Mississippi Oral History Project

Hurricane Katrina Oral History Project

An Oral History

with

Robert E. Hirsch

Interviewer: Rachel Swaykos

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Robert E. Hirsch was born November 22, 1948 in Pusan, Korea, and adopted by Peter J. Hirsch and Edna Berns Hirsch when he was approximately six years old. He earned bachelor’s degrees in Social Studies and French from Cameron University in Oklahoma in 1971 and earned his Master’s of School Administration from The University of Southern Mississippi in Hattiesburg in 1980.

Mr. Hirsch began his teaching career in Oklahoma until he and his wife fell in love with the Mississippi Gulf Coast en route to Florida for a vacation. Mr. Hirsch moved to Ocean Springs where he worked as Assistant Principal of Ocean Springs Junior High, Principal of Ocean Springs High School, and was appointed to be superintendent of the school district in July of 2006. He has spent over thirty-six years in education.

Mr. Hirsch enjoys many hobbies including playing music, gardening, cooking, fishing, canoeing, and riding and racing motorcycles. Mr. Hirsch married his wife Melissa Ann Hirsch on August 16, 1977 in Duncan, Oklahoma. They have five daughters, Tressie Hirsch, Mary Hirsch, Kim Batten, Amy Hirsch, and Elizabeth Turner. At the time of the interview, Mr. Hirsch was working toward his PhD in Organizational Leadership from Nova Southeastern University in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. He and his wife currently reside in Ocean Springs, Mississippi.
AN ORAL HISTORY

with

ROBERT E. HIRSCH

This is an interview for the Mississippi Oral History Program of The University of Southern Mississippi. The interview is with Robert E. Hirsch and is taking place on June 8, 2007. The interviewer is Rachel Swaykos.

Hirsch: Robert Hirsch. I’m fifty-eight years old. I am presently serving as the Superintendent of the Ocean Springs School District.

Swaykos: And today is June 8, 2007.

Hirsch: Today is June 8, 2007.

Swaykos: Wonderful. So you’re fifty-eight, that would make your birth date when?


Swaykos: Great. And where were you born?

Hirsch: I was born in Pusan, Korea.

Swaykos: OK, how do I spell that?

Hirsch: Well, actually, the interesting thing, I said I’m fifty-eight, I really am fifty-eight; legally I’m fifty-seven. I was not a natural born citizen and there was some confusion on my citizenship papers, so in reality I was born in ’48 but all my legal documents say I was born in ’49.

Swaykos: OK, what an interesting story. So how did you end up over here then?

Hirsch: Basically I was adopted when I was about six years old and adopted by a military family in the States. So I got my citizenship, actually, when I was about thirteen.

Swaykos: OK. So you’ve moved all around, then, if it was military?

Hirsch: Been all over. Attended high school in Europe; military family, we traveled all over the world.

Swaykos: Oh, great. Are you married?
Hirsch: Yes, I am.

Swaykos: And your wife’s name?

Hirsch: My wife’s name is Melissa Ann Hirsch, and I have five daughters.

Swaykos: Oh, my gosh.

Hirsch: Only one of them is still living at home and attending high school.

Swaykos: And what are their names and ages?

Hirsch: Oh, my God. Kim is thirty-nine. Amy is, will be thirty-seven next week. Missy is thirty-three. Tressie is twenty-four. And Mary is sixteen.

Swaykos: Great. Good job. OK and what’s your wife’s birthday?

Hirsch: Her birthday is April 23 of 1958.

Swaykos: And where did y’all get married?

Hirsch: We were married in Duncan, Oklahoma.

Swaykos: OK.


Swaykos: And where is she from, where was she born?

Hirsch: She was actually born in Miami, Florida.

Swaykos: OK.

Hirsch: Interesting, we were married on the day that Elvis Presley died.

Swaykos: Really?

Hirsch: Yeah, we walked out of the courtroom and about ten minutes later the news bulletin came on that the King had died, so.

Swaykos: Oh, my gosh. And you guys were in Oklahoma, somewhat close to there.

Hirsch: Oh, yeah. That was shocking news, actually, at the time.

Swaykos: Yeah, definitely. So, let’s talk about where you went to school; high school, college and degrees.
Hirsch: Well, it’s hard to believe now when I came over from Korea we were living in a little place called Columbus, Georgia, and I started school in about 1953 and I was not allowed in the white public schools.

Swaykos: Really.

Hirsch: I was given the choice of going to the black school, well; because I was Asian I was given the choice of going to the black public schools or the Catholic schools. So, I was—the black public schools were so shabby and disgraceful that my adopted parents decided to put me in Catholic schools. I did not actually attend a public school in America until 1966, and because of segregation policies.

Swaykos: Right, right. OK. So where did you go to college?

Hirsch: I went to college, started out at the University of Nebraska, quickly got—

Swaykos: Where is that in Nebraska?

Hirsch: —yeah, Lincoln, quickly got put on academic probation because of the freshmen flop, moved back down to Oklahoma and finished at Cameron University. Got much more serious about school after the freshmen flop because back then you only had four years to finish college or you got drafted and sent to Vietnam. So I got very serious about school.

Swaykos: What did you get your degree in?

Hirsch: Social Studies and French.

Swaykos: Oh, great. What year did you graduate from Cameron?

Hirsch: In 1971.

Swaykos: And then when did you go to USM?

Hirsch: Oh, gosh, I finished at USM I believe in about 1980.

Swaykos: What was your master then?

Hirsch: It was in school administration.

Swaykos: OK.

Hirsch: And about a year and a half ago I started working on my doctorate in organizational leadership with Nova Southeastern University out of Fort Lauderdale, Florida.
Swaykos: OK, great. How is that coming along?

Hirsch: It’s killing me. (laughter) It’s killing me but I’ve had a tough life, so.

Swaykos: Don’t tell me that.

Hirsch: So I can do it now, I mean I’ve had enough challenges in my life to where it’s just a perseverance contest but its good stuff, I’m learning a lot.

Swaykos: Good. So let’s talk about your career path. How did you end up here?

Hirsch: Actually I had been teaching eight years in Oklahoma. I was teaching French and social studies. We decided to—my wife and I decided to take a Florida vacation to visit my parents; on the way back to Oklahoma we came through the Mississippi Gulf Coast, fell in love with Ocean Springs, Biloxi, so when I got back to Oklahoma I resigned, we sold the house, U-Hauled down here, no jobs, no house, nothing, and it was just a great adventure. That was twenty-seven years ago; I was much younger. And bought some property, built the house by hand, and not necessarily a great house, but built that house by hand on waterfront which was very cheap at the time, and of course since that time waterfront property has become extremely expensive. And I’ve been here ever since.

Swaykos: Great. And what did you do for a job when you first got here?

Hirsch: When I first came down here I taught French and drove a school bus.

Swaykos: OK.

Hirsch: I eventually moved into administration as an assistant principal at Ocean Springs Junior High, later became the high school principal, and last summer I was appointed superintendent of the school district.

Swaykos: Great, so you got to skip assistant superintendent.

Hirsch: Yes, I did.

Swaykos: Wonderful. And when did you—when were you appointed? I’m sorry I missed that.

Hirsch: I was appointed July first of ’06, just last summer.

Swaykos: OK, but you were working for the school district.

Hirsch: Yeah, I was the high school principal at the time.
Swaykos: During that time. Wow, so now you’ve seen both sides of it.

Hirsch: Yeah, absolutely.

Swaykos: Great.

Hirsch: A total of thirty-six years in education.

Swaykos: Wow. That’s quite a while.

Hirsch: Most people my age are retiring. (laughter)

Swaykos: You seem like you’re having too much fun. (laughs)

Hirsch: I enjoy it. I love it.

Swaykos: Going for the doctorate now, you’ve got to stay. What do you like to do besides work?

Hirsch: Actually I’m a musician; I’ve played professionally. I like to garden; like to cook; lot of outdoor stuff, fishing, canoeing; ride motorcycles, used to race motorcycles. I have a lot—my wife says I have too many hobbies. (laughter)

Swaykos: Got to keep life fun, right?

Hirsch: Yeah, absolutely.

Swaykos: Good. What was your father’s name?

Hirsch: Well, I don’t know who my biological father was; my adopted father’s name is Peter Hirsch, he was an Army officer, infantry officer, and he’s from—he’s a German-Catholic from Wisconsin.

Swaykos: Uh-huh. And what’s his birth date, do you know?

Hirsch: Oh, my gosh. He is eighty-two as of last week, so you’ll have to do the arithmetic.

Swaykos: And your mother’s name?

Hirsch: Adopted mother’s name is, or was Edna Hirsch; she is deceased as of New Year’s Day 1980.

Swaykos: Sorry about that. Do you know her maiden name?

Hirsch: It was Berns, Edna Berns from Slocomb, Alabama.
Swaykos: Alabama, that’s how y’all ended up down here, huh?

Hirsch: Right, um-hum, correct.

Swaykos: Do you know when they were married?

Hirsch: Oh, gosh, no I don’t.

Swaykos: OK.

Hirsch: That was long before I was adopted.

Swaykos: Did your mother work?

Hirsch: No, she didn’t. She was a good military wife. At the time officers’ wives, it was expected that they not work outside of the home.

Swaykos: Definitely, no.

Hirsch: I will say that she always wanted to work (laughs), you know, but.

Swaykos: She was (inaudible).

Hirsch: She basically, she’d have the house cleaned and, you know, have dinner ready and, you know, it was the old, old American life when Mama didn’t work.

Swaykos: Yeah.

Hirsch: Very unfulfilling for her; later on she went to work after my dad retired.

Swaykos: I see.

Hirsch: Selling real estate and she loved it. Unfortunately, shortly thereafter she passed away of lung cancer.

Swaykos: Sorry to hear that. At least she got to get out there, right?

Hirsch: Well, she did for about two years.

Swaykos: OK.

Hirsch: Yeah, and loved it.

Swaykos: Good, good. OK, so let’s go into a little bit of—what was August 29th like for you?
**Hirsch:** Well, to perceive that, you need to be aware that as a school administrator we always ran the shelters, the hurricane shelters.

**Swaykos:** OK.

**Hirsch:** We turned the schools, the high school and middle school into shelters, so we opened those shelters for probably about five previous hurricanes prior to Katrina. Oddly enough, a year before Katrina hit, they closed the schools as shelters because they were south of Highway 90, so Katrina was the first time that a hurricane approached, but we as school administrators didn’t have to stay and man the shelters.

**Swaykos:** I see.

**Hirsch:** So, consequently, Sunday morning before the hurricane, I get up to watch TV and I notice that it’s a category five. I was not planning to evacuate but seeing that it was level five, I yelled at the wife and the daughter and said, “Load them up; we’re out of here.” So we immediately evacuated to Pensacola, Florida, and from Pensacola, Florida, we watched the news and the hurricane hit Monday morning and by Monday evening I jumped back in the car and came back to Ocean Springs.

**Swaykos:** OK.

**Hirsch:** I learned that even though Ocean Springs Middle School was not a designated shelter in the neighborhood where that school is, which is also where I live, people actually were swimming out of their house. A lot of houses had been flattened completely and there were hundreds of people looking for somewhere to go, so we opened the middle school even though it wasn’t a shelter and we allowed people to come in with pets.

**Swaykos:** OK.

**Hirsch:** We had probably 200 people that showed up that actually were homeless; their houses had been completely leveled.

**Swaykos:** When you went to Pensacola, what was that day like there? Where did you stay?

**Hirsch:** That day was pure madness. The interstate was clogged, I mean just bumper-to-bumper from here to Pensacola, traffic moving very slowly. A lot of cars, believe it or not, ran out of gas. There were cars abandoned on the side and people trying to get rides to Mobile and Pensacola.

**Swaykos:** Why do you think everybody waited so long?
Hirsch: Well, generally, most of the people down here on the Coast have not evacuated. You know we’ve had multiple hurricanes and the last one that really created damage was Elena in ’85. (phone ringing)

(brief interruption)

Hirsch: Yeah, generally most people, you know, the local residents, especially, that were born and raised here or have lived here a long time, hard to get them out, hard to root them out. I think really the last utterly devastating storm was Camille and I think the attitude has been nothing can be as bad as Camille and nothing will be as bad as Camille, and we’ve not had anything close to Camille. I’m trying to think, Dennis, Ivan, Elena, there’ve been a bunch of them, Frederick, so people just were not prepared for a storm of this level.

Swaykos: Right.

Hirsch: And definitely, I think, what shocked everybody was the water levels.

Swaykos: Yeah.

Hirsch: You know, you had flooding this time but that didn’t even occur during Camille. So anyway, Camille has now been eclipsed as the benchmark and Katrina has become the benchmark. But a lot of people waited till the last minute and some people waited so late that they were trapped here, they couldn’t get out, so.

Swaykos: So you got yourself to Pensacola. Where did you stay?

Hirsch: I stayed with my daughter who was a college student there. We have a house there that I bought a couple of years ago. You know, spent Sunday night. And of course everyone was up all night watching the weather, watched the storm hit Monday morning, and of course Monday afternoon we were told we’re starting to see the damage and just this horrific damage. I wanted to come back immediately because I assumed that the neighborhood where I lived and which is where the middle school was had just gotten flattened, and I knew there would be people looking for places to stay.

Swaykos: Yeah.

Hirsch: So the radio said that all the state borders were closed and you couldn’t get through, and I’ve never believed anything I’ve been told, so my daughter and I jumped in the car and we came back anyway. And this was Monday evening.

Swaykos: Which daughter did you bring back?

Hirsch: That was Mary.
Swaykos: OK.

Hirsch: That was Mary; daughter number five. I will say that the ride from Pensacola all the way through Mobile on I-10 all the way back to Ocean Springs was probably the strangest experience that I’ve ever had in my life. We drove about 120 miles and encountered possibly two to three automobiles that entire 120 miles; it was like, you know that movie “The End of the Earth?”

Swaykos: Um-hum.

Hirsch: There were no people out and about, no traffic on the roads. Now, this is going through I-10 on Mobile and you know how crowded I-10 is.

Swaykos: Yeah.

Hirsch: Saw two to three cars that whole trip. It was twilight, so it was, you know, looked really strange out. We passed, probably, over 150 abandoned cars on the side of the road, especially between Mobile and Ocean Springs where people had run out of gas or the cars were broken, I don’t know what happened to those people. Got back into Ocean Springs and some of the other administrators had opened the middle school. My house is only about a block from the middle school.

Swaykos: OK.

Hirsch: So we had opened the middle school and we were accepting—and bear in mind that it was illegal for us to do that because we had been designated as a non-shelter, but due to the need and the people coming out of that neighborhood, absolutely, like I said there were several hundred that their houses had been flattened. All of these people literally swam out of their yards and property with their pets and kids. And so we ran that shelter, actually, for about two weeks.

Swaykos: OK.

Hirsch: We also are the ones in Ocean Springs that set up the first water lines, the first ice lines, and basically all of us administrators, most of us suffered severe damage, also, in our homes. I had five feet of water so I lost everything in the house. So we would alternate between running the water line, running the ice lines, and going back and forth to our houses trying to pull up carpet and pull sheetrock, and things like that.

Swaykos: So when you went back, did you go straight to the school or did you go to your house?

Hirsch: Went straight to the house but I passed the school on the way to the house.

Swaykos: OK.
**Hirsch:** Like I say, I only live a block away from the middle school. Turned around, assessed the damage in my house, no power, it was dark, went straight back to the school.

**Swaykos:** What did your house look like?

**Hirsch:** Totally destroyed; everything was flooded, furniture upside down, refrigerators, dining cabinets, everything was upside down, you know. And we lost, we ended up losing everything in the house except a couple of pictures that were, you know, above the five-foot level.

**Swaykos:** Was this a two-story house or?

**Hirsch:** It is a two-story house. We lost everything downstairs, but upstairs is only a bedroom and a bathroom.

**Swaykos:** What had you decided to grab and take with you, or anything, because you didn’t think it was going to be that bad?

**Hirsch:** Actually the only thing I took was a box with passports, identification papers and jewelry; that’s the only thing we took. Because we really—even though at the time it was level five, it came down to a category four, even at that we did not expect to get flooded. You know, the worse we thought might happen would be some windows blown out or a tree on top of the house, but it was beyond anything that we could’ve imagined. Fortunately I had flood insurance.

**Swaykos:** Good, good.

**Hirsch:** Because I live on the water, but we did not have contents insurance. So the house was covered, but clothes, TVs, computers, we lost all that.

**Swaykos:** I see. I know how it is being around a lot of women, how was that with your daughter when she saw all that?

**Hirsch:** Amazing; not a tear, just amazement. She was amazed but speechless. She didn’t say anything. Same with my wife; the only thing my wife was upset about, we had a pet pig that had a big pig pen out in the front yard, he got flooded with about five feet of water and he drowned. You know, when we came back he was up on his back all bloated up and gassed (?) up. And our pet dog who, whenever we have hurricanes we just let the dog loose outside and he’d go up under the house, but also he got trapped up under the house and drowned. So other than losing the pets, my wife and daughter were actually amazingly stoic about everything that we lost.

**Swaykos:** Right.
**Hirsch:** And I think everyone on the Coast—I know this is strange, but when people came back and saw their houses, I didn’t see hardly anybody cry or shed a tear. It was just they were stunned; it was like the Twilight Zone. And I saw a lot of strength and courage and stoicism.

**Swaykos:** Yeah.

**Hirsch:** The crying came later, a week or two later as people began to actually clear debris and tear their houses apart, and start dragging their photographs and pianos and stuff and throwing them out on the curb. That was the first time that I actually started to see a lot of emotions, about a week or two later.

**Swaykos:** What did the rest of the neighborhood look like?

**Hirsch:** The whole place was absolutely torn up. My entire neighborhood received five to six feet of water. Everybody was at the same level of loss in terms of property loss and damage to the house. Everybody lost everything: photographs, musical instruments, furniture. So about a month or two after the storm you could walk or drive down the street and on both sides of the street there would be six to eight feet of furniture and personal belongings on both sides; refrigerators, couches, chairs. And basically everybody in that neighborhood and anyone that lived anywhere near the water dragged everything out of the house and just threw it out on the curb. You know, waiting for the FEMA people to come by and pick that up.

**Swaykos:** So, FEMA came by and got all that?

**Hirsch:** They did, but this process I’m talking about, it was like a six-month process.

**Swaykos:** OK.

**Hirsch:** It wasn’t like you dragged stuff out, heaped it up, and they came by the next day; sometimes it was months.

**Swaykos:** Had any neighbors chosen to stay?

**Hirsch:** Yes, several of my neighbors stayed. Actually, what was interesting about this storm was cell phones, people who were climbing into their attics were calling family and friends. I had some neighbors that were waiting across the street to higher ground that I talked to as they were wading. People in two-story houses were calling and saying, “We’re on the staircase, up, we’re on the second floor.” So there was a lot of communication through cell phones with the people that stayed. A lot of the people that evacuated were calling the people who stayed, their neighbors and friends, to see how the storm was going.

**Swaykos:** Right.
Hirsch: So I talked to about seven or eight different families that stayed and monitored their progress and everything through the whole storm.

Swaykos: OK. So did you lose anybody?

Hirsch: We didn’t lose any family members. There was an older lady in the neighborhood that did drown. The search and rescue people from out of state came down with the dogs and they stayed at the middle school. We put them in the gym and we got to talk to them about the—in that particular neighborhood I think they pulled out about eighteen bodies down close to the water out of houses. And that was a whole interesting process how they would mark houses where they found corpses and, you know, of course the dogs gone. And this is all stuff that we’re not used to dealing with.

Swaykos: Yeah.

Hirsch: So it was morbid, it was interesting, it was kind of shocking, you know, so quite an experience.

Swaykos: Sounds like you went through a whole range of feelings.

Hirsch: Oh yeah, absolutely, yeah, every day was a new experience.

Swaykos: So you went down to the school from your house, can you describe to me that look, since it wasn’t supposed to be a shelter—was it sort of chaos, what were people saying?

Hirsch: It was total chaos because, remember now, a lot of those people actually swam out of their houses and their houses were totally destroyed, so it’s not like they came in with suitcases or blankets, they just showed up soaking wet. Some of them had their animals with them, you know, and we didn’t have blankets. Red Cross—it was not a shelter, so the Red Cross didn’t show up with food or blankets or sleeping bags, so there for probably about four or five days there was people just with nothing, hanging out in a hallway. And we did break open the school kitchen and, you know, got into canned goods. And about four or five days later people did start to arrive; the National Guard and, you know, people did start to arrive with some assistance.

Swaykos: How did you keep order in the shelter? Was the middle school (inaudible), as well?

Hirsch: Well, we had the police, the Ocean Springs police officers, the Highway Patrol, school administrators, but there were some pretty wild moments. Got over some people that were intoxicated. Of course there were some people that didn’t have access to their medication. We actually let people in with animals, cats, dogs, stuff like that; that created a lot of problems with the people that didn’t—I mean the animals were going to the bathroom in the building and it was a mess for about five
It took us about—the first four or five days I would say were utter, third world living conditions, so.

**Swaykos:** Yeah.

**Hirsch:** We did have running water and we had an emergency generator, which nobody else had power out there, nobody had running water, you know, so, so even as bad as those conditions were at the middle school, people were grateful.

**Swaykos:** In those first couple of days did people know who you were and if they did, were they coming to you as—

**Hirsch:** Everybody knows who we are. Ocean Springs is a small community. There’s one high school, there’s one middle school. School administrators have high visibility, so everyone pretty much knew who we were.

**Swaykos:** So were they coming to you in the shelter to help them?

**Hirsch:** Yeah, yeah, we had a lot of personal requests and we had a lot of people come there because they knew that we ran the school and they knew that it used to be a shelter, so they just, out of automatic response, they showed up at the middle school. I would say the school district was an absolute lifesaver for the community that first couple of weeks of the storm.

**Swaykos:** Really sounds like it, yeah.

**Hirsch:** Yeah.

**Swaykos:** What kind of requests did you get and what stories were these people telling you?

**Hirsch:** Oh, all kinds of stories. We had people who actually were in their house as the flood came in or the tidal surge came in, walls collapsing around them, some of them had gotten up into their attic and the house collapsed, and I’m in the middle of this blown out. Hang on.

(brief interruption)

**Hirsch:** I mean there were people that barely got out of there with their lives, you know. There were other people who stayed ahead of the tidal surge. In other words, they weren’t swimming their way out. But, and cell phones probably saved—you don’t hear this, but I think cell phones probably saved thousands and thousands of lives because people that were in the middle of the chaos and destruction were talking to people that were several blocks away, you know, as the water’s rising in and everything else. So, but, yeah, just heartbreaking stories.
Swaykos: What did they need of you?

Hirsch: What did they what?

Swaykos: What did they request of you when you said you were down to the third world level, what were people wanting?

Hirsch: Well, they just—you got to remember they’re—just somewhere to go to the bathroom, somewhere to get running water, blankets, you know, just—I mean I’m talking about, we are now talking bare survival, water and food. Water and food and, you know, a roof over your head.

Swaykos: Where were you staying?

Hirsch: We were staying at the middle school.

Swaykos: So you were staying there, as well?

Hirsch: We were, too, yeah.

Swaykos: OK.

Hirsch: We took the office complex and we had the teachers and administrators that were running the place as a shelter, we took over the office area.

Swaykos: How many of there were you?

Hirsch: Probably about twenty-five to thirty all together.

Swaykos: Wow, so you had a lot of staff show.

Hirsch: Yeah, we had a lot of staff. You got to remember that half of them have lost their homes, too.

Swaykos: Yeah.

Hirsch: You know, so.

Swaykos: How commending that they would come to work.

Hirsch: Yeah.

Swaykos: Yeah.

Hirsch: So I’d say we alternated between running the shelter and taking care of people, and then trying to take care of our property.
Swaykos: Um-hum. At what point did your wife come back?

Hirsch: She came back, actually, about three days after I came.

Swaykos: OK.

Hirsch: And just an example, a lot of families got split up like that. And the first thing I asked my wife to do was to buy a big fisherman’s ice chest, one of those seventy-five to a hundred gallon ice chests that cost about $3-400, and I asked her to fill it up with meat, OK, because we didn’t have any food there. So there were probably about seven or eight of us that had family over in Pensacola. Now, you’ve got to remember that over here you couldn’t get gas, you couldn’t get food, the stores were, you know, so I asked her to load that up and I think she spent about $7-800 worth of groceries in there and she brought that back as did some of the other administrators who had family over there. And we lived off of that and shared that with people in the shelter that first four to five days, is how we ate.

Swaykos: Did you feel a lot of pressure there or was there not even time to think about that?

Hirsch: No, no pressure. It was—everything just happened by instinct. There was no complaining, there was no pressure, and basically it was just let’s help these people, let’s help ourselves, let’s just get through the day. We knew that help would be coming but unfortunately the National Guard, I don’t know what (inaudible) was. They were several days later than they should’ve been getting down here with water and food. So, unlike what happened in New Orleans, you know you heard about all those horror stories about the Superdome and everything, everybody here helped everybody. A lot of acts of kindness, a lot of pro-social behavior, a lot of emergent leadership, you know, so it actually was very—the whole thing was very inspiring.

Swaykos: Good, good. Did you know you had that in you?

Hirsch: Actually, no, no. I can tell you this, you know, I’m approaching sixty and I’ve been through a lot of things in my life, I would say that that particular week was probably the best week of my life, as I look back at it.

Swaykos: Really?

Hirsch: Oh yeah. In terms of what I was able to accomplish, how I was able to help other people, I would say that’s the best week I’ve ever put in in my entire life.

Swaykos: Good.
Hirsch: And I think, in talking to a lot of people that were there, they said the same thing. Would not want to ever do it again, but yeah, we found out how strong we really were and—

(Side 2)

Hirsch: —shared about the amazing partner in helping each other that occurred on the Mississippi Gulf Coast which is nothing more than a string of small towns as opposed to a big city like New Orleans, you know, that sense of neighborhood.

Swaykos: How well did y’all get along, all the staff who was there?

Hirsch: Extremely well. Extremely well. For example, there were several nights where there were about twenty-five of us sleeping in one room about this size, just wall-to-wall sleeping bags, I mean with our kids, our spouses, you know. Actually a lot of laughter, you know, it was just like a big slumber party. I mean it was, you know—

Swaykos: Yeah, you had to make the best of it.

Hirsch: Absolutely.

Swaykos: Yeah. OK, so what was the damage to the school, including what the people did by staying there?

Hirsch: That particular school received very little actual storm damage other than some leaky roofs. The water stopped probably about a hundred yards short of the school.

Swaykos: OK.

Hirsch: Now, in terms of having people in there for a week with animals and everything else, there was a lot of cleanup, but really not a lot of—there wasn’t any structural damage. You know, a lot of stopped up toilets and, you know, animal’s messing on the floor, and stuff like that. But they treated the building fairly well under the circumstances.

Swaykos: Good. How long did you have people there?

Hirsch: They were actually there for about two to three weeks, and then they were moved to designated shelters north of Highway 90.

Swaykos: OK.

Hirsch: The storm just took everybody by surprise, so it was a matter of getting through that first couple of weeks.
Swaykos: At what point did you get back to your school?

Hirsch: School here was closed for one whole month. In other words, we did not accept children for a full month, so.

Swaykos: I mean at what point did you personally go from middle school to your high school to ascertain damage?

Hirsch: To the high school, I was back and forth the whole time.

Swaykos: OK.

Hirsch: Our high school, we lost our auditorium; it collapsed. We had about fifteen, twenty rooms that got flooded. The school across the street, a tornado hit it and we lost six classrooms. But the high school, Ocean Springs was in much better shape than, say, Pass Christian, Gulfport, Long Beach. The closer you got to New Orleans, the more severe the damage.

Swaykos: Right.

Hirsch: So we as a community, and the school district, were luckier than people to the east of us and also to the west of us, you know. Oddly enough it’s like we had less damage that Pascagoula to the east, but also less damage than Biloxi, Gulfport, everyone to the west. There were schools that actually were flattened. I mean records destroyed and everything.

Swaykos: Yeah. I know—I don’t know how much you know about that kind of thing—what records were destroyed since you—

Hirsch: Well, I’ve been talking to the superintendents down at Pass Christian and some other places, talking about transcripts, graduation records.

Swaykos: I mean for you here.

Hirsch: Nothing.

Swaykos: No records were destroyed.

Hirsch: No, we had no loss of records or vaults. Our record vaults and everything were intact.

Swaykos: Good, good.

Hirsch: No, so we didn’t have any buildings leveled other than the six classrooms over at one of my elementary schools.
Swaykos: And what school is that?

Hirsch: Oak Park, right across the street and our high school auditorium; those were the only facilities that actually collapsed right here.

Swaykos: OK, and what happened at your other schools?

Hirsch: The rest of them, they all had some leaky ceilings; other than that we came out much better than most school districts.

Swaykos: Great. What were your estimated damages?

Hirsch: I think probably around three to four million dollars.

Swaykos: OK.

Hirsch: And that’s not a lot of money when you consider things like auditoriums and classrooms.

Swaykos: Right.

Hirsch: So we, by far, came out better on damage estimates than anybody else did.

Swaykos: Good. What was your—I don’t know if you know this number, how many staff did you have before the storm in the whole district?

Hirsch: Our staff remained stable.

Swaykos: OK.

Hirsch: We have about 550 people on staff, and after the storm we still had about 550 people on staff. We paid everybody, even though we were out of school for a month, we paid the teachers and the classified employees. Our student enrollment immediately after the storm—but remember we were closed for a month.

Swaykos: Right.

Hirsch: OK, so after that month students started to come back, but we were down probably about 25-30 percent of our enrollment.

Swaykos: OK.

Hirsch: People had evacuated, their homes were destroyed, and we went through that year with a down of about 25-30 percent because there were people who had no place to live, so they actually relocated.
Swaykos: Yeah.

Hirsch: And most of them have since come back. Within about a year to a year and a half we are still probably about 10 percent below our pre-Katrina level.

Swaykos: OK. What equipment did you guys lose?

Hirsch: Not a lot of equipment. OK, like I say—

Swaykos: Technology?

Hirsch: —basically some, you know, some desks and computers and stuff like that.

Swaykos: OK.

Hirsch: But we lost very little in terms of school equipment.

Swaykos: You guys lose any busses from flooding?

Hirsch: No, our whole bus fleet was spared, unlike Pascagoula to the east, they lost most of their busses. Like I say, we’re extremely fortunate in terms of facilities.

Swaykos: Sounds like it.

Hirsch: The damage—you know our schools are scattered all over town, and when you stop to consider it’s almost like the schools were spared. This pocket where this school was located, this pocket was spared, this pocket—we were absolutely amazed at how well the schools fared, and they’re scattered all over town.

Swaykos: So the month later were you completely repaired?

Hirsch: Oh, absolutely not, no.

Swaykos: OK.

Hirsch: No, we were operating with one arm and one leg for the rest of that year.

Swaykos: Yeah.

Hirsch: We refer to the ’05/’06 academic year as the year of recovery and everything was just fly-by-night.

Swaykos: Yeah.
Hirsch: Attendance policies, we had to be flexible. Grading policies, we had to be flexible. We had kids coming in actually from New Orleans and other districts.

Swaykos: Yeah.

Hirsch: We had a lot of our kids moved out to other [districts], I mean it was a lot of, you know, transient movement and there was a—everything was day by day.

Swaykos: How did you deal with the ones who were coming in whereas at their old school their records were lost?

Hirsch: A wing and a prayer. Basically just believe everything that people told you at the time because the kids had to be in school, we wanted them in school. School, the other thing is school here provided a more stable environment than home did, especially all these people living in trailers.

Swaykos: Yeah.

Hirsch: We had people living in tents. We had people living over in Mobile on cruise ships, were turned into evacuation centers. So there wasn’t a lot of exact record keeping all this time.

Swaykos: Right, right. So when you reopened, you were at the high school, what was the first day of school like?

Hirsch: Very strange.

Swaykos: OK.

Hirsch: Probably only about half of the students showed up, you know, everything was pretty dismal, extremely quiet, kids were excited to get back and see their friends and everything, but it was just a bizarre kind of a calm.

Swaykos: How did you get word out that school was going to be opening?

Hirsch: On the radios, on TV. Unbelievably, power was restored up and down the Coast within about three weeks of the storm.

Swaykos: Yeah.

Hirsch: I’ve never in my life seen anything like the effort of the power company, and they had people coming in from neighboring states.

Swaykos: Yeah.
Hirsch: Out on the highway you might see fifty or sixty power trucks. I mean it was just unbelievable the effort that they made. So fortunately we had power, so you know people did have TV, radio, you know, cell phone, so communication was much better than you would’ve thought.

Swaykos: What did you do at the high school with your extra teachers that your student attendance was about half in the very beginning?

Hirsch: We just conducted class. I mean I had teachers that might have five or six kids in the class and they were told to just conduct business as usual, you know. You got to remember also that a lot of people came to work and they had air conditioning and running water, and stuff like that, whereas, you know, at home commissions were better at work than they were at home. (laughs)

Swaykos: What kind of services were offered to the students did the teachers take time to discuss what happened, to let them—

Hirsch: Yeah, yeah, we had plenty of time for discussion. We had an absolute flood of assistance started showing up from all over the nation, money, book bags. Every child at school was able to eat free, basically, till November. Now, regardless of whether you qualified for free or reduced lunch, we made meals available. Every rule that could’ve been followed before the storm was temporarily changed or ignored.

Swaykos: Right.

Hirsch: So, just a great deal of flexibility.

Swaykos: Yeah. What were the behaviors like of the kids in that first year?

Hirsch: Very few problems from our kids. Kids were great. We did have problems, some problems with kids that moved in from New Orleans or, you know, Mobile, cultural type problems, you know, kids from a big city coming to a small city. Those were about the only problems we had. Our kids were fabulous.

Swaykos: What problems did that create?

Hirsch: Well, fights, drugs and things like that, behavior. I think kids in big city schools tend to be a little rougher, a little less considerate, you know, maybe a little more exposure to stuff like fights and gangs and drugs and stuff like that.

Swaykos: Um-hum.

Hirsch: But we didn’t have a lot of that. We didn’t have a lot of kids coming from those areas, but we did have some problems.
Swaykos: OK. How much did it change—I don’t know if you know your numbers on your racial or ethnic makeup, how much?

Hirsch: Very little change in terms of gender or race.

Swaykos: OK.

Hirsch: Basically, you know when I say at one point we were like 30 percent, we’re missing 30 percent of our student body, there wasn’t any one particular group of just across the boards.

Swaykos: OK. Have you seen an increase in those behavior problems this past school year?

Hirsch: Not really.

Swaykos: OK.

Hirsch: We, Ocean Springs is a middle class community and whether you’re black, white, Asian, Hispanic, we’re still middle class, so we don’t have a lot of those problems that other districts have.

Swaykos: I see. What services, as far as mental health services, were offered to your staff or students?

Hirsch: Oh gosh, in addition to our counselors, we had volunteer counselors from all over the southeast had showed up. We had federal grants, the MEMA [Mississippi Emergency Management Agency] grant, over $100,000 worth of counseling services. So there were points at which we had more counselors, school counselors, private-practice counselors than there were kids that wanted to talk to them. (laughs)

Swaykos: Really.

Hirsch: I remember several days where there’d be fifteen or twenty of them in the media center waiting for kids, and none. You know, they were just, you know—and finally after about a week or two, you know, they started to thin out, the counselors did, you know, so I think the kids mainly found the comfort with their teachers and their friends, you know, people that they know, more so than outside counselors.

Swaykos: Right, right, but the staff were also able to see those people?

Hirsch: Absolutely.

Swaykos: OK.

Hirsch: Absolutely, it was available to everybody.
Swaykos: OK, great. How many students do you think are in FEMA trailers?

Hirsch: Probably—we have one thousand in Ocean Springs out of 5,000 kids, we had almost 1,000 were classified as homeless.

Swaykos: OK.

Hirsch: So, you could say a good 20 percent.

Swaykos: Have those, at all, have those living conditions influence the families as far as an increase in any domestic violence?

Hirsch: We have seen what appears to be an increase in divorces.

Swaykos: OK.

Hirsch: We have not seen an increase in the dropout rate which we thought we would but, yeah, a lot more family issues—

Swaykos: Right.

Hirsch: —when you have three or four people living in a tiny trailer for two years. And we still have kids living in trailers, by the way. This is almost two years later and we’ve still got probably 500 or 600 FEMA trailers right here in Ocean Springs.

Swaykos: Have your teachers need to have been reporting child abuse anymore?

Hirsch: Not a whole lot.

Swaykos: OK.

Hirsch: I think the biggest thing has been people have pulled together amazingly well—probably more problems between spouses than parents and kids.

Swaykos: OK. Did you need to, with the reduced attendance, delete any positions?

Hirsch: We didn’t.

Swaykos: OK.

Hirsch: We hung tight. Nobody’s has been riffed from our school district. We made a major commitment to our employees that we were going to try and wait this out, and we’ve been able to take care of things through people retiring and moving and stuff like that.
Swaykos: OK.

Hirsch: Nobody’s lost their job in Ocean Springs as a result of the storm. Most districts did have to eliminate a lot of positions, so.

Swaykos: Yeah. With people moving out, people retiring, have you had any problems recruiting?

Hirsch: No.

Swaykos: None?

Hirsch: No. We are—you know, this is the hiring season. You know summer is your hiring season for schools and we probably have five or six applicants for every position.

Swaykos: Really?

Hirsch: Yeah.

Swaykos: What do you—why do you think that’s the difference in all the other districts I’ve talked to? They’re having quite a problem.

Hirsch: Well, we have less damage, OK, than other districts. We have good demographics in terms of students, and we have a—we attract a lot of teachers from other districts even though we pay less.

Swaykos: OK.

Hirsch: Everybody on that side of the Biloxi Bridge, their school districts receive a lot of casino money and we don’t, so everyone over there pays more, but we still manage to attract a lot of their teachers.

Swaykos: Do you think it’s because the living situation?

Hirsch: I think, yeah, I think it’s the demographics of our students. I think it’s the attitude of the administration, you know, it tends to be, I think, a little more pro, a little more student friendly, a little more teacher friendly. Actually a lot more teacher friendly and a lot more student friendly.

Swaykos: OK, and they’re attracted to that. What would you say has been the greatest problem that your whole system has faced in the recovery process?

Hirsch: The greatest problem was financial uncertainty.

Swaykos: Yeah.
**Hirsch:** OK, because we had thousands of people here in town didn’t have flood insurance and we didn’t know how that was going to work out. Homes destroyed, they still had to make mortgage payments. We didn’t know if the federal government was going to come to the assistance of the school districts, so we didn’t know, we didn’t know what our ad valorem tax was going to be with all the businesses and property that was destroyed. So now, almost two years later, now the federal government did assist the people whose homes were destroyed and didn’t have flood insurance had been assisted through the Homeowner’s Assistance Grants that the governor started. So everything has fallen into place. It turned out much better than we thought at the time.

**Swaykos:** OK.

**Hirsch:** And you might want to remember that uncertainty is more frightening than anything.

**Swaykos:** Yeah.

**Hirsch:** Fear of the unknown. And that was devastating at the time.

**Swaykos:** Right, right. In dealing with FEMA in trying to get the federal government’s money, what has that been like to restore your classrooms and your gym?

**Hirsch:** Of course FEMA and the government is bureaucracy, it’s a paper chase, I would under the circumstances and despite what the media says, I would say that the government, even though they were taken by total surprise and they were unprepared, I would say they’ve made a gargantuan effort to make things right and to try to help people.

**Swaykos:** OK.

**Hirsch:** I disagree with a lot of what you hear on the media. You can criticize the government for not being prepared, but I was unprepared and I run hurricane shelters. And I live on the Coast and I’ve been through ten hurricanes. I was unprepared, you know, and I live here and I’ve been through this, so it doesn’t surprise me that the government would be unprepared. We were all unprepared.

**Swaykos:** Right, yeah.

**Hirsch:** This was beyond, you know, what the normal benchmarks were for storms.

**Swaykos:** Right. So where are you now in your process of working with them to get money for your rebuilding?
Hirsch: We are pretty much done with what we’re going to receive and we are well satisfied that we’ve been treated well, and we are well satisfied that our neighbors who had much more damage have been treated extremely well. Hats off to the government agencies, you know, almost two years later. We, in this country, tend to be extremely critical, extremely impatient, and you know they have done—I believe they’ve done the best that they could do under the circumstances.

Swaykos: OK.

Hirsch: It was a slow start getting organized but, you know, through massive mobilization I think they’ve been able to accomplish a lot.

Swaykos: Good. So did they give you the 90 percent of what they’re giving everybody else or?

Hirsch: We have not received nearly the amount of money that the other districts have, but we should not have because we didn’t receive, you know—we got a fair amount for the damage that we received and, you know, Pass Christian, for example, their buildings were flattened. Obviously they deserve much more money than we do and they got it, so we’re happy, we’re happy for all the school districts up and down the Coast.

Swaykos: What was it like working with your insurance company, did you realize you were well enough insured?

Hirsch: My personal insurance company?

Swaykos: No, the school districts.

Hirsch: They did a good job, also.

Swaykos: OK.

Hirsch: They did a good job. Between them and the federal assistance, we came out, we came out well.

Swaykos: In that first year, you said your academic performance wasn’t hindered, how did the teachers make up the time and how did they keep their students on an academic schedule?

Hirsch: We did not make up the time.

Swaykos: OK.

Hirsch: We were one of the only school districts on the Coast that did not want to extend the school day, go into the weekend and give up holidays. So, our primary
concern—and this is an example of where Ocean Springs is more student friendly, more teacher friendly—our attitude was we had just experienced the storm of American History, the greatest natural disaster in American History, and No Child Left Behind could go to hell. It was like, you know what, we have gone through this and we don’t give a damn whether our test scores drop, we’re not going to worry about it. The surrounding districts, a lot of them, you know, gave up holidays, they added another hour or two to their calendar and we just took the attitude this is the storm, this is our community, this is people’s lives, their welfare, and we are not going to worry about test scores.

Swaykos: Right, right.

Hirsch: So, and we didn’t.

Swaykos: OK.

Hirsch: And a weird thing happened, we had the highest test scores in our history.

Swaykos: Really?

Hirsch: We did not make up a minute’s time and we exerted less pressure, and we had the highest test scores in the school district’s history. Don’t ask me how that happened.

Swaykos: So have you chosen to take that attitude into the past year?

Hirsch: No, because that was such an anomaly, such a freak occurrence, and oddly enough, I’m going to tell you, the State of Mississippi only has about twelve level five school districts where every school in the district makes a level five, and most of those, guess where they came from?

Swaykos: Down here?

Hirsch: Down here in the Hurricane Katrina area.

Swaykos: Yeah.

Hirsch: Nobody can figure that out. It’s just a weird thing.

Swaykos: Students had nothing else to do, right?

Hirsch: That may be, I don’t know. That would be a great dissertation—how did that happen.

Swaykos: Yeah. What are your students doing? Have all the activities been restored?
Hirsch: We are pretty much 100 percent back to normal.

Swaykos: OK.

Hirsch: You know, where we are now there are individual families still living in trailers and still rebuilding, but as a school district we are back 100 percent. Every activity, you know, we’re doing everything that we did before the storm; fully recovered.

Swaykos: What impact do you think being a middle class area had on the district recovery as opposed to other areas that are not?

Hirsch: Huge, huge. I think huge. In terms of values, in terms of crime, in terms of expectations, in terms of work ethic, I think this being a middle-class community handled it much better, but I think they also had more resources to handle things than people in the Ninth Ward in New Orleans.

Swaykos: Yeah.

Hirsch: You know they just, they have no resources. People in this community were able to, you know, if FEMA was behind, a lot of people were able to go out and buy a trailer or somewhere, or they were able to go out and rent another piece of property, so handled it much better and more easily.

Swaykos: So what did that mean for you guys as far as donations and volunteers since you were starting out ahead of the other areas?

Hirsch: We had—well, do you mean volunteers coming to help us?

Swaykos: Yeah.

Hirsch: Ocean Springs was flooded with volunteers cleaning up debris and rebuilding, flooded with donations, financial, book bags, books from all over the nation. I got a wake-up call on the generosity of America on this storm. I never really—you know how we complain about the government, and we complain about this, you know, the great institutions?

Swaykos: Right.

Hirsch: I found out that the average American is generous beyond belief.

Swaykos: Yeah.

Hirsch: You know.
Swaykos: Yeah.

Hirsch: I was absolutely amazed at the amount of help that came from everywhere; New York, Alaska, Hawaii, Vermont, Oklahoma, you know (laughs) it was just unbelievable.

Swaykos: What was the most touching thing you received in a donation or the most touching volunteer?

Hirsch: We received a lot of personal notes and donations from kids in other schools. We received from California, for example, a bunch of girls got together and heard that we couldn’t have prom, other people had lost all their clothes during then, and we got a shipment, I think it was like 150 prom dresses that kids out, and girls out, in California gave away their old prom dress or even went and bought new ones, and they sent boxes and boxes of prom dresses to us. And that, to me, was pretty amazing because you know what, these are kids are worried that our kids aren’t going to have prom and they can’t do this—and so that was a kid-to-kid connection and that was pretty touching watching our kids, our girls go out and go through that and “Oh, my God, I didn’t think I was going,” you know, “We couldn’t, you know, Dad’s out of work and we’re living in a trailer and we don’t have any money, you know, and I’m still going.” That was pretty, that was pretty touching.

Swaykos: Yeah.

Hirsch: To me, and it was one of those weird little things that adults would’ve never thought of that.

Swaykos: Yeah.

Hirsch: You know, but that was amazing.

Swaykos: Good. What was graduation day like as the principal?

Hirsch: Graduation day was wonderful, but a strange thing—the seniors had developed this name “Katriniors” you know, but they, as a group, asked me, as the high school principal, they said, “We don’t want to hear about Katrina, we don’t want to be called Katriniors, we don’t want a big Katrina deal at our graduation, we don’t want to be remembered for Katrina,” and that kind of surprised me.

Swaykos: Yeah.

Hirsch: But the whole senior class felt very strongly about that, and go figure, I didn’t understand it but we respected their wishes.

Swaykos: Even though you didn’t talk about it, was there still an undertone at graduation?
Hirsch: Oh, absolutely, yeah, absolutely. In the yearbook, you know, see that’s another thing, we probably would not have had a yearbook, but we got donations from all over the country from yearbook staffs.

Swaykos: Oh, great.

Hirsch: National Honor Society, got donations from National Honor Society. The Spanish Club got donations from other Spanish Clubs, you know.

Swaykos: Right.

Hirsch: So there was a lot of thought and generosity at multiple levels.

Swaykos: Did this year’s seniors choose the same thing or did they have anything said about Katrina?

Hirsch: This year’s seniors I think have forgotten Katrina.

Swaykos: Yeah.

Hirsch: They’re busy going off to college and this and this, and you know the parents haven’t.

Swaykos: Yeah.

Hirsch: But the kids, you know how resilient kids are, you know, they’re worried about the future, they’re not worried about looking back.

Swaykos: Yeah, great. So I want you, if you could, to describe to me how you went from principal to superintendent and who was the old superintendent.

Hirsch: The old super, the previous superintendent was a lady, good friend of mine and a wonderful educator, Miss Anna Hurt.

Swaykos: OK.

Hirsch: She actually retired by surprise two years earlier than I did, or I mean two years earlier than she planned.

Swaykos: OK.

Hirsch: And she came to me and said, “Robert, you are highly visible, you were extremely active during the storm on behalf of the school district and the community.” And she said, “I think that you would have a good chance of being appointed.” So she kind of talked me into it and interested me into it, and I do think that my high visibility
during the year or recovery and activities probably contributed to my chances of being selected.

**Swaykos:** Why did she retire early, and if you could talk about how she handled that year of Katrina?

**Hirsch:** I think as superintendent I actually did see her cry five or six times in meetings that year, you know, just she would hear these stories about the kids and the teachers, and the things. She actually received no damage to her property and so she would hear of these horrible stories about people getting wiped out, and this, or these wonderful stories about what so and so did to help, and this and that, and I think emotionally, believe it or not, and this is going to sound backwards, I think the fact that she received no damage and just watched all this destruction going on, I think it really hurt—

**Swaykos:** (inaudible).

**Hirsch:** No, not helped, it just hurt her and it was extremely difficult. I think it was a very difficult year for her. People that had damage did not really feel sorry for other people that had damage and they didn’t feel sorry for themselves. It was like, we’ve got to plug through this, we got to plug through this. I think it was a very difficult year for her and she just decided, you know what, I can retire, I can pass it on to someone else.

**Swaykos:** What work did she do in the recovery process in that first year?

**Hirsch:** Wonderful, wonderful work. She was at the shelter, she made all the command decisions for the school district, for the community. She probably did one of the most wonderful jobs of leadership that I’ve ever witnessed in my life.

**Swaykos:** Did she start your FEMA process for you?

**Hirsch:** Yes, she started all of that and she was extremely generous to the community. She was extremely loyal and generous to the staff. You know I told you we didn’t cut any positions, we did cut any programs, we paid everybody. She determined that we are not going to make up days and do this to our kids and community, so just a championship job of leadership.

**Swaykos:** Good. What was her contact like with all of the principals?

**Hirsch:** Close; all the time.

**Swaykos:** What did y’all say in your meetings?

**Hirsch:** Well, we just talked about enrollment fluctuating, damage, faculty members that have lost everything, students that have lost everything, how do we help the kids,
you know, how do we, you know, I mean just at every level she was involved in trying to make things work and to help people.

Swaykos: Great. Let me switch the tape.

(Tape 2)

Swaykos: —or, I don’t know, any extra assistance to your teachers who had lost everything?

Hirsch: Absolutely, yeah, we—

Swaykos: What would you do?

Hirsch: We would receive donations, for example, and the request on the donation would be “identify teachers who need help.”

Swaykos: OK.

Hirsch: So we were able to help about fifteen or twenty of them. We received gift certificates from Wal-Mart, maybe in the amount of $100, you know, for groceries.

Swaykos: OK.

Hirsch: So we would determine who it was that received the damage and got wiped out and who didn’t. We also had—I coordinated probably five different work crews that came down here, student work crews from colleges and high schools, and so I would direct them to this teacher’s house or that teacher’s house and they’d pull sheetrock or clear debris, and you know, so we were able to do a lot for our teachers.

Swaykos: It does sound very staff friendly for anyone who came to the district you offered a certain amount to your community.

Hirsch: Yes, absolutely.

Swaykos: What’s your relationship like with the community now?

Hirsch: We have a good relationship with the community.

Swaykos: Uh-huh.

Hirsch: Like I say, I think the whole Gulf Coast, every town is a one-high-school town, so the school districts are also one of the biggest employers in each of these towns, so I think every coastal community in Mississippi has a strong relationship between the community and the school district. I know we do.
**Swaykos:** Yeah. What’s your parent involvement like and what was it like before the storm?

**Hirsch:** Great before the storm, subsided during the year of recovery, obviously, because so many people were rebuilding their homes, and we’re back to great involvement again.

**Swaykos:** Did you have a lot of parents calling you, as the principal, and asking you for favors, asking you for help?

**Hirsch:** Asking for help, yeah, you know, they would say, “Look, if you’ve got kids that want to volunteer or even if you got kids that want to earn money and we need help here.” We had a lot of parents that would say, “Look, I need help with the attendance policy here. I need help with this.” Yeah, we had a lot of people asking for help. And so we tried anything that was legal or ethical or within our means, we went out of our way to help people.

**Swaykos:** Did anybody ask you for things that weren’t legal or ethical?

**Hirsch:** Every once in a while, you know, they might ask for some exceptions on disciplinary violations, and that stuff, but very little, very little.

**Swaykos:** I see. Did you have any families or community members who were coming in and trying to get some of your donations that were maybe made to your school?

**Hirsch:** We did see a certain amount of abuse.

**Swaykos:** OK.

**Hirsch:** And, you know, in retrospect, in watching this whole thing, I know there were people in the community, not necessarily related to the school district, but you know the Red Cross would come in and say, “Look, we’re giving a $250 grant, just come down here and sign it.” A lot of people who received zero damage that were there, I mean you always have that.

**Swaykos:** Yeah.

**Hirsch:** It’s like people who, these people who raised prices for gas and stuff, you know, during the storm, you always have, but very little, really, very little.

**Swaykos:** OK.

**Hirsch:** Very little scabby behavior. I mean I was truly impressed with the overall handling of everything by everybody.
Swaykos: What example has that set for the students as far as how do they feel now about America’s generosity?

Hirsch: I think, I think that whole experience was a positive in terms of role modeling, and watching how their parents rebuilt, and watching how the school, you know, acted with the community, and watching how people helped each other, and watching the generosity coming forth, and watching the government trying to help, I think it was a wonderful, positive experience for any kid that was actually paying attention to what was going on.

Swaykos: Do you think they’re ever going to create different careers of some of your seniors going to college?

Hirsch: Very possible, very possible. Let me tell you one thing—

Swaykos: In the helping professions.

Hirsch: Let me tell you one thing that happened. A lot of our kids got into community service and public service and volunteer work that had never done anything like that until the storm hit, and I know I’ve heard a lot of people talk about they like more of a public service career and to help people as a result of their storm experience. A lot of them.

Swaykos: Good. Did it validate for you your career choice?

Hirsch: Absolutely, more so than ever. You know I told you that that one week, that desperate week after the storm, I would have to say that was the best week in my life in terms of contributions coming from me and I think there’s a lot of people that felt the same way.

Swaykos: Well, good. What did you have to do to prepare your school to open, why a month?

Hirsch: We had to clean up, you know we had to sort out the finances, we had to—I mean there were just a lot of things that we had to do.

Swaykos: Yeah.

Hirsch: Now the biggest thing, one of the biggest things is half, about 50 percent of our staff either was wiped out or received serious damage and we had to allow them time, also, to rebuild. And even myself, I was the principal, but I had to get my house to where I could at least just move in, you know. And I mean we went a year without a refrigerator, without a stove, you know, I mean just, you know, it was like camping out for a year.

Swaykos: Right, right.
**Hirsch:** Well, we had 50 percent of our staff was in the same boat, so a lot of that was that first month was just people getting their house cleared out, you know, so.

**Swaykos:** Right. Once you became superintendent, where did you start, what did you know you needed to do?

**Hirsch:** The previous superintendent basically took care of the storm.

**Swaykos:** OK.

**Hirsch:** You know, she—by the time I became superintendent, that first year of recovery, she had led us through that and basically I got here in time to start spending some of the insurance money.

**Swaykos:** Oh, OK.

**Hirsch:** (laughs) So.

**Swaykos:** And where did you put it?

**Hirsch:** Well, we’ve been improving programs, buying technology, software, stuff like that.

**Swaykos:** What programs?

**Hirsch:** Well, we’re moving toward internationally baccalaureate status for example.

**Swaykos:** OK.

**Hirsch:** Our reading room Renaissance, you know, instructional technology, Smart Boards and stuff like that.

**Swaykos:** OK.

**Hirsch:** So we’re just trying to put a light back into instruction and benefits for the kids.

**Swaykos:** Were your kids able to start up the sports teams right away?

**Hirsch:** Yeah.

**Swaykos:** How are they doing?

**Hirsch:** We missed—they did well, they did well. We missed, you know several football games and stuff like that. I mean we were shut down. But one of our schools
was to get the activities back as quick as we could. You know, in other words, get the kids back involved in this, this, and that, and that was well worth the effort.

**Swaykos:** Good.

**Hirsch:** The kids were actually looking to school for normalcy.

**Swaykos:** Right. Are you completely back to your financial situation?

**Hirsch:** Yes, I would say, I would say we’re back to the pre-storm situation.

**Swaykos:** Do you have any advice to give to the other counties down here that are nowhere near that financial—

**Hirsch:** No, no. I would say that they know more about it than we do because they received more damage. They have more wisdom in those areas than we do.

**Swaykos:** OK. So where are you in the process of rebuilding?

**Hirsch:** We’re hoping to float a bond issue, build a new high school in three or four years. We’re putting an addition—we are back—you could almost now as a school district say the storm never happened.

**Swaykos:** Really?

**Hirsch:** Two years later you could say, “You know what, that was all a bad dream and now we’re back.”

**Swaykos:** So, your six classrooms are back?

**Hirsch:** Yeah.

**Swaykos:** The gym is, too?

**Hirsch:** They were replaced, they were paid for by a group in Chicago. Found out about that through the websites, and everything, and they sent down like $250,000 for us to replace those six classrooms. And you would not believe the generosity. The weird things that occurred and that people wanted to do, you know, and that was very helpful in addition to the insurance and the federal money.

**Swaykos:** Yeah.

**Hirsch:** And that’s why we’re back 100 percent.

**Swaykos:** What were one of the most interesting things donated? I’ve seen some a (inaudible), obviously, that has been used for years.
Hirsch: We got everything from shoes to used shoes to book bags. We received enough book bags for every child in the district probably to get three or four book bags.

Swaykos: Really.

Hirsch: In fact, after a point we started sending book bags up to North Mississippi to the Delta to the poor schools that had no storm damage at all, but they have a high rate of free reduced lunch.

Swaykos: Right.

Hirsch: So, you know, I mean there was no limit to the things that we—prom dresses, I told you, but just all kinds of stuff.

Swaykos: And were you able for everything else that you didn’t need to push it to the other towns that needed it more?

Hirsch: Yeah, yeah, we were able to share.

Swaykos: Good. Were you able to do anything for the other school districts?

Hirsch: Very little, other than just share information and things like that. Everyone pretty much was taking care of their own mess.

Swaykos: Yeah. OK. Can you describe what was your worst day after the storm?

Hirsch: Actually, I think my worst day was dealing with my wife and the fact that the pig and the dog drowned.

Swaykos: Yeah.

Hirsch: You know, because she had had these animals for like fifteen years; they were part of the family.

Swaykos: Yeah.

Hirsch: And I know that might sound strange, but it was not hauling our photographs and hauling out our furniture and prized possessions, it was not losing two of our automobiles, it was not having five feet of water in the house; it was the drowning of her two animals and that was just like losing family members. I personally have never understood the people/pet connection as much as my wife does, you know, but I can see that that—and that was tough. She would cry and then my daughter would cry because Mom was crying, and then I would cry because the wife was crying, not because the pets were drowned. I mean that was a tough day.
Swaykos: Yeah.

Hirsch: And maybe that was just a manifestation of the fact that we lost just about everything, but she really was upset about the animals.

Swaykos: How is your house coming along?

Hirsch: I’m back 100 percent.

Swaykos: Good.

Hirsch: I have a nicer little house than I did before the storm.

Swaykos: Any new pets?

Hirsch: No.

Swaykos: OK.

Hirsch: No, she, as a result of that, has said she doesn’t want any more animals.

Swaykos: I see.

Hirsch: And I think—

Swaykos: Why?

Hirsch: Why? Because, you know, we can’t take the pig and all the other stuff with us if we evacuate, and I’m not leaving any animals at home anymore like that, and you know, so.

Swaykos: How’s your daughter doing?

Hirsch: Great.

Swaykos: Yeah.

Hirsch: Great. She—the storm, she was the most resilient I think than everybody.

Swaykos: Did any of your older kids try to convince you to leave?

Hirsch: Yeah, I had a couple of them say, you know, “You need to leave the Coast and you need to sell your house on the Bayou,” and I’m not going anywhere. If I had another storm and I got another five feet of water, I would just rebuild.
Swaykos: Really?

Hirsch: Because I love where I live.

Swaykos: Yeah.

Hirsch: Yeah. I love being out there in the woods and on the Bayou, you know.

Swaykos: Yeah. What in all this surprised you the most?

Hirsch: What surprised me the most?

Swaykos: Yeah.

Hirsch: I think the strength of our recovery.

Swaykos: OK.

Hirsch: There was a moment when I first came back from the storm and I saw my house, and I saw my neighborhood, and I saw all these people coming towards the middle school, and I thought how are we going to manage. And so I think what surprised me the most is how we did. During that next year of recovery we handled every challenge that happened, and we didn’t break down, and we didn’t boo-hoo. I mean we handled everything that came across the transom and did it together, and did it with a good strong attitude. That surprised me the most.

Swaykos: Now that y’all are almost completely 100 percent, what do you see for the future then if there’s no looking back?

Hirsch: Just the same thing I saw before the storm; good times, good things happening.

Swaykos: Good. Do you think there needs to be any new legislation, any new rulings to come down to help better to expedite this process should it happen again?

Hirsch: I think they’ve learned a lot from the storm about evacuation and about emergency management. They have changed a lot of the laws about elevation and flood planes. I think they’ve learned a lot. You just don’t live your life counting on something like Camille or Katrina. You know, it’s like the tsunami, it just was—well, it was like an act, a freak act of nature. It’s like an earthquake; what can you do, you know. You learn after every episode like that and we’ve learned a lot. They’ve learned a lot from Katrina.

Swaykos: Right.

Hirsch: Or I mean from Camille.
Swaykos: Right.

Hirsch: Forgot most of it. (laughter) You know, thirty—if we don’t have another one thirty or forty years from now, they’ll forget what we’ve learned here. It’s just human nature.

Swaykos: What have you learned about preparation and recovery, say if another superintendent dad to deal with this?

Hirsch: The biggest thing I’ve learned and the biggest thing everyone has learned is not so much about business or work, they’ve learned about their personal insurance policies. (laughs)

Swaykos: Yeah.

Hirsch: You’ve got to have flood insurance, you’ve got to have full contents, you’ve got to dot, dot, dot, you know. That’s what people have learned is take care of your insurance policy, and if that’s taken care of, that’ll take care of everything else, you know, so that would be the biggest lesson I’ve learned.

Swaykos: Well, great. Is there anything else that you think, as this is recorded and held that should be known thirty or forty years down the line that might help somebody?

Hirsch: No, not really, I think you have thoroughly covered everything that’s happened, you know.

Swaykos: Good.

Hirsch: It was a building experience, you know, everyone had to reach deep within themselves. We found things within ourselves that we didn’t know existed. We saw things in other people that we didn’t know existed; friendships, strength, camaraderie, volunteerism. So I am a much smarter individual as a result of the Katrina recovery than I ever would’ve been without it. Would never want to have to go through it again and would never want to see anyone else go through this again. OK?

Swaykos: Thank you so much.

Hirsch: Well, thank you.

(end of interview)