

INSPIRED BY GENERATIONS: WHEN CHILD NUTRITION RUNS IN THE FAMILY

By Christina Uticone





A home-cooked meal, a caring grandparent, a godmother who worked in the school cafeteria—these are just a few core memories cited by school nutrition professionals who have “inherited” their passion for child nutrition. We asked members where they found their “why,” and they shared personal stories and inspiration that fuel the important work they do each day.





CHEF JASON BEACH,
 Director of Café Services,
 Oakland Joint Unified School
 District, California



MY INSPIRATION

I was fortunate to grow up in a food-filled life. My great-great-grandfather was an early executive chef on the Las Vegas Strip, and that legacy inspired me to attend Le Cordon Bleu in Las Vegas with the goal of becoming a food and beverage director for a major hotel group. After Las Vegas, I started a catering company with my grandma, and we had a blast with that.

My empathetic side kept pulling me toward people in need. I took a job as a district chef with Southwest Foodservice Excellence and within six months was promoted to director at Tuba City USD in Tuba City, Arizona. I fell in love with the work.

I was raised by my mother, Sharon Beach, and my grandmother Harriett Blodgett. Every holiday, my grandmother poured everything she had into her cooking, making sure every grandchild's favorite dish was on the table. Mine was her stuffed Jell-O—crushed pineapple, whipped topping, cream cheese, layered and set—a recipe that took days to build and minutes to disappear. Her soups were the savory counterpart: so precisely seasoned that every batch tasted exactly like the last.

That's the standard I carry into school meals today: food made with that same care, so that every student feels like someone poured themselves into their tray, the same way my grandmother did for us.



THE JOURNEY

I had two things I wanted to do in life: music and food. My mom said if I wanted to do music, I had to have a backup and encouraged me to pursue food first—thank God for that! I found my place.

I had gone from cooking for celebrities who marveled at a single unforgettable meal to realizing that kind of impact, however dazzling, was fleeting. When I moved into schools, I remembered what it was like to eat on the free and reduced program myself, and it took time to accept that this, and not the gourmet world, was my path. But I quickly saw these students needed something they weren't getting: motivation, excitement and inspiration.



WHY I SHOW UP

Cooking with love and knowing that the food we are creating now has a lasting impact is what I learned from my grandmother, and it's what motivates me. My mom and my grandmother are two of the most powerful women I've ever met—strong, independent and smart. My focus is always on the future because we're feeding the next president, the next governor, the next agent of change who could shift humanity to propel us forward and upward into a better, brighter future.



BRANDY GOODWIN,
 Director of Food Service,
 Mascoutah CUSD #19,
 Illinois



MY INSPIRATION

My great-grandmother Florence Jackson devoted many years to serving others through food, first as the cook for a small rural farm school in Rensselaer and later at Columbia College, a local college in Missouri. She believed that a good meal could bring comfort, nourishment and a sense of community. Although I was young, her dedication to feeding others became a lasting example of service and hospitality.

Years later, my own connection to school nutrition continued when my cousin Jane Schaefer became the cook at the Lutheran grade school I attended, Zion Lutheran School. She prepared nearly every meal from scratch, and I was fascinated watching her transform simple ingredients into delicious meals for the entire school. One of my favorite memories was "peach juice day." Whenever she opened canned peaches, she would save the sweet peach juice and pour it into cups for the students. We all looked forward to those days, and it felt like such a special treat. Each week, students had the opportunity to serve as cook helpers, and I was always excited when it was my turn. I loved being in the kitchen, helping wherever I could, and learning from my cousin as she prepared meals with such care.

I didn't realize it then, but looking back, those experiences were planting the seeds for a career that would eventually become my passion.



THE JOURNEY

I started cooking in restaurants at 14 at a little donut shop where I would pull the donuts and proof them in the morning, and eventually I learned how to decorate them. I found myself in the kitchen, asking the cook how to do this or that, and eventually my boss decided that if I was going to be back there all the time, I would just be the new cook. I loved creating and learning.

When I turned 16, I started working in one of the most popular restaurants in town, and I learned a lot about scratch cooking there. After that, I moved over to the Holiday Inn where I got to cook for President Clinton before he became president. Later, when my husband was stationed at Eielson Air Force Base in Alaska, I started cooking at the NCO (non-commissioned officers) and officers' clubs. I learned a lot just being around different people from different backgrounds; I have recipes from every single one of them. With all the moving around we did, food is one way we created families with our friends whether that was in Alaska, England or Oklahoma.

A core memory is my grandmother's cinnamon rolls and chili. This is a staple in Missouri schools, and she made the best cinnamon rolls, so I have incorporated them into our school menus to carry that memory forward. Maybe there is someone like me who is growing up around wonderful cooks and will be inspired to go into school nutrition someday!



WHY I SHOW UP

I have been with my school district for almost 20 years, and this is my second as director. My staff puts so much into all the meals we serve. Students and staff will walk by in the morning and peek their heads in to see what we are having that day; when I see that excitement, I know we are doing something great with our program.

Today, I often think about the women in my family who dedicated themselves to feeding others. Their example reminds me that school nutrition is about so much more than serving meals. It is about creating a welcoming environment, building relationships and making every student feel cared for. I hope the meals we serve and the kindness we share become cherished memories for our students, just as those experiences became lasting memories for me.



NADINE DOETTERL, SNS,
Foodservice Sales Manager/
Consultant, SunButter/NMD
School Foodservices Consulting



MY INSPIRATION

My godmother, Eva A. Shamaly, moved into the K-12 space after a long career in private sector foodservice management. I started my own career in school nutrition because of her. My favorite story is about the influence she had on students. I was traveling through security at the Buffalo airport when I struck up a conversation with a young woman about the chicken wings she had packed. As we talked, I realized she had attended Buffalo Traditional School, where my godmother had been the cafeteria manager. When I asked if she remembered Miss Shamaly, she immediately replied, "She was the best. She could be really stern, but everyone knew it was because she cared about them." My godmother had been gone for nearly 10 years, and hearing that still gives me goosebumps. I often share this story during staff trainings to remind people how much of an impact school nutrition professionals can have on the students they serve. I've had a similar experience with a former student from my own time managing a high school cafeteria in Buffalo. She recognized me years later while

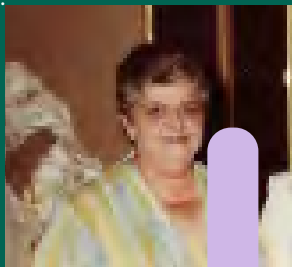


working as a bartender and said seeing me made her smile and brought back good memories. Never underestimate the influence child nutrition staff can have on students.



THE JOURNEY

My godmother instilled in me what a great profession child nutrition is, and that's really how I got my start in school foodservice. To this day, it remains the best job I have ever had. I am on the consulting side now—I also conduct trainings for ICN and New York School Nutrition Association—but I've always said that before I retire, I want to be back on the other side of the desk. I miss the daily interaction with students; it's just very rewarding to see the kids every day.



WHY I SHOW UP

My godmother never married or had children, but she was like a second mother to me, and the impression she made on me lasts to this day. My motivation is knowing I am doing something good for kids every day.



ERICA DUDLEY,
Field Supervisor,
Montgomery Public
Schools, Alabama



MY INSPIRATION

My grandmother Carrie Sears was a cafeteria manager for her entire career, dedicating more than 55 years to serving children through school nutrition. She was stern, but she was loving. She worked until she passed away, and her dedication to her work was truly inspiring. Growing up, I watched her take great pride in serving children and making sure they were fed and cared for. School nutrition was more than just a job to her—it was her life's work and a way for her to make a difference in the lives of children and families. Her commitment, work ethic and love for serving others have had a tremendous influence on me and my own career in child nutrition. I am proud to continue the legacy she started and to carry forward the same spirit of dedication and service that she demonstrated for more than 55 years. My favorite part of my job is relationship building.



THE JOURNEY

I was the secretary for our current director, and he told me about the field supervisor position and encouraged me to apply. I thought, "I love it here—you don't like me?!" He laughed at my joke, but he also encouraged me to apply to a position with better pay. I was comfortable where I was, but with much prayer, I listened to him and applied for the job—and I got it! I've been in this department for nine years; I supervise 12 cafeterias and manage more than 50 people.

I think I learned a lot from my grandmother in terms of her discipline and her work ethic. She did her job well; she was strict, but compassionate.



WHY I SHOW UP

The kids are what inspire me, and I know that sounds like a cliché. Since I've been in child nutrition, I've seen children living in hotels who don't get meals on weekends. Our lunch might be the only meal they get in a day. Students who are displaced, or maybe in foster care, students experiencing food insecurity or mistreatment. My role is making sure these kids are going to eat.



KALEIGH STIVERS,
Supervisor, Phoenix
Elementary School
District #1, Arizona



MY INSPIRATION

My biggest inspiration has always been my mom, Corrina DeJohn. She worked in the kitchen at my elementary school after my brother and I started school, which allowed her to be there with us every day. I loved having her at school, and because of her I developed a special appreciation for our cafeteria staff. Watching the care that they put into serving students inspired my own passion for school nutrition and the important role it plays in a school community.

Even after I went to college, I would come home and go visit my mom at school. I loved seeing her on line and all the food she was serving; sometimes she would let me go back and help a little. I would describe my mom as gentle but stern—she was definitely that lunch lady you didn't want to mess with! But she also has a gentle, loving way about her—she is the epitome of a mother, a lioness who will do anything for her kids, including her students. I strive to be like my mother: loving, but tough.





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THE JOURNEY

I have worked in foodservice since I was 16 at a little coffee shop. I was at Disney for seven years and I loved it; the customer service aspect of Disney is astonishing. Even now when I do a presentation or talk about customer service, I bring it back to Disney because they are top-tier, including their training program.

I went to school for nutrition and dietetics, but the medical rotations weren't really for me. I would always talk to my mom about how cool it would be if I could make menus for a school district, and she encouraged me. Foodservice is hard work, and I knew [early] that the support staff behind the lines work hard, even though that work can often be overlooked.

I love working in school nutrition. I didn't realize what I was getting into in terms of federal guidelines—we didn't have that in our rotations at school—but I really love that aspect of my job; it's like a puzzle I get to solve. There are so many misconceptions about school nutrition, and we are trying hard to break down that wall and help people understand what we do.



WHY I SHOW UP

Kids are so gracious. Sure, they have complaints, but I love making menus and seeing them get excited about what we serve. One of my kids recently told his mom he didn't want a packed lunch anymore because he likes school lunch so much!

We never really know what is going on in someone else's life, so if these meals can make my kids excited to come to school, that's what I want. I do not believe that any child should have to go hungry or worry about where that next meal is coming from.

I hope that 15 or more years from now, a student will remember their favorite school breakfast or lunch and the positive experience they had at school. Most of all, I hope we inspire the next generation of school nutrition professionals and help them discover how meaningful this work can be.



SHANNON REINA,
Food Service Program
Manager, Salt River
Pima-Maricopa Community
Schools, Arizona



MY INSPIRATION

My daughter, Bee Wood Jackson, recently switched from being a cook in a restaurant to becoming a baker in our school nutrition program, and I couldn't be prouder of her work ethic and desire to do her best for students. I have been in school nutrition for 18 years and have shared many stories with her about the work I do. I know she understands how important this profession is to me and how passionate I am about serving students. It makes me incredibly proud to see her learning, growing and carrying that same passion into school nutrition herself.



THE JOURNEY

I started as a part-time cook aide in 2008 and moved up to cook within a year. I had a lot of good mentors and moved up to kitchen supervisor within five years, and five years after that, I became the food service program manager. The more I learned, the more I fell in love with the



work, and I realized the difference we make in students' health and the way nutrition services support education and learning.

We are from the O'odham and Pii-paash from Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community. My big goal is to introduce more fresh-made items and more of our Indigenous foods. So, when Bee is baking—today she was making sheet pancakes, and we also make something called a lazy tortilla (Sko:v Ce:mait)—she uses a whole grain flour provided to us by an Indigenous farmer. Bee is a really good worker, and I'm not just saying that because she's my daughter! She is one of our best workers, and it's enjoyable to have her here because she is dependable, works hard and stepped up to take on the position of baker.

Bee: I started in restaurants as a dishwasher and then prep cook and moved up from there. I trained on the job from the beginning, and after a couple of years, I started training other people. After I changed restaurants, I started baking: bread work, pretzels, cakes, things like that. Like my mom, I think I just like feeding people, and making something people enjoy eating gives me a lot of gratification. Working for the school like my mom was always in the back of my mind. Who wouldn't want to help feed their community?



WHY I SHOW UP

Shannon: This work is an opportunity for me to make a difference in my community, teaching kids healthy eating habits so they can stay healthy throughout their lives. I have lost a lot of family members to diabetes, so I am just trying to make a positive change, and that starts with the kids.

Bee: I am still new, and I am still learning a lot about school nutrition. I feel like the work I do now is going to make a difference for kids now and

later down the road. I want to find a way to present healthy food to kids to make them more willing to try new things.



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