Biography

Born on November 21, 1980, in Frankfurt, Germany, Natalie C. Brown was one of four children. In addition to Natalie, there were two older sisters, Kelly Dawson and Christy Pollack, and one younger brother, Colin Brown, born to Ms. Brown’s father and mother. Her father, Charles M. Brown, spent many years in military service in the US Army, then in the steel industry, and as a Department of Defense Contractor, and her mother, Catherine Newman Brown, was a housewife. Ms. Brown is a self-described “military brat” who moved many times as she was growing up. As a child, she experienced Hurricane Hugo, which she remembers as a frightening experience, while living in Charleston, South Carolina.

In 1999, Ms. Brown matriculated to Tulane University on a scholarship, and also attended Kings College, London, England; she earned a bachelor of arts in English. During Hurricane Katrina, Ms. Brown was living and working in New Orleans, Louisiana, and renting a home, shared by her boyfriend and another couple, two large dogs, and three cats. She has worked as a freelance journalist, as a paralegal, and as a belly dance performer and teacher. Her hobbies include music, belly dancing, art, and costume design.

Before Hurricane Katrina made landfall, Ms. Brown and her boyfriend evacuated to her parents’ home in Columbia, South Carolina. At the time of this interview, she was living in Columbia, South Carolina, in a rented home with her boyfriend.
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Bunn: All right, this is an interview with Natalie Brown. Today’s date is January 21, 2006. All right, so I guess—

(a brief portion of the audio unrelated to the interview has not been transcribed)

Bunn: All right, so just kind of in general, just to start off with, just kind of tell me briefly how you ended up in Columbia.

Brown: Um-hm.

Bunn: Well, obviously because of the hurricane, but just kind of give me a brief overview of exactly what happened and how you got here.

Brown: Yeah. Well, I was a military brat growing up, so we lived all over the place and didn’t really have a set home. My father’s parents have settled down in the DC area; they were government officials. My mom’s parents have settled down in Moncks Corner, South Carolina. So, when my dad got out of the Army he was in the steel industry for a while and he was at (inaudible), Cincinnati, Ohio. We went up there with him for a little while but my brother got so sick with asthma that we came back down south and kind of settled in Columbia, South Carolina until my dad could find a job and get down in the area. And so my parents and my family, all my brothers and sisters, are here in Columbia. So, every time we evacuated from hurricanes in New Orleans I would, instead of going, you know, spending twelve hours to go west ninety miles to Baton Rouge, I would spend twelve hours and go ahead and come up this direction and kind of hang out with my family. So, that was always our contingency plan.

Bunn: Right. So then when Katrina came through, did that mean that you got out well in advance when you saw it coming?

Brown: Yeah, well, it was hard. By means of background story, I went through Hurricane Hugo in Charleston when I was a kid, and we got stuck being that everybody was like, oh, that’s not going to hit here, it’s going to hit Savannah, so we stayed put and by the time it turned north and we realized it was going to hit
Charleston, we were stuck. They closed the interstates and said, you know, ride it out. So I went through that. I was eight years old and it scared the absolute tar out of me. (laughter) I mean we had, you know, we could listen to the tornadoes going fifty feet from our house.

**Bunn:** Wow.

**Brown:** So I was obviously traumatized by that and when I got to New Orleans we all learned about the situation of being in the bowl and how dangerous it was, and if the big one ever hit how bad it was going to be.

**Bunn:** Yeah, when was that when you got to New Orleans? When did you start living there?

**Brown:** I went there in 1999. Tulane University gave me a full scholarship. So I graduated from Irma High School here in Columbia and then I went to New Orleans and was there for two years. I took my junior year and I went to London and then I came back to Tulane for my senior year and then stayed there an additional two years until Katrina.

**Bunn:** All right. Let’s see. Let me get to the more specific questions. Now, so you mentioned that how long and your family is from here.

**Brown:** More or less, yeah.

**Bunn:** Yeah, is here now, OK.

**Brown:** Um-hm.

**Bunn:** All right. So, what kind of—and I guess you weren’t in New Orleans that long, that many years.

**Brown:** It was six years.

**Bunn:** So I mean—

**Brown:** Five out of six.

**Bunn:** OK. So, how attached were you to the region? At least—

**Brown:** I was—well, when you’re a military brat you usually don’t stay anywhere more than about two years.

**Bunn:** Right.

**Brown:** So six years for me is like a record and it feels like forever to me.
Bunn: Yeah.

Brown: And I come from a very odd kind of worldly family because I was a military brat and my parents were also military brats, so you know, you move around all this time and you move into places where, you know, kids have been together since they were born and they’ve all been through the same schools, and here’s this oddball kid, you know, I’m the strange kid. There’s this oddball kid moving in in the middle of the tenth grade. So, I went to New Orleans and it spoke to me because it was very open and accepting, and very strange. I mean, nothing works. The city was completely dysfunctional, but at the same time if you were a guy and wanted to walk down the street wearing nothing but a pink tutu, nobody would look twice at you. (laughter) So it was really cool. It was one of those places where you could just go and be yourself and be accepted for it and it was fine. And (inaudible), you know, so many weird and interesting people down there, so I really liked it. I liked the weather. I liked, you know, it’s dirty but it’s beautiful. It’s kind of that diamond in the rough kind of feel to it.

Bunn: Right.

Brown: And I really loved it down there.

Bunn: All right. Where was your—where in New Orleans did you live, like what neighborhood?

Brown: We lived Uptown all the time we were there. I graduated from Tulane, which of course is right by Audubon Park. It’s uptown in kind of the southwest corner of Orleans Parish. When I got out of that I ended up, a couple of months later, moving in with what has become my partner, my boyfriend, Toby Morriss, and then he was going through grad school at Tulane. He was getting his MFA in photography. So, we were there for another two years waiting for him to finish. And for a while we lived on—let’s see, we lived on just off Maple Street on Adams Street, so still very much in the university area. And then we found—it was a piece of shit apartment. (laughter) That place was a slum, basically, and it was run by one of the really big kind of college slumlord companies that steals your money and steals your safety deposit and all that kind of stuff. So then we moved into this little house on Webster Street, which is one of the richest streets in New Orleans, so we were kind of the hippie trash renting amid all these million-dollar mansions which was amusing. That was more south; it was south of St. Charles and it was about three blocks from Magazine and three blocks east of Audubon Park, so it was really nice. We really enjoyed that. We stayed there; there’s this little, little old lady who was our landlord and she’d gotten the house in an inheritance from her aunt or something, and she didn’t know what she was charging. I mean, she was—it was cheap for what it was, and we had a garage, and also a great neighborhood and all sorts of stuff. And they lived in Lakeview and I actually worry about them and wonder if they got out. But when Toby graduated this last May, 2005, we were losing his stipend and we didn’t
really have much in the way of employment. I mean you scramble and get paid under the table working tables, you know, waiting tables and I was freelance writing for *Gambit*, which was great; I loved them, but they didn’t pay very much.

**Bunn:** What was *Gambit*?

**Brown:** *Gambit Weekly*? It’s kind of like—*Gambit Weekly* magazine is a weekly alternative magazine. It’s kind of like of the *Free Times* here—

**Bunn:** Um-hm.

**Brown:** —but about five times bigger and a lot more sophisticated, but they still didn’t have any money because it’s an alternative weekly.

**Bunn:** Right.

**Brown:** And then, so we moved in, starting in May we moved in with our best friends. We called it “the commune” because our best friends, Michelle Lempa and Eric Deeble, had come down there to go to school, as well, and she was working in public health; he wanted to be a vet so he was working as a vet tech. She had just finished her PhD just as Toby was getting out and we all knew student loans were going to be coming.

**Bunn:** Um-hm. (laughter)

**Brown:** And even if you’re a professional in New Orleans, you can’t make enough to make it, really. So, we decided we would move in together to try and save on rent and, you know, utilities and food, and all that kind of stuff. And so we had four people, four adults living in 1,000 square feet with two large dogs and three cats.

**Bunn:** Great. (laughter)

**Brown:** They called it the commune. It was on Lowerline Street just down from Willow, so it was about two blocks from Tulane campus and a little bit above Freret, so just on the corner of the flooding.

**Bunn:** Yes.

**Brown:** So we lived there and they were actually out of town when Katrina hit. They went out of town for a wedding, they left on Thursday and it wasn’t until Friday afternoon I was actually watching it, and I’ll probably talk about this in a minute because I think it’s really important. But, you know, nobody knew this was going to hit.

**Bunn:** Um-hm.
Brown: It was just a little blip on the radar. It came across Florida. It was supposed to hit Tampa. It wasn’t even on our radar screens and it was, you know, it’s going to hit whatever on the Florida Panhandle; it’s not going to hit us. So, nobody was really paying attention. And our friends, you know, packed up to go to a wedding in New Jersey and they went up there. And on Friday we—Friday night, we called them, and we said, “We may be evacuating tomorrow. What do you want us to take?” And then so Saturday morning we got up, and we checked the National Hurricane Center Web site again and we looked at the 4 a.m. report, and we went, “Oh my God.” We started packing. So we grabbed—we used their SUV because I have a Saturn with a kaput transmission and we couldn’t fit all the dogs and cats, the cat carriers and everything that we needed to evacuate out, so we put their dogs and cats in the back of their SUV and packed up everybody’s computers, everybody’s papers, photographs, everything we could find for both sets of couples. And we got out about noon on Saturday way ahead of the rush, just as everybody was starting to freak out and just as they were starting to call for the mandatory evacuations.

Bunn: OK.

Brown: So, yeah, and so we hung out with the dogs and cats for about two weeks until they could find plane tickets to come and retrieve them.

Bunn: And so y’all came here?

Brown: We came here.

Bunn: To your family’s—

Brown: Um-hm.

Bunn: All right. Do you know—what about, I mean as far as the place where you guys were living, do you know what happened to it?

Brown: Yes. After the hurricane we heard—you know, everybody was sitting there, we were desperately looking at all of the pictures, all of the photographs, all of the video trying to figure out, “OK, I think I know where that is. Is that our neighborhood? I can’t tell.” And you didn’t hear much about Uptown. Everybody was talking about, you know, flooding here, flooding there, French Quarter, nobody talked about Uptown because so many trees were down nobody was up there, and nobody was talking about it. So, Toby’s brother is in the National Guard and he went down there. And he flew what he thought was overhead in a Chinook looking out of a teeny little window at the bottom, and he told us there was about five to six feet, which you know, devastated us. And then we heard, you know, it was like a game of telephone, from this neighbor who talked to this neighbor who had a friend staying in their house kind of thing that there was only a couple of inches of water. And so we had these two conflicting reports for weeks. And we got there, and it turned out to be pretty much in the middle where you would expect it to be. We had about two and a
half feet of water. But we were living in what’s known as a “single shotgun.” It was a bit more modern single shotgun probably done in the 1920s. It had the bathroom, actually, in the house and it was set up in, not the—you know, one room leads into the next, leads into the next, leads into the next kind of setup. Like the kitchen was on the side and there was a hallway down the middle to get into the bedrooms, and people who are in New Orleans would know about, you know, the different styles of houses, so. But like most houses, it was up about three feet off the ground.

Bunn: Um-hm.

Brown: So we missed having water in the house by about four inches, so that was OK. We lost all the cars.

Bunn: Oh.

Brown: But, you know, when the transmission was shot on the Saturn it had 225,000 miles on it anyway, and it was a good death for the car. (laughter) And my dad got insurance money for it.

Bunn: Oh, cool. What about any—was there any wind damage or anything?

Brown: The roof got ripped off the metal shed in the back, so lots of damage in there between the water that came in. It (inaudible) the hot water heater, killed the washer and dryer and, you know, most of the tools were completely destroyed, but that wasn’t so bad. Other than that, everything was, went fine.

Bunn: OK. So why—I mean if there was—you decided just to not, you know, to not stay in the house since, you know, the rest of the city was so wrecked or what was it?

Brown: What do you mean, like after? Because we evacuated here before the hurricane.

Bunn: Right.

Brown: But—

Bunn: But did you go back and see what—

Brown: Well, we weren’t allowed back in the city for six weeks.

Bunn: Right.

Brown: Five, five and a half, six weeks when they finally opened up the city. So we went back and we checked it out; we stayed about a week. And we did some repairs and basically we just, you know, we did the thing where you had to take the refrigerator out of the house and left it on the curb because, you know, five weeks—
even though we were a vegetarian household, you know, five weeks with no power it’s pretty disgusting, too. And then we got that out and we packed up all our stuff and we put it in the trailer and we left. And when we moved into Eric and Michelle’s house, most of our stuff went into storage at Toby’s studio at Tulane.

Bunn: OK.

Brown: Which was, it was on the fifth floor, which is the top floor, of a very large brick building. And we went over there and Tulane at the time was being guarded by armed merceneries dressed in black.

Bunn: Hm.

Brown: They had armed guards at every entrance to the school and they weren’t letting anyone on. And a lot of this was because they were telling everybody, they were telling all the students, “Oh, its fine. We just had a little bit of damage, no big deal,” because they were terrified that their students weren’t going to come back. And meanwhile they were gutting the first floor of almost every building above Freret, which was almost all the living quarters and a lot of the Newcomb Campus, including the Art Building. So we were told by this mercenary that airborne mold had gotten loose in the Art Building and that everything in the, you know, the building had been condemned and that everything inside was destroyed. And that was most of our stuff. Most of our stuff was in storage; Toby’s artwork, all of our library, all of my costuming and all that kind of stuff. And we’ve since found out that this wasn’t true. The first floor was really—the first floor was slightly below the ground and it was very badly damaged, but all of our stuff is still sitting there because the elevator is still not working, so we can’t go to get all our stuff, so.

Bunn: All right. Let’s see, going back to the list here. Let’s see. All right. Going back more to the history of where you were living in New Orleans.

Brown: Um-hm.

Bunn: What traditions did you carry on, like you know, did you do Mardi Gras, St. Patrick’s Day parade and that stuff?

Brown: Most of the people who lived there did not do Mardi Gras, and we were one of those, one of those people. You know, you go to the first year or two, especially in college—

Bunn: Um-hm.

Brown: —and then you get really bored with it because mostly it’s out-of-towners getting very drunk because they think that’s what you’re supposed to do and it gets really old and it gets really dirty and disgusting. And I never got to do Mardi Gras in the French Quarter which is one thing I regret; I always did it Uptown. So we did it
this last year to an extent; we went to a lot of the parades and dressed up in costume, and went with Eric and Michelle and some other friends and had a lot of fun. But most of the time, you know, it’s just a big pain in the butt because, you know, they’d block off so many streets you can’t get anywhere. Especially when we were living on Webster Street the Thoth parade came right down Magazine Street by our house and we’d be locked in for eight hours and not be able to drive anywhere. And people park on your lawn and run over your pansies, and all that stuff and it’s just, you know. So we didn’t do that very much. I went to the symphony whenever I could especially because I was freelancing as a classical music and dance writer for Gambit Weekly. And mostly our traditions were personal ones. There’s a sushi restaurant called Ninja’s and it’s on Oak Street right at the parish border with Jefferson Parish—and it came through OK—and we would go every single Friday night for about two years and we had mostly the same sushi. We always finished it off with a teardrop roll which is nothing but pickled wasabi, rice and sushi wrapper. It is the best thing. It would make your head explode. It was great. (laughter) And so we’d go do that, and we would sit in front of our favorite sushi chef, Moriaki(?), and then if the weather was nice, we’d get on Toby’s motorcycle, in the last few months that we had it, and we would go downtown to the Dragon’s Den, which is on Esplanade right by Frenchmen Street right on the river like right by the old Mint, like right on the edge of the east end edge of the [French] Quarter, right when it turns into the Marigny. And we would see my teachers and my belly-dance troupe perform at the Dragon’s Den and then we’d go home. So mostly it was personal stuff, you know, you’d go to. You know, the St. Patrick’s Day parades and all that kind of stuff didn’t appeal to us very much, so we usually didn’t go.

Bunn: You know, I just kind of—that strikes a chord with me just because I’m originally from Augusta, Georgia, where The Masters is.

Brown: Uh-huh.

Bunn: And everybody who lives there hates The Masters because, you know, all the people come in from out of town, nobody knows how to drive, and it’s just—

Brown: Yeah.

Bunn: —you know, so.

Brown: And at the same time, you know, Mardi Gras is such a big part of the city and it’s been going on for so long that I—I agree with the fact that they’re going to do it this year, you know. I think if they didn’t do it that would just be admitting defeat.

Bunn: Right. Let’s see. Do you have any (inaudible) specific like—well, you probably mentioned them already, but if anything else comes to mind, any vivid memories of the community before the hurricane, besides what you’ve mentioned?
Brown: Oh, well, I was there for so long. Just it was more like, it’s like any really big metropolitan city, and New Orleans was really a small town masquerading as a big city because it, you know—well, there’s only half a million people in there, and it has a couple of skyscrapers, but it’s not like London. I think everybody finds their own personal New Orleans when you get there for a while. I mean, the tourists we all stick on Bourbon Street because we don’t want them to come off and bother the rest of us. But, you know, going down Magazine Street was really starting to get really cool. They’ve been developing it and all their, you know, funky locally-owned businesses moved in, and it was really neat. So I loved Magazine Street and a lot of the local shops around there. And then—it’s really strange—since the hurricane, you know, it seems like New Orleans was forever ago, but every once in a while I’ll just be walking down the street or sitting reading a book or lying in bed or whatever, and I’ll just get this very vivid flash of walking down Decatur Street or something like that and it really hurts for a little while.

Bunn: All right. What about community problems and strengths prior to the hurricane? I mean, like you said, the whole—

Brown: It was a disaster.

Bunn: Really?

Brown: It was a complete disaster. I mean, nothing worked. The streets were in shambles. I was once, I was working in a tea shop for a while, an Indian tea shop, and I was talking to this girl who had been in the Peace Corps in Ghana, and they said, “Well, I have a friend from London who’s, you know, doing the British version of the Peace Corps in Kenya.” And every time he writes about Kenya, I’m reminded of New Orleans. And I said, “Is living in New Orleans really like living in Ghana?” And she says, “Yes, but the roads are better in Ghana.” (laughter) And I’ve actually heard that a lot, like a lot of Peace Corps people who come back to the United States and just can’t cope with how modern and strange it is, move down to New Orleans and do much better. I mean, it was like living in a third world country. We had packs of wild dogs roaming the streets. And you know, the corruption in New Orleans is so bad. It was so bad, and the schools were awful. Luckily I didn’t have any kids, but I knew people who had kids, and once they started reaching about school age they moved to Houston, you know. So that was awful. Medical care was awful. Customer service was awful. And there was such poverty; there was no economy at all. I mean big oil picked up, I guess, in the 1980s and left, and just the economy, the bottom fell out of the economy in New Orleans, so everybody was scraping by on bartending and, you know, you’d get paid under the table. And I don’t think—I think Gambit was the only job that I actually got a W-2, you know, W-2 form for. You know, it was just an absolute disaster. And Mayor Nagin came in and started making a lot of changes. I mean, it was pretty apparent. He came in and threw, what, half of city hall in jail basically for corruption. He’d gotten rid of a lot. And he brought his own cronies in with him, which any politician will do.
Brown: But, you know, he started doing things, and Governor Blanco, we were hoping, would come in and do the same thing, and I was much more disappointed in her than I was in Nagin during the whole hurricane because she didn’t really do anything but cry on TV.

Bunn: Hm.

Brown: But small things started to change. The roads started to get fixed, and they were fixed correctly. You know, the sewer system started to be replaced, all that kind of thing. So, things were starting. It was looking like it was starting to turn itself around a little bit. And the revitalization was happening. They had just put in a streetcar downtown, the Canal Street streetcar, which went all the way out to City Park. And they were going to revitalize Canal Street like they managed to revitalize Magazine Street. Eight years ago you couldn’t walk down Magazine Street without getting shot, and now all of a sudden it’s like the place to be and rent is going sky-high, and, you know, the standard urban revitalization story.

Bunn: Um-hm.

Brown: But it was neat. So it was starting to get better, but it was still very, very dysfunctional, and you just kind of get used to it. I mean, I had come out, and it’s, like, things work. I’m like, “Damn, I’ve forgotten what it’s like to live in real civilization.” But you kind of just, you learn to love it because of its quirks.

Bunn: Right.

Brown: —you know, at the same time.

Bunn: Right. Can you say a little bit more about—the question as is written here is, what’s your opinion of local state and federal politicians before and after the hurricanes?

Brown: Well, that’s kind of a broad question—

Bunn: Right.

Brown: —because politicians, there’s so many of them.

Bunn: Um-hm.

Brown: I think a lot of it—I liked the mayor.

Bunn: Mayor Nagin?
Brown: I liked Mayor Nagin.

Bunn: Yeah.

Brown: I liked him a lot. I still do. It’s kind of a difficult question this week because of his whole chocolate-city shenanigans. Have you heard about this?

Bunn: No, unh-uh.

Brown: Oh man, it’s been all over the news. Well, on Martin Luther King Day, Mayor Nagin got up in front of a black audience and started giving kind of a preacher, you know, minister-reverend kind of speech.

Bunn: Um-hm.

Brown: And he said that, “God was angry at America, obviously, because of what we’ve been doing. God’s been angry at black people because they can’t get it together, and that’s why he sent the hurricanes at us and, but don’t worry, at the end of the day, New Orleans is going to be a chocolate city again,” which sent off a complete firestorm.

Bunn: Right.

Brown: And I know what he was getting at, and this is one of the things I worry about. With the ninth ward destroyed and most of our, you know—we were 68 percent African-American, and now a lot of those people feel like they’re not going to be welcome back. And Uptown, which Uptown or the French Quarter, which are pretty much the only remaining dry areas in the entire city, are very much white and middle class to upper middle class, and they’re the ones that are back, and they’re the ones trying to make the decisions. So there’s a lot of fear that it’s going to be very gentrified, that New Orleans is kind of going to be a Disney-fied version of its old self. And so I understand what Mayor Nagin was shooting for, but since he’s more of a businessman than he is a politician, when he starts speaking extemporaneously, he starts making mistakes like that and doesn’t think it through.

Bunn: Right.

Brown: So, his handlers basically didn’t have good control on him (inaudible) that day. I liked Nagin. I liked what he did for the city. I liked the direction that it was going in, and with what I’m hearing out of the Bring Back New Orleans Commission with the plans and the ideas that they have, if they go in that direction, if they make it a green city, if they put in bike trails, if they rebuild Storyville for a jazz district, you know, if they do all these parks and bike paths and everything that they’re talking about, I think that’s a good thing. And I still support Nagin. I don’t think he’s going to win reelection after this last week. Blanco? The governor race, I guess a year or two ago, was very interesting because everybody was laughing at us years ago when
we had either the crook incumbent governor versus David Duke, the Ku Klux Klan member, you know; that’s what our governor races are usually like. You’re picking between one crook and another, and you knew they were crooked. And Governor Edwards did end up in jail, along with his son.

**Bunn:** Hm.

**Brown:** But this last election for governor was very interesting because you had—is this plugged in?

**Bunn:** Yeah.

**Brown:** OK. You had Cajun grandma versus Bobby Jindal, who was the son of an Indian immigrant-educated doctor from Harvard, and it was very interesting. We had two, you know, supposedly reformer types that seemed really intelligent and seemed pretty straight laced.

**Bunn:** Right.

**Brown:** So, Blanco won, just barely, and it was New Orleans that put her over, and so we ended up sending Bobby Jindal to Congress as, like, one of the New Orleans’ representatives, the United States House. And I think now a lot of us wished that we’d voted for Bobby Jindal. I voted for Bobby Jindal, actually, in those races. But, you know, Blanco is not well-regarded anymore. You know, it seemed like there was—I’m not sure exactly what was going on behind the scenes, and what was true and what was not, and what’s posturing and what’s not.

**Bunn:** Um-hm.

**Brown:** But, you know, I wish when she put her public face on that she did something more than cry and ask people to pray for us, you know. She seemed kind of useless, whereas Nagin was screaming and doing anything he could just to try and get things done.

**Bunn:** Right.

**Brown:** So, I still like Nagin. I’m disappointed in this last week and think he’s done for, but he’s about the only one I respect in this entire state. (laughter)

**Bunn:** What about all the way up to the top with Bush and what he was doing or wasn’t?

**Brown:** I was furious. I was so furious. And, you know, I used to be conservative because, you know, I grew up in a military conservative family, so I was moderate to conservative. And after living in New Orleans and living under this administration, I have ended up a flaming liberal. (laughter) And that happens in New Orleans because
you have all these alternative people, and you’re also seeing just absolute poverty on scales that you’d never imagined could happen in America. And then, you know, you have to start believing in the social system in trying to take care of these people. You know, I didn’t have health insurance for three years, and I was, you know, desperately glad to go to Planned Parenthood, to get my birth control pills, and here’s, you know, Bush trying to slash funds and shut it down, you know.

Bunn: Yeah.

Brown: So I was watching everything on the news after the hurricane, and I was just raging. I was raging against FEMA [Federal Emergency Management Agency]; I was so mad I could’ve punched somebody. And that continues to this day, you know, watching George Bush sitting there talking about, you know, “You’re doing a heck of a job, Brownie,” and Barbara Bush telling us that we were, you know, unfortunate and didn’t have much anyway, so this is working out well for us. You know, you just want to slap the bitch, you know. (laughter) It showed me how out of touch Bush was with the situation and what was going on, and I think it was really interesting, and I feel like a lot of—I think there was turning of the tide during Hurricane Katrina because I think everybody was completely horrified at what happened, and I think poverty was put right smack into the spotlight, and that was really interesting.

Bunn: Yeah. What about the levee system? I know that was a big issue that came up before that.

Brown: Oh, God.

Bunn: How funding was being diverted from that.

Brown: Well that’s, that’s business as usual. It’s a bit of both.

Bunn: Um-hm.

Brown: I mean, I’m not going to put everything off on the Bush Administration because Louisiana’s so corrupt.

Bunn: Um-hm. (inaudible)

Brown: Yeah. With what we’re hearing about why the levees failed, I don’t know if more money would’ve fixed it because they were working on a levee base that was flawed.

Bunn: OK.

Brown: So I don’t know if they would’ve fixed it or not. I think if New Orleans is going to continue, they have to put the walls up. They have to put the levees up; they have to put the money in, and they need to put it in now. So, yeah, I am angry that
they denied Louisiana levee money and that senator from Alaska that got his two-hundred-twenty-five-million-dollar bridge to nowhere in that bloated transportation bill that wasn’t vetoed by the president. Yeah. You just, you know, you have to point fingers, and you do all that kind of stuff, but really that’s how it’s always been in this country. And if it had filtered down in Louisiana—and I know this is a big, it’s a big hesitation on Congress’ point right now, what’s going to happen to it because it’s a big black hole; things disappear, you know; it ends up in people’s pockets. It gets put off on contractors who’ve never done anything because they’re somebody’s brother, and they don’t do anything with it, you know. So, there’s a lot of blame to be put around there, I think.

Bunn: Um-hm. So, one other question here is how has the storm changed the way you think about the community? I guess you’ve—

Brown: I’m really sad. It’s not going to be the same ever again.

Bunn: Um-hm.

Brown: And it was one of those places where it was very hard; you struggled a lot, but at the same time, it was a very magical place. I mean you walked down the streets in the summertime, and it was just like walking in another world. And I know it’s not going to be like that ever again. It’s going to change somehow. You know, you can’t put that kind of atmosphere into a city; it would be forced.

Bunn: Um-hm.

Brown: They’re going to be—I think the people aren’t going to be back. I think most of the people aren’t going back. They’re going to have to rebuild somehow. I think it’s going to change, we’re going to have a lot of—for lack of another term—carpetbaggers. I think there’s going to be a lot of problems, and it’s going to take a long time to rebuild, and I think it’s just not going to be the same as it was. And that makes me really, really sad. I was talking to my mom a couple of days after the—I guess a couple of weeks after, and I said, “You know, everybody’s talking about, you know, rebuilding the ninth ward and putting nice condos down there.” And she said, “Well, you know they’re not going to build up the shacks like they were.” And I was like, “Well, that’s the problem. The Mardi Gras Indians lived in those dilapidated houses.” And you know, that’s where, oh, what’s his face? The musician who was missing for so long.

Bunn: Oh, um, I knew before you—

Brown: I know. You know who I’m talking about?

Bunn: Yeah.

Brown: They found him on his roof in the ninth ward and—
Bunn: Was it Fats Domino?

Brown: Yeah, that’s right; it was Fats Domino. That was where Fats Domino lived. Fats Domino lived in those shacks. You know, there’s so many—I mean, Louis Armstrong didn’t come out of a condo.

Bunn: Um-hm.

Brown: He came out of an orphanage, and that is where so much of the culture of New Orleans came from, and it’s all wiped out, and it’s going to be rebuilt as something different. There’s so much history that’s been lost. And that’s not the first time that that’s happened to New Orleans; there’s been other flooding. There was a gigantic fire in like the 18[00s]—I think it was the early 1800s, like 1801, 1802—that completely wiped out the city and wiped out all the French architecture, and that’s why everything’s Spanish, you know. So it’s happened before, but it just hurt on, like, a cellular level for me, and that’s really sad.

Bunn: All right. We’ve already talked about how you heard about the hurricane—

Brown: Yes.

Bunn: —when you evacuated.

Brown: Well, it was weird. I’d like to expand on that a little bit.

Bunn: Yeah, go ahead.

Brown: I was watching it. I’m one of those people who’s obsessed with hurricanes, and I love to watch, like, every report sent out by the National Hurricane Center, and I was on Weatherunderground.com reading all the National Hurricane Center blogs and all that neat stuff, watching this thing. And it started—it was sitting there, and it was looking at Tampa, looking at Tampa, looking at Pensacola, and looking at Tampa, and all of a sudden everything swung over to New Orleans. And this was around midday on Friday, and Toby was at work. He was working at a motorcycle shop across the street from the Superdome at the time, and I was at home alone. And since the Saturn was out of commission, I was at home, but I was making belly dance costuming just to try and bring in some extra money. And it was weird. Everything moved over, and it felt, to me, like something almost was going to happen. And I started e-mailing my friends. We were talking about going to the movies and going shopping at thrift stores the next day. And there was a bunch of my belly dancer friends, and we were going to practice on Sunday. And we just had the whole weekend laid out. And on Friday afternoon I was sitting there going, “You know we might want to—we, you know, might be evacuating tomorrow, so just keep an eye on it.” And everybody’s like, “It’s going to go hit Florida.”
Bunn: Hm.

Brown: So we went out to dinner that night, to Ninja’s, of course because it was a Friday night, and we went out there on Friday night, and we saw some of our friends, Nate and Amy. Nate worked for the Louisiana Homeland Security Division as an epidemiologist, so like, you know, animal heads got sent to him to check for rabies, that kind of thing. So it was kind of like bio-terrorism, Homeland Security, you know, that sort of thing. And everybody else in the restaurant was calm; nobody was really watching the news. It’s Friday night; everybody goes out and parties and, you know, just all this kind of stuff. And Nate was starting to get nervous, too, and it was the first time I’ve seen him nervous. And he was talking about how everybody, you know, at his area was starting to watch and get worried, and he just kind of had that really exhausted look in his eye. And I was like, “Oh, damn it.” So, Toby and I kept watching. We went to bed at around eleven o’clock, after the eleven o’clock release, and we got up at 4 a.m. to see that one, and all the models had now moved over New Orleans and we went, “Oh, fuck!”

Bunn: Hm.

Brown: So we started packing. We packed and packed and packed and packed, and then we got in the car. We had all the dogs and cats and everything, and we cleaned up as much as we could. And our neighbors were waking up bleary-eyed with hangovers, and they were, like, “What’s going on? Oh, it’s OK, I’ve got a room in the Sheraton; if something happens, we’ll just ride it out there.” And I was like, “Get in your car and go.” You know, so everybody was, you know, just starting to think about, “Well, maybe I’ll go get some gas and fill up and get some water” and all that kind of stuff. And it was weird because for [Hurricane] Ivan, everybody was so petrified, and they all got out of town, and this time it was just kind of like everybody was so slow, it was like molasses; nobody would move. So I was, you know, going at—we were out of town, we were going out of town, heading out of town at about maybe 12:30. And some of my friends, some of my belly dancer friends, called me up on the phone, you know like, “Do you need a ride?” And I’m like, “No, we’re cool. We’re evacuating. We’re going to my parents.” They’re like—they were like, “What do you mean? We’re talking about the movie.” They were still going to the movie that afternoon.

Bunn: Hm.

Brown: And you just wanted to throttle people because nobody wanted to move this time. I don’t understand what happened. But the state, when we got—when we went through Ivan, which ended up hitting Pensacola, and we didn’t get so much as a raindrop, and that had been happening a lot. I think that had happened enough times with Ivan and with Dennis, and all those big Category Four hurricanes that went and slammed into Pensacola. Maybe people had just gotten complacent; I don’t know. But it was really interesting how—we looked like Houston did this year for Rita, for Ivan. We tried to evacuate. We went north and east, and we were fine, but everybody
tried to go to Baton Rouge, and they were in lines for fifteen, twenty-four hours just trying to get to Baton Rouge, and it was a complete disaster. So the state and all their communities went through for the next year and figured out the evacuation plan with a contra-flow plan. And everybody talks about, you know, how Nagin and the state didn’t get everybody out, and how horrible it was, and how they didn’t stick to the plan. Well, the problem is the plan takes seventy-two hours. By the time, by Friday night, by the time we started thinking that it might have to happen, we were down to about thirty-six hours; so that’s, you know—and we still got 80 percent of the city out, which is a record. Usually the evacuation rate wasn’t more than about 60, 65 percent; at least this is what I’ve read. So, you know, everybody, it came down to Saturday night and Sunday morning, the entire city realized, “Crap, we have to evacuate.” And it was just so, it was so surprising. I mean everybody was still ready to go on with their plans for the weekend, and they just hadn’t realized. And I woke up Saturday morning and was watching the news as we were packing, and all the local stations were like, “Well, you know, we do have some tracks over New Orleans now, but I wouldn’t get panicked about it.” So, it kind of led to that same kind of feeling of complacency. “Well, don’t panic yet,” and, “It might move again.” And I felt like, you know, the one time where everybody needed to really pay attention and get out, everybody was kind of stalling and thinking, like, “It’s not going to happen.” So we woke up; we drove all night and—that’s my friend, my New Orleans friend, actually. So we drove all day, and we probably got in around two or three in the morning here in Columbia at my parents’ house. We went to bed and woke up Sunday morning, and Katrina was a Category Five and one of the biggest storms ever. You know it’s just kind of a shock; you’re like, “This isn’t really happening. This is happening on TV.”

Bunn: Right.

Brown: So we watched it all day. We stayed up; we slept in shifts that night, and just peeked at the TV now and again. And Monday morning when it actually hit, it looked like the French Quarter was fine. It looked like the city was fine. Really? Hey, you know, we glanced(?) the blow. We’re on the west side. It’s OK; we can go back. And it wasn’t until, I guess, Tuesday night when they realized they couldn’t plug the breach in the levees, and the whole city was going to fill up; that’s when we broke down and started crying. I mean we were just sobbing because that’s, you know, what they told us could happen, in the absolute worst-case scenario, if it had gone right overhead; all of that storm surge and all of that water would’ve just ended in New Orleans, and they were talking about thirty feet of French Quarter, you know.

Bunn: Um-hm.

Brown: And so we—what happened, it wasn’t quite that bad, but it was almost that bad, and it just happened in slow motion, which is why I think the death toll was so low; everybody had time to get into their attics and fight their way up to the roofs, because they pulled 30,000 people off the roofs, in the ninth ward especially, 30,000 people, and I think everybody would’ve died otherwise.
Bunn: Right. At what point did you—yeah, I might want to take a sip, too. (laughter)

Brown: Hm? Water break?

Bunn: Um-hm. So at what point did you know, you know, that you weren’t going to be going back?

Brown: That Tuesday night.

Bunn: Really? You knew that there’s no chance that you would?

Brown: That was, that was when we realized what it was going to be like afterwards, and I think the city has made progress more than we even expected that night, because they were saying the entire city was going to fill up to about three feet above sea level, which is six feet in the highest places.

Bunn: Right.

Brown: In New Orleans. So we were—we thought the city was gone; we didn’t know how they were going to bring it back, and we still kind of don’t. But Toby had gotten a job teaching at Delgado Community College, so that was the real, really the only reason we were staying, you know. We wanted to get out and try and get jobs in other places because the economy in New Orleans was so oppressive, and we were just spinning our wheels. I mean, we couldn’t get married; we couldn’t have kids; we couldn’t even buy a car, you know. You couldn’t do anything in New Orleans. And we didn’t really have the money to move anywhere else either, so we were throwing around the idea of moving up here and moving in with my parents anyway to try and, you know, find jobs and do something else. And we talked about it last summer and, but Toby got that job at Delgado, so we figured, “OK, it’ll be another year, and that’ll be something on your resume, and then maybe you could get a job somewhere teaching photography at college level.” But Delgado was in Mid-City; it’s gone. Gambit Weekly Magazine Headquarters was also in Mid-City; they had about six feet in the office. So we knew our jobs were gone, and we knew, you know, we’d heard for a while that our house was gone, the commune.

Bunn: Right.

Brown: And so I mean, there’s no reason to go back and try and fight and scrape through a living like that.

Bunn: Um-hm.

Brown: And I think a lot of people are back there, are realizing that now. Apparently suicide rates are really high, you know.
Bunn: I’ve heard that.

Brown: I’ve heard that a lot, actually.

Bunn: Hm.

Brown: So it’s pretty soon after the hurricane we realized, “That’s it; we’re done, you know. We’ve got to do something else.” And we discussed what we were going to do. I mean do you pick up—we only had about $100 in the bank account after we evacuated; we spent $200 in gas. And it was awful. I mean we were scraping pennies. We were living off—you know, my parents were buying us food, and they were doing everything. I packed so badly; you know, I took all the sentimental things, and I took all my sentimental clothes and left the socks and underwear, you know. I had a couple of jeans and, you know, T-shirt or two and a whole bunch of sweaters, and I didn’t have anything to wear. And my dad at the time was out of work and had been for a couple of years so, you know, we’re trying figure out “What do we do?” And you can’t—you know, it’d be nice if we could go and start over in San Francisco, but we don’t have the money for that.

Bunn: Yeah.

Brown: So we ended up staying put. Even after—my dad got a job pretty soon afterwards working for the Department of Defense, and Passport Control. And then the money from FEMA and the American Red Cross started filtering in, so we were able to buy new clothes and do that. Then it ended up that our small, measly, little belongings were OK anyway, so we were able to go get those as well.

Bunn: All right. As far as like the sentimental stuff that you, well, that you did take, was there anything in particular that you’d want to mention that was interesting or anything?

Brown: Oh, just my journals, photographs, the computer, Toby’s negatives, all of his negatives, the artwork we left behind. Dogs and cats. I really wanted to take my sewing machine, but it came down to, you know, computer, sewing machine, computer, sewing machine. You take the computer. (laughter)

Bunn: Right.

Brown: And I thought it was really interesting; when I got out here, even my eight year old niece, you know, everybody sits there, and they want to talk about, “What did you take out?” And then, you know, something like this, everybody, you know, even Wichita, Kansas, or something, so we’re completely removed from the situation; everybody starts wondering if they’re in the same situation, what would they take out with them?

Bunn: Um-hm.
Brown: And everybody wanted to talk about it, and I thought that was really interesting.

Bunn: Hm.

Brown: And a lot of people, you know, they just packed their clothes and left the cats and the dogs in the yard, and we ended [up] picking up a stray. His name is C-Ray. He is a black Lab/pit bull/chow mix.

Bunn: Wow.

Brown: And when we went down six weeks after the hurricane, we saw him starving, and we picked him up. He wasn’t fixed, didn’t have a tag, he had a collar but no tag, no chip. It was probably somebody’s backyard dog that they ignored and probably abused, and we took him in, and he’s ended up being a great dog.

Bunn: That’s good.

Brown: But, yeah. So many people left their pets behind, and they were like, “Oh, my God, my cat.” And I’m like, “You evacuated, and you didn’t take your pets with you?”

Bunn: Um-hm.

Brown: That bothers me. But, you know, a lot of people figured, “I’m going to go back in two or three days; I’ll get out of town, and then I’ll go back in two or three days,” which is what had happened every year for sixty years, you know, so. I don’t know. It was weird.

Bunn: Hm. All right. Let me pause it for a sec. All right, so (inaudible), so you came here, and your family was here, so you didn’t have to deal with that, knowing that actually just up the road from here actually is the Hurricane Assistance Center.

Brown: We went.

Bunn: Did you deal with them at all?

Brown: Yes.

Bunn: What was that like?

Brown: It was kind of accidental, and it was really interesting because it led to a whole bunch of things that I would not have expected. We stayed with my parents, and I got the flu; Toby got the flu. And I didn’t eat. I was so distraught that I couldn’t even tell when I was hungry, and I found that true of a lot of my friends and a lot of
the other refugees. You just couldn’t tell when you were hungry anymore. It was somewhere buried under all the hurt and pain. So I dropped weight; I had the flu. I looked like hell; I was still wearing the same clothes I’d been wearing since the evacuation. And we heard about the $2,000 debit cards that FEMA was giving out, so we said, “OK, let’s go try and find FEMA.” So we went to the Web site, and we tried to find a local FEMA office. We drove out somewhere in Lexington; I don’t know where, some wild goose chase, and we found the US Armor[y] or the National Guard Armory or something. So we went up there, and we were like, “Where’s FEMA?” They said, “FEMA hasn’t been here in a couple of years.” “Oh, God.” And they said, “Go down to the old, you know, Navy Building on Pickens Street, and that’s where the Red Cross and FEMA are supposedly setting up there. Everybody, that’s where they’re sending everybody, so go there.” And we said, “OK, thank you.” So we drove down there, and we go to the front door, and we say, “Is FEMA here?” And they said, “What do you need with FEMA?” And we said, “Well, we’re from New Orleans, and we’re trying to get ahold of those debit cards, you know; we could use some clothes and some food and things like that.” And they said, “You’re from New Orleans?” I mean, like lit up, like, “Oh my God, we get to help somebody. This is awesome.” FEMA had apparently been at the place the day before and left as soon as they started shipping in the refugees from the Astrodome. So FEMA set up there and waited around while nobody was there. As soon as people showed up, they left. We found this inordinately funny after we were done being mad.

_Bunn:_ Right.

_Brown:_ So, they were determined to help us. They were not going to let us not, you know, let them help us. So they said, “Let’s find you a shepherd.” You know, they had their “Carolina CARES” volunteers there, and there were like three hundred volunteers, or something ridiculous, there that day. And something like two or three actually trained Red Cross people for the caseworkers. So you had to sit around for five or six hours waiting to see—be seen by the Red Cross caseworker. So they said, “Let’s find you a shepherd.” And I’m sitting there; I’m just getting over the flu; I look like hell, and I was like, “Oh God, they’re going to give us to some little church biddy.” (laughter) “And she’s going to be condescending, and this is going to be awful.” And I was like, “God, I want to get out of here. I just want to talk to FEMA.” But it ended up there was a law firm, Baker, Ravenel and Bender, and about half the law firm had taken the day off to come down and volunteer.

_Bunn:_ Hm.

_Brown:_ So our shepherd was a woman named Catharine Griffin, and she was a lawyer; she was born in New Jersey, single mom, very spunky, very cool, very intelligent. And so she ended up being our shepherd; not a church biddy at all. And she was really neat, and she and the firm realized Toby and I had a brain. We were pretty smart; we were educated. We looked like shit, but we were educated. And so they started getting on their phones and calling people. They were calling people; they were trying to get us jobs. They were trying to get, you know, “Do you know
anybody at USC who Toby can work for? What about journalism? Can we get all this stuff?” And they were calling everyone they knew trying to get phone numbers and calling more phone numbers, and all this kind of stuff, as we were waiting. You know, we signed up for food stamps; we got, you know, vouchers. We got all sorts of cool stuff, and meanwhile, they were sitting there trying to find us jobs. And then eventually Catharine hung up her phone, and she said, “Why am I calling all these people? I need a paralegal.” She said, “They’re going to steal me—they’re going to steal you away from me, and I want you as my paralegal.”

**Bunn:** Hm.

**Brown:** So eventually we got to see the Red Cross people, and they gave us—they had run out of the debit cards, the Red Cross debit cards, which are different from the FEMA debit cards, and nobody outside of the Astrodome was getting the FEMA debit cards anyway. So, they gave us vouchers to K-Mart, which ended up being lovely. I went and got clothes and underwear and socks and stuff that I needed. And we got food stamps so we could, you know, buy food without worrying about putting my parents out—because they were into their, they were digging into their savings just to live, and so that was nice. And then I had an e-mail address for Catharine to send my resume off. So I did e-mail my resume. A couple of weeks later they did interview me, and they did hire me, and I’ve been working there since a couple of days after I came back from New Orleans, so that after the first, you know when they opened up the city, and we went down there for a week. So, about mid-October I’ve been working for them. So that was actually really neat. I’ve read in the paper about—it’s really interesting reading everybody else’s perspectives on how everything works. When we were there, they were starting to ship in the people from the Astrodome, and they weren’t telling them where they were going.

**Bunn:** Right.

**Brown:** Because, you know, you’ve got all these people, these big mass families, they’ve never lived anywhere but New Orleans for generations. And all of a sudden they’re like, “Hey, who wants to go to Massachusetts?” And everybody was like, “We’re not leaving.”

**Bunn:** Yeah.

**Brown:** And I understand the sentiment because even though I wasn’t plucked off my rooftop I was, I was so nesting. You know, I wanted to have my own place; I wanted to hunker down. I wanted to get married and have children, like, immediately. It was just, like, you know, I wanted to nest and kind of get my core solidity as soon as possible. And so all these people, you know, they were trying to put people on the plane and then tell them where they were going, and people were getting off. So eventually they just took people and put them on planes, and didn’t tell them where they were going until they were in the air. So these people woke up, and they were, like, in Columbia, South Carolina.
Brown: And I can understand why they had to do that, but at the same time, you know, it’s like cattle, almost.

Brown: So all these poor people were sitting around, walking around dazed, and you know some of them didn’t know where their family was, and you know “Where are my kids? Where’s my grandma? Are they alive?” And most of the people were from Elysian Fields, the ninth ward, you know, and here’s, you know—so you know, you feel a lot of survivor’s guilt, almost, taking the same money and the same handouts even though you’re, even though we ended up being OK as far as our possessions and things, and even the house, but, you know, you kind of feel like you’re in better shape, you should leave it, but that’s kind of survivor’s guilt, which I still have from time to time.

Brown: But, so just reading everybody else’s—like reading in a paper about this place. Apparently it worked pretty well, and I think aside from the very low American Red Cross case workers turnout, they just couldn’t train people fast enough apparently. Aside from that, I think it did work very well. They had everything in one place; they had people to get you through the process, and we were all in shock. I mean I didn’t really function at any sort of human level until about a week after that. I didn’t feel like I was human anymore. You know, I had the flu; I hadn’t showered, and I can only imagine how the people in the Astrodome felt. You know, and once I got out, once I got clothes and once I had good food again, then I started to feel a little bit more normal. So I felt like they did a pretty good job locally here in Columbia. I think their setup was pretty good, and I think it worked well, and the American Red Cross has called back and checked all this and made sure we got all the money we needed and everything we needed, and so that was really cool. I think that was good for my situation. FEMA ended up being a big help monetarily but only because I think it helped that, you know, I’m white, I’m educated, I know how to use a computer and I have access to one because it got to the point where you couldn’t reach them on the phone, and we signed up early, like as soon as we went home from Red Cross Shelter; we signed up at FEMA before the Web site crashed. We signed up; we had direct deposit. A lot of people in New Orleans—you know, I remember buying one package of underwear, maybe two days after the storm, at Target, and I remember sitting there and taking out my Hibernia Bank card, and I was looking at it. And I was like, “Is this even going to work?”

Bunn: Right.
Brown: And a lot of people I found among the New Orleans African-American population, they didn’t trust banks. There was a lot of money in grandma’s mattress kind of thing. So how, you know—I had a bank account that was functional; I knew how to set up direct deposit; I knew how to work a Web site; I had access to one. But when you’ve got somebody—you know, they had, FEMA came in and apparently set up a couple of computers connected to the Internet—two, for the thousand people they shipped in from the Astrodome and then didn’t tell anybody how to use it. So I mean, it’s much harder to do that sort of thing. So our involvement with FEMA’s been very light; we didn’t have as much damage to the house, so we didn’t have that kind of problem. Eric and Michelle have been fighting with their State Farm Insurance as everybody else has, but you know it’s not like my two hundred thousand dollars ruined by flood, and FEMA flood insurance is giving thirty-six for it, you know.

Bunn: Um-hm.

Brown: So I think the idea of handing out rent money and, like, the rent deposits we got, and we got the initial two thousand dollars each, as well, which was enormously helpful in terms of, you know, getting pots and pans and, you know, buying clothes and getting a car and taking trips down to New Orleans and that sort of thing. So that was good, but other than that, we haven’t had much involvement with them. We’ve been thinking about doing an SBA [Small Business Administration] Loan, but we just now found out that we’ve been cut off by FEMA because there were four FEMA claims from one house, and they find that suspicious.

Bunn: Uh-huh, right.

Brown: Even though there are four independent, not-related people living there, so we have to write a letter and, you know, get that all straightened out. But other than that, you know, FEMA has just been an Internet transaction for us, so.

Bunn: Yeah. So how did you end up here in this house?

Brown: Here? This is my uncle’s house.

Bunn: Oh, OK.

Brown: My uncle lived in this house, and he’s the kind of person who works on, you know, buys a house cheap and works on it for a while, and then rents it out and moves somewhere else, and he’s in (inaudible). His wife is from New Orleans; my aunt, and her brother, his girlfriend and several people from Mississippi were in this house for a while, and apparently milking FEMA for everything—(inaudible).

Bunn: Let’s see; oh, you were talking about your uncle.

Brown: Yeah, this is my Uncle Thomas, Tom Jolly’s house, and there’s a girl that lives upstairs. They turned it into two apartments; a downstairs and an upstairs. He
had (inaudible) brother and his girlfriend and some of her family members hanging out here for a while. Meanwhile, we’re hanging out with my mom and dad, still.

**Bunn:** Um-hm.

**Brown:** Maybe three or four weeks. And I just started spiraling into this hideous depression because, you know, Columbia, South Carolina, is a world of difference from New Orleans, Louisiana, you know. Suddenly it’s very white bread and Protestant and all the Bible Belt and not much to do, so I was—and my parents are great, and they’re very well-meaning, but when you’ve been on your own for a few years, they drive you *batty*. And, you know, Toby and I didn’t have any privacy. I would want to go and cry or something, or Toby and I would, the stress would get to us, and we’d want to have an argument or something, and we couldn’t do it because my father was sitting right there, you know; you don’t want to do that in front of him. Or we’d be sitting, then we’d go into my room to have an argument, and Dad would knock on the door and ask Toby a question about motorcycles, you know; so it was driving me batty and I come from—my immediate family is almost all women. I have five nieces; no nephews. I mean, we are family-oriented, very woman-oriented, very strong, woman-oriented family, so I am very much a nester because of that, and I have to have my own place. It was just driving me nuts. So we started talking to Tom; we were like, “What do you want for your place?” And he said, “Seven hundred dollars a month.” And we said, “Well, it’s a little bit more than we want to pay.” So we looked around for a while, and we couldn’t find [anything], you know. Considering that this is a mile from my work and also that we don’t have to pay a security deposit, and we’ve got a great landlord who will come over and fix anything we need, the little bit extra a month works out. So we moved in here the day after we came back from New Orleans the first time, and we’ve been here ever since. Pretty sparse.

**Bunn:** Well.

**Brown:** We gave away all of—most of our furniture before we moved in with Eric and Michelle, and some of it was destroyed, and some of it we just couldn’t get in touch with the people because they were, like, in *France*, you know; it’s like, “OK, I’m going back home to France.” So we can’t get our couch; so this was, this couch was my family’s couch when I was born when we were in the Army in the 1980s, which didn’t pay anything, so. So, it’s been passed around a little bit, and it’s rather threadbare as you can see, but it’s functional. The dog likes it. (laughter)

**Bunn:** All right, (inaudible). Well, one more thing I was curious about, about living with your parents. Did you know from their perspective what it was—was it, you know—do you think it was a strain on them?

**Brown:** No, no, no, no. My parents are great people. They—when you move around as much as we did, you don’t really have ties to places or things; it’s all family because that’s what you have.
Bunn: That’s right.

Brown: And I have two older sisters who’ve had to move back for one reason or another. My older sister, when she moved back to—back here from Seattle and when they were looking for a house, they moved in with my parents for a while.

Bunn: That’s good.

Brown: And, you know, my second sister got pregnant right out of college and had to move home for a couple of years, and that’s fine, you know. My parents are actually really good about trying to give you your space. You know, it’s like when I was in college, they wouldn’t call me, I’d have to call them and go, “Why didn’t you call me?” You know. It’s not like some people where their mom calls every hour wondering where they are.

Bunn: Right.

Brown: So my parents are really cool about that and they’re—I mean, what are they going to do, yell at us for being refugees?

Bunn: Right.

Brown: I mean, you know, so they were, they were great. We did everything we could. They understood, but I mean, they even took in Eric and Michelle’s cats and dogs, and my little brother, Colin, who’s still in college and comes home a lot, is very allergic to cats. He had that asthma—

Bunn: Right.

Brown: —problem. So, we had to keep the cats in the garage for a couple of weeks, but they were cool with it. They were like, “Whatever,” and when Eric and Michelle came down, you know, they were also trying to figure out where they were going to start over, where they were going to live. And my parents were like, “If you want to stay here, you can stay with us; it’s not a problem.” My parents have empty-nest syndrome; they’re happy to have guests.

Bunn: Right.

Brown: And fun, and you know, like they’re very giving, and there wasn’t a problem at all, not like, you know, “You ate my cream cheese,” (laughter) and all that kind of stuff. I mean, that’s what you do when you’re in a big family. If you’re a big military family like this, you rally around, and you take care of everybody, and there were no problems at all. And we could still be staying there; it wouldn’t be a problem. It was more like I needed a place to get out and be on my own just because there’s so much pressure and so much depression and so much problems that I just, I felt like I couldn’t leave New Orleans behind and make a new start while I was still living with my
parents. You know, I needed my own apartment. “OK, we’re going to start over here; that’s fine.” And, you know, so.

**Bunn:** What happened to Eric and Michelle? Where did they go?

**Brown:** Well, Michelle, the day before that wedding that they went to, was interviewing with DuMorris who is a subsidiary of DuPont, as I understand. They do a lot of public health research and policy that are forming. So she had just gone up there and did an interview, and when Katrina hit, the company started calling every Lempa in the phonebook trying to find Michelle and make sure she was OK. They ended up, they’re in Delaware; they ended up offering her a job, and she said, “Let me think about it.” Because they ended up—they were staying with her family in New Jersey, and her mother has mental problems, so that was an incredibly stressful situation; so they went down to Eric’s family in Port Charlotte, Florida. They had lost everything in [Hurricane] Charlie. (laughter)

**Bunn:** Well.

**Brown:** Hurricane Charlie sent a tornado right over their house and destroyed it, but they were fine. They’re, like, retired, Jewish, you know, snowbirds, and so they moved into one of their other houses.

**Bunn:** Oh, wow.

**Brown:** And they had another house where Eric and Michelle could go live close to the beach there. So they went down there and just kind of hung out for a while, and they came back. And they came down and picked up the SUV and the dogs and the cats, and that was, like—we actually picked them up from the airport after the Red Cross shelter and our lawyer team was going through and trying to push us ahead of the line. “They must go to the airport; you are not moving fast enough. Why is this not happening?” So, our lawyer team shoved us in front of a whole bunch of other refugees, and we got out in time to go pick them up from the airport. And they were so funny. So we picked them up, and we spent a few days together, and then they were on their way down to Florida. And then we went, and we met halfway in St. Augustine for like a four-day weekend before we went back to New Orleans for the first time, just so we could go and have a break. You know, we wanted to see each other.

**Bunn:** Yeah.

**Brown:** And that’s one thing we really miss is our friends. We don’t have much in the way—we really don’t have anything in the way of friends here in Columbia. And so we went down to St. Augustine and hung out with them. She ended up taking a job and then moved into—they moved to Delaware, and they are staying in this cute little colonial house. And we went and saw them over New Year’s. We drove up; you know, I got out of work early on that Friday, and we drove up and got there Friday
night, and then we spent Saturday and Sunday and drove back on Monday. And, I mean, we saw the dogs and the cats. We took C. Ray, our, dog up there. Did I tell you we named C. Ray after Mayor Nagin?

_Bunn:_ No. (laughter)

_Brown:_ We named him C. Ray. I had a friend, one of my roommates in college ended up doing an internship at city hall, and apparently—I think his name is Charles Ray Nagin or something.

_Bunn:_ I think so.

_Brown:_ So everybody around the city hall calls him C. Ray.

_Bunn:_ OK.

_Brown:_ So we named the dog C. Ray. And so we took C. Ray up to Delaware, and we spent the weekend with them. I mean, we were sitting there on the same furniture we used to be with and cooking like we used to. I mean, we were all really good chefs, so we used to have, like, gourmet vegetarian food; every night somebody would cook. It was great. I mean, it was like, the commune was very stressful because we were all living on top of each other, and we literally had no wall space left because every inch was filled with, you know, books or something. But it was really nice, and we all loved each other like families, like you know, if you could choose family, that would be it.

_Bunn:_ Yeah.

_Brown:_ And so we went up. You know, it’s hard because we went up there, and it felt like, you know the family was back together, and the dogs were all playing together, and we went shopping, and we cooked, and we watched silly movies and played dominos, and you know. That’s the—that, I think, is what I miss the most is the social life we had because we had—our life is reversed; I mean, we were flat broke in New Orleans and doing whatever little odd jobs we could. I was recovering people’s couches for a while, but we had some of the coolest friends ever, and they were phenomenal. And now we have financial stability pretty much because of my job for the first time ever.

_Bunn:_ Um-hm.

_Brown:_ But we sit at home at night. (laughter) You know, we’re starting to branch out. We’ve met some people, and we’re starting to ask them over for dinner, and I feel like we strangle them when they come over because we’re so excited to have someone over for dinner.

_Bunn:_ Yes.
Brown: But I think, you know, we kind of became hermits for several months while we were kind of nursing ourselves and trying to get back to some sense of normalcy, and so that’s, I think, what we miss the most. So Eric and Michelle are still in Delaware. Eric is trying to apply to U Penn [University of Pennsylvania] for vet school. Michelle’s being paid lots and lots and lots of money. The dogs are loving the snow. And we’re trying to figure out how to get the commune back together.

Bunn: Yeah.

Brown: You know, if we win the lottery.

Bunn: Yeah.

Brown: It’s one hundred million tonight; the Power Ball’s one hundred million.

Bunn: Oh yeah?

Brown: We have to go buy a ticket,

Bunn: Yeah, me too. (laughter) So, good luck to you on that.

Brown: Thank you. (laughter) I need it. I’ve had a crappy, unlucky year the last year.

Bunn: Well, yeah. Well, as far as when, like you say, you haven’t done much socializing since you’ve been here, but have there been any people that you’ve met here that either stand out as really great people or some people that, you know, really, you know, would you say would be your—not your favorite person, but any bad experiences with people?

Brown: Not particularly, there’s some really cool people. People have been extremely supportive, and I think the strange thing about this hurricane is it’s given us opportunities and opened a lot of doors that wouldn’t have been opened otherwise because Toby and I would send out résumés. Toby’s sent out, like, fifty-four résumés, and each one cost about two hundred bucks because of all the slides that were involved.

Bunn: Oh.

Brown: And so that’s also sitting on a credit card as debt. You know, he sent out about fifty-four résumés or so and got all rejections. And I sent out résumés; you know, we tried to figure out how to get out of here, and we just couldn’t—or out of New Orleans, and we just couldn’t do it. So this forced us out, and then everybody was so desperate to help that I think people gave us a look, a glance over when they
wouldn’t have done it before because usually you’re just, you know, a piece of paper in a stack of résumés.

**Bunn**: Right.

**Brown**: And USC [University of South Carolina] created a class for Toby for him to teach this semester. He is teaching intermediate photography, which they usually don’t even do this semester. They just opened it up; his class is full, even though it gets out at eight o’clock on Friday night. And so it’s not much, but I mean, it’s a great thing on his résumé to be teaching in a major state university, especially an intermediate class. And they may be giving him an independent study student. You know, we don’t know how long it’s going to last; it may be just for this semester. It may be every semester; we don’t know. I don’t think—you know, I don’t know that anyone would’ve decided to make me a paralegal or ask me to be a paralegal if I hadn’t been in the Red Cross shelter, you know.

**Bunn**: Right.

**Brown**: So people, people come, you know, people will throw themselves over backwards to help, at least in the beginning. I think now it’s kind of faded from consciousness and a lot of people have Katrina fatigue.

**Bunn**: Um-hm.

**Brown**: And so for a lot of the people that really need it, we don’t need it so much anymore, but for a lot of people that really need it, they can’t find that help, and the opportunity anymore. But the law firm has been great; Catharine Griffin has been wonderful, and she’s been—you know, usually, apparently, she’s kind of tough on her paralegals, but she’s been very patient while I learn everything because, you know, they kind of threw me in there, and like most jobs, didn’t give me any training. So you know, she’s been patient while I teach myself how to be a paralegal, which is amusing. The Center for Dance Education, I walked in, and I said, “I want to be a belly-dance teacher.” And they said, “OK.” And I said, “How much is rent?” And they said, “Well, we’re kind of funded by the city, so give us a donation to cover the electric bill, you know, your part of the electric bill; that’s all we really need.” I said, “Damn.” The belly-dance community around here has been fantastic. I do a specific style of belly dance called American Tribal Style Belly Dance, which most people are kind of like the, you know, cabaret, which is basically what everybody thinks of as belly dancers with beads and the sequins and long(?) hair kind of thing, whereas tribal is very different. And I’m the only tribal teacher in this entire state, and it hasn’t made its way over here yet. And so, like, they’re going crazy; they’re all coming out to my classes, they’re, you know, giving me advice, they’re inviting me to parties and workshops and will say “If you need anything, let me know.” Clark, who owns Lewis & Clark Gallery and is also part owner in the Art Bar, is a big motorcycle guy, he’s befriended us, and he’s been really cool. He’s been talking about letting me, you know, hopefully I’ll be able to perform at the Art Bar. He’s looking at, you know,
showings for Toby and putting us in touch with people if we need them, doing all sorts of things. Aside from that, we find the cultures very different here. We come from a whatever-you-want-to-do-is-OK to the very Southern Baptist kind of closed mindedness. I’ve seen a lot of racism here for the first time ever. That was one thing that really bothered me, especially the first couple of days after the hurricane; there were a lot of people who would say, “Oh, you’re from New Orleans? What do you think about them blacks?”

Bunn: Oh, geez.

Brown: And I would just, you know, I had that reaction, too, I was like, “Oh, geez.” And I just said, “Well, you know, New Orleans is very, very poor.” And a lot of this is, you know, they were showing the looters and everything on TV. And I was like, “There aren’t really that many looters. I know a lot of people are just going for bread and water and baby formula but, you know, there are some idiots who are going and stealing TVs, and that’s going to happen in any situation, and there are white people doing it, too.” But, you know, it’s, you know, and I heard the N word thrown around a lot, and it wasn’t so much, you know, people my age as the older generations doing it, and I’ve lived here, so I’ve known to kind of expect that, but it was still kind of shocking because I hadn’t been back here in a long time.

Bunn: Right.

Brown: Yeah, I was—Toby’s parents came for Christmas, and with me, Toby’s mother is a fabric maven, and we’re both into, you know, clothing and costume design and sewing, all that kind of stuff. And she said, “When you were telling me about that really neat fabric store on Main Street, how do I get there?” And I’m like, “Well, go down (inaudible), and when you get to the State House and you see the Christmas tree on the State House lawn in front of the Confederate flag, take a right.” (laughter) You know, it’s just kind of like, “Oh God.” You know.

Bunn: Yeah.

Brown: It’s like going backwards in time almost fifty years, but I think, you know, living in New Orleans is like being back in time a hundred years ago but just in different ways.

Bunn: Right.

Brown: I feel like there is a lot more cultural acceptance and openness in New Orleans.

Bunn: Um-hm.

Brown: A lot of people that I know, which generally are the white, middle- to upper-class students, that kind of thing, ended up going to the West Coast, and I know a lot
of people are waiting for their houses to sell, those that stayed dry. And they’re going
to the West Coast. They’re going to Portland; they’re going to Seattle; they’re going
to Berkeley and San Francisco and hanging out on the West Coast because it’s as
liberal and as accepting as New Orleans was.

**Bunn:** Um-hm.

**Brown:** But, you know, Toby and I just—that is Toby and my plans, you know, he’s
applying for a lot of jobs out there and hopefully we’ll end up that way because, you
know, just being—we’re kind of weird in this area. I mean we’re weird people, and
we’re very nonconforming, and so, you know, I think that’s one of the reasons we sit
at home a lot. We know—we’ve heard rumors that there are weird people around
there, and considering how many people have come to my belly-dancing classes in
just a matter of weeks since I’ve been teaching is amazing. And they are really
awesome people. You just have to find them; they’re all hidden in corners. They
don’t come out for the light of day.

**Bunn:** Yeah. One thing, I’ve only lived, actually, in Columbia since last April when
I was going to school here, and the thing is, it is South Carolina. So you’ve got that
whole, you know—

**Brown:** Yeah.

**Bunn:** I happen to think it’s a backwards way of thinking but, you know, the kind of
thing you were talking about, but at the same time, Columbia is still a college town.

**Brown:** Yeah.

**Bunn:** So it’s kind of a mix of the two, you kind of have to find those—

**Brown:** Yeah. Well, see, I went to Irmo High School, and everybody there grew up
in the same house; they lived next door to their best friends, and they all went to USC
twelve miles down the road with their best friends, and roomed with their best friends.
And their best friends, you know, then they bought houses next to their best friends,
you know. (laughter) And they all plan their pregnancies at the same time so they
can, you know, their children can grow up together kind of thing—

**Bunn:** Yeah.

**Brown:** —which is why I went to Tulane. I was like, “I’m picking the weirdest, most
far-out place I can get and still afford to go,” and couldn’t afford it at all, you know;
you got four kids on one military paycheck. And by that time it was steel-mill
paycheck, you know. I had to get a scholarship; so I did. I went out and got a
scholarship, and I got the hell out of this town. The Irmo side of Columbia is a lot
more white bread than I’d find—downtown in this area isn’t so bad. I’m actually
pretty impressed with the revitalization that’s going on downtown. There’s some interesting things going on, and I think in about five years, I think it’ll be pretty cool.

**Bunn:** Yeah.

**Brown:** And Clark is talking about doing an artist village, you know, over by the river and all that kind of stuff, and you know, building studios and art galleries and dance spaces and theaters on this little plot of land, and have a living space for all artists above. Cool, I’ll get in on that if I’m still here.

**Bunn:** Right.

**Brown:** But you know, so they’re around here; you just have to find them. And you know, you get a big college campus like that, there are going to be weird people; you just have to find them.

**Bunn:** Um-hm.

**Brown:** Generally, they’re still very white bread, you know.

**Bunn:** Yeah.

**Brown:** Here, the biggest college organization, at least it was when I was in high school—I would doubt it would be different now—is campus crusades.

**Bunn:** Yeah, they approached me one time when I was trying to get lunch.

**Brown:** They have like 5,000 people, you know, something ridiculous. The biggest religious organization at Tulane was the Hillel Society.

**Bunn:** Which is?

**Brown:** Jewish.

**Bunn:** Ah, OK.

**Brown:** It was down there, and it’s like, you know, we were right next to the Catholic school, and Loyola was right next door, so we had the Catholic school; we were considered pretty Jewish. We had a lot of upper-class New York Jews who are in our school, and that was about as religious as it got. (laughter) You know, the Catholic Society had five people in it; you know, so we were all, we were all liberal nerds on scholarships.

**Bunn:** Well, that’s good.
Brown: There’s more—there aren’t like specific people, it’s more like the type of people. For the most part, everybody has still been very, very nice, you know. I tell people, “Well, I’m from New Orleans.” And they say, “Oh, welcome to the area, and we hope you enjoy it here.” So, that’s great.

Bunn: All right. Let’s see. There’s—well, we talked a little bit about it.

Brown: Um-hm.

Bunn: But I—well, maybe if you go into a little more detail about what you think about rebuilding New Orleans. I know you said you think it might be a Disney-fied version and all that.

Brown: Well, that’s the fear.

Bunn: Yeah.

Brown: And I think Nagin, especially, and a lot of the people down there are fighting that tooth and nail, which is—I think that’s one of the reasons why I’m so disappointed in that whole chocolate speech the other day because Nagin’s going to get himself thrown out of office, and I don’t know who’s going to come next.

Bunn: Right.

Brown: I don’t know what to think about it because on one hand we were living on borrowed time, and we all knew what was going to happen. They developed on swampland, especially, you know, the ninth ward and then Lakeview, and all that kind of stuff that’s not meant to be built on, and it’s kind of an artificial living situation. It’s not very safe. You know, I think that the only people I’d trust to come in and rebuild the levees are the Dutch. You know, let the Dutch come in and do it because we obviously can’t do it right.

Bunn: Right.

Brown: And if they rebuild, if they make sure the levees will hold because they didn’t—basically what they did, there was only like a five- to seven-foot storm surge in Lake Pontchartrain, only five to seven feet compared to almost thirty feet in Mississippi.

Bunn: Right.

Brown: I mean we got almost nothing, and it fell apart. This is a completely manmade disaster. New Orleans would’ve made it if the levees hadn’t failed. And I would be right back down there, you know, scraping pennies. So I think we’ve got to get the levees down first, and nobody seems to want to move on it yet. Everybody’s
hemming and hawing, hedging and trying to figure out what to do. And you know the next hurricane season’s coming.

**Bunn:** Right.

**Brown:** We just had a hurricane out in the Atlantic only a couple of weeks ago. We had Hurricane Zeta, which formed on December 31, which was retarded.

**Bunn:** Right. Well, Zeta’s not the last. How many—how far did they get? I know they started over and started doing the Greek letters, and then how far did they—

**Brown:** They got to Zeta.

**Bunn:** OK. How far is that in the alphabetic (inaudible)?

**Brown:** Alpha, Beta, Gamma, Delta, Epsilon, Zeta, I think it is.

**Bunn:** OK.

**Brown:** I mean, ridiculous.

**Bunn:** Yeah.

**Brown:** A ridiculous amount of hurricanes. We had a ridiculous amount of Category Fours, especially the amount of Fours and Fives, the amount that hit the US.

**Bunn:** Um-hm.

**Brown:** And I worry about New Orleans because the weather patterns—I’ve been watching them the last few years—they’ve been zipping into the Gulf, and they’ve been hitting Florida, and they zipped into the Gulf, and they hit Pensacola; they zipped into the Gulf and hit Pensacola, and this time we had Louisiana get hit twice.

**Bunn:** Um-hm.

**Brown:** And that’s been going on for years, and I’m afraid next year we’re going to start sending them right back into the Gulf again. I don’t know what the deal is with the weather pattern and why it’s stuck. I remember, like, ten years ago it was Wilmington, North Carolina every year that got hit.

**Bunn:** Um-hm.

**Brown:** You know, so it’s not like it used to be when, you know, you’d have a hurricane once every four or five years hit the US, and it was no big deal. I would ride out a hurricane anywhere in the US except New Orleans; that was always my plan.
Bunn: Right.

Brown: And for obvious reasons, you know.

Bunn: Um-hm.

Brown: So they’ve got to get it done first, and they’ve got to make sure they don’t screw up the city, you know, don’t make it Vegas.

Bunn: Um-hm.

Brown: Don’t do that. And I like what I’ve heard out of the Bring Back New Orleans Commission, as I said earlier, about making it more of a green city, I think that would be in keeping with the spirit because I mean they’re going to have to rebuild new, which New Orleans is old. It’s an old, old city, and it’s got an old, old feel and old atmosphere and old political system. They don’t even have a constitution; they run off the Napoleonic Code.

Bunn: Hm.

Brown: Like you can’t—

Bunn: I didn’t know that.

Brown: Yeah, you didn’t know that?

Bunn: Unh-uh.

Brown: Yeah, they do Napoleonic Law. I mean, it’s completely backwards from the rest of the country, and it’s so old, and a lot of that is gone. The French Quarter is still there, for the most part; that can be rebuilt. But, you know, if they’re going to have to start building new then they might as well do it green because otherwise it’s just going to be condos and track housing, and that’s not New Orleans at all.

Bunn: Right.

Brown: And I worry about that, and that’s been the big things, the Disneyfication and that, the gentrification, getting rid of all the black people.

Bunn: Um-hm. All right. This also mentions Hurricane Rita, which came afterward. What do you think Katrina and Rita did to the coastline?

Brown: From what I’ve heard, they’ve been obliterated.

Bunn: Really?
Brown: Yeah. And there was a lot of problems with our coastlines to begin with. Last—when was it? It was New Year’s Eve 2004, so almost 2005, we went down to Pensacola because Toby wanted to get pictures of the beach in the fog. And we drove all the way; it was about two o’clock in the morning, and the sheriff met us on the city line, and he said, “What do you want?” And we said, “Well, we’re looking for the beach.” He said, “That’s it.” And it was like twenty feet that you were allowed to go on because it was so trashed. We used to go and camp on Perdido Key. It was really cool; you could hike, like, a mile and just camp on the beach, and there was nothing there. It was a state park; it was really neat. It was trashed. They were saying it was going to take two years to clean up, and that was before Dennis went and screwed it up. So I mean, it was a disaster. And we’d been having trouble in Louisiana and the coastlines. Apparently there were snails; there were beetles that were killing a lot of the trees, and there was also tons and tons of logging. So the marshlands that were supposed to be our barrier—because New Orleans isn’t on the coast. Actually, it’s about forty to fifty miles inland.

Bunn: Um-hm.

Brown: And you actually have to go up, I think I’ve heard, like 100 miles in the Mississippi River in the little subsidiaries to actually get to the city. So, those barriers that were supposed to keep the water out were destroyed. Our barrier islands have been screwed up. There’s a lot of offshore oil drilling. And we’ve got to put that back, you know. It’s apparently—Toby does this photography camp week called LUMCON, which is down in Cocodrie, Louisiana; it’s, like, south of Houma, so down around Grand Isle, Louisiana, and Toby’s been talking to the people about coming back and doing it again this year. And they said, “Well, there’s not much left of the barrier islands anymore; I mean they are completely washed over. We think they’re coming back a little bit.” But mostly they were completely washed over and swept out to sea, from what I understand. So there’s, you know—the levees and rebuilding the Coast—got to do it. Got to put the trees back; got to, you know, do everything we can. That’s the only way to rebuild New Orleans and have it be any sort of safe because it’s just all dumping out into the sea.

Bunn: Um-hm. All right. Then one of these other questions, talking about coastal erosion, which, I guess—like you’re talking about the Barrier Islands and stuff like that. Tell me; do you think that all that had an effect on how Katrina and Rita, you know, affected the state?

Brown: Yeah. Rita not so much because Rita hit over on the western edge; it wasn’t so bad. But you know Louisiana, I think a lot of the problems were caused by the coastal erosion and the deforestation and all that kind of stuff.

Bunn: Yeah.
Brown: And they were actually talking about that. There’s an article that *The Times-Picayune* put out, I think in 2002, 2003; it’s called “Washed Away.” And they did a five-part series about what would happen if the big one hit New Orleans.

Bunn: Right.

Brown: And then explained—it was like the absolute worst-case scenario, which almost happened—they explained about the levees failing, and the overtopping and the filling-of-the-bowl situation, and they talked about the deforestation and how much problem that was going to be. I mean, the idea of coastal erosion isn’t a new thing. *The Times-Picayune* was reporting all that years ago, and everybody knows about. So it’s not like this is a new thing, not unless it’s a magic problem where we didn’t know this was going to happen.

Bunn: Um-hm.

Brown: And this is—you know, this is the problem with being humans right now, you know; we’re messing with our natural resources and what’s natural. And I think it’s really interesting the difference between us Americans now and Americans two hundred years ago because the parts of New Orleans that were built two hundred years ago stayed dry; so it’s stuff that was built in the last hundred years that fell apart and got flooded. You know, the settlers had it right. The French, the French had it right. (laughter)

Bunn: Right. And as far as, I mean you mentioned the thing about getting, you know, the trees back there and all that; you just mean things that had to be replanted and all that stuff?

Brown: Yeah, they need to be replanted. We need to get—we need to stop developing the areas. We need to work on rebuilding the coastline and especially the barrier islands because they’ve been neglected and trashed up and built on and drilled for oil, and all sorts of things, and they’re gone.

Bunn: How long do you think something like that would take if it were to be done today?

Brown: Years. Years, and years, and years.

Bunn: Yeah.

Brown: And I don’t know if there’s enough time.

Bunn: Yeah.

Brown: You know, it’s this big watery game. Do we build the levees and get them done by the time the next hurricane comes? And considering, you know, New Orleans
hadn’t been hit in—hadn’t had a direct hit since [Hurricane] Betsy in the [19]60s, you know, you just bide your time, you know; you wait and hope you don’t get hit and cross your fingers. You know, everybody in Florida rebuilt and then got smacked again.

**Bunn:** Hm, yeah, didn’t they get, like, three in a row at one point, or was it just two?

**Brown:** There were four in one season.

**Bunn:** OK.

**Brown:** And Pensacola got hit twice in ten months by major hurricanes, [Category] Threes and Fours, which is bad, and they had bad storm surge. So basically—Pensacola, when we went, had—it was weird. We went around the sheriff and came through in the back way just to, you know, check it out, and there was nothing but skeletons of houses, stuff that was being rebuilt. I mean it was, like, pilings and maybe a couple of stairs, and I mean it was just completely wiped away. It’s the same thing that happened to, like, all the barrier islands in Charleston.

**Bunn:** Right.

**Brown:** You see. Charleston didn’t get hit as bad. They didn’t get the storm surge as bad because the barrier islands were still there.

**Bunn:** Um-hm.

**Brown:** Developed, but still there and pretty substantial.

**Bunn:** All right. Well, unless there’s anything else you’d like to add, I think we might be done.

**Brown:** No. I think this last summer before Katrina hit, we kind of felt like the city was dying. It was really strange. We had a bad—like, tourism was the only thing sustaining the city, and we had a bad tourism year. Mardi Gras was empty. It was really strange. It was the first time anyone could remember that there was no, almost no one at Mardi Gras. There were whole stretches of streets on the parade routes that were empty. And a lot of stores were closing down. We ended up, you know, we were moving into a tiny house with our best friends, and we knew a lot of people who were doing the same, you know, giving up their apartments and moving in with other people. There was a lot of stuff going on with Section 8. Section 8 had just raised the subsidies, so people that were charging their tenants $750 could kick them out and have Section 8 move low income families in and be paid $850. So housing was getting hard to find, and it was just—I felt like everything was falling apart; everybody was losing their jobs. Everybody was having a lot of problems that summer, and it really just felt like the city was dying to me. I used to sit there and talk to my mom on the phone and I’d, you know, just kind of complain and vent to her that everything felt
like it was falling apart. You know, things were so strange, and it was hard to—you know, everybody was having severe money problems, and just everyone I knew across all spectrums was having, you know, big problems. And a lot of people, especially in the rich areas like over in Old Metairie, which got flooded pretty badly, a lot of them were—there were a lot of for sale signs out there. I mean, people who have lived there for, you know, fifty years were all of a sudden selling their houses. And we were like, “What do they know that we don’t know?” All these old, influential, big-money people. It was just a really strange year. Everybody was just struggling to make ends meet, so it was kind of like, you know, Katrina sped up the job on this. And maybe it’s given New Orleans a better chance, I don’t know, to do something better because now everybody’s paying attention, you know, and before corruption went on as usual, and now it’s like, you know, “I’m going to hold the purse strings if you’re going to use federal money,” kind of thing. And you know, so it’s going to be interesting to see how it plays out and how much attention stays on it.

Bunn: Right.

Brown: Because I’m still seeing a lot of Katrina and New Orleans and even Mississippi stuff in the news. Mostly it’s New Orleans, and now I’m seeing, you know, “People from Gulf Coast of Mississippi are upset that everybody pays only attention to New Orleans,” you know, one of the AP headlines.

Bunn: Right.

Brown: It’s interesting, you know, I follow it very closely. I still check The Times-Picayune Web site and the old Gambit Weekly Web site, and they’re running a little skeleton crew out in Metairie somewhere on Veterans. And then, you know, you just—I watch it very carefully, but I even see it in the, you know, Yahoo AP headlines a lot. So, it’ll be interesting to see how long the attention is going to keep up because I think if the attention stays there, New Orleans has a chance. If everybody forgets about it and neglects them, it’s going to fall apart.

Bunn: And I assume that even—because you mentioned hoping to move out west at some point, and you’d still probably still always at least care about New Orleans and—

Brown: Yes.

Bunn: —kind of keep an eye on it and see what—

Brown: Yeah.

Bunn: What happened?

Brown: Well, I was telling Toby the other day, you know, if five or ten years from now, if they manage to get it together, if it’s safe, if they go this green route, it might
be interesting to move back, because we’re—you know, we want that kind of lifestyle, and it’s kind of hard to find it in South Carolina. But you know if they can do that, if they pull it off, then it might be worth going back, someday. But, you know, I’m too pragmatic to try and put myself in a situation where I’m going to go back and rebuild it because I think a lot of people are trying to do that, and then they end up committing suicide. An old columnist friend of mine, Chris Rose, is well known down there, and he used to be, like, a celebrity stalker and write really amusing columns about all the silliness that goes on in New Orleans. You know, “Lindsay Lohan got drunk and took off her top at Shim Sham,” kind of thing. But now he’s talking about, you know, for a while everybody was coming over to my front porch, and we would talk about everything that’s going on, and he’s a lot more somber now. He still gets a little silly; he wrote about Willy Wonka and the Chocolate City the other day. (laughter) But, you know, he was talking about how one of his neighbors was a young girl that came back and was there for a while, and she and her boyfriend committed suicide, you know. And it’s happening a lot, and there are no healthcare professionals to deal with it. There are only a few psychiatrists left, and they’re overwhelmed. Everybody needs some sort of help, especially if you’re going to stay down there. It felt like—well, when I went back there after the hurricane, we stayed with a friend of mine and one of my belly-dancer friends in Jefferson Parish, and we had jumped across the line as soon as the curfew was up. And because we still didn’t have power, you know, Uptown, it was fairly dry, and finally we got power about two nights before we left. So we stayed down there. And the mold was so bad and just in the city, and the stench was so bad that I just—like I’d wake up in the morning like this, (gagging sound) because it was, you know—I couldn’t breathe; it wasn’t healthy. I mean, it just felt like there was this stench that just stayed over the city, and it wasn’t healthy. And Toby and I—Toby is usually a very sweet, very patient kind of guy, and even he was starting to throw temper tantrums, you know. It wasn’t healthy. It was just so oppressive, and it was horrible. And I can only imagine trying to live through that every day, and I can’t really. I went and helped one of my other belly-dancer friends. She’s single, and she lived about a mile north of me on South Galvez Street, and she was—she’s so cool. She’s just one of those people that just has, like, really neat knickknacks and, you know, Asian brocade fabric everywhere and pillows and bright-colored walls and really neat Asian furniture and Japanese kimonos hanging on the wall and all that kind of stuff. She had three feet of water in the house, and she was three feet off the ground. It was, like, a six, seven foot water line. So, she called us up and—Kate’s the kind of person who will cry for five minutes, and then she’ll say, “OK, I’m done crying. I’m going to go get this, this, this, this and that. I need to do this. I need to call this person who needs to call this person, and then we’re going to do this, and I’m going to quit my job, and I’m going to make sure my house gets rebuilt, and we’re going to take it down to the studs.” She’ll be upset for about five minutes, and then she gets her game plan, and she’s like, (roar), “I’m going to do it.”

Bunn: Yeah.

Brown: So she called us, and she said, “I just saw my house.” And I said, “How is it?” She said, “It’s gone.” And I’d suspected. I had suspected it was going to be like
that. She held up hope. And she said, “It’s just me and my little old mom. Can I borrow you and Eric and Toby and Michelle to come over and help me move some stuff?” Because the water came in so fast, it basically picked everything up and threw it over. All of her antique furniture was moved around. The refrigerator—she couldn’t get into her kitchen because her refrigerator had overturned and blocked the door, you know, and couldn’t get into her bedroom because the floor warped so badly. So she asked us if we could come over and help her move some of that stuff. We went over there, and her house had been so colorful and bright and just beautiful, and was really neat and spiffy and funky and fun; and I walked in there, and the whole place was black with mold. Six weeks, the mold had completely—I mean it was like the ceiling was black, and all of the furniture was slimy, and it was covered in this mud and slime, and the floors were, you know, rolling. It was, you know, like a fun house almost and you know, that’s—and we just sat there, and Kate was really quiet. The only thing we could get out of her house were her dishes; that was the only thing. She found some guy who claims that he can restore her furniture; it’ll take one or two years.

**Bunn:** Right.

**Brown:** And we wondered how that’s even possible. I think he’s just going to, you know, restyle or build something else from scratch that resembles some of the old stuff. She had, like, these awesome 1920s and ’30s antiques. But you know—and we were just sitting there and just we had to wrench open the cabinet to get the dishes out, and we had to do it really carefully because, you know, they had been—it had been flipped over; the cabinet had been flipped over on its back, but there had been enough of water that the dishes kind of settled back down. So, you had to be really careful so as not to crack the dishes, and we took all the dishes outside and sterilized them and scrubbed them, you know, wearing respirators the entire time.

**Bunn:** Oh yeah.

**Brown:** And then Eric went to go help one of the vets that he used to vet tech for. He lived on West End Boulevard about two blocks, two or three blocks from the breach in the Seventeenth Street Canal. So, he went over to help him, and he forgot a respirator, and we were like—he was like, “No, don’t worry about it; I don’t need it.” And we looked at each other and said, “Uh, we’re going to take you to get a respirator.” So we all piled in the truck and went down West End Boulevard, and it was weird because, like, you’re going through Metairie on Veterans Boulevard. You know, there’s like, there’s a lot of tarps and a lot of reshingling and a couple of broken windows and all that kind of stuff, but it looks all right; it looks normal. People are there and everything, and then you go over the little bridge that’s over the Seventeenth Street Canal, and you go on to the other side, and it’s like the Apocalypse.

**Bunn:** Um-hm.
Brown: I mean, it’s—all the— I mean, that was, like, twenty feet of water and pianos, boats, cars overturned in the middle of the street, you know, houses moved off their foundation for a block. You start seeing everybody, you know; everybody has the spray paint on their door about whether there are any dead bodies, and that’s where you start seeing them, you know. Three people dead, two people dead, that sort of thing. And everything is dead. Everything that the water touched died in New Orleans. New Orleans was such a green, tropical, lush city with all these really cool tropical plants, and anything that had water in it died from the salt and the pollution and everything else. So, you know, everything was just gray. There’s this scene in *The Pianist* with Adrian Brody, where he’s been hiding up in this attic for a while, and then he goes outside and sees what the Russians have done in Poland. And it’s just like everything is a bombed-out shell. It reminded me very much of that moment.

Bunn: Yeah.

Brown: And it was just kind of like, you know—I’d been telling people ever since, if the nuclear apocalypse ever happens, I think it’s going to look like that.

Bunn: Yeah, I’ve heard that comparison made a lot of times, the fact that people were saying it looked like a bomb had gone off.

Brown: Yes. I mean, it’s completely surreal. And one of our good friends lived about two blocks from that, but he had moved, had sold the house and moved to Houston only a month or two before. And I’m glad they did; they were kind of fragile and, you know, fighting with each other a lot and that kind of thing, and have a little baby as well. So, I’m kind of glad they got out of that situation because we drove past their house, and it was gone. It was weird. It was weird after that to go back to our place where, you know, we had just gotten—we were getting electricity back on and, you know, we could turn on the TV even, and get cable. And it’s weird, and it’s the strange dichotomy of what’s happened in New Orleans, what was spared and what was not.

Bunn: Um-hm. Well, then I guess that is it for now.

Brown: Yeah. (laughter)

Bunn: OK, there we go. All right, so you were saying about the dancing, how that—

Brown: Yes, I made you set everything back up so I could add on to it. (laughter)

Bunn: And to make whoever’s transcribing this go, “Man.” (laughter)

Brown: Well, like I was telling you, I wanted to just add, for the record, how much dance has helped me get through this. You know, I look at Toby and, you know, I get here, and I’ve been in this area before so I’m used to it used to its idiosyncrasies. And I have a full-time job, and I also have my dance to throw myself into, and you know
Toby’s just kind of shut down and still has a lot of, you know, stuff that he deals with, and he gets down really easily, whereas I think I’m just kind of distracting myself, which works. Three weeks after the hurricane, several of my dancing friends including Kate, who’s house was destroyed, and Shannon, the girl in Jefferson—no, Shannon didn’t go to that one—Gina, who had been in the process of breaking up with her husband and then evacuated with her husband and his new girlfriend to Texas. Yeah, that was nasty, too. She was a professor at Xavier University and was one of the—she just got tenure, which didn’t matter anything after the hurricane, and got fired, and was let go, I guess, and they just called her a couple of weeks ago and brought her back on, at least temporarily. So, the kind of lives we lead. Gina and Kate got hit pretty bad. Kate was also seeing this guy who was out of town, or he’d moved to, like, New York or something for a job, and she was kind of seeing this guy, and they were kind of serious, and then after the hurricane she didn’t hear from him. She hadn’t been hearing from him a lot, for a while, and she kept trying to call him, and finally she got him, and he’s like, “I can’t talk right now. I’m on the way out the door to see my shrink.” She said, “Why are you seeing a shrink?” He said, “I tried to kill myself the other day.” This is just a couple of days after the hurricane. She said, “Fine. I’m taking care of myself. Have a nice life.”

Bunn: Right.

Brown: So, Gina and Kate had it really bad. And Kate didn’t know that her house was destroyed yet, but we went to this workshop in Dallas. It was put on by a tribal troop called “Tribal Evolution,” and they had two really big name belly dancers teaching at this workshop. One was Candy Little, and one was Ariel Aflalo, A-F-L-A-L-O for the poor transcriber. I’m a reporter; I know how bad that is.

Bunn: Yes. (laughter)

Brown: And so we went—we had signed up for it because we wanted to go, and Dallas isn’t that far from New Orleans; it’s an eight-hour drive. And they turned it from for-profit into a benefit for Katrina victims. They raised, like, seven hundred dollars at the gala show for SPCA [Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals]. They let all the Gulf Coast belly dancers go for free; so they gave us our money back, and did everything they could, and it was very neat. So we went, and we weren’t planning on performing, but when we heard that it was going to be a benefit, we thought it might help raise awareness, and we asked if we could raise the afternoon of—and they said, “Yeah.” So Toby went and burned us a CD really quick, of our dance music, and we went to Wal-Mart and grabbed some flowers for our hair and slapped some costuming together, and we went on stage. And then I got up, and I said, “OK, let me get on my soapbox a minute, and, you know, excuse us, and we’re just going to talk a little bit. And I said, we’re students of N.O.Madic Tribal [Dance Company], and we’re from New Orleans, Louisiana.” And all of a sudden everybody stood up and cheered.

Bunn: Wow.
Brown: We went, “Wow.” So, just, you know, I thanked everybody, and I did this long, rambling speech; I don’t even remember half of what I said. But I said, you know, “We’re going to be in it for the long haul, and some of us have lost our jobs. Some of us have lost our clothes; some of us don’t know yet and just do what you can, and thank you to everybody, and please donate to (inaudible).” And then we performed, and at the end we did really well even though we were completely fried by that point; like, my brain didn’t work at that point. But, you know, we did really well, and everybody gave us a standing ovation, and we hugged each other on stage and cried, and then we went outside and cried some more, and then Candy and Ariela didn’t realize we were from New Orleans, and they came over and cried. (laughter) And you know, everybody was, like, “Oh my God, I had no idea.” We were just three women sitting in the back of the class. And so it was—I think it did a lot, and it did a lot for me. That’s one of the points where I started feeling more like myself. It was like I hadn’t—I was in so much pain and sadness, I couldn’t even think of standing up and trying to dance until then. And so that was a really good moment. And dancing is one of those things that has just really gotten me through. I’ve been performing some. The belly-dance community online, they’re all pretty much on one Web site called tribe.net, which is a bunch of forums where we can talk to each other, and I mean, even like the really famous belly dancers are on there, and we just ask each other questions and hang out. And, you know, they got together. I’ve had dancers from Germany getting costuming together and shipping to me to give to N.O.Madic Tribal students. I mean, like, it was crazy; I mean people were, like, handing out free lessons, doing anything they could. I was able to get in the workshops for a while that were, that had been full for a year. You know, people let me in and, you know, the dance community has just been fantastic and locally around here, too, everybody’s been really supportive and very excited to have me here. And it’s really been good. It’s been uplifting having some sort of outlet, you know. And Toby has recently starting doing photography again. He’s been going out and shooting a lot, just in the last couple of weeks. And thank God for that because I was really worried about him; you know you have to have something to keep you going. You can’t just sit around and wallow in your misery all the time. And so I think, you know, dance has done that for me, and it’s become even more important in my life than it was before the hurricane. And the girls that I was practicing with, we were a tight-knit little group, and we were, you know, we were like the intermediate dancers in our troupe. And after the hurricane, a couple of weeks later, the Nomadic Tribal director sent out an e-mail saying that they were only going to be a performance troupe, and they were cutting out the school. And I had girls sobbing in my inbox for days, and then they decided, you know, “What—screw it; we’re forming our own troupe.” So I actually went out to Dallas. I went out to Dallas again January 6 and performed with those girls again in front of the same people, and it was awesome. And then last weekend I was in Charlotte at another belly-dance workshop, and it’s just been awesome, you know. I don’t think I would’ve made it this far without Toby, without my family, and without dance because, you know, you need that kind of creative outlet.

Bunn: Yeah.
**Brown:** So, I wish I could put it into words better because it’s like, “Yeah, dance is awesome,” and it sounds really lame.

**Bunn:** Yeah, well. (laughter) What’s the quote? “Writing about music is like dancing about architecture,” or something like that.

**Brown:** Yeah.

**Bunn:** So.

**Brown:** You can’t do it. Yeah, rah.

**Bunn:** OK. (laughter)

(end of interview)