Mississippi Oral History Project

Hurricane Katrina Oral History Project

An Oral History

with

Robert E. Bass Jr.

Interviewer: James Pat Smith

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Biography

Mr. Robert E. Bass Jr. was born July 17, 1955, in Gulfport, Mississippi, to Mr. Robert Earl Bass Sr. (born March 12, 1934, Gulfport) and Mrs. Marguerite Stephanie Welsh Bass (born August 5, 1934). Mr. Bass attended St. Thomas Catholic Elementary School, Long Beach; St. John’s Catholic High School, Gulfport; Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College, Jefferson Davis Campus, Biloxi; Mississippi State University, Starkville, from which he earned a BS in accountancy in 1976; and the University of Mississippi Law School, Oxford, from which he earned a JD in 1979.

On May 17, 1980, Mr. Bass married Rebecca Branton (born July 21, 1958, Jackson). At the time of this interview they had two children, Robert Earl Bass III (born 1985) and Stephanie Marie Bass (born 1989).

Mr. Bass has served as an attorney; as a CPA accountant in tax accounting; as State personnel director of Mississippi, 2004 to 2006; as mayor of Long Beach, Mississippi, 1997 to 2004; and he worked for public accounting firms, including Moore and Powell, 1989 to 1997. At the time of this interview, Mr. Bass was the project director, Gulf Coast Recovery, Mississippi Institutions of Higher Learning Board, working directly for the commissioner as a member of his cabinet and staff. He is a Roman Catholic and a member of St. Thomas Catholic Church, Long Beach. Some of his principal interests and activities include general public service, chamber of commerce, school support groups, and Leadership Gulf Coast.
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AN ORAL HISTORY

with

ROBERT E. BASS JR.

This is an interview for the Mississippi Oral History Program of The University of Southern Mississippi. The interview is with Robert E. Bass Jr. and is taking place on May 14, 2008. The interviewer is James Pat Smith.

Smith: This is an interview with Robert Bass. Robert Bass is an attorney and accountant who was formerly a mayor of Long Beach and has been employed by the State Board of Institutions for Higher Learning to help the USM [The University of Southern Mississippi] Gulf Park Campus recover from Hurricane Katrina. The interview takes place on May 14, 2008, in the library of the USM Gulf Park Campus on Highway 90 in Long Beach, Mississippi. The interview is conducted by James Pat Smith of the USM history faculty. Mr. Bass, would you state your name and today’s date?

Bass: Do you want full name?

Smith: Full name.

Bass: My name is Robert Earl Bass Jr.

Smith: And today’s date?

Bass: Today’s date is May 14, 2008.

Smith: And what is your current position?

Bass: My current official title is Project Director, Gulf Coast Operations for the Mississippi Institutions of Higher Learning [IHL]. I work directly for the commissioner as a member of his cabinet and staff.

Smith: OK. And prior to your work with IHL related to the Gulf Park recovery, what jobs had you held before that time?

Bass: Well, immediately prior to taking on my current position as Director of Gulf Coast Operations, I served the state as state personnel director, which it’s a government state agency which dealt with all the human resource responsibilities for all members of all employees of state government outside of the IHL system and the community college system and the state department of education, teachers specifically. Prior to becoming state personnel director—
Smith: What were the dates that you were state personnel director?

Bass: I was state personnel director from July 1 of 2004 through August 31 of 2006. Immediately prior to being state personnel director, I served as mayor of the City of Long Beach, Mississippi, from July 7, 1997, to June 30 of 2004, roughly seven years, and part of that was having to deal with USM and Gulf Park for a substantial portion of that time, as mayor.

Smith: And prior to being mayor you were?

Bass: Oh, prior to being mayor, I spent almost twenty years in the private sector, working for a series of public accounting firms, the most recent one, the prior eight years before becoming mayor, was with the firm of Moore and Powell CPAs [certified public accountants], a multioffice firm based here along the Mississippi Gulf Coast. I’m a certified public accountant as well as an attorney, and my duties were specifically in the area of tax consulting, tax return preparation for businesses and individuals and other entities as well as doing a little bit of consultant work as well for different individuals and businesses in terms of trying to help their businesses and their personal investments succeed.

Smith: And where did you attend school? Start with elementary and go through law school and business school.

Bass: OK. Well, I went to St. Thomas Elementary School, just one of the neighbors to USM Gulf Coast at the Gulf Park Campus. I went there between first grade and seventh grade. And you could go no higher at St. Thomas Elementary at that time. Went to, then transferred to St. John High School in Gulfport, and was there from eighth grade through my graduation from high school in 1972. Following graduation from St. John, I attended and graduated from Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College, was specifically at their Jefferson Davis Campus. I began there in August of [19]72, completed my associate degree in May of 1974. From there I transferred to Mississippi State University, attending from August of 1974 through August of 1976; attained my bachelor of science in accountancy. Upon graduation from State, then attended the Ole Miss Law School from August of [19]76 through May of [19]79 and obtained my Juris Doctorate degree at that point in time. I currently have an inactive license to practice law, but the law degree has served me well since I attained it. At that point in time, I began working for one of the international public accounting firms. At the time it was Ernst and Whinney, now Ernst and Young, and began my public accounting and consulting career in Memphis, Tennessee, in June of 1979.

Smith: And when did you move back to the Coast? Move back to Long Beach?

Bass: Moved back to the Mississippi Gulf Coast in late 1989. I think I started with Moore and Powell on October 31, 1989, and moved here from Lafayette, Louisiana, where I’d spent the prior eight years and began working with Moore and Powell and
stayed there with that firm in their Gulfport office until I decided to run for mayor in 1997, and at that point was able to win the mayor’s job here in Long Beach.

**Smith:** OK. Robert, what’s your date of birth?

**Bass:** July 17, 1955.

**Smith:** Place of birth?

**Bass:** Gulfport, Mississippi.

**Smith:** Memorial Hospital?

**Bass:** Memorial Hospital, Gulfport, Mississippi.

**Smith:** Your current address?

**Bass:** (The address of the interviewee has not been included in this transcript in order to protect the privacy of the interviewee.)

**Smith:** And what’s your spouse’s name?

**Bass:** My spouse’s name is Becky; it’s Rebecca Branton, B-R-A-N-T-O-N, is her maiden name.

**Smith:** And some men have trouble with this. You can certainly redact the record if you (laughter) don’t remember. She’ll never know that we asked. Do you know the date and place of marriage?

**Bass:** Yes. May 17, 1980, at St. Thomas the Apostle Catholic Church, right next door to the building we’re in right now.

**Smith:** In Long Beach?

**Bass:** That’s right.

**Smith:** And her date of birth? Again, we can redact, if necessary.

**Bass:** Her date of birth is July 21, 1958.

**Smith:** And where was she born?

**Bass:** Jackson, Mississippi.

**Smith:** Did you do any military service?
**Bass:** None.

**Smith:** Do you have any activities or interests, other than the things that you’ve done for your livelihood that would help us understand the perspective you bring to the events we’re going to talk about today?

**Bass:** Most of it’s just been public service work, working with the chambers of commerce and other types of community groups, just, you know, mainly community building. Outside of that, liking to read and watch sports on the weekends, spending time with my kids, watching them grow up and play sports and just trying to be around them. I’m not a hunter, fisher, golfer, or anything else; I just kind of get involved in community activities.

**Smith:** Religious affiliation?

**Bass:** Roman Catholic.

**Smith:** Member of St. Thomas?

**Bass:** St. Thomas.

**Smith:** Do you have any awards or honors that again, would help us understand who you are as a person, who you’ve been?

**Bass:** That one’s kind of a tough one. I mean, I’ve been able to attain certain things. I mean, I was selected as a member of the Second Class of Leadership, Gulf Coast in 1991, 1992. You know, being able to serve your community, your hometown as their mayor is a pretty significant accomplishment that places a lot of public trust in you. I’m sure there’ve been different awards, but I honestly don’t concentrate too much on them, so it’s really hard (laughter) unless I go back and look at a list or look at some prior records for me to really come up with any right now.

**Smith:** Do you know your children’s names? (laughter) And their year of birth or their age now?

**Bass:** Yes. (laughter) I’ve got, I have two children; we have two children. We have Robert Earl III; he goes by the name of Bob. His birthday is September 21, yeah, September 21, no, September 25, 1985. My mother-in-law’s birth date is September 21. My daughter Stephanie Marie was born January 18, 1989. And Bob is currently in the fourth year of a five-year landscape architecture program at LSU [Louisiana State University]. Stephanie has just completed her freshman year at The University of Southern Mississippi in Hattiesburg.

**Smith:** It’s a well-known institution.

**Bass:** Yes, I understand it’s a fairly well-known institution.
Smith: And your father’s name?

Bass: Robert Earl Bass. No senior behind it, but he was, we keep following with junior and the third, and my son keeps threatening to name his firstborn son the fourth, and I don’t know if we need to keep that line going.

Smith: Do you know your father’s date and place of birth?

Bass: Yes. My father was born March 12, 1934, and I believe he was born in Gulfport as well.

Smith: And what major occupations did he pursue?

Bass: He is a retired former dredging—he did dredging work all of his life; wound up being chief superintendent for—his last position was chief superintendent for T.L. James Dredging Corporation. He spent probably a little over forty years, forty-two, forty-three years in the dredging industry; started as an underage employee for, I think, Standard Dredging Corporation in the [19]50s when the new beach was being pumped in, the manmade beach along the Mississippi Gulf Coast, and just stayed with it, and was able to work his way up in the engine room, was very good with mechanics and was known as a diesel engineer, working in the engine room for a series of dredging companies, worked his way up to become a watch engineer to a first assistant chief and then chief engineer, and then became general superintendent for T.L. James and was responsible for the engine room workings for a fleet of dredges.

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

Bass: My mother’s name is Marguerite Stephanie Welch was her maiden name. Again, Long Beach High School graduate, 1952. My dad graduated from St. John High School in 1952. Long-term family. My mother’s, the last house I can remember them living at was over on Fifth Street here in Long Beach, and that house was destroyed when Hurricane Camille came through in 1969. And the back lot of the K-Mart, the old K-Mart is where that house was situated at.

Smith: And do you know your mother’s date and place of birth?

Bass: Yes, August 5, 1934.

Smith: And do you know the date your parents were married?

Bass: August 8, 1953, I believe.

Smith: And do you know the place they were married?

Bass: I believe St. John Catholic Church in Gulfport.
Smith: Did your mother have an occupation or a career outside of home?

Bass: She completed her freshman year at Southern Miss in Hattiesburg, but did not finish her college career. My dad did not go to college. My mother probably had a series of different jobs, but was primarily a homemaker for the first significant part of our lives. In our family we had four boys within five years, and a fifth one who came along down the line a few years after that. So having five boys in the family was a pretty significant chore for her. As my youngest brother became eligible to move from—we all went through St. Thomas Elementary here in Long Beach. As my youngest brother was ready to enter the middle school years, my mother began work because she wanted him to go to St. Stanislaus in Bay St. Louis where he remained until his graduation in 1984.

Smith: Very good. Robert, most of the interview that we’re doing will have to do with Katrina, but I want you to think about Long Beach, generally, and maybe the thing to do to start with is to have you think about the City of Long Beach when you were mayor. What would you have considered at the time that you were elected or the time you left office, as the major problems facing the City of Long Beach?

Bass: When I decided to run for mayor in 1996, preceding the election year 1997, Long Beach at that time was really the subject of a lot of ridicule. The administration that was in office at the time had a mayor and a board of aldermen who became more known for the spats that they had amongst themselves, the fighting that wound up in the paper, the lengthy, disorganized meetings, and it was one of those situations where you had a feeling that there was something really bad wrong over and above what you were reading in the paper, you know, the external indications. But my sense was, is that there was probably something really bad going on, and at the time—you know, I’ve said earlier in this interview, public service is what I really enjoy doing. And I had gotten involved. When I moved back here in October of [19]89, it was with the thought that this was the—I could do business pretty much anywhere I wanted to around the world, but I only could live in one place, and if I was going to live someplace, I wanted to be where I grew up. And when my wife and I made the decision to move back here, it was with the thought that we were going to do anything and everything to make sure it was going to be a good place to live, not just for us, but for our children, and hopefully it would be a place where our children would be able to make the decision if they wished, to raise their families. So considering the level of—ridicule is the best word I can come up with. It was absolute silliness to be honest with you. I think over a period of eight years, prior—from moving here in October of [19]89, moving back in October of [19]89, I developed what I think was a pretty good reputation in the public service circle and in the community circles. And I thought Long Beach was my—I was born in Gulfport, but I was born and raised really here in Long Beach, and I thought that would be a good way for me to see if I enjoyed the true public service arena and the elected official area and to see if I could bring some of the business sense that I’d had and maybe some of the opportunities to maybe bring Long Beach into becoming a contributing member of the Gulf Coast community.
Long Beach is a fairly insulated community; it’s an insular community. People here pretty much like to feel like they’ve got their own thing going, and my thought was, is that Long Beach could really, needed to develop, and I would hope would develop an identity and maybe a role to play within a greater Gulf Coast community here, and maybe bring some semblance of respect back to the city in 1997 was one of the reasons I ran. And also to see if we could help make Long Beach become a more well-known and well-respected member of a larger community was the other thing that I wanted to do when I took office.

**Smith:** And when you became mayor, did your perception of the challenges of Long Beach change any?

**Bass:** No.

**Smith:** What problems did you face immediately that took your time?

**Bass:** (laughter) My first day in office, the day we were sworn in July 7 of [19]97, I went around to all the different other inaugurations that were going on to try, again, to put Long Beach’s best foot forward and extend a congratulatory hand to the other mayors who were coming in, Mayor Short in Gulfport, Mayor Holloway in Biloxi, and Mayor McDonald in Pass Christian. I will never forget; we had our inauguration at Hardy Hall in Southern Miss that morning. And my wife and I upon completion of that, we took the family out to one of her favorite places to eat, the IHOP [International House of Pancakes] down on the beach in Gulfport. And we had a horrible electrical storm that afternoon; I mean, terrible. And so I’m going to all the different inauguration festivities, and I’m down in Gulfport, and we’re really, people are feeling good about Long Beach, feeling better about Long Beach. And I get home that night about eight o’clock, and I get this phone call from this really angry and extremely excited mother who’s saying, “Well, Mr. Problem-solver, I have just finished washing my dishes, and I’m now, presently trying to get my children bathed, and I don’t have any water. What are you going to do about that?” And I said, “Well, I don’t really know. Let me call and see what I can find out.” And in calling the fire department and the police station just to see if they were getting any other calls, found out that the electrical storm that afternoon had hit our main water tower directly, and it knocked out the pumps, and we essentially had no water at all to fight fires or anything else. We had to call and put all the other surrounding fire departments in the other communities on alert in case we had a fire. We couldn’t have fought a fire here in Long Beach. You know that kind of was the precursor or the premonition that there might be something more going on in Long Beach, and it might be a little bit bigger of a challenge than even I had anticipated. The first full day in office, I went back the next morning to congratulate all the folks at the fire department and the police department for having done such a great job in maintaining calm and responding to the situation and really making what could have been a very big problem and a very horrendous problem go away pretty quickly. And the fire chief, who is a third cousin of mine, happened to ask me if he could go buy some cleaning supplies and toilet paper for the central fire station. And I said, (laughter) “Well, how much are we
talking about?” And he said, “Thirty-eight dollars.” And I immediately thought, “This is probably”—it was that decision, I thought, “If this job is going to be four years of approving thirty-eight-dollar purchase orders, I may have made a mistake in seeking the office.” And so I said, “Well, if you need the cleaning supplies and the toilet paper, I mean, go ahead.” Drove back to city hall and was confronted by my city clerk outside city hall, not even getting out of my car, all red-faced, and her first words to me were, “What do you think you’re doing approving purchase orders?” And I just looked at her, and I said, “Maybe you need to go take a look at the organization chart.” And she said, “Do you not understand we don’t have any money?” Now, you know, when you get down to where you can’t even buy toilet paper, things are pretty tough. And what we found out is that we had gone about three years without having received audit reports, any adjusting journal entries, or any kind of other input from the professionals who had been helping us in trying to account for the financial results of the city. I think we had a group of employees who were absolutely terrified, living under the kind of pressure, with constant threats to their employment between competing interests of a mayor and a board of aldermen, trying to see who was going to be controlling the city. Long story short, we absolutely didn’t have any money. We didn’t know what situation we were in, and we had to go through a pretty—you know, you take over in a term with three [months] left in a fiscal year; [we] had absolutely no maneuvering room. We let go whoever we could let go; we stopped any kind of outside contracts for cleaning or yard work or any type of consulting work that was being done. If my office needed vacuuming, I vacuumed my office. If my bathroom needed to be cleaned, I cleaned my bathroom. If I needed things copied, I typically copied them. And what we did over a period of time was really establish a pretty clear avenue of teamwork amongst all the folks within city hall, the department heads, and all the employees, to try and make some things work. The completion of the first fiscal year, the last three months of the fiscal year that we took office, we had some massive, what I’ll call a net operating loss in our main general fund. I think our debt service fund, which is where you mainly make debt payments, on any kind of municipal debt was in the red as well. And I had the state department of audit calling me, saying they hadn’t received an audit report in several years, and they understood that we were in a pretty serious financial condition, and if we didn’t have some answers about when some financial information was going to be showing up in their offices, we were going to be having, we might be in a little bit of trouble. And honestly, I really thought [that] we probably, there was a real chance that the City of Long Beach was not going to make it; we were in such bad shape. But that first full fiscal year that we were in office, from October 1 of [19]97 through September 30, 1998, we were able to turn it around, and I think we went from being so far in the red we just really couldn’t see straight, we wound up operating in the black that first year. And I think we never operated another year, in the red, that I was in office. We may have had to raise taxes a minimal amount. We actually had a tax cut in property tax rates while I was in office. And all of this stuff was not due to anything major that I did; it was just mainly letting the employee know, you know, “Look, you take care of your job. If somebody’s going to put their head on the chopping block, it’ll be me. You just take care of business.” I mean, we turned off half our street lights in this city. It was absolutely that dire. We didn’t have any
choices, which was—it was a pretty significant, it was a very, very significant statement being made by the governing authority of just how serious the financial situation was in this city. Every year in October, cities and municipalities have the opportunity to borrow against the expected or anticipated property tax receipts coming in in January of the following year. The maximum we could borrow was seven hundred and fifty thousand dollars. And I’ll never forget; we’d just got three months of just absolute horror. There was not a bit of good news. We finally were able to authorize the tax anticipation note, anticipation of property tax revenues; got everything done; got the money in the bank. And I think that was on a Friday or a Thursday or Friday, and the following Monday, I’m getting calls, “How come we’re not paid?” I said, “We’ll be getting you some checks out. We’ve just gotten our tax anticipation note.” And I went in and talked to the city clerk, and I said, “Well, when are we going to be able to get so-and-so paid? They’ve just called.” And they said, “Well, the money’s gone.” I said, “What do you mean?” I said, “We got seven hundred and fifty thousand dollars.” She said, “Yes, and we had checks prepared; we had things so bad that that money was just there to cover those checks. We needed to hurry up and issue.” I mean, we still, after having gotten the relief, had to wait until property tax revenues came in to really be able to start making any kind of significant progress financially. The next year, next fiscal year, we only had to borrow two hundred and fifty thousand dollars, and then the year after that we never had to make another tax anticipation loan while I was in office. So again, there was some pretty amazing work being done by some employees, just with the thought of, “You go take care of your job. We’re not going to be playing games. You just take care of your job, and we’ll take care of you.”

Smith: And during this period of time, you were involved with different groups, the Council of Governments and others, Coast Twenty-one, trying to improve the Gulf Park program and Gulf Park Campus. Can you talk to us a little bit about that?

Bass: Yeah. You know, one of the things that I always thought was something extremely lacking here on the Coast was the availability of higher education opportunities. And you know, I’m a product of the community college system, so I didn’t want anybody to think that we were not keen on the benefits the community college system could bring to the table, but we were definitely an underserved area, the population down here. In my own family, we had one of my brothers who attempted/struck out going off to school, not able to complete his degree, went back to the community college, and then tried what was known as the two-plus-two system at the time and just because he had to go fifteen different places, just never completed his degree. And that was one personal example I had. The other thing I looked at when I was running for mayor and people were seeing this Gulf Park Campus, and I thought, “Long Beach really needed to figure out what it wanted to be when it grew up, and why not use the university campus as its role, its reason to be here on the Gulf Coast by becoming the Gulf Coast university town.” So in using some of the, in working with some of the other individuals across the Gulf Coast, higher education became a real priority for members of the business community. They knew they needed to have that kind of opportunity if they were going—if we as a community on the Gulf Coast

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were going to be able to attract the kind of long-range opportunities for our citizens to
take and take advantage of. And [a] university campus, having a full, very
recognizable higher ed offerings here on the Coast or in an area, is an extremely
important thing to business owners and other substantial investors wanting to come
into your community because it has not only just the educational possibilities for their
employees and the family, but also it’s an indication of the quality of life that’s
brought to an area, cultural amenities that flow in relation with university activities
and other things of that nature. So there was a really significant effort made through
the Council of Governments, which was a loose confederation of representatives from
the different municipal governments in our county of Harrison, and the county board
of supervisors and other agency heads. And you had a corollary or I guess a parallel
effort being made in the business community with a group known as Coast Twenty-
one. And we were able to marshal a pretty good number of forces to show and
demonstrate how important higher education was to this area. The advanced
education center on the Gulf Park Campus was funded through a cooperative effort of
state government and the five municipalities within Harrison County and the Harrison
County government to fund. I don’t know of many other places in this state that could
show an example of that kind of cooperation, considering the intramural squabbles we
often get into amongst our competing cities. But I think the five cities and Harrison
County joined together and agreed to pay off or to take on in their responsibility two
million dollars of debt to have that building built. And I think it was a total of about a
five-and-a-half-million-dollar building that was proposed. We agreed to do it over
fifteen years, and we’re getting close to having those notes paid off even after the
impact of Katrina coming in. Examples of that we could take and go to the legislature
and working with people like Representative Diane Peranich who was just, she was a
Long Beach girl, and she knew how important higher ed was, and she made it her
mission to come up with the kind of information to tell us what we needed to do to
help develop the right kind of facilities so that we could make a reasonable argument
and a winnable argument about why we needed to have not just a community college
and third- and fourth-year offerings being offered by Southern Miss, but to have an
opportunity to have a university offer a full educational experience from the freshman
year all the way through their senior year and graduate level offerings.

Smith: And you were presiding over the City of Long Beach, which was financially
strapped, and yet you led them to take up a portion of the financing of the classroom
building, the new classroom building.

Bass: Exactly. Yeah. You know, the cities on the western side of the county, Long
Beach and Pass Christian really did not have the financial wherewithal to take on that
burden, but it was one of those things that, whether you had the money or not, you
needed to find the money to make that happen. And the deal with doing the advanced
education center, the combination classroom and auditorium here on this campus
would not have happened if all five of the cities hadn’t said they would participate
because the county was wanting to make sure that the municipalities were signed on;
the municipalities were wanting to make sure that all the municipalities agreed to
participate. Some of the municipalities may not have really seen the merit of
supporting a building on a campus that was outside their city limits. And it was really amazing to see a group of individuals with their own particular personal interests related to their individual communities come together and support something. And some of those decisions were made with substantial support and encouragement from the business community as well. It was a total community effort to get that thing done, and you think two million dollars and one building is not that big a deal, but it is a big deal when you’re talking about that kind of cooperative enterprise.

Smith: Was there any controversy with the Long Beach City Council over whether to step up to the plate in bad times for Long Beach and put money into this building?

Bass: You know, at the time, I think there was some concern, and there may not have been the level, what you would have hoped to be the level of support amongst some of our aldermen. But you know, one of the aldermen who was on there, who was the alderman-at-large at that point in time, was Dr. Louis Elias who was in charge of development for the USM Gulf Coast, and he provided a significant level of leadership in making sure that that was, you know, that we were able to get the number of aldermen, a winning number of aldermen on board with approving that for the city.

Smith: You were involved in other ways with this. Do you know how many trips you made on behalf of either the expansion program to get the freshman/sophomore courses here, or in behalf of these buildings, library? How many trips? You must have gone at least every January to the Coast Chamber.

Bass: Oh, easily. And we had other times in between where we were going back and forth to Jackson, trying to make the trips, making the representations. From a personal standpoint, I was really very fortunate to have been included, not just in higher ed, but in some of the other efforts we were wanting to make from a transportation and other types of improvements to this area, really helped take advantage of some of the economic opportunities that the advent of gaming had brought to us, the expansion of the state Port of Gulfport. But one of the things that we talked about in our campaign in [19]96 and ’97 was that we couldn’t rely on our ability just to sit back and hope that things would get better. We had to be aggressive advocates, and I think not just from our standpoint in Long Beach, but all the way across the Gulf Coast community, there was a realization that if we wanted to have things better here on the Coast, and if being better on the Coast meant having support from other areas outside the Gulf Coast, that we needed to be aggressive in advocating our positions and asking for help, and also realizing that we had to be aggressive in our willingness to help other areas of this state accomplish the things that they wanted to accomplish by partnering with them and doing those things, too. And if, I guess for lack of a better word, maybe our community became a little bit more mature in the process in terms of understanding what they needed to do to really be able to get some significant things done down here.
Smith: What would you consider to be your most outstanding accomplishment as mayor?

Bass: Hm. I honestly don’t know. There were a whole host of good things that we got done.

Smith: Well, maybe you could just tick off some of those.

Bass: I think the one I’m most proud of is in May of 1998 we had two of our policemen killed in the line of duty here, and a third one seriously injured; could have been a third one killed in what was just a horrific couple of days related to a domestic violence situation. For a small town like Long Beach—and I don’t think we’ve ever averaged more than about seventeen, eighty thousand residents. Everybody knows everybody here; it’s one of those communities that we may not have the greatest level of business here, we may not have been maybe the richest community in the world, but we’ve got a good school system with some really great athletic leagues for our kids to participate in. We used to have the saying that “You went to work in Gulfport; you went to play in Biloxi, but you went to live in Long Beach.” So when we came under attack that day, I lost a good friend of mine who was a coach. One of the officers, Steve Morgan, was a friend and coached my son in baseball. (crying)

Smith: This is a very emotional recollection for you still.

Bass: Yeah. And the other two guys had become friends, too. I mean, you get to know folks when you become mayor, and I will never forget. At the time we were having some really tough times in our police department; the equipment was in terrible shape. Guys were getting in cars and heading out; you didn’t know if the car would quit on them because things were in such bad repair. One of the things I went through was I actually interviewed everybody in the police department all the way down the line from the standpoint of patrolmen, detectives, officers, [and] administration people to find out what was going on. And the last two people I talked to were two guys named Jim Northcutt and Steve Morgan. And those were the two—the last two guys I talked to, that was on Monday in May; I think May the fourth. And May the sixth, two days later, both of them were dead. I will never forget that. But if there was one big achievement that I had, it was at a time when the community was absolutely ripping apart at the seams because it was in such shock, being able to at least have some people focus on their mayor and have their mayor show that everything was going to be OK and just being calm was a pretty big deal to me. And I don’t know that I did anything more than just be around, but I thought it was important that somebody put a good face forward and put a strong face forward and try and hold that community together, and it was probably one of the tougher things I’ve done in my life. A lot of times I look at some of the things that I’ve been involved with, and some of the problems or concerns or issues that we’ve had to deal with, and I will never forget. When I think about that, and think things are tough, I will never forget handing a folded flag over to Jim Northcutt’s widow, and you go through a statement, “On behalf of the President of the United States and a grateful nation, we present this flag.”
I don’t know. That’s the probably the thing that hit me the most, that I remember the most, I think I contributed the most from a personal standpoint in seven years of being mayor is just some calm at a really tough time.

Smith: That event still kind of echoes in Long Beach. They recently named the new public safety building.

Bass: New public safety building has been dedicated in honor of Jim Northcutt and Steve Morgan.

Smith: And this has been, what? Eight years?

Bass: No. They just had their ten-year anniversary from that earlier this month, as a matter of fact. And the annual remembrance, I guess, has gotten to be something that’s really pretty, just being—not celebrated is not the word—but observed within the police department, itself. [What] we found is, like any kind of tragic situation, like Katrina, over a period there comes a point in time where the community, itself, needs to move on and wants to move on, and it’s not that we forget the significance of what happened, but you have to maintain some perspective, and begin the process of looking ahead and trying to make things better the next day instead of continuing to dwell on it or allowing yourself to have other people have you dwell on what happened in the past.

Smith: Robert, on another note, I’m going to ask you to list some things off. I can remember your work with the zoning, zoning planning group in Long Beach. And way on before Katrina, you had a kind of a charrette-like process for Long Beach, didn’t you? You want to talk a little bit about that?

Bass: Yeah.

Smith: This was many years before Katrina.

Bass: You know, I, and I keep using the word “I”; maybe I shouldn’t do that. But from my standpoint, the answers to where a community should go or the answers to what a community can become doesn’t need to come from any one individual; it ought to come from the community itself. And I went through the process of asking a number of individuals within the business community outside of elected office if they would come and participate in the process of helping us develop a community plan. And one of the guys, the first person I went and asked, was a guy by the name of Glenn Mueller, who was a local business person, probably the most prominent business person we had in Long Beach, and somebody who is extremely proactive in terms of dealing with problems in the school district and within the city and was never, never backed off from putting his name on anything that had anything to do with being able to make Long Beach better. And he and a group of individuals that, you know I didn’t even come up with the full list of individuals. He and I helped develop a list, and we talked with the aldermen to see if they had some suggestions to
make about people to be included in it. And I’ll never forget; you know, we had a first
meeting with them, and I said, “Now, folks, we’re not here to tell you what the
answers are. We’re here for you to kind of help us figure out what the answers need to
be and short of saying a few things to you right now, we’re going to be here to kind of
support you and see what you need to do to help make some things happen. We went
through a process; they decided to call the group Vision 20/20. And it was. You
know, if I look back at what happened after Katrina, we really did have a number of
charrettes, talking about exactly what this city could look like and could become. We
got a group out of the Tulane [University] Regional Urban Design Center, a gentleman
by the name of Grover Mouton, to come in and help us look at some things. At the
time, Professor Mouton was working with the cities of Biloxi and Gulfport to try and
come up with some type of renderings of what their cities could look like. And I was
introduced to Grover at a Leadership Gulf Coast meeting; asked him to get involved.
But you know, at the time, Long Beach really, like I said, before, Long Beach was an
insular community; it just kind of, everybody just kind of plugged along, and the days
passed, and the sun rose in the east and set in the west, and the moon was there at
night. And nobody ever really stood up and really asked, “Well, things, we seem to be
getting by, but is there something else better that we can do?” And I don’t think
anybody had ever really taken the opportunity in positions of leadership to ask the
community exactly, “Things are OK, and you seem to be satisfied, but if you had your
druthers, what would you like this city to become, or what do you see happening for
it?” And it was really, I tell you, it was absolutely—I gained a great deal of
satisfaction from being able to watch the number of people who simply appreciated
being asked and to see the level of interest that we had in some of the different
sessions. You know, you think that in a city of sixteen, seventeen thousand, if you can
get fifty people to a meeting, you’ve had a really good turnout. And we were going
out to a community center, out at the West Harrison County Community Center out on
Espy Avenue, and we were having several—two hundred people show up for a
meeting. Absolutely amazing, and some of the ideas that they were coming up;
everybody kind of knew what they wanted, and everybody was on the same page with
it. It was a matter of seeing everybody’s thoughts in one spot and knowing that there
was actually some consensus about directions. Our problems in making some of those
things happen was simply not being able to marshal funds fast enough. You know,
you can come up with the ideas, and come up with the vision and come up with what,
the picture of what you want the community to look like, but then the hard part comes
to try and put the degree of resources together necessary. And that’s a time-
consuming process, and that’s one of the things where maybe the mayor and the
administration let the folks down. (brief interruption)

Smith: You also, let’s see, somewhere later, you had the fellow in from Clemson
University.

Bass: Yeah, we had—

Smith: You had another process that went on related especially to downtown and Jeff
Davis Avenue.
Bass: Well, I tell you. We had a couple of things that happened, and Southern Miss really provided a substantial degree of leadership. Southern Miss had a president at the time by the name of Horace Fleming. And I’ll tell you; Horace Fleming, who became a really good friend of mine, was a president at Southern Miss who truly understood what the potential here on the Gulf Coast was, and particularly in the city of Long Beach. He asked a good friend of his by the name of Lynn Craig to come down and in essence take a sabbatical and pretty much, I think, for a very small fee if he got much of anything, come down and help lead a charrette process for this campus. And I think we came up with a pretty good work product, and we’ll be seeing that at some sessions next week over at the advanced education center, talking about some things. But Lynn was totally dedicated to the process; he was able to bring a lot of different constituency groups who knew about the university and were impacted by the university to come in and get a sense of what this campus could become. And following that at a later date—I guess it was about a year and a half later—we knew about Lynn’s work, and we had a community group, some of the folks from Vision 20/20 who said, “Well, we’d really like to have a minilook at the city and see if we could have somebody kind of come in and help us continue to flesh out where we wanted to go.” And Lynn Craig’s name came up, and we brought him in, and in a period of thirty-six hours, it absolutely astounded me the quality of the work he came up. And if you look back at some of the charrettes that have gone on and some of the work product that was produced as a result of that and the result of, and piggybacking on some of the other things that Grover Mouton’s group out of Tulane did, I don’t think you’re going to find anything that significantly different that was derived in the charrette process following Katrina than what we already had on the book. The main thing is taking those pictures and making those things happen, but Lynn Craig and Southern Miss were big, big players and contributors in that. I mean, I really viewed Southern Miss here as a true resource. I mean, Horace Fleming, again, whatever needed to happen, if he needed assistance, he asked for it, but he really wanted to make sure that this university campus was playing a part in what happened on the Gulf Coast, and he spent an awful lot of time down here. And at the time, Southern Miss Gulf Coast had a really, another great friend and another just true leader in Dr. Jim Williams. You know, Jim came in from the Auburn University at Montgomery campus; it was a satellite campus or an adjunct campus to Auburn University further in north Alabama. He knew how to build an institution that was not going to be the be-all, end-all, but he had grown that institution in Montgomery to where I think it had, like, six thousand students at the time he left it. And people were really feeling very good at the level of leadership that we had in Horace and in Jim here locally to get some good things done. You know, Jim got intimately involved in the community. I mean, he truly made the university campus and the university itself a real player in this area. And honestly, I really think that those were the times and those were the years we really had kind of a golden age, if we just could have kept it going, boy, what could we have gotten done with that kind of team in place? And I rambled on you a little bit, but it was—
Smith: I want to ask you; there came a time when you decided you’d done what you could do as mayor of Long Beach. How did you—you actually left office before you were up for reelection.

Bass: Well, you know, when I decided to run for mayor in [19]96, one of the things that I—I don’t know that I really understood how prescient I was or not, but I knew that I did not want to become the glorified hack who couldn’t find any other self-worth than staying in office. I made a commitment to myself that I would not stay longer than two terms, and when I was running that initial campaign in 1997, I had people think, “Well, we don’t know if we want to support you if you’re not willing to run for reelection.” And my response to them was, (laughter), “I appreciate that confidence in me, but you guys don’t even know how good a job I’m going to do in the first term.” But if we were doing a good job, and if we had good feelings about things, I would be willing to run for reelection, but I told people then, I said, “There will absolutely not be a third term.” I said, “I just don’t think that’s productive. I think over a period”—And they were, you know, “Why?” “I think over a period of time, you go from being the person from the outside coming in with the fresh perspective and eventually become part of the problem because you stay too long, you get caught up in the bickering that will go on, and in essence, the end of my term, I really felt like that’s what was happening, and it was time for me to move. And I made an announcement that I was going to. I made a run for the state senate, and I was not successful in it, but as a result of that unsuccessful run for state senate—

Smith: You should come to me first; I will help you be successful. (laughter) We got to get a different label on you.

Bass: Yeah, we could have put that different label, you know, if I’d had a different label, I probably wouldn’t have gone on to other things at that point in time. But in not winning that race, though, I was able to develop a relationship with the person who became governor, Haley Barbour, and was invited to come up and asked if I would be willing to take on the job of state personnel director. And it wasn’t a position that he could appoint directly, but he asked me if I would be willing to apply for it and go through the process, and he felt really good about my chances. And it worked out well for me. And we were able to get some good things done as state personnel director, but it required me to leave office a year early, and that was a tough thing. You feel like maybe you might have left Long Beach before the tour of duty that you signed on for, but the other thing I thought about was in Jackson I could help get some things done; I could develop some relationships in Jackson from where I was going to be sitting and be able to help get some things done. And honestly there were several times when questions came about that I was able to make some phone calls and put people in need in touch with the people who could answer those needs. And it really worked out pretty well for us. And we were able to get some good things done at the state personnel board. We had a crying need in our state of employees being horrendously underpaid in all levels of state government, and in the two and a half, almost two and a half years that I was there, we were able to push through a process and accomplish having the legislature approve market-rate compensation for all
employees across the board within state government we had purview over. I mean, we had nurses who were horribly underpaid; we couldn’t get people in our state hospitals or working for the department of mental health. The state legislature came through, and the governor signed off on approving raises that some went up to thirty-thousand dollars a year for certain employees. And when you’re talking about that kind of money and the kind of public scrutiny and public ridicule and criticism that that could have engendered, that was a pretty significant accomplishment. Now, and I think it was a good thing for the state; we were in good times financially. We had good economic times, and I think it really did help us build a good bit of support and rapport with the employees of the state to try and help them make a good life for themselves and be in a public arena at the same time.

Smith: You went to the state personnel board in?


Smith: July of ’04, about one year before Katrina, a little over a year before Katrina. When you were mayor, did you have fairly routine seasonal storm preparation workshops?

Bass: Yeah. The first month I was in office, we had a scare from a storm that really grazed us and went into Florida, and I can’t remember the name of the storm. But the first full month, full six weeks I was in office, we were in the middle of El , and I mean, we had torrential downpours every day of the week, it seemed like. And I mean, every flooding problem that there was, I mean, we knew where all the problems were, and we even knew where some problems we didn’t think we had before were because of the level of water. The hurricane experience that I had prior to going through Katrina and coming back here was Hurricane Georges in 1998. And we got kicked in the teeth pretty well at that time. Nothing, obviously, nowhere close, not even in the same universe of what happened at Katrina, but it did require us to go through and go through the kind of recovery, you know, the debris collection, the contracts and all the different grant type things in recovery and working with FEMA and what have you. And honestly it was probably, probably a pretty good run-through in getting people ready and knowing the kind of things that they had to do when Katrina hit. We also had another—you know the thing about storm events, there’s no one event that’s the same, and you can’t really go by a name, whether something’s a hurricane versus a tropical storm, to let you know just how bad the event was. We had an event, Hurricane Georges, and we got through that with all the debris and recovery and getting our—you know, we had our new, we had a police station; we got a grant to go through and totally refurbish it. But we also had 1999, I think, Tropical Storm Allison, who came in, and it was really called, for our area, the perfect storm. We had a convergence of different weather elements that came together and absolutely flooded this entire community, just about. So I mean the thing I remember about storms and what people tend to focus on, “Well, if it’s a tropical storm or tropical depression, it must not be real bad.” No. I mean, you take everything seriously, and that was one of the things we learned about. But it seemed like there was always a scare every year.
We made sure we upgraded our access to weather forecasting services. We also made sure that we were involved in the countywide planning for emergency responses, and it wasn’t trying to do everything all our own, but we made a continual effort as we approached every hurricane season to see, “OK, what’s on the to-do list that we should have gotten done last year that we need to get done before we have those things hit?” But most of the time, I just got out the way. I mean, somebody’d tell me, “Well, this is what we need to get done this year.” “Well, let’s go do it.” And you just kind of play the part. Probably there were some acute areas in the city that were, if you got a weather event coming through, one of the things I learned as mayor is you also have to be cognizant of not just where you do develop, but where you really should never develop. And we had an area that had really acute problems of flooding in what we called the Leigh Street, Maxine Drive area. And that was a pretty significant, that was a very significant accomplishment during my term in office. We were actually able to put together a hazard mitigation grant that allowed people to be bought out of their homes and taken totally and permanently out of harm’s way from an area that, I think, the first two years I was in office, we had three major floods in this one very localized area of the city. And to have that done and to have that go away and to have that risk, you know, it wasn’t a perfect solution, but for about sixty homeowners, today, they don’t have to worry about floods, and it’s a direct result of that program.

Smith: Well, you went on to the state personnel board the year before the storm. But you still maintained a residence in Long Beach. Is that right?

Bass: Yeah. I am not one to really upset my family or to uproot my family. My daughter was a sophomore in high school, I think, when I decided, when the opportunity for the state personnel board job came up, and my wife and I made the commitment that we did not want to uproot her. So we got an apartment up in Jackson, and I essentially commuted back and forth every other weekend, and then she and my daughter would come up. My son was off at school over in Baton Rouge, so he wasn’t impacted that much. But we did that for probably the first year, and we had plans that as soon as Stephanie graduated in 2007, we would be moving up to Jackson and permanently relocating. And just after one year, though, Katrina hit in August of 2005, and it went from being a pretty relaxed every-other-weekend and having my wife being able to take a break by getting out of town and coming up to Jackson, it was pretty much every weekend I was driving back and forth, driving back down here to help do some things on repairs. We were here for Katrina. I was down here when the storm was approaching. One of those story things that you hear about that just happened to coincide around the storm, a group of friends and I were going to have a large alumni reunion for St. John High School because it was such a small school, we were inviting people from across a whole host of classes to try and get as many people as we could. I’ll never forget the Thursday before the storm, the last thing I did about 5:30 that afternoon was check with the Mississippi Emergency Management to see what was going on and looking at their maps, and the forecast was still Katrina was going to go into Tampa with maybe some threat to go further west, and I went ahead and got in the car. And you know, that Friday we’re cleaning up, getting ready, cleaning up the place we were going to be having the party, and all of a sudden it was
getting further west and further west, and Friday night we understand that there’s
going to be, that Katrina’s going to hit us. And at that point in time, Saturday we
battened down the hatches, did everything we could, and we said, “Guys, why don’t
y’all come on out, and let’s just go ahead and have a party, and tomorrow we’ll go
ahead, and if anybody’s evacuating, they can evacuate, and if not, we’ll at least know
we had one last hurrah before the storm hits.” And it was tough; I’ll tell you. I wrote
a—

Smith: Did you stay, or did you evacuate?

Bass: No, we were here.

Smith: You stayed here.

Bass: We were here on the Coast, yeah. We were not in the house; we drove over to
my parents’ house, who live about a mile away from us in a house that we built after
Hurricane Camille hit. Camille, I lived two blocks or two and a half blocks from this
campus when I was growing up; Camille took our house, and we built a little bit north
of town, just south of Commission Road in Long Beach off of Klondyke. And our
normal routine was to drive over to my parents and just kind of ride the storm out
there, so. But we were on the Coast and saw everything and really got to experience
it. I’ll never forget that Monday Katrina hit, the last transmission I got on my cell
phone was from my deputy director saying, “This is”—I forget what it was, but it was
just like, “Have just taken a look at the last weather report and sure wish you were up
here.” And I thought, “Well, he knows”—he was really anal retentive about all things
weather, and I figured, “He must know something’s really bad coming in.” And it was
like, that was on a Monday; it wasn’t until the following Friday that my staff even
knew I was alive. They really thought something bad—I mean, they didn’t think I’d
made it. And (laughter) you know, the biggest experience I remember from Katrina is
no street lights and no lights, and I mean, feeling absolutely alone and just truly
exposed and vulnerable. I was standing outside my house in the middle of pitch black,
looking up at the stars, and heard somebody breathing, realized somebody had passed
right in front of me, and I didn’t even know they were even walking by me. And I
mean, all I could think of was all those old westerns and things that you would watch
from the [19]50s where these guys are, you know I mean, where they said, “Well, it’s
getting to be nighttime. It’s time to make camp.” I mean there was a reason why they
stopped and made camp; they couldn’t see two inches in front of their face. And I
thought, “Until you really see that, until you really go through the experience, you
never understand.

Smith: Did your house, your personal residence or your parents’ residence suffer
severe damage?

Bass: My parents’ house really didn’t go through that bad. I mean, one broken
window and maybe some scratching of some of the fascia. My dad had a workshop
out back that had some pine trees fall over, but he was able to get that fixed. In the
grand scheme of things, our personal residence, the house was never unlivable. I mean, we had to get a new roof, but we had one of those multicolored tarps on our roof for several months, and had to put new windows in the house, but we were always able to be in that house and be in existence. Probably the toughest thing to recover from was for five days a week after the immediate time after the storm, I was getting to go into real life, and my wife and daughter down here—my son was not here when Katrina hit. We told him to stay away and stay in safety in Baton Rouge. And I mean, that was the toughest thing because the picture never got any better. The yard was torn up; the debris was in the yard or stacked up. The tarp was on the roof; the windows were still broken. That was probably the toughest thing in terms of recovering from the storm that I can recall because it was easy for me. I got to go back into the real world because this wasn’t real here. This was not real, here.

Smith: There came a time when you began to talk about the condition of Gulf Park Campus. Can you talk about those conversations that led you to an increased interest in what had happened here to this campus?

Bass: Yeah. And some of this may be one of those things where we go back and hold some agreements to disclose of some of these things. We’ve talked earlier in this interview about my involvement with, in a very small way, in higher edu[ca]tional improvement of higher education in this area. And it was, particularly because I was mayor of Long Beach at the time, it was very, very serious to me. Tom Meredith, the commissioner, came on board roughly a month after Katrina hit, and a couple of his trustees, who were friends of mine and we’d known for a number of years, referred him to me to get kind of a read because I had been on the ground, working on some of this stuff in higher ed, and I had the particular knowledge about Gulf Park and what have you. And anyway, he followed up on their advice and called me in October of [20]05. And we talked, and apparently whatever I said to him must have hit on all fours because we served together on a board for the state employees’ health and benefits committee. He and I talked again, while we were serving on that board, and I would have conversations with—and he was talking to me about different things, about what was going to happen, and what would happen to Gulf Park. And I would have conversations with some of the trustees at the same time. And I don’t think people really understood how close this area came to losing everything from a higher ed standpoint. There really was, seeing the level of damage and the level of destruction that occurred to this campus and all the other institutions along the Coast, people were asking, “Why do we need to be putting ourselves in that kind of harm’s way again?” And there really was a thought that Gulf Park was going to close and permanently. I think there was going to be a desire and probably an effort to reestablish higher ed in some way, shape, or form here on the Coast, but the conversations I had, and the discussions that were going on at the trustee level and at the commissioner level were pretty significant in terms of there being a formal closure of this campus to see what else could be done with it. And my attitude—and I was asked for advice, and my attitude was, “You got to do what you got to do for the greater good of the community. We’ll understand that. But you really need to be thinking about the impact that you’ll be creating on the community when you’re doing
that and make the best decision you can.” And I’ll never forget, Virginia Shanteau Newton, who, she was president of the board at the time, she organized a meeting of some key business leaders, and we met out at the community college building, the technical center out there on Industrial Seaway. She called me up the day before, and she said, “Can you be here at this meeting?” She said, “I think you bring something to the—you bring a perspective to the table that people need to hear.” I said, “OK.” And I could tell when we got into that meeting, everybody was talking about it—and they really need not do Gulf Park, and Gulf Park was really, we couldn’t take another hit like that on that campus and all that kind of stuff. And they were asking me, “Well, I see the former mayor over there and let’s not get overly excited here. We want to listen to what we’re saying.” I said, “I understand what you’re saying.” I said, “I’m here to tell you that I know everybody’s got a tough decision to make, and we really need to be sitting back and looking at the long view and coming up with a decision and a course of action or a recommendation that is good for people in the long run. And that’s fine. All I’m going to tell you is you’ve got a community that has made a significant, significant commitment to that campus and has really based its future on the development of that campus and what it could bring to their community. And it’s a community that doesn’t have the money to have staff to try and recover from something like that. And the only thing I’ll tell you is whatever you choose to do, I’ll support it, but do not leave those people in a lurch. You got to find a way to come up with a solution for them.” And Commissioner Meredith was there and a number of the trustees like Ed Blakeslee and some of the guys, the usual suspects that you find at meetings like that, the George Schloegels and the Ron Peresichs and the Anthony Topazis and some of the gaming executives. I can’t remember who all was in that meeting that day.

Smith: Gene Warr?

Bass: Gene Warr, oh, yeah, Gene Warr. I mean, all the leaders who, a Who’s Who of people across the Gulf Coast that put their names and their necks on the line to get good things done down here. And the next thing I knew I had seen Tom Meredith at a committee meeting, and I asked him, I said, “Well, what’s the latest on the Gulf Coast?” He said, “Well,” he said, “We think, we believe what’s going to happen is we’re going to go ahead and rehab Gulf Park, but we’re going to establish a brand-new, from-the-ground-up campus on the Gulf Coast, and we’re going to do both of those things. Maybe Gulf Park isn’t the central campus or the main campus, but we’re going to have something really good happening on that campus.” I said, “That’s wonderful.”

Smith: About what time did the meeting on the [Industrial] Seaway—do you remember rough dates when that was happening?

Bass: Pat, I think it was sometime in April of 2006.

Smith: So that was several months after Katrina.
Bass: Yeah, March or April of 2006. Yeah, he—

Smith: So as late as that date, they were considering erasing the whole campus?

Bass: I think they were—you know, nobody knew what to do. I mean, and there’s not fault to anybody. I mean, I think people like Virginia and Ed Blakesly were concerned about wanting to do the right thing, trying to figure [out] and understanding that the right thing, the right thing, hard as it might have been to conceive, in their own minds would have been to close this campus down and to find some other place to do business, but if that’s what had to be done, that’s what had to be done. And they really, I think the commissioner showed the leadership in trying to explore the possibilities of utilizing this property for a higher education mission, understanding that the central, the main focus will become a brand-new campus in the years ahead, but always knowing that you had to make good use of this property and not leaving people in the lurch down here. And then of course in June of 2006, you had the meeting that was called, and the press conference and the community meeting that was called by the board of trustees and the commissioner that occurred out at the auditorium and the fine arts center out at Jeff Davis Campus at Gulf Coast Community College where it was announced that a new campus would be established, and Gulf Park would be rehabbed, and it was all going to be a Southern Miss operation. And from there the commissioner had asked me to consider applying for a position, the current position that I’m in right now, not knowing that we could get it. You had to go through the selection process, and once it was advertised, I think there was a pretty significant level of interest in it, but I wound up being named the project director down here.

Smith: And what led them to believe they needed a special project director?

Bass: Well, in Tom Meredith’s words, the board kept asking him for updates and all that kind of—and it was just with everything that was going on in heading up the higher ed system in the state of Mississippi, there was just too much that needed to be kept up with down here for him to be doing that and everything else he was doing, and he really thought the solution was to have, in his words, somebody who got up in the morning, thinking about things here, worked on it all day, and went to bed at night, thinking about it. And somebody that they could be, have IHL, the board of trustees, and the commissioner could have their person on the ground down here that could kind of help them keep the situation monitored and moving in a positive direction.

Smith: And so you applied for the position. And when did they name you the project director?

Bass: In the middle of August 2006, and I had known that it was coming down the wire and that that was probably, I was probably going to be named, but didn’t get the official word. It was right around the fourteenth, fifteenth, sixteenth of August, and I went ahead from that point in time, came back, and I had forewarned my board of directors at the personnel board that I was up for that position, and it might happen.
And when I got back—I was out of town at the time when I got the call. I got back and let everybody know that I had been named, and I was going to go ahead and take the job. And I roughly gave them two and a half weeks of notice, two weeks notice, and we had the transition. I started September 1, 2006, at this current position.

Smith: And your current position involves the recovery of the Gulf Park Campus. Did it involve other IHL assets also?

Bass: You know there were a couple of things that we wanted to make sure of that I understood to be the mission that I had; although, this really hadn’t been done before, so we were really moving in uncharted territory. So in some certain respects, the job description didn’t get fleshed out to the degree that we probably, looking back at it now, we probably should have thought about. But if you communicate what the board’s decisions were regarding Gulf Park and the new campus and the USM—you know, it would be a USM mission, seeing what needed to be done on the Gulf Park Campus to get it up and kind of get a sense of what the situation was because the campus had really remained in a state of disrepair since the time of Katrina. It had been over a year; matter of fact, it had been over a year, and nothing had really been done on this campus short of a little bit of rehabbing done on the back part of the campus, and then also, going through the process, developing a process where we could find a site that we could locate a brand-new campus on, and again in Tom Meredith’s words, “at a fairly reasonable price.” So those were the three things that I was tasked at. I mean, I think the commissioner, I think the trustees from this area, and I think all the trustees were essentially thinking that we had an opportunity down here to take a look at higher ed in one area of the state and really come back with a coherent and a cohesive picture and a delivery system of what higher ed could be down here. I mean, essentially the board was erased. I mean, the ground was just cleared down to the ground, and we could start from scratch and try and see if we could build it right from day one.

Smith: When you came on the job here, did anything in particular surprise you, either bad or good, about the situation that you came into on the campus?

Bass: You know, from the bad part, not bad part, but something I noticed is that nobody wanted to take any action. People were really—you know, we had the Gulf Coast Student Service Center over at Garden Park, and things were kind of plugging along. But, well, how come we’re not getting the debris—I mean, the debris from Katrina was still in all the buildings up on the front part of the campus. The old cafeteria that had been built on the west side of Hardy was still there in just some kind of shambles. I had trustees driving through this campus, saying “nothing’s being cleaned up,” and the campus really looked terrible. And I would get, “Well, FEMA won’t let us do this.” And, “Don’t you understand all these issues?” And “We tried cleaning up this part of the campus, and FEMA came in and said they would shut us down because we were tearing up historical buildings.” Well, you know, I said, “Well, I can appreciate that. When’s the next meeting? Do we have regular meetings?” And simply getting people off the dime to get some things done, like
being able to simply clean debris out of supposedly historically significant buildings was just amazing to me. And I mean the fact that we were approaching our thirteenth month after the storm, and nothing was done. And I don’t mean to belittle anybody, and I’m not being critical of anybody because God forbid, to have been able, after Katrina, to get people back in classrooms within six weeks after that storm event occurred, I think, was monumental. And maybe it took that amount of time just for everybody to get a sense of what actually needed to be done. But I can remember the advanced education center in the library, I mean, we had plans for the rehabbing of these, which included different options like the coffee shop down on the first floor. “Well, when are we going to start?” “Well, we don’t know if we got the money. We just don’t know when we’re going to start.” I said, “Well, I tell you what we need to do. We need to start getting some plans submitted, and get them up there, and get this project started, and let’s figure out if we got money later on.” And it was essentially—what I think I told them, again, [was], “If somebody needs a fall guy, here I am. Blame me.” But we were able, working together, we were really able to get the approvals to go ahead and get some of the old, destroyed hulks of buildings taken off this campus and starting to get it cleaned up and getting it replanted, and just spruced up a little bit. And today, with the exception of a few old houses over on Beach Park Place that we’re using for storage, really the remaining structure of the plan to fully have this campus fully rehabbed is what’s going to happen to Hardy Hall and to the admin building and to Lloyd Hall and Elizabeth Hall. And the design charrette workshop that we’ll be hosting next week in conjunction with the Department of Archives and History and Southern [Miss] and the City of Long Beach and the Mississippi Film Office, I hope, will give us the plan, give us the alternatives, give us something to make some decisions and move forward on it, and that will finish this campus up, and it’ll also at the same point, not just bringing something back to what it was, but also giving this property an opportunity and this institution an opportunity to do something that will help it become an even better and even bigger contributor to the surrounding area.

Smith: Robert, did you have any—and this may be something that you don’t want to talk about. But we had a lot of rumors, employees did, that there were orders given not to mitigate damage. You have storm damage, and then all of us, for example, on my house, the next day after the storm, I was up on the roof trying to put tarpaper down to keep rain out until something else could be done with the roof. And we were understanding all kinds of rumors that things could not be done over here. Is there anything to that that you can talk about?

Bass: Look. That’s another one of those items that maybe we do need to delay the distribution of this information from a public standpoint. It was never stated to me directly, but I understood that there wasn’t much interest in seeing that this campus really come back, within the administration.

Smith: We’re talking about Dr. Thames’ administration.
Bass: Yeah. I mean, I think they were, they just didn’t, Dr. Thames did not want to be down here. He really probably was—he had already had discussions about not being here at Gulf Park before Katrina and wanting to go out and start some work on new campuses and find another place to go do business that was further away from the beach because it wasn’t accessible, and he had a whole host of reasons. One of the first meetings I had was a big group meeting. You know, higher ed deals, you can’t just have a meeting with an individual; when you have a meeting, everybody has got to be in there. So when I went in meetings, me being invited to a meeting where I get to come in and represent IHL, and I got to sit in front of about eight, nine, ten individuals who represent Southern Miss, and the first, we had a meeting up at Dr. Thames’ office in October of 2006. And Dr. Thames’ position was, “Robert, we need to, we want to sit down and get some work, and we need to just all figure out what we want to do on this new campus and start, get ready to go to that legislature in that 2007 session and go ahead and get some things done.” And I patiently relayed what the commissioner and what the trustees had kind of indicated is that the job is we’re going to take our time; we’re going to work through that process and come up with a good overall plan. But it occurred to me that, and I told him this, that one of the things that kept us further away from getting a new campus was the lack of action in getting the Gulf Park Campus up to speed and back online, and that the first thing that I saw as my job was to make sure that we were taking definite actions to get this campus rehabbed. And I’ll never forget—Joe Morgan was the CFO [Chief Financial Officer] or interim CFO at the time. He said, “Well you know, if you just, I’ll just ask this; if you just please remember that we got limited cash, and we don’t have the ability to just go spending all kinds of money down there on that campus, rehabbing.” I said, “I think we’ll always be cognizant of that, but again, there is a statement being made right now with the lack of action on getting that campus taken care of.” I said, “We’re going to take care of that first, and we’re going to go through the process of figuring out how to get our, where the site’s going to be and what have you.” And I really do think Dr. Thames probably was thinking that he’d already had some discussions with the proponents at Tradition about moving out there, and I think that’s probably what—I don’t know this; he didn’t say this specifically, but I really do think that he really wanted to get something established right up there at Tradition and go ahead and get started from the get-go. And why not utilize all the resources that were available from the standpoint of recovery and things like that to go ahead and get a campus established up there as quickly as possible?

Smith: That’s roughly in the area where the new St. Patrick’s High School is?

Bass: Yes.

Smith: Sort of south of Saucier.

Bass: Yeah. We went through a process of making a site selection and recommendation for the trustees on the new site, and really from the time I started as project director for IHL, I mean, the Tradition folks were really wanting to make the best case they possibly could to selecting their site. And I think the commissioner and
trustees wanted to have a chance to kick the tires on the situation down here and see if there might not be some other opportunities available to them instead of just going and taking the first one that made an offer even though it was an extremely attractive place to put a college campus in. It was a brand-new community being built. I mean, the community was going to be built at the same time the campus was. So we went through a process, and I think at the time in late [20]06, when I started, I think some of the folks on the trustees and even in the commissioner’s office were thinking and even people locally, like, “Who in the devil is going to be selling that much property? And there’s no money in the bank. You guys are not going to be able to afford it.” And there was a great degree of skepticism, and what we found was people got it; they understood what a university campus and a university apparatus brings in value to the surrounding area. And they wanted it bad, and the offers that we had went from, “Well, we’ll give you a hundred acres.” “Well, we’ll give you 125 acres.” “Well, we’ll give you 150.” “Well, we’ll give you two hundred, and you can pick wherever you want to go within this—just tell us where you want the two hundred in all the property we got, and we’ll give that to you.” And I mean, it got to be—it wasn’t direct dueling amongst the parties. I mean, we were hearing these different things, but apparently the word would circulate through the rumor mill and in the background of the business community what was going on. I think we created a pretty strong, and a very, very objective evaluation process and looked at things from a truly—we took some qualitative factors that the commissioner and the board said were important to them—access, visibility, the ability to recover after a storm, the ability to create your neighbors while you’re doing it so that we could be in the right kind of environment, not just—this wasn’t going to be a ten-year decision. This was a generational, century-long impact and multiple-century-long decision that’s being made. And they wanted to make sure they were taking these qualitative factors and applying them to a quantitative process to come up with a good recommendation. I think we did. We looked at a host—we probably had about a dozen properties that we were looking at. Some of them were up for sale, but others, most of them were outright donations, and the final three that came out of our first level of analysis were properties that the City of Gulfport was going to buy a tract of roughly two hundred acres and donate it to the IHL trustees if they selected it. And then of course the Tradition property, which was always one of the top properties we looked at. And then the other property, which was, at the time it was known as the Gulf South Technology Center property, which later became known as Cross Creek, roughly, a little bit, about three and a half, four miles north of Long Beach, and that became the, Cross Creek became the site that was selected by the board of trustees because it was right on I-10, the developers were going to have a brand-new interstate interchange that would provide direct access off of I-10 into the area. The whole thing was going to have brand-new utilities that would tie into some of the other bank, Hancock Bank infrastructure that was going in. Of course, the Cross Creek property was half-owned by Hancock Bank and half-owned by W.C. Fore Trucking Company. And the moon and the stars were aligning just right that that was just going to be the best location for a campus to locate. And I mean, people would be able to see for miles and miles along a highway, along an interstate that puts fifty- to sixty-thousand cars a day running by it, seeing nothing but
higher ed, higher ed, and if you don’t want [believe you can get] an above-high-school education here on the Coast, you just not paying attention.

**Smith:** So you went through this process; there was a consulting firm hired to rate the properties.

**Bass:** Yeah, the board hired a consulting firm, Broaddus and Associates, to come in, and they were from out of town, really had not had a connection. Jim Broaddus, who was the founder of the firm, actually was a battalion commander at the CB [Naval Construction Battalion] Base in the [19]70s. So he was familiar with Long Beach and lived in Long Beach, out in Green Acres as a matter of fact. So when Katrina hit, he had already retired from the Navy and been in charge of the buildings at the University of Texas system, out in Austin, and had moved, gravitated from that into his own consulting—(brief interruption) We had a number of firms that were looking to help us make that [decision], but the board selected Broaddus to kind of come in and kick the tires and help us create this system, and they really did a great job in not telling me or the commissioner what we wanted to hear, but telling us what we needed to hear about the reasons why and what the relative advantages and disadvantages of all the different alternatives we had, and I was extremely pleased with the process and the quality of the report we presented to the trustees. And the selection was made in April of 2007. April 18, 2007, they selected Cross Creek as a site.

**Smith:** Let’s back up a little bit from that decision and talk a little bit more about your work inside of USM, if you can. You mentioned that there was quite a bit of skepticism in Dr. Thames about the rehabilitation of the Gulf Park Campus. When you were hired for the job, had the board come to that clear decision at that point that they were going to rehab the campus?

**Bass:** Yes.

**Smith:** So the board had decided and yet still Dr. Thames was very reluctant to help implement that decision.

**Bass:** Yeah. I mean, the board had made their formal decision; the board made the announcement of their formal decision in June of 2006. I was named as project director in August of 2006 and started my job September 1, 2006. So it was pretty clear what the indications were, but even after I got here, I mean it really was swimming upstream in terms of being able to move forward on some things and having some people take some action to move the rehabbing of this campus in a positive direction.

**Smith:** Did you find that Dr. Thames’ lack of support for the rehab decision continued to impact you in what you were having to do here? Was there an ongoing tension that was built?
Bass: No. There was really not anything overt on his part. I mean, I feel like I do need to say there never were any cross words from him directly to me. He was always very kind and supportive when I would do things. What I would do in terms of dealing with him was I felt it was appropriate that, having conversations with him was a good thing to do, and to let him know what my job was and to have that meeting that I was in there with his cabinet and what have you, explaining really pretty much what my charge was. I really tried to respect him and respect his position, and if there were anything official that needed to be communicated, I had the commissioner talk with him because I thought that, his being the president of the university, that was the appropriate respect that needed to be shown him. So I tried not to bother him on the day-to-day stuff, and he pretty much really did stay out of my way. Now, I mean, you always know that there’s probably things swirling beneath the surface and what have you, but I just pretty much went and did my thing and worked for people the best way I could to get some things done. And it hadn’t been perfect, but it’s probably been a slower process over the last nine to ten months or eleven months. I think back now, as we’re going through this interview, about what kind of condition this campus was in, and for us to have moved forward and gotten things rehabbed and had students in the buildings last August is really—you know, maybe I haven’t been as unproductive as I sometimes feel. We’ve gotten some good things done here. So I don’t think there’s anything overt—

Smith: So, then about nine months, ten months after you got here, we were able to open the AEC [Advanced Education Center] classroom building.

Bass: Yeah. The AEC and then the library was roughly six—

Smith: And the library three or four months later.

Bass: I think, well, I don’t think—

Smith: January.

Bass: Was it January officially? I can’t remember now. I remember that we could make some use of the library in some limited fashion, probably sometime during that first term we got back here with the formal reopening happening in January, I guess. The library is a work in progress. I mean, you can see the coffee shop going in downstairs, and that’s a good thing, to see some things changing and adapting and making some improvements to the area. But I’ll tell you; I think back about the way this campus looked when I got here and to see what’s going on now, and there really have been some significant things. It’s been when you’ve moved from having Dr. Saunders come in as the new president and trying to establish herself and her administration in within the university.

Smith: That was summer [20]07; we’re summer [20]08.
Bass: Yeah. We’re approaching summer [2008] right now. I think we’ve had, there’ve been some confusing things, some confusing factors that we’ve all had to deal with. Number one, the way the planning money came down, very unusual that it was funded through a bond bill that had to be administered through the bureau of buildings. Probably some of that is due to lack of trust for some of the prior administration and what have you and wanting to make sure that the thing got done. So it has been a slow process in getting a request for proposal out, to get our planners on board, and having that request for proposal actually be issued and published and then getting a selection. And then once we got the thing published and our planners selected, actually finalizing the contract and getting additional—you know, the money that we had originally appropriated was not enough to cover the projected contract costs, and we had to wait and get through another legislative session to find additional money. So we’re ten months into this fiscal year and just now getting planners on board to get everybody talking about, “What are we going to do on the new campus, and how are we going to lay it out?” And what have you.

Smith: So the State part of this has been slow, confusing.

Bass: Yeah.

Smith: In terms of the rehab of Gulf Park Campus, you have a lot of players involved in that. You mentioned awhile ago that before you got here, people were afraid to do things that might upset FEMA. FEMA works through the federal Stafford Act. Can you think of any examples of working through a FEMA problem where you learned something that ordinary people don’t understand about public institutions going through the recovery process?

Bass: Well, I can give you specifically one. It had to do with even debris removal. Right after the storm, the physical plant folks here on the campus were cleaning off the debris from the president’s home, which was right up on the front, on the southwest corner of the campus. And people from FEMA came up and immediately just chastised the folks who were on the equipment and David Taylor, the physical plant director and what have you, telling them that, “What do you guys mean? Don’t you understand? None of this has been reviewed for historic, for archeological purposes and what have you. If you don’t stop, cease, and desist, we’re going to declare this entire campus a historic area, and you won’t be able to do anything. It’ll effectively shut everything down.” Well, as a result, nothing happened. So really pretty much nothing happened for that first year. When I got on board, I said, “How come we aren’t doing this?” “Well, you don’t understand. FEMA and MEMA and their historic preservation folks won’t allow us to do anything.


meeting we go to.” And I said, “Well, let me know when that next one is, and I’ll go with you.” And essentially my position was we patiently listened to what the people—the first meeting I attended was just essentially going over, “Well, these are the rules, and here’s our latest project worksheets.” “Oh, well, this is good. OK, well, that’s a great meeting.” And I said, “Hold on.” I said, “I got a question to ask, and I’m the most uninformed and ignorant guy at this table.” But I said, “What do we need to do to get those buildings cleaned? What do we need to do to get those buildings back up and figure out whether we need to tear them down, or what do we need to do to start getting that campus cleaned up?” And everybody hemmed and hawed and said, “Well, we need to have a bigger meeting.” OK. So the next week we came back, and there were the historic preservation folks within FEMA, and again, (laughter) a couple of guys from Southern Miss and me and eleven or twelve of all the experts around a table, and we patiently listened for a while. And I finally said, “OK. We’ve listened to this. I need to know what we need to do to gain immediate permission to get the debris cleaned out of those supposedly, according to your words, historically significant buildings because it occurs to me if we leave the debris in there much longer, those historically historic buildings are going to fall down on top of that debris that’s already in there.” And they gave me a process, said, “We just need a letter that states exactly what you want to do and an application that you’ll—a letter applying that. If you’ll just put that in the mail to us.” I said, “Well, no. You’re going to give me a fax number because you’re going to have this letter this afternoon, and I want permission right away.” And in a matter of about two days, we had permission to start the cleanup. And the thing that I learned is, do not allow authorities who are really kind of coming in and not wanting to make a mistake, do not let them off the hook, do not let the opportunity to have a decision and a course of action get by you because in dealing with bureaucrats, there’s always a better time tomorrow to make a decision than today, and you just have to kind of push and not let those guys get away from you before you get a commitment on their part. And it’s more so; it becomes even more serious in a very significant disaster situation because the workloads are so great, the emergency management folks from both the state and the federal level were moving people in on rotation schedules, and you might get an answer from an individual that you could move forward with on one day, and the next week, that individual is not here anymore, and the guy or the gal who’s replaced him, all of a sudden they say, “Well, no, that’s not true. My interpretation of the rules is this.” So when you get an answer you like, hurry up; lock it in, and start taking action before the next guy comes to the table and starts saying, “Well, it’s a new ballgame now.” Does that make sense?

Smith: That’s all very interesting (laughter) to me. So you managed to get the debris cleaned up that needed to be gotten away. It was unsafe; it was unsightly, depressing, and this is right along the beachfront Highway 90. About the only thing left you could recognize between Gulfport and Pass Christian would have been these buildings that were—

Bass: Exactly.
Smith: —standing here as ruins. The buildings still stand, and you’re in the process of beginning to plan for the rehabilitation of the campus. What do you see standing as challenges that you’re going to face with FEMA and MEMA when you go forward with figuring out whether to keep these buildings or tear them down?

Bass: Well, the activities that we’ll be going through next week, which we call it a design charrette for the Gulf Park Campus, is being funded through a grant through the Mississippi Department of Archives and History. Last year I went up, and in asking for help from the department of archives and history, from my own personal standpoint, being able to make a recommendation to the board of trustees or the commissioner or even the administration at Southern Miss about what to do with these buildings on the front part of the campus, I found that I was really, because of my past associations with the campus as mayor and what have you, that I was having a hard time feeling like I could make a good objective recommendation without some help. The buildings on the front part of the campus are tremendously important to a lot of the significant things that have gone on in this area. [I] already told you, I was inaugurated in Hardy Hall.

Smith: That’s probably the most beautiful one.

Bass: Yeah. So I asked for the department of archives and history, and I said, “Look, I understand these buildings are important, and I’m needing some help to find a use for these buildings that can justify the decision for leaving them standing.” And I said, “Right now, what I’m told the master plan that exists that was supposed to be presented for the Gulf Park Campus”—there was a master plan for the Gulf Park Campus that was to be presented the day Katrina hit. And I said, “Part of that master plan was that the administration building would go away, and we would have a more open part of the central campus with some enhancements being made to Hardy and with some actual extensions and additions being made to Lloyd Hall to make it a really nice central walking area for the campus.” And the response I got from them—and they’re very good people and friends of mine—was that, “Prior to Katrina, we probably don’t have any problem doing whatever you really want to do. But since Katrina, and since we’ve lost so much of the historic context of our coastline as a result of a lot of buildings just not being there anymore, the buildings on the front part of the Gulf Park Campus have really risen in level of priority for us, and we want to keep all those buildings.”

Smith: This is archives and history.

Bass: Yeah, Hank Holmes, the executive director and Ken P’Poole, who is in charge of historic preservation. I said, “Well, I can’t promise that we would keep the admin building,” I said, “but if we go through and look and find—but I need some help. I don’t have any money to do anything. I need some money to help develop a plan or where somebody can kind of sit down, who is a lot smarter than I am, and help us and the commissioner and the trustees and Southern Miss make some good, solid decisions about what we need to do up on the front part of that campus.” And they approved a
grant for fifty thousand dollars that we received, we were approved on, I guess, last July, last August. I can’t remember which month. And from that point in time, it has taken some degree of additional effort to be able to get us to the point where we have a design charrette because I think a lot of folks within the Southern Miss administration have had their feelings hurt because folks from outside the Southern Miss family have been pushing to get money and create a process that would kind of take some level of authority or control over what happens on the front part of this campus away from them. And you know, that wasn’t the intent, but that has necessarily caused this process to be a lot slower and a lot more painful than it probably needed to be. But I think we’ll have, utilizing that money, I think what the net result will be from it is that we’ll come up with an alternative and a really pretty report that will give Dr. Saunders and Dr. Meredith the opportunity, and the trustees and the Southern Miss administration an opportunity to say, “Yes. This is the direction we want to go in, and that means we’ve got uses for the front part of the campus, and this will fit in with our grand plan to have a truly beneficial use of the Gulf Park Campus as we move forward.” Southern Miss has a really, well, I call it the entertainment industry program. It’s a film and music production program that, you know, the Gulf Park Campus has a tremendously beautiful environment. It stimulates the creative juices, and people that we have brought in to take a look at this campus, people who have been brought in as a result of having, providing input on how to rebuild and how to renovate and how to rehab this entire area and how to reconstruct this entire area, people uniformly, with the expertise to know about historic renovations and community rehabilitation, what have you, just think this is actually one of the most important properties along the entire Gulf Coast. And they think, and we believe, that utilizing Southern Miss’s program, that could be a catalyst to do not just the educational part of it, but also maybe have this campus be a catalyst to actually create an entire new future for students at this campus to maybe not just get their education here, but to begin their employment on this campus with immediate openings within the film and the music industry and having a small studio here where, if we’ve got an entertainment act down at one of the casinos, well, maybe one of the things is one of the recording stars, they finish their show, and then they want to come down to the Southern Miss studio to finish releasing some tracks for a CD that they’re going to be putting out. The Southern Miss Program, there are a couple of things that go on throughout this state. In Canton, there is supposedly an area where they’re training people to work in the film industry, and that’s being funded with workforce development money because if you go to a movie, you got credits on the front end, and you got credits on the back end. Well, the credits on the back end are much more extensive because they’re all the folks that hold the lights and make sure the camera lenses are polished and all that kind of stuff. That’s what’s being trained up in Canton; it’s pure workforce development in the truest sense. Southern Miss’s program and what can apply down here are the folks that get the credit on the front end of the movie, the writers, the directors, the scores of the film, all the creative things, the really high-end, principal money being paid out goes to those folks, and that’s the kind of things we have here on this campus that as we move out to Cross Creek, and Cross Creek becomes the main campus for the university, right out there on the interstate, this campus will transition into something that’s not just an afterthought
solution, but something that will be a much more permanent and much more value-enhancing and honestly give this campus the ability not to be a drag on the greater university community but become a sustainable type of operation in its own respect.

**Smith:** This charrette that we’re talking about, that’s about to happen, this is made possible by archives and history funding?

**Bass:** Archives and history grant, yeah, funding.

**Smith:** Let’s think a little bit more about the problem of this campus. We understand that we’re entangled with FEMA. As you go forward, FEMA has to approve. Will FEMA be involved in financing the transformation of things at Gulf Park?

**Bass:** Yeah. FEMA will pay the full cost of rehabbing the buildings to what they were doing before. I think our—nobody’s wanted to pull the trigger on that decision because of whatever internal drag has been evident in prior administrations, but what’s become an even more pressing concern now is do we want to just go rehab and have what we had before, or is there some better way we can reconfigure the interior of those buildings to really accomplish some long-term uses? And if we’re going to spend more money, let’s just spend it one time. That may mean a reduced amount of FEMA funding because it’s not just—they’ll pay 100 percent just to give you what you had before. Maybe there’s a lower level of FEMA funding to do that, but if we do it with the right kind of interest and the right kind of approach, there probably is third-party money even from the private sector or through historic rehabilitation monies that will allow us to make up that difference and more to not just sustain the buildings, but to really kind of enhance and make sure those things are going to be here for years to come with a supply of funds to keep them up.

**Smith:** Would you expect to come out of the planning processes the next couple of weeks able to decide how you’re going to use FEMA, or if you’re going to use FEMA?

**Bass:** Yeah. My understanding is that the decision’s been made to go ahead and initiate contracts or initiate projects with FEMA at the June meeting of the Board of Trustees at IHL to go ahead and say, “FEMA, we want to rehab those things.” At least get the process started where, once plans come up, and we find that, well, maybe there’s some things to do, we can—it will take twelve to eighteen months to finish the design and planning work, just on rehabbing the buildings to get them to where they were before. So let’s go ahead and at least start the project so that even if we have to change them in midstream and do something as a result of some of the plans that we’ve developed through the charrette process and some of the other things that will occur down the line, we at least won’t have to start from scratch to begin that process and put us even further behind the curve in getting something accomplished.

**Smith:** The buildings on the front end of the campus had several feet of water in them in Katrina. The bottom floors were washed out everywhere. What about the
insurance angle on the rehab? Number one, have we collected all the insurance that we’re due on these buildings? And number two, moving forward, how does that impact you, to think about the insurance situation?

**Bass:** Well, the latest information I have is that we’ve collected all the primary insurance that covers—there wasn’t much insurance on these buildings to begin with. For whatever reason, there just wasn’t much. But an insurance recovery consultant has been working with the university, and pretty much had gone through the process of getting all the dollars on the primary coverage. And as of sometime last spring probably, sometime last fall, or earlier than that, you know, the move was, “Let’s go ahead and sign off on the primary coverage so we can move into the secondary coverage and see what else we can recover. I can tell you, whatever insurance is out there as far as the recovery on the front part of the buildings, you may not have had that much insurance on them to begin with, and if you do, it’s still the basic argument of what got to you, wind versus water? And what we found is the Bureau of Buildings actually had some flood insurance on these buildings up front. So it was not much, but it was a little bit off recovery that helped give us some additional funding. The good thing about these buildings, yeah they had several feet in them, and they were washed out and what have you. The fact that they’re historically significant gives us the ability to go ahead and rehab those things. Had something been done to where the buildings were torn down, or the buildings totally destroyed, we probably don’t get to rebuild where we are because of the redrawing of the flood zones and the various velocity zones that the regulatory authorities tell us we have to adhere to for insurance provisions. The fact that we got some historically significant buildings gives us the ability to rehab those building up on the front of the campus. If insurance, we hopefully will insure them, but if we can’t insure them or it’s prohibitively expensive to insure them, then we can apply for a waiver that would allow us to move forward to say, “Economically we can’t afford it, and economically it’s just not feasible.” And the disaster authorities will say, “OK. Fine. You don’t have to have insurance.”

**Smith:** FEMA will let you rebuild it without buying flood insurance.

**Bass:** Yeah. They’ll let you go back; they won’t let you rebuild. They will let you rehab; they will let you go back and take, if the building is there, you can go back in and do what you need to to reuse the thing and apply all kinds of different monies, and if it winds up being too expensive to insure, then, “OK. We’ll give you a waiver, but only because of the type buildings you had because they are historically significant buildings.” And otherwise I don’t think we’d have the ability to do what we’re doing.

**Smith:** So FEMA will pay the bill even—

**Bass:** Yeah.

**Smith:** —if you go back in and say you can’t afford the flood insurance.

**Bass:** Oh, yeah. They’ll come back in and help.
Smith: So long as it’s in that historically significant category.

Bass: And you got to make sure you get it in black and white, get it in writing. And we got to make sure we get that done. So it does—the fact that these buildings—these buildings may be a pain to some people, but it really is beneficial that they’re there because if you drive down Highway 90, look north as you’re passing by the front of this campus, Hardy Hall makes a statement. I mean, it needs to be looking pretty; it needs to be stabilized and what have you, but people don’t understand just how much of that building you can see from there and what kind of appearance and presence it has, and what kind of presence this campus has up and down the Coast. For us to have been able to get lights redone across the front part of this campus when everything else to the east and to the west was totally dark, was a big deal. It was a great, great sign of encouragement to people along the Coast. I mean, you know, ‘Things are getting better. Maybe we’re not perfect, but things are getting better. Look. You got lights on there, and you can at least see something other than just trying to figure out where you’re supposed to turn on Highway 90.’

Smith: When you think about the project, rehabilitation project here, do you have any ballpark idea about what kind of a total cost FEMA and private might be involved? Or are you just not that far in the thinking about—

Bass: I would imagine—I mean, if I just threw a ballpark figure out there, I would think for the three front buildings, on the numbers that I can recall from reports, we’re talking probably ten million dollars just to rehab the buildings to the way they were before, based on current estimates. Those might go up. Again, the amount of money is really not the important thing because FEMA is saying they’re going to pay 100 percent of the rehab costs. So if it’s fifty million, they’re on the hook for whatever it is, so you don’t worry about that. I think the key thing is making sure that you have a fundamentally sound long-range use for those buildings within a larger overall master plan or focus or direction for this campus as a whole in the future. The money will work out. What’s this campus going to be? What kind of catalyst is it going to be, not just for higher education, but for the surrounding area? And I think the way this campus is placed within this community and on this Coast from the standpoint of its position of exposure could really send some very, if we do this right, it could really send a very strong message to the rest of the Coast about the way you take care of things and the way you come back from events like this and how to make it not just get what you had before, but make it look better and even more impressive in the process.

Smith: Let me ask you a question. Awhile ago you talked about the difficulty of getting the university together with the board’s desire for this property. Have you felt that inside the university that you were accepted as a part of the so-called USM family? Or have you felt that there was some level of concern about you?
Bass: With the thought that this isn’t going to go public anytime soon, (laughter) I think I have been tolerated and not because of me, not from a personal standpoint, but because of the position that I’m in and the fact that I’m here taking care of university business, but I’m not really the university. And I think people have really been offended by that within certain corners of the university administration. In the prior administration, I think there’ve been a lot of hurt feelings since then. You’ve got a new president who’s come in, who I understand is probably going to be judged very substantially on the quality of what happens here on the Coast. And I think she feels that mission very, very strongly based on my personal conversations with her. But she’s also having to come in and learn how to be a president, get her feet on the ground, understand all the different constituencies she’s having to deal with and really (laughter) trying to make the best that she possibly can, considering all the different folks that are kind of hitting her with those things that are important to [them] or the complaints that she needs to be dealing with. And it’s created a tough situation here, but I don’t know that I would be able to say that I would be doing anything any different or have created an environment any different if I were in the president’s shoes or anybody else’s shoes. I think everybody within the university who are in decision-making positions probably would feel a whole lot more comfortable if somebody from IHL, whether it’s Robert Bass or somebody else, were not here doing what they’re doing.

Smith: Can I get you to think a little bit about the board. Sometime back, maybe last December after the Cross Creek decision had been made and accepted, you had a number of board members come down, Dr. Meredith and someone from Hancock Bank who made a presentation; it was some part of the board. It wasn’t a full board meeting.

Bass: No. It was a meeting of the, I think what you’re talking about is a meeting of the Gulf Coast committee, which occurred in December of 2007, December 4, 2007, if I remember right.

Smith: Can you help us understand the dynamics there of the board? I believe it was Ms. Whitten and maybe two or three others that were with her from the board. How are they organized? What’s their approach to this recovery and new campus challenge?

Bass: That’s been somewhat difficult to discern because I think some of the trustees are feeling a lot more comfortable at dealing with the commissioner and have him kind of give their directions or give their input, what have you, directly from him instead of them providing it directly to the folks on the staff. I think the Gulf Coast committee was created by Dr. Davidson as part of his term to make sure that people understood from a public standpoint that the board of trustees was not losing its focus and losing its interest in the Gulf Coast, and that it was something that the board wanted to make sure that they were having current information on a month-to-month basis. I don’t know, I guess I really don’t know what the committee actually does other than just have come down here and kind of said, “The Gulf Coast is important,
and we’re going to be doing Cross Creek, and we’re going to be rehabbing Gulf Park.”  
And again, it’s just to kind of make people feel good; I don’t know what it’s done from the standpoint of really taking some effective positive action.  It’s more, I guess, for helping people feel better than anything else.  You know, Ms. Whitten has now taken over as president of the board of trustees, and I know that she has kept up to the commitment she made.  She’s maintained the Gulf Coast committee, and she’s appointed Robin Robinson from Laurel as chair of the Gulf Coast committee.  And the new board has just come on.  Next week will be their first meeting as a new board with four new members coming on board, and I think we’re just going to need to see how that’s going to play out, and just exactly what role the Gulf Coast committee and how the board of trustees is going to react towards the Gulf Coast at that point in time.

Smith:  Robert, I’m near the end of my list of questions.  I always like to get you to do a little thinking about the most important lesson, either the most important lesson for good or ill, that you’ve learned out of working on helping a state agency get over major storm damage.  The most important lesson.

Bass:  You know something?  The most important lesson is, I guess, to stabilize the situation and to help people get through the shock as quickly as possible, and then begin moving them forward and actually pushing to make decisions to kind of get things back on the road and back to recovery as quickly as you possibly can.  It will not get any better, and if somebody’s waiting for somebody to come present that perfect solution to you, it’s just not going to happen, and you just have to kind of get up and make sure that every day when you go home, there’s just been a little something else that’s improved the situation.  And that’s the biggest lesson that I can, I mean, there’s no one thing that you can do that makes it all better all at once.  You have to be very patient; you have to be very positive, even when you don’t feel positive, but you have to be moving in a direction, and you can’t be afraid to have somebody point the finger at you and say, “Gee whiz, you screwed up.”  And honestly, I don’t have the answer to that all the time.  I probably don’t have the answer to that 30 percent of the time, but I can just tell you from experience, get everybody in there around you; make sure you keep people in support and around you and just do the best you can to kind of move it forward.

Smith:  Thinking about community, you’ve been here a long time; you’ve been mayor.  You’re helping one of the most important institutions in Long Beach try to get back on its feet.  How do you think the community is doing?  What’s the mood of the community?  How do you think the community is doing?

Bass:  I honestly don’t think the community is doing very well.  I think what you’re seeing in the community is board of aldermen who, again, are becoming more well-known for their ability to argue amongst themselves and start talking about, “Well, it’s that side’s fault,” or, “No, it’s that side’s fault.”  And there’s a bunch of finger-pointing going on, and as a result, I mean, the analogy I draw is Nero is fiddling while Rome is burning.  And in the grand scheme of things, Long Beach is still, even after recovering from Katrina, Long Beach has still never really figured out what it wanted
to be when it grew up. I mean, I think there’s plenty of indications, and people kind of have a sense of what the answer is. They’ve told us in enough forms and fashion, but we’ve not seen that translate into demonstrative action by the elected officials and focused effort in bringing the kind of resources to the table to get those things done. What’s happened is that it’s easier to argue about whether somebody’s going to build a twenty-eight-story condo on the beachfront or whether somebody’s going to put a casino in the harbor. People can understand those arguments. It’s easier to focus on those than to really sit back and kind of create a picture of what the community’s supposed to look like and then figure out a way to make that happen.

Smith: Again, thinking as a citizen of the community and being involved deeply in so many things, when you think back on the experience of the last two and a half, almost three years now, what’s been the most surprising, positive thing that you’ve seen?

Bass: It’s not a surprising positive thing, but the most positive thing is (laughter) to see, is to be hurt as badly as we’ve been hurt, and to see people get up, and despite facing the situation where they ought to just say (laughter), throw in a towel and call it a day, they still continue to persist and persevere and try and recapture some of what they had before because they think the place is special. I mean, you know, I was married over in St. Thomas Church back in 1980. That church was a brand-new construction, following the destruction of the prior church in 1969 when [Hurricane] Camille hit. I never thought we’d ever have to build another church again. You never think you’re going to have to ever come through that.

Smith: It was built like a pyramid.

Bass: And as God is my witness, I don’t ever, ever want to have to go through this again, but there’s just a resilience down here that just will not be denied. And I think the thing that I am most concerned about is that, despite the willingness of the people and despite the sheer level of care that people bring to the table down here, and how much they want things to get back to the way they were, the economics of the situation may dictate that the very people who were born and raised here may not be able to afford to live here. And if we’re not careful about what we do, and if we don’t provide the kind of opportunities and the right kind of development and quit arguing amongst ourselves and start moving forward in a positive direction, that may be the greatest example of destruction of this community, and quite frankly, at a level which no Katrina could ever reach.

Smith: Is this bound up in a housing problem, you think? Affordable housing?

Bass: It’s affordable housing; it’s insurance. I mean, people that had beachfront homes, some of those folks had homes, they’d inherited them. I mean, they were homes that they were able to afford simply because they’d inherited them. They didn’t start from scratch to build those things and buy the property on the beachfront and construct it at what they needed to construct at the level of strength that they needed to construct those homes at. Insurance. I mean, you got people who were
retired who were living in some of the homes along the beach. They can’t afford four—I’m paying now three and a half times what I was paying for insurance pre-Katrina. Three and a half times, and I live two miles off the beach. You know, some people are paying, ten, twelve, fifteen thousand dollars a year for insurance. I mean, that’s more—I don’t pay that a year in house payments. I mean, the economics have just changed. I mean, I told somebody that, “Thirty years from now, you may look back and people who were from the Coast have been here for thirty years.” And that shouldn’t be the legacy.

Smith: Let me ask you a little bit about St. Thomas Church. They’re going to rebuild on the beach.

Bass: Yeah. (laughter)

Smith: How do you feel about that? That’s sacred ground; the church has been there a long time.

Bass: I honestly don’t know how I feel about that. You’re talking to somebody who in the past, I was president of the St. Thomas School Board; I was also president of the St. Thomas Parish Council. And anybody that thinks that local politics, state politics, or national politics has anything on the politics within the Catholic Church has another thing coming. I mean, it’s a great proving ground. So the decision that was made is the decision. Was it a unanimous one? No. Will there ever be anything unanimous? No. But it was important to people, and I think the decision-makers, that that church be rebuilt where it’s at because sacred ground, tradition, whatever. And I think it will make people feel good to be able to be there. Now, I think the drawback is going to be that there’s been a—St. Thomas School is no longer there. It’s been consolidated with St. Paul School to become St. Vincent de Paul School, which is going to be opening up at a brand-new facility located in between Menge Avenue and Espy Avenue, out in the county area north of Pass Christian. I don’t think people understand how big a convenience it was to have a school or an educational facility right near the church that people could find convenient for continuing religious education and other things both on Sundays and on Wednesday nights. And when given the choice, people are going to go for the more, they’re going to want to go to church, and they’re going to want to worship God, but they’re also going to want to make sure that it doesn’t take them an extra two hours a day to get that done. They’re going to want to go to a church that’s near where the educational opportunities are. I think that’s the big risk that’s going to be run. (brief interruption)

Smith: Do you have any, as a practicing, loyal Catholic, do you have any feelings about what’s going on down at St. Paul’s in Pass Christian? Do you understand their dilemmas or what they have to say about church politics?

Bass: You know what I understand about that? Number one, I don’t want to get involved in it because some of those folks are already mad at me about other things that have happened in the past. But what I think people need to understand about the
Catholic Church is it is not a democracy. When they ask you to give, it truly is giving. And for all the structure that has developed to create opportunities for input, people need to understand that it’s just like Lincoln; you can sit in there in the midst of a cabinet meeting, and have it be ten or twelve to one against taking a certain action, but when the one is Lincoln, that one’s going to win. And that’s the way it is with the Catholic Church; we can talk, and we can have votes, and all that kind of stuff, but quite frankly, whatever the priest, whatever the bishop, whatever the archbishop or the cardinal or the pope say, that’s the answer. And there’s no other answer on this test, and you can be as frustrated as you want to be, and that’s all you’re going to be is frustrated. That’s not going to have any impact.

**Smith:** Do you have any insight about the feelings that would cause a bunch of Catholics to challenge their bishop on that decision to move off the beach? Their priest, really, and their bishop. The bishop has backed up the priest.

**Bass:** You know something? I would be wanting to hang onto that as much as anybody else. I mean, I do understand that, and I think people can point, “Well, look at St. Thomas. They’re rebuilding on the [beach]. Look at St. Peter by the Sea up in Gulfport; they’re rebuilding by the beach.”

**Smith:** St. Michael’s.

**Bass:** St. Michael’s. But you know something? What’s good for the goose is not good for the gander, and just because somebody else is saying that’s the right thing doesn’t mean that that’s the right thing for that other parish. And quite frankly, there’s people that are going to be held responsible to kind of make a better long-term decision. And you know, quite frankly, we may look back, Pat, in twenty years and that St. Paul, Our Holy Family Parish decision may wind up looking to be the more positive decision of any of the things that are occurring here along the beachfront. I don’t know. If I were down at St. Paul, I’d probably be doing the same thing, arguing and fighting, wanting to try and keep what I could have down there because it’s something I’m used to. It’s something I grew up with. I mean, the elementary school and the high school I went to and successfully completed are no longer in existence. Now, that makes me feel old. And you’re a historian; you know how important it is to hang onto those things. But in the grand scheme of things, you go ahead, and you grieve, and you really do have to move forward and accept kind of the things that are presented to you in life and just make the best can of them and be smart about it. Don’t just be going back and doing something the same way before just because that’s the way you always did it. Just like this situation; let’s be smarter about things, and let’s see if there’s not a better and smarter answer to a question that can be put into motion.

**Smith:** Is there anything else that you think people fifty years from now would like to know or ought to know, or you’d want them to know?
**Bass:** You know something? Just that there are a lot of strong and imperfect people trying to do the best they can to get an area back up to a normal function. And I would think that one of the things that probably in fifty years, people aren’t going to really worry about whether it took twelve months longer to get a campus rehabbed or two years longer to get a campus built than it maybe should’ve, could’ve, would’ve taken. They’re going to know that, “Gee, there was a big storm that hit this place, and we came through it, and look at what a thriving place we have today, and look at what a beautiful campus we have north of town.” That’s what they’re going to be focused on. And sometimes all this squabbling that goes on, all these hurt feelings that go on, I think we just have to forget about that and understand that it’s a lot longer and a lot larger mission that we’re involved in. And you know, quite frankly, in fifty years people are not even going to know who was here. They’re just going to see the results of the fruits of their labor.

**Smith:** OK. Thank you.

(end of interview)