

A Lunch Lady's Untold Story

A “Lunch Lady’s” (LL) job is not a glamorous one. Most days she is the first employee to arrive at school, often between 5:00-6:00 a.m. She doesn’t enter school using the well-lit front entrance. She enters school using the doors closest to the tall brick walls that surround the school’s trash dumpsters. She doesn’t always feel secure making her entrance in dim lighting and spaces where someone can easily hide.

In order to be effective, Lunch Ladies must be skilled at multi-tasking. She opens her kitchen, turns on equipment and begins the process of getting breakfast ready—while simultaneously starting preparations for the day’s lunch menus. Early morning phone calls can make her anxious as they usually mean someone is unable to report to work. Her workload is considerable, as her classroom is hundreds, and sometimes, even thousands of students with diverse likes and dislikes. Lunch ladies may be the only staff member that interacts with all students—sometimes twice each day.

Her work is more complicated and arduous than most people understand. She helps plan menus that meet government regulations, tight budget constraints, the equipment capacity of her kitchen and, ultimately, the interests of her students. I sometimes wonder if others have this idea that the lunch lady possesses a “magic wand.” Where all she has to do is wave it and...Abracadabra, fresh, safe and tasty foods are magically prepared—on-time. Also, I know that some actually think that I order all her food and supplies and that I may even pull supplies for her each morning from their freezer, cooler and dry storage areas. Wrong again. The Lunch Lady must study her menus to order and maintain appropriate levels of over a thousand food and non-food inventory items. And most of her supplies are perishable—so they must be carefully ordered and rotated—first in, first out.

Lunch Ladies make a living the old fashioned way. During the course of her work day, she is expected to not only provide a service, but she must also make things. Our Lunch Ladies are skilled in baking whole grain rich yeast breads and many other baked goods. She prepares many items from scratch and is constantly searching for new entrée and vegetable recipes to satisfy her students. She works hard to maintain partnerships with Cargill, Chef Marshall O’Brien, Hennepin County Public health, Passion Church and most recently, African Immigrant Services. These partnerships help her improve student services. She’s busy from the moment she enters the kitchen until the last tray, pot, pan and pieces of equipment is cleaned. She diligently maintains required paperwork and continuing education for her Child Nutrition and Health Department certifications.

The Lunch Lady may have as many as 20 nutrition staff working in her kitchen and some days, students and community volunteers may be present. She’s responsible for giving direction to ensure that foods are handled in a way that ensures safe and tasty products are efficiently prepared, in accordance with strict budget, sanitation, and dietary procedures. Keeping students with food allergies safe and the rising cost of unpaid student meal debt are growing concerns for her.

Most people don’t know that for the past 28 years, Osseo Lunch Ladies have received monthly fiscal report cards. The truth is that Lunch Ladies have accountability for growing revenue and controlling much more than labor expenses. The rising cost of food and supplies are a concern as she works hard to

help us run a cost-effective student nutrition program. She must deal with daily problems including incomplete food deliveries, equipment failures and/or being short staffed. A Lunch Lady knows that her job description and her performance evaluation clearly states the following: Plans and/or serves quality meals on time every day regardless of challenges with food, equipment or staffing. This reality (her reality) has helped make her a master at being adaptive because she often must make things happen under less than ideal circumstances. And, in an effort to retain staff, she has to find creative ways to get the job done while also keeping the work environment positive and fun.

The truth is that a Lunch Lady is not given a lot—but a lot is expected from her. She cares for the kitchen equipment and facilities as if they were her own. Her hands, her arms, and sometimes her legs have scars from burns and bruises. She sometimes needs to take pain medication to make it through the end-of-day clean-up. It is not uncommon to see Lunch Ladies go above and beyond expectations. It is my hope that people might take a moment to notice this.

Everything I've written so far is a story that Lunch Ladies know all too well. However, this may be my most important message today: A Lunch Lady achieves her greatest influence in our school system the moment she realizes that being a champion for kids is job one. Every child deserves to have a champion. Being their champion is more than skillfully preparing nutritious and tasty foods. It is about intentionally seeing and putting the needs of kids first. It's about working hard to build relationship with them and others. This is the idea behind our Food and Nutrition motto: We do more than Lunch.

In retirement, I will miss most being your head-lunch lady man. It has been a privilege to have served with generations of lunch ladies who have given their best in making low cost school meals a safe, tasty and pleasant experience for students. And so it is with gratitude that I try to express my deep appreciation for these hidden artists...these often, unsung heroes in our schools. Lunch Ladies. Thank you for your leadership. You have taught me what hard work and commitment to our school district's core values and mission look like. It was you that inspired me to develop confidence, courage and competence to achieve many dreams where we together—contributed to communities in this place we call Osseo. Thank you for all that you do each and every day for our students. Your work....really does matter.

Tom Pellegrino, RD, MS, SNS
Lunch Lady-man, 1990-2018