

# SNA *plus*

INSPIRES

INFORMS

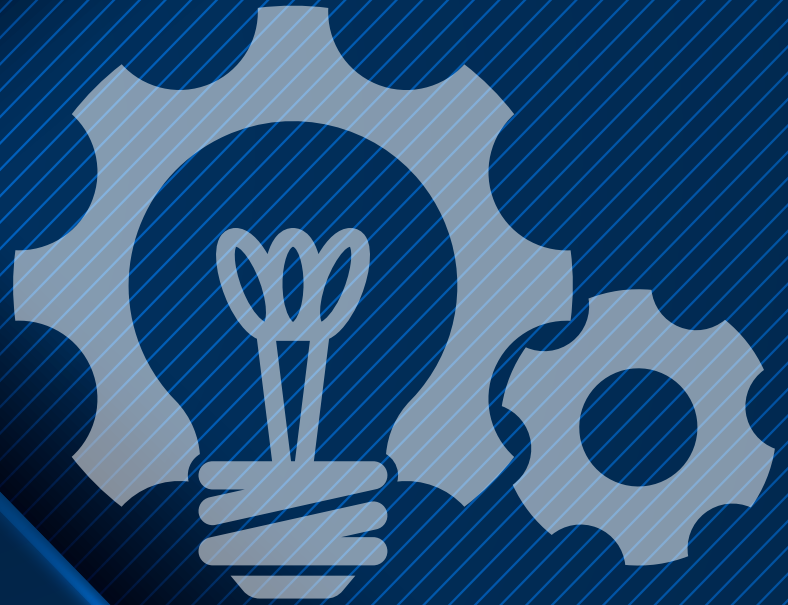
INSTRUCTS

K-12 FOODSERVICE

Equipment

Greenhouse

## A Tale of Two Innovations



A pair of school nutrition directors in Alaska and Georgia represent an immensely creative profession, brimming over with great ideas and finding ways to see them through.

BY CHRISTINA UTICONE



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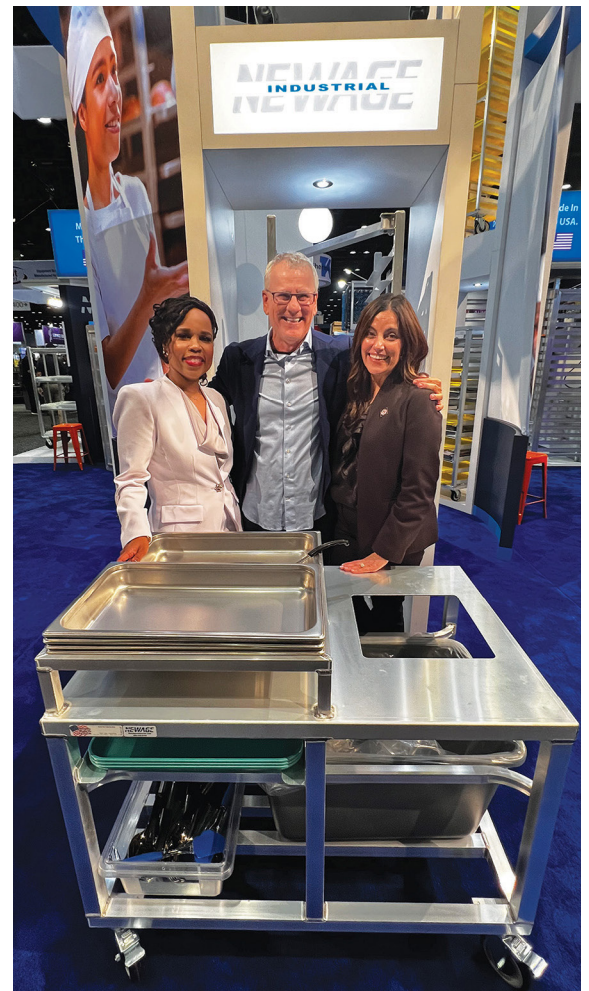
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## Equipment Greenhouse

**SAVVY STRATEGISTS ARE ALWAYS ON THE HUNT FOR NEW IDEAS—FRESH APPROACHES TO OLD PROBLEMS, NEW OPPORTUNITIES FOR ENGAGEMENT, INVENTIVE WAYS TO “WORK SMARTER, NOT HARDER.”** Increasing efficiency in this age of labor shortages, supply chain interruptions and skyrocketing prices means rising above the relentless pressure to do more with less. Fortunately, most school nutrition professionals are already experts in this arena. If you have ever improved a food preparation process, jerry-rigged a piece of aging equipment to extend its life, created a system to better manage paperwork or discovered a new way to use a USDA commodity food, guess what? You’re an innovator!

Innovators don’t just dream up possibilities—they are very intentional about making them happen. They analyze the strengths and weaknesses of the idea, identify barriers to success and develop a detailed plan to go forward. Whether you’re a director looking to increase staff efficiency or a manager hoping to improve fruit and vegetable consumption among middle-



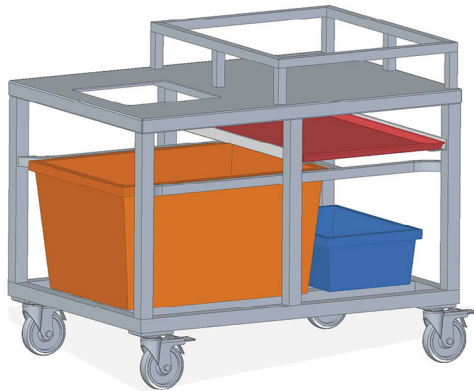
graders, creative problem solving (a.k.a. innovation!) is just one spark of inspiration away.

On the surface, this spotlight on two projects developed and championed by a few of your colleagues may seem to emphasize the differences in district size, location, problem and solution. But look deeper, and you’ll likely notice a few similarities. In both, a far-flung rural district in Alaska and a metropolitan district near Atlanta, Ga., the ingredients for innovation in school nutrition are ever-present: invested colleagues, partners and stakeholders eager and willing to collaborate; students hungry for nutritious meals and novel learning experiences; and a committed team of passionate school nutrition professionals. Hmm....does this sound like your district, too?





## Spotlight: Alyssia Wright & Claudia Harry



As Executive Director of Food and Nutrition Operations, **Fulton County (Ga.) Schools**, **Alyssia Wright, EdS**, has earned a wide range of titles over the course of her career, but it's unlikely that "kitchen equipment inventor" was one of them—until now. Wright and **Claudia Harry**, Manufacturer's Representative, **The Hansen Group**, are the winning partners in the first Custom Product Design Contest sponsored by **New Age Industrial Corp.** Bringing together unique and complementary skill sets, Wright and Harry collaborated to create the award-winning Scrap and Stack specialty cart.

New Age Industrial is an extruder and fabricator of aluminum storage and transportation products for foodservice and other

industries. Its Fall 2022 contest invited manufacturer representatives to team up with end users, consultants or dealer partners to submit ideas for aluminum foodservice equipment innovations intended to solve a specific need within their operations. The Scrap & Stack, unveiled at the NAFEM (North American Foodservice Equipment Manufacturers) show in February, has now been manufactured and is available for purchase ([www.newageindustrial.com/product/scrap-and-stack](http://www.newageindustrial.com/product/scrap-and-stack)).

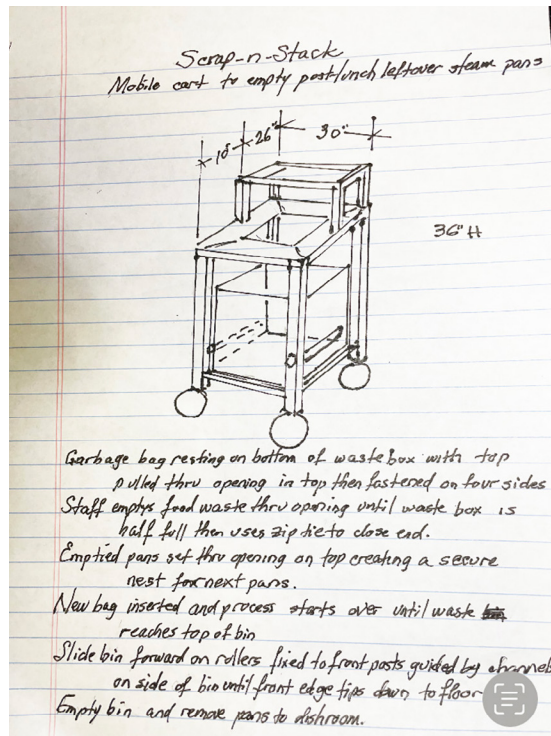
The Hansen Group brings manufacturer-specific consultation services, design facilitation and other services and solutions to end-users like its Fulton County Schools customer. Harry was fresh off a site visit to one of Fulton's largest high schools, where she was conducting a demonstration of a new combi oven. She had the opportunity to take a walk through the large cafeteria serving area in the company of a newly-hired school foodservice employee.

"We got to the serving line and the employee said, 'Oh my gosh, how do I clean that? Do I do that alone?'" The array of steamtable pans, serving utensils, excess menu items and food waste was overwhelming. It was a lightbulb moment for Harry: "How could we make this easier for the cafeteria team?" With regular turnover in site-based





# Equipment



positions like these even in the best of times, this has long been a legit problem to be solved. "How might we design an equipment solution that is easy to move around and is singularly focused on this task, so employees can say, 'I've got this.'"

Even with a very full plate—Wright is the current Georgia SNA President—she didn't skip a beat when Harry called "out of the blue" to propose they collaborate on an entry to the contest: designing a mobile clean-up cart. Without hesitation, Wright agreed to the proposal. "I'm a risk-taker when it comes to trying new things, and of course I want to make things easier for our team," she recounts. "I could see this cart eliminating some of those double or even triple steps that our staff members were taking."

The Scrap and Stack is a mobile cart that features a well for discarding food waste from the line, space for stacking sheet and steamtable pans and an area to soak and store serving utensils. Before the Scrap and Stack, Fulton County clean-up crews would move the steamtable pans from the line to a small cart, placing them catty-corner, with their leftover

contents, and then adding all of the utensils. Next, they would head to the production area where they would remove pans from the cart, discarding food waste and counting leftover items that could be served again, explains Wright. "Then, they put the empty pans back on the cart and take them to the dish room. It's a three-step process, taking time and adding to labor costs."

Wright details the specifics of their award-winning product: "The well of the Scrap and Stack is fitted with the same 30-gallon trash bag that we use on the serving line. Employees remove pans, discard the contents in the trash bag or in designated areas on the cart. Fruits and vegetables are stacked on green trays on the second shelf, and utensils can go into a Cambro unit with warm, soapy water. They can collect and stack the pans on the cart all the way down the serving line before heading to the dish room.

Before the Scrap and Stack was a cart, it was a sketch, which Harry sent to Wright as a "jumping off" point. "I love to sketch, but it is really rough," says Harry. "I have learned to

53757 | Scrap and Stack

Model Number: 53757 | Width: 40" | Height: 35" | Depth: 27 1/4" | Ship Lbs.: 65

Top mounted pan rail holds two rows of stacked 12" x 20" steamtable pans.  
Angle slides mounted below holds stacked 18" x 26" sheet pans.

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listen to and understand a customer's needs, rough-draw a concept and then ask for expert support from my factories."

Sketch in hand, "We took an inventory of the different items on the serving line—steamtable and sheet pans, utensils, trash bags, trash cans—and created a list to send to the engineering team at New Age," says Harry. "These amazing engineers look at your design and help you think beyond aesthetics and functions for elements like balance."

Once Harry and Wright's design had been selected, the pair provided the engineers with the exact model numbers for items like trash cans and specific pan sizes. Then New Age produced more detailed drawings based on those discussions. And now? "Now it has a model number and a specification and it's already being quoted across the United States," says Harry. "That is just so cool when you think about it!"

Calling the project "a breath of fresh air," Wright concurs with her design partner. "There is never a dull day in school nutrition, and you are always trying to think of ways to be more innovative. This contest helped that come to life," says Wright. "I've described it as birthing a baby! First, you design, plan and create, then you wait through an incubation period. When I saw the Scrap and Stack in-person at NAFEM, I was overcome with emotion."

Acknowledging the demands of the normal workday, Harry says they carved out discussion and planning time where they could, such as during commutes, carpools and walking the dog. "If there is one thing I can say about us, if there is a better way of doing things, we want to make that happen," says Harry. The project was well worth the personal time and a terrific opportunity "to fuel our instincts to innovate."

## Spotlight: Tracy Hulett, Alaska Gateway School District



It might be hard for most of us to imagine living and working in the **Alaska Gateway School District (AGSD)**, which spans 28,000 square miles of very rural Alaska. Total student enrollment in the district is approximately 415 students, scattered among schools in seven communities. One site, with a PreK-12 enrollment of 10 students,

is accessible only by plane for seven months of the year. Now, try to imagine how you might grow and serve fresh produce for students almost *year-round*, right on school grounds, in Tok (rhymes with "oak"), a town about two hours from the Canadian border where winter temperatures can fall to -50°F.

AGSD Child Nutrition Coordinator **Tracy**



# Greenhouse



**Hulett** *could* imagine it, and that's why she is the inaugural winner of the **Arctic School Food Service Innovation Competition** sponsored by the **Alaska School Nutrition Association**. Key to her efforts is a district-owned and -operated greenhouse and hydroponics facility and the support of Greenhouse Manager Michelle Flagan.

"My job is to make food tastier and more visually appealing, so the kids eat more," says Hulett. "Kids eat with their eyes, and our kids are very picky. Initially, all I wanted was to add more color to make our salads more appealing."

Hulett came to AGSD three years ago when COVID forced a temporary closure of the Sourdough Campground & Café, a seasonal business she ran with her husband. She took her café experience and went to work as a cook for the school district, finding herself, a year later, heading up the school meals operation.

The high tunnel greenhouse had been established on the Tok School campus before her arrival, eight years earlier. It was designed

in part to redirect excess energy from the school's biomass heating system, while also growing produce items for meals served to students in Tok. Harvests were minimal, however, and the greenhouse would be shut down completely during the winter months. Once Hulett took on leadership of the child nutrition operation, she met with Flagan to discuss expansion efforts.

"As coordinator, I wanted this to become district-wide," she explains. Since school nutrition staff at each school travel to Tok to pick up food supplies, "Why not have containers of our produce ready for them?" Now, the greenhouse grows lettuce, celery, cucumbers, radishes, carrots, zucchini, cherry tomatoes, cabbage, kale, arugula and fresh herbs—and it's growing and harvesting these all year long.

Hulett and Flagan are excellent partners in deciding what to plant and what items to add to school lunch, and what it would take to provide produce to the FFVP and Summer programs. Flagan, in turn, is supported by two



# Greenhouse



employees who manage the day-to-day operations of the greenhouse and hydroponics building. Extra harvests are sold to the public, farmers' market-style, year round.

Secondary students can also take an elective science class that provides them with hands-on experience in every aspect of the growing



process, reports Hulett, adding that there's general interest in learning the nuts and bolts of greenhouse management. She gives Flagan full credit for creating a number of student engagement activities. For example, during the sun-shortened months, teachers are invited to bring students to the greenhouse for art and reading activities, taking advantage of the growing lights "so they get some vitamin D. I loved that idea!"

For Hulett, innovation is baked into the process of feeding kids, whether you are thinking through your next "big idea" or just thinking on your feet in a one-on-one exchange with a student. "Kids will walk up and without even knowing what you're planning to serve, will tell you they don't like it, even if they've never tried it," she laments. But it's all about a creative response. Her husband, who is now head cook for the district, was confronted by a student dressed as Spider Man who said he didn't like peas. "My husband said, 'Well that's how Spider Man got strong!' And this student took his peas, went to his seat and ate them all. That's innovation, too!"

After a whirlwind month—the Alaska SNA meeting, her award (which was voted by conference attendees) and not one but two state reviews—Hulett hasn't had too much time to consider her prize: a free trip (travel and registration) to SNA's Annual National Conference in Denver this summer. She'll be a first-timer, and she's eager to explore the Exhibit Hall to find menu items her students will be sure to love at first glance!

"I'm interested in menus and in versatility," Hulett explains. "I want to avoid getting into a rut. When I make the food more beautiful, when I make it tastier, our kids eat more. My goal is to always make these menus and recipes more enticing." **SN+**

*Christina Uticone is a freelance writer based in Houston and an SN Contributing Editor.*

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