole week- they don't just take it day by day. Because some days my menus are higher in fat some days they're really low in fat. So they take a whole week and evaluate what your fat content is for that week. And we got in under the 30 percent content. You've got the vitamin A and vitamin C you've got to have that on your menu almost every other day just about. And of course the bread and grain content has to be there. We are writing it to their specifications and I still have the vegetarian menu on there, so if the kids want cheese on there. We sort of offer it so that if they want the cheese they can have it.

AR: Do you have a lot of vegetarian students?

NB: We have a certain amount. I think it's because of the Seventh Day Adventists in Mount Vernon. There's more of an influence than you might expect. So we do mostly cheese items- cheese pizza, grilled cheese sandwiches, the vegetarian chili and things like that kind of go over, but the kids aren't real familiar with them, but we keep putting them out and they eventually get used to them. And we do a lot of salads, we do a lot of meat-free salads, but then you have to put the cheese in them. Or we do salads with yogurt or

sandwiches with yogurt depending which way you want to go. The salads are meat-free, but the yogurt- the USDA has considered that a protein. So they changed that with in the past year.

AR: What brought you to this job?

NB: I'm actually- I've been doing this for seventeen years now, not here, but. I worked for Akron University for a time period. I have a degree in Business from The Ohio State University and I worked in restaurant management when I first graduate- for Red Lobster. But I decided that the restaurant trade was really tough if you wanted to have a family and I did. I wanted to get married, have a family. But working 70 or 80 hours a week just wasn't cutting it. And plus in those kinds of businesses, they have a tendency to transfer you to different stores, and I did for six years I moved about every ten months to a different place. So it was tough to have a social life. I was looking around for something else to do. I got into Akron University for a while in their food service department. But it was only a part time job even though I was 24 or 25 at the time. I couldn't survive on that. Kept looking and found a job in the Cleveland area at the Lakewood City Schools. I got into their food service as a manager. Was there for eleven years and I was wanting to go up a step and I just kept looking and finally this job came up. These jobs come up very rarely. They're nice jobs to have. If you've got children, you're working your kids' schedule, you're not working nights and weekends. Generally you have spring break and Christmas and summer off too. Not going to make a lot of money, but if family's what you're interested in, it's a good spot to be in. So that's what brought me to it. Because that was sort of my focus and I wanted to stay in food service. That's how I got here.

AR: How do you feel about the USDA and the Ohio Department of Education?

NB: Well, the Ohio Department of Education, it's the Child Nutrition Services that's a part of the Ohio Department of Education and they administer the program for the USDA for the free and reduced lunch program. Which is where all our regulations come from as regards to how to write the menu and that sort of thing, because we get reimbursement back from the USDA for serving those lunches. Over the years you up and down with things depending on who's in office and the times, weather it's democrats or republican. I was in food service when Ronald Regan was around and ketchup was considered a vegetable and stuff like that. That was never really true, but we booted that idea around and poked fun at him a little bit. The thing with nutrition and the main focus on making the diet better for the students really came about seven or eight years ago. They really have changed how they do recording of the menus and how they evaluate things. And they changed the food pyramid. I'm not so sure I totally agree with that because nutrition is a science that's in flux and they don't know everything. There are so many factors out there that includes everything. I think eating a healthy diet, yeah it's important, but I don't think they really know what a healthy diet is yet. But I have to go with what they give me because that's how I get my funding and that's how we feed the children who are disadvantaged. And I wouldn't want to second guess them because obviously they have more resources than I do as far as getting into nutrition research. I do not have a degree in

nutrition or dietetics, so I kind of have to go along with what they say. But you know how it is, you read the paper. One day something's good for you, one day something's bad for you. Are we going to quit serving beef eventually because of BSE. Is that a big concern? And then you've got salmonella concerns with the chicken. It's getting tougher to figure out what's going to be good to serve these kids. But really, really, really what it boils down to is- you could put a beautiful menu down in front of these kids and if they don't want to eat it, they won't eat it. And a lot of it goes right back to what mom makes for them at home. Most kids are creatures of habit and they like their comfort food. We just keep plugging away. We have something that we think is really great. We just keep putting it on the menu and eventually it takes off, but it's kind of a long, drawn out process. For good nutrition, I think that's just going to take time. Start with the little kids when they're in kindergarten and just keep working on them. Maybe by the time they're seniors they won't be totally ignorant. You know how it is, you get so totally wrapped up, especially in your teenage years, with what your friends think, what certain rock stars say, what they think is good. Personal preference. They have the freedom of choice too. So we put out what we think is good for them. If they want to take it, fine. If they don't, you know, we're not their moms, we can't force them.

AR: Are there health classes here where they talk about nutrition with the kids?

NB: Yeah, they do that in the elementary too, and it goes in spurts. I don't really follow with the class room. Our department volunteers ourselves as a support system, so if the teachers need something, we can provide it for them, but we're not in charge of the curriculum and we're not in charge of when they teach it, but I do know that they teach diet sometime around third or fourth grade they get into health and nutrition. They have a segment when they do that. And of course they deal with some of it in middle school when they do their home-ec classes and now in the high school they do have health, but that covers a lot of things other than nutrition and they start that freshman year. So they get hit with good nutrition at least three or four times through out their school life. But how effective that is, I don't know because most people develop their eating habits at home. It's hard to cook like mom.

AR: Lot of moms in the county to compete with. What would you change about what you are allowed to serve or what the kids would take. Do you have a vision?

NB: I would love to see the record keeping be easier for the information the state wants you to keep. I think it kind of holds schools back and I'm not the only school in that position. They have like six different ways you can write your menus through the USDA. You can pick your choice of how you want to write your menus. Most schools will pick the last way which we call enhanced menu planning which is basically the same way we've been writing menus for twenty years except you have to add more bread on. You take your protein, your fruit and vegetable, your milk and bread and you balance it out. There are other ways to do it, but they basically require a computer program to figure out the nutritional content of the menu and a lot of schools aren't...

-Interruption-

NB: ... But a lot of schools don't even have computers. The food service department doesn't have the budget. Our department is lucky, we've been able to run a solvent department so we can afford the sorts of things. But I haven't even purchased a nutrition analysis program because they take so many man hours to enter the data in. Every school has a little bit of a different recipe. You have to put all of that information into your nutritional program in order to get the right information back out. Then when you write your menus based on that, you can juggle things a little more, but it takes more time. Anytime you make any substitutions you have to go back in there and enter it again just so you can keep up the paper work the state requires. It sounds like a nightmare to me. Case in point- this is my calendar for this month. All of these red and blue things are people who've been out sick- employees. It's been like this for a while, since September basically. I'm not the only school district that deals with this. I've had ladies out. One lady broke her foot, one had surgery. This month, for some reason is the flu season here in Mount Vernon and people are just dropping. I usually- today I'm working as a cashier because I've stretched my substitute cooks to the limit and I've been doing that for the last two weeks. I have minimal time sometimes to do these things. I spend eight, nine, ten hours here just getting caught up with my own work, but I still have a family. I just have to cut it off at some point in time. The thing that kind of suffered was this nutritional analysis. Because it's just my secretary and I- she's out sick today, by the way. That's why her desk, there's no one sitting there. But she and I, between the two of us do all the state paperwork, do all the ordering, all the payroll, we do our billing on top of other operational aspects. You have to go out and do sanitation checks, make sure the food is kept at the proper temp. It's a lot of variety, that's why I like the job. Sitting at the computer, entering data for hours on end is not one of them. We're working toward that goal. We're probably five years now. We finally have standardized recipes. We had some old-timers who were great cooks, but they did not work from recipes before, so we've had to kind of- what's one hand full, a cup and a half? Several of those ladies have retired and new cooks have taken over and so now we basically have a book of knowledge written down so when we transfer, we have that. But we're not to that point yet. It is kind of a goal of mine. It was a goal of mine when I first started working here, but I have not been able to accomplish it. Things keep rolling along. Like I said, we did get a good rating from the state on our nutritional analysis on the menus we write and I write those as the standard format- the enhanced menu plan. There's nothing wrong with doing it that way. The kids- it comes out in how many calories a day they need to have and then in order to get their vitamin A and vitamin C and their half a cup or cup and a half of fruit and vegetables. It works out ok. They get their protein. And there are options for kids that are vegetarian here too. I've had parents call and say what can my kid eat that doesn't have meat in it and we'll go through the menu and highlight the things they can take and just eliminate what ever they're not interested in here. It seems to work out ok. As far as acceptability of the menus, the kids have their favorite that they have requests and I put them on. They like the nacho things- we call them Mexican Hats, it's basically beef nachos. Chili bread bowls, it's chili in a bowl made out of bread. They like our breakfast for lunch, which at the elementary we do sausage and french toast sticks, but at the high school, middle school it's like an egg McMuffin, but without the egg. It's just a sausage and cheese sandwich on an english muffin. And pizza, pizza, and more pizza.

AR: Yeah, I remember that.

NB: And we do a lot of salads. Chef salads. Garden salads, the ones without the meat. We sell a lot of those everyday too. I think she does about sixty or seventy here everyday at the high school. That's not just to adults. Students buy them too. And sandwiches, deli subs and things like that. So we do quite a variety of things.

AR: All right. Do you have anything else that you think might help me?

NB: I don't know. Is this going to be- how are these articles going to be presented as-

AR: The Mount Vernon News has been kind enough to give each student a full page spread and we've got color photos and recipes- we've got all of this going in. My topic is why we make the choices we make regarding our food. So I've interviewed people who shop really strictly for bargains and vegetarian health nuts and you're feeding all the kids in the city.

NB: We try to please everybody.

AR: I'm learning that the variety that you have to work with is outstanding.

NB: We never please everybody, but we take a shot at it anyway. School lunch doesn't change a whole lot from year to year and the reason for that is kids do like- even though they don't say it, they like to be in a rut when it comes to food. They don't want any big surprises. Little kids- I keep forgetting this- I like to put fresh fruit on the menu, but I have to remember that at the elementary school, half the time they don't have their teeth. Their front teeth have fallen out. So I can't put apples on too much or carrot sticks because they can't chew them. So you have to remember little stuff like that. The cooks will come to me and say, Nancy you know you had apples on twice last week. Why did you do that? Because these kids are like trying to eat it out of the side of their mouth or they don't eat it at all. And I'm like you're right we'll go back to applesauce. They're like old people, slurping it up. And the older kids, they really do get influenced by their peers more than anything else. Middle school, high school. Middle school. You should go down there sometime. It's a wild trip. I mean high school's pretty sedate compare to six, seventh, eighth graders because they're getting older, they want to be more independent and they just want to be wild sometimes. It's a real educational thing. That's another reason I've stuck with this for so long because the money really is not that fair. I mean if you're a cook, if you're on of the ladies out here- I mean my salary's good. I'm not complaining about that, but if you're just a cook out there. Man, they're not making a lot of money. They're like the lowest paid employees in the school district, probably. But the reason that is because our budget from the Board of Education is a big fat zero. We pay for everything we get by the money we take in at the registers. Our salaries, our medical, our retirement, we buy the food, we buy the equipment, we repair the equipment.

-Interruption-

We get a lot of requests for stuff like that too. But, we pay for everything. In the past few years we've bought new computer equipment, we bought a new food service truck. I've built two kitchens since I've been here. We're always buying and repairing equipment. We buy all the supplies we need to operate- cleaning supplies, aprons for the ladies, just things like that. So we really are a cash operation. We have to show. Well. I won't say a profit, but we have to be in the black. I'm allowed to carry- by the state- I'm only allowed to carry three month's of operating revenue in my account. So we're always working just to keep that filled up so we don't run out of money. It's always a challenge. Most school districts are like that. They don't get any funding from the Board of Education. They're not subsidized in anyway. So you figure they're charging a dollar, dollar fifty a lunch and they're paying for all of that stuff out of that and really your reimbursement for free and reduced in Knox County, that's going to be about a third of your budget. Unless school districts are in an area where a lot of people are out of work, they're going to run around 25 percent of their kids will be eligible for free or reduced lunch.

AR: Where does that fall on a national average, do you know?

NB: No, big cities, you can run- Pittsburgh, you go over there and it's like 80 or 85 percent of the kids might be eligible in the city for free or reduced lunch. When I was up in Cleveland at Lakewood, we ran about 26 percent, but if you went right over the boarder into Cleveland proper, the number shot right up to 75 percent or so of the kids eligible. It really depends on the community your in and their economic basis. Mount Vernon's got good diversity for a rural area, they've got really good diversity, so their poverty levels are somewhat low. Though their total yearly salaries seems a little low to me, but that's from coming from Cleveland, but it seems to work here because the cost of living is lower. But the federal guidelines, a family of four can make up to \$1,800 a month and still be eligible for a free lunch. \$1,800 a month for four people sounds like nothing to me. So that's where the limit is right now. But only 24 to 26 percent of our kids are eligible and it drops off as they get older because the parents are making more money or the kids get jobs and just buy their own lunches. Especially at the high school level, it really drops off here. Only about 11 percent of the kids in the high school take the free and reduced lunch.

AR: Do you get any of your food locally or is it all from Gordon?

NB: We get Gordon Food Service, Abbott Food Service out of Columbus. Abbott is an Ohio company. Gordon is a Michigan Company. We buy produce from Lannings locally, but I also get my produce from Gordon sometimes. I buy my apples sometimes from a local orchard. Milk is from Smith Dairy, which is an Ohio company. Milk is an interesting thing for school food services. Smith Dairy is my provider this year. Two years ago, no one at all bid for any of the schools at all for Knox County for half pints of milk for school service so we had to go out and find someone. Not a good scene.

-Interruption-

NB: We do this whole operation, like this is our central kitchen here at the high school. The girls who are back there, we pack up all the elementary lunches in the morning and we ship them out and then they re-heat them on site. Only two of my elementary schools have kitchens, the rest of them just have these re-thermalizing ovens. So we get calls in from the secretaries how many lunches they need everyday.

AR: this has helped a great deal. If you think of anything else or anyone else you think I should talk to-

NB: Talk to anyone in school food service. I know the lady up in Danville has been there a couple of years, I forget her name though. Lady at East Knox quite just recently, she went over to work for the Naz College. Have you talked to any of the college guys.

AR: Yeah, I talked to John Darmstadt.

NB: I know Todd Galloup over at the Naz has quite an operation going over there.

AR: Thanks.