RUTH SIMMONS INTERVIEW
MAKERS: WOMEN WHO MAKE AMERICA
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

Ruth Simmons
Brown University President (2001-2012)
9/14/2011
Interviewed by Betsy West
Total Running Time: 59 minutes and 47 seconds

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ON SCREEN TEXT:

Makers: Women Who Make America

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BETSY WEST:

President Simmons, start at the beginning here. Can you tell me about your childhood and the circumstances of your family when you were growing up?

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RUTH SIMMONS:
Oh, well, that's a long story. I was born in a small town in East Texas that no one has really heard of. It's called Grapeland, Texas, because at some point there were lots of grape vines in the area. I actually was born on a farm. My parents were tenant farmers or sharecroppers, and I was brought into the world by a midwife.

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I was noisy as an infant, I'm told. Very busy getting into everything, but also laughing a lot, apparently, which was irritating to my siblings. There were 11 of them before I came along, so I was the runt, and as a consequence of being the youngest in the family, I got a lot of attention-

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-and I got a lot of care from my older sisters and brothers, and that was actually an extraordinary experience, I have to say. Of course, even today, they don't regard me as an adult, but that's beside the point. Growing up, it was a great advantage to have that kind of attention from older children in the family, as well as my mother and father.

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My mother and father were very traditional. In the South, at that time, traditional meant that the man of the family was completely in charge, and the wife was what they called a help meet, biblical phrase, which meant that her task was to take care of the family and the household, and to obey, and my mother took that very seriously. She had been brought up that way.

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She believed that this was really appropriate, and so she gave a deference to my father in all matters. As a consequence of that, the whole family, I think, was mostly dominated by my father, who made the decisions, who handled all of the money, who decided everything that was to take place in our family. In addition to my father, of course, I had seven brothers,-

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-and that attitude was more or less passed on to my seven brothers. So if you could imagine a very dominant father and seven brothers emulating my father, you could imagine what the environment was for the girls in the family and for my mother. It was a strict household in that children were expected to be very obedient to their parents. One was not allowed to question decisions.

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One could not ask inappropriate questions. One could not be in the presence of adults when they were talking. There were lots of rules of that kind that shaped our lives. As a consequence of that, I would say from my mother's perspective, she mostly taught us to follow these rules, but one of the wonderful things about the role that she played, of course, was that we had time with her.

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Much of that time was spent listening to her talk about her family, her values, and teaching us the kinds of things that we needed to know in order to grow up as healthy adults. Girls especially had that privilege. The boys were away because they had, really, the ability to go anywhere and do anything, but girls

couldn't do that. So we were more or less trapped at home in this family environment,-

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-but the great benefit was listening to my mother and her sisters and women talk about these tremendous values that they brought. As a couple, they were very devoted to each other, and that meant that my father could do just about anything he wanted with the assurance that my mother would be faithful and obedient, and that is what I faced when I was growing up. My mother actually died when I was 16 years old.

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My father lived many, many years beyond that, but never remarried. So it was a close knit family with my parents setting the standards. At that time, deep in segregation, one of their major tasks was for us to be safe. That meant that they had to give us all kinds of rules to prevent us from being affected by the violence that surrounded us at the hands of racists.

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So we were taught how to walk on a sidewalk and step off the sidewalk when a white person was approaching. We were taught never to speak out of turn or to speak in an arrogant or aggressive way. We were taught not to go certain places. So much of their task when we were growing up was to teach us how to survive in this racist, segregated environment that we were growing up in.

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BETSY WEST:

You had all kinds of rules. There were rules for you as a girl, rules for you as a young black child-

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RUTH SIMMONS:
Yes.

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BETSY WEST:
-How to behave. At what point, do you have any examples of becoming aware of some of these rules and maybe rebelling against them, or how did that impact you as a kid coming up?

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RUTH SIMMONS:
Frankly, at the time that I was growing up, it was so important for African Americans to stay within these boundaries because of the danger when one went outside the boundaries, that there wasn't anything that we saw that entailed rebellion, frankly. It was too risky, and our parents reigned us in very well.

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Now, I will say that our parents reigned us in, but that didn't prevent their doing certain things to keep us safe. So I remember for example, that my sister, at one point had some difficulty because some money was missing on a

bus, and the bus driver assumed that she had taken it. My father took my brothers and hunted down the bus driver-

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-and got on that bus and challenged him about accusing her of stealing, which was an incredibly risky thing to do, of course. So there was a sense that to some extent, men from time to time could do those things, but it wasn't safe for us to do it. In terms of rebelling, what was there to rebel against? I was the youngest of 12 children, a mother and father who took care of me, and as far as I knew, the world was a wonderful place.

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There was this little problem that I couldn't go certain places and that I would never be able to achieve, and I understood that perfectly well, in a segregated South, that my opportunities were limited. I accepted that fully. It wasn't until I was much older and began to see some more of the world that I understood the burden of that, and also the opportunities that might be available to me.

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BETSY WEST:
Tell me about moving out of your family, going to school. Tell me about that.

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RUTH SIMMONS:
We stayed in this small town in Texas until I was seven years old, and then something truly miraculous happened for me, and that is when we lived in

Grapeland, it was impossible really, to go to school year round, because when you were a sharecropper, all the children worked in the fields, and the only times they could go to school actually were when there wasn't work to do in the fields,-

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-and that meant that most of my older sisters were not able to go to school consistently, and many, in fact, did not graduate from high school because they couldn't go to school enough. But my family moved to Houston when I was seven years old. As a consequence of that move, I then fell into a pattern of attending school that was extraordinary for me. Obviously it was required and supervised very heavily in Houston, in this large city.

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So at that point, going to school every day was a miracle for me. I fell absolutely in love with this whole experience, getting outside of my family, meeting new people, learning things, reading marvelous stories about what happened in other societies and other parts of the world and so forth, and that was it for me. I just fell absolutely in love with that whole experience of learning.

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So I would say I began from that point, second grade onward, to distinguish myself as a student. I wasn't trying to do that so much as I was just loving what I was doing. So with that work that I was doing and that focus, it separated me a bit from my family, because they concluded fairly early on that there was something wrong with me because I was reading all the time.

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My sisters and brothers used to complain to my mother that there was something wrong with me developmentally, because I wasn't playing outside with other children. I wasn't doing the things that they were accustomed to doing. Instead, I had my face buried in a book all the time, that simply wasn't normal, and they asked my parents to do something about it. So as time went on and I progressed through school, that was pretty much the pattern. I was an odd duck in my neighborhood.

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I was an odd duck in my family, and of course, in school, I was just one of those odd characters who really did what they were supposed to do, completed their homework, focused on studies, read, and so forth. I felt somewhat odd as a consequence of it, but at that point, I already had a sense that I was going to be different from everybody else.

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I think I found teachers who supported my oddity and encouraged me, and as a consequence of that, I sort of stuck to my guns and kept doing what I was doing all the way through high school. At a critical moment in high school, the idea of actually going to college was introduced to me. It wasn't something that I brought to the table-

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-because nobody really in my family had gone to college, and so it wasn't something I contemplated as a possibility for me, but teachers began to mention that I ought to think about going to college. I remember when I

asked my mother about this, if I could perhaps go to college one day, I think the look on her face really said it all. What an impossible idea.

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What an impossible idea. So somehow, miraculously, I kept working hard, and I managed to rise to the top of my class in high school, and I had one teacher. So inspired, was she as a teacher, but in any case, she had gone to Dillard for her own education, and she recommended that I go to Dillard, but she went beyond that.

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She appealed to them to give me a scholarship. So there I was graduating from high school and discovering that I actually was going to be able to go to college. That was a miracle to me. Here's a desperately poor family with no sense of how the world was changing at all, no ability to really think ahead to what might happen, and without the influence of people who could see that, I would have had a very different life.

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BETSY WEST:
So you get to college, what's that like?

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RUTH SIMMONS:
Odd. I had been odd all of my life and I continued to be odd in college. So first of all, it was very lonely for me because I have this huge family, very tight knit

family. I'd been protected all my life by this love and care of all these people, and here I am leaving that. First of all, nobody in my family ever leaves. I'm the only one who did that. So the idea of getting on a train and going so far away was- I didn't realize what I was doing.

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Had I realized it, I probably would not have left Houston. So first of all, it was lonely. Secondly, I sort of knew that I was odd in so many ways. First of all, I didn't have the right clothes. I was kind of a country bumpkin. I remember when I got ready to go to school, to leave Houston, actually, it was one of my teachers who went into her closet and took her clothes out of her closet to give to me to take to college.

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So that was a sense of not fitting in. There was a sense of missing my family desperately and really the sense of being an odd duck at Dillard because I was a little bit too cerebral for the setting. It was a social place. Imagine, it was New Orleans, so everybody was going out to bars and having a good time, and being very social and drinking and so forth.

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First of all, that was against everything that I knew. I said we had lots of rules in my family. Well, first of all, you couldn't drink in my family. You couldn't dance in my family. All of that was just taboo. So this whole new world of these young people having fun and doing all of this- I didn't get that, and I certainly didn't fit into it.

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So my first year was a tough year, and I actually contemplated dropping out of college because of this difference that I felt. What kept me going was the fact that I didn't know how to say that all these people had helped me, and I had these scholarships, how did I say, “Thanks very much, but I'm going to squander that”?

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How could I say that? So what actually kept me going was the fact, one, that I had all of this help, and two, I had no money to go home. So that was very useful too, the fact that it wasn't that easy for me to buy a train ticket because I didn't have any money.

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BETSY WEST:
You're kind of stuck there.

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RUTH SIMMONS:
I was stuck. Also, it was just this notion, which always impressed me, that strangers paid for my education. That's such a powerful idea for me.

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BETSY WEST:
So was there a turning point moment where things turned around for you in your education?

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RUTH SIMMONS:

Well, like most college students who are miserable for a time, I found things that mattered to me. I had a wonderful teacher, professor. Her name was Lula Brandt. In those days, still segregated South, there were many white teachers who came from the North to work in historically black colleges, and one such person was Lula Brandt, who was an incredible teacher.

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Having her as a professor, and then others who inspired me, I just fell into the work and again, was so enthralled with what I was doing and learning that it just got so interesting for me. I had a course on existentialism, and every young person who takes existentialism, you found the answer to life when you've taken existentialism, and what I was reading and the conversations that I was having.

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Then I got involved with the campus newspaper, and so eventually I found enough to make things fit. That was the period when I really, I think, found my rebellion, and probably if I had not gone to Dillard, which was a very conservative environment, I probably would never have found that streak in myself.

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So here I was working on the campus newspaper writing editorials, and what a moment that was to critique everything that was going on on campus. So I

went on a bit of a tear with everything that was wrong and not wrong at the college. So for example, we had required chapel, and it occurred to me that what if I were Jewish, and I had to go to chapel to a Christian service?

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I railed against that. So I decided, well, I'm not going to chapel. I'm going to protest this insane practice of having chapel in this day and age where people have many faiths. Now, the oddity of that was that everybody at Dillard was Christian, right? And the notion that… Obviously. So you can see at that age, I was looking for… I was fighting my battles.

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So that was very important to me, but I did it to such an extent that I think the faculty at Dillard have expressed their surprise that I really went on to do anything successful because they had really lost hope that I would ever do anything successful in life because I was such a rebel. My failure to attend chapel, for example, resulted in the university wanting to withhold my degree when I graduated.

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So there were things of that sort that I did, but what had formed in me was the ability to step outside of that very rigid, traditional culture that had shaped my early life, and to begin to determine the things that I cared about and to assert my views, and then to have the courage to be alone in my views. That really took off, I would say, when I was a college student.

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BETSY WEST:
So you had talked about an aspiration to work in an office. At what point did you think, "Well, maybe education is going to be my future?"

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RUTH SIMMONS:
Not when I was in undergraduate school. I was still, as an undergraduate, more enthralled with the idea of a liberal education. I just wanted to soak all that up because somewhere, I thought, that it was a solution for all the ills that I had seen growing up, the prejudice, the discrimination. I just thought that it was a way of getting outside of that somehow-

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-and reconciling myself to that dim, dim period in my life where my aspirations were squashed and where my dignity was taken away from me. So I was healing. I was overcoming that to a certain extent, and that meant that I had to do everything. I was far from the point where I knew what I should do. It was not until the circumstances when I graduated from college really dictated what I did,-

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-and that is, I expected I would graduate from college and then go on to do something, but again, a number of surprises occurred. First, I received a Danforth Fellowship, which would pay for my education through a PhD. I hadn't thought about that as an option. I got a Fulbright and was able to spend a year in France. I hadn't planned that.

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So following undergraduate school, I had these opportunities, and of course, since I had been taking care to really take advantage of every opportunity, it was important for me to take these things and to do them. That's what led me into graduate school and an understanding at that point that I could have a career as a professor.

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BETSY WEST:
And the move into administration, was there a moment when you thought, "Hey, maybe I would be good as a leader?" Was there something?

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RUTH SIMMONS:
There was never a conscious decision that I wanted to be an administrator. I saw myself as being a professor for all of my career, but again, circumstances arose that pushed me in that direction. First, the dean of the College of Letters called me in one day and said, "We have someone going on leave, and I need an assistant dean. Would you be willing to do that?"

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I thought hard about that because I wasn't sure that was a good move for me frankly. I had just started my time as a professor. I think that might have been my second year as an assistant professor at University of New Orleans, and here somebody was asking me to play a leadership role. I didn't understand

that. However, here's one of the experiences that I had as a professor that told me to do it.

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You see, I was in the most esoteric of fields. French literature, teaching both language and literature. I noticed something pretty important, and that is that there were no minority students in my classes. So here I was, one of very few African Americans on the faculty, and yet I was not encountering any minority students at all. As I thought about that, I thought, I have a problem here,-

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-and that is I want to do something to help students like me, and yet, what if I don't encounter them because of the esoteric field in which I am teaching? So that prompted me to take that position because it was a more central position that would allow me to encounter and to help a diversity of students. So that's actually why I took that job.

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BETSY WEST:
Your career was progressing as the women's movement was also taking off. What impact did that have on you?

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RUTH SIMMONS:

Two movements had a tremendous impact on me. First, the civil rights struggle was the most important, I would say, for me, because without it, I simply would not have been able to do what I was doing at that time.

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And then at the same time, I would say the women's movement was helped immensely by the civil rights struggle. So as time went on, the courageous acts of women who led the way and prompted people to begin to ask, "Well, why can't women do that," also had an enormously powerful impact on my career,-

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-because although we went through the civil rights struggle and I got in the door, I was still impeded by this notion that women could not do certain things. There's one instance in my time as a college student that struck me as having probably a very powerful impact for me as a woman, and that is, I went to Wellesley for a year during my undergraduate years as a visiting student.

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And guess what? There's a woman president of a college there. I was just so stunned. I couldn't believe it. That was the first time it ever crystallized for me that a woman could occupy a powerful position like that, because I was coming from the South, from Dillard, going to Wellesley, and Margaret Clapp was a phenomenon to me.

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I think at that moment, I began to think, well, maybe those barriers are coming down. Of course they did. But ultimately, I have to say that people like Betty Friedan, Gloria Steinem, and so many others, in their courageous efforts to put these issues forward, made a big difference for all of us.

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BETSY WEST:
So now you're the president of a woman's college, an all women's college. You made some major initiatives there. One of them really involved women in science. I mean, tell me about that atmosphere of being in an all women's college and the challenge that you saw there.

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RUTH SIMMONS:
Well, I was president of a women's college, certainly well after many of these barriers had effectively come down, and I ended up at a women's college because that was important to me. I wanted to make sure that women continued to enjoy the kinds of opportunities that I thought I had had, but I also thought that there are elements of education that I saw in my experience that continued to contribute to women not choosing certain disciplines.

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So one of the things I wanted to do at Smith was to open opportunities wider, particularly in those fields in which women were still not well represented.

So we started an engineering program at Smith, the only one at a women's college, certainly in this country. I also started a finance program because of the lack of women in the financial industries.

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So what it was like is an opportunity, finally, at the head of a women's college to say some things about what women could do, as well as to say some things about the kind of a silent barriers that continued to exist, because at a certain point, women started to conclude that everything was done, that the frontier had already been settled, and therefore it was only a woman's choice.

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We of course know that that is still not the case. So to be in a position to address those issues and to speak to the fact that we still have those barriers within families, within society, even within universities, that was very, very important to me.

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BETSY WEST:
I was going to ask you about finance because it strikes me, you're a humanities person, but now you're running these big institutions. How important was it for you to get your arms around numbers and finance and all of that?

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RUTH SIMMONS:

I think, frankly, if I had not had the position that I had at Princeton, which was a budget focused position, that I probably would not have been able to advance in the way that I did. Being a humanist, again, in a fairly esoteric area, people would've concluded that that would be a high risk to have me run an institution of the size of Smith or Brown,-

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-but I had the experience of working with the budget at Princeton, and as a consequence, I was able to move into that position, but every woman should have some basic knowledge of, first of all, personal finance. One of my observations over the years has been that women often suffer greatly because they do not confront financial issues easily.

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That is to say, when they go to negotiate with an employer for a job, they always come out less well than men. Because they come out less well than men with regard to benefits, with regard to all areas of compensation, with regard to perks of all kinds, they stay behind for a long period of time, and that affects their lives, their family's lives, their retirement, and so forth.

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I also noticed over time that women did not become familiar with how to build assets. They often had assets, but they didn't know how to protect them. They didn't know how to grow them. They didn't know how to manage them, passively or not. So one of the things I wanted to do at Smith is to say to women,-

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"You must know about insurance. You must know about investment strategies. You must know about how to protect your assets. Whether in a relationship or not, you have to find a way to do that." So that's a big factor for women still.

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BETSY WEST:
Tell me about coming to Brown. How were you approached and what did you think at first?

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RUTH SIMMONS:
I was very surprised to get the offer to be president of Smith. I was even more surprised to be approached by Brown. I guess that's because there is some part of me still from those days in Texas that feels that I'm really not all that, as the young people say, right? So I'm often perplexed when people ask me to do things of that sort.

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So the first approach came, and I was stunned, and I said, "Well, no, of course not. I can't do that." Brown persisted, came back to me and tried to explore with me why they thought it would be a good idea for me to consider becoming president of Brown. Now, I have to say that in my own negotiations when I'm trying to hire women, I often face the same thing.

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Women who at first blush, say, "Oh, no, I couldn't possibly do that." So there's obviously something going on still in the culture that makes us recede when we shouldn't, but they were patient enough to keep at it, to keep probing and to keep the conversation going, but the hardest part for me was-

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-I was devoted to Smith, and I could not imagine doing this terrible thing, which was to tell Smith that I was leaving. That was very difficult. I think for many women, that nurturing side of us, it makes us loyal. It makes us feel that gratification, personal satisfaction and gratification is far more important than many other factors, and that was also impeding me.

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But something happened that was quite interesting to me, and I don't know if people are aware of this, but the member of the Board of Trustees at Smith, who had helped to persuade me to come to Smith, was African American, and she came to me and said, "Ruth, I think it's been terrific that you have been president of Smith,-

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-but I want you to know that if you ever get an opportunity to become president of a major university, I think you should take it because it's too important historically for you to pass it up." That was probably what I needed to hear from someone whom I respected, and she basically gave me permission to do something that I was not really comfortable doing because she said it mattered nationally to do it. So that's how I finally made the decision to go to Brown.

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BETSY WEST:
Wow, that's amazing. I watched the 60 Minutes piece, and you told Morley Safer that you were worried about failing. I also watched the video of you in your first speech at Sales, and I think of you as so confident, as a very confident person, but you looked very nervous then.

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RUTH SIMMONS:
Yes.

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BETSY WEST:
Can you tell me about what that was like, what you were feeling then when you went there?

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RUTH SIMMONS:
Well, first of all, I'm a very private person, and I had spent my career succeeding in many ways, doing many things, but people didn't know very much about me, frankly, and one of the shocks I got when I was named president of Smith was all the press attention and all of the recounting of my life.

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I suppose for most of the people who knew me, who worked with me at that time, they assumed me to be kind of an average middle class sort who just had the life that everybody else had had. Then these stories started coming out about what my real background was, and I think it dawned on me that I was no longer in a sense in Kansas, that something had happened to my life, and some part of my life was being taken away from me.

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I've always worried about that separation because I've tried to maintain a well integrated life where who I am publicly is the same as who I am privately, and my family who still are very different circumstances for me, are very important to me, and I don't want a division of any kind between them and me.

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So it occurred to me that my life was now not within my control, not so much, and that there would be many of these stories and many efforts to take me away from that sphere that I had crafted so carefully over the years. That was making me nervous. The second thing that made me nervous is, of course, I could fail, and because of all these stories of what I had become, what if I failed?

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I thought it would be horrible because when would be the next time that a place like Smith would appoint somebody like me if I failed? So I felt

responsible to the future and to opportunities that others might have after me, and I didn't want to fail.

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BETSY WEST:
You've been at Brown now for 10 years. Arguably, you've had a very successful presidency on many, many different levels. Have you stopped worrying about this? Have you relaxed?

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RUTH SIMMONS:
Have I stopped worrying about failure? No, I haven't, because I'd like to say the world is a completely different place from the world that I knew as a child, but I know that that's not entirely true yet. After all, if you look at the composition of presidencies across the country, you'll still find that it isn't really what it should be. I know so many outstanding, qualified people who don't get the chance that I've gotten.

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They're more brilliant than I am. They're more qualified than I am, and yet, opportunity passes them by, and there are lots of reasons for that. So I know that in order for things to continue to progress, we have to lay a very careful trail for the country so that things continue to progress.

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Every time one of us becomes a kind of icon of success, it's only just that one instance. We also know that the next person will have a better time or a more difficult time because of what we do. So that's never left me.

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BETSY WEST:
These institutions, these elite institutions, for many, many centuries really, several centuries, were white men. I'm wondering when you talk about 'we,' was it harder to move up in this exclusive club as an African American or as a woman?

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RUTH SIMMONS:
It is so difficult to separate them for me, because I have only lived one life, and that's been integrated as a woman and an African American. So there are days when I feel that my race is a far more important factor, and then there are days when I feel that being a woman is a more important factor, and I can't discern which has been a more important factor.

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I will say that in terms of moving up, I probably was helped by the fact that I was both an African American and woman, because for so much of my career, I was just an oddity. Being an oddity, I think the fact that I surprised people as an oddity certainly helped garner some attention for what I was doing. First

of all, what was I doing in French? What on earth was I thinking to get a PhD in French? What is that all about?

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So the idea that the stereotype of what an African American scholar should be, didn't dwell in me, was an important aspect of it. The fact that I was a probably stronger woman than many- that my colleagues were dealing with probably helped me. Now I have to say, I wasn't trying to advance when I did this.

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So I became a rebel in college, and then for my early career, I think people who knew me at that time were very surprised when I became a college president because I made so much trouble for people. Their conclusion early in my career was that I wouldn't really never go anywhere because I was still a protestor.

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I remember at Princeton, for example, there was an effort to get me to speak on behalf of minorities at one point, and this was a request delivered by the president of Princeton. I refused to do it, on principle that I wasn't there to do that. I wasn't there to be the show minority person. To be trotted out whenever somebody wanted to do that.

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I was often warned going along that I would never advance because of course, who wants to hear that all the time. So whether it was women's issues or minority issues, I was always doing that. Therefore, I assumed like everybody

else, I'd never get an opportunity to lead anything because I was too much of an odd duck, but apparently that's what people were looking for.

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BETSY WEST:
You talked to Morley Safer about examples of racism that you felt. Did you also suffer sexism, examples that you remember of this as you were coming through in your career?

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RUTH SIMMONS:
I continue to experience sexism in my career. That's not over by a long shot, but yes, there were many of these. I remember one supervisor told me that he wasn't giving me a raise because there was a man in the office who had a family and he needed it. I remember as late as Princeton that my supervisor paid a junior person,-

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-junior male in the office with less education and less responsibility than me, much more than he was paying me. So, this is why I say there's a lot that's hidden in all of this, and even today, the disparate treatment of minorities and women is omnipresent. Most people never see it because of course, salaries are hidden, perks are hidden, and you never know what's going on, but one day it's disclosed,-

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-and you discover, my goodness, you've been mistreated for all these years. So I would say that, yes, there were many instances of this, but I always spoke up for myself. Always. The moment that I discovered that I was being paid a lower salary, I went to my supervisor and I said, "I want you to know something very important. I discovered the salary of my colleague. I understand that he is being paid considerably more than I,-

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-while I am the senior person of the two, and I only want you to know one thing, and that is I know that this is unfair, and I will never feel the same way about working for you again." That's all I said. So I was always unable to sit and take it. I always spoke up for myself, and it worked for me. I always try to do it in a nice way.

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This is why I say being born in the South and being culturally still attached to that… One of the things I remember most about the segregated South is that people who hated you and discriminated against you, could be perfectly polite to you. That was the South of those days, and so one of the things that I took from that is it's possible to disagree. It's possible to fight for yourself, but you can still be decent to people when you do that. I think that's been very useful for me to do.

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BETSY WEST:
Do you consider yourself a feminist?

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RUTH SIMMONS:
Definitely. Oh my, yes.

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BETSY WEST:
What does a feminist mean to you? What is it?

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RUTH SIMMONS:
Feminism has to do with consciousness. You cannot be a feminist if you are unaware of the unique circumstances and the differential circumstances that women face in society. You can't be a feminist. So first, it's the consciousness of being alert to the ways in which society forms these and sustains these differences.

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Secondly, I suppose it's having the will and the self-respect to speak up for people who are being treated differently. So if you are a feminist, you cannot sit still when you know that people are treating women unjustly.

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BETSY WEST:

The women's movement has been criticized for focusing too much on white middle class women. Do you think that's true?

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RUTH SIMMONS:
I do think it's true that the movement has not focused enough on the women who bear the brunt of discrimination against women, because think of all of those women at the poverty line trying to support families. Now, this is really the area that is of the greatest importance, it seems to me, because the social problems that arise from the fact that those women are held back,-

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-it goes to their children, it goes to their grandchildren, and it continues a kind of hopelessness because these women are not able to earn at the appropriate level, and they don't have the rights that most of us take for granted in the middle class.

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BETSY WEST:
You're in contact with a lot of younger women. What do you think they think about feminism and these issues?

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RUTH SIMMONS:

I think many younger women think it's kind of a passé concept. After all, they can do anything they want. There are no barriers to them, and so all of this talk about, it's so tiresome, all of this talk about feminism and so forth. They want to be friends with men. They are concerned about having a complete life.

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They dismiss many feminists, who they would say have had very troubled lives as a consequence of their focusing overly on the issue of women's rights. Unfortunately, so many of them don't realize that they never would have the rights that they have today, were it not for the work that these women have done, and furthermore, that the extent of their equality in the future is also dependent on whether or not women continue to work for equal rights.

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So equal pay is something that young women haven't experienced yet. They don't know until they get into the workplace that they actually are suffering discrimination. So in time, I think they will come to understand that there are some issues that remain unresolved with regard to the rights of women.

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BETSY WEST:
Well, they also will come up with the, sort of, work/life balance issues.

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RUTH SIMMONS:

Yes.

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BETSY WEST:
Which I was going to ask you about. What were your expectations about growing up, marriage and everything else, and how was it for you to balance your work and personal life?

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RUTH SIMMONS:
Well, of course, in my family, with all these males who had rigid rules about what women did, I grew up expecting that my mother's burden was my burden. That whatever I did, in addition to serving my husband, taking care of children, cleaning the house and so forth, was kind of extra for me, and that it still was not an obligation so much for my spouse or my partner to do that.

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So I started out with that idea. But of course, once you have children and you see the burden of doing all of that, you very quickly come to understand that it's just not a workable plan. And so I think as a young mother, I really progressed into, "Wait a minute. My job is no easier than your job. And yet we both come home and you sit down and I have to do everything else."

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So that's a progression. I didn't come to that because of any sense that it was wrong. I came to it because as a practical matter, it's just an unworkable

approach. There are men who, of course, are very traditional and who believe still that women have to do certain kinds of work, and many of those men are in my family still.

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So when I'm home with my sisters and brothers, and often my nieces, my nephews, I'm trying to persuade them still that what they're doing is just not appropriate. I have to say this, I shouldn't confess it, I shouldn't, but my own son is really a far cry from being the kind of man that I thought I would rear.

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So I think that it's just very difficult to do that, and I think as he saw me growing up and what I was trying to communicate him about equal work in the household, I think to a certain degree, he's taken that on, but he now has a child of his own, and he participates in childcare, and he helps out considerably, but he treats me in a way that really is reminiscent of what would've been true when I was growing up.

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So he tells me what to do. He thinks that he has to explain things to me in a very careful way because my brain is perhaps not big enough to absorb the things he's saying. So anyway, I don't know how that happens.

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BETSY WEST:

These habits take a long time to change I think-

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RUTH SIMMONS:
They do. They do.

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BETSY WEST:
You've talked about some of the work that still needs to be done. What do you think is the biggest challenge for the young women at Brown and the other young women that you meet going forward now?

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RUTH SIMMONS:
The biggest challenge for us all is the fact that the problems we're facing now are so complex and so acute that every effort has to be made to prepare one's self, whether you're a man or a woman, to confront these challenges. So I would say the challenge for women is very similar to the challenge for men today,-

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-and that is we've got to work harder at identifying those challenges and solutions to those challenges by working in teams across all kinds of boundaries. We have to learn somehow how to solve cross border conflict in a way that those who preceded us have not been able to do it. We have to learn how to respect each other in a way that still society doesn't seem to be able to get a handle on.

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These are age-old issues, but they're not resolved, and part of what I see on our campuses is that students who focus on a career or a particular trajectory may be missing the point. The point is, whatever your career, you will have the same issues that your colleague in another country has because the lack of sustainable means of feeding people will encroach upon what you're doing sooner or later.

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So you have to be involved, you have to be immersed in solving the world's problems in the ways that you can best contribute to that, and so that's having a broader view. So for those girls on my campus who are worrying about balance of career and family, worrying about very local concerns, I'm saying to them,-

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"Your concerns are not local. They're much broader than that. They are global, and you may in fact, as a woman, as an individual, be called on to lead in that effort." Nobody ever expects when you are a teenager or a 20 year old, you never expect to be running anything. I certainly never expected that, but they will be. They cannot predict now what precisely they will be leading.

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That's why I say to them, you've got to be prepared. You've got to move across the world, encountering different people. You have to find different ways of knowing than you currently have. If you keep that in mind, that global context, I think they'll be fine, but what helped me most growing up in some

ways, is that I knew somewhere that this world, I lived in, a world of segregation and bigotry, wasn't really the real world.

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I knew that. What I had to do was go outside it to find a way to resolve the issues that confronted me as a consequence of the way that I grew up, and that's what everybody has to do. They have to go outside that immediate world and find a way to be a part of that larger world. If they do that, there'll be better problem solvers. There'll be better leaders, There'll be better mothers. There'll be better partners. They'll be better in every respect if they have that broader purview.

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BETSY WEST:
What's the most meaningful piece of advice that you've ever received?

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RUTH SIMMONS:
The best advice I probably got was from my mother, who though her own circumstances as a child were very constrained, and she never knew anything other than segregation, by the way, because she died before she could see the civil rights struggle, but here was a person who had this profound belief that one had to respect people.

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So I think what she gave me was this advice that never consider yourself better than any other human being. Just that simple dictum, frankly, and to always act as if you have respect for another person, even when you disagree with them, even when they oppress you, even when they do these horrible things to you.

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I think that's probably the single most important piece of advice to me because frankly, without it, I don't think I could have gone through the experiences I've gone through being discriminated against, being periodically harassed, being held back, and still having the attitude where people would say, "Okay, I understand what you're saying, Ruth, and I understand that you're saying that I've been unfair to you, but let's fix it."

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So I somehow always had the capacity, because I didn't disrespect people, to have people come back with a right answer, and the right answer was, “Yeah, we ought to find a different way to do this. Let's figure out how to do it.”

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BETSY WEST:
What's the accomplishment you're most proud of?

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RUTH SIMMONS:

Oh, of course, being president of Brown. What an opportunity it has been to serve this university, and the experiences that I've had as president, I can't tell you what that's been like for somebody- Nobody can understand the path that I've actually been on because you would have to live that life in Grapeland and know what poverty is at that level,-

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-on the life of a sharecropper at that point in time, the feeling of starvation, both real and metaphorical, to understand how immense a journey I've been on. The contrast between the two overwhelms me. So as I like to say, I grew up with very modest goals.

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I just wanted to have an opportunity to not become a maid like everybody else around me, and yet, I've traversed this chasm and in such a way that I feel that my life has just been so blessed, and I'm thankful for that.

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BETSY WEST:
You've blessed many others. What was your first paying job?

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RUTH SIMMONS:
My first paying job was as a maid. So when I was a student, I got a job cleaning houses to make some money. So in an odd way, although my idea

was that I would get away from that, I actually, frankly, ended up doing that myself.

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BETSY WEST:
You dipped into it.

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RUTH SIMMONS:
Yes.

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BETSY WEST:
The three adjectives that best describe you?

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RUTH SIMMONS:
Respectful of people, very pragmatic, down to earth.

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BETSY WEST:
What person you've never met do you think has had the biggest influence on your life?

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RUTH SIMMONS:

Oh, there's no question that Martin Luther King- Thurgood Marshall, Martin Luther King, those who shaped the Civil Rights Movement are responsible for my sitting here today. Without them, I could not have had the life that I've had. No question.

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