

## AN ORAL HISTORY

with

LETITIA “TISH” H. WILLIAMS

*This is an interview for the Mississippi Oral History Program of The University of Southern Mississippi. The interview is with Letitia “Tish” H. Williams and is taking place on December 29, 2006. The interviewer is Linda VanZandt.*

**VanZandt:** Today is December 29, 2006, and it’s a Friday, so it’s about a year and four months after Katrina, which is hard to believe.

**Williams:** Mm-hm.

**VanZandt:** And I’m here in the office of the Hancock Chamber of Commerce with Tish Williams, the director of the Chamber of Commerce here?

**Williams:** Mm-hm.

**VanZandt:** OK.

**Williams:** Chief cook and bottle washer.

**VanZandt:** (laughs) A little bit of everything, I can tell, in this office. And thank you for sitting down with me, Tish—

**Williams:** Mm-hm.

**VanZandt:** —to just give me a little bit of time to talk about Katrina. This is for the Hurricane Katrina Oral History Project. So I’m just going to start—if you could, because you’ve got your own personal story of having lived here in Bay St. Louis as a resident for a long time, and then in your professional capacity. If you could kind of start and take us back to about maybe the weekend before the hurricane and your preparations and, it’s probably all a blur, but anything you can think of that just describes, you know, leaving and what you knew was coming—

**Williams:** Mm-hm (tearing up).

**VanZandt:** and I know it’s going to be difficult.  
And if it’s too much, we can talk about what’s going on now.

**Williams:** I'm sitting here in my office that is beautifully appointed now, but we had about eight feet of water. And in front of my desk is this beautiful photograph of downtown Bay St. Louis.

**VanZandt:** Looks like Cruising the Coast. Is that Cruising the Coast or—

**Williams:** And that was during Cruising the Coast, one of the biggest retail weekends along the Mississippi Coast and all of the downtown buildings are still there and so it's a wonderful place to start to answer your question because the weekend before Hurricane Katrina hit I remember how much fun we were having (laughs). We were having so much fun that weekend because—

**VanZandt:** What was going on?

**Williams:** —for some reason there were like all these parties going on. We had a party at the Bay Waveland Yacht Club, which is no longer there, and I just remember us all talking about the storm and we had—even though there was a big party going on and the TVs were on, and we were all sort of, you know, keeping in touch with the weather, but not really realizing that it was going to hit us because we had been threatened so many times before and this was just another one of those storms that was coming our way or *might not* be coming our way, and surely it's going to turn like so many other storms had done before. And so we just went about our merry way, all talking about—well, what if? what if we need to leave? where are you going to go? are you going to leave? what are you going to do?—and that was pretty much the conversation of the weekend. And I remember going downtown to Daniel's of South Beach, and it used to be Dan B's Restaurant and the owners, the next generation had taken over and had totally rebuilt Dan B's and renamed it Daniel's of South Beach. And it was this wonderful place on the beach side of South Beach at Main Street, and there was a band playing and people were dancing and just enjoying each other's company. And we thought, you know—hey, isn't this just the best place to live? Aren't we just having so much fun?

**VanZandt:** The good life.

**Williams:** Yeah, right down the street from the Good Life. Well, now we say “That's life.” (laughs) But little did we know that the next day when we woke up, and I'll never forget my husband waking up at like five o'clock on Sunday morning the day before the storm and saying, “We've got to get the hell out of here.” And I was like, “What? What's going on?” And he said, “That storm is heading right for us.” I think at that time it was a Category 5. And my neighbor down the street is my best friend in the whole wide world, said, “What are we going to do? Don't leave town without me.” And I remember making some phone calls to loved ones and saying, “You need to get the hell out of here. We are all leaving.” And of course there was no quick way to leave because we had to go down—we had to first, you know, board up our own house, get all the outdoor furniture in, pack for a few days—of course we were only going to be gone for a couple of days— and then figure out where are we going to go.

I had to go to my office and pack up my computers. I needed to go to my mother's house and board up her beachfront home, and that was one of the things—if you left town without boarding up Myrt's beachfront home, you were going to be in a lot of trouble when you got back. (laughter) So, I'll never forget, the last thing we did, we went down to Myrt and Mike's house at 712 South Beach Boulevard at the corner of Ballantine Street and we boarded up her home.

**VanZandt:** So you had materials already handy?

**Williams:** We, because we had done it so many times before, we already had the plywood, we had the big nails and, you know, we were prepared, ready to go, boarded up the windows and she had even made a delicious fresh shrimp salad. We sat there on the fireplace in the back room and ate a delicious shrimp salad. And we thought about, well, where are we going to go? And my mother, as you know, she's originally from Hattiesburg and she always goes to Hattiesburg because she has friends and family there and doesn't want to get too far away from Bay St. Louis, so she's going to Hattiesburg to stay with our cousins. And she said, "Where are you going to go to, Tish?" And I said, "Well, you know, we'd kind of like to go to Jackson because that's where George's (my husband's) family is from." And she said, "Well, you know what, just a few minutes ago my good friend, my college roommate, Mignon Mitchell, has a family home in Jackson and she offered the use of her family home as she has done every time there's a storm coming, you think you'd like to stay there?" I said, "Yes, we would *love* to stay there." So I had—

**VanZandt:** Beats a hotel, doesn't it?

**Williams:** Yeah, we had a beautiful home in Belhaven area of Jackson, Mississippi, waiting for our arrival and went straight there. And it was me and my family. I have —

**VanZandt:** Tell me who that is.

**Williams:** —twin daughters, Trisha and Georgia—

**VanZandt:** How old?

**Williams:** —who were nine years old at the time, they have now since turned ten, and my husband George, and then my best friend, my high school best friend in the whole wide world, Debbie Alford and her husband Doug. And the interesting thing is if you ever have to evacuate, make sure you take someone who is the owner of Quizno's Restaurants with you (laughter) because when he left town he went down to his restaurant, loaded up all the bread, the cheese, the meats, and you know, it was going to go bad anyway, so.

**VanZandt:** Sure, it needed to go with you.

**Williams:** We have all this *food*, you know, thankfully. We didn't know we were going to need it. And then my assistant who was pregnant, only weeks away from delivery, had no place to go, she and her husband, Ashley and Ronnie Boone came with us. So, it was just basically these three families and we had a wonderful time. Cooked out steaks on the grill, you know, just—

**VanZandt:** Made a party of it.

**Williams:** —waiting for the storm to get over. And little did we know, you know, what would happen after the storm was over.

**VanZandt:** Had you done much at your house as far as getting things up off the floor or anything like that at all, or did you just pack some things?

**Williams:** Oh yeah. No, and I have—my house is always, because it's on Sunset Drive, 517 Sunset Drive—

**VanZandt:** Good, I was going to ask you tell us where it was.

**Williams:** —this house and this neighborhood have never been touched by a storm, not even the storm of '47. And I was talking with a real estate appraiser that Saturday night before and he said, "Oh, that area never gets hit, you know, not even in the storm of '47, so you're high and dry. You'll be fine." Well, um, we had eight and a half feet of water in our house.

**VanZandt:** And how far back off the beach is that, Tish?

**Williams:** We're—I don't know exactly, but it's several miles. I mean it's not near the, you couldn't walk to the beach from there. But I'll never forget when we were packing up, and of course I'd spent the whole weekend washing and drying clothes and changing linens and making sure my house was in order because I figured I was going to be a refugee home for the beach owners, beachfront owners and everything, I mean I could kill myself. I had washed everything. Everything was in its place. And I'll never forget my children, they were kind of dragging their feet and getting their bags packed. And I said, "Look, you just need to take three pairs of underwear, you know, a few outfits, a pair of shoes and," I said, "and I want you to think about one thing that is really important to you that you want to take with you." Well, I'm packing in there and they were up all their soccer trophies and all of their fairy collection, and I'm like, "We don't—we can't—we don't have time for all that, we got to get out of here. Just take one or two of those things and throw it in your suitcase and we got to get out of here." So we finally are about to get on the road, it was like 1:15, 1:30 on the Sunday afternoon. I went down to my office, loaded up my three computers and threw them in the back of my van, reluctantly I might add because I had done it so many times before, and that's pretty much all I did at my office. But at 2:00 the winds were really starting to rev up and we hit the road. And right before we hit the road my next door neighbor across the street—who is from Alabama originally

and had never been through a storm before—comes walking over, “Hey, where y’all going?” I said, “We’re going to Jackson. I suggest you get your butt in my car right now and go up there with us.” She said, “No, my boyfriend Tommy wants me to experience a storm, so we’re just going to stay here.” And I said, “Well, I hope this won’t be the ending of your relationship with Tommy.”

**VanZandt:** Well, that’s prophetic.

**Williams:** They ended up on their roof.

**VanZandt:** I’ll let you know what happened.

**Williams:** Yeah, they ended up on their roof. They literally—and another family, thankfully, had a boat at the end of Sunset Drive and they came in a boat, drove a boat down Sunset Drive and pulled Tommy and Pam off their roof with the cats. They were babysitting six or eight cats. So anyway, that—

**VanZandt:** So people stayed around your neighborhood.

**Williams:** People stayed around my neighborhood. In fact, my best friend’s next door neighbor stayed. Her husband was in Iraq. Her husband was in—he was gone and she and her teenage daughter stayed and every so often she would call us during the storm. And at one point she called us and she said, “There’s water coming down Sunset Drive. The water’s up to the mailbox.” And then we’d lose her, you know, and we were like, oh my God, you know, and then she’d get a connection back to us and say, “I don’t know what to do. The water’s coming into the house.”

**VanZandt:** Oh, you must’ve been frantic.

**Williams:** And then we’d lose her again. But of course, you know, the instructions to everybody is get an ax and go into your—

**VanZandt:** Attic.

**Williams:** —attic.

**VanZandt:** Right.

**Williams:** How many people have axes handy? (laughter) Think of that.

**VanZandt:** I don’t have an axe, yeah.

**Williams:** I wouldn’t know where my axe is.

**VanZandt:** I’d be swinging my hammer if I could find it.

**Williams:** So, we didn't hear from her for—oh, it's just all kinds of stories of people that you connected with during the storm. We didn't know another neighbor, his father, Mr. Woody Santa Cruz stayed in his beachfront home and I remember calling them during the storm and saying, you know, "What's going on? Where are you there in Florida?" But Woody Santa Cruz stayed behind on the beachfront home and they hadn't heard from him, and this went on for days following the storm and we didn't know if he was dead or alive. And he eventually turned up alive and, you know, with a few cuts and bruises. But the stories that people tell is that, that were here, is the buildings collapsed and crumbled, and it's amazing how many people actually had boats that they could swim to and get into and ride the storm out in, and that's what Mr. Santa Cruz did. The bravery is just beyond comprehension. I mean I'm a different kind of survivor because I went to Jackson. I wasn't here during the storm, so just the whole tragedy of seeing all this. Because it seems like—and I remember Hurricane Camille as a child because I guess was eleven years old, I was about the same age as my daughters, and—

**VanZandt:** I wanted to ask you some of your memories of that.

**Williams:** I remember being in Hattiesburg at my grandmother's house and my mother was very upset because she couldn't go home. We were on a family vacation and she couldn't go home to get her house boarded up. See, told you it was that house getting boarded up thing.

**VanZandt:** But you were already there when Camille happened.

**Williams:** So we made it to Hattiesburg and that's as far as we got, thank goodness, because she wanted to go all the way to Bay St. Louis, and I'm like, "We're not going there. She's crazy, Dad, don't let her take us to that." Because we had stayed in that house for Hurricane Betsy. We had stayed in that house for several storms, but no, we didn't—

**VanZandt:** As a child then.

**Williams:** Yeah, we didn't, I mean I remember carrying my rosary around and my Mary and saying my Hail Marys.

**VanZandt:** And what kind of damage did the family have in Camille?

**Williams:** We had some extensive damage but the home was still intact. It was like, I think, twenty-two feet above sea level so there was a lot of mud. The chandeliers were hanging by a thread. You know, we had to do a complete restoration of the home. And I remember living in a trailer for many months following the storm. I remember spending Christmas in that trailer. But these were trailers; these weren't RVs. That's what we have today in Katrina and it's really inhumane treatment to the soul and the mind and the whole psyche. You know, it's just too small of a space for people to live and to live for such an indefinite time. It seems like, I don't remember

exactly, but it seems like we were in our home not too long after that Christmas, but here it is—

**VanZandt:** And I have to throw in that you had—there were six children in your family.

**Williams:** Not at that time, but I think we had four.

**VanZandt:** Four of you.

**Williams:** Four of us.

**VanZandt:** Yeah, in a trailer.

**Williams:** Yeah, I mean it was not the best but when you compare it to living in an RV, which is what people are faced with today following Katrina, boy, we had it made (laughs).

**VanZandt:** That's funny to think about.

**Williams:** So, it's—

**VanZandt:** Do you remember being afraid?

**Williams:** Yes, because I remember, for some reason, they had a transistor radio and I was getting some news report, and they said that Bay St. Louis is burning. And so I have this vivid imagination and of course it was envisioning the entire town in flames, and that turned out not to be true. I'm not exactly sure. Surely, it must've been true for some part of Bay St. Louis but the town was not burning. And my dad made it back the very next day, took my ten year old brother with him, climbed over trees, finally got to Ballantine on the beach, entered the back door of the house and everything was in its place exactly as they had left it. He said, "*Ah*, we're saved." And then he walked into the dining room and the crystal chandelier was sort of hanging and there was mud, probably twelve or fourteen inches of mud, and he said, "Well, this is really not too good but, you know, we can fix this." And then he walked into the living room and toward the front of the house to where the front porch is, and he said, "Oh, my God, we're ruined." (laughter) And he was like—

**VanZandt:** Oh no!

**Williams:** I can't let Myrt [mother] see this; she'll just die, you know.

**VanZandt:** And he even boarded it up.

**Williams:** And he wouldn't let us go back to Bay St. Louis for over a month. We stayed in Hattiesburg with my grandmother, but we finally got back there after we got

the trailer and I just remember everything being real yellow. Everything was yellow. And everybody had all their stuff out on the front lawns and, but it was *nothing*. Of course, we thought we had seen the worse then.

**VanZandt:** That was the benchmark until now.

**Williams:** That was a Hurricane Betsy compared to Katrina. And it was so hard to envision what was going on following the storm here because we really had been cut off from the communication. There was—the house we stayed that we were staying in in Jackson lost power. Here we were—

**VanZandt:** Jackson was hit hard enough.

**Williams:** Yeah.

**VanZandt:** It took trees down and power, so you really had no communication to know what was going on.

**Williams:** We had three, what, a three hour drive from Bay St. Louis to Jackson only to go to a place that didn't have power, had trouble getting gas to get back down to the Coast to see what had happened to your property.

**VanZandt:** Tell me about that trip back, when you decided to come, when was that?

**Williams:** I remember following Hurricane Camille my Aunt Linda had commandeered some sort of a generator and we were like kings because we had a generator, and so that immediately, that—I said—my first thought was, “we’ve got to get a generator.” And so by the time we got through, after that first day following the storm, we had like five generators.

**VanZandt:** Did you.

**Williams:** We had generators being FedExed in, you know, so we were—

**VanZandt:** And you had a lot of friends around too.

**Williams:** We had so many generators. It ended up that we didn't really use them that much, but you know how that goes, you just kind of go overboard. Well, that was our little overboard thing, but it kept us busy. And of course the first couple of days were just keeping, just trying to locate everybody and try to make sure everybody was safe. And thankfully all of our family members and all of our extended family members were safe, and no one we knew perished from the storm and that was a wonderful blessing. But right after the storm, one by one, every member of Haas clan started heading to Jackson, and by the time it was over, I think we had like fifteen members of our family in this one little two bedroom *nice* home, but—actually, it was three bedrooms.

**VanZandt:** Which was Mignon's home or was it—

**Williams:** (laughs) Mignon's family, huh. And of course her offer of one two or a weekend stay, ended up being months and months of—

**VanZandt:** How do you feel about (laughs) a long term lease?

**Williams:** —taking over this poor woman's family home. And of course she knew where everything was. Everything was in its place, but by the time we got through, it was [messed up]. (laughter) All reorganized and rearranged, but thankfully—

**VanZandt:** You probably hadn't had that much family togetherness in a long time.

**Williams:** No. And my dad, who has since passed away, he passed away in March. He was in bad health and with, you know, the electricity, he has a terrible asthma problem and couldn't breathe, and so—

**VanZandt:** Was he on oxygen then?

**Williams:** He was on oxygen, and so he ended up being in and out of the hospital the whole time, and that was good because he was in good care at St. Dominic's Hospital. Everybody just really extended themselves. It was a real outpouring of love and support from all over the country. I mean, and we've—you've heard the story about all the thousands of volunteers that have come in to help us rebuild our homes and our lives, especially in those early days. I felt like we must've had a certain look on our faces (laughs) because I would go to Wal Mart or some store or whatever, walk through the—because, you know, we realized that we don't have any clothes, we look like *hell*, we need to go to the beauty parlor—

**VanZandt:** Get a shower.

**Williams:** —we need to go get our hair done and get our nails done because we, not only do we feel raunchy, but we look bad, too. So people would come up to you and say, "Are you from the Coast?" We had a certain look about us. (laughter) Like a stamp was on our forehead. And, "We're so sorry," you know. "Anything we can do to help you?" And that was that outpouring that we felt everywhere we went, but—

**VanZandt:** It brings people together, doesn't it, that you would never meet in a million years.

**Williams:** The first thing that you think about, though, especially as a parent is, "Oh my gosh, what am I going to do with my children? If it's really that bad down there they're not going to be able to go to school. And how long will they be out of school?" And so that was my first thing after we found out that everybody was OK even before we actually could get back down to Bay St. Louis.

**VanZandt:** Sure, because it might be that you needed to stay in Jackson and get them in school there, which a lot of people did that.

**Williams:** And that's what we did.

**VanZandt:** Did you?

**Williams:** I mean immediately, and I have to say St. Richard's Church and school in Jackson, it's as though they had a disaster plan because they immediately went into action and opened up their school, their homes, their church and just *welcomed* us. And—

**VanZandt:** Because school had already been in session, had it, in Bay St. Louis?

**Williams:** Yes. And so we, you know, we inserted ourselves into their church, into their school, and they welcomed us and they just took our children under their wing. And my children actually stayed in school there until almost the end of October, so—

**VanZandt:** About two months.

**Williams:** —it was—but we finally—

**VanZandt:** What grade, were they in fourth grade?

**Williams:** They're in fourth grade this year.

**VanZandt:** OK.

**Williams:** So they were in third grade, but it took us a week, basically, to get back down here. Not by choice but I'll never forget my husband George attempting—he and my friend, Debbie and her husband Doug, they were going to go in, OK. And I mean they would have to wake up—

**VanZandt:** Do the manly thing [to do].

**Williams:** —they would have to wake up at like, you know, four o'clock in the morning and go sit in long lines at gas stations in Jackson to try to get gas. I mean, of course we had, everybody had a car—I had a car, George had a car, Debbie and Doug had a car. There was all these cars, but no gas. And so one day they said, "Well, we're going in." So later that—I think they got some old boots, you know, and GermX and they loaded up the supplies, and they made sure they had some *beer*, too, because you never—that's the main, number one thing people want to—"Forget the water, we want beer." But anyway, so they loaded up the car with supplies and everything, and they said, "Well, you know we know we can get as far as Hattiesburg

and surely we'll be able to get some gas there." Why they thought they could get gas in Hattiesburg, I don't know.

**VanZandt:** No, we couldn't find it either.

**Williams:** They got to Hattiesburg and they realized, "Wait a minute. We can't get gas here, and if we go in, there's surely not going to be any gas down there, so the only thing we can do now is turn around and go back to Jackson." So they went back to Jackson, regrouped and then they went on a *plot*, you know—

**VanZandt:** A mission to find gas.

**Williams:** —to get this gasoline to fill this car up and to get additional tanks of gas because you had to actually take gas with you.

**VanZandt:** Mm-hm, and it was hard to find gas cans, even, to store some.

**Williams:** So, it was just—but they finally got in and my husband's son, George Jr., went with them and he, um, they took pictures and so they were able to bring it back to us to show us exactly what had happened to our property. And I think it took a couple of days before we found out that my mother's house on the beach was completely gone and that the only thing left was the brick staircase. There was not even a stick of furniture. There was nothing. It was—we recovered a few trinkets. The interesting thing is the things that you really probably didn't care too much about, those are the things you found in the rubble (laughs).

**VanZandt:** "That old thing," yeah.

**Williams:** And, but my sister Jennifer, she and her husband and their baby—I think, I guess he was one at the time, Christopher—they were coming to Jackson and at the last minute they decided to go to a friend's house in Pass Christian because the baby just couldn't handle that long drive.

**VanZandt:** But they lived in Bay St. Louis as well.

**Williams:** And their house was completely destroyed. They lived in a section that's sort of like in the canal area that's near the Jordan River and they had just rebuilt their home. It was beautiful. And of course it was completely destroyed by Katrina, nothing left. But they were the ones, they went and called us and told us of the destruction and that Mom's house was gone and that their house was gone, and that my house was damaged, eight and a half feet of water. And my brother, Michael, who lives on the same street as I do, his house had, I think, four feet of water. My friend's house had, I guess, four or five feet of water. So, it was either totally destroyed or damaged, throughout.

**VanZandt:** So, four in your family, in your immediate family had homes damaged?

**Williams:** And my brother, Steve, his house was damaged as well. My sister, Liz, and her family lived in New Orleans area and their house was not damaged.

**VanZandt:** And where was Jennifer, they had evacuated to Pass Christian?

**Williams:** They went to north Pass Christian and they were safe where they were, but we didn't know that.

**VanZandt:** Right, because it was hit so hard, too.

**Williams:** So, we were very worried. And my brother, Michael, and his family went to Pensacola, Florida, which I thought that was sort of a strange place to go (laughs) to evacuate.

**VanZandt:** Another beach.

**Williams:** They went to the Sandestin Hilton.

**VanZandt:** Did they?

**Williams:** And a lot of people, it was like little Bay St. Louis, a lot of people from our area went to Destin, Florida, and that's where they were evacuated to and I kept thinking, it seems like you should go north.

**VanZandt:** Right.

**Williams:** OK.

**VanZandt:** Right.

**Williams:** But—

**VanZandt:** Well, Pensacola is still recovering from the hurricane the year before.

**Williams:** Oh, no. So anyway, I just thought that was funny. But we decided to go north, but—

**VanZandt:** When you—was it hard, Tish, not to come back with your husband when he came back, or were you OK with that, with him just going and—

**Williams:** I wanted to go.

**VanZandt:** —and that pull to see?

**Williams:** Oh, sure, you know, I wanted to go with him and to do all that, but my priority had to be my children and so while they were making the run down here I was on the phone. Thankfully I had so many friends in Jackson that I could—

**VanZandt:** Right.

**Williams:** —that I had known over the years and hadn't connected with in all these years—

**VanZandt:** You were connecting.

**Williams:** —and I reconnected with my old college friends. And I had worked in Jackson for a while and saw some former colleagues and just said, “What am I going to do now?” You know my dad's sick, I've got to get him into a hospital, my children, where am I going to, what am I going to do.

**VanZandt:** Plenty of decisions to make.

**Williams:** And being the Chamber [of Commerce] director I also had a responsibility to get back here as quickly as possible to help the businesses. We had 1600 businesses pre-Katrina and post-Katrina more than 50 percent of the businesses were either totally destroyed or severely damaged. And so with that, 100 percent of the businesses were shut down indefinitely. When I finally got in touch with my boss, the president of the Chamber, I was so thankful to be able to connect with him and I said, “What are we going to do now?” And he said—he's the number two guy at what was then Casino Magic and is now Hollywood Casino, he's from New Jersey originally—and he said, “Tish, I don't think you get it. *You* are the director the chamber of *no commerce*. There's no businesses here. They're all shut down. There's no Chamber of Commerce. There's no revenue coming in. You don't have a job, Tish.” OK. And I said, “But, but, but John, the businesses need me now more than ever before.” I felt like Scarlett O'Hara or something. (laughter)

**VanZandt:** That's exactly the picture that I got.

**Williams:** It's like I had this *dirt* in my hands. “As God is my witness.” So I had this, I don't know, call me crazy, but you know, it's like—

**VanZandt:** Well, heroic, that's probably just a natural feeling. You want to get down there and help.

**Williams:** So, I said—I mean I even had visions of me, I said, “I've got the computers so the chamber is saved, you know. I could set up an office here in Jackson. This is where it's going to be happening. I mean this is going to be command central. This was not planned but this was a good strategy on my part to end up in Jackson because this is where all the state governmental departments are located, it's where the governor's office is, it's where MEMA [Mississippi Emergency

Management Agency] is headquartered, it's where FEMA's [Federal Emergency Management Agency's] coming in, so.

**VanZandt:** You could plug in.

**Williams:** Hey, let me work the chamber right here in the capital city and let me make some things happen for Hancock County. He was like, "Tish, you might be stretching a bit for us to, you know, set up a chamber office in Jackson." I said, "Look, let me just—give me some time to work on this. I'm just not willing to walk away, OK?" "OK, well, you know, whatever you can work out, but let's face it, you're not going to be getting any revenue coming in from the government or any of your business."

**VanZandt:** Not in the immediate—

**Williams:** So my next two calls were to the Mississippi Development Authority, which is the Economic Development Agency for the State of Mississippi and the Mississippi Small Business Development Center. And I showed up on their doorsteps at the Mississippi Development Authority and I said, "What are we going to do now, folks?" And they were like, "Well, Tish, we're glad you're here because we are crafting the plan for small businesses and it would be great to have your counsel. Come on in, we're in a planning meeting right now." And that's when—of course, they were already a step ahead of us. They had already had people in from Florida. They had already done research on developing a bridge loan for small businesses to help them get back up and running, to give them the capital that they needed to quickly restart. They had already begun—

**VanZandt:** Wow, they were on the ball, that's impressive.

**Williams:** —the drawing up the plans to establish business assistance centers throughout the Gulf Coast area. And because I was there, I really believe that so many things happened for Hancock County that might not have otherwise happened, OK.

**VanZandt:** I was just thinking that, yeah.

**Williams:** We were the first business assistance center to open on the Gulf Coast in Hancock County. And we were nationally recognized for our work by the US Small Business Administration and the Mississippi Small Business Administration as a *model* for disaster recovery.

**VanZandt:** Oh wow.

**Williams:** And it wasn't anything that we planned but through tragedy comes triumph. And you do things you don't really know that what you're doing is going to work, but you know you just—

**VanZandt:** You're just following those gut instincts.

**Williams:** —you're just going for it because, you know, every day, you know, you just wake up and you just say—from my perspective I tried to stay totally focused on business because that is what I do. I am the voice of business in Hancock County and so I knew that I could get pulled into a lot of other areas, but that in order to be successful I needed to stay focused on my mission and so that's what I did. And as soon as I could, I got back down here. I really don't—I think it may have been two weeks before I actually got back down here and, but when I did I was ready to roll. I had my kids in school, my dad was in the hospital, my mother looked at me and said, "Tish, you've got to get back down there, you know."

**VanZandt:** She knew they needed you. They needed you, yeah. And it's a good distraction, isn't it? You know, I've talked to so many people who said, "Thank goodness I still had a job to go to to do because it distracted me."

**Williams:** Well, you know, like my mother said, "Tish, you know we'll take care of the kids. You've got to get back down there and help rebuild Hancock County." Because as my dad did, as my grandfather did—

**VanZandt:** In what capacity, Tish?

**Williams:** My grandfather and my dad were a team. My grandfather was probably the first unpaid economic development professional in Hancock County. He was Mr. Hancock County.

**VanZandt:** And what was his name, for the record?

**Williams:** Norton Haas, and he did so many things. There's even a highway named after him, the highway that you drove in on, Highway 603 is named the Norton Haas Memorial Highway.

**VanZandt:** I didn't know that.

**Williams:** And he was a great, a great leader, a great silent leader, I would say, and he was a wonderful public relations person who *always* believe in the potential of Hancock County. And today we are realizing the benefits from his vision and the vision of my father, Michael Haas, who did a lot of the foot and leg work. They wrote the legislation that created the Hancock County Port and Harbor Commission. And my dad says he remembers going to Washington and working with the federal government to receive the approvals to establish a railroad at Port Harbor and to establish the Stennis International Airport off of [Highway] 603 in the Kiln area. They were involved in the water and sewer programs, and the establishment of the McCloud Park, which is named after my grandfather's uncle who raised him, Albert J. McCloud was a successful business person out in the Kiln. So, I mean he was involved in so many things and helping with the United Way and establishing the Retired Senior

Volunteer Program. And there was nothing that my grandfather didn't have his hand in and my dad really followed in his footsteps. He started Our Lady Academy which is the only all-girl Catholic school in the state of Mississippi. Of course he had a vested interest in that because of his four daughters. And they needed to go to school somewhere and have a good Catholic education, so. And he can be credited with so many other things as well. So, people say, you know, "Well, why did you return? Why are you doing this? You could live anywhere." It's part of your heritage. It's what you're supposed to do. This is where your roots are and—

**VanZandt:** It's in your blood and it was up to you to carry on those footsteps, and I'm sure you felt that.

**Williams:** Oh, you do, you feel a wonderful connection to the land and to each other because its families that have lived here for generations. But the interesting thing is all the people who have come in from all over the country to call Hancock County their home and they don't have that, the roots and the generations and generations of family ties, but they have that connection to the land. And to see *them* come back, that was the most inspiring thing to me. And to roll up their sleeves and to dig in and to rebuild, that confirms that this is the best place to live and to raise a family.

**VanZandt:** It's a real sense of place is how I think about it. But then it's hard to define, isn't it? How would you define what is just so special about this community? "A place apart" I think it says on one of the signs.

**Williams:** Well, now we say "It's a place together." (laughter)

**VanZandt:** Oh, that's great.

**Williams:** But how do you define it? I mean, I think it's a very accepting community. We don't care who you are or where you came from. If you have something to contribute, don't wait for an invitation, just jump right in. It's a very open and welcoming community, and any surveys that have been done by our Tourism Bureau, the two things that came up as the biggest assets for our community are the people, the friendliness of the people and the food. Because being this close to New Orleans we love to eat.

**VanZandt:** You've got a lot more influence from New Orleans, don't you?

**Williams:** And I'm sorry, but the MREs were just not good enough. (laughter)  
That's Meals Ready to Eat. I think I—

**VanZandt:** They don't have red beans and rice MREs, do they?

**Williams:** They might, but I mean I think I only had to eat one of those the whole time because we, thankfully—

**VanZandt:** You had Quizno's and, you know—

**Williams:** You know, most of the people who live here know how to cook really good and, in particular, the elected officials, and they were cooking up a storm so we always had good food, even in spite of the tragedy.

**VanZandt:** Do you remember some of the groups—because, you know, you hear things particularly—maybe it was Waveland, I'm not sure if it was Bay St. Louis or Waveland, maybe you can tell me, that was labeled, you know, the town that America forgot, and Red Cross was too big to go in there or, you know, the town was too small. And so what kind of groups do you remember being here and who really helped particularly in those first stages?

**Williams:** There were so many groups. The interesting thing was that it was faith-based groups and they would just—it was so amazing. Well, of course, we still have City Team Ministries here today, but there were so many churches and people who would just come in. I'll never forget this one group that came in from Oxford, Mississippi, and they were with a Baptist church up there. And they had obviously loaded up their van, loaded up a trailer, hitched it to their van, and just one day just came on down to Bay St. Louis, pulled into an empty parking lot, which happened to be where my office was—so this is how I was observing all this—and they started taking out supplies, you know, to help you clean your home—Clorox, brooms and mops, and GermX and paper towels, and just setting it up on the, in the parking lot. And then they pulled out a grill (laughter) and they started cooking hamburgers and hot dogs, and I thought, “You know, how is anybody going to know that they're here?”

**VanZandt:** Right.

**Williams:** In no time they had a crowd. OK.

**VanZandt:** It didn't take long for that word to spread, right?

**Williams:** But keep in mind that, and this is what people didn't understand, this is what the federal government didn't understand, all communications were lost. OK, 65,000 homes were destroyed, another 55,000 were either damaged, you know, in some way damaged. All communications lost. So if FEMA and others say, “Well, go to the Internet and look this up,” you can't go to the Internet, you don't have a home, you don't have a computer, and you certainly don't have access to the Internet. And so this is where, in many ways, government and others failed because they didn't understand that the communications have changed, OK, and so how do you communicate out to people in the disaster that you don't have any communications. And some of the most effective forms were simply, you know, a piece of plywood with, you know, paint.

**VanZandt:** Spray painted on.

**Williams:** You know, “Rotary Club Meeting Wednesday at David’s House,” you know. I’ll never forget that one. We met at the Methodist church. The Rotary Club met faithfully every Wednesday in the church pews. And, but I often thought if only I had had—do you remember the old campaign days? I remember campaigning with my dad for various candidates when I was growing up, and they would have the old speaker on the top of the—

**VanZandt:** Oh sure.

**Williams:** —truck.

**VanZandt:** A bull horn.

**Williams:** A bull horn, and you ride through town and signs are on either side, and you ride through town and you say, “Vote for you-know-who for Sheriff” or whatever it was. And only if I had had a bull horn, that would’ve been a really effective form of communication.

**VanZandt:** Absolutely.

**Williams:** But, so—

**VanZandt:** And your mom on the bull horn—

**Williams:** Oh yeah. She had to stay up in Jackson, but yeah, we always say, even pre-Katrina, that the grapevine is faster than the Internet in Hancock County. (laughs)

**VanZandt:** Yeah, everybody’s in everybody’s business, which came to be a positive thing, right?

**Williams:** Oh yeah.

**VanZandt:** Isn’t that great.

**Williams:** And it’s not, I don’t consider it to be in everybody’s business. It’s not a gossipy-type place, it’s *hey*, you know, *did you hear the news, this is what’s going on* kind of thing more than the informative—

**VanZandt:** Look out for one another.

**Williams:** Sure, looking out for each other.

**VanZandt:** Mm-hm. Well, it was like being back in the old days.

**Williams:** Mm-hm.

**VanZandt:** Which there's so many positive things to that, especially for children. I remember in my home it brought us together. And we didn't have lights; we had a flashlight and we read because the TV was off, which was a great thing. What sort of things did you all—

**Williams:** It certainly—Katrina has purged us of all of the unnecessary things in our life. It has brought us together working toward common goals to rebuild our community and to make it a *better* Mississippi, and it's brought us together to focus on what's really important in life. And that is just being with each other and spending time with our children and our families, and nothing else is really important, you know. I mean, faith in God that He will provide all our needs.

**VanZandt:** Relationships.

**Williams:** Relationships are the key and we, the Chamber, you know, the chambers are known for their ribbon cuttings and their business after hours and social networking events. And I'll never forget this. I was racking my brain, you know, what can I do, what can I do, I've got to help these businesses. And we set up that business assistance center. We brought all the resources for businesses under one roof. We had the WIN [Workforce Investment Network] Job Center. We had the Mississippi Small Business Development Center, they sent in business counselors from throughout the country who helped businesses their financial statements. We create their records to help with their SBA [Small Business Administration] loans. We had the SBA Disaster Loan Staff. We had the Chamber. We had the ARTS Hancock County. We had Mississippi Bar Association came and set up a bank of computers so that the lawyers who had lost their offices and their computers could come in. We had wireless access to the Internet. We had phone services. We had photocopy machines and fax machines and telephones. Just, you name it, whatever could be there to help serve our business community, that's what we did and that's what we offered and we stayed focused on that. We were only to make that happen because we were able to secure Coast Electric Conference Center, which was one of the few buildings that had a roof and four walls and electricity. And because of that donation from Coast Electric we were able to provide a window to the world for, not just our businesses, we didn't turn anybody away. I mean, citizens could come and gain access to the internet and make phone calls and send faxes and that, thanks to the Mississippi Development Authority who provided us with a grant for funding so that we could staff—

**VanZandt:** I wondered that, thank you for saying that.

**Williams:** —we could staff there and that's how I was able to stay employed with the Chamber. I was able to get a grant from the Mississippi Development Authority which had a grant from the Economic Development Authority, or the EDA, it was a federal grant, we were to provide services. And I believe we made a difference and I would like to think that the Chamber has a higher profile and the Chamber has a

greater meaning to the citizens and to the business owners, at large, that yes, we are a known program in for our ribbon cutting and our Business After Hours, but we're more than that. We are the voice of business. We're also the voice of the community.

**VanZandt:** The face of Bay St. Louis, too, yeah.

**Williams:** And we care about, you know, rebuilding a better Hancock County.

**VanZandt:** Tell me if you would, Tish, about the annexation issue just a little bit, briefly, and some of those types of issues that come up when you're trying to figure out how to rebuild a community from scratch and, you know, Waveland included, and just some of the issues and how you've worked through that.

**Williams:** Well, first of all, thank God for Haley Barbour, you know, let me just say that because I don't know where we would (crying) be if it had not been for his leadership.

**VanZandt:** Well, Mississippi is markedly different from Louisiana in that aspect of leadership.

**Williams:** He came in and he provided strong leadership, and Marsha did as well, our First Lady. And he never wavered from his belief that we can rebuild a better Mississippi and brought in the New Urbanists from all over the world. In just *weeks* following the storm the planning began and many of our elected officials were still, you know, knee deep in search and rescue phase and weren't able to actually participate. But what came out of that was a vision for a better Bay St. Louis and a better Waveland, and it gave us a dream and it gave us hope. And from there, more planning continued and so there's been a tremendous amount of planning that has gone on while we are moving toward the various phases of disaster recovery. And we're now at a point where we can begin to conclude those plans and start moving toward implementation, and, of course, the number one issue *facing* the entire Mississippi Gulf Coast is housing, *affordable* housing. And that includes insurance. There's been a big issue statewide and really, this is a national issue that Mississippi, I believe, will solve because of this disaster and that is the need for catastrophic insurance. What happened in Mississippi could happen in California or any other place in this country and we look at it from a disaster standpoint. And really this wasn't a disaster. I found this out only a few months ago. This was a *catastrophe*. (laughter)

**VanZandt:** That's right.

**Williams:** We used to walk around here and go—anything that was unexplained we'd just say, “Hey, it's a disaster.” And now we're going, “Hey, wait a minute, it wasn't a disaster, it was catastrophe.” Because, and what that means is we lost our infrastructure, and so, you know we're starting from—

**VanZandt:** So that's the definition, the difference?

**Williams:** Below ground zero, we're having to rebuild our infrastructure before we could have, you know, true economic development and a rebuilt community, we have to have our infrastructure in place. That's step one. I think you know we lost our bridge, we lost Beach Road that connects our downtown to the rest of the Mississippi Coast, so we're rebuilding a bridge, we are rebuilding Beach Road, we are rebuilding infrastructure, we're repairing damaged buildings, and we are rebuilding those buildings that are gone including residential. And people might drive through here and say, well, how come things are moving so slow? Well, we've just learned that residential community will face a 100 percent increase in the wind [insurance] pool. Businesses will face, I believe it was 268 percent increase for businesses.

**VanZandt:** Yeah, it was over 200, I'm sure.

**Williams:** So, I think about that. My brother-in-law just found out that his house that he has just built two blocks from the beach in Waveland that his insurance is going to be \$7,000. And so—

**VanZandt:** Yeah, so many people—

**Williams:** —the cost of insurance—

**VanZandt:** —can't pay that because it's more than their note.

**Williams:** —and the eventual property taxes and, it's just the fear of the unknown. It's like my own mother has not rebuilt her house on the beach for a lot of reasons, but one of them is just the uncertainty of *will I be able to afford it?* even though, as she says, she is a wealthy widow (laughter), will she be able to afford to rebuild a home, what will the taxes be, what will the insurance be, and what will it cost to rebuild a home? Certainly she could never rebuild the kind of home that she had.

**VanZandt:** Describe that home, if you would, just quickly. And how old was it? Because, Tish, I have memories of that home, you know, of coming to visit.

**Williams:** We often referred to it as the Hotel California because people were just coming in and out of there constantly, with six kids, but you know, it was a home. It was not a house; it was a home. It was a place where we could bring our friends and, you know, just enjoy growing up there. And if you can imagine a two-story, Victorian-style, beach house sitting right in the middle of Bay St. Louis. And the wonderful thing about Bay St. Louis is that, unlike the rest of the Coast, there's just a two-lane road that separates my mother's house from the beach. And so as a child growing up there, you could just run across the street and you'd be on the beach, and you could go down there and, you know—I remember going floundering, and walking down to Washington Street and going crabbing, and I don't know why, but just as a child one of the most exciting memories is pulling up your crab net, you know, at the

Washington Street Pier and seeing if you've got a—"have I caught a crab yet," you know, and then finally catching some and taking them home, and boiling them and eating them. We didn't catch that many but it was just the journey was the destination, you know. And just good old wholesome entertainment of just walking the beach and looking for diamonds, you know, which was any kind of shell that you could find out there. Go gigging, you'd always go gigging for flounders.

**VanZandt:** What's gigging?

**Williams:** You get yourself a Coleman lantern and in the evening, when the tide is out, you can go out walking in the water and you've got your, it's like a, it's almost like a broom handle that has a spear on the end of it. And so when you find your flounder, the flounder stays buried in the sand and you *gig it* with your spear and, you know, you'd get yourself a flounder. And I remember as a child my dad took me out floundering one night and we caught a flounder that was maybe about six inches long. (laughter) And, boy, that was a great catch, wasn't it. But my uncle, who was a taxidermist in Hattiesburg, took that flounder and he mounted that fish and it was a joke, it was a family joke for many, many years to have that little flounder mounted.

**VanZandt:** So, was that hanging in your home?

**Williams:** It was in our family room. The interesting thing is the family room was in the back of the house, the smallest room in the house. That's where the kitchen was and the fireplace that my Uncle Dickey built for us. That's where we gathered. That's where we—

**VanZandt:** Cozy.

**Williams:** —hung out. It was cozy. But I never understood it because, here we sat, we live on the beach, but yet we're all huddled up in this small room in the back of the house with no beach view. Now, does that make sense? No.

**VanZandt:** It was near the kitchen which was probably the—that's usually the heart of the house.

**Williams:** I always thought—

**VanZandt:** Can I share something—

**Williams:** —it should be reversed.

**VanZandt:** —that I remember—

**Williams:** Yeah.

**VanZandt:** —and tell me if you remember this. I remember coming, I don't know how old I was, but I do remember that my older sister, who is three years older than I am, got to, you know, hang with you a little bit more because I was just younger. And going up to your bedroom and—

**Williams:** On the second floor, yeah.

**VanZandt:** —which I thought—yeah—I was just *so* excited if I got to actually go up into the bedroom with the two older girls, and I remember the barber shop chair.

**Williams:** Yeah, oh my gosh.

**VanZandt:** I thought that was the coolest thing in the world that somebody had a barber shop chair in their room.

**Williams:** I don't know where we got that from.

**VanZandt:** And the player piano.

**Williams:** Oh yeah. Oh, the player piano was so much fun. I would love to have a player piano today. That—those were the good times when we'd sit at the player piano and that's when we had the rolls.

**VanZandt:** Right.

**Williams:** The music rolls, and we'd sit there. I mean I probably know so many old songs because of that.

**VanZandt:** Absolutely.

**Williams:** You know, I'd sit there for hours and just singing that music. But one of the scary thoughts from my mother when she realized her house was gone is “Oh, my gosh, what happened to that, what happened to that chair?” Because it weighed *a ton*, it was so heavy. We actually did find pieces of it.

**VanZandt:** Did you.

**Williams:** In the back yard. But I mean, God forbid anybody would be hit in the head by that thing (laughter) flying through the air.

**VanZandt:** And I think you had it on the second floor. I'm surprised it didn't come crashing through. But you had those great tall ceilings and, yeah, that great porch. And a swing in that tree in the front, right?

**Williams:** Oh yeah, there was a swing out there for the kids. And we just had so many great parties there. That's where I got married.

**VanZandt:** Did you?

**Williams:** And I'll never forget, I got married on the front lawn of my parents' home and (laughter) my dad said, "But there's no aisle for you to walk down." And so he had a sidewalk poured so that I would have an aisle to walk down from the front steps down to the front, the end of the front lawn. And the interesting thing is that that survived Katrina. (laughter)

**VanZandt:** Did it? Your aisle was still there.

**Williams:** My wedding aisle is still there. Yeah, we had some good times there. Wonderful parties. We had three wedding receptions. The sad thing is my younger sister, Laura—you know, I guess every girl's dream, you know you have your dream about what your wedding is going to be, and because we loved our family home so much and have so many memories there, and it was just a great party house, you know, we all wanted to have our wedding receptions at that home. So we all did, except—

**VanZandt:** Yeah, I can't imagine a better place.

**Williams:** —for Laura. She's thinking about getting married and she came down a couple of weeks ago, and we were dreaming about her wedding and we kind of got off, you know, we still have vivid imaginations. We're like, "Yeah, we could get the lot cleared and we could bring tents in and we could like set up tables and chairs and have a dance floor brought in.

**VanZandt:** *Oh*, that's a great idea.

**Williams:** And then we're realizing, oh, this would be wonderful but there's no electricity out there and, you know, there's no—

**VanZandt:** You got some generators.

**Williams:** —no port-o-pots. I mean—

**VanZandt:** Pull out those five generators.

**Williams:** I think we've convinced her that she just needs to go Hollywood Casino.

**VanZandt:** Oh, yeah.

**Williams:** Or the OLG [Our Lady of the Gulf] Community Center but—so that's the sad thing. And then her father has passed away, our father has passed away, so her dad won't be able to walk her down the aisle and, you know, just things like that.

**VanZandt:** Yeah, it's going to be different, mm-hm.

**Williams:** So.

**VanZandt:** So, tell me about, mentioning Hollywood Casino, just some of the businesses that—because just driving down [Highway] 90 alone and I haven't been down the Beach Boulevard in about maybe two months now, and it just, things change so quickly that, I just was struck by how many businesses are open along 90. And I remember because I came down maybe a month after the storm, and just nothing. So it looks like things, like you said, are just amazing in their bounce back. So tell me about like the casino and how people felt about that, and obviously that's important.

**Williams:** Well, we just got a report today from the Employment Commission that says that Hancock County's unemployment is the lowest its been since Katrina.

**VanZandt:** Really.

**Williams:** And that is, in large part, due to the fact that the Port Bienville Industrial Park is up and running, and really only lost maybe one of their major industries. The small businesses, 62 percent of our businesses are back up and running again, and we have new businesses that have emerged. And so, you know, and they've through their own true grit and determination, I might add. There's been very little for the small business owner in the way of support—

**VanZandt:** That's true, and so many of them lost their homes and their businesses, so.

**Williams:** —in the struggle that they must be facing. And then the Hollywood Casino re-emerged, formerly Casino Magic, and they're employing like 1000 people. I think Silver Slipper, a new casino, just opened at Bayou Caddy on the other end of the Beach Road past Waveland and I think they, I want to say they're employing like 500 people. The Super Center, Wal-Mart Super Center is employing 500. The biggest void that we have right now is we do not have a grocery store in Bay St. Louis or Waveland.

**VanZandt:** Where is Super Wal-Mart?

**Williams:** Super Wal-Mart is in Waveland.

**VanZandt:** Waveland, down on [Highway] 90.

**Williams:** But there's a difference. And yes, thank God for Wal-Mart is the other thing we say because they were with us before the storm, they were with us *immediately* following the storm, they opened their doors to the public and distributed goods at no charge to residents immediately following the storm, and they were there immediately following the storm just reinventing themselves and have been there for

us. But pre-Katrina we had the Waveland Market Center. We had the Sav-a-Center. We had the Winn Dixie. We lost those three stores. And so, we've been working, the Chamber's been working hard with local officials to get our grocery store, at least one grocery store back. It's a huge community issue and it's something that I'm never going to give up on. We have a good prospect; somebody that we believe could make a good impact on our community. But there's a lot of things that have to fall into place to make that happen. So, we'd like to see this grocery store happen. The small businesses, they are, they are my inspiration. As you drive down Highway 90 you will see Ricky's Restaurant that used to be on Coleman Avenue in Waveland and now on Highway 90 at Zuppardo's Shopping Center. You will see Trapani's Restaurant. In their promotion they say "We're the best in the Bay." They were on the beach near the corner of Main in Bay St. Louis; they're now on Highway 90 at Hancock Square, the Village at Hancock Square. And you walk in and it looks like the same restaurant but, wait a minutes, it's in a shopping area.

**VanZandt:** Oh, that's great.

**Williams:** You see all these businesses that might've been somewhere else reopening in different locations and some are in the same location, like some of our downtown businesses. And then you see new businesses emerging; people who maybe they've never been in business before.

**VanZandt:** Well, that's what I was curious about. Are these people who are coming here who *are not* previous Bay St. Louis residents who are opening businesses?

**Williams:** Some are and some aren't. Bay Books is an example of that. This is a lady who was an advertising executive working for the Godwin Agency, and after the storm her position was eliminated, and she actually came and worked for the Chamber as a volunteer and then came on staff, and at some point she said, "You know, I've always wanted to open my own business and I think it's time for me to take the plunge." And so she boldly went down to the first block of Main Street in Bay St. Louis and opened up a bookstore. We had a wonderful book store pre-Katrina that we *loved* and supported, and the owner of that store decided not to go back into the book business, and actually reinvented herself and has gone into modular home sales. And so this then opened the door for a new entrepreneur to establish a bookstore.

**VanZandt:** So is it in the same location?

**Williams:** It's in a different location, mm-hm. A different name, but we've got our bookstore back.

**VanZandt:** Tell me about the artist community. I know you deal a lot with businesses by just looking around at all your beautiful art on the walls, and that's one of the things that Bay St. Louis is so well known for.

**Williams:** Well, the arts has provided us with hope and beauty during a challenging and unexpected time. One of the partners that came into the Business Assistance Center immediately following the storm was the arts. And the Arts Hancock County is a non-profit organization that was volunteer led, had only been established a few years ago and, but they organized themselves so well. They had over 200 resident artists pre-Katrina. And these are artists who are from all over the country who have come to make Bay St. Louis their home and Waveland, and really they're spread throughout all of Hancock County. And I believe that the arts program will go down in history as one of the most productive business recovery programs.

**VanZandt:** And why is that?

**Williams:** It's because—

**VanZandt:** Who's helped them?

**Williams:** —of the leadership of Gwen Emson(?), who was the president, and thankfully Ruth Thompson showed up on her doorstep one day and said, "I want to help." She's an artist, also. They're both artists. But they gave of themselves, their souls to bring the artists back and to help get the artists back on their feet. And we provided them with a spot to do that, and in fact, they're still here with us today and that's been one of the beautiful outcomes of Katrina is the partnership that began following the storm, that were never there before, are now still in place. And so the arts actually works out of the Chamber office and they've—it first started with bringing, you know, getting donations of supplies and distributing those out to the artists, and then creating a communications network for the artists and that they could be aware of grant opportunities and things that would help them get their homes and their studios rebuilt. Because, think about it, pre-Katrina we had numerous art galleries throughout, in particular, downtown Bay St. Louis and those were shut down, and there's really only one art gallery that's open today. Here it is all these months later.

**VanZandt:** Are you still having a Saturday art walk?

**Williams:** We had second Saturday—

**VanZandt:** Second Saturday.

**Williams:** —which is a wonderful event every second Saturday in the month. Visitors and residents come to, I call it the, it's a giant house party as far as I'm concerned, but it's called the Art Walk. And you go and you walk through the stores and there's entertainment and there's refreshments, and it's just a wonderful social event that helps generate sales for the local businesses, as well. And it's been an interesting thing. It's been wildly supported by the residents. The residents have really come out to support those local businesses and the visitors are beginning to come, as well, the volunteers that have been here to help rebuild Hancock County.

**VanZandt:** Cruising the Coast has been successful?

**Williams:** Cruising the Coast came through and it was in a different place this year, but we'd like to see it return to our downtown. This year they moved it to the Historic Depot District and *that* has emerged as a new—well, I guess it was the original downtown district, business district, and now we're seeing that emerge as a new business district, as well. Some of the businesses that were—well, Jack's Restaurant is going to reopen in what was Bay City Grill. Carol and Mary's Restaurant has reinvented itself as CJ's Grocery, Deli and Caterer and that's there. There's a couple of businesses that were there before the storm, Beningo's, Beningo's Bar. And then they have some new businesses, Emma's Eatery, and Emma, I think it's Emma Nicole's Shop. So it's been interesting to see how people aren't going to let Katrina stop them from living and making a living in Hancock County. And it's the spirit of the people. It's the resiliency of the people that is inspiring, you know. We will—throughout Katrina, the story of Katrina, we have heard so many stories about wind versus rain. (laughter) I mean wind versus water, and pain and suffering, and all of these tragedies that come from Katrina, but the greatest story is the power of human spirit. And those—

**VanZandt:** The power of one to make a difference.

**Williams:** Those are the stories that need to be told and those are the stories that will make us a stronger Mississippi Coast. It's about the people who came to help from all over the country. It's about the people who live here and their resiliency and their determination to rebuild a better Mississippi Coast. And it's about a passion of the people to live in a place like Hancock County that will make us a stronger community. And, you know, right after the storm, my husband's company he works for—made a decision to relocate their headquarters to St. Louis, Missouri. It's the Isle of Capri Casino Corporation and we—and I said, "George, you know, this is a good company. They have been so good to you and our family, and you need to go with your company, but I can't leave. (laughter) I can't leave Hancock County."

**VanZandt:** That's a big "but."

**Williams:** And he says, "And, Tish, I wouldn't ask you to." And I just thought it was kind of funny because how many people—people probably think, you know, those people down there are crazy. There must be something in that water. But how many people would say, you know, "No, I can't go to St. Louis, Missouri, because I must stay here in this devastated, storm-ravaged community so I can raise my children and rebuild my home." Well, am I nuts? I don't know what it is that draws us to this place and what keeps us here. But (laughter)—you know—

**VanZandt:** Yeah.

**Williams:** —a little thing called Katrina isn't going to run any of us away. We're here to stay. That was the thing that came up right after the storm. One of our local Chamber members, Shari Raft(?), I will never forget her leadership and she came up with this sign, "We are staying!" And she had, on her own nickel, she went out and got these signs made in bright red ink and it says, "We are staying!" And then people went crazy. Everybody had to get one of these signs. But it was a symbol of hope and it was a statement of commitment that *we* are staying, we're not going anywhere. This storm's not going to run us off. We're going to rebuild and we're going to rebuild better than ever.

**VanZandt:** And that's exciting, I'm sure, to think about particularly in your job of just the *potential*. If everything's handled the right way, and I'm sure that's, you know, been difficult, too, everyone agreeing on so many decisions to be made. But do you feel like that there's a pretty united effort or united vision, I should say?

**Williams:** I think we've been fortunate to have a number of people from all over the country who've come in here to help us develop our plans and our visions. We still have a few more plans to complete. We're in the middle of updating the comprehensive plan for Hancock County. We still have yet to do a charrette for Bay St. Louis. The Waveland charrette is complete. And applications are in for FEMA support and community development block grant money. We have, our county and our two cities have submitted over seventy-two million dollars in requests to the Mississippi Development Authority for community development block grant funds that will help with infrastructure and community revitalization.

**VanZandt:** Yeah, those are great.

**Williams:** And when those funds begin to flow, then I believe this next year, year 2007 will be a tremendous rebuilding boom for the Mississippi Coast because all of the homeowner grants should be in the hands of the people who need this money to rebuild their homes. The government will have resources to rebuild the infrastructure and to revitalize their downtowns. And it will create economic opportunities. It will create more jobs, more sales tax revenue, more business income.

**VanZandt:** Get that chain going that, yeah, one thing depends on the next.

**Williams:** So, I think probably, you know, some more interviews should be done at the end of 2007 to see. I believe we're going to—there's going to be tremendous progress made during 2007.

**VanZandt:** Well, that's a great way to end because it's New Years weekend.

**Williams:** That's right.

**VanZandt:** And it's going to be 2007 next week, so *let it begin*. And I just—you've taken so much time here, Tish, I know you've got things to do and a Chamber to run,

but is there anything that I haven't asked or anything in closing that you can think of that you want to add, any memories or what you see in the future? It just sounds like you're so positive. So positive.

**Williams:** Well, as you can tell, because I've been crying throughout this whole interview, it's, you know, it's been a—it sounds crazy for me to say this, but it's been a wonderful experience. And when I—you know I grew up here and I left when I was eighteen, I wanted to go out and see the world. And I had the opportunity to live in a lot of places and to do some wonderful things throughout my career, but after I had—and I went to Baltimore for ten years and worked for a national, non-profit organization—but when I had my children and I thought about what I wanted for them, all roads kept leading south towards home. And I knew that what I wanted for my kids is what I had. I wanted my children to be able to grow up in a community where they could feel the love of their grandparents and to know their aunts and uncles and to grow up with their cousins and to have those wonderful relationships that *memories* are made of. And I wanted them to be able to live in a neighborhood where they could ride their bikes to wherever they wanted to go and to walk freely throughout their neighborhood and to play with the children in the neighborhood. *That's* what I wanted for my children. *That's* why I found a way for my husband—my husband and I found a way for us to be back here to give our children that. (laughs) Little did I know that they, too, were going to be hurricane survivors. But it's what gives them *strength*. It's what's going to give them the fiber to be able to tackle any problem and turn it into a solution. And so I think, in the end, that they will be better off having gone through this experience. And I guess the final thing I want to say is that—we were watching—I was with my children and we were watching the CNN [Cable News Network] documentary that was produced by Bay St. Louis native, Kathleen Koch. After it was over with, my daughter Trisha looked at me and she said, "Mama, it's not the buildings that make the town, it's the people." And I thought, you know, at nine years old she just *gets it* already. If I have done nothing else but give her that, that foundation to work from, then you know what, that's good enough.

**VanZandt:** You've done good, yeah, that's huge. That's huge. Well, and your children, you know I didn't get to hear much about, you know, how they've done but I'm sure they've been affected in so many ways and met so many friends that they never would've made in Jackson, and just all the different experiences.

**Williams:** The children have been the heroes, really. I don't know how they've done, I really don't because they have just been so flexible. It's like, OK, one day, you know, they go to Jackson and the next day they're being enrolled in a completely different school in a different city that they've never lived in before, and they just deal with. And it wasn't without struggle. I mean it was an emotional roller coaster for these children, and then it's like, wait, why are we here and why is Mom and Dad commuting back and forth. We were commuting back and forth from Jackson to Bay St. Louis and Biloxi until October when we finally were able to get a home that was donated to us by a friend so that we could bring our children down here. And their school reopened in October so that we could get them back in school. Unbelievable.

But the kids, you know, in retrospect, I think really—although it would've been difficult, the most important thing is to keep the families together and that's what the children needed the most is to be with their parents. And so what if you miss (laughs) a couple of months of school, but for some—I didn't know how long it was going to go on, so I felt like I needed to make sure that they didn't miss anything academically. So, sometimes you second guess your decisions but in the end it always works out. And the biggest thing that my children miss is their neighborhood. Here it is, how many months, eighteen months after the storm and we're still not back in our home and—

**VanZandt:** Tell me about that.

**Williams:** —we've moved—

**VanZandt:** Do you know when it will be?

**Williams:** We first moved in the Jackson home and then a friend gave us, loaned us their home in Diamondhead that wasn't damaged so we were able to stay there for a good while, and then we moved into an apartment in February almost—has it been almost a year?

**VanZandt:** Wow.

**Williams:** And so we just haven't had time, because we both work full time we hadn't had time to focus on rebuilding our own home. And we *now* have done that and we are at the stage where we have completed the electrical and the plumbing.

**VanZandt:** That's great.

**Williams:** And so we're ready for the inspectors to come and then when that happens we can move forward with the sheetrock.

**VanZandt:** Mm-hm, one step at a time.

**Williams:** One step at a time, one day at a time.

**VanZandt:** Yeah.

**Williams:** And, you know, we just, that's all we could do.

**VanZandt:** Thank you, Tish, so much.

**Williams:** Thank you.

**VanZandt:** I appreciate it.

**Williams:** Thank you for doing this.

**VanZandt:** Yeah, well, it's just been, like you said, it's been a wonderful experience, too. You know, we gain strength from hearing your stories and hopefully other people too, who hear this. Thank you.

(end of interview)