Table of Contents

Personal history ................................................................. 1
Family issues during Hurricane Katrina ................................ 2
Working in hotel industry ................................................... 2
Preparing for Hurricane Katrina ......................................... 3, 6, 16
Assessing needs in kitchen of hotel ................................. 3
Staff .................................................................................. 4, 8
Hurricane Katrina arrives in Hattiesburg, sixty miles north of Gulf Coast .... 4, 15
Debris ............................................................................... 4
Katrina’s aftermath ........................................................... 4
Cooking by candlelight and flashlights ............................. 4
Food cooked and served at hotel after Katrina ................. 5
Who was fed ................................................................. 5
Community cooperates to accomplish necessary tasks .... 5
Getting water after Katrina ............................................... 5
Camp Shelby .................................................................. 6
Food supplies in freezer after Katrina .............................. 6
Lessons learned from Katrina .......................................... 7, 16, 18, 22
Hot summer after Katrina ............................................... 7
Issues related to avoiding food poisoning after Katrina .... 8
Issues related to freezers after Katrina ............................. 8
Staff members do whatever jobs need to be done, help each other .... 9
Decisions regarding running hotel on limited resources after Katrina .... 9
Flushing toilets with pool water ....................................... 9
Cleaning rooms, changing linens ..................................... 9
Helping guests and would-be guests ............................. 9
Assessment of the guests weathering Katrina and aftermath at hotel .... 10
Camaraderie among guests .............................................. 10
Stress produces frustration ........................................... 11
Military boarded at hotel ............................................. 13
Hotel provided food free of charge after Katrina .............. 13
Sense of responsibility, commitment to fulfill her job tasks .... 13
Going home after Katrina ............................................. 14
Damages to home ......................................................... 14
Stress of missing family members .................................. 14
Winds of Katrina .......................................................... 15
Flashlights ................................................................. 16
Generator power .......................................................... 17
Fire extinguishers ........................................................ 17
First aid ......................................................................... 17
Changes wrought by Katrina ........................................... 18
Special needs of infants after Katrina .............................. 19
Children in hotel during Katrina ............................................................................... 19
Most demanding tasks after Katrina ........................................................................ 20
Heroes ....................................................................................................................... 20
Failure of her employer to compensate for overtime work after Katrina ................. 22
Importance of self-care ............................................................................................. 22
Honoring grief ........................................................................................................... 22
Security issues at hotel after Katrina ........................................................................ 23
This is an interview for the Mississippi Oral History Program of The University of Southern Mississippi Hurricane Katrina Project. The interview is with Angelia Genice Gray and is taking place on July 16, 2007. The interviewer is Catherine Price.

Price: OK. So we’re starting now, and would you state your name and spell it, please?


Price: OK. And what is your date of birth?


Price: OK. And where were you born?

Gray: Hattiesburg, Mississippi.

Price: OK. And your father’s name?

Gray: Willie James Simmons.

Price: OK. And your mother?

Gray: Ora V. Simmons.

Price: OK. And where did you grow up?

Gray: Here in Hattiesburg.

Price: OK. And you live in Hattiesburg now?

Gray: Yes, ma’am.

Price: And you’ve lived here your whole life.

Gray: Yes, ma’am.
Price: OK. Because family is such an important part of surviving a crisis, can you describe your family situation at the time of [Hurricane] Katrina with spouse, parents, children, pets? Whatever your—

Gray: With my childrens, two of my kid, my childrens was with me, and my grandkids and my daughter-in-law was with me. My daughter, she was with some friends, and my pets was at the house. And we had to let them go so they would, you know—in case anything happened, that they would be able to survive because I had too many to bring up here. And my mother and my sister and (inaudible), they was at home at their house. So I made sure they was all right before I knew what I had to do up here, so.

Price: OK. So it must have been very hard to let your pets loose.

Gray: Yeah, it was. But they are, like, stay-at-home pets so I knew they wasn’t going to wander too far. And we made sure we had put a little extra food out, and we made sure they had water so that they could get to it.

Price: So you didn’t lose any of them?

Gray: No, I didn’t lose any of my pets.

Price: Oh, good. That makes me feel better because I love pets. OK. Thank you. How long have you worked in the hotel industry?

Gray: I worked in the hotel for three and a half years; this is my first hotel experience.

Price: OK. Great. And what is your current position?

Gray: I’m the food and beverage director.

Price: OK. And this is the one position you’ve had the entire time you’ve been here?

Gray: No, ma’am. I started out as just a cook. And the guy that hired me to cook, he was leaving to go to another job. And he promoted me to take his position when he left.

Price: OK, great. And what are your long-term career goals?

Gray: Eventually one day I’m hoping that, before I get too old, that I can own my own restaurant.

Price: OK, all right. So not necessarily stay in the hotel industry?

Gray: Right.
Gray: Yes, ma’am.

Price: OK. So you were employed at this hotel at the time of Katrina?

Gray: I can’t even remember the day that Katrina was coming. I think the day before, which was like, I think that Friday, we had got paid. And I think the weather had started beginning to get, you know, rain. You know, the weather wasn’t looking too good. So when they start saying when Katrina was going to hit, we got paid that day, and I went home and got my kids, told them, “Hey, y’all want to come stay with me, or y’all want to stay at home?” And I made sure they had water and whatever they needed and food, canned goods and stuff at the house. And I told my son to get up and go gas his truck up; gave him money to gas his truck up. I gassed my car up. I packed for me to stay up here for four or five days because I didn’t know if I was going to have to stay or what the outcome would be. And I got everything at the house prepared, made sure they had flashlight batteries and whatever they need. I was skeptical of leaving them there because, you know, I was scared, like, what if something happen? You know. Am I going to be able to get to them and stuff? So I came on up here. And I think when the weather started getting bad the next day, my childrens called me and said, “Mama, I think we want to come up there and stay with you.” So I told them to come on. We had a few rooms left, and I got my childrens a room so they can have because I had my son and my daughter-in-law and their two kids with me. They was here, and so I got them to come up here so that (inaudible). My youngest son was with me, and my daughter, she was working at the convalescent home during that time. So she was all right during that time, but she was staying with her friends. So after they came up here, we got situated and everything, to make sure we did, and I had to go in the kitchen to see what I had, and what I was going to need. I had to make sure that we had filled water up in pots and stuff in the kitchen, to case if the water went out or we lost power or something, that I would have something to cook with or to heat up to wash dishes because I knew that I had a gas stove, that I would have gas if didn’t nothing happen. And I had a gas oven. And one of my fryers was gas; the other one was electric. So I knew if anything happen, I would have something to cook on. And I made sure we had flashlights and stuff in the kitchen, because I had them in the areas that I knew I was going to need them in. And my main concern was my cooler and my freezer going out. So I had my staff that was here and my childrens to come help me move my milk and stuff that was in the cooler into the freezer. Because if the power went out or something happened, that we’ll have save that a little longer than normal if I’d left them in the cooler. So we was all making preparation doing that. So I think that was the day Katrina was getting ready.
to hit. So I made preparations for that, and they had told us we could bring two employees to help out. Each department had to have two employees that they can depend on. So I knew in my kitchen and restaurant, I need somebody to be in the restaurant and somebody to be in the kitchen to help me cook. And I think housekeeping had two employees. We had, like, two, maybe three front-desk employees, and we had two maintenance peoples to stay on probably. And we had security, and all the manager was automatically on call. And so it was four of us, four managers on call that day, plus the employees. And Stacy McQuery(?) during that time was our general manager, and her family and stuff, everybody brought their family with them. And the ones that didn’t have a whole bunch of dogs and stuff, they brought their animals and stuff with them, up here to stay. And during the time when Katrina finally did hit—I think the majority of the employees, they was in they room. The managers, we was walking around, and the maintenance man, the head of maintenance, he was walking around with Stacy, the general manager, making sure everybody was in their room and what needed to be locked down and bolted up was down, so it wouldn’t blow anywhere. And me and a couple other managers was at the front, by the front desk, standing up. So after a while, when Katrina started, we went into the restaurant, and we was looking up out the window, and we saw debris coming. I’m like, “You can see over this way towards the pool area on this side by the rooms, you can see the trees and stuff just waving.” And all of a sudden, some of the guests, I guess they got scared, and they was walking, coming into the main building. And Stacy and Milton was walking around in Katrina, while Katrina was going on, trying to get the guests to stay in their rooms because, to make sure wouldn’t nobody get hurt because debris was blowing from down the hill, like Barnhill, like the top of—we saw the top of Barnhill coming up the hill, and tin from other places coming up. And you can just hear the trees where they were just popping, wind just breaking them off. And I think we watched that for, like, thirty minutes, and you could hear the windows in the restaurant, where, like, we didn’t know if they were going to break or what because we could just hear them, how the wind was hitting up against the window like it was going to pull them out. But we watched that and listened to that and made sure all the—Stacy and Milton made sure all the employees and the guests wasn’t nobody in harm’s way, that everybody was safe. And I think after the wind and stuff had died down, we went around and made sure everybody was all right, wasn’t nobody hurt, and if anybody need water, this and that. And during the time, my ice machine had plenty of ice, so I knew if I had to, we could get ice to do whatever we need to melt down to do stuff with. And after I did that, everybody came into the lobby; all the employees and stuff came into the lobby, and we sat around deciding on what needed to be done and what. So it was getting later in the day, and some of the employees, the peoples talking about they was hungry. So me and one of my cook, her name was Mary Harris(?), but she’s no longer with me; she went somewhere else. Me and her got in the kitchen, and I had told her find us, got some flashlights. I think we had two flashlights, and we had the candles, and we sat around. And we went in the freezer to see what I had, take out stuff that I knew that I can cook so we start trying to find stuff to cook so everybody can have something to eat. So she’ll stir a pot, and I hold the flashlight. I stir a pot. (laughter) We was taking turns with the flashlight and the candles, holding over the pots and stuff so we can see, make sure didn’t nothing burn
and that we had everything we needed in there. And going in the coolers and the dry storage, trying to get stuff out to find. And I thank the Lord that we was blessed that we didn’t have it as bad as a lot of people have it because I made sure, my staff made sure that each guest here had two hot meals a day. So we would get up about—our day would start about five o’clock to get up to get dressed to come in the kitchen to cook food for those days that—I think we lost power the day Katrina hit, and we didn’t get it back to that Thursday evening, so I think that Wednesday, that Tuesday and that Wednesday, we got—they ran a lamp in there so we had a lamp to cook by until we got the lights and stuff got cut back on. And like I say, we had two hot meals a day.

**Price:** What’d you cook?

**Gray:** Whew! We had Sunday dinner every day. We had hamburger steaks. We had baked chicken. We had spaghetti and meat sauce. I mean, you name it; whatever I can throw together and I had in that freezer, I was just cooking up food because I didn’t want to lose it. And so when I (inaudible) seen something like it was thawing out, I grabbed it and cooked it. So we had, like, a Sunday dinner every day.

**Price:** For how many people?

**Gray:** Whew! I think I cooked for maybe fifty peoples or more. And then Chris(?), the man over the general manager, our regional manager, he stays here. So his family came up here to eat. And then they took, like, the elderly people that was in his neighborhood, that couldn’t get out, he’d come up here and get lunches for them. So really he might have took ten plates to somebody else. So really, I say more than about sixty people, give or take, because I really couldn’t tell you exactly how many people, and we had a lot of military in-house. And the military people was coming in, and like when it was time to clean up, pick up debris, everybody chipped in to help clean up around the area. And like when the water was off, everybody pitched in and dipped water up and put them in big trash cans so we can keep the toilets and stuff flushed and all that. So.

**Price:** So they took water from the pool? Is that when they went to the trash cans in the rooms?

**Gray:** Right. So they can keep their toilets and stuff flushed. And I had water in the kitchen to where I could cook and do, and we would do up enough to where we had—I think it was a little service station right down here was a carpet place, and they was the only place that kept running water the whole time that Katrina was out. And we went down there, and we would fill up the pots with water so that we can boil it to wash dishes and stuff with.

**Price:** How did you know they had power?

**Gray:** They didn’t have power; they just—
Price: I mean water.

Gray: —had water. (Inaudible) one of the maintenance guys was down there, and I
told him; I said, “Go down there and check.” I say, “Somebody got to have water.”
We were going looking for water. So he decide to stop over there and see if they had
water because I think somebody might have been there, or he saw some water running
out, and he went over there, and they had running water the whole time. It never lost
its water. And so we just kept going down there, getting water, filling up the pots
when I would start running low to make sure we had water to wash the dishes because
we would put it on the stove and boil it. And my sons went in and washed dishes until
my dishwasher and stuff was able to come back to work. Because I had one
dishwasher, tree fell on his house, and so he was trying to get stuff out his house and
wash clothes and try to make sure they save some of they stuff that they’d lost in they
house.

Price: So if there were like a hundred and nineteen rooms here, and you were only
cooking for sixty, is that because a lot of them went away during the day, like the
military?

Gray: The military guys, I say sixty. But like I say, I had enough there for if
anybody needed something to eat, they have it because we had little sandwich meats
and different juice and stuff. But like I said, a lot of the military, they had to go back
on Camp Shelby to help clean up whatever damage Camp Shelby had done. They was
like on call like as a cleanup duty. And so a lot of some of those wasn’t here, but
when they came in, if they wanted something to eat, I made sure they had something
to eat.

Price: And then did you order any that Friday before all this? Did you order any
additional food?

Gray: Well, we had just got a truck in, a grocery truck in. So I already had a lot of
stuff on hand, and like they was telling me, “Well, get sandwich meat and this and
that.” And I told them; I said, “No. I wasn’t going to get any sandwich because either
way it go, I had to worry about how I was going to store the sandwich meat if the
lights and stuff went out.” And so I told them, “Look. We got all this other food in
here that’s been ordered that I done had. I need to go on and get rid of it because if the
lights stay out a certain amount of time,” I said, “only thing I need is canned good
stuff that we can throw together quick that I ain’t have to worry about losing because I
can keep that for a while.” So I just told them I just needed to get stuff to go with
what I already got because in so many days the freezer would take so long before, like,
after the way I had it stack, it was going to take three or four days or more before
everything thawed out in my freezer. So long as it was froze, I didn’t worry about it
because I go in the freezer as less as possible. But everything in my cooler I had took
out and put it in the freezer so I couldn’t lose it. And what I did lose, I threw it away
because I had to wash out, get my cooler washed out because the smell, from that being cut off.

**Price:** Um-hm. How did you throw the food away?

**Gray:** We just put it in trash bags and threw it in the dumpster. But most everything was maybe like vegetables, produce stuff. I didn’t have a lot of meat and stuff in there to throw away because I had used all of it up.

**Price:** OK. What would you—I don’t know why I’ve got this frog in my throat. In looking back, are there things you would have done differently or different things you would have had on hand? Or is there anything you wish you’d done differently?

**Gray:** I think I say I make sure next time I remember instead of just getting water, make sure I get, go to the store and buy ice because we had a problem not having enough ice and keeping stuff cool because the ice would help the food last a little longer. I would have made sure I had a little bit more canned goods and snacks and stuff, because a lot of people like the stuff to snack on late at night, to make sure I had enough stuff like that. And I actually would have had a little bit more staff on hand (laughter) than I had this time because me and the lady that was here, it was hard on us because we was up at five in the morning, and (inaudible) sometime it would be about ten, eleven, twelve, maybe one o’clock the next morning before I lay down, and I knew I had to get right back up at five to start all over again.

**Price:** But you weren’t hot or tired or anything?

**Gray:** Yeah. I was very (laughter) hot and very tired. (laughter) I mean, after it was all over and the lights came back down and my regular staff came, I think I took a day just to do nothing but sleep because it was, in that kitchen without any air circulating, it was very hot. You have to wipe sweat off and steady cooking, and it was extremely hot.

**Price:** And the lighting, with the lighting, would you do that differently? You were saying they brought a lamp in, but have you thought about how that would have been better?

**Gray:** Yeah, because I told my boss; I said, “Next time anything happen, I want a generator just for the kitchen because we had a generator for the computers to make sure they stayed on, but we didn’t have another one.” So I told him; I said, “We needed another generator so I can run electricity through the kitchen with the generator, and we can put it out back.”

**Price:** So did they do that yet? Do you know?

**Gray:** I think they have. They keep it in the phone room, I believe.
Price: Oh, OK. So that’s there for you. Were you worried about food poisoning?

Gray: Yes. I mean, I was worried about food poisoning. I was worrying about the sanitizing ways because your water have to be certain level, but I was boiling the water to wash the dishes. That was fine, but I had to make sure I had the water that I had out the sink already for the food. You got to make sure it didn’t get contaminated, didn’t nobody go back there and try to stick they hands in it or do anything to cause contamination right there. And always—we had plenty cleaning supplies, so I always kept me a bucket with some sanitized water and a little bleach in it so I can wipe, keep my counters wiped down so that wouldn’t nobody get sick or wouldn’t nothing happen to anybody. And that’s the reason—the food and stuff, I’d check my food before I would prepare it to make sure it wasn’t anything wrong with it, that it hadn’t got too hot, or it was going bad or anything like that.

Price: How did you check it?

Gray: I took checking by the temperature, colorations of it, and you check by the smell.

Price: OK. So with a thermometer or something, you checked the internal temperature of that?

Gray: Right.

Price: Did you ever turn the freezer down?

Gray: No. I left it. Well, see, you couldn’t turn the freezer down because freezer run by electricity. It stayed the same temperature after the power went off; it stayed the same temperature at all times. Because the more I open the door, the hotter it would have got in there. So it was like you had to go in and shut yourself up in there to keep the heat from the air from the coolness from going out because if I stayed in there, and the door stayed open, I was losing the temperature of the freezer. So you had to be very careful about how you go in and how you came out. It was like you had to hurry up and get in there quick, and I would go in there and get everything I needed and put it right at the door so when I got ready to get out, all I had to do was grab it and come on out, and I wouldn’t hold the freezer open that long.

Price: Well, how did all the staff work together?

Gray: Well, I had—

Price: I mean from the whole hotel.

Gray: The housekeeping, when they couldn’t go—when they wasn’t cleaning rooms because it was hard to clean rooms, so all we could do was like change the linens and pick up the towels. So what they would do in the evenings, they would come in and
help me cook when they could. And when I got through cooking, I would go help them clean rooms. So we had to do everything else as teamwork to make sure the guests was comfortable as much as we could and do what needed for them.

**Price:** Who organized y’all into these teams?

**Gray:** Stacy McCory(?) is our general manager, and all the managers got together, and we just discussed what needed to be done, and we decided—

**Price:** Tell me as many things as you can remember that y’all discussed.

**Gray:** We discussed how we was going to go about doing the rooms because no water, so it wasn’t a whole bunch you could do. So what the housekeeper and maintenance did, they would go around and fill up the trash cans with water, and they would go into each room and make sure each toilet was flushed and made sure everybody had clean towels every day. There would be so many, so you had to make sure you’d hold onto them because they was limited. If linens need to be changed, bedding sheets, they went in and did that. I mean, they had disinfectant and stuff, so they would spray the rooms and try to keep the rooms fresh and neat and stuff. So we really didn’t have any check-ins and check-outs because if somebody checked out, they would go in and do what they had to do to clean the rooms and make sure the rooms got straightened up and stuff. And they made sure they had enough linen on hand, so they didn’t have to worry about washing linen to change the sheets and the comforters and stuff on the bed.

**Price:** And like what would Stacy do? What was her main responsibility?

**Gray:** To make sure that she had to do the best she could for us, maintaining the records and stuff of who was in-house and what was going on around the hotel. And making sure that we had everything we needed. And trying to keep making phone calls to see when the lights was going to get cut on. And we was steady having customers coming in, wanting to check in, trying to get away to find somewhere to go, and she was trying to help people find other places to go and trying to help find gas or whatever needed to be done.

**Price:** Which department do you think is the most important in a crisis like that?

**Gray:** Oh. Well, when you got guests, housekeeping, I think housekeeping and the kitchen area was most needed because making sure the rooms stay straight and making sure people had stuff to eat because we had a lot of people that didn’t believe this was going to happen, and didn’t get prepared, and didn’t have anything to eat or anything.

**Price:** They didn’t bring anything with them. Tell me, talk to me more, then, about the guests, about how were they? What was their mood?
Gray: We had a lot of guests that they was in good spirit; I mean, especially the military people. I mean, they just jumped in and just helped out wherever needed. Whatever they saw that we might need help doing, they got in and helped. I mean, you seen guys and womens out there sweeping the sidewalks, pulling limbs and stuff, picking up trash or helping get the linens and stuff and putting them in trash bags or on the buggies so we can put them in housekeeping so when the machines got back on to do it. I mean, we had a few guests that—during that time, I found out that it’s a lot of ungrateful peoples in the world. And I mean we had a couple of guests that came in, and I was cooking. It had got to where we were just doing the food as buffet style. You just come in and fix your plate, and I wanted to make sure everybody at least had a good helping the first time. If it was anything left over, you can help yourself to whatever’s left. And I had people coming in, and they just was trying to take everything. They wasn’t trying to leave anything for anybody, and I had to actually go tell them, “Look, please get one piece of meat and some vegetables and whatever and eat. And if there’s some left over after everybody else get through eating, you’re welcome to it.” And I mean, they had a attitude like, “Well, we hungry.” “Well, didn’t y’all know to make sure y’all had something to snack on?” You know, because I had bottled water and canned drinks and bottled drinks and stuff that we had on hand, and I had them in a ice chest for somebody to grab them and like in the evenings, I had snacks and stuff. I had chips and stuff like that for them to put out so they could have some to eat on, apples and oranges. And they would come in with they duffel bags and just try to fill up everything and wouldn’t leave nothing for anybody else. And I told them; I said, “No.” I say, “It’s more than y’all here in the hotel that got to be fed. And I mean, leave some for somebody else.” And they got mad with me because I wouldn’t let them have what they wanted. “Well, we hungry.” I say, “I understand that.” I said, “That’s the reason I’m giving you two hot meals a day and snacks.” And they just—

Price: So how long were those people—were they there the whole time?

Gray: I think they left maybe a day early.

Price: So how many would you say were like that?

Gray: I had maybe ten like that. But everybody else, they understood. I mean, they knew what was going on, and they just put in that I’m-going-to-help-out mode. And they came in, and they helped out, and they did what we needed to do to get us through this. I mean, in the evenings when it came time for the news, everybody would get into the lounge because we had the TV set up in the lounge, where you come in there and sit down and you watch TV to see what was going on. And whether we would do it like, during lunchtime they watch TV, and then for the six o’clock news and then maybe ten o’clock news, we would turn on, and then we had DVD players, stuff like that for the kids, and somebody had brought some movies and stuff, and the kids watched the movies and stuff so they can have something to do. And when they went outside playing football, or tossing a ball, or Frisbee, or something like that. So everybody pretty much kept busy, and everybody came together. Kids
played well together. I mean, they didn’t even know anybody. In fact, my son met a little boy, and they hung out all the time. He was just staying up here. The little boy wanted my son to come spend the night in his room. I say, “It’s already hot enough in the room. Don’t nobody have any air.” “Well, that’s OK, Ms. Angie. Can he come stay?” I said, “Yeah, he can stay tonight.” So he made friends, and they played the whole time he was here. So it was real nice.

Price: Do you think that—it sounds like a few of them did—expected more of the staff—

Gray: Yes, some of them did.

Price: —than when they normally would?

Gray: Yeah, they did.

Price: How would you say it was different from normal?

Gray: It was different because they felt like that they was demanding stuff that we couldn’t give them during that time. I mean, I had one lady and her daughter. She had some Ramen noodles, and she kept bringing them to the kitchen, wanting me to cook, and it was right after they had breakfast; I think it was round about lunchtime because I served breakfast about seven because I couldn’t really see that good in the dark, in the kitchen at that time of day. And I was telling her; I said, “Well, ma’am, right now, I don’t have any dishes washed up; I don’t have anything to cook anything.” I said, “We doing the best we can to get stuff washed up so I can get ready to start cooking dinner.” I say, “But could you give me a while, and we can do this, or,” I say, “can you wait to lunch?” Say, “You don’t have anything else (inaudible).” “Well, I need these noodles. I need—I bring my own water.” I said, “Ma’am, I don’t have dishes right now.” I said, “We’re washing stuff now.” And it was like she didn’t want to take no for an answer that I couldn’t do this, do these noodles for her. And it was just like one pack she wanted done. I said, “Well, let us do this.” And she said, “Well, I brought my water, and you can’t cook this for us?” I said, “No, ma’am, because we’re washing.” I said, “Every pot that I have is dirty,” and I say, “I got somebody in there washing dishes, trying to get it done for me.” And she just—I don’t know.

Price: Well, what were the most frustrating things? I’m sure things like that were—when you’re hot and you’re tired, you don’t have the same resilience.

Gray: No, you don’t.

Price: So how did you keep from going off on people?

Gray: Oh, it was very, very hard because me, by me getting up like I was and I was working in that kitchen all day, trying to do and then helping out. And when you go in and somebody want you to stop doing what you doing and do something right then,
you just like, “OK. Yes, OK.” And you biting your tongue, as my grandma say, “I had to bite my tongue,” to keep from going off because I mean, it was like people was trying your patience to make, “I want this now.” Or, “I need this done now.” And it got to a point where you just have to step back and catch your breath and just walk off and go to a corner and say, “I got to take five.”

Price: Well, did you—not to point fingers at anybody, but did the staff get kind of tense, too? I mean—

Gray: Yes, we did. And I mean, it was something, I might have wanted something done or asked somebody to do something, and they say, “Well, I’m tired. Can you go do it?” And I’m like, “OK. I’ve been up before you, and you want me to stop and do this?” And it’s like. “Oh!” You just have to shake your head and just go on.

Price: So there was a little bit of that, just everybody stretched?

Gray: Stretched to the extreme.

Price: Right.

Gray: Because housekeeping having to try to get rooms cleaned, and you can’t—when you tell a guest, “Well, ma’am, this is all the towels and stuff. This all the towels I can give you right now.” “Well, I need some more towels because we going out.” I say, “Well, OK, under the circumstances, can you use what you got?” You know? And some of them just didn’t want to hear it. They wanted—I mean, “Under the circumstances, we don’t have any more. We trying to ration them out.” You know. You having (inaudible) to ration stuff out. I mean, that’s from towels to, you know, like the employees that stay here, we didn’t mind. Our beds didn’t need to be changed every day because we didn’t change our sheets every day at home. So wasn’t no use in us saying, “Hey!” If I’d wanted mine changed, I say, “Well, give me some sheets to change my bed,” and we would do our own, make sure our own rooms stay clean. We change out our linens or do whatever. But the guests wanted it done right then, and you only had so many housekeepers. “OK, we’ll get to it. It might be five o’clock when your linens got changed, but we working as hard as we can to get this done.”

Price: So did you see a difference in different types of guests? There were the military guests. There were the regular, the guests who had been in the hotel before Katrina. And then there were the evacuees.

Gray: Right.

Price: So was there a difference in—could you tell one group from another?

Gray: Not really, we just—I could tell the difference because I had been here, and I knew who was what during the time when they checked in. You knew these was
people running from Katrina, victims or people that was trying to leave the storm or whatever. Because by me being here, I was in the lobby, and I seen a lot of that. But some of the attitudes and stuff, and the way things was going, you really couldn’t tell. Just overall, you really couldn’t tell who was what unless you just knew what was what.

Price: But it sounds like you could tell the military.

Gray: Yeah.

Price: That they were—

Gray: Because they had been here for—I mean, some of them had been here for like six or seven months so you pretty much knew all of those. And some of them had been here for maybe a month, maybe two weeks or something. So you get familiar like on a one-on-one basis with those, because you see them on a regular basis.

Price: Did anybody pay extra for the food?

Gray: No.

Price: So there was no—did they leave tips, or was there any way they thanked you-all?

Gray: Not that I know of.

Price: Interesting. So how did that feel?

Gray: During the time I really didn’t think about it because I felt like that was my job. That was part of my job, and I was trying to make sure that I did what need to be done to take care of the people that was here in the hotel. They was like my responsibility, to make sure they got fed, and they had something to eat. So I really didn’t think about—it was nothing for me, really—I didn’t think about it.

Price: How do you think you got this sense about being so committed to your job? Where does that come from in your background?

Gray: I guess I just—maybe from my mom and my grandmother because, I mean, I been like this all my life. Whatever job I’ve had, I was always committed to it. I put everything off into it. I give it my all.

Price: OK. Now, how long before you were able to leave the hotel?

Gray: I think I stayed here for almost three weeks, two to three weeks before I actually went home. But my childrens—I think I finally went home to go check on my house maybe six or seven days after Katrina hit. But my children was able to go
home before I did because I couldn’t leave because I was having to make sure the stuff that needs to be done in the kitchen was done. But my oldest son and my baby son, they went home to check on the house to make sure the dogs was fed and stuff like that. And I had neighbors that stayed across in front of me. I stay out close to Camp Shelby, so I stay out in the country, as they say. And my neighbor across the street from me, he was concerned that I had gotten trapped in my house. So he was so nice, and he went up my driveway and cut the trees that had fell across my driveway because if I had been there, I would have got blocked in; I wouldn’t have had no way in because it’s only one way in and one way out in my driveway. And he cut all the trees in half, cut them up into small pieces, so all we had to do was just throw them out of the driveway. And I was blessed that I didn’t have a lot of damage to my house. I think one little, small tree bumped my house; it didn’t fall on it. It bumped the house and made a little thing where it might be thin. And I had several trees around my house that I just knew, one of them big pecan trees had fell on my house. But I was blessed that all the trees that fell, uprooted, they fell out in the yard, not on my house. And I had one tree that was right side my house. It was a big cedar tree, and it’s a old cedar tree, and you could see where the storm just went around it and cut all the limbs off of it. And all the limbs just fell; the tree is still standing, but all, it just took all the limbs off of it.

Price: How interesting. I never heard of that before. Well, now, how was it not knowing what had happened to your house?

Gray: It was—I mean, I was devastated. I didn’t know: do I still have a house? Is it going to be all right? And then I was wondering; my daughter was with her friends, and I couldn’t get in touch with her. And my mom was—and I didn’t know if she was all right, and my grandmom because she’s elderly, and she has Alzheimer’s, and she’s losing her sight. Was her and my auntie and them all right? And I was just wondering what was going on, and what was what.

Price: That had to just be very, very difficult.

Gray: Yeah. And by it taking me, that a lot of us couldn’t get to go home because like a lot of us—I think Lisa, the housekeeper, and her husband left, and on his way home, it took him maybe two hours to get to they house. It normally take thirty minutes. He was going down the road, cutting trees; he had his chain saw. He was cutting trees, clearing the highway so him and other people can get down the highway. So he’ll get out, and he’ll cut a tree, and somebody that was behind him will help move it out the way, so—and that’s what they was doing.

Price: Well, were you ever afraid?

Gray: Yes, I was.

Price: Tell me about that.
Gray: I mean, it was, I’m like—I was standing up there, looking out the window at the wind and stuff blowing, and when it hit the—I’m like, “Oh, my God. Is it going to break this window? Is it going to pull me out?” Because you can just see how it was just picking stuff up, and it’s just throwing. I’m like “Oh, Lord, we up on this hill.” And I’m thinking, “OK, Angie. You standing up in here. It’s going to take this side of this building off.” And I’m thinking by us being high up off the ground that it would come through and maybe knock the walls down. And I’m like, “OK. It come through; where am I going to go? What am I going to do?” I said, “Ooh, my children’s upstairs. Is it going to take the top floor off?” And stuff like that, and it was just, I’m like, “OK. What’s going to happen? Or what you going to do because you standing up here, and your kids are over there? You can’t get out the door to get to your childrens, and the wind blowing, and the trees.” And you can see Stacy and them walking down the walkway, holding on to—it was like they was having to pull they self to walk the sidewalk because the wind was blowing that hard. And by them having guests coming out, it was a little child out there; I said, “Lord, somebody get the child.” And I think one of the maintenance guy grabbed the child and told it, said, “Look! You need to go back in your room before—because you trying to come out the room.” Say, “You need to go back in your room and stay there until the wind stop.” And I mean, they trying to walk back to the building after they had made their rounds, and the wind was so strong. I’m like, “Is it going to blow them away?” Because you didn’t know what was going to happen.

Price: Well, why were they out walking?

Gray: Because some of the guests was trying to get out of they rooms to come to the main building, come to the front. And they was trying to make sure everybody was in they room, and they telling everybody stay in they rooms because Katrina, it was getting ready to hit. But by the time they made it back, the wind and stuff had already started.

Price: So they were in their own, physical danger?

Gray: Um-hm.

Price: From being out in all that.

Gray: Yeah, but they were trying to make sure the guests and stuff was safe.

Price: That’s great for them to risk their own selves for the guests. Had the hotel prepared you in any way for how to deal with a hurricane? Had you had any training?

Gray: They had; they gave us hurricane, like a little pamphlet thing, a little book, that telling us, the preparations for a hurricane. But far as having any training of knowing what to do, we didn’t. I mean, it was just like instinct and with the little pamphlet they had gave us because we was like anybody. We really didn’t think that it was going to be like it was.
**Price:** Have y’all had any training since then in case another hurricane comes?

**Gray:** Yeah, we have; like we go in the staff meetings, and we look up on—we sit down and discuss what we did with Katrina and what we can do different, and what we needed to do. Like for us, adding a couple of more generators, making sure each department have so many different flashlights, and we make sure we have candles for the rooms and stuff and different stuff, like to make sure the water, we have plenty of water and different stuff like that.

**Price:** So I tend to think that candles would be very dangerous.

**Gray:** Yeah, they are with kids around and stuff like that. But during a certain time they good to have on hand for the emergency just for a short-time use, not for longtime. The flashlights would be better, but if you had the candles for like a short-time use to where like if something happened, and you needed them and you couldn’t get to a flashlight and you had the candles right by you to have for a temporary—

**Price:** —light source.

**Gray:** —thing, yeah.

**Price:** As far as the flashlights, can you describe what they look like?

**Gray:** The flashlights?

**Price:** Um-hm.

**Gray:** We had the—I had a yellow one. It was the kind that you had the handle to that you mash the button, the round, the big round—

**Price:** Like the big, nine volt?

**Gray:** Yeah. We had the nine volt. Then we had some of the little, small, regular size that you use the D batteries in. We had a lot of those, and then we had the—it’s really not, it wasn’t a flashlight, but it was some kind of light that you have to charge up with a battery, but it showed just like a regular lamp. It was like a lamp.

**Price:** Like a camping lantern, kind of?

**Gray:** It was sort of something like that, but it was more powerful than that, because it would light up. It would burn up the whole room like we had the lights on. And we had about two of those, and they would light up. It had a certain battery, some kind of battery that it used, and it would light up the whole room like it is now in here.

**Price:** But you didn’t have one of those for the kitchen?
Gray: I had one later on; they brought me one in there to use. But by me being in the kitchen so long, the battery, it would wear out, so the lamp, when I would use that—and then they brought me a new lamp in there from the light from the generator; I used the light, took an extension cord and ran it to the generator. And we had that lamp in there, and when I got ready to leave at night, we would cut it off and take it back to the front desk. And when I got ready to leave again, I’d get it in the morning, take it in the kitchen.

Price: There are no [windows] in the kitchen?

Gray: No, ma’am.

Price: And how many doors are there?

Gray: I have four exit doors, but one door I got way back in the back that goes out to the outside. And then you have the two that’s going into the restaurant, and I got one that goes into the lounge, and one that goes out into the lobby, in the kitchen.

Price: So you had only that one door that had any fresh air?

Gray: That come from the back, yes, ma’am.

Price: Access.

Gray: Yes, ma’am.

Price: So most of those, then, didn’t bring any light in because they were from another dark space?

Gray: Um-hm.

Price: What about, do you know how to use a fire extinguisher?

Gray: Yes, ma’am, but lucky I didn’t have to. (laughter)

Price: Yeah. I just wondered if those are around or not. Do you know who in the hotel knows how to do, like, CPR [cardiopulmonary resuscitation], or a defibrillator, or the Heimlich, or any of that?

Gray: I knew Stacy knew how to do and Lisa knew how to do CPR. I think those two knew. Me, I told them I need to take a class, but I didn’t. But a defibrillator—

Price: Do y’all have one on property?

Gray: No, ma’am.
Price: Because they have those new ones now that are portable.

Gray: Yes.

Price: So when you look back on it all, how do you think you’ve changed as a result of that experience?

Gray: Oh, I really hadn’t thought about that. I know not to take things lightly anymore. When they say something’s going to happen, you don’t just take things for granted. And I’ve learned—my kids was like, “Oh, it’s hot in here and this, that, and the other.” I say, “You can’t take the little things for granted.” I mean, here it is, you had no electricity; you had no water, and you need not to take those for granted because it was a lot of things during that time, we had to do without. You had to make do. And I mean it’s the little, simplest thing. Somebody wanted a cup of coffee. And they like, “Well, I need some coffee. I don’t know how to make coffee.” And it was things that I had learned from a previous job I had how you can make do to make coffee. And I had some clean towels that we have; we get linen service, and they have the napkins and different stuff, and you have the coffee filters. And I learned that you can take a clean towel and put your coffee in that and pour some hot water off of it and make some coffee, make tea or something like that. And I mean, little things like that we take for granted every day; I mean, try to take a bath with a eight-ounce bottle of water.

Price: Right. (laughter)

Gray: You know. I mean, finding soap to bathe with. You know, the least little thing that you don’t think about, you have to think about. Like we used to saying, “Oh, I’ll run out and get it.” During that time, you couldn’t run out and get anything. I mean, and I learned keep some gas in your car because you trying to go get ice and you had to have a car and going back and forth and walking over there, trying to find ice, and you don’t have—like, “I’m out of gas.” Because we had several people running out of gas, because during that time they didn’t think to fill up with gas. I mean, you take stuff like that for granted. “Oh, I’ll do it tomorrow.” It might not be a tomorrow.

Price: That’s right, might not be any gas tomorrow, if there is a tomorrow.

Gray: Right. And so I mean, and you just think, “Oh, I got lights. I’m sitting up under the air conditioner.” You got to learn to make do. We didn’t have air-conditioning during Katrina. And that’s the first time you see people sleep with they doors open.

Price: And the love bugs?
Gray: And the love bugs was everywhere. I mean, but you had to get some air. And I had, during that time, my grandbaby was three or four months old. So you got a hot, hollering baby, and trying to keep milk and stuff cool, and stuff for him. And if a baby’s hot, he’s not going to sleep.

Price: Oh, I hadn’t thought about that, but that would be—

Gray: Yeah. I mean, and we had to keep him in front of the door so he can stay cool, and having to make sure his milk was cool. I had to keep bottled water for it; you had to make a bottle at a time because you couldn’t mix it all up at one time and say, “Hey, you got some milk,” because it would sour. So you have to make sure, instead of getting this liquid milk, you had to make sure you got powder milk for them babies because you had to make one bottle at a time.

Price: How many children did you have here?

Gray: I had my grandson and my granddaughter, which she was two, one and a half to two during that time. And then we had maybe fifteen or more other kids that was just on the property because I had my son. Lisa had her four kids. Stacy had her two kids. Other guests had maybe a couple kids in they room. Somebody else might have—we had one room that had maybe three or four kids. So it was a lot of different kids, and they had—and with the pool and stuff, they got in the pool to play to stay cool, and after the water and stuff come back, you couldn’t—they had to drain the pool and redo it because we couldn’t keep it clean.

Price: That would be scary for the kids to be playing in it.

Gray: Right. And so after, with all that happened, and the pool guy, when we finally got lights on, be able to get in touch with the guy, they called the pool guy. He said, “Just put some bleach in it to help fight off any germs and stuff.” But we had to close it down because we couldn’t run no chemicals in it to shock it or anything like that. So they drained it and cleaned it out.

Price: With all the little kids standing there watching and saying, “Please don’t.”

Gray: And see, we had to use the pool water to keep the toilets and stuff flushed.

Price: Well, how many of those kids were babies that needed formula and diapers?

Gray: I think I had the only that I know of; I had the only baby in-house because I had him and I had my grand-daughter, which she was still in Pampers. So I had two in Pampers, so I think mine was the only two that I can think of.

Price: Well, that was probably good because if you’d had a lot of them, that could have been a real problem.
Gray: Yeah.

Price: So let’s see. What would you say the worst part of it from your perspective? For you it probably was after, when you were trying to cook for everybody?

Gray: Yes.

Price: That was the preparation stage and the actual storm stage, although you said that was frightening, that was the most frightening time during the storm, but then just the hardest and most demanding—

Gray: Was the preparation, trying to make sure everybody got fed; you was going to have enough food to feed everybody, and they had stuff to drink. And I mean, getting up, and you in the hot kitchen trying to prepare the food and smoke everywhere because you didn’t have no ventilation to take the heat of the smoke or anything out. So you had all that to deal with. And you got the oven cooking, and you got the stove on; you got the steam and stuff coming from it, and it’s no air circulating anywhere. So eventually we got these big, old fans, and I think after we got the generator situation, they brought another generator, we could run a line in the kitchen and run a big fan. But that’s still was like circulating that heat, so it really wasn’t no air. You know it was circulating it, but it still wasn’t no air coming in to keep it cool back there.

Price: Because there were no exits really that went outside to take (inaudible).

Gray: Right. And the one we had was like down the hallway, and the air, all we could do was like pull the air out. But it still wasn’t enough to circulate no cool air in there. So it was hot at all times.

Price: I truly cannot imagine how hot that must have been, what a real commitment that was, and it’s disappointing that people didn’t appreciate it, maybe, more than they did. Do you have any other stories or experiences that, since you’re going to have a copy of this, that you want to be a part of your story of this experience?

Gray: I really can’t think right now. I’m trying—

Price: Was there anybody that was just a hero that you remember?

Gray: I think everybody was a hero to get through that, I mean, because it took a lot from you; it took a lot out of you, and it made you see a lot of things that you wasn’t expected to see. And I feel like whatever anybody did, that they was a hero in doing it because it was a trying time. It was a bad disaster, but I look at it to where we was better off than a lot of people. I rode around to the Coast and Bay St. Louis and all them different places, and all I can do is say, “Thank you, God,” because I didn’t lose anything compared to those people losing the stuff that they lost because I seen clothes, mattresses, bicycles in trees. I mean, just riding down there just looking and
seeing a house sitting on top of another house or a house sitting on top of a car. And you like, “OK, I didn’t just see that; that really didn’t happen.” Or I mean, we rode and saw a house sitting in the middle of the road. And I mean, and I’m like—it was a lot to be learned. You know. If you pull together and you help your neighbor out, I consider you as a hero.

Price: Well, I think it certainly sounds like there were a lot of heroes around. Did your employer reward you for the work you had done?

Gray: As in how?

Price: In any way?

Gray: Thank you.

Price: A thank you?

Gray: Um-hm.

Price: But you didn’t get paid for all the hours you worked?

Gray: No, ma’am. I just got my regular paycheck.

Price: You got your regular paycheck. No bonus?

Gray: No, ma’am.

Price: OK. Well, that’s—how’d that feel?

Gray: Hurtful.

Price: I would think that would be very hurtful.

Gray: Yeah.

Price: Did that make you reconsider what you would do in another time?

Gray: Yeah, it really did. I don’t know if I would do it again, I mean, because I did it because that’s what needed to be done. But I just don’t know if I’d do it again because I put myself to the extreme.

Price: Absolutely. OK. Well, anything else that you think of that felt bad, or felt good, or that you would do differently?

Gray: Yeah. I think I would—how can I put it? I think I would have took a little more time, put some time aside to make sure I took care of me because I overextended
myself to where my blood pressure had went up. And I didn’t really see after me because I was too busy trying to do all this stuff.

**Price:** So you put your own health at risk.

**Gray:** Yeah, to a certain extent. But I mean, I was seeing about doing what needed to be done.

**Price:** I know in a crisis a lot of times you don’t think about those things. You just—

**Gray:** No, you don’t. You just do.

**Price:** —do it. Well, I very much appreciate. If you think of anything else you would like to add to that—but your story is very—I mean, it’s amazing to me.

**Gray:** Thank you.

**Price:** I can’t even, truthfully, picture being in that dark, hot kitchen for that many days and hours. And so you should be very proud of yourself.

**Gray:** Thank you.

**Price:** OK. Well, thank you very much. I hope I’ve left you a little bit of extra time to get your dinner started for tonight.

**Gray:** Well, I got it started. I just got to—oh, it’s plenty; I got plenty of time. It’s four o’clock.

**Price:** Did you ever cry?

**Gray:** Yes, ma’am, I did.

**Price:** When did you cry?

**Gray:** I think after I really realized what had happened, and it really came to me. And I think after the lights came back on, and I had time to sit down and breathe. And I thought about everything that was going on, and everything that happened, I cried.

**Price:** Only that one time?

**Gray:** That one time.

**Price:** Well, and there wasn’t any crime around? People weren’t stealing from people’s rooms or—

**Gray:** No, ma’am.
Price: —threatening or anything like that? Nobody felt at risk—

Gray: No, ma'am.

Price: —for their possessions or their physical?

Gray: No, ma’am.

Price: And there was no health emergency or injury? So that was lucky, too.

Gray: Yeah, that was very lucky. I think one time we had—but this was close to the end. Come to think of it, one military guy, somebody had stole gas out his car.

Price: Was security—how’d y’all handle security, things like that?

Gray: We had a guy; we had a security guy stayed on property, and especially at night, he walked around. He would like sit down for thirty minutes, and walk around the property then. When I was able to come in and take a bath, me and the lady from housekeeping, we would sit on like, up top, on the edge down here on the thing, with us a chair. And we would watch, you know, watch out and would just walk around and make sure everything was all right.

Price: Looking safe.

Gray: Yeah. and we’d just walk around, just to have something to do. And we would sit out, watching the cars trying to get down the highway, and all you could see is the car lights and nothing else.

Price: Mm. Back up for miles.

Gray: Um-hm.

Price: Well, hopefully we won’t have another one.

Gray: I hope not.

(end of the interview)