Mississippi Oral History Project

Hurricane Katrina Oral History Project

An Oral History

with

Glen East

Interviewer: Rachel Swaykos

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Swaykos: [This is May 30,] 2007 and I am Rachel Swaykos interviewing Mr. Glen East, Superintendent of Gulfport Schools. We are currently in the administration office located at 2001 Pass Road in Gulfport, Mississippi, around 8 a.m. Now, if you could please state your full name, address, today’s date and your position here.

East: I’m Glen East. The address of the Gulfport School District is 2001 Pass Road. The phone number here is (228) 865-4600.

Swaykos: Thank you, and you’re the superintendent here, is that correct?

East: Yes.

Swaykos: OK, and how long have you been on the Coast?

East: Which time?

Swaykos: (laughter)

East: I’ve been in South Mississippi my whole life.

Swaykos: You were born down here?

East: I was actually born in Meridian and lived in Meridian, Hattiesburg, Laurel, and Gulfport.

Swaykos: Oh, great.

East: Many, many moves. (laughter)

Swaykos: OK. And where are you living now? Are you living in Gulfport?

East: I’m in Gulfport, yes.

Swaykos: OK, great. And were you married here, are you married?
**East:** I am married and was married here.

**Swaykos:** OK, and do you have kids together?

**East:** I do have children.

**Swaykos:** And your wife’s name?

**East:** My wife’s name is Elizabeth East.

**Swaykos:** Is she from down here, as well?

**East:** She is.

**Swaykos:** Oh, great. And what are your kids’ names and how old are they?

**East:** I have Sara(?), Sara Elizabeth East and she is twenty. And I have Jeffrey(?) Thomas East and he is seventeen.

**Swaykos:** Great. And your parents are from down here, then, I guess if you were born here?

**East:** My mother was definitely from down here and my father is from Laurel, so.

**Swaykos:** And what are their names?

**East:** George and Mary East.

**Swaykos:** And what was your mother’s maiden name?

**East:** Mary King, K-I-N-G.

**Swaykos:** Great, and were your parents both in education?

**East:** No.

**Swaykos:** What did they do?

**East:** My mother raised children, so she stayed at home to take care of three boys, and my father worked for Mississippi Power Company.

**Swaykos:** Oh, great. And now we’re going to lead into the storm and I mostly want to talk about your work with the storm, but first I would love to hear how it affected you personally, where you were on August 29.
**East:** I was—I rode the storm out in my home here in Gulfport. I’m one of the fortunate ones that had little or no damage. We had some shingles and a tree fall, and some fence work, but I’m one of those who escaped pretty much untouched.

**Swaykos:** And did you stay with your wife and your kids, were they there with you?

**East:** Wife and one of my children; my wife and my son.

**Swaykos:** Wow, and how was it during the storm? Did you sit and watch or did you—

**East:** I sat on my front porch a lot. The storm was a typical hurricane for us, I had no idea what was going on three blocks south of us below the railroad track, but I would’ve said at the end of the storm that we had survived another one until I got in my jeep and rode down south of the tracks, and so forth.

**Swaykos:** So you didn’t even know. When you were sitting outside—

**East:** Sure.

**Swaykos:** —it didn’t feel powerful to you?

**East:** Well, we had the typical hurricane winds, don’t get me wrong.

**Swaykos:** Right.

**East:** But I did not—it was not, the winds were not the damaging force that I thought they would’ve been.

**Swaykos:** How many hurricanes had you been through here, living down here?

**East:** Total number, I don’t know. I went through Camille in ’69, and every other storm except for my youth. I left, and actually, I guess, in Jackson I experienced a storm, too, but every storm since 1969.

**Swaykos:** Wow, so you’ve been here a while. So with the schools, how was your staff affected, if you got away OK, how was your staff?

**East:** In our principal staff, we had eleven principals before the storm; nine of them lost their home either to wind damage or water or, you know, rising water. Teachers, we had about 25 percent of our teachers that lost everything.

**Swaykos:** Oh, my gosh.

**East:** So, staff wise, we were hit pretty hard.
**Swaykos:** Do you know any stories about someone, an example of one of your principals losing—did they have to leave, have they come back?

**East:** Everybody’s returned.

**Swaykos:** Everybody.

**East:** They all were in FEMA trailers or living with neighbors or trying to, you know, just get by the best they could. As far as individual stories, we don’t have any individual stories there.

**Swaykos:** That’s amazing that everyone’s come back, I can’t believe that. Did you guys lose any records from the water, the building damage?

**East:** We lost our entire computer department, our technology, so all of our records on computer, all the backups that we had doled out to the three different places, we lost the majority of those because they lost their home.

**Swaykos:** All backups. Oh, my gosh.

**East:** So we lost a lot. As far as written records, we were very fortunate. The central office is at 2001 Pass Road and it received little or no damage.

**Swaykos:** Oh great.

**East:** So our written records were pretty much intact, but computer wise, those were all housed at East Ward Elementary School.

**Swaykos:** OK.

**East:** And that school had twenty-some-odd feet of water in it and so the whole bottom floor was destroyed, so that was our computer technology center.

**Swaykos:** So what kinds of records were lost then?

**East:** We lost all of your basic student attendance data, computer-wise now, but we had to back it up with writing, but computer attendance, kid grades for that year, the current roll—and we had just started school, so those current rolls were all on computer. So, pretty good amount of information.

**Swaykos:** How long had you been in school before the storm?

**East:** We started on August 4, I believe, that year, so we’d been in about thirty days.

**Swaykos:** OK, and what kinds of things—you said the one elementary school was twenty feet in water, what were the other buildings and the other schools like?
East: We lost East Ward, and we call it Elementary, it was the technology center and community ed. We also lost Twenty-eighth Street Elementary School; the roof came off of it and filled with water. And so we have those children; we moved those children to Gaston Point on Central so we could start school as quickly as we did.

Swaykos: How long did it take you to start school?

East: We were back in school sixteen days after the storm.

Swaykos: That’s pretty quickly. How does that compare to the other school districts, do you know?

East: We were pretty much—the districts in Harrison County were back on that same timeline. Bay St. Louis was a little later because they lost everything, but—

Swaykos: Right.

East: —Pass Christian and Long Beach, Gulfport, Harrison Central, well, Harrison County Schools and then Biloxi schools were all back in school by September 26.

Swaykos: And what were some of your physical, did you have to move children into buildings together, were there bus systems running at that point?

East: The Twenty-eighth—well, we’ve always had busses, so Twenty-eighth Street kids were split based on boundary lines, some went to Gaston Point and some went to Central Elementary.

Swaykos: OK, so no busses were flooded, you had everything dry?

East: All of my buses were on the high ground.

Swaykos: Well, great. So what was your enrollment before the storm?

East: We were about 6200; we kind of, we fluctuate between 6000 and 6400, and have done that for about ten or fifteen years.

Swaykos: And that’s all the way K through 12th grade?

East: It’s K through 12.

Swaykos: OK, and what about after the storm?

East: We immediately came back with about 87 percent. We were probably one of the highest districts on the Coast and we’re, right now, we’re still about, we’re between 57[00] and 5900, depending on the day, as we close the school year this year,
you know, two years after the storm. So, we’re not back to our full number but as housing comes back, then we’ll probably be back to our 62[00] to 6500.

**Swaykos:** Are people filtering in all the time? Are you getting your students back every couple of months?

**East:** We’ve had a pretty good influx; every week, every day, adding a family here or a child there. And then also you had the normal transfer moves, so there’s some kids that would leave and come back. So we kind of balanced out waiting on some more housing.

**Swaykos:** Well, good. So were there any changes in the ethnic makeup of this town?

**East:** Gulfport has always been one of the most diverse school systems on the Coast. We run about fifty/fifty minority/majority; we’ve always been that way and that hasn’t really changed.

**Swaykos:** And how does that makeup influence your schools? How are the children—is everyone becoming pretty accepting and the majority/minority, do they get along?

**East:** Always have been; that’s an unfair question because Gulfport’s always been a very good diverse—get along very well together.

**Swaykos:** Good.

**East:** A strong school district.

**Swaykos:** Well, good. So, have the living conditions influenced the children’s behaviors, the ones living in the FEMA trailers?

**East:** I will tell you that the kids, the kids have been very resilient. We’ve had a lot of mental health issues with the adult population and we’ve had some with children, but overall the kids have been very resilient. We did some things right after the storm to make sure we addressed those needs, and did some Katrina quilts and some drawings, and things like that to help the kids express their fears and frustrations. And it is a problem that there’s an issue there because you’re not in your home but as far as singing in school, they’ve been very resilient.

**Swaykos:** Great. Did you bring in mental health professionals for a while to deal with that?

**East:** We have—we had our own counselors; we brought in a group from Jackson who trained them and worked with them for about three days before we reopened about what to look for, strategies for letting them, you know, just that first couple of
weeks of school, release and talk and not be afraid, and so on and so forth. So, we did more of a consulting approach with our own people.

**Swaykos:** OK. What kinds of things are the teachers looking for?

**East:** As we came back from the storm, of course, they’re looking for that mental stress, is my home going to be there, when the thunderstorm rolled in, is my FEMA trailer going to hold up to that thunderstorm, or we going to have another hurricane before the season’s over and I’m in a trailer, you know. And you have the issues of kids picking at each other.

**Swaykos:** Yeah.

**East:** Just trying to find a way to be noticed. Kids want to get attention any way they can and sometimes negatively is easier, unfortunately. So, looking for those type issues; looking for kids who were very much extroverted before the storm and were kind of introverted after the storm.

**Swaykos:** Great.

**East:** Looking for kids who were introverted [before] the storm who have become extroverts after the storm, so, all of those kind of things; decline in work or increase in work, or anything that would be a difference than before the storm.

**Swaykos:** How has the—how have the grades changed, your levels, your—

**East:** Academically we’ve had the best year on state testing that we’ve ever had in the Katrina year. We’ve had one of our elementary schools be nominated as a National Blue Ribbon School.

**Swaykos:** Oh great.

**East:** The year of Katrina our test scores were up.

**Swaykos:** What school was that?

**East:** That’s Bellevue(?) Elementary School. The test scores were up across the district. We felt like school was a safe house and that we wanted to make it as normal as possible so kids could come. I think that paid off for the kids’ attitudes about life in general and they probably worked a little harder because, you know, there was—and they went to school to have some little place to be, some little success in my life right now, so we thought they probably worked a lot harder that year.

**Swaykos:** Did you see any differences between the kids versus the teenagers, the older kids?
East: The primary kids, the K-5 kids, I think when they got to school they became normal very quickly. The high school kids are very mobile so they were able to travel to the Mobiles and the Hattiesburgs. We really worried about our junior high age, those kids that want to be out and be social but have no movie theater to go to, no water park, no, you know, the churches weren’t restarted, so we saw a lot of them with their cell phone, the cell phone traffic must’ve been tremendous the eight months, twelve months after the storm for the middle school kids, and we worried most about our middle school kids.

Swaykos: So then did you try to grab some collaboration with any community resources that were there to help them out?

East: We used our normal Gulfport Police Department, the Athletic League. We used our normal after-school care programs. We really stressed our athletic programs and our debate teams.

Swaykos: So, sports started right back up?

East: Definitely, we didn’t miss a beat.

Swaykos: Great. Have you seen many children or do you know how many are living with family members or were living with family members at that time instead of their parents so that they could continue going to school and living at homes that were intact?

East: I really don’t know the percentage of that.

Swaykos: OK.

East: At one time 42 percent of our children were not in their homes, for whatever reasons. But to date, I really don’t know the answer to that.

Swaykos: OK. Did you have an increase in violence or—

East: No.

Swaykos: —teen pregnancy, any of that?

East: Totally opposite.

Swaykos: Really?

East: The twelve months after the storm there were, I think there was a lot more esprit de corps, you know, you had a mission as a group. I had very few problems. Since the storm, we’ve had some folks had moved in and had to learn how we do business and how we educate and how we are, you know, education’s important to the
community. But I would say, I would definitely say that after the storm we had little or no problems anyway, and it was little or no problems anyway, so I guess it was more normal.

**Swaykos:** And you had the same graduation rate—

**East:** Let’s see, we did 337 this year and we did 326, so pretty much—

**Swaykos:** Pretty much the same.

**East:** Our high school returned to its normal size eight months right toward the end of that school year, so we’ve got two elementary schools where we have a loss of numbers. So, our high school is the same size.

**Swaykos:** Great. Have you seen extra parent involvement?

**East:** We’ve got pretty good parent involvement in Gulfport, always have in all of our schools. I guess you probably saw a few more parents because you were air conditioned, safe haven, you know, it just was, it was good to come to school because it was a good environment. You know, we would do—our PTA [Parent-Teacher Association] is always centered around food, you know, we’d do a hot dog night or spaghetti night or fruit night or whatever, so we probably saw a few more parents that were coming, with air conditioning and the food, and so on and so forth, but not really a great increase.

**Swaykos:** Yeah, you describe the schools as a safe haven, but at home do you think the kids were experiencing the family stress with more divorce or more child abuse, more domestic violence?

**East:** We have not seen that. We have not seen that in Gulfport. Now there’s stress there. Definitely those kids, and all of us, even those that didn’t lose their home, you’re trying to help somebody out, you’re trying to clean up, mop up, rebuild, you know, with your neighbors and your friends, but we did not—there’ve been some abnormal kind of issues that have come through, probably a little more magnified because the attention is on it more, but I’m not going to say we saw an increase in it.

**Swaykos:** OK. Do you have your teachers more alert to those kind of things right now?

**East:** That would be part of that mental health training, yes.

**Swaykos:** OK, great. How many—you said that all your teachers returned, did all of them come back?

**East:** All of my administrative staff returned.
Swaykos: OK.

East: We did lose some teachers.

Swaykos: How many teachers?

East: There were eight that we lost immediately after—no, there were not, there was twelve that we lost immediately after the storm.

Swaykos: OK.

East: Three of them returned later on and at the end of that school year we probably ended up losing between sixteen and twenty teachers.

Swaykos: OK.

East: Who toughed it out that year and then decided to go do something else.

Swaykos: Have any of them returned?

East: Yes.

Swaykos: Oh great.

East: And I would be lying to you if I gave you an exact number, but I would say between four and six of them have actually returned.

Swaykos: OK. Did the school system give them any support as far as rebuilding, as far as with their family, the mental health services for the kids?

East: We actually opened, we allowed FEMA to put trailers on our high school campus.

Swaykos: Wow.

East: And so that way those staff members that wanted to stay, they could. And if they didn’t want to stay at their homes where they were or they were actually living in apartments, we actually allowed those trailers to be on our high school campus.

Swaykos: How many trailers did you have?

East: We were as high as twenty-four and we’re now down to about six or seven that are still with us.

Swaykos: And you have one family per trailer?
East: Yes.

Swaykos: OK.

East: Yes.

Swaykos: Were any staff positions eliminated due to the storm?

East: Because of the storm? No.

Swaykos: OK. So you’ve brought everyone that you possibly could back.

East: Yes.

Swaykos: What’s the greatest problem that you guys have encountered?

East: Since the storm?

Swaykos: Yeah, the school district as a whole.

East: The replacement of the East Ward complex, the East Ward Elementary School complex has been difficult.

Swaykos: Because of funding or—

East: That is the only project that we really wanted FEMA to help us with. The Gulfport School District is very well insured and was able to pretty much take care of the damages concerning the property, our own properties, but East Ward was a project that we really wanted FEMA to work with and they have a lot more guidelines that you have to follow.

Swaykos: Right.

East: So it’s just a slower process. It’s not a negative situation, it’s just a slower process. So, we’re still working through moving that function. We definitely want to get that function off the beach and have bought some property on a high ground to move that function to. The Twenty-eighth Street—

Swaykos: (Inaudible)

East: We’re still probably a year away.

Swaykos: OK.

East: The Twenty-eighth Street Elementary School, we have those kids who’ve had their highest test scores the year of Katrina who are now in two elementary schools.
We’re very eager to rebuild that school at a new location. It was in an area that was becoming commercial and industrial, so we’re going to kind of take that one and make some lemonade out of it and try to rebuild a brand new state-of-the-art school for those guys.

Swaykos: How are you guys planning to do that?

East: We’re going to take out a loan and split it out over twenty years, and rebuild it. It’s about a 14 million dollar school that’ll hold 600 kids. Another reason we need to do that is the Seabee base feeds through the Gulfport School District and they’ve increased their housing there exponentially since the storm, in the process of doing that now, so we financially have enough room and a state-of-the-art building coming in.

Swaykos: What kind of impact has the Seabee base had on you pre and post storm?

East: The Seabee base is always a good neighbor. They’ve been a good neighbor in the Gulfport School District forever; great parents, good commanding officers, good staff there.

Swaykos: Good.

East: Since the storm they helped us with some small trimming and limb cutting, tree cutting, trying to help our playground, and so on and so forth. So very positive, very positive role.

Swaykos: What other kinds of support did you guys get right afterward, the volunteers, I know a lot of volunteers, civic groups, that kind of thing?

East: I will tell you that the church-base organizations in this country, school districts across this country, all were tremendously helpful. If I was prioritizing, I don’t want to say ranking, but prioritizing the support, we received a great deal of support from the big red school bus out of Colorado. It was a religious-based school that came down and actually set up two days for our kids just to play. They brought their big jumping machines and all that, what do you call those things, all air induced—what do you call those things?

Swaykos: Air jumpers?

East: Air jumpers.

Swaykos: OK, and bounce.

East: Bounce or whatever you want to call it. And did snowballs for the kids; they did that twice. So, that group had a great deal of impact. Feelan-Reed(?) is a law firm out of New York. They have 100 percent given dollars to help us redo our technology
across the district to the tune of almost two hundred thousand dollars in technology. That group has been very important. And then tons of school districts across, we’ve gotten books. The Rotary Clubs across the southeast have donated textbooks and books and helped us rebuild onto the libraries, and so on and so forth, that we lost.

Swaykos: OK, how much of the libraries did you lose? How many books?

East: We lost an entire collection at Anniston(?) Elementary School; that’s probably 28,000 books. And we lost the entire collection at Twenty-eighth Street, which would be about 28,000 books. And we lost part of a collection at Pass Road and Central Elementary because we had water damage.

Swaykos: So those are all elementary schools.

East: The high school came out unscathed and the two middle schools were untouched.

Swaykos: Good. How did you do cleanup? How did that start?

East: We started—we had a board meeting the Thursday after the storm, what would that have been?

Swaykos: It was Monday, the twenty-ninth.

East: So that was thirty or thirty-one; thirty days hath September—

Swaykos: The second. (laughter)

East: So, I guess the second or the first of September and so on and so forth. And did our emergency declaration and started cleanup immediately. We spent the first day after the storm emptying our freezers, our child nutrition freezers, and we did that. We donated or got those foods to church-based groups, or the Harrison County Jail so that that food would not go to waste. So, we immediately tried to contribute to them because it was just going to go bad, so we tried to make sure that we were part of that recovery. We had principals on the roofs of schools; Roy Edison(?), Mandells(?), (inaudible) Harding Architects, they were on our roofs making repairs three days after the storm.

Swaykos: Wow. So it was mostly personnel who showed up?

East: We had good return on personnel.

Swaykos: OK.

East: Good return.
Swaykos: Speaking of food, did you buy—I know some schools were given free lunches—

East: Yes.

Swaykos: —for a long while.

East: We did aftercare. We did daycare and provided free lunches at all of our school sites that we were able to open.

Swaykos: And you did that for every student?

East: We did that for every child that walked in the door, through the—definitely the year after Katrina, and even the lunch program was free to everybody who lost their home.

Swaykos: And then did you wean that out this year?

East: Well, we had to by code, you know, the rules changed for us and so we had to make sure we went to our normal system.

Swaykos: OK. How many students do you think you got from other districts? You said you had to split some of your own.

East: Well, we got a bunch. Actually, I have an actual number for that so when you send this report back, I’ll put the correct number down for you.

Swaykos: OK.

East: Anywhere from 240 to 300 kids.

Swaykos: Wow.

East: That would start with us. Gulfport is on the high ground, if you look at the Coast, you know, you start off in Hancock County, then at Jackson County there’s kind of a hill and Gulfport’s on the middle of that hill, and Harrison County’s below that hill. So our schools were the least damaged, probably.

Swaykos: OK.

East: But our homes, south of the beach, south of the tracks, I mean—

Swaykos: Right.
East: —and in (inaudible) that flooded, so we lost more homes and student stuff than we did schools. So our schools were there and parents knew that, so they tried to get their kids to us.

Swaykos: Oh good, good. And did you provide any busing for them or what they needed to bring their own kids in?

East: These folks had moved into our community in FEMA trailers, living with families, whatever the case may be. We did not do any out of district busing.

Swaykos: OK.

East: We just maintained our regular bus routes.

Swaykos: OK. And once things started up again, how did you prioritize recovery tasks that are still going on? How did you know where to start?

East: The first thing we did was we wanted our schools to be safe, air conditioned and have enough water, and that was our first goal. We wanted to open schools as quickly as possible, then we worried about staff—did we have enough staff, we began to try to call staff to let them know and they—

Swaykos: How did you get a hold of them?

East: Oh, by word of mouth, phones, all of our schools had phone trees, most of those phone trees had cell phones on them, so as cell service returned we were able to talk to them. Mississippi Power Company having lights on within eleven days after the storm was a big plus. Coast Coca-Cola supplied water. We had jugs and jugs of water.

Swaykos: Wow.

East: And actually, when we started school, the water system was back up everywhere but we were prepared not to have water for at least three or four weeks, and it was back up, so we really never had to use it. But, so the safety was first.

Swaykos: OK.

East: Staff was second, and then all the little ancillary stuff. And then we started repairing the buildings; the buildings, they looked terrible but they were patched and then dried, the roofs were fixed and then we just went to work repairing buildings.

Swaykos: OK. And did you get your technology stuff back yet, all your computers and everything?
East: We have the computers, all the innards are there, we just don’t have a building, they’re spread out in several places across the district.

Swaykos: OK. Have you been able to recover any of the records?

East: No, they were in the saltwater.

Swaykos: Wow. How does that impact—are they records you need to be using daily?

East: It was very difficult for us on attendance the few months after Katrina, but we’ve now got it all reloaded and reestablished, and we’re back on line.

Swaykos: Did parents have to like reregister their children?

East: No. See, we had everything, we had all that on paper.

Swaykos: OK.

East: And paper was not lost; it was just a matter of us reloading. Also, our school sites were OK. It was just our middle of the road, our server section, the big hub that was lost, so we were able to clean information and pull it back in for the school.

Swaykos: So that was a lot of man hours, especially by your administration.

East: Tons of man hours from Terri Burnham(?) and her team, and our technology department.

Swaykos: Great. Can you compare your system’s pre- and post-Katrina financial situation?

East: We’re not, since the storm we’re probably about six million dollars in the hole and we’ve done some grants and some loans to get us through the short term. The first year, financially, was not a big shock to us because the storm was so late in August and most of your tax dollars were already escrowed, et cetera.

Swaykos: Oh, good.

East: The current school year’s been the toughest so far and we believe that next year, the 08/09, no, 07/08 school year would be, probably going to be as tough as this year. And that’s an interesting sidebar. I used to remember dates perfectly, but since the storm I cannot remember the day behind me nor the year. (laughter) There’s a mental health issue for you. I used to—numbers used to be there and now it’s just hard. Go ahead.

Swaykos: Have you received any state or federal help for that?
East: Yes, both. The State of Mississippi held us harmless in some areas so that we would not lose our dollars based on our decline in attendance. The restart grants, the local senators and legislature did a great job of making sure that we were not going to hurt ourselves over the short term. So, yes, tons of support from both the state and federal.

Swaykos: You said you had a lot of grants. Did you hire extra grant writers?

East: No. No, these were grants that anybody could apply for; they were just under grant fashion to let every school district apply for them.

Swaykos: So you’re thinking next year is going to be just as hard as this year?

East: We feel like because our tax base—once we get our kids home, they’re not back, that’s going to be a tough year. Next year will be as, probably as tough as this year, maybe a little easier, but we really planned for this, the year that we’re in now, you know, the ’06-’07 and then the ’07-’08 school years, to be the tough ones and hopefully we will be kind of seeing the light at the end of the tunnel.

Swaykos: That’s the hardest job for you as a superintendent, then, of the schools is to deal with the financial problems?

East: That’s the hardest job for us, the board, the superintendent, the chief financial officer, because we’re trying to sustain—we have very good programs—so you’re trying to sustain those kids and sustain what you’re doing but also know that you had to have a dollar to pay at the end of the game.

Swaykos: Right.

East: And we’re not troubled by it, we’re not worried about it yet, but if after next year we may have to do some things, cut back, cut lights off definitely, not use facilities and so on and so forth.

Swaykos: So you haven’t started cuts yet?

East: No, we have sustained what we’ve done since the storm.

Swaykos: And faculty and staff salaries have remained?

East: They’ve done the normal increases we would do, we absorb the state’s pay raise, so we’ve been a normal financial facility.

Swaykos: Are you having any recruiting or retention problems? I was looking on your website last night and noticed you had twenty-six jobs open.
East: That’s kind of normal for us. Those jobs range from custodial to teachers. We have had some recruiting problems, places to live that have definitely been an issue. We have—we’ve lost some key folks who’ve retired this year, our band director, Glen Buckalew had been here for twenty-two plus years, and a math teacher, Joe Campbell, at the high school. Those were top notch individuals who are taking a great deal of talent and legacy with them. So, I mean, you’re looking for, you’re not looking for a green first-year person a lot of times to replace those kind of people, so having trying to get folks to move in is difficult with insurance, home insurance.

Swaykos: How is that doing, the recruiting?

East: We’re doing well. Well, we’ve done our normal college and university recruiting but then we’ve also just done a bunch of phone calls to an individual, “Look, we talked to you a couple of years ago about coming down. Are you still interested?” and tried to go back and talk to some people, and are helping them with, “Here’s an insurance agent, kids are in the Gulfport School District, here’s a list of four or five different companies, go talk to them, and hopefully they can help you, whatever the case may be. Here’s homes, this is a list of homes. Apartments are going to open back up,” just to kind of let folks know that there are some places but it’s going to be tough, so.

Swaykos: Have you resorted to going out of state or is most of your recruitment in the state?

East: No, we’ve been very fortunate to be able to stay local.

Swaykos: Oh, good.

East: Very fortunate. And there has been—we normally would have some out of state folks move back, move back, and I say back because normally they’re from here or from the Coast or from Mississippi.

Swaykos: Right.

East: So we’ve had some out of state, so it’s just been able to be just normal, there’s nothing, there’s no extra push or anything, it’s just our normal process.

Swaykos: As apartments and housing is opening up again, I’ve noticed that price of housing has shot up.

East: Sure.

Swaykos: How is that affecting your teachers in your recruitment?
East: That’s a tough issue for recruiting because things are a little more expensive, they’re kind of embellished right now and should go down as more opens but this is supply and demand.

Swaykos: Right.

East: There’s a great demand right now and not much in supply.

Swaykos: Um-hm. Has FEMA been a help or been a hindrance the way people are talking about them?

East: In the Gulfport School District, in the overall picture, FEMA has been a positive.

Swaykos: OK.

East: It’s been difficult to get used to their guidelines. They work at a lot slower pace than we do.

Swaykos: Right.

East: And so that’s been an issue, but I think, you know, if you’d asked me that question two months after the storm I would’ve said they’re in the way, but, you know, now that you understand the process and you’re trying to work things out, and you understand it’s a large organization.

Swaykos: How did you feel like they were in the way at that point?

East: How did we feel like they were in the way?

Swaykos: Yeah.

East: They, I don’t think they realized—they being the individuals who represent FEMA—we want to be back in school.

Swaykos: Right.

East: And we treat schools, I guess, along the Coast and in Mississippi, I don’t know how far it goes, but it’s important to us. Education’s important. I think we have this stigma from the country that’s not deserved. But anyway, I think they thought we would just take our time getting back in school and we weren’t going to rush to do it and, you know, we were just a bureaucracy that was going to just kind of let things happen.

Swaykos: Go on their time?
**East:** But, no, we wanted school open. We wanted it because for schools to be open, that means the community rebuilds, and so we were on a little bit different mission. And they were trying to—this was a tough task. Katrina was what, the worst national disaster they’re saying in the history or whatever, so they were scrambling to make sure they had the right personnel and they was coming to make sure things were done properly. So it was, you know, hindsight now I would say it’s a positive experience. You know you have growing pains, so.

**Swaykos:** Good. We’re at the end of the tape so I’m just going to turn it over real quick.

(brief interruption)

**Swaykos:** So, back with Mr. East, if we could go back to FEMA and the federal government. Have you been working with just one person? Is their turnover high, is that part of their slow—

**East:** They definitely have a turnover. These folks were from all over the country and they’re borrowed from industry, they’re borrowed from management, you know, the whole nine yards, so they definitely have a turnover.

**Swaykos:** Are the students seeing any of this impact or is the staff just trying to absorb and keep going so the students don’t notice a difference in dealing with the slowness?

**East:** Our kids haven’t experienced any changes.

**Swaykos:** Good.

**East:** We’re back normal again, very much so.

**Swaykos:** OK. Let’s see. Do you have or do you remember when you were working one of the most heartwarming or touching memories of volunteers were? Do you have a story? Did you work with any of them?

**East:** I’ll go back to the Big Red School Bus and that group from Colorado.

**Swaykos:** OK.

**East:** They came down here with very pure hearts wanting just to help. You learn that the majority of the folks are here really just to help, just to do their part, but we do have some that, I think, they’re down here to be recognized and learn and want the press and that kind of stuff. The Big Red School Bus group was just really pure-hearted people that wanted to come down and help children, and gave a lot of their time and energy, and raised a lot of money to do that. And when the sun sets at the end of my career here in whatever year, in twenty, thirty years or however long I last,
I’ll remember that group and their pure approach to our kids. They were really here to give our kids a good time for three or four days and let them know that somebody on the outside world cared about them as kids and that process.

**Swaykos:** So they were a faith-based organization?

**East:** They were.

**Swaykos:** OK, what’s the religious makeup? Do you have that as your—

**East:** Of that group? They were nondenom[inational].

**Swaykos:** Of your schools here.

**East:** Oh, this, Gulfport is diverse as its ethnicity. You have Catholic, Protestant. It’s a very diverse religious community.

**Swaykos:** Well, good. What is the most proudest accomplishment of recovery so far for you?

**East:** Opening school in nineteen days after the storm. We opened school on September 26. That’s got to be, that made us all feel good that we were back running and the kids were happy and we saw smiling faces again.

**Swaykos:** How did you get it out to the kids that school was going to be open?

**East:** Word of mouth, TV, we went through neighborhoods. Of course, it spread like wildfire. You know, the first thing was was whether we’re going to take our kids somewhere else and how long’s it going to take. And we started talking about October 3 as starting day and then when we were able to open a week earlier than that, it just, it was powerful. And so we just started spreading the word about October 3, and all of a sudden we were back on September 26.

**Swaykos:** Were all your textbooks saved? Did kids take textbooks home?

**East:** We lost some textbooks, kids’ band instruments, you know, musical instruments, uniforms from kids’ homes, yeah.

**Swaykos:** How have you started recovering the little, nitty-gritty things?

**East:** Well, insurance took care of some of it.

**Swaykos:** OK.

**East:** The faith-based donations and that kind of stuff we funneled into, you know, band uniforms, library books—textbooks, the state helped us take care of—
Swaykos: Oh, good.

East: —other school districts helped us take care of. So, it came together very—

Swaykos: Were the donations, were they just—how organized were they? Were they sent directly to Gulfport schools or were they sent to the counties, to the state?

East: Our donations came to us. We had our warehouse and we have a gym that we use, folks would call and we would set up an arrival time and make sure we had people there to do it. Quite frankly, if you didn’t call, we began to have to say, “Look, we can’t accept this, we don’t have the manpower or the space to do it.” So, those folks that called and made arrangements when our website went back up, we made that clear, we had a contact person here with a phone number, and I don’t say we were choosy but we just—

Swaykos: Right.

East: —we saw very quickly we could have easily become inundated and that would’ve been a negative for everybody, so we pretty much organized and said, “Well, here’s what we’re going to do and we’ll have manpower at certain times.” It may have been at midnight. We had a group from Boston that came in at midnight. But we knew about it a week in advance.

Swaykos: OK.

East: We could line up the personnel to do it, I mean they had a donated truck and so on, so you were there. But if you showed up at midnight and didn’t call, well, there’s no way we could, you know, we weren’t (inaudible).

Swaykos: So did you have to turn people away?

East: We turned a few groups away sent them to other places; one, that had more damage than we did, and two, we just didn’t have—but they would show up at closing time.

Swaykos: OK.

East: And what folks, I think, forget is we had our staff, our adult world was giving us a good day of work but then also going home and rebuilding their homes.

Swaykos: I’m sure, yeah.

East: So how, you know, our philosophy became—and this is the line we used, there was a couple of them that would get pretty haughty about it, “Well, here we are giving you this and you don’t want it.” “Well, sir, you don’t understand, you know, these
folks are giving you eight hours a day. I can take you to show you that right now they’re hammering, nailing, and mopping out, taking care of their houses so folks are already putting in sixteen, eighteen hour days and it’s not fair for us to call back and say, “Come help us unload this truck,”—

Swaykos: Right.

East: —“because you’ve come at seven o’clock at night and nobody knew you were coming.” So there were some issues like that and we tried to be as kind and, you know, but just—and you had some pushy groups, they wanted to do it for the press and not for the real reason and I guess we read between the lines pretty quickly for some of them.

Swaykos: And they were able to go and take their resources to other areas?

East: Well, I think they got—there are resources everywhere, yeah.

Swaykos: OK.

East: I don’t think there was ever an issue about being able to deliver something, so.

Swaykos: Great. What did you need most at that time?

East: Right after the storm?

Swaykos: Resources, yeah.

East: Water and safety issues, making sure we had cleaning supplies for the schools. We used a lot of the gift cards that came.

Swaykos: OK.

East: We allowed teachers to replace furniture that may have been lost in their classroom. We had teachers over the course of years spend a ton of money—

Swaykos: Right.

East: —to make their class a little family place and so those teachers that lost that, we tried to help them rebuild—

Swaykos: OK.

East: —their collections of twenty years or eight years or even four years.

Swaykos: Right.
East: You begin to amass this volume of good stuff to help in the classroom.

Swaykos: What did you need least? Were people showing up with clothes you didn’t need or that kind of thing?

East: The clothes definitely were great to have, but we didn’t need a lot of clothes.

Swaykos: OK.

East: And the thing is, I guess one of the funniest stories is, you know, you get clothes from other parts of the country, obviously not understanding that Mississippi is the hottest place on earth. (laughter) Yeah, there were a ton of, of course, you know, coats, sweatsuits, the old fashioned sweat, you know, T-shirts and some stuff that, you know, we would use thirty days, you know, out of the course of the year.

Swaykos: Right.

East: But the intention was good and the clothes were probably the thing that we got inundated the most with. That was the hardest to deal with and the hardest to make sure we were fair about giving to folks and not having it just sit there and go to waste. And we actually moved some of that to different places, too, but we were in a situation, we would have pallets of clothes that we didn’t need and so we would—

Swaykos: Oh good.

East: —find a sister school district or a faith-based group to come in and help us give the clothes to the community.

Swaykos: OK. Did the kids seem to understand all the help that was going on? Did they understand and appreciate?

East: Oh, I definitely think the kids understood the help they were getting, they were very much involved in having that help, you know, move across the Coast. Those that were, like I said, were real fortunate, that didn’t lose their homes, they were already working and helping other folks, you know, with their homes. Of course, you probably had a neighbor living with you or a friend living with you for a period of time anyway, so there’s been a lot of learning and a lot of appreciation going on. I know the Enterprise, Alabama, School District, they had a tornado and our high school kids jumped on that very quickly and took up a collection and kind of sent them some gift cards and some textbooks and some student stuff so they can kind of rebuild there, so.

Swaykos: I know that a lot of schools from around the country were “adopting schools” around here. Did you guys have anybody adopt you?

East: We did that as individual schools.
Swaykos: OK.

East: And so each of our schools probably had anywhere from four to eight schools that “did the adoption thing.” And then you had the letter writing back and forth, the pen pal stuff that came from that and, you know, very much trying to be a two-way street because you’re not just a taker, but you could also teach about the storm and teach about what happened after and so on.

Swaykos: Right.

East: So, yes.

Swaykos: Well, good. And they sent, did they send like prom dresses and did anyone come to graduation?

East: We’ve had folks sending out everything. There’s probably nothing that you could think about that we haven’t received in some shape, form or fashion.

Swaykos: Well, good. If you had all the resources you could have right now, what post-Katrina programs would you create or what activities would you enhance in the schools?

East: In the schools, we’re pretty much back to normal, so I can’t give you an answer to that.

Swaykos: OK.

East: Where I would spend it? If I had all the resources in the world to spend anyway I wanted to, I would definitely look at taking care of the social side.

Swaykos: OK.

East: The movie theaters, the bowling alleys, helping churches get their youth groups restarted, those things that kids do outside of school. Inside of school we came out very lucky.

Swaykos: So if they’re doing good inside of school, have you—what manifestations have you seen outside of school without those social programs there? What are the kids doing and is it—

East: Well, I will tell you that you’re seeing Gulfport on vacation time is empty. I mean, parents are leaving, they’re going off. You know, normally there’s folks staying around here and folks would come to us.

Swaykos: Right.
East: And my wife and I were talking that first Thanksgiving, we stayed with our family here, but the place was empty, so, you know, families were going to find their little niche of peace or whatever for a few days. And Thanksgiving was probably the first real time you saw the change because folks were working so hard September, October, and then through November to rebuild and I think the Thanksgiving holiday was the time they kind of took their first deep breath and said, “Let’s get away from this for a while.” And I noticed that Thanksgiving, Christmas, you know, Mardi Gras was smaller, you know, just your holidays were a lot smaller because folks went somewhere.

Swaykos: Right.

East: And you can’t blame them for that, so.

Swaykos: So what lessons do you think you could share or what did you learn from this that maybe you hadn’t known before the storm?

East: I think the biggest lesson that we learned on the positive side is that the mission of opening school as quickly as possible is a plus. It helped the community. The adult world, the professional adult world was tired, but I think when the sun set at the end of the year they were glad we reopened, they were glad to get their kids back to normal. They went home and sacked out and crashed and still tried to work on their homes. So I think that’s probably the biggest positive lesson is that the schools can control the loss. See, a lot of our folks didn’t leave because they knew we were going to be back quickly. I guess on a negative side is, you know, you always feel like you’re prepared and you’ve done all the right things and still lost some things. But hindsight being 20/20, we may have done differently, you know. For example, you have computer backups, then you have a system where individuals in that department take home their backups, but when they lost their homes, you know, you’re still—so the magnitude of it’s different. So how we handle that next time, you know, may be a little different, you know, do we hire an outside group away from the Coast to send the backups, so some more things like that. But dealing with the fed, and understanding that it’s a slower process, I think, will take away a lot of that, learn to handle that anxiety. We were so ready to be moving and they were so ready to get on the ground and take, you know, and so I guess just that knowledge knowing if this ever happens again that understanding the process is going to be slow will help.

Swaykos: How did your emergency procedures play out? I can’t imagine that you’d used them much before.

East: On a scale of one to a hundred, we probably scored a ninety.

Swaykos: OK.
East: There were some vans that we should’ve moved. There were some, the technology piece, a better way to backup. The ability to enter those freezers more timely are all things that were the procedures that we learned from.

Swaykos: Right.

East: So I would say we scored a ninety on what we did. You know what you know, and what we knew, we did well on, and so hopefully we can grow from it.

Swaykos: Right. If you—excuse me, I lost my train of thought. So what stands out as your worst day or memory following Katrina?

East: My worst memory is as the former superintendent of schools in Gulfport lived on the beach right by the Armed Forces Museum, and he— Anniston(?) Elementary School is a first responder shelter and he asked me to be able to stay out there, and of course we talked about it, and he stayed at Anniston. I guess my worst memory is I remember out on my front porch, don’t know the water damage, the wind damage to me was the normal, smaller hurricane type wind damage in my neighborhood, didn’t have a tornado or the down thrust or whatever, luckily. So I jumped in my jeep and head back, and he’s coming up the street with a silver platter, spoon, couple of cups and that’s all he’s got left.

Swaykos: My gosh.

East: So that’s probably the thing in my mind that I’ll remember as the worst moment because—but the thing is I live about three blocks north of the railroad tracks and I caught him just as he was coming over, so I didn’t see what was behind him. I had no idea that it was all gone. And then here he comes up and has nothing.

Swaykos: Did he have a family?

East: Yeah, a wife, children and mother-in-law that lived with him.

Swaykos: And how are they?

East: They’re fine. They’re moving back to North Carolina; had no plans to do that before the storm but because of the storm they’re moving back to his home state. That was tough, you know, had that true hurricane glare and that stare, that trance, I guess, and it was really a personal experience, very tough.

Swaykos: And what was his name?

East: Carlos Hicks.

Swaykos: And how long was he the superintendent?
East: Ten years.

Swaykos: And did you take over—is that one you took over? How long had you been doing it?

East: I had taken over it from him the year before, the January before the storm.

Swaykos: Oh, my gosh. OK, so he was someone you were looking up to and good friends with?

East: Good guy, hard worker.

Swaykos: How is he doing now?

East: Now doing very well. The first three or four months, very shaky, but he’s doing well.

Swaykos: Does he have plans to come back?

East: Probably not. He grew up in North Carolina and moved for this job and stayed here ten years and so his family roots are there.

Swaykos: OK.

East: He’ll come back and visit, but I don’t think he’ll come back permanently.

Swaykos: I see. So what was your best day or your best memory?

East: I guess our best memory was when we opened school.

Swaykos: OK.

East: On that September 26 morning; just watching the buses run and seeing the kids coming off the bus and happy, knowing that we were giving these guys a safe place to be so mom and dad can get back to work and do the things that they do.

Swaykos: Um-hm. Did you go into the schools that day?

East: Every one of them. Every one of them.

Swaykos: Did you? Every one of them; and that’s how many schools?

East: That was eleven before the storm, ten after, so ten schools.

Swaykos: And did you spend time talking with the kids?
East: I high-fived and hugged them and walked down the hallway, and the whole nine yards.

Swaykos: What was the greatest thing you heard from one of the students?

East: “Glad to be back.” “Good to see you, Mr. East.” “West Point.” (laughter)

Swaykos: So, your students know who you are.

East: Yeah.

Swaykos: OK, I don’t think I knew who my superintendent was, but they know you.

East: Well, the superintendents here have always been very much hands-on in the school. We’ve very visible.

Swaykos: Good. Do you think the school district has been as close-knit as they were, or more, before the storm?

East: I would say that we were probably more close-knit immediately after the storm, but you’re now back in that normal and normal’s pretty good.

Swaykos: OK.

East: And normal is a pretty close-knit family, you know, I guess you compare it to the fleas on a dog, you know, fleas just the things that bite you every once in a while.

Swaykos: Right.

East: They’re an annoyance but they’re not things that end your life.

Swaykos: Right.

East: And so those little fleas are kind of back, this little thing, and after the storm the fleas didn’t matter, you know, you just were focused on doing it. And it’s a very close-knit school community, so I guess, and like I said again, normal is good, and we’re probably a little more close now after the storm.

Swaykos: OK. What new recovery process has surprised you the most?

East: The faith-based groups, the impact—

Swaykos: OK.
East: —that the North Carolina Baptist Men, the United Methodist Church, the Presbyterian Church, just the faith-based groups have carried the rebuilding. Habitat for Humanity, just the idea—

Swaykos: They’re amazing, aren’t they?

East: It’s amazing how it’s all come together and they have done a super job.

Swaykos: Do you know how many of your families have received a Habitat for Humanity home?

East: I do not.

Swaykos: OK.

East: I do not. I would say 100 percent of our families, though, have been touched in some way by a faith-based group.

Swaykos: Of course.

East: One hundred percent.

Swaykos: Have any of the faith-based groups been up and running here and giving out support yet? You said some community organizations, some church organizations aren’t up and running yet, but are—

East: We’ve got—

Swaykos: —some important ones?

East: I’ll tell you that right now we still have four churches that are meeting in our schools.

Swaykos: Really? OK.

East: Because they’re totally wiped out and I guess that’s one of the novel pieces, is after Camille the schools used churches for classrooms.

Swaykos: Um-hm.

East: Just a different set of circumstances, and now they’re kind of using some schools to get back on their feet. So, pretty much everybody that I know of that have been traditionally strong groups are back up and running now.

Swaykos: OK.
**East:** And now they’re offering that care and that daily and weekly care for their congregation, whatever the case may be.

**Swaykos:** What is the recovery process looking like for those who are using your schools?

**East:** We started off with six, we’re now down to four. They’re slowing getting their acts back together and building new buildings. And we’re going to hang with them as long as we can.

**Swaykos:** OK.

**East:** Because we want to do what we can to make sure everybody’s back together.

**Swaykos:** How are you measuring the school district’s recovery? What’s 100 percent for you?

**East:** I guess 100 percent would mean I can drive down Highway 90 and not see all the destruction. And once again, the district, the school district I think is in good shape.

**Swaykos:** OK.

**East:** Having Twenty-eighth Street School rebuilt, moving into that building, having the East Ward complex rebuilt, those were all concrete things that will be important to us.

**Swaykos:** OK.

**East:** But the tax dollar piece is going to be important, having those homes rebuilt to generate tax dollars for the schools is important. After the storm, there’s destruction.

**Swaykos:** Um-hm.

**East:** Two months, it’s every instance, you know, every party you went to, every date you went on, every window you broke, either on purpose or accidentally, you know, this—so that’s what you’re trying to recover from now is no longer do you see where a family lived, you see, well, I know two families that lived in that house and I had a senior graduation party in that house which is no longer there, or a wedding reception, you know, so getting through all those things and being able to put all that to rest with a new building, a new piece of concrete, or however you want to say it, that will be a good day. We have a brown folder here that we’ve been kind of just keeping all of our Gulfport stuff and I guess the day that we close it up, put the tape around it, and put it up on the storage shelf will be a good day.
Swaykos: Right. What was the most—you talked about the buildings. What was the most memorable building for you that was destroyed?

East: West Lawn.

Swaykos: OK, and what was that?

East: West Lawn was an old home on the beach, 1830s, I believe was the construction and it was where you had a lot of wedding receptions, the school district would do its retirement parties, retirement functions, school functions for kids, just a nice open space right there on the beach with a breeze. It’s also only three blocks from my mother’s home, which was also an older home which was untouched during the storm, but so we lost a piece of history there that’ll never be replaced.

Swaykos: What do you think the difference has been in the resources given to Mississippi versus New Orleans?

East: I could not tell you.

Swaykos: OK.

East: I just know that we should be very proud to be Mississippians on the Coast.

Swaykos: Good.

East: I think that the people here—had no federal dollars come in, I really think we would’ve rebuilt in the same speed.

Swaykos: Great.

East: I really believe there was a drive, there was a mission, and it was everybody. It knew no racial bounds.

Swaykos: Right.

East: It knew no economic bounds. We were going to do what it took to get our community back together. And I guess the only part that I feel, and the only opinion I have is, is that we have worked a lot harder than the New Orleans area.

Swaykos: OK.

East: And that’s just an opinion on my part of what I’ve seen and how quickly we tried to bounce back. And I don’t think it’s tied to federal dollars, I think that we just had a drive.
Swaykos: Do you think it was that ability to get past the racial bounds, the religious bounds—

East: No, I’m not going to say it has—

Swaykos: —those economic bounds—

East: It has nothing to do with race or religion, it has to do with the folks on the Coast wanting to rebuild their community. And see, I don’t know what New Orleans’s issues are and I don’t pretend to know. People on the Coast get along with each other and it’s not racial and it’s not economic and it’s not religious; it’s here’s a community that was destroyed and we’re going to do whatever it takes to build it back.

Swaykos: OK.

East: So there’s—I’m not going to put any kind of a racial or religious twist on it. It is people committed to each other to rebuild the community.

Swaykos: What percentage of people do you have here that did go through Camille, what parents, because now their children are going through Katrina?

East: Tons. And percentage, you know, I really haven’t thought about that. I know that Camille, Camille gave us all an experience and helped us through Katrina.

Swaykos: OK.

East: Camille also killed a lot of people.

Swaykos: Right.

East: And Katrina, because you had the Camille watermarks and you had the Camille lines, and everybody said there would never be one as bad as Camille, so a lot of our destruction was definitely worse than Camille. I don’t know what percentage. I would say in the school district, let’s see, maybe 50 percent dealt with Camille in some shape. That’s definitely a guess; not an accurate thing. But I know that we had school board members, all of the school board members had dealt with Camille, all five of them.

Swaykos: Wow.

East: So they had that history. One of them is very young, and so before she reads this transcript—(laughter). Two of them would’ve been parents or new parents at that time.

Swaykos: Wow.
East: One would’ve been an upper, a junior high, and one would’ve been probably three or four years old, so.

Swaykos: And who was the young one?

East: Bridget Weatherly(?) is the youngest one on the board.

Swaykos: And the junior high?

East: That would’ve been David Mumphrey(?); his kids are my kids’ age, so we probably, we probably would’ve been late elementary, early junior high. And then Miss Holder and Dr. Walker were raising their families at that time, so they were definitely in the adult world and part of the community, so.

Swaykos: You mentioned you lost how many people in your family, in your school district did you lose?

East: In the school district, none.

Swaykos: None.

East: We had a teacher who we almost lost, and she got beat up real bad in the house and had a family of kids that was close. But we lost no individuals in the storm.

Swaykos: That’s great.

East: It really is.

Swaykos: That’s real great.

East: It would’ve been something else to have to deal with, but we didn’t lose anybody.

Swaykos: That’s amazing, really, for as large as it is.

East: As large as it is and the focus being—below the railroad track, there’s a lot of living quarters, so we were very lucky.

Swaykos: Lastly—

East: Since the storm we’ve lost, you’ve lost some people because of the storm, not during the storm. You know, there’s an older group like, you know, we’ve lost some of our elderly folks, retired teachers that, you know, are seventy, eighty years old that just weren’t going to do it and so the storm caused some death, but the tragedy, the trauma-type death, we were very lucky and did not have any.
Swaykos: Great. So lastly, what do you have to say to everyone about your district, where you are now, and your hope for the future?

East: I would just say that the Gulfport School District has proven that where there’s a will, there’s a way; that being committed to kids, building relationships with children really comes to the forefront within tragedy. And I’m just very proud to have been the leader of the group and can take no individual credit for anything we’ve done, it was definitely a team effort. Folks were not going to let this thing beat us and they stepped up and did what they had to do.

Swaykos: How was that, being a leader, on you?

East: Just, well, it’s just good to know that when you talk about a team, that all that’s come together, whether they had tragedy or not, but that the team pulls together and does what’s best for kids.

Swaykos: OK.

East: We’re going to do what’s best for children and that happened. We did what was best for kids. And where we are today is I can—I’m very proud of where we are and how hard we’ve worked, and I know folks were tired, we were all tired, and we just battled on through it and did it for our kids.

Swaykos: Good. Well, thank you so much.

East: All right, thank you.

(end of interview)