

# [***Even in Haley's backyard, there's evidence of Trump's GOP makeover***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6B8J-8YC1-JBSS-S04X-00000-00&context=1516831)

CNN Wire

February 6, 2024 Tuesday 5:19 PM GMT

Copyright 2024 Cable News Network All Rights Reserved

**Length:** 1384 words

**Byline:** By John King, CNN

**Dateline:** (CNN)

**Body**

Pawleys Island, South Carolina (CNN) &#8212; Joy Rendulic was hesitant when her husband first suggested a move to South Carolina. Then she visited a small ice cream shop for sale near the spectacular coast of this barrier island town.

Rendulic cashed in her 401(k) to buy it, and left Erie, Pennsylvania, behind.

"God brought me here," Rendulic told us during a break at Island Treats ice cream shop. "I thought I was doing what I was supposed to be doing for the rest of my life, and he had a different plan. We think we are in control. But we're not."

The big move was in 2016. Nikki Haley was the governor then, and newcomer Rendulic was impressed.

"Yes, she was a very good governor," Rendulic said.

Donald Trump won her vote for president that same year, again in 2020 and will once more when Trump and Haley square off in the South Carolina GOP presidential primary this month.

"I totally believe that God has assigned him to this position," Rendulic said of Trump. "That is my true belief."

We ask what happened in 2020.

"That was a mess," Rendulic said. "That was so illegal. Some improper cheating happening to the voting procedures."

We mention all the recounts and court cases Trump lost, including cases decided by judges Trump appointed, that upheld now-President Joe Biden's victory.

"I think so many people hate Trump," she said. "I just know there was a whole lot of cheating."

There is no evidence of that, but Rendulic is adamant.

So we ask, if it was God's plan for Trump to be president, why would God let that happen?

The answer is halting.

"What happened is what happened. And I believe Trump is coming again."

Rendulic represents an important slice of the Trump base: for Trump no matter what. These voters echo his false claims about rigged elections and bogus investigations and they stand by Trump even when he does things counter to their priorities. You find a lot of them in South Carolina, one reason Trump consistently leads the primary polls despite Haley's home state status.

Rendulic, for example, lists abortion - or the "right to life," as she puts it - as the reason her last vote for a Democrat for president was Jimmy Carter. But she offers no criticism of Trump when we point out he has recently criticized some state abortion restrictions as too harsh and has warned it could be a losing issue for Republicans.

"I haven't thought about that too much, probably," Rendulic said. "I want it to be right to life."

No doubt Trump gets her vote.

"He's even more ready now and very, very intelligent, cares a lot about this country," she said. "Wants to do what is right."

Looking for a tough border 'fix' from Trump

Billy Pierce is another piece of the Trump comeback puzzle.

He has lived in Hartsville - about two hours inland from the South Carolina coast - all his 70 years except for a stint in the Navy.

Pierce says he was drawn to Trump in 2016 for the same reason he backed Ross Perot in 1992.

"I wanted a non-career politician in there that would do, would run it like a company," Pierce said in an interview in the garage office where he organizes his part-time consulting work.

Pierce sees Biden as too unwilling to stand up to the Democratic left and has fond memories of the pre-Covid economy during the Trump administration.

"We didn't have the high inflation," he said. "We didn't have the high interest rates."

Pierce is not an election denier. He does believe it was wrong that many states adopted new voting rules during the 2020 pandemic, but said Trump should have honored the results once all his challenges were exhausted.

Nor is Pierce a fan of the former president's toxic tone.

"If he'd just shut up and, you know, got off Twitter and that kind of stuff, he'd have made a great president," Pierce said.

He called himself a likely Trump voter in the primary and described the choice between Trump and Haley as "the lesser of two evils."

But Pierce is very much in line with Trump on policy matters.

"He's going to fix the things I need him to fix," Pierce said, listing the border as his top priority.

"Shut it down," is Pierce's desire, though he agrees with Trump that congressional Republicans should not pass a border package before the November election - even if it would slow the flow of illegal border crossings. "This is a Democratic ploy" designed to help Biden, Pierce said.

He offers a suggestion on what he would do at the border, based on his time in the military.

"Have us put up razor wire," Pierce said. "I have no problem with putting up two rows and mining the other. So if they come in, you tell them it is mined. You put signs out there that says it's mined."

He balances such tough talk with a personal story about his daughter adopting two children from Guatemala. Be tough at the border now, Pierce said, and then conversations about more legal immigration would be possible. "It needs to be done the right way."

From sending a message to DC to sending a message to the next generation

Craig Thomas lived in Tennessee when Trump caught his attention in 2016.

Thomas describes himself as "conservative, some areas libertarian."

Trump, he thought then, was an outsider - and a vote for him would send a message to Washington.

"It was like, alright, like this is good," said Thomas. "Let's blow some things up."

Now, Thomas lives in Charleston and is voting for Haley - to send a message to his two children.

He is tired of all the personal attacks and all the anger and wants a president who is also a role model. Haley, he said, "brings very similar policy positions, but definitely without the drama."

One recent MAGA [*conspiracy theory*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/30/media/taylor-swift-super-bowl-right-wing-conspiracy/index.html) hit too close to home.

"I don't think there's any sort of a crazy conspiracy between the NFL and Taylor Swift and everything else just showing up for a Biden coronation," Thomas said. "How do I look at my daughter, who is a huge Taylor Swift fan, and this guy just attacking Taylor Swift, just because she is going to support another candidate, right."

"And other things like that. And having those conversations with them. It does matter. And it does matter who you support."

Trump as a religion

Charleston is rich with both Revolutionary and Civil War history, a place where you can still ride a horse-drawn carriage down a cobblestone street. It is more affluent, more educated and less Trumpy than most of South Carolina.

"But there is quite a bit of talk about Trump, even here," Thomas said.

Mark Sanford is out of ***politics*** because of that - because of the reach of the Trump Republican revolution.

Sanford served in the House representing a Charleston-area district, and then was the state's two-term Republican governor just before Haley was first elected in 2010. Sanford won his old House seat back in 2013, but then lost the Republican primary in 2018 because he was a sharp critic of then-President Trump's fiscal policies, and sometimes of his tone.

"I would say, 'Well I'm for Trump in this area, but I'm against in these different areas.' But people didn't want nuance. They want: 'Are you for or against him.'"

Sanford wouldn't directly answer when asked how he will vote in this month's primary.

But he did offer this: "I've never voted for Trump so far. I know that I'm not voting for him this time. I'll let you read the tea leaves from that."

Sanford agrees when Haley goes after Trump for all the "chaos," and especially when she highlights the deficit spending of the Trump years. Yet he expects a big Trump win in South Carolina, because the GOP electorate is so different now from when he was first elected.

"What has traditionally worked in GOP ***politics*** isn't so much working these days," he said in an interview at his home in the Charleston suburb of Mount Pleasant. "He became sort of a proxy litmus test for 'Are you for or against the system,'" Sanford said.

"I've seen this erosion," Sanford said. "Sort of Perot movement to Tea Party to Trump. It's metastasized in ever aggressive forms. And what started out as a lot of well meaning Americans saying, 'Look, we've got to do something about politicians doing what they said they were going to do' (has evolved) into something much more strident. ... It is their religion. I mean, I, I don't know how else to explain it."

By John King, CNN

TM & © 2024 Cable News Network, Inc., a Time Warner Company. All rights reserved.

**Load-Date:** March 7, 2024

**End of Document**