Life Stories
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ABIGAIL DISNEY INTERVIEW
THE THREAD SEASON TWO

Abigail Disney, Filmmaker and Activist
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Interviewed by: David Bender
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START TC: 00:00:00:00

ON SCREEN TEXT:
Life Stories Presents

ABIGAIL DISNEY:
I felt so proud, standing there looking at my grandfather. I mean, it was — it's a little weird. You know, you're standing there and that's grandpa, and everybody's looking at grandpa, and he's my grandpa, and he carries me on his back to the ice cream store on weekends. I mean, how is it possible that the world cares this much about my grandpa? The way I care about my grandpa? You know, for me, this was like...I guess my first real glance at the enormity of what was accomplished, you know, under this rubric that was my name.

ON SCREEN TEXT:
The Thread
Abigail Disney
Filmmaker and Activist

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INTERVIEWER:

Well, welcome. I'd love for you to introduce yourself to our audience.

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ABIGAIL DISNEY:

I'm Abigail Disney. I am a filmmaker and a philanthropist and an activist and a mother of four and a PhD, so a doctor too, but don't ask me to resuscitate you. Please.

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INTERVIEWER:

There's so many things that I'd like to ask you about, but I'm going to start with this. What are conscience?

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ABIGAIL DISNEY:

I love that so much, that moment. That's a moment in Pinocchio, when, he's hurrying along behind Pinocchio. Jiminy Cricket is. And I love Jiminy Cricket because he sounded to me exactly like my grandfather. My grandfather spoke like this very, humble Midwestern guy, which is what he was. And, and he, Jiminy Cricket says you have to follow your conscience. And, Pinocchio says what our conscience and and Jiminy Crickets answer is "that still small voice inside you that tells you what's right and wrong." And the first part of that is from the Bible, which actually, when I found that out, surprised me a bit because, you know, they were not Bible thumping guys, my grandfather and

great uncle. But it's the perfect description of what it is people should be listening to.

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INTERVIEWER:
There were two Disney brothers. Your grandfather was the older of two by eight years.

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ABIGAIL DISNEY:
Yeah. My grandfather, Roy, was eight years older than his brother Walt, and they started what was known as the Disney Brothers Company. My grandfather did the work of figuring out copyright law, figuring out distribution, figuring out how to build a company. He took his name off of it. It stopped being the Disney brothers and became a Walt Disney Company because he didn't really like having the focus on him, and he really believed that Walt was the creative and that the creative should get the credit. My grandfather, Roy, was a very humble man. He just was a sweet human, and we were his only four grandchildren. And he treated us like we were gods and goddesses. And I learned a lot from him. I would go to the park with him when I was young, and I would watch the way he related to people there. There were hugs and smiles. People called him Roy. He hated when people called him Mister Disney. He just didn't want there to be an obvious hierarchy. He didn't feel like that had anything to do with doing the work well. One of the things I remember him telling me was, "Don't you ever, ever sass any of the people who work here because they work harder than you can ever

imagine, and we need them and nobody's better than them." So that was really an important piece of of something that I took with me and still hold close to my heart. And the other one is that he as soon as he got into the park, he would look around and see if he could find a piece of garbage, and if he could find a piece of garbage, he would always pick it up and throw it in the garbage. And when I asked him why he did that, he said, "Because I want people to know that nobody's too good to pick up a piece of garbage." And, you know, I have to say, that's actually kind of a Disney tradition still to this day. You'll see employees walk through the park. They always pick up garbage when they see it. They always — when I go on a hike in the woods, I pick up garbage. Just because it feels like — you could learn worst lessons. But I feel like that's just such a profound lesson.

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INTERVIEWER:
As that name began to obvious it had it from the films, but the theme park too, did you understand that that name carried with it both a blessing and a curse?

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ABIGAIL DISNEY:
You know, I didn't really understand my name until I left home. Really, I had to get out of my home to-to see the way other people reacted to me, to start to pass what it meant. And for me, it was mostly blessing because we got these sort of perks. You know, I rode in the first boat of the Small World ride next to my grandfather, which is one of my best memories. And, you know, when the

parades would happen, we'd be there in the special box with whatever dignitary it was — it was really a beautiful thing. Disneyland was the happiest place on Earth. It really, really was. A few years ago, I met the daughter of Medgar Evers. We were at his house in Mississippi, and they had all these Disney books. The house has been kept exactly as it was in the bookshelf. And I said, "Okay, well, that's interesting. Tell me about that." I like to ask people what it meant to them from all these different backgrounds. And she said, are you kidding? That was that was my life. I love Disney so much. And when after Medgar Evers was shot, her mother had to move them five kids to San Bernardino County. That was the only place they could afford. And she said it was worse in San Bernardino than Mississippi, which is an important thing to know. And their mother worked as a maid to raise them. Nobody supported her, and they got no help or anything from anybody, in spite of Medgar Evers status. And, every other weekend they could save up enough money to go to Disneyland. And she said, you have no idea what that meant to us all. We felt like we were valued. It changed everything for us to go there every other weekend. And that moved me so much. You know, it's a complicated legacy, and I can talk for hours about why it's complicated, but but those moments when you hear, like, just the pure joy that came into the world as a result of that work, that makes me so proud.

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INTERVIEWER:
That time in the 60s was a very interesting transition time in the country.

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ABIGAIL DISNEY:
Yeah.

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INTERVIEWER:
You were watching this as a pre-teen and then a young teen as we went through. Do you remember Doctor King? Do you remember all of that happening? You remember Bobby Kennedy in Los Angeles? Tell me.

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ABIGAIL DISNEY:
I mean, I — you know, it's a hard thing to talk about this because, when you're young, you know, you only get to see things through your parents lenses. And my parents were very conservative. And, they didn't like Martin Luther King. They thought he was a communist. So, you know, stuff would come filtered through them. And I had a hard time trying to decide how I felt about anything. But I do remember in 1970, the Kent State shooting, I remember my mother saying, you know how people talk to the television when the news is going on? "I don't know what those kids expected." And I just remember thinking, well, that just makes no sense to me, you know? And I think that's the first really concrete memory I have of starting to separate. I never rejected my parents values. But I never understood how those values aligned with their political views. And it's very difficult to separate off and go your own way politically in life.

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INTERVIEWER:
But you did. And you said that you really didn't understand your name or yourself until you left home. How old were you when you did?

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ABIGAIL DISNEY:
I left for college at 18 years old, like so many people do. And, it wasn't until, like, three weeks in when I overheard somebody talking about me. And I just thought, why would I be interesting enough to talk about? I don't understand that. And so there were little, moments where I would recognize that something weird was going on. That I was notable for some reason because I did feel notable. And so, you know, you pick up the little lessons and the little learnings along the way. Took a long time.

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INTERVIEWER:
As that happened to you when you realized that people were talking about you because of your name. Did that cause you to withdraw from it? Erase it? How did how did that evolve?

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ABIGAIL DISNEY:
Yeah, I — you know, eventually, in my 30s, I started meeting a lot of women who came from families with a lot of money. And I realized there's a little bit of a pattern to it. I spent my 20s really running from it. And there's two parts of this. There's the money, and then there's the name. And the name came

with all the baggage it came with. You know, I hadn't at that point met Reena Evers. So I hadn't at that point really seen globally what the name can mean to people. I was mostly focused in on the McCarthy hearings and, and the John Birch Society and the things that are negative around the legacy of that name. And so I felt very defensive, and I felt like people were judging my politics before it ever opened my mouth. So so I was carrying that. I was also carrying this assumption that I, you know, just slept on pillows made out of $500 bills. And it wasn't pleasant have either of those things. And so I, kind of started to pretend, and, you know, I just dressed really bad and, you know, just tried not to call attention to myself. And sometimes when people asked if I was related, I'd lie because it was just too complicated.

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INTERVIEWER:
You have used imagination, throughout your life to reimagine yourself. So can you talk about it in those terms?

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ABIGAIL DISNEY:
Well, I think when you when you leave home and you go to a very different sort of political space or social or cultural space than you were raised in, the first impulses do the opposite of everything that you were raised to do. And then at some point, you grow up a little bit and you recognize, oh, they're just as much deciding everything I do as if I was doing the same thing, because I'm just doing a shadow version of everything. So perhaps I should look at everything newly and and decide things for myself. And so that took me into

my 30s and 40s to really try to imagine, that there is another way to think about the name and the money and the legacy and all of that. I did in, in my 20s and 30s, living in New York City when it was still pretty rough, and we still had a lot of people sleeping on the sidewalk, and we still had a lot of yuppies stepping over them on their way to work. I had really started to become very aware of the disparities and felt, frustrated by how it didn't seem like anybody was working on it. But that's because I really hadn't been raised in a space where I would know who was working on it. And that was when I started really opening myself up to the idea that there were people who were working on it. And, I started getting involved with foundations and not for profits and things like that. And I, I sort of emerged fully into the foundation world in my 30s and 40s. And that was like my second PhD, honestly, learning about how what we mean when we say grassroots, because it's a word gets thrown around, but it actually has a meaning and it's important. Grassroots means the people working at the level of the of the problems, people coming from the problems, being empowered to address the problems. So there's the grassroots and then there's the tree tops, and the tree tops are people helicoptering in and sprinkling their largesse over things. I went on the board of the New York Women's Foundation was one of the first things that I did. And they had this thing called the allocations committee, and it was partly women like me, and it was partly women from the programs, not just people who ran the programs, but some of their clients. And, what I realized was, I may have been on the same bus with some of these women when I rode the bus, but I certainly never interacted with them. And we were living on other planets. But here we were on this committee together and problem solving together, elbow to elbow. That was

an incredibly profound shift for me. I think that when kids are raised in highly privileged environments, they can become monsters not because they're inherently monsters, but because it's easy to mistake your centrality in everybody's eyes when you go out to visit program like that for importance, when all people are really looking for is money, and the only reason they're paying special attention to you is money. It's really easy to mistake your money for value. And, when I was doing that work side by side, what I had to recognize was that I was no more smart or important than anybody else on that committee and that, that there was a wisdom in us working together and combining all of our intelligence and experience into into a single decision making process, and that we were all richer for it. You know, we all learned a lot about each other, and some of my oldest and best friendships today still come from those days.

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INTERVIEWER:
One of the things that I've seen you talk about, following a path, going back to that time, was the idea that you saw the tree tops and the grass roots didn't associate. And you said today that corporate boards never see the workers, they never meet them. And there's a disconnect, not just in the economic inequality. There's a physical disconnect between these people. Can you talk about that observation?

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ABIGAIL DISNEY:

Well, what's happened is there's a physical disconnect between the corporate boards and the executives in the managerial class and the working people, but it's also a social, cultural, emotional disconnect that's really, really important. You know, ages ago, when Disney first started, they looked for management in the ranks of the day to day workers, people who were pulling sodas and handing out tickets. Those are the people they look to, to cultivate management from. And some of them rose very high in the company. I think Dick Newnes was one who who started with sodas. It sounds cliche to say so, but there was a sort of family feeling in the company. And you, no matter how high you rose, you had a sense of that where you came from. And during the 80s and 90s, when we had basically the siege of the MBAs on American corporate culture, they started dividing workers into groups, some of whom worked on an hourly wage. So they were stripped of all their bonuses, stripped of all their perks, and stripped of all their health care and stripped of all of these things. And they got reduced to an hourly wage and every hour became something to negotiate, you know, how long do I work? Are you going to give me on this break enough time to actually get from here to the toilet and back so that the break is actually meaningful? So there were there were these hourly people, and then there were people who were hired up above them. They stopped looking at those hourly people as people who are potentially management experience material, and they started bringing in people withMBAs who would manage people even though they'd never done that kind of work in their lives and knew nothing about it. And that level of antipathy that develops when you do that is really important. And and when they're in that kind of adversarial dynamic that grows and affects everybody for years in their in their progress up the managerial class. And I really

believe, I mean, I and I as I've been fighting Disney about how they pay people, I feel like sometimes they will say things like, you know, we'll get them health care, we'll give them education, we'll give them this, will give them that. It feels to me like they'll give them anything but money. You know, that money's the real thing. They won't. Because money is the thing they care about. And money is the thing that matters. And these are not people who matter. I don't believe that the managerial class in this country looks upon people who work for an hourly wage as fully human. And that is what they...allows them to sleep at night when they treat them in this way.

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INTERVIEWER:
You said you had a conversation with Jane Fonda. You said of all the damaging things said during the 80s and 90s, it was Margaret Thatcher saying, there's no such thing as society. You said, that breaks my heart, because, you know, when they took that collective spirit and they dismissed it as just a communist or socialist plot, they took from people something essential, spiritual, something really important to the human experience and made it into a left right problem. And I was so struck by that, because that dichotomy still exists in the way we view things now, today, as if it made any sense at all, left and right.

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ABIGAIL DISNEY:
Yeah, we've raised generations now, more than one generation of-of young people on the idea that they're in it by themselves. I mean, how does anybody

grow up inside of a family and not question that, you know, looking around you just your mother and your father and your siblings? Of course, you're not in it alone. Nobody is. Yeah. Margaret Thatcher did a lot of damage with there's No Such Thing as society and with her best pal Ronald Reagan, because everything they did politically was aimed at deconstructing anything that the government had put together that was rooted in the idea that, if if someone is suffering, that's my problem too. The society we've kind of landed at after 50 years of focusing on being a highly individuated society is kind of dumb one kind of a fractured, angry one, because there's a moral and spiritual and emotional poverty in the idea that we're all in this on our own. It's a fiction, but it's also it's a deprivation of things that are the most natural to human beings. Every society, the first thing they do when they want to torture you is put you in solitary. So we need each other.

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INTERVIEWER:
You've looked at this from a very interesting perspective, because capitalism has been at the core of your family's history, and yet you have looked at capitalism through a very different lens. I really want to go there now for a bit. The idea of capitalism with what our conscience. Is that capitalism? Is that possible to have capitalism that has conscience and has principle in the way Disneyland began?

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ABIGAIL DISNEY: You know, my grandfather and my great uncle had their limits of what they would do to make money. You know, they kept

deliberately kept the prices at the park quite low because they wanted it to be affordable for people. But they faced a different set of problems. Demand for the park is so high, how can you not raise the prices? How can you not charge for parking, etc., etc.? There's there's like a matter of degree in capitalism that got steamrolled in the 80s. I mean, I remember sitting in a theater in 1987 here in New York City and hearing Gordon Gekko say, greed is good. And having the theater erupt in place. He was the villain of the piece. And my theater full of Goldman Sachs trainees went insane because they said, finally, somebody's saying the truth. So there was a massive personality shift that occurred. And I don't know, because I know it was a form of it was because of social persuasion, and heavy investment from conservatives and all that. But still, even so, how did our culture lap that up so readily? Why did our culture want to be fed that story that I can't ever quite get my head wrapped around.

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INTERVIEWER:
So let me ask you, you're still wrestling with whether capitalism can be saved. A lot of people are questioning existentially whether America can be saved. The conversation you had with Jane Fonda was what she's devoted the rest of her life to: Climate.

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ABIGAIL DISNEY:
Yeah

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INTERVIEWER:

And whether we can save the planet, quite literally in our lifetime. Talk to me as the mother of four and as someone who has been an activist, how do you see that existential challenge?

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ABIGAIL DISNEY:

You know. Yeah. I'm a mother of four, and I am seeing them make choices that they might not otherwise have made if they were more confident about what the future looked like. And they've been educating me and jerking my eyes open. I think I was in a that subliminal denial state where you sort of are educated and you sort of know, but somebody else is going to fix it. And so in the last few years, I felt myself get more radicalized. And I do think that, that the main barrier here is capitalism. No matter what happens in the environment, you know whether we only have 20 years left on the planet and our is going to die or we're going to have massive dislocation, which I think is more likely and enormous trials. Or whether everything's fine. What are we fighting for, exactly except human dignity? And that brings us back to the question of work and capitalism's primary challenge to human dignity and work. Capitalism as we currently practice it. And, and so I, I really do think that those are the two most important things that we can spend time on. They they overlap utterly. All of it leads back to capitalism. All of it leads back to something higher or lower than capitalism, which is, selfish motivations and greed and the sort of highly individualistic way of living. Those are the poles we're living between is that and a collective sense of responsibility for one another and for the future of our people and children. So we need to do

some fundamental questioning either of capitalism itself and the way we practice it, if it can be done differently or some other system. And God knows I've read enough about revolutions not to want to subject this world to that kind of thing, but if we continue behaving as though everything is fine, we're headed for deep trouble.

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INTERVIEWER:
We've talked about so many existential threats and difficulties. So I'm going to ask you something in almost the opposite direction. If you pause and think about it, what gives you hope? Now, today.

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ABIGAIL DISNEY:
I do have to pause and think about it, because I've been I've been struggling with hope lately. January 6th I started struggling with hope. The pandemic had me struggling with hope. I've been really engaged in a bit of a fight with myself about how to land this gymnastic thing that happened during the pandemic and everything else. But when I was in the East Hampton Airport in whatever it's called, the Chain Dragon or whatever it was, and we got sought out and brought off to jail, 63 years old, and the other people I was arrested with, they were not just younger than me. They were a third by age. They were so young and, I didn't really notice it until we got into jail — sat there for 4 or 5 hours together and talked, and they were so committed. They were so smart. They had it together. This was their life. This was their life. And I have four kids and they're all like that themselves. I don't think we've

ever known a generation like this. And the world isn't ready for this, but, I'm ready to hand it over to them. So every time I get down, I just think about what I can do to facilitate what it is that the young people decide to do. They are shining beacons, they're developing skills and they're learning smart things and all that, but they're keeping their children's eyes on the truth, and that is what's going to get us somewhere important.

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