Mississippi Oral History Program

Hurricane Katrina Oral History Project

An Oral History

with

Rita W. Baldwin

Interviewer: Rachel Swaykos

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Biography

Ms. Rita Baldwin was born February 18, 1951, in Alabama. When Hurricane Katrina devastated the Mississippi Gulf Coast in August of 2005, Baldwin was living in Biloxi, managing Loaves and Fishes, a service agency that helps homeless persons. At the time of this interview, she also worked for Coastal Family Health Center.

Baldwin earned a BA in Sociology in 1978, and an MA in Adult Education in 1981, both at The University of Southern Mississippi. She is a Methodist by faith. She was married to John Baldwin in 2000. She is the mother of two sons.
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AN ORAL HISTORY

with

RITA W. BALDWIN

This is an interview for the Mississippi Oral History Program of The University of Southern Mississippi. The interview is with Rita W. Baldwin and is taking place on June 6, 2007. The interviewer is Rachel Swaykos.

Baldwin: Rita Baldwin and I’m the coordinator for Loaves and Fishes, the community kitchen in Biloxi, Mississippi, and today is June 6, 2007.

Swaykos: OK. If you could, just tell me a little bit about yourself. How long have you been working here?

Baldwin: In October, I will celebrate my seven-year anniversary. And I had been homeless myself the year prior to working here, and had actually eaten in this kitchen, and had met with some hostility and not such kindness when I came in here to eat, as a matter of fact.

Swaykos: I see.

Baldwin: And when the last part of my homelessness, my partner and I lived in the woods and were there for six months. And I was so depressed I didn’t want to come out of the woods, and my partner talked me into—he had a job at Shoney’s—and so he talked me into getting the waitress job; that way we’d have money coming in every day. So I went down to the Waffle House, and I got a job as a waitress.

Swaykos: Which Waffle House was that?

Baldwin: That was the Waffle House across from Treasure Bay [Casino]. Of course, this was pre-Katrina, and it was—there was a Treasure Bay. (laughter)

Swaykos: Right, right, right.

Baldwin: Yes. I worked the night shift, and actually I didn’t tell the manager on my first interview that I was homeless. Anyway, I was fairly clean except we were doing coffee and food over a fire, and it’s very difficult to get that soot off of your fingers, and she did tell me to clean my fingernails real good before I came for the training, which I did. But I actually had—I did tell her before I started working, and she was OK with it. And they did send somebody to the woods one time to get me to go to work at another place. So they were fairly supportive of the fact that I was living out there in the woods. It was hard. I was in my late forties, and I was going through
menopause. So that’s when I tell everybody when they start saying, “Well, I can’t work because I live in the woods.” I said, “Look, stop, no whining. If this old woman did it going through menopause, worked as a waitress, you know, and made it through it, then I feel like everybody else can, too. (laughter) So that’s just kind of how I feel. But after I’d been working there for a while, we managed to get into a trailer, so we came off the street about four or five months before I started working here.

Swaykos: OK. And then what brought you here?

Baldwin: Well, I saw an ad in the paper for a coordinator, and my partner and I always knew that we’d be working with homeless people. I mean I’ve been in social services all my adult life as far as my professional things, and even some of my paraprofessional jobs had been in social-service type work, so that’s all I’ve really ever done. So when I went for the interview, I interviewed with three of the board members, and I told them then that if I was the person who got the job, that it would have to be more emphasis on working with the homeless and working with the people and actually doing more than just slapping them a plate of food.

Swaykos: Right, certainly.

Baldwin: And I said, “If y’all are not supportive of that, then I’m not the right person.” And they hired me.

Swaykos: Good.

Baldwin: And there’s been some differences of opinion in terms of how much focus; I think they felt like I was doing too much, you know, but I’m real proud of what we’ve done here. And since the hurricane, I don’t call this a soup kitchen; I call it a community kitchen. And I feel very strongly about promoting that concept rather than that everybody that eats here is homeless. And that is not correct, anyway. We have a lot of people that work, and we have some people that live in homes. And since the hurricane, we have quite a few people who live in FEMA [Federal Emergency Management Agency] trailers that come in here and eat. Now, as far as before the storm, we were in this building, so we one of the fortunate ones that didn’t lose their whole facility. We did have a tremendous amount of damage. We had eight feet [and] two inches of water.

Swaykos: Wow.

Baldwin: There were two people in here, and they almost waited too late to get out. They couldn’t get out the door. They had to break windows and go out the front. So consequently, lesson learned from Katrina, well, number one, nobody could get out those windows because they have bars on them now. I mean, everything is different. I’ve just hired a security guard. So I mean, it’s like before the storm, informal methods worked. People didn’t steal from Loaves and Fishes; I mean like break in
and steal, destroy our property, all that kind of thing. But since the storm, it’s a whole
different ballgame.

_Swaykos_: Yeah. Before we get into that kind of stuff, if we could finish—can you
tell me about where you went to school and the degrees that you do have, [and] if
you’ve been in social services?

_Baldwin_: Sure. I have an undergraduate degree in sociology from USM [The
University of Southern Mississippi] with an emphasis in social work.

_Swaykos_: And when did you get that?

_Baldwin_: I believe it was [19]78. And my masters is in adult education, also from
USM, and that was a degree that I chose because I could basically take the classes and
focus on basically whatever I wanted to, but my emphasis was developing and
designing programs for adults in transition. This is the big adult going to college. At
that time, there were more adults going to college than there were the traditional
college student. So I was right there in on that adult education.

_Swaykos_: And what year was that?

_Baldwin_: That was probably [19]81, [19]80 or [19]81.

_Swaykos_: OK, sure. And you said you have a partner right now. Are you still with
him?

_Baldwin_: No. We got married after the—he was a long-term homeless person; he’s a
character within himself. I’d have to devote at least a couple of chapters of my book
to him. (laughter) He was a notorious person. And when my original staff that I had
here, the last person quit because she didn’t want to be around homeless people,
people that smelled of alcohol. Alcohol, body odor, and cigarettes, she couldn’t be
around them, she said. And I said, “Well, maybe you got the wrong job.”

_Swaykos_: Right.

_Baldwin_: So she took her apron off, and my husband put her apron on. So he became
my cook. And so for a long time, it was just me and him running it by ourselves, all
of it.

_Swaykos_: Right.

_Baldwin_: And, but John was not one of these people that would go inside and learn to
pay the bills and not break the law, and so he ran away with a homeless woman
(laughter) a few years later. So we’ve been divorced about three years now.

_Swaykos_: When were y’all married?
Baldwin: We got married the summer before I came here, whatever year that was. That was 2000, yeah, 2000.

Swaykos: Could you give me his name?

Baldwin: Well, everybody knows that I was married to John Baldwin, so. He’s not to be confused with the homeless John Baldwin that was murdered years ago, but he is John Baldwin, and he is still around.

Swaykos: OK. What kinds of things do you do other than work here? What are you interested in?

Baldwin: Well, I actually have another job. Before the storm, this was really a part-time job, and I don’t make very much money here, so I was beginning to kind of sweat because I made more money as a waitress than I did here. So I worked for Coastal Family Health Center. They have a homeless program, and what I do for them is I do the outreach for their drop-in clinic, and I try to help the homeless patients. And it covers anybody who doesn’t have permanent housing, whether it’s living in substandard housing, living with someone else, living in a FEMA trailer, anything that is temporary. So I do a lot, helping them trying to stay compliant with their medical care, assisting with transportation or whatever.

Swaykos: I see.

Baldwin: So that I do. And as far as anything as personal as having a life (laughter), I, you know, I was thinking about this the other day. I’m suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, and I’ve always had depression, and even though there’s a pack of cigarettes right there, I’m taking some medicine to help me quit smoking.

Baldwin: When I’m at my smoking-est, I smoke four or five packs a day.

Swaykos: Wow, OK.

Baldwin: And now I’m smoking one and a half to two, so that just shows how crazy I am. (laughter) And after the storm it was really, really, really hard for me to find joy in anything. I didn’t even find joy in coming up here. I mean, when you’re depressed and all you’ve got to look at is what I call broke-down hell---I mean, I live here. I work here. Both of my jobs are here. Coastal Family Health Center was there on the corner, and it’s no longer there anymore, so we’re all spread out. I mean, everything has just been so complicated since the hurricane. And each of the social service agencies in Biloxi have had to just, literally, start over. And one of the things that we did, and are still doing, is try to plug in the holes in the services that were eliminated following Hurricane Katrina. And one of the biggest ones was Seashore Mission, and it was totally destroyed, and six people died there.
Swaykos: Wow.

Baldwin: And I usually try to make that part of my—when volunteers come from out of state, I try to let them know about that because a lot of people, I think, don’t realize that people actually died here.

Swaykos: Right.

Baldwin: And when the volunteers are here, most of them are staying on the west side, and it’s like the east side, and the west side is like totally different. And so I try to let them know. One of the people that died there was a good friend of mine who had worked here, and nobody claimed his body, so he laid in a refrigeration unit for ten months until I got so bad, I couldn’t stand it anymore. I wanted the Methodists to take some responsibility, but they wouldn’t. So I got somebody to donate some money, and the coroner released his body to me, and we got him cremated, and we had a nice little service for him. We’d been doing the memorials for homeless people prior to Katrina. We had lost three homeless people the year before Katrina, so we’d already gotten in the swing of doing that. But I’d never brought ashes to my office; that was a new thing. But he sits up there in that urn.

Swaykos: What was his name?

Baldwin: His name was Ralph Madison, and Ralph was a real good guy; he’s the person in the middle in that picture there. See that picture?

Swaykos: Oh, OK, uh-huh, with the hat and glasses, in the middle?

Baldwin: In the middle, yeah, that’s him. And that picture came to me directly from God. I was very—I understand I lost everything at my home. There was a picture of Ralph in my stuff because he was at my wedding, and see, I’d known him since the street (inaudible). We’d been friends for a long time. And I lost everything up here, so I had no pictures of anybody. I mean, I don’t even have pictures of my parents anymore. I don’t have my degree, my certificates of degrees from USM anymore, either.

Swaykos: They have recreated them, if you, like---just to let you know.

Baldwin: Well, I read something about that. I thought it would be nice to have them. But anyway, I forgot where I was going with this. I was talking about Ralph.

Swaykos: How you got that picture.

Baldwin: Oh, yeah, OK. I was very depressed because I didn’t have anything to, like, say, “This is Ralph.” And my neighbor had befriended the women in the picture who had volunteered here the summer before Katrina with a group from Back Bay Mission. She came down to do hurricane relief. She met my neighbor; she went back
to Wisconsin, sent him this picture and said, “Do you know anything about Loaves and Fishes?” Not knowing that he was my neighbor.

Swaykos: Oh, great.

Baldwin: So tell me that’s not a God thing. It has to be; it has to be. So. And then coincidentally the fellow on the end there was my cook during the hurricane, and he was one of the people that was in here during the storm, and he didn’t come back to work for me. And as a lot of other people, he retreated into his FEMA trailer and into his alcohol addiction, and literally drank himself to death, and he died back in February.

Swaykos: And his name?

Baldwin: His name is Rick Johnson, and we had a memorial for him, and one of the articles that was written was primarily about us doing this to help people that had nobody. Now, Rick had someone, but, see, we didn’t even find out; his brother called me and asked me if I would look for him.

Swaykos: I see.

Baldwin: And when I called the coroner’s office, unfortunately they didn’t think about calling me. They call me if it’s somebody that’s homeless, obviously, homeless and unknown. If it’s somebody that’s living in a home, they don’t think that I’m going to know them.

Swaykos: I see.

Baldwin: So she had not—they had not called me. And I had, just kind of had a foreboding that he was deceased. We tried to find him a couple of times. And so by the time I called in April, he had already been cremated as an unclaimed, and so I had the task, the grim task of calling his brother back and informing him. And they were a lovely family. Rick had been—I think that’s when I do talk about what I do here and about homelessness, I want people to understand homelessness doesn’t happen to just the low-lifes of the world.

Swaykos: Right.

Baldwin: It happens to anybody. It could happen to anyone, if it happened to me. I had a master’s degree. I worked all my adult life. It can happen to anyone. And I think that’s one of the reasons that people seem to fear homeless people so much. I mean most of the people that knew me, including some of my family members, wouldn’t have anything to do with me during my homelessness.

Swaykos: Wow.
**Baldwin:** So. And a lot of families are still trying to be supportive, but mostly what happens is, if you have come from a good family, and you have done something in your life, when you start deteriorating and become homeless, as a matter of fact, you’re pretty much ashamed of that, so you burn the bridges. And that’s what Rick had done. He had burned the bridges with his family. And a lot of what I do here is families, friends, people call me [and] ask me if I’ve seen people. You know, “Have you seen so-and-so?” I’m kind of the hubbub. Even if people don’t come in here and eat, they’ll come by and say, “hey” to Ms. Rita, or they’ll come in to get something. I mean, there’s a large population of homeless people that live in west Biloxi that most of them are veterans that never come down here for services; they’re completely dependent on themselves, and there is an agency down there that helps a lot, Our Lady of Fatima. I don’t know what I’d do without them taking care of the west Biloxi people. (brief interruption)

**Swaykos:** I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about how you became homeless.

**Baldwin:** Well, yeah, I can. I don’t like to, but I will.

**Swaykos:** You don’t have to if you’re not comfortable.

**Baldwin:** Well, I think it’s important, so I will. I don’t do it in front of groups anymore, but I will do it one-on-one. I had been sober and clean in Alcoholics Anonymous [AA] for almost eleven years. In celebrating my eleventh year anniversary of not drinking, I chose to get drunk. And I had a lot of mental problems, and I tried to kill myself, and I lost my son, and I lost a lot of stuff. So on the heels of a suicide attempt, I went to live with a woman in AA, and her son kicked me out, and I wound up homeless. So that’s that story. Can you stop it a second? (brief interruption) Let me, let me cap on that.

**Swaykos:** Sure.

**Baldwin:** I’m not ashamed of anything that has to do with my homelessness. I’m not proud of some of the things that I did when I was homeless because when you’re homeless you’re in survival mode, but it brings you a lot closer to God because you realize out there that the only one that you can count on is God. And that’s a—I mean, that’s—like they say there are no atheists in foxholes. Well, there are very few atheists out there homeless, too. I can promise you that.

**Swaykos:** Do you feel like you can count on yourself, as well, or do you just kind of give it all up?

**Baldwin:** When I was homeless—when I was homeless, I trusted myself, and I trusted my partner, but we used to say we didn’t trust anybody else because when everybody’s in survival mode, they’ll steal from you. We tried to pride ourselves in—I mean, there were certain things that I wouldn’t do. I wasn’t going to steal from
somebody, particularly another homeless person. And I just had a conversation with a woman today. Just like I said, everything’s different since before the storm to now, and she and I came to agreement that there’s so much more evilness out there now. I mean, the homeless people, when I was out there, we were like a family, and now it’s like everybody is out for themselves. We have what I call the new homeless, people that have come in here to work, and there’s no place for them to live and then wind up homeless, and they have no allegiance to the people that were here. So it’s just not like it used to be.

_Swaykos:_ Can you tell me about your experience with the storm? What were you doing that day?

_Baldwin:_ Well, I have always tried to do a hurricane preparedness with my homeless population, and what I have done every year, and I’m doing it this year---I didn’t do it last year---but I had started talking to my people about hurricane preparedness, having your own plan, and I have them sign up if they wanted us to assist them. We have gone through a few evacuations that turned out to be nonevents, but nevertheless they were evacuations. And we assisted people in getting to the shelters, provided transportation in the van, Loaves and Fishes van. We provided them some food in the form of a bag lunch or two. We also gave them a bedroll if they needed it and some water.

_Swaykos:_ What day did you do all this?

_Baldwin:_ Well, it didn’t work for Katrina because on Friday when I came in, it wasn’t coming this way. By Friday night they were talking that it was. So Saturday and Sunday when we were looking for everyone, we really didn’t find them. Some of them did make it, in fact—funny story. I saw this guy at the store probably two or three months ago, and he said, “Oh, Ms. Rita, I thought about you on the day of the hurricane.” I said, “Oh, yeah? What did you think?” He said, “How you were always telling us that we better go to a shelter. We better have our own plan.” And I said, “Well, did you go to a shelter?” And he said, “No. I stayed down in this house right down from your house.” And he said, “I just, I finally got mad at them because they were all getting drunk, and I went somewhere else and holed up in the attic.” So they remember it, but they didn’t do it. There was one group of them that were scouting around on Sunday afternoon [and] found a good place to hole up and get drunk. And the police came out and said, “What are y’all doing?” They said, “Oh, we’re looking for the shelter. We don’t know where it is.” And the cop said, “Oh, well, we’ll take you.” So that’s how they wound up at the shelter.

_Swaykos:_ I see.

_Baldwin:_ And so there was a whole lot of confusion. I had already told Seashore Mission where the shelter was going to be; that turned out not to be the shelter. I couldn’t get back with them because cell phones were all messed up and all that kind of stuff. And I’m still thinking this may be another nonevent. I have five dogs, and
I’ve got five inside cats. We rented out beds in the two-story apartment in the back. I rented two houses over on Crawford Street. Crawford Street is on the Point. So I was thinking that we could probably just hole up, and we’d be OK.

**Swaykos:** Who all was with you?

**Baldwin:** Two of the guys that didn’t go to a shelter that lived in the back in one of the rooms; Joey and Guy. And Duane lived back there, too. And the only thing that I did right was I bagged up his medicine and my medicine. He has a brain tumor and has to take medicine for it, one of the few brain tumors that is treatable with medication and not surgery, so it’s very important that he doesn’t run out of medicine, which is also one of the other things that I preach to everybody, “Don’t run out of your medicine. Make sure you have your medicine. Bag it up. Be sure you have it.” Anyway, I did that. We had water. We had those kind of things, but when it got down to zero hour—well, let me back up to Sunday. One of my board members called me and begged me to leave, and I still said no. And Sunday night my neighborhood was very dark. All the old-timers that had said, “I didn’t leave during [Hurricane] Camille, and I’m not leaving now”---

**Swaykos:** Right.

**Baldwin:** They were all gone. They were all gone, so that’s when I started getting nervous. And I called one of my friends over in Pascagoula, and he’s an old-timer over there, and he said, “Oh, we’re due to get a little wind. It’s not going to be anything.” So that, I tried to let that assure me, and I totally exhausted myself by cleaning up my house, which I really don’t do. I have one of those old houses with the ten-foot ceilings. It’s a shotgun house, and the rooms were huge, and I cleaned up my son’s [room]. My seventeen year old son had gone to Texas with somebody else so he was out of harm’s way. And so I went to bed, probably about 10:30. And Monday, ironically enough, was the first day, August the twenty-ninth was the first day of my two-week vacation.

**Swaykos:** Oh, gosh.

**Baldwin:** So I had not turned my alarm off my phone, so I woke up at 6:30, and Duane and them were—the water was not up yet, but the wind was, of course, blowing. The electricity was off. The guys came into the kitchen. I was on my little transistor radio, trying to find out where everything was going, what was going on, and I wasn’t really getting any kind of information. And out of my free ear I heard one of the guys in the back say, “There’s white caps in the backyard.” So I said, “I better go investigate.” So I looked out the back, and the water was all the way up to the door, on the stoop to the door, was seeping in. The guys were putting blankets in the back. I went to the front. The water was all the way up on the porch, and I came back into my bedroom, and when I turned, I’d looked, I saw the water coming up through the floor furnace. So I knew we were in trouble; I knew that was---yeah. I went back up to the front room, sat in a chair and called 911, and this is what I said,
“I’m Rita Baldwin, and I’m on Crawford Street, and I know I’m a dumb ass, but can you come get me?”

Swaykos: Right.

Baldwin: And they said, “Ma’am”—this was Harrison County Sheriff’s Department, and they said, “Ma’am, you’re going to have to call Biloxi PD [Police Department].” I said, “I don’t think I’ll get another signal.” And they said, “Well, we haven’t been able to transfer anybody.” And these are, these are dispatchers that have been taking those horrible messages where people are drowning in the background.

Swaykos: Right.

Baldwin: And it’s probably about 8:30 [a.m.] or so by this time. Just from coming back up here, making the phone call, the water’s in my lap now, so that’s how fast it was coming.

Swaykos: Wow.

Baldwin: So I had to get help to get out of the chair. I had a purse. I had this bed. I had my cigarettes in a cigarette case, and matter of fact, I dropped my cigarette case in the water, fumbling around, and when I got back there, poor Duane was trying to save—we had three TVs, and he was trying to save the TVs by putting them up high. And I said, “Fuck the TVs. We’ve lost everything. We’re going to die if we don’t get out of here.” Joey says he is so glad I said that. And so we went to the back. We kind of lined up, and the door wouldn’t open. Here’s another God thing. As they’re trying the door and the door won’t open, the roof up—(brief interruption)

Swaykos: It wasn’t open, able to open.

Baldwin: Yes, if the door—while the door was trying to be opened, the roof was shattering. So right after it kind of cleared, they tried the door again, and it opened. So my thinking is, if we’d have gone out, had been able to go out, we could’ve been harmed by flying nails, debris, whatever. So as we go out the back door, I announced that I can’t swim. I had already told Duane “I can’t swim.” I panic. I freak. Joey says I can hold onto his bag; I’m holding onto his bag. He’s going very, very slowly, telling me each step, “Watch the step.” And then when he got to the last step, he said, “Now, be real careful because you’re going to take a big step down.” Well, when I started stepping down, at the same time I’m thinking, watching him; all his bags are getting wet, and I’m thinking, “I’m a lot shorter than him so now my stuff’s going to get wet.”

Swaykos: Right.

Baldwin: So I let go of Duane’s hand, turn to him, and was handing him my purse and my bag because he’s like six foot, something. Well, at the same time I’m
stepping, and I realize I can’t touch the bottom. I call it a washout. My eyes were still open. Duane said I cussed him out. I remember nothing from that point until they were pushing me in through the banister of the stairs, and there was a tree on the bottom of the stairs, so we had to go through the banister. And I came to myself at that point. So I guess I just rode Joey over there is kind of what happened. And the water was still coming pretty rapidly as I got upstairs, and none of us remember my dog, Chewy, swimming over, but she must have.

**Swaykos:** So where is this that you swam to, one of the other apartments?

**Baldwin:** There was a two-story apartment behind my house that I also rented. And so we got up there, and when I got up there, I was the first one inside. Chewy was hiding under the table. Once we all got in there, Duane went back and got the other four dogs, and two of them didn’t swim, so he had to carry one of them. And by then he was having to swim; the water was that high. And the guys were talking about how the water was; well, it’s three steps from the top. And it was funny because when we were going in, there was a turtle that was sitting in the water on the steps, and as the water rose, he rose with it, and so when the water kept rising, he wound up on the porch.

**Swaykos:** Oh, wow.

**Baldwin:** And long story short, when the water stopped rising, it was here.

**Swaykos:** From a second-story building, it was all the way at your knee. OK.

**Baldwin:** And so the water stopped at that point, and it didn’t go real fast, draining off, but it did drain off rather quickly, and I think we all just—we were in shock. We were exhausted. The adrenalin had been shooting us forward, and we all fell asleep, dogs included. And the first noise that I remember was the amphibious vehicle coming down the street, not down my street but down the main street, Howard Avenue. I still haven’t thought about the possibility of anybody dying. I had thought about, that it was possible that we might die, but I hadn’t thought that there were people dying around me. We walked out, stepped over debris, and there were people all on the street. There was a house in the middle of the street down here. There was a house in the middle of the street down this side of my house. The van had been covered in water so I knew it wasn’t going to run. It was funny. It was sitting crooked in the driveway, but it was still in the driveway. There were cars everywhere, parts of houses in my yard. There were people’s TVs. Now, see, my stuff did not come out of my house. It stayed in my house, but my house moved off the foundation. The fence stopped it, so it ultimately had to be demolished because of the fact that she wouldn’t be rebuilt. So when we saw these other people, we saw that some people had been injured on the other street. They were blocking three streets, I mean, because houses were missing, and there were lots where there had been houses, but there wasn’t any more. We never did find out where those houses came from that were in the street. We talked to them for a little bit, and one guy was trying to get across the house to get
to Howard [Avenue] to get an ambulance. So we just kind of went on back in and decided we were just going to bed down for the night. It was about to get dark. And we heard the firemen going house-to-house, seeing if everybody was OK, and we told them we were, and that we were in the back. And they told us that we could go to the community center down on Howard. We were thinking we could go down there and regroup, which wasn’t really exactly true. They were going to take us somewhere else. So we weren’t going to be able to get back to the house. They told us they cleared us a pathway. We had already gotten dry from getting wet before, but now we’re going through this slushy water. There was gas pouring out of people’s houses.

We got down there. The [fire] department in the Point had to be rescued themselves when they lost all their vehicles. They were operating as part of the rescue effort, but they weren’t contributing any vehicles or anything.

Swaykos: Right.

Baldwin: Those guys were so wonderful. They were giving us a ride down to the community center where we were waiting for busses, and there was just a lot of pitiful people down there. I mean, it was very, very, very sad. We were exhausted. There was mud everywhere. The wind was still blowing pretty hard. We caught the last bus, and there was no more room in; I think, the shelter of the school in Biloxi. The one that had been open during the hurricane. So they wound up taking us out to the high school, which had been the special needs shelter. So when we got out there, basically it was not, it was not really set up to be a shelter. The only food that they had to give us and the only water they had to give us was what was in the cafeteria. Got a half a sandwich that night. And really, things were bad for two or three days, and that’s when I started hearing about the people that died. And there were a lot of sad stories there. One of the things that, those of us who’d been homeless, we were used to this. We knew how to rough it. We knew how to sleep without a blanket. We knew how to. In fact, I said, “I’m not sleeping on this hard floor anymore. Put me out in the sand. I can wiggle my butt, and I could make myself a place.” Well, we was kind of scoping out where we could go to sleep outside, and they found some Port-o-lets. The bathrooms were terrible; there was no water. And the bathrooms were horrible after about a day. And there were two Port-o-lets in the back that nobody had brought up.

Swaykos: I see.

Baldwin: So it was very unsanitary things. So there was this, like, secret society that had discovered these Port-o-lets, and they were telling just certain people, so only certain people were going out there. And I guess the bigwigs finally caught on to what we were doing, so they brought the Port-o-lets around so everybody could use them. The whole point of telling you this is things were not very organized as far as—everybody kept saying, “FEMA’s coming. FEMA’s coming.” The military arrived before FEMA, and when FEMA got there, they didn’t really seem to know what to do. The Salvation Army guy that came in from—gave us our first hot food since we’d been there. He got arrested by the military people. The military people had him arrested because he was taking food out of their supplies to provide us food. So there
was no coordination. There was no cooperation, and there was just—it was a mess. It was a terrible, terrible mess.

**Swaykos:** How many people would you say were in the shelter?

**Baldwin:** There were about, there were probably seventy to eighty people that were in the special needs [shelter].

**Swaykos:** And what—

**Baldwin:** And they were elderly people and very sick people. In fact, they tried to put me down there, but I wouldn’t go down there. I had developed bronchitis in the course of all this, and I had hurt my back, and I wasn’t really able to walk very well, but I wasn’t sick like they were. And there was no place for them to sleep. There were old people propped up in lawn chairs where their legs would just swell up from having their feet down. They had no beds. And then there were homeless people that had helped the military unload supplies, and they had been given air mattresses. So I was kind of a militant during this whole thing. And one of the girls that was staying close to where we were, she turned out to be my neighbor; she lived about four houses down from me. And she said that if they would give her the Hazmat [hazardous materials] bags and give her some gloves, that she would clean a couple of the toilets so we could have a clean—so I went down and told the nurse that. They gave me the stuff, and she did that. And you know what they did, what that created? That created men in the middle of the night coming in to use our bathroom because we had two stalls that were clean. I thought that was horrible. I just can’t tell you how horrible.

**Swaykos:** It sounds like it was a mess.

**Baldwin:** After a week, I was sick. On Sunday night I had finally gotten a message to my son. He worked for the Harrison County Sheriff’s Department. I had been sending him messages all week, and the last person I gave the message to said, “Shannon was just here yesterday, picking up supplies to take to another shelter where he was.” And I said, “Oh, please let him know that I’m here.” So I got to see him Sunday night.

**Swaykos:** And what’s your son’s name?

**Baldwin:** Shannon Nobles.

**Swaykos:** And how old is he?

**Baldwin:** He’s thirty-two. He had gotten his family to safety, and he lost his home out in Woolmarket. And they had left their little puppy in the garage. None of us really prepared for this water thing. And I really fault myself because I used to give hurricane preparedness briefings to military families when I worked for the Navy Family Service Center. And I know that it’s the water that kills people, mostly, in
hurricanes. And I’ve had people say to me, “This is just hard to believe.” And I say, “Well, even when you’re there and you’re seeing that water come up, it’s still hard to believe.” It’s just unbelievable. And you see, my son did not, because of the inability to contact anybody with phones, my son didn’t know whether I was alive or dead. My young son didn’t know I was alive or dead for a week. And they finally, him and his sister hooked up, and they came and got me and talked me into leaving. And I had contracted some kind of virus or something there. So the good part of the story was we were very well received everywhere we went. I had gotten the Red Cross money from St. Louis. The State of Illinois provided medical services to me and my son, and they also gave us food stamps, and all that kind of stuff. So they I can’t fault any of the people that were out there. And then I stayed there for about a week and a half, and I came back. During that time, I found out that night that the soup kitchen had been—I don’t know—robbed. I don’t want to say robbed, looted, robbed, whatever. My dogs had been rescued from my neighborhood and taken up—

Swaykos: Great.

Baldwin: No, not great. And taken up to Hattiesburg, and so when I finally was able to get a vehicle and go up there and get them, I only got four of them back, so, because the guys were, they were hitchhiking into town and feeding the cats and dogs, and my neighbor was watching out for them. [They] kind of liked having the dogs because they were keeping the looters away.

Swaykos: Right.

Baldwin: So it was like the wild, wild west here right after the storm.

Swaykos: At what point did you finally come back to this building?

Baldwin: Well, when I came back into town, this is the first place I went. Came down here because I wanted to find out what happened because when I left, everything was all a mess. There’s some pictures up there I can show you. And Duane and them had been coming in and trying to sort out the good from the bad, and they weren’t—people kept saying they would come help them, but nobody showed up. And I was afraid he was going to get sick because we had a freezer full of fish, freezer full of chicken, and it was very hot, and so I told him, “Take the day off. Don’t go in there tomorrow.” Well, when he came in the next day, everything was gone. Somebody had come [to] clean, but they had stolen all the good stuff. We got our ten-foot ladder back, but we didn’t get the rest back. Somebody even took the door off the hinges right here—

Swaykos: Oh, my gosh.

Baldwin: —where I had written “I’m safe” on it, when I came by here before I left. People were telling me that some of my board members were looking for me, so I wrote that message so they’d know that I was OK and where Duane was. Somebody
ripped out the attic fan, which didn’t work, but they ripped it out of the ceiling. It was, it was just horrible. So I just—and there was no—there were no—it was not secure. The ceiling was messed up. It was raining in when it did rain. I came up here, like off-and-on, and then somebody came in from Florida with a truckload of stuff. So what I did was, we put a board up, and I paid somebody to sleep in here at night to guard the stuff, so we did that for a while and then eventually, on the twenty-ninth of September, which was exactly a month after the storm, we had what we call an open house and laughed because it was definitely an open house; the windows and doors were missing. I came up here at seven o’clock in the morning, and I stayed until seven o’clock at night, and the idea was to remember the ones who died. By this time I had started finding out a lot of people that had died.

**Swaykos:** How many in all did you lose?

**Baldwin:** Well, a lot of people died. I knew probably—I knew about twelve or thirteen that died.

**Swaykos:** Wow.

**Baldwin:** Two of them, well, I was really close to.

**Swaykos:** And these were all homeless people?

**Baldwin:** No. They weren’t all homeless people, no. Most of the people that died in Biloxi died in this area in East Biloxi. There was one guy that they called him “Hermit of the Point” and he died. He was sleeping outside, so nobody knows. I think they found his body somewhere down there on that Oak Street, which is where he kind of hung out. But there were people that died in their---not being able to get out of their apartments, as well. Several people died at the Tivoli Hotel. Some of them were homeless. One guy that worked at the Tivoli, he had worked for me, and he was a good friend of mine. He had an apartment on the west side, but he was over there during the storm, he was (inaudible).

**Swaykos:** And what was his name?

**Baldwin:** That was Scottie Michaels. And there were just, there were so many people. Still, to this day, I expect Scottie to call me and say, “Have you seen Johnny?” I still expect Ralph to come popping in, saying, “Where’s my sister?” He always called me sister. There’s been so much sadness, and we’ve lost several homeless people since the storm that I say are indirect victims of Hurricane Katrina because we, even though on the twenty-ninth of September, a lot of groups came in and started the process of putting us back together, hooking up our electricity, mucking out, bringing us things to get started back up, That day things started, but we were not back in operation. But I came down here every day to be kind of a beacon of help and to let people know that we would be back. And whatever stuff people gave me, I gave it out. I had groups that would call me and say, “What do you need?” And women’s
underwear, underwear was a big sore subject for me. I had gotten some brand-new underwear when I was in Illinois, and I had one pack I opened, one pack I hadn’t. I had some new clothes, too. I had some used clothes; I had some new clothes, because remember, I lost everything. I walked out, and what I walked out with, that’s it. I had two bags of stuff. One was my used clothes, and I had another bag that had all my, my brand-new radio, a pack of panties that had been opened, and some new clothes. Well, when I went to Bethel Church to meet with my board president to get the car they were giving us and camper, they wouldn’t let me, not the pastor, but the volunteers wouldn’t let me put my stuff inside, so it had to stay outside. And so when I was going into his office I said, “Please watch my stuff. That is all I own in the world.” And when I came out, one was gone, the one with my brand-new panties. And I’m telling the story on the twenty-ninth of September, and these lovely ladies went out and bought me some dresses, and bought me some brand-new panties because at that point I didn’t really have anything. I mean there’s a lot of lovely, lovely people and into today. You had said you wanted to know about volunteers.

Swaykos: Right.

Baldwin: We still have relief groups that are still working on houses and stuff, and they send people to us. Back Bay sent us some, and Bethel was sending some, and AmeriCorps and Hands-On, a group called Youth Works. I’ve had several of these groups that have come in. So we’ve been very, very blessed. We’ve been blessed with funds to buy things. We’ve had people buy things for us. So everything in this kitchen is pretty much new. I’d say it looks better than it did before the storm. Got a new paint job. We had some tremendous problems getting the roof fixed; we’ve got a lot of leaking and that kind of thing. We’ve acquired a new suite next door to accommodate our, I guess, expansion because we certainly couldn’t have stored all the stuff that was coming in to us. Our services have expanded in that we are—for a while there was no food pantry down here. The only food that you could get was from the Salvation Army and you had to have a FEMA number. So we were giving out food. We were giving out personal hygiene items, blankets, all those kinds of things.

Swaykos: And where did you receive all those items from?

Baldwin: Various places. I had individuals. I had groups. I had agencies that brought things to us. And we didn’t keep any records. We just distributed to who needed it. And remember that we don’t have to feed anybody because until the end of December, the Salvation Army and the Red Cross were sending canteens through the neighborhoods. So everybody was getting fed; that wasn’t a problem. So my goal was to, by January, be able to move into providing meals again. It wasn’t until probably the middle of January that we started—we were cooking on a residential stove. The fire department was constantly telling me we couldn’t cook, and then when they put it in writing, we just started making sandwiches. But we just did whatever we could to start it going, and I guess it was probably in April that we were really going full swing again using the trays. And I mean because all this time we’re still putting it back together. We got our commercial equipment. We got all of our approvals from
the City, the fire department, which took time, but through it all we were still
providing whatever service we could. And so now we’re fully operational. And other
than distributing of things that we have to give to people, we’ve added giving them a
bag lunch to take with them because there is no place to eat supper because the
Seashore provided that. So that’s—

**Swaykos:** What you’re doing now.

**Baldwin:** Yeah.

**Swaykos:** Let’s talk about your base. How many people were you serving, before the
storm, daily?

**Baldwin:** As far as people, an average would be about ninety persons. We don’t
count persons; we count plates, [and] they can come back as many times as they want.
We were serving more people before the storm than we are now. We’re serving
different people. We’re providing more services, but we are serving less people.
There are less people in this area. There’s a lot of people that have come in to work;
the transient, they come, they go. Still people are coming back from their evacuations.
Just this week a guy that used to be here before the storm, arrived back from his
evacuation. And people that didn’t use our services have off-and-on used our services
where they hadn’t needed them before.

**Swaykos:** You said the population has changed. How are they different now?

**Baldwin:** Well, they’re different in that there are more transient people that are just
like here today and maybe gone tomorrow. There are less of the, what we call the
“old-time homeless,” less of them. There’s a lot of them left, and some of them died.
There are no motels and stuff we can rent cheap. There are no cheap places to rent, so
if you come here, you don’t have a place to stay, so a lot of people have moved on.

**Swaykos:** OK. And where are they all going? Do you know?

**Baldwin:** Different places. Different places. A lot of people that come into town
saying they want to work and then they get to work, we literally have just put them,
been putting them on busses and sending them back to where they came from. For a
while they were eating up our resources that we were trying to provide to the people
that were from here.

**Swaykos:** Right.

**Baldwin:** So it’s kind of leveled out now.

**Swaykos:** Where has your homeless population gone if your person space is so much
lower?
**Baldwin:** Well, I don’t think it’s so much lower. I’d say like the average daily guests runs probably about seventy. I can say this accurately because I just did my paperwork for the City of Biloxi, yesterday, and I had to give them percentages. When I say it’s changed, I am looking at the people that didn’t used to come in. We used to never have any Asians. We had less people that were working and living inside houses. We have more of those people that come and eat with us now. We have a lot of people that work day labor that come in during lunch. I did kind of an informal survey last summer, I think, and it was about—actually, more people were working than weren’t, and more people were living somewhere than were homeless. So when I say the population has changed, that’s the kind of demographics I’m talking about. And remember, also, a lot of the homeless people wound up getting FEMA trailers.

**Swaykos:** I see.

**Baldwin:** So a lot of people wound up being better off than they had been before the storm.

**Swaykos:** OK. What percentage of your population here would you say is on medications or severely mentally ill, that they’re not being cared for by those services?

**Baldwin:** Well, when I could recognize that they have these problems, I make it very vocal. I’m very vocal that if you have a medical or a mental health need, please get with me. I was very proud of the services that we provided to people through Coastal Family Health Center. And some of them slipped through the cracks, but I still think we’re doing a good job catching these people as far as percentages.

**Swaykos:** So what are you doing for services (inaudible)?

**Baldwin:** As far as percentage, I looked at this yesterday, and I wound up saying that like 95 percent of my population has some kind of disability, is what I said. I think I went with 50 percent with mental, and then I put like 20 or 30 percent had multiple, whether it was physical and mental. A great number of our people have addiction problems. And we have a group that meets here on Friday that’s specifically for their purpose. So we do that, plus I try to help them get their medications. We have several people that take, I call them psychotropic medicines, but some of them are being treated for bipolar. Some are being treated only for depression, so we’re able to get those medicines for them through programs. (phone rings, brief interruption) I can get their medications for them if I can just get them to the clinic. We had our ninth clinic last night. And I can get their medicines vouchered for them for a few times. See, this is provided through a grant, a homeless grant. And then there are programs where they can get their medicine free on an ongoing basis. And one of the things that I also do in the course of my work with Coastal is anybody that qualifies for disability and isn’t already on it, I refer them to somebody to get them going through that, that process. And I will assist them in making their doctor’s appointments and those kind
of things. So as far as medical stuff, it’s real easy to do it. You just have to do it because there are resources for medical.

**Swaykos:** Right.

**Baldwin:** The housing is the most frustrating because there is no emergency housing for anyone.

**Swaykos:** That goes along with next question. What differences are the homeless population facing now that they weren’t before the storm?

**Baldwin:** Well, before, we had the Salvation Army in Gulfport, so I could always get them over there, take them, or send them on the bus to the shelter in Gulfport; that’s gone. And we also had a transient program that we worked out with Bible Way Ministries out in Gautier/Vancleave. They would come pick people up if they wanted to go spend the night and bring them back the next morning. So it was a seven-day transient program that they could go through. We don’t have that anymore because they can’t provide the transportation. They also don’t have a women’s dorm anymore. The only other place that’s still left, which is not an emergency shelter, is the work therapy program, is the Gulf Coast Rescue Mission. And it has no women’s dorm. So what I see is that, I mean first of all, there’s not—OK, I mean zero. You can’t make something happen out of nothing. Before we were limited, but I could still make something happen. Women have no place to go. I mean no place to go. And that is one of my biggest heartaches is just trying to—well, just literally watching women drink themselves to death and die, because that’s what’s happening.

**Swaykos:** What percentage of your clients are women and what percentage are men?

**Baldwin:** Very small percentage. When they do my people count, they break it down by race because I’m required to do that for USDA. The most you’re going to see is maybe seven women a day. I’ve noticed that I’ve had more women coming in lately.

**Swaykos:** OK. And why do you suppose that is?

**Baldwin:** There’s more women around. I’m not sure why. But also, they’re not homeless; I am seeing some women that live in FEMA—there’s a woman that comes in and brings her children, and she lives in a FEMA trailer, and actually signed up on my hurricane preparedness thing. So I mean you don’t see a lot of children here. This is a pretty unsafe area, but it’s not anymore; it’s pretty safe down here now. They’ve got the park all cleaned up, and there’s not as much going on. But I’ve had homeless families come in here and eat. And that’s another thing; there used to be a program for homeless families, and their day center was, they were part of Back Bay Missions. And they went to churches to sleep at night, and the churches are all involved in relief. And their building was messed up and had to be demolished, so that program is hoping to get back started. So right now there are no services to homeless families
either. So I mean, a lot of services, I don’t think people realize how many services were eliminated.

**Swaykos:** I don’t think they do either. I don’t think it’s been—for many people, I think some awareness has then risen because of the storm. But do you think that homelessness awareness has risen since the storm?

**Baldwin:** I think there was a time after the storm when people who had never been homeless were homeless. Their plights were put on CNN, and people got to see the people living on the beach; [they’d] had the big, nice houses, and now they’re having to live in a FEMA trailer, and for a while they were living in tents like the rest of us, but I think they’ve forgotten. They’ve forgotten because there for a while you could have a tent, and the cops didn’t bother you, but they’re telling me now that the cops are coming around saying, “The tent’s got to go.” So there’s no place for people to be.

**Swaykos:** So where is your homeless population going now at night?

**Baldwin:** Well, like I said, there’s the West Biloxi people. They’re over here. There’s still people up under the overpass by the IP [Imperial Palace.] There are people who—you see; it’s kind of a hush-hush thing. You don’t tell people where you go.

**Swaykos:** Right.

**Baldwin:** And people don’t want everybody to know where you are. Some people are staying in abandoned houses; some people are staying in houses that they may be working for the people that own the house, helping it get back together, and a lot of people have been doing those kind of things. They’re just staying here and wherever. Staying with friends. A lot of people are staying in people’s FEMA trailers. (brief interruption) When I was talking to you earlier about the people that we’ve lost since the hurricane, one of them was mentally ill. He had been—see, there’s a program. When I say there’s nothing, I guess I’m lying because there is one program that’s called Home at Last. It operates out of Back Bay Mission. They would have like maybe fourteen slots. You have to have been chronically homeless or had episodes over the last three years of homelessness and have a disability to qualify for the program. And they put you in apartments. Well, the problem is he doesn’t have enough apartments to put them in or apartments that are willing to go for the price that they’re able to pay; it’s a HUD [Housing and Urban Development] program.

**Swaykos:** Right.

**Baldwin:** But he does have people in that program and actually one of the people that was in that program, he died in his apartment.

**Swaykos:** Wow.
Baldwin: And that was devastating to the case worker. And also, a lot of people that worked—I had my little cluster of guys. I called them, they were my helpers. They helped me do all the stuff that I do with the homeless, and none of them came back to their jobs. Greg was case manager for the Home At Last Program, they never, never came back.

Swaykos: Wow.

Baldwin: Al was the emergency assistance person in Back Bay Mission. He came back to town, but he did not go back to there. And another guy was working at Mental Health and doing wonders, Mental Health Association. He was doing a lot of work with the homeless guys, and he didn’t come back either. So it’s all the people that were doing all of this; they didn’t come back. So it’s been back to that feeling that I felt when I first came here, that I’m here doing this by myself. But there’s Reverend Mitchell from Seashore Mission. He is set up in a different church, [and] even though he’s not able to sleep people, he’s still coming and ministering to the homeless people, and he is looking at coming and feeding, bringing his group in to serve lunch on Sunday. So I’m not saying I’m out here by myself right now. There for a while I felt like that. I felt like that. But back to the people that died. Poor Randy, he was mentally ill, and he had gotten kicked out of the apartment because after the storm he had fifty different homeless people come and stay at his house, his apartment. He totally damaged the inside of it, so they kicked him out. He was like zapping out, out here on the street, and he had been coming in here every day. Greg had been working with him and getting him to mental health when he didn’t have that cohesion. He got beat up again, and when he was in the hospital, they were talking about committing him, and he had a seizure. And by the time they found him—crazy people in the hospital, they tend to just leave you alone because they don’t want to deal with it. I hate to say that, but that’s true. And when they found him, he was already brain dead. And so he was the first one we had a memorial for since the storm. And another guy, he had cancer. He had lymphoma, and he was no longer getting treatment for his lymphoma. He was going from place to place. He had mental problems, too. He was going into bars and churches, and everywhere disrupting and getting arrested, so he left town and he died in a hospital in Mobile. So several more, several more have died since. But it’s just there’s no comfort zone anymore. I mean, we’re trying to do that new normal, but it’s just—it just doesn’t feel good.

Swaykos: I keep hearing the new normal everywhere I go. What does that mean? Everybody says it.

Baldwin: They coined it in New Orleans. That’s where I first heard it from was the folks in New Orleans. That we’re never going to get back to normal. I mean, obviously too much has happened. But, so what we’re doing; we’re out of survival mode now, OK, which causes me a tremendous amount of depression because I knew I had to get up every morning. I knew I had to get this kitchen back up, and I knew I had to do what I had to do at the house. I knew I had to do all those things. And now that everything is back to its new normal, I’m really not sure what to do with myself.
because I don’t feel normal at all. I don’t feel right. I mean there was a period when I really didn’t want to help anybody.

Swaykos: Wow.

Baldwin: I was unable to help myself, and I didn’t want to help anybody. And people were saying, “Oh, well, you have to get well to take care of everybody.” And I’m going, “That’s what depresses me the most is that everybody’s always telling me, ‘Yeah,’ that they’re depending on me.” I don’t want everybody depending on me.

Swaykos: A lot of pressure?

Baldwin: Yeah, it really and truly is. I told the guys out there, I said, “Y’all think I’m your fairy godmother.” Because if somebody needs anything, they come and ask Ms. Rita for it. And I have set some different boundaries since the storm. I’m not willing to have people in my life whether it’s living in a tent in my backyard or coming in here and getting extra stuff from me. I’m not willing to do that anymore. If they’re not willing to help themselves, I’m not willing to keep them in my life. I’m having a little problem with my son now, so.

Swaykos: How have people received that change in you?

Baldwin: Not very well. Not very well. They don’t like it when I tell them no.

Swaykos: (Inaudible)

Baldwin: Yeah.

Swaykos: What is the homeless population’s relationship with the police officers and with the rest of the community now, and how has that changed because of the storm?

Baldwin: Well, for a while I think that because so many people were homeless, I think people weren’t singling out the homeless on this.

Swaykos: Right.

Baldwin: OK, the street homeless.

Swaykos: Right.

Baldwin: But it’s back to that now. It’s definitely back to that now. And what one of the girls and I were talking about today is the worst—I mean, when I was living in the circle, the things I hated was the people that urinated in public and cussed and fussed and slept and peed on themselves, and acted crazy out there in front of tourists because that makes it harder for everybody else. And not all of us are like that. That’s what gets noticed. So the focus is back to the bad homeless.
Swaykos: Absolutely.

Baldwin: So it’s really, it’s very easy to get people excited about having children, OK, and programs for children. It’s pretty hard to get people excited about helping people that they perceive as lazy, no good, won’t work, drunks, addicts, that kind of thing.

Swaykos: Have you seen an increase in drinking and drug use?

Baldwin: Yes. Yes, I have.

Swaykos: Is it becoming more expensive drug use, or where are people getting the money for it?

Baldwin: Well, what I’ve seen is, there for a while everybody had their FEMA money, so they were buying their drug of choice. But what I’m seeing is a lot of people that were using crack are replacing it with alcohol. And one of the reasons that I had to hire a security guard was because there are fights in here every day.

Swaykos: Really.

Baldwin: And a lot of that is—most of that, I would say, is attributed to the drinking; the people that have been in fights, mostly, with the exception of maybe one, have been drinking.

Swaykos: Do you have any requirements about drugs or alcohol for someone to be served here?

Baldwin: Before the storm, it was an informal thing, and I still don’t breathalyze anybody like other places do. I just said, “If you’ve been drinking or if you’re under the influence, if you behave yourself, you’re welcome to eat.” That hasn’t worked because they’ll come in, and they’ll behave for a few minutes, and then the next thing you know they’re throwing trays at each other.

Swaykos: Right. So is that something that you’re wanting to change?

Baldwin: Well, yeah, I’m wanting to change it.

Swaykos: (Inaudible)

Baldwin: Well, I’m changing it in that, I mean, I haven’t posted “no drinking” signs, but the fact the security has the authority, anybody who has been drinking, to deny their entrance into this kitchen.

Swaykos: OK. Who staffs your kitchen?
**Baldwin:** I have a cook/kitchen manager. I have a kitchen assistant. They do all the kitchen stuff. I’m the coordinator, and I have a part-time—all of our jobs are part-time—but I have a part-time, part-time, I call her special projects, which is really, she’s really my office administrative assistant. She does my computer work. She comes in two or three days a week and helps me with some of the bookkeeping and that kind of stuff.

**Swaykos:** OK. And do you have many volunteer groups?

**Baldwin:** I have a lot of volunteer groups. I have two board members that cover most of the days a week to supervise the volunteers, two different board members, and then I have groups that come on set days.

**Swaykos:** Are these mostly faith-based organizations?

**Baldwin:** Mostly. Well, right now, well, one is through Back Bay Mission, but they’re—it’s the relief groups. There’s two different groups, relief groups that are coming.

**Swaykos:** OK. What do you think the difference is between here and the big city, how this happens in Big Town, USA? How do you think the homeless would’ve fared differently?

**Baldwin:** In terms of the storm, you mean, or just life as a homeless person?

**Swaykos:** Life as a homeless person afterwards in terms of the storm (inaudible) it to be provided services when starting again and maybe not being eliminated.

**Baldwin:** As far as a big city?

**Swaykos:** Um-hm. Just I’m pretty much asking are there any differences between here and a big city for the homeless?

**Baldwin:** Well, why don’t we just compare Biloxi and New Orleans?

**Swaykos:** OK.

**Baldwin:** In many ways it’s better here. I’ve had people come from New Orleans that were afraid they were going to get shot.

**Swaykos:** Really?

**Baldwin:** They feared for their lives living in the streets. I had one guy who had never been homeless in his life came down to work, was living in a motel room, had stuff, tools, all this kind of stuff, he got arrested for public drunk, and so he lost
everything. And when he went back to the streets from the Parish Prison, and he couldn’t get out of that. And he talked somebody into giving him money to buy a bus ticket, and him and another guy, the other guy had just got out of Parchman, and they gave him a bus ticket to New Orleans, thinking he could get a job. And he couldn’t get no work. He didn’t have an ID. I mean it was horrible. Then him and this guy hooked up. They both just found somebody to give them the $22 to get here. And we got them both—I got somebody to buy their bus tickets back to where they had family.

Swaykos: Great.

Baldwin: So I’m able to pretty much do that. Back Bay Mission and some of the other agencies are able to do that. A lot of the services that were eliminated, with the exception of the emergency shelter, have begun back up here. Food pantry is back at Back Bay Missions, so that’s taken a lot of pressure off of us. And that kind of thing. So things are getting better as far—I mean, I would think as far as being a homeless person in a large city, there’s always going to be more services, but there’s going to be more competition for those services, as well.

Swaykos: I see.

Baldwin: So you can look at it from that direction. One of the things I would just really like is that the mayor’s task force on homelessness would start back up and actually do something instead of the planning and meeting, and that kind of stuff. But I don’t see it happening. There’s just too many politics involved. So what I do is what I have pretty much been doing before the storm. I look for resources in like that fellow that called me, he’s going around, getting the casinos interested in the plight of the homeless and the people that come in here. I will do a---like Make-a-Difference Day is the fourth Saturday of October, and I really focus on homelessness awareness like I’ve done in the past. And we will be soliciting a lot of groups to assist us with that. And I’ll try to get Tony from WLOX and maybe somebody from the paper who would come in and do some publicity on that day. So I’m not like hoping that groups are going to come together and work together. I’m not hoping for that anymore, but the relief groups, a lot of the different groups, they only want to get credit for what they do. They don’t want to collaborate with anybody else. They’re afraid that you’re going to get some more money or something; I don’t know. So I don’t work with organizations. I work with individuals in the organization. So I guess we form our own group.

Swaykos: Right. What has the job situation been for your homeless population since now there are people willing to do these other jobs?

Baldwin: Well, for a while it was better. But as things have kind of panned out, the people who are from here are having problems getting jobs through the day labor. I mean if you’re homeless, that’s the best way is through day labor, so it’s kind of scarce right now, but I think it’s fixing to crank up because there is some new
construction going on, so hopefully some of those jobs will be taken by some of the homeless.

Swaykos: OK. Can we talk about your finances? Where do you get the funding for the food and the services?

Baldwin: Well, we are able to receive USDA food, and we can purchase at salvage prices food from Twelve Baskets where we do get our USDA. So as they’re kind of in-kind donations, we get money from what we used to refer to FEMA, but it’s technically, it’s emergency food and shelter money, and that has increased. I used to get $5,000 a year, and last year I got $10,000, and this year I got twenty [thousand dollars]. That money that comes into this area and been divided up amongst the agencies is based on the unemployment figures. And one of the pet peeves that I’ve had in the past has been that homeless people are not normally included within those figures because they aren’t registered with the employment agency. So I feel like it’s kind of a skewed thing, but the fact that we are still considered an area needing hurricane relief, I think they’re just—and I figure this is going to stop pretty soon. Like we got a grant from World Vision last year, which helped us replace all of our equipment. We got a grant last year and this year from AmeriCares, but this is the last year. I got no money from the City of Biloxi in 2005-2006. Their fiscal year is different from us. But I did get $30,000 from them last year. So we’re like OK right this minute. And then that’s the bulk of the resources, and the rest of it depends upon churches, individuals, and organizations. So we’ve had more money since the hurricane because of the emphasis on the relief.

Swaykos: Right. How long do you think that will last?

Baldwin: I think it’s waning as we speak. But what I’m doing is I started with a faith-based community trying to strengthen the relationship with the churches and get the word out. That’s a lot of people. I just assume everybody knows about Loaves and Fishes, but everybody doesn’t. So next I was going to go to organizations and businesses and focus on doing that, and Mr. Peter, who just called, has been doing some of that for me by going to the casinos. And then leave the last, is the individuals, and kind of like that’s going to be a newsletter. But whenever they put a pitiful article in the paper, I usually get some calls. So, or they see us on TV or whatever.

Swaykos: So what does the agency still need in this recovery process?

Baldwin: Well, of course we still need money, but as far as—I mean we’re very blessed with in-kind donations. I mean, if you can believe that I have more food than I can possibly use—(phone ringing, brief interruption)

Swaykos: What kinds of things are you still needing?

Baldwin: Well, as far as what I’m soliciting right now is things that we would try to provide for the people who want us to assist them in their evacuation, which is like
here, we’re talking about bottles of water. I’m buying bottled water now. Nobody’s giving it out free anymore. So bottled water, insect repellant, socks—we always use socks, homeless people always need socks. Whenever it rains and you get your feet wet, you just throw the socks away and hope you can find some more. I’m fairly good on personal hygiene items, but I’m going to need more blankets and those kind of things to assist people with bedrolls. And those are the kinds of things I will be soliciting for my Make-a-Difference Day, too. I probably need to get with somebody on the paper.

**Swaykos:** What did you learn from this year that you’ll do differently the next time, the next storm?

**Baldwin:** As far as Katrina?

**Swaykos:** Um-hm.

**Baldwin:** Well, number one, there will be nobody in my kitchen. If they can’t go to a shelter, they’re not going to stay here. We will probably leave our abode. I don’t know where we’re going to go, but we’ll probably leave.

**Swaykos:** Where are you living now?

**Baldwin:** I live in a trailer in the hole where my house was demolished from, the two-story apartment in the back. My son lives in one room, and the laundry room is in the other room, and then there’s a couple of guys that live upstairs. So the trailer is not a FEMA trailer; it was given to me. So what I’m worried about is whether the City’s going to let me keep that trailer on that spot and how long. But they haven’t made them move the FEMA trailers yet, so.

**Swaykos:** OK.

**Baldwin:** So, and if there’s another storm, then they’ll postpone it.

**Swaykos:** Right.

**Baldwin:** So I just don’t see Biloxi going really—I mean like you ride down my street, it’s like—OK, example, I used to be the fifth house on the right, and now I’m the second, and that’s not counting the FEMA trailer. So it’s just total nothing. It’s gone.

**Swaykos:** What difference in the housing prices do you think it’s going to make in the homeless population as housing prices are rising?

**Baldwin:** Well, I think more people are becoming homeless because they are unable to find something that they can afford. I mean whereas you could get a two-bedroom or even a one-bedroom in the $400 range. And see, this used to be the cheapest place
in East Biloxi—(brief interruption)—before the storm, and it’s probably going to be about $900 now, and that’s maybe a one-bedroom, and that’s ridiculous. And if you’re moving into a place—and it was hard before because if you’re moving into someplace, you’ve got to have a deposit, your first month’s rent, [and] sometimes they want the last month’s rent. So we’re talking up in the thousands of dollars just to get into a place. And there are no weekly places much anymore, where we had the hobo hotels, we called them, because they’re gone. The Tivoli’s gone. I’m trying to think of the other two that are still down there. The girl that I was talking to this morning said they’re staying at one of the motels down on the beach right there at Rodenberg, and she said they’re paying $55 a night.

Swaykos: Wow.

Baldwin: I thought it was more than that, but that’s quite a bit. But if the guys that are working day labor, I mean if they let three people stay in a room for fifty-five, maybe you kind of manage it.

Swaykos: Right. What other residual effects of the storm do you think will start to show?

Baldwin: Well, I think the emotional residuals are—I think that’s the fighting and the—I mean, everybody that went through the storm and everybody that’s homeless, and everybody that’s looking at what’s left here every day, if you’re not depressed every day, you’re going to be depressed some of those days, and I think that’s what that fighting—because the stages of grief include anger. And I have bounced from anger to the good, better stages and then back to anger. And a lot of what I feel is that when you’re having a bad day, you count on the folks around you to support you and get you through that. When all of your friends, all of your family members, all of your colleagues have gone through the same thing you have, there’s nobody to go to except the outsiders, and the outsiders, some of them really kind of aggravate me, and I don’t want to ask them for help. That’s another story. I have to tell you. I’m losing interest. So I may not sound like it---so how much more we got?

Swaykos: That was it. I was just going to ask you—

Baldwin: Well, see, good, well, I lost interest when—

Swaykos: —one last thing.

Baldwin: Well, I think I made most of my points and told you most of my colorful stories—

Swaykos: OK, great.

Baldwin: —and threw in a few people, so.
Swaykos: Thank you.

Baldwin: You’re so welcome.

(end of interview)