Biography

Mr. George Bass was born in Gulfport, Mississippi, in 1954, to Mr. Carl Bass and Mrs. Gay Alexander Bass. They have one son, Jarrod Bass. Bass grew up in Long Beach, Mississippi, in the country. He has two older sisters. He attended Long Beach schools from first grade through his senior year, and he was graduated from Long Beach High School in 1972. After working for Sherwin Williams for four years, he began working for the Long Beach Fire Department. At the time of this interview, he had worked there for thirty years and had become a fire chief. During his tenure in the fire department, Bass has undergone many years of training, including basic firefighting I, II, and III, rope rescue, and chemistry of hazardous materials I and II; he has attended classes at the National Fire Academy, and he has begun working on certification to be chief executive fire officer. Additionally Bass is six hours away from earning his bachelor’s degree in public administration.
Table of Contents

Childhood.................................................................2
Diversity of Mississippi Coast population, cultures .................2
Education ...................................................................2
Working history ..........................................................3
Becoming a fireman .......................................................4
Son, Jarrod ................................................................6, 28
Becoming fire chief .......................................................6
Hurricane Camille, 1969 ..................................................8, 14, 24, 32, 34
Attachment to Mississippi Gulf Coast ....................................9
Neighborhood before Katrina ............................................9
Hurricane Katrina as a community-builder .........................10
Community traditions, Mardi Gras .....................................10
Downtown fair .............................................................11
Preparing for Hurricane Katrina at the Long Beach Fire Department ........................................11
Hurricanes Georges, Elena, Isidore, Lili ...............................13
Katrina becomes a monster storm overnight .........................14
Mandatory evacuation ...................................................14
FEMA ........................................................................15, 26, 32, 34
Putting in hurricane food supplies .......................................15
Fire stations ................................................................15
Declarations of emergency ...............................................15
Fire at nonregulated storage units ........................................15
Door-to-door evacuation notifications ..................................15
Foreboding regarding Katrina’s aftermath ..............................16
Precautions of first-responders regarding their families ........16
Wife working during Katrina at Biloxi Regional Hospital, son with Dad .................................17
Boarding up homes ......................................................17
Storm advice to Biloxi Regional Hospital ..............................18
Storm advice to Long Beach Police Department ....................18
Going over emergency plan .............................................18
Evacuation ................................................................19
Interview with CNN .......................................................19
Hurricane Ivan, 2004 .....................................................19
First responders ........................................................20, 22
Sunday, one day before Katrina .........................................20
Katrina comes ashore ...................................................20
Tornadoes and trees blowing down .....................................20
Fire station doors blown in, damaged fire truck ......................21
Antenna tower comes down ..........................................21
Phones, Internet fail .....................................................22
Out into the aftermath as first responders in ninety-mph winds, 1:00 p.m. .......................22
Cutting trees, testing downed power lines, going south as first responders ..............23
Debris line, twenty feet tall, 150 feet wide ............................23
Nail wound in contaminated water ...................................24
Utter destruction.................................................................................................. 24, 31
Finding survivors .......................................................................................... 24, 25, 26
American Medical Response ambulances ........................................................... 24
Communications are only line-of-sight ............................................................. 25
Search; return; meet; evaluate; reassess; reassign .............................................. 25
Thousands of ruptured natural gas lines ........................................................... 25
Cleaning streets of debris .................................................................................. 26
Gas lines ............................................................................................................... 27
Heroic response of Biloxi Regional Hospital ......................................................... 27
MEMA .................................................................................................................. 27
Beau Rivage Casino washed out .......................................................................... 27
Hurricane Ivan ...................................................................................................... 27
Food, gasoline depleted ....................................................................................... 28
City’s losses .......................................................................................................... 28
Rationing water .................................................................................................... 29
Staff meetings after Katrina .................................................................................. 29
Needs for commodities and services after Katrina ............................................. 29
Upper respiratory infections ................................................................................. 29
Contaminated water ............................................................................................. 29
Physician practices medicine at fire station ......................................................... 29
Fatalities ................................................................................................................ 30
Fear of nudity trumps fear of death ....................................................................... 31
Danger from dead, decaying animals, live snakes .............................................. 31
Confiscating gasoline requires threat of arrest ..................................................... 33
Lessons learned ..................................................................................................... 33
Volunteers ............................................................................................................. 33
Recovering from Katrina ....................................................................................... 34
Insurance issues ..................................................................................................... 34
University of Southern Mississippi Gulf Park Friendship Oak ............................. 35
AN ORAL HISTORY

with

GEORGE BASS

This is an interview for the Mississippi Oral History Program of The University of Southern Mississippi. The interview is with George Bass and is taking place on February 18, 2009. The interviewers are Katharine Wilson and Justine Baskey.

Baskey: So 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 George Bass, and is taking place February [18], 2009, in Long Beach, Mississippi. The interviewers are Justine Baskey and—


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

Bass: George Bass.

Baskey: And for the record, can you spell your name for me?

Bass: George, G-E-O-R-G-E, Bass, B-A-S-S.

Wilson: And where were you born?

Bass: I was born in Gulfport, Mississippi. I’m a lifelong resident of the city of Long Beach.

Wilson: And what year was this?

Bass: Nineteen fifty-four.

Baskey: And for the record, what was your father’s name, and how do you spell it?


Baskey: And your mother’s first name and maiden name?

Wilson: Where did you grow up, and what was your childhood like?

Bass: I grew up here in Long Beach, and I had a, I would consider a wonderful childhood. Where I lived and grew up as a child was considered country. We had dirt roads. There were some large dairy farms around us, and they used to drive cattle down the roads to the railroad tracks here in Long Beach and put them on the cattle cars to move them out to slaughter houses. And when NASA [National Aeronautics and Space Administration] came in on the Coast in the mid-[19]60s, our city began to change. What was known as country became more city. The large dairy farms went out of business, sold out, became large subdivisions for all the newcomers that were coming in. All the areas that we as kids used to go and do our hunting in became subdivisions. There were no more places around in so-called country for us to do our squirrel hunting and rabbit hunting. We became citified pretty quick, and it was a pretty drastic change over a short period of time. From elementary school, catching the bus and riding the bus down into downtown Long Beach to go to school to having a new elementary school built out in the country where we were, and I can remember as being in junior high as a young teenager, the girls asked us where we lived, all of us boys. And we would say, “We live out on Daughtery(?) Road.” “Oh, y’all live out in the country.” (laughter) So we were considered country boys. But I had a wonderful life. My mom and dad, they both worked. It was a typical paycheck-to-paycheck family, and we never lacked for anything that we needed. We got most of what we wanted, and having Mom and Dad there throughout my life, and I have two older sisters, and my older sister is five years older than me, and my sister is just one year older than me. She’s legally blind, and we never treated her as being handicapped in any manner. As young kids, when I learned how to ride a bike, we would put her on her bike next to mine, and I would ride my bike and hold her steering wheel while she peddled, and we rode around the yard. So we just had a wonderful, wonderful childhood, just great. What I would consider the Leave-It-to-Beaver childhood, except Mom worked.

Baskey: You were talking about like a change from rural to more urban when, you said, NASA came in. Did that affect the city and your childhood a lot in a bad way or a good way, or did you just continue like accepting it into your life?

Baskey: I think it was a good thing for us. I think when you look at the Coast now, especially when you go into other rural areas of Mississippi, you see there’s not an acceptance of different cultures and different peoples, where we’ve had that exposure from a young age, where we’ve had different cultures and different people here and acceptance. We’ve got NASA here; we’ve got the US Navy CB [Construction Battalion or Seabee] Base right next door to us here in Gulfport. The CB base butts up to the city of Long Beach. And then you’ve got Keesler over in Biloxi. So we’re pretty diversified. It’s not the typical view of Mississippi that most people have that you’re ignorant and barefoot, because we had educated folks that moved in here. And it raised the median income of everyone here on the Coast, and it raised the education
level. More people were insistent that their children get the education. And I think overall it was a very good thing for us. We lost what we had, but what we gained was so much more.

**Wilson:** Where did you go to school?

**Baskey:** I attended Long Beach schools from first grade through my senior year, elementary school, junior high, and Long Beach High School; graduated in 1972. When I graduated from high school, my biggest thing was, back then, Vietnam was still going on, and they were still having the draft, and I can remember watching, probably from the time I was thirteen or fourteen years old, we would watch the lottery draws on TV and see. And I would look and see, “Well, if I was eighteen, this would be my draft number.” And they were always real high. And I was like, “Well, this is great if it continues.” Well, I turned eighteen, and my draft number was forty-seven. So at that time I tried to go down and join the Navy or the Coast Guard or the Air Force, and the first thing the recruiter would ask me, “What is your draft number?” And I would tell them, “Well, it’s forty-seven.” And they would say, “Well, you need to go to the Marines or the Army because if you get drafted, that’s where you’re going to go. So you might as well go ahead and go do it.” So I graduated from high school; I’m here with this low draft number, and I keep getting, “Report for field school in three months.” And the next month, I’d get papers putting me on hold. This went on for like two years, so I went to the local junior college and ran out of money real quick on trying to sustain college life and the life of being able to do what I wanted to do. And it became difficult to stay in college, so I got out of college real quick and decided, “Well, if I’m going to go on and further my education, I’ve got to work and save some money and buckle down and get enough.” I didn’t want to do a student loan; at that time, student loans were not very appealing.

**Baskey:** They’re still not appealing. (laughter)

**Bass:** Right, yeah. And I know that. My son’s twenty-four years old, and he’s in his sixth year of college. And I tell him, “Mom and Dad’s about tired of paying for college.” And he said, “Well, it takes longer these days to get through college.” And I said, “Yeah, but most people who go six years, have a few more years, and they’ll have doctor behind their name or in front of their name.” So we’re about to the point where we’re going to cut him off. But anyway, after college there, I just kicked around here. I worked, doing electrical work, whatever type of job I could find and went to work for Sherwin-Williams Paint Company; brought me in, said, “Well, we’re going to have you stocking shelves, and we want to see what you could do.” In six months time, they had me in a training to do accounting for them. Within a year I was an accountant, keeping the books for them, which was totally out of what I, my character of what I thought I would do with my life. I hadn’t really put any great depth and thought into what I would do with my life. So bookkeeping, I said, “Well, I’ll give it a shot.” And I worked for Sherwin Williams for four years; got tired of doing the bookkeeping. They moved me to outside sales; was doing great with that. Went to work one morning, and they’d taken all of my accounts away from me that I
got paid commission on and said, “Go out and do them over,” because I was still, I was a twenty-three-year-old, young man that they thought, “We’ll just take them away.” And I decided if that was the way this company was going to treat me, I didn’t need to do it. So I left them and worked different jobs. Before I went to work with Sherwin Williams, I went up to Mississippi State for a semester. The money I’d saved lasted one semester. My social life, I think, got in my way more than my education, and so that put me on the halt of the education trail, again. But after I left Sherwin Williams, I went to work for a contractor here in Long Beach that I knew, and I went back to doing electrical work for him and doing carpenter work; got the opportunity to work with some great carpenters who taught me a great deal and helped me later on in things that I was able to do. And across the street from the contractor’s office was the fire station, and the assistant fire chief, I knew him. I knew him to say, “Hello. How you doing?” And speak to him, and as I was going in one morning, he hollers at me; he says, “Would you like to be a fireman?” I said, “Sure. Go ahead; put me down.” I didn’t think nothing about it. It wasn’t but probably three days later, I’m going into work again, and he calls me, and he says, “Well, the mayor and board hired you as a fireman last night.” And I was like, “You’re kidding me.” I didn’t know what I was going to make. I’d never even considered being a firefighter. So I went over and talked to him, and two days later I started work. And this was thirty years ago. So a thirty-year career out of, “Hey, you want to be a fireman?”

Wilson: What kind of training did they give you?

Baskey: Right off the bat, they sent myself and a man that they hired about six months—I say right off the bat. About six months after they hired me, they hired another gentleman, Mike Brown, and he and I were sent to the state fire academy. And we went through a two-week fire class up there and proceeded to do—and the two-week fire class is a basic firefighting certification class that you have to go through. It’s pretty involved; there’s a lot of physical activities with it, along with a lot of classroom training and then field application about what you learn and discuss in the classroom. We trained on hoses, and nozzles, and the different types of fire apparatus, ladders, the way to get ladders off the truck, proper ways to put ladders up against the building, and the way to climb the ladders, wearing different types of breathing apparatus, the self-contained breathing apparatus, being in total blackout situations. We crawled through mazes with our masks blacked out; had to affect a rescue. At the academy, underground is large pipe culverts and tunnels all over, and they would have a victim under there, and you would have to go in underground and affect a rescue to get someone out. It’s now called confined-space rescue. We did a great deal of training in a two-week period of time; did live-fire training; did some chemical-fire training. It was great; when you got through with it—it was tough, but when you got through with it, you were very happy that you did it and very anxious to get to the next level. Since that basic class, I’ve taken—the basic class is called firefighter 1001. At the time, there was another two-week class of firefighter 1002, and then another two-week class of firefighter three. Then I went on, and I took—let’s see, after that I think I did rope rescue, which is a one-week class. And then I’ve done—let’s see; they had introduction of a new class, chemistry of hazardous material,
and they invited different firefighters—at the time I was a lieutenant; had been promoted to lieutenant when this came up—different ones from across the state to come in because this was a first delivery of the program, and we went in for a forty-week class. And we probably in that forty-week class, each night we may have gotten two hours sleep, because we were introduced to the periodic table, and we learned the periodic table. And we really went into doing chemical change and studying and trying to get all this in. And after we got through, we all successfully did it, but it was a matter of just really dedicating ourselves to this class and getting the certification.

And in the evaluation of the class, we recommended that they change it out to an eighty-hour course, two-week course, and they did another class, and the same evaluation came up, because it was just too much. And so now it is a two-week class for everybody. And for our one-week class, we got three college credits in chemistry. So I realized then; I said, “I could get college credits for these classes.” So I started, you know, the more classes; they had a new introduction class on dealing with hazardous materials, actually hands-on. They have a mockup at the state fire academy that has trains, cars, and different types of tanks, and they have some that’s derailed in different situations. And they’re all piped in with different types of gases and stuff that we could actually go in and self-contain units, full chemical units, and you do a mock scene there on Thursday nights after the Monday through Thursday class. On Thursday nights you do a full scene. They assign someone as incident commander, and that incident commander signs his team members on down. And then you go out, and you remedy the situation, and it’s a great class. So I took two weeks hazardous materials one and two and got more college credit. I said, “This is going pretty good. I think I need to get back in school.” I’d had some classes at Mississippi State, some English classes, and some history classes, and math classes. And I said, “Well, I need to go ahead and get back in school.” So I had talked to my wife, and my son was probably a year old. She said, “Yeah. Why don’t you go ahead and go back?” My wife is a nurse, and she has a bachelor’s in nursing, and she has a master’s of science in nursing. And she said, “I want to go back and get an MBA, but I’ll wait. You go ahead and go back and get your degree.” So I had taken my classes I’d taken at the junior college here, at Jefferson Davis [Campus of the Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College] and at Mississippi State. And I began to look around and see, “Where can I get something that’s fire-related? I’m getting these classes that are all, I get college credits for these fire classes I’ve taken, but where are they going to apply?”

And a friend of mine who was an alderman for the City of Long Beach happened to be a doctor here at USM [University of Southern Mississippi]. So I asked him; I said, “Can you help me? I need some direction here.” And he said, “Sure. Let me see what I can find out.” Well, a day or two later he calls me; he says, “Call this man over at LSU [Louisiana State University]. David Folse(?) is his name.” He said, “I think he can help you.” So I called Mr. Folse and went over and sat down and talked with him. And he said, “What we’re doing here at LSU,” he said, “we’re not developed into a four-year program yet.” He said, “But I can get you an associate’s degree in fire administration.” And I said, “Well, I really want that four-year degree.” He said, “Well, let’s get this one.” He said, “It’s through LSU.” And he said, “Let’s get this, and get this awarded.” He said, “Then you can go ahead and do something else later on.” So I followed up on it, and the first class we took over there, it was so interesting
to me, because it applied to what I was doing in everyday life here in the fire department. And where I had been making Cs and low Bs before, I was making A’s. I was getting 4.0s, and I was like, “What’s going on here? I can’t figure this out.” Then I got to thinking about it; I said, “Well, my social life is not getting involved like it did back then.” (laughter) “And I have a wife and a one-year-old at home, so things are a little different.” And it took me driving back and forth to LSU; I took courses here at USM to help fill in some so I wouldn’t have to drive over there, and it took me about seven years driving back and forth because there were some classes I had to wait. It may be two years before they had delivery on them. I would fill in other classes and take, but it took me about seven years. And I finally achieved that goal. And I don’t know why I did this, but I got probably six hours away from getting my bachelor’s in public administration, and I just burned out. And my wife and I, we talk about this often, and say, “Why won’t you finish it?” And I say, “Well, I’m so long in my career now, I don’t know that I want to. I’m the fire chief. There’s nothing else that I really want to do.” And she said, “Well, why did you really stop?” And I said, “Well, Jarrod(?), our son, he got up to where he wanted to play sports, and I wanted to be there with him. So I stopped.” And I coached Jarrod in baseball and football and soccer and spent a lot of time with him up until I guess when he got into high school in the ninth grade and started playing high school sports, and my coaching duties were over. [It] was time to be able to sit in the stands and enjoy watching him play. And that was something in my life that I’ll always cherish is being able to have that time that I was allowed to be able to spend with him in those sports and do those things. Before I got married, I umpired baseball, and I did the kids, the fourteen-, fifteen-, sixteen-year-old kids, and I did high school baseball. And I got out of it when I got married, right before I got married. And after Jarrod got through where I had to coach him and got through with high school, I got back into umpiring and did that for about six or eight years till my knees felt like they were giving out on me. But it was nice to be able to watch him play. But the training at the state fire academy, I continued that. I have on my record and in my personnel file every class that’s been offered up; until about four years ago, I had had every class that was offered at state fire academy. I’ve gone to the National Fire Academy in Emmitsburg, Maryland, two-week classes there. You can get graduate and undergraduate credits for two-week classes, and I’ve had two graduate classes up there. There’s a program called chief executive fire officer. You take four of the graduate classes, and then you write a thesis paper. Well, I’m two classes and a thesis paper away from having that certification, and I don’t know. Again, I’m thirty years into my career. I don’t know that I’ll—I have no intention of moving to another department, to a bigger department. I’m happy here where I’m at. Certainly since Katrina, things have changed for me. There’s things that I would like to see completed, and I want to be here and continue to be involved in them.

**Baskey:** How long did it take you to become fire chief? Like you just started (laughter) one day out of nowhere, and now, you’re the fire chief. How did that come about?

**Bass:** Well, when I started at the fire department, we were a small department. I was the tenth firefighter hired. In a matter of probably three to four years, the City
annexed the area out where I had grew up that was the country; it became the city. We had paved streets and sidewalks, and we had stop signs and all those things out there. But the City annexed out there and were forced to put in another [fire] station and add more manpower. So we went from having one station to having three stations. We had built a new central fire station, a station two, and a station three. And we went from being—at the time we were annexed, there were fourteen of us; we went from fourteen to twenty-eight in a matter of weeks. And so the whole dynamics of our fire department that we knew changed, almost overnight. I had probably five years in at the time of the annexation, the civil service. The fire chief at the time, Chief Klegg(?) said, “We’ve got to have, for the rating bureau, state fire rating bureau, we’ve got to have lieutenants in charge of stations.” So they designed a test, and we tested, and I made lieutenant, and in very short order, he had redesigned the chain of command and added captains in. And he said, “I’ve got to have captains.” And he let several lieutenants, who had the time in, test. I missed it by about two months. And they got promoted; two of them got promoted, and he still had one open because there was nobody else qualified. So about a year later, he said, “Well, I’m going to give another test.” Well, at that time, I had the time in, so I took the test and was moved up to a captain, and then we had some folks that left, went and took jobs at other departments or left and went into other businesses, and a battalion chief position came open. And he allowed all the captains to test, and I fortunately—and I think it was because of the education I was going through that I was more able to pass the written exam. And things I’ve done in my life, I’ve never been afraid to sit down and talk to someone. I’ve never been afraid to walk up to someone and have a conversation. I guess I have an outgoing personality, but that helped me with my written and my oral interview, because he had brought chiefs in from other departments to come in and do the oral interview. So I got the battalion chief position, and this was in a matter of; I think, eight years; I went to battalion chief. And then about a year after I was battalion chief, or two years after I was battalion chief on shift, Chief Klegg retired, and our assistant chief, Chief Fennell(?) was promoted to fire chief. And he said, “I need a training officer, and I want you to be it.” So I went to training officer five days a week, and I didn’t really like that because I lost out on my side job; the money that I got from being promoted wasn’t equivalent to what I lost doing my side jobs because our shift work, we worked forty-eight hours on duty and ninety-six off. We had before worked twenty-four on and forty-eight off. So we expanded it out so we could work side jobs to help supplement our income because we weren’t at the time one of the higher-paid departments here on the Coast, and so anyway I did the training officer job, and Chief Fennell, I think he was chief for four years, five, maybe six years. I had been, I guess nine years with the department. It was a pretty quick promotion, and I was very—somebody said one time, “You were fortunate when you got hired and that everything occurred like it did through the annexation and all these extra needs and everything and all.” I said, “I don’t think it was fortune. I think I was blessed. I think God blessed me, and I believe that God leads us where we’re supposed to be, and I think he had to open that door, and my timing of getting there to the office that morning and having the assistant chief walk out and say, ‘Hey, you want to be a fireman,’ that wasn’t coincidence; that was all in God’s plan, and I think everything that occurs was there.” And so my ascension through the ranks was pretty quick compared to what it
is right now. And I tell the guys, “If we were to annex further out and had to add two more stations, you would see the same thing happen again in the evolution of the fire department.” And Chief Fennell was chief, I think, for six years. He had a deputy chief who worked shift work, and he in [19]93 decided he would retire, in December of [19]93. And the mayor at the time and the board said, “Well, we’re going to test from within.” And he allowed the deputy chief and all the battalion chiefs—there were four of us who had the rank of battalion chief—allowed to test. Two of the battalion chiefs said they were not interested in it. I really was not interested in being chief at the time, and the deputy chief, I told him; I said, “I’ll take the test just so you’ll have enough folks to meet the qualification for civil service.” And he said, “Well, I’m not taking it. I don’t want the job.” So the mayor comes back and says, “Well, we’ve got to have folks to test.” And I said, “Well, I’ll test.” And I said, “I don’t want nobody from outside coming in here, taking over the department.” And two of the other battalion chiefs said, “Well, we don’t either; so we’ll take the test.” So the three of us tested. The test that we had taken, the civil service had ordered a national fire chief’s exam. At the time, I had just finished a correspondence course in fire administration towards my bachelor’s degree at Memphis State University, and they gave us a book to study for for this test, and it just happened to be the same book that I had completed that semester before. And the next book they gave us was the book that I was taking for that course that semester. I felt pretty good about that; took the test and 70 percent of the test came out of the first book, first semester. And I did extremely well on the test and through the oral interview. And I got the job in February of 1994, and I’ve been fire chief since then. A lot of things have occurred and changed, and we have continued to evolve, built a new central fire station to be able to—and this was my goal, was to have a station that we could stay in if we did have a storm. And I always referenced everything to Hurricane Camille in 1969. I was a few weeks short of being fifteen when Camille hit in 1969, so everything that I did and thought about for a new central fire station was trying to be geared to, “Well, if Camille hit again, could we stay here and function out of it as first responders?” And that was my presentation to the mayor and board on the new station. “Let’s get a station that will stand up to sustained winds of 180 miles an hour at least.” So we built a new station, a central fire station, and it was built to 180-mile-an-hour wind standards, with the exception of our apparatus doors, and there was none out there that was available above 120-mile-an-hour wind standard. So our apparatus doors were our only defect in the building as far as being a totally wind-rated building there. But that was a big accomplishment for us to be able to get that done.

Baskey: So how long have you lived in—you’ve lived [on] the Mississippi Gulf Coast all your life, right?

Bass: My entire life. I’m fifth generation.

Baskey: Fifth generation. And can you describe your attachment to the region? And what does it mean to you?
**Bass:** Oh, my attachment is right out here to the Gulf. That means a lot to me. I know when I spent a couple of semesters at Mississippi State and being away from the water, I missed Mom and Dad; I missed friends. I missed family, but I sure missed the beach. And I’m not talking about the sand; I’m talking about the whole effect of the beach; being able to go down there in the afternoon, early evening, and go down and get in the water and go floundering, or get up early in the morning and go down and go fishing. It’s just everything to me, and I’ve always said if I had to leave this area and go somewhere else, it would be a beach like ours. To me, I go to the Smoky Mountains; I’ve gone, I’ve traveled all over, all over the United States, different areas, and there’s nothing like coming home. And the first thing I want to do, if I get to the airport, and I get in my vehicle, I drive down, come down the beach to get back home, when I could go down the interstate and get there quicker. The beach, the oak trees, just having the big oak trees here, where I grew up was my grandfather’s old farm site. He had 150 acres there where we grew up. And he give each one of his children, six children, land to live on. And as my dad was growing up, where old fence rows were, there were oak trees that just by nature had sprouted and grown up, and we’ve got trees in our yard that are very close to the size of the Friendship Oak here at USM. And that’s part of the Coast, the oak trees here. Where my house is right now, I lived four houses down on a three-acre lot, three or four lots down was another three acres, and in the middle of this three acres, there’s a huge oak tree. And I just loved it, and I talked to the man who owned it, and I said, “If you ever want to sell it, let me know.” And he said, “Well, I’m saving it for my two sons.” He said, “I’ve got paved road frontage on both sides, and I can split it and give to them.” And his sons grew up, and I feel sorry for him; it’s fortunate for me. They both moved to Jackson with their wives and had grandchildren there. So the gentleman I bought the land from moved to Jackson. So he sold me the land, and I built a new house there. I was probably three weeks away from moving into my new house when Katrina hit. And I had worked on it for two and a half years, but that was one of my big deals was get there where I could see, I’d have this oak. And I’ve got my house situated where I can sit in my dining room window, look out the bay, and there’s my big oak. And that’s, to me, that’s us; that’s the Coast, the oaks and the beach. That’s my draw.

**Wilson:** Well, what was your neighborhood like before Katrina?

**Bass:** My direct neighborhood where I lived, I live on a half-mile, dead-end street. It’s called Long Beach Country Estates. There is a railroad spur that goes out to DuPont, which is over in Pass Christian, that splits my Long Beach Country Estates, which is South Long Beach Country Estates, from North Long Beach Country Estates. And I always said that, if somebody’d say, “Well, where do you live?” And I said, “Well, I live in Long Beach Country Estates, but I live on the poor side of the tracks.” Because all the doctors live on the north side. The schoolteachers and the nurses live on the south side. But it’s a half-mile, dead-end road. It was wonderful; my son was three years old when I built the house out there. There were four or five other boys on the street either a year younger or a year older than him, and they had the run of the neighborhood. I couldn’t have thought of a better place or designed a better place to have. I’ve got three acres here; it’s fenced in. The boys could play; I built them a big
play center out in the backyard with a fort on it, and a tree house so that they could all play in it. And it was wonderful up until the time Katrina hit. All the kids had grown, and they were all gone to college, all the boys. And it was more or less, everybody in the neighborhood were parents whose kids had gone. And you could get out in the afternoon, early morning, walk up and down the street for exercise, and there was always another family from the street, another couple, friends of ours who would be out walking. We would walk and visit and talk, and it was wonderful. It still is; it’s still the same way. The homes that were damaged have been repaired, and the people are still there. I’ve got my home repaired, my new home and my old home. Sold my old home; moved in my new home; got new people in my old house that have become good neighbors, good friends. They enjoy our neighborhood; they enjoy being able to get out. They’re from an area; they lived in the Pass, lost their home. They had lived up north, somewhere outside of Chicago, and I don’t think they had really experienced what we grew up with and what we know here as just every-day life, seeing someone and speaking to them. Say, “Hey, how you doing? How’s your day going?” Just being friendly. And I think they really enjoy that aspect of it. They had told me they’ve never lived where they had land around them; they always lived in a subdivision where there was houses real close to them and didn’t know their neighbors. And they like that. Y’all familiar with that?

**Baskey:** Yes. I don’t know my neighbors.

**Bass:** You talk about that, not knowing your neighbors. One of the couples in my Sunday school class—my wife and I—we’re a couple Sunday school class. We go to First Baptist here in Long Beach. And he used to be assistant superintendent here in Long Beach, school superintendent. And after we got settled down after the storm, and we finally got back to where we could have Sunday school classes, we were discussing some things one morning, and a lot of our Sunday school discussions and our Bible lessons, we were able to relate to things that occurred during and after Katrina. And one of the things that he said, he said, “I didn’t know my neighbors. I’ve lived there in my neighborhood for twenty-something years.” And he said, “I didn’t know the neighbors that lived behind me; didn’t know one of the neighbors who lived on one side of me.” He said, “But Katrina literally took the fences down.” And he said, “We were able to share meat and food as neighbors, as true neighbors,” he said, “but it’s a shame that it took Katrina to literally take the fences down.” So I hope that doesn’t happen to y’all.

**Baskey:** Did you have community traditions or celebrations that you guys took part in?

**Bass:** We yearly have a Mardi Gras celebration. We have the Mardi Gras parade. Our parade is a family-oriented parade; it’s a good, nice—it’s not a large parade. Before Katrina, we would have eighty to a hundred different what we call floats; it would be eighteen-wheel trucks pulling the trailers behind it, are decorated and with tons of folks on there, throwing beads. And it’s a great place to bring your children because it seems like if you go and you watch the Long Beach parade, you’ll see the
mom and dad standing back, and the kids right in front, and all the children are standing there, getting all the beads. You go to some other parades, and people will literally run over you and your children to get to a ten-cent bead. And it doesn’t make sense, but our parade—and still, we just had our parade this past Sunday. And the week before Sunday, I think was Friday morning, the radio station I was listening to, they were going over the list of the parades for the weekend, and the way they announced the Long Beach parade was, “The family parade in Long Beach will be held Sunday,” as opposed to the New-Orleans-style Mardi Gras parade that will be held in the city of Pass Christian. So it was two completely different parade atmospheres at both of them. But that was a big thing. We have Christmas on the Avenue in December where Santa Claus comes into town for the kids. I think our community really tries to do things for the children, and I think that everything that we do—we had a fair this year for the first time, downtown Long Beach on an area where one of our elementary schools was prior to Katrina. Katrina destroyed it, and it’s a city block where we were able to have a fair this year, downtown fair. It was wonderful. We had a number of booths there with different crafts and a large majority of the fair that day was dedicated for the children, and it had face-painting. They had all types of water rides and slides and just different things for children to do. And it was great; we had a large—we probably had twenty-five, thirty thousand people show up for that one day. Had a car show that day of the antique cars, prior to Katrina, and we still do. We had Cruising the Coast here on the Coast. And Long Beach always hosted the opening day parade, and we would have cars. The parade would start in the afternoon; it’s in October, right before the time change from daylight savings time. And parades start about five o’clock, and it would go till dark, and it would be bumper-to-bumper of old cars. And it was just wonderful. My most favorite time of the year to be out in the crowds and doing things is watching the old cars come by. You see cars that you saw when you were a kid that were old, and you saw cars that were new when you were a kid, and cars that you wished you could have bought when you were a teenager. And it’s a wonderful time; it’s a big crowd. They have a party afterwards at the yacht club. They all park down at the harbor. I say all of them; most of them park down at the Long Beach Harbor, and you can go down, and you can walk through, and you can look at all the old cars. But that’s some of the things that we did prior to the storm, and are still trying to do.

Wilson: How and when did you hear about the hurricane, and how did you start preparing for it?

Bass: Well, I have a habit of once hurricane season starts to heighten my awareness. We, in March of every year, myself and my assistant fire chief, we review our response plan as we’re going to be responding for different storms, whether it be a tropical storm, tropical depression, hurricane, whether it’s a Category One, Two, Three, Four, Five. We have a preplan, and we reevaluate that every year in March. We tighten up, and we have the other departments, be it the police department, the building permits office, the water department, harbor, they all submit their plans to us, and we critique those, evaluate them, make changes, whatever we think. Or if they’re fine, we go with them, and we make those preparations. But to answer your question,
like I said, I start kind of watching the tropics when hurricane season starts, and usually, we don’t really have to pay a lot of attention to the tropics until late July or early August. And in this particular year [2005], we had early-season storms here. Something that we really usually do not have is early-season tropical storms. We had a storm that came in, that looked like it was going to come at us. I think it was Dennis was its name, if I’m not being confused with 2004. That kind of heightened our awareness. I watched Katrina form off the east coast of Florida; watched it for days. We buy a service from a hurricane expert; it’s a private meteorologist, that really watches the storms and has a very high track record on predictions on what’s going to go on, and he watched this low pressure, and for several days before the Hurricane Center out of Miami picked up on it and said that, “We need to watch this; it’s going to develop.” And sure enough in a couple of days, the Hurricane Center picked up on it, and it developed into a tropical depression and then a tropical storm that hit the east coast of Florida. And the Hurricane Center was calling it a tropical storm. Well, it hit with about eighty-mile-an-hour winds, which is six miles above being a named hurricane; came across Florida, and where the Hurricane Center was saying it was going to come out was further north of Florida. And the private meteorologist was saying, “This thing’s going to go south of where they’re saying, and it’s got all the potential in the world to become a bad hurricane.” And so we were aware of it at a early stage. We watched it and monitored it, and I think as it got across Miami and got back out into the open Gulf and got away from Miami and started really developing, it went from I think fifty-mile-an-hour storm to a Category Two in a matter of, like, overnight. And it continued to go south, and the hurricane center kept trying to turn it up into the panhandle of Florida, turn it on up, and the private meteorologist kept saying, “No. This is going to go, is going further south.” And he kept his track in, and it kept going further south. And then he said, “This is going to turn north, and it’s not going to go to Florida.” He said, “It’s going to be Alabama, Mississippi, or Louisiana.” And that really concerned me. And sure enough, it gets up to a Category Three, and it’s still going where he’s saying it’s going. And then it hits Category Four, and then the Hurricane Center has moved their track over, and they’ve got it at the Florida-Alabama line, and he has his over on New Orleans. And that really concerned me then, and then before the storm made a turn to the north, it still is a Category Three. And we are called in; I’m not only the fire chief for the City, but I’m the emergency management director for our City. And each City and county has their own emergency management director, and then we have a county emergency management director. Our emergency management director had retired, for the county. So the board of supervisors for Harrison County hired a retired general; he was [a] colonel at the time, Colonel [Brigadier General] Joe Spraggin, and the day he took over was a Friday, I think. Hadn’t really even started on the payroll; it was the Friday before the storm hit on Monday morning. And we all kind of went down there, said, “We’ve got to prepare. This is not looking good. We’ve got a spread, a cone here of uncertainty where they’re saying Alabama-Florida line. If it goes over there, we’re on the west side of the storm, which is the good side of the storm. We really don’t have anything to worry about.” The year before we had evacuated for Hurricane Ivan; it was coming straight for us, and then it made a little bit of a jog, and it hit at the Florida-Alabama line. We were on the west side, and we had called for evacuation
because we thought the storm was coming at us based on what we were being told from the Hurricane Center, and we were in a dilemma on at what time were we going to call for evacuation. We got a lot of folks that are mad at us; we’re crying wolf, again, you know. And so we went in, and we sit down, and we talked to the Hurricane Center, to the director down there, and they said that they really felt like that everything, all the guidance, all the computer models and information, that we here on the Mississippi Gulf Coast would be all right, and I think this was on a Friday morning. Well, Friday afternoon we get another call; it says, “We need to come back. The Hurricane Center wants to talk to us again.” So we go back down there. I’m getting chill bumps. I got chill bumps when I got down there, and we sat down, and they said, “We really feel like that this storm is probably going to go in probably a little west of you. You’re probably going to get some bad winds off of it, but it’s not going to be as good as it was if it would have went to the east of you, but it’s not going to be as bad. It’s going to be further away from you, on the west side of you.” So we kind of felt good about that, and this was like two o’clock in the afternoon, after a nine o’clock meeting with them. We went back; I came back, and I pulled up my meteorologist, and he had it hitting at the Mississippi-Louisiana line; had had it there for three days, but his new, added information was that this was going to be a powerful Category Four, possibly a Category Five storm, and it would probably follow a path very similar or close to that of Hurricane Camille of 1969, that the people of the Mississippi Gulf Coast and South Louisiana need to prepare now because this is going to be bad. So I got with my assistant chief, and I said, “David, start getting the plan. Let’s go ahead and heighten it up. We haven’t been put on alert from the Hurricane Center or through the county EOC [emergency operations center],” I said, “but let’s go ahead and get ready for this.” He said, “Well, I’ve already topped off all the gas, all the fuel. I’ve got the list made out for food. All we’ve got to do is go purchase it.” And I said, “Well”—there’s always a fine line about going and purchasing food for seventy-two hours for forty-six men, and once you purchase that food, it’s not like you could take it back. It’s not like a flashlight that you buy, and you could take back to the grocery store. And you have to watch that because our City, just like I’d referred to earlier of the working family that works from paycheck-to-paycheck, our city is essentially the same thing. You collect some taxes, sales taxes, and you pay your bills. Next month, you collect your sales tax; you pay your bills. Well, there’s not a lot of wiggle room in the budget to be able to go out and buy three days worth of food for forty-six firefighters. And he said, “Well, I’ve got the list ready.” He said, “I’ll pull the trigger as soon as you tell me.” And I said, “Well, let’s just keep it loaded and ready, and we’ll go.” I said, “I’ve got to go back up to the EOC at six o’clock. We’re going to talk to the Hurricane Center again.” Go back up to the EOC; Hurricane Center gets on the line with us, and we’re sitting at a table. There’s all of us as directors from each City and a lot of county officials there. A lot of the mayors were there because they have become really concerned, and they tell us that it’s a very good possibility it’s going to hit New Orleans. “All right. What can we look for?” “Well, we can look for twelve-foot storm surge here on the Coast, and we can look for a-hundred-, a-hundred-and-ten-mile-an-hour winds.” I’m thinking, “Well, that’s not bad. We had Hurricane Georges; it was about the same thing. I went through Hurricane Elena in 1985, about the same thing. We had Isidore
and Lili in, I think, 2002. A little bit less than that.” So I’m thinking, “Everything’s going to be fine.” And Saturday comes around; we have a couple more meetings, and they feeling like it’s still going to go probably a little west of New Orleans. And Sunday morning, at about four o’clock in the morning, I get a call from the county EOC, saying—and we had had a scheduled meeting for, I think, nine o’clock Sunday morning, and they called at, I think, it was four o’clock in the morning, said, “We’ve got a six o’clock a.m. teleconference with the Hurricane Center. We need you to be here, all EMA [emergency management agency] directors of each City.” So I get up, and I get dressed, and I’m like, “What’s going on?” And I turn on the Weather Channel, and they show the storm out, still south of us, and it’s a-hundred-and-seventy-mile-an-hour storm, and it’s huge. It covers the whole Gulf, now. And I was like, “My God. It’s grown into a monster overnight.” So I go up to the EOC, and we get on the line with our teleconference with the director, and he says, “Folks, this is probably going to be right close to Hurricane Camille’s track.” He said, “You can look from twenty-four- to twenty-eight-foot storm surge.” And again, I got chills. I’m thinking, “Twenty-eight-foot storm surge. That’s just unbelievable.” And, “You will probably have a-hundred-thirty-five to a-hundred-fifty-five sustained [winds], and gusts to a hundred and eighty.” And I’m thinking, “My God!” And he’s saying, “If you’ve got any boats left in your harbors, you need to get them out. Make sure that everybody’s evacuating. Go to your maps.” We’ve got predefined maps for evacuation zones. “Let’s get those evacuated.” And he goes through the whole routine spiel that we’ve all been thinking about. And so after we get off the conference, we sit, and we talk. We talk about things that happened from Camille in 1969. “Well, the water only got up to here in Camille. Camille was a two-hundred-mile-an-hour-sustained-wind storm that hit the Mississippi Gulf Coast; has a recorded twenty-seven-foot storm surge, and they’re saying we’re going to have twenty-four- to twenty-eight-foot storm surge. So this is where the water went. We know it’s documented. Let’s do our evacuations based on these numbers.” So we’re looking, and I look back at our map, and I see our flood areas, and I’m like, “There’s so many more houses south of our CSX [railroad] tracks.” CSX tracks is five blocks north of the beach. We’ve got five streets south of the CSX railroad tracks. And then you’ve got US Highway 90, and then you’ve got the sand beach, and then you’ve got the water. So we called for an evacuation of those areas south, mandatory in the first three blocks, and recommended south of the CSX tracks in any low-lying areas that have experienced any flooding before. And a lot of people are getting out. I left the meeting, finally, and I’m coming back to Long Beach. I see Father Louis Lohan of St. Thomas [Catholic Church], and I say, “Father, do me a favor. If you’ve got any parishioners in here this morning, tell them, if they’re not aware, this storm’s coming; it’s going to be a Camille-like storm. Please get your folks, if they’re in any of these dangerous or hazardous areas, get them to evacuate. Here are the schools that are open for shelters. This is what time they’ll be open. I recommend getting them off the Coast. Get them out of the area; just get them away.” And he says, “I’ll do that.” I go on down to First Baptist, and I see my preacher there, Brother Larue Stevens(?), and I tell Brother Larue, I said, “Look.” I said, “Tell these folks”—essentially the same thing I told Father Lohan. I said, “Tell these folks to go.” And I said, “Don’t have a long sermon this morning. Let’s have a little, short sermon.” And I said, “And say a
prayer for all of us that’s still going to have to be here,” I said, “because there’s going
to be several of us.” And I said, “There’s going to be several families that’s not going
to make the wise and right choice, and they’re going to stay.” And I said, “Pray that
they’ll leave.” And so he said, “I’ll take care of that.” [I] go back to the station, and
we pull the trigger on buying the food, and the food is almost gone at the grocery
stores. We managed to get enough stuff, foods, to be able to survive for a few days.
FEMA, Federal Emergency Management Agency, they recommend that each
municipality or area that’s going to be hit has seventy-two hours worth of food and
water to be able to take care of yourself until they could get in and help you. They
want seventy-two hours to be able to man up and get in. So we were covered. We
thought we had enough to take care of. We felt pretty comfortable with it; we had
everything fueled up. I have a station that sits on Fourth Street, which is two blocks
north of Highway 90 on the beachfront. I have another station that’s located just about
a mile north of the CSX tracks on the western edge of town, both of them being metal
buildings. And I knew I wasn’t going to leave the equipment or manpower at station
two. I said, “It’s in too much danger.” So I evacuated them to the north of the tracks
to our central fire station, which is about a mile and a half north of the CSX tracks.
We’re in a high area there at our central station; felt real good about our building.
Station three, I left them out there. I said, “I’ll bring you in at six o’clock Sunday
afternoon.” And we went on making preparations. I had the trucks out, south of the
tracks on the loudspeakers. I’d brought the police in. We’d declared a declaration of
emergency through the city, through the county, through the state, and so we had all of
our declarations declared. Once that happened, I left my role as fire chief and became
emergency management director for the City; so I took over all the City departments
at that time. So I started directing the police department, the police chief, telling him,
“This is what I want done.” Had their folks out with loudspeakers; had all my folks
out with loudspeakers, just making announcement after announcement, on street-to-
street. At about four o’clock that afternoon, we had a fire at a miniwarehouse.
Miniwarehouse fires is one of the fires that we dread the most as firefighters because
you don’t know what people are storing in there. It’s a nonregulated storage where we
can’t go in and do inspections. We don’t know if people have—if they owned a pest
control and were storing their chemicals in there, we wouldn’t know it because it’s a
private storage facility. So you really hate when you see those catch on fire; you don’t
know what you’ve got. So four o’clock in the afternoon of Sunday, we have this fire,
and I have to bring fire trucks and bring two engine companies in, and I’ve got twenty-
four firefighters out there, fighting this warehouse fire from four to probably about
seven o’clock before they got it under control and out and where we could get back
out. So it’s almost dark when we get through and get cleaned up and rolled up and
back in the stations to have to stop and put the trucks back in order, get gear cleaned
up. It’s just a long timeframe there from once you leave the scene to getting
everything back in order. It takes you another three hours at least. So they’re working
on that. So the rest of us who are not out there doing that, we get in the vehicles and
all the fire vehicles and the policemen, and we go down south of the tracks. The
mayor and our alderman-at-large, they’re out in the mayor’s vehicle, and anywhere we
saw a house with a light on, we would stop and go up and knock on the door to see if
anybody was home, and tell them, “Look, you’ve got to get out. This is dangerous.
This is very dangerous.” We went and did that. We went back out, and we came back in, and we did that till probably about nine o’clock. A couple over here on the east side of town, it was an elderly doctor, his wife, and a son. We go by, and the trunk’s up on the car, and the son’s putting stuff in the trunk. And we stop and say, “Are y’all leaving?” He says, “Yes. We’re going to leave.” He said, “I’ve talked them into leaving.” And we’re like, “Great. We won’t have to worry about it, but we’re going to be coming back and check and make sure.” Other folks that we saw, another couple, right on the beachfront, “Yeah. We’re packing.” Two elderly ladies, “We’re going to be getting out of here. We’re going.” “OK. We’ll come back and check.” They said, “OK. You can come back and check, but we’re going to be gone.” “OK.” A man over here on the west side of town; we called him the bird man. He had an aviary built out in his backyard, and he had huge, beautiful birds, and we told him, “You need to leave.” He said, “Well, I’m not going to leave my birds.” He said, “I’ve got this large truck parked in the front yard.” He said, “I’m going to get all my birds and put them in the cage.” He said, “If it gets bad, I’ll get in the large truck with all the birds, and we’ll drive north of the tracks.” He said, “We’ll get out and go somewhere.” And I was like, “Well, you really need to do that right now while it’s safe.” Because the winds weren’t blowing hard; we’d had a few sprinkles, little rain showers come over, nothing that would even foretell that there’s a major storm out here in the Gulf. You could drive down to the beach, and the water was a little rough, but it was nothing out of the ordinary. You really couldn’t tell. And I think people really thought that this storm was going to change directions, and they didn’t see what we were about to have to deal with. So that’s how I come to know about it, and I really, it really frightened me when I sat there, and I’m taking my notes, and I’m listening to the Hurricane Center director tell us that we’re looking at twenty-four- to twenty-eight-foot storm surge, and I still have that in my notes. I kept all my notes and everything that I took leading up and after the storm; I’ve got just files of paperwork. And I was looking through my paperwork there, and I saw that day, and when I started reading it, I still get chills, just to think about. And as I was driving back that morning, I’m thinking about, “What will our Coast look like again? I remember how devastating Camille was to us. And what’s it going to be like if this storm does hit us like they’re talking about? What will our coastline look like then? Is it going to be the first block and a half, two blocks gone like it was in Camille?” I was like, “My God, that’s just terrible to think that we’re going to maybe lose two blocks of our city.” And then the other damages that you have further in, homes with roofs blown off and just where tornadoes have come through and hit areas, just spot areas all over the place. I really, it really heightened my thoughts and awareness about what was going on.

**Baskey:** And so you had to stay. You didn’t evacuate?

**Bass:** No, I had to stay, being the fire chief and the emergency management director, I had to stay. Our families, in our prehurricane plan, we have documents and paperwork that our firefighters and police officers have to fill out of who their next of kin is, their families, where their families will be going to if they’re evacuated, where will they be staying; who will they be staying with? Contact numbers, all that
information, we make sure we have that on file. We pull it out, and I have a meeting with the fire department. I have a meeting with the police department. And I pull these out, go over one at a time, “Has anything changed? Evaluate it. If anything’s changed, let me know. Give me your evacuation plan for your family right now so we’ll know that the families are gone and taken care of.”

**Baskey:** So the families did evacuate. Your family did evacuate?

**Bass:** Well, no, not mine. My son was twenty-one years old at the time; he was working part-time, going to college. My wife at the time was the director of surgical services at Biloxi Regional Hospital; she was over in Biloxi just to the east of us, the hospital about a block and a half off of Highway 90. I was very concerned about her having to be there, because she had to be there at work. She had to report for work. We got, I think it was six lifejackets, and I sent my wife to work with six lifejackets. (crying) Didn’t know when I’d—excuse me.

**Baskey:** That’s OK. If you want me to stop, just let us know.

**Bass:** I didn’t know when I’d see her again. Being that close to the beach and twenty-four, twenty-eight storm surge, it was hard to kiss her goodbye. And my son came with me to work, and he wanted to go up to Mississippi State. I had a nephew up there; he said, “Dad,” he said, “I think I’ll just ride to Mississippi State and stay up there.” I said, “No.” I said, “Why don’t you stay here?” I said, “There’s things you could do for me not only right now before the storm because I’ve got two houses I’ve got to get boarded up, and I’ve got too much on my plate as fire chief and emergency management director to be able to take care of those. Can you and some of your friends take care of getting both houses boarded up?” He said, “Dad, I’ll take care of it. Don’t worry about it.” And he did a wonderful job, got everything boarded up. In fact went around and helped some neighbors get boarded up. And I told him; I said, “I want you to stay here at the station with me, because after the storm’s over, I’m going to need you to go and check on the house.” My mom and dad, my two sisters, and their families, they all evacuated. My dad, he’s eighty-two years old now; at the time—he has Alzheimer’s, and I told my mom that Friday morning, I called her, and I said, “Mom,” I said, “I want you to call the girls, and y’all make a decision on where you’re going to evacuate to.” I said, “I don’t want to have to worry about y’all if this storm comes in. I want y’all to be able to know where you’re going; I want to know where you’re going to be, know that you’re safe, and I don’t have to worry about you during this storm. I’ll have too much to do. I can’t do my job and worry about y’all, too.” Mom calls me back; I didn’t get a chance to check with her Friday evening. I was just so busy. And Saturday, sometime Saturday morning, she calls me back; she says, “Your dad says he doesn’t want to go anywhere.” I said, “Mom, Dad has Alzheimer’s. He doesn’t know.” I said, “That’s why I called you and told you.” And I said, “I’ll take care of it.” I called my sisters, and I said, “Y’all go to Mom’s with all the family, all the nephews, all the nieces, and their families, and y’all get over there, and y’all decide where you’re going.” I’ve got a nephew that lives in Birmingham and another nephew that lives in Nashville, Tennessee. I said, “I suggest y’all go to those
places. Some of you go to Nashville; some of you got to Birmingham.” And I said, “Y’all will be safe there.” Well, Mom calls me back, and I have a brother-in-law that works out at NASA at the Stennis Space Center. He’s legally blind. He has the—the State and Federal government set him up in there; he has a restaurant in there that he’s over the kitchen and the restaurant. Essentially he owns it, owns the business. And he says, “Well, we’ll just go out to NASA.” And I said, “No. Y’all have got to get out of town. I can’t worry about y’all being here. You’ve got to be out of town where I don’t have to worry about y’all.” So my older sister calls me back, says, “We’re all leaving. Some of us are going to Rodney’s house in Birmingham, and some of us are going to Brian’s house.” Her son’s in Nashville, right outside of Nashville. And I said, “Well, that’s great. When you leaving?” Well, we’re not going to leave till in the morning.” This is Saturday she’s telling me. I said, “You’re going to leave Sunday morning?” I said, “The highway’s going to be so packed; it’s going to be miserable.” She said, “Well, that’s when everybody wants to leave.” And I said, “All right. Just let me know when you leave, and call me when you get there so I’ll know that y’all have all made it safe.” Well, they left Sunday morning at about six o’clock, a six-hour drive to Birmingham, and it took them twelve hours to get there. It took them about eighteen hours to get to Nashville, to get to where my other nephew was at. But they made it, got there, and they were very tired, and it was great for me to know. The only one I had to worry about was my wife’s mother, and my wife’s brother, just older than her; he had just retired from the Gulfport Fire Department, as assistant fire chief there. And he told me, he said, “George, don’t worry. I’m going to take care of Mom and Dad. We’re going to be over here at their house. And my wife’s dad, he was a retired federal police officer, and he had had a heart attack and threw a blood clot and ended up being paralyzed from the waist down. Big man, six [feet], five [inches tall], 270 pound, big man that was just able to do everything, and then he’s laying in a hospital bed at his home, can’t move. So I was worried about him. But Joey told me, said, “I’ve got them. Don’t worry about it; we’re taking care of them.” I said, “OK.” So I felt good about all the family being gone except for my wife being over at Biloxi Regional, so close. I felt good about the building; what I was worried about was the water. And I told her, I said, “Don’t get down on the first floor. Stay the second floor or higher; six stories, you’ve got plenty of room to get up. Storm’s coming in, get on the north side; when the storm goes by, get on the south side; get out of the wind.” Felt confident that everything would be fine. Jarrod and I, he got everything done. He called me; I went out and checked everything. He had done both my houses and my mom and dad’s house, boarding all those up. And so we came to the station, and Sunday night, I guess around eleven o’clock, I got all of our guys together, all the firemen together. Had the policemen were all over at the police station, which was a block north of the CSX tracks. I really didn’t, at the time I wasn’t concerned about them being in their building. I felt like it would probably hold up for them. Told them they could call, come out to Central Fire Station; it would be crowded, but they were more than welcome, and I would really like for them to. But they made the decision they’d rather just stay there. I got all of my men together, and we gathered up in the apparatus stall. There was forty-six of us there, and the mayor and some of the aldermen were there. And we went over our game plan, again. My assistant chief and some battalion officers, they’d already worked everything. They’d
assigned rescue teams, and all the assignments were already made, who’s going to be on what engine, who’s going to be doing this. When the storm’s over, we’re going to go out; this is our assigned areas. We had one area for south of the tracks, one area for the west side, and one area for the east side. We were covering all of our bases for a normal storm, and we got through, and I had one of the firemen, I asked him to say a prayer for us. And he did, and I felt good. I felt like that we were protected, that God was protecting us. We were first responders; we were there to help everybody, and I felt good that God was going to take care of us and our building, that we would not get hit by a tornado, [that] we would be safe there. A couple of my firemen who had never been through a hurricane were a little scared, and I just told them, I said, “Look. This is part of the job. This is no [more] dangerous than running into a burning building, pulling the hose line.” I said, “You don’t know what you’re going to get when you get in there.” I said, “We don’t know what we’ll get here.” I said, “But God’s going to take care of us; we’ll be protected.” Went back out at, I guess it was about 11:30. I went back out, and we started, some of us started going door-to-door; sent people down there to check; come back, and they said, “Yeah, the Maxies(?) are gone. The old ladies are gone. The birdman’s still there, says he’s going to leave if the water comes up any. He’s going to get out.” And we just went everywhere we thought people were staying. And you knock on the door; no lights are on, and say, “Well, they’ve all gone.” We felt really good about our evacuation. I thought that everybody had left. I got a call come back in, that CNN [Cable News Network] wanted to do a phone interview with me. So I run back to the station; CNN calls me, and by that time we’ve lost Internet; we’ve lost our TV cable. We can’t watch TV; we can’t get on the Internet. We don’t know where the storm’s at; we don’t know what it’s doing. So we’re having to call the county; they’re updating us on what’s going on with the storm. I do the interview with CNN, and the reason I mention this, one of the things that’s pretty ironic about it, one of the men in our Sunday school class, he and his wife had been in our Sunday school class. He was a colonel in the Air Force, stationed here at Keesler [Air Force Base]. He had been transferred a year and a half before over to Florida to Eglin Air Force Base. He was over a MASH [mobile Army surgical hospital] unit for special forces, and they get over there and get settled in just in time for [Hurricane] Ivan to strike them in 2004. We go over and help them, do everything we can for them after the storm for recovery. Well, during this interview, the guys ask me about our preparations, what all we’re doing, what we’re thinking. And at the very end, he says, “Well, is there anything you would like to say?” And I said, “Yeah. I’d like for everybody who hears this to pray for us that we will be safe and God will put his protection around each of us who are here.” And he said, “OK. Thank you for your time, and we’ll be thinking about you and be praying for you.” And I was like, “That’s great.” And I said, “There’s no way that’ll get on CNN.” Well, three weeks after Katrina hit, and we got Internet back up, I get to going through my e-mails, and I’ve got just hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of e-mails about, “I’m so-and-so. I wanted to check on so-and-so who lived over here.” That was the kind of e-mails [I was] getting. And I go down through them, and I get down to one that’s from Dave Johnson(?) who was in our Sunday school class who had been transferred to Florida. He is in Afghanistan, and he said, “George,” he said, “I just want to let you know that I just come off duty, heard your voice; when I walked into
the mess tent on CNN, I hear your voice.” And he said, “I hear you asking for prayers.” And he says, “I just want you to know that prayers were lifted up for you and your men from the other side of the world.” And I thought, (crying) “How great.” And I apologize. This storm, it really affected a lot of us. The first responders who came in here afterwards to help us, it was just, it was something else to have them in here. But I thought it was great that Dave was able to hear me.

**Baskey:** So you were saying that you and your men stayed at your central fire station. Can you describe your experience of Hurricane Katrina and then its aftermath for us?

**Bass:** Yeah. The storm, we all came back in. During the night we were back out, just all during the night. We didn’t sleep at all Sunday night; none of us did, except for my son. I had a mattress, one of the blow-up; we had several blow-up mattresses for all the extra folks that we had in. It was well past the normal sleeping arrangements for normal shift work, and I had a blow-up mattress in my office, and he went to sleep in there. He’s just twenty-one years old; there’s no care in the world there, pretty much, so he was able to sleep, and about four o’clock I came back in, and the winds were starting to pick up. We were probably having seventy-, seventy-five-mile-an-hour winds by four or 4:30 in the morning, and the alderman-at-large, who, he and I walked in my office, and he looks down at Jarrod who’s asleep on that mattress. He said, “That’s living proof that you can sleep through a hurricane.” (laughter) I thought, “That’s true.” I said, “But he can sleep through anything.” About six o’clock, we had our first breakfast. We have one of the guys that’s assigned to cook for everybody, cooked a big breakfast, and we all took turns going and getting our plates, sitting down and eating, and we go back, and we check. We’re checking all of our gear, and everybody’s looking at everything, just making sure that we’ve got everything that we need, and we’re ready. About eight o’clock we had to go out to try to get to the shelter, which was just to the west of us about half a mile. We went out, and we got about a block and a half south, and about a block and a half to the west of the station, and trees were blowing down. And I told the guys, I said, “We can’t do this.” I said, “We’re going to have to cut our way back to the station to get equipment back in and get us back in.” I said, “It’s time for everybody to stay off the road.” So at 8:30 we were back at the station. We’ve got everything locked down. We feel pretty secure there; all the windows are boarded up. All the preps have been done like we’re supposed to. And 8:30 we have the—the winds are really starting to pick up pretty good. We’re getting hundred-mile-an-hour winds. We’ve got a handheld anemometer, and we’re holding it out there; we’re getting ninety-five-, hundred-mile-an-hour winds, hundred-and-ten-mile-an-hour gusts. And I guess about 9:30, my training officer comes to me, and he says, “Chief,” he said, “our bay doors on the east side of the station, they’re bowing in.” He said, “We need to do something. And we’ve got the door open, the bay door open facing to the west, and the other two bay doors are shut, facing west.” So we’re watching, and the rain, it’s really, it’s just raining hard, and we’re watching the rain, and it’s just blowing, just straight across, parallel to the ground. And we’re watching shingles blow off roofs of the subdivision just to the north of us, and watching trees go over. And the rain is slacking off a little bit, and you would see a tornado come over, and you’d see, it was amazing to watch.
So Jerry, my training officer, he goes over—he’s also my assigned safety officer on events—and he goes over, and he says, “We’re going to move the fire engines up against the door.” And he comes back, and he said, “I think everybody needs to have their helmets on while we’re out here.” And I said, “Pass the word.” And I said, “Get it disseminated there, and let’s get everybody.” So I grabbed my helmet, and Jarrod’s by me. I’d given him a helmet, too. So we get our helmets on, and everybody gets their helmets on. They move the ladder truck up against the first south bay door there on the east side. They move the engine up against the next one, and I’m looking at the third door, and the door, they’re fourteen-foot-wide doors, and they’re bowing in like a foot. The wind’s just blowing them in. And I’m like, “Guys, we got to hurry up and get this other truck up against there.” Well, they’re pulling it up, and just as they get close enough, the door blows in; the stall door blows in, the apparatus door. It comes up the truck, knocks the windshield out, knocks the lights off the roof, and it’s just flapping up. It looks like a magic carpet just flying there. And just before this occurred, one of my lieutenants came up to me, and he said, “I think Chief Dubuisson’s crazy for making us put our helmets on.” And when that occurred, you could see him; he pulled the strap (laughter) on. He tightened his chin strap up. He said, “Good move.” And we backed that unit out of the way, and we put ladders up, and it’s howling then. We’re getting hundred-forty-mile-an-hour, sustained winds. And it’s just howling through, blowing insulation off the apparatus bay ceilings in there. They’re twenty-five foot up; it’s just blowing them out and just going through the back. And so we get ladders up on both sides of the door, and we finally are able to manage to cut the cables and drop the door to the ground, and it’s just doing this. (gesturing) The wind’s getting under it; it’s just rolling. So it takes about six of us; we get on top of it, and it’s literally like riding on a magic carpet. We’re just doing that. And we finally get one end down, and they pull the truck up on it. We had to park the truck on top of that door; that was the only way we could get it to stop. So we park the truck on top of that, and we kind of calmed down a little bit, and we go back to the back, and we’ve got the video cameras there, and we’re videoing everything. We have a hundred-foot, free-standing antenna tower for our communications tower; it’s our backup communication tower, and it sits about twenty feet away from the station. Well, the wind’s coming out of the southeast, and it’s just howling in. And all of a sudden this tower about halfway up comes down, and it’s starting to bounce around. And the guys are looking and say, “What are we going to do?” I said, “We’re going to have to go out and secure it somehow.” And one of my other guys, one of the firemen there, he said, “I got rope here.” He said, “How about I run out?” And I said, “Why don’t you do this? Why don’t you take the rope and throw it over it when it comes down, and just throw a lot of it over it?” And I said, “When it comes down, then we’ll send somebody out there to grab the rope that’s thrown over it and bring it back in.” And I said, “Then we’ll keep doing that till we get enough rope around it.” So what we did, we got enough rope around it, throwing it out there and one of the guys run out and grab it, and they’d come back in. And the wind was blowing so hard that at times we’d have to send two guys out there so one could help hold the other to get back in. Finally we did that, and then we ran around the base, and we all got in, and we pulled. And we pulled that antenna down against the base, and they took turns running around and wrapping it around, and we just
brought it back in, and we held it. Then we finally got a little bit of a slack in the rain, and they ran out there, and they tied it down. We were afraid that with the wind, if the wind would have shifted, it would have blowed it back around to the station and started tearing the station apart, and that would have been bad for us being responders there. But it was pretty hairy. And after we got that done, we just continued to watch probably for about another thirty minutes, and it was the same thing, the wind blowing, just howling. We got up to, I think it was 120 on the hand-held, and it stopped. It wouldn’t register anything higher than 120. We looked at, tried to look on the Internet, and of course, everything was still gone. We didn’t know why we even tried that; some of the guys said, “Well, maybe we can.” Couple of the guys had text on their cell phones, and they were trying to text during the storm and couldn’t get out during the storm. And we have, our phone service went out; we couldn’t do any local calls, but one of our dispatchers, her husband, he worked for immigrations, and he had taken their three children and gone to Indiana where his family was at. And Debbie, the dispatcher, we were in there talking, and I said, “We don’t know where the storm’s at, what it’s doing, how long it’s going to be.” So she reaches over, and she picks up the phone, and she says, “Well, I’m just going to call my husband.” And she dials the number, and it rings, and he answers. And they start talking, and I’m like, I said, “Debbie, are you kidding me, or are you really talking to your husband?” She said, “No, I’m talking to him. I really am. Listen.” She puts him on the loudspeaker, and she says, “Where is the storm?” And he said, “It’s still south of y’all.” Said, “It hasn’t even got to y’all yet.” We were like, “Oh, my God. We’re having this, and the storm hadn’t even got to us.” He said, “Well, what they’re showing on the radar right now, it’s just south of y’all.” Said, “It won’t be another thirty minutes, and the eye’ll be coming on.” He said, “It looks like the eye is going to go just to the west of y’all.” Said, “It looks like it’s going to go right up the Bay of St. Louis.” And we were like, “Oh, OK.” So we’re thinking we’re getting close to being through. During the earlier part of the storm, probably around nine o’clock, one of the guys, one of the firemen, his friend who lives south of the track, called him and said, “Look, water’s coming up down here.” Said, “It’s getting pretty high.” He said, “I think I might have to get in my attic.” And he lived on the north side of Fourth Street, I think it was. He said, “I may have to get in my attic.” And we were like, “Water can’t be getting that high.” And so we said, “You need us to try to come get you?” He said, “No, y’all can’t.” He said, “There’s trees down around all over out here.” That was the last I thought about just how bad because we were watching things. We see a tornado come over, and it hits the roof of the house in the neighborhood there, and it takes shingles and plywood and just all over, and then we see one come through, and it takes the tops out of pine trees, and just we’re like, “My God.” And they’re all over us. The Coke machine on the south side of the station, the electrical socket that it was plugged into, it shorted out during all this, and we’re down there trying to get out on the south side where that direct wind is 130 miles an hour, and we’re trying to get that taken care of. We managed to get that secured, and about, I guess about one o’clock in the afternoon, I mean, we just watched it, and it was like it just never wasn’t going to end. But about one o’clock it got down to about ninety miles an hour, and I got the guys together, and I said, “Look.” I said, “We’ve got to go ahead and start making our way out of here;” I said, “We’re going to have to get south to see what’s going on down there, if there’s
anybody, and we got to start getting some roads opened up best we can. So I guess about 1:30 we got out, and we started cutting our way south on Klondike Road, which runs about three-quarters of a mile down to Cleveland Avenue, and Cleveland Avenue runs at a little angle down, all the way down to Highway 90, which runs into our Long Beach Harbor. It crosses over the tracks and goes on down to Long Beach Harbor. We got out of the station, and we were fortunate; there were no trees down in front of the apparatus drive, where you drive out onto Klondike Road. And we were able to make a turn, but as soon as you made the turn, there was trees down. So we had one of my battalion chiefs out front with a hot stick, which is a device they use to touch power lines to see if they are energized. He’s out front pretty much leading the charge, and we’ve got probably sixteen firefighters out with chainsaws, and then the rest of the guys that are not driving the equipment that’s following up behind us are out moving tree limbs. And I’m out with them, and I’ve got somebody else driving my vehicle. I want to be out there with them; I want to help them. So we’re out there; the guys are cutting, and we’re pulling limbs out and opening the way, and we’ll get wind gusts that’ll get on up to ninety-five to a hundred, a hundred and five miles an hour. We’ll get those wind gusts, and they’ll start blowing limbs and stuff, so we had to just kind of like lay down in the road and let that blow over you. And when it stopped, we’d get back up and start clearing. It took us probably an hour, hour and a half, once we left the station, to get down Klondike, on Cleveland. We were fortunate when we got on Cleveland; there was a lot of open areas because there’s a middle school and a high school and an open area on the other side. No trees, we didn’t have to worry about trees till we got about a block from the CSX tracks and Railroad Street. We managed to get down there, and we walk up, and I’ve got all these guys with me, and we walk up onto the tracks, and I look, and a block and a half south of the track, I see this debris line of construction debris, tree limbs, just unimaginable to see this. And it’s as far as I could see; it’s probably fifteen to twenty foot tall, this debris, and it’s probably 150 foot wide. And you see roofs of houses that are just all over the place. And I walk up, and I looked, and the guys were standing by, and they look at me. And I was like, “Oh, my God! This is incredible. This is something we didn’t think was happening while we were secure in our station. Our biggest battle was an apparatus door that acted like a flying carpet, and these folks have lost. It’s gone.” And I got my battalion chiefs together, and I said, “Guys, game plan’s changed.” I said, “Forget about going east; forget about going west.” I said, “Our focus is going to have to be south of the tracks.” And I said, “I want one crew of four men to go to the police station and check on them.” I said, “Let’s go make sure they’re all right.” I said, “Then let’s sector off here. We got six miles of the city of Long Beach that we’ve got to focus on here, guys.” And I said, “Let’s sector off into teams, and let’s move south.” And I had my son with me, and I said, “I’ll take Jarrod with me, and we’re going to go straight down this street, and we’ll work our way over to Jeff Davis. I want another team to go down Jeff Davis to start.” And then we started, just like lining off, just like parachute jumpers, “One OK,” and then the next one says, “Two OK,” and the next one. Well, it was like that. We started right on down the line from me to the east and from me to the west. And Jarrod and I—I told Jarrod; I said, “There’s a lady that lived down here on Third and Cleveland.” I said, “She has mental problems.” And I said, “She told us she was leaving.” And I said, “We went back and
couldn’t rouse her at two o’clock this morning, so we think she probably left, but we’re not really sure.” So we start making our way, and we have to make our way over this pile of debris and around. I gave Jarrod my boots; they’re steel-shanked, and I said, “I don’t want you stepping on a nail.” We’re almost over this pile, and what do I do? I step on a nail. It goes through my foot and right out the top. And I’m thinking, “This is not good. It’s been four years since I had a tetanus, and I don’t know when we’re going to get tetanus shots in here now, and I’ve stepped on a nail.” There’s no telling what was in the water. We’ve got leaking sewage all over the place and broken sewage lines, and we don’t know what contaminants were brought in with the water. And I said, “Well, I’ll just deal with it later.” So we managed to get on over, and we’re walking south, and I see the lady’s roof from her house, and it’s about a block north and on the other side of the street. And I’m like, “Well, I just certainly hope she was gone.” And we’re walking along, and Jarrod grabs me. He said, “Dad, did you hear that?” And I said, “I didn’t hear a thing.” I’ve got a hearing deficit in my right ear from years of driving the fire apparatus with the siren right here. And he says, “It’s right over here.” So I’m listening, and he says, “I hear something.” And I said, “Well, let’s move towards it. You know where the sound’s coming from. Let’s move towards it.” I said, “Let’s see what it is.” So we began to make our way over more debris, I mean it’s just, we’re still in the debris field, and we’re making our way over. And Jarrod says, “Stop.” And he hollers, and he said, “There’s somebody saying something.” And so we’re making our way over this roof—-that’s where it’s coming from—-that’s left of this house. And we get over there, and Jarrod says something, and somebody starts talking to him. And it’s the lady; she’s probably sixty-five, seventy years old. [She] had stayed; she had climbed up in her attic to get out of the water; house was washed out from under her. She stays in the attic, and it moved about a block north. Jarrod and I start tearing stuff away, and we get to her, and she is physically all right. She has a scratch on her cheek. Mentally, she’s in shock, to say the least. We get her out; she says, “I need to go in my house and get my papers.” And I was like, “Well, ma’am, you don’t have a house left.” She said, “Well, let me just get in my car.” I’m telling her; I said, “Hon, look around you. What you had last night is gone.” So we carry her; make our way back over the debris field, and we get her out. And we have an ambulance, AMR [American Medical Response] our local ambulance provider, they have one there, and we get to her, and we hand her over to them. Said, “Take her to the hospital. That’s all we know to do. We’re not prepared for any mass casualties, but we have one unit here that’s going to take, and we have another one to fill back in behind them.” Because AMR, they’d brought hundreds of ambulances in and personnel. So we knew we had enough ambulances to help cover us. So we get her, get her out, and we work our way on over to Jeff Davis, and it’s just overwhelming, the destruction. It’s way past what Camille did in [1969]. Block and a half, maybe two blocks of Long Beach was gone in [1969]; we’re talking four blocks, sometimes five blocks of nothing, where homes, where businesses used to be. I mean, there’s nothing. It’s just, you think about the tsunami that hit, and you see those pictures on TV of just nothing being left. Well, we had just nothing left. It was just totally devastated. We get back over to Jeff Davis; we meet up with another team, and our radio system, we’re on an 800 radio system, county-wide system, that we lost part of our antenna over here on the west side of town.
Gulfport at the EOC didn’t know that we had lost part of our tower. So all of our communications were line of sight. If you were a hundred yards down there, and I could see you, I could talk to you. But if I couldn’t see you, there were no communications. We had no cell phones; I mean, we couldn’t text. I mean, we had line-of-sight communications; so we were just trying to bring everybody back to, “You going to be out for this certain time doing a search; you’re going to come back here, and we’re going to meet, and we’re going to evaluate, and we’re going to reassess, and we’re going to reassign. And we’re going to move out again.” We did that. The devastation was just, it was just so overwhelming that it was hard to focus on what you were trying to do and what needed to be done. I made my way over the debris line again to get south on Jeff Davis, our main drag in Long Beach. Our First Baptist Church sat a block off the beach, and it was gone. The only thing that was left was part of the roof on the main sanctuary and the cross. When the guys come back from the east end where St. Thomas Catholic Church is at, they come back, and it was unfortunately the guys I’d assigned over there were members, lifelong members at St. Thomas. And they come back, and one of them had tears in his eyes. And he said, “The only thing’s left is the cross.” And I said, “Yeah. Thank God.” And I said, “That’s what we got left is the cross. So God’s not left us. We’re still here.” But it was hard to focus with all the devastation, but it was 6:30 in the afternoon by that time, and I send one of my guys; I say, “I’ve got to have heavy equipment to open these streets so we can get—I want something open enough that I could drive fire apparatus through.” I said, “Heaven forbid if one of these gas lines”—and there was multiple, multiple, hundreds of thousands of gas lines that had ruptured. Natural gas smell all over the place. We had sewage lines that had just been washed away on Highway 90; no way to stop them from flowing. Sewage just all over the place. When we crossed over the pile of debris on Jeff Davis and walked down, we were still in the water. The water was still up, and we’re two and a half blocks north, three blocks north of Highway 90, and we’re still in water. We’re in water almost up, midthigh. And it was like all of a sudden, the wind changed direction, and the water went out, and you could see the beach. And we could go further south, and when we got further south and looked, it was just total devastation. There was nothing left. It was like it had just been, like the tsunami; it had been washed away. After that we made our way on over to where we knew another couple had stayed, and one of our aldermen had fortunately found them. They had got out before the storm got bad; we were trying to make our way over to the birdman to see if he had got out like he said he was, and we had a man that stayed on Highway 90 in his house. He was a civil engineer, had built his house on a spot that his grandmother had died in Camille in 1969, on the same lot, right on the beach, built it to twenty-eight-foot flood stage and built it to withstand two-hundred-mile-an-hour winds. Well, he and two of his friends spent the storm in his attic with water up above their knees at about thirty-foot in the air. And they survived. That gentleman has now relocated to, I think it’s South Carolina or North Carolina. His house is still there; it’s been cleaned out, but still the concrete infrastructure is still there. For weeks and months, you could go by, and you could still see the stairway leading up into the attic with debris on it. And just everything washed out on the first and second floor. Pretty dramatic, but he did make it out, he and the two people who were with him. The birdman, we got over there, and
everything was gone. There was nothing left. Trees that were in the yard were gone. Trees that were inside the aviary were gone. We found him the next day over at the shelter; looked like he had been beat up. And we asked him, “My God, what happened?” He said, “Well, the water came in, and when it came in, it came in fast. I was putting the birds in the back of the big truck.” And he said, “The water came up so fast,” said, “it took the roof off the house.” He said, “I had to swim up under a door that had opened up to get out to the truck.” And he had three other people with him. And he said, “We swam over to this tree and held on.” And he said, “A boat came by; I grabbed the boat. It was a little skiff.” And he said, “It was upside-down.” He said, “Me and my nephew turned the boat over, right-side-up.” He said, “I put the three of them in there.” And he said, “I pushed them north.” And he said, “They went over to that house about a block and a half, two blocks away. It’s a two-story house.” Said, “They landed on the roof of that two-story house.” Said, “They got out and went around to the other side of the roof, and that’s the way they stayed.” And he said, “I stayed thirty-six foot up in that tree till the storm ended.” And I said, “Did you get hit with debris when you was leaving, trying to get out of the tree.” “No.” He said, “Every time I’d look back, during the storm,” he said, “something would hit me in the face.” He said, “So I quit looking back.” So but he survived. Lost all of his birds. He had a lot of valuable birds. You could stop by over there and see him and talk to him and see all of his birds and everything. It was pretty interesting to see that right in the middle of a residential area. As we were walking away from there going up Lang Avenue, it was getting close to dark, and we were walking up the road; they was about twelve of us firemen, and the house that we’re passing is just washed out. There’s nothing left; it’s just the shell of the house. And the house next door to it, just as we get in front of it, we hear a lady inside the house say, “Jarrod,” calling my son. And looks at me; he said, “Dad, what is that?” I said, “I don’t know.” I turned around where I could hear, and she’s saying, “Jarrod.” So we start walking over there, and it was one of his former high school teachers, had stayed in her house. And she had like eight feet of water in her house, and had got up in her attic, and got back down after the storm, and was all fine. Didn’t want to leave, but we made her get out and go to the—we worked all night long. So we’d gone Sunday night without sleep and then Monday night without sleep, and then Tuesday, I guess about 5:30, six o’clock in the morning, one of our former aldermen, he has a construction company. He had parked some heavy equipment at his house, and he lives south of the tracks. He lived right, like a half block south of the railroad tracks. So I got with him; I said, “Jimmy, I need you to clean me paths through this debris.” I said, “But I’ve got to have a crew of my men with you as you clean.” And I said, “You’re going to have to pick up gently and pile to the side, and we’re going to have to be there, looking, in case we have any victims.” And he said, “Well, this could take a while.” And I said, “Yeah, it can, but it’s got to be done.” I said, “I want Jeff Davis cleaned first so I can get down to Highway 90.” I said, “And then I want our next main east and west street cleaned.” And he said, “OK.” So he got operators out there. I said, “We’ll keep your time and everything.” I said, “When FEMA comes in, they’ll reimburse us, and we’ll pay you back.” So he started working; we had teams assigned for that. I had teams assigned on four-wheelers that some of the guys of the fire department own. And I had a man that brought me two four-wheelers and said, “Here. Use them. I know y’all are going
to need them.” I had teams just out plugging gas lines, twenty-four hours a day; they plugged gas, natural gas lines, just around the clock, we went. And I think back on it; I didn’t get much sleep on the Friday night. I didn’t get much sleep on Saturday night before the storm. I got none on Sunday night, none on Monday night, and on Tuesday night, didn’t get anything. Wednesday, I still hadn’t heard from my wife. I didn’t know what was going on there. I didn’t know anything outside of our city and our duties and our responsibilities. I managed to make it over to the EOC in Gulfport, and one of the firemen, one of the fire officers from Biloxi was there. And I asked him; I said, “How is Biloxi Regional Hospital?” I said, “Did everything turn out all right there?” And he said, “Yeah.” He said, “They had a little damage, but they’re fine.” So I felt good then. “They had a little damage, but everything’s fine. We’re taking folks to them.” Said, “We’ve already taken people in to them, and they’re treating. They’re up and running. They have partial electricity; they have no running water.” He said, “Their facilities are not functioning.” I said, “Well, that’s not good.” And I get on into the EOC, and the State has finally managed to make it down, MEMA [Mississippi Emergency Management Agency], and they have brought down a satellite phone, and they’ve sent a satellite phone to each one of the hospitals. So I’m sitting there, and I was like, “I can call Sherry.” So about eleven o’clock at night, I’m able to get through to Sherry. I call the hospital, and I tell them I want to talk to Sherry Bass. And they said, “Well, it’ll take me a minute to find her.” I said, “I don’t care.” I said, “I want to talk to her.” And she finally, she got on the phone, and she said, “We’re fine. We didn’t have to use our life vests, our lifejackets.” And I said, “Well, praise God. I’m glad you didn’t.” She said, “Water came in on the first floor.” Said, “We watched the storm; we watched the Beau Rivage [Casino] wash out on the first two floors, and,” said, “we’ve got all kind of souvenirs from the Beau Rivage here.” Said, “It’s amazing.” Said, “We’re busy.” Said, “We’ve did rescues from the sixth floor down to the fifth, moved people from the first up to the second, up to the third, water leaking through the elevators. We’re having to carry everybody up and down stairs.” She said, “It’s a life I hope I don’t have to live too long.” And I said, “Well, I understand. I hope I don’t have to live mine too long, either.” So she worked for, I think, another seven days before she got off. Her hospital is a privately-owned hospital, and her company, they sent in a tanker truck full of fuel for the employees, and sent in tanker trucks of water, drinking water; sent in teams to clean up the hospital. They sent in temporary air-conditioning units on trailers, and they piped in air through portable vents. They did everything. They gave them money, said, “Here’s cash. It’s outside of your paycheck. This is cash for you to be able to survive on to buy stuff with. Every day they came, gave them food. Each employee got a food allotment to cover them and their family. They treated them wonderful. I said, “These folks, they got it going on.” And I told Sherry; I said, “I can’t believe that these folks are able to do this, that they knew to do this and they had all this prepared.” And she said, “Well, they had a hospital that was wiped out during Ivan, a five-story hospital in Florida. It was just completely wiped out, and they didn’t have this response. It’s part of their plan now.” I said, “Thank God. That’s wonderful.” But I was able to talk to her, and I come back, and the first thing that Jarrod said, he said, “I want to talk to Mama.” And I said, “I just talked to her. She’s all right.” He said, “Well, good. I’m fine as long as Mom’s all right.” He was worried about her. I could
tell; he had been moping around when I’d see him. Hadn’t seen him much. They had kind of deputized him as a firefighter, and they were treating him just like a firefighter. I mean, he was given assignments, and when they had staff meetings, and the chief officer was going over the other chief officers or lieutenants, “Who you want assigned here?” “Jarrod with this team.” And he was out. I mean, I went four days without seeing him because he was working. That Wednesday I got back in, I started making out requests for aid that I knew I’d need at the station. We were out of food. I needed food. We had seventy-two hours worth of food, and we were out of food. The police department had got water in it and lost part of its roof; they had lost all of their food that they had bought in preparation. They were over, eating our food, too. They had five hundred people in a shelter at Quarels School that had run out of food, also. That Thursday morning, I took my guys; I said, “Let’s go to Winn-Dixie.” And they said, “What are we going to do?” I said, “We’re going to go in and get what’s left of food there. We’ve got to get.” So we took the storm panel off the door and were about to break the glass when a guy comes walking up. And he said, “What are y’all doing?” I said, “We’re about to break the door to go in here to get food for firefighters, police officers, and responders.” He said, “Well, I’m a manager here.” He said, “Y’all can’t do that.” And I just happened to have two police with me. And I said, “You have a key to this?” He said, “Yes, I do.” And I said, “Well, I want the keys.” And he said, “Well, I can’t give you the keys.” And I turned to the police officer, and I said, “Y’all arrest him.” I said, “I want his key.” And he said, “What are you talking about?” I said, “We’re under declaration of emergency, so,” I said, “I’m going to place you under arrest. I’m going to have these officers arrest you. I want your key.” And he said, “Well, here. You can have my key.” He gave me the key; so we went in. The freezers were still cold. I took my cook with me. I said, “Get what you can.” The freezers were still cold in there, so we got meat, just chunks of meat. And we wrote down everything we got. It had the price on it; we wrote it down. Cigarettes, chewing tobacco, snuff, whatever, we loaded up on. I said, “No alcohol.” That was a mistake I made. We had some of the guys liked to drink a beer. I didn’t realize the duration of how long we were going to be on duty, or I would have got them some beer, without a doubt. But we got every cigarette they had in there; it didn’t matter if it was a Virginia Slims. I saw a guy smoking Virginia Slims for weeks. It was a cigarette to those who smoked. We got everything they had; we wrote everything down; took it back to the station; made a copy on the copy machine; took it back to Winn-Dixie and put it on the manager’s shelf that was dry in a sealed bag, put it in there with notes on what to do when they come in there. Even took their electric slicers. They’re not going to use it; they don’t even have power. Much less power, they don’t have any meat left because we took all the meat. So we got enough food to feed everybody. We got whatever canned goods they could use. We got what we needed, and we put it back together, and left. We were starting to run out of gas, our seventy-two hour supply. My generator had been running nonstop at central station. We had lost city hall; we had lost the water department. We had lost our courts. We lost station two, we lost station three, and public works building had been severely damaged. So all of city operations had began to operate out of my central station. Took my assistant chief’s office, and we turned it into city hall; it and part of the hallway was turned into city hall. It was strange having so many people there in the station; we were about to run
over one another. And the food, back to the food there; we had all these people. It wasn’t just the firefighters we were trying to get food for and water. We were down to the point where we were rationing water; we were boiling water that we could probably drink if we had to. We were kind of rationing water. Before the storm hit, we went down to the harbor; they had an ice [freezer], that you buy your bags of ice out of, ice freezers. So we loaded up, brought it to the station, and a couple more we found at different places. We just unplugged them, loaded them up, brought them to the station, plugged them up. So we had plenty of freezers to put food in. Some of the guys went to their houses or people they knew, and they’d go through the freezer and get food out that was good, bring it to the station. You didn’t know what you was going to eat when you got to eat. Breakfast was my probably one true meal I got in a twenty-four hour period, because it was at 5:30 in the morning was when they started cooking. I would have my staff meetings. I would sit down with the guys, and I’d tell them, I said, “Look, let’s be in; I want to be in the station at two o’clock a.m. in the morning. I want to have a staff meeting. I want y’all—let’s review what we’ve done, what we’re going to accomplish tomorrow, and I want to know team assignments, any of your needs because after this meeting, I’ve got to fill out my request to take up to the EOC for assistance that we need.” I’d get bombarded with needs: we need shower facilities; we’ve got three shower stalls in here, and everybody’s trying to shower and clean up and change clothes and go back to work and get dirty again. We need water; we need soft drinks. We’re out of soft drinks. If you’ve got a beer, the guys would like to be able to sit down and drink a beer if they can get a few minutes to rest, drink just one. And I said, “Well, I don’t have beer. I can’t request beer, but I’ll work on the rest of this stuff.” So after those meetings at three o’clock in the morning, I would spend another forty-five minutes writing up my requests to take up to the EOC to turn them in. I did request a shower unit if they could find one for us, more water, Porta-Potties. “I need MREs to be able to feed these five hundred people out at the shelter. They’re out of food and water, and what food we’re getting”—they were making sandwiches at the station and taking them out there and handing them out to these five hundred people, feeding the multitude out there; it was just overwhelming. They had no bathroom facilities. Some of the men that were out there at the shelter went outside and made temporary bathroom facilities. I told the guys, I said, “Find a hardware store and see if y’all can find some lime.” I said, “We got to do something with this. This is not sanitary. I can’t have this. I got to have Porta-Potties to get out there for these folks.” And one of my big requests was a shower unit and Porta-Potties, water, soft drinks. I told them, “If y’all can find somebody that’s got some shoes, our boot soles of our fire boots are falling off. Whatever we were in down in there in that water, it’s turned our soles loose; they’re falling off our boots. The guys are wearing tennis shoes, and they’re starting to tear loose.” Dark blue t-shirts that the guys wear and dark blue BDUs [battle dress uniforms] they wear as part of their uniform were turning white. We don’t know what was in there; we don’t know what we’re breathing. Friday morning, all of us started getting upper respiratory infection; don’t know why. The storm, we don’t know what blew in here, don’t know what caused it. We all started getting, I mean severely, respiratory infections. And I saw one of the doctors that lived in Long Beach, Dr. Leatherwood, and I said, “You still got your office?” He said, “No, it’s gone. I’ve been up there; it’s gone. It’s destroyed. I ain’t
got nothing left. I don’t know what I’m going to do.” And I said, “Well, I know what you going to do. I’m going to set you up, make you an office over at the shelter.” He said, “Well, I don’t have any supplies or anything.” I said, “Don’t worry about that. We’ve got drugstores that are still up. We’re going to them. You’re going to go with us and tell us what you need.” And I said, “You point it out, and we’ll load it up.” We went through one of the local drugstores there, and we documented everything we got, wrote it down, got him, had him sign it as a doctor, and I signed it as the EMA director. Took him out, and I said, “Now, you’ve got to treat us as responders first. We’ve got this respiratory [infection]; something’s going on with us. We don’t know. I stepped on a nail Monday morning, went through my foot. I hadn’t had a hepatitis.” He said, “Well, I got stuff to give a hepatitis shot. I got steroids, and I’ll give you antibiotic, and I’ll give all y’all something that’s got the respiratory.” There was about thirty of us that got whatever it was. He gave me the steroid shot, and I felt better in thirty minutes, felt like a new man, and in about four days, it was gone, whatever it was, and all of us cleared right up, but we kept right on working. We couldn’t stop; we had so much to do. The folks, the doctor and his wife and his son who said they were leaving on the east side of town, well, we found the mom and dad three days later; they didn’t leave. They had pulled the car back up in the garage, shut everything down and wouldn’t answer the door when we were knocking to make sure they had gone. The dad was confined to a bed; the son, we found him, and he said, “They drowned. I was in the house with them when the water come up. I couldn’t get them out. The roof collapsed on us. I heard my dad drown; I heard my mom drown. The only reason I survived is my dog found a way out through the debris, and I followed him and climbed out and climbed into a tree and stayed in the tree through the storm.” Two old ladies that were right on the beach, their structure was gone; their house was gone just like the doctor’s house. Everything was gone, and we were like, we really hoped that they had evacuated. We recovered their bodies six weeks and eight weeks after the storm; they hadn’t left. Another [lady] stayed that was the apartment manager on the west side of town, three blocks off the beach. She stayed and wouldn’t answer when we went to the door, and she died. Had another man and his wife; they lived on Shady Lane. He wouldn’t evacuate because he couldn’t take his dogs to the shelter. She said, “Well, you can stay here with the damn dogs; I’m gone.” About a week after the storm, she come back in. We thought we had him talked into going. “Just leave the dogs; they’ll be all right. Throw them up in the attic, whatever. Please go.” About a week after the storm, she come back, and she had a picture of both dogs and a reward for the dogs, and I’ve still got this page that she brought us with the dogs picture on the top, reward for the dogs, also missing my husband and had his picture. No reward for him. We found him; it was about eight weeks after the storm. We found him; he didn’t make it. We don’t know about the dogs. The Saturday after Thanksgiving, I had just managed—we had just got through working where we could go home at night and not have to spend the night at the station. The Saturday after Thanksgiving I got a call, “We recovered our last body.” We had lost six people in Long Beach. I hate that, and that’s one of the things that I regret most, that if I’d go back, I think I would physically remove those folks. Knowing what happens, I would; I’d have them physically removed. “I don’t care; I’ll face the consequences later, but you’re alive to charge me with moving you out forcibly.” And
I could live with that. And I’ll have to live for the rest of my life with that we lost six people. And I’ve had people tell me, “Well, that’s great that that’s all you lost. Look how many was lost in Camille.” I said, “Yeah, but I shouldn’t have lost any.” So that’ll be a burden that I’ll have for the rest of my life, being responsible for the citizens, not only the first responders, but I’m responsible for the citizens, and I let those down. Jokingly, at later times, I had one of my battalion chiefs, I sent him to an apartment complex that was a block and a half off the beach, and there was about eleven people of a family that were going to stay there. And I sent my battalion chief down there, Grif. I said, “Grif, go down, and do whatever you can to get them out there.” And he went down there, and he said, “Look, y’all have got to leave.” He said, “Y’all are going to die down here.” And the grandma said, “Well, we’re staying. We’re not going to leave.” And he said, “Well, take this magic marker and write your social security number on your arms so that we’ll be able to identify you.” And she grabbed it and said, “I’ll do that.” And he said, “Now, when you get through putting it on your arm, I want you to write it on your belly, and on both your thighs.” And she said, “Well, y’all will just have to undress me when y’all find me then if y’all think I’m going to die.” And he said, “No, ma’am. We don’t find anybody that’s got clothes on. Everybody’s naked.” She turned around and looked at everybody, said, “Y’all get your stuff. We’re leaving.” So when he said they were all naked, no clothes, nude, she didn’t want to be found like that; she left. So I told Grif, I said, “Maybe I should have sent you to look.” The animals, there were dead animals all over the place. We had decaying animals; we had cats and dogs. We had deer that washed up from the barrier island, just huge deer, all over the place. We had snakes. We had fish all over the place. We had chickens that come from the Gulfport Harbor, frozen chickens that were to be shipped out, had washed up over here on the east side of our town. The smell was just ungodly down there. I mean, we were wearing particle masks. We ran out of particle masks, and we were down on the east side of town, hunting for a man that owned the local hardware store downtown. He had said that he was going to stay at his house. We told him to leave, “Please leave.” “No, I’m going to stay here. I’ll be all right.” Well, we’re down there; his roof’s up in the middle of the road, and we’re moving debris with the heavy equipment. We’re looking and searching, and the guys, they’ve wore out their leather gloves. They’ve used them so much, they’ve literally wore them out. So I say, “Well, I’m going to the hardware store. The wall’s blown out on it on Jeff Davis. I’ll go down there; I’ll get us some gloves.” I go down there, and I got gloves, and I’m coming out with bags, an armful of gloves, and who should walk up but the guy that they’re over there hunting for, Bill, who owns the hardware store. And I looked at him, and I said, “I don’t know whether to hug you or hit you.” I said, “We’re over there hunting for you, been over there for four hours, digging through debris of your house.” And he starts crying. He says, “I am so sorry. It got so bad I left. I didn’t think about telling anybody.” And I said, “Bill, I’m just so thankful that you’re alive. Another miracle.” Had a doctor on the east side of town that, when we got phone service, he called, and he gets me on the phone. He says, “George, I need you to go down to my house and look in my Mercedes. In the box between the seats, in the glove box there, there is another box in there, it’s got my safety deposit key in there. Can you go get that for me and bring it back?” I said, “No, sir. I can’t. Have you talked to anybody about your house?” And
he said, “No.” And I said, “Well, doctor, I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but you
don’t have a house left. Unfortunately your house and every house for the next two
blocks are gone.” He said, “You’re kidding me.” I said, “No. But we will see if we
could find your car. It’s in the debris somewhere. We’ll see if we can find it and see
if we can get that safety box key out for you.” And he said, “I just can’t believe that.
When should I come home?” I said, “Not any time soon. If you’re out and away
where you could eat and you got a good place to stay and air-conditioning and shower
and eat when you want to and watch TV and rest, stay there. You have nothing here.
You don’t have an office left.” And he said, “My office is gone, too?” I said, “Yes,
sir, it’s gone. This is worse than Camille.” He said, “It can’t be.” And I said, “Yeah,
it is.” Same thing my sister said when I was finally able to get a hold of her up in
Tennessee. We had been trying to get signals to get out on our phones. I had the
ladder truck; we had about six different cell phone services amongst all the men. So
one of the guys took a board and made it where he could put the phones down in there
with them on, all the antennas up. We attached it to the top of the ladder on the ladder
truck, and we’d get up there. And we’re not supposed to do this, move it around with
a guy on there, but we get out, and we’re moving it around real slow, all the way
around to see if we can pick up a signal. We can’t get out; we can’t text; we just have
no communication with the outside world, like a third-world country here. So we
didn’t get the signal. On a Thursday night, the mayor and I are down on Highway 90,
and it’s midnight, one o’clock, and we pull up in front of USM Gulf Park, right out
here. And we get out, and we’re just looking. The stars and the sky was beautiful; it
was amazing to see the stars. There’s no lights; there’s nothing to reflect and keep you
from seeing the stars, and you can see the Milky Way that I hadn’t seen since I was a
child here. And we’re just out looking and just kind of catching our breath. And he
and I are talking about things that’s going on, things that we’ve got to do. And all of a
sudden my phone, it beeps. And I’m like, “What is that?” And I grab my phone, and
it’s a different type phone at the time; I flip it open. I look, and I say, “I think I got
signal.” So I punch in my nephew’s phone number there, and I’m holding it up to my
ear. And it rings, and my sister answers the phone. And the first thing she says, “Are
you all right?” I said, “Yeah, I’m fine. I’m just surprised. We’ve been trying to get
signals, and all of a sudden this signal popped in.” And the mayor’s over there, and he
said, “I’m going to check my phone.” He picks it up because he hadn’t talked to his
wife. And he’s got a signal. So he calls his wife, and we’re just like kids. We talking
to them, and I’m telling my sister, “Y’all stay there. Don’t come home. You got to
stay there. It’s worse than Camille.” And she can’t believe it’s worse than Camille,
either. But it was amazing to be able to get the signal, talk to our family. But work
was just nonstop, cleaning roads, getting those cleaned out, and then we had finally,
after twenty-one days, we had FEMA that came in. It took them a long time to get
teams in here to talk to us. We had one man at the county who was telling us; we
called him FEMA Mike. He was from up North, and he was great. I don’t know what
we would have done without him. I told him; I went down there, and I said, “Mike,
will FEMA reimburse me if I buy four-wheelers? We’re wearing our four-wheelers
out, the guys. The tires are getting punctures, and we’ve got so many plugs in them.
We need extra tires.” He said, “FEMA will reimburse you. Get what you need.” So I
went, sent a guy to Hattiesburg, took the trucks and trailers. I said, “Go buy me eight
four-wheelers and bring them back.” And they did. I told him; I said, “We got to have fuel.” He said, “You got anybody in Long Beach that’s got fuel?” And I said, “Well, look, I’ve got all the fuel at the bus barn for the school. I’ve confiscated two service stations. But I still need more fuel.” He said, “Well, find you a truck to get fuel in. Just go get what you need. Just keep a record of it so we can reimburse you.”

Well, I found a man; he used to fuel the trucks, the equipment down at the harbor in Gulfport at the big harbor, big port. And he had a truck that hauled twenty-five hundred gallons of fuel at a time. So I sent my guys to him, sent a police officer and two of my guys. And I said, “Go over and tell him I want his truck.” And they come back and said, “No, you can’t have his truck. He’s got fuel in it, and he’s going to wait, and he’s going to sell it later on.” And I told him, “Well, y’all go back. You arrest him, and you drive the truck back, and you bring the other vehicle back.” So about thirty minutes later, here they all come with the truck and him, and he come in, and I’ve known this man. I went to school with him. And he said, “George, they said you told him to arrest me.” And I said, “Yeah. I told you I wanted your truck. I’ll pay you for your fuel that’s in it and pay you for the time that we use it. We’ll reimburse you for it. I got to have your truck to keep everything going.” He said, “Well, it’s full of diesel fuel right now.” And I said, “Well, good. Let’s settle on a price right now, going price at the pump right now, and this is what we’ll pay you. I’ll pay you twenty dollars an hour to drive your truck, and I’ll pay an assistant fifteen dollars an hour to help you operate it.” He said, “Well, I don’t know.” And I said, “Well, what you going to do?” And he said, “I’m going to sit at home and do nothing.” And I said, “No, you going to sit in jail and do nothing because I’m going to arrest you if you don’t give it to me. It’s easy terms; just agree to it.” And he did, and he came to me about five weeks after the storm, and he said, “This is the best thing that’s happened to me. I didn’t realize the port was gone. I didn’t know everything was gone like this. I wouldn’t have had no income. Thank you.” And I said, “Well, you’re welcome. I hated that I had to put that pressure on you, but that’s some of the things we had to do.” I had a man call me. I know I’m switching gears a little bit here, and I don’t know where you want me to go with this.

Baskey: We’re actually kind of over our time.

Bass: Oh, are we? Well, I’ve got so much more I could tell you, but—

Baskey: But if you could just make some last comments about what you’ve learned from Katrina, or anything that you feel really needs to be heard.

Bass: I think the major thing I’ve learned is that you hear bad things about people in the United States, but there’s a lot of people out there who care. We had volunteers come in from all over the United States. We had several cities in Florida that sent volunteers weekly to help us get our City back and going, get computers back up, to be able to make payroll, to be able to—brought us supplies, not just for the citizens but for the first responders, brought us tennis shoes in, brought us eighteen-wheelers worth of water and stuff that we needed as responders. I think that the biggest thing is that it makes it hard for people here to sit back and not participate in helping
somebody else. I think we’ve always as a community and as a Coast or as a State have always been willing to help others in need, and we’ve done that before. I think now that there’s more people that will do that. You’ll see more people volunteering and going out to help, because we’ve had so many people. If it wasn’t for the volunteers, I don’t know where our recovery would be. I think about our families that let us go and do our jobs. We have, on our local TV here, we have the local heroes on every Tuesday night. And my training officer, he was talking to me about heroes, and he would like to nominate somebody. And he said, “We need to nominate somebody. We’ve got so many folks that have helped us.” And I said, “Well, Jerry, I think that our families are our heroes. They allowed us to do our jobs while they worried about the homes and the children and everybody else, and we didn’t have to worry about them. Our wives and our children, I think they’re the heroes. I think they’re the ones that allowed us just to do our jobs.” As far as the storm itself, we didn’t get out of the Camille box when we did planning. We did scenarios year in and year out through the county, through the state, on planning for storms, and every one I attended for a number of years, it was, “What if Camille hit again? What if Camille did this?” We never got out of the Camille box, and [we never] walked around the outside of it and looked and said, “What if it’s bigger than Camille? What if the winds are not as strong as Camille, but the tidal surge is bigger? Or what if we get a storm that’s got the same winds with a bigger tidal surge? What is our coastline like now compared to what it was then?” We never got out of that box, and I would say that in any community where you’re faced with any disaster, don’t make your plans solely on what’s happened previously. Use that knowledge to better prepare yourself, but get yourself away from that. Think a little bit more about “what-if.” I mean, you could “what-if” something to death, but I think when you’re in a situation like this that you need to “what-if” it to death. You need to get out of that box.

**Baskey:** And how long do you think it’ll take to fully recover from Katrina?

**Bass:** Oh, we’re approaching four years; my central fire station’s door that blew in, it’s just walled up. I hadn’t had it replaced yet. We’re still dealing with FEMA and insurance and trying to get that replaced. My station two hasn’t been rebuilt. We’re working on plans. Station three, roof damage, it’s still damaged; we hadn’t got that done. We have got a new police station built. We’re about to break ground for a new city hall finally. Here we are three and a half years out, and we’re about to break ground. We did get our water and sewer replaced along Highway 90, and they’re starting to work on the water and sewer and all the infrastructure on the streets and avenues south of CSX track. I would say that probably within three years we’ll have our infrastructure back together. We’ll have our facilities back together. I think that it’s going to be a number of years until there’s something that’s figured out about what to do about insurance. Insurance right now is what’s killing folks. They cannot come back home and pay what’s required for insurance now. The insurance on my house is killing me compared to what it was before. I pay as much in insurance as I do on my house note. You can’t go back down there and build. I’m in a situation where I didn’t lose my house. I couldn’t collect insurance on it and build a smaller house in a different way that would have done things—but I really think it’s going to be ten years
at least before you see some substantial recovery. I think things are going to have to happen from the government on our wind insurance to allow that to happen, but it’ll come back. I remember I had an interview with a national correspondent. He came out of Los Angeles, and his big thing was he wanted to meet in front of the Friendship Oak here at USM. We kind of take the Friendship Oak for granted, but it’s known far and wide for its beauty. And as we stood out there under it, and he asked me essentially the same question. He said, “Will the Coast survive?” And I said, “Surely.” This was about three weeks after the storm, four weeks after the storm, and there were little buds coming out all over this great, big, magnificent oak tree. And I told him; I looked at those, and I said, “Just like this Friendship Oak is budding again, we’ll bud again. I just don’t know how long it’ll take us to flower, but we will bud out again.” It’ll be different from what it was before Katrina, just as it was after Camille. The Coast I knew and grew up to, till my almost-fifteen-years-[old], before Camille [hit us], was gone; my whole coastline was gone. And the same thing now. There’s a generation of young children who, they’ll know a new coastline, that what they have grown to know is gone. But we’ll be back. It’s just going to take time. It’s going to take a lot of effort. And people here, they’re resilient; they will come back.

**Baskey:** Good. Well, thank you so much for your time.

**Bass:** It’s all right.

**Baskey:** Yeah.

(end of interview)