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Grabka: (A portion of the audio pertaining to protocol has not been transcribed.) 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 Mr. Ellis Cuevas and is taking place on February 20, 2008, at approximately nine a.m. in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi. The interviewers are Dariusz Grabka—

Tobia: And Alanna Tobia.

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

Cuevas: My name is Ellis C. Cuevas. That’s E-L-L-I-S, middle initial C, C-U-E-V-A-S.

Grabka: And when were you born, sir?

Cuevas: I was born on April 6, 1934, in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi, King’s Daughters Hospital.

Grabka: And what, sir, was your father’s name?

Cuevas: My father was Robert Ellis Cuevas.

Grabka: And your mother’s name?

Cuevas: Was Magalena Sitha(?) she went by Lena Cuevas.

Grabka: Where did you grow up?

Cuevas: I grew up in Waveland, Mississippi.
Grabka: And tell me a little about how that went?

Cuevas: Of course, Waveland, being a sister city of Bay St. Louis, it was the town of Waveland at that time. It’s a city, now. Everything we primarily did, we did in Bay St. Louis. We went to school in Bay St. Louis, and we went grocery shopping in Bay St. Louis, and most everything we did in Bay St. Louis because Waveland didn’t have very much at that time. That is going back to the days where they only had two paved streets in Waveland, three paved streets, really. The rest of them were shells.

Grabka: So how long have you lived on the Gulf Coast, then? Your entire (inaudible)?

Cuevas: Well, I’ve lived here all my life with the exception of three years in the military.

Grabka: And where did you do your military service?

Cuevas: I was in the—I’m considered being a Korean-[Conflict]-era veteran. I served; it was Army Security Agency loaned to the National Security Agency, and my primary work was done at the headquarters of the National Security Agency’s Communication Center in Arlington, Virginia, in 1954, [19]55, [19]56, and part of [19]57.

Grabka: Right. So how many generations of your family have lived in the Mississippi Gulf Coast?

Cuevas: Well, on my father’s side, I’m the sixth generation, but his original ancestor back, his wife may have been seventh or eighth generation; I’m not sure of that. My great-great-grandfather, he moved to Bay St. Louis in 1849 from Cat Island, which is one of the barrier islands here. His father was Gawain(?) Cuevas who was granted Cat Island, a grant for his support of Andrew Jackson in the Battle of New Orleans. And part of it recently became National Seashores, I think, ownership. Some of it is still in private ownership. The family lost it around 1900 for taxes.

Grabka: Due to taxes? (laughter) Two things certain, right?

Cuevas: Yeah.

Grabka: So why do you continue to live in Bay St. Louis?

Cuevas: Why do I continue to live in Bay St. Louis?

Grabka: Or I guess, why—

Cuevas: Well, I mean, I was born and raised here, as was my wife, and this has always been home to me. And when I finished my military service to Uncle Sam, I
couldn’t wait to get back home. As a matter of fact, I turned down a job of seven thousand dollars a year in Arlington, Virginia, and came home and went to work at the newspaper for twenty-six hundred dollars a year. I was happy to come back home.

**Grabka:** Can you describe a little more about your attachment to Bay St. Louis and the area here, Waveland.

**Cuevas:** Well, I’ve been heavily involved in the community affairs all my life, I guess. When I was growing up, we were sort of a vacation area for the people of New Orleans. Many of the homes in this community, maybe about 25 percent of them were owned by people primarily from the New Orleans area or other areas as vacation homes. They’d come over on weekends in the summer and different things like that. We had a joke around Waveland that when Labor Day came along that they rolled the sidewalks up on Coleman Avenue, which was the town’s central business district; it was the only business district in the town. It was just a one-block thing. And it was a great place to live as youngsters. I have three younger brothers, and we all enjoyed fishing and hunting, and I mean, we could walk out our back door at home and go hunting and things like that. And fishing, we had freshwater fishing, saltwater fishing; had all that stuff and things that we really, as kids, enjoyed.

**Grabka:** So your neighborhood wasn’t—where you grew up, Waveland was very—where was it in relationship to, like, the central business district, let’s say?

**Cuevas:** Well, from Bay St. Louis, the central business district was probably about two, two and a half miles from there. And the big thing, the big industry here then was the railroad. We had a lot of people working on the railroad. As a matter of fact, commuter trains used to make three stops in Waveland. One on Nicholson Avenue, Coleman Avenue, Waveland Avenue. People would commute back and forth to New Orleans. The summer vacationers, some people would come over for three months and spend here, and the husbands would catch the trains back to New Orleans. They had a commuter train that ran, I think, from Mobile to New Orleans, a couple of trains each direction, each day. And we—of course my father worked on the railroad. So we had passes, and we used to ride to New Orleans all the time on the train.

**Grabka:** Could you maybe describe your neighborhood before what we now know as Hurricane Katrina, in the time immediately before?

**Cuevas:** Well, I live on just a one-block street; been living there forty-four years now, almost forty-five. And it was rather quiet, a quiet neighborhood. Most of the people—it was a mixture of people, retired people and people my age—I mean, younger families and similar-aged people, too. We pretty well all got along together, you know, good relationships. Everybody looked out for each other.

**Grabka:** So did you stay at home during the hurricane?

**Cuevas:** Oh, yes.
**Grabka:** Could you maybe describe that experience for us?

**Cuevas:** Well, I know later on you’ll ask me about [Hurricane] Camille, but I was one of the people, like hundreds of other and maybe thousands of others, probably, Camille was a benchmark for us. We had, like, two hundred miles an hour, plus, winds, and my home withstood that. The only thing I lost in Camille: my roof, shingles on my roof. And did not have any surface water. My house is between three-quarters and a mile from the beach, and there’s a big bluff out on the beach, I guess thirty-seven foot high or so, and my property’s twenty-five foot, my elevation, my property’s about twenty-four, twenty-five foot. Never did suspect that I’d have any water there. So it was just my wife and I and cat at home, and from two other bedrooms on the beach end of the house, in the direction of the beach end, the wind was pushing so hard that it was pushing water underneath the windows and around the windows, that we’d go from room to room with towels and mop up the water from the windowsill to keep it from going on the floor. And wring it out in a bucket. We were by one window, just about a foot from it, and all of a sudden, I could see something coming. Boom! Glass all over the room, splintered. And I mean we were no further than that from it. It was a miracle we did not get a piece of glass on us. It was like in matchsticks. So I had a piece of plywood inside. My wife and I were taking turns holding it up to keep the water from coming in the room because it was real close to a couple of our lockers where we kept our clothes and all. We didn’t want any water to come in. So finally I told my wife; I said, “We can’t stay here holding this plywood up.” I said, “That’s too hard.” The wind was pushing real hard. I said, “I have to go out into the shed and get another piece, a larger piece of plywood and a board to nail across the window.” She said, “You better not go outside in this.” I said, “Well,” I said, “I need to do it.” We just bought this shed about three months before the storm. Fortunately it was anchored down. So I went out to the shed, and it was rocking in between the gusts of wind, and it was rocking and rolling. And as I got back in the house, I started; I nailed one board with a piece of plywood behind it on one side, and I was getting ready to nail it on another side, and my wife said, “My God! Here comes the water.” She says, “Grab Milo and put him in a box and up the attic.” So I mean, all of a sudden, we had water in the house. So I grabbed him, put him in the box, got him up the attic, and pushed my wife up the attic. I grabbed a jug of water, a jar of jelly, a knife, a loaf of bread, and a gallon of water, and of course, flashlights. We had flashlights and all. And headed up there. But my sister-in-law’s property is right next to us, and all that morning—this was probably around ten o’clock in the morning, this all transpired sometime in there. You didn’t mess too much with time. We kept watching the trees bending over, and they’d come over a little further and a little further and a little further, and all of a sudden, they’d crash the fence and be up against the house. And we had a big pecan tree in our front yard, and limbs were cramming and broke off, and anyway, so we got upstairs in the attic. And as the wind would peel the shingles off the roof, I’m sitting up there where the ladder goes up in the attic, my feet dangling down, and I’m thinking, “We got a half-inch piece of plywood over our head.” (laughter) “And the shingles are peeling off. What happens if the plywood starts peeling off?” Well, we were up there for a while, and my wife, it
really shocked her real bad. I’m sitting at the top of the steps, and I have a carport window, and I looked outside, and I could see the water was lower outside than it was in the house. So I knew that the water was beginning to fall. But the water came up four foot; six minutes time, we had, in our yard, we had water over a four-foot fence, in six minutes time.

Grabka: And you’re on a twenty-three-foot bluff (inaudible).

Cuevas: Well, about twenty-four, twenty-five foot, and it was over the fence. Now, I had taken pictures. I had the camera, water floating around the house and all. And it was just unbelievable. So I tried to open the door, and the house was tight, and the water did not get up but seventeen inches in the house, but we were lucky all our light plugs, base outlets, were eighteen inches high, one inch above. Now, just to give you an idea how your utility shed, which has a small breezeway between it and the house where we have the washer and dryer; it’s on the same level as the house, had twenty-seven inches of water in there. But we had about an inch and a quarter, inch and a half gap under the door for ventilation for the dryer and the washer. So finally I got the door open, and stuff just started flooding out, you know, jugs of water and all this kind of stuff, canned goods, cat food, you name it, and there it was going. Foodstuff, I mean, we didn’t even know where some of the stuff came from that was in the house. One of the things not too many people will mention to you, and that was one of the areas I didn’t realize: commodes backed up. So I had a bathtub full of water, you know, for flushing the toilet because we knew we were going to probably have that problem. And I went in there, and that water was brown, that was left in the bathtub. So we considered anything that water touched, anywhere it got was polluted. So to make a long story short, we lost all our appliances; we tried to salvage a lot of stuff and all. Two freezers packed with food, upright freezers, refrigerator. Must have had about thirty gallons of water, about four or five gallons of it, we did have it on a window sill, and it didn’t get wet. But it was kind of weary. But what we went through was minor compared to a lot of my friends, people whom, because of my job, we (inaudible) for an interview, you know, following the storm, things like that, and people I talked to.

Grabka: So what are some of the memories of your friends and your community members before the storm?

Cuevas: Before the storm?

Grabka: Before the storm, yeah.

Cuevas: Well, I’m a people person; I have a lot of friends, and because of my position at the newspaper, former publisher and my involvement in the community in so many organizations over the years, relationship has been very good, you know, relatively. Historical society, I mean, it just goes on and on and on, United Way and all this stuff. Retired Senior Volunteer Program and all that type of stuff. First, of course, immediate neighbors, we all met them, my brother-in-law and all like that.
And the next morning, after the storm, somehow or another my brother-in-law’s dog got out, and so we fanned out down the street, and the first people I ran into were walking down the street. And I saw one of my friends whom I sit next to in church every Sunday, he and his wife walking to the gate. The place they were was a kind of a garage apartment at that time. And they had lived down in the Cedar Point area, which is a low area of Bay St. Louis. And Bobby had a big black eye. I said, “What happened to you?” He said, “Well, we survived the storm by getting on the roof.” And he said, “A missile hit me in the eye.” As a matter of fact, he had a picture of one of his neighbors who stayed out (inaudible), made it out of the storm in his sailboat, had taken a picture of he and his wife on top of their roof, and the water was up to the eaves of the roof on their house. He said, “We were walking down the street, not knowing where we were going, and this boy, young man, stopped and asked us where we were going. We said, “We don’t know. We lost our home. We don’t have anything. We lost all our vehicles.” So he brought them to his mother’s house and put them up in the garage apartment, and he looked bad. I mean, he was all beat out. And just a block from me, one person I’ve known a long time, he and his wife spent the night on their roof. It just goes on and on.

Grabka: What was your opinion of your state and local politicians and your public service before the hurricane?

Cuevas: Well, we thought we were well-prepared. Our emergency management agency was very active. They had a new director who’d been in only about two years. As a matter of fact, don’t want to go back, but we did not have a full evacuation of Bay St. Louis recommended. I attended a meeting, a two o’clock meeting the Saturday before the storm because I work with the EMA [emergency management agency] was one of my beats, so to say.

Grabka: What does EMA stand for?

Cuevas: Emergency management agency, local emergency management agency. And got the last information that they had. Now, we did have mandatory evacuation in our low-lying areas, but in the last three hundred years of history, never had they had water, surface water where I lived and hundreds of other people. And to get the last-minute story to go in our Sunday edition of the newspaper, it just so happened the Sunday evening, friends of ours from Baton Rouge had called us and wanted us to come stay with them, but since the city of New Orleans and all Louisiana was evacuating, we’d have to go down Interstate 10, and there was no way we could get on it. They were having mass evacuations out of there. We called civil defense up, emergency management agency that used to be civil defense, and they said, “Go to Pensacola, Florida.” Well, they were announcing on TV that they had a jam-up of traffic from Slidell, Louisiana, to the tunnel in Mobile, Alabama, which is about eighty miles, seventy-, eighty-mile stretch. And we would have had to buck that.

Grabka: So people weren’t going anywhere.
Cuevas: You know, it wasn’t too healthy getting out at that time. It was too late; I guess it was too late to get out. So a little bit before midnight, I had a little battery-operated television with C batteries, and I didn’t realize I didn’t have a extra set of batteries. And I told my wife, “I better go see if Wal-Mart in Waveland has any C batteries.” So I went down there and picked up some batteries, and three-quarters a block from my house is a service station on Highway 90. I said, “I better top my gas off.” So I topped it off; I only needed a couple gallons, and while I was there, the director from emergency management agency was there, and he says, “Mr. Ellis,” he says, “I just got some bad news.” I said, “What’s that, Bryan?”(?) He said, “They tell me I may have water in my headquarters.” I said, “Well, Bryan, if you have water in your headquarters”—this is around midnight, Sunday night, midnight—I said, “that means I’m going to have water in my house.” (laughter) And it turned out to be true.

Grabka: Where were the headquarters?

Cuevas: It’s about a block from my house on Highway 90, on the service road, but it’s about a block from my house. I do believe, as a lot of other people believe, that we would not have had—and that’s my belief—any surface water where I live, if we would not have had Interstate 10 crossing our county because it acted as a levee and pushed the water back. When water came to my house in the storm, I had water from the beach, and I had it from the river, back. That wind for hours and hours was pushing the water in, pushing it up the river, pushing it up, just backing it up, pushing it up. And when that big tidal wave came, water had no place to go. I think normally that water would have funneled out in the woods because there’s very few openings, only Highway 603 and where the Jourdan River is. The rest of it’s nothing but levee, but I do feel that we would not have had water if Interstate 10 would not have been constructed out there. That’s just my personal feeling. I’ve had other people say that.

Grabka: When was Interstate 10 constructed, then?

Cuevas: I’m going to have to guess. I guess it’s probably back in the [19]60s, during back in the [19]60s, something like that.

Grabka: So what do you have to say about the, once again, the local and state or federal agencies following Katrina?

Cuevas: Local people, we had immediate response. The morning after the storm, I went to the emergency management office; I walked over there to take some pictures. I saw Bay St. Louis’s officials and Bay St. Louis people, county officials, supervisors, and the sheriff’s deputy, police officers, and so forth and so on. I even saw the director from the human services; he was holding a meeting with about four of his people in the parking lot, an open parking lot. The City of Bay St. Louis, they had four-wheelers pulling trailers with water and gas and things and searching the areas for people, in the Cedar Point area, and things like that. I mean, it was something else. Wednesday after the storm, we heard, “Whoo. They got ice and water and food by Wal-Mart.” So somehow or another, the little girl that lives next to us with her
mother, she had a little pickup truck, old model pickup truck, and that thing worked. It (inaudible). Now, she got gas from some boats or something, and it had a little water in some of it, and every now and then, it would (inaudible) and flutter, but myself, my brother-in-law from next door, her and her boyfriend, we stayed with them, and another neighbor, we went down there, and we got ice. Time we got in there, I think we got some apples; that was the only fruit they had left, but they had cantaloupes and all that stuff. The National Guard was here and were working up a storm. Now, we get on that morning, on the Tuesday morning, my house, from one of the main drags, is just the second house on a little one-block street I live on. I walked out there, and the Bay St. Louis fire chief passed, and he stopped. He saw me. He said, “Mr. Ellis,” he said, “There anything you need?” I said, “Well, Bobby,” I said, “You know, I’m really limited in what I can eat.” He was aware of that. I said, “Because I’m having stomach problems. I can’t eat anything with fat.” And I said, “We lost all our food.” I said, “We had it on a low shelf, and it all went underwater.” He says, “We didn’t have any water at the fire station.” He said, “I’ll see if I can get something for you.” So he brought us back about four cans of tuna, and a gallon of water, which was a big help. And we had some water, and we still had some bread at home, and jelly. But we ate for four days, till Saturday, tuna (laughter) and jelly sandwiches and slept on wet beds (laughter) until we were rescued. Our friends in Baton Rouge, one of the boys, just good friends; we’ve known them since they were babies. They came on the Thursday with a friend of his whose father lived in Diamondhead, which is in this county, about eight miles from here. And he brought us some food and some flashlights, extra flashlights and things like that. Of course, very little of it I could eat, and he wanted us to go back with him to Baton Rouge. And we had stuff strewn all over the yard and all this kind of stuff. And my wife wouldn’t think of leaving with them. (laughter) He finally convinced her. My wife said, “Look,” said, “Rick, come back Saturday morning, and we’ll go with you.” OK. So we got stuff, locked it up. I don’t know why we locked it up because it all turned out it wasn’t any good, but anyway. (laughter) Just about all of it. He picked us up, and we went to Baton Rouge, and we stayed with them. I know I’m getting a little bit ahead, but we stayed with he and his wife for eight weeks. And then, meanwhile back at the ranch, his mother-in-law, who—I mean, no, his wife’s grandmother had lived in a trailer, a mobile home, a big mobile home outside Baton Rouge, and she had four of her relatives that were staying at her house, and she ended up in the hospital with heart problems, so she needed some peace and quiet. Well, one of the girls who my wife went to school with in Logtown(?) where the test site is out here now, we moved in with her. And she lived in a trailer park, but we could only stay there two weeks. And in two weeks time we were able to get a FEMA [Federal Emergency Management Agency] trailer, but on the fifteenth of the month of September, which was a couple of weeks after the storm, a few days, I bought an automobile at a dealership there. The dealer happened to have started being a dealer or owner in Bay St. Louis, and I handled his account for many years when he was here. And he gave me a good deal and credit and all this kind of jazz, you know. As a matter of fact, his son after we got up there a couple of days, I went by the dealership, [and] his son offered for us to stay in a fifth-wheel he had up there, if we wanted, (laughter) my wife and I, as long as we wanted. So my wife and I would come home every other day because Baton Rouge,
their population increased 50 percent overnight. Traffic was horrendous. Horrendous. Didn’t have my car ten days, I’m going down the interstate back to Baton Rouge, and it’s over a two-hour drive. It was over a hundred miles. Piece of wood flies off of the trailer, hits my windshield, breaks my windshield. (laughter)

Grabka: On your brand-new car.

Cuevas: On my brand-new car. (laughter) Of course we lost two cars, that were relatively new, in the storm, you know, but so what? That wasn’t the first time for us to lose a car in the storm because we lost one in Camille in the storm. My wife worked at the hospital, and she lost one in Camille. But so we go back and forth and up to the fifteenth in Baton Rouge, phone calls from insurance companies. And that’s one of the worst things in the world, dealing with insurance companies. You got adjustors for your automobiles. You got one for wind storm. You got another one for general insurance. I mean, it goes on and on. We were able to come back and forth and try to salvage some stuff. And going through a lot of stuff, and we had a lot of stuff in the house because we been in there for about forty-two years when the storm hit. We had enough clothes to live to be a hundred and twenty-five and never wear them all out. (laughter) So Goodwill felt good on that when we finally got it out. We had one electrical outlet—and that was in the utility room—we had to replace because that was for the dryer. I know I’m getting off the beaten path, but—

Tobia: Oh, no. That’s OK.

Grabka: That’s OK. We’ll fill in.

Cuevas: But anyway, go ahead. Ask your question now.

Grabka: The last question from this page is how has the storm changed the way you perceive or you think about your community?

Cuevas: Well, I’m going to be honest with you. I think a symbol of what our community is going to look like is this new bridge across the bay. With all the new infrastructure that’s coming in—I may not see it—new water, new gas, new sewer, new streets, new drainage, completely renovated courthouse, new jail if we ever get one, new schools if we ever get one. It’s been a nightmare (inaudible) even with the hospital, dealing with FEMA. Of course, hurricanes usually cover maybe fifteen-, twenty-mile width. This one here was from New Orleans to Mobile, which is probably eighty or ninety miles. It’s a big difference, big difference in the destruction. Water just did so much more damage than winds; I mean as far as damage. But me, probably without the water, I’d have had to replace the window and had some damage in that one bedroom and replace the roof, and then some Sheetrock in one room or something. I wouldn’t have had to go through the whole house and go up four foot and replace the Sheetrock.

Grabka: That’s quite a bit.
**Cuevas:** But it makes a big difference. But I feel that when everything is finished, if—I’ll put an if in there—if insurance becomes to be reasonable—insurance is killing the homeowner, and it’s killing the business person right now. You just wouldn’t believe what we pay in insurance.

**Grabka:** What are you paying, and how does that compare with—

**Cuevas:** Well, like on my house, prior to Katrina, it was costing say a thousand dollars; now, it’s close to four thousand.

**Grabka:** Much larger chunk of your income.

**Cuevas:** Yeah, it’s much larger chunk of your income. And, man, business places it’s just—some of them went up six, seven times (inaudible) six times, business people, the insurance. And you can’t build without insurance if you make a loan or anything like that.

**Tobia:** Were you working when Hurricane Katrina hit?

**Cuevas:** Sure.

**Tobia:** So you weren’t retired? You’re still with the (inaudible)?

**Cuevas:** Semiretired, I consider myself semiretired, yes, ma’am.

**Tobia:** So how long after Hurricane Katrina did you go back to working at the newspaper?

**Cuevas:** Well, I took a slight sabbatical for about eight months because my wife and I, we did a lot of the work on our house, ourselves. And I was, like, seventy-one years old when that storm hit. My wife was seventy, and I felt it was more important. My prior job, in my job I carried the load following Camille, but I was half the age I was when Katrina came along. So that made a big difference. I still contributed columns a couple of times a week and things like that. I still made some contributions, more at the paper. Matter of fact, a week after the storm, I sold two ads in Baton Rouge for them. (laughter) So I have a long association with newspaper; I’m in my fifty-first year there.

**Grabka:** Wow.

**Cuevas:** Yeah.

**Tobia:** After the storm, what kind of articles and stuff like that were in the paper? Like, what was the front page like?
Cuevas: Well, the front page was, “Disaster.” (laughter) It was just four pages that the publisher—our office was completely gutted. We lost probably about 70, 75 percent of our bound volumes, and our paper went back to 1892. I had, as a matter of fact, I had 1892 and [18]93 bound volume in my office. That’s an area, I feel, that this community has really lost as a resource because we carried the history of this community for over a hundred years, and we had all but maybe one or two of the years covered. Now, some of the state archives microfilm project [archived] all the newspapers in the state, I guess—I don’t know—fifteen years ago or something like that. So many of them are on microfilm, but the quality of looking at microfilm and looking and flipping a bound volume open, is much different. I used to do an archives looking back in history thing for the paper; go back twenty-five, thirty, forty years, fifty years, and sometime I’d drop a hundred and ten, a hundred and twelve years in there because it created an interest. Another thing that we lost at the newspaper, and I feel like that’s important; I had thousands of negatives, photographs, old photographs, old negatives of Camille, the [19]47 Hurricane, [Hurricane] Betsy, different things. I had organizations; I had the history of our Rotary from 1925. I bet you I had at least sixty years of newsletters from the organization there. I had information on our United Way, from when it started back in the [19]60s. The Virgin(?) Management Agency, a scholarship fund I’m president of, RSVP [that] I’m chairman of. Hospital foundation, Gulf Coast Ad Club, just numerous things I had information on. I used to be, I guess you can call a pack rat. At one time, I guess about ten years ago while I was still publisher, I had a lady come by, and she says, “I need to know when my mother stopped working at the newspaper.” She was a typesetter, and she was working there when I started back in [19]57. I said, “Give me a little while.” I said, “I’ll find it for you.” And I went back and said, “OK. Here’s the span.” She was rather shocked that I had the information. (laughter) Not that I necessarily needed it, but of course, when I stepped down as publisher in 2000, I had three tall file cabinets full of stuff I had to go through, and my home was the same way. I had the first checks I ever wrote when we got married, and all that. (laughter) You know, nine-dollar telephone bill. (laughter) And all that kind of stuff, that was of no value, really. All my income—I had income tax information back to 1950.

Tobia: Well, it’s personal value.

Cuevas: Yeah. Photographs, my wife and I did some traveling over the years and lost all the photographs on that, and that kind of stuff at home. OK. We’re getting off of that. (laughter) I got to tell you a little tidbit, though.

Grabka: Sure.

Cuevas: I had a small safe, file, one of those file things to protect from fire. I told my wife; I said, “Look. I’m going to put the last four years of income tax records in there, and I’m going to put the checkbook,” because we use a large checkbook. I said, “In case the roof blows off, at least it’ll stay dry.” (laughter) Needless to say, didn’t make it. (laughter)
**Grabka:** Nice little water cabinet, right?

**Cuevas:** Water got in it, sure. (laughter)

**Grabka:** I guess you have opinions about how would you like to see your community rebuilt? What would be your vision for rebuilding your community and the rest of the Gulf Coast?

**Cuevas:** Well, I hope that it doesn’t lose the quality of life that we had before the storm inasmuch that, especially in our area, there was always a great relationship between the classes of people, the rich, the poor, the middle class. I had a man tell me one time who worked for the government—I don’t know what he did—and he said he’d worked in about fourteen places for the government, and each one of them was usually a couple years. And he said, “I hate to be moving from here.” He said, “I have never lived in a place like this before. I have never seen a place where the rich people, middle-class people, and the poor people get along so well.” He says, “You go, no matter where you go,” he says, “it doesn’t make any difference.” He says, “There’s no boundary between the people.” He said, “It’s just one happy family.” And that’s one of the aspects I hope we see here. True, it’s going to change. A lot of people have been against high-rises, condos and things like that, but that’s coming. That’s on the horizon. But I do hope this, especially around here, that [the view of] our water is not blocked like it is in areas such as Florida and so forth and so on, or admission is restricted anywhere along our beach front. That’s public, and I hope it stays that way.

**Grabka:** And do you feel that it’s changing?

**Cuevas:** Well, it stands a possibility of changing if correct issues are not addressed; I think it is a possibility. I mean, we’ve had people wanting to build seventy-five story condos, proposals and things. Of course, I’ve seen a lot of proposals over the years that never developed, too. So. But as I said earlier, it will be better, I do believe, overall. It’s just that we lost so much that it’s going to take so long to restore it. Rome wasn’t built in a day.

**Grabka:** No. And we had read that you experienced both Hurricane Camille as well as the [Hurricane] of 1947.

**Cuevas:** Yes.

**Grabka:** So could you tell us a little bit more about that experience?

**Cuevas:** OK. We’ll go back to 1947. We didn’t even know we were going to have a hurricane till it got here. (laughter)

**Grabka:** Sorry. How old were you?
Cuevas: I’ll be seventy-four in April; I’m seventy-three.

Grabka: And how old were you during the 1947 storm?

Cuevas: I was thirteen.

Grabka: Wow. OK.

Cuevas: And I lived in Waveland, and at that time, my house was like about, I guess, thirty by forty or something like that. And it sat up off the—on pillars. It was an old house; the original part of it was built around 1900, so it was pretty old. Straight up and down boards. And boy, the winds came, and the rain came. The rains and rains and the winds. All of a sudden, the house would start shaking. The roof started peeling off in the back of the house. Now, the front of the house faced toward the beach, and we were across the railroad track from it. And we had rolled roofing on it; was about three foot wide and had some red gravel-like on top of it. And it would fly off in sheets in the backyard. And during the gusts, we’d run out there and pick up a few pieces of it and bring it back in the house and cover armoires. We had these big, old-time armoires that were about ten foot high, and that’s what we used to store our clothes. We didn’t have wall lockers or anything in that house. You know, (laughter) modern-day things. And there were not that many people in Waveland then, either. But now, that storm of [19]47 raked across South Louisiana, and it brought in a bunch of cattle, cows, horses. Of course, needless to say, they were dead. The man who lived across the street from us was in the dirt-hauling business, and he had a big truck. And my dad worked with him; they were hauling the cattle to big burrow pits and burn them because they were afraid of disease, with them decaying and things like that. So they did that for several weeks. But anyway, so right after the storm, they had this gentleman—as a matter of fact, two of my younger brothers, they spent the night with him. He lived probably about a quarter of a mile or so from us. He was from New Orleans, and my mother used to drive for him because he had bad eyesight. And when he’d come over, my brothers would take turns staying with him. Sometimes I would, even. And my dad and he got in his old model-A car, took a saw and an axe and headed for Bay St. Louis, the McDonald Lumber Company, and they sawed their way through the trees off the road. They come up along Central Avenue, the railroad—used to be called Railroad Avenue and got some roofing from McDonald’s who was open, to replace the back roof on my house. And Mr. Deets(?) needed some for his house, too; got some for his house. We got nary a penny, a drop of food, (laughter) or anything from anybody. When I say anybody, I mean government or anything like that. We got none of that. School, our school lost its roof; it had to be replaced, which was in Bay St. Louis. The railroads, my father was working on the railroad at the time. When they got things going, they worked day and night because the railroad bed between here and Louisiana, New Orleans, was completely wiped out. They had to completely rebuild.

Grabka: And the railroad was very important (inaudible).
**Cuevas:** The railroad was very important, yes. Very important at that time. But like I say, we heard of the Red Cross giving stuff out, but never did see anything from the [19]47. Now, that storm had high water in some areas in the county that Camille did; not Katrina, now, (laughter) but that one. And that’s kind of the thing on that. Camille. A couple stayed with me at Camille from Cedar Point area. Water went over the roof of their house; they lived on a little canal down there, and he was an artist. He painted his art here in Bay St. Louis, and he’d take it to New Orleans, the French Quarter, and sell it. And the only thing they saved was their dog, old TV set, and a suitcase full of clothes. Behind my house, about seventy-five foot, I had a large barn. It was an Italian family who owned the property, and one time they butchered cattle there and all that kind of stuff and had a bunch of old pecan trees, old seedling pecan trees in there, and they had sheep. He had goats, and he had chickens and ducks, and the trees just covered the barn, both sides, completely covered it. At that time we had a civil defense director for Bay St. Louis; we had the sheriff, and we had civil defense director for Waveland and one for the county and all this kind of stuff. Kept trying to get them to push to get it cleared because the stench was beginning to be bad in our neighborhood. And finally one day I got all three of them at the courthouse together, and they got a dozer in there, and they still had—this was over a week after the storm, about ten days after the storm—they still had sheep that were still alive; they had goats that were still alive. Of course, they had some that were dead. And they had live chickens and everything else that was locked up in there. Our house, as I said earlier, all we did was lost the shingles on my roof. Right after the storm, I had an old Ford Ranch Wagon. (laughter) It was on my carport at home; it was high and dry, and my wife had the new car, and it was up at the hospital. She was working at the hospital, which was on Dunbar, not here. And I did not know till late the next evening whether she even survived—and she was only about a quarter of a mile from me—when she finally got home. The first day after the storm, my friend George and I, we walked down to one of the convenience stores that’s right down here on Main Street, and I used to go there on occasion. And I picked up a few things we needed, food items and stuff like that. I can remember us; I had a Coleman [lantern]. That’s what we used for light then, and a week after the storm, the people started flocking in here from New Orleans because they had Betsy in [19]65, four years before. And to make tears come to your eyes, people from Waveland, they’d go down, drive down in front of town hall, from New Orleans, drop off bags of food, water, ice, and take off. I mean it was just a steady flow of people. Our friends from New Orleans, a gal we had traveled with, a gal my wife had worked with because she was a telephone operator in New Orleans before we married, brought us a Coleman stove, and we started cooking on a Coleman stove, but I can remember us taking a pile of sticks outside and building a fire and cooking bacon and eggs. (laughter) And we had kerosene lamps, of course, and things like that. But ice, they brought some ice in; we could get some ice after Camille, but as far as somebody giving us money or a mattress or anything like that, we never got anything like that, either, for Camille.

**Grabka:** Did you have power after Camille? Was it—

**Cuevas:** Oh, no. We were out for a while.
**Grabka:** So you relied on ice for your food refrigeration.

**Cuevas:** Oh, yeah, we had to depend on ice. Oh, yeah. And they brought it to the courthouse, and of course my office was, at that time, just a half a block from the courthouse, and I could see it was there. And I went and got some water one day; they brought water, and I yelled to my father-in-law because he lived right across the street from the courthouse. I said, “Pa!” I said, “Did you get you any water?” He said, “No, they ain’t got any water up there.” I said, “OK, Pa. I got two jugs on my shoulder.” He said, “Where you get that water?” (laughter) “Where you get that water, boy?” Anyway. But our beachfront got torn up real bad. It did in [19]47, too, as far as that goes, in Bay St. Louis. And Camille, I’ll tell you an interesting story. They built the railroad bridge in [19]65. It was a wood bridge before then. They built it in [19]65, Brown and Root. You-all may have heard of, from Texas; it’s a big outfit. And the guy who was the foreman was named Zabia Black(?). And when they were building the new bridge, he asked the guy from Brown and Root, he said, “Why are you-all putting concrete crossties?” Said, “Well, we don’t want water to come up over this bridge and float it away.” That it would float the wooden ones, and it’s kind of a drop down where they put them on slag and all. Said, “OK.” Now, those crossties weighed 750 pounds, if I’m not mistaken, apiece. Rail, I think, is about a hundred pounds a foot. Each rail, you got two of them now, and they got a gap of about a foot in between the crossties. So Camille comes along, picks up all those concrete crossties and sets them off in the water, all of them. The same foreman comes back, and he told Mr. Black, who was still working for the railroad, he says, “Zabia,” he says, “I remember the day you asked me why we were using them concrete crossties.” (laughter) Needless to say, when they replaced them, they put wood. (laughter) But now the difference is, when Katrina came along, it completely tore the bridge out. I mean, it completely tore the railroad bridge out. There’s a picture in there, I think, of how they tore the bridge out completely.

**Grabka:** It doesn’t matter what you build it out of.

**Cuevas:** It don’t matter what you build it out of. And just like the highway bridge, that was a superstructure as far as everybody thought, but it took it out. But I went around; I was ad manager at the time and general manager, and I went around, sold ten pages of ads just like that, nothing (inaudible), just making friendship calls on people. You know, they’re going to come back, and we came back real fast after Camille. Yeah, came back a lot faster.

**Grabka:** Why do you think that is?

**Cuevas:** Because we didn’t have the damage.

**Grabka:** Didn’t have the damage.
Cuevas: We didn’t have the damage we had with this one. But Camille was a much stronger storm. Oh, my God! The house, that guy that had that barn, they had a house that was probably about a hundred fifty feet from mine, and it was clean. Just the floor was left. We had more tornadoes. The street from my corner from my house, tremendous power poles, they were just flattened like matchsticks. Flattened like matchsticks. But it wasn’t but a few hours. Like this storm, I don’t know; we had six or eight hours of hurricane wind, I guess. I mean, it was just constant beating, constant, constant, constant. And the noise wasn’t quite as bad. Now, my wife, she hears a storm coming now, she’s ready to leave yesterday. But today, I mean, I still believe that hopefully we’ll never have another Katrina. I don’t think we’ll ever see anything like that again, but I hate to get back on Katrina, but my generation have really been affected by this storm. So many, I suspect—and I’m just guessing right now, two and a half years almost since that storm—that 65 percent of my generation hasn’t come back yet. And I’ll give you an example. Retired Senior Volunteer Program is from fifty up. Prior to the storm, we had four hundred and thirty people were members. Some people, just very old, make phone calls to neighbors and so forth and so on. Now, we have a hundred and sixty. Of that hundred and sixty, thirty are newcomers to the area. So we got about a hundred and thirty out of that four hundred and thirty. Of course, some of them have died. I mean, we carry obituaries in the paper; like we have one today, a guy that used to work at the newspaper as a matter of fact, living in Florida with his son. We have people all over this country. Our subscriptions to the newspaper, we have people all over the country.

Grabka: So it’s an interesting way to follow people. Right? To see where they went.

Cuevas: Yeah.

Grabka: Just following the subscriptions.

Cuevas: But my generation was hit very hard, as well as the young people, by this storm. Our school district, the Bay/Waveland School District is still very short on the numbers of students that they have. I mean, they’re below their pre-Katrina numbers.

Grabka: Do you and your wife have children?

Cuevas: No. We don’t.

Tobia: Is there anything you miss most about your community, like, post-Katrina? Were there any big, really big changes?

Cuevas: Yes, a supermarket. We had three in Bay St. Louis and Waveland. Between Bay St. Louis and Waveland, we don’t have a one, yet.

Tobia: So where do you go to get your food?
Cuevas: Well, Diamondhead has a small independent. Winn-Dixie, it used to be two blocks from my house; [it] is in Long Beach now. We have in Slidell, we have a Rouse’s(?) or Picayune has a Winn-Dixie. Now, Wal-Mart, we do buy some stuff from Super Wal-Mart. There is a Super Wal-Mart, but that’s still not a real grocery store, what I consider a grocery and a market.

Grabka: Right. How about other businesses?

Cuevas: Well, we have more food outlets now, cooked food outlets than we had before the storm, but I think they’re going to begin to hurt; some of them are going to begin to hurt. It’s just, there’s a lot of things you cannot find here yet, small things—it may be surprising to you—that you’re just unable to find.

Grabka: Like if you wanted to buy an engagement ring or something. (laughter)

Cuevas: Well, you might be able to. You can, but not, you know—that you possibly can, but still it’s coming back, but it’s real slow. But the biggest thing we miss right now is a grocery store, supermarket. I guarantee you that’s one of the biggest things.

Grabka: I’m just going to go through all my questions to make sure.

Tobia: The question is, describe some of the interesting people you’ve met, favorite or least favorite. So with all your involvement, like, with Rotary and the newspaper, post-Katrina, is there any people that really stand out that you’ve met?

Grabka: That I’ve met since the storm?

Tobia: Yeah, if you were working with anybody through your volunteer groups?

Cuevas: Well, I got to tell you this. I don’t know where—we would never be anywhere near to where we are now if we wouldn’t have had the volunteers from across the country come in. We’ve received help from a group from New Jersey, also a group from Pittsburg, Pennsylvania, that helped us and enabled us to get back into our home relatively early. We were back in our home—of course, we have a lot of work still yet to do—by April of 2006. But we still had doors to be replaced; we had windows to be replaced. We had a lot of stuff to be done, yet. We had very little furniture. Matter of fact we just had a mattress on the floor.

Grabka: But you were living in your home the entire time there?

Cuevas: Well, no. We stayed in the FEMA trailer for about six months, from November to April, after the storm, but all we did was sleep in it because we, I mean, we were in the house working in the daytime, seven days a week.

Grabka: And what about between September and November?
Cuevas: I stayed in Baton Rouge with friends, with good friends. I stayed with them.

Grabka: How was it coming home in November? How was that?

Cuevas: Oh, I bought a new Malibu, and I tell you what; I almost had to leave my wife in Baton Rouge because I didn’t have any room. I bought a lot of food (laughter) and stuff. One of the first things we did, though, when we come home, we had bought—I’m trying to think. That was before—we got electricity six days after the storm in my house; that’s hard to believe, but we’re close to the main grid and all. But anyway, we bought a washer and dryer in Baton Rouge and brought that home, and we were able to wash clothes with cold water, but we used a lot of Purex. I ruined a lot of clothes with Purex, (laughter) but at least we washed them. But it was grateful to have good friends; I tell you. But these people, matter of fact, we, my wife and I had the honor of visiting a church group, the church of a group that helped us in New Jersey, and we spent four days up there, and they rolled the red carpet out for us. And the lady who, she was one of the volunteers who helped pack some of our stuff and all and was down here for two weeks in November of [20]05, last two years, she’s come down in September and spent four days with us. So we’ve made some good friends. As a matter of fact, these groups keep coming back. We got some from Pittsburg that’ll be coming the first of next month, part of the group. We have one or two of them, but they always come by and see how we’re doing. And we’ve made a lot of new friends like that. In my career, I’ve met a lot of people in this place. I had an ambassador to Gorbachev come and interview me.

Grabka: When was that?

Cuevas: That was in [19]95. I was supposed to interview him. One of the local teachers here, kindergarten teachers started this, I don’t know, Hope for Kids or some program that turned out to be international, and he was here because of that. And she, instead of me interviewing [him], (laughter) he came and interviewed me. (laughter) Nurses come popping in. By the way, I went through a hurricane in 1954 in Massachusetts. I was in service; I was at Fort Devens, Massachusetts, and the day we were to leave to go to Camp Gordon, Georgia, a hurricane came through there, and they had, I think, something like seventy-five miles an hour winds. On our way to the airport—now, the bus driver told us this, and I don’t know if it’s true or not, they had this church belfry on the ground. He said, “Now, that’s the belfry of the church in the Old North Church Tower.” I don’t know how true it was or anything else. We got to Boston airport, and we spent about seven hours there waiting for the water to get off the airport so the plane could take off. I do remember that. In [19]95, when I had surgery, here a big, tall guy comes in the room, and he says, “Can I check out my power out, and we move your bed?” I said, “Sure.” They were checking the auxiliary power to see if it was working because we had a hurricane coming. But anyway that same day, I ended up having a second surgery in my intestines. So I had a real serious threat of a hurricane; I had a operation right in this hospital. Fortunately we just got very little from the hurricane. Didn’t get much. It went in, I think, over around, between Mobile and Mississippi line somewhere.
Grabka: It sounds like you have a very special relationship with the hurricanes.

Cuevas: Yeah.

Grabka: (Inaudible) (laughter)

Cuevas: Yeah, I guess I do.

Tobia: So if there was another one, would you still come back and—

Cuevas: Yes. It just depends. I may not even leave unless it’s a [Category] Three or Four or Five, something like that.

Grabka: Does your wife feel the same way?

Cuevas: No. (laughter) My wife would move tomorrow if I’d say, “Yeah, let’s move.” Yeah, my wife would say, “Let’s move.”

Tobia: But you’d stay.

Cuevas: But I’d stay. You got to remember; my ancestors lived on Cat Island. That’s eight miles off the shoreline here.

Grabka: So you feel very connected with this place and these people.

Cuevas: Oh, yeah. This is my life; this is my friends; I went to school here.

Grabka: Are there any traditions in this community that you feel particularly connected to?

Cuevas: Well, I still like the fishing aspect of it. The recreation, I guess, is the big thing here. No question about it, and the church. I mean, it’s all part of it. And my involvement in the community with so many organizations, I’ve always contended, I’ve always felt that a person needs to give back to the community. I don’t care who you are, what job you have, if you’re afforded to earn a living in a community, you need to give a little bit back to the community, and that’s whether you’re a business owner, or just an everyday worker. And I was taught that by my parents. We used to have the keys to always eight or ten homes in our area that we looked after; never got anything for it. People from New Orleans, they knew my mother was from New Orleans, and stuff like that. And it just goes to the people, the atmosphere, and this is my home.

Grabka: Thank you very much for your time. We really appreciate it.
**Cuevas:** OK. I enjoyed it, and I hope I didn’t get too far-fetched or too far out of line.

**Tobia:** No, not at all.

**Grabka:** No, not at all.

**Cuevas:** All right.

**Grabka:** Thank you very much, sir.

**Tobia:** Thank you.

(end of interview)