Mississippi Oral History Project

Hurricane Katrina Oral History Project

An Oral History

with

Reverend Chris Colby

Interviewer: Katharine Wilson, Justine Baskey

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Biography

Christopher Colby was born on September 25, 1952, at the Great Lakes Naval Training Center in Illinois. His father was Gage Colby, a navy dentist. His mother was Sylvia Phoebus Chaney, a homemaker whose family disintegrated during the Great Depression.

Mr. Colby received his B.S. in philosophy from Iowa State University in 1974. Then in 1977, he received his Master of Divinity from Seabury-Western Theological Seminary. Mr. Colby is an Episcopalian priest and has been rector of Trinity Church in Pass Christian for over thirteen years.

Mr. Colby serves on the corporate board of the Boys and Girls Club, the board of the *Anglican Digest*, and the board of Mercy Housing and Human Development. He has one daughter, Jessica Lorraine Gage Colby, and one stepdaughter, Jessica Nicole Ellis Freeman.
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AN ORAL HISTORY

with

REVEREND CHRIS COLBY

This is an interview for the Mississippi Oral History Program of The University of Southern Mississippi. The interview is with Reverend Chris Colby and is taking place on February 18, 2009. The interviewers are Katharine Wilson and Justine Baskey.

Baskey: So this is an interview for The University of Southern Mississippi, Hurricane Katrina Oral History, done in conjunction with the University of Guelph, Ontario, Canada. The interview is with Father Chris Colby and is taking place February 18, 2009, at 2:08 in Long Beach, Mississippi. The interviewers are Justine Baskey—


Baskey: I’m Justine Baskey, and I’ll begin with the first question. First, I’d like to thank you, Father Chris Colby, for taking time to talk with us today, and I’d like to get some background information about you, which is what we usually do in our oral history interviews. So I’m going to ask you for the record, could you state your name, please?

Colby: Christopher Colby.

Baskey: And for the record, can you spell your name?

Colby: C-O-L-B-Y.

Baskey: And your first name?

Colby: C-H-R-I-S-T-O-P-H-E-R.

Wilson: And for the record, where were you born?

Colby: I was born in northern Illinois at the Great Lakes Naval Training Center in 1952.

Baskey: And for the record, what was your father’s name, and how do you spell it?

Colby: His name was Gage Colby, G-A-G-E C-O-L-B-Y, and he was a Navy dentist for all of my childhood.
Baskey: And what was that like?

Colby: We moved a lot. I am sick of moving; don’t want to do it anymore.

Baskey: So you’ve made like a nice nest egg here.

Colby: Uh-huh.

Baskey: OK. And what was your mother’s first name and maiden name?

Colby: Well, that gets a little complicated. My mother was a product of a family that disintegrated during the Great Depression. So her name on her birth certificate was Sylvia Lorraine Phoebus, and she was eventually adopted by the Chaney’s and grew up in New York City. So she had a very, very tough childhood.

Baskey: So you said you moved around a lot. Did you have like a period of time where you lived in one place longer than another that you would consider your hometown?

Colby: Well, home is St. Paul, Minnesota, and only because we would go back there occasionally in the summers on summer vacation. But as a kid, we moved every two years. So I never lived any place longer than that until I went to college. And then I spent four years in Ames, Iowa. And that just seemed like a lifetime.

Baskey: And what college did you go to?

Colby: I went to Iowa State.

Baskey: And how was that for you?

Colby: Oh, I loved it. I loved it. When I went back to visit for the first time in 2002, I cried. It was just wonderful. It was stable. It was very exciting, because I was finally learning stuff I wanted to learn and not what I was being forced to learn. The philosophy professors were focused on the undergraduates, and forced us to think hard, which, that was very exciting.

Baskey: Moving around a lot, how was school, in your childhood, affected by that?

Colby: Well, there was no continuity to it, so every two years, you pick up, and you move. And you move into a new school district, where things are a little bit different. And I didn’t have any childhood friends because, I had my twin brother. So that was great. But it was just—the older I got, the more I resented it. But as a little kid, you’re just, “Well, this is what we do because this is Dad’s work.” So that’s what we did.
Baskey: Are there any habits from your childhood, anything you remember that sticks out, other than moving?

Colby: What kind of habits?

Wilson: Activities or hobbies or things that made your family cohesive throughout all the moving? Things that held you together?

Colby: Well, church, and we held onto one church in the Washington DC area for two sets of orders. So we were actually there five or six years, and that ended up being very pivotal for me, obviously. But the other thing was baseball. My brother and I got to be great baseball fans, and even now it’s a source of great torment. We love to call each other and rib each other about what’s happening with the baseball teams. And living in Washington DC got my brother all revved up into politics. So he called this morning to make sure I knew all the good things that the new administration was doing, and I’m not a Democrat, so I was not cooperating with. So.

Baskey: So despite the fact that you’re twins, you tend to take (inaudible) you were ribbing each other about opposite teams.

Colby: Well, yeah. He’s wrong. (laughter) It’s simple. And being identical twins, we love to make it clear to everyone we meet, especially good-looking college girls, that I’m the better-looking one and the smarter one. So you’re right to talk to me and not him. (laughter) Of course, if he was here, he would say the same thing. So.

Baskey: That’s the identical twin in you.

Colby: There you are; there you are. There you are. All this charm and no place to go; it’s just very sad.

Baskey: So you went to Iowa State, and what degree did you end up [earning]?

Colby: I ended up with a bachelor of science in philosophy. I really, really wanted a BS in philosophy. I thought that was just too much fun. And so that’s what I did. And it was very good in preparing to go to seminary. So I’m glad I did that, and Iowa State was great. It was just perfect.

Baskey: Any good baseball?

Colby: No. They actually disbanded their baseball team so that they could expand women’s athletics.

Wilson: Is there any other training that you’ve had apart from school before you went into the church?
Colby: I did a lot of, in college and in seminary, I did a lot of restaurant work, and that kind of got me ready for a lot of what Katrina was about, which was just, you do an awful lot of grunt work where it’s just gross. And then, too, I did a little bit of farm work growing up, and that helped, too. I mean, people with refined sensibilities who couldn’t get their hands dirty couldn’t do Katrina.

Baskey: And what careers have you pursued, including the work you do currently?

Colby: This one, this is it.

Baskey: That’s it?

Colby: That’s it.

Wilson: Working in the restaurant, what was that like? What kind of restaurant was it, and what did you do there?

Colby: Well, my first job was in McDonald’s, and that was good, dealing with the public and being paid almost nothing. And then in college, I worked in a barbecue; it was the only Texas barbecue restaurant in the whole state of Iowa, and my girlfriend loved it because when I came to see her after I was working, I smelled like barbecue. And she was really keen on that. And that got me used to—well, when you’re doing restaurant work, there’s a lot of dirty jobs. I mean, washing dishes, cleaning up, dealing with the public. I mean, it’s something.

Baskey: And how long have you lived on the Mississippi Gulf Coast?

Colby: We moved here in 1997, twelve years.

Baskey: And I’m assuming because you moved around, you’re—are you the first generation of your family to have lived here, or were there more?

Colby: Well, my wife was born and raised in New Orleans, and so she has a lot more experience with this area. As a kid, she had to go through, I think, Hurricane Audrey. And so she knew what that was like.

Baskey: And do you know what Audrey was like in comparison to Katrina?

Colby: Well, they had no electricity for two weeks in New Orleans; they had to use bottled water. She would have been in high school when Camille went by in [19]69, but I don’t think that messed up New Orleans very much. Now, when I was in the third grade, we lived in Norfolk, and Hurricane Ruth, I think, came through town, and I remember that. But that was just, it seemed like within a week that was all back, put back. Nothing like Katrina.
**Wilson:** What is your attachment to this area, just wanting to stay here instead of moving away?

**Colby:** Well, I now live in the home I always wanted to live in, that it’s settled; it’s comfortable. It’s attractive. I don’t really want to give it up. And then the thing about Pass Christian is Pass Christian has a very intense, there’s a very intense sense of place. Nothing else feels like Pass Christian, and it doesn’t look like suburbia. And I grew up in suburbia, and I hate suburbia. You’re not supposed to hate, but I still, I just never want to do that again, because it’s so homogenous, and you don’t know where you are. And Pass Christian, there’s only one place like it. It only has three major east-west streets, but so what? And I love it; I really do. I want to see it put back together.

**Wilson:** When you say “sense of place,” do you mean communitywise or physically?

**Colby:** Well, both. I mean, it’s physically unusual with the live oaks and the Spanish moss and the Carpenter Gothic Architecture. But it’s also, Pass Christian is really extraordinary racially, that somewhere along the line they figured out as a community they had to work together, or they were never going to be able to rebuild. So it’s a community with a tremendous sense of community, and sure, there’s still racism in the Pass, but it’s a whole lot better than what you see north of [Interstate] 10. So I really like it.

**Baskey:** Can you describe for us what your neighborhood looked like before Hurricane Katrina? And where was it? What was it like?

**Colby:** Well, I can describe the town better than I can the neighborhood. The neighborhood, there’s really not much of a neighborhood. It’s really just that one street. The first day back—I got back September 1, 2005, and as we drove into town I took hold of my wife’s hand because I didn’t know if we had a house left. And then we drove up to it, and the whole front of the roof was peeled off, but we had walls, and all of the windows were intact. And when we got inside, we noticed the high-water mark was just fourteen inches above the floor, and, “Well, that doesn’t seem so bad.” Well, then you find out over the next few weeks what that really means, and it was horrible.

**Baskey:** What does that really mean?

**Colby:** Well, all of your appliances have motors, and the motor is about that high [gesturing] off the ground. And once the motor goes underwater, it’s dead; you have to replace the whole thing. So it meant every appliance had to be replaced. All of the cabinets that got wet had to be ripped out. The walls had to be torn out four feet up. You had to spray the inside of the walls for mildew. Basically the whole first floor had to be gutted, and you throw out a lot of stuff. So that was horrible. But what happened to the community was—I told my wife I just had to go see what the church, how the church was. So I got to City Park and had to walk from City Park; I guess it’s
a mile or so to Trinity. And I couldn’t walk down Second Street because it was so full of debris. So I walked toward the beach and went over on Scenic Drive and couldn’t believe the number of gouges where the whole street, Scenic Drive, was just gouged out. And I got over to Trinity Church, and we had a roof, and we had a floor and these beams, holding up the roof. And that was really it. Two of my three major buildings were gone. That didn’t upset me as much as looking across the street and seeing the elementary school or the middle high, and that was a field of bricks. And that made me cry. That was a WPA [Works Progress Administration] project, a Works Progress Administration from the [19]30s, and they overbuilt everything. And I just couldn’t believe a hurricane took apart a brick building like that, but it did. So there was just—I was in shock but didn’t really know it. And you get one thing piled on another; it was just horrible. The way I came to describe it was, it was as if my town got erased, literally. And that was hard; that was really hard.

**Baskey:** Did you have any traditions that you carried on in your community before Katrina? Like for example, Mardi Gras celebration, St. Patrick’s Day, music festivals, anything like that?

**Colby:** Oh, yeah. We did all of those. This Sunday is the Pass [Mardi Gras] parade if you’re here—oh, you’ll be gone by then. It’s nuts. It’s very loud, and there’s too much beer, but it’s a lot of fun. We did a thing called Music Festival in the spring called Music in the Air to raise money for music scholarships. This is the only town I’ve ever lived in where the volunteer fire department raises money for scholarships for the high school kids. All of that kind of helped make up the fabric of the community. So we did lots of those kinds of things.

**Baskey:** And was that affected after Katrina?

**Colby:** Oh, yeah.

**Baskey:** Can you describe for us what happened?

**Colby:** Well, Trinity Church has a pumpkin patch. We unload a semitrailer that’s full of pumpkins. It’s usually around four thousand pumpkins, and we sell them for the month of October. We couldn’t do that. At Christmas, the first Friday in December, we usually have Christmas in the Pass; I don’t remember if we did it or not. I think we did, and everybody, people were just hugging each other, so delighted to see each other. Christmas at Trinity Church was very, very strange, because when I walked out after that service, it was about six p.m. It was dark, and as I looked west from the front steps, I realized nobody lived between me and Bay St. Louis. It was just a ghost town. And that sense of being on a ghost town as the lights are going out, when all the street lights are gone, is really creepy. So I mean, it was a sense that it had become a ghost town.

**Baskey:** And how has the process been of rebuilding these? Are you rebuilding the traditions you used to have?
CoUby: They got put back fairly quickly because an awful lot of the stuff that we do here as community festivals is in the street. Music in the Air, well, that was in a building, and we got that into a private home. The Pass parade is in the street. Christmas in the Pass is in the street, so that was actually not that hard. There just weren’t that many people around, and a lot of the buildings were missing. So.

Wilson: What were some of your community’s problems and strengths, prior to the hurricane? Strong points of your community, things that held it together?

Baskey: Or things that you were working on?

Wilson: Things you wanted to see develop?

CoUby: Well, we were working on a renovation at Trinity Church. It would have been beautiful. We had raised about nine hundred thousand dollars. The community was—our schools had achieved the top level for public schools in the state. It was only one of two school systems in the state that had done that. We were all very excited about that and trying to figure out how to continue it. And so I wanted to continue being very involved in the schools. We’d only had the Wal-Mart open for a couple of years. After the storm, it was, I think, the sense of community that really, that was the heart of what kind of kept it going, that we had a number of individuals who were just very committed to restoring the community. Is this for me?

Baskey: Yes, please.

CoUby: Thank you. I don’t know if anybody has told you this. The mayor kind of lost his mind in the process of all this. So that was a very, very difficult problem to deal with. The City, the board of aldermen have really had a struggle. I went to see the mayor to see if what I was hearing was true, and it really was. He just was out of it.

Baskey: What do you mean by losing his mind? Can you explain to us how that—

CoUby: I don’t know if he had a mental breakdown. I don’t know. I don’t really know or understand what happened to him, but he was only capable of saying one or two things: “I’m in charge. And I’m here.” And that was it. I mean, he could not function as the mayor, and see, the board of aldermen in Pass Christian was meeting all day, every day for a while. The only City structure that survived the storm was the firehouse on Second Street, two blocks from my home. And they would meet in there. They didn’t have chairs, so they stood and talked for hours, and we could come and watch. And so when you talk about problems, every vehicle that the City owned was destroyed. There were no major buildings that survived except that firehouse. City hall, the library, Trinity Church, St. Paul’s, the whole downtown, it was all gone or gutted. And so what really started the recovery, I think, it was an act of will that people wanted to go back.
**Baskey:** With the problems with the mayor, how did you end up resolving those?

**Colby:** I’m not really sure how the City, the board of aldermen convinced him that he had to step down. But we got an election. Well, actually, they kind of finessed it initially; they got the City attorney to act like a mayor pro tem or like a city administrator. And Malcolm Jones, who was not well-regarded by everyone in the community, did a brilliant job. He was for the six-months after the storm, he was just brilliant and did a tremendous job.

**Baskey:** You were talking about the public schools and how you had achieved the school excellence. You said you were the best public school in the state.

**Colby:** Yes.

**Baskey:** How is that now? Was it affected by Katrina?

**Colby:** Well, a couple of stories about that. When they put the schools back together, they put them back together out in the community called DeLisle, and the Corps of Engineers set up fifty-seven housing units that they turned into classrooms. And they really didn’t know how many of the senior class to expect back. Every kid except two showed up. They really wanted to be at Pass High. There’s a tremendous—the sense of community there is even more intense, I think. So the schools, this is one place where I think FEMA and the government have really analyzed correctly that you put the schools back in place, and the people will come back. And that’s what they did. Now, I asked the principal, “Where are these kids living?” And she said, “We’re not sure.” But some of them were living in cars; some of them were living with friends. Some of them were living with neighbors, and it was just—but they came back. And so that was tremendous. And then the new high school on North Street, the ground floor was wrecked, but the second floor was just like they left it, and it was really strange having teachers in my congregation tell me, “Yeah, I went to my classroom, and it was just like I left it. There was an assignment.” He said, “It was written August 29, I expect this stuff to be turned in.” And of course, that’s the day the hurricane hit. But they said, “My classroom looked just like I left it.” Of course downstairs was gutted. (laughter) But they were able to put the high school back together for like five million dollars, which was great, great. So the schools really were at the heart of the recovery, along with that, just the will of the people.

**Baskey:** And were those that you were talking about a [school] across the street from your church?

**Colby:** No. No, the high school is two blocks away.

**Baskey:** OK. So these are different schools.
Colby: Three blocks away. The schools across the street, that was the middle high, and they are just finishing up reconstruction now. They should be moving in the first of June, and it’s not one school. They’re putting back two schools, and a Boys and Girls Club, and a daycare center. It’s going to be a thirty-million-dollar complex; it’s going to be gorgeous. Federal money can do a lot. (laughter)

Wilson: Has this storm, the hurricane itself, given you, I guess, greater faith in your community, then, a sense of rebuilding?

Baskey: Or has it changed the way you think about your community at all?

Colby: Well, it made me realize I loved it more than I thought I did. And one of the things you find out is you find what people are made of after something like this, and you find out who’s really made out of tar paper and roofing nails.

(inaudible)

Colby: And who hasn’t? And a lot of people, who could have stayed, left, and I didn’t begrudge any of them that, but it’s given me a lot more confidence in certain people. Chipper McDermott who became mayor in Pass Christian, I mean, there are things about him I wish were different, but I really admire his grit, and Lou Rizzardi and Joe Piernas and Anthony Hall. I mean, those guys just really stepped up and made sure the town got put back together.

Baskey: Can you give us any examples or describe to us like how they stepped up?

Colby: Well, they were all on the board of aldermen, and they were there day after day. Only one member of the board of aldermen resigned. It was just too much for his family, his business, and he just couldn’t do it. So he stepped down, but I mean, those other guys just, they were tremendous. And we had a lot of community meetings to talk about how we wanted to rebuild. Now, it doesn’t appear we’re going to get a whole lot of that, but it was really reassuring to see the community come together and have those kinds of conversations. So it was cool.

Baskey: So how and when did you hear about Katrina?

Wilson: When were you given warning?

Colby: Well, you don’t live with it, so I just kind of—you’re not kidding. OK. When a hurricane comes into the Gulf of Mexico, everybody’s ears perk up. You can see it. Everybody’s kind of tuned to the radio; everybody’s just kind of, they’re really paying attention, even when they’re doing something else. So I think it was Saturday when they started talking about it, because this thing was going west, and Saturday they said, “Uh-oh, it’s stopping.” And I thought, “Oh, crap. Is this going to do what Camille did?” Because Camille followed very much the same course. See, if they haven’t explained this to you, this isn’t history; this is geography. OK. Here’s the
state of Louisiana; here’s the state of Mississippi. You have a counterclockwise-turning storm. It turns into the corner. Where does the water go? It goes up because that’s the only place it can go, and it does. And this Coast is the most vulnerable to storm surge anywhere on North America.

**Baskey:** Because of how shallow it is?

**Colby:** Yes. It’s shallow, and it’s very gradual coming up. And you have this corner with Louisiana, and so that water just literally has no place to go, so it just stacks up. And so you get a photograph like you have at the top of the third-floor stairs, showing how much was inundated. Yeah, that’s right. And so Saturday, was that the twenty-eighth or twenty-seventh of August, 2005, all of a sudden, I’m getting this thing like uh-oh. And then Sunday morning, we knew we were doomed. So Sunday morning is when we started realizing we had to go, and it was going to be awful. And see, one of the things that’s gotten out is that the oceanographic office at the Stennis Space Center knew we were going to get a storm surge of around thirty to forty feet, close to the theoretical limit, and they were not allowed to tell us. They were not allowed to tell us, and that’s why some of the people drowned that didn’t have to. Now, we got lots of warning, the radio. The mayor of New Orleans got on and said, “Get out. You have to get out.” The governor of Louisiana got on TV and said, “OK. If you have to stay, take a Magic Marker and write your social security number so we can identify your corpse.” She said that on TV. So we knew this was going to be bad, and I think we did get adequate notice to get out. I had tried to get a hurricane plan put into place for Trinity Church but just never succeeded. So we removed some things, but not very much.

**Baskey:** Were there any other preparations you did for the storm for yourself, for your church, for the community?

**Colby:** Well, for Trinity Church, I put two boxes of records in my upstairs hall in my house. We had fortunately gotten storm shutters put on our house; at the end of July we lowered them,

**Baskey:** What is a storm shutter? Can you describe it to us?

**Colby:** Well, sometimes they close in front of a window, and you put a bar down it. These roll down, and you can fire a two-by-four into one of them out of an air cannon at a hundred and fifty miles an hour, just bounces off, and there’s no mark. And see, what you want is you want to avoid having your windows and doors blown open, because then everything inside can get sucked out. So this, we think this saved our house.

**Wilson:** Did you actually evacuate your house for the hurricane?

**Colby:** Oh, sure. Sure. We went to Mobile, which was not far enough away. I didn’t realize how big that thing was. There’s a photograph that shows Katrina covering the
entire state of Mississippi, which is just—well, if you had a storm hit Canada, and it
covered Manitoba, you’d go, “Oh, crap.” I mean, it’s just so big; you can’t, you just
can’t imagine. So.

**Baskey:** So can you describe to us the evacuation from your home? Other than storm
shutters, were there any other things you did?

**Colby:** Well, we had to pack up the dog; we had to pack up my mother-in-law. We
had to put—normally you evacuate with a suitcase with about three changes of
clothes. And we all know the drill. So you just throw it in the car. Now, there was
more stuff. I put the altar cross from Trinity Church in my trunk, a few other things,
and that was really all there was room for, because there were three adults and the dog
in the car. And we drove to Mobile. And it, well, the interstate was packed, so it took
two hours, three hours to get there.

**Baskey:** And how far away is Mobile generally?

**Colby:** Seventy-two miles from here.

**Baskey:** What was the most important in your decision to leave?

**Colby:** Survival. Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. I mean, this storm, I have never known that
kind of fear, physical fear. I did a service at Trinity Church Sunday morning with
seven people, and the fear was just palpable. I mean, it was just horrible. And this
terrible thing was on the way. I can remember looking at specific objects, wishing I
could take them with me and knowing I might never see them again. And some of
them, I didn’t. So.

**Wilson:** Which objects were really difficult to leave behind?

**Colby:** Oh, these beautiful needle-pointed cushions. Some of them were on church
chairs; some were kneeling cushions. I wish I had put the altar book stand in the car; I
wish I had put the altar Bible in. Just all sorts of things that I would have—I wish I’d
have had time to put my vestments in the car. My grandfather had left me his Navy
cape, which had been in my family since 1915. My grandfather’s Chippendale table,
which had been a wedding present, from 1918, was in my office. I found it after the
storm, though, in little pieces, half a mile away.

**Baskey:** I was about to get all happy until “in the little pieces” came out. When
exactly did you evacuate? You said?

**Colby:** We left town around noon Sunday, the twenty-eighth I think. Yeah.

**Wilson:** And you were with your wife and your mother-in-law?

**Colby:** My wife, my mother-in-law, and the family dog.
Wilson: What kind of dog?

Colby: A cocker spaniel. Not good in a hurricane, poor baby.

Wilson: Oh, I can imagine.

Baskey: How did you decide where to go, and how did you—you went by car, correct?

Colby: Yes. We had been debating going to Louisiana. It was very hard to figure out where the storm was going. We ended up going to Mobile because we thought we would be far enough away that we’d be out of basically the hurricane zone, but we were a hundred miles from the eye, and it still had hurricane-force winds. I mean, that was just—it was just huge. Jeez, it was a big storm. And then a day, two days after, like around the thirty-first, we got kicked out of hotel.

Baskey: Why did you get kicked out?

Colby: Because FEMA had rented every room and were sending in hundreds of field agents. And that’s the way it was. So I had an old friend that I had gotten to know fifteen years before in Mobile, and I called him up. And he said, “Please, come over.” So we did, and they put us up for two nights. And then we drove back on the first, and that was just one of the most frightening days I’ve ever known.

Baskey: And you said earlier that Mobile wasn’t far enough. What did you mean by that?

Colby: The hurricane-force winds extended there, and they lost [electrical] power, and we began having fuel shortages very quickly. Gasoline got to be a real trial. I stood in line forty-five minutes once to get gas.

Baskey: And you haven’t moved at all since you evacuated?

Colby: No. We never had to live in a FEMA trailer. We lived upstairs while they were gutting the first floor. We had two bedrooms and a full bath up there; so that made a real difference.

Wilson: How long did the renovations take to get everything—

Colby: It was nine months. It was May of [20]06 before we could use the ground floor again.

Wilson: What experience did you have with emergency personnel during the hurricane and right afterwards?
Colby: Well, a firefighter came to the door to make sure there were no corpses in the house and to make that funny symbol they put on the front door, to make sure they know it’s been searched. And there were no corpses, and that was fine. And then I got my first taste of—well, then we dealt with the National Guard at the checkpoints, coming into town. And this was one place where, having been in the community for eight years, a police officer who was there recognized me, and I was able to get into town. But then we went over to what was left of the Wal-Mart site, and they were distributing free ice and some food. And that’s where I ran into the Georgia State Patrol. And these guys, I’ve never seen guys this big in t-shirts that tight and felt so relieved. “Thank God they’re here.” Because we did have looters. And I thought, “Oh, I wish I could watch as they apprehend somebody who thinks they’re going to get away with something.” But all my experiences with the emergency personnel was very positive.

Wilson: You’ve told us about the condition of your home when you returned. What was the church like when you walked in? What was still there, and what was missing?

Colby: Well, there was nothing there. I mean, I had a roof, and I had two-thirds of the floor of the church, and that was about it. Now, the heavy metal stuff, like there was a metal pulpit; that was on the ground right outside the building. That had moved about a hundred feet. The Campus Crusade kids found our processional cross buried in the sand; they brought that back. The wooden staff it was on top of was gone, but we found another one very quickly. The Bible, the missile stand from the altar was found, and we were able to refurbish that. But I mean, no books, no art work, no musical instruments, no furniture. I never saw another pew. We had thirty-two twelve-foot pews.

Baskey: And what is your church like now, and how did you get it to the way it’s looking now?

Colby: Construction’s just started.

Baskey: Just started?

Colby: Yeah. Yeah. Recovery is very slow; I mean, it’s just like a lifetime.

Baskey: So considering that the construction’s just starting now, where have you been? Have you had like a house church?

Colby: Well, initially we worshipped right behind my garage for about a month. And then we went back over to the church site, and we put up a big tent. The bishop got us a tent. And we were there for maybe a month, and then the City wanted us out of that end of town, because Trinity Church was the only major building at that end of town that survived in any sense. But I mean there really wasn’t anything there; there was no electricity, no running water. It was not safe, and lots and lots of debris. So we started talking to the Methodists, who had only lost one shingle off their roof, and they
had gotten water in their building, but they were able to refurbish it, and we began worshipping at the First Methodist Church in town. So that’s worked out very well.

**Baskey:** So have you just been doing shifts?
**Colby:** Well, they have a ten o’clock service, and we have an eight and 11:15.

**Baskey:** So it works out very well.
**Colby:** Oh, yeah. It works out great.

**Wilson:** Did you notice people’s commitment to the church changing after the hurricane? Either going up or going down?

**Colby:** That’s a good question. I guess it became clearer who was really committed to it and who wasn’t. And I lost 60 percent of my congregation, but the 40 percent I kept were really good, really good. And they’ve been very tough, but it’s—I think what has made it so difficult has been that when you have your town erased, it really threatens your identity. And you have to find ways to kind of reinforce it, and church is a good way to do that.

**Baskey:** Do you know why you only got 40 percent back? Was it moving? Not attending? Is there any specific reason?

**Colby:** Oh, I think the 60 percent lost their homes, never came back. Yeah. And see my neighbor [Father David Knight, clergy] had all of his parishioners on a list-serv. I never got to do that, so I still don’t know where some of them are. I did have one killed by the storm, and I’ve had a number die since the storm.

**Baskey:** Is it really tough for you not being able to know where those people are?

**Colby:** Well, this is the great thing about growing up in the Navy. I can let go of people sometimes without too much pain. My best friend got forced to move to Birmingham, and that I did not like. I did not like that at all.

**Baskey:** What was it like after Katrina, getting basic necessities? Like you had to wait forty-five minutes for gas, what about the lines at the Wal-Mart where you bought drinks, and food, and other necessities?

**Colby:** Waiting for ice was never too long a process. Sometimes the line for dinner when you went down to one of the feeding tents, that could be, you might wait in line fifteen, twenty minutes for that. But you always had somebody to talk to; I was always very grateful to have a meal that I didn’t have to pay for, and I didn’t have to buy it; I didn’t have to cook it. And the volunteers; listen, if you haven’t gotten people to tell you how fabulous the volunteers have been, I mean, it’s been unbelievable because this is really a disaster that overwhelmed the federal government’s ability to respond. It was too big, which is unimaginable, but it really was. And so the church
groups and volunteers from around the country had to make up the difference, and they did. They absolutely did. So it was cool.

**Baskey:** What were these meals like? Were they the MREs [meals ready to eat]?

**Colby:** No. We had to eat MREs for maybe a week until the feeding ministries got set up or the FEMA feeding tent got set up. And MREs are fun for about two days. And about the third day you really don’t like them.

**Baskey:** I’ve heard they’re not very good (inaudible).

**Colby:** No, some of them. Some of them are—well, my wife’s a hospital dietician, and she started (laughter) looking. She said, “Do you know how much calories are in these?” It’s just staggering, and they are—but they’re for eighteen-year-old, young men, lugging a sixty-pound pack about thirty miles. You need a lot of calories to be a soldier. So MREs do what they’re designed for. They fill you up, and a couple of them are really kind of fun to eat, but I mean, it’s just no fresh food, nothing that goes crunch. It’s just, no.

**Baskey:** Delightful. (laughter)

**Colby:** Yes.

**Baskey:** Was there a place in town that became a central meeting place or a clearinghouse?

**Colby:** Well, if you wanted to see people, you would go down to the FEMA feeding tent, or you would go—well, initially the first month, if you wanted to find out what was going on, you went over to the firehouse. That’s where you found out stuff.

**Baskey:** And was that like a tradition from before Hurricane Katrina?

**Colby:** No.

**Baskey:** That was just like after?

**Colby:** Yeah.

**Wilson:** We talked a bit about other people’s commitment to the church after the hurricane. How did your work change afterwards compared to before?

**Colby:** Well, it was a new job. It was not the same job.

**Wilson:** How did it change?
Baskey: Can you just give us maybe a couple of examples of something you have to do now or something you had to do before, or something that you no longer are capable of doing?

Colby: The first I realized things were really different was, I had this very peculiar conversation with one of the city council about a year after the storm, where he looked at me, and I’m not sure exactly what it was he said, but I had gone to those meetings in the firehouse with my collar on, thinking I was there to get information. And he said, “Oh, no. You don’t know how reassuring it was for us to see you.” And that’s when I realized that before the storm, I was one of the community leaders, but after the storm, I was providing enormous emotional support to people who just needed to see something familiar. And so after the storm, my role in the community just, I think, stepped up quite a bit. And I had to go to my board, my vestry and say, “Look. There’s no sense talking about rebuilding Trinity Church if we don’t rebuild Pass Christian.” So they said, “Well, then you go ahead and spend a day, an evening, a week just working on rebuilding the community.” So I now sit on three long-range housing committees, and I’ve talked to the city planner several times, and I have some influence that I didn’t realize I had before the storm. I’m not sure I did have it, but now I do.

Baskey: What type of influence is that? Is it the rebuilding, planning type stuff?

Colby: Well I think it’s, I have moral, I guess, moral influence, that if I look at them and say, “Look, you guys. I don’t think this is a good idea,” they would pay attention to that. They might still do it, but they would think about it. And so, but my role has changed tremendously in the community, but it’s also changed at Trinity Church. See, Trinity Church, I used to have a moderate-sized congregation. We’d have over a hundred and fifty on Sunday morning. Now, we almost never have more than a hundred. So it’s the character of the congregation has changed. It’s older than it was. There are fewer young families with children, so I’ve had to change the way I do things. But that’s another advantage of growing up in a Navy family is you learn how to change because you have to.

Baskey: Adaptation.

Colby: Yes.

Baskey: With less younger families, is that a concern of yours? Does it bother you at all?

Colby: Well, it’s just what is. And my wife and I had agreed if we’d had a child under ten years of age, we would not have come back. It’s just way too dangerous. They did a water test, standing water after the storm, and the test tested for 250 bad things. How many were present? All of them, which meant there were things in that water they weren’t testing for. I mean, it was really, really—I mean, you had all these giant splinters. You had debris everywhere. You had this film over everything from
the floodwater. And see, what they don’t like telling people is that a lot of septic tanks burst, and so you had all this fecal matter everywhere. Well, little kids stick their hands in their mouths a lot, so God knows what they would have picked up. And I had a nurse, I mean, the first week I was back, she says, “Have you had a tetanus shot?” And she (laughter) grabs me, and she wasn’t going to let go, and she gave me a tetanus shot right on the spot, which I’d never seen before. And they were ready to start giving everybody gamma globulin for hepatitis, but they didn’t do it. But they were ready. They were really ready.

**Baskey:** What was the major industries or employers pre-Katrina, and what have they been like since?

**Colby:** Well, the largest employer in town was the Wal-Mart; it was gone. It will reopen in the fall for the first time. They employed hundreds of people. The city employed, I think, over fifty people. I don’t know how many they employ now. There was not a lot of industry here. Then the schools, and I don’t think the schools laid off anybody.

**Baskey:** So are industries building more than they were before, or are they stagnant?

**Colby:** Well, it’s been very hard to get our downtown rebuilt.

**Baskey:** Why is that?

**Colby:** Insurance, that it’s very hard, for some people their insurance has doubled or tripled, and then others can’t get the kind of insurance they need in order to secure a mortgage. And now with the meltdown, the economic meltdown, securing a loan is just out of the question. So.

**Wilson:** In an ideal world, what direction would you like to see the rebuilding take, the rebuilding of the community?

**Colby:** Oh, now, there you go. (laughter) Now, that’s what I love to talk about. I want them to embrace the SmartCode fully. I want them to plan for a green future; I want them to plan like gasoline is going to cost ten dollars a gallon and really design and build a walkable community, because I think that’s what we’re on our way to whether we want to or not.

**Baskey:** What is the SmartCode?

**Colby:** It is a building code that’s designed to make a walkable community. Most of our communities are built around the automobile.

**Unknown speaker:** Yeah, we’ve noticed.
**Colby:** Yes. And so if you’ve been to the French Quarter, the French Quarter was built around pedestrians. OK? Suburbia is all designed around the automobile. Well, even if you want to walk someplace, you can’t. So when you build a walkable community, it looks different; it feels different because the physical space is designed around a different mode of transportation. And it has enormous consequences. But I mean, see, if we get to a place in ten years where gasoline is much more difficult to obtain, or we can’t afford it, and we have rebuilt everything around the automobile, it’s going to be miserable to live here.

**Baskey:** Is there anything else you would like to see change about the community? Not just in a spatial sense, but in the way it functions?

**Colby:** Well, I suppose in an ideal world, if I could have the Pass just the way I’d like it, I’d really like to continue to develop our relationship with the schools, not to proselytize as much as, it’s just we have facilities the schools can’t afford to build, and I’d like them to feel free to use it. Just walk across the street; it’s a very small street. And I’d like to see a walkable community, and I want to see the racial mix of the community continue. I mean, see, Pass High is the top-rated public high school in the state of Mississippi. It’s also the most ethnically diverse, and I would like that to continue. And I’d like to see more of my people come back. I’d like to get back to a hundred and fifty on Sunday morning. That’d be cool. My father, one of the things my father taught me was to leave it better than when you found it. I’d just like to leave it as good, at this point. Yeah.

**Baskey:** So you’ve been describing some of your hopes. Are there any hopes and fears you have for the future of the Mississippi Gulf Coast?

**Colby:** Well, if we don’t solve the insurance problem, I’m nervous about what that’ll mean. And I think we also, we have to convince people to organize their lives around the reality of storms. See, we tend to organize our lives and our communities around, the restored state is the normal state, except we spend most of the time rebuilding from the previous storm. So that’s really what we ought to think of as normal, is rebuilding, and if we would think of it that way, I think we’d organize differently. I think we’d build into the community resources that would help us in those first few days after the storm, because I mean, I’ve looked at my wife more than once and asked, “How did we get through September of 2005?” It was just brutal.

**Baskey:** Can you paint a picture for us of how?

**Colby:** No electricity, no running water, no gas, no telephones. I mean, it was very isolated, and every time I wanted something to drink, I had to walk to get it. Gasoline was very hard to get. It was just very hard, and what kept us going was there was just so much work to clean up the mess. And so that’s what we focused on.

**Unknown speaker:** Just keeping yourself occupied.
Colby: And I think one of the more difficult moments for me was realizing I was Trinity Church. I didn’t have any of my lay leaders. The only ones left in town were tied up with City business. I was it, and so I had to keep the institution going almost singlehandedly for a while. And that was, I really felt that.

Baskey: How did that affect you like on a day-to-day basis?

Colby: Well, it felt like a burden, that it was, you’re carrying a load all by yourself. But within a month, I began to find people, and then it eased, but it was just very, it was lonely, and I prayed that God would send me friends. And he did. So I’ve made some new friends; some of them live in Savannah, and some live in, oh, gosh. One church that took an awful lot of leadership in helping us recover was from Coeur D’Alene, Idaho.

Baskey: Wow.

Colby: Yeah. Yeah, and they sent down three work teams, bang, bang, bang, and they built a shed for us. They helped us enclose what was left of the church. They did a lot. St. Luke’s in Coeur D’Alene, beautiful. Photographs are just stunning. Oh, my God. Oh, my God. So. All right. Well, what do you guys want to know that’s not on your questionnaire that you just can’t quite figure out how to ask?

Baskey: I’m actually kind of interested in just some of the experiences you’ve been describing like coming back and seeing your—like how did that make you feel? You said that you had this huge burden to carry. I don’t know how you guys do it.

Colby: Well, you’re in a unique place in your lives. You’re college students; you’re as free as you’re going to ever be. You don’t have all that much tying you down. If something happens, and you want to stay here, you can. I can’t do that. But on the other hand, Katrina comes to town, wrecks our lives. You’re tied to the community for all sorts of reasons. The freedom in college was so much fun, but it’s really kind of neat to be tied to a place, too. I mean, if you had children, you wouldn’t negotiate feeding them; you’d just do it. And it’s like that. It’s that, “Walk out? What the hell? I ain’t leaving.” Get a National Guard soldier stick a gun, rifle in my face, then I might leave, but I mean, that’s what it would take. It’s just, this is home.

Baskey: I understand why you like it. Tend to enjoy (inaudible).

Wilson: How do you think studying philosophy affected you later on? Do you think it changed your way of thinking, maybe to give you a different way of thinking to carry on to get through things?

Colby: No, philosophy didn’t do that. But I mean, philosophy helps you to see, I think, more clearly, maybe what really matters and what really doesn’t. One of the big things about living in the Pass that surprised my wife and me when we moved here was how much socializing we were expected to do. And there are a lot of people in
the community who think parties, that’s what life is about. And I mean, that’s nice, but I mean, it’s not necessary.

**Baskey:** Do you think Katrina maybe made some people realize that parties really aren’t what everything’s about? Do you think that changed the way they (inaudible)?

**Colby:** Well, I suppose somebody figured that out, but there were a number of women who looked at their [husbands] and said, “I’m not going to live like this. I’m moving back to Cincinnati,” or wherever, “and if you come, fine. If you don’t, fine.” And I know a number of physicians’ wives that did that. We had a number of people commit suicide. I guess the great thing, you know, the West is undergoing some phenomenal changes right now. And somebody wrote this morning somewhere that we really did not think about how much the sexual revolution would change the West, and maybe we didn’t really analyze that properly. But the West seems to be undergoing a massive sea change, and so things that we used to think were so critically important, a number of people, I’ve seen a number of college kids right now, making money is not the biggest thing in their lives. And I’m not sure it ever will be. But building a sustainable planet, making sure it’s possible that there is a future. I get very energized by that kind of focus and commitment. And I mean, one of the things that’s been really disturbing to me was how crass a lot of American culture has become. I mean, you turn on popular television, and you wonder, “God, how much lower can this go?” And then you run into kids from Ohio and Pennsylvania who came down, and, “Well, I’m spending spring break to help you guys rebuild.” And they don’t spend the whole of spring break making a house pretty; they spend the whole of spring break shoveling shit off somebody’s slab so they can rebuild. I mean, that’s, wow, that’s amazing. And the Mennonites, I mean, I’ve been really inspired by these people. They come down from Pennsylvania, come down from Iowa; a lot of them came down from Canada. And I was really inspired by their devotion, and boy, can they work. So I guess the way philosophy would be helpful would be to just help you see what really matters and what really is nice but not necessary.

**Baskey:** We’ve heard, I guess because a lot of people, when they hear we’re from Canada, they try to give us the lowdown on things, and they tell us about the insurance and how that’s why it’s so difficult to rebuild houses. But how is it that some houses can be rebuilt and some can’t? Like it’s a difficult concept to grasp.

**Colby:** Some people have enough money they don’t have to borrow money from the bank, and if you don’t have to borrow money, then you don’t have to secure the loan. And you secure a loan by providing evidence of insurance. But some people don’t—like, I have parishioners that, they don’t have to borrow money. So I mean, that’s part of the reason, is some people are that well off.

**Baskey:** And would you say that’s the main reason? Like you said that it’s really hard to rebuild the downtown area now because of insurance.
Colby: Well, insurance seems to be a major factor. They also have to build to a better code than they had before, which means that any insurance money they did collect won’t be enough to rebuild it to the higher standard. But they need to build to the higher standard; they really do. It’s worth the money.

Baskey: And would you say that the insurance and how much it costs is the reason that people didn’t come back, or is it more a fear of being here now?

Colby: I think there are all sorts of reasons why people don’t come back; some are financial. Some are emotional. There are a lot of people who do not want to suffer. I mean, they just, the people who are oriented toward parties, they’re oriented towards something else. And I guess the only way to change a hedonist is you have to convert them, (laughter) and so, well, but I think lots of people didn’t come back for lots of reasons.

Baskey: Are there any experiences you went through when you came back from Katrina that just knocked you off your feet? Anything, the looting, anything specific?

Colby: Well, I never thought I would go through something where I would just burst into tears as many times as I did. And I got to the point where I could feel it coming sometimes, and you just—well, one of the most astonishing things I came to see was we would have volunteers who’d come to town for all sorts of very good reasons. And within twenty-four hours, you could see it in their eyes that they were becoming overwhelmed, and they would have to leave. They couldn’t stand it. And that was, I didn’t cry over that, but what reduced me to tears was just how much destruction there really was, so that one of my good friends from the northern part of Mississippi was down. And George and I were driving down the highway, and I kept missing the turns. There were no landmarks; it was very hard to find your way around. And at night there was no light. I mean, (laughter) it was dark as pitch out. Jeez. And there were no street signs. And the highway was torn up, so I mean, it was just very, very difficult. I swear to God, I have a friend in Columbus, Mississippi, and she told me about one of her parishioners who was down on the Coast with one of his buddies, and they were driving down the highway, and they disappeared. Their car fell into a hole, and it was so big that they fell out of sight. And it was night. And so they call for help on their cell phones, and the police can’t find them (laughter) because they’re in a hole.

Baskey: Were they OK?

Colby: Yeah, they got them out, (laughter) but I mean, it was just the most—they said, “Could that really happen?” I said, “Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah.” I mean, the first time I went to jog on my route, I would turn down Menge, then turn onto Scenic, and I knew intellectually this was going to happen, but emotionally I did it anyway, and I had to stop just dead in my tracks because there was a five-foot gouge in the road, twenty feet long, thirty feet long, the whole width of the street. The street was gone.
Baskey: And this is just a gouge caused by the storm surge?

Colby: Yeah. I never saw a hole as deep as the room, but I mean, half as deep as the room, as long as the room. Yeah. And so I actually went down to Highway 90 and jogged many days, on Highway 90, which felt just weird as hell because you shouldn’t be able to do that. But the highway was closed for months.

Wilson: How long do you think it will take to rebuild the city completely, to what it was before?

Colby: Fifteen, twenty years.

Wilson: It’s been a long time already.

Colby: Oh, yeah. Oh, we get calls, “You got it all put back?” And we just kind of look at the phone, “You’re not from here, are you?” (laughter) Yeah, it’s just slow, and they say Katrina’s a five-hundred-year storm. Before the storm, they would say, “Nothing could be worse than Camille.” Nobody says that anymore, and nobody dare says, “Nothing could be worse than Katrina.” Don’t dare God. Don’t do it. “I’ll lose my mind if I have triplets.” Don’t say that because then it’s going to happen. Don’t say that.

Baskey: You never had to live in a FEMA trailer, did you?

Colby: No.

Baskey: Did you ever have to interact with FEMA, or did you know anyone who had to (inaudible).

Colby: Oh, we had lots of interactions with FEMA because we had people coming to the church for help who were living in FEMA trailers, and the FEMA inspector would come around and want to know if so-and-so had been by there. A lot of druggies ended up in FEMA trailers, and there were prostitutes, and there were all sorts of people. So yeah, I’ve dealt with FEMA.

Baskey: How would you describe those experiences with them? Were they good? Were they bad?

Colby: See, FEMA did a brilliant job with these feeding tents. I mean, they set them up; they had good people in, and they got people fed, and they knew what they were doing. When it came to housing, that was a little more iffy because these travel trailers were really not, they weren’t well-designed; they weren’t well-built. They were hard to live in. My secretary lived in one for over a year, and the joke was, “How many things can you do in a FEMA trailer while you’re sitting on the toilet? Well, you can make eggs.” And when you stepped out of the shower, you could fall into bed. I mean, it was really, really tight, and there were lots of older people who
were terrified of using gas stoves, so they wouldn’t. And there were all sorts of problems with these things. Now, they had shelter, which was good, but these new Katrina cottages with the metal roofs that are factory-built, that’s what FEMA needs to use in the future, because the FEMA trailers had to be pulled in by truck. These things have to be pulled in by truck, but they’re much better looking; they’re much better built. They are much more comfortable, and they will last. They will last. I mean, I think we’ll be seeing the Katrina cottages for about twenty more years. The FEMA trailers, if they set them on fire now, that would be just fine. They’re terrible.

Wilson: One thing I’m wondering, just back about your childhood, you mentioned your mother had a very rough upbringing. How did that affect your childhood, in turn?

Colby: Well, my mother died at forty-nine, and she was going to die of the cancer that killed her, or she was going to die of alcoholism. And the cancer got her, but the alcohol was not far behind. And when I was in about the eighth grade, my mother really started hitting the bottle, and then she kind of just disappeared. She couldn’t deal with it anymore. And does that affect me? I’m sure it does, but I don’t know. In regards to this, I don’t know. In twenty years, maybe a shrink can look at this and say, “Oh, yeah.” (laughter)

Baskey: Freudian.

Colby: Uh-huh, yeah.

Baskey: Do you have a worst experience, coming back, of one thing that happened? And you just thought, “This is it. I can’t handle it anymore.”

Colby: No, I don’t think so.

Baskey: Just a lot of very difficult situations?

Colby: Yeah.

Baskey: Is there anything good you see that came out of Katrina?

Colby: It got us to stop talking about Camille. (laughter) Well, the experience of community has been profound. There are people in town I know I can count on through anything. I know I saved some lives; I kept some people going. Yeah, there’ve been some good things, getting to work with the people at the schools; that was really something.

Baskey: Can you describe any experiences you may have had with local, state, or federal officials and institutions?
Colby: Well, the head of the Episcopal Church came to Trinity Church with a busload of bishops and their spouses just to see the damage, and she wouldn’t shake my hand. And I had a political banner above the door that I’d forgotten about that was not the kind of banner she wanted to see, and I thought that was pretty small of her, but—

Baskey: She wouldn’t shake your hand?

Colby: No. See, you watch, and you watch, if you’re going to study philosophy. All this talk about diversity and inclusion, it only works if you’re part of the in-crowd. And you watch. Just try it sometime as an experiment; just take an opposing position once just to see how they deal with you, and the moment it becomes clear you’re not going to toe the line, you’re toast. (laughter) So that was a very bad experience. Now, my experience with state and civil authorities has been wonderful. Our state representative Gene Taylor has been—I’ve seen him a couple of times since the storm; I’m happy to talk to him; love that guy. I don’t agree with him all the time, but I mean, he’s been great, and he’s been fighting real hard to get Congress to change some of the insurance laws, and I think it would be helpful, but you know. I think the governor of Mississippi, if I could send him roses, I’d probably do it. I mean, I think he did a brilliant job as compared to the governor of Louisiana who was an idiot.

Wilson: What was his involvement, the governor of Mississippi?

Colby: He sent his wife down that first week, and she was talking to him every day, and he’s had all sorts of representative down, and he was down. And he was just going to bat for us, boom, boom, boom. My bishop, the bishop of Mississippi has been enormously helpful. So in Mississippi, my experience of government’s been very positive, generally. Even Pass Christian with its mayor going, kind of falling off the rails, the town still managed to function; they just had to work around him for a while, and I have no real complaints about the state. I wish FEMA could have figured out the housing thing because I mean, in Pass Christian we’re going to have lots of people living in those trailers and in those cottages for a long time.

Baskey: And how do you think that’s going to affect the, like obviously they’re living in FEMA trailers. They’re not having a house rebuilt for them, but how is that going to affect the community if they’re stuck in trailers?

Colby: Well, we’ll get the trailers out of the city limits, but I mean, we have a lot of people who are very poor. And they’re never going to have the money to build a house; they’re never going to have the resources to have more than that. And so they’re going to live, well, they’re just going to live in them till they fall apart. So, OK, that’s just the way it is.

Baskey: With all of the volunteers who come in and help clear away everything, and rebuild houses, and all the other things that you said that like the different church
groups got involved in, what’s your experiences like with volunteers? You said that sometimes you could see that they were getting overwhelmed (inaudible).

Colby: Well, generally they come; they work very hard. They’re very committed to being helpful, and I think by and large they do wonderful things. And Habitat for Humanity has brought in, shoot, thousands of people. We still have a couple of church groups in Pass Christian bringing in volunteers. Camp Coast Care is still bringing in volunteers. The Northern Baptist Association’s still bringing in volunteers, and they just keep at it. The money’s drying up. That’s the problem.

Baskey: And how are you going to go about solving that?

Colby: I’m not sure there is a solution. With the economic meltdown, there’ll be some money trickling in, but not near as much. See, for one thing, America’s attention has turned away, and I don’t think anybody realized how long and how difficult a rebuild this would be. So we’ve rebuilt an awful lot of houses, but we need to build another four thousand. We had sixty-five thousand homes destroyed in Katrina on the Coast of Mississippi. And I think we’ve rebuilt all but about five or six thousand. That’s pretty good.

Baskey: And I know that coming in as a volunteer, I don’t really understand the severity of everything that happened, and it’s not until you see, sometimes it’s not until you see pictures of what happened that it kind of hits you. Do you think that affects how volunteers work for you, or do you ever try to give them an understanding of what went on?

Colby: Well, anybody who comes to Trinity Church, I’ll give them the nickel tour. When I show them the high water mark twenty-two feet above the floor, I mean, that always kind of gets their attention. This is a unique kind of disaster; until you’re here, television doesn’t capture it. You have to drive down the Coast and just see mile after mile of desolation. Then it begins to hit you that something phenomenal happened. But it’s hard to say. I think it probably does motivate volunteers to work harder when the need is clearer.

Baskey: You were talking about—I can’t remember. You said they were Georgia State Police, and you were never happier to see them. Is there any group or person in particular that stood up as a hero in this situation? Like not even just in your community, but like in the, in Katrina in general?

Colby: Well, the Salvation Army made an appearance, and I’ll tell you; when you’ve spent your whole life giving money to the Salvation Army, and suddenly you’re waiting in line to get lunch from the Salvation Army, that’s really weird. That is a weird shift. I never knew about Samaritan’s Purse until Katrina. That’s Billy Graham’s outreach arm; they do wonderful things. Yeah. And there are organizations that I think did an extraordinary job, and I’m just blanking right now on who I would point to.
Baskey: Any individuals that—

Colby: Well, the guy who came down and set up God’s Katrina Kitchen from Indiana, I met him many times, and I just can’t remember his name. I thought that was absolutely extraordinary, because he actually was providing better meals than FEMA. And so we would go over to the Katrina Kitchen for dinner more often than we’d go to the FEMA tent because it was better (laughter) food.

Baskey: And what exactly was he doing?

Colby: Well, he came down strictly as a volunteer. He brought up a portable stove, and he started providing meals, and it just grew until he had a campus with about three or four different ministries, including clothing, feeding. But he had a work camp; he had these huts that people lived in. It really got to be a huge operation. I think it covered roughly three or four acres, and he was feeding hundreds of people every day. It was amazing, and it was all free, and so it was all donated. I mean, it was just amazing, just amazing.

Baskey: And with all the recovery coming up and all the things that you guys have been working towards, is there a marker in this recovery that you see as being like the epitome, like you realize things are changing, or in the past when you were working towards it?

Colby: Well, when Trinity Church is back in place, I’ll be free to think about leaving.

Baskey: Do you think you’ll leave and not stay here?

Colby: Well, I don’t know. I love the community, but some of the things that’s happened at church, I really—we’ll see.

Baskey: Can you describe to us the things that have happened at the church, or is it—

Colby: Well, we had a very good building plan; it was a plan that would provide two buildings, two working buildings from the get-go. I had an architect that had worked on over thirty church projects. I had a retired Navy Seabee helping me [CB Naval Construction Battalion], and we had a very, very good plan. It was just taking very slow; it was very, very slow. And I had a group at church just take over the building committee and impose a different program, and it’ll mean we have one building. We have an architect who’s brand-new, right out of school. I like her very much, but she doesn’t have very much experience, and the process of construction is very, very risky. And I’m tolerating it because I really wasn’t given a choice. And so it’s one of the few things where I’ve actually felt raped and like I got violated. And I hope it works; I do because if it doesn’t, then we’re really going to be up the creek.

Wilson: Why did they move in and alter the previous plans?
Colby: Because it wasn’t moving fast enough.

Baskey: Has Katrina been all about the fastest recovery possible?

Colby: Oh, sure. Oh, sure. And see, one of the things that’s really phenomenal in all this is people want to put things back just like they were, and in psychology it’s called the will to repeat. But it absolutely exists in groups as well, and the will to repeat is really formidable. I mean, you start trying to get things moved in a slightly different direction, and you would be amazed at the kind of hostility you can generate. So that has not been pleasant to learn about.

Baskey: So what all this fast recovery is supposed to focus on is improving, is that—

Colby: Well, OK. Look, when you have a disaster like this, in recovery you have to ask, “What do we need?” But more often than not, you’re dealing with an awful lot of people, because of the identity issues, who want it back just like it was so their identity doesn’t continue to be threatened, and, “What do we need,” just kind of disappears. And I don’t know how you deal with that. I thought I did, but this has really taught me; I mean, this is really potent. And if you don’t take it seriously, you are going to get raped like I did.

Baskey: Would you say the alterations and the issues with your church now, are those the biggest problems you’re having with moving forward?

Colby: Well, construction’s underway. As long as it stays on track, and it’s ready to go sometime in the fall, that’s fine. I mean, I do see progress. It’s just been very slow getting to this point.

Baskey: And when you think about leaving, is it partially because of Katrina and everything that happened, or is it just because of the issues you’re having?

Colby: No. It’s not so much Katrina as it is I’m tired. I am really tired. So I want to live someplace, and I want to do something that’s not so hard.

Baskey: Interesting. And is there anything you’ve learned from this experience that you could share should a hurricane comparable to Katrina strike again?

Colby: Yeah. Run like hell.

Baskey: (inaudible)

Colby: Well, to clergy I would say you really have to have everybody on a list-serv, and the sooner you get a, you start communicatifying with your Website to let everybody know where you are so you can begin to function like a church again, the better. That really makes a big difference. I don’t know what I’d say to civic and state people.
The housing thing would be big. I think one of the things we’re talking about in the Pass that I’d love to see come to fruition is get a design center for architects and industrial engineers to come and study so that they can figure out what they could do differently. Now, I think that could be huge, because initially it’s, life is just so hard. Anything that would make it easier would be great.

**Baskey:** Is there anything that post-Katrina could change? For example, is there anything about the amount or the ability of the volunteers that came down that would need to change?

**Colby:** Well, I don’t think we could have asked for a better response from volunteers. I mean, if they ever get around to quantifying it, I bet that they figure out that the contribution just in terms of man-hours was just off the charts. I mean, it was just—I can remember being at God’s Katrina Kitchen one night, and there was a group from Alaska and a group from Pennsylvania. There were over a hundred people in this place having dinner together, and my job was to stand up and say something spiritual. And you had all these different church groups; it was really kind of, “How am I going to do this?” (laughter) You know? So but I mean, it was really a wonderful experience. I’ll treasure that; that was cool.

**Baskey:** We definitely treasure it, too. We enjoy coming down here now. Is there anything we haven’t asked you about that you would like to share or include in your interview, any experiences or thoughts in particular?

**Colby:** I’m glad you’re doing this.

**Wilson:** So are we.

**Colby:** It’s kind of neat. I’d love to see what y’all come up with? What’s the goal?

**Wilson:** I think the main goal is just to have a record, to make sure the stories and voices aren’t lost. And from there it goes in a lot of different directions. I know for me, I’m a painter, so people’s experiences I’m hearing about could (inaudible) and artwork. But in the strict sense of the oral history, it’s also going into books, sometimes videos, I think.

**Baskey:** Yeah. There’s some interviews we’ve watched of a couple of the interviews, and the oral history program at USM has transcribed interviews in tons and tons of books, like there are just shelves of interviews they’ve taken. And they can—people who are writing books about the experience can come in and look at it.

**Wilson:** And above all else, I think to learn from the past and try not to repeat the same mistakes in terms of how it was dealt with, how we responded.

**Colby:** Well, don’t go look at New Orleans, then, because they specialize in it.
Wilson: So I’ve heard.

Baskey: What exactly do you mean by that?

Colby: Well, it’s a city started by pirates and prostitutes. And they never got on track. The governor in 1990 was the grandson of the governor from 1890, and so when Billy Bob Moffett stood up and said, “This is nothing but a banana republic,” he was right. It’s an oligarchy. You have a small group of families, extremely well-to-do and powerful, and they control the State. And that’s the way it is. And it’s a banana republic, and there ain’t nothing else like (laughter) it. And it’s crazy; it’s just nuts. But the cuisine, I mean, if you like Cajun cooking, it is fabulous. But in terms of social organization, oh, it’s a nightmare. They are not going to do it the right way; they’re going to do it their way, and you better not mess with it. You don’t have any corruption in Canada, do you? (laughter)

Wilson: Oh, all over the place. (laughter)

Colby: All right, ladies.

Baskey: Thank you very much for your time.

Colby: You’re welcome.

Wilson: Thank you.

(end of interview)