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AN ORAL HISTORY

with

JOHN "TOMMY" LONGO

This is an interview for the Mississippi Oral History Program of The University of Southern Mississippi. The interview is with John "Tommy" Longo and is taking place on February 21, 2008. The interviewers are Kate Doyle and Alanna Tobia.

Doyle: So 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 Mayor Tommy Longo and is taking place on February 21, 2008, at 4:20 p.m. in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi. The interviewers are Kate Doyle and—

Tobia: Alanna Tobia.

Doyle: And I am Kate, and I will begin with the first question. First I'd like to thank you, Mayor Tommy, for taking the time to talk with us today. We're going to get a little bit of background information about you. So I'm going to ask for the record, could you state your name, please?

Longo: My name is Tommy Longo.

Doyle: And could you spell your name?

Longo: T-O-M-M-Y, L-O-N-G-O.

Doyle: And when were you born?

Longo: Six, thirty, [June 30] 1958.

Doyle: And where?

Longo: In Waveland, Mississippi.

Doyle: And for the record, what was your father's name?

Longo: John Longo.

Doyle: And your mother's first name and maiden name?

Longo: Jean Crump was her maiden name.

Doyle: And can you tell me a little bit about growing up in Waveland and what that was like?

Longo: It was a sleepy, little, basically a fishing village. A lot of the people shrimped and oystered and fished, and those that didn't—there weren't a lot of jobs back then other than the tourism industry if you weren't a fisherman. And so a lot of people commuted on the trains from New Orleans, and at each little main street, Nicholson Avenue and Coleman Avenue, Waveland Avenue, they had these little train depots and little train stores. And they were a real big part of the community, and people would catch the train in the morning, go to work in New Orleans, and then catch the train back in the afternoons. And the tourist season and about four months out of the year, the summer months, probably more of the homes in Waveland, or residences, were actually summer homes or camps from wealthier people in New Orleans and people around the world, really, because it was the place to be on the Gulf Coast. And they would, back when it was trains and traffic wasn't as easy to get around—the interstates weren't open—people would come and stay the whole summer. And so there were a lot of camps and second homes in Waveland. When Labor Day rolled around, you could pretty much roll up the sidewalks. Everything really slowed down. Businesses, if they didn't make it during those tourist months, wouldn't make it because they had to make enough money to make it through the winter. So it's changed an awful lot since then. Waveland is the fastest-growing community in the state, and it's really a twelve-month year business, and it's really changed. But back then, it was really a great place to grow up, as it is now. But a lot of that old quaintness, that really permeated small-town America back then, has you know, kind of gone away, and it's sad in a way. But the growth and all is also glad to see.

Doyle: How many generations of your family have lived on the Coast?

Longo: My parents moved here; they were the first generation to live here. He moved here to start his own business, and he did, and after he got it started, my mother and my two older sisters still lived in New Orleans until he got it started. He built our own home here. It was a flat-roofed, three-room house. It has a kitchen, a bathroom, and a bedroom. And as our family grew, so did the house. The business was very, very successful; it was a trucking company and blanketed five states. And as time grew, so did the family, and I ended up having six siblings, and so the house is now a two-story house. And it actually made it through Hurricane Katrina because—and there wasn't anything for miles left around it. But it was pretty much gutted, but each wall, inside wall of the house was an outside wall at one time. You know, it was a brick outside wall, so it was an extremely sturdy structure, and enough of it was left standing to where I'm refurbishing it, and you know, my children will be able to grow up in the family homestead, albeit a lot of it's real new, but it looks the same from the outside, I guess. But I was the first Longo child to be born on the Coast of Mississippi, and then I had three siblings that were born after me here on the Coast.

Doyle: Did you stay in your home during Hurricane Katrina, or did your family stay in your home during Hurricane Katrina?

Longo: No, a lesser hurricane—again, because I know how sturdy the home was, Hurricane Camille, until Katrina, was the hurricane of record, largest tidal surge on record and strongest *winds* on record, well over two hundred miles an hour, and the eye also passed through here for Camille. So it was the yard post, and our house made it through that, my family homestead. So lesser hurricanes I would normally stay in my house. I'd stay at the command post with my first responders up until time that the weather got too bad, and normally I would stay there if it wasn't too bad. For Katrina, staying in the command post, which during normal times is actually our wastewater treatment plant. We have conference rooms, and you know, I'm usually the only one there; I bring my family there. It's a building that was built after Hurricane Camille; it was built to withstand hurricane-force winds, and one of the only *truly* hurricane-proof, if you will, hardened buildings in the county. And so we would stay there, usually because I'm so busy taking care of the city and getting the city ready and all when a hurricane is approaching that I don't get a lot of time to take care of my own home. And a lot of times I don't get a chance to evacuate my family, and that happened with Katrina because on top of all that, I also had a total knee replacement done a few days prior to the hurricane and actually got out of the hospital to go to the first hurricane meeting at four o'clock on the Friday before it made landfall. So I didn't evacuate my family; they stayed with me at the command post, and if they had to be in town, thank God that they were there, because 95 percent of the residential structures in Waveland were substantially destroyed, 100 percent of our businesses. There was, even though the vast, vast majority of the people heeded our evacuation, I was the last one. I don't normally go myself, but if they didn't listen to the police, I was probably the last one that went and tried to convince some of those holdouts to leave. Most of them did, thank God. There were a few that did not, and a large part of those lost their lives.

Doyle: Do you think a lot of them didn't follow the evacuation because of the precedent of Hurricane Camille because they didn't—

Longo: Unfortunately a lot of them, that is the reason. And you know, we always told people, "Don't think of any other storms or anything like that. Each storm is unique unto itself." And Katrina is an excellent example of that because—and we know hurricanes and tropical storms, and you know, it was a Category Five storm till right before it made landfall, but it was so huge. You know, it covered the entire Gulf of Mexico, and so it had a Category Five storm surge that was built up, and since it was so big, there was nowhere for that surge to dissipate. So when it made landfall, and we had well over forty-foot tidal surge that made landfall in Waveland, and you know, my home's an excellent example. It's in a C zone, which means you don't get flood insurance; they won't even sell you flood insurance, some insurers. C zone is supposed to be the safest zone; there's no chance of water or anything like that, and I had fourteen feet of water went through my house. It's twenty-three feet above sea

level, and so we had a large number of deaths on Hurley(?) Street, which is north of the railroad tracks. I know that doesn't mean anything to you, but the railroad is a man-made barrier, and never before have we had a hurricane, even Camille, where water went across the railroad tracks. Hurricane Katrina took out the railroad tracks and laid the tracks somewhere else. And those things have been—that track base has been there two hundred years. But on Hurley Street, it's two or three blocks north of the railroad tracks, in the middle of the city, and we had a lot of people that felt they were very, very safe there, and they lost their lives. Also in our command post where I was, I mean, water hadn't come within, you know, miles of it, and we had eight feet of water there. There were only approximately twenty homes in Waveland that didn't get some kind of water. Literally, almost all of Waveland and Bay St. Louis was under water, and a great deal of our county. Diamondhead, which one of the reasons it's so populated were those people that wanted to live on the Coast, but for this reason, wanted to be away from, you know, safe from storms and things. Diamondhead sits up on a bluff and overlooks the Bay, and you know, they had, probably 50 percent of Diamondhead had water. The southern half of Diamondhead was totally wiped out. So this was a—Class Five is a thousand-year storm. It depends on who you talk to; you hear all kind of things, but it's a real anomaly. It's a hopefully, a once-in-a-lifetime experience because everything, like I said, the size of it had a huge effect. The winds battered our city for over twelve hours, a hundred and twenty plus winds, you know, sustained winds of over a hundred and twenty miles an hour, gusts of a hundred and forty to a hundred and sixty, for over twelve hours before the water ever came in. And so I pulled in my first responders about midnight, and I usually do that when the winds get so high that it gets too dangerous for them to traverse the city safely. By that time we already had a large number of trees that had fallen across rights-of-way and major roads and had public works people that are staged with them that clear the roads and keep them clear, but it was just too dangerous. And so they were pulled in about midnight, and the water didn't come in till about 8:30, nine o'clock the next morning. So it was well over twelve hours of sustained winds. And I want to apologize, it's not a problem, but since the hurricane, from some reason, unknown reason that when I get overly tired, I begin to lose my voice. But I feel fine, and I'm well, but—

Tobia: OK, good.

Longo: If I have to speak louder, just let me know.

Doyle: No, I think you're OK. Can you elaborate on what you were doing as the mayor, I guess, leading up to Hurricane Katrina, the days leading up, the day of Hurricane Katrina? What was that day like for you? What was involved in planning evacuation?

Longo: Well, it depends on how many days. Four days before Hurricane Katrina, I was laying in a hospital bed, recovering from total knee replacement.

Doyle: I heard about that. I was talking to the police chief this morning.

Longo: Who was that?

Doyle: The former police chief, Frank McNeil.

Longo: He's the police chief of Bay St. Louis.

Doyle: Yeah, sorry, Bay St. Louis.

Longo: David Garcia is the fire chief.

Doyle: And he mentioned you; he said you were quite the trooper in there right after knee replacement, always there. Quite a figure.

Longo: Frank McNeil said that?

Doyle: Um-hm.

Longo: That was very nice of him. You know, I have a team; we have a great team. We take protecting life and property in the city of Waveland very, very seriously. Matter of fact, we're rated in the top two percent in the nation as far as community ratings go, and that's all cities and counties in all fifty states. So when I first became mayor and got involved, we were class nine, and I was told that cities on the Gulf or Atlantic or Pacific, but cities on the water probably would never get below a rating of eight. And we're a rating of a five, and that puts us in the, like I said, the top 2 percent of the nation. So what we do to protect life and property, we take very seriously. And also that rating is what your insurance rates are based off of, your flood insurance and all. So you know, it lowers our people's flood insurance, but again, the most important thing is how strongly we take protecting life and property. And so we have a series of events that take place and meetings that take place to begin those things, setting in motion, leading up to the storm. And we began meeting every four hours with the county and other cities, and then every two hours as the storm gets closer, we have conference calls with the governor's office, and then depending on the storm, sometimes other states. If we're doing evacuations, we do it with other states, too, because to make sure the highways are clear, and what they're doing affects the safe passage of our citizens. So there's an awful lot of planning and things that go into place. As I said, the early evacuations and making sure that—it's a real fine balancing act because you never want to call evacuations unless you have to, because you don't want people—you don't want to lull them to sleep. You don't want to have them say, "Well, this time, you know, heck, we left the last four times, and nothing happened. So we're just not going to leave this time." And you know, inevitably that's the one. It only takes one. So you know, we're very prudent in what we do. And we were meeting of course, and we were beginning those things. And the police officers would go around and actually knock on the doors and ask people to leave and eventually when people just refused, I went myself and talked to them. And there were a lot of senior citizens; there were a lot of people that wouldn't leave because they had pets,

dogs or cats, and the hotels wouldn't keep dogs or cats, or shelters; you can't bring dogs or cats to the shelter. And I was able to convince most of those people to leave, thank God. And one lady I think of all the time that in the midst of all the devastation, a lady that—it was probably ten o'clock the night before the storm, and as I said earlier, you know, the winds were pretty strong by then. And I convinced her to leave, and when she told me, she said, "All right, Mayor, I'll leave tomorrow morning." And it was because of her cats. And I said, "No, you can't leave tomorrow morning; it'll be too late. You've got to leave now." And I told her that; it was a little, white fib. I had told her that I read a lot, that if she put—she had this barn-like structure on her property—and that if she put the cats in there, you know, they would get up in the rafters, and they would be safe. And the truth of the matter is, you know, cats and dogs can survive in the open. You know, their natural instincts take over, but flood waters and things like that are a little different. But a few days after the storm, amidst unbelievable devastation and pain and sorrow and everything, this lady finally made it back. And she came up, and she hugged me, and said she had gone by the house, and everything was gone except parts of that barn-like structure, and she went over there, and there were her cats up in what was left of the rafters. And so that was God helping me out, because I'd almost tell her anything to get her and her husband out of town. And so that worked out; that was one of the good stories.

Doyle: What are your most vivid memories of your community before Hurricane Katrina?

Longo: Before the hurricane, very, very community-oriented, very family- and neighborhood-oriented, the fastest growing community in the state. I mean, we were really moving and shaking. There were a lot of good things happening. There was a breakfast with the mayor a few days before the hurricane; I don't know, a couple of weeks, something. And I had addressed it, and I mean it was a packed house at the Hollywood Casino, and we had just received grants. We'd received matching money in grants to do about fifteen million dollars in just really kind of icing-on-the-cake type projects: new and improved sidewalks, and antique lighting in the old downtown, and, you know, the kind of things that you don't normally get to do because you're dealing with the things that, with limited funds, you're dealing with water and sewer and that kind of stuff every day, potholes. But we had gotten to the point to where we were really doing some good things, had saved our money and used it to parlay it into more money and grants, and we had just announced it. I mean the future just couldn't look brighter. And again, the community, it's always been big on neighborhoods and family, and in our old downtown, the heart and soul of the community, Coleman Avenue, we were having at least one major family event a quarter throughout the year. But it had gotten to where we also had smaller events almost every month that the family could come down and be involved in, and I mean, just it was really where you want to see your community. And we were very, very excited about the future, and you know, Katrina, of course, changed all of that. There were forty-two businesses on Coleman Avenue, the heart and soul, and our historic city hall built in the 1800s was there, three-story, concrete structure that had lasted God knows how many storms and things. Our historic post office was there; the first elementary school built in the

1800s, all of those structures plus all of those businesses, and every single of them was reduced to nothing but a slab. They're all just gone. We had just dedicated a new three hundred thousand dollar library on Coleman Avenue. We cut the ribbon the first week of August, I believe, and it's gone. The only thing that there was anything left of was the elementary school, the original, old elementary school, and it was collapsed. And there were a couple of walls left, and we have worked with the Department of Archives and History, both with the state and nationally, to allow us to refurbish and rebuild it to its original state. And we're using a real special kind of contractor, and they're using original parts, and they went through the debris and got the bricks and all that, because it's the only historic government structure that we have. We had two firehouses and two fire companies, and they're totally gone; the police station, totally gone; city annex and board room, totally gone. So it's important to us that we preserve that little bit of history, and we're in the process of doing that right now.

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

Longo: I don't think it's changed the way I think about my community. Other than my wife and children and my God, you'd be hard-pressed to find anything that I love more than my community, the city of Waveland. It's endeared me more to the community. You know, you run the emotions; your emotions run the gamut. I speak with psychologists and all that that work for the federal government, study after natural disasters, and supposedly nine out of ten of us are suffering from post-traumatic stress, which I can very well believe. Very, very busy since the hurricane, as you can imagine. And for the first few weeks and months maybe, and we were just focused on trying to keep people alive, you know, food and water and shelter, just the bare necessities, because there weren't any buildings with four walls thereof. And we didn't have food. All of our rations that we stored, water and things like that we store for hurricanes, it was all destroyed. We moved equipment fifteen miles north of the city so that it would be away from any kind of storm surge or danger. It was destroyed there, fifteen miles north of the city. So the way I feel about my city hasn't changed; I love it probably even more, but there are days when I'm sad because my city was destroyed. I think of it almost as a person, and it was beat up very, very badly, but I'm very, very proud of her, because the citizens that have remained have really banded together, and employees that have remained have banded together and worked hard. I have employees that have been working twenty-four/seven since the hurricane. But you know, there's days that you're sad. It's very, very much like a war zone, and the people that have been involved since the day of the hurricane are much like soldiers. And you know, your emotions run the gamut. There are days when you make some success, and you're emotionally very high and excited, and then there's days when you're just beat down. But as far as the way I feel about my community and its people, I probably, if it's possible, love it even more, and am very, very committed and dedicated to breathing new life into it.

Doyle: Can you describe the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina? So right after the storm was over, describe what your city looked like, what you were doing afterwards? What

was your main—your main focus, you said, was keeping people alive. What did the city look like after the storm had passed?

Longo: It's very difficult to describe. It literally looked like a war zone. We had military personnel, of course, that were flown in. We had emergency relief workers that had worked all over the world. They had worked the tsunami; many of them have worked in Beirut, [Lebanon], in a war zone, in Bosnia, and you know, all of them to a person told me they had never seen devastation anything that looked like this. The parts of our city that weren't just wiped off the map—and huge parts of it were—was just covered in a fifteen-foot-tall debris field, shattered boards and windows and cars and clothing and just anything that you can imagine, just looked like a garbage dump basically, you know, what was the remnants of people's lives. Everything that they had built and bought and gathered as a family was thrown together in this pile of junk. And as I said, what wasn't there, was just gone; it was just wiped off the face of the earth. Had a satellite picture from the day before, and you know, Waveland was this lush, beautiful, almost tropical-looking area with these beautiful colored rooftops and houses everywhere and traffic and cars and people, and then from the day after, same satellite, same picture, same time, it looked like an atom bomb had been dropped. Everything was gray and dank, and just nothing was there. And it was like that; I remember it. It was like that for some time, for weeks. There wasn't even a bug; there were no insects. There was nothing, no birds, no nothing. And there was nothing that was green. If it wasn't dead from being blown down or destroyed, then it was brown from the salt water and the salt air. And most of the area was covered in this muck that comes from the ocean floor and the marshes and things that stinks to high heaven and sticks to your feet. You can't walk in it. And I mean, it covered everything. During the storm, as I said, I was in the command post. I have—let's see. I have five children of my own, and they were in the command post with me. They went from age eighteen to two at the time. The two youngest we adopted; Maya's(?) two, and Raven's(?) four. Johnny(?) was eight at the time; Callie(?) was [ten], and Tiffany(?) was eighteen, and they were all in the command post with us. And we had some heart patients that we had evacuated, and the executive director of the wastewater treatment plant was there, Cheryl Colson(?). And as I said, this is a hurricane-hardened building, so we had been being battered by the winds for so long, I got everybody downstairs because the roof had begun to unravel, and there was water being pushed in. There was some water starting to come into the upstairs, and for everybody's safety and comfort, got everybody downstairs, and wasn't long after we got everybody settled and downstairs, I was upstairs, and I was looking out of the upstairs window, looking south, and the only thing I can equate it to is if you've ever seen these old B movies from Africa, like the *Tarzan* movies, and the ones with the army ants where the army ants are coming, and in the distance you can see the crops being eaten and mowed down, or the trees being mowed down. I was upstairs, and I was looking south, and on the horizon, that's what it looked like. And so I knew that that was floodwaters. I was shocked at first, because there was *no way* that there should be floodwaters where we were, but it was either that or army ants. And so I immediately went downstairs, and didn't want to panic anyone or frighten anyone, but told everybody they needed to move upstairs as rapidly as they could; floodwaters

were coming. And almost—I mean, it happened so quick—almost by the time I said that, the water began coming into the building. And I said—and I took my little ones and threw them up on the landing on the steps, got my older ones to take care of them and helped get other people up the steps, and lo and behold, two of the seniors and heart patients tried to use the elevator to get upstairs, and of course, that's not a good idea if there's water coming in. And the elevator shorted out, and so they were literally trapped like rats, going to drown, and God, they were screaming this bloody scream and begging us to get them out. And about that time, the firemen had got out of their post, had been washed out, and you think about these seventy-eight-thousand-pound fire trucks just floating by you, and tied a rope to one of them, got him to get one of the axes off of the truck that was floating by. And we chopped a hole; we had to chop a hole through a concrete wall, and then the steel elevator doors or wall. And to this day, I don't know how those ladies got through it because that hole was only about—couldn't have been much more than twelve or fourteen inches in diameter. But we squeezed them through there, got them out, and of course it saved their lives. And I basically tried to keep people, but there wasn't much you could do then; just get people up, try to take care of people, try to make sure that everybody was safe, and rescue other people that swam up or whatever. And in the midst of doing all that, I guess it seemed like minutes, but it was obviously hours, my public works director who was with me, Ron Calcagno(?), I guess around eleven o'clock or so the night before, he had left his briefcase at his house and told me that he needed to run to the house and get that; he'd be right back. And I admonished him, and he said, "Nah, I got to, Mayor; I got very important stuff in there I got to get. And when the floodwaters began to come in, he called me on his cell phone, and he told me, said the water was coming in his windows. He said it just happened, and well, to put it more into perspective, he left about eleven, but what happened was once he got there, he sat down, and he fell asleep, and he called me. And the floodwater got there south of us a couple of hours before it got to us, seemed like, anyway. And he called me, and he said, "Mayor, I don't think I can get out. The water's coming through the windows of my house." And at that time, he was panicking, and about that time we were disconnected by phone. And I couldn't get him back. And you know, as I was up there, we had rescued these people, and we were trying to make everybody comfortable, et cetera. And we knocked out an upstairs window because we didn't know how high the water was going to keep coming, in case we had to escape and get on the roof. And we made contingency plans and things like that, what we were going to do. And other than that, all you can do is wait it out and continue to protect people and make them comfortable, make sure—keep the heart patients calm. And eventually the water began to go down some; it stayed up for *so* long, and then all of a sudden, you know, the winds were still high, but they had died way, way down. It was the last remnants of the storm were beginning to pass through, and saw Ron come, my public works director, come stumbling over trees and things out in the distance, and we helped get him up, and he was going into a state of shock. And he had held onto a roof cap, the top of a roof for twelve hours, through this. And he had made his way back to where we are, once the water started to go down, and he was beginning to go into a state of shock. We got a blanket and put that around him, and trying to calm him. And about that time, somebody called and said they were outside in an airboat;

David Yarbrough(?), one of our county commissioners, board of supervisors, had come to pick me up in the airboat, said they needed me at the county EOC [emergency operations command], the command post. And I was looking at my kids; we had been through this tragic, very tragic experience, best friend and employee. Ron is sitting here, and he's going in a state of shock. And my wife's trying to keep him calm and trying to take care of the kids, and I'm just so proud of them, how they conducted themselves, and handled themselves and stayed out of the way and stayed safe. And I told him; I said, "I can't leave." And then I had these twenty firemen that had swam in, and we were basically caring for them, too. And they were all in this one upstairs room. And I said, "I can't go; I got my family here and these men. I got to stick with them and take care of them." And my wife said, "No, we'll be OK. You got a job to do; go. You got to go. Go." And so I did; they came and got me in an airboat, as I said. I couldn't walk; I lost my crutches and my cane and everything in the flood and had a soft cast on my leg; I lost it. And that's one of the miracles, I think. And kind of jumping ahead, but I never thought about it for days, but the fact that I didn't get an infection in this open, fifteen-inch incision, swimming around in this nasty, nasty water is a miracle. It was one of the first miracles I saw because I had to send police officers and people, first responders, to the Center of Disease Control with flesh-eating bacteria, and we all had these rashes and things. And here I got this fifteen-inch, open wound, and I didn't get an infection. It's a miracle. But when I got—I basically rolled into the airboat, and when we started leaving, it began to hit home just how devastating things were. On the road that leads to where we were, the command post, there were three houses sitting in the middle of the road, countless trees; it was a maze of trees that you had to work your way through in the airboat. And as we went out, I mean everything was just destroyed, and just *unbelievable*. I was almost in shock, looking at it, how just total it was. And we went four or five miles in the airboat until we got to dry road, where they had parked their trucks to come in and get me. And we went to the command post, and then there they were much in the same situation as we were. They had all written numbers on their hands in case they died and lost each other, and who they would be. And literally it began hitting home that our entire county was, you know, we were pretty much wiped out. And everybody, my police officers that were in their command post, I was on the phone with them, and much like Ron, they were telling me the condition they were in. And the last words I had gotten from them was, "Mayor, what are we going to do? The water has pushed the cars up against the doors. We can't get the doors open." And I had that whole staff in there, teamed with public works and firemen, and then their phone went out. And so I didn't know if these seventy-five men and women that I had in these different command posts, I didn't know if any of them were alive. And that was one of the reasons I needed to go. They ended up getting out through the roof and stayed on the roof of the place where they were. And they got a coaxial cable that had come loose, and they used it to get each other to this big bush, this tree, and they held on into the top of that tree, twenty-one of them, for twelve hours, and pulled each other up as they would fall under the water, and keep each other alive. So when we got to the command post, they were just getting them there. And reports of death started coming in, and I could not get *back* to my command post where my family and these other brave people were, and it was three *days* before we were able to get back in there. And then you couldn't

use the airboat, because now the water's gone. We had no vehicles in the county; nothing ran. We lost every single piece of equipment that ran; we lost every vehicle that ran, every police car, every fire car, truck, every car and then every *personal* car. Matter of fact, in the place where we were, next to it was this equipment shed, and on top of it was a pipe that came up, was a vent. And my daughter had a Jeep, and her Jeep sat down on top of that pipe, on top of that shed and we couldn't get it off. And now, looking back, it's one of the more amazing pictures that we have, and had to get equipment to lift it up off of the pipe and then to set it back down. But our vehicles and some vehicles were never even found again. But you asked me what was going through my mind at that time. All of this was going through my mind, whether these men and women were still alive, and then once I got them all accounted for, was one of the more relieved feelings that I've felt in my life. And we only lost one city employee, and he was a gentleman that worked part time for us. And he was an older gentleman, and him and his mother drowned on Hurley Street, that I had mentioned earlier; they were two of the victims on that street. But that was just—all of that happened, really, before the winds had even totally quit. So there was a lot more things and emotions and everything else getting back. And I tried to send people in to try to get to my family and the firemen and all, but once the water went down, those homes across the roads and the trees, the maze that they were, you just couldn't walk them out at that time. Couldn't really get to them until we got equipment in to start pushing the streets and making that avenue or path for people to walk through.

Doyle: I was doing some reading before you came here, and I read that you were a mental health therapist before mayor. How did that help? Did that help prepare you for the hurricane and everything you dealt with?

Longo: I was jokingly going to say, "Yeah, it helped me diagnose the fact that I was going *nuts* or crazy." There's no doubt in my mind that it helped me. There were exercises that I would teach other people to keep their calm and to help them have some peace. And I used those exercises almost constantly, and it enabled me to be able to help others and be able to talk to others and understand some of the things that people were going through and having to deal with. And of course, I think it helped me, too, to some extent.

Doyle: How have your children responded since the hurricane?

Longo: They've really been amazing. You know, we lost our home; they went through that experience of the hurricane and the floodwaters, and they were right there when those people were screaming and trapped in the elevator, and they've seen more already in their young lives than most people see in a lifetime. The four days after the hurricane, a Good Samaritan sent me a van to use to evacuate my family in because it was just not a place for people to be if you didn't have to be. It was dangerous. There was no clean or safe place to be. There was no air-conditioning. There was nowhere to sleep except on the floor where you had all these other people now; there was nowhere for them to go, so they were there. There was nothing to eat. There was nothing to drink. And there were all kind of phenomena that were happening, but one

of the ones that really weighed heavy was the domestic animal population that was still alive reverted to its own natural instincts, survival of the fittest, because there was no food for them or clean water for them. So there was one case in particular; there was this huge rottweiler, and there was a fence around where we were, but there were parts of it that were obviously broken from trees or whatever. And we tried everything we could to make sure that the animals stayed out, but he would patrol outside the fence, and he would kill any smaller dog or anything that came up. And you can't keep small children penned up, especially with that many other people, and upstairs in this small building forever. You got to let them outside. And there was no doubt in my mind that if that dog got the opportunity, it would kill my two-year-old and probably my four-year-old. And it just was not a safe place to be. And I said there was all kind of unknown bacterial infections that we were having to deal with getting fresh water. And we were trapped where we were; there was no way out. The bridges onto the east and the west were out, so we couldn't get help in like we needed to. And it took a few days, but the bridge to the north, the corps of engineers got it to where it was passable, and so you could get out, and we began eventually getting in supplies through there, but before that we had to airlift everything in. And so it was very limited, plus having to walk everywhere that you went made it difficult. And it was days later where we were able to get vehicles, where we were able to distribute it out through the community to people, but until then, my wife and kids for those four days, they walked roundtrip five miles to get one sixteen-ounce bottle of water each and ice. And, of course, the ice was melted by the time they got back there, and eventually Ron and I were able to get this *old, old*—I mean it was a surplus, old animal control truck working. And since I couldn't walk very well, he drove me around. He was a heck of a trooper, and he drove me around everywhere I went. But I was able to evacuate my family four days after the storm, as I said, and they went to—they didn't know where to go. There was nowhere to go, and we didn't know because we didn't have communication with the outside world. There was *no* phones. When the military got here, their satellite phones didn't even work to begin with. So I didn't know just how broad the total devastation was because for a good bit inland, all the way into Florida everything was out. And so the sister city and the interlocal agreements we had with other cities and states, they couldn't come to our aid because they were taking care of their own problems. And so I told my wife—all they had were the clothes that were on their backs, you know—"Load the kids up and just go north." Go to her family's, and they lived in the state of Maine. And they did. My wife had a fractured forearm. So my kids—this old van you had to shift. So my eight-year-old son and ten-year-old daughter helped shift the vehicle, and they really took on a real leadership role as children and really helped their mother, and they got there, and they stayed there for eight months. And it was for all kind of reasons, it was the best thing. It broke my heart to see them leave, and there were parts of me that wanted to leave with them. But I knew that I couldn't take care of them; I had my hands full with having to take care of the city. And I knew when I sent them off that I probably wouldn't see them for a while. But my oldest daughter, Tiffany, the eighteen-year-old, *being* eighteen, she refused to leave. She said she was going to stay and take care of *me*. And she did a good job of doing that, and she also worked in the recovery operations, and she just did a wonderful job. I'm extremely proud of her; I'm

extremely proud of all of them because they had to start school in a new area. They had to live—can't get much different from Waveland, Mississippi, than going to Maine; the weather, everything. My five-year-old, she turned five there. She ended up on the school skiing team. They had never seen snow skis in their life, and in the state game she won two golds and a bronze medal. And so they fit in real well. They made friends, and it was an adventure for them. My son, Johnny's best friend—

Scull-DeArmeY: I'm sorry to interrupt you, but we're going to have to get on the road.

Longo: All right. Let me finish this sentence. Johnny's best friend, Darden Barrier(?), they only live a couple of blocks from us, and they had just got finished playing the soccer season together and traveling all over the South together, and he died. We buried him six weeks after the hurricane, and that was a very, very difficult—I didn't think I could cry anymore after the storm. The governor's wife came and got me and took me to the hospital; I was in the hospital room with his parents when he passed away. And I literally felt gutted, but my wife couldn't tell him; didn't know how to tell him, and didn't tell him, said she wouldn't tell him until I was there. And to cut to the chase, when I went up eight months later to drive them home, we stayed an extra night in Hattiesburg, right by Southern [The University of Southern Mississippi], because I still hadn't told him; didn't know how to tell him. How do you tell a little kid that the best friend, the costar of every sporting event, the kid that's invincible, died? And he died six weeks after the hurricane with the first known rabies death case in seventy-five years. And his parents were two of the first people to make it through the debris and the devastation and everything after the storm, just days after the storm, to bring us relief supplies and things. And what do you say? So my children, I think as children, thank God they're very resilient with what they've had to go through. And we lost our home; we hadn't gotten insurance yet. And our grant hadn't come through, so they lived in a FEMA trailer for two years, eight of us, but for the last three months, they've lived in a Katrina cottage. And our home should be built in the next three months, finished in the next three months. I've been building it paycheck to paycheck, but I stay totally out of it. I let them create, rebuild the house and rebuild their rooms the way they want them. You know, Johnny's got fluorescent walls, but they are very proud of it, and I'm very proud of them. And I can't say enough about how my children and wife did what they had to do. And at the same time, none of my first responders, seventy-five first responders, none of them had homes. None of them had vehicles, and so I confiscated the state park, Buccaneer State Park, and built a little community in there, ran water and sewer and power to the park, made one little section, a wing of the park for the policemen, and another little wing for the firemen, another wing for the administrative staff, and we had our own little city in there for a year, and we all lived in there together for a year, and we made the best that we could. And had a guy from Florida that had created a process after 9/11 that took sewer water, took ocean water, took anything and turned it into drinking water. And somehow he got through before the military or anybody with these kind of things because up until that, we were taking a shower at night. When the sun went down, you'd get naked and open the valve on the fire truck. And we put up a thing,

and we created a public shower with this creating water, pulling water out of the Gulf. And we'd have two thousand people a day come and take showers, plus if you had buckets or whatever, you could get all of the drinking water you could carry, instead of the one little bottle. So that's a good place to stop, I guess.

Scull-DeArmey: I'm sorry I have to interrupt you, so sorry.

Tobia: Thank you so much.

(end of interview)