

AN ORAL HISTORY

with

KURT BRAUTIGAM

This is an interview for the Mississippi Oral History Program of The University of Southern Mississippi. The interview is with Kurt Brautigam and is taking place on December 18, 2006. The interviewer is David Tisdale.

Tisdale: Today is December 18, 2006, and today we are visiting with Kurt Brautigam, distinguished visiting lecturer in public relations at The University of Southern Mississippi and former manager of external communications with Mississippi Power Company. Kurt, thanks for joining us today for this project with the Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage.

Brautigam: It's my pleasure, thank you.

Tisdale: Kurt, tell us a little bit first about where you're from. I understand you're a graduate of The University of Southern Mississippi. Is that right?

Brautigam: I am a graduate of Southern Miss. I got my undergraduate degree in radio, television and film in 1986, and then a master's in communication with a public relations emphasis in 1989. I have been in Mississippi since 1982. Lived in Hattiesburg for sixteen or seventeen years, and then lived on the Coast the past eight years since taking the job with Mississippi Power.

Tisdale: And what was your—and your title was manager of external communications.

Brautigam: That's correct. Essentially, I was the spokesman for the company; I oversaw the external communications. Media relations was a large part of my responsibility, issues management, those kinds of things, but then certainly during the storm [Hurricane Katrina], I became the spokesperson for the company primarily on the Coast. We actually—in an ideal world, I covered all the service territory for Mississippi Power, which was really all the way from the Coast through Hattiesburg, Laurel, up into the Meridian area; we served customers there, and then maybe fifty more small towns like Quitman, and Bassfield, and Purvis, and Columbia, those kinds of areas. So I actually acted as a spokesman for the company throughout the service territory under normal conditions. When we knew we had an emergency or an extreme situation, such as we were preparing for for Katrina, then we would send additional spokespeople to work in the markets in the Hattiesburg/Laurel area, and

then another one up in the Meridian area. I, though, oversaw the talking points and the communication plans for them, working with the local media in those markets and then acted as the spokesperson on the Coast.

Tisdale: Now, about how many customers—you've talked about the area. About how many customers approximately did Mississippi Power serve at that time?

Brautigam: Prior to the storm, Mississippi Power had about 195,000 customers. Probably half of those were on the Coast, within twenty miles of the Coast. Meridian was the smallest [division] area, and then the Hattiesburg/Laurel area was kind of its own Pine Belt Division and maybe a third of the customers. So the majority of our customers were on the Coast. We served all the cities and towns. The rural electric co-ops served the more rural areas or the areas that were rural thirty, forty, fifty years ago when the system came together. But we served customers in Waveland, Bay St. Louis, Pass Christian, Long Beach, Gulfport, Biloxi, Ocean Springs, Pascagoula, all along the beach.

Tisdale: People just immediately assumed that Mississippi Power was just about providing electricity, but are there other services that they provide aside from just basic, you know, getting the lights on, are there others?

Brautigam: Well, you know that's the main business of the company, and certainly that entails a lot. You've got generating facilities; you've got transmission facilities. You've got the distribution facilities that, you know, generate the power and deliver it to the customers. We certainly had a lot of economic development input in the state and in the area, worked very closely with those people. You know, we did as many things as we possibly could to serve the communities where we lived and worked in those communities that we served. So there was always a very public face, still is, to the power company, a very good reputation, something that we worked on, of course, throughout my whole term there and many years before. The communications plans that we came up with for specific issues, you know, we're able to address different audiences, but in this case when it was obvious what was going to happen with this storm, we had a communications plan for that, actually, an entire emergency response plan from one end of the company to the other. Every employee has a distinct assignment for storm duty. Of course the line crews are out doing their thing; the power plant people are doing their thing, but those people who are not going to be directly responsible for restoring power become logistics people, food people, clothes-washing people; so you know, we put everybody to work.

Tisdale: Talk about those days leading up to the storm. What are your recollections about preparation, just, you know, your thoughts about this storm coming in? I know a lot of people, you know, both just residents and maybe public officials may have not thought that this was going to be the big one like it was, just because we had—I know we had a lot of false starts, false alarms, you know, [Hurricane] Dennis, and [Hurricane] Georges wasn't quite the storm we thought it was going to be. Just if you would, just share some of your thoughts about those days leading up to the storm.

Brautigam: Well, you know, for the power company, we take those kinds of storms as seriously as we can. Our overall emergency plan is based on a worst-case scenario, and pretty much a worst-case scenario is a major hurricane, you know, that goes right up our service territory, that lands on or near our shoreline, and then does significant amount of damage to our facilities. I don't think any of us were aware at the time how devastating the effect would be from Katrina. As soon as a storm like that gets into the Gulf, two days out, three days out, four days out, we begin our preparations. Certainly there's a lot of communication with employees so that they know what to do. They're expected to be at work; you know, that's really part of their employment is that they will respond in an emergency situation. So that means that they have to make plans for their family for, you know, battening down their homes, doing all the things that need to be done so that they are free to be able to respond. As I recall—well, the storm came in on a Monday, so we were looking at a weekend, and you know, come Thursday and Friday, and the forecasts looked like they do, you have to communicate well with your employees because they're going to be gone for two days, and they need to know where they can get information. We had a phone bank set up; we had e-mails going out; we had information available on the Internet so that they absolutely knew what we knew and what was expected of them. Then, of course, externally, our messages began probably about that same time, Thursday or Friday; it was obvious that Katrina was a big storm, and it got very big out in the Gulf two or three or four days away. So the messages to our customers and to all the audiences important to us were about safety, first and foremost, about the fact that we had a plan. You know, we had made arrangements to have assistance come in, people, resources, material, whatever it took to respond to this storm once it hit. I think, you know all along, you figure, well, it may not be a direct hit on a small piece of coastline, sixty miles wide, that we serve. I think for the longest time everyone thought that it might be heading toward New Orleans, which was certainly going to be a bad case. But I can remember giving an interview on probably Saturday, I think; the Weather Channel was on the Coast, and they wanted to talk to somebody. And so I saw a replay of it later, and I said something to the effect, "Well, yeah, it may be heading toward New Orleans now, but we know that we need to be ready. And whether it hit New Orleans, or whether it hit us, it was going to be very bad based on the expectations." So as it turned out, it turned and caught us, really, as badly as it could have. It went straight up the heart of our service territory, virtually right up I[nterstate] 59 and [Highway] 49 all the way to Meridian. And so we suffered significant damages.

Tisdale: Talk about those damages and what the power company did to respond, you know, and the time that it took to get people back up.

Brautigam: Well, we hunkered down. We actually had a storm center that is at the power plant in Gulfport; Plant Watson has been there for fifty or sixty years. It sits right there on the interstate, off of the beach but close to the Back Bay. And our overall storm center, which was manned by some twenty-five or so department directors, all of the people responsible for generation, transmission, human resources, safety, those kinds of things, that was really the brain trust preparing for making the

response to the storm after the storm passed through. So we were all together at the power plant there in Gulfport. As the storm came through, and it was pretty obvious where it was going, I think, at that point early on Monday morning. We knew that it was coming, basically skirting New Orleans and coming up, right through Bay St. Louis, which put us on the worst, you know, north side.

Tisdale: East side.

Brautigam: Northeast side, northeast quadrant, which brought the brunt of the storm. We rode it out at the second floor, a room that's a part of that power plant. Unfortunately, the tide, the storm surge was so amazing, so amazingly high, it was much more severe than Camille. You know Camille had been the benchmark. Everybody who was in a house that had survived Camille thought that they were—you know, couldn't see anything worse, that they would be fine. In many cases that was, unfortunately, not the case. Certainly our power plant had never seen any storm surge or any problems associated with any kind of storms, even Camille. We experienced flooding at the power plant about, I don't know, midmorning, that morning. So much water was being pushed up the Back Bay, it pushed it all the way onto the plant property and then began actually flooding the lower levels of the plant. The reason we were at a power plant in the first place was because we figured we would at least have electricity. We could keep one of the units up, available to help meet our needs there at the facility, and then that would run all of our generators and computers, and whatnot. So, when the flooding came, we had to shut the plant down. It flooded all of the cars that we had parked out there. We basically were stranded for many hours.

Tisdale: So you were stuck up on the second floor. The surge is coming through the—about how high would you estimate where you were?

Brautigam: Well, we were on a pretty, much a normal second floor, maybe twenty, thirty feet up in the air, and we were behind all the superstructure of the plant. So the plant was blocking most of the wind.

Tisdale: So you had sort of a buffer.

Brautigam: It was a buffer. I never felt in fear for my life based on the wind or things whipping around. I mean it's a strong facility, and we were in the lee side of the storm. We could hear it; we were able to look outside and watch. We watched this parking lot as it just slowly, slowly filled up with water and then actually very much more quickly there at the end, cars were floating. I actually had a rental car. Most everybody had their own personal cars, and so immediately they've already lost personal property. Fortunately for me, you know, that was not the case for me. But we basically rode it out, and then by midafternoon as the winds were starting to die on the Coast—of course they were still very strong and moving north through Hattiesburg and all the way through Meridian—we started to try to come out and begin whatever it was going to take to begin this restoration, but we were cut off. We now had no electricity, no phones. We did have some radios that worked; our Southern Linc radio

network that was, you know, our operational walkie-talkie network had a very, very small capacity. A couple of the repeaters or the actual transmitters were still working, so we were able to talk, and that was the only thing that saved us. They really had to—there were, you know, other employees stationed at other places along the Coast at our main operational facility in Gulfport; they had some structural damage there, but they were still up and going. And that facility had a small generator that could serve the needs of that facility. So we were able to get in contact with people there, and they ultimately sent vans for us because we had no vehicles. We had really no way to go. Of course, the trees and everything else that was strewn across the Coast made it difficult to go back and forth, but ultimately about something like six or seven that evening, folks came to pick us up, and we loaded up, and we went back to that facility in Gulfport, which is where we ultimately then oversaw the restoration process.

Tisdale: What were some of the priorities for power restoration?

Brautigam: Well.

Tisdale: Hospitals and those kinds of big operations?

Brautigam: Yeah, for us, you know, again, we thought we were prepared for a worst-case scenario, and actually we were much better prepared than we probably had been a year or two before. We had revised, going into 2005, many, many parts of our storm plan based on the previous year's destruction that had occurred in Pensacola. Our sister company, Gulf Power, Hurricane Ivan struck Pensacola. They had power out over there for almost two weeks in some cases because it was a tough storm. In fact, that was what we were trying to tell people was that, "All right, if Ivan caused as much damage as it did in Mobile and Pensacola, Katrina has the potential, really, to cause even more destruction," which again was part of our messages to our external publics, which was, "OK, this may not be a two- or a three- or a four-day process; this may be a two- or a three- or a four-week process depending on the damage." The first thing we needed to do was assess damage the day after. Every customer was out. All of our system, well, virtually 60 to 70 percent of our lines and poles and substations were out of commission; they were either on the ground or needed to be repaired. So structurally it was, you know, as devastating as it possibly could [be]. So to restore power, you have to just begin to build the main components of the system, which entail the transmission lines coming out of the substation or—excuse me, coming out of the power plants that go to approximately 150 different substations throughout that service territory. Almost all of the substations on the Coast were under water, were inundated with saltwater, which is obviously not a good thing for electric facilities. The poles, the towers, you know, that supported the main transmission system, which is the backbone of our system, were down. We had to figure out how bad that damage was and how to repair it. And then you could get to the substations and down the main distribution lines in town, in each of the towns. It turned out, obviously, to be very bad. It really took about a day and a half to assess everything. That was our people; that was their job beginning as soon as the winds died down to go out and understand what we were dealing with. And in the meantime, we had people on

standby; line crews, resources, material, truckloads of material, on standby in Birmingham, in Pensacola, in Montgomery, in Atlanta, you know, outside the danger zone of the storm but ready to roll as soon as the winds passed. And, literally, people were on the road to us that night. That Monday night, they were starting to roll in and beginning to arrive probably the next day. And at that point we had to figure out what to do to put them to work. You're right, though; there are priorities with our customers. When we do try to begin the restoration, certainly you have to have access to electricity. So, in this case, again it was a matter of the transmission system and the substations, but once we were able to start restoring power, you know, up and down the streets to the customers, hospitals are a high priority. Law enforcement agencies, radio stations, media outlets, in order to begin getting the word out, those are high priority customers, and so those were the ones that we focused on. But at this point it really didn't matter; I mean anything that you did was going to be a step in the right direction just because it was all laying on the ground.

Tisdale: What about those reciprocal relationships with other service providers? How crucial was that, and what would you say was the amount of assistance you got from all over the country?

Brautigam: Well, the expectations in the electric industry are that—well, first of all, you cannot have enough people on your staff or in your company to respond to major problems. You bring them in; that's a given. Our crews have gone numerous places. In fact, they're in very high demand because they're so good. The culture of Mississippi Power and the expectations there are extremely high, and so you know, our guys, linemen and people who work in the electric field out in the field are a breed apart. They're very dedicated. They're very conscientious. They're very—when the time comes, when the chips are down, they're going to be there. Our guys have done that and gone other places. When it happens to us, we know that other folks will come. Mississippi Power being part of the Southern Company really, that was so advantageous, and I don't know that any of us knew how advantageous it could be, really, because Mississippi Power is only about 8 percent of the Southern Company. Georgia Power is twenty times bigger. Alabama Power is ten times bigger than our company in terms of employees and customers, and all. So, having those resources available, and not only available but standing by and ready to come to our assistance, made such a big difference in those first couple of days. And again, it wasn't just line crews; it was the communications people, the IT [information technology] people, the folks who came in and brought temporary transformers and different things for the communications specifically. So they were rolling in and allowing us to get back to the point where we could communicate and efficiently try to work this effort. Now, in our plans again, our worst-case scenario plans, I think we figured that at most we could bring in approximately [4000] to 5000 outside workers, which is a lot of outside workers, and that's throughout our service territory, have them work in Meridian and at the same time all the other small towns and the Laurels and the Hattiesburgs and along the Coast, and still remain efficient, not be stepping all over each other, not being able to, you know, get the material that they needed, the pieces, parts, the hardware that go up on the poles, the poles themselves, the wire. Ultimately I think

we restrung more than a thousand miles of wire. I think we replaced more than a thousand poles. And then our people are the ones who oversee that process. They're the ones who supervise, who manage that kind of a work force. Ultimately, amazingly, and to the credit of those people on the ground, we brought in more than 10,000 outside people, which was just unheard of. I don't know that that kind of an effort has ever been mounted in the industry before. Our initial estimates were that, again, it could be up to four weeks or more before we could get everybody who could receive power back in service. We wound up completing it in thirteen days. The Sunday prior to what would've been two weeks on the following Monday, we had everybody back in service who could take service. Just a remarkable, remarkable effort; one that speaks to, again, the culture of the company and then just the efforts of everybody who were just able to maintain efficiency. When crews were done in Meridian, they moved down to Laurel and helped Laurel. And when Laurel was done they moved down to Hattiesburg. And, you know, there were sections that were so devastated with so many trees that needed so much clearing and rebuilding, and you know, there were sections of each little town, I think for the most part, that took those thirteen days, but ultimately it all got finished, and it was just amazing. It was a military effort. So, at that point if you're bringing in more than 10,000 outside workers and Mississippi Power has about 1500 workers, you know, you've got to feed all those people. We needed 30,000 meals a day. You needed to be able to sleep those people. We had tents and semitrailers that had bunk beds in them. I mean we had staging sites where these people would come in and sleep, and there were 2,000 of those people at one location and at another location, one in Hattiesburg and one, you know—well, more than that; two or three or four on the Coast. So the logistics of the whole process was amazing. Fuel, obviously fuel was a very difficult resource to get your hands on. We had some. We had tanker trucks that were coming from out of state, and we had to work very hard to allow them to actually deliver their fuel to us. There were many other entities that wanted those trucks. We got them to our place. But again at the height of all those outside workers, there were probably 5,000 additional vehicles that were working in our area that we were responsible for fueling. And I think the number went, on an average day, Mississippi Power may have used 2,000 gallons in a day for our fleet, for its home fleet, and I think one day we pumped more than—and I'm going to get the number wrong, I'll get it for you another time—but it might've been [40,000] or 50,000 gallons of fuel each night, and so those workers were out there doing that.

Tisdale: All total.

Brautigam: All total, yeah. I mean it's just incredible how much you had to gear up to be able to, again, feed, sleep, fuel, provide material. I believe there was something along the lines of thirty or thirty-five staging areas where poles were being delivered, hardware was being delivered, you know, where all these crews could come and get those materials and go out and work all day in the field, and they did work all day.

Tisdale: Speaking of that, you know, the fuel situation, making decisions about who gets power, what are some challenges as far as conflicts with either agencies or

businesses or maybe even individual customers that you had to try to—you know, situations that you might not have had a crisis situation, but had to resolve, where people were just kind of at wit's end or just, you know—

Brautigam: Well, I think in general, you know, everybody was in the same boat; nobody had power. And it was so bad, you know, that it was obvious it was going to take a long, long time in some cases, or it appeared that it was going to, for the electricity to come back, and in some cases for the water and some other infrastructure resources as well. Now, in our case, again, we had to get that transmission system up, or you couldn't get anything after that. So they worked extremely hard to get those high-voltage lines on the high towers that ran through the swamps and ran through the forests and get those up and restored. Now, there was one instance where we had to mount some special efforts in conjunction with some of the other electric companies because the rural electric co-ops are out there doing the same thing as we are at the same time. Entergy Mississippi is kind of doing the same thing in the [west]. But in Collins, Mississippi, as you're probably aware, there are two extremely strategic and significant junctions of the pipelines, the oil pipelines that feed the entire eastern half of the United States. At that time, I believe, the gasoline prices were high; much of the gasoline supply was low. And right now, at this particular moment, there is nothing flowing through, you know, one of the major arteries that gets gasoline and other petroleum products to the east. We had calls from the White House and from the vice president and from numerous congressmen and possibly, I'm not sure, maybe even Homeland Security reminding us how important it was to get that pipeline back up and going, and so there were some special efforts made, again, in conjunction with some of the other companies that were also providing service in that area to get those up and going. And I think that was really accomplished in about a day and a half; we were able to restore the—and that was primarily transmission feeds, you know, larger feeds that went straight to their substations that operated those facilities, and that was accomplished. But in the meantime, you know you had all these crews that were coming; they didn't have electricity to restore, but they certainly had facilities to restore. I mean in Bay St. Louis and along the Coast and many of the other places, they're rebuilding lines before there was even any electricity, you know, to feed those lines, but they've got to restore the distribution system as well, so all that was kind of going on, you know, at one time. And then, then you just saw this mass of personnel and trucks, and anywhere you went in our service territory, you saw block after block after convoy after convoy of outside crews who were just there busting it, just working, working hard and an amazing amount of dedication, an amazing amount of awareness of how important their job was, and a lot of appreciation from everybody who lived in those towns. I mean they were heroes. People were bringing them water; people were bringing them food.

Tisdale: I was going to ask, what kind of interesting stories of relationships built with people on the ground. I'm sure, you know, obviously people are desperate, but—

Brautigam: I'm sure there were thousands of them because, again, everybody understood how bad the situation was and to see the effort that was being mounted on

their behalf, and line crews coming from, I think it was twenty-three states, twenty-four states and Canada. You had guys from Michigan down there in the middle of a Mississippi summer now; these guys are not used to that kind of stuff.

Tisdale: And typically it's cooler after a big storm like this, and it was just really, really hot.

Brautigam: Oh, it was; it was brutal. It was extremely hot, and so they needed the water; they needed the food, and these people were coming to them and thanking them and talking to them. And you know at the end of a day, I heard so many times, at the end of a day, they'd be trying to get that one last street hooked up or one last neighborhood or one last block, and finally they had to call it a night. And they'd have to go home and tell the people, "Look, we'll be back first thing tomorrow, and we'll get you tomorrow." And everybody understood; they were pretty good about it.

Tisdale: What about for you personally? How does this rate as a professional challenge in your life?

Brautigam: Well, I don't know that too many people have ever had to go through this from a personal standpoint, and not just me. I mean, our CEO, all of our executives, all of our supervisory people, you know, all the people who pulled together and accomplished something that maybe we didn't think we could do. From my standpoint, it was pretty straightforward. After the storm hit, it was all about trying to get as much information as we could to our customers as well as those other important publics, which include of course city officials, county officials, legislators, the governor's office, you know all those people that really needed to know what was going on. MEMA [Mississippi Emergency Management Agency], FEMA [Federal Emergency Management Agency], we were working very closely with all the emergency agencies in each of the counties to let them know where things stood. So we needed to have that information; it needed to be accurate; it needed to be delivered as well as we possibly could, so we did that as much as we could, first thing in the morning. We came up with a [news] release every morning that basically stated where we were, what we knew, what we—

Tisdale: Situation reports.

Brautigam: —had accomplished up, you know, until midnight the night before, so how many customers were restored to service, you know, an update on that transmission system, you know. The first day maybe we got 10 percent of it restored, and the second day maybe we got 40 percent of it—well, probably not that much on the second day. But as we went through those milestones every day, we had the update. After that, as I mentioned, I have the two media contacts in the Hattiesburg area and in the Meridian area; they had the same information I had; they also had their local information because they were working with the operations people in those areas so that they could then go to their media and start making updates. And that's what we did. I went to the—(brief interruption)

Brautigam: You know, after we had all that information at hand, as much information as we could have, we went out and tried to disseminate it as best we could. So for me personally, I spent all morning going from one radio station to the next, giving the updates, again talking about the important issues such as safety, such as, “Here are all these crews. Please stay out of their way. Please don’t stop them and try to get them to come to your house. They’re working on a plan, and they’ll get there as quickly as they can.” It was so interesting because there was not a lot of information flow going on after the storm. You know, again, there was no cell phone system that was working; the regular telephone system really wasn’t working, so when I was able to walk into a studio at a radio station, they were really happy to see somebody who had information who would spend a little bit of time, who would help them get the information to their listeners and basically, you know, that’s all you could do at that point if you lived anywhere in South Mississippi, was just listen to the radio for all the updates. And of course there was so much more going on. You know, we focused, obviously, on our business, but it was also imperative to know, for instance, where you could get the ice, where you could get the water, where you could get the gasoline, where you could get the baby food and the baby diapers and those kinds of things. So we were just trying to restore service as quickly as we can because that’s our responsibility; I mean, restoring electric service is really one of the first hurdles in that kind of a situation, and so that’s a responsibility we took very seriously, and it was my responsibility to make sure the people knew where we stood and how the plan was going. And as it gained momentum, as it just kept going almost—there’s no reason for it to have gone so well, but it just kind of accumulated this momentum. You know, we had a great story to tell, and so you go tell it, “Here’s what’s happening. And we may have everybody back in Ocean Springs within two more days.” And all the other towns that we served, we gave updates on them and tried to make sure that everybody knew so they could start to make their plans. And you know, it was; it was probably something that a lot of folks in my business have never gone through. It may be something that I can help other people with down the road with some expertise when the time comes because obviously there will be more storms. But we were able to tell a very good story and tell it effectively.

Tisdale: What do you share with your students now here at The University of Southern Mississippi in public relations as far as that experience?

Brautigam: Well, from that experience, you know, crisis communications, I mean there’s no better, more intense situation that you could have from a corporate standpoint. I mean, certainly there are a lot of other different kinds of situations, but certainly none that requires more effort and planning, and then execution. Overall, you know I’d like to be able to provide any valuable lessons in expertise that I can to those students. You know, a lot of times I’m not sure that they can put things in context, but there’s a lot to be learned. And that’s what’s really interesting for me now is to try to be able to help them understand those situations and understand the processes that you go through and the planning that you do do, and then the adjustment and evaluation that you do on the fly. And it’s something nobody can

really understand, of course, until you go through it. I surely don't want to go through it again, but there are lots of other things that are very similar.

Tisdale: What are some—just reflecting, and I'm sure you thought—hard not to think about it pretty often. What are some reflections, maybe thoughts about lessons learned? Have you looked back and seen things maybe that the company might have done different?

Brautigam: That's a good question. You know, we came up with things that we could plan for, for the next year, and we did that.

Tisdale: So you had a review process on this.

Brautigam: We did have a review process and when we went into, you know, 2006 storm season, we had actually a lot more logistics in place. We were ready and will continue to get ready as a company, I'm sure, to be more self-sufficient. If you're ever in this situation again, and you are cut off, you need to have the food, you need to have the water, you need to have all those other logistical things, gasoline and cots. And now everybody is kind of vying for those same kind of resources, so you have to continue to work to make sure that you can do that. From the communications side, I think everybody, customers or other audiences, were aware that we did a pretty darn good job of keeping them informed, and so there again, that's like anything; that builds your credibility; that adds to your credibility. Now you've raised the bar of their expectations, so you have to meet it the next time, so you have to have all those pieces, parts in place so that you can continue to get the word out in an extremely bad emergency or just kind of a normal emergency. You know, we get small storms, and we get tropical storms, we get tornadoes, we get ice storms up in the Meridian area, so you're always going to be susceptible to those kind of things and you just need to have your plans together and your relationships with your media counterparts, and then provide the information they need when the time comes.

Tisdale: More than a year later, what are your thoughts about the recovery process?

Brautigam: The recovery process on the Coast is, I think, going, it's going well, as well as could be expected, but I think the scope of it is so vast that it's going to be a much longer and slower process. There are still infrastructure issues, you know, especially on the Coast. I mean there are places, especially Waveland and Bay St. Louis, and then Pass Christian and Long Beach, you know, that have a lot of issues that they're still dealing with in terms of rebuilding their infrastructure. There's nothing really being built on the beach, still at this point, almost eighteen months later. That will come, but there's so many pieces that need to fall in place; the insurance issues, the legal issues in terms of how high buildings need to be built. Do homes need to be built to a level that it becomes prohibitively expensive to rebuild them, especially in some areas that people don't have the resources? I just think it's going to be a much longer period of time before the Coast can come back than we all might've initially thought. I can remember being, well, being very optimistic overall; I think

I'm optimistic by nature, and as we went through our restoration process, and it did gather this momentum, and it was starting to have some just amazing results, it was easy to say, "OK, you know, here we go; we're accomplishing a lot today. We expect to accomplish more tomorrow. We're going to get 20,000, 30,000 customers back in service." And by the way, before I forget, by the end of the thirteen-day period, we actually restored service to 169,000 customers, and I think ultimately we were able to establish, reestablish service to about [174,000] or 175,000 customers, so.

Tisdale: Out of the 195,000?

Brautigam: Out of the 195,000, so we lost about 20,000 customers who, you know, absolutely lost their homes or businesses, or who were not able to reestablish power because they were damaged to the point of not being able to repair them immediately, whatever—

Tisdale: And that includes hookups to FEMA trailers, I'm sure.

Brautigam: Exactly, yeah, that started to become a real issue later in the process, you know, as people were ready to make some of those moves. We tried to be there and do the things that they needed to have done so that they could get back to whatever the case was, back to a FEMA trailer or whatever. So through that thirteen-day period, personally I was rocking along; we were working long hours, but we were seeing good, positive results. And I believe it was that Saturday, the twelfth day, we had a *USA Today* photographer in, and he wanted to take aerial photographs. So we took him up in a helicopter, and that was the first time I'd been in the helicopter [during the restoration], and we flew all the way over to Henderson Point in Pass Christian and then flew all the way back along the Coast to the Point in Biloxi. So we went really all the way from the Bay of St. Louis to the Biloxi/Ocean Springs side. And when I got out of that helicopter, I think is when it hit me that, "Wow, this is really, really bad, and it may be a lot longer than anybody could imagine." The damage that you could see from the air over that wide of an area was just incredible, knowing that it was even worse over on the Bay St. Louis/Waveland side and had an extreme amount of damage over on the other side in Ocean Springs and Pascagoula and Gautier, as well. So I think my optimism went away at that point, and you know, we are seeing some good progress, but I'm not sure, I'm not sure how long it's going to take until we feel like we're back to where we were, years, five years, ten years, maybe. That's my personal opinion. Some city leaders may not like to hear those kinds of things, and there are success stories. There's a lot of things that are happening that are very good, you know, but there's just still many, many, many things that need to happen.

Tisdale: Well, what's a image, lasting image in your mind of any particular scene or maybe a kind of poignant moment that stands out in your mind?

Brautigam: Well, you know, that's a good question. And you know it was funny, because as I went from one radio station to the next, and especially to the TV station because they've got, you know, a hundred or a hundred and fifty employees working

around the clock, and I would see them at different times of the day. So many of them would come up to me and tell me that they had got their power that day, or they got it two days ago, or the crews were in their area and they hope to get it the next day, and you know it all became so personal. And that, in a small way, was a reflection of what was going on out on the streets when customers and average people were saying those same kind of things to the guys, you know, the line crews and the folks who would come in. And so it was just, it was very interesting to see the change in attitudes and expectations, the thankfulness for the small things.

Tisdale: Kind of a humbling experience.

Brautigam: It was very humbling, and it restores your faith in what's real and what's important. It brought a lot of people together. Everybody who's been through that experience certainly has gone through it together. So you know, and we've all got to move on from it, too, and that's been difficult, you know, more difficult for many people than it has for other people. You know, I personally have been pretty well off; I had damage to my house, but I've been able to live in it. There are still people now eighteen months later living in trailers trying to, you know, trying to figure out what they're going to do, still waiting to get their insurance payoffs; so their lives have been upside-down for eighteen months, and it could be, you know, another eighteen months before they get situated. So it's just this broad scope of effect, different kinds of effects on everybody who's been through it, and you know we can't leave anybody behind. There's a lot of folks who still need a lot of help, but we'll get there. I mean the other thing, maybe, that would be a good answer for that is the spirit of the people of Mississippi. You know, they were just amazing.

Tisdale: One last thing, and linking to that, you know, the people that came here that may have never been to Mississippi and maybe they come away with a different image of the state; talk about that.

Brautigam: Oh, absolutely. Again, everyone of those people who came down whether they were linemen, you know, grizzled, tough, seemingly nonchalant or everybody else who came in, I don't think there's any question that they could not be affected by what they saw. They could not be—they had to be impressed with the spirit of the people, the ability for people, for the most part, to get off the ground, get back up, and get back to work. I don't think there's any question that people who had never been to Mississippi and only had the conceptions and the preconceptions and more likely than not, the misconceptions that they developed over their lifetimes. When they came, saw, were touched, and went home, you know, no way they couldn't have been affected in a positive sense. And we've seen that. I mean the volunteers that have continued to come down, you know, with the church groups and the other groups, all of those volunteers are here, have been here, are still here, have returned more than once; I mean that's remarkable. And I think that's a reflection of our people, of the gratefulness and the ability to be open and welcoming and hospitable in the midst of, you know, of this situation. So yeah, I think this is going to help Mississippi along the line, down the road. In a lot of different ways at a lot of

different levels, I think it will help, amazingly enough. But hopefully we won't have to go through it again.

Tisdale: Hopefully not. Kurt Brautigam, thank you for joining us today.

Brautigam: It's my pleasure. Thank you.

(end of interview)