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AN ORAL HISTORY

with

MARTHA WILLIAMS

This is an interview for the Mississippi Oral History Program of The University of Southern Mississippi. The interview is with Martha Williams and is taking place on June 22, 2007. The interviewer is Rachel Swaykos.

Williams: This is Martha Williams. I’m in Gulfport, Mississippi, serving with the North Carolina Baptist Men. This is Friday, June 22, 2007.

Swaykos: Great. And if we could, just start off where you’re from.

Williams: My husband and I are from Spruce Pine, North Carolina, which is in the western part of the state.

Swaykos: OK. And what’s your husband’s name?

Williams: Eddie.

Swaykos: And who’s down here with him as well?

Williams: Actually, he is the main, he is the coordinator. And I help with the books and keeping up with all the financial work and everything.

Swaykos: OK. So how did y’all end up here from North Carolina?

Williams: Well, we had served with North Carolina Baptist Men for probably ten, twelve years on foreign mission trips and short-terms mission trips.

Swaykos: OK. And how did you guys end up coming down to [Hurricane] Katrina?

Williams: Well, my husband Eddie is generally a first responder with North Carolina Baptist Men in the event of a disaster. So he came down on September 5, and I had already planned to go on a mission trip, not to Gulfport, but to Sri Lanka in October. So I had those two weeks set aside, and when the disaster occurred down here, we decided to come here because he had already gone to Sri Lanka. So we decided the need was greater here.

Swaykos: I see. So what was it like for you in the beginning, when you were in North Carolina, and you were seeing all the pictures of what had happened?
Williams: Well, it was just so overwhelming to see all these people on the tops of the roof of their homes, and they had no food, they had no water, and actually we were the first volunteer team that came into Gulfport to see, and we set up at a church on Pass Road and fed—

Swaykos: How did you guys choose to come to Gulfport and not go to maybe New Orleans or go further east or west?

Williams: We had contact from the Mississippi Baptist State Convention to our North Carolina Headquarters in Cary, and we were invited by those folks to come, and Chuck Register, pastor of Gulfport First Baptist. He played a very important role in getting us to Gulfport.

Swaykos: And what did everyone bring with them when they got here on the fifth?

Williams: The North Carolina Baptist Men brought in a feeding unit, which is capable of putting out three thousand to five thousand meals per day.

Swaykos: Oh, my gosh.

Williams: We prepared three meals a day, fed the public, worked with the Red Cross sending meals out on (inaudible) to the community, and we had a waiting line out in the parking lot that went way, way, way, probably, I don’t know how many yards down there to the parking lot, hundreds of people.

Swaykos: Wow.

Williams: They would stand in line for hours for food.

Swaykos: So you were able to feed five thousand people a day?

Williams: In the beginning at least that many, and then it probably averaged around three thousand.

Swaykos: Where were you getting food from?

Williams: The American Red Cross partners with North Carolina Baptist Men in the event of a disaster. North Carolina Baptist Men is the third largest disaster team that was formed. American Red Cross contacts our headquarters, and they provide the food, usually for the first ninety days, and we provide the labor for cooking it.

Swaykos: OK. So how many people came down the first time, the labor?

Williams: On our feeding teams, in the event of a disaster that large, we usually would have anywhere in the range of fourteen to twenty people.
Swaykos: Wow, OK.

Williams: And then, of course, we have the recovery teams going out and putting blue tarps on homes, and gutting out homes that we start immediately.

Swaykos: You start immediately doing that?

Williams: Um-hm.

Swaykos: OK. So you had a feeding team here doing three thousand to five thousand meals a day. Are these hot meals?

Williams: Hot meals, yes.

Swaykos: Breakfast, lunch, and dinner was all hot.

Williams: Yes. They may prepare some sandwiches at the lunch time, but generally in the beginning when the folks have memories of getting food, it’s a hot meal.

Swaykos: Right. What day did you come down here?

Williams: My husband on September the fifth, and then I came—we came separate, a long term on October 28 of 2005.

Swaykos: OK. So at that time you were still feeding that volume?

Williams: Probably about three thousand.

Swaykos: Wow. What was that like for you to feed that line of people in their own country? You had been to so many other countries. What was it like to see it here?

Williams: Well, it was very humbling, and it was heartbreaking to realize that in that short period of time that that many people could be living without food, without clothing, without their vehicles. Their homes, their schools, their churches, everything was destroyed.

Swaykos: Did you talk with any of them while you were out there?

Williams: Yes. My husband is generally very busy seeing that the food has been ordered and maybe it’s here, and that everything’s running on schedule, and that the recovery teams have proper safety gear, and that they’re going to—we have an application process where we have volunteers that come in and take applications. It’s a huge undertaking, but he makes sure that all the other forms (inaudible). Of course, I help in that, also, but I try to listen to their story and just be there for them. A lot of times that’s more important than the food.
Swaykos: Yeah, yeah. Do you have any stories that stick out, too, that you remember from those first couple of days?

Williams: Well, we had so many elderly people that came in, and one lady in particular, she came with her daughter, and they were literally living in their car, and we were able to at least get a blue tarp on their home till they could have, try to get it dry and then go back and tear it out, sanitize it, and rebuild that home for them eventually.

Swaykos: Right. Well, good. When did your food service taper down? You’re not feeding that many now.

Williams: Well, I would say we fed at least that many through January of 2006. And then we were in the process of obtaining this facility and getting out of the church parking lot so we could start our rebuilding effort. And we built a state-of-the-art kitchen here at the Armory, but we’re not feeding the public. We stopped feeding the public, so when that ended and the Red Cross pulled out, which was December of 2005 they pulled out. And of course our meals in numbers decreased, but we were still feeding a very large number of volunteers. And if we had folks from the community that came by for food, we fed them, but we had to stop at some point and time because some sense of normalcy had come back into their lives where they could prepare their meals.

Swaykos: When stores were reopening and that kind of thing?

Williams: Right. And there were several concessions set up specifically for that, so we went into our rebuild program.

Swaykos: OK. So what’s the rebuild program? Can you tell me about what you guys do? What all does that entail?

Williams: Well, we have to be invited to stay for rebuild just as we were for the initial disaster. So we worked very closely with Harrison County, Mayor Brent Warr, and the City of Gulfport.

Swaykos: Right.

Williams: We had to go before the City council to get approval to obtain this facility and work out of this facility.

Swaykos: And right now we’re in the old Armory.

Williams: Mississippi National Guard Armory. And when we came here this building had been empty for quite a while. I think they told us four years. So we had to renovate all three of these buildings.
Swaykos: How was this building affected by the storm?

Williams: Minor. They had some water damage, but Mayor Brent Warr said he felt like God put a checkmark on this facility for North Carolina Baptist Men to use, so it was a miracle.

Swaykos: Good, good. And how were you living before that? Where were you and Eddie living?

Williams: Eddie and I have been in a camper. We were in the church parking lot prior to coming over here. Now we’re in the Armory parking lot in another camper.

Swaykos: How is that?

Williams: Well, we’ve been very blessed in that we have very, very long, busy days so we don’t spend a lot of time in that camper other than just sleeping and showering and eating a few meals. And it’s roomy. It’s OK for two people.

Swaykos: Good, good. But you guys got the permission to have the facility. How long did the renovations take?

Williams: We started immediately after obtaining approval for the building, and it was April 1, [2006], when we were still working out of the church parking lot, and driving—we got this building, our administrative building, April 1, so we were working in other places for about three months. So April 1 we were over here.

Swaykos: Of 2006?

Williams: Yeah.

Swaykos: OK. And at that point you started some rebuilding.

Williams: Well, we were doing rebuilding before then. We were renovating these three buildings, finishing up our recovery application, and also we started taking rebuild applications on January 1, [2006]. So we were doing all of that. And our rebuild application, of course, was a completely different process from the recovery because we had to know more—we had to have proof; the homeowner had to have their building permits, and you know (inaudible) working at the Coast office, and it was changing literally weekly.

Swaykos: Right.

Williams: What was good last week wasn’t good this week, so that was very stressful in trying in the beginning for the homeowners and the volunteers that were trying to help, but there had never been a disaster like Katrina.
Swaykos: Right.

Williams: So we were all just trying to work together. This is the first time that government and faith-based organizations (inaudible) city, municipality, and faith-based organizations work very closely together, and it was very positive for us as well as them. It’s really been a good experience working with the City government.

Swaykos: Good. They really welcomed you here.

Williams: Oh, yes.

Swaykos: How about all the people of the community, have they welcomed y’all here?

Williams: The people in Gulfport, Mississippi, and Harrison County are some of the sweetest people on the face of this planet. We have totally enjoyed loving on them and trying to help in our small way. There was over twenty-nine thousand homes destroyed and that many more that were damaged.

Swaykos: Right. So we were talking about how many people were affected, and you were saying twenty-nine [thousand] houses were destroyed, twenty-nine thousand.

Williams: Yes. In Harrison County alone, twenty-nine thousand, nine hundred seventy homes were destroyed and forty-seven thousand, four hundred twenty damaged.

Swaykos: Wow.

Williams: And North Carolina volunteers, over sixteen thousand have served in Harrison County alone. We’ve had over a hundred twenty thousand Southern Baptists that’s responded that have stayed with us.

Swaykos: Wow.

Williams: But just working in Harrison County.

Swaykos: Right.

Williams: We’ve had every faith-based organization, which has been a very positive experience. We’ve worked with the local Catholic Disaster Recovery, and we’ve just worked with every faith-based group, and it’s been very positive.

Swaykos: Do you think that’s really brought everyone together, working together, no matter who they are, no matter race, religion, age, that kind of thing?
**Williams:** Absolutely. We were all working together toward one goal, and that was to get people back in their homes as quickly and as efficiently as possible. And at the same time we were showing them the love of Christ, which is what we are all about.

**Swaykos:** Right.

**Williams:** We meet a physical need, and at the same time we’re meeting a spiritual need.

**Swaykos:** Great. Well, how did you know, with that many homes damaged, how did you know where to start and the scope of what you-all could provide?

**Williams:** Well, we just, we go into an area, and North Carolina Baptist Men is very organized, so we go into an area with applications in hand. And actually we have an office that is portable, in the beginning, and so the people know that when they come to get their meal, then they know that they can put in an application for their home.

**Swaykos:** OK. And what’s included on their application? What information do you need from them?

**Williams:** Basically, we get their name, address, what they are needing. This is in the very beginning. This is their recovery application. If it’s a tree on their home, or you know, whatever they needed, just basic, very basic information on that. Not a lot of red tape or bureaucracy because we’re there to meet that immediate need. When we go into the rebuild program, however, we get more information if the homeowner got monies from FEMA [Federal Emergency Management Agency] and the insurance. We want them to be a part of rebuilding their home and use that money.

**Swaykos:** I see.

**Williams:** We prioritize elderly, handicapped and those who got no insurance or no FEMA money; we prioritize that way.

**Swaykos:** Are big families a priority for you, people with children?

**Williams:** Yes.

**Swaykos:** OK. So you pull them in. Who sorts through them to decide who?

**Williams:** Well, in the beginning, it’s first come, first served.

**Swaykos:** Right, OK.

**Williams:** When we start to rebuild, Eddie and myself, we take the applications and we review them, and then we send an assessor out, which is like a caseworker.
Swaykos: Right.

Williams: They go out and measure, and look at the properties and talk to the homeowner, and bring back very valuable information for us. We do not get into a lot of the financial bureaucracy of it because we are here to serve them.

Swaykos: Right.

Williams: We can serve them where other organizations are required to go through a lot of bureaucracy, but we do make sure that we are working with the homeowner. We’ll ask for proof of ownership. We do not do rental properties, just individual homes. We have not done any commercial property. We have helped with Pass Christian School getting their school back up.

Swaykos: Right.

Williams: Pass Road Elementary School, we furnished thirty-thousand-dollars-worth worth of playground equipment for them. We have helped with Gulfport First Baptist Church; [they] have been our church while we’ve been here. Chuck Register’s been their pastor while we’ve been here. And so we have helped with monies toward the rebuild of their church. Their church was completely destroyed. But our basic goal is to get as many individuals back into their homes as possible, then local Baptist Associations, Gulf Coast Baptist Association works with churches, partnering with churches to rebuild churches. And of course, commercial properties have to have the structural engineer approval before, so it’s much longer, and for our short-term we don’t get involved in that, and wouldn’t anyway.

Swaykos: Right, right. So how many houses have you rebuilt?

Williams: To date we’ve rebuilt five hundred forty-eight.

Swaykos: Oh, my gosh.

Williams: And of those homes we have eight from the ground up that are completed, and people are in their home. We have ten new homes under construction from the ground up.

Swaykos: So you’re helping those people who were left with just their slab?

Williams: Right.

Swaykos: Not many other organizations are doing that. How have you been able to help those people whereas others are just fixing problems? How are you building from the bottom up?
Williams: Well, God has blessed us in that the folks in North Carolina have been very generous with their donations.

Swaykos: I see.

Williams: In the beginning we had a set amount that we had budgeted for five hundred homes. We were going to give four thousand dollars for five hundred homes, and we were able to go beyond that, and we finished the—we were partnered for two years from Harrison County to rebuild five hundred homes, and we’ve well exceeded that. And our goal is now to complete seven hundred. In the beginning we were not going to be able to build anything from the ground up because of that budgeted four thousand, but for the generous donations and working with the Catholic—

Swaykos: Catholic Charities?

Williams: Catholic Charities, they actually have a long-term disaster relief, and so they have helped, not a lot with money, but they have helped some, which enabled us to help people that we wouldn’t have helped otherwise. Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, Samaritan’s Purse, along with the generous donations of the folks in North Carolina we have been able to exceed our goal.

Swaykos: Great. That’s wonderful. How long are y’all going to be here?

Williams: We will be here until December 31, this year [2007]. Unless, you know, it’s extended. But right now that is their commitment fulfillment would be December 31.

Swaykos: So now you’ve built almost five hundred fifty houses. Where are they all located?

Williams: They’re all over Harrison County. We have homes, Biloxi, Gulfport, Long Beach, Pass Christian.

Swaykos: Wow, great. What are the people having to say to you? Have you had conversations with these people that you’re putting them back in their homes?

Williams: Not only have we had conversations, but they have become our family while we’ve been here. We’ve been invited into their homes for meals. After we complete their home, they come back to visit with us. One man, in particular I’m thinking about, he said to us, “I would have never had a home if you hadn’t come and helped me.” And he has such a humble spirit, and the volunteers that go to these homes, they end up coming back with more than they gave.

Swaykos: Right.
**Williams:** The homeowners are so humble and so thankful. One lady, she just continually wants to do for us because she just, she’s so overwhelmed by the fact that people would drive this far to help her, someone they’ve never met before and take their vacation time and sick leave time, whatever they’ve got; they had used it to come and help.

**Swaykos:** Really?

**Williams:** Use their own money and pay their own way, and then when they get here, they contribute with their monies as well as their labor.

**Swaykos:** Right. So can we talk about the volunteers? What kind of volunteers are you getting?

**Williams:** Well, North Carolina Baptist Men have training sessions in strategic locations across the state, and folks go and get trained in feeding and child care unit, and assessment and administrative. We have several different training sessions in different parts of the state and different regions so they can easily go to those trainings. And from those trainings we have a very large volunteer base, over four thousand.

**Swaykos:** OK. So most of your volunteers are coming from instate?

**Williams:** Yes. They are, but we have had them from every, almost every state in the union.

**Swaykos:** Really.

**Williams:** And Hawaii, even.

**Swaykos:** Really.

**Williams:** They have been here three times, and they’ve been wonderful.

**Swaykos:** Great.

**Williams:** We partnered with helping to build churches in Hawaii, and so they wanted to come and help in our efforts, too.

**Swaykos:** So how many volunteers have you had come through so far?

**Williams:** So far they have had over [a hundred twenty thousand] volunteers that have been with just our organization here at the Armory on Pass Road.

**Swaykos:** Have any of them really stood out to you that you can remember?
Williams: Well, I think—oh, there’s so many that stands out in my mind. The group that came from Hawaii came with such enthusiasm and such appreciation for what the North Carolina Baptist Men had done to help them. And also our volunteers from the eastern part of North Carolina where they had been hit from Hurricane Faye, they appreciate so much what we did for them that a lot of their volunteers came from that part of the state. Basically I guess what stands out in my mind the most is the volunteers who have said to me, “I wanted to give back a little bit of what had been given to me when I had nothing.”

Swaykos: Right, right.

Williams: And as far as any one particular group, we’ve had one group from Asheville-Biltmore Baptist that has come numerous times, well over twenty, and they have been not only a rebuild group, but they have also evangelized. We’ve had four hundred eighteen salvations recorded in the office, four hundred eighteen. Biltmore has a hundred twenty-plus of those.

Swaykos: Really? OK. So we were just talking about the relationship of the volunteers are then having with the homeowners. You were saying y’all went out to dinner last night with some of them.

Williams: Well, we go out to eat with the homeowners. The teams that come down, they invite the homeowners to go out to eat with them, and the homeowner cooks for them while they’re here, and then when they leave and go back to North Carolina or wherever it is—we’ve had volunteers from all over the United States and Alaska; well, Alaska is part of the United States. But when they go back to their homes, they take a part of that homeowner’s Katrina story, and they build a bond with that homeowner, and they continue to communicate with them. And they come back numerous times and work on that same homeowner’s house; they adopt them, and they see their homes through to completion, and that’s really special.

Swaykos: Right. You’ve been down here now, about a year and a half. What changes have you seen in the community just since you’ve been down here? How do you think progress is going and the recovery effort it?

Williams: As far as the rebuilding effort, I think that Gulfport is leaps and bounds ahead of the other, smaller—well, Gulfport’s the second largest city in Mississippi, but Long Beach and Pass Christian is not moving along as strongly as Gulfport. But I have seen a huge difference in the last six months, especially in Pass Christian because the new homes are going up down there, and that’s amazing. And it’s great to see that they are coming back.

Swaykos: Right. Do you go out to the sites often?

Williams: Yes. After the volunteer teams leave, Eddie and myself, and Jerry Holland and his wife, Edith, we go to the homes, and we make sure that things were done.
correctly. And if they weren’t done correctly, we make every effort to get it corrected. We’re constantly, our volunteer teams are here, going to the homeowners and to the job site and checking, and so it’s very closely monitored.

Swaykos: Who is doing the training for the rebuilding and making sure that safety procedures and stuff like that are being followed?

Williams: Well, the training that our Baptist Men get that I was talking about earlier, all of that is gone over with them at the training, and they’re certified, and they have ID badges. And when they get here—but in Katrina, which is the first time that we’ve really worked with all the different organizations that are not—volunteers that are not part of the North Carolina Baptist Men, we have had to set up a little training thing here where we teach them what’s the proper way per the codes department—

Swaykos: Right, right.

Williams: —here in the city to put a roof on and to, and how to do their Sheetrock and their insulation per code, and also the inspection process that takes place. The electrical has to be inspected and everything before the Sheetrock can be put up next (inaudible). So they are given training here, and also before they get here we’ve been able to work with volunteer teams and their crew chief, to get the crew chief that information so it can be covered before they get here, and they can hit the ground running and not waste any of their precious five days.

Swaykos: Right. So that’s all they’re staying is just one week.

Williams: Yeah, for each, yeah. And we have a warehouse here, and we try to have everything that they need on their job site when they arrive.

Swaykos: OK, great. So they can get right started. How much can a crew accomplish in a week?

Williams: It’s amazing what they can do in a week. We have had a house from the ground up, from the foundation up, under roof, in the dry, in a week’s time.

Swaykos: In a week.

Williams: Um-hm.

Swaykos: Really?

Williams: Now the interior takes longer. But to get one of our homes that are three bedroom or two bedroom in the dry, we can do it in a week with a good team, and that’s what they’re doing. And what we try to do is get a very strong crew chief that is a contractor—
Swaykos: I see.

Williams: —and that does know how to do those things.

Swaykos: OK. Let me turn the tape over. (Side 2)—your volunteers affected? They come back here to stay at night. Is that correct?

Williams: Well, we provide three meals a day and—

Swaykos: OK.

Williams: —a bunk for them to sleep in at night. And when they come back at the end of the day they are overflowing with stories, and they are just thrilled to be able to come and help.

Swaykos: Right. I saw your regulations out there says they must be thirteen years old. Do you have a lot of young kids coming?

Williams: We do have youth coming. During their recovery, there was much more for youth to do. They can go in and do the tear-outs and do the sanitation, and they’re very good at that, and yard cleanup. But now that we’ve got into a rebuild program, we really talked a lot about changing the age limit to eighteen. But we have a one-to-three ratio, and we only have large numbers of youth during June and July. Most of the time it’s just our normal Baptist Men volunteers and the older volunteers from different states. But we allow the youth the opportunity to come and to learn and to be part of the rebuild effort, and they bring energy. The homeowners love having the youth, and we do monitor very closely their safety and what they do because obviously they’re not skilled.

Swaykos: Right, right. Are you finding it harder to get volunteers now, the further and further away from the storm we are?

Williams: The first year we averaged three hundred volunteers a day. This past year we’ve averaged around two hundred. And with the upcoming storm season, depending on where we will be pulled, not our location here, of course we’ll stay here, but other volunteers from North Carolina may be pulled to different states for different disasters. So we always have a decrease during storm season. Hopefully we will maintain the two-hundred average; we’re praying for that.

Swaykos: Right, right. The recruiting is through the trainings and everything. How are you getting all your funding?

Williams: It’s by donation.

Swaykos: Really?
Williams: It’s—

Swaykos: Who’s asking for the donations?

Williams: OK. Once a year the North Carolina Baptist Men has a huge fund drive in the month of November where they send out donation cards and information to the local churches all over the State of North Carolina, and it’s called the North Carolina Missions Offering. And they contribute to that. And of course when you have a particular storm and one such as Katrina that has such huge devastation, then there’s additional donations that are made to cover that.

Swaykos: Has the funding decreased as well as the volunteers as time goes on?

Williams: Of course.

Swaykos: OK. Do you think that’s going to impact you guys getting to your seven hundred [houses rebuilt]?

Williams: No. We will complete our commitment.

Swaykos: OK, great. Can you tell me about your other services? You said you have child care.

Williams: Yes. We do have a child care unit, and that is used in the initial recovery process where we’re putting on the blue tarps and things like feeding thousands food. Parents have so many things that they have to deal with; they have to go fill out papers and stand in line and work with FEMA, so the child care unit is basically a little day care, and the child care unit served four hundred eighty children.

Swaykos: Wow. And they were watching them. How long did y’all run that?

Williams: We ran that through December of [20]05. We also provide for our volunteers; we have laundry rooms that we pull on site.

Swaykos: Oh, wonderful.

Williams: So we take care of, at the recovery, during that period of time the work is so nasty.

Swaykos: Right.

Williams: So we try to provide them with clean clothing. We also have showers, shower trailers that they get a clean shower, hopefully, every day, takes one every day.

Swaykos: Right. (laughter) Were you out there gutting any of the houses?
Williams: No. But I have done that in the past. This time Eddie and I were coordinating the entire operation. So we didn’t get to go out and do anything, but we have done it in past disasters.

Swaykos: Do you know if they were able to salvage anything for any of the homeowners, or were most of the houses you worked on complete losses?

Williams: We were able to salvage. That’s why it’s so critical to get those blue tarps on the roof, so that did save the homeowners a lot. And in the event that we just could not salvage anything, we would try to salvage things like their bathroom fixtures, their tubs, their commodes, their sinks.

Swaykos: Right.

Williams: Things that were—and their appliances, a lot of times, were salvageable.

Swaykos: OK. What pride does it give you to drive by a house that you know that y’all have helped rebuild?

Williams: Well, the only pride that we have is in the fact that we serve a great God to have brought so many people. It’s more, the word would be more humbling than prideful when we go by and see, and I’m just thinking of a new house that I passed this morning, and I saw the lady out on the porch watering her flowers, and I just had to stop and say, “Thank you Lord that we were blessed to be able to serve in this capacity.”

Swaykos: Right. Do any homeowners stand out in your mind, their stories and what y’all were able to do for them?

Williams: Well, the ones that stand out in my mind are the elderly, and I know that families with young children, that they need a home, and we have helped so many of them, probably more than we have the elderly, but the elderly folks are so depressed and feel like they have absolutely no hope.

Swaykos: Right.

Williams: And most of them are living alone as an elderly couple, and that group of people are the ones that really broke my heart because they’ve worked so hard for so many years, and a lot of them had to actually take out a loan to be able to rebuild back. And I had one man look at me and say, “Seventy-seven years old, and everything I had was paid for, and I was just spending my days fishing on the pier and enjoying life, and had just gotten to the point where I could do that.” And he said, “I had absolutely no hope until I heard that y’all were (inaudible).” And he said, “Then I knew that”—see, the labor is two-thirds of the cost.

Swaykos: Right.
Williams: And if we can provide labor and some materials for them, then they have hope, and that’s what we bring them; we bring hope. We had one young man come in; he’s probably in his thirties, and he came in, and we had pretty much closed the application process, and he came in. He wanted to try; he had tried everywhere to get someone to help him.

Swaykos: Right.

Williams: And he just—it just ripped our heart. Eddie said, “I’m going to try to find a way to help this young man because he had worked so hard.” He had taken his FEMA money, and he had already got the slab poured for his home. He spent all he had, but he still just had a slab.

Swaykos: Right.

Williams: And so we started working for him and worked with other organizations and were able to get enough money, and we’ve got his house in the dry.

Swaykos: Really.

Williams: And he is so excited. And of course he has a seven-year-old son, and that gives a father a great sense of security to be able to put their children back in their home.

Swaykos: Right, right, great. Unfortunately we can’t help everybody. How many people have you had to turn away?

Williams: Well, that’s the hardest part of this job. I would love to tell—and I say this time and time again when I tell people that we have closed the application process: “We would love to be able to help everyone.” But the worst thing we can do is give people an unrealistic expectation of what we can do, so we have continued putting names on the waiting list. So just in the event that we do have a large number of volunteers, and if we can do a thousand homes, that’s what we’re going to do.

Swaykos: Right, good.

Williams: But we want to complete our commitment.

Swaykos: Right, right. What has been the most enjoyable for you and Eddie here?

Williams: The most enjoyable thing for Eddie and I has been loving on the people of Harrison County, just loving on them, whether it has been giving them a hug, giving them a smile, or putting them in a new home, or rebuilding a damaged home, that it has been a pure joy to just love on them.
Swaykos: Right. Are you finding that they all appreciate the small things as much as the brand-new house? Do they seem that they appreciate a hug and a smile just as much?

Williams: Absolutely, and in some cases I have seen them working on the new house. When I have—God has blessed me with a double, whopping dose of compassion. (laughter) So I can almost sense when they want the hammers to stop, and they really do. They want to just talk. So I have been blessed in that I could go and just talk with them while the workers kept going. (laughter, inaudible)

Swaykos: (Inaudible)

Williams: (Inaudible).

Swaykos: How are they saying, “Thank you” to you?

Williams: Well, we’ve heard over and over, “We could’ve never done this without you.”

Swaykos: Yeah.

Williams: “There is no way we thought the faith-based organizations at the Gulf Coast would’ve even began to recover and by you folks coming in.” Actually, our grandson’s down here just during this week, and we took him and our son and daughter-in-law to Ship Island yesterday. And on the ferry boat over, there was a third-grade class that was on the boat. And I’ve worn my volunteer clothing until a lot of times I don’t realize I’ve got it on. (laughter) But this little girl said to me, she said, “Oh, you’re from North Carolina.” And I said, “Yes, I am.” And she said, “You folks came and helped get all the bad stuff out of our home till we could help our self.” And she said, “And then you had a vacation bible school that came to our church when we didn’t have materials and things that we’d had in the past.” We partnered with First Baptist Gulfport to do an outreach ministry in the summer from April through August [2006] with backyard Bible classes and backyard Bible schools, and going and visiting the nursing homes, and that’s one thing they actually do, the coordination for us, but we provided them with four sleeper-trailers to sleep the volunteers for that ministry. So there’s another arm of our organization. And the reason we did that, we got so many calls, and that’s where the youth are utilized a lot when we can’t use them on the construction; we can use them there.

Swaykos: OK. So I have to ask, North Carolina Baptist Men? You have a lot of women here.

Williams: We do have a lot of men and a lot of women, and you know the old saying, “Behind every good man there’s a woman.” So it is the North Carolina Baptist Men, but they are very respectful and thankful for the women that serve besides them.
Swaykos: Good. What do you think the ratio is to men and women. Do you know?

Williams: Well, we have, as far as the coordinators that are here for the long-term, we have husband-and-wife teams. We have Eddie and myself; Gary and Nita Collin(?) Curtis and Joyce Thrift (?), Barbara and Elmo Farlow(?), and Cybil and Don Freeman(?). And we have a couple that works in the warehouse. We have a couple that takes care of our housing. We have a couple that does our job requests, and then we have a couple that just kind of roves between all of those jobs. And then Eddie and I just oversee the whole thing. So I’ve seen more and more couples than I have ever noticed in the past. Of course I’ve never been anywhere for a two-year commitment, but I see a lot of couples going together. A lot of retired people that are totally enjoying this, but instead of going and traveling and doing the things that they could obviously do, they say, “We don’t enjoy it any more. We want to be serving. We want to be helping others.”

Swaykos: You and Eddie weren’t retired. Were you?

Williams: No. We were not retired.

Swaykos: How did you give it all up?

Williams: Well, I did a lot of prayer, and I didn’t have a very long time to get prepared. I had worked for a CPA [Certified Public Accounting] firm, and had a very good job, and loved it, and had a wonderful boss. And had no intention of, hadn’t even thought of leaving until retirement. And Eddie worked as an outreach ministry director, which was the (inaudible) mission team. So God had well prepared us for where he was sending us, but to answer your question as to how we gave it all up, it was through prayer. And finally I just had to say, “Lord, you have to give me something from your word that will let me know beyond a shadow of a doubt that we are to go.” And Isaiah 55 is what he gave me. And it very plainly says, “My thoughts are not your thoughts, my ways are not your ways; they’re so much higher than yours, but if you will go, I will give you peace, the leaves on the trees will clap the hands; (inaudible) hills will sing, and you will go forth with my hand of blessing upon you.” So I—that was paraphrasing. I didn’t quote the scripture, but when I read that, I said, “OK. I’m ready to go.” But in the midst of all of this we had a personal tragedy that was going on in our family. Our granddaughter had been diagnosed with Fanconi anemia in August of 2004. She had a transplant in February of 2005, and the bone marrow transplant was successful, and she was able—they stayed in Minnesota from January till June for that transplant. And of course we went through the donor process of not finding a donor, and no one was compatible; her little brother wasn’t a compatible donor. So they did a cord blood transplant. And when it was time to come, I felt like I was abandoning my son and his family at a time when they really needed parents to be there for them. So we prayed together as a family, and it was extremely hard; that’s harder than the job and the retirement, but my granddaughter, her name is Sydney(?); she said, “Granny, go. They don’t have a home.” And so they were very, very supportive; we couldn’t have done it without their support. We have a
daughter, and she and her husband have two little girls, and they live right behind us, so it was very hard for them to not see us every day. And of course my son had a son and a daughter. And everything went along pretty well, and we got to go back home, and we had three wonderful vacations with them. We went to the beach with them and got away from everything. But Sydney got sick in November of 2006. (brief interruption)

**Swaykos:** Sydney got sick in November.

**Williams:** Yes. And we went back to North Carolina, and she was in ICU [Intensive Care Unit]. We never really found out exactly what happened, but her immune system was very low because of the chemo[therapy] that she taken with the transplant, so we knew that she’d be very fragile for that next year, and she was still taking her immunization shots. I don’t know if you know a lot about chemotherapy, but when you have it, it brings you down to rock bottom, and so you have to build everything back up. So she got sick, and we went back, and they told us it was just a bump in the road. And she was a very, very sick little girl, but they felt that they could just treat her for the infection. Her lungs, she was not breathing well, but we lost her on Thanksgiving Day.

**Swaykos:** Sorry.

**Williams:** And she was nine.

**Swaykos:** I’m sorry about that.

**Williams:** But that was the hardest thing, and of course I went through a period of—had I known, I would never have come.

**Swaykos:** Right.

**Williams:** And that’s why God’s plan is so perfect.

**Swaykos:** And she told you. How wonderful is that a nine-year-old can be so selfless?

**Williams:** She wanted us to come, and she wanted to be a part of it; just as soon as she got well enough and got her immune system built up, she was coming. She and the oldest granddaughter were going to come spend a couple of weeks with us, and we were going to take them with us because Sydney loved missions and so did Jessica, and their parents are involved in missions, and their whole family has been that way. And I have a son and daughter-in-law, and Sydney’s little brother is here this week.

**Swaykos:** Oh, good.

**Williams:** So.
Swaykos: That must be so hard. But what does that say to you about the American people when so many are going through a hard time that they can come down here and help someone who is going through an even harder time? I think her telling you to come down is just the most overriding of this whole thing. She knew, and she was willing to give it up.

Williams: Um-hm.

Swaykos: What does that say about the American people wanting to help each other out?

Williams: Well, I think that, again, we can go back to the scriptures. It says, “Greater love has no man than to lay down his own life for his brothers.” And we really laid down our lives to come and help. But two years out of our life was just a blip compared to what the people on the Gulf Coast is going to be enduring for years to come, so coming and helping didn’t seem that large of a sacrifice to us, but leaving our family at that particular time was a huge sacrifice, and it still is. You know, I wouldn’t be human if I said that I didn’t miss my friends and my family and my church. That’s just been hard, and I’ve been lonely many, many times, and that’s why it’s so wonderful to serve a living God who flung the universe into existence. And he can still somehow make us feel close even when we’re far away. Thank God for cell phones, and you can call at any time during the day. And our son has come and brought church groups, so he’s been down. This is probably his fourth time down, but the only time that he’s spending with us, but our daughter has come down and stayed with us several weeks, so.

Swaykos: How do you think the storm has affected families down here?

Williams: Oh, I see so much. Even though they’ve made great progress, this year I see more depression.

Swaykos: Do you?

Williams: High crime. The depression, I think, has just become overwhelming because they have got to the point that they’re almost in their home, but something has brought them to a standstill whether it be the code’s office, whether it be money or sickness, and a lot of them have become sick from the stress and just the (inaudible). And last year they were calling Katrina their new normal, but this year, they are wanting to really be back to normal. So depression, I think the families are really suffering more than anyone. I just want to encourage people to please keep coming; please keep caring for these folks because they’ve got a long, long way to go after the volunteers pull out. I’m really worried about that because most volunteer organizations, after two years, they pull out, which is a good thing. Then they start pulling together as a community; the community helps, but I really want them to feel strong and solid before that starts happening.
Swaykos: What does this area need to create a self-sufficiency before everyone leaves?

Williams: Well, I think the governments are working very, very hard to make that happen, and that’s really where it’s going to have to start. The City government is going to have to work with the homeowner and continue to provide them assistance in the areas where they can offer it. And of course the federal government, they pull out after a certain time, and so any help that gets to the homeowner now will have to come from that, through the government.

Swaykos: Right. So lastly, y’all have done so much for this area; you really have, and I know that everybody thanks you in their own way, but what can—is there anything else you can tell us that need to be remembered about the work you’ve done, or what you’ve seen happen in this area because of the storm?

Williams: Well, I think the one thing that stands out the very most in my mind as a result of the storm and our helping have been that we have brought these people hope when they had no hope, and they’re going to need that in the future.

Swaykos: Is there anything Eddie would want us to know?

Williams: Probably. (laughter)

Swaykos: Well, we’ll have to get him next time.

Williams: Well, I could call him.

Swaykos: Thank you.

Williams: But he just—

(end of interview)