Mississippi Oral History Project

Hurricane Katrina Oral History Project

An Oral History

with

Eddie Williams

Interviewer: Deanne Nuwer

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Biography

Mr. Eddie Williams was born on July 7, 1948, in Marion, North Carolina, to Mr. Leonard James Williams and Mrs. Ruth Sparks Williams. His father was a miner, and his mother was a homemaker. Mrs. Martha Hall Williams married her husband, Eddie Williams, in Greenville, South Carolina, on March 10, 1968. He graduated from high school and completed two years of college. Mr. Williams rose to the rank of staff sergeant in the United States Marine Corps, and his occupation as a civilian has been in on-site construction. At the time of this interview, Mr. Williams was a member of the North Carolina Baptist Men, and he was working in Harrison County, Mississippi, helping survivors of Hurricane Katrina put their homes back together.

Mr. Williams is a Baptist and a Gideon. He enjoys sports, including golf. He has been awarded the North Carolina Baptist Men’s Man of the Year Award, the Distinguished Citizen Award, the You Make a Difference Award, and has had a domestic violence shelter named in his honor.
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AN ORAL HISTORY

with

EDDIE WILLIAMS

This is an interview for the Mississippi Oral History Program of The University of Southern Mississippi. The interview is with Eddie Williams and is taking place on January 4, 2006. The interviewer is Deanne Nuwer. Also present is Mrs. Williams.

Nuwer: It’s January 4, Wednesday, and I am interviewing Mr. Eddie Williams of the North Carolina Baptist Men. Mr. Williams, could you tell us, sir, a little bit about the organization?

Williams: Our organization consists of over 6,000 volunteers. All of these are from North Carolina. They do go through a two-day training period in order to familiarize themselves with our rules and our regulations and how to handle themselves in a disaster such as the one that [you] have here on the Gulf Coast.

Nuwer: Any particular place in North Carolina where the training takes place, or is it statewide?

Williams: It is statewide. We start in March of each year, and we start down on the East Coast because of the weather. It’s a little warmer on the East Coast in March. And then we work our way back up to the western end of the state, and we end our training in the second week in June.

Nuwer: Um-hm. How did this organization come to be?

Williams: This organization was a vision of one man, James Bullard, and he started that in 1978. And his vision was to take an empty semitrailer and convert that trailer into a feeding unit to where they could go out and feed people in the community, that had suffered through a disaster such as a hurricane.

Nuwer: Now, you started out helping folks in North Carolina. Then it became nationwide?

Williams: Yes, ma’am. We’re involved worldwide, really. We have partnerships with other countries. I’ve been to Armenia. We have partnerships with Malaysia. Of course, we also do our partnership statewide with other states within the United States. We’re doing some work down in Cuba. We’ve just traveled extensively. We usually
have a partnership from about three to four years, and if we see that it’s going to last longer, then we’ll renew that partnership. But we try to reach around the world in what we are doing.

**Nuwer:** Oh, wonderful. How many men and women do you—I know it’s the North Carolina Baptist Men. How many do you think are involved, maybe a rough estimation of numbers?

**Williams:** This hurricane that we’ve had here with Katrina, we have had over 40,000 volunteer days. Now keep in mind that a volunteer day consists of, if I’m on the job site five days, and that counts as five volunteer days. But if you look at that, that is a large, large number of volunteers per day. Just this past week, the week after Christmas, we had 490 volunteers per day here for the entire week. And later, right after Katrina, we were averaging about 275 per day for a couple of months. So our numbers have yet to fall below seventy-five, per day, and I think that’s just, that’s awesome. It is because, you know, it gets out of the news media, and people kind of tend to forget, or something new will happen, and their focus gets generated to what’s happening there, and then they forget about the people down here in Mississippi, or wherever the hurricane or the disaster’s at. So I’m just, I’m well pleased with the way our volunteers has fallen in behind us and continued to support us. And we also have other volunteers from other states; it’s not just North Carolina. We’ve had volunteers from Hawaii, and we have a couple that’s coming in from Alaska. So we’ve had them from New Hampshire all the way out to the West Coast and all in between, so. And it’s going to take that to accomplish what we’re setting out to do.

**Nuwer:** Right. And this leads us into so many questions. Now very quickly, I noticed also that there’s a sign that says North Carolina Women? When did the women’s—is that still under the men, or how does that work?

**Williams:** Well, we get that question asked a whole lot. (laughter) But really there would be no North Carolina Baptist Men without the women. The name was put along with that in 1978, and it has remained there, but we have as many women working with us as we do men. And really we wouldn’t be where we’re at today if it wasn’t for the women. But the name is just—it stayed there. Generally, we just speak out of it as North Carolina Baptist, but our women are a major, major part of what we do. They just help us in our feeding, to help us in our child care, water purification during a recovery, any ministry that we’re involved in. And we have thirteen ministries that we do, and our women are involved in every one of them. And we appreciate every lady that’s ever came on a disaster of any type. It’s just helped us tremendously.

**Nuwer:** So when volunteers, men or women, come to a disaster area like Katrina, where do they stay? What would be, perhaps, maybe a rundown of a typical day, breakfast, where they would go, things along this line?
Williams: Well, generally when a disaster happens, we work very closely with the American Red Cross and the Salvation Army, and I’m sure you’re aware that those are the two leading organizations in disaster relief. And it starts out with the American Red Cross, and then it’s the Salvation Army, and then it’s the Southern Baptist Convention. We’re number three in that lineup. And it starts out with us working with those two organizations that are one and two, and they assess the situation and they see what the needs are, and they know what our capabilities are. They know what equipment we have, and they know the volunteers that we have available. So they’re very quick to call us to respond to a disaster. And you may have, like in Katrina you may have eight or ten states that would be responding at the same time, but they would be going at different locations. And not all states are prepared the way that North Carolina and some other states are. We’re just more involved basically because we’ve been hit with so many hurricanes in North Carolina that we’ve got the experience. We went through them time and time again, and Florida’s in the same situation. They went through them time and time again. And so you learn by going through these hurricanes, and you know what you can do, [and] what you can’t do. You know what your limitations are. And the Red Cross will ask us to come in and set up in a certain area, and whenever they do, we immediately start feeding. We’re prepared, year round, to go anywhere at just a short period of notification. And just within a few hours we can be from North Carolina to Florida or from Louisiana, wherever we’re needed, and we’ll go into that area. We’ll have our generators, and we’ll have a water tanker truck, and it’ll be loaded. We’ll have a three-day supply of food. We’ll pack our volunteers in with us. We can just basically go to a parking lot, as long we’ve got somewhere to discharge our water from our cooking unit into an appropriate drain. Then we can set up just like a little small city and within the next day we can be serving thousands of meals. Just this past fall after Katrina in Meridian, there were a couple of days there that we were serving 23,000 meals per day. And right here in Gulfport, right out here at the kitchen that you saw whenever you came in, that kitchen has served around 13,000 per day. So we’ve got the capabilities. We have three kitchens, so we could basically serve around 40,000 meals per day if we had them all three up and running at full speed.

Nuwer: Right. Well, from someone who had a delicious hamburger meal, thank you. (laughter)

Williams: You’re quite welcome.

Nuwer: It was delicious. So the volunteers—and when Mr. Williams referred to the parking lot, we are in a parking lot in Gulfport by the Baptist Church, and they’ve been here since Katrina. Then the volunteers stay here in-house in a bivouac situation.

Williams: Yes ma’am. We come prepared with our cots and our blankets and our pillows. There’ve been times, even right after Katrina, where we slept right out in the
parking lot here in front of the church. Some of the guys slept in the back of their pickup trucks, and some let the tailgates down and slept on them. Some just laid their sleeping bags down directly on the parking lot because we didn’t have any power here in the building, and we didn’t have any water. All of our power was directed at doing our feeding operation. But the church here has been just, they’ve been magnificent in helping us get organized, where we’re sleeping and staying. And we’ve basically just taken over their church, and they just stood back and watched us and helped us, and been very, very supportive. And it’s just a great opportunity to come and just minister.

Nuwer: Well, we know that the church has been very, very helpful. What do you see, sir, as the ultimate goal? I know that you come in and do immediate relief with food, but what ultimately does the North Carolina Baptist Association come in and do?

Williams: Well, we start out in the feeding operation, and just within a matter of days after we get our feeding lines up and running, we turn to doing recovery work. And the recovery work consists of, like during Katrina you had a lot of trees down on houses, you had a lot of limbs that were through the roofs, you had a lot of debris and stuff that was in the yard. We started taking trees off of homes, started putting blue tarps on their homes, cleaning out the yards and cleaning out the driveways and getting the trees off of cars, and just so the people could get in and out. And from there, we kind of went into a different gear, and that was going in and doing tear-outs of people’s homes that had been flooded.

Nuwer: Can you explain what a tear-out is?

Williams: Yes, ma’am, I would be glad to. A tear-out really consists of going into a person’s home that’s been flooded, and we’ll go in and have our assessors look at what the situation is, and you look for the water line on the walls. And what we experienced in Katrina was anywhere from three foot to eight foot, and even some places was even higher than that. So we go in, and say the water line’s at three foot, then we’ll measure a foot above that, and we’ll cut the sheetrock out. And we’ll take all that old, wet insulation out. If the floors are starting to buckle, then we’ll take the floors up to where everything can air out, and take your cabinets out, bath fixtures. Some of the homes have to be just totally, totally gutted out. The only thing that’s left is just the bare floors and the stud walls. And then we spray with disinfectant to get rid of any mold and mildew, and in a couple of weeks after it’s dried out and aired out, and the city has okayed, or the inspector has okayed us to go back in, then that homeowner is ready to start rebuilding back. And we’re also focused on helping that homeowner do so. We can come back, and we can help them put the insulation in, put the sheetrock in, reroof their homes, refloor their rooms. A lot of our churches back in North Carolina will partner with an individual family. We’ve had several instances where our churches came, and they wanted to recovery work, and that refers back to doing the tree and debris removal and doing the sheetrock. And they make a bond
with these families. And they want to come back and make several trips. They’ll make multiple trips to come back just to help that individual family. And it’s not uncommon to have a church to help a family rebuild totally; I mean cabinets, anything that homeowner needs, they will help. And of course, our Baptist men also will contribute X amount of dollars depending on the situation and the support that we’re getting through donations. We’ll be able to help that homeowner, too. So they’re not just left with no hope. Our purpose is to give them that hope, and if we can help them some way with some building materials and then also help them with that labor, free labor, then that gives them that hope. We have a lot of instances where there’s no insurance, and maybe they did have insurance, but they’re struggling with the insurance company, and then you have to take into consideration that they’ve got mortgage payments, and they’ve lost everything that they had. And so just because they’ve got $20,000 in insurance doesn’t mean that we’re not going to help them because that $20,000 is nowhere near going to get them back in their home. They’ve lost every bit of furniture, clothing, and everything that they had, so we want to help. We want to look at helping the elderly and the handicapped, those that can’t help themselves, don’t have the means. That’s our first priority. And then we just assess. We actually prioritize everything from like a one, two, and a three, and you want to take care of those priority ones and work your way down. And everybody’s been very, very understanding of how our operation works, and it’s went very, very smoothly. People have been just so nice to us. And it’s not uncommon for us to get stopped on the street, and somebody that you just totally do not know just hug you and shake your hand and tell you how much they appreciate you. We’ve even been stopped in the highway at the red light there, and somebody will want you to roll the window down just to thank you. And we don’t do it for that; that’s not our purpose. Our purpose is just to be God’s hands and feet here on earth. And he’s just given each one of us the talent, and we just feel like that we need to take that talent and use it to help someone else. And that’s our sole purpose is just being his hands and feet.

**Nuwer:** That’s marvelous. How do you locate priorities one, two, and three? Do people actually come in and make applications with you, or do you get them through Red Cross and Salvation Army?

**Williams:** Well, normally what we try to do, the first few days it’s kind of hard getting started because everybody is kind of green at the location they’re in. They don’t know north, east, west, or south. So it takes a little while to get oriented. And one of the things that we really do would be go to a radio station or go to our local pastors at the churches and tell them that we are available. We’ll go to city hall, go to your fire departments, your police departments because those guys are around in the community. They know where all the damage is. And a lot of them, we kind of start off helping them because they’ve been up hours and hours and hours. And they’ve not even had time to take care of their own home, let alone trying to do anything else. So we feel like if we can get established with those guys and help them because they’re out helping somebody else then, word gets around. And then if it’s announced on the
radio and it’s announced through the churches, and before long you just have an abundance of work orders to do. Our recovery right here in Gulfport, this past fall we had about 2400 requests. Well, let’s put it this way, 2,490 work requests that we had for either debris removal or sheetrock or the tear-outs, and we’ve got all those done. We’re down to about sixty of those since September. And from that we went into our rebuilding, and we initially started out that we wanted to help rebuild 500 homes here in Harrison County. And the Mississippi Baptist Convention asked us to focus specifically on Harrison County, and that’s what we’ve been doing. And as word got out that we were taking these rebuild applications, a lot of those came from the homeowners that we’ve done the tear-outs and things from. Just in a very short period of time we were over 600. So we had to just stop taking applications, and right now we’re putting people on a waiting list. We don’t want to tell them no. Who knows what might happen a year down the road? We may get a whole lot of volunteers and be able to knock out a whole lot of jobs, and if that’s so, then we can accept these other applications.

**Nuwer:** Well, hearing that, how long is [your] projected stay?

**Williams:** Right now we’re committed at a minimum of two years.

**Nuwer:** Wow.

**Williams:** We have three couples that have committed themselves to come here in Gulfport. I know myself and my wife, we resigned our jobs. Had good jobs but we just felt God leading us and calling us to his work. So we resigned our jobs, and we’re the onsite coordinators. We have two other couples that did the same thing. It’s just, when you know the Lord wants you to do something, you become obedient. Sometimes it means you leave those granddaughters and grandsons and leave a nice home where you can work a good eight-hour day, and all of a sudden you’re working sixteen and seventeen, seven days a week. But it’s a different type of being tired. Even though you work those long hours, you’re not just physically drained. It may sound crazy, but it’s a restful tiredness.

**Nuwer:** Um-hm, very satisfying, I would think.

**Williams:** Oh, yes, it’s very, very satisfying. I’m just thrilled to get up each day and look forward to the challenges, and I know the Lord’s equipped me to handle each task. And we just let him walk close by us, and I know that he’s in control and not us. And when it gets reversed, and we think we’re in control, that’s when we get in trouble, so things don’t go too good. And so every now and then he’s got to put us behind him and let him take the lead, so instead of us trying to lead him.

**Nuwer:** Well, when did you first arrive in Mississippi and down here on the Coast?
Williams: I first came to Mississippi, it was right within about two days, three days after Katrina. I went to Meridian, and I stayed there a week. And at the end of that week they asked me to come to Gulfport, and they being the North Carolina Baptist Men. And when we came down here, there was no real organizations at all doing anything. It was still just, the damage was just severe. And we were able to set up here at Pass Road Baptist Church, and from there we started our operation. And I stayed a week. I went back to North Carolina, stayed in North Carolina a week or two weeks; I came back. I went back to North Carolina; I came back, went back to North Carolina, and then this last time I came the twenty-eighth of October and have been here since with the exception of a short Christmas holiday break. So we’re committed there to see these 500 plus homes get rebuilt back.

Nuwer: Right. Well, you said you saw when you were here very shortly after Katrina—I know it’s so difficult to articulate; I have trouble. What was your impression about the Coast when you first saw this when you came in?

Williams: Well, I guess I won’t call it an advantage. I don’t think that would sound appropriate, but I was in Sri Lanka in January, and I really wasn’t prepared to see what I saw. That’s not good terminology, but it was devastating as far as the eye could see, and we rode for miles, and miles, and miles, and nothing but just total devastation. And when I got to Gulfport, and I walked down on the coastline south of Highway 90, what I saw there was identical to what I saw in Sri Lanka. There wasn’t any difference. It was total devastation down there. Had a whole lot more buildings here in Gulfport than they had in Sri Lanka, so the debris piles were higher. But if you just stop and think, the same thing happened here that happened in Sri Lanka. The only exception being you guys had a lot of high wind and rain with what happened here. And then in Sri Lanka there was just the tidal waves that caused all the damage there, but there was very little difference in what I saw.

Nuwer: In all of the folks that you’ve met and have interacted with down here, is there any one particular person or family that sticks out more than others? I’m sure you’ve just met a whole slew of great people.

Williams: Well, I wish that I had a journal of everybody that I have met. I’ve not had any negative situations. Everything, as far as the people that we have met and God’s put in our pathway, they’ve just been fantastic. The first person that really comes to my mind, and I’ll never forget this gentleman. It’s one of your local pastors, and that being Chuck Register from First Baptist here in Gulfport, just within a matter of—it was probably just a matter of hours after we arrived here at Pass Road, that Chuck came walking across the parking lot. And I’d already heard about his church, the sides being blown out of it, and I knew his congregation was just scattered all over, but he walked up to me, and he said, “Eddie, what can I do to help you?” And here was a gentleman that, 600 plus in his congregation at his church, and he’s just lost everything that he had there, had damage at his own home, and his congregation
scattered, but the first words out of his mouth was what could he do to help someone else. And that’s made a lasting impression on me, and I’ll never forget Chuck. And even to this day right now, he calls and checks on me, and wants to know if I need anything or if he can do anything to help, and we formed a great bond. And we get to go out and eat together with his wife, Charlene, and we just love him to death. But that’s the foremost person, and I’ve met a lot of good homeowners. Robert and Cookie Norwood comes to mind, just a fabulous couple that live off of Ricky Road here, and they’ve just been so good to us. And if you’re down and out and you need some encouragement, just go to Robert and Cookie’s, and they’ll encourage you. And they basically lost—they didn’t lose their home, but they lost everything in it. And we’re in the process of helping them get rebuilt back, but they’ve just got a fantastic attitude.

**Nuwer:** Right. I wanted to mention, for the tape, that the church you’re referring to sits on Highway 90, and it is completely blown out. That’s the best way to describe that church on [Highway] 90 that Pastor Register is with. Well, I just think it’s a marvelous organization, and I know that you’ve got laundry facilities here and showers; I saw the shower scheduling. For people to feel this calling, young people I saw on the grounds, do you have a lot coming in from colleges and things to help?

**Williams:** We have a tremendous amount coming in from college. The break right after Christmas, between Christmas and New Year’s, is always a big week for us. If we have a disaster and we’re involved in it, school’s out. And we get a lot of people out of work, so that’s why our numbers right after that was running around 490. But really, year round we get a lot of youth, more so at spring break. And in the summer it wouldn’t be uncommon to have 200 youth at a week this summer, or during one of the holiday breaks, that won’t be uncommon. A lot of the colleges are participating. We’ve got some kids here from Meredith College back in Raleigh this week, and we’ve had some students from the University of Wisconsin. We’ve had various—Campbell University back in North Carolina, NC State, just an abundance of colleges sending their youth. And then it all starts out with, I think it starts out with the youth being good Christians. And they get into school, [and] they’re involved in Christian groups. And when we have a disaster, then they’re very willing to get a group together and come down, and then they bring friends with them, and the group grows, and it’s just great to have them to come. And this summer we’ll have a lot of high school students up here.

**Nuwer:** Really?

**Williams:** Yes, ma’am, we sure will. We’ll have an abundance of high school kids that’ll come and help us, and we welcome them to come. So it’s going to take all that to get all this work done. It’s going to take all the other states helping us and the colleges and the youth. We’re just going to have to pitch in together and roll our sleeves up and go to work. So it’s just great to know that we do have that resource to
help us. So it kind of makes the blow a little softer when you look at, say you’ve got 600 homes to do in about two years. So that kind of eases it a little bit, knowing that you can rely on these other groups to come and help.

**Nuwer:** Right. And the materials are all donated?

**Williams:** Yes ma’am, they have had some materials that have been donated. We had some that through the Danny Lipford TV Show donated some. And that’s on CBS, and it does a spot on The Weather Channel. But the majority of our materials we have bought. We have bought our own materials, and most of our materials are coming from North Carolina at the present time because our local homeowners are going to Lowe’s and Home Depot, and all of your local building supplies, and the lines are long, and the supplies are short. And we’ve got some good people back in Raleigh that have been through these time and time again, and they foresaw the need to order some stuff, really, right after Katrina. And then we had that in the pipeline, so that’s helped us. But we’ve got tractors and trailers that are just about every other day coming, bringing us building materials. And that helps a whole lot, too, because we can house all of our volunteers in one place. Right now we’ve got them staying at about five different locations, and ultimately we’ll be in one location. We’ll have everybody together. We’ll have our own building materials there, and a lot of those building materials are being bought through some of the local suppliers, too. We just need it to where our crew leaders know when they get up in the morning they can load their pickup truck and trailers, and go right straight to the job site and get started working on some of these homes. And then come back in every night, and we’ll load them back up, and they’ll be ready to go the next morning.

**Nuwer:** Wow. Well, I’ve got a half a tape here just about finished, and we might need to flip it for a moment. But I just wanted to ask you; is there anything else about the experience, about the organization that I might not have covered that you would want to share?

**Williams:** I think, generally speaking, our organization is more known for our disaster relief and our disaster recovery, and that is a major part of it. But we have lay renewal; we have lay revival. We’ve got an aviation ministry. We’ve got agricultural ministry. I mentioned the water purification. We’ve got child care. We’ve got just various ministries that if anyone was looking to get involved in ministry work, I think we’ve pretty well covered about all the bases. There’s something there for everyone. (Side two)

**Nuwer:** And we were talking about the availability of work for and through the North Carolina Baptist Men. Education, do you go into any of the schools and provide reading materials and things?
Williams: Yes, ma’am, we do. A lot of our local churches will get together. Even some of our schools back in North Carolina right after Katrina, maybe they had a surplus of books or knew how to get books, and they were willing to do this and ship them down to the local schools. I know Thanksgiving, a lot of our churches wanted to help individual families. A lot of them wanted to help the schools. And even during Christmas, my phone was ringing constantly about churches and individuals back in North Carolina wanting to ensure that all the kids had a shoe box. And we worked with Pass Road Elementary School and another school here locally and provided each kid in that school a shoe box.

Nuwer: And what was—

Williams: It was basically like you do with the Samaritan’s Purse, all of those that will go overseas to underdeveloped countries, and you got your toothbrush and hairbrush, and maybe a little toy, and some candy, and some cards, maybe a toboggan, gloves, socks, things like that, some of the common items that you put in a shoe box. But our group even went further than that. Right after Katrina they did book bags, and they filled these book bags with coloring books, and reading books, and pens and pencils, and rulers and erasers, and little games and again, a little toy, and a lot of those were delivered right here to the kids here in Gulfport, because they’ve lost everything they had, too, so. Really, I guess if you look at it, the schools are a good outlet for the children. Things are looking up now, but there for a while, the school was all they had. I mean, that was the only normalcy that they had. Once they got to school, everything returned back basically normal, but after they got out of the walls of that school and got on the school bus or their parents picked them up, then reality set back on them. They had to go through all the debris. They had to go to half of a home or a home with a blue tarp on it. They had to relive that over each day. But while they were at school, things was more normal, and you can see a lot of smiles and a lot of laughter. Our school system down here has been terrific; they supported us. We’ve even had our volunteers stay and sleep on the gym floor at the elementary school and the high school. So they’ve been very, very supportive, and we appreciate that.

Nuwer: Well, I appreciate so much your time. I know you’ve got homes to build and things to do, and we just appreciate so much your taking the time. Mr. Williams, it has been an honor. Thank you so very much for the interview.

Williams: Well, I thank you, and I appreciate the fine people here in Southern Mississippi.

Nuwer: Thank you, sir.

(end of interview)