Mississippi Oral History Project

Hurricane Katrina Oral History Project

An Oral History

with

Elizabeth Marie Brewton

Interviewer: Ted Butler

Volume 839
2005
Biography

Elizabeth Marie Brewton was born February 1, 1982, in Rolla, Missouri. The daughter of a military man, Elizabeth moved many times as a child, settling down with her family in Vancleave, Mississippi, in 1985. She attended Vancleave High School, Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College, Jackson County Campus, and at the time of this interview was attending The University of Southern Mississippi. Elizabeth is Catholic, and she is involved in ALA and MLA. Her father is Mr. Bobby Lee Brewton, who was employed by Veterans Administration Hospital in Biloxi, Mississippi, at the time of this interview.
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AN ORAL HISTORY

with

ELIZABETH MARIE BREWTON

This is an interview for the Mississippi Oral History Program of The University of Southern Mississippi. The interview is with Elizabeth Marie Brewton and is taking place on November 1, 2005. The interviewer is Ted Butler.

Butler: My name is Ted Butler. I’m interviewing Elizabeth Brewton for an oral history project about Mississippi survivors of Hurricane Katrina. It is approximately 4:00 p.m. on November 1. We are interviewing at The University of Southern Mississippi [USM] in the Cook Library. Elizabeth, when and where were you born?

Brewton: February 1, 1982, Rolla, Missouri.

Butler: Where did you go to elementary and grammar school?

Brewton: Lots of places.

Butler: Lots of places? Well, how did you end up in Mississippi? At what point did you end up in Mississippi?

Brewton: My father was stationed at Fort Leonard Wood in Missouri, and when he got off of active duty in [19]85, I moved to Vancleave, Mississippi. And after that we moved to Hattiesburg where my mother finished college at The University of Southern Mississippi. She got a job at Jackson; we moved to Jackson. Then my father finished his masters at Xavier in Louisiana, and that’s when we moved back to Vancleave because he got a job at the Biloxi VA [Veterans Administration] Hospital, and we’ve been there even since.

Butler: Now Elizabeth, for those who aren’t familiar with Vancleave, where on the Coast is it? Is it close to Pascagoula or—

Brewton: It’s in Jackson County. We’re right next to Pascagoula.

Butler: On which side, on the east side or the west side? Is it closer to Gulfport/Biloxi or closer to Mobile?

Brewton: It’s closer, probably, to Gulfport/Biloxi. We’re twenty minutes from Biloxi.

Butler: OK, that helps.
Brewton: I’m sorry; I’m not good with directions.

Butler: No, I’m not either, and this is for the listeners. How did you end up in Hattiesburg to go to the university? You ended up attending USM.

Brewton: How did I end up attending USM? Well, this is where my mother graduated from, so this is where I just wanted to go to school, and it worked out that way.

Butler: Well, take us to—well, let’s go back a little further. Had you experienced other storms? Obviously you weren’t alive for [Hurricane] Camille, but there were a number of storms that hit the Mississippi Gulf Coast. Did you have any experience with those?

Brewton: Well, my mother’s family was in Camille. They lived in Waveland at the time, and that’s her experience; they lost everything. So her stipulation to moving back to the Coast would be, “Can’t live near the water.” So I’ve been in Elena, Georges, Katrina. I’ve been in a lot of the storms.

Butler: What was the damage like, for your family, you know, when they were living in Vancleave? When you were living in Vancleave, did any of these storms impact the area before Katrina?

Brewton: We had storm damage with Georges. It looked like a tornado went through our—on Highway 57 it looked like a tornado came down it and tore down trees and power lines and all that. But there was no real, like, building damage or anything; it was just debris damage. Katrina was a lot worse.

Butler: Well, where were you living this past fall? Were you living in Hattiesburg?

Brewton: I was in Hattiesburg when Katrina hit.

Butler: What part of Hattiesburg?

Brewton: I was here on campus.

Butler: So you lived in the dormitories?

Brewton: Yes.

Butler: Take me back to that weekend right before Katrina struck, because I remember being here in Hattiesburg, and it looked like it was taking a turn and it might hit the Central Gulf Coast on Friday. What were your feelings then?
Brewton: It was so weird because for every other storm, you know, we’d always watch the news; we’ve always at least had some knowledge of what was happening, but for some reason—and it’s not just me; it was other people, too—it’s like we just didn’t pay attention because you know, “It’s happened before, big deal.” So I honestly didn’t even know that a storm was even coming until a friend or one of my parents or somebody told me, and I still didn’t pay any attention because big deal, you know.

Butler: When was this that you first—

Brewton: It was probably about Wednesday or Thursday, right before it hit, the week before it hit.

Butler: Did you make any preparations?

Brewton: I mean I made the normal preparations: went to Wal-Mart and got the water, the nonperishable food items to stock up on, you know because, I mean I didn’t know how to be prepared, but I wasn’t expecting the worst.

Butler: Well, were you concerned about your family in Vancleave?

Brewton: No.

Butler: No.

Brewton: I wasn’t expecting anything; you know, it was just supposed to be a storm, not a hurricane.

Butler: Well, let’s go a little bit further ahead. The actual weekend—we’re talking about Saturday—were you more concerned by Saturday, about the hurricane?

Brewton: I would say that I was getting more concerned. I remember calling my mother later that night, Saturday night, with my concerns about it, and my mom telling me, “Oh, don’t worry about it. It’ll be OK. It’s already towards New Orleans. It’s not going to turn. It’s not going to turn.” And then I remember waking up Sunday morning and turning on the Weather Channel, and we had a Category Five storm headed for Biloxi, Mississippi.

Butler: Did you think about going home to your family? Was that an option to you?

Brewton: It wasn’t an option. I had to stay where I was; both my parents would not let me go home.

Butler: Well, let’s go ahead. By Sunday, this is when you had heard that it was turning towards, headed towards Biloxi, Mississippi. What was it like—you know I don’t want to say neighborhood, but in your dorm, the people that were living—
Brewton: *Panic.*

Butler: Panic, really? Is this a girls’ dormitory?

Brewton: Yes.

Butler: It’s all girls.

Brewton: And we were panicked. Everybody who could go home was going home, and the ones that were staying (inaudible).

Butler: Did you get any kind of help from the university? Did anyone from the university come over and tell you what you should do, what kind of arrangements you should make?

Brewton: We were well taken care of during the storm. You know, they told us stuff, tried to calm us down; they gave us help when we needed it. We were well taken care of.

Butler: Well, when you say well taken care of, did they provide food, water or—

Brewton: After the storm, yes. We had food first thing and water first thing after the storm. Actually *during* the storm because that morning they had bought all the food and preparations up Monday morning before it got really bad.

Butler: Now what kind of damage was there due to the—well, actually let’s go ahead and—what was it like being in the hurricane? Because it actually did—and a lot of people—this is one of the untold stories about the hurricane, but Katrina was actually a Category Two when it passed directly over Hattiesburg. What was that like?

Brewton: It’s the weirdest thing; you never want to do again. It was horrible. It was very scary.

Butler: What exactly? What, the rain, the wind?

Brewton: The rain started about seven o’clock that morning, and the wind and all that started about seven o’clock, but even then it wasn’t that bad. It didn’t really start to get bad until about nine o’clock. About nine o’clock they told us, the announcement came on that everybody had to get into a hallway because, you know, the potential for a tornado to come through. And as the day progressed, it just kept getting worse and worse, and the rain just kept falling heavier and heavier; the wind was getting, blowing worse. And I was in the part right next to the restroom, and they had the windows open, and the wind was so bad it [would] suck the doors open and slam them shut. You know, you couldn’t, at the times before we lost power, you were able to go to the restroom. You know, you couldn’t go in the restroom without being knocked over by the wind. That’s how bad.
Butler: Now, why was the wind so bad? Were the windows taken out, or were they already—

Brewton: No, they had been opened up for, I guess to relieve pressure or whatever. I don’t know what their theory behind that was, but they were open.

Butler: So what time did you lose power in the dormitory?

Brewton: We lost power about one o’clock, and then about thirty minutes later, we lost our generator. So that night, for the rest of that day and that night, we were without everything because about thirty minutes after losing our generator, we lost our water.

Butler: Well given that, did people in your dormitory—it sounded like you were prepared for the storm. You had nonperishable food, as you said, and you had water. Did other people have, did they prepare in the same manner? Did they have these things?

Brewton: More or less.

Butler: More or less.

Brewton: And like I said, the university had provided for us. We had, like, three meals for the day, four bottles of water a day. We were provided for.

Butler: How did they do this? Did they open up one of the cafeterias?

Brewton: No, they brought it to us.

Butler: They brought it to you?

Brewton: And we had to stand in line, and they handed them out to us.

Butler: Did you see any kind of evidence of looting or any kind of criminal activity?

Brewton: Not by the girls, and we weren’t allowed outside.

Butler: You weren’t allowed outside. What, were you afraid for your safety because of what was possibly going on outside?

Brewton: Honestly, yes. You know, I’m a woman, and it’s obvious what can happen to a woman—

Butler: Sure.
Brewton: —in this day and age. So yeah, I was concerned about that, and the guys in the guys’ dormitory weren’t exactly acting the way they should be acting, you know, so.

Butler: What were they doing?

Brewton: Well, everybody was under curfew. We weren’t supposed to, nobody was supposed to be allowed out of the dorms because of the potential of what could happen to us if we left, but somehow some of the guys managed to sneak out and came over to the girls’ side. So that was a concern of mine. I didn’t understand why they weren’t taken away. And then we were given the warning that when we went to bed that night we had to lock our doors because obviously we didn’t have power, and our doors weren’t, our main doors that kept everybody out, they weren’t working, so anybody could get into our dormitories at that time.

Butler: So at this point you still didn’t have power. What was the number of days before you had power?

Brewton: From what I understand, because I left Tuesday morning—

Butler: Now, where did you go to?

Brewton: Vancleave.

Butler: Vancleave. How did your parents hold up during the storm? How did Vancleave hold up?

Brewton: We had a lot of structural damage, tree damage, power-line damage, stuff like that, but we didn’t have any, like a loss of life or anything. It was flooding, stuff like that. But I don’t think it was bad as, say, Biloxi or someplace.

Butler: How long did you remain in Vancleave? Did you stay there until school resumed, or did you—

Brewton: Basically two weeks. The only day that I honestly got out—well, actually I did get out a little during that time, but the first day I got out was probably the following Tuesday, because my dad had been off of work a week, and it was the Tuesday after Memorial Day. He had to go back to work because there was no way to communicate, so he had to physically drive himself over there to make sure he still had a job. And I went with him because I obviously couldn’t stay at the house with no power or anything, and that was my first real scene of what happened to everything after the hurricane.

Butler: What was it like?
Brewton: It was surreal. The pictures on TV didn’t give it justice. I mean it really
did look like somebody had picked up our Gulf Coast, shook us up a little, threw us
back down, and then stomped all over us.

Butler: Now what part of the Gulf Coast did you see? Did you see near Pascagoula
or closer to—

Brewton: No, this was Ocean Springs and Biloxi that I saw.

Butler: And I’ve heard other people say that it was exactly like you say it, just
devastated.

Brewton: It really is. Structures were just matchsticks. It was like they were
nothing, you know. All this stuff was just taken from where it was and moved, and
there was, like, no way it should’ve happened like that, you know. Like it’s taking
Casino Magic and putting it next to the St. Michael’s Church, or putting The Grand in
the middle of [Highway] 90. It’s too weird.

Butler: Well, you said that your mother lived through Camille. Did she say that—did
she have any kind of—she had a reference point with Camille. Did she say that this
was the type of devastation or worse?

Brewton: She thinks it’s worse because her theory—and this is true to some extent—
yes, Camille was a Category Five, but it was more organized. It was smaller. It didn’t
reach as far. And back then, you know, there was less population, less business. As
of now, even though [Katrina] was only a Category Four, when it hit us, it reached out
a hundred miles each way, and there was more property and more population to
destroy. So that’s why Katrina is worse.

Butler: A lot of people said that they’re, you know, not sure if they’re going to stay
on the Coast, or if they’re living someone else now that they’re not going to remain.
How has that affected your family? Are they going to stay in Vancleave?

Brewton: I’m going to stay in Vancleave for now, but I definitely don’t want to be
here for much longer. I never want to live through that again. So, and it’s only me
and my father that’s living there now. My mother lives in Texas now. So she wasn’t
even in Katrina, so.

Butler: Well, if you went through the same kind of circumstances again, and if you
knew that there was a storm, and you are in Hattiesburg, and it looked like the
possibility was there that it may come this way, would you do things any differently?

Brewton: Get in my car and drive north.

Butler: Drive north.
Brewton: Heck, yeah.

Butler: You said that you felt that the university responded in a satisfactory way. What was your feeling about the other authorities, the municipal government, the state government, the federal government?

Brewton: Well, I was very pleased with Haley Barbour’s response to us. I wasn’t too pleased with President Bush’s. And the people in New Orleans, that’s a whole other story. But I was pleased with Haley Barbour, and I think he did do a lot to help us out. And he did his part, and it was just our responsibility to help ourselves, in my opinion. Instead of just expecting that he was going to help us, we should’ve helped ourselves.

Butler: You said that you weren’t pleased with President Bush’s response. What were you unhappy with that he did or didn’t do?

Brewton: Well, that he was at Camp David at the time, that it took him two days, I think, to even acknowledge that we were in the middle of a catastrophe; stuff like that.

Butler: There seems to be a recurring theme in these interviews. A lot of people think that because of where this disaster took place in Mississippi and Louisiana, that had this occurred in, say, Los Angeles and New York, the response would’ve been different. Do you think that’s true?

Brewton: Yes. Oh, yes. I mean they didn’t even realize that Mississippi existed before this. We weren’t even a concern to anybody. You know those people up in New York who were hearing about it, and like, “Where? I never heard of that place. Does that place exist?” You know these people are ignorant to our situation. But it’s not their—it’s really not their responsibility to pick us up; we need to pick ourselves up. But we do need help.

Butler: When do you plan to graduate from the university?

Brewton: I planned on December. I’m still planning on December.

Butler: I guess that leads into another question. How has the storm affected your life? I know this is probably one of these questions that you can’t really fully address until five or ten years down the road, but can you see right now how this storm has maybe changed your life, even in small ways?

Brewton: Unfortunately, for the most part, it was just a really big inconvenience to me because I wasn’t completely affected. Like I said, I didn’t lose property; I didn’t lose family members. So, to me, it didn’t really affect me that much.

Butler: Well, I guess what I’m getting at—I have heard from one doctor that everyone south of Jackson, Mississippi, is suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder as a result of the storm. Has it affected—you know, it’s kind of a post-
Katrina malaise that I’ve heard it described as. Has it affected you in that manner at all?

**Brewton:** Well, when I heard Rita was coming, I almost had a breakdown. I called my mother at midnight and started crying, because of that, but other than that I don’t think I’ve—I’ve been too busy to be affected. It’s very stressful now. So much is happening at one time. You really don’t have time to stop and think about it.

**Butler:** Well, as a final question, will you remain in this area? Will you move back to the Gulf Coast, or would you probably choose to live somewhere else?

**Brewton:** As of right now, I wouldn’t mind staying where I am at the moment. I don’t think I want to go back to the Coast to live. But Vancleave is actually a pretty safe place to live. We’re north of the interstate in the rural part, you know, so it’s really not a bad place to live in reference to hurricanes and natural disasters.

**Butler:** Well, I think with that we’ll conclude the interview, and I thank you.

**Brewton:** OK.

(end of interview)