Mississippi Oral History Program

Hurricane Katrina Oral History Project

An Oral History

with

Zaheer Ahmad, Amtul Bari Chaudhry,
And Naseer Ahmad

Interviewer: Holly Thomas

Volume 977
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An Oral History with Naseer, Zaheer, and Amtul Bari Chaudry Ahmad, Volume 977
Interviewer: Holly Thomas
Transcriber: Stephanie Scull-DeArmey
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Biography

Mr. Zaheer Ahmad, father of Naseer Ahmad, was originally from Pakistan. At the time of this interview, he had lived in the United States, mostly New Orleans, for about twenty-five years. He had been a cab driver in New Orleans. His wife, Amtul Bari Chaudhry, also from Pakistan, loved New Orleans, and felt at home there from the very first day. They rented an apartment with their son and two daughters in the Metairie section of the city. Amtul Bari Chaudhry has always been a housewife, and Zaheer, at the time of this interview, could not find work. At the time of this interview, they were living in Virginia because their apartment in New Orleans, after a seven-foot flooding from Hurricane Katrina, was uninhabitable. They do not know what will happen to them if Zaheer cannot find work. He had applied to a community college to train to get a commercial license in 2006, but the college charged him out-of-state tuition, and he could not afford it.
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AN ORAL HISTORY

with

ZAHEER AHMAD,

AMTUL BARI CHAUDHRY,

and NASEER AHMAD

This is an interview for the Mississippi Oral History Program of The University of Southern Mississippi. The interview is with Zaheer Ahmad, Amtul Bari Chaudhry, and Naseer Ahmad and is taking place on July 25, 2006. The interviewer is Holly Werner Thomas.

Thomas: Today is Tuesday, July 25, 2006. It’s four o’clock p.m. We are sitting in the home of—can I have your name?

Zaheer Ahmad: Zaheer Ahmad.

Thomas: Ahmad, and his wife. Can you please state your name?

Chaudhry: Amtul Chaudhry.

Thomas: And their son Naseer Ahmad, as well, in Herndon, Virginia. This is the Hurricane Katrina Oral History Project. And I need to get all of your permission on tape to record this interview. Do I have your—

Zaheer Ahmad: Yes.

Thomas: And Naseer?

Naseer Ahmad: Yes, ma’am.

Chaudhry: Yes, ma’am.

Thomas: OK, terrific. I’d like to start out by asking all of you about your neighborhood and region. You’re from just outside of New Orleans. You lived in Metairie.

Zaheer Ahmad: Correct.

Thomas: Can you tell me about your neighborhood before the storm? How long you were in that particular area?

Zaheer Ahmad: We was living in that neighborhood almost fifteen years. And it was a really good neighborhood.
Thomas: And what was the name of the specific neighborhood, if it had one?

Zaheer Ahmad: It’s called the Fat City part of Metairie, Louisiana, and we was, like, two and a half blocks from Lake Ponchartrain.

Thomas: OK. So only two and a half blocks from the lake (inaudible).

Zaheer Ahmad: Right. Correct.

Thomas: OK. And tell me about some of your memories, your most vivid memories of the neighborhood. Naseer is their son; he’s twelve years old, and he lived all his life in this one apartment. Correct?

Naseer Ahmad: Yes.

Thomas: So Naseer, can you tell me something about your neighborhood before the storm? Your home, essentially.

Naseer Ahmad: I enjoyed it a lot, and I had friends there that I enjoyed my time with.

Thomas: What kinds of things did you do with your friend?

Naseer Ahmad: We usually played soccer, and, well, they didn’t have any goals there; so we used a shopping cart for a goal and—

Thomas: Is that in the street, or was there a park?

Naseer Ahmad: We used our parking lot as a soccer field. And we played basketball on the side of the apartments.

Thomas: And tell me about the neighborhood in terms of, you know, the neighbors. You mentioned that you were close with the neighbors, and Amtul, you said that you had been in the United States and in Louisiana for fifteen years, and you always felt welcome, and you really enjoyed New Orleans and Metairie from the day that you arrived. Can you tell me a little bit about why you felt so welcome and what it means to you?

Chaudhry: Yes, ma’am. I almost lived a long time there, and I really enjoyed there because the people, itself, New Orleans, they were really close to other peoples, and you really feel comfortable with them. And a lot of them were really helpful. You never feel that you are not at your home, or it’s not your hometown. And the second thing was, I think the main thing that I live there on that place, I have kids there, and we have a really good time there. So that’s why; the people who are good there, so you enjoy the time there. And you still remember that.
Thomas: Right. And you have three children. Naseer of course is here with us, and he’s twelve. But you have a fourteen-year-old daughter?

Zaheer Ahmad: I have a daughter, fourteen-years-old daughter; her name is Osma(?) Ahmad. And then I have a four-and-a-half-years-old daughter; her name is Jivana(?). They all born in New Orleans area.

Thomas: In the New Orleans area.

Zaheer Ahmad: Right. And I lived in that place so long, and the reason was because schools in that area was really good, and the neighborhood was very good neighborhood. There was not too much crime, and also my neighbors, we know almost everyone. And the neighbors, they was good. And some neighbors, they always was a part of, like, a family to us. They always take care of my kids, and if I have to take care of their kids, I always take care of their kids.

Thomas: I see. So you had a network, a neighborhood network.

Zaheer Ahmad: It was a kind of network. And other good thing was about that neighborhood; everything was very convenient. The McDonalds was across the street from us; the Chinese was there. Lakeside Shopping Center was walking distance. Grocery stores was walking distance, and hospital was not that far. My children’s doctor, he was not that far from there.

Thomas: What hospital was this?

Zaheer Ahmad: Lakeside Hospital and East Jefferson Hospital.

Thomas: You mentioned there wasn’t that much crime. What were some of the other strengths of the neighborhood, would you say? You’ve got the neighbors and the connections that you have there. Was it a very diverse neighborhood? How would you describe (inaudible)?

Zaheer Ahmad: It was a very mixed neighborhood. We had families living over there; they was African-American. They was families from south of Louisiana, Cajuns. They was foreigners, so-called foreigners, and all mixed neighborhood. It was not one kind of neighborhood. It was different kind of people; they was living together, and they was good, was very nice with each other.

Thomas: Let me ask, going back a little. What were some of the other strengths? You mentioned diversity, now, as well. Was there anything else that you’d like to add regarding some of the neighborhood strengths? Or weaknesses for that matter?

Zaheer Ahmad: I don’t see too much weaknesses; though when I moved out from that area, I can see lot of other areas. But when I compare, yes, there was weaknesses,
too, in that area because basically New Orleans was not—Louisiana, New Orleans, and Metairie area where we was living in Jefferson Parish, compared to other states, it was not that rich. And the infrastructure over there was not really modern infrastructure, but the infrastructure, whatever the infrastructure was, it was very complete.

**Thomas:** You felt it was complete?

**Zaheer Ahmad:** It was complete, and you have peace of mind. You always think this is a place you belongs to. That was a very important thing, that you start living someplace, and you start thinking that you belongs to this place. I was not really a rich guy over there, or I was not making lot of money. I was very mediocre.

**Thomas:** You were a taxicab driver; is that correct?

**Zaheer Ahmad:** I was a taxicab driver in the city of New Orleans. But I had peace of mind whatever I was making, and that was very important. Then I want to mention one more thing, that people always called New Orleans is a Big Easy. I never realized what Big Easy is, but when I moved out from that place, then I realized the Big Easy is that you work, and you also enjoy your life, but you don’t find in lot of other places.

**Thomas:** Thank you for saying that; that’s very good information. Let me just address this question of infrastructure, when you said you had peace of mind about the infrastructure. What infrastructure are you referring to specifically? Because you were just a couple of blocks, you said, from the lake. Are you talking about the levees or the roads or utilities or schools or all of those things?

**Zaheer Ahmad:** The infrastructure in that area, and especially in the state of Louisiana, mostly, is not a new infrastructure. It’s not modern; it’s old, seem [to] go with the culture of Louisiana. It’s not a new culture; it’s an old culture. A lot of other states I’ve seen, like I moved to Houston, or I came over here to Virginia; I’ve seen new buildings, new apartments, new roads, everything new, expanded left and right. It was not like that in New Orleans; it was very compact. Whatever it was there, it was there for a long time.

**Thomas:** Yes, people do talk about the kind of compactness of the geography in the city.

**Zaheer Ahmad:** Right.

**Thomas:** Did you feel like you were a part of New Orleans, being in Jefferson Parish?

**Zaheer Ahmad:** Yeah, the—

**Thomas:** You felt part of the city. Obviously you lived in the city.
Zaheer Ahmad: Right. It’s the same thing. The Jefferson Parish or Metairie area, West Bank, East Bank, East New Orleans, New Orleans, was just the same thing.

Thomas: Um-hm. Did you have a social center in your neighborhood or your community where everybody gathered? Was there a park, or was it just the neighborhood, itself? (Inaudible)

Zaheer Ahmad: It was just the neighborhood. It’s a neighborhood, but we had the part that you can take your kids over there. We had the Lefernia (?) Park over there, which was not that far from where we lived.

Thomas: What about in terms of cultural traditions? This being New Orleans, a lot of people talk about the parades, not always just Mardi Gras, but some of the others, the Irish Day and Saints Parades and things.

Zaheer Ahmad: You can put it this way, that when you are living in New Orleans, you always looking for excuse to have a party. (laughter)

Thomas: I’ve heard that as well.

Zaheer Ahmad: Right. (laughter) And it’s always in a good sense, too, that people can understand each other. And kids, they understand the other cultures and all those kind of things. My kids always celebrated the Mardi Gras, and we enjoyed the Mardi Gras.


Zaheer Ahmad: Because all the families get together, do the cooking, sit together, talking, all those kind of things.

Thomas: What kinds of things did you cook for Mardi Gras? Did you bring some of your own dishes, and then also cook New Orleans style?

Zaheer Ahmad: Yeah, the cooking, New Orleans-style cooking is very good, and we always enjoyed the New Orleans cooking, too. But we also cooked our own food, which is not too different than basically the New Orleans cooking because the New Orleans cooking, Cajun or Creole, they use lot of spices. And the same way, we use lot of spices.

Thomas: Um-hm, that’s true. A lot of rice-based dishes, as well.

Zaheer Ahmad: Rice-based dishes.

Thomas: Um-hm, interesting. You wanted to say something about your traditions, Naseer, as in Mardi Gras and whatnot?
Naseer Ahmad: Usually we used to go to the parades there with friends and have a good time catching, and afterwards we would compete on what we get.

Thomas: What kinds of things did you get?

Naseer Ahmad: Beads, stuffed animals, spears, toys.

Thomas: Beers, did you say?

Naseer Ahmad: Spears.

Thomas: Oh, spears.

Naseer Ahmad: Toy spears, toy guns.

Thomas: Really?

Naseer Ahmad: Yeah.

Thomas: And these are thrown off?

Naseer Ahmad: Yes, off of—

Thomas: The floats.

Naseer Ahmad: Floats.

Thomas: OK. Did you ever win a competition?

Naseer Ahmad: They didn’t have.

Thomas: With your friends?

Naseer Ahmad: Oh, with my friends. Not really. We didn’t see who wins, but we just showed our stuff.

Thomas: Right. So you always went down and enjoyed the parades, then?

Naseer Ahmad: Yes.

Zaheer Ahmad: And parade was not that far from our house. It was across the street from where we lived. We was living on a (inaudible) and always the parade (inaudible) was one block from there (inaudible). So we just have to walk from our place to the parade.
Thomas: Let me ask you, because you said that you had lived in Arizona briefly. Well, not that briefly. A few years.

Zaheer Ahmad: Uh-huh, a few years I lived in Arizona. I also lived in New York.

Thomas: OK. In New York City?

Zaheer Ahmad: In New York City, in Queens.

Thomas: Um-hm, and when were you there?

Zaheer Ahmad: I was there 1981 till [19]84.

Thomas: In Arizona or New York?

Zaheer Ahmad: In New York.

Thomas: In New York.

Zaheer Ahmad: Right.

Thomas: Very different place then. (laughter) I, myself, moved there in [19]91; so it was completely different. And you’ve only lived, Amtul, in Louisiana?

Chaudhry: Yes, ma’am.

Thomas: And you said you didn’t really care for Arizona. So I’m asking you this to just get some comparison as to why and sort of your sense of New Orleans.

Chaudhry: The main thing, when you come to someone house or to a new country, if the people is not friendly with you, that’s the main, basic thing. And where you feel comfortable. So I feel much, much more comfortable in Louisiana because the people in Louisiana—

Zaheer Ahmad: When I married Amtul, I was living in Arizona on that time—

Thomas: Where in Arizona were you?

Zaheer Ahmad: I was living northeast Phoenix, and I was living in New Orleans from [19]84 till almost end of [19]88, and then I moved out of New Orleans to Phoenix. And I started living over there, and that was the time when I married to Amtul, and she came to Phoenix, too. But she didn’t like Phoenix and—

Thomas: And that was primarily due to the people, you say.

Chaudhry: Yes.
**Zaheer Ahmad:** People, there was no culture, and she was felt very lonely over there, or she didn’t feel that—she basically left out. And that was the time, then, I decided that I had to move back to New Orleans. So I moved back to New Orleans.

**Thomas:** And you prefer, obviously, New Orleans, as far as—

**Chaudhry:** Even though I didn’t realize what New Orleans, what kind of city itself it is, right.

**Zaheer Ahmad:** The day she came to New Orleans, she started loving the place.

**Chaudhry:** Because the New Orleans people heart was really big. Yeah, they were very welcome to other person. They appreciate you a lot with everything. I was so close in with my neighbors, with my kids’ teachers. We were so close; if we ever go ask about our kids, how they doing, we are always welcome there. And teacher, usually, more often, we get together with her, and so they can tell you how your kids are doing. So like we have relation with everybody.

**Zaheer Ahmad:** People in general, people in general in New Orleans, Metairie area, they are very helpful people, majority of them. They like to go out of their way to help you out if you need any help.

**Thomas:** Interesting. Tell me about what your view of the political situation in New Orleans, in the state of Louisiana, before the hurricane [Katrina]. And also, what were your views of the levee system? We talked a little bit about infrastructure.

**Zaheer Ahmad:** Somehow, I cannot go in detail because I’m not a politician, but what I’d seen, the politicians in New Orleans, probably they are also like the (laughter) majority people of Louisiana. Basically they are simple, maybe; they are not very much take things seriously, or laid-back type of people. And there’s lot of things in the New Orleans area could be better if they do it little bit differently, if they think to rebuild the levees probably long time ago, before the hurricane struck over there. And people knew; politicians and also the people that was living over there, that this thing can be happen one day.

**Thomas:** So you were aware that it’s a possibility.

**Zaheer Ahmad:** Everyone was aware, but we was not aware of lot of things that levees are not going to hold, but we knew that we are living in a dangerous place when you talk about natural disasters, especially the hurricanes.

**Thomas:** Um-hm. Some people have told me that they believed that—they were aware of the danger, but they thought it wouldn’t happen in their lifetimes, either. So you just sort of lived your life.
Zaheer Ahmad: Right. You have to be, like, sometimes lot of things comes in your mind, but you have to take it out because if you keep that thing in your mind all the time, then it’s difficult to deal with the day-to-day things.

Thomas: And what about you, Naseer? Did you have any idea about the levees? Did you and your friends talk about the levees at all?

Zaheer Ahmad: No.

Thomas: Nothing.

Zaheer Ahmad: We thought that it would be like a regular hurricane, like, usually, through the years, the hurricanes were not that bad around our area. So we really didn’t care about it. We were sort of happy because we got two days off of school, but afterwards we weren’t that happy.

Thomas: No, I can imagine. Well, we’re going to get to those questions in just a minute, but before that, anything else that—let me just ask you this about a little bit more on the political scene. Did you have anything to add, Amtul? Did either of you vote, for example? Did you—

Zaheer Ahmad: Yeah, I always vote. I vote over there.

Thomas: Did you vote for Ray Nagin?

Zaheer Ahmad: Ray Nagin, he was from New Orleans. I never voted for—

Thomas: Right, OK, different—

Zaheer Ahmad: Because I was living in Jefferson Parish.

Thomas: Parish, right, right, right, right.

Zaheer Ahmad: But I voted for the senators and for my local elections and all those things.

Thomas: OK. How has your opinion of some of these political leaders changed since the hurricane?

Zaheer Ahmad: The political leaders, I think they didn’t took it seriously about that hurricane, and they didn’t arrange a lot of things that if things happen, what they have to do in those kind of situations. And I think they made lot of mistakes; also the federal government, they made lot of mistakes. FEMA made lot of mistakes. Governor Blanco, she didn’t took it seriously.

Thomas: What makes you think or say that she didn’t take it seriously?
Zaheer Ahmad: Because they know from day one that the people of New Orleans area, they are not rich people, majority of people. They are living over there. Lot of people didn’t have resources to get out from evacuation time because lot of people, they don’t have no cars. A lot of people, even they have a car, it’s really old cars they was driving. It was not like Virginia that everybody is driving a new car. The people, they have ten-, fifteen-, sometimes twenty-years-old cars over there in Metairie area. And lot of people, even they have a car, but they didn’t have no money to fill up the tanks. And then top of that, from New Orleans, Metairie area, if you have to get out, you have to get out through Interstate 10. That’s the only way that you can get out if you are going towards Houston. If you are going towards Mobile, you still have to be on Interstate 10. Or from Interstate 10, you can take [Interstate] 55 or [Interstate] 59 towards the north. And then you talk about evacuating the whole city, it’s not possible; it never be possible. It never going to be possible that you can take out all those people from these two roads—we call it interstate—unless you move them in some other way on airplanes or you move them in school buses. They have to have better way to do that. And whenever I seen it, whenever they had a warning, hurricane warnings that you have to evacuate, most of the time, the grocery store get closed, and the gas station get closed. So where you can buy your gas or groceries and other things?

Thomas: That’s interesting. Yeah, makes it a little difficult for everybody to go.

Zaheer Ahmad: But the government, they don’t think that way. They have to—same thing I seen after we evacuated to Houston, then, after Katrina, there was Hurricane—

Chaudhry: Rita.

Zaheer Ahmad: Rita, and same thing happened in Texas, too. The people, they was evacuating from Houston area, and they got stuck on interstate, and the gas stations, they was empty, though they was not closed, but there was no gas. So they have to think that way, if you are making sure that your people are going to evacuate it by cars or by buses, those cars or buses, they need fuel. So you have to aware of this problem, and you have to be ready to do the refilling of those vehicles. But they never thought, and I don’t know if they have any plans for a future.

Thomas: Yes. Now, we’re in hurricane season again. So who knows? Tell me where you were when you first heard about Hurricane Katrina.

Zaheer Ahmad: We was at home.

Thomas: What day was this when you first—because some people started monitoring since early in the week. Naseer, why don’t you start?
Naseer Ahmad: Actually, it was a Saturday, and I went to my mosque in the morning. And I was coming back, and I went to my friend’s house. And that’s where I found out on his TV that Hurricane Katrina was coming, but, like I said before, I didn’t take it seriously. And my parents were at home; so they called me and told me that hurry up and come home so we can do some preparations.

Thomas: I see. So then you knew that Saturday. Were you aware of it (inaudible) before?

Zaheer Ahmad: Saturday was the day when we knew that hurricane is going to strike New Orleans area, but before Saturday that we was watching news, and they was saying that, OK, the hurricane is coming this way, but then they also showed that it might turn to south, or maybe it’s going to turn towards—

Thomas: They’re unpredictable, aren’t they?

Zaheer Ahmad: Right. And there was no 100 percent prediction. But the day when I find it out about the hurricane, it was Saturday, that for sure the hurricane is coming towards New Orleans, and we are on the way to hurricane.

Thomas: OK. And what were you listening to?

Zaheer Ahmad: I was watching news on the TV.

Thomas: And was it Ray Nagin who you were listening to, or the local news?

Zaheer Ahmad: It was the local news, um-hm, local news. They were saying that—but they was also thinking until the last moment, maybe it turn because they thought the cold front probably going to push, which is coming from Houston side, from Texas side, from west. It’s going to push towards, to Mississippi, and we are going to be chosen ones (laughter) to be saved again.

Thomas: Right. Some people were hopeful of this, coming from New Orleans. Of course, people from Mississippi weren’t too happy.

Zaheer Ahmad: It didn’t happen; it didn’t happen. It didn’t happen.

Thomas: No. And what were the neighbors saying? What was the atmosphere like by that Saturday? Were people getting ready to leave, or were there—

Zaheer Ahmad: Some people, they left, but in my building, almost 65 percent was the occupancy because a lot of people, they was not able to get out. I don’t have to give you the example of anybody else, but I can give you my own reason why we was not able to get out because the first thing was, it was taking twenty-three hours from Metairie, Louisiana, to Baton Rouge.
Thomas: Twenty-three hours at that point.

Zaheer Ahmad: Twenty-three hours, though even in my van the tank was full with the gas, but how I’m going to take three kids, and I’m going to stay on the road for twenty-three hours? And top of that, I was not sure that I’m going to be able to refill the vehicle again, and what’s going to be my next stop? I’m going to stop in Baton Rouge, or I’m going to stop in Houston? So finally I decided that I’m going to leave the area, but I’m going to leave on the last moment when Interstate 10 was going to be a little easy so I don’t have to take so many hours on a highway.

Thomas: So let me ask you this because we didn’t talk about your home. So I know you’re living in an apartment, and you just mentioned the building. So was it a large building?

Zaheer Ahmad: It was a two-story building like most areas over there. There’s not too many high-rise in New Orleans area.

Thomas: Were you on—what floor?

Zaheer Ahmad: We was on the second floor.

Thomas: You were, OK.

Zaheer Ahmad: Yeah. It’s a good thing that we was on the second floor. And so when we decided that we are going to leave on the last moment. But around 5:30—

Thomas: On that Saturday?

Zaheer Ahmad: On that Saturday, they said that you cannot get out because they had some kind of curfew. The reason was because the Interstate 10 was like a parking lot. People, they was trying to evacuate from there. They left their cars on the interstate because a lot of people, they was ran out of gas; lot of cars broken on interstate. So when I knew that we are not going to able to leave, then the second plan was that we are going to face the hurricane. We start filling up all the pots we have with the water because we knew that water is going to be first thing to get out, and there’s no electricity. We cooked few foods, and we always have some bottled water because we knew whenever the hurricane season start, you have to have bottled water and canned food and (inaudible).

Thomas: I see. So over the course of that Saturday you knew that you had to, first, leave. But then you realized it was going to be impossible, and you decided to buckle down. So it sounds like you did stay, in fact, through the hurricane.

Zaheer Ahmad: Correct. We seen the whole thing.
Thomas: Um-hm. So tell me about that experience then. Saturday night passes; it becomes Sunday.

Zaheer Ahmad: Saturday night—

Thomas: There’s a mandatory evacuation, at least, from New Orleans.

Zaheer Ahmad: Saturday night was, first thing I want to mention; whenever we had the hurricane, before the hurricane, you always have very, very depressed atmosphere, somehow. I don’t know what the reason is, but things was very quiet. People was inside their homes, though some people over there, they was in a mood of party, always in New Orleans? So we was in our house; the streets was very quiet, and there was no rain, nothing. So I was watching the TV on that time, and I went to sleep around three o’clock, I think.

Thomas: Did you board up your windows or anything like that?

Zaheer Ahmad: Right, we put tape—

Thomas: So those kinds of preparations.

Zaheer Ahmad: We did all that taping and everything.

Thomas: I imagine you never had been flooded, being on the second story, though. Is that right?

Zaheer Ahmad: Right, but I’m going to let you know how much flood we seen over there. Around three o’clock, I went to sleep, and around 3:30, my wife, she wake me up. And at that time I heard a lot of noises. The people was running here and there. So she looked outside the window, and she said, “The water is coming.” Even there was no wind or nothing yet. So the water was actually coming over the levees.

Thomas: This was Saturday night?

Zaheer Ahmad: Saturday and—

Chaudhry: Sunday.

Zaheer Ahmad: This is Sunday morning, 3:30 Sunday morning.

Chaudhry: Around four o’clock.

Thomas: I see.

Zaheer Ahmad: Four o’clock, yeah. The water was coming over the levees because the hurricane was pushing the water from Gulf of Mexico to Lake Ponchartrain, and
Lake Ponchartrain was throwing all the water over the levees. And that time the hurricane wind in our area was not started yet, and we didn’t have rain yet, either. So around 4:30, five o’clock, we had almost seven feet of water in our neighborhood. The first floor people that was living on first floors, they all came second floor. We accommodated all the people; they was from first floor to second floor. And next morning, then the hurricane struck, and that time it was, we didn’t have too much rain with that hurricane, but the wind was very, very strong. I never seen so much wind. I seen lot of hurricanes last twenty-five years in New Orleans area, but I never seen a hurricane like Katrina. The whole building, the apartment building was shaking like you are in a ship; it was going left and right, left and right.

Chaudhry: Too much sound.

Zaheer Ahmad: And the sound was very, very terrible type of sound, scary sounding.

Thomas: What were you feeling at that time?

Zaheer Ahmad: We were just sitting on our knees and praying because on the same times a lot of apartments in my building, they blew their roofs. And some apartments, their floor was sucked out, too, on the second floor.

Thomas: Oh, really?

Zaheer Ahmad: In my building they was two families. They had the kids. One was our family, and the other was an Afro-American family, and they had small kids. And their apartment survived, too; didn’t blow up, although all the air-condition units, everything blew out from the top. And the same thing happened with my apartment, too, because the air-condition units was on the roof; it was blewed out. But luckily the roof didn’t blew out, and the floor didn’t sucked out.

Thomas: No. So how many people did you have with you in your apartment from neighbors?

Zaheer Ahmad: On that time, I think in our whole building, there was, like, thirty or forty people altogether.

Thomas: Wow. Nazeer, what were you doing during that time?

Naseer Ahmad: I really didn’t take it seriously until, like—

Thomas: Even then?

Naseer Ahmad: Yes, but (laughter) when I woke up at seven o’clock, I heard these noises that were, like, making me shake. And then outside I heard people, like, they were just partying outside during the hurricane.
Thomas: Partying? Really?

Naseer Ahmad: Yes, and they were, like, watching the hurricane, standing outside.

Zaheer Ahmad: Because on the first floor, there was seven feet of water. When we was standing on the balcony, you can see the dirty water. And in that water you can see the frogs and the small fishes and snakes, small snakes. Everything was in that water, and that water was full with debris. And also there was a lot of gasoline smell in that water because I think from a lot of, in that area, the gas stations, they had the gas, but they was closed. And their tanks was busted after the water hit. The gas came out.

Naseer Ahmad: A block away from my house, there was a Citgo gas station, and they still had gas in their tanks. And I think this was the gas station that blew up a day after the hurricane. I think so. Right? Or the owner, I think, put it on fire.

Zaheer Ahmad: No, no, there was—

Chaudhry: No, that was far away; that was a little far away. That was another gas station.

Zaheer Ahmad: It was in Fat City. There was a convenience store; it got a fire.

Chaudhry: But this storm was really hard because I was—

Zaheer Ahmad: The water was very high.

Thomas: So tell me because it must have been, also, the strongest hurricane—

Chaudhry: Right.

Thomas: —that you’ve lived through in that area.

Chaudhry: It was really, really strong, and I was praying the whole time that God save us because today we save ourselves; God save us, that will be a miracle, because the wind was too much. The whole apartment complex was shaking, and the water was too much, and the noise was so, so scary. So when the winds blew up, you will think that, “Now it’s our turn to blow up. Something will happen.”

Thomas: How many hours did you go through this?

Chaudhry: Till four p.m. to the next, like, maybe two, three o’clock, yeah, the next—
Zaheer Ahmad: The hurricane was passing through until on Sunday, I think it was around 2:30, three o’clock in the afternoon it was done.

Chaudhry: Itself, the hurricane (inaudible) because the period of time was too much. So it make a lot of disaster, too; that’s why.

Thomas: And you had, you said, seven feet of water, and this is before the levee broke.

Zaheer Ahmad: The levee was not broke in our area.

Thomas: This is just come—oh, no?

Zaheer Ahmad: It was coming over the levees.

Thomas: It was coming over.

Zaheer Ahmad: Over the levees.

Chaudhry: Because we was—

Zaheer Ahmad: And then I think the pumping station, they stopped working because there was no electricity. So it was all water everywhere. All my car was submerged in the water, and then I had a cab; it was a van. It was submerged in the water, and the van took us out from Louisiana; it was only survived because we parked on a little bit higher place. Though the water came all the way up to the floor, but when water went down after four days, I was able to start that van with the help of my neighbor; he gave me the jump. But there was no computer in that van because the computer was all filled with water.

Thomas: Tell me, then. As the days went by, four days. You were there in your apartment for four days, then, the whole time.

Zaheer Ahmad: Yeah, we was there. Right.

Thomas: Tell me what you saw, how you got information, because obviously there was a communication breakdown in the city. So then—

Zaheer Ahmad: There was no communication because there was no electricity. We didn’t know what—

Thomas: So you didn’t know what was going on in the neighborhoods.

Zaheer Ahmad: We didn’t know even till I get to Houston that the levee is broken on the other side where we was living. Right. We didn’t know that we was broken because we didn’t have no TV; we didn’t have no radio, no cell phones, no—
Thomas: What were the neighbors saying? They didn’t know, either.

Zaheer Ahmad: They was just like us; they had no information, either.

Thomas: The cell phones weren’t working.

Zaheer Ahmad: No cell phones.

Chaudhry: Just maybe one house there, they have a radio. So they were not turning on again and again because if they might lose the batteries. So we can’t hear nothing. So sometimes they just turn it on that do the storm finish and this and that. Like, what kind of disaster is after the storm? We are on what place right now, what shape? What is around us right now?

Zaheer Ahmad: And I have to mention one thing. When the water went down, after that, one telephone line in our building worked somehow. It was Turnee’s(?) grandma’s line.


Chaudhry: Because just one telephone.

Thomas: Strange.

Chaudhry: Just one telephone was working in the whole—so we, everyone—

Zaheer Ahmad: And that started working after the water went down.

Naseer Ahmad: And their computer was working somehow, too.

Chaudhry: Right.

Zaheer Ahmad: She had a laptop.

Chaudhry: So we can (inaudible) laptop.

Thomas: I see, um-hm.

Chaudhry: So we connect; we contacted one of our family members so they—

Zaheer Ahmad: In Houston, I think.

Chaudhry: Yeah, that’s how everyone contacted their families, from the same phone, or someone just send an e-mail if someone not picking up the phone.
**Thomas:**  OK. So you have family in Houston, Texas?

**Chaudhry:**  Right.

**Thomas:**  Well, let me ask you a couple questions. First of all, you said the water actually stayed there for four days? Is that correct?

**Chaudhry:**  Um-hm, right.

**Thomas:**  Before it receded? Really?

**Zaheer Ahmad:**  Right.

**Thomas:**  And is that the first time that that’s happened before?

**Chaudhry:**  Yes.

**Thomas:**  With a hurricane?

**Chaudhry:**  Um-hm, with that much water. This was the first time, actually.

**Thomas:**  OK. And basically you were isolated during those days?

**Zaheer Ahmad:**  We was isolated; we was watching a helicopter flying over us, in case they was flagging.

**Naseer Ahmad:**  We had signs made.

**Thomas:**  You did?

**Naseer Ahmad:**  Yeah, and we were just putting them here.

**Thomas:**  What did they say?

**Naseer Ahmad:**  They were just—

**Zaheer Ahmad:**  They were just cruising over our head. Nobody came to help us, to take us up.

**Thomas:**  You just saw the helicopters going back and forth?

**Zaheer Ahmad:**  Right, and they landed in Lake—on Lakeside Shopping Mall because they was worried to protect Lakeside Shopping Mall more than the people that was living in that area, though the shopping mall was also flooded. And they landed over there, probably fourteen or fifteen helicopters.
**Thomas:** Is this the National Guard?

**Zaheer Ahmad:** It was the National Guard; I don’t know it was the National Guard or Army, but I think it was the National Guard, or maybe Army helicopters. But nobody came to help us.

**Chaudhry:** No one help us.

**Zaheer Ahmad:** The day I left, after four days, and that day I had a half a bottle of water; that’s all that was left. If my well was not able—I was not able to start my well. We didn’t have no drinking water.

**Thomas:** Terrifying.

**Chaudhry:** Just neighbor was helping each other. Our neighbor—

**Zaheer Ahmad:** We was helping each other.

**Chaudhry:** We were just helping; that’s how we survived. That’s how we left New Orleans.

**Zaheer Ahmad:** There was no water to use—

**Thomas:** Did you have gas to cook during that time?

**Zaheer Ahmad:** No, there was no gas because the cooking was all electric cooking. Some of our neighbors, they had a charcoal grill. So we using a charcoal, and then we heated up the water for our tea or coffee, and sometimes we heat up the canned food. And basically—

**Chaudhry:** Everyone is helping everybody. Someone don’t have food, we were provide the food. If someone don’t have water, we will provide water.

**Zaheer Ahmad:** Because the people, they was living on the first floor; their apartment was completely gone. And I was scared because if the water is going to stay longer that we might be sink because the buildings, they are not really strong buildings.

**Thomas:** So when you were able to leave, was it just obvious that you had to get out at that point? You just wanted to go, or what was your decision-making process?

**Zaheer Ahmad:** The first thing was when the water start going down, the first thing was that if my van get started—

**Thomas:** I see, which you couldn’t, of course, know until you could get there.
Zaheer Ahmad: Right. So luckily the van got started, and when I was walking towards my van, I decided in my heart, if my van gets started, I’m going to make sure that I’m going to, obviously, I’m going to take my family out from here. But the one more person I have to take it out is, that person is Mr. Kenny(?).

Naseer Ahmad: Kenny Clark(?)?

Zaheer Ahmad: What’s his [name]?

Naseer Ahmad: Kenny Clark.

Zaheer Ahmad: Kenny Clark.

Thomas: And he was a good neighbor?

Chaudhry: He was a really good neighbor.

Zaheer Ahmad: Right. He was a grandfather of my daughter’s best friend, and that person, he had a lung and heart transplant. And he cannot survive without air-conditioning and without medication. And the day before, one day before when we left that place, that night he was almost dead because he didn’t have no oxygen. And it was very difficult to breathe for him. So when I was going to start my van, I pledged for myself that I’m going to make sure that I’m going to take him. And somehow my van got started, and then I ran back to my house, and I told my wife that, “Whatever you can grab, the papers.”

Thomas: Yes. What did you take with you when you left?

Zaheer Ahmad: We took basically a few papers.

Chaudhry: Our social security cards, our birth certificates, kids’, passports.

Zaheer Ahmad: Kids’ birth certificates, passport. Our few clothing.

Chaudhry: Few clothing.

Zaheer Ahmad: And at that time I knocked that neighbor’s door, and I told him that, “You have to go with me.”

And he said, “No, no, no, no. You guys can go. I’ll call the 911; they are going to come and help me out.”

I said, “There’s no 911.”

Chaudhry: He don’t want to leave; he don’t want to leave his wife alone. So the wife, she was staying for the kids, for her daughter kids. Like, they have a big family.
So she was worried for her grandkids, that, “I cannot leave them alone just with their mother. If I’m there, maybe I help more.” You know? So they don’t have a car; they don’t have any car.

So then my husband told him, “No. Some of you guys who can come with us so we can leave.” And they decide that only Mr. Kenny who was her husband, Miss Mimi’s husband, he’s going to leave with us. So he take his medicine, some clothing, and he left the family with us.

**Thomas:** I see. So you brought him, but otherwise it was the immediate family, you and your three children.

**Zaheer Ahmad:** Right.

**Chaudhry:** Right.

**Thomas:** I see. And did you bring any keepsakes with you? You know, photos—

**Chaudhry:** No.

**Thomas:** —or anything of that nature?

**Zaheer Ahmad:** Nothing.

**Chaudhry:** Nothing. Nothing.

**Zaheer Ahmad:** Because on that time you don’t think about the things.

**Chaudhry:** You don’t realize about other things.

**Zaheer Ahmad:** You think that you have to—

**Thomas:** You’re not thinking you’re leaving—

**Chaudhry:** You just see—

**Thomas:** (Inaudible)

**Chaudhry:** No.

**Zaheer Ahmad:** We was not thinking that, “We are leaving forever.” We thought that we are going to leave for few days, and we are going to be back because sometimes lot of things don’t come in your subconscious or your conscious right away because you don’t want to face those things. I didn’t want to leave that place. So we all thought that we are going to be back, but it never happened.
Thomas: And did you go to Houston to be with your family there?

Zaheer Ahmad: Yeah, the time when I was leaving, it was the biggest problem I had because the debris was too much on the road. So I was praying that my tires don’t get bad because they was nails—

Thomas: What day was this? I’m sorry. Was this on the fourth day after the hurricane?

Zaheer Ahmad: Fourth day after the hurricane.

Naseer Ahmad: It was a Wednesday.

Thomas: It was a Wednesday. OK.

Zaheer Ahmad: Wednesday.

Naseer Ahmad: It was a Wednesday.

Zaheer Ahmad: Wednesday, right.

Thomas: OK. And so at that point, the water has receded—

Zaheer Ahmad: Yeah, water was receded.

Thomas: —where you were, which is a different story from some of the other areas.

Zaheer Ahmad: Right. We was lucky the water went down. In lot of other areas, the water never gone down. And I winded up when I got to Houston that where we was living—

Thomas: Um-hm. So you were able to call through this one line to your relatives in Houston. And did they tell you about what was happening then in the rest of the city?

Zaheer Ahmad: No, they didn’t say. They said, just, “You have to get out. Just get out.”

Thomas: OK. So then you drove there, and you found out.

Zaheer Ahmad: Right. I started driving towards Houston, and my van was really stinking inside because the water was inside of the floor. By the time I got to Lafayette, in that time I need more gas; I stop on a gas station to fill up gas again. At that time my van quit shifting because the computer was not working. The water was all inside the engine and transmission.

Thomas: What did you do?
Zaheer Ahmad: So I drove in first gear to closest transmission place. The guy when he seen me with the kids and the guy, Mr. Kenny; so he told me that this is going to take lot of money and lot of time, but he did something that the van start shifting. He said, “I’m not going to promise with you that how long it’s going to do that, but if you don’t stop, you can get to Houston.” So I start driving towards Houston.

Thomas: How many hours was that between Lafayette and Houston?

Zaheer Ahmad: It was almost three hours.

Chaudhry: No.

Naseer Ahmad: We stayed at least an hour in Lafayette.

Chaudhry: I’m sorry.

Thomas: Between Lafayette and Houston.

Chaudhry: Yeah, it was three hours, right.

Zaheer Ahmad: Three hours, right.

Thomas: OK. So that’s a possibility to not stop, three hours.

Zaheer Ahmad: Right. So when I got to Houston, and after Lafayette, my cell phone start working. And then I call my brother in Houston, and first thing I ask him that I have a patient with me, and I have to drop him to the hospital. So he told me that there is a Methodist Hospital close to his house. So he gave me the directions. So I took Mr. Kenny all the way to Methodist Hospital. I went inside to do for his paperwork to admit him to the hospital. When I came back, and I tried to drive again, my van, it stopped shifting again. And it cost me almost about [$800] to $900 to fix that thing. But that van didn’t—it’s not—since that day.

Thomas: It’s not working still?

Zaheer Ahmad: It still always have some kind of problem.

Chaudhry: Yeah, it’s still giving us a problem. Yeah, it’s still giving us a problem sometimes.

Thomas: Tell me what you saw; I’d like to hear more from Amtul and Nazeer, what you saw, as well, on the way from Metairie to Houston. You said you saw a lot of debris in the road.

Zaheer Ahmad: I seen lot of debris in my area, and—
Thomas: Did you see a lot of other people leaving still Or were people on the road at all?

Zaheer Ahmad: There was very few people that was leaving because the majority people that was in my area—I don’t know about the other area, but in my area, they was not able to start their cars because their car was submerged in water.

Thomas: So the people in your neighborhood were still stuck.

Zaheer Ahmad: They were still stuck.

Thomas: And they weren’t getting the help, it sounds like.

Zaheer Ahmad: No, I think they got the help—

Naseer Ahmad: —from the helicopters.

Zaheer Ahmad: —two or three days after that. The only help was that the Guard, they came, and they told them that you have to leave. And they have to walk from their homes to all the way on Interstate 10 and the causeway. And it was really hot and humid; lot of people didn’t have water. And there was a time when they have a casualty on the causeway; four or five people died in one day, and the next day, there was other four or five people that passed out.

Chaudhry: And a lot of people are still missing.

Zaheer Ahmad: And on that time, when they was doing evacuation, they didn’t get evacuation properly, either. They took parents in a different helicopter; kids was in a different helicopter. And that was a time they—

Thomas: And this is, again, the National Guard or the Army?

Zaheer Ahmad: Right.

Thomas: So have you heard from your neighbors? Are you in contact at all with your neighbors?

Zaheer Ahmad: Yeah, I was able to find contact with Mr. Kenny. And a lot of neighbors, I really don’t know where they are now.

Thomas: Some people, so you still don’t know.

Zaheer Ahmad: I still don’t know.
Thomas: Yeah. So it’s pretty clear that—did you want to add anything about what you saw, as well, on the way to Houston?

Zaheer Ahmad: I seen lot of cars on the side of the road on that time; they cleared up Interstate 10, but the car was still on the left and right of interstate. And there was no gas up to Lafayette.

Thomas: That’s not surprising.

Zaheer Ahmad: There was no gas, even in Baton Rouge. When we got close to Baton Rouge, it was a lot of traffic in Baton Rouge. It took us almost an hour to get out from that area, and there was no gas in Baton Rouge.

Thomas: Um-hm. No, I’m not surprised, given what happened there.

Naseer Ahmad: And when we were leaving, if I’m not wrong, there was, I think, the president’s plane was passing by.

Thomas: Oh, did you see that?

Naseer Ahmad: Yes, it was a gray plane; I think it was from the Navy, and maybe it was the president, but—

Zaheer Ahmad: All the politicians from Washington, they went over there for photo, what they call it?

Thomas: Photo op.

Zaheer Ahmad: Right.

Thomas: Photo opportunity, yeah.

Zaheer Ahmad: Photo opportunity. All the senators, they gone over there to tell their—

Naseer Ahmad: Part of the story.

Zaheer Ahmad: —story, and let the people know they was very worried about—

Thomas: And you don’t believe that they were very concerned (laughter) it sounds like.

Zaheer Ahmad: Nobody is concerned; nobody did nothing. They still don’t do. I think the majority helped people (inaudible) after Katrina, it was from a faith-based organization, or from individuals. Red Cross did what they had the capacity to do. FEMA, they did a really bad job.
Thomas: Can you give me some specifics? I have my opinion, too, but I don’t—that’s not the point. I want to hear, why do you think FEMA did a bad job? What are the specifics?

Zaheer Ahmad: First of all the president, I don’t want to say a lot of things, but (inaudible) president did it, and told FEMA to do it for the families of Katrina. The base was really bad; he told that every family is going to get $2000, which don’t make sense to me.

Thomas: Because?

Zaheer Ahmad: And he probably knows this thing, too, and a lot of other people, they know, too, because in Louisiana, when you say that every family is going to get $2000, there’s lot of people over there, they was a single family, individual guys, not married. They got $2000, and the people, they had ten children, they got $2000. I have three kids, and my wife and me, we are five people; we got $2000. How they determined that every family is going to get $2000, and it’s going to be help for them? When the Red Cross, they didn’t give you the money per family; they gave you the money per person. They looked you, how many people are in the family? So the base of that decision was really bad, and after that, what FEMA did, it don’t make any sense.

Thomas: Such as?

Zaheer Ahmad: They didn’t gave you any help for rent, and they gave you lot of paperwork. Of course, some people, they was crook, probably; they took advantage of a lot of things. But lot of people, they didn’t know how to do the paperwork and all those kind of things.

Thomas: Yeah, that’s very true. And so tell me, what agencies have you dealt with? Obviously, FEMA, and you said you received $2000. Correct?

Zaheer Ahmad: Right, from FEMA. And then they sent me $2300 for rent one time, and then when I was living in (inaudible) Virginia, they sent me the rent, too, but I sent them all receipts for rent. Red Cross, they gave us, per person, some money. Right. And then the Reston Interfaith help us a lot.

Thomas: The Reston Interfaith from here, from northern Virginia?

Zaheer Ahmad: From here, right. They help us really a lot.

Thomas: OK. Well, I want to ask you more about these groups, but just finishing with on your way to Houston, you’re in Houston. How long did you stay there, and what made you leave?
Zaheer Ahmad: Houston? Houston, I stayed over there for one month.

Naseer Ahmad: Up to October, early October.

Zaheer Ahmad: October, right.

Thomas: OK. And so obviously, you’re twelve; you have siblings who are fourteen, four and a half, not in school yet, but what about schools? What was the process?

Zaheer Ahmad: When I gone to Houston, I moved with my brother in Houston. He was living in Houston, and the first thing was for my kids that they don’t miss any school, anything. So I start sending my kids to school, and Texas government, they did really good job, too.

Chaudhry: They take people (inaudible).

Zaheer Ahmad: They took care so many people, and the people in Texas, probably, they did a lot. But I was not able to stay too long in Houston. The problem was that we all was stressed out, depressed; we didn’t know nothing about our future. I have a lot of problems, what I’m going to do in the future. What I have to do? How I’m going to make my living, all those kind of things.

Thomas: So what was your—

Zaheer Ahmad: So I stayed over there one month, and then I moved to Virginia. The reason why I moved to Virginia, because I call over here, and somebody told me that there is probably more opportunities in Virginia than Texas.

Thomas: Naseer, go ahead.

Naseer Ahmad: I want to talk about Houston. Like, I didn’t feel comfortable in Houston; like, the schools, at least every day there was a fight, and I really didn’t have a friend.

Thomas: What school were you in? Do you remember the name of it?

Naseer Ahmad: Lyle(?).

Thomas: Lyle?

Naseer Ahmad: Yes, and it was in northwestern Houston. And—

Thomas: OK. Was this a middle school?

Naseer Ahmad: It was a middle school.
Zaheer Ahmad: It’s a big problem in Houston and Texas schools; they have a lot of gangs.

Naseer Ahmad: Really?

Zaheer Ahmad: Right.

Thomas: OK. So you felt that it was violent (inaudible)?

Naseer Ahmad: Yeah, and I was being—it wasn’t that violent, but there were also good people there, but I was feeling left out. But then I had a friend that was from New Orleans, but he came, like, a week after I came. So I didn’t spend too much time with him.

Thomas: Were there other people from the New Orleans area in that school who maybe you didn’t know, but you knew that they were there from Louisiana?

Naseer Ahmad: Yeah, there were maybe, like—

Chaudhry: There was a lot of people.

Naseer Ahmad: Twenty.

Chaudhry: People from Louisiana, especially from New Orleans.

Naseer Ahmad: Around twenty people, maybe.

Thomas: OK, so quite a few actually.

Naseer Ahmad: And in my neighborhood, I didn’t have any friends either.

Thomas: No. And had you been there before to visit your uncle?

Naseer Ahmad: Yes, but at that time I was, like, four, maybe.

Chaudhry: Long time ago.

Zaheer Ahmad: Long time ago.

Naseer Ahmad: Long time ago.

Thomas: Right. So you didn’t feel any connections there.

Chaudhry: No.

Naseer Ahmad: No.
Zaheer Ahmad: Right, it’s not that. And top of that, when you have a problem, or even your relatives, sometimes, when you are not in good shape, they don’t want to (laughter) be a part of your problem.

Thomas: Not always helpful then.

Chaudhry: No, they are not very helpful somehow.

Zaheer Ahmad: They was not that helpful, and they don’t want to be—they think maybe I become a dependent on them. Right.

Chaudhry: And that’s what sometime you can’t even suggest for you. You cannot think what’s good for me, what’s bad for you.

Thomas: I see. It’s more complicated than that.

Chaudhry: Yeah, sometime, yeah, it’s really complicated when you are not in a good environment. A lot of people just give you idea, “You do this; you do that. You do this; do that.” But if they are not connected with you, not honest with you, you are not trust from that person. Even though later on you find it out, that if we do this thing it was maybe good for us, but if you can’t trust on someone, someone is not here with you with all of their hearts, it’s hard sometimes.

Thomas: Now, what made you decide not to go back to your apartment in Metairie? You had only packed for a few days thinking that you were going to be gone a few days.

Zaheer Ahmad: Me and Bari, we went back—

Thomas: Meaning Amtul?

Zaheer Ahmad: Amtul, right. We went back to our place after two weeks, I think.

Chaudhry: Right.

Zaheer Ahmad: After two weeks we left that area.

Thomas: You knew you weren’t flooded because you had just lived through it, even though the area had been. So go ahead. You said you went back after two weeks.

Zaheer Ahmad: Right, and that time you had to get a permit to get inside the city. So it took us a long time, almost four or five hours from Baton Rouge to New Orleans, to our place; to get to our place. But when I gone there, it was so much smell over there, even when I open up my apartment, it was really bad smell because a lot of people, they left the area, and they had meat and food inside their homes, and in their
refrigerators and freezers, there was food. And there was a lot of garbage, dirty water, and it was so much smell and so much depression because the streets was empty. You cannot find no one on a street.

Thomas: Did you go, too?

Naseer Ahmad: No.

Zaheer Ahmad: It looked like a ghost town, and I looked around the area; a lot of buildings, they lost their walls, and roofs was gone. You can see somebody’s living room from outside. And even in my apartment, things was really bad, so much smell then and mildew—

Thomas: OK. You were together. Is that when you decided to—

Zaheer Ahmad: We salvaged a few things on that time, and we took it back to Houston, some clothing.

Thomas: You mean that things were actually ruined because of the smell?

Zaheer Ahmad: Things was. By the time we gone to Houston, and we start opening up our clothing, it was so much smell and stink inside and mildew.

Thomas: So what about your furniture and other things?

Zaheer Ahmad: It’s all gone; it’s history now. We left everything over there. I don’t know what they did with it.

Thomas: Well, you went back to Houston, and you were in the process of deciding. You said you called somebody here. Did you have a connection here, family or friend connection?

Zaheer Ahmad: Yeah, it was family.

Thomas: Also here?

Zaheer Ahmad: Right.

Thomas: If you don’t mind my asking, what relative?

Zaheer Ahmad: It was my sister; she is living in Bealeton(?), Virginia.

Thomas: So northern Virginia area.

Zaheer Ahmad: Right.
Thomas: And so you decided to come here then.

Zaheer Ahmad: Right.

Thomas: And that was after a month in Houston. And did you drive or fly?

Zaheer Ahmad: We drove.

Thomas: The van?

Chaudhry: The same van. (laughter) The same van.

Thomas: I hope it treated you a little bit well.

Chaudhry: Really, really.

Thomas: And did you go through areas where you stopped and talked to people about coming from New Orleans, or did you just drive the whole way?

Zaheer Ahmad: We drove from Houston to all the way over here because you cannot go through Louisiana because (inaudible). So we came from Arkansas.

Naseer Ahmad: Through Memphis.

Zaheer Ahmad: Memphis, we stopped in Memphis. I have one friend; we stayed over there one night with him. Then we got to Virginia, and came to Bealeton. I start sending my kids in the Warrenton(?) school.

Thomas: The Warrenton School District here?

Zaheer Ahmad: Right.

Thomas: And how long did you stay with your sister then?

Zaheer Ahmad: It was almost two months. Two months.

Thomas: OK. So we’re getting to be toward winter at that point.

Zaheer Ahmad: Right. It was winter. When you are living in the New Orleans area, you never need any heavy clothing. We didn’t have no winter heavy clothings; so we have to buy all the jackets and coats and—

Naseer Ahmad: Thermals.

Zaheer Ahmad: Thermals.
Naseer Ahmad: (Inaudible) (laughter)

Zaheer Ahmad: And a lot of (inaudible). We even not familiar with those things.

Thomas: (laughter) Yeah, I can see from Nazeer’s face that he hasn’t adjusted to winter yet.

Zaheer Ahmad: Right.

Thomas: Can’t say I blame you.

Zaheer Ahmad: And they stayed in Warrenton school almost two months, at Tyler?

Naseer Ahmad: Taylor.

Zaheer Ahmad: Taylor Middle School?

Naseer Ahmad: Taylor Middle School. But it’s country. My kids, they never lived in the country, or we are not used to country. For groceries you have to go to Warrenton from Bealeton, or you have to go to Culpeper.

Thomas: I see.

Naseer Ahmad: It’s ten miles away.

Zaheer Ahmad: Ten, fifteen.

Chaudhry: Or Manassas.

Zaheer Ahmad: Or Manassas, yeah.

Thomas: Yes. Yeah, it’s far.

Chaudhry: It’s really far.

Zaheer Ahmad: And there was no jobs, nothing over there. Then I moved over here in Sterling with a family who was from uncle’s relatives’ side. We lived over there one month.

Chaudhry: But in Bealeton we have a really bad time.

Thomas: Why is that?

Chaudhry: Because when you are not in a good shape, no one wants around.
Zaheer Ahmad: I think the biggest mistake we made that we start depending on our—

Chaudhry: Families.

Zaheer Ahmad: —family, that OK, maybe they help you out somehow, or you have little peace of mind when you are (inaudible) family. But I think it was a really bad choice to move in with the family because I think they have their own problems, so they are running their day-to-day life. And suddenly you fell down from the sky, and they start thinking maybe it’s one more problem. So.

Chaudhry: Sometime people use you, too. When you are not in good shape, they use you. They misbehave with you a lot because of you are not standing on your own feet. But once you better, the things has changed, then—so that’s the thing.

Thomas: So but it sounds like you knew it would be temporary, living with these relatives.

Chaudhry: Exactly, yes. Exactly. No way would we—with the kids, you can’t live with someone.

Zaheer Ahmad: We still are temporary. We don’t know what’s going to happen in the future. Then we moved over here.

Thomas: OK. Well, that brings me to—we talked a little bit about the agencies, FEMA and the Red Cross and Reston Interfaith. And I know that the state of Virginia had given over control of some of the social services regarding the Hurricane Katrina victims to these different groups, one of them being Reston Interfaith for certain counties in northern Virginia. How did you get connected with this group, Reston Interfaith?

Zaheer Ahmad: I didn’t know nothing about a lot of things because these things are not published, or they didn’t have any guideline or anything. The people, they was running here and there; I was calling every day to FEMA that I need a place to live. And FEMA, they was calling me, “OK. Your trailer is ready, but we don’t have no commercial place to put your trailer. If you have a commercial place, we can deliver you a trailer. And they was not clear on that type; the commercial place they are talking about in Louisiana? Or they are talking about where I am right now in Virginia? They was not sure, either; so finally I told the lady in FEMA that I need some place to live. I’m running from place to place with my
kids. And she told me that, “You have to rent your own.” So I start looking for a place—

**Thomas:** The person from FEMA said you have to rent your own?

**Zaheer Ahmad:** Right. “And then we reimburse you for your rent and those kind of things.”

**Thomas:** Oh, really? So tell me first; how did you get involved with FEMA? Did you apply? A lot of people applied online.

**Zaheer Ahmad:** Right. I applied on a form because I didn’t have no computer or anything.

**Thomas:** Um-hm. And when was this? Was this—

**Zaheer Ahmad:** It was when I was in Houston.

**Thomas:** In Houston, OK. So you applied, and what was the reception then? Tell me the process that, what happened with FEMA. Did you receive $2000?

**Zaheer Ahmad:** FEMA didn’t know nothing on that time. FEMA, they just want to take your information, and that’s it.

**Thomas:** And how long did you wait before hearing back from them?

**Zaheer Ahmad:** I still waiting from that.

**Thomas:** Well, you did receive the $2000, right?

**Zaheer Ahmad:** Right.

**Thomas:** OK. So tell me more about specifics—

**Zaheer Ahmad:** Well, I have to call them; they never call me, or they never—

**Thomas:** They never return phone calls.

**Zaheer Ahmad:** No, they never. They didn’t have no guideline or anything. They are fishing in a pond, too, I think.

**Thomas:** OK. So eventually you receive the [$2000]. Was that before the New Year? Was that still in 2005?

**Zaheer Ahmad:** Uh-huh, right.
Thomas: OK. And then there was another check that’s for reimbursement of rent?

Zaheer Ahmad: Right, reimbursement of rent.

Thomas: Uh-huh. And was that rather random? I mean, how did they decide upon that amount, or was that specific? Something that you—

Zaheer Ahmad: Because when I was living even with my [phone rings] friends or family, they (inaudible) me live. There was other sad story because they say you have to pay the rent and electricity and everything.

Thomas: This was your family?

Zaheer Ahmad: Right, because I was not a single person; I have three kids.

Thomas: Was that here in Virginia or in Houston?

Zaheer Ahmad: Virginia and Houston, both. But I don’t blame them, either, because they have to pay, too.

Thomas: Yeah. Let me ask you a little bit more about the agencies then. So you’ve dealt with FEMA. And what is your assessment of FEMA? I mean, you told me some, that you know they were sort of fishing in a pond, themselves. But you’ve gotten help intermittently, but it sounds a little bit random, the $2000. Well, everybody’s gotten $2000, and you say it hasn’t necessarily been very logical. And then there’s been the rent reimbursement. And did you apply for a trailer?

Zaheer Ahmad: FEMA, they didn’t have no way to settle down the people. Of course they paid a lot of money to the hotels, and the hotels, they got rich because the people, they was staying in hotels. But that’s just a temporary thing.

Thomas: People from New Orleans, you’re saying, were staying—

Zaheer Ahmad: Yeah, they was staying in hotels in Houston, but I cannot live in a hotel with three kids and a family. A lot of families, they was not able to live in hotels.

Thomas: And that’s only going to last for so long, anyway. Nobody’s going to be able to do that forever.

Zaheer Ahmad: But they didn’t have no land to relocate the people. They didn’t have no plans. All their plan was just temporary plans that, “OK. We are going to pay the rent for the hotels for three months or four months.” Those kind of things, but when people dislocated from natural disaster or hurricanes and those kind of things, FEMA is supposed to have a plan to relocate them, which they never had plans.
Thomas: Right. No, that was very clear. What about this trailer then? You applied for a trailer in order to go back to Metairie? Is that accurate?

Zaheer Ahmad: Right, because I told FEMA that I need housing. So they called me one day, and they said that, “You have good news. Your trailer is ready, but there is bad news that we don’t have no commercial place to put the trailer.”

Thomas: Bizarre. And yet you applied as a resident.

Zaheer Ahmad: Right, and that time I (inaudible), I don’t have a place to put my trailer. So that thing was gone. So finally I rented this place, and on that time I was calling local governments, a lot of agencies, housing and this and that. Finally they directed me to (inaudible) Reston Interfaith. I went over there, and after that they took care of me a lot, the Reston—

Thomas: OK. Let me ask you some very specific—and I’m going to get back to you Naseer; don’t worry. But we’ve spoken about FEMA; you also have been dealing with the Red Cross. Did they get in touch with you? Did you get in touch with them?

Zaheer Ahmad: No, I went to Red Cross.

Thomas: Was that in Houston, or was that here?

Zaheer Ahmad: On, no; it was in Warrenton.

Thomas: It was in Warrenton, OK. So you went there, and what has the Red Cross done for you?

Zaheer Ahmad: The Red Cross, what they did it for me?

Thomas: Yes, what did they do or didn’t do for you?

Zaheer Ahmad: They just gave us the check; I think it was, like, $1400 or $1500, $300 per person, something—

Thomas: Did they direct you to Reston Interfaith?

Zaheer Ahmad: No, they didn’t direct us to it. No, no, no.

Thomas: How did you find Reston Interfaith?

Zaheer Ahmad: Because I was personally calling the Virginia Housing Authority and (inaudible) and all those kind of places to get housing assistance. And they said, “No, we didn’t have no assistance right now.”

Thomas: The state of Virginia didn’t have anything to offer.
Zaheer Ahmad: That’s what they told me, and they didn’t offer me anything.

Thomas: And when was this that you were calling? You were calling in what month or months?

Zaheer Ahmad: It was in January when I was calling; December, I think. December, 2005.

Thomas: Really? You have a good memory. (laughter)

Zaheer Ahmad: Finally, somebody—I don’t know who gave me the Reston Interfaith number. So I called them, and they said that, “We have a case manager for Katrina.” So I called the case manager, Katrina case manager, and she took all my information. And she was in a process to leave Reston Interfaith. Then Joann Weiss(?), she become case manager for Katrina. And she did really good. The other problem was that when I moved to over here with so much stress and running from place to place, I got sick. And I didn’t know what the problem is with me. And I went to doctor, and he did my blood work, and that time I find it out that I have a really high triglycerides. And I become a diabetic. And then they find it out that I might have depression. And there was no steady job or nothing. And still I don’t have any job. I applied for Fairfax County Public Schools.

Thomas: To do?

Zaheer Ahmad: To drive a bus.

Thomas: Um-hm. And you haven’t heard back?

Zaheer Ahmad: They did a training, but now it’s, I think after holidays they might call me.

Thomas: Um-hm. It would seem that there’d be some cabbie work here. No? Some taxicab.

Zaheer Ahmad: Yeah, I tried to do that with the Washington Flyer(?), but you have to put fourteen, fifteen, sixteen hours a day, and you have to pay a lot of money to have a cab, which is like $570 every week.

Thomas: Really?

Zaheer Ahmad: Right. And the area is new; I don’t know too much about the area. You can make—

Thomas: Um-hm. So a lot of obstacles.
Zaheer Ahmad: Right. Things are difficult when you have to start from scratch in a new place. It’s very difficult.

Thomas: So tell me more about your health. Are you getting help at all?

Zaheer Ahmad: Yeah, I’m taking medicine right now. Reston Interfaith, they help me to buy my medicines, and services—what’s?

Chaudhry: Amerigroup(?)?

Zaheer Ahmad: No, no. The people they gave us the food stamps.

Thomas: It wasn’t the state government, then?

Chaudhry: Yeah.

Thomas: It was?

Chaudhry: It was, I think, state government.

Zaheer Ahmad: Right. What they call it over here in Virginia?

Thomas: You can always find out later and let me know. But, so you did get some food stamps as well?

Zaheer Ahmad: Right. Now, I start getting some food stamps.

Thomas: I see. What about this apartment you said that you’re renting? Is this also something that Reston Interfaith has helped you with?

Zaheer Ahmad: Reston Interfaith, they are helping me. I paid rent for one month; it was very difficult. It’s $1238 rent plus electric and—

Chaudhry: Water.

Zaheer Ahmad: Water. It’s very, very difficult. And they help me, too; Reston Interfaith, they gave us some furniture, some cooking pots. And they gave us cards from different stores.

Thomas: Right. How long are they going to continue to help you with your rent?

Zaheer Ahmad: I have no idea how long they are going to do—

Thomas: Have they not communicated that with you?
Zaheer Ahmad: No, not really, but the case manager, she offered me to Home Stretch Housing. Or?

Chaudhry: Home Stretch.

Zaheer Ahmad: Home Stretch, right. And they interview us, and they might take us for next two years, Home Stretch. In Home Stretch, you have to pay, like, 31 percent of your income as the rent. So I really don’t know what my future is; I’m still a rolling stone.

Thomas: And are you—and again, you just said this. So. But are you planning on staying here at least for a couple of years, it sounds like?

Zaheer Ahmad: Right. The reason is because my kids, they are moving from school to school. I don’t [want to] mess up their education. And there is no living back in Louisiana; it’s not easy to find apartments because sometimes I call over there in contact with my few friends, and there is no work over there, also. And I don’t want to take my kids over there right now, and I don’t want them to move from school to school. They start doing really good over here in the schools, and I hope they are going to be continuing.

Thomas: Naseer is smiling. Tell me, Naseer, from your point of view. Now, obviously this is very difficult as a twelve-year-old, as well, all this moving. How many schools have you been in this last year since September?

Naseer Ahmad: Four.

Thomas: Four schools?

Naseer Ahmad: Yes.

Thomas: One in Houston and three in Virginia?

Naseer Ahmad: One in New Orleans, one in Houston, and two in Virginia.

Thomas: I see. And are you going to be going to the same school that you just ended with this spring in the fall, or do you know?

Naseer Ahmad: Actually I just finished elementary school this year. Well, actually, this is the first place I’ve heard about with sixth grade in elementary. So I finished elementary, and this is going to be my first year of middle school.

Thomas: How are you finding it?

Naseer Ahmad: I’ve heard that the schools in this county are, like, the best in America. I like it because education here is easier. It’s not too much of a burden.
because, like, in New Orleans I sort of felt a burden on myself. Over here I don’t have a burden on me, and the students, like, everywhere there’s not good people. But you know, like, I’m starting to adapt with the people, trying my best. But sometimes they don’t want to adapt with me.

**Thomas:** Really?

**Naseer Ahmad:** Yeah, but that doesn’t mean all of them. Most of them I’ve adapted with, and I’ve made some friends that I could trust.

**Thomas:** It takes time, doesn’t it? It takes a long time when you move.

**Chaudhry:** Takes time whenever you go to a new place.

**Thomas:** Yes, for everybody and at any age, but I know it’s very difficult for children in school.

**Chaudhry:** Right. Yes, of course. Teachers are new. Yeah, the students are new, and the style is different.

**Naseer Ahmad:** It’s totally different style.

**Chaudhry:** In New Orleans they used to work a lot with the kids in the school. So. But here, I think they are a little different here.

**Naseer Ahmad:** Like—

**Thomas:** You’re learning this, too, as the mother.

**Chaudhry:** But there was too much teacher and parent connection there in Louisiana, but here you have to go yourself and introduce that, “I’m the parent of this child. I want to know how he’s doing, like, other than report cards.”

**Thomas:** I see. So the teachers in New Orleans reached out to you more than—

**Chaudhry:** Right, really close to the parents.

**Naseer Ahmad:** And like, just going through all this, I was in world history in New Orleans. Then I went to Houston, I was taking American history part one, and then I came here, taking American history part two. So my head’s bouncing around, and I’m trying to catch everything. Math is different; like I was taking prealgebra; then I started taking algebra, then regular math. So it’s very hard to stay with the subjects they have here.
Thomas: Yes, four schools in one year is certainly a lot. Absolutely. Have you found that anybody, the school system or particular teachers, are making special efforts for you as somebody who’s come from New Orleans?

Naseer Ahmad: There was my counselor; she helped a lot. Well, not a lot, but you know she just gave me company sometimes. And when I had, like, times of breaking down, maybe, and there was also another counselor that sort of helped that gave us numbers for human services.

Thomas: Have you taken advantage of those things? (laughter)

Naseer Ahmad: Have we? Not really.

Chaudhry: Not really.

Naseer Ahmad: My daughter’s counselor, my older daughter’s counselor, she was real nice. She mostly contact us; she usually talk with me how my daughter is doing, if she is doing—

Zaheer Ahmad: We didn’t have a computer, and my daughter, she asked them. So they finded out one old computer, fix it up, and give it to us. It was a lot of help, you know. And social services over here, they help us (inaudible).

Thomas: Are you receiving counseling?

Zaheer Ahmad: I’m receiving some counseling from Reston Interfaith because they have a counselor. She comes every sometimes two weeks or week.

Thomas: So there is some help.

Zaheer Ahmad: Right.

Thomas: What are some of the—talking about schools right now, but—other similarities or differences? Obviously you’ve been bounced around even in Virginia. So it’s hard to say. You’re here now. We’re by the airport; we’re by Dulles International Airport. I think these are sort of brand-new apartment buildings, and you may or may not stay here. You might be moving on. But what are some of the other sort of similarities and differences that you find? Clearly you haven’t had time enough to establish yourselves in schools and neighborhoods.

Zaheer Ahmad: Things are very far over here, Virginia. Things are—

Thomas: Sort of sprawled out.

Zaheer Ahmad: Right, spread out. Virginia is very spread out. And I think the people that are living here, they probably used to spread-out things.
Chaudhry: And things are real expensive.

Thomas: Yes, I hear that a lot. The cost of living is very different.

Chaudhry: Cost of living, everything is the second thing. And people are so realistic here. (laughter)

Thomas: Are they? What do you mean by realistic?

Chaudhry: Like in New Orleans, if you are in good shape or bad shape, it’s your problem. But here, you can see the difference. You can see the big difference. Yeah. Things are real expensive.

Thomas: OK. What about you Naseer; what do you feel?

Naseer Ahmad: And like in New Orleans, suppose if all of New Orleans was on a boat, and it was sinking, they would, like—maybe somebody would—well, almost everybody would give you a hand. But over here, I think, like, maybe nobody would give you a hand.

Thomas: What makes you say that?

Naseer Ahmad: Everybody’s on their own path over here. They really don’t care about you.

Thomas: What gives you that impression?

Naseer Ahmad: In school, the children.

Thomas: Hm. They’re really that different.

Naseer Ahmad: Yeah.

Thomas: Interesting. Do you think that some of that is also that you haven’t spent that time in one school yet, or is it that the children, something about the other kids—

Naseer Ahmad: I think I spent enough time in this school, and I still don’t feel like—

Zaheer Ahmad: I think it’s a little bit cultural shock. It is probably different culture over here than culture of New Orleans, or Louisiana culture is maybe different.

Thomas: Now, you lived in New York City.

Zaheer Ahmad: I lived in New York City.
Thomas: So how do you compare it with that? How long were you there?

Zaheer Ahmad: I lived over there, like, two years. New York is good for certain lot of things, but it’s different. But I really love New Orleans. New Orleans was my favorite.

Thomas: I see. And how does this area compare to New York in terms of—because say the same thing about New York. People are on their own path, but at the same time a lot of New Yorkers feel that there are real neighborhoods and—

Zaheer Ahmad: Right, this is the difference.

Thomas: —that kind of thing. So I think you have both in New York, but how do you feel this area compares?

Zaheer Ahmad: Probably if you are living in the Washington DC, then probably you have little bit of neighborhood feeling, like in New York because in walking distance you can go and have a dry-cleaning shop or restaurants or those kind. But in Virginia, it’s totally different. I think it’s a different atmosphere; it’s probably more new areas where we are right now, spread out.

Naseer Ahmad: Like, usually bigger cities, they’re not that much of a—like this area is more of a business area; so—

Thomas: Very much so.

Naseer Ahmad: So, like, you can think that most of the people are, like, business people, and they’re on their own track. And in—

Thomas: Yeah, right here, definitely.

Naseer Ahmad: And in the cities, like, usually they’re middle-class people that, you know, they bond with each other, and more of a cultural (inaudible).

Zaheer Ahmad: And environmental—

Thomas: And a what? Environmental?

Zaheer Ahmad: Environmental difference.

Thomas: Just for the record, we’re next to Dulles International Airport, which I mentioned, off the [Highway] 267, which is off the Beltway. And we’re surrounded by essentially large office buildings, and there’s just a few condominiums and apartment buildings that are very new, as you say, in this area. So it’s not—there’s no mixed use; there’s no sort of grocery store that you can walk to. So it is very, very business-oriented here. Exactly. So that’s a lot of differences. Let me ask you what
you would like to see in a rebuilt New Orleans, or the whole area. What would you like to see change?

**Naseer Ahmad:** Everything, maybe.

**Thomas:** Such as?

**Zaheer Ahmad:** I think they have to, if they want rebuilt New Orleans, they have to make a better infrastructure. And they have to make better levees; they have to spend the money on the levees because if they have to keep the New Orleans area, New Orleans is below sea level. They have to have levees around New Orleans. And hurricanes are going to be there always, and they have to have better pumping stations. And they have to make sure if the electricity is not available, or it somehow because of the hurricane or wind, the electricity go out, then they have to have a backup generating system. And they have to keep the generators on a higher place so they are not submerged in the water. The motors and pumps, they have to [be] mounted probably in a higher place, a better place, where they cannot submerge in the water, also. They have to do probably more highways.

**Thomas:** When you say, “they,” who do you feel should be responsible for the infrastructure upkeep?

**Zaheer Ahmad:** The local government, state and federal government.

**Thomas:** A combination, then?

**Zaheer Ahmad:** Combination, right.

**Thomas:** Um-hm, OK. And Naseer, you said everything should change. What do you mean by that?

**Naseer Ahmad:** Like New Orleans pretty much is complete from about maybe sixty years. So, like, everything is old there. So I’m thinking that maybe they should put newer buildings in the area. Like, our apartment complex was made in the [19]60s; so maybe it should be remade or remodeled.

**Thomas:** Um-hm. What would that do? Make it stronger?

**Naseer Ahmad:** Yeah, make it stronger, which can sort of help. And make the levees—

**Zaheer Ahmad:** Because obviously the building codes may be much better now than what was in the [19]60s or [10]50s or maybe [10]40s.
**Thomas:** Do you think that there should be a requirement to build a certain kind of house, one that’s above a certain number of feet, in order to be safe, and that kind of thing?

**Zaheer Ahmad:** They might do that, but they cannot do this; I think that’s why they have levees.

**Chaudhry:** If they want to build New Orleans, first of all they have to do something with the levees. If their levees are strong, then they have to spend money on their apartment buildings or other houses or big buildings.

**Zaheer Ahmad:** Levees and pumping is very important for that area because you have to pump out everything.

**Chaudhry:** Otherwise, they do not have to spend the money.

**Thomas:** Right. Why bother? In other words.

**Chaudhry:** Yeah, because the things will, maybe one day the things will [be] worse than this, which were right now.

**Thomas:** And in a long-term way, are you thinking of going back, or is it just too hard to know?

**Zaheer Ahmad:** It’s very difficult right now to make any kind of decision right now. But I don’t know what’s happen in the future because I have really good memories with New Orleans. So New Orleans is going to be always in my mind.

**Thomas:** What are your hopes and fears for the future?

**Zaheer Ahmad:** There is the hopes that I might settle down, and I might become better off. And my kids, they are right now, they might get better education, and they become better people in the future, better city then. But also I have the fears that if I’m not able to make it, then what’s going to happen?

**Thomas:** Um-hm. And what about you, Naseer, what are your hopes and fears?

**Naseer Ahmad:** My hopes are first to pass, get past high school, and I don’t know if this ever happens, but I wish I could go to Harvard and become a lawyer. Or if I doubt this happens, but if I’m good in sports—

**Zaheer Ahmad:** There is no doubt; you can do it.

**Naseer Ahmad:** If I’m good in sports, maybe I might join sports in college and maybe go to the pros. And right now I don’t really have any fears, but actually I do have a fear. I don’t want to live through, like, another Katrina. That’s it.
Thomas: That’s pretty big. What about you, Amtul?

Chaudhry: Yes, I just pray for my family that we live together, wherever we live, and for their good education, for better jobs for me and my husband. That’s what our basic thing we can supply them everything what they need. Yeah. And the second thing is, of course, our health. Yeah. And then sometime you worry, of course, for your kids; if you can provide them the good things. That’s what your fears are, but I believe in God. We will do good job for them. But sometime you need help; you need a lot of help. With other people’s help, you can make it.

Thomas: What about in terms of any of the agencies that we’ve spoken about, is there anything else that you would like to see from—speaking of help, anything more that you’re expecting from FEMA or any of these other entities that you would like to see? From the federal government in other forms, from the current administration, what you would like to see addressed, talked about? Anything of that nature?

Zaheer Ahmad: I have no idea, and I also have no hopes that they might do anything. But I don’t know what they are going to do. I have no hopes.

Thomas: You don’t believe that this administration’s going to do anything, it sounds like. OK. What about you?

Chaudhry: I will think if they help, especially, actually they should help every person in the world, but especially if they help right now to people of New Orleans. I think there will be a lot of prayers with every person who is sitting on the seat.

Zaheer Ahmad: For the government they are spending I think $83 billion. I don’t know where they are spending and how they are spending because the majority people, they haven’t got help.

Thomas: Are you in contact with other people from the region here?

Zaheer Ahmad: In this area?

Thomas: Yeah.

Zaheer Ahmad: There is a few people from New Orleans, very few, but the majority people, they move to Texas, Arkansas, Oklahoma, Mississippi, Alabama, not in this area.

Thomas: So you just know a few people from that area?

Zaheer Ahmad: Right.
Thomas: OK. Is there anything else that we haven’t discussed that you would like to add, anybody? That you think is important, anything at all? You can always tell me later. Often people think of things as I leave. (laughter)

Chaudhry: I think they should (inaudible) people—

Zaheer Ahmad: I want to say thank you to all those people; they helped us in bad times. And I also want to be thankful to those volunteers from Reston Interfaith or from Red Cross and people of Texas. They really helped. All those individuals, they helped. I want to say thank you to them.

Thomas: Anything else, Amtul?

Chaudhry: That’s all; we just want to say thank you to them. And I wish that we might, the people who are sitting on the good seats, they can provide us jobs so we can stand up on our own feet. And that will be much better for us because this way, when you work, you think that, “We don’t need anybody’s help.”

Zaheer Ahmad: I think federal government, they have to have a clear policy that when people—I hope it never happen again with any other state or any other city, but if people have to be relocated, they have to have a certain policy to relocate them properly because they might cannot do the same kind of job in a new area; they have to have new trainings to go in the new jobs and those kind of things.

Thomas: Um-hm, very good point. So some sort of relocation policy.

Zaheer Ahmad: Relocation policy or maybe some kind of education for the newer area, where they are going to find different jobs.

Thomas: Um-hm, training of some sort.

Zaheer Ahmad: Some kind of training.

Thomas: OK. Well, thank you so much for all of your time. I really appreciate it.

Zaheer Ahmad: You’re welcome.

Chaudhry: Thank you so much, ma’am. Thank you for your time, too.

Zaheer Ahmad: For coming over here and talking with us.

Thomas: Absolutely my pleasure.

(end of interview)