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Interview with Annette Brunson Sutcliffe

Annette Brunson Sutcliffe
SC Mother of the Year 2010

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

Mrs. Annette Brunson Sutcliffe

Winner of the 2010 South Carolina Mother of the Year Award

June 24, 2015

Dr. Disney: Good afternoon.

Annette Brunson Sutcliffe: Good afternoon.

Dr. Disney: My name is Dr. Jennifer Leigh Disney and I am honored to be here with Mrs. Annette Brunson Sutcliffe, the 2010 winner of the South Carolina Mother of the Year award. Thank you Annette for taking the time to be with us today.

Annette Brunson Sutcliffe: Thank you for allowing me.

Dr. Disney: We'd love you to begin by telling us a little bit about when and where you were born and raised and share a little bit about your family and your early childhood experience.

Annette Brunson Sutcliffe: I was born in Orangeburg, South Carolina in 1937 October. I had one sister older than I and we lived in my grandmother's house. My younger brother was five years younger than I. I was born in the post-Depression era. We struggled as a family, my dad was drafted into the Marines and we moved a short time when he was having training, to Beaufort, South Carolina near Parris Island and that was the only time for about six months that I lived out of Orangeburg. I was raised there, I attended grammar school and high school there. I was honored to be inducted into the National Honor Society in the eleventh grade and in the twelfth, I was voted Miss High Miss which was a tremendous honor for me because it was voted on by my peers in the senior class so that was an honor. I graduated in 1955 from Orangeburg High School.

Dr. Disney: That's wonderful. So tell us anything else you want to share about any further education you had or your young adult life.

Annette Brunson Sutcliffe: I went to Winthrop College with a major, a two year degree in Secretarial Science. I was gifted from the time I started taking typing that I typed fast and I took short hand very fast so I had a dream of maybe being secretary to the manager of a company or something when I got out of Winthrop. I married after a year and did not complete my degree but my first job was secretary to the manager of a division of an insurance company where I worked for two years until my first child was born. I really lived two lives, I have to explain that because I was married for fourteen years and had three children and during that time, I didn't have a lot of ministry because I was consumed with raising three small children. My husband was killed at the age of thirty-four in an automobile accident and I was left with three children to raise. Then I married four years later to Lenny Sutcliffe from Norway and he had five children and I had three, making a total of eight children in the home.

Dr. Disney: Wow, that's a lot of responsibility.

Annette Brunson Sutcliffe: Yes, it was and is.

Dr. Disney: So you've already answered some of my questions. Tell me a little bit about what activities you were involved in, you talked a little bit about your two lives, so different activities

maybe related to family, community, education, employment, volunteerism, church within both marriages.

Annette Brunson Sutcliffe: In my first marriage, I was not involved with a lot of ministry because of the children being so small but early on, I noticed that I had a spiritual gift of encouragement that the Lord had given me and I tried to be aware of things, needs in the community that I could respond to and I did that. The second marriage, I really started my ministry after the second marriage. I worked for three years after marriage with the eight children being at home, one of them was in college but I decided to give up my job, I was secretary to the personnel manager at a chemical plant, and I gave up my job to stay home and be a mother, a full time mother to my children. About three years after I quit my job, I started a jail ministry and I had a class in the local law complex that I would go to every week. That lasted about a year and a half or two years until they started having people break out and they stopped me from going in because I was in with the inmates in one room. Then, I am a two time cancer survivor and so I became aware of different people who had had the same surgery that I had to have and were going through chemo and needed somebody just to be there. I would send cards and cook them a meal to take to them and different things like that to encourage them. I still do that, that is an ongoing ministry of mine. For about twelve years, I was a volunteer for Reach to Recovery, that is an encouragement organization that reaches out to breast cancer survivors and I did that until they dissolved the organization in Orangeburg, that ended that ministry. After our first two children went to college, we started taking in foster children and took them in when the beds became available and we kept foster children for about three years on and off. My husband and I taught preset bible study in our church for twenty-two years while that was going on. I still cook and take to shut-ins and I'm ministering to a lady right now who had colon cancer and she's going through chemo and they had to stop the chemo, she was sick and I'm trying to reach out to her.

Dr. Disney: How have you managed to balance, I mean you're starting ministries you're involved in outside the home, you're raising eight children inside the home, how have you been able to balance, working for work, you suffered great loss, working as a single mother for a few years between marriages, just talk to us a little bit about how you've been able to balance all those different experiences and work inside the home and outside the home.

Annette Brunson Sutcliffe: Well, it was a challenge to have to try and balance your life between career and home and family but our children were unique in that all eight of them, none of them could really participate in a lot of outside activity because, to my husband and me, the family time came first and we required them to be there for meals. Today, so many parents are going in ten different directions and they don't know what it is to sit down and eat a meal together, that's when we share what's gone on that day and that sort of thing. It is a challenge for a mother who is working to balance that and too many times today, they try to get the children and everything and the family suffers. I went to a church retreat with my daughter one time about seven or eight years ago and they were talking about home and family and career and when I asked the girl next to me, she looked to me to be in her mid-30s, I said, "Why do you think these children have to be in dance and music and piano and soccer and football and t-ball, what is it? Is it peer pressure?" and she said, "No ma'am, it's parental peer pressure." That really opened my eyes that it's really so many times the parents who are wanting to keep up with the next family

and have the children in so many activities. I know the activities are good but I think as a mother and a wife, the home, the children, the family, the husband, comes first.

Dr. Disney: You've already kind of spoken to this, I wanted to ask you to maybe compare women today and the struggles you had with that kind of balance of work and family and the struggles that women today are experiencing, it sounds like one of the things you're saying is sometimes it's more difficult if you're a working mom or if you're suffering under this parental fear of pressure, that it can be more difficult.

Annette Brunson Sutcliffe: It's more difficult today, it is. It's more difficult. I just felt like when I quit my job, that that was more important, being home with my children, and I think that they have grown in their own identity and grown together as siblings because so many times, divorce happens in a mixed marriage – the children don't get along or the parents and children fight and that type of thing and I felt like it was too important for me to be there for my children and they, through the years, they've told me that they were glad that they were raised the way they were.

Dr. Disney: Why don't you tell us a little bit more about your children, their names, what they're doing today, that kind of thing.

Annette Brunson Sutcliffe: When we got married, we had two that were nine, one was eleven, one twelve, two fifteen, one seventeen, and one eighteen. They each are individuals, all of them are different. We have one who was ADHD, he was one of mine but never used the words Mine or Lenny's, we never used the word "step" in our home, they were all our's. I think Len played football one year but we weren't able to go all of his games because we had all the rest of the children at home and I just didn't feel like dragging the whole family there was the thing to do. Then Janet, the youngest, she's our baby, she's fifty but she's still the baby, she played volleyball but that was after most of the children were out of the home. We had one daughter who's a Christian singer and she goes around to different churches and she sings for weddings and funerals and she has some CDs out, she is Cindy. Eddie is works for a computer company in Columbia, he's made a career buying and renovating houses and selling them. They've gotten a bigger home each time and they really, all of our children have excelled. Mark, the one that was ADHD, to a point has grown out of it, he's grown in to how to live with it, he's still extremely nervous but he works at the Pentagon. He's got his Master's degree and he's still going to school but the government's paying this time. There's Julie, she is a nurse in Columbia. There is Janet, an x-ray technician in Orangeburg. Polly is married to a physician in Columbia and she's a nurse but she gave up her career to raise her children, just like I did. I think that covers it.

Dr. Disney: Well that's a beautiful segue to my next question which is what does motherhood mean to you?

Annette Brunson Sutcliffe: Motherhood, to me, is taking the life or lives that God has loaned us and with help from my husband, helping to shape and mold them into productive adults where they can contribute to society and the community that they live in. That's what it means to me, to be there for my children, and they still come for advice, but I do not give it unless asked. I'm not a mother to give advice unless I'm asked but that's what it means to me.

Dr. Disney: That's a beautiful definition, I love that. Tell us what it meant to you to be named the South Carolina Mother of the Year in 2010.

Annette Brunson Sutcliffe: It was numbing. It was awesome, it was humbling because I think of all the outstanding women in South Carolina that may deserve it more than I do and I know when they called me, I think it was New Years Day, she told me I had been selected and I said, “You have got to be kidding”, that was my response to her. I just thought it was a prank at first. It meant as much or more than any other honor I have been given, to think of the responsibility that carried with it.

Dr. Disney: Tell us about your experiences that year, being an award winner. Did you get to go to the Governor’s mansion for a luncheon, did you engage in any public activities as Mother of the Year, tell us about that.

Annette Brunson Sutcliffe: I didn’t engage in a whole lot of activities as Mother of the Year but we did have a press conference for me where I spoke a few words when I was first named and I was terrified. They had the Governor’s tea and I went to the state house and met Governor Sanford and received a plaque with I have hanging in my den which I’m really proud of. I’ve been to several luncheons that the committee has had every year to congratulate the new Mother of the Year for the next year and I’ve enjoyed those immensely, getting to know these committee has been an outstanding experience for me.

Dr. Disney: This is an amazing group of women, isn’t it? The South Carolina Mothers’ Association is an amazing group of women. What do you think are the most important issues facing women today?

Annette Brunson Sutcliffe: One issue I think that women are facing is one we mentioned a few minutes ago that they’re trying to balance career and home and that’s such an awesome task for mothers today because most women work and a lot of times, I think that women could stay home but choose to work and so many times, their children will suffer for it. We struggled as a family with four children in college but they all got loans, it took them a long time to pay off student loans, they got grants for those who made good grades, got scholarships and most our children made good grades but I think that’s one issue that women are really facing today that I see in my dealings at church and in the community. One other thing I think women are facing today, is education, the issue of education. Our children are graduating from college, many are not know who the vice president of the United States is, just who we fought in the Second World War. I’ve seen it on TV when people did interviews with the young people and they just have no idea. They don’t even know how to read handwriting because they print everything. My daughter had something she wanted this girl she knew to read, this young person, and she asked her to read it and she said, “I can’t read that” and it was cursive writing. They’re not learning how to spell because of texting. I’m afraid our young people are not going to be able to spell in addition to not being able to hear when they’re forty-five or fifty.

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

Annette Brunson Sutcliffe: I don’t think so, no. I don’t think, especially women that stay at home to mother their children, they are not recognized. I like the term household engineer because that is what they are, they have to fill a multitude of roles more so than one role, like I was a stenographer and secretary, they have to be a nurse and a chauffeur and all these different roles they have to fill. I don’t think they’re recognized like they should be. I don’t think women make enough in the workplace.

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

Annette Brunson Sutcliffe: Well I was part-time when my children were home, I did work for three years. I consider myself a working mother, I work now.

Dr. Disney: I mean, I learned through this process of interviewing that at one time, I used to ask someone, “Do you work?” and I learned that you never ask a women do you work, you ask do you work inside the home, outside the home, or both?

Annette Brunson Sutcliffe: Absolutely.

Dr. Disney: Your life certainly models your testimony to that, the different types of work, household engineer, I like that, I like that a lot. You mentioned women who work for pay, do you think that’s another issue when women do work in the workforce and they’re taking care of children, a question of whether they’re getting equal pay for equal work.

Annette Brunson Sutcliffe: They’re not, they’re not and in any case, in some cases they are in some industries I think they are getting paid equally what men are, but in most cases they’re not and that’s not fair.

Dr. Disney: When you hear the term feminism, what does feminism mean to you?

Annette Brunson Sutcliffe: To me, feminism is not what it is to the world. To me, feminism is fulfilling that God-ordained life that the Lord has given me to fulfill to the max and to do what I can to support my family, to be there for my family, and my role as a mother is most important to me so I guess if you look at it that way, in the light that I look at and not as the world looks at it, I’m a feminist because I believe that feminism is fulfilling that ordained light.

Dr. Disney: That’s beautiful and you predicted my next question, I was going to ask you if you consider yourself a feminist and certainly, based on your own definition, absolutely.

Annette Brunson Sutcliffe: I do, I do.

Dr. Disney: That’s wonderful. Do you have any questions for us or anything else you’d like to add about your experience as South Carolina Mother of the Year and working with this wonderful committee, anything else that you want to share?

Annette Brunson Sutcliffe: Just that this committee has been wonderful to me, they just take you in and make you feel good. If I have a day that’s not so full or problems that come up during the day and I hear from Boo Poole or Ann, it just lifts my day.

Dr. Disney: What was the process like? Did you have to submit an application, were you nominated by someone, how does that process work?

Annette Brunson Sutcliffe: I was nominated by my daughter Cindy who is the Christian singer and she got the Orangeburg Regional Medical Center to sponsor me and that’s how I got involved. She didn’t tell me until I had to write something and then she told what she was doing, I had no idea.

Dr. Disney: Did you have to prepare a portfolio of materials?

Annette Brunson Sutcliffe: I did, I had to prepare a full packet. I had to write essays about what being a mother meant to me and how being a mother had impacted my community and different things like that.

Dr. Disney: Congratulations on your South Carolina Mother of the Year award victory in 2010 and thank you for sharing your thoughts on motherhood, womanhood, and feminism here with us today.

Annette Brunson Sutcliffe: I enjoyed it, it was easier than I thought.

Dr. Disney: Good! You answered many of my questions before I even got to them so I didn't have to ask them again. Thank you, that was beautiful.