Mississippi Oral History Program

Hurricane Katrina Oral History Project

An Oral History

with

Carrolyn R. Hamilton

Interviewer: Rachel Swaykos

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Biography

Ms. Carrolyn Reeves Hamilton was born on February 15, 1954, in Gulfport, Mississippi, to Mr. Thomas Reeves and Mrs. Lois Herrington Reeves. Her father was superintendent of Long Beach Schools, and her mother was a housewife. Hamilton was married to James Hamilton (born August 18, 1954, in Fairfax County, Virginia) in 1976, in Long Beach, Mississippi, and they are the parents of James, Thomas Joseph, and Kristin.

Hamilton was graduated from Long Beach High School in 1972, and she earned a BA in music from The University of Southern Mississippi in 1976. At the time of this interview, Hamilton was superintendent of Long Beach Schools.
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This is an interview for the Mississippi Oral History Program of The University of Southern Mississippi. The interview is with Carrolyn Reeves Hamilton and is taking place on June 5, 2008. The interviewer is Rachel Swaykos.

Hamilton: —superintendent of schools in Long Beach, Mississippi, and today’s date is June 5, 2007.

Swaykos: Perfect. And what’s your date of birth, Miss Hamilton?


Swaykos: And are you currently married?

Hamilton: Yes, I am.

Swaykos: And your spouse’s name?

Hamilton: James Hamilton.

Swaykos: And his date of birth?


Swaykos: And when did y’all get married?

Hamilton: In 1976.

Swaykos: Down here?

Hamilton: Yes, in Long Beach.

Swaykos: And how long have you lived here?

Hamilton: I’ve lived here all my life. My husband’s lived here since we were married.

Swaykos: OK. Where were you born?
Hamilton: In Gulfport. My family lived in Long Beach. I was born in the hospital in Gulfport.

Swaykos: Perfect. And where is he from?

Hamilton: He is from Fairfax County, Virginia.

Swaykos: OK. I know that very well.

Hamilton: We met at USM [The University of Southern Mississippi] when we were in college.

Swaykos: Oh, great. So what year did you graduate from USM?


Swaykos: OK. With what degree?

Hamilton: A bachelors in music education.

Swaykos: So where did you go to high school if you were down here?

Hamilton: Long Beach High School.

Swaykos: OK. And what year did you graduate there?

Hamilton: In 1972.

Swaykos: What do you like to do besides work?

Hamilton: Family; mainly involved with family activities. As our children grew up, the school and community events they were involved in, so.

Swaykos: OK, great. Were you ever in the military?

Hamilton: No, I was not.

Swaykos: OK. Would you like to share your religious affiliation?

Hamilton: Methodist.

Swaykos: And what are your children’s names, and how old are they?

Hamilton: James IV, Jimmy is going to be twenty-seven in about three weeks. And you want to know something about him or just their name and age?
Swaykos: You can tell me something about them. (laughter)

Hamilton: Well, I didn’t know. (laughter) He just graduated med school and will be doing residency in Jackson. Then Joey, Thomas Joseph is twenty-four, and he graduated from USM with a business degree. And then our daughter Kristin is twenty-one.

Swaykos: Could you spell that for me?

Hamilton: K-R-I-S-T-I-N. And she is a polymer science major at Southern.

Swaykos: OK, great. Was your whole family from here, your mother and father?

Hamilton: Yes.

Swaykos: OK. And what were their names?

Hamilton: Thomas L. Reeves, and then my mother is Lois Reeves.

Swaykos: And what was her maiden name?

Hamilton: Herrington.

Swaykos: L-O-I-S?

Hamilton: L-O-I-S.

Swaykos: And Herrington?

Hamilton: H-E-R-R-I-N-G-T-O-N.

Swaykos: And what did they do for work?

Hamilton: My father was superintendent of schools in Long Beach for thirty-three years, so. And my mother’s always been a housewife. There were four of us children, so.

Swaykos: Great. OK. And I’ll let you fill this in more if you choose to; if not, we just need the basics.

Hamilton: OK.

Swaykos: How long have you been superintendent?

Hamilton: Four years; starting my fifth year.
Swaykos: OK. And you’re enjoying it?

Hamilton: Yes, I am.

Swaykos: Oh, good. How great to follow in your father’s footsteps, huh?

Hamilton: It’s pretty neat.

Swaykos: OK. And so let’s start with the day of the storm, personally for you. What did you do?

Hamilton: When we realized the storm was coming in here on the Sunday, we boarded up our house, my husband and I and my son and daughter. Then we went into my mother’s home, which is about a block off the beach, and we helped my mother and sister board up their home and gather up their suitcase and stuff. And then they came out to our house that afternoon, and then by about five o’clock that evening we decided it looked like the winds were going to be very strong, and we went on to the school, Quarles Elementary School.

Swaykos: So this is Sunday, the twenty-eight?

Hamilton: Yes, yes.

Swaykos: And which son was with you?

Hamilton: Joey, Thomas Joseph.

Swaykos: OK. So it was you, your husband and the two kids.

Hamilton: Right.

Swaykos: Where’s your house? Sorry.

Hamilton: Our house is on Mitchell Road, which is near here. It’s several miles away from the beach.

Swaykos: OK. So you’re off the water?

Hamilton: We were off the water. So we boarded up my mother’s house, and then my son brought sandbags to sandbag around the doors in case there was water. And then we came on, and we went to Quarles Elementary School for the storm.

Swaykos: And where is that located?

Hamilton: On Commission Road, just right down the street here. And it’s not a Red Cross Shelter, but it’s a City shelter, the school. So we opened that.
Swaykos: OK. Can you explain the difference between the two to me?

Hamilton: Red Cross Shelter is they don’t have any shelters south of the interstate because they want access in case of flooding, and Red Cross mans the shelter. The City shelter is a place that our mayor and our civil defense director designates that if people will not go north of the interstate that there’s a place here in the city that they can go to. So we had about three hundred people that went to Quarles.

Swaykos: So who’s the worker in those? Who mans those?

Hamilton: The police and fire department send an officer, and then I was there to open up. We give them keys, and they open up and all.

Swaykos: OK. So were you supposed to be working, or did you go there to actually stay at the shelter?

Hamilton: A little bit of both, so we decided just in case. My mother was seventy-seven and had double-knee replacement, and my sister was undergoing chemotherapy treatment; so we thought, well—

Swaykos: I’m sorry to hear that.

Hamilton: She’s doing fine, but we thought, “Well, if we get in and our house”—we live behind the main road, down. We have a drive that goes down an acre, lots of trees. And we said, “Well, what if something happened, and we need to get out and wouldn’t be able to with the trees?” So we went to the shelter, to Quarles Elementary.

Swaykos: OK. So you spent the night there on Sunday night?

Hamilton: Sunday night and on Monday; stayed until about 5:30 Monday.

Swaykos: OK. Can you tell me about Sunday night? How was everyone’s attitude? You said you had about three hundred people there. What was the feeling there?

Hamilton: It was good. It really didn’t start getting bad till, you know, Monday morning early, but even then, we didn’t realize how bad it was. The wind didn’t seem that severe. You could see some damage out the windows. It was raining, and we had rain coming in through the windows, but you didn’t realize how severe it was south of the tracks.

Swaykos: So the school wasn’t boarded?

Hamilton: No. No, no.
Swaykos: OK. What amenities did you have in there? Did you have cots, food, water?

Hamilton: Everybody brought their own, so we had brought some blow-up mattresses, and you bring your own food for they tell you for up to three days, so.

Swaykos: Had you had to prepare the school?

Hamilton: Yes, we—

Swaykos: Wednesday or Friday?

Hamilton: We knew on, well, Friday afternoon, Saturday morning early, there was a civil defense meeting with superintendents. At that point on Saturday, we brought in our financial director and the business staff to get checks out because we knew that if we lost power Monday, if the storm came through, no matter how bad it was, we would not be able to get checks out to people by the thirty-first. So we declared an emergency with the board, and we came in and did our automatic deposits and mailed, and had checks ready for people to pick up.

Swaykos: So you prepaid all your employees?

Hamilton: Right. And we tried, we started phone trees to get word to employees that they could pick up their checks either at the central office or at the financial director’s home, which is right down the street, to try to let them—you know, so if they needed to go out of town, they would have it. And then we picked up all the things outside around the school, all the garbage cans, anything that could fly around. We took down the nets at all the sports fields, secured everything we could. We sandbagged around Harper McCaughan Elementary School in case we had water. That was about two blocks off the beach, so we sandbagged around there.

Swaykos: OK. So overnight, what was it like being in the shelter, sleeping there?

Hamilton: No problem. It was quiet. We actually slept some because, like I said, it didn’t get really bad till about six.

Swaykos: Where was everyone sleeping?

Hamilton: People brought either sleeping bags or blow-up mattresses, or some people had cots, so just all around the school.

Swaykos: OK. So in classrooms and everything like that?

Hamilton: Well, we didn’t open the classrooms. We had hallways, all the hallways. We try not to open the classrooms. After the storm we had to, but we try not to do it beforehand.
Swaykos: OK. And what was happening Monday morning after the storm was going?

Hamilton: Well, people were calm. Like I said, we did not realize the severity of the water, of the surge that we had. So people were calm. The first time most of the people really knew how bad it was, was afternoon, late afternoon, they started bringing in people that had had to swim out, and they brought them into the shelter, and that’s when we realized that there had been the tremendous storm surge.

Swaykos: OK. When did everyone leave the shelter?

Hamilton: A lot of people stayed till Tuesday morning. We left at about 5:30 because we just lived a mile away. So we went to our house that day.

Swaykos: OK. And what was that mile drive like?

Hamilton: We got there. When we got to our house, we had to park two or three houses away. We couldn’t get down the drive. There were trees all over it. So we had to walk our way in and then start chain-sawing to try to clear the drive so you could drive in.

Swaykos: Wow.

Hamilton: But the house was there.

Swaykos: Good.

Hamilton: It had a lot of roof damage, and a tree came partially in one room, but it was there, at least.

Swaykos: Good. Have you been able to repair that yet?

Hamilton: Yes. We have been working on repairing it and have that about through, the process.

Swaykos: OK. What’s your personal experience been with FEMA and insurance then?

Hamilton: FEMA, we didn’t, we didn’t file FEMA homewise, personal because we had insurance. The insurance, I was amazed because we didn’t have any floodwater. All of our damage came from the roof, the shingles being peeled off with the tornado, and water damaged the roof. So I didn’t think there’d be any question about the insurance. I’d had State Farm Insurance for years; never filed a claim. And I was surprised that it was a fight to get enough money to cover. And we still haven’t gotten
to cover everything we had to repair. We just had to use our money and go in debt on it.

Swaykos: Is that going to be something you will settle with them, or it’s done now?

Hamilton: I think basically it’s done. I got tired of fighting them.

Swaykos: I see.

Hamilton: And that’s, probably a lot of people did.

Swaykos: So it’s a difficult process.

Hamilton: There were so many other things.

Swaykos: Yeah. How was your mom’s house?

Hamilton: It was destroyed, so she and my sister lost everything. And we walked down Tuesday morning and drove down as close as we could get, and then parked at the railroad tracks about a mile behind the bulldozer that was clearing the road for us to get down in there. And they had lost everything.

Swaykos: Was your mother able to walk down with you?

Hamilton: No, she was not. My sister did, but my mother could not. We just had to go back and tell her.

Swaykos: And what was that like, seeing the house for the first time?

Hamilton: It was hard. It was the house I grew up in. As we crossed the railroad tracks, though, we basically knew what it would be like because you could see, so you expected it by the time you got there. And my mother’s a strong lady. She’d been through the Depression and lived through that, and so it’s just—she had insurance, luckily, and had flood insurance, so.

Swaykos: So what is she doing now?

Hamilton: She lived with us for about four or five months, and then she got her flood insurance, so she was able to buy a home.

Swaykos: Oh, good.

Hamilton: North of the tracks and out near us. (laughter)

Swaykos: She relocated.
Hamilton: Yes, she relocated.

Swaykos: Were y’all able to salvage anything from the home?

Hamilton: Very, very little. A lot of stuff, some of the furniture. Three walls were still standing; the roof was still there, but all the back wall that faced south was completely blown out and all the windows out, and the water had just come in and went. It was over eight feet of water. So the stuff that was in the house was not ours. We found a few things, but they were damaged so heavily, you couldn’t do anything. So.

Swaykos: Did anybody come to that house looking for their stuff?

Hamilton: Oh, I’m sure. We all walked everywhere, trying to find. So I’m sure they did. I didn’t see any, but our neighbors, everybody was looking for their stuff.

Swaykos: What did all the roads look like as you were driving down to the beach and through the neighborhood?

Hamilton: Well, at first you couldn’t drive. You had to park and walk. But the debris as—we followed a bulldozer down, so the debris was over six feet high, about eight feet high just as he cleared the path.

Swaykos: How’s your sister doing?

Hamilton: Doing OK.

Swaykos: Good.

Hamilton: She went through the year of chemo and then had some more surgery. She’s doing real well.

Swaykos: Good. And her name?

Hamilton: Linda Reeves.

Swaykos: OK. And she had to live with y’all, as well?

Hamilton: She lived with us, yes. And then, now, she and my mother share a home, so. But they lived with us for about five months after the storm.

Swaykos: OK. What point did you come back to work?

Hamilton: Immediately. Tuesday morning as we walked down to check my mother’s house, we went down Jeff Davis and checked McCaughan Elementary, saw the damage there. I knew that we couldn’t get in there. Tuesday we went down to my
mother’s home. Tuesday night I got with the business, the financial director. Wednesday morning I met with—started being able to get in touch with principals, and we started assessing damage. The architect for the district, his father was the architect in Camille, and he’s been with our district a long time. And Terry Gile(?) is the (inaudible). And he found me Wednesday, and we started sitting down, going over and assessing schools to see the damage, to see what we could use and what we couldn’t. And then Thursday of that first week, Henry Arledge had managed to get in touch with the five superintendents of Harrison County, and we all met out at his office and came up with a game plan on when we’d start school, and how we’d do it. And we combined resources to do what we needed to do.

Swaykos: And you had met weekly following that, correct, with him? I think that’s what he told me.

Hamilton: We met with him then; that was the Thursday. Then we met again early the next week, and by that next Thursday, the State Department of Education had begun coming down, and they brought everybody down to us, and we met weekly at that time, for a long time.

Swaykos: Good. What was that first conversation like with all the superintendents? What was said?

Hamilton: First checked to see how each of us were doing personally and then checked on the status of the schools, what we could use, what we couldn’t use, what it would take to get us going again, how soon we could get school going, whether it was on split shifts or just by moving kids, and what we had to do.

Swaykos: And what did everyone think about how quickly you could get the schools up?

Hamilton: We all agreed on a timeline of about October third that we wanted to try to be in school. Biloxi was able to beat us by, I think, a week. But it just depended. A lot of it depended on when the people that were in the shelter could get out, and we could get it in, and the resources we needed.

Swaykos: So what was the damage to each of your schools? How many schools do you have?

Hamilton: I have five.

Swaykos: You have five. OK.

Hamilton: Harper McCaughan was destroyed; so we relocated that. We decided, the school board and the administrators met and made the decision that we would keep Harper McCaughan together as a school. We wouldn’t split it up among the other two schools. So we brought in twenty-three double-wide trailers that we put on the
Quarles Playground, and we formed a separate school right there. So we run Harper McCaughan here, and then just across the sidewalk we run Quarles Elementary. So we have a completely different staff for each. And the children got to, when they came back to school, they got to see their teacher, their friends, their administrators, and that was a big help to them.

Swaykos: Oh, good. So that was the two schools. And what about your other three?

Hamilton: Well, then Quarles and Reeves, and middle school and high school, each had some damage, roof damage and that kind of stuff. But it was where we could do temporary repairs and get in, even though it was not the permanent repairs. We could go ahead and have school.

Swaykos: Do you know what your total estimated damages were?

Hamilton: Not counting McCaughan, it was probably about five million, maybe a little bit less than that. And then McCaughan was a total loss, and the cost to replace that now—it was valued at about four million before the storm, but the cost to replace it’s going to be about seventeen million. That’s the difference in the prices since then.

Swaykos: OK. And are you planning to just bulldoze it and rebuild there?

Hamilton: We’ve already cleared the site where it was. We had permission from FEMA to do that. We’re working with FEMA. The school will very likely be moved because I don’t think the citizens can pay the recurring cost of the insurance on it. And so I think the school will be moved.

Swaykos: OK. How many staff did you have prestorm?

Hamilton: We had 234 certified teachers, and I had five that weren’t able to come back.

Swaykos: And why were those five not able to come back?

Hamilton: Lost their home, and had no one to stay with.

Swaykos: OK. Did you lose anyone during the storm?

Hamilton: No.

Swaykos: Good. Are there any teacher’s stories that you could share with us? About what they went through, how they were able to stay, whether it was living with family or back in their home if they repaired?

Hamilton: So many people in Long Beach lived with other people. It’s a very tight-knit community, so people who lost their homes, they either put a mobile home, one of
the travel trailers on somebody else’s, in their yard, or they just moved in with them, two or three families living together in a house. And that’s still occurring some.

**Swaykos:** How were you able to communicate with your teachers after the storm?

**Hamilton:** All the teachers started checking in with principals, and we had phone trees for those who had phones. But we’d keep a log, if they checked in with us or checked in with a principal to check to see what the status is. We probably had 30 percent of our teachers lost homes.

**Swaykos:** Wow.

**Hamilton:** So. And we kept logs on all of them, and we’d meet them. Are they OK? Lost their home? Put that kind of stuff.

**Swaykos:** Were you able to offer them any services, anybody who lost everything?

**Hamilton:** Yes, we worked with them. We got the names of the people who would need a place to live, and FEMA put teachers in with a list of first responders or people to get the first travel trailers. And so then we had this site where our office is; we had forty travel trailers on this site of teachers that needed a place to put their trailer.

**Swaykos:** And what’s the address of this office?

**Hamilton:** [It is] 19148 Commission Road.

**Swaykos:** OK. So how many trailers did you have here?

**Hamilton:** Forty.

**Swaykos:** Forty, wow.

**Hamilton:** So. And then some teachers would put their trailers on their lots, if they had sewage accessibility and that kind of stuff.

**Swaykos:** OK. How many trailers do you have left?

**Hamilton:** None. They closed down the site in March; FEMA did. But ours had (inaudible) as the grant money came in, and the insurance settlements, people were able to find a place to live.

**Swaykos:** OK. So you have no teachers left in FEMA trailers?

**Hamilton:** No, not on this lot. Now, we still have some living on their lot.

**Swaykos:** Do you know how many?
**Hamilton:** No, I don’t. I don’t, but I do know there’s still some people in trailers.

**Swaykos:** OK. Sure. Along with the loss of your buildings, what equipment did you lose?

**Hamilton:** Well, at Harper McCaughan we lost everything. Then at the other schools, we lost some computers and digital cameras and those kind of things, if we had roof damage in that room, and it got wet. We had some books lost the same way from that damage, but most of the damage was concentrated at McCaughan.

**Swaykos:** OK. What records were lost then?

**Hamilton:** At McCaughan, everything. All the cumulative folders and all the files and everything. Everything at McCaughan was a total loss.

**Swaykos:** OK. So everything with paper, none of it was backed up anywhere?

**Hamilton:** Well, no. No, no. We had our student information system of current students; that’s on the computers. And we have backup, so we had all of that. What we didn’t have were records of former students and those kind of things. And each student’s cumulative folder, we didn’t have those. You don’t do backup; those are paper and pen, cumulative folders.

**Swaykos:** OK. Are those going to be recreated? How are you going to deal with the loss?

**Hamilton:** We’ve recreated those as best we could. The state gave us some guidelines of how to do that, so, because many schools did that, lost that.

**Swaykos:** Yeah, right. What were their guidelines on the recreation?

**Hamilton:** You just reproduce as much, as best as you can. There’s some things you couldn’t do, but just you have to redo a cumulative folder on each child and have their name, and the vital information and get copies of their birth certificate again and all that.

**Swaykos:** How far back did you have to go with that?

**Hamilton:** Just for the current students. So like the other students, there’s no way to even know how many it would be.

**Swaykos:** OK. Has that caused any problems with previous students needing files or anything?
Hamilton: No. No. If they weren’t in school here now, then we would’ve transferred everything but their inner sheets, so they had it. If they need something else, then they have to go through the State Department of Education to get it.

Swaykos: OK. What was lost in the way of buses and transportation?

Hamilton: We didn’t have any buses lost. Our buses were in a spot that was dry, and we didn’t have water there.

Swaykos: OK. And library books?

Hamilton: Lost everything at Harper McCaughan. And at the other schools, we lost books that students had taken home, and then they might’ve lost their homes and that kind of stuff.

Swaykos: OK, I see. What was your student enrollment prestorm?

Hamilton: Thirty-two hundred before the storm.

Swaykos: OK. And what day did you open school again?

Hamilton: That year? Oh, you mean when we came back?

Swaykos: Correct.

Hamilton: We started back October 3.

Swaykos: And how many students did you have then?

Hamilton: We ended the year with about twenty-eight hundred, so probably about twenty-seven hundred or so, twenty-six to twenty-seven hundred.

Swaykos: And where do you think that other five hundred went?

Hamilton: They moved, just, away from the Coast. Sometimes it’s because the parents lost their job, or they just did not want to come back and face that, and they went with relatives.

Swaykos: Right. How were you able to get word out to students and families that school was starting again?

Hamilton: We used the media, the TV interviews. We put signs up around town. We did registrations at several sites around town that people might see, and then word of mouth. So most people knew what was going on.

Swaykos: OK. What was the first day of school like?
Hamilton: It was wonderful. The students were just so happy to be back at school because they’d been in school three weeks, and then the storm hit, and there was a worry about, “Can we revive the year? Can we get back in school?” So they were very happy. I think it gave the students a release from all the pressures of everything at home, so at least they could come to school and be normal. We had normal school days, and then go home, and deal with it again.

Swaykos: Right. Well, how did you make up the lost time?

Hamilton: We added extra days on the end of the year.

Swaykos: OK. So some schools were doing the double-up in the days; you just added them on to the end.

Hamilton: We added on the end.

Swaykos: OK. And that worked for everyone?

Hamilton: Yeah, we made up our days. (laughter) I mean, you’d prefer not to, some of them, but we made up our days. We gave up a day at Thanksgiving. We gave up a day or two at Christmas; gave up another day somewhere. I don’t remember, Mardi Gras, maybe. I don’t remember.

Swaykos: OK. How were you able to replace those five that didn’t come back when school started on October 3? Or did you need to since the student attendance was so much lower?

Hamilton: Some, we could just cover through attendance because the attendance was lower. One, a PE [physical education] teacher, we had to replace a PE teacher because it was at an elementary school, and there was only one PE teacher. So in order for that group to have PE, we had to replace that one.

Swaykos: And how did you do that so quickly?

Hamilton: We advertised and brought in someone.

Swaykos: Really? It was easy to find someone to work?

Hamilton: Yeah. There was someone who had a degree that was working as something else but willing to come after the storm and work with us, so.

Swaykos: OK, great. Were there any changes? Did you get any other students from other districts?
Hamilton: Yes, everybody did, where they might’ve been living in Gulfport or Pass Christian or Bay St. Louis, and they lost their home, and then they were over here living with relatives, so yes.

Swaykos: Do you know how many, about how many students that was?

Hamilton: No, I really don’t. I’m sorry.

Swaykos: OK. No. It’s OK. Did any of that change your racial or ethnic makeup of your schools?

Hamilton: No, it really did not make a major change.

Swaykos: OK. How did the living conditions at home in FEMA trailers with other families affect the children at school that year?

Hamilton: I didn’t see it really affect that year. This year, a year after, I saw more of the effect. The stress and the wear and tear of families being in FEMA trailers, that seemed greater this year.

Swaykos: And what are they showing?

Hamilton: Just emotional stress. Fragile, they just seem fragile with the things they did; get their feelings hurt easily; break down easily.

Swaykos: What services are you providing to deal with that?

Hamilton: We have contracted with counselors to come into the district and work with our students. Then this coming year, we’re using restart funds to add an additional counselor to help with that, elementary- and middle-school kids, especially, who want to talk.

Swaykos: OK. And the children are free to see them at any time?

Hamilton: Yes, yes, yes.

Swaykos: Have they talked to teachers about what behaviors to look out for in the students, anything like that?

Hamilton: Yes, they do. (Inaudible)

Swaykos: And what do they say?

Hamilton: Well, just to watch and see what the child’s doing, and then if you see a change in personality, to try to get the child to talk to them and keep parents alerted and that kind of thing.
Swaykos: Right. How have relations with parents been, parents who are stressed?

Hamilton: It’s been good. I mean, they realize that we can’t take care of all of that, but we have good parents in Long Beach.

Swaykos: Good. Have you seen any increase—or I don’t know if you guys keep track of any of this—in divorce rates or anything like that since then?

Hamilton: No, I don’t know about that.

Swaykos: OK. In your students has there been any increase in violence or fights at school?

Hamilton: No, no. There really hasn’t been.

Swaykos: OK, great.

Hamilton: We’re pretty strict on the fighting. If it’s a bad fight, we have them arrested. So we don’t tolerate it.

Swaykos: OK. Did you go into the schools the first days?

Hamilton: Yes.

Swaykos: Did you visit all of them?

Hamilton: Yes, I visited all of them and all of the facilities. Yeah. That’s my job.

Swaykos: What did any of the students say to you? Did you have any conversations with them?

Hamilton: Oh, when they came back?

Swaykos: Yes.

Hamilton: Oh, yes. They were very glad to be back in school, very excited. And they just talked about, they’d tell me what they’d gone through. And, “We’re glad to be back at school. And are we still going to do this?” And at the high school, “Are we still going to have a homecoming?” All of those kind of things.

Swaykos: Oh, good. And did y’all have regular activities through the whole year?

Hamilton: Yes, we did. We had some schools, Lampeter-Strasburg High School in Pennsylvania adopted us, and they brought homecoming down to our students. And that was just a wonderful thing.
Swaykos: Good. Did they do other things? I’ve heard of prom dresses, things sent down and that kind of stuff.

Hamilton: Yes. We had prom dresses sent down. And when Lampeter-Strasburg, when I tell you they came down and they put homecoming on, they sent clothes down in advance. They brought the disc jockey. They brought the decorations. They brought the food, and they were here for a week, and they did everything.

Swaykos: And this was the students?

Hamilton: This is, yes, Lampeter-Strasburg High School, a few of the teachers came down, but it was a bunch of the students who came down, that they raised a tremendous amount of money, and they did that for Long Beach High School and Pass Christian High School.

Swaykos: Great. How amazing. Were you having to—I know you had to replace a couple of teachers. Did you lose any positions? Did you have to eliminate any positions with your school because of lowered attendance?

Hamilton: We had a few that left that we didn’t replace. We could handle it by absorbing the students, so we did that.

Swaykos: OK. So there were no people let go.

Hamilton: No.

Swaykos: By the district.

Hamilton: No. We have not done that, no.

Swaykos: OK. How were lunches and food served to the kids in the first opening month?

Hamilton: We served regular lunches. We tried to keep it as regular, as normal as possible. We had for Harper McCaughan, we ran the Harper McCaughan Cafeteria and the Quarles cafeteria out of one cafeteria, out of one cooking area. But the kids all eat. The McCaughan students get their tray, then go out to the trailers, and then the Quarles children sit in the cafeteria.

Swaykos: Were they given free lunches?

Hamilton: Yes, the first, I think, it was a month or two, everybody received free lunches.
Swaykos: OK. And have the standards lowered, or have more people qualified for free lunches since then?

Hamilton: Yes. The first year, especially, we had more that qualified. Now, at the end of this year, it’s not that big a change from the way it was before the storm. Things are leveling back out.

Swaykos: What was your attendance at the end of this year?

Hamilton: We ran—(Track 2)

Swaykos: —hundred the first year, ending with twenty-eight hundred, what was your starting and ending?

Hamilton: About twenty-eight hundred.

Swaykos: This year as well?

Hamilton: Right.

Swaykos: OK. So you’ve had about a permanent loss of about four hundred students?

Hamilton: Right. And some of those, now, we won’t get back until—most people still can’t live south of the railroad tracks. They have temporary sewer in areas but until—there are a lot of subdivisions going in north of the railroad tracks. And when some of those are open, I think our enrollment’ll go back up. They’ve started those. They’re just not finished.

Swaykos: What do you think, since the storm, the cost of housing has risen?

Hamilton: Tremendously.

Swaykos: Right. What affect do you think that’ll have on your student enrollment?

Hamilton: I think it’s going to hurt, but I don’t think the housing’s going to hurt as much if they don’t get a handle on the insurance. If they don’t get a handle on the insurance, whether any of us’ll be able to live here, I don’t know. And I think that’s something that is going to take some congressional orders to take care of.

Swaykos: Intercessions, right. OK. What would you say was the greatest problem the school district faced after the storm?

Hamilton: For us it’s getting Long Beach to come back so we have a tax base. We’re very worried about that. Other districts have caught up to what their tax base was before the storm and moving on, and we haven’t caught up yet. And we’ve got to be
much more aggressive on the City level, going after things and being willing to have things come in here.

Swaykos: Right. How did you prioritize where to start in the recovery?

Hamilton: I don’t know. You just do it as it goes. You know what you have to—everything was, “What do we have to do to get our students back in school?” And it was—so we hired a company immediately to come in and start doing the temporary repairs so that we could put a child in a room and they didn’t get wet if it rained, those kind of things. And while we were doing that, we started out split shifts at McCaughan and Quarles until we got the trailers up and ready, and that didn’t happen till January. So we started back for three months on split shifts. And we just did what we had to do from getting food services ready, cleanups, all of that.

Swaykos: Was water running by the time you started?

Hamilton: Oh, yes, yes, yes. We had taken measures in case. We had filtering systems put in each of the schools, just in case, that could give us clean drinking water, but the City was able to get it up right before we started back.

Swaykos: Oh, good, good. What was the damage like to this building, to the administration building here?

Hamilton: This building had roof damage and water damage, but then this also became the site of emergency facilities because the police department collapsed in the storm. So this is where all the police were housed, and they literally, as units came in to help in the recovery, they slept here. And so we had to paint and replace all the flooring and all that kind of stuff by the time all that was over.

Swaykos: OK. How long did they stay here?

Hamilton: Five weeks, five or six weeks, till they got temporary quarters.

Swaykos: So you had to work around them or with them.

Hamilton: We worked with them, right.

Swaykos: Good.

Hamilton: It worked out.

Swaykos: Did you have any problems with that or issues—

Hamilton: No.

Swaykos: —having them in here—
Hamilton: No.

Swaykos: —as well?

Hamilton: We were all here for the sake of the community. This isn’t—

Swaykos: Right.

Hamilton: I mean the school district’s buildings belong to the citizens, so.

Swaykos: OK. So you talked earlier about the tax base. How much have you lost in these two years, or how much lower is your financial situation?

Hamilton: We’re down about 30 percent; we lost 30 percent of our tax base, I’d say. I think it was higher than that, and some things have come back on. So at the end of this year, I’d say it’s going to be about 30 percent.

Swaykos: OK. And what are plans to try to gain that back?

Hamilton: The problem is we can’t. We don’t control that. That’s the City. So I’m hoping that city administration, city council, the board of aldermen will do something to let people know that we want growth in Long Beach.

Swaykos: What impact has that 30 percent had on the school year these past two years?

Hamilton: We’ll end up this year with about a million dollars shortfall in our budget.

Swaykos: OK. It’s not cutting any services or anything like that that the students are receiving?

Hamilton: No, but that will eventually come. So far we haven’t because there were special block grants were given, but eventually that’s going to come.

Swaykos: Right. And with the grants, a lot of them I’ve heard are ending after this year. Are you having that trouble?

Hamilton: Yes. Well, the restart grant goes through December, so that’ll carry us through that next year, and then it’ll be the year after that that’s the big problem.

Swaykos: OK. Have you created new grant-writing positions for people to try to bring in extra money?

Hamilton: No. We don’t have the money to do that. We just do a lot of the grant writing on our own. Different people pick it up, so.
Swaykos: OK. What sorts of grants have you received?

Hamilton: Well, from the federal government, we received displaced student grant. We received the restart grant, and then we had two people that wrote a grant for Chevron that was three hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars for technology. So those grants we received.

Swaykos: So you’ve been able to replace all your computers and all that stuff.

Hamilton: Right. We’ve done all that through displaced and restart.

Swaykos: OK. And what does restart entail? What does that give you money for?

Hamilton: That’s for normal operations of school. You can cover your local contributions from tax revenues, so you can cover teacher salaries for local contributions. You can provide tutorial services. You can provide instructional materials, all of that working on your technology and your network, and those kind of things.

Swaykos: OK. Does Long Beach have any casinos?

Hamilton: No.

Swaykos: What disadvantage do you think that has put the school district in, as far as money?

Hamilton: You can just look at what all the other school districts are able to do. We don’t receive that money from a casino, and that’s a large addition to a tax base that helps.

Swaykos: Right. Do you think that that addition should be made to Long Beach?

Hamilton: The citizens of Long Beach voted last summer for a casino in Long Beach.

Swaykos: OK. And if that gets up and running, then that will help your district out greatly.

Hamilton: If that would happen. Now, the citizens voted in a nonbinding referendum. So now it’s up to a developer to come in, make a proposal, and then for the city council to approve it.

Swaykos: OK. You’re a small district compared to some of the other ones around.

Hamilton: Yes.
Swaykos: How do you think that has affected this process, whether for good or bad?

Hamilton: I think it affected all of us the same way. We don’t have the revenue some districts have, but all of us have gone through the same thing whether you’re a large district or a small district.

Swaykos: Right. Do y’all still keep in touch, all the superintendents?

Hamilton: Yes. Yes, we meet consortium once a month. We talk on the phone. I was talking to another superintendent this morning, so we’re very lucky because we have a support group that, as things happen, you can call and get advice or, “How would you do this?” Or just ask questions, so.

Swaykos: What kind of aid have they given you?

Hamilton: Pardon?

Swaykos: What kind of aid or advice have they given you along the way?

Hamilton: We’re lucky in the county. If there’s something that we need and another district has it, that they can let us borrow or whatever, they do that, in sharing resources or a place to store something, or anything like that.

Swaykos: OK. How were you able to recreate school materials, textbooks, all that kind of stuff?

Hamilton: Oh, we had to purchase all new text books for McCaughan and instructional supplies and library (inaudible).

Swaykos: So you had to purchase those yourself?

Hamilton: We had to purchase those. And then at the other schools, for what was destroyed or missing, we bought replacement books.

Swaykos: OK. Volunteers, I want to go that way. What sorts of volunteers and donations did the school district receive?

Hamilton: Oh, a tremendous amount. We got donations from all over the country for instructional supplies. The students didn’t have to buy supplies, paper and pencils and all that. Teachers received donations for classroom supplies and instructional materials. Library books were donated. Technology equipment was donated. It was just tremendous.

Swaykos: Did you have any large companies send anything in? Do you know?
Hamilton: We had furniture brought in from—what was the name of that company? I can’t remember the name. We did receive some furniture. But I think a lot of it was small companies and individuals who did so much, schools in other parts of the country, those kind of things.

Swaykos: Right. What about volunteers for working at the schools for cleanup?

Hamilton: We had people in. We had citizens who came in and helped with cleanup. Navy, NAVO [Naval Oceanographic Office] and NASA [National Aeronautics and Space Administration] sent some of their people in to help with cleanups and crews to help things get ready.

Swaykos: OK. Did you get an overwhelming amount of donations? Some places have talked about that, that it just kept coming.

Hamilton: It was tremendous, and we got the donations, but we put it to use. And like I said, we didn’t ask students—for two years, they didn’t have to have supply lists.

Swaykos: A full two years?

Hamilton: Right. This coming year we’ll have a supply list for the first time since the storm.

Swaykos: Wow.

Hamilton: So we tried to, as teachers needed stuff—we have a storeroom here that we kept stuff in, and teachers would come in and get what they needed or their children needed.

Swaykos: Great. What was the most surprising donation that you received?

Hamilton: I don’t know.

Swaykos: Is there anything you couldn’t use? I know some people were talking about big, hefty winter jackets that just don’t go in 90 degree weather out here.

Hamilton: No. We got some winter jackets, but when those came in, it was beginning to be fall, and people needed them, so we were able to put them out in the schools and let people get them. So I think we made use of just about everything. We set up and let people come in to get prom dresses or shoes. We’d keep the office open late for kids and parents to come in, and so all that was available.

Swaykos: Were people willing to take the donations?

Hamilton: Oh, yes.
Swaykos: Some people were saying they were too proud.

Hamilton: No, I didn’t see that in Long Beach. When you’d lost everything, you knew you needed help, and you were willing to take it. And the kids were very happy to have it, so we didn’t have a problem with that.

Swaykos: Good. What was your most touching donation or volunteer experience, if you could recall that?

Hamilton: Probably the donations made by Lampeter-Strasburg for homecoming. To have people, that didn’t even know you, come in and adopt your school like that and provide homecoming and all the activities for both Long Beach and Pass Christian, and come in. And that group has come back several more times since then. And they’ve come in; they’ve helped clean up areas. They’ve helped work on people’s homes. Several of them came to watch some of the kids graduate. They’d gotten close to some of the kids here, so that was probably the most touching.

Swaykos: Good. What impact has that had on your staff and your students, realizing that now the whole country knows who they are?

Hamilton: They realize, and they feel like they also have obligations. They know what it meant when people stepped up to help us, so when you had the tornado that hit Enterprise, Alabama, we had, all of our schools participated in fundraisers for Enterprise and sending things to them.

Swaykos: OK. Has it created a much more selfless—

Hamilton: Oh, yes. They’re willing to give and help and realize they can get by on a lot less than what they had, so.

Swaykos: Good. What has your community done to pull together to bring the school district back?

Hamilton: We’re lucky in Long Beach in that Long Beach is a bedroom community, and schools are very important in Long Beach. So the people are very supportive of all school activities, and that was a big thing that first year, going to all the different events. That gave them something to do.

Swaykos: OK. Have any of the schools done fundraisers, or is that just something that isn’t able to happen here right now because of—

Hamilton: We’ve done some. We have limited it greatly, but we are doing some on a limited basis.

Swaykos: What kinds are you doing?
Hamilton: Some car washes. And there’s a golf event that went on, a golf tournament a group put together. It’s just a much smaller scale.

Swaykos: Have you seen the same turnout at those events, or do people not just have any money?

Hamilton: Yeah. I think we see pretty much the turnout’s been the same. But like I said, we haven’t had as many.

Swaykos: OK. What about activities such as sports teams for the students? Have those continued?

Hamilton: Yes. I think they missed two games in the year of Katrina, and then we came back. Right.

Swaykos: And I saw your cheerleaders won state champions.

Hamilton: Right, they won state championship.

Swaykos: Great.

Hamilton: The soccer team made it to the finals of state; so you know, they’ve done very well.

Swaykos: So life went on in the students.

Hamilton: Right. The students needed that. That gave them a release, so.

Swaykos: It’s very normalizing to come back to school.

Hamilton: Right.

Swaykos: Good. How has your academic status been? I know Long Beach was very high before the storm.

Hamilton: We remained a level five for that year, so we’re very proud of the parents and the students and the teachers working together to keep that bar high for academics.

Swaykos: What extra did the teachers do to make sure that it was just normal and not (inaudible)?

Hamilton: Just the planning and trying to go in every day with an attitude, no matter what it was like at home, that just, “Concentrate. We’re going to do our normal school routine and enjoy being together,” and that kind of thing.
Swaykos: Good. Did you have the same graduation rate these past two years?

Hamilton: Yes, we did.

Swaykos: OK. So the dropout rate hasn’t risen?

Hamilton: No. I can’t say that it has.

Swaykos: OK. What services did you provide for your teachers to deal with the stress at home?

Hamilton: We had, before teachers went back in the classroom, we had a couple of work days, and we brought counselors in. Then we divided the staff up, and we did some sessions for them to help them, and how to help them deal with their students when they came back in. Plus the teachers also have access to the counselors that we’ve had coming in through the different programs.

Swaykos: Do you know if they’ve actually gone and accessed those services?

Hamilton: I haven’t asked. I feel sure some have, but that’s their private business. I haven’t asked anything like that.

Swaykos: OK. In the first couple of days, how did the teachers adjust? I mean, I know you can’t just ignore what had happened. How did they address, somewhat, the students who came into their classroom?

Hamilton: They hugged. They read some books that had been sent. They read to the kids on some books of (inaudible) disasters like this. They drew pictures. They talked. They let the kids write stories. So it was just a matter of being open in communication, mainly, [that] kids know it’s OK to talk about it. But they’d let them do that, and then they’d get into the normal—

Swaykos: OK. So they let that go for a couple of days, and then they started to work education back in?

Hamilton: They made them in all through the year, but we still were educating. It was just how you go about doing it. They could write a story about it, and then critique their stories.

Swaykos: Right, right. Good. Can you describe your experience with the school district working with FEMA and insurance companies?

Hamilton: The insurance company’s been OK. FEMA’s been very frustrating because—and it’s frustrating for them. There’s some really good people, but they come in, and the way FEMA’s set up, they’re only assigned for a certain amount of time. And then they leave, and then another group comes in. So you’re just beginning
to get something done, and then that person leaves, and somebody else comes in, and they want it done a different way. It’s very frustrating. There’s too many levels of bureaucracy in FEMA, and it just takes too long to get anything done.

Swaykos: Who has been assigned to work with them? Is that something you have to do?

Hamilton: I work with them. The business manager works with them, and the principals have, at times.

Swaykos: OK. And what’s the process like? You said there’s too many layers of bureaucracy. What are those layers? What do you do?

Hamilton: You have your local level, and then it goes on to the state level, and then you go to the federal government. And what one person might want, another person wants it done a different way, and then you’re back redoing a report. It’s just if they’d tell us up front what they needed, and then be consistent and not change that, it’d be easier. But you’ve got too many different people you’re working with.

Swaykos: How often are they changing their employees?

Hamilton: About every three months. See, that’s what it was in the beginning.

Swaykos: Right. So what have you been able to accomplish? Have they been sympathetic to that change?

Hamilton: We’ve gotten accomplished that they finally agreed that Harper McCaughan was over 50 percent damaged. They gave us permission to tear it down. They agreed to the setup of the temporary site over here, and that’s a little over a million dollars just in site work, about three million in trailers. So those they’ve agreed. They are working on trying to get them to approve the relocation of Harper McCaughan, and that’s where we’re hung up right now. So it just depends on how long it takes them to—

Swaykos: Because that’s huge, because if they call it a relocation, they pay 90 percent, correct?

Hamilton: Right.

Swaykos: OK. And where do you think the disconnect is? Where is the argument? When you can see a school that’s completely destroyed that needs to be relocated, why can’t they see that?

Hamilton: They look strictly at bottom line, how they do the figures. Instead of looking at it, “Is this a place where I can put children back in?” And that’s two different perspectives. And then they don’t realize the need for, “The children have
been in trailers for two years. We need them in a regular class and setting.” And that
doesn’t hit them.

Swaykos: Do you have any ideas on how they could change that?

Hamilton: I think they need to give more control to the locals. And the problem is
when they do that, Washington can’t sit there and second guess and then come back
later with a different ruling.

Swaykos: OK. So the problem is actually in their levels, as well, not agreeing?

Hamilton: Right, right. You may get a yes down here; you may get a yes from the
state, and then it’ll hit Washington, and it’s a no.

Swaykos: Have you seen anybody from Washington down here? And how do you
think Washington’s making any decisions when they haven’t been down?

Hamilton: They come down occasionally. They don’t come down enough, but they
do come down here occasionally. But when they do, they separate themselves from it.
I mean they don’t live here. They’re down here for a couple of days. Then they go
back. So I don’t think—the American people has no idea what you have to go through
to get this help. They just know they appropriated the money. Why aren’t we
building schools?

Swaykos: Right. So a lot of people on the individual level are also having FEMA
issues. Do you think it’s the same thing, or do you think it’s harder for a business or
school to deal with them?

Hamilton: I think it’s harder for a school—I could be wrong—just because of the
amount of money. It puts it into different categories. And so, but it’s hard to deal
with them, I guess, at any level.

Swaykos: Do you think that they’re bottom line is money? That’s all they’re worried
about? Do you get that feeling?

Hamilton: They’re worried about being cost-effective with the taxpayers’ money,
and they’re worried about who’s going to come back a year or so from now and say,
“No, you shouldn’t have done it that way. Now we’ve got to go ask them to repay
money.” So that’s a problem.

Swaykos: Some people have said, have expressed the same frustrations with FEMA,
but they said that on a local level, the actual personnel they are working with are very
pleasant.

Hamilton: I have no problem with them. They’re very nice. They care. They get
frustrated on a local level with the national level.
**Swaykos:** OK. So it’s just a system issue; it’s not a people issue.

**Hamilton:** Yeah. There’ve been very few people with FEMA that we did not work well with. There’ve been a few, but most of them we work well with, and that hasn’t been a problem. It’s the system and the way they do it.

**Swaykos:** Right. How much money have you received from them so far?

**Hamilton:** We still haven’t been repaid all of the million and a half, 1.3 million it took to put in the temporary site. And that’s been—we’ve been in that temporary site a year and six months. So we haven’t even received all that, much less the allocation for the new school.

**Swaykos:** OK. And how does that factor into working with the [Mississippi] State Department of Education? Does it at all, or are they a separate entity that—

**Hamilton:** No, it’s separate. It’s separate.

**Swaykos:** And how has it been working with them?

**Hamilton:** The state department’s been wonderful throughout this process, Dr. Bounds in the State Department of Education.

**Swaykos:** And what kinds of work have you had to do with them?

**Hamilton:** They came down after the storm immediately for weeks finding out, “What you need?” “We need textbooks.” “OK. Get us a list of what you need.” And then they’d go back, and they’d do orders. It was easy for them with phones and everything, and they’d deal with the companies with us. They got the trailers provided for us. And then since then, support in government and restart money, and then displaced student money.

**Swaykos:** OK. So they’ve only been able to give you grants. They haven’t been able to just finance anything for you.

**Hamilton:** No. They don’t finance, but they’ve been able to get money appropriated through grants or through the state legislature, and that’s tremendous help. So it’s been wonderful working with the State Department of Education.

**Swaykos:** OK. Speaking of legislature, what legislative issues do you think need to be changed before this happens again? Or what new rules do you think need to be implemented on either federal or state level to speed the process of recovery after this happens?
Hamilton: I think they need to have stuff in place before the storm hits, to know how they’re going to do it, and what the rules are going to be instead of having it come up, and then you got to decide on the rules. That’s the biggest thing. Just, I think, get more authority at the local level.

Swaykos: OK. So do you think there should be any sort of national preparation the next time that—

Hamilton: Yes. And they’re working on that, like having drop sites. Instead of having them in Atlanta for stockpiling water and that kind of stuff, you put it in Hattiesburg, so it’s seventy miles instead of six hundred. So those kind of things they’re already working on, trying to answer and get that done for us.

Swaykos: Good, good. What has been your proudest accomplishment of the recovery so far?

Hamilton: The fact that we were able to get school going so quickly and that we maintained a level five last year; that says a lot for our students and our teachers.

Swaykos: Great. So you give credit to your students, as well, not just your teachers doing that?

Hamilton: Well, yeah. They have to come in focused and ready to work and knowing the importance of the education.

Swaykos: Good. During this time, how have you been able to be a leader while you’re dealing with your issues, as well, your own personal loss?

Hamilton: I think just being able to listen to people. And see, I have a very good school board, so we have a shared vision of where we need to go. And that’s helped a lot.

Swaykos: Where do you get your strength from?

Hamilton: Oh, my family.

Swaykos: Good.

Hamilton: And (inaudible) my faith, so.

Swaykos: Good, good. What could you share with anybody who would be in this position later? What have you learned, either maybe something about preparing, maybe something about afterwards?

Hamilton: There’s no way to prepare. You just have to jump in when it happens, I believe, and make the decisions that you got to make, and you can’t second guess
yourself. You have to make the decisions that are going to be best for getting your schools up and running and taking care of your students, and then hope that it all works out.

**Swaykos:** What was the hardest decision you had to make?

**Hamilton:** I don’t know. In some ways, the ones that bother you the most is that we had to tear down Harper McCaughan, that we couldn’t save it. But there wasn’t a question of, “Should we keep it?” We knew it couldn’t be done. That was probably the hardest.

**Swaykos:** Just an emotional decision.

**Hamilton:** Yeah, because it had been there so long and meant a lot to the town and everything.

**Swaykos:** Right. What has it meant for you doing this? Was your father the superintendent during Camille?

**Hamilton:** Yes, he was.

**Swaykos:** How did you seem him handle Camille?

**Hamilton:** Much the same way. He didn’t have to go through all the bureaucracy of FEMA. But I saw him jump in and just make the decisions he had to make to get the schools going there, and that’s what we did here. And there’s a lot of support people that helped with that.

**Swaykos:** Did you find yourself during this period thinking about, “What did he do this way?” Or, “What would he have done?”

**Hamilton:** Sometimes, sometimes I did. In the first month or two, there really wasn’t time to second guess, the first month especially. It was probably twenty-hour days and constantly going, and you just did what you had to do as each crisis came up. And then you had to make a decision and go on to the next. There were a lot of good people, administrative staff and volunteers, who were given—we’d give jobs. We’d meet in the morning, say, “OK. We need these things done.” And then you trusted them to go get it done because you couldn’t do all of it. And I was lucky that we have a very strong administrative staff, and they got done what they had to get done.

**Swaykos:** At what point did you have some burnout, on your own level?

**Hamilton:** I don’t know. There really hasn’t been time for it yet, so I guess that’ll happen when we get the school built, and that’s probably two years away.

**Swaykos:** You’re still looking at two years for that?
Hamilton: We haven’t gotten the approval to move it, and when we do get that approval, once we can bid it, then it’ll be another eighteen months before we can get in it. So I think at least two years. I hate that, but that’s what I think it’ll be.

Swaykos: Right. What is your husband’s position here?

Hamilton: He’s assistant superintendent.

Swaykos: And how has that been, working with him through all this?

Hamilton: That’s fine. We’ve been married twenty-eight years, twenty-nine years, and we have worked as band directors together. He was already at central office when I was hired. And so he was already in his position when I was hired as superintendent. So we work together, but we have different roles in the district. He does curriculum and instruction and federal programs and crisis management. He wrote the plan for that. So it’s very good. And USM, by the way, asked to use that, his plan.

Swaykos: Oh, great.

Hamilton: So it’s very good. He’s very knowledgeable and cutting edge. So he has his role, and I have mine.

Swaykos: Good. What has been his greatest asset in this recovery to you?

Hamilton: That he thinks a lot out of the box, coming up with solutions and then cutting edge nationwide, keeping our curriculum and instruction where it needs to be.

Swaykos: Do you think that’s needed? Do you think change is needed? Do you see this as a clean slate to build on, or do you want to get back to the way it was?

Hamilton: I mean, you can’t ever go back to the way it was. You hated it happened because change is essential. Things are always changing. This is not the way you want to change. You don’t want a clean slate like this. But you do what you’ve got to do to get back some of what you were doing, but it’s not ever going to be the same, and you wouldn’t want it to be. We tried to keep the best of what we had before and then move forward with it.

Swaykos: What was the best that you had before that you’re trying to keep?

Hamilton: The staff, a caring staff and community that cares. Our school, Harper McCaughan, won’t be in the same place it was before. Our teachers won’t be in the same homes they were before, but they’re still the same people, and the community’s still very supportive, and the students are great. So we want to keep that.

Swaykos: Good. Do you have a new site picked for the school yet?
Hamilton: Yes, we do.

Swaykos: And where is that?

Hamilton: We hope to put it on Pineville Road on the south side of, just east of Royal Estates. Are you from Long Beach?

Swaykos: Pass Christian.

Hamilton: OK. So we’ll probably build back out there.

Swaykos: OK. You talked about the school being built. That’s what you have left. Is that what you consider your 100 percent for recovery?

Hamilton: That and the tax base to run the school. So we’ve got to get a tax base going again.

Swaykos: And how long do you think that’ll take?

Hamilton: I don’t know. I think if they would approve some things now, you’re two years away. So I think you’re probably about three years away, at least, because I haven’t seen the willingness to go out and go after things the way Biloxi, Gulfport, and those places are doing.

Swaykos: I see. Are you satisfied with the rate of recovery so far?

Hamilton: No. (laughter) No, I’m not. I think we need to be moving faster.

Swaykos: OK. And how do you think that can happen?

Hamilton: Just the attitude from everybody on the city council because some people—the board of aldermen, some are very progressive and know that some things need to be changed, but we have some that want things to go back to the way they were. It’s never going to be the way it was. And they have to realize that post-Katrina, it’s going to take more revenue than it did just to run the schools, and to run the City. And you cannot keep the status quo. So the problems that the schools are having, the Cities are having the same problems.

Swaykos: Um-hm. Do you think that’ll take new city council members, or do you think it’ll just take coercing current [members]? (Track 3)

Swaykos: —asked if you thought it was a need of new city council, or if it was just the mind-changing of the current city council, and your answer was?
**Hamilton:** I don’t know. I don’t know. It would take the constituents—if they approve them, and they may not—saying, “This is what we need to do.” If it’s going to take a few other people being butted out, I don’t know. And who knows? A lot of people may disagree with what I think.

**Swaykos:** OK. Have you had any parent input as to the way recovery is going?

**Hamilton:** Oh, yes, we had—

**Swaykos:** Or the direction?

**Hamilton:** Our parents are involved in the school through PTO [Parent Teacher Organization], through our parent advisory council, so we have had input.

**Swaykos:** And what have they had to say about this whole process?

**Hamilton:** Well, they’re pleased with where the schools are. They wish we were a little bit further along, but they know that we’re waiting and trying to deal with FEMA on it, so.

**Swaykos:** Right. So they’re not starting to put pressure on you because they think they should be further along?

**Hamilton:** No. I’m sure they wonder why we aren’t doing more, but I can’t say pressure. There’s nothing more we can do than what we’ve done so far. So we just have to wait.

**Swaykos:** What in this process has surprised you the most, whether for good or for bad?

**Hamilton:** Just the process of having to do things over and over. I was amazed after the storm just at the generosity of the American people because it was the individuals and the faith-based groups that kept us all going. It was not the government. So that was just amazing to me. You think that the government will step in, but it wasn’t the government who really helped us in the beginning; it was the faith-based groups and the individuals who came down.

**Swaykos:** Do you still need help from the American public?

**Hamilton:** We need help in that we need help putting pressure on insurance companies on freeing up money faster, so that it doesn’t take as long. Those are the kind of things we need to keep them aware of.

**Swaykos:** Right. I read a story in the paper recently that said the Gulf Coast is beginning to feel forgotten by everyone else, that it’s hard to find volunteers anymore. Have you experienced any of that?
Hamilton: I haven’t, but I mean I know that would be just normal, that other things have happened, and you focus somewhere else. People have done a lot for us, and I think they think that, OK, it’s time for us to step up and take care of ourselves some. And it’s not that they’re not caring; I think they just get focused in on other things.

Swaykos: Right. During the time immediately following the storm, there was a lot of coverage on New Orleans.

Hamilton: Right.

Swaykos: Did you feel like Mississippi wasn’t getting enough coverage, or was it just better that they were able to be silent and recover?

Hamilton: Absolutely we didn’t get the coverage, but in some ways later on I think that helped us in some of the grants. Mississippi’s gotten a much larger share, in some cases, than Louisiana, and I think that’s because some of what people saw that was happening in Louisiana, so.

Swaykos: OK. What stands out as your worst day or memory following the storm?

Hamilton: I guess just the day after the storm, just seeing the total destruction south of Railroad Street in Long Beach because the things that I had known all my life, they were all gone down there, so.

Swaykos: What did you cherish most from childhood that’s gone?

Hamilton: I don’t know, the home I grew up in, all the memories of the landmarks and the places and the things we’ve done and seen. All of that’s gone.

Swaykos: Right. What do you think the new beach line is going to look like?

Hamilton: I don’t know. It’s so different. I personally don’t want development on the south side of [Highway] 90, but I would love to see development on the north side. And I think there’s going to be very few people who can afford to go back there with homes, so I think it’s going to have to be commercial, condos, something like that.

Swaykos: OK. What stands out as your best day or memory following the storm?

Hamilton: Probably the day we got back in school; that we were able to do it and accomplish it by October 3.

Swaykos: Even on a personal level, that’s—
Hamilton: Oh, on a personal level, I don’t know any one particular memory. We were very fortunate, and we knew it. We had our family together, and we were all OK.

Swaykos: Good. So what does the future look like for Long Beach schools?

Hamilton: It’s hard to say. Things have been good with what we’ve accomplished the last two years, but we need some things to happen in the city in order for us to sustain what we’re doing.

Swaykos: Do you think you’ll be in this position to see that through?

Hamilton: As superintendent?

Swaykos: Correct.

Hamilton: I mean, I guess you never know. Hopefully, but we’ll see.

Swaykos: So you’re planning to be?

Hamilton: I plan to be, yeah. I don’t know whether people may have other plans, but I can’t control that.

Swaykos: Right. How hard would it be for someone to step in the middle right now and try to take it along? Do you think that you really hold the key to keep this going, now that you’ve seen it this far?

Hamilton: That’s hard to say. I mean, I’m sure that there’s always people who think they can do a better job. I think I know the community and the schools, and have a good handle of where we are and where we’re going, but that’s not for me to say. Whether somebody else could do it or not, I don’t know. There’s always somebody that can take your place.

Swaykos: Right. Have you done your father proud?

Hamilton: I hope. We’ll see. He understands what I’ve gone through and all, so.

Swaykos: Good. Do you have any last comments, anything else?

Hamilton: No. Just, you hope you’ll never see another Katrina, so.

Swaykos: Thank you so much.

Hamilton: Thank you.

(end of interview)