



7-13-2015

Interview with Ruth Lesesne

Ruth Lesesne
SC Mother of the Year Committee

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.winthrop.edu/scmotheroftheyear>



Part of the [Oral History Commons](#), [United States History Commons](#), and the [Women's History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Lesesne, Ruth, "Interview with Ruth Lesesne" (2015). *South Carolina Mother of the Year Oral History Archives*. 14.

<https://digitalcommons.winthrop.edu/scmotheroftheyear/14>

This Sound is brought to you for free and open access by the South Carolina Mothers Collection at Digital Commons @ Winthrop University. It has been accepted for inclusion in South Carolina Mother of the Year Oral History Archives by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Winthrop University. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@mailbox.winthrop.edu.

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

Ruth Lesesne Interview

Member of the South Carolina Mother of the Year Committee

July 13, 2015

Dr. Disney: My name is Dr. Jennifer Leigh Disney and I'm honored to be here on July 13th 2015 with Mrs. Ruth Lesesne. Thank You so much for agreeing to be interviewed as part of this South Carolina Mother of the Year Association Oral History Project.

Ruth Lesesne: I'm glad to cooperate.

Dr. Disney: Thank You for being here. Let's start by having you tell us a little bit about when and where you were born and raised - tell us about your early childhood.

Ruth Lesesne: I was born in 1938 which is towards the end of the depression, I guess and right before WWII. I was born in a little textile town called Ninety Six, South Carolina. Its very small. We lived there and then as the war started then when I was 4, I guess, we moved to.... My dad worked in the shipyards, so we lived in Panama City, FL and Brunswick, GA. Its funny for me to look back and think we could not wait to get back to this little town of Ninety Six. We just thought that was gonna be the greatest thing - and we did go back, and it WAS! It was great to grow up in a small town and go to a very small High School. Of course at that point it was segregated. I was the youngest of three girls and you know money was always a little bit tight, but you know it didn't matter at that point. Nobody really had A LOT. My dad did not work in the textile mills; I see now looking back, it was distinguished between town people and mill people as they were called, and yet some of my best friends of course lived at the mill. I was the youngest of three girls. My mother ended up teaching school after a while, so she was a school teacher as I was growing up. My dad did different things, he had a brick yard and a lumber company so that's what he ended up doing.

Dr. Disney: Tell us about your education in your young adult life, and maybe within that time period what were your dreams, your goals, and your aspirations as a young woman

Ruth Lesesne: You know, I think girls back then didn't really have the goals and dreams that girls today have, which I think is just wonderful that women have so many choices now. I grew up thinking, "Oh I guess I'll just be a school teacher." But after all, I went to Columbia College, which is an all girls school in Columbia, SC. My freshman year, my two older sisters had gone to a little school called Erskine College, it was not far from us. It was in a town called Due West, not far from Ninety Six where I grew up and graduated from High School. While I was at Columbia College, another friend of mine just started really talking about what we wanted to do, so I decided I wanted to go to medical school. So, I got some information about medical school, but at that point my dad started having financial difficulties. Erskine was closer and it was just a

little bit cheaper, and I got a little bit better scholarships. I had been the valedictorian of my High School, of 30 people. Haha... So, I don't know how important that is. But, anyway...

Dr. Disney: We have a lot in common, I'm the youngest of 3 girls and I was valedictorian of my High School.

Ruth Lesesne: Oh, I bet you had a lot more than 30 people in your graduating class. Haha. But, anyway, so because of the valedictorian business, I got a little scholarship. Anyway, I ended up transferring to Erskine and as I said, my 2 older sisters had graduated from Erskine and the one closest to me, just loved Erskine - they both did, but my middle sister really did and had known this young man, this High School boy, actually.... in Due West. His dad actually was the president of Erskine. He was a neat guy and Louise, my middle sister, always said, "Ruth, you just need to come and meet Joe Lesesne." So, we actually made a trip in the spring. She still had friends, my sister still had friends there because she had graduated a year early. So, we went back and stayed with one of her friends, and I actually saw this guy but we never really talked, but then that summer.....

My family decided I needed to just go on and transfer, so I ended up going to summer school at Erskine that summer. Then I went to Erskine in the Fall and met this guy, Joe Lesesne. Anyway, we ended up dating and we ended up getting married. So, I credit my middle sister for picking out my husband. I went to Erskine and had scheduled all these science classes, because I was still going to medical school but that soon fell by the waist side. Haha. Joe was a history major, and I thought, "Oh well, I'll be a History major too." Because I had always liked that. I had a wonderful history teacher in High School. So, ended up majoring in History.

We got married, I was going to end up finishing early too. My dad, as I said, had had some financial problems and so he just thought we should all finish in three years and so we all did. So I graduated a year before Joe. We ended up getting married, in the middle of what was his Junior year, in the middle of my Senior year. So, then I taught school the next year, while he graduated from college. Then we went to Columbia, and he got a masters in History. His dad had a History Degree, a Ph.D. in History. He got a masters, we went to Conway - actually we had a baby, we had been married a year and a half. He's in school and I'm teaching and.... we didn't, we were not very smart haha. You just did those things back then and didn't worry too much about it. He got a masters and then we went to Conway, SC where there was the first year that Coastal Carolina had been a part of the University System, before that they had been a Junior College started by the College of Charleston. Then, maybe the county, maybe Horry county had.... now I'm not absolutely sure about that. But, anyway, they had that year become a part of the University system. So, Joe was hired down there to teach History. Oh, we loved Conway, and made such good friends there. Its just a great town. Then, after 2 years, we realized he need to go on and get his Phd, so we went back to Columbia then, and by that time we had a second child in Conway. So, we went back to Columbia and I taught school and he went graduate school and we finally had a third child. After 2 years in Columbia, he was hired at Wofford College to teach history. So we moved to Spartanburg in 1964 and have been here ever since.

Dr. Disney: Your husband was a history teacher at Wofford College, who later became the president of Wofford College?

Ruth Lesesne: Right. So, we've just had the most wonderful experience being part of an educational institute that you could really get into. I mean, I'm sure big universities are wonderful. Joe really didn't plan to stay at Wofford forever, but every time something else would come along, we'd think, "Well, for our family's sake, and his career..." which he did consider but, that wasn't the biggest thing. We just love being at Wofford and still are probably too involved. He's been retired from the President's office for 15 years. After a year, he started volunteering with the football team, because when we married he was planning to be a football coach. He always laughed and said well it took him a while but he finally got around to being a football coach.

Dr. Disney: And you two have three children?

Ruth Lesesne: Four. We ended up having one after we got to Spartanburg.

Dr. Disney: Okay, four children. What was it like raising children within an educational environment like that?

Ruth Lesesne: It was great. It was really good. We felt like they had opportunities to meet people. After president Ford was no longer president, he visited the campus one time and our children, well our oldest daughter at that point was away at school in Europe. The younger 3 got to meet a former president, which was kind of exciting for them. Lot of different people that we felt like they had good experience to meet. Living on campus, the girls sometimes didn't like that. Our two daughters that are older of the 4 children. The boys, of course loved all the athletic stuff. Especially our oldest son, who was the third child actually probably spent too much time... learned too many four letter words early on. They all enjoyed living on campus, I'm sure. We enjoyed this big old house we had. My whole extended family in enjoyed that, because I would have all the family dinners and everything because, you know... big rooms. Anyway, it was really nice. I remember thinking when we, in the summer when the people would be gone and I would drive back on the campus, I would think... this is not going to last forever. You're gonna get kicked off one of these days. Because it was, it was like being on this big estate, you know, in the summer when not many people are around. We loved the time that the kids were there too. We lived, the house we lived in was between some of the dorms and the dining hall. So, people constantly up and down the driveway. I had a hard time learning names, but I knew faces, just all the time.

Dr. Disney: That's wonderful. So, you had two older daughters, two younger sons.

Ruth Lesesne: Right.

Dr. Disney: Tell us a little bit about them, where they are today, what they are doing, ages, and things like that.

Ruth Lesesne: Well, I'm proud of all four of them. They are all doing very different things. They all four went to different schools. Our daughter, oldest daughter, oldest child, is the only one who actually graduated from Wofford. She kind of had a hard time figuring out what she wanted to do and went to two different schools before she came to Wofford, but then she ended up graduating - and she graduated in three years. Then went on and started a work on a masters but ended up getting married. She's a teacher now. She teaches 1st grade in Asheville, NC.

Dr. Disney: So, that's your oldest daughter....

Ruth Lesesne: That's my oldest. My second daughter fulfilled my ambition and did go to medical school, and she is a pediatrician in Greenwood, SC. Then, our oldest son went to law school and had wanted, well they all four did a summer internship with Senator Hollings in Washington, and they all loved that, and we've always sort of been a political family. Joey was our oldest son, and he just really enjoyed that summer time in Washington with Senator Hollings. So, when he graduated from college he went to a little school called Birmingham Southern, in Alabama. We knew the person who was Senator Hollings' office manager, and Joey had talked to him and said, "If anything comes up that I can do, I will do anything" and so he had applied to law school and had actually gotten in, and we weren't sure if he was gonna get in or not, but he did but right at the last minute, Ashley Thrift was Senator Hollings office... person, and he called that he had a gopher position. So we still had to help him a little financially because he couldn't live in Washington on what they paid him. He had just the best year, and he really got to know Senator Hollings because he was his driver. So, they would be in the car, he would 30 minutes, 45 minutes with Senator Hollings by himself. So, he came home with all these wonderful Senator Hollings stories. I don't if you know him or not, or know about him but he is the funniest man you'll ever meet. Joey is a good imitator too. He has great Senator Hollings stories.

Dr. Disney: What a great opportunity to have that one on one time with Senator Hollings.

Ruth Lesesne: Absolutely! And Joey had to learn quickly how to get around in Washington because he was the driver. Anyway, that worked out great. Then after that year, he went on to go to Law School, Joey did, and then ended up going back to Washington with Senator Hollings until he retired. Now he works for a company called Cox Communications, they're diversified, so they have a cable company around Atlanta, Cox Cable, but they also have a lot of different things. But, Joey's still in Washington, he's their Legislative....something. He's taught me to say something, and now I've forgotten what it is. Rather than saying "Lobbyist" but... it's sort of a Lobbyist. Legislative Liaison or something like that.

Dr. Disney: I think that's great, very good.

Ruth Lesesne: And our youngest son, went to Duke on an ROTC Scholarship. Wofford has something called "Tuition Exchange" so they have a group of schools you can pick from and then if you get chosen by that school, then you get the same, you know you get free tuition... which is great. Our daughter, who went to medical school, ended up going to William & Mary,

and that was not "Tuition Exchange" and Duke was not "Tuition Exchange." So, Harry ended up going on a ROTC Scholarship. He went into the army a little while, got married, and then went back to graduate school and got a history Ph.D. He worked at the university for a little while. The Bicentennial was about that time, and he was looking for a job. He ended up working for something called The Conservation Fund. He got a Ph.D. in History, but kind of decided, maybe..... He really wanted to stay in the South East, and at that point the only History jobs available were like Kansas, or North Dakota, or somewhere like that and he and his wife really didn't want to go out there. So, he worked for The Conservation Fund and then Mayor Riley in Charleston, Joe Riley, who is just the most wonderful person... was looking for an office person. I think since Joey had worked for Senator Hollings, who's from Charleston, then Harry kind of heard about the job with Mayor Riley. So then he worked, he went, they moved to Charleston and he worked for Mayor Riley for about 8 or 10 years. And then, Mayor Riley, you know is retiring. So a couple of years ago, Harry realized he had to get a real job. He is doing something in Charleston called "The Charleston Parks Conservancy," and its a, there's a woman Darla Moore, do you know who Darla Moore is? She's a South Carolinian who has made a lot of money. She gave the 20 Million Dollars to the University for the Darla Moore Business School. So, anyway, she with some other people had started this, "Charleston Park Conservancy." So, then Harry went to work for her in this park's thing.

Dr. Disney: Sounds like you have raised four very successful children. You must be very proud.

Ruth Lesesne: I'm very proud of them. I have to say, it hadn't been easy. Haha. The thing that has disappointed the most, I guess about my children is that 3 of the 4 of them have been divorced and they all have these wonderful children. I just hate that these 9 grandchildren have had to go through the breakup of their parents marriage. Now, all 3 of them have re-married, have re-married wonderful people. And so I'm blessed in that area. At one point I just thought, "I can't believe I have 9 grandchildren from broken homes" but you know, who knows? I wasn't there. I wasn't in the middle of the relationship, so...

Dr. Disney: So, you've probably reflected a lot on the concept of mother. I mean, why don't you share with us... What does motherhood mean to you?

Ruth Lesesne: Well, I think I have been the generation that, you know I grew up wanted to be just a stay at home mother. I really, and once I realized I wasn't going to medical school, I really did not like teaching. I thought, "If I have to earn my living teaching school, we're in big trouble." So, I did always tell the girls, I wanted them to have some way that they could support themselves, because I felt like even though... Especially since Joe became president of Wofford, it was a team effort...I mean, we were together in it. So, I did feel like I contributed my part and he was, I mean he would tell you that we were equal partners. That's probably not true, but anyway, we looked at it that way. And I as a college president's wife, I went to lots of meetings and so many of the younger wives wanted to be paid and I haven't heard much about that lately, but that kind of was a big thing for a while. I always knew I did not want to be paid, because I wanted to be able to have the choice to say, "I'm sorry, I can't do that..." Wofford had been a Men's College until, well... Co-Education started just as Joe became President, and he's the one who actually carried it through. Women on campus, you know, living on dorms and everything

had not been before he was President. So, the wife of the Wofford President, really... it was as not as demanding as some of the school that were all women, or even were co-ed because women at Wofford were not... You were supposed to be in the kitchen. So, anyway I think my job was a lot easier than many peoples. I always wanted my children to know that they came first with me. That if they needed me to not go to some banquet or alumni meeting in Bennettsville or whatever, then I didn't go. Because they knew Joe was gonna go, you know, he loved them, but his job was first with him. I definitely women's roles have changed, I do think some young women that think they can do it all put too much pressure on themselves, because I don't think they can do it all. But, maybe their husband is cooperative and helps. I think my sons certainly helps them much more than their dad did, but everybody's different. I think each woman and her husband have to work it out for themselves. I don't think you can say "This size fits all."

Dr. Disney: I think you're right, I think one of the toughest issues women face today is probably trying to balance work outside of the home with work inside of the home and that could be employment, community service, you know all those things. Talk a little more about how you were able to balance with the activities, the work you were doing inside your home, the work I'm sure you were doing outside the home, the activities you were involved in as a wife of a college president or activities in your kid's school and the community. Tell us about some of the activities you were involved in, and how you were able to balance everything you were doing - raising four kids.

Ruth Lesesne: Well, I think I was, I was what I would call, "A Community Volunteer." For a while I was on a lot of boards and committees. At that point Spartanburg had something called, "The County Board of Education" and that's been done away with now. We have 7 districts in the county, and at that point the county board was sort of an umbrella board over this other 7 districts. We didn't have a lot of day to day activities in the districts at all, but we did look at their budgets and have some other oversight activities. So, I ran and got elected to that. I was on The County Board of Education for 12 years and during that time my children were in school. It was a tough time for schools back then. In 1970, I think is when all the separate districts were done away with. Not the separate 7 districts, but the "white district and the "black" district. There was no longer 2 high school in district 7, which is where we lived. So, it was a period of adjustment; and living on campus, Wofford is sort of on the wrong side of town. So our children, and we really wanted to keep them in public schools, actually we never thought of anything else, for one thing we couldn't have afforded it. Some of the schools they went to weren't that great, so I guess that's one reason I got involved because I saw the schools on the right side of town getting some advantages that the schools where my children were, were not getting. So, I was able to make voice heard. There was a different system of electing or appointing the local board members and I could see that we had some women, when I went on the county board, the person that prayed, used to pray for these gentlemen and their deliberation and I used to think, "I guess they don't think I need to be prayed for."

Dr. Disney: Were you the only woman on the body?

Ruth Lesesne: Right. And in most of the districts, there were no women. Now there was a black man on districts 7 board, but there were no women and as time went on, we had more blacks

appointed because the school population was heavily black and we had women appointed. Even after I had been on the board for 12 years, I had decided I was not going to run again, so they gave me a Plaque and it said.... I don't know exactly the wording but "For all of HIS service".... on the plaque after I had worked there. I gave it back to them, and they fixed it.

Dr. Disney: My goodness! And you said after 12 years of service? And you were elected, you were not appointed. You had to run for your positions. Several times.

Ruth Lesesne: Yes. It was I guess, 4 years... because I had to be elected. I had to sit up there and check all those names, you had to get names on a petition. It was not..... it was a non partisan. So you had to get a certain number petitions, and the first year, the first times it wasn't that many, but the last time there were a lot because you had to check each name to be sure they, you know, were in the right district because they couldn't... if they didn't vote in district 7, they couldn't sign the petition.

Dr. Disney: And your children were school age when you were serving?

Ruth Lesesne: Yes. You know, I was just really, I really enjoyed that and felt good about having done that. Other things I did, I was involved with my church. Wofford is Methodist, has always been Methodist related. We were Methodist anyway. I was involved at church and all those church activities that you do. I was on several boards in, one a juvenile justice thing, I remember, I was very interested in that. There was something called "The Girl's Home" and "The Boy's Home" in Spartanburg, and friends were involved with them, so that was, I think that was one thing. Then, I was on something called The Human Relations Committee for the city and I really liked doing that. By the time I was on that, though, about that time, my mother and.... I had an elderly aunt that had never married needed care. At that point, they... My aunt and then my mother, two years later moved to a retirement home in Spartanburg and I pretty much got off of my community things at that point. Just because I was very involved with them.

Dr. Disney: That's a very important role that women often play, is "caretaker" ... "health care advocates" and practitioners in their own families.

Ruth Lesesne: And Joe's parents had been ill, and he was very involved... especially his dad, because his mother had died and his dad was there to be cared for. We had grandchildren early on, so I've always been very involved with them.

Dr. Disney: How did you become involved with The South Carolina Mothers Association?

Ruth Lesesne: You know, that's interesting because my oldest daughters.... about the time they approached me first. I'm not quite sure, but I always felt like it was Mona Ruth Davis who probably suggested me. Now, Anne Porché might know because you really, you know it was a self perpetuating committee, so the members of the committee came forward with names to be considered. So, Mona Ruth was for Greenwood and had lived in Ninety Six when her daddy was a Baptist Teacher, and she was my oldest sister's age, I think. She was so pretty, she was the

beauty queen at Furman when she was a student at Furman. I don't know that she was the one that suggested me, but we had kept up with them over the years. Erskine is an ARP school, I don't know if you what ARP is or not, but its Associate Reformed Presbyterian. It's a form of Presbyterian, it's very conservative. Mona Ruth's husband's family had Erskine ties because he was on the board at some point, so my husband and her husband got to be good friends and of course she and I had known each other for years. I don't know that she's the one who suggested me. When they came to me the first time, my oldest daughter's husband, her first husband had been in a motorcycle accident and had become a quadriplegic. So, I was very involved in helping her because at that point she had 3 children, her youngest one was 18 months old. Her husband had been a dentist, of course he could no longer do that. It was just kind of a tough haul for a while to get adjusted. They did end up divorcing. They had all kinds of problems. She had left him a few times and come home but I had always counseled her to go back and then I felt bad about it because I felt like, you know, you can do this. Anyway, so the first time they asked me, I said, "I just can't even consider it." But about a year later, I can't remember exactly.... I even remember who called me... whether it was Gwen Howell or who. Anyway, I decided then that it was something that I would like to do.

Dr. Disney: How did your service on the committee impact you, or your family, or your community? Talk to us a little bit about the experience of serving on the committee.

Ruth Lesesne: Well, I just loved getting to know the other committee members. It was just a group of fine women, who you would want to be just like, you know? I always felt like I was finding these wonderful role models, and I guess that's what I... I even thought then, though, I wanted to be sure that things were you know that, at that point there were just all these white women. Now, I'll have to say, before I even went on the committee, there had been black mothers chosen. There has been an asian mother chosen. So, it was not, I didn't feel like it was... because the school board was definitely, you know... not very... needed to be expanded. This group was not, I didn't feel like they were racists but we did, I think we had maybe Anyway, it was just a great group and I always enjoyed meeting the new mothers and I had some ties with some of the ones that were chosen. One of the mothers chosen, had had a son who played football at Wofford, who we had known, Joe and I had known. He was one of like, 12 children and they lived, they were very modest, you know... didn't have lots of money, lived around Lake City. I had known the one at Wofford, but had not known about the others, but all of them had gone to college and they just... they were teachers, or nurses, or I've forgotten what else. They were like this huge about of children, 12 children and this mother saw that they all went to college and I just loved the fact that she was chosen as a mother of the year. Several of them, were people that you really could admire.

Dr. Disney: So, it sounds like you met some amazing women.

Ruth Lesesne: I did. Members of the committee, as well as the mothers, and then see I got to meet the mothers... the past mothers, because in the Spring meeting a lot of them would come. I had known one of them, one of them... her husband had gone to Wofford, and her son had gone to Wofford, Ms. Caroline Watson from Bamberg and I loved her, because I just loved her son, who had come to Wofford. It was funny when we first moved on the campus, Joe was the Dean,

so we lived in one house and the President was in the President's House on the campus. Everyone had little children, so these kids who all went to the same church, they were all little Methodist children decided they had heard about this doctor from Bamberg who went on Missions trips. So, they decided that they wanted to try and raise money for Dr. Watson's mission trip. So, they had a little garage sale, I don't know whether they made \$25 or not. They gave their money, wanted to send their money to Dr. Watson and it turned out, later then, but that was Caroline's husband.

Dr. Disney: We were able to interview her.

Ruth Lesesne: You've already interviewed her? Isn't she great?!

Dr. Disney: She's wonderful.

Ruth Lesesne: And her son, the one that I knew the best, who went to Wofford. I was just reading about him in the Wofford thing... I don't know if he still is but, President of The Bar Association for the state. But, her husband also did all these great things.

Dr. Disney: What was it like going to the Governor's Mansion? Did you go to, Did you participate in any of the ceremonies?

Ruth Lesesne: Well, I always went... when I was a member of the committee and I loved just being in the mansion, it was just, to me it's just South Carolina. I know I had been there once, we actually got to spend the night there, one night... when Dick Riley was the Governor. Joe was on this committee called, "A Committee For The Future of The South" and Dick Riley at that point was the Governor, Chairmanships moved around but that was his year to be the chairman so the committee was meeting with him so he invited Joe and me to spend the night in the Governor's mansion which I just thought was exceptionally exciting. So, I did love going back and seeing... Have you been in the mansion?

Dr. Disney: I have not.

Ruth Lesesne: If you ever have the chance, you know... Everything is historic and so interesting and so beautiful, I think it's, I think they've done a great job with it.

Dr. Disney: That's so good. I want to ask you some broader questions about women and society. Let me know, Tell us this, What do you think are the most important issues facing women today?

Ruth Lesesne: Well, I think most important issues facing women are the most important issues facing everybody, is our government, our foreign policy, what's happening in the world? And I think women need to be involved, because I think women have a different, just have a different perspective and that's really really important.

Dr. Disney: That's a great answer. I don't think anyone has said that yet. I teach Political Science, so I have to agree with you - that women... 2 things: That we need to care about what's happening in the political world, and then maybe women create a different perspective perhaps because woman mother, could be part of the fact that women bring a different perspective. What do you think about that?

Ruth Lesesne: I think that's so true. I think it's hard, sometimes to be able to do that because I do think women are, like I know i'm so much more aware of my children, what's going on in their lives, and when I meet people, you know, especially people i've known before, I want to know about their children. Men, just, I guess... don't really have that personal feeling about people as much because their mind is concentrating on other things. Let's see, how to say it exactly...

Dr. Disney: It may have to do with the way boys and girls are raised. Historically they have been raised to have these different roles, like what's considered women's work? and what's considered men's work?

Ruth Lesesne: Exactly.

Dr. Disney: You think that's changing in the world? You think men are becoming more parts, in terms of fathering and family and...

Ruth Lesesne: Exactly. I definitely do because I see my sons, just so much more involved. And Joe was always involved, but he was busy, he had what was going on at Wofford. Those were the things that he was really concentrating on and we had a, you know he just felt like I could handle it. I know when our fourth child... Well, I'm getting too personal, you wanted... Well, when my fourth child was born, it was the first year of the Wofford interim and at Wofford it's a month in January that's not connected to either semester and everybody is supposed to do very different things, so that was the first interim. He had been appointed the assistant dean in charge of the interim that summer before, so he had, this was his baby. He had planned a trip to Mexico, with another faculty member. At that point, he was the Dean, he was not the President. But, it just happened that I got pregnant and we weren't expecting a baby and he was expecting a trip to Mexico.

Dr. Disney: What happened? What did you do?

Ruth Lesesne: Well, the baby was late, so it was time for him to go to Mexico, and he left. He left me in the hospital and went to Mexico. But my parents were around, and his parents were around and they were always, we were very lucky. We always had lots of help from our parents. My dad died early on, but my parents came and stayed and when I got out of the hospital, then I think... well, I think Joe's mother stayed while I was in the hospital and then my parents came and I got out. I remember Joe's mother came and brought me from the hospital because he was in Mexico. You know, I was not worried about it. I knew I could handle it and he knew I could handle it.

Dr. Disney: I was just going to repeat that sentence that I think you said beautifully, "He knew I could handle it." In other words, he was the president of Wofford College, you were the president of the family. In many ways, the mother is the leader, the executive leader of the family and he knew that you could handle, you knew you could handle it.

Ruth Lesesne: Right.

Dr. Disney: Do you think women's roles and women's work as mothers, as kind of leaders of their families are, do you think that work of women and mothers is recognized as much as it could be or should be in society?

Ruth Lesesne: I don't know about that because I do know for a while when we would go to these education meetings and 1 times, "Now I wanted everyone to go around and tell what they do" and I was panicked, I thought "What do I do?" I hated to just stand up and say that I was the wife of the president, I wanted some other identification. But, basically that's what I was. I do think women that stay at home, now, sometimes don't get the recognition they deserve. i dont know.

Dr. Disney: I think, I'll just speak for me, when I started doing interviews, I went to Mozambique and Nicaragua and conducted interviews with women.

Ruth Lesesne: Mozambique and Nicaragua? Oh, interesting! Now I'd like to see your interviews from that.

Dr. Disney: I wrote a book called, "Women's Activism and Feminist Agency in Mozambique and Nicaragua" and one of the things that I learned very early on, was not to ask a women, "Do you work?" I realized that was such a ridiculous question. Because all women work already, the question was more, "Do you work inside the home, Do you work outside the home or both?" I think that's getting a little bit at what you are talking about, as the first lady, as the wife of the president you didn't have, you were not employed by Wofford but you certainly had a lot of work to do for your family and for Wofford and to make sure that your husband could do what he was doing. And I think historically, we haven't paid enough attention to unpaid work that women do, whether its community service, or activism or parenting. And I think your life is just a great testament to, what I hope is becoming the greater recognition. This research project is trying to give greater recognition to all of the work that women do.

Ruth Lesesne: Well, I know someone gave me a refrigerator magnet early on that said, "Every Mother is a Working Mother."

Dr. Disney: Exactly. And I love how you said earlier, I didn't want paid work for Wofford. I wanted to be able to say no, when I could and when I needed to know that my children were first. I wanted them to know that.

Ruth Lesesne: Exactly.

Dr. Disney: But that's a tough balance. I think you've already addressed this, but is there anything you want to say about how, would you have done, or young women today especially if husbands and wives are both working. A question of balance, working for wage outside of the home, and working inside of the home, and balancing activism, volunteerism, church and community. How are women able to do that balance?

Ruth Lesesne: Well, and that's why, I say every couple has to work it out for themselves. If you and your husband agree that this is going to be your focus, and that's going to be his focus or if you both.... if it's equal there, how do you work it out? But you gotta work it out between the two of you. But, the children need to understand, and I think mine always did, they just knew they came first with me. And Joe was always busy, but I mean he was a good father, I don't mean to sound like he was not a good dad, he was a good dad.

Dr. Disney: What does "feminism" mean to you?

Ruth Lesesne: It means women having a choice and having, I mean if you choose to have 16 children and stay at home with them. That's your choice, but you also could choose to have 2 children or no children and I respect people who choose to have no children. Its just, its having a choice is the way I see it. And I would like to think, I am a feminist. Some women don't want to be called a feminist. I know I read, *The Feminine Mystique* early on and it really, you know, made me think. And I don't think there's any question, but that over the years, Women didn't have rights early on, you know you read all the... I know this woman here who has always promoted Susan B. Anthony and we she used to have a luncheon on Susan B. Anthony's birthday, February 15th, if ya'll don't know that, that's Susan B. Anthony. This year she didn't have a luncheon, but she sent out a card. I loved what it said, it just said, "All the young women need to remember that all these rights have, somebody worked really hard to get em. They didn't just happen. So you need to appreciate that."

Dr. Disney: That was so well said. And my students, at Winthrop University still, they read Betty Friedan, they read about *The Feminine Mystique* and I think what Friedan called, "The problem that has no name." Friedan talked about, kind of, women waking up and doing all the things that were expected of them as wives and mothers. And kind of wondering, is this all? Is this everything that my life was meant to be? And so I think you said it beautifully, If that's a woman's choice, then that's should be highly respected. Making sure women have all the choices available to them that men have. I agree with you 100%, that that's one of the legacies of feminism. That the women have, before, for several generations have fought for to ensure women today can make those choices. Very well said.