Mississippi Oral History Program

Hurricane Katrina Oral History Project

An Oral History

with

Leroy Johnson

Interviewers: Lucy Maynard and Kristen Wallace

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Biography

Born on March 6, 1949, in Forest, Mississippi, Mr. Leroy Johnson moved to Pascagoula, Mississippi, with his parents when he was three years old; he has lived there ever since. After finishing high school, Mr. Johnson became an electrician, and he worked at Ingalls Shipyard. His father, Mr. Booker T. Otis Johnson, was a painter at Ingalls Shipyard. At the time of this interview, Mr. Johnson was retired, enjoying fishing, woodwork, and his grandchildren. He was active in the Boys and Girls Club of Jackson County, and had been named Head Start Volunteer of the Year.
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AN ORAL HISTORY

with

LEROY JOHNSON

This is an interview for the Mississippi Oral History Program of The University of Southern Mississippi. The interview is with Leroy Johnson and is taking place on February 21, 2007. The interviewers are Kristen Wallace and Lucy Maynard. Also present is film documentarian Ella Kliger.

Wallace: This is an interview for The University of Southern Mississippi Hurricane Katrina Oral History Project, done in conjunction with the University of Guelph, Ontario, Canada. The interview is with Leroy Johnson and is taking place on February 21, 2007, at 12:30 p.m. in Pascagoula, Mississippi, at St. John’s Episcopal Church. The interviewers are Kristen Wallace and Lucy Maynard. So first of all, I would like to thank you, Leroy, for taking the time to talk with us today. And to begin with, we would like to get some background information about you, which is what we usually do in our oral history interviews. So first I would like to ask you, for the record, if you could please state and spell your name.


Maynard: OK. Could you please tell us, Leroy, where and when you were born?

Johnson: I was born March 6, 1949, in Forest, Mississippi.

Maynard: OK, and for the record, what was your father’s name?

Johnson: Otis Johnson, Booker T. Otis Johnson.

Wallace: And your mother’s maiden name?

Johnson: Burks.

Maynard: And where did you grow up?

Johnson: We moved here when I was like three years old. And stayed on Marcus Street in Pascagoula for two years, and then we moved into the house that I was in that burned up. So most of my growing up was here, in Pascagoula.

Wallace: OK. And how many generations of your family have lived on the Mississippi Gulf Coast?
Johnson: We migrated from Forest, so it’s my father, then my generation, and then my kids, and then my grandkids, and then my great-grand are all here.

Wallace: Awesome.

Maynard: OK. Why are you living here?

Johnson: Job.

Maynard: Yeah.

Johnson: Uh-huh. The better jobs that was down here. I felt with the limited jobs, and that’s the way you had to make it. You had to leave home to find a better job; so we found a better job here, so we just stayed here.

Maynard: Could you describe your attachment to this region and what it means to you?

Johnson: This is my home now. Forest is where I was born, but this is my home. This is where we’re raising my kids and helping with my grandkids and great-grand; all is tied up out here in this area. So this is home now.

Wallace: Where was your neighborhood?

Johnson: On Tucker Street, over on—see, it was mostly convenient to—matter of fact, when I was smaller, there was stores right there on the corner, and my school was right there across the street, so it was very convenient.

Wallace: Can you describe your neighborhood before Hurricane Katrina?

Johnson: It was a very, very, very nice place to live. On two streets over, they was having problems, but on our street there was none because, well, the kids kind of took over and looked out for the old, older people. They kind of respected them more over there on that side of town. We did a lot for each other. If you needed help, you didn’t go get somebody that you going to have to pay; you went and got your neighbor. You didn’t have to pay him; he would do it freely and do it good. But then the storm, it kind of changed a lot. So many people moved away, so many empty houses.

Maynard: Would you say that it was more affected by the flood or by wind?

Johnson: More by the flood, over that way.

Maynard: So what were your most vivid memories of your community before the hurricane?
Johnson: The people. Enjoying the people that was there. And then the loneliness when most of them was gone; most of them left.

Wallace: Tell us about growing up on Tucker Street.

Johnson: Oh, right there in front of the school, that was our football place right there. Our baseball place was all right there in front of the school. They had put the, they have five ways (inaudible) right there now. That used to be land, and we played our football there, and we played our baseball there, and it was a community thing. OK, now, the kids then, where we grew up, the majority stayed there, and we’re raising our kids on the same street. (Inaudible) and our kids, some was on the back street, some went to Moss Point, but all of us was still mostly in the area. Wasn’t too many of them had left then, when that time coming on up.

Maynard: How many relatives lived on your street? Who else lived there from your family and from there?

Johnson: Let’s see; it’s my third cousin stayed not quite a block up the street, and let’s see, about my fifth cousin stayed on, just about on the end on the corner of Testament—that’s, I’m going to say Testament, on the corner of Testament and Tucker.

Maynard: Let me ask you one more thing about growing up. So what happens if one of the kids was up to something?

Johnson: Ooh, now that, then everybody had that super-respect for their elders, so if one caught you doing something, you know you’re going to get a whipping from them, and if they took you home, you was going to get another whipping. And if you was very fortunate to have a father there with you, when he got off of work, there was another one. So you had respect for—

Maynard: Community parenting.

Johnson: Yes, but this is something that you can’t do now. (laughter)

Maynard: Definitely not. (laughter)

Johnson: No, you can’t really even chastise them, somebody else’s child now.

Wallace: So can you tell us what your opinion was of the local, state, and federal politicians before Hurricane Katrina?

Johnson: I listened to a lot of the conversation, and it put everything in one high level that this was going to happen, and everything was going to be taken care of. But then when things was really needed, it seemed like everybody started dragging their feet about it. We just kind of went out of sight for a little while. I mean, things have to
start picking back up, but it’s not really them that’s doing it, that’s bringing everything back; it’s the people with heart and true love for the place that’s coming in that’s helping, but they’re coming from different places. We would like some help from ours, you know. “We’re putting you in these places. Help us.”

Wallace: And what about after Hurricane Katrina? How did you feel about the politics then?

Johnson: Wow. Now we’re in a (inaudible). See, kind of after the storm, for about three days I was kind of out of it, kind of lost. We was running, but I was really numb-like, and then everything kind of came down on me. And when I got through crying about my own problems and started looking, it was people that had worse problems than I had. I still had a standing house, so a lot of other people, they didn’t have anything; I mean nothing. So I wasn’t, my mind wasn’t in those areas right after the storm. It was later on, once you get to a TV and watch TV and see what was being done for our area, that part started coming back in. I believe they started doing more for Mobile than they had started doing for Pascagoula, and [Mobile] just got a little bit of the wind. I’m serious. (laughter) I’m serious.

Maynard: So like how did that make you feel that your community of Pascagoula was being neglected?

Johnson: That’s the word. I would say I got kind of lost because everybody, where everybody here was beginning to lean on the next person that was here, I seen that, and that was kind of pulling us together. But the part that should have been there, I mean, it wasn’t. We had to kind of hold each other up. If it wasn’t for a lot of the agencies—they don’t put Red Cross at a level that it should be for places like this, but they was the ones that really started coming in helping us.

Maynard: So how do you think that the storm changed your community?

Johnson: It took all my loved ones away. It took all the people that I grewed up with; I mean, they’re scattered now. Majority of the old ones, I don’t believe they will be able to make it back anyway. A lot of them kind of went into shock being moved that fast and don’t know when they’re coming home, and it’s been like close to a year now. A lot of them I haven’t even heard from.

Wallace: So how and when did you hear about Hurricane Katrina?

Johnson: That’s something we kind of watch around here. You start hearing about it, everybody gets to a TV and starts watching. Once we started watching, we seen how it was advancing. And the size, the size is what really got us. Everybody had it in their mind to leave, but it was a bunch of us who stayed. A lot of us stayed, and I believe it would have been a little bit better if a lot of the old ones had left. It was a lot of people caught up in that water that was over there on Tucker. We had some that couldn’t even walk; we had to go down there and get them out. But we did not lose
anybody in that area. The place where I—I was trying to leave, but my daughter wanted to stay. She was in Moss Point; so we went to a projects. If I’d stayed at my house, we’d have walked around in water, maybe about up to my thighs, something like that. But where I was at, we had to swim for it; I mean, swim for it. The water came in so fast that—you’ll have to see the projects to know what I’m saying. Imagine you’re coming in, and the area that you’re coming into is low, but you come into a high spot. But then as the water comes in, we have nowhere to go. You just go back up to the high part and hope that it’s going to stop, which it did, but the rest of the projects, it was up under water. It was like fifteen houses on one end that didn’t really go under the water. I mean, we went back and checked, but you had to go under the water to get into the house to see if anybody was in there. But we was lucky there, too. It was something like you would see on TV, kids toting kids; they’re already short, and they got a kid on their shoulder, you know. You had to hold him. But we had people to come in there with boats and start getting us out.

**Wallace:** Was it just locals, like with their own boats, that were bringing those in?

**Johnson:** Yes. People that had a grudge on one side of the street, they was over on this side of the street helping. When it’s something like that, they pull together a little bit tighter.

**Maynard:** When did you hear about the evacuation for Hurricane Katrina, and how did you react to that?

**Johnson:** Well, we had gassed up, and we had put clothes and food and stuff in the car. And we heard about it; that was constant. You hearing about it from the radio, from the TV, from the neighbors, the ones that come out in the street that was already trying to leave early, giving you advice to leave. And that was the way, one neighbor to the other neighbor. Even though everybody got TV, when one step out the door, the other one holler, “Hey you listening? This is happening.” And so we thought everybody had left out from over on that side, but it was a lot of them that did stay.

**Maynard:** So most of your neighbors left?

**Johnson:** It was quite a lot of them that stayed, uh-huh. They got caught up in the water.

**Maynard:** Yeah.

**Johnson:** We had a recreation center on the street. They had to go in the recreation center and climb the bleachers to stay out of the water.

**Wallace:** How did you prepare for Katrina?

**Johnson:** (laughter) It’s kind of hard to prepare for. Most of the things is to get your food, your water, your lights, your clothing, something that you know you can wrap
them up in to try to keep everything dry, if you trying to stay. But we was trying to leave, but we did have all this packed up, and we made it to Moss Point. My daughter was telling us about the projects and that it had been through so many storms and hadn’t been shook, so we were going to try to stay there.

Wallace: Where were you staying down in the projects?

Johnson: It’s just level house, an old two-story, just level house.

Maynard: Who were you with in the projects other than your daughter?

Johnson: Ooh, I don’t know. I was super blessed there, baby. If I had lost some of them, I sure enough would’ve lost (inaudible), but my kids, they went with—my daughter, my baby girl and my grandkids, they went with their boyfriends; over there they just did get wind and leaves down. Over there we was swimming. I can imagine what it would been like if I have had three baby trying to make it out there. So I was blessed there. My other daughter Kim is thirty-six. She has eight; she call them eight-pack. She have eight kids. And they big, out of the weight. There’s one, two, three great-grand there. But they weren’t over there either, so we was blessed that it was more safe. The big kids, her youngest is twelve now. He was eleven then. So he’s big size, too. So everybody was helping everybody. It was something like you wouldn’t believe; it took three days before everything came down on me just what had happened. And when it start to settle in your mind, what had happened and what could have happened, I imagine my nerves kind of broke for a little while. And then I was working on the house before the storm, (laughter) and I had put everything I had into the house then. And then here come the storm, and it just—I was just disgusted. I had did sides, inside; I had two more places, then, OK, out of that because it washed up the plywood and stuff in there. That water had to be moving; I mean, really moving. Those big, blue garbage cans, full. It’s already full; it’s got water and stuff in it. It’s pushed behind the house up against another house, and it was already full. So that water had to be sure enough moving. It picked up, it pushed my—I had a glass door in front. It pushed the door on the inside of the house; the glass was all through. It picked the wood that was nailed down and pushed it up. OK. So I’m thinking [to] myself, “We still had a house because it’s still standing. It still can be repaired.” We made it through, though. We made it through all this. And then just when I’m—I had a hard time trying to find—I’m on disability—trying to find my check. After I found that and we got food, and then I got a car myself, and then we started moving around, then my nerves and everything broke again when we hit the beach because there wasn’t no beach. Everywhere I looked everything was totally changed, even our church. I mean, it was all messed up. So everything, the houses that I remember going to—a lot of people down there I work for, I mean, they didn’t have anything; it was just gone. One of the, he’s my insurance man, but he’s a friend, too; he said it was gone. He said he went there. He left, and then he came back. He said it wasn’t nothing there, said it wasn’t, said he couldn’t see the slab, said he couldn’t see nothing. Some places you could see the slab where the house was; some places the whole slab was gone. It came in that fast and that hard on us.
Maynard: How long was it after the storm that you saw the beach and the church?

Johnson: It was, I think it was on the fourth day. See, we had lines down everywhere. Because of that we were trying to get back to Tucker Street, because it was so much down, and you took your own chance by riding across electric wires, stuff, and debris and stuff that’s made it over. And then the people over there, they had already started sweeping up the street, getting the pathway. They had already started working over there. And I guess just staying busy kind of keep your mind off it until you get down there and see. And then it kind of shakes you that you been in something like that. The cell phones, they went [down]. Let me start it over.

Wallace: How did you get back to Tucker Street?

Johnson: Now, that was a job, because you’re moving branches, you’re—majority of people here, they got out and started opening up some of the streets up theirself. They wouldn’t mess with none of the electric wires; you’re scared to run across them. But they was out moving the debris off where you can make a way back with (inaudible). There wasn’t too many cars that was moving; wasn’t too much of anything that was moving in Pascagoula. The National Guard, they began to come in; something like the second night, they was here. They was over that way. They said it was all through Moss Point, all the way down where there was big flood lights that was going over, and the helicopters, they was shining all through. I seen the Milky Way when I was small, but I looked up in the sky and all those stars, it was one of the most beautiful sights I have ever seen. Through all that, there was still something beautiful to look at. You know what I’m saying?

Maynard: So could you describe to us like what happened to you during the hurricane, like your experience of that?

Johnson: OK. Yes. Everybody—I was kind of caught off asleep; I was pretty tired, and so I lay down for a little while. We had made it to the projects. We left home trying to get my daughter to go, and all of a sudden, we look at the projects. They was in one set of apartments; we was in another one. We just kind of scattered around. So we was listening to the radio. And as it got closer and closer, it seemed like it wasn’t going to be so bad, so I went on to sleep. When I woke up, it seemed like the whole building was shaking. They said the waters was coming in. When you looked down the street, when you first go in there, don’t look like it’s that elevated; seem like you riding pretty well level. But then when you look down on the other end, we was looking at a car that was down there; we seen one fellow crank his car up and move it. This fellow had left his car down there too long, and the water got too high on him. OK, kind of like fifteen or twenty seconds at the most, I looked out and looked at the car, and I said, “Well, he moved one car.” And I turned back around to look; I said, “Where did he move the other car, man?” I said, “I didn’t know he could crank the car up when it got that high.” And I looked again, and the wind hit, and when it pushed the water aside, I could see the top of the car. I said, “Man, we better get
ready.” So everything that we could get, we stacked it on top of the counters, on top of the tables. And the water, it started coming in, and we tried to plug it out first. But it was coming in so fast, I believed they had opened the dams on us, for it to come that fast and that quick. And it just flooded us out. As it flooding out one house, we started checking, but we didn’t know who was in the end houses. So we had to go back to them, but that was later. All the ones that was—as the water was coming, we had to get them out. There was a lot of elderly people there. There was one fellow, he was huge, and he was in a wheelchair. We had to catch him on both sides of his arm in the water and let him ride on the water as we put him on the truck; they had a big, old City truck out there. We got him on that, OK. The boats, we had to go around to the other side. We was trying to get the boats. We could see some boats over there, and we was going to try to get over there to them; they was tied up. One of them you could see the back part of it, but we knew it was a boat, and we were going to try to get over there, but we had to get the people out first. So we got everybody on the end, and then we had to go around, but by the time we started around, the projects to the other side of it, there was some people over there, they just didn’t get along with us. But here they are coming out there in boats, and they start picking up. That’s how we got most of the small kids and the old people out. The majority just started walking after that. Imagine somebody shooting you with a BB gun all at one time, and it’s all over your face and chest. That’s how hard that rain and that wind was hitting us. And a little—she’s not little; she pretty close to being a woman now. But she was walking beside me, and [her] eyes was in and out, and it was something in that water that my eyes, they stayed burning. And my right eye, I had lost sight in it. So I’m like this here trying to find my way out. And she’s holding onto me, but she’s telling me which way to turn (laughter) to make it out of this way; we was making it out.

Maynard: Did you receive any injuries at all?

Johnson: It’s not like—whatever was in that water, it would break you out like every place that been. Your neck, your arms, creases here, in your fingers, every place that fit, behind your leg. And we went to—as we got out—I’ll finish on that. As we got out of the projects, OK, we got the, we didn’t see anybody else so we went back in the projects. And then the wind had calmed down, and the water had stopped rising, so we went back and double-checked to make sure wasn’t nobody else out there. And I was telling them then, “Something in this water is slick-like.” It was a lot of us that came up; we had to go get hepatitis shots. And it’s some kind of salve; I know the name, but I can’t think of it right now, but it’s in a little, yellow tube. The Army gave us this. And you rub it on, and it did a lot. It cleared a lot of it up. A lot of people still have suffered with some of the same stuff.

Wallace: When did you get to take a shower after the storm?

Johnson: Let me tell you about our shower. The fire hydrant, that’s where we took our bath at. (laughter) Over the fire hydrant everybody take their bath, take their
water. We were next door from it, so we was right there at our bath place and place to get your water. I was real fortunate my gas didn’t go off, so I still had gas. We could start heating water, so you could get the hot bath. (laughter) So we was doing pretty good. We was blessed. We was blessed to go through that and make it up.

**Maynard:** So when you got everybody out and yourself out, where did you go?

**Johnson:** The lady that let us stay over there, stay at the projects, her mother stayed behind the projects. It’s up on the hill. OK, when we got everybody out, that’s where everybody was. That’s where everybody was leaving from. Everybody made it there and finding out who was there. After we had checked that second time and came out we didn’t lose nobody, and everybody was out. I think she fed a lot of them. We was trying to get home to find out what kind of damage we had done took. But she was kind enough to let us in her home and stay there and kind of dry off. And get to where I could see; I couldn’t see. I got to where this eye was grayish, like you had diamonds or something on it. When I looked at you, like it was glowing. It took a little while. I don’t think this eye ever going to be right, this one. A lot of times I just can’t see out of it good.

**Wallace:** How long was it before the water was gone on the streets and out of the house?

**Johnson:** A good five, six hours out of the initial hit, it started to recede; it started going down. It was a man telling me that he was in his house; he stayed down by the beach. And he said he don’t know why he was there trying to protect his house. And he says he was downstairs; said he looked, said it looked like fog, a big thing of fog coming. Said he ran upstairs; by the time he got upstairs, the whole front of his house was left. Said he just sat down, said he knew, he said to himself, “Well, I’m dead.” By the time he sat down, said the water started going down. It’s a lot of people out there, maybe if the word get around that somebody is interesting in hearing their story, you know, they may volunteer. But it’s a lot of them that went through way worse than I did. I mean, it was shattered stories.

**Wallace:** So can you describe any experiences that you had with local, state, or federal officials? Like after Katrina, how you got in contact with them or them with you?

**Johnson:** Oh, I started calling. We was calling FEMA; a lot of people was going to the overpasses, and with cell phones that’s about the only way you could get [phone calls] out. It was on the third day after that, we did get in contact with them. OK, and they took name, and all of this area, and they was telling us when FEMA was going to be set up in the area. That’s about the only ones that we was able to get through to then. Red Cross, they just came like automatic. I guess United Way was in there, too. It’s like the automatic thing; they was just there. I mean God blessed that they were there; (laughter) somebody was there, you know. But yeah, I cried.
Wallace: We’ve heard a lot about FEMA really being disorganized. How did you feel about it?

Johnson: I’m in the, was set up in the Pascagoula High School; I’m there with three babies, and they was in my arms at that time, all three of them, and it was unbelievable. One of the fellows I know. I know—I don’t recall his name—but I know he ain’t got nobody; he’s just got himself. It was just like, “You get two thousand dollars. You get two thousand. You get nothing. You get two thousand.” And I’m sitting there with kids. The relief for my daughter, my grandkids—they got my son; they even got copies of paper saying that they would get nothing, and then they was sending letters saying if you don’t have receipts and stuff where you done spent your funds, that you’re going to have to pay back, but they ain’t never sent nothing. I would say that’s kind of disorganized, yes.

Wallace: That is bizarre. (laughter)

Johnson: Yes. Well, thank God for the trailer, but with the trailer it was messed up on that. They came out there like two times looking to inspect the trailer, and they didn’t even put a trailer out there. They brought me a key, what? About three weeks before the trailer got there.

Maynard: How many people were living in the trailer with you?

Johnson: Broke up my family there. Let’s see; we supposed to got two trailers, and we ended up with one. OK, my daughter, she had three kids, and then my son, he’s my grandson, but I call him my son, Destin Neal(?), and he was here, so he was staying. Well, it was quite a lot more that wanted to stay, just wanted to stay in the house if they could sleep on the floor in the house because they didn’t have no place they could sleep, because they didn’t have no place they could sleep in a normal bed. So the trailer was shared with me. Oh, and Bernstine Miller(?), she stayed down on Twelfth. She had lost everything, and she moved in. That’s my kids’ mother. You know, we was separated but we back (inaudible). We stayed there. Let’s see; my mind, six, seven, eight people, and it was a little bit too crowded, so my daughter moved; she moved to Moss Point. It broke up my family. She was going to school, and didn’t have but a little bit longer, but she couldn’t get the transportation to come down to school. Well, anyway, she found her a job and stared working. And, well, she got things going pretty good for herself. Then they were staying with their mother, and they moved out; staying with his mother, and after they both—well, he had a little job, trying to get back off in school. After she got that job at Imperial Palace, they found a place to move to. It was the house that my [grand]babies got burned in; they moved up in that house. Tell you what, slumlords made a killing down there. Long as [a landlord] had a little place, you could put anybody up in there and charge them what you want to. Slumlords, they made a killing. Then people came from all different places claiming to help. It wasn’t no help; it was steady taking. So a lot of people got to where they didn’t trust nobody coming from nowhere else. That’s why I wondered if it was something good could be done with my house,
showing these people coming from their heart doing things, you know, I would like for that to get out, and let people see, and let people share. There are some people out there that really care. I got my babies on my mind. I get kind of shook up sometimes.

Wallace: It’s understandable.

Johnson: My babies. (deep breath) OK, where are we?

Wallace: So how long after Katrina, how long did it take for you to get back to your house?

Johnson: Right after the storm? We made it back that day. It was that evening when the storm had subsided, and we started trying to make it back then. I had a truck in Pascagoula. My truck that was in Moss Point, I know it wasn’t going to run because I seen it floating. I mean, it just floated, and the back end went one way and the front end, seen it go, but you couldn’t see nothing but a little part of the top, so I knew it was done for. But I had my truck in Pascagoula, and I didn’t know how bad it was in Pascagoula, so we made it down here, and I did see how it was, because we had to do some backing up, zigzagging, people that was bringing us down. You find the right road or road where you knew somebody was because the majority would be out there cleaning off the road, trying to get past, their way through. Finally made it back, and I got my truck and then had to go back up there. It flooded. I have a standard shift; I know that it will work for—after so long, I knew it was going to play out, but we used it while it was working and pulled one of my daughters of my first wife, Keana(?), we pulled her, got her truck in. We moved a few cars, but my truck, it lasted close to a week before it broke down, but we was moving.

Maynard: What was your initial reaction when you saw your house after the hurricane?

Johnson: I was pleased. The trees that I thought was going to fall on my house didn’t. My neighbor, he really had the worst damage. We don’t even know where the tree came from. He had two trees; one tree on the side of his house, it was in his house, and then another tree that we don’t even know where it came from was on top of that tree. So he really had the worst damage then. Mine was mostly just flooded; buckled up my floors, you know, blew my back door off. And my windows and all my roof part, we had to cover that up trying to find—when it rained, everybody found a spot in the house that you didn’t get wet. (laughter) It was like that, but we did have a roof; we had a place to stay. It was so many that didn’t, so I had to count my blessings. If we can give help somewhere down the line, it’s going to come back to you. We got to keep it going, just keep on giving. Give till it hurts; it’s going to come back.

Maynard: Um-hm, I agree.
Wallace: So when you came back to your house, most of your things were still there, then?

Johnson: Everything was messed up, wet. The furniture you could see where—I don’t know how it twisted things around through the house. It moved my house; it twisted it.

Maynard: Wow.

Johnson: Lots that was up under the house and the middle part of the house, it was in the back corner of the fence. It moved blocks; it moved bricks. That water was moving. But I’m a jack-of-all-trades; I try to do a little bit of everything, but I was young. But when I was young, young, I got married at seventeen. But I tried then, when you didn’t even need a social security card. You got paid cash working at a filling station; you got paid cash. I was working for (inaudible) plumbing. I got paid with cash all the way up until I got responsibilities. And to me, that was one of the best things. My kids, that’s one of the best things that you can ever have. Because you can kind of see yourself in them. So once I got responsibility, I had to get me a job and stay; (laughter) couldn’t bounce around no more. But before that, I’d work and then go to another job just to see what that job was like.

Maynard: So how were you treated during this time when you were trying to get yourself back together?

Johnson: Let’s see. Well, I really didn’t have any help, nobody but—well, I didn’t really have no help. My son, he started his own little contracting job; so he was staying on the move. So most of the things that were being done at the house, I was doing them myself. And it wasn’t too bad. See, I always kept the thought, “Well, I got something to work with.” Lot of people didn’t have that. The biggest problem was the money part. So as I got my money, I started adding a little bit and made plans for Christmas. I wanted to be able to give them a fantastic Christmas. I wanted the house to be together. The kids, their room is, we had made it into a toy room. And so that’s where we kept our toys, and if it was wet outside, that’s where they rolled their toys, in this one particular room. And I had made so many plans. I got them a swing. I told them every day was Christmas. Rocking horses, it’s the kind you put down cement, stick them in the ground; got a big old spring on it. I was getting three of them. And if I had just—it just put me at a low. My son, he had start having good spirits; he getting up, he cleaning up, he cleaning up the yard. He beating me. He getting up before I’m getting up. That particular morning he got up and done cleaned up, and he had picked up all the yard; we had piles of stuff. I said, “Well, let me get out here and help him pick up the stuff.” And he started raking, and he hollered, “Daddy!” And I ran to the back door and looked and smoke was just boiling out of his bedroom. And I messed up that I went back in the house and kicked the door open, and I should have used the window; it would have kept it contained in one room. But when I kicked the door open, [the fire] took off. I mean, it just took off. Now, I think about it now; then, I wasn’t even thinking. I’m thinking the water is in the front, so
I’m running around the house back to the front to get some water from the hydrant, but there’s water in the house, but my mind still hadn’t—and then when I was getting the water, I called my son, and he didn’t answer; first thing in my mind, he done ran back in there to get something. And I ran in the house, and that stuff they tell you about get down on the floor, that ain’t none of that true. It’s just as dark up here as it is—it’s dark; you can’t inhale nothing. You can’t breathe; that’s why I felt for him. And I had a feeling, after I hit the hall, and so I came back out, and then I seen him after I got out on the outside and I, I just grabbed him, held on to him till the fire truck got there. If the whole thing burnt down, I would still be satisfied that I had him. Things kind of fell into perspective then. You know, we lost a lot because Mrs. Miller, she was getting furniture; she had most of her furniture up there in the living room. My daughter, she had all hers stacked up there; all that was gone. All the clothes and stuff, that was gone. Majority part of the work I did inside, it was burnt up. The fire people, they did a good job, but it was just gone. That’s the other thing. I had my son. That material, in time you can get that back. So I think, I kind of thought that that was the worst part. Let me tell you, though, the last—losing of my father, I say that was one of the hardest things that had ever happened to me. It was pretty close. And right after that, my sister, and that was, everything was like different; it’s a different pain. It’s a different hurt; it goes deep, and it was just right behind each other, it seemed like. And then everything was going so good. I mean, things seemed like they were getting back into order. I done accepted the house being burnt. So I’m tearing out, kind of—I have to do things, have to write it out. How much I can take from this to put on the house; how much I could—started going to school. When they was born, they were my babies. When they came from the hospital, they slept on my chest. They were going to school. I had big plans. When they got out of school, we always go get us some donuts. My grandson came and told me, he said, “I think they had a fire.” He knew; he wouldn’t tell me anything. And I went up there; we started talking. I started telling him, “Get out of there.” We had it so bad (inaudible). You can tell people with the power [company]. If the City comes and sees something wrong, it’s supposed to be shut down. The power people came and seen that something was wrong, and they told them, “Talk to him, and tell [the landlord]” [that] he had to get that fixed. Never was fixed, and it caught on fire and took my babies.

**Wallace:** When did that happen?

**Johnson:** Lord, have mercy.

**Wallace:** Do you want to take a break?

**Johnson:** Yeah. You got a little water?

**Wallace:** Sure.

**Maynard:** OK. Could you describe to us some of the people that you met through your experience?
Johnson: Oh, I met so many. You mean some that went through the storm? I saw some that was coming back home, or both?

Maynard: Anyone you met. (laughter)

Wallace: Any volunteers who came to help?

Johnson: Oh, the volunteers? Ooh-wee. College kids or school kids, I think they was out for spring break. They came down, and they was, they was the first lifting powers. They was energetic (laughter), curious, full of conversation, full of life. More inspiration to me, more love. They’d make conversation, and let you know they was here. They could have spent their time somewhere else on the pleasure side, but they was here giving something, giving themselves, sharing their love; so that was a pick-me-up. You had to (inaudible) to kind of keep moving.

Maynard: Where were some of the people from that you met?

Johnson: (laughter) Let’s see, Canada, Kentucky; Macon, Georgia, some from right here in Alabama. OK, Wisconsin. It seemed like they was just from around the world. Seemed like they just—(inaudible) Mennonites, Amish, like a family coming together with one thing in mind. That’s what it felt like to me, and still feel like a family when I see them, when I get a call from some. I still get calls.

Maynard: That’s great.

Johnson: Yes, it do the heart good (laughter) to see your blessings.

Wallace: What was it like to see so many people come to help?

Johnson: Ooh-wee! It’s something I would love to share with the world. That’s a feeling that is kind of unexplainable. It’s super-good. It warms you on the inside out. I don’t care how you’re feeling, that feeling, it’s going to bring it like that. It’s going to bring that smile to your face. That’s what it felt like. I’d like for everybody to get a little bit of that. If you can’t get a lot of it, get a little bit of it, you know. (laughter)

Maynard: Did you ever expect so many people to show up to help?

Johnson: No, No. I never expected as much that was did, you know? Started off, I was expecting some lumber for me to repair. But then they said about tearing down, and would I mind, and talking about building me another house. Would I mind? “Oh, no. I’m going to help you.” (laughter) Lot of memories was there, a lot of hardships, too. I would have been working for the rest of my life checking that house. It was close to a ten-year thing because my money, I had to do a little bit and then stop, you know, so it was being stretched out. It started with my father; he did his patchwork. I was changing out the whole thing as I was going to change out, start from your bottom and work up. It started like that, and I came a long way, but I still would have been
working on it. That one particular spot of jacking it up, we’d jack it up, and then the middle part would go back down. The fellow that was two doors down from me, he said—he was way older, now. He said when he was a boy, he said it was like swamp land. Said he used to fish right there where my house was. Well, I just put it in mind, but I never really kept like that, but then it turned out that it was. We had to dig out; found we felt like digging out of a bottom of a pond, so he was telling the truth.

Wallace: So how do you think that Katrina affected your community?

Johnson: It’s not really a community now. The original ones, they, let’s see, one, two, three, four. I think it’s four of them, the originals, that’s back, but just staying in their house. They’re not really in their houses; they are staying in the trailer. A lot of the kids are there, or the grandkids, or a friend. OK. So I going to have a friend stay and do the work in the house, tear it out. A lot of people got sick from the mold, just the mold that’s come out.

Wallace: Um-hm. So did a lot of people leave and not come back?

Johnson: Yes. A lot of them still haven’t came back. That’s the hard part. I’m not young; I’m old. Some of them got left were the ones that was with me. It’s kids that’s back, the ones my kids’ age, and some of them my grandkids’ age. The ones I came up with, part of them left; I guess don’t plan on coming back.

Maynard: What do you miss most about your community?

Johnson: The people, uh-uh, the sharing. Well, if it came to we’d have one lawn mower, and everybody was going to get their yard cut, you know; it was like that. You’d pass along. If you wasn’t able to get out there and cut your yard, I would come down there and cut it. We kind of took care of each other. Well, not, yeah, you can say it’s a community because it’s the back street, the street in front of you, and the next street. We kind of took care of each other. Don’t think it was easy street; we had some hard, some mean people on some of them, too. Uh-huh.

Wallace: So what does your street look now? Is it cleaned up, or is there still a lot of work to be done?

Johnson: It’s still a lot of work to be done. The house next to me, well, the house I was telling you that had trees in it, well, they cut the trees off, but the house is still there. They will start working on it pretty soon. That house, the next one, then the next, there’s three right there together. If they go ahead and work on that one, he might come back because he is in a FEMA trailer down on Ingalls Avenue not far from his house, but he is still here in Pascagoula. The others, I don’t think they’re coming back. I seen for-sale sign on one of them.

Wallace: Yeah.
Maynard: Would you ever leave Pascagoula?

Johnson: No, this is where all my kids at. (laughter) This is home. I would love to visit. Y’all going to get me a ticket? (laughter)

Maynard: Sure, we have some extra seats on the bus.

Wallace: Tell us about your work before Katrina.

Johnson: I mostly babysit. I kept my grand[kids]. The little jobs that I could go on. A lot of people, they are a lot like me; they spoil them. If I was doing yard work, they was taking care of them, most of the people that I knew. Other than that, I was there. We was all over the place. Every street in Pascagoula we went up and down, go to the beach. You ought to see them. He’d get up there and try to drive. He’d get all in the road; three years old, he can hold it in the road, with it turning. The one that was up under him, Keshawn(?), Keshawn did not care. He’d get here like this, and he’d point over here, and whatever he was looking at, he wasn’t going to look back at the road. Junior, Junior would sit there and try to drive. Stick shift, he’d tell him when to shift it. They were a mess; that’s where I spent most of my time. It would be with them. And then when their mom and dad would come get them, they’d keep them a little while, but then when I got ready to see them, I would go and get them. Uh-huh. My daughter, she is sitting out because I keep one; her name is Nikeria(?). I keep her a lot of the time. If she come get them, she like, “Daddy, I had this baby, didn’t I?” I say, “Yeah, but it’s my baby.” (laughter) “You had it, but it’s my baby. Last one born on my birthday.”

Wallace: Do you think your children will want to stay in Pascagoula, or do you think they will want to move now?

Johnson: Seem like everybody is trying to stay. I only have one that, when she had left before the storm, she moved to Bay Springs. So I only had one away; all the rest of my kids are here, like I said. And jobs, I think all of them will stay here. I think the majority of my grand going to stay here. That’s twenty-two; twenty-two grand and five great-grand. So I’m blessed; I seen all of them. I know the feeling of a mother’s love, father’s love, sister’s love, my nephew’s love, my grandkid’s love. And I know what it is to lose family, and to lose them. My thing is I’m here for something. I just got to figure out what it is, to share. (brief interruption)

Maynard: So what would you like to see in the rebuilding of your community?

Johnson: I would like to—more of the young kids here; I would like to see more of them participate. It’s a lot of them that’s of my age that been hanging out there for a while. Six or seven days, yeah, I’ll hang with you for a pretty good while, but after that I get to aching, and then you have to start really, sure-enough taking, I be calling it dope, but it’s doctor’s medicine. But it’s still the same; it’s easing the pain. It’s still the same. You got to have something natural to get out and run it off, swim it off,
basketball. Kids, my worst day will sometimes be my best day. I’ll be sick with fever; I’m sweating, and they would come, and you know you got to get up, you know you got to cook them something to eat. You know you have to change a Pamper, but after a while, then after a while you get one of them laughing; then you get to laughing with them. Even sickness didn’t hold you down. I always going, “You got to play.” We got a playground across the street; that was ours. We’d go across the street and play. At certain times it was boys and girls that couldn’t go over there. You had to wait until later on. When it get a certain time, he knew. “Daddy, it’s time for us to go.” (laughter) They gone. All of us go over there, play from there to the beach, or just ride, stop and get junk. And just ride and enjoy. I got my time in. I sure wish I had some more time. Thank God for that time.

Maynard: So after everything you’ve been through, what’s the greatest advice you can give to people?

Johnson: It’s easy to talk about love. It’s a easy word to say, love. Thing is expressing it, showing it. Show it to your neighbor; not just to your friend, show it to your enemy, something they can’t stop. They can put all type of words on you, but they can’t stop. Say the right thing no matter what they trying to send back at you. You send the right thing at them, somewhere down the line it’s going to go through. Share everything that’s good; share it.

Wallace: That’s some pretty good advice.

Maynard: With your neighbors on the other side of the street that you didn’t get along with, do you get along with them now?

Johnson: Well, that was up at the projects. OK. It was about, I don’t know, about three or four days after that, but they had stole a few (inaudible) and stuff like that. So at least they got— the police wasn’t even called, the police and all that, so it was more of a, it was more of, “Your dog didn’t have no business in my yard,” and, “My dog”— they raised bulldogs, and things like wolf (inaudible) would pop up. So it was something like, I think one dog was in heat, and one dog got over there. And that started all that, “You going to pay.” But other than that, everything changed. Disaster changed. It separated a lot of people, uprooted them, some away from home, but it brung a lot of people closer.

Maynard: What are some of your hopes and fears for the future?

Johnson: My hope is that, that’s been given, I can share. I mean, this is something that I always try to do, anyway. My fear, which it is a great fear, I’m the last one. It’s so many—and I know I can’t stay here forever—but it’s so many I would like to see grown or starting a family or just finishing school. I’m still pushing on my daughter to get back in school, and she’s a manager over there, but I still want her to go to school. I still want her to finish. Death’s not—I don’t know. God (inaudible) but that’s the only fear. I been in places where I knew I shouldn’t have come out. I had
no doubt. See, you can be drunk, stoned, whatever; if it’s a message in there for somebody, the next day be wanting to know, “Why was I in there talking to that person? Why did I tell him to go to church?” Or, “Why did I tell him to stop drinking?” Or, “Why did I tell him, ‘Don’t try to fight.’ “Why did I tell him, ‘Don’t try to shoot a man that’s messing you up.’” You got to look at who’s in the picture. Uh-huh. You take that book and start reading, and find out that God uses a lot of people, a lot. If you go in the Bible just right, you’ll see what the Samaritans was up in there. It was called upon. As they say, “They were delivered.” Mail coming from him, what you going to do? Deliver that mail. The thing is, just know where it’s coming from, and I know. It done took me a long way.

Maynard: So is there anything else that you’d like to add that we haven’t asked you?

Johnson: (laughter) Things going through my mind so fast. Can I ask y’all something? Is this for a school projects?

Maynard: Sure can.

Johnson: Is this for a school project?

Wallace: It’s through a thing called Project Serve, Canada, and it’s just kind of like an exposure trip. Also, just, you know, volunteer, come down here and do some Katrina disaster relief. They do some Habitat for Humanity work here, up in Hattiesburg; doing some construction, and then also going down to the Gulf Coast doing some coastal clean-up work. And then through The University of Southern Mississippi, they gave us the opportunity to participate in the oral history project, coming out here and interviewing Pascagoula residents, you know, just trying to get their experiences documented for The University of Southern Mississippi Archives.

Johnson: OK. Do you think this will help anybody?

Maynard: I do. I think it’s great for us to hear it ourselves, and we can bring your stories back with us to Guelph and tell people about what’s going on. And I think it’s really important for people to hear because I think Mississippi was really ignored a lot in the news. I think it’s really important for people’s stories to be heard.

Johnson: Yes. Don’t tell just one side; tell the good side, too.

Maynard: For sure.

Johnson: Uh-huh. Let the people see what y’all are doing. Y’all could be spending time somewhere else. Uh-huh. So kind of let them know what you’re doing because the past, well, it’s a lot of them that done seen me and called me and stuff. And I’m telling them that these people are for real. You seen yourself.
Maynard: Yep and a group came down here last year as well; so this is our second year coming to Mississippi. So we really hope that the project continues and that our university will continue to send people down on our reading week to experience something and to learn, because I think you learn a lot more by experiencing than you can ever learn in a book.

Johnson: Yes. Yes. Or watching TV. On-hands experience. One time I had experienced some storms; we ran from a lot of them, but thing like that, that’s the one that we should have ran, and we stayed, and there haven’t been nothing like that. Made history here, in places that water probably had never been that far inland.

Maynard: Yeah. Well, I think a lot of people just, you know, took their own experiences from the past, like past hurricanes. And where like, you know, “We lived through three other,” something like that. Like, it’s going to be just like everything else. You know, “Well, we’ll do what we have to, and we’ll get through it.” And I just think that it was just totally unexpected, the magnitude.

Johnson: I was looking at it; I said, “Looks like it’s growing.” Said, “It’s getting bigger.” Then they started talking, and but then they said it was going towards New Orleans. I said, “They going to catch it over there.” And everything they was saying, the way they said it was coming, and it hit a pocket or something and started drifting back towards them, and it drifted right in on us.

Wallace: Were you here for Hurricane Camille?

Johnson: Yes.

Wallace: Yeah? And you stayed here during that hurricane, as well?

Johnson: Um-huh, the same place. (laughter) This time it didn’t help us. (laughter). Then, only lost shingles and stuff; a tree that was in the back.

Wallace: Did you ever hear of Pascagoula flooding during Camille?

Johnson: No, not like that, nowhere like that. It got good and saturated, good and saturated; wasn’t even walking—you might walk in water like this in different little spots, but this is swimming water we’re talking about. (laughter) That’s swimming.

Kliger: Let me ask you [interviewers] something. What’s been the most surprising thing for you about Mississippi, about actually being here instead of just hearing about it or reading about it?

Maynard: Well, I think just like he said being here and like talking to, you know, Leroy and other people, and it just gives me a whole new perspective because being from Canada, we don’t have hurricanes. The kind of disasters we have are really like an ice storm, but it’s not going to, it doesn’t have the possibility of killing people.
And just hearing your experiences, and like this is in the United States of America, right? It’s like the richest nation. And for the fact that two years later, people are still rebuilding, and still there’s FEMA tarps on people’s houses and trailers in their driveway; it’s unimaginable to me.

**Wallace:** Yeah, absolutely. I sometimes can’t even believe that we are in the United States, and that as much as there’s money here and how the States can go into other countries and help there, and yet there are so many people that are still suffering and having such a hard time getting their lives back. And maybe they won’t even get their lives back to what they were.

**Johnson:** Yeah, a whole year, that much time.

**Wallace:** Yeah, it’s crazy.

**Johnson:** You listen to what I heard one time that everything that was happening over this side that they was giving explanation for New Orleans side, that they could get the people to see why they were bringing all these other people in; why not bring all the people that stayed there back home? Let them work; let them help themselves some, but you’re sending them away, and you’re bringing other people in. And then when you working some places over here, you putting down trees, and this place is still, you got this particular part back. But you got places that still haven’t got lights and stuff. This one might be, if nothing else, give them (inaudible). We’re catching the devil all the way on the Coast. Probably follow it all the way up; you show one side, show the whole Coast, show the whole thing.

**Maynard:** Yep. I think it’s also amazing the spirit of the people in Mississippi and how everybody came together in their community and stuck together and helped each other out, and I don’t know if another community would do that and get stronger after something that was so difficult. The stories that we’ve heard of people who didn’t know their neighbors but went over there and helped anyways. And people who came from other states, risking a lot to come down and help, and they did it, and it was a good experience for them. And I think that’s positive and something that you don’t ever hear about in the news, about people having really good experiences. You always hear about tragedy.

**Johnson:** Yeah, yeah.

**Maynard:** And I think it’s amazing that you can see a light and a positive in something that was so awful, and I think that’s great.

**Johnson:** It can shake us, but can’t stop us.

**Maynard:** No.
Johnson: It’s like the man across the street asked for a piece of bread, give him a piece of bread and some water, too. Um-hm.

Maynard: Yeah.

Johnson: Share, care about—

Wallace: Let me ask you this. If there is another hurricane predicted this summer, are you going to stay?

Johnson: I’m trying to get my vehicles together, sell both of them, and get something I know I can run in, (laughter) and I’m running. (laughter). My house supposed to be hurricane-proof, right?

Wallace: That’s right. (laughter)

Maynard: Your house is hurricane-proof now?

Wallace: I hope.

Kliger: Knock on wood.

Johnson: We hope that storm don’t knock on us. (laughter) I’m going to.

Wallace: Thank you so much, Mr. Leroy, for sharing your story with us.

Johnson: You are quite welcome. And I’m on 1403 Tucker Street. Come anytime that y’all like.

(end of interview)