

AN ORAL HISTORY

with

DIANE C. PERANICH

This is an interview for the Mississippi Oral History Program of The University of Southern Mississippi. The interview is with Diane C. Peranich and is taking place on May 15, 2008. The interviewer is James Pat Smith.

Smith: This is an interview with State Representative Diane C. Peranich, House District 121, representing Pass Christian and De Lisle and western Harrison County. Representative Peranich has served in the Mississippi legislature representing this area for the past twenty years. Today's date is May 15, 2008. The focus of this interview is on [Hurricane] Katrina and subjects related to Katrina recovery. Representative Peranich, could you say your name and today's date?

Peranich: All right, my name is Diane Creel Peranich and today's date is 5/15/08.

Smith: OK. And where are we today?

Peranich: We're in my home in De Lisle, Mississippi.

Smith: OK. And Representative Peranich, would you share with us your date of birth?

Peranich: Yes, my date of birth—I've been here as long as the mosquitoes. My date of birth is January 11, 1940.

Smith: Your place of birth?

Peranich: Biloxi, Mississippi. I was actually born at home. So, you are in De Lisle, named for Comp(?) De Lisle, a lieutenant—you refer to him as Iberville, and De Lisle is named for him, Comp De Lisle, and Le Chene is "the oaks" in French.

Smith: All very good. And your spouse's name?

Peranich: My husband's name is John Peranich, or Alfred John Peranich.

Smith: And his place of birth?

Peranich: He was actually born in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi, in a hospital.

Smith: And you have, for the past twenty years, served in the Mississippi legislature. What major occupations have you had in your lifetime?

Peranich: Well, I'm actually currently in my twenty-first year. I will, at the end of this term God willing, complete twenty-four years in the House. I've worked in various areas. I've been a savings officer at a savings and loan. I've worked in county government in various capacities; I've worked in the Chancery Clerk's office and in the Tax Assessor's office, both of whom were relatives of mine, but I think that's irrelevant.

Smith: (laughs) And what's your educational background? Where did you attend elementary and high school?

Peranich: I began in kindergarten, which is unusual for someone of my age. Kindergarten at Pasadie(?) Pavilion and at Sacred Heart Academy in Biloxi, Mississippi, and I attended my first school years at Sacred Heart Academy, that was the precursor to—I don't know what the new school—St. Patrick's. Had morphed from Sacred Heart to Notre Dame, which was a boys' school, and to what is now St. Patrick's, and then took various courses related to my profession of savings officer with the bank.

Smith: And what activities and interests have you pursued outside of the things that have paid you money?

Peranich: Well, I was probably your consummate volunteer. I've always been very interested in politics and volunteered there in numerous capacities. We work with the senior citizens; we actually organized a group out here in De Lisle for senior citizens and we would take them to the doctor, at the same time take them to the druggist, and pick up their groceries, and then lo and behold they had other state organizations that then took over, but we were happy to do it when we did it.

Smith: Have you been involved in raising money for schools?

Peranich: Yes, I served as an officer in the PTO, the Parent Teachers Organization, and I was the perennial room mother inasmuch as I had a station wagon. So have been very active in raising money for Pass Christian schools and other schools in the area, and have worked on school bond issues to assure their passage. Various things like that that one would consider civic-oriented things. And Cancer Society and Heart Society, and various things like that.

Smith: What's your religious affiliation?

Peranich: I'm a Roman Catholic.

Smith: Which parishes do you attend?

Peranich: Well, that's in transition, also. St. Stephen's Parish here in De Lisle, probably by the time this is transcribed, will no longer exist. The bishop has consolidated several churches and I imagine it will be the Catholic church of this area, but I don't think they've determined a name as yet, but it will combine St. Stephen's, St. Ann's, St. Williams into a larger church closer to Diamondhead, Mississippi. But we're all, of course, mourning the demise of St. Paul's parish that the current Bishop Rodie(?) decided not to rebuild over vehement protest to the people.

Smith: Have you been involved in raising money for St. Paul's School?

Peranich: Yes, I've served—the Seafood Festival was a way we raised money. You know, while I am in fact a member of the legislature, I am an old queen, so I was Queen of Carnival; that was another fundraiser for the Mardi Gras in Pass Christian, and just various things, school-related raising funds and various other charities.

Smith: And do you have any honors or awards that come to mind that would help someone understand where you come from?

Peranich: Well, I'm very proud to have received Legislator of the Year Award and I'm—

Smith: When was that?

Peranich: I'm sorry, Environmental Legislator of the Year Award in protecting the environment, which is certainly an interest of mine. I've received an award from, actually from my school district and the State Superintendent of Education for, as they called it "A Champion of Education," public education. And I've received an award in my capacity in the legislature. I received an award because we were able to move forward with legislation and create, actually, a film institute here in the state of Mississippi, so I received that award, the first ever. I've also received the Tourism Legislator of the Year Award on numerous occasions.

Smith: And how many children do you have?

Peranich: My husband and I have four sons.

Smith: And can you give me their names and the year of their birth?

Peranich: I can do that. That's much easier than their age. Our first child is John Peranich, John I. Peranich, and since hopefully he won't see this, the I stands for Innocence. He was named for his great-grandfather who was from an island off the coast of Croatia, Lucene(?) Piccolo, so little did I know when we agreed to name our son after his great grandfather that the I stood for Innocence. John was born in 1962. And then Stephen was born in 1964 and his middle name is Stephen Cletus Peranich,

and he was named Cletus for a dear friend of ours who is an oblate Catholic missionary in the Philippines and is to this day.

Smith: And?

Peranich: And Daniel was next, 1966, and Daniel Owen Peranich and he has received two last names of family. His great-grandmother was an Owen, Judge—his great grandfather was—one moment, let me think what his name was, he died before—oh, what was his name—his name was Charles, his great grandfather Charles Owen was a descendant of Robert Owen, the first US geologist and also the person who established New Harmony, Indiana. And the Daniel was from Judge Henry Clay Daniel, his great-grandma was a Daniel who was a renowned judge during the Civil War [era] and a Confederate sympathizer, although he was from Missouri. And Anthony, my youngest son, was born in 1970, and Anthony is Anthony Marc Peranich, and it's M-A-R-C Marc because he is named for my great-grandfather, Marc Kievet(?), and he—do you want to know their occupations?

Smith: If you'd like to list them.

Peranich: Well, I consider them the greatest thing I've ever done.

Smith: Sure.

Peranich: John has his own company in Pascagoula, Millennium. Stephen is chief of staff for our congressman, Gene Taylor. Daniel works for the Choctaws, and since we, in our lineage someplace have Choctaw blood, I think that's only appropriate, and he works at the reservation, but in tourism at the Indian casino. And my youngest son, Anthony, is a longshoreman at the Port of Gulfport.

Smith: Good. And what was your father's name?

Peranich: My father's name was Cecil Berry Creel, and the Berry was also a family name, and he was an absolutely magnificent man.

Smith: Do you know his date and place of birth?

Peranich: Um, well, I know my mother was born in 1920 and he was five years older than Mother, so we can say 1915, and he was born in Biloxi, Mississippi.

Smith: And what was his major occupation or occupations?

Peranich: My father was a member of Army Air Corps during World War II that later morphed into the United States Air Force. And then when he was out of the service after the war, he was then a civil servant working either at Keesler Air Force Base or at the Navy base, and for a while at Lowery Air Force Base in Denver, Colorado, and he was an instructor in Intelligence. So I guess Daddy was a spook.

Smith: Hmm. What was your mother's maiden name?

Peranich: My mother was Laura Claire Caivette and that is a family name, Laura Claire. I'm sorry, Laura Claire Thompson; her mother was Laura Claire Caivette. And we currently now, on this date, have our fifth generation Laura Claire. My mother married and Father married very young, and my mother not only raised us and made a home for my grandfather in his later years, but Mother was also a realtor.

Smith: Do you know your mother's date and place of birth?

Peranich: My mother was born December 9, 1920 in Biloxi, Mississippi, in the same house that I was born in.

Smith: Do you know the date that she and your father married?

Peranich: No. Isn't that a terrible thing? I don't know that.

Smith: Do you know the place they were married?

Peranich: Yes, they were married in Biloxi, Mississippi, and had a home wedding because it—well, they were married in the rectory because at that time a Catholic marrying a non-Catholic could not be married in the church, so Mother and Daddy were married in the rectory of Sacred Heart, what is now Sacred Heart Cathedral and Nativity in Biloxi.

Smith: Diane, we're going to be—we're doing this interview today that mostly focuses on Katrina and we're going to come back and think about other things that have occurred during your lifetime in your legislative career at another time. But what I'd like for you to do is to just think for a minute about the first thing that comes to your mind if you were trying to speak to someone fifty years from now. What's the most important recollection or story coming out of this storm that you wish somebody knew about?

Peranich: Well, I hope the main thing we've learned is how to handle situations to, you know, to a degree that would alleviate suffering from the people *sooner*. I think of all things we learned, how many things we did wrong; at the same time, how many things we did right, the people themselves being so resilient. I guess the main thing I'm thankful for today and will be thankful for forever is that none of us lost our lives. John did lose a cousin here in De Lisle; he drowned. But my immediate family, by the grace of God, was spared.

Smith: What would be the best memory that you have, off the top of your head, the best thing that you've seen or heard or participated in about this storm and the recovery?

Peranich: Well, just something trivial, just that's so personal. You know you suspend reality. We, you know, when we approached our home, probably half a mile away, saw cushions and various things that had heretofore been in our home lying around in the debris. So you began to suspend—and I often wonder if people who face death or in battle cope the same way that you actually sort of suspend reality and function. And we were away from home when the storm hit, and I don't know if you want to go into that later, you know, why we happened to be away.

Smith: Sure.

Peranich: Well, I was a speaker at a conference in Seattle, National Conference of State Legislators, and since we would be celebrating John's seventieth birthday while we were in Seattle, and under the good graces of the State of Mississippi I had already had a flight from the Coast to Seattle, we decided to take an Alaskan cruise. And, in fact, when the storm entered the Gulf and those of us, and hereafter, will know when a storm enters the Gulf that you're at a different level. We were actually between Alaska and about to go into British Columbia, the cruise ship. So, the last part of the cruise we don't remember because we were glued to the British system that they had on the ship. And then our greatest goal was to urge our family members to not to stay in their homes, to get out, which thank goodness they did. And then just every instinct we had, every instinct we had was that urge to get home. And we were able to get the last flight into Jackson, Mississippi, before the airport closed, and then the day after the storm able to get to the Coast via a Black Hawk helicopter, my husband and I. He, retired from Mississippi Power, was, of course, a central personnel, and I, being a politician, was, at that point, irrelevant. But the best part—I must tell you this—when we got as close as we could, we walked in and everything is so horrible, and we heard our dog bark and come around the wreckage, and that is, in fact, the only time that I saw my husband cry because, you know, the simple fact that your dog survived. Now, since we had flown, not only did we lose our home but we lost our car and our truck, and the children had had to flee and couldn't get the dog in time, so our dog actually swam—we have no idea what he went through—and my cat. So, our dog and our cat survived in spite of us.

Smith: Your dog's a Lab[rador]?

Peranich: He is a Lab and cannot bear bad weather, and the cat is neurotic, but then, you know, maybe he just caught that from us.

Smith: OK, you said that when you got back to Jackson you could go no further.

Peranich: We could go no further and I was in communication—

Smith: This was Sunday?

Peranich: Yes, well, I have no—I don't know when it was.

Smith: OK.

Peranich: I have no, I have no idea. I had no idea of any of that time.

Smith: How did you come to be in a Black Hawk helicopter?

Peranich: Well, I was in communication with the Speaker of the House and was going to just stay at the Capitol until we could—we were getting home, there was never any doubt in my mind. I didn't know how, but we were getting home. And one of my colleagues, Bobby Moak, who now is chairman of the Gaming Committee, picked us up at the airport late at night and brought us to his home. And we, of course, were watching television and the next day, or that evening they lost power. So, the storm as it affected, hit the Coast and came inland, but we knew it had devastated the Coast, came inland, they lost power. So, his wife was evacuating to her family in the Delta someplace and Bobby then took me to the Capitol and I was able to get in touch with a young man that worked for the governor and told him that if they were going south, that I needed to get home and that I, you know, told him about my husband being mobilized with the power company, but also I had to get home to my family. And found out that the governor, in fact, was—now this is the day after the storm—the governor was, in fact, bringing a series of Black Hawk helicopters down with news individuals in there, the news media. So I managed to get my husband and I on that flight with the Black Hawk. Of course, we had nothing here, but we hadn't actually seen it yet and any baggage that we had from our trip we had to leave in Jackson, and so essentially we came down—I had a pair of tennis shoes, and my husband, when he realized we were coming into a storm, moving into a storm area, actually got off the cruise ship in Alaska and bought work boots, and came back on the ship with work boots that, when we got off the helicopter, he already had his work boots on. And the president of the power company, Anthony Topazi, of course they were there to meet the governor and all this sort of stuff, but when he saw John getting off the helicopter and realized he had gotten work boots in Alaska and walked off the helicopter with nothing, ready to go to work, he was very emotional. We, of course, all this time were very stoic.

Smith: OK, so you got off the helicopter at the airport in Gulfport?

Peranich: I got off the helicopter at the airport in Gulfport. And one of the stipulations when it was arranged, the transport was arranged by the young man that worked for the governor's office, that we remain on the helicopter until the governor had held his press conference and then we could disembark from the helicopter. So, we were so grateful to get home that, you know, we were going to just will ourselves home, so I was happy, but I didn't see how we could be so distracting to stragglers.

Smith: And how did you get from the airport back to your house?

Peranich: Well, the power company, actually, since John would have to go to work immediately, the power company—and I think the government sector should take note

of this—the power company actually had their individuals who worked for them, who were retired, to come in at various times during the year and train for just such emergencies as this. After [Hurricane] Camille, they had a terrible incident where a crew came in from Alabama, Alabama also being part of the Southern Company, sister to Mississippi Power, and they had fatalities because they weren't familiar with the area, and when they would energize the lines, it was just very dangerous. So then they had people accompany them who were familiar with the system, and that's the role John would play, specifically in this area. So the power company, they called and someone came to meet John and that poor soul, you know, we said, "Well, we'd please like to go by our house." He was taking us to Bay St. Louis because that's where the power company on this end was functioning, from the office in Bay St. Louis, and that poor man had to bring us here not realizing he was taking people into an area where they'd lost everything. So, you know, he got us as far as he could and then we walked in over debris, and while we were here that very first time, our son came over and when he saw his parents, he then got to be a little boy and cried, and he had just dispatched a ten-foot alligator that had been in his front yard, so maybe that had a little bit to do with his emotions. But to him the worst thing of all was to see his children's possessions; little toys and things scattered. That seemed to be what got him. What got me after realizing the emotional—thinking the dog was here, where we would've had guilt that we abandoned him—was looking at the pictures. The pictures, when I closed my eyes now, it's not just your couch cushions and things that you realize are yours in these circumstances you never thought you'd see, but pictures scattered. Because by this time the sun had dried stuff and pictures were stuck in bushes all over on the ground, and when you'd pick them up to touch them, the process of, I guess, developing the pictures, if the image was still there, it would slide off. So you got to lose them twice; you got to lose them when they washed out of your house and when you touched them again, the color or the image just washed off, with the exception of old Polaroids, so I guess the process that they used to coat the old Polaroids, the image remained. So, you know, you have no pictures of your children when they were little or any documents or, you know, it's just everything, all that's wiped out but you have them living, which is the most magnificent thing of all.

Smith: Your house was washed through.

Peranich: The house was washed through and, you know, in a terrible situation, but we didn't realize until everything we cleared that the house was so damaged that it was like a hundred percent loss. While it looked like you may have remnants of a home, in fact it was much like you'd touch ashes in a fire that would disintegrate. So we had to start from scratch. So we rebuilt on a slab, so our slab remained.

Smith: And how deep was the water that went through your house?

Peranich: Well, the water that came through here where we're located in De Lisle on the edge of Bay St. Louis—Bay of St. Louis, Pass Christian, much like the Point in Biloxi, is a peninsula. You have the Mississippi Sound, of course, and Bay of St. Louis, and then rivers and bayous behind it. So there is no actual land mass between

the Bay of St. Louis and De Lisle, or Pass Christian and De Lisle. Because it's a series of Bayou Arcadia, Wolf River, Bayou Potage, and marsh grass; there is no land mass in there to break the fury of the storm. So our neighbors stayed and they went into the attic, and they said that the water came so fast. And I think that's why so many people were lost, the water just seeped in and seeped. It came in just huge, huge volume. But here where we are, they actually had wave action on top of the water that had risen. You had wave action, you had white caps. So we had between, I guess between five and six feet of water. You know I have no doubt had we been here when the storm came, we would've lost our lives.

Smith: So you, you essentially lost everything that was in your home.

Peranich: Yes.

Smith: How did you live? What did you do that night?

Peranich: Well, that night the gentleman that had brought us this far that picked us up at the airport, the power company person, as I said they were working out of Bay St. Louis, so he took us to Bay St. Louis to the service center on Highway 90 at Bay St. Louis. And there were various power company people bedded down there on air mattresses, and they got us an air mattress and we then stayed in one of the offices. They tried to put the—now, there were no children there—but they put us in offices, and so you had an office and a floor. But, you know, while we were there, some power company employees, these happened to be men, their wives came in, they were also homeless, and they would make sandwiches. So the only food these individuals would have was that they would somehow find cold cuts and sandwiches, and the men would have that when they came in. Maybe they'd eat a sandwich in the morning and then go work all day, and then come back and get a sandwich at night. There was no place to bathe. And we stayed there for probably three nights, and by that time our oldest son, John, who had evacuated to Florida, he and his family returned and we were able to stay with them; John and his wife and their daughter, and their two dogs, and their cat and six kittens, we all cohabitated. No one had—there was no power and after, I guess, about a week my committee assistant, Debbie Wood, God bless her, and her father were able to buy a generator, and she and her father fought their way down Highway 49 and we were able to meet them in Hattiesburg, simply because John had the power company truck that would allow him with a pass to move. We went there and met them and picked up the generator and came back. And while we stayed at John's house we were able then to run the pump for water. And we were able to get the fuel; John would just, you know, get it from the power company. (laughter) We were very grateful, but at the time I don't know if they were aware of it. But, so we were able to run the—there was no air conditioning or really no lights, but we were able to run the pump, and occasionally a light bulb. So we were fortunate; we had water and we could flush a commode, so that's more than my neighbors had. But we were there and eventually we were able to get a FEMA camper and, again, it was not because I was a state legislator, it was because John was essential personnel with the power company; they were right up there with our fire and police, of course, and then

your people, your public utilities and, but considered essential personnel. So I digress now and tell you, you said what changes I made that I discovered needed to be made after the storm. When our children, eventually, were able to go to school in trailers and Quonset huts and tents, their faculty, their teachers were living wherever they could, whether it was Florida, and those men and women were driving in to be with the children. And their desire to be with the children was as great as a parent and a child; it was really something wonderful to see. So we then, I was able to get into the law that teachers, educators are now considered essential personnel because they were certainly essential to those children to have some normalcy in their lives to be back with, you know, with their classmates who was here and that teacher who gave them some stability. So that's one thing that we were able to do and I would recommend that all states do the same, and have told them that not only are fire and police essential personnel, but when you have a school system, your teachers are essential personnel. And we were able to change the law to allow them to actually be on school grounds because there was some—there was a glitch in the law that would not let them live on school grounds, so we did that all over in the De Lisle school system because they had nothing. And our principal was driving in from Florida every day because they had to, because they couldn't stay at night because there was no place to stay. We were able to set up—it was a village and it was a village of school teachers. So they taught all day on what was left of the school grounds, and then they lived there.

Smith: So they didn't go home; they were in the trailers.

Peranich: That's my point, my point exactly. They had no home to go to, so they taught in our Quonset hut tent-type things or trailers, and then they slept on the school grounds. So they went, you know, all day long they were there. But that was a big, big and important emotional, psychological, important thing to those children that I can't begin—that we can't even measure. And it was our healing process. It was a healing process. These children were living, a lot of them, in tent cities and to be able to go someplace, quite frankly, where they had warm food, something to eat, surrounded by people—it made them feel safe. They didn't feel safe where they were with strangers all around them, but when they went into the semblance of a classroom, I think they felt safe.

Smith: Let's stay with the school situation a little bit. How many schools in Pass Christian's system were damaged or destroyed, do you know?

Peranich: Yes, all the schools were. The De Lisle School was heavily damaged, but the rest of them were obliterated. Pass Christian High School was obliterated. Pass Christian Middle School was obliterated. Pass Christian Elementary and Pass Christian Proper obliterated. The only school in the Pass Christian municipal secular school district to survive, of any semblance resembling a building, was the school, a little elementary school here in De Lisle. And the teachers and the school board members, as soon as the water was down, went in themselves and began to rip carpet up, or anything that was in there. If there was tile, they ripped it all out. And so they were then back in but it was raw cement. And that's one thing that impressed the

author, John Grisham, who was a Mississippian and came to our aid, he and his wife Renee. They were so impressed by the fact that these teachers had gone in there and, in essence, saved what was left of the Pass Christian school system. Had they waited and not been able to do that, the mold would have set in and the building would not have been—they wouldn't have been able to do anything in that building. So while the children didn't go to school in what was left of the building, the structure of the school system was able to function out of that remaining building. And then as the portable buildings and various things came in, the Seabees, God bless them, went to work and cleared land in areas to put—you just saw red clay, to put these temporary quarters on red clay with portable toilets there, also, and our children did not have running water, probably, for two years until our Congressman Gene Taylor brought a congressional delegation down with the then Speaker of the House and currently Nancy Pelosi, who walked through and witnessed the fact that all this time there had been pending applications to allow us to drill a well, and hadn't come yet. You can bring portable water in but you can't flush a commode for children in school with portable water; you must have, you have to have facilities for them to wash their hands. So we were able to get that done and that was done after that visit, it was granted in a matter of days. So while they were still in portable buildings, they actually had a well where they had water that they could drink and could wash their hands. Because remember, this was not just an elementary school, this had now become Pass Christian High School, Pass Christian Middle School, Pass Christian Junior High, and the whole Pass Christian system was run out of that one little building, and then the students were in portable buildings and would have to change classes into different buildings in inclement weather, and those children—Pass Christian was a Blue Ribbon, Level Five school, and at this time that we're doing this interview, you can't get any better than that. And I want you to know that when they next tested them, they were still a Blue Ribbon, Level Five school; so that speaks for the students, but it also speaks volumes for the leadership and the faculty.

Smith: You mentioned they didn't have the water to flush with. They were using these port-o-lets.

Peranich: They were using port-o-lets, so you had little children, little kindergarten, pre-K children going in there trying to exist much as they existed at home. Their tent city in Pass Christian had portable showers and portable restroom facilities, and so here these little children came to school and the teachers—the teachers then became nursery school teachers, also, because they would have to take these little children to the bathroom. You know you can't send a five year old to the bathroom when you have seniors running in and out, so how they managed, you know, that in and of itself would be a story—that in and of itself would be a story.

Smith: Now, as we're speaking now, this is May 2008, about three school years have been completed since Katrina. What's the state of physical plant of Pass Christian schools today?

Peranich: The high school is back in operation. Let me, let me just tell you, go back to who these people are when we're talking about Pass Christian, their public school system. We had young people come; one of them was living in a car, the desire to reunite to graduate with their class. Other families took children in; the parents were someplace else, but the seniors, in particular, came back and nothing was too much trouble. If you were living at Tent City, you just all got together and lived together. We had students that were living in tents in Tent City in order to graduate with the high school class, and they did. So that just tells you, you know, who these people are when we say Pass Christian High School students. We had the high school up. Robin Roberts, who is a graduate of Pass Christian High School, of course, put us, you know, brought us to national attention, but Robin dedicated herself to getting Pass Christian up on its feet. The high school is up and going; they're building the middle school, the school offices are going to have moved—were washed out of North Street in Pass and they'll remain out here in De Lisle. And the De Lisle school will be the next one built, the De Lisle elementary will be the next one built. But, you know, we're still in portable classrooms in areas of Pass Christian. And the Bay St. Louis school system is still in tent Quonset huts. The faculty is in tent Quonset huts and that, you know, people can't get over that.

Smith: I think a lot of people would be amazed at coming up on almost three years after the storm that you've had one building rehabilitated and others under construction, but you're still in trailers. Can you talk about what it is that makes that process so slow?

Peranich: Well, it's bureaucracy at its worst. The money that came in is in the area of Community Development Block Grants or—all of the funds that Congress appropriated to alleviate situations like this and, certainly, the suffering came through the Community Development Block Grants, billions of dollars came through the governor's office, and the governor then set up a mechanism where it was administered through his office and, quite frankly, that slowed the process because there are people—while we're very grateful for the money, there are people who had been doing this job for years who would've known how to make the system work, and that slowed it down. And then various levels of government from FEMA to MEMA to all these, you know, they're new four-letter words now, FEMA.

Smith: It's Federal Emergency Management.

Peranich: Yes.

Smith: And MEMA is Mississippi Emergency Management.

Peranich: Yes, and we had HUD [Housing and Urban Development], we had the various environmental groups. Everybody, when you have a lot of money for anything, you find everyone—if we were raising horses, we would say every horse tried to put his muzzle in the trough, so, you know, everyone then had a role to play that created a whole level of bureaucracy. So if the money had just come, you know,

we, the people that actually knew, were actually on the ground would've known what to do. I think a classic example of that, that came to light in the Stennis Institute study was Waveland/Hancock County, the firemen and policemen in Waveland—it's a miracle that they survived because there was nothing left in their town, *nothing*—they would walk the railroad tracks from Waveland to an area of Bay St. Louis to get water. They were only allowed one or two bottles of water and they'd have to walk back. I mean how ridiculous is that? Instead of getting cases of water, or letting them take cases of water, they would hold them to the same standard as though they were dolling out to people who just were standing around; just goofy things like that. Things that were so ridiculous—well, you know the Iraq War is ridiculous. But we had, in other hurricanes we had our Mississippi National Guard, our own people that were mobilized from all over the state of Mississippi that would come to our aid. I say that because I'm old enough to remember the National Guard; I was seven years old in the 1947 Hurricane, that's before they named them. And then in Hurricane Camille, you know, our National Guard were out. This time our National Guard were deployed all over and the National Guardsmen, men and women that came in here were absolutely wonderful, from the Midwest, they were on their way back from Iraq, so they were here with us while their families were all in the United States and out of harm's way, to a certain degree, their families were waiting on them. So we had—and they were compassionate and they were wonderful, but, you know, our National Guard that could've been in here, they, in fact, were deprived of being with their families *or* they were on their way to Iraq. But those on their way to Iraq, unlike the Seabees in Hurricane Camille and that was during the Vietnam War—another war that shouldn't have happened—the Seabees that were here and were ready to ship out and relieve the Seabees to rotate out of Vietnam were put in civic action projects, so they were here and the other poor souls had to wait. This time we found that our Seabees, who could do anything, jumped in and helped and were stopped because the private sector said, "This is a job for us. We can do this." Now, these private sector people, you'll understand, were no-bid contractors from wherever, we didn't know. I know the garbage people were political cronies that came out of Florida and we had to fight to get our local people that were left that had trucks, dump trucks that would run, an opportunity to be employed instead of these people coming in here and profiting from our misery.

(brief interruption)

Peranich: And after, the people that came in here that helped us most of all were the volunteers; the volunteers from religious organizations and volunteers of every stripe. We had—people actually allowed their children to come in here and live in tents in these terrible conditions, we had people that came in and cooked and fed us. We, probably for one year, we had to eat at a tent in Pass Christian because there was no way, there was no way to get up and going, and they fed us there. We're grateful for that.

Smith: You and John ate in the tent?

Peranich: Yes, we ate in the tent. And Katrina was an equal opportunity destroyer; you would have someone who had lived in, you know, a several million dollar home on the beach next to someone who had lived in Camille Village, which was the housing for people of modest, of low means financial status in Pass Christian, but we were all in the same line eating the same food. And that's—people—that, also, is a lesson that needs to be learned. People need a place to be together. The wonderful, wonderful opportunity to go in nasty, dirty to see people, that you didn't even know if they had survived, to see them, it was a wonderful, wonderful thing. It was an uplifting—it was almost like a religious experience to get together in the evening. And that, you know, the individuals that volunteered marveled, really marveled at that; black and white, young and old. The emotion that was displayed when you'd see each other, it was really wonderful.

Smith: You and John lived in a FEMA trailer for how long?

Peranich: We lived in a FEMA trailer for two years. Well, the first FEMA trailer we went into, the fumes—I'm allergic, different people are allergic to different things, I'm allergic to fingernail polish because of a certain chemical that's in fingernail polish—well, lo and behold, it's the same chemical they used to use glue in the FEMA campers. So, you know, my eyes were red-rimmed, it was miserable. You couldn't sleep, you couldn't open a door because the mosquitoes and gnats were so bad, so you'd have to stay in there. That one had an electrical fire that was a fortunate fire. Had an electrical fire, so they had to take it and we then got delivery of a—well, I will say they were going to take it, I use that term—I'll just say that. John hooked it up to his truck, the power company truck, and was going to haul it out.

(brief interruption)

Peranich: Where was I?

Smith: You were talking about the FEMA trailer.

Peranich: All right, so, had an electrical fire and John was going to take the truck out, and they said, no, they would swap it out. Now, I was in Jackson in session. So when I came home, they'd swapped the trailers out all right. The trailer they brought—we don't know who had been in it, some people handling the FEMA operation or someone had been in it because when I arrived home from the legislature that Friday, we couldn't use the lights in what was passing for the bedroom because there were cigarette butts put out in the light fixtures and it was so nasty and dirty that I had to stay up half the night. Now John, of course, was in a sleeping bag in it so he wasn't fooling around with anything, but I had to clean that filthy, you know, that filthy thing. So we did have a larger trailer that replaced the actual FEMA trailer with the fumes, but it was filthy. And I just don't know how many other people were in the same situation. Later, when my mother was able to come from Mobile where she had evacuated, she'd lost her home, also, she was in a FEMA camper next to us, but I was able, by that time, to get something better for my mother than we, in fact, had. And

the reason you could have a FEMA camper, the stipulation was you had to have water and you had to have a sewer connection. Well, naturally the city sewer systems were down, the water systems were down, so those folks who lived in an area that had a septic tank and a well, if they had a generator were in better shape because they could then use—go on their own properties. So, Mother was able to connect to the septic tank and our well here, and that's why she could be here with us.

Smith: What's it like living in one of those little boxes called a FEMA trailer?

Peranich: Well, my husband and I know more about each other than we ever intended. I can tell you what we heard. It was miserable. You could actually use the facilities and make the bed at the same time. They operated with butane and our people were so unaccustomed, didn't know what butane was, especially our older citizens would use it and when the butane ran out, they had no idea what was going on. So, they would have to fill it with butane, which was very dangerous. That went on and on. The parts that worked with electricity, if you had a power pole—I left that part out—you had to have a septic tank, a well, and had to get electricity to you. So once we, you know, had all that done, the space, you just stayed out of it as much as you could; you stayed out in the elements, whether the sun was shining or it was foggy or the mosquitoes bit you, and as a last resort you went in. We even cooked outside. We didn't cook inside; we cooked outside like a pack of gypsies. But it was a place to lay down and you were on your own property. So, you know, you still didn't have a sense of being in control of anything. All we did for, it seems like a year and a half, two years, was fill out various forms and papers to replace the forms and papers we'd filled out that, you know, nobody knew where they went, so, with people we didn't know and wanted things you didn't have. You know, "Well, all the instructions are online." Well, that's good if you're in Jackson and you can pull it offline, but if you're living in a FEMA camper and you don't have any, a computer or anything, how are you supposed to get stuff offline? So, here we go with the ingenuity of citizens. Sally James is the librarian in Pass Christian. Sally managed to get a trailer, start the library, but it really wasn't the library, it was the hub of Pass Christian. Our mayor, the storm destroyed him emotionally; he couldn't function.

Smith: This is Billy McDonald?

Peranich: Yes, Mayor Billy McDonald, who had been a good mayor and president of the board of supervisors, lost everything and here his city is destroyed, and he was overwhelmed and he became—I guess what you would call it if he had been to war would be shell-shocked. He couldn't talk, he couldn't do anything. He could just sit there or he was absent, so the City of Pass Christian, in essence, was not a functioning, you know, didn't have a functioning government. The board attorney kind of helped. The aldermen were afraid to make a decision. So, up steps our librarian and begins to organize volunteers and would make a list of people who needed things and needed help. We were fortunate that a young woman from the, I think it was *New York Times*—I'll give you the actual information in a minute—came down to cover the story and was so taken by this, she stayed with us and began the *Gazebo Gazette*. The first thing

she did was print paper with phone numbers and places to go for what you needed. If you needed water, if you needed to talk to somebody, everything was listed. It consisted of where you could go find help, where there was food, you know, what was open, who had lumber—it was just a survival sheet and has now evolved into a little weekly newspaper in Pass Christian, and she has since been awarded a prize for her school of journalism at Columbia University. And she has made her home with us in Pass Christian. We found that people that came bonded with us and it was just, it was just marvelous. They'd just come for a week or two and gone, but they would come and they'd stay, and then they'd come back and they'd tell our story, and they'd bring additional people back. So the librarian, Sally James, saved Pass Christian.

Smith: You were involved in trying to find a way to rebuild your house through this time and there were several different methods; people had insurance, they had small business development, administration, they had FEMA. Talk about your experience in all of that.

Peranich: Well, the Congress appropriated \$150,000 per individual on a number that were given them of the people who had lost their homes. Now, these were people who—they were very careful to say people, who through no fault of their own, lost their homes. But they considered the storm, you know, a catastrophe, an act of God. Only the insurance companies thought we did it to ourselves. Congress appropriated 150[,000 dollars] per household with an estimate of how many people had lost their homes, and we're very grateful for that.

Smith: A hundred and fifty thousand.

Peranich: A hundred and fifty thousand. Then the State of Mississippi developed their own plan. The State of Mississippi, because Congress gave the money to the State of Mississippi and the governor, himself, took it upon himself and formed various divisions that would dispense the money. And contractors dispensing the money from Virginia area and other areas, you know, there were no local people. Then the governor decided, Congress had allocated the 150,000, the governor then decided any proceeds you received from your insurance company had to be deducted from the 150,000, and then any other federal money—I could see a rationale there—any other federal money, FEMA gave some people \$5000, you know, just to survive to pay rent or to pay, find a hotel room or find something. I could see taking that \$5000 off the 150. But what that meant was that if you were negotiating with your insurance company or you were trying to get an adjustor to come or you were appealing your insurance that was a delay. So, I'll just use myself as an example. We were insured by Mississippi Farm Bureau Insurance that we had had probably for forty years. We were insured, I'll just say like around \$300,000 home and contents, and those are dollars, you know, '05 dollars. So, we received, I think, \$34,000 from our insurance company. We received nothing for our contents. So we had, would've had—and then the 150,000, you got a percentage predicated on your amount of loss. Well, you had three different series of individuals to come through and give you three different amounts of loss. If you were 100 percent, you had the 150 less your

insurance proceeds or any 500, and that's what you had. If someone came behind them and said, "No, you had 90 percent loss," then you had the competing interest from the same agency that's supposed to help you. Then, lo and behold, behind that comes another person and that's supposed to be the final arbiter of, you know, your loss. So, we were not 100 percent because we had a slab. If you had a slab, you weren't 100 percent. If you had any kind of structure, it was less than that. So, here we had some individual now that's going to come and tell you—now they haven't taken the walls out, they haven't taken anything out, so they don't know if you're structurally sound, they don't know what kind of situation you were truly in because they're just, guess what, insurance adjusters. So they're the "glass is either half full or half empty," but not to your advantage. So, you know, so you had the 150, and say they came through and said you had 75 percent loss, well then you do the numbers and you then subtract your insurance. So, some people got a pittance, some people got the maximum. Now, our home was paid for. We now, at this age—SBA [Small Business Administration] does not discriminate—my husband is seventy-three and we now have a 30-year SBA loan. So we went from having our home paid for and, you know, and a retirement account and your investments and various things, but you're now—you have a mortgage again. So, people tried to get by on the little they had rather than go with the mortgage. Now, if you were a young family working and you were in a \$250,000 home, which is you know probably a middle-class home, and you got your \$150,000 and you weren't quite damaged, and you had a mortgage, maybe, for \$250,000, you weren't whole, you couldn't even start again. So, after much consternation and people actually taken to task, they came and they're now supposed to be getting checks out—they're not out yet, we're three years out now—for your uncompensated loss. So they're now realizing, if in fact your loss was greater than they will come with additional money. All this is federal money, by the way, that you should've had in your hands all this time. They have *yet*, to date, to allocate the money that they have had in hand for over two years for elevation grants.

Smith: This is the Mississippi—

Peranich: This is the Mississippi plan. The FEMA—

Smith: Federal money administered through the State of Mississippi.

Peranich: Yes, for elevation grants. In other words, you were in a—you flooded, so if you elevate now, you know you may have this much rebuilt but you must elevate three, five, ten or fifteen feet and you have up to \$30,000 to elevate, to mitigate your elevation. Well, guess what? Not one dime of that elevation money that we've had all this time has been issued. Now, even in the Bible it says you must have a good foundation to build. Well, the people that hadn't received their elevation grants, then elevated out of necessity out of their proceeds of their combination of insurance, homeowner grant, all their building had come to a halt because they are now short that money they would've needed to elevate. So I think you should follow sequentially what common sense would tell you. You would give people money to sustain them body and soul until they can—the process begins to work. Now, this is separate from

food and water and shelter. This would be to begin to recover. You would have to remove the debris, you would have to, if you had to mitigate you would have to do, you know, bring dirt in or move to a different part of your lot, you would then allocate the money for elevation so you could build your foundation for your home, then you would come and build your home, and then you would come and insure. So, but that isn't the way it went. Here we are three years out and the elevation grants still have not gone out. Now, I don't know if they're accruing interest, I don't know the situation because only the governor knows. This is, you know, no one else knows what's going on. We're starting to break them up a little bit now since they're hitting a lot of problems with allocating money other than Congress intended, there are all sorts of congressional investigations going on, so now they're starting to open up a little bit because I think they want to spread it around some. You also had to have a covenant on your property that you would forevermore have flood insurance. Well, that wasn't that bad, with the exception that the flood insurance is so expensive, you can't afford it. The federal flood insurance costs have gone up, but wind you can't afford. The insurance companies won't write it, so you're caught between the rock and the hard place. You have to have insurance to get the money and you can't afford the insurance to build.

Smith: So, the housing thing has been really hard.

Peranich: Housing has been a fiasco. People that could afford already built. People who were waiting for SBA loans have built now; in desperation they built or they left, they walked away. This is the greatest, to me will be the greatest, land will change hands much as it did in the Great Depression or the Dust Bowl because when the governor said people will no longer be able to live along the Coast like they did before, I thought it was heartless. Now I think it may have been intentional. I think they want property for development so all this stuff is held up. I hate to be a cynic, but I am.

Smith: OK. Let's think about the neighborhood around here; your experiences there. What are you seeing in other people in the neighborhood? How's this neighborhood, the De Lisle community doing? What number of people do you think have actually managed to rebuild and get their selves back together? You and John managed to get back in your house last fall?

Peranich: Right. Well, we're still down a third in our school district. So if you look and say a third of your students aren't back and you equate that to families, you know, that tells you something there. But we're back in our house. Our son and his wife and two children are back in their house. We were almost two years, a little more than two years before we got in our house. My grandson and his wife and family were more than that, I guess about, it seems like two and a half years. My mother, to this day, is still not in hers. My mother is still not in her home. We anticipate her—my mother's eighty-seven—we anticipate her being in her home probably in the next two months. My son and his wife had to get an SBA loan because they had to use their proceeds of their grant to pay off their mortgage, so the mortgage company got their money. And

to make sure they got their money, the checks were made out to the mortgage company. And so they received an SBA loan to build a new home; but they're young, they'll be fine. But my mother couldn't incur that, she's on fixed income and so volunteers built her home, some wonderful volunteers. Mother had enough in her grant and her insurance to buy her material and the volunteers built her home, and you'll find that the majority of the homes that are up now are homes that were built by volunteers. Anthony, our son, and his family—our home was built by a contractor who was a member of the family and that is probably the reason we were in our homes two years after Katrina and other people are still waiting.

Smith: As you looked around, again, in the community, do you have any observations about the way the local government has functioned? You mentioned the City of Pass Christian, the mayor was unable to cope with it. What do you see happening with city and county government for good or bad coming out of the storm?

Peranich: Well, you know, that's what we're trying to ascertain now, you know, who's in charge. If in fact—you know, I would like to see the National Guard come in immediately. We have such a tremendous asset here of the Seabee Base in Gulfport with everything that's containerized in a box car, and their boxcars are containers with the rail yard right there at the Navy base. One boxcar would have a hospital. One boxcar would have a mess tent. One boxcar would have living quarters. All that could've been used early on had we had the authority to do that. So, I think, you know, the first civic action project should be the community where you live because these young men and women, remember their homes were destroyed, too. So, if in fact we have an asset like that, I'd like to see that, you know, that dispensed. We need a system that gets—we had more helicopters fly over us and people observing that we said, "If [President] George Bush comes one more time and doesn't bring a plane load of water and groceries, we wish he'd just stay." (laughter) He made more trips here, and to my knowledge, you know, didn't bring a drink of water. We need warehouses, we need to have places set up throughout—and I would say this about all of the entire country, but certainly around areas prone to, you know, to flooding or hurricanes, that we need to have someplace to go that's designated to go; we need to have water and food dispensed, MREs [meals ready to eat], they need to drop them by helicopter, if nothing else. We need water and MREs and shelter, but water and MREs, and one thing we learned, not just baby formula and baby diapers, but there's so many old people who are in diapers themselves. I know this because one of our neighbors around the corner, because you remember you emptied everyone out of nursing homes, had an elderly relative and they needed—living in cramped conditions, they needed adult diapers. So I think things like that. There needs to be a division that looks to elderly people and their needs, things they need; babies. Also, the mental health money has run out and it's still very bad, and domestic violence is up. I serve on the Public Health Committee and we had testimony from the State Department of Mental Health that the residual mental health problems around here are going to be horrific. You know we, as adults, know how difficult it was to cope. We have no way of knowing how this has affected our children, that's why you have *got to get them* into some semblance of school life immediately, as quick as you can because to them

that's normal. The parents aren't normal. It doesn't matter the circumstances, they're in school, they've got to be in school and something has to be the same for them and that is their lessons.

Smith: You have been the person that's really instrumental in helping USM [University of Southern Mississippi] Gulf Coast develop over the last twenty years in Long Beach, the campus at Gulf Park. What did you come to understand about the situation of that state college board campus?

Peranich: Oh, where shall I begin? I don't guess we have to go as far back as having to go to the supreme court to allow us to have freshmen.

Smith: Well, let's think about, let's think about Katrina.

Peranich: OK. My concern, with the history of the inattention and neglect, and certainly not a priority that Gulf Park Campus at The University of Southern Mississippi had within the Hattiesburg Campus, itself, it was—I was concerned. It was allowed. Much as an example I used about getting in immediately and cleaning out the buildings allowed us to save this particular school, had we been allowed, we could've gotten in there or folks could've gotten in there and cleaned it out, and I think the damage would not have been as severe. But it was allowed to mold because they wanted it to go away; it didn't, the buildings didn't go away, but they wanted it to go away.

Smith: Who do you think wanted it to go away?

Peranich: Oh, I think, I think the president.

Smith: And who is that?

Peranich: That is Shelby Thames, all right, and that whole organization that fought us all along, you know. They thought this, you know, that finally we're gone, we're finally gone. But the buildings made it; the older historic buildings in the front didn't need to be damaged as much as they did; the library could've been, the damage shouldn't have been as great, but they just didn't fool with it. Then we had to battle and find out where the insurance money was going to make sure they didn't take the insurance money that was paid for the Gulf Park Campus and use it someplace else. It has always been a battle and it is still a battle. The goal all along was, you know, while we wanted great things to happen, the only thing we could control in those of us that were available at the time to help was to try and get the three buildings that the faculty told us they needed to complete a university. They had a library, they had to have offices, and science and nursing building, and the opportunity to graduate students here. We know we have no nurses. The state—not just the state, it's the United States of America needed nurses and we needed math teachers, we don't have math teachers, and instead of getting all that up and running, they began to—I think they were opportunistic in trying to do us in, quite frankly. And I say that with

justifiable paranoia. We fought this battle a long time and I see no commitment, as of this date, for them to move forward and I intend to see that they do move forward. But, you know, how long the faculty can keep hope—I hope they’ll do it; if I can do it, I hope they can do it.

Smith: Right after the storm the faculty moved their operations to the old hospital complex in Gulfport. There were some discussions about what to do with the Gulf Park Campus. Did you participate in any of those discussions with board members or officials from USM about what to do with Gulf Park?

Peranich: The only conversations I had, and I had them often, was that Gulf Park will be up and running again as a four-year university, period. I didn’t entertain any discussion with anything else. As it has evolved now, land has been donated in close proximity to expand the university and I think that’s wonderful, but it will have to be in addition and in concert with the campus at Gulf Park, and not to the detriment of the campus at Gulf Park. If we still have money out there to construct a third building, and you know my goal now, I have to safeguard that money to see that it’s not reappropriated within the University of Southern Mississippi budget and also that it’s not pounced on by other universities, and I’ve thus far been able to do that. But until they allow us to get that third building in the ground and set a direction for The University of Southern Mississippi—we said at the time that we wanted to be a dual campus and we had no other intention of going and becoming The University of Southern Mississippi dual campus. If they continue to push us, you know, in my lifetime if they don’t want us, we’ll find somebody else that wants us.

Smith: Did you—

Peranich: And they can squander this resource that they will—whoever’s watched—if this happens and it’s on somebody’s watch, that’s all they’ll be remembered for.

Smith: Did you—were you aware of specific efforts to move the university operation out of Long Beach in the immediate aftermath of the storm?

Peranich: Yes, there were moves; there were moves all over, but the moves that they were talking about moving the university out of Long Beach were only for fulfilling their desires. There was no necessity. This was just a long opportunity that they’d been waiting for through multiple administrations. We haven’t had a friendly person now, and the current president, I truly don’t know her that well, but we haven’t had a friendly in there since Dr. Flemming left. And I say that from personal experience. I say that from the experience of serving in the legislature and working to get bond money to construct buildings on the campus, and then having the chairman of the Ways and Means Committee hand me a note written by the person who has represented The University of Southern Mississippi in Jackson saying, “We don’t want it.”

Smith: In the immediate aftermath of the storm, do you remember a conversation talking about cats and claws?

Peranich: Yes, I do. I hate to say this—

Smith: Who was that conversation with?

Peranich: I imagine it was with the president.

Smith: Or Dr. Joachim?

Peranich: Oh yes, the—in what capacity I have never been absolutely certain what capacity Dr. Joachim serves the Gulf Park Campus.

Smith: She is the functioning chief executive officer.

Peranich: All right, the functioning chief executive officer. There were discussions about moving it and doing various things, and I told the lady, I said, “Well, then I suggest you get some cats and practice flushing them down the commode because it will be easier to do that than to move The University of Southern Mississippi from the Gulf Park Campus, and that was one of the nicer things I said.

Smith: And you said that, you used that analogy because of what was coming up around you that made you think you needed to make it clear.

Peranich: They were talking about, you know, in essence there would be no University of Southern Mississippi in Long Beach, Mississippi.

Smith: OK.

Peranich: And they would move it, perhaps, to another area of the county which we know—one thing about being in the legislature all this time, the state of Mississippi, all the universities are combined in a bond bill and out of that bond bill is allocated so much for the University of Mississippi, so much for Mississippi State, and the University of Southern Mississippi, Alcorn, all through, but the historically black universities have a different fund because of a federal suit, the [Jake] *Ayers* suit. So we would then have to get in, if you’re going to have a whole new university complex, you would have to determine whose bonds they would be. And I can tell you, if you get, if you—it’s like the loaves and the fishes—if The University of Southern Mississippi would come in and say, “We need \$40 million worth of bonds,” I can absolutely tell you every other university would file a suit wanting \$40 million worth of bonds. So to tell me that we’re going to build a brand new university, I would say that’s wonderful, but I can’t see it happening. I can’t see a student going into Cross Creek [Campus] for ten or fifteen years. So, The University of Southern Mississippi Dual Campus at Long Beach is the four-year university for the Gulf Coast. And when, and I’m in total support, when they build the large campus, The University of

Southern Mississippi Campus at Cross Creek, then I can see a role for that particular campus to evolve into, you know, maybe a part of the university, but it's certainly to be an academic part of the university, but I have no intention of The University of Southern Mississippi physically located in Long Beach at Gulf Park to die on the vine while they are looking down the road to some prospective major campus that I hope, I hope and pray and will do everything in my power to come to fruition but it won't happen, I'm afraid, it won't happen in my legislative lifetime.

Smith: For—

Peranich: Their whole goal, and it's not just The University of Southern Mississippi, it is also the other universities. Their goal was to put us in the same category as Meridian which works for them fine, but community colleges provide the first two years and the last two years are provided by Mississippi State University that they would be fine, not taking into account that in the southern counties in Mississippi would have to develop without a four-year university, we're not having it.

Smith: There came a time when the new commissioner, Meredith, appointed a project director of Gulf Park for the IHL [Institutions of Higher Learning] Board, Robert Bass. Did you—were you aware that the commissioner was moving in that direction?

Peranich: I was not aware that the commissioner was moving in that direction, but I had conversations with him on an ongoing basis and with members of the IHL Board from the Coast. When Robert Bass, who's the former mayor of Long Beach, is a CPA and a lawyer and is one of the most capable individuals and honorable individuals I have ever known. I knew him as a young man and I know him now as an adult and a husband and a father. When Robert Bass was appointed in the position with IHL to look at the development of the Gulf Park Campus, it was like Christmas morning, it was the most wonderful news that I had had. My concern now is that, you know, the board members who, for various reasons, somehow see us as a threat and I think part of it is that they don't want bonds in the future diverted from the main campuses, be it Mississippi State or University of Mississippi, they don't want those bonds gone or divided up, so I think they are using any means they can to keep us from happening. Because remember, they are also graduates of these universities and that's why they're put on there. So, for them to advocate to put millions of dollars of bonds into what they would consider, you know, a new university, The University of Southern Mississippi, they are not going to be—it's going to be very difficult to do. And unless you have the cooperation of the chairman of Ways and Means, the speaker of the House, the chairman of Finance, lieutenant governor, and the governor—you have to get a commitment from all those people because bonds come from the legislature. They originate in one house or the other and must be passed. And a bond bill has to have more than a simple majority. All of those people sitting there are representing different areas of the state. So, while in fact I hope this happens; if it doesn't happen, I hope we get a private university in here.

Smith: When you—when they were thinking about sites for a new campus, the Board has gotten two hundred acres—

Peranich: Um-hum, yes.

Smith: —donated at Cross Creek. Do you remember any of the proposals back and forth there about sites?

Peranich: Yes, it was supposed to be a secret, you know, a deep secret, but you would hear rumors that they were trying to get it—William Carey [University] has since gone to the area of the Tradition development right out of Stone County. There was talk that they were going to be given land there. You know, I don't know how it will be in the future, but right now to get up and down Highway 49 is bumper to bumper, you would have to have had parachutes to get into a campus up there. Then they were talking about Gulfport borrowing money and buying property, and then donating it to the university. And then there was a third proposal that they accepted was land to be developed in an area in close proximity to the existing campus in west Harrison in an area that would not flood and allow the university to evolve in that area. And thank goodness that proposal passed, but I can tell you it was with great consternation from local officials who had, for various reasons, wanted the university in other places, and also on the board who didn't want it at all but were finally forced to do it, because they could see they did not want to have to come to the legislature. Well, I'll use Mississippi State just as an example and I'll just use Scott Ross just to pick out a particular member. I served with Scott in the legislature and he is a friend of mine, but Scott loves Mississippi State more than Gale Sayers loved Brian Piccolo [reference to football teammates]. He—to get Scott Ross to vote for—to propose a bond bill that Mississippi State didn't have an equal share, I will have to see it. I will have to see stigmata, and I just say that because I know how deeply he loves that university, and I hope he will put the good of the entire state of Mississippi over what he loves and cherishes right next to his, to God and his family.

Smith: All right.

Peranich: How's that?

Smith: So the board finally got around to picking a piece of property. Do you think they picked the best available property at Cross Creek?

Peranich: Absolutely, it's in close proximity to the existing campus to give it continuity, the land was free, accessible to an interstate, so the university—remember, we're not just talking about Harrison County and Jackson County, we're also talking about Hancock County that has the NASA Space Center there that has more PhDs per inch, probably, than any place in the state of Mississippi or in the South. It would allow access along a main corridor between the three coastal counties and, also, if they talk about adding an additional corridor off [Highway] 49, this, off of I-10 would serve all of the three southern counties and would solve a—would only make sense

rather than to try to go up Highway 49 or, you know, off someplace into Biloxi that—and, also, the citizens of Gulfport didn't have to incur any bond debt to buy property when free property was available. Of the two parcels of free property, this by far was the best.

Smith: Now you—

Peranich: And I'd like to see a park, you know, a park developed around there with industries and incubators much as, Mississippi State has a technology park has evolved around Mississippi State; I see the same thing for The University of Southern Mississippi.

Smith: You're assessing the political viability of a major bond bill to fund the campus and you're—

Peranich: Well, I'm saying that—

Smith: —you're concerned about the Board?

Peranich: I am saying that to you because I don't know when this will ever, you know, see the light of day, but I'm saying that to you while I am, in fact, hoping and praying and doing everything I can in encouraging, *encouraging* the development of the new campus. And I think there are people involved that, you know, that will make sure it happens. But what they don't understand, after being chairman of Public Buildings, Grounds, and Lands as I was for four years and had to go through all the universities and public hearings, I know how difficult it is to get a bond. In fact, the governor isn't letting any bonds be issued now for anything other than economic development. That's this governor, Haley Barbour.

Smith: If you were—you named a number of key people in the legislature that you thought had to be aboard—

Peranich: That would be yes, in leadership roles.

Smith: Where do you think those people are? Have you tested the water? Do you know their attitudes?

Peranich: Well—

Smith: At this point?

Peranich: No, because I doubt very seriously if this is the legislature—I am in the first year of a four-year term—I doubt very seriously if this is the legislature that will actually do it. I think this legislature may come with preplanning. Now, what we instituted under now Speaker McCoy when he was chairman of Ways and Means and I was chairman of Public Buildings, we instituted a preplanning, have a fund of money

that the legislature appropriates that's used by IHL for preplanning. When you get close to bringing an idea out or something forward, it will first have to be—I don't know if there are any drawings, I don't know what's proposed, but once that's there, then they would have to request from the legislature money for preplanning and that's the money for your architects and your, you know, to get it ready to submit to for construction. Then after preplanning you would then submit the amount for construction. You would decide if—that's why the campus at Gulf Park in Long Beach is so important because you may—you're not going to get five buildings, you may get one building and then you'll get another building, if you're fortunate, and then another building. So, what goes up at Cross Creek is going to have to work in concert with what is already functioning at USM Gulf Park. And at the end of the day when you have your however many buildings you're going to have constructed, then you may look at a road for Gulf Park other than straight undergraduate academics.

Smith: OK. Let's see, we talked about all sorts of agencies. Talk about insurance reform, for a little bit, in the legislature.

Peranich: Well—

Smith: We know that it's been a national issue. What's happening in the state of Mississippi about insurance?

Peranich: Well, let me tell you—why don't I just tell you, the chairman of Insurance in the Senate is an insurance agent. The chairman of Insurance in the House had served on the Insurance Committee to a degree. The former, immediate-past, statewide-elected Insurance commissioner now works for an insurance company. The members on the Insurance committees, the majority of them either sell insurance or work in a field that is closely related to insurance. When they go to—when you go to the legislature, you list the committees you would like to serve on. You know, a certain number of the committees you'd like to serve on, you get that, you know, you're allowed to, you're chosen to serve on that committee because there are only so many committees, the rest of them, you know, your seniority would tell, but you have attorneys and insurance agents on the Insurance Committee. Their cry was, "You cannot destabilize the insurance industry." I do not see insurance—we try to come with Insurers Bill of Rights, various things—that was bogus. They let a member pass it out and knowing it would be killed in the Senate. It's all a façade. I see no insurance reform coming out of the Mississippi legislature. We maybe could fight and get it out of the House, but it would never come out of the Senate—

Smith: You said—

Peranich: —when you have a lieutenant governor that was a fire investigator.

Smith: Do you think that there's actually anything substantive that state reform could do for people?

Peranich: No, you still had the initiative process but, you know, other than the Coast counties—I think when they begin to realize that those insurance companies that write in the state of Mississippi that don't write the insurance still have to pay into the wind pool, so they're paying with every insurance policy in the state of Mississippi already. The relief is going to have to come on a national level; it cannot come on a state level. And the current insurance commissioner has a press release that says, you know, "If the insurance rates are going down and then we find out the truth," you know there's one home built that would qualify for the—it's ridiculous, it's absolutely—it has to come on a national level when something of this magnitude, we could not recover on our own and we cannot address the insurance issue on our own. It has to come—and I have no faith because special interests, elect members of the legislature and they would never elect anybody that would do anything to the insurance industry *ever*.

Smith: Can you rate the performance of the previous insurance commissioner in Mississippi coming out of Katrina?

Peranich: They get too close to the subject. They are so concerned about alienating the insurance companies because they have such a symbiotic relationship, you know, I don't think—I don't—you know, we shouldn't even have an insurance commissioner. I don't know what you would have other than an insurance commissioner because it's just like anything else; they're lobbied, they're courted, they're—I don't see how they can function. I don't know how you would get someone in there that would reform the industry. I was present in the legislature one night when we were—you know it's always dangerous to keep us in session late at night, that's why we don't do that anymore—but a member had an amendment, and it passed, that rolled back the insurance rates and it, you know, it rolled back the insurance rates to—I don't know, at the time it was reasonable, but it would've been like ten years ago—and it passed the House. The next day there were more lobbyists than they have in—they looked like caves and bats hanging from the ceiling. You couldn't move. It was like wading through locusts to try and get through. Naturally, it died in the Senate. So they'll never be—it'll never come at a local level, never. I hate to say that, but never.

Smith: Can you rate the performances of Mississippi Emergency Management in the aftermath of Katrina?

Peranich: Well, you know they had no authority, really. They were an underfunded—and I take responsibility that the whole legislature does—

(brief interruption)

Smith: You said that you take some—

Peranich: We should all take responsibility for underfunding them.

Smith: But MEMA has been underfunded.

Peranich: Yes, MEMA has been, historically, underfunded. They had claims that still had not been paid from the ice storm; I don't remember what year that was but that was years ago. Then, you know, there was always sort of a conflict between—like the governor, you know, the head of MEMA is will and pleasure appointed by the governor; the National Guard, the National Guard general is appointed by the governor, will and pleasure. There has always been some jockeying around about, you know, who was in charge. We've strengthened MEMA to a degree, because I think it should come through MEMA and it should come through our agencies in our counties that actually know how to deal with disasters, instead of coming out of the governor's office.

Smith: How about Mississippi Development Authority and its role in the recovery?

Peranich: Well, any time you have—you know, there was an agency in existence already and had they then locked in with the agencies that are existing already in the various counties, it would've moved. But the minute you allow billions of dollars—when you have contracts to administer millions of dollars and you have no-bid contracts and have these people come in, they get paid first. If it's exposed, the people working the contract that—I'm trying to think of the name of it, um, Sigmund Freud would say—well, I can't remember but they were actually boarding dogs and flying first class. We didn't know who they were. They were some entity from the Beltway that, you know, that came in. And then they hired, I understand, a lot of executives from the defunct WorldCom. And now, lately, a lot of those people have been rolled onto another division that's being paid for out of our disaster money of this recovery. They've got a whole division, they brought in another seven people now that are getting terrific salaries—I will have them shortly—have escalated these salaries and they still haven't given out the elevation grants.

Smith: And this is Mississippi Development Authority?

Peranich: This is the Mississippi Development Authority. You know—well, I hesitate to say the Mississippi Development Authority. The Mississippi Development Authority is acting on orders of the governor of the state of Mississippi. Everything—and when I was at the National Conference of State Legislators and they were talking, you know, other states were talking about this, I was able to tell them—it hadn't occurred to them—I was able to tell them that in the event of a disaster, your governor then speaks for the state, asks the president to declare a disaster area. What happened was the governor and his office went and advocated, and we would not have had any money had Thad Cochran not been chairman of Appropriations and put our recovery money on the Defense Appropriation Bill. So, let's get clear exactly why we had the money. We had the money because—and I'm a Democrat—we had the money because Thad Cochran was chairman of the Appropriations Committee and put it on a Defense Appropriation Bill; that's why we had it. The governor lobbied for votes, but Thad Cochran and the rest of our delegation, Gene Taylor who was a victim of the storm himself, and his father, you know certainly helped, but that's really how it happened. The governor then writes the plan to submit. Well, when he writes the

plan, he *is* the plan. And the speaker of the House, William J. McCoy, said it exactly, “Everything had to come from the mighty paw of Haley Barbour.” And they kept it so close that it has created a log jam and now they’re before Congress trying to defend a program that they, themselves, created with no help from anybody else, so that’s why they’re the only ones up there. There are no supervisors up there. There are no legislators up there. The only people up there being called to task for the stewardship of this money—

Smith: Is this Community Development Block Grant money?

Peranich: This is the money allocated by Congress; all of it. The only people being taken to task trying to explain the diversions and how the money was spent is the administration, the current administration because they froze everybody out, that mistakes were made, I think, that we could certainly could’ve helped. We would have done nothing other than help our constituents. We had no desire to help these other companies to come in and make a killing. We were trying to get our, you know, help our people. We had no way—we knew absolutely nothing about recovery plans. And the governor is brilliant, absolutely brilliant. So he appoints a committee and he co-opts everybody who could have organized and helped us deliver. He automatically co-opted them when he put them on this. I mean he was the chairman of GOP who just happens to be governor of the state of Mississippi.

Smith: OK.

Peranich: It was very frustrating, but now they’re starting to open up a little bit. Now they’re starting to open up a little bit and maybe things will move. And the people, the rank-and-file state employee that was over there were just knocking themselves out doing the best they can, but then they have these people who come in who are hired, you know, that we don’t know. We’re just a job, they’re that job; they’re out of here the next day; they’re not living here with us.

Smith: So this is sort of Mississippi Development Authority contract?

Peranich: Yes.

Smith: Subcontractors.

Peranich: They were the MDA that received the funds that then channeled it over, you know, over and out. And they expanded Go Zones, you know, they’ve done all kind of things with funds as a diversion for the Port of Gulfport but, you know, if I had been asked, I would have said, “If you’re going to divert money to the Port of Gulfport, Governor, the first place you need to put it is in the freezer so the poultry industry in the state of Mississippi, who is suffering from high gas prices, won’t have to haul their poultry to other ports. They can come right down Highway 49 from Morton, Mississippi, and ship their chickens because we need a freezer. Now there’s a freezer, sort of, planned in the great plan of the Port of Gulfport, but if he had put that

freezer, if they had prioritized that freezer and had that freezer up and running, we'd be shipping Mississippi chickens, we'd have longshoremen employed, and we'd have ships coming into the Port of Gulfport. Instead of that, who knows what he's done.

Smith: OK, let me get you to think a little bit about evaluating Harrison County and Hancock County Emergency Management, from what you've been able to see. Right after the storm—

Peranich: Well, you know—

Smith: —and since then.

Peranich: It's, you know, it didn't function, quite frankly. We had the best in the world and he was acknowledged as the best in the world because they took him all over the world to set up their facility, and that was Wade Guice. He was the best. He was the *gold* standard. Then one of his employees succeeded him and—

Smith: He passed away several years ago.

Peranich: Yeah, and she was wonderful. She retired and we had a National Guard General Spragens that came in there but, so, you know, he's a fine man but, you know, I'm sure he did his best.

Smith: He got there just a week or two before the storm.

Peranich: A week or two before the storm. And a lot of our—we just had our mayors' elections, so a lot of mayors were brand new who came in. But, you know, things just didn't function; just didn't function. And a thousand times I yearned for Wade Guice to be back. Hopefully things will be better now. Hopefully things will be better. And what we had is we had inertia, people couldn't start up to do things or to criticize. Remember, how can you criticize the king when you're asking the king for the funds to recover?

Smith: The king being?

Peranich: The king being the governor who wrote the plan, who was administering the plan. How could you—in fact, when the mayor of Bay St. Louis, who's a wonderful man whose town was just devastated, was complaining he was actually told by someone not to complain because they didn't want to antagonize anybody because they wouldn't get any money. So that was the fear, but, you know, and we had, you know, I would like to have had the money for the Pass Christian school system that they spent on the president flying down here. How many times did he fly? I don't know if we've been reimbursed but, you know, we said one time if he didn't fly down with another check, we hope he didn't come.

Smith: Can you evaluate—

Peranich: We even had Laura Bush flying down here to read the schoolbooks to children. How much did that cost?

Smith: Can you evaluate local law enforcement, Harrison County Sheriff's Department?

Peranich: I think they probably did the best they can, but who was in charge? We had—we were fortunate a resident of the city of Pass Christian's family owns Murphy Oil Company, and she was able to get a tanker of gasoline designated for Pass Christian so we could run our emergency vehicles off of it. Well, they tried to confiscate her gasoline and, in fact, arrest her.

Smith: Who tried to confiscate?

Peranich: The—I don't know, I'll have to ask John, but John, my husband—

Smith: Is this a FEMA person?

Peranich: It was someone—I don't remember if it was the State or some governmental entity tried to take it for themselves, and it was, in fact, for the devastated city of Pass Christian who was operating on the slab of a—who was operating at a washed-out filling station. And the reason that she was trying to do this is because they could put the gasoline in the, you know, down in the tank that was sealed and hadn't taken water, and they could then have the fire trucks, and the police cars, and the emergency management, everything for the city of Pass Christian. So we had to clear that up legislatively. But I think it was MEMA. I think it was MEMA tried to—well, they tried to federalize and nationalize her tank of gasoline.

Smith: Can you evaluate the functioning of the Mississippi legislature in the aftermath of this crisis?

Peranich: Well, our speaker, Speaker McCoy was down here immediately and formed a Katrina Recovery Committee. And on that Katrina Recovery Committee, chaired by, jointly chaired, he had every major chairman. He had chairman of Transportation. All of the Coast legislators were automatically on it. Then he had the chairman of Ways and Means, Appropriations, Transportation, Public Health, all the chairmen. We passed numerous bills, because we were close to the people, and all of them died in the Senate. The governor opposed every one of them. We passed legislation that would've given twenty-five, you know, would've allowed people to borrow and they'd just pay the interest, you know, the interest that the State incurred. And then we passed legislation granting to try and get people that were renters into homes \$25,000—nothing. And what we thought, and our goal was that this would've been one-time money. It was—we called it the "misery tax." While in fact the economy, the—I'm a member of the Budget Committee and the state economist said our economy was flat long before the nation went into a Republican recession. The

economy in the state of Mississippi was flat; no growth, no anything, just flat. Then Katrina hits us and then we have the federal money coming in and the rebuilding money coming in. So when they say the Mississippi median income went up and, you know, the money's spent, everything went up like a rosy picture—if you subtract the misery, you have nothing. So when they talk about how wonderful, you know, this administration has been, they were only wonderful through our misery. So we said and the speaker said, you know, while we have this recovery and this new monies coming in generated from the loss of the people on the Coast, let's turn around and give some of this back to them in little grants or various things. So the only thing we—and the governor killed it all because the mighty paw. The only thing we were able to get through is on the Tideland Funds that the governor has no control over. The Tideland Funds generated by the casinos that would've been the previous year that are administered for projects like marinas and various piers and stuff to our municipalities and our county, three coastal counties, we were able to change the law for that one time to allow them to draw that money down for fire and police salaries, and we did in fact get that done. But that's, you know, all we were able to get through. But I would suggest that as people look at this in the years to come, that I would suggest that they look at the years, and all the legislation passed by the House that died in the Senate. You will be amazed. You will now, in retrospect, be able to see how the needs would have, the immediate needs and long-range needs would've been met. The money would've been out to the people. Because some people, you know, maybe \$25,000 would have repaired their home enough and we would've gotten that to them immediately, as now some folks are still waiting for Phase One to finish, for Phase Two to start. So I would suggest—I don't think any recounting of legislative response or response to Katrina would be complete without a look at the legislation that was filed in the House, and in good conscience pull the legislation that was filed in the Senate and see what happened, and then look back and see if the measures advocated by the House of Representatives were not in fact what should have been done. You can look at this now or you can look at this fifteen years from now.

Smith: OK, one of them would've been the housing grants. What else, insurance reform?

Peranich: One of them—oh, insurance reform, housing grants, the outright grant, and then the ability to borrow money and only pay the interest. In other words, it would not have cost the taxpayers anything. We would have borrowed the money. What they would have paid would have covered the cost of us borrowing the money. So you would've had the 25,000 out there or you would've had the amount, you know, other amounts out there, and in conjunction maybe with their little insurance pittance. But anything you would get, the governor's plan would have deducted from your 150. So we were trying to come with ways, too. And then they would tell you if you do this, then you won't get any money. So, we knew that was bogus and I want—you can pull legislation and see the money that came out from the—the legislation that came out from the Katrina Recovery Committee was coming from us who were listening to our mayors, our supervisors, our constituents, the three southern counties. Who knew better than us?

Smith: Some of the municipalities down here such as Pass Christian and Bay St. Louis and Waveland had a tremendous—well, their local tax base, the property tax base was eradicated. What's the status with the municipalities and whether the state is going to continue to help them?

Peranich: Well, we, just this year, you know, we had—the schools had the ability to borrow money to operate and in years past the government would forgive it—this is, you know, federal money. So we recommended that they do that again. We then freed up—we have revolving funds, you know, a Revolving Fund Committee—we then freed up municipalities to request that. We did every single thing we could to alleviate the problem while they were waiting for the block grant to come. And on that end, they would be intimidated; they were afraid to advocate for anything because they could see the carrot held out in front of them of these block grants, they were afraid to agitate or ask anything.

Smith: So you think it was—

Peranich: So that's why Mayor Eddie Favre is still in Bermuda shorts three years after Katrina; that is his protest. That is an outward manifestation of his angst in the way things are run.

Smith: OK, so this is mostly an angst about state government, or is it part state and part federal?

Peranich: Well, you know, you appeal to the federal government when you had such an overwhelming loss and the federal government responds, and then *bam*, it's stopped.

Smith: By the state administration?

Peranich: By this plan, but then they say MDA has got this plan that—then they say MDA's got this plan. MDA hires then—I don't know why I can't remember the name of that firm. I'll find out for you.

Smith: OK. What do you think are the most important challenges in the recovery at this point? What's the big things that are out there now?

Peranich: Insurance, and then you local governments have no ad valorem tax base. Waveland was obliterated but they had that little area along Highway 90. Bay St. Louis was obliterated; they had that little area along Highway 90. Pass Christian was obliterated; there was nothing for them. Long Beach was obliterated, the front part, but then they had all the back part of Long Beach. Pass Christian still has no grocery store. We're three years, approaching three years, and Pass Christian still does not have a grocery store. You can go—there are two filling stations open in Pass Christian where you can buy, if you wanted to buy bread and milk in the past you

could go there. Wal-Mart's supposed to come back. Now, to their credit, our local merchants in Pass Christian opened up in little huts—I hate to call them trailers because they're so small—in the city park around the library. So, you'd have one little trailer that would be, you know, your Hancock Bank and then, you know, Peoples Bank. Now the Hancock and Peoples Bank have built back. And Hancock renovated their old building but Peoples Bank is the first private sector to come back and build a building in Pass Christian, and what it has done was just marvelous. You had a little restaurant there; you had to stand up, it was just like going to a carnival. They opened up little businesses in the park and that's how they functioned. Hopefully—now our lumber companies, our hardware stores came back and just opened up and were out operating out of a lean-to just trying to get the stuff out. You know you don't have anybody to work because there's no place for them to stay that come in. Also, when they talk about people, you know, coming in and working, “There's a job if you want it.” Yes, there's a job if you want it but there's no insurance with that job, there are no benefits with that job, so you can work but—just in *our* family, our son was a longshoreman. Well, he had no house and no job; they had no insurance. So he—

Smith: Insurance was tied to the job.

Peranich: Insurance, that's a benefit; your insurance was tied to your job. So think about that. When you look across the Coast with all the businesses wiped out, that wiped out health insurance. Never mind your salary, health insurance. Well, he did things like carpenter work, cleanup work. When he could he mowed lawns for people that had them, like in Diamondhead. If his children became ill—they finally signed up for CHIPS [Children's Health Insurance Program] and the children then had excellent [insurance.] The very thing that the government's balking about is the very thing that saved our children. Now, he had no insurance, he became ill, didn't tell anybody, didn't tell anybody and finally had to go to the emergency room, and his appendix, the blood flow to the appendix, the appendix—it wasn't appendicitis, his appendix died and he was left with a horrific bill but it's because he didn't have insurance, you know. He put it off and it became worse, and he didn't have any insurance and he didn't want to tell us, so he was left billed with a \$60,000 hospital bill with no insurance, no house, no job. So then the Arabs come; some, I don't know if it was Kuwaiti or Dubai or someone, out of their generosity gave millions to Memorial Hospital, which is our, in essence, our public hospital, to pay hospital bills and medical care for people who didn't have the money. That's where they put theirs, for medical care. The irony was that my son, by working all these jobs and using his income tax from pre-Katrina and working these jobs, fell a few dollars into the category, above the category that would've allowed him to receive these funds. But if in fact they took out the monthly payment that they wanted from him to, you know, to pay the hospital bill, he would have qualified. So, you know, I don't know *who* qualified under the largesse of this Arab Emirate country; I don't know who benefited. But my son, who was without a job, without insurance, working at menial jobs, pickup jobs, living in a FEMA camper, children on CHIPS, he did not qualify for this money because he made a few dollars too much in working.

Smith: Is Anthony back at the port?

Peranich: Anthony's back at the port, but a lot of us—

Smith: How long has he been back?

Peranich: He's been back probably, not quite a year he's been back.

Smith: So he was basically without work for about two years.

Peranich: He was out of his—due to Katrina he was out of his normal employment, I guess almost two years, but he worked. He worked at, you know, I mean it was heartbreaking. It was heartbreaking. We were *three generations* that lost our home. You know, if your son loses his home, he'd go to his mother's. Well, you know, or you can go to your grandmother's. In this instance he couldn't go to any of those. And his mother-in-law had lost her home. And his wife's grandmother had lost her home. So it was not a thing in the South, you know, we take care of our own; in this instance, there was no way to take care of your own because you were all in the same boat; that's what was different. And someone made the comment that I think described everything; you know you can stand losing your house. I mean people lose their house to fire and it's a horrible thing but, you know, you have your neighbors for support. Or, you know, if a neighborhood, you can maybe survive, bad as that is, in a neighborhood. But we lost a city, we lost a county, we lost the entire, everything, this whole stretch, we lost *all* that. So how then do you cope when everything's gone? So I think, psychologically, if people want to put it in perspective, think how horrible it would be to lose your home to a fire and then expand that to go outside and look at your street, and then look at your block and look at your town, and then look at your county. But it just, you know, it just overwhelms you. And I think there was a certain amount of malaise or inertia. I know I still have blanks about what happened and what I did during those days. But John would get up to go to work before daylight and, you know, go off to the power company and get gas, and they were feeding them. And I would come here, because we had no car, I would come here and I found a folding chair. I would come here and sit in this wreckage every day in the sun for months, you know, for months. I don't know why, it's just, you know, it's just I was just there. It was just, you know, a place to be. I accomplished nothing. I wrecked my skin. And they said, "Well, how did you go to the bathroom?" We were so hot and miserable, I'd bring a bottle of water and you just, you know, you didn't hydrate so you didn't go to the bathroom. And then someone would come, you know, one of the children or someone would come and pick me up and take me back to spend the night at John's and then I'd just come back, and that's how I spent my days every day until we got a FEMA camper. But isn't that—I mean just thinking back on that.

Smith: How long did it take you to get the camper, the first one?

Peranich: Probably, I would say two, maybe two or three months. But I was sunburned and I'd peel and, you know, I'd wear a hat because you'd take a shower,

you couldn't wash your hair. But other than that you'd just put a hat on your head. And I had a pair of tennis shoes that I wore and I addressed the House of Representatives in an old T-shirt and tennis shoes because that's all I had. But we, you know, that's just, that's just how it was and you think about that. And my desk mate, Jack Gadd(?) came down and brought, you know, water and Vienna sausage and different things, and my dear friend and colleague Steve Holland came out of Lee County bringing cold beer and whiskey, but he would stop along the way and visit with people and check on them, and by the time they got here they drank it all. He ran out of the last of the cold beer, he said, over on Bush Road with the Bradleys, some of my constituents who were living in a tent. And when he got here he said he fed my cat Vienna sausage and left me a note. But you know, and you'd wait to see what was coming when you'd go over to, you know, to the shelters, you'd go there. And one day I was given a box and in that box—I said I'd never forget this—was, both bars of soap were green. I had a bar of soap from Israel and a bar of soap from South Korea in the *same* box. You know, so whoever, you know, was putting and packing those boxes reached over in this bunch and got a bar of soap here and a bar of soap there. But isn't that ironic? A bar of soap from South Korea and a bar of soap from Israel, and they were both green.

Smith: Think about the recovery in general terms, what's the most heartening, most encouraging thing that you've seen in the recovery of the area?

Peranich: The *people*. You know, everything else pales in comparison.

Smith: Do you have any particular episode that symbolizes that?

Peranich: Well, it's just, you know, the way we, as human beings, the way we feel about each other. You know we're Southerners anyway, we're effusive, but you know just how much we love each other. And also just the generosity and the goodness of this country and, well, we'll have to say Israel and South Korea, too, and the Arab Emirate that gave the money to the hospital. But the faith-based groups, these faith-based groups function—we need to take a look at them because they send teams into disaster areas and they're self-contained or they live in the same conditions as the other people. The Baptist Men came. The Amish, the Mennonites, Methodist. I didn't even know there was such a thing as a Free Methodist, but the Free Methodists came and sat up and fed people for months, for *years*, right down there in Pass Christian and they're still working out of a facility in Pass Christian. *They* came and then their young people came, and they all came. The difference in—I'll use the Baptist Men, as an example, and the Free Methodists, they fed everybody. They didn't say, you know, "Did you lose your home? Are you down here working?" Or, "Did you just bring a load of something, you know, perishable goods down here?" They fed *everybody*. The Salvation Army eventually started coming around with a truck, and while I'd sit in my chair we could go there and they'd pass and give you juice and, you know, a lunch. They'd just tour around. They began to tour around. And then in the evening you'd go into Pass Christian and into the tent there, but it was more social and emotional. It was also good food but it fed our spirit and our body,

you know, that was necessary. I would say if there's ever anything like that, get something up where the people can come together. Now, some were clean and some weren't; some were still dirty. But the people that were coming back trying to see what was left of their property could come in there and eat. And there were people that you didn't, you know, we lost so many folks, there were people that came in that you were just glad to see, that were still alive. The people, nothing compares to the people, to our local people and the people that came to our aid, and are still here. My mother's home was built entirely by volunteers and beautifully, beautifully done. And if you would go there in the daytime, there was not a sound. They didn't say, "Give me a nail, throw me a hammer," because by the act of building my mother's home, to them, was a prayer. You know, that's how they—and they'd stop in the evening and they'd bring their little lunch and, you know, they'd have a prayer time and then they'd get back to work. They were just remarkable, just absolutely remarkable, and that was all over, all over, you know, and still going on. It's still going on. And we'll never come back without it. And we just hope people, you know, people will come back. I don't know in my—we will have a census. This legislature will redistrict and I'm on the redistricting committee, and until we have a census we don't know who's here. Henderson Point, a whole area of my district, is gone. You know, my district, well, other than Biloxi, my district is just, just devastated. The northern part of the district is still there, so, you know, the dynamics of, the political dynamics of this about having to collapse districts, you know, where we go from here, how we branch out, it's going to be a true challenge. The Vietnamese population, we don't know where they've gone, you know, whether they've been absorbed by Vietnamese communities in other areas. Some of them are still here but, you know, people have just been absorbed. And the incidences of mental health problems, domestic violence, children acting out, we need long-term mental health commitment here on the Coast and we're probably going to need it for the next ten years for this to work its way out and manifest itself in various ways. But we just know the numbers from the Health Department, both the Health Department, itself, and Mental Health.

Smith: Now, what about race relations? Did you see anything of—this is Mississippi and—

Peranich: Yeah.

Smith: —we're always—

Peranich: Well, the Pass—

Smith: —thinking about race in Mississippi.

Peranich: Yeah. Well, you know, the Pass is different. You know Pass Christian has always been different, much as Biloxi's been different because, you know, they're old towns and you grew, you, people lived cheek by jowl, so but Gulfport and Long Beach—well, I don't know if there's any black people in Long Beach, very few, but you know there was no problem here. As I said, Katrina was an equal opportunity

destroyer. It was like that in [Hurricane] Camille and it was like that, you know, like that again. I saw no problem with race relations, although the majority of white people were hit, you know, so they were in reduced circumstances. Maybe it made them more empathetic.

Smith: Did you see the assistance going out white hands to black, black hands to white?

Peranich: Yes, yes. Now, most of the volunteers that came in were white so, you know, the Baptist Men that came in. You know they would have to be people with enough means to come in and sustain themselves. But, you know, it was something. It was remarkable. Then I think FEMA came in and then finally put up a tent but, of course, you know—and the food was good, but they didn't stay, they folded their tent.

Smith: Is there anything else that we should've talked about that we didn't?

Peranich: I'll probably think of one million—I'll probably think of the most important things of all that I just haven't thought of, you know, now. I'd probably, you know.

Smith: Best memory?

Peranich: The best memory was knowing that, you know, that my family had survived. And it was interesting, our son Stephen, who's in Washington, we could all reach him, so we would pass messages through Washington, DC to get to Mobile, Alabama, or get to, you know, Gulfport. While we couldn't call from here to Gulfport, we could call Washington and then come back. And the power company was wonderful to their employees; they were absolutely wonderful, you know. They took us in, you know, they fed us. That was the only transportation we had was the rental car from Mississippi Power. So, you know, they took care of their own in Camille. When the employees were allowed to bring their clothes there and they kept their clothes washed so they could, you know, they could have clothes to work in. They fed them and, you know, fed them hot meals. They fed them breakfast. They set up at the Hancock County Fairgrounds for all the people that worked, many people that came in from other areas from the Southern Company and other areas from Mississippi Power contractors. They fed them all wonderful breakfasts, because John would ride me over there and I'd get to have a hot breakfast, and then he'd come back. I'd go over there and get in line; they didn't care. You could bring your family if you wanted to and give them breakfast; nobody said anything. They were just really good, but then those were the men getting the lights on, the power on, so they were like—I remember people coming and knocking on the side of the FEMA camper asking John to please come help them, that they could get a FEMA camper if they had a pole, so when he was home he didn't get any rest. But it was amazing the way people would come to him like *he* was the power company and he did, he'd do it. And the irony was that one of the individuals he was working under was someone that he had hired when he was, before he retired and they told him they said, "John, we don't do things that

way. We can't do things that way anymore; we got to fill out papers, we got to do this." He said, "Fire me." (chuckle) But one example of something they did, when they were setting the lights coming from Pass Christian to De Lisle to the school, they needed, you know, they needed to fill, they had no way to get all this fill, so John called the supervisor and the supervisor was able to—I mean just things like this that people on their own initiative, people that took the initiative to help their citizens and do their job function. They got all this power out here to the school with, you know, the power company setting poles and doing this, and the county backfilling with stuff. Now, there was no work order from the county or no work order from the power company or, you know, any channel, and they just turned a blind eye. The power company just turned a blind eye because he got everything done. They didn't *want* to know it. (laughter) So, it was just, you know, you had to have people that had experience and that's what FEMA didn't have. The people that came in that FEMA sent in were people they'd hired in other areas to come in and did not know what they were doing. The people handling the FEMA campers weren't people that had experience from FEMA campers, they might've been people who, you know, sold cars someplace else that they brought in. Also, another thing is, here we are in August and September burning hot, and I know because I'm sitting out here in my chair, and all of a sudden you see this group come, this burly-looking group come through that's in orange jumpsuits in that horrible heat with metal hats on and equipment, and they're from Washington State and they're going around looking—by this time they weren't looking for live people, they were looking to recover dead people. And they were volunteers who had come from Washington State that were held up because they couldn't get—they said they wished they could've found live people, but were held up. And they're the ones that put the Xs. Remember you'd have the Xs.

Smith: Um-hm.

Peranich: That's who did it, these recovery teams that came from all over. And these were firemen from Washington State, in this horrible humid weather going through, digging through garbage and going through things looking for bodies. And if they had the X that meant they'd been through it or if they had the X and had circled an X meant that there was a body in that quadrant in the house. But they, you know—think about that. From Washington State, came over here in the blistering heat doing disgusting work. Some bodies they didn't find; I know Nick(?) Blaine(?) they didn't find until they were taking the debris out months later, when they were clearing stuff they found their bodies, but you know there's some they hadn't found yet and some they don't know who they are. But, you know, it was an ongoing thing; they'd find a body and then you had certain procedures you'd have to go through, you'd have to shut down and stuff. But it was volunteers. Again, I'll come back to the volunteers and people who lived their faith because it *was not* pleasant. It stunk, and it was hot, and there were bugs, and there were no showers. There was no relief and yet those people came, and they came, and they'd come back, and people actually let their children come, you know, mission groups actually came. Think about that, Pat, letting your daughter go off with a group of—

(brief interruption)

Peranich: —a Sunday school class and do this work. The Free Methodists that came here and helped us with the bricks were just children and they wouldn't eat. You'd say, you know, "Let me make a sandwich for you or something." No, they wouldn't take anything from you to eat. They'd go back and eat, and then they had a prayer service we found out, and then came back and finished and said, "We'll be back tomorrow." And here they'd come. That was the strangest thing. And then no horsing around or anything, they just would come and work. And when they left, poor little things were filthy, but when they'd come the next day they were clean, so I don't know where they were cleaning up from.

Smith: Well, OK, very good. That'll wrap this up.

(end of interview)