Mississippi Oral History Project

Hurricane Katrina Oral History Project

An Oral History

with

Ella Kliger

Interviewers: Kelsey Lange and Olivia Ronkainen

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Biography

Pamela “Ella” Kliger was born January 30, 1969, in Boston, Massachusetts. Her father Harvey (b: August 9, 1934, in Boston) and mother Marilyn Ritter (b: December 31, 1940, in New York) were married December 19, 1965, in New York. Ms. Kliger’s father is an attorney and her mother is an accountant. Her own professions have included technical writer, Starbucks manager, scuba divemaster, and working in the Michael Dukakis presidential campaign. Since 2006, she has been an independent filmmaker. At the time of the interview, Ms. Kliger had moved to the Mississippi Gulf Coast to document the experiences of those living, working, assisting, and recovering in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

Ms. Kliger’s educational history encompasses Mason Rice Elementary School, Day Junior High School, Newton North High School, and Tulane University. She enjoys “meeting new people, engaging in lengthy, thought-provoking conversations long past dark, scuba diving, travel, beachcombing, reading, and working crossword puzzles and other word games.” Her religious affiliation is Jewish.

Ms. Kliger comments: “As a relatively recent transplant to the Mississippi Gulf Coast, I am overwhelmed by the generosity of spirit that has been showered upon me. Even in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, this is a special place to live. I feel like I’m home.”
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AN ORAL HISTORY
This is an interview for the Mississippi Oral History Program of The University of Southern Mississippi. The interview is with Ella Kliger and is taking place on February 21, 2007. The interviewers are Kelsey Lange and Olivia Ronkainen.

**Lange:** 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 Ella Kliger and is taking place on February 21, 2007, at 10:30 a.m. in Pascagoula, Mississippi, at the St. John’s Episcopal Church. The interviewers are Kelsey Lange and Olivia Ronkainen. First, I’d like to thank you, Ella Kliger, for taking the time 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?

**Kliger:** Sure. My name is Ella Kliger.

**Lange:** And for the record, in case all the labels are lost or damaged, how do you spell your name?

**Kliger:** E-L-L-A, K-L-I-G-E-R.

**Ronkainen:** OK. So could you tell us a little bit about when and where you were born?

**Kliger:** Sure. I was born in Boston, Massachusetts, in 1969; January 30, for anyone wanting to send birthday cards. (laughter) And grew up there.

**Lange:** Perfect. OK. And for the record, what was your father’s name?

**Kliger:** Herbert Kliger.

**Ronkainen:** And your mother’s maiden name?

**Kliger:** Marilyn Ritter.

**Lange:** And where did you grow up?

**Kliger:** In Newton Center, Massachusetts, five miles outside of Boston.
**Ronkainen:** How long have you lived on the Mississippi Gulf Coast?

**Klinger:** I was here off and on through the fall, and I officially moved here in January.

**Ronkainen:** Of?

**Klinger:** Of 2007.

**Lange:** OK. And where is your neighborhood currently?

**Klinger:** Well, currently, I actually float between different volunteer centers down here; so this is actually one of my neighborhoods, here in Pascagoula, at the Operation TLC Volunteer Center down the street, on Pascagoula Street. And I also live in D'Iberville, which is the north part of Biloxi, and there’s another volunteer center there.

**Lange:** Perfect. So you are involved with the different relief organizations?

**Klinger:** I am. And then there are several other cities that I visit frequently on the Coast.

**Ronkainen:** OK. So we’ll start from the beginning and then move on to that. What did you do when you were in Boston?

**Klinger:** I’ve done several different things. I was managing a Starbucks for a while, I was a technical writer, and then most recently, I was a producer for a small community-access cable station, Somerville Community Access Television, which is in Somerville, Massachusetts, just outside of Boston.

**Lange:** And what did you hear about Katrina before arriving on the Coast?

**Klinger:** I heard it was bad, but I didn’t know it was that bad. And I know that, from the interviews I’ve done, I hear that all the time. But, you know, saw the news footage right after it in August of 2005, and then other things took my attention. So it sort of drifted out of my consciousness. Before I came down here, I had read on the anniversary date, so August 29, 2006, a story in the Boston Phoenix, I believe it was, an alternative newspaper that was doing a story about a nonprofit group called Mississippi Home Again, that’s actually based out of the Operation TLC Volunteer Center. And when I read the story, I e-mailed one of the cofounders, who was from New Hampshire, and about two weeks later, she was going to be in the Boston area. And so she came up, and I was planning at that point to do a quick thirty-minute interview with her and go back to my regularly-scheduled life, (laughter) throw it on our cable station, maybe raise a little money for her organization, because it sounded like they were doing cool stuff. After I met with her and our thirty-minute interview turned into a two-and-a-half-hour conversation, I decided that I really needed to come down and see what was happening because I was, quite frankly, shocked that thirteen
months after the storm, the stories she was telling me sounded just incredible, in the
truest sense of the word. So the next week I flew down, and I flew into New Orleans
and then spent four days driving around Mississippi and decided that I really needed to
put some more effort into developing a documentary about the current situation that
was happening in coastal Mississippi.

**Ronkainen:** Good. So why was it you chose to document Mississippi, as opposed to
New Orleans or other areas that were affected?

**Kliger:** Well, interesting that you should ask that because it really is pretty telling. I
went to Tulane [University]; so I lived in New Orleans for a few years and, you know,
still have friends who live there, friends who went through the storm. New Orleans
has a national presence, and they’ve certainly gotten a ton of press coverage, and not
that it’s unmerited. What I’ve learned was—when I came over the coast to
Mississippi, I learned a couple of things: one, that they hadn’t attracted the attention
that I felt that the scale of the disaster deserved here in coastal Mississippi. And that
really it was a different kind of disaster than what happened in New Orleans. Loss is
loss, and everybody in the four-state area that was affected by Katrina lost. But New
Orleans was more of a man-made disaster based on gambling that was done for years
with monies that should have gone to shoring up the levees. Right after Hurricane
Katrina passed, there was no water on the street. It was fine. Then the levees broke.
In Mississippi, seventy miles of coastline were stormed by a thirty-foot storm surge.
They were slammed by a thirty-foot storm surge. Seventy miles across the entire
width of the state took a direct hit from the bands of the hurricane. And the
destruction that I saw last September—I mean this past September—and the
destruction that you see today, driving around the neighborhoods, many of those
places look exactly as they did August 30, 2005. There is a lot of obstacles to the
rebuilding process. There’s a lot of different considerations when you’re talking about
a region, an entire region that was affected by the kind of storm that Katrina was. And
there’s a lot of components about the makeup of rural Mississippi that have also
affected the cleanup efforts and rebuilding process, and then there’s the political stuff.
But in reality I just felt that it was a compelling story down here to talk to the
residents, to talk to the nonprofits. A lot of nonprofits sprung up in the wake of the
hurricane, and I thought that that was interesting as well, that people would see the
gaps in services available down here and decide, instead of sort of throwing up their
hands or just sending some money to a big organization, they decided to start their
own.

**Lange:** Great. So in particular, as you are doing this, has a certain theme developed
about your documentary? Or is that still up in the air?

**Kliger:** There have been a couple different themes. One of them is definitely the
outpouring of support from volunteers; the repetitive stories that I hear about, “I came
for a week, two months ago.” “I came; this is my fifth trip down here.” “I can’t stay
away.” Or, “I came here, and then I decided to move here.” A lot of people came
here and even some—again, I don’t want to position this like an either/or situation
with New Orleans, but the reality is, it’s just a different culture here in Mississippi. It’s a different situation here in Mississippi, and the fact that it was a direct result of a direct hit by the storm, I think affects the way people perceive the damage and the loss.

Ronkainen: How do you feel that people are perceiving the damage and loss? And what particular about the culture stands out?

Kliger: What stands out to me is the incredible, insurmountable faith that people have in God and government down here. It’s something that I’ve just never seen. Considering what people have been through down here in the last eighteen months, honestly, it is incredible to me that there aren’t more bitter people. (laughter) Honestly, I think I’d be really, really bitter if what happened to the folks in Mississippi had happened to me. And honestly, they’re not. I hear time and again, “I’m alive. I didn’t lose anyone in my family. It’s just stuff.” And these are people who lost their home, all their possessions, their car, their business, their job, their church, their school, their neighbor’s houses, the places where they used to gather for Sunday dinner. They lost everything that they could have, and that they had collected over a lifetime. And for them to have been living in the conditions they’ve been living in, which run the gamut, is really incredible to me that there wouldn’t be more resentment. There’s certainly a lot of pain; there’s certainly a lot of bad days; there’s certainly a lot of simmering mental health issues and concerns down here, but there’s also a huge support network. There’s a ton of people who have gone out of their way to help their neighbors; there’s a ton of people who have gone out of their way to help their relatives, and there’s an incredible openness to the volunteers and the people who’ve come down here to help; and honestly, some real incredible gratitude from people. You know, I drive; I drive all over the Coast for this. And at Christmastime, one of the people who I’d met, one of the residents, again, who lost her car, her home, her business, gave me a Christmas present. She gave me a portable charger for my car because she was worried that I might get stuck somewhere with a dead battery. It’s incredible to me, not that she would be thoughtful, not that that’s so unusual, but that she would go out of her way for somebody when really she’s still recovering from her own disaster. And the problem is that everyone around you also is recovering from their own disaster, and the disaster of their family, you know. I don’t know what it’s like from where you’re from, but where I’m from, you know, family is kind of like you have a big holiday party once a year, maybe your paths cross a couple of times a year for minor holidays or events, you know, a graduation, a funeral, a birth. I’m meeting families who literally grow up together, who, everybody in a small geographical area might live within a mile or two of each other, and they all lost their homes. There are some families where collectively—and they think collectively, like aunts, uncles, cousins, brothers-in-law—up to twenty-one homes might have been lost. So when you think about, in most disasters, you can draw upon familial resources or other things, but the reality of it is, here, you’re in it. And they’re paralyzed because they can’t help their family because they are still trying to get their own house in order. And the other side story of this is that for people who get together every weekend, who it’s just, it’s a commonality to have dinner for twenty, that hasn’t been
able to happen in FEMA [Federal Emergency Management Agency] trailers; there’s no place large enough to gather your families. So there’s a whole pressure of not having your typical, comfortable settings to rely on in the midst of having the rug pulled out from under you.

Ronkainen: How do you think this family support and this strong faith in religion that a lot of people in Mississippi, as well as New Orleans, have drawn from, how do you think that’s different from maybe, if like, you were saying in Boston that you don’t feel like that would have happened? How do you think that differs a lot, now so that they’re dealing with it?

Kriger: I think it’s the saving grace for coastal Mississippi, and I think it’s probably the only thing that gives them hope to get through when they wake up in the kind of situation—you know, in my neighborhood when I was growing up, there was one scary house on the block. Right? The old McMullan place, you know. Windows were blown out, you know, and of course, all the kids made up scary stories about, “Don’t let old Mrs. McMullan catch you,” dah dah dah. And there’s talk in cities about blighted buildings and cities are all—imagine your entire neighborhood looks like that, and every day you get up and first of all, you probably haven’t slept well because you’re sleeping on a thin foam mattress in a FEMA trailer that’s drafty and cold and noisy, and there’s no personal space. And then you walk outside and trees are still broken in half, and debris higher than snowdrifts lines the side of the road, and twisted metal is still present, and debris that you know was there. You know, billboards are wrenched, and churches are destroyed, and that’s the world you’re living in. It looks like, I don’t know, something out of like Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome in some of these neighborhoods. That’s the new normal because that’s what the situation is down here right now. And if you’re fortunate enough to have a job and if you’re fortunate enough to have insurance on your car or maybe have been able to fix your car, you know, you see it. There are so many layers to this because, you know, people who were prepared for the disaster, all their preparations floated away. People had ten, twelve foot of water in their house; so all the—you know, they say have three days of food and five days of water and extra clothes, and put your pictures, like, on the shelf and stuff, and have a suitcase ready to go. And that all went under water. And your cars floated away, and all the municipal vehicles in towns floated away. You know, every ambulance went under water in Waveland. Every fire truck was destroyed by the water. So when everything in your neighborhood and in your worldview is gone, and there’s nothing familiar and all your landmarks are gone, it’s disturbing in a way that you can’t conceive of. The other thing that I hear all the time from volunteers is, and not from residents so much because they’re living in it, but from volunteers is, “I’ve seen pictures; I saw the news; I read the stories, but until I got here, I didn’t get it.” And somebody that I interviewed, Paige Roberts of the Red Cross said, she goes, “You know, it’s a three-dimensional disaster, and until you’re in it, you can’t absorb it. And even in it, you can’t absorb it. It’s just too big.”

Lange: How do you feel that it’s affected you personally, coming here to witness this?
Kliger: Oh, it’s changed my life, changed my life to the core. For one, I closed up my life in Boston and left, moved down here. I don’t really have a concrete timeframe for this to end. And I think, honestly, when I finish the documentary, I’ll probably just find a job with one of the organizations down here because the more I find out about Mississippi, the more that I want to stay in Mississippi. The people have been generous and gracious and just amazing, and funny and good-hearted and far more aware and intuitive, I guess. You know, you don’t know an area until you live in it. But, and just really, I guess, you know, you hear about—I used to live in Key West—an attitude of gratitude, right, is sort of a new-agey kind of thing to say. The folks here—and I’ve met hundreds and hundreds of people—they live it everyday under the worst conditions imaginable. And they’re grateful, you know, and it makes me, it helps put your life in perspective. It helps you realize what you used to complain about and then you look at what people don’t complain about down here, and it really just shifts your perspective. You know, when I flew down—I flew back and forth, I think, three times before I decided to move down here. And on the plane the last time when I was coming in, there was, it was probably like Extreme Home Makeover or one of those home improvement shows, right? And they’d made over this house, just beautifully. You know, and the kid had in his room, he was into, you know, stargazing, and he had this contraption that tied to a telescope on the roof, and he could actually see on his computer screen the different, you know, skyscapes. Amazing, you know. Every room they opened the door to, the mom is screaming and jumping up and down for joy and crying and you know, those shows are a big lovefest at the end. And a couple of things happened to me. Right then when I’m looking at it, I thought, “Of all the money that they spent on all the gadgets in that show, they probably could have had five or ten families back in a home. Basic, but back in a home, out of a FEMA trailer, out of a mold-compromised house.”

The other thing that happened is the next day I went to the warehouse that Mississippi Home Again runs, and they have some building materials there. They focus primarily on beds, stoves, refrigerators, and hot water heaters. The big ticket items that, you know, if you’re lucky enough to get into a home maybe with Habitat [for Humanity], or one of the other faith-based organizations or something else, there’s really no provision for contents, and that’s what these two women, Annie Card and Tammy Agard, focus on. They decided after coming down here, maybe six weeks after the storm, that that was what they were going to focus on. So the things that help you get back to normal, like the Red Cross will—I know I’m digressing, sorry. The Red Cross will run a food bank, and they will spend untold amounts of money to feed people, but their charter doesn’t allow them to buy you a stove and a refrigerator so that you can get back to cooking for yourself, so that you can get that self-sufficiency back. That’s not what they do. So that was what Tammy and Annie decided to focus on because even if—or if your house wasn’t totally demolished, if you don’t have a car, you can’t drive to the grocery store. Groceries are expensive if you can’t refrigerate them. The FEMA trailers, the refrigerators are tiny, wouldn’t hold three days of groceries for a family of four. So what do they do? They go to the dollar menus, quite frankly, at the drive-throughs or at the fast-foods; so then you’ve got health issues on top of everything else you’re dealing with. You’re eating crap, or
you’re eating cheap. You’re eating Ramen Noodles; you’re eating whatever you can buy that’s cheap at the dollar store. So, rolling back, (laughter) being down here has completely affected the way I look at what’s important, the way I have chosen to structure my life. And seeing the outpouring of support from people, both local residents and volunteers, who have traveled far has really been life altering. And my goal with this documentary is to capture the fact that hundreds of thousands of people have come down here to help rebuild Mississippi, and I honestly believe that hundreds of thousands more would if they understood that this was still going on. When I first decided to come down here in the fall, people were like, “That was over a year ago, you know? We’re not seeing it in any of the—isn’t everything back to normal?” And it’s really far from normal here; it’s just a huge problem. There is a lot of structural, infrastructure issues that even under the best of circumstances couldn’t have been solved logistically in a year and a half. And there’s a lot of, you know, other issues with dealing with a disaster of this scale. And luckily I’ve met some really good people down here who are finding solutions and are making great progress, despite obstacles that have been placed in their way.

Ronkainen: So when you’re looking for interviewees, are you interviewing more volunteers or people that lived through the hurricane? Do you want to talk more about the interviews, your most memorable ones or one’s you—

Kliger: Kind of both. And really the way I kind of find it, I wouldn’t say it’s random, but it’s linked in the sense that you meet somebody and they say, “Oh, you should talk to this person,” that they have a story. Oh, I didn’t actually finish my earlier thought about the Extreme Home Makeover. So I’m watching this television show, Extreme Home Makeover, and everyone’s oohing and aahing and screaming over the house and excited—and I think that this is an important point so, sorry to belabor it, but—the next day I’m at the warehouse talking to people who are going to be given beds or stoves, and they’ve all been case-managed and, you know, there’s a process. It’s not just, “Hey, we’re handing out stuff.” We’re trying to give it to [those] who have no other way of getting those things; it’s going to take them months to save up $500 to go buy this appliance. And this woman was in there, and they had some windows, and they had the right size window for the hole in her house. And this woman, when she heard that she was getting a window for her house, was jumping up and down and couldn’t have been more excited than the folks who got an entirely new, glamour house. And when I saw that, I just thought, “This woman—it’s like she won a million dollars in the lottery because she’s going to have a window instead of plastic sheeting over a gaping hole in her house.” She couldn’t afford it. And people down here, for the most part, are buying sheetrock a couple sheets at a time, or buying paint one gallon at a time, or getting what they can get. As they work their regular job to earn money to support themselves, [they] are then coming home to a second full-time job of rebuilding their homes. And those are the kind of stories that I’m looking at are—you know, the sexy media story, I think, is people who are—and again if you spent any time at all in a FEMA trailer, you can’t help but scoff at people who are like, “Oh, there are people who are living off the government, sitting in a FEMA trailer for free,” blah blah blah. I’m telling you; I don’t know how bad your life would have to
be to think that you were living a charmed life to be able to kick back in a FEMA trailer, but I’m telling you, the people I’m meeting, the people I’m talking to, want out of that as quick as possible. They can’t wait till the day when they are done with being in a FEMA trailer. And I’ve stayed in FEMA trailers; they’re not comfortable; they’re not home. This is a state, Mississippi is a state where—the slogan as you drive into Louisiana is “Bienvenue en Louisiane,” right? “Welcome to Louisiana” in French to show their heritage. When you drive into Alabama, it’s “Alabama, the Beautiful” on the state sign. When you drive into Mississippi, the sign says, “Mississippi, it’s like coming home.” There is a feeling of home down here that’s like nothing I’ve experienced, and a lot of people have said to me, you know, “Why would people rebuild? They got hit with [Hurricane] Camille in 1969; they got hit with this storm, Katrina, in 2005. You know, thirty-five years is not that long apart, thirty-six years. Why would you rebuild in a hurry? You know, it could happen next year; it could happen the next week?” That’s not even on the drawing—for the people who are still here, for the people who didn’t relocate right after the storm or before the storm, it’s not even a consideration; it’s not an option. This is home. This is where their families have been for generations. This is where they’re tied to the land; they know the people. They know everybody in the neighborhood. And, on the darker side, there’s a lot of people who don’t have the option to move. Maybe they’ve got an elderly relative who’s not going to move; maybe they can’t afford it because they don’t have first, last, and security deposits for rent, and they don’t know anywhere else to go. They’re not going to pick up and venture off to Atlanta to restart a whole new life. They have roots here. And those are the kind of people that I’m talking to.

In D’Iberville where I live, one of the family guys that I talk to said, “You know, it’s closely kinned here in a way that you don’t see in other places.” He grew up, and literally almost every house on his block was owned by somebody in his family or by marriage or birth. And the church was there, and the school was there, and his aunts taught at the school. And the grocery was a block away. And it wasn’t even so much that, like, “Oh, you feel like you couldn’t go anywhere else, or you wouldn’t go anywhere else.” You had everything you wanted or needed right there; why would you go anywhere else? And these are folks who are, you know, rebuilding their folk’s house. A couple of people I’ve met, guys in their forties or fifties who are putting their own homes and careers on hold to rebuild their families’ houses, and not just their mom’s house, but their mom and helping out their cousin and helping out whoever needs it. The people I’ve met, the volunteers I’ve met, are amazing. I went out to dinner last night with a group from Connecticut, a woman who’s down here for her fourth service trip, and honestly, if she didn’t have a job and a husband and a daughter living at home, she’d have moved here already. And she says, “Every time I go home, I just want to be back here.” And that’s how I felt; I mean, I came down for four days; then I came down for sixteen days, and then I came down for six weeks. And then I said, “You know, I don’t want to be anywhere else. I want to be down here.” And there’s a group out of Pennsylvania called Lend a Hand. They’ve been down to D’Iberville fifteen times. They come once a month. They drive down; takes them two days to drive. They work for six days, and then they drive back. I met a group over Christmas break from Wyoming from a tiny college up there. Twenty-two hundred miles, three days drive, seven days working, three days home. That was their
holiday break. That was how they chose to spend their holidays. And honestly, you know, here’s the other side of it: people up north who haven’t been down here often say, “Oh, that’s so noble of you. Wow, you’re going to volunteer in Mississippi. Wow, I could never do that.” Or, “Wow, that’s so hard.” You know what? It’s hard in the sense that, you know, most volunteers aren’t staying at fancy hotels; they’re not on vacation, per se. But almost invariably, the volunteers I’ve talked to say time and again, “I feel that I got so much more from this experience than I give.” And they’re the ones who are hauling dirt or hammering nails or hanging sheetrock or painting and, you know, working in the Mississippi mud. And there’s a reason they call it the Mississippi Mud. It’s like nothing else. I watched a cement truck at a worksite yesterday get totally stuck in the mud, and it’s a mess, you know? It’ll suck you in, suck your boot right off your foot, you know. But what you hear from people and again is—and these are people who have maybe donated a lot of money or their time or been down numerous times, they just feel, “You know what? What I’m doing, I’m having fun; I’m meeting amazing people. The residents are so grateful for help.” And they’re also amazed. You know, coastal Mississippi, some of these small towns, D’Iberville isn’t exactly a hot spot. There’s not a huge train of foreigners running through there. And the people that I’ve interviewed have also said to me, they’re like, “You know, we’ve never met anyone from, you know, outside the state, or some of these folks from New York.” You know, they have their misconceptions, too. They have their stereotypes about Yankees and Northerners and whatever. And you know what? They’re amazed, and the connections that have been forged. There were volunteers who came down here after the storm, worked in the fall, maybe worked here for, let’s say, a week, right? Pretty brief meeting. Have kept in touch with the families that they worked with and, in fact, last summer when there were storm warnings, I talked to several residents who told me that they received calls and invitations from people that if they had to evacuate, “Come stay with us. Come to Kentucky.” “Come to Tennessee.” “Come to Pennsylvania.” “Come to”—wherever. And for that level of connection, that’s the story I want to show, is this incredible outpouring of support from people, the long-term connections that are going to bolster us, whether the next disaster is a copy cat hurricane down here or, you know, a hurricane like Hurricane Hugo that hit the Carolinas, or perhaps a terrorist thing that hits New York City again or Chicago or LA.

One of the best interviews I did was with a woman over in Moss Point, one of the smaller towns. And she said, “You know what?” She’s a middle-aged black woman with a very small, solidly connected church, and from her church they partner with Northwest Medical, which is a group out in Oregon that did, basically, their first domestic operation here. They’re pretty much an international relief group, and based on what they saw after Hurricane Katrina, they came down, and they supported this group over in Moss Point, which is in Jackson County here in the easternmost coastal county of Mississippi. And she said, “You know what? In general, we don’t volunteer.” What she meant was you don’t see a lot of black volunteers going out to a group like Hands On or the Red Cross. She goes, “We take care of our own. When somebody in our congregation needs help, we help. But we don’t do that sort of organized volunteering. That’s not really our culture.” She goes, “But after this, when I saw all these people who left their homes, left their families, cost them money
to come down here to help us, well, as scared as I would be to get in my car and drive to a city or get on a plane and go to a place I’ve never been before, I think I’d do it now. I think I’d do it because those folks came who didn’t know us, didn’t have any ties to us, came down to help us. I’d get a little van of people together, and we’d go help maybe next time Florida gets hit with a storm. And it’s just something I didn’t really realize that we could do, and I didn’t realize anybody would do it for us.”

Lange: The people that you interview and the political situation, what did they, the people that you interviewed, feel that the main reasons are? How do they view the political aspects of this country?

Kliger: You know, I would say that there’s certainly some people—I don’t want to sugarcoat it. There’s certainly some people who are very upset with the government, and they’re very upset with the lack of response. And, mind you, there was a huge breakdown in response rate, and there were people who were truly shocked to their core, veterans who are more bewildered than angry that their government would let them down in this way. And most of the people, you know, it’s a blue-collar area. You got a lot of fishermen, shrimpers, generations who’ve spent their lives on the water who certainly have dealt with the government before with fishing licenses and rules and regulations and stuff, but pretty much take care of themselves. And there’s a huge resistance to outwardly blame people, I guess. They’re not saying the government needs to fix this or has to fix this or should have fixed this. There’s certainly some surprise about how things were handled and all of the hoops that people have to jump through, and I think a lot of that is sort of cultural with the way things get done, and the way that government, you know, in the main probably, maybe has to operate. But there are a lot of people who, you know, they call it being assessed for need. It’s a needs assessment form, which sounds like a very benign term, but it might be a thirty-page stack of paper with all of these questions that you have to fill out, and you have to fill it out for every organization. Now, FEMA tried to put into place this thing called “FEMA Can,” which is a database that was supposed to link all this together. So, ideally, you would just have to tell your story once. But it didn’t quite work out that way. And oftentimes, you’d fill out the paper; you’d stand in line, and again, keep in mind that it was about 99 degrees at the end of August, early September 2005, so limited water maybe, no ice, no air-conditioning to speak of, you’re standing in long lines at these FEMA offices set up, and certainly the FEMA folks were working under challenging situations as well. But then, they would send you, they would mail you the paperwork from the information that you diligently gave to them, and it’d be wrong. So you would have to call them, and you’d wait on hold, or you’d get somebody, and they would look through your file or not have your file and you’d have to maybe start the whole process over again. A lot of the resources required a huge amount of time to get to the resources, and you’d fill out the paperwork and, again, you’ve lost all of your paperwork. You’ve lost [pause], it all floated away, or it got moldy, right? So you’re being asked to bring in paperwork that you don’t have. FEMA offered people the option of going online to fill out the paperwork. Well, that, first of all, assumes that they’ve got power; that they’ve got a computer; that they have the skill level to or the knowledge of what that means to go
online and go through the process, and a lot of those were gaps that weren’t really addressed. And if you were lucky enough to have a job after the storm, you probably had to go to that job, and maybe you had to walk to that job and, or carpool with somebody else, and maybe the FEMA office was only open office hours in your area. And if your job required you to be at your job, and you didn’t have the luxury of having a phone and a computer at your desk, because that’s not what most of the jobs are like down here in coastal Mississippi, then you didn’t get to apply. And if you didn’t understand the deadlines, or you didn’t understand the questions people were asking, and again, you’ve just lost everything except literally the clothes on your back, maybe you actually watched some of your relatives die during the storm, and there’s lines of people, lines of your neighbors around standing behind you, you know. They probably had cubicles maybe set up, but you’re being asked to tell what happened to you and what your resources are and what you need in a pretty public area. The person sitting on the other side of the desk is looking at you like you’re a file. You’re a file that they’re opening; you’re a case on their desk.

And I’ll tell you the other thing I’ve had to—you know, being from Boston, I talk pretty fast, and I keep to a tight schedule, and I kind of cut to the chase. But that’s not how people talk in Mississippi, and there was a huge cultural disconnect, from the government assuming that they could come in and take down information on a form in a nice orderly way. But you know what? And this oral history project at USM probably could shed some light on this. That’s not how people talk in Mississippi. Sometimes it’s a very circuitous route, and sometimes they need to tell you about the grandmother’s china cabinet that went under water. So, when you say, “Well, how much did you lose? What are your contents?” They don’t have a dollar figure in their mind. They’re not going, “Oh, I lost $75,000 worth of stuff.” They’re like, “I lost a hand-painted plate that my grandmother gave my mother who gave to me. And I lost all those. I lost every baby picture that I had of my four kids and my baby pictures. And maybe the pictures of my relatives.” And those stories, there wasn’t an outlet because everybody in the area, they didn’t feel they could really talk to their neighbors because everybody was like, “Oh, I’m not so bad.” You know, here’s another thing that I heard a lot from people who worked on the Red Cross food trucks, people saying, people standing on slabs of rubble saying, “I’m fine. There’s somebody else who needs it more than me.” And the volunteers are looking at them like, “That would be you.” And they said, “No, no, I’m sure, go two blocks over. Mr. Myers is over there, lives alone, uses a walker to get around, not too quick; go check on him. OK, maybe I’ll take one bottle of water.” I got to tell you, maybe this is a northern bias, but I got to think that in Boston, people would be going, “Just unload the truck right here. I’ll take everything you got.” And you know what, that’s not what happened in coastal Mississippi. In coastal Mississippi, people took the bare minimum of what they needed and thought of their neighbors. Or there were distribution points, and if you were lucky enough to have a car, most of those folks that I’ve talked to, went, and they said, “Look, I got six people in my neighborhood who don’t have cars, who are elderly, who can’t get over here. Can you also give me the allotment of ice for them?” And that’s what happened in these small towns in Mississippi. So, it’s not the exciting sizzle story of New Orleans looting, and I’m not saying that it didn’t happen. I don’t want to be Pollyanna about this. What I’m saying
is, the stories that I’m hearing and the stories when I go and I visit people repeatedly and I get to know them, then they open up to you. The situation that happened here in Mississippi after the storm, couldn’t have been more different than just a few miles west in New Orleans. There was real concern. There was a guy that I talked to in Waveland who with a nineteen-foot skiff saved twenty-two people, five dogs, and a bird, going back and forth because he’d see somebody struggling, and he’s like, “I couldn’t leave them.” And he did it ten hours, maybe, out in the midst of the storm, seeing people stranded somewhere, helping them out because that’s what you do. And it just, it’s stellar and quite frankly, I think people in Mississippi are getting a bit of a raw deal sort of being lumped in with the situation in New Orleans; very different: different history, different culture, different people. But people who are outside of this area lump it all in together. And you know, again, even as far north as Hattiesburg, they got a lot of tree damage and wind damage, and you know what? If your roof got caved in and you’re struggling, and that’s a huge hardship for you maybe, but you almost feel like, “It’s not as bad as what some people went through.” There’s a huge hierarchy down here, in fact, including like, Pearlington, which is far west, which is pretty much where the eye of the storm went over, when you talk to people, who again, are standing there with nothing, in Pascagoula, and you mention you were just over in Pearlington, they go, “Oh! Those poor people, they got hit hard.” And from my perspective, I’m like “Um, and that would be you, too.” And they’re like, “Oh, no. I’m fine.” And then you hear about these stories of people just, you know, going out of their way to help their neighbors. It’s inspiring. I tell you; you know what it is? It’s the feel-good story of the year. And the people of Mississippi aren’t, they’re not boasting about it; there’s no real outlet for it. You know, LOX, WLOX did some great stories about storm recovery, and everyone talks about the resiliency of the people of Mississippi.

Ronkainen: Sorry, what’s WLOX?

Kliger: It’s a local television station here. They’ve done a really good job. They did a great video after the storm. But I tell you, it’s eighteen months. People have used up any 401K or savings or family resources. They’re still waiting on grant money that’s been promised for months and months and months from the government. There’s a lot of money that was raised through charities, through good-hearted people, who thought, “When I send in my check, my donation, it’s going to go to families in need.” And I don’t have firm figures, but we are talking millions upon millions of dollars that has been sitting in bank accounts for over a year that has not yet been distributed. And when you talk about the political problems, the distribution network, the inability of the largest groups with the most money to get it down to the people who need it most, and their either unwillingness or inability to regrant monies to the small minimal organizations like Mississippi Home Again, like Project Teamwork, like Waveland’s Citizens Fund, like Hope Has a Face, like D’Iberville Volunteers Foundation, those small groups that are on the ground, that are often utilizing local resources, and they don’t have enough funds. They know who needs the money. They’ve got waiting lists of people who could use appliances and roofs put on. And, you know, you’ve got tons—you’ve got Mennonites and Amish and German Baptists,
coming down with their—and the faith-based groups have been amazing down here. But faith-based groups can’t really get government money, but they’re the ones who are doing the best work down here. So it becomes a question of, “What’s your goal? Is your goal to set up a new government agency that can redistribute the money, or is your goal to get the money to the people on the ground who need it to start rebuilding their lives?” Then you have to kind of question, “What’s the best method?” And you know, the government does some things really well; the Red Cross does some things really well, but a lot of the small groups down here—Salvation Army has been huge down here. There’s a lot of groups doing great, great stuff. Presbyterian Disaster Assistance (PDA) and then just the small folk, just the people who came down and set up their own little operation, you know? And they just go out, and they help people get back on their feet. They help them with some construction; they help them with paint; they helped them. Samaritan’s Purse, God’s Katrina Kitchen, I mean the list is enormous. But the people who have the most money, either—I don’t know.

You know, when I first came down, I thought, “Oh, they’re heartless. They’re unaware.” And then I thought, “You know what? Maybe there’s—who does the inaction serve? Who benefits by that money not being distributed in a timely fashion?” It’s a hard question to answer because, you know what? This isn’t—we’re not looking for a cure for Huntington’s Disease. This is a logistics problem. The solution lies in the proper proportions of manpower, materials, and money being in the right place at the right time. That’s all it is. I mean, when you look at it in those terms, you go, “This could be fixed in a couple, three years.” But if the money doesn’t get into the right place, if you don’t—if you have a warehouse full of sheetrock and no one to hang it, or a hundred volunteers and no materials to fix the homes, then you don’t get to fix the problem quickly. And it becomes a question of maybe some people’s goals aren’t to get people back home quickly, maybe it’s to keep their job for the next eight to ten years. And I don’t think it’s really been done maliciously; I just think that’s sort of the nature of the beast. Really, disaster relief? It is big money now. It wasn’t like that after Camille. And it’s like that now, and so we need to take maybe a fresh look at how we do disaster relief. Because as big as a disaster as this was, if Katrina had hugged the Coast and hit Raleigh/Durham, if a similar storm had hit Houston, let’s say, it really would be inconceivable. I mean, nobody’s really tracking the figures effectively. I’ve heard 1.2 million families affected. I’ve heard a million people displaced through shelter systems. You know, there’s all sorts of ways to play with the statistics, but the reality is that just in Mississippi, the best counts I’ve found, the ones that Habitat for Humanity is using, are in Jackson County, which is where we are, 23,500 homes were blown off their slabs; there’s nothing left except the foundation. That doesn’t count the homes that were compromised, that are unsafe to be in, or that were just, you know, maybe got enough water and roof damage to create a mold-contaminated situation so a whole house has to be gutted or demolished. In the state, they are counting about 75,000 homes down to the slab and maybe 140,000 damaged that need serious construction work. So, in Mississippi prior to the storm was building about 2,000 new homes a year. There’s a woman I met in Waveland who currently is managing 930 cases of families that are just in Waveland. Waveland had a population of probably about 8,000 people before the storm, and she’s been working on the ground for over a year. At her current pace of three new homes a
week, which is pretty ambitious, quite frankly, it’s six and a half years till she finishes her current collection of cases. What do you tell a person? Somebody’s got to be first on the list, and somebody’s got to be last, and what do you tell the person who’s last on the list? That it’s going to be six years before she has the volunteer team and the resources to fix their home.

**Lange:** That kind of leads into another question that I wanted to ask. Just, how do you perceive the area personally in five to ten years? Or maybe, what, like, you would hope to see would happen, maybe in this area or the area as a whole?

**Kliger:** You know, it’s really hard to say. There are, as many good people as there are, there are people who have been pushed to the breaking point. Every bad statistic is up here—alcoholism, domestic abuse, arrests for drunk driving, stress-related conditions. People are stressed; as friendly and nice as they are, there are moments when they are just at the breaking point. Columbia just did a study of the mental health issues of people living in trailers, and they studied people last August; the people hadn’t even been in the trailers for a year. Now, we’re looking at sixteen to eighteen months they’ve been living in a trailer that’s probably not much bigger than this room, maybe for a family of four.

**Lange:** Could you describe the FEMA trailers a bit more?

**Kliger:** Sure. You know what? I’m going to just stop here and just change my tape (whispering) because it’s running out because I’m talking.

(brief interruption)

**Lange:** So, just, why don’t you describe a bit more the FEMA trailers and maybe what FEMA stands for?

**Kliger:** FEMA stands for Federal Emergency Management Agency, I think. Yeah, Federal Emergency Management Agency. And certainly they have done a lot of things well, and certainly there have been some errors made. Some things that couldn’t possibly have been predicted, and then some things that probably could have been predicted. (laughter) But be that as it may, the trailers, there’s a wide range. And there’s a wide range of problems in the trailers. We’re talking about trailers that tend to be maybe fourteen by twenty-five foot wide at the large size, and then there’s certainly smaller travel trailers because FEMA didn’t have enough for all the people who needed temporary housing. The trailers also were not really designed to be lived in twenty-four/seven for a year plus. Many of them were purchased on the fly, as literally traveler trailers, the kind of things that you would hook up to a camper, you know, hook up as a camper to take on a two-week vacation in the summertime. There’s health issues associated with the trailers as far as formaldehyde. The Sierra Club is doing a lot of good work in trying to draw some attention to toxicity levels in the trailers. And then there’s the trailers themselves. You know, you’ve got families living in very a small space. Now, “You don’t know how big your house is till you
don’t have one,” is something I heard from a woman that I interviewed because certainly before the storm people were, “Ugh, such a small house.” Well, you know what’s really small? I also heard a very funny story, actually, from a guy who said, “You know what?” He’s about fifty-five. He said, “I was always looking forward to retirement, to getting myself a little RV [recreational vehicle], traveling around the country.” He’s like, “After I get out of this trailer, I will never set foot in another trailer.” He goes, “This has totally cured me of that little fantasy.” (laughter) It’s very small, you know. I’ll give you a brief overview. So, you walk in, and there’s usually three steps up, which is sort of a little bit flimsy metal, and you walk in. And the door is very thin. It’s got a small plastic flip lock on the inside for your deadbolt. There are some trailers that have ramps that had to be refitted with ramps for ADA [Americans with Disabilities Act] compliance. You walk in to most—

Ronkainen: What’s ADA?

Kliger: Americans with Disabilities Act. So if you are elderly or infirm or have a disability, FEMA was required to provide you with a trailer that was accessible. However, many of that didn’t happen immediately, so people were waiting for months. People sustained injuries trying to get in and out of their trailers with walkers, or people were sort of placed in there in wheelchairs and were stuck in their trailers. So, you walk in, and the trailer, there’s typically when you walk in, there’s a bedroom off to the right with a pocket door, which is, you know, sort of thin, you know, maybe particleboard or a hollow core door. And then the bed, if you’re lucky enough to have a double bed in there, takes up pretty much all the space in the room. OK? So, actually, you have to make the bed from outside the room and kind of, with a big flourish, you know, fling the blankets over the bed, and there’s usually cabinets for storage over the bed, except there’s not all that much headspace. I’m 5’8”, and if I were 6’2”—I almost bang my head on the cabinets just literally getting in and out of the bed, so. And there are some tall men who have to live in these trailers, you know, who are squinching into the room and whatever. And then you’ve got your kids; so maybe you’ve got, at the other end of the trailer, if you’re lucky to have a two-bedroom trailer, you might have bunk beds. And some of them have ladders to the top bunk, and some of them don’t. There’s one family I interviewed here in Pascagoula that’s a family of five, three little girls, and the oldest girl, who I think is seven, sleeps on the top bunk, and there is no ladder. So she has to sort of climb up there, and in the middle of the night if she has to get down to go to the bedroom, she jumps. And her two little sisters who are three and five sleep together in the bottom bunk because they want to keep their kitchen space clean. Now, if you have a one-bedroom trailer, your kids are sleeping on the foldout sofa in the living room, and then the bench seat by the kitchen table is also a bed. There’s no storage. If you were lucky enough to salvage some stuff after the storm, there’s room for probably personal effects of maybe the size of a large laundry basket, as far as all the little cabinets that are in there. You don’t have space for kids to do homework; there’s no space, there’s no personal space. There’s not a room with a door. OK, imagine you’re a teenager, and not only have you lost all your stuff, but now, you have no privacy, and you have to stay in a room with your little sister or your little brother. Or maybe you have to, you just—you
know, the kids are really just—they don’t really get it. And they’ve lost everything that seems normal to them, and they have no space. And you’re living in really tight quarters under really stressful circumstances. And then the kitchen. You know, Mississippi has a huge history of good Southern cooking, right? Maybe you’ve got an electric stove, or maybe you have propane. The propane, right after the storm, was about $21 a bottle, and it would last for about a meal and a half, maybe two. So you’ve got an added expense with that. You’ve got a tiny little, like a dorm fridge; I don’t know. Very small, you know, maybe two or three little plastic, wire shelves, enough for a couple of days of groceries. You’ve got maybe two, what they call, eyes, two burners, maybe, on your stove. Some have four, some have a microwave, some have an oven, but you don’t have space because literally, as you walk into the trailer, you’re in a sort of open room that’s both the kitchen and a tiny hallway to the bathroom and the seating area for eating. And the bathroom. Many of the tubs require a pretty high step into the tub, which for some people who have hip or knee or old age issues, it’s a challenge. I’ve met people with serious bruises from slipping or falling or whatever. The whole bathroom is probably two foot square; there’s maybe a medicine cabinet and a little sink and the shower and the tub. You can’t sit in the tub if you’re more than maybe five foot, two, I would think, sit comfortably in the tub.

I’ve heard people joke; they’re like, “Yeah, I can cook breakfast while showering because you’re that kind of close,” which is, you know, embellishment but funny, good sense of humor. And then the showerhead is like a little plastic showerhead. And there’s only, I think, five gallons of water that can be, that are in the hot water heater. So again, if you’re fortunate enough for both parents to have a job, and you’re trying to get yourselves and the kids off to school, it’s tough to do. Plus, you’re cooking breakfast, plus, just the general thing of trying to get kids ready for school. There’s no washer/dryer in the FEMA trailers. Many towns might have just one laundromat available; certainly right after the storm, there wasn’t any, enough power or running water to wash clothes. People were just hand-washing them. And if you’re lucky enough to own land on which you were granted a trailer, you know, you’re paying for utilities that are pretty high because they’re not sort of economically designed. They’re not insulated well; the windows have very poor closures. So oftentimes, the trailer that I stay at sometimes, in Bay St. Louis, if it’s windy, all you hear all night is the whistling wind through the windows, even though I’ve cranked down the knobs as tight as they go.

If you’re living in a FEMA trailer park, you’re looking at a big parking lot, hundreds of trailers set, hammer and tong, just next to each other. Again, there’s no personal space in your trailer; you walk out, you’re looking at a wall of trailers, right? Maybe there’s enough space to park a car next to it. There’s no green space in these FEMA parks. Park being an anomaly, I would say; I would call it the FEMA parking lot. And many of the kids are going to school in modular classrooms; so pretty much their entire world is now circumscribed by the world of modular trailers. And as cute as that kitchen sink is, you really can’t put all the dinner dishes into it. There’s no dishwashers; there’s no space. There’s barely enough storage space; you know, the pantry cabinet’s probably a foot square for your food. There’s maybe a tiny cabinet under the sink for cleaning supplies. It’s not conducive to comfort, and while I’m certain there are people who are happy enough to live off the government, and I’m
pretty sure if you’re living in a FEMA trailer park, you don’t have to pay for utilities, which I suppose is a benefit. I guess the government covers that; however, the trade-off for quality of life is pretty staggering. And there’s a lot of talk, and again, there’s a lot truth to it that there’s drug use; drug use is rampant in the FEMA trailer parks. Guns, shootings, there have been deaths in trailers; there’s a lot of theft going on because, again, I’m guessing that a lot of these manufacturers, the keys needed for the trailers, and plus the—I mean, literally, it’s almost like, you know, like an airplane seatbelt? That’s what the door handle’s like to a FEMA trailer. It wouldn’t take much to pry it open. But I also imagine that some of the keys probably fit; I imagine there’s a dozen types of key, and that they’re kind of rotated. But now, we’ve never had this many FEMA trailers in one space. If you’ve lost everything and the government has been telling you for a year and a half, “There’s grant money coming,” but you haven’t seen any of it, and you received a little bit of emergency fund, but it wasn’t certainly enough to support you, you’ve lost your job, there’s no public transportation, your car is limping along, if you still have one, I’m thinking, honestly, and this is not meant as a judgment in any way, but I’m thinking, “You know what? TV and drugs and alcohol are looking like a pretty good escape route.” Because a lot of people have lost hope. And there’s a lot of other ripple effects stemming from this much regional trauma that’s going to play out more in the years to come. And, again, there’s certainly a lot of this was not necessarily due to the storm. You know, FEMA and other groups, UMCOR [United Methodist Committee on Relief], they talk about deferred maintenance on a home and storm-related damage. What they mean by deferred maintenance is, let’s say you were getting by, living paycheck-to-paycheck, and your roof really needed to be redone. So your house was not in the best of shape, but it was fine, and you know what? You didn’t have $5,000 to fix your roof; so you patched it, you patched it when you could. Maybe your brother-in-law has an operation, and he came over and helped you out or whatever. Your house was fine until the storm came, but then the storm came, and your roof blew off, and you live five miles from the beach. So you didn’t have flood insurance, and your mortgage company never forced you to get it because, “This place has never flooded. It didn’t flood during Camille.” Camille was the standard by which people measured storms. It was the worst storm that ever happened down here. It was the worst; it was the yardstick. So, if you don’t have flood insurance, and the government agencies that are suppose to require you to have flood insurance don’t. They look the other way. And quite frankly, you might not have been able to afford it, anyways. Then you know what? You let things slide; you let some of those regular maintenance issues that might need to be done to your house, go. But if the storm hadn’t happened, your house would have been probably fine for another twenty-five years, and you know what? No, it’s not the prettiest house on the block, but it’s home. However, now, there are agencies that are looking at that, being like, “Well, a lot of that was wrecked before the storm; so we don’t fix that.”

**Lange:** I have so many questions that I could ask. Just, maybe is there anything in particular that you want to put on record, just maybe something like your overall impression or something that you hope to see will happen or anything along those lines or something that you might get out of doing your documentary?
Kliger: You know, I’ve done a lot of research on this, and in fact, the Department of Homeland Security came out with a report called “Hurricane Katrina: Lessons Learned.” And I think they had a hundred and twenty-seven points, recommendations of what they could do differently next time. And truly, some of them have been implemented. But there’s one line in it that really stands out for me, which is, “relationships matter.” What they found through their research was that the relationships that were preexisting between agencies, between people, between organizations are the ones that were most effective during the incredible maelstrom of drama and emergency and activity right after the storm. And intuitively you know that’s true. You know, if you get a cold call from an agency saying, “We’re raising money for X,” depending on your personal circumstances you might donate; you might not. You might have heard of them. It might be like the Police Benevolent Association, might be the Red Cross. You might be moved to help, but you might not. If Tom from your church calls and says, “We’re doing a blanket drive for our sister city in a far flung town,” you might even be more inclined to do it. If you went to school or went on vacation and met people who lived in Mississippi or had friends from college or friends from a job, or you moved away from Mississippi, and you’re now living in Kansas or New York or California, and Liz calls you and says, “My home was just washed away,” you’re going to go out, and you’re going to get every bit of clothing, every bit of donated material, and you might even drive a truck down yourself. So we know that that kind of connectivity is what works, and the same thing works with business. If you know a vendor, if they’ve taken the time to get to know you, if they need something, whether it’s business-related or personal-related, you’re more inclined to help. So, the best possible thing that could come out of this tragedy is for there to be more mechanisms for people to make connections during the calm, so that when the storm hits, they’re connected because I’ll tell you this, and you’ll notice this when you go back home, and every volunteer I’ve met and followed up with, when they hear—they might be cooking dinner, and they hear a news report about Mississippi or about Katrina, they’re immediately dialled in because they’ve been here; they’ve seen it. They know that street in Pascagoula. They know that church. They know Route 90. They know what it means to drive on I-10. It’s different when you have that connection, and so the best thing that we can do as a nation to support the United States of America is not forget about people who maybe aren’t making a big hullabaloo about what they need, but there’s a lot of work that needs to be done just to bring it back to where it was on August 28, 2005.

Again, the clock’s ticking; time’s moving on. Just to get back to the old normal will take a lot of money, and time, and effort. When I see and hear about another consultancy, another agency, another assessment round being done, all I can say is, “You know what, folks?” Tammy who works at Mississippi Home Again went to this meeting, and this group in Florida brought in a team of consultants to assess what was needed. You know what? There are people who’ve been on the ground here for eighteen months since the storm. They have waiting lists. They’ve done the case management. The people who are working here in Mississippi know what’s needed. You don’t need to go out and survey people again. There are people who’ve been asked and asked and asked for what they need, and they’re grateful for what you can
help with. But they’re also willing; they’ll do it themselves. They’ll get back, whether anyone sends help or not. And she asked this room, after the consultants were going off at what they were going to do and what they were going to analyze, and Tammy, just stood up; she’s a kind of get-things-done woman, and she said, “Everybody in this room.” There was a lot of residents. She goes, “How many people have already been assessed?” And they all, every hand goes up in the air. “How many people have been assessed more than five times?” Ninety percent of the hands go up. And the consultants at the front of the room were shocked because the biggest thing that happens with outside agencies that are newly-made aware of the situation here is that they want to do what they know how to do, and what they know how to do is create a survey form and create an application form, and dah, dah, dah. All of that information already exists.

I just talked to a woman the other day in East Biloxi who said they’re still struggling with some of the grant applications, and they actually, which I hadn’t really heard before, they actually had a disk with all the information that they had given some other FEMA person six months ago. And the guy came out to their house, and they said, “Oh, we have this disk.” “Oh, no, here’s the packet of paperwork. You need to fill this out again.” You know, there’s so many things facing people in this recovery effort. Not just being asked to do all this stuff, all this paperwork, in addition to everything else to worrying about your kids to worrying about where you’re going to get money for groceries to worrying about getting your kids uniforms or just doing the dishes and the laundry. Having to do all this paperwork is a burden. Having to tell fresh-faced, well-meaning, good-intentioned people your whole story again is a burden. Having to prove the need when it’s evident what the needs are is a burden on top of everything else. And Mississippi does not have a history of political activism, of huge amounts of advocacy, and I truly believe that part of this is, in a crisis they do their level best, and if you could do better, you would. And I think that they are applying that theory to the government. If the government could be doing this faster, wouldn’t they? I’ll tell you one last story about that issue, and I just wrote this up last night, and I did this interview about two months ago. It still makes me cry, thinking about it. So, Dr. Irene McIntosh and Dr. Ed Cake in D’Iberville have been working eighteen months; literally since the winds subsided. On the day of the storm, they were asked by the mayor of D’Iberville to help get the residents home. D’Iberville is a town of about 8,000; about 4,000 were made homeless from the storm. And Irene, we were talking about, and this was maybe in December when, in fact, we didn’t—you know, the FEMA trailers were originally granted for eighteen months, and as late as mid-January, there was no firm decision that that was going to be extended. So, imagine, on top of everything else, the tiny tin can that’s been your home for sixteen months might be taken away from you, and there is literally, physically not enough housing in this state, if those FEMA trailers get pulled out. There just isn’t. It’s not a matter of money; it’s not a matter of, “I don’t want to pay the escalated rent.” There’s physically not enough housing structures built in this state to house everybody who’s living in a FEMA trailer right now. And we were talking, and she said, “You know what? We’ve had a lot of politicians come through our towns, and they take off their suit jackets, they leave the ties on, and they get a photo op taken, maybe holding a hammer, maybe at a work site, maybe even some of those politicians who announce
their president candidacies, over in the Ninth Ward, who we haven’t seen a whole lot of in the last eighteen months, but show up for the press release.” She said, “You know, I only know of one congressman who has actually come and worked for a week in a volunteer camp.” She said, “You know if Congress came, if they stood with our residents and rooted through the rubble of a lifetime of memories and carefully cleaned the few treasures that were salvageable, and then they stood there and held them as they watched their home be demolished, the people in Washington couldn’t do what they’re doing. They wouldn’t be arguing about the best way to distribute the money. They’d just get it done, and that’s what just needs to happen.” We just need to get it done, and we need better solutions. We need stopgap measures that can be put into place after a storm, not the FEMA trailers. Katrina cottages is a move in the right direction, these small homes that could be maybe added onto later or used in conjunction with a more permanent structure. But we know the current plan doesn’t work, and we can look at the mistakes that were made on the federal level, on the state level, even with the nonprofit groups and faith-based groups. We can criticize, or we can say, “You know what? We need to really just, like they say, think outside the box. We need to look at the engineering of how we help people who suffered massive disaster, and we need to put everything on the table and figure out what a reasonable timeframe is for getting this done.” The military is very good at logistical problems. They’re able to move troops thousands of miles, build bases, create food services. We can’t do it in our own country.

We also don’t have good distribution systems in place. When I first got down here, one of the things that really hooked me on this was, I went to Jackson, Mississippi, which is the state capital, which is 180 miles from Pascagoula, where we’re sitting today. And we walked into a FEMA subsidized warehouse. FEMA was renting a space of this warehouse for supplies and donations at the tune of $900,000 a year, very large warehouse, probably 300,000 square feet. And they wanted it outside of a potential strike zone because again, keep in mind, they were thinking ahead, and they were looking at another hurricane season coming through. So, you maybe don’t want it right on the Coast were it could be hit; that would be very sad to have all of these donations ruined. It was even sadder to see eighty stoves, eighty refrigerators sitting there that had been reinventoried in July, and this is September. And Tammy was with me, and she said, “I’m looking at this, and I’m seeing eighty families that could be cooking dinner at home tonight, and these appliances are sitting here collecting dust.” And then I thought, “Well, they’ve already got the stuff sitting there, right? It’s 180 miles away from the people who need it. Tammy’s got the list. She’s personally visited most of those homes. She knows that they could put it to use today, that they have the flooring in place, that it’s not going to go into storage in a shed for six months from now when they get their home. They’re ready for it. All they need is the appliance to be put in. They’ve had their electrical wiring redone; they’ve had their plumbing redone. And I said to FEMA; I said, “You know what? We’ve got all of these people down on the Coast.” And the warehouse was filled with clothing and tents, and Saudi Arabia, a year ago, had sent linens that would fit the travel trailers, and pallets, pallets upon pallets, stacks upon stacks, mind-boggling amounts of stuff had been collected at this warehouse. It was sitting there collecting dust. And people had generously donated and paid for the shipping over there or paid for the transport,
and it was sitting there in the warehouse. And I thought, “How tough could it be?” We have to move it just 180 miles. That’s not difficult. That’s three hours drive.” FEMA tells me, “FEMA doesn’t do transportation. FEMA can do purchasing of supplies that are needed. FEMA can accept and store donations, but FEMA doesn’t transport those donations.” I talked to the Red Cross. “No, we don’t do that. We do food banks. We do meals. We do shelter. We can’t pay for the tractor trailer to move that stuff.” Small groups like Mississippi Home Again has the clients; they don’t have the money for the people to pack the truck. They can offload it once it gets down here. They’ve got a warehouse set up that they negotiated with the city of Pascagoula; they don’t have the funds and the insurance to pay for a truck to go up there and get the stuff. There’s a problem in this country when we can collect all that stuff and let it sit there, just a couple of hours away from the people who need it, and we can’t make it happen? It’s a problem; it’s a very solvable problem. But it’s a problem.

Ronkainen: One of the last questions we’ll ask you today is on the funding issue with money, et cetera. How are you making it through this? I mean, you’ve moved from your home. You’ve left things behind. You’re down here making this documentary. You’re not on salary, I presume. Do you want to explain your situation a little bit about that?

Kliger: Sure. I’m an independent filmmaker. I am draining my dwindling bank account to do this because, again, the project has expanded. I’ve become completely captivated by it, and there’s nothing better I could have spent my money on, quite frankly. And actually, interestingly enough, I think I may have just found an editor to work with me on this, which is great because I’ve got a lot of footage of interviews that I’ve done. The problem is my plan originally, way, way back in September, was be down here for a few weeks, get some footage, go up to Boston, work with my editor up there. I have a whole television studio full of equipment and computer stuff to work with up there, and then I realized I couldn’t be away from it. And I needed to utilize resources down here, and my editor up in Boston, who didn’t go through the storm, who hasn’t been here, you can’t really get it. And I didn’t want this to be, there to be a sense of pity or sympathy; there needs to be empathy in this movie for the people who lived through it because they’re not, you know—I’ve been down here off and on now for five, six months. And while I’m sure there are a lot of people standing there waiting for handouts, I’ve met few very of them, and I’ve traveled a lot. I’ve met a lot of people, I’ve gone to a lot of different places. What I see happening is, people who are like, “You know what? Yeah, it might take me five years to build my house because I’m buying sheetrock by the sheet because that’s what I can afford, and there’s a lot of people who have never even signed up for one thing. There’s a lot of people who have never even been because to them, getting a case manager assigned by one of these well-meaning faith-based groups or state agencies is just one step away from welfare. And there’s a lot of pride. There’s a lot of people who are like, “We’re do it ourselves, or we won’t do it. We’ll do without.” And I am not looking to make money on this film. I actually had a falling-out with somebody over this who thought I’d be selling these stories. You know what? I’m probably, I’ve stopped counting, but I’m probably in the neighborhood of having spent about $20,000 on this project. And
that really doesn’t even account for my time. But it doesn’t even matter. It could be a $100,000. What I’m looking for is a granting foundation that will help me cover expenses and help me cover the expenses to get this edited and distributed and the stories out there and the awareness raised because, again, from seeing the people who have come down here, I know that more people would help if they fully grasped the fact that more help is needed. Before I came down here, I thought, “It’s been a year. Things are back to normal.” They’re not, and there’s a lot of people who could use a lot of help, and the best place to put your money is with the small organizations that are on the ground. To be truthful, not the American Red Cross, you know, not the largest, not even, like, not large agencies that are looking to help sustain themselves for years. The best people to work with are the people who honestly, they’re not looking for this to take ten years. They’ve got plans for it to be done in three because you know what? They had a really full life before this storm. They’re not looking to make their livelihood off of disaster. They want to get it fixed and get back to living their lives.

So quite frankly, I couldn’t do this project if I hadn’t been shown incredible generosity; as I said, I’ve stayed in different volunteer centers, most of them, some of them charge; some of them don’t. Some of them charge a nominal fee; ten dollars, usually, a day for food and shelter, you know, a bed to sleep in, basic shower facilities. Virtually none of them have asked me to pay, which would have been a burden that would have prevented me from staying down here as long as I have. I now have a family in D’Iberville that’s actually, you know, they’re renting me a room, except they actually haven’t asked for the money because they know I don’t have any. (laughter) My health insurance through my previous employer has run out, so now I’m paying out $330.00 a month in COBRA payments because I can’t be without health insurance down here, and that’s probably going to wipe me out in another couple of months. I know this seems crazy, but right now, I have about a $1,000 left in the bank, and my family has been supportive. My brother is actually writing the music for this film and has already come up with five or six really amazing songs. Actually I just got in the mail today discs of some new tunes that he has written, and he, too, has forestalled payment. He’s like, “Just do what you need to do to get it done.” This is the best work I’ve ever done. And this, I feel like I’m in the right place at the right time, and that if I did get a big chunk of money, I’d pay off my credit card bills, (laughter) and after that, anything that was left over, would literally just go to helping people with the things for which there are gaps in our social fabric, you know? For whatever reason, you know, right after the storm, you heard a lot of people talking about it. “Oh, now that we know about the poverty in New Orleans, we’re going to do something about it.” “Now, look at this social injustice. Look at the way people are living. Look at the way people are going to have to live after this storm.” And you know what? That hasn’t been sustained, not in any meaningful way. There are some really great groups on the ground here that are doing great work to help level the playing field. But there’s a huge way to go, and in my mind that whole issue of like deferred maintenance and stuff, you know what? If you see people living in terrible conditions, whether it’s directly storm-related or not, why wouldn’t you fix that, too? You know, we’ve got an incredible opportunity right now. We’ve got hundreds of thousands of people that have already come down to volunteer. We’ve got a lot of people who have
willingly donated money, equipment, appliances, shelter, foodstuffs, clothing, all sorts of things, books have come over, letters from kids, there’s just a story of a group that came over from Phoenix last week, and they brought Valentines, a whole classroom of kids in Phoenix wrote Valentines for a whole classroom of kids in Pascagoula. That is what we ought to be cultivating, and that is the kind of thing that is going to actually organically change the way this country takes care of this country. You know, we are the United States of America, and Mississippi is a state. It’s at the bottom of almost every metric you can think of, and you know what? The people here, there are people here who wouldn’t live anywhere else. And this is just something that’s happened to them. A lot of them say that it was God’s will; it was God’s plan. And maybe if it had happened anywhere else, you wouldn’t have this kind of outpouring of support and this kind of selfless gratitude from people who are receiving maybe far less than they deserve but far more than they had on August 30th, 2005. And I would love to see a groundswell of change in this nation about how we help each other. You know, that would be the silver lining to Katrina. For all the loss, for all the destruction, there’s something that valuable to our nation to come out of it. That’s what I would hope for.

Lange: Great. I think we’ll stop you there.

Kliger: Well, thank you.

Lange and Ronkainen: Thank you.

(end of interview)