Biography

Mr. Robert A. Weaver was born July 15, 1962, in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, to Mr. Jack C. Weaver (born May 14, 1936, in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania) and Mrs. Nancy Wrightkey(?) Weaver (born October 11, 1936, in Pennsylvania).

Weaver started school in D’Iberville, Mississippi. He lived in Pennsylvania for a short time after Hurricane Camille in 1969, later returning to graduate from D’Iberville High School. He attended Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College and The University of Southern Mississippi. He has worked in construction and shipyard work. At the time of this interview he was employed by Harrison County Government as sand beach director and road manager.

On September 25, 1982, he married Deanna Sonnier Weaver (born October 19, 1962). They have two daughters. Weaver is a Roman Catholic and a member of Knights of Columbus, Parish Council of Sacred Heart Church in D’Iberville, and PTO in Catholic schools. He enjoys family, travel, fishing, and golfing.
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AN ORAL HISTORY

with

ROBERT A. WEAVER

This is an interview for the Mississippi Oral History Program of The University of Southern Mississippi. The interview is with Robert A. Weaver and is taking place on September 23, 2009. The interviewer is James Pat Smith.

Smith: This is an interview with Bobby Weaver, Robert Weaver, who is an employee of Harrison County. He is the manager of the Sand Beach Department in Harrison County, Mississippi. The interview is taking place on September 23, 2009. The main focus of this interview is on [Hurricane] Katrina and the aftermath of Katrina in which Mr. Weaver played a key role as an important manager in Harrison County. He was the person working with the emergency operations director and others in the storm response and recovery process. The interview is conducted by James Pat Smith of the USM [University of Southern Mississippi] History Faculty. It’s taking place in the library of the USM Gulf Park Campus in Long Beach, Mississippi. And so Mr. Weaver, could you state your name and today’s date?


Smith: And can you tell us your position that you currently hold at the county?

Weaver: Currently I am the county road manager, which oversees the management of the roads and bridges throughout the unincorporated areas of the county, and also serve as the director of the Harrison County Sand Beach Authority, which is responsible for managing the twenty-six miles of beach here along Harrison County.

Smith: And just briefly could you state what the work was that you did during Katrina?

Weaver: As Katrina, post-Katrina, the day following landfall, I was assigned the operations, or as the operations section chief for our Incidence Management Team with the Emergency Management Office here in Harrison County.

Smith: OK. And could you give us your date of birth?

Weaver: July 15, 1962.

Smith: And where were you born?
Weaver: Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. (A portion of the recording unrelated to the interview has not been transcribed.)

Smith: Your spouse’s name?

Weaver: Deanna Weaver.

Smith: Does she have a maiden name?

Weaver: Sonier.

Smith: OK. Do you know her date and place of birth?

Weaver: October 19, 1962, and it was Biloxi, Mississippi.

Smith: And date and place of marriage? That’s—be careful.

Weaver: It’s coming up this week, so I won’t get this wrong. September 25, 1982, and it was D’Iberville, Mississippi.

Smith: Does she allow you to state her date of birth and place of birth? Well, you stated her place of birth.

Weaver: I’ve already.

Smith: OK.

Weaver: I already gave the date, too.

Smith: You’re doing good. Can you briefly list the major occupations, different types of work you’ve pursued during your lifetime up until now?

Weaver: Predominantly construction related. I spent some time working out at Ingalls Shipbuilding, did construction activity, traveled the country a little bit, chasing those construction jobs, and then I became employed in 1985 with Harrison County and been here ever since.

Smith: Did you have any particular construction skills or activities that you focused on back in those days?

Weaver: Probably carpentry and painting.

Smith: And can you talk—just sketch out your educational background; go as far back as you can. Where did you start school and where did you wind up?
Weaver: Certainly. I started here in the D’Iberville School System, Harrison County, in 1968. In ’69, you know we had a little adventure with Camille, so we moved back to Pennsylvania for a time period until conditions here on the Coast was suitable for families to come back, those that could get away. So I finished my education in D’Iberville. I attempted to go play football for The University of Southern Mississippi. I chose to walk away from that. I did some stuff at the community college here on the Gulf Coast and went into the work force. It seemed to be typical of what we did in D’Iberville at the time, and I just felt comfortable, and that’s what I did.

Smith: OK. Do you have any interests, activities, hobbies other than your work?

Weaver: Since Katrina, it’s been about all work, you know, but yeah. Family first, fishing, golfing, occasionally I get the opportunity to travel; I like to do that.

Smith: And I would be surprised if you grew up in D’Iberville and you didn’t fish, then there’d be something wrong with you, but that’s for folks that don’t know D’Iberville. Did you do any time in the military?

Weaver: No, I did not.

Smith: Do you have a religious affiliation that you want to share?

Weaver: I’m a Catholic; I converted in 1980, I suppose it was. Had no religious upbringing up till that point in my life, but the lady I ended up marrying was a devout Catholic, and I went through the religious program through the church to just become a Catholic and have been one ever since, and raised our kids that way till this day.

Smith: And are you involved in any civic clubs, charitable groups?

Weaver: Well, recently I had become a member of the Knights of Columbus. I had served as, on our parish council for our church for several years pre-Katrina and then a couple of years after that and, you know, have been involved with various organizations through the school and school board with my kids. My kids go to the private—get a private education at the Catholic school, so I’ve been involved with the PTOs [parent-teacher organizations] and the parent organizations they have at the schools.

Smith: And you said you were on the parish council for your church. What’s the name of your church?

Weaver: Sacred Heart.

Smith: Sacred Heart.

Weaver: Catholic Church in D’Iberville.
Smith: Have you received any awards or citations that you think would help somebody understand who you are and where you’ve come from?

Weaver: I’ve received some things with various associations that I’ve been affiliated with workwise. I belong to an organization called International Municipal Signal Association; just a national organization that’s dealt primarily with people in the traffic industry, and I’ve received a couple of awards from the section, recognition of service, things of that nature.

Smith: Can you talk a little bit about your family? At least we like to get the names of your children and how old they are now or the years of their birth, whichever you feel like you can.

Weaver: Sure. My oldest child is Jamie Marie Weaver; she’s twenty-two years of age. She just recently graduated from Ole Miss, and as of now she’s gainfully employed at St. Patrick’s Catholic High School, so that was a good thing.

Smith: What does she teach?

Weaver: Well, she’s in marketing communication, and she’s the development director, so she’s in the process of establishing fundraising programs, marketing the school, different things like that. And I think she has a desire that probably in the next two years or so she’s going to go into law school. So she wanted to work a few years to make sure that’s what she wanted to do. My oldest one—I meant my youngest one, she’ll turn eighteen this October, same day as her mother’s birthday, so I’ll never forget my mother—you know, her mother, my wife’s birthday. And she’s a senior at St. Patrick’s High School right now, and if things bode well, she will be a student at The University of Southern Mississippi next year.

Smith: I’m going to stop it just a second. (brief interruption) OK. We were talking about your family. What was your father’s name?

Weaver: Jack C. Weaver.

Smith: And his date and place of birth?

Weaver: May 14, 1936, I think, and it was Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.

Smith: What kind of work did he pursue during his lifetime?

Weaver: Well, I guess upon graduation from high school he joined the military, served some tours I think in Korea and Vietnam; he retired military. And then he was into construction activity, and I suppose that’s how I got indoctrinated into the carpentry and the painting because I always tended to have to, after school and
weekends during school I would go work with him, and then certainly during the summers. That’s kind of how I spent most of my summer’s upbringing as a kid.

Smith: What about your mother? What was her maiden name?

Weaver: Her name was Nancy Rikely(?). She was born October 11; I think it was 1936, in Sunbury, Pennsylvania. And I guess in my younger years, she was just a housewife. Parents divorced; she went off to work. She worked for a couple of eye doctors in a local community, and now she’s, you know, she retired now.

Smith: And do you know the place, the date and place that your parents were married?

Weaver: I do not know the—I don’t even know the date or the year, but I know it was in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.

Smith: And how did the family come to be on the Coast?

Weaver: Well, my father was military. So two weeks after I was born, we were stationed here. So I lived a year here in the six—late, well, ’62 to ’63, and then we went back and lived in Pennsylvania for a couple of more years. Then he was stationed in Sumter, South Carolina, and we stayed two years there until ’68. Then we were transferred here to Keesler [Air Force Base]. And there was one tour he was assigned in Germany. I’d say it was in the midseventies, but we chose to stay behind. He went off and did his tour and come back, and we’ve been here ever since.

Smith: So this is just sort of (inaudible) roots.

Weaver: This is home.

Smith: Yeah. Let’s talk a little bit about your awareness of Hurricane Katrina. Just tell me—you’re a county employee, so that entails some responsibilities there. Tell me about your awareness that there was something out there that you should be thinking about.

Weaver: Well, typically my role in Harrison County, pre-landfall for Katrina was the same as it had been for previous storms. Keep in mind, I’ve been employed with the county since ’85, so my first hurricane was Elena that I dealt with as a county employee. And we’ve had Hurricane Georges, and Isidore, and Lily, and threats of Ivan, and different things like that. You know, we monitor the weathers year-round. But predominantly when you get to that middle to late July, August, September, October, you know you pay attention every time you have a little system that forms out in the Caribbean or maybe in the western part of the Atlantic. So we know there’s things going on. For this, we knew that we were going to be within a cone, so certainly we take certain activities.
Smith: You say “within the cone,” meaning?

Weaver: Well, the cone of potential landfall. I mean, we’re looking five days out. We know we’re going to be close, so yeah, we get on heightened alert. We might make some preliminary moves. For instance, on the beach we might move the trash barrels up to the seawall. That way if it becomes a mess and we didn’t have to do anything, then we’d just have to take it from the seawall back out to midbeach point, but if we have to pull the trigger and get them off the beach, then they’re right there at the seawall so we can load them on a pickup truck, in a trailer and move. So we might do some things like that.

Smith: So the weather service’s projection of, light the pathways.

Weaver: Correct. Weather service, what comes through the Weather Channel, different things like that. And we maintain that coordination with our emergency manager the whole time period, so we’re taking care of the preliminary things that would have to be taken care of. Certainly the closer landfall is and you’re still within that cone, other decisions are made and other actions has to be taken. And certainly twenty-four hours, maybe even thirty-six hours you’re within that cone, we want to get the obstacles off the beach. Information goes out to mariners, “You need to seek safe harbor.” Being involved on the bridge side of the county, we have movable bridges, so we’ve monitored the coordination of that activity. It’s kind of a tough mix. A lot of the boaters want to wait till the very last to see if they really need to move. We’re always hopeful that it’ll take that little tick to the right or that little tick to the left, and it bypasses us. Well, sometimes you know they’re trying to get through while everybody else is trying to take care of last-minute things and get out of town or whatever, so you have that big conflict with people trying to cross these bridges and the large number of boats is trying to get through these bridges to safe harbor.

Smith: Oh, you’re speaking of a drawbridge?

Weaver: The drawbridge.

Smith: Do you know how many draw bridges were operating in Harrison County at the time?

Weaver: At the time, we had [Highway] 90 in Biloxi Bay, [Interstate] 10 Popps Ferry, we had the one on, the old Wilkes Bridge, 605, and then we have the Bayou Portage Bridge over on the west side of the county, and then at the time the [Highway] 90 Bay St. Louis Bridge was drawn, and then you have the two CXS bridges that require opening for marine vessels. It doesn’t impact vehicle traffic, but it does have the impact with the trains. So there’s a lot of bridges you have to deal with, and you want to at least try to coordinate an effort to where you don’t want to open it every time a boat comes there. So you try to gather the boats up and say, “OK. We’re going up; let all the boats come through; lower down.” And then you wait maybe thirty minutes or so before you have another open. That way you clear traffic and get on a
schedule so that the motoring public would know on the top of the hour and the bottom of the hour, the drawbridge is going up. And so if you’re planning your route and you’re going to plan to get somewhere, you might want to time it to where you get to the bridge at a quarter after or twenty after, so you pretty much have had traffic cleared and then go from there. We make those adjustments. We might start out every hour on the hour, or then if you get enough, you go to every hour on the top and the bottom of the hour until you make arrangements for the vessels to get through. At some point after the winds get to, I think it’s thirty-five miles an hour, then you have to batten the bridge down. It’s just not safe to raise one of those bascule leafs in the air because if you got a big gust of wind take it, you can create some damage, and then we don’t have a bridge for vehicle traffic or maybe marine traffic, as well, depending on what might occur to it.

Smith: So there’s considerable worry about the bridge cycles so far as your department would be concerned.

Weaver: Yeah. Katrina, we had one bridge; that was Portage. Some of the prior storms we continued. We had the maintenance of Portage; I missed one earlier. See, the lake has a turnstile bridge, so that’s an extra one to the list. We had maintenance responsibility and operation of that, although Biloxi, it was Biloxi Bridge they had paid us to (inaudible). At such time that evolved over to complete jurisdictional control by Biloxi and they maintained it, and they had it for Katrina. But yeah, a lot of coordination, putting additional manpower on the bridge. When you get that kind of traffic flow, you want to make sure traffic’s stopped before you get the gates down. You certainly want to make sure they stop before you raised (inaudible) span, and then you want to have someone be over there to monitor the marine traffic and communicate with the radio to these mariners because some of them get real antsy. They want to go; they want to get their stuff secure so they can go take care of their homes and do what they’re going to do. So sometimes it can get quite dicey in dealing with that issue.

Smith: Are you responsible for road equipment, heavy equipment that the county owns, also?

Weaver: For Katrina I was not; that was the county road manager, was Terry Brawliss(?) at the time. I was certainly responsible for the bridge and traffic crew that I had jurisdiction over, and we take efforts to batten everything down, which now if we were to have one, then certainly I have the entire road department that’s under my jurisdiction, so yes, I would have it now.

Smith: OK. So we’ve got this awareness of an approaching threat. How is the county coordinating all this just to get ready? At the time of Katrina, the emergency operations director’s job was either not yet filled or the guy, General Spraggins, had just come on to it.

Weaver: Um-hm.
Smith: So y’all we’re in a get-ready mode, without really an emergency operations coordinator in position.

Weaver: Well, it’s one of those things that—with the exception of Joe [Spraggins] being—and Joe was in place, but like I said, he really did not have the opportunity to know who the other players were that he would have to be dealing with, so we all handled our responsibility. We all communicated to Joe, so we didn’t miss anything in regards to our normal preparation up to the storm. We all, the department heads that had certain responsibilities continued to do that. And we would have scheduled meetings, maybe one in the morning, one in the afternoon to get an update and discuss about these issues, and the people from the cities were basically the same personnel that we’ve had for years, so. With the exception of Joe, I think everything else just almost was like on cruise control, you could say. Everybody was professional. They did their job. And we just communicated the same information to Joe that we would’ve communicated to Linda, if she still would’ve been there, or John Edwards if he was still in that position, or even I remember days when Mr. Wade [Guice] was in there, and we would’ve done the same thing if it was Wade.

Smith: Wade Guice?

Weaver: Wade Guice. And so that was, that was steady. Certainly Joe had to get brought up to speed on some of those integral parts that he might not have been quite aware of, or he might not have known who was handling it, but when we presented it to him, then he knew that we had things taken care of from that standpoint.

Smith: And would you, the day before the storm, kind of grade your, the county’s preparation? If you were looking at that, based on what you knew on Sunday night, what would you have said?

Weaver: I think we did what we have always done, and we did it the way it needed to be done up to that point. If you find a fault, we didn’t have a plan for Katrina, and I don’t think at the time, nobody did. We experienced a lot of storms, and we did a lot of things. I mean, I don’t think anybody—there probably wasn’t even a boat left in the harbor, so we did our job. We got them out of the harbor. We communicated to the public, “You need to evacuate.” We did those things. Probably those decisions that might’ve needed to be made immediately for immediate post response, those decisions uncovered as the disaster uncovered, but I think we did a good job for what we were used to encountering with storm preparation.

Smith: Did you participate in any of the meetings leading up to the evacuation decision itself? I think on maybe Saturday before the storm was the formal decision about evacuation.

Weaver: At the time, my role in a disaster component was prestorm, take care of securing the beach, the bridges, things of that nature. I evolved into damage—I
would’ve evolved into damage assessment poststorm. The only meetings that I would’ve participated in would’ve been the general briefings, and like I say, that would be—he would call all the City people, the county people, law enforcement communities, the mayor. Everybody would have representation, and they would talk about, “This is where the storm’s positioned. This is where it’s projected to go. This is what we’re anticipating going to do.” When Joe met with the different emergency managers from each city, I was not in that meeting. So when they discussed the timeline for evacuation, things like that, no, I was not involved in those meetings for Katrina.

Smith: OK. That’s just an area where we were ahead of New Orleans and all that.

Weaver: Um-hm.

Smith: So if you had been there, I’d want to hear about it. OK. So you have awareness several days out, and you’re taking steps to prepare your department.

Weaver: Um-hm.

Smith: And as far as you could see, the county itself was well prepared for what you thought—

Weaver: Right.

Smith: —a storm like this might be about. OK. Well, talk to me about storm day. Like, where did you spend storm day?

Weaver: I spent storm day at my brother-in-law’s house up off of Crawn(?) Lane, which is a little bit north of Biloxi, off of Big John Road. It always had been kind of the family compound on the wife’s side of the family to go there. Her parents, her three other sisters, they bring their family there. So I finished up, I guess, about dusk Sunday night. I’d just finished my last meeting at the EOC, and I remember driving home [Highway] 90. Yeah. It was a very eerie drive because at that time of the evening there wasn’t many people out and very little activity along the homes of 90. Occasionally you might find a business or a home still boarding up, and you just look out, and you see those storm clouds, and you see that appearance over the [Mississippi] Sound, and I just kind of wondered what tomorrow was going to unfold. But at the time, I just don’t think, nobody anticipated thirty feet of water. So I go home, and I got to my sister-in-law’s house, and I tried to sleep, but about one o’clock, wind started blowing, and it blew and it blew. And I remember about six o’clock we was listening to the radio. We had lost power. And so I was wondering, “Is this thing ever going to stop blowing?” This is a quick little story. I went into one of the rooms and felt something drop, and I looked up, and I noticed water in the light fixture, and I didn’t say nothing. We probably had twenty-five people in the house. So I went and checked another room, and it had it. So I went and got my brother-in-law, and I pulled him off to the side, and I said, “Look, I think we’ve got a problem.” He said, “What?”
And I said, “I think we got a bad leak. Look at these fixtures.” So it must’ve been nine o’clock. So I mean, we’re in the height of the storm. We go out there and look on the back part of the house, and the whole roof layer, other than plywood’s, been peeled off. So we knew that the storm was just now peaking. There’s probably going to be a couple of hours of it. We had a chance that we were going to lose plywood, so we attempted a makeshift repair. And myself, my brother-in-law, and my nephew got up there with plastic and felt and trying to secure it in a-hundred-twenty-mile-an-hour winds. Fortunately, Mother Nature creates this little howl as the winds approach. Normally you don’t have it on a regular windy day. You feel a little breeze. Well, in a storm, you hear it before it gets to you, so we always had that opportunity to spread-eagle on the roof and let the gust pass us by, and then we’d do it. So fortunately we made a makeshift repair, and we had no ceiling or anything fall down on anybody during that time period. So we took care of that, and I guess it probably was three o’clock before the weather really calmed down enough to be able to get out. And so my brother-in-law, and myself, and my nephew, make our trek back into D’Iberville. We’re going to go check on the homes. I guess the drive down wasn’t no different than any other trip from the house after a storm, an occasional tree down here and there. Got to the river, the river was up, but you know that’s typical when you get an event like this.

**Smith:** The Tchoutacaboufffa River.

**Weaver:** The Tchoutacaboufffa River. So I remember driving down [Interstate] 110, coming into D’Iberville at the Rodriguez exit, and we’re just pulling off of the highway down on the exit ramp, and that was really my first glimpse of what occurred because the tide line was at the throat of the exit ramp in the overpass over Rodriguez Avenue, twenty feet above the roadway, of Rodriguez.

**Smith:** Was the water still there?

**Weaver:** No, no. The water had already subsided at the time, but that was the first evidence. And then coming down straight into view a guy’s home that I knew lived there, there was nothing. And I remember saying to my brother-in-law, “Oh, my God! What in the hell’s happened?” And that’s when we realized that that part of D’Iberville was wiped clean. I mean there was nothing there. So we attempt to go check all of our homes. The first one we went to was my sister-in-law, who lived down on the bay in D’Iberville. And two doors down was my previous home that I and my wife had bought in ’85 and had our kids in, but we had sold in 2001 and bought a new home up a little further north in D’Iberville. And her home was pretty much destroyed. Made our way to my mother-in-law’s, which was about a half mile north of there, and her house had floated off the foundation, and then when it set, it just kind of twisted and racked. It was basically destroyed. Made it up to my mother’s house where I grew up, which was about another half mile or so north, and I could tell they had seven-and-a-half feet of water in her house. Now, fortunately, they were far enough inland that there wasn’t the wave action that could’ve tore her home up, but I knew there—Camille only had two-and-a-half feet of water, so I knew that it
was tough. I tried to get to my house, but the water was still too much over the road along the river, so I’m thinking “I ain’t never seen water this high, so I probably have water myself.” So I have a sister that lived down in Biloxi; went out to her place, and she had about four-and-a-half foot of water. Fortunately I got back before nightfall to my place, and I was able to get through, and water had just gotten up to my front step, so I was saved from that standpoint, so I was very gracious of that. But probably one of the hardest things I had to do was when we went back to the house and I had to tell my sister-in-law and my mother-in-law that their homes were destroyed. And I had a nineteen-year-old nephew at the time; I mean, he just started bawling, crying. I mean, they did not know what to expect. They know their home was destroyed, but they hadn’t seen what had happened up to that point. So that pretty much was it until the next morning. And then the next morning is when I made my way into the courthouse. Yeah. So the next morning bright and early I went on into Biloxi off of [Interstate] 110, and that was my first glimpse of the devastation on Highway 90. I tried to get to Gulfport off of 90; I got as far as Rodenberg Avenue and couldn’t get any further, so I made my trek back up to the interstate and went on down Highway 49, and got into the courthouse. And I guess it must’ve been about 10:30 that morning, and that’s when I was—I don’t know if I was in the wrong place at the wrong time or whatever, but I remember Supervisor Larry Benefield(?) had grabbed me by the arm and he says, “Come here.” And I said, “What?” And he says, “We need you to be the operations chief for this response.” And that was my first—and I said, “OK. What does the operations chief do?” Go get a book and figure it out. That was basically the extent of where we were at the time. We were having to put people into a position that had never experienced this, and we had to somehow figure out a way to make things work. And that’s when I got assigned to the team. Rupert Lacy, who was a veteran of working disasters, he was working for the sheriff’s office at the time. He was assigned the logistics chief. I think at the time that was probably, Rupert and I was the only two that was put in a position at that point. Probably sometime that afternoon, Pam Ulrich(?) the county administrator, was assigned the financial person on that team. The way it’s set up is you have operations, you have logistics, you have financing, you have planning, and then you had at the time the emergency manager, which was Joe. And so Rupert and I worked hand in hand close by because the issues I was dealing with in getting the information and making the decisions, getting the personnel to implement what we decided to do. Rupert’s responsibility was to make sure we had the equipment, the materials, the supplies to achieve that goal. So we had to work hand in hand, and Rupert was a tremendous help for me in earlier days because he had far more training in regards to emergency management than I had had. So he was extremely helpful because he understood what my role needed to be as well as the role he needed to play. So that was a big help, and things worked well for us. And I think the first evening—oh, another thing that was extremely beneficial for us was we had a FEMA rep that was in REOC Regional Emergency Operations Center prelandfall, so—

Smith: This is Mike Beaman?
**Weaver:** Mike Beaman, FEMA Mike, we called him. A great guy, great guy. He was truly instrumental in our success in what we did. But I remember that afternoon, Mike, Rupert, and myself was in a room, and we were talking about our plans, what we needed to do right away, and for some reason Mike had to get up, and I think he had to go meet with Joe or something, so Rupert and I were sitting there talking and in comes from one of the side rooms was two gentlemen. My memory, short pants, one of them had I think Jacksonville Fire Department, the other one had Duval County Emergency Management.

**Smith:** Florida.

**Weaver:** Florida guys, the cavalry. So they walked in the room, and Rupert and I stopped and said, “Hey, can we help you?” And he said, “Well, yeah. We were sent over here by Governor Bush to establish an EOC because word was that the one in Harrison County was destroyed, and everybody in it was gone.” And I looked and said, “Well, you can see the building’s not destroyed, and we’re here, but you’re certainly welcome to sit in and help us.” So they sat down, and Rupert and I was talking about a few things.

**Smith:** So you had no idea that this Florida group had pushed in that morning?

**Weaver:** Not until that time. I didn’t.

**Smith:** I think MEMA didn’t either.

**Weaver:** Yeah. Well, apparently it must’ve been—it had to have been task ordered. Now, whether the governor bypassed MEMA and went straight to Florida, I don’t know. But all I know is these guys, these two guys walked in, and we were talking about things we needed to do, and Chip, who was, I think Chip was the—he was the head guy, then Marty Senefert(?).

**Smith:** They had a center for emergency management—

**Weaver:** Well, these were emergency management—

**Smith:** —operations.

**Weaver:** Yeah, these were people—they were part of an incident management team that has received the training to go into a disaster area, to a fire area, and to a wherever, to be first responders and get things set up. So after about five minutes, Rupert and I are back and forth, blah, blah, and I remembered Chip Hanniston(?) said, “Hey guys, can you do us one favor?” And I said, “Sure.” Said, “We’re here to help you first and foremost, but if you will give us five minutes to just explain something, after we’re done, we’ll do whatever you want us to do.” I said, “Sure.” So Rupert and I shut up, and Chip spoke. He said, “First of all, let me point out one thing. Everybody in this county is emotionally attached to this disaster. The second thing is,
you have the desire to take care of all your citizens’ needs right away. That will not happen. You do not have the mental or the physical capacity to do that today. So what you need to do is you need to focus on one or two or three priorities that is most important right now, and you focus your efforts on achieving that goal. And when you achieve that goal, then you focus on the next one, and then you focus on the next one. You’re not going to take care of everybody tonight.” So we sat down, and we started talking about what were our goals. Well, certainly search and rescue; that was number one. We knew people were out there or in buildings that needed help. Fortunately, the federal government had already task ordered the USAR [Urban Search and Rescue] teams in, so they were already out searching and rescuing at this point. So that was in place, so we really didn’t have to do much about that because that was already set up. Federal assist come in; guys were terrific. Second thing, we have water and ice; we knew we needed to get water and ice established. Couldn’t think of a third one at that time. I mean there’s nothing that really just stood out at that time. So they said, “OK. Well, let’s focus on these two.” So at the time, we found out USAR was here. They were setting up base. They were coordinating with the local municipalities and the law enforcement, fire, and they had that. And all we needed to know who the contact person was, and he was handling search and rescue. Water and ice, so we had to bring the people together, what City personnel was there. We had to go to the maps that they had (inaudible), where were the LSA [Logistical Staging Area]—I mean, where was the locations? And we had to dispatch people out. Could we get a truck in there? Because we knew that the federal government had already had the orders to bring the trucks in, but where were we going to take them? Did we have personnel to man them? So we had to work and make sure that our POD [point of distribution] locations was accessible. We had to make sure that we had personnel assigned to distribute the water and ice. So we worked on that a good bit of that afternoon and into the night. I remember; it must’ve been about nine o’clock, pretty much had all our PODs set up. We knew where we were going. All the municipalities knew where they were going to be. The balance of the team came in from Florida, so—

Smith: This would’ve been Tuesday night?

Weaver: Yes, Tuesday night, the balance of the team came in. And so we started then talking about needing to identify a location for all these incoming supplies. He said, “Look, guys. You’ve got tractor-trailer loads of stuff that you’ve ordered, requested, and you’ve got stuff that’s coming that you hadn’t ordered and requested. Where does it go?” So we started thinking about it, and I said, “Well, I’ll tell you what. I got a good idea. I know a guy that’s affiliated with the old Sack-and-Save up here on [Highway] 49 and Dedeaux Road. I could probably get a hold of him first thing in the morning. He’s an engineer with the City of Gulfport. I’m sure we could arrange to get a key.” And this guy from one of the counties outside of, I think it was St. John County or somewhere over there on the East Coast of Florida, he says, “That’s all right. We don’t need him.” And I says, “No. We got to get him. I’ve got to get a key so we can get in the building.” He said, “No. You don’t understand. We don’t need him.” And I said, “Well, how in the heck are you going to get in that
building if you don’t have a key?” He said, “We got ways.” And then it dawned on me. We’re confiscating the thing. I mean, that’s what we’re doing, but I wasn’t thinking. I knew we had the right to do it, but, so. About an hour and a half later they had the doors open. They had a generator hooked to it, and they had power.

Smith: And this is the building on the corner of Dedeaux and [Highway] 49?

Weaver: Yeah. It’s the old grocery store, yeah. So that was our LSA, that is—

Smith: LSA means?

Weaver: Logistical Staging Area. This is where all incoming supplies are going to be routed to. The next day they had changed message signs with the message, “LSA exit right, north a quarter a mile,” whatever it was.

Smith: On Interstate 10.

Weaver: Yeah, on [Interstate] 10, east and westbound, we had signs. Well, now that we have an LSA, we’ve got to find personnel to run it, twenty-four/seven. Now, we don’t have a lot of help from outside, so we’re having the first able body that comes by that’s an employee, “Your job is to run this. You go help him do this.” So basically, we had to staff these positions with county employees, and that’s how the LSA got established that first evening, is, well, I’ll say the second evening postlandfall because the storm made landfall on Monday, but we got it set up and then eventually we had more and more people come in. Then we started getting more and more assets from forestry personnel, park service personnel, people like that, and we were able to task order some of them to handle the responsibility of running the LSA, and that afforded us to be able to take some of our personnel to use them elsewhere where we had needs. And that was something that came into effect that first Tuesday night, and it was important because we had trucks coming in the next morning, and helpful because that way the items that we were expected to receive we were getting, and went from there. And I suppose probably the thing that I remember most about that first afternoon, that first evening was we finished; we had our last command staff meeting. Must’ve finished about eleven, 11:30 that Tuesday night, and we walked out of the—Dixie County had a nice, nice eighteen-wheeler operation trailer. I mean it expanded out, air-conditioning and satellite phones, fully equipped with food.

Smith: This was the Florida crew?

Weaver: Florida crew. Florida crews. And so we met out there. A lot of activity going in EOC. Joe was getting a lot of interruptions, and it was important that we take time to not have those kind of interruptions, and “Let’s focus on the items we needed to make decisions on.” So we really took probably an hour and a half meeting and made it into thirty minutes, but because of no distractions, we were able to do that. So we walked out of the trailer, I guess about 11:30, and Rupert and I was talking about, “All right. What do you think we need to do?” Rupert says, “I don’t know about
you,” he said, “but we’re probably not going to be able to get anything done until daylight. Anything we can get done, we’ve already done.” He said, “I’m going to go sleep.” I said, “OK. What time we going to meet in the morning?” He said, “Well, let’s meet at six o’clock.” I said, “All right.” I said, “Well, where are you going to go sleep?” He said, “I’m going to go sleep in my truck.” He said, “Where are you going?” I said, “I’m going to my sister-in-law’s house.” And I was able to do that every night, and I think through the whole process that was kind of a saving grace for me because I was able to go home and see my wife and my daughter, my youngest daughter. My oldest one was at college, and that was a tough week because we were not able to talk to her until I think Friday night. And I even tried; the dorm she was in, the telephone wasn’t working. I had access to a SAT phone so I could call, but I couldn’t get through. Her cell phone reception wasn’t good, so. Certainly the first road trip to Oxford, after that we changed services to get her to Cellular South. She had Sprint at the time. But that was a saving grace to be able to just get home and just see my wife and kid every night.

Smith: Were you able to sleep?

Weaver: Yeah, probably far better, even though it was less time, but probably far better than if I would’ve tried to sleep in a vehicle.

Smith: Y’all had—did Rupert Lacey lose his home?

Weaver: No.

Smith: So he was making the choice there to stay in the vehicle.

Weaver: Well, Rupert lives, Rupert probably has a thirty-five-, forty-minute ride to his home, and I had about a twenty-minute ride there. So that was just choices we made.

Smith: OK.

Weaver: Yeah.

Smith: So you got a kind of an organizational strategy, a location for your supplies coming in, and you started to identify people that were going to work that location—

Weaver: Um-hm.

Smith: —for you. That’s a pretty good accomplishment for a Tuesday.

Weaver: It was.

Smith: And you got the Florida—
Weaver: Florida guys.

Smith: —guys in—

Weaver: Florida guys and gals, yeah, they were a huge, huge help.

Smith: —that nobody knew to expect. Go ahead and talk a little bit about how these tasks evolved. You have this distribution center that you’ve opened at Dedeaux and [Highway] 49. Did you have any concerns about the adequacy of the water and ice—you identified that as a top priority—the adequacy of what was coming in?

Weaver: No, because once that train started coming in, when them trucks started coming in, we had ample supply, so I don’t think we ever really encountered any time period where we didn’t have that asset there. I think maybe there were occasions where people might’ve wanted more than two gallons of water and a bag of ice, and certainly later on in time that was able to be offered.

Smith: That was—

Weaver: But that was, initially I think it was, I think it was two gallons of water or two cases of water; I think it was that, or maybe two and two. We wanted to make sure that we somewhat rationed it, and we wanted to make sure we had personnel that was distributing it, placing it in the vehicles to help expedite. If you started getting people out of the cars, loading it, and then you’ve got to have time for them to get back in their cars and buckle up. So we wanted to make sure we had enough personnel there that would be able to take the water, take the thing, put it in your vehicle, and keep that line moving. And it worked, and I didn’t mean that somebody couldn’t come back an hour later and get more, but that’s kind of was the thing because you had so many people needing it, you just wanted to keep things flowing.

Smith: So you were receiving your supplies at the old grocery store on Dedeaux Road. But then you distributed them out elsewhere.

Weaver: Well, I think what was happening was the—I think out of Stennis, most of the water and ice came in, and then as the calls would come in, they would be dispatched directly to the POD, the point of distribution. So we really weren’t getting the water and ice. Eventually we got a bunch of water deliveries, but it wasn’t part of that FEMA move. I think those were coming in out of Stennis, and then once we had it coordinated, that person knew we need a truck of ice, we need a truck of water at such and such POD. So then the truck would know to go straight to that location, and we got those things working fairly smoothly. So that really didn’t become an issue until later when it became more of somebody just wanting it; they didn’t need it, but they wanted it. And then we ended up having to make a decision to cut off the water and ice. It was time for people to start buying it at the Wal-Marts and the grocery stores.
Smith: When the stores were back up.

Weaver: Yeah, and that was a tough call really to have to make because, but you had to be mindful of the business interests in getting things somewhat back to normal.

Smith: You were having to think about how to staff different operations that the county was involved in. You mentioned the emergency management people from Florida. Did they have any large number of people in that you were able to dispatch to help with some of these chores?

Weaver: Well, what normally happened, you would get a representative from an agency that would be assigned in. They might have twenty; they might have ten; they might have forty people. Normally at the time, other than the initial, probably the initial week, most of the people that came in were assigned a specific responsibility, so we would put requests in, “We need thirty National Guardsmen to work the POD.” And then MEMA would work the channel and say, “OK. This is your contact person.” They would come in; they might work a seven, eight, ten-day rotation. So we was always able to put in our requests for what specific needs we had.

Smith: So you didn’t deal directly with the National Guard liaison officer?

Weaver: Well, we would have a liaison officer in there, but the thing is is that they had to have their task order to be able to go do it and possibly seek that reimbursement for their effort, so we just didn’t have the latitude of saying, “Hey, I need you to take fifteen guys and go do this.” We had to work the channels. We had liaison with the military, and there was some flexibility, but on a lot of the major things, we had to make sure we got the requests in. It would get approved, and then the military brass would make sure they had it assigned, “You report to so-and-so, for this purpose.” And then you would fill it.

Smith: How long would that take to go through your proper procedure to get a National Guard unit task to something?

Weaver: I think within the first couple of weeks, it was almost like a quick phone call. Later in time, there probably was a bit more scrutiny over the request, and then allowed to possibly handle more of a normal flow to where there was more consideration seeing to make sure they felt it was justified and give the approval.

Smith: OK, good. How did your job change over time? I know that you told me you had a couple of—you made some notes about the first couple of weeks. Go back and look at your notes and talk to me about anything we haven’t talked about during that first couple of weeks.

Weaver: One of the big issues that happened, and I do not know—I don’t know if it was day two, day three, but I had received a phone call from a lady at Memorial Hospital in Gulfport, and she’s pleading she needs diesel fuel for their generator, and I
think she said she had about two hours left of fuel, and the generator would go out, and potentially people could die. I asked her, said, “Do you know you should’ve had a fuel plan?” “Yeah, but we had no communication. We don’t know if the truck’s coming.”

Smith: Now, did the county have a fuel order in, prestorm?

Weaver: There was a fuel order placed, but trucks were being confiscated.

Smith: Who was confiscating the trucks?

Weaver: Various, various law enforcement. There was a need for fuel to go, “So-and-so, there’s a fuel truck come across the state line, follow me. I’ll take you where you need to go.” So we were encountering that.

Smith: So different agencies, highway patrol, DOT [Department of Transportation]?

Weaver: Same as we did with the building.

Smith: Just confiscated.

Weaver: You had a need; you had an emergency need to take care of a situation, and that was the only access you had. You exercised that right.

Smith: So the incoming fuel was not being centrally prioritized or wasn’t any kind of a fuel—

Weaver: In the early days it might show up; it might not.

Smith: So there was no like state-level fuel triage system?

Weaver: Not at that point. I do not recall anything. All I know is is that we had to—I had to dispatch one of my beach trucks. We have a little service truck with three hundred gallons of diesel, and we brought it over there, and we put a couple of hundred gallons in there. I don’t remember if it was later that afternoon or if it was the next day. We had received word that a lot of the federal assets was being diverted into New Orleans, and that we were going to have to pretty much start fending for ourselves a bit more than we had. So as part of our team and the personnel we had with us from Florida, we got to discussing about the fact that Chevron was in Pascagoula and wondered if they had any significant damage, and did they have any storage of fuel that we could possible tap into. It must’ve been that evening. The next morning we dispatched one of my bridge-and-traffic employees and one of the reps we had in from the Florida guys and went over and visited with people at Chevron. And we found out that, yes, they had plenty of diesel, and they had plenty of gasoline. They just had no way to truck it. So those two individuals spent a good bit of that day securing—
Smith: This would’ve been Wednesday, Thursday?

Weaver: Wednesday, Thursday, somewhere in that time period, securing tanker trucks out of Mobile to come in, and we set up a twenty-four/seven fuel operation. It just so happened as we got things set up and we were fixing to implement it, had a guy from Indiana, Indiana State Patrol had come into the EOC, and he was reporting for an assignment. And I don’t think he had any specific orders; maybe he did. Maybe I ignored them. I don’t remember, but I asked him, I said, “How many you got?” He said, “There is,” I think he said, “There is twenty of them.” He had ten vehicles, and they were here for ten days. I said, “OK. Your job is to run escort for our fuel trucks. I want a unit in front and a unit in back of every truck that runs to Pascagoula. I want to make sure that that tanker truck comes back into Harrison County, and it goes where we need it to go.” Because under the operation, we had to facilitate requests for the Cities, so we were having to provide, in the early days we had to make sure that the Cities were getting their fuel and those kind of things. So that worked out, and then as time went on, things, more gas stations were under operation, more people had access to fuel, so.

Smith: Did they have an episode of another law enforcement agency challenging any of the—

Weaver: No.

Smith: —Florida teams about the tanker trucks?

Weaver: No. Well, this was the Indiana State Troopers that was here.

Smith: The Indiana team.

Weaver: No. We had it under control. They were our trucks, and they made sure.

Smith: What about the hospital situation? They said they were within two hours of turning their generators off?

Weaver: We gave them, we got them fuel and—

Smith: Where did the fuel come from for them?

Weaver: Well, it came out of our, out of my beach truck. We had diesel fuel.

Smith: You basically siphoned out of your own truck?

Weaver: Yeah, but you did what you had to do. We weren’t needing the fuel at the time. They needed it; we did what we thought was right. And like I say, fortunately within probably twenty-four to thirty-six hours of that episode, we established a fuel
supply that was able to sustain all of our needs until things started to come back more and more, and there was a less likelihood that something was going to be confiscated because the access and the availability of fuel was much greater seven, ten days out than it was three or four days out.

**Smith:** So you think, would you guess on which day you might’ve had that first fuel truck out at the Pascagoula Refinery into Harrison County?

**Weaver:** I’m thinking it had been the latter part of the week or maybe on the weekend.

**Smith:** Maybe Friday or Saturday.

**Weaver:** Yeah, somewhere in that time period, that’s my recollection.

**Smith:** Were you at a point of being concerned that there might be a major breakdown for lack of fuel before that happened?

**Weaver:** Well, certainly that became a top issue for us. We weren’t able to provide the heavy equipment to clear roadways without the fuel. As the Cities started making temporary repairs to lift stations, they had to have emergency power till full power was restored.

**Smith:** Generators?

**Weaver:** Generators, so we had to have supply to keep those running. As each step of the way as we started making progress, a lot of that progress was being supported by generated power.

**Smith:** That’s water wells?

**Weaver:** Water wells, lift stations, towers for cell service, communication, radio stations are trying to keep the message out. So all those efforts to try to sustain that recovery, a lot of it within the first week was being supported by generator power, and we had to keep it flowing. So what we ended up doing was with my beach truck and the other truck, we ended up—my beach truck run twenty-four/seven probably for two weeks, and we had a route set up.

**Smith:** Now, this is a truck with a big tank on it?

**Weaver:** I had a two-hundred, three-hundred-gallon tank on the back of a service truck.

**Smith:** Like a big water tank or something?
**Weaver:** Yeah. All we had was a little square thing that might—it’s probably half the size as this table, three foot high, and it was a couple of hundred gallons. And we would go from lift station, whatever. Another thing you got to keep in mind, we had reefer [refrigerated] trucks with dead bodies in it.

**Smith:** OK.

**Weaver:** (Inaudible)

**Smith:** Now, we were talking about this fuel problem, and so you’ve got, you’ve pasted together a supply—

**Weaver:** Um-hm.

**Smith:** —to go to Pascagoula, and you’re using beach department trucks with makeshift tanks on the back of them.

**Weaver:** Beach department, we were using some road department that we utilized to service our equipment when we’re out in the field working. You can’t take a track hoe and just drive it to the gas station, so you have to bring fuel to it. So we were utilizing those kind of vehicles, and that’s how we were servicing a lot of these generated stations. And I was commenting before we took a quick break, as the coroner was getting the dead bodies, they were having us store them in reefer [refrigerated] trucks, and they need generated power to keep the refrigeration unit running.

**Smith:** Now, did you have trouble getting the reefer trucks?

**Weaver:** No.

**Smith:** So they were around. Somebody had them and didn’t mind putting dead bodies in them?

**Weaver:** I wonder if they might’ve been confiscated, too. It might’ve been one of those ice trucks that came down here that somebody unhooked, but anyway. Mr. Hargrove certainly probably could provide a little bit more detail on that. But I remember we were having to run, I think, to the Bradford site in Biloxi. We had the old (inaudible) site there in Gulfport, [Highway] 49.

**Smith:** That building was damaged.

**Weaver:** Yeah, that one was damaged. I think the one in Biloxi was damaged. So I think they had reefer trucks there.

**Smith:** The Bradford building in Gulfport was pretty much destroyed, the funeral homes, both the major funeral homes.
Weaver: Right. Well, at least their capacity to handle and store the dead bodies, so. And then I think that Gary assisted Hancock County, and I think we had a reefer truck over in Hancock County that we—

Smith: Which they did confiscate that one.

Weaver: You know that for sure then, OK. And I think, and we provided that as part of our fuel run. So like I said, we had—I had beach employees work twenty-four/seven, and we also housed at CTA [Coast Transit Authority] Kevin (inaudible) location. We staffed personnel to run their fuel tanks for a period of time.

Smith: Transit Authority—

Weaver: Right.

Smith: Bus lines. What were they doing out of there?

Weaver: It wasn’t just them; it was whoever needed fuel.

Smith: Whoever needed fuel.

Weaver: Whatever, yeah.

Smith: You had like a storage depot there?

Weaver: Yeah.

Smith: At the bus transit authority?

Weaver: They had in-ground tanks. All works, road department works had in-ground tanks. We had an in-ground tank system out on Lorraine Road. I think the sheriff brought in a tanker truck at the jail that disbursed fuel. Each City has underground tanks that they store fuel in. I think a lot of the Cities end up going to more of the Fuelman, so they had to really rely on the businesses to come back before they really had a full ample supply. So we had to bring in some temporary storage tanks, and I think we—I guess we purchased a couple ten-thousand-gallon tanks or five-thousand-gallon tanks, whatever, and we had them stored at some of the fire stations and different things like that as a dispensing point to be able to maintain this fuel.

Smith: The Fuelman is a kind of credit card system that operates at gas stations.

Weaver: Correct.

Smith: So this is kind of interesting to me. Your observation is that a lot of local governments had stopped storing much fuel.
Weaver: Yeah. I don’t think they maintain as much in-ground fuel storage because they rely—

Smith: Because of the cost of the gas going bad, and things like that?

Weaver: Well, I think it’s more, it’s a rather expensive thing to maintain tanks in your system. I’ve got right now, and we just had some inspections done, and I’ve got fifteen thousand dollars’ worth of repairs got to be made to six locations.

Smith: They developed leaks? What—

Weaver: Well, a lot of it is the intake, the overflows, spill back and things of that nature. You get traffic drive over the top of them. You get big trucks over the top of them, damage this, crack this, so they’re always requiring maintenance. Cathodic protection has to be maintained. So there’s a pretty good expense into maintaining these underground storage tanks. So I suppose for that reason, plus where these tanks are located. Not everybody feels real comfortable living next to a ten-thousand-gallon gasoline tank. So maybe that’s part of the reason why a lot of them went to the Fuelman, but it just seemed like an easy way to track costs, usage and things like that.

Smith: Do you know if post-storm the municipalities in the counties still think the same way about that—

Weaver: I don’t know. I haven’t ever looked into that, whether they do or they don’t. I would imagine that they probably have increased some capacity for this purpose. Now, it might just be in an above-ground storage facility that there’s no fuel in it unless they have to activate it for a storm, and then they might do a big fuel dump and have all this fuel on hand prelandfall so they have availability to sustain them over a two- or three- or four-day operational period until they can get a resupply in.

Smith: You say you were making daily runs to different locations with the Harrison County trucks. How long does it take a refrigerated truck—you’re using refrigerated trucks for dead bodies. How long does it take for that truck to run through the supply of diesel that it can hold to run its refrigeration unit?

Weaver: I’m wanting to say that we—I’m wanting to say we ran it every other day, so we kind of split it up. I don’t know if we had anything that had to be run on a daily basis. There might’ve been some, but again, my part was, “Let’s get the thing established.” Once it was, who was running it, they knew the nuts and bolts of how often. I just wanted to know—

Smith: Make sure you got fuel.

Weaver: —“Do we have any fuel issues?” “No. It’s going fine.”

Smith: And people who can deliver.
**Weaver:** Yeah, it’s being taken care of.

**Smith:** And it’s on schedule. Were you delivering fuel at some point—now you correct me. The original reefer trucks that you’re talking about in Harrison County were at the funeral home there by the county courthouse in Gulfport.

**Weaver:** Yeah. I think there was one there. There was one in Biloxi.

**Smith:** One in Biloxi.

**Weaver:** Right.

**Smith:** And at some point they were consolidated to the airport.

**Weaver:** Right. There was the morgue set up out at the airport at a later time.

**Smith:** Did you continue fueling that morgue, or did they have some federal supply?

**Weaver:** We might’ve run some fuel out there on occasion, but I would imagine at the time that probably was set up they might’ve had power because that was a couple of weeks—

**Smith:** A couple of weeks.

**Weaver:** —after that time period. So I remember going out there on one or two occasions to the site, and I just don’t recall if there was power or not set up, but I think they probably did have.

**Smith:** Well, we started in the fuel question here by looking at your list. Keep going with that list. That’s a good list.

**Weaver:** OK. Let me get through here. Another thing we did earlier on—and I was real proud of the effort—we knew based on the level of destruction that we were going to have a housing issue, temporary housing. So we assigned an employee the task to set up housing, and the initial intent was to go find locations where travel trailers could be set up. Well, the first inkling was, “Let’s go check the existing trailer parks and RV parks.” One of the things that we uncovered early was that the people was beating us to the punch. We had a large trailer manufacturing company was going out, securing available spots. We found, I think it was, insurance companies had secured because they knew they had an influx of people coming into town for adjusting purposes and all that. So we were finding that there wasn’t a lot of opportunity in existing mobile home parks to be able to secure for travel trailers for the citizens. Predominantly it was construction companies, debris companies, insurance companies, and they had it. We didn’t have the opportunity to go out and negotiate costs. We were just trying to identify potential locations because we wanted to have this
information so when the FEMA people came, we could say, “This is where we need to go.” So we were probably two or three days out doing that before the housing personnel with FEMA made contact with us. So the ball changed; the game changed on that. Then we’re looking for tracts of land that could be developed into a mobile home park or an egg, what they called an egg site. It was a temporary where they’d go put utilities on top of the ground and put a bunch of travel trailers in. So that was a big undertaking to get those established. Certainly we were encountering opposition by some of the local population that would be living close to it, just wasn’t real supportive of it, was almost, “I understand they need a place to stay, but I don’t want it in my backyard.” So we encountered a lot of that, but fortunately a lot of the communities did step up, and we were able to secure some locations, and we were able to get those eggs in. That was one component of it. The second component of it was we had a bunch of—I think we had about three thousand or so still in the schools and—

Smith: This would’ve been a couple of weeks after the storm?

Weaver: Yeah, I think it was because I think our goal was—I think the schools wanted to be open for the first of October, so we had a challenge to get them, get the participants out of the schools.

Smith: The schools were actually shelters?

Weaver: In the schools as shelters. So what we did initially is we worked with the school system, and we combined shelters. We tried to condense down; instead of having ten schools, we had three schools, and that freed up the other seven to have their repairs made. Then we focused on: where could we move? Well, I’m real proud of the board of supervisors for their commitment to step up and say, “We’re going to take care of this,” because the board turned over their community centers so we could transition people out of schools and bring them into a community center. Red Cross worked with us on continuing to run the shelter. I think we had one at D’Iberville; I think we did one at Woolmarket, West Harrison County, and then we did one in Gulfport. They did one up in Soso. So we were able to take them out of the school and put them into the community center. And it was cot living, but they were getting three meals a day; they were able to come and go and go take care of things they needed to take care of. So we made that transition. While we were doing that, we were still working on continuing to identify trailer park locations, and also we were working on the issue of tent cities. And that’s where they came in and built the hardback canvas tents, and we ended up having two of those: one in D’Iberville and one over in Long Beach. And that was a bit of a challenge. The military had initially stepped up, and they were going to build them.

Smith: That’s kind of what the Seabees [CBs, Naval Construction Battalion] do for Marines anyway.

Weaver: Yeah, that’s what they do. Well—
Smith: For Marines to go anywhere in the world, they got to have Seabees putting up those villages for them.

Weaver: Word was there was at least one contractor in the state that had some opposition to that, and it delayed it. They felt like there ought to have been a contractor building, where the contractor could build it and put people to work and made a profit off of it. But military was doing it for what the costs were. So it was unfortunate that that got involved, but finally it got worked through, and the military built the two, and we transitioned the people into the tent cities and cleared the community centers. We made makeshift repairs to make the building safe, but there was still additional work that needed to be done. It almost comes back to trying to get that sense of normalcy. If somebody had a wedding booked for December 15, they wanted to have their wedding in that building. If they had a family reunion scheduled for January or something, so we had to—

Smith: Get the community centers empty.

Weaver: —get the community centers back. So we had to make that next transition into tent cities until all the mobile home parks was built, or people were able to find a place to live elsewhere.

Smith: What were the capacity of the two tent cities in Harrison County? Do you know?

Weaver: I’m going to guess probably somewhere around two hundred.

Smith: Two hundred each?

Weaver: Each.

Smith: And do you know how long they operated?

Weaver: The one in Long Beach shut down—I would imagine they operated for a couple of months. One of the things we were encountering is with the food contract because the food contract was only for the residents, and it turned out to be the community food place, and we ended up having to enforce it, and people that were not signed residency at the tent city wasn’t able to eat, and it became a media issue. So that one shut down earlier than the one in D’Iberville did. And then what D’Iberville ended up doing, the City of D’Iberville worked out an agreement with FEMA to allow them to continue, no cost to FEMA, and they made it a volunteer village. So volunteers that came in to assist ended up utilizing the tent cities as living quarters. They had showers and things like that, and I think the volunteer organizations provided the food for the participants who stayed in it. So that proved to be very beneficial for the community of D’Iberville to have that housing quarter set up.
Smith: Are there any other issues where you might’ve had a military capacity to rebuild or recover something where you had this dispute over whether you should let the military do it or take bids on the project?

Weaver: No. I think that probably was the only one that I was aware of, and it’s just unfortunate. We were trying to move forward; we were trying to get these things built, because we really got to a point, we entertained the idea, and we met with several, Kellogg, Brown and Root, places like that, to see if we could facilitate tent cities and contract out large tent living quarters, large tent, a place to eat, and there was none to be found. I mean they were searching foreign countries. And keep in mind they had New Orleans. By this time [Hurricane] Rita had already—you got the war in Afghanistan and Iraq going on, so there really wasn’t—

Smith: Tents are—

Weaver: There was no real supply of tents and Kellogg, Brown and Root gave a price that was just outrageous, and then they couldn’t even assure that they could get the tents. And that’s why it was so important to get what the Seabees were going to be able to do, because they weren’t the same type of tent. South Central Bell had a real nice operation out there at Three Rivers School. The power companies had really—and we were looking for those kind of things. We couldn’t get them. We couldn’t get them done because there was no tents to be secured. So that left us to that military-style, tent-city situation.

Smith: Just back tracking to the fuel situation again. Was the county involved in supplying the power company with fuel?

Weaver: No.

Smith: They got all those trucks going.

Weaver: No.

Smith: So they had their own set of—

Weaver: They had their own.

Smith: —supplies somehow—

Weaver: Um-hm.

Smith: —that they were keeping—

Weaver: Correct.

Smith: —for thousands of vehicles.
**Weaver:** In their prestorm advantage, they take care of the whole thing. They take care of the sleeping quarters, their feeding services, their laundry services, everything is precontract. They’ve got it secured.

**Smith:** So you didn’t have to worry about them.

**Weaver:** Did not have to worry about them.

**Smith:** Were you having to worry about National Guard troops with the fuel—

**Weaver:** No.

**Smith:** —business?

**Weaver:** No.

**Smith:** So you just basically—the operations that the county has to operate, the EMAC [Emergency Management Assistance Compact] officers—

**Weaver:** Um-hm.

**Smith:** —firemen, you’ve got to take care of fuel for them.

**Weaver:** Um-hm.

**Smith:** So well, that’s a pretty big fuel job right there. Well, what else have you got on the list? That housing is good; the tent city is interesting.

**Weaver:** Let me go through this thing here and make sure we—community centers, the tent cities. (brief interruption)—the issue.

**Smith:** OK, big issue.

**Weaver:** Big issue. Yeah. It made Nightline; was the clothing donations. You have to admire the will of the American people in their desire to help people in need, and we were seeing tractor-trailer loads of clothing that was being trucked in here. The unfortunate thing is the driver would just be assigned to bring the clothes in and leave. So they go find a corner parking lot; they take the clothes out, close the truck up, and leave. So you have these donated clothes in a parking lot. Well, that was fine until the first rainfall, and at that point the clothes were not really of any use, particularly if they were out there for a day or two, and they started getting—

**Smith:** Moldy.
Weaver: —moldy and whatever. So we started realizing we would have a problem with this, and we called a couple of organizations to see if they would be willing to take it on. We need to have a central point to bring it into; we need to establish a distribution area so we can let the public know, “If you need clothing, you can come here.” So we couldn’t get anybody to step up. I think Joe Spraggins and John McAdams had met with a person at—I forget if it was the Salvation Army or if it was the Thrift Store. No. I’m sorry. It was Goodwill, Goodwill Center. And they worked out an agreement that they would take the clothes, they would clean them, and they would put them on a rack. And I don’t think that there was a cost incurred for that donated stuff. But Goodwill does sell items.

Smith: Used clothing.

Weaver: It’s not a large-dollar amount, but they use it to cover operational costs. Well, there was a person that I guess took offense to it and contacted the national media to make Goodwill—what’s the ABC, Nightline, that we were taking donated clothing, donated by Americans, and Goodwill was selling them, which was totally untrue, but it was out there. So fortunately the next day they interview Joe, and I think there was a retraction, and I think there might’ve been an apology that they got the story wrong. But we ended up having to set up a store like. We had it down at the coliseum, and we had employees that set the clothes up on racks, had them by sizes and women’s, kids, things like that, and it was at the coliseum where people could go and, almost like it was—under a big tent, but they were able to go do their shopping. We also did that with commodities. We had a couple of tents. I think we had one up in Saucier, had some around here just north of Orange Grove where we set a tent up, and cleaning supplies. Anything that was donated that people would need, we brought there. We might have a person monitoring it for security reasons, but you just come up and get what you need. But those are things we had to do to make sure we took those products that came in and got it out for people’s needs. So that was another thing we did. I was thinking, there’s—I’m sure we could talk about a lot. But the one thing that was truly invaluable was these IMT [Incident Management Teams] teams.

Smith: IMT meaning?

Weaver: Incident management teams.

Smith: OK. This is the Florida people?

Weaver: Well, Florida started. Florida was the first team, but they had to depart early because there was a threatening storm, so the second team that came in was Tallahassee, and they were primarily law and fire personnel, the first crew that came in. I think they were here fourteen days, ten days, something like that. The second Tallahassee group that came in was primarily construction, public works, engineering, things like that. And that’s kind of how they do. They create these teams for specialty reasons. They come in and work their rotation. Then we ended up getting crews coming in out of the Tidewater region, the national, DC region, and I think we pretty
much ended it. We had a couple of Florida, and we had a couple out of that region. We probably in all, probably had six or seven teams over three months. The last group that we specifically asked for was a documentation team. We were being requested to start submitting this information in a format that could be reused by the federal government, of lessons learned. So it was something that was very tough on all of us. Day one, day two, day three was to—if you had a phone in this ear, and you had a phone in this ear, and you had a phone ringing on your back, you didn’t have time to write, so we had to really backtrack and go by memory and discussion and try to capture the information because it was important. It was important for somebody else to understand what we did. I remember guys coming in and say, “We thought we were prepared.” The Florida guys, “We thought we were prepared. We’re doing things here we never thought of.” So I suppose Katrina was a great lesson, not only for us, New Orleans, and those communities, but for the rest of the country that came and experienced, whether they were here, or they were in New Orleans, or where they were, they experienced another level of a disaster that no one had ever, ever thought about. A little story: had a little group coming in from the Tidewater area, and they’re flying in, and they’re telling us the story after they get off the plane and come report to where we are. Say, “We were flying in, and we started looking out the window of the plane, and we started noticing all the blue roofs.” So they said, “Ah, we’ve got to be getting close. Look at all the blue roofs down there.” And they knew what a blue roof meant. So they said, “Well, ten minutes later, the pilot gets on the loudspeaker and says, ‘All right, ladies and gentlemen, we’re about thirty minutes outside of Mississippi Gulf Coast. We’re now flying over Meridian, Mississippi.’” And the guy says, “Oh, crap! If they got that many blue roofs up in Meridian, a hundred fifty miles from the Coast, I hate to see what the Coast looks like.” And I mean, these guys come down, and they had tears in their eyes. He says, “I don’t know how y’all are doing it.” And there was this bond that was created with each of these teams. And in my office at the beach, I’ve got the emblems of each of the fire departments and each of the police departments that came and assisted us. It’s on the wall. People come in, “What’s that for?” I tell them those are the people that came and helped us with the operation response and recovery. We couldn’t capture everybody because the people that came and helped Harrison County weren’t the same people that helped Gulfport, weren’t the same people that came and helped Biloxi. They all had teams that came in; some had them from Kansas; some had them from different parts of Florida, and some came from California, wherever. We had them, and everybody else had them, so that tends to be the thing as we went over the years and going to the hurricane conference or whatever, you can count all the different people that worked different parts of the disaster. And I was proud of what we were able to do. Rupert, myself, and Pam had the opportunity to sit down with Secretary Chertoff and discuss what we did in Harrison County because it had gotten back to that level of how we put together the incident management team, and how we focused, and what we were able to do. And I’m wanting to say, and I might be wrong on this, but I’m wanting to say it’s one of the first natural disasters that full unified command was stressed to be implemented.
Smith: Let’s talk about that a little bit because I’ve heard you mention that before in a meeting. It seems to me that; let’s see, you’ve got Harrison County personnel, you’ve got from time to time, I’m guessing, some people from the State of Mississippi.

Weaver: Um-hm.

Smith: Public health, highway patrol, the transportation department, MEMA. You’ve got National Guard operations. You’ve got personnel in from different states, surrounding states, under the EMAC umbrella. You have the normal egos working in the state and local government between counties and cities. And tell me about unified command in that environment.

Weaver: Well.

Smith: What is it? How did it work, and why was anybody interested in how it worked?

Weaver: Well, how it worked for us—and a big credit goes to our political leadership; they easily could have stepped in, and, I guess, tried to exert their power and responsibility and start dictating things. But they had the utmost confidence in Joe Spraggins; that was first and foremost.

Smith: So we’re talking about mayors and county—

Weaver: Mayors.

Smith: —supervisors.

Weaver: County supervisors. What we did early on was, under the unified we had our sit[uation] report meetings, our planning meetings.

Smith: Situation report?

Weaver: Right. And we had our command stat meetings. We did that once in the morning, once in the afternoon. So on the sit report, every representative that had a function was there and just a quick example of how beneficial it was. We had a rep from Mississippi Power, we had a rep from Coast Electric, we had a rep from the hospital. Hospital people would come in and say, “Hey, I can get X number of beds ready if I can get power to this location.” Power company, “Can we make that happen? What do you need from us?” “Well, I really need to get the road cleared.” We had the road personnel there, so we could somewhat schedule the activity to take care of that need. If I needed power down to a huge lift station to get a treatment plant up and running, we could communicate to the power company, “Hey, we need some focus paid to this location. Can you help us?” “That’s scheduled first thing in the morning. We’ll get it taken care of.” So just a coordination effort. It wasn’t the power company just going off, doing their thing. We were discussing where we
needed to go with this, and everybody was participating and working towards those common goals that we established from meeting to meeting to meeting. So that helped tremendously. Everybody would come in and say, “This is what we’re doing.”

**Smith:** And who all would be in the room when you’d have a situation report meeting? Obviously you. What? Joe Spraggins?

**Weaver:** Yeah, Joe—

**Smith:** Rupert.

**Weaver:** Rupert and myself, Pam.

**Smith:** Law enforcement people?

**Weaver:** Well, what we tried to do is, we assigned somebody responsible for law, so whoever that person that was assigned for law enforcement [was], was responsible to track the other law enforcement communities and get what they’re doing, what are their needs. So we had a law rep; we had a fire rep; we had search and rescue. We didn’t have search and rescue from each municipality. We had the search-and-rescue guy. He was responsible for all of them. So you had to assign the people their role and trust them to do what was needed. So we didn’t have—we might’ve had thirty people in the room; we didn’t have five hundred. We didn’t allow it to become a bitch session. “Listen, we’re only focusing on what we’ve done, and what do we need to do. We’re not going to complain that we didn’t get this out of FEMA. We’re not going to complain that this guy wouldn’t help me. We’re not going to get into that. We’re going to talk about what we’ve accomplished, and where we need to go, and that’s all this meeting’s about.” Earlier on, one of the mayors, one of the younger mayors—I’m not going to go any further than that—had attended, and it became a question and answer thing. Well, Joe finally says, “Mayor, with all due respect, this ain’t a Q&A session. We’re here to understand what each one of these individuals have accomplished today, and what they need tomorrow, and how can we collectively work together to take care of all of these needs because the better we work together, the sooner we get this taken care of.” So that’s how we did it. And if somebody got to want to do question and answers, we’d say, “Hey, it’s OK. We’ll do a sidebar. Let’s meet after this meeting. There’s no sense in tying up fifteen, twenty, thirty other people for your question when you and I can discuss it outdoors and take care of your problem. So let’s just keep it short and simple, focus, and we go forward.” So that was part of it. The planning meetings, if there was particular issues that we wanted to focus on for the next day, we would ask those individuals to stay for the planning meeting. We might not have needed a HAZMAT guy, but we might’ve needed a power company guy; we might’ve needed the ambulance guy; we might’ve needed the coroner, we might, you know, whatever. So we would just strategically work that, and we would have our command staff meeting, and that pretty much consisted of Joe, me, Rupert, Pam, and Lynn Atterbury(?) who served as Joe’s deputy. And in there we would discuss where we’re going, what are some of the issues. Joe would rely on,
“Where do I need to—where can I intervene help on some of these matters?” Joe trusted us, “You’re running operations. You take care of it, and if you got a problem you can’t handle, you got a problem you need help on, then come see me. I trust you.” And that’s how we run it, and I think that was part of the reason that we were successful in dealing with it the way we did.

Smith: So within the group in Harrison County there’s a considerable amount of delegation of authority.

Weaver: For that.

Smith: You didn’t feel like you were going to get in trouble if you did what you thought needed to be done.

Weaver: Well, it was almost like, “What are you going to do to me? I’m the only guy here.”

Smith: Yeah.

Weaver: “I’m the only guy doing the job.” (chuckle)

Smith: You got a pretty clear mission every day.

Weaver: Yeah.

Smith: You’ve had the situation before; you’ve got a plan, and you’ve got two or three things you’re trying to accomplish.

Weaver: Right. And then when you handle that one, you go to the next one. One of the things that with Joe was, Joe always focused about, and stressed, in his words, “Don’t throw no hatchet. Don’t come in here and say something about somebody or some organization that might hurt somebody’s feelings because you can’t take it back. The damage is done, and we don’t need to be in here offending anybody or getting anybody mad. We just need to figure out a way, OK, if we can’t do it that way, let’s figure out another way to do it.” And that was always kind of the approach. “Just because you told me no, you told me I couldn’t do it that way, you didn’t tell me there was another way we couldn’t do it, so let’s figure out a way to get it done.” And that’s what we did. And we always tried to make sure that if somebody started showing emotion, we’d just interrupt, say, “Hey, that’s not here. Let’s stay positive. Let’s focus on the things that we can take care of. If there’s something we can’t handle right now, let’s talk about it after the meeting and take care of it.” So earlier on when Joe kind of stepped up and commented that to the mayor, there was less interference as far the meeting goes. So everybody was able to come in and state the things where we go. Joe had implemented a four o’clock, executive committee meeting, which consisted of the mayor and the board. So every day at four o’clock, they would meet at the courthouse, and they would talk about those other issues that needed to be dealt
with. And out of that meeting might’ve been instructions for me on what we need to do with a certain aspect of what we were working on, tent cities.

Smith: Maybe prioritizing things from the political side.

Weaver: Or ways they would like to see us go. So they had their input; they provided that initial direction. Our job was to get it done, to make it happen. We knew what the mission was, just make it happen. They didn’t care how we did it. As long as we did what they expected that we were going to do, they were happy. And that’s kind of how things went. And we had great working relationships with all agencies, all levels of municipalities, all federal assets that came in. We all worked well together.

Smith: Were you aware that your Florida teams in all three counties were having these kind of meetings with their supervisor in Tallahassee every day? In Tallahassee they were treating Mississippi, their Mississippi groups as if they were working the Florida counties. Would that surprise you?

Weaver: I guess it would. I just would assume that the lead person that came over was involved, but it makes sense that they would’ve collaborated back. One of the things about the rotation, I think they might have a fourteen-day rotation, but the new crew would come in maybe two days prior to the old crew leaving, so they would have that transitional period where they would bring them up to speed, and they would transition, so it would be a seamless transition. The other thing was that some of them got their sightseeing in before it was time to really show up and work. They came in. They had transition meetings. They might have some downtime, so they go toward disaster. Most of the pictures I got is from the ones they gave me. (laughter) I wasn’t in—

Smith: You didn’t have time to take pictures.

Weaver: I didn’t have time to go take pictures. I’m the six-to-eleven guy. I didn’t have time to go out and take pictures. I think it was three or four weeks before I made it to Pass Christian on Highway 90, post-storm. I was at the courthouse; that was my role. I wasn’t supposed to be out in the field. If I needed something done in the field, I’d have to send somebody. I needed to be there where if people needed me, they knew right where to come.

Smith: What else have you got on your list there?

Weaver: Let’s see. Ambulance, if the bridge is out, Biloxi, 90 out, both ends, Popp’s Ferry out, the community hospital was down.

Smith: Gulf Coast Community Hospital of Biloxi.

Weaver: Yeah. Hancock County.
Smith: The hospital was down?

Weaver: It was down. So we didn’t have a lot of choices in personnel, additional ambulance, because that ambulance that left the area might’ve had to go ten extra miles to get to an available hospital. It might’ve before went five miles. So we had to have extra things. Another thing, a big issue was—and Steve Delahoussaye (?) was great with this—was the ambulance. We had to fight like hell to get that air ambulance to stay for a period of time. But if you had a traumatic injury in Hancock County, you had to go to Louisiana, or you had to go to Gulfport, or maybe to Hattiesburg. Well, that air ambulance probably cut time down thirty minutes on travel time.

Smith: And the Hancock County Hospital, the bottom floor was washed through, so their sanitation and everything was ruined.

Weaver: Well, they ended up having to have a makeshift hospital out there to take care of a lot of things.

Smith: It was North Carolina (inaudible).

Weaver: Yeah. Yeah, those med teams that came in, and they were great, professionally. And from there we wanted to—

Smith: Who is it that you’re fighting to keep the air ambulance available?

Weaver: I think it was—it was either FEMA or it was the—or there might be a federal agency that it would’ve fell under. I don’t know if it—I can’t remember now if it was FEMA, or if it was like GSA [General Services Administration] or something like that. But Steve really had to work hard to convince them to allow that thing to stay as long as they did.

Smith: Now, Steve Delahoussaye, can you explain his role?

Weaver: Well, at the time I think Steve had a management position with the AMR [American Medical Response] group that was stationed here locally. Now, since that, I think he’s taking a bigger role in the corporation. But he kind of was that liaison person for AMR and served as kind of our medical ESF [Emergency Support Function] function person for our operation. So when there was a medical issue, Steve was our guy. When there was a public health issue, Dr. Travacheck (?) was our guy. If it was a transportation, whoever was sitting at that transportation desk was our guy, and you just went to that station and say, “I need help with this.” Tell them what it is, and they would work the issue. Public health was an issue, problem for us. We just didn’t have, one of the problems, we just didn’t have good communication with the state department of public health. There was a rift going on between the local guy, Dr. Travacheck, and the management people, and it was just, it was like pulling teeth to
get people to attend meetings. But fortunately at the end we got things worked out, and I think that might’ve just been a turf battle that got involved in somewhat creating a little interference on occasion.

Smith: Go ahead with your list. This is good. See what you got.

Weaver: Another little issue, it wasn’t a major thing, but it’s how the bureaucracy of some organizations, but food coordination. Who would’ve thought you had to coordinate where you feed for the day, but we had to. I had to take a person; every day we’d have to take a map. Red Cross, I don’t know how they come up with their numbers, but they would decide they’re going to feed by zip code, and they wouldn’t let us know till about seven o’clock at night, “OK. We’re going to feed in 39532, 39507, 39503.” So they’d tell us about seven, eight o’clock that evening where they’re going to feed the next day. Fortunately, Salvation Army was much more flexible.

Smith: Now, when Red Cross feeds, we’re talking about these trucks that take soup out.

Weaver: Right, the mobile units.

Smith: Mobile kitchens.

Weaver: And they all had their stationary, and everybody knew where they were at, but the mobile units that went out in the community. Well, some zip codes might’ve had power; some still didn’t have it, but Red Cross was going to just—I don’t know if they pulled from a hat, or what they did. Fortunately, like I said, Salvation Army was flexible, so what they told us, they said, “We’ll tell you what. You get with us after they give you the locations, and we’ll fill wherever else you need us.” So every day I had to have an employee that would get with Red Cross, plot on the map where it would be they were going to serve for the next day, and then we’d get Salvation Army to go ahead and plug in the rest of it. So at the next morning sit report meeting, we’d be able to put on the map, “All right, people, this is where the mobile unit’s going to be running today. Try to get the word out to the public. The mobile unit’s going to run this area, this area, this area, this area, and this area.” But those are just little intricate things that you had to deal with, and those are the, how we combatted it.

Smith: Do you know how many of those mobile units—

Weaver: Oh, they probably—

Smith: —Red Cross and Salvation Army might’ve had to get?

Weaver: Twenty, twenty-five, maybe.

Smith: Maybe twenty-five?
Weaver: Yeah.

Smith: How much of it was Red Cross, and how much was the Salvation Army?

Weaver: I’m just going to say 50/50. I don’t know. I just—

Smith: So they had cooking stations.

Weaver: Yeah.

Smith: And then they would load the trucks.

Weaver: Um-hm.

Smith: And take the hot meals out that way.

Weaver: Yeah. And then they would have areas where people could just drive up and eat there. So. And then there was a lot of volunteer groups, two weeks out, three weeks out came in and set up shop at a church, set up shop at a parking lot, set up shop somewhere, and they’d cook for ten days. So it took an effort on this guy that handled the food for the Red Cross and Salvation Army to drive out daily and find these cooking places, get their information, how long you’re going to be here so we can get that information out. So anything we could do to try to get accurate information out to the public for what was being done, we put an effort into it.

Smith: Good. Anything else on your list? I’ve got one or two items here, but you’ve got a good list.

Weaver: Well, go ahead, hit me one of yours. Maybe I’ll come up with something else.

Smith: Well, I was going to ask you about communications. Now, you were telling me about missing the paperwork with two cell phones in your ear, and you mentioned that you had tried to make a satellite phone call to your daughter.

Weaver: Um-hm.

Smith: Talk to me about the way communications difficulty affected the response in the first few weeks there.

Weaver: Well, I think probably the biggest thing was for us was locally to communicate amongst personnel. We all ended up having Southern Lincs, which worked.

Smith: Which is a walkie-talkie?
Weaver: It’s like a walkie-talkie system. So we had X-amount prestorm; then we were able to secure more as time went on because they were working immediately. I think I had two of them, so I—like I said, people would call me at different times. The first day or two cell phones didn’t work. They came in and set a tower up at the courthouse, so that gave us cellular service.

Smith: Cellular South was giving you cell service.

Weaver: They were giving us cellular service fairly quickly, and we had other towers set up in other areas, so that worked; that worked out well. So I would say by the end of the first week we had cellular capability. Certainly, from our level we had MEMA representation at the EOC, so if we had a request come in, all we had to do was hand it to the MEMA guy, and they would go to their trailer. They had SAT phone capability, and they would send it into Jackson. It would be processed and we’d get word back. So the SAT phones kept that line of communication with Jackson and their own, but it was more so me being able to call one of my employees and instruct them, “I need you to come here. I need you to go there.” I didn’t have the opportunity to pick up the phone and call Jackson. I didn’t have a need to call Jackson. I didn’t have a need to call Washington. I didn’t need to call none of those people. We just funneled it through the process. Rupert was responsible for placing all the orders. So if I had a fire department person to say, Gulfport, come in, “I need ten firemen with turnout gear. I need five pumper trucks with personnel,” write it up, give it to Rupert, and Rupert would have to review it and sign off on it, and put it in the MEMA channel. It would go through the process, the task order would be assigned, the personnel would be assigned to show up, and they show up to where they’re supposed to report. So that’s how the communication worked. So I didn’t have a need, other than to communicate. And it wasn’t—most of our communication wasn’t necessarily that; it was getting somebody to go look at a building to see if power could be hooked to it as we were trying to transition to community centers, trying to see about if we had access to a generator to hook up at this lift station or go hook up at this water well. Sent personnel out to take a look at it and get an assessment. That was three or four days before we really had a good handle on it.

Smith: OK. Did you have anything to do with the—thinking about debris removal contracts. You said you were responsible at least some of the time to get county crews to move things—

Weaver: Um-hm.

Smith: —off streets.

Weaver: Yeah.

Smith: I’m assuming everybody, National Guard and others were, whoever could (inaudible).
Weaver: Yeah, on the debris side, debris fell under, debris mainly fell under operations, but we had somebody from the county level sign, and certainly MEMA and FEMA had their personnel in there, so I was aware of the ongoings, but I wasn’t an integral part of making sure that I fully understood what the requirements were, what we had to do. Our county engineer took on that role, and he handled those meetings, the coordination, things of that nature. Later in time, as things tended to slow down, and then I started assuming more and more of my normal day-to-day operation with the beach, the bridge, and traffic. And then I had debris issues that I had to get engaged with with the beach, but the initial storm debris—the beach, we didn’t touch the beach for weeks. It was just like (inaudible) stuff on top of it, and some of it was already cleared up because I know military made a landing, and they pushed a bunch of stuff out of their way to bring equipment on and off, for assets they brought in off of ships. And there was a time we almost, we almost utilized their fuel, but their diesel isn’t the same diesel we have to use on our stuff, so it was really going to be more of an issue. They were looking at setting (inaudible) up, transferring from the ship onto the beach and then into the (inaudible) and then disbursement and truck it here and there. But we were able to get our fuel operation up and running, so we didn’t have to go into that angle. But that was being handled by our county engineer, and they had regular debris meetings, and the FEMA people were there and explained the process, what needed to be done, what had to be followed and stuff like that.

Smith: OK. What else is on your list?

Weaver: Let’s see. I had pre, post stuff, IMT [Incident Management Team] teams, talked about Joe a little bit and the crew, talked about the fuel issue, the facilities. I remember a couple of days after the storm; we were down at Island View—well, it was the Grand at the time. That was one of my first trips out, but we was talking about identifying a place where new people were coming in, where we could stage them, whatever. And I said, “Look, the Grand across the highway didn’t look like it was damaged too much from what I’ve been told. Let’s go down there.” So we’re down there, and we’re sorting through the building, looking for anybody with the Grand Casino. Well, out comes two guys from the Grand Casino, and I head up there, and I head there, and I said, “Look,” who I was, was there damage, blah, blah, blah. And here comes Gene Taylor, and he’s got a pair of penny loafers on and short pants, an old, cut-up T-shirt.

Smith: That’s our U.S. Congressman.

Weaver: U.S. Congressman Gene Taylor was there, and he said, “I was wondering how long it would take before somebody would come down here and check on that.” And I think he was kind of doing the same thing, but we weren’t able to work out the details with securing the hotel. And I think they probably looked at doing other things because there was a lot of contract people coming in and looking for places to stay, and I understand they’ve got expenses tied up in it, and they needed to figure out a way they could start getting some income coming in to support their operation and
their project, so it didn’t work out for us, but in the end it all worked out good for everybody.

Smith: Were you responsible for finding housing for all of these EMEC people that were coming in?

Weaver: No.

Smith: What did you do with them?

Weaver: Well, traditionally, early, the request is they need to be self sufficient.

Smith: Bring their own tents?

Weaver: Bring their own living quarters. Now, IP was secured by the federal government. So—

Smith: That’s the Imperial Palace—

Weaver: Yeah, the IP.

Smith: —Hotel in Biloxi, thirty stories.

Weaver: FEMA secured the whole facility, so there were times that some of the IMT teams were able to stay there. There was times that they came and stayed in tents on the beach property because eventually, the second week, third week, we moved the operation out of the courthouse and brought it over to the beach complex. I mean, at one time we were using basically the whole bottom floor as the operation. Tax assessor’s office, we had housing over there. We had people in the tax collector’s office doing things, and they needed to get business back up. We had to open the courthouse; people needed to pay their taxes and get car tags, and certainly the car business was—

Smith: Booming.

Weaver: —popular after Katrina. So you know Mr. LaRosa(?) needed to put people to work. So we ended up moving the operation of that over to the beach office, and that’s where the IMT teams came, and that’s where they worked from, so we ended up having a couple of them brought in their fire trucks, their command operation fire trucks, and they were staged there, and we utilized the whole complex. We had makeshift showers built and all that. People just stayed there.

Smith: So you ran a little bit of a hotel operation yourself, but you were able to find places for them.

Weaver: Yeah, we were.
Smith: What else is on your list?

Weaver: I think we might’ve covered it. Like I said, I only covered the first couple of weeks, and I’m sure that if you think back that you could come across things that did occur on down the line from that standpoint, but one of the things I do take from it is how supportive these IMT people were. It must’ve been, it must’ve been either Wednesday, Wednesday or Thursday afternoon, I evidently hit a brick wall. I mean, I’d just, I was mentally out of it. And one of the guys, he’d seen me—and that’s one of the things that they stress: you have a buddy system. These IMT teams should come in, and they target one person that this person needs to look out for. If you see them looking a little down, well, you go grab them, and you get them out of there, and you take them somewhere. Well, the guy I guess that was assigned to me, he come up to me, and he said, “Man, what’s going on?” I said, “I don’t know. I just got tired all of a sudden.” He says, “Come on. Let’s go take a walk.” So we went out and went into the Dixie trailer, and I mean the air conditioner was working great. He said, “Man, you hungry, thirsty?” I said, “Yeah. I’m hungry, but I only had a little pack of crackers today.” He said, “That’s all right. Come on in.” Man, they had Nutty Buddy bars, potato chips; they had everything. And I said, “You got a Diet Coke in there?” I had had nothing but water to drink. “Yeah.” So I started hitting that, and then I happened to look up, and the TV’s playing. The first time I’d seen TV, and they’re showing the levees of New Orleans, over the top. And I remember saying, “Oh, crap, where’s that at?” And he said, “Oh, you don’t know?” I said, “Know what?” He said, “New Orleans is going under water.” And I said, “You’re kidding me.” He said, “Yeah.” He said, “The levees are failing. That’s live pictures of the waters flowing into New Orleans. It’s going under water.” I couldn’t believe it, and that was before we found out.

Smith: This was maybe Thursday, you think?

Weaver: Either Wednesday or Thursday, whenever, because it was right before, right before we got word about Ida’s being diverted to New Orleans, so I know it wasn’t Tuesday. It had to be either Wednesday afternoon, or it was Thursday afternoon. It had to be one of them. It probably was Wednesday afternoon. But that was the first time any of us had knowledge that this issue was being played out in New Orleans. We thought it was just the coastline of ours and the coastline of Louisiana. We didn’t know New Orleans was in the shape they were in.

Smith: How would you describe your own team? You put a lot of praise on the Florida people coming in and kind of getting you focused. You really needed to pick out two or three things to do and not get sidetracked from them. How would you characterize your situation at the courthouse, the courthouse crew? Were you-all dazed and sort of overwhelmed by—

Weaver: Well, I think—
Smith: —the size of everything that had to be done?

Weaver: For me, I don’t think I fully grasped my task until Wednesday morning. I remember when Larry grabbed me and told me they wanted me to run operations; I got this pit in my stomach that, “Man, what I got to do? Can I do it?” I mean, it’s just all of a sudden you got this, almost like an insurmountable task placed on you, and you don’t even know where to start. You don’t have a clue; you’d never been in this. Nobody’s been in it, probably. First thought that came to my mind was, “When am I going to see my family?” I’m thinking I might be here for weeks and months. And then you come back that I had four family members lose their homes; don’t even know about my wife’s aunts and uncles that lived in the Point of Biloxi. I imagined their homes were all gone, and I’m not going to be there to help them. I cannot be at any of their houses to help salvage, strip out, or nothing because I’ve got this job to do and not knowing where to go, like I said. So as those things unfolded throughout the day, I started getting an understanding. But when I came in Wednesday morning, like, I’m a man on a mission! I know what I got to do. We’ve just got to make a decision and move forward, get the best information you can get together and make a decision and move forward. If we make a mistake, we’ll correct it. And Rupert, I think, probably was in that same boat because we didn’t have a choice at that point. These IMT teams came in. They were there. They were instrumental in help, direction, but we made those choices. We made those decisions; they didn’t. They were there—if we got talking about an issue, and we needed something checked out, they would take one of theirs to go with one of ours, and they collectively would come back and make an assessment. And these IMT teams never made decisions for us, they just offered suggestions, bounced ideas off of each other, and we got to the point, Rupert and I, before we would go into the executive committee meeting and the sit report meetings, we would have a meeting with the IMT team, and we would discuss things so it helped us better prepare for when we got in those meetings.

Smith: Clarify your thinking.

Weaver: And where we needed to go.

Smith: Bounce ideas around.

Weaver: Yeah, but like I said, I think Wednesday morning it no longer became an insurmountable task. It came, “We have a job to do. We’re going to do it. It’s going to be tough.” You had your ups and downs; you had your moments. I remember the first Sunday, we had a—I think our command staff meeting was eight o’clock, and we had our sit report meeting at seven, and they were having mass at St. John at eight o’clock. I went, and I told Joe; I said, “Joe, are we going to cancel this? Are we going to move the eight o’clock meeting to nine?” “Why?” I said, “Because we’re going to church.” And we walked over there, and there was a lot of people that were working in that courthouse, may not have even been Catholic, but there was a church. I mean, and it is was just, I think for me—and we all cried. Everybody had tears in their eyes
during that mass. But for me, it just signaled home that a lot of people were counting on us to do it.

Smith: Do you remember the priest who officiated at the mass?

Weaver: It was a young priest. I cannot remember his name, but he was a younger priest.

Smith: Did he have anything particularly memorable in his homily, in his sermon?

Weaver: Yeah. I don’t remember at the time. I know he spoke about faith, and I know he spoke about the hurt, and he spoke about God giving people the strength to overcome these things. And so much of what he talked about, we had already just experienced in what we were doing. But like I say, if anything profound that I took out of anything was that word from Chip Patterson, “Y’all are emotionally attached to this. You can’t take care of everybody tonight.” That one comment just kind of crystallized it: “I can’t be everything to everybody, but let’s take it one step at a time.”

Smith: Very good. What’s the best memory of all of this if you had to label something the best memory coming out of Katrina?

Weaver: I don’t know if you could say there was—I can’t say there was one. I think it’s more of a symbol for me is the people and the positive media the Mississippi Coast got. I know in Hancock County there was somebody that did the same thing I did, and I know in Jackson County there was somebody that did the same thing I did. So for us to get that positive out of it, and for New Orleans to not have been so positive, I knew that all of our efforts and everybody that put their time and their heart and soul into it, that was rewarding.

Smith: Is your impression that Hancock and Jackson County had the same degree of sort of unified command?

Weaver: I think they did. Certainly I think they probably didn’t have the number of resources as far as internal personnel that would be able to step up because they’re not as large a county, so they probably didn’t have these numbers to draw from. And I know there was times, particularly with Hancock County, we assisted them, and I don’t think we were really in a situation that we needed to help Jackson County out. Bush did a great job over there. (Inaudible) in Hancock County, but like I said, I think it was just about sheer numbers. Harrison County has always been looked at as as leisure on the Mississippi Gulf Coast, and I think we were looked at from that point, also, but like I say, that probably, just that in itself gives me more pride about what we were able to accomplish as a group of people, not just the IMT group and the EOC group, but the entire Coast. And I always comment on people that Katrina was my worst and greatest moment in my career.
Smith: What’s the worst memory you have coming out of that? You mentioned the sinking feeling in your stomach when they told you you were going to have this responsibility.

Weaver: Yeah.

Smith: Was there another sinking feeling, worst memory?

Weaver: I don’t know. Sometimes I almost take that one moment as, I question my ability. Why did I feel that way? But nobody knows how they’ll react until they’re put in that situation, and so I don’t look at that as a bad moment, probably just a reality check. (laughter) You may be able to do a lot of things, but this might be one you may not be so good at it. And will I be able to do it? But I don’t know; I think I have a harder time with it today than I did for the first year, the way this is lingering on and the difficulties to getting this thing behind us.

Smith: This is four years out.

Weaver: Yeah.

Smith: What’s not been done that you feel frustrated about?

Weaver: I still got projects we’re working. I still got projects that we haven’t put the plans yet to go to MEMA for review because I can’t start it until another project gets completed.

Smith: What’s still outstanding for you?

Weaver: Parking lot, finishing the boardwalk, some of the smaller things associated with the boardwalk, the benches.

Smith: You’re talking about the beachfront now?

Weaver: Beachfront, yeah, those kind of things. Couple that with the Gustav event. We have another declaration post-Katrina, so we’ve got intermingled projects that, part of the damage was Katrina, and some other stuff now is Gustav, keeping it separated. So probably right now, 75, 80 percent of my day is still Katrina related.

Smith: This is four years later.

Weaver: Four years, four plus years out. I’m hoping within the next twelve months it’ll be over.

Smith: So you’re mostly working through the FEMA issues—

Weaver: Well, it’s more—
Smith: —reimbursement issues.

Weaver: Most of it is more through the MEMA, because MEMA’s in a position that they have to review and make sure everything complies. FEMA will come back in on closeout. But it’s just, I guess it was so big of a storm and so much stuff that you submit, it might sit for six weeks before somebody picks it up and looks at it because they might have fifteen other projects that they have to look at, as well. So it’s just the timing of that. We’d all love to have been done by now, but it’s just a reality we’re not. But the burnout from it—I wonder if we were to have another storm, how many people will stay. How many people in these key positions that worked Katrina will stay if they had to do it again, people that’s got retirement made.

Smith: So repeat deployment to the battle zone.

Weaver: Yeah. It might be to the HR [human resources] office and sign your retirement paper, and you’d say, “I ain’t doing it again. Let somebody else do it.” I mean, that’s not uncommon. We lost some key staff post-Katrina; some went off to work for FEMA and MEMA, and some went off and did other things. And that’s counties, cities, whomever. It can happen with a storm that size, and how it impacts you, so I don’t know. Like I said, the worst moment, I think it’s all a bad moment. You can find a lot of good out of it, but that is something I hope no one—I hope we don’t, and nobody else ever has to deal with it.

Smith: How do you think the community as a whole is doing?

Weaver: I think there’s a lot of scars that don’t show, and it’s on the people. People still have a tough time coping with it. Like my mother, her house is put back, but it doesn’t change what they went through, and she gets where she don’t have something to do, she gets down. As long as she’s got something to go do, do something, do this, do that, she’s fine, but if she’s got time to sit and think about it, it comes right back to her, that event. I remember probably it was January or February ’06, I was being interviewed by a gentleman with the paper out of Memphis, talking about the Katrina recovery, the beach and things of that nature. And he says, “Well, how many hours are you working nowadays?” I said, “Probably ten hours or so.” “Well, at least when you get off you can go home and get away from it.” And I says, “No, not really because when I get off, I go change my clothes, and I go to my mother’s house and help her put her house back together.” And the guy says, “I never really thought about it, but y’all are victims; people working the storm are victims.” I said, “Yeah, that’s a good way to put it. You just can’t get away from it.” And I guess right now, being involved with the beach and driving [Highway] 90 pretty much on a daily basis, it’s encouraging to see the progress being made on one side of the roadway, but to look on the other side and see nothing really happening is very discouraging.

Smith: All the vacant lots.
Weaver: Vacant lots, what will it be? Will it ever come back? Who knows? We don’t know. You don’t know.

Smith: Is there anything else that we should’ve talked about that we haven’t talked about? Fifty years from now, what will you want people to know that we haven’t left on the record up here?

Weaver: Well, I certainly hope fifty years from now that Katrina is still the worst national disaster this country’s ever had, and that would be one good thing. Nobody else would have to endure it. Hopefully people can look back at what was done and realize that their communities are better prepared to handle disaster or some like event based on the struggles that we all endured and the lessons we’ve learned, that somehow another community will be better for it. And because one thing I don’t think will ever change, I don’t think; I don’t care if it’s fifty years, a hundred, two hundred years from now, the spirit of the American people will always be as it was for Katrina. I don’t think that will ever waiver. We may get upset, and we may get disappointed with our political leadership, but when the chips are down, they stand up and rally behind the people that needs the help. And if you want to know how, I guess the volunteers was one of the remarkable things that came out of this.

Smith: OK. Well, very good. Thank you so much for your time.

Weaver: You’re quite welcome.

Smith: And I appreciate your willingness to help us document this.

Weaver: You’re quite welcome.

Smith: Thank you.

(end of interview)