

AN ORAL HISTORY

with

WENDY FROST

This is an interview for the Mississippi Oral History Program of The University of Southern Mississippi. The interview is with Wendy Frost and is taking place on October 22, 2005. The interviewer is Deanne Nuwer.

Nuwer: It's October 22, I'm at the Jumper Shrine on Highway 67 in Biloxi [Mississippi] and this is an interview with Wendy Frost, who is a registered nurse who has been working in Hancock County [Mississippi] in the Pearlinton area after Hurricane Katrina. Mrs. Frost, can you tell us a little bit about yourself?

Frost: I am from Findlay, Ohio. I'm a registered nurse, I have a wonderful husband, four terrific children; they range in age from six to almost seventeen. I've been an emergency room nurse for, gosh, nine years. I've had advance training in, I'm a forensic nurse examiner, I'm a sexual assault nurse examiner. So I've had a lot of training with victims of violence, people that have survived violent crimes.

Nuwer: Right, where did you go to school?

Frost: Saint Vincent School in Toledo, Ohio.

Nuwer: And your children's names are?

Frost: I have Jacob Charles, he's six; John Joseph we call him Jack, Jack is thirteen; Mary Katherine is fifteen; and Sarah Elizabeth is seventeen.

Nuwer: That's wonderful. And I'm sure that it's hard being away from them.

Frost: It is, it's really hard. Yeah, when I told them, you know we watch the news in Ohio, and we saw the pictures of the aftermath of the hurricane and when Mom became a nurse it was because when I started nursing school I was a single mom with three kids, so they saw Mommy work to achieve a goal. And when I became a nurse, they were pretty proud and they would bring anybody that had a bump, bruise, scrape to the house, because Mom can fix them. "My mom's a nurse, come on over she'll fix you up." So, I mean we have people coming all the time, but when they saw everything that had happened down here, they said, "You know Mom, you're a nurse and you really do have to go, those people need you."

Nuwer: Oh, how wonderful. Have you worked with the Red Cross before?

Frost: No, this is my first assignment.

Nuwer: And it was just a volunteer on your part?

Frost: Yes.

Nuwer: Your children urged you.

Frost: Um-hm.

Nuwer: That's wonderful. When did you arrive in Mississippi?

Frost: October third.

Nuwer: So you've been here for quite sometime.

Frost: Yes. (chuckle)

Nuwer: Where were you, is it stationed—where was your position?

Frost: Well, I was stationed, I slept at the Seabee Base with 1250 of my closest friends, like on a cot about a foot and a half apart. But yeah, it just made for a community, it made for a family. But then everyday we had routes; I was with staff help and they would assign us a route and we would go as staff help, it's kind of like occupational help. We're responsible for every financial center, every shelter, every place there's a Red Cross volunteer to make sure they're mentally and physically well and have everything they need so they can take care of people. And so there's different routes and I was assigned, I spent a day on an ERV [Emergency Response Vehicle], got to see a lot of things, and you know, be in touch with a lot of people. And then I went on another route and then I was assigned Route 1, and Route 1 took me, my last stop of the day took me to Pearlinton, and I got there at about, I don't know one o'clock that day, and it's great out there, I mean it's about as far as you can go without being in Louisiana. It took a little doing to get there. And as I was driving through the old roads to get to the school where the shelter was, and I just couldn't believe you know what I had seen. You see news, New Orleans, you know I saw Biloxi, all these other things but it was just different, and driving through those gates and the first time, there are some firefighters there from Virginia that volunteered two weeks of their time. And they met me at the gate, you know had scrubs on like, "Hey, you a doctor?" Just struck up a conversation and started talking. I tried to talk, I couldn't; I was speechless.

Nuwer: The destruction?

Frost: I was speechless.

Nuwer: What school, do you remember the name of that school?

Frost: It's the Charles B. Murphy School. It's a Red Cross shelter now.

Nuwer: OK, so you entered the school and is that where you stayed and slept?

Frost: No, I came back. I drove everyday and I came back to the Seabee Base but once I found these people and this route, I asked to stay on that route permanently. So I put a lot of miles on that rental van.

Nuwer: Yes, you did.

Frost: A lot of gas. (chuckle) But yeah, the people there, a lot of them when they would talk to me, they would tell me they were the town that FEMA forgot, or the town that people forgot. And I was just determined they weren't going to be forgotten and I would stay and make sure that people knew where they were, and continue to get help there.

Nuwer: Right. I know you've seen a lot. Is there anything that you are comfortable sharing with us? I know everybody has a story, but any particular people that you remember more than others?

Frost: There's a lot of them. I mean there's a lot of them in that town. I'll never forget that town. One of the first people that I encountered there, his name was J.D. and when I went down, we were just driving up and down the roads, you know. Because when I got to the schools, I met Dr. Marsha, and after I could speak I asked what can I do. And she said, "See all this stuff up here?" And it was things that organizations donated—tarps, things, all underneath the school. She said, "All this needs to go out there, because there are people too proud, too depressed, or too ill to come in." And there just wasn't much outreach in the area then. It's there now but there wasn't any then. So that's what I did. I loaded up the van. You know they called the trucks to take the food around in ERVs.

Nuwer: How do you think you spell that, H-U—

Frost: No, the ERV is E-R-V, the Emergency Response Vehicle.

Nuwer: Oh, OK.

Frost: That's what they call the emergency—yeah. So I loaded up a bunch of stuff in the van and I called it the NERV, the Nurses Emergency Response Vehicle.

Nuwer: Great.

Frost: And so I loaded up the NERV and took off and drove up and down the roads and I see somebody working, and I stop and say, “Do you—” you know they are working on the house or something, “Do you need a cold drink, do you need some gloves, are you wearing a mask, is there anybody that I can check on, you know anybody with special needs?” This guy, Joe, he says, “Check on Mr. J.D., Mr. J.D. had heart surgery.” And so went looking for Mr. J.D., and when I found this man, you know his tent is in the driveway in front of the house that’s not even his. And he’s sitting at the coffee table drinking coffee and everything is around him, all their belongings is around him and the tent behind him that he is sleeping in. And I said, “Can I do anything for you, is there anything that you need?” And he says, “Oh honey, somebody down the road needs it worse than I do.” And that’s what they kept telling me, and I talked to him for probably forty-five minutes and then he started telling me more about his story. He actually left, he didn’t ride out the storm and the hurricane, he actually left. And he left his dog Buddy and his little Chihuahua at home, and the dog Buddy had rode out the storm on top of the boat that got on top of a van—a big black Lab[rador Retriever]. And then as I was leaving I said, “Is there anything I can do for you?” “If you can get somebody here to get rid of that,” and he pointed to the house across the way, and that was his home. And I thought the one behind him was, but the one over there was his and he said that’s where his little dog drowned. Because when he got to the shelter they, you know they said you can’t have dogs here and [he] thought you know, he had been through [Hurricane] Camille; it wasn’t going to get that bad and the dog could get up on the furniture and the dog will be OK. But his little dog drowned.

Nuwer: And he didn’t want the house?

Frost: And he didn’t want the house there. And he told me about how she come running to meet him; he had a motorcycle and she’ll come running to meet him, and he was fixing a box for her on the motorcycle so he could take her for rides. And then you know, I tried to, I said, “Well, you know when you get on that motorcycle you’ll think of her.” And he said, “Yeah well, I got to get the motorcycle fixed,” the motorcycle had been damaged too. Then he told me that the motorcycle had actually belonged to a friend of his who had died, and he had a motorcycle at his house because the wife was concerned something might happen to it. And he’d take it out to run it every once in a while so it wouldn’t fall apart. Things get yucky when they don’t run. And he said that one day he got his wife, Sunny, they got on the bike and went for a ride down the beach. He’s kind of limited because of his heart, there’s not a lot of things that he can do, but he says it’s nothing like it to feel so free. They went down to the beach and when they got down there the phone, his cell phone ring and it was his son, and he said, “Dad how do you like that ride down there?” And he said, “I liked it just fine.” And his son said, “You’re going to like the ride back even better. Happy Father’s Day, that bike’s yours.”

Nuwer: I love stories like that.

Frost: Yeah, and then he introduced me to his daughter. He worried about her; she had a hard life, a single mom, two little kids. And then Sam, I met a bunch of Sams, so we call one Samuel, one Sam, and the other Reverend Burton. But Sam was a volunteer firefighter and he and his wife survived the storm up in the second floor of their home in Pearlington, and he told me about being out in the yard. They rescued dogs; one point they had fifty-two dogs there but they got all the dogs out except for the ones that were like blind and ill and couldn't be moved. And so they were in their yard and they went out the back, the water got to the back porch and when the water got to the back porch they said, "We better get on upstairs," just thinking you know it wasn't going to get much deeper. But kind of sarcastically is how he said it, and they had this beautiful home with the big brick fireplace in the middle and twelve-foot ceilings and two huge glass doors on either side of this fireplace. And Lynn(?) was headed upstairs with the blind dog.

Nuwer: This is the wife?

Frost: Um-hm, and Sam had shut the doors and turned around and was walking upstairs and he heard a noise. And when he turned back again all he could see was green, and he thought somebody had come by and sprayed the windows but it was water. And then the doors burst open and pinned him against the stairs and it took three tries for him to get upstairs. But they made it upstairs and that's where they hung out, survived the storm. Lynn told me—they have such a wonderful sense of humor, and I tell you they're going to be OK—she told me, you know how your mom always tells you not to air your dirty laundry in public.

Nuwer: Right.

Frost: They were living in the upstairs of this house and they needed clean underwear, and she washed out her panties and Sam's boxers and put them over the rail. And they're waiting and nobody is coming and they got their underwear out there, all of a sudden they hear a helicopter and they think this helicopter is going to land on the roof of the house. And so Lynn goes out there on this little porch; this guy comes down on a wire, he's got on a wet suit and a helmet that says, "I swim with sharks," and he's yelling, "Where are you?" And she couldn't understand what he was yelling so she got Sam, "Where are you?" And Sam's going, "Sixty thirty Gin Road." "No, what town is this?" And he said, "Pearlington," and the guy said, "You're not on the map." They had been going up down the coast looking for survivors, looking for people clinging to rubbish, and they saw the panties and they find him and Sam says can you send help, and help started coming.

Nuwer: Pearlington was not even on the military's map?

Frost: It wasn't on the military's map, no.

Nuwer: So when you arrived on October third—the hurricane came through August twenty-ninth—people in Pearlington had no contact, to the best of your knowledge?

Frost: You mean the helicopter?

Nuwer: Right.

Frost: Well, I think the helicopter, you know, found the underwear, found them. And then more rescuers started coming in, but for the first four or five days they were pretty much on their own. But you know, FEMA is there now and it's just, I mean they are so isolated, so isolated, you know, and it's across the board. It's African American, it's white, it's everybody; they're all united because it's property. So they kind of felt forgotten before because it's a little bit on nowhere, you know, a community of about a thousand people. But FEMA's there and they're getting their help, it's just they're proud and you just can't walk up to somebody and say, "Hey, I'm from the Red Cross, would you like a tarp? I'm from the Red Cross, can I get you some food?" They're not going to take it, they don't want a hand out, they want a hand up. And they want a smiling face that's going to say, "I'm going to come back tomorrow and I'm going to bring you a blanket," and you come back tomorrow and you bring the blanket. And then, you know, you get in there and you get to know them and then you say, "This is my friend, I brought her with me. And when I'm not here, she will be." And so you've introduced them. It's a network kind of thing you have to build before.

Nuwer: So you spent about two and half weeks in the Pearlington area?

Frost: Yeah.

Nuwer: So I assume you then were on a three-week tour of duty?

Frost: I was on a two week. I'm supposed to go home on Monday of next, because I wanted to make sure that people were going to be there. I had introduced people personally so that, you know, "Wendy said that this person is OK." And then J.D. will go and tell somebody else and you know, Clyde and Cookie, and make sure that everybody's got what they need.

Nuwer: In the Pearlington area did you see, is there one church that seems to be hub of the area? Are people that spread out that they don't even have a central meeting place where they can have—

Frost: There are a bunch of different little churches, but that's one thing, you know the church is really—I met a wonderful man, a retired minister, Reverend Samuel Burton Sr., and he is seventy-seven years old. But he's just incredible, he says that that's what this place needs; they need all the ministers to get together and have a community meeting because there is a lot of room out there. You don't have landlines [telephones] and they just started to get some hardlines in. People have got cell phones and this one talks to that one. You know how the telephone game goes, yeah,

everything changes. Yeah, they need more of a community. There's no central, right now the central gathering place is probably at the shelter when people come for lunch.

Nuwer: At the school.

Frost: The ones that can come, yeah. They come and they talk.

Nuwer: Well, as a registered nurse did you see any dire medical needs in the area, or situations?

Frost: The wonderful thing about this shelter is there is a free standing, a separate medical clinic, a free clinic there that is staffed by volunteers from another organization. There's like three different volunteer organizations there, but they have physicians there, they have nurses there. And for the people that will come, they have medications. The biggest need is outreach but it's difficult to get it there because you go knock on the door and say, "Hi, how are you doing?" And if they don't know you, they're not going to talk to you, they're going to say, "Oh, I'm fine and I don't need anything."

Nuwer: Right.

Frost: It's just not true. Like I spent a lot of time educating Claude, this wonderful, wonderful man. He's a diabetic. Someone had told him that when your sugar's low if you eat green beans it will elevate your sugar. (chuckle) He knows better now. They just need outreach, they need consistence, and they are going to need to for a long time.

Nuwer: I know that a lot of the clinics were concentrating on preventative medicine with the tet[anus] shot and things. Is that a different program, too?

Frost: Yeah, they're doing that. They are giving tet, they are giving Hepatitis A, and when they get the flu vaccine they will be giving the flu vaccine there as well. If people are going to come in, they are still going to need people to go out and, like I said, and make themselves available.

Nuwer: You had mentioned a Dr. Marsha; can you give us her last name?

Frost: McKay, Marsha McKay. She was only there—she was there about five or six days and then they kind of line up their own replacements. There's a doctor there, Dr. Sam, I don't know his last name, I can't remember it, but he's a medical school professor at Stanford University. And he's got a lot of med students there that he supervises, and he's back and forth between there and Waveland.

Nuwer: Did you get down to Waveland?

Frost: Yeah, I've been to Waveland and I've been to Bay St. Louis.

Nuwer: You kind of went all over Hancock County to a certain extent, so you've seen the eye of the destruction?

Frost: Yes.

Nuwer: Yes, you have. Someone asked me to remind you about something with pigs. It's a story with pigs. Can we talk about the pig's story? (laughter)

Frost: Well, I went to check on Mrs. Helsey(?). Mrs. Helsey is a diabetic and we'd gotten a lactometer and test strips, just stopped in just to make sure she was doing OK.

Nuwer: This is in Pearlinton?

Frost: In Pearlinton. And I went to check and Mrs. Helsey wasn't there, and there were these two little boys sitting in back of a pick-up truck. And as I was walking towards Mrs. Helsey's, I hear this little guy yelling at me, he's going, "She ain't home. Excuse me, she ain't home." And I say, "Well, where is she?" "Well, you need to talk to my daddy," and he took off running through the trailer and his daddy came out. And these little boys are just running all over in the back of the yard and they got a lasso. And I say, What are they doing? This guy's name is Tiger, Tiger Dorsey. I say, "Tiger, what are they doing?" He says, "We're roping hogs." I say, "So boys, are you catching any?" "Oh, yes ma'am." And I said, "What do you do when you catch them?" He said, "We wrestle them." And I said, "I would like to see that." And they said, "Well, come on." And so I went back in the woods with them because they just, they wanted some attention, they wanted some interaction; so darn cute I just couldn't say no. So I went back in the woods with them a little bit and they showed me the pig's tracks and a hog wallow and a hog boar, telling me the difference between a root and a wallow and it's just this wonderful history from these two little ten-year-old boys.

Nuwer: Oh, they are ten years old?

Frost: Almost ten. Nate tells me he's almost ten; he's a little guy. He's nine, almost ten.

Nuwer: Do you know their names?

Frost: Yeah, Nathaniel Dorsey and Donavan. What is Donavan's last name? He's Angel's son and I don't remember his last name. But then one of Nathaniel or Nat's cousins, Black, he was hanging out there off and on, too. But I went back there and they're telling me, they'll catch it for me if I'll wrestle it. I said, "You know, I'd love to but I can't today." But I did go through the woods with them and they want me to follow them through this thicket, it's like a tunnel. "It's just right through here." And I said, "Honey, I can't get down there and crawl through that," and they said, "But they're close." And he put his hand in this little pile, he says, "It's still sticky, it's

fresh, they're close." And he's showing me these hoof prints and I mean these hoof prints are huge. And even if we saw something that big I didn't want to wrestle it; wrestle, lasso, whatever the boys say. But you know I would have probably done it, but I told them I would come back, and then school started for them. So I made it a point yesterday to go back when I knew they would be out of school. And they were like, "Ms. Wendy, Ms. Wendy," and they come running out to see me. "I just got a new bike." Nat had found this bike on somebody else's debris pile-up, this big fat seat, two flat tires. He goes, "The hogs are right down there." They told me about somebody else's house. "It's a little too far to walk but you can ride my bike." (chuckle) They wanted me to get on this bike and go down the road with them, and I said, "Well, I'll drive and we'll go down there," so we did. We went through the woods and we heard the grunting and they said, "It's right over here." So I crawled through the thicket again and over some trees and found this hog.

Nuwer: Oh, you did see the hog?

Frost: Oh, yes we saw the hog. And when it grunted and squealed and it opened its mouth I was like, a little scream, they heard it from the road. But they were like, "It's OK, it's OK." Then they are telling me if the hairs are standing up this way it would mean it was mad and could kill; you would have to watch out. But, "They're standing up this way so it's afraid of you, so it'll be OK." So then they wanted to get it out so I could wrestle it, and it was sleeping and I was like, I couldn't get out of where I was really quick so I said, "Well, let me get to the road first." They show me how to get to the road and they herded this thing out there and we took off after it. (chuckle)

Nuwer: So being an ER nurse has all kinds of excitement involved.

Frost: Yeah, yeah, very adaptable.

Nuwer: Yeah, very adaptable.

Frost: But you know, they've just been through a lot. They've lost a lot and just to have that contact and that interaction. To let them know that somebody cares what they think and what they feel and what they are interested in. It made them happy. I tell you, it was a wonderful experience for me.

Nuwer: I'm sure you had not done that.

Frost: No, that was a first. (chuckle) That was a first. And I go back to the Seabee Base, and I told like the truck drivers that I met and all the people, because there's a lot of people that their job isn't like mine. They are like in the warehouse and their job is important but you know, they don't get to have that interaction. So they don't get that good feeling. So I go tell them stories and I tell them, you know, about the fact the kids I met and the things that we did. And tell them that, "Those things that I picked up from you, you know, I took out here and I gave it to them," and I'll show

them a picture, take a picture of it. And they'll thank me and they'll feel valuable, because everybody wants to feel valuable. It would help them, help them, too.

Nuwer: Well, what a wonderful experience.

Frost: It's been an adventure, I set out to have an adventure and I did.

Nuwer: And the people's lives that you touched along the way. Having seen our coast and the Pearlinton area, what do you think, how long—you've been out more than most people have—recovery news.

Frost: Yes, it's going to be years. I know Waveland, Waveland, Bay St. Louis, they're bad; I mean they are really bad. A lot of cases everything is gone, and sometimes you have to wonder if that's not easier to have everything gone than to be in an isolated area like Pearlinton, with all the trees and everything. The trees didn't let things really move, the water came in and ruined it so now they got the black mold. But all their things are still there, they are ruined but they are still there and they have to look at it. A lot of the people there aren't as educated, I mean they are wonderful, wonderful, caring compassionate people and they will do anything for their neighbor. But they are not as educated and they are not as, I don't know how to say it. I mean the resources are there to help them but they are not really sure how to make use of all the resources that are available to them. And so it's going to be a longer road for them, I mean they need somebody there.

Nuwer: I know in the Pearlinton area, part of the community actually lives on the river. There's a big contingence on the river. Were you able to interact with any of those?

Frost: That's mostly where I was, was on the river, yeah, because they got it both ways. They talk about one family that I met, Claude and Cookie. You know, Claude's a crabber and a shrimp boat guy and so he's used to water. He rode out Camille and he thought, well, Cookie and he thought he was going to stay. Other members of their family tried to evacuate and couldn't. And so they all ended up staying at Mr. Russ's house, this brick house. And when the water came up, it got up to the second floor and it kept coming. And they broke out a window, climbed out down the tin roof, Claude swam over and got a boat, you know a leaky boat. And he was telling me how they got it from both ways, you know. It came from the river and then you had another coming from the Gulf, they got it.

Nuwer: Any particular women that you know—I always like to try to get a really good cross-section—see the mothers who were making it or had problems that you can tell us about.

Frost: Well, J.D.'s daughter Vicki. Vicki had a hard life, a really, really hard life before and she'd been through things that, I mean that just shouldn't happen. But you know, she's a survivor and she's got two little kids to take care of. And she's got

some hurt things going on that she never really had looked at. The little guy's got asthma; they lost their dad six months ago, which according to Vicki and her dad, it's kind of a blessing because of the situation. But the little guy's, the kids are still looking for him. But I tell you she's a strong woman and they got nothing but a FEMA trailer and a few totes of clothes. But she says, you know, somebody told her that Katrina was like cleansing and this was her new start. And she's going to start over and she's got a struggle, she's got an uphill battle.

Nuwer: She's determined.

Frost: She's determined.

Nuwer: Did you get a sense that in the area, if many of the people are going to stay and just rebuild?

Frost: No, they're going to stay, a lot of them are going to stay.

Nuwer: I think roots go deeper in this kind of town.

Frost: They do, they do. And I asked, because when the houses were ruined a lot of people didn't want to camp, there wasn't room to camp on their plot of land or where their house was. So they'll move next to their family. So I got to where after a few days I would ask, you know, "Is this your family here?" Or, "Is this your family there?" And one gentleman said, "Honey, we're all family here." So, you know, it's just they look out for each other. And it doesn't matter if they had a difference of opinion or you know. When you say, "I'm a nurse, I'm with the Red Cross. Is there anybody that you think I should look in on?" It doesn't matter if they had a disagreement with somebody, if they know a person has a health condition, "Would you please go look in on this Ms. Lottie. Would you please go look in on Mr. J.D.," you know. "Could you check on Reverend Bush for me?" Because you know, they stick together.

Nuwer: It sounds like what you encountered are a lot of problems—were diabetes, and just the stress.

Frost: Yeah. There's a lot of COPD there and asthma. And with all this dust and all the mold, now we're moving into some colder weather here for you all that's going to be, it's going to be a problem.

Nuwer: Oh, that exaggerates the problem?

Frost: Yeah, definitely, the dampness and coldness.

Nuwer: And burning the trash, I sure.

Frost: It doesn't help but it has to be done, and they know it has to be done.

Nuwer: So again.

Frost: They adapt. Like in Ohio somebody, I'm an ER nurse, and I don't know if I should say this but everything in the ER is usually bullshit or old shit. (chuckle) People come in with a splinter; they'll come in with a hang nail to the ER. These people don't—they doctor themselves at home and they heal so fast. They're so resilient and I just, if these people here in this community or in my community, it would be frequent flyers in the ER and we'll take care of it, but here—

Nuwer: They're a pretty independent group of people here, yeah.

Frost: Yeah.

Nuwer: Yeah, they are. Well, you've seen so much and we're getting near the thirty-minute mark on the tape and I can flip it. But I guess I'm going to ask you, you really were introduced to not just a world of disaster but really a new cultural world, I think.

Frost: Yeah.

Nuwer: Is there any closing remarks for prosperity's sake that you would want to say about the Pearlinton-Hancock area? You know, while you are thinking of that, I'm going to go ahead and flip the tape.

Frost: OK.

Nuwer: We're back with Nurse Frost and we're getting ready to wrap up about her experiences in Pearlinton, Mississippi. Is there anything you would like to say as we close this tape and your story with Hurricane Katrina?

Frost: What really struck me, I think on my first day when I got there, was the sense by the people that they had been forgotten. And they were forgotten even before the hurricane hit. And one thing that I promised them, you know, I always, I kept my promises. If I said I was going to bring them something, I brought it the next day. And the one thing I promised them, and I promised every single one of them that I met, that they will never be forgotten again. Somebody asked what I was going to take from this experience, and even though these people have nothing to give, you know they've given me alot. And the one thing I'm going to take from here is their stories and I'm going to tell their stories. And I promised them, every one of them, that they will never be forgotten again and I won't forget them. And I will make sure other people don't forget them.

Nuwer: Thank you.

(end of interview)