

# A PROFILE OF

# Passionate Purpose

BY KELSEY CASSELBURY

New SNA President **Leah Schmidt's** past, present and, presumably, future reaffirm her singular commitment to feeding our nation's school children.

## YOUNGSTERS MAY GET AN EARLY EXPOSURE TO VARIOUS CAREER OPTIONS

through school presentations or take-your-child-to-work initiatives. But few children have the opportunity for a hands-on introduction to their future profession; fewer still choose to stick with that profession for a lifetime. SNA President Leah Schmidt, SNS, however, is one of the few and the proud: a *lifelong* school nutrition professional.

"My love of school nutrition started a long time ago," Schmidt says, reminiscing about her youth in a *very* small elementary school. Her sixth-grade teacher, who also served as the school principal, would allow Schmidt and her 11 (total!) classmates to help out in the kitchen if they were ahead in their studies. It was an experience that piqued her interest and was formative in her becoming the professional she is today.

Would Schmidt's sixth-grade self also have set her sights on leading a national association of 53,000 members as its 67th president? Maybe, maybe not. Although her path to SNA president is marked by a long string of state and national leadership roles, Schmidt hasn't always sought these out—in fact, her service as both local chapter and state president came, admittedly, as somewhat of an accident. But in

each position, she has served with the tenacity and commitment fitting of one who has dedicated her life to child nutrition.

"Leah is passionate about our profession and has an exceptional way of connecting to all of our members, especially the most important people working on the front lines in our programs," says SNA President-Elect Julia Bauscher, SNS, citing Schmidt's patience and thoughtfulness as just two qualities that make her a skilled leader.

*School Nutrition* wants to help you to get to know your new president as well as the SNA leadership team already does. Join us as we ask Schmidt to reflect on her past, celebrate the present and anticipate the future.





"We've come so far, but we still have a lot to do. So, we need young boots on the ground, too. It's a pretty exciting time to be in school nutrition."

—2013-14 SNA President Leah Schmidt, SNS





## Remembering the **PAST**

*Schmidt is director of nutrition services for Hickman Mills C-1 School District in Kansas City, Mo., and has worked for the district since 1992. Although born in St. Louis, she's always considered the Kansas City area to be home.*

**School Nutrition:** We've already noted that your love for school nutrition stretches back to opportunities you had to assist in the school kitchen when you were in the sixth grade. Do you think that experience helped shape what you wanted to do, or was it just a lucky coincidence?

**Schmidt:** I think it did hit home with me. I enjoyed it, and I had really awesome school nutrition ladies that worked in the kitchen. We had really good food; pretty much everything was made from scratch. When I went to junior high, I ate salads all the time—they had really good salads.

I pretty much was on target by pursuing dietetics from the beginning. In high school, I worked for a chiropractor who did nutrition counseling. I knew I wasn't going to go into a clinical setting, but I was interested in the foodservice part of it.

I got an associate degree from a local community college, and then I went to a lot of different places. I got my bachelor's degree from University of St. Mary in Leavenworth, Kan., but the road to finalizing that took me to seven different colleges, [while also getting married and having a child]. I just enjoyed going to school. St. Mary was probably my favorite; it was very personal. With it being small, they knew you.

**SN:** Despite your lengthy career in school nutrition, you actually started work in a hospital setting. How was it different than what you do now?

**Schmidt:** Right out of college, I was able to get a position where I was an assistant to the administrator and managed the off-site locations for the hospital. We had a daycare center, children's residential care center, racquetball club and three geriatric facilities; I was

## A Few of Leah's Favorite Things

School Nutrition asked, and our new SNA president answered! What is Leah's favorite...?

- ◀ **Book:** "Chicken Soup" type of books
- ◀ **Movie:** *You've Got Mail*
- ◀ **Food indulgence:** Dark Chocolate
- ◀ **Thing to do in your spare time:** Visit with family and friends, cook and play Words With Friends
- ◀ **Thing about working in school nutrition:** I tell people that the thing I like best and the thing that sometimes frustrates me is the same. Each day is different, and even if you come in with a plan for the day, it can change in a second.
- ◀ **Time of day:** I am a morning person.
- ◀ **Meal to cook at home:** White Chili
- ◀ **School food as a kid:** Tacos
- ◀ **School subject:** History
- ◀ **Foods I've never developed a taste for:** Jell-O and Saltines
- ◀ **Dream dinner guest:** Harry Truman
- ◀ **Person in school nutrition to trade places with for one day:** Dr. Janey Thornton, SNS, Deputy Under Secretary, USDA/FNS
- ◀ **Thing you don't know about me:** I am a Certified Barbeque Judge.
- ◀ **Thing I wish I could change about myself:** I'd like to have a better memory.
- ◀ **Talent I would most like to have:** To sing and dance
- ◀ **Career choice if not school nutrition:** Professional tour guide



"Continue the paths we have started as a leader in child nutrition."

—Sandra Ford, SNS, 2012-13  
SNA President

responsible for making sure they had what they needed—I did the scheduling, any trouble-shooting that they needed and made sure their weekly operating reports were done, among other things.

**SN:** It sounds similar—yet slightly different—to what you do now. What prompted you to make a change?

**Schmidt:** The hours. What finally did me in was working 80 hours in one week. With a two-year-old, it was very difficult, and I had the opportunity to work for my family's business, which did financial planning. I did the clerical work. That was a little better for a young mother with a small child, and I was also pregnant during that time with my second child. It was an opportunity to stay home with her for a couple of years.

**SN:** So, what was your first job in school nutrition?

**Schmidt:** Other than at my elementary school? I was a kitchen manager at a K-5 school here in Hickman Mills for a year. After that, I was the field supervisor for five years, which was mostly training, helping in the kitchen, plus monitoring, menu planning and ordering. I became director in 1998 when [former director] Betty Culley retired.

Our district has been here since 1902. Of course, we didn't have a school meal program until after '46, but there have only been three directors since then. Betty was here for 27 years, the lady before her was here for 20ish years. If everything goes right, I'll be here [as the director] for at least 20 years.

**SN:** Did you aspire to be the director, or was it a fortunate evolution for you?

**Schmidt:** It was a right place, right time thing. I originally got into the kitchen manager position because I would have summers off with my two young children. When the field supervisor position became available, it was a time in my life when it just worked. And when Betty retired, it just seemed like the logical progression.

**SN:** So, when does SNA come into the picture for you?

**Schmidt:** I began working in Hickman Mills in 1992; two years later, in 1994, it happened that the annual national conference (ANC) was in nearby St. Louis, Mo., so I had the opportunity to go. Betty encouraged [the whole child nutrition team] to join, get that professional development and be active in our Association.

It was amazing! ANC is pretty overwhelming the first time you attend. To know that we can get together as school nutrition people and have this conference [with thousands of our peers]... I was just overwhelmed.

**SN:** Have those impressions changed over time?

**Schmidt:** I think we, as an Association, still do a great job [coordinating this annual event]. It's not as overwhelming for me anymore, but I love to see other people experience it for the first time.

**SN:** It didn't take you long to start making your mark in this business. You won the FAME Silver Rising Star Award in 2003 after having been nominated by your nutrition education coordinator, Grennan Sims. This award is given to those who have been a school nutrition director for a short time. And you participated as a member of *School Nutrition's* Roundtable of Leaders in 2007.

**Schmidt:** I felt really honored by FAME, because being recognized by your coworkers and peers is very special. A lot

## In Three Words . . .

School Nutrition asked SNA President Leah Schmidt to describe herself in three words:

- ◀ **Relator.** "I really try to work with people and understand where they're coming from."
- ◀ **Responsible.** "I feel like that's a very important characteristic of a leader."
- ◀ **Significance.** "That last one is kind of a weird one... It's important to me to do something that I feel is important."

of the changes that I made when I became the director at Hickman Mills probably caught people's attention.

For example, before being promoted as director, I had to make a presentation to get the job, because they were looking at management companies. I essentially became a bidder to keep the district self-operated. You don't need to make a management company richer at the potential detriment to our students. We can do anything the management company can do and do it in a more efficient way. We had a good program already, so we didn't need them.

Also, at that point, I was the state president and was very active in our state association. We had been doing a lot of innovative things with member recruitment, partnering with a local TV station doing videos about our conferences and encouraging people to join.

**SN:** And since then? What other achievements and innovations have you and your Hickman Mills team made in the last decade?

**Schmidt:** The thing that I'm really proud of is adding a nutrition education coordinator position to the staff. That's someone who is available to classrooms to conduct nutrition education; she also manages our nutrient analyses for menus and handles special meals for students with food allergies—she's very knowledgeable!

Another accomplishment is our supper program—we're doing about 800 suppers a day at 10 locations. The challenge was that we did it so fast. I found out about the federal pilot program in October, and we started serving suppers in January. I hired all the staff, created the menus and got the service and administrative logistics down in a little over two months. I saw it as a real win-win for everybody—students and my staff—so it was a no-brainer. We were able to add some full-time positions and give some of our formerly part-time staffers benefits. Plus, we're helping families in the community stretch their dollars for food.

**SN:** Turning back to your SNA involvement, what inspired you to run for your first leadership position in the Association?

**Schmidt:** National, state or local? I was the local chapter president, but it was a bizarre thing—I did not serve as vice president or president-elect. The two people who were supposed to serve left the chapter, so I went straight to being president. Then, the same thing happened when I was the state president! I did serve as the vice president, but the president-elect left school nutrition, so I went right from VP to president. Then the person



behind me also left school nutrition, so I stayed on in the position for an extra year.

**SN:** Wow! Did you think that was, perhaps, a sign for a future in the national Association?

**Schmidt:** No, I don't think so. I never dreamt that I would be president. My school district is pretty small. A lot of other state leaders I knew saw themselves possibly going on to national; I didn't at the time, but I am very happy that it worked out!

## Living in the **PRESENT**

*Schmidt and her family live in Lee's Summit ("a nice place to raise our children"), a Kansas City suburb within 20 miles of where she grew up. Her children, family and in-laws all live close by.*

**SN:** Tell us about your family (see above).

**Schmidt:** The four kids—those are my kiddos. My oldest son, Trey (28), and my daughter with the long dark hair is Chessa (23). The little guy is Channon; that's Chessa's son. He's 17 months. The other two are my twins, Trevor and Lauren (18). My husband, Scott, and my mother, Fran, are also in the picture.

Scott and I have been married for 20 years. We met when we were on a bowling league together. My husband is really good. I was kind of getting better until I got pregnant with the twins—and that put an end to my bowling!

**SN:** A dynamic operation. National association leadership. Your family—including a grandchild! All this and I understand you're currently working to earn your master's degree in education, too?

**Schmidt:** I hope to do some adult education in nutrition when I retire from district operations, and I thought the degree would help me in my second career.

School Nutrition Foundation (SNF) scholarships have been available to help me pursue this goal, and that has helped. I've always loved to learn; when I'm finished with my term as SNA president, I'm very anxious to get back to it!

In doing the master's degree work, I can pick classes and projects that help me on the job, as well as those I'm interested in.

## In Three Words . . .

Annette McDonald, a Hickman Mills coworker of 15 years, describes SNA President Leah Schmidt:

- ◀ **Patient.** "She's just like Mother Earth. She's just really wonderful."
- ◀ **Kind.** "She always has our kids in mind, their health and well-being."
- ◀ **Accepting.** "She puts up with my craziness like I can't even tell you."



Schmidt knows well that school nutrition success is contingent on the efforts of a vast team, including (clockwise from top) her managers, her central office staff and key colleagues in the district.

It's been really nice to do research that can further my career and make me more aware of what's going on in this profession. I'm also able to share a unique perspective with those who are in the education classes with me. They've become more aware of what school nutrition is about.

**SN:** Do you find that some in the education community—not just in your degree program, but in your district, as well—need an *education* about school nutrition?

**Schmidt:** A lot of them don't really understand how we work. But I'm fortunate: My new bosses—a new superintendent joined the district in April, and I have a new immediate supervisor, as well—both come from an operations background, so they probably understand my world a little bit better than some other people in school administration.

**SN:** What makes the field of K-12 school nutrition unique and special to you?

**Schmidt:** I love being around the kids—and knowing that we are doing something that helps them get through their day. My district has an 85% free and reduced enrollment, so for a lot of them, the meals that they're getting from us might be the *only* meals that they're getting. I think our programs are especially important for those at-risk students.



**SN:** Do you find unique challenges in serving a district with high rates of poverty and food insecurity?

**Schmidt:** In some ways, yes, and in some ways, no. Kids are kids, as long as you treat them well, and we just try to take care of them. I don't

know that it's any harder than it would be if we had a low free and reduced rate, other than we try to make the meals as appealing as we can, because we don't do a lot of a la carte, as you see in more affluent school districts.

**SN:** Do you have a personal motto or words of wisdom that help you get through the day and do the best you can?

**Schmidt:** "It is what it is." [Laughs] That's one that's been coming up a lot in our office lately! Right now, it's pretty appropriate. We've all been through a lot of changes these past couple of years, no doubt.

**SN:** In this issue of the magazine, we're focusing on the value of mentors and mentoring in school nutrition. Are there individuals who helped influence your own career path?

**Schmidt:** Betty Culley, who hired me as a manager, was a great mentor. She was very active in our state association and served as its executive director for several years after she retired from our school district—really, a very smart lady. Also, 2012-13 SNA President Sandy Ford—I've known Sandy for several years; she was director in a neighboring district here in the KC area before she moved to Florida. I've always respected her, but working with

## In Three Words . . .

Marie Heistand, a former administrative assistant in Hickman Mills' child nutrition department, describes SNA President Leah Schmidt:

- ◀ **Compassionate.** "I never felt like she was a boss, just a friend. Nothing was ever dumped on me, it was always a partnership."
- ◀ **Honest.** "She got me involved in more than being her administrative assistant. She was the one to convince me to run for state president; she stood right beside me during my year."
- ◀ **Trustworthy.** "If Leah stays the same way she has for all the years I have known her, people will flock to her to help her achieve her goals."



her for the past couple years on the SNA Executive Team has been wonderful.

I have a lot of respect for many of the SNA past presidents. They're just really great people. I could call out different things about each one of them, but I know you don't have the space. I'm also looking forward to this next year with President-Elect Julia Bauscher and Vice President Jean Ronnei.

**SN:** With so much going on in school nutrition today, plus the demands of leading this Association, what do you do to stay physically healthy and cope with stress?

**Schmidt:** I try to get in my 10,000 steps every day. While I advocate for staying active, there's a fitness center here in my

building that I wish I used more often than I do. For relaxation, I like to play Words With Friends. I'm not a real stressful person. I'm pretty easy-going and don't get rattled too easily; I go with the flow.

## Looking to the **FUTURE**

*"Positive Partnerships for Healthy Results" is the theme for SNA's 2013-14 Annual Plan and continues to build on the Strategic Framework established by SNA's leadership in December 2011. To learn more about the specifics of Schmidt's vision and expectations, see "Leading Edge" on page 6 and check out the Annual Plan online at [SchoolNutrition.org](http://SchoolNutrition.org); click on "About SNA."*

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## In Three Words . . .

Paula Kullman, SNS, served on the Missouri School Nutrition Association Executive Team with SNA President Leah Schmidt and describes her colleague:

- ◀ **Sincere.** "She's always looking for people with leadership potential, and when she tells you that she thinks you can do the job, she's genuinely sincere."
- ◀ **Passionate.** "People recognize that she's not doing anything for votes, she's not doing it for anything personal, she's just really that way. There are not a lot of people that are like that."
- ◀ **Eloquent.** "She always has the right words."



Right: Schmidt offers periodic culinary skills training classes to Hickman Mills students of all ages and employs several to work as part of the cafeteria team.

**SN:** Tell us a little bit about your theme for the year ahead.

**Schmidt:** It's about bringing people together. If we work together, we can make things work well—"Positive partnerships." I really feel like we're all in this together—even industry, which comes up with the products needed to fit new regulations; they've been a help to us, as well.

**SN:** And what do you expect will be the most enjoyable aspect about the months to come?

**Schmidt:** I'm really excited about working with USDA and the National Food Service Management Institute and having the friends we have there in SNA Past Presidents Dr. Janey Thornton and Dr. Katie Wilson. It's only going to help us in the long run.

**SN:** And the most difficult?

**Schmidt:** We've got our plates pretty full, getting these new meal pattern regulations in place, and of course, an expected new proposed regulation on professional standards, as well. We don't know what *that* will bring. We have a lot going on, and it's not going to slow down.

**SN:** There is a lot going on, so what advice would you give to someone interested in entering the school nutrition profession today?

**Schmidt:** Go for it. It's a wonderful industry; I just can't say enough about it. It's such an interesting time to be in this business. We've come so far, but we still have a lot to do, so we need young boots on the ground, too. It's a pretty exciting time to be in school nutrition.

**SN:** Is it too early for you to start looking ahead to this time *next* year?

**Schmidt:** Typically after serving as president, you serve as Nominating Committee chair, so it will be my job next year to recruit new leaders and get those individuals ready. I believe I'll serve on the SNF board, as well, and I'm excited about that.

I really believe that continuing to learn is very important, and I'm excited to be on the Board right now, helping to find different ways to offer professional development to our members.

**SN:** Finally, what are your hopes in serving the next generation of students?

**Schmidt:** Just that we can continue to make a difference. Hopefully, getting students to eat more healthfully will be the key to finding a solution to the childhood obesity problem—I really, truly, feel that we are part of that solution. **SN**

*Kelsey Casselbury is School Nutrition's associate editor. Photos by Rick Brady.*

### Bonus Web Content

**S**chool Nutrition is making this profile of new SNA President Leah Schmidt available in Spanish. If you or someone you know would like to read a Spanish translation of this article, you will find a link on the magazine's Bonus Web Content Archives page on SNA's website, [www.schoolnutrition.org/snmagazine/bonuscontent](http://www.schoolnutrition.org/snmagazine/bonuscontent).

**BONUS  
WEB CONTENT**

### Contenido Adicional

**S**chool Nutrition a creado el perfil del nuevo Presidente de SNA, Leah Schmidt, disponible en español. Si usted o alguien que usted conoce desea leer la traducción en español de este artículo, lo encontrará en el enlace en la página del Bonus Web Content en el sitio web de SNA, [www.schoolnutrition.org/snmagazinebonuscontent](http://www.schoolnutrition.org/snmagazinebonuscontent).