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Interview with Mary Kate Brearley Glasser

Mary Kate Brearley Glasser
SC Mother of the Year 2008

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Winthrop University
South Carolina Mother of the Year Award Oral History Archives
Interview Transcript

Mrs. Mary Kate Brearley Glasser
Winner of the 2008 SC Mother of the Year Award
June 24, 2015

Dr. Disney: Good morning. My name is Dr. Jennifer Leigh Disney and I am here with Mrs. Mary Kate Brearley Glasser, the South Carolina Mother of the Year from 2008. We are so honored to have you with us.

Mary Kate Brearley Glasser: Thank you, I'm very honored to be here and very proud to be the South Carolina Mother of the Year.

Dr. Disney: So proud. Let's take a few minutes and have you just begin by telling us when and where you were born and raised and a little bit about your early childhood.

Mary Kate Brearley Glasser: I'd like to tell you about my two, very special grandmothers. Alice Caldwell Bell and Katherine Edwards Rogers. I'm named for Katherine, the Kate comes from her. I was born, my mother was Ayola Mary Rogers from Marion, South Carolina. When she finished college, she went to Guthriesville in York County to teach and there she met and fell in love and married Caldwell Bell, who was my father. Because Mother was from Marion, she went back home to have me so I was born in Florence, at McLeod's infirmary, on September 3, 1925. Then of course, we went back to Guthriesville and had a wonderful life in a village, a farming village. My daddy had a store and my granddaddy had the depot and it was just a wonderful community. The main part of the community was the Bethesda Presbyterian Church. There, I got my spiritual background. I loved going to Sunday School, Vacation Bible School, Worship, picnics, it was there that I learned the catechism. I learned that God made me and that He wanted me, He loved me and wanted me to glorify him with my life. That has been my faith. When I was two and half years old, my brother was born. We lived in Guthriesville, well go back a little bit, I joined the church. I wanted to join the church early and they wouldn't let me until I was nine years old, I made my profession of faith at Bethesda Presbyterian Church. My brother was born when I was two and a half years old but when I was ten years old, we lost our father. After a very difficult year with Mother and the two children alone, she decided to take us back to Marion to live. So we lived in my old, my grandmother's old home. I loved Marion and that's where I finished high school. I was, I loved school, always did. In high school, I was editor of the high school paper, I was Winthrop's Miss High Miss, I was on the student council. During that time, we moved from my townhouse, my grandmother's home, out to the farm and we could rent the house in Marion. Times were hard, we were getting through the depression and the war was coming on. I drove every day from the farm out four miles from Marion into high school. When I was four years old, I visited my Aunt Margaret's classroom and I knew right then that I wanted to be a teacher. Then, everywhere I went, I wanted to teach. I taught my dolls. I taught the little children on the farm. On Sunday afternoon, we had a Sunday School class. I can hear them right now singing "Jesus Loves Me." Then we moved to Marion and I was a member of the Marion Presbyterian Church. I knew I wanted to be a teacher and so it was very appropriate that I was choose Winthrop, it was the school for teachers then. I was planning to major in English until a friend of mine said, "You need to major in Business and then you can always get a job if you can't teach English." And so I busied myself and got a scholarship to Winthrop. I majored in Business, B.S. in Commerce they called it then, now it would Business Education. Did my

student teaching at Rock Hill High School and just loved it. I loved Winthrop and was a freshman counselor. I was in the Senate. I was Chairman of the Worship for the college, in the YWCA. I had charge of any prayer services and blessings and I was asked one time to speak at the "high why" of North and South Carolina over in Johnson Hall. I had already made up my mind that I was going to be a teacher in the church. So I had already applied at the Presbyterian School of Christian Education in Richmond and had received a scholarship to teach typing at the school. I had told the registrar's office not to recommend me for a job because I was going on to school. But when I finished my talk with the students in Johnson Hall that day, the marshal came up to me with a note – "Go to the registrar's office." So immediately, I went to the registrar's office to tell them there had been a mistake. They were not supposed to recommend me for a teaching job because I was going on the Christian school, Christian education. And I wanted, really, to be a missionary to the Congo or be a DCE in a church. Everywhere I went, I helped with the Sunday school. In Marion, I helped with the Sunday school that we had out at the mill. In Winthrop, I helped with the Sunday school at the Red River, I think it's the river school, near Rock Hill. But anyway, when I got out to meet this man that had come to interview me, Mr. Keller, and I said, "I'm just so sorry but this is a mistake. I am not planning to teach now." And he was a very persistent man. He said, "Well you can wait for two years and then go to Richmond." I said, "No, I already have my scholarship." He just kept telling me how wonderful Allendale was, I'd never heard of it. I was from Marion, I went to school in Rock Hill, didn't know where Allendale was. He said, "It's just a nice little town. We have a wonderful school, we have good salaries, small classes, wonderful parents. You've just got to come teach in Allendale." I kept saying no, but finally Mr. Keller said, "Well, would you just come visit one weekend? We will invite you and give you a nice place to stay and let you see our school and meet the community." Well, I had always believed that God had a plan for my life. When I was at Winthrop, I wrote an essay, the professor had us write an essay on what we wanted our lives to be, and this is what I wrote May the first, 1934: I want my career to consist of teaching in the Church as well as in the public schools. It will be a career that can be followed all my life. I plan to travel in Europe. I want to marry a minister. I hope to become a mother, still teaching in one way or another, and my life will be grand. I read and studied and prayed and in the Scripture in Jeremiah, I read, "For I know the plans I have for you, declared the Lord. Plans to prosper you and not to harm you. Plans to give you hope and a future." And God had a stronger plan than I did. And I went to Allendale and had a wonderful time. Enjoyed it so much and told Mr. Keller that I would come to be the business teacher in the high school there. Told Richmond school that I would delay my coming for my Christian education certificate. I just loved Allendale and it was just like a big, happy family. I, of course, thought a good teacher should visit in all the homes and should go to church. I joined the Allendale Presbyterian Church and had my Sunday school class there. A young minister from the seminary was the supply pastor and came every two weeks for services. I won't go into it, but we became very good friends. After two years, we were married. Then, I had to stop teaching. The rules for the district were once a teacher was married, she's no longer employed. They wanted her full time attention in the schools, I guess. But this is interesting. I told the board when I resigned, that I was not going to be married until October of the following year and the board said, "Well since you started as a single person, you can finish the year as a married teacher." And that I did. While we were in Allendale, Cecil had four churches in Barnwell, Williston, Allendale, and Boiling Springs, a little country church. We didn't have enough young people in any church to have youth group activities, but I suggested that we combine them and form and meet once a month, in each church. All the young people

enjoyed that and loved it and when I see them today, they still remind me of the group and the good times we had. After I couldn't teach anymore, since I had a business degree, I worked for two lawyers as a substitute really, as they needed me to fill in when they needed help. Sometimes, I transcribed divorce cases. I got five dollars for each case. Our first son was born while we were in Allendale, he was born in Augusta, because we didn't have a hospital in Allendale. He is William DuBois Brearley, born in June 1950. After we left Allendale, we went to Ninety-Six, a little town near Greenwood. I cried all the way, I had had my first career, my first home, met my husband, had my first baby. I just loved Allendale, but I promised to go where he went. We moved to Ninety-Six and I enjoyed it, but I didn't get out as much. I helped in the Church and I was a member of the music club and I had good neighbors and good friends and our second son was born while we were there. 18 months later, Robert Montgomery Brearley was born in Greenwood, one of the first born in the hospital there. After three years, a pulpit committee came from Columbia to Ninety-Six to ask my husband to take a job at a church in Columbia and I did not want to go. I was a country girl and I thought I might have to wear shoes in the city. I didn't think the city was a place to raise children, but don't you know, God won again. We moved to Columbia and Cecil was the founder, the first pastor of Covenant Presbyterian Church in Columbia. We enjoyed that. We lived in house next door to the church and one day, an elder came to the our house and said that the kindergarten director had resigned to take a better job and this was in August and they needed a director of the kindergarten immediately. I had a teacher's certificate, being in high school, but I could play the piano and they wanted me. I was felt that if I were asked to do something, it was a calling from God. I thought I should take that job. Since I was next door to the church and it was just half day. So, I did. By then, I think I had a little girl. Her was Margaret, for Aunt Margaret, Margaret Rodgers Brearley, and she was in the kindergarten, but since I was a high school teacher, I knew I had to get early childhood training. I felt like if I was going to do a job, I should be prepared. So I started taking courses at the university in Elementary, just every now and then, I would go to take a course. While I was at the kindergarten at the church one day, a lady came from the orthopedic school in Columbia and said that I had been recommended to her to teach kindergarten at the orthopedic school. And I said, "But I'm not certified." Well, you can get a temporary certificate and then get your certificate. Well that was all right. So we were leaving the church, my husband was taking a job as district executive secretary, it was sort of a district job with all of the churches of Congaree Presbyterian. We had to buy a home and we thought it was best for me to go ahead and take a job and I did and still took courses at the university from time to time to get my certificate. Then, I never applied for a job, I can't believe it. Taught all those years and never applied for a job. Anyways, then the district called me in one day and said, "We want you to go to the hearing handicap school and be head teacher there." I said, "Well I know anything about teaching the deaf." And they said, "Well you'll be supervisor and you'll be in charge of the school and just teach half a day." So, I went. I taught there as head teacher for two years. There were some years in between, I think I took a leave of absence one time from the orthopedic school, but I went back, they came to me and asked me to come back. Anyways, I was at the school for the deaf, I was there for two years when they called me into the office again. I thought what could they want with me? They said the state has passed the law that all children go to public school. And so our happy time center, near where I lived, was going to be made into a public school. It was a little private school that the parents could transport the children. The teachers were not certified, they didn't have buses. Parents could pay for this school. Anyways, I prayed about it and thought about and that was a demanding job, but I took

it. I thought well maybe God has a plan for me and this school. So I went and I'm still going to the university now, taking courses in special education. I just couldn't believe, I don't believe I would have done it if I had known how difficult it was. I had to tell my teachers that they could no longer teach there unless they became certified. We had to get buses, because parents had taken their children before. Now we had children off the streets, ages five to sixteen and I had to tell the wonderful volunteers in the district that the junior women's club couldn't teach anymore because they weren't certified. We had a lot of work to do, had to write a curriculum. There was not a curriculum for special children then. This was really pioneering. After two years, we just outgrew little happy time center, so the district said they will take the older children and put them in an old, closed hospital. And I said that I will stay here with the younger ones because that was where my office was. Jim Bagnel was the head teacher there. We were just head teachers then, we weren't principals. After two years, no, after one year, he was over there two years, the district called me and said they were going to put me in a district building, in a school building. So I was on a committee that would suit my children. We found Fairwall Elementary School, that had been closed. We moved the older children there for one year and the next year, mine came, the younger ones. That is the first time that I applied for a job and they said, "We're going to advertise for a principal of Fairwall." They picked three people and I did apply, they asked me why did I want to apply and I told them it was because they were my children. Anyways, they called me at 10:30 one night after a board meeting to tell me I had been elected principal of Fairwall School. Really, it was called center then because it wasn't a regular elementary school. That building was in bad need of repairs, had to paint, had to get heating and air. It was a tremendous job and to find special ed teachers was an answered prayer. I would pray that a law student would come in from Mississippi and had a wife that could teach special ed. Anyway, we had a very wonderful school and wrote our curriculum and many, many visitors from other schools were coming to see what we were doing at Fairwall. It was, I was just so proud and the district was so supportive, they said, "Anything you want, we will get you." The superintendent and a board member came one day and they visited and when they left, they said, "What do you want?" and I said, "Well we need an activities building" and kind of laughed, because I was being facetious. When they left, they said, "Well you will get your activities building." They built a beautiful gym with classrooms and bathrooms and we used that building so much, it was just wonderful. They loved coming to our graduations and our children were so special. Back then, people didn't really appreciate special education like they do today. When people would ask me what I taught and I would say special ed, they'd say, "Oh," like you can't do anything else. But I went to my bible and Jesus said, "And as much as you do it, unto the least of these my brethren, you do it unto me." I wanted those children to have everything the Brearley children had. We even flew to Charlotte on a fieldtrip. You had to fight for them, because I saw an ad that Eastern airlines was giving a special rate to seniors and so, I called and got tickets for eight of my seniors to go to Charlotte, to fly to Charlotte. And when I went down to pick up the tickets, they asked me how old the students were and I said, "Twenty and twenty-one." They had lengthened the age of the students, I had them from four to twenty-one and my seniors were twenty and twenty-one. And they said, "We're very sorry, but we can't give you tickets because they're adults now. They're too old to be seniors in high school." I said, "But this is the law in South Carolina. And my children deserve this senior privilege." They wouldn't hear to it, so on the way back to school, I asked my secretary to take this letter to Frank Bielman, I think was his name, and I wrote the president of Eastern Airlines and told him that my children needed that field trip. In three days I got a call to come pick up the tickets. But, and I loved my children, we

had a wonderful school, but then after eleven years, I retired, but with a certificate to teach elementary, high school, trainable, profound administration. My supervisor at the university said I should take enough certification for administration too, so I could be principal. So then, one night after I had retired, I thought I was all through, I got a call from Columbia College, "Is your certificate still good? We need you to come supervise clinical students." And I did and I enjoyed that. I loved teaching anything from kindergarten to college, I would love, and in church. Anywhere I could teach.

Dr. Disney: What an amazing, I mean your life experience, that testimony from teaching your kids to teaching every age – kindergarten to adult, special ed, high school, principal, and you went where you were called. You didn't apply for jobs, you were called.

Mary Kate Brearley Glasser: I never dreamed I would be doing something like that, never dreamed I could do something like that. Only with the grace of God could I, because I prayed so much. Just prayed so much.

Dr. Disney: How did you balance all of those wonderful career opportunities with raising your children, how did you balance being a wonderful mother and working inside the home to being a wonderful teacher with all these kids outside the home, was that difficult?

Mary Kate Brearley Glasser: No, it was so natural. I loved my children wherever they were and they helped me. We helped each other. I was going to school, I was working. They were going to school, they were working. We had so much fun, we had such a good time and I had such good children. They were all so smart and so caring and so loving. When we brought the little girl home, my second son ran out to the car. The children couldn't visit me in the hospital so they hadn't seen the little girl. Little Bob ran out and opened the door to the car and no seatbelts or anything, I was holding her in my arms and he said, "Oh Mommy, now we have a baby lady!" And she's always been our baby lady. One day, I heard her whimpering, I knew it was time to feed her. I went to the bathroom to wash my hands and I looked down and Bob had taken that little few weeks old baby in his arms like this and I nearly fainted but I didn't want to hurt him. So I said, "Oh Bob" and he knew I was distressed and he said, "But Mama, her's crying." He was taking care of her. They all loved each other and they helped. We had a son and another son, all the '50s, I was having Brearleys – Bill in '50, Bob in '51, Margaret in '55, and John in '59. They helped each other, Bob never had a new coat because he always wore Bill's but he never complained that his wasn't new. He was so proud to be in his big brother's coat. You know, a positive attitude goes a long way. The children loved me and they helped me and I had to get up at 4:30 in the morning to study, because at night I was with the children or too tired. Every day, I planned a time to be with each child alone and I was a great believer in all the children being together with me. We always had a warm breakfast together. We ate at home, we played at home, we had little league ball games, we had scouts, the boys were Eagle Scouts and then it was time to go to college. In 1972, I finished my Master's at the university. Bill finished his Bachelor of Science at Presbyterian College and Margaret finished high school. So we were all helping each other and the children learned to work, to share, to save, and to be thankful for what they had. We didn't have everything given to us, we had to work and help and those things can't be bought. Now, let's see, where did I go from college. I was going to tell you that three of the three sons that went to Presbyterian College graduate Summa Cum Laude. And Margaret finished Winthrop in 3 years, Magna Cum Laude.

Dr. Disney: Wow, you must be so proud.

Mary Kate Brearley Glasser: I am so thankful, but it was God's grace. They learned to be thankful for what they had and to work and to help each other and we were always faithful to the church. We were always in worship and we always said our prayers in worship at home.

Dr. Disney: Let me ask you this. Tell me, what does motherhood mean to you?

Mary Kate Brearley Glasser: When Bill was born, I just hear the words of Scripture saying, "Take this child and raise it from me." I was thrilled to have a son, it changed my life completely to have a baby, but I always had a responsibility for training that child, not only for this life, but for eternity. We were always very close, we prayed with the children and we worked with the children. Motherhood made me appreciate my mother more because she was a wonderful mother. And when I started out by telling you my grandmothers, I didn't really finish. I wanted to tell you about Katherine that I'm named for, had nine children. One died in infancy, but her husband died I think in his fifties. But she sent all eight children to college, I thought that was amazing. And then, three went to service in World War II and one was killed in France, so she was the first gold star mother, but I thought a remarkable woman. Very spiritual. My other grandmother was too and I had a wonderful background.

Dr. Disney: I see now why you were named the South Carolina Mother of the Year.

Mary Kate Brearley Glasser: Why?

Dr. Disney: Your life experience, I mean, tell us what that meant. What did that mean to you to be named the South Carolina Mother of the Year, what was that experience like in your award winning year?

Mary Kate Brearley Glasser: Well it was the greatest honor I ever had, I think, I'll say that. It was amazing, I was surprised, I was overwhelmed. But then I thought it was a responsibility, to represent the mothers of the state of South Carolina that I loved, I've always been here. I've never been anywhere else, lived anywhere else. It was such a joy and so much happiness. I wanted my children to be close to me, to each other, of course first of all to the Lord. They all were very active in the church and love each other and help each other and to serve the community, like good scouts and good leaders. They were leaders in their schools and leaders in the church and God just blessed me with such good children and I give him the credit and I give them the credit of working hard and serving their communities. Now, you want me to tell you what they do now?

Dr. Disney: I would love to hear that.

Mary Kate Brearley Glasser: We came from a family of ministers and Bill thought perhaps he should become a minister. But when he was at Presbyterian College, they realized his love for science and so he majored in biology, I think, but anyways he went on to medical school and has served as a doctor, physician, in Lexington, for many years. I can't believe he's now retired. Bob went to Presbyterian College and decided he was going to be a teacher, so he went to University of South Carolina for his Master's, I don't remember now what Bob's Master's was in, English I guess, or history? But anyways, he felt the call for the ministry and he went to Union Theological Seminary in Richmond. When he finished, he got a fellowship to study in Scotland, so he went to New College in Edinburgh. Margaret wanted to be a teacher and she went to Winthrop and John wanted to, felt the call to the ministry too. He visited Bob and he wanted to go to the same seminary. My husband had gone to Columbia Seminary in Decatur and he really wanted the boys to go there and that was sad for him, but we had to decide that the boys were doing the going this time and he'd had his. So Bob would go to Union and he loved the library there and John went to visit him and they are so much alike and John then felt the call to ministry and went to the Union Seminary and when he graduated, got the same fellowship. Bob had had a

rural church for five years, had used the scholarship within five years. So when John finished and got it, they went together to Edinburgh and that was so nice that they could be in school together in Scotland. But Bob is now the pastor of the St. Simons Presbyterian Church in St. Simons, Georgia and John is pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Myrtle Beach, where his grandfather founded that church in 1929.

Dr. Disney: Unbelievable.

Mary Kate Brearley Glasser: It is unbelievable, isn't it? Interesting, interesting. Margaret is principal in Lexington and this is the second school that she has founded and become principal of.

Dr. Disney: What a family of educators, Christian education, I mean all kinds. You must be so proud.

Mary Kate Brearley Glasser: Just amazing. But I had ten wonderful grandchildren. And I want to tell you who they are. I cannot remember their birthdates, but I remember the chronological years. The chronological ages, they know which finger she has, each one has a finger. This is James, James finished Georgia Tech in engineering and is now in business. This is Will, he finished medical school, then went into cardiology and then went into interventionist. So he is now a cardio-logical interventionist in Lexington. Jenny is a physician's assistant at the Moore clinic. Let me see, have I got it right? No, I left out Davey. It's James, Will, Davey, and Davey is a lawyer in Rome, Georgia. And Jenny is with Moore clinic. And then Meg you met here. And Hannah is a nurse practitioner with an orthopedic group in Greenville. Kate, my namesake, finished the University of Georgia and in journalism, which she went into, went to the seminary and graduated as a minister. And then Michael is finishing Vanderbilt Law School. Then Lauren has finished university law school and she lives in Myrtle Beach and Caroline is a student at Furman. And then there are ten great-grandchildren.

Dr. Disney: Oh my goodness.

Mary Kate Brearley Glasser: It's amazing. God's blessings never cease.

Dr. Disney: So blessed.

Mary Kate Brearley Glasser: Yes, they are. And the children were older when they married and had their children, so their children are young. All of them are under five or four years old. We have Bennett and Walker and Claire. This is Jack, this is Ben, and another one's coming in October. William, Ella, and but anyway, the most wonderful part of it all is they all belong to me.

Dr. Disney: That's right. Ten grandchildren, ten great-grandchildren, you run out of fingers! I want to ask you two more questions. Let me just ask you this, what do you think are the most important issues facing women today. I mean, you've it all, you've outside the home, you've worked inside the home, you've raised a generation, what do you think of the women today and the issues they're facing. What do you think those are?

Mary Kate Brearley Glasser: Well one thing I think is important is that so many of our young people graduate with debt and so many of our young people, I know there's many who don't have a lot, but there's some who have too much and they want more. They go into debt to get more and I really feel like debt is a real problem and so many of our young women think they have to work to pay the debts and that makes it hard on the home. I'm so distressed about the breakdown of the family, with the violence, the divorce rate, society's just changing and the family is not going to be the strong. Our country was founded by strong families and the children are losing that security. I think it's important that these mothers do without a lot of things to stay with their children, especially young children. Young children need their mothers at home and if

they could at least wait until the children are older to start back to school or to work, I think television is a bad influence on our families and our children. I feel like sometimes we're just too busy with other things that we're not taking time for our children, it was important for me and mine to get together and to belong, they didn't have to go searching somewhere else, they were always welcomed and wanted at home, and their friends too. You can't know your children if you're not with them. I think that we're so busy now.

Dr. Disney: Well said.

Mary Kate Brearley Glasser: I don't know if I'm saying everything I'm thinking or not.

Dr. Disney: Last question, what does feminism mean to you?

Mary Kate Brearley Glasser: Well I really don't know what feminism is because it can be different things. I consider myself a Southern lady and I demand respect and I want every woman to be treated with respect. If there's a job to be done and a woman can do it, I think she should be given the opportunity and she should be given the pay that that job offers. I don't think she should be denied pay because she is a woman, I think she should get the job. I think if we hadn't had women to fight for women, we wouldn't even be voting today, but I don't like it in the political sense when I'm having rallies for women and all that, I don't know if that's what feminism means. I just think women should have the opportunity to give their service and their talents as they're called to do and paid adequately for it.

Dr. Disney: I think what you said is beautiful. You described yourself as a Southern lady and feminism is about demanding respect, and giving women opportunities, including equal pay for their work and the right to vote. If that's what feminism is, do you consider yourself a feminist?

Mary Kate Brearley Glasser: Amen. I am.

Dr. Disney: Amen to that, I agree.

Mary Kate Brearley Glasser: I think I am a feminist, because I believe in standing up for women's rights.

Dr. Disney: Well said.

Mary Kate Brearley Glasser: I think God has a plan and a purpose for all of us and we have our children and then sometimes when our children are gone or older, we can have other responsibilities, I haven't even mentioned the fact that I have enjoyed being in other organizations, besides the church and the family. I'm a member of Delta Kappa Gamma, national state president, and well, Presbyterian, president for the women of the church. Whenever they called me, they worked.

Dr. Disney: It's clear, whenever you get the call, you respond. You are such an amazing role model for women. Congratulations on being the South Carolina Mother of the Year, you're an amazing role model to all of us and the future generations of women who will watch your interview and learn from you in this state and beyond and I cannot thank you enough for giving us your time today.