

AN ORAL HISTORY

with

RICKY MATHEWS

This is an interview for the Mississippi Oral History Program of The University of Southern Mississippi. The interview is with Ricky Mathews and is taking place on August 25, 2006. The interviewer is David Tisdale.

Tisdale: Today is August 25, 2006. My name is David Tisdale with The University of Southern Mississippi Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage. And today we are visiting with Ricky Mathews, publisher of *The Sun Herald*. Ricky, thanks for joining us today as we approach the one year anniversary of Hurricane Katrina.

Mathews: I thank you very much for including me in your project.

Tisdale: Ricky, if you would, talk a little bit about the days leading up to the storm. What was the attitude of the newsroom here at *The Sun Herald* and in the community as well, as this storm developed and we, you know, realized that kind of on short notice, because at first, I believe, we saw that it was going to head toward Destin, and it took kind of a sharp turn toward us.

Mathews: Yeah, I'm actually an amateur meteorologist. I do a lot of offshore fishing; so over the years I've enjoyed learning about weather and watching weather. And in the day of Internet, it really provides a lot of opportunity for us to learn more, to go to blogs and hear different points of view. On Thursday it became apparent that the track that the National Hurricane Center had for Hurricane Katrina was beginning to erode somewhat. We saw some of the models beginning to shift our way. By Friday morning we saw complete alignment of the models headed toward somewhere between central Mississippi and New Orleans. And the National Hurricane Center unfortunately didn't change their track till late Friday afternoon. So, the conversation around here during the day on Friday was we were a little disappointed that they didn't change that track earlier and some kind of—they only change the track certain times of the day. But in this case, because we knew there was going to be an evacuation of New Orleans and that that affected the roads and affected South Mississippi, and so we're going to be needing to evacuate as well, that we were very, very concerned that the communities were going to act too late. As we well know now, as it turned out, New Orleans did order the evacuation late, and it clogged up our roads, and by the time we ordered, created, or asked for an evacuation on Sunday morning, in only Zones A and B—we didn't evacuate Zone C—people were killed in Zone C, incidentally.

Tisdale: And Zone C, what area is that?

Mathews: Those are flood zones. So, A is the lowest area, B is next, and C is the other areas. So, what should've happened—you know hindsight's 20/20, and we know that now, and we'll build that into our plans as we go forward. But we should've done a mandatory evacuation of all areas south of I-10. OK. We've got new flood maps now; so we know, we have different configurations for those zones, but the fact is by the time we ordered mandatory evacuation on Sunday morning, the New Orleans people had clogged up the roads, and I think people knew, you know, it was getting late. So I think a lot of people chose not to leave for the reasons that it was late, you know we thought [the hurricane] was going to hit New Orleans. It was—you know, people felt like they had survived Hurricane Camille and could make a similar decision for this one, which turned out to be a bad decision. And you know all of these things were swirling in our newsroom. We had a meeting in the newsroom on Saturday, and we brought all the newsroom people together, and I told them what I had seen, from what I had done, the research I had done on the Internet, and I told them to go ahead and start making arrangements to cover this story because it's going to be one of the most fundamentally important stories in the history of this newspaper. And that, I hope that I'm wrong, but I think I'm not, that our community is going to be destroyed. I actually have a picture of that meeting in my newsroom up in my office to remind me that it is so important, as leaders, to stay on top of issues like this so that we know how to best direct our people. And when you look at the faces of the people who were in that meeting in the newsroom on Saturday, many of the people who were in that picture actually lost their homes, so it was a really prophetic moment. I wish, you know, we had been wrong about what we saw was going to happen. But it prepared our newsroom for one of the most important stories in the history of South Mississippi and got them thinking about, you know, "How are we going to go about covering this in the aftermath?" And as you know now, the Pulitzer was awarded to us as a result of our work. So, it was an important time, the reflection and the planning we did before the storm.

Tisdale: Describe that morning the storm came through and the preparations that you and the rest of the staff had to [do].

Mathews: Well, we had—I had actually had a rule that if it was a Category Four or Five storm, no one stays here at the newspaper. On Sunday evening, or Sunday, late Sunday, Marlene Clure(?), our operations director, called and said, "You know it looks like it's going into New Orleans." It did look, at that time, that it was going to go into New Orleans. Many people who are in, basically, low-lying areas who are part of what we call our Operations Response Team, along with some newsroom people, she said, you know, "Why don't you go ahead and let us stay here because if it's going to go into New Orleans, you know, I think it'll be safe" and whatever. And I chose to change my point of view about that and said, "OK, go ahead." So, a limited number of people stayed here. I actually opted to stay at my house. I live on the—because that was the original plan was that no one was going to stay here, and so I was staying

at my house, which is only about four minutes from here if we don't catch a light over the Back Bay, on Popp's Ferry Road Bridge on the north shore of Back Bay. When the storm hit, as the water rose at my house, it was really clear to me that if the water was as high as it was at my house in the other areas of South Mississippi, that the South Mississippi that I knew and loved was getting destroyed. And boy, did I regret the decision I had made to let people stay at the newspaper. I lost contact with them. So for about four or five hours, I had no idea what their fate was. It was a terrible time. I finally learned on a satellite phone, as the storm surge started to kind of fall off, I could actually call outside the area and called San Jose, our parent company, and was able to learn that they had received an E-mail from Marlene, from here at the plant letting him know that they were OK. And that was the first moment I learned that the people at the newspaper were OK.

Tisdale: I know that had to be—

Mathews: It was a terrible—

Tisdale: —trying.

Mathews: It was terrible. Well, the truth is, for three hours—you know, I made a bad decision to stay at my house. I live between twenty-five and twenty-seven feet above sea level, and I had ten foot, or three to ten foot waves hitting my house for three hours. The waves didn't get in the house; that's the good news. We did get water, but we didn't get waves, which would have been devastating. But I had my entire family with me; my three kids, my wife, my brother-in-law, my mother-in-law, and a friend of mine from Seattle. And it was a terrible experience. It brings you closer to God, and it brings you closer to your family what we went through. But I had that, having had just gone through that, on my mind when I finally made the satellite phone connection. So you can imagine; it was a terribly emotional moment realizing that the Coast had been destroyed; all my neighbors had been destroyed.

Tisdale: And you're a native of—

Mathews: Yeah.

Tisdale: —this area, Gulfport. Is that where you're from?

Mathews: Yeah, I was raised in Gulfport. I moved here when I was three. So I lived in Bayou View and actually went through Hurricane Camille in from Bayou View. The home that I actually rode the storm out in, in 1969 for Hurricane Camille, was destroyed in Hurricane Katrina. And it didn't even—this area did not flood at all during Hurricane [Camille]. It was destroyed from Hurricane Katrina.

Tisdale: What kind of comparison have you drawn between those two storms? I mean, I know it was many years ago now.

Mathews: Well, I mean I remember very well. I mean I think the wind was much more severe for Hurricane Camille. Camille was a tighter storm. It devastated, you know, South Mississippi, but significantly in the Pass Christian area and Hancock County area, but Katrina was just this *massive* storm with world-record storm surges, high as thirty-five feet. I mean it's—you know, we hope we never have anything like that to compare with, you know, what it did to South Mississippi. I think our headline the day after the storm probably speaks best about what we experienced when we said, "Our Tsunami." I believe it was more tsunami than it was hurricane. It was just an amazingly record-breaking storm. You know, you would never believe that you would live in a community that would be ground zero for the worst natural disaster in American history, and you never, in your wildest imagination, think that you would, in my case, be publisher and president of the newspaper that serves a region that was ground zero for the worst storm in American history. So, it's just an incredible time. I don't think Katrina will ever be—we hope that Katrina will never be compared with anything like it again. But unfortunately I think it will be; you know, that's the sad part about it, that we're in a time when the storms are more severe. They say that we're in—for the next twenty years, that the storm, just because of the way the atmospheric conditions are lining up, we're going to have severe storms. So, you know, a major storm like Katrina will probably not downgrade. Katrina could've had Category Five [wind]. If that would've been the case, that would've been unbelievable. It was Category Three, Category Four wind with, you know, Category Five-plus storm surge. But if that were to hit the Galveston area and would go into Houston or hit a metropolitan area like Miami, I mean it would be absolutely devastating. I think we will see that in our lifetime, and that's unfortunate. But that's why we really need to learn from the experience of Katrina and make sure other communities don't go through what we've been through.

Tisdale: Talk about some of the challenges that the newspaper faced, and, you know, what you had to go through to get the news to the people.

Mathews: I think the biggest issue for me, personally, in the beginning was just locating our employees. So, you know, it took us two weeks to find all of our employees. And there was a moment in time, about three or four days after the storm, where I went up to a map, and I looked at the list of the people we had not found yet, and looked at the map, and every single person we had not found yet lived in an area that no longer existed. And we really expected to get bad news. So you can imagine, for that two-week period every time an employee walked in the door, you know, we were just all tears. It was like a welcome home party. And they would say, "We lost our house." And we actually got numb to that after a while. We just said, "So has everyone else."

Tisdale: (laughter) Join the crowd.

Mathews: "You know, the good news is you're alive."

Tisdale: Yeah.

Mathews: Twenty-five percent of our employees lost everything. And then we had another, you know, actually, essentially, all other employees were affected in one or way or the other. So it was a pretty devastating event, but we didn't have the luxury of sitting still. I mean, we had to take care of our employees, and we had to get the paper out. And, you know, making the decision to print in Columbus, which was a decision I made on the Saturday before the storm—

Tisdale: Columbus, Mississippi?

Mathews: Columbus, Georgia—

Tisdale: Georgia, OK.

Mathews: —which is five hours from here. Columbus, Georgia, is a fellow Knight Ridder paper. At the time that newspaper reported to me; so there were a lot of reasons to go to Columbus. They did a *fantastic* job of supporting us, but I asked Stan Tiner(?), our editor, to send a group of people, a newsroom people, to—and mostly production folks; these are people who do the editing and graphics work—to Columbus, along with their families, and be prepared to print a paper. And, you know, what they would do is layout. If they couldn't have any communication with us, the instructions were to do the best they could, print 20,000 copies, put them on a truck, and get them back here. We'd figure out what to do with them when they got here. And that's what they did. But the good news is we had some intermittent communications; so we were able to send some photos and some stories to them. So that first day's paper was an extraordinary accomplishment. And then we printed there for the next seven days and eventually brought production back here. We actually had power. We have a generator that we can run the press off of. The problem for us was water pressure; you need water pressure to run a press. And we got great support from Knight Ridder. We had some production guys from the *Miami Herald* who came up here and somehow rigged an air compressor to our water line and was able to actually manufacture water pressure for us that was good enough to be able to print. So we put a lot of work-arounds in place. But, you know, we used—the only way we could actually transmit stories was we hooked a Macintosh laptop to a satellite phone, and we sent things over the satellite phone. Eventually we were able to get a work-around on the Internet and get that to work, but as you know there was a fiber-optics line that was actually severed between here and New Orleans, and it took the Internet down for all of us in this area. Eventually we got the work-arounds in place and were able to get that done. But it was really incredible seeing what we put in place. We had, for our employees, we had RVs coming in from all over the country. We set up an RV park out in our parking lot. We had a very important security service that came in here from Boston. They helped kind of secure the plant because the problem was we had fuel, both gas and diesel; we had power; we had food; we had cash. You know, you had to have cash when, because it becomes a cash economy right after the storm because nobody has the ability to take credit cards, et cetera. So we had guards to help protect the building. We didn't keep people *out*; we

actually had many people in the community came here that we gave water to and food to, et cetera, but we essentially had an army camp. And it was—you know, we had counselors here to talk to our employees. They were on staff for weeks. We had a full-time MD here to help our employees, many of whom needed help. We had, you know, food and all the things you could imagine. The thing we didn't have, initially, was sewerage. There was no working sewerage in South Mississippi; so we didn't have—you know, the bathrooms here backed up; so they were actually off limits until we could sanitize them. But then even if we could sanitize them, we couldn't use them. That was a major problem. We made some makeshift outhouses. And I like to joke that WLOX across the street actually got a shipment of Port-a-lets here three or four days after the storm, and I went across the street and borrowed two from them. And that was a happy day for all of us, (laughter) the day that we had actually working sewerage here.

Tisdale: I was going to ask, too, about what kind of cooperation you had with WLOX.

Mathews: Well, I went, and I called WLOX the day after the storm and told them that, you know, if we're ever going to find the time to work together, now's going to be the time. And I went—well, actually, I say I called them. I didn't call them because we didn't have communication, but I went over there and walked across the street. And we shook hands and made an agreement that we would share resources, you know, news resources and make sure we were getting the word out. And Dave Vincent, who's our news director, and I went immediately on the air and talked about it. But, you know, let's face it—nobody had power. There were only a limited number of people who could actually see their newscasts, I mean those people who had—

Tisdale: Battery-operated TV.

Mathews: —battery-operated TVs could see it. But they eventually did some simulcasting with some local radio stations, and that lasted for a day or two. But, you know, we understood that we had to hit on a bunch of different cylinders; we had to get as much information to the radio as we could. We had to get as much information to TV as we could. But at the end of the day, the newsprint, the newspaper product, you know, getting it out into the community, to the shelters, to Red Cross centers, to, you know, areas where we could have it delivered was going to be a vital source of information. And we made the decision to print the paper for free. I mean to distribute it free even to our paid subscribers, and we did that until October the tenth; we gave the paper away free. Our normal daily circulation was about 47,000 and on Sundays was around 55,000. We reached an all-time high of over 80,000 papers that we distributed free, because we said, "Let's set the business aside for a second," and realize that the only, you know, basically for most people the only communication that they're going to have in terms of detailed communication was going to be the newspaper. And that's not to say they weren't getting some information on radio and TV, because they were, but the kind of detail work that we could do, the amount of

resources we had on the ground here, both ours and the help from Knight Ridder, man, we were covering this story like a blanket. And we were a vital source of information for people. And we had people getting out of food lines and water lines and ice lines to get a copy of the newspaper. It was amazing. We had reporters, and photographers, and truck drivers, and advertising sales people, and me, whoever could deliver papers were delivering papers. On my journey home, I would walk across the Popp's Ferry Road Bridge because it was broken. Eventually, within about a week or so, they actually opened up [closed] the bridge permanently, and then I was forced to either drive around or take a boat across, and I actually chose a skiff that I actually had to—my skiff that was washed out of my driveway—had to pull it off of a fifteen-foot-high pile of debris. And we got it—my brother-in-laws and a neighbor got it working for me, and for four and a half months that's how I got to work, in the boat and driving across as opposed to driving the hour and a half journey around. But on my way home each day when the bridge was open, I would actually bring stacks of paper with me, and I'd pass people who were doing like I was and doing this commute, and I'd hand the paper out, and they were *completely* amazed by that. I mean one of the great feelings that we got was the ability to not only produce this product with just awesome journalism information to help people see what had happened to us and what we need to do to get out of this mess, but to hand it to someone and then to be so blown away with "How did you do that? I mean how did you get that paper together?" And then sit there and watch them read it, you know, you really got a sense of what newspapers are really all about. It was just, for everyone who was in that position and most of our employees ultimately got to do some distributing of the paper, it was really a life-changing experience to see how people reacted to receiving their copy of the newspaper. Sounds kind of, you know, I don't know, self-promoting to say that, but the fact is it's not. It was a—you were kind of—you were removed from your role as running a business and in this kind of new role of being part of the recovery, and it was just touching to be part of that.

Tisdale: Do you think people really understood, more than ever, how important, you know, the job that you guys do—

Mathews: Oh, I think—

Tisdale: And, again, not be self promoting but—

Mathews: No, I think—

Tisdale: —that it's—I mean the way you're describing it sounds like they were just like soaking in like food and water.

Mathews: Oh, I think so, and it's still true today. You know 40,000 of the homes and—40 percent of the homes, 65,000 homes, were completely destroyed in South Mississippi. There were 38,000 FEMA trailers in South Mississippi. Our home delivering in single copy sales are less than 1,000 copies from where they were prior to Katrina. I mean you think about that for a minute, that we've recovered that much

circulation. And the only explanation is that people are reading the paper that didn't read it before. And that we're providing information to people that they realize, you know, that in their busy lives, whatever might've been keeping them from reading the paper every day, they're reading it now, and we're a source of recovery information. I mean that's the key, you know.

Tisdale: Is that still the sense today, a year later? What's the attitude that you get from the community?

Mathews: I think that it's—oh yeah, the paper is incredibly important in their lives. I think, you know, here's the deal—the community can best be described this way. It's a tale of two worlds. On one hand the economic level, the amount of money that's coming in here from insurance companies, from FEMA, from the federal government is creating an economic boom like we probably have never seen. We have only just begun to appreciate how big it's going to be. So the economic situation is pretty good, and the number of employees that are here for every casino and related job that we lost, we've gained in construction jobs. So the overall macro, the big picture view of the economy, is very good. However, they're hurting. We need 70,000 housing units just to get square. *Seventy thousand*. And we typically only build 2800 a year. So, I mean you do the math on that. We can't recover doing it the way we did it before. So there are a lot of people who are still struggling through this. The way I say is that if you have a home and you have a job, you're probably finding your new normal. But if you *don't* have a job or *don't* have a home, or worse *don't* have either one, you haven't even begun. And too many people still fight with their insurance companies and haven't made their rebuilding decision. While there's a lot of building going on, the reality of it is we haven't even *begun* to rebuild yet. And, but you know, most South Mississippians came back. I mean that is an amazing story when you think about how many people came back. And getting the schools open by the end of October last year was an amazingly important thing, and it gave families a choice to come back. You know, it's—you know, the community really is a tale of two worlds, and we are, the newspaper is telling both of those stories: what's happening in the good side about where we're headed, and then where there are still challenges. It's going to be like that for three or four more years.

Tisdale: What's your thoughts on the federal and state response and even to, you know, go further the charities and—

Mathews: Yeah, I think that, you know, early on we were screaming out for help from the federal government, from anyone who could give us help. You know we had three or four days there where there was a lull. It's easy to criticize FEMA, I think. You see, you look at other states, and they've really gone out of their way to criticize FEMA and to blame everybody else, but I think if you really study the scenario, every individual, every company, every government, state, local, federal, regional, whatever, we were all overwhelmed. And if we put more emphasis on one group other than another group, then we're not being fair. The reality of Hurricane Katrina is the worst natural disaster in American History, and none of us were prepared for this kind of

disaster. It is the worst thing anybody could have ever imagined. And so we, as a paper, chose not to take everyone to task on that. We said, "OK, it's not good; we'll write the important stories, we'll criticize when we need to, but we're not going to take a position where we're blaming everybody for this mess we're in, because the fact is Katrina was just so darn big." I think that the—I've had the opportunity to work with the governor. The governor and I actually talked on Wednesday following the storm. We had played phone tag. I had a satellite phone. There was no—you know, it wasn't easy to call. But we finally connected, and I offered to work with him to put together meeting in South Mississippi to talk about where we're going from here. And we actually put that meeting together, the way I discuss it is, using the Pony Express because we didn't have any phones or anything. So, we had the mayors of Biloxi and Gulfport, several other community leaders, and the governor. We met on Sunday at three o'clock following the storm. The way the governor explains it is he—we talked about needing to put together a process that brings all the community of South Mississippi together and that we've got to get started right away, and that South Mississippi has had a history of not working together very well, so we needed one process. He left here. The first lady, Marsha Barbour was feeding on the food line on Sunday night. For two hours the governor had, literally, the back of an envelope to kind of sketch out what became the Governor's Commission of Recovery, Rebuilding, and Renewal. The first phone call he made was to Jeb Bush, the governor of Florida, and talked to him about that, got some input from him, made a few other phone calls. That was Sunday we met. Monday I didn't hear back from him. Tuesday I heard back from him, and he said, "Do you have about an hour?" I said, "Sure." And he said, "I want to tell you where I am." And he took me through this whole process and what he had envisioned, and who the leadership ought to be, and I was blown away. He did such a great job. He brought—he asked myself, Jerry St. Pé, Anthony Topazi, the president of the power company, and then eventually asked Derek Johnson, who is the president of the NAACP in Mississippi who's a lawyer in Jackson, to be the vice chairman. By later that week, we were already meeting in Jackson talking about who should be on the Commission. It had to be Democrats, Republicans, blacks, and whites. I mean it was amazing what we went through. Governor [William] Winter joined us for that meeting, Ambassador Palmer, others from the governor's staff, and within five weeks after the storm, the Mississippi Renewal Forum happened. I mean when you look at the story, when history tells the story of Mississippi, what you're going to find is when the governor says, "We hitched up our britches and got on with it," we really did. We were self-reliant people. We're self-supportive people. We were neighbor helping neighbor. We'd done all the things that you would expect a community to do, and we developed a plan. We had a 178-page plan on the governor's desk by the end of December that detailed exactly where we needed to go as a community. And then we used that as a basis for where we go with the federal government and the president. The legislature with the help of Trent Lott, and Thad Cochran, and Gene Taylor, and others has been extraordinarily important. But the dots have aligned. It's been really the perfect storm of leadership to go along with this perfect storm, and I think it's been extraordinarily good. You know, there have been issues with FEMA along the way, and there's been issues with Red Cross along the way. I mean you got all that because there's been an unparalleled

disaster, *but* the response has been unbelievable. But you can put all that aside for a second and recognize that we would not have been able to recover if we didn't have volunteers coming in here from all over the United States. I call that "the thousand points of light." And it's true, we ended up, because we couldn't coordinate them, with too many hamburgers over here and too much water over there. But the fact was, these people came in; it was families helping families, and communities helping communities, and states helping states. It was *amazing* what these people did. The Baptist Men's Organization from North Carolina are *still* in South Mississippi working their rear ends off a year later. Well, what is it that motivates these people? How do they do it? How do they bring these people together and not get burned out on one community? It is *amazing* what has happened. I was meeting with the volunteer coordinator for the state yesterday, Marsha Meeks Kelly, who's executive director of the Mississippi Commission on Volunteer Service, and she said, "There are between 20[,000] and 30,000 volunteers in South Mississippi *today*." I mean, that's a year later. I mean, it's an amazing story. And so for everything bad thing you see that happened because we were overwhelmed or maybe there was some lack of coordination, there were *fifty great* things that happened that tell you a lot about human nature and the spirit of Mississippi. It's been an incredible process.

Tisdale: We've always been recognized—I know the *Boston Globe* rated us as the number one charitable state per capita—

Mathews: Right.

Tisdale: —in the union, and I guess this was an opportunity for the rest of the country, and it seemed that way with people from all over coming here to help.

Mathews: I agree.

Tisdale: There had to be—if you had to look at an upside, well—and I think you probably touched on how, you know, the leadership was, like, you mentioned how there were problems in the past in South Mississippi of people coming together, it was this unification also that's in addition to just the, you know, seeing the best of mankind.

Mathews: Yeah, I mean, you know, we've done things, we've done things with, in the post-Katrina world, to form a major regional business organization, get through a six-county wastewater district. I can name many other things, but there are a number of major, major things that have happened that you would not have been able to do before Katrina. I mean, it's just too complicated, too many jurisdictions, too much parochialness, and all for the good reason people want to protect, they want to protect their turf. But I'll tell you, the best thing about South Mississippi is we're a collection of unique historically and culturally diverse communities. The worst thing about us is the same dang thing, because we don't have a city center like Hattiesburg or Jackson or Mobile or New Orleans. We're a collection of communities that make up a 400,000 population-strong region of the state. But because we don't have centralized

leadership—it's just broken out and very diverse leadership—it's hard to get everybody on the same page. We've historically in South Mississippi had a very difficult time finding our common issues, and that's one of the reasons when I became publisher of the paper, we focused so much on becoming South Mississippi's newspaper. Our goal was to literally politically bring this region together so we could appreciate our differences but find our common issues, so we could have success in Jackson, so we grow the quality of life in South Mississippi in a way that could be unparalleled. And we were making great progress in that area, but Katrina, Katrina sped that process along pretty rapidly.

Tisdale: Well, from a reporter or journalist's standpoint, what's it been like in terms of our working with public officials? I know probably that's more often than not, some of the, you know, where there's friction, between media and public officials. What's it been like post-Katrina in terms of cooperation with public officials in getting the word out?

Mathews: Well, I think, you know, that plays out on two levels. One is really my level, you know, as a community leader. You know a publisher in a community, the present publisher of the newspaper, has a very unique position. He's a community leader, he's a CEO [chief executive officer] of a company. You know, I have a company to run and employees to deal with and make sure that they're—and in particularly after a storm—are dealt with well and safe and taken care of. But you have, you know, fiduciary responsibilities to go with that, along with that as well. Then you're the publisher of a newspaper, you know, and that's—

(begin second CD)

Mathews: —and CEO, and those things don't always balance very well, so it's quite a challenge at times. But as a reporter, I think, the reporters are energized because their goal is if you really believe this, that a newspaper's role in society is to keep democracy viable. If you really believe that. I mean, that's what the First Amendment's all about. I believe that to the core of my existence. I think most reporters feel that same way. That in the wake of Hurricane Katrina when you think about the public involvement that ought to be in the rebuilding process and then think, also, about that same public as trying to rebuild their own lives, it's hard to keep democracy viable in a world like this. And you've got public officials, with all due respect, who didn't sign up to be what they're having to be today. They didn't sign up to be community planners. They didn't sign up to be emergency medical experts. I mean, the truth is most of them don't have the capacity and the understanding to deal with the issues that they're dealing with today, so it makes it very difficult. And they don't always make the best decisions. Andres Duany, who headed the Mississippi Renewal Forum said that his worst nightmare and our worst nightmare should be—and it is mine now. My worst nightmare is that fifty years from now, our kids and our kids' kids are going to have to live with the low expectations of current elected officials. OK. And that also goes true for current leaders. It's easy to go to the path of least resistance. It's not easy to make the tough decisions, and tough decisions at

times means we're going to rebuild this thing back different than it was before. We're going to build back stronger and better. And those are tough decisions. And it means some zoning and land issues, and all kinds of things. So, the newspaper plays a role in all that. As far as my role, when I became vice chairman of the governor's commission, you know, I don't think anyone's ever raised a question about that role. I think they understand that it's about trying to get the best leaders they can get a hold of, and I happened to be in a position where I was willing to lead and stepping up to the plate like others. I was honored to have that opportunity and said that, you know, one thing that I'll never compromise is my integrity. And if you go into a project like this, knowing that the integrity is not going to get compromised, there just really are no issues there. It's gone surprisingly better than I thought it was going to be, but it's been extremely difficult at the same time.

Tisdale: Talk about the plans for the anniversary. What is the paper doing to mark this anniversary of one year?

Mathews: We started a five—for the anniversary, a five-part series that started today. We're looking back on Katrina's impact. Today was, you know, the forty-eight hours that changed South Mississippi forever. We talked about those who are missing and those who perished in the storm. Our goal has been to tell the story of every person who was killed in the storm so that people could know the decision they made to stay, and maybe others in the future wouldn't make the same decision. And then we take you through series of days that end with a look forward, that we want to talk about the rebuilding process. We want to talk about the challenges the community is facing. We want to talk about the hope, about where South Mississippi is headed. And I think it's a heck of a series, and we're going to, I think, give a lot of perspective on this. I think it's important to local people. We have over 200 media that's going to be here from all over the United States.

Tisdale: And I understand that President, Bush is going to be here.

Mathews: President Bush is going to be here. You know we met with Trent Lott yesterday. Thad Cochran's going to be here and Chertoff, the head of the Homeland Security; you know, numerous legislators from all over this state and congressmen from Washington. Really, it is a moment in time, people might say, "Gosh, we're going to be overwhelmed," and clearly we're going to be. But the good news is that the story will continue to be told. I mean all along the way we've been concerned that people see the story of Katrina being only about New Orleans. It's unfortunate. The way I say it is that two natural disasters played out simultaneously. New Orleans is more of man-made disaster flood, a terrible international story. We feel for them. We don't compete with them. We care about them. They're part of our culture. But then you have the real disaster that was created by Katrina, the impact of the hurricane. And the impacts of a flood and a hurricane, very different kinds of problems here, and too many people in America *don't get* what happened to South Mississippi, which is why we wrote, not too long after the storm, the story we call—I mean the editorial we called "Mississippi's Invisible Coast." We won't be invisible over the next few days.

There's going to be a lot of focus on South Mississippi, and I think others across America can appreciate what we've been through in the past year and that we still have a long way to go.

Tisdale: Talk about winning the Pulitzer Prize.

Mathews: Yeah, the Pulitzer is the top, top award you can possibly get in journalism. The Gold Medal for Public Service is clearly the most significant of those awards. You know, the way I say it is that professionally, I think, I'm so honored that I work with a team of dedicated journalists who have gone through unparalleled personal agony to cover the story for South Mississippi. I mean that's something that's hard to put words around. Personally, I hate it because I know the reason we got it. We got it because we had to first, experience the worst natural disaster in American history. So there's an emptiness there because of why we're having to do what we're doing, but professionally it's incredible. To go to the Pulitzer award luncheon at Columbia University in New York was an amazing time. The best journalists from all over the country, from *New York Times*, *Washington Post* and, you know, all cities in between were all there, and you have this sense of history and something important, and you get a reminder about the First Amendment, and this thing I said earlier that newspapers are about, keeping our democracy viable. You get a good injection of why that's important. And so, it's been a special, a special process.

Tisdale: Going back to Camille, were there some lessons that people just didn't take?

Mathews: Yeah, I think the most important lesson, in terms of rebuilding we didn't pay attention; we didn't rebuild back safely. So, you know, we got to get it right this time. We're not going to get billions of dollars next time if we don't get this right this time. So, from a rebuilding point of view, we made some mistakes. From a pure, you know, let's-be-safe point of view, you know, I think the big learning for Katrina is this: Mayor Holloway said that Hurricane [Camille] killed more people in 2005 than it killed in 1969. And what he's saying there is that too many people used Camille as the benchmark, and so they felt they would be safe, and they weren't. So, what we've learned, the *biggest* lesson that we've learned, there are two major lessons: one is we better get it right this time in terms of rebuilding, and the second lesson is every hurricane has its own personality. You better be smart about how you evacuate people, and people *better* understand what's at stake, because too many people died that decided to stay, and we've got to make sure that doesn't happen next time.

Tisdale: How long do you think this recovery is going to take?

Mathews: I think the economic recovery is already happening before our very eyes. I think one, there's one element that has never existed before, and that is the casinos. Moving the casinos inland and getting 15[000], actually, 17,000 because we had just hired 2,000 people for Hard Rock Café, so 17,000 employed, another one to 1.5 employees, indirect employees for each casino job; so you're talking about, you know, somewhere in the vicinity of 40,000 people lost their jobs immediately. And then the

carryover effect of that to others. The fact that we got inland gaming voted in within 800 feet of the shoreline is significant. That means they get to get opened back up again and get people back employed.

Tisdale: Do you think that—speaking about the casinos, do you think that recognition from Jackson—

Mathews: Oh, absolutely.

Tisdale: —that the casino industry is important even with, you know, in '92 when there was opposition (inaudible).

Mathews: Oh, absolutely. Absolutely. We could not have done it without in-state support. I think, you know, Speaker McCoy and many others who I'm sure went to church on the following Sunday and got beat up pretty good. They realized that 10 percent of the general funds for Mississippi comes from the gaming industry. Let's face it; South Mississippi is the engine that drives the state. We got to get people back to work, and if we don't get them back to work, this state's going to be in serious trouble. They got that really quickly. And what that means is that casinos are going to build back safer now, bigger; we're going to have more than one, 1.5 billion dollar development. I mean the number of people who are going to be employed in the casino industry by 2010 is somewhere between 25[000] and 30,000 people. There were 17,000 before the storm, as I said; so double the number of employees. Again, then think about the indirect jobs that are created by those jobs. It's going to—I believe strongly, and that's assuming that we get some innovative approaches to housing, that our recovery will be one of the most significant recoveries, *if not*, the *most* significant recovery efforts in the history of the United States. There's no doubt about it. We've got the leadership to make it happen. We've got the help on infrastructure rebuilding that we need. We've got great leaders in South Mississippi, and we've got this economic engine. Northrup Grummond is back up and running well; other industries are back up and running well, and the casino industry is going to inject the tourism arena to a great degree. I think we have a lot to look forward to. That doesn't mean it's going to be easy. That doesn't mean that there are not going to be people falling through the cracks, because they're going to be. And that doesn't mean that there's not going to be huge social and psychological issues that go along with all of this. *But* the fact is South Mississippi will be bigger and better, stronger by the year 2010. It will blow some people's minds.

Tisdale: Do you think that's the main story, looking back now? Is that the main story of this storm?

Mathews: Yeah, I think it is. I think it's how, how can—when I walked across the street with my friend from Seattle, Mark Calvert, who's been critical to the recovery effort—I might add he's a financial genius—we walked across that bridge that next day, and we looked out at this community that was destroyed, boats, the beach, the bridge was destroyed, the stench in the air, it was terrible, and we looked across, and

we said, “How in the heck will this community *ever* recover?” To think that we could so rapidly develop the process that got everyone on the same wavelength about where we need to go in terms of the recovery effort, and to think that we have done what we’ve done up to this point, and I could say what I just said about the economic situation, and where we’ll be by 2010, I can’t imagine that we—I could not even in *my wildest imagination* have thought that we would be where we are today. It is *amazing* testament to what people will do, and how they will come together for the good of a community. It’s been an *amazing* last year; I can assure you. And it’s going to be an amazing next two or three years. You know, I say that knowing that as I talk to you, there’s a tropical depression in the Caribbean *as we speak*. It probably already should be named Ernesto. We don’t know what, you know, whoever is listening to this tape years from now will know, you know, what the fate of Ernesto was, but you know that’s a symbol that we don’t need to be hit in the couple of years. If we get hit, you know with 38,000 FEMA trailers and many of those in low-lying areas and lots of businesses trying to decide if they’re going to make major investments in this community, and with the insurance issues that we face, I could go on and on, but the fact is we will face a real uphill battle if we get whacked in the next couple of years. If we can get significantly into the rebuilding effort where we’re rebuilding stronger and better, it won’t be as much of an issue, but it would be an issue if we got hit soon. So, I pray that Ernesto and anything else like that doesn’t come to South Mississippi in *at least* the next couple of years.

Tisdale: Finally, you mentioned earlier what an impression it made upon you to be able to deliver the paper to people. Is there any other poignant moments that stand out in your mind in the last year following the storm that really is kind of a—

Mathews: Yeah, there’s one.

Tisdale: —standard?

Mathews: There’s one. There’s a lot; I even tell people about this in my speeches, but as part of my work in the Governor’s Commission, I got to help facilitate many of the public meetings. And I helped with the three in Hancock County, which was the hardest-hit area. In fact, the first Governor’s Commission public meeting was in Hancock County at a church that had had all of its walls knocked out. It had a roof, so it was more like a pavilion than it was a church. It was sort of symbolic, actually, that we were meeting there. And the people were really, because communication was a problem, they really weren’t sure what we were doing. They were really there to talk about building codes and possibilities for the future, and they wanted to talk about food and water. And it was a tough meeting, but it really let you know where people’s heads were. Well, after the meeting, I asked a group to stick around. This was members of the Governor’s Commission, the governor’s staff and some FEMA representatives. I wanted to debrief the group to make sure that we learned from the meeting because it was really a difficult meeting in terms of understanding the mindset of the people in the days after the storm. They couldn’t understand why we would talk about rebuilding when we’re still recovering. And the governor kept making the

point that you've got to do both. Many of the recovery decisions are dependent on the rebuilding decisions, and you got to get those rebuilding decisions made so people can know what their recovery timeline is going to be. So, you got to do them both.

Tisdale: Yeah.

Mathews: You got to do it simultaneously. That's *hard* for people to hear, but it was an important learning early on. While I was meeting this debriefing, I noticed this woman, she had not had a bath in days, you could tell. She was poor, you could tell, but she desperately was waiting to talk to me. And she hovered. We got around this table, and she kind of hovered out, off to the side, but I could see her there. And I'm thinking, "Well, she sees me as one of the leaders. She's going to let me have it." And I was ready to take it to be honest with you. And so we concluded the debriefing, and I immediately walked up to her, and I introduced myself. And she says, "I'm so glad that you took the time to come to talk to me." And she said—you know, we could see through, because there were no walls there, out into the parking lot, and there was this old van sitting there. And she says, "You know, that's where I'm living." And she showed me this van. And she says, "I'm from Pearlington." And she says, "I just wanted to make sure somebody heard this, that the next time a hurricane comes, they need to pre-position busses because too many of my friends died, and too many of my family members died because they didn't have cars or didn't have gas in their cars, and I just wanted to make sure somebody heard that." And man, I looked at her, and I said, "You can bet. You can bet I will never forget this moment." And it hit me then; I used to could not tell that story without tearing up because it hit me at the core. I'm stronger now. We're all stronger; I mean, all the emotional experiences that we have experienced have made us tougher. But it was a moment in time when I thought as a publisher, as a community leader, as a person, that too often we forget, if we don't look at people in all walks of life right in the face and understand what they're going through—and I committed to myself when I left, I told her that I would not forget that. I made what she said part of every speech I gave from that point forward, that we won't forget that, and we didn't forget that. It became a big part of the Governor's Commission Report, you know, the whole evacuation piece of this. And more importantly, I said it from this point of view, that you *got to listen* to people. You can't decide for them what's best for them. You got to hear them. And when you think you know what they're going to say, they'll surprise you. And, you know, I had her figured wrong. I mean she just wanted to save some lives; that's what she wanted to tell me, and it just touched me. I mean I'll never forget. I wish I'd have gotten her name, but I didn't, and, but I heard her, and I've made sure she was heard. And there were thousands of others just like her that wanted to be heard, too. And, you know, being publisher of a newspaper is one thing, being a community leader is another, but they both go hand in hand. And that is, it's all about the community, and the community is made up of people, and people have different points of view and different perspectives. And if you're talking about democracy really working, you've got to listen to them. To me that's fundamental, and I'll never forget it. It changed me as a person, and, you know, I'll probably never be the same again.

Tisdale: Ricky, thank you for joining us today.

Mathews: Thank you.

Tisdale: And for your contribution to this project.

Mathews: I appreciate it, man.

(end of interview)