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An Oral History with Paige Roberts, Volume 867
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Biography

Mrs. Paige Roberts was born on December 12, 1969, in Elkhart, Indiana; she spent her childhood there. At the time of this interview, Mrs. Roberts had been living on the Mississippi Gulf Coast for fourteen years. She came to the Gulf Coast right out of college as a television news reporter for the ABC affiliate on the Gulf Coast. On August 11, 2004, she became the executive director of the Southeast Mississippi Chapter of the Red Cross. During Hurricane Katrina, she opened and helped staff shelters for a two-county area in Pascagoula. Prior to Katrina, Mrs. Roberts made sure that the shelters were adequately supplied to provide food and water and clothing for storm victims. During Hurricane Katrina, Mrs. Roberts and her family lost their home and everything in it. She is married and is the mother of two sons who were ages five and two at the time of this interview.
Table of Contents

Neighborhood in South Gautier..................................................................................2
Hurricane season of 2005.................................................................3
Hurricane Dennis ..............................................................................3
National Red Cross directives.................................................................4
Hurricane Katrina approaching.......................................................4
Meeting of disaster-preparedness agencies..................................................5
Opening emergency shelters.................................................................5
Hurricane Ivan ................................................................................6
Prelandfall shelters compared to postlandfall shelters...................................6
Emergency operations center.................................................................7
Notifying the public regarding shelter locations............................................7
Communication challenges during Katrina ................................................8
Shelter issues, capacity, food, water ............................................................8
Evacuation in the middle of Katrina............................................................9
First Mississippi Katrina insurance claim ...................................................9
Storm surge coming up stairwell ..............................................................9
Fatalities .............................................................................................10
Hurricane Camille ................................................................................10
Loss of home .......................................................................................11
Gender-based reactions to Katrina ..........................................................13
Mold in houses after Katrina....................................................................13
Shelter at Pascagoula High School...........................................................14
Katrina newborn infant ..........................................................................15
Value of storm-preparedness education....................................................17
Days following Katrina..........................................................................17
Shortage of supplies ............................................................................18
FEMA .................................................................................................18
Points of distribution ............................................................................18
Shelter population for three months following Katrina ................................19
Typical day at a shelter .........................................................................19
Hurricane Recovery Program for Katrina, Rita, and Wilma .......................20
Mental health services for hurricane post-traumatic stress disorder,
   Access to Care.................................................................................20
La Nina weather patterns ......................................................................21
Volunteers .........................................................................................21
Delayed Katrina mortalities ....................................................................21
Post-Katrina health issues ......................................................................22
Obstacles to rebuilding house ...............................................................22
Skyrocketing insurance costs and cancellations of policies .......................22
Personal coping strategies ....................................................................23
AN ORAL HISTORY

with

PAIGE ROBERTS

This is an interview for the Mississippi Oral History Program of The University of Southern Mississippi. The interview is with Paige Roberts and is taking place on February 22, 2007. The interviewers are Kirsti Piirtoniemi and Vera Santillana.

Piirtoniemi: This is an interview for The University of Southern Mississippi Hurricane Katrina Oral History Project done in conjunction with The University of Guelph, Ontario, Canada. The interview is with Paige Roberts and is taking place on February 22, 2007, at 2:15 p.m., in Pascagoula at St. John’s Episcopal Church. The interviewers are Kirsti Piirtoniemi—

Santillana: —and Vera Santillana.

Piirtoniemi: First, we’d like to thank you, Miss Roberts, for taking the time to speak with us today, and we’d like to get some background information about you, which is what we usually do for our oral history projects. So I’m going to ask you, for the record, could you please state your name?


Piirtoniemi: Where were you born?

Roberts: Elkhart, Indiana.

Piirtoniemi: And is that where you grew up?

Roberts: Yes.

Piirtoniemi: Yes. When was your birthday?

Roberts: December 12, 1969.

Piirtoniemi: How long have you lived in Mississippi?

Roberts: Fourteen years.

Piirtoniemi: And on the Gulf Coast?
Roberts: Entirely in Jackson County, uh-huh.

Piirtoniemi: How many generations of your family have lived here?

Roberts: (laughter) I have grandparents who live in Pass Christian, which is the next county over, that had lived here in the [19]70s—or in the [19]60s and then left and then returned in the early [19]90s. And then my mother moved back down here, and my uncle lives here; so it’s not that we’re a generational Mississippi family, but three generations, well, four now with my children who happen to live here now, so.

Piirtoniemi: Oh, wow. Where is your neighborhood, and what is it like?

Roberts: The neighborhood where we live is in South Gautier, which is located here in Jackson County, and we live in the southern part on the Gulf. And it’s a fairly quiet neighborhood. My sons are five and two years old, but there aren’t a lot of young kids in the neighborhood; there’s a few. Some retired couples, some families with just grown children, and it’s a mix. The socioeconomic status of the family is pretty much middle to high in comparison to a lot of areas in the county.

Piirtoniemi: OK. What’s your attachment to the region like? How would you describe it?

Roberts: Well, I moved here right after college. I was hired to be a television news reporter down here for the ABC [American Broadcasting Company] affiliate, which is what I went to school to do, and so this is the only place I’ve lived as an adult, postcollege. And so it’s been an interesting experience just because I’ve now lived here for fourteen years, which is a considerable amount of time, and yet I don’t really feel from here, you know. It’s not that I don’t consider this home, but I’m still very attached to northern Indiana, but this is my community where I’m living and where I’m raising my children. And so there’s a very strong root here without being completely cemented.

Piirtoniemi: Right, yeah. Do you plan to stay here for like the duration, like for long term?

Roberts: Well, that’s relative, of course. The issue with my particular situation is that my husband is a long-time attorney and City judge in this area, and he, because he has a long-established law practice, it doesn’t really make financial sense for us to move somewhere else until he’s ready to retire. He’s considerably older than I am, and so that could be in the next ten years. What we’ll do postretirement, I don’t know. I mean our boys will probably be middle school or early high school and elementary school; so whether I’ll live here till I’m eighty, or (laughter) if I live that long, I don’t know. That’s undetermined. But as far as the next ten years, I can say yeah, that’s the plan.
Piirtoniemi: OK. How did you first get involved with the Red Cross?

Roberts: Well, I first became involved as a blood donor. I’ve been donating blood since I was about eighteen. My father has a rare blood type, and so he was called a lot while I was growing up, and so it was very natural to do blood donation. So really the only association I had with the Red Cross was as a blood donor until I was approached by some community leaders about possibly running the local Red Cross Chapter. I was in between jobs, and somebody brought up the idea because they knew that the current executive director was leaving for medical reasons. And I thought, “Well, that’s interesting, and yeah.” And so I took this job on August 11, 2004, and then five weeks later we got hit by Hurricane Ivan. So it’s been sort of a whirlwind, so to speak, ever since I took the job, actually.

Piirtoniemi: Could you kind of start with Hurricane Katrina stuff?

Roberts: Um-hm.

Piirtoniemi: Can you describe, like I mean when you first heard about the storm, what was happening? And for the duration, what you were doing?

Roberts: Sure.

Piirtoniemi: During and after.

Roberts: Sure. Let’s see, the 2005 hurricane season had been fairly active.

Piirtoniemi: Yes.

Roberts: I mean we were already in late August, and we were up to the (inaudible), obviously. And so we were pretty active. In fact, Hurricane Dennis that threatened us in around July fourth period, maybe the seventh, sometime in that week had threatened us, and we had to go through all the motions of opening shelters and going through what we call a complete evolution without it actually becoming anything. I mean it kind of went ashore in Panama City and not even that forcefully there. So Dennis had come in July. We’d already gone through one evolution. We sort of were tipped off that the season was going to be rather voluminous in the sense of the number of storms when the first one, Arlene, came in June around the tenth because I was in Seattle at a childhood friend’s wedding. And I mean it’s rare to have a storm in June. It’s rare, really, to have one in July, and here already we had A in June; we were to D by the first week of July. And so it was shaping up to be a pretty active season, but again, with Dennis, nothing. My philosophy about disasters, I mean I’m sure it can be extended to life in general, but my thing is with the hurricanes, there’s all this time period where they’re forming, they’re strengthening, they’re moving, they’re weakening; they’re doing all these things that are really—everybody’s all abuzz about it, and it can do a thousand things between now and twenty-four hours from now. So
my thing is, “OK. I’m aware, but I’m not really going to be into the whole thing until I really need to be because in my opinion that’s a lot of expended energy for nothing.”

Piirtoniemi: And time.

Roberts: Right. And I mean it’s very stressful, and so it’s already exhausting when you think that, say, last year when we had a very quiet season, but we were prepared for anything. So you’re hoping for the best, expecting the worst, and then you realize nothing’s happened, but you don’t know that until afterwards. And then you look back and realize how you were so on edge the entire time, and that can just be very exhausting. So my idea was always, “Don’t get caught up in the hype; don’t be a fatalist or real negative unless you have to be, or real worried unless you have to be.”

So how I go about handling that is I always get calls from National Red Cross and from our regional headquarters out of Birmingham, “Be ready, have people on standby, check your supplies, see where you are. If you have any immediate shortfalls, let us know; whether it’s materials or manpower, let us know now.” So we kind of go through those motions, kind of see who’s in town, who’s not, because we’re an agency that’s 95 percent volunteer oriented. And so there’s nothing mandating them to be available. So and quite frankly in the months that a hurricane hits are very popular vacation times, and so you kind of just don’t know where everyone is. Now, since Katrina, we have started calling everyone at the beginning of every month of the hurricane season to get an idea right away, even if there’s no storm. But before Katrina we weren’t that organized. (laughter) So when Katrina came, what I do is I (inaudible) the Emergency Management Agency director; I use my contacts at Chevron, at Northrop Grumman, at Mississippi Power, and some of my disaster volunteers who are retired military who kind of know how to track storms by computer, sort of amateur weathermen kind of thing. And I use them as my gauge of when to put certain phases of preparation process in place. The funny thing about Katrina was that for a long time it looked like it was not going to be a big issue for us. It looked like it was going to take more the track of Dennis. Maybe we would open; maybe we wouldn’t. And then on Friday, August 26, there was this change in the atmosphere. It was about three o’clock in the afternoon I got a call from the Emergency Management Director; I got a call from those corporation contacts that I told you about from my disaster volunteers, and they were all pretty much saying the same thing that we were suddenly in a much more direct-impact zone, much more possibility for danger. It was a weirdness. I mean it was like we were going along kind of calmly, and then suddenly we were thrown into this frenzy, but it was really only the push of the frenzy that, like I said that was Friday afternoon. Well, so then I had to spend all Saturday trying to get—because the biggest problem for us is getting the shelters stocked, staffed, and secured. And we have a total of sixteen shelters because I have a two-county jurisdiction. So you need, obviously, to be ordering the food. And we’re talking about we need enough food for approximately fifteen hundred people over what we’re used to, say, a three-day period. Well, a lot of the people that had been around for Dennis were not around suddenly for Katrina because people were starting to get this feeling like this was going to be really bad, and they evacuated themselves and their families, whereas before they hadn’t. And so not only...
did we become ramped up in our preparations of getting things stocked, staffed, and secured, we did it with fewer people. We had to do it with fewer people because suddenly the people we were relying on were leaving. And there’s nothing you can say. I mean, it’s just what happened. So Saturday night I remember going to bed; I think I talked to the Emergency Management Agency director right before I went to bed. He said, “We’re going to have a meeting tomorrow afternoon.” And that means all the players come in. Representatives from the fire departments, the police departments, the City governments, the county governments, the ambulance service, the hospital system, us, Chevron, Northrop Grumman Shipyard. I mean everybody comes in, and we have a meeting so we’re all on the same page. And National Guard, you know, all of the agencies, Department of Health, that kind of thing. Sunday morning I got up around seven, and I was in the shower, and the phone rang. Apparently my husband said it was the Emergency Management Director on the phone, and he said, “We’re having the meeting in thirty minutes, not this afternoon.” (laughter) I was like, “Oh, OK.”

Piirtoniemi: Is that for the Red Cross?

Roberts: That was the meeting with everybody that we—

Piirtoniemi: But he’s the emergency director for the Red Cross?

Roberts: No, he’s—an Emergency Management Agency director is in charge of emergency management for an entire county. So there’s one per county, and then they group together at the state level. They’re called MEMA, which is Mississippi Emergency Management Agency. So we have the Jackson County EMA, and then we have MEMA, the Mississippi group, and then you get FEMA at the federal level. And so it all kind of starts at the local level, which is how Red Cross works, too. You have these eight-hundred-plus local chapters; you have eight service areas, and then you have national headquarters. So you really, national headquarters doesn’t ever really step in until they know you’re overwhelmed as a local chapter. The problem with Katrina, of course, was we were overwhelmed the moment the wind blew. So when the EMA director for the county calls up, and he’s in charge of emergency management for the entire county, and so all of these people have to—I mean, he has to make sure that we’re all on the same page, first responders, that kind of thing. So when he said that we were having the meeting in thirty minutes, then I knew that things were deteriorating. So I got dressed and went with wet hair, I remember, and went to the meeting, and we were going to have to open shelters before sundown—because we never open or close in the dark if we can help it—that day. So I think we set it up for the people, the shelter staff to arrive at four and to make sure everybody was in by around six, I guess, or at least start the majority of the people. So basically that was the time; by that time, it was Sunday, the twenty-eighth, so.

Piirtoniemi: And you had all your shelters set up, and was it just the volunteers who were in them at the time?
Roberts: No. What happened was we had the volunteer staff, some of my staff—although I say that, and I only had a couple at the time—but the volunteers go in, set it up, and then we open the doors, and we start registering the people. And by the time we open the doors to register people, there’s always a line out to the parking lot. We use mostly schools. So yeah, I mean we got people in that evening. The storm really didn’t start hitting until early Monday morning of the twenty-ninth, so you know people are free to come and go. They just have to check in and check out. But we were set up with shelter managers and some different shifts of people for night shift and day shift for that evening. So that brings us up to the twenty-eighth.

Piirtoniemi: Actually (inaudible).

Roberts: Yeah.

Piirtoniemi: How many people did you get in that shelter that day?

Roberts: Well, I opened—I don’t even think that I opened all sixteen; I think I opened twelve because I had some—at that time we had come up with like a primary system and then a secondary layer. Because when Hurricane Ivan came five weeks after I took this job, we only had three shelters approved in this county, and they should only have had about eight hundred people among those three shelters, and we had to put eleven hundred in those three shelters because we don’t turn people away in the middle of a storm. And so that was very unpleasant for everyone. And so we had spent, meaning the emergency management director and I, had spent the time post-Ivan to June first of the next season looking for more facilities to get them approved according to National Red Cross standards. And so we were able to increase the number from three to ten down here, and I think from four to six up there. But really, I didn’t end up opening prelandfall. I did not end up opening all sixteen; I think I only opened twelve. The need was not there, and also I was running out of staff. I can’t open; I mean, if I can’t staff a shelter, I can’t open it, so.

Piirtoniemi: In the end, did you open all sixteen?

Roberts: Well, in the end, I mean postlandfall became a three month ordeal. We had Red Cross shelters open because postlandfall facilities can be shelters that could never be shelters prelandfall because of their location, geographically and topographically. So postlandfall we had all kinds of shelters open anywhere where there was a facility that was not damaged that could be used as one. We had to—in fact, the night of the storm, Monday night the twenty-ninth, we had to open an emergency shelter at Pascagoula High School for the people that were being rescued by the Fire Department because they were soaking wet and had nowhere to go, as well as people that had been through the storm, made it through the storm, and now had nowhere to be and were just wandering around aimlessly. So one of my board members, a volunteer who was with me at the emergency operations center, he and I and then the department of human services director that works alongside us, we did shifts opening up that shelter ourselves because there was no one else to open it.
Piirtoniemi: So where were you during all of that opening of the shelters?

Roberts: While the shelters are open, I stay at the office as long as I can, but then at a certain point I move to the emergency operations center where the emergency management operation is set up, and that’s where everybody has their little cubicle. There’s a place for the department of health; there’s a place for 911. There’s a place for National Guard, you know, a variety of people. Red Cross happens to have an office that we use up there that serves as our bedroom, also, when we have to spend the night, and became our home-away-from-home for three weeks. I lived there after the storm. And so at the very last moment that I can, I move over there, and then I have radio contact with the people at the shelters from then throughout as long as radio contact exists, and cell phone contact until those go out.

Piirtoniemi: I was just wondering, you said you worked for two counties?

Roberts: Um-hm.

Piirtoniemi: Jackson County and?

Roberts: George.

Piirtoniemi: And George County, OK.

Roberts: Um-hm. Right, so I had approximately, prelandfall or pre-Katrina, and that included a population total of about 156,000.

Piirtoniemi: Wow. How do you let people know where those shelters are going to be prestorm?

Roberts: The media. Actually, as much as we can, starting in about May, we try to inform the people of where the shelters are going to be. And because we had this new shelter system that the EMA director and I had designed with the (inaudible) because we’d gone from only three available buildings in the entire county to ten, but not all of them—we would open them on a phased-in basis, based on need. Then we wanted to communicate that to people, so they have a pretty good idea where they are even when there’s no storm in the Gulf. When the storm gets into the Gulf, they can usually find out [by] newspaper, television; they call us, radio. Because I was a former reporter, I have a really strong rapport with the local media and so it’s not—

Piirtoniemi: (Inaudible)

Roberts: Yeah. It’s not difficult at all to get that information out there.

Piirtoniemi: What were some of the challenges that the shelters faced during the storm?
Roberts: Well, there were a lot of challenges.

Piirtoniemi: Yeah.

Roberts: Communication became a big challenge because I was essentially cut off from them at some point. And at some point we were all cut off from each other, even the police could not communicate, and so you could only communicate face-to-face. I mean, we were joking that we needed smoke signals or carrier pigeons because there was just no communication. Well, another challenge was there was the communication challenge; there was the transportation challenge because all of us—the EOC is located a little bit south of here, and again, I don’t ever really get bothered during the storm unless the EMA director and the lieutenant colonel, who’s in charge of the National Guard during a storm here, are worried. If they’re not worried, then I’m not worried. Well, at about eight or so in the morning, eight, 8:30, I was on the phone with a *Sun Herald* newspaper reporter, and the EMA director came in and said we were all going to have to evacuate to the courthouse across the street because the roof was coming off of the building that we were in. And so then, (laughter) that’s when I thought, “OK. This is a little more than what we’ve been through before.” That building is a concrete, two-story building. It’s not very big. It’s very square, very concrete. We’re always up in the northeast corner, and there are windows, but I don’t spend a lot of time looking out them because I’m so busy trying to report to Red Cross and do those reports and find out the status of the shelters, because our biggest concern is, “What’s your capacity at the shelter?” That of course became an issue, and “What’s your food supply? What’s your water supply? And what is my staff supply like? I mean, how am I doing staffwise?” Because you’re talking about volunteers in a very stressful situation, and while they are trained by Red Cross ahead of time, there are certain things that you cannot predict. Everything about Katrina was one of those things. And unfortunately my logistics volunteer, who always did the ordering of food, was one of the people who got scared and left early; so I had to order the food. And I did the best job that I could based on what I had seen him do, but I didn’t do a very good job, overall. And for example, at some of the places all I had besides fruit and bread to make the sandwiches was peanut butter. Well, some people are deathly allergic to peanuts, so they’re sort of out of luck. I mean, that was an issue; our stocking was not as good, I think, as it could’ve been. I mean under the circumstances, maybe, it was the best it could’ve been, but now in hindsight, we have a much better plan which includes Wal-Mart and them trucking things in and certain amounts of things, and plus we planned more for five days without outside help, whereas before we were only—

Piirtoniemi: Three.

Roberts: —planning for three. Right. So when we evacuated that morning, and we were in, not the middle of the storm but the beginning of the middle, the worst part, rather, we got outside. We have all our stuff because we don’t know what the building’s going to be like. So we’ve got—I keep all my stuff in a laundry basket,
sleeping bag, comforter, you know, all this stuff, my slicker. The National Guardsmen, there was one in front of us and one behind us, and I had another board member with me who was a girl who’s one of my good friends. The water was already knee-high. The Gulf was already up to where we were at knee-high level at that time; so we had to get through the water to get across the street, which normally isn’t—I mean it’s really not much wider than this area, but in the middle of a hurricane it’s a little bit different type of challenge to get across the street. So we got across the street fine the first time, but I had to go back to get another load, and there weren’t any National Guardsmen right there. And plus, we’re evacuating this building where there was a good fifty people in there, and a lot of them, the supervisors and their families go there and stay in their offices. I mean, so we’re talking about some people that maybe are harder to get around because of size or health or age. And anyway, the second time going across I didn’t do as well and a gust of wind blew me into the water, and I was holding stuff, and I remember, it wasn’t ever a time where I was floating away; I mean, I was pretty much set in place, but I got slammed down on my knees in the middle of the street. And I was sitting there thinking. The water’s up to my neck. I’m like, “How did I get here?” (laughter) “How did I get to the middle of Convent Avenue, Pascagoula, Mississippi. I was going to be Diane Sawyer.” (laughter). “How did I get to this position?” I mean it was the most surreal, and the crazy thing was I couldn’t stand up because it was too windy. So eventually, not a long period of time at all, but enough for that thought process to go through my head, and then somebody—I think a National Guardsman—came into the water and plucked me out and took me to the other side. And so I remember going upstairs to the courthouse to the second floor. The courthouse is three stories, so once I was in the courthouse, I never really felt like anything was going to happen to us. The problem was what was seemingly happening all around us. There are a lot of people who ride the storm out in the courthouse, like the district attorney and his family and other courthouse employees and their families, and we knew a lot of them. And so we were all sitting. There were no lights, but we got changed into somewhat drier clothes, and I remember sitting at the table, and we were looking outside, and we could see all of our cars. So this is all the sheriff’s cars, all the first responders’ cars, all our personal cars, all our professional vehicles go underwater because the water eventually got to five feet there. And so (laughter) we were sitting around, and somebody from the health department decided he should call his insurance company and make a claim. So he was the first one in the state of Mississippi to make a Katrina claim.

Piirtoniemi: Wow.

Roberts: And we’re like, “Oh, that’s cool.” (laughter) I mean it was just the funniest thing because they’re like, “Well, are you sure about the address?” “Yeah, I’m watching it happening right now.” And so not even really thinking about the fact that then when all the water’s gone, we now have no vehicles, and then there’s no gas. And I mean that all nightmarish stuff was not yet registering. What was registering was that you could look down, you come in on the ground level, which is the sheriff’s department, and then you go up. Well, you can look down those stairwells. Well, we just watched the water come up. It was like we were the aquarium; I mean, it was
weird. It was like the glass windows and doors, and then all of this water just kept rising and rising, and we actually were looking out to the west, is the Catholic school and the Catholic Church. And there’s a Virgin Mary statue, and so we were just gauging how high the water was getting on the Virgin Mary, and then that’s also how we figured out, around 1:30, that it was starting, that afternoon, that it was starting to recede. But in the interim, there were people around us like the coroner and a police officer who had swam down from the police station, which is just around the corner from—it’s just right over there. So he swam down the couple of blocks to the EOC. And I said, “Jeff, do you know of any fatalities yet?” Because the one thing I heard when I came through the door the second time, after I got plucked out of the water, was I heard the Ocean Springs fire chief say over the radio to somebody on our end, because he was over to the west of us, that the city of Bay St. Louis had just been wiped off the face of the earth. And so you just knew, plus you could—I mean the Gulf was already up here, and then we were watching all this stuff floating around; you knew it had to come from some building. And so I said, “Do you know of any fatalities?” And he said, “Well, just one.” And I said, “Oh, who was it?” And he said, “I don’t know. It was a woman who called.” Because we were—I didn’t realize at that time that the 911 as it was going down from the west to the east, it was getting forwarded like to the farther east like wherever it could, the closest place it could pick up. So some of the dispatchers in this county were actually having to answer calls from Hancock and Harrison Counties because the 911 systems were already down there. So they were taking calls from people like right before they were drowning or as they were drowning or where there was just a little bit of air left. And Jeff said, “Yeah. This woman called and said she had fallen asleep,” which is apparently not uncommon because of the barometric pressure changes in a storm, and when she woke up that her baby was floating, and she needed somebody to come and get her and the child, the now-dead child. And nobody could go. I mean, you know, nobody could get out. And the thing was, like the coroner, for example, in our county, who I know and taught—I used to teach at the local high school, a journalism program, and I had taught her daughter. And her husband and their children live in South Pascagoula. And see, we had made a mandatory evacuation south of [Highway] 90, the EMA directors had, the county had, but so many people just based their decisions on what had happened in Hurricane Camille, which had been the worst thing that had ever happened. And they wrongly thought that was the worst thing that ever could happen, and so if they were in a building that had been fine in Camille, they didn’t care if they were in a mandatory evacuation zone or not. So her daughter and her husband and her children chose to stay in Pascagoula, and the last time the coroner had talked to her, they were having to hack through the roof. So they did end up making it, but it was the whole fact that she didn’t know. It was like, it was just being around this woman who had no idea if her daughter and son-in-law and grandchildren were dead or alive, and just the whole—I mean that was really hard. That was a very defining moment. When Jeff Barnes said that about the woman and her baby, I was like, “OK. Well, whatever happens from now on, I’m not that woman.” And at that point there was like, OK, there is—that’s before we heard all of the other horror stories about family members watching each other drown and that kind of thing, and it just, that was an extremely defining moment for me because my children and my husband had
evacuated. But my son, at that time, was four, my older son, and my other son was seven months old, and so my husband had taken them to I-10 and [Highway] 63, which is about ten miles north of the shore to a hotel, thinking they would be fine. Well, they got five feet of water and had to evacuate to the second floor and spend the night there, and his car went underwater just like mine did. And anyway, I did see them the next day, but they evacuated out of state, and we didn’t live together as a family again, because our own home was destroyed, until ten weeks later.

Piirtoniemi: Wow.

Roberts: So yeah, it was a very interesting experience, three weeks living in the emergency operations center on an air mattress on the floor and then seven weeks in a hotel, that pre-Katrina I would never have been caught dead in, but post-Katrina it looked fine. (laughter) Yeah, so it didn’t matter about the neighborhood because everybody was on the same playing field at that point.

Piirtoniemi: What happened to your home?

Roberts: Our house was on the shore of Gautier, and it was a one-story brick house with a, had a pool and a deck out from the house, and then there was a hill and went down to the water. So there’s no street between, like a lot of the areas on the Coast. And apparently, I did not go to the property for three days. My husband went the next day and took my children and my mother and stepfather who live here now, but I was not with them and hadn’t—I mean I knew, when I heard that the homes on Beach Boulevard were not left standing here, I knew our house wouldn’t be left standing. But I didn’t physically go see it or was not able to timewise, but I made a point of going to see it that third day because I’m a very concrete thinker, and for me, I would’ve been wasting a lot of time trying to imagine what it looked like, because it was brick. Was there a corner standing? Or it was very hard to get an idea about what destroyed is, and so I thought it was just easier to get a mental picture and be done with it. Because no matter what the situation at 2309 Swetman Beach, which was our address, I couldn’t do anything about that. But I could do something, as much as I could, about this situation that we had with people’s lives being at risk and the need for food and shelter and clothing, which is our number one priority after a disaster. So when we got there, I mean to say it disappeared; (laughter) it disappeared. Apparently what happened was the water—we had these crazy neighbors who lived across the street and moved in the weekend before Katrina, and they stayed, and they had to float out on a mattress on top of their moving van, the U-haul, and that’s how they survived. But fortunately for us and the insurance claim, they said the roof blew off first, and then apparently the continuing surge, it must have washed away the hill because it then ripped the pool out of the ground; so there was no pool. You could see the pool in the trees to the west.

Piirtoniemi: Was it cement?
Roberts: Well, the cement was gone, but like the liner, yeah, like you know the light, the pool light that’s at the one end? Well, it was still in like around with the lining, but it was in a tree. And there were like all these blue specks as you looked to the west; it was all our pool lining, anything that you could see that was blue was our liner. So it ripped the pool out, and then it must’ve just continually come at the house while the wind was doing its thing and the water was doing its thing, and apparently it just—I mean I don’t know if like the day you die you get to see things you never got to see while you were living, but I would be very interested. I mean when you got to the property at that point—because what happened was when the pool left and then the house left, the foundation that the house had been on fell into the crater where the pool had been, and so there was only half a slab. We didn’t even have a whole slab, and it fell into the crater where the pool had been, so what was there, was in the front yard, was some of the two-by-fours that had been the framing of the house, just kind of piled up in the front yard, and a lot of broken brick and some broken dishes, a couple of those, and one of our kayaks from the garage. And that was it. That was absolutely it. And quite frankly, it made it a whole lot easier to go on and do what I needed to do because there was nothing to be done there. I mean there was nothing to salvage; there was nothing to dig through. There was just nothing whereas a lot of people who had no house, in the same way that I had no house, still had a structure of some sort that was standing, and they had all of this horrible water and mud—I mean disgusting water that had God-knows-what in it, and a lot of it dead—go through. And their stuff was just as destroyed as mine, but I couldn’t see mine. They had to see theirs, and they had to dig through all of that mud and muck. And there have never been hotter days than the days that came after Katrina. I mean it was horrible. So I always felt extremely blessed that we lost the house the way that we did because I might’ve felt compelled to want to go in there and try to get stuff or try just to do something. But when there was obviously, so obviously nothing to be done, well, then it was like, you know, “OK.”

Piirtoniemi: Back to work.

Roberts: Yeah, exactly. And there’s only a couple of things that I really, two or three that I am sorry that I don’t still have. But when you think about that woman and her baby, it’s like, “Whatever. Whatever about the house.” Because we ended up losing the house, my husband’s law office, and both our cars, so it was a pretty huge—

Piirtoniemi: Loss.

Roberts: Yeah, yeah.

Piirtoniemi: So have you rebuilt since then?

Roberts: Oh, no.

Piirtoniemi: You haven’t?
Roberts: Oh, no. This is how crazy post-Katrina life is. It’s so funny the difference between men and women. It was very obvious even weeks, not even a full month after the storm, that the men were taking it a lot harder than the women.

Piirtoniemi: (Inaudible) yeah.

Roberts: Oh, my God. I mean it was like not in the least a sexist statement; it was just a reality. And I think a lot of it is because of the way our society is with men and how they’re the provider. And my husband, for example, he’s twenty years older than I; he had spent his entire life working very hard as a lawyer in his own practice, not in a firm, to have what he has. And he now, he has an older son who’s in law school himself, but here he has now this new family, a five-year-old, well, now, five and two, but at the time, four and seven months. And he was fifty-six at the time, and I was not there, but my mother said that when he saw the house, he said, “I’m fifty-six years old; I have no house. I have no business. I have four people on my payroll, and I have a family to support.” I mean it was devastating to him. He took our kids out of state and came back for one, like a couple of days. His office happened to be next to my office. Our office was not destroyed like his because we were four feet higher, but we were flooded, and I happened to be driving by when I saw him in there. And he was just sweeping the floor. I mean the whole place was just flooded, and it’s an old, like, ninety-year-old house that he uses as an office, and he’s just crying, sweeping. And I was like, “What are you doing here? There’s nothing you can do here.” And plus my mother had just called from Texas and said that our older son was crying for him. Because if the boys had been separated from my husband the way they were separated from me, there would’ve been serious trauma because they’re such daddy’s boys; it worked out much in the reverse of what people think. My boys are extremely attached to their father. And so they were not as, they were not traumatized by being separated from me. They would have been the other way around. So I said, “Winston needs you in Texas, and there is nothing you can be doing here.” And even my mother had a hard time getting her—her house was around the corner from ours, but it just got like two inches of water. But people didn’t want to leave where all the mold, leave and then come back a couple of weeks later where the mold had destroyed everything. So she just worked as hard as she could to get it to a place where they could leave it for several weeks. But at one point—I mean she’s thin like I am, and it’s very, very hot. And she’s older, and they’re working hard all day long, and there’s hardly any water or any food. In fact, the government was using our property and the slab next to us as helicopter landing places to bring in food. I’m like, “If you are here tomorrow, I’m bringing the National Guard in to haul you out because you cannot.” I was like, “You cannot be here. I cannot worry about my family and 156,000 other people. I’m not doing it, so you have to leave, and I’ll deal with all the other crazy people who are refusing to leave.” But when people came up to me and would ask about things I’d say, “If you have transportation and you have somewhere to go outside of this area, you need to go there because it’s not going to get any better here any time soon. And you need to absolutely go.” So that was just the reality of it. And the men, just so many men that are in such positions of authority and leadership here, and they were just devastated. They just were, just emotionally, because they’re the provider, and
they’re in control, and this just washed away their control, literally. And women, I think, are just like, either just—I hate to use the word stronger, but I think that we— somebody said to me she thought it was that we always plan A, plan B, and plan C, and we just automatically go B and C and don’t even think twice about it. Whereas they’re very concentrated on plan A and fixing things, just like in Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus. I mean it’s very true. Usually if I’m telling my husband a problem, if he can’t fix it, he really doesn’t want to know about it (laughter) because there’s nothing he can offer. And that was the same, and it was just an interesting—the City manager here in Pascagoula, she and I are in the same, this little like counseling group for a critical incident stress management together, and she said the same thing. She’s like, “People that I, these men that I was going to look to for guidance were falling apart,” all around her, looking to her. And I remember that, too, just because I’m Red Cross, and I’m in this room with all of these authority figures from all over, and they’re looking to me because I’m supposed to have the food and water. I mean it was, that was a really, it was an amazing experience. It was; yeah, it was amazing, to say the least, very life-altering but also very revealing, life-revealing. I think that there was a point in those first few days after Katrina; in the first four days I got a total of five hours of sleep. And when you are living every day, and it’s lasting about twenty-two hours every day, then your whole concept of time becomes somewhat warped because you’re really living more like a week every day, and your time references are off. And so I would go in my head and think of, like, all the things in my life that had happened. I was thirty-five at the time that Katrina hit, and there was this moment where I realized that every relationship that I had formed and every training I had received, every experience that I had had, had all been designed for thirty-five years to prepare me for that one day and what it was going to demand thereafter. And that’s a really amazing experience in itself to think, “Well”—I never knew if I was making the right decision, or always questioning myself and then realizing that there had been this greater plan of, “You’re going to do this and this and this because when it gets to August 29, 2005, you’re going to need either that knowledge or that relationship or whatever that ability or that skill developed because people’s lives are going to be depending on you.” So that was—

Piirtoniemi: That’s incredible.

Roberts: It is.

Piirtoniemi: Yeah.

Roberts: Yeah, and (laughter) the Red Cross, I just laugh because nationally I kind of became the poster child of Katrina for them because I was an executive director who also lost everything in the storm and kept working. Like what else was I going to do? But anyway, it really became this sort of topic of urban legend when we opened that emergency shelter at Pascagoula High School. And we did it in the evening, so we were—I mean it was an emergency situation, and people were soaking wet, and we had gotten all of these blood drive T-shirts that we could find that were still dry at our own office to put on people just to have something dry. And this woman checked in
with her husband and her eight-year-old and her four-day-old baby, and I was like, “Oh, my God,” because I had a seven-month-old, and I was so tuned into the whole baby thing. And a newborn, and they’re so fragile, and I was like, “Oh, my God.” I had no idea if that child was going to be alive the next day just because of the situation we were in. At this point we had so little water left that we were rationing in little paper cups of amounts because we didn’t have enough bottles of water. We didn’t have enough of this that we’re having to pour it in little paper cups. And I helped the woman get along the wall, get her space, and I said, “Are you breastfeeding?” And she said, “No,” kind of like that. And I said, “Oh, well, do you want to try?” And she said, “No,” like she was really scared. And I said, “I breastfeed both of my boys.” Thank God for only six months because that would’ve been a nightmare in itself if I had still been nursing when the storm hit. So I had quit the month before. And I could tell that she was scared and not very receptive, so I let it alone. Well, then the next day, and another shift of people came in to work that shelter, and I went back to the EOC. Well, within the next twenty-four hours the sanitary conditions at the high school became very bad because the toilets were not flushing, and you have a great risk for dysentery and a whole second disaster with health issues. So it became evident that we had to evacuate that shelter and get them to some other shelters north of the interstate where there were some showers and some plumbing facilities. So the State Guard went with me, and we got some busses. (laughter) We commandeered a bus; commandeer was our favorite verb.

Piirtoniemi: What does that mean?

Roberts: Kind of took over. (laughter) Kind of just took whatever we needed. In fact, the firefighters broke into the WIC [Women, Infants, and Children] Building for us so we could get formula and stuff out of there.

Piirtoniemi: What’s the WIC Building?

Roberts: Women, Infants, Children, that’s a program for poor women that need to feed their children. And so the firefighters just went with us and broke into the building with us. But anyway, so I came back two days later to run the evacuation, and I saw the same woman with the baby that’s now six days old. And I said, “Have you started breastfeeding?” And she said, “No.” And I said, “What are you going to feed the baby? How much formula do you have from the hospital?” She said, “Four days.” I said, “What are you going to feed the baby when you run out?” She said, “Well, I’ll just go to the store.”

Piirtoniemi: Oh, my God.

Roberts: I took her face in my hands, and I said, “There are not going to be any stores available anytime soon. If you do not start breastfeeding this baby, the baby will die. There’s no chance of getting food for this baby for a while.” And I said, “I have done it. I can take you in the other room and teach you how to do it. It’s not a big deal.” So she agreed. So I took her in the guidance office, and this was the school...
where I had taught and so I was very comfortable there. And all the secretaries have pictures of my sons everywhere, and so it was kind of nice because there were all these pictures of Winston and Quincy that also made me feel more comfortable anyway. So I started helping her breastfeed the baby, and her husband or the father of the child came in, and he was yelling at her for letting me teach her because he said, “Breastfed babies cry more, and they’re more attached to their mother”—

Piirtoniemi: (Inaudible)

Roberts: I know. So I just whispered to her; I said, “That’s OK.” And at that—I was so mad at the State of Mississippi at that moment because they’ve been notorious and historically very bad about focusing money and efforts on education, and we rate very low in education in anything, really, that has to do with quality of lives for children. And I thought, “Because they perpetuated ignorance over education, I’m now having to fight this dad about letting his wife breastfeed their child to keep her alive.” I mean it was just, it was like the, it was just amazing to me. It was just like we would not be suffering. There was so much suffering, I think, that went on just based on people’s ignorance, and that they just didn’t—I would go to neighborhoods that week. I would go with National Guard and busses to help them move to a shelter because they were in a condemned apartment complex or a condemned trailer or a condemned neighborhood or whatever, and they wouldn’t go. And they let their children run around with bare feet in an area—

Piirtoniemi: —with a mess.

Roberts: Right, that was in a mosquito-laden area, and they knew not to brush—they knew not to drink the water, but [they didn’t know] not to brush their teeth in the water. They didn’t realize that that was—

Piirtoniemi: That it was connected.

Roberts: Yeah, and they also didn’t know not to bathe with open sores in the water. I mean it was—I was like, “Oh, my God.” It was the most—I swear, every time I think of Katrina, I just think of slamming my head into a brick wall because I was just talking and talking and talking, and nobody was hearing anything because they just want—it was their home, and that’s where they were going to stay, and if somebody forcefully made them leave, well, fine, but until then, they weren’t going anywhere.

Piirtoniemi: Was that here in Pascagoula or just around Jackson County in general?

Roberts: Here, Pascagoula, Gautier, you name it. I struck out. I batted zero on the apartment complex and trailer condemnation issues. Oh, yeah, zero. And now I realize looking back that there was no getting through to them, that they were—the state that they were in, they couldn’t hear me. I mean they—so anyway, yeah.

Piirtoniemi: After that trauma, people will think less rationally, probably, than—
Roberts: Oh, sure.

Piirtoniemi: Yeah.

Roberts: Plus they’re not that well-educated in the first place under normal circumstances.

Santillana: Do you think that’s the solution to increasing awareness on how the storm—

Roberts: Oh, of course. I mean I'm a big fan and promoter of knowledge is power. I mean, that’s my job to prepare and educate people on disaster readiness, and it’s just, oh, it’s just almost like trying to stamp out teen pregnancy around here where we’re also worse. We’re top on teen pregnancy, so yeah, I mean I think that is a solution, but it’s one of those hitting your head against the wall and never really knowing when you’re making an impact or not.

Santillana: Are there any programs in place right now?

Roberts: Oh, sure. I mean if we spent all of last year, every moment from after the first of the year headed toward the next hurricane season doing all kinds of education programs. We have programs in the schools. We do speaking engagements. We do media things; we pass out [information] at Wal-Mart; on one Saturday alone, you can hit like thirty-thousand people if you do the three Wal-Marts in my two-county jurisdiction. And we do preparedness brochures. And I mean, it’s hard to even think of anything to possibly do, and some of it is, a lot of it is you just have to be your own advocate. It’s about self-advocacy and that you and your family, you have to take care of you and your family while they take care of them and their families, and it’s very hard sometimes to make people realize that.

Santillana: So after Katrina, like can you just talk about the weeks after and how help started coming and what kind of relief was made available to you?

Roberts: Uh-huh. (laughter) Let’s see, the help coming after—well, it’s hard to say the exact day, but I think it was people from other areas of the country, Red-Crosswise, started to show up the first day after, like on Tuesday.

Santillana: Volunteers?

Roberts: Well, no. Paid Red Cross people that were sent by nationals to assess the situation. They showed up on Tuesday. I don’t remember when the first food and water showed up. It was sometime that week, but every day we didn’t know what we were going to have for the next day until about midnight of that day because the trucks, some of the trucks were being—and this was not just Red Cross stuff but FEMA stuff—they were disappearing between leaving and coming because sheriffs in
some of the counties in Mississippi thought that if it was in their county, it was for their people, and they pretty much hijacked the cars.

Santillana: Oh, my gosh.

Roberts: I mean, they pulled the trucks over and forced the—oh, yeah, it’s a true story. And so some of the supplies never made it to the Coast because other parts of Mississippi—80 percent of Mississippi was in need in the first couple of weeks after the storm, was without power, and so sometimes the supplies didn’t get here. Other times they would start out with enough gas and then run into a gasoline issue. Sometimes it was just the fact that the roads were jammed. I mean it was logistics. It was a logistics nightmare. And so there was never a time where we didn’t have enough, but there were times where we didn’t know if we were going to have enough, which is a scary enough feeling even if you end up being OK. The first FEMA person didn’t arrive until sometime at the end of the week, and then that person was a building inspector I felt sorry for because he was not welcome at that point. FEMA, as far as my perspective, has been, bureaucratically and in the big picture, they did a poor job. But individually, the FEMA people that we have worked with here on the ground have been magnificent. They’ve been wonderful to work with. We’ve had great relationships with them. And so on an individual basis, on the ground we did well. It was just the sluggish trickle that comes down from the top down was the problem that we saw with FEMA. And of course our own organization had some issues in the beginning that we have fixed since, but apparently at [Red Cross] National Headquarters, they were waiting for FEMA to pull the trigger before they pulled the trigger, and that just shouldn’t have happened. There shouldn’t have been a gap. At one point, somebody in Red Cross said, “Well, we didn’t hear from you so we didn’t know.” And I’m like, “OK. If you didn’t hear from us, that’s your first clue that there’s a very big problem.” I mean, it was just a disconnect, again, not just our organization, but any organization that is somehow connected to Washington, DC, or an area way outside of here, a huge disconnect between what reality was and what their presumption of reality was, and that caused a lot of problems.

Santillana: So like, so then you guys had the shelters set up for weeks and weeks. How many people do you—were you having people who were living there?

Roberts: Um-hm.

Santillana: Or were there also people who were coming in taking supplies and then leaving and going back to their homes?

Roberts: We had both. We had what are called PODS, which are points of distribution sites, and we actually did them drive-through, and had, you drove up, and the National Guard or Red Cross or whoever, who knows where the supplies—they were usually our supplies, but other people were—we had it with bottled water, food, diapers, whatever you needed, and they just put them in the trunk, and you drove off, and it was kind of a drive-through system like that. We had fixed feeding sites where
all you did was go there and eat. It wasn’t necessarily a shelter where you stayed, besides the shelter feeding and the mobile feeding through the neighborhoods. In the three months—because we closed our last shelter here in Jackson County on December first, so we did almost exactly three months of postlandfall sheltering—I hear there were like, I think it was something like forty thousand people, total. Now, some people could be counted twice because sometimes they left thinking they had a better situation, and they ended up coming back. But yeah, I mean, three months of long-term sheltering; that was people’s homes for a while.

Santillana: If you’re living there, what do you get? What is it like?

Roberts: Well, first of all, it’s very structured. There is an area—a lot of times for postlandfall, we use community centers and churches, whereas usually they aren’t qualifying as a shelter prelandfall, but they make great postlandfall shelters. So you have a sleeping area. There’ll be an area for single men, and there’ll be an area, a different area, for single women. And there’s a separate area for older people. And there’s a separate area for families. And so they try to get that established for sleeping arrangements. You have a cot, or whatever bedding that you bring, and it’s very, just one after the other set up in the room. And then you’ll have an area that’s sort of like a television viewing area, and you might have a children’s recreation area. We’ve since developed a partnership with the local YMCA [Young Men’s Christian Association] that they’ll send in people to set up for postlandfall children activities, which is really—

Santillana: (Inaudible)

Roberts: Yeah. And we have a lot of wonderful things in place now. And then there’s an area, an eating area, and there are certain rules. There’s the breakfast time; there’s the lunch time; there’s the dinner time; there’s lights-out time; there’s TV-watching time. I mean, you have to be very courteous of each other because this is now all your living space. And then there’s usually a bulletin board for information, any type of information from anywhere, whether it’s from FEMA or another organization. Whatever information you can get out, we try to get as much of that accurately out that we can because that tends to soothe people. We try to get them back in. The reason for the rules is to get them back into routine because routine settles people and makes them reestablish a sense of normalcy, because we try not to ever say that we’re getting back to normal because there is—our pre-Katrina normal and our post-Katrina normal can never be the same, but it can be a reestablished, redefined normal for whatever your family is. So there’s also an area where there are a lot of supplies, like toothbrushes, toothpaste, deodorant, what have you on the hygiene, personal hygiene product, and then snacks, and water and different kinds of things like that.

Piirtoniemi: So people bring their own bedding?
Roberts: Sure. We like for people to bring their own bedding, but again, prelandfall you’re only allowed about fifteen square feet per person. Postlandfall, it’s forty square feet per person. Because in prelandfall we’re just looking to shove as many people as we safely can into a safe environment until the danger of the storm is passed. Postlandfall we’re trying to create a little bit more comfortable environment so you can make better decisions for you and your family in the long term.

Piirtoniemi: Um-hm, of course.

Roberts: Oh, and there’s also—I’m sorry. There’s also in the shelters a health services area where you have a nurse and medical care, and then a mental health services where you have counselors available.

Santillana: I was just going to touch on that. What if, like now after the storm, you’re dealing with a lot of medical and mental health issues around here. What does the Red Cross have to do with that?

Roberts: Well, we have, on the mental health end, we have a program. We have now postlandfall—well, post-postlandfall—a program called the Hurricane Recovery Program, and it is utilizing the donations that we received that have to be used for Hurricanes Katrina, Rita, and Wilma. And that money, forty million dollars of that money is going toward the mental health care, and it’s a program called Access to Care, which is up to a thousand dollars per individual if you lived in any of the FEMA zip codes predisaster, that it could pay for medication like an antidepressant; it could pay for counseling, or it could pay for a substance abuse program, any kind of outpatient program, that kind of thing. It’ll pay for a thousand dollars per individual, not per family; so that’s helpful also. And you’d call—you access it through the Web or through an 866-toll-free number and take care of it that way. So mental-healthwise we’ve continued to be in the picture. Hands-onwise we had mental health counselors available up until the disaster job, which we call each disaster, this particular job closed here in Mississippi for Red Cross in, I think it was, May of last year. So after May, all of our mental health counselors were pulled out, but then Access to Care went into place in October, so. And healthwise we’re not really—now, since May we haven’t really done anything, but prior to May we were doing things like dentures and eyeglasses, and things like that.

Santillana: I’m trying to think. I think that we’re interested in like climate change, so is the Red Cross doing—it seemed that Hurricane Katrina was so much more severe than anything I’d ever seen before, and a lot of people think that has a lot to do with climate change. Is there anything in the Red Cross that is kind of tied into that? Are they anticipating things in the sense of—

Roberts: Because of global warming issues?

Santillana: Yeah.
**Roberts:** Well, I know that we pay a lot of attention to what the meteorology experts are saying. For instance, last year they predicted this very active season, and then we ended up with a very—thank God—dull season and where hardly anything hit, or anything that formed kind of fizzled out and went off to nowhereville in the Atlantic Ocean. Apparently that had something to do with the weather patterns related to La Nina. I’m told that that’s supposed to repeat itself for this year. So but I mean, I know that; I mean I hear that, but nobody ever can really predict the future, and so our organization never officially lets its guard down on preparedness and readiness. I mean, if anything, we’re—I mean we haven’t had the chance, us or anybody, the chance to prove that we learned our lessons from Katrina because last year nobody had to activate. So it’s still, the rubber hasn’t met the road, so to speak, on that. And so with climate, I mean, yeah, we pay attention to that; I mean we work with people more so at the national level than the local level, but it’s something that we pay attention to, but it does not deter our efforts at trying to reach 100 percent disaster preparedness and education in a community.

**Santillana:** I think one of the last things I want to touch on is maybe—if you have any other questions after that—is that the volunteer impact that is going on, I wonder if you could just talk about that.

**Roberts:** Yeah. (laughter) We lost a lot of volunteers for a variety of reasons. Obviously some of them just simply moved away. Some of them are still here, but very consumed by their own personal situations that they found themselves in. The other thing about disaster is that people just come out of the woodwork when the disaster happens. It’s, again, like preparedness; nobody is that excited about doing training for something that isn’t going on or may not ever happen, but then once it happens, then you wish they’d all been trained. And so do they because they could be a lot more effective. You want your volunteer work to be as meaningful as it can be, and so that’s a hard one. Yeah, our number of volunteers has been down at our local chapter, but we’re starting to see somewhat of an increase. Of course it’s starting to be spring again, and that’s starting to start to be our push again for disaster readiness. Although our organization is very big about, “Disasters do not just happen June 1 to November 30 when the hurricane season is; they can happen any day in any form or fashion. It doesn’t have to be a hurricane. It can be a tornado or an aviation accident or a chemical leak, or it can be a snowstorm or avian flu.” Which is something else that we’re all, when we have to start talking about avian flu on top of Katrina, I’m always like, I’ve decided after avian flu discussions, I think the first big one I was in after Katrina was November, so it was just three months later. I said, “I’m just going to retitle myself the disaster diva.” (laughter) Because it’s like all things from avian flu to hurricanes and floods. We always are looking for volunteers. Some of what’s happened, that I think a lot of times people don’t think about when they’re not involved in directly, has to do with the health issues. And the obituaries were extremely and noticeably longer after, for several months after the storm. And what happens is it looks like they died of natural causes, but it’s a lot of times older people who are widowed, or widows themselves, and they just give up. It’s like they don’t really have any big reason to go on, and they don’t. And a lot of people who had sort
of a sickness before Katrina have had a lot worse sickness since, and they’ve died. And so, no, Katrina didn’t kill them in the storm, but the stress and the impact of Katrina and the environmental issues—we’re dealing with a lot of mold issues and a lot of bacteria issues and things, infections the doctors say they’ve never seen before, because we still don’t know what was in that water—is causing health issues. And one of my main disaster volunteers who, I mean he’s a retired Army captain, I mean, barked the orders with the best of them, but I could give him a project, and he just took it over. He’s only sixty-seven, I think, and in August, the day after the anniversary of Katrina, he died of pancreatic cancer, and apparently he had found out, maybe in June, but he was the one in charge of getting us back in our building, and he got us back in March and was still working on it. I mean he got us back so we were operational, but he was working on that; he was working on shelter communications issues. He was working on quite a few projects. And I found out on a Friday he had terminal cancer, and he died Wednesday. I mean, I was like, he might as well have died in a car accident, it was that unexpected and sudden. And I mean, we’re still recovering as a chapter from that because he came every day. He had a desk; I mean, he wasn’t paid, but he was like any other staff member, and then he was gone. And then one just like him, also in her sixties, was our volunteer coordinator, handled getting volunteers for things, when new volunteers came, in handled them. She got cancer at the same time, got lung cancer. She’s still alive, has not come back since. In fact they had done surgery and thought they got the cancer, and then just last week we found out that it’s come back, and it’s in her brain. So I think we’ll end up losing her, probably, by the end of the year. So it’s (laughter) like, when, yeah, when Peter died, I just thought, “Oh.” Because they always say the second year of disaster is so much harder than the first because you’re on this adrenalin thing, and everybody’s pushing like it’s this big sprint for the first year, and then you realize it’s not. It’s a marathon. And the second year you’re not anywhere you thought you were going to be. Like you said, “Did we rebuild?” We didn’t rebuild because we were fortunate enough to get a house, a little, bitty house, an old couple wanting to move before Katrina. We were fortunate enough to get a very good insurance settlement. My husband had a great deal of cash in hand and was able to pay for this house. He thought—at that time, this was November; ten weeks after the storm, we moved into this house. He thought we would live there a year while we rebuilt on our property on the water. Well, that became quite evident that we couldn’t get insurance; we couldn’t find a builder. You can never find contractors; nobody’s showing up when they say. They come to do an estimate, and you never hear from them again. I mean all kinds of horrible issues with the labor force down here and the price of things, that we finally decided this past November, we would buy a house around the corner from our slab that was much bigger so we could live there more normally than being cramped into this little [house] for a couple of years while we look, like while we watch to see what unfolds regarding insurance and building issues when we rebuild. That’s our plan. Will we be able to? We don’t know. Will be able to afford it? The house that we bought, which is, I mean, right around the corner, had water. It wasn’t standing water, but it was wet, and they redid the floors and everything. They paid eighteen hundred dollars a year in wind pool for just wind insurance alone before the storm. We’re paying nine thousand dollars. Yeah. Yeah, and that’s wind alone. And the insurance company canceled our
homeowners, and so we had to get a different company. I don’t know what we’re paying for that, but I mean that’s just an example of what we’re talking about. So you know, but at least now we’re in a house. I mean we’re further. You couldn’t, except for the loss of life, you really couldn’t have lost more than we lost, but you couldn’t be much better off than we are. Both my husband and I have jobs, good jobs. He’s very smart with money and had, was not completely devastated when he lost his business and his cars and his house, financially. And we’re now in this very large house, and we’re good, whereas some people are still in FEMA trailers; the mom, the dad, and the two high-school age kids or middle-school-age kids and they’re in a little FEMA trailer. I mean it’s awful. You talk about the mental health issues about that alone; it’s just mind boggling. So yeah, so there’s psychically, the Red Cross looks at 9/11 [September 11, 2001], looks at the Oklahoma City Bombing, and looks at what the trends were, mental-healthwise and community-impactwise, and it’s not that pretty of a picture. I mean, we’re about to hit eighteen months. We’re at a cyclically low; at two years we’ll be at another one. I mean, it could go on like this for five to seven years. So you just, I mean, it is what it is; so you go with it from there. But there are certainly a lot of issues that people are dealing with down here.

**Santillana:** Yeah. On an individual level how have you really processed the adversity you face in the aftermath of Katrina? I mean, how have you personally got through all of this?

**Roberts:** (laughter) Well, several ways. First of all, I got into this critical incident stress management [CISM] group, which is really just this little counseling thing. The City manager from Pascagoula and the mayor of Moss Point and I are the three counseled people. And then our friend that runs the Community Coalition—in fact, he was here earlier this morning—Jim Yancy is his name, and Jim is trained in CISM. Well, of course, since the storm we’ve had a big community training so a lot of us are trained now, but he was the only one trained at the time, and so he kind of facilitates the discussions. And that helps immensely because the three of us, the City manager, the mayor and me, are in very high-profile, high-stress, disaster-related jobs where a lot of people are depending on us to help fix their lives, while we have our own personal lives ourselves. So that’s been an extreme help. And in doing that was encouraged—for one thing, I had been a runner before, in between pregnancies, and then because Quincy was only seven months, had not gotten back to running yet. So December 10 of last year, of 2005, I started running again, and that was huge because of all of the benefits that go with that type of exercise. I started reading again for personal enjoyment, which is big for me. I have a counselor. I had been in counseling off and on for years just, you know, on an as-needed basis or a self-proclaimed, as-needed basis, and had a lot of cognitive therapy training, had a lot of counseling, had a lot of coping skills before I went into Katrina, and so I think that that kicked in to be quite a big benefit since. And also, I take an antidepressant, quite frankly, and took one before Katrina. I have a thyroid condition which makes you more prone to need one, but I just doubled the dosage after Katrina, on my own, and when I finally got to the doctor, he was like, “That’s fine; that’s totally fine.” So yeah, so between the medication and the counseling, and I have a really strong support system with friends...
in my church, and I have a very strong spiritual awareness and faith-based living concept that that’s helped immensely. And just, I think just keeping a perspective because I deal with so many people who have these problems that I could never dream up in a thousand years, the situations that they have found themselves in, I’m like—I mean I used to just say it’s all because of bad choices, and that you need to be responsible for the consequences that come from bad choices, but now I realize that most people don’t even know how to make a good choice because generationally they’ve just been in a bad place, and they have no role models for making good choices. And anyway, so I’m less judgmental about that, but they do find themselves in the craziest, horrible situations, and I’m not in that situation; so that helps.

Santillana: That’s very fortunate. Unfortunately we’re out of time now. We’ve got someone else coming, but is there anything that we haven’t asked you that you want to add?

Roberts: No, I can’t think. You know, the main thing I think is that we’re at eighteen months, and in some ways that seems surreal, in itself because when you’re living at one point where every day is a week, and then now you look back, and it’s been a year and a half, and it’s a very, it’s a very strange existence sometimes. *Sometimes*, and I know this is going to sound crazy, but sometimes I miss the days, like the first six weeks after the storm because there was this camaraderie among the first responders. I became completely in tune with how soldiers must feel, people in the military who go fight battles together, and then they come back, and they can’t really relate to their family or to their friends who weren’t there the way that they can relate to the people who were in, the troops that were on the ground with them. I mean that is exactly the feeling that we all developed here. It doesn’t happen everywhere, but here it was a very close-knit group. And so some days I just, you know, I don’t wish to be back in that sort of that state, but I wish to be around those people with that sense of belonging and security. I mean, I’ve never loved the National Guard more in my whole life. I mean, I was always with a man in camouflage. It’s a great thing, that kind of thing. So people’s lives, like I said, will never be the same, but I think they’re going to be better, or that they can be better. It’s just taking *so long*, and everything is just *so slow*, and unfortunately not everybody was equipped with the coping skills that I have or the strength, inner strength that I have. And there were people with even better qualities than I have, but I think that makes a big difference. I just look at how we can become even better than we were before.

(end of interview)