Mississippi Oral History Program

Hurricane Katrina Oral History Project

An Oral History

with

Kai Drobish

Interviewer: Beth Morgan

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This is an interview for the Mississippi Oral History Program of The University of Southern Mississippi. The interview is with Kai Drobish and is taking place on June 18, 2006. The interviewer is Beth Morgan.

**Morgan:** This is Beth Morgan. I’m in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi, with Kai Drobish. Kai is a—

**Drobish:** —ceramicist.

**Morgan:** Ceramicist. I didn’t know if it was a potter or sculptor. A ceramicist here in Bay St. Louis. Kai, tell me a little bit about where your studio was before [Hurricane] Katrina and a little bit about the artist community before Katrina.

**Drobish:** Well, my studio before Katrina was across the street from the house that I was finishing, so it was going to be an ideal situation. The artist community, we have a very strong artist community. I think that was one of our biggest growth factors, and we were growing, the city and the community. And we’re working on cultural tourism, and we did have a Second Saturday that people as far away as from New Orleans and Mobile would come to, and that was basically about the little art gallery openings and new artists, and they’d come once a month. And it was a big deal.

**Morgan:** OK. And how long have you been doing your craft here in Bay St. Louis?

**Drobish:** Five years.

**Morgan:** Have you lived on the Coast your whole life?

**Drobish:** No. Well, I lived on the Louisiana, kind of Gulf Coast down in Houma, which is pretty close. I’ve lived south of [Highway] 90 almost my whole life. So that’s pretty close to the Coast, wouldn’t you say?

**Morgan:** I think so. (laughter) So you’ve been through the hurricane warnings before and hurricane season.

**Drobish:** Trillions of times.

**Morgan:** Prior to Katrina, what would you have done or your reaction have been?
Drobish: I had never evacuated for a hurricane in my life, never, prior to Katrina. Now? Probably still won’t evacuate for a lot of them, but when they come on this strong, (laughter) I’m leaving.

Morgan: What was the strongest that you can remember before Katrina?

Drobish: I think Georges in New Orleans kind of scared us because there were so many lines down. My mom and I sat inside for three days; I went to her house and ate. We had frozen spinach, cream cheese, candlelight, and cards and wine. (laughter) And we drank wine, played gin rummy, and ate frozen spinach and cream cheese, made a little dip and crackers, for three days. (laughter)

Morgan: And at the end of three days, lights came back on?

Drobish: Yeah. The lines were up, and you felt safer walking around. But other than that, I can’t remember. You know, when we were young, we’d all go in the little—well, first off, you didn’t have all the newscasters crying wolf all the time because they didn’t know. I don’t think they know that much now, but they talk a lot more, and I can remember when it’d get strong, you’d go in the little—there’s always one room in everybody’s house that has no windows. Ours was a half-bath, and all six of us would go in there. My dad would tape all the windows; that was in the days when they said taping windows was good. Now they say that’s stupid, but—

Morgan: It makes you feel like you’re doing something.

Drobish: Well, just so the glass can’t fly everywhere, but you know, we were always in the bathroom. Who knew how bad they were? I mean, I can’t really remember a bad one. You want to hear—well, I’ll tell you this ironic thing.

Morgan: OK.

Drobish: You know how conversations are always about Katrina? And we’re like, “When the hell are we going to stop talking about Katrina?” But I’m like, well, I have these friends that had a seven thou[sand]—it was their great-grandparents’ house on the Coast, and it’s grown into a sprawling seven-thousand-square-foot house in Pass Christian, which is now gone. But every Christmas they’d have a big party, and every Christmas—and we’re down to my generation. I mean this house was started way back when what? [Hurricane] Camille was in the [19]60s; every Christmas the Camille pictures and the damage to their house would come out. Well, I just had lunch with Roe(?). I said, “You know, Roe, everybody says, ‘When are we going to stop talking about Katrina?’ And I always tell the story, well, thirty years later we were still taking out the Camille pictures.” Of course, Camille pictures went when their house went. She said, “But yeah, now, we have new pictures.” I’m like, “This means for at least the rest of my life, we’ll still be talking because this was way worse.”
**Morgan:** It’ll be birth of Christ, and Katrina, during the holidays.

**Drobish:** I mean, it’s horrible. I mean, and you want to stop talking about it, but it’s like something hits you new every day. I went to the French Quarter; I’ve been to the French Quarter, but I generally stay on the kind of residential side, the side near Esplanade, which is where my mom owns property, and that’s just always kind of been where the nontransients, the more long-term people, not the bartenders and waitresses and all that live, the longer-term residents. Well, we walked to Bacco to go have lunch, which is on the kind of other side, near Canal Street. I had no idea how much was closed—I was just crying—and how much damage. Even though all they got was what I call regular hurricane damage; they didn’t get the flood, and the tidal wave, and it was just sad. And I didn’t even realize that because on the other side, it’s not that bad, but I stopped because there’s so many long-term residences; the buildings are more well maintained. There’s a lot of condos on the right side, very expensive ones; so even if they’re not living there, they maintain them. When you’re paying five hundred dollars a square foot, your building’s maintained, where on the other side, again, they rent to a lot of bartenders, and they just have retail at the bottom, and they can’t—one family will own it, and they can’t afford the other two floors, to really—so those really got bashed. I had no idea, and now it’s just a whole new sadness.

**Morgan:** Yeah. And is your mother still in New Orleans?

**Drobish:** Well, she has a house down the block here, which she has repaired; she got about six feet of water.

**Morgan:** Was she here during Katrina, or was she still living in New Orleans?

**Drobish:** She was kind of living both, but she was planning on retiring here, but she has her house up for sale now.

**Morgan:** OK. So when the first warnings for Katrina started coming in, what’d you think?

**Drobish:** We weren’t leaving at all. I thought the newscasters needed to shut their mouth. Well, first off, they had it going to the west up until two days before the storm. I mean, you know, I, too, when it comes into the Gulf of Mexico could say, “This four-hundred-mile stretch is in danger.” I mean, you know how they do. And we were never going to leave until an aunt in Pensacola—well, my little brother called. And again, he’s never evacuated for a hurricane, and he now lives in Lafayette, but he grew up in Houma. And he called me and said, “I just want y’all out of there; I have a bad feeling.” He had called like during the week when they were still hav[ing] the five-hundred-mile radius of where it was going. He said, “I just really have a bad feeling about this one.” And he’s never done that; he’s not a worry wart. And then my aunt, Sunday morning, called and woke my mom up, which you have to call really early to wake my mom up, and said, “Carmella, you have to come here.” And my mom’s like, “Manny, I’m sleeping; I’ll call you back later.” Well, my
aunt called, like, every half an hour and then finally said, “Carmella, I can’t go to church unless you tell me you’re coming.”

Morgan: And where was your aunt calling from?

Drobish: Destin, [Florida].

Morgan: Destin, OK.

Drobish: Yeah. And she said—and finally my mom called me and said, “Kai, I can’t let Manny miss church. She’s probably never missed church a Sunday in her life unless she was giving birth to a baby. So,” she said, “let’s just go; we’ll have a nice weekend with them. I mean, it’s a short ride.” It was my great-aunt’s, like, ninetieth birthday, so she was having a dinner party. So there was a good reason to go anyway. And we left Sunday at about noon, and only because my aunt was bugging the hell out of my mom did we even leave.

Morgan: So what’d you take with you?

Drobish: Two dresses, maybe; a pair of underwear, (laughter) flip-flops. No, I did have something fairly nice for the dinner party, but that was it.

Morgan: And your studio was in your house at that time?

Drobish: No, my studio was across the street; it was its own little individual building, and then my other house was on St. George, which I was going to put up for sale to pay for—we had just got final approval on this one the Wednesday before the storm, that we could move in. We had been working on it for a year.

Morgan: Around Sycamore.

Drobish: Right. And that was my ideal situation because when I run my kiln, let’s say I started in the evening, which is really the ideal time because it doesn’t heat up my studio so much. Instead of having to get my car and run back to check on it and turn it on high, I could just walk across the street. So that was the whole plan of having a house and a studio close to each other. If I wanted to pour clay at—I could get up when I wake up at five o’clock in the morning, go run over there, pour clay, come back over here, do breakfast, play with the dogs, clean the kitchen, you know, the things you have to do, then run back over there and pull clay. It was just—instead of having to get in a car and drive—it was just ideal. I mean, it was going to be ideal.

Morgan: So you get to your aunt’s, and what happens there? You’re doing aunt activities?

Drobish: Yeah, but it was kind of a little rough on there. She lives on a really large, beautiful piece of property on the corner of that—I can’t say Indian name—bay in
Destin. It’s a Long-wicka-hatchee-watchee or something, and she lives on a corner where it goes in a bayou, and that was bad. So all we did was drink wine and watch CNN for what? Three days. And my boyfriend had stayed along with the dog; at that time I just had Baybay. When I finally heard from him, that was the first time I cried because I thought he was dead. But we were lucky; we didn’t even get water in this house. He saw the tornado that hit my studio, and at that time he didn’t know what St. George was like. His cell phone was out of juice, and there was no way to plug them in. So he finally found somebody on the beach on, I guess, the Tuesday evening, that had a cell phone that could actually go out. You could actually sometimes get a signal if you were on the beach or at the end of [Highway] 90 where the bridge went down. So you’d see hoards of people down there. And then we talked, and we agreed to meet Wednesday in Lafayette at my little brother’s house to stay for a more long term. And when Mom and I were on our way through, came back here. He had told me the house was standing; he had said Mom’s house was standing, but had taken a lot of water, that the studio was gone. He had no way of getting to St. George, and we couldn’t get near St. George for weeks because of the trees and everything down, but we had to come see for ourselves. And then we met in Lafayette, and we turned around and came the next day. My little brother went and bought two hundred-gallon tanks, and we filled them with gas, and he came like every day for three days. And he’d set up a gas station right there and just pump gas for anybody who lined up.

Morgan: Hand pumped? Wow.

Drobish: Yeah, and then we’d bring the—what do you call those things? When you run out of gas, the little tank?

Morgan: The plastic—

Drobish: Yeah. We’d bring about ten of those of three and five gallons, and then we’d bring food and water. And then I came and emptied out my house because there was, in front of this church who then kicked everybody off their land because I guess the people were bothering them, that was a piece of dry land. And the family across the street had—they’re all from around here, and they had, like, seventeen relatives that lost everything. So they were all camping out over there; so we got our mattresses and brought them over and medicine and food.

Morgan: So how many days after, you know, it hit on that Monday?

Drobish: We were back by Wednesday, and then by Thursday we were back with supplies. Wednesday we just drove through and went straight to Lafayette, and then on Thursday we came back with supplies. On Friday we came back with supplies; Sunday we came back with supplies, and then by Wednesday we actually had electricity. I’m very lucky; I didn’t know this. This house was by a substation, so we were some of the first people to have electricity. So we came back in and started living here as it was. All my furniture was being reupholstered in Waveland, and since Waveland’s gone—
Morgan: That’s incredible. I live in Clinton, Mississippi, and we didn’t have electricity by the following Wednesday.

Drobish: That was a miracle. And then we had about—well, we had a bunch of people move in, but every night (laughter) we had, like, thirty people showering, washing their clothes, and eating here every day. So that’s what I did for three months, played Martha Stewart.

Morgan: So tell me about a normal day when you’re caddying thirty people through your house.

Drobish: Well, I was being—I don’t know—I was serving them off of china because, you know, most of these people—I didn’t have water. They were working in muck up to their knees every day trying to muck out their houses, the ones that had houses left. And actually everybody that was staying with me had houses left, in bad shape, but left, and family members of theirs that had come to help. And so I was wanting everything to be really nice for them at night. So I’d spend—the first thing was to clean thirty dishes because at night, because we were all drinking a lot, as you can imagine. We thought we were going to become a town of alcoholics for a while. And then I’d start washing their clothes because when they came in with their mucked clothes, I’d tell them to leave them in the bathroom. So I’d wash everybody’s clothes, fold everybody’s clothes, make piles of everybody’s clothes—they’d all have clean towels—sweep the floors, clean the kitchen, start another big dinner. And then they’d come in periodically to take breaks, kept the AC [air conditioner] running full blast. This was when I thought I’d get some help from FEMA [Federal Emergency Management Agency] that might help pay for the electricity bill, and actually my air conditioner condenser got wet, very wet, underwater, but they managed with a six hundred dollar repair, to get it working it again, instead of the three thousand dollar whole new system, which I couldn’t even have got anyway because all the systems had been washed out to sea along with my air-conditioner guy’s business. And my brother would come periodically and bring food. And anybody coming in, we really didn’t use the—I mean, I felt like since I had something left, and I wasn’t destitute that I shouldn’t go use like the food lines because that was for people who had nothing. So we just brought in supplies. Every time my mom came pretty regularly to start working on her house and my brothers, and so people were just bringing food.

Morgan: But your supply line was—

Drobish: Chickens and roast beef and ground meat, the cheapest food. I’d cook like four chickens a night, roasted chickens, carrots, potatoes, sweet potatoes, bags of salad, tons of bread.

Morgan: And your supply line was in from Lafayette? That’s how y’all were—

Drobish: Yeah.
Morgan: —being able to bring food in. Well, how long did that go on?

Drobish: About three months, not having one private moment ever, and I’m not that Martha Stewart-y. I did finally, as it started slacking off and things got better for people, I started using paper plates for a while. That helped.

Morgan: Uh-huh. So what—is there anything that you did to kind of help you keep it together, or it was just automatic?

Drobish: Just the work.

Morgan: Just working.

Drobish: Yeah. I didn’t break till after the first of the year, after it calmed down, which is probably good because I didn’t have time to think.

Morgan: So how was January when things started—

Drobish: January sucked.

Morgan: Tell me about it.

Drobish: It’s always bad; I mean, for most normal people, January’s a bad month anyway. I mean, it’s cold; it’s gloomy; it’s miserable. Another year’s gone through; you’ve either made lots of successes, maybe it’s better, or things are the same. But when things—I turned forty in January. (crying) I had done this house with cash and some on credit. The studio I already owned; I had bought that cash and done everything for cash. I only had a mortgage on the St. George house, but we had put it up for a certain amount, but what we really thought we were going to get was going to give me ninety thousand dollars. I was going to pay off everything I owed because it was going to be such a quick flip because real estate here was so high that it just didn’t make sense to go take out a loan on this one to get it done, just because it was going to be so short-term on my credit cards. And I was still going to have about fifty thousand dollars to put in the bank, after I’d done my yard and paid off what I owed on this house. And realizing that twenty years, (crying) everything you’ve earned and saved is really gone. January I got my final approval from the SBA [Small Business Administration] that I can borrow two hundred grand; never owned two hundred grand in my life. Well, I did on a four-plex one time that I bought with my—but I was making a lot of rent. (laughter) But it’s all gone. Now, at forty (crying), more in debt and with less financial future than I was at twenty. At least at twenty, I hadn’t earned anything, but I hadn’t lost anything. And that was depressing.

Morgan: That’s hard.
Drobish: Yeah, it was very hard, and considering I can’t do the things I did for the last twenty years. I’m older, I’m tireder. How am I going to make that again?

Morgan: When were you able to start producing art again?

Drobish: I started in—I did, luckily, and this was very lucky. I do this big show in Lafayette, and I had been stockpiling because my merchandise is so heavy. So every time—my mom, not only—when she had the house here, she had a condo on the water in Henderson Point, which is of course gone, but it was really kind of a family place. And my little brother and his kids would come a lot, and his wife. And so every time they’d leave, they both have big monster, horrible cars, and I’d stock them up with stuff. So 90 percent of that merchandise, the Lafayette merchandise, was in Lafayette in their garage. Well, just so happens that they canceled my big show, which is a big disappointment because that’s like ten grand of my income. But I had one in December, but I didn’t have to make any merchandise. I mean, I had been stockpiling all summer; I had like four dozen of every piece I make.

Morgan: Describe some of your work.

Drobish: I do architectural plaques, and what we kind of say is we sell memories, your church, your school, where your kids went to school, where your kids were baptized, where you were married, restaurants where your husband might have proposed to you or your first—I mean, we basically sell—I mean, not that the buildings themselves can’t be attractive. Sometimes they can; sometimes they can’t. We all know that there’s cute buildings and not cute buildings. Lafayette was built in the [19]50s, so what would you guess? Not cute buildings, which would be true, but people don’t buy them necessarily because, I mean, you wouldn’t just walk up and say, “Oh, that’s so cute; I’m buying it,” as just a weird individual. You’d buy it because you know what it is; I mean, you know, an individual—

Morgan: It has meaning for people.

Drobish: Right. You wouldn’t just buy it because it’s a piece of art probably unless maybe it was a church, and you wanted to collect churches. But you wouldn’t, you know, walk up—and you’re really buying it because it’s a memory of yours.

Morgan: Had you stockpiled a lot of pieces of buildings that now, around here, are gone?

Drobish: Well, actually, I work with a partner, and she does around here. She had been doing it longer than I am, and she did New Orleans and around here. And yeah, she never did big business around here, so she didn’t have enough, but luckily she was not affected at all. I mean, she had maybe two inches of water in her studio, and so she was straight back to work. And this has been a real heyday because everybody’s replacing their New Orleans stuff; she’s been selling there for twenty-five years, and
then everybody wants Bay St. Louis stuff now. So luckily she did have a lot of molds that she could produce pieces.

**Morgan:** And so in January you started back up in your business.

**Drobish:** Yeah. And I did the Jackson thing, and so it must have been—I probably was working in October, somewhat, but again, I had done a lot of the Jackson work ahead of time. Summer’s slow, and I know what shows I’m doing in fall, so summer’s when I start trying to—and Jackson I actually had in bisque. So I just painted and then had to fire it. I didn’t have to create the piece, make the mold, then pour them, let them dry and bisque them. I had probably 60 percent of the process already done because that was a new market for me anyway.

**Morgan:** And was it the handiwork market, and it was that fall?

**Drobish:** Yeah.

**Morgan:** Was that a fall or spring after Katrina?

**Drobish:** No, it was fall. Yeah.

**Morgan:** Fall after Katrina?

**Drobish:** Right. What was it? September or October, November, something like that. No, it must have been November.

**Morgan:** I think it was November because it came before Mistletoe Market Place.

**Drobish:** And so that I was working; so I guess I did paint a little bit during the day and stuff. I don’t seem to remember that. In January I really started working again because now I do that line, and the architecture’s what really pays my bills. It’s not particularly my favorite thing to do. I like my more arty stuff, and that was all lost.

**Morgan:** Describe some of those pieces. What do you do?

**Drobish:** I do a lot of, like, goofy—my stuff is real silly and whimsical. It’s wall plaques, but you know, it’s feel-good stuff. I sell really inexpensive; expensive pieces for me are $25 and $35, and you buy it because it’s cute, and it makes you laugh. I do sea life and zoo animals and kind of tiles with sea scenes and the crabs and octopus. And, of course, [Hurricane] Ivan, the year before, had wiped out a lot of my market because I was selling down on the panhandle of Florida and Orange Beach and Gulf Shores and all that, and this pretty much killed the rest of it. So I just felt like since most of my molds were gone, and most of my merchandise was gone, and my market’s really less than it was, it was time for me to do some different things and try and search for a new market. And so that’s kind of what I’ve been working on and coming up with different ideas, things that are more universal, not so beach-related.
Not that—I mean, everybody loves fish, and you do your bathroom in fish even if you live in Minnesota. I mean, some people do, but in general my better markets are around coastal areas and resort areas. So that’s what I’ve been working on besides then adding to there’s always new buildings in Lafayette to do. And then there’s been a big business—we do custom homes, both of us separately, and we do a lot of custom orders, like you’re an alumni of blah, blah, blah. And you want to do a fundraiser; you and your group of alumni want to do a fundraiser, so you might order two hundred plaques of the school from us. And we sell them to you wholesale, and then you sell them retail and make the money as a fundraiser. So I actually got from Coast Electric, because so many of their buildings went, I did a big plaque of six of their buildings, and I did three hundred of those for them right after the storm. I got the order, I guess, at the end of January, needed by the end of February, and I got three hundred pieces produced; I worked my ass off.

Morgan: Well, tell me about reorganizing your kiln, your studio. Where did all that go?

Drobish: Well, I have to say, luckily, my kiln, because I am so tall, I have my kiln really set up in my studio because then I don’t have to bend so far down to load it. So actually when my roof went, my rafters went. My studio did like this.

Morgan: Leaned.

Drobish: Yeah. So all the merchandise on the walls and shelves, all that went boom. And then because the roof was gone, all the molds that are made out of plaster just got—

Morgan: Wet.

Drobish: —gone. But the kiln, luckily, because it was so high—I don’t know if water came in, or if it was from the ceiling, but I mean, I’ve had to do repairs to it, and I had to rewire it and electrical stuff, but I got my big kiln working pretty fast, and so that’s work. Got an electrician; paid a lot of money to get a 220 line put right there, and put it right there and got to work. My boyfriend went (inaudible). People threw things out; this cute look of all these doors and shutters that makes it look like—I don’t know—somebody’s drug-addict house. We had to do something to protect from rain and wind and (inaudible). So he went, and as he’d see them on the junk piles, he’d go get them and pile them up. Then he made me more drying shelves, moved my big table from across the way and set it up.

Morgan: And your studio’s here in your house now. It’s a brand new house.

Drobish: Oh, yeah. Very fun, very fun.

Morgan: Everybody talks about the new norm and redefining what’s your new normal. What is your new normal?
Drobish: What’s the new normal?

Morgan: Does it change every day? You have seven new normals every week?

Drobish: I don’t know. I mean, you know, normal was every Wednesday night I went to the yacht club. It’s what we did; it’s a small town. There’s not that much to do. You go to a club; you have a couple drinks; you watch people sail, or you sail, either way. I mean, and actually, now we go to the yacht club; it’s now two trailers with a deck in between them. I mean, that took a while for that to come back. What’s new normal? Oh, I don’t know; the fact that people come by this house constantly. I got out of the tub the other day; somebody had been sitting here for twenty minutes.

Morgan: Are they coming by for your art or—

Drobish: No, just to visit because people that weren’t real clingy before are now, like—and my dogs are pretty much enough company for me. I tend to be a loner. I mean, it’s just constant, the new normal. Trying to keep my house clean because I’ve got a studio and three dogs; trying to find enough places to keep organized; trying to figure out how I’m going to find enough markets to make enough money to even live, not even to begin to pay back what I’m having to borrow to slightly recover. And, of course, my hope is I’ll rebuild my studio, and I’m going to rebuild it as a house—it’s the first light industrial lot, but it’s in a neighborhood of houses—and sell it and then get my St. George house done and sell it, then pay back SBA, then hopefully have a little bit of money left over, and what I’m going to try and do is buy this property behind me and put the studio back there, so that I can call it a personal work space because, although it was a personal work space, because it was on an I-1 lot—now, there was no room for you to come in and buy. It was not a retail shop, but because of that I had to pay commercial rates of insurance, and I have a friend who just got her new commercial rates for wind and storm, and they went up 300 percent. I was already paying $1800 on six hundred square feet, for which I got zippo, by the way, but $1800 a year for six hundred square feet. OK? So 300 percent; now, I’m looking at what, six grand almost? And hers went up a little over 300 percent whereas if I can build a studio as my personal work space on a non-I lot, an R-lot, residential as opposed to industrial, I’ll just pay, you know, regular insurance because really that’s all it was; it just happened to be—I mean, I didn’t buy it because it was an I-1 lot. And before I had bought it, in the really old days, because people would always stop by and say, “I knew somebody who lived there.” It was a tiny, little shotgun; I mean, it was a home. I don’t know how it ended up in an I-spot, but it just—so it curves around from where you saw the bars, Flamingos and—

Morgan: Through rezoning, probably.

Drobish: Yeah. So I just found that out, what? Friday night. So I’m thinking what I was going to do was kind of build a big, old, ugly, blank building and put a cute little front porch façade on it, but that will then be a C. And I mean, at six thousand dollars,
you’re looking at selling twelve thousand dollars before you’ve even paid your
insurance, and that’s a lot of—

Morgan: Doesn’t really make business sense, does it?

Drobish: No. But, again, the lot cannot be rebuilt on by anybody but me. So if
I don’t do it, the lot then becomes, because it’s a very narrow lot, and the house was
grandfathered in, if I don’t do it, it becomes a $75,000 garden for me. And I can’t
afford that. So that’s what I figure; it was a $75,000 building that went up in smoke.

Morgan: Bay St. Louis has a lot of artists in the area.

Drobish: They have been—the arts has been one of the first organizations that came
back strong. They have been a rallying point for everybody that’s a member. They
have been so active in trying to find grant money and putting out information, getting
people to meetings to talk about future plans, what can we do, what we need to do.
They have been—

Morgan: Now, is this the chamber of commerce?

Drobish: Nope. It’s called the Arts Hancock County, and it was very new. When—

Morgan: Arts Hancock County.

Drobish: Gwen Eppson(?), who’s the president now, but she kind of came into town
and organized everybody and got them started and only about a year and a half, two
years ago. And it has really been very, very strong. I mean, they have been a lifesaver
for artists. So now they have us all applying for a grant through the Mississippi Arts
Commission; that’s it. I mean, it’s five grand, but five grand is five grand, so they did
us a grant-writing blitz, and they’ve been holding workshops on how to write an
artist’s resume and an artist’s bio, (laughter) and an artist’s statement. And so, I mean,
they’ve been great.

Morgan: Have there been many nonprofit organizations with a lot of money, maybe
do special grants for Katrina relief for artists? So you’re just having to plug into
traditional, existing grants.

Drobish: Right.

Morgan: Strings.

Drobish: Right, yeah. It hasn’t been—the only thing—no, none of the big ones that
you see on, like, public television, the Ford Foundation or this—and I should know a
lot of more names because I used to write grants for a living. But you haven’t seen a
lot of that. What you’ve seen is—you certainly haven’t seen a lot of government help.
Although I’m sure MAC got the money, Mississippi Arts Commission got it from
somewhere from the government, but in general what you’ve seen is just small, individual churches. And I do think that truly they should be giving their money to people that lost their homes, and I mean, that’s obviously their first priority. I have a home; that’s my business. So that has—and we did have, actually recently, this is cute, but—(brief interruption while tape is turned over)

Morgan: OK. So the lady from Wisconsin?

Drobish: No. So Gwen—there were so many ceramicists that it would equal $25 a piece, and this woman said, “No, that’s not what I want. I want to pick three.” And she took three of us to go get art supplies at Dogwood Ceramics in Gulfport, which was really nice. And then there’ve been—a group from Santa Fe has been sending in art supplies; it’s been more painting, but that’s OK, anything. And we all get to go up there and choose things we need. That happened. We just had Highwater Clay out of North Carolina send in clay, which was really nice. And other groups have sent in art supplies, and actually the arts have organized a series; we had an event at the Clinton Library to raise money for the arts. There’s a exhibit going on in DC, and again, that was for fine artists, but that’s OK. It’s making awareness of the arts. There was something in Minnesota that people sent stuff up to sell and can continue to send stuff up to sell. I mean, they’re doing, and they’re always looking for new opportunities. Something just got canceled in California, but they’re going to reschedule. Then there’s been this group out of Port—you’ve heard of it. It’s cute.

Morgan: Is it in Texas?

Drobish: Port Arthur, no, Oregon or Washington. Anyway, they said they’re our sister city. I didn’t know that, but they have really come out and helped the artists. They offered—they have several cabins; people have little cabins, and they’ve offered any of us that go up there a free car and the cabin for free for a week to relax. And there’s been several different places that have done that. And then not only the arts here, but the arts, actually, the Mid-City Art Group that I do shows at, and the Bywater Art Group, they’ve been sending out stuff, you know, offers of studios. And so there’s been a lot of individual help.

Morgan: Have you gotten away from Bay St. Louis since then? Have you had any time off the coast?

Drobish: No, not really. No. But that’s what I’m working on now. I’m getting a product line together, all my really good samples, getting it organized, and I’m going to drive through the Panhandle, go up into Georgia. I have a woman in Darien who wants to carry my stuff. So I need to go up there and see her and talk to her. She’s just heard about it, and she keeps calling me and saying, “I hear it’s so cute, everybody says.” Because I have a whole group of friends that live in Darien, Georgia, it’s right on the coast—and go into St. Simons. So I’m getting ready to do that, and that’s going to be my break. I’m going to go look for actual furniture off the Gulf Coast
where they have something besides brown and wood, heavy wood furniture and just get away that way. So I’ll make it work and get away.

**Morgan:** So is being—and I know you’re going to hate this—like, a Katrina artist, is that something now when people, like in Georgia, this is an artist who was affected by Katrina, and this is some of her work. Is that helpful?

**Drobish:** I do think the sympathy factor worked a bit in Lafayette, and even in New Orleans, but everybody is a Katrina victim around here. I guess when I get there, I’ll see, but I mean, I don’t want people to carry my stuff because—I want them to carry it because they like it and continue to carry it. I don’t need one-shot wonders; I mean, not that that’s not nice, but we were talking about that on writing our bios and our narratives for our grants. Well, obviously they’re giving you the money for Katrina; so you can mention Ka[trina]. And right now you can include in your bio Katrina, but that’s not going to ride for long. You can already see the world doesn’t care much, and you may get another three, four months out of that; that’s why these bios have to be constantly updated. They don’t care; it’s not going to carry you. It’s helped a bit; people, like the fine artists that got to do Clinton Library and this big Washington, DC exhibit, it’s gotten them exposure they would have probably never gotten outside of the area, necessarily. I mean, I’m not saying they might be the next Reubens or Andy Warhol, but generally, they wouldn’t have got that big exposure. So it’s been really—and that was OK, because they were Katrina victims, so that’s good. And that’s what Gwen keeps saying, “Let’s take advantage of this while we can. It’s given us opportunities we would not have otherwise had, but at the same time remember,” because—

**Morgan:** Think about the long, long haul.

**Drobish:** I mean, if you watch, which I don’t watch Fox News, but if you do, since Katrina, Natalie Holloway—I bet after the initial covering of Katrina, they have more Natalie Holloway stories than they have Katrina stories. I mean, CNN’s been a little bit better, but you know, most of them are off of it. And we were actually—I had a conversation with a friend last night about that. I’m like, “We need”—and not even that I’m a big fan of George Clooney or anything, but we need somebody like that. And even if Washington hates them, they at least respond to them. Then it would get into the public dialogue again, and somebody that—we just need some awareness again. And my sister-in-law came down for the first time—she lives in Tampa—for the first time this weekend, and her husband had been here a bit. But saying it—we went to—oh, well, this is another that was the normal. Every Saturday morning we had this greatest little farmer’s market, produce, and then there was a Vietnamese woman that made like spring rolls, and another woman who did these like barbecued pork things, and then sweets, and people who sold soaps and plants. So every Saturday morning you’d get up, and people would sell shrimp in shrimp time or crabs. And you go fill up your larder, I guess. Well, that’d be gone; that’s where the new county government is in trailers, where the flea market was; I mean the farmer’s market. So on Coleman Avenue, which is Waveland, where there’s nothing left,
they’ve set up three of the big kind of Quonset army tents, the kind of rounded top, long ones, and they have a little farmer’s market. It’s very little, and artists set up, and I mean—

**Morgan:** Is that a weekly thing now?

**Drobish:** Yeah, it’s on Saturday mornings. So that was—my sister-in-law had come straight in, and she got in in the evening, and she came [Highway] 603 straight into Bay St. Louis, and we really—I mean, it’s bad, but, like, this part has really been kind of saved. Now, two blocks over starts nothing; I don’t know how much you’ve driven around. Well, we took our Long Beach Road to Coleman; I mean, after five minutes, she was just hysterical, crying, sobbing, and apologizing. She was like, “I had no idea! I had no idea! I mean, Jay said it was bad; I saw pictures. I had no idea; I had no idea.” And I mean, it’s shocking. And I think people don’t—until you really see it. And she said, she kept saying, “I can’t believe this is United States of America.” And it’s hard to believe, and this is what? Nine months after the storm. And it looks good. I mean, to us, this looks good. That would be Coco you’re hearing on the tape, a blonde lab that was my present to myself after the storm when I needed somebody to make me happy, and she does.

**Morgan:** She does a good job.

**Drobish:** Yeah.

**Morgan:** You had mentioned maybe FEMA helping you with your air-conditioning. Have you had any experience with FEMA? Have you had to deal with them at all?

**Drobish:** Yeah, they finally sent me a fifty-two-hundred-dollar grant for the house on St. George.

**Morgan:** OK. How was that? Was dealing with them easy?

**Drobish:** When I couldn’t get the evacuation money, no. And then I just gave up. I’m like, “What’s two grand?” Is it worth, every time I’d go talk to them, they’d make me cry. I had friends that have their third home in New Orleans; they live off a trust fund at Cape Cod. They did have a broken window in their five-hundred-dollar-a-square-foot condo in New Orleans; they got FEMA money, and they don’t live in New Orleans. They live in Cape Cod, and they got Red Cross money. No Red Cross money (referring to herself). I have some other friends that live on a thirteen-million-dollar piece of property in Ashville, North Carolina; they got FEMA money, but they have property in the French Quarter. They have $1.5 million worth of condos in the French Quarter; they got FEMA money.

**Morgan:** When you see things like that, and now, a lot of the fraud stories—
Drobish: And it wasn’t even fraud; FEMA sent it to them because they saw they had addresses. Now, I’m sure they applied before they knew they weren’t supposed to, and it makes me sick. But it makes me sick that my mom has—well, it was a big joke, OK? Everybody knew the French Quarter did OK, and anybody that’s driven through the French Quarter would know there is no room for trailers. And 90 percent of my mom’s friends are French Quarter homeowners. Everybody got calls, “Where would you like your trailer delivered?” They’re like, “First off, my house isn’t harmed. Second off, have you looked at my address? I live on Royal Street.” I mean, just look at your satellite photographs. So stupid. And people here were begging for—like, they were really good with the French Quarter; now, if you lived in Chalmette, you didn’t get anything. And I have to say, I think FEMA did—once trailers started coming in, they did a pretty good job. Of course, I’m more upset about what they did in New Orleans, but we were lucky. We have a Republican governor, which I don’t think is so lucky, but we were lucky in that, again, and we have the person, Trent person, Trent Lott. And so we got a lot more. And although I live here, New Orleans is still such a home of my heart and was such a big part of my life that I can’t separate, and it hurts me that they’ve hurt them so bad and continue to hurt them. But we’ve been a little lucky, and we really, the trash pickup, once it started happening was good because you couldn’t imagine. I mean, you couldn’t see houses; all you could see was walls of debris, and that felt better. But for like five months, all you saw was debris; so now that you don’t see that so much, that makes your attitude better.

Morgan: Was there ever any debate with you about building back down here, going further inland?

Drobish: I have no choice but to try and recover. I have to tell you honestly; probably if I could leave, I would leave, right now. And not because of the storms, just because, when will it be normal again? My friends, most of them, are now in DeLisle; I mean, we can’t get together at night. There’s no lights; they don’t want to get on the [interstate]. I don’t want to drive on the interstate late at night. I mean, we generally have a couple of drinks, but we lived within blocks of each other. Really, my best friend locally now lives in Ashville, North Carolina. She and her husband went up there and bought a house.

Morgan: Did they leave after the storm?

Drobish: Yeah, yeah. They were on St. Joseph Street in Waveland, and they have nothing. And I had dinner with the friend that lost the large family home in Pass Christian. They’ve so far got two hundred fifty thousand [dollars] from flood; they still owe over five hundred thousand dollars on their mortgage. And the wind storm, they’re saying no; they’re getting a lawyer. They had a big Buddha in their backyard that they had had appraised about three years ago, and it appraised for a hundred and ninety thousand. Well, it fell over. When I tell you—it was almost as big as this house. I mean, it was big.

Morgan: That’s a big Buddha.
Drobish: Yeah, her great-great-grandparents had had it imported. Well, it had fallen and cracked in three. And somebody with a crane [went to] try and steal it, and then when they did, they dropped it, and then it just kind of shattered. They had two statues left that, again, were very valuable, but they never really thought about that. I mean, it was just something that had always been part of their lives, and it was there before they were born. Somebody got one of them, but they don’t—well, that’s not even the point. They don’t know what they’re going to do. They don’t know if they can rebuild. First off, there’s been no FEMA guidelines. As Roe said, “If I had a million dollars, I don’t know if anybody will insure me there. What kind of insurance are they going to give me? Can I rebuild on my property? How high do I have to go up to get insurance?” And right now she has nothing. She has a five-hundred-thousand-dollar note she has to pay every month on; so that’s five grand or so she has to come up with every month. So she and her husband are just working their asses off and living in some friends’ barn, a converted barn, that luckily, they get to live in for free since they’re paying a five-thousand-dollar note on—

Morgan: On something that’s not there.

Drobish: Yeah, I mean, but the point is, when are we ever going to be able to get together again easily? When am I going to be able to go buy clothes again? When am I going to have a grocery store that is not Wal-Mart, that has, like, real meat, a choice, better produce, organic produce? I mean, any of those things. It’s not the same.

Morgan: Well, do you have any kind of timeline on when you’re going to be able to begin work, or how’s getting contractors and stuff like that?

Drobish: Oh, that’s a joke! I’ve been on—my St. George house, I had a contractor do a new roof, and I’ve had it leveled and joists and piers replaced that had gotten busted. Luckily, it stayed on its piers, but some busted, so they got under there with jacks, and I’ve been on them since then because those needed to be done immediately before anything else because the house could crack. So I got those things done, and I’ve been on a list. I need all the subfloor pulled up and replaced, which is the next step. And then I’ve gutted it, and then we can get in and start rebuilding walls and stuff like that and electricity. Well, I’ve been on a list for three contractors, and again, it’s a small house; it’s a small budget. I mean, I’m probably going to have to spend about sixty thousand dollars; it’s not a big deal, and that’s including electricity. Big, good contractors want to rebuild three-, four-hundred-, five-hundred-[thousand]-dollar house. I mean, you’re not getting so-and-so construction company come out to do—because it’s mostly small work putting in cabinets, redoing the bathroom, putting Sheetrock on the ceilings. It’s not building. So it’s mostly handymen that have building—but they’re not big contractors. I’ve been on three lists for over two months.

Morgan: And still waiting. Have you had any of the volunteer help, any of the church workers?
**Drobish:** Now, again, I did not ask because my primary home was intact, and I felt like my neighbor across the street had a lot of damage to hers. She’s a seventy-two-year-old heart transplant patient and had zero insurance. I mean, I at least got thirty-two thousand dollars for the St. George House; she got nothing. I mean, I feel—and she’s seventy-two years old with a heart transplant; that’s who they’re here for. But now that that’s slowing down, I’m going to go get myself on some lists, but I’m going to make them aware that it’s not a primary home. I mean, I know people who got rental properties rebuilt by volunteers right after the storm, and I think that was really wrong. And I don’t think they told the volunteers, “Hey, this is a property that I just rent out.” I actually know people who got full insurance on some rental properties, like the full value of the house and got it rebuilt by volunteers. You learned a lot about people; you learned the good and the bad during this, things people would do. And I am now going to—now that they’ve taken care of the immediate needs, I’m going to go put myself on a list for both my studio and (inaudible) tell them it’s commercial, and that this was a property I was selling and will go back up for sale; it’s not a primary home, and if anybody wants to come help me under those terms, then that’s great. But I don’t want anybody to be fooled that—and I need a new roof on this house now, but I don’t want to be ugly, but I want a good new roof; I don’t want a volunteer new [roof]. Does that sound ugly? I mean, if I’m going to do it, I have to buy the materials anyway. The volunteers really aren’t buying the materials, and that’s OK. I’m not complaining about that. But if I’m going to spend three thousand dollars on materials, and labor is only another four thousand, I want it to stay on for the next hurricane. And actually my mom’s roof went; she had a professional roofing company do it, but she was right in the middle of adding on a back porch, screened-in back porch. That roof, the back porch roof did not go. So when we got back and saw the professional roofing company’s roof had peeled off as one piece—they hadn’t put enough hurricane straps on it—Mom said, “Stephen, you fix my roof because your roof held.” And then he went and fixed my roof. Luckily, he was the guy that was doing her back porch anyway, and he is a licensed contractor, and so—because I was like, “I got the guy whose roof held, and he’s who I want to do this roof.” Because his roof at his house—in fact, if you go down Central towards Waveland, you will see one house on the left, in the middle of nothing, still standing, and that was his house. And then he had one on Esterbrook(?) that did really well. So I just feel like, “Hey, this guy knows what he’s doing.”

**Morgan:** He’s got the touch or something.

**Drobish:** Yeah. So he’s one I’m willing to wait for. I’d rather have it done right, and the volunteers are great at a lot of things, and I certainly don’t want to disparage them, but I’d just rather have a roof that I’m really comfortable about holding.

**Morgan:** When June 1 rolled around again this year, and the announcement of hurricane season, did you have any anxiety? No?
Drobish: Not at all. You know, it could happen again, and it could never happen again. Again, I tend to be liberal; I do think that there’s something going on. I don’t know that for a fact, but I do think they’re probably right. We’re in for some worse storms. I’m just hoping they don’t necessarily hit us again, but they could. But nothing I can say or do is going to change it, and worrying about it is not going to change it. This time I’ll pack up my doggies and my boyfriend, and we will go north or east, as the case may be. I mean, that was so stupid because the storm still could have swung east, but we always—my aunt said, “If it starts looking [bad], we have cell phones, and then we’ll all meet in Atlanta.” Because we’d be going that way, anyway. So no. Now, I’ve heard lots of people, “Well, I’m not going to rebuild till after the storm season.” I’m like, “Well, what about the next one? And there’s always another one. So then don’t rebuild here.” But there’s been severe weather all around; I mean, forest fires, the tornadoes, the tsunami, the typhoons hitting Japan and China, the drought, the heat wave in Europe last year that killed what? Like thirty thousand people. I mean, we’re having severe weather.

Morgan: If you’re running from something, you’re always going to be running.

Drobish: Yeah, and there’s probably some places that are safer, but who knows? It’s like worrying about a serial killer. That’s not something I can worry about. Now, I do worry about getting mugged when I’m walking the streets of New Orleans; I’m very careful. Can’t worry about something that just comes out of the blue and you have no way of anticipating. And I have to tell you; this is the, I guess, ironic thing. So far I’ve lost two buildings, well, a building and 75 percent of another, and I got thirty-two thousand dollars worth of insurance, and I pay insurance. Don’t get me wrong; I’m not an uninsured person. This house, they won’t do your homeowner’s when you’re in the middle of construction. So I have like fifty thousand dollars fire policy in case it burned before I had any stuff in it. And so the Wednesday when I got final approval and I knew we were moving in, I called my insurance agent. And I said, “Hey, I need a policy on this house. We’re moving in; we got approval.” He was like, “Great. We’re moving in; we got approval.” He was like, “Great. What do you want?” I said, “Well, I always keep a five thousand dollar deductible because I think it’s stupid when you can’t claim anything (inaudible) drop your insurance.” So he called me. It must have been Wednesday afternoon; he called me Thursday morning and said, “I’ve got what you need. Lloyd’s of London, eighteen hundred dollars, come up here; just give me a check, sign the papers.” So I said, “OK. I’m at the library now, and I have to go do this and this, and I’ll be by this afternoon.” Well, by the time I got there Thursday afternoon, it had entered the Gulf, and there was no way of signing; they don’t let you. You probably know that; no signing on anything once the storm’s in the Gulf. So that was the other anxiety, that I had no wind policy on this house, and if this one went, I had just wasted another hundred thousand dollars.

So now I have flood; I have wind; I have regular homeowner’s, flood being the big one. Because my mom asked, “Should I get flood? I need flood.” And her agent told her, a State Farm agent, mind you, “You don’t need flood, lady; you’re twenty-two feet above sea level, and you have to get special permission to get flood because
you’re not in a flood zone,” which turned out not to be true, and my mom didn’t even think it was true at the time. It’s just she was in the middle of trying to move, and she just thought she’d get to it later. What a joke. But now I’m really well-insured, but again, a lot of people were really well-insured and have so far not seen a penny. I mean, I was actually lucky I got thirty-two thousand. My mom just met a woman that she knew from way back when, who had moved to Diamondhead, and she and her husband had just signed a contract on their house to sell it for $450,000 the week before the storm. So far they have not even seen living expenses money from their insurance company; they’ve seen nothing. So thirty-two thousand is a lot more than nothing, even though it doesn’t sound like a lot. I mean, in most ways, I was one of the lucky ones. I was able to be here, live in my home; I got a bit of money. And it felt good being here for everybody and having a place for everybody to stay. I mean, in general, I’m a lucky one. I was able—I mean, as gross as it is having my studio and my house look like this, at least I’m able to work. And I do know I’m a lucky one. And then when I whine about everything I lost, I mean, I still lost a lot, and I’m a lucky one. And I’m young; I mean, my mom’s sixty-seven. She thought she was retiring; she’s going back to work. She’s selling her home here. She’s kind of scared to be in New Orleans, but that’s where most of her friends are, but crime’s running rampant in New Orleans. She doesn’t know what to do, but everybody that was here, she had just moved here and just started making friends, and the ones she had made had left, and they’re not coming back. She had just joined Pass Christian Yacht Club, which you can’t get to Pass Christian Yacht Club. There’s no bridge. They just started a new mah-jongg and bridge group, you know? I mean, they were due to have their, like, first thing the next—she was going to join Book Club; well, the bookstore blew away. We don’t have Book Club anymore. We’re actually starting a new one at my yacht club, but it’s still not the same as the one, little, funky Bookends; we had this independent bookstore that was just great, and we read really cool, cutting-edge stuff.

Morgan: So is that what gets you through, kind of comparing other peoples’ losses. Is that how you get to, you’re lucky?

Drobish: Yeah, I guess. I mean, I try; I don’t want to be a whiney baby. Still better off than other people, even though I have my little pity parties.

(end of interview)