Mississippi Oral History Project

Hurricane Katrina Oral History Project

An Oral History

with

Reverend Rick Brooks

Interviewer: Erin Townson,
Jennifer Kaufman

Volume 969
2008
Biography

Reverend Rick Brooks was born June 11, 1959, in Jackson, Mississippi, to Mr. Fred L. Brooks Jr. (born October 17, 1924, in Meridian, Mississippi) and Mrs. Sue Longest Brooks (born September 17, 1934, in Lyman, Mississippi). His parents were married July 26, 1958, in Gulfport, Mississippi. His father was a speech instructor at Hinds Community College, and his mother was a speech instructor at Hinds Community College. Reverend Brooks grew up in Raymond, Mississippi. He was graduated from Raymond High School, earned an associate in arts degree at Hinds Community College, a BS at Mississippi State University, an MDiv at Emory University, and a DMin at Columbia Theological Seminary. At the time of this interview, Reverend Brooks was the pastor of Main Street United Methodist Church in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi.

On August 1, 1987, Brooks married his wife Lynn in Jackson, Mississippi. They have two children, Catherine (born March 3, 1990) and John Wesley (born May 1, 1995). Brooks is a member of the Rotary Club, the Bay St. Louis Little Theater, and Hancock County Leadership Class. He enjoys theater, music, reading, and running.
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AN ORAL HISTORY

with

REVEREND RICK BROOKS

This is an interview for the Mississippi Oral History Program of The University of Southern Mississippi Hurricane Katrina Project. The interview is with Rick Brooks and is taking place on February 21, 2008. The interviewers are Erin Townson and Jennifer Kaufman.

Townson: This is an interview for The University of Southern Mississippi Hurricane Katrina Oral History Project, done in conjunction with the University of Guelph, Ontario, Canada. The interview is with Reverend Rick Brooks, and it is taking place on February 21, 2008, at 10:40 a.m. in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi. The interviewers are Erin Townson—

Kaufman: And Jennifer Kaufman.

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

Brooks: Rick Brooks.

Townson: OK, and for the record, could you please spell that out for us?

Brooks: R-I-C-K, B-R-O-O-K-S.

Townson: And when were you born?

Brooks: June 11, 1959.

Townson: And where were you born?

Brooks: Jackson, Mississippi.

Townson: For the record, what was your father’s name?

Brooks: Fred Brooks.
Townson: OK, and could you spell that out for us?

Brooks: F-R-E-D.

Townson: And your mother’s first name and maiden name?

Brooks: Sue Longest.

Townson: Could you spell that out for us?

Brooks: Yes, S-U-E and L-O-N-G-E-S-T.

Townson: Where did you grow up, and could you tell us a little bit about that?

Brooks: I grew up in Raymond, Mississippi, which is in the same county, about twenty-five minutes from Jackson, Mississippi, in central Mississippi. My parents were both community college teachers at the school located in that town, and they both taught speech and theater. And so that’s how we happened to be located there. It’s an old, historical town. There was a battle of the Civil War fought there. And it’s really a lovely place. I’m a little bit biased, but so that’s where most of my upbringing occurred. Yeah.

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

Brooks: This is my sixth year.

Townson: And how many generations in your family have lived along the Mississippi Gulf Coast?

Brooks: I would say three. My mother grew up on the Gulf Coast, and her parents did not actually originate on the Coast. So that’s about as far back, yeah.

Townson: Can you describe your neighborhood to us before Hurricane Katrina and where your neighborhood was in this area?

Brooks: Yes. Would you like it for our residence and the church?

Townson: Yes, please.

Brooks: OK. I have had the privilege of serving as pastor of the Main Street United Methodist Church, located on the end of the first block of Main Street in what’s called Old Town Bay St. Louis. The actual building is about a hundred and ten years old, or the sanctuary, the worship space. And it’s a beautiful place, fortunately mostly spared by the storm. But we arrived here in June of 2002, my wife and two children, to begin serving here. And that was really fortunate that we had as little damage as we did. I’ll
need to temper that a little bit later when I talk about some of the difficulties, challenges we’ve had with repairs and things, but we were able to use that space even though we did get some floodwater in part of the plant. That’s not the sanctuary, which actually sits off the ground a little more. We were able to house volunteers immediately, within days when they could get there, and serve as an operation center after the storm. And we were able to use, even though we had rain damage and we had to watch out for rain, it was one of the few meeting places downtown available, and we were able to have Sunday service for whoever could make it, which were very few people right at the beginning, but hold Rotary meetings and other things there. And of course at night we had people sleeping there from Kansas or wherever, who could come down to help in those weeks and months, which were a very surreal time. You’ve probably heard that word bandied about quite a bit. (laughter) So it was part of—the church is located there in what’s called Old Town, which was a charming, really, place. It was old, full of art shops and businesses. The courthouse was there and restaurants, bars. And it was just a lovely area, just great to hang out in, you know, feel good about. And this community has great appreciation for, in my view, of the good things of life, just food and people and all that and just celebrating life, which is probably why we’re still around. If we didn’t, I don’t think we’d have the same resilience actually, but we absolutely fell in love, you might say, with the area, and just being here. And so it of course was all the more devastating when that storm moved in. The church is located at the corner of Main Street and Second Street. We live down Second Street, north of the church, closer to Highway 90 and closer to the bridge that crosses the Bay of St. Louis, and we had in our home, six and a half feet of floodwater, and so we lost virtually every possession and had to totally strip out that house. And that created, as it did for so many other people, whether you had floodwaters wipe out or the total wind wipe out, you still had all kinds of challenges. For us and for me as a pastor, it was, you know, what to do with the family and just how to negotiate our way as a family, and then what to do as a pastor at this unparalleled time. And the United Methodist Church, through our connection with the broader denomination, supplied within three weeks, supplied a travel trailer that stayed by the house, and so I was able to stay on site a good bit, not all the time, but to begin to do that. But we have two children, and we had to farm them out to grandparents in central Mississippi because school was out until right before Thanksgiving in Hancock County, public schools were. I think that parallels the parochial schools as well. And so my wife is a schoolteacher, and she kind of floated between, going between where her parents live and just coming down to see me in the trailer, but it was [a] very devastating time in so many ways. Yeah. We had a lot of help as the fall progressed. Before Christmas, we had a lot of help with working on the house and through connections with other church people, and we actually were ahead of the curve about getting back to live in our house early in 2006. Of course that helped a lot of things.

Townson: Now, during this storm, did you stay in your home, or were you at the church?

Brooks: We evacuated.
Townson: Evacuated, OK. Could you tell us a bit about that, too?

Brooks: Yeah, I sure will.

Townson: Your process.

Brooks: It was, and again, I’m sure I’m just being redundant with people you’ve already interviewed. The benchmark for the storm was Hurricane Camille, 1969, for the worst it’s ever been, in recent history, that’s ever hit this area, which was devastating enough. And it was hard to take anything worse than that very seriously at that time, whatever the Weather Channel showed. And I even had to deliberate—the storm was going to move in Monday—about whether to have Sunday service. I was still trying to, Saturday evening, trying to decide about that; finally realized I don’t need to discourage anybody from getting ready to get out of here, and getting out of here. So we cancelled that. I seriously doubt I would have had too many takers, but we realized the thing to do was to go, as well, that we probably were very likely to be in harm’s way. And I honestly thought that most people had. I would say a majority of my congregation did the same. But I had some Hurricane Camille, 1969, survivors who had that same mind-set: they had seen the worst. And they hung around, and fortunately lucked out as far as their physical safety. I don’t know; I’d be interested to know in talking to the other pastors. I think we’re one of the few churches whose membership didn’t have any fatalities. But I don’t have that documented. But anyway there were so many traumatized; many of them were. And on finding higher ground, whether on the roof or wherever, from where they had stayed in their homes. And I was able to come back. The storm was Monday, August 29, and communication was cut off, and we’d just hear secondhand, third hand, about how you couldn’t get back home and get through. My wife Lynn and I finally couldn’t stand it. We had to come back. We came back Thursday. And it’s a real undertaking, more than you might realize, not just to get through once you get closer here, through the debris and the cars everywhere and what might be obstacles on the road from the storm. But when power’s out everywhere, it’s hard to get gasoline, and you really had to pack whatever you’re going to have because there’s nowhere else to get it. We had a true adventure, just coming down and getting here, and we’ll never forget that scene when we did. We did come down Highway 603, which was one of the, from the Jackson, Mississippi, area, one of the main ways people come down to Bay St. Louis and Waveland. And people had parked their cars, as they typically did, alongside the road, that highway, which comes into Highway 90 because those who lived in that area above there, and that part of Waveland particularly, know that that’s higher ground. And so you have cars everywhere because surge water covered that area. And I even remember one in a tree, a car (laughter) hanging from a tree. But it was a war zone. It was absolutely a war zone and like something you’d see from, I don’t know, Escape from New York, or as Kathleen Koch said, Saigon; as somebody else said, Dresden. But it was pretty amazing, and from where we came in, to come back to Bay St. Louis, to where our home was, as we got closer to the actual Bay, the Bay of St. Louis, I realized we were in trouble because everything was just wiped out. And my wife saw our house, and we live about a block from Highway 90. So when we
approached it, it was still there, and she was hooraying, and I was going, (laughter) “I’m not sure.” And I was wise not to be sure because you go through that period where I’m glad it didn’t happen now, but when you’re flooded, you really sometimes wish the whole thing had blown away. It’s just an utter mess. Of course, I don’t feel that way now. I’m very glad to have the structure, and of course there’s the old wind versus water debate where insurance is concerned. If it’s clearly sometimes documented being wind, then you’re covered. If not, you’re in trouble. But anyway, we did have a lot of help and support, but the philosophy of the church, my bishop and my church and others was to help the pastors get back on their feet so that they could be available for other people, which I think made sense. But you incur a lot of—I think everybody has post-traumatic stress. I don’t know of anybody who doesn’t, and I think mine’s caught up with me just recently a little bit, and the disaster response people warned me about this. They said, “You’ll go through this period of more intense, getting-back-on-your feet, and you feel like you’re getting somewhere, and then all of a sudden you don’t feel like you’re going anywhere, and it’s the grind. Something this big, and you’re carrying not only yours, but the helping professions, you know, you’re carrying a lot of other people’s, despite trying to take care of yourself.” And I think that I’ve felt that a little bit recently. I was talking to some of my church members about that the other day, and they were very sympathetic, I must say, and understanding because they’ve been through it, too.

Townson: Now, you left with your wife and your two children?

Brooks: I did, and the storm was pretty bad even up central Mississippi. When it moved up there, there were tornadoes and all kind of damage and power outages and everything. And the not knowing is terrible. You know. My wife is of the kind that if—I kind of wanted to stay, myself, and shack up in the EOC [emergency operations command] or somewhere with other people who were there, but she wasn’t going to leave if I didn’t.

Townson: What was the EOC?

Brooks: Emergency operations center.

Townson: And where was that?

Brooks: Well, it’s a good thing I didn’t because they were running for their lives, too. There was one downtown in Bay St. Louis, and Waveland’s was out here on Highway 90. And they were in trouble. Those first responders had to get out of harm’s way themselves. And there’s a famous photo of—although I must say if I’d stayed closer to the Bay where I was, which some other people did, actually—this is the ironic thing—closer to the water, I think I would have been OK. They kind of gathered at one of the highest points there, just over the rise, and they had boats and things there, and the wind came in. And so after that, the water moved in, and if you had some kind of safe vessel, you might be OK. But there’s a famous, real famous photo—I
think it was on AP [Associated Press]—out here on Highway 90, not far away from here where people are being rescued out of their car with those first responders.

Townson: How old are your two children, and what are their names?

Brooks: Catherine and John Wesley, and presently Katherine is seventeen, will be eighteen years old next month, is a senior in high school at Bay High School, here in Bay St. Louis. And John Wesley will be thirteen soon, and he is a special-needs little boy and developmentally delayed and goes to Second Street Elementary, Bay St. Louis.

Townson: What are your most vivid memories of your community before Hurricane Katrina?

Brooks: I think it was just the, as I mentioned before, the “celebrate-life” kind of attitude. It was a place that you could just feel like you really lucked out being able to live here, and like it must be one of the best places in the world, and one of the best-kept secrets. And at that time it was, and may never be again. But it was actually affordable to live here (laughter) for middle-class people, and then we did have, at that time, housing available, too, for people who were not. In fact one of my son’s helpers who is kind of a vagabond guy who helped out with him at our preschool at the church in a wonderful way, and you lose so many people. I think that’s one of the big losses. Another big loss is the people who’ve gone, and I had felt that in the community and the church. But that changing the landscape, in so many ways, is what happens. You have the cheaper housing is gone, and then the cost of living for the professions, and it really makes a difference. But again, it was just the kind of place you could feel good about just walking around, and there was a natural beauty, habitat, and there was the charm of the shops and people and the sense of community that was there. And I think the real easy attitude was present, I loved about it.

Townson: Do you feel like that attitude, that “celebrate-life” attitude is coming back, or will ever come back in time?

Brooks: I think it is. It is, despite the trauma. It exists and probably helps keep us afloat. There was a group; one tradition that has been in Bay St. Louis for years is on the second Saturday of each month, there was an art walk, which is just a party downtown, and the shops stay open, and the people serve refreshments and have music and everything. And they were determined; that October after the storm, they had a Second Saturday.

Townson: Yeah. We just actually interviewed Mark Currier.

Brooks: Did you?

Townson: Yeah. That’s interesting that you brought that up.
Brooks: And have since, ever since, which is, I think, a real testament to that, “We’re going to be this kind of community. (laughter) And even Katrina cannot take that away.” And I have business people, small-business people in my church who, I’m amazed—I am amazed—at their strength and their gifts and what they contribute to this community to ensure that it’s going to be a vital community again. I am absolutely amazed by them.

Kaufman: Now, what was your decision to come back? Was it the community and the church beforehand? You wanted to be able to build that back up?

Brooks: Yeah. Well, it’s a mixed bag, to be honest with you. There was the love of the place and the people that already existed and hardly being able to imagine just leaving. Now, but that is a question that I have a lot of sympathy with. I would never—there are so many needs, so many situations. I would never fault anybody for leaving. We have, I know, among my Methodist clergy brothers and sisters along the Gulf Coast, there are a lot of them who were serving here at that time, who are not here anymore. And I totally understand that. For me, I think for one thing, in a selfish vein, that the cutoff, immediate cutoff would have been harmful, that as hard as it is to be here, that being away would have had its different challenges, too, and some residue that it’d be more difficult to work out the rest of my life, (laughter) to be honest with you, than to go on through this severe time with the people that I’ve had established relationships with and to go on through to a better day, certainly a different day, but a better day. And we’re still in some respects waiting for that better day, working toward it, obviously. So there was that, and just the felt need and desire to want to do that. We had established home, a residence again, and so there was a comfort in that. And my wife loves the community, too, and she’s now currently librarian at the middle school, which is not far from here, and it was a good setting for my son. My two children love it; so there’s that. That’s always a big factor. But it was the desire to want to see, the satisfaction to see things come back together. So yeah, to be a part of that.

Townson: Did you have any experience with the local, state, or federal officials when you came back in?

Brooks: Well, who didn’t? (laughter)

Townson: Can you describe some of that for us?

Brooks: Well, when you say officials, I probably should backtrack a little. We certainly had contact with first responders, people representing the government and the helping agencies, and besides the volunteer ones, the churches and so forth. And we have our own Gene Taylor, our Congressman who lives here in Bay St. Louis, who has been—I understand is going to be interviewed. He’s been a local hero, and others who have been very present. It was such a strange time. You would have people from the Red Cross just walking by after we had our second church service, offering shots to people, just coming into the sanctuary, “Anybody want a tetanus shot, whatever?”
So you had that kind of contact with the day-to-day or when they were able to get here with the little bus that brought meals around. And that’s the main kind of contact. I’ll never forget those days afterwards when there were no trains or any other usual sounds. The train sound, when it finally came back months later, that was a cue that some kind of life is coming back because you’re used to hearing that. But the helicopters overhead, that really was dramatic, and the terrible, still heat afterwards, too, a very austere time. But even that was a presence of extended arms of relief and the government, but we had that, and then we had the local community organizing that was done in those weeks and months afterwards, which was impromptu a lot of times. And even the local Rotary Club, where I was already a member, used to meet out at the yacht club and was kind of a social gathering. We’d do some good projects each year. All of a sudden the ante was upped, and it became a place of mutual support, of sharing, “What’s going on here? What’s the primary need we need to look at? And what do we need to know about this insurance question? And how can we help each other out?” And you would have that plus whatever agencies, who would gather together. One group that came in, and I hope somebody else documents this because my description will not do them justice. But one group that came in was not a governmental group at all, but were the Rainbow People. And they are kind of avant garde—you might say hippie—alternate lifestyle people who often are known for living in the wilderness for a long time, being self-sufficient. They came in; not mainstream people. But they came in and set up a big operations place, parking lot here in Waveland on Highway 90, and they did a tremendous service for this community, providing three meals a day with organic kind of food and entertainment, and especially that aspect was not to be missed and provisions for people and even paperback books, which I appreciated. Things like that, and you would have them, and everybody was just kind of allied because we’re all in this thing together. It sounds cliché, but that’s at least one good aspect that comes out from the storm is we realized it’s just basic human need, that, “We’re in this together. Let’s pitch in and help each other.” But there were a couple of people who came in to volunteer with that group. I’ve got a friend who’s a photographer, whose office is downtown across from the church, and she came down from another part of the country just to volunteer with that group that was out here, and has stayed. And I know a couple of other people who’ve done the same. It’s very interesting.

Townson: Could you tell us a little bit about your church before the storm, and then how it was affected after? And you said you had a lot of volunteer groups come in?

Brooks: Yes. I realize I needed to probably take that direction and not leave that out when I’m thinking about the community support and help, sure. On a personal level, let me share something that was extraordinary about the situation for me. In the structure of our church, I would say of every United Methodist Church, each church has its own kind of polity, and the way it’s designed to run its business and so forth. But in the immediate aftermath of the storm, I was kind of alone as far as determining what should be done, if anything, about the actual church. Usually as pastor, that would not be my role or place, and it was a big question mark. When you don’t have your usual people to consult, the leaders that you at least bounce things off of, and
actually the leadership actually make those decisions, who are placed in, trustees, or whatever group you have to do that. And it was a very stressful time for me not to have that kind of collegiality there. In retrospect, and it’s one of those funny things I say, if I ever have to do this again—heaven forbid I have to go through again and all that means. This kind of storm, people call a hundred-year storm, but I would have taken it easy. I think I felt such a need to need to do something, but I made some decisions that we are struggling with. One is I signed a contract with a cleaning outfit, a national cleaning outfit, that an insurance adjustor had put me on, and they did what’s called dry-out remedial work for the church building. That is they took the sheetrock out that needed to be, cleared it away, and brought in air machines and so forth, and I say this because it’s very relevant to what some people are going through as a result of the storm, the aftermath. They charged us a certain amount, which was reasonable to begin with, and they changed the contract again, and we didn’t pay the bill because we thought it was unjustly increased. They padded it even more. The upshot of it is the insurance company paid them a substantial amount; ours did. And we paid a little more right at the beginning, but we contested that, and unfortunately they moved before we did. But they’re suing us for that, this little Methodist Church down here and this huge corporation; we’re talking about hundreds of thousands of dollars. And that is the kind of—not knowing how that’s going to come out is one of those things, that up-in-the-air question mark that you deal with. I’ve learned to realize that what will be, will be, that I have a secure job somewhere, (laughter) but I really hate that, things that are not resolved, and also things that the implications of the storm are so far-reaching in so many ways for organizations and for families and people and everything. One thing touches on another. Absolutely does. Well, we were able to get space cleared out, and through a colleague of mine, a woman United Methodist pastor who actually was pastor of my wife’s parents and a friend of mine, she had a connection through Kansas, a Methodist Church in Kansas, what we call conference. It’s a jurisdictional group, and they had been actively involved in relief, and they came down within three weeks to assess. And they had set up shop soon after, there in our church hallway, an operation center, and a bunking place. And they came in and helped us be able to serve the community. We were up to our necks in just trying to take care of our own business, but a basic thing we did was offer them the space, and then assist a little bit. But they mainly took it from there, and it was a beautiful kind of partnership there. Again, I’m sure you’ve heard this before. You have this experience of people coming down to help, and they thank you, “for letting us come down and serve you. We thank you for letting us come down and save your necks.” It’s always interesting (laughter), an interesting thing. But it’s humbling on our end, absolutely. And so when you’re totally in upheaval, your world is shattered, turned upside-down, that human compassion is amazing, and the actual physical help as well. But that was a beautiful thing because those people who served, who came down in waves each week—and actually we had a couple who ran the operation center who had been in missionary work before and done this before who lived there and kind of headed it up—it helped us to serve the community. And that was a really nice thing.
Townson: Could you describe your first church service after the storm? Just how you went about it.

Brooks: The actual service was second Sunday afterwards. That first Sunday, the Sunday after the Monday storm, my wife and I made our way down here. We had come down that Thursday after the Monday storm; there was no place to stay. There was no place to put your head down. Actually I suppose we could have gone to a colleague’s of mine’s church north of the interstate, but you know, we needed to get back (laughter) to family, whatever, and we came back Sunday. And we met a couple of church members there, and they were just there out of curiosity. And we just had a prayer. (laughter) The following Sunday, I had ten people. I had ten people who gathered, and it was an informal kind of service, gathering, and it just gradually increased a little bit after that; it has. We averaged close to a couple of hundred people for Sunday service before the storm; we had two worship services. And now, we’re about a hundred and thirty. And that kind of parallels, I think, the population shift. The people who moved away from the membership of the church and as well as the surrounding community, kind of parallels each other. And the volunteers who have come down and been here, many of them returning since that time, now are not housed in the church, [our United Methodist ones]. They’re housed down in Camp Gulfside, down in Waveland, which was Gulfside [United Methodist] Assembly Grounds before the storm. It was a traditional African-American campgrounds and meeting center, and it was well known throughout the Southeast in our circles for its historical significance and also being a nice place to meet. But it was totally wiped out. But anyway, on the grounds of that site are temporary housing buildings, and that’s now where volunteers who would have come to our church that first year, now are housed and where the operation center is. But a lot of them have, through the months, come to worship at our church, and that’s been a help to us on more than one level. One is just the encouragement level, but also the presence and the gifts, and we don’t have quite as many of them lately, but I guess other people, visitors, fortunately have kind of stepped in, too. So that just occurs; in other words, we’ve had a few more people gradually than we’ve had. But it was austere, that first service after the storm; it really was. Ten people is like a tiny church prayer meeting, and we were just there and glad to be alive and encouraging one another and all that.

Kaufman: So you did reflect a bit about the storm, definitely during that meeting?

Brooks: What else are (laughter) you going to do?

Kaufman: What else? (laughter)

Brooks: Right.

Townson: During all this time, how do you feel your roles differed between being a father and a husband versus being a reverend? Do you feel like those roles were different in some ways? Did you have issues dealing with the separate responsibilities at all?
Brooks: I sure did, and that was probably the area of greatest stress and hardship. My immediate concern was to protect the family, and it was actually a point of tension. I don’t think my wife would mind this, because we talked about it many times, of between us with children and what best to do with them and their welfare. I felt good; fortunately, I’m grateful to have the in-laws that I do, her parents who were so good with basically being parents of our children for a good while, especially our special-needs son. And he was doing so well up there after he was admitted to his special education class, and living there with his grandparents. And as the fall proceeded, and school was about to resume here in November, that was a big point of contention and strife. I couldn’t see bringing those children back. My wife couldn’t see not doing it, and my father-in-law had another trailer that he added to our site so that we’d actually have enough space because you don’t have enough in a little travel trailer, and I don’t think even my wife would have agreed to that for a family of four, although some people have done it, have been doing it. But that kind of thing, those kind of tensions are, on top of everything else, are horrendous. And you know with the job you have in front of you, getting back in your own home and just being a presence for other people, as a pastor, it really was too much some days. It was just too much, and then just the personal grief and turmoil. I remember one Friday evening, interestingly, the local public high school resumed their football season long before school ever did, and again, it was one of those things that people were so glad to see because it was something to go to and be a part of. But I remember one Friday evening, I had walked along—probably shouldn’t have done it then because it was not an easy thing to do—the beach line where Beach Boulevard is and the Bay, and it was just horrendous, and I just broke down when I got back, like I never have before. It was overwhelming, and I wasn’t even sure I was going to be able to go to the ballgame. But I did, and people have those moments. Some people who haven’t had them are having them now. But it really was one of the most devastating things I’ve ever experienced, and the overwhelmingness of it, I think gets to you sometimes. But that dimension of being parent and husband and working that out, because that’s not an easy thing to do when times are normal. (laughter) But especially difficult during those times. Yeah. And I had, you know, when we were trying to—actually working on the house, and the church group from Tupelo, Mississippi, and other places were there actually bringing in people to work and a contractor here and there, my wife felt better by having the children close by. And I guess you run into that thing, but we got through it. We got through it and got to a better day.

Kaufman: You said your son was adjusting really well in his new class, up with your in-laws. Was that ever kind of one of those things where you say, “Well, maybe we should leave here and stay there for his well-being and for what he was going through.” Was that ever—

Brooks: I don’t think we ever considered that as far as our family at that time, being transplanted. I certainly did just consider conceding that I wouldn’t be able to see him as often, but that his welfare was being served if he stayed up there longer, and I think that was the real tension with me. And so those are the kind of things you run into,
things you work out as parents and family. But again, I’m grateful that there was that safe and good environment for them during that time and for my in-laws and everybody who came through for us.

Townson: You and your wife stayed—you mentioned a trailer; you had a trailer at your home while you were rebuilding?

Brooks: We did. There was the one that was supplied, which actually wasn’t a FEMA [Federal Emergency Management Agency] trailer, but it was like a motor home was what it was, the first one we had, and the one that we had that was provided. And then there was another camper style one that later my father-in-law brought there. So it was the typical kind of campsite outside the shell of the house. (laughter)

Kaufman: Now, who provided—it wasn’t FEMA who then was providing—

Brooks: Actually it was a couple from the coast of North Carolina, and just through the connection of the large United Methodist Church, knew of the plight of people here and offered to give theirs. It was a few years old, but it was very good shape, and they just donated it and brought it down themselves. I’ve still got their names, Marsha and Dennis Lakus(?). And I haven’t seen them since that time, but we became acquainted that day, and they showed us how to hook things up and all that, and just beautiful, beautiful gift.

Townson: What would you like to see rebuilt in the community and along, like, the Gulf Coast here? Is there anything specific?

Brooks: Um-hm. One of the things that’s on the drawing board by a small group of leaders, Bay Area Recovery Team, who’ve kind of pushed this—incidentally a poignant footnote to that is, one of those was a young man who died, tragically, last Mardi Gras, well, before Mardi Gras at a parade in New Orleans, and our community is just reeling from that, but he was one of the ones instrumental in this proposal for a marina, a recreational boat marina here in Bay St. Louis, which sounds wonderful. It’s a vision of something that can be done that will bring out something good as a result of the storm that was not there before, but that perfectly complements the kind of community we are and opens up new possibilities. I want to see that. I want to see the resulting—for this particular community, I’d like to see that same flavor there, the quaintness, and the artistic sensibility and everything that was there before, and the good establishments for food and good times and all that, and I think that will happen. It’s going to take a while because of the infrastructure and the whole seawall having to be rebuilt, a lot longer time than so much of the rest of the Mississippi Gulf Coast is taking just because of the situation. And if you haven’t seen the local papers, even now in these next few days, our city leaders are trying to fight FEMA for the flood maps. They’re questioning the flood maps that FEMA has put out that say you have this certain height you have to rebuild that applies to local businesses and residences, and it’s outrageous, especially compared to the rest of the Coast. So many people will be outpriced if those are not changed, so it’s a very immediate concern that we have.
You have those kind of roadblocks, those kind of things to get through, and a lot of “this-hinges-on-that” kind of thing. But that’s what I want to see. I think nobody knows the exact shape of that, how it’s going to be, but it’s going to be good. This community’s going to be great again, and it’s going to take a while. It’s going to take a while. And the rest of the Coast has a uniqueness about it, too. I’m biased, but this particular end of the Mississippi Gulf Coast is influenced by our culture, close to New Orleans and many of the things, influences there, and just its own local quaintness. And that’s going to be here, but likewise the other communities have their own things that they want to, I think, retain, and as it was before the storm, it’ll be a blend of many things, of tourism and industry.

Townson: Do you have any fears of the future in this town, besides how you mentioned with FEMA, the flooding zone, and—

Brooks: Yeah. As my friend who passed away last month would tell us, he was afraid it’s going to be a Mississippi Coast town with a Florida price tag, and at least on the immediate horizon, that is a hindrance to the kind of wholesome community it was before, the kind of diverse community it was before. And we don’t want it to be just another tourist place, you know. I want it to be a great place to live. And that fear is certainly prevalent there. I mean, it’s in the background in that way. And I think the change factor, that we all as human beings go through, there’s always an element of fear there, and sometimes some of us are so busy, though, just getting through the challenges, that may not be as prominent in some ways. But most of all—I sound like a preacher now, but most of all, I think anything that is meaningful to us has an element of fear in it. And so if this place and this community is very important, and how it turns out, you have that in the background, too. You hopefully have something else within you and support, without that override, that transcend the fear somehow, gets you through it, but it’s there. But I think wherever you live, you have, to a certain extent, the challenges of community and things coming on.

Kaufman: Just to mention with your children, how have they responded to Hurricane Katrina?

Brooks: That’s an interesting question because I think the jury is still out. I wish there were a way to assess—I guess I wish; maybe I do not—the effect, especially on my daughter, that this storm may have had for her, if it had not occurred in her path. She’s a senior in high school, and interestingly for her and for many of her peers, just one thing that I noted that was fascinating was many of them didn’t want to talk about the storm very much, especially those in high school, who stood to be robbed of some of the usual experiences you might enjoy, or privileges of being an upperclassman or high school student. They just want to get back to that, and certainly played out where my daughter Katherine was concerned. But she’s also very affected by it, like everybody, in a way that cannot be denied. And I would hope that she’s shaped in a way that will give her strength through the storm in later perspective, looking back. I don’t know; I don’t know if it will or not. Sometimes you just wait and see how that works, and when things, you’re so busy going through at the time, or you’re at that
developmental stage that she was in high school, in different level maturity and all that, later on maybe you’ll pick back and process things that you went through and experienced that really inform life now in a helpful way, a positive way. And I hope that’ll be the case. I don’t think that she’s been too deprived of privilege, you know, the usual things that a high school kid would enjoy, as a result of the storm. And our son, in his developmental needs, has been very resilient for his development, where he is in that area. So I think he’s (laughter) probably coped better than most of us as far as a day-to-day thing, (laughter) there. But that is an interesting question, and I think we’ll find out more about that, how that touches them and the implications of that in the years ahead, as we will for adults.

**Townson:** Right. Do you find with your church, with the role that you play, that people still talk about it quite a bit, about the storm, and need the support?

**Brooks:** I do. Although there certainly have been times when people, I think, have been resistant to that, that there has been a strong need, as there often is with church and those faith-based communities, of returning to normal, the life, at least in this place, getting back some semblance of the way things were before. And that hasn’t been spoken as much for me, (inaudible) is felt by some people, especially people who’ve been a part of that church for a long time. And I totally understand this basic human need, partly a safety issue. And of course, there’s nothing the same. (laughter) Nothing can be, but that is felt, and so I think I’ve had times in the months and years since the storm where I’ve had people who didn’t really want to talk about it; didn’t want to. If there was a way not to, they would rather not do it at that time or day or that board meeting, whenever. You could hardly escape doing so, and again, I totally understand that. I have had the last two years during the season of Lent and in springtime a Wednesday night group at the church just for whoever wants to be a part of it. And it includes sharing time and so forth, and sometimes it’s very interesting. Sometimes it was very oriented, has been very oriented toward what we’ve been through and what we’re going through as far as Katrina, and other times, it seems like a deliberate swing away from that. And I think that just tells you; I mean, sometimes we need to deal with it and want to, and sometimes we want something else. Yeah.

**Townson:** So I’m sorry. Did you experience Hurricane Camille?

**Brooks:** No. I was ten years old in 1969, and my grandparents who lived in Gulfport, Mississippi, which is down the road from here, stayed in their home, their residence. They were well into their seventies at the time, and they felt like they were going through Armageddon. They never talked about it too much. In fact, my grandfather died; he died a couple of months later, and that was a point of awareness for me, talking to my mother about him, her father, after this storm, and seeing how many people in the months after have passed away, have died. Last Christmas a year ago was especially poignant for me as pastor because I had three different people who I had not seen, senior citizens, but who had relocated—I take it back. I’d seen one of them since the storm, but in relocating and came back to be buried. The bodies came back, and it just happened to happen during the holidays at Christmas. Here we are,
and it was a very strong reminder. And that could have happened without the storm, but there’s a strong—I really feel like the storm contributes to that. How—it cannot not do that. And then I realized I’d never thought about it. My grandfather who had heart disease and had been through that horrendous time, that storm shortly before that, and who knows? Who knows? But I do feel like there’s no way to empirically know, study that, but certainly it contributes to the stress and strain of people in that age group, who are upper in years, who are not in the position to take a whole new track in life as far as rebuilding and all of that. It definitely affects, I’m sure. But that again, was a benchmark storm at that time, Hurricane Camille, 1969, and it was one where it was not uncommon for—it was more uncommon than not for a week to go by where someone who I was visiting in the community didn’t mention Hurricane Camille in some offhand way, because it was kind of that storm of legend, and again of the worst you could imagine. And boy, little did we know. And so it was the thing that people would reference, prior to this time. How things change in one day. (laughter)

**Townson:** I think that’s it for what I have? Do you have any more?

**Kaufman:** Well, I think that I have something. You said you had a friend come down to specifically tour with the Rainbow People group?

**Brooks:** Yes, and I did not know her when she was working there. Since that time she has established herself as a photographer and has her own business here in town.

**Kaufman:** Would she be willing to be interviewed possibly?

**Brooks:** I think she would. If she’s available, she certainly would.

**Kaufman:** Can we just get her name, then? And maybe we can—


**Townson:** Do you have anything you’d like to share with us?

**Brooks:** My fear is I’ll walk out, and I’ll think of something I really wish I’d said or told you. I think just to say it’s a totally different, changed life, and it’s an everyday thing. And it’s an amazing thing; it’s an amazing time, as well, but it really made me mindful of how heightened human tensions become, interpersonal relationships and family relationships. I’ve seen a lot of strife as pastor; I’ve seen a lot of turmoil among families and people who, as a result of this, and the far-reaching implications just still make themselves known in new ways. And that’s something that I guess continues to—will continue to happen. It’s almost as if—someone said this the other day: this stage of recovery now, things are going well. I was listening to the superintendent of the local schools talk yesterday. Our local—she would be another good person to interview, Kim Stasney is her name, if she’s available. K-I-M, S-T-A-
S-N-E-Y. The local school board is being sued by Lloyd’s of London; it’s an outrageous thing. I mentioned that suit, possible suit we’re going through at the church. It’s crazy. And I can’t give you all the details about that, but she was talking about how her life and job just changed dramatically right after the storm, as all of ours did, and it’s almost as if you get to this point where you hit the brick wall, and you don’t know which way is up.

Townson: Right. How do you feel with your church being sued? How do you feel? Like, what is your position with that?

Brooks: It’s just praying and hoping everything’s going to come out OK, in a financial settlement. We won’t have to do—the concern is because they are suing us, and they’re located in Massachusetts, hopefully, if it goes to a jury, that people may not have a point of relationship, as you’re able to see things now. But they’ll think, “That storm happened in 2005.” You know? And so that the full understanding—that’s the fear. That’s a fear that’s prominent for the longest time anyway; I felt being forgotten or people not realizing. But with groups like you here, that helps. You know, you know people. We know that you know. So anyway, it’s just that unknown how things are going to pan out, you live with.

Townson: It’s a fear, the unknown.

Brooks: Right, right. But that stage, the grind now that we’re in, with every new obstacle, any of them can be the straw that breaks the camel’s back. You know, not one thing, but when they gang up on you, then there’s the wall. I think that’s part of what a lot of the citizenry is (laughter) going through right now.

Townson: Could you just—what is Kim’s position? Sorry.

Brooks: She is superintendent of the Bay/Waveland schools.

Townson: Just so we have it.

Brooks: The Bay/Waveland School System.

Townson: Perfect. And if you feel that you haven’t discussed anything with us, feel free to contact them, and they can set up another interview, no problem.

Brooks: OK. Right.

Townson: That’s about it for me. Did you have anything, or you want to ask us any questions?

Kaufman: Well, we thank you for coming down and sharing your stories and your experiences with us. We greatly appreciate it, very much.

Brooks: Glad to do it.

Kaufman: Get the word of mouth around (inaudible).

Brooks: Yeah, thanks.

Townson: Thank you very much.

(end of part one; beginning of part two, May 12, 2008)

Klapwyk: This is an interview for The University of Southern Mississippi Hurricane Katrina Oral History Project. The interview is with Rick Brooks, and this is part two of the interview, and it is taking place on May 12, 2008, at about 9:05 a.m. in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi. The interviewer is Bethany Klapwyk. First I’d like to thank you Rick for coming back to talk to me.

Brooks: Sure thing.

Klapwyk: So I’m just going to ask you to maybe talk a little bit about what you want to talk about. (laughter)

Brooks: Bethany, I was remembering about an incident that happened just some days, the week after the actual cataclysm itself, and it’s humorous and kind of it’s on the scale of legend now, and I just forgot to include it last time. But I’m pastor of Main Street United Methodist Church, which is on the end of the first block of Main Street from the shoreline in Bay St. Louis. And fortunately the church survived. It did experience extensive damage from wind, but we’ve been able to use the facility since right after the storm, the actual sanctuary, the old sanctuary part, which is over a hundred years old, and then we did have some other floodwater in another part of the plant, but we were able to take care of that pretty soon. *But* the huge steeple, that was part of the church, blew down, and in fact it still is down and has not been replaced or repaired. It’s on schedule to be replaced, hopefully. This is May, 2008, hopefully this year, before the year’s end. But it had blown down, and it also caused some structural damage, wind damage because of the pull on the steeple and the huge cone part of it had blown down on Second Street, which is really the side of the church. The church is on the corner of Main and Second. And it was obstructing the road of Second Street, and so you had various people working from who knows where, some National Guard and some other people. I don’t know if FEMA was there, but I doubt it. But anyway, they were trying to clear the road and some unidentified man with a bulldozer was working on that steeple, what was left of the cone of the steeple. Again, there was a whole midsection that’s still missing, but this is a huge, huge—it’s like twelve-, no, it’s like twenty-feet-long steeple. Anyway. And for a long time it sat in the front of the church. I’m getting ahead of myself. And [it] was a big photo op [for] people who
come by because they would have their picture made in front of the church by that steeple. It’s like a big witch’s hat, kind of, that had been erected over a hundred years ago. You saw all the huge timbers inside. Anyway, this man, this gentlemen was not being too careful with this antique part of the church, and it looked like he was just trying to push it away into the refuse pile, and my neighbor across the street, who I suppose I’ll not mention his name. He may not appreciate that, but he was a vendor and ran a clothing shop across the street and has been around Bay St. Louis a long time. [He] was not taking too kindly to the way he was doing that. He went and tried to reason with him to ask him, “Please just be gentle with that and put it aside.” And the man kind of just brushed him off. He tried again, and he was upset. Tensions were running high during this time, those days after the storm in all kinds of ways. And he goes back, my friend across the street, and he gets his pistol. And the upshot of it is the man does place it in the yard, the front yard of the church. (laughter) And there it remained for months as the photo op for people.

**Klapwyk:** So that’s what it takes, eh? (laughter)

**Brooks:** Sometimes it must. Sometimes it must. But I thought that was illustrative of how, in one way, the rawness of everything going on there, of not knowing how to cope with things, and everything being such a mess, and also things being on edge, and trying to take stock of what’s important, and what to do about it now. (phone rings) Critical questions.

**Klapwyk:** (Inaudible)

**Brooks:** Yeah.

**Klapwyk:** I don’t believe that. Go ahead. I turned it back on. (brief interruption)

**Brooks:** But that was—

**Klapwyk:** It’s funny because it’s church, and even a church can’t (inaudible) everything.

**Brooks:** Right, right. And that was, it was something, even though, as it turns out, we’re not going to be able to put that part of the steeple back up because it’s so damaged. *But* there’s parts of it that are very valuable. Right now it’s tucked away. I mean, even the wood inside can be used to do things. We’ve made crosses for people, a couple of members of our church have, and things like that. It’s tucked away within that second block now, off the road. You can find it close to the Buttercup Bakery, and I don’t know what we’ll do with all of it, but somebody suggested a monument. But you’ve got to have space, and all that. Right now we just want the steeple reconstructed. But I think trying to negotiate your way in what to do next and how to do it was, we were just thrown for such a loss, such a loop during those times—I know I’m speaking for myself, anyway—where to begin, and what’s most important. And the whole issue, even for homeowners, for people who had homes who were flooded...
and trying to go through the first steps there of sorting out what to put by the side of the road, what can possibly be salvaged when there’s so much to do, it’s just, it really caused a lot of stress in itself. Never mind all the grief that was going on, and so it was for everybody. For instance, I think I might’ve mentioned it before, my wife and I have different philosophies about things. I was ready to throw everything away in our flooded house down Second Street. We had six and a half feet of water, and like just get rid of it. And she wanted to go through everything.

**Klapwyk:** You said a part of you always wished that it kind of just blew away.

**Brooks:** That’s right; that’s right, sure do. And we probably needed a happy medium there somewhere, and with the help of family and friends who helped us, I think we began to find it after a while. But I wanted to share that story because it was (laughter)—I just think it was characteristic of what was going on in a lot of ways and people, you know, you just do the best you can in something like this that you never dream of going through.

**Klapwyk:** It’s a good statement about what the community was going through.

**Brooks:** Right, right, right. So I have, in retrospect, as time goes on, I have just a lot of passion for the way people just tried to get through the best way they can in whatever way, and whether it’s going or staying after the storm, doing what you need to do as long as it’s not done out of hatred or some ill will in some way, but it’s an interesting thing.

**Klapwyk:** Even since February when we interviewed you last, have many things been rebuilt, I mean, and changed just even in your church community?

**Brooks:** Main Street, that first block where the church is, has been redone. It seems like it took forever, but I guess it’s been, since that time, redone, being the pipes under the street have been replaced, and then the street’s been repaved, and that’s nice. And then the street over, now, parallel to that, Court Street is—

**Klapwyk:** Undergoing the same thing.

**Brooks:** —undergoing the same thing. And then also, (inaudible) in other places, especially down the street and close to where we live, they’ve been doing the same thing. It’s a real adventure sometimes to try to get to work just a half mile away.

**Klapwyk:** Everyone needs a dirt bike or something. (laughter)

**Brooks:** They do. They do, yeah.

**Klapwyk:** Yeah.
Brooks: That’d be a good excuse for that. I need one of those. Good excuse to make a purchase; sounds good to me. (laughter)

Klapwyk: Make a ridiculous purchase. (laughter)

Brooks: That’s right, that’s right. We’ve had some lovely weather, which has helped with all this going on. I mean for here in April and May this has been quite mild, which has helped a lot, unseasonably mild. And with everything going on, it helps a lot. So anyway, that’s mainly what I wanted to tell you, Bethany, to add on to that.

Klapwyk: All right.

Brooks: Yeah.

Klapwyk: Anything else? Any little anecdotes you thought of in the last couple of months?

Brooks: I don’t think so. I’ll give you a ring if something comes up, but I think that’s it.

Klapwyk: That sounds good. Thanks for coming back.

Brooks: Yeah.

(end of interview)