Mississippi Oral History Program

Hurricane Katrina Oral History Project

An Oral History

with

David Elliott

Interviewer: James Pat Smith

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Biography

Mr. David Elliott was born November 20, 1956, in Minneapolis, Minnesota, to Mr. Leonard B. Elliott and Mrs. Joan Day Elliott. His father was a professor of communications at The University of Minnesota, and he worked for Minnesota Public Television. His paternal grandfather was a pharmacist, and his grandparents had emigrated from Russia and Romania to come to the United States. His mother was a homemaker with five children. On February 14, 1987, he married Loretta Lejean (born December 14, 1954, in Lafourche Parish, Louisiana). They have one son, Bart Elliott.

Elliott attended high school in Minneapolis and in California. He earned his BA in speech communications from The University of Minnesota. Additionally he attended Brown Institute, graduating with training in radio. His first job was in Jackson, Mississippi, with WTIX. In 1985 he began working at WLOX-TV as a newscaster, where he was employed at the time of this interview.

Elliott enjoys reading, following politics and American social trends, golfing, and managing rental and vacation homes. He has earned awards from the Boys and Girls Club, the Lion’s Club, and the Associated Press.
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AN ORAL HISTORY

with

DAVID ELLIOTT

This is an interview for the Mississippi Oral History Program of The University of Southern Mississippi. The interview is with David Elliott and is taking place on August 31, 2009. The interviewer is James Pat Smith.

Smith: This is an interview with David Elliott. David Elliott is a reporter with WLOX Television who was extensively involved in the WLOX coverage of Hurricane Katrina in 2005. The interview takes place at the USM [University of Southern Mississippi] Gulf Park Library in Long Beach, Mississippi. Today’s date is August 31, 2009. The interview is conducted by James Pat Smith of the USM history faculty. Mr. Elliott, could you state your name and today’s date?

Elliott: David Elliott, August 31, 2009.

Smith: And what’s your birth date? That’s something you—

Elliott: Well, I don’t mind, 11-20-56 [November 20, 1956].

Smith: And where were you born?

Elliott: Minneapolis, Minnesota.

Smith: And what’s your current address? (A portion of the interview was not transcribed in order to protect the privacy of the interviewee.)

Smith: What’s your spouse’s name?

Elliott: Loretta.

Smith: Can you share her maiden name?

Elliott: Lejean, terribly Louisiana.

Smith: And some people prefer not to take a stab at this, and nothing is implied by whether you answer or not. Do you know the date and place you were married?

Elliott: Well, I know the place. It was actually in St. Martin, Jackson County, and it would’ve been, oh, Lord, twenty-two years. So it would’ve been—I know it was

**Smith:** Good. And does your wife allow you to share her date and place of birth?

**Elliott:** [December 14, 1954]; so she’s a little older than I am. The place of birth would be Lafourche Parish, Louisiana.

**Smith:** Good. And for the sake of our record here, could you talk a little bit about your own work history before you came to WLOX? Start as far back as you can remember. What kinds of jobs have you been doing that led you to Biloxi, Mississippi?

**Elliott:** Well, I’ll go ahead and start right out of college.

**Smith:** First of all, did we establish your place of birth was?

**Elliott:** Minneapolis, Minnesota.

**Smith:** Minneapolis, OK. There’s a trail that gets you somehow to Mississippi.

**Elliott:** It does.

**Smith:** Let’s talk about the work part of that.

**Elliott:** OK. Well, right out of the University of Minnesota, I majored in speech communications. I went, right after school actually, to this place called Brown Institute in Minneapolis, which was a kind of a specialty technology school, if you will. Well, but it was very sophisticated, and they placed people in radio stations all across the country once you finish with their fourteen-month program, or whatever it was, because I always had a love of radio. I worked radios, as a matter of fact, at the campus radio station at the University of Minnesota when I was going to school. So lo and behold, they place me in Jackson, Mississippi. I had never been south of Iowa, I don’t think, prior to that. I didn’t even have a car. I remember getting on a train and taking it to Jackson, Mississippi, where I eventually bought, you know, my first six-hundred-dollar car, whatever it was, in Jackson. It was a rock station at the time, what they called album rock, and the year probably, I think, was 1980. And I worked there for about a year and a half. Then I went over to a radio station called 94 Text, which was owned by Jimmy Love. This is going to have a circle, as you know, and as eventually we’ll get to. And I worked there for a couple of years. I went to a cattle call audition for a new television show they were starting in Jackson called *PM Magazine*. It was Monday through Friday, 6:30 at night, a kind of a feature around town, kind of a two on the town, a guy and a girl, a man and a woman, who would be in different locations around Jackson and around, really, Central Mississippi, doing feature stories on a wide variety of things. I went to the cattle call; I think about seventy-five men. They already had the woman lined up, Melanie Christopher.
was a news anchor at WJTV, the CBS affiliate up there. The cattle call, the audition

got down to about ten, whittled down to five, finally down to two. Lo and behold, I
ended up getting the job, so I went right from radio. My first job in television was a
prime-time access, 6:30 p.m. show called *PM Magazine*. I did that show for about a
year. The ABC affiliate across town stole—or we stole, rather, *Wheel of Fortune* from
the ABC station across town. At that time *Wheel of Fortune* was just in its ascent. It
was considered a hot property; still is. So they put that in the 6:30 timeslot, and I
started doing a feature segment called “The Mississippi Traveler.” I went all over the
state of Mississippi and did feature stories. Jimmy Love was always, dating back even
to the time I worked for him in radio, trying to talk me into coming down and working
for his television station in Biloxi, Mississippi, WLOX. I finally decided to talk
seriously to Jimmy Love about that; came down to the Coast. Had never been to the
Coast before. I had been in Jackson then for like three, three and a half years. So it
was rather unusual. I’d come down here to do a few stories, but I’d never been down
to really see the sights and learn much about the culture down here. And he talked me
into accepting a job, which at the time was a feature reporter. We invented a segment
called *Page Thirteen*. That was in 1985, and I’m still doing *Page Thirteen* in 2009.
But I took that job. Before I knew it, I was coanchoring the five o’clock news.

Smith:  Still are?

Elliott: Still I’m doing the five o’clock news. They’ve invented other venues, other
television programs, a four o’clock show, which I now do, a show called *WLOX News
This Week* that I do with Doug Walker, which is kind of a newsmaker recap of what
the big stories were that week. Did a late night Sunday night talk show, phone-in
show, which I don’t do anymore, but we did that for seventeen years, believe it or not.
A lot of folks don’t realize that. And now I guess I’m considered one of the senior
correspondence figures at WLOX.

Smith: Very good. You mentioned University of Minnesota. Can you take us back
to your education leading to the University of Minnesota?

Elliott: Well, it gets rather unusual there. I went, I grew up going to school in
Minneapolis, actually suburban Minneapolis, but then my parents got divorced when I
was just getting ready to go into the eleventh grade. And my mother, whose family
was in Southern California, Glendale, California, as a reaction, I suppose, to the
trauma of the divorce—and it was pretty traumatic—grabbed her five kids, my four
brothers and sisters and I, and moved us out to California. So I finished my last two
Came back to Minnesota, because I was very close to my dad. My family stayed in
California. I lived with my dad and went to the University of Minnesota where he
taught. He was head of the speech department at the University of Minnesota. He
taught radio and television, actually. Used to do a TV show on Minnesota Public
Television. He used to do a lot of voiceovers, national voiceovers, so really even
when I was growing up, I used to go to some of his classes. I used to always go with
him when he did a lot of the professional things that he did on the side, used to go
behind the scenes where this old Minnesota Public Television show that he did, and that really sort of launched my interests in media.

Smith: Interesting. And do you have any other interests, activities outside of your career that you think would help someone understand who you are?

Elliott: Well, I have an innate curiosity and interest in following politics, following kind of American social trends and things like that, so I read a lot. I’m a golf bum, if that counts as something outside of television, and living here on the Gulf Coast, of course, I can play year round, which is something I wasn’t used to, growing up in Minnesota, because I started playing golf when I was probably eight years old. But in Minnesota the golf season is six months, at best. And so I have some homes in some other states, in Florida, Alabama, and New Orleans, so I’m busy kind of managing those homes, so that’s kind of a hobby, too, believe it or not, so.

Smith: Um-hm. Are you involved in any civic activities?

Elliott: You won’t believe it. I hate to say, but no, not really. It’s not really my cup of tea.

Smith: Did you serve in the military?

Elliott: No, I didn’t, not in any way, shape, or form.

Smith: Do you have a religious affiliation?

Elliott: I was brought up in a Judaic home. I was bar mitzvahed. My father was Jewish, but my mother was Catholic, and she converted to Judaism before they got married, so I grew up going to temple, going to Sunday school, going to regular Friday night services. As I said, I was bar mitzvahed. But then I sort of drifted away from Judaism, and I do not belong to the synagogue here on the Coast.

Smith: OK. Have you received any awards or citations that would be of interest to anyone trying to understand, again, who you are, honors?

Elliott: Well, I’ve received plaques and gifts and all sorts of certificates on all of the different things I’ve kind of been involved in from the Boys and Girls Club, but again, I’m not a board member, but I’ve just helped them with events. Lions Club, all sorts of things I’ve received. I have one Associated Press Award on television segments and stories I’ve done, but that would probably be about it, in that regard.

Smith: Do you have any children?

Elliott: I have a twenty-year-old son as of August 31, 2009, at the time of this recording, a college student in New Orleans.
**Smith:** Can you state his name?

**Elliott:** Bart Elliott. Bart is my middle name. My wife and I went searching for a name. I wasn’t too hot on the name Bart, actually, but my wife really liked it, and it’s turned out to be unique, and now he likes it a lot, too, so.

**Smith:** Very good. And you talked a little bit about your father’s background. Do you know your father’s date of birth and place of birth?

**Elliott:** Well, I know he was born in Minneapolis. You know, as I said, he was Jewish. His parents came over right around the turn of the century from Russia and Romania. And he has a PhD, of course, and was kind of my mentor. But he was born in Minneapolis. He had twin brothers growing up. And he died very young, at fifty-one years old, of a brain tumor.

**Smith:** Can you state his name again?

**Elliott:** Leonard Bart.

**Smith:** Leonard Bart Elliott.

**Elliott:** Yes.

**Smith:** And your mother’s maiden name.

**Elliott:** Day, a fine Irish Catholic.

**Smith:** And her first name was?

**Elliott:** Joan.

**Smith:** Joan Day. And do you know her date of birth?

**Elliott:** You know, I really don’t. I’m not even sure how old she is. Oh, I know her—the year I don’t know, but it’s February 13, and I, again, at the time of this taping, I think she’s seventy-five years old. I should know that, but I think that’s her age.

**Smith:** Good. And do you know much about her family background?

**Elliott:** She came from very humble—whereas my father, his dad, even during the Great Depression, owned a pharmacy, a big drugstore in Minneapolis, so they were very active in the Temple Israel, the synagogue in Minneapolis. And they were probably considered a little more upper-middle class. But my mother came, actually, from very humble beginnings, very. Her family was not particularly well to do, and so
she kind of rose once she married my dad, and went back to school and did a lot of
different things.

Smith: What work did she do, work outside of the home?

Elliott: Never worked.

Smith: Never worked.

Elliott: Never worked, homemaker.

Smith: Worked.

Elliott: (Inaudible) five kids. My parents had five kids before they were thirty years
old. We had five kids within seven years, which was, I think, the thing to do back in
the late [19]50s and through the, up to the mid-1960s.

Smith: Interesting. How long have you been employed at WLOX at this point?

Elliott: Well, since 1985, so that would be twenty-four years, and it’s been a very
quick twenty-four years.

Smith: And can you tell us a little bit about the station? In your mind, what makes
that station unique? You mentioned Jimmy Love recruited you to the station.

Elliott: He did.

Smith: Is there anything else there that makes the station attractive to you now, or has
made it over the years?

Elliott: Well, I mean over the years, (laughter) honestly time. Locally owned and
operated television stations are dinosaurs; they are things of the past. They have long
since gone the way of the buggy whip. But he was actually sort of my mentor, too. I
had a very close relationship with him. And I was able to do a lot of things in those
eyear early days, a lot of traveling, and a lot of special projects at the television station.
Then since we were sold to one company and sold to another company, and now we’re
with a rather large corporation that owns television stations all around America. But I
think LOX has always been unique in that it’s, I think, one of the top ABC stations in
America. It might even be the number one ABC station in America. We’ve always
had a monopoly, a lock on this market. No network affiliate has ever been allowed.
There’s a small Fox station here, but no NBC or CBS stations have ever been allowed
in because of cable penetration from New Orleans and Mobile. So I think LOX has
always been sort of, regardless of our market size, really a giant and has enjoyed a
national reputation.

Smith: And has the station won any awards that you’ve been associated with?
**Elliott:** Oh, the station has won Emmys, Peabodys, Pulitzer Prizes, if I’m not mistaken, after our Hurricane Katrina coverage, which, along with our entire staff, I was involved in. Our ability to stay on the air and continue to cover the worst natural disaster in US history earned us a national award on that, an Emmy and a Pulitzer Prize.

**Smith:** And let’s talk a little bit about the storm. Let’s talk about your awareness of the storm and what that meant for your family and for what you understand your work to be when a hurricane is approaching. This is not the first hurricane you’ve ever seen.

**Elliott:** No, not my first rodeo. As a matter of fact, there is a plan; every good television station should have a hurricane plan, and it’s a drill. It’s a routine. A month after I moved to the Coast, Hurricane Elena hit, so here we have a kid from Minnesota, even though I lived in Jackson for a few years. I found it kind of exciting, honestly. I learned what a lot of people learned, even people I think who have been through storms, that the event itself, there’s a certain adrenalin, a certain excitement, and then after it’s over is when you realize the consequences: no power, no cable, or anything else. So we were ready for this storm. We had just followed—I believe it was 2004—five storms in thirteen months, including Ivan over in Pensacola had gotten into Florida. And every one of them at one point or another, as we all know, once they enter the Gulf of Mexico is a Russian Roulette, if you will. So communities from South Florida all the way over to South Texas have to gear up, and we did. And I’ll just tell a very quick story. I have a home in Destin, Florida, and for every storm since I bought that house in 2004, I’ve had to kind of go back and forth, sometimes in the middle of the night, because I have to go over there and secure my interests over there. And sometimes I’ll wait to the last minute, middle of the night, to stay in Destin. And if it looks like it’s coming to Destin and I’m not going to have to be—or in the Florida panhandle—and I’m not going to have to be here, I’ll stay there and ride it out, or do whatever I have to do. Or I have to, at ninety-five miles an hour, get back to the Coast because that’s where my responsibility is at WLOX once it seems apparent or appears that the storm is coming into our viewing area.

**Smith:** So there’s a kind of a drill with the new staff. You sort of know what’s expected of you. It’s not a surprise when someone makes a call to you. Do you usually get a call, or you just know what to do?

**Elliott:** Well, again, once it enters the Gulf of Mexico, we kind of go into our hurricane plan, and everybody kind of knows what their responsibilities are. And a smart television station—and WLOX is a smart television station—knows you have to marshal your resources. You obviously can’t have 100 percent of your staff covering the eighteen hours before the storm when you know you’re going to have to have a staff there during the storm, and then everybody will have to, of course, be there after the storm. It seems like I’m always on the air when the hurricane makes landfall. That has been Elena. That was Georges, and that was Katrina, and many tropical
storms in between. So I know my responsibility is to be sort of the news anchor and
to be on the air. I’m not out as much covering what’s happening in the community as
businesses and homeowners are getting ready. I’ve got to stay kind of fresh because I

Smith: OK. And you used to relish this. Do you still relish that?

Elliott: The thrill of a hurricane? You know, you can’t deny in our business, I guess
it’s like a war correspondent covering a skirmish or business correspondents covering
a recession or the crash of a stock market. In our business this is big news. This is our
Super Bowl. And I must confess there is some adrenalin, and there is some
excitement leading up to and during a storm. And some people might be able to relate
to that even as they’re at their home, getting ready for a storm and might find it
unusual that I feel that way, but I think in our business you better feel that way.

Smith: One of your colleagues at the Sun Herald, if I can call him a colleague, stated
that they recognized before the storm hit, maybe by Saturday, that they were likely
going to sit on top of a huge story, and that started governing the way they approached
what they were doing in the lead up. Did you have any sense that this story might be
as big as it turned out to be?

Elliott: No. I knew it was a monster storm. All you had to do was look at the radar
and the data to know that it was going to be a horrific event, even during the storm.
And we’re going to talk, we’ll talk more about that, I’m sure. I had no idea until I
went out afterwards and surveyed and assessed what had happened. Nobody did.
Who did? Maybe people who were swimming for their lives. I’m sure they had an
idea that they were in the middle of a world of hurt. But I had no idea it was going to
be one of the biggest stories ever.

Smith: You had a teenage son. You have family. How did you go about preparing
for this particular storm? Anything different about it in your personal preparation?

Elliott: Well, having the home in Destin, my family kind of does the opposite that I
do. So they stayed here for a little while, while I went over to Destin to board up and
watch, put up all my patio furniture and all the routine that every homeowner does in
Hurricane Alley. And then suddenly when I make the decision to come back to
Mississippi, they went over to Destin where they were basically out of harm’s way
even though Katrina, as we know, all the way over to Pensacola and even east of
Pensacola did damage. But my family stayed for Georges, and I felt terrible. I felt
powerless. And there are a lot of people in our business feel this way, I think, when
their families stay home, and you’re at work, and you’re wondering what horrific
things could be happening. I mean, we’ll get more into this, I’m sure, about my loss.
If my family would’ve been in my house during Katrina, they would’ve been up in the
attic as the water was rising in my Bayou View home, so And you can’t put that out
of your mind; you do while you’re working, but when you have moments in between working and you have time to think, those things seep into your mind, and you do worry a little bit. But my family now, ever since Georges and that experience, they leave; they evacuate.

**Smith:** At some point the station started doing wall-to-wall coverage twenty-four/seven of the storm. Do you remember when that decision was made? How are those decisions made when it’s time to just go over to this issue for the community?

**Elliott:** I would say—and I don’t know what our official plan is—it’s more of a management, a chief meteorologist’s decision, but I think about twelve hours out or eighteen hours out. I mean we’re doing twenty-minute segments here. Our weather man is going on every fifteen minutes with two-and-a-half-minute segments. But when you talk wall to wall, gavel to gavel, I think that’s maybe eighteen hours, twelve hours out.

**Smith:** That can be a significant business decision for the station, too, because you’re preempting programming.

**Elliott:** Preempting programming, preempting commercials.

**Smith:** Programming and commercials that pay the bills.

**Elliott:** Yeah, yeah.

**Smith:** Is there any sense of trepidation or doubt when that’s happening?

**Elliott:** Well, I can’t speak for management on that, but I imagine there must be, except, to give people an inside look at television, we have sponsors galore who sponsor our hurricane coverage, so maybe the revenue is made up to a certain degree. And, “This hurricane update brought to by”—and that sort of thing. So once you start dropping commercials and getting away from whatever the regularly-scheduled ABC programming might be in our case, it’s a different ballgame, really is.

**Smith:** How many people were employed at the station?

**Elliott:** I think in our newsroom, the total people of the station over, a little over a hundred. In our newsroom, probably close to fifty.

**Smith:** So the news staff, do you count production people that are working to keep the cameras going?

**Elliott:** Yes. Yes, I would.

**Smith:** They’re part of the news staff.
**Elliott:** I would count that in that fifty.

**Smith:** When the storm is coming in, and this one reached, achieved its maximum in daylight hours, talk to me about your idea of how reporters are either exposed or protected in bringing the public the story. What’s your idea of the ethics of disaster or storm coverage when the reporter is really a part of the story?

**Elliott:** That has changed over the years. I’ll never forget my first storm, Elena. During the eye of the storm we sent crews out. We went out in three-man teams, women, three-person teams. And even Georges in 1998, we still were going out. I’ll never forget one of the tropical storms. I don’t remember the name of the storm. I was down at Courthouse Road, but the live truck getting swamped by water. I thought we were probably going to die. There were three of us, a photographer and a live-truck operator. As the waves were crashing over the jetty and coming up to our knees but there is a—with the exception of maybe The Weather Channel and maybe the networks because, you know the CNNs, FOXs, and et cetera—ABC, NBC, CBS not as much. But to be out there, “The wind is pelting my face.” And you see the street signs, and everyone is always like, “Geez! Why are you standing there? The street sign is going to, like, decapitate you.” Anyway, we’ve become much more careful about going out. There’s a point, management makes a decision where they call all the crews in. And it’s funny because the crews are all begging to go out in the storm, the photographers. This could be their moment. The reporters are saying, “I promise I’ll be careful.” They worry about equipment more, I think, in a corporate environment that we’re in, protecting assets, and well, not to put that ahead of people, but they are worried about protecting assets. People are assets. But they draw the line. We had crews once—and I’ll use this as an example—once the water started getting up over Highway 90, we pulled all of our crews back in. And that’s changed with local affiliates in New Orleans or in Pensacola or in Mobile. I don’t think you’re going to see local stations out there in the height of the storm anymore. It just doesn’t happen. But the moment you can, you talk management into letting you get out there.

**Smith:** Very good. Just a second. OK. Talk to me about what’s going on inside the studio during the storm, the production operations themselves. What’s happening in there with fifty people?

**Elliott:** It’s kind of funny.

**Smith:** Those on the air, trying to—

**Elliott:** It’s kind of funny. It’s sort of a test tube of human nature that you would find in any business. Some people are scared. Some people are on auto pilot. I’m on auto pilot. I don’t worry about it. Some people actually, I think, sort of within the building itself, disappeared for a while; found a corner in an office somewhere. I’m not sure. But there’s a real camaraderie, a real sense of teamwork, and a real stick-to-it-iveness. I think that you better have that, or you better find another line of work. But I think
there’s a combination of excitement, fear, obligation, and that’s about it about the emotions. It runs the gamut.

Smith: And how are you getting information at that point that you’re transmitting?

Elliott: Well, we have producers working behind the scenes who are calling local emergency management directors, who are calling local police chiefs, who are calling local supervisors with the county, mayors, lining up interviews. And we’re sitting out on the set, and we honestly don’t know what’s coming up next. When you’re on twenty-four/seven, you sometimes are just talking. You’re not even sure what you’re saying, but you know you have to fill the time. And then we wear these earpieces, and the producers tell us we have the mayor of Biloxi on the line, and then you’ll, “Mayor Holloway, how are things in your city?” And it’s very fluid. And that I find exciting, actually. Some people may think that’s odd. But you have a lot of people working behind the scenes making sure you have content. But in many cases, it seems like it might be three minutes, but for ten minutes you’ve just been out there with one of your coworkers adlibbing and talking and scrambling, if you will, and I like that, personally, a lot.

Smith: Now, at some point during the storm, the station itself had some major damage.

Elliott: Major issues.

Smith: To the building.

Elliott: Yeah. Again I always seem to be on at landfall, so I was on the air. I imagine cable and electricity was already off in fifty, seventy, who knows what percentage of the Coast, so people with battery-operated TVs were still watching us. At that time we also have radio partners, so radio stations pick up our signal because they know they don’t have any resources, these radio stations here. They know LOX has resources, so they start taking our audio, take our audio feed. So what was the question again, Pat?

Smith: Well, talk about the building.

Elliott: Oh. Oh, yeah. Oh, golly. I was on the air when the roof blew off the newsroom, and there was this scramble. I’ll never forget. Actually, the lights are shaking, and I really thought the building was going to come apart. I really did at that point. And there’s a famous moment in WLOX Katrina history involving one of my coworkers, Rhonda Weidner, our morning news anchor. She and I run the air together. This is probably, of all the moments on our DVD that people all over the world have seen, this is probably in the top three that people comment on. She and I are there, and the building does literally sound like it’s shaking apart and, again, we don’t know how many people are listening to us at that point, but still you run on auto pilot, and you’re going. Rhonda stands up and says, “That’s it. We are out of here,”
and takes her mic off. And I’m sitting there, and I look up at her because I’m still sitting in the chair. I’m wondering, “Oh, what are we”—I’m looking around. “What are we going to do?” And everyone’s looking at us like, “What are we going to do?” And then we went off the air twice during the storm, I believe, for short periods of time. Coincidentally, one of the two times that we went off the air was a split second after Rhonda did that. She stands up says, “That’s it. We’re out of here,” takes off her mic, and boom, we go off the air. I’ve had thousands of people say to me in the four years since the storm that they thought the LOX, the building was swamped at that point, that that could’ve been the end of the building, you know, a slab or whatever. Fortunately that wasn’t the case, but people were scrambling, running around, trying to save equipment because the studio’s in more of a bunker, and it’s an old warehouse with cinder blocks, but the newsroom was in a newly-built kind of metal building, and that’s where we lost the roof. And so people were running and grabbing computers and grabbing equipment, and we’re on the air, and our camera people don’t know what to do. They’re looking to us, and we’re having to try to keep talking, and it got pretty dicey, very dicey. We moved into a secured area of the building at some point. A decision was made by management to put us into an area that really is like a bunker, a cinder block.

**Smith:** The green room?

**Elliott:** Yeah, the green room. And again, there may be a lot—I don’t know if there were eleven people listening and watching this at this point. Although I had so many people tell me that they were in their attic listening to us, and we were like a lifeline, which is humbling. But yeah, we were in this cinder-block bunker room, broadcasting, at that point.

**Smith:** And you were stunned and confused by the situation. Did your life flash before you?

**Elliott:** No, nothing like that. I don’t know why.

**Smith:** Just cool Dave Elliott.

**Elliott:** Well, I mean, I hate to make it sound like cool Dave Elliott, but I think you have to be. I mean, again, I don’t think everybody is. I think there were some people that were pretty scared. The question is always and has been from the day after—well, from about a month after the storm up until this second with the same fifty souls that were in there during the storm, “How many of them would be back the next time? How many would conveniently not be able to get back to the station or something?” I’ll be back.

**Smith:** So people were frightened, truly frightened.

**Elliott:** They were frightened.
Smith: By the damage to the building.

Elliott: Yeah, speechless.

Smith: Do you have anything else there that stands out in your mind? That was a long day.

Elliott: A blur.

Smith: You were there a long time.

Elliott: It was a blur.

Smith: Do you remember how early in the afternoon crews might’ve gotten back out when you started to realize the magnitude of what happened?

Elliott: Well, the storm hit, what? Landfall 7:45, 7:30, eight o’clock in the morning at the height of the storm. We started pleading with management by noon, as the winds are still howling, to let us out. I’ll tell you two very quick stories. Rhonda Weidner, again, for some reason wanted to check on her house. It must’ve been she lived not far from the station. I had a big old Yukon XL, a tank, at the station, that’s my hurricane car, I call it because I have some smaller cars, but during hurricanes, I always bring the Yukon XL out. And so she and I drove as trees, branches, on Debuys Road near the station. We were trying to get to Pass Road because she lived over by Edgewater Mall, and I’ll never forget getting on Pass Road, and later I found out it was the Biloxi Police Department. I didn’t even know they had these military vehicles almost like Bradley tanks or something. I’m not sure what they were, those amphibious things, that was flashing by us down Pass Road. There were a few police officers, and that was about it, maybe one fire truck. We’re watching electrical wires arcing. And we shouldn’t have been out. We went out, couldn’t get into her neighborhood, but she had some of her neighbors that were actually standing out on Pass Road and told her, “Rhonda, your house is OK, but you have limbs down, and the neighborhood survived. There’s no water in there.” Rebecca Powers, one of our news anchors, had—this is a mistake I made in one storm, and I don’t remember what it was, and I don’t think I’ll ever do it again. When there’s a little break, you say, “Maybe I’ll try to make it home for a little while and check on things.” Well, you can’t get back to the station. There’s a point you do that, and you’re stuck; you can’t get back to the station. You have water in your neighborhood; tree limbs are over the—so she did that, and she, of course, tells a story that’s become a famous national story, because she had to swim for her life. Her home was destroyed, turned into matchsticks, and she and her husband swam for their lives. But anyway, our promotions director, Todd Durbin, and I are both very good friends with Rebecca, and about 2:30 in the afternoon, when no one had heard from her, and we knew where she lived, we went over to her neighborhood. Again, only police officers out at that time. National Guard was just beginning to show up. So we did see some troops. We go into her neighborhood, and it looked like a tornado had hit. We’re expecting to see
bodies. Later of course, we found out a couple of people did die in that neighborhood. And we were walking over the rubble, and there were commodes over here and other personal items, but basically it was like a tornado had hit, like the world’s largest tornado. And we didn’t know that a half hour earlier our station manager, Leon Long, and our news director, Dave Vincent, had gone out and basically found Rebecca. But Todd Durbin and I thought that they had probably perished in the storm. And then we got back to the station, again the winds are howling still like probably eighty-five, ninety miles an hour at that point; it’s 2:30 in the afternoon. Then we found out that she was safe and back at the station, but we didn’t know when we left to go look for her.

Smith: So at that time you were putting people back on the street.

Elliott: Exactly, but they were given parameters. They were told, “Sure, you can go down to the end of Debuys Road, over the tracks where the Olive Garden and the Red Lobster were no more, nothing but slabs along with all of the motels.”

Smith: It was a convenient disaster to (inaudible).

Elliott: (laughter) That’s one thing about being located where we are, because you’re right over the tracks. The tracks, as we all know, is sort of the symbolic levee, if you will, the line of demarcation on storms. We’re right on the tracks, and water never crossed the tracks where we were. But we were able to venture out. Again, they told us they trusted us enough, but told us to be careful. But we started going out probably about 2:30, three o’clock in the afternoon gathering video.

Smith: At this point I want to ask you, did you happen to bring any notes about anything that you wanted to be sure that we covered today?

Elliott: No, I really didn’t, Pat. I have to be honest with you.

Smith: We’ll just trail along then, but feel free to add things that pop up that I may not know to ask you about when you see something that you think needs to be a part of the record.

Elliott: Well, I will say that I think it’s a fine line that the media, again, your obligation and responsibility is to be there. But I find it odd to be on—I’ve never been much of a, what I call “preach TV,” while everyone else is harping on the evacuation, evacuation, evacuation. I kind of purposefully don’t talk about it as much as other people do because I find it ironic to be sitting there on television telling people to evacuate, and I’ve always found that to be odd.

Smith: You’re sitting in a building—

Elliott: And I’m sitting in the—
Smith: —about a quarter of a mile from the beachfront.

Elliott: Yeah. And again I’m not sure many other people feel that same way in our business, but I’ve always found that sort of odd. So I try to do it only as much as I have to.

Smith: Well, let’s see. You had been on the air, how long, by the time you went outside?

Elliott: Well, I was on the air probably ten hours straight. We were doing, we were pulling eight-, ten-hour shifts. Again, they’re trying to marshal their resources. They’re trying to pair people up. They don’t want you out there really by yourself, so they would try to put you with another news anchor, and the weatherman, of course, was there constantly. But I had probably been on the air about eight to ten hours at that time, as I think I went on at about three in the morning.

Smith: And when did you discover the fate of your own home?

Elliott: Also, about three o’clock in the afternoon. I live in the Bayou View area of Gulfport; lived in the Bayou View area of Gulfport. I somehow got down Pass Road to Courthouse Road, parked my car, which is all I could do, in the Walgreen’s parking lot, walked about a hundred yards over fallen trees and being very careful of live electrical wires, and there’s an apartment complex down kind of on the bottom of Courthouse Road on Bayou Bernard, Brickyard Bayou, where I lived called the Racquet Club, not there anymore. Nothing but a lake; all I saw was a lake, and I knew at that moment my house was gone, had to be. Tried to go around over by Washington Avenue and the airport, which would’ve been the only other way in to my neighborhood and couldn’t even get close. Again, a lake; this was before the water began receding, of course. I knew in my heart, knew in my mind that my house was in big trouble.

Smith: And when were you actually able to get to your house the first time?

Elliott: Well, it was Monday morning of Katrina; I probably got over there Tuesday afternoon and saw the ruin. I lived in a circle, twenty-two homes on a circle, and I was number nine. It went, obviously, as you came into the circle from one to twenty-two, so I was number nine. Every house on the circle had [damage], to one degree or another, depending on where you were relative to the bayou, and my house was kind of in the back corner closest to the bayou. Every house had had water in it, and I ended up having nine feet of water in my house, so I lost the whole first floor. And I went in, and I’ll never forget this. It looked like a blender, and our refrigerator in the living room, a couch in the kitchen. Unbelievable stench that I will never forget, and I still smell sometimes some places on the Coast, actually.

Smith: And when did you let your wife know?
**Elliott:** After being on the air, they tried—Doug Walker, who is our assignment editor, he’s a management figure. They tried to give us some kind of breaks, whether it was—because we all had to take care of personal things. It’s like a fireman at work. I think TV is like, we are like an emergency responder. We’re like the police and fire department. I hope I’m not making that a little too grandiose, but I think we’re close. We have to reconcile what’s happening in your private life with your obligation in your professional life to the community. I think it was middle of the night, Wednesday, Thursday, I hadn’t talked to my wife. There was no cell service. There was no phone service. My wife’s panicking in Destin, just watching on cable TV what images were beginning to then come in of a laid-to-waste Mississippi Coast. They said, “You have twelve hours off.” We could take a twelve-hour break. I went to Destin, I managed to, and it took me about nine hours to get there where it normally does about three hours, and my wife followed me back. We had trouble getting gas. It was like a world at war. This is all a blur, too. At that time gas stations were running out of gasoline all along the Gulf, Florida. Of course, Louisiana a mess. I never went that direction. Brought her back. She walked into the house, instantly and like fell to her knees and started crying, got back in her car and drove back to Florida. She couldn’t handle it. She couldn’t stand it. She went through some pictures like a zombie, saved a few things, and then went back to Florida. So. But one good thing about being able to go to Florida is I got a cell phone while I was in Florida with an 850 area code, which gave me some access, and also she was able to call our insurance agent, call whatever business we had to do from Florida. So I was actually way ahead of the curve than everybody else on insurance adjusters and everything else, so.

**Smith:** So, where do you put up—your house is gone. You’ve got to stay in town. It’s wall-to-wall coverage. For how long did the—

**Elliott:** We stayed in the station, slept on floors.

**Smith:** You never had (inaudible) quarters after (inaudible)?

**Elliott:** No, terrible, actually. You know a lot of people, it’s like—WLOX’s little secret is we had air-conditioning, where no one else did. We also had a—

**Smith:** You had a generator?

**Elliott:** We did have a generator. It’s a whole other story about getting diesel gas down, during what was as close to martial law, and the stories I’ve heard is they came within an inch of calling martial law, actually. I don’t know if you’ve heard that, too. Our corporation brought in diesel fuel to keep the generator going, to keep our transmitter on the air so we could continue to broadcast. But we stayed in the, wherever we could find somewhere between on-the-air shifts to catch—it was hardly restful sleep, a one-hour nap here, a three-hour nap there. I had another home that didn’t have water in it that was a rental property, and I wanted to check on it, too, and it wasn’t far from the television station. I went over there. The roof was damaged. Trees were down, of course. I had a key. The people were gone; my renters. No
electricity, of course. No phone. So it didn’t do me a lot of good, but I went inside anyway, and I felt a sense of ownership in that house, even though they had a lease. So I think one time I laid down and napped on a couch there. Eventually found those people, paid them off, bought them out of their lease, and I’m in that house today.

Smith: How about that. So you, fairly quickly, had a place to go to crash.

Elliott: Yeah. I had to get that place fixed up right away and worry about my other home, primary residence, and to be on the air at the TV station ten, twelve hours a day. I requested the night shift, and they worked with me on that. So during the day I’m over, taking care of all of these things, taking a French shower. I had all this Kentwood bottled water that I was able to save over in my house, so I was taking the old wet, the washcloth and clean under the arms and wet the hair and do the shampoo in the sink in my upstairs bathroom that had been saved in my flooded house, and going back to work. And at the same time, hiring a company to gut my house, trying to get power turned on, trying to get a telephone, trying to get a repairman over, trying to get an insurance adjuster just like everyone else did, but at the same time, we were having to be on the air ten, twelve hours a day, so it was like a double whammy. It was, it was something.

Smith: And how were people who were in the station? How many people lost their home, by the way?

Elliott: I don’t know the exact number, but I think ten, a dozen.

Smith: So you had many people who had no place to go but the station.

Elliott: The station, we stayed at the station. It was Camp WLOX. And again, I think people were sleeping in chairs, on chairs, sleeping on the floor, sleeping on tables and desks, air mattresses. I think the station had brought in a couple of cots at that point. I don’t want to comment on it, but I do believe they should have more cots prior to a storm. But it was pretty rough. But at the same time there was a real camaraderie. I think that maybe men in war can relate more than anything else to the situation we were in.

Smith: Now, in the investigations of FEMA post-storm, it’s pretty clear that we were in, nearly, in a food-and-water disaster that could’ve been very terrible during that first week after Katrina. How were you guys eating?

Elliott: We were eating pretty well. The station had under contract a local restaurateur who had a lot of food. I don’t even know where. The food kept coming, hot food. But I’ll tell you very quickly. Here’s what I do. Two days before the storm, since we were—I’ll rewind very quickly. I’m kind of a strange guy. I throw things like five boxes of granola bars in my car. I throw a bag of apples in my car. Even though the station had water, I still had about five cases of water in my car. I have
everything from rope and hammers and screwdrivers and flashlights; I have it all in my car.

Smith: You’re a one-man disaster (inaudible).

Elliott: I mean, I don’t know who else does it at the station, but I’m very odd about that. Again, I even had rope in my car in case—you never know what’s going to happen. So I had a lot of it, but it was mostly snacks we were living on, but we had somebody cooking for us at the station, believe it or not, for the whole, during the storm and probably for two weeks afterwards.

Smith: Well, now you’re an on-the-air personality. You didn’t lose your clothes upstairs in your house? Other people had to have lost their clothes.

Elliott: They did.

Smith: How did they function? Rebecca went back on.

Elliott: Well, they wore the same things on the air every day; I guess it didn’t matter at that point. And I really didn’t, we were wearing wet suits, wearing wet pants because we’re still—if we’re not anchoring on the air, we’re out kind of covering the Coast. But our corporation at that time then began flying in crews from other TV stations in the region, everywhere from Lake Charles, all the way up to Toledo, Ohio, and Alabama and all over. We couldn’t have done it without them. They came in from all over and went out and did stories, and came back, and we interviewed them on the set. But we were wearing—how often we shaved, what our hair looked like was really the least of our concerns.

Smith: So somehow all of you—

Elliott: We even wore ball caps on the air. We wore ball caps on the air. I mean, that’s the point we were at.

Smith: It all got hashed together, somehow.

Elliott: Yes, somehow.

Smith: And people kept getting information.

Elliott: Yeah.

Smith: Talk to me a little bit about the, about Al Showers’ situation. When did you become aware of what had happened to the Bay St. Louis office over there?

Elliott: All right. To be honest with you, I didn’t know probably till a week afterwards about that situation. I knew he was in desperate straits. I mean, for God’s
sake, he was at ground zero in Hancock County, so I knew. But I have to be honest with you. I really didn’t think about it. People weren’t talking about it until after things had settled down a little bit, and it dawned on me suddenly that we hadn’t heard from Al. So I figured, “Oh, Lord.” Then I started asking questions and got the information about Al Showers, but no one came out and told us what his situation was. And then, of course, everyone began to think about that and talk about that.

Smith: Well, how were you-all deciding what got covered in that—it was many, many days after the storm that you were on the air all the time.

Elliott: Oh, there is no plan.

Smith: Couple weeks.

Elliott: There’s no plan. It’s whatever you—I mean, you go out. If you grab a camera after an event like Katrina, and you go out for two hours, you’re going to get twenty stories. And you would just come back, very little editing. Everything was kind of raw and real. We again, on the air, would be told in our ear pieces who the next person on the phone was or what guest was coming onto the set to be interviewed. By that time there was a real FEMA presence and a real presence from the State, so we began to get a lot of federal and state perspectives and guests, along with the mayor, again the mayors, the supervisors, the police, the fire, emergency management directors, et cetera.

Smith: And so you feel that you were pretty free, from a reporting standpoint, pretty free to just go find what needed to be found?

Elliott: Oh, yes. Again, you would just go out, and again they’d say, “You have ninety minutes to go out. You have two hours to go out. Find people’s stories.” And they were everywhere. The people’s stories, you couldn’t miss them. You shouldn’t be in television if you can’t find stories in a situation like that.

Smith: Do any of your colleagues come to mind as having really found something that still stands out that maybe surprised you?

Elliott: Well, we have a reporter named Steve Phillips who went through East Biloxi, which was an area that was just particularly hard hit, and Steve did a very dramatic, very spontaneous drive through these areas that had been reduced to rubble. And just in a spontaneous way from his heart described what he saw, and that ran eighteen minutes, twenty-four minutes. We didn’t care at that point. I mean, here we’re in a business where the average news story runs a minute and a half, and we were running things that ran eight minutes, and ten minutes, and twelve minutes. Again part of it is you’re on the air twenty-four/seven, but it was compelling. It wasn’t eight minutes anyone could turn away from.
**Smith:** You mentioned that you had some frustrations with the generator, with keeping the generator going and keeping the station on air.

**Elliott:** Well, no, we didn’t really. We fought and our corporation fought. We had a famous—and I’m not so sure how well known this story is, and maybe Dave Vincent should’ve told this story, Pat, where the department of transportation, I believe actually—and I think there maybe even were guns involved in this—pulled over a tractor-trailer that we were bringing in diesel fuel to run our transmitter and all of our generators, and then eventually after a few well-placed calls, we were able to do that in a freer way. But again, you’re getting close to this un-American situation, that when I used to work, it was almost martial law kind of situation, and it was pretty dicey, but we eventually were able to work out a deal on that.

**Smith:** Can you describe your working relationship with other broadcasters and, say, the *Sun Herald*, during this crisis? These are competitors. They’re going after the same advertising dollar. Do you have any reflection about that?

**Elliott:** We worked with the *Sun Herald*. I think you kind of put that aside. In the, I would say, in the first five days we actually would have their people on the air. They couldn’t, obviously—I mean, I don’t know when they started publishing and were able to, but they don’t have the luxury of real time like we do. So we actually had a pretty good relationship with them for the first four or five days, and then I think it was kind of every man for himself. (laughter) You go out and find your stories and, “Good luck. We’ll work on our stories, and we’ll try to beat you.”

**Smith:** You had limitations on your information gathering, storm day. Do you recall any particular obstacles that reporters faced in the days after the storm?

**Elliott:** It’s all about access at that point. There are areas you just can’t get to. There are officials who have a million things to worry about, who may not want to stop and talk to you, who may not be available to come into the station or may not be able to do a telephone interview with you, live, on the air, because they, too, are dealing with their own situations and emergencies, and things like that. So there was beginning to be a National Guard issue of being able to get into certain areas. There were obvious just infrastructure problems of roads being out and wires being down and trees being down, so I would say the only problems were kind of physical from the storm itself, not really anyone being uncooperative.

**Smith:** Did you-all have some sort of identification system? When we started coming back into this campus, we had to pass through National Guardsmen with some kind of a voucher. Did you-all have—

**Elliott:** Oh, yeah.

**Smith:** —some sort of a pass system?
Elliott: We sure did. And this is another story I tell about, I guess people could say God bless the Kansas policemen that came down here, and the Missouri policemen, and the Illinois Highway Patrol, and all these law enforcers from other parts of the country. It’s hard to actually deal with those folks. We have no problem with the Biloxi Police Department. We had no problem with the Gulfport Police Department and the Harrison County Sheriff’s Department, and even at one point after a while with the National Guard. But we actually had some problems with some of these out-of-state law enforcement agencies, and they were tough, I thought. I don’t want to get into some stories. And the federal people were difficult, too.

Smith: So you got access but you—it had not been an untethered one.

Elliott: We had to break a few rules. We had to talk our way in and out of things. Again, I’m going to liken it to a war correspondent, I guess. We are trying to get into a village or a sector, and it was a lot of that.

Smith: Let’s shift back and talk a little bit about your personal situation again. How do you decide whether—Rebecca’s story, I think, became pretty well-known.

Elliott: Sure.

Smith: A day or two after the storm. We knew that she’d nearly been killed. What goes in your mind about whether a reporter’s personal trauma in the storm, loss of housing, becomes a part of the story just going to look for the same story that someone else has gotten it.

Elliott: We actually began to kind of feature some of our personal stories at one point. I’ve never been very comfortable with that, personally, my personal stories. And I don’t think it was because I didn’t want to talk about it because it was too painful. I have never really liked that kind of journalism, so I didn’t (inaudible).

Elliott: So I didn’t like doing it. I wasn’t that comfortable with it, that really talking about myself.

Smith: How do you decide that?

Elliott: We actually began to kind of feature some of our personal stories at one point. I’ve never been very comfortable with that, personally, my personal stories. And I don’t think it was because I didn’t want to talk about it because it was too painful. I have never really liked that kind of journalism, so I didn’t (inaudible).

Elliott: So I didn’t like doing it. I wasn’t that comfortable with it, that really talking about myself.

Smith: So that we can know what’s going on behind the scenes, you’re a face on television that most of us see, and we’ll say this is a sympathetic face because he’s been here for a long time, and we know he knows the community, must have a lot of friends, know a lot of things that happened to people. But what’s actually going on with you? You’ve lost your house, or if the house is a mess, it’s going to have to be completely redone. You’ve got a child, and your wife is off at Destin. What happened with your son with regard to school? Did he enroll in school somewhere else?
Elliott: Well, I was convinced—again, this is August 29. I was convinced they were not going to reopen school till the end of the year. And I think that was kind of a conventional wisdom. My son actually enrolled at Niceville, Florida, High School and a friend of his, also from the Coast whose parents—I don’t want to say begged us but—asked us if their son—because he was to end up being the valedictorian there, not my son, but the friend at Gulfport High, and he was working on his—he was driven, went and lived with my wife and son in Destin. And they both enrolled in Niceville High School, went for a week. Superintendent of Gulfport Schools, Glenn East, finally told me, convinced me that by—and I think the day was October 15; I’m not exactly sure when they were finally able to open the schools—that those schools were going to damn the torpedoes. They’re going to get those schools open no matter what. And he convinced met that that was going to happen. And sure enough they stuck to that, so my son came back and went back to Gulfport High School at the time.

Smith: We had some schools that were destroyed. Gulfport High School was not destroyed.

Elliott: Yeah, so.

Smith: Their big issue was probably, when can the Red Cross clear the building? They were using that; they were a Red Cross shelter.

Elliott: Yeah, and teachers who had lost homes. What were they going to do with the faculty? That was a big problem there, too.

Smith: So you brought your family back to the rental house that you had moved into, bought out the lease on.

Elliott: (laughter) Yes.

Smith: And so if you could, talk a little bit about that.

Elliott: My wife stayed in Destin.

Smith: Did she? She just was too affected by it?

Elliott: She was very emotional about the whole thing. She has a business over there, too, and so there are other factors in that. But she stayed in Destin for a few months.

Smith: And talk a little bit about your experience with insurance. Did you have flood insurance on your house?

Elliott: Thank God, I had flood insurance on my house. It was a lifesaver. And also, because I was able to go to Florida, as I said earlier, the three days or so after the storm and make phone calls, I think I was one of the first people to have an adjuster at
my house. And I met him over at the house just about a week after the storm, and it was amazing people hadn’t, as we found out later, didn’t even see an adjuster for weeks, maybe even a month. I don’t know. And I did have flood insurance, and it financially saved my life, really.

**Smith:** Without asking you to name figures—a lot of people have had disputes over whether there was wind damage that they should have been compensated for, in addition to flood damage. Sometimes the value of the policies really don’t add up to what’s been lost. Did you have any doubts about the way your personal property was being accounted for?

**Elliott:** Maybe I’m the only one on the Coast. No. I actually thought the adjuster, I know, God bless the federal taxpayers for the National Flood Insurance Program, but I actually thought they were very generous with me. My wind, I thought they were barely fair.

**Smith:** So that tends to be the big, the big grief is—

**Elliott:** No, not even grief.

**Smith:** Yours was obviously above the water line.

**Elliott:** Sure. I thought they were just fair enough to be considered, to get some kind of recognition as humanitarians, but they were the—the National Flood Insurance Program and the adjuster who came to my home, I thought, was very generous. I was underinsured. That’s one of the big stories that a lot of people don’t talk about; uninsured is one thing, but there were a lot of people who were underinsured, and no one checks their insurance policy. We do now. How often do you update content value? Nobody sees the small print. So I was underinsured, but I still came out OK.

**Smith:** And did you have occasion to, as many people did, to deal with FEMA on any sort of housing issues, yourself?

**Elliott:** I wouldn’t have, and I didn’t. I turned down an SBA loan. I didn’t want to do business with the government.

**Smith:** Did you participate in the Mississippi Development Authority grants at all?

**Elliott:** No. As much as I say I don’t want to do business with the government, if I didn’t have flood insurance, and I didn’t want to lose the equity in my house, which is what I think that grant program protected in people was really the equity they had in their home. You can’t afford to take a loss like that. And I would’ve taken advantage of that, but I didn’t have to, no.

**Smith:** So you were made whole by the (inaudible).
**Elliott:** By the federal taxpayers.

**Smith:** Does anything else stand out in your mind about your personal situation that you think would sort of help us understand what people generally were going through who worked at the station who were responsible for sort of getting us through the information that we had to have to bounce back?

**Elliott:** I think it’s pure adrenalin. I think it’s pure obligation. I think it’s, you know, you’re either in this, in the right business, or you’re not. I think some people really had difficulty. I think some people in not only Katrina but in other storms aren’t there, and it always kind of seems to be sort of the same people, and there will be no names mentioned here today. But I think everybody, again—and the question would be the next time—I think, surprisingly 95 percent of the people that were there would do it again. I think there’s 5 percent, though, that would not.

**Smith:** How did your son adjust to his changed circumstances? He lost a house, and he’s into another house, and there’s some destruction?

**Elliott:** He was remarkable. I’m going to have to give him that. I think his whole class, his whole generation at Gulfport—he was a junior, so he didn’t have the lost senior year that so many of these students kind of had in 2005. He graduated a year later, so it wasn’t quite so dramatic for him. And you know what? I think there’s a part of him—I found out a couple of years later—that felt a little guilty that he wasn’t there for the storm or like he missed something by not being there for the storm. I mean it’s nothing like he’s going to carry his emotional baggage his whole life, but he and I’ve talked about it, and I think there was a part of him that kind of wished he would’ve been here for the storm. I think he feels like he missed out on something.

**Smith:** When you’re looking back on this—well, let me ask you this question. The station obviously rebuilt in the same location. It patched the damage up, and a few months later it’s back, I guess, the same as it was before the storm. Was there any internal discussion, debate about whether that was a good idea to stay there half a mile from the beach or less than half a mile from the beach?

**Elliott:** Well, among the workforce, among the soldiers, I think there was. I personally think it would be a smart business decision to move away from that location. It wasn’t going to happen. I knew that. I think the newsroom, which is not a very fortified metal building, is probably not a good idea, and I’m sure 100 percent of my coworkers agree with that. I think in the best interest of the company, they should move.

**Smith:** Bad economy to think about, too, though. (laughter) Let me ask you to think about your worst memory of the storm, episode, or the immediate response to the storm. What’s the worst thing that comes to your mind when you think about Hurricane Katrina?
**Elliott:** I think the worst thing was really my wife’s reaction. She was crestfallen. She was heartbroken. She was an emotional wreck. She lost her home. I don’t look at it quite as emotionally. That’s personally the worst thing was the way my wife was so devastated by what had happened to our home. For me it was what had happened to the Coast. I knew there are people who thought, “Oh, we’ll be up. We’ll pull ourselves up by our bootstraps, dust ourselves off, and life goes on.” And I knew better once I had surveyed the Coast. I felt the Coast was on an ascension, sort of a momentum, so I felt horrible about the community and the Coast, about losing everything. I’ve always been a south-of-the-tracks kind of guy. I’m not a big north-of-the-interstate guy. So I feel horrible about what’s happened or hasn’t happened now south of Pass Road, if you will, or within a mile of the beach. So I felt a real loss for the community, the community I’d grown to love. I mean, I feel like I’m a lifetime Coast resident. I feel sorry for a few of my coworkers because I think those that weren’t there maybe feel a little bad about it. I’m always going to be there, though.

**Smith:** What’s the worst frustration of the recovery four years later? Speak as a citizen now and not necessarily a news guy, just a citizen. You live here. What’s the worst frustration of the recovery in the last four years, as far as you’re concerned?

**Elliott:** Oh, wow. I think it’s the insurance industry putting profits ahead of people, government being unwilling, unable to play hard-ball with an industry that—although I understand the whole risk of living in a vulnerable area. The most frustrating thing for me really, as I said, has kind of been the lack of redevelopment, Renaissance, close to the beach. That’s been the most frustrating thing to me.

**Smith:** And if you look back on this experience, what stands out as the best memory? Everything has got bad and good to it. What’s something that really gives you an up to remember?

**Elliott:** Well, I know it sounds corny. It’s people. I’ll just tell a very quick story. I went into my home. By the time I finally got into my neighborhood where I know at least ten out of the twenty-two people were in their attics as the water was lapping at the attic door, some of them people in their seventies. As I’m wandering down my street, and I see some of my neighbors wandering around the street like zombies, I had a woman about seventy-five years old, who was one of those people in the attic during the storm with water probably up to her ankles and not an ax to go through the roof, who said to me, “Dave, let me know if there’s anything I can do for you.” “Dave, let me know if there’s anything I can do for you.” I was a forty-eight-year-old, able-bodied, old-fashioned, white man, and here’s this seventy-five-year-old woman who looked like she had just been through it all—and she had—as I was anything that she could do for me.

**Smith:** Do you know her name?

**Elliott:** I don’t, actually.
Smith: Someone on the street there.

Elliott: Yeah.

Smith: That you recognized from your street.

Elliott: Yeah.

Smith: Do you have any personal or professional lessons learned from this experience? What’s changed with you personally or professionally as a result of Katrina?

Elliott: I’m going to be very honest. And I don’t know if this even answers your question. If I was twenty-six years old, I’d move away from the Coast. But again, I don’t know if that answers your question.

Smith: Why?

Elliott: I’m not as optimistic about recovery as some people might be. Plus I think that it’s an old cliché; it’s not a matter of if, but it’s a matter of when. There’s another storm out there. And Gustav, I was covering stories, and here’s a storm that goes into Houston, and I go into a neighborhood where there’s eight feet of water, and Highway 90 sort of washed out. I think the Coast—and no one’s talking about this. But I think there’s an emotional effect on this Coast, which I’m not comfortable with, and I see it in my coworkers, and I see it in people, residual kind of emotional boomerang kind of effect on this Coast, and that bothers me a lot. And I just think I would move if I wasn’t so well established on this Coast.

Smith: Anything professionally that you can think of that’s changed in your mind about how you do your work or the importance of your work?

Elliott: Oh, I believe in the importance of my work. I’ve always felt—again, I was never one to think that we were anything other than emergency responders. I think we are. I think we always have been, and I still think now that that was reinforced by our Katrina experience, that we’re the link. Here again, I don’t know how many people told me in the middle of the night they’re listening on their little, old, battery-operated television or on a transistor radio. I mean, how 1960s that is. We were their lifeline. We were their link to the world, and that’s a humbling experience to me, and I take that very seriously. And I’ve said it before and I’ll say that I’ll be there the next time and the time after that. But I don’t think I’ve really changed my professional point of view of my responsibility.

Smith: What will we wish we had talked about when we switch the microphone off that we’ve not talked about?

Elliott: You know, I can’t think of anything, Pat. I really can’t. I can’t.
Smith: What will your great-grandchildren want to know about your experience of this that we haven’t talked about?

Elliott: Hm, my great-grandchildren, what will they want to know?

Smith: They’ll hear your voice. What had you wished you had talked about?

Elliott: About this experience. I think they maybe would think, “Are you sure you weren’t scared?” And I’m going to say it again, “I wasn’t scared.” I was worried. I think there’s a distinction between being scared and being worried. I was actually more worried about my coworkers than I was about myself. I saw looks on people’s faces and still see them today, actually, if you want to know the truth. But I imagine my grandkids, they would say, “Come on. You had to be scared.” And, “How in the world can you find it exciting?” And, A, I wasn’t scared and, B, I did find it exciting.

Smith: OK. Anything else?

Elliott: No, I can’t think of anything, Pat.

Smith: Well, thank you so much for your time.

Elliott: OK, hope it was useful.

Smith: I believe it was. Thank you.

(end of interview)