Mississippi Oral History Program

Hurricane Katrina Oral History Project

An Oral History

with

Eric Jones

Interviewer: Ted Butler

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Biography

Mr. Eric Jones was born August 13, 1971, in Laurel, Mississippi, to Mr. Henry Jones (born February 18, 1941, in Quitman, Mississippi) and Mrs. Geraldine Loper Jones (born December 31, 1937, in Quitman, Mississippi). His father was self-employed, and his mother was a nurse. After graduation from Quitman High School, Jones enlisted in the US Navy, serving on the USS America in Desert Shield and Desert Storm in the Gulf War, honorably leaving the military as an E-7. He attended Johnson and Wales Culinary School of Art, Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College, and The University of Southern Mississippi Gulf Park. He is a member of the American Legion, and he received a commendation for his service in Kuwait. He is a Seventh-Day Adventist. He enjoys history, cooking, church, and teaching.

On March 16, 1979, in Livingston, Alabama, he married Ms. Annika Sterling. They have three children, Kijana Jones (born August 17, 1995), Erykah Jones (born April 17, 2000), and Eryk Jones (born March 11, 2002).
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AN ORAL HISTORY

with

ERIC JONES

This is an interview for the Mississippi Oral History Program of The University of Southern Mississippi. The interview is with Eric Jones and is taking place on October 26, 2005. The interviewer is Ted Butler.

Butler: My name is Ted Butler. I am interviewing Eric Jones for an oral history project about Mississippi survivors of Hurricane Katrina. It is the twenty-sixth of October, 2005, 10:00 a.m. We are interviewing at The [University of] Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg Campus. Eric, when and where were you born?

Jones: I was born in a little town called Laurel, Mississippi, August thirteen of [19]71.

Butler: So where did you go to elementary school and grammar school?

Jones: I went to school in Quitman, Mississippi, about, I guess about sixty miles from Hattiesburg here. I went to Quitman High School. It was a consolidated high school at that time, not just Quitman High School there in Quitman.

Butler: What year did you graduate from Quitman?

Jones: In 1989.

Butler: In 1989. Eric, what did you do right after high school? Did you go off to college? Did you join the service?

Jones: No. I went right into the service. At that time they were offering the best thing for me, so I just went right into the service, went to boot camp, as a matter of fact, on my birthday. I left on my birthday.

Butler: Which branch of the service?

Jones: The Navy.

Butler: The Navy. Where did they station you?

Jones: Well, the first place I was stationed, believe it or not, was San Diego, California, which is kind of rough on a country boy, you know, but that was the first place that I was stationed. And I couldn’t imagine being out there in the big city, so I decided that I could
get what’s called a swap in the Navy. Someone wants to be in San Diego, and I want to be somewhere else. You could change with them. So I ended up trying to get back to the East Coast and ended up about four months later going to Norfolk, Virginia, back on the East Coast to the USS *America*.

**Butler:** Now, I understand you served in the Gulf War. Even though that’s not really a focus of the interview, I know that was a big, formative experience in your life. I mean, how did that come about?

**Jones:** Well, the *America* was the only ship, at the time when the Gulf War began, to both serve in the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf. They was asking for volunteers that wanted to go into a land-based unit, and I ended up going into Kuwait on a land-based unit, you know, volunteering myself. And I didn’t realize the extent to my volunteer. But I got off the ship for about eight months, onto a ground-based unit in the Gulf right there in Kuwait.

**Butler:** Did you see any combat?

**Jones:** Well, I was with a combat unit. Actually it was like a mine-sweeping unit that was set up, a MIUW [mobile inshore undersea warfare], and we were more or less in the oil fields trying to contain most of the burning of the oil wells there.

**Butler:** So this is essentially after the defeat of Saddam Hussein’s forces?

**Jones:** Well, during that time the actual period of combat wasn’t very long during the Gulf War. You know that we overwhelmed them really fast, and most everything that happened was right at the end of the fighting or the beginning of everything during Desert Shield or either right after Desert Storm.

**Butler:** Did you stay in the service after the Gulf War?

**Jones:** Yes, I stayed in the service. That’s what I knew. I wasn’t good at anything else. That’s what I was good at, is being in the service.

**Butler:** What did you do exactly? I mean, what job did you have?

**Jones:** Well, when I came in, I came in as a machinist’s mate, but on the ship you have to, every machinist may have to go mess cranking. So I kind of fell in love with being able to eat on time, and anybody that’s in the service, in the Navy especially, will know what that means. You can come down, and you got a ship with 6500 people on it. You can look at the chow line and say, “Hey, we got fried chicken or pizza or lasagna on the line. Ooh, I’m going to eat good today.” And you go up and get in line, and about an hour later when you get down to where you’re about to get served, you have hot dogs because all the food has run out. So when they asked for someone to go mess cranking, I volunteered, and I figured that I could get a free meal because all the cooks will eat first. I went mess cranking. I stayed down there. They kept sending me back and sending me back because I asked to go back, and I became a cook, which was really enjoyable. I got a chance to go to
a school, to an eighteen-month program at Johnson and Wales Culinary School of Art. And I had a passion for cooking anyway, so I became a cook in what’s called the Admiral’s Mess, and it was pretty good.

**Butler:** Well, I guess we’ll skip a few years. Actually, this is probably a lot of years. But kind of take us back to where you were, what you were doing right before Katrina hit. I mean, where were you living, and where were you working and that sort of thing?

**Jones:** Well, I had just retired from Pascagoula, and I was working there in the barracks at the front desk for the barracks and everything. I remember the day before the storm, I was living in Moss Point, Mississippi, but right down in the downtown area of Moss Point, right there off the river. There’s a swamp there, and it wasn’t bad. It was a slow-moving town, but it had a lot of industry in it. With the shipyard being there, there was a lot of things to do. It has a nice Navy station. A lot of people worried about their job that was there because the BRAC [base realignment and closure] list had just came out—the base closure list—and Pascagoula was on it and set for closure, but it was a practically new base. It was built, I think, around [19]92 or so. And a lot of people worried about their job there.

**Butler:** Well, what were your circumstances as far as were you married?

**Jones:** Yes.

**Butler:** You are married.

**Jones:** Yes, I’m married.

**Butler:** So you have how many children?

**Jones:** I have three children.

**Butler:** Three children. We’ll go even further forward. The days before Katrina when you see that the storm looks like it’s in the Gulf and looks like it possibly may come here, say Thursday or Friday if I remember correctly, actually just a couple of months ago, what were your feelings? I mean, had you been through prior hurricanes before?

**Jones:** Well, I had gone through little hurricanes and stuff like that because I’ve been down there for a little while, so we had saw Ivan and Cindy and Dennis and stuff like that, but I remember joking with one of the supervisors at the base that, “I’m not going to run from this hurricane because there’s so many that come, and they always go to either side of us.” And we had a joke there that Pascagoula and Gulfport and Biloxi, Ocean Springs area, we had a halo over our head because nothing ever comes through there. The biggest hurricane that had been through there was Camille. And then you had, what? Georges a few years back in the [19]90s, but nothing really was serious enough to wipe out a town or anything, and we couldn’t comprehend that happening. So. (laughter)
Butler: So you decided to stay put?

Jones: Yeah, I decided to stay put because I was in a good area. My house is, was above sea level. The houses, I have two other houses that was in Biloxi area, Gulfport, that I had just acquired, and they were in good, decent places. I wasn’t worried about them flooding or nothing like that, so I thought.

Butler: Were they inland? How far inland were the ones in Gulfport-Biloxi that you’d acquired?

Jones: They were about a mile off the road, off [US Highway] 90, so you really don’t worry about nothing like that because if you look at the beautiful beaches of Gulfport and Biloxi, you can’t imagine that water being fierce.

Butler: No. No, you certainly can’t. How did your family feel? Did they have more fear and apprehension than you? Did they say, “Well, maybe we should go”?

Jones: No, actually, my wife—and I only had one son with me, my youngest son—we were so concentrated on boarding up the house and stuff, just in case like limbs and stuff fall or whatever. We said we would board up the house just in case something like that happened, but we would stay because it’s not going to get very bad. We had enough food, canned goods for a couple of days and water and everything like that. Portable radios and stuff like that to listen to the weather report. So we just decided, “Hey, we’re going to stay.” And it didn’t seem like it would be very bad.

Butler: So let’s go further, even hours and maybe a day or two later. Come Sunday it looks like it’s going to hit somewhere in Louisiana or Mississippi. Did you have some second thoughts then, or did you think—I mean, because that time I know it became a lot harder to get out, by the Sunday. I believe it was the twenty-sixth of August.

Jones: Right.

Butler: Did you think, “Well, maybe we should get out,” or did you think, “No. I still don’t think it’s going to be that bad”?

Jones: Well, come Sunday, I remember I had worked the night shift at work and the base, having secured the civilians and nonessential personnel there. So we had to show up for work. And one of my coworkers, Miss Felicia Woods, come in, and I tell her, I say, “Hey, I’ve been looking at the weather. It’s hitting on the, basically the other side of New Orleans, so it’s not going to be that bad.” And both of us decided, “Yeah. It’s not going to be very bad, this and that.” But she said, “I got a lot of stuff I need to take care of.” And I said, “Yeah. You know what? I’ll stay here and finish (inaudible) this up because they’re going to secure us in a little while, and that way you can have a whole day to do what you got to do.” We wrapped up the computers and stuff on the base and everything, and we got all that set up, and I left about, I guess about 11:00 that [morning]. And I got home, and my wife and I was looking at the news and said, “Well, it’s not been very bad.” So
later on that evening, the wind kind of got up a little bit, not very much. We have a big oak tree in the front yard, and I told my wife, I said, “You know what, dear? I’m going to put the car on the back to keep it from that tree falling on it, if it do happen to fall.” So I went outside and did that, and I said, “Wow, this wind is getting up.” And then, right then I thought, I said, “Maybe we should go up to Quitman,” up to my hometown, which is about two and a half, three hours from Pascagoula. But it just didn’t seem like it was really that bad. I can deal with the wind, a little bit of rain or whatever. I remember that night the wind blowing really, really hard. You could just hear it howling. And I started thinking, I said, “Man, maybe we should’ve left.” And I got a call from my supervisor. He said “Eric, maybe I should leave.” (laughter) And I said, “Well, if you want to risk it now, the wind is kind of bad.” And I said “[US Highway] 49 is gridlocked right now. Most of the people that’s on there, I’m scared that they’re going to get caught out there in their car.” And he said, “Yeah, you’re right. So what I’m going to do is stay.” So he came up a little bit up above Lucedale, Mississippi, and stayed right up there in one of the hotels, but I stayed at home there in Moss Point, not knowing that the water levels would rise at all, because I was so far off the beach area.

Butler: How far, Eric, are you off—well, is where you were in Moss Point off the water?

Jones: Well, from [Highway] 90, I’m about four or five miles—

Butler: Four or five miles.

Jones: From [Highway] 90 in Pascagoula to the beach is about two miles.

Butler: Are there any kind of bayous or rivers or anything around there?

Jones: Right. And that’s the thing that got us. We got the Pascagoula and the Escatawpa River that’s running behind us, behind the house. And we got a bayou that’s down the road, I guess, about three miles that all our water drained into.

Butler: So at this point the wind is starting to pick up. I mean, you’re starting to get a lot of rain. Are you starting to—well, I mean, just kind of take me back to what exactly is happening.

Jones: Well, I remember that night. I guess it was about 1:30, two o’clock in the morning, and the rain is really coming down. The wind is blowing, and you could hear it hitting like golf balls against the house and the windows and stuff. We still had power at that time. Early, I guess about five o’clock, 5:30, you hear limbs breaking, garbage cans and everything that wasn’t secured by different people, flapping and moving. It woke me up about, I guess about 5:30. So I said, “OK. Let me see how it’s looking.” And I kind of opened the door. I have a big glass door. And the door was really, it had like a suction on it. I said, “Oh, Lord,” kind of, “I better not open this door,” kind of look. And I happened to look outside, and I see how black and cloudy it was. And I couldn’t imagine what was going on because the hurricanes that I’ve been through, even as a kid in [19]79 during Frederick—I remember being in Quitman—it wasn’t as intense. So I said, “OK. This is
not bad. This is not bad.” And my wife is from Jamaica, so she’s used to hurricanes and everything. And she said, “Ooh, this hurricane reminds me of Gilbert when I was little.” And we was looking at a couple of things about Gilbert. Her dad had took some pictures and stuff of Gilbert, and she had them. And I said, “Man, it’s not going to be that bad because it’s way over in New Orleans. That’s a long ways from here.” All of a sudden we hear on the radio that the eye of the hurricane is coming towards this way, towards Mississippi. They think it’s going to hit more in Mississippi. And right then, it kind of bothered me because I realized the distance that we were from the Louisiana/Mississippi border and the Alabama border. I said, “That’s not a very long distance.” And when they started saying that it’s like five hundred miles wide and everything like that, and its eye is really big, it kind of got intense. And I said, “Oh, Lord, I can’t believe I did this.” I wasn’t really concerned about the hurricane. I was just concerned about my family, and I failed. And I said to myself, “I can’t believe I put my family in this kind of danger,” as a second thought. That’s when I started realizing the magnitude of the hurricane. I get a call from over in the Gulfport area that morning from one of my, from one of the pastors at the church that said, “It’s really bad.” He was staying up at Saucier, Mississippi, which is right up [Highway] 49. He said, “It’s really bad in Gulfport. Do you think your house is doing all right right there?” I said, “I hope so.” Because of the fact that I had just bought them and we had paid for them, and I just hoped they were doing well. But I said, I told him my concern that, “I’m just scared of how things are looking over here.” He said, “Well, that’s way over there. It shouldn’t get too bad over in Pascagoula and Moss Point.” I said, “It’s really bad over here, and we have a lot of things going on.” So about eight o’clock we were stirring around the house. We’re in full, I call it, combat mode. We have our clothes on. We have the boots on and everything. Everybody’s ready to go. I happened to look outside in my backyard, and I see my water level is kind of high back there. I said, “Wow. There’s some water back there.” And I said “Well, that’s the highest it’ll ever get right there because it’s just not flowing fast enough.” I guess about a hour later I go on back out, and I got right at a acre of land back there. The water had come, had started coming up, and it was on the porch. And I said, “Oh, my God. This water is filling up really fast.” It got really intense right then. And I had two little dogs, a poodle and a shih-tzu that started going crazy in the house right then. They got to jumping and everything, and I said, “Well, I might need to try to move my car out of the backyard.” And I thought it was kind of ironic that I put the car on the back of the house to keep it from, the tree from falling on it, and the tree that was standing there really tall and strong, and the water was getting in my car. (laughter) When I opened the door my dogs ran out, and they wouldn’t come back in. I guess they were just into the storm or afraid of the storm or whatever. So about nine, 9:30, after I see that the ground is too soggy to move the car, that it was just bogged down, I decided to go back in the house and see whatever, what we could salvage. So we had our food and everything. We were good to go with that. We had ways of fixing the food. No generator.

Butler: No generator. So you were out of power by this time.

Jones: Right. I was out of power by that time. And we still had our radios and everything, flashlights, candles and everything like that. When the, I guess the eye was passing over the area of Slidell, from Gulfport to Slidell, it starting spinning off tornadoes.
We could hear—actually, Pascagoula and Moss Point had kind of cleared up. It was kind of clear, but it was raining real hard. But it was a cloudy sky, but it was clear. It was daylight, and we had the front door kind of cracked a little bit. You could hear just like whirlwinds, just *woo-woo*, like that, and you would hear them like every two or three minutes. I heard one in the backyard. I got about, I guess about 150 feet between my house and another house in my backyard, and I heard one just *howl*, and I didn’t know what it was. I looked back there, and I said, “Man, what is this?” And it just dumped like a big gush of water back there on my shed. It just ripped my little shed apart. I have like a ten by eighteen shed made out of tin. It just ripped it apart. And the water is in my backyard. It’s coming into the back of the house a little bit, down in the lower level of my den, and I said, “Oh, baby, we’re going to have to move out of here and go.” The house in front of me was an abandoned house, but it was on higher ground. And I said, “If it get any higher, we’re going to go back here. We’re going to go over there.” So at that time, I’m not panicking, but I’m kind of down, and I said, “Lord, have mercy.” I can’t imagine if it’s flooding like this here, what’s downtown Moss Point looking like and the bank area and stuff like that, that’s behind my house. So I look out to see the post office that I got at Moss Point. I have a brand-new post office that’s down the street from me, and I looked out there, and I couldn’t see nothing but the little blue sign there. I said, “I know that’s not underwater.” But I look over there, and I see my neighbor’s house that’s down the hill a little bit. Her water is over her front door. And I said, “Lord, I hope they’re not in there.” So the first thing I do is I say, “At least I can go out there and check.” So I go out there and I say, “Well, her car’s gone, so she’s good to go.” My neighbor, Mr. Dred(?), I say, “Hey. He might need to know how bad it is because he’s got all his windows boarded up.” I go over and knock on his door and knock on his door and knock his door. I said, “Mr. Dred, you in there? You in there?” Later I found out he was gone. He had went over to his brother’s house when the storm got really bad. So I said, “OK. At least he’s gone, hopefully.” And the neighbors and stuff are gone. They don’t know how it is, though. My wife and I are sitting out there. We decided we’re going to—we see the water coming in through the back of the kitchen. I said, “OK. It’s time for us to leave. There’s nothing we can do here.” We go out the front door, grabbed my son up and everything, and we take him over to the house. And the house is, I guess about ten feet higher than my house. So we were there, and everything’s OK. We’re listening to the radio. I say, “OK. I got to go.” Curiosity I guess is the word to use, and it definitely can kill the cat. I go back over there, and I say I got to at least see if it’s coming in the back door. So I go to open my front door of the house, and when I opened it water run out on my feet. I said, “Oh, my God. I can’t believe this is flooding.” The only thing that we had going for us that we was in the process of putting down some tile, so we had moved all the furniture up to a corner of the house in the front. We moved all our furniture up there a couple of days before, so we was—all the front rooms are in the back. Back there in that corner was cleared out. And I closed the door. I go back over there, and we sit. We sit. The storm is just bearing down. We got a boat shop next to us, and we see the doors of the boat shop just flying off. We see like a, I call it a tornado or maybe a whirlwind or whatever, but we see it just sitting on, it’s basically sitting on top of this tin building, and it’s ripping the doors off. It ripped the doors off. The doors are thrown about, I guess about two, three hundred feet. You see trees flying and everything, and you can hear tornadoes just coming through there, *woomp*. That’s when I figured it out: that sound is a tornado. You could just hear
them, and they’re going up. And we have a church up above us about, I guess about four miles from the house right there in Pascagoula, and you could see like bricks, a little bricks, red bricks was falling on my house. And I said, “Man, I wonder where these bricks come from.” And I didn’t know what it was. And I said, “Well, maybe it’s from one of the houses around us or something like that.” I have oak trees in the backyard. Three of my trees are just down because it’s so saturated. They’re just falling over just like it was, just like a pencil snapping. You could see the trees and stuff falling.

Butler: How big were these trees?

Jones: These trees, in diameter, they have to be at least three feet. They’re really big, hundred-year-old oak trees, falling over and stuff like that. Little pecan trees that was in my yard, it was so saturated they just—they didn’t snap. They just fell over from all the water and how soft the ground was. The rain’s coming down. We’re listening on the radio, and everybody’s staying in. You can’t see this or that and going on. I see a truck pass by, and I say, “Man, I wonder what that truck doing.” Later I found out they was trying to steal out of the shop. I’m saying this is in the dead of a hurricane.

Butler: So they didn’t even wait for things to calm down.

Jones: No, no. This truck was there, trying to steal the stuff. So I just, I say, “I know they’re not stealing.” So I thought that maybe they was coming—I said, “Hey, they can take us for a ride to get us out of this.” But then I thought about it. I said, “Hey, if I go back to the north, that’s the Escatawpa Bridge. All that’s flooded anyway. You could see the water. If I go to Pascagoula, that’s the beach. It’s coming that way, so that’s going to be flooded. So I’m in probably the best place that I can be, with my family and everything.” I step out on the porch of the house that we evacuated to, and they turned around, and I called them. I said, “Hey.” They look at me. They jump in the truck, and they take off. They had a boat motor, trying to bring it out of the shop. And I said, “Oh, my God. Those folks are not trying to help anyone. They’re stealing.” So I get my camera phone, and I take a picture of the truck, but it’s so far away you can’t really do anything.

Butler: You can’t get a license or anything.

Jones: Right. And I look across the street, and across what’s Main Street in Moss Point, all that’s flooded over there. Everything’s flooded. Now, I’m really concerned because the water is still coming up. The water is coming up really bad, and it’s about five feet from the door of the house that we went to. I said, “Lord, have mercy. I can’t believe this water is up this high.”

Butler: I’m going to go ahead and stop the tape. I don’t mean to interrupt, but it’s about to cut off. (interview continues on side two)

Butler: Now we’re good to go now. Now, you were telling me you were in this house across the street where the water is coming up, even though it’s ten feet higher.
Jones: Right. The water is coming up, and I said, “‘Oh, Lord, what have I done?’” That’s the first thing and the only thing I can think about, is my family, if something was going to happen. I couldn’t believe I had put—I’m smarter than that. I know I am. And I’m usually the type to sit down and be quiet and not say anything if it’s even thinking about lightning outside. So what am I doing staying during the storm? So suddenly I get a call.

Butler: Is this on your cell phone?

Jones: Yeah, on my cell phone. And I said, “I didn’t think this phone would work. Hey, way to go Cingular.” And it was from my little sister. She said, “Hey, what are you doing?” (laughter) I said, “Well, we just was sitting here waiting on this hurricane to pass over, wondering whether we’re going to die or not.” She said, “Oh, well, it’s getting bad up here in Quitman.” I said, “Yeah? It can’t be too bad because the storm could”—and at that time I was listening to a news broadcast on the radio, and they said that the storm has blanketed Mississippi. And I said, “Aw, man,” I said, “This must be a really huge storm.” And we talked for a minute, and I said, “Well, I’m going to go and save my battery and everything.” So we cut off the phone. And at that time it’s clearing up a little bit outside. I guess it’s around eleven o’clock or so, but the water was still rising. And we had sit there and prayed about things, and I told my wife, I said, “One of the major things is not while the storm is going on. It’s at the end of the storm. Usually the water will rise because you have so many different tributaries of water coming into one thing.” And I said, “If the water is rising already, it’s going to be rough when we get through.” So my car is flooded. Portions of my house is flooded. And I said, “I can’t believe this. We haven’t even finished fixing the house, and it’s flooded already.” It’s blown off a lot of that siding that I had on it. It’s a brick home, but it had siding on some parts. Blown off a lot of my shingles and roofing. I said, “But that’s not, that really don’t matter to me right now. All I’m worried about is getting”—I told her. I said, “I hope we can go work tomorrow.” She said, “Why you hope you can go to work tomorrow?” I said, “Because then I know we lived through all of this.” And she said, “Yeah, I guess that’s right.” I guess about thirty minutes later I said—the storm done, the wind was still really bad, but the rain had kind of stopped. And I said, “Hey, this is not so bad. Now if the water don’t get too bad,” but I see it coming. And you could see it just floating, stuff just floating down the road right there at Moss Point in that area and—

Butler: So I mean, was it like a river essentially?

Jones: Yes.

Butler: Or was it still water?

Jones: It was flowing because you could see it moving a little bit, but it wasn’t moving really fast, and it kind of looked like a lake. And I said, “Man, this water is still rising.” You could see it coming across the street, and I told my wife, I said, “Baby, this water is really going to get up here. It’s about two to three feet from coming up the stairs here, up the steps to the house.” And she said, “Yeah, but why is some of our yard flooded over
there on that side?” On the east side of my house. I said, “I don’t know.” So we’re praying, and we’re praying, and I guess about thirty minutes later she said, “Huh. I could see her door handle now.” I said, “If you can see her door handle”—she said, “Yeah, see the door handle there?” I said, “Oh, my God. The water must be going down because you couldn’t see her door handle.” The neighbor’s door, at first. So we wait about an hour, hour and a half later, and the water started going back down, through the grace of God because of how Pascagoula and Moss Point is. When you come off [Highway] 63, you come into Moss Point over the Escatawpa Bridge, and you have a river right there. By the time you come off the bridge, you have what’s called the Riverwalk Memorial for Moss Point. And we’re about, I guess about—it’s not even a mile from downtown Moss Point, and all that is flooded. All that is flooded. You can see all down through there, and that water’s rushing in. Then the Escatawpa’s coming like that and rushing from this way, and the bayou is around the other side. So it’s just terrifying to know that. And I know better. I know better, and that’s what I was thinking to myself. “I know better.” I don’t put myself in between a rock and a hard place like that. So the water’s receding. The wind’s still high, but the rain isn’t that bad. It’s getting into the afternoon part of the day and everything. The sky is clearing out. We see a little sign of life. We see some of the emergency vehicles coming through like that and getting to the point of coming, going down by the Escatawpa Bridge and having to turn around because they can’t get through that way. I guess they didn’t realize the water would be out there like that. And I said, “OK, baby. It’s going to be all right, now. It’s going to be all right.” At that time we started noticing little things about the area. How we just walked to the end of the road because it had stopped raining. The wind had died down and everything. It’s about six o’clock, seven o’clock in the evening. Everything died down, kind of, and you could see poles down, lines down, trees down. My shed in the back was just all just tore down.

Butler: It’s the one that you think that the tornado or something like that hit.

Jones: Right. And it just ripped all the tin off. It’s just like it’s a skeleton. And I said, “OK.” And I praised God, and I thanked God for sparing us, and I looked out, scared to go in the house. I go in the house, and you can see the little water line and everything from where the water had came in. It didn’t come in eight feet or nine feet or anything. It just was large enough to wet all the wood and everything in that section in the largest section of the house. And the top section where we had put the furniture, it wasn’t so bad, but I didn’t realize how fast water damaged a home. The good thing was that it was more fresh water than salt water from that area. The Sheetrock and everything was just soaked. I had a leak in the house in the bathroom, in my master bedroom bathroom where it blew off some of the roof. It was soaked in. That whole wall and everything. And I said, “Man, I can’t believe it’s that bad, but it’s still standing.” And later on that evening, a couple of guys came by the house to check on us to see if we was all right and all, and we talked about [it]. And he said, “You know what? I see you got some bricks from the church down there.” I said, “From the church?” He said, “Yeah.” I said, “There’s no church down there.” He said, “In Pascagoula there is, and these are some bricks from Restoration Church.” And I said, “For real?” He said, “You ought to see. It’s torn apart. A tornado hit it. Tornadoes hit all around your house.” And I said, “Man.” And I was thanking God. You just don’t know until you’re in that predicament. If you didn’t have religion, you had
it after then. And I said, “Well, we got a clean room there and everything that we can sleep in tonight, and then we’ll see what we’re going to do in the morning. The power is still off. We wake up that next morning, my car (laughter), I said, “Well, I know the Kia is not going to start because I know it got wet.” But it started up, and it come on out of there, and I said, “Oh, thank God.” But I get up that morning, and I see how fast the mold is growing on there.

Butler: That’s the next morning?

Jones: Yes, the next morning. It was just, you could see where the water was still in there, and we were squeezing it out and everything, but the mold had just instantaneously grown. And I said, “Man.” And I said, “OK. That’s not bad. That’s not bad. That’s not bad.” A lot of people lost more than that. A lot of people lost more than that. But I said, “Well, baby, I tell you what I’m going to do. I’m going to go and see if we can get a couple of things from the stores.” Even though we had some food, see if we can get a couple of things from the stores. None of the stores had anything from where they had been looted and everything like that, and a lot of people were just out there that didn’t prepare at all. And I saw, all the places I’ve been overseas and everywhere, that was the first time I said to myself, “Some of these people may starve because they don’t have gas to go anywhere. Where are they going to go if they do have gas? Because most of the roads are closed down.” I had some people calling me from work that were some of my associates, and they said, “Hey, the base is really messed up and the barracks and stuff.” We were staying in the barracks, and it’s about, I guess about four or five miles off the beach and on Chico Road. And the water was up to, going to the second floor. We was going to go over there and stay, but they say it was like tidal waves just came in and just busted all of it out and everything. Thank God that we didn’t go over there because a lot of people would’ve been lost if they hadn’t reacted fast. I had talked to a couple of guys, and they said, “What you about to do?” I said, “You know what? I don’t even see any of the people that I know here.” It’s like it was a ghost town. All the people that you thought was staying there are—something’s wrong. So. And you could see people. We have this little, she’s not homeless. She have a home, but she come by and collect cans. Every morning it’s like clockwork. At 7:15 she’s there checking the garbage cans and stuff, and she said, she was just looking. She said, “I wish I would’ve got some food because we can’t even get any food.” And I said, “I see that, and all the stores are closed now.” The ones that are there had been broken into and people have stolen most of the little canned goods and stuff. You couldn’t even get a bag of chips and no gas, no nothing all through the Moss Point area. And that was the first time I really felt like, “Hey, I’m going to starve.” These people here are going to starve if they don’t get anything to eat, if no one is there. This is the next day. No one is there, giving out anything.

Butler: No government, no—

Jones: No government agency doing anything. And that kind of bothered me. I felt like I was in a third-world country with no hope or anything. And I told my wife, I said, “You know what? This is really hurting because I just can’t stand to see no one not able to do anything.” I get in the car, and I go over to one of my church member’s home and to check
on him. He’s a older guy, about seventy years old, and I bring him some of the stuff that we have, and this and that, and a couple of other church members. And I said, “I don’t know what’s going on, but I can’t find anything to eat or anything for none of the people.” And he said, “This is worse”—he had been down there for about fifty years. And he said, “This is the worst storm I’ve ever been in, and I wished I wouldn’t have stayed.” And for him to say that, because he’s really a positive person, it kind of dawned on me that it was a problem. I left and came back to the house, and I said, “You know what, Annika? It’s time we go. Get what we can get, and let’s go.” And she said, “Go where?” I said, “We got to go somewhere.” And I go out the door, and I have about thirty people in my yard, their cars are lined up. They say, “Hey, Jones.” They call me Jones. And they said, “What you about to do?” I say, “I’m about to go home.” They said, “Go home? You [are] home.” And I said, “No. I’m about to go to Quitman, Mississippi.” They say, “Quitman? How you going to get to Quitman? You can’t get to Quitman. Everything is down.” I said, “Trust me. If I can’t get nowhere else, I can get to Quitman, and I guarantee you, it’ll be something going on in Quitman. And if I can get to Quitman, I can get out of Mississippi. There’s too many ways to get out of Mississippi.”

Butler: How far is Quitman?

Jones: Quitman is 128 miles from Pascagoula, Moss Point.

Butler: North?

Jones: North. Yeah, it’s in south central Mississippi. They said, “Well, I hear you.” So my wife and I, we pack up the little car, and it’s down on the ground. It’s (inaudible) basically. Get in the car, take off. And I got around the back way through the little back roads about a mile or two around to get to [Highway] 63. And I say, “Oh, let me pull over right here. I hear something scrubbing.” I pulled over, and I looked behind me, not paying attention to what’s behind me. I look behind me. I got a line of cars that pulled over. And I said—well, I go to the next car. I said, “Hey, what’s wrong? Are you having any problems?” He said, “No. We just waiting on you. They said you was going up by Meridian.” I said, “Yeah.” He said, “Yeah. So we following you because none of us know how to get out of the area.” And I said, “OK.” (laughter) I got about sixty cars behind me. And we go up to Lucedale and weave through the back roads, and surprisingly—now, I don’t know who did it. I saw a lot of private people out there, just homeowners, cutting trees out of the road, up through [Highways] 63, 57, 45. The trees were removed out of the road. You could see where people had cut them. So we got up there to Quitman, and Quitman was really hurt pretty bad, but it was home. And I got there with my sister. Later on I found that one of my brothers, they hadn’t found him living down on the Coast in the Slidell-New Orleans area. And they kept asking me, “Have you heard from him? Have you heard from him?” And I said, “Well, no, I haven’t heard from him yet, but I’m sure he’ll call sooner or later.” And I guess about two or three hours later I decided, “Hey, maybe I can go down there.” But then when you hear the radio report, how bad New Orleans is and what’s going on in that area. So I said, “Hey, I just came from the Slidell area a few days before the storm, so I know it’s pretty bad down there.” A day later, two days later, I said, “Well, we’re going to go back, and we’re going
to clean up the house and everything.” I go back, take some food and water and a lot of gas and bring it back down there, my wife and I. And still there’s nothing going on in Pascagoula. I don’t see no effort to do anything. They say that the response teams and stuff are going to be here at the camp grounds, this and that, giving out water and all that. My neighbors hadn’t gotten any water. So I give him some. I give my church members what I had of some gas and stuff. A couple of them tell me, “Hey, let’s get this stuff out of the house as fast as possible.” So we’re tearing out the house, just by the layer or whatever. It dawned on me that no stores or nothing have still—they’re open, but they’re just letting two or three people in, just like that, and they don’t have anything. What do they have in there? Wal-Mart is open and letting a few people in. I don’t know whether they had generators or not. Everybody is scraping and scrounging for ice, generators, anything. A lot of people are making money off of ice. They’re selling ice for seven and eight dollars a bag.

Butler: Who’s doing this? Are these private people?

Jones: Yeah. Just private people and I don’t think they’re from the area or whatever, but when you have a need like that, you have a need, and you really don’t have any authority right then, anyway. I didn’t see but one or two police in the City of Moss Point after the storm.

Butler: Why do you think that was?

Jones: Well, I really think that a lot of the people that was nonessential—which I can’t imagine any police officers being able to let go of their family—initially thinking, “Hey, I want to be with my family if something this bad is going to happen.” But I just, I think we wasn’t prepared in Moss Point and Pascagoula, Ocean Springs, D’Iberville for something to happen really that bad. We thought, “Maybe Slidell and Waveland may be messed up a little bit, but it won’t be so bad over here, I don’t think, especially.” We have a new mayor, Mr. Bishop there, that I don’t think he thought it would be that bad either. But I can remember telling my wife, I said, “You know what? We haven’t heard from nobody in Moss Point, as far as City officials, supervisors, mayor, anyone, have come on WLOX was doing”—which they did a great job because they kept everyone informed, and they were there day after day after day. But we hadn’t heard from none of the supervisors, saying this or that or anything. And my wife and I, we just came to the point where right then we just said, “You know what? We’re leaving, and we’re never going back. We’re going to try to salvage the house and everything, sell it, do anything we can.” We couldn’t get to Biloxi, but my pastor went to check on the house we had over there, and he said they were gone. They were just down and gone.

Butler: They were destroyed.

Jones: Yeah, they were just destroyed.

Butler: By wind or water or both?
Jones: Wind and water. So I said, “OK. We cut our ties. This is what I saved for all my life, but it’s gone. We will claim the insurance and everything, and see what they’re going to do about it.” But still right then, this was two or three days after the storm, and we still didn’t know the magnitude of the hurricane, what it really had done because a lot of people didn’t, that was over in that area, didn’t realize that Gulfport and Biloxi was messed up that bad. Waveland, Pass Christian, and everything. I said, “Well, baby, we still got to go to school, and I don’t know what we’re going to do. We’re going to have to”—because we were going to Gulf Park, USM [University of Southern Mississippi] Gulf Park, and after the newscasters started talking about how bad Long Beach and everything was messed up and the coastline was gone, and he came across USM. He said, “Ooh, USM is just totally destroyed down here.”

Butler: This is USM—

Jones: Gulf Park.

Butler: Gulf Park.

Jones: Right. And I said, “I can’t imagine that being destroyed.” I said, “Maybe it’s just whatever.” But later down the line, we found out it was really tore apart.

Butler: Gone.

Jones: Yeah. So we just said—now, and I told her, I said, “We’re going to work as much and as fast as possible to tear out this stuff and get it redone, just paint over it. Any colors we got in the paint cans back there we’re just going to paint as much as possible and go from there. Fix what we can, and hopefully we can get things going back together, get it livable. And then we’ll sell it, get away from here,” this and that and whatever. So I happened to talk to USM to the secretary for the president of USM, what’s her name? Miss, I want to say Paulette, Pauline.

Butler: Is this Thames, President Thames’ secretary?

Jones: Right. That’s up here. And I asked her about what did we need to do about school, and she said, “Hey, we’re going to start registering people up here.” I said, “Oh, that’s great.” It didn’t dawn on me that we didn’t have anywhere to live because we were staying in a hotel, so until school started, we’re staying in a hotel, and it was running about $70 a day, cheap, budget hotel, but you have to find what you can find. And the bill is adding up, and you know $70 a day is a lot of money to stay for ten, fifteen, twenty days. And it just happened that we had come over, and one of the young ladies at financial aid was telling us, she said, “Hey, Mr. Jones, maybe you-all can get something in Pine Haven.” You know, this and that. USM has been just great with what they have done for us, and they move us, or we get it, and it was small. The young lady was the manager for Pine Haven said, “Well, it’s not much. It’s really small,” saying excuses. And she said that they were going to tear it down to build fraternity houses. And she said, “I know it’s small.” But when we got it, it was like a kid in a candy store, or just saw a Christmas
present that he’s been wanting. I said, “OK. This is great. It’s somewhere to live. We
don’t really have anything right now, so it’s somewhere to live.” And the longer you leave
your furniture and stuff in that mold, the mold is on it, so you got to get rid of the furniture
even though a lot of the furniture wasn’t wet. It still had the bacteria and everything. And
so anyway, we get through with that, and I get a call that my brother is—they found one of
my brothers. He was dead from the storm. So at the same time my father is in Meridian.
He’s dying of colon cancer that’s spreading through his body. And I said, “Man, this has
not been a good month, and still dealing with”—you’re starting to see the response teams.
This is like a week and half or so later, you’re starting to see some response teams down in
Pascagoula and stuff and all that’s going in effect, and we’re not getting any media
coverage because we’re so far over, but people don’t realize the devastation that a lot of
these people have. I go into my work. I go down there because they called a mandatory
meeting about, I guess about two and a half weeks after the storm or whatever. And they
talked about the benefits that you could get and whatever. OK. That’s fine and dandy but
none of them really pertain to the situation that we was in. One of my other coworkers,
Felicia, her home and her mom’s home was totally wet lossed, and they really don’t have
anywhere to stay. The supervisor, my supervisor there, he, his house was washed under,
and he don’t have nowhere to stay. They decided, “Hey, we’re going to open up the
barracks for them to stay in.” The barracks that has gotten wet, that’s about fifty years old
or more, that had gotten wet on the second floor. So anyway, that’s another story. But I
said, “Well, you know what? I just don’t feel comfortable staying in those barracks. From
my history of those barracks, I don’t think that’s a good idea. But those barracks were
opened up, and it was already wet with mold, and we already had a mold problem there
before the storm and everything, and you have people living there. But that’s the only
place they can live because they don’t have nothing else. I get a call from work. They say,
“Hey,” they want us to come back to work. I don’t have anywhere to live down there if I
come back to work. Gas is too expensive for me to drive from [Hattiesburg], Mississippi,
every day. I just really can’t afford to do this, and my dad is dying right now. I need some
things, and I just found out my brother has just died. Even though he’s a distant brother,
he’s still my brother. We get to the point where my wife and I said, “We’re just going to
sit back and think about what we’re going to do and this and that.” My life changed in a
matter of twelve hours.

Butler: And those twelve hours would be the storm.

Jones: The storm. In a matter of twelve hours I went from knowing exactly where I was
in life, what I was going to do, how I was going to do it, and when everything was going to
happen, to not knowing what was going to happen next. Where was I going to get a
check? Where was I going to live? Or anything. People were taken out of my life that,
even though—you don’t have to see your kin people for years, months, whatever at a time,
but you know they’re there. But when you know that they’re not there and that you won’t
see them again, it’s a different story.

Butler: Eric, I hate to interrupt, but we’re going to stop here and this is a good time to
change [the tape.] (interview continues on tape two, side one)
**Butler:** OK. Now Eric, you were talking about [how], just in a matter of twelve hours, the storm, Hurricane Katrina, how it changed your life. And essentially we moved beyond the storm and kind of the aftereffects, if you will. Will you go back?

**Jones:** No.

**Butler:** To Moss Point?

**Jones:** No, I will not ever live on the Coast again. No.

**Butler:** How do you feel about the government’s role in this and their response to this, from the municipal level, Moss Point level, all the way up to the federal government and the president? Do you think that they responded to this situation in a manner that you would’ve liked? Or I mean, what could they have done differently?

**Jones:** Well, I think there’s been a lot of criticism about how the response was. One thing that I always told people that if—even being in the military, they say, “Oh, I know you don’t, you shouldn’t go to war. You shouldn’t go to war.” But I tell them, I said, “That’s what the military is for. When you sign that contract, you know that that’s your job is to go to war.” When you have FEMA and officials, that their job is to help in disaster relief, that’s their job. There’s nothing else that’s more important, except for God, in their life than their job, and that’s what they’re supposed to do. So as far as the City of Moss Point, I didn’t see very much of dwelling in Moss Point, but you have to understand that Moss Point, we don’t really have very many people that work in Moss Point, for the City and everything because of their budget crunch that has been through the years. I would’ve liked to see, or at least heard, the mayor. And maybe I missed him, but I don’t think I did because I listened to a lot of radio, and that’s the only means of communication. I didn’t hear him, very much of him. I didn’t hear none of the people coming through, supervisors or anything. I’m sure they assessed the damage and everything, but they kept it quiet, and even now it’s pretty much quiet. Moss Point is back up, and Pascagoula is back up, trying to make amends for themselves, but a lot of people don’t have what they need to have for day-to-day living. I don’t think FEMA even really concerned themselves with the Gulf Coast as much as it should’ve been. A lot of us had to go to Mobile, and luckily we had friends there in Mobile that could get us help and do things like that or come up in the northern part of Mississippi by Meridian or whatever to get things. I really don’t understand. If this is your job, and believe it or not, Mississippi is in the United States of America.

**Butler:** Oh, I hate to interrupt, but you brought up an important point, I think. You said that there wasn’t enough focus on the Gulf Coast.

**Jones:** Right.

**Butler:** Do you think that there was too much focus on New Orleans, or do you think that people just, because it was Mississippi, that they didn’t pay the same kind of attention that maybe they would’ve paid, say, if it was in New York or Washington, DC?
Jones: Right. It’s undeniable that the attention wasn’t shown because it was Mississippi. Our governor, I think he really got out there and did what he had to do, and it’s kind of embarrassing because only a year or so ago, maybe two years ago, President Bush was down here on the Gulf Coast to try to help get our governor elected. And I feel like the administration turned their back on Mississippi, on the governor, and let him fend for himself. He stopped in Mobile, Alabama. Landed in Mobile, Alabama, when we had the Trent Lott National Airport, regional airport out there where he could’ve stopped in Mississippi and did whatever. You can’t tell very much about Mississippi if you’re in Alabama. And yes, I think that the government, the president reacted in such a slow manner because it was Mississippi. And even in New Orleans because it was a lowland area that consists more of a minority, that really wasn’t their focus.

Butler: Once again, where you live, would you say that it was predominantly African American, a mix of people of—I mean, how would you say, demographically?

Jones: Well, demographically Mississippi, where Moss Point is, is primarily black. We have an interculture of Hispanics and whites, but it’s primarily black.

Butler: Do you think that that may—because other people have said this, like you said about New Orleans, that perhaps if this was in a place that was preponderantly white, affluent people, that there might’ve been a quicker response.

Jones: Well, I don’t really think that it was because it was predominantly black or a minority, I think it’s more or less a contributory to moneywise. If you was in New York—and New York is a mecca and a megalopolis of people that really is nationally known. Yes, it’s a bigger response because the media is going to be there. But as for Mississippi, no one was really—who’s going to come down to Mississippi? You have people say, “Well, the casino is messed up.” That was the first thing that we heard on the news, “Oh, all the casinos are gone.” Not, “This man lost his life,” or, “These houses and areas is demolished.” Thirty people lost their lives in an apartment complex. That wasn’t the first thing that came up. The first thing that came up was, “Oh, the President Casino is gone. The Grand is messed up,” things like that. I think it was more of an economical thing, for the response, than anything. Of course, if you look at the area, more of the people down here that are in the bad neighborhoods or the neighborhoods that’s not as predominant are black or Hispanic, so that’s what makes up the Coast. That’s what make up New Orleans. That’s why all the media, that’s why the response wasn’t really strong. If we would’ve been—even after Ivan hit Florida, they had trailers from FEMA set up in a matter of days. You still have Mississippian here on the Coast that don’t really have anywhere to live, that don’t have nowhere to cook and eat, that can’t get a trailer set up because they have to go through so much red tape. Just in a couple of days on the thirty-first, one of the independent contractors that’s feeding in the Moss Point area in Jackson County is going to be closing up shop. A lot of these people can’t afford not to get free food because they don’t have nowhere to live. They don’t have nowhere to eat. They don’t have or none of their relatives—a lot of the people that come to Mississippi, or Mississippian that come to the Coast, are Mississippian from other places, and their family is rooted down here now,
and that’s been here thirty, forty years now, are rooted down here. They don’t have nowhere else to go. They don’t have any money to go.

Butler: So essentially, a lot of this is factoring in your decision just to remain in this area or at least to not go back because you feel like, you feel like you pretty much have to fend for yourself. I mean, have you felt like that pretty much the whole time?

Jones: Yeah, I feel like—now, I’ve gotten assistance and everything, but I shouldn’t have to pry open a coffin to get an answer or something or some kind of help or aid or anything, and that’s essentially what’s happening to these people. They’re not getting the aid that they need. But lines for Red Cross for instance, when you’re sent to ten, fifteen different places in the state, and you don’t have any money anyway to get to those places, what’s the significance? How can you open one, two Red Cross Centers in a area that’s been devastated like this? I can understand if the wind blewed over a few trees or whatever, but this is the whole State of Mississippi. This is the Gulf Coast. This is the livelihood. Many of the people don’t actually know how many people don’t have a job right now, and a lot of them are getting—we can’t afford to live anywhere else. We can’t afford to go to Florida because the same thing may happen again. The only place we can go is up; that’s the only place we can go. And the bigger city you get into, you still are going to have to pay money. I was talking to a young lady at Cable One, and they said, “Well, at least they give you a month off your cable bill.” Yeah, that’s great, but if you don’t have a TV or electricity to watch the cable, or a house, what do that matter? And I’m not knocking Cable One because I think they did great. That was great. I said to myself, I said, “Mississippi Power could at least give you sort of a, some type of relief or something like that.” A lot of the big companies here in South Mississippi could at least say, “Hey, let’s do this.” We’ve gotten response and help from a lot of places, but the federal government haven’t did none of what they have to to support us. Like I said, we are, Mississippi is in the United States of America. New Orleans is in the United States of America. We shouldn’t have to wait for a response. We shouldn’t have to. It’s two months after the storm. People are still without homes, still without places to live. Even now, as far as up here, when we was looking in the paper the other day to try to see if maybe when we get a chance, we’re going to try to get on out of—and get in a place to live, but there’s no places out there to live right now from all the fluctuation of the people coming from the Coast and New Orleans and wherever.

Butler: You mean in Hattiesburg?

Jones: Right, in Hattiesburg, period, even all the way up through Meridian, you don’t have enough home situations. I was looking at the news that so many people are so concerned with rebuilding the Coast, which is great, and I think we have to move on and start rebuilding and everything, but you can’t lay back and let the process overtake the people. You have a lot of good people that were positive. I always said that nobody would run me from my home, but after I started seeing how the response and everything was, and then I thought about something a young man had told me about twenty years ago. He told me, he said, “You know what? Mississippi is always at the bottom of everything, and we’ll stay there because we’ll never get any help from anything else but ourselves.”
And that's what makes Mississippi Mississippi because if—usually we're fending for ourselves here in Mississippi. Yeah, we get federal aid and this and that, but have you ever noticed how hard it is for Mississippi to get put on the map? You never hear nothing about Mississippi unless it's something bad. And a child growing up, my son asked me—he's ten years old—he asked me, he said, “Daddy, you know Mississippi don't do nothing but bad things?” And that hurt me because this is my home state, for him to say that, and I don't have nothing to say really good because the response and everything changed my mind about me living on the Coast. The Coast is a beautiful place, have beautiful people, but nobody ever see those people excel because we don't have any type of federal help or media help unless it's something bad. Yeah, we have a, even before the storm when we saw the casinos and the—and it was just as nice and beautiful as any big city that you would go to, but you never see that. You never see it. We don't have no promotion.

**Butler:** Well, Eric, it's been a great interview, and I think this is probably as good a time as any to conclude. I thank you.

(end of interview)