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Interview with Joyce White Rheney

Joyce White Rheney
SC Mother of the Year 2001

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Dr. Disney: Good morning.
Mrs. Joyce Rheney: Good morning.
Dr. Disney: My name is Dr. Jennifer Leigh Disney and I am honored to be here today interviewing Joyce Rheney, the 2001 South Carolina Mother of the Year. Joyce, thank you so much for being here with us today.
Mrs. Joyce Rheney: You’re very welcome. Thank you for having me.
Dr. Disney: Why don’t we start by having you tell us when and where you were born and raised?
Mrs. Joyce Rheney: I was born in Hartselle, Alabama and actually lived there until I was in the third grade and moved to Athens after that. Of course, that’s where I was raised.
Dr. Disney: Okay. Tell us about your family and your early childhood experience.
Mrs. Joyce Rheney: I was going to tell you about my mother, my mother was Margaret White and my father was William McKinley White.
Dr. Disney: Do you have any siblings?
Mrs. Joyce Rheney: Oh I did, yes. There were seven of us.
Dr. Disney: So you were one of seven?
Mrs. Joyce Rheney: Yes, I was one of seven. And there are two who are deceased now.
Dr. Disney: So tell us anything you want to share about your early childhood experience as one of seven in Alabama.
Mrs. Joyce Rheney: Just, you know, it was, I was not born with a silver spoon in my mouth, but I learned early on that you earn what you work for, that’s how I was raised.
Dr. Disney: How did you make your way to South Carolina, how and when?
Mrs. Joyce Rheney: After I graduated from high school, I went to nursing school in Birmingham, Alabama and I met my husband, he was an intern and we married in 1953 and went to Charleston, South Carolina for his residency in pediatrics. And then from there, to Orangeburg, South Carolina.
Dr. Disney: So I jumped ahead by asking you the South Carolina story. I’d love it if you would tell us more about your education experience and your young adult life and what were your dreams and goals and aspirations?
Mrs. Joyce Rheney: Well I think my really real dream in high school was to go to nursing school, so I applied and was accepted into nursing school. I also have a twin sister, by the way, her name is Joy and she went to nursing school along with me.
Dr. Disney: Tell us about how you met your husband.
Mrs. Joyce Rheney: Well, he was interning in Birmingham, Alabama and I was a student nurse and I met him that way. Somebody introduced us.
Dr. Disney: Tell us about the early years of your marriage and then the birth of your children.
Mrs. Joyce Rheney: First, I went to Charleston to work right after I got married in 1953 and was in Charleston at Roper High School, in old Roper High School, and that was my early work. I became pregnant that first year after, I think it was eight months later. I was quite sick and I went to work at St. Francis Hospital because it was a much easier job than what I had, it was what they
called “colored surgery” at the time, it would be called “black surgery” now, it was old Roper and a great big ward of both men and women, divided of course, but just a big open ward so it was right, hard work. Being pregnant, I think I became a little ill at times and I think maybe the older and all these patients and everything, so I went to St. Francis and had an eight bed pediatric ward and usually we averaged four patients, they were never in that ward at that time. They were mostly tonsils, very few very sick patients, because I think most of those went on over to Roper High School. Of course, St. Francis became very big now and is part of Roper High School in Charleston.

Dr. Disney: So tell us more about the birth of your children.

Mrs. Joyce Rheney: Well, I was going to tell you that Johnny, who was born two months before we went to Orangeburg to live, and then after I got to Orangeburg, I had three other children. I worked for awhile for my husband in his office, but then became a homemaker and occasionally I’d have to go work in his office when his nurse was out. I had two more on the way that way.

Dr. Disney: How were you able to balance working inside the home and raising four children and work outside the home, and I’m sure there are many more activities that you’re going to tell us about.

Mrs. Joyce Rheney: I really didn’t work outside the home after I started having a family, except occasionally right at first I started to help Jack. But then, I stayed at home and raised my children and did not work outside the home. And I had some help, by then we could afford some help, so we had some help babysitting.

Dr. Disney: Tell us about some of the other activities you were involved in in terms of volunteerism, civic organizational work, church, that kind of thing.

Mrs. Joyce Rheney: Well, in the beginning, I was still involved in the Methodist church. At first, I belonged to St. Paul’s Methodist Church and somewhere along the way, it became very big and they decided to form a second Methodist church in Orangeburg and it’s St. Andrew’s. So we were some of the charter members who joined that church. Most of the young couples left St. Paul’s at that time and went to St. Andrew’s, it was very big. Over the years, membership has become old and we’ve lost a lot of members. But still very active in that, I’ve been on several committees and I still am active. I go to bible study, today was my bible study day, but I missed that to be here. Of course, Sunday school and church on Sundays. Some committees, different committees over the years, most recently I’ve just gotten off the trustees committee, but I’m also involved with the flowers at the church, but I’m not pulling weeds, just sort of worked with a landscaper on putting flowers out around the church this year.

Dr. Disney: Are there any other civic organizations in Orangeburg you’ve been involved in?

Mrs. Joyce Rheney: Yes, I served twenty years on the city council and I can’t recall when I got off the city council, but anyhow, involved during that time besides civic activities that concerned the council. We renovated Stevenson Auditorium and so I was in charge of that in decorating Stevenson Auditorium, it’s quite pretty. It was built about 1927, I think, ’27, ’29, something like that, and I’m proud of that effort.

Dr. Disney: Were you the only woman on the city council when you served?

Mrs. Joyce Rheney: No, there were two other women that served with me. It was a seven member council and the Mayor, it’s a mayor-council form of government, not just strong mayor council, so his vote was like ours.
Dr. Disney: So what was it like as a woman running for office and serving on the city council?

Mrs. Joyce Rheney: Well, my whole family was behind me, of course, when I did this. And our children were already in college, some of them out when I became a member of council. I never had complete backing of the family when I served. Our meetings were at night every other week, first and third Tuesdays.

Dr. Disney: You mentioned having four children. Do you want to tell us anything about your four children, what they do, your grandchildren, anything you want to share?

Mrs. Joyce Rheney: Wonderful children, all of them. Johnny, the oldest child, is a dentist in Orangeburg and he has just gotten married for the first time in December, so I have a lovely new daughter-in-law. She had been married and has three daughters by that marriage, two of them are already out of college and working and one is still in college. Let me see, Betsy, my daughter, lives in Aiken and she’s a mother of three children, two twins by the way. She’s the one with my great-grandchild right now. I’ve got to say that I lost my husband last year, in January, on the fourteenth. But he was, of course, beside me the whole time raising his children. Our third child is Bruce and he’s the vice president of a bank in Orangeburg and the father of two children, two girls. David, our youngest, is a lawyer in Greenville and he has three children.

Dr. Disney: That’s wonderful. You must be very proud of them.

Mrs. Joyce Rheney: Oh, of all of them. They’ve been wonderful.

Dr. Disney: What does motherhood mean to you?

Mrs. Joyce Rheney: Everything. The most important thing in my life.

Dr. Disney: What did it mean to you to be named the South Carolina Mother of the Year?

Mrs. Joyce Rheney: Shocking. I became very humbled over it, I just kind of found it very hard to believe that I was named South Carolina Mother of the Year, because I know so many other mothers that deserved it more than I did.

Dr. Disney: What was that year like, your year of service as the Mother of the Year? I know that there are often celebrations and the Statehouse and the Governor’s Mansion, talk to us a little bit about what it was like being the reigning Mother of the Year in 2001.

Mrs. Joyce Rheney: Again, very humbled. I think I was timid about talking about it. If I was approached about it, I would talk, but I just loved the idea of serving as South Carolina Mother of the Year, but again, I just had so many friends I just really wanted to share it with more than being the single Mother of the Year that year.

Dr. Disney: You’re very gracious.

Mrs. Joyce Rheney: No, I really mean it. and I still feel that way, that’s the thing. I feel honored to have been the South Carolina Mother of the Year, but again, I was just timid about it.

Dr. Disney: Did you attend the national convention to meet the other state mothers?

Mrs. Joyce Rheney: I did, I went to Portland, Oregon.

Dr. Disney: What was that like?

Mrs. Joyce Rheney: Wonderful. I loved meeting the other mothers, of course it was one from every state I think. We had a lot of activities. Our activities were mostly put on by Mormons, which I guess there were a lot of them, a lot of mothers were Mormon mothers and had as many as eight and ten children and things like this, and here I am sitting there with four.

Dr. Disney: Well I’m a mother of one and I sit in awe of a mother of four and how you were able to accomplish everything you were able to accomplish.
Mrs. Joyce Rheney: We were all, my husband and I, were very much involved in all of our children’s activities. Where they were, we were. They were so involved in school and sports that they didn’t have time for anything else. I had none that were any trouble and that, I am proud of. We knew where they were, when they were coming in, who they were with, which I think is so important.

Dr. Disney: It sounds like you were able to balance everything that you were doing, in part because you had such a wonderful partner. How important do you think it is for mothers and wives to have wonderful husbands and fathers that are willing to share that work inside the home and the family, as well as the civic work outside the home.

Mrs. Joyce Rheney: Well my father died when I was young, so when I told you that I had six other, you know, there were six others in my family, I saw the work that my mother did as a single mother. I don’t know how she did it because I had the help of my husband.

Dr. Disney: What an amazing role model your mother was raising seven children as a single mother.

Mrs. Joyce Rheney: And worked. She was a teacher then later, she worked in the coroner’s office.

Dr. Disney: So your mother really modeled for you.

Mrs. Joyce Rheney: She really did, she’s the strongest woman I know.

Dr. Disney: How do you think you think young women today, even in two parent households for two income earners, how do you think young women today are able to balance work inside the home, work outside the home, civic volunteerism, you know, all of those things?

Mrs. Joyce Rheney: I have it in my own family. My three daughters-in-law and my daughter work. I’ve seen what they can do, I don’t know how they do it. Along the way I’ve been able to help some. My daughter, as I told you, had twins and when she had those twins, I was up and down the road a good bit, she lived in Batesburg. And finally one day, I said, “Betsy, we don’t have a whole lot of money, but I’m willing to share with you what we’ve got and I think you need some help” because it really took four hands to take care of those babies and one of them had a little sickness. But anyhow, I’ve helped when I could.

Dr. Disney: It truly takes a family doing the work.

Mrs. Joyce Rheney: It does. It takes a whole family.

Dr. Disney: You mentioned Johnny, Betsy, tell us about your other children.

Mrs. Joyce Rheney: Bruce is the third one, and David.

Dr. Disney: Bruce and David. Anything else you want to share about them, what all your children are doing, your grandchildren, anything else you want to share about family?

Mrs. Joyce Rheney: Well they stay very busy. I cooked about three days a week, Johnny lives in town and Bruce lives in town, that’s the banker, and they come and have lunch. It’s a quick lunch, and then they get a quick nap and they go back to work.

Dr. Disney: Well that is great.

Mrs. Joyce Rheney: So I see them often. David is in Greenville and he this past week was in Charleston for a deposition and so he stopped on the way home to Greenville. I see less of him than any of them.

Dr. Disney: And Betsy, where’s Betsy?
**Mrs. Joyce Rheney:** Betsy’s in Aiken, in fact, she was over yesterday, she had to run and get a dental appointment. She works in human resources in Aiken. Betsy actually has divorced since well this past year, it’s final now. She has downsized, I was there to help her downsize. She has a patio home now and it’s wonderful. She’s doing real well, she’s coped with this.

**Dr. Disney:** So let me ask you a few broader questions. What do you think are the most important issues facing women today?

**Mrs. Joyce Rheney:** Oh gosh, they’re under so much pressure, they really are. I really think, I hate to get involved politically, but I think we’ve had a lot of change this last month in the whole nation, in South Carolina, as recent as yesterday with the decision that was made concerning our end. I don’t know, I just feel so sorry for the future, I’m scared for the future of my children, I don’t know. I just think they’re under a whole lot of pressure.

**Dr. Disney:** What kind of pressures, I mean, you’re thinking international pressures, domestic pressures, family, work?

**Mrs. Joyce Rheney:** I think family, work, yeah. I’m sure they’re worried about the future of their children, too. I think there’s been so much change and that concerns me.

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

**Mrs. Joyce Rheney:** Well I recognize it, and I think my friends recognize them, but I hope, I think they’re getting more recognized, I really do. I think more women are demanding equal pay and I think they should get equal pay for equal work. I think top positions are being given to women now, of course I think that’s just been coming about in the past few years. Before, you know, it was all men. I think they’re capable of doing and they should have these jobs.

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

**Mrs. Joyce Rheney:** Well I try not to think about it very much. Again, I like equal pay for equal work, I wouldn’t be at a band box or walking with a sign or anything like this, I wouldn’t be doing that.

**Dr. Disney:** So when you hear the word “feminism,” it makes you think of public protests.

**Mrs. Joyce Rheney:** Yes, exactly.

**Dr. Disney:** And while you would not participate in public protests, privately you believe in equal pay for equal work and equal opportunities for women and men and that kind of thing.

**Mrs. Joyce Rheney:** Absolutely. I do I would not protest, but I do believe.

**Dr. Disney:** I think a lot of women who mother sons and daughters, they think about making sure that their sons and daughters have equal opportunities, right, they want that.

**Mrs. Joyce Rheney:** And that’s the way I believe, I just really think so.

**Dr. Disney:** do you have any questions for us, anything you’d like to ask or anything you’d like to share about motherhood, womanhood, your experience interacting with other Mothers of the Year through this amazing South Carolina Mothers Association, the selection committee, just anything.

**Mrs. Joyce Rheney:** This committee has just been wonderful the whole time we stayed in touch. Janet Cotter was the first person I met on the Mothers Committee, and of course we have one that lives out south of Orangeburg, Callie Wienges. Janet has been my go-to really, often more than anybody, and of course Shirley a lot this year.

**Dr. Disney:** Shirley and Martha have been amazing.
Mrs. Joyce Rheney: Martha is wonderful.
Dr. Disney: They’ve been getting this book together of seventy years of Mothers of the Year and bringing me on board on the book project and now with this oral history archives, I’m just so honored to have met you and to be affiliated with the Mothers of the Year and this association, this project. I can’t thank you enough for sharing your life’s story with us and your words of wisdom. Do you have any advice that you’d like to share for younger generations of women and men that will be watching this video?
Mrs. Joyce Rheney: No, not really. Because I’ve gotten to the stage in life that I’m not going to give advice to anybody. In fact, my husband always told me, when I’d come in and say something about the children, how I was worried about this and that, he’d say, “Joyce, you’ve got to remember they’re grown, just let them do what they want to do. Keep your decisions to yourself, your thoughts.” And I have, I’ve tried to be that way.
Dr. Disney: It certainly appears that you have modeled through your life, you’ve kind of been a model—
Mrs. Joyce Rheney: I don’t think so.
Dr. Disney: In the same way your mother was a model for you, I think you’ve modeled for your kids how to be, how to make decisions and letting them make their own way. Thank you so much, Joyce Rheney, South Carolina Mother of the Year from 2001. It’s been an honor to have talked with you today.
Mrs. Joyce Rheney: Thank you.
Dr. Disney: Thank you very much.
Mrs. Joyce Rheney: I hope I’ve helped in some way.
Dr. Disney: You have.
Mrs. Joyce Rheney: And I think its wonderful that they’ll have this archive at Winthrop now.
Dr. Disney: We’re so excited.
Mrs. Joyce Rheney: It’s a good way to end our program.
Dr. Disney: I agree, and if you find anything else you’d like to contribute to the archives such as documents or materials, we’d love to have it.
Mrs. Joyce Rheney: I have a bunch. I’m not sure if the children want them, but I have a bunch of them.
Dr. Disney: Talk to your children, talk to your family, we’d love to have it. I’ll make sure we have some paperwork, I’ll be sure I get that to you via email.
Mrs. Joyce Rheney: I’ll see what I can find and I thank you very much.
Dr. Disney: So before we end, I just want to ask you. You had mentioned some of the changes in South Carolina that had happened recently. So I think right away about the confederate flag issue, of course the murders of nine people in church in Charleston. Do you want to say anything about those events in South Carolina, the impact?
Mrs. Joyce Rheney: The death of the young people, not the young people, the members of the church in Charleston was just terrible. I think the boy was really ill when it happened. We all had emotions over there, I had friends with tears rolling from their eyes when they were talking about it, it was sad. But I do want to say that Governor Haley, Nikki Haley, and Joe Riley handled that just beautifully. I thought the words that they chose to say, the way Nikki followed up with the removing of the confederate flag was good. The flag didn’t go up until 1962 and I had family
that fought in the Civil War and it meant, the Civil War meant as much to me as it did to anybody else, but the flag didn’t go up until 1962 and I thought it was time for it to come down and I’m happy that they have removed it. I really am, and I am so proud of Nikki Haley.

**Dr. Disney:** It sounds like I think that we’re both proud of the way South Carolina as a state, Charleston as a city, that our state and our city have come together in response to this great tragedy and been a model for the rest of the country.

**Mrs. Joyce Rheney:** Well I think so too and Nikki had a small letter, I think, she had an interview with somebody in the paper today, I think it was the Parker girl. I really read headlines, because I haven’t had time to read the newspapers these days, but she said, “We don’t even like to speak this name.” And I thought, “What did she mean by that?” It was the headline on the front page so I turned to page six and she was talking about she didn’t want to speak the name of the young boy and I thought that was good, I’ll go home and read the rest of that interview. It sounded like it was going to be a good article. But I’m very proud of her.

**Dr. Disney:** Well thank you for sharing your story about your family and the work that you have done being a nurse, raising four children, the role model you’ve been, your mother’s been, and even today, Nikki Haley as governor of South Carolina, just so many good role models. We appreciate your thoughts and again, congratulations.

**Mrs. Joyce Rheney:** You know, Nikki is from Bamberg County and she actually went to school in Orangeburg. And her parents had a dress shop in Orangeburg for several years.

**Dr. Disney:** Did your families know one another growing up?

**Mrs. Joyce Rheney:** No, I did not know her. She was older than any of my children, I think. But she also graduated from Clemson University and my children all graduated from Clemson University and my husband graduated from Clemson University.

**Dr. Disney:** Wow. Thank you again for your time today.

**Mrs. Joyce Rheney:** It meant to so much to have met both of you and I hope I’ve helped in some ways.

**Dr. Disney:** You have, very much.

**Mrs. Joyce Rheney:** Thank you.

**Dr. Disney:** Thank you, Joyce.