Mississippi Oral History Program

Hurricane Katrina Oral History Project

An Oral History

with

Robert Gavagnie

Interviewers: Rachel Swaykos, Sheena Barnett, and Kate Doyle

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Biography

Robert L. Gavagnie was born in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi, on September 16, 1947, to Willard Gavagnie (b. December 23, 1921, DeLisle, Mississippi) and Mary M. Thomas Gavagnie (b. March 8, 1926, New Orleans, Louisiana). His father was an aircraft maintenance technician at Keesler Air Force Base in Biloxi, Mississippi, from 1946 to 1975, and his mother was a savings and loan manager. His ancestors were some of the first settlers of the Mississippi Gulf Coast, the Gavagnies arriving from Venice, Italy, in 1869; the Selliers arriving from France in the late 1700s; the Thomases arriving from France about 1800; and the Colsons arriving from Sweden about 1800.

Mr. Gavagnie attended St. Stanislaus High School and Bay High School, from which he was graduated in 1965. He attended Pearl River Community College and William Carey College, from which he earned a bachelor’s degree in 1989. In 1968 he enlisted in the US Navy and served for four years, including one tour in Vietnam. In 1972, when he returned to Bay St. Louis, he went to work as a firefighter in the Bay St. Louis Fire Department. He stayed with the Bay St. Louis Fire Department until 1976, during which time he made chief. In 1976, he returned to active duty with the Mississippi Army National Guard until 1997, when he retired from the Guard. In July of 1997, he assumed the duties of chief of the Bay St. Louis Fire Department, and he was chief when Hurricane Katrina made landfall, devastating Bay St. Louis and the Mississippi Gulf Coast. On June 6, 2007, he retired from the Bay St. Louis Fire Department. On November 23, 1974, Mr. Gavagnie married Linda Serio, and they have two children, Robert Gavagnie Jr. and Alicia Gavagnie.
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AN ORAL HISTORY

with

ROBERT GAVAGNIE

This is the first of two interviews for the Mississippi Oral History Program of The University of Southern Mississippi. The interview is with Robert Gavagnie and is taking place on June 12, 2007. The interviewer is Rachel Swaykos. Also present are Mike Cuevas and Pam San Fillippo.

Swaykos: Today is June the twelfth, 2007, and it’s about one o’clock p.m.

Gavagnie: I’m Robert Gavagnie, was fire chief of Bay St. Louis during the Hurricane Katrina period, now retired. (laughter)

Swaykos: Good. Retired one week, right?

Gavagnie: Right.

Swaykos: OK. Have you always been from here, or where’d you start out?

Gavagnie: I was born and raised in Bay St. Louis.

Swaykos: Good, good. And when were you born?

Gavagnie: Nineteen forty-seven.

Swaykos: And are you currently living in Bay St. Louis as well?

Gavagnie: Yes.

Swaykos: And are you married?

Gavagnie: Yes.

Swaykos: And what’s your wife’s name?

Gavagnie: Linda.

Swaykos: Linda. And what was her maiden name?

Gavagnie: Serio.
Swaykos: How do you spell that?

Gavagnie: S-E-R-I-O.

Swaykos: And where was she from?

Gavagnie: She’s lived here, well, in Waveland since she was a teenager, but she’s originally from New Orleans.

Swaykos: Oh. How’d y’all meet? (laughter)

Gavagnie: Just sort of met. (laughter) I’d just come home after Navy in 1972, and that’s when we met, sometime right after that.

Swaykos: I see. And when were you married?


Swaykos: Do you know the date? It’s tough. (laughter)

Gavagnie: November 23. (laughter) These are trick questions. (laughter)

Swaykos: I’m going to tell her if you don’t know. (laughter) And when was she born?

Gavagnie: February 21, 1953. See, I remember that. (laughter)

Swaykos: In New Orleans?

Gavagnie: Yeah.

Swaykos: And can you walk me through your career?

Gavagnie: I graduated from Bay High School in 1965, attended Pearl River Junior College for two years, enlisted in the Navy in 1968, under threats of being drafted, served in the Navy for four years, including one tour in Vietnam, came home in 1972. From 1972, went to work as a firefighter in Bay St. Louis Fire Department, April 12, 1972. I stayed with Bay St. Louis Fire Department until 1976 and made chief for the first time in that time frame. And in 1976, I went back to work on active duty with the Mississippi Army National Guard, which I stayed with till 1997, when I retired from them. And in July of 1997, I came back, and I assumed the duties as chief of Bay St. Louis Fire Department, and I retired June 6, 2007, from Bay St. Louis Fire Department.

Swaykos: Good, good, good. So that was a ten-year run, that last one, huh?
Gavagnie: Um-hm.

Swaykos: OK. Good. What do you like to do now that you’re retired and not working?

Gavagnie: I’m still getting used to it. (laughter)

Swaykos: What did you do before that when you weren’t working?

Gavagnie: I just messed around. I’m a big NASCAR (National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing) fan; I attend a couple, about five or six races a year, you know, in the Southeast. Some of them, my wife and I—

Swaykos: Did you go to Bristol?

Gavagnie: Yeah, my wife and I have been to Bristol; we’ve been to Darlington[ton]. I hold season tickets to Darlington, (inaudible) tickets. I attend five or six a year, and usually we hook a couple of them together with vacations. Like when we go to Martinsville, we usually go to the mountains for a week prior to it, things like that, my wife and I.

Swaykos: OK, good, good. Do you have any religious affiliation you’d like to share?

Gavagnie: Roman Catholic.

Swaykos: OK. Do you belong to any service organizations, specific activities?

Gavagnie: American Legion, VFW [Veterans of Foreign Wars], International Association of Fire Chiefs, Mississippi Fire Chiefs Association. What else do I belong to? (laughter) That’s just the four I can think off the top of my head.

Swaykos: Sure. Do you have any kids?

Gavagnie: Two.

Swaykos: And what are their names and ages?

Gavagnie: Robert, Jr., and he will be thirty years old next month. He is a police officer with the Waveland Police Department, but he was injured in Iraq, and he’s still recovering from his injuries. He mobilized with the Mississippi Army National Guard back in 2005.

Swaykos: OK. What a blessing to have him come home, huh?

Gavagnie: Oh, yeah. Yeah.
Swaykos: Yeah. And the other?

Gavagnie: My daughter Alicia. She lives in Sanford, Florida. She was born in 1979, so she’s just about twenty-eight years old, and she’s a registered nurse. She works for Florida Hospital in Orlando, and she’s getting ready to get married August 18.

Swaykos: Oh, what a fun summer. (laughter) So your parents were from here, I’m guessing, if you were born and raised.

Gavagnie: Well, my father’s from Harrison County over in DeLisle, and my mother was from here. So they all local; everybody’s local.

Swaykos: And what’s your dad’s name?

Gavagnie: Willard.

Swaykos: Willard?

Gavagnie: W-I-L-L-A-R-D.

Swaykos: OK. And do you know his date of birth?

Gavagnie: Nineteen twenty-one, December 23.

Swaykos: Good. And what did he do for work around here?

Gavagnie: He was a civil service employee of Keesler Air Force Base from the day it opened. He was in the aircraft maintenance.

Swaykos: Oh, good. And a little bit about his family? Do you know how they ended up here or anything like that?

Gavagnie: Well, the Gavagnie side came over in 1869 from Italy. We can trace our ancestry back to Venice where the original ones came from. My grandmother’s side of the family on that side is the Selliers, and we can trace that family history all the way back to the original Dedeaux land grant from the French.

Swaykos: Wow. Wow. And your mother’s maiden name?

Gavagnie: Thomas.

Swaykos: And her first name?

Gavagnie: Mary Margaret.

Swaykos: And her date of birth?
Gavagnie: March 8, 1926.

Swaykos: And where was she born?

Gavagnie: New Orleans.

Swaykos: OK. And when were they married? Do you know that?

Gavagnie: October 31, 1946.

Swaykos: Ooh, what a wedding day.

Gavagnie: Yeah. (laughter)

Swaykos: And that was here?

Gavagnie: Correct.

Swaykos: OK.

Gavagnie: Well, in DeLisle, it’s close enough.

Swaykos: Yeah, OK. And what does she do for work?

Gavagnie: She was in the banking business. She was the manager of Security Savings and Loan, one of the companies here, until she retired.

Swaykos: OK. And what about your mother’s family? Do you know any background on them?

Gavagnie: Yeah, the Thomases are kind of a mixture of French and Irish, and they’ve traced back into the 1700s somewhere. And then her mother was a Colson, and it’s the same thing, and they trace back—they’re some of the original family names in this area.

Swaykos: Oh, good. Good, good. So you have quite a bit of roots here, huh?

Gavagnie: Pretty deep. (laughter)

Swaykos: OK. So why don’t you tell me a little bit about what August 29, [2005] was about for you? How did that go? How’d you prepare?

Gavagnie: Well, actually we’re going to back up to about the twenty-sixth or so, in that time frame. We have a set hurricane plan for the fire department, and we have certain goals we got to accomplish in so many hours, so many days out, including
bringing extra people in, (inaudible) equipment, checking equipment and so forth, planning evacuation plans if we need any, you know, how we’d implement the evacuation plans and all that.

**Swaykos:** Who sets up those regulations for you?

**Gavagnie:** I would for the fire department. I also served as emergency manager for the city, and I coordinate everything through Hancock Emergency Management.

**Swaykos:** So that’s what you were doing on the twenty-fifth.

**Gavagnie:** I think the twenty-sixth. That should have been about Thursday, I think, yeah, something like that. And it was just a thing, you had meetings at the EOC [emergency operations center] and the two cities, and the county and everyone, you know; we’d meet and prepping up. And on the twenty-sixth, I believe it was that Thursday and that Friday, OK. Anyway, you know, it wasn’t much of anything back then, and we were going to treat it like we always treat our normal Category One, Category Two storms, near-misses, and we were still preparing because you always prepare. But at that time the forecast wasn’t really expecting it to be much of anything. And—

**Swaykos:** Right, right. Who all comes to those meetings?

**Gavagnie:** Oh, representatives from the various governments that you have your—like the county emergency management, we all coordinate with—I mean, we all—everything goes through the county emergency management, but the mayor attends them, the police chief usually, myself, just various people. What you need at a particular meeting, like the different school systems, and the people, the school board or the superintendents and so forth, and basically everything was normal. We met again; I remember we were meeting on Saturday, and I had made some arrangements and talked to people. And as of Saturday, we still really didn’t have much to look at, and the way the storm tracked—you got to have your hurricane warning for the way it was tracking, your watches and your warnings—it never would get quite close enough to where it was tracking till it made a turn for us to start issuing, for the hurricane center to issue the correct time frame for your watches and warnings. And so we went on Saturday, and we felt we were pretty well prepared Saturday. And I know some friends of mine that lived in some of the lower—not the lower areas—parts of town that had never flooded; they lived in there. And they said, what did I think? And I said, “Well, at that particular time, I feel like everything’s going to be OK. We’re looking at a light Category Two.” In fact, one of the nursing homes, it was on high land; it had never flooded. We kind of concluded it was safer to leave the sixty-something bedridden patients in there for a small storm than it was to try to move these people with these medical conditions. And this went on through Saturday night with a few meetings, and Saturday night a bunch of us went over, and we had a Bristol party; the Bristol night race was that night. (laughter) And I went on home, and every now and then during the night, I’d get up and turn the weather channel on and see.
And all at once that Saturday night was when it jumped to 175-mile-an-hour winds, and it started a direct track to this area. First thing I did Sunday morning, I got up. I called the people that I had told that I thought they should stay, that I thought it’d be safe to stay and told them to pack up and go. I drove directly from my house, got dressed, drove directly from my house to Dunbar Village Assisted Living Facility; I don’t think you can call them nursing homes anymore. (laughter) And the manager was standing on the front steps waiting for me, and he said, “I imagine you here to order a mandatory evacuation.” I said, “Yes, I am here to order a mandatory evacuation.” He said, “Well, good. I’ve already called, and the ambulatory buses are on the way.”

**Swaykos:** So were you working on Sunday morning, or is this something you chose to do?

**Gavagnie:** I just woke up. Well, the fire chief is on call. We work twenty-four hours a day, basically, you might as well say. And just from what I saw on the Weather Channel, I knew (inaudible) see it, and then from there we went to the EOC [emergency operations center], and that’s when we started getting serious. The FEMA [Federal Emergency Management Agency] people were down by then, their (inaudible), their hurricane, their storm people, the ones that come in advance of the storm. Our MEMA [Mississippi Emergency Management Agency] people were there; they’d been here from the day before, and our National Guard liaison was there. And we started meeting that morning to start making decisions, and we had issued voluntary evacuation orders Saturday, and Saturday evening we issued some mandatory evacuation orders for the low-lying areas. Sunday morning, I believe if I remember correctly, we issued all our mandatory evacuation orders for the whole, everything, and then through the day it was just meetings and planning and trying to get ready, buttoning things down, and that night, I remember, we decided as it grew, different crews, my firefighters, police officers, myself, we went to low-lying areas like Cedar Point, South Beach, and all that was in the city at that time, and we started going up and down every street. If we saw lights on or anything in a house that should be evacuated, we’d go knocking [on] doors, and even though you had the mandatory evacuation order, they [the mandatory evacuation orders] have absolutely no teeth in them whatsoever. You can’t drag a person out they house; you can’t arrest them. If they refuse to go, all you can do basically is take their name and hope you don’t find—

**Swaykos:** So why call it a mandatory evacuation?

**Gavagnie:** Because you got to go up to the federal level for that and the state level. A mandatory evac[uation], I mean, if you arrest people and take them out they homes, what are you going to do with them?

**Swaykos:** You can’t put them on a bus and drive them away?
Gavagnie: You can’t put them in jail because I mean, you just got to go impressing the fact to them that they’ve got to leave. And what a mandatory evacuation basically means is at a certain point and time, your emergency services, be it fire, police, EMS [emergency medical services], we’ve got to cease operations, and we cannot come help you because at one point, you got to quit where the reasonable risk is for these people, your first responders. What is the reasonable risk? I mean, where can you draw that line? You got to draw that line. And people, when they evacuate, they got to understand at a certain point, we can’t help them anymore. All we can do is go help afterwards.

Swaykos: Right. Did you send your family away?

Gavagnie: No. My wife is a [Hurricane] Camille survivor, and she said she was staying, and she did.

Swaykos: Most of the people you saw as you were going up and down the street, what were they saying? Why were they there?

Gavagnie: Well, we didn’t have—I don’t think we found more than fifteen or twenty people in the whole Cedar Point area. A number of them agreed to go ahead and leave. In fact, I had one of the city councilmen, Councilman Reed was riding around with me in my car, and if we saw lights on, then we’d go knock on doors, and one or two places, people refused to answer the doors, we’d just knock, and all we could do was write their address down for afterwards. And I’ll interject this; it goes later on in the deal, but I know of three cases in Bay St. Louis [in] that pets caused their owners to die because people would not leave their pets. And now we have a pet shelter; they plan on doing one in Jackson for people where you can bring your pets if you evacuate. But I know three cases; there’s one house I beat on out in Cedar Point, and the lady would not answer the door because she would not leave her cats.

Swaykos: What—if someone—

Gavagnie: And she was lost in the storm; she was one of the fatalities.

Swaykos: If someone showed up with a pet, does someone at a shelter really have a heart to tell them to go away?

Gavagnie: I wasn’t at any of the shelters, and I couldn’t say, but they announced way in advance that pets were not allowed in the shelters.

Swaykos: Right. I know that was huge for people to stay, but I know a lot of the shelters, people just showed up with their animals, anyway.

Gavagnie: And another thing that hurt our evacuation—I don’t think it’ll hurt it anymore—was the Hurricane Camille mentality. My wife was one of them; Miss Cuevas was another one. (laughter) “I’ve lived here my whole life; I know what
flooded in Hurricane Camille, the worst storm to ever hit the United States, and I’ll be safe where I stayed.” And out of the eight thousand people we had in Bay St. Louis, I don’t think—we might have evacuated 60 percent if we were lucky because most of them said, “Well, I live on high ground.” My mother’s house, for example. She lives on Demontluzin Street, which is one of the highest points on the Gulf Coast from Florida to Texas, and I sent her off because of her age, but that street had never flooded in the known history of this town; since 1699, it had never flooded that area. Well, my mother’s house is built up about three feet off the ground, and it had over two feet of water inside of it. I mean, that’s just what people—they lived on certain streets, and they said, “Well, we’ve never flooded.” Even people along the beach on the bluff said, “We never got water here, so we’ll just stay and watch the storm.”

**Swaykos:** Yeah. How scary. So you went home Sunday night. What time did you get home?

**Gavagnie:** I don’t think I went home Sunday night. I believe when I left my house, when I went back to my house Sunday, picked up clothes, and I stayed at the station from landfall through early Monday morning.

**Swaykos:** OK. So your wife just stayed home alone?

**Gavagnie:** My wife, my daughter, her fiancé. We had about six or seven people at my house, and since I’m one of the few houses in the area of town that didn’t take water, until I got back to my house about eight o’clock Monday night, my wife thought it was just a wind event. She was unaware; they couldn’t get out, and she was unaware of the amount of damage and the devastation that was done by water.

**Swaykos:** So your house was OK?

**Gavagnie:** Yeah. You got your normal hurricane damage, lost some shingles off the roof; some fences blew down. A big oak tree fell on my wife’s [Ford] Expedition [sport utility vehicle], nothing out the ordinary. (laughter)

**Swaykos:** Oh, no. (laughter)

**Gavagnie:** Nothing out the ordinary; it was a favor. (laughter)

**Swaykos:** So you had never been through something like this here with this area.

**Gavagnie:** Well, not as—I was gone for Hurricane Camille; I been through numerous storms and prior to Hurricane Camille, I went through Hurricane Betsy, which was, you know, it was a bad storm, but nothing real bad. And I been through all the ones over the years because of my role either in the fire service or my role with the National Guard, which we would have to activate. Or I went through years of either we activated and went and stood by to rescue, whatever needed to be done. So I’ve always been involved, and that’s one of the reasons I decided to retire when I did,
prior to this storm season because for thirty-three years my wife and I have been married, she’s had to fend for herself. I never could be the one to be home, to pick up the stuff, board up, whatever had to be done, either job that I’ve had. And I got to looking this year, and I said, “You know what?” I said, “I owe her this much to retire before hurricane season.” She’s always did it with friends and got things ready because I was always either getting the city ready or getting the National Guard unit ready or something like that, and that’s the nature of the beast.

Swaykos: How has she handled that?

Gavagnie: She did good. We always made it through. She always—sometime different people, our friends would go over and help pick things up, whatever you got to do, get your lawn furniture in, and all that good stuff and just secure things. And they always went and helped her, and I was never around to do it because I was too busy helping, getting everybody else ready.

Swaykos: That’s hard, but you had a lot of people help?

Gavagnie: Yeah. So I decided this year it was time for me to be home. If one should come this year, which God forbid, I would pack up my three dogs and my wife, and we’d go stay at my sister’s in Poplarville. (laughter)

Swaykos: Good, good. You have a plan. OK. So let’s get back to Sunday night. You’re going down to the station. Were you scared? What were you thinking?

Gavagnie: No, you just got to take each incident as it happens to try to—you got to somewhat keep your calm.

Swaykos: Did y’all sleep that night?

Gavagnie: Yeah, everybody slept. I was sleeping in my office, and I had an air mattress on the floor, and of course, the firemen were all in the bunkrooms, and we had extra ones in. And we had people sleeping about everywhere, but you know, it was windy and rainy. I remember that, but it was nothing out the ordinary.

Swaykos: Yeah. Did you have any staff beneath you who were supposed to stay and were supposed to work that just said, “I’m not doing it; I’m leaving.”

Gavagnie: No.

Swaykos: No.

Gavagnie: We call in two-thirds of the people and keep one-third reserved for after the storm. And everybody that was supposed to be there, was there.

Swaykos: Good. So when the storm hit, can you walk me through that day?
Gavagnie: Well, it started, I imagine, about five o’clock that morning; we started into hurricane winds or high, gale-force winds going into hurricane-force winds, and it just continued to escalate. And we were receiving calls, and—

Swaykos: Where’s the station located?

Gavagnie: [At] 910 Old Spanish Trail, right across the tracks, a couple of blocks from here. And we were still receiving calls and dispatch and people telling us they had trees falling, and various things, people who had stayed. And the last call we received before all our phone systems went down, we received one from Oak Boulevard in Cedar Point, and the man said he was going up in his attic because the water was getting deep in his house. And it should have been around ten o’clock in the morning, huh, Mike? Ten, 10:30 about, the water started coming up? And that’s when we knew we might be in trouble.

Swaykos: Yeah. Were you responding to any of the first calls, or you just had to tell them—

Gavagnie: Some of the early ones, we responded to what we could, and then at the point the trees were falling and other things, and at that point we couldn’t respond anymore. And it just continued to escalate through the day, and I guess about forty-five minutes after we had got that last call, a lady came to the door of the police department, carrying her baby, saying that they were flooding across the street, the housing authority. And we looked over there, and we could see the water coming up in the housing authority, right across the street from us. So what firemen and police officers we had, we sent in there because it’s mostly elderly people, and we sent them in there to start getting people out, and we either put them in the hallway of the police and fire department, or we put them over across the street at the senior citizen’s center, which did not flood. The water came up to the Old Spanish Trail on the west side and stopped, and we watched it. We thought it was going to come on across and get us, too, and then it started receding.

Swaykos: OK. What do you say to someone when he says he’s going up into the attic, and he thinks that he’s about to lose his life?

Gavagnie: Ask for his address so after the storm’s over with, we could start an entire search and rescue right away. We had, prior to it, and it’s just common operating procedures; the people who told us they were not leaving in the low-lying areas or the areas that we thought would be in danger and anybody like that, we had a big map, and we would plot the address on the map. And we’d ride around the map and plot it, and that way, after the storm, we had areas we could start searching in. As the day went on, it was just normal. And the city of Bay St. Louis, regardless of what anybody says, never got out the east eyewall. We never saw the eye; the eye passed west of us. We had hurricane-force winds from that morning to that evening, and the only difference is about halfway through the day, the hurricane-force winds changed
direction. It stopped coming out the southeast and started coming out the northwest. That’s when we knew the eye had come ashore, but the city of Bay St. Louis and the city of Waveland never got out the eyewall.

Swaykos: Um-hm. So you were hit the hardest.

Gavagnie: And of course Henderson’s Point was in the same shape we were in. They never—we never got—I mean, it just—the winds never abated till the storm made it on inland.

Swaykos: OK. Were you keeping in touch with your wife as long as you could?

Gavagnie: I lost touch with her about the same time, about 10:30 [a.m.]. Cell phones went down; everything went down.

Swaykos: So when did y’all get back to work? When did you start?

Gavagnie: We started into our search and rescue and recovery and trying to get out about, I would say, around five o’clock that afternoon. We still had strong winds blowing, still had debris flying, but we went on and got our first move to try to get to EOC because last we heard from them was water was coming in, and the roof had lifted off.

Swaykos: And what is the EOC?

Gavagnie: Emergency operations center for the whole county.

Swaykos: So this isn’t the 911 center?

Gavagnie: No, it’s just the emergency operations center. All your communications, all your MEMA people, FEMA people and all that, all under your emergency manager, and it’s only a few blocks away, and that was one of my first goals was to get to it. And we couldn’t leave the station because every road was blocked with trees. Eventually I believe some firemen and a couple of public works people got some of the backhoes going, and we pushed enough out the way so we could saw with chainsaws to get to where we had to go. I can’t remember the time, but just to show you, I mean, my deputy chief, she’s an LPN [licensed practical nurse] also; she took some people in a rescue truck, and they made it to the corner of Ballentine and Third Street, which is at the end of, I think, the three hundred block of Ballentine, if I’m not mistaken, which is a good ways off the beach, and that’s where the debris piles had stopped.

And they set a triage up right there because the hospital had flooded, and what we had in the rescue truck, there was people literally walking out of the debris piles with cuts, bruises, breaks, whatever. And with what little bit they had, she and about three EMTs [emergency medical technicians] actually set a triage up there, and I think
they moved the people to the hospital—and I think the second floor was still open—on
a commandeered school bus that our deputy police chief had borrowed when he
went—

**Swaykos:** Kim Stasny told me about that.

**Gavagnie:** He went and rescued the Waveland Police Department (laughter) to
include his wife. (laughter)

**Swaykos:** She told me; she says, “My bus keys were gone.” (laughter) So you got
them up to the hospital. When you were working, were you mostly, had a directorial
role, or were you out there working?

**Gavagnie:** Everybody was trying to do everything. Different people, we were all
going; we had a plan, but yeah, I was working, and I was directing, and like my deputy
chief, she was working, and she was directing. And it was just, had to be an all—
everybody had to do a little of everything. I mean, I think we had twelve firefighters
at the station, plus the administrative people, and we had a few public works
employees; I think five or six of those. And we had twelve or fourteen police officers,
and that was what we had for that first night, the next day.

**Swaykos:** So when you got out there that first night, what were you doing? What did
you see?

**Gavagnie:** A lot of devastation. When we could get to places, it—

**Swaykos:** Did you go back to that man’s address who called?

**Gavagnie:** We couldn’t get to Cedar Point, but we did—he was in his attic, and he
was OK. And through the night, we basically was trying to get the roads open where
we could start search and rescue of places. I mean, there was just people walking
around, basically, like zombies. And we knew people in different places and people
were wet; all their clothes had gotten wet because houses that had never flooded,
flooded. And it was an experience. I jokingly tell people I have trouble remembering
it because I filed it away in the same part of my brain I filed away Vietnam in. And
you just don’t recall a lot of stuff. (laughter)

**Swaykos:** Yeah, that’s true. The next day—

**Gavagnie:** The next day, I guess that was—

**Swaykos:** Sun comes up.

**Gavagnie:** We worked somewhat through the night and rested, and the next day is
when—(brief interruption) We realized we were pretty well cut off. The bridge was
gone. All the highways coming in were blocked, and we had rumors that the bridges
were out there, also, but it wasn’t a fact. At daylight that morning, we put some little rescue teams together that we—search and rescue teams, and we started in and out right away into the areas. We just worked our way in, and the police, everybody as a whole was doing it, and then we had to start trying to figure out how we were going to survive and how we were going to take care of our people. We’d have to go—we opened the Bay High gym; it had flooded, but the bleachers had all remained dry. We opened it because we just had people walking the streets, and we had to get them somewhere, and I remember that next day I was on Second Street, went over to Second Street Elementary gym. And a young lady flagged me down; she had opened a shelter. Said she’d never done it. And I said, “Well, what have you done? And I’ll try to get y’all some supplies.” And she had it running. (laughter) I haven’t seen shelters run this good. She had a list of everybody’s name who was in it and everything else because people from that area that had flooded had to go somewhere.

But that morning our biggest thing was trying to get supplies to keep going. And I’ll be perfectly honest with you; I don’t think our first outside supplies showed up here till Wednesday sometime. We had to get water out the local businesses. What little bit of food that didn’t go under water, we had to try to get to give to the people. And it started out through the day on Tuesday, a few people would show up, maybe with a four-wheeler and a trailer, and we put water on it, and what streets they could go up and down, they’d ride up and down, just giving stuff out to the people. I mean, these were people that lost everything, also, but local volunteer efforts, the first two days after the storm, it was unbelievable. I mean, people just stepped up, and anything they could do, they would do. Everybody was helping their neighbors; they were helping people they didn’t know, and everything. It was just—

Swaykos: Did you or did any of your staff, any of your firefighters, get to go back and assess their damage, or they just went straight to work and worried about that a week later?

Gavagnie: They went straight to work. Yeah, well, not a week later. The six firefighters that I had on reserve, somehow five of them managed to make into the station by Tuesday night to relieve a couple of guys there, and we tried to let the guys, one or two and at a time, if they could get to where their property was, to go take care of it. I think I had twenty-three or twenty-four employees at that time, and of those people, fourteen of them either lost their homes, or they were totally flooded. And they stood right there, and they did what was asked of them.

Swaykos: Yeah. How do you motivate people to keep going when they know that’s at home?

Gavagnie: Once they found out their families were OK, these guys are all professionals.

Swaykos: Sounds like it.
Gavagnie: They just know what they got to do, and they go do it. And every one of them—I can’t say enough about any. Like, my whole staff, the whole bunch of them, they just got out and did what they had to do.

Swaykos: Looks like they mean a lot to you.

Gavagnie: They do, and I feel like, you know, great bunch of people.

Swaykos: All their families were OK?

Gavagnie: Yeah, everybody was OK. In fact, we ended up with a few of them, like my deputy chief, her house had five or six feet of water in it, I think, or something in that neighborhood, and she never missed a beat. Once she moved into her office with her two children, as we call them, her two big golden retrievers, aren’t they, Mike? Yeah, she brought; that’s her children, and she brought her two golden retrievers there. A bunch of her husband’s family were staying at her house, and they had to go up in the attic. And her house, well, she lives right, almost across the street from Mike, and that never flooded before. And she lived at the station for a number of months till they got their FEMA trailers. My training officer, his house went under; he lived at the station. A lot of the firemen just stayed at the station; didn’t go home. If they were off-duty, they’d go to sleep, whatever they had to do, the few hours they were off. And that went on like that for a good two weeks.

Swaykos: Wow. I don’t know much about the 911 [emergency telephone number] system. Was that still in place? Where is their base? Did they lose—

Gavagnie: We used to have a 911 system. Each entity had its own 911; a 911 call would go to a local dispatch, and if you dial 911 in Bay St. Louis, it came to Bay St. Louis Police Department. (Inaudible) dispatch (inaudible) you dial 911 in Waveland, it went to Waveland. We lost the whole 911 system. It was put back in pretty quick, and that’s when we went to a central dispatcher in the north end of the county, will dispatch everybody, police, fire, sheriffs, EMS; everybody is dispatched out one area, which is the best thing to do.

Swaykos: When did those calls start coming back in? When’d you get back up?

Gavagnie: I know it was a couple of weeks because a lot of the calls, people would just come to the station and say, “Somebody’s hurt such-and-such address,” or “We have a small fire. We have another gas leak.” Or whatever it happened to be. It was very primitive for at least a month; we were very primitive. Cell phones, the only place you could get a cell phone to work is at the foot of Highway 90 where the Bay Bridge used to be, and you’d see people walking around, holding their phones up, trying to get a signal. The minute you got a signal, you dialed out. That was the only outside communication we had, and every now and then, you’d get a lucky area where you’d pick a signal up. But we had very little communications to outside for close to two days, three days at least.
The outside help, it got here; like I said, I think the first water and items like that made it here that Wednesday, if I remember correctly. We were on our own till then, and that was one of the failures of the higher-ups. Of course, that’s been hashed over everywhere since the hurricane, and we won’t go into that. And it was the National Guard that got the first supplies here into town. And I want to think it wasn’t even the Mississippi National Guard; it was another unit that had came in, but it might have been Ohio, but I’m not sure.

**Swaykos:** Something like that, yeah.

**Gavagnie:** But I mean, they were working through the command structure here, and they got us our first supplies outside of what we had commandeered. We just had to commandeer what we could or appropriate what we could out the local businesses that wasn’t destroyed or water didn’t reach that area. And the business owners, they supported us. I mean, they opened up; if they were available, they would open up and say, “Just take what you need as long as”—the way the rule of thumb was, if somebody came walking out of a grocery store, the first two or three days, when they were flooded, they came out walking with baby diapers or something like that, fine. If they come out walking with TV set, arrest them. That was sort of—

**Swaykos:** Take what you need.

**Gavagnie:** What you need to survive because we were not getting any outside help we needed. We were in a survival mode; we had to survive those first few days.

**Swaykos:** Right. That’s what I wanted to talk about kind of. Did it just become chaos? Were people doing whatever they wanted?

**Gavagnie:** No. It was fairly orderly for a disaster of this magnitude. No, they wasn’t no rioting; there wasn’t no people trying to tear into buildings and all this. Everything, believe it or not, was in a somewhat orderly manner, and when people get in a situation like this, you just got to do what you have to do, but yet, they only did what they had to do. And everybody was helping everyone. I mean, neighbors, friends, strangers; it was a community effort all the way through.

**Swaykos:** When you’re so completely cut off, and you’re a leader of the community, how are you making decisions? Who are you making them with?

**Gavagnie:** Well, the mayor and his staff; we ended up setting up. I guess you might say City hall set up in the dayroom at the fire department; that’s where the firemen watch TV and do all that. The whole City, for the first couple weeks, was in the dayroom at the fire department, the mayor, all the various department head, his other staff members, City councilmen, everybody. We were just meeting there regular, and amongst people eating.
And we were cooking at the fire department and everything else, and I guess about five days into it, an old fellow showed up across the street, and he’s says, “I’m here. I can cook fifteen hundred meals.” He came from a church group in northern Georgia, and he said, “I’m here. I can cook fifteen hundred meals. Whenever I run out of food, I’ll pack up and go home.” He didn’t run out of food because we kept—by that time (laughter) we had open roads to parts of Harrison County. We’d buy him food and bring loads of food back. And he ended up cooking for all of my first responders, whatever local residents wanted to come, and he just had a regular cafeteria system set up.

Swaykos: What was his name?

Gavagnie: Billy Williams.

Swaykos: OK. So how long did he stay?

Gavagnie: What did Billy stay? About eight weeks, Mike?

Cuevas: He stayed almost until November.

Gavagnie: Yeah.

Swaykos: Till November.

Gavagnie: Yeah.

Swaykos: What a great man.

Gavagnie: He was, and there were so many—I’m going to inject this right now. If it hadn’t been faith-based organizations, the volunteer groups, the recovery would not be where it’s at today, if we were strictly relying on the red tape in government. And I’m not saying—I’ve been in government my whole life. We are slow. (laughter)

Swaykos: I think that’s pretty widely known. (laughter)

Gavagnie: Yeah. But these people that came, they just started showing up, some volunteer groups. We had one group came here, and I want to say, I know they got here before the first of the year sometime. Were they Louden Medical Group they called themselves?

Cuevas: Louden Medical Group. They came from—

Gavagnie: Leesburg, Virginia.
Cuevas: —Leesburg, Virginia, and in September, they opened up a free medical clinic downstairs in the depot. And they operated there for nine months; they saw over twenty thousand patients in nine months.

Gavagnie: Everything free, prescriptions—

Swaykos: So they came down from Virginia, and they opened a medical clinic.

Gavagnie: Right in the bottom of the depot; right down in the bottom.

Swaykos: Twenty thousand people in nine months, they saw?

Cuevas: Over.

Gavagnie: Over twenty thousand and—

Swaykos: This is all for free?

Gavagnie: All for free. In fact, we went up and did a fund-raiser for them in February of [20]06, helped them do a fund-raiser up in Virginia, the mayor and I, and they were just a fantastic group of people. I’ll never forget them. I really won’t. They were just fantastic. I mean, the hospital had started opening and—(phone rings) Excuse me.

Swaykos: That’s OK. (brief interruption)

Gavagnie: And (inaudible) I’m going to say this about the fire service. We started receiving calls all over the United States of fire departments wanting to help us. I think about a week after the storm, three firefighters showed up here from Iowa to relieve my firefighters, and work in their place, so they could go home and start taking care of their stuff, and go. But we had them from—Florida was a big contributor, sending firefighters to help us. The city of Vicksburg sent me, I want to say five firefighters every week from two weeks after the storm till the week after Thanksgiving. Five Vicksburg firefighters would be in Bay St. Louis so my firefighters could go take care of their stuff, and they’d help, whatever calls we had. And another group that stepped up was the firefighters from the Northeast, New York, New Jersey, Delaware, Long Island, all that area, they just—I mean, they just wanted to help so much. One group from—let’s see if I can get the city right.

Cuevas: Rockaway.

Gavagnie: Rockaway, I believe it—is that in New Jersey, Mike?

Cuevas: No.
Gavagnie: I’m thinking about the ones from New Jersey that our kids sent the stuff up there after 9/11 [September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on Twin Towers, New York].

Cuevas: Oh, you mean (inaudible).

Gavagnie: One of our third-grade classes had sent a mailbox, all these letters—they were one of the groups involved in 9/11—sent them just thanking them for what they did during 9/11 and all that.

Cuevas: It was Rockaway, New Jersey.

Gavagnie: OK, Rockaway, New Jersey, and I got a call from them, and they came down. They made a donation to the elementary school, substantial. They made a donation to help the fire[fighters], to firefighter relief to help the firefighters out. They came down here and built a playground, and one day they called me and said, “Can you meet us at the school? We want to go down there.” And they went to that third-grade class, which is now, like, maybe the seventh or eighth grade. I can’t remember what they were in, the sixth grade, something. And the children that was left in that class that had sent them these things, they gave each one of those children a check for a thousand dollars to help with their relief. I mean, I’ve got to say, the fire service stepped up to help them, and of course, we’ve always helped our own. And I mean, we just had people bringing stuff in, supplies. I’ll never forget; we had the little volunteer fire department out of Texas sent a check to us for a thousand dollars to help with our fuel, and most probably they needed it a lot worse than we did. But it was just things like that. They just kept sending stuff, and the fire service was just unbelievable. They said, “We take care of our own, no matter what.” And one group out of New York called up, and they said, “We coming down.” And I think it was about eight of them or nine of them. Boy, and these guys could party, too. (laughter) But they came down, and we’re a nonunion fire department, and they were from a strong union fire department, and they said, “We can’t fight fires or can’t respond to calls because of our union affiliation, and you’re nonunion.” They went to the firefighters houses; they put roofs on two of their houses, worked all day in heat, and we had a little place set up for them to stay in another part of the public safety complex. All the volunteers stayed there. Search and rescue, I’m going to back up a little bit.

Swaykos: Sure.

Gavagnie: FEMA sent their search and rescue groups in; I imagine they got here four or five days after the storm with their dogs and all that. And again, I’m going to go to work with my deputy chief; she is involved in search and rescue, and she owns her own cadaver dog and all this, to look for bodies. They did this town; the federal groups came through this town and did it in a day and a half. “Clean, we found everything.” We still had missing people. “We through; we got to move on.” And I called Pam; Pam called, and we talked, and she said, “I can get in touch with some groups, and we’ll come down, and they’ll come down and do the city.” And we had
two groups come down, brought their dogs with them. All we did was give them a place to stay, and believe me, they combed Bay St. Louis inch by inch, looking for any victims and so forth. But just things like that—

**Swaykos:** A group effort, not a government effort.

**Gavagnie:** No, it was a group effort. And the government did what they could, but again, red tape bogged them down. I hope we have lessons learned out of this. I know Congressman [Gene] Taylor is keeping FEMA on their [toes], (laughter) I guess you could say. He won’t leave them alone, and a couple of other ones, [Senators] Trent Lott and Thad Cochran, all of them. And I understood, having been time I spent in military, FEMA is not anything more than a coordinating agency. FEMA has a few resources, very few, but their job’s to coordinate, and they got to learn how to coordinate better to get this in. I mean, like I jokingly said, they need to take lessons from Wal-Mart as far as mobilization. And I said a few weeks into the storm, I said, “You know, they possibly need to really turn search and rescue and early recovery operations over to the military.” Having spent all those years in the military, we train to operate at night, under the most adverse conditions in the world, probably people even shooting at you. You know? And that’s what the military trains for, to operate under adverse conditions. It’s nothing. These big exercises I used to have to go to in Germany, REFORGER—that’s gone now, with the fall of the walls and all. But the REFORGER exercises, it would be nothing for us to have to, at six o’clock that night to get an order to take one of our supply depots or supply points and say, “You got to move it from here to forty kilometers down the road and set it up and be ready to deliver supplies twelve hours from now.” And it might be snowing and pouring down rain, and you move; I mean, you do it. And I’ve always said, “Why not utilize the military?” I realize we have a war going on, but they trained to operate under adverse conditions. We don’t know how to operate under good conditions.

**Swaykos:** Right. (laughter) In the couple weeks following the day of the storm, can you describe a day to me? A day of work for your men and women and you, as well.

**Gavagnie:** Well, it could be a number of things. Once it was over with, a lot of mine was coordinating—thank you, Mike. A lot of mine was coordinating, trying to coordinate different activities. My deputy chief was running—she ran all the search, rescue, and recovery since she has a lot of experience; she ran that on a day-to-day basis. It was a number of things, coordinating meetings with FEMA and MEMA, trying to get stuff to keep going on my part. And whatever the mayor needed done, we did. And just trying to keep everything tied together; coordinate people constantly calling, and once we had some type of communications, trying to get supplies to us, and everything else, and you were trying to coordinate all this, and the (inaudible). And Mike ended up, she had to take over supplies. (laughter)

**Cuevas:** Let me interject one thing that firemen, that we do that is not a traditional fireman’s duty. Our firemen do them, but they must have unloaded upwards of three-quarters of a million tons of freight. I’m sure I’m exaggerating the amount of tonnage,
but I bet you I’m not missing it by much. But they would unload up to four eighteen-wheelers in a shift. When the supplies starting coming, they were coming from all over the country, and they were coming twenty-four hours a day, and we had no forklift. So it wasn’t until almost four months after the storm before FEMA finally got us a forklift. (Inaudible) primarily the fire services unloaded every piece of freight that came to this community.

Swaykos: That’s amazing.

Cuevas: Yes, it is.

Gavagnie: And you learn other things, too. We set up something. I mean, everybody—I mean, I can start telling you about heroes, as far as I’m concerned, in the storm. You had Buddy Zimmerman, Public Works; he’s our number two man in Public Works. I don’t think the water was going down good; we’d lost all our wells. Our water pressure was zero. Our sewer system was down, which is more important than your water system, believe it or not. Buddy Zimmerman started working, himself, on these wells and everything. We had trickles of water, what? Three days after the hurricane. We had water trickling through our pipes, and it wasn’t good enough to drink, but it was good enough to take showers with, clean stuff, wash pots and pans, because we didn’t know what breaks we had. As we were opening lines up, I think it was the third or fourth night after the storm, we started feeding into the water systems, mains, and we got a little power going into them. I got a generator running where we could get our pumps going, and Buddy was opening valves, and the firemen were riding along what was left of the beach on four-wheelers, their own, personal four-wheelers, most of them, and when they’d find a break, where a line had been severed, they would go, and we’d go up, and we know where the valves are, too, and turn the nearest valve off so we could start pressurizing our water system. And things like that, I mean, Buddy Zimmerman and his people in public works stepped up, and they just did a [great] job. The firemen, we came up with the conclusion, if we’d keep our City employees’ families taken care of, then we going to have a City employee that can work. And we jokingly pulled the fire trucks out into the outside, and the two big apparatus floors, as certain supplies come in, food, toilet articles and all that, we set up, we called the Fire Department “Wal-Mart” for the City employees’ families to come get relief supplies. I mean, we just had canned goods and maybe MREs [meals ready to eat] and toilet articles and stuff like that, and that was for them to keep their families where they wouldn’t have to be out trying to get in long lines for everything so we could keep them working to bring the City services back up.

Swaykos: OK. So that was kind of your main priority, then?

Gavagnie: Right. We opened up, (laughter) like, we called it the Little Wal-Mart is what we called it, and it was used, and it started out, just it kept everything going.

Swaykos: Did you lose any fire trucks?
Gavagnie: No, I was very fortunate. I was about the only department south of [Interstate]-10 that didn’t. I know Waveland watched theirs float by. And just about every other department here lost their stations and/or, both their stations and their trucks, but we were the only ones south of I-10 that did not lose our equipment.

Swaykos: Did you lose anything? Did you have any damage to your building?

Gavagnie: Very slight. That building’s been there; (laughter) it’s built like a fortress.

Cuevas: Slight, very slight on the fire department where they’re located. Where the gymnasium area was, we lost the roof, but primary building—

Gavagnie: It stayed, yes.

Cuevas: —was OK.

Swaykos: Good, good. What were your firefighters going home to when they were relieved?

Cuevas: Nothing.

Gavagnie: Nothing, tents.

Swaykos: Yeah. How were they—

Gavagnie: Some of them had got their families situated the best they could, and some of them were living in half-flooded houses, and some of them were still living in tents. A few of them might have been lucky enough to find an old trailer or something to live in. And then I can’t remember when; I know it was before Halloween, but the first people they took care of [were] the first responders, firefighters, police officers, City employees and all that, and they set a little FEMA—some of the first trailers that came in were given to them. They put them down up near the beach, of all places. It’s one of the lowest areas in the county, but (laughter) they put them down there, and a lot of them lived down there for a good while until they finally closed it.

Swaykos: OK. Were there any services, as far as mental health stuff, given to your workers, maybe further down the line when they had time to start dealing with that?

Gavagnie: Yeah. We had—the Louden people had some, and again, I’m going to step back. My deputy chief walks on water, evidently. (laughter) She does. She had brought in some people with her medical background. She had a—I can’t think of what Pat is.

Cuevas: She had a friend who was a psychologist.

Gavagnie: Yeah, and that came in and offered to interview the firemen, each, yeah.
Cuevas: And the Mississippi State Department of Mental Health, they sent people and other fire departments sent some of their crisis teams in, but to send mental health workers in the first couple of days or the first couple of weeks was useless.

Swaykos: I figured it was months down the road.

Cuevas: Yeah, we needed help a year later.

Gavagnie: And we need help now; this is the worst time.

Cuevas: And they need help, now, but we were great to get what help we got. Don’t misunderstand me. But if we’d known then what we know now, we would have said, “Go back; come back in six months. Come back in twelve months.”

Gavagnie: Absolutely.

Swaykos: So what effects are you seeing now that you’re needing—

Gavagnie: Just on the other side of the house—and I’ll say this and including myself; everyone who was here at ground zero, whether they left and came back within a few days, all our personalities have changed.

Swaykos: Really?

Gavagnie: I think so. We’ve all had some type of personality change. As far as our professional side, our domestic violence with people living in these FEMA trailers, our domestic violence, abused children, attempted suicides, drug overdoses, have picked up. We run regular on them. And most of them are to FEMA trailers. And I know, I can’t remember when it was, but we had some people come down from the—I can’t think of (inaudible). The Department of Health on United States level, on the federal level, they came down, and we were talking about—we started off talking about the first responders, and I said, “You know, the first responders suffered, but they can cope with it because they cope with it at different levels throughout their career.” What I was concerned about was adolescent teens. I mean, I’m sure you’ll understand what I’m getting ready to say. You want to be—from about twelve or thirteen to eighteen or nineteen, you want to be as far away from your parents because they don’t know anything; you don’t want to—and here you are in a twenty-eight-foot FEMA trailer. You might have two teenagers and two parents sleeping in it. The teenagers are in two bunk beds about this far apart. They have no—and there was no place to go in town. They had no place for their privacy. You know, when my daughter’d get mad at me, she’d run lock herself in her room, and she was in her world. And the teens suffered. And I’ll say it; and they’re still suffering because they have no place or had no place for that little bit of privacy you got to have at that age.

Swaykos: Yeah. Yeah. So are you getting more calls about teens? Is there more—
Gavagnie: No, it’s the stress. We had just last week, they attributed to Katrina a fellow in Waveland—you may have read about it in the paper—when he started shooting at the police.

Swaykos: The firefighter. The police or the firefighter?

Gavagnie: The police. Well, no, another one starting shooting at the fire[fighter].

Swaykos: There was one this weekend at the firefighters, yeah.

Gavagnie: Yeah, but last week also, they had one, a police standoff. He ended up committing suicide, but he just started shooting shots to draw the police to the house, and they said he hadn’t been himself since Hurricane Katrina.

Swaykos: Have you seen a lot of that? A lot of change in your community?

Gavagnie: Yeah, big change. And—

Swaykos: Have you had any training, then, how to deal with these calls? With the new increase [in problems]?

Gavagnie: Well, no. We deal with them the same. A domestic violence call is the same as it was before the hurricane, attempted suicide. If the firefighters are going in, of course the scene’s got to be secure by the law enforcement before we can go in. I mean, we handle it; it’s just that the call volume’s up in those particular things. We handle it; our operating procedure is the same.

Swaykos: OK. (brief interruption) How you handle calls in FEMA trailers because in homes, not just a single person’s privacy, but there’s some family privacy in a single-unit home, but in a FEMA trailer that’s three feet away from another FEMA trailer with walls that are an inch and a half thick. How do you handle family violence calls, spousal disagreement, that kind of thing, when you get there?

Gavagnie: Well, usually with something like that, the police have it under control. As far as the medical side, we handle it just like we handle it anywhere. Whatever situation’s given to you, you got to do whatever you got to do, as far as we use AEDs [automatic external defibrillator], do CPR [cardiopulmonary resuscitation], give oxygen, just treat—whatever you got to do, you just got to do it to the best of your abilities. There’s no like difference. When we respond to an accident, we’re working with the victim inside one of the wrecked cars. You just got to do it. People just adjust to it.

Swaykos: What have you seen in the way of—is there any more—I don’t want to say this badly—hysteria calls? I mean, something that maybe isn’t an emergency anymore, but people are at this heightened level?
**Gavagnie:** We still have calls, I would say since the storm, especially in the last six months; they think they having a stroke, think they having a heart attack, but basically it’s an anxiety attack.

**Swaykos:** Right.

**Gavagnie:** Yeah, those have increased somewhat. I’m not going to say a large volume, but they may have went from—we never had maybe one, two a year. We having maybe one, two a month now, something like that.

**Swaykos:** OK. How did you begin your cleanup? I mean, how did you—are you part of the group that does the x in the quadrants? Were your search-and-rescue doing that kind of stuff on the buildings and the houses?

**Gavagnie:** We did it. That was the New York and Virginia groups, actually wrote that on houses.

**Swaykos:** Can you explain to me what each of them are? Do you know?

**Gavagnie:** One of them is, on the left middle [of the search-and-rescue mark] is [a symbol to distinguish] what group did it, like New York, Virginia, and we used some of ours. We used tape, colored tape on ours more, that crime-scene tape, to let our people know where we’d been. And I really can’t remember what it all—I know one of the bottom numbers, if they had a zero, it meant that no one was found. If they had a one or two, it meant somebody was found. And I have it back in what used to be my office, but it’s been so long since I used it again, I’d have to look at it to tell you exactly what it meant.

**Swaykos:** Can you share what kinds of things you guys were finding? The type of people you were helping in those first couple weeks?

**Gavagnie:** We were helping people from all walks of life. We were helping—I mean, it didn’t say just because this person’s such-and-such a person, I’m going to leave you and your property alone, in this walk of society or that walk of society. We helped everyone equally. I mean, it just—

**Cuevas:** [Katrina] was the great leveler.

**Gavagnie:** Yeah. Katrina. I mean, nobody—I mean, money wasn’t any good.

**Cuevas:** Nobody was special.

**Gavagnie:** Nobody was special, and everyone stepped forward and did what they had to do. And I remember Mr. Leo Seal, president of Hancock Bank, was down there working on his property just as hard as anybody else. He walked in the fire station
one day, and you’d have never known who he was except for the fact that we all knew him, and they had some people from the State or Washington here, and when he walked in, we stopped talking to them and started talking to him. They couldn’t figure out why we were talking to this shabby-dressed, old fellow. (laughter) You know?

Swaykos: Yeah, uh-huh. What did you feel like you owed to the community? To do all this work kind of goes above and beyond what you are called on to do, don’t you think?

Gavagnie: No. This is my city.

Swaykos: Yeah.

Gavagnie: It’s mine. Whatever it takes is what you got to do. You sitting in the office with the two biggest cheerleaders for the city of Bay St. Louis there ever was, and I mean, this is my home, and what it takes to get it going, we going to do it. You know?

Swaykos: What have you seen in your community over the past two years as far as growth and recovery?

Gavagnie: The most impressive thing, and right after the storm, (phone rings) the most impressive thing I saw, as soon as they could get in FEMA trailers, whatever, our neighborhood started coming back. It might have been all FEMA trailers with people working in their houses, people were working in their houses, but I attribute that to one of the biggest things to this city, our neighborhoods started coming back. The three hundred block of—

Cuevas: The assistant fire chief he’s been talking about is Pam San Fillippo.

Swaykos: Hi.

Gavagnie: This is the hero of the hurricane. (brief interruption)

Cuevas: She’s our assistant fire chief.

Swaykos: All right. Thank you. How are you?

Cuevas: Bobby’s got to the point in the story where he’s talking about the recovery of the community after the storm.

Gavagnie: I was just saying I feel like the most important thing that happened as far as Bay St. Louis is concerned, is our neighborhoods started coming back. And you know, I mean, you can have businesses and all, but if you don’t have neighborhoods, what good is a business going to do you? There’s nobody to spend any money in it. And that was our biggest thing, (inaudible), I think our neighborhoods are coming
back. Everybody’s working; some people are still working in their houses, themselves. And even as slow as it was, the Homeowner’s Grant Program, which [Governor] Haley Barbour, is his big idea, anyway. And I got to give him credit for that, even as slow as it was and as much red tape and trial runs we had to make on it, if it hadn’t been for that, I don’t know what we would have done as far as individual homeowners would have done because the insurance companies left you hanging out to dry. If they could show that you had one inch of water in your house, and anything with water damage, they didn’t even want to talk to you. And it was terrible. I mean, they came to my house, settled like it was nothing. I didn’t have any water; they paid for my roof; they paid for my fences. They paid for my car; they paid for everything. “Oh, man, we just can’t help you enough.” We were so glad. They even walked out of my house, says, “Look, you got to redo this because the wind did this.” And you know, pointing things out to me that I didn’t even know, and then she can tell you horror stories because she had water in her house with no flood insurance, how they come in, and they just, “Oh! Don’t talk to us. That’s all water damage. We don’t want to talk to you.”

San Fillippo: Insurance companies.

Swaykos: They’re not helping you at all.

San Fillippo: Paid only for a roof.

Swaykos: You have no roof still.

San Fillippo: No roof.

Swaykos: (Inaudible) As firefighters, did you feel pressure from the community, even though it’s not your job, to put the community back together? People look to their police department, their fire department to fix stuff. You know what I mean? “You’re heroes because of who you are, so help.” Did you feel some pressure from your community to do that?

San Fillippo: I don’t think. I think people were so sidetracked by their insurance companies, and the problems they were having with that, that that was the big thing.

Gavagnie: Yeah. I mean, we helped everywheres we could.

San Fillippo: And but there’s no (inaudible) solving the situation that they were in, financially.

Swaykos: Yeah. Can I ask you—he told me you set up a triage center.

Gavagnie: Yeah, I was telling her about your little triage center you set up on Ballentine that night, the night of the storm, when everybody was kind of walking out the debris piles.
San Fillippo: Was it when (inaudible) had all those people in those (inaudible) houses?

Gavagnie: Well, yeah, we had (inaudible).

San Fillippo: Ballentine and Third?

Gavagnie: Ballentine and Third, yeah. Y’all set the first triage up there, if I remember correctly.

San Fillippo: Yeah, because (inaudible) I think one house floated into another house, and they had people in both houses, and some were under the houses. And most of them were elderly if I remember (inaudible) they were older people.

Swaykos: So what kinds of things were you working with? Where did you get supplies?

Gavagnie: Off the rescue truck.

San Fillippo: What we had, we could take off the trucks. And I think the AMOs [American Medical Response], they had like one unit here then (inaudible).

Gavagnie: Something like that. Wasn’t much.

Swaykos: Yeah.

San Fillippo: Till we started getting supplies, donated supplies in, which came fairly quickly, I think, within a couple days.

Swaykos: Are you guys getting more calls now every time there’s bad weather? When the wind starts to pick up and the clouds come in?

San Fillippo: No, not that I know of.

Gavagnie: I think last year, thank goodness, was a nonyear as far as hurricanes goes, and I believe, should another one come, be a small one—I hope that’s all it is—I think our job would be as hard to convince people to leave. I don’t think our job would be—I think they’re going to leave, and a lot more easily than they did before. And I know when I did an interview with the Weather Channel last year, they asked me, “What was the difference in this coming hurricane season from the previous one?” I said, “Well, prior to Katrina, the way you planned for hurricane season [was] on historical data of previous hurricanes, what flooded, what didn’t flood.” And I said, “All the historical data we had prior to Katrina is thirty-six years old, from Hurricane Camille, so that’s what we had to work with.” I said, “This one’s going to be a piece of cake. Our historical data’s not even a year old yet.” You know, so.
Swaykos: So how have you been preparing for this June 1, this year?

Gavagnie: We been meeting regular. The Bay St. Louis, Waveland, and Hancock County emergency managers been sitting down, formulating. We all—we sat down, and we made a little committee of one person from each City and the county, and we meet prior to whenever the City and county leaders want to meet, and we’ll go give them a lot of good detailed information that will narrow the decision-making process down a lot where there’s not a lot of gray area. And that’s the plan we working with right now.

Swaykos: OK. When you were first going out, how did you protect yourselves and the other firefighters when you were going into, I’m guessing, buildings that you didn’t know if they were going to keep standing, or if they were going to crash?

Gavagnie: Didn’t really think about it. (laughter)

Swaykos: Muddy, murky, you-don’t-know-what’s-in-it water.

San Fillippo: We had no options, we had the boots that we had and the equipment we had, and that was it.

Gavagnie: That’s it.

San Fillippo: The only thing we did, we set up some bleach baths, some tubs with bleach water in it, and we just had the guys walk through. That was before we had running water, you know.

Gavagnie: Well, we had water; we took it out of the tank. Those three or four days, all the firefighting water was in our trucks, which is not a lot because you got hydrants. We used it for everything. We had to use firefighting water for sanitary purposes only. (laughter)

Swaykos: How many fires did you have right afterwards?

Gavagnie: (Inaudible).

San Fillippo: (laughter) They were all very wet. (laughter)

Swaykos: (Inaudible) almost up.

Gavagnie: Wasn’t much left standing to burn. (laughter)

Swaykos: Yeah. Did you think you needed to protect yourself against your people, against anybody, crime, anything like that?
Gavagnie: Everybody was helping everyone. I can’t—everybody was pitching in and doing it.

San Fillippo: They had some minor incidents, I think, that the police dealt with. Somebody’s kids. I know we had one incident where a kid, a teenager, young teenager went on somebody’s property and robbed them and beat them, but fire station, but no, we didn’t. I have no—mostly most of volunteers that would come in would ask, you know, about security because of course all they saw on TV was New Orleans and, reports of people being shot at and that sort of thing. And we just kind of laughed and said, “Security against what?” (laughter)

Swaykos: Right, you didn’t have anything. So you repeated that this was the worst storm, again. Camille the worst storm then; it’s hit the same spot. Do you think everyone’s going to have that attitude, “Well, it’s not going to happen a third time.” Or you think everybody’s learned—

Gavagnie: No, I believe—

San Fillippo: They should learn to never say “never.”

Gavagnie: They should. (laughter) Never say “never,” absolutely. I mean, this is the worst disaster to ever hit the United States in its history, and unfortunately we were ground zero.

Swaykos: Yeah. Can y’all talk about what you’ve learned? Should it happen again, what to do.

San Fillippo: Leave.

Swaykos: Where to go?

San Fillippo: Leave.

Swaykos: Yeah.

Gavagnie: To be honest with you, from ten o’clock that morning, I told you, when the water started coming up till five o’clock or so that afternoon. I’d been helping those few people across the street. All we can do is sit there in the building, too, and just wait. I mean, basically, our mission stops—I talked about, a firefighter, you can’t put him beyond, or any first responder—you have what you call the reasonable risk. Once you get to that reasonable risk, you can’t ask somebody because it’s almost like a suicide mission then. You can’t say, “Well, look, 130-mile-an-hour winds, and I’m sending you out in it.” There’s pieces of metal and tin and everything else flying through. You got to draw a line at that reasonable risk. It’s a judgment call, but you got to make it where you don’t cross that.
Swaykos: What have you seen since you’re still working there with them, as far as the mental effects on your firefighters?

San Fillippo: I think everybody’s tired, and they’re frustrated still, a lot of people. That’s probably the main thing.

Swaykos: Have you had anybody quit?

Gavagnie: We’ve had a—we stayed full strength all the way through.

Swaykos: OK. So you’ve had no burnout or anything yet?

Gavagnie: Lost a couple of our firefighters in Iraq, but they went over there for four or five times the salary we’re making here for one year.

Swaykos: OK. So they’re over there.

Gavagnie: I think some of them’s back now. (laughter)

Swaykos: Already?

Gavagnie: Yeah.

Swaykos: OK. Is there anything else that you think people should know later, down the line, about the work that you did?

Cuevas: Yes, I do. Not necessarily just the fire department, but [Douglas] Brinkley’s book The Great Deluge was the biggest farce I’ve ever seen. It was a real disappointment, (inaudible) his stature and position in the historical community and in the community of writers, to have been as sensational and inaccurate as he was.

Swaykos: Can you tell me what that was about? I don’t know.

Cuevas: He wrote, oh, almost a thousand-page book called The Great Deluge. He is the resident historian. He took Stephen Ambrose’s place at University of New Orleans; he’s a frequent commentator and was a frequent commentator for the national media. And he sent a group of researchers over here and interviewed a lot of people, and he reported on the most inane stories and sensationalized the fact that whites and blacks helped one another and things like that. And I wouldn’t want the only message that the rest of the world hears about Bay St. Louis’ experience in Katrina to be only what he wrote. Now, the rest of the world will probably not be backhanded with you, nor will they name names, but I will because it is a huge disappointment. It really is. It really portrays us in a stereotypical Mississippi way that was not true.

Swaykos: At that point, does it matter?
Cuevas: Yes, it does.

Swaykos: I mean, did—

San Fillippo: No, in reality, no.

Swaykos: In the—you think he’s sensationalizing race and all this stuff. I’m saying, when it’s going on, did that matter?

San Fillippo: And there was no issue with that. No.

Cuevas: No, that did not matter, but what matters is that (inaudible) word on Katrina may quite possibly be—

Gavagne: His book.


San Fillippo: His book with his comments.

Cuevas: You know, when the TV things are gone, his book will be in print for a very long time, and it’s very distressing.

San Fillippo: Especially for a man that lives in the South. I don’t know if he’s from the South, but he certainly—

Cuevas: Yes.

San Fillippo: —lives here. We had volunteers that were coming from the North, Northeast, Northwest, and would say, when they’d see you standing in the food lines with blacks and whites, (inaudible).

Cuevas: Sharing meals or going to church together.

San Fillippo: Kissing one another and I can’t count the people that would pull me aside and say, “We didn’t (inaudible) black people. We’ve seen them hugging and eating together.” And I said, “Yes, we do.” (laughter)

Swaykos: Yeah.

San Fillippo: You know, so—

Gavagne: We grew up together.
San Fillippo: When somebody from the Northeast or the North or wherever to say that is one thing; for somebody who’s supposed to be a historian who lives in the South and sees what (inaudible), that was kind of ridiculous.

Swaykos: So you think he sensationalized the stereotype?

San Fillippo: Yes.

Gavagnie: Yeah.

Cuevas: Yes, he did.

San Fillippo: Talking about Sons of Confederate Soldiers helping the poor black family that was drowning right here in South Mississippi, in the year 2005.

Cuevas: I mean, you know, it was so unnecessary, and (inaudible) it truly was.

San Fillippo: It was (inaudible).

Swaykos: So what could you say that’s actually correct and counter to what he wrote?

Cuevas: Well, I told you earlier; Katrina was the great levelizer. There was no social class. There was no racial class. There was no economic class with that storm. Everybody started from square one, and frankly, we were so damn grateful that our citizens were alive, whether we knew them or not, we were one community at that time. And those things did not matter to us nor should they have mattered to him. This was not New Orleans; never has been; never wanted to be; never will be. You know, the issues that they dealt with in New Orleans, whole different set of circumstances than what we dealt with in South Mississippi. And frankly, I resented the hell out of it.

Swaykos: Did y’all feel really lumped in with them over there?

Gavagnie: Oh, absolutely.

Cuevas: We couldn’t avoid it, with the exception—

San Fillippo: Everything from e-mails to news stories, everything else, to the MSNBC [Microsoft/National Broadcasting Company] Web site where people would write in, made no—didn’t differentiate between us and New Orleans. They thought we were one and the same.

Swaykos: Really?

San Fillippo: Yeah.
Cuevas: Absolutely.

San Fillippo: I guess they thought we were—

Cuevas: And if it had not been for—

San Fillippo:—a suburb of New Orleans or something.

Cuevas: —for a few national reporters who were from this area like Robin Roberts and Kathleen Koch, people like that, know, I mean, you know, New Orleans was a man-made disaster.

Gavagnie: Absolutely.

Cuevas: We were a natural disaster.

San Fillippo: A lot of people didn’t even know Katrina hit Bay St. Louis.

Swaykos: Well, here’s Robin Roberts, who went to Bay High, correct?

Gavagnie: Hancock. (Inaudible)

Cuevas: No, she went to Hancock.

Swaykos: She went to Pass High, OK. But African American.

Cuevas: Right.

Swaykos: And there she is on the news; she’s a respected woman. How could he write something like that in a book, when this is out there, and there’s example after example showing everybody it’s not that way?

Gavagnie: (Inaudible).

San Fillippo: I guess because it sells more books.

Cuevas: I have no idea.

Gavagnie: Sells more books. (laughter)

San Fillippo: I guess people want to read that. I can’t imagine because if he were just a writer of fiction or (inaudible), but to claim to be an historian and to document the worst disaster in the United States in that way is just unforgivable to me.

Cuevas: And never get the name of the police—
San Fillippo: And it’s ludicrous.

Cuevas: —chief correct.

San Fillippo: Yeah, then put the wrong names.

Cuevas: Poor fellow worked his behind off, and here he is. [Douglas] Brinkley comes over, does the interview, and then spells it Griffith.

Gavagnie: (Inaudible)

San Fillippo: (Inaudible) Griffith.

Cuevas: Griffith is his secretary’s last name.


Cuevas: Consistent throughout the whole chapter on Bay St. Louis, calling him Chief Frank Griffith, but that wasn’t his name. His name was McNeil. So he will forever go down in history as Chief Frank Griffith, you know, who’s her—

Swaykos: Yeah.

Cuevas: And those kind of inaccuracies just irritate you.

Swaykos: Have you see any other people trying to benefit from this? Especially in your area that got hit so hard, seeing no eye, being in the eyewall the whole time, y’all got pretty destroyed. Have you seen anyone else trying to benefit off that? Anybody trying to come in and get services? Maybe they’re from up North, coming down, and here’s all this free stuff.

Gavagnie: Oh, (inaudible).

Swaykos: People trying to televise and get themselves on TV.

Cuevas: Oh, we could identify; we very quickly, probably after the first three weeks, we could spot the ones who were coming for the (inaudible) real quick, and we had very little to do with them.

Gavagnie: Yeah.

Swaykos: How did you sort them out, and how did you tell them to hightail (inaudible)?
**Cuevas:** You can tell; it’s a gut instinct, by the questions they had. First thing is, if they’re not happy, or the fire chief, or the assistant fire chief, or if our title wasn’t heavy enough for them, then it had to be [that they were here for] the photo with the banker. We could have made megabucks off of just our mayor taking photographs with people, in his shorts. Yep. I mean, we could have just stood in—we could have propped him up—he probably would have gotten some rest—and let people just take pictures with the mayor. And the most difficult thing that he probably had to deal with was the sorting through of those people he really needed to see and those people that were only here for their little shot. No debate about it.

**Swaykos:** How do you get your job done amongst all that chaos, trying to sort through the TV cameras showing up, the Weather Channel showing up?

**Gavagnie:** It just happened.

**Swaykos:** How did you do your job?

**Cuevas:** Well, after a while—just as an observer at the fire department, after a while the fact that, what’s his name? Stone. Not Stone. Oh, the good-looking one from National Public Radio. What’s his name? After a while it wouldn’t matter if they came with a video-camera and a microphone. Firemen who before would have talked to you like they had marbles in their mouth and just sweat rolling off their face from nerves of being—it was a piece of cake. I’ll sit down and have a drink with it. They’d go fix them a Coke, get them a glass of water or whatever or share a meal with them and just sit and chat, and they did a great job weeding out people from bothering the mayor, the council, the department heads. Yeah, they really served as hosts for the City, and then even they got tired of it after a while. (laughter)

**San Fillippo:** Really, our primary job quickly became managing supplies and stuff.

**Gavagnie:** Yeah.

**San Fillippo:** That was the pri[mary]—so we were all mostly at the fire station. And now and then, guys would go out, or we’d go out and send people on the (inaudible) to bring some water and food in, but the job of sorting through all the supplies that were coming in was tremendous. So we were there; so that was the job. So if somebody came up and wanted to talk to you while you were unloading the truck, well, you know, they could do that.

**Swaykos:** What goods were coming? You talked a lot about volunteers, but what goods?

**San Fillippo:** Everything.

**Gavagnie:** Everything; clothes, food, water, furniture—
San Fillippo: Baby stuff, medications.

Gavagnie: Baby stuff, you name it; it came rolling in. Cleanup supplies. We started getting kits with mops and brooms and bleach in them so people could start bleaching their houses out, and we put the truck outside and—

Cuevas: There was nothing that we asked for that we did not receive that was within reason.

Gavagnie: I mean, Cities sent us—most of our police cars were tore up after the storm. Cities actually sent us their used police cars to use.

Cuevas: Their surplus cars.

Gavagnie: Surplus cars and things just started flowing in. Basically, like Pam said, everything came through the fire department almost.

Cuevas: Engineering firm, we had an engineering firm that called and wanted to know what we needed. And I said, “Can I send you a list?” And they said, “Yeah.” And they replaced—it was a small community about the same size as Bay St. Louis, so they didn’t have a lot of money, and we knew that. But their community got together, and they replaced all of the public works department hand tools, wrenches, screwdrivers, hammers, shovels. They could afford to do that, and we were most grateful for them because we didn’t have those things. They either got lost in the shuffle or were lost at someone’s home or something like that. And we would try very diligently to match our needs with what a community could provide.

Swaykos: I see. So is there anything the community still needs here that they’re not receiving?

Cuevas: It’s a little more difficult to tell now because of the grant money coming in. We still don’t know what the shakedown’s going to wind up being. It was real easy to tell you within the first year of the storm what people needed because we could follow the progress of the community. There are still going to be people who are going to get lost in the cracks of funding. We never asked for money. We never asked for money. Now, money was sent, but we would ask for gift cards. And we would ask for Home Depot or Lowe’s or to buy gift certificates at local hardware stores and stuff like that because then we knew that people could spend the money on home repairs, not on what donations are not meant for.

Gavagnie: One of our biggest problems right now, and it’s going to continue to be one, is going to be affordable housing. A lot of the people that still claim that FEMA trailers or whatever you want to call them, are—they’re renters. We finally got three apartment complexes open in Bay St. Louis again. I don’t think Waveland has any opened yet. Where do all these people have—these people need—(phone rings) the people who did not have insurance at all, could not afford insurance—if you didn’t
have insurance, then you didn’t qualify for a grant. People that were leasing houses
didn’t qualify for a grant. I mean, these people are still stuck in FEMA trailers, and
they keep saying, “Well, all the FEMA trailers are going to be out of here by the end
of August. They dreaming.

Swaykos: This August?

Gavagnie: Yeah. They dreaming. There’s no affordable housing for the person that
works at Wal-Mart or the person that works at McDonald’s or the person that works at
Burger King or the person that works at the Dollar Store that was a renter before the
storm because that’s all they could afford. There’s no place for them to go right now.

Swaykos: And we need them to bring the businesses back.

Gavagnie: We need affordable housing, and the politicians—or I’m not going to say
politicians—certain groups, every time they going to develop affordable housing, the
people in the area—of course, (inaudible) going to want my house; I’m going to
probably be up in arms against it. But every time they try to put an apartment
complex in with affordable housing, the people in the area fight it, and then the
supervisors, the City council, the board of aldermen, (inaudible) government will say,
“Well, our constituents don’t want it, so we’re not going to vote it in.” And it’s—

Cuevas: Insurance is (inaudible).

Gavagnie: Insurance, oh!

Cuevas: That may be some of the problems that need to be addressed are not within
our power as a local government to address them. The only thing that we have is the
power of the people to, through the next elections, to demand that there be insurance
reform. And frankly, and I don’t think that I’m speaking out of turn with the three
people that are in this room, that we need to have a nationwide catastrophic insurance
policy. (brief interruption) And I had enough income from my husband to carry my
mortgage until last month. My taxes have gone up so much that it has pushed my
mortgage payment up beyond what my income from my husband was, which has cut
into my (inaudible) salary to where I am just now making all the ends meet. You
know? Now, that was just taxes. My insurance hadn’t gone up yet. My insurance
won’t go up until this coming March, and I don’t know what it’s going to be. And am
I going to afford to be able to stay in my community? And that’s what’s going to
happen to a lot of people. One of our biggest losses was almost the entire segment of
our community in our senior citizens’ community. So many people left, and unlike
Bobby’s mother, were not healthy enough, wealthy enough to come back home, or had
the desire in their late seventies, early eighties, mideighties, nineties, to rebuild. And
if they didn’t have children who lived in this area, they had no choice but to leave the
area, and now they have no choice about coming home. We lost such a foundation;
the foundation of the community suffered because of the loss of their senior citizens.
It really did, and every day you can read in the obituaries, and I can’t tell you how
many older citizens have died as a result of displacement by Katrina. They died of broken hearts.

Gavagnie: We still having—I guess you could say we still suffering fatalities indirectly from Katrina. I mean, it—

Swaykos: How is that?

Gavagnie: Well, just various incidents, that suicide we had last week; wasn’t the first one. Like she said, a lot of senior citizens have just given up. I have no—they just lost their will to live. And a lot of influential, were prominent people in our history is gone because of that storm.

Cuevas: Our medical care is so limited here that I think the best we can offer is triage, if we can stabilize somebody well enough to get them out of here. This is a for instance; this was two weeks in my life. One woman who stayed in my house during the storm, a man and woman that I went all the way through grade school, went to high school, and part of college with, all three died in the same week. In that same two-week period, the mayor had a heart attack, my family physician had a heart attack, and a good friend had a heart attack. And it comes in bunches like that.

Swaykos: Yeah. You’re really starting to see the effects later.

Cuevas: It’s coming in bunches. Now, my friend who stayed in my home was ill before the storm. In fact, she died during the storm. Had her defibrillator not gone off, she would have—her heart stopped. If her defibrillator had not gone off, quite possibly she would have died, and had it not been for the fire department and other persons staying at my house that I was able to flag somebody down and bring into the fire department where that I knew they would have electricity where he could put, plug in his breathing machine, would have quite possibly died before we could have gotten him out of here.

Swaykos: Did you guys get a lot of those emergencies right afterwards? People bringing people in?

Gavagnie: Biggest emergency we had—I hope I’m using the right word—were diabetic emergencies after the storm, insulin, insulin-dependent people. That was our biggest—I think that was the biggest thing we had.

San Fillippo: Yeah, because they lost all their insulin and their refrigerators—

Gavagnie: People lost all their insulin.

San Fillippo:—and had no way to replace their insulin.

Swaykos: So how could you handle that?
**Gavagnie:** It was—insulin dependency is one of the biggest problems we had right after the storm.

**Swaykos:** So what were you able to do about it?

**Gavagnie:** Just do the best we could.

**San Fillippo:** We sent what we could to the hospital, whatever they could manage—

**Gavagnie:** Trying to get them type of food they needed.

**San Fillippo:** —and just tried to get people out—the people like that had to get out of here; they couldn’t stay because—

**Cuevas:** The diabetic was overall the primary patient that the clinic saw. That and respiratory problems because of all the mold and residue, environmental residue (inaudible).

**San Fillippo:** And skin problems.

**Cuevas:** Skin problems.

**Gavagnie:** Skin problems, and then the other medical thing that’s still ongoing since the storm; I mean, you cut yourself right now, you just about guaranteed a staph infection. A friend of mine had arthroscopic knee surgery. He’s under treatment for a staph infection now. I mean, arthroscopic knee surgery, my goodness. You walk in, and you walk out after they do it, and I mean, staph infections have been rampant in this area. I mean, the hospitals and everybody’s been getting it.

**Cuevas:** You asked what the community needed more than anything, and we need adequate health care, and we don’t have it. And people who still call me to find out if it’s safe to come home, if they have a chronic illness I have to tell them no because where they used to be able to get a lot of their specialized services in New Orleans, most of those hospitals are now closed. New Orleans can’t meet its own needs, much less take care of people from Hancock County as well. And Gulfport Memorial [Hospital] and Garden Park [Medical Center] and Biloxi Regional [Medical Center] are at capacity. A lot of people have resorted to going to Forrest General [Hospital] in Hattiesburg or to Singing River [Hospital] in Pascagoula, but we’re having to go farther and farther away to take care of major illnesses.

**Gavagnie:** In fact, I had surgery a little over a year ago, and I had to get it—I had it done at Singing River in Pascagoula because Keesler [Air Force Base], usually I normally used Keesler, but it was still closed down.
Swaykos: Um-hm. What effects and more calls are you guys getting due to—I don’t want to call it poverty, but there’s a lot of people with a lot less now who are having to fend in different ways. Are you getting any more calls that you can attribute to loss or not having enough?

Gavagnie: Just what I told the reporter, domestic violence, most definitely. That’s from living cooped up in FEMA trailers; attempted suicides, and anxiety attacks, some abuse. It’s—

San Fillippo: But I don’t think it’s specific to those who have less in terms of means or money. It seems like—

Cuevas: Do you know, honestly, I believe that finances has defined recovery.

San Fillippo: Because some of the people have had money. I’m making a reasonable wage; my husband does, but I’m just as frustrated and aggravated trying to get things done as the guy that has no job and is on food stamps or whatever. Or maybe more so because sometimes when things are available to people that have—

Swaykos: —less.

Cuevas: —less.

Gavagnie: Regardless of how much money you got, a FEMA trailer’s still twenty feet long, eight feet wide no matter—

Cuevas: You’re absolutely right.

San Fillippo: No matter what your job is; doesn’t matter what you think your social status is. It doesn’t matter—

Gavagnie: Until you get a house—.

San Fillippo: (Inaudible). If you’re battling that day in and day out as opposed to the next person that makes minimum wage or has no wage.

Cuevas: And a lot of people who have little or no income have been—they’ve been back in their homes faster than those of us who work because volunteers concentrate on those people, and we’re grateful for it. Don’t misinterpret anything as that we are not grateful for it, but I don’t think that money has been a reason for recovery. Now, I mean, everybody’s done without. Everybody has done without. We all have to pay the contractors the same exorbitant prices. We all have to pay the same exorbitant prices for building materials whether we’re doing the work. I was lucky enough to have volunteers to come and put a roof on my house, but I still had to pay the same price for shingles as anybody else. So you know—
San Fillippo: Whereas in contrast, somebody who had no job, had nothing, had whatever, a volunteer very often would look at them and say—and perhaps rightly so—but they’ll say, “Well, she has a job. This guy has nothing. We’ll give him back his house first.” So maybe he did, and he got new furniture, and he got all his stuff, and good for him. But there are people that—and it’s, I mean, they haven’t got people around, and they had to prioritize what they were doing. Same with the elderly. There were some elderly, and of course, people fell through the cracks. I’m not saying all the elderly were helped, but the same thing. We focus more on an eighty-year-old man or woman that has no home at all than on me; I can sleep on my cot in what’s left of my house and be OK. They can’t.

Swaykos: Right. What do you think about the rate of recovery in town? Fast enough?

Gavagnie: It’ll never be fast enough, but—

San Fillippo: I think considering—

Gavagnie: Considering the magnitude of the disaster, it’s moving along.

Cuevas: It’s been very steady. There have been no giant leaps, but it has been—

Swaykos: (Inaudible).

Cuevas: Well, that’s been steady.

Gavagnie: Yeah.

Swaykos: Yeah.

Cuevas: Everything has been steady and steadily moving forward. Fortunately we made it through one hurricane season. Hopefully we will make it through another hurricane season without any major setbacks. That’s what we haven’t had, has been a major setback in that way. And frankly I think Mississippi’s recovery has been so speedy in comparison to Louisiana because of our political situation. We had a governor who was extremely effective, who developed—and I don’t know who helped him do all that, but developed a program that recovery money that was fair and equitable, that helped everyone to the same degree, and was expedited very quickly.

Swaykos: How long do you think the process is going to take?

Cuevas: To completely rebuild this community?

Swaykos: Um-hm.

Cuevas: Let’s see. We were what? Thirty-seven years?
Gavagnie: Thirty-six.

Cuevas: Thirty-six after Camille, we still had empty places that had not rebuilt after Camille.

Gavagnie: I thought, well, first six months after the storm, I said, “Well, it’ll be probably five years, and we’ll be back 80 percent.” If I had to guess now, I’d put it closer to ten years to get us back to 80 percent. But I’ll tell you this right now—

San Fillippo: Barring any other disaster.

Gavagnie: Barring any other disasters. The Bay St. Louis that is going to rebuild is not going to be the Bay St. Louis that was here on August 28, [2005]. It’ll never be the same. You won’t ride down the beach and see the antebellum homes. You’ll ride down the beach and see houses jacked up sixteen and eighteen feet in the air. It won’t be the Bay St. Louis that we all knew on August 28; it’ll never be that again.

Cuevas: Well, Bobby and I lost what was important to us—

Gavagnie: In Hurricane Camille.

Cuevas: —in Bay St. Louis in Hurricane Camille.

Gavagnie: Yeah.

Cuevas: I mean, a lot of what was very special to us—

Gavagnie: What we grew up knowing—

Cuevas: —as children—

Gavagnie: —is gone.

Cuevas: —was gone with Camille that wasn’t as strong an attachment to what—except for some places, but frankly it was easier to deal with the losses of Katrina because we had seen—because we had already suffered the childhood losses from Camille.

Swaykos: So what effects has Katrina had on the kids of your community?

Cuevas: I can tell you about my grandson, and none of us has small children. I have a grandson who’s seven and a half years old whose sixth birthday was three days after Katrina. They lost everything but what they had in their automobile. He lost everything that was familiar to him, and it has taken him two years now, almost two years, to reestablish a sense of comfort. His mother, they moved; they left here. He
lost his school; he lost his home. His other grandparents lost their home. Mine was heavily damaged. They moved to Memphis; he went to a new school. He had to make new friends. They turned around and came back to Diamondhead. Once again, new home, new school, new friends. He hasn’t had a chance to settle, and it’s difficult. It’s as difficult for young people to accept change as it is for older people. And yeah, I mean, he had problems, enough so that his mother quit working to stay home with him full-time and could do so, was lucky enough to be able to do so just to give him that sense of security.

**Gavagnie:** So many people sent their children off, especially the ones in high school (inaudible), but they sent them off, and a good case, one of our employees at the fire department went this past weekend to South—or two weekends ago to South Carolina to see a friend of the family’s son graduate because he went up there, I guess, in tenth grade, and he graduated. And we still have people, children off staying with relatives, and sometimes the parents move, too, that they letting them finish school, so they displaced them from here to go where they needed to go, and then they coming back.

**Cuevas:** I hear horror stories from teachers, discipline problems in the school are far worse than they ever were before, and they’re more violent. The younger children still have that deer-caught-in-the-headlights look. They’re very quiet. But by the same token, some of the best things I’ve seen was, remember when we all moved down to (inaudible) and Tammy’s little boy—this is a young lady who works in the fire department—her son got to go fishing for the first time, and it was a real return to some type of normalcy for him. So he was lucky enough to spend most of his free time down on the seawall fishing, you know? I mean, but it got him out of the trailer; it gave him something productive to do, and that was a tremendous help. And those children who are not dependent on the television for entertainment have done much better than those children who have been babysated by the TV.

**Swaykos:** Interesting observation.

**Cuevas:** Yeah. They found things to do. The lack of cable television, or the lack of a satellite dish, or the lack of their PlayStation [video game system] was OK with them because they had other things that they could do, and they knew what to do with their time. Those kids who primarily found their entertainment sources in arcades or PlayStations and this kind of stuff, didn’t know what to do when they didn’t have computers; didn’t know what to do when they didn’t have television, or they couldn’t spend time on TV in their room playing their game because they had one television for the family in the middle of the FEMA trailer. Those kids whose parents had spent time with them camping adjusted easier. Those children whose parents encouraged their children in outdoor activities recovered or are having an easier time in the recovery than those that didn’t.

**Swaykos:** Um-hm. OK. We’re almost out of tape, so I just wanted to see if y’all had any last comments about your hopes for the community, where you want to see it head.
Cuevas: I want to see Bay St. Louis safe again. I want us as a community to remember what it was like the day of and the day after the storm when we knew that the only thing that mattered was each other, that everything else was just stuff. I don’t want to see us become cluttered, as a community, with stuff again.

Swaykos: So you don’t want to forget.

Cuevas: No.

Swaykos: How about you two?

Cuevas: And I want the Firedog [Saloon] back! (laughter)

Gavagnie: We really miss the Sunday afternoons there.

Cuevas: (Inaudible). We used to go meet on Saturday and Sunday afternoons and have a beer and people watch.

Swaykos: I know (inaudible).

Gavagnie: They’d sit on the patio every Saturday; Sunday afternoon we’d be out there.

Cuevas: (Inaudible).

Swaykos: I saw it; I know.

Gavagnie: No matter what, we lost a lot of houses and everything else, but (inaudible) we still got our home, Bay St. Louis. We’ll be here. It might not be the one we remember; it might not be the one (inaudible) on August 28, but it’ll still be here, and it’ll still be Bay St. Louis.

Swaykos: OK. Thank you. Anything? Thanks for your time. Thank you.

(end of first interview)

This is the second of two interviews for the Mississippi Oral History Program of The University of Southern Mississippi. The interview is with Robert Gavagnie and is taking place on February 20, 2008. The interviewers are Sheena Barnett and Kate Doyle.

Doyle: This is an interview for The University of Southern Mississippi Hurricane Katrina Oral History Project, done in conjunction with the University of Guelph,
Ontario, Canada. The interview is with Bobby, and it’s taking place on February 20, 2008, nine a.m. in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi. The interviewers are—

**Barnett:** —Sheena Barnett—

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


**Barnett:** And the next question is where were you born?

**Gavagnie:** Bay St. Louis.

**Doyle:** And when were you born?

**Gavagnie:** Sixteenth of September, 1947.

**Barnett:** And for the record, what is your father’s name?

**Gavagnie:** Willard, he’s deceased.

**Doyle:** And your mother’s first name and maiden name?

**Gavagnie:** Mary Margaret Thomas, maiden name.

**Barnett:** Where did you grow up?

**Gavagnie:** Bay St. Louis.

**Barnett:** Tell me a bit about what it was like.

**Gavagnie:** It was a fine, little, quaint town because everyone knew everyone. It was just a good place to grow up, I mean, and then some major changes happened over the years, 1960 or ’61, when the NASA [National Aeronautics and Space Administration] Test Facility came in. We had a influx of people come in, but they just kind of fit right in with everyone. And of course, Hurricane Camille in 1969, a lot of us older people joke that Hurricane Camille actually changed the Bay St. Louis we knew when we was growing up. And Katrina changed the Bay St. Louis we knew after Camille.

**Doyle:** How long have you lived on the Mississippi Gulf Coast?

**Gavagnie:** My whole life, sixty years.
Doyle: And how many generations in your family have lived on the Gulf Coast?

Gavagnie: On my father’s side, the Gavagnie side, let’s see. I’m the fourth generation; my great-grandfather came from Italy. On my grandmother’s side on my father’s side, we can trace the Selliers all the way back to the original French land grants here. On my mother’s side, the Thomases trace back to about the late 1700s, 1800s, and the Colsons, also.

Barnett: Very rich history. Wow. Why were you living there? I guess because your family’s here.

Gavagnie: Yes.

Barnett: That’s (inaudible).

Doyle: And describe your attachment to the region. What does it mean to you?

Gavagnie: Well, I spent twenty-one years in the military, most of it right here in Mississippi, thank goodness, on active duty before I became fire chief of Bay St. Louis. And like I told my friends that didn’t leave, I said, “You’d be surprised. It’s just a great place to come back to.”

Doyle: And where was your neighborhood?

Gavagnie: The neighborhood where I’m living or the neighborhood where I grew up?

Doyle: The neighborhood where you’re living.

Gavagnie: OK. It’s on Chiniche Street, right off the Old Spanish Trail in Bay St. Louis. I was one of the first houses to build on that particular street; now we got about six or seven houses on it. It was a wooded area right in the middle of town. We were fortunate to be able to build in there. And we’re very fortunate; my house is one of about the, maybe, two hundred and fifty houses that didn’t take water in Katrina. It was that little island that didn’t take water; that’s where I live.

Barnett: Did you stay in your home during Hurricane Katrina?

Gavagnie: No, I stayed at the fire station. My job required me to stay there, along with some of my firefighters and other people. My wife stayed at our house, and I finally made it back home by walking a four-wheeler by eight o’clock that night. And
since they didn’t receive any water, they were totally unaware how devastating the storm was. I mean, we lost a bunch of oak trees in our yard, and shingles blew off the roof. But there was really no major damage to any of the houses in that area. And when I got home, my wife said, “Well, it was just a wind event.” I said, “I hate to tell you, but,” I said, “the town’s 80 to 85 percent destroyed; it’s gone.” And she didn’t realize how bad it really was till I told her about it. She and my daughter and my son-in-law, her mother, and one or two other people rode it out at my house.

Barnett: Did they all retreat there because of—no?

Gavagnie: They all made plans to stay there because we were in one of the higher parts of town.

Doyle: What happened to you during Hurricane Katrina?

Gavagnie: Well, where do you want to start at? (laughter) You want to start a couple of days before? With my position, that’s when everything started happening.

Doyle: Yeah.

Gavagnie: We started holding meetings with the EOC [emergency operations center] or the emergency management, which I was the emergency manager for the City of Bay St. Louis, also, and I coordinated everything through the county emergency manager. Your fire chief carries that position in most cities, and we started meeting Friday. At that time, it was just a very weak storm, and it looked like it was a possibility it would come into the Gulf and come this way. So we made plans, and we rode out Friday night, and we met again Saturday, and I think that was the twenty-seventh. We met early that morning, and that’s when we knew it was coming into the Gulf, and we were in a prime area within the cone of probability. And we met again, and of course, I advised the mayor. And he’s on the EMA [Emergency Management Agency] board for the county. And we said we’d issue a voluntary evacuation order for low-lying areas and people in trailers and so forth and just get them ready; in case it does come this way, we’d get them out the low-lying areas first. And we monitored it most of Saturday, and Saturday afternoon, it strengthened a little bit, and we really weren’t that concerned about it. I mean, we were concerned, but you know what I mean; we just said, “This is going to be a Category One, Category Two storm, and we’ll just take it from there.” And about that afternoon, I know I’d made some arrangements with one of the local nursing homes that their bedridden patients could stay because they were on the high ground, and it never had flooded in the history that we knew of. And a friend of mine, he’s a retired deputy police chief now; he and his family lived in the upper side of Cedar Point, and they said, “You think it’s safe?” And I said, “Yeah, if it don’t get any bigger, it’s safe.” And we let it go at that, and about six o’clock that evening, we made a decision that we was going to see what happened overnight, and we was going to issue possibly mandatory evacuation orders, first thing Sunday morning. We notified the people that we may be issuing mandatory evacuation orders. And we just went about normal business Saturday evening, and in
fact we had a couple of our friends were down, pulling some NASCAR cars around, and they were visiting us. And we’d said, “Well, we’ll all get together and barbecue and watch the Bristol race on TV Saturday night.” And so forth, and that’s what we did. And I kept switching to the Weather Channel and looking at it, and at home, I’m online with the National Hurricane Service. And I was getting the bulletins, and I said, “This thing’s starting to look kind of bad.” Well, I went to bed and got up again that morning about two o’clock, Sunday morning, the twenty-eighth, and that’s when it’d already jumped from a Category Two to a Category Five. And I told my wife; I said, “At six o’clock, I’m leaving; I got to go make some decisions.” And the first thing I did at six o’clock, I drove down to the nursing home, and the manager was waiting for me on the front steps. He said, “You’re here to order a mandatory evacuation?” I said, “Absolutely.” I said, “We need to get them out today.” He said, “I already have the ambulatory buses on the way.” We had sixty-something bedridden people that we were going to put EMTs [emergency medical technician] down there with them at first, and it’s a good thing we did because I think the nursing home had about six feet of water in it. And then I called my friend, and I said, “You better”—he was on hurricane duty with the police department. I called him, and I said, “You better go ahead and tell your wife and them to go up to her family’s place in Picayune.” I said, “I think it’s going to be worse than we thought.” And we just went about our business, issuing mandatory evacuation orders. And we got a hurricane plan in effect, and you bringing certain people on, and continue bringing crews on to bring our station up, and all our generators had been serviced and all at the station. And we were just getting everything ready, and about that evening, we said, “We’re going to go to the low-lying areas, Cedar Point, South Beach, North Beach, and some of the low-lying areas and start telling the people.” Go door-to-door, and wherever we see lights on, we’d tell the people to get out.

And let me explain the mandatory evacuation. In the state of Mississippi, in most states, it has no teeth in it, whatsoever, to enforce it. I mean, you’re not going to arrest somebody. Where you going to take them to? The jail, and just put them back in harm’s way again? So what a mandatory evacuation is, is telling the people that at a certain point, you will not be able to receive any fire service, police law enforcement, EMS [emergency medical service], and at a certain point we got to say, “We can’t put our firefighters and our first responders beyond what we consider a reasonable risk.” And at that point is when we stop helping people, and they on their own, and that’s what a mandatory evacuation is. It’s telling you somewhere along the line, you going to be on your own, if you don’t leave, and we can’t help you. So we went door-to-door in areas where we knew people should be out. And if we saw lights on in the house or a car still in the yard, we’d stop and go knock on the door. Myself, I had my firemen out. In fact, I had one of the City councilmen riding with me, and—

Barnett: How did you divide it? Who was doing what? And were you the one delegating that job?

Gavagnie: Well, we coordinated with the police, took one area, Cedar Point. The firefighters took another area, and we told each—we broke it down. This particular
crew would take the first three streets on the beach, and this would take the next three. And we just kept working it that way. It’s all in the plan. And I guess you can say I actually talked to dead people. You tell people to leave, and [they] say, “Oh, no. We were here during Hurricane Camille; we not leaving.” And two days later, we dug them out debris. I mean, we actually talked to dead people that night; they weren’t there yet. And I was one—and another thing, and I’m glad they finally did something about it. I know of two ladies in this town their pets killed; they would not leave their pets, and they were deceased after the hurricane because they would not leave their pets. And at that particular time, the state or anybody had not done anything about pet shelters. And now they do have a plan where the Jackson Coliseum is, a shelter where you can bring your pets. So that’s a major thing. Of the twenty people we lost in Bay St. Louis, I would say fifteen of them were actually killed by Hurricane Camille instead of Hurricane Katrina because the word was, “Well, this didn’t flood in Camille, and we don’t have to leave. We were safe.” And really, Hurricane Camille killed more people than Hurricane Katrina did; it’s just that she waited till Hurricane Katrina to do it.

**Doyle:** Do you know how or if your home was affected by the flood or the wind? You mentioned your home didn’t take on water during it.

**Gavagnie:** No, it didn’t take on water. I will tell you where my mother lives, in Demontluzin Street, is one of the highest places on the Gulf Coast from Texas to somewhere in Florida or something like that, that bluff that Bay St. Louis is built on. And she’s got a older house; it’s built up on blocks, and they had approximately six feet of water in her yard, and there’s never been any history of any water coming up in that part of town. And she had about two feet of water in her house. So that’s what hurt so many people that stayed in areas where—even the mayor’s mother and brothers and all stayed; they lived a block away from me. He and I have known each other for years, and the same thing with his parents. His mother, and well, his father’s deceased. His mother and his brothers and their families, they took five, six feet of water where they were.

**Barnett:** Were they all in their homes, then?

**Gavagnie:** Yeah, they were by the mayor’s mother’s house, and they all went up in the attics, just waited for it to go back down. It only stayed up about, in most areas, only about forty-five minutes to an hour, where the peak water was, and then it started going back down. We were at the fire station, and we have the housing authority across the street, and it’s never flooded; that’s never flooded. Thank goodness the fire station didn’t flood because the Old Spanish Trail where the station’s located and the railroad tracks, which my house and the station and everything else is located between, actually acted like levees, and they kept the water from coming in that part of town. And through about the height of the storm when the water started coming up, I guess it was—the time was at a standstill. I can’t tell you what time anything happened. The twenty-four hours from that morning to Tuesday morning, seemed like a year, maybe. It’s hard to figure time unless you have a log book in front of you. And we were
looking out some of the little side windows in the fire station, and we saw this lady come across the street and ask could she come in, that water was coming up into the housing authority. And they had a lot of elderly people living in there, and a lot of them stayed. So the firefighters that were on duty, and the police officers were in the same building. They went over there far above what the reasonable risk was, but they had to get those people out those houses, and we either put them in the hallway of the fire department and the police department hallway, public safety building, or we put them right across the street at the Senior Citizen’s Center, which didn’t flood; we put a lot of them over there. But those guys went out in the height of that storm, rescuing those people.

Barnett: What traditions do you carry on in your community, for example, Mardi Gras, St. Patrick’s Day Parade, Crab Festival?

Gavagnie: You mean carried on after the storm?

Barnett: Um-hm.

Gavagnie: Everything just about went on. The Mardi Gras parades, I believe they had one in February of [20]06. Even though it didn’t have a lot to it, they had one. St. Patrick’s Day Parade went on. We had our big event in the Catholic church, the Crab Festival on the Fourth of July weekend. We had that in [20]06. And that’s big; each family has their own thing they cook, and there’s food and arts and crafts and all of that; we carried on with that. You would set down, and people had lost their homes and were living in trailers and whatever else they could find to live in, but we just said, you know, the community didn’t ever get down; I guess you could say. Say, “Oh, we feel sorry.” All you hear is, “Well, we just going to build up and keep going.” Just like my mother. She went to my sister’s house in Poplarville, and then she went and stayed in Arkansas for about two weeks, at some other relatives’ houses. And she came home, and I was worried to death. I mean, she was eighty years old, and I was worried to death when she saw her house. I mean, there was her prized possession, her Lincoln Town Car; it had water up to the top of it because the house is built up, and it was sitting in the carport. And I mean, she had antiques in that house that can’t be replaced. For instance, on the Sellier side, we have postcards that were sent from France to the United States in the late 1800s and early 1900s, and most of those were destroyed. But a lot of her furniture—the house was so old, and it’s had so many times siding, and floors put in it and all this, actually the water line outside the house was a foot higher than the water line inside the house, because that old house was that tight. But she walked up, and to show you how strong her generation is, we brought her there after the storm, and she looked at the house, and she had a little cottage in the backyard, and a tree fell through it. That’s where my daughter lived for a while. And all she said was, “Oh, well. I guess we’ll have to fix it.” And that was it.

Barnett: And could you give us generally the time period that the house was built?

Gavagnie: Her house was built in 1946. I remember that. (laughter)
Doyle: And what are your most vivid memories of your community before Hurricane Katrina?

Gavagnie: It was a fun place to live. I mean, you had all your restaurants and places up on the beach. We had a group of us every Sunday would go sit up at the Fire Dog [Saloon] on the front porch and eat supper and have a few drinks and just watch every[body], talk to everybody passing. And we never would even go inside; we’d always sit on the front porch where we could talk to everybody that walked by. And just things like that, it’s all gone. Certain places we used to go eat and places we’d go out. And I don’t know, it just—and some of the old buildings that survived everything are gone now. And some of the buildings that the engineers said should have fell down ten years ago, are still downtown, standing. And the other old ones next to it are gone. And I just remember, just like we were so proud of our Old Town section. We’re one of the few communities that ever revitalized an old town section and got it a viable part of the community. We had the arts and the crafts and the antique stores and everything else downtown, and the whole community life revolved around the Old Town section. And it’s coming back, but it’s coming back different buildings and all.

Barnett: What were your community’s problems and strengths prior to Hurricane Katrina?

Gavagnie: I guess the only problem we had was, there was always, especially working in the community and the City and all, you always had—never quite had all the money you wanted to do what you wanted to do, but we had a very good police department, a very good fire department. We were one of twenty-something classified fire departments in the state. Our mayor and the City council, no bickering; we always got along good. It was just everybody pulled together; everybody pulled for the community. And it’s still like that, but it’s just, we were, like we said, a place apart. (laughter) I mean, that’s the way we always were; we were our own thing, and we did our own thing, and we enjoyed it.

Doyle: What was your opinion of local, state, and federal politicians before Hurricane Katrina?

Gavagnie: They were all good. I’ve dealt with them. I had to deal with them all, and in my last couple of years in the military, I was full-time assigned to the Mississippi National Guard, so my last two years, my family lived down here, and I’d come home on the weekend. I worked at the military department State headquarters in Jackson. So I was involved with the State people and politicians up in that level and plus all the way down. And I grew up with all our City politicians and county politicians. I know them all; I’ve known them all, all their lives.

Doyle: And what about after Katrina?
Gavagnie: They did a good job. I got to say a lot for Gene Taylor; I got to say he really stepped up to the plate, and he helped a lot. A lot of other things people don’t know about. We had the Mississippi Armored Brigade was over in Iraq; my son was a member of it. And I went to Gene, I know no more than three or four days after the storm; I found him, and I said, “When we were in Vietnam and Camille hit, most of our people got to come home. The people from down here, they got to come home for fifteen or thirty days in emergency leave, and then go back to the war zone.” And he said, “Well, we’ll work on it.” And he surely did, and General Blum, Chief National Guard Bureau, flew down, and we met with him, and we got our people back home. My son was one of them, and he got to come back home for fifteen days, which is a unique story in itself. My son was married; he and his wife were married in [June] of [20]04. He was a Waveland police officer; they were mobilized in August of [20]04, and that’s when they went to Camp Shelby. He left for Iraq in January of [20]05; he came home June of [20]05 for his anniversary on leave. They bought a house, nice house, and he never stayed a night in it. And when Katrina came, he was in Iraq; their house had fourteen feet of water in it. (laughter) And then he got to come home on leave, and then he went back, and then he was injured. And then he stayed the whole time over there, and then he came home. Because of his injuries, he’s no longer a police officer. He works for Mississippi Emergency Management, now.

Barnett: What’s his name?


Doyle: How has the storm changed the way you think about your community?

Gavagnie: It really didn’t change it a lot. We just a strong, close-knit community; the people just pick up the pieces, and with the help of the volunteers, who have—I’ll say something for them right now, also. If it hadn’t been for the volunteers, and the faith-based organizations, mostly the faith-based organizations, and we had to depend solely on FEMA, we wouldn’t be near where we are right now in rebuilding.

Barnett: So we’re going to go on to the hurricane notification, information, and response. So how and when did you hear about Hurricane Katrina?

Gavagnie: Well, I heard about it, like I said—being in my position, we started tracking it. Well, we track them all whenever they start out in the Atlantic Ocean or the Caribbean; wherever they start, we start tracking them in. We were tracking Katrina, I guess, ever since she was a low-pressure system. (laughter) I mean, you know.

Barnett: Um-hm. (Inaudible).

Gavagnie: Yeah. It’s unique because I had the first information, and we give it to the public as soon as we can. And of course, you can’t give it to them too early because, then, things change, and you don’t want to get them complacent, but you got to play a
fine timeline in putting information out and all. The hurricane center does help letting you know when you should put information out, and “So many hours before landfall, you should do this, or probably landfall. And so many hours or days before this, you got to do something.” It’s just like that.

**Doyle:** And what, when, and how did you hear about evacuation for Hurricane Katrina?

**Gavagnie:** I called it. (laughter) Through the mayor.

**Barnett:** What was your reaction, and how did you prepare, yourself?

**Gavagnie:** My job was unique, and my previous job when I was with the Mississippi Army National Guard was unique because both jobs required me to either prepare military units for mobilization in case of a hurricane or prepare my city for a hurricane. And I have to rely—not any more—but I had to rely on other people to help get my personal property in order. I mean, I could call and tell my wife, “Has this been done? Has this been done?” But I said, after I retired this past July, I said, “I’ll finish this hurricane season.” I said, “This’ll be the first one that I don’t have to sit down and worry about a whole city or a group of soldiers, and I can sit down and worry about my family and my piece of property and not anything else.”

**Doyle:** Describe your experience as Hurricane Katrina approached.

**Gavagnie:** Very busy. We were just doing everything you got to do. We were making sure all our equipment was secure, and everything was secure. We was making—as I said, up to the last minute, we were trying to evacuate people, tell them they needed to get out. It was very busy, prehurricane stuff, making plans. “If it does hit, where are we going to send search teams out first? What we going to do?” And so forth. And like I said, again, I was in a unique position. I can’t really say what the civilian part of the city was doing. I know my wife, they had got water, and they had their weather radios and extra batteries. And I had a little generator so they could run a few things in the house and things like that. I guess that’s about all you can do.

**Barnett:** A lot of these questions you’ve answered. So I’m going to (inaudible).

**Doyle:** What was the most important aspect in your decision to evacuate the city, to go around and start evacuation procedures?

**Gavagnie:** Well, just the intensity of the storm, when it did intensify so rapidly. And like I said, we’d already made plans to call our mandatory evacuation. I want to say it was six o’clock Sunday morning. It might have been six o’clock Saturday afternoon. I can’t—like I say, everything runs together. I kind of filed a lot of Hurricane Katrina away with my Vietnam experience. You file it away, and you put it in a locked file, and you don’t bring it back up again. (laughter) But anyway, that keeps you from getting that, what they call it? [Post]-traumatic stress disorder; it keeps you from
getting that. (laughter) But you look at a lot of things, and we have what they call a FEMA rep was down here with us in the EOC, and he had what you call a SLOSH [Sea, Lake, and Overland Surge from Hurricane] model, and I told him he was crazy, but evidently he wasn’t. He said, “This is what we predicting will flood.” And they just had that one little area of Bay St. Louis open, and myself and the Waveland fire chief said, “Man, you don’t know what you talking about! Your computers are not too smart.” (laughter) And what’s bad, you plan for hurricanes off historical data. If we had one coming this summer, our historical data that we’re going to plan with is only three years old, and according to what everybody says, it’s the worst natural disaster to ever hit the United States. The historical data we had to plan on for Hurricane Katrina was thirty-six years old, Hurricane Camille, because we had no major storms in between, to hit this area, and so we plan on historical data. I mean, that’s all you have. And we plan, “OK, this, this, and this, in a Category Five hurricane flooded.” And all the flood maps that FEMA and MEMA put out, are based on the same information, what your tidal surge, or your surge maps, and say, “Well, this is where the surge reached in Hurricane Camille, and this one may be a little bit worse. Maybe it’ll reach another two blocks down this road.” Well, that didn’t come into play because, like I said, the area of town flooded that shouldn’t have flooded. And the area of town that should have flooded, didn’t flood because of the density that wasn’t here in [19]69, the interstate that wasn’t here in 1969, it’s like a big levee that instead of letting the water flow into the lowlands, it held it as it could find ways to get through the interstate, and of course that caused the water to come up higher than expected. And just the area, I call it degrees, that the storm come in, the area, the way it came in, we were just—Waveland, well, Pearlington—the eye passed by Pearlington. So from Pearlington to east Pass Christian, we would never—the worst part, the eastern eyewall, we were never out the eyewall; we never saw the eye in Bay St. Louis. They never saw the eye in Waveland. They never saw the eye in Pass Christian. We were in hurricane-force winds from about five or six o’clock that morning till five or six o’clock that afternoon. The only way we know the eye came ashore is when the winds switched directions and started coming out the northwest instead of the southeast. That’s the only reason, and this was just the prime location for ground zero. We were it.

**Barnett:** Please tell your story about staying through the hurricane, and the immediate aftermath.

**Gavagnie:** I said it was the longest day; I couldn’t tell you—we received phone calls up to a certain time. That’s when we knew we’d get in trouble, people calling, saying they were going up in the attics in parts of town that they shouldn’t have been going in the attic; the water was coming into their homes.

**Barnett:** How many calls do you think you got?

**Gavagnie:** Two legal pads full.

**Barnett:** Wow.
Gavagnie: I mean, two legal pages full. That’s all the dispatchers had because most of our—we were running on generators, so a lot of our major equipment was shut down. And I want to say they quit coming in about 10:30 that morning. Like I said, I can’t tell you a lot about timelines right now. And we got the last call; I do remember. It came off Oak Boulevard, and the guy said he was going up in his attic, and I knew we were in trouble. And I said, “This is a part of town that shouldn’t be flooding this deep.” And of course we had our city EOC at the fire station and the public safety building. And the county EOC, we were right down the street, but we lost touch with them. In fact, they flooded with all their equipment and everything else. I don’t know if I answered your question.

Doyle: And why did you stay? What was most important in your decision to stay?

Gavagnie: (laughter) I was required to stay. (laughter)

Doyle: Yeah. And did the proximity of friends and/or relatives in the communities on higher ground influence your decision to stay?

Gavagnie: Like I said, it’s part of the job. Yeah. I tried to talk my wife into leaving, but she’s one of the Hurricane Camille survivors, “Oh, I survived Camille.” She said next time she’ll leave. (laughter)

Doyle: Yeah. Do you think a lot of people, now, after seeing Hurricane Katrina, that they would react differently if you were to do the mandatory evacuation?

Gavagnie: For another couple of years, and then people’s going to forget. Just like everything else, people’s going to forget. “Oh, I’m OK.” You know. New people move in; new generations.

Barnett: So who was with you? Do you want to talk about your team and your firefighters?

Gavagnie: Well, I had—I want to say I brought in—I bring in—it’s all part of the planning. The fire department is divided into three shifts, and what we do, we keep two-thirds at the station. One-third stays home. The deal is, for most storms, and most of it did it, though. They to come as soon as they can get there the next day after or whenever it’s safe, to relieve some of the ones that had been there because you call them in on staggered deals, so that they can relieve them so they can go take care, check on their stuff. And I try to let them all have time off before to make preparations for everything. We had the mayor’s staff was there at the public safety building, the mayor’s staff, the mayor, two of the councilmen; the City government was there. In fact, the ready room, that we call it, that’s where the firemen sit and watch TV, eat their meals and all, that served as our City hall till most probably, I guess about November, when they finally put the trailers in for us to operate out of because all our City buildings were either destroyed or went under water other than the fire station. We had City council meetings in the ready room; we had meetings
with FEMA, MEMA, former President Bush, President Bush. (laughter) It was just the hub of activity.

Doyle: Can you describe Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath?

Gavagnie: I can describe it a lot better now than I could a week afterwards. After I retired, I looked back on everything. I figure every one of us, without realizing it, were in a state of shock for the first month or two after the storm. We kept doing our jobs; we kept making decisions, but after I retired, I sat down. I have a lot of time; I can sit down and look at things. talked to people, and I mean, it was just talking to them. We were making plans, but we were—people were in a state of shock, but they still had that, “This isn’t going to get us down.” And all that. And again, the volunteer groups and everything. I was what? Five days after the storm, I think, this old guy, Billy Williams, from up around northern Georgia, come pulling in—he was with a church group—with a mobile kitchen. He says, “I have enough food to feed approximately fifteen hundred people for four days, or I’ll stay here until the food runs out.” Well, we kept getting food from people we knew, come down, bring it from Hattiesburg, bring it from north parts of Gulfport and all that didn’t flood. And Billy stayed with us through Thanksgiving. And he said as long as he had food, he’d stay. He stayed there, and he’d cook. And then Calvary, I think it was a Baptist church, took over from Billy. And they set up a kitchen to feed people. And it was just things like that, and it was individuals. We received no help in Bay St. Louis. We were totally cut off. The bridge went away. Highway 603 was open, but it was almost impassable. But from Monday night when the storm ended, we took care of ourselves and the people until Wednesday afternoon when the first outside help actually got here. And it was some National Guard units, and I don’t even think they were from Mississippi, that brought in some water and food. We had to get the water and what food we could find. Some of the local stores said, “Look, go and get what you need to the people, and help the people, and pass [supplies] out.” There was people on their four-wheelers pulling trailers, that their houses had flooded, and they went, and we loaded them up with water, and they’d ride up and down the streets giving water out and what little food they had.

And one of my biggest problems was medical problems and shelter. Your diabetic people had diabetic emergencies. There wasn’t a lot we could do, but we tried to help because you got to have your insulin on ice, you got to have a certain diet, and that was one of our big things because we had nothing to help them. I mean, we didn’t lose anybody because we had some awfully sick people. We sent one of my assistant chiefs down—I had two of them. We sent one of them down, and we opened up the gymnasium right over here. And it had water in it, but the stands were livable. And there were just people coming out of anywheres. I know the night, that Monday night, my other assistant chief, she’s also an RN [registered nurse], but she loves firefighting so that’s what she does. And she took a group of people and what little medical stuff we had in our rescue truck, and they made it to the corner of Ballentine and Third Street where the debris pile ended, and set up a triage, that a lot of people stayed in that area. And all we had—in Mississippi your EMTs [emergency medical
—of course, we’d do anything we had to in that case, but we just didn’t have the stuff to do it. And there was people actually walking out of debris piles, and we were treating them. And I remember a man and his daughter had got separated; we got them back together. And we were fortunate; we were the only department in the— the only one, I guess, in the whole South, in the county, we still had a little radio communication left. In fire service, you got your main radio frequency; you got what you call TAC [Technical Advisory Committee] channels because you can’t have, maybe you’ve got two fires working, or if you got a team in one end of a building and a team in one other end of the building, you can’t have them on the same frequency. We got TAC channels where this team leader can talk to his people without bleeding over into this other team leader. And we had one TAC channel kept working. We lost our main, our big, call it a repeater; that’s because it lets us blast out a long distance on our radios. They went underwater, but our one TAC channel kept working, and we had a little bit of radio communication. That was the only communication the city had. For two or three days after the storm, you had to go stand at the foot of the bridge with your cell phone and do like this with it until you got a signal. And you might get a one-minute call out if you’re lucky or anything like that. Just lack of communication with the outside is terrible.

Barnett: Could you describe more, your position on, I guess, sustaining the morale of the community?

Gavagnie: We just tried to do what we could do. I mean, help the people with medical problems. We tried to deliver what water we could find, what water and what little food we could find, we delivered it. Of course, that night we started and into the next morning, we started our rescue. You start off in your search and rescue mode, and we did get people out of attics and helped them and just found people in various places, and helped them to some type of shelters. And then after that, of course, you go into a recovery mode because at a certain point, you know it’s beyond the point of doing [rescue]. And we started recovery mode. Of course we were finding—like I said, we were fortunate, or not fortunate, but well, we lost twenty people inside the city limits of Bay St. Louis. And of course, we found some of those, and you tag them and go ahead and make arrangements to have them moved. And just talk to the people and try to help them any way you can, just keep reassuring them that help’s on the way, and things are going to get better. And just try to reassure them; that’s all you can do. You have very little resources to work with; just try to get it going.

Barnett: You said you were alongside with the mayor. How much was he actually with you? And how did that influence your, I guess, sustaining your own morale?

Gavagnie: It was good. The mayor and I, like I said, we’ve known each other for years. I was with the fire department in 1972 when I came home after my first tour of military duty. And I stayed here as a firefighter till 1976 until I went—in fact, I made chief in 1976. And he and I have been close for years since back then. And he asked me when I retired from the military in [19]97, would I come back and reorganize the fire department and rebuild it and bring it up to whatever standards we needed to get it
to. And I agreed to in 1997; I said, “I’ll come to work for you for about ten years.” And that’s what I did. But he was right there in everything. In fact, it was on CNN [Cable News Network]; he didn’t make no bones about it. The mayor and his wife—who was his fiancé then, but his wife—he was not given a FEMA trailer. He didn’t qualify for one for some reason. And I guess I don’t know why, but they lived in my office until, I want to say, right before Thanksgiving. They actually lived in my office at the fire station.

Barnett: For all those meetings that were in that building, they were there.

Gavagnie: Yeah, he was there. (laughter) He was there twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week.

Barnett: Wow, that’s unbelievable.

Doyle: So now we’re going to talk about after the hurricane, and evacuation. Can you describe any experiences you may have had with State or federal officials after the hurricane?

Gavagnie: Most of them were good. I had a few that riled me up a little bit, but I understand bureaucracy, how it works. And a lot of people were really down on FEMA, and FEMA did learn a lot of lessons. And FEMA did—I’m not going to say, “drop the ball,” but you got to understand how FEMA works. FEMA has—and just like Mississippi Emergency Management [MEMA], also. They have no true resources; they are coordinating agencies. If MEMA comes in to do recovery, they got to get the resources from other cities, other counties, from us or whatever. They have the people, but they have no resources, and the same with FEMA. They just don’t have the resources; they got to coordinate. If they going to get you ice, they got to coordinate with people that do ice. And if they going to get you food, they got to coordinate with the industry to get you food, coordinate with the military to get your MREs [meals ready to eat] down here and all that. I mean, they coordinating agencies. And they stepped up, and we had run-ins with them, but of course, we were on edge. They were on edge into something that no one has ever dealt with anything this catastrophic. I mean, it’s just never been handled. I imagine the only thing that could outdo this right now would be an earthquake in California or something, a major one. And I jokingly I’ve told people, and I’ve said it; I’ve been interviewed by MSN, NBC, CNN, the Weather Channel; I did live things on it. And I’ve told every one of them my hurricane plan that I had written for the fire department was perfect until landfall. Then it didn’t work. It worked fine for Category One, Category Twos, and Threes, but it didn’t work for this one. It was just too massive. I couldn’t write a plan right now that would work for something this big, I don’t think. Just can’t do it.

But the people, just like, one lady, I was going down—two days or three days after the storm, I was over by the old senior high [school] where I went to school at, Second Street. And this lady flagged me down, and she says, “I don’t what I’m doing, but I opened a shelter in the gym.” And I said, “What did you do?” And she said,
“Well, I took everybody’s name and address and wrote it down.” And I said, “You
doing better than shelters that (laughter) the Red Cross and everybody’s opening.”
(laughter) And she says, “All I am is a waitress.” And I said, “Well, you doing a
good job.” I said, “Just keep up.” And we put her—she ran that shelter for, I know,
two to three weeks after the storm. She ran it with no training and did a wonderful
job; it was one of our smoothest-run shelters that we had.

**Barnett:** She’s not just a waitress, now. (laughter) Wow.

**Gavagnie:** Yeah.

**Barnett:** Were you injured at all?

**Gavagnie:** No.

**Doyle:** What accommodations have you had to make to your new surroundings?

**Gavagnie:** You mean since the storm?

**Doyle:** Um-hm.

**Gavagnie:** Well, my house is one of the few that did not flood. I didn’t—I believe
the first night I spent in the house was about seven or eight days after the storm, I went
home just to try to make more room at the fire station. The roads were open. It’s
things that the people had to do. A month after the storm—something else you got to
figure; we lost probably 80 percent of the vehicles that people owned, also, in the
storm, went under water, and ain’t any more good. You know, you can’t drive them.
The only place—Diamondhead Market was open; D’Iberville Wal-Mart, and you had to
drive. And the lines were outrageous. You had to go everywheres. One thing, my
street—my son-in-law and my daughter got out. He’s from Gonzales, Louisiana, right
out of Baton Rouge, and I had my Jeep Wrangler that I played with, that was just my
toy, is all it was. And they tried to get a couple of cars out the yard, and they couldn’t.
Well, a tree was on top my wife’s [Ford] Expedition; it wouldn’t go anywheres.
(laughter) But anyway, they finally got my Jeep out, and they drove; about every
other day they would go to Baton Rouge where he lived, and they’d load up, get a
couple things of gasoline for the generator, and that was just for my family. After the
storm, we had, I believe, thirteen or fourteen people staying at my house after different
people showed up. And they would go back and forth to Baton Rouge in the Jeep over
the summer. So I’d take the top off and put it in the shed. So they were just in the
open, going back and forth to Baton Rouge with it all the time, only way they could.
Took the back seat out, and you’ve only got that much space in the back of a Jeep;
whatever they could fit back there, they’d come on back with it.

**Barnett:** So what was different or strange to you about, I guess, the surroundings?
Gavagnie: Just the loss of everything I was familiar with. And it was ironic; you know, we operate. You get your call in the fire department; you give them a street address. You don’t think of it, and you drive to it. The drivers of the vehicles drive them to the street address. Well, after the storm, we didn’t realize how much we depended on landmarks. Without realizing it, you’d say, “We’ve got a trash fire, gas leak, such-and-such an address.” And then pass up the street to turn on because they knew it was there before the storm; they knew the street by the name, but they always would say, “Oh, we got to go down Chartres Street; you turn by that old house that’s been there for forty years. You just turn right then, and you’ll know where to go. It’s only a one-block street.” Well, sometime they’d pass it up because the house wasn’t there anymore. And they didn’t realize how dependent they were on landmarks even though you’re not supposed to be. And just the change of the whole face of the city. It’s different now, and it’ll never be the same. The Bay St. Louis I knew on August 28, [2005], won’t ever be here again. I know that. Some of it is, but some of it’ll never be here.

Doyle: What interesting, horrible, or funny experiences have you had from the hurricane experience?

Gavagnie: I don’t know. I mean, there’s things—there’s not anything really stands out. Your mind has a funny way of, as far as the horrible, your mind has a funny way of blocking those things out after a while. And I imagine there was a lot of funny things happened, I just can’t think of one of them right now. It’s just it all happened; it’s just you can’t bring it to mind. I can’t bring it to mind right now.

Barnett: How similar or different is your evacuation location—no.

Doyle: Describe some of the interesting people you have met, favorites or least favorites.

Gavagnie: Well, I’ve met former President Bush, President Bush. A bunch of different people I’ve seen on TV from various news deals. I met what’s her name? Stephanie Abrams of Weather Channel; she did a live interview with me. A lot of good people from FEMA and MEMA and other government agencies, a lot of—many, many interesting people. I guess I couldn’t name them all. You know, anything from politicians to famous people.

Doyle: What was your opinion of President Bush and how he handled the whole hurricane aftermath? You spoke that he came here.

Gavagnie: I think he did—just like in my position, I can’t—it’s who you surround yourself with when you’re in a position of leadership. That’s the whole part of leadership; it’s not you doing it, and I’ll be the first to tell you: I was an old-time firefighter. I have little or no medical training, where all my firefighters are EMTs or paramedics. And it’s the same thing; it’s who you surround yourself with, and that’s going to say how you look. And just like he and everybody else, I mean, they come
and pat you on the back and say, “You did a wonderful job.” Say, “Well, no, I didn’t. This person who works for me is who did, or who is under me, did what was supposed to be done.” And that’s part of keeping their morale up; you got to give credit where credit’s due. He made some changes, and maybe they should have been, and maybe they shouldn’t have been. And some were, I guess, politically motivated, and some were just in the heat of the situation. Just like in the military, a battalion commander can lose a battle, and it’s not his fault, but nine out of ten times, he’ll be relieved of his battalion because he might have been against a superior force, and there’s not anything you can do about it but yet somebody—you always said a certain thing rolls downhill. Well, in a serious situation, when it comes time, it really rolls uphill to the top.

Barnett: What role do family, neighbors, and club members and church members play in the efforts to reconnect after Hurricane Katrina and to return home?

Gavagnie: Well, all the churches stepped up. And even the ones here in town or churches—I can’t say anything about any denomination. Everybody was here to help. Every organization helped. Six days after the storm, I had two firefighters came here from Iowa so that some of my firefighters could take off. The city of Vicksburg sent me a fire crew every week through Thanksgiving. So they would actually come fill in for my firefighters so they could go home and take care of their personal property and still continue to receive their pay because these men were filling in for them. Florida, I can’t think of the name of the town; about three towns in Florida sent us firefighters. We were adopted by what is it? Rockport and Long Island, two cities in Long Island, adopted us. A group in New Jersey, a group of firefighters, after 9/11, a third grade class at North Bay Elementary sent a mailbox with all these letters in it, thanking them for what they did in 9/11. Those guys remembered that, and they came down here. They built a playground at the elementary school. They gave us a lot of stuff we needed at the fire department, arranged for us to get a lot of equipment that was lost and everything else. And then they went and found that third grade class, which I think was an eighth grade class or something in that neighborhood, maybe seventh. I can’t remember now. And they brought each of those children that sent, that were still here, they brought a check for fifteen hundred dollars that they raised up there to help them, and they’re rebuilding, helping them keep the school, get going to school again and all that. But everybody stepped up, and being a Southern boy, I used to always talk bad about the North. (laughter) But especially the Northeast. (laughter) But let me tell you, the Northeast and Florida and everywhere, but the Northeast, New Jersey, New York, they stepped up and sent—I mean, firefighters came down here. We had one group of firefighters came down; we’re a nonunion department. They were from a strong union, a department with a strong union, and he explained it to me, and I very well understood that we were nonunion, [and] they really couldn’t fight fires with us. But he said, “That don’t mean we can’t help you.” And they stayed down here for ten days; they helped the firefighters work on their houses and everything else, getting them back in line. I had twenty-three employees when the storm hit, and of my twenty-three employees, fourteen of them’s houses were either destroyed or flooded. But those people came to work; never missed a shift other than we gave them off because that’s how dedicated they are.
Doyle: What social networks or resource people have you personally, or your family, been drawing on after Hurricane Katrina?

Gavagnie: Myself, we didn’t have claims to file other than insurance, and they were very good to us, but we didn’t receive any water. They didn’t give us a hard time like you read about the people that took water, and they get the big fight about wind and water. And first, mine was all wind damage, so they settled with me right away. How did the question go?

Doyle: What social networks or—

Gavagnie: OK. Again, the faith-based organizations came down. The volunteers helped rebuild the homes, and they were from all walks of life. A lot of them are retired. And they would come down and stay two weeks or three weeks and work on a house or work on a number of houses. A lot of them helped my mother and helped her do her house. That was mostly through the Knights of Columbus, that Catholic organization, and that lot of them helped her. But all of them were there. And the government agencies, I mean, every now and then you’d get one of these people in FEMA or MEMA that just having a bad day, I guess, and hook up with somebody trying to get something. Most of them did everything they could to help people get the grants, get any FEMA money that was due them and all that. And everybody pitched in. I really can’t say—people had individual bad experiences, but as a whole, it was all good.

Barnett: Um-hm. What is your story of going back home after, and I guess, how did you not being able to go home, affect you?

Gavagnie: I was, knowing how bad it was, like I said, I was still at the station; my house is only a mile from the fire station, and about six or 6:30 that night, I told Pam, one of my assistant chiefs; I said, “Pam, can you take over for a while? I’m going to try to get home.” And she said she’d—and I told the mayor, “I’m going to try to get home.” And I drove a couple of blocks, and because there was so many trees in the road, I couldn’t go no more. So I started climbing over trees and walking, and one of my neighbors, lived up at the (inaudible) end of my street, showed up on a four-wheeler, and he rode me to my house on the four-wheeler. And like I said, that’s when I got home. But it was about eight o’clock that night, it seems like. It was just getting dark, so it must have been right around eight o’clock. And then I walked back to where I could get to my vehicle where I left it, and then I drove on back to the station.

Barnett: Um-hm. What was that initial feeling of actually stepping onto your property and going into your home?

Gavagnie: It was good to see the house still standing. Everything was good, and I saw a number of people, my mother-in-law, my son-in-law, my daughter. They were
all there, and after the storm, I believe we had—let’s see. We had my brother and his wife; he had one of these little, sliding campers, back of a truck. They lived in it, but they used everything in my house. And my wife’s brother and his wife borrowed a trailer, and they were living in our yard, and my mother, my wife’s mother, my son-in-law and my daughter. We had a number of people live at our house, and after they were delivered, I had two FEMA trailers in my yard. And I’m down to one Mississippi cottage now, and that’s where my wife’s brother and his wife’s living because they were going to build back where they were, but they were in a low part of Waveland, and they not going to build at the height they got to build and all, so they trying to find them a place already built. And they kind of at a premium right now, or either priced out, just out of the market.

**Doyle:** Um-hm. What damages and changes occurred in and around your neighborhood for most of the houses? Just wind damage?

**Gavagnie:** Everything in my neighborhood was strictly wind damage, as far as I know. With the exception of one house, they all had, and that one was an older house up at the corner of the Old Spanish Trail and my street. It shifted on its foundation, and it caused some separation, so they tore it down and built a new house. It was all wind damage. I had a number of—I don’t know how many oak trees I had in my yard between live oaks and water oaks, and what really got me upset, all the water oaks survived, and I lost about six or seven live oak trees out in my yard. They just split and fell, and I couldn’t believe it because those are usually the strongest ones. I mean, everything, shingles off the roof, and a little water seeped in underneath the doors and all, and we had to put a new wood floor, but that’s no big thing, either. It’s just, I was very fortunate.

**Barnett:** Um-hm. What would you like to see rebuilt in your community and along the Gulf?

**Gavagnie:** I would like to see my old town back like it was (laughter) with everything the same. I guess it’s going to happen one of these days, but since the beach road has got to be totally rebuilt, all it is is a temporary road up there right now. Nobody can build on it because it’s got to be all tore out, and rebuilt, new sea walls put up and everything else. And I guess the Old Town section, just get it back like it was. I’d love to see that.

**Doyle:** Um-hm. What are your hopes and fears of the future?

**Gavagnie:** Hopes that Bay St. Louis can stay like it is. Fears, another hurricane comes, it just comes. I mean, we live in a hurricane—my administrative secretary that worked for me lived up in the north end of the county. She spent from eight o’clock that morning till when it stopped, she spent the whole time in her big, walk-in closet, locked in her master bedroom because a tornado took the roof off her house. I mean, they actually got it worse than some people down here, and they thought they were safe. You know? You can’t run from nature; you might as well accept what you can
accept and just try to build and prepare for what could come. And I mean, I feel my house is OK in a hurricane, and the flooding you can’t do much about. But I’d much rather have a hurricane with forty-eight hours notice than be sitting up in Kansas and Missouri and have a tornado drop in on me with two minutes notice. You know. (laughter) Or in California where you have an earthquake or somewheres or even in Missouri where that, what is it? New Madrid Fault? Even where it is, I mean, have a earthquake with no notice. I mean, you know, (laughter) I’ll take my hurricanes.

Barnett: Yeah. What issues do you anticipate in rebuilding the city?

Gavagnie: Red tape, environmental. It took us, I would say, a good ten years after Hurricane Camille to get it back close to where it was, and the mayor and I were sitting there talking. We both made a estimate. We both said we figured three to five years to get us back to where about 90 percent of where Bay St. Louis was. I talked to him the other day, and I think we looking at ten years. That’s what I believe, to get us even close, and that’s if we don’t have any other disasters in the meantime. This one did so much damage to infrastructure and everything else. We got to replace water lines and gas lines, and all that, and it took things that’s been here for a hundred years or more. We had the old house on the beach that survived, down in Cedar Point. It was a old plantation house; it survived everything. It was built in the late 1790s, right around 1800. It survived everything up till then, and it’s gone now. They collecting the bricks and trying to save them. I mean, it’s going to take time, a lot more time than I thought. A month or two after the storm, and I was still in the circle with all the meetings with all the people and all. And, “Oh, man, this and that.” But now, you let a contract, and before you can bid it out, you got to send all those bids; they got to go to the state; they got to go to the federal government; they got to go to the corps of engineers; they got to go to the Coast Guard if it involves the sea wall. And I mean, it’s just something, of course, that’s grown over the years, and it’s just going to be hard to rebuild, a lot more expensive.

Doyle: So when Hurricane Camille, a Category Five storm, slammed into the Mississippi Gulf Coast in 1969, were you living here at the time, and if so, how would you compare it to Katrina?

Gavagnie: I wasn’t here. I was overseas, and since most people got to come home— I was in the military, but I was in a intelligence unit, and (laughter) we didn’t get to come home because we was operating under certain conditions that we weren’t allowed to leave. And I came home in November of 1969 I think it was; I came home when I finally got home on leave, and it looked worse than the war zone when I came home, and things had already started happening. And compared to what I can remember what it looked like then, compared to Katrina, it’s just unbelievable. I mean, Katrina looked like we had a nuclear blast here, especially if you went along the beach. I mean, we had debris piles a half mile in, and you just would find stuff. We found half the sign for Christ Episcopal Church in one direction—it was on the beach—and the other half about two miles away in another direction. (laughter) And I’ll never forget; I rode down the beach with a, I think it was a FEMA or MEMA rep,
and we were talking about we were still in the recovery phase, and we were trying to recover—we were still missing people. And he said, “Well, there’s no way, the way that water come in,” he said, “there’s no way any bodies could have washed out into the Gulf.” Which we have recovered everybody that was missing. But I said, “What do you mean?” I said, “Look. You look out at the beach, and there’s riding lawn mowers that were three blocks in, laying on the beach now. As the water went out, it took it with them.” I said, “I just can’t go along with your reasoning.” And I’ll give a plug to my assistant chief, both my assistant chiefs, Louis and Pam; they both, they just took the ball. Louis is the type, you tell him, “We need this. We need this done and don’t ask any questions.” And it comes back, and it’s done, or a piece of equipment that you needed shows up. Just don’t ask any questions and go ahead and do what you got to do. And Pam, she’s been in the fire service since 1984, I think. And like I said, she’s a nurse, and also she has a search, a cadaver dog. And I wasn’t satisfied; the FEMA team passed through here so fast searching with their dogs, I wasn’t satisfied. And I told her I wasn’t; she made some phone calls. We had a whole dog team come down from Virginia, three days later, at their own expense, and they worked with us for five days with their dogs, along with her, searching the debris piles and everything else. She ran the search and rescue.

_Barnett:_ Wow. Didn’t you say she also set up a station?

_Gavagnie:_ Well, she had a triage the night after the storm; she set the triage up, her and a couple of EMTs, and I mean, she lost her house in the storm. Her house had about six or seven feet of water in it in the storm, and she lost everything in it, and she never slowed down. She lived at the fire station for three or four months, and her husband’s a fire fighter out at the NASA test facility. And they finally got them a FEMA trailer. (laughter) But she’s back in her house now.

_Doyle:_ So that’s all of the formal questions we have for you.

_Gavagnie:_ OK.

_Doyle:_ Is there any other stories or information you’d like to share for the record?

_Gavagnie:_ Just like the mayor said, “We may have lost a lot of houses, but we didn’t lose our home.” Bay St. Louis is our home, and we didn’t lose it, and we’ll be back. I decided to retire in July because it had been ten years, and I was totally wore out from Katrina, and I mean, I make no bones about it. I was eligible to retire again, and I said, “Why should I continue to work? And I’d like to enjoy some of my retirement.” (laughter)

_Barnett:_ Um-hm. What are your plans?

_Gavagnie:_ Oh, we just kicked back and enjoying it. I’m a big NASCAR fan. In fact, I just got back from Daytona yesterday afternoon—I meant Monday afternoon, I just got back from Daytona, and I do what I—I go to the races. We travel some, mostly in...
the country. There’s so much to see in here; there’s no sense in going overseas. (laughter) I spent so much time overseas anyway, my first tour in the military before I was married; I’ve seen most of the world, I think. So I enjoy just going around the United States. I just kick back and enjoy myself. That’s it.

**Barnett:** I guess, could you describe how much, like, the value you put on your family now, and I guess—

**Gavagnie:** You don’t take a lot for granted anymore, after seeing things, and I don’t know, you just—you don’t realize how quick something can change. And I mean I’ve been through a war and everything else, and things change, and you don’t realize how quick things can change and alter your whole life. It’s really—I was fortunate it didn’t alter mine a lot, but a lot of people, it’s altered their lives completely. And you know, it’s just something to be studied; it’s how human nature accepts it. And so far, Bay St. Louis, the majority of us said, “Well, yeah, it knocked us down, but we’re going to get back up, and we going to go.” That’s how I feel about it. Can’t do anything about what happened in the past other than try to rectify mistakes you made and then plan for the future. That’s all you can do. Once the past is past, there’s not a whole lot you can do about anything.

**Barnett:** Yeah. That’s all. Thanks.

(end of second interview)