Mississippi Oral History Project

Hurricane Katrina Oral History Project

An Oral History

with

Pete Hansen

Interviewer: Stephen Sloan

Volume 875
2006
# Table of Contents

- Early years .................................................................................................................1
- Damned Yankees .......................................................................................................2
- Family ........................................................................................................................2
- Storm preparation.......................................................................................................3
- During the storm at work ...........................................................................................4
- Evacuation of ICU .....................................................................................................4
- “The truck’s gone too” ...............................................................................................5
- The water recedes ......................................................................................................6
- Devastation inside ......................................................................................................7
- Medical treatment after the storm: battlefield conditions ..........................................8
- Power restored ...........................................................................................................8
- Bay bridge ..................................................................................................................9
- Off to the Kiln ............................................................................................................9
- DeLisle to Pass Christian ...........................................................................................9
- Pass Christian to Long Beach ....................................................................................10
- Long Beach to Gulfport .............................................................................................11
- Gulfport Memorial Hospital ......................................................................................12
- Hard, desperate times .................................................................................................13
- Recovery ....................................................................................................................13
- FEMA trailer ..............................................................................................................14
- The nursing home .....................................................................................................14
- The Coast’s future ......................................................................................................15
- Preparations for future storms ..................................................................................15
- Relief agencies and volunteers ................................................................................16
- “Welcome to Mississippi; it doesn’t always look this bad” ........................................16
- Mobile Army Surgical Hospital ................................................................................17
Biography

Mr. Peter W. “Pete” Hansen was born on November 5, 1952, in Hartford, Connecticut, to Vincent (b: August 6, 1917 in Hoboken, New Jersey, deceased) and Meta White Hansen (Hoboken, New Jersey, deceased). His father’s family members were Norwegian immigrants. Mr. Hansen’s father grew up in Hoboken, played minor league baseball, and was drafted into World War II where he fought in the European Theater. He later became a bank loan officer in St. Petersburg, Florida. Mr. Hansen’s mother died at age thirty-five in 1958.

Mr. Hansen attended Canyon Rim Elementary School and Skyline High School in Salt Lake City, Utah, graduating in 1970. He graduated from Mississippi Gulf Community College in 1979 as a surgical technician, and completed his Associate Degree in Business from Phillips College in 1985. From 1971 to 1973, he served in the United States Navy (Seabees) as an Equipment Operator 3rd Class, honorably discharged. Mr. Hansen served two overseas tours of duty: NMCB-62 to Diego-Garcia in the Indian Ocean; and Midway Island in the Pacific Theater. From 1970 to 1979, he worked for the City of Gulfport Public Works Department. After graduation as a surgical assistant, he worked for Hancock Medical Center, retiring in 2000. At the time of this interview, Mr. Hansen was working for Memorial Hospital in Gulfport, Mississippi.

Mr. Hansen has one child, a daughter, Rebecca Hansen Harmon and one grandson. In his free time, he enjoys competitive cycling and competitive shooting sports, such as target shooting and trap shooting. He received an award while in the service for being an M-16 Sharp-Shooter. Mr. Hansen belongs to the National Rifle Association, the South Mississippi Gun Association, and the Coast Rifle and Pistol Club. At the time of this interview, he is married and living in Ocean Springs, Mississippi, and lists his religious affiliation as Catholic.
Sloan: This is Stephen Sloan. The date is August 11, 2006. I’m with Mr. Pete Hansen in his FEMA [Federal Emergency Management Agency] trailer in Gulfport, Mississippi, and, Pete, I appreciate you taking the opportunity to sit down with us. Let’s start; this is an interview for the Hurricane Katrina Oral History Project. But Pete, I want to start, and back up a little bit and talk about where you were born and kind of your early life and background and things like that.

Hansen: I was born in Hartford, Connecticut, and grew up, of all places, in Utah; ended up in Mississippi. I was stationed here in the Navy; ended up marrying a girl, and thirty-four years later, I’m still here. I’m seriously thinking about staying. When I got out of the Navy, I went to school, became an operating room technician, which I’ve been doing the past twenty-seven years now. I’ve worked at Hancock Medical Center in Bay St. Louis for that time. I’m retired from there now, but I still work there part-time. Now, I work full time at Gulfport Memorial in outpatient surgery and I have one daughter, one grandson. Both are very, very close to me.

Sloan: So now, at what point were you accepted as Mississippian, do you think? (laughter) How many years in do you—

Hansen: Good question. Good question. (laughter) You know, as I recall, when I first came here, you know, you had the stigma of being a Yankee if you were not from the South, and that seems to have changed through the years, or maybe I’ve gotten enough of an accent or whatever to—

Sloan: You can get by now.

Hansen: To get by, yeah. I remember years ago, if you weren’t from here, you were one of those “damn Yankees.” One of the good things about being in Gulfport and being in the Navy was the Navy CB [Construction Battalion, Seabee] base over here has always been welcomed down here, and the people in Gulfport, especially, have welcomed the Navy people, as opposed to Biloxi with the Air Force people. There seems to be—years ago there seemed to be a lot of friction. I think Hurricane Camille did a lot as far as helping the outlook that the people had on the Navy here because they did so much to help clean up. And I was a Seabee, and the Seabees as I
understand, after Camille were the ones who were clearing the roads and saving people and things like that. They were about one of the few agencies that were still working. So you know, it’s been funny that some people hold it against you, the fact you’re not from here, but at the same time, they like what you did.

Sloan: Well, what made you stay?

Hansen: I married a girl from here.

Sloan: OK. All right. (laughter) She made you stay.

Hansen: Yes, she did, in fact. Yeah. But you know, the funny thing is, being in the service here, so many young men just didn’t like it here. It was the armpit of the world and everything, and one of the things I noticed immediately was, this is a nice place. There’s nothing wrong with this area. And I think for a lot of young men who have been stationed here, just the fact it’s not home, they don’t like it. But like I said, thirty-four years now, I’m thinking about staying. (laughter)

Sloan: Now, you mentioned your daughter and grandson? You have a daughter and grandson.

Hansen: Right.

Sloan: And now, do they live in this area as well?

Hansen: They live over in Jackson County, in St. Martin, just north of Ocean Springs.

Sloan: And we’ll talk about your letter to your grandson in a little bit because I think that’s interesting that you did that. So you were living in Pass Christian at the time of the storm?

Hansen: Right, right, living in an area called Henderson Point, which is the southwest extreme of Harrison County; if you go any farther, you’re in Hancock County, right on the beach on Highway 90, beautiful house, absolutely beautiful view. You know, it was like being in paradise. It was so beautiful.

Sloan: And had you had experience with other storms?

Hansen: Yes, yes, but nothing severe. The one I remember was Hurricane Elena back in the [19]80s, and I think it was Hurricane Georges, but neither one of them really did significant damage, compared to Katrina. And I was kind of real lackadaisical about storms, going through these two minor things, and really didn’t think, “Oh, this is nothing to really worry about.”
Sloan: Yeah, a lot of people talk about Ivan, you know, the fears over Ivan the year before, that Ivan kind of set up Katrina because it turned out to be a nonevent, for the most part, in Mississippi.

Hansen: Yeah. Yeah, it really did; that’s a good point.

Sloan: Yeah. How did you prepare? Did you do anything to prepare for the storm?

Hansen: I knew—everyone said this storm was going to be bad, and I was unfortunately on call, as I said earlier, for this storm. So it was only so many things I could do. I took what I thought was the most valuable and put them in my old car; brought my old car over here to Gulfport to my brother and sister-in-law’s house, and packed up a few things in my truck that I thought I would need over there. And among them were some extra clothes, a battery-operated TV, and—this sounds crazy—a bicycle. I have this twenty-four-speed mountain bike that I figured, well, if worse comes to worse, I’ve still got the bike.

Sloan: Well, you’re an avid cyclist, right?

Hansen: Right, I’ve been racing for about twenty-seven years. And so I figured, well, if I have to head out and the truck’s ruined, I can ride out, no problem. And that was more or less it. The house I was in, I was renting. So they just told me, they said, “The only direct request we have is just get out; lock all the doors and just get out.” So that’s more or less what I did.

Sloan: And you mentioned that there’s not a debris problem at your old place.

Hansen: No. (laughter) No, there isn’t. Everything is gone.

Sloan: Just a slab.

Hansen: Yeah, yeah. In fact, when I got there the day after the storm, not only the house was gone, but most of Highway 90 and one of the streets running parallel, they were just, you know—there was nothing but sand. Unbelievable to see what everything looked like immediately after the storm.

Sloan: If you could, talk a little bit about what you do, before we get to your experience during the storm, with your job. Talk a little bit about your work and what you do.

Hansen: Well, I’m a certified operating room technician, and what that job involves is standing next to the surgeon during operations and passing instruments to him; you’re more or less an extra set of hands for him. My job is actually very important. The surgeon can’t operate until I’m ready and I’ve got all the equipment and everything ready. And hospitals, of course, are open twenty-four hours a day, so we have people who have to take call. We have elective operations that we do, and then
after that, anything emergency that would come along, we have to be available for that. Normally, we can take call from home; we have thirty minutes to get to the hospital, of course, but with a storm, they do what they call lock-down. In other words, anyone who is on call has to remain in the hospital, so that’s how I was. By the luck of the draw, I happened to be on call that Sunday, and, of course, the storm hit Monday. So we were there, unfortunately.

**Sloan:** Take me through that as the hospital began to prepare for the storm.

**Hansen:** Well, they made all the necessary preparations, you know, getting the building ready, and, of course, every specialty who was on call, as in x-ray staff, lab, and extra help on the floor. They were all there getting ready, so there were quite a few people in the hospital. I was there; the OR [operating room] supervisor was there, and one other nurse was there. And we were representing surgery. Anything that came up, we would take care of, and we also had a M.D. [medical doctor] anesthesiologist there, a nurse anesthetist, and there was one general surgeon who stayed. So we were, more or less manpower-wise, ready.

**Sloan:** When did you start to realize that this was going to be something—a unique event?

**Hansen:** The weather just progressively got worse and worse, and what told me things were going to get bad, I guess, midmorning on Monday, my boss came and said, “We’ve got to evacuate ICU [intensive care unit]”—ICU is on the first floor—“because water is rapidly getting in there.” So we all ran down to ICU and started moving patients up to the second floor. Actually, this is kind of where the story begins. The ICU, for some reason, was flooding quicker than the rest of the hospital, so we grabbed patients, put them in the elevator, took them up to the second floor. I think the one man I moved was strong enough to get into a wheelchair. So I got him in the wheelchair, took him up the elevator, and gave him to the nurses there. Well, just not long after that, the water started rushing into the rest of the hospital. ICU was empty. Unfortunately, the rest of the patients in regular rooms who were not that sick, we had to get them out; around the same time, both diesel generators went under water. So here we are putting these poor people in wheelchairs and running through water about two and a half, three feet high. We had to get them to the second floor; unfortunately, there were no elevators. So what we had to do, we came to this flight of stairs, we’d lift the people up, and somebody’d put an arm under a right shoulder and you under a left shoulder, and we would carry them up the stairs. The poor people, of course, were terrified. I helped move three people. The first man was an elderly gentleman with one leg. Fortunately he weighed about ninety pounds, soaking wet; we managed to pick him up and carry him up the stairs, no problem. The second man we had, this was scary. He probably weighed close to three hundred pounds, had severe breathing problems, could barely stand up; he’d get out of breath. Well, we had to get him up there. So he put his left shoulder on me, somebody else on the right side. We had nasal cannula going around his back, and there was a nurse behind us carrying an oxygen bottle. The poor man was just gasping for breath. We got halfway
up the stairs; the man said, “I can’t make it. I can’t make it. You got to stop. You got to stop.” I told him; I said, “We can’t stop; we got people behind you. There’s water coming in.” We got him to the second floor; the poor man was cyanotic by the time we got there. He was blue as could be; he was just exhausted. And we had a third patient I moved, was a poor little lady with, I guess, some kind of, I’m thinking Alzheimer’s, something like that; had no idea what was going on. We were carrying her up; she was screaming, “Put me down! Put me down! Put me down! If you don’t put me down, I’m going to sue you.” The poor soul had no idea what was going on. We got her up there, and more or less after that, most of the patients were up there. So we stayed on the second and third floor till the storm passed. We were standing at a big picture window, and you could look out in the parking lot and see the vehicles slowly disappearing.

**Sloan:** So were you watching your truck? Could you see your truck?

**Hansen:** Couldn’t see my truck, but I knew from everybody else’s vehicles; I was thinking, “Well, the truck’s gone, too.” And so we just stayed in there for several hours. There was no electricity, of course, just a couple of battery-operated things. And there was no panic or anything like that; there were so many of us there, and we felt the building was secure. And you know, the wind was howling and blowing, but the building wasn’t buckling or anything like that. It seemed very secure; it was a lot of water coming in, but the roof seemed to be intact and everything.

**Sloan:** Well now, how did losing power complicate patient care, though?

**Hansen:** Not really that bad. Apparently, the ICU patients that we had were not that bad off. No one was on a ventilator. A worst-case scenario, if they were on a ventilator, we would have had to take turns bagging people with an Ambu bag, but to my knowledge there was no one that was that bad of shape. You know, just everyone was crowded; all the patients were crowded in the second floor, but they seemed to do all right. No one died or anything, fortunately.

**Sloan:** Oh, that’s great.

**Hansen:** Yeah, yeah.

**Sloan:** No one got trapped in the elevator, I assume, when the power went out?

**Hansen:** No, no.

**Sloan:** That was fortunate.

**Hansen:** I think I was the last person, with my patient, out of the elevator, and the power went off. Yeah, we were lucky in that regard.

**Sloan:** So how high did the water get, do you know, in that first floor?
Hansen: I think on the first floor, maybe four feet, something like that. It was high enough to be scary.

Sloan: There weren’t any emergency surgeries that needed to be done or anything like that?

Hansen: No, no. There was nothing. I think we had done something the night before, as I recall, an appendectomy, but everything was fine at that time.

Sloan: Did the hospital take in any people? You said it was locked down. Were they taking any new patients in after the storm?

Hansen: The hospital is just that; it’s a hospital. It’s not a shelter, but during the storm we had several people driving up there, saying, “Help me! Help me!” And they were screaming, “We can’t take you; we’re not a shelter.” Well, you know, the water was getting waist-deep outside, so they let these people in. So there were probably, oh, ten, twelve people who came there, bringing their dogs, in fact. (laughter) They were told, “This is not a shelter; go to the shelter.” Well, the water and everything was so bad, they couldn’t get to a shelter which was probably, oh, maybe less than a half a mile away, Bay St. Louis High [School], if they could have gotten to it. But you know, the weather was so bad, the water was so bad, they stayed with us.

Sloan: Um-hm. So that day, you’re waiting out the storm on the second floor?

Hansen: Yes.

Sloan: So when did the water—do you know when the water started to recede?

Hansen: Probably about four in the afternoon, it started going down. The interesting thing was you could look out and see where there were no cars, slowly the tops of the cars started reappearing. A lot of the cars were in different positions. And so after that, the water went down, of course, the first thing everybody who did not have to take care of patients did was go down there to assess the damage, see what was going on. And it was like, “Oh, my goodness. Look at this.” The funny thing, there were all kinds of dead fish and crabs on the first floor. It was unbelievable.

Sloan: Inside the—

Hansen: Inside the hospital—it’s hard to describe the devastation there. The first thing I did; I ran out to see if my truck was still there. My truck was still there, but like everybody else’s vehicles, it had gone underwater. It was just completely toast. One of the things I was very concerned with; I had brought a satchel, that had my important papers, with me, and I had put them in my locker. I thought, “Oh, my God, these papers are ruined; they’re in my locker.” I ran into the locker room, and luckily
I was smart enough to have hung it up in a high rack, and everything there was fine. And then my bicycle, I had brought my bicycle into the hospital, and believe it or not, it had gone underwater, but it was fine. And so I thought, “Well, I don’t know what we’re going to do, but here we are. We’re still alive, I guess.”

Sloan: Well, since you had your bike, you were one of the few with transportation.

Hansen: Exactly, yes. Yes.

Sloan: Yeah. So were you able to get out soon after and kind of see?

Hansen: The next day I went out sightseeing, and one of the problems was lack of communications. We had no idea what was going on, and you were hearing rumors and things like that. There were a few vehicles around; of course, no one at the hospital had anything.

Sloan: Now, what were some of the rumors that you were hearing? Do you remember?

Hansen: That the Bay St. Louis Bridge was gone, which it was, and you know, that New Orleans had been destroyed, and things like that. You know, we couldn’t confirm anything. We didn’t know anything about Harrison County; we just knew that they had been hit hard. That was one of my fears, was my daughter. You know, how had she fared? Becky works at a nursing home, which is right next to Gulfport Memorial [Hospital]. And, like me, her job obligated her to stay for the storm. So the more time progressed, the more I realized it wasn’t just us that was hit hard; it was all over. I didn’t think it was hit as hard as Hancock County, but it was hit hard enough. One of the exciting things that happened after the storm, people were starting to flock in, and of course, we really couldn’t treat them because everything was destroyed; everything was ruined. I was helping some maintenance guys; we were trying to squeegee the water out of the hallways and everything, and my boss came up from the emergency room. She said, “Pete, we’ve got a radial artery that Dr. Anthony”—Dr. Anthony is the general surgeon—“has to fix, and we’re going to do it down in the emergency room. Get what you need.” So I go into surgery; of course, surgery looks like a bomb hit it. There’s water all over; everything’s ruined, and I managed to find a tray of instruments that was still sterile. I found some suture that was still sterile. So I go down to the emergency room; of course, there’s no power there or anything, and this guy has cut his radial artery, which is the one you can feel on your wrist. They had it compressed real tight and everything, but it was one of those things that had to be fixed. So we numbed him up the best we could. The poor man was just screaming. My boss held a flashlight up; I held the guy’s wrist down with one hand and a retractor, a surgical instrument, with the other so the doctor could see each end of the cut artery. So he managed to ligate it; it was exciting because, you know, you couldn’t see anything; sweat was dripping off of you. And Virginia had a flashlight up there, and that was all we could see. So anyway, we managed to get that thing tied off, and
sewed the guy up. And that was more or less the only thing that I really did as far as taking care of patients after the storm. There was nothing much we could do.

Sloan: You know, I thought of it as you were saying that; I mean, your experience in the military. That’s battlefield conditions.

Hansen: It really was. (laughter) It was, yeah. You know, “This is not good.” You know, people were all standing around. We were doing the best we could. The poor man was hurting so bad. We numbed him up and numbed him up, and he just kept screaming. I felt so bad for the guy. After we sewed him up, of course, we couldn’t really admit him or anything. We closed the skin, put a dressing on as best as we could find and then discharged him. Really don’t know what has ever become of the man.

Sloan: When did you start to get power restored to the hospital?

Hansen: I don’t know. I left—

Sloan: Or the generators back up?

Hansen: —they managed to get one of the generators back up, in fact, a few hours later, but it would only power so much, and one of the problems was everything that went underwater, of course, was ruined. So all the electrical outlets and stuff like that, circuit breakers had thrown. You know, they were doing what they were supposed to do, and so there was still really not much power. You couldn’t run the air conditioner; you couldn’t do anything like that.

Sloan: Talk about, you know, as you left and got out and kind of saw, kind of your impressions and what you thought of what you saw.

Hansen: I managed to leave the next day. My big concern was—this is probably the second part of my odyssey. My concern was my daughter. I was so concerned with her. I knew my grandson was safe because he was with her husband, the boy’s dad.

Sloan: And where is he?

Hansen: They were in Vancleave, Mississippi.

Sloan: Oh, OK, yeah.

Hansen: And so they were a pretty good ways away; they were safe. But I wanted to check on Becky; I was so worried about her. The big problem was the Bay St. Louis Bridge was gone. One of the things that I was able to do, or tried to do—again, I had the only transportation around there. And one of the stories was that if you went to the foot of the Bay of St. Louis where the bridge was, you could get, like, four or five bars on your cell phone. So a whole bunch of people came up to me and said, “If I write a
message, would you call this number and tell so-and-so this, this, this, and this?” You know, and I said, “Well, sure.” So I had my cell phone, and I had my bicycle. So I had about four people write letters for me and everything, with the hopes of going out there and me contacting them. Well, I get out there, and it was true; I got about four or five bars on the phone, but you couldn’t get through. So I felt kind of bad about that. There were all kinds of people out there sitting on what was left of the bridge, trying to get out on cell phones but couldn’t. There were plenty of bars, but you just kept getting a busy signal. So I had to make a plan; I wanted to get the heck out of Bay St. Louis. I knew they certainly didn’t need my expertise, and I just wanted to get out of there. So I’m thinking, “How am I going to get out of here? Bay St. Louis Bridge is gone. I guess the only thing to do would be go way north and then cut south.” So I figured, “Well, do it on the bicycle.” Again, from years and years of racing, I’ve put many a mile on bikes, so it wasn’t a problem of distance. So I was making plans; the next morning I was going to ride out, bring plenty of water with me and ride north to Kiln, Mississippi, and then down south to Pass Christian, see what was left of the house, and then go to Gulfport. So that evening, before I was going to go, there was a nurse from Picayune who managed to drive down to see what was left of the hospital. Well, she went down there, and of course, they didn’t need her services either because we couldn’t help anybody. So I asked her; I said, “Would you mind if I threw the bike in the back of your pickup? And you could drop me off in the Kiln?” She said, “Yeah, no problem.” So I threw the bike in the back, and this was on—I guess this was on Tuesday. It was about four in the afternoon. Well, we get up to Kiln and she said, “You know, I have some relatives down on Vidaalia. Why don’t we just go down to Vidaalia, and I’ll drop you off there?” So I said, “Fine.” So we drive up to the Kiln; we’re going up what they call Highway 603, which was unbelievable. It was just more or less a mud path going up there. Cars all over the place; houses all over the place. I didn’t realize the amount of destruction.

Sloan: Yeah, all that had been underwater.

Hansen: Yes, yes, it had. We go up to where I-10 and [Highway] 603 meet, and you could see where the interstate had been underwater; you could see from the water lines. So we go up north to Kiln, Mississippi, and then we turn south to get to Vidaalia. So we get as far as a little area called DeLisle. DeLisle is [north] of Pass Christian, and she let me off there. She said, “Is this going to be OK?” And I said, “Yeah, this’ll be great. I can get to wherever I need to go.” So I’m on the bike; I start riding. I get down to Pass Christian, to the north part of Pass Christian, and there’s no traffic on the road. And I get to what they call North Street, which is a street that runs parallel with Highway 90. Mud all over the place; I’m thankful I’m on a mountain bike. I’ve got these big, knobby tires and everything, and I’m riding down North Street to check on the house. About a mile down the road, there is a house on the road, just a complete house. I thought, “Well, this is unbelievable.” So luckily I’m on a bicycle; I’m able to ride around the house. So I get back on North Street; another mile down the road, here’s another house on the road. You know, if you can imagine a complete thousand-square-foot house on the road. So I managed to ride around it. There’s mud all over the place, and I’m making it through fine. About another mile down the road, there’s
a grocery store that was heavily damaged, and this was the first time I really got frightened. There were people in there looting it. I thought, “Hm, I need to stay away from there.” As quiet as I could, I rode around there. So I got to Henderson Point, and there was a National Guardsman there, and I said, “I need to check out my house.” And she told me; she said, “Well, get over this bridge, but stay to the extreme right on the bridge.” It’s what they call the railroad bridge, which is what you get to before you hit the Bay St. Louis Bridge. So as I get to the top of the bridge, I realized what she was talking about; half the bridge was gone. And I looked over the area, and there’s, like, nothing there. It’s like, I guess, the closest thing to actually seeing what Hiroshima looked like. I get around to the house, and again, the house is gone; it’s completely gone. You know, I thought, “Well, so much for spending the night here. I’ve got to get to Gulfport. I want to check on Becky. I can’t spend the night here because there’s nothing here.” So I start riding on [Highway] 90; there’s really nothing much left of [Highway] 90. It’s huge craters in it; I’m doing more walking than I am riding. There’s no cars there; there’s no one there. There was a lot of boats washed all over the place there. I ran into a couple who were in a Jeep; they were just hopelessly stuck in some crater there. A little farther, I ran into a man who was wearing a set of swimming trunks and a bar of soap. He was going to go into the Gulf to take a bath, you know, and we stopped and we talked for a while. Very nice man, and I said I’ve got to get to Gulfport. And he said, “Well, why don’t you go up on Second Street? It’s much, much more clear there. The road isn’t anything like this, and you can get to Second Street, and that will take you”—and again, I’m going eastbound. He said, “Get to Second Street, and you’ll be able to get to Gulfport much easier.” So I more or less eventually got to Second Street; there was all kinds of debris there; by that time, it was pitch black. Could not see a thing. So it’s too dark for me to ride the bike.

Sloan: You didn’t have a flashlight or anything?

Hansen: I did not. This was a racing bike; (laughter) had nothing like that on there. So you can’t see anything. So I start walking on Second Street. Luckily I’d ridden Second Street for twenty-something years, so I thought I knew every nook and cranny and every bump on the road riding on the bike. So something hits me in the face, and I realize, “Well, this is not good.” So I’m pushing the bike with my right hand, and I’ve got my left hand out in front of me, and I’m walking into power lines and walking into trees, branches and things like that, and all I can say is, “This is not good. This is scary.” This is—you know, because it’s so dark, and I think I know where I’m at, but I’m not really sure. Well, I finally, after about a mile, I see some light to the east, and I hear a generator running. Well, what it was, it was the Pass Christian Fire Department. I guess it’s about eight o’clock at night, and I’m walking up there, and I’m thinking, “Hopefully, these guys will just let me spend the night there. I can sleep on the ground. I just want to stay somewhere.” Well, (laughter) just as I’m about to get there, their generator goes out. These guys start panicking, “Oh, my God! We got to get this thing going! Got to get it going! Got to get it going!” So I mean, it was just absolute chaos there. And I figured, “I better not stop there. These guys have their own agenda.” So I walk a little farther, and again, you know, it’s pitch black.
You know, there’s no lights whatsoever. I see a light up ahead; so I walk up ahead, and there’s two ladies standing out on the road with a flashlight. And I asked them; I said, “How close am I to the Long Beach line?” And they told me and then said, “Well, would you like to come in for some water?” And I said, “Oh, would I ever.” Because I drank everything I had. Their house had not been that badly damaged. So I’m thinking, “These ladies are very brave taking a stranger in.” I had my hospital ID [identification] with me, and I’m thinking maybe that made them realize that you know, this is no crazy idiot out here on a bike in the middle of the night. They take me in their house; their husbands are in there, and they gave me water, and they were just so nice. I visited with them for about thirty minutes. They said, “Well, look, you can spend the night here if you’d like.” And I said no.

_Sloan:_ Do you remember their names?

_Hansen:_ No, and that’s what I’m so upset about, and I don’t even really know where they were at because it was so dark. So anyway, after about thirty minutes with them, like I said, they were so nice to me, gave me all this water and everything, and I start going back down Second Street towards Gulfport. I get as far as the Long Beach, Pass Christian line where the road ends, and I get over on what they call Railroad Street, which runs parallel with [Highway] 90 and parallel with the railroad tracks. So I can just barely make things out, and I’m able to get on the bike, and I’m riding at just a snail’s pace, and I get as far as Jeff Davis Avenue in Long Beach, and the police catch me there. “Hey! Get over here! What are you doing?” And everything. Well, fortunately I had my Gulfport Memorial ID on, and you know, I told them; I said, “Look, I’ve come from Bay St. Louis; I’ve got to get to Memorial. I’ve got to get over there. They’re waiting on me.” I said, “I work in surgery; they’re needing me.” Well, they weren’t, but I just wanted that as an excuse to get there. So, “All right, go ahead and go.” So I’m on Railroad Street, and I’m looking to the north, and I can start seeing this faint glow in the northern sky. And I said, “I don’t know what it is, but it’s kind of guiding me.” So I’m going farther and farther east on Railroad Street, and the glow is getting more and more and more, and it’s almost to where I can ride a little faster. Well, I get into Gulfport, and again, this glow is more and more. I get as far as what they call Broad Avenue and Railroad Street, which is where I needed to turn to get to the nursing home where Becky works. It was Gulfport Memorial Hospital. They have emergency generators; they have this huge diesel generator that was powering the entire hospital. The place was just glowing like the sun. And I got on the bike, and I sprinted up there. The nursing home Becky works at is right next to them. “Oh, God! What a relief! What a relief; I’ve made it. I can’t believe I made it.” So I get up to the nursing home, and they seemed to be all right. There was a lot of damage to the place, but there were some faint glows inside the nursing home. And I go in there, and you know, I don’t really know any of these people in there. And I go in there, and I say, “Is Becky Harmon there?” And they say, “Yeah, but she left.” I said, “Well, is she all right?” They said, “Yeah, she’s fine; she’s fine.” Apparently I was so delirious from dehydration, I kept asking them the same question, “Is she OK? Is Becky OK?” “Yeah, she’s OK.” “Is she OK?” You know. I was just so dehydrated. Well, it was a little after midnight; there was a big curfew going on. And
I said, “Look, can I spend the night here? There’s a curfew, and I don’t want to be out on the road. And I don’t know what to do.” And they said, “Yeah, no problem.” So I spent the night at the nursing home; they were very, very nice, and the next morning Becky came back, and I saw her, and it was very emotional. I just lost it; I just, you know, finally seeing her, knowing that she was safe, knowing that her son was safe and everything. I was just very, very emotional. I just completely broke down, and that’s kind of more or less it. Well, after the next morning, I went over to Memorial Hospital to see if there was anything I needed to do. Well, working in outpatient surgery, we were more shut down. The main OR, of course, was going to be working. So I did something in there that was just wonderful after three days; I took a shower, (laughter) put on clean clothes and everything.

Sloan: Oh, after that bike ride.

Hansen: Yeah, yeah.

Sloan: I was thinking, that ride the day before, you ended at midnight. What time did you start that morning?

Hansen: I started probably about six that evening. Remember, it was Daylight Savings Time?

Sloan: Yeah.

Hansen: So it stayed daylight till probably about close to eight o’clock in the evening.

Sloan: Yeah, but most of it you were in the dark.

Hansen: Yes, most of it in the dark; it was scary. It really was. Becky drove me over here, and much to my surprise, Lana and Jerry’s house fared very well. My old car was fine, so at least I still had transportation.

Sloan: This was all above the waterline?

Hansen: Yes, it was. If you go down south here, there’s railroad tracks, and the railroad tracks more or less act like a levee, and it kept the water—it kept this area from flooding. The other side of the tracks went completely under. But it was interesting what happened the next day. I was over there, and of course there was no power or anything, and we were just sitting outside trying to catch our breath and everything. Becky comes driving up in some big SUV [suburban utility vehicle] with a man, and she said, “Dad, this is a man from the St. Petersburg Times who wants to interview you.” So I said, “OK. Well, my parents used to live in St. Petersburg, and I lived there for just a few years.” So he came there and he interviewed me. I told him the same thing I’m telling you now, and an interesting side note was, as he was leaving—he had flown into Mobile, rented an SUV, and they told him, they said,
“You got to bring plenty of gasoline if you go over there.” So what he had was four five-gallon cans of gas strapped to the top of this SUV. A man came driving around here saying, “Hey, sell me that gas! Sell me that gas.” I said, “No, he needs his gas. He’s got to keep this gas to get out of here.” He says, “I’ll give you ten dollars a gallon for this gas.” He said, “You better sell me this gas.” And you know, this guy’s, like, serious. So this reporter’s in the SUV, and I said, “Look, man, he can’t sell you the gas.” You know, I told him, “Just get out of here; get out of here.” It made me realize that people were really starting to get desperate. And after that, you kind of stayed in your house and just kept an eye on everything. Again, it was so dark in the whole area. At least I knew I was safe, but that’s kind of more or less it.

Sloan: Yeah. Well now, as recovery kind of began after this, how have you noticed it? I mean, you know, it’s a world of difference, I know, since it was afterwards. You know, you bring people down now, and they go, “Oh, my gosh.” And you say, “Well, you know, this is a year of cleaning up.”

Hansen: You’re so right; you’re so right.

Sloan: So how have you noticed—you know, what phases do you see it going through? You talk about that phase right after where people start to kind of panic and are getting antsy. Where do you feel it’s gotten to now?

Hansen: Well, there’s much more goods and services, especially over here. One of the problems was long lines to get fuel, to get anything. Businesses were slowly opening, but it took a long time. For example, the casinos are open now. You know, and people with that expendable income are going out to the casinos, and so things are getting more and more back to normal. The big problem right now is any kind of housing, affordable or not affordable housing. You know, apartments, of course, were destroyed, and houses were destroyed, things like that. I think people are going to be in these FEMA [Federal Emergency Management Agency] trailers for a pretty good while until they get enough things built here. As you can tell, there’s a building boom going on here, but unfortunately, you can only build as fast as you get materials in, so we’re very dependant on supplies coming in, things like that.

Sloan: When’d you get your trailer?

Hansen: I got mine, I think it was in November. It seems like I had to wait forever. One of the problems with FEMA was just the lack of communications. Nobody seemed to know what was going on, and I applied for a trailer in three different places and was finally able to get one. And when I applied, you know, they said, “OK. Well, you should have something within ten days.” Well, ten days nothing happened; a month, nothing happened. Two months, nothing happened. So you’re asking questions, “When am I going to get this trailer?” And nobody seemed to know. Nobody seemed to know where you would call to get information. That was one of the big problems, lack of coordination and lack of information.
Sloan: Now, your daughter, she was in the nursing home during the storm?

Hansen: Yeah.

Sloan: And, of course, they lost power.

Hansen: Yeah.

Sloan: But was it pretty smooth for her there?

Hansen: It was very hot. It was extremely hot in there, and these poor patients were really suffering. Their generators did not start, so they were in quite a bit of discomfort for quite a while. They got power back relatively fast, because Gulfport Memorial, you know, they had to get their power back on. The power company, I think, put them as a high priority. So they were able to get power back relatively fast, and the nursing home, itself, didn’t seem to be damaged that heavily. They got their air-conditioning up and everything after a while. I think it was probably a good week and a half before somebody did pass away, and it didn’t seem to be as a result of heat. It was just, you know, their time. But I think from what my daughter told me, there was never a problem with all this water coming in, being inundated or anything like that.

Sloan: I wanted to ask you, since we’ve determined that you’re here to stay—

Hansen: Yeah. (laughter)

Sloan: As you think about kind of what the Coast is going to look like, I mean, what are your thoughts now as you see, kind of, this debate and you know, a lot of discussion, you know, about moving forward, and what the Coast is going to be like?

Hansen: Well, of course, the Coast will never be the same; I don’t think we’ll ever see near the building on Highway 90, as far as homes go. Actually, to be honest with you, this storm, as long as I’ve been here, thirty-four years, if it were not for my daughter, I would have probably left the day after the storm. I don’t know where I would have gone, but I feel so strongly, and the only thing keeping me here is my daughter. But my daughter’s here to stay, so, therefore, I am. So I can certainly learn to live with that, and I’ve certainly changed my plans as far as I’ll never ride out another storm. And I’ve got, besides this old car, I’ve got a brand-new pickup truck, which I call my hurricane escape vehicle. (laughter) And I’ve got all kinds of equipment and everything to carry with me, so if they say, “Go,” unless I’m obligated to be on call, or I have some kind of obligation, I’m out of here. (laughter) Not really sure where I’m going, but I’m out of here.

Sloan: So are you watching the Weather Channel this year more than you were last?
Hansen: Oh, without a doubt. Yeah, the Weather Channel and keeping plenty of fuel in the vehicle. One of the things, when they say, “Evacuate,” there’s going to be a mass exit out of here, and it’s going to be a mess to get out of here. And I think one of the important things is to have plenty of fuel with you, where you don’t have to worry about waiting in line to get gas. So I have made it a point that both vehicles, at the minimum, when I get below three-quarters of a tank, I’m looking for gas. So a lot of people have learned their lesson.

Sloan: I think so.

Hansen: Yeah. (laughter)

Sloan: Well, is there anything else I should have asked you? Anything else you want to add?

Hansen: I don’t think so. Again, my story, as I’ve written it, I don’t consider myself a hero or doing anything. I think the only thing to me that was different than anybody else was the fact I walked across the Mississippi Gulf Coast in the middle of the night the day after the storm. (laughter) A little bit different, you know.

Sloan: That’s right. Well, you know, as a father, I can appreciate why you did that. (laughter)

Hansen: Yeah.

Sloan: So, all right. Well, thank you so much, Pete, for sitting down with me.

Hansen: Glad I could help.

(brief interruption)

Sloan: OK, Pete, I’m going to make you say it again. (laughter) You were talking about the relief response and people coming. And you’ve mentioned [Hurricane] Elena, the power outage during Elena. How long was power out for that?

Hansen: Elena was back in the [19]80s; the power was out for about a month in this neighborhood where for Katrina, it was out for two weeks. Mississippi Power just brought an army of people in here and got up on-line extremely fast. The other thing that amazed me was the faith-based groups and all the help that we got. It made me realize that people really care about you, and I can remember riding from here to Gulfport Memorial Hospital, and there were people from the city of Charleston, South Carolina, directing traffic. (laughter) And the power company trucks—I remember talking to a crew from Rhode Island, and I understand there were power company crews as far as Canada that came down, and the response and help that we got was unbelievable. And the amazing thing is, here, we’re almost on the anniversary of Katrina; there’s still plenty of faith-based groups down here working, from all over the
country. They’re taking their time. And it made me realize how lucky we really are. And here I’m already getting choked up, you know? It was just amazing the amount of help that just poured in.

**Sloan:** And you had the Mexican Army in Biloxi doing relief work.

**Hansen:** Yes.

**Sloan:** And Canadian power companies.

**Hansen:** Yeah, I remember that. It was unbelievable how quickly these people came in and the food and water and everything you need. They came and did so many things, and they’re still here. They’re reroofing houses. One of the big things that the faith-based groups did were rip out people’s sheetrock that was so heavily damaged and things like that, and you know, didn’t want anything, just came in there to help.

**Sloan:** Yeah, well, you know, what I was amazed is you’d see vans come by from some little town in Kansas.

**Hansen:** Yeah.

**Sloan:** You know? This is not a large Christian organization. It’s very small groups.

**Hansen:** Yeah, and they would come down and just help. I tried to make it a point whenever I would see people, I would say, my line was, “Welcome to Mississippi; it doesn’t always look this bad.” You know. (laughter) And I would say, “And thank you so much for coming.” But it just amazed me where they came from.

**Sloan:** Well, I think you just came up with the new state motto: Welcome to Mississippi; it doesn’t always look this bad. (laughter) Replace “the hospitality state” or whatever. (laughter)

**Hansen:** Right.

**Sloan:** All right. Thanks for sharing that.

**Hansen:** Sure.

(brief interruption)

**Sloan:** Pete, you were telling me about this North Carolina team that came down with the State, you said?

**Hansen:** Yeah, the State of North Carolina. I learned this from my sister who is a nurse in North Carolina. The State of North Carolina apparently is the only state in the Union that has a portable hospital; I guess you could call it a MASH [mobile army
surgical unit] hospital. It had just been put on-line, and they decided to bring it to Mississippi to see if it would work, and it turned out to be one of the biggest success stories of the storm. They came and set up in the parking lot of the K-Mart Shopping Center, and they treated I don’t know how many hundreds of people. The hospital was extremely well-equipped in that it had everything you would need to do just about anything. They treated hundreds of people, in I guess it was about, the three months they were there. They brought their own supplies, their own people, completely self-sufficient. In fact, when I was working at Hancock, weeks after the storm, I went over there to borrow some supplies. They had their own police force there from Charlotte, North Carolina, and they were standing guard there with M-16 rifles and everything, and they were just completely self-sufficient, helped hundreds of people. I think the State of North Carolina has a lot to be proud of because this was an overwhelming success.

Sloan: Well, and you had mentioned, they’re not just doing triage. They had CAT [computerized axial tomography) scans.

Hansen: CAT scans, x-rays, a fully-equipped operating room. I think what I understood was volunteers from North Carolina in the medical field would come down there for two weeks at a time and work, just give their services. It was unbelievably successful, how well it went and how well it was run. Again, we have a lot to be thankful for with the faith-based groups, and these people, wonderful people from North Carolina.

(end of interview)