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Interview with Miriam Elizabeth McLaurin Gulledge

Miriam Elizabeth McLaurin Gulledge
SC Mother of the Year 2012

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Dr. Disney: Good morning. My name is Dr. Jennifer Leigh Disney and I’m honored to be here with the 2012 South Carolina Mother of the Year, Miriam Gulledge. Miriam, thank you so much for giving us your time today.

Miriam Gulledge: You’re welcome.

Dr. Disney: Miriam, you have the honor of being the final Mother of the Year selected. 2012 was when the South Carolina Mothers Association Committee decided to kind of stop the process of how they were selecting Mothers of the Year. How do you feel to have been the final Mother of the Year selected from the state?

Miriam Gulledge: Well, I guess it’s an honor but at the time I did not know it. But, I feel that, under the circumstances of what the national decided on, we just could not go with it, so I’m proud of our chapter in South Carolina that we pulled out.

Dr. Disney: That’s what it sounds like, there were some directions the national chapter was going that the state chapter couldn’t really support. So it sounds like you all made a good decision and congratulations on being the ultimate Mother of the Year. We’ll start by asking you just some personal information about yourself, tell us a little bit about when and where you were born and raised.

Miriam Gulledge: I was born about thirty miles from here, out in the country. My father had a forty acre farm, which I mean, that was home to me all my life. I thought nothing about how fortunate we were, but I had so many friends that had to move a lot, you know, they were sharecroppers and we didn’t, so that was very fortunate. We had, it was hard work and we were about eight miles from Cheraw and eight miles from Chesterfield, so whichever town we wanted to go to, we had about the same distance to travel. I have one brother who is six years younger than I and that was our family. My father died at 52, which is mighty young, with a cerebral hemorrhage. I was glad to get up passed that age. Of course, my grandmother McCray lived to be ninety-eight so I hope I got some of her genes, and she was such an inspiration to me and I’m sure she looks down from heaven and is just proud of our family.

Dr. Disney: I’m sure, I know she is. Is there anything else you want to share about your family or your early childhood experience growing up?

Miriam Gulledge: Well I remember from the time I was twelve until about the time I was sixteen, I worked at my uncle’s store in McFarlane, North Carolina. It was just a little store that
had anything you needed, groceries, feed, material to make clothes, ready-made clothes, shoes, even a little grill at the back so you could make sandwiches. But he would pick me up about six o’clock on Saturday morning and bring me home about twelve o’clock that night, so it was a long day. But I remember making six dollars a day and I remember paying for my music lessons and buying material for Mother to make me dresses. I would find something in the catalog and she could sit there and cut it out and make it without a pattern or anything. I did not inherit that trait. But yes, it was a good childhood.

**Dr. Disney:** That’s great. Tell us about your education and your young adult life and maybe what were your dreams, goals, and aspirations as a young woman.

**Miriam Gulledge:** Well, I finished the eleventh grade and I was so in love. I met my husband Robert in school, we went to school together and my daddy wanted me to go to school instead of music so badly, go to college you know. But we got married that summer and then we started having seven children.

**Dr. Disney:** Seven children? That’s amazing.

**Miriam Gulledge:** It was hard, but it’s been worth it, I tell you. And since he died, I guess it was my third daughter said, “Momma, you have seven children and there are seven days of the week.” So each child has a day to call me and check on me and make sure everything is going good, and they do it.

**Dr. Disney:** That was a beautiful story. Anne Flynn told us yesterday, “Make sure you ask Miriam to tell you about her seven children.” I also know that you have seven nicknames for each child, sort of like the seven days of the week that they each call. So, I’m supposed to ask you their nicknames and what day of the week they call you.

**Miriam Gulledge:** I don’t know about nicknames.

**Dr. Disney:** What would you tell us, anything about your seven children?

**Miriam Gulledge:** You’d like to hear about all of my seven children?

**Dr. Disney:** If you would like to, we’d love to hear.

**Miriam Gulledge:** My oldest, Ann, she works for a dentist in Cheraw. She has worked for several physicians, in fact my three oldest daughters work for Dr. Wiley, who was a physician in Chesterfield when they were in high school. And that, I think, taught them a lot about drugs, about medicine, and everything in there. And then Cathy, the second one, well she was Vice President of the Medical University at the hospital in Columbia, but she has just been promoted to Assistant Dean, so we’re proud of her. And Ellen, the third one, is a physical therapist. All three of my boys, well David works in the office at Duke Energy in Hartsville now, it is Duke
Energy now. Barbara, my youngest daughter is the commissioner for rehabilitation for South Carolina. And then, Dean, my youngest one, is in the, well I’ll tell you in a minute. He’s an electrical engineer in Clemson. It’s hard to keep up with them.

**Dr. Disney:** It’s hard, I have one I can’t keep up with. How have you kept up with seven?

**Miriam Gulledge:** It’s been hard, but then my grandchildren, let me tell you about them. My oldest, all five of my granddaughters have finished college and one is an orthodontist and one is a cardiologist. And two of them that have children, so my great-grandchildren have been lucky enough to stay home with them until they end school and everything.

**Dr. Disney:** You look too young to have great-grandchildren.

**Miriam Gulledge:** I am, but I have five now, so that’s a fact.

**Dr. Disney:** Five great-grandchildren?

**Miriam Gulledge:** Five great-grandchildren that I’m very proud of.

**Dr. Disney:** Wow, you must be so proud of your family.

**Miriam Gulledge:** Very much.

**Dr. Disney:** You’ve given us a small taste about why you were selected to be Mother of the Year. I want to go back to something you said earlier. When you worked at your uncle’s store, you talked about making six dollars a day and you could help pay for your music lessons. What kind of music lessons did you take?

**Miriam Gulledge:** I took piano.

**Dr. Disney:** Piano. So when your dad wanted you to go to college, it was for piano?

**Miriam Gulledge:** Yes, he played piano.

**Dr. Disney:** Your dad played piano too?

**Miriam Gulledge:** And I have learned, pretty much on my own, to play an organ, and I’m the organist in our local funeral home. And Anne Flynn just had a fit when she met the owner of it, he took her all through it and we had a good time there.

**Dr. Disney:** So music has stayed a part of your life? You continue to play piano and organ?

**Miriam Gulledge:** It is. In fact, right now, I play the piano for a Presbyterian church out in the country that couldn’t find anybody to play for them and they kept after me and I prayed about it,
but it was a hard decision, but I finally told them I’d help them until they could find somebody, which I don’t think they’re looking for, but I go to my Baptist church for Sunday school and then on to their church for preaching service so I can play for them every Sunday. So I’m still using it.

**Dr. Disney:** So you mentioned some of your grandchildren who are able to stay home, raising the young great-grands in their early years. You were raising seven children. Were you able to stay home to raise those seven children, were you working, tell us how that happened. I couldn’t imagine one salary being able to take care of that.

**Miriam Gulledge:** It was hard I’ll tell you, but both of us worked and my husband was a good provider, I mean he really brought home the bacon as they say, but it was hard. I was very lucky to have the people that I had to come to my house and keep my children when they were growing up. That was not unheard of then, but it is now.

**Dr. Disney:** So where did you work when you were working when your kids were growing up?

**Miriam Gulledge:** I was sort of a bookkeeper in our county for about all my working life. Automotive bookkeeper. I’ve always liked anything to with arithmetic, numbers. I still like to balance my checkbook. That’s what I did for my living.

**Dr. Disney:** So you mentioned a couple of the activities, the employment, things that you’ve done. Talk a little bit more about the activities you’ve been involved in when your kids were young, things that you did, and also as your kids were growing up, activities you got involved in, in terms of family, education, community, employment, any or all of those things.

**Miriam Gulledge:** I worked as a county bookkeeper for about seven years in Chesterfield County. I even ran for office of auditor, she retired, the lady that was auditor, that year. But I lost by eighty votes. But that was quite an experience.

**Dr. Disney:** Wow, running for office.

**Miriam Gulledge:** And our county is very large, as I found out. Trying to visit as many people as I could for that.

**Dr. Disney:** Was your opponent a man or a woman?

**Miriam Gulledge:** Man.

**Dr. Disney:** What was it like running for office as a woman in county-wide election, we mean we all know historically that politics has been a man’s sphere. Did it feel that way when you were running for auditor in your county?
**Miriam Gulledge:** I know of some people that promised to vote for me that took him around in their car to different precincts, it’s always been like that, but I think it might be getting a little better. And that’s one of the questions I noticed, you wanted to know if I’m a feminist. And I never have really considered myself one, but I looked it up in my dictionary, and I thought, “Well yes, I want equality for women as much as men.” In fact, I was talking to a friend of mine last night, she was a bookkeeper in Cheraw. I said, “Now had a man had that position as bookkeeper, when we did, I have an idea he would have made twice of what we made.” But, I was glad to get what I made.

**Dr. Disney:** And that’s certainly one of the issues women face today, equal pay for equal work, right, so you look back and think, “Well I’m not sure I was getting equal pay as a female.”

**Miriam Gulledge:** I do, and in fact I know I wasn’t because I wrote the checks. And I knew what everybody made.

**Dr. Disney:** So you’re jumping ahead in my interview, we’ll come back because I have a lot to ask, but I’m really glad you looked ahead and thought about it and said, “Well maybe I am a feminist.” Certainly running for office, I mean, that’s been a sphere that women have struggled within. And with equal pay for equal work. In addition to that is balance, balancing work outside the home and work inside the home. And you have had to balance, you must have been amazing, I mean to have balance raising seven children, working as a bookkeeper, being underpaid as a bookkeeper, running for auditor and doing other, I’m sure, volunteer work in the community, how were you able to balance everything that you did?

**Miriam Gulledge:** Really, I look back, in fact my youngest daughter asked me last weekend, she said, “Momma, can I ask you something?” I said, “Sure.” “How did you raise all of us?” I said, “With the good Lord’s help is all I can tell you because I look back now and think, “How in the world did I do it?” But I don’t know, I just it each day at a time, but that was nine people to cook for every meal, and so many times they had extra ones, you know friends and all. And all that washing and ironing and back in that time, when my husband came along, the housework and raising the children was women’s work. Now he had a big garden and he loved to watch it grow, but when it got ready to pick and can and freeze, it was mine then. And how, I don’t know, but I did it. It was hard, it really was, but I wouldn’t trade my seven for anything.

**Dr. Disney:** You just spoke beautifully about that division of labor that we’ve all grown up with, what’s considered men’s work and what’s considered women’s work and I think that that’s part of the difficulty for women to balance, because we’re working outside the home to bring home additional bacon, especially in your case, just like he to raise seven kids, but when it comes to work inside the home, he’s not also helping with that work inside the home, the cooking, the laundry, the cleaning.

**Miriam Gulledge:** Mine did not. I think now, maybe I think things are changing a lot. I’ve seen with my grandchildren, and even my children’s spouses, how they help a lot more than mine did.
**Dr. Disney:** Do you think that helps, having a partnership inside and outside the home, can help women and men engage in that balance a little bit easier?

**Miriam Gulledge:** I sure think so.

**Dr. Disney:** Ok, let me ask you this. What does motherhood mean to you?

**Miriam Gulledge:** Oh, I really don’t know how to describe it. It’s just wonderful, it’s love. It is love and mine, I don’t know, but so families I see don’t get along, fuss and fight, mine love each other and just enjoy being with each other, getting together, in fact we’re getting ready to go on our family vacation, we’re going to the beach this year, the last weekend this month, and we just have the best time.

**Dr. Disney:** And everybody’s going?

**Miriam Gulledge:** Everybody’s going, yeah. In fact, most of the time we have to get two houses and we call it a quiet house and a loud house. And I used to do that and I got smart and wised up. I realized from now on, we’re taking turns about this place to go for our vacation. I started with the oldest, then next year worked down so everybody has their year to do it.

**Dr. Disney:** Well good. So each, everybody has certain selection in where to go, or actually coming and being a part of the beach.

**Miriam Gulledge:** No, it starts out Ann has one year, then Kathy the next year, Ellen the next year, works its way down so that way they don’t have to do it but every eight years.

**Dr. Disney:** Well that’s good. That’s beautiful. What did it mean to you to be named the South Carolina Mother of the Year in 2012?

**Miriam Gulledge:** I was overwhelmed. I had no idea. I got home from church, it was January the 1st and I was fixing our lunch and my husband was in a carbon monoxide poison network back in ’91 and he never worked a day after that, it had him in, but the phone rang and it was Anne Flynn, I saw it was an 864 number and I thought, “Well that’s a Spartanburg/Greenville area number.” She said, “Is this the Gulledge residence?” I said, “Well it’s one of them.” There were lots of Gulleidges up that way. She said, “Miriam?” I said, “Yes.” She said, “This is Anne Flynn. I just called to tell you that you have been selected Mother of the Year.” And I mean, she talked a good while, Anne likes to talk, but when I got off the phone, I could not tell him what that conversation was about, I was just so emotional. But it was just, I don’t know, you don’t expect to receive anything that like that in your lifetime.

**Dr. Disney:** Tell us about what that year was like for you, the year of service.
**Miriam Gulledge:** It was busy. We had such a wonderful time at the state house with the governor. I didn’t wear my pin.

**Miriam Disney:** Governor Haley. Was it Governor Nikki Haley when you were there?

**Miriam Gulledge:** It was Nikki Haley. And then, yeah, our first female governor.

**Dr. Disney:** Exactly.

**Miriam Gulledge:** And then we went to the Governor’s Mansion for tea and just to see all the people from Chesterfield, I think that everybody was there just lined up, I couldn’t believe it, you know. That just made me feel extra special, to think that they would travel to Columbia for me. And then, the girls, Dave, and I went to Washington for the national that year. That was a good experience.

**Dr. Disney:** That’s great. That’s wonderful.

**Miriam Gulledge:** And my, the country council invited me and presented me a plaque of appreciation for Chesterfield County that year.

**Dr. Disney:** That’s wonderful. You mentioned your husband and carbon monoxide poisoning, did you have to, were you a caretaker for your husband for several years?

**Miriam Gulledge:** I was. In fact, I had three patients at one time. My daughter Ellen said, “Momma, I can’t believe you had three.” Well I told you my father died early, knowing my mother remarried, but he died. I had my mother and then I had this uncle that had diabetes real bad, he lost both legs. So I was his caretaker, as well as my husband’s, as well as working, and I look back and think, “How did I do that?” But I did, with the good Lord’s help. I’ve had a busy life, I’ll say that.

**Dr. Disney:** You have been, you seem to just epitomize what caring and nurturing and loving other people, what that really means. It seems like you’re a perfect fit for the Mother of the Year.

**Miriam Gulledge:** My grandson was down in the hospital recently and we were coming home and I had told his daddy, I said, “Now my bed is made and if you need to come to my hospital, bring him on.” Ann said, “Momma.” I had told her, I said, “I hope I just go to sleep and wake up in Heaven when I die, you know.” She said, “Momma, right when you get to Heaven, you’ll be a caretaker.”

**Dr. Disney:** Oh my goodness. So your kids–

**Miriam Gulledge:** They call me their caretaker.
**Dr. Disney:** You’re their caretaker. That’s beautiful. Let me ask you kind of a broader question about women. What do you think are the most important facing women today?

**Miriam Gulledge:** Well, like we discussed awhile ago, equal pay, equality, and everything. I think we ought to be paid as much, respected as much as a man.

**Dr. Disney:** Well said. So that connects beautifully to my next question which is, what does feminism mean to you? When you hear that word “feminism,” what does it mean?

**Miriam Gulledge:** It sort of, always I thought about somebody that stood out and was working for a cause or something like that. I always said I never really considered myself a feminist until I looked at the definition.

**Dr. Disney:** Do you think you are a feminist now that you’ve looked at the definition and reflected on your life’s work? What do you think?

**Miriam Gulledge:** Somewhat. Is that a good answer?

**Dr. Disney:** I mean, do you think that word can have different connotations for different people?

**Miriam Gulledge:** I do.

**Dr. Disney:** Do you think it has a negative connotation, despite what the dictionary definition of it is? I think that’s why some people don’t want to claim “I’m a feminist.” I’ve heard lots of young people in my classes who will say, “I’m not a feminist, but…” and then after the ‘but,’ they’ll proceed to say, “I want women’s equality, equal pay for equal work, equal respect,” everything you just said. And I’ll scratch my head and say, “Well that sounds like a feminist.” It sounds like when you looked it up in the dictionary, you had a similar experience.

**Miriam Gulledge:** It made me think, “Well maybe, yes I am.” Never thought I was, but I do believe in equality, not just in pay, but in everything.

**Dr. Disney:** I love that. I think that about having daughters and sons, too. When women and men raise daughters and sons, I can’t imagine someone not wanting their daughter to have the same opportunities as their son.

**Miriam Gulledge:** And my daughters have. They really have.

**Dr. Disney:** It sounds like they’ve been very successful in their life’s work, being women, workers, mothers, all those things. Is there anything else you would like to share with us about your amazing life, your years, Mother of the Year, or any questions that you’d like to ask us?
**Miriam Gulledge:** Do you think, I don’t know that you would know this, that we will ever have another South Carolina Mother of the Year?

**Dr. Disney:** That’s a good question. That’s a really good question for the committee to think about and talk about. My understanding is that people can still use the internet, like any one of us can nominate someone through the internet, through this kind of national. Whether another one will be chosen at the state level or not, that’s a good question.

**Miriam Gulledge:** Well I understood that you could nominate somebody for Mother of—

**Dr. Disney:** Or the National Mother?

**Miriam Gulledge:** But this, you didn’t have to be a mother. So that was one of the things.

**Dr. Disney:** We should ask Martha and Shirley about that. Kind of what is the relationship, since our committee process has stopped the one that you’ve been a part of and so many amazing women in the state have been a part of, is there any alternative process out there? Because it is sad, it’s wonderful and sad to think of you as the last State Mother.

**Miriam Gulledge:** It is, it really is. Cause just seeing all the National Mothers the year we went to Washington, it was just wonderful, it really was.

**Dr. Disney:** You’re making me think that since 2012, since 2013, 2014, there was no South Carolina Mother to represent South Carolina at the National Convention, is that right?

**Miriam Gulledge:** That’s right.

**Dr. Disney:** So that’s something we might want to think about. This reminds me of a question I didn’t ask you. You’ve obviously been a working mother your whole life. Do you think women’s work and women’s roles as mothers are adequately recognized by society?

**Miriam Gulledge:** Not really. Not unless it’s another mother, and then they would.

**Dr. Disney:** It seems like the Mother of the Year Award has been one way to recognize that work of women as mothers. So it’s a shame to see that state level process end.

**Miriam Gulledge:** It is.

**Dr. Disney:** I agree with you. Any final thoughts, any final words of wisdom or questions or comments you want to share with us?

**Miriam Gulledge:** No, I think I’ve said enough.
Dr. Disney: Well let me just say as a mother of one, how honored and amazed I am to be sitting across from a mother of seven, a working mother inside the home, outside the home, a caretaker of so many. Miriam Gulledge, congratulations on your Mother of the Year Award in 2012 and thank you for sharing your time and your story with us here today.

Miriam Gulledge: Thank you. I’m very proud of my family. I feel like they are the reason I’m Mother of the Year.

Dr. Disney: And you do have a Winthrop connection. Tell us that, your one connection to Winthrop.

Miriam Gulledge: My brother taught at Winthrop in the English Department for several years.

Dr. Disney: Your brother taught at Winthrop and this amazing interview will be available in the Louise Pettus Archives at Winthrop University. So thank you very much for your time.

Miriam Gulledge: Thank you.