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Interview with Janet Cotter

Janet Cotter
SC Mother of the Year Committee

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Dr. Disney: Good morning. My name is Dr. Jennifer Leigh Disney and I am here with Mrs. Janet Cotter. We are honored to be hosted here today at the Washington Street United Methodist Church in Columbia, South Carolina. Thank you Janet so much for being with us today and helping organize this beautiful day at Washington Street United Methodist.

Janet Cotter: Thank you, it’s a privilege to have this group here.

Dr. Disney: So we’re going to start with some very simple questions about you personally. Janet if you would, tell us a little bit about when and where you were born and raised. Tell us a little bit about your family and your early childhood experience.

Janet Cotter: I was born in Columbia but my home is Brunson, South Carolina, a small village in Hampton County. It gets smaller every year. But what a wonderful place to grow. And then you wanted to know where I was educated?

Dr. Disney: Born and raised, and then your early childhood experiences.

Janet Cotter: All my childhood, all my childhood until marriage, my home was Brunson. I went to school, elementary and high school, in the same building in Brunson. I just enjoyed, I didn’t realize what I had at the time but when I got to Columbia and realized how big and wonderful Columbia is, it’s a big town, I feel like I had the best of both worlds – the small town and the city. I have loved having that background from the small town where everybody knew everybody else and everyone knew your name. You got reported if you did something you weren’t supposed to because by the time you got home, your mother knew it. So you behaved and the town, as a whole, were are guardians too, and that’s a real asset to a child, to have that support and to have those friends. Those friends are friends for life. Then I got older and entered Columbia College where my mother had gone to school, it made her very happy, and oh what a joy it was to be there and meet more people. Those four years were just wonderful years with wonderful memories. I became involved in everything I could – if they said, “Now we’re going to be playing volleyball today”, I’d play volleyball. “We’re going to try out for the choir” – I, who cannot sing, tried out for the choir. Whatever was going on, that’s what I wanted to do until finally I found my niche and joined, it was in student government. I loved that and went on and somehow later was elected President of the student body and enjoyed that and made great friends and learned a lot. Through that, you got together with other student body presidents all over the state and we became good friends through that and some I haven’t seen for years, but if you run into them, you start right back where you were fifty some odd years ago. Columbia College really helped finish my education. I graduated with honors and I think that was easier then than it is now. I loved studying so that was my education.

Dr. Disney: You were a leader at such a young age. President of the student body, wow.

Janet Cotter: Well I loved it. And we all went to vote by, we voted not with machines but you wrote them in so we had to wait for them to count the votes and all that so it was excited and I had my sophomore year, I was a secretary. Always running for something, always involved in
something, but I loved to study. We had teachers who asked us to reach for the stars and we tried.

**Dr. Disney:** What did you study at Columbia College?

**Janet Cotter:** English was my major and I had a Doctor Ariel whose name is very well known, he’s been going for a long time. He was a wonderful professor and a stickler for detail. You wanted to study because you wanted to succeed not only for yourself, but also for him, so I’m grateful for him. And then we had a wonderful president of our college, Dr. Wright Spears, you may or may not have heard of him. Columbia College is a Methodist college and he had come from Florence. He was just a wonderful person to bring it out of a very low place in their history and encourage people to improve the atmosphere of the student body and we began to build buildings.

**Dr. Disney:** What were your personal dreams, goals, and aspirations at that age and that time at Columbia College?

**Janet Cotter:** Well, they changed. You see, I think everybody needs to her sense of purpose. I did not know that at the time. When I was a student, I was just involved in everything but I realize now that I hadn’t found my sense of purpose and I hope that when you find it, that you would have the wisdom to follow through with it. Now what was my sense of purpose? Well back then, it was to study hard, to achieve, to do well, and I thought I wanted to teach school but that changed when Dr. Spears called me in his office one day and said, “Would you like to work at the college?” I said, “Oh yes.” I would have done anything to work there. So I was put in charge of student recruitment and that was great because you travelled and there again, you got to meet people your age who were from other colleges. South Carolina has a great affinity for each college attracting the other and they share information. I think it’s a wonderful brotherhood/sisterhood that the colleges have among each other. I found that when we were travelling, recruiting students. Then we got through recruiting students, that’s done in the fall of the year, then the spring of the year they asked me to help with the alumni association, well that was wonderful! Well here we go to teas and parties and all this, but one thing was missing. It was a girls school and there were no men on campus and that was important. There was somebody very special at Clemson and there was somebody from Carolina, but I hadn’t met number one yet. I met number one on a blind date that I did not want to do, I did not think a blind date would be very good. My friend who wanted me to go on this blind date said, “Please go, please go you need to find somebody” and I said, “Only if we go to a walk-in movie.” People may not be familiar with drive-in movies, but we had them then. And I said, “I’ll go on one condition, that we go to a walk-in movie.” Well we did not and I got a little upset about that until I realized that we were going to my date’s home and his parents weren’t there and I thought, “Oh my goodness, I don’t know what will be said in Brunson.” Well it was all okay and his parents came in and we began to play bridge. That was not my sense of purpose, playing bridge but anyway, I was having a good time. It wasn’t long before we became engaged and less than a year later, we were married and then I found my sense of purpose. My purpose was to be as good a wife as I could and then when the children came along, you needed to use all of your mothering skills and then I began to wonder “How is Shakespeare going to help me” – that’s what I majored in in English. How was Shakespeare going to help me, Shakespeare did. There were quotes and there were things you could use when you went to PTA meetings and all of the
sudden, I realize I know what I’m supposed to do. I’m supposed to be a good mother and a good wife and make my life as happy and interesting for myself and my family as I could. So, that’s what I think we did. I’ve had a wonderful life and just meeting you, you people, every time you go somewhere, you meet new people and that enriches your life. I’ve enjoyed every minute.

Being on this committee, to find the state mother of the year, the committee became close to each other – they’re some of my very best friends. These mothers really were so outstanding and we were so glad that we had chosen these people and it involved our state and that was good.

Then, as the children got older, I was asked to serve on committees and Brook Green Gardens, the friends of Brook Green Gardens and the board of trustees at Columbia College and I’ve been very interested in this church, in Washington Street. When my husband was born, the day he was born, his father walked from the Columbia Hospital over to Washington Street and enrolled him. He was enrolled the day he was born, so you see I have to stay active in the church, I have business to do here. It’s just been a great life and all my children, I have two children.

**Dr. Disney:** Tell me about your children.

**Janet Cotter:** A son, Leslie Arnold Cotter Jr., and a daughter, Janelle Alexander Collin. They’re both married and I have five grandchildren. Now you know how a grandmother dotes on those but my son is an attorney here and my daughter teaches school, first grade. She really loves it and you’re going to meet her later. They seem to be very happy and the grandchildren seem to be alright. We’ve got one grandchild married and the rest of them,

**Dr. Disney:** You must be so proud.

**Janet Cotter:** I am, I am, as every grandmother is.

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

**Janet Cotter:** Motherhood means a lot. Motherhood means giving up whatever you have to to make your children’s lives meaningful and happy and whole. Motherhood is, when you enter motherhood, you have to enter it wholeheartedly. It takes all of your heart. As anybody knows, it’s not an easy task, but it’s a fulfilling task and in the end, you hope for the best. You pray and it takes, you spend a lot of time on your knees asking for help. Prayer goes a long way with being a mother. When you see it answered, its just a wonderful sense of success when you do that. My children seem to be carrying on with those, I hope they walk in faith, that’s the only way you can go – is to walk in faith. Sometimes, you don’t know what’s going to happen but faith gets you a long way and also friends, friends and family. Everybody needs a support group and I hope I can always be part of a support group for other people because that’s what we need, going through life.

**Dr. Disney:** Speaking of support groups, you’ve been a part of many in your life. Tell us a little bit about how you became a member of the South Carolina Mother of the Year Association.

**Janet Cotter:** That was so exciting, I had a friend, Rather Gant, who was a member of the committee and had been and I had been hearing about state mother of the year for a long time. Then I got a letter asking me to be a member and I wish I could remember what year it was, I cannot remember what year it was. I know who was on the committee when I first went, but I can’t tell you the year, but it’s a long time. I’m so glad that I stayed on. When you join, they don’t give you a term. Most boards and most committees have terms, two years or four years, but not this committee and I’m glad. It was for life if you wanted it so for me, it’s life. Even though we do not have the same function, we still have a purpose.
Dr. Disney: That’s beautiful. Talk a little bit about how your membership on the committee impacted you, your family, and your community.

Janet Cotter: Well, how it impacted me, it gave me friends and it gave me a sense of... I felt that I was doing something not only for the motherhood, but for the state. Choosing an example for other mothers and for other people and I love the fact that we tried to get mothers from different sections of the state so that the state was represented. I think that it gave the mother who had done so much, the one who was chosen, a sense of what she had done for herself, for her children, for her family, and for her state. Her children were so successful and they were always bright stars. Then what it’s done for the community, everybody in Columbia knows about the Mother of the Year and how important it is that she be an outstanding person. For my family, I think they’re so glad that I was a part of it and they liked to hear what we were doing and the person we had chosen, I can’t explain what joy it was to be on this committee. What joy, and we hope we brought joy to the state and to the community and to that family. I hope I’ve done a good job telling you about that.

Dr. Disney: I know that you have and this project, we’re so glad you’re participating in, just continues to share that joy with students and community members to learn about the Mothers of the Year and the committee.

Janet Cotter: When we heard that this was available, and it could be done and it could be housed at Winthrop and it could be accessed through any college archives, it was just glorious to know that all these years of work would still live on and it would be in the archives at Winthrop.

Dr. Disney: Absolutely. I want to ask you a few questions now that are broader questions that are just about you and the committee. Let me ask you this, what do you think are the most important issues facing women today?

Janet Cotter: Facing women, well we’ve come a long way baby, but we’ve still got to hold our ground. The issues facing women today, I read now, I’ve only worked for two years with pay, but I’ve realized that women sometimes have a hard time getting the same paycheck that men might get. They have to work harder to be accepted, they have to look better, better groomed, they can’t just go. I’ve noticed that they’re buying, if you go in a store you’ll see business section, there’s one store here in Columbia and there’s all these suits lined up, I know they don’t want to wear these navy blue and brown suits all the time, but they need to look and act and I think women are smarter than that. I think they’ve learned, and their background is a help, the issues are not as large but we still have issues to overcome. Look how many CEOs are women, I’m so excited when I read that this woman or that woman is chairman and here, at home, we’ve had the most wonderful chairman of the board of trustees at Columbia College. She did an outstanding job, we’ve had others before, the first one was from King Street and she was Mrs. Epps from King Street. She and Willie Grey were the first, Willie Grey was a pioneer in women’s education, and they were the first members of the board of trustees. They became outstanding women in government. I wanted to tell you a little bit about Willard Grey who was really a very, oh she worked so hard to educate people who could not get education. She had a school for the people who were undereducated here in Columbia and she was always going to the Capitol to ask for help and one state representative, “Oh Willard Grey is on the agenda today, she’s like chewing gum in my hair.” But Willie didn’t care, Willie became the chewing gum and she got everything she wanted. She got grants, she got money, she got land to build the school
and it’s called the Opportunity School and it still survives. She was just a wonderful person, she was a pioneer and I think women have, one generation builds from the other generations, what we can do today, the next generation and the next will use so we’ve like the stepping stones. I hope we can help.

**Dr. Disney:** That’s such a great story, that’s a model for women.

**Janet Cotter:** Well I wish you could have interviewed her, she was a delight but she has long been gone.

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

**Janet Cotter:** It depends on to whom you’re talking. Most people think they are, women have to work harder to be a mother if they work. If she works, she has to find help and good help, a place for the child to stay, then you’ve got afterschool. I think they’re adequately recognized, if they don’t, you see they can’t go to meetings and committee meetings like we could when we weren’t working but they make it happen if they can.

**Dr. Disney:** You were always very active in your community, it sounds like. So how were you able to balance that work outside the home, in the community, and being a good mother and work inside the family and work inside the home – how were you able to balance that?

**Janet Cotter:** I was blessed, my mother in law and father in law lived one block from me. They were always there, grandparents are always available, nearly always available to help with the children. They encouraged me and they helped keep the children. They were just one block away. I had a next door neighbor also who had fourteen teenagers and they were delighted to help me with the children. That was why I don’t know what I would have done had I not had that wonderful support and help. I could not have done the things I did.

**Dr. Disney:** Why don’t you talk a little bit more, you mentioned earlier some of the activities you were engaged in before and after marriage and particularly with your kids and how you were able to balance some of those activities.

**Janet Cotter:** Well before I was married, I mean I graduated from Columbia College and then the next year, one year later, I was married. I didn’t have much, many committees to attend. However, I did join the alumni club that was here and then the church. The church is smaller, they get the young people early and put them on committees and they find the time that suits them. We had a wonderful organization here called the 20/30 club in this church, and you had to be in your twenties or your thirties to belong. We became good friends and we met twice a month, sometimes once a month, and had dinner and had one of the older members come and join us and speak about what we had, what we looked forward to and what might happen and how you might cope with things. We became good friends and now some of those people are my age and they’re still in this church, some of them, and we’re still good friends. Isn’t that great?

**Dr. Disney:** It’s wonderful.

**Janet Cotter:** That was a good idea to have those ages.

**Dr. Disney:** I think you’ve really already touched on this, the fact that women today who are working outside of the home for pay and working inside the home, women of today seem to have more to balance, do you think it’s more difficult? How do women of today, you think struggle with balancing work in the home and work outside the home, volunteerism, and church.
**Janet Cotter:** They do. They cannot volunteer as much as you could if you had help. However, with the internet and cellphones and texting and the Cloud, you can do all sorts of things without having. I’ve just been on a committee where we’ve never met all together but we did it by texting and email. We accomplished what we set out to do. I think it’s awfully hard for a mother today to balance both, especially if there’s more than one child, but she can pick and choose and choose carefully and choose what interests her and what she might use later in life and how she can contribute to that. I don’t see being on a committee unless you can contribute something to it. I’ve heard people who join just for the sake of joining and never attend. I think if you give your name to a committee, you should really work it. That’s a hard decision but they can do it if they want to and they have a good husband behind them, that’s a big one. It’s very important.

**Dr. Disney:** That’s very important. I love how you pointed out that technology can help and also a good husband, a good partner to be there to truly help. What does feminism mean to you?

**Janet Cotter:** Well it means a lot of things. When you think about feminism, you think about women who used to wear frills like I have on, frills and were pretty and sweet and kind, but it’s more than that. It goes deeper than that. Feminism is a whole section of life, of people, and we’re all in it together and I think we have to work together to foster the good of feminism, it’s not a bad word, it’s not a bad thing – it’s a good thing. To be a Feminist, you must proud to be a Feminist. Women have, I mean look at the suffragettes, they marched down Main Street and they got sent home from Columbia College because they did. But they marched down Main Street to vote in 1922 I think, but they shoved us away and we don’t have to be raspy and ugly and shoving people, we can be feminine and we can be kind and loving and strong.

**Dr. Disney:** That’s beautiful and such an important message for young people today, the way you spoke about that and reminding us of our history and then reminding us of how we can continue on that legacy with dignity and respect.

**Janet Cotter:** And they can, with dignity and grace, and I think they figured it out. I think I’m looking at it, at a senior, and she’s figured it out. How she can fit in and be a feminist and be a lady at the same time.

**Dr. Disney:** Do you consider yourself a feminist?

**Janet Cotter:** Well, I guess I am because I love what women are doing now. They’re helping the world, I mean we’ve got women in all walks of life who are doing great things. They also have an empathy for what they’re doing and I think that’s in their faith. I don’t know whether I’m a feminist or not, if I say I’m going out there and moving, trying to shake the world up and doing things that I’m not for, then I’m not. But I think so far, women are doing a great job.

**Dr. Disney:** Based on your own definition of feminism, you probably would be it sounds like.

**Janet Cotter:** Well I would hope.

**Dr. Disney:** Do you have any questions for us? Or anything else you’d like to share?

**Janet Cotter:** Oh I just want to thank you for doing this, for making our history possible to anyone who wants to hear it and also preserving the year that each mother represented her state of South Carolina. I think that is so important and through them we can see how feminism has grown, how our committee grew, and what we have to offer our state and our country. Thank you so much.

**Dr. Disney:** Thank you, thank you so much Janet. We really appreciate your time.

**Janet Cotter:** I’m sure I haven’t done what I should have.
**Dr. Disney:** It was a lovely interview. Beautiful. I should have asked do you all have anything you want to ask? Questions? Comments?

**Voice from Audience:** I wish Janet would run for President.

[Laughter]

**Dr. Disney:** She is so presidential, isn’t she? That is the exact right word! And all the positions you have held, from Student Government President to the Board of Trustees of your College.

**Janet Cotter:** Well the Brook Green thing was so good, and the Friends of the Library, oh our library has come a long way. I can’t do it anymore, because I can’t give it anymore what it needs, you have to give it what it needs, but I have gotten older.

**Dr. Disney:** Haven’t we all!

**Janet Cotter:** But I think about you and all you have to look forward to.

**Janet Cotter:** In thinking about what I said earlier, I wanted to add a PS. I’m sure my thoughts were on my children and grandchildren, but I wanted to emphasize how important to me and my life. I wanted to name them. My son is Leslie Arnold Cotter, Jr. and we call him “Les.” He is an attorney here in Columbia and his wife is Elizabeth Webster Cotter and she is a wonderful housewife. My daughter is Janelle, we call her “Jan”, Cotter Jenkins and she teaches first grade here in Columbia. I’m lucky, I’m blessed, I have my children and my grandchildren here in Columbia. Now to get to my grandchildren, I have five. The oldest one is Caroline Reeves Cotter, she graduated from Wofford and she is now in the executive branch of MUSC in Charleston, South Carolina. My second granddaughter is Elizabeth Alexander Cotter Thompson, she’s married to Will Thompson and they live in Atlanta. He is a stockbroker and she teaches school, she’s currently working on her Master’s degree. My third grandchild is Janet Cotter Jenkins and she is a senior at Columbia College. The fourth is Leslie Arnold Cotter, Jr. and he graduated from the College of Charleston last year, oh no this year in May and he’s working for the port’s authority in Charleston. And then our last one is Forrest Norton Jenkins and he is a rising senior, no a rising junior at PC. And that’s the end of my story about my family. They’re the most important things, as most people would agree. Family is everything.

**Dr. Disney:** You must be so proud Janet, of all that your children and grandchildren have accomplished.

**Janet Cotter:** I am.

**Dr. Disney:** We have another PS we would like to add to your interview. You have been so active at Columbia College and we spoke about your activities on our last interview. We have subsequently found out that Columbia College and the students have come up with a wonderful way to honor you and your legacy at Columbia College by naming a building after, can you please tell us about that Janet?

**Janet Cotter:** Well, I sort of pinch myself every time I heard it, I can’t believe it. It was such an honor to get and so, I could hardly believe. It’s a building that was a library when I was in college and it was also there when my mother was at Columbia College. It subsequently was named “Alumni Hall” and was the alumni headquarters. It’s the oldest building on campus and in the spring, they will put my name about “Alumni Hall” and I cannot tell you how moved and humble and honored I am. I can think of one hundred names that can go up there with mine and I just can never tell how grateful I am for that.

**Dr. Disney:** Janet Cotter Alumni Hall?
Janet Cotter: Janet Alexander Cotter Alumni Hall.

Dr. Disney: Beautiful. And you told us they surprised you? Tell us the story of how you were surprised.

Janet Cotter: They did! I had no idea and I was invited to come to dinner with a dear friend of mine, Janice McNair, and her husband, Bob McNair, who have been loyal and good and generous to Columbia College and because they were going to dinner and it was graduation and her friend was going to be the speaker, I thought, “Well I have to go.” So they seated me by Janice and next to us was an empty table and the president of Columbia College, Beth Kendall, said, “You may notice there’s an empty table here.” I thought, “Oh good the McNair Scholars will come and entertain us.” Well, the door opened and she said, “We have some very special guests” and in walked my family. My children and grandchildren, my sister Libby Alexander Murdock and her husband, Randolph, my brother, Don Alexander, and his wife, Lisa, and my niece, Lynn Murdock Dowty, and her husband, Alan, and I thought, “What are they doing here?” All of the sudden, they said, “We have an honor, a gift, a surprise.” Oh what a surprise, they took the cloth off of a picture of the building and it had my name on it as it will appear. Well, I thought, “I don’t think I’m dreaming, I’m asleep.” But it was true, and I am so grateful and exhilarated and every time I think of it, I think, “Oh what a wonderful thing for me” and I don’t think I deserve that much. Janice and Bob were the major contributors for that and what a lovely thing for a friend to do. I was overwhelmed.

Dr. Disney: What an honor to you and your amazing legacy at Columbia College.

Janet Cotter: Well it’s a great, great college and we’ve had a lot of family go there, my sister, my granddaughter’s been there, my mother, my aunts, cousins, a lot of people have been there. I’m just grateful that I went there and made so many friends.

Dr. Disney: We are so grateful to be counted as part of your friends in the South Carolina Mothers Association and Selection Committee and you have just been an amazing leader in this journey for us, to interview the mothers of the year and selection committee members, this beautiful church. Is it Washington United Methodist Church?

Janet Cotter: It’s Washington Street United Methodist Church and it was founded in 1803. We like to say that we’re the oldest church that was founded but First Presbyterian across the street claims that also so the University of South Carolina was founded in 1801 and we were founded in 1803, we had to have had a church for the students. I do want to thank Winthrop for having the archives and housing our material because it’s been a long time coming and we need a good safe place for it and my gratitude for Winthrop for doing this.

Dr. Disney: Thank you so much, thank you Washington Street United Methodist Church and it’s been an honor to work with you throughout this project.

Janet Cotter: Well it’s been a great honor for me, thank you.