



Broadcast Transcript

Broadcast: From Poverty to Ph.D. – Part 1

Guest(s): Dr. Carol Swain

Air Date: January 27, 2025

Dr. James Dobson: Hello everyone. You're listening to Family Talk, the radio broadcasting ministry of the James Dobson Family Institute. I'm Dr. James Dobson and thank you for joining us for this program.

Roger Marsh: Well welcome to Family Talk. I'm Roger Marsh. On today's program, we're going to hear a story of remarkable transformation, literally from a two-room shack with no indoor plumbing to the halls of academia. Our guest is Dr. Carol Swain, and she grew up as one of 12 children in rural Virginia, facing poverty, family dysfunction and limited opportunities. And yet, through God's providence and her own determination, she would rise to become an accomplished author and a respected professor. Dr. Swain's journey from dropping out of school to earning a Ph.D. reminds us that with faith and perseverance, no obstacle is too great to overcome with God's help. Let's get into this fascinating conversation as she talks with Dr. James Dobson about her story right here on Family Talk.

Dr. James Dobson: You're about to meet a woman with a fascinating story to tell. I met her at a conference, and she stood up and talked at one point in the meeting. And I was so taken with her that afterwards, I walked over and introduced myself, and even mentioned the possibility of you being a guest on the program. Speaking to my guest, she is named Dr. Carol Swain. If you don't know her, you should. She's written six books, and she has had quite an experience through the years, and her journey is unlike anything I've ever heard. Carol, welcome to Family Talk.

Dr. Carol Swain: Thank you. It's quite a pleasure.

Dr. James Dobson: I am delighted to have you here, and I want you to take us back to your childhood and give us a glimpse of, I called it a journey, your journey through life. And it began with you being one of 12 children in a state of abject poverty.

Dr. Carol Swain: Yes. I was born and raised in rural Virginia, a little community called Chamblissburg that was so small that if you batted your eye, you could just pass right through it. And the house that I grew up in, it was for the early part of my life, it was a two-room shack pretty much.

Dr. James Dobson: Literally a shack.

Dr. Carol Swain: Literally a shack. I have some photographs of it that was taken a few years ago, but it was very tiny. And we had a living room and a kitchen, and the firstborn children slept on the kitchen floor. Later, my stepfather expanded the house to four rooms, and then we had a bedroom for the children, a bedroom for my mother and my stepfather. And there was a bed for the girls, they all slept together and a bed for the boys, and no indoor plumbing.

Dr. James Dobson: So six, seven, eight kids per bed?

Dr. Carol Swain: Well, at that time, not all 12 had been born. And so probably, there may have been nine of us that lived in that circumstance.

Dr. James Dobson: Did you go to school?

Dr. Carol Swain: I did go to school, but in my family, we all dropped out after the eighth grade. And I can remember one year that we all failed school, and we failed because we missed 80 of 180 days. And so it didn't matter that when I went to school and my older sister, we would almost always make As and Bs, even though we miss lots of school. That year, it snowed a lot. We did not have snow shoes or boots, so we stayed home until the snow melted, and that caused us to miss 80 of 180 days, and the whole family failed.

Dr. James Dobson: How can you do well academically missing that much school and still get As?

Dr. Carol Swain: Well I think it was because for one thing, I realized more and more just how intelligent my mother was and is, and then my grandmother. That these were people that were very intelligent, but I had access through my grandmother to books, the classics. And these were volumes that she had been given by a lady that she worked for. She was paid one time with a library. And so there was a bookcase that had encyclopedias, the classics, and she would give us access to that. And so even though I was in this dire poverty in Bedford, Virginia, my grandparents were a little bit better off, and we could walk to their house and we could get access to those books. And for some reason, my older sister and I, we just did very well in school.

Dr. James Dobson: That reminds me of Dr. Ben Carson, whose mother insisted that he read. If a kid will read, he can overcome an awful lot of handicaps.

Dr. Carol Swain: I certainly will agree with that. And back then, living in the country, there wasn't a whole lot to do, and you didn't have all the competition that young people have today with the internet and just various things competing for their time. But I was an avid reader, and I suppose my older sister as well. And we did extremely well in school, even though we missed a lot. And I can remember times when teachers would crack jokes, like maybe I'd walk into the classroom and the teacher would say, "Look, we have a visitor today." Or, "Look who showed up today." And if other students laughed, I can remember her saying,

"What are you laughing at? She knows more than you do, and you're here every day."

Dr. James Dobson: Obviously, you were a very bright kid.

Dr. Carol Swain: I think so.

Dr. James Dobson: And your life since those days has proved it, because you've gone on academically to do things that no one would've anticipated. Now how difficult was it for you to live in a dysfunctional family like that? Your real dad, your biological father left early, and your mother divorced your stepdad soon after that.

Dr. Carol Swain: Yeah. I don't remember when my mother lived with my biological father, and she had three children by him and they divorced, and so I had a stepfather. And in those circumstances, it was difficult.

Dr. James Dobson: Did you feel poor?

Dr. Carol Swain: I knew. It was very vivid. I knew I was poor. We were teased-

Dr. James Dobson: Were you embarrassed by that?

Dr. Carol Swain: We were teased in school. And at the time I started school, it was during the era of segregation, and so we went to a Black school, and later that school was integrated. But during the time that I was there, we were the poorest of the poor. It was always that way, and we would be teased for all sorts of reasons. For one thing, my maiden name was Payne, P-A-Y-N-E. And so that lent itself to quite a few jokes independently.

Dr. James Dobson: None of them funny.

Dr. Carol Swain: None of them funny. And they would laugh at the lunches, if you didn't have sliced bread. Back then, my mother, she would make biscuits and put whatever she had in the biscuits. And to avoid being teased, we would eat our lunch either before school or after school. And we never had our hair fixed, straightened. Back then, Black children that came from middle-class families, they had their hair straight. We had plaids and torn clothes, and I'm sure we were dirty. I'm sure we were smelly. We were the kids that were poor and we knew we were poor. And what I can remember is that we act today like bullying as something that was just discovered. I can attest to the fact that bullying has always been around.

Dr. James Dobson: It has, and it's still as painful as it ever was as well.

Dr. Carol Swain: It is, but you-

Dr. James Dobson: Did you change your name to get away from that word, Payne?

Dr. Carol Swain: I didn't mind leaving Payne behind.

Dr. James Dobson: Well, you're a beautiful woman today and a very intelligent person. And life has not been easy for you though, has it?

Dr. Carol Swain: No. I mean, when I think about my life, there's been so much pain and suffering. I married at 16, not because I was in love, but to get away from home. And even before I married at 16, at some point, the circumstances, my mother was an alcoholic, stepfather. They would fight every weekend. And there was one particular fight that's seared in my mind and in the minds of some of my siblings, where my stepfather was chasing my mother with an ax. And we were screaming, trying to keep him from killing her. And he eventually broke one of her legs and she has polio, and so she was always a small woman. But my older sister and I went to live with the father we didn't know in our early teens. At some point, he got sick and I literally went to the juvenile authorities and filed a petition to be placed in a foster home, because at that point, I knew some children that were in foster homes and I thought that was better.

So I filed the petition, and what happened was other members of my family turned on me, because they thought that the social workers would take all my mother's children away. And that even though I was in a bad circumstance, they made me feel tremendously guilty for having done that. The day of the court hearing, all I did was cry. I didn't talk at all. And so the judge said I could live with my grandmother. And I lived with her for a little while, but that was not a good solution. And so my next wise idea was to get married at 16. And I remember that I was not old enough to get married. When I made that decision, my mother had to sign the paperwork. I didn't marry at that time thinking that I would ever want to get out of it. I was so thrilled that anyone would have me. I married a man that lived next door to me. By this time, we'd moved into the city. He purchased my first store bought clothes at a high end women's store, and so they were falling off my-

Dr. James Dobson: You had never bought clothes before?

Dr. Carol Swain: No, and they were falling off my little girlish frame, 'cause they were women's clothes. So they were high end, but they didn't fit very well.

Dr. James Dobson: You moved into town. How many of the 12 kids in your family successfully got out of poverty? How many of them went on to have successful lives?

Dr. Carol Swain: They've all struggled and their children have struggled. And there are several that are working, but we all dropped out of high school after the eighth grade. No one went through the system and graduated with a high school diploma, but three of us have high school equivalencies. My older sister has a high school equivalency, and one of my siblings. The sibling that has it, he got his while he

was in jail, and he sent it to me, his prized possession. And he's someone very intelligent, but it's like when the odds are stacked against you and our family was downwardly mobile, it's almost impossible to get out. And so I have been extremely blessed in the sense that for some reason, God did set me apart and He opened doors for me, and I was the only one to reach college, and I've had a very successful life within academia.

Dr. James Dobson: Yeah, I want to talk about that in a minute, but you always felt a little bit different from the rest of the kids.

Dr. Carol Swain: Yes.

Dr. James Dobson: You told me you felt like you'd been parachuted in from outer space somewhere, 'cause you didn't seem to fit the mold.

Dr. Carol Swain: Yeah. I can remember my earliest memories of myself, and my mother said I used to hide behind furniture and peer out. I guess I had a lot of fear, but it was like I had been dropped from outer space. I was observing these people live their lives and I was part of them, but I was not part of them. And from my earliest memories, I remember feeling like there's something I'm supposed to do. And today as a Christian, I would say that it was the call on my life that somehow deep down, I knew that there was something I was supposed to do. It didn't make any sense to me, but I always had that sense of urgency and a sense that there was something I was supposed to do, and that I was watching these people. And at some point, I had a fantasy life to endure in those circumstances, but I was in the family, but not of the family.

Dr. James Dobson: You said that on the bus, on the way to school, you would fantasize about who you really were.

Dr. Carol Swain: Yeah, I had a fantasy life, and in my fantasy life, this is probably embarrassing and my enemies could use it against me, but I've always shared the truth about it. I used to fantasize that I was this rich white male named David. And David grew up as I grew up, because this was over a period of years. And so when I was a kid, he was a kid. And then when I was a teen, he was a teen, and he was rich and he was powerful. And so even though I was trapped in that poverty, I had that mode of escape, and I could go into my fantasy world while I was on my way to school on the bus, and on my way back home, which is probably a 45-minute ride.

Dr. James Dobson: When did you first become aware that God was alive, God was real and that He also was watching you?

Dr. Carol Swain: Well, my first experience with God that I knew that that was a God was when I was probably 12, 11 or 12. I remember being in a church program. Now, we were not regular church-goers, but my grandmother was a pastor's daughter, and every now and then she would do something. And so she did a program, a

church program, and she put her grandchildren in it. And I had a poem to recite one Easter. And as I was standing on the stage reciting my poem, the sun came through the window, and it shone on me in such a way that I knew there was a God and I knew I wanted to serve Him. And when I got down off the stage, I told people I wanted to get baptized. I didn't get baptized at that point, and then life went on. But that was the first encounter that I remember with God.

Growing up, I've always known that there was something bigger than me guiding my life, but I would not have said it was Jesus Christ. I just always knew that there was more than what I was hearing from people around me. And some of what I heard from people around me was, you've probably heard these things, there's no such thing as spirits. Yet I knew that there was a spiritual world. And I don't know how I knew that there was a spiritual world, but I always knew that there was more than what I was being told.

Dr. James Dobson: Wouldn't it have been wonderful if a little church nearby had come knocked on your door and got acquainted with you and befriended you and your family, and then introduced you to Christ? 'Cause you were sitting duck for Him. You were waiting there for Him to come along.

Dr. Carol Swain: Well, I mean, here's what happened. Shortly after that experience in the Methodist Church with the Easter Program, there was a knock on my door, and it was Jehovah's Witnesses and they started a Bible study with me. And so part of my teen years was spent in affiliation with them. I have mixed feelings about that experience. I can see the fact that it was a cult, and I broke away from them. In my late teens, early 20s, I broke away from them.

Dr. James Dobson: Yeah. So even though you dropped out of high school, you later got a GED, a General Education Degree.

Dr. Carol Swain: I did, and part of the teen years was lots of depression, lots of suicide gestures, where I would take bottles of pills and I would call someone and set up my rescue. I guess suicide gesture is the right way to describe it, because knowing it was a cry for help. And doing one of those suicide gestures, the doctor, he told me I was intelligent, I was attractive. I could do more with my life. And it stunned me, because I had forgotten that I used to be smart. I had forgotten that when I was in school that I had been smart, and I was so embarrassed that I only had a high school equivalency. By that time, I'd had two children, and every time I gave birth, I had to put down the highest education of the mother, highest grade completed. And I was so embarrassed to put down eighth grade.

When the doctor said that to me, it reminded me that I was smart. And around this time, my high school class was graduating, the class I would've graduated with. And I certainly knew a lot of the people that were graduating weren't as smart as I was. I learned about the high school equivalency, the GED. And when I learned about it, I was too young to take the test, because Virginia had a law that you had to wait until you were 20. But I took the test. I scored really high on everything except math, and that gave me a sense of accomplishment.

In 1975 was a turning point year for me, and it was the year that Jehovah's Witnesses had taught that the world would end. I left them before the world was supposed to have ended in October 14th. I had already broken off association, because at that point, I didn't care. I got my high school equivalency. I had a daughter die of a crib death, and I filed for divorce. And sometimes, when I tell my story, I say, "My world ended in 1975." 1976, I started college and the rest was history for me.

Dr. James Dobson: How'd you get accepted to college?

Dr. Carol Swain: Well, it was a community college, and I was making Cs without trying. And when I decided to study, I started making the dean's list, and I graduated within the two-year period with a degree in business. That was not my choice. I wanted to do commercial art, because I've always been artistic. I wanted to do art. I was told to be practical, and so my practical decision was to take business merchandising. So I graduated with that business degree and started applying for jobs, and I kept being told that I needed a four-year degree to be a store manager. I wanted to manage a store.

I also noticed that as I was filling out the job applications that I didn't have enough stuff to distinguish myself. I didn't have many awards. I didn't have these accolades for the application. I'd been on the dean's list twice. So I decided I would get the four-year degree. I went through the college catalog of Roanoke College, which is a Lutheran School looking for the major that had the least amount of math, and that was criminal justice. And I chose that as a major, but I also made a decision that I would be an honor student. And I graduated from Roanoke College Magna Cum Laude.

Dr. James Dobson: Did you really?

Dr. Carol Swain: I did, and I was inducted into the highest honor societies they had. And later when they got Phi Beta Kappa, I was inducted into that. And I started a scholarship there for minorities that was meant to be an academic scholarship. And I did all of that even though I was still working at the community college library full time. And this is God's story in the sense that, I had favor at that community college library because I was willing to work nights and weekends. I started as a work-study student. The regular employees would call out sick or they didn't show up. That would be a crisis about who's going to work at night. I would always volunteer to work. So a full-time position was created for me nights and weekends, in circulation. And I was able to keep that job for five years, go to the four-year college full-time, and do my homework at night and take my children to the library when I needed to. And I see that as God's provision.

Dr. James Dobson: Carol, this story of yours really is a story about God and His intervention in your life. You and I were standing in the hall before we came into the studio, and I told you that I thought one of the most incomprehensible things in my life through the years has been that God, the Creator of the entire universe, who

knows every secret, who is omniscient, who is all-knowing, all-caring, and created this universe that as far as we know, runs at least 30 billion light-years in all directions from the earth. Imagine that, and that's probably not even the start of it, because He's infinite and His universe is infinite. And yet, and yet, He knows me. And David said, "Who are Thou that You are mindful of us?"

I can't comprehend that. How did He come to know and care about Carol Swain? Why would He care? Why would He waste His time on us mere mortals? But He does, and He cares about everybody. And He was looking for you and a relationship with you when you didn't even know it. And you were in sin and you were not looking for Him, and yet, He was there. That's a story in itself, but He was not through with you, Carol. And He's not through with you yet, and your story is not complete. And we're going to get right back into it tomorrow, because it is a wonderful story of God's intervention and God's love. And I know you love Him with all your heart now, which is what I saw in that first encounter with you at a conference not too long ago. Thank you for being our guest today. And tomorrow, we are going to pick up with the story with you graduating from college, and now what? Thank you for being with us.

Dr. Carol Swain: Thank you

Roger Marsh: Dr. Carol Swain's story of finding hope through education and faith reminds us that even in life's darkest valleys, God's hand is always at work, weaving a greater purpose than we can see in that moment. Friend, you're listening to Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk, and part one of Dr. Dobson's inspiring conversation with Dr. Carol Swain. Be sure to join us again next time when Dr. Swain continues to share her story. You will not want to miss the conclusion of her powerful testimony of God's faithfulness.

Now, if you'd like to listen to today's broadcast again or share it with a friend, simply visit drjamesdobson.org/familytalk, or download the free JDFI App from the Apple or Android store, to access this and other great content. Looking for more wisdom for your family? Well access free reading plans on parenting, discipline and more when you search for the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute in the Bible App by YouVersion. You can do that today.

Well, I'm Roger Marsh, inviting you back for part two of Dr. Dobson's conversation with Dr. Carol Swain. You'll hear the conclusion of her journey from poverty to Ph.D. coming up right here next time on the next edition of Dr. Dobson's Family Talk.

Announcer: This has been a presentation of the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute.