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Interview with Jean Ishbel Long Dowty

Jean Long Dowty

SC Mother of the Year

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Dr. Disney: Good morning.

Jean Ishbel Long Dowty: Good morning.

Dr. Disney: My name is Dr. Jennifer Leigh Disney and I am honored to be here with Jean Dowty, who is the mother of a South Carolina Mother of the Year. Jean is Judy Pittard’s mother. Judy Pittard was the 2007 Mother of the Year. We are honored to talk to the mother of a mother of the year, so we can see where Judy learned all of her tricks of the trade and got all of her wisdom. This is a real honor for me and I just wanted to thank you for being here Jean, we really appreciate it.

Jean Ishbel Long Dowty: Thank you.

Dr. Disney: Would you start by telling us a little bit about when and where you were born and raised?

Jean Ishbel Long Dowty: I was born in a little village about eleven miles from Oxford in England. We were kind of a self-sufficient little village. I always like to tell people we had three things that kept us together. We had a news agent because we did have radio and we didn’t have television, of course. We read everything and I still like to have the paper first thing in the morning to look at the news. We had a pub for social events, known as the Carpenter’s Arms. When you think of a pub, it’s where people go to drink. Well that was not always the case. Families came to have meals there and there was a little garden where you could have your children run around. The third thing we had was a little Methodist chapel, so we were covered on the spiritual side. It was a little self-contained community. We were outside of the town of Witney, which, at one time, was the blanket capital of the world. The blankets were made from the wool of the sheep from the Cotswold Hills. Unfortunately, people no longer want wool blankets, so the tradition has died out. Factories are now made into flats, apartments. There was a lot of glove making there and in fact, there is a letter from Queen Elizabeth I asking for a pair of gloves to be made in Witney by the glovers there. She was not going to pay for it probably; she had a habit of asking for things and getting them, of course.

My father was a blacksmith and my earliest memories are of playing in the blacksmith shop. I had my own little anvil and little donkey shoes and a hammer. What a wonderful place to be – you could get dirty and no one really bothered, but I was with my father and that was important to me. Unfortunately, I did not have a relationship with my mother, not because of her fault, but because she had been ill, even before I was born. In fact, I have been told that she was told by the doctor that the best thing for her health problems would be to have a child. She was going through a change of life and the best thing was to have a child, which was why I was born. My only memories of her, unfortunately, are of her in bed either in a hospital or a nursing home. That’s a gap for me, but I never felt unloved. I had a sister who was fourteen years older than I was and she took care of my. I adored my father. There came a time when I think I was about eight, and because my sister was older and married and had her own family, I was sent to live with
my aunt, my father’s sister. What a blessing that was to me. She was the biggest influence in my life. She had such a positive attitude. She was my second mother, really. In spite of a lot of hardships that she endured, she was always positive. She had this outlook on life, and she suffered a lot from arthritis, but she always said how thankful she was to get out of bed in the morning. She said, “If I didn’t have to work, make money, I’d lay in bed every morning because everything hurts so much.” That was her positive outcome she got from this. Her constant thing to me was, because I was a teenager and going through a lot, was count your blessings, name them one by one. That was one big message I got from her. I lived with her until I was old enough to go out to work. During the war I joined the Land Army, which was an organization set up. We had uniforms and rules and everything. It was set up for the women to take the place of the men who were called out. We worked on farms and logging. Some women and girls really worked very hard. Sometimes the employers were farmers who did not want women there in the first place; they didn’t think the girls could do the job, so they didn’t have a happy life.

I was fortunate to be sent to a girls’ boarding school, where I was in charge of maybe 300 chickens. I dug potatoes, I planted, I weeded, and I cut grass. It was a wonderful time for me, really. We were in a fairly safe area. I was away from the cities and the bombing and everything. That was my early experience.

Dr. Disney: I am so glad we are interviewing you because you bring an international experience to our conversation, as well. You are the first internationally born person that we are interviewing. Tell us about your education and your young adult life.

Jean Ishbel Long Dowty: I started in a school run by the Methodist church. When I went to live with my aunt, I went to a school run by the Church of England, St. Matthew’s. At age eleven, we took exams to see whether we should go to the technical school or the university. I was a very poor student, but I got into the grammar school. It was a girls’ school and we wore uniforms, but we wore uniforms all through school. I took Latin, French, and German; I did poorly in everything. I pursued French throughout school, but I did not like it. I was not good at math; that was a real pain. I liked English literature, history, and geology. That was my passion; that’s what I liked. We finished school at sixteen. I had no desire to do any more education. I wanted to go and the war was going on. Things were very touchy, at this time especially. We just didn’t know what was going to happen. Germany had taken over Europe and much of the rest of the world, like North Africa. I just didn’t see any point in going any further. I wanted to experience life while it was available and just live for the moment. That was the way I was.

I worked in an office and I’m sure it was like a file clerk. But then I was seventeen and I had to do some sort of war work, so that was when I went into the land army. I have taken courses in the States, you know, at community colleges.

Dr. Disney: When you were a young adult, before you got married, what were your dreams, goals, and aspirations? You’ve talked about how living in war time really does shape and affect one’s dreams, goals, and aspirations.

Jean Ishbel Long Dowty: Yes, it does. You feel that you live for today because you don’t know what is going to happen. Things were so uncertain.

Dr. Disney: I think that’s really important point and I’m glad that you made it.
Jean Ishbel Long Dowty: I also thought I wanted to be a librarian because books were so important to me.

Dr. Disney: I share that value. Tell us about how you met your husband.

Jean Ishbel Long Dowty: I went to a U.S.O dance. My husband was in the 98th American General Hospital. He had been hurt while he was in France a few days after the invasion or maybe a month after the invasion. My friends had been to the dances there because the Americans would bring around a bus to pick up all the girls so they could come to the dance. My friend would say, “Oh, the food is so good. They’ve got chocolates there.” It was things we hadn’t had because they were in short supply. I resisted for a long time. I was not a social person at all. I didn’t want to be involved in anything like that, but they kind of persuaded me to go. I went once and I said, “Okay, I’ve done it, but no more.” The next day I got a message from my friends that this G.I. said he’d met me and he’d really like to see me more. I didn’t have any idea who that was. So I went out with them – it was a group of us girls and a group of the Americans. I got to know him and I found out that Americans may be – some of them might be alright. I had not been impressed before. Eventually we got married, but probably way too soon. We were married the following April and I think I met him in August. Again, it was war time; that’s an excuse that I use.

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

Jean Ishbel Long Dowty: Well, our first year of marriage, I think we spent maybe six weeks together because he’d been sent back to France. He was sent back to the States in September of the year after we married. I had to wait to be able to come over because you had to go through a lot of procedures to be able to get transport over. I finally got transport in the following April of 1946. I came over on the Queen Mary, which was still a troop ship. It was loaded with women and children. Most got seasick, not because of the motion of the boat, but because we were introduced to this rich food that we had not had in six years. I didn’t get seasick, and was one of the lucky ones. I landed in New York on April the 4th, 1946. Your husbands had to sign for you to allow you to come into the country. In fact, my mother-in-law had to sign a form saying she would be financially responsible for me when I came here. My mother-in-law lived in Washington, D.C., so that was my first experience. My first sight of a different country was the separate restrooms, colored and white, and separate places you could go to. I had no experience of that. When the American soldiers came to England, they had asked, “Where do we go? Where is our theatre?” You come to our theatre; there was not that separation.

Dr. Disney: You didn’t have the segregation in the UK that the U.S. had.

Jean Ishbel Long Dowty: No. The reason was because I did not have my first sight of a black person until I was eleven. That was when a missionary brought a child to school. My mother-in-law was very prejudiced; she came from North Carolina. I was horrified by the way that the people talked because this was something new to me.

Dr. Disney: And it just didn’t seem right to you, it sounds like.

Jean Ishbel Long Dowty: No. That was a very negative thing. My mother-in-law from South Carolina cooked green beans floating with fat back. I was not used to this food and I became pregnant after, which made it even worse. We moved to North Carolina for a short time when my husband rejoined the military, but my first child was born North Carolina. He was delivered by the same doctor who had delivered my
husband. It was at home, of course. I had to lie in bed for ten days and there were certain things I wasn’t supposed to eat; it was so different. My husband rejoined the military and we, at first, went to Fort Knox. Then we went to Albuquerque, New Mexico, where Judy was born. I had a boy and a girl; two children. That should have been fine, right? From New Mexico, we came back to Fort Meade in Maryland and my third child was born, another girl. So that’s three and I thought, really, that was it. That’s enough children. We had several moves – Fort Lee, Fort Dix, and just several experiences. Then we came to Virginia and settled in Virginia. There, I had two more children, a girl and a boy. I thought, three girls, oh my goodness. I finally I had another boy; my last child was a boy. My oldest son was seventeen when my youngest was born, so I had built-in baby sitters. I enjoyed my last two because I could hand them off.

Dr. Disney: So you had five children – three girls and two boys – over a seventeen year period. Wow, you sure had your hands full, but you did have some older helpers, which was good.

Jean Ishbel Long Dowty: Oh yes. I think they enjoyed it.

Dr. Disney: I think Judy told us how much she enjoyed being a part of a big family, being one of five. And she was one of the older ones, so she ended up being a good helper to you hopefully, with the younger ones.

Jean Ishbel Long Dowty: We had our final tour overseas in Germany. We were there for two and half years.

Dr. Disney: How did you balance? You’re a military wife, you’re raising five children. I want you to tell us if there were any activities you were involved in – any additional work inside the home and outside the home, community. How did you balance, even just raising 5 children? I’m raising one child and it’s difficult.

Jean Ishbel Long Dowty: As I said before, I was not a very social person. I made a few close friends. I did not work outside the house until my youngest was in high school, I think. I had done volunteer work. I was pretty active in the church. We did some things, like patterning. Children needed the exercise so we did things like that. We had a very big garden and that supplied just about everything we ate and that kept us very busing. I was a homebody.

Dr. Disney: Well, that is a lot of work to maintain. To have a garden that’s feeding your family and canning – that’s a lot of work. What does motherhood mean to you?

Jean Ishbel Long Dowty: To me, it meant, that was my focus. It really was. I think it means putting your family first, putting your children first. That’s what motherhood is. It means pain and sacrifice sometimes. It means worrying all the time because you never quite know what is around the corner.

Dr. Disney: Do you think women’s roles as mothers and women’s work as mother inside the home – particularly all the work you were talking about inside and outside the home – do you think women’s roles and work as mother are adequately recognized by society?

Jean Ishbel Long Dowty: I think they were more in my time, past time. That what they were for really, though that doesn’t sound like what it should be. That’s the way I grew up – women’s work was in the home and men went out and made money. It’s changed today; I know it has.
**Dr. Disney:** Do you think women today have a more difficult challenge if they are expected to work outside the home as a second income earner, in addition to the responsibilities of working inside the home and being a mother?

**Jean Ishbel Long Dowty:** Yes I’m sure, but I think sometimes we want more. We could be satisfied with less if we are not willing to make the money.

**Dr. Disney:** That’s a good point. Changing desires leads to more work. I’m thinking about the era in which you were born and in times of war, going back to those thoughts about how you cherished the moment, you counted your blessings, you were glad for what you had because you were living in a life or death, short supply kind of context. That’s probably a little bit a part of what you said now – being happy with what you had and not necessarily always wanting more, which seems to be the value of contemporary consumerist society.

**Jean Ishbel Long Dowty:** To go into debt, from my childhood memories, is something that only the other people did. We waited until we had the money to buy it.

**Dr. Disney:** What an amazing concept. That’s a rarity today, but in your day, that’s the way it was and that’s the way you did things.

**Jean Ishbel Long Dowty:** We called it on tick, which meant you signed your name to something, but you didn’t do that. If you have the money you’d get it, but not until then.

**Dr. Disney:** What do you think are the most important issues facing women today?

**Jean Ishbel Long Dowty:** I think it’s balancing – making sure that what you’re doing is worth something, worth the sacrifice. You have to sacrifice something because you don’t get something from nothing. There’s always a payback somewhere and I think that’s challenge for women. Children today are involved in so many more things. We played outside; we didn’t have organized things. Now children are into swimming, sports and everything, which takes so much time for the mothers. The fathers are working outside somewhere, so I think a lot of it falls on the mother.

**Dr. Disney:** When you were a little girl in your dad’s blacksmith shop, with your own anvil and space to play – it’s not clear that things are better today. You went outside, you played in your dad’s shop and it’s just interesting and you’re reinforcing how much things have changed with child rearing. The question of whether things are better or worse is really a question.

**Jean Ishbel Long Dowty:** I didn’t have toys; I had a teddy bear and I think I had one doll. But one thing we played with and I think this might sound really gross, was snails. In my little village in the Cotswold era, we had stone walls. The stone walls were covered in moss. We made palaces on these stone walls and snails were our king and queen.

**Dr. Disney:** That sounds beautiful to me. You played in natures and you didn’t need plastic to create joy; you found joy in nature. That was a running theme in Judy’s interview – taking walks with her son and wanting her in nature. So I think a love of nature was transferred from you to your daughter.

**Jean Ishbel Long Dowty:** Of course we didn’t think of it as nature; it was fun.
**Dr. Disney:** That’s important. What was it like when your daughter was named the South Carolina Mother of the Year?

**Jean Ishbel Long Dowty:** I was extremely proud. Everybody that I knew, knew about it because I broadcast it.

**Dr. Disney:** You must have been a proud mother.

**Jean Ishbel Long Dowty:** Yes, indeed. A lot of the family came to the tea.

**Dr. Disney:** One of the things that were so beautiful to me was that when I interviewed your daughter, the first thing she said when she was named mother of the year was how excited she would be to bring you to the tea at the Governor’s Mansion. That says something beautiful about your relationship.

**Jean Ishbel Long Dowty:** Well, she was my first daughter.

**Dr. Disney:** You clearly have a great mother-daughter bond. What was it like going to the tea at the Governor’s Mansion to honor your daughter?

**Jean Ishbel Long Dowty:** It was very nice. I got to meet the governor’s wife; the governor was not there. It was beautiful; I was amazed by how beautiful it was and what a festive occasion it was, too.

**Dr. Disney:** Was this Jenny Sanford at the time?

**Jean Ishbel Long Dowty:** Yes.

**Dr. Disney:** It must have been quite an honor to have your whole family there with your daughter. Were there other celebrations or other things that took place that year that you participated in?

**Jean Ishbel Long Dowty:** I did not live here with her; I was living in northern Virginia at the time and was just visiting here occasionally.

**Dr. Disney:** So you came down to visit for the tea?

**Jean Ishbel Long Dowty:** Right.

**Dr. Disney:** We know that your daughter learned a lot from you and your leadership and your model as a mother.

**Jean Ishbel Long Dowty:** That is my greatest achievement – my children. They have grown up to be responsible and God-loving people. They are just a great blessing.

**Dr. Disney:** Having interviewed your daughter, I see so much of you in her and her in you and in her answers and in your answers. I want to thank you for giving us this time. I have one more question I want to ask you, but I’m just kind of sitting and just appreciating the joy of motherhood and the commitment that my children were the most important thing to me and my greatest accomplishment, as you said. So one of your greatest accomplishments was also raising the South Carolina Mother of the Year for 2007 and that’s a beautiful thing. What does feminism mean to you?
Jean Ishbel Long Dowty: Judy and I talked about this and I think that men and women are equal, but I just don’t like to see women put above men because that’s not the way I was raised. The man was the ruler of the house, as you might say; he made the important decisions. I’m old fashioned enough that I retain that, in a way. Women had to go out to work during the war; I was part of that women’s workforce. I see that it is important for women to be recognized as equal to men, but not above them; I just can’t see the push to make women so important and so emphasized. I’m uncomfortable with the word feminism; it has kind of a negative thing to me.

Dr. Disney: In your mind, it seems like feminism is something that seems to push women above men.

Jean Ishbel Long Dowty: Yes.

Dr. Disney: Are you comfortable – and it sounds like you are – with women and men being equal?

Jean Ishbel Long Dowty: Yes.

Dr. Disney: And that could also be, in terms of the household, equal sharing of decision making, 50/50 partnerships?

Jean Ishbel Long Dowty: Oh yes. And I realize that women sometimes have to be the head of the households because the men are not capable of it. There are a lot of families where women take the initiative.

Dr. Disney: That’s right, as well as with single mother or single parent households.

Jean Ishbel Long Dowty: Yes.

Dr. Disney: While you retained, you said you’re old fashioned in that sense. I retained the way I grew up, which was the man made the decisions in the household, but I’m supportive of 50/50 equal sharing of the household, women being recognized and men being recognized, neither one over the other. But equal dignity and equal respect in the work they do outside the home and the work they do inside the home.

Jean Ishbel Long Dowty: Yes, I agree.

Dr. Disney: Are there any questions you have for us? Or anything else you’d like to share that we haven’t touched on yet?

Jean Ishbel Long Dowty: I have traveled a lot. I’ve had the privilege to be able to go to Australia and New Zealand. I have traveled through the Middle East. Some of my most wonderful experiences are saying, “I’m walking on the same path that Paul walked in the streets of Philippi. I have seen many ancient civilizations; I’ve been to Crete and I’ve seen the Minoan there. I’ve been through a lot of Europe. I have been through Yugoslavia when it was still Yugoslavia. I think traveling has been a wonderful experience for me. There are still places I would love to go, but all my friends and people I’ve traveled with say they’re too old to go.

Dr. Disney: Is that a piece of advice you would give to younger women? To make sure they travel and see the world?
Jean Ishbel Long Dowty: Oh yes. Please do. I think that has been a lot of my education because I have learned so much from that. Oh yes. I see these children take these trips; I have a grandson that went to Greece and then went to Italy. Judy took the children to England. My youngest son’s children have been to Italy and France and Germany and Switzerland – just wonderful. I’d encourage anybody if they can travel before they get too old.

Dr. Disney: May I ask – how old are you?

Jean Ishbel Long Dowty: I am 91. I’ll be 92 in December, so I am well on the way to 92.

Dr. Disney: Wow, 92. Well you’re a young, spry 92.

Jean Ishbel Long Dowty: Well, not so spry! But I still have a fairly young attitude I think. I hope.

Dr. Disney: It’s been an honor for me to get to meet you, Jean Dowty, mother of Judy Pittard, the South Carolina Mother of the Year in 2007. To think about these intergenerational relationships; mother to daughter and the beautiful relationship you both have. I am the mother of a son; I have one son who’s five, going on six. I have done a lot of international traveling myself, so I think about when he’ll be old enough that I’m comfortable enough taking him and going. I’ve kind of given up my travel as I was getting him from zero to five. I also think about feminism and I want to share this with you. My dream or goal of feminism is as a very egalitarian system where women and men, just as we said earlier, have the equal respect, equal dignity, and equal opportunity to be and do whatever they want to be and do. I think sometimes even boys and girls can be limited in what they are expected to be or do because of patriarchy or old fashioned expectations of what a boy is or what a girl is. I hope that negative connotation is more of a stereotype and that we can work toward a true reality where boys and girls can be, like you said, can have equal dignity and equal respect.

Jean Ishbel Long Dowty: One of the first things I learned to do, at four and a half, was knit in school. The boys and the girls – we were all taught to knit. It was good hand-eye coordination, that’s what they said. But I think it was to just keep our hands busy.

Dr. Disney: I’m not sure many boys are taught to knit anymore, but that’s a good example of how we all need to be self-sufficient. Many of the traits for boys and girls to be self-sufficient will be the same, but we end up, sometimes, have these two tracks that are gender paths toward self-sufficiency.

Jean Ishbel Long Dowty: I think men should do the dishes……

Dr. Disney: Exactly – sharing the work inside and outside the home in society and in families is a beautiful vision. Any final thoughts, comments, or questions for us?

Jean Ishbel Long Dowty: How do you balance your life?

Dr. Disney: It’s hard. I’m a professor at Winthrop University. I chair the political science department and I direct the women and gender studies program. I engage in a lot of interesting projects, like the South Carolina Mother of the Year oral history project. My husband is home with my son today so that I can be here doing this. It’s not easy. I think you spoke to it earlier, beautifully, how difficult it is to take one more roles and responsibilities and trying to be the best you can be. I certainly feel that struggle.
Jean Ishbel Long Dowty: Women are under more stress now than they used to be.

Dr. Disney: I appreciate that; you make me feel better. You seem to have done all that you’ve done with such grace, so thank you for saying that.

Jean Ishbel Long Dowty: Life was easier for women in the past; I really believe that.

Dr. Disney: Well, it’s an interesting question. You’ve raised a lot of interesting questions for us to think about – intergenerationally, through war times, internationally. Thank you so much for sharing your wisdom with us, your years of wisdom and talents and gifts.

Jean Ishbel Long Dowty: It’s been a pleasure.

Dr. Disney: It’s been a pleasure to meet you and I see you both in each other. Thank you Jean Dowty and Judy Pittard.