




7-13-2015

Interview with Mrs. Gwen P. Howell

Gwen P. Howell
SC Mother of the Year Committee

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Recommended Citation

Howell, Gwen P, "Interview with Mrs. Gwen P. Howell" (2015). *South Carolina Mother of the Year Oral History Archives*. 16.
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Winthrop University
South Carolina Mother of the Year Award Oral History Archives
Interview Transcript
Gwen Howell P. Howell
Member of the SC Mother of the Year Award Selection Committee
July 13, 2015

Dr. Disney: Good afternoon. My name is Dr. Jennifer Leigh Disney, and I'm honored to be here with Gwen Howell Howell, a member of the South Carolina Mother of the Year Association, on July 13th, 2015. Thank you, Gwen Howell, so much for being here with us today.

Gwen Howell: I'm delighted and honored to be asked to participate in this.

Dr. Disney: Thank you. Why don't we just start by you telling us a little bit about where you were born and raised.

Gwen Howell: Actually, I was born in Savannah, Georgia, but at the wonderful tender age of three years, my family moved to Florence, South Carolina. I grew up in Florence, attended all the public schools there, had wonderful friends there that I have even to this day, some of them. I went to the University of South Carolina, and enjoyed every moment there also. I was fortunate enough to be Secretary of the Student Body, I was a cheerleader for three years, I was in many of the organizations there, and I was lucky there. I don't know if I want this on the camera, but I was lucky enough and fortunate enough to be elected Homecoming Queen one year. That was before I got all these wrinkles and the gray hair.

[laughter]

Gwen Howell: I met my husband there. My roommate and friend from Florence introduced me on a Sunday afternoon. It was kind of misty rain, and I had walked over to the post office. At that time, you had to go across Carolina's campus, and I was sort of down in the dumps, I think. I saw this friend, Jean, talking to this young man, and she stopped me and said she wanted me to meet Louis Howell. We met and we dated, and then he graduated and we got married. Then we came back, and I worked as a secretary, and he went to law school. That's a lot.

Dr. Disney: That's great. That's wonderful, you predicted a lot of my questions. Let me go back a little bit. Tell me about your family upbringing, brothers and sisters, mom and dad, anything about your early childhood.

Gwen Howell: I do not have any siblings, and I did not have any siblings. I always thought it would be wonderful to have a sister or a brother, but fortunately, and I'm sure in this day in time they still think this, if you're an only child, you're extremely selfish. That's a strong word, but that's not true. You are, I think, more independent when you do not have brothers and sisters. Therefore, when I got married, I certainly wanted more than one child. I didn't miss anything growing up, as a youngster, but I always thought it would be wonderful to have somebody to talk to about our parents. Not about them, just enjoy talking of the good things, positive things. So that's whatever. This is on camera isn't it? Oh, geez.

Dr. Disney: You're doing great. What do you remember as a young woman at USC? What were your dreams, goals and aspirations?

Gwen Howell: I majored in Education. At that time, of course, most of the things that were offered to young females were teaching positions. Although I had learned in high school, I took the prep courses in high school, and I also took the secretarial courses that were offered there. So, I could type, I could do bookkeeping, etc. When I went to Carolina, I majored in Education, and I worked part time at the university. I worked in the library one semester, another semester I worked in a

different library on campus, for two semesters I was a secretary to one of the professors. Probably if I were at Winthrop now and I was a student, I would like to be your secretary.

Dr. Disney: I would love that.

Gwen Howell: Now, they're administrative assistants, I know they've changed the name for secretaries.

Dr. Disney: Tell us about the early years of your marriage, and then the birth of your children.

Gwen Howell: We got married and my husband was in the Marine Corp, he was stationed at Cherry Point, North Carolina. We started out our married life there, for about four weeks. He was sent on maneuvers, so I went home to Mama. He was on maneuvers for about five weeks, maybe six, I don't remember. He wrote me every day and I wrote him every day. Then when he was coming back to Cherry Point he let me know, so I drove his car, which was the only car we had, and met him as if the ship came off the war. I was there like one of the World War II girls to greet him. We lived in the barracks, he was a Second Lieutenant. He lived in the barracks and he found us a duplex house, it was a duplex for officers. We moved into one said, and fortunately had a delightful young couple next door that we became close friends, and with other people in the Marine Corp down the street, so we had a lot of good times. I learned to cook. I did not know how to cook, but I learned to cook, and fortunately it did not make any difference to him what we had.

Dr. Disney: How many children do you have?

Gwen Howell: Three. All of them have graduated from the University of South Carolina. My oldest one is an attorney in Columbia, a daughter. My second daughter was a teacher, she's a homemaker now in Atlanta, and she has three children. My oldest daughter has three children. My son lives here in Spartanburg, he has two Howell boys, so I have eight grandchildren. Four granddaughters and four grandsons. None of them are tiny any more, and I miss the little ones. The last one will graduate next year, and he's in Mechanical Engineering at Carolina. One graduated last year, and he has a position in Mt. Pleasant with a construction company. My second daughter, one of her sons is a Major League baseball player, and her daughter lives in New York, and she's getting married next year. Her youngest has just graduated, all of them went to the University of Georgia. The oldest son of my oldest daughter is a professor at Coastal Carolina. So I have academia, I have baseball, I have engineers, and I'm proud of each one of them. It's fun to have eight grandchildren.

Dr. Disney: You took the words right out of my mouth. You must be so proud of your children and your grandchildren.

Gwen Howell: I am, I certainly am. I have every reason to be. Of course, I might be very prejudiced too, but that's okay, a grandmother can be prejudiced.

Dr. Disney: That's right. You've already talked about some of the activities you were involved in. I want to get a sense of the activities you were involved in, in terms of family, we talked a little bit about employment, volunteerism, community service. It could be a combination of before and after you were married. Tell us about some of the activities you've been involved in.

Gwen Howell: When my husband finished law school, of course, I worked as a secretary/administrative assistant for the state office of the National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis, that was in Columbia at that time. Then when we moved to Spartanburg, I was fortunate enough to be the secretary at the Episcopal Church of the Advent, which we attended. The secretary had to leave and one of the lawyers, I think, that my husband worked for suggested that I interview, and I was secretary of the Episcopal church until I had my second daughter. I have been very involved with the church since then, it's a huge part of my life, it's my second home.

Dr. Disney: How did you become a member of the South Carolina Mother of the Year association

and selection committee?

Gwen Howell: One of the best committees that I've ever served on was the South Carolina Mother of the Year committee. My cousin, Ann Perrin, was on it, and she was getting ready to resign, which I didn't really know at the time. She asked me would I be interested, and I said, "If the approve me, if they vote for me, I would love to participate if I can contribute". It's really one of the best committees I've ever had an opportunity to serve on.

Dr. Disney: Tell us a little bit about that service, what was that like serving on the committee in terms of your peers, the committee members, and also making the tough decisions you had to make to select mothers of the year.

Gwen Howell: It was really a pleasure to serve with such sophisticated, knowledgeable, caring members of the committee. I guess it was the most satisfying responsibility of any committee I had ever served on. The only regret that I had, and I think this is true probably of everyone else, was that we could not select but one of the many nominated. There are so many out there, to this day and then, that need to be recognized. It's just the way the world is, I guess. Each mother, in my opinion, has a PhD in a lot of areas, not just one. It's really been the only way, I think, that they've been recognized. It's just the only way I've ever noticed or ever been aware of that they are given any kind of recognition.

Dr. Disney: You kind of predicted one of my future questions which is; do you think women's work and women's roles as mothers are adequately recognized by society today? It sounds like you would say, "No".

Gwen Howell: That's an interesting question because I think when they are "only", in the public's eyes, a non-outside of the house working mother, I do not think that overall they're given enough recognition. In addition to that, I do think that those moms that do have a profession or work outside the home, and try their very best to be a good influence and a good mom, it's very, very difficult. They have to spread themselves pretty thin, I think. That's not always a good thing, but it's not because they're not trying. I hate to say it. Some people will say, "Oh, she doesn't work outside the home, she's got it made". Then there are those that don't work out of the home that say, "I don't know how she does it all. I do not know how working outside the home and then she takes care of the children and the husband and all the volunteer activities, etc." I think it's a really, really smart female if they can have a good balance with that. On both sides, working outside the home and not working. Does that make sense to you?

Dr. Disney: Yes, you've hit on so many important themes of this research project, which is first of all, you never ask a woman does she work, because all women work.

Gwen Howell: That's right.

Dr. Disney: It's do you work inside the home, outside the home, or both. You've just kind of clarified that beautifully. Then you talked about this issue of balance, which I was also going to ask you about. How were you able to balance raising your children, you worked as a schoolteacher, you worked as a secretary, you did a lot of volunteerism in your church and the Mother of the Year association, how were you able to balance all of your work inside and outside the home?

Gwen Howell: When my husband was in law school and I was working in an office, I had a wonderful, wonderful person that took care of my daughter, she was about a year old. She was a very caring black female with a wonderful sense of love. Therefore, I was very comfortable when I went to work. I did not get off until five. She didn't live very far, but I would take her home. I think that my daughter, the oldest daughter, has a wonderful sense of non-prejudice with all walks of life. Not only Caucasians, but black people, immigrants, you name it, she just has a sense. I think it was because she was small and she didn't recognize color. I don't know if I've expressed

that really well.

Dr. Disney: That's beautiful. How long was she cared for?

Gwen Howell: Two years. Then we moved to Spartanburg, and I was lucky enough, I found another black female that was smaller in size, but I was comfortable with her also. About two years, I guess, after we got here I expected my second daughter, so I resigned from the secretary of the church. Then I decided I wanted a little help during the week. I don't like to iron. I wanted somebody to iron, so I got a part time job at Converse College, so I could afford someone to come in two days of the week. I worked part time every day so I could afford somebody to come take care of her for a little while. That was interesting, I got to know a number of professors and the administrative people there. In face my children always, I think it was because my husband was that way and I was that way, we always felt it was important not just to make money, but for the responsibility of having a job. So they found themselves having to do it pretty early. I don't know if it has had bad effects, hopefully it has had good effects on the.

Dr. Disney: You talk really well about how women balance working inside the home, working outside the home, part time, being able to afford to hire help, whether it's with the house or with the children. That's all part of a series of choices that women and men, husbands and wives, mothers and fathers make. How well do you think women are able to balance all those choices today? You kind of talked through how you were able to do it.

Gwen Howell: I think it's more difficult today. I don't think that they have an opportunity to do as much volunteer charitable work as we did, because they're in an office or they're in the courtroom, or they're in a medical profession and they don't have the time. Particularly if they are married and have children. There are only so many hours in the day. I do think now, in 2015, with the economy like it is, I think more and more females are required to work outside the home. The economy has certainly hurt them, in the fact that they can't stay at home, there's got to be two salaries coming in, or two professions. I'm probably not being very erudite with that, but I'm being honest.

Dr. Disney: You're exactly right. I mean, that's what I've experienced. That's what I've observed. You're kind of reinforcing a lot of my hypotheses about the situation. Let me ask you this, a question I want to go back to; what does motherhood mean to you?

Gwen Howell: That's interesting, because I kind of got chills when you asked me that. I don't think anyone has ever asked me that. It means caring and loving, discipline, understanding, keeping your mouth closed at certain times, getting gray hair. It's beautiful, and it's absolutely a miracle when you birth a baby and you see the tiny little fingers, and all you want to do is you want everything in their life to be perfect. Everything. From the time you see them, as long as you're around. I think it's a whole circle, and it's lots of different slices in that circle. There's so many that you would end up getting a little, tiny sliver if you sliced the pie into servings, because it encompasses so many things. Motherhood is not just by itself. You've got a husband that helped you, hopefully, birth these children and stayed with you and understands when you are tired and cranky, and understands when you are happy and joyful. So many things that I might spend the next six months wondering if I said the right thing here today.

Dr. Disney: By mentioning a partnership, that also connects back to the question of balance, right? If a woman has a good partner, that can help with that balancing of work inside and outside the home.

Gwen Howell: Yes, it's teamwork, I think. They're a team of two, and sometimes one doesn't catch the ball and one doesn't throw it as well. Like football.

Dr. Disney: You may have already mentioned this, but I want to ask it again, the question's worded slightly differently. How did your membership on the South Carolina Mother association

committee impact you, impact your family, impact the community? Is there anything else you want to say about your role or your experience serving on that committee, and any impacts that it had?

Gwen Howell: Each mother that was selected, and particularly I can speak for the two that when I was president of it, or chairman of it, they were absolutely so thrilled to be selected. Of course, most of them are nominated by maybe a member of their family or a friend at church, different ways, and they were all so humbled, they couldn't believe it. It made us feel ecstatic. We were doing some thing really that was appreciated. A lot of their stories, I think, have made good impacts on the committee. We got to learn about different moms and what they had been through, if they had not had a college education and they were writing books and they were teaching school, because they had gone back to school. It was very rewarding to me to be on the committee to read about the ones that did not get selected, and of course the one that was selected. It was tough competition, and it was tough to make a decision each year.

Dr. Disney: You said that you were chair two years –

Gwen Howell: One.

Dr. Disney: Do you remember what mothers were the winning mothers?

Gwen Howell: The Mother of the Year when I was chairman, the first one, was Deane Risher from Camden. She was a very dynamic person.

Dr. Disney: I think we're going to get to interview her tomorrow, so I'm excited about that.

Gwen Howell: You will be very impressed with her. I really felt like I had a good Christian on my side that year. I hope I didn't offend her any because she really is dynamic in what she believes. Now, she has very strong beliefs, and it was wonderful getting to know her. Then the other one was a black lady from Myrtle Beach, I think. She was nominated by a professor from Coastal Carolina, Charles –

Dr. Disney: Is it Marjorie Mitchell?

Gwen Howell: I know who you're talking about, Janet Kotter, I think, nominated her. I can't think right now, I'm sorry. Anyway, she was outstanding and it was a pleasure to go down to the coast and have the newspaper come to write up, the Myrtle Beach News or something, I've forgotten the name of it. She was so thrilled and her family was so thrilled.

Dr. Disney: Did you participate in the ceremonies at the governor's mansion?

Gwen Howell: Yes, that was always a delight. The governor was always really, really excellent with the little children that came, the grandchildren of the Mother of the Year, all ages, and so was the first lady of South Carolina at the tea, she was always there. They could invite, I think it was about 100, maybe more, of their friends. We sent the invitation out, and they gave us the names. That was always special and happy, and of course it was fun to be there for me.

Dr. Disney: It sounds so great. What do you think are the most important issues facing women today?

Gwen Howell: There are a lot. I'm kind of glad I don't have to bring up children, because I don't know how I could adapt to all these different things, but I would have to. I think it's difficult for them to this day, because I think the news, most of the time, has all the bad things in it. If you want publicity, if you want to be good or bad or indifferent, you just do something bad and it's going to be in the newspaper and on television. That's not good. I want them to do more happy and positive and good things to inspire young people. I think that's tough for mamas now, and for daddies. I don't know if that answers your question or not.

Dr. Disney: It does. I think access to negative news and negative media, and certainly social media, the fact that everybody can constantly be public –

Gwen Howell: Don't get me started on that.

Dr. Disney: When I heard you speak, that's right away what I thought of was how there is greater access to a lot more negativity that we could shelter our kids from in previous generations.

Gwen Howell: Yes.

Dr. Disney: Technology, it's good and bad.

Gwen Howell: There are good things about it, but I think privacy sometimes is a good thing. Maybe not completely privacy, but I think pretty much so, because I think the world out there doesn't have everybody in it that feels like you do or feels like I do or feels like we feel about motherhood. They can pick up too much information about a good guy. I think it's my vintage too, Jennifer, that it's not because I didn't grow up with it, it's just that I see the harm sometimes that it can do. Maybe I see that too much, maybe I ought to start thinking of the positive things it does, but I haven't found any yet. I don't guess the people that do cellphones would like me very much, or computers very much, Facebook would not like me at all, and those other names, hashtags and all those things. They're not in the dictionary yet. I can Google them though.

Dr. Disney: Okay, let me ask you this; what does feminism mean to you?

Gwen Howell: At one time, it was a negative to me, because maybe I didn't understand it like I should have. I don't know that I understand – I think different people have different ideas and opinions of what it means. I think females should get, if they're doing the same job that the males are doing, they should be recognized and paid for that. I wouldn't like it if I were doing the same thing you were doing, and you got all the money and I didn't, and I knew that I was doing a good job, and I was performing well and my duties were on time and blah, blah, blah. I do think equal pay is important either way. I don't think a female should be overpaid if she's the CEO and the CEO over there doesn't get it, if they're in the same situation. I think it should be equal. It depends so much though on the person, in my opinion. Just because they are CEO or they're a vice president, they shouldn't just get a bonus, it depends on how well they perform, their performance. But then, I probably won't be hired anywhere as a boss man, you know, because I say, "You better do that thing right".

Dr. Disney: Do you consider yourself a feminist?

Gwen Howell: There again, what is the definition of a feminist?

Dr. Disney: That's a great question, I've been asking. I've interviewed women in Mozambique and Nicaragua, and I've asked them what feminism means to them, now I'm interviewing women in South Carolina, so I'm real interested in how people define feminism. I think, for me, what you said, feminism at its core is about equal opportunities, equal rights, equal pay for women and men. I think that really is a core element. I think feminism can mean different things to different people, but I think the idea of equality is probably at its core. I'm agreeing with you and your definition. Under that definition, do you consider yourself a feminist, someone who believes in –

Gwen Howell: Yes, I do believe in equal pay, equal rights, but I do think it should be based on not just because you're a female or you're a male or the color of your skin, I think it should be based on performance. If you can't perform, then it's understandable that you need to go into a different profession or find different avenues, if this one you're not performing in it, you need to find something else that you would be happier doing, and would be better, do a better job.

Dr. Disney: A true meritocracy.

Gwen Howell: Yes, that's a good word, I hadn't thought of that one, that's it. I like being with a professor.

Dr. Disney: Some people think we have a meritocracy in America, but some people seem to get paid more just because of their position in the company, right? As you were saying before, VP of this or CEO of that, but their performance may not warrant that pay. I think what you're calling for

is a true meritocracy, where one's merit would actually determine their reward. I think a lot of Americans would be happier if we lived in a more meritorious society.

Gwen Howell: I think so. They'd be happier in their profession, or whatever they're bringing home the bacon with, so to speak.

Dr. Disney: That's right. Do you have any questions for us, or any comments, or anything else you'd like to share about womanhood or motherhood?

Gwen Howell: First of all, I'd like to ask how you became a professor at Winthrop?

Dr. Disney: That's a great question. I had a wonderful mentor, I went to a college called Western Maryland College, it's now called McDaniel College, they changed their name. It's a private liberal arts college in Maryland. Had an amazing mentor, Christiana Nichols Lahey, I am everything I am today because of Christiana, because of the teacher who changed my life. She turned me onto the developing world and Mozambique. I did a dissertation topic comparing Mozambique and Nicaragua, women's roles in these two countries that have had social inspired revolutions that no longer exist. I went to CUNY, City University of New York, got my PhD. Then I applied for tenured track positions all over the country. Winthrop University was one of a handful who gave me an interview, and I came down and visited, this was in 2002. I loved the campus, I loved the students I met.

Gwen Howell: It's a pretty campus.

Dr. Disney: I loved my faculty colleagues. I remember the plane, I was flying back to New York and the plane was landing and I started to cry, because I thought, "Can I really leave this city I've come to love?" I came to love New York City, I lived there for eight, nine years. I kind of knew that this was the job for me, it was exactly in my field, teaching Women and Global Politics in a National Political Economy. So, I moved from New York City to Rock Hill, South Carolina. I met my husband at Winthrop, I have a five year old son, I've been here since 2002, haven't looked for another job since.

Gwen Howell: How wonderful. That gives me chilly bumps. It's been a happy, it's not an ending, it's just a happy going on.

Dr. Disney: Exactly. I appreciate you asking me that.

Gwen Howell: I'm interested in that, because I met you, and I'm interested in you. I'm going to ask her the same thing; where is she from?

Michaela: I'm from Summerville, South Carolina.

Gwen Howell: Oh, you lucky thing, with that pretty brick down there. It's gorgeous. Do you live in one of those pretty brick homes? If you don't, it's not a problem.

Michaela: I live in one of those crappy suburbs that they started building when everyone moved there.

Gwen Howell: What a lovely place it is. You went to public schools there?

Michaela: Yes, Knightsville, before we moved to North Carolina for a bit, then we came back and I went to Rawlings, Middle School of the Arts, and then Summerville High School.

Gwen Howell: Okay. Have you been down in that?

Dr. Disney: I've not. I need to go visit Michaela.

Michaela: You need to go whenever the azaleas all start blooming.

Gwen Howell: Yes. Let her know when, because then you just think you're in heaven. They're not brand new azaleas, they've been there, and been there, and been there.

Dr. Disney: This project has been amazing in helping with Martha and Shirley McHale, we've been driving across the great state of South Carolina, interviewing committee members and mothers, so I've been able to see a lot more of the state, due to this project.

Gwen Howell: Well, Shirley and Martha, as I told them when I hadn't seen them in a while, they have been ongoing wonderful members of that committee. I was on it when they got on it, and the committee is just like best friends. I was sorry, but it was time. I think at one time this committee, you probably have learned, when you became a member of this committee, you stayed on until you went to the beyond, either there or up there. It was wonderful because there are so many members that have stayed on it so long, so it has a lot of continuity to it, but then new blood always has good ideas. Younger ones came and Shirley was delightful. Shirley got Martha and she's just precious fun, too. I'm very happy that Ann Flynn, I talked her into being a member.

Dr. Disney: I did learn that today, that's right.

Gwen Howell: Her mother was the one that was on it, and asked me to join, and her mother and my husband are first cousins. So, whatever that is, if you study genealogy, I'm one cousin, second cousins, two removed or something with Ann. I'm sure it has been interesting to meet the different people, and I hope you've enjoyed listening to the elderly speak sometimes.

Michaela: I've been telling them it's like a whole different world to me, because I didn't grow up with the families that had established homes, so it's been just a completely different world, I've enjoyed it.

Gwen Howell: Good. It's not often that my vintage, I don't say that I'm the elderly, but I am the elderly. Every time the weather man comes on and says the index is so and so, be careful with the elderly and the little babies, and I don't know what in between. It's not easy sometimes, I think, for young people to enjoy talking to older people. Do you have a grandmother?

Michaela: Yes, they live in Ohio.

Gwen Howell: Oh, do you ever write her?

Michaela: I can't say that I've written her. We'll call and talk.

Gwen Howell: Do you text her?

Michaela: She's not that good at texting, but I call her.

Gwen Howell: But, do you ever write her a letter?

Michaela: No, I haven't.

Gwen Howell: You know what, I bet you if you wrote her a letter in the snail mail, she would absolutely love it. If you write her, tell her what you're doing, don't tell her anything bad, if you're doing anything. She would love to see that and read it, it's something in your hands that you don't have to go push a button and find the contacts and all that, she can read it over and over and over again. That's one of the things that I think is going to be really missed in the future, because everything is going to be in the clouds. Do me a favor, write her a letter.

Michaela: I will.