

## **2017 FAME GOLDEN DIRECTOR WINNER**

### **Betti Wiggins**

#### **1. Describe three of your nominee's most outstanding leadership skills.**

Betti Wiggins is the Executive Director of the Office of School Nutrition for the Detroit Public Schools (DPS). A native Detroiter, Betti is an outspoken advocate for children and a community leader in the city of Detroit. Betti is a skillful collaborator who brings individuals and groups together to achieve mutually shared goals. Her pragmatic style is inclusive and energizing. Her office resides in one of Detroit's many repurposed school buildings. The space resembles two adjacent classrooms connected by a doorway. Desks are lined around the perimeter of the room with a single conference table in the middle of the room. Betti doesn't believe in offices and walls. She believes everyone has a role and each person's role is as important as the next. Betti loves enthusiasm and encourages everyone's engagement, embracing change for the betterment of children's lives in Detroit.

Betti's collaboration goes far beyond the walls of DPS into the community of Detroit and agrarian community of Michigan. Betti is one of the founding board members of the Detroit Food Policy Council. The Council is committed to nurturing the development and maintenance of a sustainable, localized food system, and a food-secure city of Detroit. Betti's ambition is for all residents of Detroit to be hunger-free, healthy, and benefit economically from the food system that impacts their lives. She collaborates with Greening of Detroit, an organization dedicated to enhancing the quality of life for Detroiters by repurposing city land to create beautiful and productive green spaces. Betti declares, "In its very bones this city is agrarian." Betti is active nationally as an advisory board member of the National Farm to School Network. Betti's record of accomplishments through collaboration and public/private partnerships consisting of organizations and businesses including East Market, one of the oldest farmer's markets in the country, Kellogg's, Lifetime Fitness, Kroeger's, and PriorityHealth.

Another leadership skill Betti demonstrates is leading by example. Betti is eager to roll-up her sleeves to get the job done. She has a frequent presence in the schools of Detroit, visiting with principals, listening to teachers, and even filling in for absent cafeteria workers. When DPS was experiencing a custodial workers strike, Betti and her foodservice associates cleaned school bathrooms.

But above all, Betti is a visionary. Betti has transformed the nutrition and food delivery system in the eight years she has been with Detroit Public Schools. She built the nationally recognized Detroit School Garden Collaborative and the highly successful prototype for DPS food production found at the Drew Farm, an effort recognized by the Lifetime Fitness Foundation with a generous grant to support its work.

Betti's newest and most ambitious project is the development of the Kettering Food Enterprise Center. Betti originated the plan to bring new life to the former Kettering High School campus to catalyze public/private partnerships for food and agricultural economic development initiatives. She commissioned an architectural and engineering feasibility study that determined specific renovation and development needs. Betti then partnered with the Detroit Public Schools

Foundation to commission a comprehensive business plan that led to the creation of the Food Enterprise Development Corporation, a non-profit community development corporation to raise funds to develop Kettering into a food business park. The former school includes a 225,000 square-foot building originally constructed in 1964 on a 27 acre campus in a strategic location within the city's center. The campus will house for-profit and non-profit enterprises with a focus on empowering Detroit women and other underserved constituencies through food production and processing, business incubation facilities for community entrepreneurs, and workforce development and job training. The project has a \$20 million price tag, but with Betti's audacious brand of leadership, it is well on its way.

## **2. In what ways does your nominee show dedication to school nutrition?**

To understand Betti Wiggins' dedication to school nutrition, you first need to understand Betti and her beloved Detroit. Detroit Public Schools was in its heyday in the 1960's with 300,000 students enrolled in nearly 300 schools. Today there are 47,000 students that attend the 91 traditional schools that remain open. DPS has closed nearly 200 schools in the last 15 years. In 2014, the city was losing 1,000 residents per month. Detroit's neighborhoods are dotted with vacant, ransacked houses, abandoned schools, and empty lots where schools once stood. Under the control of the state-appointed emergency financial manager, DPS runs at an annual budget deficit of \$515 million, with long term debts of over \$3.5 billion. Detroit is often referred to as a dying city, while others call it a dead city. But to Betti Wiggins, it is the city of hope.

Betti's parents left the South during the Great Migration of African Americans. She grew-up during her early years on a truck farm in southeastern Michigan not far from Detroit. Betti spent her childhood tending chickens, pigs, and a cow while helping harvest vegetables for market. She would later bring her love of fresh produce and local farms into her work. Betti moved to Detroit to attend secondary school where her love for this city bloomed. She attended Wayne State University in downtown Detroit earning a bachelor's degree in nutrition.

Betti's school nutrition career started in Ann Arbor, Michigan working for the Marriott Corporation. She went on to work for school nutrition programs in Patterson, New Jersey, Baltimore City, and Washington, DC. Betti returned to Detroit to work at DPS in 2000. Her tenure was cut short to just 18 months after the school board outsourced the school nutrition program to contract management. She successfully reclaimed her position at DPS in 2008 and has served as the Executive Director for the Office of School Nutrition ever since.

Betti has been a staunch supporter of improving nutrition standards ever since the Institute of Medicine published its recommendations in 2007. She started transforming school meals in Detroit long before the enactment of the Healthy, Hunger Free Kids Act. As Betti says, "I don't consider the new standards to be a challenge; I consider them to be a responsibility." Even though DPS is one of the nation's poorest and most beleaguered school districts, Betti has eliminated the use of canned vegetables, hot dogs, artificially sweetened beverages, flavored milk, and iceberg lettuce. Betti steadily makes the case that even a distressed place like Detroit can afford to feed its kids well.

Betti established the Detroit School Garden Collaborative that placed raised-bed gardens at 82 school sites. Each school receives 6 raised-bed gardens, fresh soil and compost, and seedling transplants twice a year from the school farms. She also built Drew Farm, a two acre farm located at Drew Transition Center, a Detroit Public School for 18-26 year olds with cognitive and physical disabilities. The farm consists of six hoop green houses as well as one acre of field growing space. It produces more than 20,000 pounds of food each year, providing seven thousand ears of corn and three thousand potatoes to school lunch trays in a single growing season. Randolph Career and Technical Center houses a three bays, climate controlled, and self irrigating greenhouse capable of producing 30,000 transplants. The Center houses a horticultural classroom with walk-in coolers, wash sink, and storage capabilities. The Detroit School Garden Collaborative staff provides work-based skills training for Randolph students who learn to grow thousands of plants from seeds that are distributed to the 82 school garden sites. Betti received a grant from the U-Haul Growing Detroit Green Economy Fund to implement the Detroit Schools Permaculture Project at Ludington Magnet School. The Project grows produce with alternative agriculture methods such as Hugel growing, mound growing using wood debris and organic material. Students experience the entire life cycle of food from seed to plate.

### **3. How has your nominee bettered the lives of children in his/her district?**

Prior to joining DPS in 2000, Betti worked at the Washington, DC Public Schools. She had never before experienced such a severe level of poverty as did in DC. She introduced the School Breakfast Program (SBP) to the DC Public Schools and greatly expanded the Summer Food Service Program. When she joined DPS in 2000, she used lessons learned in DC to quickly implement the School Breakfast Program and eventually converted it to one of the first SBPs in the country to serve universal free breakfast to all children regardless of income.

Upon her return to DPS in 2008, Betti found the program rife with deficiencies. She partnered with the Michigan Department of Education to execute a swift turn around. She is an enthusiastic advocate for the role of the state agency in school nutrition programs. She also credits the Marriott Corporation for training her in foodservice business administration.

Detroit was one of the first school districts in the country to convert 100 percent of their schools to the Community Eligibility Provision in 2011. Meal participation increased by 30 percent. Betti also implemented the Supper program in all schools having after school programs.

To effectively run the Detroit School Garden Collaborative, Betti hired a garden director with a degree in community outreach, a horticulturalist, and a farmer. Each school site with a garden commits school staff to volunteer in the garden and 200 community volunteers to tend to the gardens on weekends and over school holidays. The garden director worked with the non-profit group Greening of Detroit to create garden education programs. Following the Michigan state standards for math and science, they developed a curriculum for classroom teachers. Sixty to seventy teachers are trained each month, receiving continuing curriculum education

credits. Betti's efforts have institutionalized the lessons in the garden by incorporating the state curriculum standards.

The Drew Farm hosts Family Farm Days inviting families to learn more about gardening and growing their own food. The families also learn about nutrition and how to provide healthy foods at home. Families are served lunch and given organic produce to take home. The Drew Farm also hosts a Title I certified field trip program. Students from PK through 12th grade spend an entire day at the farm that is centered in STEAM education (science, technology, engineering, and math with art/design incorporated).

The Drew Farm also incorporates job training programs for the Drew Transition Center students. Those raised-bed gardens provided to the school sites are built by Drew students. Foodservice training is also provided for students and adults in the community. Betti has even hired some of the trainees for school foodservice positions.

#### **4. Give specific examples of your nominee's innovation in management/systems.**

Betti's return to DPS in 2008 was the result of a proposal she wrote when the existing foodservice management contract was put out for bid by the school board. Betty submitted a proposal to return to school district self-operation that competed with contract management company proposals. She successfully convinced the school board that she could save \$6 million per year in management fees and divert those savings into improving food quality. Her persuasive proposal contained the slogan - We Work for Stakeholders, Not Shareholders.

Betti was convinced that fresher, more wholesome foods would help kids learn better and improve their diets. She totally reconfigured the district's meals, purchasing, and processing infrastructure. The nutrition program was using a base kitchen cooking and satellite delivery system that negatively affected food quality. Betti converted the satellite system to full preparation kitchens in every school, dubbing it the Fresh Cook Program. She eliminated all deep fat fryers and added convection ovens and steamers. Betti faced many challenges with meeting local building codes and exhaust hoods were added to some sites.

The transition from satellite to onsite preparation required a massive training effort in training employees about HACCP and food safety. No raw protein is purchased for the schools, but fresh vegetables and starches are cooked on site with fully cooked protein products heated on site. Betti also remodeled cafeteria spaces that had been neglected for 40 years. In Betti's words, "So if you serve food in a dark, stinky gym, it's not conducive to enjoying your food."

Betti shifted the district's procurement program towards local produce, no small feat given Michigan's short growing season. Thanks to Betti, DPS now buys 30 percent of their produce, including potatoes, apples, squash, peaches, and asparagus from farms around the state. She works with multiple farmers including the minority-owned Barbara's Blueberry Patch that sells 80,000 pounds of blueberries to DPS each year.

Betti participates in the USDA Pilot Project for Procurement of Unprocessed Fruits and Vegetables launched in 2014. She uses the district's USDA Foods allocation to

purchase produce from local farmers. Now, the school meal program at DPS provides a large market for local Michigan agriculture. DPS is the second largest purchaser of local foods in the state of Michigan. Betti really believes in the local agricultural economy. She feels good about using USDA dollars to support noble small business owners that provide a meaningful product.

#### **5. Highlight your nominee's career awards and industry involvement AWARDS**

- DC Board of Education, Ward 5: Appreciation Award for Service to Children, 1998
- Federal Executive Boards: Excellence in Government Silver Medalist Certificate of Achievement – 1997
- Marriott Corporation Regional Award: Best Improvement in Student Participation, 1992
- Marriott Corporation Marquis Award: Best 1st Year Financial Performance, 1990
- Nominated: Food Management Award for Humanitarian Service, 1988
- Nominated: Mead Johnson Outstanding Student in Public Health, 1987

#### **MEMBERSHIPS**

- National Farm to School Network Advisory Board – Member 2012 - present
- Detroit Food Policy Council, 2011 – Present: Chair of Schools and Institutions Committee
- Baltimore City Schools Student First Committee, Chair 1993- 1995
- School Nutrition Association – Member 1989 – Present
- Wayne State University - President Student Faculty Council 1973 – 1974 (first woman elected student body President)
- Wayne State University Board of Governors – Student Member 1973 – 1974

#### **INDUSTRY INVOLVEMENT**

- Participated in First Lady Michelle Obama's White House celebration of the impact of Let's Move!, October 5, 2015.
  - USDA Secretary Tom Vilsack called Betti Wiggins "the patron saint of school nutrition" during a speech to the October 2015 James Beard Foundation conference.
  - Testified before the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry in support of improving nutrition standards, 2014.
- Works closely with Senator Debbie Stabenow's office for the State of Michigan to advocate for child nutrition programs, ongoing.