

**Nancy Young Fortner, M.Ed**

**Director of Guidance and Counseling Services, Huntsville City Schools (1985-2008)**

**President, Alabama Counseling Association (1985-1986)**

**Acknowledgements and Introduction:**

**JB:** *I would like to thank Dr. Morgan Kiper Riechel for interviewing Ms. Nancy Fortner. I also want to thank Ms. Fortner for her willingness to visit us during the Alabama Counseling Association Conference in Birmingham, AL on November 21, 2013.*

*Ms. Fortner enthusiastically talked about her leadership and advocacy efforts in school counseling. In January 2014, in a follow-up interview, I asked additional questions to gain a personal perspective. The following information reflects excerpts from both interviews. This version was reviewed and approved by Ms. Fortner, prior to publication.*

**MKR:** *Nancy, thank you for agreeing to let me interview today. We appreciate that.*

**NF:** My pleasure.

**MKR:** *Could tell me about when you began your career as a school counselor and/or coordinator in counseling guidance?*

**NF:** My first job as a school counselor was in 1973 in South Carolina. I taught high school social studies and government at Opelika High School, finished my master's degree in counselor education at Auburn University, moved with my husband to Augusta, Georgia, and was hired as a school counselor in the Aiken County school district. Ridge Spring-Monetta School was a K-8 school located in a rural area of Aiken County. I was the middle school counselor for the first year. The second year, I was the K-8 counselor and was both the elementary and middle school counselor. Our family moved to Huntsville in 1975 and I became the first elementary counselor in the Huntsville City Schools. Then, I moved to Johnson High School as a counselor and Guidance Department Chairperson for 7 years. In 1985, I moved to the central office and became the Director of Guidance and Counseling Services for Huntsville City Schools. I served for 23 years in that position, which later included the role of Coordinator of Safe and Drug Free Schools and Communities until my retirement in 2008. Also, from 1998 to 2008, I was an adjunct professor at Alabama A & M University teaching graduate counselor education courses. That is the cliff note version of my career.

*MKR: What has it been like to be a school counselor and also a coordinator in your career? What were those experiences like?*

**NF:** You know if I could have painted a picture of what I wanted to do in my life, I believe it was to be a school counselor. From that school based level - it is that interaction, that one-on-one with students that is so rewarding because it was hands-on. I got to work with students individually, in groups, and teams. I was able to see students set goals and in many cases realize their goals, which was extremely validating.

Coming from a school-based school counselor position, it was hard for me to leave the school setting because I loved working directly with students. But the opportunity came in our school district, which in 1985 had close to 30,000 students, and it was a challenge worth taking. To work on the system-wide level in a systemic effort was an opportunity to work with all of our school principals and administrators, parents and community for our counseling and guidance program. As far as what was most rewarding to me – from the school level, it was that one-on-one with the students; on a system level, it was that systemic effort and working with other administrators and stakeholders to see and work for the entire school district counseling and guidance program, which hopefully made a difference.

*MKR: Tell me a little bit about the beginning years for you?*

**NF:** Well, when I started my school counseling career in 1973, it was in Ridge Spring-Monetta School in South Carolina. It was in peach-orchard country and it was in a low economic, rural community – probably 800 students in the middle school and I was *the* counselor. At that time there was not a system-wide counseling and guidance plan.

I remember my first day at Ridge Spring going into a room and I had a desk and a chair and that was it. And it thought, “Okay” . . . it was my first school counseling job and I had all these modules I had worked on and I took a lot of books with me and I just went from there . . . it was really learning under fire. I was very fortunate, as I have been all through my career, to have a wonderful, wise principal to be my supervisor and he became my mentor; his name was Joseph Anderson. He said, “I just want you to build a program and we’ll do it together,” and we worked together as a team to make it happen. I remember saying a lot, “We have to do this and this and this.” And I remember he gave me the best advice, saying, “You can’t solve it all, Nancy.” And, I said “but we can work on it can’t we?” and he said “You know, we can. We are going to set the priorities step by step.” And we did.

We had little funding and materials from the school district, but Mr. Anderson wrote a grant and we went to the University of South Carolina (USC) one to two days a month for a program their counseling and guidance department implemented for school districts in South Carolina. The program helped underserved schools develop counseling and guidance programs. From this program and leadership, we developed a school-based counseling and guidance program. It was truly learning from excellent mentorship from USC and from a visionary principal in Mr. Anderson. It was a meaningful experience that I revisited many

times in my career. I was there for two years and then my husband and I moved to Huntsville.

When I was hired in the Huntsville City Schools, we did not have elementary counseling positions in Alabama, except selected units that were federally funded in a few areas of the state. In the Huntsville City Schools our Superintendent, Dr. Mary Jane Caylor (who later served 4 terms on the Alabama State Board of Education) was determined to have elementary school counselors. So, I became the first elementary counselor in this large, high-achieving school system and I thought, "This is going to be so much fun," and it was. We had tremendous support, materials, and human resources and we just took the ball and ran with it.

Then, I moved to Johnson High School, a school with about 2,750 students. We had 5 counselors and a full-time guidance aide, and what was interesting, we did our work without any computers; we did everything by paper and pencil. The counselors took turns taking the office IBM typewriter home at night to type our letters of reference and prepare group guidance activities. We did have a registrar and she entered all the grades on the transcripts by hand! The management piece was all done by pieces of paper and pen and pencil. (We were pretty accurate because we were so afraid we would make an error!). We did have workable counselor-student ratios. We were able through wonderful support from administrators, to implement effective counseling and guidance programs. We started a school-wide advisor-advisee program that is still in place. We were helping students as a team and we had the support of a dynamic administration in our Assistant Principal John Masterson and Principal Tom Drake. It was an exciting, team-oriented working environment. So, those were the beginning years for me as a school counselor prior to 1985.

In remembering the beginning years, I experienced four name changes in our professional counseling association. When I joined, we were in the second name change, from the Alabama Personnel and Guidance Association (ALPGA) to the American Association for Counseling and Development (ALACD), and later to our current name, Alabama Counseling Association (ALCA). I remember when our membership reached 1,000 members in the early 1980s, and you would have thought we had won the lottery. It was so exciting; we cheered when it was announced at the Executive Council Spring Retreat at Ann Jordan Lodge. It was just a big moment for our association to get to that membership level.

At that time, ALCA did not have an executive director. With that appointment not coming until later in the early 1990s, the leadership of our association was primarily from college-level counselor educators who had university resources and support. That was advantageous because during those early years, we had meager funding. I recall when we held one of our first annual conferences in Birmingham. I think we had about 300 attendees and little funding for it. I remember we passed a hat around for the members on the Executive Council to help fund a speaker. We went from a "prayer and a passion" for serving our state with a counseling association to what we are today. I think some of the early years were amazing.

When I became president of ALCA in 1985-1986, it was the 20th year of our association. I was the second school counselor president. After I was elected, many of our members said it was not because no one thought a school counselor was qualified for the job, but it was related to how would you ever have the resources, funding, and flexibility for the position. I was fortunate, however, because I had a wonderful superintendent and high school principal who believed in school counseling and supported this effort 100%. They literally helped fund and support a large portion of the expenses incurred for serving in a leadership role in ALCA, along with in-kind support. I was proud of that effort, not just because I had that opportunity to serve, (that was wonderful), but because other school systems saw the benefit of supporting association leadership efforts.

It was near this time that an exciting and long overdue event happened for our association - we hired our first executive director. Dr. Pat Barnes, Ms. Anne Hartline, and I met Dr. Wilbur Tincher at a restaurant in Montgomery, we interviewed him, and we were sold. Wilbur had been our first president of our association, and he had a vision. Dr. Tincher served for about six years until his retirement. Then, Dr. Chip Wood became our second executive director. I give both Wilbur and Chip credit for molding the administrative piece in ALCA. This has helped our association develop leaders, and having the support from the executive director position helped gel ALCA with continuity.

We started out small. People say start small and plan big, and we did. Now, we have over 2,000 members, 13 divisions, and the conference this year, I think may be our largest. We are well over 1,300 attendees. Our professional organization has come a long way; the professional development opportunity at the annual conference is attractive to counselors across the state regardless of their work setting. It is the largest professional development function of this state for counselors, and even with funding shortages, from personal or work setting funds, counselors find a way to come to this conference.

Looking back on my personal experiences during the early years, I was a school counselor, an ALCA president, and a counselor coordinator. I was the second school system counseling and guidance coordinator for the Huntsville City Schools and it was fun to help develop a system-wide counseling and guidance program for our school system. Again it was, "Do it." It was learning under fire, but it was exciting and meaningful to help develop programs and to work with our counselors and principals during the early years.

**MKR:** *So I was curious, what are some of the things you are most proud of as a professional in your counseling field?*

**NF:** Professionally, I think there are two things.

First, I have been part of a major counseling and guidance program challenge in 1991-1992 when our local and state counseling and guidance programs were challenged by the Eagle Forum (n.d.). The Eagle Forum was concerned about selected instructional materials counselors were using. For example, in Huntsville City Schools we had purchased videos for our counselors to use with students to promote relaxation before standardized testing. The Eagle Forum thought the videos were standard induction techniques for hypnosis.

Therefore, the Eagle Forum started connecting their dots and voiced that “Huntsville City hypnotizes children.” This was their focal point, but across the state in selected school systems, they were challenging counseling and guidance programs/materials, books, and resources.

Our professional association, ALCA, along with the Alabama School Counselor Association (ALSCA) and counseling leadership from several school systems that also had counseling and guidance program areas that were being questioned, joined together to respond. We met the Eagle Forum representatives numerous times in an effort to help them understand the role of school counselors and counselor resources, but there appeared to be a lack of flexibility and compromise. The Eagle Forum crafted a resolution they took to the Alabama State Board of Education to eliminate school counselors from using any materials that were personal/social in nature (i.e., one of the three major domains of the American School Counselor Association). They wanted that entire domain done away with, which we knew they could not do. They also wanted parental permission for a student to see a school counselor for any reason. But to get to that point, it was amazing. The Alabama school counselor leadership went to monthly Alabama State Board of Education meetings. Our Alabama State Board of Education was dealing with many issues for our state school children, but for almost a whole year, I think eleven monthly meetings were devoted to this issue. Over time, the meetings got larger and larger and the Eagle Forum actually bused in people who did not even know the purpose of their attendance.

Our school counselors stood tall against the Eagle Forum’s challenge. We worked with our Alabama State Board of Education members and with our State Superintendent of Education, Dr. Wayne Teague. We gave testimony to the state school board regarding our mission and role as school counselors, and I was just so proud to stand up and be an advocate for our school counselors and to let others know who we are as counseling professionals. We had several school board members who were our champions. We worked very hard and defeated the resolution that would require parental permission for students to see a school counselor for any circumstance, which would have been catastrophic. But they did pass the resolution about no material with relaxation techniques. Afterwards, we let our school systems know about the concerns. This was academic year 1991-1992 and I feel like we covered that very well. I know in our school system, we have never had a challenge since then. It just went away. Looking back, that was eleven months of my life that I felt was both a challenge and an opportunity to stand up for what I believed in as a school counselor. We worked very hard for our school counselors (and students) and for me, I am very proud of our efforts.

The second experience that I am the most proud of is the opportunity I had to work with the Alabama State Department of Education (ALSDE). We have had five state guidance and counseling plans developed across time: *A Handbook for Comprehensive Guidance Programs in Alabama (1979)*, *The Guidance and Counseling State Plan for Excellence in Alabama’s Public Schools (1984)*, *The Guidance and Counseling State Plan for Excellence in Alabama’s Public Schools (Revised Edition, 1986)*, *The Revised Comprehensive Counseling and Guidance State Model for Alabama’s Public Schools (1996)*, and *Comprehensive Counseling and Guidance Model for Alabama Public Schools (State Plan, 2003)*. I have had the privilege and

opportunity to serve on all five of the ALSDE planning and writing teams for our state counseling and guidance plans and models. The first plan was in 1979 and it was a manual of activities. Then, in 1984 the revision increased to having goals and objectives. Then, two years later in 1986, the revision included the career guidance component. In 1996, the plan added goals and objectives, activity suggestions, and it was very thorough. The 2003 Comprehensive State Plan for Guidance and Counseling, which is still in effect, included the ASCA National Standards (2003), which was key. With this version, we could infuse the plan that we had implemented earlier with the ASCA National Standards. It is a solid plan and we were pleased that we had a way to bring our program from being “service-oriented for some students” to being “program-centered for all students.” The plan is a blueprint of what school systems can use to develop their own system’s programs. Our committee was given the directive to take the plan on the road for the ALSDE all across the state. I made many presentations (regional, state, and in-service meetings) for the ALSDE with other school districts. I helped many school systems develop their system-wide counseling and guidance plan, and I know in Huntsville City Schools we spent a year and a half developing and refining our own plan that was our system-wide model and a model for individual school-based plans. This plan still stands today, with an evaluation component that we needed to have in place.

So, those two things: standing tall for our counseling and guidance programs against challenges from those who are very conservative in nature (i.e., that history, of questioning programs and textbooks) and working with the ALSDE in developing comprehensive counseling and guidance models, were contributions I am most proud of as a professional in counseling and guidance. I am so proud I had those opportunities to contribute.

I would also add, working for 23 years as a director of guidance, working with all the counselors I had the opportunity to work with, the community and stakeholders, was a rewarding experience. I value the contributions our school counselors make every day in the lives of the students they touch. They make a difference. I have always felt that school counselors are the heart of the school, the “glue” people that hold it together.

I want to shift back to our professional organization. For the decade of the 1980s, our Alabama Counseling Association was the catalyst to push for elementary counselors in our state. At the time, the only elementary counselors we had in this state were from federal funded programs whose scope was not necessarily comprehensive in nature and that did not have a system-wide counseling and guidance plan. Our professional association and ALSCA, spearheaded the movement for elementary counselors. The leadership of ALCA formed a task force and funded the efforts for elementary counselors. Our professional association, in my opinion, has been the flagship organization for counseling and guidance in our state for all counseling divisions.

For an entire decade, we worked as an association through ALSCA meeting with parental groups, PTA groups, superintendent groups, principal groups, and selected stakeholders to help them understand the benefits of elementary school counselors in our schools. Schools counselors were added in the schools first at the secondary level, then middle/junior high, and now we have elementary counselors, which is where we really should have started to

begin with in our schools. We advocated relentlessly for an entire decade. Around 1990, right before the Eagle Forum was challenging school counselor programs and materials, we had the advent of the elementary school counselor reform. The state legislature passed an amendment to phase in elementary school counselors around 1992. There were certain percentages and ratios that would be used to roll out the phase in of elementary school counselors. I know in 1992, 10 elementary school counselor units were allocated for the Huntsville City Schools. It started small, but we kept building. Later, the Southern Accreditation of Colleges and Schools (SACS) came on board and mandated elementary school counseling. SACS moved that schools shall and must have elementary counselors at an appropriate ratio based on the enrollment of students. At that point, elementary counselors took off in the state. I feel like our association can be extremely proud that we were the individuals charging up the hill for our students and through these efforts, we have elementary counselors in our schools.

**MKR:** *That is definitely something to be proud of.*

**NF:** I am proud of that for our state and just to have a small part of that opportunity was great.

**MKR:** *Can you tell us a little more about, in general, the history of counseling in our schools?*

**NF:** In the 1960s, we had the National Defense Education Act (NDEA) funding for career and secondary counselors. This funding really started the advent of school counselors in our state at the secondary level. I remember in our school system and across the state this is how we funded our first school counselors. School counselor training was an area of growth that we had to work through because we had very limited training at the beginning - just the basic courses, and very limited practicum and internship experiences. When counselors were placed in schools with this minimal training, there was a great deal of growth necessary for the implementation of effective counseling and guidance programs. In addition, secondary school counselors in the schools came so fast and furious that our administrators were not always trained to know the appropriate role of a school counselor. Therefore, our secondary counselors who were trained first were in many cases perceived either through their eyes or from their school principal's eyes or from administrators as quasi-administrators.

With state counseling and guidance plans, through the years we have been able to fine tune and redirect the whole secondary counselor movement. I think the elementary counselor movement started out with appropriate training and implementation, but with the secondary counselor movement, it has taken some time to change in many cases principals' perception. With funding history, it was piecemeal.

Our new state superintendent of education, Dr. Tommy Bice, spoke yesterday at our conference. I think we all were very pleased with his remarks. Dr. Bice believes in school counseling and he is following through with making sure there is the perception that counseling is important for schools, students, and parents. I am thankful for his support.

**MKR:** *What challenges are ahead?*

**NF:** A challenge ahead is ongoing training for administrators, superintendents, and principals on the role of school counselors and the state counseling and guidance model for Alabama schools. That is where our focus should be now. I have no doubt that our counselor education programs are training our counselors well. But, regardless of what counselor training you have had, when all else is said and done - when you are in a school, if you do not have the administrator's understanding of the role of the school counselor in your school - there may be issues. That is where we are now. We have evolved in our school counseling profession a long way since the early 1960's, but there is still a challenge and an opportunity for growth.

I have always said I spent so much of my time, probably a third of my time, working with administrators in our system to help them understand what a guidance program should be and how it can help all of our students become more effective and efficient learners, plus how we can all work together to achieve this goal. That is the key, you just cannot beat that drum enough.

**MKR:** *If you could bring back anything to the profession from the past few decades what would it be?*

**NF:** My passion in school counseling is working with students - whether in individual, small groups, or large groups. I often see that so many of the programs being implemented are from software instruction. Students are working on the Internet for many guidance-related programs. I do not think there is any substitute, even though many of these software programs are research-based programs, for working with kids eyeball to eyeball; that's what guidance is. So, I have been very concerned over the last five years, when I see school districts invest a large amount of money in software programs for their school counseling and guidance programs. I think there needs to be a balance between software and counselor delivered guidance instruction; I do not think software instruction should be the total guidance delivered curriculum. I understand that this change is somewhat based on finances as it is cheaper to buy software programs than to fund counselor units. But, no doubt, counseling programs work best when you are working directly with students. Computer programs can be a supplement, but I am seeing signs that our guidance programs are software programs in many schools. Counseling is counseling; we need to be there for our students. Not to say "we have a guidance program" because we have "this software program in our computer lab." This is a caution to consider.

**MKR:** *I was wondering if you might have any advice for counseling educators who are preparing to ascend school counselors in the field?*

I think it is important for counselor educators, and this was something that I saw from one of my mentors, Dr. Bob Myrick, counselor educator from the University of Florida, to be in the schools on a regular basis to observe best practices and in many cases participate in the counseling and guidance program. As busy as Dr. Myrick was with writing, training, and teaching, he spent one day a week going into the schools. He worked with groups of



students and observed student behavior and interaction. He said there is just no substitute from going out in the field, and to me that was admirable and impressive. Plus, it just makes sense to keep current in your professional field. When I became a system-wide director of counseling and guidance, I would allocate a certain time in my schedule to be in the schools. On occasion I facilitated groups. I know it helped to keep me current and also gave me a heightened professional perspective.

From the counselor educator perspective, this is something I would say to any counselor educator whether they are in a university level or system-wide level. You have to make time, but it can be done. I had late nights trying to play catch-up, but I loved it because I missed working with kids, and it gave me the opportunity to not only connect with students but to network with our counselors and principals.

Another important piece is mentoring. I look back at our professional association and there were people who were leadership mentors for me. I think of Dr. Bob Comas from the University of Alabama, Dr. Linda Mahan from the University of Montevallo, and Gail McCullers and Dr. Pat Barnes from Auburn University. They were my professional leadership role models. Because of the time they each gave to me and the knowledge they shared and leadership they modeled for me, it is important for me to give back and mentor new colleagues and leaders. I just had an opportunity to eat breakfast, a short breakfast meeting, at our conference with one of my professional mentors, Dr. Carolyn Thomas. She is so wise and I can always run professional issues and concerns by her. She always has a fresh perspective. Giving back to our profession, rather as a counselor educator mentoring students or as a colleague mentoring new colleagues, is our responsibility. Someone did it for us.

**MKR:** *Great advice, thank you so much.*

**NF:** Oh, this was fun! You know as we were talking I just stared reminiscing...gosh, this has been forty years; it goes quickly.

**MKR:** *Well, we appreciate your sharing.*

**NF:** It was an opportunity for me to reflect as we were talking. It gave me validation that I chose what fit me for my profession as a school counselor and school system administrator and the positive professional influence and friendships I have experienced in the Alabama Counseling Association.

*A few months later, Ms. Fortner was given another opportunity to provide information. She shared some interesting details about her path*

**JB:** *I want to ask you a few questions about your life prior to your becoming a counselor. Where were you born and what do you think prompted your career in counseling?*

**NF:** I was born and raised in Auburn, Alabama. I am from a multi-generational family of educators. My mother was a high school science teacher for 44 years and my father was a college professor and coach. They modeled unselfish giving, looking at life from a positive perspective, and the value of all individuals. When we had family reunions, the conversation always turned to education because the majority of my family are educators and I suppose you talk best about what you know! I was a secondary social studies teacher before I went to graduate school to become a counselor. Being a counselor just clicked for me. I felt I could relate to students better as a school counselor than as a classroom teacher, plus it was a lot more fun! I became a school counselor in 1973 and have loved school counseling ever since.

**JB:** *What were some early influences in your life?*

**NF:** My late parents, Luther and Carolyn Young, were my role models and still are my role models. My youth minister at First Methodist Church in Auburn, Paul Bradley, as well as my first grade teacher, Mrs. Umbach and my fourth grade teacher, Mrs. Vowell and later my band director, Mr. Goff, were powerful, positive influences who I suppose also indirectly influenced me to enter the field of education. My Aunt Liz who was a high school P.E. teacher in Birmingham and my paternal grandmother (and also the wife of a Methodist minister) for whom I am named, were the two people besides my parents I could talk to about anything. Maybe they were the first counselors I had in my life! Also, a powerful influence was the community I was born in and lived in until I graduated from graduate school: Auburn, Alabama. This warm, cocoon-like, small Southern community was an oasis in life that I cherish even more as I look back on my life.

**JB:** *What were some influences in early adulthood in your life?*

**NF:** Some early influences in early adulthood would be Nancy Bethea who I practice taught under at Columbus High School in Columbus, Georgia. I wanted to be a teacher just like her and I admired her ability to relate to the students to make them feel that they truly could succeed. My Principal, Joseph Anderson, from Ridge Spring, South Carolina was my principal when I was first a school counselor. I still look back and remember his wisdom and vision. Starting my career in the Huntsville City Schools, Dr. Martha Becket, my supervisor of counseling in the HCS, Dr. Mary Jane Caylor, Superintendent of Schools for HCS, and John Masterson, Assistant Principal at Johnson High School were powerful, professional influences and motivators. They were never too busy to offer their support and more importantly, they made me feel that I mattered, encouraged me, and believed in me.

**JB:** *As you reflect back on your family, tell me more?*

**NF:** I have been married for 42 years to Robert, whom I have known my entire life. Robert is a retired Pharmacist and he is probably my best friend. He has always been my champion and supporter and has unselfishly and unconditionally been my cheerleader. We have a

son, David, who lives in Hoover with his wife, Amber, who he met at Auburn, and our precious 10-year old granddaughter, Abby. My faith and family come first in my life. I also consider my support system of true friends like family. My childhood friends of Hannah and Sue, my college roommate Ann, my neighbors on Calumet Drive, my professional network of counselors and ALCA friends are true blue. Also, Tuffy Black, my “pseudo” big sister who lives next door to us at our lake cabin at Lake Martin. Tuffy and I grew up in Auburn and she taught me to swim; she is a wise confidant and trusted, dear friend.

**JB:** *Theoretically speaking, where do you stand?*

**NF:** As a counselor, I am an Adlerian counselor in theory. Perhaps on a lighter note, I am also a right-brained educator, a Protestant, a Methodist, wife, mother, grandmother, and a Democrat!

**JB:** *It has been a few months since we interviewed you. Would there be any other thoughts you would like to add to this interview?*

**NF:** Thank you, Joy, for undertaking this project to help preserve the history of ALCA. It has been an honor to participate and I thank you for all of your efforts! ALCA has been an important part of my career and life – for almost 40 years it has been a source of professional support and direction – plus at times has been like a lifeline in the sea of life!

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