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Interview with Mary Carolyn Watson

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SC Mother of the Year 1986

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

Mary Carolyn Watson

Winner of the 1986 South Carolina Mother of the Year Award

May 14, 2015

Dr. Disney: Good afternoon. My name is Dr. Jennifer Leigh Disney and I am honored to interviewing Mrs. Mary Carolyn Watson – 1986 winner of the South Carolina Mother of the Year Award. Thank you for being with us here today, for letting us interview you.

Mrs. Watson: Well thank you for asking us and having us here.

Dr. Disney: I'm honored to have this conversation. Let me ask you, why don't you just start by telling us when and where you were born and raised and then tell us maybe a little bit about your family, your education, and your early childhood experiences?

Mrs. Watson: Well, I was born in Baton Rouge, Louisiana on August 24, 1931. My father had graduated from West Point and being an army man, his father had an accident and he did get back to Bamberg, for which I'm grateful because he met my mother there. Then he, after his father was headed for recuperating, we moved around quite a bit and so I was an army brat. When he went back in the service full time was right before World War II so during the time he was in training and from post to post, we moved quite a bit. We came back, he went overseas in 1943, January '43 and we moved back to Bamberg and we've been there ever since. I finished high school in Bamberg and then went to Columbia College and studied there. When I finished with a Music Education major, I taught in the pre-college department at Columbia College for three years. I can look back and see God's hand all the way through, through the time. At the second year I was teaching, I felt like I wanted to go into music therapy and the only place that they had a music therapy program that was recommended by my teachers at Columbia College was, I believe in Philadelphia, it was up there, up north and I was making plans to go and my mother had a stroke. I decided against leaving, I wanted to stay near her. Then, when I came back, my husband, future husband, had come to Bamberg in 1954 as a young doctor and we got together.

Dr. Disney: So tell me about some, you've already told me a little bit about your young adult life and music education and before - I was going to ask you how you met your husband - before we go there, tell me about some of your dreams, goals, and aspirations as a young woman before you were married.

Mrs. Watson: Well, I really had a heart. I had so many people in my life who inspired me that I wasn't always quite sure what I wanted to do because they did all different things. I did go into music, for years I said I was going to Lander College because that's where my mother went and my sister went but my music teacher in Bamberg was very much in favor of Mrs. Margaret Richards at Columbia College and very highly recommended so that's where I went and studied with her. I just thought I would have wanted to teach and wanted to teach piano because I had enjoyed it so much and I thought those coming along would enjoy it too.

Dr. Disney: Did you end up becoming a piano teacher?

Mrs. Watson: Yes.

Dr. Disney: How many years did you teach piano?

Mrs. Watson: Well I did the three years in the pre-college at Columbia College and then when we married in 1956, we hoped and prayed for children and we had six and I did not teach until the children in school.

Dr. Disney: So tell me how you met your husband.

Mrs. Watson: Well the first that he came to Bamberg, a friend who was also a doctor knew he was single and as he and his wife wanted to ask someone to go out with him for a double date and the doctor who was a friend was a Baptist and so he asked one of his Baptist friends and she was busy and couldn't go and so he came on to the Methodist church. I always said I was second choice but that was the first night he was in Bamberg, we dated.

Dr. Disney: And the rest is history.

Mrs. Watson: I had prayed in early years that if I were to be married and have a family that God would send the right person and he did and I feel like I saw His hand just working.

Dr. Disney: So tell me about the birth, you had six children, tell me about the birth of your children.

Mrs. Watson: When we first got married, my husband said that he would rather not be over forty when the last one was born. His father was forty when he was born, he was the baby of four, and he said it just felt like he didn't have quite as much time with his father as his older siblings did. So we actually, when we married, we were twenty-five, I was twenty-five and he was thirty so ten years, we knew if we were gonna have six, we had to have them in a hurry. One day before our first anniversary, Mary Beth, our oldest, was born. Then we had the other five and the sixth one came three months after Mike's fortieth birthday. We had six in nine and a half years so it was a busy time but a wonderful time.

Dr. Disney: And you said, "We knew we were gonna have six", was six your count, that was your target, that was your goal?

Mrs. Watson: That's what we hoped for, what we prayed for. He said he didn't know that I wanted that many when we got married but he always wanted children, he was one of four and I was one of three and we always liked large families and I just thought six would be a wonderful number and that's what we prayed for. He answered our prayer and they've been wonderful ever since, I'm just grateful everyday.

Dr. Disney: So tell us a little bit about what does motherhood mean to you?

Mrs. Watson: It's God-given gift, I know that. It's an honor and a pleasure and then there are some rough moments sometimes. We had three boys and three girls and they, I do remember one time when our oldest just did not want to clean up her room, it was always such a mess, such a mess and I just got a little bit upset about and when I complained to my husband about the awful room that she had, he said, "Just close the door." That's what we did.

Dr. Disney: I like that, that's a good lesson to choose your battles sometimes, right?

Mrs. Watson: Well I lost that battle but she's a pretty good housekeeper now.

Dr. Disney: That's good, that's beautiful. What did it mean to you to be named the South Carolina Mother of the Year?

Mrs. Watson: It was a real honor, a real honor. I felt there were just so many more deserving mothers in the whole state that I really couldn't quite believe it but it was a wonderful

experience. I had the chance to meet so many wonderful people through the South Carolina group and then the national too, as far as that's concerned.

Dr. Disney: So tell us about some of those activities that you did during the year as the Mother of the Year.

Mrs. Watson: As a result of the Mother of the Year, we did start a young mother's study group and that was quite a pleasure, we had that for about five years. We had speakers to come in and the young mothers would come and tell their things that had happened in their lives and some of the other mothers would join in and give advice or had some of the same problems. Then we had nice speakers that came and gave information and it was really a wonderful association. I was able to meet so many and get to know well so many of the young mothers because at that point, my children were all college age and graduated so I didn't know so many of the young ones.

Dr. Disney: So tell us about some of the things your children do, tell us about some of their occupations, what are they up to, your six children?

Mrs. Watson: At the present time? We have, actually our oldest daughter is a professor at the University of Illinois in Chicago and she's married to a physician in Chicago. She was married and lived Greenville and just around the corner, she actually went to Carol's husband who was a doctor there. Unfortunately, that marriage did not work and they were divorced some years later and that was sad. She's very happy now and has the job in Chicago. Our first son, the second child, is a physician in Raleigh, North Carolina. The third one, Caroline, is went to law school and she worked for BellSouth for a number of years and she's retired from BellSouth and has just moved to Charleston. Our fourth is Cal who is a lawyer and lives in Columbia and he is very interested in genealogy and all sorts of things, he keeps busy. Our next son is a physician and he was with the World Health Organization in Geneva, Switzerland and Turkey. He is now back and with the CDC in Atlanta so we're happy they're all on US soil. Our youngest is our daughter who lives in Boise, Idaho and she's a physician there and enjoying that life. Her son is back at Furman University, he said he wanted to come back to where his roots were and he's a sophomore there at Furman. They've all been wonderful. We are very blessed, very very blessed.

Dr. Disney: You said you had six children in nine and a half years basically, that must have been a very busy time. So I wondered if you would talk a little bit about the challenges that faced in balancing, first of all raising six children generally, balancing activities inside the home and outside the home, balancing work and family and church and community activities – talk a little bit about that.

Mrs. Watson: The volunteerism that we did was involving the children so it was mainly church and school. I did enjoy the music club in Bamberg. I had some wonderful students, two from Denmark, Boo's two, and they were very talented, just like their mom. That was a wonderful experience. I never did teach over twelve at a time in my home, the time just didn't allow it.

Dr. Disney: You taught up to twelve students piano in your home at a time? Up to twelve?

Mrs. Watson: Up to twelve, but not always that many. When it came to be twelve was when our children were taking from another piano teacher – I didn't think Mom would do too well – and she got sick so I inherited them and thoroughly enjoyed them, I had them also. I never did take over twelve and had less than that some years.

Dr. Disney: Do you consider yourself a working mother? I do.

Mrs. Watson: Yes. I had a friend who always introduced me as a mother who did not work out of the home.

Dr. Disney: But worked a lot in the home, in a lot of ways – a lot of different types of work.

Mrs. Watson: I was very fortunate to have some very good help and she right now is one of the nicest elderly black ladies that is one of my best friends and she helped me all through the years and she calls our children her children.

Dr. Disney: Do you think women's work and women's roles as mothers are adequately recognized by society today?

Mrs. Watson: I really, I'm just not sure. They had a program on TV this morning on how things have changed and how children are allowed to walk distances alone and unfortunately because of that, we've had some terrible things to happen. But I think so many times in today's world, the mothers have outside jobs and they don't have the time to spend with the children that was such a pleasure to those of us who could. I feel for them.

Dr. Disney: What we've been talking about leads really nicely into my next question which is to talk about and you've kind of already done some of this already, what were some of the challenges you faced when you were raising your children in terms of balancing work inside the home, work outside the home, and church and other activities and then how do you compare that with what women today, the challenges they have to face – work inside and outside the home, church, volunteerism, and everything else?

Mrs. Watson: It's a challenge. I earned a nickname years ago when I was playing for the youth choir at the church, which our children were in, and it met in the afternoon. Then I raised home to get supper for the family and my father was living with us at the time, we wanted to be sure everything was right for that. Then we'd go back to adult choir practice at 7:30. One day, the choir director, when I walked in late, said, "Well, the Late Mrs. Watson has arrived" and I have not lost that name, I'm still the Late Mrs. Watson. So I've tried hard but I still am that.

Dr. Disney: With everything you were doing, I think it was okay if you were a little late.

Mrs. Watson: What about today?

Dr. Disney: That's right, it's tough. What do you think are the most important issues facing women today?

Mrs. Watson: Rearing children. It worries me so much that God has been taken out of schools and out of a lot of life in general. Yesterday, I saw something about how church membership has gone down and the largest group are the "nones" – N O N E S – that don't have any relationship with the church. I think that's the biggest factor today in the way life is going.

Carol Laffitte: And I think your interview wouldn't be complete without talking about Mike Watson, your husband, and his mission in this world.

Dr. Disney: That's a great question, would you tell us a little bit about your husband and his work?

Mrs. Watson: He always has been interested in missions and he felt like if he did not find the right person, that maybe God was telling him not just missions at home, but missions abroad. But we found the right ones and he and a Methodist minister, George Strait, George lived in Cope which was six miles from Bamberg, they both felt like people could give more time to reaching out. So they met with a number of other people and began the United Methodist Volunteers in Mission and they went on various mission trips around the world. In fact, one trip Mike was to

take as a doctor to the little island of Anguilla, which is back then was not anything like it is now. It looked like a snake, it was three miles long, but their doctor had left some months before but they were really in need. We went and got permission from all the teachers in school for the children to miss those two weeks in April. Our youngest child was three when we went. That was the most wonderful experience that they still talk about.

Dr. Disney: So your whole family went to participate on this mission trip.

Mrs. Watson: The whole family went that time, the family was able to go. They have gone to a number of countries and have enjoyed doing that, they and the next door neighbor as well.

Dr. Disney: when you say “they” have gone, your husband and some of your children continue to do mission trips throughout their lives?

Mrs. Watson: Several of the children have done our mission trips, our daughter just got back from Cuba with a mission trip with them not very long ago. It’s been a wonderful experience and as I said before, you can just see God’s hand in all of it. It’s been wonderful to look back on everything.

Dr. Disney: Let me ask you this, what does feminism mean to you? When you hear the word feminism, what does that make you think of?

Mrs. Watson: Well to me, it means having a family and rearing a family and home activities but in the paper just recently, I saw the women who had just built a home with reaching out, homes that are being built for needy people but a group of women did it. Also, the first general in the US Army was inducted and so, everybody has a different gift and a different outlook and we’re all made differently so it can be in a lot of directions. For me personally, it’s home and family and children.

Dr. Disney: So in other words, what I hear you saying is feminism allows women and men to kind of find those gifts and pursue those gifts to the best of their ability, to the best of their God-given ability. Do you consider yourself a feminist?

Mrs. Watson: If feminists, if feminism is home and family and church and friends, yes.

Dr. Disney: Does anybody in our group have any questions they’d like to add, to ask to our Mother of the Year winner from 1986?

Voice from Audience: All of that was very interesting, to hear it again from a standpoint of being on the committee and then just hearing you speak with your heart about this whole situation.

Mrs. Watson: I would like to say that the committee, the search committee, all the members that I have met have been outstanding, just wonderful and they worked hard. The book that Martha and Shirley put together is unbelievable, really y’all did a wonderful job. All the luncheons and the teas and everything that you did was outstanding.

Voice from Audience: We had wonderful honorees. Can I make a few remarks about my memories of me and Carolyn because I knew her early?

Dr. Disney: Sure, shall we get you on camera?

Voice from Audience: Sure, or just my voice will be fine. Well I think I told you a little while ago that I was looking for a piano teacher that would be a good piano teacher for my children because I felt like one particularly might have some talent. I must say, I looked in two or three counties, I was willing to drive because we live in a rural area and it hard to find professionals like that. I was told Mary Carolyn Watson and I said, “I don’t know Mary Carolyn” and my

friend said, “Well I know her because she lives in Bamberg where my mother lives. She can be seen walking down the street in Bamberg and she will have five or six little children following behind her like little ducks and her hair might not be brushed that day and she might be a little busy but she’s never in a hurry. They might be looking at something, a book that they are looking at or a store window, but she’s never in hurry and she’s always with her children.” That sounded like a pretty good recommendation because I knew good piano teachers for beginners need to love children so I was all aboard for Mary Caroline Watson to be the piano teacher for my children. Then later, when I made the drive to Bamberg every week for about five or six years with both children, I had the honor of sitting in her den and listening to the piano lesson going but also listening to things that were going on in her home. At that time, she had one daughter who was in high school, maybe a senior, she had one son who would come in from Clemson and he was a football player, and they were on the road going to football games, and between that and the high school senior, I remember hearing the phone ring and her daughter said, “I don’t think I can go with you to do that on Saturday night. No, I don’t think so. No, my mother, my daddy wouldn’t like that idea.” I thought, “How wonderful! I hope my children can use me as an excuse not to do something that someone else suggests” and the other thing I remember is in the kitchen was a map of the world and the little town of Bamberg, there was a map of the world spread across the wall and I think they brought the world to the little town of Bamberg and I thought, “How wonderful.” Mary Carolyn was a role model for me in many ways because she would say things like, “Children do need dreaming time, it’s okay not to be busy every moment, they need to have time to dream.” The stories she told about closing the door, she told me that one too so it probably helped our family to be happier, because I also had a very messy daughter, so those are my remarks about Mary Carolyn. And then, one more thing, while she was teaching my children, I was asked by an organization to write a letter of recommendation for her for South Carolina Mother of the Year, little knowing that I would even know the committee, much less have the chance to serve on the committee. Mary Carolyn received the honor and I was able to attend tea at the Governor’s mansion in her honor and it was happy and wonderful and everybody was so happy to be able to honor Mary Carolyn.

Dr. Disney: Did you say it was some of the children who asked you to write this letter?

Voice from Audience: No, her church sponsored her. We have associations that sponsor a mother and invite them to enter the selections. I was asked by, I believe her church.

Mrs. Watson:

Dr. Disney: Thank you for adding that, it’s nice to hear memories. Other people talk about your legacy and you being a role model to them, how does that make you feel hearing Boo talk about that?

Mrs. Watson: Very humble. I can’t believe it, I didn’t know all that. All those conversations in the kitchen, talking about the world, the map of the world – I remember that my husband said, as we were rearing the children, he said, “Now we have to give them roots so they’ll know how to live and wings so they’ll know how to fly.” When we had the one in Turkey and Idaho and Chicago, we did have two in South Carolina, I said, “If I had known how far they were going to fly, I think I would have clipped a few.”

Dr. Disney: I think it’s beautiful. I’m so glad you mentioned the map of the world, this idea that you had that, that you brought the world to Bamberg and that you did. That’s a beautiful

sentiment, roots to know how to live and wings to fly, it sounds like you've prepared your children such beautiful ways.

Mrs. Watson: Thank you, we had a wonderful help upstairs.

Dr. Disney: So, do you have any questions for us? Or any comments, anything additional you would like to add?

Mrs. Watson: I just would like to tell you about the one project that the group did that has been so meaningful and they like for you to reach out in some one way, if not others, were Books for Babies. Actually, at that time, this was in about three years, four, no it's been longer than that, it was when I was President, whenever that was. The library in Bamberg was a place where people could drop off books that were used for any group to take them to children. In Bamberg, we have what they call First Steps and they visit new babies once a week and take a book to the new baby and books for the older children in the family. At drop-off points, Boo was one of them we asked to do that, and Deane Risher, the vice president at the time in Camden and Joyce Rheney in Orangeburg who was 2005 Mother. It was most successful and the thing I remember most about that was a little boy from Springfield was found out about, his mother was gathering books to bring to the Bamberg library to be distributed, and he found out about it and he went through all of his books and everything that he had finished with, he put it in a big book and brought it to the Bamberg library himself with his mother when she brought her's. That was one of the most meaningful things that happened at that time, as far as I was concerned.

Dr. Disney: And this was a project of the South Carolina Mothers' Association?

Mrs. Watson: Yes, it was recommended from the American Mothers' but the South Carolina group wanted each to reach out in at least one way and the other ways were the ABC quilts for the children and knitting little hats and things and prayer shawls, those were other ways, but we chose the books. It was very successful and the churches joined in. We had a hard time, especially with Trinity and First Baptist and your church, a lot of them joined in and gathered quite a few books and we would pick them up from the library. There was a big book there and people would just come and bring them, knowing that reading is so important to a child – it'll be something they do the rest of their lives if they get started.

Dr. Disney: As a college professor and knowing these interviews will be deposited at the Louise Pettis Archives at Winthrop University, I am so please that you shared that story because sometimes the art of reading a book, because of the internet and technology, sometimes people forget to put their hands on a book and read it. The younger you start that with children in pre-k, it's so important.

Mrs. Watson: It definitely is, it definitely is.

Dr. Disney: I just want to say, we're coming up on your thirtieth anniversary, 2016 will be the thirteenth anniversary of your Mother of the Year award, that's a big deal – you have to do something to celebrate.

Mrs. Watson: Well, it's been 30 wonderful years, it really has been. This is a marvelous group of ladies and I really and truly, it just was wonderful to get to know them.

Dr. Disney: Thank you so much.

Mrs. Watson: And you're doing so much and such a wonderful job at Winthrop with this, Boo was telling me all about it on the way and I'm just so pleased that that's happening because it needs to be.

Dr. Disney: Well thank you, it's the least we need to do to recognize and record and remember the work of powerful women and powerful mothers in our state. Just thank you for all you've done and given to us and congratulations on your thirty year anniversary.

Mrs. Watson: That tells my age pretty much! I will be eighty-four this summer.

Dr. Disney: It tells your staying power.

Mrs. Watson: Oh goodness. Well my husband has written two books and they are kind of not the American Mothers' but the volunteers' mission part in medicine and kind of thing.

Voice from Audience: I think those books have been added to Mary Carolyn's things at Winthrop, if they haven't they need to be.

Dr. Disney: If they haven't, we have given you some forms, some paperwork from the Archives. If you find some things from you and your husband's life that you would like to donate to the Archives, other students can read from and learn from your histories, your lives together, please do so. We'll find a way, we'll get it either tomorrow from Shirley or me coming back down or Boo bringing it up. We'd like to add anything you want to contribute to the Archives.

Mrs. Watson: Well I have plenty of things saved but I don't think you want most of them. Most of them need to go in the trash.

Dr. Disney: Don't trash anything, we'll take it. Thank you so much.

Mrs. Watson: Well thank you, thank you. I want to say again what a wonderful group of ladies have served on this search committee.

Voice from Audience: Well it was our pleasure too to read about all of the wonderful mothers it was just astounding, it was just a pleasure and it wasn't just reading a name and reading things that they had done. We had actually met them, visited them in their hometowns, and had a lot of people to tell us all about them on a personal basis. They were really handpicked.

Dr. Disney: Ann Edwards said it was wonderful mothers selecting wonderful mothers. Thank you, Mary Carolyn, thank you for your time.

Mrs. Watson: Well thank you.