Mississippi Oral History Project

Hurricane Katrina Oral History Project

An Oral History

with

Pamela L. Berry

Interviewer: Ted Butler

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Butler: My name is Ted Butler. I’m interviewing Pam Berry for an oral history project about Mississippi survivors, Hurricane Katrina. It is thirty-first of October, 2005. We’re interviewing at the narrator’s sister’s home. Pam, could you tell me when and where you were born?

Berry: I was born in Valdosta, Georgia, 1954.

Butler: I know that you grew up on the Mississippi Gulf Coast, right?

Berry: No.

Butler: No?

Berry: I lived in Georgia for the first six years, then we moved to Alabama, lived in Montgomery and Birmingham and, actually, I was living in Montgomery when Martin Luther King [Jr.] marched on the Capitol. I remember that day. And then we ended up in Mississippi when I was about twelve. So I was, lived most of my life [in] Hattiesburg but I was working full time in Biloxi.

Butler: And where did you attend college?

Berry: USM [The University of Southern Mississippi]

Butler: USM. What is your present occupation?

Berry: Registered nurse.

Butler: Registered nurse. Let me go back a little bit from today and before Katrina. Had you lived through any other hurricanes or tropical storms before Katrina?

Berry: I was here, we lived here during Camille but, you know, the only thing we had trees down on our house.

Butler: Oh, and I hate to interrupt—you mean Hattiesburg, right?
Berry: In Hattiesburg.

Butler: In Hattiesburg.

Berry: I was in Hattiesburg during Camille and we had trees down, but that’s all.

Butler: OK, we’re going to jump up a little bit further. Tell me when you moved to the Gulf Coast area.

Berry: I don’t live, I never have lived down there. I’ve worked down there.

Butler: Right. OK, so we’ll go up a little bit further. Kind of take me back to the days before the storm. I remember Friday was—

Berry: Normally, well, as far as my work, I usually drive down on a Thursday or Friday and I sleep in the hospital, and I work Thursday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday, and usually come home on Monday. So I do live there half time but it’s just in the hospital. The day before the hurricane I was scheduled to work. I was going to work Thursday, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. And the weather reports were showing it was going to hit Monday; Katrina was going to hit Monday around noon. So I had no plans to stay down there for the storm. I figured—I got off at seven o’clock that morning—that I was going to drive home to Hattiesburg, and did not take extra clothes or anything because I wasn’t planning to be there. Well, the hurricane came in a lot sooner than they had predicted and so I found myself having been there since Thursday. You know, here it was Sunday night and the hurricane was starting to hit and I was kind of stuck there. But, um, where do you want me to—

Butler: Oh no, you’re doing great.

Berry: Just to start telling about the experience or—

Butler: I think—well, what kind of nurse are you exactly?

Berry: OK, I’m a labor and delivery nurse.

Butler: Labor and delivery.

Berry: OK, let me just—so I had come to work. I worked several nights in a row and I’d worked—I don’t know, I guess I’m kind of nervous. By the time the hurricane hit I had been up for forty-eight hours. I was exhausted by the time it hit. But Sunday night—you know I’m a labor and delivery nurse. We went around, we were trying to, you know, we were busy putting plastic bags over all our equipment and trying to move it into the inner halls. Basically, our hospital was not very prepared for this. I
just need to back up.

**Butler:** No, you’re doing great. Actually, how far are y’all from the beach, just to get an idea?

**Berry:** Not, well, there’s the beach, Highway 90, and then there’s like a building in front of us and then we’re right there. We’re in that first block off the beach.

**Butler:** Right.

**Berry:** We’re considered on the beach. When I was hired by Gulf Coast [Medical Center?], I was concerned about the hurricane and I asked them, you know, “When do we evacuate?” And they told me that we always evacuate for a Category Three. Well, this past year we got a new CEO [Chief Executive Officer] from Oklahoma and I’m sure he’s never been in a hurricane. And he decided, like days before the hurricane was going to hit, that we could stay there for a Category Five. And, you know, I was upset. Everybody was upset. Several people, you know, were—we were told, if you didn’t come to work you’d be fired. Well, several people were fired because they weren’t going, but being a single parent with a son I’m trying to put through college, I felt like I didn’t have a choice but to go to work. So I was down there and also—I know I’m talking bad about where I work—but I even ran off a copy of this e-mail. The people that I work for told us not to pay attention to the people on—the weathermen. But they said, it said, “Please do not panic by what you see on TV. Some of the stations such as the Weather Channel tend to sensationalize things.” So they were telling us, “Yes it’s going to be a Category Five but it’s only going to be a two or three here.” They were thinking they knew more about the weather than the weathermen, and they were telling us not to listen to the TV.

**Butler:** Well, I hate to interrupt, but they said it was going to be a [Category] Five, and only a Two or Three here. Did they think that it would hit someplace else, like New Orleans?

**Berry:** They thought it was going to hit New Orleans.

**Butler:** I see.

**Berry:** But that we would just get the outer bands that could be two or three.

**Butler:** What did you think, personally? I mean—

**Berry:** I thought they were crazy. I thought the CEO of our hospital and what they call the safety officer, I thought they were crazy because this is an old hospital, it’s not as new as the other hospitals in the area, and I think they just were more concerned about making money after the storm. They said, “We want to be here for the victims after the storm.” And the other hospitals were staying open but they’re bigger, they’re
newer, and our hospital just wasn’t built to withstand that. But anyway, I thought they were crazy but, you know, I needed my job so I stayed. And once I realized the storm was coming in quicker than it was supposed to, I mean I knew I wasn’t leaving. Well, that night we, about three o’clock, I guess it was early Monday morning, the winds started, you know, and we’re thinking it’s going to hit at noon and it’s only three o’clock in the morning and the winds were already starting. So, our hospital is five stories. The first two floors, first floor is just office building, second floor is your surgery unit, third floor is your labor and delivery and your ICU, which is where I was, and then your fourth and fifth are just like medical units. There were patients all the way up to the fifth floor. Well, this hospital didn’t, they boarded up no windows. They did not board up a window. The only thing they boarded in the whole hospital were the glass doors outside the emergency room; that was it. And we’re on the beach. Well, about five o’clock that morning the winds were starting to pick up and I think a couple of windows blew out with the patients were in the room. Some of the windows were blowing out with the patients in the rooms, so they were like, oh, I guess we need to move them. (laughter) So about five o’clock is when we were called upstairs to try to get the patients from the fifth floor down to the third floor. So we moved all of them. So I think the windows on the fifth floor blew out first. And then by eight o’clock that morning it was getting bad and I think the windows on the fourth floor were starting to go. So then they were like, well, we’ve got to get these patients moved. I think we lost power around eight that morning. We lost the power and the water which was bad because we had patients on feeding pumps and those were run by electricity. Their I.V. pumps are run by electricity. And just, you know, your heart monitors, all these things that you need electricity for. So they had to evacuate, because the windows were blown on the fourth floor they had to evacuate them to the second floor but so we’re basically out in the halls where the surgery is. And the ones, the patients they put on our floor they put out on a back hall. It was dark, and I think it was about that time the roof caught on fire because the generator blew up, transformer—

**Butler:** So you had an emergency generator that they kicked in when the power went out?

**Berry:** They had a—yeah, when the power went out they had an emergency generator but it didn’t work very long because it caught on fire. And we didn’t know it was on fire but somebody called us. Somebody, you know, on a cell phone said, “The hospital’s on fire.” So we were like, oh great. But there was so much water that it just kind of burnt out.

**Butler:** Sure.

**Berry:** And we were also told from people that were calling in, because we couldn’t go outside to see, but people who could see us were calling us and telling us that part of the roof had come off. Well I believe it because there was water was just coming
through the walls. It was just coming through the ceiling and then those heavy tiles would just would fall. On our floor where we had all the patients around this back hall that they considered safe, well, water started pouring all over them so we had to move them to another hall. And basically what it boiled down to is we all ended up—the patients, the staff that was working, and just the extra staff and some of their family members, and visitors—we all ended up on the end of one hall and it was very crowded. It was very hot. You know we didn’t have any power or water. But the worst was the patients. We ran out of oxygen—eventually their um, probably about ten thirty it was just, it was, at ten thirty that morning, by that time we were having to get in the hallways. Well, let me back up a little bit. I had been up for like thirty-six hours.

Butler: No sleep.

Berry: At that point. No sleep since Saturday night because of just trying to get ready and everything. I was absolutely exhausted, and hurricane or no hurricane I wanted to lay down somewhere and get some sleep. The problem was there wasn’t anywhere to lay down because there was water was all over the floor. And so I just, I left the hallway. I said, “I’ve got to find somewhere to lay down.” So I went into a room. The window wasn’t blown out and so I was like, well, I could get up on this bed but that’s probably not smart because something’s going to come through that window. And then I was like, well, I could get on the floor over here but the floor’s kind of wet. I said, well, I can go in the bathroom. So inside the bathroom in the shower stall there was like a little, um, it was, you had to kind of step into the shower, so the shower, the bottom of the shower stall was dry. I said, there’s my bed. So I went and found a dry blanket and made me a little pallet in the bottom of that stall and I was just going to sleep even if I could just get like a twenty minute nap because I was so tired. And I had just gotten comfortable and I felt that whole building move. I mean it just moved. I don’t know if that’s when the storm surge hit it but I stood, you know, and I just prayed I said, “Well, this is it. This whole building’s going to fall down.” I wasn’t worried about it blowing over as much as I would as just collapsing like the fifth floor falling into the fourth and the third. But, you know, I just prayed and said, “Well, this is it, Lord. I’m ready.” And so I laid there just a little bit longer when, then somebody came in and said, “You’ve got to get up. You’ve got to get up. Come out in the hall.” So I said, “OK.” So we were out in the hall and so then they said, “We’ve got to tie the doors together,” you know, to keep them from—so when the windows blow out. You know, there won’t be anything to keep the wind and the glass from coming in on us. So we’re taking ropes and we’re tying the doors together and you know we’re just all, it’s all hot. And then, like the patients that were running out of oxygen, we were trying to, we found out that we could get some of, we went up and back up into the rooms on some of the rooms we could like get some long, long tubing and get some out of the walls. But what was happening was the patients on the oxygen, their tubing was like down running on the floor in the water. So it was dark and in order to get down the hallway we were having to step, trying not to break your neck stepping over these peoples’ oxygen that was down in the water which was so
unsanitary. But, gosh there’s so much, let me think what had happened.

**Butler:** What was the atmosphere like? I mean how were the patients responding? How were your colleagues responding?

**Berry:** The patients were—OK, the patients, one of them was just moaning. It was so dark. And that’s another thing, they said, “Oh,” before the hurricane, the night before, “we’ve got plenty of water. We’ve got plenty of flashlights.” Well that was—no they didn’t. If I had not had a penlight that I use to do neuro checks with, I would’ve broken my neck a million times because they did not have enough flashlights. And I mean you couldn’t see. If a patient was moaning, you know, you had to get over there to them some kind of way and you had to be able to see to get to them and it was pitch dark. And I mean you’d have to really like get a flashlight and get over to them.

(interruption)

**Butler:** Start from right here. You were talking about the lights, the flashlights—

**Berry:** OK, the patients.

**Butler:** —and water and—

**Berry:** Right. The patients were moaning. One lady was moaning and moaning, and I was like, “Can’t somebody do”—I wasn’t that patient’s nurse—I was like, “Can’t somebody do something for that lady?” They said, “Well we can’t get the medicine because the medicine’s locked up because it’s computerized and there’s no power.” So like their pain medicine was in this machine that’s operated by a computer that they couldn’t get the medicine out. So these patients are out there moaning in pain and they’re not even giving them anything. So I was like, “You’ve got to be kidding.”

**Butler:** Well, why would the medicine be computerized? Is there a reason for that? The pain medication.

**Berry:** It’s the thing they dispense it out of was like the pharmacy’s. It’s just a little cabinet. You know, you put in what medicine you want and it just, the door automatically opens up and it’s just the way they dispense the medicine now. And they couldn’t get the medicine out of there, I guess without breaking the machine and they weren’t going to do that, so. Anyway, that lady that was moaning, she finally just died. And then we had like a hundred staff people for twenty-one patients. They had evacuated most of the patients. We only had twenty-one patients and three of those died during the storm. And the next day they were saying, “Oh, but they were sick, they were going to die anyway.” But I, I mean I don’t think so because some of them that were on oxygen, the air was so thick and humid I could barely breathe, and with them not getting the oxygen they needed and trying to breathe up in there, I think they just went ahead and just died to get out of there because it was so miserable. I mean
you couldn’t, like if they needed to go to the bathroom, there was no privacy. You know it was just bad.

**Butler:** Did you have any kind of communication with, say, with anyone outside of the hospital, whether it be family, whether it be administration?

**Berry:** After ten—well, I caught—the last contact I had with my sister while the cell phones were working was at ten-thirty that morning. And at that time I had, there was a nurse and I, and we were like, we met, you know, after we felt that big shift of the building, everybody was like over it. We’re like, “Well, if we’re going to die, what the heck, you know.” So this girl and I decided we were going to go around to the front of the building because she had a video camera and we were going to take some pictures. So we went where we weren’t supposed to go. And we looked out the window and there was parts of buildings floating right in front of us.

**Butler:** Why weren’t you supposed to go in the front of the building?

**Berry:** I guess for safety.

**Butler:** For safety.

**Berry:** They didn’t want us in those areas because the ceilings were falling in and the wind was sort of—you know it’s just not safe. But we figured if we were going to die anyway we might as well go over there and get some good pictures. (laughter) We were like, you know after a point you just, you just get over it. And I think one thing that was hard was just the roaring. It was unbelievable roaring, this roaring noise. It was just, it was so loud and it never let up. I mean it started, I guess that loud roaring started around ten and it didn’t let up until about eight o’clock that night, it seemed like. I just was like, is this ever going to end?

**Butler:** That’s a common experience with everyone that I’ve talked to who live in Hattiesburg.

**Berry:** It was so loud, it was like you really couldn’t even hardly hear each other sometimes it was so loud. So, you know this nurse and I, we went to the other part. You know, we were just figuring like, we’re going to die, let’s go take some pictures. Maybe in case we get out of here, we’ll have our pictures. So I mean we went to the front. We couldn’t believe it. There was like whitecaps right up into the back of the building. The storm surge did go, it went around us.

**Butler:** Right.

**Berry:** And I never was sure. I never could get anybody to tell me whether water did come in the building, but I was reading on the internet that it did a few days ago. They were talking about the damage to our hospital. And so we did get some water from
the surge inside the building. But it was hard to tell because the next morning you’d go down and there’s so much water anyway. There was so much water on every unit. It was just like inches of water. I want to say that during this whole hurricane I never saw the CEO or the safety officer. They never came around and checked on us. They never came and gave us an update or said, “How are y’all doing, hang in there,” or anything. I didn’t even see them till the next morning after the hurricane, and then they looked like they were trying to hide because there were so many people upset with them. And I mean they had just put all of our lives in jeopardy and they knew it and I think they were trying to hide because they didn’t want anybody to know where they were because I think there were some husbands who just wanted to beat them up. Anyway, so basically, you know, that was all as far as the—let me try and remember here. OK, after it started to die down—let me just say that during that day everybody took turns having a breakdown. (laughter) People took turns like some person, some nurse would just, you know, you’d be, you’d had enough and you would just start crying, but I didn’t cry till later. I was so tired. By the time the storm was over I’d been up for forty-eight hours, most of it working and doing stuff. And you know, one by one everybody was just kind of trying to find somewhere to lay down and get some rest. And I guess I’m rebellious, I did everything they told me not to do and I really didn’t care at that point. But I couldn’t find a dry place to sleep, you know. They were like, “Well, find a place to sleep.” And we’re like, “Where?” So I went and found, I went on a whole other unit to try to find a bed that was dry, and so I found one and I just got up in the bed and I couldn’t go to sleep and finally I just, it just all hit me and I just started crying. You know just all the tension and the, you know, the pressure of it all. And I guess it was about eleven o’clock that night the wind’s still blowing a little bit but it’s not bad, and I just can’t go to sleep. And then all of a sudden I heard the most beautiful sound I’ve ever heard in my life; it was a helicopter. I will always remember that as long as I live. I said, “Oh my gosh, it’s a helicopter.” So I ran to the window and I looked up and it was a helicopter with a search light, and I thought, I said, “Well, I guess they’re looking for bodies.” You know they know we’re here and that was our first contact, I felt like, with the outside world but it really wasn’t contact but it was to me because it was like, at least they know we’re here.

Butler: Who was it, the Coast Guard, the local authorities?

Berry: I think it was the Coast Guard.

Butler: The Coast Guard.

Berry: I got pretty good at, you know, to tell the Coast Guard from the Red Cross from the National Guard from—I know them all. So the next day, that next morning—so after I heard that helicopter I was able to go to sleep—the next morning, I guess they had some propane or something, they did manage to cook something, I forgot, I don’t even remember what it was. So we did have something to eat that day, and they found some water. And, you know, it was just people were real upset
because the heat—you couldn’t, there was no contact with the people up front. You couldn’t call anybody. Nobody’s cell phones were working because they were all down. About, it was Tuesday morning they finally let us walk outside the hospital. And I just couldn’t believe, I mean I couldn’t believe what we were seeing. A lot of the cars were just piled up on each other. There were like refrigerators in the bushes and stuff. It was just unbelievable stuff. This nurse and I, we walked along together and I was like, man I hope we don’t see any bodies. I was like I just don’t want to see any bodies anywhere. So we were some of the first people out, you know, to see that. The only people out were people that were in the storm because there was no way we could’ve gotten in. But I guess some of the people that had lived in apartments and stuff around us were kind of out.

**Butler:** What part of the Coast was this? I think I probably didn’t ask you, but was this Gulfport, Biloxi?

**Berry:** This is Biloxi.

**Butler:** Oh I see.

**Berry:** Do you know where the flags are? Do you know where the Olive Garden is, was?

**Butler:** What intersection was that there?

**Berry:** OK, on Debuys Road. Ninety and Debuys. It’s where the Biloxi, they used—when you leave Gulfport and go into Biloxi, it’s where they have the flags, had the flags because the flags were up there, and we were right behind where the Olive Garden used to be. About a couple of blocks before the Edgewater Mall. So where there are a lot of bars, were a lot of bars and businesses along there. So of course some of the people that, in the hospital, they go looking for the liquor. I mean that’s the first thing they ran to, wherever the bars were they were like going through the debris and they found a good, probably about twenty bottles.

**Butler:** Were these people that were patients or were they—

**Berry:** No, they were employees.

**Butler:** Employees, and they just need a drink.

**Berry:** Yeah. But you know, they probably deserved it, I guess. Well, I guess they shouldn’t looted but they did.

**Butler:** Did you see more looting than that?

**Berry:** Yes, when we got near the mall. But, um, well, I don’t know if you could
really call it looting if it’s in the middle of the road.

**Butler:** So it was really nothing. There was no structural integrity in that place?

**Berry:** Oh no.

**Butler:** Totally destroyed.

**Berry:** No, I mean you knew it came from a bar, but there’s no telling which bar it came from. I mean because all the buildings were so messed up. I mean like I walked outside the hospital and I picked up a menu from the Beau Rivage. That’s way down the road. That’s like miles and miles away. So just because you find a bottle of liquor in the bushes doesn’t mean that it came from that restaurant right there, it could’ve come—no telling where it came from. But you know there were a lot of bars with liquor, so. Anyway, they went looking for it and they found it.

**Butler:** I think this is a good point right here to stop and turn the tape over and we’ll resume right after that.

**Butler:** I think we’re good to go right here. You were talking about finding liquor.

**Berry:** Yeah.

**Butler:** And finding Beau Rivage menus.

**Berry:** Yeah.

**Butler:** Where Beau Rivage was miles away from where you found the menu.

**Berry:** Exactly. But it was just, you would see peoples’ medications, you know family pictures, peoples’ furniture, peoples’ medical records all on the road. I mean just all kinds of stuff. Just couldn’t believe the stuff that was everywhere. So we decided to—Highway 90 was just torn up. It wasn’t even there; it was just big holes. So we decided to walk up towards the Edgewater Mall. So we walked to the mall and that’s where we saw people looting because the National Guard had not made it yet. And so that was Tuesday and there really wasn’t anything to do because, you know, you’re just kind of stuck there. So I went out that morning when I just, after I was going back I said, “I don’t want to do that. I’m not going back again.” You know, I’ve seen enough, I’m not going back. There were just buildings that were just slabs. If you didn’t know what was there you wouldn’t have known what building was there.

**Butler:** Now, you were doing this by foot. I presume—

**Berry:** Yeah, of course.
Butler: —that your car was destroyed.

Berry: Oh yeah. Well, the car, my car—some cars were worse than others. Mine was on the backside of the hospital, the side opposite the beach. So the water, the saltwater got about halfway up in mine. It didn’t completely submerge it like some of the other ones. But all my windows, I had the front windshield but the back windshield and all my windows were out, and it was partially underwater. But most of them were like completely underwater. So mine wasn’t as bad as some but it was still totaled because of the saltwater. No, you couldn’t have driven. You couldn’t have driven through here. The only car I saw driving was one of these monster trucks and I always thought those trucks looked out of place but that day it looked very appropriate, because they could drive through that but you couldn’t drive. So we were walking down the beach to the mall and I mean it was just—I don’t know, it—I mean you’re familiar with Edgewater Mall, Dillard’s and all that, because Dillard’s really doesn’t have a lot of windows it was OK, but that little strip mall (laughter) next to it, it was just, it was just gone. It was just a frame. It was a frame with nothing inside of it.

Butler: Do you think the water, the storm surge reached that far or that was wind damage and rain or both?

Berry: No, that was the storm surge.

Butler: That was the storm surge that did that.

Berry: Oh yeah.

Butler: OK.

Berry: Yeah, all the way almost to the Toys-R-Us, if you know where that is. I’m trying to remember.

Butler: Well, let me, I’ll try to draw you out with a few more questions. You must’ve thought about your family and friends, and I’m sure they were concerned about you. Was there any way to get in touch with them at this point?

Berry: Well, anybody that had a cell phone that worked or anybody that was able to get a different call out because people had different plans and different companies, I was going “Let me try your phone. Try your phone.” But I couldn’t get out. I knew my family was upset. That probably upset me more. I knew they were going to be worried about me, you know, and I just wanted to tell them I was OK but I couldn’t, so. I didn’t realize how bad it was in Hattiesburg and I kept thinking, well, my son will come get me, but I didn’t realize he couldn’t come get me, so.
Butler: Does your son live with you or does he live—

Berry: Well, he was before this hurricane. Now he’s staying with another friend.

Butler: You had a house or an apartment?

Berry: I was, we were renting an apartment.

Butler: You were renting an apartment. Well, I think that’s one of the unreported stories of the hurricane. I mean the devastation, of course, in New Orleans and on the Gulf Coast in Mississippi was horrendous but there was a lot of devastation in Hattiesburg. Now, how did you manage to get back to Hattiesburg and find out about that?

Berry: Well, let me, um, let me kind of fill in just a little bit.

Butler: Sure.

Berry: OK, so Tuesday I walked around on the beach, we went back in, and I don’t remember what all we did that day. That’s another thing; my memory. That whole week is just, a lot of things I can’t remember, I couldn’t, you know. But that night there were some apartments right across the road from the parking lot, they pulled eight people out of those apartments. They had died.

Butler: Near the hospital.

Berry: Yeah, right across from the parking—you had the hospital, the parking lot and apartments—and they pulled eight people out of those, and that kind of freaked me out thinking we had just walked by there. You know you don’t realize there’s dead people in there. And it kind of—everybody was upset. People were upset because they hadn’t heard from their families. And I was upset. And let’s see. So Wednesday, I’m just trying to remember, Wednesday—no, Tuesday—OK that’s what it—OK, my mind’s gone. Tuesday they got the rest of those patients out of there. Ambulances came from the west and the east but no one was coming from the north because—my concern was I wanted to get home, but there was nobody coming from Hattiesburg area. I was told Tuesday night that the National Guard was coming down to guard the hospital, to keep it from being robbed. I’m going to back up. Tuesday, late Tuesday afternoon the CEO had a meeting with everybody and he says, “OK, y’all are dismissed but y’all need to call in soon and, you know, check back with us.” And everybody goes, “How? How are we supposed to call, you know, there’s no phone?” And at that point he started yelling at everybody. This guy that he—I mean he’s put everybody’s life at risk.

Butler: Is this the CEO?
**Berry:** This is the CEO so he goes, “*Time out. Time out.* This has been hard for everybody.” And just acting like a real redneck.

**Butler:** Was he even there during the storm?

**Berry:** He was but he hid. That’s what I’m saying, he didn’t come around and talk to people or encourage anybody. He hid somewhere in an office somewhere in the hospital. He was hiding. And we saw him, you know, he came out and told us that we were all dismissed. So everybody leaves and I’m stuck there with a few other people because they had found out they didn’t have homes. So I’m like, “OK, so I’m just here.” So my main concern was, you know, finding out how I was going to get home. Well then I heard the National Guard was going to come Tuesday night and guard the hospital. So I sit out there in the dark with the security guard. They had one security guard to guard this whole hospital. So he and I sit out there on this bench, you know, waiting for the National Guard to come because, um, I asked him I said, “Well, who’s guarding the hospital?” He says, “Well, me and the CEO. He’s over there.” And I was like, “Well, where is he?” And he says, “Oh, he and the safety officer, they’re over there in their trucks.” And I said, “Well, what are they doing?” He says, “Well, you know what they’re doing.” I says, “No, I don’t.” And he says, “They’re over there getting drunk.” I said, “You’re kidding!” He said, “No.” I said, “You mean they’re responsible?” He said, “As soon as the National Guard,” he said, “They’re responsible for watching the hospital until the National Guard comes. When the National Guard comes they can leave.” I said, “OK, so you’re telling me that the CEO and the safety officer are guarding our hospital while they still have employees that they’re responsible for and they’re sitting over there getting drunk in their trucks?” And he said, “Yeah.” I said, “Oh gosh.” Not very many people know that. And I’ve told one person but I had, and you, but I don’t want to, I could probably get him in trouble but I really like the security guard that told me and I wouldn’t want him to get in trouble because if it got told that they were drunk over there while they were supposed to be guarding the hospital, they would know, I mean there weren’t that many people there, they would know he told me and then he would get in trouble. But that really upset me.

**Butler:** Do you think that—not to make excuses for anyone’s behavior but you essentially said before that made people behave in a manner that maybe they wouldn’t behave—is the storm an excuse for that kind of behavior or of the aftermath?

**Berry:** I think with the position he has, I don’t think that’s an excuse. He’s the CEO of the hospital. And at that point let me say that we’ve already evacuated the hospital. At that point I’m staying in the little building that was behind the hospital that was not as damaged. So the hospital’s been closed down and all the patients are gone, all the employees have left because it’s, I mean it’s in bad shape. Windows are blown out, ceilings are falling in, the floors are flooded, you know, it’s just bad. So I’m staying in this little building behind the hospital and it’s pretty damaged. In fact, I went
looking for a room on purpose that had windows blown out because it was so hot, you
know, and some of those hospital windows you can’t open, so I was like, well I’ll find
one. I found one that didn’t even have much of a ceiling (laughter), so I said, “Well,
it’s like sleeping under the stars but at least it was cool.” And there weren’t any
mosquitoes—it was none because they all got blown away. There were no insects or
mosquitoes so, that was fine. But anyway, I waited till about midnight because I kept
thinking if the National Guard would come, they’re stationed like sixteen miles south
of Hattiesburg, if they can make it from there to the Coast then I can probably make it
home. But they never made it. So it was Wednesday that—Wednesday I never did
see the National Guard come to our hospital—so it’s Wednesday and now we’re down
to eating grits. That’s grits for breakfast, grits for lunch, and grits—

Butler: Did you have water?

Berry: We had water. They had found water but they had run out of food and so now
that’s all we had was grits.

Butler: You probably don’t want to see grits again for a while, I imagine.

Berry: No. (laughter) And they just didn’t even taste that good. I guess they had
some propane or something that they were cooking those grits in. So anyway, during
that time I kind of, we’d walk down to the beach and walk around. And Wednesday I
went down there and was just sitting down there and I saw Air Force One fly over. It
was so neat. I went, “There’s the president,” because I knew it was Air Force One
because I’ve already, you know you’ve seen it, the white jet with the blue stripe and
I’ve seen it a million times on TV. But I had seen so many helicopters, but the thing
about it is you see all these people fly over but nobody’s made it to us yet. It’s
Wednesday now.

Butler: How did you feel about that? Did you feel that—

Berry: Nobody’s gotten there. The Red Cross hadn’t gotten there, the police, the
National Guard—nobody’s gotten there and it’s already Wednesday and the storm hit
Monday. Well, I was like, I know they’re up there because they’re flying over but
then nobody was ever landing or anything. But I guess I felt OK because I had water,
had a place to lay down, and I had grits, so I mean, you know, what more could you
ask for. Anyway, but it was neat because I was just sitting out there watching them fly
by and when I saw the jet, because it was coming, it was flying real low, and I
thought, man, because that’s the only jet that had gone by, and I thought, that’s neat.
And then I, it was confirmed, I heard it on the radio that he had flown the coastline
that day so I knew it was him. And, so—I’m trying to think—oh, OK, yeah that
Wednesday, I’m sitting out there and then I see these little guys drive up in the truck
and they’re messing with this pipe. It looked like—I guess it was water. It was a
mainline for water. I don’t know much about it, but. And they went over there and
they rigged up a faucet off this main water line. And up until then we had had no running water. I mean it was just water that could get you wet, you know at that point we just wanted to get wet, because I hadn’t had a bath in four days now and neither had anybody else. (laughter) It was getting rough. (laughter) So they rigged up a faucet which was, people were coming and getting water for their dogs. And they rigged up some kind of little shower thing. When I saw that I just went running up and down the beach going, “We’ve got a shower.” So people were running and getting their shampoo and their towels and stuff, and so here we are taking a shower, washing our hair and stuff on Highway 90. It was great. It felt so good. But I, of course you don’t want to stoop down in the middle of the road, but I was just in my scrubs and I was just washing my hair and just—that water felt so good just to be wet. So that was one of the highlights was getting to wash my hair. And I went back in and, you know, we’re all kind of—there’s like twelve of us now, there’s like twelve staff members. Some of them had gone home and found out they didn’t have a home so they came back. And the hospital was giving a place, you know, they were telling people “If you go home and your home’s not there, just come back.” So we’re hanging out and my phone rings.

Butler: Your cell phone.

Berry: My cell phone rang. I couldn’t believe it. I told somebody I said, “Well, it’s probably the wrong number.” And I answered it and it was my sister from Atlanta, and I was going, “How did you get me?” She’d say like—I don’t know how she got me. But anyway, what we found out was you could call out of state but you couldn’t call in state. So I asked her—so this is Wednesday—I was going, “Please call, you know, my sister and my mother and tell them I’m alive and not to worry.” But somehow she wasn’t able to get in touch with them because their phones weren’t working. Well by Wednesday evening, the water, my car, I just wanted to go out there and see if the thing would crank. I went out there and it cranked. I couldn’t believe it. But I guess it was because it wasn’t underwater as deep and as long as some of the others. Nobody else’s was cranking but mine cranked. Well, I told them I said, “Y’all, I’m going home. My car cranked, I’m going home.” They’re like, “No, don’t you go home. You don’t know how far it’s going to drive.” I said, “Well, I don’t care. If I get twenty miles down the road I’m just going to put my thumb out and go home because I want to go home.” And they were like “No, don’t go, don’t go.” I said, “Well, I’m going.” The curfew, I left at four and the curfew was at six. So it was like arrest me. I didn’t even care what—I mean there wasn’t anything they could have done to me at that point that would’ve upset me because I just didn’t care any more—I was tired, I was hot, I just wanted to get home. So believe it or not I drove that little car about forty miles an hour. I’m coming up the road and my windshield, I mean no back windshield, no windows. You know water, glass, leaves, all kind of debris inside the car and here I am. I know I was a sight, but it made it home. I couldn’t believe it but it made it home which—and so I get up to my apartment and I was not prepared. I was not prepared for what I saw. Part of the roof had come off and both of the ceilings had collapsed. The ceilings were on the floor
and of course all the stuff in the upstairs bed, there was two upstairs bedrooms which was ruined. And then I had a grand piano on the first floor, and of course once the water got on the second floor it went through the floor down to the first floor and ruined my grand piano.

Butler: What part of Hattiesburg is this?

Berry: That was in Oak Grove.

Butler: Oak Grove.

Berry: I just started crying. That was the second time I broke down; the first time was at the end of the storm. And I just cried. I could not believe that I had finally gotten home and I couldn’t even stay there because it was falling down. So I left and came out to my sister’s. And it was so hot out here, I came out to Lake Serene. It was so hot out here I slept out on the patio. And the next day I went to my mother’s and stayed with her for about a month. I finally, I just got, I found an apartment which was very hard to find because you can’t hardly find hotel a room. And I’ve been in the new apartment for three weeks and I should like it but I’ve just been, I don’t know, I’ve been depressed and I mean it’s a nicer apartment then I had but I guess I just was satisfied with what I had and I wasn’t ready to move. It was just being forced on me. I did find another car but I liked the car I had. Now I’ve got another car note. And I don’t know about my job. I don’t even know if I want to go back down there. You know, I don’t know if I want to go back down there because every year it’s just going to be more hurricanes, you know. And I just don’t know. I haven’t worked since the hurricane, and it’s what, October the 31st? And I know I’ve got to start doing something. My insurance is over after today; I have no more health insurance after today. So I just don’t know. But I have been, I had been very depressed the past week. And I have a lot to be grateful for, but I think it’s just so much change and stuff. Too much change, all at one time. So I guess that’s about all I have to say.

Butler: Well, I just have a couple of questions and I think that’ll be it. I kind of alluded this earlier. When you talked about the response of the hospital, the administration in particular, what about the response of the federal government, the state government, municipal government, and not really Hattiesburg as much as down on the Gulf Coast, I mean do you think that there was more that they could’ve done or they did as much as they could have or—

Berry: I think that our hospital should have evacuated. That was what they should have done and they didn’t. They boarded up the windows three weeks after the hurricane; this is no lie. I was surprised that by Wednesday we hadn’t seen anybody from the outside world. Anybody like the National Guard or Red Cross or somebody. I would’ve thought after three days we would’ve seen somebody. And I knew they were flying over, you know, probably every thirty minutes a helicopter went over.
And I was just, I don’t know, I mean I guess they were doing what they could do. I didn’t realize it was so much. I just feel like, I think it would’ve made us feel better if somebody from the outside had showed up. Wednesday afternoon I saw two National Guards drive by in a civilian vehicle, so I guess they had arrived about the time I was leaving. I don’t know what they could’ve done. It just probably would’ve made us feel better just having them there, I don’t really know. But you do kind of feel like you were abandoned.

**Butler:** I’ve heard that a lot. I think with that we’ll conclude, and I thank you very much.

**Berry:** Well, you’re welcome.

(End of interview)