Mississippi Oral History Program

Hurricane Katrina Oral History Project

An Oral History

with

Dwight Gordon

Interviewer: Gill Buckle and Laura Schep

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Biography

Mr. Dwight E. Gordon was born in London, Ohio, on August 26, 1964, to Mr. Richard L. Gordon (born June 10, 1930) and Mrs. Bernice M. Smith Gordon (born February 9, 1930). His father was occupied in industrial and commercial plants, and he was a volunteer fireman. On March 30, 1990, in Pensacola, Florida, Gordon married Pamela J. Woodruff (born February 20, 1964, in London, England). At the time of this interview, they had four children, Troy S. Woodruff, Kristin L. Woodruff, Amy N. Gordon, and Seth C. Gordon.

Gordon was graduated from Miami Trace High School in Washington C.H., Ohio, and subsequently attended Pensacola Junior College, and the University of Maryland, earning many certifications in fire science, including EMT, fire administration, and fire prevention. From 1983 through 2003, he served in the US Navy until he retired from the military. From 2003 through the time of this interview, Gordon was a firefighter for the City of Pass Christian, Mississippi.
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AN ORAL HISTORY

with

DWIGHT GORDON

This is an interview for the Mississippi Oral History Program of The University of Southern Mississippi. The interview is with Dwight Gordon and is taking place on February 19, 2009. The interviewers are Gill Buckle and Laura Schep.

Buckle: OK. So this is an interview for The University of Southern Mississippi, Hurricane Katrina Oral History Project, done in conjunction with The University of Guelph, Ontario, Canada. The interview is with Chief Gordon, and it is taking place on February 19, 2009, in Long Beach, Mississippi. The interviewers are Gill Buckle and—

Schep: Laura Schep.

Buckle: I am Gill, and I will begin with the first question. First I’d like to thank you, Dwight, for taking the time to talk with us today, and I’d like to get some background information about you, which is what we usually do in our oral history interviews. So I’m going to ask you for the record, could you state your name, please?

Gordon: Dwight Gordon.

Buckle: And for the record, how do you spell that?


Buckle: And when were you born?

Gordon: August 26, 1964.

Buckle: And where were you born?


Buckle: And for the record, what was your father’s name, and how do you spell it?


Buckle: And your mother’s first name and maiden name and spelling?
Gordon: Bernice Smith Gordon, B-E-R-N-I-C-E.

Buckle: Smith Gordon, I guess, is pretty easy. So can you tell us a bit about where you grew up?

Gordon: A small farming town in Ohio, approximately twenty-five hundred people.

Buckle: Can you tell us a bit about your childhood?

Gordon: I grew up around the fire station. My dad was a volunteer fireman. It’s what I wanted to do. Pretty much that consumed everything I wanted to do as a child.

Buckle: Um-hm. And could you tell us a bit about your educational background in elementary and high school?

Gordon: Typical elementary, Jeffersonville(?) Elementary School. I graduated from Miami Trace(?) High School in 1982. I went into the military, twenty years in the military. I’m retired. I attended Pensacola Junior College, Anne Arundel Community College in Maryland, University of Maryland, and when I retired in 2003, I came to the Mississippi Gulf Coast.

Schep: So you mentioned where you went to college. And could you tell us what degrees you earned?

Gordon: I don’t have degrees. I have certificates for the most part. I was in a fire science degree program at The University of Maryland when I retired, and I never went back.

Buckle: Um-hm. Is there any other training that you had other than your certificates?

Gordon: Just I have numerous certificates in fire science, EMT [emergency medical technician], fire administration, fire prevention.

Buckle: Could you, for the record, define what EMT means?

Gordon: Emergency medical technician, basic.

Buckle: And what careers have you pursued, including the work you currently do? You mentioned the military.

Gordon: I’m retired from the military, and the fire service is it.

Buckle: Do you mind me asking what you did in the military?
Gordon: Mainly I was in supply, accounting part, but also part of my military duties were to, as part of fire teams, and then eventually as a trainer for fire teams and fire personnel.

Buckle: OK. And you mentioned that you moved to the Gulf Coast. So how long have you lived here?


Buckle: And how many generations in your family have lived on the Gulf Coast? Are you the first?

Gordon: None.

Buckle: And can you describe your attachment to the region, or what it means to you?

Gordon: I actually came here because of the job opportunity and the weather. It was too cold to fight fire up North.

Buckle: Can you describe your neighborhood before Hurricane Katrina? What was it like, and where was it?

Gordon: For my home, it’s up in the country. It’s basically pastureland, pasture with a little bit of farming land that’s still in that same existence as of right now.

Buckle: So before Katrina hit, what traditions were carried on in your community? For example Mardi Gras, St. Patrick’s Day, music or art festivals? And were there any traditions like boatbuilding? You said you lived in pastureland, so (inaudible). And if so, can you describe them?

Gordon: Well, as far as where I live is about eighteen miles north of Pass Christian. It’s actually registered that for postal reasons for my address. Where I work is here on the Coast in the actual city of Pass Christian. Pretty much the traditions, they have strong, small-town tradition of Mardi Gras. I mean, we’re well known along the Mississippi Coast for the Mardi Gras celebration. St. Patrick’s, we used to have St. Patrick’s Day parades. We had many arts in the park, and they called it Paws in the Pass, which was dog shows in the park. It’s a little bedroom community, for the most part, that’s well known for its views and scenic. So there was always a lot of a historical tradition and celebrations that were usually at least once a month. There was something special that Pass Christian always had going on. Christmas in the Pass is a big tradition. It’s the first Friday of December, which brings in a lot of folks. So. But nothing’s as big as the Pass Parade on Mardi Gras, which is sixty thousand people, plus.

Schep: That’s very big. Did you usually go out to that?
Gordon: Work, we work it. The fire department always is working that day.

Schep: Can you tell us, what were some of your community’s problems and strengths prior to Hurricane Katrina?

Gordon: It was a small, tight-knit community. Some of the weaknesses were that the population, the people who made up the population for Pass Christian, and the owners of properties in Pass Christian controlled and kept it to a small town to the point where it didn’t have strong economic growth when it comes to businesses. Most of it was Mom-and-Pop stores, specialty shops, that type of thing, extremely high property values. It held down standard growth that a lot of other cities would see. Again, but that could also be a strong point because they did control what came into town. We didn't have just every little shop that decided to pop up. They didn’t come to Pass Christian because it was so well-controlled by the people. They kept a strong grasp on what Pass Christian had in it. So it was both a strong point and a weak point. So the economic part of it was very controlled, and at this point, now, due to the economic problems, the property values and the location on the Coast, the insurance and the property values also are keeping businesses from coming back strongly or as fast as they could.

Schep: Do you think that was intentional to keep the (inaudible)?

Gordon: Yes, in a way. They controlled it. I won’t say that they had it set up where, “We decide who we want in, and who we want out.” But it was well controlled, and the property was owned in a way that they more or less controlled who could come into their little town. They did control the growth.

Schep: OK. So you kind of mentioned this, but do you feel like a lot of those problems have changed since Katrina?

Gordon: No. Not really. It’s been added to one of the things with, again, the land, the property value of the land and the location being on the water, our property values are even higher now. And then that’s exacerbated by the fact that insurance costs are so high for the whole city of Pass Christian to build anything there. And the economic problems with the increased problems of getting loans and securing loans for businesses, it’s actually gotten worse, not necessarily to the efforts of the people, but more just what they had in place, and then the added problems.

Schep: OK. I know that a lot of people have mentioned that people didn’t have flood insurance before the hurricane because they just didn’t anticipate that sort of damage occurring. So has flood insurance gone up as well?

Gordon: Yes.

Schep: Considerably?
Gordon: Yes. Well, flood insurance, where a lot of them were told prior to Katrina that it wasn’t required, now it is required, and it’s a lot higher than it was. Homeowners’ insurance, for the most part to the last I recall, was up about 400 percent of what it was prior to Katrina.

Schep: Has the storm changed the way that you think about your community?

Gordon: Actually in a way, yes. Where I talked about how they were strong as far as the controlling their community, I will say that I realize they’re strong in other ways, too. They do have foresight in some instances where I think they realize now that they may have sort of hurt themselves before by the way they did things. I think a lot of them are trying to change that idea, trying to change the way they’re going to do things. They are trying what they can to go back and seek other businesses now. The problems with that is now that they’re seeking other businesses where they didn’t do it before, a lot of the insurance issues and the property value issues and things like that are working against them. So I do think they’re a strong community. They’re a smart community, and I think they’ve realized some of the issues that they have, and I think they’re working to somewhat change those as best possible.

Schep: So how and when did you hear about Hurricane Katrina?

Gordon: I think it was basically August 24 or 25. We tracked it pretty much the whole time. That’s part of our job, emergency management. So we were keeping a eye on it. The county was also keeping a eye on it. It wasn’t a surprise to us, and we pretty much, starting around August 26, which was the Friday prior to Katrina, we knew we’d have some amount of impact. And we didn’t know exactly how much, but we knew there would be some kind of impact. And as it went further along, and the tracks continued to define themselves, come Sunday, roughly probably Sunday morning—well, actually probably Saturday night on August 27 through August 28, the morning of August 28, we really knew we’d have a significant impact. And preparations were for the most part made definitely from the fire department, and the City’s viewpoint, they were well taken care of. But as far as the citizens, I think more of those came the final realization was late Sunday.

Schep: So how did you prepare for the storm?

Gordon: We were out—myself, or are you talking about as a fire department?

Schep: Both would be interesting.

Gordon: Actually, personally, there wasn’t a whole lot that I did at my own residence. My wife pretty much secured the house and that type of thing and laid in some supplies from whatever because I was working almost straight through. I did go home Sunday evening or Sunday afternoon for a few hours and helped finish up and just basically to take that last few-minute break before I had to go back to work, and
had dinner with the family. We did prepare throughout the weekend. We laid in supplies, ordered in from grocery distributors, Sysco. I also had an agreement with one of the nursing homes that was destroyed. Of course, we didn’t know that was going to be the case at the time, but we had an agreement with one of the nursing homes where what food, when they moved all their people and moved, what food we were going to take, we also took some of their food for our supplies. We were out and about the city notifying people through PA [public address] systems and through word-of-mouth and maps that they needed to evacuate Pass Christian. And pretty much, we had moved both our fire stations into one, moved all the personnel and some of the equipment, all the engines and that type of thing. And we had filled up our fuel reserves and stuff like that for our generators, our engines.

Schep: How did you hear about evacuation for Hurricane Katrina?

Gordon: That came down through Harrison County Emergency Management.

Schep: And you mentioned that you started hearing about, was it evacuation on August 25?

Gordon: No. Evacuation, I think, was actually, I’m pretty sure it was August 26, later in the day. I would say probably in the evening of that day.

Schep: That’s when people started to think it might be worth leaving?

Gordon: Yes. Well, I mean, as the track was defining itself, and there was starting more realization, I think that precautionary evacuations were already pretty much set at that point and notified. I don’t recall what (inaudible), but I believe it was that evening.

Schep: And what were people saying about evacuation at that point?

Gordon: Most of the people—personally I believe, and I know I heard some people say it—a lot of them was overly concerned with it. The Gulf Coast is a typical hurricane area. They see them on a regular basis. Camille had hit here in [19]69, and it was at that point, still, there was a lot of people living in Pass Christian. Because of the type of community it is, it had quite an older population. A lot of them had lived through it there, and they didn’t evacuate then. A lot of them said, “It’ll never be as bad as Camille. There’ll never be another storm that bad.” So there were lots of them that weren’t going to evacuate. Now, we do know that a lot more reconsidered on Sunday because at one point the winds were, if I’m not mistaken, at one point around Sunday midday, the winds had hit 175 miles an hour or more.

Schep: Yeah. I heard two hundred miles an hour.

Gordon: So, and the track was, at that point, even more defined towards the Mississippi Gulf Coast, so at that point, there were more people that heeded the
warning because it became more important. They understood. So there was not as many people in town on Sunday night, and Monday morning as said that they would be in town Friday evening, Saturday morning.

**Schep:** OK. So did you evacuate from your home?

**Gordon:** No. We didn’t. My wife stayed at my home with friends of the family, and I was at the fire department here in Pass Christian.

**Buckle:** So you mentioned that your wife stayed at home during Katrina. And why did she stay?

**Gordon:** Part of it is where we’re at; flooding is definitely not an issue that far north. The magnitude of the storm—and I mean, we do have animals to take care of. She had family friends. To leave the property, our biggest concern is that to leave the property would be quite a chore, moving the animals, that type of thing, and that I was going to still be here, local, because of the fire department, and that our major concern where we live, other than the fact that we’re relatively close to the Coast, was more tornado-spawn than wind. And to actually get her and everybody and everything that far north to actually where it wouldn’t be impacted, she would have had to probably gone to Tennessee at a minimum. And it just wasn’t something that we even considered an option, that we felt it was a concern because tornadoes, she could have been in Jackson, or she could have been whatever, and when Jackson was hit, it was actually still a Category One hurricane, so they still had the same issues up there, we had down here, just less wind velocity.

**Buckle:** Um-hm. So you were working. Can you describe who was with you at the fire department? What you guys did?

**Gordon:** We had twenty people at the department. All our shifts were in; well, almost all our shifts were in. We had all our vehicles on standby. We ran calls. We did everything up till the wind got to the point where we couldn’t go out anymore. It got, I think it’s seventy-five-mile-an-hour winds, somewhere in that vicinity. And that was on late Sunday evening.

**Buckle:** So can you describe your experience of Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath?

**Gordon:** As far as the hurricane goes, we were locked up in our fire station, one block off the beach. But initial call was for the firefighters to go to the public library in Pass Christian. That, we decided against that as a group because we didn’t want to put our equipment out in the weather. We decided that we would stay, and one of the reasons the station was built where, our station one was built where it was, was because we did not take water in Camille. So we felt like that was probably a better chance there than the library, which was a smaller area, supposedly quite secure, also. But it was, the police department was going to be there. So it wasn’t going to be a very big area for all those people and our equipment. So we decided to stay there. As
the night went on, we could hear trees falling, and of course it was storming. The wind was up. We could actually at times, if you were sitting in certain spots, like I was sitting in one of the offices with my back up against an exterior wall, you could actually feel the building breathing, and you could actually watch the ceiling tile rise and fall as the building was breathing due to the wind and the pressures. Through until the morning, we hadn’t received any water as far as groundwater. We had received rain. Water started coming up and around the station probably about 5:30 in the morning, and it got high enough that we could look outside the station—we had a pretty good seal—and we could actually see the water level at the front of the station, which was probably about waist-high, looking out the front of the building, although we were still standing, and it was just basically trickling under the doors. And finally one of our bay doors where our equipment was housed, it started letting water in under it, and it started coming back, flowing through the building. And so we happened to be outside because water was starting to get on the floor. And at probably about eight o’clock in the morning, roughly—I’m not even sure about times—the door gave way, and we flooded, waist-deep water all throughout the fire station. And at that point we were basically, we moved up to the second floor, and we were trying to salvage equipment as best we could—some stuff was trying to float away—trying to save electronics, radios, that type of thing, as best we could. Anything that would be damaged beyond repair that we could immediately get a hold of, we tried to save.

Buckle: So did the water come into the building after most of the wind had died down, or was it still—

Gordon: No. No, it came in while the wind was in the, pretty much a good part of the height of the storm. One of the reasons, the way it came in, it was originally seeping under the doors, but our bay doors were taking a beating from the wind because they face south, and eventually, even though we had trucks parked up against them and braced with wood, the door finally just had gotten beaten up by the wind enough that it gave way and actually ripped off. And at that point, when the water came in, we also had the wind inside. The building was still breathing; the walls, you could still see expanding and contracting, and actually the most nervous I got at that point, because the water rose quite quickly, but it stopped at waist-deep. And the most nervous I was was actually on the second floor because the building we were in was a metal building, and after seeing what happened to the metal door, we were watching the walls, and I was more concerned about the metal starting to tear. And at that point, we were exposed; if the metal had torn, it would have, who knows what? It would have just made flying objects out of pieces of metal, and then we could have had problems, which luckily that was never realized, and we were safe. As the winds died down, everything was fine. Now, after that because of where we were at, how our building was located and situated, we really did not realize the extent of the damage throughout the town because the houses that we could see ahead of us were still intact. Houses beside were still intact. Of course we saw a lot of water, a lot of trees down, and minor damage like that. One of our vehicles was turned over by the water. It was one that was still parked outside. All our personal vehicles behind the station all flooded out, so some of them were smoking from the water getting into the
electronics. Some of the batteries were shorted out so the lights were flashing on and off, and horns were honking. But we did not realize the true devastation because of just where our location was, and until we got out later in the evening on Monday, the twenty-ninth, and actually started going out to assess damage, the different teams, that’s when we started actually seeing homes that were just obliterated, and even ones that were flooded up through to the top of the roofs, because what we saw and where we were at, we didn’t have that. It took us to get out and about before we saw that.

**Buckle:** Can you just describe where your building is located?

**Gordon:** It’s on Second Street just east of Menge Avenue in Pass Christian. It’s actually, the building is at, I want to say, twenty-six feet above sea level, roughly. So.

**Buckle:** OK. Thank you. And can you describe the devastation that you saw when you went out into the community?

**Gordon:** First thing I saw was massive flooding. I initially walked east from the station; my crew walked east. Water was everywhere, of course. We went out. As my crew split, I went to the water, to Highway 90. We got down to Scenic [Drive], where we could view [Highway] 90 and eventually got down on Highway 90. It was probably about 5:30, six o’clock in the evening and quickly realized it was still too early for us to be there because of the wind. So we got back up on Scenic [Drive], which is a little more protected, or it seemed like. We saw major parts of the street just eroded away. There was actually crevices in Scenic and 90 that we saw that were, especially Scenic, was more deep. [Highway] 90 was for the most part destroyed, but Scenic [Drive] had crevices that were at some point ten to fifteen foot deep where the roads had washed away and the underlay had been eroded away from it. It was not uncommon to see the water and sewer mains that were normally buried well. A lot of them were exposed. Some of them were just broken from something hitting them. As we went further down, walking back west along Scenic, that’s when we started seeing major portions of homes just destroyed, missing. Then as we were looking for possible survivors, if there were people that were still living, or stayed. They [the houses] were for the most part abandoned, thankfully. We found the going was too tough, so we only made it a couple of blocks on Scenic, and we actually cut back again up onto Second Street. And as we walked further east, we started running into standing water still, and the homes started, more parts of the homes were missing until we finally got down to roughly Fletis(?) Avenue on Second Street. We were probably walking in waist-deep water in most places. Water was receding, of course, and some places we were walking on good land, but as we got closer down into that area and moving west, still, we actually saw buildings that were completely missing. There were slabs and just debris piles and different things where, that we were actually climbing over. And quite a bit from the middle part of the city west was just wiped clean, as far as buildings. Now, I mean, there was just debris strewn all over the place, and it was one big debris field, roughly. Then we met up with one of the other crews that were coming back from the north part in there; checked out some more businesses and some of the homes in that part of town. We couldn’t get any further west at that
point because of water because there was still parts that was under water that was at neck-deep, so we weren’t taking the chances. We did have some tools and medical equipment with us. We did dig through a couple places, like the hardware store because we knew what happened at the station. We lost all our power. Our generator, our large, station generator was completely flooded out early. So we knew we had no power. We looked for equipment and tools we could utilize, and we actually made our way back to the station. Later on that evening, roughly about dark, we decided that we were going to go down [Highway] 90. The wind had subsided quite a bit by that point. We were going to walk down 90 east to check that direction, and one of our firefighters had a grandmother and family that lived a good little deal east of us. And we wanted to make our way that direction and check for what was left, and that’s when we realized as we got further west, roughly probably the midway point between Menge and Espy Avenue, everything along Highway 90 was destroyed at least half a block north. And I mean, nothing but slabs. All the condominiums, private-owned homes, businesses, they were all gone. And when we cut north to try to get up to where that particular family lived, and we knew they stayed, we actually had to climb over a debris field that was probably about thirty to forty feet high, and maybe a hundred and fifty to two hundred feet across. So once we did that, luckily they were fine. And we ran across some other people that had stayed in that area that were fine. And we started making our way back, and more and more people were out and about in that area that had actually stayed in town. So. And to the best of my knowledge, roughly in that time frame, I wasn’t there when it came down, but we found out on our way back that one of our firefighters father’s had drowned in the storm. And to the best of my knowledge, that was some of the first information we had received from outside of the city, of word getting in, of what had happened in other places.

Buckle: Can you just explain how long it took for the water to recede from your station before you left? Did you wait until the water receded before you left?

Gordon: It probably took it about, probably four to five hours, I would imagine. It stayed up for quite a while, and then it slowly started receding, and actually it was probably four to five hours before the water was actually out of our station. But I mean, it was still around us in different spots. The lower-lying area, of course, the water stayed longer.

Buckle: And so when you went out to assess the damage, did you have to wait until all the water had left your building, or did you just go out?

Gordon: We basically waited. It was a little bit of combination of waiting for the water to recede, what we thought would be receded enough where we could actually get out and about in the wind because we didn’t want to get out into the wind any sooner. Looking back, we probably could have left a little bit sooner with the wind as long as we stayed back away from the beach and stayed on Second Street, but we would have been wading through a little bit deeper water to do it. So it actually was probably a pretty good time, and to honestly recall the true mindset of how we made that decision and when, I couldn’t tell you.
**Buckle:** When you first went out and were going around the town, what was your interaction with people that had stayed? You started to talk about that a little bit.

**Gordon:** For the most part we just checked to make sure they were OK, see if they had any injuries. There were a few. Some of it was people asking about a certain area that they may have known somebody there, or were expecting somebody to stay. And quite a lot of it was people had, like I had stated earlier, there was a lot of people that said they were going to stay, but some of them had made last minute decisions, and probably a good chunk of those was probably lifesaving decisions by changing their mind as they saw the intensity. So there was concern because we thought there was a lot more people in town than actually was because people weren’t notifying us that they were evacuating. They were just, as we would go around, they would say, “I’m not leaving. Nothing has ever been as bad as Camille.” But luckily they had made decisions after that to leave, and we didn’t know. And so that was the major concern. People wanted to know about other locations where other people might have been, and we were concerned with locations where other people might have been, if they knew of anybody. And we tried to keep track of those parts of town. I think it was on actually the third day for the most part, actually we had made it around most of the town, and actually mapped out where the destruction was, where the water, whether it was flat destruction or due to surge where it was actually just flooding, wind damage, whatever the case may be. And we pretty much had a good picture in town of what was existing and what wasn’t.

**Schep:** Um-hm. Sorry. What do you mean by flat destruction?

**Gordon:** Just where there’s nothing left but slabs and concrete, basically wiping a whole building off of its foundation. It was quite similar to what a tornado looks like, if you’ve ever been around anything like that. It’s just a path of nothing but ground and concrete and debris strewn everywhere.

**Buckle:** Did you have any experiences with other emergency response personnel, other than your team?

**Gordon:** The first night the police officers from our city, we had heard their story of what had happened with them at the library, and then truly none other. Some of the first actual emergency response that we had interaction with was Daphne, Alabama, Fire Department. They showed up just out of the blue, bringing us supplies. We had our communications was down. Now, I understand that over time that there were actually people that had came in from different directions. My understanding, the National Guard the second day or something, had started coming in from the east, but to truly, honestly recall seeing them, I don’t. It seems to me that my best recollection is that Daphne, Alabama, was probably the first outside agency that I saw. And I want to say they were there on the third day. But now, we were getting a lot of people showing up around that time, so there might have been more. We did have—I will step back and say this. We did have a major fire the second night after the storm, and
we did have some radio communication back by that point, and the county coroner was there. We did have a few tankers end up showing up that we had called for help from the county, but true, full interaction storm recovery was probably into the third day before we really started having a major response.

Schep: So far you’ve talked a little bit about the destruction of the city. But what about your home?

Gordon: I got roughly about 6:30 in the morning on the twenty-ninth, my wife did get one call through to me and told me she had, all the ridge vents of my house had blown off, and that water was coming in from the ceiling all over the place, due to the rain. And that was the last information I got from her until I think it was late on the second day before she actually was able to get down to the Coast, and it may have even been on the morning of the third day—I don’t remember—by the time she was able to get down on the Coast. I never had contact with her after that, but basically everything I had problems with my house was water damage that came through where the roofing was blown off in different spots. And I had severe wind damage through the actual top of the house that had blown out one gable end. And actually by the luck of the draw, the way part of the roof was, the way the house was constructed, it actually held the end, the gable end in, but it was all bowed out, which the wind got in there basically under the carport, which went up through, into the attic. The north end was the one that was blown out, but because it held together, the house actually stayed up. If that end would have came out, we’d have probably had a partial collapse of the roof. But compared to what I had where I live was nothing compared to what the people actually down closer on the Coast, and there was a lot of people, other people that got hit by tornadoes and different things like that. But we did not have the mass destruction like other people did.

Buckle: So what was it like getting basic necessities, food, water, medicine?

Gordon: The first day, well, we really didn’t have anything the first day, the day of the twenty-ninth because what little bit we had left, we had quite a good supply that we had set in prior to the storm, but it was all flooded with saltwater and basically wastewater because one of the problems you have is when the flooding occurs, you have the sewer water that gets up in there. So everything was contaminated for the most part that we had laid in. There was a few items that we had saved that we now had, but most people weren’t worried about eating at that point. Water was not a major concern. The second day we did go down to the nursing home that I thought would—quite a large facility on further west. We actually put a group of us together, and we trekked down the railroad tracks, which we thought was actually—and it probably was—the best path to take. We ran into a few problems; had to go around some houses and buses and boats and different things that were laid on the tracks. But when we got down there, it was just a slab, also. And as big a facility as it was, and walk-in refrigerators and freezers and stuff, I thought that we’d have a good source. We might have to dig stuff out, but I figured we’d have a decent source. It might be more collapsed around it, but when we got there, the whole building was just gone. I
did locate some canned food that was not labeled, or that the wrappers had been blown off, but I recognized as condensed soup. And then we also went to just south of that was where the Winn-Dixie and the shopping center had been, and there was a liquor store that had been in there. All that was gone, of course, but we did find some bottles of wine that we looked at and could tell that they were not contaminated. So we picked those up. And then later, well, actually the next morning, one of the crews went to a grocery store, and I’m not quite sure how that worked out, but they secured food from the grocery store and bottled water, and in the end, that day when Daphne showed up, that was one of the first things they brought, was just boxed food and water for us. But if it wouldn’t have been, in particular Daphne, but there was other departments around there, they were all helping out. That was our first sources coming in. It was not federally funded. It wasn’t anything, to the best of my knowledge, that the state or anybody did. Now, what made Daphne pick Pass Christian out, I don’t know. And that may have been dictated by somebody, but they were coming twice a day. They were going to Alabama, where they would come from Alabama with a load of supplies. When they got there, they would offload our supplies, ask us what our biggest concern was, what we needed, take the list back, try to scavenge that list. Usually twice a day they made trips for over a week, and then after that, they were still coming back about once every day or once every other day. All we would do is get a list of stuff together. I mean, at different points, baby food and formula and diapers was on there, just whatever the case may be. We tried to get a good variety because our building was the only City building left standing. And being a fire station, after a time of destruction, it’s a natural congregation point for people, either to come get help, [or] to come to offer help. Again because it was the only City building left, it became the middle of the City government, and it was just the natural jumping-off point for everything. So we pretty much were the hub of everything happening in Pass Christian, happened around that fire station for quite a while.

Buckle: Could you describe, I guess in further detail, some of the things that happened around the fire station because it was the hub of activity?

Gordon: We were a distribution point for quite a while. At one point our bays were just becoming inundated. We actually had more of a grocery store look to it on the inside. We naturally responded to calls for when people had (inaudible) locating the search-and-rescue teams came through, but also as people would locate bodies or animals, they would call us, and we would respond. We had numerous gas leaks where debris had sheared off gas mains, the typical cause that would come from a natural disaster. We had all the City employees working out of that building; some of them stayed, and some of them were put to work for distribution. Some of them were put to work cataloging people. All the City government operated out of there. The board of aldermen and the mayor used it basically as his office. The City’s chief operating officer used the building to run the show for the most part. They held their board meetings; for quite a while they actually held their board meetings on a hose-drying rack out behind the station. And then as time went on and we got the distribution point moved down the street, we had some volunteers come in and
actually set up a wholesale distribution that took up a good chunk of land. They were actually holding their board meetings, and they would set up tables, and we’d probably have sometime, two, three, four hundred people inside the station for the board meetings, which were at one point being held every day. As time went on, and things were going, they slowed down how often they had the board meetings, but we had them there for quite a while. Again, we used it for dispatch, the police. We fed all the City workers there. And we did everything we could do to provide food, water, and necessities for anybody who showed up.

Buckle: So it sounds like you were working all the time after the storm?

Gordon: Yeah.

Buckle: So you worked—

Gordon: I went home on the fourth day for two hours, I think it was. And then on the fifth day, I actually started going home at nighttime and sleeping. I probably, somewhere around twenty-one straight days, for the most part I worked, other than going home maybe at ten o’clock at night and coming back to work at six o’clock in the morning. And then it eventually got to where, I think I took a day off or so, and actually in that timeframe I remember one day, I think it was probably about, it was close to the two-and-a-half-week point, if I’m not mistaken, that I actually, my wife and my sister-in-law and brother-in-law, they took me up to Wiggins to go to the Wal-Mart and to eat out. That was the first time I’d been basically out of the area to just get away and relax. And I would say about the three-week point, I started working seven in the morning to seven in the evening, and that lasted for quite a while. And then I don’t even recall how long that we pretty much worked. What we were doing, there was some of us senior people—I want to say about four of us—we worked every day seven [a.m.] to seven [p.m.]. And then the rest of the firefighters were broken up into two shifts, and they would work twenty-four-hour shifts. So one day, half of them would be there, and the other day, the other half would be there for twenty-four hours to provide protection.

Buckle: Can you talk about how your work and career changed from pre-Katrina to post-Katrina?

Gordon: To be honest with you, I mean, other than the timeframe in and around Katrina, it probably hasn’t changed a whole lot. People’s perspectives on stuff changed. An influence that may not be well noticed or something for a lot of people, but our homes, Pass Christian was an old, established community. Our homes now that exist, for the most part, a good majority of them are brand-new homes. So they’re actually more fire-safe than what the home that was on the site existing before was. So you hate to see something coming good out of the way it had to happen, but we probably got people living in safer buildings now than we did prior to Katrina, as far as the fire safety. It was just a bad way for it to have to come about. As far as the career part, it was a defining moment for several people. We lost some people that
decided that they wouldn’t stick around. They wasn’t going to stick around to go through the effort. For quite a while, we wasn’t necessarily sure that the City would recover, so I mean, that’s also a thought process on some people’s minds, which you can’t blame. But I mean, other than that, like I said, it was a defining moment for some people. You saw what people were made out of, and the people that came out of it that are still, and not saying that the other people aren’t—the ones that have moved on. Of course, we don’t necessarily have contact with a lot of them, but we’re a lot smarter now, I think. If nothing else, you got to look at the whole thing as a learning experience and preparation for the next time. Hopefully there’ll never be another one just like that or as bad as that, but I think we’ve learned a lot from it. And unfortunately memories that people have, you know, the fact that Camille hit in 1969, which was thirty-six years prior, there was a lot of people that remembered what they believed how bad Camille was, but as far as the way things were done in the late [19]60s and how federal government was involved and different things like that, and the way they are now, there was not a lot of experience left. People go, “This happened, or that happened.” But the way the federal government steps in with disasters now wasn’t the way they did it back then. So there was no history to draw on from people that were still around as far as that goes. So basically you were doing everything for the first time for quite a while.

**Buckle:** Can you describe how the federal government acted in Katrina?

**Gordon:** To be honest with you, I don’t think it was a bad response, in my eyes, from my viewpoint as a firefighter. I had not been around something like that prior to Katrina to that size and devastation, and I would guess that—I’m not going to sit here and say it was the worst because everybody has their own viewpoint on something that happens to them. But I would daresay that where the federal government was lacking was with the fact that they had never had to deal with anything like that before. So just like everybody else, they were trying to wing it. Yeah. They always have a game plan for a lot of stuff, but to something of that magnitude that far-reaching, it really pushed them. And then to come back, I want to say six weeks later I think it was, something like that, Hurricane Rita hit Texas, and so it was a follow-on that just compounded the problems they had. And that was a year, if I’m not mistaken, of so many massive storms, that they were trying to learn from Katrina and manage all these other locations. And I would personally say that I think pretty much everybody did a dang good job working with what they had to work with and never having done it before from the lowest people and our department, all the way up to the top. I mean, if you have nothing to draw on and say, “This is what we’re going to do, and this is how it worked last time,” that’s what makes you better, is the learning. Everybody was learning it for the first time.

**Buckle:** Can you describe the major industries or employers pre-Katrina and how they’ve been (inaudible)?

**Gordon:** I’m sorry. Say that again.
Buckle: Can you describe the major industries or employers pre-Katrina, and how they have changed? Or what have they been like after Katrina?

Gordon: We had mostly small businesses. Some of the small businesses that were in place, a lot of them, if they were owned by older folks, a lot of them decided either not to come back due to they had been around for two major hurricanes now, and they wasn’t going to do it, or they took the loss of their business as a sign, then, “I’m coming up on retirement. I’m going to go ahead and make this it, sell off my property, or whatever the case may be.” And so basically, I mean, that was the main existence in the town as far as business would go. Everything was pretty much a small business. We had a couple plants; one is a prestress, which is prestress concrete they use to build bridges and that type of thing. They were back up and running pretty quickly, which the nature of the business allowed them to do that because, I mean, yeah, they lost their offices and some equipment, but for the most part, their plant exists of metal and concrete, and that’s what they’re building and working with. And a lot of it is outside with forms and different things like that. So they were able to get back up and running relatively quickly after the storm, just by the nature of their business. We had a wax plant that did not come back, but other than that, for the most part, it was all small businesses. And it was a crap shoot, for the most part, throwing the dice out there and seeing if they came back or not. Now, there were other small businesses that popped up and other small businesses, and you name it. But most of it had ties to do with recovering from Katrina, that popped up afterwards. But those were for the most part, if it wasn’t a local person starting it or doing it, then they were only around for a certain length of time, and then they moved on.

Buckle: What are your hopes and fears for the future of the Mississippi Gulf Coast?

Gordon: I hope they use what’s happened; I hope they all remember what happened, use it as a learning experience, build back properly. Don’t become complacent with the attitude of, “It’s happened twice, but we’ll be all right. We don’t need to worry about it happening again.” It is a chance to improve on things that may have not been the best before. I fear that with it happening, I say I want them to plan and look ahead, that it could happen again. My fear is if we have something like this again, in particular, the City of Pass Christian would probably cease to exist. They would probably become nothing more than a little community of a few homes and a little bit of this, a little bit of that. And it probably would basically cease as a city the way it’s—and I say a city. I mean the population is not a large city by any means, but it would probably, most of the way things are done now would probably cease if we were to have major destruction again because right now, the amount of people coming back, we only have basically half the population now that we had pre-Katrina, and I would daresay that, I mean, there are people still building back and everything, but with the economic issues, the insurance issues, the rapid succession of destruction that sooner or later, most people would either say, “I’m just not doing it.” Or the government might even step in and say, “OK. You’re just in a bad spot, and we can’t continue to funnel money to you.” They’ve set a precedent on that on some towns up along the Mississippi River that have flooded over and over again, that they actually
came in and moved them. Well, I mean, it’s sort of hard to move a— I mean, you can move a city, town that’s there. You may be able to move them here, move them there, somewhere else, but Pass Christian is defined by being on the Coast, and it’s pretty much surrounded by other towns. So to actually move them would, there’d be no reason for it. They would just basically cease to exist as we know it.

**Schep:** What is the population of Pass Christian?

**Gordon:** It’s right around forty-five hundred now.

**Schep:** OK. So it was about nine thousand?

**Gordon:** Yeah. It was in the eights, I think, if I’m not mistaken, prior to Katrina.

**Buckle:** In an ideal world, what would you like to see in the rebuilding of your community and the Gulf Coast?

**Gordon:** Well, what I would personally like to see the city of Pass Christian do is, I would like to see them flow more into what the rest of the cities are doing. For the most part this area has become a tourist destination, for lack of a better term. The way they do things, casinos are a big issue. I think Pass Christian, for the security of the city, needs to open themselves up to accept casinos, which they’ve never done before, go commercial. We for the most part, well, I mean, we didn’t have any hotels. We had very few restaurants. I would like for them to, for the, I think for the betterment of the city—now, there’d be many people that would argue about the casinos bettering the city, but for the security and safety of the city, as far as being able to remain solvent and strong, I think they need that financial input. And at this point, the fact that we are still so small and we don’t have that much business, I think that would help secure the existence down the road, as long as nothing major, no major hurricanes did the same thing to us. I think that would promote growth, and I would also like to see the city annex north into some county-owned areas to actually expand the square miles of the city. I think that’s one of the growth potentials that the city needs to latch onto.

**Buckle:** What are the difficulties and obstacles to rebuilding homes and infrastructure in the community?

**Gordon:** Mainly the things I pointed out before. The cost is probably the biggest issue. Dealing with the government as far as because of our location, flood zones and high-velocity zones. Actually just to rebuild our fire station number two, it was quite a while just to get permission because the state and the federal government both had to get together because the state dictates where our stations basically need to be. And the fact that one station was not completely destroyed, it pretty much was the fact that we were going to [renovate] it right where it was because it was not cost-effective to tear it down because it wasn’t thoroughly destroyed. By that being renovated on the existed site, it pretty much dictated that the second fire station was going to be in a flood-prone area on the same site it was, and the federal government did not want it
built back where it was. The State required that it was being built somewhere near the location of where it was. And so that was actually, took time just for them to work it out because the federal government saying we couldn’t, and the State saying we needed to. And we were sort of stuck in the middle, just waiting. Constant issues like that with all the sites to rebuild the City buildings, and that’s been a consistent issue. Money, the property values, now the economic crisis, the property values are quite high. I want to say—well, I know just recently I had heard it, but the average cost—and I don’t remember the size home it was, but if I’m not mistaken, it was around two thousand square feet or whatever, all the towns surrounding us had a certain property value, the average sale price for that style of home in the city of Pass Christian was almost fifty thousand dollars more for that same home in our town as opposed to the surrounding towns. So that gives you a little bit of idea of the property values. Well, with the property values being high, if you don’t already own the property, you’ll have a large payment just to pay for the land. Economic crisis, loans are hard to get, so people aren’t necessarily able to secure those loans. At that, the next point is not only are you securing a high-priced loan for a piece of land, you’re also securing the high-priced loan, or you have to be able to secure the loan to build the building on the land. And then once you do that, the insurance on it is so high that now you have quite large payments, and if you don’t have a business that can draw in the income, it’s not going to survive. So it’s really, people have had to think really long and hard if they’re going to invest in that because where you could typically put a small business and say, “Yeah. I can make enough money to survive here,” you have to think really long and hard because you may not be able to do it in Pass Christian.

Schep: Have you had a lot of experience with the FEMA trailers?

Gordon: Yes, quite a bit. I mean, as far as, more in particular are you asking with that?

Schep: Well, if you could explain the experience with them?

Gordon: Well, actually, I guess in two different ways. One, after I stopped working overtime for Katrina, which was basically I want to say late October probably, or in October of [20]05, I actually, one of my friends from up north in Mississippi, but up north going towards Memphis, they were down here. And we were actually, I had actually helped set FEMA trailers both in Harrison County, Hancock County, and over in St. Tammany Parish in Louisiana. So we actually contracted with a couple of companies and set FEMA trailers for people. The other is we have had some fires in FEMA trailers, and for the most part, my experience with that was, I mean, probably pretty self-explanatory, but if the fire got any kind of hold, the trailer was usually gone by the time we got there, for the most part.

Schep: Was that common, for that fire?

Gordon: I won’t say common, but I mean, it seemed to me that there was some issues with the heaters on them. I won’t say it was—because at that point you’re looking at
it was wintertime, and so many people were living in them, I guess it was just the nature of everything that we were going to have, if we were going to have a decent amount of fires, they were going to be FEMA trailers.

Schep: What kind of experience have you had with faith-based groups?

Gordon: There was quite a few down here. I mean, I’ve not personally been majorly interactive with them. I hope that makes sense. I know a lot of them have been down just in all aspects. A lot of it has been volunteer building. They’ve done a great job, and I honestly think that if it was not for such a major undertaking of all the faith-based, and some of them are well coordinated, and some of them were, I guess, for lack of a better [word], just less coordinated as far as what their game plan was. But they’ve done a tremendous amount of work on this Coast; I know in the city of Pass Christian. And I would say 50 percent of the work that came in, as far as volunteer work, was strictly through them. I know Red Cross and different people like that were through, but as far as sticking around, we still have in the city of Pass Christian, faith-based volunteers that have been around and are still around doing it.

Schep: How long do you personally think it will take for the Mississippi Gulf Coast to fully recover from Katrina?

Gordon: Probably another fifteen or twenty years, just to guess, just seeing what’s going on. Honestly, I mean, I don’t want to bring it up. It’s not part of an agenda I have, but I think we were doing better for a while, but honestly—and I’m sure a lot of people will agree—the downturn in the economy in the last six months is going to hurt people and slow people down. You’re going to have people, just like everybody across the country, you’re going to have a higher unemployment rate. A higher unemployment rate means people don’t have the disposable income to work on their properties, or to save money to save up to build property. People are more likely to spend less money, less likely to take on new initiatives if they’re bigger companies because they’re holding cash reserves or whatever the case may be, or they can’t just get truly funded to do projects. I think it’s going to slow people down. If we wouldn’t have had this downturn in the economy, I would have probably said it would be closer to ten to fifteen years for a full recovery. Now, some of it we’ll just never recover from, but it would be more like to the point where we’ve done what we’re going to do, and we’ve moved on past everything else. I would have probably said ten to fifteen years probably when it’s all said and done.

Schep: Thinking back over the days since Katrina came ashore, what’s the worst thing that you remember in the days after Hurricane Katrina?

Gordon: I think for the most part it was this having—I don’t want this to sound, but dealing with the people that had lost so much. I’m not trying to say it where I don’t feel for them. That was probably the hardest part was actually trying to figure out how to help them or how to help them help themselves. Understanding is probably a bad
term for that, too, but when we had to work with everything we had to do along with everybody having to do it for themselves, also. Yeah, I came out way ahead of what a good majority of the people I work with had. Probably a good 50 percent of our firefighters lost their homes. I didn’t lose my home, luckily for me, but we ended up sleeping outside under the carport for a while because of the water inside our home, albeit nothing near what everybody else had. But by the same token, you were doing everything you could for everybody else, but each person also had their own issues that they had to take care of. I would be at the fire station and do everything I could. My wife had her business doing everything she could, and by the same token, we were both trying to accomplish anything we could in any spare time to set up to get things taken care of for our own home. We didn’t get a claims adjustor for insurance until November. So we were doing work; I had five guys from the fire department go up and help me stretch tarps on the top of my roof. We basically tarped the whole roof of my house. Out of the five, four of them had completely lost their homes. So you were trying to help people in our job as firefighters distribute food, do anything they could for them, and at the same token you were trying to do what you could to take care of yourself and your own, your employees. I had to secure a vehicle; I ended up going to Florida about three weeks later just to buy a vehicle. And luckily for me I had a family member that worked for the auto dealer, and they’d already sent us a list of what they had available on the lot. So basically I already knew what I was getting and all I had to do was go over and do the paperwork and bring the vehicle home. I didn’t actually have to go out and look for a vehicle and search like a lot of other people. I was, again, ahead of people on that, but so many other people were—firefighters had to find ways to get to work every day. They had to find a place to live on a regular basis or to do whatever. So it was a combination of trying to help other people and help yourselves at the same time. I think that was the most difficult thing and most stressful of everything.

Schep: OK. And then kind of shifting gears to that, what’s the best thing that you remember?

Gordon: People pulling together. By the same token, I guess it’s just a follow-on. I mean, even though you had major trauma to your own life and your own lifestyle, for the most part, most people put their own personal things to the side as much as they could. They took care of it, but by the same token it never slowed them down helping each other, just like the illustration of the five guys that went with me up to my house to put a roof. Four of them didn’t have anything left. They were all, actually all of them were living at the one guy’s house that did survive. I mean, they were all family, but they took their time out to go help me take care of my home. And so everybody worked together for the most part, especially from my viewpoint in the jobs we did, the people I saw that worked with me. There were issues with some people that showed up that expected only help for themselves that didn’t want—all they were worried about was themselves. But the people I worked with weren’t like that, and a lot of other people weren’t like that, and there was a lot of good people that just, however they made it down there, they flowed into Pass Christian strictly to help, and they didn’t have to do that. So I think that was the best thing that came out of it was
actually human nature, to see the human nature of a lot of people, how actually good it is.

**Schep:** We’ve heard that before, people pulling together, how that was the good outcome of it, or like the silver lining. That’s really touching. Who would you say were the heroes that emerged from Hurricane Katrina?

**Gordon:** Honestly, to me there’s probably really no true heroes. I would say there are—I guess that’s probably the wrong way of saying it, but there was a lot of people out there. And some of them were emergency service workers, and some of them were just neighbors and different things like that. Is there true heroes? I would say technically not in my eyes. There was heroic acts performed by ordinary people. I guess if I was going to say name true heroes, other than large numbers of people, I would probably say there are some that probably came to the rescue of people, and I’m not talking about rescue in an emergency-point-in-time sense. I’m talking about people that, I know of groups that were living on one person’s land. They basically opened their home up and made it a shelter for fifteen, twenty people at a shot. They probably did a lot more for the security of the individual because for the most part, everybody that lost a home—well, I won’t make a general statement like that. Most everybody I knew that lost a home, within a couple of days, they had a place that they were going to stay on a long-term basis, and that was because of individuals that didn’t lose everything opening their houses and basically their whole lives up and accepting and giving them any bit of shelter or land or anything to put something up to live on or whatever for a long-term basis. And they wasn’t doing it for anything other than they were helping them. Yeah. There were heroic acts out there; there was times where people actually saved other people, but I would just say in my eyes, I would narrow it down to the people that just gave so much, helping the others.

**Buckle:** What is one thing that you think is like a marker of recovery that shows that people are moving forward and that the community is kind of getting better?

**Gordon:** Just by the fact that every time you have a sentence, it doesn’t start with, “Katrina.” It doesn’t start with talking about Katrina. I mean, for the longest time, it seemed like every conversation you had, it was, “Before Katrina this, or during Katrina that, or after Katrina this.” Just by the fact it’s not the beginning of every conversation. I think that’s a key step forward.

**Buckle:** Refreshing, I guess. What is the biggest problem that you have now, moving forward?

**Gordon:** Personally?

**Buckle:** Yeah, or otherwise if you’d like.

**Gordon:** Other than being able to get the people—I would just say the progress is slow rebuilding. And I said a little while ago that I figured it would be fifteen, twenty
Buckle: So what did you learn from your experience that you could share should a hurricane comparable to Katrina ever strike again?

Gordon: I guess one of the things that somehow we’ve got to remind people, and luckily I guess people had a better judgment when it was all said and done about evacuation. I would like for people to understand that the government’s not going to come in and do everything for them although it did do quite a bit for them at this point. But I would like to see the thought process on people’s minds not be, “Well, I’ll just wait until they do something for me.” I would want people to evacuate and have a clear remembrance of what happened and the devastation that’s capable from a hurricane, not be complacent and have the attitude—and I’ve even heard it already, though. People say, “Oh, it didn’t happen in Katrina, so I’m not worried about it. Nothing’s going to be worse than Katrina.” That’s what killed some people with this storm because of people saying, “Oh, it’ll never be as bad as Camille.” And somehow maybe reminding people of that statement right there can be the difference between life and death. So they need to not be complacent; [they need to] take a lot of things upon themselves to protect themselves and be ready to do whatever it takes without the government being there for them. A lot of people absolutely did not prepare at all. There are things that you need to do to prepare yourself even if you are leaving the area. People just jumped in their car and left. They had no preparations made, no places to go, no real destination, and I would like to see the preparation for hurricanes by individuals be a lot better.

Buckle: Is there anything we haven’t asked you about that you would like to include in this interview?

Gordon: Not that I’m aware of.

Buckle: OK. Well, thanks very much.

Schep: Thank you very much.

Gordon: Thank you.

(end of interview)