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Price: Can you give me your name, please?

Westfall: Oh, sure. My name is Rich Westfall.

Price: Where were you born?

Westfall: I was born in Bryan, Texas.

Price: And for the record, what’s your father’s name?

Westfall: Elmer.

Price: And your mother’s name?

Westfall: Alma Sloan.

Price: Where did you grow up?

Westfall: Well, born in College Station, Texas, and grew up in the Dallas-Fort Worth area [in] Arlington, Texas, actually.

Price: What city do you live in at this time?


Price: How long have you lived there?

Westfall: Fourteen and a half years.

Price: Wow. Because family is such an important part of surviving a crisis, can you describe your family, spouse, children, and dependents?

Westfall: Yeah. They’re very good looking! No. I’m just kidding, (laughter) In terms of age?
Price: Just tell me how many children do you have, maybe your spouse’s name.

Westfall: Mary Ann, my wife Mary Ann and I have been married, it will be twenty-nine years in October. And I have a son that’s twenty-six and a daughter that’s fifteen.

Price: OK. How long have you worked in the tourism industry?

Westfall: Twenty years in theme park and water park industry and now sixteen and a half years in the casino industry.

Price: And what’s your current employment position?

Westfall: I’m the director of community development.

Price: And what other positions have you held while working in the tourism industry?

Westfall: Well, primarily marketing positions with theme parks and water parks and also management operating positions in those areas. And here in the casino industry, I’ve held the position of marketing director and now community development.

Price: OK. And who is your current employer?

Westfall: The Isle of Capri Casino Resort in Biloxi.

Price: At this point I’m just going to ask you to start talking about — I’m really looking at the beginning of when you were aware of [Hurricane] Katrina coming into the area, and just a scenario or timeline of what happened and what decisions were made, how they were made, those types of things.

Westfall: Sure. Obviously, I think it had been a relatively quiet summer. We noticed that a low pressure had formed just east of Florida, south and east of Florida. And of course, I kind of watch that stuff pretty closely. I’m addicted to The Weather Channel and all that. But we’re constantly on vigil to watch for any kind of developments that either come off the African Coast, or develop in the Caribbean, or anywhere that any kind of wave or low pressure that might have potential to develop. We noticed that this storm had developed really east of Florida. And we watched it as it turned into, you know, became a hurricane and raked across South Florida and the Keys, in that area. As it came into the Gulf [of Mexico], all eyes were on it at that point in time. And it was kind of interesting because as it went into the Gulf, we kept watching it for the next day or two. We were all on alert. I was with the station manager from WLOX TV, which is our local ABC affiliate. He and his wife and my wife and me were on our way over to New Orleans the Friday before the storm hit. And we were actually going over to watch the taping of Wheel of Fortune because we had done the tryouts here at the Isle, for people to win slots during this taping. And so as a result of
that big sponsorship, we went over there with them and got over there, went through
the first taping Friday afternoon, and finished up about 3:30. And all of our cell
phones started ringing. It was the station manager, me, and the chief meteorologist
from the ABC affiliate were all over there, and according to our phone calls, Katrina
had made the turn to going directly to New Orleans and the Coast. So at that point in
time we moved quickly to get our emergency preparedness plans put into full speed
ahead. WLOX was calling in people from other stations to come and assist as they go
into emergency operation when this happens and all that. We did finish out the taping
of Wheel of Fortune and had a great time, but we knew that that was the last great time
we were going to have. It was that feeling that you had, you were just completely
numb when this news comes in. So Mike Reader, the meteorologist, said, “This looks
like it’s going to be a bad one.” So as we went back that night, we’re all kind of in
shock. And the next day, Saturday, we woke up to a day that really we began putting
our hurricane plans into full motion, doing everything that we do according to our plan
and getting ready to hear from civil defense and Mississippi Gaming, the [Mississippi]
Gaming Commission. So as the day went on, the storm increased in speed and size. I
mean, it was a huge storm. I remember looking at the radar, and it completely covered
the Gulf of Mexico. It was just a giant monster coming at us. So as we went along
during the day, finally the Mississippi Gaming Commission said that we were going to
go ahead and evacuate. They closed the casino at midnight. It was funny. That night,
Saturday night, we had Ann-Margaret in concert, and we went ahead and had her
concert. It was a great concert. You know, there is nobody like Ann-Margaret, in
terms of an entertainer. So we went ahead and had that and closed the casino down at
midnight and then knew that we had to evacuate and be out of the property, everyone
out, by noon on Sunday. So that arduous task of evacuating the hotel started bright
and early Sunday morning. Most of the people seemed to understand and got
organized and left the hotel on their own. But there are those that just, for whatever
reason, don’t want to leave. So you have to go up, and knock on the door, and let
them know that there is a mandatory evacuation, “You have to leave. Go back home,
or go somewhere away from here, north of Highway 90, preferably north of Interstate
10, too.” So we completed that, shut the property down at noon. We finished our
preparations at our house and got the animals and everything and headed out shortly
after noon ourselves, maybe around two in the afternoon, headed up to Starkville. So
that kind of is how everything went as the storm came in and what happened. Kind of
what we do here is very involved because there’s a lot of money, a lot of team
members, and a lot of guests that are here on property. So we go through a
progressive preparation, and we have meetings with our staff, and we set up phone
trees where it starts with our regional vice president; well, it starts with the president
of the company and all of the board of directors.

Price: Who’s located where?

Westfall: At that time, corporate was here in Biloxi. And so we had that whole
phone-tree communication plan. The phone tree interconnected here between
corporate and the property and all of our directors and managers and everybody else
all the way down. And that’s how we communicated. Additionally we set up, we
have an eight-hundred-number for reservations, to make hotel reservations with the call center. And we used those; we set that up as an employee hotline for information. Usually when you evacuate, the storm comes in. You come in, open back up, and certain people come in first, and then others. And then as we get opened, more team members come in. And we used that eight-hundred-number as a hotline to communicate. So we all evacuated, and I was up in Starkville. Of course we were watching it closely every way we could watch, whether it was streaming WLOX on a computer, watching the major networks online, watching it through the National Hurricane Center, NOAA [National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration], Weather Underground. We had three or four computers going, couple of TVs going, really trying to stay in touch. I remember when [Hurricane] Ivan came in; it was a big storm as well, but at the last minute it veered off and went to the east of us and had little or no impact on us. But we had evacuated, so we knew we could get back in. Well, this was a little different because as the storm came in that Monday morning, no news was coming out of the Mississippi Gulf Coast. We were getting news from Mobile, getting news from New Orleans, and at that time the levees hadn’t broken yet, so it was just, “Oh, the wind’s blowing. It’s a big hurricane.”

Price: So tell me when this was. Was this Monday morning?

Westfall: This was Monday morning when Katrina was coming on shore. I believe it started coming on shore about six in the morning or so, and worked its way in throughout the morning. And so obviously all communications cut off, and we couldn’t believe it. Let me back up a minute, though.

Price: That’s fine.

Westfall: Let’s go back to that Sunday morning. That was the day that we had to have everybody evacuated from the hotel and the property and everything. I guess I got up around four in the morning, not feeling too good about this, and I turned on the TV, and Katrina was a Category Five at that point in time, a-hundred-fifty-, hundred-fifty-five-mile-an-hour winds, and it was coming right at us. So I made the decision that we were going to evacuate at that point in time from our house. But I just wanted to throw that in. So I can now fast-forward back to that Monday morning. And I knew it was bad. I knew the storm was bad. I knew the destruction was horrible. I was calling around that afternoon, trying to find out. I finally got in touch with our eight-hundred-number, and I, as marketing guide, worked closely with them to establish all of this. So I was talking to one of the managers, and I said, “What are you hearing?” She goes, “We’re hearing all kinds of weird things.” I go, “What do you mean?” She said that, “All the casino barges down there are destroyed, and some are floating out in the Mississippi Sound,” which is this body of water just south of the shoreline that leads to the Gulf of Mexico. And she said that, “Those are the kinds of reports that we’re getting from down there.” And I said, “Don’t tell anybody yet. Let’s watch it and try to get more verification.” So as time went on, finally there was a helicopter from maybe a Jackson TV station or something, that we were able to kind of lock into that morning or that afternoon or that evening. And we were watching it,
and it showed, it started in Long Beach and flew over the Coast. And it was wiped out. It was gone, the entire Coast. There were little restaurants and things that were on the seawall side or the beach side in Long Beach, in their harbor there, Long Beach Harbor. And they were completely gone, wiped out. The store that was there was wiped out, blocks back, wiped out. I couldn’t believe it. And it was that way all the way down. It showed the Grand [Casino] Gulfport with their two barges. One was in the middle of Highway 90, and the other was on the north side of Highway 90. And they came down through—I had just walked on Second Street in Gulfport for the American Heart Walk that Saturday morning on Second Street in Gulfport. From Jones Park to Second Street, it was wiped out. I couldn’t believe it. And you know, your heart and your feelings, that’s where you live. This doesn’t happen where you live. This happens somewhere else. It was like a bomb had hit, an atomic bomb had hit, but there was no atomic energy to go with it. It was just the devastation that would ensue from that. So it was frightening. It was horrible. It was very emotional. We just couldn’t believe what we were seeing. And we didn’t know if we had a house left. So as the storm comes on shore and heads up through, I guess really kind of up the center into the east side of Mississippi, obviously it hit hard in Hattiesburg, as you well know, and went on up. We had that evening, we experienced hundred-mile-an-hour winds in Starkville from this storm, and massive loss of power and trees down and tornados and all of that, as it blew through Starkville. So I thought that was kind of interesting.

Price: Really, and they say it went all the way to Memphis—

Westfall: Yeah, probably so.

Price: —just about, through Northern Mississippi, still at way more than a Category One when it got to those points.

Westfall: So the corporate office evacuated to Vicksburg. And we quickly realized that Vicksburg got hit almost as hard as Hattiesburg. So then they evacuated to Bossier City, [Louisiana], to our property in Bossier City, and set up a corporate command post over there. So the storm kind of followed them and pushed them around a little bit, too. So that kind of describes a little bit of what happened, you know, from the formation of the storm as it came across into the Gulf, and how it exploded into a Category Five, coming right at us. It was one of the most frightening things you ever saw in your life. And as it came through, I guarantee you, if that storm had come through at night, the loss of life would have been exponential, because there are so many stories of people swimming for their lives, and hanging onto trees, and tying themselves to the rafters of their homes, escaping up through the ceiling from their second-floor attic, homes being washed away, and people grabbing onto anything that floats. One of my friends, a guy name Gary Rachal(?), who is a reporter for Mississippi Public Broadcasting located here on the Coast, lives down on Seal Avenue, which is just past Beau Rivage [Hotel and Casino], three houses up from Highway 90 and the beach. And there was an apartment building right there that was completely crushed by the storm surge. And a lot of people did stay, and they were
being washed up in all the debris, up to his house. They formed a human chain in the
water standing on debris and stuff, saving people. I think he saved about eight people.

**Price:** My goodness. So obviously he didn’t evacuate.

**Westfall:** No, no. A lot of these people made it through [Hurricane] Camille in 1969,
and that was the threshold.

**Price:** Presumed to be the ultimate.

**Westfall:** Ultimate. And I think that’s what caused a lot of death and near-death
situations, “I made it through Camille; nothing could be that bad.” So there was a
little complacency in that.

**Price:** Right. When you talk about it was a good thing [that] it wasn’t at night, what
about the fact that it was over a weekend? Did that have any impact? Probably less
on y’all because you are a twenty-four-hour operation, essentially.

**Westfall:** Yeah.

**Price:** So it amazes me that, it sounds like from the time the gaming commission
called—and say a little bit about that, because you said they determine when y’all evacuate and to what degree.

**Westfall:** I think they did a really good job in communicating with us, letting us
know what their plans were so we could do what we needed to do here to protect the
lives of the people that are guests here at this property and also our team members’
lives, and allow them time to help us do what we need to do to prepare the property
and do the proper evacuation, plus get out of here and to take care of their families.
The gaming commission works very closely with MEMA [Mississippi Emergency
Management Agency] and also the civil defense locally and the Cities and everything
like that, so it was a coordinated effort in evacuations. So if the City calls for a
mandatory evacuation of everything south of Highway 90, well, that’s basically every
casino. So the City has to work closely with civil defense and MEMA and the gaming
commission, so it’s a coordinated effort to maximize safety. But there’s a big effort
telling people to please evacuate. You know, everyone knew the storm was bad. We
didn’t know how bad it was really going to be until about four o’clock in the morning,
Sunday morning, when the storm got up to that Category Five and was pushing some
pretty large storm surge with it.

**Price:** Well, tell me about the Mississippi Gaming Commission. What is their role in
all this? Why is this not just left to the civil defense in the local area?

**Westfall:** Well, I think it has to do with the assets that we have and the control of
controlled items like slot machines and table games and all of that. We can’t change
the littlest thing on a slot machine without having proper documentation and
notification of Mississippi Gaming Commission. Plus there’s a lot of cash that’s involved and that kind of thing. So it has to be closely monitored. We have set procedures for closing down. We need about twelve to twenty-four hours to shut down, preferably forty-eight hours to do it properly and effectively. And so all of these things that are controlled by the Mississippi Gaming Commission; [they] have to stay in their control. So that’s why we take direction from them, rather than civil defense or MEMA.

Price: And they require each casino to submit their own evacuation plan?

Westfall: Oh, definitely, yeah. That’s a big issue, and it’s an emergency preparedness plan. It doesn’t necessarily deal specifically—well, it deals specifically with hurricanes, but it also encompasses every other kind of emergency that you can imagine, whether it be fire, bomb threat, some kind of marine attack, because we’re on the water basically, and any other kind of emergency that could exist in the world.

Price: Well, now tell me; you said y’all took twelve to twenty-four hours to close the property, and ideally forty-eight. You didn’t have that length of time at that point, did you?

Westfall: Well, we go ahead and start anyway. But I think the official word came out—you know, I can’t remember exactly when that happened. I’d rather not speculate, but it was sometime on Saturday, as I recall. But we already knew the things we had to do. We follow our procedures within the specified timing of where the storm is.

Price: And so who would be the one who initially gave that directive to say, “Start shutting down”?

Westfall: From the gaming commission?

Price: No. Did you start doing that before the gaming commission?

Westfall: Oh, yeah, absolutely. Bill Kilduff(?) is our general manager, vice president and general manager, and he is the one that is responsible for the procedures and all of that. So yeah, we started meeting when the storm had just come out into the Gulf. And we’d been through evacuations and shutting down so many times in the past—well, then it was thirteen years—that we had a pretty good handle on what we needed to do. We’re a very experienced and seasoned management team here. But yeah, we generally would have a directors meeting, an executive committee meeting. And we would meet and talk about, “The storm’s coming. What you need to do, make sure that you’re staffed correctly.” Because usually people will not come to an area if a storm’s coming directly to that location. So you get a lot of hotel-room cancellations, and people don’t come. And so you try to anticipate that and know what the level of business is going to be. But we’ve done it so many times; we’ve closed down so many times, we’re pretty experienced at it. And really, Bill’s the one—and the
mechanics of the closings, the gaming commission, Rich Randall at the gaming commission calls Bill Kilduff personally and tells him that casino operations will cease at this time, and mandatory evacuation of the entire property at this time.

Price: OK. Now, when you’re in-house, when you start this, is your plan organized by department? So that’s pretty well the structure, is each department knows—

Westfall: Um-hm, yes.

Price: —knows what they have to do, and they’ve got their own scenario. And once word goes out, they can independently go into action.

Westfall: Some start earlier, and some can’t start earlier, like finance, for example. You know if gaming is going on on the floor, you can’t start shutting down and doing all of that, so. Facilities probably rolls into action first to get any lower-level items that might blow or might not sustain water well. That’s all lifted up and moved over and taken care of and secured. We thought our shuttles and our limos and everything would be safe because we parked them on the second level of this secondary parking structure that we had on the west side of our property, between us and Casino Magic. But that wasn’t the case. (laughter) They had water in them.

Price: What was left?

Westfall: Let’s see. Most everything was left. I mean, the two towers that we have came through pretty well. There was exterior damage on the south and the east side of what I call our older tower that opened in 1995. And I had a lot of room damage from wind blowing and water blowing in through the sliding glass doors that they have on the balconies. So that was that. The newer section that opened in May of 2005, right before the storm, did extremely well; there was no problem. And the barge, which sits on the east side of our property between the parking garage and the pavilion area, had basically stayed in place; it didn’t go across Highway 90. But it obviously was, it was like a big monster picked it up and shook it and threw it back down. And as the process went, we had a secondary barge attached to the back end of it, a service barge, and it swung around and hit our parking garage on the southwest corner, and it collapsed all six floors, pancaked all six floors in that southwest corner. So that was quite shocking to see. And just everything up to a certain level was just washed out. It was just debris, mud, dirt, just stuff everywhere. Then I looked over to the Marine Education Center, which is the J.L. Scott Aquarium and Marine Education Center over, here part of the IHL [Institutions of Higher Learning Board]. It was a two-story building, elevated, and the storm surge came through and just blew the whole thing through. All it had was the roof and sides. All the brick and everything just washed out, and all the marine life that was in the aquarium was gone.

Price: Were these some of the ones that you heard reports of that they found and moved to other places?
Westfall: Actually, those were the dolphins that were down at Marine Life in Gulfport.

Price: In Gulfport, OK. That’s what I thought, but then when you said that, I didn’t know.

Westfall: All of those dolphins were recovered, actually, out in the Mississippi Sound. It took them a while to find them, but they got them.

Price: Which was a great story.

Westfall: It was a miracle.

Price: Right. It really was, among so much tragedy. From a casino—and this is just my curiosity. There were stories that said that there were slot machines floating around, that there were bags of money floating around. Is any of that true or just wishful thinking?

Westfall: I never saw anything like that. I do know that we got back within a day or two, and the barges that were on the north side were totally exposed. Anybody could get up into those and have access to whatever was on there, slot machines or whatever. I don’t know if there was much money left in those slot machines or not. But I know we were pretty secure back over here, with the barge staying where it belonged. We came back; our people came back the day of the storm. Our operations people came back the day of the storm. And Yates, who was our construction company, came back in, as well, very quickly. So we had it pretty secured, but you could tell when you came back in, that there were people who had been through the property, who shouldn’t have been there, and there were people taking safe harbor in the building at some point in time after the storm, Monday afternoon, Monday evening. After Tuesday we were on-property.

Price: Everybody was pretty much back. Now, was there a prior agreement with Yates that they would show up immediately afterward? That was just a professional relationship?

Westfall: Yeah, that’s Yates for you. Absolutely.

Price: I’ve heard very, very good things about them. So the displacement of employees, how long before y’all were now moving into that phase of, really, recovery? Can you describe that phase?

Westfall: Yeah. That was a very interesting phase to come back. My son and I came back down; I can’t remember if it was Tuesday or Wednesday. But we came back down in his big truck, pulling his big off-road Jeep because we didn’t know what we would find when we came down here, and we had enough fuel, food, water, and ammunition to last us probably a couple months.
Price: And you really mean ammunition?

Westfall: I do.

Price: Right, because it was—

Westfall: We felt like commandos coming down. As you came down, we came the back way from Starkville through State Line and through there. And you would get closer to South Mississippi, the six counties in South Mississippi, and as you got closer to Stone County and in through there, the Leaf River and all those places, and you got closer to Vancleave, the roads became more narrow and more narrow. And as the debris and the power lines and everything like that, the trees falling over would close in on the roads as you’re going along. Coming in into Vancleave, we barely made it through. We had to take the Jeep off the trailer and drive it separately because everything was so crammed in there and falling down. We had, of course, four-wheel drive on both the vehicles, and we had chain saws and everything like that just in case. We didn’t know what we would find. So we made it to our home in Gulf Hills, and the first thing we did was, our neighbor’s roof had blown into our yard. So these big tarps that we purchased in Starkville went on their house to help keep, protect that home. Next thing we did, we drove around in our neighborhood to check on people that we knew that had evacuated, to check on their homes and to try to get in touch with them, let them know what happened. And then we drove across the Fort Bayou Bridge into Ocean Springs to find Bill Kilduff, the general manager. We found him; he had just gotten back from his evacuation. Talked to him a little bit and decided we’d meet the next morning at the property and do the first walk-through, together. So he was going to bring his son Billy, and I brought my son Andy. We met at eight o’clock in the morning; I guess it was Thursday morning, Wednesday or Thursday morning, and we were standing out there just at the entrance talking to Yates, looking around, just totally shocked at everything, just totally amazed. And Andy goes, “Let’s go look at the bridge.” So we walked up the little hill to look at the bridge, and I’m just standing, looking over this massive bridge that was completely destroyed and falling in the water from the storm. I just couldn’t believe it. And this little reporter from Albuquerque, New Mexico, it was the shortest interview I ever had with the media. He comes up with his little recorder and goes, “Hi. I’m so-and-so with the Albuquerque newspaper, Avalanche,” or whatever they call it. And, “Do you work with Isle of Capri?” I said, “Yes.” He goes, “What is your impression of this?” And he goes, “Did you expect this much damage?” And I looked at him with tears coming down my eyes and said, “No,” and just walked off. That was the shortest interview I ever had. That just summed it all up. So we came back and walked into the property, really didn’t know what we would find. But you walk up the ramp; the ramp is seventeen to twenty-four feet, and that was where we had our buffet, and the buffet obviously had a storm surge blow through that and blow through the front entrance, completely destroying Calypso’s Buffet and the little Tradewinds Marketplace we had right there. And all that level was completely destroyed. So we went up the steps to the second level, which is the lobby of the hotel. Farradays, which is our fancy steak
place, had floor-to-ceiling windows all along the south side. You could look out onto the Point Cadet Marina. That was completely blown through, completely gone. And it was like the movies you see with stuff just kind of, the sun was out; little things were just kind of blowing in the wind and all that. And you walked up to where the windows were. It had blown through and destroyed the restaurant with hurricane-force winds and rain. We looked out, and our office was down below Farradays on the south side of the property. I remember Bill, standing there, going, “It’s all gone. It’s all gone.” He kept repeating, and I said, “What?” He goes, “Our office, my office is completely gone.” And I went down there, and sure enough, nothing was left except for the steel structure. Everything inside, everything was gone from our administrative offices and finance offices, just gone. So we go, “OK.” Then we turned around and walked into the property and started going through the convention space and everything. So we kind of reconvened and caught our breath a little bit. And Bill said, “OK. You need to drive over to WLOX and get on TV and let everybody know that, in fact, the casino itself has been destroyed, the property has sustained severe damage, and the first thing to do, to tell our employees is to take care of what they need, to take care of themselves, their families, their homes, and their neighbors first, and to continue to watch WLOX for updates and information as time goes on.” So Andy and I jumped in his big truck, like commandos, and actually tried to drive down Highway 90 the best we could. We did have to traverse to the north, to go around where Highway 90 had completely collapsed. Water was still in and around everything. From the storm surge, power lines were down everywhere. Casino barges were on the north side of Highway 90. The Grand Biloxi went across Highway 90, and it actually landed on the tallest manor, just completely crushing it. One of the most historic homes ever on the Coast just crushed, and the President [Casino’s] barge had come across and had run into the big live oaks in front of the Jeff Davis Home and moved to the west along there, in front of the coliseum, and ended up landing on top of the Holiday Inn on the north side of Highway 90, most amazing sight. We finally made it down to WLOX and carried the message that I needed to carry. And at that point in time I was able to use their satellite phone to reach Tim Hinkley(?) who was president of the company at the time, who had relocated to Bossier, and was able to talk to him for the first time to give him an update of what had happened. I think he already knew because Rob Norton(?) and Mark Martin(?) and other people (inaudible) were able to get back here, I think, the afternoon of the storm or early Tuesday morning and able to get back to Tim on the condition of the Isle. So he had kind of an idea of what was going on, and then we were able to talk. And Tim just reiterated exactly what Bill said, in that we were going to form a plan for payroll and to get back to him the next day, and we would form a payroll plan. And the other thought was that a lot of the guys that were in Bossier were driving in to meet at the corporate office in Biloxi to kind of have a little planning meeting of what we needed to do and coordinate who was on the ground, who needed to go back to Bossier and all of that, just kind of assess where each of the corporate vice presidents were, where our directors were, and who was here on-property, and what was going to happen. So that took place, I think, on Thursday, and then by Friday we had determined that we were going to do a payroll distribution on Monday, one week after the storm. And we would do the payroll distribution at the corporate office in Biloxi. And they were
going to generate the payroll in Bossier City and bring it down, and we would set up and do a payroll distribution on Monday and Tuesday.

**Price:** Where employees would come to corporate to pick up their checks.

**Westfall:** Yeah. So with that plan in place, it was my job to make it back over to WLOX again to make those announcements and to contact our eight-hundred-number, information line, to get that information out. Also I went to every radio group in town, too, Coast Radio group, the Clear Channel group, all of the radio stations. We made it around that very first day, and we went to WLOX. Andy and I made it around to all the other radio stations, as well, to get on the air and talk a lit bit about what happened and all that.

**Price:** Now, at this point you did not have cellular phone service. So your communication was driving around?

**Westfall:** Driving around, and some of the Clear Channel radio had a satellite phone. I could get out on the satellite phone, and so did WLOX. WLOX had a little bit more; they had to use it more than Clear Channel, so I would go back to Clear Channel to use the [phone], which is in Biloxi, very near WLOX, and use their satellite phone. That’s how we communicated to the corporate operation in Bossier, and how they let me know what the payroll plan was, and what we were going to do, when it was, and all of that. And I just went back out to WLOX, I believe on Friday, and mentioned to everybody to come on out to corporate office on Popps Ferry beginning at eight o’clock Monday morning for payroll distribution, and we’ll do it all day Monday and all day Tuesday. And I went to the radio stations and told them, and they kept broadcasting it. All these stations were in emergency mode, and it was all talk, all the time, about where things were, like water and ice and emergency service, medical service, all these things that people needed to know. So with that plan in place, we all gathered at corporate early on Monday morning, and we got the payroll ready to go. And people started showing up, a lot of people, a lot of our team members. And one of our thought processes involved in the payroll distribution was to actually do a physical count of our team members, to try to do an inventory so to speak, to find out who’s still here, who did what. So that helped us begin that process to really find all our team members, do an inventory of them, what was going on with them. So people started showing up Monday morning, and you would not believe the emotions that took place as people started showing up and the stories that were involved. Everybody had their own trauma during this, whether they had lost everything, or they swam for their life, they had to save their children, or their children saved them. There were people there that had lost everything; the only thing that they had left in their name was a car and the clothes that they had on at the time. That’s all they had in their lives, nothing else. I would say probably 40 percent of our employees lost everything. I mean everything. You name it, and it was gone. And it was the most horrifying experience I have ever been through, hugging everybody, and crying with everybody, talking to them. Prior to that, on Thursday, when everybody, all the corporate people came together at the corporate office, one of our security guards showed up, a guy
name Doug Desalve(?). And Doug was a big guy with a big voice and worked all his life down at Ingall’s Shipyard, just a great security guard, a supervisor kind of guy and very distinguished. He was there, talking to Bill, and apparently the house that he went to—his daughter was in town, helping us get our spa open. She actually worked in Bossier. So she was in town. He and his daughter went over to his ex-wife’s parent’s house. That’s where they rode out Camille, and that’s where they ride out all the storms. So it was Doug, and his daughter, his ex-wife, and her parents in this house in Gulf Hills, and a giant storm surge came in, crushed into the house, blew the roof off, came back down, trapped everybody in the water in the house, and he couldn’t save a single person. He saw his daughter die, his ex-wife, her parents. And he said he couldn’t do a damn thing about it. And he was in there telling Bill his story on that Thursday. And Doug and I, we talk all the time very—we’re not friends, but we’re very close.

Price: Close colleagues.

Westfall: Yeah. And it was just heart-wrenching to hear that story and to know what Doug was going through. He didn’t know what to do. He goes, “What do I do? I don’t know what to do. Where do I go?” That story and there were millions of other stories that like that, that took place. And people were just lost, aimless, didn’t know where to go, or what to do, so. It was as much counseling on our part as it was payroll distribution. It was more about finding our employees than payroll distribution. It was trying to get money into people’s hands so that they could exist the next week.

Price: So it wasn’t just their payroll, then. It became, “What else do we need financially to help them live so they can survive.”

Westfall: Exactly, and at that point in time the Isle of Capri team member assistance fund was developed where our employees could come in and apply for a grant from the Isle to try to get their lives back, sort of a way to kind of fill in where maybe the FEMA [Federal Emergency Management Agency] payments didn’t, or the Red Cross money didn’t. And a way to keep everybody, to give someone a chance to get something to eat, or to maybe find some clothes, to get baby food for their kids and for diapers, those sort of very basic things.

Price: Where were they living when they lost their homes?

Westfall: They were just in their cars. Some were living in tents. Some just had to go to a house where their relatives were, that didn’t get destroyed. We had sometimes six to seven families in one house. I had a guy that I worked with for years here lost three homes, two rentals and his home, completely wiped out, gone. So that assistance fund was developed, and it was started with five hundred thousand dollars contributed by the company itself, the board of directors. The chairman of the board determined that they would invest five hundred thousand dollars into this assistance fund. An application was developed, and the system was started. We took the application. Typically it would be from five hundred to twenty five hundred dollars depending on
the need of the team member [and] came out about fifteen hundred dollars on average. And as soon as that was announced and online, money started rolling in. It was the most incredible thing you ever saw, from our vendors, money from other Isle properties. They would do a little fundraiser at the property in Bettendorf, and they would send that money down, or in Natchez or wherever. And as money started rolling in, people, some of our best customers, our casino players, were sending money to individuals, like a host that lost everything, that player would find them somehow and try to send them money. We encouraged them to send it through the fund, the assistance fund. Money was coming in through that, contributions from organizations that we work with. I think we raised well over a million dollars for that fund, and we helped; I want to say we helped close to seven or eight hundred employees. The other thing that happened after the storm was I started getting all these phone calls about the other properties wanting to send supplies, and so it was my job to organize the receiving of supplies, communicating what we need, working with the other properties on getting those supplies and getting them down here to us. We had two or three eighteen-wheelers come in one day from our property in Colorado and our properties up in the Quad Cities, and I had to find out where to put all this stuff because there was nothing available.

**Price:** This would be like food and water and diapers and those kinds of supplies, personal needs, and type of supplies?

**Westfall:** Yeah, bedding, sheets, pillows, dog food, cat food, whatever. I mean tons of clothes and shoes, and it was just incredible. So there at the corporate office, we had about a three thousand—one of the office suites was open, and did have a floor; it was a dirt floor and had no air-conditioning. Well, we had no air-conditioning anyway. So at least it had some lights in it, but a dirt floor. It was like going to the manger. You know what I’m saying.

**Price:** Um-hm, right.

**Westfall:** So I walked in there. I had some of the warehouse guys with me, and I said, “What can we do?” They go, “We got some ideas.” So I go back to the warehouse that was wiped out, found some, I guess, eight-by-twelve sheets of this hard material, not plywood but something like that, and brought it over. And if this was the room here, which is a rectangle, we had one, had a single door that size right there, not a double door or anything you could get a pallet into, because everything was coming in on pallets. Had the single door right here, and so we set up a warehouse-looking place with walkways, set up walkways first, and then came in and set up the pallets, the wooden pallets. We brought those in and set them up around there, and then started offloading eighteen-wheelers and carrying the stuff by hand through that single door, and setting up a distribution center, a supply store, by clothes on this end, food on this end, toys and baby things along the back, in the middle more clothes, and more shoes, and more shampoo here. We tried to set it up like a Sam’s Warehouse in a way. And do you know how many pallets can be on an eighteen-wheeler?
Price: I have no idea.

Westfall: Hundreds. And we’d pull it off. Stark Construction, down the street, took care of the building. Oh, I got to mention that Bill Mitchell, Bill Mitchell in town, he’s got an engineering company here in town, Brown and Mitchell, owns that corporate office building, and we lease from him. And he was kind enough to allow us to use that empty space and asked Stark Construction to come down with their forklift to help us out.

Price: This is very emotional. I mean, I was so far removed from what you were experiencing. But you just feel it; that feeling comes back to you.

Westfall: Oh, it does.

Price: The horror and the generosity that continues to go on today, I think.

Westfall: I think that’s really interesting what you just said, the horror and the generosity. Normally you don’t have those two words together, but it was in this case, no question about it. And the feeling and the outflow of wanting to help, from other people around the country, was just phenomenal. It wasn’t just the Isle’s sending stuff. You would see eighteen-wheelers coming into town with ice and food and everything. We kind of insulated ourselves a little bit through our little corporate organization and didn’t really have to deal too much with trying to find water, ice, or food, or anything like that, like some who didn’t have the corporate structure to fall back to. Someone in Gulfport somewhere, or in Orange Grove, or over in Lattimore(?) or something, that had nothing, no electricity, or no home, these people who didn’t have this corporate structure to fall back onto, I don’t know how they did it. They had to go fend for themselves in lines to get ice and to get whatever water they could get, or whatever food because, I guarantee you, there was no gasoline around here. You could drive to Birmingham and not find gas. You probably experienced that in Hattiesburg. There was no ice, and you had to wait for a couple of weeks for that to really start coming in. So we were kind of insulated in this corporate environment; we didn’t have to deal with it that much. So as we got the distribution center set up, and the fund was established, we started getting a handle on who had come through to get their paychecks and who hadn’t. It would boil down to we were missing five or six employees, and these commando guys came in and said, “Have you found everybody?” “What?” “Have you found everybody?” Commando guys with guns and stuff. And we go, “Well, there are six people missing.” “Who are they?” We gave them, and they went out and found them.

Price: Oh, they did?

Westfall: (laughter) Oh, my God, I couldn’t believe it. It was the wildest thing you ever saw.
Price: So y’all did not lose an employee?

Westfall: We didn’t lose an employee here. Doug Desalve lost family members, and his daughter was an employee in Bossier City.

Price: Oh, OK.

Westfall: So that was an Isle employee lost. And another person in Vicksburg, a tree fell on her house and killed her, so that was another employee that was lost. We lost two in the storm, best I can recall.

Price: One of the stories that you hear so much about is that when people evacuated, then they were kind of lost. So it’s amazing to me that—did they call through the eight-hundred number from wherever they were so that’s how you could identify with them? And clearly they understood the system.

Westfall: They did. I mean, we had enough practice. They know how to do that. We used the eight-hundred number the last several evacuations, and they know how to do that. And this was different. Katrina was different. There wasn’t any goofing around. You did what you were supposed to do, and you knew that this was serious and that if you needed information, you knew how to get it. And you would make that call. There was no goofing around here on this, or negligence, not calling. Everybody was tuned in, and this storm environment was totally different. It was horrible enough to really make you sit up and do what you needed to do.

Price: And wanting to know that you had been accounted for and that you had heard from your colleagues that you knew.

Westfall: Yeah. I mean, you can go online and see the missing names. People would type in names that were missing. And there were people on the radio; if you had a way to call the radio station, you would call into the radio station and say, “I’m so-and-so, and I can’t find my mother. She was last seen here,” or whatever. People would call in and say, “Well, I know her; I saw her. She’s safe. She’s in this shelter up here,” or whatever. And they began putting people back together that way. And that happened for weeks afterwards. Let’s see, OK. A couple of things took place, when we came back that first night that we stayed in our house.

Price: And did all your family come or just your son?

Westfall: Just Andy and me, my son. I wouldn’t allow—

Price: Put them through that.

Westfall: Because I didn’t know what we would find. But our house was fine. It made it through the storm, didn’t have any water. So the first night we hooked up our
Price: Peanut butter never tasted better. (laughter)

Westfall: Oh, it was great. As the sun went down, it was a beautifully brilliant night, no clouds. And you would walk out into the backyard and look up; there were no lights anywhere, total darkness and total silence, except for generators around the neighborhood. And it was the most eerie feeling that you have ever seen. The other image that comes into play is when we were driving down Highway 90, going to WLOX. You looked out at the water, and it was just as serene and calm as it ever has been. And you think to yourself, “Where did all this come from? How can that just be as calm as ever and not twenty-four, forty-eight hours ago, it was crashing onto the land at twenty-seven feet with waves of ten or fifteen feet above it, just total terror and destruction, and then be sitting back as calm as ever?” It was quite a dichotomy to see that. As we drove down Highway 90, we came to a mausoleum area, a gravesite, a graveyard, and a big mausoleum in front, and it was a horrible sight to see, to look up and see the storm surge had ripped open these mausoleums, and the caskets were gone out of there, just floated away wherever. It was the most bizarre—

Price: That would be very bizarre to see.

Westfall: It was unbelievable. Those were just a couple of sidebar images.

Price: Yeah. I remember that silence except for the generators.

Westfall: Oh, you had it in Hattiesburg, as well. So you didn’t have any electricity.

Price: Right. And so it was that same feeling of total darkness and the silence and then just chainsaws during the day. Generators and chainsaws, you just thought the chainsaws would never stop. Do you need to take a break?

Westfall: I’ll call her back. Let me go into something now. As I said, one of my jobs was to manage the distribution center to receive the materials and supplies, communicate what we needed to everyone, figure out a way to get it here, receive it, and to stock it. And as we were going along and these eighteen-wheelers were coming in, we’d rip open the boxes and find out what was in there, and we’d get everything stocked, and we had literally hundreds of employees coming through and getting what they needed and all of that, to try and exist. There were a few little rays of sunshine that would come in those boxes, and you just never knew, and it would be a total surprise. Now, this was a little emotional, and I hope I can get through it. As we were going through these boxes that were from the Quad Cities, which is Moline, Rock Island, Bettendorf, and Davenport in Iowa and Illinois, there on the Mississippi River—that’s where our company started back in the early 1990s. And as we were going through these boxes and getting all the supplies out, we ran into these little things. And what I’m holding up is a plastic bag that has two pot holders in it. You
know the pot holders that you made when you were a kid, and you’d run around and sell them to all the people in your neighborhood and that kind of thing? It’s those pot holders, but there’s a little slip of paper in here that’s nicely done, obviously done on a computer. And it says, “KK’s precious pot holders. My name is Katlin Klein. I am nine years old. I live in East Moline, Illinois. Mee-maw and I made these pot holders. I hope they will be of some help.” It has a little heart there, and it says, “God bless you, KK.”

**Price:** Oh, my.

**Westfall:** And as we went through these boxes and all these supplies, and you’re sweating, and you’re totally focused on getting this stuff out to help your fellow team members and employees, these little things would pop up like that, and you just couldn’t believe it. People put little personal notes in there, and it was just incredible what we went through. Those are the things that helped get us through.

**Price:** I’m sure they were, and a whole new world of realization. When there’s tragedy in other places, I think that is a real awakening, I think, for everybody.

**Westfall:** I’m sure you experienced a lot of that, too.

**Price:** We did. I think it was different; it was very different from what was going on down here. But it was still a horrible experience and a frightening experience to go through.

**Westfall:** It really was, no question about it.

**Price:** Now, I don’t want to abuse our time, but how did y’all get started back? How long was it that you were not open? Did you take care of your employees when you weren’t open? Can you give me a little background on that?

**Westfall:** I’ll give you a little bit of that background. We actually paid our employees from the day the storm hit until we opened. The company—Tim Hinkley was the president at the time—made the decision that we wanted to open as quickly as possible. And to be able to do that, you need your employees. So the conscious decision [was] to pay our employees, provide the team-member assistance, set up the distribution center. A few weeks into it, we were able to open up some hotel rooms to house some employees and primarily to house Mississippi Power, who needed a place to stay. And it was a perfect marriage because we needed power. So they got us power; so they could stay in the hotel rooms. So we had MEMA, FEMA, Homeland Security, Mississippi Power, some employees, and other people staying here in the property. The entire Highway 90 became a war zone with checkpoints at certain intersections being manned by the National Guard. You couldn’t get on Highway 90 without a good reason to be on Highway 90, primarily first responders only and civil defense and emergency. So we had that set up. Governor Barbour called a governor’s commission on rebuilding, renewal, and I forgot the three words. But we did that big
meeting here on the Coast to plan our rebuilding and plan our renewal and restructuring. And that whole meeting took place here at the Isle, and that started October ninth.

**Price:** Oh, my goodness. So y’all were partially reopened.

**Westfall:** Just the hotel.

**Price:** Just the hotel. The rooms, had the furniture and the bedding and all that been destroyed?

**Westfall:** No, no. They were useable.

**Price:** No. Power was your main—and water, I don’t know how long your water was out.

**Westfall:** We were able to get water back pretty quickly. And we were able to open these rooms and have people stay there, at least first responders. Oh, yeah, it was renewal, recovery and rebuilding. It was that governor’s commission that he put together. And they brought in all of those city planners, and New Urbanists and engineers and all of this, that group that came in and met shortly after with the governor. It was about a ten-day-long conference, and we actually had it here. Who was the guy that headed that up, that started FedEx [Federal Express]?

**Price:** Oh, I don’t know.

**Westfall:** I’m trying to think of his name. I’d have to go online and look at it. But he was incredible. So we hosted that, and it was interesting because at any one time down at the place where we were serving lunch, you would be having lunch with the governor, or with the mayor, or with these big city planners, our team members, or the Yates Construction guys. I mean, our entire hotel was a construction zone. It was down to the bare bones; it was concrete. It was bare bones. And we were having this meeting here [and] probably should have all had hard hats on. And it was completely surrounded by destruction, total destruction. And we’re having this meeting on renewal, recovery, and rebuilding, and that’s an interesting dichotomy. And I don’t think it’s a script that Hollywood could even write. So that took place at the same time we were lobbying in Jackson for onshore gaming. We had gotten together quickly as a group of concerned citizens here on the Coast, our community leaders, and brought in our local legislators from the House and from the Senate, to talk to them a little bit about it. We put on a full court press to get the word out and to the legislators throughout the state. Governor Barbour called a special session; we lobbied more and more, harder and harder, and were able to get that onshore gaming passed, I believe, in early October, so that when this conference had finished, we immediately went in and started rebuilding the convention and meeting space. We had about thirty-five thousand square feet. This story follows up your question, “How long did it take you to get open, and what did you do?” We worked like crazy twenty-
four hours a day to remodel that whole area. We were getting ready to open a new casino barge and had done the exterior work and were getting ready to do the interior work on that barge. And that means all the furniture and fixtures and equipment, slot bases and slot machines and everything, those were all coming in to outfit that new barge. And we were able to take that and put it into the new casino area onshore. We got that done; we got everything set up and ready to go to open up, with I think around three hundred fifty to four hundred hotel rooms. And [we] opened up December 26, 2005. Do you remember that emotion and that anguish and desperation that I talked about when we had our employees come over and get their paychecks the first day, all of that that happened there? All of those employees who went through that and helped us get opened were all standing in line when we cut the ribbon on December 26. And we had hundreds of guests come up the steps and the escalator, and [they] would see our employees for the first time, and we’d see them for the first time. There were tears and hugs of excitement and exuberance, just really excited about getting open, and all that. So it was really an interesting contrast from that Monday after the storm, with total desperation to total excitement and exhilaration on December 26 when we finally opened. So it was the right decision to go ahead and work as hard as we could to get opened as fast as we could. We paid our employees from the day the storm hit to when we opened.

Price: That is just amazing. Now, did you continue over this time to house the first responders, or were you blending that, now, with customers and employees and first responders?

Westfall: It became a blend, and as more facilities began to open for these first responders, and the pressure was less and less, then that sort of just was a natural turnover, so to speak. There’s one last thing I would like to talk about, and that is the faith-based organizations and volunteers that came into our area from all over the United States and the world. I can guarantee you this area would not have recovered as quickly as it did, if you want to say that, without these groups coming in. They actually were more prepared than the federal government. There’s First Baptist Church over there; you can see off of I-10 near our corporate office. The day that I drove by there, they were already set up, distributing supplies, and they had a command center set up already within two or three days. That’s the way it was all over in South Mississippi, with the faith-based organizations, with those guys coming in and setting up and taking over and helping out. There’s one more little vignette that I’d like to talk about on volunteers. The same Doug Desalve guy, as much as he lost, it was just unbelievable; you can’t even imagine. He’s back at his own home in Ocean Springs, trying to fix his roof on his house that next like January, February, March, and some kids came into town on alternative spring break from Indiana, and it was a big push to have kids that came in to help rebuild homes and stuff, instead of going to Cancun or whatever. I guess he had about five or six, maybe ten kids, high school kids that were assigned to his house to help him put his roof back on. So they worked for that entire week, got a lot done. They became very close and good friends. So he knew they were graduating. These were high school students from a very small school in Indiana, and he knew they were graduating, so he took it on himself to drive to
Indiana to attend the graduation. Isn’t that something? Isn’t that great? The kids didn’t know it, but the principal knew it. So the commencement exercises, you know, it’s a small school. Everyone gets to graduation, and he said, “Well, that just about does it except for one thing. I want to introduce you to Mr. Doug Desalve from the Mississippi Gulf Coast.” Boom! He walks in; the kids just scream and group hug, right there. Isn’t that just amazing?

**Price:** It is.

**Westfall:** It’s just one of those brilliant stories. So Doug walks up to the podium and looks out at the audience, and he goes, “You know, I came up here on my own to thank you for coming to help.” I wasn’t even there, and it still gets me. “But it’s not like I lost four family members. I gained ten new sons and daughters.” What a story, huh?

**Price:** What a story, right.

**Westfall:** And that’s the kind of guy Doug is. And I think that just is a perfect little vignette or example of how these volunteers that came in and how the faith-based organizations came in and just kind of picked us up, you know, and shepherded us through all this. We wouldn’t be where we are now without that. It’s a huge effort; there were hundreds of thousands of people that came in, and if this little story does anything and makes any kind of history, I think the history here has to be the giving and caring of everybody that came in and helped us. It was just phenomenal. So it’s something that I’ll never forget.

**Price:** So in the end, to some degree, it sounds like things are better, that even the people who lost the most grew the most and received a lot from the charity of the companies [and] these faith-based groups?

**Westfall:** Yeah, I think you’re right. I think it sure showed the resolve of the people that live in this area, the citizens of the Mississippi Gulf Coast. They impressed me early on when we came to town. We provided, back in the early [19]90s, we provided an economic spark, and to the credit of the individuals that live here, they took it and made good with it, new schools, new roads, new public-safety things. They took that opportunity and have done well with it. They were not, as Governor Barbour says, “We were not into victimhood.” We saw what we needed to do and got out and did it with the help of these volunteers that came in, tremendous resolve. As far as being better, we have a clean slate. It’s up to us to do the right thing and to rebuild this area the right way and make it a very special place. So it’s really up to us in how we handle it.

**Price:** When do you ultimately think people will say it’s done?

**Westfall:** Well, I thought it would be two years. Really, I think two years. In Florida, in Homestead, Florida, it was two years, maybe five years later; they got back
to some normal life. But it’s going to take ten to fifteen years, and I would suggest that in the ten- to fifteen-year time period, there’s going to be probably twenty to thirty million dollars in economic development here on the Coast. We could see up to twenty casino resorts just in Biloxi alone. With that kind of development, you know, I’m very excited about it. And I guarantee I wouldn’t want to be anywhere else in the world than right now, right here on the Mississippi Gulf Coast to watch this happen.

**Price:** Well, thank you so much. This has been very hard for me. I think it’s been hard for you, too. It is a very emotional experience, and I’ve been trying to keep my face straight.

**Westfall:** It is, yeah. Oh, me, too.

**Price:** Anyway, I do thank you so much. I appreciate your time, and you shared wonderful things.

**Westfall:** Thanks. I didn’t even read your list. (laughter)

**Price:** Well, if you read through it sometime, and you find things that—

(end of interview)