Mississippi Oral History Program

Hurricane Katrina Oral History Project

An Oral History

with

Kathryn Anne James

Interviewer: Elizabeth Smith

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An Oral History with Kathryn Anne James, Volume 1002
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Biography

Mrs. Kathryn Anne (Sally) James was born on June 24, 1938, to Mr. Floyd E. Bishop (born on January 21, 1918) and Mrs. Vernice Murphy Farrell Bishop (born February 13, 1914). Her parents were married in September of 1937. Her father was a machinist at Keesler Field (later Air Force Base), and he worked for L and N Railroad. Her mother was a homemaker and the mother of seven boys and three girls. On August 16, 1959, James married Mr. Thomas Wayne James in Pass Christian, Mississippi. They are the parents of Kathryn (born June 14, 1960), Sally Anne James (born February 5, 1962), and Thomas W. James Jr. (born October 21, 1963).

James was graduated from St. Joseph High School in Pass Christian, and she attended two years of college at Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College. She started working at Pass Christian Public Library as a reference librarian, and at the time of this interview, when she was seventy years old, she was the children’s librarian there, as well as the manager. She is active in St. Paul’s Carnival Alumni Association and the historical society. She was the second person chosen as the Mississippi Gulf Coast Hero of WLOX, and she was awarded the position of the 2008 Carnival Parade Grand Marshall. She is a Catholic, and she enjoys reading, cooking, family gatherings, and playing card games.
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This is an interview for The University of Southern Mississippi Hurricane Katrina Oral History Project. The interview is with Mrs. Kathryn Anne James, and it is taking place on December 6, 2007, at 11:30 a.m. in Pass Christian, Mississippi, at the Pass Christian Public Library. The interviewer is Elizabeth Smith. First, I would like to thank you, Miss Sally, for taking time to talk with me today, and I’d like to get some background information about you, which is what we usually do in oral history interviews. So I’m going to ask you for the record, could you state your name, please?

James: My legal name is Kathryn Anne Bishop James. My family’s called me Sally since birth. There’s no oral or written record as why they chose to do that.

Smith: So no real reason, huh?

James: No. No, nobody can come up with one. They just said I looked like a Sally.

Smith: OK. (laughter) That’s awesome. OK. And for the record, if you could, spell your name for me.


Smith: All right, thank you. When were you born?

James: I was born June 24, 1938.

Smith: OK. Here in Pass Christian?

James: No. I was born in Gulfport, Mississippi, King’s Daughters Hospital.

Smith: OK. Tell me a little about your mom and your dad, their names, where they were born.

James: My mom was born here in Pass Christian; her name was Kathryn Farrell, and everybody called her Tattie(?), another one of those Southern names that’s hard to extrapolate from Kathryn, but anyway they called her Tattie. She went to the same
high school that I graduated, which was St. Joseph School, which was a longtime Catholic school in the Pass. She played piano beautifully. She had seven sons and three daughters. She ruled us with a stare and a look and a word. She was five foot tall and weighed about a hundred pounds. She was an Irish Catholic. Her dad was from here. He also went to St. Joseph School in the late 1800s. And he owned his own hardware store here in Pass Christian. The Depression wiped him out, and he went to work for his brother at a grocery store because people still had to eat. They might not have had to buy hammers, but they had to eat. And he met—and I’m not sure of the date because I had all that, and Katrina took it. But he met and married my grandmother. He was in a kind of a local guard unit, you know, that they had, all up and down the Coast. And her brother, Robert Massey was in the same one, and somehow or another, they met, and they married. And they had twelve children. Seven survived to adulthood. My father was born in Birmingham, [Alabama]. My grandfather was a railroad man for forty years. He worked for the L and N [Louisville and Nashville] Railroad. He met and married my grandmother. She was from Pascagoula. They called her—her name was Verniece(?). And they were good Methodists, tithed, were the backbone of the Pass Christian Methodist Church, and all of them lived and died right here in Pass Christian.

Smith: Hm. So y’all got some long, deep roots in Pass Christian.

James: We do; we do.

Smith: What did you say your dad’s name was?

James: Floyd.

Smith: Floyd, OK.

James: And his dad was Floyd.

Smith: Floyd, Floyd. (laughter) Kathryn, Kathryn.

James: That’s right.

Smith: And you said—I saw on your form, you said you had ten—

James: I have seven brothers. I have two sisters. That’s ten of us, and we all live within twenty-five miles of each other. We almost always get together; well, we always get together on Sunday, and almost always, all ten of us show up.

Smith: Oh, that’s awesome.

James: So every Sunday we have coffee and dessert, up at my house or my other sister here in the Pass, and we get together, visit with each other, and catch up on the
week, and see how each other’s grandchildren are doing. And well, I think it’s unusual that we all live within twenty-five miles of each other.

Smith: I know. That’s awesome. Not scattered over the countryside, but just—

James: We’re all right here.

Smith: Have y’all always been that close, growing up?

James: Yeah. Now, my sister’s are spaced out. One is eleven years younger than I am. One’s seventeen, so that was a little different for me. But my brothers were all very, very close to each other, and they still are. Three of them play golf twice a week, you know. They’re not good. They just play. (laughter) And I think it’s the excuse that after they play golf, they go to one of the casinos and have lunch and maybe lose a little money. (laughter)

Smith: Um-hm, all a part of the experience of getting together.

James: That’s right. Actually in my family, my immediate family, that would be my brothers and sisters and our children and grandchildren, we number sixty-seven right now, and waiting for sixty-eight.

Smith: Oh, little bambino on the way.

James: Yeah. That’s a good-sized family.

Smith: Yes, it is. So with you guys being all here together, what did y’all do during the hurricane? What was your evacuation plan?

James: I had no plan. My plan came to me on Saturday night about nine o’clock. I didn’t have Internet at the house, just a computer with kids’ games. So we came up to the library, which was on Hearn(?) Avenue, and I went online, and it was nine o’clock at night. And I made reservations for the nearest place we could evacuate to and actually get to. So we left town about eleven o’clock Sunday morning, and it took us five and a half hours to get just north of Mobile in a small town up there, which was not far enough because it had seventy-miles-an-hour wind. But there was—you know, we were still safer than we were here. Four of my brothers and myself lost our homes; that’s five out of ten. Two of my children lost their homes, and nieces and nephews lost their home. I think we totaled up; I was going to say, I think it was eleven or twelve of us lost, in my immediate family, lost their homes. As to my brothers’ plans to evacuate, some of them are safe enough where they are, but I don’t know that they would stay in something else this major, again, but everybody actually, except one brother, left. One of them stayed in his house, but the rest of them left.

Smith: And his house stayed?
James: Is in Long Beach, yes, um-hm.

Smith: Well, that’s good.

James: On the north side of the tracks.

Smith: And that’s a lot. What did y’all do when you come back, and all these homes were destroyed? Did y’all stay with each other family?

James: You know what? You’ve asked a very interesting and deep question because what happened, for instance, to my family, is we were essentially all homeless. Eight of us were homeless. You know? Normally in something like this, say my house would have survived, and the children would have come to me. Or my son’s house would have survived, and we would have gone to him. Well, in this case, there were no houses. Out of the eight of us, we lost—two or three children lost their homes. All of us—we just went; we split up, and everybody went wherever they could. My brothers did the same. We had a friend in Long Beach who had a big living room, and everybody just put down sleeping bags or whatever, and we slept there for a while. I went to my sister’s. At one time there were eleven of us there, staying at her house, and her house survived, naturally. But basically until we got the trailers, everybody just was wherever they could find to be. We had a trailer for my daughter and one for my husband on our property on Second Street, and each one of my brothers that lost their homes have a trailer on their properties. Well, actually my brother Robert had one on—they couldn’t get to his property because part of his house was still there. So they put it on an aunt’s property, and they stayed there until the next step came along.

Smith: So you’re saying all of your children’s homes were destroyed?

James: Yes.

Smith: And how many do you have?

James: Oh, I have three. One lived with me in an apartment on my home, which was gone, too. So I guess you could say all three lost their homes.

Smith: Right. Right. My God.

James: But my daughter had a home that she lost, and my son had a home he lost.

Smith: Being in Hattiesburg, one of the big things at the multipurpose center was they had an animal shelter, huge.

James: Right.

Smith: Did y’all have any animals?
James: That was one of the things that—we had to find some place that would take us and our dog. And fortunately there are still places that will do that, but not many, and that was one of the reasons we had a hard time finding some place. We probably could have gone, all of us, anywhere, but taking your dog with you, and my son had his dog, so it was—yeah, when you have an animal, it changes the whole perspective of things.

Smith: Right. And that’s part of your family. You can’t just leave your pet behind.

James: That’s right. No, indeed not. No.

Smith: Well, we’re here. What is the address of the current location?

James: This is 324 East Second Street. It’s an address that was created because this essentially is the War Memorial Park, and we just have a doublewide trailer here in the War Memorial Park.

Smith: Oh, OK, OK. So this was here before the—

James: Oh, yeah. This is a park that goes back to Second World War.

Smith: Oh, my goodness.

James: It’s a beautiful park.

Smith: It is. So obviously they had to redo a lot after Katrina.

James: Oh, my gosh, yes.

Smith: Because I noticed so many things are new.

James: Oh, it was awful. It was awful, and a lot of the trees are dying because heavy trucks drove over them. The Army was actually—the Army stayed here, in tents right here in this—they cleaned up the park, and then they stayed here for a while. That’s who guarded the entrances and exits to town.

Smith: Oh, OK. Why were they guarding it?

James: Keeping people out.

Smith: From looting, or just didn’t want them in until they cleaned up the debris?

James: Looting, mostly.

Smith: OK. So they helped to police.
James: Um-hm.

Smith: Well, I talked to the chief. I know that the library was used for them for shelter, because I think in Camille it survived.

James: It was built after Camille.

Smith: It was built after Camille. OK.

James: Built in 1973, but it’s high. The elevation here was twenty, and the library’s a pretty substantial building, and it held up. If you Google “shoot out at the Pass Christian Library”—did he tell you about that? One of the officers had three minutes of film on a video camera, and if you Google “shoot out at Pass Christian Library,” you can see their perspective looking out when the first wave came in, and there was no water in the library. We had gotten a grant for hurricane-proof windows and doors, and they proved to hold up, but out in the parking lot on this video is, floating, all these cars with the lights going, and going beep, beep.

Smith: The patrol cars.

James: Yeah. And some private vehicles, and what eventually happened is one of the police cars knocked down the south door, and the second wave had come in, and the water rushed through there, and carried them out the north door. And John told you this, I’m sure, that he grabbed the handicapped railing, and they formed a human chain to get up on the roof of the library.

Smith: Man, that had to been something.

James: That was something. That really was.

Smith: So did anything survive in the library?

James: I saved 2,800 books.

Smith: Oh, 2,800.

James: Out of 40,000.

Smith: Out of 40,000. Man! Well, how did y’all replenish or restart?

James: Totally by donations.

Smith: Oh, OK. In this area, or just in the country?

James: No, from everywhere in the United States.
Smith: Isn’t that awesome?

James: We’re still—Naperville, Illinois, is still a sister library to us, and we get all our DVDs and music CDs, all, and VHS tapes, and we’re back to lending VHS tapes with an honor system, and as many VHS tapes go out as DVDs. And we do a big business in videos. But Naperville sends us everything.

Smith: Well, that’s awesome.

James: Isn’t that something? Naperville, Illinois, the library system there.

Smith: Did they contact you guys, or did y’all have to come to—

James: They did. No. Everybody contacted us. The state of Texas, in December [2005], right after the hurricane, sent 17,000 books. They brought them down in a big U-Haul van. And it took a while going through that; I’m telling you. A group from Kentucky, three Methodist groups, Tommy Baker(?) built all the shelving you saw in there, all those nice shelves. All those real wooden shelves came in, and he prefabbed by pieces and then put them all together in an army tent out, right next to us, and put all the shelving in there. And so we started opening boxes, and they were kept, put on the shelf, put in storage for further use because they weren’t something that we needed in the type library we’re running right now. And we still have to do that. We’re warehousing, storing books in a storage unit that we want for when we reopen, but we just don’t have room for them now, and then there were the books that we sold. And we had five book sales, and raised about $10,000 for the library.

Smith: Well, that’s good. That’s good. What are your goals as far as moving back?

James: Well, the City has decided—the City owned the building, and the Harrison County Library System furnished the building and furnished the employees. I’m paid by Harrison County Library System, but the City’s decided to build a new library, there, just a little north and west of the current library, so they can accommodate a new city hall that’s going to be redesigned. So I’m assuming that sometime in the near future, we’ll hear that that library is going to be—which will be a sad day for me. I’ll have twenty-five years in June. That’ll be bulldozed and getting the property ready for a new library. And it’ll be 10,000 square feet. We know that. That’s how much has been approved. We had about 8200 before. And I thought about that, that I wish I had 12,000, and they’re going to build this library so that we can add on in the future. So it’ll all be fine. If we can afford 10,000, let’s just build 10,000. (laughter)

Smith: Exactly, and just add onto it later.

James: Right.

Smith: Well, you said y’all started out after Katrina, you saved or salvaged 2800 books. How many do you have now, after the donations and everything?
James: I’m going to say roughly, we probably are housing maybe fifteen—we’ve got a lot in the children’s wing—fifteen to eighteen thousand.

Smith: OK. All right. And you got quite a bit in storage.

James: And that’s DVDs and VHS and music. Now, not the music because we have hundreds and hundreds of music CDs that fit into a smaller area, and they’re not catalogued yet, so I can’t tell you the number, but between fifteen and eighteen thousand. And we have probably—I’m going to say about 9,000 items in storage.

Smith: So what type of audience, would you say—who are the typical people who use your library right now?

James: Well, in the beginning, we knew that we needed to offer the services that were of immediate need to—the first one was the Internet or maybe first was a copy machine, a fax machine, and the Internet. And that’s what we set up first, the copy machine, the fax machine, and the Internet. And in our early days, they were just constantly—

Smith: What were they using it for?

James: Well, trying to get FEMA [Federal Emergency Management Agency], SBA [Small Business Administration], insurance, State Farm, Farm Bureau, all of them, everything had to be copied and faxed, copied and faxed. Then they were online, and you could go on the Internet and do your FEMA applications or your FEMA stuff. There were still plenty of people—now, we registered, because we had nothing to do when we were sitting up there, we registered on the phone with FEMA. But there were still many, many people who had not. But then things got better, and though, all those things are still used a lot, the Internet is a big, big thing here for us. We have the wireless; have always had the wireless, and it’s a big necessity for a lot of people who use the wireless. But by the same token, the books and the videos and the music are going out at a steady rate. We’re back to having some children’s programs. I had twenty-seven story hours a month at the other library. So when we came back and there were none, it was like a really cultural shock to me. But there were no kids around, and as the kids came back, they went to schools, and they stayed aftercares, and there’s a school here that takes them as young as two, and these children are going to these schools, and that’s where they are. And schools right now can’t come to see us. They just don’t have the staff, or maybe they lost their vans, and a lot of them had vans and minibuses. But we hope all that will change once we move back into—well, it’s changing now. We’re starting to get children, a lot of children coming in. Some of them are getting off the bus in the afternoon, and coming to use the library right after school. We’re going to adjust our hours after the first of the year to accommodate.

Smith: Opening later?
James: Staying open.

Smith: Staying open later, um-hm. That’s good.

James: Well, yeah. We’ve got to do that for these kids.

Smith: Right. Have you had any requests or feedback from parents or just different citizens around here, saying what they need, or what they expect or what they (inaudible).

James: I think we’re supplying it all. I really do think we’re able, through a grant, to do a lot of the things that we need to do. This whole building that you’re looking at, that we’re sitting in, was done with a grant, everything. The TV was given to us by a group that came through with a TV and a VCR, just to give it to us. We weren’t the only place they gave to, but we were one of the places. The tables that we were in, in the other room, Dupont gave. I mean, everything has been donated. All those computers that you saw in the other room were donated by the Lions Club of Hattiesburg, but I think we’re probably supplying as much as we possibly, in our tight quarters, as we can. And I think that people are pretty happy with it. They seem to be.

Smith: I was just about to say, it seems like you have a revolving door, people coming through and utilizing the services. So that’s great.

James: Absolutely, yeah.

Smith: That’s a good thing. How about the art work? I mean, you have it on every aspect of this, other than the floor.

James: Yeah. And I’m sorry that some of it’s covered up, and it’s covered up right now because we needed space to—we’re still selling books and stuff. And we found ourselves in need of putting these out, getting them out of the main part of the library and into this room. This artwork is very special. That’s my granddaughters, right in back of you. A young man came, and he painted this oak tree that you see. And he came out, and he painted acorns. And wherever an acorn fell, a kid came in and painted a tree, and they painted their own—there’s the happy tree. Over here is an ice cream tree. There’s a—just whatever you see, they came in, and where an acorn fell, they painted a tree. See that young fellow, B.P.—whoever he is, and his name is—no, her name is Ashea(?)—paints himself in the tree.

Smith: Oh, that’s awesome.

James: Isn’t that great? (laughter)

Smith: Yes. So they feel a part; they have to feel a part of the—
James: Oh, yeah.

Smith: They probably come a lot just to show it off.

James: They planted the flower beds in the front of the library. They planted the flower beds.

Smith: Oh, really? And they’re beautiful.

James: They are. Thank you. The kids planted the flower beds about a month ago.

Smith: Well, now, how great is that for kids to want to come to a library?


Smith: Those are great ways to get them in there.

James: Well, we’ve always been something special to the kids in Pass Christian, and I missed that in our early days, because we only saw adults. But it’s getting better; it’s getting better.

Smith: Well, that’s good. That’s good.

James: Saturday, we see a lot of young people. They come up here to use the park, and here we are. But when we move to the back, to Hearn Avenue in the new library, we’ll be half a football field from the new school, which is going to have a birth-to-four-year-old day care, donated by a major oil company. And then, kindergarten through eighth grade will be housed there. So I imagine we’re going to be very, very busy.

Smith: Yes, that is awesome.

James: Right.

Smith: So you’re not planning to retire any time soon, are you?

James: Well, I’ll have twenty-five years, and I’ll be seventy in June. And I had thought to retire then, but I would really like to stay to see the library built, or at least started and progressed, and then maybe I’ll go ahead and retire and see how retirement feels after twenty-five years.

Smith: Right, right, right. I don’t know. That new library might refire you rather than retire you.

James: It surely may. (laughter) I worry about that a little bit.
**Smith:** Right, right, right. You’d be tempted to keep going, huh?

**James:** Yes, I would. But everybody has their time.

**Smith:** Um-hm. So we’ll see what yours is.

**James:** That’s right.

**Smith:** Well, that’s awesome. How has this affected the employees? Did y’all lose any employees?

**James:** We did. You’re going to find this to be a very interesting story. There were seven of us, four full-time and three part-time. After the hurricane, I was kept on, and I was able to get two of our full-time employees back on a part-time basis with, as soon as we were able, to go to full-time, which we did. We did. And I think that we all basically worked part-time because we’re inputting into the computer all the books that we have in there. We’re now going to be—we are back online. As soon as we were able to get back online with our other libraries, we started having to enter the books, barcode them, enter the books. So we needed Wendy(?) to come on so that she could help. She’s doing all the children’s wing, and Jan’s(?) doing all the adult books. So they have to sit down and put these books in our database. So we were able to rehire Wendy. Jerrie Sellier(?) is retiring after thirteen years. She wants to stay home with her new grandchild, and so we’re rehiring another part-time person back to fill Jerrie’s spot. So we’re back to kind of—they were available, and we’re very lucky to be able to have them back. Wendy came to work at the library in 2000, so it’s nice to have her back. And Jessica came to work in 2003, so she’ll be back. And we’ll still be four, but—

**Smith:** But it’s great to have—

**James:** Isn’t that nice to be able to get that? There’s only one that we haven’t been able to get back. (laughter)

**Smith:** Is she doing something else?

**James:** Yes. Yes, she’s in nursing school, and I really hope she stays there.

**Smith:** Right, exactly. Well, it’s great you don’t have to retrain.

**James:** No. Isn’t that wonderful?

**Smith:** Yes.
James: It really is, and I’ll tell you. It’s such a blessing to be able to stay here and do these data entries from right here rather than haul these books down to the headquarters in Gulfport for the technical processing people to do. Mike came down and trained Jan and Wendy and showed them how to do this job, and that’s what they spend a lot of their time during the day, doing.

Smith: Um-hm. That’s awesome. And you’re the manager.

James: I’m the manager right now.

Smith: How long have you been in that position?

James: Well, since the storm, but off and on over the years, my years. This is my fifth time doing this. (laughter) I keep trying to get this head librarian in here so I can retire in peace, and something seems to happen. (laughter)

Smith: Um-hm. Oh, man. You might have to—I don’t know—promote within the ranks, I take it. (laughter)

James: Well, I hope that that’s what happens this time. I hope that’s what happens this time, because we have good prospects within the ranks.

Smith: Well, that’s great. Do you have to have certain criteria degree-wise or experience-wise?

James: You have to have a librarian’s degree, yes. Master’s degree in library science.

Smith: OK. So do you have a prospect that’s currently working here?

James: Well, I think what’ll happen is Jessica has shown great interest in going to library school, and now you can take so many classes online, [so] it won’t be a burden to her. So I think for a while we’ll just rock on like we are and see how Jessica manages.

Smith: Um-hm. Well, that’ll be good.

James: Yeah, listen. I want to tell you; these young women and men that are coming out of library school are coming out with their brains full of new knowledge that only the computer can give you. And where we used to have to have hundreds, maybe thousands of reference books, these people know how to find it online without having to have the book in hand, which is sad to me in a way, because I did reference to begin with, and I loved having the book in my hand. But that’s not how it’s going to be anymore. It’s going to be a totally different. Everything’s going to be totally different in libraries, and we all have—no matter how old we are, we have to accept that. But that’s why I’m anxious to see. Jessica’s twenty-seven, and it’s going to take her about
three years to finish. And what great things she could bring if she comes aboard as the head librarian. What great things, youth being one of them. (laughter) But I went to a meeting with two new—one’s been a librarian two years, and she’s at Margaret Sherry(?), and the other just graduated with her library degree, and she’s at Orange Grove. And they’re so knowledgeable. They’re so up on everything that it makes—one of the things that I realized is I can’t rebuild the reference section for the Pass Christian Library. I’d pick out all the books we had before, and we don’t need them all.

**Smith:** Right, right, right.

**James:** So much is online now.

**Smith:** Uh-huh. So that new knowledge is needed.

**James:** Absolutely.

**Smith:** Big time. But that’s good.

**James:** Absolutely.

**Smith:** What did—

**James:** But that’s the way it’s supposed to be.

**Smith:** Right, right, keep progressing.

**James:** That’s right.

**Smith:** What is the projected day for the rebuilding?

**James:** I wish I could tell you.

**Smith:** Don’t know that? (laughter)

**James:** I wish someone would tell me. Everything, you balance everything. You balance an MDA [Mississippi Development Authority] grant with what FEMA’s going to do, and finding an architect. All of this is just—Pass Christian’s still—well, you know. You’ve seen it. We’re still in dire straits.

**Smith:** It’s construction going everywhere.

**James:** It is.

**Smith:** And I’m pretty sure it’s still not enough.
**James:** Not enough. Not nearly enough. And mainly it’s still trying to find—for instance, getting a plumber. You have to get on a waiting list for a plumber and electrician, all of that, and it’s hard on people to rebuild right now. There’s just not enough of the resources that you need. You may wait on a plumber’s list three months.

**Smith:** Man! And that’s for a business, and it was—

**James:** That’s right. And it’s not because they’re shirking. It’s because they’ve got more than they can handle.

**Smith:** Exactly. Well, I know that you guys lost a lot. Have you rebuilt?

**James:** We have.

**Smith:** Have all of y’all?

**James:** Right. My daughter’s in the process—my daughter and son are in the process of rebuilding. They’re not in their homes. My husband and I are in our home. My son’s living in a large FEMA trailer on his property while he rebuilds. My daughter has a Katrina cottage in our backyard. I mean, we have a little of everything in our backyard. We’re in the house. It’s not completely finished, but we moved in in September when I was able to turn on faucets and flush toilets, and I went and got a mattress at Sam’s, and we moved in. (laughter)

**Smith:** September [20]06?

**James:** No, this year, [2007].

**Smith:** Oh, my goodness.

**James:** Um-hm.

**Smith:** It took a while.

**James:** We started building on June the twenty-fourth of 2006, and we hoped to be finished in 2007, in June, but we ran over just a couple of months. But it took close to fifteen months to rebuild, and that’s the standard. That’s how it’s going.

**Smith:** Unfortunately.

**James:** Unfortunately.

**Smith:** How about employees? Did any of them lose homes, or were they (inaudible)?
James: No. Jan lost her home, and she’s gone up Vidalia Road. She’s about twenty-one miles off the Coast now and drives down here every day for work. She lost her home. Jerrie was OK, and Wendy was OK.

Smith: Was it because they’re just further away?

James: Yeah, right.

Smith: Man. Did you guys build in the same area, the same property?

James: Well, we had a big, old house, 3000 square foot, on Magnolia Avenue, and oak trees had grown over the years. Well, I mean, the house had been there a long time; I think 1880. And we added another story after Camille. What we found when we went back was that we needed a one-floor, one-story house. And we could not fit 1800 square feet, which is what we were shooting for—we could afford—between the oak trees that survived. Three big oak trees survived, and there’s no way we could fit a house in among them. It’s going to have to have another two-story house built there, because nobody’s going to cut these old oak trees down. So we were in the process of remodeling my husband’s mother’s house on West Second Street, one-story, and we were going to move into that. So we just decided to rebuild there.

Smith: That makes sense.

James: We had 3000 square feet; we’ve gone to 1800.

Smith: Man. That’s an adjustment.

James: Storage space is at a premium at my house, but I want to tell you, I’m very glad to have the 1800.

Smith: In what way?

James: Well, having a roof over your head, it doesn’t have to be 3000 square foot anymore. It’s just having that—I tell you, sleeping in your own bed at night. I was laying in bed last night, and thinking how grateful I was to have my own roof over my head. My daughter knows she’ll be in her house by the summer. My son knows he’ll be in his house by the summer. And we’re not so desperate as we were. The FEMA trailers were horrible, horrible, but I can’t tell you how grateful, in December after the hurricane, we were, glad to see those things pull in so that we could get out of people’s way. Sleeping in a back bedroom at my sister’s or on a sofa, my daughter sleeping on a sofa. And we were just grateful to have those things. They could have been a heck of a lot better. Better plans could have been made, but at the time that they all came in, we were glad to see them.

Smith: I bet. Just not to be up, like you said, on top of each other.
James: That’s right.

Smith: And whether small or not, it just feels small because it’s so many people.

James: That’s right. Well, they were 300 feet, so they were small. But my husband and I had ours. My daughter had hers. My son got a larger one because they wouldn’t put them in Pass Christian because these larger ones, they wouldn’t put in what they called a flood plain. And then FEMA said the whole Coast was a flood plain, everything six miles from the water was in a flood plain. So nobody got these trailers, but he was on Vidalia Road, up far enough. He’s about nine miles from here. So he got a three-bedroom FEMA trailer. So they had more room to move around.

Smith: Well, that’s kind of interesting though, that the people who almost need it the most—

James: Couldn’t get them.

Smith: Couldn’t get them, because there are very few homes that survived on this—

James: Do you want me to tell you how many families with two and three children lived in that 300 feet? I’ve thought about it. Divorce rates went up. Depression was astronomical. They had people here walking the streets, counseling folks and saying—they couldn’t actually help them, but they told them where to go to get help, and if they had to, they drove them where they had to go to help. I saw eighty-year-old women, just in—they were staying in tent city across the way. You see tent city over there. But were glad to get the trailer, and then of course, they get in the trailer, and the trailer walls sweat. They found out that formaldehyde were in a full third of them that were here on the Coast. My daughter’s was one of them. But things could have been done better, but at the same time, we didn’t say no to these trailers that were coming in. They were lifesaving in many cases, but I feel so bad for all the people who had to raise children, and still families with children in these trailers. How do you take a shower? How do you go to bed? If the parents slept in the meager bedroom and the kids were in these bunk beds that we referred to as coffins, it was just terrible. You know? The stress on families was just enormous.

Smith: What did they do to relieve stress? You said that the local mental health agencies—

James: Yes, yes, were a big help. The schools had longer hours. The Boys and Girls Club established itself very quickly in the public school. The Catholic school extended their hours so that kids could stay. Everybody had a camp in the summertime. Everybody had a camp in the summertime so these kids could get out of these trailers and go somewhere.

Smith: Um-hm, have some sanity.

Smith: So I take it the churches that were still up and running, that had maintained their structure, I guess they did a lot of outreach, too.

James: Oh yes. Absolutely, absolutely.

Smith: Why do you think that the divorce rate went up during this time?

James: Well, sometimes the stress just is too much on a marriage. Just too much.

Smith: The loss, even if it’s not a loss of life, I guess, loss of property, I guess, and just loss of—

James: And you know what? The uncertainty, because you have to remember that people were underinsured. A lot of people didn’t have flood insurance because they were told they didn’t need it. SBA [Small Business Administration] came to the rescue to many with the low interest rate, but there were—some people are still waiting, hoping that they’ll get a house from a church, from a group for a small amount or nothing, and that’s slowly going away. There was a good bit of it initially, but it’s slowly going away. They can’t depend upon a church or a group like the Mennonites that came in and built square foot, they came in and built. They’re going to have to pull up their bootstraps and help to do something for themselves. Now, maybe the best thing that some would be able to do is go into public housing or small, affordable homes with controlled rent. But those aren’t built yet. They aren’t built yet, so what do we do for these people?

Smith: What do you think—is the local government doing anything?

James: Yeah. They’re helping these people get these, what they call Go-Zone loans and grants as much as they can. Camille Village, which was public housing, they were able to convince the private owners to refurbish and rebuild these with a grant that—partial grant—I don’t mean a full grant. And they’re now taking applications for the houses. I think that they had to tear down maybe seven out of the whole number. The rest were able to be refurbished, but initially he wasn’t going to do it. He was going to demolish them all, but there’s a hundred-and-thirty unit, affordable housing that’s going to be built on Cedar Avenue, but they’ve cleared the land, and that’s it.

Smith: So I guess earlier, initially, that the community just kind of pulled together to help each other.

James: Oh, my gosh, honey. We had Café Katrina. We had FEMA cafes. FEMA came in and opened up two big tents, one on the west side of town, one right here behind tent city, and that’s where everybody ate. It was the mutual—you could eat three meals a day there if you wanted to, or however many you wanted, and many
people did that. Some ate lunch there. Some ate supper there. But that’s how you got each other’s cell phone numbers and made your connections. And if somebody was looking, was just coming back into town, that’s where they would go to make the connections that they needed to make. So you talk about—I mean it’s—you thought you were eating in the finest of restaurants, and look, they turned out some good food. I can tell you. (laughter)

**Smith:** Um-hm. Well, that’s a great thing. So when did that kind of trickle away?

**James:** When more people got trailers. When more people got trailers, and people could cook for themselves.

**Smith:** Right, right. So it was there pretty—

**James:** But I want to tell you that there were pods, three pods in town, that’s for people to go get canned goods, diapers, paper products, and those went on a pretty good, long time. Even when people were back in the trailers, they were still depending upon the pods to get canned goods for their meals and things like that, and slowly that went away, and we have one left in town, which is a food bank run by the churches, the two Catholic churches, and I think one Baptist and Methodist, and it’s run in Our Mother of Mercy Church. They can’t keep the food in there. There’s so many that still need this food bank. They can’t keep the food in there.

**Smith:** I can imagine.

**James:** I don’t know what the other churches did, but Sunday before last, there was a drive through the St. Vincent DePaul Society to get money to put back in its coffers, and over seven thousand dollars was given at the three masses they had that day, which will help out a lot, help these people a lot.

**Smith:** Yeah, yeah. Well, churches are one of the primary places to go to.

**James:** Well, sometimes it’s the only place you can go to. The public’s hamstrung by how much they can actually do in that regard. I mean, like, the city hall can’t take food donations or even money for food donations. They have to be so careful with that type.

**Smith:** Right, right.

**James:** But the Red Cross is still operating. The Salvation Army is still operating, and volunteers are still coming. They’re just fewer and fewer and farther between.

**Smith:** Um-hm. How was the people here as far as—did they feel like they were being taken care of, or did they feel ignored as it relates to Mississippi and this area versus all the tensions in New Orleans?
James: Both. You mean as far as New Orleans getting the publicity?

Smith: Right.

James: Oh, no. Initially—

Smith: Did they worry about that?

James: Oh, yeah. Initially they—it was an insult to think that New Orleans had suffered because actually what New Orleans suffered, it suffered the breakdown of the dam whereas we took the brunt, the Gulf Coast took the direct brunt of the hurricane.

Smith: Of the direct hurricane.

James: Of the hurricane, Bay St. Louis and Pass Christian took it. And if you drove—you know where DeLisle is. You got an idea where DeLisle is. Well, DeLisle was—this is North Pass Christian. That was wiped out. Wiped out. I mean, just homes all over the place. How about all the homes in Diamondhead that never expected to ever, to have this happen to them? It did. But yeah, there was some animosity about New Orleans getting so much public attention. Now, people don’t have time to worry about that. What they worry about that I hear every day is they think that four hundred million that MDA gave to the port, they think that was their second round of grant money. And I don’t know how you would dissuade them otherwise. They firmly believe, those in the second round of the MDA grant thing, that their money went to the port. (laughter)

Smith: More so than coming here.

James: No. See they—

Smith: Another slight to the New Orleans—

James: Well, see, they haven’t seen any money, the second round of grant. No, they haven’t. And that’s what I tell you. A lot of people are waiting on that to try to get into something.

Smith: Right, right. So you’re saying that they may need to stop waiting and do something else, huh? (laughter)

James: Well, we, my husband and I, he was just seventy on November the thirtieth. We took out an SBA loan. We have a hundred-and-twenty-five-thousand-dollar SBA loan. We didn’t want to do that, either, but that’s the reality.

Smith: Right, right, right. Hm.
James: It’s a very low interest loan. I don’t want to pay $550 a month to SBA for another thirty years. I won’t live that long. But what choice did you have? I wanted a roof over my head.

Smith: Right. You don’t have time to wait; can’t wait forever.

James: No. If the grant comes, it comes. That’s—

Smith: Going back a little bit after Katrina, how long did it take for you guys to get, like, the basics, running water and communications, either cell phone or land lines, that type of thing?

James: In different parts of town, different times. We’re six miles long. So for instance, we had it up here pretty quickly, because city hall was across the street. And tent city is across the street. But we had to wait at 248 West Second, where we were putting our trailers, we had to wait until December. That was the whole—it was actually the water because there was a problem finding the water tap that turned on the water to—it was just our block, too. Other blocks on each side of us were running, but different people had different problems, like ours was trying to find something that had been turned off, to get it turned back on. And you know what’s happened is, after Camille, a lot of new lines were run without taking the old ones up. So underground, in these underground things are a lot of pipes.

Smith: So you’re trying to weed through and establish which ones actually work.

James: That’s right. That’s exactly what happened. That’s exactly what happened.

Smith: Oh, man, so just a lot of little things going on.

James: We did.

Smith: My goodness.

James: But basically, I would tell you within four months. Within four months, you could live in Pass Christian. Now, you couldn’t buy anything in Pass Christian. (laughter) And you still can’t buy groceries here, or drugs. You have to go to Long Beach, or the Bay, now that the bridge is up.

Smith: How far away is that?

James: Long Beach is seven miles, and the Bay’s about seven miles. So you have to—

Smith: Is there good public transportation?

James: No.
Smith: It’s not? Oh. Is there any?

James: No.

Smith: No public. So—

James: The only thing that they have is the City runs a senior citizen’s bus, which is very helpful for—and I actually believe if you’re fifty-five and older, you can take advantage of it. But that’s what takes the senior citizens to their doctor’s appointments, and they go to the grocery store one day. And that’s the only transportation is what the City provides. Otherwise you find a ride.

Smith: Right, right, right, which is probably a big thing.

James: For some people it is.

Smith: Um-hm, especially if you think about those—how well do you think people bounced back as far as getting a job? Were people able to return back? So many things were destroyed and haven’t been rebuilt.

James: Right. It was a mixture. There were plenty of jobs, just maybe not what you were doing before. And we still have a low employment here. There are help-wanted signs all over town. Pirate’s Cove needs help. Café Katrina needs help. Every one of the construction companies that are operating need help, and either the folks that are here don’t know how to do any of this, or they don’t want to do any of this, or they’re waiting. Now, a lot have gone back to the casinos. They had good jobs at the casinos, and they’ve gone back. But we don’t have any businesses. The two banks are reopened and the hardware store, but I mean, everything else is gone. I mean, it’s just wiped out. Prestress is back up and running, but just, you know, it’s gone. That’s just the way it is. (laughter)

Smith: Yeah, pretty much.

James: Yeah, and Long Beach’s business, other than north of the track, I mean, it was wiped out. So you would have to ride to Gulfport to find a job, maybe, whatever you were doing before, and some people don’t want to go that far, or they don’t have steady transportation to go that far.

Smith: Right, right. So what do you guys see? What do you envision the library doing, in playing a part in just the aftermath and the rebuild, the redevelopment?

James: You know what our biggest thing was, and I promise you this. I fought very hard to get the library back up and running. I went to every city council meeting. It met Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. And I said, “Give me a trailer. Give me a trailer. Give me a trailer,” until finally Dupont gave me a trailer.
And we opened up November the fifth, 2005. That was pretty fast. What we needed to be is not the FEMA thing. We needed to be the familiar, comfortable, play that role here in Pass Christian. Be the library where people could—what we were initially—well, we were many things initially. We were initially where you could come and leave—we had just an old, spiral notebook. We called it the Bible. You could come in, and you could sign, “I need my blue roof replaced.” “I need help clearing my lot so my trailer can be put on.” And then we had volunteers coming, and volunteers coming, and they would come in, and they would take these jobs. And they’d come in and take a page of these jobs and go off and do the jobs.

Smith: Oh, that’s awesome.

James: So for months until the gray hut was established and a steady volunteer thing, I would tell you for six months, the library served as the place that people knew that they could come and leave their name and their location, and somebody would come help them. And a lot of it was getting their lots cleared for FEMA trailers. But some were to get their houses gutted. And my dear, people came here, young people, middle-aged, old people came here and gutted houses that were just terrible, twelve inches of mud on the floor, refrigerators with rotting food. They ripped out Sheetrock. They did mold remediation. And these were volunteers, and lots of them were young, young people, nineteen and twenty. And I just hope that this is—from what I saw—and I saw hundreds, maybe thousands of them—we have a great hope for our future if these are going to be our future leaders. (laughter) But what I see our role is the same thing. You can still come to the library and ask a question, and somebody will try to help you get the answer, and it doesn’t have to be a book on the shelf. It can be someone’s phone number or where they can find something that they need. And we’re pretty good at doing that. We’ve done it for two and a half years, and we did it before. That was part of our role before. A library is not just books and videos and computers.

Smith: It’s a resource area.

James: Absolutely, but for six months, the Bible was what it was, and we just put it up on the front desk. And what happened to us, we had to get this gray hut up and running. It wasn’t playing that same role because we were having so many people come into the library that needed something. Nobody could get up to the counter to get a book checked out.

Smith: So what is the gray hut?

James: There’s that volunteer—

Smith: The little building right there beside you.

James: Right.

Smith: OK.
James: They run the volunteer group now.

Smith: Oh, OK. So how do people find out about you guys first of all, and now the gray hut? How do they know to come to the Pass Christian Library?

James: Word of mouth.

Smith: It’s a powerful tool. (laughter)

James: It is. Word of mouth, it is. It really is.

Smith: That’s awesome.

James: And you know, that’s how the volunteers found us.

Smith: Was that just Pass Christian, or did other people—

James: Just us.

Smith: I mean, the people who signed up in the book, was it just Pass Christian?

James: Yeah, at that time, they just wanted to do the Pass, volunteer in Pass Christian. Now, the DeLisle area and the Pineville area, those areas, too. They didn’t just stop right here. But yeah, the Bible was it.

Smith: Well, that’s awesome.

James: Yeah.

Smith: So how did that make you feel to be a part of that?

James: Oh, well, one of the things that helped during all that time, you were so busy that it helped maintain your own sanity. I mean, the three of us, Miss Jerrie, Jan and I, I mean, every day we saw twenty people, maybe more, that were in need. And either they wrote their name in the Bible and we found them some help, or the help found them. Or if it were in the case of something like the food that they needed, or how to get their light bill paid—and that was coming along, too—then that was what we did. We used all our resources to put them in touch with the person that could help them the most.

Smith: That had to keep your morale up.

James: Oh, yeah.

Smith: Versus someone being in a home and they didn’t see all of that.
James: When you’re needed, there’s no better feeling in the world than to be needed. It really is.

Smith: And to be able to actually do something.

James: Yes, that’s right. That’s right. Not to just be needed and not be able to do anything, but to be needed and to the fulfillment of being able to help people. And that’s really, as much as anything, the minute we opened our doors—and I go back and think, “How did this all transpire?” Because that’s not a normal role in the library, and it just did. We also (laughter)—you know we have a weekly newspaper, the Gazebo Gazette?

Smith: Uh-huh.

James: Started right there in that library. We were all sitting around that November, and Americorps had done a little sheet that kept people up, and they handed it out at the city council meeting, and Evelina Shmukler, who was a writer, a newspaper writer, came down here with the Wall Street Journal, left her job there and came back as a volunteer. So we decided we’d put out something a little more than that with, like where the SBA was and its telephone number, where FEMA was located and its telephone number, what was happening at the city council meeting. And this evolved; it got to be eight pages of just copy paper to a full-fledged newspaper that we’re real proud of. And we’re real proud that its roots began there. And so we gave her a little desk in the back room, and then she was finally able to find someplace to rent and have her own office, but we gave her a place to start right there.

Smith: So you guys are just the hub and the catalyst for a lot of rebuild—

James: I do think so. I do.

Smith: —in this area. That’s awesome.

James: Right.

Smith: That’s awesome. So no wonder—I almost forgot. (laughter) No wonder you’re the second person chosen as the Mississippi Gulf Coast Hero of WLOX. That’s channel two for us up there.

James: Yeah.

Smith: That is awesome. And you’re going to be also—well, tell me a little bit about that before we finish. Tell me a little bit about the heroes’ thing.

James: Well, I’ll tell you what an honor, and I’ve been to several different things that have been given for the heroes. It was just a tremendous honor to be chosen as a hero,
because I never saw myself in that role, but apparently a few people around town did. And WLOX came down and did an interview here at the library, and that’s what you see when you see me on TV. And they knew about all of this because that’s what people sent is as a recommendation. But to be picked out of so many good, good people and so many people that did so much, that was really the exceptional honor.

Smith: Um-hm. Well, you’re an exceptional person.

James: Thank you.

Smith: In exceptional situations, exceptional people rise up to the top.

James: Yeah, I think so. And I don’t say that I’m it, but I think that’s what happens.

Smith: You are. Exceptional people know they’re exceptional. (laughter)

James: I’m the oldest of ten, and I’m also a facilitator. I’ve always been one. And having that skill, I guess, is the reason I was able to sometimes juggle these things. And when the library was on Hearn Avenue, that was part of my day, doing that kind of stuff. And sometimes it was just with kids, but anyway, facilitating is an important thing, and that’s how—I always had a skill at doing it.

Smith: It’s awesome that you have a career, a niche, where you can utilize all those talents, and I think that’s probably one of the reasons—or what do you think—one of the reasons why you’re able to get to the twenty-five years, where so many people in America now, we switch jobs so much. We don’t even stay twenty-five years in one spot. (laughter)

James: You’re right; you’re right. You’re right. I love my job.

Smith: Right. That’s awesome. And it shows because you’re able to be so productive and have helped develop so many people. We need that in the community.

James: We do. We do; we do. And sometimes the only place these come out of is churches, but I see the library in a whole—and I’ll tell you. When we’re back on our feet—the three main libraries, Gulfport, Biloxi, and Pass Christian were wiped out. The structures were there in some form, but essentially nobody is there. No main library is where it was before. And that was what formed the library system. The three libraries, Gulfport, Pass Christian, and Biloxi are what formed the Harrison County Library System. When we are all back at home, wherever that might be—and of course, for us it’ll be back where we were—and we open doors, we’re going to be a different library then, too. We’re going to be completely different. And we all need to be up on our toes and get ready for that change.

Smith: Um-hm. Well, I think y’all had some serious training in that, (laughter) whether you wanted to or not.
James: It’s not going to be this, “Shhhhh!” You know. (laughter)

Smith: Right. (laughter) Gone are the days of, “Be quiet in the library.”

James: Well, you can see in that little, the doublewide that’s twenty-four by seventy; we do a lot of things there, and quiet’s not part of it.

Smith: Right. There might be—we’re not a quiet society too much nowadays, so that might be why you’re having such a—or will get such an attraction to young people.

James: I think so.

Smith: To kids.

James: I think so. We’re not the traditional library, and none of us are in the system that intimidates kids. I know my kids were really intimidated by libraries when they were young. And that’s gone; that’s not (laughter) (inaudible).

Smith: See, that’s that exceptionality coming back out. (laughter)

James: Well, you want kids to come and ask you questions and feel that you’ll respond to them as a person, not just an annoyance.

Smith: Um-hm. That’s awesome, awesome. And do you feel that you’re able to train the next generation of librarians?

James: As I told you, I think these young women and men that are coming out of library school are going to be so—I mean, it’s just going to be so different from the previous library schools that turned out librarians. And some of it has to do with the Internet and the computer, and that’s going to be a major role in what we find ourselves doing.

Smith: Um-hm. And it’s great that you’re involved in a progression and not kind of staying stuck in tradition and being left behind.

James: No. But I still want to go back to doing twenty-seven story hours a month. (laughter)

Smith: Yeah, well, we got to have that. Reading has always got to be fundamental to—(laughter)

James: Yeah. I tell you. That’s one of the things Miss Wendy helped me did. We had so many that I could never have a day off, if I needed one, go to the doc[tor], anything. So Miss Wendy came aboard. She was hired really in a totally different capacity, but she started doing some of the story hours for me so that if I had to go
anywhere, I was free to go. And we had just, kids. We were in the hub of four
different schools being able to come to the library on a regular basis. And see that’s
not the way it is right now. It’s just, they can’t.

**Smith:** Right, right. We got so many schools that are not—

**James:** Well, two Catholic schools, St. Thomas and St. Paul, are in a roller-skating
rink in Long Beach. That’s where their school is, a converted roller-skating rink.

**Smith:** And do you know if they have plans to come back to the area?

**James:** Oh, the school is being built right off Espy Avenue, a beautiful new school.

**Smith:** So it’s just a matter of time.

**James:** Well, what we may find ourselves having to do? As much as we may not see
ourselves in that role, we may have to go to the schools and do more outreach. We
might find ourselves, especially to the second, third, and fourth grades, we might have
to go see them. And we might have to bring with them, especially say, the upper kids,
new information, because they’re computer savvy, that they can use to find things that
they need to do or papers that they need to work on. And we need to be up and ready
to take that information to them.

**Smith:** Um-hm. It’s taking the concept of the—what is it? The mobile library, we
used to have those.

**James:** Right. That’s (inaudible). You know what we’ll just be? The librarian will
be the mobile person.

**Smith:** Right, right, right. Because you’re the actual information carrier.

**James:** That’s right. You should look into it, if you haven’t. There’s a Web site that
is provided by the State of Mississippi—I’m sure very dear—called Magnolia. And it
has everything you could ever imagine that a student would need, including, the new
librarians tell me—remember the new librarians know this. You can set this up very
quickly to, as you do your research on Magnolia, it will do all your footnotes for you
automatically. You remember doing footnotes?

**Smith:** Yeah. (laughter)

**James:** You won’t have to do those ever again. Magnolia will do these for you.

**Smith:** Oh, that’s awesome.

**James:** Yes, indeedy. That is great. Isn’t it?
Smith: Um-hm. That’s awesome because that’s a big deal. (laughter)

James: Yeah.

Smith: That’s a big deal.

James: That’s right.

Smith: Oh, yeah. Well, that’s awesome. That is awesome. I see in 2008 you’re plans says you are going to be the [Mardi Gras] carnival parade grand marshal.

James: That means I ride at the front of the parade.

Smith: That is awesome.

James: I’m very excited about it. That is also a great honor.

Smith: Right, the grand marshal, the grand poohbah. (laughter)

James: The grand something or another. (laughter) You’ll have to come down and see the parade.

Smith: Well, that’s going to be awesome. Do you know the date or anything yet?

James: It’s the fourth of February, very early this year.

Smith: Oh, that’s awesome. How long has that been going on?

James: The Pass Christian parade?

Smith: Uh-huh.

James: Nineteen thirteen.

Smith: Oh, my goodness, 1913.

James: Right. Now, off and on during the war years, they wouldn’t have parades, but the St. Paul Carnival Association has had their parades, without stop, without fail, no hurricane, no anything, since 1956. They’ve had continuing parades. The year after Camille, they had a parade. The year after Katrina, they had a parade. Even though they couldn’t go the regular route because the streets were so torn up, they still did it. After Katrina the parade, I think, had sixteen floats. Last year, they had sixty-seven.

Smith: Oh, my goodness. Well! So it’s just a real resilience here. Determination to keep going.
James: Oh, yes, my dear. I mean, every town has it, but Pass Christian people are stubborn, hardheaded, and come back to the Pass as soon as they can. They all haven’t come back yet, but as soon as they can, they will come back.

Smith: Well, it’s a beautiful place.

James: You ask them. You say, “Why do you want to come back to the Pass and rebuild here?” They said, “Well, that’s where I been all my life. Where else am I going to go?” And the ones who have left, yearn to come back, even if they can’t. I see them. They come in; they say, “Oh, I wish I could come back. I wish I could come back. My daughter won’t let me. My son won’t let me. They want me up here.” And there’s something about it. I used to say that I thought it was something in the water because so many of our young men would leave and go get jobs elsewhere, and all they ever thought about was coming back to the Pass. So it had to be something in the water. (laughter)

Smith: So Pass Christian is kind of the Pass, huh?

James: The Pass, yeah.

Smith: The Pass.

James: Right.

Smith: That’s awesome. Well, thank you so very much.

James: You’re more than welcome.

Smith: Is there anything else you can think of that we haven’t talked about?

James: Well, you can call me and ask me anything that you look at and you see that interests you. Just give me a ring. We’ll talk.

Smith: Well, great, great, great.

James: I’ve done lots of PMR interviews after different things. He comes down, and we do a little interview, and so far I’ve missed myself every single time. (laughter) He’ll call me and tell me when it’s going to be on, and then whatever reason, something happens.

Smith: You’re too busy doing. You’re too busy working to actually see it.

James: (Inaudible) lock the door. (laughter)

Smith: Right, right, right. Well, thank you so very much.
James: Oh, I appreciate it.

Smith: Keep up the great work that you’re doing in this area.

James: Thank you. And I hope you come down when we get this library started and break ground. I’ll call you, and I hope you’ll come down and see us break ground.

Smith: Definitely. That would (inaudible).

James: You know one of the things I—now, this was said in joking manner, but as I said, the role of libraries is going to be changing. They want a coffee shop in it. (laughter)

Smith: Yeah. Well, we have one at USM. We got a Starbucks in there.

James: Yeah, of course.

Smith: It’s changing.

James: You got to go with the flow. And I’ve thought about this, and I thought one of the things we won’t do, is we won’t carpet every square inch of that. We’ll make people feel that they can comfortably come, as long as they don’t sit over the computers. (laughter)

Smith: Right, right, right. (laughter) Well, that’s awesome. That’s awesome.

James: I’ll tell you a couple of other facts that might be interesting to you. Pass Christian Library through a grant through the agriculture department, USDA [United States Department of Agriculture] was the first library on the Gulf Coast to offer public-access computers. There were five rural sites chosen in Mississippi, and Pass Christian by virtue of its zip code is rural, even though we’re right here on the Gulf. And we got three, through the State of Mississippi Department of Education, through a grant from USDA, we got three computers, and we were hooked onto a server. At that time, it was some company that we picked to provide service, over a T line. And we had standing-room only. They came from Keesler Field to use these three computers.

Smith: After Katrina?


Smith: Oh, before.

James: Yeah. No, no. We were the first ones to have public-access computers. Gulfport Library didn’t have them. Biloxi Library didn’t have them. Bay St. Louis didn’t have them. Long Beach didn’t have them. Pass Christian had them.
Smith: Oh, that’s awesome.

James: Yeah. We’ve taken advantage. Whenever there’s been something to take advantage of, we have found a way to take advantage of it. Little libraries have to do that.

Smith: Yeah, that makes sense.

James: But we would have standing-room only. We had to start limiting a half hour at a time to people coming in to use it. There was nothing for us to do, like, forty-five people a day, coming from all over to use these three computers.

Smith: Um-hm. That’s awesome.


Smith: So who says that libraries don’t have relevance in the community?

James: That’s right.

Smith: Because Pass Christian Library does.

James: We did; we did.

Smith: It still does.

James: We were the first library in the system that was computerized. We had an Apple computer with a program designed for a school library with less than 40,000 books. We ran a stringing tape every night, but you could check out with a library card, a little, green, cardboard card with a bar code on it, and you could check out books, and we bar-coded every book in that library. Volunteers came in and helped us. The staff did the typing, and the criteria was, until your back hurts, you typed. (laughter) When your back hurt, somebody else came and did it. And we put all the books in the computer, and then in about two years we were like that, and then finally the Harrison County Library System computerized. And we converted all of our—we were able to convert all of our information, not us, but the system that we brought converted all of ours and dumped it into the big—

Smith: The bigger system.

James: Um-hm, but we were the first.

Smith: That’s awesome.

James: We were.
Smith: The first on the Coast.

James: Late 1980s, Apple computer. You had to shove those cassettes in there. Every night, back it up, so you didn’t lose your stuff. I don’t know if you know what I’m talking about.

Smith: Um-hm.

James: But some people don’t. They say, “You did a backup? Tape backup?” And I say, “Yeah.” We even got the Michelangelo virus one time and had to have—and we were down four days, and I’m telling you, that’s the only thing about a computerized system. And then when you have to write it down and answer it—

Smith: Then you miss it, huh? (laughter)

James: There you go. But we’ve come so far now that we all have hand-held scanners, so if worse comes to worst, you can electronically, you can scan the stuff, and then later when the system’s back up, you download it.

Smith: So who runs your technical support?

James: We have technical support in Gulfport, in a trailer. (laughter)

Smith: Everybody’s in a trailer. (laughter)

James: We do; we do.

Smith: OK. Well, that’s awesome.

James: The headquarters has the technical.

Smith: Um-hm. The City?

James: No. It’s Harrison County Library System.

Smith: Library, OK. So you guys are up and running. How about the other two?

James: They’re all up. Everybody’s up and running. Now, Gulfport and Biloxi got trailers in June.

Smith: Oh, OK. (laughter) So y’all the first on that, too. (laughter) Well, thank you so much, Miss Sally.

James: (Inaudible)
Smith: Probably so. OK. Well, we’re going to end this interview, and thank you so much.

James: Thank you so much for coming down.

Smith: All right.

(end of interview)