Mississippi Oral History Project

Hurricane Katrina Oral History Project

An Oral History

with

Gwendolyn Beard

Interviewers: Johanna Stork, Chrystal Bowen-Swan

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Biography

Gwendolyn Joyce Beard was born on April 30, 1948, in Moss Point, Mississippi to Thomas Marx, Sr. (deceased) and Ida Bell Watson (born: August 17, 1919, in Moss Point, Mississippi). Ms. Beard received her high school diploma from Magnolia High School. She attended Alcorn State University where she received a Bachelor of Science degree in Elementary Education in 1969. She received her Master of Education in Elementary Education in 1978 from the University of South Alabama and her Educational Administration Certificate from The University of Southern Mississippi in 1991. Between 1969 and 2005, Ms. Beard states that she was in “continuous training” within the Pascagoula [Mississippi] School System. Ms. Beard’s career in education encompassed 37 years in the Pascagoula School System: 24 years as a classroom teacher (Grades 4-6) and 13 years in administration (KG-Grades 5-6).

Ms. Beard married Henry Leo Beard, Sr. (born: February 4, 1946, in Wilmer, Alabama) on April 30, 1968, in Moss Point, Mississippi. The Beards have four children: April (born: August 10, 1970); Henry, Jr. (born: August 11, 1972); Daryl (born: September 16, 1974); and Ashleigh (born: March 8, 1987). At the time of this writing, they have four grandchildren. Ms. Beard has three sisters (Ernestine Hutchins; Georgett McCorvey; and Sharon Broadnax) and two brothers (Thomas Marx, Jr. and Henry Broadnax [deceased]).

Ms. Beard participates in her church choir and is a Sunday school teacher. She also participates in the Moss Point Adult Theater Group and serves on the Planning Committee for the City of Moss Point. She volunteers for the Southeast Chapter of the American Red Cross, the Jackson County Sickle Cell Association, the Moss Point School System, and the Moss Point Branch of the Jackson-George County Library. Ms. Beard has been a member of the National Association of Educators, the National Association of Elementary Principals, Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc., Moss Point-Jackson County NAACP, and the Alcorn State University Alumni Association. Awards she is proud of include Teacher of the Year, Outstanding Educator of the County, MS Jack Scroll of Merit, Moss Point School District (Grand) Parent of the Year, NAACP Community Service Award, Library Volunteer Award, and Black History Community Service Award.

One of Ms. Beard’s favorite quotes is this, from Edith Wharton:
“There are two ways of spreading light: to be the candle or the mirror that reflects it.”
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AN ORAL HISTORY

with

GWENDOLYN BEARD

This is an interview for the Mississippi Oral History Program of The University of Southern Mississippi. The interview is with Gwendolyn Beard and is taking place on February 22, 2007. The interviewers are Johanna Stork and Chrystal Bowen-Swan.

Bowen-Swan: 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 Mrs. Beard. Am I pronouncing your name right? Thank you. And it is taking place on February 22, 2007, at 9:13 a.m. in Moss Point, Mississippi, at the Moss Point Library. The interviewers are Johanna Stork and Chrystal Bowen-Swan. And first of all, I’d like to thank you, Mrs. Beard, for taking the time to speak with us today, and I’d like to get some background information about you, which is usually what we do in our oral history interviews. So, I’m going to ask you for the record, could you state your name, please?

Beard: Gwendolyn Beard.

Bowen-Swan: OK, thank you.

Stork: And for the record, in case all the labels are lost or damaged, how do you spell your name?


Stork: Thank you. And when were you born?

Beard: April 30, 1948.

Bowen-Swan: Thank you. And where were you born?

Beard: Moss Point.

Stork: And for the record, what was your father’s name?

Beard: Thomas Marx, M-A-R-X.

Bowen-Swan: And your mother’s maiden name?
Beard: Watson.

Stork: And where did you grow up? In Moss Point?

Beard: Sure.

Stork: And have you lived here your entire life?

Beard: My entire life, yes.

Stork: How many generations of your family have lived on the Mississippi Gulf Coast?

Beard: At least four that I’m aware of. I don’t know of any roots any place else.

Stork: OK, and do you know why you were living there?

Beard: No, it’s just always been home. As far back as I can remember, my family has always been here.

Stork: And describe your attachment to the region, what does it mean to you?

Beard: Well, to me this region is home. I’ve never really considered moving because I just couldn’t think of any other place I’d rather be. When I first got married, my husband had the opportunity to relocate with Chevron Refinery, and after visiting a couple of the places he had thought about going, I opted to stay here. So we just did not relocate.

Stork: Where was your neighborhood?

Beard: Actually it’s within a mile of the library, just right down the street.

Stork: And describe your neighborhood, if you will, before Hurricane Katrina.

Beard: OK, the neighborhood where I grew up, or the neighborhood where I live now? Does it really matter?

Stork: Both.

Beard: OK. The area where I grew up was—I think about the biggest problem in that area was no electricity. And the area where I live now, we had rising water, but it was interesting because none came into our house. We stood in the front door, and we watched the water going down the street, and it was like watching a rapid. You know, you could see white caps. And it was amazing because it came up about halfway my front yard, and that was as far as it came. We lost shingles, and we had parts of
somebody’s roof in our yard, but we didn’t lose our entire roof. We just lost enough of it to create a problem later.

Bowen-Swan: Wow, it’s lucky that the water didn’t come up to your house.

Beard: Yeah, we were.

Bowen-Swan: So, did you stay in your home during Hurricane Katrina?

Beard: We did.

Stork: Describe that experience for me. What happened to you during the hurricane?

Beard: OK. During the hurricane—well, first of all, let me say that we have this family joke because I always prepare what I called a “hurricane hamper,” well in advance of hurricane season. And it’s a large Tupperware tub with a top, and I have like a manual can opener. I have nonperishable foods, crackers, powdered milk. We stock up on bottled water, just anything that we think we might have. And of course if we have no hurricanes, the grandchildren always come and ask if they can get the hamper, and they just go through it and eat all the cookies (laughter) and things like that. So, we had the hamper prepared. We’re not expecting Hurricane Katrina to be anything like she was. Well, I have storm windows so we didn’t bother with, you know, preparing the windows or anything. We just, we’re settling in, waiting for a couple of days of bad weather, and then things would get back to normal. At that time, my younger daughter was at USM [The University of Southern Mississippi], and she came home for the weekend. And she was making plans to go back to school that Sunday. And, you know, we were saying, “Well, Ashleigh, the weather’s kind of bad; maybe you should just stay here.” “Oh no, but I have a test on Monday.” And she was just really chomping at the bits. Well, you know how teenagers are. (laughter) Chomping at the bits to get back to school, and the girls who were riding with her were calling, and I finally insisted that if the weather cleared up, they could go early Monday morning. Well, of course, that never happened. But the weather started to get worse, and we still did not realize how bad it was because for us it was just a bad thunderstorm, you know, from where we were. We ended up with about nine people in our house, and normally we are a family of three. When the electricity went off, you know, we were fine. I had hurricane lanterns. I had bought all of the grandchildren the little miner, the type head flashlights that miners wear, you know, and strap on your head. Everybody had their own light, and it was just a big, one big game. So, finally when it started getting a little warm, you know, we started opening doors and letting up windows. We even removed a few of the storm windows, you know, to try to ventilate the house. We had a small generator which we used for the freezer, the refrigerator, and the microwave when necessary. Then after the storm started to—the time started to stretch out with no power. A friend of ours came by, and somebody was bringing him in a larger generator. So we said, “OK, yeah, well, bring us one.” So then we had a larger generator, which we could use to do more lights in the house, and we had some fans. After several days gas started running low...
for the generator, so the guy across the street had lots of gas but no generator. So, of course, we bartered. We traded our small generator for gas and, you know, we’re still going along not realizing how much damage that storm was really doing. Finally one day I decided to plug the computer in. We booted up the computer, and I went online, and then I saw the devastation of the hurricane, and we were in shock. Absolute shock because we were worried about, you know, the vent over our hot water heater. Water had started shimmying down the pipe, and I’m worried about this little water that’s dripping in, you know, into that closet. And I’m looking, and I’m seeing where people have lost their homes, their lives, people up in trees, and I mean it was just, it was an awakening for us. But we had no idea how bad it really was until I booted my computer up.

**Stork:** How many days do you think that was after the storm?

**Beard:** That had to have been anywhere from five to seven days. You know, we were just in isolation. You know, we’d peep out and wave at our neighbors and go back in. We’d stand in the front door. The children would stand out in the front yard and wave at the other little children down the street. And in that little area, we still had no idea how bad it really was. In the meantime, I had Cellular South; my phone was the only one that still had a signal. My cell phone was the only one that still had a signal. I think my husband may have had Sprint or something. Anyway, so calls could come in. I could get calls in, and relatives from other states were calling to check on us, and we were fine. Well, they were seeing all of this on the news; so they knew more about it than we did. And I wondered why—I said, “Well, it’s just a storm.” I wondered why they were so upset. My sister-in-law in California could not get through to us. She called my sons in Baton Rouge; then they called us. So we were just relaying messages and talking, and finally my sons wanted to know, well, if there was anything we needed because by that time the water was running a little low. You know, when you’re using bottled water for food, you’re using it to drink; we were using it to flush commodes. We were running a little bit short. The National Guard had set up at the fairground; so we were going down there. We could pick up ice; we could pick up water. Chevron was offering gas to employees and former employees; so my husband went out there and gassed up the vehicles. But there was still no place to go to buy anything. So finally my son in Baton Rouge wanted to know if we really needed anything. “Well, yeah, we could use tissue,” because we were running short on everything. And I even had baby wipes in my hamper; we had used all of those. And we named off a few things that we could use, but we really had no idea that he could come because the interstate was blocked; they were advising traffic not to come through, you know. Nobody was to try to come into this area. Well, my husband has an—my son has an Allstate [Insurance] agency and my second—

**Bowen-Swan:** What’s that? I don’t know what that is.

**Beard:** Oh, Allstate Insurance, I’m sorry.

**Bowen-Swan:** Oh, OK, right.
**Beard:** He’s an insurance agent.

**Bowen-Swan:** OK.

**Beard:** So, and my other son worked for BellSouth, and BellSouth had set up care centers in the Gulfport area.

**Bowen-Swan:** Gulfport, whereabouts is that?

**Beard:** Gulfport is about forty miles west of here.

**Bowen-Swan:** OK.

**Beard:** It’s along the Coast, too.

**Bowen-Swan:** OK.

**Beard:** And they came; he put his insurance sign on the side of his car because they were letting insurance agents into the area. And Darryl had his BellSouth ID. The two of them came. They brought us a truckload of food and supplies. Actually, they brought the care package for the family because when they came in—and my son was driving a white truck, and I teased him and said he was our knight in shining armor because we had cleaning supplies; we had food. We had fresh fruit; we had juices, tissue, that type of stuff.

**Bowen-Swan:** And how did he get in through the highway with all the trees and all?

**Beard:** My son said he knew some back roads. (laughter)

**Bowen-Swan:** Oh, good.

**Beard:** I, quite frankly, I don’t know how he got here because things were blocked, but we do know that the few checkpoints he came through, because he was an insurance agent, they did allow him through. But he said for the most part, he came, they came back roads. He said, “And a few shortcuts, Mama.” So. But they came and brought us supplies. And I called my sisters. I have, let’s see, three sisters and a brother in the area, and they all came over. And they shopped off the back of the truck, and then we had enough to sustain us a little while longer. Then we got the word that people were opening fire hydrants; they were just turning them on getting water. So, there was this neighbor of ours who was home who was in the military and we convinced him to go. And he went with—we get Rainbow Water with the big—we have a cooler and the big bottles of water. About how many gallons?

**Unknown male:** I’d probably say they—I’d say ten gallons, maybe fifteen.
Beard: OK. Anyway, we sent him with some of those, and he went to where somebody had already turned, you know, turned on a fire hydrant, and he collected water. And that way we could conserve our bottled water for drinking because we used that water for flushing commodes and for just cleaning up.

Stork: Exactly. That was smart. So at that point, like, say, five or seven days after the storm, was the water pretty much out of the streets? Was it easy to get down the—other than the trees across the street, could you get down the street?

Beard: Some streets. It was amazing how quickly the water drained off. And what really, really amazed me is, there was one area of town where one of my sisters lived. That area had flooded like with a spring rain. And my sister didn’t even stay home; she evacuated. She went to Clinton, Mississippi, up near Jackson, Mississippi. And when she called back, she said, “Just give me the bad news.” She just knew that, you know, her street would hold water. So under normal circumstances, she just knew she didn’t have a house to come back to. She called, and her son who stayed told her, said, “Well, Mama, your house,” said, “the house didn’t get any water.” And she didn’t believe him; she called me. And I sent my husband down, and the biggest problem he had even getting to that area was the trees across the street. And he came back; he said, “You won’t believe this; Rose Drive is dry.” And I mean that was like a miracle because places that did not normally get water were flooded, and the streets that normally flooded, did not. But the water was moving, I think, in a different direction. I mean everything was going contrary to what it normally would do.

Bowen-Swan: Hm, that’s interesting.

Stork: What traditions do you usually carry on in your community, for example, Mardi Gras or St. Patrick’s Day or boatbuilding or music?

Beard: OK. Since they’ve been developing the waterfront here in Moss Point, we do the various holiday parades, but they all end up at the waterfront now. And, but the Christmas parade, they do the day parade on land, and then it’s Christmas by the River. They do a boat parade at night.

Bowen-Swan: Oh, cool.

Beard: And that’s really nice because all the boats are decorated, and you see the lights coming in, and that’s a beautiful sight.

Bowen-Swan: So, they have the small little Christmas lights all on different boats?

Beard: Yeah, they use the Christmas lights to decorate the boats. They may have—sometimes they even use animated figures on the boats powered by generators.

Stork: And do, I guess, corporations all do boats, or do private people do boats?
**Beard:** Well, most of these are private. Most of them are private. And the boat parade has grown. The first year they did it, I think there were about five boats, and I think this past year, they were maybe up near twenty, yeah. But then we do Mardi Gras. In fact, the Mardi Gras parade was last Saturday, and Mardi Gras ended up on the water, also. And they had, like, a small fair. They had face painting, food booths, games for children, just a lot of activities on the water. Let’s see, at Easter a lot of the churches band together, and they do a parade of sorts. The young people sometimes will carry a cross.

**Stork:** I don’t know what that is, a parade of swords.

**Beard:** Oh, a parade. Just a parade.

**Bowen-Swan:** It’s like a type of parade.

**Beard:** A type of parade.

**Stork:** OK.

**Beard:** And this has not always been; this is something that started happening recently. Some of the ministers decided that, you know, “If we have a parade for Christmas and we have a parade for Mardi Gras, then why can’t we have one at Easter and celebrate Jesus?” So they do. A lot of times they do, sometimes they do just walks, maybe cross-country walks. Maybe walk about three to five miles, just youth groups, singing, carrying crosses of various sizes, just to call attention to the resurrection of Jesus that happens at Easter.

**Bowen-Swan:** So, did they have floats and things, too, at Easter?

**Beard:** Well, sometimes, because, you know, the older people just can’t walk that far. (laughter) Yeah, they do.

**Stork:** And then are they really decorated with flowers and things, as well?

**Beard:** Yeah. Sometimes it may be just even a truck, but always decorated and always with a theme. At the high schools here, we do homecoming. Every—usually homecoming is around October; the schools select a homecoming queen and her court, and there’s always a homecoming parade. The bands from the high school, the middle school, and our elementary schools here even sometimes have bands. Different organizations from the school will march. Different civic organizations will put in either a truck or float or a car, and that’s always a big deal.

**Bowen-Swan:** And so, you have one high school in Moss Point here?

**Beard:** Just one.
Bowen-Swan: OK.

Beard: At one time we had two middle schools, but after the hurricane, one flooded. And the population was dwindling a little bit anyway because a lot of people moved away and didn’t readily come back. So they put all of the children, all of the middle school children are now in one building. They’re in one school.

Stork: Do you know how many kids would go to that middle school, probably?

Beard: Hm, maybe three to four hundred.

Stork: OK. And that’d be grade six to eight?

Beard: Actually, it’s seven to eight because I said middle school, but it’s still considered a junior high here because the sixth grade is still in the elementary school. Now, in Pascagoula they have a middle school because the sixth grade is in the middle school; they go K-5. But in Moss Point we go K-6.

Bowen-Swan: What are your most vivid memories of your community before Hurricane Katrina?

Beard: Before the hurricane, um, I think the community was a caring community, but after the hurricane everybody bumped it up a notch. People are a lot more thoughtful now than they were before the hurricane. Before the hurricane, if you needed something and you approached a civic organization or a church, you could probably get it. But after the hurricane, if an organization or a church thought you needed something, they would offer it to you, and that’s the big difference.

Bowen-Swan: Great, that’s nice to hear. What would you say were your community’s problems and strengths prior to Hurricane Katrina?

Beard: Prior to Hurricane Katrina I would say—we’d done a lot of changes with the police department. They were going through some changes, and I would say that there was more concern about the crime rate. And after the hurricane, I think it leveled off some. The police force was beefed up; you know, we had help come in from the state and the National Guard, and that helped some. Then the bigger concern was patrolling the new trailer parks because you had a lot of people pulled together because that’s where the trailers—that’s where the homes were, and you know there was not that sense of family there. In a regular neighborhood, everybody knows everybody; everybody looks out for everybody. But when you get people together in what I call the FEMA trailer park, you’re pulling in the good guys, the bad guys—well, actually, the good, the bad, and the ugly. And there’s definitely more of a concern there about safety.

Bowen-Swan: Right. And it’s got to be hard, too, being displaced in a trailer park, too.
Beard: Yeah. Because I know my daughter’s house in Escatawpa, she had like three feet of sludge in her house; not just the water but the mud came in with it. And my daughter has M.S. [multiple sclerosis], so of course she couldn’t go anywhere near that because her immune system was already compromised. So she and her three children stayed with us. A group of contractors from Chevron called and wanted to know what they could do, and they went up and ripped her house out and sanitized it so that a construction crew could go in and start working in it. But, you know, that was just kind of how things started happening after the storm.

Stork: OK. What was your opinion of local, state, and federal politicians before Hurricane Katrina?

Beard: Well, before Hurricane Katrina, I never thought a lot about them. When I was in the school system, because I retired right ahead of the hurricane; I was an elementary school principal. And I retired that May, and the hurricane came that September. And my thoughts, you know, we taught the children who their representatives and senators were. We taught them—in the classroom, we taught them a little bit about how things happened on the state and national level. When we had special programs, sometimes our legislators would come in and speak to the children, you know. But I never really thought about them performing any major acts or duties for us. I guess I was just naïve.

Stork: And then what about after Hurricane Katrina, how did you think of them after?

Beard: OK. After the hurricane then I started having some serious thoughts about who they were and what they needed to do. But we were fortunate in that, on a national level, Senator [Trent] Lott from Pascagoula had been very, very active in getting some things done. His house was destroyed; so he was in the boat with everybody else, and he knew what everybody was going through. He was not as removed from it. Then, um, I think it’s [Representative Thad] Cochran—is it Cochran; over, further down on the Coast—lost his house. So we had two key people in Washington who really knew what we were going through, and they kind of pushed for a lot of things to happen, and it trickled on down to the state and local level.

Stork: How has the storm changed the way you think about your community?

Beard: If anything, I think, I appreciate it more because I’m not a shopper, but leading up to Christmas, I let my sisters convince me to go with them to some sale, and actually I was just going to help them get some things that they were going to get because I really didn’t want to be there. But you wait in this long line to get in the store, and normally where people are doing the pushing and shoving, now whoever gets up front is grabbing two or three of whatever and coming back to the end of the line, say, “Is this what you were trying to get?” You know, it’s, I don’t know; people
are just more giving, more caring, and it’s just a much warmer place to be. So I think it’s improved since the hurricane.

**Bowen-Swan:** That’s what I’ve been hearing. In a couple of interviews we did yesterday, that’s what other people have been saying, too. So.

**Beard:** Really?

**Bowen-Swan:** Yeah, it nice that some good can come out of something so hard, right?

**Beard:** You’re right. You know, even the churches—we have always in this area had what we called an interdenominational ministerial alliance. The ministers from all of the different religions, churches, all come together for the good of the community. That has always been in place. But since the hurricane it’s been more apparent, you know, nobody is saying, “Well, I’m going to do this for Baptist or the Catholic.” It’s just, “I’m going to do this for you.” You know, nobody’s concerned about it. The churches are worshipping together more. Our pastor preached at, I think it was maybe a Pentecostal church, I guess a few months after the hurricane. And it was so funny because our choir went, and when the lady got up to introduce him, she said, “I’ve got to tell you, when I told my friends at Ingalls that I had invited First Missionary Baptist, they laughed and said, ‘Oh, they aren’t going to come.’” But, you know, a church is a church, and it’s just not all about titles, and more people are realizing that now.

**Bowen-Swan:** That’s nice. OK, so just, I guess, talking a little bit about hurricane notification information and response. How and when did you first hear about Hurricane Katrina?

**Beard:** Let’s see. Probably that Saturday they started talking about it, and we started watching it on the news, but we weren’t alarmed. And on my computer, I have the WLOX, which is the station in Biloxi. I have the little weather watch, and whenever something happens, it does, like, a “pop-up.” And it’ll show you the bottom part of Mississippi, the lower half of Mississippi, and it’ll give you warnings, you know, flood warning, wind, fog, that type thing. And it started popping up on a regular basis, you know, but we still didn’t think a lot about it. On the television they were doing the little marquis scroll across the bottom giving updates and alerts; we still didn’t give it a lot of thought.

**Bowen-Swan:** Um-hm, that’s also something I’ve been hearing from a lot of people, too.

**Beard:** Yeah, we’re so accustomed to hurricanes that we just don’t worry about them. And I was born in Moss Point and have never, even when I was a child, we’ve never left because of a storm. And it just didn’t occur to us to leave.
Stork: Well, it’s the same at home. We get flashes across the bottom of the TV screen warning storm warnings—

Beard: Yeah.

Stork: —about snow, and we never thing twice about it.

Bowen-Swan: What, when, and how did you hear about evacuation for Hurricane Katrina?

Beard: OK, on television they started giving the evacuation routes. You know, if you were in this area, you needed to follow this highway. They were—it was mapped out really well, well planned. And some friends of mine who are not native to the area always leave. In fact, the Proctors are from Maryland, and if the wind blows hard, they leave. So they had called to let me know that they were headed out; they were moving up, going towards Birmingham to wherever. They said, “We’re just going as far north as we can get.” And we had ample warning, and like I said, it was all planned out really, really well. Anybody who wanted to evacuate, if they had started moving when they were first asked to move, should not have had a problem. But now, the people who waited until the last minute were caught in bumper-to-bumper traffic where cars were running out of gas because there was no gas on the way. Tempers were flaring, and I understand it was horrible being caught in that. But anybody who heeded the early warnings got out of here in record time.

Bowen-Swan: So what was your reaction to the evacuation notices, and how did you prepare?

Beard: You know, my husband and I talked about it, and we didn’t consider leaving, but as a plan B, you know, we had thought, “well, you know, we’ll wait and see if it comes in too close, then we’ll decide which direction we’re going in.” But we never talked about it seriously.

Bowen-Swan: Um-hm. Describe your experience as Hurricane Katrina approached.

Beard: My experience, let’s see. I play a lot of Mahjong and Solitaire on the computer. That’s what I did. (whispering and laughter)

Stork: That’s a good way to pass your time.

Beard: That’s what I did. I had lots of paperback books, and the kids had books and puzzles in the hurricane hamper; so we just basically sat around. I fooled around on the computer. My husband watched TV and played musical channels, you know, with the remote. (laughter) And the kids just sat around, read, played games, that type of thing.

Stork: And how old are the kids?
Beard: The grandkids are six, eight, and thirteen.

Bowen-Swan: And you just have one daughter, did you say?

Beard: Well, actually I have three grown children; they’re like thirty-six, thirty-four, thirty-two. Ashleigh is a granddaughter that I’ve had since four pounds; she’s nineteen.

Bowen-Swan: Since four pounds?

Beard: Um-hm.

Bowen-Swan: What do you mean?

Beard: See, she was four pounds.

Bowen-Swan: Oh.

Beard: Since birth. She was a preemie.

Bowen-Swan: Oh, OK.

Beard: And we brought her home from the hospital; when she was about four years old; we legally adopted her. So we went from a thirty-two-year-old to—we have a thirty-two-year-old and a nineteen-year-old. So Ashley was the only one at home. She was the one who was trying to get back to USM at the time. And then I have the, actually not counting her, I still have four grandchildren because I have a granddaughter in Baton Rouge, also.

Stork: So why did you stay, and what was the most important factor in your decision to stay?

Beard: Um, one of the most important factors I think, had it just been my husband, Ashleigh and me, you know, we might’ve considered leaving. But my daughter has three children, and while she is in remission with her MS [multiple sclerosis], we would not have let her leave here driving. All of us wouldn’t fit in one vehicle, and I was in no mood to take two. It was easier to just stay home.

Bowen-Swan: Um-hm. Did the proximity of friends or relatives—

(A portion of dialogue unrelated to the interview has not been transcribed.)

Bowen-Swan: Just the question was, did the proximity of friends or relatives in communities on higher ground influence your decision to stay?
Beard: No, not really, because when my mom was alive, she would either go to my house or to my older sister’s house, which is also here in Moss Point, not because her house wouldn’t withstand, but we didn’t worry as much if she was with one of us.

Stork: So as the hurricane approached, like, when could you first tell that it was bad? When could you first, like, hear the winds and the trees?

Beard: Oh, we could hear the wind early, but we still didn’t give it much thought because, you know, we’ve heard the wind before. And what’s amazing was, my husband retired in [19]99; up until that time it seemed that anytime we had a hurricane, he was at work, because he worked at Chevron, and they would have to, I call “tie the refinery down.” And my boy, when my boys were at home, you know, they would always prepare our windows, make sure we had lots of water. Then they would go next door and help the ladies on either side of us, you know, get ready for the hurricane. When my husband was home, a lot of times, we just went on with our regular routine, you know, and he would get everything handled. But the wind was strong; we didn’t give it a thought. The one thing we did was when it started picking up, you know, you could watch the trees, and you could hear it whistling because we have a fireplace, and you could hear it whistling across the top of the chimney. We let the garage up just a little bit because we have a dog who comes home every now and then, let the garage door up just a little bit in case he came home, and he could get in out of the weather, but—

Bowen-Swan: He didn’t come home?

Beard: Oh yeah, he came.

Bowen-Swan: Oh, he did? Good.

Stork: OK, so after—talking about after the hurricane and evacuation, what happened to—oh, we didn’t go to a new location, sorry. The question is: describe any experiences that you may have had with local, state or federal officials, if any.

Beard: Repeat that question.

Stork: Describe if you had any experiences with any local, state or federal officials after the hurricane. Did you have to deal with any FEMA or any government officials at all?

Beard: Mm, not really. Our church was a disaster relief center, and basically I worked at the church every day. Any dealings that we had with anybody official was on a positive note because the different ones would stop by to see, you know, how things were going, if we had enough help unloading trucks because a lot of trucks came into the area. But our pastor mobilized the youth department and, you know, for a hamburger those kids would do anything.
Bowen-Swan: Um-hm.

Beard: They actually went from church to church unloading trucks and helping distribute goods. The girls stayed at our church, and they had—they set up—they developed a system. They set up everything. They had one room in the learning center where they put all things for babies, one area where they put clothing, one area for food, cleaning supplies. Any officials who stopped by basically were just stopping by to check. One Sunday during church service, the mayor came by just to reassure people that, you know, they were doing what they could, and if anybody needed assistance with anything that they could stop by city hall, but that’s it.

Bowen-Swan: Mm, that’s good.

Stork: I’d really like to, like, talk more about the actual hurricane and what was happening. So, it was you and your husband, and your two daughters and three grandchildren, right?

Beard: And there was another child—well, this young lady was a friend of my daughter’s. She had been—she was being raised by her grandparents. Her grandmother died. Her grandfather decided to relocate. I think he moved to Meridian. She was a senior in high school and wanted to finish the year, so we had just kind of let her stay with us to finish the school term, and she just kind of never left. (laughter) But she was there with us, and then a young man from down the street who was home from the military came, and he stayed at the house with us just in case he needed to help with something, so.

Stork: So, what time was it? It was on Sunday night when the hurricane struck?

Beard: Yeah, it got really, really bad Sunday night.

Stork: And what time do you think it was around?

Beard: Hm, I know it was after dark. I’m not sure about the time, I just remember that it was dark when it really got bad.

Stork: Were the kids already in bed?

Beard: No, they were too excited to go to bed. And basically we had—the kids had sleeping bags because we just kind of all camped out in my den. The kids had sleeping bags, had their own headlights, and it was just one big party; so no, they didn’t go to bed.

Stork: No, not all night?
**Beard:** They nodded; they napped, but I don’t think any of them ever went to sleep at the same time. (laughter) During the whole experience, I don’t know (laughter) that they all went to sleep at the same time.

**Bowen-Swan:** Were they worried at all? No? There wasn’t that sense of worrying—

**Beard:** No.

**Bowen-Swan:** —in your house, really? That’s good. That’s good.

**Beard:** That’s why I said it would probably be boring, you know, because we just—

**Bowen-Swan:** No, it’s—

**Beard:** Well, after having worked at the school, I know that you stay calm, and everybody around you stays calm. Because when I was working, if we had a tornado drill or warning, usually we had several children in the building who were really afraid of bad weather. I would e-mail the teachers and tell them, “OK, this is not a drill. This is the real thing. Start moving the children into the hall.” And then I would make an announcement and say, “Teachers, check your e-mail.” That way we could—everybody remained calm; we’d get the children out in the hall. They’d read, they’d sing songs, and everybody stayed calm, so.

**Bowen-Swan:** And they didn’t know if it was a drill or for real?

**Beard:** Right.

**Bowen-Swan:** Perfect.

**Bowen-Swan:** Um, so just talking about school and children, how have your children or your grandchildren responded after Hurricane Katrina, and what activities have they had?

**Beard:** Well, the one thing that they learned was they learned to spot the Red Cross truck, and that was a hoot because they would come around and bring, they’d bring the MREs [meals ready to eat]. Are you familiar with MREs?

**Stork:** No.

**Beard:** This meals ready to eat. It’s a military meal. They would either bring those or, they would come around; some of the trucks actually cooked and would bring hot meals door-to-door. And my grandson is, he’s a healthy little fellow, but he could hear a Red [Cross] truck coming a mile away, I think. (laughter) And it was so funny because he’d be standing out front, and he’d run out to the truck, and he’d get a meal for him. He’d say, “I got to get one for my mama.” And he would stand out there and collect as many meals as he could get, and finally, you know, the people were
wondering, and one of us would go out and laugh and tell them, “Yeah, we did have that many people in the house.” (laughter) But Scott would flag down anybody who passed by giving away anything.

**Stork:** Yeah, it’s exciting for a kid.

**Beard:** It was. He was, I mean, he was the man of the house. He’d say, “I’ve got to help Daddy get some food for everybody.” (laughter) So, it just—the kids, for them it was one big, like I said, one big party. They never—I don’t think they ever stopped to worry; I don’t think they ever realized how serious it was or could’ve been because they never saw that part of it.

**Stork:** Um-hm. How much damage was done to your neighborhood when you first were able to look outside, I guess, the next day?

**Beard:** Practically everybody on my street had what we called a “blue roof.” I mean the entire neighborhood had blue roofs. There was debris because most of us had, like, popcorn trees.

**Bowen-Swan:** What’s a popcorn tree?

**Beard:** Actually, in the fall the leaves turn. The leaves are really, really pretty. They look like the leaves on a painting—the yellow, the red, the orange. The leaves are really, really pretty when they’re there, but before they come the buds look like popcorn. And when you see—the tree is pretty both times; it’s just that the leaves shed, and you have to rake every day. You know, it’ll work you, but it’s a really pretty tree, but the buds look like popcorn. The tree actually looks like, you know.

**Bowen-Swan:** So, they were really ruined?

**Beard:** But they’re brittle; they’ll snap. So there were a lot of limbs in the yard, a lot of debris. Other than that I think, I don’t think anybody actually had a lot of water in their house. There were some houses down at the other end of my street that did get some water, but I don’t think anybody got a lot. I think the biggest damage was where we lost shingles and where the roofs were compromised, and the water came in from the top.

**Bowen-Swan:** And how did that compare for you, seeing that, compared to other storms that you’ve seen?

**Beard:** Well, that was a big switch because of all the storms I’ve seen, other than Camille, I had not seen a lot. I had not seen, you know, that much damage or devastation.

**Bowen-Swan:** So, what was that like for you seeing this damage?
Beard: It’s kind of depressing. It was kind of depressing when you look around and see all of the damage that’s been done, and you wonder how it’s affecting the people in the house. Because, you know, some people have a higher tolerance than others, and I guess my tolerance is pretty high. I just kind of take things in stride, but there are people who get all worried and stressed out over the least little thing. And we’ve got some little old ladies down the street from us who were really bothered, and my husband went down a lot to check on them to see what he could do, or he would take them a meal, that type of thing, you know, just trying to keep them on an even keel.

Bowen-Swan: Did your grandchildren have to change schools at all after the hurricane?

Beard: When the schools opened back up, oh yeah, they were anxious to go because everybody wanted to go so they could do show and tell. (laughter) Everybody had something to tell; so they were anxious to get back in school.

Bowen-Swan: Yeah, and they were able to go back to their same school?

Beard: Um-hm.

Bowen-Swan: Do you know how long they were out of school for?

Beard: Oh, you know, I really don’t remember. At least a couple of weeks. At least.

(Bowen-Swan: Yeah, and they were able to go back to their same school?)

Beard: When the schools opened back up, oh yeah, they were anxious to go because everybody wanted to go so they could do show and tell. (laughter) Everybody had something to tell; so they were anxious to get back in school.

Bowen-Swan: Yeah, and they were able to go back to their same school?

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Bowen-Swan: Do you know how long they were out of school for?

Beard: Oh, you know, I really don’t remember. At least a couple of weeks. At least.

(A portion of dialogue unrelated to the interview has not been transcribed.)

Bowen-Swan: What would you like to see in the rebuilding of your community and the Gulf Coast in general?

Beard: Well, they say we’re going to have a bigger and better place; so I’m hoping that a lot of the repairs end up being improvements on what we had. I know that here in Moss Point we’ve got a revitalization plan that they’re putting—where they’ve redesigned downtown Moss Point, they’ve got a blueprint of what they want the waterfront to look like, and they’re making application for some grant money that the federal government is offering in order to make some of these things happen. There’s a fire station that was damaged by the hurricane that has already been leveled, and I know it’s going to be a bigger, better one. So, that’s the main thing is we’re hoping that in spite of everything that was lost, we’re hoping that what replaces it will be bigger and better.

Stork: Was there a lot of historical things lost on the waterfront?

Beard: Well, in Moss Point a lot of the houses near the waterfront are older homes, but they were not necessarily on the historical registry. The biggest damage of that type of thing took place in Pascagoula along the beach.
**Stork:** So, what are your hopes and fears for the future?

**Beard:** Well, my hopes are that once Moss Point is revitalized that we can attract more industry to the area because Moss Point now is kind of boxed in and has lost all of its major industries, which is one of the reasons the population is going down. People are moving to areas where they can find jobs. So, I’m hoping that we can attract more industry to the area and just really start to grow again.

**Stork:** What were the major industries in Moss Point?

**Beard:** We lost International Paper Company a while back. Then there was Thiokol, which is a chemical company. Chevron is still here; it’s in Pascagoula, but still it employs a lot of the people from this area.

**Bowen-Swan:** What do they do at Chevron, again?

**Beard:** Chevron Pascagoula—it’s a refinery.

**Bowen-Swan:** OK, oil refinery?

**Beard:** Um-hm, oil refinery.

**Bowen-Swan:** And do you have any fears about the future?

**Beard:** No.

**Bowen-Swan:** No. That’s good. There’s no point in worrying.

**Beard:** Nopes. (laughter)

**Stork:** What issues do you anticipate in rebuilding the city? What issues?

**Beard:** What issues? Getting the money to fund what the plans are because right now I’m on a committee, a selection review committee with the city, and when they start working up their grants, I help go through; we review the different companies that turn in proposals. And we go through and try to select the one who has a plan that would best meet our needs as we put together our grant package, and I’m really optimistic about that.

**Bowen-Swan:** Um, in an ideal world, how would you like to see your community rebuilt?

**Beard:** Hm, well, in an ideal world I think if they follow the plans that they’ve already drawn up, they’re looking at, like, downtown Moss Point, they want quaint shops with overhead living, want multi-use buildings to attract people to the
downtown area, develop the waterfront more, so that it’ll be more accessible, just to attract more people to the area.

**Stork:** How do we preserve the strengths in communities—uh, strengths of our communities while addressing the challenges?

**Beard:** Well, you pull in the right people. It’s all about the people who work with you to make it happen. People can play on your strengths and make something better, or they can whine about the weaknesses and let everything slip through the cracks. It’s all about the people.

**Bowen-Swan:** Was there anything else you’d like to tell us about your hurricane experience?

**Beard:** I can say that if somebody tells me again that something similar to Hurricane Katrina is coming, *I’ll probably evacuate.* (laughter) I will probably leave.

**Bowen-Swan:** If you don’t know if you’ll be, you won’t get as, you won’t—this time you were lucky, you know; you didn’t get hit too hard, right?

**Beard:** I know. I know.

**Bowen-Swan:** But a lot of people were hit way harder than they ever dreamed of.

**Beard:** You know, just listening—I told you our church was a disaster relief center, and it was so funny; I told my husband, I said, “I think I must have a sign here on my forehead that says ‘Talk to me.’” Because people would come in and, you know, I would just sort of—I was more of a greeter, you know. You know, “Welcome to First Missionary Baptist. Come on in, and the young people can show you, you know, how to find what you need.” And I invariably had to hear a hurricane story first. It was like they’d come in; they’d tell me their story; then they’d go in and collect whatever they were going to get. After about a week, I had to take a few days off to collect myself. I had gotten so depressed just hearing, you know, all the horror stories. It bothered me. It even made me feel guilty, you know, because we were sitting up at home playing games and just, just literally enjoying ourselves in spite of it all, and people were out there going through all these horrors. But it was—it was awful. I mean just, I think that depressed me more than the storm itself, just hearing how it had affected other people. But I stayed home a couple of days, and it was funny because our pastor called me; he said, “You’re going to have to come back because they’re asking for you.” (laughter) I say, “Who appointed me counselor?” (laughter)

**Bowen-Swan:** Exactly.

**Stork:** What kind of services did your church provide for the community?
Beard: OK, we had, like, the gro[ceries]; like I said, we had the groceries; we had clothing; we had baby supplies; we had feminine items. Oh, I’ll never forget the lady who came in and took a box of twenty-four toothbrushes. What she was going to do with that many toothbrushes, I don’t know. But anyway, that’s another story.

(laughter)

Stork: And was all that just donated by—

Beard: Yeah.

Bowen-Swan: —church members?

Beard: Donated by—no, not necessarily by church members. We had trucks coming in from other areas, and they were bringing things to the different churches in the area, and our church just happened to be—it was an easier one to get to because it was right on the main street. So most trucks came, especially the ones coming into the black community, came to our church. And either we called, and the other churches in the community sent vans, sent their vans over to collect stuff, or our pastor, you know, divvied the stuff up, and they distributed it to some of the other churches. But we even had a truck to come in from Judge Maybelline. I don’t know if you watch Court TV in Canada. But Judge Maybelline is from Mississippi. She’s from the Delta area, and my pastor is from the Delta area, so I think he knew her family. But she had called and gotten directions to the church, and she was going to come with the truck, so we were all excited. You know, “Oh, hey, Judge Maybelline from Court TV is coming.” When her truck started out—what was the next hurricane that came in and hit Texas right after?

Unknown male: Rita.

Beard: Rita hit Texas. Well, she was coming out of Texas. She had to turn around and go back. When the weather cleared up a little bit, and the highways opened back up, she had another commitment, but she sent her brother to bring the truck on in. But we had churches—one day I manned the phone—churches from as far as away as New York were calling wanting to know what they could do to help the people in Mississippi. And usually we had a kind of a list, you know, a lot of people are without beds, this type thing; so a lot of churches sent Wal-Mart gift cards; they sent money with instructions on how it was to be distributed. So, just a lot of things were channeled in, and people were calling and sending from all over. There was a church in the Mississippi Delta that adopted my daughter, and they were going to send her an allowance for a year. So, we did, like, a little résumé, you know, telling them about her and her family. We took a picture of her in front of her trailer to show them. We showed them the house, the condition of the house, and then I took a picture of her and the kids in front of the trailer, and we sent it. And for about six months they did send her a check to the church. Then we finally notified them that, you know, if there was a greater need someplace else, because April was doing OK. You know, why take it if she could make it without it? Because there was probably somebody else who could
have used it more. But, I mean, it was just amazing the way people rallied to help other people. And I think that’s one of the—I don’t know; sometimes it takes something like a Katrina to bring out the human side of people, and I just think that everybody in this area, you know, they’re just all much better because of it all, in spite of it all.

Bowen-Swan: Um-hm. Good, Well, I’m glad to hear. Thank you very much for taking the time and sharing what you shared with us today.

Stork: Wait, I still have something. You said you grew up here in Pascagoula—

Beard: Uh-huh, Moss Point.

Stork: I mean in Moss Point, right?

Beard: Yeah.

Stork: Could you tell us some more about your childhood? Was there any memories—

Beard: OK, my childhood.

Stork: —of maybe a typical day in your childhood?

Beard: OK. When I grew up in Moss Point, the city was still totally segregated, which meant we had schools for whites, school for blacks; everything was on a black/white level. But I never really felt segregated or isolated or anything of that nature. We just, just took it all in stride. My mom babysat for a white couple, and I mean, I would go to work with her, and I would stay in the room and play with the girls while she was working, or if she couldn’t get there, you know, the lady would drop the girls off at our house. And I never realized, I guess, segregation in its truest sense. Never had a problem at the drug store or the pharmacy when my grandmother got her medicine we would have to—we called it walking to town because it was right out here on the highway, and we lived just—it was right down the street. So we would walk down to get her medicine and go in and, you know, request a prescription to be filled. And they had like a little dairy bar or a counter, and nobody ever told me that I wasn’t supposed to sit at the counter because I was black. And when I went over there and sat to wait on her prescription, nobody ever told me I needed to get up. You know, and it just amazed me when I would hear the horror stories about how things were, and I never really experienced any of that. My first experience with segregation was after I graduated from high school at an all-black high school, I went off to college at an all-black college, and I came back home, and I was going to take one class that summer, and I went to the community college in Gautier, enrolled in a class no problem, went into this class, and when I sat down, um, I noticed that, you know, chairs started scooting. And I looked, and I was sitting here, because I’m a front-row sitter.
**Stork:** Um-hm, me, too. (laughter)

**Beard:** OK, and I noticed that, you know, everybody was moving, and I was kind of sitting in the—I was front and center all right, but everybody else had moved. And I didn’t pay it any attention; you know, I just went on and took my notes. Got home and my mom said, “Well, how was school?” I said, “Great.” Did not dare tell her that nobody wanted to sit by me.

**Bowen-Swan:** Because she would’ve been mad?

**Beard:** She would have been worried.

**Bowen-Swan:** OK.

**Beard:** OK. Went back for the next class, and there was a retired airman from Keesler, the Air Force base, who was taking—

**Bowen-Swan:** In Mississippi here?

**Beard:** Uh-huh. It’s located in the Biloxi area. [He] was taking that class, and when the rearranging of the room started, he came and pulled his chair up right beside me; so now there were two of us front and center. And the instructor walked over—

**Bowen-Swan:** This is another black man or a white man?

**Beard:** White. *I was the only black one in there.*

**Bowen-Swan:** Oh, OK.

**Beard:** The instructor walked over, stood right in front of us and started to lecture in a very soft voice.

**Bowen-Swan:** So everyone had to—

**Beard:** He did that for the entire class period. The next class period we came in, the airman and I sat there, and when the instructors came over and started to lecture again I think they got the message because before that class period was over, everybody had come back. (laughter)

**Bowen-Swan:** Good.

**Beard:** And that was my first experience. And I must’ve been, I must’ve been about eighteen at that time, and that was the first time I had ever experienced any type of attitude about race or color. But growing up in this area was great. We loved our school; our teachers loved us. In fact, there was such a sense of family in our school.
We were Magnolia Elementary and Magnolia High. Every summer our old high school—because I think the last class graduated from Magnolia in about [19]69 or [19]70—every summer we have, like, small scale reunions. Well, this is the summer for the, we called it “This is the big year.” Every third year we have a parade, and we have a ball. Everything’s purple and gold because those were our school colors. Every class earns points, and the night of the ball, a king and a queen will be crowned based on the points you earned, and a lot of the points are service points. For example, at Easter we do Easter egg hunts for the children in the area, and you get points for every dozen eggs that you bring for the hunt. You also get points for working the hunt. You get points for doing other things that are designated in the community. And we fill the—I don’t know if you’ve been down by the Civic Center in Pascagoula on the fairgrounds; it’s a really big building. We have our ball there every third year, and people who have left the area always arrange to come home at that time. It’s usually around the Fourth of July; so it is just one big reunion that happens every three years. So, you know, I have nothing but good memories of growing up and going to school here.

Bowen-Swan: OK. Well, I think that’s filling up our time a little more, so thanks so much for coming and doing this interview with us.

Beard: Sure, no problem.

Bowen-Swan: OK.

(end of interview)