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AN ORAL HISTORY

with

LOUIS GOMEZ

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

Morgan: I’m at American Medical Response in Gulfport, Mississippi, with Louis Gonzales.

Gomez: Gomez.

Morgan: Gomez, I’m sorry, with Louis Gomez. Mr. Gomez, what’s your position here at American Medical Response?

Gomez: I’m a registered nurse and my title here is Utilization Manager.

Morgan: Tell me a little bit about, in your position, what you did in getting ready for Katrina.

Gomez: I’ve been tasked during hurricanes to set up and manage a special needs shelter in Biloxi. So that was my primary task as well as working with in conjunction with the local emergency support function to help coordinate with the different facilities whether it be assisted living centers, nursing homes, things of that nature.

Morgan: And is that what you mean by “special needs” shelters?

Gomez: Correct. The special needs shelter is set up for individuals who cannot evacuate the area, who have possibly some type of disability, whether it be a limited physical or even some mental problems, things of that nature.

Morgan: Were you here last year when [Hurricane] Ivan came through?

Gomez: I was in the special needs shelter for Ivan, too.

Morgan: So what, how did that compare to Katrina?

Gomez: It’s significantly different. We actually, the shelter, this we had a little bit better organized because Ivan was a learning experience for us, so we had it much more organized this time around, thank goodness. So it was different, I mean much
more different. And we actually had the same similar drill early going with I believe it was Dennis, so we actually opened up the shelter for Dennis, too.

Morgan: When did y’all first begin your preparations for Katrina coming in?

Gomez: Well, I don’t know the exact dates but I use the reference of the days that it came through. It’s like, I think, Friday morning when we woke up it changed from the panhandle of Florida to dead on us. So immediately we went into action: starting coordinating with the local facilities about their evacuation, local nursing homes, and things of that nature. But you try to encourage everyone to get out of town, but you’re always going to have people that stay.

Morgan: Did you find some resistance, some complacency about—

Gomez: Oh yes, even with us. Going into it, it was like, oh, you know another fire drill, you know it really is not going to be as bad as Ivan or Andrew or something like that. Even the morning when it first started coming through, you know we first started getting some of the winds, you know, it wasn’t till later when we started seeing the water rise and things of that nature.

Morgan: When did you go from suggesting people move to a—telling them that they had to get out?

Gomez: I don’t know when the exact order was given but the meetings starting occurring Friday. We had one of the big meetings that Saturday evening before with the local officials including hospitals and things, and we decided that, I don’t remember when the mandatory came out, but it was close to Saturday evening, Sunday morning because we opened up the special needs shelter at ten or twelve Sunday morning and pretty much as soon as we, got it established we starting getting people in.

Morgan: And as the storm approached, were you here at the offices?

Gomez: No ma’am, I was actually at the special needs shelter at Biloxi High School. The building was designed and set up to be a shelter, so it was very, very formidable, so it was good. Once the winds really started blowing—fortunately this was a daytime storm, so we actually got to see the parts of the roof come off and things of that nature. I think that’s when things started getting a little bit tense for the other folks there.

Morgan: Where was the shelter located?

Gomez: Biloxi High School.

Morgan: OK and you rode out the storm there.

Gomez: Yes ma’am.
Morgan: So tell me about that twelve hours.

Gomez: Early going it was fine. We had air condition, we had lights, we were able to plug in all of their equipment, and it was fine up until then. At one point it was almost jovial because it was me, a colleague of mine from Jackson, and it seems like six or seven, maybe eight nurses from the Department of Health.

Morgan: And what kind of patients? Who was being sheltered there?

Gomez: We had patients that, initially going into it we first we just had individuals that just need a little bit of assistance with daily living that need to get up and move around or patients that were on oxygen, or needed concentrators and things of that nature. As the storm progressed we started getting people. We weren’t going to turn anybody away. And we got people that came in, you know, in the family Toyota with Grandma in the backseat, so we made space for them also, you know the bed-bound type patients.

Morgan: All right. So after the “we think it’s another hurricane” party gathering, what happened from there?

Gomez: Well, like I said, at one point it was kind of jovial. We made the best of the situation, then we realized the gravity of what was going on when the roof started coming off and the power went out. Biloxi High School is a very technical, high tech, it’s very advanced. I mean they got, the way that it’s set up, when the power went out they have a generator but it only powers emergency lighting in the cafeteria. So at that point the air condition goes out, so it starts getting stuffy. There’s no windows to open. We didn’t, we requested, we couldn’t get fans because in the heat of it that wasn’t really a priority for everyone. With the school the way it’s built, from what— I really didn’t get the whole concept of it, but the plumbing works off of power. It’s like a, it needs power to flush and things of that nature. So now you’ve got a hot building with a whole bunch of people in it with no functioning toilets. So it was just the ten of us that was there and at this time we had three ambulance crews that rode out with us. So we did what we could to keep the stench down. At one point Monday afternoon, where the water had came into the drainage ditch, me and another one of the nurses (long pause) had to go out to the drainage ditch with mop buckets so we could flush the toilet.

Morgan: Was there no running water either?

Gomez: No. Well, again, there was no power to flush the water.

Morgan: So none of the water moved.

Gomez: Nothing.
Morgan: OK.

Gomez: Nothing. We had no water at all, so.

Morgan: So you were getting buckets from the draining ditch to flush the toilets.

Gomez: Flush the toilets.

Morgan: Wow. How many total people ended up at the shelter?

Gomez: During the height of the storm we had, it was probably close to a hundred special needs individuals along with their family but as the storm progressed and people were trying to ride out the storm or other shelters were destroyed, they were coming to us. So I think our peak number was close to twelve to fifteen hundred.

Morgan: And did you have food supply or water supply?

Gomez: Going into Monday evening and Tuesday it really got to a very low point. We actually got into the cafeteria and raided what we could, so to speak. We did a little looting of our own.

Morgan: Acquisition I think is the word that I’ve heard.

Gomez: Yeah. Yes.

Morgan: Yes.

Gomez: We did acquire some supplies. And thank God for the cafeteria because there would’ve been several hours there we wouldn’t have had nothing.

Morgan: How long were you in the shelter?

Gomez: I was in the shelter a week. No, no I’m sorry.

Morgan: Beginning—

Gomez: Let’s see, Sunday—no I was in there, Sunday through the following Monday.

Morgan: So eight days.

Gomez: Eight days, yes.

Morgan: And but that was almost a thousand, over a thousand people.
Gomez: Correct. It got to a point where we didn’t have the resources with the small crew we had to, unfortunately this just doesn’t sound all that good, to actually provide a lot of assistance to the general population. We focused mainly on the people with special needs.

Morgan: Since they were out of the elements and they were safe.

Gomez: Correct. Correct.

Morgan: So during that week, tell me about how you managed that many people.

Gomez: Just like I said, we kind of let the general population kind of fend for themselves. It was amazing that there was no kind of disruption or anything like that because it could’ve, they could’ve had a little coup there because we only had like three Biloxi police officers and there’s no way that they could’ve managed all those people if something were to arose. But I mean there was a, it was interesting and calm, so.

Morgan: While you were there, were you getting any of the news from like the New Orleans Superdome or anything good?

Gomez: Yeah, it was good, but I guess you’d say no news is good news, but it was, we weren’t getting anything. And then communication, we had none. That radio right there is EDAX, the local law enforcement and public service radio is the only mode of communication we had. We got a group from North Mississippi came in and they set up a ham radio station so we got some more communication that way.

Morgan: So the spirit was, of the people who were there, good?

Gomez: It was mixed. You had some people that you know really don’t know what was going on, just by nature of their illness or what have you. But the one thing with this storm, it didn’t discriminate. It hit everybody all across the classes and that was the one thing that was kind of a, I don’t know what you’d call it, for the upper, you know the middle- to upper-class individuals who’ve now lost everything. And they’re laying next to someone that they would probably consider lower class or probably wouldn’t even associate with, so it was kind of interesting from that standpoint.

Morgan: Did they get along and work together?

Gomez: For the most part they did. There was a couple that didn’t really want to associate with anyone. I guess they felt they may’ve been a little bit too good to be interacting with them, but for the most part everybody got along well.

Morgan: And where does your family live?
Gomez: My family, well, we live in Waveland and I sent my family to Pensacola. It’s kind of weird to evacuate to Pensacola for a hurricane. My mom and dad lived in Louisiana along with my brother and grandparents.

Morgan: Where in Louisiana were they?

Gomez: St. Bernard.

Morgan: OK. So everyone, your parents and your wife and children?

Gomez: No, no. My mom—my dad’s a deputy for St. Bernard and he’s a watch commander in a school. He was at work the whole time. They’ve always ridden out storms there and at the houses they lived in and it’s never done this. So they—our neighbor came back in, who’s a fireman with a boat, and got them out. My grandmother was first sent to the airport and then they managed to get to some friends in Lafayette, so that’s where they are.

Morgan: And your wife and children?

Gomez: Yes, are in Pensacola still.

Morgan: OK, how many children do you have?

Gomez: I have two.

Morgan: You got the picture? Oh and they’re babies. How old?

Gomez: But yeah, and my mom and brother’s got a place in Baton Rouge.

Morgan: OK. Were you able to communicate with your wife at all during that week?

Gomez: Right, I guess last time I spoke with her was early Monday morning and then I think the next time we spoke was Thursday or Friday.

Morgan: And your house is in Waveland?

Gomez: Was in Waveland.

Morgan: Was in Waveland. Is anything left?

Gomez: No, we have a slab.

Morgan: And when was your first opportunity to even think about your own personal property during that wait?
**Gomez:** Well I mean I thought about it. And then we finally had crews that went over there and I had asked them to take a look.

**Morgan:** And they brought the news back to you. And after getting that news, did you have to just turn around and continue with your job—

**Gomez:** Oh yeah.

**Morgan:** —moving people?

**Gomez:** Yeah, I mean just because it’s gone, I mean it’s gone. My family is safe. And you know I had to keep on keeping on with the shelter because those people were depending on us.

**Morgan:** So where are you living now? (laughter) Are we sitting here in your house or are we now at your office?

**Gomez:** At first, the first weeks after that, yes, this is, this was at home. So I had a cot in here and this is where I was living. I’m staying with a coworker up further in the county, so.

**Morgan:** So now post storm, you were in the shelter for eight days.

**Gomez:** Mm-hm.

**Morgan:** And at some point you were able to get people back into their facilities or were they sent north somewhere? What happened?

**Gomez:** They were sent all over. We Medivacked several of the people that needed acute care, that needed to be in a hospital. So we Medivacked those out as soon as we started getting military resources in which I want to say was probably Wednesday or Thursday. So we were actually running like a little MASH [Mobile Army Surgical Hospital], a little hospital there where we would camp because at that time we got positioned and we were just bandaging people as best we could. Then we were able to get those Medivacked out and as the week progressed we had different groups come in like a group from Mobile came in with a bus and they bussed them to places in Mobile. And one came in and bussed some to Georgia somewhere.

**Morgan:** A new normal is sort of the phrase everyone is using.

**Gomez:** All these different—

**Morgan:** Are you sick of it yet?

**Gomez:** You know, it’s like normalcy is a word I’m growing to not like, a new normal or—
Morgan: Let’s just say the schedule.

Gomez: Yes. Yeah.

Morgan: Today’s marching orders and today’s schedule.

Gomez: Yes, exactly.

Morgan: So on a day to day basis what is it like here at AMR?

Gomez: Well if you could have seen what that looked out there the weeks immediately after the storm, it was totally different. There was no sense of what it was.

Morgan: And we’re in an industrial park just south of I-10 in Gulfport.

Gomez: Correct.

Morgan: OK. Give me a little description of what it looked like out there.

Gomez: We had tents. You still see them. You might’ve seen them when you came in. We had tents all over. I wasn’t here when the first crew started coming in to relieve crews but I seen pictures where they were sleeping out here in sleeping bags or quilts or whatever they had in the parking lot. We have an influx of moored ambulances here so you could see that the lots full with all the additional ambulances. They were cooking in a little bitty kitchen we had, but as the masses grew we had to get a mobile kitchen so that’s where they’re serving food out there and they’re eating.

Morgan: Were these AMR relief crews or are these volunteer crews or military crews?

Gomez: The crews that we had here were AMR. The state EMS [Emergency Medical Services] assets were all tied up. Everybody was taxed because it tore, I mean the problems went up into, all the way up into the state so they weren’t able to lend us assistance like they did during Ivan. So we got crews from AMR from all over the country, as far away as Washington State.

Morgan: And now your focus or today’s focus for you is what?

Gomez: I’ve been reassigned. I really don’t have the same duties that I had pre-storm. Steve Delahousey, who’s the vice president for this division as well as, he’s the medical coordinator for the county of Harrison, has tasked me with—what did he call me? I’ve got to look. I just got this task early this week.

Morgan: Your new title?
**Gomez:** It’s Disaster Transition Coordinator. So that’s what I’m doing now.

**Morgan:** So you’ll be making some plans?

**Gomez:** Yes. I’ll be helping transition these mobile clinics, get the patients back in mainstream healthcare, back into the hospitals where they usually are.

**Morgan:** How about the AMR crew and staff? That was a problem with a lot of people, just not even knowing where their own staff was. Did y’all have those problems also?

**Gomez:** Yes, and I only speak from here and what went on afterwards because we didn’t know. Being in a shelter we knew nothing. I know that at first there were concerns because they couldn’t locate some crews. Joel [Ellzie] was one of them, as a matter of fact. So you know, I really didn’t hear about that until after they were found, thank God. So I really didn’t hear anything.

**Morgan:** Has everybody been accounted for as far as staff?

**Gomez:** Yes, everyone has been accounted for.

**Morgan:** Great. Have you even had any time to think—were you raised on the Coast?

**Gomez:** I was from in St. Bernard, Louisiana; that’s where I grew up. And we moved over here I guess about eight years ago.

**Morgan:** Have you even had any time to think about your house and rebuilding yet?

**Gomez:** No, we’ve talked about it. It’s in a great piece of property. And we live a few hundred feet from the beach in Waveland. And on one of the days I went out there, I was looking, I was standing on the slab and everything had been blown in. I’ve got a great view of the beach now, so it’s like if my neighbors—I had two houses between me and the beach—if they ever decide not to rebuild, heck man.

**Morgan:** Then your property value goes through the roof at that point.

**Gomez:** Exactly. But no, I got my son in—we have our son in school in Pensacola so we don’t want to pull him out, so we’re going to stay there through the school year. And I guess as the school year winds down then we’ll make some more decisions there. I don’t know if you’re going to actually be able to rebuild any time soon where we are. I mean because the infrastructure is totally wiped out. Now they’re not even allowing people to put their FEMA trailers, as they say, on any of that property.

**Morgan:** And are they giving you any timelines yet?
Gomez: Mm-mm, its all speculation so we really don’t know.

Morgan: So is there any question in your mind about staying on the Coast or are you thinking about mountain living somewhere?

Gomez: You know, we just love it over here, so, I mean I think maybe we’ll come back. I don’t know when though.

Morgan: How are you visiting with your wife? How are y’all arranging that?

Gomez: Right now I’m going over there on the weekends. Every now and then I’ll have a long weekend to stay with them.

Morgan: But mostly you’re here?

Gomez: Yes.

Morgan: Tell me about operations. You told me about your job, but in general here, how are things settling back in?

Gomez: They’re trying to get back into normal but it’s still different. We have a lot of out-of-town people that are still staying here. In this room as you go out you can take a look, there’s sixty or so additional people who were pretty much living here during their ten-day tour through trying to get back to normal as best but you know that’s relative right now, so.

Morgan: If you, in asking—what’s the one main problem, and so in no particular order, give me the top three problems. Did your, did this building have damage to it?

Gomez: Yeah, I think it was pretty much just water got underneath but it (inaudible) and one of the bays, it blew the bay doors out in the mechanic shop, but it’s, amazingly, it survived. Thank God because they had a bunch of people in here.

Morgan: So the top three big challenges for AMR, if you could list them for me what would they be?

Gomez: I think it’s to continue to provide for the people on the Coast. The big thing is the logistics and it comes from the bridges being out. Now you got Popps Ferry which is a pretty busy north/south corridor and you have the bridge out in, the Ocean Springs Bridge as well as the Bay Bridge. So those three bridges being out, it’s almost—that’s our top three problems right now. And with those being out you can’t, you don’t have ready access plus you have the traffic and I’m not sure if you seen that when you came in.
Morgan: I did see the traffic backed up for the one remaining bridge. It’s several miles of waiting traffic.

Gomez: Exactly. It turns into a parking lot.

Morgan: And this is a Thursday morning at almost ten o’clock and it still looks like that.


Morgan: Are you getting calls, uh, well I guess it’s what you just described, from people who are camping and staying in places that you almost can’t even get to?

Gomez: Mm-hm, we do. We pretty much have access to everything but it’s a matter of getting there, the route to get there, and then get them to a hospital, that’s why we have the helicopter. We got, that was an agreement between us and the agencies that be(?) and that has been working out really well.

(end of interview)