Mississippi Oral History Project

Hurricane Katrina Oral History Project

An Oral History

with

Emma L. West

Interviewer: Beth Morgan

Volume 795
2005
Morgan: I am in the Rain Street Community Center in Poplarville, Mississippi, with Emma L. West, who has evacuated up here from Gulfport. And, Emma, I understood that you rode the storm out in Gulfport.

West: Yes, I did.

Morgan: Would you tell us about that?

West: OK. I was—Monday morning, when the water started to come into the house, I went in there and fixed me a big old strong drink, went in there, crawled into bed, drank the drink, laid down, put my hand over the edge of the bed so that when the water touched my hand I would wake up. When I woke up, I saw stuff that had been in the bathroom floating past my bed in the bedroom and I got up and I came out, and I couldn’t get into the kitchen because the refrigerator had turned up on its back and was across the—toe up the cabinets and stuff and was across the entrance way into the kitchen, so I went around and came through the living room. And as I was coming into the dining room, the table come floating toward me and I just sort of pushed it aside. Now, I’m in my pajamas, right, and I pushed it aside and I went to the window, there’s a little short window, and I’m standing there and when the water got up to here—

Morgan: Your chest area.

West: Yes, I’m on my tiptoes.

Morgan: OK.

West: When the water got up to here and it started to lip over the edge of that, bottom edge of that little window, I just turned and I went to the front door, reached under the water, unlocked the door, opened it, unlocked the screen, opened it and stepped out into the storm. And then I hugged the side of the building and went past an apartment into a stairwell, and climbed up into the second floor area of that stairwell. And there
was a storage area where the door is sort of caved in like this, but it had a chain, chain in the door shaft. I ducked up in there and grabbed hold to the doorknob so that the wind couldn’t blow me out of there. And I stayed there and I heard other people talking, so when the wind went down a little, I came back down them steps, and by this time, when I went out in the water and I’m on my tiptoes and my chin is up like this, and the water’s curling up like that—I can’t swim.

**Morgan:** Towards your bottom lip, that’s how high the water is.

**West:** Yeah. I can’t swim. (laughter) But I followed the building and I went across to this building B, because I’m out of A building; I went across to building B and a guy that was up in B came down to help me. And I couldn’t get as far as the first step of the stairs, going up the stairs, so he pushed me over the edge of a railing and I came down about the third step and went on upstairs, and then he turned and followed me upstairs. There was him, his wife, and his dog, Vanessa and her mother, Ruth. Ruth is about ninety. The rest of them were all younger than I am, but Ruth was about ninety. And (laughs) when she came out—her daughter brought her out of there and her daughter was trying to put her over a fence to get her out of the area, and she was hanging onto a post that wouldn’t turn her loose. (laughter) She said her daughter was trying to choke her, but they took her and they put her into Judy and Ellis’—Ellis was the little guy that came and helped me—Judy and Ellis’ apartment and took her clothes off and put one of Judy’s robes on her because they didn’t want her to get sick. They said that she was sitting on the couch with the dog and the couch was floating, so they had taken her and gotten upstairs. When they got her upstairs they took Judy’s robe off of her and they wrapped her in some sheets. And Vanessa broke into the apartment above them and that’s how they got in and got the sheets and stuff. OK, the people who were, belonged to that apartment had gone downstairs over in D building to be with their people so they all got ran out and they was on the second floor of D building, but they were standing over there hollering they was going to call the cops (laughter) when we went into their apartment. Well, they were already in there by the time I got there. I went on in there and wrapped up in sheets, too, shoot. And then as the water went down—first of all, you look out there and it was like an ocean between—OK—

**Morgan:** Where was your—let me ask you; where was your apartment located?

**West:** Baywood.

**Morgan:** Baywood in Gulfport.

**West:** Yeah.

**Morgan:** And that’s below I-10?
West: Yes.

Morgan: OK.

West: It’s, Baywood—OK, you know where Cowan Road is?

Morgan: I know, but go ahead and just describe the location because—

West: OK.

Morgan: —they may not.

West: Cowan Road runs north and south. Magnolia comes off of Cowan and then you come to a stop sign and then it’s Pine. Pine goes up and goes around. It’s right next door to the Handsboro Community Center, down the road from Jefferson Davis College. This is a senior and disability complex.

Morgan: How many miles from the beach were you?

West: I’d say a good three or four miles.

Morgan: Three or four miles.

West: But the Gulf didn’t come in on us; Bayou Bernard came in on us. Bayou Bernard was a, it’s a swamp-like area, and they have a nature walk, and they have a park there, and like I said, the Handsboro Community Center is right next door to it. And across the street was a trailer court. And while I was standing up in that stairwell, I saw the deck from the bar at the trailer court come floating across the street. (laughter)

Morgan: It’s like in The Wizard of Oz, you know, when she goes up into the tornado and sees those things out of her window.

West: And you could not tell there was a car in that parking area, and there was a good eleven or twelve cars out there. There was even a pickup, but all you could see was just white water. And then when it went down, then I went over and got on C building because these people over here in D building was fussing about us being in there. Well, then when we left their apartment and went to C building, they left D building and came back over to B building where they belonged.

Morgan: How long was it before the water went down, do you remember?

West: About five hours.
Morgan: So, late Monday afternoon?

West: Right. And what I did then, I spent the night in Kay and John’s apartment. There was, oh, there must’ve been about ten of us in a one-bedroom apartment. They was laying all on the floors and stuff, and I was sitting in the couch, and I couldn’t sleep because I knew I couldn’t stay there, and I knew there was nobody to come get me because my kids lived in Denver. So what I did was I went back over to the house, and my couch was sitting like this, so it had floated up, but it had come back down. And I got John and Cecil to come over and pull my couch out and put it up in that stairwell where I had been standing during the storm and that’s where I slept.

Morgan: Monday night?

West: Tuesday.

Morgan: OK.

West: I slept there until the ninth of September. I would get out, and I would go over to John and them in the daytime, and we would get out and rustle up ice and water and food and stuff like that. And then when banks opened, Hancock Bank opened on payday, because I’m on Social Security check; so I went in, and they let me write a check. My checks, they are still looking like they’ve been through the storm because my purse and everything went under. Oh, I had on those pajamas, right. OK, so I went to the Hancock Bank, and I dried out one of the checks enough to write it, and they gave me one hundred dollars, and I went and bought groceries for us because by this time—because see, the storm was on Monday, so by Friday we had—what wasn’t spoiled had been cooked and ate, and other stuff was spoiled, so we didn’t have nothing. So I took out one hundred dollars, and we went and bought groceries with it.

Morgan: Were there groceries in the store for you to even buy? Was there very much in the stores?

West: We went to a little—what do you call those little—convenience store and loaded just can goods, but they had like canned soups and stuff like that, right. And so then we made it through that and then the next day I went back to them and wrote another check for one hundred dollars, and we got to Sam’s. And we bought—we still couldn’t get no fresh meat, but we bought canned gravy, stuff like that, and some grits and—Kay was out there cooking. We had a grill, and she went out there, and they made coffee every morning, and they cooked. So that was two hundred dollars that I spent to help us make it through. Well, then there was a lady that was with us, and she said she couldn’t help us because she had bills to pay. (laughter) So then Friday, the ninth of September, they told me I could have one suitcase, and I ain’t got no suitcases because everything was in the water. So I had a plastic box, and I filled my plastic box with whatever I could get in there and got on a bus and moved up here.
Morgan: Did you know you were coming to Poplarville then or were you just getting on a bus—

West: I was just getting on a bus. They said it’d be either Columbia, Lumberton or Poplarville. I had been through Columbia before; the rest of them I didn’t know nothing about them. Coming here, no car, meds messed up, yes.

Morgan: Your whole world messed up. Were you able to get word to your children in Denver that you were alive?

West: Yes, I got a shout out. This girl that lived next door to me was running back and forth from Mobile, she had—somebody called her from Mobile and I asked them to contact my kids. Well, they didn’t do it. But then the next day or so people’s cell phones started and I called the kids and left a message that I was all right. This is what I got today.

Morgan: You got a bill or a—oh, it’s your cable bill.

West: Yeah, look at it, though.

Morgan: OK, a past due. They’re charging you for your cable for last month.

West: And this month.

Morgan: And for this month. (laughter)

West: And the apartment is gutted out. I mean, they took all the walls and floors out of the apartment. (laughter)

Morgan: I’m guessing you’re not going to worry about paying it.

West: I tried to call them, but their phone was busy, of course. No, I’m not paying it.

Morgan: How has been—how has rebuilding your life in Poplarville been?

West: It hasn’t. Like I said, when I come in here I had no car, I had to buy meds. I went to—OK, I went to a Dr. Angela and she wrote me some prescriptions because—OK, they had this thing where you could go to Wal-Mart and they would give you your meds. Well, I went in there and they gave me my meds the first time, and then it was only for a week because they had to contact my doctor. OK, I was with close family; they couldn’t get hold to them because they were destroyed. So the next week I went to Wal-Mart in Picayune and I was able to get my meds, and they said they wouldn’t do it no more unless I can get some prescriptions. So Sherilyn set up an
appointment for me to go see Dr. Angela Jones. So I went in there and she wrote the
prescriptions, and the lady next door was supposed to take me to Picayune to get them.
Well, she got tied up with this Red Cross thing and she took off and left me. So the
next day she told me to just give her the prescriptions and the Medicaid card and she
would pick them up because she was still tied up with trying to get her Red Cross. So
she took off and left me again, and when she got back, when she got there, they told
her that it would be eight o’clock that night before they could get them filled. So she
brought them back and she took them to Pearl River County Drug Store right there on
Main Street, and when I went in to get them, he went to telling me about how I need to
take my meds to Picayune and I just had beef. So he and I got into it and I’m telling
him that I just want to buy my meds and he said, “Take them to CVS because you can
get them for free.” And because, see, my meds was running me, what, three hundred
to five hundred dollars; last time they checked them out they were five hundred
dollars.

Morgan: Tell me a little bit about your conditions that you take medications for.

West: OK, I had a heart attack in [19]97.

Morgan: I see you’re wearing a patch.

West: Yes.

Morgan: That’s for your heart?

West: Yeah, a nitro patch. I take digoxin for my heart. I have fibromyalgia, and I
just take—in the wintertime, usually, I can get hold of Darvocet, but since I’m—I
can’t, right, so I’m taking Motrin, and I went and bought a heating pad Wednesday. I
have arthritis in the knee. Oh, my blood, my sugar is unreal. I take 124 units of NPH
and twelve units of Humalog in the morning. In the evening I take 22 units of
Humalog and 64 units of NPH.

Morgan: For diabetes.

West: For diabetes. I take Tarka for high blood pressure. I take Furosemide and
potassium for congestive heart failure or whatever. (laughter)

Morgan: You forget after a while which one does what, don’t you?

West: No.

Morgan: Yeah?

West: That’s—is that all of it? That’s pretty much it.
Morgan: Do you have any plans about getting back to Gulfport? Have you heard anything at all about your complex?

West: They told us when we wanted to come up here that we had first choice. OK, I have been in touch with some of the people that were there. This girl, Kay, that we was all hanging in her apartment, she has been told that she can move back on the 15th of November, but she is on a second floor, mine’s a first floor.

Morgan: So, you’ll be back in your same apartment—that’s your understanding—and your apartment will be unlivable.

West: Yeah, until about January or so. But I don’t want to buy furniture and stuff because I’ve gotten my FEMA [Federal Emergency Management Agency money], but it’s in the bank, and I’m trying not to buy stuff because all this stuff that I buy, I’ve got to get back to Gulfport.

Morgan: And that’s how long of a trip, from here?

West: It’s about seventy or eighty miles.

Morgan: Almost an hour and a half, really.

West: Well see, Wiggins is, what, maybe thirty miles and then it’s about, yeah, it’s about a good thirty or forty miles past Wiggins, at least.

Morgan: Where are you staying up here?

West: Mississippi Regional because that’s who had that complex. They put me in a one-bedroom—in a three-bedroom apartment on 210 Martin Luther King here in these projects. They gave me a Army cot and there was a refrigerator and stove in the house.

Morgan: So you got three bedrooms and one Army cot.

West: Right. The girl next door loaned me one of her kids’ old beds, so I had a bed. And then the people on the other side—well, I couldn’t buy a car. I actually went into a panic attack or something, called an ambulance, they took me to Picayune, left me there, I went to a car lot to try to buy a car because I had $1500—I had $1800 in the bank, OK. So I wanted to put $1500 down on a car or buy a car for $1500. They would not sell me a car because they said I had not been in Pearl River County for a year. So they told me to go to another—told me where there was another car lot. I went to that car lot, the same story. Well, then I’m stuck in Picayune, and I don’t have a way to get out; so I went to this church, but it was locked up, and there was a school,
and they said, “No, we can’t help you; you got to go to the church to find out.” Anyway, so I went across the street to Phillips, whatever, some kind of a home repair type stuff, and I saw these people and I asked them could I pay them fifty dollars to get me back to Poplarville and they said, no, they didn’t have time. So they sent me back over to the Red Cross, because the Red Cross was in that church that I was trying to get into. They had an ambulance sitting there so I went over there to him, but there was nobody in the ambulance. So then I saw two guys talking and I thought one of them might’ve been the ambulance driver, so I went up and I talked to him. Well, he put me in his truck and he took me to the Red Cross center and brought me in there to try to get Red Cross to get me back to Poplarville. And I saw a couple of girls that said that they were from Poplarville and I hooked a ride with them, and gave them twenty-five dollars for some gas because I was desperate, and they brought me home. My daughter came down here from Denver and she got me in her car and we went and tried to find a car. We went and got my Red Cross in Gulfport. We went to a dealer in Gulfport, they said, no, they weren’t—they didn’t have cars for $2,000 or less and they weren’t accepting less than $2,000 down for their cars. You know what that’s about. So we drove all the way to McComb and bought me a car. They accepted the $1500 down, and then I gave them a check for the first month’s car note and then—that was on a Thursday—on Friday, we went back to Gulfport to put tags on the car because I’m saying I live in Harrison County; I don’t live in Pearl River. Well, would you believe there was $19,000 in my bank. So Saturday we went back to McComb, paid that car off. (laughter)

Morgan: Great.

West: And most of that money is still in that bank waiting for me to get back to Gulfport so I can buy my furniture because I don’t want to buy furniture and stuff here because it has to be shipped to Gulfport. So what I’m trying to do is I don’t want to buy anything that I can’t put in that Buick.

Morgan: Um-hm.

West: To get me back to Gulfport. So that’s where I’m standing at right now. The girl next door gave me a skillet and I bought a little sauce pan. Well, the other day I bought a covered skillet and then I wanted some spaghetti so I bought a spaghetti pan. (laughter) Somebody bought me a box of dishes.

Morgan: And you are rebuilding from nothing.

West: Yes.

Morgan: Where do you get your strength? What do you draw from to be able to walk this walk, as I was listening to you with your health?
West: Let me tell you this. I’m going to tell you this joke that my son come up with. When the girls heard about the storm, they was all upset. My son said, “If she makes it out of there, she’ll survive because she’s ghetto.” That’s it.

Morgan: Ghetto.

West: Ghetto.

Morgan: Ghetto got me through; that’s your new bumper sticker on your car. (laughter)

West: I’m ghetto. (laughter) That’s probably what I should’ve named the car, but the car’s name is “Sweet Wine.”

(end of interview)