Mississippi Oral History Program

Hurricane Katrina Oral History Project

An Oral History

with

Odalee Fair

Interviewer: Holly Thomas

Volume 1082
2006
AN ORAL HISTORY

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ODALEE FAIR

This is an interview for the Mississippi Oral History Program of The University of Southern Mississippi. The interview is with Odalee Fair and is taking place on July 18, 2006. The interviewer is Holly Werner Thomas.

Thomas: Today is Tuesday, July 18, 2006. It’s 3:20 p.m. This is the Hurricane Katrina Oral History Project, and we are sitting in the home of Odalee Fair in Alexandria, Virginia. My name is Holly Werner Thomas. Odalee, do I have your permission to record this interview?

Fair: Yes, you do, Holly.

Thomas: OK. So I’d like to begin by asking you where you’re from and a little bit about your community and your neighborhood. You said you’re from New Orleans?

Fair: Yes. Originally I’m from New Orleans, Louisiana, and first off, prior to the hurricane, I lived just outside of New Orleans, like a suburb five minutes away by automobile in Jefferson Parish, which is a neighboring parish to Orleans Parish on the East Bank. And it was a relatively quiet community, working-class for the most part. I was down the street about five blocks away from our very prestigious hospital, Ochsner Medical Hospital, which specialized in heart transplants. And it was a typical apartment, very small. As I said, I lived in a five-apartment unit. It was a family-oriented community. I was close to my daughter’s school, close to supermarkets; I was close to a pharmacy and restaurants and a couple of parks. And also I had as my backyard the Mississippi River levee, which was very nice.

Thomas: Yeah?

Fair: Um-hm.

Thomas: Well, I’m going to ask you more about that. Can you describe your home for me? You said you’d been there about five and a half years, in that neighborhood.

Fair: Yes, uh-huh.

Thomas: And it’s kind of a suburb of New Orleans. What is the name?

Fair: Yeah. It’s sort of like a suburb. It was outside, not that far outside of New Orleans, across the parish line. As I said, it was family-oriented. I lived in a two-
bedroom apartment, ground level. We had a backyard with two pecan trees, and there were other trees, like ash, I believe or birch. And so it was very nice, a great place for the kids to play, and it was quiet. It was secluded. It was like a little cubbyhole.

**Fair:** Who lived there with you?

**Thomas:** My daughter Sereta(?), who is nine now; she was eight when the hurricane struck; she was eight years old.

**Thomas:** And you said you’re from New Orleans. You were born there.

**Fair:** Yes.

**Thomas:** Where did you grow up in the city?

**Fair:** Well, we lived in different areas in the city, but for the most part, we lived in what is called the Irish Channel, and it’s named that because at one point it had a high population of Irish, Irish-Americans. They settled it. And so it was unique, and it was typical because we grew up celebrating the Irish holidays, especially St. Patrick’s Day.

**Thomas:** Um-hm. You mean the whole city did?

**Fair:** Well, yeah, but mainly that area, that community, that area. That was mainly (inaudible) because they had a bar, and people would converge on it. It’s called Parasol’s, and as far as I know, it’s still there. I think it fared well during the hurricane. And so they have a big, you know, beer bash party with their decorated umbrellas in the Irish flag colors, and they also had a parade. And they would go around the area, and they would throw cabbages (laughter) and carrots and onions and potatoes to make Irish stew, I guess. (laughter) So it was unique, you know. It was unique. It was interracial, an interracial community, and for the main part it was working class.

**Thomas:** Um-hm. Is that where you went to high school, in that neighborhood?

**Fair:** No. It was a little bit out of the Irish Channel where the high school was. I used to have to take a bus to get to high school, public bus to take to go to high school.

**Thomas:** Walter L. Cohen, is that right?

**Fair:** Yes, uh-huh. It’s off Dryades Street. I can’t remember the address anymore, but it’s not too far off St. Charles Avenue, St. Charles and Louisiana Avenue. And those were both historic avenues.
Thomas: What about your neighborhood that you were living in for the last five and a half years before the storm? You said it was sometimes referred to as Shrewsbury.

Fair: Yeah. Shrewsbury has a history all its own, and the area, the part of Shrewsbury where I was, which was going more toward New Orleans than going away from it, at one point it was a Cuban-American community because when the Cubans left Cuba, I guess during when Castro came into power, many of them went to Jefferson Parish, and they settled in that area.

Thomas: Really? You hear about Miami, of course, but I didn’t know they also went to New Orleans.

Fair: Um-hm. Oh, yeah. They had a large population. Uh-huh. And so there were many senior Cuban-Americans in the area, and they still spoke their language. So that was unique; that was very unique, that part of Shrewsbury. But Shrewsbury, I understand, at one point it was an area, that particular part of Shrewsbury toward the levee, that’s where people used to go to gamble and to drink and to club because up River Road, past where I live, maybe about three blocks, there’s a old building that used to be a hotel where all the black performers would come and stay. And they would perform in this local bar about a block or two away from the hotel. Ray Charles or even performers older than that, I guess Count Basie, all of them, they performed there in Shrewsbury.

Thomas: Do you happen to remember the name of the hotel?

Fair: No, I don’t, but—

Thomas: I wonder what it is.

Fair: I know someone who could tell you the name of the hotel.

Thomas: Yeah? Well, maybe I’ll follow up with that; that’s interesting.

Fair: Yeah, uh-huh, that really is. It really is because I was surprised to learn that because I didn’t know anything about it.

Thomas: So the hotel is still there.

Fair: Yeah, run-down but it’s still there. It was still there.

Thomas: Um-hm. And did musicians come through still? It sounds like—

Fair: No, they didn’t come through, which was a shame because it should have been turned into a museum.
**Thomas:** Yeah. That would be a really good opportunity for that.

**Fair:** Uh-huh, but also it had been developed. You had a lot of townhouses and single homes on River Road. It was middle-class for the most part, sometimes going up the scale. And further down on River Road, there’s remnants of a plantation that has been turned into a home for boys with mental handicaps, mental and physical handicaps. But you can still see the oak trees, and what it used to be because the building is still there; the house is still there.

**Thomas:** Interesting.

**Fair:** So it is an interesting area.

**Thomas:** Very. What are your most vivid memories of your community before the hurricane?

**Fair:** A typical day, I would get up; I would go to work, had to be at work for about seven, no later than 7:30. I would get up, get my little girl up, drop her off at day care, which is again on River Road, maybe five blocks away from where we live. It was a very convenient area for me. Drop her off there, and I would go to work and come home in the evening. I’d get off work at about four; I’d get home around anywhere from 4:30 to around quarter of five, depending on traffic because I lived between River Road and Jefferson Highway, which is a major thoroughfare. So traffic is usually heavy, but definitely around anywhere from starting at 3:30 on, traffic is terrible. So it take you a while to travel up Jefferson Highway on any given evening, and River Road, too, because they let from points in Louisiana, and it’s skirted through the city of New Orleans, both River Road and Jefferson Highway. Jefferson Highway, when it cross the parish line, becomes Claiborne Avenue in New Orleans.

**Thomas:** And Shrewsbury’s in Jefferson. Is that correct?

**Fair:** Shrewsbury’s Jefferson, old Jefferson. Old Jefferson because on the other side of the tracks—and I don’t know how many miles away—you go into Metairie, which is a city in Jefferson Parish. It used to be the major city in Jefferson Parish. And then you have old Metairie, which is closer to the Orleans Parish line. It’s sort of like a suburb of Orleans, too, a very old, exclusive, used to be a very rich neighborhood, old Jefferson.

**Thomas:** Um-hm. Did your community also have—you mentioned the Irish Channel and some of the traditions there. Did your community also have, not necessarily anything Irish-related, but any traditions or anything, celebrations or things specific to that community at all?
Fair: Yeah, mainly it was the St. Patrick’s Day Parade was the main thing that was specific to the Irish Channel. Also—

Thomas: But for Shrewsbury?

Fair: Shrewsbury, well, Jefferson Parish for the most part, many people who populated Jefferson Parish left out of cities in New Orleans and moved into Jefferson Parish when land became available and loans became available. They were developing that area so many of them still had ties in memory of the neighborhoods in New Orleans. So many of the people who live in Jefferson Parish tend to go to New Orleans to celebrate, to party, to have fun. So many of them still (inaudible); they would have the parades, the same parades like the Irish-American Parade, the Italian-Irish Parade, you know, because people are mixed up; they jumbled up. (laughter) Everything is jumbled; it’s like a gumbo, (laughter) New Orleans and Jefferson Parish. And so typically what Jefferson Parish had, the community where I lived would have the vintage auto show. People love to fix up old automobiles in Jefferson Parish, and so they would have these car shows. And about a block and a half away from where I lived on Jefferson Highway, there’s a Frost Top; it’s like a little restaurant, and it’s known for its root beer and hamburgers. And it used to be the hub years ago; I think this might have been the first one in that area. It’s kind of a historic place, and in October and in—I can’t remember quite sure, but I think in July, they would have these auto shows.

Thomas: Twice a year it sounds like.

Fair: Yeah, twice or three times a year.

Thomas: So there’s a (inaudible)

Fair: Yeah, twice or three times a year.

Thomas: Really?

Fair: Yeah, and they had this, and so it was a gathering. The cars would come; they’d display the cars, and there would be music, and there would be food, and sometimes they would boil seafood like crawfish mainly and things like that. So that was typical for that area.

Thomas: I’m not surprised about the crawfish. (laughter)

Fair: Don’t have to—

Thomas: Sounds good.
**Fair:** They’re OK, but I prefer them prepared like crawfish etouffe or crawfish bread or something like that. Uh-huh.

**Thomas:** You like (inaudible) more rich.

**Fair:** But just to eat them like that, you know, I’m not so particular about that.

**Thomas:** Really? (laughter)

**Fair:** Give me oysters or shrimp or crab.

**Thomas:** Yeah, OK. I understand. (laughter) What would you say your community’s problems and strengths prior to the hurricane were?

**Fair:** In my community, the one where I lived for five and a half years, its strength was that it was central to many other points in Jefferson and in Orleans. The weaknesses was that not too much focus was put on that area because, as I said, this was one of the earlier areas, and so it, for the most part in comparison to Orleans and Metairie, it was more like a rural area. But they had upgraded it at one time because there’s this overpass and this thing they call a circle. It’s like a highway, and it takes you to other points in Jefferson, and it can take you to, I believe it can take you to the Crescent City Connection, which is the Mississippi River Bridge. And they had upgraded that. They had altered the up-ramp because about three years ago, there was a hideous accident where a woman and her children were killed, an automobile accident. There was a carjacking, and the deputies were chasing the person, and he hit the lady in her automobile, and the family died because he was trying to get on the up-ramp. And so they altered that, which was great. That was a fantastic upgrade.

**Thomas:** (inaudible) infrastructure. (laughter)

**Fair:** Yes, uh-huh. But the area was thriving; it wasn’t a stagnant area. It was thriving; people were buying homes. People were selling homes. As I said, it was a community; there was two parks. There was a smaller park, which is in the—that was in another little community; they called it Azalea, I guess for the azalea bushes.

**Thomas:** Um-hm. How beautiful.

**Fair:** Jefferson Park was a small park, and there was another larger park that was affiliated with the middle school, which also was on Jefferson Highway. And everything was in walking distance.

**Thomas:** You said it was good to live next to the levee.

**Fair:** Yes.
Thomas: Now, why was that?

Fair: Because first off, you had River Road. (background noise)

Thomas: Let’s pause for a second.

Fair: I’m sorry. What was that last thing?

Thomas: No. That’s OK. So I asked you about the levee.

Fair: Oh, yes. Oh, yes, yes. That is the thing. You see the levee was the thing.

Thomas: Tell me why.

Fair: Because on my stretch of the levee where I lived, I was, like, at the most a block away, but not a true block because, as I said, right behind me I had, like, a little walkway. And right behind me was a fence, and that was the driveway for the parking garage for the bank and for Ochsner Hospital, Whitney Bank and Ochsner Hospital. And beyond that was, like, a huge green expanse where a house used to stand, but the people sold the house to the hospital, but they hadn’t developed it yet. So at one point, we had that whole open area, and then beyond that was another building that was used as a day-labor place; Labor Finder it was called, where they would hire men to do work, you know, just work by the day. But that had closed down recently, and then you had the wide-open expanse of the levee. So you got all of that wonderful air blowing off the water; when there was a breeze coming, it would blow right off the water.

Thomas: Oh, that’s so nice.

Fair: Yes.

Thomas: Necessary, I would think.

Fair: Yes, uh-huh. Oh, yes, quite, quite, and it was fantastic. And so you’d get up there; you could just walk down about a half block, cross over River Road and walk up the ridge and the levee, and then you’d go down, and you’d walk, and you can see the Mississippi River. And that was fantastic.

Thomas: That sounds beautiful.

Fair: It was.
Thomas: Tell me; you mentioned that you were close to where you worked. Where did you work in New Orleans?

Fair: I worked in what we call the Uptown area of New Orleans, and it is called Pigeon Town. It’s either the beginning of Pigeon Town or else the end of Pigeon Town; I’m not sure, (laughter) but it’s called Pigeon Town. Pigeon Town is an old area, has many historic houses in it, in that area. It was a family-oriented community; we had many single-family houses there. Some of them had been converted into apartments, but they still were one structure level or two stories or something like that. And the lady I worked for, she had been in that area for about maybe forty years. Yeah, maybe about forty years, and she and her husband are from another area of the city, which is known as—people might take offense to this word, but people who live in the city understand it to be the original name of that area of the city, and it’s called Nigger Town.

Thomas: You’re kidding!

Fair: No.

Thomas: And what part of the city is that, officially?

Fair: As far as I know, it’s Nigger Town. Now they call it Black Pearl, but the people who are from there said, “No. It was always called Nigger Town because that’s where you had a high population of black people there.” And from what I understand—I might be wrong, but that land was designated for the Buffalo Soldiers. So that was their land, and that was their area of the city. And that’s what I know as, and everyone who lived there, was born there, that’s what they know it as.

Thomas: And now it’s called Black Pearl?

Fair: Yes.

Thomas: I never heard that.

Fair: Because you had people whose parents lived in the city, and they may have grown up in the city until they were, like, high-school age. Their parents bought houses in Jefferson Parish, and they grew up in Jefferson Parish, went to college, became professionals, moved away, came back, but they wanted to live in New Orleans. But they know the history of New Orleans; the history was street floodings on any good downpour. And New Orleans has tropical weather patterns. So when we get rain, we get serious rain at any given time. And the streets will fill up, and you will have some flooding. In some cases you will have house flooding; it’s typical. And so they wanted to live in the city, and they wanted to live in an area of the city that didn’t flood. And that area of the city doesn’t flood because it’s closer to the
levee, which is higher than the rest of the city. So many of the people there were
dying, and the children—I don’t know if it was because of inheritance rights or
whatever, but they weren’t taking care of the property. So the property was put on the
market by the city, and people were acquiring the property for as little as the back
taxes owed, and it could be anywhere from fifty dollars to fifty thousand dollars.

Thomas: Whoa. And about what decade was this that we’re talking about?

Fair: This is now; we’re talking recent times.

Thomas: Really?

Fair: Yes, uh-huh. This was going on prior to the hurricane.

Thomas: Incredible.

Fair: Yes, uh-huh.

Thomas: How interesting.

Fair: And anyway, the area where I worked, it’s called Pigeon Town. And you can
see that it’s an old area because of the architecture, but to look at it, it was a nice area
because you still had greenery. You had nice houses to look at; the streets were kind
of narrow because it’s in an older area. In fact, it’s the Carrollton part of New Orleans.
And Carrollton used to be a cattle field, a hundred, two hundred years ago, however
long. It was a cattle field; it was very rural, but people settled there, and they started
developing it. And so it’s a nice area of town, but also it was one of the most violent
areas of the city. Believe it or not in the midst of all of that, yes, there used to be
shootouts in the streets, in some of the streets in that area of town.

Thomas: What about in Jefferson? First of all, is Jefferson a different—it’s got its
own city council or mayor?

Fair: Yeah, it has everything. It’s a parish unto itself.

Thomas: Parish, that’s the word I’m looking for.

Fair: It’s its own, I guess you would say, sovereign area. Jefferson Parish doesn’t
have a police force; it has a sheriff and a deputy force even though it is a large
community, very large. And it has—

Thomas: That’s surprising.
Fair: Yes, because it has Metairie; Metairie is a huge area, a huge community, and it has a lot going on in it. You have a residential area; you have a business section, you know. And so it’s a very big, very thriving area, but it has a sheriff’s department; it has a city council. It has a parish president, and you also have a couple of mayors in Jefferson Parish, but that’s just one part of Jefferson Parish because you have the east side, and that’s where I am. That’s the parish that borders Orleans, which is New Orleans, city of New Orleans. And then you have the West Bank, which is over across the Mississippi River, Jefferson Parish.

Thomas: Right. Is that Algiers? I’m just (inaudible).

Fair: No. Algiers is Orleans Parish, part of Orleans Parish. Gretna is part of Jefferson Parish.

Thomas: Um-hm, OK. And what was your opinion before the hurricane, you know, the parish president and even of Ray Nagin if, first of all, as part of Jefferson Parish, were people concerned, or did they pay much attention to New Orleans city politics, or was it really very much a separate feeling and entity?

Fair: No. As far as that is concerned, no, because as I said, many people in Jefferson Parish originated in Orleans. Their history is in Orleans. Many of them went to schools in New Orleans till they reached a certain age, and they went to schools in Jefferson Parish when their parents moved. Many of them went to Catholic schools because it is a Catholic community. And because of this, Jefferson Parish came up more as, what would you call it? A bed-and-breakfast type community. People would live there, sleep there, eat there, drive out into New Orleans to work. So many of them were reliant upon New Orleans for their livelihoods.

Thomas: I see.

Fair: Uh-huh, and so they went in to work; they made their money. Many of them had investments in New Orleans. Some of them are property owners in New Orleans, but they lived in Jefferson Parish. So.

Thomas: So the connections are very strong.

Fair: Very strong because if New Orleans goes, ergo Jefferson Parish and possibly the rest of the state because it all is happening in New Orleans. Politics, especially business, the politics of business is interconnected.

Thomas: Um-hm. And so what was your opinion? What did you hear about the levees before the hurricane? What did people say, and what was your opinion of the political system in general, or of specific individuals, if any?
Fair: Well, Jefferson Parish had a concern about levees, and as far as I can remember, they were doing something to shore up the levees and the barrier islands of the lower-lying communities because Jefferson Parish has a lot of low-lying communities, and they have the concern because it’s a large parish, a large parish. And they were concerned about the levees in New Orleans because New Orleans is higher than Jefferson Parish. When you talk about terrain, when you talk about the ground and the elevation, if Orleans Parish flooded, everyone had a fear that Jefferson Parish would be wiped out because the levee systems, your drainage systems, the most sophisticated ones, were in Orleans Parish. Jefferson was upgrading their drainage systems. In the area where I lived a couple of miles away going to the Elmwood and Harahan areas, we had a serious problem with drainage. It was right under the Huey P. Long Bridge, which is an old bridge. You got, like, a swimming pool of water when it rained heavy, and in the Clearview area—

Thomas: That’s a lot.

Fair: Yes, it was. In the Clearview area, which is like an industrial area—you had a lot of businesses, commercial businesses—one area of it, when the water came down, the people had to stay where they were until it drained off. It was a bad problem in Jefferson.

Thomas: That’s very scary.

Fair: And so they had paved, and they had laid pipes, and they had dug, like, a catch basin, and it didn’t work.

Thomas: Oh, really?

Fair: Yeah, and people were quite upset about that because you’re at work; the rain falls, and you can’t get home. You try driving your car through that, and you could lose your automobile, if not your life. So there was that going on; there was that element in Jefferson where people felt that it was shady, that they were just making work for their buddies, making their buddies rich.

Thomas: I see; nothing was getting done correctly.

Fair: No. No, not in that area anyway. Maybe more toward Metairie, like Veterans Highway, which is a major thoroughfare. It’s almost a hub of Metairie; everything is there. There’s a beautiful memorial on Veterans Memorial Boulevard, and that’s where their parades took place. You had your shopping areas there; you had all kind of restaurants there. Al Copeland who is a very prominent restaurant owner in New Orleans, he had restaurants on Veterans Highway. So you had a lot going on, and you had a shopping mall, Lakeside. You had a lot going on on Veterans Highway. And the politics in New Orleans, the sheriff of Jefferson Parish, he would do his business in
New Orleans. He would go, and he would have fund-raisers for his campaigns in Orleans Parish. So when the situation came up about the levees, they all put on their thinking hats, and they came together to try to ascertain what could be done to shore up the levees, the Lakefront or the Mississippi levees and also the major drainage canals in Orleans Parish. And everyone was concerned about that. They were more concerned with the erosion of the barrier islands, which are to the south.

**Thomas:** I’ve heard that there was some Christmas-tree dropping on islands and things.

**Fair:** Yes, that had been going on for some years.

**Thomas:** So people were aware of the erosion, it sounds like.

**Fair:** Yes, we were. Yeah, we were aware; we were very much aware, and we were concerned because they were truthful; they were honest with the situation that without these islands, there was nothing to slow down hurricanes, which meant the hurricanes would come ashore at full force. And everyone knew what that meant; so everyone had a concern. And it was growing because after, I believe it was Hurricane Cindy, she further eroded what barrier islands were left.

**Thomas:** Do you know when that was?

**Fair:** Let’s see; maybe it was, like, a year or two years before Hurricane Katrina. Yeah.

**Thomas:** So that was very recent.

**Fair:** Yes, that was very recent because she stayed off the shore of Louisiana in the Gulf of Mexico, and she just churned and churned the water, and she eroded what barrier islands were left. And so when Katrina came along, there was nothing to slow her down, and this is why it was as devastating as it was. It could have been worse because she wasn’t a direct hit. In fact when she came, just before she came ashore, the eye wall started deteriorating, which weakened her considerably but not enough.

**Thomas:** Not enough, especially with the levee system being what it is in terms of New Orleans and of course we talked about the Gulf Coast getting completely slammed as well.

**Fair:** Yes, completely.

**Thomas:** So where were you? When did you first hear about the hurricane?
**Fair:** Well, we had been monitoring the weather reports because we knew that it was hurricane season, and we knew of the predictions about how many hurricanes were predicted for that year and how many serious ones were predicted. And there had been something off the coast of Florida a week before.

**Thomas:** When you say, “we,” are you talking about you and your sister Ann(?) or you and your daughter?

**Fair:** No, I mean the entire area.

**Thomas:** The whole area. Wow. You’re kidding.

**Fair:** Yes, because before there was a report of a hurricane, and I forgot how close it was. And they were telling people to prepare, make your plans, get your needs in order, your food, water, flashlights, all of that. You get your boards to board up your house if that’s what you’re planning on doing. Just be prepared. So the weekend before that, people had prepared themselves because it was something hovering around Florida. And so everybody went to the store, bought all their needs and everything, and the banks closed early that Friday. So you could only use an ATM if you needed money, and then some of the ATMs were closed; naturally they were emptied out because some people took advantage of the situation. When people evacuate, other people come in, and they take advantage; they would loot. And that was always a concern.

**Thomas:** Yes. I imagine that’s why some people didn’t want to leave their homes.

**Fair:** Right.

**Thomas:** OK. So you had been monitoring it.

**Fair:** Yeah. I had been monitoring it because a wave was spotted that came from around Africa, off the coast of Africa, and hurricanes that come from Africa tend to be major weather patterns. They’re not the ones that you fool around with. The others that develop, like, in the Atlantic Ocean or around the islands or maybe even are very south in the Gulf [of Mexico], they tend not to be as strong, as significant as those that come from Africa. So there was a wave spotted, and they were monitoring it. And then it got closer to the coast of Florida, and hurricane hunters went in to investigate. And the thing was a tropical storm, and it was on the eastern coast of Florida, and it was still a tropical storm, just a hurricane, a Category One hurricane. That’s all it was. So they predicted that it would cross Florida; they predicted it would skirt across Florida from the Atlantic Ocean, enter into the Gulf of Mexico, and then it would be turned back into Florida, veer off into the Atlantic again, and skirt up the eastern seaboard, but people weren’t necessarily convinced, and that did not lull anyone into a sense of wellness. So we said we couldn’t see that happening, and we had a fear that
if it got into the Gulf, anything could happen because the waters had been hot; they had been hot for many months. And they were extremely hot; they were, like, I think 90 degrees.

**Thomas:** Wow, amazing. That is amazing.

**Child’s voice:** Mommy, can I have a freeze pop?

**Fair:** All right. Just one. OK?

**Thomas:** Tell me about when—let me ask you this. Did you evacuate then, yourselves?

**Fair:** Yes. We were planning, when we first heard about it. In fact we had been looking at it the weekend before, and then somewhere during the week—it was the Thursday—we were really looking at it because the thing was sitting off the coast of Florida, and no one was sure what it was going to do. And so that Friday when I went to work, and the boss’s daughter came in the Friday morning, and she was talking about the hurricane. I said, “What about it?” I said, “Oh, well, it’s still a Category One maybe.” She said, “No.” She said, “No. I think it’s a Category Three.” I said, “I saw the news last night.” She say, “Yeah, I think it’s a Three.” I said, “Well, we’d better monitor this.” And so later on that morning, we put on the midday news, and we got the information. And so we had a discussion as to what our plans were going to be, if we were going to shut down, or call the parents, inform them that we weren’t sure if we would be opening that Monday because we had to monitor the situation. So we had to decide what we were going to do. And then we had to make our own personal decisions. If it turned out to be a significant hurricane, if we were going to stay in the city, or if we intended to evacuate, and if we evacuated, how far away did we intend to go just in case damage wasn’t that bad, we could get back to work on that Monday, or how much time we would need.

**Thomas:** This is for the child care facility. Right?

**Fair:** This is for the child care facility, uh-huh. And so the boss said she wasn’t sure. She would have to get more information, and she would have to decide later. She would keep us informed over the weekend. So that Friday when I got home from work, I started packing. I telephoned my brother who lived in New Orleans, but he had an upstairs apartment. That’s what we had gone to the year before. And so he said sure, that we could come over. He was going to get some supplies just in case, you know, we lost light or if the street flooded, we wouldn’t have to worry about going out for food or anything like that. We’d be prepared. So we said fine, started packing. So I spoke to my other sister who lives in Metairie in Jefferson Parish, and I asked her if she was going to evacuate because she had evacuated last year and the year before. And she said no, she didn’t think so because her boss had no plans to
evacuate, and she usually went out with her and her family. So I said, “OK.” I said, “Well, let me know what you decide to do.” So all that next morning, Saturday morning, I was up early. And I was looking at the news, and they were talking about the situation, how they still couldn’t say where the hurricane was going to turn because it wasn’t moving; it was stationary off the coast of Florida. It could have gone back into Florida; it could have hit Destin; it could have hit one point of Alabama, or somewhere between Mississippi and Alabama. That’s what everybody was hoping for, anyway, because it was a weather pattern that the meteorologist were looking at. It was coming down across the country. It was a low, and the winds were cool. They said if it got down far enough, and if it rested long enough, it could interfere with the hurricane, and it would push it back eastward. But that didn’t happen.

Thomas: So people were still obviously hoping.

Fair: Yeah, they were hoping, and at the same time, the local government—

Thomas: Is this Saturday?

Fair: This was Saturday, Saturday morning, local governments, especially in Jefferson Parish, were talking to each other. Also the mayor of Mississippi and the governor of Louisiana were all communicating with each other. And no one had called for a voluntary evacuation because they had to wait on the Gulf Coast of Mississippi to decide what was going to be done. Those people had to be given first priority to get out because they were lower, they had a farther distance to travel because everybody would move, usually, toward Texas or else to Tennessee or someplace like that because no one was going to go toward Florida. They weren’t sure. So they were saying that, but if you wanted to evacuate, you could. You had that option, and it would be better if you did instead of waiting because other people would be waiting, and then there’d be traffic jams, and there’d be a whole lot of nonsense. You couldn’t get gas for your car because that had happened before. So you had people who were leaving; people started leaving that Friday. Early Saturday morning people were bugging out. You could see nothing but the red lights of the tail lights of the automobiles streaming out of the area. People were getting out. So later that day, they had set a press conference for later that day, and they would decide whether or not it would be a mandatory or else a voluntary evacuation.

Thomas: And who is this at this point that’s setting this (inaudible)?

Fair: That’s Broussard, Aaron Broussard(?), of Jefferson Parish and Ray Nagin of Orleans Parish. Broussard was given first priority because before he had called for a mandatory evacuation, and the hurricane didn’t hit. And so he had taken a lot of flak for that; people said that he had jumped the gun. You know, his reputation was on the line; people said they had spent unnecessary money; they had to live in hotels. And so
whatever he did, Mayor Ray Nagin of Orleans Parish said he would do the same, just
to give him that moral support. And also the governor said that she would back
whatever their decisions were. So they monitored it, and they talked with people who
were experts, who were in the know, and they went to the simulations. And they said
that this thing was going to be a problem for the city. It seemed like if it were to hit, it
would be a direct hit, and they told everyone what that meant, and they told them how
much water could be in the streets of New Orleans. You’re talking, like, a twenty-foot
surge, tidal surge. So that meant—and they showed you—that even a three-story
building, you would be in trouble. That’s that much water; you could be stuck there.
Even if you didn’t get flooded, you would be stuck there. So by noon that Saturday,
August the twenty-sixth, Aaron Broussard of Jefferson Parish had called for a
mandatory evacuation, and he shut down parish government. He also shut down the
bus service and other kind of services related to the parish. So if you were to get out,
you had to get out on your own. So the banks were closed, and all of that was closed.
Wal-Mart, the major Wal-Mart, Super Wal-Mart in the area in Elmwood was closing
at some point that day; it would stay open for as long as it could. So I started
communicating back and forth with my family members, deciding what we were
going to do. So my sister told me she was going to keep me posted because she
thought that she and her boss would be evacuating out. She would let me know, if I
wanted to come. I said, “Sure.” Where were we going to go. She said they weren’t
sure where they were going to go, but they were going to get out.

Thomas: Was this Ann, or was this another—this is your other sister.

Fair: No. This is my other sister. Well, I have two still in Jefferson Parish. This is
my second older sister; her name is Catherine(?) Fair. And so I was packing, and I
was monitoring. She called later that day, and she asked if I needed any supplies. She
was going to go out to K-Mart, and she was going to buy water and things like that. I
told her sure. So she brought that to me. So my brother wanted to know if I was
coming to his place that Saturday. I told him, “I’m not sure. I’m going to wait and
see because we’re talking about evacuating.” He said, “Well, keep me posted because
I’ll probably go with you. Whatever you do, I’ll go with you.” So we went to bed that
Saturday, and my sister woke me early that Sunday morning; I think it was around
seven. And she said, “Are you watching the news?” I said, “No. I fell asleep. I’ve
been asleep.” And she said, “Look at it.” And I did, and the hurricane, Hurricane
Katrina had exploded into a Category Five hurricane overnight. It just exploded; it
erupted. And so Orleans Parish, Ray Nagin was saying about mandatory evacuation.
Everybody who could get out, should get out. He was going to open up the
Convention Center and the Superdome as special care shelters; that was for senior
citizens and people with special medical needs. He wasn’t going to call for mandatory
evacuation for everybody because he said there would be no place to shelter all the
people. He couldn’t do that because before he couldn’t do that. And later we learned
that what he did do was order ten thousand body bags from the U.S. military in
preparation for after the hurricane.
Thomas: That’s reassuring.

Fair: Hm. And so he got with—the governor came to New Orleans. They said it was the first time ever a governor has come to New Orleans to call for a mandatory evacuation, but she did. She was telling people this was the real one; this was a serious one, that if you could get out of town, get out of town. And so we decided that we were leaving. We were supposed to leave, I think eleven o’clock that Sunday morning. We didn’t leave till around twelve or 12:30, and we drove north (inaudible).

Thomas: When you say, “we,” tell me who ended up going.

Fair: OK. My youngest brother Thomas because my older brother Luther had died the year before. So my youngest brother Thomas, and a niece, the sister I live with now, my second oldest sister Catherine. I thought my youngest sister Frankie would evacuate with us. So we drove to Metairie to my sister’s employer’s house because her family were evacuating, and she was helping her get all her luggage and everything together. We evacuated in an SUV; my sister’s employer evacuated in her daughter’s SUV; her youngest daughter, I believe she had a SUV also. And her oldest daughter—I’m getting confused now; there’s only two daughters. Well, her oldest daughter had a SUV, and also she has an RV. So they took those vehicles with them. Also a relative her husband, her late husband, and her son and his girlfriend and his dog evacuated in a vehicle. So I’m not sure how many vehicles that were.

Thomas: A lot.

Fair: A lot. (laughter) We went to a small town in northeast Louisiana, called Clinton.

Thomas: How long did it take you to get there?

Fair: Seemed like hours because driving out of Jefferson Parish, it wasn’t that bad except when you got to a certain point, and you had to take a two-lane bridge over a swamp. So things started getting close, bumper to bumper. So we had to crawl, and then we could drive, then we had to crawl, then we could drive. But the thing that really got me, that struck me, was that on our drive through Louisiana, we would come to these roads that led to other towns in the state, and these roads would be blocked by Army Reserve, the local sheriff’s department, and some of the citizens who had been deputized. They blocked the roads into their little cities and into their towns.

Thomas: Did they?
**Fair:** Yes, they did, to keep people from New Orleans and that part of Louisiana moving north. They wanted us to go to Baton Rouge, I guess, but yes, they blocked the roads.

**Thomas:** Very welcoming.

**Fair:** You had to keep going. And so we—

**Thomas:** That’s ugly. I haven’t heard about that part.

**Fair:** Oh, yes. Oh, yes. And it was worse for other people. So we got to our destination; I don’t know, maybe it was six o’clock, maybe it was seven o’clock that evening. And we went to bed, and we heard when the hurricane hit shore, even as far up as we were, and we later found out that the wind force was so powerful and it stretched out so many miles that damage had been done in the region. The telephone poles and the electrical poles had been knocked down; trees had been knocked down. We had lost power. So they had to go out and buy generators to get power for the house.

**Thomas:** And this is Clinton?

**Fair:** This is in Clinton.

**Thomas:** Where were you in Clinton, I mean in terms of, did you have friends there? Is that why you went there?

**Fair:** This was my sister’s boss; we had been knowing her for years. And we knew this was a nephew, a nephew-in-law, her husband’s brother’s son, his stepson, really, but his son. And so we went to his home, and that’s where he lived with his wife and his little girl. So it’s a rural area; it was a nice area, a lot of trees.

**Thomas:** And so what happened then in terms—well, let me ask you first; what did you end up taking with you when you left?

**Fair:** When I packed, I packed toys for my daughter; I packed a few articles of clothing, maybe enough for, I would say for about four days, I would say.

**Thomas:** Incredible. Most people I’ve talked to say the same thing. Just a few days.

**Fair:** Yeah, just for a few days, but I also took my paperwork because since the parish had been shut down, in order if you wanted to come back in after the fact, or you decided not to evacuate and you wanted to come back, you had to prove that you resided in that parish. So I made sure that I took important papers; I took as much paperwork as I could to prove that I had been in that area, I lived there.
**Thomas:** Did you take any keepsakes at all?

**Fair:** Yes. I took pictures, a few pictures, those sort of things. Not much else in the way of keepsakes because we had to take food. We took food, and we took other things that we needed when we evacuated so we wouldn’t have to buy as much.

**Thomas:** How long were you in Clinton?

**Fair:** We were in Clinton, originally after we went there, let’s see. The hurricane hit that Monday. Tuesday. Maybe we left—we were in Clinton for about two days, maybe two to three days. Then we drove, decided to go to—we were supposed to been going to Houston, evacuating to Houston. So we started that long ride there.

**Thomas:** What do you mean, you were supposed to be? In terms of that was your plan?

**Fair:** Well, we were traveling; everybody decided to stick together and travel as a group because we learned also after the hurricane hit, the cell phones weren’t working. We only had about one or two phones that did work, but people would have to relay their calls to someone outside of the state, and they would have to call to different points in the state and then would have to call back to us and give us the message because my sister’s employer had a son in Las Vegas. And he was the one who was keeping in touch, who was calling, and who was finding out information for us because we had no way of knowing if the city was still a city, what had happened, if Jefferson Parish was under water, or anything.

**Thomas:** When did you find out? A lot of people said they watched CNN, or they listened to the radio.

**Fair:** Well, where we were, we didn’t have any power.

**Thomas:** So you were cut off.

**Fair:** Yes, we were basically cut off. When we were driving, making stops in areas that had power, we would learn from them what was going on by watching the news and listening to the radio. So we eventually drove out of Louisiana, and we supposed to been going to Houston, but we decided to stay in Beaumont, Texas, because Beaumont is just outside of Louisiana, and it would be easier to drive that distance if we wanted to go back to Orleans and Jefferson to find out, to make an assessment of the damage.

**Thomas:** What was your thinking then? Did you have any idea about the damage?
Fair: Well, at that point we weren’t sure, but—

Thomas: You knew you couldn’t go back, it sounds like. You weren’t sure.

Fair: Yeah. You couldn’t go back because they were saying that the city was shut down. At that point they had called for the National Guard because they powered up the generator, and there was a—someone had a little portable TV. And we started seeing the pictures, and we saw the water, and we saw the people stranded in the different areas, and also we heard about people being killed. We heard about the total breakdown in the police force for the most part; some of them were just abandoning their posts, getting out. The mayor seemed like he didn’t know what to do. The police chief, he seemed like he was at a loss, and it was just was pandemonium in the city, and we didn’t know what was happening in Jefferson Parish.

Child’s voice: Excuse me. Is that a recorder of some kind?

Thomas: That’s a recorder, yes.

Fair: OK. Now, you go watch your TV.

Child’s voice: OK.

Fair: And so in Beaumont we tried to see as much as we could without upsetting the children because we had—let’s see, about six or seven—we had about five or six children, and we had about two teenagers with us, two fourteen-year-old girls with us.

Thomas: Um-hm, very young still.

Fair: So we didn’t want to upset them too much, but we tried to monitor the situation to know what was going on because everybody needed to know what was going on so that they could make some plans.

Thomas: And how do you tell the children, “Well, now we’re going to Beaumont, Texas, and this is why.”

Fair: Well, the children, well, we kept it light. You know. We kept it light. It was in a hotel so the children thought they was on vacation. You know. We let them swim; we took them shopping, bought them little toys and things like that. So we kept it as light as we could. We didn’t display any serious distress in front of them because we didn’t want them to be distressed because the children were under strain. The children were away from their familiar surrounding, their homes, their friends. So we didn’t want to put any more stress on them.

Thomas: I can understand that. So you went to Beaumont, Texas.
Fair: We went to Beaumont, and we were in, I believe, the Hampton Inn. And we learned then that we could stay there for free, that FEMA would pay for the lodging because at the time we didn’t know. And while we were there we met people; other people from New Orleans and parts of Louisiana were there. And so they were trying to—there was a computer set up for the guests to use to try to get in contact with FEMA because we learned that you had to register with FEMA. You had to register and be in the system if you wanted to get some kind of assistance.

Thomas: And how did you go about registering?

Fair: They said online with the computer, but the computer wasn’t working. And then later, we stayed in Beaumont for a couple of days; I believe it was, two or three days because we decided not to go to Houston after all because everybody wanted to see what was left of their property and their homes and everything. So we decided to go back into Louisiana. So we went back to Clinton, where a house had been rented for us. My sister’s employer had rented this home, which was across the road from her nephew’s home, which was convenient.

Thomas: Very convenient.

Fair: Which was convenient, uh-huh. And it was also not too far from the main highway, which is Plank Road(?) that leads right into Baton Rouge, which was a few miles away. So it wasn’t that bad because you had the airport and everything, also. There was a city, a larger area city, Zachary, that had supermarkets and Wal-Marts and things like that. So it wasn’t bad. So we were there. We were there for about a week, and we learned that the city was going to be opened up; Jefferson Parish was going to be opened up. You could drive in, assess your property, but you had to leave.

Thomas: You could drive in.

Fair: You could drive in, but you had to leave. You couldn’t stay.

Thomas: When was this that you could drive in? This was after the first week I imagine.

Fair: This was after the hurricane; this was, like, yeah, the second week, maybe that Wednesday. And so we drove in because we were trying to get into the areas on the West Bank of New Orleans, like Gretna and those areas, which would be closer to drive and get into Jefferson Parish, but they didn’t have lights. The hurricane had come through that area, had messed up many of the hotels in that area. So we couldn’t stay there; so we had to stay in Clinton.

Thomas: What about the roads? You can drive through?
**Fair:** You could drive through the main road that led into Jefferson Parish, but many of the other streets that led from Jefferson into Orleans Parish were blocked because Orleans was on lockdown. The National Guard was there; the National Guard was present in Jefferson Parish, but because that area didn’t flood as severe. Only parts of it, you had water still standing, but for the most part, it didn’t take as big a hit as people had thought. But it had taken a serious hit. So people were able to go in and view the damage and get important papers, but they had to leave. You couldn’t stay.

**Thomas:** Did you go in?

**Fair:** I went into Jefferson Parish; I didn’t get into my area of Jefferson Parish. I was closer to the levee, and we weren’t sure if that area had been flooded or not because the military did aerial photos of certain areas of the city in Jefferson Parish, but not all. So we couldn’t see exactly if that area was flooded or not.

**Thomas:** So you still didn’t even know.

**Fair:** No, we didn’t know.

**Thomas:** Wow. (Inaudible)

**Fair:** We didn’t even know about the house in Orleans, my sister’s home. Judging from the shots that we saw, we did an estimate from the Superdome. The Superdome had a lot of water, but there was areas away from it that appeared to be dry, and judging from the direction, we were trying to determine whether or not her neighborhood took a hit, but we thought maybe it would because that area, the water drains from other neighborhoods into that area because that’s where the pumps are, and the drainage canal leads to. So we were saying, “Well, maybe it did, but it wasn’t severe flooding.” It wasn’t like eighteen feet like in many areas of the city. And so we were in Clinton, and driving through Baton Rouge, we had to try and go find the Red Cross headquarters, where they had set up a registration area. And we eventually found it, and we were able to register with them. But we also found that it had to set up for first responders, like police, EMT [emergency medical technician] workers and people like that, but they took our information anyway. And that’s how we got into the system; however, it still didn’t do any good because when we eventually came up here, I decided to come up here because no one knew what they wanted to do, if they wanted to stay, if they wanted to leave. I had a concern about schools; the schools weren’t open. I wanted to get my child in school, get her back into a normal groove, as normal a groove as possible. And I have a sister already here in Alexandria.

**Thomas:** OK. You anticipated my question. I was thinking, “How did you get to Alexandria, Virginia?”
Fair: Yes, we have a sister and a niece, and the niece has been here for about eighteen years; my sister has been here for about maybe twelve years. And she, in fact, had been down to visit a year before, and she had invited my daughter and I to come back with her. So she told us to come. So I decided; I said, “Yes, we have to give it a try. I have to make a decision. I have to do something.” You know? So I decided to come here, and then when we arrived here, I was able to get even more information as to the situation in Orleans and Jefferson Parishes.

Thomas: So when did you arrive? Just exactly that week? In other words, a couple weeks after the hurricane?

Fair: We arrived in—no. This was maybe a couple of weeks after the hurricane because we arrived on September the twelfth. September the twelfth.

Thomas: Um-hm. It sounds like a big part of your willingness to come here was the fact that you have a daughter who’s nine years old, and you wanted her to get in school.

Fair: That is the main reason; that is the main reason, to make life more normal for her so that she wouldn’t be stressed out because I can only imagine what it’s like for the children, you know, for the children. And I’ve worked with children, and even now, I have a concern about those children. I wonder where they are and how they are doing. You know? And that’s what’s on my mind, about the kids because some children—

Thomas: Have you heard anything? Are you in contact with any of your coworkers?

Fair: No. I can’t even get in touch with them. Only a couple of people that I know in the area; I know that I try to call the business, and I guess it’s not open because the phone just ring. I’m not sure; as far as I knew, last time I spoke to my employer was the Saturday before I evacuated. She was going out to try to get supplies, and her daughter said they weren’t sure if they were going to evacuate. They possibly would go on the West Bank to her son’s house. So maybe that’s what they did, but other than that, I don’t know.

Thomas: But you still don’t know.

Fair: I don’t know.

Thomas: That’s very difficult.

Fair: Yeah. I hope she made out well because she’s a senior citizen; she wasn’t in the best of health. She was undergoing monitoring for cancer, cervical cancer. And so I’m not sure.
Thomas: Yeah. I’m sorry; that’s very difficult. Tell me more about your experience here then. We’re in Alexandria, Virginia. Had you been here before to visit your sister?

Fair: No. This was our first time. I was supposed to come to visit, but I always put it off. I don’t know why, but I did. But when we arrived, first we flew out from Baton Rouge, and we had to do a connecting flight in Houston, and then we flew into Reagan International.

Thomas: Um-hm, yeah. I’m surprised there was a connecting flight in Houston, in a way, because it was already pretty chaotic there.

Fair: Yeah, it was more chaotic in Baton Rouge because even though it is the capital of Louisiana, it wasn’t the hub that New Orleans was.

Thomas: Never.

Fair: Right, and so they weren’t used to that level of business, having to service all those passengers. And so it was a new experience for them, but it’s going to be that way for some time to come, I believe.

Thomas: Yeah, I’m sure it is. So you and your other sister Ann and a niece and your daughter are here.

Fair: Yes, we flew in, and—

Thomas: Did anybody else decide to come, too? Your brother?

Fair: No. My brother decided, because he had been in contact with a friend of his, a man he knows in San Francisco—this man sells spices and things, and he met him when he came to New Orleans years ago. My brother works in a local restaurant, Pascal Minelli(?), which has some history. It was known for it’s oyster dish; I’m not sure exactly what it is. I never had it; I was supposed to go and eat it, but I—(laughter) But it had a historic oyster bar. And so he was the oysterman there, and he met this man and his wife, and they kept in contact, and he went out, and he visited with them before. So when the man heard about what was happening, he called him, and he invited him to come to San Francisco. So that’s where he decided to go, but we left him in Clinton, and he left, I think, a few days after we left to come here to go to Alexandria, he went to San Francisco. But he has recently returned to New Orleans.

Thomas: Has he?
Fair: Um-hm.

Thomas: In a permanent way, or does he know?

Fair: No. In a permanent way, I believe; as far as I know, in a permanent way. Uh-huh. He didn’t care much for San Francisco. It was beautiful, he said, but it’s not the same.

Thomas: People say that about—no matter where they end up—there’s something really special. I think it’s the family connections and—

Fair: And also New Orleans—

Thomas: —the depth of history.

Fair: —was a major city, but it didn’t move in the way that a major city moves. The pace was off. It was slower; it was more laid-back, a bit more casual, even though a lot was going on in the city. You know it was a major—

Thomas: Yeah. San Francisco is going to feel a lot different from that.

Fair: Yes, uh-huh. And also I think a little bit more snooty, I think he said because the way they cook there in San Francisco as opposed to the way you cook in New Orleans—

Thomas: Oh, there’s a competition there.

Fair: Yeah, in San Francisco, it’s about what culinary school you graduated from. You know, it’s about doing it by the book whereas in New Orleans it tend to be more family recipes that are brought up, you know, that are sophisticated.

Thomas: That’s a really interesting difference.

Fair: Yeah, a big difference, uh-huh.

Thomas: Um-hm, huge. I can see that. So he went back, but you’ve been here since that time, then?

Fair: Yes, I’ve been here since that time.

Thomas: OK. Have you had any other interactions with FEMA? Did you ever get ahold of them?
**Fair:** Recently I did. FEMA sent me a letter, and I had to fill it out, but I haven’t heard back from them. It’s about if I have further needs and about recouping my losses and that sort of thing. But I haven’t heard back.

**Thomas:** Now, how did they get a hold of you? Because you had registered online (inaudible)?

**Fair:** Because I had registered, uh-huh, with FEMA in September, and then again in November, I reregistered with FEMA.

**Thomas:** Um-hm, and are you expecting anything from FEMA at this point? It doesn’t sound like they’ve been (inaudible).

**Fair:** Well, from what I understand, I understand that I do qualify for something. So in a way I am; in a way I am. I mean if I qualify, then yes.

**Thomas:** What about any other federal or state bureaucracies? Anything that you’ve dealt with, Red Cross?

**Fair:** Red Cross was wonderful. They were about the first organization, I think, that we connected with, the Red Cross.

**Thomas:** Was that here or in Louisiana?

**Fair:** We registered with Red Cross in Louisiana, and we contacted them when we got here in Virginia. And they came through right away.

**Thomas:** What did they do for you?

**Fair:** They gave us a gift card, a debit card for about almost a thousand dollars. They also put our names down on the Christmas wish list because that was prior to December. And also I think we got information from Red Cross about if you had medical needs, like if you were on a prescription or something like that.

**Thomas:** Um-hm. I see. Do you have medical needs yourselves?

**Fair:** No, fortunately I don’t. I don’t.

**Thomas:** Some people I have talked to, do [have medical needs], and have not had always good luck, the help that they need with that. What about with housing? Did they help with that, or did they direct you to one of these groups that I’m connected with, the Northern Virginia Family Services or Reston Interfaith, one of those?
**Fair:** No. As a matter of fact it was my sister, the one here who lives in Alexandria, who linked us with the group that helped us get housing, Good Shepherds because Robin was trying to help us, but the situation that she had set up for us didn’t come through. And then Alexandria said that it wasn’t taking any more applications. People from—

**Thomas:** The City of Alexandria.

**Fair:** Yes.

**Thomas:** Oh, really?

**Fair:** Uh-huh.

**Thomas:** And when was this that they said, “We’re not taking any more applications”?

**Fair:** This was in November because our application was put on hold; they were supposed to contact us about three months after we filled it out, and we had to call them, and then they said it would be about ninety more days, but we still haven’t heard from them. So I guess I’ll have to go back and submit another application because we’re in this program for two years, and after that, we have to have some solid plans.

**Thomas:** So it’s for two years; this is a program. Can you describe the—so this is from Good Shepherds, this program?

**Fair:** The Good Shepherds, uh-huh.

**Thomas:** So how long were you with your sister? You came up; you stayed with your sister.

**Fair:** Well, from September to December.

**Thomas:** Um-hm. And is your daughter in the same school that she enrolled in in the fall?

**Fair:** No. She registered in September at (inaudible) in the Valley, which is off Lockheed Boulevard. And we are out of that district; so now this fall she’ll be going to another school that’s closer, Riverside, that’s on Old Mount Vernon Highway or Road, whatever it is.

**Thomas:** So we’re off Richmond Highway here. How different is it, or how similar, from where you were living?
Fair: Well, Richmond Highway isn’t too far off from Jefferson Highway or Veterans Highway. A highway is a highway (laughter) except that I think there’s more traffic and as for—it’s broader than Jefferson Highway was, but still just as fast. Well, the ethnicity of the area is a bit different.

Thomas: How so?

Fair: You have more Latin Americans here, and you have more other ethnic people here, like people from the Middle East and from the Far East and from Africa, but in Jefferson Parish we had a lot of Middle Easterners. We had a community of Iraqis, and we also had some Latin Americans. And growing up in the Irish Channel, we also had Eastern Indians in the area, and we had Hondurans and people from Guatemala. So you know it was—

Thomas: Very much a mix.

Fair: Right. And also there were some Africans, (inaudible) Africans came to New Orleans. So it’s not so different; it’s just that the number is greater.

Thomas: Right. What are some of the other differences or similarities that you find between here and your experience here so far. I know it’s hard to compare. You spent your life in New Orleans and several generations back, and you weren’t expecting to live here, but what are some of the other similarities and differences so far that you’ve sensed?

Fair: Well, as far as the terrain is concerned, the elevation; I wasn’t used to elevation when I first came here. And so I was really amazed by the elevation because New Orleans and Orleans is flat.

Thomas: That’s so interesting. (laughter) It’s funny what people get used to. I grew up in Portland, Oregon, which is pretty mountainous. And so coming east, I was in New York for many years, but coming here, for me these are just sort of sloping, rolling hills. They’re really tame. (laughter)

Fair: Yeah, (inaudible). Now, to us this was like a challenge because we’re not used to that elevation. No matter where you go, you’re encountering elevation. So that took some getting used to. Like walking on sidewalks, (laughter) you can feel it; you can feel the elevation.

Thomas: Right. How interesting. I never would have thought of that.

Fair: And also it’s a lot more urban in many ways than New Orleans was. The trains for instance, subways, that was a big thing because there’s no such thing (laughter) anywhere as far as I know in Louisiana. (laughter) No subways.
Thomas: No, I don’t think so.

Fair: So that was great. I love that; now, I love that. They were talking a monorail, building a monorail in that part of Louisiana, but I don’t know if they can anymore because you have to worry about hurricane winds. And the fact that Alexandria sprawls. New Orleans was compact, where Jefferson sprawled more than Orleans, but in comparison to here, it was compact, too.

Thomas: Right, it’s in a certain area.

Fair: Yes.

Thomas: It’s very much sprawled here, in northern Virginia especially. Obviously Washington DC is compact. It’s its own kind of unit. When you get out from that going north and south.

Fair: So that takes a lot of getting used to because you have to get on a bus. You have to get on several buses to get to something. (laughter) So that takes a lot of getting used to.

Thomas: Are you close to your other sisters? Where are they?

Fair: My other two sisters are in Jefferson, Louisiana. They’re in Metairie, uh-huh.

Thomas: Did they leave, or did they go back?

Fair: They left, and then they went back, just decided to go back because the house didn’t take a major hit. It wasn’t that bad off; it took some damage, some roof damage. Some water came in from the lake, but it receded right away. So it didn’t stand there in the houses; so that meant damage was minimal, carpet and that sort of thing.

Thomas: That’s great. You said you haven’t been back yet.

Fair: Right, uh-huh.

Thomas: You haven’t been able to go to see your place. Are you planning on staying here, it sounds like, for the next year? Your daughter’s going to be enrolled in school.

Fair: I think the way I see it, I would like to stay here until she graduates junior high school. That’s as far as my plans are going because I think then she’ll be mature enough to make another move and to understand the move because she’d be a young adult by then. So that’s my plans for now, to stay here at least for those years. So I
guess that would be like, let’s see; she’s nine now. So that’d be, like, seven years maybe. Five years? I’d say about five years.

**Thomas:** Yeah, OK. You said you’d lived in another place about a mile from here. So you came; you stayed with your sister; you were in a place about a mile from here. Was that also with Good Shepherds?

**Fair:** It was at her place.

**Thomas:** Or, no, that’s your sister’s.

**Fair:** Yeah, that’s my sister’s place, uh-huh.

**Thomas:** OK, I see. So you were pretty close to this sister in terms of geography.

**Fair:** Yes, in terms of geography, yes. We’re just, like, a bus ride away, which isn’t much.

**Thomas:** What about Arnese(?)? Where is she?

**Fair:** She’s at work, and she lives here with me. (inaudible). Uh-huh, we live together.

**Thomas:** And Good Shepherds, this program, has given you this apartment for a couple of years?

**Fair:** They have linked us up with the owner of the apartment, and yes, that’s how we got it, through them, uh-huh, because they work with ministries, and he is affiliated with a ministry. In fact, the minister who is the overseer or caretaker of the property has been down in Louisiana recently, helping people get their property together.

**Thomas:** Oh, really?

**Fair:** Uh-huh. That’s what they have been doing.

**Thomas:** So they’re very involved, it sounds like.

**Fair:** Yeah, they’re very involved, uh-huh, very involved.

**Thomas:** OK. And are you going to be able to stay in this apartment through the time that you want to be here, or you’re not sure yet?

**Fair:** I’m not sure. We are considering other areas that are more community-based, that feel more like, I’d say more like a neighborhood.
Thomas: Right. There’s apartment buildings here, but it’s not necessarily, people aren’t necessarily out playing.

Fair: Right, uh-huh. And so we’re considering that, and we have seen other areas not too far from here, like in Springfield and those areas because they’re older areas.

Thomas: Exactly, the older suburbs tend to be a little bit more neighborhood-like.

Fair: Right, uh-huh, and that’s what we’re considering.

Thomas: Right. Are you planning on going back if you can this next year?

Fair: Yes, I would like to go down for a visit; I really would, just to see firsthand. I’m not too sure if I should take my daughter with me. I have to consider that; I have to get some professional advice from someone. Maybe she should see it. You know? Maybe the truth shouldn’t be kept from the children; I’m not sure.

Thomas: It’s very hard to know. When you’re nine years old, it’s a vulnerable age. So it’s hard to know.

Fair: Yes.

Thomas: But obviously you have family there to see.

Fair: Yes, uh-huh, and friends.

Thomas: Have you managed to stay in contact with friends as well? I know obviously—

Fair: With a few friends, I have, uh-huh. I’ve heard recently that a neighbor, a former neighbor, he had evacuated, but he couldn’t take Houston. So he ended up back at home, and he’s from Jefferson Parish, also, Shrewsbury, but he’s from more the older part of Shrewsbury, which is going deeper into Jefferson, more toward Metairie. And so he’s back, and he knows someone who knows us, and he asked, and so he’s aware that we’re fine and where we are, which is good to hear, that he’s OK, and his family’s fine.

Thomas: Very nice.

Fair: Yes.

Thomas: How has your daughter reacted to the move? You mentioned before we started recorded that she does miss home.
Fair: Yeah. She tells me that almost daily, that she miss home, but it’s not like she’s dwelling on it, but things are not the same. It’s different. It’s not familiar, and I think that’s what she misses more than anything, the sense that she’s home. I think that’s what she misses because she knew our area; she knew people in the area. We used to go to the Piccadilly’s on Jefferson Highway; we used to make that a routine. And we would go and eat there, and (inaudible)—

Thomas: Is that a local restaurant?

Fair: Right, uh-huh, it was a chain of restaurants, Piccadilly’s. It used to be Morrison’s. It’s like a cafeteria style restaurant, just a little neighborhood thing, mainly seniors used to go there. (laughter) And so I used to take her there because it was close. It was convenient, like if I didn’t feel like cooking in the evening, we’d go, and we could get a hot meal. And so there was a piano player, and he’d always play the piano, and she would go and listen. And she’d make a request, and she’d give him the tip; so she liked that. And he liked her; he gave her his CD. And so she misses all of that, and other people in the neighborhood, neighbors. Miss Maria who was a Latin lady, and her little friends because we had some little children who had moved in, like, six months before the hurricane hit. They had come from Monroe; that’s like a rural area in Louisiana. And so they were friends, and the little girl, she had little playmates. And she had been there, as I said, for almost six years.

Thomas: Right. So basically since she’s a toddler; so that was (inaudible) I’m sure.

Fair: Yes.

Thomas: But one thing that people say a lot, too, people I’ve interviewed is kind of along the lines of what you said: New Orleans is a big city, but it’s different; it’s laid back, and I think the other major difference is it’s so family-oriented, and people have roots there. Most cities, like we were talking about San Francisco, here, very transient populations in comparison. Not everybody of course, but a lot. So the interconnectedness; people really feel like they miss relatives, friends stopping by.

Fair: That’s right, and also traveling, like people from the part of the city that was really hit hard, the north part, the Ninth Ward, those people, generations upon generations lived there, grew up there. Some people moved out of the area; some of them didn’t like the other parts of the city and moved back because they say it wasn’t the same. And it wasn’t because they had their own little groove there and the way that they did things as opposed to the rest of the city, different parts. But in the area where I worked, it was like that. Everybody was interconnected. They were connected by marriage and by birth, and it was that kind of thing because one of the kids who were in the day care where I worked, we found out that one of the other children was a cousin by way of the grandfather; that the grandfathers were brothers,
and it went that way. But they didn’t share family names. You had Hendersons, and you had—

**Thomas:** Amazing that you could even find out that you’re related, and you don’t even know. It’s incredible.

**Fair:** And they didn’t even know that they were related. It was like that; it was weird, you know? And you say, “Isn’t that amazing?” Well, that’s the way New Orleans was.

**Thomas:** Right. Is this Arnese?

**Fair:** Yeah.

**Thomas:** Hello.

**Fair:** You got home early today, or was the traffic good?

**Arnese:** No. The early bus was late.

**Fair:** Oh, OK.

(The interview abruptly ends here.)