Mississippi Oral History Program

Hurricane Katrina Oral History Project

An Oral History

with

Jeff Weathersby

Interviewer: Beth Morgan

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Morgan: I’m Beth Morgan, and I’m here in Gulfport at Pat Peck Honda with Jeff Weathersby, who is in sales here. And Jeff came to the Gulf Coast months, or the month prior, to Katrina hitting. Where did you live prior to moving to the Gulf Coast?

Weathersby: We lived in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, about seventy miles north.

Morgan: OK. And you also recently married. Is that—

Weathersby: Yes ma’am. We got married the December beforehand, so we’d been married about nine months, almost.

Morgan: Had you grown up in Hattiesburg? Was that—

Weathersby: I didn’t grow up there, but I lived there for the past six years, so I had some roots established there, so. But I grew up in Louisiana, in Mandeville, so I kind of stayed in the same region my whole life.

Morgan: So you’ve had some experience with hurricanes and hurricane warning, being in Mandeville?

Weathersby: Oh, yes. I remember as a kid; my dad had his own business. I remember a couple of times we’d have to get up and go board up the office and get things ready just for a precaution. So that’s how, I guess, a normal—you grow up, and it’s kind of normal to hear about hurricane warnings and things like that.

Morgan: So you had been accustomed to what procedures you have to take. Had you ever had to evacuate Mandeville?

Weathersby: We evacuated a few times, but we’ve always come home to everything being safe and sound. We never had any damage, just one of those things you do as a precaution, just in case.

Morgan: And so when did you move to Gulfport?
Weathersby:  August 4, 2005.

Morgan:  OK.  And were you in a house or an apartment?

Weathersby:  We had signed all the lease work for the apartment; we couldn’t move in until September 1, so my wife’s grandmother lives here, and we were staying with her, supposedly until the first of September.

Morgan:  And where was the apartment located?

Weathersby:  On Pass Road in Gulfport.

Morgan:  Is that north or south of I-10?

Weathersby:  It is south of I-10.

Morgan:  OK.  And your grandmother lived where?

Weathersby:  She lived off of Lorraine-Cowan Road, south of I-10 in the Brentwood subdivision.

Morgan:  Has she lived on the Coast all her life?

Weathersby:  She lived on the Coast for a large part of her life, and they were military, so I know they spent some time in Hawai and some other places, but for the past, I’d say, thirty-five years, she’s been in the same house.  She’s been here for a long time.

Morgan:  Was she here when Camille hit, or she just missed Camille?

Weathersby:  I’m not sure if she was here or not, then.  I don’t really know.  Maybe I should know more about my wife’s family, but I’m not sure about that.

Morgan:  OK.  So you were staying in a house, south of I-10, and in the week prior to—well, let me ask you this.  Did Pat Peck Honda, do they have standard hurricane training?  Had y’all been trained in any sort of procedure for—

Weathersby:  I wasn’t here at that time, so I didn’t—I wasn’t here before the storm.  When we moved, I didn’t have a job when we moved here, and there were some things going on, that it’d been—you know, I wanted to be out of the way before I found a job.  And then the storm hit, so in a way, it kind of worked out good that I didn’t have a job because I was freed up to do things.  And where we were at, we were kind of trapped and couldn’t back to the Coast right away.  So you know, it probably worked out for the best that way.
Morgan: Well, what were you doing the week prior to Katrina when the first news warnings started coming in, “It’s in the Gulf, and it looks bad”?

Weathersby: Well, it’s kind of bad to say, but I didn’t do anything. You know, my whole life I grew up hearing those things, and we were just kind of—I guess I didn’t think much of it. “Oh, it’s going to turn at the last minute like the other ones have and go somewhere else,” you know. “We’re going to be OK.” So, you know, at the beginnings of it, I didn’t think anything of it.

Morgan: How long—do you remember when it hit you that, “Whoa! This may not be turning”?

Weathersby: Well, I remember the weeks of it, it kept getting big, and you knew it was going to hit somewhere; you knew it was going to be bad somewhere, and I guess the point when you realized, “It’s coming to Gulfport; it’s coming to the Coast,” is when we started making preparations, when it was so big and just moving. It was turning a little bit, but it was turning so slowly, and it was so big that we knew we were going to get something, some bad weather, or some damage.

Morgan: Do you remember what day of the week you started actually taking some preparation?

Weathersby: Well, I remember—I think one of the things I remember the most is we left Sunday, and I remember us loading everything up and tying everything down and getting ready. And I remember looking around, and you could just tell that something bad was coming. The skies had that darkness to them, and you could just tell bad weather was coming. And I remember we loaded up; I loaded up my wife’s car, or our car, and my wife’s grandmother’s car with as much stuff as we could put in there and secured the house as best we could, tied things down in the yard, and we had to leave a car in Gulfport. And I really thought, “Well, this is the last time we’re going to see this car again.” But we went to my in-laws’ house, and they live just north of Hattiesburg, and that’s where we waited out the storm.

Morgan: What town do they live in?

Weathersby: It’s a little town called Moselle in Jones County; they live out in a rural area, out in the middle of nowhere.

Morgan: Were you surprised how hard you got hit up in Moselle?

Weathersby: I was very surprised. I think one of the things that hurt or that, I guess, affected a lot of people is I don’t think anybody realized that it was going to be as bad as it was. And there’s a lot of criticism going on, blaming who, but I think when it’s all said and done, like all the powers-that-be kind of met, and no one thought—they thought it would blow over, and “We’ll look like heroes because we didn’t waste all their money and go to such extremes.” And I was very surprised when (inaudible) we
just waited out the storm. And it was scary. My in-laws live on an old dairy farm, and there’s lots of pastures, and so you can see for miles, but here and there there’s huge oak trees, and it amazed me to see this huge oak tree that had been there for hundreds of years, just topple down and thinking, “If that tree went, then this house could go at any moment.”

**Morgan:** Were they coming up by the roots? Were they breaking off?

**Weathersby:** Both. There were some that would snap in half and some that would come up from the roots and just topple over. And it was scary. I actually had just bought a car a few months ago, and we had parked it by an oak tree. And my father-in-law said, “That tree’s been there,” since he was a kid, and been there forever and not to worry. Well, there was a branch that was just hanging really low, and I got kind of nervous because I was like, “Well, I don’t want—I just got this car.” And so I ran out there in the rain, and I moved it, and not five minutes later that tree came down. So it would have totaled our car out, so thankfully I moved it just in time. But it came down, and it didn’t miss the house by very much. So it could have very well taken out the house, too.

**Morgan:** Did y’all lose electricity in Moselle?

**Weathersby:** We lost electricity. I would say we were probably without power for two weeks, and after the storm, we were just out on county land; it’s not a city. They really don’t have the organized city where they lived in, and we were trapped. Trees were blocking the roads, and I remember getting out there. You could hear the chain saws going. All the neighbors had to get together and start cleaning the roads and clear a path and every now and then a neighbor—the neighbor is like a mile or two away. So it wasn’t like you lived, just—houses were close by every now and then. Someone would make their way through the debris and come check on us, or we would go out and try to fight our way through the debris and check on other people. And it was the residents of that community that had to get together and really try to clear the roads and kind of look after each other. And my mother-in-law actually has cancer, and her medicine has to be refrigerated. So that was a big concern, and we had a generator, and we’d run it just enough to keep the refrigerator cool and keep the freezer charged up. And there was a lot of fear going on. From what you’d get from the radio, it was kind of just panic everywhere. And all you kept hearing was bad things, “This is bad.” FEMA’s [Federal Emergency Management Agency] run out of supplies, or MEMA’s [Mississippi Emergency Management Agency] run out of supplies or this and that, and you really didn’t know what to expect. And so we were like that; I mean, we were kind of trapped close to the house for a few days, before we could even get out into the city, and I remember the road cleared enough we can get a path out, and I want—me and my wife, like I told you earlier, we got married in December of 2004. We lived in a really small apartment on campus at USM [The University of Southern Mississippi] in student housing, so we didn’t have a lot of room to keep all our stuff. And so a lot of it was in boxes in storage at my in-laws, and we were moving. When we moved to the Coast, since we knew we were going to
be with her grandmother temporarily, we rented a storage shed in Hattiesburg and just had all our stuff there. And I remember I wanted to go—we got out, and we were going to Hattiesburg on, it had to be like that Friday or Saturday at the earliest after the storm. And we were driving around Hattiesburg, and I was amazed at how much damage Hattiesburg had gotten that far north.

Morgan: Can you describe Highway 49 in your drive down from Moselle?

Weathersby: Oh, well, Highway 49, I don’t remember too much between Hattiesburg and Moselle, but I remember going, the first time we tried to go back to Gulfport and how horrible the roads were. And I was thinking, “Oh, I don’t want to get a flat tire because if something happens, we’re stuck. It’s not like someone can come get us.” Gas was very hard to come by, and I remember there was just—you might see twenty trucks go by, like power trucks or things from Georgia or Florida, just in a row, just massive crews out there doing stuff. And it seemed that it would never get cleaned up, just as bad as it was, it would never get completely taken care of.

Morgan: Was 49 cleared by the Friday?

Weathersby: Well, we didn’t try to go south on getting to Moselle to Hattiesburg; I don’t remember too much. I mean, that’s only—I’m talking about we take the interstate from Hattiesburg to Moselle, and there was some stuff down on the interstate, but it wasn’t bad enough to be really memorable. The week after that, we tried to go to Gulfport, and I remember just the whole trip down there, it was bad. A lot of debris everywhere; a good chunk of the way, it was just one lane. You didn’t have the two lanes going in each direction. It was a very slow trip to get down there. You just had to be careful, watch for debris, just crews seemed to be working nonstop. I had a friend that worked for a power company; finally got a hold of him one day because I was trying to find out what was going on, and with him being with the power company, I figured he might have first knowledge. And he said they had crews from all over the country, and everyone was working fourteen-hour days, seven days a week, and I never thought it would get cleared up. You hear something’s that bad; it’s never going to get cleared up. And we did have some bad stuff happen. We didn’t own a house; we didn’t have to come home and our house be destroyed, but our storage shed got robbed in Hattiesburg. And my wife took it really hard, I think; harder than I did, and I was just, I guess, had too much other stuff, thinking about how are we going to just make it, with everything we’d hear on the radio, and how difficult things were right now. So I wasn’t in the mind-set of, “Oh, our storage shed got robbed.” And we pulled up, and there was no lock on the door. And I didn’t think anything of it, and I opened it up, and something was wrong with it, and I didn’t quite place it. And I realized, “Wait a minute. We had a lot more stuff in here, and it was just stuff like a blender and some other things, but it was wedding gifts and picture frames and other things. And to me that was the biggest thing; I would have felt—it wouldn’t have been the same if a tree just landed on it and broke it or destroyed it. It was that someone robbed it; I mean, they took our wedding memories. But we tried not to go anywhere or do anything unless we had to. Gas was insanely high, and the
lines were miles long when there was gas to get in Hattiesburg. On two occasions we went to North Mississippi to get gas, and my father-in-law, I went with him one day, just me and him, and he was rebuilding an old Porsche, just as a hobby. And we found everything we could get to put gas in and bring back, and we even pulled the gas tank out of the Porsche, old Porsche and sealed it off to use that. It’s just one other thing to bring gas home in, and we made two trips there to get gas to keep—

Morgan: How far north did you have to go?

Weathersby: We went to Grenada, and there gas was still high, but there was no limit. If you were paying cash, you can get as much gas as you wanted, and we made two trips, and both times we got hundreds of dollars worth of gas, as much as we could possibly get. We did one of those trips; the first one that we—the whole family, we just went out to eat. It was nice to have an air-conditioned restaurant and real food, and we went to Wal-Mart and got groceries and food and supplies and brought some stuff back for the neighbors, and you kind of had to make sure you looked out for each other where we were at. We did that, and we finally went back to the Coast, and the whole time we didn’t have any kind of cell phone recovery or telephones or power or anything, and it was kind of strange. Right when we got to Harrison County is when I got cell phone reception again. I thought that was kind of funny, and we got there.

Morgan: Had you had any reports on your wife’s grandmother home prior to then?

Weathersby: No. We couldn’t get in touch with anybody. And me and my wife both had unheard number of voicemails; people’d kind of call and check on us and see what was going on, and it was hard to make any calls out. The system was bogged down. And we got down there. My wife’s grandmother’s house had just a very little damage; it was very minimal. Over the laundry room had a little damage, but most part, it was OK. Other than that, the food in the refrigerator had gone bad. For the most part, we were fortunate. A lot of people a lot worse off than we were. My wife’s car was OK. A branch hit the windshield and just left a little crack. Someone siphoned all the gas out of it, but that’s understandable. In those times you have to survive. So if that was the worst that we went through, then I was OK with that. I remember after the storm, my wife had to go back teaching eventually, but during the storm we went to visit some family and things like that since we had this time off from school and things. And we came back home, and I think one of the really neat things was you go and see how many people were around the country, just kind of band together for something like that. Every church in Gulfport and Biloxi had teams come in and help their repairs, distribute food, and there was distribution lines everywhere. And I thought that was impressive of how people from all over the country kind of reach out and to help and regardless of what you may believe or I may believe or anything, it’s just people were there to help. And that was encouraging. I remember I went to go get some water, and since we didn’t have any—we didn’t have running water for a long time or drinkable water. And I think one of the best things was we got some cheesecake from a church. And I was thinking, “Oh, cheesecake.” When
you think about—it’s kind of, a sense of normalcy was really good, and it was just kind of something nice to have, and it was kind of—

**Morgan:** Instead of just plain, lukewarm water and something out of a can.

**Weathersby:** And MREs [meals ready to eat] and who knows what else, and I thought that was so bizarre when they gave that to us, but I thought, “That’s really something that perked our spirits up, something as little as cheesecake.” And you look at things now, not even a year removed from the storm, and it’s hard to even tell that there ever was a storm unless you drive down south of the railroad tracks. For the most part, homes are repaired, and businesses are open, and it’s hard to even tell if there was a storm here. And I remember when we were back here, and we were tired of eating sandwiches and things like that, and we decided we were going to go out to eat. And we found the TGI Friday’s was here, open, and they were in full—they were, like, the only restaurant open in full swing. And we waited two and a half hours for a table, and we were glad to wait. It was just—and things like that, it’s weird how your mind-set changes on things, overnight. One thing you wouldn’t think of doing, the next day you’re doing it and glad to do it.

**Morgan:** And happy to do.

**Weathersby:** Yeah, happy to wait two and a half hours for a table at a restaurant that has a very limited menu, that they’re out of everything because the whole town’s coming to eat there.

**Morgan:** Well, you had come down to hunt for a job and to sort of relocate yourselves down here.

**Weathersby:** Um-hm.

**Morgan:** Did you have time to think about what this storm may have done to your job prospects?

**Weathersby:** Well, my wife had just graduated and got a job teaching, and I still had another semester. So I wasn’t really looking for full-time work; I was just trying to—I wanted to finish up at school, and I was just going to try to work for something with my experience. I was looking for something flexible and that would work with my schedule, but still be a pretty good, I guess, college job. And my wife’s grandmother was having surgery; she raises two little granddaughters. And I said, “Well, I’ll wait until after she has her surgery to look for a job because she’s going to need help watching the kids. She’s going in the hospital for a while and needs someone to look after them.” So that’s why I didn’t initially look for a job, and after the storm, I remember I got a job interview at a pharmacy, and I was two hours late for my interview because I couldn’t get there. It was just—I couldn’t. It was five miles away, but the roads were gridlocked, and if this road wasn’t gridlocked, then I’d get sent down endless detours, and end up somewhere totally off base. They still hired
me, though, so I guess I impressed them enough on my interview, but it was insane how different things were. It took an hour to get to work every day, just up the road, just because you didn’t have Highway 90; you didn’t have a lot of other—the Popps Ferry Bridge was out. Highway 90 was out, and a lot of methods to go and come were gone so you just had very limited options. And I’m sure it was very good for business here. Everybody needed a new car. So I guess it worked out great for the people here at Pat Peck, but I was really impressed with just the outreach that people did. And I consider ourselves very fortunate; what we lost I consider minor losses. There was a family that came into the pharmacy; they were regular customers at the pharmacy I worked at, and they brought in a Christmas card they had made. And it’s the whole family standing in front of what was their house, and it’s just a slab. And I’m thinking, “Well, they have a great attitude about it. I don’t think I could have had that attitude if I lost everything.” My wife’s brother, his wife, her family had lost everything. I mean, they lived in the same house as they got married in, and her parents had lived there for—they’d built their whole lives there. She grew up there.

**Morgan:** Where’d they live?

**Weathersby:** Port Sulphur, Louisiana, and they lost everything. I mean, they—I don’t even know if they had a slab to come back to. I mean, everything was gone; everything they’d built their lives around. And I couldn’t imagine having as good of an attitude that they had when they came back to that.

**Morgan:** Where does your wife teach school?

**Weathersby:** She teaches; she’s the choral director at Bayou View Middle School.

**Morgan:** Was the school damaged?

**Weathersby:** The school had a lot of damage; I don’t think I ever went up there. But the school had some damage to it, and school was out for about a month, and it was not only from the school being damaged, but a lot of the teachers were displaced, and the students were displaced. And the school district was really good about trying to look after the kids and the teachers. I’m not sure where they came from, but at my wife’s school—and I’m not sure this was at other schools, also—they had gotten in a lot of appliances like washers and dryers and things like that to give to the teachers who needed them, giving appliances and stuff and help out, just kind of help teachers rebuild. And a lot of churches and different organizations sent school supplies and clothes and just whatever you can imagine down for the students and really helped restore life. And school was a lot different after that because my wife had about a month with the students before the storm.

**Morgan:** What grades does she teach?

**Weathersby:** Sixth through eighth grade. And after the storm, things were very different, very relaxed. Even though school was in session, they couldn’t go back to
the full swing of things because there was a lot of just, I guess, emotional distress. And I guess it’d be hard for a kid to focus in school when they lost everything they owned, and they’re staying with friends or juggling around. And so a lot of concessions were made in that regard. Things weren’t as strict, and there was a lot more for trying to build a routine and get things back to normal than so much schooling, I guess, technically. But it was hard, and I don’t think anybody’s going to forget what it was like to go through the storm.

Morgan: Did you ever debate after the storm, “Maybe I don’t want to live on the Gulf Coast”? (laughter)

Weathersby: I keep joking with my wife that the next one that comes through, we’re moving to Washington State because you don’t hear of anything happening up there so we’re just going to—

Morgan: Pretty boring.

Weathersby: —hope for the best up there. But in a way I was kind of glad to be here because you experienced something, and you get to help out, and you get to help other people. And that, to me, it’s satisfying to be able to reach out to people, and there’s things you can learn from it and take from it, and you certainly should appreciate things more. You don’t take things for granted as much, and it was a crazy time. And I can’t say I enjoyed spending two weeks in the summer with no [cooling], not being able to take a shower. It’s hot and sweaty, a-hundred-degree August heat, and it was very trying. But I guess next time something like that comes around, I think people here will be better equipped to handle it emotionally. And all the problems that happened among people, maybe that won’t be such a big deal next time.

Morgan: Are you getting a sense from your neighbors or the community or people that you talked to that they’re now more ready to evacuate, less laissez-faire about hurricane warnings now?

Weathersby: I’m thinking that anything that comes through here, Category One, Category Five, whatever, anything, I imagine that a lot of people are going to leave. And you hear reports that people who are still staying in the FEMA trailers don’t want to leave because that’s all they have, and they don’t want to lose what little they have left. And for me and my perspective, I’ve never been an overly materialistic person. I can replace a TV or a car or things like that. I can’t replace my family, but some people, that may be all they have, and they don’t want to lose that, their only sense of normalcy. But I imagine that if anything comes through here besides a strong wind, there’s going to be a lot of people leaving, and especially with like New Orleans. I imagine New Orleans is going to be empty for anything.

Morgan: There was a lot of coverage prior to June 1, this year, “Here comes the next hurricane season.” As June 1 hit, and hurricane season opened, did you find yourself
being anxious at all about it? And Alberto just made his presence in the Coast. Did you find yourself anxious about that?

**Weathersby:** I wasn’t anxious about that. I really get annoyed, and I really got irritated with the media coverage during Katrina and the whole thing. It’s like they played on people’s—obviously they want to get ratings, and they wanted you to watch. They played on what got people riled up, and I thought they really didn’t cover a lot of the Coast. They more so covered New Orleans more than anything else because I think they said, “Well, this is what gets the most reaction.” And while New Orleans suffered a lot of damage, I don’t think they were ever technically hit by the hurricane; they just had their levees break, if I’m understanding it correctly. And a lot of loss and a lot of tragedy there, but it seems like they plan on what can they do to stir things up and to get their ratings up and not so much, “Well, here’s what’s going on in New Orleans; here’s what’s going on in Biloxi or Gulfport. Here’s what’s going on in Alabama.” And the news could have been a tool for people here to say, “OK. Here’s what’s going on here.” The news, I know we listened to 107.9, I think. It’s the only station we could get where we were at that had anything to do with the Coast, and all they—they had a generator, and they were operating, and all they did is people who could get through, whether there was a food distribution or whatever, they would just relay that information. And that was so helpful and so beneficial, and I wish the media had done more things like that instead of focusing on, “Here’s something going on in New Orleans.” The whole issue with the Superdome and this and that and looting.

**Morgan:** The looting.

**Weathersby:** I don’t think that helped people; it certainly got people riled up a lot, but it didn’t benefit anybody, and I think with Alberto, they played on people’s fears and emotions and trying to get things drummed up for them, and so it didn’t bother me because I check things out for myself. I went to Weather.com and checked the Weather Channel and kept an eye on it, and the next time something comes through, I’ll keep my eye on things, and be ready if we need to leave and not take anything as lightly as I have in the past. And I think that was a big problem, especially like New Orleans; the mayor got a lot of grief over it, and I think probably in reality, he probably sat down with his advisors, and no one expected the storm to be as bad as they did. And they thought, “Well, we’ll just open up the Superdome, let people stay. This will all blow over Monday night, and Tuesday I’ll look like a hero for acting as I did.” If the cards fell a little different, then that would have worked, but it didn’t. And I think he got a lot of undue—I mean, certainly there were some things they could have done differently, but I don’t think all the blame should have fallen solely on him. But it was definitely a time that I don’t think anybody will forget. Been a lot of public outreach, and throughout the whole country, which is good. It kind of makes you feel a little better about people, that there’s still, I guess, good in the world, and that sounds so, I guess, cliché or silly to say, but it’s true.

(end of interview)