

## Mrs. Betty Ford

Mrs. Betty Ford's public disclosure of her treatment for and recovery from alcohol and other drug dependence and her leadership in founding the Betty Ford Center stand as influential milestones in the modern history of addiction treatment and recovery in the United States. Mrs. Ford died on July 8, 2011, and gave her last public interview on October 4, 2007 with the *Desert Sun*, A Gannett Company publication. Below is the transcript from this final interview. (From *Desert Sun*, Erica Felci, October 4, 2007).

**Desert Sun:** I first want to tell you how sorry I am and express my personal condolences for the loss of your husband.

Mrs. Ford: Well I appreciate that. Thank you.

**Desert Sun:** You are so very, very loved in this valley and nation. We've just heard nothing but good things. Can you please tell me, how are you doing?

**Mrs. Ford:** I am doing well, I think, because our children have been wonderful about coming and spending time with me. So they don't want to have me alone too much. And I'm really not alone. But the children have been, and I say children, of course, the youngest one is Susan and you know, she's the baby of the family. The rest of them are older, there's four of them all together. And they all make such great efforts to be here.

**Desert Sun:** And I know you spent some time in San Diego, too, so I hope you had a beautiful summer.

**Mrs. Ford:** Oh yes, that was great. And I was not too far from our second son, his wife, and two of our grandsons, who came by very often.

**Desert Sun:** Well sure, but grandma is there to baby-sit and spoil. Why wouldn't they swing by?

**Mrs. Ford:** I've never been a very good babysitter as grandma. (Laughs) I've enjoyed them. But I'm afraid I was, I had a busy life and I didn't spend a lot of time babysitting.

**Desert Sun:** Well I'm sure there's plenty lessons that you've passed on that they'll remember always. I want to talk to you obviously about the center. I was looking at my calendar. The anniversary is actually today.

**Mrs. Ford:** Yes, when we opened.

**Desert Sun:** Twenty-five years ago today.

**Mrs. Ford:** Um-hum.

**Desert Sun:** Did you ever imagine when you agreed to put your name on the center that it would transform how people view alcoholism and drug addiction?

**Mrs. Ford:** No, of course not. In fact I didn't want my name to go on the center. But it was my husband, and Leonard Firestone who was co-founder and some of the people that were on the board putting, helping put it together. They just insisted it was very important because if it just was a center for chemical dependency or something it would not have the impact that it would if I allowed my name. So they kind of twisted my arm and I did allow my name to be used.

**Desert Sun:** Now Susan mentioned yesterday that all children also were, that you talked to them before hand as well. They were all OK with it. They were very proud of you.

**Mrs. Ford:** Oh very definitely. I wouldn't do that without out, you know, going, making sure they were comfortable with it because it kind of identified us as a family. And they were part of the family.

**Desert Sun:** Did having your name on the Betty Ford center with the world, I mean it's become a world-wide staple, did that help with your own personal battle?

**Mrs. Ford:** Well, it certainly made it obvious that if I was not going to stick to my program, it was going to be national news.

**Desert Sun:** Sure, sure.

**Mrs. Ford:** No, I think once I made up my mind that I was allergic to alcohol, and that's what I learned, it made sense to me. And I think it was kind of pointed out that you know if you were allergic to strawberries, you wouldn't eat strawberries.

**Desert Sun:** Sure.

**Mrs. Ford:** And that made sense to me.

**Desert Sun:** 80,000 alumni. And who could count the amount of family members. Are you surprised at the success?

**Mrs. Ford:** I've been watching that number build. So it's been doing this for quite a while. And, I, but I never really projected that at all. I'm pleased. We're full all the time. And people do have good success and I think one of the programs at the center, the Continuing Care, helps them with their success. Because it's difficult the first year.

**Desert Sun:** Sure. And the years after.

**Mrs. Ford:** Yes.

**Desert Sun:** And I know yesterday, I spoke to a woman who came up to me afterwards and mentioned that she had been a patient two years ago and that being at the center, it's like a family.

**Mrs. Ford:** She described it as a chance to look inside yourself, not so much, that this isn't like other centers. This is a place where you can go, that you can feel save and look inside yourself and discover yourself. I think that's very true.

**Desert Sun:** She had met you and your husband actually during one of your visits there. She just said it was very helpful to have somebody who could, who could, you know, understand.

**Mrs. Ford:** I'm sure it's helpful for anyone to see another person who has been successful. And you know, I don't do it as much no, but I used to be in the center a great deal of the time. I was there a good part of the week and I interacted with the patients.

**Desert Sun:** I actually just read a comment by your husband, who had made this comment a few years ago, but I don't remember the year. He mentioned, he said, and this was a very husbandly comment it actually made me laugh. But he said I know she's very, I'm proud of her, and isn't verbatim. But he said that he was proud of you and he admired what you were doing. But I get a little irritated she spends so much time over there. (Chuckles)

**Mrs. Ford:** Well you know, not too many. It's 15 minutes from our door to that door.

**Desert Sun:** Sure.

**Mrs. Ford:** So it was easy for me to be there almost daily. I say almost daily.

**Desert Sun:** Sure, sure.

**Mrs. Ford:** There was always something to do. (chuckle)

**Desert Sun:** Oh, I bet. And Susan also, not to give away anything what she said yesterday, but she did mention you're still very active, even if it's through her, and always asking about meetings and such.

**Mrs. Ford:** Oh, that's true.

**Desert Sun:** She said and mentioned that she'll always ask about carpeting we're choosing or if we're choosing furniture or colors. Everything.

**Mrs. Ford:** Well yes. I also usually ask her you know, what was the compilation of the meeting.

**Desert Sun:** Sure. What does it mean, she's been such a huge contributor to the center and she's been anything but an absentee landlord. What does it mean to have your daughter following in your footsteps and what advice do you give to her?

**Mrs. Ford:** That is one of the greatest gifts she could give me. And in many ways, I feel very guilty that I asked her to do it because I didn't realize how dedicated she would be to it. I think at first she thought, because of course she sat on the board. And I think that it's been now a total of about 16 years, maybe, including the two years she's been chairman.

And the board (members) are all so pleased with her as a chairman. And that's very important and of course it reflects on me. And I like that.

**Desert Sun:** What would you like to see during the next 25 years at the Betty Ford Center?

**Mrs. Ford:** Well I hope we continue pretty much in the same size we are. This has been great discussion at some of our board meetings.

**Desert Sun:** Oh.

**Mrs. Ford:** Because there have been people who say well, why don't we start one you know, in Denver or Texas or something, off campus. And I have always felt that would dissipate what we have here, that what we have here is so special you can't do it someplace else.

**Desert Sun:** Someone else can do it. And that's fine. But there's a certain, if you talk to patients, there's a feeling of belonging to a special family when patients go through the Betty Ford Center.

**Mrs. Ford:** And that continues for all our alumni activities. And they come back, you know, maybe not every year, but every few years, like they'll come back you know if not every year, they'll come back every third year, or every fifth year.

**Desert Sun:** Sure.

**Mrs. Ford:** They like to still feel that attachment, to the center and to our staff. We have a wonderful staff.

**Desert Sun:** Yes, we got to meet quite a few of them yesterday. And I'm actually going back in a couple weeks to meet with John and he'll be giving me a tour. The campus is beautiful. I had never been there before.

**Mrs. Ford:** It's a place you can pull away from wherever you've been, you know, and you pull away from all your, don't let people bring any work with them.

**Desert Sun:** Sure.

**Mrs. Ford:** And concentrate just on yourself and opening up to take a good look and evaluate. And we don't want any distractions.

**Desert Sun:** Of course. Now of all, obviously....

**Mrs. Ford:** Some people come and they bring their golf clubs or...

**Desert Sun:** Really?

**Mrs. Ford:** (laughs)

Well, you know, and sometimes if they're musicians they bring you know, something like a guitar or something which is not too bad because they can do a little of that. But they think they can come and practice their violin. But there's not time for that. Their day is full. And it's very important that they're interacting with their fellow patients. But if you notice, we don't notice a big building with like 120 people.

**Desert Sun:** Sure.

**Mrs. Ford:** We have individual groups of 20.

**Desert Sun:** Now this is obviously a huge contribution to society, in many ways, especially for the awareness it has brought to the disease. But of all the contributions you and your husband have made over the years, what's the legacy you want people to remember?

**Mrs. Ford:** That's always a hard question. I certainly know he leaves his legacy as being very active in Republican politics and being a leader in the House of Representatives of the Republican members and then as vice president and as president. So he leaves a wonderful legacy of all those years as far as his activities and so forth. But my activities have been pretty much focused in the last almost 30 years on the recovery, of my own recovery, the understanding for my family of my recovery.

**Desert Sun:** Sure.

**Mrs. Ford:** And the importance of it.

**Desert Sun:** If you don't mind me asking, I understand that your husband gave up drinking shortly after you did?

**Mrs. Ford:** (chuckles) He, well we always used to have a cocktail before dinner. And so I was no longer joining him and the cocktail was usually a martini on the rocks or something like that.

**Desert Sun:** Sure.

**Mrs. Ford:** And he did it for a while. But then he said "Well, you know, it's no fun to drink alone." (laugh) So he decided he'd just stop and have something.

**Desert Sun:** I read somewhere you used to have tonic water and lime.

**Mrs. Ford:** Yes, just a tonic and lime without any alcohol in it. You know like a gin and tonic.

**Desert Sun:** Sure, sure. Kind of like, for the (Betty Ford Center) anniversary, the cocktail party without cocktails.

**Mrs. Ford:** Right. (laughs)

**Desert Sun:** You can still have fun. You just gotta...

**Mrs. Ford:** And I have always told the patients when I talk to them. When they come around and say, "What will you have to drink? Oh that's right you don't drink." Just speak up and say "Of course I drink. But I just don't alcohol." (Laughs)

**Desert Sun:** It's all about perception and choice of words. Well, I really appreciate your time today. Is there anything else that you would like to add?

**Mrs. Ford:** I just want to express how grateful I am to Susan for her taking on the importance of this chairmanship. And she is doing just a bang-up job. She's doing excellent. I talked to the board members and they say "Well, she's different than you were. But she's doing fine and we're really working well and are grateful for her."

**Desert Sun:** I would be remised if I didn't mention, you know, we have had in the last year just an outpouring of love and support from people across the country into our newsroom, just wanting to send the deepest condolences to you and your family.

**Mrs. Ford:** And I've told Susan this before when I talked to her, but people want you to know as well that as well. And we appreciate that. And of course we've received a lot of it here at the residence and the office. And we've tried to make sure we express, you know, our gratitude for that because people make that effort. It truly means a lot to us. And the children have their own friends that are expressing their support.

**Desert Sun:** I think a lot of people, and you just, I read it over and over again, about how your how family just, especially your children just stood up you know, and they greeted people at the center...

**Mrs. Ford:** And that was so, and that was them. That wasn't me. I was surprised. I was back at the, when we were in Washington, I was back at Blair House, where we were staying, which is right across the street from the White House, it's the guest house for the White House. And they just went and did that on their own. They said these people are so nice. They're standing in line waiting to pass by dad's casket.

**Desert Sun:** Sure.

**Mrs. Ford:** And the least we can do is be there to shake their hands.

**Desert Sun:** I know when I, the thing that I'll always remember and I still see it now is the signs along the freeway which I'm sure you've seen, which say "Gerald 'Our' Ford."

**Mrs. Ford:** Yes, weren't those great?

**Desert Sun:** Yes, and they're still up.

**Mrs. Ford:** Isn't that wonderful? When we drove through several of the places we lived - Grand Rapids, Washington - they all had those placards. That they stood by the street and had in their hands placards that said "Gerald Our Ford."

**Desert Sun:** Sure.

**Mrs. Ford:** That meant so much to us as we were driving into Washington.

**Desert Sun:** And I don't mean to ask about sensitive subjects, but I would be remised if I didn't ask. Obviously the country misses him, and I'm sure you miss him dearly. In everything I've read, he calls it just the luckiest day of his life when he met you and married you, which is just the sweetest thing to read. Do you mind if I ask what you miss most about him?

**Mrs. Ford:** Oh, I just miss him being here. We were very close and to have to give up. But I'm so grateful he didn't suffer. And he went very quietly and very comfortably in his sleep.

**Desert Sun:** And that's all any of us ...

**Mrs. Ford:** Of course I miss. Sometimes I think, Oh I'm sure he's going to call. Or I'm sure he's going to walk in the door. And I have to realize, that's not to be. But as I told you, our children have been so helpful that way.

**Desert Sun:** I know Susan said that she's staying with you, she often stays with you when she comes in the valley so

**Mrs. Ford:** She'd better. (laughs)

**Desert Sun:** My mother would say the same thing. I would be in quite the trouble if I didn't.

**Mrs. Ford:** Yep.

**Desert Sun:** I also, I think it says a lot about her character. She always refers to you as "mother," and always just with the most adoring tone.

**Mrs. Ford:** Well I'm very grateful that after three boys, we were lucky and we got a little girl.

**Desert Sun:** Sure, sure, absolutely.

**Mrs. Ford:** That would have been just a, you know, big loss in my life.

**Desert Sun:** Yes and there's nothing like a bond between a mother and a daughter. And as she said, she's very proud to carry on your legacy.

**Mrs. Ford:** And she's doing a great job. And for that I'm grateful.