Mississippi Oral History Project

Hurricane Katrina Oral History Project

An Oral History

with

Jessica Beane

Interviewer: Beth Morgan

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At the time of the interview, Jessica Beane lived in Bay St. Louis and worked as a full-time volunteer for Foundation Hope, a non-profit organization founded to assist those affected by Hurricane Katrina. Prior to Katrina, Ms. Beane worked as an accountant in the Sponsored Programs Administration of The University of Southern Mississippi in Hattiesburg, and had a part-time financial business. After Katrina hit, Ms. Beane resigned from her position at the university to devote herself full-time to Foundation Hope and helping the people of the Gulf Coast.
This is an interview for the Mississippi Oral History Program of The University of Southern Mississippi. The interview is with Jessica Beane and is taking place on October 26, 2005. The interviewer is Beth Morgan.

Morgan: I’m talking with Jessica Beane, who works for Foundation Hope in Bay St. Louis. Jessica, where were you when Katrina hit?

Beane: I was in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, that’s where I have a home. And my neighborhood, my best friend lives there and another new best friend, Mike Smith, he owns Cingular Wireless stores in Hattiesburg and Bay St. Louis areas. At the time the storm hit, me and some of my friends were staying with Trisha Myrick, my best friend, and we rode out the storm there. We didn’t have any damage to our homes, personally; there were some in our neighborhoods. So the day after the storm we started cleaning up our neighborhood and we just got to know a lot of the neighbors. Really got to know Mike very well, he just helped us out tremendously in the neighborhood going above and beyond. And we started talking to some other people and made some connections, and a couple of days after the storm, Mike’s Cingular store in Hattiesburg had electricity and water and he said, “Well, why don’t we just all go stay at the store. We can live up there until we all get power back in the neighborhood, and water.” So that’s what we did. And we stayed in the store for a couple of days, probably, maybe one night, and then we had started talking about we wanted to be able to do something to help out because we could. We had the resources available to do that. Mike wanted to let people come in and be able to make phone calls and send e-mails and try to contact family members and friends and let them know that they’re OK or they need help or, you know, whatever we could do for them. And we said, well, we want to try to get supplies out to people who’ve lost everything or who’ve lost something and they, you know, they need food and water and whatever. So the local radio station just happened to be—it’s not a coincidence at all— but happened to be just upstairs from his store. And so we would get on the radio and tell people what was needed, what people needed, and ask for donations, and people started bringing stuff in. We made more phone calls. People from Memphis started bringing stuff down. We got gas for local hospitals, diesel, to run, to operate the generators to be able to keep the patients alive; there were patients dying. I mean, it was just, it just exploded in a matter of days.

Morgan: And that was all from the Hattiesburg store?

Beane: That was from Hattiesburg. There was more—I mean, Hattiesburg area,
north of the Coast, was pretty much ignored for the most part because, you know, we didn’t suffer from major damage like they did here on the Coast but there were a lot of people that lost their homes and, or they lost something or they had a lot of damage and they needed help, too. And so we were there—we wanted to take care of our home first—and we were there for ten days doing the supplies and the, you know, the contacting family members and all that, and trying to help people register for FEMA [Federal Emergency Management Agency] and whatever we could. We did whatever we could to help people. And we realized that the major need was here in Bay St. Louis/Waveland area. Mike grew up in Waveland, and his parents and his brother were, well, they still lived in Waveland. His brother and his dad were—his dad’s the assistant fire chief of Waveland Fire Department—so his dad and his brother, they were at the fire station when Katrina hit because he had no choice, basically. The water started coming in the firehouse very quickly and they tried to get away in the fire truck but it started flooding. I mean, the water came up so fast they were on top of the fire truck. The last that Mike and his mom heard was that they were going to have to swim. And this, you know, this is like one small miracle after, well, one miracle after the next to make this huge miracle, that after two days they thought they were dead, they show up in Hattiesburg. And anyway, they are our huge connection here. That’s how, that’s why Trisha and I are here because of Mike and his family, now our adopted family. But they lost their home. It was flooded. And anyway, we came here to his Cingular store.

**Morgan:** So what was your real job in Hattiesburg—

**Beane:** My real job—

**Morgan:** —prior to Katrina?

**Beane:** Well, my real job was, I was an accountant for The University of Southern Mississippi [USM] at Sponsored Programs Administration. I’d been there for about three years and it was a really good job and I loved the people there. I enjoyed it but I was really, for a few months now I’ve been thinking there’s something else, there’s something more. I’m too scared to—I have a financial business, my friend and I, on the side. Well, I was doing it part time and it’s commission based so I was pretty scared about, you know, doing it full time, quitting the regular job. And so I didn’t really have any, I didn’t have that one little thing that it took to push me over the edge to say, “OK, this is it”, you know. I knew that my time was pretty much up at USM. It served its purpose, it was a great job but I knew the time was coming soon, I just didn’t know exactly when, what was going to happen, how it was going to play out but—

**Morgan:** So Katrina was that one little thing for you?

**Beane:** Katrina was that one big thing, pretty much. But what happened was, after we came down here, we were here for a few days doing relief work, just getting it started. And it started out pretty small, basically where we left off in Hattiesburg, and within a matter of a couple of days it was really just snowballing. And by that time it had been
about two weeks since the storm and I was supposed to go back to work. I missed the first two days because I didn’t want to go because I wanted to be here. And I thought, “There’s no way. I can’t. I can’t go back to that when I know that this is where I’m supposed to be.” I had no doubt about it. And it was—I mean, I was scared but I was like, “I know this is what I’m doing so I’m just going to go in and do it.” And I went in there Monday morning and I—

**Morgan:** Back to Hattiesburg?

**Beane:** —put in my notice. Back to Hattiesburg and put in my notice, and I mean, you know, they were shocked pretty much but they were very good to me, they were very supportive. And I couldn’t have asked for, you know, a better response.

**Morgan:** Are you a full-time volunteer here?

**Beane:** Yes. We’re all volunteers, no profit whatsoever, I mean, you know.

**Morgan:** And where are you located, the Hope Foundation—Foundation Hope?

**Beane:** Foundation Hope is here. It’s in Bay St. Louis’ Zuppardo’s Bay Plaza. We started—

**Morgan:** You started in the Cingular store.

**Beane:** Well, we started in the Cingular Store that Mike owns. And there was an empty store next door that used to be a Curves Workout Center and it was empty, it was abandoned, and the mayor gave us eminent domain over it, so that’s our warehouse. So we keep supplies there. We have supplies in tents in the parking lot. And anyway, we’d, you know, after we came down here it snowballed. And we made more and more connections and more supplies coming in. And now we are one of the three distribution centers in this area. Well, four, one of four in the three cities—Waveland, Bay St. Louis, and Pearlington. And we are the most organized. We receive donations from all over the country. We have volunteers coming from all over the country and it’s just about to be, I mean, it’s huge now but it’s about to be even bigger. We’re going to continue. We’re in the works of some ongoing, permanent relief. I guess I don’t want to give too much details right now, but.

**Morgan:** So where are you living, because there’s no place to live in?

**Beane:** I’m living in an RV in the back of the Cingular store that—Steve McNair is one of our main, major donors, and a connection of his, a friend of his connection has loaned us their RV. So, and now we have another RV from Wisconsin.

**Morgan:** RV Chateau behind us. Is this you?
Beane: Yes.

Morgan: OK.

Beane: This is me. Yeah. And I tell you what, after sleeping in our cars, after sleeping on a floor—I don’t even remember—sleeping in the store on cots, an RV was like a palace. (laughter) So it really doesn’t matter anymore. I mean, after being here and seeing people living in tents and living on the slab where their home used to be, I mean, you pretty much don’t even think of your own needs any more. It’s so humbling. I mean, I don’t even think about my house and my bed. I mean, honestly, I just, it doesn’t even cross my mind hardly ever anymore and it’s just not important. The things that we used to think were important are so unimportant now. And things that, you know, we thought we needed, we don’t need. And just, it’s been such a life-changing experience for us, for everyone. It’s like we’re getting back to the basics of life and back to the important things of people and God. And it’s like God’s allowed this to happen for a good reason. There are so many people that come through the lines in our center that they have so much hope and they’re just thankful for what they have and they’re thankful for their family and thankful for their lives and, I mean, you think, if that was me, would I be that thankful? You know, would I, how would I feel if I was in their shoes? And that’s why we put ourselves here. We stay here. We don’t go to a hotel. We don’t go home every night. We’re living—

Morgan: You’re living the way your clients are living?

Beane: Right. Well, some of them.

Morgan: Better than some because they don’t have RVs.

Beane: Better. Better. Right. Because so many people are still in the tents, they’re not going to get trailers. FEMA’s not going to be here much longer and, you know, a lot of the military have pulled out. And that’s why we chose the name Foundation Hope because you have to have a foundation, and you have to have hope. And our foundation is in Christ and our hope’s in Christ and that’s why we don’t, we don’t tell people, we don’t beat Bibles over people’s heads. But they see it in us and they see the difference and that’s what we’re about.

Morgan: What kinds of services do people get here?

Beane: We provide food, water, clothing, bedding.

Morgan: Can you describe the setup? It’s sort of a drive-through service.

Beane: We have a drive-through. We have tents set up outside and they drive through and just tell us what they need. Nobody gets out of their cars. It’s quick. We get it in their car and then they get out.
Morgan: What else can I get here?

Beane: The food, water. You can get paper goods. We have a list for things like pots and pans and dishes and bedding, and anything, and grills. Anything that people need to survive in tents, any kind of camping gear. Anything that people need to start over in a home. I mean, just the basic things of life, the basic things to be able to make it, to be able to survive. And blankets and jackets are huge right now because the cold weather is here. And baby food, medical kits, toiletries, personal supplies. Cleaning supplies is huge right now for people who are lucky enough to still have homes to be able to clean. Just about anything that you can think of that you would need at this time if you had lost everything. And anything that we don’t have, we try to get. We do our best to get whatever people need to start over and to survive.

Morgan: Have y’all had any space to think about Foundation Hope long term, maybe past the emergency relief?

Beane: Absolutely.

Morgan: And what’s the long-term vision?

Beane: We’re working on joining with some other organizations to rebuild the communities, rebuild these towns. And that’s just something that I can’t really go into much detail about because it’s in the beginning, you know, it’s just being thought up and planned and starting to get the wheels turning there. But we’re in this for the long haul until these cities are rebuilt. These cities here, the Bay St. Louis, Waveland, Pearlington areas were the hardest hit out of the hurricane. Pearlington is horrible. I mean, just, this is the worst national disaster in the history of US and it’s right here. This is ground zero and we’re here for the long haul.

Morgan: What went through your head when you heard that [Hurricane] Rita was coming behind Katrina?

Beane: (long pause) One thought, and it was just a mesh of thoughts—it was, how can these people handle another hit? They have already lost and suffered so much. I mean we just, we couldn’t imagine anything. I mean anything at all because there’s so much, there’s, you know, so many trees are down, the structures are down, any kind of wind we knew was just going to be destructive and cause even that much more damage, so just all kinds of thoughts. But we didn’t really know whether we should stay here or leave and go back to Hattiesburg or shut down the relief center for that few days. We were advised very strongly to leave and we did. We took that advice which we know now to be a good decision. But we tried to tell people to leave, as well, that were trying to come to the relief center. But what happened was even though Rita hit Texas, there were still the bands of the storm came through and tornadoes and the rain and the water started rising very quickly, and some of the homes that had already been flooded started flooding again. I mean people, we talked to people that are like, I just, you know, I’m just now starting to
try to get back on my feet and now this. And, you know, it wasn’t nearly as big of a blow but it was, it was another blow. And it was another, it was like almost a setback, but these people have, they’re so resilient and they are so determined. But, you know, I mean tornadoes came through here and actually tore up our parking lot out here, but we just got back at it. We didn’t let it discourage us or, you know, we’re just again trying to keep people encouraged and keep giving them hope and let them know, just hang in there. It is just going to take a little bit of time and things will get back to normal. They’re going to be better than what they were before. That’s our goal.

Morgan: So you think you have stumbled into a long-term career change?

Beane: Mmm, I wouldn’t call it a career change, I’d call it—a life. I wouldn’t—this is not a career. This is a passion. This is helping people. And I don’t know, I mean, money’s just not a concern for me so I can’t call it a career. All my needs are being met so I’m not concerned about that. But I’m taking one step at a time but, yeah, it’s long term.

(end of interview)