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Interview with Jean Orr Belcher

Jean Orr Belcher
SC Mother of the Year 2006

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

Jean Orr Belcher

Dr. Disney: Good morning.

Jean Orr Belcher: Good morning.

Dr. Disney: My name is Jennifer Leigh Disney and I am honored to be in the home of Miss Jean Orr Belcher, the 2006 winner of the South Carolina Mother of the Year award. Thank you so much for having us today.

Jean Orr Belcher: I'm delighted to have you.

Dr. Disney: Why don't we start with you tell us when and where you were born and raised?

Jean Orr Belcher: I was born in Spartanburg General Hospital, but I was raised in Inman, which is about twelve miles from Spartanburg, where my father was a pharmacist.

Dr. Disney: Tell us a little bit about your family and your early childhood experiences.

Jean Orr Belcher: My mother was a graduate nurse; she graduated from Spartanburg General Hospital School of Nursing. She went to Inman, which is about twelve miles above Spartanburg to work in a doctor's office and that doctor's office happened to be above my dad's drugstore. They were married after about two years of courtship, I think. So that's how that happened.

Dr. Disney: Did you have any brothers or sisters?

Jean Orr Belcher: Yes. I'm the oldest and I have a sister who is three years and nine months younger. And that's all.

Dr. Disney: Is there anything you want to share about your early childhood experience growing up in Inman?

Jean Orr Belcher: I grew up going to Sunday school and church every Sunday. When I became old enough, I began to work in my dad's drug store, just a little at a time. It wasn't a regular thing, of course I went to school and all of that, but for most of my life I worked. In the store, particularly if he had a sale, he always needed me. I worked behind the soda fountain and I did just about anything in there, but I did not fill prescriptions. That was left to him. He also had an assistant pharmacist in there with him, but I grew up doing that. It was always just a family thing. When I graduated from high school, I left and went to Furman University.

Dr. Disney: Great school. When you think back to your experiences at Furman and your young adult life, what were your goals, dreams, and aspirations at that time?

Jean Orr Belcher: Well, I wanted to teach and I taught first grade for a long time. Even after I married, I taught in Walterboro, where we moved.

Dr. Disney: So tell us about how you met your husband.

Jean Orr Belcher: When I was a senior in high school, he transferred to our school from another because his mother, who was a teacher, moved there, so her children came with her. He was a year younger than I and he was a junior while I was a senior. That's I met him. When I graduated and went on to Furman, we continued to keep in contact. At that time, North Greenville was not the senior college that it is now. It was a junior college and he went there and I went to Furman. But we had a friend who was the librarian at North Greenville who would come down and get me and take me there so I could spend the weekend with some girls. It was not long distance between North Greenville and Furman, so we stayed in contact and he would come down.

After I graduated from Furman, I taught for one year in Greenville, and this is odd to say, but my first year of teaching was my best. The students were well-behaved, they wanted to learn. It was just a delightful experience. I thought that your first year would be the most difficult, but this one was just a real pleasure. Anyway, we were married after that first year. Then we moved because he was going to be a minister and we moved to Durham, North Carolina, but the seminary was just eighteen miles away in Wake Forest. He drove part of the time, and somebody else drove part of the time. He had friends and they sort of switched off. But all I had to do to get to school was cross the high way. It was very easy. We found an apartment that was close to the school, so I had no problem. I taught there for three years, until he finished seminary.

Dr. Disney: Did you stay in that area or did you move again?

Jean Orr Belcher: During the time he was in seminary, we had a seminary church in the lower part of North Carolina and we went every other weekend. We maintained friendship with those people through the years. But that was just until he finished seminary. He accepted a call to the First Baptist Church in Barnwell, South Carolina.

Dr. Disney: How long did you live in Barnwell?

Jean Orr Belcher: Nineteen years.

Dr. Disney: There's something prominent about Barnwell.

Jean Orr Belcher: Does the name Solomon Blatt mean anything to you? Or Edgar Brown? They were two of the most powerful men that South Carolina has ever had in their government. Blatt was the Speaker of the House.

Dr. Disney: Many people call Barnwell the political capital of the state.

Jean Orr Belcher: Yes, that's exactly right. We were there during the time that they were very prominent. Mr. Blatt and my husband were the closest of friends. Mrs. Blatt was a lovely person. And although they were Jewish, it was amazing that they invited the ministers of the town to their home once a year for a meal.

Dr. Disney: What position did you say that Mr. Blatt held? Was he the Speaker of the House?

Jean Orr Belcher: He was the Speaker of the House of Representatives for years and years. His son was Solomon Jr. and lived there as well and worked in that law firm with him. Solomon Jr. became a judge. I am not positive, but the last I heard, he was in very, very poor health and he's bound to be way, way up in years by now, and I'm not sure that he's still living. The Blatt family meant a great deal to us. Mr. Brown and Mr. Blatt lived not too far apart. They sometimes didn't see eye to eye, but they worked together to make things smooth.

Dr. Disney: So tell us about what kinds of activities you were involved in. You can talk about before and after you were married, during your nineteen years in Barnwell, in terms of family, church, working outside the home, community. Any activities you were involved in that you'd like us to know about.

Jean Orr Belcher: Most of the activities after we were married involved church. I was the church pianist and, of course, that meant choir rehearsals. I also worked with the smaller children in Sunday school – four year olds.

Dr. Disney: Tell us about the birth of your children.

Jean Orr Belcher: The first child was born in Mobile, Alabama. I did tell you that we went to Mobile, did I not?

Dr. Disney: I don't know if you mentioned Mobile.

Jean Orr Belcher: After my husband graduated from seminary, he had a two year internship in a large, four-thousand member church in Mobile, Alabama. The pastor there came to the seminary and interviewed students for his assistant. He kept one or two assistants at a time and trained them in how to preside, how to baptize properly, how to do things, and he did it in a dignified way, which we appreciated. He was a wonderful held and we stayed there for two years and our oldest son was born there and I've often thought how fortunate we were that we were there when he was born. He was a footling breech and we did not realize that until it was time for his birth. Had I not had that specialist, I don't know if we'd have him. It was a difficult, long, about 22 hour labor. But he was as healthy as he could be and has prospered and grown just fine. It was a difficult birth, but I got along well. I've always thought that it was just a blessing that I was there. I didn't have any troubles with the others, just that first one.

Dr. Disney: You have two sons and two daughters, is that right?

Jean Orr Belcher: That's right. The other three were born in Barnwell.

Dr. Disney: So why don't you tell us about each of your four children anything you want to share about them? Anything about their birthing experience, growing up, or what they're doing today.

Jean Orr Belcher: The oldest one is the Chancellor at Western Carolina. He has a graduate degree from the Eastman School of Music in Piano. He still uses that and he came here and did a concert once. He does not allow that talent to go away and he keeps up the practice. He has a piano of his own. His wife is a wonder and she has a marvelous voice. They do joint concerts and use them occasionally as fundraisers.

The second son was the President of the Mary Black Foundation in Spartanburg for close to twenty years. All of his children went to school in Spartanburg and graduated there. Now he is working as the Vice President for a foundation in Asheville. His wife is a minister and she worked for a long time for hospice after they moved. But her territory took her from Asheville to Spartanburg and she kept it for a number of years, but she's not working right at this moment. I don't know what she plans to do after that.

The third one is a daughter, who is here. She graduated from Furman in voice performance. She was the director of music at North Western High School for many years. They did marvelous productions. Her husband is also a graduate from Furman and he has a beautiful voice. He's a music graduate in voice. He can build almost anything, so he built the sets for her productions. But one morning, she got up and found a note on her kitchen table from the older daughter. It said, "Mom, do you think you have time to talk to me today?" and she gave up that music immediately because it was taking her time away from her children. So she is the test coordinator now for North Western High School and it doesn't take as much away from her home as the other did.

Our fourth child is a daughter and she started off working with the Computer Sound Corporation of America (?) and worked there for a long time out of her home. The headquarters was in either New York or Washington, I don't remember, but she did it online and it worked fine until the financial crunch came again and she had to get a new job. They discontinued the online part, so she couldn't do that any longer. She works now for a company in Huntersville, just above Charlotte and I think it's a tire company. She's still a computer worker. She can make a computer go and she knows all about it. If I have something wrong with mine, she can fix it.

Dr. Disney: You have very talented children and they express their talents in diverse ways. You must be very proud.

Jean Orr Belcher: We are very pleased. My fourth daughter married a man from Furman – and all of my children were Furman graduates. Neither of the boys married girls from Furman, but both of the girls did. The second daughter’s husband repairs musical instruments. Bands at schools send their instruments to this company and he knows enough about them to fix them. He’s had that job a long time.

Dr. Disney: Do you have grandchildren as well?

Jean Orr Belcher: Yes. The older son and his wife were older when they married, so they don’t have children. The second one has two – the older grandson is getting a PhD from the Eastman School of Music in music theory. I got particularly amused by him one time. He was playing for church and I wanted to hear him and I sat just where I could see him. Well, all of a sudden, I saw the backs of music, but I felt I couldn’t see his face. So I said to him afterwards, “Owen, why did you put all of that music up there?” and he said, “So I couldn’t see you looking at me.” I can appreciate that.

The second son’s daughter is a Furman graduate and she has just moved to North Carolina and she’s going to be a veterinarian. It’s the University of North Carolina School of Veterinarian Medicine.

My first daughter lives here and has two daughters. The oldest one is a rising sophomore at Furman. She is going to Chile for her second semester. I think that’s interesting. I don’t know why, but I do know her interest is nutrition. She has taken over her mother’s kitchen a couple of years ago. She loves to cook. The younger one is a rising senior. She was the head of her academic class her junior year, so I don’t know what she will do. She is an avid reader. We used to be able to go to church on Wednesday night and we had supper before the evening service. She’d bring a book to read while she ate and I’ve never seen a child read like that. Of course, that improves her vocabulary and her written work and so forth. I feel like that will be to her advantage in the long run.

My younger daughter has one son, who is a rising fifth grader. He’s the youngest and he does quite well. He is particularly gifted with the computer.

Dr. Disney: You have an amazing family – your children and grandchildren are so successful. Let me ask you this: what does motherhood mean to you?

Jean Orr Belcher: It’s nearly at the top of the list. My relationship with God is the first, but that would be second. I don’t know what I’d do without them. Of course, my marriage is at the top, too, because I never have had another boyfriend and he is so ill now and that breaks my heart.

Dr. Disney: It sounds like you two have had a real partnership, a lifetime partnership.

Jean Orr Belcher: Yes we have. It’s been good. We’ve been married sixty-one years.

Dr. Disney: I was just going to ask that. Wow, sixty-one years. Congratulations. What did it mean to you to be named the South Carolina Mother of the Year in 2006?

Jean Orr Belcher: First of all, it floored me that I would even be considered. That was a highlight. It really was a highlight for the entire family. It will always remain one of the nicest things that ever happened to me. I am very grateful.

Dr. Disney: Are there any experiences you had that year that you'd like to share with us? Going to the Governor's Mansion, meeting the other mothers of the year, meeting the committee members?

Jean Orr Belcher: I did enjoy meeting the other mothers. Going to the Governor's Mansion was a special treat.

Dr. Disney: We're very proud at Winthrop University to be a part of the project of the seventy years of remarkable women that were put together by Martha and Shirley. Any materials you have given or want to give are housed at the Louise Pettus Archives and these oral histories will be available through the Digital Common on the Louise Pettus Archives website. We are so honored that you all are sharing this wealth of experience and information with us.

Jean Orr Belcher: I am delighted to do it. I have such fun recollections. Is there another mother of the year here?

Dr. Disney: In Rock Hill?

Jean Orr Belcher: Yes. Do you remember at the last meeting we had, we came to Winthrop and right before we left there was a lady there, and she told me she was moving to Westminster Towers and I cannot remember her name, but I do not know who she is.

Dr. Disney: I will look into that because on our list of interviews, you're the only mother we have in the Rock Hill area to interview. Martha and Shirley were committee members, but you're our only mother in Rock Hill. But if I find out, I will let you know.

Jean Orr Belcher: I thought about that so many times because I wanted to get to know her well if she's here, but I cannot remember her name. I have looked at my list, but nothing rings a bell.

Dr. Disney: Let me ask you some broader questions that you can reflect upon, given your experience. What do you think are the most important issues facing women today?

Jean Orr Belcher: Well if they're mothers, their families and their children. If the mother does not give leadership, the children are not going to progress as they should. They can go in any direction if they're left hanging. The father is usually working with his business somewhere and he isn't home as much with the children as the mother is. At least that's what it was in my family. I know women work more now than they used to and it's important, I think, if a mother needs to work, she has the correct person to keep her children. I was very fortunate. I did not

start teaching until my last child was three. I wouldn't have left her then except for the fact that it was an elderly couple that wanted to keep her. She sat with them in church and loved them like they were her grandparents. They knew exactly how to deal with her in church and everything else and she got along very well. One day, right before she got tired, she whispered in the man's ear, "Are we going to have any brown rice for dinner today?" I'll never forget that. They kept her in their home; she was the only child they had there and they would take her on outings and it worked quite well. Otherwise I would not have left her.

Dr. Disney: You've mentioned something really important: the struggles with balance that working mothers often have to deal with – balancing their responsibilities at work and the love, care, and leadership that they need to provide at home. Talk a little bit about how you were able to balance those things and then how younger mothers today, maybe both of whom the mothers and fathers may be working full-time, how they're able to balance that.

Jean Orr Belcher: I think that would be very difficult, the way that mothers have to do that today. As I said, she was the fourth child and the others were in school, and I would pick them up and then come home. My rule at home was: take a break, get something to eat, but get your homework done before night hours and don't wait until the last minute to do it. I had meetings at night sometimes and then they were too tired after playing ball all day long in the afternoon, or something like that to properly do your work. We had four valedictorians, but they got their work done before they went out. Sometimes they had to work later at night because sometimes they had that amount of homework, but they didn't wait until then to start it. You just can't absorb it like that.

Dr. Disney: Do you think mothers today, who are working mothers, may have a harder time balancing than you had?

Jean Orr Belcher: I think that they do have a harder time balancing, particularly if they are gone all day. I would get home and do some work at home, but I would get home in time to see that they got started on their work and got a lot of that done. Most of the time they'd be done before I had anything at night, and of course I didn't have everything every night and they didn't either. It was never my policy to let someone wait until the night to start working on something that was going to last into the wee hours. I would always call out questions if they had a study sheet.

Dr. Disney: Well, you did something right if you raised four valedictorians.

Jean Orr Belcher: Well, they came through and they have been successful in their work. I feel that the background is so important in education. If you get a good background, you can go forward.

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

Jean Orr Belcher: Probably not by the general population. I don't think so. It's a full-time job and it's not always easy to balance. I realize now that probably more demands are made of women that weren't even then when I was mother of the year and it seems to have increased. Somehow, mothers need to plan to give as much time as they can to their children.

Dr. Disney: You talked about increased demands on women and I'm hearing this from the interviews – when men and women are both working outside of the home, the husbands and fathers are giving a little more help inside of the home to help with that balance, maybe more than they did in past generations.

Jean Orr Belcher: I hope so. If they have a job where they get off at a reasonable hour, they can be a great help. Sometimes I don't think they have the patience to deal with the nitty gritty. They certainly can be supportive.

Dr. Disney: Your husband was a minister, so I know he had a lot of demands on his time.

Jean Orr Belcher: Oh yes. Night and day and in between.

Dr. Disney: That's a twenty-four hour job. You have to be on-call if people need that spiritual support. And I know that you had to be there to be his spiritual support as the First Lady of the church.

Jean Orr Belcher: I played the piano for the services. Of course that meant choir rehearsal and that type of thing, so at the time I had to balance and maneuver.

Dr. Disney: With four children, that's a lot.

Jean Orr Belcher: That's one reason we had to do things in the afternoon and a lot of it beforehand. I wasn't about to leave them bogged down, so we had to get it done. That was another reason.

Dr. Disney: What does feminism mean to you?

Jean Orr Belcher: It's something I think we might be losing some of. Feminism, it just means being a mother. There's just a difference between the male and the female, and feminism usually means being a little bit more gentle and a little bit more understanding sometimes. I think sometimes fathers get so wrapped up in their businesses and that type of thing, which is perfectly natural, and if they have to make a living for the family, then they have to. I feel that sometimes there's a difference there, but we never had a problem with that.

Dr. Disney: So feminism, it sounds like to you, is a way to recognize some of the special qualities that women can bring to the household, to the family, to the workforce, to society.

Jean Orr Belcher: That's right, but it's important for the father and the mother to work together and I think that was a large part of our feeling. My husband wanted me there for them, but he also knew I had church responsibilities. He accepted that and we would just work together on it.

Dr. Disney: It sounds like you both were able to work as a team – with your church responsibilities, with your family responsibilities. Would you say that's true?

Jean Orr Belcher: It all worked out. If one goes one way and the other goes another, you've got a bad situation going. We never had that problem.

Dr. Disney: Do you have any advice for young women who are struggling with balancing family, responsibilities at work, raising children, how to be true partners with their spouses? Any advice you want to share?

Jean Orr Belcher: I think they need to discuss it out of the presence of their children. They need to discuss what they need to do and why and just have an understanding. If there's a problem, I don't remember ever having to discuss that with my husband. He was the son of a teacher and perhaps that had something to do with it because he saw how his mother had to balance it.

Dr. Disney: So you both just tended to see eye to eye on things?

Jean Orr Belcher: We tended to see eye to eye on things to begin with. She taught and her husband was a farmer. She helped him when she could, but she taught school and she did what she needed to do at home. I think that had an influence on him.

Dr. Disney: You and your husband clearly shared the value of education and instilled that into your children.

Jean Orr Belcher: Oh, yes. No question about that. It is so important. I don't know how families work when one goes one way and one goes the other and the children are caught in the middle.

Dr. Disney: Do you have any questions for us or anything else that you would like to share?

Jean Orr Belcher: I don't know of a thing. You've covered it well.

Dr. Disney: Well, you've made it easy. You helped us cover it well.

Jean Orr Belcher: Let me show you a picture. That was when we left Walterboro. I was sitting at the piano. For our fiftieth wedding anniversary, we did something a little different and you might find it interesting. I can't think of the inn in Charleston, but it was my husband's idea. Instead of having a drop in or anything for it, we had all the children and their spouses meet and spend the weekend with us at the Bluegrass Inn. It's a beautiful inn in Charleston. I took with me, for each child, one of my wedding gifts to give to them. Each year there is a concert at Furman in our name and honor. We used to go every year, but my husband isn't able to do that

anymore. My musician son was there this year and he said they had a wonderful crowd and it was a wonderful concert. I was so pleased that they had such a good group there and that it's still going. It was a wonderful gift from my children and a special gift and I'm delighted. It's something that will continue through the years we hope.

Dr. Disney: We hope. Your names will carry on and so will all the good that you've brought to Furman.

Jean Orr Belcher: Well, we've tried. We brought them some good students. That the main thing we've done – just provided a few students for them.

Dr. Disney: Great students from Furman and great contributors to the larger society. Well we want to congratulate you, Jean Belcher, the 2006 South Carolina Mother of the Year. Congratulations, again and thank you for sharing a little bit of your time and your life with us. We really appreciate that.

Jean Orr Belcher: I appreciate your coming and it's been delightful to talk with you.