



The Our American States podcast—produced by the National Conference of State Legislatures—is where you hear compelling conversations that tell the story of America’s state legislatures, the people in them, the politics that compel them, and the important work of democracy.

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Celeb Chef Hugh Acheson on Hunger in America | OAS Episode 61

Gene: Welcome to “Our American States,” a podcast of meaningful conversations that tell the story of America’s state legislatures, the people in them, the politics that compel them, and the important work of democracy. For the National Conference of State Legislatures, I’m your host, Gene Rose.

Our topic today is food insecurity and the prevention of hunger. Later in the program we will talk with Georgia state Senator Renee Unterman, who is co-chair of the National Conference of State Legislatures’ Hunger Partnership. She’ll discuss the work of the partnership and how it’s benefitting the public in state legislatures.

But first we specifically look into the subject of school lunches. We have a renowned chef who also lives in Georgia who explains why he feels providing meals for students is so critical.

We have as our guest on “Our American States” the celebrated chef, Hugh Acheson. If you love to eat or cook, you’re familiar with his work. Hugh is the chef and owner of five Georgia-based restaurants. His celebrated career includes the James Beard Award for best chef and Food and Wine’s best new chef. He has received national recognition for his cookbooks, the latest being “The Chef in the Slow Cooker,” and you’ve likely seen him on television. He’s been featured on “Top Chef Masters” as well as my wife’s favorite show, “Top Chef.”

Hugh, welcome to our program.

Hugh: It’s good to be here.

Time Marker (TM): 01:27

Gene: Tell us how you first got interested in cooking.

Hugh: Oh geez, I come from a really academic family and I just needed something to do because I was kind of the black sheep of the family, and I was really good at cooking. So, at 15, I started getting jobs in restaurants and that was kind of the start of it. Went to university for a little while, dropped out and kept cooking.

Gene: One of the reasons that we wanted to talk to you and one of the things we think that really sets you apart is your dedication to ending childhood hunger in America. You’ve written op-eds,

you've made speeches, you've joined your fellow chefs in the halls of Congress and in front of federal and state legislators to stand up for the kids who need you. You're a valued partner of a group called No Kid Hungry, and that's what we'd like to talk to you about today.

TM: 02:08

With all the well-deserved accolades you've earned, what drove you to work with No Kid Hungry and what continues to drive your participation in it?

Hugh: I think being a citizen means you try to affect your community and your state in whatever way you can. And just the affiliation with food and what I do professionally as a chef led me to look deeper into ... and also being a father, led me to look into the public schools that we send our kids to and seeing the real issue there, that kids weren't getting the nourishment they needed. No Kid Hungry was really one group that was really dedicated to showing the disparity in this country, that 1 out of 6 kids is in need of good nourishment. And schools are particularly an influential place to get those kids what they need to survive and to excel.

You know, to me looking at the greatest asset we have, which is this next generation coming up, it's kind of like you've got a beautiful car parked outside, but if you don't put gas in the tank you get nothing from it.

So, we've got to win this race and the way we do that is we empower a generation and we nourish a generation. And so this is just a small part of what I can do to make sure that we're concentrating on the right things in state legislatures and really across the country.

TM 03:24

Gene: And what kind of evidence do you see, Hugh, in your interaction with kids about the benefits of having meals?

Hugh: You know, in-room breakfast and lunch in the public schools—public schools really become the repository of food and nourishment, but also therapy and medical and all these things. And so we see impact daily from kids paying attention when they have a proper meal and good nourishment and good nutrition to start the day, and then at lunch as well. And then at summer meal programs which No Kid Hungry is a really big fan of, because we can't ignore the fact that schools shut down for the summer and these kids have gotten used to the nourishment being provided and we need to continue that nourishment throughout even off times.

So, there are some really important things that we can make sure that we know this is a solvable issue; it's a solvable state issue; it's a solvable issue across the country, and we just need to pay attention to it and make sure it gets the due diligence that it deserves.

TM 04:22

Gene: What's the value of governments partnering with organizations to create programs like this?

Hugh: I think partnering with a group like No Kid Hungry is essential. I think the state legislatures really need to go to nokidhungry.org \electedofficial, and it's a great resource. You'll see what's

happening within communities and where the needs are. And within, you know, summer meal programs and school breakfasts and in-room breakfasts, they're just a no-brainer to advance a community and advance the power of your state and create a next generation of assets.

Good citizenship is key, but nourishing good citizens is really the important thing.

TM 05:02

Gene: And what would you encourage legislators specifically to do, Hugh? What do you recommend to them? What kind of actions do you recommend that they take?

Hugh: I think they need to get out and be aware of the situation, be aware of the malaise within some of our communities on the lack of nourishment for kids. And we need state legislators to prioritize ending child hunger by leading the way in efforts to increase access to meal programs like school breakfast, summer meals and after-school meals. And I think they need to visit schools and see what's happening, or visit a summer meal site and see how these programs are really amazingly beneficial.

It's just so empowering to see kids smiling and learning, and the key to that is the foundation of nourishment. And we need state legislators to issue proclamations and make sure that they're aware of it on social media and posting about these things.

This is the most important issue that we have in this country, or one of the most important issues. So, if we don't feed our citizenship and empower them to be better humans, then we've got nothing. So we need them to pay attention. We can end childhood hunger in our states and in our country, but we can't do it without the help of the legislatures. These are the people who are empowering the laws and purse strings of their individual states and really are carving the future for those states.

TM 06:22

Gene: And why do you think, Hugh, that this has become such an issue for celebrated chefs like yourself? What gravitates you all to take up this mantle?

Hugh: I think at the core of it being a chef is about being a provider of nourishment and being immersed in your community and empowering your community. And so we need to make sure that all of our community is covered in that regard. And I think chefs just tend to be very active and empowered to lend a hand and, though we all work 70-hour weeks, we still set aside time to make sure that we're applying our skillsets to how we can better our communities.

TM 07:00

Gene: You're located in the Atlanta area now, is that correct?

Hugh: I live in Athens, Georgia, which is an amazing, amazing town in the amazing state of Georgia. But we have issues here that we're constantly dealing with. We have endemic poverty of 37%. We have very, very great school systems, but those great school systems are really empowered by

in-classroom breakfast and really amazing lunch programs and food and summer meal programs.

So, all these things have great impact and we see it in our local community of Athens, but I've also worked with a lot of Head Start programs around the country and been in school lunch programs and school breakfast programs around the country and seeing how this all affects all the amazing future points that we really want to take care of.

You feed people well, you feed kids well and you raise a generation of nutritionally well, you'll have better healthcare, you'll have better education, you'll have better workforce, you'll have better military readiness and a vastly better economy. So it all matters and it's all about feeding kids properly.

And when kids don't get the food they need, they struggle in school; we see that. I mean, I did that. If I wasn't eating well and eating breakfast, I didn't pay attention in the first few periods. So you see these impacts, so we have control, but we see the data, we know what can fix these things and this malaise. We just have to do it.

TM 08:23

Gene: And I promised that I would ask you: When kids are not in school, do you have a recipe that you can share with our listeners that perhaps they can use at home to help get their kids interested in good nutrition?

Hugh: I think the key for that is a lot of emphasis on cooking skills for kids at a young age and for all Americans to get back into from-scratch cooking. You know, the key to me is a five-letter word: it's pasta. For very little budget, you can make a really healthy meal for four people or a family of whatever size and really impact the sort of empowerment of that family.

But it's all a matter of cooking from scratch and realizing that there's great economic smartness to learning basic cooking skills. And so we need to teach the next generation that and eventually they're all going to feed themselves in a healthy way.

TM 09:12

Gene: That's fantastic. What final words of advice would you leave us with, Hugh, and let us know where people could go to get more information?

Hugh: Everybody needs to know the urgency and need: it's 1 in 6 kids struggle with hunger. All around this country right now families are making terrible decisions between paying the electric bill and buying groceries and between paying rent or having enough food.

Childhood food insecurity affects every community including the districts all the state legislators represent. So it's a matter of just getting involved and making change for a betterment. This is not a political issue. This is, again, putting gas in the most powerful asset we have, which is this next generation of kids coming up.

TM 09:52

Gene: Fantastic. And where would you have people go to, to get more information?

Hugh: They can go to ... No Kid Hungry has got a great website for this; it's nokidhungry.org/electedofficial and it's a great resource for state legislators looking to combat childhood hunger.

And look, if you're not looking out for kids, then what are you looking out for? I want to put a smile on these kids' face and have them be great, great citizens of the future.

Gene: We've been talking with celebrated chef Hugh Acheson. Hugh, thank you so much for being a guest on "Our American States."

Hugh: Thanks a lot, Gene, for all you do. Have a good day.

MUSIC

Gene: We have as our guest Georgia state Senator Renee Unterman. She is co-chair of the National Conference of State Legislatures' Hunger Partnership. Senator, thanks for being on our program.

Renee: Thank you, I appreciate it.

TM 10:49

Gene: Senator, we've talked with chef Hugh Acheson, who has restaurants based in your state, about the need to provide school children with nutritious meals, and we'd like to get your perspective on how state legislators across the country have been addressing this issue. But first, why don't you tell us about the purpose of the NCSL Hunger Partnership?

Renee: Well, thank you very much for the question. The purpose of the partnership has to be to join public and private, and the public, of course, would be state governments and local governments with private enterprises, whether those are large corporations like General Mills, or they're individual restaurants, the restaurant associations in different states.

And the purpose is not to reinvent the wheel, but to learn from one another in the different states of what are our best practices, and to publish those to become more educated as state legislators, and to work collaboratively across the nation to make people aware of the issue of hunger and also what we can do to solve the problems related to it.

TM 11:58

Gene: So, from your perspective, how big is this problem?

Renee: We first started out during the recession and the reason I came about it is because my particular Senate district was really not affected until the recession, and I literally during the recession of 2009/2010 had suburban mothers calling me because they wanted to understand how to get on food stamps and the SNAP program.

And when I realized that it crossed a broad spectrum of people, not just people who are low-income, but then it began to affect people who were newly related to being low-income, and that's when we started the partnership. And it has grown and prospered unfortunately ever since then.

But during that time period when we became more educated and worked across the country, we've improved conditions.

TM 12:56

Gene: So, tell us about the actions that the partnership has taken. You co-chair this with Texas state Senator Eddie Lucio Jr. What have you all done to address this topic?

Renee: Well, we've done many, many things, but I think the most important thing we've done is the publication of our work and sharing our knowledge and teaching not just veteran legislators, but new legislators who've come into NCSL on what they can do if they're interested in the topic, they want to work on this particular issue of food insecurity, that we can give them the tools.

And the most important thing we've done is publication of materials and collaterals. The second thing we've done is to have individual meetings, whether we have those meetings in a regional network, whether we have podcasts, whether we actually have printed published material.

We've been very fortunate to have a line item in the federal budget with a congressional fellowship. This gives us the opportunity to have access to manpower when we have a fellow that participates with the network. It helps us do this part of the written materials.

So, it's been really fulfilling. We've had several co-chairs; it's always been bipartisan. And the other thing we've had, we've had NGOs that have participated and been with us from the very beginning, but we also have had large corporations that have been a part of it, so that we understand how the private sector can work on the issue and promote it also.

TM 14:38

Gene: So, you mentioned finances and having a line item in the congressional budget. This strikes me that this is not an issue that you can just throw money at, that there are other things that have to be involved as well.

Renee: Exactly. It's really people working together, and you need a facilitator and that's where NCSL comes in, because they draw the different groups together and they're the one that keeps the cohesiveness and the energy to keep the movement going; because of course now our economy is much better, we're not in a recessionary period, but there still are issues related to SNAP.

And having that relationship with the feds has been very important as we've gone through different presidents and different changes in federal budget items and federal regulations, and in particular with the SNAP program and the agricultural community.

TM 15:36

Gene: Can you give us some examples of what other state legislatures across the country have been doing to address the issue?

Renee: Well, the most important thing that I've found when we travel across the country ... we have literally been from east coast to west coast, north and south ... the most important thing I've found is the food bank network. And we have a great network across the country and, of course, they have their own organizations and they have their national organizations, but it's legislators tapping into that network.

And the reason it's so important is not really the infrastructure; it's people with like-minded issues, because if you're related to the issue of food insecurity and you get together within your own state and then across the country, then it's much easier to find those people and to work together.

TM 16:30

Gene: So, we've talked about quite a few things here, Senator. What haven't I asked you that you think is important for state legislators and legislative staff to know about the issue?

Renee: I think the most important thing to know is that there are people out there that are interested in the same issues that you're interested in, and we have literally moved the dial, we've moved the cultural dial on food insecurity, but there's a lot more work we have to do.

And if we work together collaboratively, whether it's through the general assemblies across the nation, whether it's through the staff, that there is a cohesiveness, there is an interest in it, and there are many, many people who are interested in this subject matter who are subject matter experts, whether you're working with the National Restaurant Association, if you're working with chefs—it doesn't matter who you're working with, but the whole thing is the synergy of working together and being interested in this topic.

Gene: We've been talking with Georgia state Senator Renee Unterman. Senator, thank you for being on our program.

Renee: Thank you very much.

Music and Gene VO:

And that concludes this edition of "Our American States." We invite you to subscribe to this podcast on iTunes and Google Play. Until our next episode, this is Gene Rose for the National Conference of State Legislatures. Thanks for listening.