An Oral History with Lamar Gray., Volume 962
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Biography

Mr. Lamar Gray was born May 19, 1950, in Camden, Arkansas, to Mr. George Albert Gray (born October 16, 1921, in Mendham, New Jersey) and Mrs. Frances Smead Gray (born March 29, 1921, in Camden, Arkansas). His father was a factory representative for La-Z-Boy, Inc., in Louisiana and Mississippi, and his mother was a secretary and a housewife. His father served in the United States Navy during World War II, and his mother immigrated to the United States from England when she was sixteen years old. His parents were married on June 30, 1943. On July 26, 1972, Gray married his wife, Mrs. Susan A. Gray (born April 10, 1951, in Mobile, Alabama). They have two children, Kristen Gray Miller (born September 5, 1975) and Meggan Gray Stolarski (born June 22, 1981).

Gray attended grammar school in Camden, Arkansas; T.H. Harris Junior High School in Metairie, Louisiana; Pass Christian High School in Pass Christian, Mississippi; and from 1968 to 1972, he attended Auburn University, from which he was graduated with a BS in industrial engineering. From 1975 to 1988 he was a factory representative for La-Z-Boy, Inc. in Louisiana. At the time of this interview, Gray and his wife owned Gray’s Furniture Galleries in Gulfport, Mississippi. He enjoys home theater, electronics, automobiles and their maintenance, and woodworking. He is an Episcopalian, and he is on the board of directors of the Orange Grove/Lyman Chamber of Commerce. In 2007 he was awarded the Business of the Year Award by the Orange Grove/Lyman Chamber of Commerce.
Table of Contents

Business, Furniture Gallery ................................................................. 1
Hurricane Camille, 1969 ................................................................. 1
Preparing for Hurricane Katrina ....................................................... 1
Store flooded one mile south of Interstate-10 .................................... 2
Damage to store .............................................................................. 2
Damage to warehouse ..................................................................... 2
Tornado .......................................................................................... 2
Odor following Hurricanes Camille and Katrina .......................... 3
Cleaning up .................................................................................... 3
Saving computers, databases ....................................................... 3
Damage to home ........................................................................... 3
Tarps for roofing .......................................................................... 4
Loss of total inventory .................................................................. 4
Employees ...................................................................................... 4
La-Z-Boy Corporate helps .............................................................. 5
Survivors’ needs for new furniture ............................................... 5
Dearth of display space ................................................................. 5
Rebuilding business ...................................................................... 5
Dearth of labor force .................................................................... 5
Staying and rebuilding on the Coast ............................................ 6
Retail community ......................................................................... 6
Spirit of survivors and volunteers ............................................... 7
Reopening store, expanding offerings ........................................... 7

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AN ORAL HISTORY

with

LAMAR GRAY

This is an interview for the Mississippi Oral History Program of The University of Southern Mississippi. The interview is with Lamar Gray and is taking place on October 27, 2005. The interviewer is Beth Morgan.

Morgan: I am with Lamar Gray, who is the owner of the La-Z-Boy store in Gulfport, Mississippi. Mr. Gray, tell me a little bit about how long you’ve been in business and how you started the business out.

Gray: We’ve been in business at this location since 1993. We had a previous location from [19]88 to [19]93 in another part of Gulfport, but the Furniture Gallery store has been here since [19]93, and we carry the entire line of La-Z-Boy, Incorporated products for the living room and the family room.

Morgan: And I understand Katrina is your second major hurricane to go through?

Gray: For me personally it’s the second. I’m a two-time survivor, [Hurricanes] Camille and Katrina, all those hard Cs or Ks, whatever. Yeah, it’s been a real experience. I was in Pass Christian in 1969, between my freshman and sophomore years of college, and experienced Camille first hand. And we dealt with four feet of water in the house. From the beach we were about a block and a half northwest of the Richelieu Apartments where so many people were killed, I think, in that one vicinity alone. And then in Katrina it happened all over again. It’s just the difference is this one was so much larger and was around for so much longer with hurricane force winds. Camille was actually a stronger storm, but it wasn’t around as long. And Katrina did so much more damage because of the length of time it was here.

Morgan: When did you start preparing for Katrina?

Gray: Actually, Sunday, believe it or not. Because of my experience with Camille, hurricanes don’t bother me like they bother a lot of people. They just really don’t, and I’ve never really thought too much about them except to watch all the panic with people around me from a lot of the newcomers. But we prepared a little bit at the house, but I mean, I really thought the storm was going to go west of New Orleans over toward Lake Charles based on what I saw. And then Sunday night and Monday morning I saw that it had changed and still didn’t realize we were in the kind of trouble we were in. But that same happened during Camille. We had no idea we were in that kind of trouble until the last several hours. And you know, both of those storms really popped us good.
Morgan: So what was it that made the switch click in your head, “Whoa, this is another big one”?

Gray: Probably when I woke up Monday morning, for some reason, and the power had just gone out at the house. And I don’t think I had any idea, and a lot of people didn’t have any idea, of what was going on. It was a bad storm because you could look outside and obviously see that. But where we lived was on very high ground, and we had no water issues up north of Interstate 10, and there was some pretty severe wind. But I had no idea until late that day when I came down to the store that we had sustained the kind of damage in this area. I had no idea. There was so much water on the Coast; nobody could ever imagine that, ever.

Morgan: And your store is south of I-10 by what, a mile?

Gray: A mile, yeah. And we had water in the store.

Morgan: How many square feet is this building?

Gray: This particular building is around 16,000 square feet, and at the time of the storm we had a 6,000-foot, separate warehouse facility, and there was water on the west side of Highway 49 across from my store, in some places five feet deep. And that’s phenomenal because we’re three or four miles, as the crow flies, from the beach. So I mean, where the water came in this area is quite remarkable on what it did. We had a lot of structural damage at the store. We had a wall that blew out and fell in the parking lot, had a lot of roof damage. I have a great picture that a friend of mine took. I took him up on the roof, and there was a two-by-four that just penetrated through the roof. It looked just like a tornado had popped it in there. But we had tremendous roof damage on both the main building and the separate warehouse.

Morgan: So describe the warehouse, just the appearance of the warehouse, when you walked in for the first time.

Gray: The main rollup door had blown completely out and was lying on the floor right behind our delivery truck. We had our delivery truck up in the warehouse to try to protect it. Any time a storm comes we try to do that. And we had merchandise—let’s see; I’m trying to think. We probably had 4[00] to 500 pieces of upholstered product in that warehouse. The chairs were stacked in square cartons three high. The sofas were standing vertically. And the chair cartons had gotten wet on the bottom, and the stacks had collapsed, and everything had just collapsed in the warehouse. A third of the roof was gone, and everything was wet. And what didn’t get wet from the top floated from the bottom. There was a building behind us that looks like probably a tornado hit it, and the debris impacted our building and just perforated the walls and the roof. It was a real mess. But I knew we were in trouble. Even after I saw that is when I opened the front door to the main building and walked in and smelled that smell I haven’t smelled since 1969.
Morgan: Describe that.

Gray: It’s that muddy, murky smell when water and debris mixes in a home or a business. It’s just very bad, and you never forget it.

Morgan: You have an entire glass storefront, as we’re sitting here. Did you lose glass?

Gray: Just on the north side where the wall blew out into the parking lot. They have just replaced that, and the whole wall was in the parking lot, windows and all. And part of the roof and the parapet structure in the front of the building had separated, and we had water all through the store because of that, but it was a mess. We had things that floated all through the store. We even had a television set that was sitting on the floor, and because the picture tube was sealed, it floated and turned itself upside-down; so interesting things like that.

Morgan: And you’re a sole business owner, a sole proprietor of this business.

Gray: Right, my wife and I own the store. That’s correct.

Morgan: So what did you do just to begin the cleanup process?

Gray: Well, it’s a daunting task, and it’s really, as I told a lot of people, you’re just absolutely overwhelmed. It’s different when you’re a teenager or a young adult like I was in [19]69, and you take care of yourself and your family. But when you have your family to take care of and a business, it’s just overwhelming, and you really, at first, just don’t know where to start. I’m not sure it’s a state of shock, but it’s pretty close to it. So after working with the insurance company pretty closely, we determined that after they gave us the OK, we would get the merchandise out of the store that was all ruined. And actually before that, the first several days, the most important thing I did was get our computers and our bank records and any salvageable business records that would help us keep the business going. We took those out and took them to the house, and my house probably looks worse than the store does now because of it, but that’s what you have to do.

Morgan: Did you also get damage to your home?

Gray: We were lucky. We had a broken window and a lot of roof damage, ceiling damage, and lost most of the trees in the yard, but we were one of the lucky ones. So we took the major hit at the store here.

Morgan: And it was in good enough shape that you could run your business out of the home?
Gray: Yes, that’s true. But as far as what to do first, it’s just you try to accomplish one task, and then you move on to the next. And the first big priority we had was securing some tarps so we could cover up the big gaping holes in the roof here at the store, so we could carry on with some sense of normalcy. And that’s probably more of a joke than anything else, but we had to figure out a way to plug those holes so when and if it rained, we wouldn’t get more water in the building. And that was one of the first priorities. We then got the big warehouse door replaced, and that was a start because we were able to, once we got the warehouse cleared out, we were able to carry on a little business out there and be able to lock it up at night, at least from the sides, although the roof had big holes in it. And just generally start going through what we could salvage day-by-day and throwing the rest away. And that at the very end when the insurance company gave us the go-ahead, we physically took every single piece of upholstered product and table product, and entertainment centers out of the store, put them in the parking lot; they crushed them and hauled them off as junk. And it was a pretty depressing sight when you lose 800 pieces of upholstery and 300 tables and entertainment centers, but that’s what had to be done because it’s not usable. It’s ruined.

Morgan: Did you know the dollar value on that?

Gray: It was approaching a half a million dollars, and we have a small store, but that’s a lot of inventory. And our type of business deals with what we call instant gratification, although we do a lot of custom order also. We usually have a fairly large stock at the store, and we lost it all, everything.

Morgan: How about your employees? I’ve heard from other businesses that it was difficult finding your employees, accounting for your employees. Have you experienced that?

Gray: We were able to keep all of our employees but one [and] never missed a payroll since the storm. And we’ve been real fortunate in that regard. It took several weeks to get everybody synchronized, so we let them take care of what they had to take care of, and then concentrate on what we needed to do down here. But after two or three weeks, we got our things together, and everybody’s been here ever since. But I think we were fortunate that we just lost one person because two of my employees lost everything they had in Pass Christian, and that’s tough.

Morgan: Were their houses totally destroyed?

Gray: Yes. I believe they lived in housing in an apartment community in Pass Christian. It may have been a house, but I’m not sure. But they lost everything.

Morgan: Where are they living now?
Gray: One is living in an RV [recreational vehicle] that one of our sales people let them use temporarily up in Wiggins, and the other is living with some relatives in some portion of Pass Christian or De Lisle, I believe.

Morgan: There’s new stock here, as we’re sitting here. There’s new stock, and I was going to ask you, have you had difficulty with getting delivery of inventory in?

Gray: Actually, Beth, I have for a lot of reasons. When La-Z-Boy Corporate found out that we had been devastated in this storm, after I finally got word to them, they were extremely helpful to us. But they had put our whole account on hold because they knew we had no place to put anything, and we were certainly not open for business. So basically we had to reload on our special orders. We had a lot of special orders that had come in that were waiting to be delivered that were lost that had to be reordered. They took all of my stock orders that were in the system and put them on hold, and then released them gradually as I was able to take them. What we didn’t count on was the big demand for upholstered furniture this quickly after the storm from people that lost everything they owned. I just had no idea. Usually it takes a little bit longer than that. But we found that a lot of people are in temporary housing and need, at the very least, temporary seating and bedding. And we’ve gone through a tremendous amount of bedding and upholstered products. But we’re slowly bringing in as much as we can, based on how much warehouse space we have available until we put the new roof on the main building. The warehouse should be complete within the next week, but still it’s a mess because you have no place to display it properly. So people have been very gracious in how they’ve worked with us because a lot of this is being sold from pictures and out of boxes, and we can only display so much at a time on a bare concrete floor. It’s a very unusual situation.

Morgan: Do you have a timeline? What’s next in the rebuild?

Gray: We’re going to start on the main building in the next week or two, and I’m hoping—no deadline has been set, but I’m hoping to be back in shape by the end of the year. The biggest problem my contractor is faced with is finding help with his subcontractors. They can’t get the manpower. For whatever reason, either the folks were decimated in the storm and left the Coast, or they found other employment or whatever, but they cannot get the people to do the job. And my contractor is blessed with some very reliable subcontractors that have been with him for years, but it’s a manpower issue, and we’re doing it as quickly as we can, but we’re looking at December, hopefully.

Morgan: OK. So you at least have some timeline.

Gray: Yes.

Morgan: And it’s being very flexible.
Gray: My timeline is probably different than my contractor, but I can’t pressure him too much because although he’s doing the job for me, he’s doing the job for lots of other people, too, with the same problems or worse. So you kind of have to work within the system and just do the best you can.

Morgan: Now that you’ve been through two, was there any question in your mind about rebuilding down here—

Gray: None whatsoever.

Morgan: —or making a move north?

Gray: None whatsoever. I understand that a lot of people have left the Coast, and I certainly understand that, but that never crossed my mind. And you know the Coast has been changed forever. There’s no question about that. I think if we all work together like I think the community will, and they take advantage of the opportunity that’s before them with the Governor’s Commission on Rebuilding the Coast and the committees that they’ve appointed, and all of the brilliant people that have been on the Coast for the last several weeks to look into rebuilding and restructuring the Coast, I think it’s an opportunity that you just cannot afford to waste. And I think it’s going to be beneficial to everyone. I really do.

Morgan: Have you been able to meet with the other businessmen in this area who also had losses to do any sort of planning or working with the City?

Gray: A few, Beth, but not a lot. I’ve been so tied up here at the store, I’m pulled every which way you can think of right now, and I just physically have no time to go and meet with a lot of my contemporaries. I’ve talked to a few of them. Some have had more damage than I’ve had; some have had less. But we’ll make it work. It’ll all work out. And I hope that the Coast, that the people of the Coast, when they rebuild, will help everyone on the Coast, especially the businesses that make the Coast a viable retail community. I hope the consumers will do what they can to shop the retail merchants on the Coast rather than go out of the area. It’ll be so helpful to the economy if they will do that, and I think for the most part they probably will. But with such terrible devastation, I think it’s important to let people know who’s open and who’s not open, and let’s try to keep the dollars here on the Coast where it’ll do a lot of good for everybody in this community.

Morgan: Has it been a problem for you, letting people know that you are open?

Gray: Not really. We’ve gone back to our normal advertising scheme. We’re just not on as much right now because it just wouldn’t make sense to do that with no showroom, but we’re on enough where people know we’re here. And we’ve done remarkably well since the storm. It’s quite gratifying. It really is.
Morgan: Have you gotten a chance to be out in the community with your neighbors and get a sense of the spirit of the people around you?

Gray: Sure have.

Morgan: And how do you find that?

Gray: Sure have. Everybody’s extremely upbeat. I’ve been very impressed since the storm with everyone’s attitude. It’s been very, very refreshing. And the people that have come down to the Coast to help, we’ll never forget them, especially those guys from the power company. They’re the heroes, or at least some of them. And the phone company, all the utility companies, and the debris removal people, they’ve all just done marvelous work. But the power companies involved, especially from all over the country, are just remarkable, and we certainly applaud all of their efforts.

Morgan: Well, I hear a lot of, “We’re going to build back bigger and better.” And I know that was—you’ve told me a little bit—that was your plan—

Gray: Absolutely.

Morgan: —before the storm hit. So how is the store going to be different when you finally reopen?

Gray: Well, we had expansion plans in the works before the storm, and the storm not only confirmed what we had planned, it has also accelerated it, and now it’s become an absolute necessity. As a part of the community, having been so for a long time, and especially part of the retail community, I owe it not only to my family and my employees, but also to the people on the Coast to try to help as many people as I can rebuild their lives and their homes. And what better way to do it than with home furnishings? Because people are going to need the stuff, and if the statistics that I’ve heard are correct, where basically a third of the housing in the Mississippi Gulf Coast area has been destroyed, not damaged but destroyed—I heard sixty-something thousand residences out of a hundred seventy-something thousand have been destroyed—everybody’s going to need some help. And we’re expanding our product offerings. In addition to our La-Z-Boy Gallery at the store here with all of the fine La-Z-Boy products that we’ve carried through the years and will continue to carry, we’re also going to be expanding into bedroom and dining room. We’re going to have a bedding department. And basically we’ll be a family-owned, full-line furniture store with terrific products and service after the sale, and we’re going to continue doing what we’ve been doing in the past; just we’re going to offer more of it. That’s all.

Morgan: So if you stay on your timeline rather than your contractor’s timeline (laughter), do you have a grand reopening date?

Gray: We would love, Beth, to have the grand opening around the first of the year. I’m hoping to get most of this done by sometime in December. I’m really pushing for
that, but I can only work as fast the contractors can get the people to work. And everybody’s in the same boat, and you have to understand there’s some folks that are rebuilding that just have a slab. Now whether that’s easier or more difficult, it’s tough to say. But we’re doing the best we can, and we’re really shooting for some time in December, hopefully with the grand opening in the first quarter sometime.

(end of interview)