Mississippi Oral History Project

Hurricane Katrina Oral History Project

An Oral History

with

Mayor Johnny L. DuPree

Interviewer: David Tisdale

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Biography

Johnny L. DuPree was born November 18, 1953, in Fort Benning, Georgia, to Johnny DuPree and Hattie Mae Hubbard DuPree. He received his early education at Eureka Elementary and W. H. Jones Junior High. During his high school years, Mr. DuPree attended Rowan High School, Anacostia High School in Washington, DC, and Hattiesburg High School Blair Center. Between 1972 and 1987, Mr. DuPree worked as sales manager for Sears, and in 1988, he established Johnny DuPree Realty, which he still maintains today. He has also held various political offices, first as a member of the Hattiesburg School Board from 1987 to 1992, and then as a member of the Forrest County Board of Supervisors from 1992 to 2001. Since 2001, Mr. DuPree has been the mayor of Hattiesburg.

In addition to his duties as mayor, Mr. DuPree is also involved with several other organizations. He is involved with the National League of Cities, US Conference of Mayors, Conference of Black Mayors, and the Mississippi Municipal League. He is also a member of a Baptist church. Mr. DuPree’s hobbies include fishing, reading, and bowling. He also enjoys spending time with his family.

Mr. DuPree married his wife, Johniece Jennings, on December 24, 1972, in Hattiesburg. They have two children, April Yolanda DuPree, born April 6, 1973, and Monica Nicole DuPree, born October 27, 1974. He currently lives in Hattiesburg.
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Tisdale: Today is August 1, 2006, and today we’re visiting with Hattiesburg Mayor Johnny DuPree. And Mayor DuPree, we appreciate you doing this interview for the Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage as a Katrina project.

DuPree: Well, I thank you for inviting me to do this, David.

Tisdale: First thing I wanted to ask, Mayor, was what do you recall about the days just before the storm hit? Did you—you know, I think a lot of us were caught off guard by how it turned. Originally, the prediction had been that Hurricane Katrina was going to hit the Destin, Florida area and I think it caught a lot of people off guard the way it just made that sudden turn. What were some of your thoughts about, you know, and I guess you, as a public official, didn’t have a lot of time to—

DuPree: Well, I really didn’t, David. You know we’d just got through with an election and we’d been sworn in in July and was trying to get the new administration together, and so my wife and I had the opportunity just the week prior to Katrina to go to Disney World.

Tisdale: Oh, OK.

DuPree: So, we had not had a vacation in a year and a half, and so we decided we’d go to Disney World and had a great time. And of course the storm was headed to the Florida Keys. We were to stay there until that Sunday before the storm hit.

Tisdale: Oh, that’s right, it had crossed over—

DuPree: It had crossed—

Tisdale: —and then went back into the Gulf.

DuPree: That’s right. And so we were there, was to be there until Sunday and then about Thursday, Thursday night it looked like it was turning from the Gulf to the Florida Keys, and I told my wife, I said, “You know we probably need to get out of Florida.” And so we caught a flight, [we] were [blessed] to get a flight out of Florida.
that Friday, flew back into Jackson and drove in. And David, by the time we drove in on Saturday morning, it had turned from the Florida Keys headed for the Gulf. And we had done some preliminary preparations with EOC [Emergency Operation Centers] and so we immediately, when we came in, called everybody together and started preparing for what eventually happened.

**Tisdale:** OK. When it became apparent that it was going to bear down on Mississippi, what were some specific things as far as the city that were taken in advance? You mentioned the EOC; that’s the Emergency Operations Centers. And is that a Hattiesburg or Forrest County entity or a joint?

**DuPree:** It’s a joint.

**Tisdale:** Joint, OK.

**DuPree:** Yeah. It’s Forrest County EOC which takes in Hattiesburg and Petal. And you know we had to, we thought we were trying to prepare because we’d had sort of a close call before.

**Tisdale:** With Dennis.

**DuPree:** With Dennis.

**Tisdale:** Yeah, in July.

**DuPree:** And so—right—so we knew that we would have some traffic congestion and so we had devised a plan to keep the traffic moving. We thought we had worked pretty well with that. We worked with United Way for shelters because we knew we’d be getting people in with the shelters. We were working with other entities like Salvation Army and Christian Services for food supplies. You know, we thought we had a pretty [good] handle on it but we knew that if they did contraflow that there would be some traffic congestion, so we tried to work towards those ends.

**Tisdale:** Could you explain that contraflow, that plan just kind of real quick for me?

**DuPree:** Yeah, well, contra flow basically means that the two—the four lanes that are going north and south in and out of New Orleans would be turned—

**Tisdale:** On Interstate 59.

**DuPree:** —on Interstate 59, would actually be turning towards Hattiesburg, all four lanes, but it would somewhere around Poplarville, I think, they would turn back into the four lanes again. But everything coming out of New Orleans up until, I think, Poplarville would be four lanes coming towards Hattiesburg. So you can imagine the amount of traffic that was coming and when those people from New Orleans actually reached Hattiesburg, because it was bumping—it took hours to get out of New Orleans.
if you can imagine those cars, how many cars were coming out even with four lanes. When they finally made it to Hattiesburg, most of them made a mad dash for gas.

Tisdale: Um-hm, I remember that.

DuPree: Yeah, and so—

Tisdale: And [Highway] 49 was pretty packed, too, I think, Highway 49.

DuPree: [Highway 49] was packed. Those that couldn’t get off at [Highway] 11 intersection, at Highway 11 where we had two service stations there which were jammed packed, they moved further down the interstate to try and get to 49 and so then we had to, because we had—we were trying to direct traffic to keep it flowing. You know, some of those people [we] were not [letting] off the highway, so we know we had—we had a lot of concerns during that time.

Tisdale: What were your immediate impressions of what was happening during the storm and just afterward when you had a chance to examine people’s self image and what were some of the things that you—what were some of your concerns immediately after the storm as far as addressing issues?

DuPree: Well, of course, one major concern I had was my family.

Tisdale: I was going to ask you, too, what—

DuPree: OK.

Tisdale: —how, what impact that had on them and your own home.

DuPree: Well, normally my oldest daughter lives in Mobile and normally when there’s a threat of hurricanes she and her husband come to Hattiesburg. But this time because of the way it was tracking, we all felt it was best for them to stay in Mobile and it turned out it was best for them to stay in Mobile. My other daughter was in Jackson and she lives in Jackson—she’s in Jackson and we thought for her it’d be better for her to stay in Jackson, too, and it turned out it was better for her to stay in Jackson. She had some gasoline issues, but other than that she was OK. My wife—you know, we live in a hundred year old house so she was going to stay there, and we lost contact so I really didn’t know where she was at one point. But one of my friends had gone by and just said he was not going to let her stay there, and so he picked her up and they went to the Forrest County Courthouse.

Tisdale: OK.

DuPree: And they rode the storm out, he and a couple of Forrest County Supervisors and their families stayed in the courthouse and kind of rode the storm out that way,
along with my mother-in-law and my mother, and their children, or their adult children. So they were OK and we were at the EOC while the storm was happening.

**Tisdale:** Yeah, so you just stayed there the whole time?

**DuPree:** We stayed at the EOC the whole time and we thought we need to because—you know, we had—you know, during the storm we had to make some decisions, too. If there were some health issues with citizens, would we allow emergency vehicles to get out. Now, would we allow AAA out, would we allow the firemen, fire trucks out, would we allow police? And we made the decision we could not put emergency personnel at risk in 100-mile-an-hour winds.

**Tisdale:** Oh, during the event.

**DuPree:** During the event. And so we made that call that—that was a tough decision to say that someone called and needed help that we couldn’t send anybody, but you just couldn’t take the chance of sending people out in 100-mile-an-hour winds, it’s just so—

**Tisdale:** And that’s about how—it was right about that fast as it was coming through Hattiesburg.

**DuPree:** It was about 100-mile-an-hour sustained winds, yeah, and that’s, that’s pretty fast. We stayed at the EOC, and actually [we] were locked in the EOC by trees around us, and we were there for a few hours until we could actually get access to some chainsaws to cut our way out.

**Tisdale:** Who was in there with you? I imagine you were with Terry Steed and—

**DuPree:** Terry Steed, myself.

**Tisdale:** And he’s the Forrest County Emergency Management Director.

**DuPree:** Yeah. A couple of Forrest County Supervisors[—gosh, Dave,] I went blank. I can’t think of who all was there. There were so many.

**Tisdale:** Was there a lot of people down there?

**DuPree:** Yeah, yeah, there was. Yeah, we were there trying to make the decisions, you know, public relations coordinator was there, police officers, firemen. You know, we were blessed that nobody was—we had no loss of life attributed to the storm, but when we finally cut our way out and we could finally get out to kind of assess the damage, I mean it was—my first thought was, “God, why did you allow me to be reelected?” (laughter)
Tisdale: Well, you’ve grown up in Hattiesburg, were you here when Camille came through?

DuPree: I was.

Tisdale: Were there any thoughts of comparison at all, did that come up, maybe later afterward?

DuPree: Well, not really, you know, for me. In ’69, you know I was a teenager. I mean I slept through the storm. And I remember the trees being down.

Tisdale: Being without power and stuff?

DuPree: Without power and that kind of stuff but, you know, we had a ball. You know, no lights, I mean, you know—

Tisdale: School out and everything for a while.

DuPree: School out, that’s right, no chores, I mean, we had a ball. So it was a different perspective from being a child with no responsibilities than to be the Mayor of the City that people were looking to for direction. So we knew directly after the storm that we needed to start a process of cleanup. We waited to hear—we were told to wait to hear from FEMA, that we needed to try to hold on for, you know, seventy-two hours or thereabouts, three to four days and they’d be in. Of course they came in about seven days.

Tisdale: Well, you mentioned that and I have to tell you the other day as I was preparing questions, I went online, and you may have already seen this, but there’s still the, online you can still access the interview with you.

DuPree: Oh really?

Tisdale: I can’t remember the reporter’s name from CNN but he had caught—you were waiting online to talk to CNN and he was asking you—and I’ll e-mail that to you sometime.

DuPree: Yeah, I’d like to see it.

Tisdale: I still have it. I found that—and he said, “Is FEMA in your city?” And you said, “Who’s FEMA?” (laughter) And obviously that was kind of a running theme for public officials everywhere in the South Mississippi. You know, looking back, a lot of people criticized the government, even charities like Red Cross and that sort of thing.

DuPree: Yeah.
Tisdale: Looking at your bag, what’s your assessment of the response, now that you’ve had some time to think about it? And obviously you weren’t happy with FEMA and others, but what can, you know, be done?

DuPree: Well, I guess, you know, looking back, you know it’s easy to be critical when you’re in the eye of the storm, I guess, when you need help and it doesn’t look like help is coming. You know, after a year looking back, you know, David, we thought we prepared pretty well here in Hattiesburg. We prepared for a storm and we had a disaster, catastrophe. FEMA was downsized by the federal government. I don’t know that it could’ve done better. You know, they didn’t have the people, the manpower. I mean all the FEMA people around later on six months down the line were contract workers, they just went out and got people and started working them. I don’t know that—and even when I look back, even if they had been fully staffed could they have responded to this kind of disaster.

Tisdale: Even if the people were competent—

DuPree: Even if the competent—

Tisdale: —or either they had—even if they had to go ahead to do—

DuPree: Oh yeah.

Tisdale: —things that they could’ve done earlier—

DuPree: Yeah.

Tisdale: —like the ice trucks.

DuPree: Yeah. They were fully—now, well, you know there were a lot of things they could’ve done. Now, you know, having ice trucks sit, instead giving the go ahead for them to be distributed, I mean those are the kinds of things that it could’ve been done better. I mean, that could’ve been done better. But I’m not sure that they could’ve responded any better, given the gravity of what actually happened. You know, you take New Orleans, you know they had people underwater, dying, I mean so, you know, I’m sure that they put a lot of energies to go over there even more so maybe than Mississippi and up in our area. But I’m not sure that they could’ve had enough people. I mean what is enough? I’m not sure they had enough people or could’ve had enough people.

Tisdale: And the magnitude of the storm—

DuPree: And the magnitude, yeah, oh yeah.

Tisdale: —this was such a wide and strong storm.
DuPree: Yeah. So I was critical and—I was critical because as the Mayor of the City of Hattiesburg, my people [needed help] and—

Tisdale: Well, you were obviously frustrated—

DuPree: I was frustrated.

Tisdale: —along with everyone else, and probably exhausted, too.

DuPree: Oh yeah, everybody is—

Tisdale: I’m sure.

DuPree: Well, yeah—

Tisdale: Were you able to sleep at all?

DuPree: Oh no, we were averaging about twenty-two hours of sleep, I mean twenty—we were averaging working about twenty-two hours for the first, about three weeks, and so you know two or three hours of sleep at night for the first three weeks was—it was about getting to me, you know.

Tisdale: Well, did you go to—I guess in times like that you really build up a camaraderie even with people that you’ve already worked with and were friends, I guess you really got close to people when the chips are down and—

DuPree: I tell you what—

Tisdale: —lean on your own faith, and I know how important that is to you, as well.

DuPree: Well, it really became, it became difficult just to come back to work. You know, you became accustomed to putting on boots, tennis or jeans and a pullover and going out and trying to take care of your constituents and making sure that things were [working] and whatever. And I put a shirt and tie on and come back and sit behind that desk, man, that—

Tisdale: Oh, that would tie me down.

DuPree: Yeah, they almost had to tie me down, you know.

Tisdale: When were you finally able to do that or felt like you could do that?

DuPree: I think somewhere around the end of October I think I felt that I could back and start having everything, I mean trying just to get back to some normalcy to make sure that were working the way we should and it was probably around October that I
really felt comfortable to do that and not feel that I needed to be out in the communities instead of in this office.

Tisdale: What was your—going back to the damage after, what, what’s, do you have any numbers you can share as far as damages there, maybe debris or—

DuPree: Well, initially—

Tisdale: —or did your own assessments of that?

DuPree: Well, initially we—we do an initial assessment. It was somewhere around 3,000 homes that were either damaged—that were either destroyed or had major damage to them, to the structures. We had no deaths. We had well over a million cubic yards of debris that were picked up. And of course we did have the hospital was evacuated, Forrest General was evacuated.

Tisdale: Then there was a water issue, too, and I talked to them about some assistance you had received to kind of get the water going back going—

DuPree: Yeah.

Tisdale: —a couple of days, two or three days, I guess, after.

DuPree: Yeah. Yeah, we had some water issues and we were without water for seven days, and we were without power for eleven days. You know we actually got power back on September 11, we called it the day that the lights came on. (laughter) So we’d have something positive to think about September 11 now. So, you know, we—Mississippi Power did a terrific job in doing that and I can’t say enough about our city workers.

Tisdale: I was going to say if you wanted to say something about colleagues and—

DuPree: Oh yeah.

Tisdale: —the community crew, I know they worked really hard to clean the streets up.

DuPree: They did. The City Police Department, Fire Department, Tree Crew, I mean they worked tirelessly with chainsaws and keeping our streets safe, and getting—make sure our streets were passable. Within several, within a few weeks we were back 100 percent, or 95 percent with passable streets. You know, our Action Line, those ladies they stayed up there, I think, for ten to eleven days, maybe two weeks, twenty-four hours a day. They just took—one would go home and shower, the other would stay and just take in calls from people when we could finally get the telephone working. You know, Public Works—I mean I just can’t say enough about all of the people who worked for the City of Hattiesburg, even the people who were behind desks, I mean
they were out doing what they could do to make our city, bring our city back to some pre-Katrina status. The faith-based community—

**Tisdale:** They just really turned out.

**DuPree:** Oh yeah, they turned out. I mean—

**Tisdale:** And also—

**DuPree:** —not only just here in Hattiesburg, but those from around the country.

**Tisdale:** Yeah, talk about some of them, I mean I’m sure you met a lot of new—made a lot of new friends.

**DuPree:** Oh, we did.

**Tisdale:** Like we all did.

**DuPree:** Oh, we did. We did, you know, St. Cloud, Minnesota, their mayor who is a different mayor now, they adopted us and they sent clothes and toys, monies. My wife and I visited them twice. San Jose, California, their mayor visited us and they adopted us and sent people here to help in our public works—in our Code Enforcement, that’s our Land Code Department. We’re visiting there in August, my wife and I to tell them thank you. We met—there was a group of men that came here, and I have a list of them, but they drove three dump trucks, twice, I think they drove about, I mean thirty-six hours, they’re from Virginia or something, I think, to get here.

**Tisdale:** Oh wow.

**DuPree:** To help our Water Department. I mean they drove dump trucks. I mean five guys; the city allowed five guys to come here in a dump truck. Now you can’t get that kind of [help]. You know the world became much, much smaller because of that. Had another gentleman who owned his own business and he allowed his—he told his employees, “I’ll give y’all the opportunity. Those who want to go to Mississippi to help out, you can go. I’ll pay you forty hours a week for working. I’ll pay your way and food.” And he brought them over here and he paid them their forty hours to come over here and work.

**Tisdale:** Wow.

**DuPree:** I mean it—

**Tisdale:** And there’s so many stories like that.

**DuPree:** Oh, there’s so many stories.
Tisdale: And you know Mississippi has always been known for being the most per capita generous state.

DuPree: Yeah.

Tisdale: And then, you know, the country seems to really respond to when we were in need.

DuPree: [Hopefully that means you reap what you sow.]

Tisdale: Um-hm, exactly.

DuPree: You know.

Tisdale: Yeah, exactly.

DuPree: When we give and I think that we certainly were given, I mean much more than we may even deserved, but we certainly—people were certainly very generous in their giving to us, not only money but of their time.

Tisdale: Also, I know you were pleased with the sales tax revenue—

DuPree: Yeah.

Tisdale: —that came in and a lot of the cities where people evacuated to and enjoyed—I think Wiggins also has enjoyed a huge increase and so that’s, I guess that’s another thing we can be thankful for in terms of—

DuPree: Yeah, I mean it would’ve been—

Tisdale: Obviously we didn’t want it under those conditions, but—

DuPree: No, no, not quite. You know, we spent about eight million dollars for storm-related activities and so far we’re still probably about five million dollars behind as far as receiving reimbursement.

Tisdale: Oh, where from?

DuPree: Either from FEMA or from the insurance companies.

Tisdale: OK.

DuPree: And so without the increase in sales tax, we really would be like some of the cities on the Coast that are really just floundering because they have no income, basically, you know.
Tisdale: Have you had a chance to go down there and to New Orleans and see the damages?

DuPree: Oh yeah, we’ve gone down. In fact, Terry Steed and myself, a week after the storm, we got a helicopter and we flew over the area. And then—

Tisdale: What was that like?

DuPree: Oh gosh, I mean, it was—

Tisdale: I know some people are—

DuPree: —like match—

Tisdale: —some people go down there to visit and say it hurts to see.

DuPree: Oh man, but from the air, I mean from the air a week after, I mean you would not know the area. I mean it was, I mean boats and trees, slabs, that’s with no houses on there. I’ve never seen anything like that. I never have. I’ll always remember that. Then I’ve probably gone down at least once a month since the storm. I was second vice president, I was voted second vice president of the Mississippi Municipal League last summer and so, [well, not last summer], it actually was in September after the storm and I was elected first president or president elect last week, and so—

Tisdale: Congratulations.

DuPree: So next year I’ll be president of the Mississippi Municipal League and so we are traveling there trying to give aid and see what they need and that kind of thing, you know.

Tisdale: Have you ever faced a challenge like this as an elected official?

DuPree: No. No, I don’t know if—you know, I would say that getting married at nineteen and having babies would be a challenge and, you know, that’s an ongoing challenge, but something that affects so many people. I mean you can imagine—

Tisdale: They’re looking to you to—

DuPree: Yeah.

Tisdale: How did you handle that stress?

DuPree: You know—

Tisdale: I mean for so many days and longer, actually.
**DuPree:** Well, you know, I guess after that first pity party I had about the first thirty minutes, about why was I doing it, why I am—Lord, why [did] you allow me to be reelected—after about that first thirty minutes, I got really resolved, and I guess kind of say, well, who better, and I think he— I think he prepared me with all the jobs and the different positions that I’ve had and I think that he prepared Hattiesburg [well]. I think that the supervisors, EOC and all the emergency personnel were well prepared. I think we did a great job of preparing and because of that preparation I think that it made my job a whole lot easier.

**Tisdale:** This was kind of a defining moment, I guess.

**DuPree:** I think it was.

**Tisdale:** Historically, that was.

**DuPree:** I could imagine—don’t want to—but I could imagine what the storyline would be if we had not fared well. If the storyline wouldn’t be good, people wouldn’t be coming to Hattiesburg to shop or to seek medical attention or education or anything else. If we wouldn’t have had the increase in sales tax then it would be a different story.

**Tisdale:** Well, I wonder if you would talk briefly about the curfew that we implemented and the tent city that was, that the police department had the tent city that was in front of the police department for those who had broken the curfew, could you talk a little bit about how that was formulated?

**DuPree:** Well, believe it or not, you know, that storm brought out not only the best of people but it brought out the worst in some people, too, David. We instituted a curfew because we had so many people that were sightseers and we had power lines down, they were trying to restore power. We didn’t want to hurt the people. I mean the storm didn’t kill anyone, we certainly didn’t want them to be electrocuted for sightseeing. And you can imagine it was dark and because the worse comes out in people sometimes, it wasn’t safe to be out in the dark. I mean the darkness brings out the worst in people, also. And so we instituted the curfew so people would stay home. There was no need to be out; only the people that needed to be out needed to be out. And then we had a number of break ins, people breaking into—of course you had windows out in some businesses, some people were looting. And they had some residents that called in that were concerned about people driving through the streets and shooting guns, and that kind of stuff, and so we thought that we needed to do something and it needed to be drastic. It needed to be something that would get the people’s attention that when we meant curfew, we meant curfew. Curfew doesn’t mean you go out; you need to stay in. And so Chief Winn came up with, devised this great plan which I thought was great and I went along with it that we would construct, have a fence constructed at the Police Department and have two tents; one for females and one for males. If you violated the curfew then you’d be put in there.
Tisdale: And you had to spend the night there, right?

DuPree: You spent the night and most of the day so that you would get a little of that sun, and man it was ninety to a hundred degrees. (laughter)

Tisdale: That’s what I—you know, one of the things I thought about after the storm was I was thinking, well, maybe it’ll cool off some like it would—you would think it would after a storm.

DuPree: It didn’t.

Tisdale: I don’t think I’ve ever been hotter or appreciated air conditioning more in my life. (laughter)

DuPree: Because at least now you can have some prospect, well, I can get to my office and it’s cool, or I can get to my house, it’s cool, I get can get to my—

Tisdale: Car, yeah.

DuPree: Yeah, but that was no problem. You couldn’t get cool, and so I think we had to get their attention and those numbers started steadily decreasing. I mean it started the first night was almost eighty and then it went to maybe sixty and then it was like thirty, and then the teens, and then there was like one or two in there, so.

Tisdale: So word got out.

DuPree: Word got out, and it achieved what we were trying to achieve.

Tisdale: Looking back, would you have done anything differently? I mean—

DuPree: Well, you know—I don’t know that I would have, Dave. You know, there’s some criticism about us giving gas to people. I think we did the right thing. I think people who were going to provide services to us, deliver food to people, doctors who needed to get to their patients—

Tisdale: Public services.

DuPree: Yeah. Yeah, I would’ve done this—I think we would’ve done this, done it the same, the same way.

Tisdale: The last question I wanted to ask was, you know obviously this was a trying time for everyone here. Was everything that stands out most in your memory, whether it be a sad or a humorous or an inspirational moment during all this that you kind of look back to every once in a while?
DuPree: Yeah, I guess, Dave, it would’ve been that we were at Mount Carmel Baptist Church, they were giving out food, and the WNBA and the NBA came and these people left their safe places and got on eighteen wheelers and their very expensive car and drove to Hattiesburg, Mississippi, and around to feed the children, [as] part of the Feed the Children Foundation. And they brought food. They stood in lines unloading the trucks. I mean, some of those guys, you can tell they hadn’t done any work in a long time, if ever. (laughter) Man, they were huffing and puffing and whatever, but it was good that they took the time. They spent their money, and the time to come do this. They didn’t have to do this. They didn’t have to do that. But that’s so indicative of so many people, Dave. I mean, and the [other] thing I guess that really stands out is the spirit. Dave, there was no bickering. There was no fighting. Everybody was pulling the same direction. Everyone was trying to get to the place where we used to be before Katrina. And it seemed that as soon as we were there, life started just like Katrina had never been. So, during that time from August 29 until, I don’t know—

Tisdale: Mid September, I guess, or late September.

DuPree: Late September, end of September it was the worst of times. But, Dave, you know what? It was the best of times.

Tisdale: I agree. I agree. Mayor, thanks for joining us today.

DuPree: Yeah, thank you, Dave.

Tisdale: I appreciate it.

(end of interview)