Mississippi Oral History Program

Hurricane Katrina Oral History Project

An Oral History

with

Deborah Sledge

Interviewer:  Catherine Price

Volume 1101
2007
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AN ORAL HISTORY

with

DEBORAH SLEDGE

This is an interview for the Mississippi Oral History Project of the University of Southern Mississippi Hurricane Katrina Project. The interview is with Deborah Sledge and is taking place on July 18, 2007. The interviewer is Catherine Price.

Price: This is an interview for a study conducted by me, Cathie Price, from the Department of Tourism Management at The University of Southern Mississippi. Will you please state your name, as the person being interviewed, and spell it for me?


Price: OK. And you are an employee currently at?

Sledge: The Inn on the Hill.

Price: And this is the same place you were employed at the time of [Hurricane] Katrina?

Sledge: Yes, ma’am.

Price: OK. And this is taking place on April 18, [2007], at 10 a.m. in the morning in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, at the Inn on the Hill. I’m just going to review some of this. And thank you very much for taking the time and talking to me because your knowledge and insights are, as I said, what will make my study really effective. The purpose is to increase an awareness of the roles of hotels in hurricane crisis and to develop an emergency management plan. I’m going to ask you about your personal and hotel background, your Katrina experience, and your thoughts about Katrina two years after. As you talk about each of these, I would like you to focus on what was different from your routine tasks and responsibilities. How did that change what you did on a day-to-day basis? And try to think of this in terms of the property, the physical property, the staff, and the guests. I’m also interested in what you did and how you felt physically and emotionally and professionally through this experience. I have already reviewed with you your opportunity to review the transcripts, and I think you have received a copy of the questions in advance. I will not be following those after we get through the preliminary questions in that specific order, but it gives you an idea of the types of things that I’m thinking in terms of, and if I need to follow up with some of those that we don’t get to, I will. Can you tell us where you were born?
Sledge: I was born in Laurel, Mississippi.

Price: OK. And when were you born?

Sledge: January the twenty-fifth of 1975.

Price: OK. And what’s your father’s name?

Sledge: Clarence W. Sledge.

Price: And your mother’s name.

Sledge: Her maiden name?

Price: Either way.

Sledge: Carol Ann Sledge.

Price: OK. Where did you grow up?

Sledge: In Wiggins, Mississippi.

Price: In Wiggins, Mississippi. OK. What city do you live in at this time?

Sledge: I live in Forrest County; I live in Hattiesburg, Mississippi.

Price: Hattiesburg, OK. How long have you lived here?

Sledge: Ten years now.

Price: OK. Because family is such an important part of surviving a crisis, can you describe your family, spouse, children, dependents, pets?

Sledge: Well, like, now? Describe them as of now, or then?

Price: Then, well, at the time of Katrina.

Sledge: Oh, it was really just unexplainable. I mean, I have three kids, and it was just kind of hard. But you know, we had freezers full of meat, and we had big coolers of ice. And the lines, like, at these places was long; you couldn’t get in Walgreen’s.

Price: Was this before Katrina or during?

Sledge: This was during Katrina.
Price: OK. Well, just tell me; you had three children. Did you have a husband at home?

Sledge: Yeah. He was there with us, too.

Price: OK. And do you have any other dependents, or where were your parents?

Sledge: No. My mom and daddy’s deceased.

Price: OK. So you didn’t have to worry about them.

Sledge: My brother had came up; he lived in Wiggins. His family was at my house during Katrina, but they was just coming up because I was cooking on a Sunday. You know, and so they just knew; my brother kept saying he just knew it was going to be a bad hurricane. So he just said, “Well, since we coming, we just going to bring clothes and stay.” So he came, and they stayed. And then my sister, I have a sister live out in Lamar County; she came because everybody was going to meet at my house to eat that Sunday anyway. So after all that, everybody just got stuck there during the hurricane. So everybody got stuck at my house; that’s the way it was. And basically, like I said, during the hurricane, I really sit on my porch.

Price: So you weren’t at the hotel.

Sledge: Not the day of Katrina, mm-mm, I was at home. I came, like, maybe two days after the hurricane.

Price: OK, great. So you weren’t here when they were making the preparations for securing the building.

Sledge: Mm-mm.

Price: That sort of thing. You were not here during Katrina, and so about two days after, you came to the property. And were you able to go home every night?

Sledge: Mm-mm. Well, when I came to the property, we stayed because, I mean, it was bad because there was a lot of trees down. And I was a housekeeper at the time; I was a housekeeper. And we had, it was, like, me and this lady’s no longer employed here, Miss Mary Keys(?) and her daughter, which is Martha Keys. It was just, like, us three and Miss Lisa. And we had to go out and clean rooms, like, just us four. We had military guys everywhere, and we all had to try to pitch in and help clean rooms. We did linen at night back there. I’m talking about, it was just—oh, it was really, really something.

Price: Well, now, so you arrived when there was no power.

Sledge: No. When I made it, it was power.
Price: OK. So it would have been maybe—they were telling me that the power came on that Thursday.

Sledge: Yeah.

Price: So during your whole experience, you had power.

Sledge: Yeah. We tried to get everything back together, but the bad thing about it with the girls was, a lot of them couldn’t get to work because it was trees everywhere, and you know, they just needed someone here, like, to be on staff all the time. So that’s why I had to stay. So I got my kids, and we came and stayed, which it was a good thing because they didn’t get my power at home back on until, like, three weeks later.

Price: OK. So you were better off here.

Sledge: Right, than at my house.

Price: Now, just to back up a little bit, how long have you worked in the hotel industry?

Sledge: Oh, this hotel?

Price: Any hotel.

Sledge: Well, I worked the Hampton Inn, like, four years. And I worked, well, I’ve been here three and a half years.

Price: OK. And then what’s your current position?

Sledge: I’m director of housekeeping, now.

Price: OK. And what other positions have you held while working in any hotel?

Sledge: Just a regular housekeeper and inspectress. I went from inspectress; then I went to director of housekeeping.

Price: And we’ve already talked about your current employer and how long you’ve been here. What are your long-term career goals?

Sledge: Well, really, it’s just to work and just, I love what I’m doing now. You know, I love it, and I think I’ll probably stay in hotels for, probably until I retire because I love the hotel work; I really do. And just to live to see my babies get grown; that’s all I really—that’s my goal is to take care of my kids and make sure they finish school and go to college, and I’m all right with the rest of it.
Price: OK. I’m going to stop for just one second. (brief interruption) OK. Now that we’ve really gotten the background information, I’m just going to ask you to start with any part of the Katrina experience you want to talk about. Some of it you were starting with your personal before you came here, and that’s fine. Or you can start with when you arrived here or any communications you had with the hotel, wherever you want to start. So just tell me everything that you can remember about this.

Sledge: Well, after we got through with that day, we was able—didn’t no trees really fall in my yard. So I was able to come; me and my brother and my sister, we was wanting to go and see what all had happened because like I said, we sit on my porch the whole while it went on, which if my mama was alive, we probably couldn’t have did it. But you know, we sit on the porch, and I said, “Well, let’s go to the hotel to see if we can get some ice.” So when we got up here, the power was out. Now, I did come the day of Katrina, and we came up here that day. We came later.

Price: (Inaudible)

Sledge: Yes. I’m talking about it wasn’t no lights nowhere. I’m talking about Hattiesburg was just blank anyway. And I talked to Miss Angie right there, and I asked her was the machines working. And she was like, “No. The machines is not working. We’re trying to run off generators.” So I walked on through the lobby; it was, like, one dim light on, and people was trying to use their Internet service, and they wasn’t nothing working; nothing. And they was still trying they best to check people in; they was trying to be good with the guests. And Miss Angie was actually back there cooking. I want to say she had a candle lit back there because I went in the back, and she had a candle back there. And she was cooking by candlelight.

Price: My goodness.

Sledge: And she had, like, jugs of water; she had jugs of water is what she was cooking with. And as I walked through, I was just looking, like, “Oh, my God.” And it was real, real hot that day; it was real hot, and it was just bad. And so I know I stayed up here and talked to everybody for at least thirty minutes, and it was just ridiculous. And everybody was trying to figure out where were they going to get ice from up here and water. And Miss Mary told me that they had been toting water from the pool to flush the guests’ toilets. And I said, “Oh, Lord!” I mean, it was just, it was something. It really was something, but they was using—they was getting—they was flushing toilets. They was filling buckets before I even got here to stay. They was cleaning rooms out of—they would take water and fill up the sinks and fill up the tubs, and they was, like, cleaning tubs, toting water back and forth from the pool. That’s a lot what they was doing. And then when they finally started giving out water, they started giving—the guests came first, of course. The guests started getting water. By the guests getting water, they was able to take baths in small bits of water, but they was still getting a bath and stuff like that. But it was just—and I know for a fact, like I say, I went to Sam’s, me and my sister-in-law, and well, Forrest General wasn’t letting
people in. And we went to Sam’s, and we got to Sam’s about eight o’clock that morning, and we wind up getting in Sam’s door about seven o’clock that night.

**Price:** My goodness.

**Sledge:** Yes, ma’am. That’s how long it was, and we was out there, and it was hot, and everybody was dehydrated. You looking at drink machines; they wasn’t hooked up because no one had power. And the man come out, like, every hour and give out maybe twenty bottles of water. And if you wasn’t that close to the line, he would run out before he get to you. So it was just really something.

**Price:** What did you need at Sam’s that would make you wait that long?

**Sledge:** Water. We was trying to get water; we was trying to get charcoal because no one had power. So that was the only way we had means of cooking was by grill. So we was trying to get charcoal; they had stuff like snacks for the kids, and, like, Vienna sausages, little stuff like that that your kids could eat because I was OK long as my kids was OK. That’s the way; that’s why I stood in the line as long as I did, and I knew I had to stand there because I didn’t want my babies to be without food.

**Price:** And did they still have all of the things you needed?

**Sledge:** Well, by the time we got in there, no. By the time we got in there, they had limited it down; you could only get, like, one case of water. You could only get, like, one case of canned goods. You could only get, like, one small bag of charcoal. Everything had narrowed down because the line was so long, and they was letting people come in and get what they wanted at first, but they saw that the store—I mean, it was so many people until it just wasn’t enough. So that’s when the manager came out and said he was going to put a limit on everything that you could get. So you just couldn’t get everything you wanted. You just had to get what you needed, and you had to get out.

**Price:** OK. Now, did you not realize that the hurricane was going to be potentially this bad, so you really didn’t do any advance preparations? Or did you?

**Sledge:** Well, now, I always would just keep a lot of canned foods at my house and stuff like that. My mama have always told us we would have one that bad. She would always tell us that, but we never just really—we was, like, “OK, yeah, right.” We always said we’re going to get them, but we never do. But I always keep my pantry full; I always do that. But by me having other, my brother and his wife, and they brought my niece and my nephew, and then my sister was at my house. That’s why we had to go so we could have enough for everybody. But just for my family, I was more than prepared for the hurricane. I was more than prepared because I always keep jugs of water; I always keep stuff like that. So I knew, and when I knew it was getting closer, and I was like, “We going to get a lot of it.” So I said, “We better start doing what we need to do.” And then when my brother called me and told me, “We just
going to stay on at your house,” he said, “because if it hit the Gulf Coast, it’s going to be badder in Wiggins, so we’re going to come that way; we going to just stay there.” And I say, “OK.” So like I said, when he came, they stayed, and it was a good thing they did because a tree did fall in his house.

**Price:** Oh, my goodness.

**Sledge:** An apple tree fell, but he wasn’t able to go home for, like, what? Four days, because, like, they had the highways blocked off, and they got this tree cut down I think, like, the third or fourth day. So many trees laying on the wires and stuff until they couldn’t get through to go home. So everybody was just stuck where they was, and they had to stay there.

**Price:** So did they leave the same time you came to work?

**Sledge:** Yeah. They was leaving to go home, and I was coming up here.

**Price:** OK. So then when you came just that first day, was it the day of Katrina or the day after?

**Sledge:** I came that day of Katrina.

**Price:** So really, almost, you would have come in the middle of the storm?

**Sledge:** Well, it just soon as the storm was over, after it had blew over, we got in the car because we was sitting on the porch, and we heard all this tin falling, and trees; you could hear the trees cracking because we sitting outside listening to this. And you know, I’m like, “We going to need ice,” because the power just automatically went out. The power went out on my side of town first. So it was, like, “Power out. OK. We going to need ice.” So what we did was we came up here to get some ice, after, right after the hurricane, after it was over.

**Price:** What time of day would you say that was?

**Sledge:** It was right at dark. It was right at dark when we made it up here, and like I [said], the hotel was black when we come up the hill.

**Price:** So that’s why it was so dark when you were here and Miss [Angie] was cooking with the candlelight. I don’t—

**Sledge:** Miss Angie, yeah, she was cooking by candle.

**Price:** Did the staff seem to be organized?

**Sledge:** Yes! Yes, ma’am.
Price: Not in a panic?

Sledge: Mm-mm. Everybody was getting along, and Miss Lisa was talking to the guests, and everybody was, like, they was acting just like the lights was on. They was acting like the lights was on; it was guests checking in just like the computers was working. They had a generator going, but like I say, the lights was real dim because it was pulling so much. But the hotel was actually functioning just like normal. It was just like normal, and that was amazing to see because I’m thinking once we get up here, it was going to be (inaudible). But no, it was not. And we had guests walking around just like they normally would do, and I was looking like, “Oh, my God, we ain’t got power or nothing up here at work.” And we had guests still laughing and talking. We had—I think, I want to say some of them was barbecuing outside. Stuff like that was going on. Miss Angie back there cooking just like she had lights everywhere. And I’m looking like, “Oh, Lord! Look at this.”

Price: So then you left and you went back home.

Sledge: Um-hm.

Price: So you want to start telling me from the day you arrived, how things were different? Or what was happening?

Sledge: Yeah, we was real, real short of staff because, like I say, a lot of the girls couldn’t get to work. So what I would do was leave the kids up here in the room, and I would come down. It was three; it was me, Miss Mary and Martha.

Price: Now, were all of them in the housekeeping department?

Sledge: Um-hm, we was all in the housekeeping department.

Price: So, y’all were experienced, at least, in what you needed to do.

Sledge: Um-hm. So me and Martha would clean maybe fifty rooms together.

Price: Fifty?

Sledge: Yeah, (laughter) we would clean fifty together, and we didn’t have nobody to come in for laundry. So we would have to go down there at night. We would clean the rooms in the daytime and go down at night in the laundry and wash the linen.

Price: For that many rooms?

Sledge: Um-hm, yeah.
Price: Now, how was the cleaning of the rooms different from how you normally cleaned the rooms? Did you do every single thing that you always did, or because there were so many people around, were you not able to do everything?

Sledge: We did it. We was tired, but we did it. We did it. But you had some guests just wanted, just sheets because they knew we was kind of stressed out and tired, but we never showed it. It was all about making the guests happy; so that’s what we had to do no matter how tired we was. Everybody kept a smile on their face. And then the guests was, like, “I mean, y’all so amazing to be out doing this, helping.” You know, “We got to take care of y’all, just what we here to do, even if we do have to go and wash sheets at night. So what?” We didn’t care about staying down there till twelve o’clock, washing sheets, and then everything really just fell in place for us.

Price: Did you run out of anything? Did you have enough supplies?

Sledge: Oh, yes. Miss Lisa would—oh, yes. Then Miss Lisa was over housekeeping. She would order up enough of everything. And when I tell you everything, she would order enough of everything, but we never knew why she always kept that much of everything back there. But then it all came in handy.

Price: And it lasted throughout the entire time?

Sledge: Yes. Towels, we didn’t run out because we was washing them at night. Sheets, we didn’t run out. We had new ones we could easily go pull out, wash them, and if they wanted us to give them to them, we gave them to them so they could make up they own beds, or if you wanted service, we would come in and just clean your room for you. Sometime I know we may have got to some people like at three o’clock that day, four o’clock that day, but we still cleaned it; if they wanted the room clean, we cleaned them.

Price: You said the guests were helpful. Were any of them difficult to deal with?

Sledge: No.

Price: None.

Sledge: Mm-mm, we didn’t have none, even the military guys. I’m talking about everybody; it was like everybody came together like one family and just realized, “OK. We stuck here; we got to make this work, and everybody get along with everybody.” People that was hard to get along with even before the hurricane, they bowed down like we did, and everybody got along just like one big family out here.

Price: Are the people that worked here during the hurricane and the people that didn’t, is there a different bond or relationship between?
Sledge: Yeah, because the ones that was here know what we went through to just get through it. But now a lot of the girls I don’t even think—I think I’m the only one still here behind it.

Price: Really?

Sledge: Um-hm.

Price: That was in the housekeeping department?

Sledge: And Miss Lisa.

Price: OK. What—

Sledge: And Miss Alene(?) and Miss Pam. But Miss Alene had a tree in her yard, so it was like, five, six days, maybe seven days before she even got to come back to work. Miss Pam the same way, Miss Pam’s been here from, I think, when the hotel was another name, she was here. And she couldn’t come because didn’t nobody—everybody’s gas was running low. I knew they had sent Brad to—it was a guy named Brad; he was working in the maintenance department. They sent him to Jackson to get some gas. He had to go all the way to Jackson to get some gas.

Price: My goodness.

Sledge: He went to Jackson to get gas, and he went to Jackson and got the gas. And I think it was, like, two big barrels of gas, two big barrels. He went; he come back with the gas, and he made sure everybody had gas in their cars and stuff like that.

Price: The staff or the guests?

Sledge: The guests, too.

Price: Really?

Sledge: Yeah.

Price: He was giving gas to the guests.

Sledge: If they needed gas, and they was trying to, like, get somewhere in a hurry or whatever, he was giving them gas.

Price: Now, what about the food portion? They fed you while you were here?

Sledge: Um-hm. You would eat, well, in the morning time, breakfast. And then she would cook at five. Everybody would go eat supper or whatever.
Price: And there was enough food?

Sledge: Oh, yeah.

Price: And the staff ate after everybody else, or how’d they do that?

Sledge: What she would do was, Miss Angie cooked enough, and what she would do was, as soon as she get through cooking, she would let the guests eat. And then when the guests ate, then she would call the staff in, tell them that the guests has done cleared out, and, “Y’all come and eat.” And we would go and eat.

Price: Do you know if she sat food aside so there would be plenty for the staff?

Sledge: Yeah, she cooked a lot. It was her and this other lady; she don’t work anymore. Her name was Miss Mary because Miss Angie was getting up, like, at four o’clock in the morning. She was getting up, like, at four o’clock in the morning, going down. And she wouldn’t go back up to her room until, like, ten o’clock that night. That’s what Miss Angie was doing, and then she was moving like it didn’t even bother her.

Price: Well, what kind of help did she have? Do you know?

Sledge: She had Miss Mary.

Price: OK. One person.

Sledge: Um-hm. She had one person, Miss Mary.

Price: For all that cooking?

Sledge: Yep, with candles.

Price: What department do you think had the most difficult time?

Sledge: I would honestly say housekeeping. I would; I would say housekeeping. The reason why I would say that is because it’s hard trying to satisfy everybody at one time, I mean, with, like, two people doing it, and you got all these rooms full. You got these rooms full of guests, and you trying to make them happy. And the reason I would say housekeeping, because that’s where I experienced it at, in housekeeping. And like I say, you trying to make everybody happy, but you managed to do it. So I mean, you feel good about yourself because you was able to help somebody else. That’s the only thing that kept us going.

Price: And you’re doing a lot of manual labor in the heat.

Sledge: Right.
Price: That maybe the front-desk people didn’t have. They were working, but they
didn’t have the same kind of labor and out in the heat and sun, back and forth, like
you-all were.

Sledge: Right. And we had to constantly run and go get this; run and go get that.
And that’s how we had to do it, but we (inaudible), too. And like I said, we had to just
kind of play it by ear, and like I said, we cleaned the rooms, and like I said, we just
tried to make the guests happy. And I know we did do that.

Price: Well, now, that’s got to be a good feeling.

Sledge: Yes, it is.

Price: To know when people are—because people had to be under a lot of different
stressful situations. What did you see, or did you know about, as far as what guests
were experiencing?

Sledge: Oh, now, I know there was one lady, like, she was living up here, one of Miss
Lisa—I guess Miss Lisa was her friend at the time; I can’t remember her name. She
had lost everything; she had come from the Coast here, and she said, that the only
thing that was left was her vacuum cleaner, and it was out in the street in the water.
Now, she was on the news, to be exact, but she was the only one that lost everything.
And she was having a hard time because she was crying a lot, and she was, like, when
you would go in the room and clean the room, she would tell you about it. It took time
for you to sit there and listen with her and talk to her and tell her, “It’s going to be all
right. This ain’t the end of the world. It’s going to get better.” That’s all we could
tell her, is it’s going to get better. And we know the government going to soon send
some help, and we all will come out this mess. You know? But she would always,
everybody that went to her room, I know me and Martha went to her room, and she
would just cry and tell us she lost everything. And it was hurtful to know that you did
have people to lose everything.

Price: Right, and that you really couldn’t—

Sledge: —do nothing about it, but I mean, we couldn’t do nothing about it, but we
could make them feel better. Sometimes a conversation do go a long way with people,
and just to let them know that if you don’t have nothing else, you got us; we here.
And if you ain’t got nothing, if you just want to talk, we here. We’ll talk to you, if
you want to come down and do laundry with us or talk, we will do whatever you want
us to do to make you feel better and to make you feel as much at home as possible.
We know this wasn’t a home, but we tried to make it a home for some people because
this was all they had.

Price: So how did you—did that affect you emotionally, and did your coping skills
and emotional stress—
Sledge: It made me thank God for one thing, that I was blessed to not lose what a lot of people lost, and it made me, to now, I cherish everything that I have because some people still haven’t even started over yet. And I thank God that I didn’t even have to start over because I didn’t lose nothing that I had to start over. So that’s what, and I never just felt bad about it because I knew, like I said, my mama always told us, “One day it will come.” But she never knew—we never knew that it would have been then. But the thing about it was, like I said, I never stressed out about it. I never just stressed out about it. I just tried to do everything I could to help somebody else in the process. It’s like a eighty-five-year-old lady stay next-door to me.

Price: How was she?

Sledge: She was fine. A tree didn’t even fall on her house.

Price: Where did she come from?

Sledge: Well, that’s where she stay. She stay, like, right next-door to me.

Price: Oh, I thought you meant stay next door; I thought when you were staying at the hotel.

Sledge: Mm-mm, no, no, no, no, she was, like, at home. And my concern was, as soon as the hurricane was over to go and check on her. So I went and knocked, and she came to the door; I knew she was OK, and that just the way I am. I’m surrounded by a lot of elderly people, and I made sure all them were OK. Soon as I heard that they was giving out ice here and there, when I got me bags, I got them bags. I took stuff to them just like I want somebody to do for me, if I get to be that age because, like I said, I mean, she’s eighty-five. She can’t get up to really go and get ice and get water and get; so whatever I got, I made sure the neighborhood, just about, (laughter) had everything, too.

Price: Do I remember correctly that you’ve gotten some awards?

Sledge: Um-hm.

Price: Can you describe those to me? What they were for?

Sledge: Shining Star Award.

Price: OK, and who gave [that]? How did you happen to get that?

Sledge: Miss Lisa, because I was a good inspectress, and I never called in for work. I’m always here. And Lisa just—I don’t know why, but when I first started, Miss Lisa just took to me, and she just knew what I could do. She knew I was not going to play around; I was going to come in, get it done, do what I had to do, be real friendly, and
she always told me I always smile a lot. And I told her, I mean, that’s just me. Even when I’m having a bad day, I don’t care; I still smile because sometime when you smile, just a little smile can make a guest that’s feeling bad, that can make them happy. So that’s why. Like I say, I’m smiling; I don’t care where you see me at; I don’t care what you see me doing. I can be doing something real, real stressful, but I could have had a bad night, been up all night with one of my kids. I do not bring it to work; I’m still smiling when I get here.

**Price:** Well, now, that award, she would have recommended you to the Hattiesburg Convention and Visitor’s Bureau?

**Sledge:** Um-hm.

**Price:** And then Tourism Week, they give out awards to Shining Stars in the hotel industry that are recommended by their bosses or employers. So have you gotten that one year?

**Sledge:** Um-hm.

**Price:** That’s great. OK. Now, I want to go back and ask you something else. The hotel has, according to what somebody’s told me, 119 rooms. And you said you cleaned fifty a day. What happened to the other rooms that weren’t?

**Sledge:** Well, the reason we would say fifty is because we’d just narrow it down to fifty because you were only going to do about that many. Sometimes it may have been seventy because most of the time you was going to run into at least twenty-five or thirty that just wanted you to just hand them sheets through the door. That’s why. So that’s why I would say fifty to seventy. But most of the time you had some of them was going to say, “Well, just pass me this through the door,” or, “Just give me towels.” That’s why you would just say you had from maybe fifty to seventy. Sometimes we just maybe would lock housekeeping; we wouldn’t even really lock the doors. I mean, we would be cleaning rooms and had laundry going at the same time. I mean, but like I said, we did it, and we got through it.

**Price:** How long would you say it was before things got back to normal?

**Sledge:** Oh, I would say it took about maybe, I would say a good, all the way back to normal, about six months. I would say about six months, everything was, it was about back together. We lost housekeepers behind it. We lost some that just said they wasn’t coming back to work because of that.

**Price:** Were you having trouble hiring more?

**Sledge:** Yeah. Yeah, we did, but as people started moving from the Coast, and people started moving from Louisiana, then we had no problem with hiring them because they was coming in like that because they was moving here. And then as
time passed, you didn’t have the problem of hiring because Hattiesburg was getting bigger and bigger and bigger, like it is now. And it’s so many people done moved and came, and they needed jobs because they was all, OK, when they came here, they wanted to stay.

**Price:** Did most of them stay? Are they still here now, most of the ones you hired?

**Sledge:** Yeah. A lot of them is still here that was hired after the hurricane.

**Price:** OK. Did you have any knowledge of the hotel having an emergency management plan?

**Sledge:** Yes. We knew if anything like that happened, we knew the supervisors had to stay, for a fact. We knew Miss Lisa would have to stay because she was director of housekeeping; we knew Miss Mary would have to stay because she was under Miss Lisa. So we knew for a fact they had to stay. We knew the general manager Miss Stacey(?) was here; we knew she would have to stay. We knew Miss Angie would have to stay because she cooks. (laughter) So that was the emergency [staff] we knew for a fact would have to stay.

**Price:** What about maintenance service? Engineering and security?

**Sledge:** Yep, maintenance did have to; Milton was here, then. We had another maintenance crew. He knew he would have to stay on lockdown. And they would call a lockdown.

**Price:** And then did they have a certain number from each department in addition to those supervisors or managers that needed to be here?

**Sledge:** Well, the way it—yeah, it was a certain number. Yeah. Like Miss Angie, because there wasn’t but one person in there with her, so it was just one for Miss Angie, and Miss Lisa just had Miss Mary, like, under her, was just supposed to stay because she was here. And then out of maintenance, it was supposed to be two, and it was two. So I guess it was, like, may have been, like, two out of each department was really supposed to stay if anything was to happen. That’s how it goes with this hotel.

**Price:** OK. Did you see any people from one department helping another department?

**Sledge:** Yes.

**Price:** Give me some examples of that.

**Sledge:** Miss Lisa was up there helping Miss Angie; she would go up there and help Miss Angie. I have went up in the kitchen and seen her helping Miss Angie prepare
food. Miss Mary Keys was in housekeeping; she helped Miss Angie prepare food. Miss Angie had got out and helped us clean rooms.

**Price:** She did?

**Sledge:** Yes, ma’am. She got out and helped us clean rooms. The lady that I was telling you about, Miss Lisa’s friend, she got out; she was stressed out. She just wanted to help; she helped clean rooms. Maintenance helped clean rooms. (laughter)

**Price:** Oh, really?

**Sledge:** Yes. That’s just the way it worked. Everybody pitched in and helped everybody.

**Price:** Did the guests help in any ways?

**Sledge:** The lady I was telling you; she was a guest.

**Price:** The one, but can you think of any others that did like that?

**Sledge:** It was another one; it was a military guy. His wife was here. She helped Miss Angie in the restaurant serve food to the guests, and she helped clean rooms.

**Price:** My goodness.

**Sledge:** Yeah, she helped do a lot. She sure did; she was helping Miss Angie. She was helping clean rooms; she was just all the way around just helping.

**Price:** Well, what would you say about the leadership during that time? Who was the person that you primarily looked to for leadership?

**Sledge:** Well, really, everybody was really just—I wouldn’t say really nobody.

**Price:** So how much did you interact with the general manager during that time period?

**Sledge:** Well, she was here the whole time. But now, she would come out, and she would help, but she was so busy trying to keep the front organized and make sure it wasn’t no screwups up there until she still would come out, though, and help. And I don’t know if she ever helped in the restaurant or not, though. But I know she would come out and help, make up a few beds and help do a few bathrooms. And you seen her all the time; you seen her. She was here because she had her family here, too. They was upstairs, so really, we looked to Miss Lisa for leadership because we was working under Miss Lisa. And really, I think Miss Lisa had it better organized than anybody else. And the reason why was because Miss Lisa had already, she’s always prepared for something. So that’s why we looked to her for things. And I still do the
same thing now; I look to Miss Lisa for things now because I know she will handle any situation when nobody else would, and that’s why I always, like if I have a problem, I go to her with it, and I talk to her about it because it’s just, the advice that she gives, I mean, you want to sit there and listen to it. So that’s really who we really looked up to, her, at the time.

Price: So try to describe the qualities that she had that make her that kind of person.

Sledge: Well, one thing, she’ll play every now and then, but when it’s time to do what you got to do, she wants you to get it done. And she don’t just take a lot of stuff off people. If she feel like you don’t want to work here or whatever, she’ll tell you in a nice way that she just thinks this ain’t working out. She’s not never mean to nobody like that. It’s just she’s just herself, and she’d never try to be nothing that she ain’t. Whatever she tell you she do, she going do it. She just lives up to Miss Lisa; that’s just the way she do. And like I said, she done ran housekeeping, and she done got out and cleaned rooms with us when we was short back there. And she just basically, like I said, if you have a problem with somebody and you go to her, you talk to her, and if she going to pull you in in a meeting, she going to get a understanding about it, and because in hotels you going to run across people that, a lot of gossip and stuff like that. She don’t like that. She cut that off before it even get started. And that’s why she is a good person to work under; I think, to work under, because she—

Price: What’s her position now?

Sledge: Well, now she’s over the front desk. So I think she’s over the front; she’s at the front now. Yeah, now she’s over that.

Price: Did you feel like you—because you’re in a position she was once in, right?

Sledge: Yeah, um-hm.

Price: So did you feel like you have learned a lot in how to do your job from her as a role model?

Sledge: Yes, very much. I know right now, I do a lot of things that she would have done. And she tell me, “I guess I taught you well.” And I’ll say, “Well, yes, ma’am, I guess so,” because I learned a lot from Miss Lisa.

Price: How did you learn it?

Sledge: Because she would bring you in and then teach you how to do stuff, like when she taught me how to be a inspectress, I wasn’t an inspectress. She taught me how to be one. She took me to the rooms and showed me exactly what to look for, what to do. She explained everything that needed to be done, how to come in and do it, how to look for it, and how to send people back in a nice way, just stuff that a supervisor will do. And she taught me basically everything I knew; I learned from
her, and I was at Hampton Inn for, like, four years. And the stuff that she’s taught me, I never learned it there.

**Price:** So if the hotel lost one critical person that would impact the whole operation, would she be the one, that you think the hotel would suffer the most from losing?

**Sledge:** Yeah, um-hm. Yeah. That’s what I really think.

**Price:** OK. Now, have you ever run into any medical emergencies when you were in a room or any problems that made you feel ill at ease or in danger?

**Sledge:** No, I haven’t.

**Price:** Are there any medical problems that you would know how to handle? If you walked into a room and somebody was having a heart attack, would you know how to do CPR [cardiopulmonary resuscitation], or do y’all have a defibrillator that you could hook up?

**Sledge:** Well, I do know CPR, yeah. And first I would get on the phone, get 911. And then, I would see what I could do about trying to get that person safe till they get here. And then I would automatically—we have our walkie-talkies on us, and get the front desk and then get somebody back here, so somebody be in the room with you and try to get them revived as soon as possible.

**Price:** What if the phone’s not working?

**Sledge:** Well, I do what I have to do by myself.

**Price:** OK, because that’s part of that emergency planning, is when the power is out, and you can’t get to the people you need, what do you know how to do?

**Sledge:** I will try to do what I can, yeah.

**Price:** Do you know how to work the fire extinguisher? Have you ever worked one?

**Sledge:** Mm-mm. I ain’t never had to. (laughter)

**Price:** OK. That’s fine. Let’s see. If there were changes—if you could change things and you knew another Katrina was coming, and you knew for sure it was another Katrina headed right here, what would you do differently?

**Sledge:** I don’t think I’d do nothing no different. I don’t think I would do nothing no different.

**Price:** OK. Do you think there’s anything the hotel could do differently?
Sledge: No, mm-mm. I don’t think so.

Price: Are there any other things that you would like to share about your experience that we haven’t talked about already?

Sledge: Well, no, not really. Basically I was just—I guess that’s about it, but like I said, it was just, with Katrina, that was just a experience that you just won’t never forget. It’s really sad when you think about it and to know what you went through, and you just hope you don’t have to go through it again. That’s for sure, but if that time come, I guess we just have to go through it.

Price: Right, just have to—

Sledge: Right. Like I say, because if it’s going to happen, it’s going to happen, and then you can’t do nothing to stop it.

Price: OK. Well, I want to thank you so much. You have been very, very helpful, and you have such interesting things to say, and I really appreciate it. Thank you so much.

Sledge: Thank you, too.

(end of interview)