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Interview with Ann Edwards

Ann D. Edwards
SC Mother of the Year Committee

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Winthrop University
South Carolina Mother of the Year Award Oral History Archives
Interview Transcript
Ann Edwards
Former First Lady of South Carolina
Member of the SC Mother of the Year Award Selection Committee
May 14, 2015

Dr. Disney: My name is Dr. Jennifer Leigh Disney and I am here on May 14, 2015 in the beautiful home of Ann Edwards to interview the former first lady of the great state of South Carolina, Mrs. Ann Edwards. How are you doing this morning?

Ann Edwards: Fine, and it's wonderful to have all of you here with us.

Dr. Disney: Thank you so much for inviting us into your home today. We're so excited to interview you in relation to the South Carolina Mother of the Year Award selection committee. We're going to start with a few questions about you, to learn a little bit about you, Ann. First question – I'm going to ask you to tell us when and where you were born and raised, and tell us a little bit about your family, education, and early childhood experiences.

Ann Edwards: Well, I was born in Edgefield, South Carolina. This was the home of my grandmother, well, two grandmothers. My mother came for a visit and I came early and so I was born there on November 15. It was rather chilly for a small newborn but the good Lord, I think, had a plan for me and so from there I moved to Lake Murray.

My father was an operation engineer for construction at Lake Murray and then on to Columbia and then Mr. Murray asked my dad to develop a plantation for him so we moved to a tremendous property, part of it is now Fort Jackson, it was near Eastover, South Carolina and we were there where he built a home, built a power plant, a lake, a sawmill, a coal storage, all these things back in the early '30s. And I went off, I started school in Eastover and then we moved to Columbia after that was completed. When you're the daughter of an engineer, I shouldn't tell this, but Dad was a yankee that finished at Yale but, you move a lot – the longest I ever went to a school was three or four years. So we came to Mount Pleasant after being in Columbia again and this was a wonderful place to come.

I was here in grammar school and it was a little village, little historic village, and you could ride a bicycle all around and you knew everybody. There were I think, close to 500 African-Americans and 500 whites and we all knew each other and it was just ideal. And I lived here until, I was here in 1941 when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor and things changed immediately for me and for our family. First of all, I lived next door, in the cottage next door and we had to have blackout because of the shipping. I will never forget one night I heard somebody, you could hear the oars in the water out in front of us, and I said, "Dad, there's somebody out in the water" and it was against the law and so we called the coast guard and it's interesting that after the World War, they said that the U boats sent people in frequently into the harbor, in the ground and my brother was at Clemson, he's five years my senior, and so he left Clemson to join the army and that April was a sad time for me because my mother died next door. She had rheumatic heart and we moved in October and moved to Columbia and Daddy was sent to Washington. Washington then was safe for young people and everybody wanted to do things for the war effort. So I joined the Junior Army Navy Gill organization which were the children of people who had been officers before and was in essence, a candy striper. And so low and behold, it infected me – I just loved it. And so my brother was with PAT and I joined the Cadet Nurse Corps and much to the chagrin of my father who had wanted me to go to college, everybody

wanted to be part of the situation so this really dates me and lets you know how far back I go. So I returned to Columbia and I went to the Columbia School of Nursing at Columbia Hospital that was affiliated with the university. After we graduated, we went year round, because they were trying to get nurses and there would be like class A, class B, and class C, and afterwards the war was over but there was a terrific polio epidemic and they had turned army camp, Camp Sutton in North Carolina into a polio hospital and so many of my class and I went to nurse polio and I did that for several epidemics and the last one, I was with my father in Florida and he said, "I've never asked you to do anything but I don't want you go this time." I had already signed up to go. His brother was terrifically crippled from polio and he said, "We've had one tragedy and I don't need another." And so I said, "I won't go" and the girl that took my place came home in an iron lung. So that would give you an idea of just what we were up against at that time. I met Jim in grammar school, in fact it was right up Venning Street. I was a highway patrol and I was very official and I think we may have had one car, two cars a day, I don't know, not that many...but we were childhood sweethearts and then when I went to Washington, we lost track and broke up. Jim was in Le Harve, he was too young to be in the service so he joined the merchant marines and he was loading things onto his ship, warbrides and equipment and my brother had a Jeep and he was wanting it loaded and they ran into each other and he said, "I want you to go see Ann, we don't like who she's dating." So, we got back together.

Dr. Disney: That's a great story. You segued right into my next question which is to tell us more about your young adult life and when you started your family.

Ann Edwards: Jim and I were married twelve days before he started dental school and at that time, South Carolina had no dental school so you had to get reciprocity in other states and Jim got reciprocity in Kentucky and he went to the University of Louisville Dental School and while we were there, I started out working in the operating room and Jim was studying hard and working in an anatomy lab and I got a job and ended up as assistant chief nurse of Louisville Regional Blood Center. It was a fabulous opportunity for me because I travelled all over Kentucky, in the mountains and the coal mines, all over in the bluegrass, and then I travelled to Indiana and I had had Jim stop when we went to Indiana, I said, "Jim, stop, I have to take a picture." It was this beautiful barn, lovely barn, you know in South Carolina we didn't have the resources to paint our barns. I've seen pictures of those in the storybook and this was the real thing. I can from Charleston and the rice culture and this was the corn culture in Indiana. I'd seen the horses and bluegrass and here was the corn culture. Big beautiful barns, and your importance was not who your parents were but how big a barn you had and how many livestock and this sort of thing and I just had a wonderful time. During the time of our junior year, our son Jim was born and he was a joy. We had such a good time and Jim graduated and held Jim Jr. and he had the cap on and it was just a wonderful new dimension to our family and we just enjoyed him so much and he was a good little fella, he didn't act like it at first but grew up to be a wonderful little fella, we just had a good time.

Dr. Disney: So tell me, you're already into this, tell me more about the early years of your marriage and the births of all of your children.

Ann Edwards: Well Jim, at that time you didn't get any credit for the fact that he had 36 months sea duty so Jim joined the Navy and we moved to Chincoteague, Virginia and he was in the naval air station there for two years and at that time, there were no dentists for fifty miles so Jim was allowed to practice after hours and it really was a wonderful, fun place because there was more hunting and fishing than you could ever imagine. Jim just thought he had been thrown in the briar patch, I mean it was fabulous and the people were so nice to us and we were there for

two years and when we got ready to leave, we went down to pay our utilities and they said, "You don't owe us anything." I tried to fill up with gas and they said, "Nope." They said, "Doc, you've been a part of our lives and you don't need to pay us anything." And he'd been involved with the Pony Penning, you know the swim from Assateague and the fire chief said, "C'mon Doc, you need to be part of this" and we, in essence, in the Navy and did all these things but we became part of the community and it was such a special time in our lives and then we moved to Philadelphia. We hadn't been there long and they had the biggest snow they'd ever had in their lives, I mean awful. We lived in the carriage house and I had a wonderful time with Jimmy, you know I had books over in the meadow and in the sand and in the sun and reading him these things and I would put him down and his snowsuit, you know the snow was so deep. We had had snow in Indiana when he went to kindergarten, but this was the real thing. We were there for a year when he was in the graduate medical school and then we went to Detroit where he did his residency. And my daughter said, Kathy was born in Detroit, she said, "Mother, who wants to tell anybody they were married in Detroit?" She never forgave me and we were surrounded by residents in housing and made lasting friends that we've kept through the years. We came home when Jim opened up his oral surgery in 1960 and we thought we thought were just going to be you know, just an ordinary dentist, and then he got involved with somebody named Barry Goldwater and we didn't know what a precinct was and the rest is history. You know, we went to Columbia and at that time you couldn't succeed yourself, it was sort of like Virginia for years, everybody in South Carolina was wonderful to me and we established a foundation to raised money to help with the furnishings of the Governor's mansion and had a first lady prayer retreat and it just was wonderful for all of us and most of our family was in college by that time.

Dr. Disney: What was it like being the first lady of South Carolina, could you tell us a little bit about that, what activities you were involved in and that kind of thing?

Ann Edwards: Naturally, none of the dental wives wanted to go to Columbia. And the former First Lady's staff were her friends so they were leaving and at that time, at the Governor's mansion, you had security and you had inmates from the Central Correctional Institute and I was a little wary because I had a sixteen year old daughter and there were no keys, no locks, and I was very apprehensive about it and they turned out to be wonderful. In fact I got jobs for them, in country clubs, they could serve a President, they were just so beautifully trained. And then we established, I went to the White House and found out about a session program on how you would label things and I found out how you would label articles, for example if I had this table in this room but then I took it in the other room, if someone came and asked, "Where is my table that I gave?" and you could look and say, "Well, we're using it now in the large drawing room." It was a learning experience for me, a marvelous learning experience. I had Boys State, I had the American Red Cross, the first few weeks we had something like 1,500 – 1,800 people through the Governor's mansion, either on a tour or for coffee, for a luncheon, for dinner, you know the Governor's mansion, it's a hotel, it's a restaurant, it's a historical house, it's all these things rolled into one and just think, I was given the opportunity to live there for four years and meet all these people. Jim said we would invite the senior citizens to come and they said 1,000 people would come. We had 5,000 people and it was pouring rain. So I said, "Jim, what are we gonna do?" and he said, "We're gonna walk in the rain." We walked out and talked, nobody left and nobody went home, they all stayed and we hugged and talked to everybody and they were just fabulous. I mean, it's their house. People don't realize that the Governor's mansion belongs to the people. We acquired another building, now it's a complex, Mrs. McNair acquired the Lace

House to the Governor's mansion, we acquired the Boston House so now it's a complex and we had national and international leaders there. As I said, it was a learning experience.

Dr. Disney: Wasn't your time in the Governor's mansion the time when you first became aware of the South Carolina Mother of the Year Award and the award committee?

Ann Edwards: It was, it was the first time they said, "You know, we've always entertained the Mother of the Year." Well, it was exciting. I mean, here the committee came and they said, "This is how you do it" and I said, "Fine, we'll take care of that" and it was wonderful, it was just perfectly marvelous to have them and the mothers. Jennifer, all of the mothers were remarkable women. They were women of substance, they had taught school, they were nurses, they were leaders, they were wonderful people and they were the nucleus of the family. You know, they were what held it all together and you could feel that when they came in the Governor's mansion. The children had so much pride to see their mothers so honored, I mean it was wonderful and the grandchildren were just hanging on you know, it was wonderful it was generational grace.

Dr. Disney: What does motherhood mean to you, Ann?

Ann Edwards: I really think that motherhood, now more than ever, the importance of holding the family together and instructing the family, the characteristics that you want to instill in these children, the love of education, the desire to exceed and when they don't exceed to put your arm around them and say it's alright, you know. Particularly in today's world, we need to gather our children, our whole family together and I can't overemphasize, my mother died when I was a little girl and I didn't have that and I think that's one reason that I stayed on and on and on the committee, I should have gotten off the committee a long time ago, but even when I was in Columbia, they touched my life. It's an unusual thing, they touched in different ways. I mean, one mother would bring these characteristics, all of them good, but they didn't act like they were perfect, do you understand? They were humble, remarkable women. I think they just touched the entire committee, you know it was a privilege. And I think that's so important now, to teach them about God and teach them about church and about the school, regardless what the church is, some faith – it's the basis that holds us together, faith. These children just bloom with that kind of nurturing. They are confident, they feel loved, they feel that they're important, that they are very much a part of the family unit and that's what we want to do. Each one of us somehow wants to feel like, "You know, I really belong and it's so important that I'm part of this family, they love me." It's love that's the basis for it all.

Dr. Disney: How did you first become a member of the Mother of the Year committee?

Ann Edwards: Well, I entertained them for four years and I must have done alright because I came home and in 1980, they called and asked me if I would like to be on the committee. I never hesitated, I said, "Absolutely, I'd love to be on that committee!"

Dr. Disney: And how long did you serve, how many years? You served until the rest—

Ann Edwards: I'm embarrassed, I've been on it ever since.

Dr. Disney: Until 2013 right? And still, today? The committee still meets today, right?

Ann Edwards: I should have gone a long time ago.

Dr. Disney: We're so glad you didn't. You've spoken about this some already but I was going to ask how did your membership on this committee impact you, your family, and your community?

Ann Edwards: I think that it gave me something that I had missed in my own life without having my mother alive – that I really saw motherhood in the finest way. And it had to, when you turn the pages of the this remarkable book which we would not have without Shirley and

Martha, I mean if I can say a few words here now they're both wonderful mothers, see? Here are wonderful mothers recognizing wonderful mothers, to think that they realize that we needed to put something together to go into your hands that Winthrop was wonderful enough to receive and honor it and realize the value of it. So they went to work and I mean they cleared the deck and can you imagine from January to May? And then Jennifer, it wasn't, you know you were there, I can see the tables right now with the linens on them with the rose and the book, what a gift to these women? And they did it. They did it, and it was the smartest thing we ever did, get them.

Dr. Disney: It was a beautiful tribute, as is the book. I want to switch gears and ask you some questions about today, about women and motherhood in today's context so let me start with this. What do you think are the most important issues facing women today?

Ann Edwards: Well obviously, the preservation of the family unit. I think that is the most, I mean they not only are giving love and sustaining these that they have and are responsible for these children, but they are molding the leaders of tomorrow. We're going to rely on them for leadership because they have been there to go help train those children.

Dr. Disney: Do you think women's work and women's roles as mothers are truly recognized by society and valued in importance?

Ann Edwards: Yes, yes I do. You know, our society is changing and our country is changing and because of it, more and more women are in the workforce and I think that they should have every consideration because they have two jobs, they're in the workforce having to bring home money but they're also at home and they're having to keep the home unit together and make the children feel like they're so important so these women today have a mighty job in front of them, it's not an easy job and we should give them every consideration.

Dr. Disney: It's tough right, to balance work at home as you said, really keeping the family together and working in the workforce. What issues did you face, with all of your activities and all of your work inside and outside the home and what issues do you think women face today in terms of balance, being able to balance those activities inside and outside the home?

Ann Edwards: I felt that a great deal of my life, I tried to be a partner with my husband. And it has required me to be very active in that partnership. In retrospect, I wish I had spent more time with my family. I tried to balance that out, first in helping to earn a living and then, as we moved around, I learned a lot when Jim was in the Navy. We were on a naval air station and we had dinner one night and the next night, one of the planes went down. I think there were twenty-two children who lost their dads and it was devastating because it was a small unit and the next day, every plane was in the air and every Navy wife that I knew was there, beside those people who had lost their husbands and they were cleaning the diapers, getting the food on the table, it was the most heroic thing that I had ever seen. I learned about courage then and I wish that our people who recognize what our people in the armed forces are giving today, there are things that they face that are just unbelievable.

Dr. Disney: That's powerful, powerful story. Do you think women today face issues that you faced, in terms of balancing work and family, home, activities in the home and activities outside the home?

Ann Edwards: They need more consideration than we can give them. You know, this is so true because I know that you all see people who may be here but their families may be in Oklahoma or they may be in Arkansas and they don't have the family together like we did and things. Jim's family lived nearby but that means so much to have them there again, to ripple and this is so important if we can, and I need to practice what I'm preaching, because we need to look out for

these young people that haven't had any sleep and taking care of the baby all night and have got to go to work and the babysitter's not coming, you know they just face many challenges.

Dr. Disney: What does feminism mean to you? When you heard the word "feminism," what does that mean to you?

Ann Edwards: Well, feminism to me means equal opportunity, equal pay – it means standing in the workforce shoulder to shoulder. I think that because you're a woman doesn't mean you don't deserve what you're working for and how well you do it, you should have equal pay, as I said before. Now this is a kind of many splendored thing that we're talking about. We, as women, need to be careful because through the years and through the ages particularly in our country, we have been looked up to and we've been honored, the fact that we honor the Mother of the Year in this country is an example. We like the fact that we are honored, that we are treated with a great deal of respect. My generation of men and women recognized the value of women and they opened doors for us, pulled chairs out for us, this sounds like a little thing but it's a kind, curtesy that they're saying, "You deserve this, I want to honor you this way" and although I want opportunities to be the same, financially and everything, I don't want to step on men, I think that they're struggling too, they're trying to support a family. And so we should honor them to have a mutual respect at the same time.

Dr. Disney: That's beautiful, I agree one hundred percent. Do you consider yourself a feminist?

Ann Edwards: I don't know, do you think I'm one?

Dr. Disney: I think you're one, but what do you think?

Ann Edwards: I've never considered myself one, I'm just Ann.

Dr. Disney: I want to throw it open - does anyone in the room have any questions for Ann and I want to throw it open to see if Ann has any questions for me or for us?

Ann Edwards: I would like to end this way, the good Lord has walked with me for many years and I've had so many opportunities that I really wasn't, you know I've never been in the Governor's mansion but once. Going to Washington, I knew I was going to get lost and I wasn't and then the opportunity to be at the medical university was, to see things grow and to see things change and see the wonderful people there and their dedication – it's not about Ann, it really isn't about Ann. It's about people, when you think of South Carolinians, when I think of President Reagan, and then I think of the medical university and what they were doing and what lives they were saving – it's not about us, do you understand? But I just think the Lord walked with me in all of that and it's been a wonderful journey.

Dr. Disney: You have had so many wonderful experiences and wonderful opportunities. I hate to end and I'd like to ask you more questions about what it was like during the time when your husband was Secretary of Energy and the Reagan years. What was that experience like?

Ann Edwards: There was nobody like Reagan. Nobody like Reagan, you know what a privilege. He knew what he wanted done and he asked you to do it and now I think, for the most part, his cabinet tried very diligently to do it, when you think a man like that pulled the Berlin Wall down.

Dr. Disney: Those were amazing times. And then the medical university, how many years –

Ann Edwards: Seventeen.

Dr. Disney: Seventeen, that's what I thought, seventeen years.

Ann Edwards: He resigned, it said 1999, but actually walked out the door in 2000. But, we continued to raise money over for them after, you know so much of our finance is not supplied by the state, you have to raise money and Jim was good at that.

Dr. Disney: Would he have wanted to be governor a second term if he would have had the chance?

Ann Edwards: I don't think that he looked at things as "would have", he just sort of did what it was. When he went in, we were very much in the red financially and he left a surplus when he left, a big surplus. Didn't raise taxes but he cut our budget right away and he did the Education Equal Opportunity Act and there were things that meant so much that he did but I don't think Jim ever looked at, "could I stay," I mean he knew what the rules were.

Dr. Disney: Of all the jobs he held and all the jobs you held, do you think that he had a favorite position? Did you have a favorite position for him or of your own positions that you know?

Ann Edwards: I think that he did things as he came to them and he had an ability of surrounding himself with very good capable people and he always said, "I got the credit but they made me look good."

Dr. Disney: Is there anything else you want to share with us about your many roles and your many activities, many favorite roles or activities that you've participated in through the years?

Ann Edwards: There's one thing I'd like to say. This committee has been going on for years and years and years, it's a unique group of women and they all bring different treasures to the table, different qualities and I think that it's an unusual thing that they have, do you know how you get in, you have to advertise in the paper, do you know that?

Dr. Disney: No, tell me.

Ann Edwards: You put the notice in the newspaper, "Does anyone want to recommend a Mother of the Year?" but it has to be a church, a committee, a group of people, and then they send in these recommendations and the committee looks at them and says, "Well, they're all wonderful" and then we tear our hair out and say, "This one's the best!" You know, it's hard to make a decision and it isn't hastily and there's much looking at it and reviewing it and what the mother's done and children have done and then selecting. But this is going on all of these years and the girls of Columbia, they don't get any money for it, they just get the pleasure of selecting and it's interesting because they always say, "Oh, I wish we could get them all."

Dr. Disney: How many have you had to look at in any given year, how many nominations?

Ann Edwards: Well, it varies.

Dr. Disney: Must have been tough, tough decisions. It sounds like, and I know from experience from your work with Martha and Shirley, it sounds like there's a real bond that's been formed among the committee members. Can you talk a little bit about what that is, what causes that?

Ann Edwards: We've had three national? – four national –

Dr. Disney: National mothers, from South Carolina? And you said all those women are remarkable but do you remember some of the stories of some of the women that you chose?

Ann Edwards: One of them was Clemey Weber, who was from Orangeburg. She was an African-American lady, brilliant, wonderful, just gives me cold chills. Then you have Nancy Hulk, she had so many children and she went back to school and got her degree, got a law degree, I mean you just can go on and on, give me some others.

Unknown Voice: May Coker, Betty Jean McGregor.

Ann Edwards: Yeah, I talked to Betty Jean the other day. And this committee has decided that Mothers' Day, they would send a report on each mother and they wanted to, they want to keep in touch with each other and so we all sent Mothers' Day cards and sent this report of what was happening to each Mother that was living and it was beautifully done.

Dr. Disney: I can't thank you enough for your time, Mrs. Ann Edwards. Ladies, do you have anything you want to add, anything you want to say?

Unknown Voice: I think I want to ask something about nursing.

Unknown Voice #2: Yeah, 'cause Ann's been very involved.

Dr. Disney: Do you want to speak a little bit about your time as a nurse and nursing and that experience?

Ann Edwards: Oh, I love nursing – I think I got the best training in the world. And I liked action, I liked the operation room and the emergency room and bedside, I loved the bedside, but I was a little hesitant about medicine because mother had been so sick that I liked things that you could, you know like delivering babies, taking care of young children, I think that it really afforded me experience that I needed as a mother, but there's something about helping somebody that is very ill that is so satisfying. A lot of it, you bring home but it's a rewarding profession and I am very involved with the college of nursing now and have been with them since Jim was at the medical university. We have gone online because there are people all over South Carolina that are nursing and are supporting their family but they'd like to upgrade their education, maybe they'd like a Master's or a Doctorate of Nurse Practitioner but they can't leave their family or their job so our dean went online so that these people that are nurses can upgrade their degrees and US News and World Report brought their report out just last month and we're number one in the nation in technology and education, in upgrading it – number one in the nation, it's just incredible what they're doing and she's expanding her programs and people are joining, it's just working so beautifully and I'm so proud of them. We've recently restored the college of nursing building which was terrible and just this past December, they cut the ribbon to get back in and it is glorious, so wonderful.

Dr. Disney: Well I just want to tell you what an honor it has been for me to get to meet you, to get to interview you. What you and your husband have contributed to this great state, to this great nation, to your families, it's really remarkable, to the Mother of the Year committee, to all the women in this room, thank you so much for what you've done, your legacy of you and your husband and your family lives on.

Ann Edwards: You're very kind. When I look around and see all the wonderful examples, I appreciate your kindness but I don't feel that I have a legacy and stuff. It's been a privilege and an opportunity and I've enjoyed it. I've been involved in too many things.

Dr. Disney: Thank you so much.