

AN ORAL HISTORY

with

LORI K. GORDON

This is an interview for the Mississippi Oral History Program of The University of Southern Mississippi. The interview is with Lori K. Gordon and is taking place on February 20, 2008. The interviewers are Kate Doyle and Sheena Barnett.

Doyle: This is an interview for The University of Southern Mississippi Hurricane Katrina Oral History Project, done in conjunction with the University of Guelph, Ontario, Canada. The interview is with Lori Gordon, and it is taking place on February 20, 2008, at 3:30 p.m. in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi. The interviewers are—

Barnett: Sheena Barnett.

Doyle: And Kate Doyle. And I am Kate Doyle, and I will begin with the first question. So first I'd like to thank you, Lori, for taking the time to talk with me today, and I'd like to get some background information about you, which is what we usually do in our oral history interviews. So I'm going to ask you for the record, could you state your name, please?

Gordon: Lori Gordon.

Doyle: And could you spell your name?

Gordon: Lori is L-O-R-I, middle initial K, G-O-R-D-O-N.

Doyle: And when were you born?

Gordon: January 20, 1958.

Doyle: And where were you born?

Gordon: Brooking, South Dakota.

Doyle: And what was your father's name?

Gordon: Alan(?), Alan Gordon.

Doyle: And your mother's first name and maiden name, please.

Gordon: Janet Macatee(?).

Doyle: And where did you grow up, and can you tell me a little bit about what that was like?

Gordon: Sure. I grew up mostly in Watertown, South Dakota, although I lived all over eastern South Dakota. I grew up in a family that was a bit financially disadvantaged, which had a bearing on who I am today, I'm sure, just like all of those things do. We moved a lot when I was a kid. I think in the fourth grade, I lived in, like, three different towns; it was all towns in eastern South Dakota. Came from a family, I had five siblings, and we were a real close family in a lot of ways, and we still are. So the early years were pretty tough but were made better by my parents' (note to tape editor: this is a plural possessive: both of her parents, the two, had an attitude, thus parents is plural and parents' is plural possessive; so please don't change this; the gerund having calls for a possessive modifier) having a really good attitude, and their attitude was always kind of like, "Well, we're just a little short till the next paycheck." When actually, circumstances were pretty bad. Anyway, let's see, when I was in senior high, we made the move from eastern South Dakota to the Black Hills of South Dakota, which is on the western side of the state, which is a very beautiful area. Eastern South Dakota is all prairies; summers are OK, but the winters are awful. Boy, that snow comes in October and just gets piled up and gets dirtier all winter, you know, till it finally melts in the spring. The Black Hills, on the other hand, they're a very gentle mountain range, very beautiful, and it had kind of this mystique to them that when I was at that age, you know, fifteen, sixteen, it really affected me. I loved the Black Hills and graduated from high school in the Black Hills in the town of Spearfish and moved to Rapid City then, after high school and went on from there.

Doyle: And how long have you lived on the Mississippi Gulf Coast?

Gordon: I've been here twenty-two years, twenty-two wonderful years.

Doyle: And how many generations of your family have lived on the Gulf Coast?

Gordon: Just me and my daughter for a time till Katrina changed that.

Doyle: Why are you living here on the Mississippi Gulf Coast?

Gordon: It was January in South Dakota, (laughter) and that was the initial impulse. All of a sudden I realized that I didn't have to live someplace where we had winter all winter long and all that awful snow. When I first came here, I immediately connected with the place. I felt like for the first time in my life, I'd really found home. I mean, I loved the Black Hills; I lived in the high desert of Arizona for a time, and I loved it there. But there was something about this area that just reached out and grabbed me. And I think it took me a year to get down here, but basically I saw this place, and I went home and packed my bags. And I've never looked back.

Doyle: And can you describe your attachment to the region? What does it mean to you?

Gordon: Well, there's the very strong sense of home, which for someone with my background, you know, being homeless as a child, it's really, really important. And that's pretty hard to explain, and I think that's just something that happens with people sometimes. And it happened with me, but on top of that there is the culture. I mean, this ain't nothing like South Dakota. (laughter) Let me tell you, down here. A lot of it has to do with the cultural traditions of New Orleans. I absolutely love being this close to New Orleans. I love that whole cultural thing. It's much easier; it's much looser down here. Where I grew up, it was, even though my family was not really rigid, but basically eastern South Dakota is just really Germanic, real Protestant work ethic. You know, you get out there, and you work your tail off. I mean, I still have that; that's still who I am, but at least I can live in a place where people understand what's really (laughter) important. And that's a lot of what I like about down here.

Doyle: So where is your neighborhood?

Gordon: My neighborhood is in the little community of Clermont Harbor; it's on the beach about eight miles from here, straight west on the other side of Waveland. And Clermont was completely, completely wiped out by Katrina. So there's not much left to my community at this point. There are a few houses going up; we probably have maybe a dozen houses going up at this point. But it still feels like home.

Doyle: Can you describe what your neighborhood looked like before the hurricane?

Gordon: Yeah, it was beautiful. Beautiful in a very rural, blue-collar kind of way. We didn't have any of those big, nice houses you see, you know, from here to Biloxi. It was a working-class community, real blue-collar, very rural. For instance my house sat on five lots, and we'd go out the backyard and go to the end, and it backed up to a bayou. I could get in my little kayak and go down the bayou and out into the Gulf of Mexico. We had tons of wildlife, just you know, this semitropical paradise is the way it seemed to me. It was really a very gorgeous place.

Doyle: And did you stay in your home during Hurricane Katrina?

Gordon: Oh, no. Anybody that stayed in Clermont Harbor is no longer with us. We had forty-three feet of water in Clermont. Yeah, so it was real bad.

Doyle: Where did you end up staying during the hurricane?

Gordon: Well, I just went to Diamondhead; just got away from the water. Diamondhead is a community just north of here, probably three miles from here in Bay St. Louis, about eight miles from my home. And we stayed there for Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, three nights. And after Tuesday, we were able to leave.

Barnett: When you say we, you mean who?

Gordon: My husband and I, and there were a few other people staying in the same place.

Doyle: And can you describe the experience of the hurricane?

Gordon: Yeah. Where to start is a—I woke up about two o'clock Monday morning because of the wind. You could hear the wind was coming in about two. So then we were awake from two Monday morning, and the hard thing was, of course, the communications. You two probably have heard from other people you interviewed, we didn't know what was happening down here. You know, we had the weather radios, and the folks at WLOX in Biloxi were broadcasting, but the only thing you could get was what was happening in Gulfport and Biloxi. We had no idea. And actually from where I was, it didn't—and of course, there was no water, and that was what was so awful about this particular, was how high the storm surge was. So we knew we had big winds; we were watching trees going down. We were watching, you know, bits of the neighbors' (tape editor: this is another plural possessive) roofs blowing across, but all in all, it didn't seem that bad. You know, it was just we were in a real well-constructed house, and it was also on a golf course. So what you could see, we had this expanse of all this golf course, this grass, and there was nothing to be blown off onto that. So it wasn't too bad. The worst part was not knowing what was happening down on the Coast, and not just Clermont Harbor, but here in Bay St. Louis and Waveland, you know, where all our friends live and our people we love. That was the hardest part.

Doyle: So when did you end up evacuating? When did you end up leaving your house and going?

Gordon: Sunday afternoon. The storm blew in Monday, and we left; I think we got up to Diamondhead, maybe two or three o'clock in the afternoon on Sunday.

Doyle: And do you know how or if your home was affected by the flood or wind?

Gordon: It's completely gone. So when did I know?

Doyle: It says do you know.

Gordon: Oh, yeah, and I knew. We tried to get home on [Wednesday]. We couldn't get out of Diamondhead Monday night or Tuesday. So Wednesday we got out of Diamondhead, and we made it down here to Bay St. Louis and Waveland. We couldn't get to Clermont Harbor; it was still completely cut off by water. The water was just too high. So we got down here and saw what had happened to Bay St. Louis and Waveland, and we knew that we didn't have a chance, that Clermont was gone.

Doyle: Can you describe your experience of going back to your house the way it (inaudible)?

Gordon: Actually, I have to tell you, I can't. And this is so weird. I guess I blocked out the memory. I don't know how we got home that first time, you know, what route we took because when we came down from Diamondhead the first day and we couldn't get there, we went back to Diamondhead, and then the next day we drove to Florida; went to Pensacola and picked up a little travel trailer for me to live in. We knew that my husband was going to have to go find some work and make some money because we knew we were in trouble. So then we came back from Pascagoula, and I think dropped the little camper off at a friend's motel in the parking lot on Highway 603 and [Highway] 90. And I don't know; I don't remember seeing home the first time. Isn't that weird? It seems weird to me.

Barnett: Yeah.

Doyle: It's funny how the mind works.

Gordon: Yeah. Yeah, it is, and I just must be—

Doyle: It might be a good thing. You know what I mean?

Gordon: Yeah, maybe. I mean, obviously it was kind of traumatic. I mean, I remember what it looks like; I just don't remember the first time seeing it.

Doyle: And then what traditions do you carry on in your community after the hurricane? Mardi Gras? St. Patrick's Day parade?

Gordon: All of those things. That's what I kind of was referring to when I was talking about how much I love the culture down here. It is so engrained; it's so much a part of the community. And I tell you one tradition in particular that we are so really proud that we were able to keep going. All of us, all the artists that were in galleries up and down Main Street in Bay St. Louis, of course, we lost our galleries. So not only did we not have a home or a job, I mean, we had no place to sell our work. Well, there are these terrific people, Jenice McCardle and Mark Currier who own the building at 220 Main Street in Bay St. Louis. They were very fortunate; they were on high ground. They didn't get that much damage. And they got in there, and they went to work right after the storm, got the place cleaned out, and the business that had been in the front part of the building—I mean, they weren't in any shape to go back in business right away. So they put the word out that they were ready to rent the front. So a group of us artists got together, and we formed our co-op, and we opened up. Let's see, it was four weeks, I think, after the storm. We had our grand opening five weeks after the storm on Second Saturday, and our Second Saturday Art Walk here has been a tradition in Old Town Bay St. Louis for years and years. And we actually had our Second Saturday. And we've had it—sorry. (crying) And we've had it every

Saturday, Second Saturday since then, and we are so proud of that. So I really want you two to come visit tomorrow if you can, to go to the gallery because it is cool.

Doyle: Did you have a lot of old clientele and people from Bay St. Louis—

Gordon: Oh, yeah.

Doyle: —(inaudible) on that first time?

Gordon: Oh, yeah. It was wild. We had, like, three bands, you know. We had—oh, it was the most incredible, incredible celebration that you can imagine.

Doyle: Probably a huge morale boost.

Gordon: Yeah, it was.

Doyle: Just what you need to get that culture back.

Gordon: Yeah, exactly, and that whole first year we were almost the only ones open in Old Town, and every Second Saturday, the whole town showed up. It was incredible. And it still is. You know, so that's a tradition that we're real proud of working hard to keep going.

Doyle: What are your most vivid memories of your community before Hurricane Katrina, either the city in general or your neighborhood?

Gordon: Yeah. Just how lush and beautiful it was. And you know how it's so easy to take for granted the beautiful things of where you live? That was—and I've certainly done that, you know, over my life, like everybody else. But from the time that I moved to Clermont Harbor, I don't think there was a day that went by that I didn't think about how lucky I was. I mean, you know, for a poor kid growing up in the middle of South Dakota to live three blocks from the beach. I mean, this was like heaven for me, and it still is. I still feel that way, but that's what it was. Every day. I mean, I'd start most days by riding my bicycle to the beach, you know, watching the sun come up. And most evenings I'd be at the beach, too. And oh, it was just, it was great.

Doyle: It's so different. We ran (inaudible). I was running in the water today. (laughter)

Gordon: Yeah.

Doyle: At the beach, from Canada. The snow right now. I'm like, "It's January, and we're at the beach."

Gordon: All right. See, so you understand.

Doyle: I understand that feeling.

Gordon: Yeah.

Doyle: To keep that on after living here and appreciate it.

Gordon: Yeah, and I don't know why I never took it for granted; I just didn't. I mean, I kind of may now because I've been so damn busy since the storm. I never get to go to the beach, (laughter) but that was the most important thing to me was the beauty of my surroundings.

Doyle: Yeah. I want to tell you, too, we have water (inaudible) you know, this is your stuff.

Gordon: Thanks, because I didn't even notice. OK.

Doyle: No, I meant to tell you, but if you get thirsty—

Gordon: This is smart. (laughter)

Doyle: It's for you or us. (laughter)

Gordon: OK.

Doyle: So back to the community. What do you think the community's problems and their strengths were prior to the hurricane?

Gordon: Problems. There's still some lasting racism down here, and there is everywhere. You know, it's like there were so many people when they heard I moved to Mississippi, it was like, (whispering) "You're living where?" You know, it was like, "Why?" And I'd say like, "Oh yeah, it's awful; don't even come down and look." You know? (laughter) Because we do have such a bad reputation, such a bad history. And I am probably more sensitive to it than a lot of white people, just because I grew up in this family where you could say the F word way before you could say the N word. You know, we were just brought up to be very aware of social issues and social injustice. So that is a bit of a problem, but not that much. It's a lot better. So what else would be a problem down here? In my community of Clermont Harbor, in particular, it was just poverty. You know, still a lot of people and lack of education and things like that that you see in any poor, working-class community. The strengths, again, would be the sense of culture. We're such a small community here that we really feel like, you know, to say a family that's kind of trite and not quite right, but we feel like we're a community, not a town, not a county, but a community with some really strong bonds to the community, itself and to making an effort to live our lives in such a way that it not only is good for us but good for our community. And I'd never had that anyplace that I'd lived, either. So.

Doyle: So what was your opinion of local, state, and federal politicians before the hurricane? I mean, the three levels, all of them, whatever.

Gordon: I'm very biased. I was very politically active when I was young; from the time I was in junior high, I worked my butt off for George McGovern's [19]72 presidential campaign. I was politically active my whole young adult life. I worked for Senator Daschle from South Dakota for a time, did my bachelor's, got a bachelor's degree in political science. And by the time I had moved down here, I was so jaded, I was so fed up with politics and so fed up with the whole game. So very negative, very negative. I mean, I still voted, but that was about all I did. Since the storm, it's probably (laughter) gotten worse, and it's probably gotten worse because we are trying to deal with the county government down here with zoning issues. Very reluctantly and against my better judgment, I got involved in politics again. A friend of mine and I formed an Internet organization called Coastal Community Watch when we found out that they had rezoned my end of the beach, a thousand acres of saltwater marsh, of wetlands, you know, just two, three feet elevation tops, they rezoned a thousand acres of that beautiful, beautiful land for unlimited height, unlimited density condo and casino development. So we started fighting that, and these guys on this county board of supervisors are the biggest bunch of corrupt yahoos I've ever seen in my life. And so I'm still don't feel too good about the political scene, although I have to say, even with all of FEMA's problems, we were damn lucky to have what we did. I had a FEMA trailer for two years. Now I have a Katrina cottage while we're trying to rebuild, and I'm really grateful for that, and the other thing is, I have never met a single individual that was working for FEMA or for the Mississippi Emergency Management [Agency] that wasn't really good to work with. So it's kind of a mix how I feel about it.

Doyle: How has the storm changed the way that you think about your community?

Gordon: Gee. I don't really know that it has. You know, before the storm, I was acutely aware of how lucky I was to be living here, and I still feel that way. So it probably really hasn't changed much.

Doyle: So now we're going to get into talking about the hurricane notification, information, and response.

Gordon: OK.

Doyle: So how and when did you hear about Hurricane Katrina?

Gordon: Oh, this is a great story. Must have been a week before, you know, we all watch these storms. Have either of you lived in a hurricane area like on the Coast?

Doyle: No.

Gordon: We're always aware, even if it's in the back of our mind, when there's a storm out there, but after a while, you get to a point where you know you can't panic every time there's a storm in the Gulf, or you can't even really do that much preparation ahead of time because it's so much work to prepare for a hurricane. My God, it takes days to button up the outside, bring in all the furniture, the bikes, you know, to board up, all of that stuff. So everybody pretty much waits till the last couple of days because we're just so damn sick of doing it all the time. So I remember about a week out I heard about Katrina, and a friend of mine was on her way to visit her parents in North Carolina, and she called me, and she said, "(Inaudible), did you hear about this storm?" And I said, "Oh, God, look Alice." At that point, really early on, they were predicting that it was going to go way to the east, I think. Way to the east. And I said, "Alice, how long has it been since they've been that far off with their—we got nothing to worry about." And she said, "Oh, thanks." And she kept on going to South Carolina. (laughter) Well, three days later, four days later, I called her, and I said, "Alice, they were that wrong. Now, it's coming this way." So even though we were well aware of it for a week, it wasn't until perhaps four days before it hit that we all started getting pretty nervous.

Doyle: Did your friend from this area, did she end up coming home?

Gordon: Yeah, she came home, and she actually did very well. She was in Old Town Bay St. Louis. They had four feet there, but her house is way up on stilts, or you know, built up, so she was OK. And she sheltered quite a few people after the storm in her home.

Doyle: What, when, and how did you hear about the evacuation for Hurricane Katrina?

Gordon: That's kind of hard to remember. I think two days out, perhaps, we knew that there was going to be mandatory evacuation, and that never meant much to me because living where I did, every hurricane was mandatory evacuation for me. I was only at seven feet above sea level. I left for the Category Ones; irritated the hell out of my husband. I don't know how many times because he's like, "This is ridiculous. We did this three times last year." You know, I didn't care because it's the water that kills people more than anything, and I'm scared to death. You know, I wasn't—there was no way I was going to stay. So probably two days out, I'm sure. How did I hear it? On everything, radio, newspapers, talking to people. What was the third? When, how, and?

Doyle: What, when, and how?

Gordon: So just how bad it was and the closer it got, in fact, my daughter and her husband and my granddaughter who is now five, so she was two and a half at the time of the storm, I guess, had just moved here. Oh, this was a hard thing for me. They had just moved here five weeks before. They had wanted to move here, you know, so I could be close to the baby, and they stayed with us for four weeks, and the week

before the storm, they moved to a little rental house in Waveland, and they were just going to evacuate locally with us. And up until—the storm blew in Monday morning. Up until Sunday; about four o'clock I got up Sunday morning, and when I saw that that storm had changed to a Category Five and that it was still barreling right towards us, I knew Emmy(?) couldn't stay with that baby, not just for the danger of the storm, but how bad it would be afterwards, more than anything, is what I was thinking, that it would be terrible afterwards. So by the time the sun came up Sunday morning, I was pounding on Emily's door and said, "You have got to take that baby and go. You just have to." And for the first time in twenty-seven years, the kid listened to me. (laughter) I swear to God it was the first time she listened to her mommy. (laughter) And they left; they evacuated. So at that point, that's when we all knew how terribly serious this storm was going to be. It was real early Sunday morning.

Doyle: Was their house affected by the storm?

Gordon: Oh, yeah. It actually stood because it was cement block, but the water went completely over the roof. So they lost everything, too.

Doyle: Are they still in this area?

Gordon: No, they evacuated to North Carolina, and they're still there. So that's the hard part, that they weren't able to come back, and they probably won't now. She starts school this fall, you know, so that's bad.

Doyle: What was your reaction when you heard about the evacuation for the hurricane, and how did you prepare for it?

Gordon: We had already partially prepared by bringing the outside furniture in and doing that kind of stuff. So we finished doing that on Sunday, and it was very confusing because we always, for every other storm, we've always evacuated to the motel on the corner of Highway 603 and [Highway] 90; my friends own that. And we would get together, and I wouldn't say we actually had hurricane parties, but at least we were with friends, you know, people to visit with and play poker with, for the most part, I think is what we did the rest (laughter) of those storms. But because—oh, I know what happened. I had some vouchers for some free rooms at the casino hotel, at Casino Magic; it's called Hollywood, now. And I thought, "Well, that'll be fun since we have my daughter and her family. We'll get two rooms next to each other." So I told Steve, "We don't need a room; we're all set." That was probably on Saturday. Sunday, Casino Magic announced, "Hey, we have to close." And they called and said, "You can't have a room here." So then we were left without a room; Steve's motel had filled up by then. So we took up the offer to go and stay with a friend in Diamondhead and told Emmy she had to go, take the baby and go.

Doyle: Why did you decide to go to Diamondhead? Was it just convenience kind of?

Gordon: Just because we—yeah, it was. We didn't want to go far because it's so hard to get back; that's such a problem. You know? Evacuating is tough enough because everybody waits till the last minute in case they don't really have to leave. So getting out of town, you know, a three-hour drive to Baton Rouge took people nine and ten hours on Sunday. Emmy drove all night long, all day Sunday and all night long just to get to some little town in Georgia someplace, and getting back is even worse. And you know, you want to get back. You want to see what happened to your house and your friends. And so Diamondhead seemed safe, and it was close, and we had the offer. You know, they said they'd take us. They wouldn't take our cat, darn it, so we lost the cat. But we were safe.

Barnett: Could you expand more on your experience as the hurricane approached? Could you go into more detail?

Gordon: Yeah. As it approached. I think I can. Just what we were doing? Or what I was feeling?

Barnett: Um-hm.

Gordon: Just all the normal stuff. Oh, this is another funny story. I had asked my husband to make shutters for our house a year or two before because it's such a pain getting the plywood and putting it all up. So all we had to do was shut the shutters. So we did all of that preparation work, and at this point on Sunday, I knew how bad it was going to be. I had this little, bitty two-door Saturn, and my husband had this big van. And I spent all day Sunday hauling everything I thought that I wouldn't want to lose. And I had that van—I had, like—my husband's an artist who makes furniture. So I had the little chair and table that he had given me for a wedding present. You know, I packed that. I got a lot of photos. I got my computer; I got my favorite art, all of that kind of stuff. And it took me hours and hours. I think I started about four o'clock Sunday morning. And so about twelve hours later, you know, I had everything I could fit, and as we were leaving, my husband left. And he evacuated with two things, and (laughter) in his right hand he had his briefcase with his important papers, and in his left hand, he had the battery-operated screw-gun so he could take the plywood off the front door when we got home. (laughter) So another thing I remember about that day was, hiding it quite well, I think, but being quite irritated with my husband because he just was not taking it seriously. He just didn't seem to get how bad it was probably going to be. And I tell you, that happened to a lot of people down here. I've heard it said that Hurricane Camille killed more people in 2005 than it did in [19]69 because everybody used Camille as a benchmark. It was like, "Well, our house did fine in Camille. We're going to be fine for this storm." Well, that killed a lot of people; it really did. So there was that sense of irritation, and then I remember getting up to our friend's house in Diamondhead, and it was Ann and her husband who own the house, and two other single women, and Cairo(?) and me. And I remember we got there, and nothing was looking any better; it was looking worse all the time. And I remember we all said, "Oh, God, have we made a really bad mistake here? Should we go? Should we get further away?" It was very frightening,

but at that point, it was too late. You know, the arteries going out were so clogged, we probably wouldn't have been able to get more than just a few hours further, and then you're stuck in your car because the motels for hundreds of miles are all booked up. You don't have any place to go. So we just decided to stay, and we were all quite tense that night. And you know, everybody handles stress differently. I remember feeling just really irritable just because I was there with a group of people, and everybody was talking. Well, duh! What did I think was going to happen? But you know, it's just when I'm under stress, I want to be alone; I don't want people talking to me. You know, I just want to kind of hibernate. And of course, you couldn't do that in a house full of people. I think that's about it. That's about all I can tell you other than we just hunkered down and hoped we hadn't made a really bad mistake.

Barnett: Did the proximity of friends and/or relatives and communities on high ground influence your decision to leave voluntarily?

Gordon: Well, no, because in my case, Ann and John were on high ground, so it influenced my decision of where I should evacuate and it definitely influenced my decision with my daughter. Not that they had any place in particular they were going, but I just knew she had to leave.

Barnett: Um-hm.

Doyle: You already mentioned a bit of this, but if you want to expand on what did you decide to take with you? What factors did you take into account when you were trying to decide what to pack and what to leave?

Gordon: Two things. The things that were important to me on a very personal, emotional level. And I forgot some of those, darn it. I didn't get any of Emmy's baby pictures. I mean, I had some on CD, you know, some stored on the computer, but basically it was two things. The things that were really important to me on a personal level, and the records of my artwork because, like, when I make a piece, I always photograph it, and then I'll go back, and I'll take that image, and I'll make new artwork from the images. So I wanted to be sure that I had all of the digital files, and I got all of those. I did this incredible oral history with a hundred-and-four-year-old woman here in Bay St. Louis. Listen, you two. I have twenty-nine cassette tapes, and I've transcribed it into a hundred pages, single-spaced, typed pages of her oral history. It's incredible. So I wanted to make sure I got all of Celestine's stuff. And I got the tapes, and I got the transcriptions; I got all that. But I forgot I had three videotapes of her, too. And I forgot those. You know, so it's just stuff like that, and Emmy's baby pictures. And you know, who gives a damn about the couch? You know? Things like that, you don't care about that. So I regret those few personal things that I forgot. I regret, like, Celestine's videotapes that I forgot. And I regret that I wasn't able to get more of my old artwork. You know, most of the new stuff, you know within the last couple of years, I saved. But I had a studio full of stuff that I'd done from the time I was in senior high and junior high, and that's all gone, and I regret that. But you know, you can't take everything. So.

Barnett: Do you have photos of that then, still?

Gordon: No, because I forgot those photo albums, too.

Barnett: Oh, no.

Gordon: Yeah, those weren't on CDs, so. But what are you going to do?

Doyle: How many times have you moved since evacuating?

Gordon: Well, let's see. We were actually pretty lucky. I told you I went to Pensacola a couple days after the storm, and I got that little, bitty camper. We brought that back here, and put it in the parking lot of that motel I was telling you about. And then I drove my husband to Mobile; he got on a plane and went up to Minnesota and worked for a few months. So after a week in the parking lot of that motel, we moved it to the driveway of some friends of mine, the same folks that own the motel. They live on an acreage up on [Highway] 603, just a mile south of the interstate, so just four or five miles from here. And I lived in my little camper in their driveway for three months, and then my husband came home. And we moved our little camper back to our property in Clermont Harbor and got a FEMA trailer there, and we've been there since. So I didn't have to move around very much. I was really lucky.

Doyle: How did you find the experience of living without your husband for those few months? Because you said that he went up to find work, I'm assuming.

Gordon: Yeah.

Doyle: How was—right after the hurri[cane]—well, soon after the hurricane, how was that?

Gordon: It was very mixed. On the one hand, I was really lonesome, and I was scared, and there was another really bad thing going on in my life. I had a brother who was dying at that point. He was diagnosed with cancer a year before the storm, and we lost him two months after the storm. So that was worse than the storm for me, you know, just watching my brother fight that awful cancer for fourteen months. So it was very difficult because I was really scared; I was really lonely; I was really upset about losing my brother, and you know, just the suffering he was going through. And I was also extremely angry with my husband, and that's too personal. I don't want to go into why I was so angry; it was storm-related. So on the one hand, I was so glad he went to Minnesota because I was too screwed up to have to deal with that much anger, have to deal with him every day. So it was really good that for three months he was gone because I was able to get past the anger and figure out a way how we could work out the issue. And so it was tough because I'd think about him, and I'd be so damn mad, but I couldn't wait for him to call that night. So it was a very difficult time, but at the same time, I have some very precious memories from that three months, too,

because of the friends I was living with. It's a husband and wife. Steve was my very first friend down here, and his wife has since become a very good friend, and so the three of us, we just, we went through a whole lot together. And I'm closer to them than I have ever been to anybody, you know, as far as friends go. So we have some good memories, too, because we just—one thing you've probably heard is, "Boy, a way that a lot of us were coping or trying to cope was we were drinking a lot." And Steve and Brenda and I would sit around in the evenings, you know, and have a few drinks. And we had some good times, too.

Doyle: Can you describe any experiences you may have had with local, state, or federal officials after the evacuation and hurricane?

Gordon: Absolutely nothing but good to say about everybody I had to deal with, whether it was FEMA, the Red Cross, local, nothing but really good experiences. Again, what I'm seeing happening with the county board of supervisors, I feel very bitter about. I felt like they were selling us out before the storm, and the storm didn't change a thing. So I have very hard feelings towards that group of county supervisors, not all of them; there's a couple of exceptions, but mostly I just think they're out to make sure they're just fine financially and the hell with everybody else down here. So I have very hard feelings toward them.

Doyle: Were you injured at any point during the storm?

Gordon: No, in fact it's funny. I don't know if—do you know about my collection of work from mixed media.

Doyle: [No.]

Gordon: Well, I was painting before the storm, but the paints and canvases went with everything else. So just a couple of weeks after the storm, I started collecting bits of rubble, and it started with just my—you know, in the woods behind where my house used to be. I was just searching desperately for anything I had left, and I started putting those bits of rubble into mixed media assemblages. And what is funny is that for the next year and a half, I spent almost every single day crawling through rubble piles, collecting debris, and I never got anything more than a scratch, (laughter) which is amazing because there were some pretty—you know, I was crawling on top of houses that had collapsed, and so no, no injuries at all.

Doyle: What a great way, though, to use, like, the debris (inaudible) such a negative connotation to it and turn it into something really beautiful.

Gordon: Well, you know, it was a lifesaver for me; it was a lifesaver initially, psychologically. I just had to be doing something positive; I just had to. I had to go back to work. It's not like I ever chose to be an artist; it's just who I am, and it was a psychological need for me to go back to work. And it's been a financial lifesaver since then, too; it's done really well. So that's good.

Barnett: What pieces have you been most proud of?

Gordon: Oh, gee. Hon, I have about five hundred pieces in this collection, now. That's hard to say. But the earliest ones more than anything because they were born out of kind of a psychological desperation on my part, and it's funny because I've been interviewed by newspeople quite a bit about the Katrina collection, and several of them, including this one guy—CBS interviewed me, and he kept on asking this question in different ways, trying to get an answer from me. And I knew what he wanted; he wanted me to say, “Oh, this is so painful creating this stuff. You know, I'm ripping my heart out.” And I was like, “Bullshit! This is great. It's joyous. I'm doing something positive.” So it's those earliest pieces. There's one called Northeast Quadrant, which is very simple. All it is is a lid to a barrel that, it was blue. You know, it's metal, and it's just rusted beautiful, just beautiful, the blue and rust color and a broken plaster gold-painted wing from some statue on the front of it. And that's one of the really good ones. I know we're doing an interview, but I'll pull out a brochure to leave with you two so you can kind of see what I'm talking about here.

Barnett: With your autograph?

Gordon: Sure. Sure. Anyway, here's the Katrina Collection.

Barnett: We're going to need two; we'll fight over them. (laughter)

Gordon: Yeah, there's two right there; (laughter) you got it. So those earlier pieces, and also that's when the situation was so incredibly difficult. All I had for a studio at first—I'm making crinkling sounds, aren't I? All I had for a studio at first was Steve's driveway, and then they had a garage that had been damaged pretty heavily by the storm. There was a big hole in the roof, and one wall was gone, but we cleaned the mud and muck out of that, and then I used that for a year. So I had no power, no air-conditioning, no fan. So the pieces I created under those really difficult circumstances are pretty important to me, too.

Barnett: Beautiful.

Doyle: Do you find that it's a lot of locals who are buying? Like your primary customers for this type of artwork around Hurricane Katrina, or is it more tourists, people visiting? Like, where is your main clientele for that?

Gordon: It's really interesting because I thought the collection would do well down here just because people down here would intuitively understand what it was about, and it was about rebirth, and taking whatever you can find, the bits and pieces you can find of your life and putting them back together in any way you can and moving forward, which is what we were all doing. But what's been really amazing is I have had a tremendous reaction all over the country. I have a dozen pieces in Europe; I have a piece in Asia. And I have them in almost every state, and it occurred to me

after a while. It was, like, well, duh. You don't have to have experienced Katrina to understand loss. I mean most of us as we grow to adulthood and especially the older you get, we all understand about loss, and that no matter how painful it is, you got to pick up the pieces, you got to move on. So I still, I continue to sell out of the gallery here; there are a lot of pieces that have stayed local, but a lot more have gone around the country, and I have a couple of blogs, and I sell them off of my blogs. I just sold four today to one woman, and so that's continuing. And it's great because it's how I am building a house; that's what's paying for a house.

Doyle: Wow, that's even better, too, because the storm took that from you. You're taking pieces from the storm, too. What an amazing circle.

Gordon: Yeah. Yeah, it is. It's pretty cool.

Doyle: Make something positive out of that experience.

Gordon: Yeah.

Doyle: What was your experience, like, living with your friends when you evacuated for that short period of time?

Gordon: Oh, just that three days, or the three months? Well, the three days, it was very stressful. You know, everybody was on edge. We had some great times, too, in those three days. In fact, we laughed. (laughter) We had to laugh because, of course, we lost power early in the storm, and we were there for three or four days after the storm. And my friend Ann and John, they live on the golf course in Diamondhead. And you know, it's not the kind of neighborhood I'm used to living in. You know, I was in Clermont Harbor, right? Where we all had little, bitty, shabby places, but Ann had the keys to all these neighbors' homes, neighbors that had evacuated. So for two or three days there, we would take little treks across the golf course every day, and we'd go raid their liquor cabinets and all their little gourmet tins of food from their cupboards. (laughter) You know, so we would come home with oh, smoked oysters and caviar and shrimp, all this great, you know, canned stuff, and a bottle of whatever, a bottle of wine from this place or a bottle of vodka from that place. So we had fun, too, because we laughed about how, you know, we're probably the only people that are doing this. (laughter) You know, certainly nobody in Clermont Harbor was doing this. So those things were fun, but it was also difficult because we were all just really screwed up, and you just get irritable when you're under stress. The three months at Steve and Brenda's were tough, but also really wonderful in a lot of ways. I think anytime, you know, you share a really hard experience with someone, there are some good things that come out of it, and that was certainly the case with me.

Doyle: What doesn't kill you will only make you stronger, right?

Gordon: Yeah, there you go. Right.

Doyle: So what accommodations have you had to make to your new surroundings? So say, your surroundings right now, today

Gordon: Mostly to get past getting up every morning and looking outside at a destroyed area because it still looks really, really bad where I live. We have five lots out there. We had a few hardwood trees, maybe a dozen hardwood trees. And they survived, but we lost—we had probably—I don't know, between two hundred and seventy-five and three hundred pine trees on that property. It was all heavily wooded; it was so beautiful. And we have two, out of almost three hundred that survived. And a good portion of them came down in the storm, and my husband has cut down a lot, but the whole town, the whole community still, you look outside and all you see are all these dead pine trees, just all—it looks like a wasteland. Still tough. Most of the lots have been cleaned up. There are a few houses going up, but it's just, it's so depressing because it was so beautiful. So you know, I just try and not look because it's still very, very hurtful. A very positive thing for me—and this is probably a question you'll get to later—is that I bought some property a year after the storm. I knew that we wouldn't be able to rebuild in Clermont. There are the insurance issues; there's the elevation requirements. There's the fact that those bastards are probably going to win, and I'm going to have fifty-story neighbors down there one of these days, you know? I don't think we're going to win that battle; I think it's going to be all condos and casinos eventually. So because of all those reasons, I started looking for property, and a year after the storm, I found five acres about an hour north, northwest of here, and it's in a little community called Henley Field in between Picayune, Mississippi, and Bogalusa, Louisiana, so kind of out in the middle of nowhere. But it's a real nice property. It didn't have a house. The house that had been there previously burned before I bought the property. But it had a barn, so I finally, after that whole year of working with no power, I had a barn to work in where I could have a fan and lights, which was—God, it was great. And I think it was—let's see, I bought the property in December. I think I moved all my rubble, all my debris up there in December. So since then, we've been working on getting a house going, and it's taking a while, but we're to the point now where I have put up a steel building; hired some guys to put up a steel building, and my husband and I are just starting to turn it into a house. So that's nice. I go up there, and I have goats. I had to have goats because five acres, God, down here, you just mow all the time. (laughter) It's just overwhelming, and I knew when I bought the property I'd be getting goats. So I've been slowly building up my goat herds. I've got nine goats now. They are so cool; they are so great. (laughter) Do y'all know anything about goats.

Doyle: [Yes.]

Gordon: You do? (laughter) What trippy animals; they're so funny. And these are all bottle-fed, so you know, they're just like big puppies. They just want to follow you around. They're hilarious. So I get—about three days a week, I get to leave the devastation of Clermont Harbor and go up to Henleyfield and work up there. That's where I do all my artwork now, and play with goats, you know. So that's a nice thing.

Barnett: Could you describe what you used as a studio before that year, before buying that property?

Gordon: Yes, I can do that. On Steve and Brenda's property on Highway 603, they had a house towards the front of the ten acres with an attached garage and a nice big deck and patio. They had a beautiful place up there. And then they had a large steel building in the rear of the property that was Steve's workshop, and they had built a little apartment back there for when guests came. So the house went completely. The house was just on cement blocks, maybe three feet off the ground, and the water lifted that, took it down the road, planted it in the middle of the road, and they had to bulldoze it almost immediately, like, two days, three days after the storm because it was blocking. There were people living back there, and the help vehicles, the Salvation Army, nobody could get back there and help those people. So the garage was all that was left of that place up front. And there was a huge hole in the roof, which my husband fixed before he went to Mobile? No, I think after he came back from Minneapolis. And the garage doors were gone, so the front was completely open. And there was a large hole in one of the side walls as well. So I—oh, God, I can't believe what good friends they were. (laughter) I filled that place completely with debris, and then I had to start filling up the driveway because I was collecting and collecting, and there was all this great stuff. And you know, there were these big dump trucks coming to haul it to the landfill every day. So it didn't take long before the garage was filled; I couldn't work in there anyway. I had to be working in what space I could find in the driveway. So in that DVD I just handed you, there's a photo. It's a light blue building. You'll see it when you watch the DVD.

Doyle: What's been different or strange to you about the community, now, since the hurricane? Either your neighborhood or the general city, whatever.

Gordon: Nothing is that different or strange in Bay St. Louis or Waveland. You know, I didn't spend much time in Waveland, and that was very severely damaged. The part of Bay St. Louis where I always was was the Old Town area where the galleries are. That's where I was working before the storm; that's where I work now, and the first year was real strange because we were the only ones there, but it feels like it used to down there now. We've really, that whole area has come back very well. My community in Clermont Harbor, that's still real strange because of the devastation, and most of the neighbors are gone. And that's still uncomfortable, and it's painful to me because I wanted to live there the rest of my life. You know, I really loved it; I really wanted to stay, and I just had to accept the fact that I probably wasn't going to be able to, and that I had to move on. And that's when I bought the new property. My husband, unfortunately, has not accepted it yet. He's still determined to stay in Clermont Harbor, and maybe he's right. You know, maybe I'm wrong; maybe if we can live there, maybe I'll sell the place in Henley Field and we'll build down here. I don't know.

Doyle: Do you think the new place and the new land has helped you deal with—

Gordon: Oh, yeah.

Doyle: —losing the house or having something else to put your energy into?

Gordon: Yes. Absolutely. And I'll tell you one way that I've been able to make that work for me was living on the Coast, living three blocks from the beach was a dream for me. God, it was so great. But that was a dream from when I was, you know, maybe a teenager and young adult. I had a dream before that when I was a very small child growing up in eastern South Dakota, I always wanted to be a farm kid. I had all these friends, you know, and they'd go home to farms, and there were cows and sheep and ponies, and I was such an animal nut when I was a kid. So it's like, "OK. I was luckier than a lot of people. I lived twenty-two years, now, in one dream home. Now, I get to pursue a dream home from when I was six years old and live on a farm, basically." So that has helped immensely to be able to look at it in that fashion.

Barnett: Could you go into more detail as far as, I guess, waking up and smelling the water to now waking up and smelling the farm or looking into the farm? Could you go into more detail?

Gordon: Yeah, sure. What it was about living by the beach. The smell, that's interesting because the smell is a big part of it. I still travel a lot north of the Mason-Dixon Line, and it's like, every time I'm driving home, usually I'll wake up in Iowa or very northern Missouri, and I'll smell the smell, and it's like, "I'm in the South." And so that was a big part of it on the beach; it's the smell of the water. I love the smell of the swamp. Whoever would have thought I'd love the smell of rotting vegetation?

Barnett: Rich.

Gordon: Yeah, it is. I just absolutely love it. And the sounds, the sounds of the seagulls I love, and the egrets. That was a big part, too. And then just those sunrises and sunsets and how lush it was. I'd lived in Arizona for a time while I was in South Dakota; I was going back and forth, Arizona was beautiful. The Sonora Desert is gorgeous. The high desert where I was, but it's the lushness of this area, the semitropical that's just so, so beautiful. And up at Pinetucky(?)—I should explain that. The property I bought is on Pinetucky Road, believe it or not. When I first saw the address, I thought, "Oh, my God. Pinetucky, how corny is that?" Well, I've gotten kind of fond of it since then, so that's what I call the place, is Pinetucky. (laughter) But up there it's very different. Instead of egrets and seagulls, we have hawks. We have a lot of hawks up there. And of course I have my goats bahing at me all the time. One of the things I love about the property is it has lots of mature oak trees on it. I've got a few live oaks, and I don't know what the other oaks are, but just to be able to look around there and not see a single dead tree is wonderful. What else about that place? I don't know; just walking across the property and just seeing the barn and knowing I have a place to work, and more than anything it's just knowing that I have a home because that was—that whole period of time after Katrina, I had to face my two personal terrors, one of which was of course, losing somebody I love to

something awful like cancer, and the other was being homeless. And that's a fear from my childhood, you know; it's just, (inaudible) I have a place to live. And I had to face both of those. And having the place on Pinetucky Road, I mean, I have a home. No matter what happens down here, I have a place to go that, you know, it's there.

Barnett: Could you share with us how many hours you spent looking through material and, I guess, how much time you put into building even one piece?

Gordon: (laughter) Mm. That's funny. OK, the hours. Collecting the debris was an incredible amount of hours. For the longest time I still had that little two-door Saturn. Boy, did I beat up that poor, little car, stuffing it full of debris, and I remember one trip I was on my way back to Clermont Harbor with the car just stuffed so full of debris. And you know, this isn't clean stuff; this is stuff that's full of mud and rust, and I was on my way home, and off to the side of the road in Waveland, I saw something, and I thought, "Oh, my God." And I looked at it, and it was—all right, now, you two are both so young. But have you ever been anyplace where you've seen disco balls hanging with the little mirrors?

Barnett: Um-hm.

Gordon: OK. And they spin, and the light—there was this half-smashed disco ball. (laughter) Oh, it was so great, and I actually stopped and unloaded some of the debris that wasn't quite as good so I could fit that (laughter) disco ball in there. I still have it. I've used quite a bit of it. In fact, I made one piece out of all those little beautifully rusted and cracked and chipped mirror tiles that's in a corporate collection in Seattle right now. So I spent a whole lot of time collecting debris, a lot of time transferring it from my friend's house up to Pinetucky, and as far as putting them together, it's funny. Sometimes I can design a piece like that; I'm talking, like, five, ten minutes. I'll pick up something, and I'll say, "Oh, ooh, look how this looks with this!" And other times it takes a year. You know, sometimes things just fall together, and sometimes they don't. So it varies, but I have been working almost continuously on the Katrina Collection, since probably two weeks after the storm, and with the exception of the traveling I've done to the art shows. And I have a barn full of debris yet; I mean, I'll be working on it for another couple of years, anyway, if not longer. And that's exciting.

Doyle: What social networks or government agencies have you been drawing on after or since Hurricane Katrina?

Gordon: FEMA with the trailer, and FEMA gave us a little bit of money in the beginning. They sent everybody, like, a two-thousand-dollar check, and then they sent me another check for twenty-six hundred. So I guess I got forty-six hundred dollars from FEMA. I have the Katrina cottage now from the Mississippi Emergency Management Agency, which is wonderful. It's so much better than the FEMA trailer. Red Cross gave me a tetanus shot, and they gave us a little bit of money, too; I think,

like, six hundred dollars. I applied with the SBA [Small Business Administration] for a loan and ended up not taking the loan because by that time I was starting to sell the Katrina Collection, and I thought, “Maybe I can do this without having to borrow money.” And so far, so far it’s working. What else? Oh, God, the recent thing is—this is so wonderful. I really had thought that I would be able to get this house at Pinetucky built without asking for any kind of help, so I never applied for a homeowner’s grant, any of that stuff, until about maybe four or five months ago, I started getting nervous about money. So I applied through the St. Rose Recovery and Outreach Center. St. Rose de Lima is a church here in town. And I applied through them, and those wonderful people got me a Salvation Army grant for ten thousand dollars in building supplies, which has really been—it’s going to help immensely. I just had all the two- by-fours and stuff delivered a couple of weeks ago up there. So we’re starting to use that stuff. That’s about all as far as direct hurricane relief, but I have been so fortunate. I’ve applied for a lot of grants from arts agencies, and I’ve received a lot of grants. I received a grant from the Pollack-Krasner Foundation in New York City, the Gottlieb Foundation in New York City, a fund out of the Center for Contemporary Arts in New Orleans. The Mississippi Arts Commission has been wonderful; I’ve received several grants from them. So that is where the majority of my assistance has come from is through these really wonderful arts organizations.

Barnett: Good for you.

Gordon: Yeah, it’s been very good.

Doyle: What role have family or neighbors or church members played in your efforts to reconnect after Hurricane Katrina or in returning home?

Gordon: Family, my family was incredibly supportive. Not a whole lot financiallywise; even though they offered it, really, I just didn’t—my family’s not well off. But as far as psychological and emotional support and offers of places to stay, they have been absolutely incredible. I’m not a churchgoer, so I didn’t have any connections there. The St. Rose thing was the first time, and that was incredible through the Salvation Army. And friends, I’ve been very fortunate with friends, too. I mean, having Steve and Brenda take me in for three months, you know, that was really something. Friends have been a very strong network here for a lot of people. There was the sense—it was really amazing. Michelle Allee, who you may meet tomorrow because she’s probably working the gallery tomorrow. She is an artist that I met after the storm, and the way I met her—this is all these little friendship things and what has happened are really amazing. I got an e-mail from this woman at some point not too long after the storm, and she said, “Look, I read about you on-line; I love what you’re doing. I live in Pass Christian, and I’ve been picking up all sorts of rubble just because it’s all so beautiful, and it shouldn’t go to the landfill. But I’m a painter, not a mixed-media artist. Can I bring it to you?” She brought me several carloads, and we got to be great friends. She’s in the gallery; I asked her to come be in the gallery with us, and Michelle, like a lot of people who were not badly hurt by the storm felt guilty because they had their homes, because they hadn’t been badly hurt. And so she for

months and months, she was inviting, you know, having people stay with her, cooking meals for people in her neighborhood, you know, doing everything she could, and I knew a lot of people that weren't badly hurt who felt that way. They felt like they—it was required of them to give as much as they could because they had been more fortunate than some of the rest of us. So that's been really important, that network of friends.

Doyle: How did not being able to go home after the storm or even home, period, affect you?

Gordon: It affected me very, very severely, even though I could go to my property. OK, here's another funny story. And a lot also because of my childhood, because of that fear of homelessness. I was a real psychological mess after the storm, and I was going back to Clermont every day. I'd usually spend the mornings—I had this routine down. In the morning I'd go, and I'd go to some relief center to get some hot breakfast. And then I'd go stand in line at FEMA or at the Red Cross, you know, whatever it was I was doing that day to try and get some help. And you'd stand in line for hours, and it was so hot, you know, and you'd be out in a hot parking lot, and these poor people with children. Every time I heard a little kid scream, I thought, "Oh, thank God my granddaughter isn't here. Oh, thank God, she didn't have to go through this." You know? And then in the afternoon, I would collect rubble and go out to Clermont and try and pick through the woods and try and find anything of mine that was left. So my house had been on a slab, and I had ripped up this ugly linoleum that was in the kitchen and the dining area when I bought it, and I had laid a ceramic tile floor. And it took me weeks on my knees, and I had done a mosaic in part of it. It was really nice; I was really proud of that floor. And when I got home, that's all I had left. There was the cement slab, but that tile had stayed. I still had my mosaic floor, and I became obsessive about cleaning it. You know, first I got all the mud off it, and then I was sweeping every day to get the pine needles, all the stuff off, and it was like I was just, I was nuts! I was obsessive about this stupid floor. It was cleaner than it probably had ever been when there was a house on top of it, and one day I got a voice-mail from a friend that said, "Lori, we were just out at your place, and your insurance agent, your adjuster left a note. You better go out there." And we were all just *waiting* for the insurance adjusters to come; we were desperate for them to come so we could, you know, get things moving. So I raced out to Clermont, and I got there, and this insurance agent had left a note for me in black spray paint in letters a foot high all over my mosaic tile floor. (laughter) And for a minute, I was *devastated!* I mean, I was just—I was so freaked out. I was like, "How could he do this to me? This is all I have. How could he do this?" And within maybe five, maybe ten minutes, I had to start laughing. Because it was like, you know, in this life, you know what? Katrina, the only thing Katrina didn't take from me, some big, dumb kid from Arkansas did. (laughter) You know?

Barnett: Like, he didn't think it cleaned itself. (laughter) Like, did he not realize that you were—

Gordon: (laughter) And there was all that cement, all around, and the rest of the house. But *no!* (laughter) That's been kind of a joke, and I'm not sure how I got off on that tangent. The question was how it affected me having, yeah, home. I think that kind of helped me kind of get a better grip on reality, you know, so he probably did me a favor. And it's funny because since then, my husband built a workshop for himself on the slab, and part of it is on those tiles, and the black spray paint hasn't completely worn off yet. And we still laugh when we look at it.

Barnett: Has there been any pieces that you've found that you haven't been able to part with, or that you've made, like, art out of that you—

Gordon: One.

Barnett: Yeah, something.

Gordon: One. And that is I found—you know what a Jew's harp is? Or a mouth harp, sometimes they're called. Boing, boing.

Doyle: Oh, yes.

Gordon: I found one that my mom and dad had given me in the seventh grade, and I found it in the mud in the backyard, and that's in a piece, and I'm not going to sell that. But that's it. I'll sell every single one. I need that money; I need to have a house. So that's the only one I won't sell.

Doyle: I know we talked about specific damages to your specific house. What damages and changes have occurred in your neighborhood, on your street, in that area? Were pretty much all of the houses—

Gordon: They're all gone. There wasn't—

Doyle: So there's slabs?

Gordon: Yeah. There wasn't a wall left standing in Clermont Harbor. It's just completely gone.

Doyle: Did a lot of your neighbors stay, or did most evacuate:

Gordon: I think almost everybody evacuated. I heard that there were a few people in Clermont that stayed and died, but you know, I never looked at the list of the people that died that were in the newspapers. I just didn't want to know. As far as I know, I don't know anyone that died; I may have recognized the faces. But most everybody left because Clermont is such a low-lying area. There aren't too many people that were either dumb enough or I don't know what excuse, what you could say why you wouldn't leave an area like Clermont in a storm. But I swear to God, my husband said

he wasn't going to go. You know. Phew! I don't know. I don't know what happens to people sometimes.

Doyle: (Inaudible)

Gordon: Yeah, I just—or maybe it's a denial thing. I don't know.

Doyle: I know you mentioned two weeks after the storm, I believe, going around and collecting the debris. How soon after the hurricane did you return to work, did you start working on art?

Gordon: Oh, within, I'd say, maybe a couple of weeks because I know by the time we had the grand opening of the gallery, five weeks after the storm, I had a good half a dozen pieces done, so probably a couple weeks.

Doyle: OK. So now we're going to talk a little bit about rebuilding this area. So our assumption is that displaced persons should have a voice in the rebuilding. They have expert knowledge about the communities, and they should have a say in what happens. It shouldn't just be the politicians deciding everything. What would you like to see in the rebuilding of your community and the Gulf Coast in general?

Gordon: I know exactly what I want to see. I want us to hold on to what made us unique. I want to keep the condos, the high-rise condos out. I mean, condos themselves aren't bad, but you know, keep them reasonable, two, three stories. I want to keep the casinos out. You know, Biloxi and Gulf[port], that's enough; that's just enough. And we have a casino now down at my end; it opened up maybe a year ago, and it was in the planning stages. Actually they had started building it before the storm. We had something so unique here, and there are people all over the world that will pay to have eco-vacations, you know, that would go through the saltwater marsh and go on kayak rides. We could survive by pursuing those options. Smart growth. We have had this guy from Boston, Bill Dennis, this incredible architect; his wife has been really involved as well. He's come here well over a dozen times to try and help plan our redevelopment along those lines. And unfortunately there's not the immediate money in stuff like that. We're fighting looking like everywhere else that's along the coast in this country as hard as we can; we probably won't win, but we're still fighting.

Barnett: So what are some of your more hopes, and you've mentioned some of your fears, for the future? What are your hopes?

Gordon: Hopes? That we can have, still, a beautiful, little arts community that is very unique, very friendly, right here on the Coast. My fears are is that we will end up looking like the Florida coastline; I don't want that.

Doyle: What issues do you anticipate in rebuilding the city?

Gordon: Insurance is a huge issue; it's a huge problem. That's the primary because if any of us small business people are going to survive, something has got to be done with the insurance, something.

Doyle: Do you see after the hurricane that tourism, the rates of people coming and visiting this area has increased, decreased, stayed the same? Because I would gather that's a big boost to the economy, the tourist season.

Gordon: Yeah, it's huge down here. Tourism has definitely fallen way, way off. It has been mitigated by the fact that we've had all these incredible volunteer groups, and they have kept us alive because they're not only coming here from all over the country and all over the world—we had a group of young women from Ireland in a few months ago, that had come here for a week to sweat, tearing down old sheetrock and putting up new sheetrock. I mean, that's pretty remarkable. So the volunteers have been great; not only are they helping us rebuild, but they're pumping money into our economy because they buy things when they're here, too. So that's been very helpful.

Barnett: In an ideal world, how would you like to see your community rebuilt? Paint us a picture.

Gordon: Paint us a picture. I would like to see the local people have a very strong say in what we want done. I would like to see smart growth, where we have mixed residential and business areas. I would like to see a lot of green building going on. I would like to see a focus on preserving the natural environment and accepting that not only as something we are so fortunate to have, but building upon that for our economy as well as, of course, the arts community, which has been very important in Bay St. Louis for many years. And I would like to see a lot of support to keep that a viable enterprise here.

Doyle: How, in this community, do you preserve the strengths of the community while addressing the challenges?

Gordon: That's the big problem, especially now because this state, and especially this part of this state, we need money so badly. We are desperate to find a way to rebuild, to bring money in. And the only people at this point that are really showing an interest in coming in and rebuilding are the casino-high-rise-condo folks; so that's a serious problem.

Doyle: When Hurricane Camille, a Category Five storm, slammed into the Mississippi Gulf Coast in 1969, were you living here at the time, and if so, how would you compare it to Katrina?

Gordon: I was not here. The way I've heard it compared is that everyone thought Camille was the big one, and that is simply not the case, that Katrina was so much worse. But I wasn't here, so.

Doyle: Do you think now that Hurricane Katrina's happened, that if another storm was to happen, people would take it more seriously, and more people would evacuate, do you think, because of the experience of Katrina?

Gordon: Oh, yeah. Yeah, for a while, until people forget. I mean, we're all—humans have this tendency, and probably it's kind of a survival kind of a thing. You forget. It's like, why would women have more than one child unless they could forget? You know. (laughter) And I think it's the same thing with an experience like this. People will remember for a while, but younger ones will grow up, and new people will move in, and eventually we'll forget.

Barnett: You think even with the influence that your art has had that people are going to forget?

Gordon: Yeah.

Barnett: Yeah?

Gordon: Yeah, I mean, it's going to take a while, but sure, because you look at all the other disasters, natural disasters in this country. I mean, you know, I have a brother living in San Francisco. We all live with these threats, and we just find a way psychologically to live with them, and forgetting, I think, is one way that we do that.

Barnett: Um-hm. Now, that you've moved up more north, how many other people do you think have done that?

Gordon: Oh, a lot of people, Sheena.

Barnett: Yeah?

Gordon: Yeah. I'm terrible at remembering numbers; I can't remember numbers, but there are six, what they call six coastal counties down here. There's Hancock, Harrison, and Jackson, which are right on the Coast. And then there's Pearl River and Stone and I forgot the other one, but they're the three counties just north of the three counties right down here. Well, [George]. And Pearl River County is where I am. And all three of those counties, their populations I think at least—now, I shouldn't say at least doubled. I know Pearl River County where I am now, more than doubled in the year after the storm, and the other two counties had large increases as well. People were first moving just out of the trauma of it; they just wanted away from the water. But also because of the insurance and because of the new building, the elevation requirements. I mean my house was on a slab, and now if we were to rebuild in Clermont, our bottom floor would have to be fifteen feet off the ground. And that's not unusual, and there are some that are higher than that. So you know, that makes it tough. You're talking thirty, forty, at least thirty or forty thousand dollars for a small

house just to get that high before you can start building the house. It makes a big difference.

Doyle: Do you think they're justified in having that requirement, or would you rather them to just say, "Deal with it the way you want. Build it the way you want if you're comfortable with that?"

Gordon: No, I think they need to do that, but what I would like to see happen, and I wasn't able to say this for that first year or two after the storm because I was just so torn up about my home. I'd like to see them turn all of those really low-lying areas into green space. You know. Let them go back to marshes; use it as a way to bring in tourist dollars. It's the only thing that makes sense. We shouldn't be living in those areas, period; we just shouldn't. And you can't expand that all over the country; you can't say, "OK, all you San Franciscans, get out of there because the big ones coming." But in some cases, you can do that, and it would be a lot easier for me to let my property go if I knew it was going to go back to marshland. If somebody wants to build a condo or a casino on it, I'm going to fight it. (laughter) You know? It would just hurt. It would just hurt to let it go, but I could let it go if I knew there would be egrets on it, a bunch of crawdads. (laughter)

Barnett: Now, since you've had such an impact in the community as far as bringing back the morale, could you describe how that is for you? What do you feel?

Gordon: Well, good. I mean, this is my community; this is my home, and any small part that I may have been able to do, it's very gratifying. And I look at the people around me who have done their small parts, and I'm very grateful for what they've done. So it's nice to be a part of the rebuilding in whatever way you can.

Barnett: Um-hm. Your art, could you describe how it's affected people? Have you felt the initial effects yet, or are you still—

Gordon: Oh, no. No, I've definitely felt it. I've just had the most tremendous response. There have been a few people that have come into the gallery, and they take a look at my work, and it's like, "Nope! Don't want to be reminded of that, thank you very much." And they go over to some other artist's work, which is fine. Some people just can't, but for the most part I have had such a tremendous response. And a lot of the people that contact me over at the—OK. This is interesting. I got a phone call today from a woman in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. She's an artist, and she called me. She said, "I didn't do anything over Katrina because I didn't know what to do. I didn't know how to help, but I feel badly, and so I just decided I wanted to do a benefit art show for an artist from your area. And I found you online," she said, "And I thought, 'Oh, this might be the person.'" She said, "Then I watched your DVD." This one.

Barnett: Um-hm.

Gordon: And she said, “And I knew you’re the person.” So we’re setting up an art show in Bethlehem in April. A lot of the other—so it’s people that really wanted to do something that connect with the work. Also it’s been a lot of people who have experience very painful losses themselves. Last week I got an e-mail from this woman, the woman who today said, “All right, I want this one and this one and this one and this one.” (laughter) And she experience cancer; she fought cancer, so she really understands about loss and the trauma and all that stuff. So it’s resonating with people who just have the emotional compass to understand and empathize with other people’s loss, which is really cool because I am meeting a lot of great people. I really am.

Barnett: Your rebirth is definitely inspiring and beautiful. If Kate doesn’t have any more questions, I’d definitely like to—do you?

Doyle: No.

Barnett: No? I’d definitely like to take this time right now to thank you and shake your hand.

Gordon: (laughter) You are welcome, you two.

Barnett: And get your autograph. (laughter)

Gordon: This is great. Listen, I really enjoyed this, and the timing is perfect. My meeting starts in one minute. So I’ll be five minutes late. Let me—

(The interview ends abruptly here.)