Mississippi Oral History Program

Hurricane Katrina Oral History Project

An Oral History

with

Sara Hamilton

Interviewer: Rachel Swaykos

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Biography

Ms. Sara Hamilton was born on March 6, 1981, in Grosse Pointe, Michigan. She attended Boston University, earning a degree in photojournalism. While attending Boston University, Hamilton spent a lot of time at the Community Service Center, working a part-time job. After college graduation, Hamilton moved to Chicago and worked for a nonprofit, Chicago Cares, a Hands-On affiliate, coordinating volunteer programs. Three weeks following Hurricane Katrina’s landfall, Chicago Cares sent Hamilton to Houston, to help Katrina evacuees there. In April of 2006, Hands-On USA sent Hamilton to Biloxi with a group of twelve volunteers. At the time of this interview, Hamilton was still living in Biloxi, serving as program manager of AmeriCorps in Biloxi.
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AN ORAL HISTORY

with

SARA HAMILTON

This is an interview for the Mississippi Oral History Program of The University of Southern Mississippi. The interview is with Sara Hamilton and is taking place on June 19, 2007. The interviewer is Rachel Swaykos.

Hamilton: My name is Sara Hamilton. It’s June 19, 2007, and I am currently the AmeriCorps program manager at Hands-On Gulf Coast.

Swaykos: OK. Great. Did you say your last name?

Hamilton: Yeah, Hamilton.

Swaykos: And when’s your date of birth?


Swaykos: And where are you from?

Hamilton: Grosse Pointe, Michigan.

Swaykos: Is that where you were born?

Hamilton: Yes.

Swaykos: Are you living down here right now?

Hamilton: Yes. I’ve lived down here for about a year now.

Swaykos: OK. And where are you living in Biloxi?

Hamilton: Yeah.

Swaykos: OK. Are you married?

Hamilton: No.

Swaykos: And can you kind of walk me through your education and your career so far?
Hamilton: I went to college at Boston University, got a degree in photojournalism there, but somewhere along the line got wrapped up in volunteering and decided to pursue nonprofits instead.

Swaykos: What year did you graduate from there?

Hamilton: [In] 2003. So after I graduated from BU, I moved to Chicago where I got a job with Chicago Cares, which is the Hands-On network affiliate, so it’s affiliated with the organization that I work with now. And what they do up there is they run volunteer programs for people who live a busy life in Chicago. So I was coordinating volunteer programs there, which is actually how I ended up down here.

Swaykos: How do you get into that kind of thing with that major?

Hamilton: I ended up kind of spending a lot of my time at the Community Service Center at Boston University. So that was my part-time job as a student. I ran volunteer programs there and ended up kind of spending more time at my job there than I did on my classes in photojournalism.

Swaykos: I see. So then you ended up here.

Hamilton: Um-hm.

Swaykos: Volunteer coordinator, is that what you call it?

Hamilton: It’s program manager, I guess.

Swaykos: OK. That’s a little bit more. And when did you come down here? Do you remember the date?

Hamilton: June 16.

Swaykos: And what do you like to do when you’re out there, and you’re not working?

Hamilton: I enjoy the beach. Biloxi beach is nice. I’ve lived in cities for a while, so to be in a place that’s not a city is kind of, it’s got its pros and its cons. So I’ve enjoyed—I got a dog down here, so it’s nice to have a yard.

Swaykos: Much better than Chicago, huh?

Hamilton: Yes, it is. (laughter)

Swaykos: OK. Sounds good. So let’s talk about how you ended up here. Where were you when the hurricane happened?
Hamilton: I was in Chicago when Katrina hit. I remember watching a lot of the news footage, and most of it was about New Orleans, but watching all of that.

Swaykos: What did you think when you saw what happened?

Hamilton: It’s pretty amazing.

Swaykos: Yeah.

Hamilton: Just, I’m kind of a news junkie, so I just sat and watched CNN [Cable News Network] and The Weather Channel for hours on end. And I actually had been involved in service in New Orleans. The college, it did an alternate spring break trip to New Orleans, so.

Swaykos: During—

Hamilton: During—

Swaykos: Not during the hurricane time.

Hamilton: No. It was in 2003, so a couple of years before. But I’d been a little bit familiar, had seen the city.

Swaykos: OK. What were you doing there?

Hamilton: We worked with Volunteers of America and just did a number of different volunteer projects for a week. So instead of going and partying on spring break, we went and worked. So it was interesting to me to see how New Orleans was affected and then to see, you know, the other side of it with Mississippi and just how different the—

Swaykos: Did you see a lot of the places on TV that you had seen while you were down in New Orleans?

Hamilton: Not really. You know, I tried to watch for the church that we stayed at or the synagogue, but it was kind of hard to pick it out, especially with the floodwaters, to try to figure out what was what.

Swaykos: Right. So what did you do for that year between the hurricane and coming down here?

Hamilton: I first came down about three weeks after Katrina hit. I came down—I went down to Houston, actually, and worked with all the people who had evacuated New Orleans to Houston.

Swaykos: OK. What’d you do down there?
Hamilton: We served meals. There were people staying in hotels that had evacuated on their own, that weren’t being provided any services, and after living in a hotel for three weeks with their family, they had run out of money. So we would cook them meals. We worked at the Astrodome a little bit with the Red Cross.

Swaykos: OK. Who’d you go—so you went down there with the Red Cross?

Hamilton: I went down with Chicago Cares, through the Hands-On Network.

Swaykos: OK. So you were still working with that.

Hamilton: Yeah. So I brought down—there was a group of seventeen of us that drove down to Houston, and we were supposed to be there for a week. But we were actually kind of run out of town by Hurricane Rita that was coming in around that time.

Swaykos: Right. So you couldn’t have even been down there for that long.

Hamilton: We did about probably three solid days of work. So there was a lot of stuff done in that time, a lot of warehouse work and meal serving, and things like that, but it wasn’t quite enough.

Swaykos: Right. When you are doing the traveling and that kind of thing, who funds all that?

Hamilton: For me, because I was a staff member, Hands-On Network did reimburse. Chicago Cares and Hands-On Network pay for me, but for our volunteers, they all paid their own way down there.

Swaykos: Wonderful.

Hamilton: And then there was a church that put us up, so all of our meals and our housing were taken care of once we got to Houston.

Swaykos: I see. How many people did you bring down there?

Hamilton: It was a group of seventeen of us.

Swaykos: OK. So that’s quite a bit. You can get a lot of work done with that many people.

Hamilton: Yeah.

Swaykos: Are they all young, that went down?
Hamilton: No. We had a pretty wide range, probably ranging from about twenty-two to maybe fifty-something.

Swaykos: OK. At that point, it wasn’t too far away from Katrina hitting. What stories were people telling you as you were feeding them, and they were all the way in Houston away from their homes?

Hamilton: We were finding a lot of people who were still trying to connect with their families. I remember one gentleman who was divorced from his wife, and his wife had his daughter, and his daughter was supposed to be coming to see him, but he hadn’t been able to get in touch with either of them. He was from New Orleans. His cell phone had fallen in the water, so he couldn’t access her phone number to get hold of her. And one of the volunteers was able to log into his account through the Web site and track down the phone number and contact her. And he found his daughter, and she came and met up with him the day after we left.

Swaykos: Well, good. Did it seem like everyone was kind of in the same place in Houston, or did they just have them scattered everywhere?

Hamilton: They were all over because it did seem like there was people who came to the Astrodome, coming from New Orleans on buses, and then people who had evacuated on their own, so they were on every edge of the city.

Swaykos: Did it seem like Houston was welcoming to them?

Hamilton: Very much. We met a couple of people who, they’d been there only a couple of weeks and said everyone loved them. You know, “Everyone’s so nice and so welcoming. We think we might just stay. There’s nothing to go back to.” So.

Swaykos: So you went back to Chicago after that.

Hamilton: Um-hm.

Swaykos: And what did you do during that time?

Hamilton: I went back to my job, which was coordinating just volunteer projects in Chicago but kind of had the hurricane relief efforts in the back of my head, especially since I just didn’t—I had planned to go for a week and only got work for three days, so I kind of felt like my job wasn’t done. And so through that time, I made some more connections with Hands-On Network, and they were working on setting up this building. So I got in touch with them and brought down another group of volunteers. There were twelve of us that time that came down in April of 2006.

Swaykos: OK. So about six months after?
**Hamilton:** Yeah. So we came down here to Biloxi and spent a week in Biloxi, and I actually did one day of service in New Orleans, as well.

**Swaykos:** OK. Was this building here then?

**Hamilton:** Um-hm.

**Swaykos:** Do you know when Hands-On was handled by America then?

**Hamilton:** It was Hands-On USA then.

**Swaykos:** Hands-On USA.

**Hamilton:** Yeah.

**Swaykos:** Do you know when they actually got here?

**Hamilton:** This building, they got here just a few days after the storm in that first week in September. I don’t know the exact date. But they were a group of volunteers that kind of came together when the tsunami hit back in December of [20]04, that one that hit around Christmas. So they formed a group called Hands-On Worldwide, I think they were called at that point. And so they went over and did relief work for the tsunami, had come back to the States, and Katrina hit. So they decided that they wanted to attend to that, as well. So they came down. Dave Campbell was the founder; he’s out of Boston. And so he came down. They met with the church. They found this building and said maybe twenty volunteers for a couple of weeks or so.

**Swaykos:** Because right now we’re located in—what’s the name of the church?

**Hamilton:** At the Beauvoir United Methodist Church.

**Swaykos:** OK, on Pass Road. And are they still using the church as a church, or have they turned the whole place over to you guys?

**Hamilton:** Yep, they still use the church. So they have services here on Sunday. I believe they still invite Beth Israel, the synagogue in the area, to come and do their services on Saturday nights. And they just brought in Seashore Mission, which was another church that had lost their building during the storm. So they’re kind of partnering together now.

**Swaykos:** OK. So they’re using this building for a lot.

**Hamilton:** They are. (laughter)

**Swaykos:** How great of them to give it to everyone.
Hamilton: Um-hm.

Swaykos: I notice the door said, “Fifth-grade classroom.”

Hamilton: Yeah.

Swaykos: So is this their like preschool, when kids are sick, kind of thing?

Hamilton: Yeah, like a Sunday school kind of program, I think, was what they had in here.

Swaykos: I see. So they didn’t have a full school before.

Hamilton: No.

Swaykos: Do you know what damage they had, if any?

Hamilton: It was very minimal. The building that we’re in was rated to withstand a hurricane Category Three or lower. So when Katrina hit it was a Three, so it did OK. There’s some minor damage. There’s a garage door in the back that has some damage, and I think there was a small tear in the roof.

Swaykos: OK. They were able to repair it pretty quickly?

Hamilton: Yeah.

Swaykos: OK, good. So when you came down the first time to down here, what kinds of things did you do?

Hamilton: We gutted houses. We removed mold, and I found out I had an allergy to mold. So I didn’t get to do a lot of that. We removed a lot of debris in a park, which was pretty amazing to see.

Swaykos: What park was it? A lot of them have been renovated now.

Hamilton: Yeah.

Swaykos: I don’t know if you remember.

Hamilton: It was in Gulfport, actually. It was just north of the train tracks, and I want to say it was near Courthouse Road. I could be wrong on that. Yeah. It was six months, more than six months, a little more than six months after the storm, and there were refrigerators and the sides of houses and things like that. It was pretty incredible to see all of that still there.

Swaykos: And you worked a day in New Orleans. What’d y’all do over there?
Hamilton: We gutted a house in the Gentilly neighborhood. We were told it was the house of one of the policemen’s mothers or something like that. So we gutted her home and actually got to meet a resident that lived across the street, which was pretty—it really made the day for us as volunteers to get to meet someone because the whole neighborhood was deserted, which is a lot different than in Mississippi. You see people in trailers next to their homes.

Swaykos: Right. And what did the person say to you?

Hamilton: She was, at the time, working for The Times-Picayune, so she was just kind of a daily reporter there. And her husband is a photographer for them, and then they have two kids that are teenagers. So the storm hit, was about to hit, and they evacuated their family, but she, her husband, and their oldest son decided to drive back in when the floodwaters were coming up to take pictures and report on the story. And the three of them eventually ended up evacuating on the newspaper delivery trucks as the water was coming up there. Her husband had some incredible photos. He came by and set up his laptop and showed us a slideshow.

Swaykos: Oh, wow. That’s nice.

Hamilton: And then we just had a lot of conversations about what they were going through, that now she was living in Alabama; her husband—

Swaykos: Oh, she just happened to be back at the house the same day.

Hamilton: Yeah.

Swaykos: I see.

Hamilton: She was looking for a job because they got in an apartment in Uptown, but they were paying rent on that and still paying the mortgage on their home. And she lost her job at the newspaper because she had gotten to Alabama to get her kids into school, and they were just kind of struggling with that and with the idea of rebuilding in their neighborhood because as they explained, financially they were in a position where they were going to be able to scrape it together and put their house back together, but that the person across the street wasn’t going to be able to and her next-door neighbor wasn’t going to be able to, so.

Swaykos: Do you rebuild when no one else is going to?

Hamilton: Yeah.

Swaykos: What’s it like to gut someone’s house and see every belonging you know must’ve meant so much to them completely destroyed?
Hamilton: That’s really hard.

Swaykos: Yeah.

Hamilton: I think to some extent you have to try to detach yourself from the sentimental side of it and just see that it’s got to be taken down to start back up again.

Swaykos: Was there anything that you took out that you just looked at it and just knew that it was probably something special, or did you just, like you said, try not to look at anything, just throw it out?

Hamilton: It was kind of a combination. And some of it had been sitting in floodwater for just about three weeks. You couldn’t even tell what it was.

Swaykos: Really?

Hamilton: In the house we did, we didn’t really come across too many photo albums and things like that, but we did clear out her attic, which had, you could tell it was like, things like old Christmas decorations and like kids’ toys that had been kind of stuffed away for later use.

Swaykos: Yeah, that’s hard.

Hamilton: Um-hm.

Swaykos: So how long did you stay that time?

Hamilton: We were down for a week at that point.

Swaykos: OK. And you went back up.

Hamilton: Um-hm.

Swaykos: And then how did you end up back down here for good?

Hamilton: I went back up, and I actually I took a road trip on my way back and visited some friends along the way and just had a lot of time to kind of think about what I’d seen and what I’d done. And it was just—it moved me a lot. And I got back to Chicago, sitting in my cubicle doing what I thought was definitely meaningful work, serving the folks in Chicago, but there was something about being down here that just kept drawing me back.

Swaykos: Right. What kind of feeling did you get from the Coast when you were down here the first time, maybe as opposed to Houston or New Orleans?

Hamilton: Hm, I never really thought about that.
Swaykos: I feel like the people here are kind of, it’s what drew me here. They’re different. I feel like they’re so much more resilient and—

Hamilton: Yeah.

Swaykos: —just somehow have this more uppity way about them. You know what I mean?

Hamilton: Yeah.

Swaykos: I didn’t know if you saw any difference between the people here than anywhere else.

Hamilton: I think looking back on it, I did. I think the overwhelming emotion though was just looking at everything. I think that was what really was burned in my memory the most.

Swaykos: I see.

Hamilton: But, yeah, we met some amazing people when we were down here. And knowing how much work there was and how determined people were to make it back was definitely a drawing factor for me.

Swaykos: Good. So you were thinking it over on your drive back, and you were looking around your cubicle. (laughter) How’d you end up back?

Hamilton: Well, I got back in touch with the folks who were running things down here with Hands-On Gulf Coast and told them that I was interested in coming back. And it turned out that they were looking for someone to help manage some of their volunteer programs. So it was tough. They were in the process of figuring out if they were able to hire folks on or not, and I was very gung-ho and ready to come on down. So I kind of made the decision to leave before I knew that I had an actual job. I was going to come down, and if I needed to, just do the volunteer thing for a while.

Swaykos: Really? You were really that drawn to it. That’s—

Hamilton: Yeah.

Swaykos: —amazing.

Hamilton: Yeah. It was something that I was at a point in my life where I felt like it was an opportunity, that I had to do something, that I wouldn’t have an opportunity to do later. I was old enough to make a decision to do that, but young enough to not be tied down to anything.
Swaykos: Yeah, definitely. So you came down. You didn’t even know if you had a job?

Hamilton: I found out about a week before I was coming down that I did have a job. So that was (laughter) good. And yeah, I sublet my apartment, stored all my stuff in my parents’ basement, and I drove myself down.

Swaykos: And your parents are in Chicago?

Hamilton: They’re in Michigan, so. So all of my stuff is sitting in their basement right now. (laughter)

Swaykos: And you moved down.

Hamilton: Um-hm.

Swaykos: And if you could, kind of describe this whole thing for us.

Hamilton: OK. So we have essentially a church auxiliary building that had been, it’s kind of an old warehouse-looking sort of thing. Inside, it’s got a loft on the inside, which is where we sleep everybody. So at the time that I came, it was just a wide-open space at the loft. We now have bunk beds up there. But you can set up a tent inside or just lay down your air mattress and your sleeping bag, and that overlooks a main room that can comfortably feed probably 150 people seated.

Swaykos: Wow. OK.

Hamilton: It’s got a kitchen and indoor bathrooms. We’ve got some rough-looking, donated couches and chairs that (laughter) volunteers'll hang out on. And it’s a good open space for everyone to come in and congregate together. And then behind the—it’s situated right behind the church. And then behind the building itself, we’ve got a large back yard that has, right now a big, old mud puddle in the backyard because it’s all dirt, and every time it rains, it floods. But we’ve got tents back there that our volunteers stay in, a combination of an old Army tent that we put tents underneath to keep them a little bit drier. And then the other tents are just kind of set up, and people live in those months and months on end. We’ve run electricity out to them. People have couches and such in there. (brief interruption) The volunteers have run electrical lines out there, so they’ve got fans. I think we had a volunteer that had an air conditioner in her tent at one point. (laughter) I think we’ve had a TV or two back there. So they make it pretty comfortable for themselves.

Swaykos: What are these buildings right behind you?

Hamilton: Yeah. We’ve also got what we call the Spin Cycle, which is where we have a couple of washers and dryers for folks, and there’s also a couple of couches and a TV in there that people can watch videos on, as well as our tool shed. That keeps all
of our tools for building, as well as things like shovels and rakes, and things like that when we’re working in gardens. We’ve also got our outdoor showers back there. So we’ve got four showers that volunteers built for us.

Swaykos: Oh, good.

Hamilton: We’ve got hot water, kind of nice.

Swaykos: So you’re all set up.

Hamilton: Yep.

Swaykos: Well, good. OK. So what did you do when you first got down here?

Hamilton: As soon as I got down here, I kind of jumped right into an office, volunteer management sort of work. So got in, set up my tent upstairs inside, and I got to work, sitting in the front office, taking volunteer calls and welcoming residents who came in looking for help, and things like that.

Swaykos: OK. So there were still people coming in at that point?

Hamilton: Yeah, we’ve still got people today, even, will stop by and say, “I need help. Can you fix my roof? I’ve got a tree that needs to be removed. I’ve got mold in my house.”

Swaykos: OK. I got you. So can you tell me a little bit about volunteers? Who do you have coming in? How long do they stay? What do they do?

Hamilton: They’re really a diverse group of volunteers. We, right now only take eighteen and up, but we have taken them a little younger before, so pretty much high-school-age through—I think our oldest volunteer was actually ninety-two at one point.

Swaykos: Oh, my gosh. What did you do with a ninety-two year old person? (laughter)

Hamilton: She spent a lot of time—we work over at Pass Road Elementary School in Gulfport, so she volunteered over there and tutored the kids.

Swaykos: OK. (laughter) Oh, my gosh.

Hamilton: They come from all ends of the country, and we’ve had a handful of international folks. We had one volunteer from Scotland who hung out for a few months, and he had some architectural background and was helping with the building.

Swaykos: Oh, wonderful.
Hamilton: And folks will stay anywhere from—they’ll come down and work for just a day to a year.

Swaykos: Really?

Hamilton: And especially the folks who came down early on, we welcomed them to stay, and they would stay and volunteer for, “I’ll do another week. I’ll do another month. I’ll do a few more months.” It was kind of hard to pull themselves away, I think.

Swaykos: Yeah. Do you have a lot of people coming and going? They go, and they come back?

Hamilton: Yeah. We had a lot of return volunteers. I don’t have a stat on it, but you do see a lot of familiar faces.

Swaykos: Oh, good. How many people have you had come through here total?

Hamilton: Over four thousand.

Swaykos: Have you guys totaled up your manhours?

Hamilton: We have, and I know that since February of [20]06, and from February of [20]06 to February of [20]07, we did over a half a million.

Swaykos: Manhours?

Hamilton: Yeah.

Swaykos: Oh, my gosh. That has to make such a huge difference down here. Can you tell me about all the services you guys provide?

Hamilton: Sure. We started out, like most groups, removing debris and building houses, and then we got into mold removal, which is something that’s still going on today. So the mold removal is something we’re pretty proud of. We actually did a study on it last spring to test our method against more professional methods and other volunteer methods, and ours came out to be the most efficient and effective volunteer method out there.

Swaykos: What do you guys do?

Hamilton: We go in, and we scrub the mold off the studs, and then we vacuum all the mold spores that have fallen down; we vacuum those up. And then we wipe it with a disinfectant chemical. And then we go through and we paint a sealing—it’s a latex paint that we paint over it that kind of seals the wood to prevent the mold from growing back again.
Swaykos: OK. I see. And who came up with all the ideas of how to do stuff? (Inaudible)

Hamilton: Right. On the mold, we actually consulted with some other groups and professional mold experts in the area and some methods to do that with. The things like gutting houses and—well, debris removal is simple enough. You can figure that one out. (laughter) And the gutting houses, I think most people had a good idea of how to do it, and then we had a few people who knew some structural things about houses on what to take out and what not to take out.

Swaykos: I see.

Hamilton: And then that’s been knowledge that we just kind of pass down from one volunteer to the next.

Swaykos: Good. Do you have special training times or anything like that, or as each person comes in, they just go out with the group and learn as they go?

Hamilton: Yeah. Everyone kind of comes in and goes out and then learns. You pick it up as you go, especially for the folks who came down thinking they’d be here for a week or two, and then end up here for a few months. They kind of find their little niche of what they like to do and learn from those folks so they can carry it on.

Swaykos: I see. That’s good. How do you guys get your volunteers?

Hamilton: Right now, pretty much all through word-of-mouth, and we’ve done very little actual recruitment. Hands-On USA did do some recruitment in the early days just to let folks know they were down here, but since then, it’s been very, “A friend-of-a-friend or my cousin or whoever told me that they were down here, so I want to come, too.”

Swaykos: Do you have full groups come down, or is it usually just a couple of people in a carload kind of thing?

Hamilton: It’s a mix. And so we get the couple from Minnesota or the three friends from Indiana, or wherever it is, and then we’ll get a lot of college groups, especially around spring break time. We’ve gotten some church groups. We get corporate groups, people who want to—their companies want to bring down their employees.

Swaykos: Really? Wow.

Hamilton: Um-hm.

Swaykos: OK. What’s the biggest group you’ve worked with?
Hamilton: Ooh. For Hands-On, it probably would’ve been the spring break of 2006, we had a group from MTV come down.

Swaykos: Oh, OK.

Hamilton: They had a storm, it was called Storm Corps. They brought in a whole bunch of college-age kids, and I don’t know exactly how big that group was.

Swaykos: Right, right.

Hamilton: We try to cap our average group at about maybe thirty at the most, just to share the wealth so that we can have more than one group.

Swaykos: They can have someplace to stay.

Hamilton: Yeah.

Swaykos: I see.

Hamilton: We also have a really large group this past January from the Guiding Light soap opera.

Swaykos: Oh, yeah.

Hamilton: So we pretty much shut down. (laughter) We shut down the other volunteers, and they had, between their cast, and crew close to a hundred people.

Swaykos: And they were living in the tents?

Hamilton: A few of them did. (laughter) They also had some space set up at the Holiday Inn.

Swaykos: OK. What’s that like, working with—did they bring their cameras and everything?

Hamilton: Yep.

Swaykos: Do you feel like when you have people like that coming down, that it’s more for the camera than it is for the people?

Hamilton: I think it’s a combination, especially with this group it was. Watching the actors, they put on their smiles and turned around and did the things that the camera wanted them to do. But they turned right back around and worked really hard even when the camera wasn’t there. And I think for us, as long as they’re there for the right reason, which all of these folks were, we don’t mind having the cameras there and having to put on a little bit of a show from time to time because we know that that—I
mean, that aired on CBS, and we got a lot of phone calls. We had people who were calling and saying that they wanted to do the same thing Guiding Light did, and it’s helping us out, but it’s also keeping Katrina in the minds of everyone else in the country because it’s not out there on a daily basis.

Swaykos: Right. So that was just in January.

Hamilton: Um-hm.

Swaykos: Is it nice to have them come down and give you that oomph so long after, a year and a half after the storm when maybe people are forgetting, for them to come down that much later and do it?

Hamilton: Yeah, it is. Like I said, I think especially because it puts it back in the minds of everyone who’s not in the region.

Swaykos: And you got a lot from it?

Hamilton: We did, and they’re still finishing up a couple of their houses.

Swaykos: Are they?

Hamilton: And going to talk about coming back down, maybe.

Swaykos: Oh, good. When they’re finishing up right now, is it mostly just the crew, or do you get a mix of everybody that the actors brought down and everything?

Hamilton: Right now we have, most of our volunteers working on the houses to finish it up, and then we have a few days that they’ll bring down a couple of their actors and the crew to film a little bit more.

Swaykos: I see.

Hamilton: And some of the actors have come back down on their own without cameras. They just really enjoyed their time with us.

Swaykos: Good, good. What do you see in the college kids? It felt like, down here college kids haven’t gotten their credit in the rest of America to be helpers instead of spring breakers. You know what I mean?

Hamilton: Um-hm.

Swaykos: What have you seen fostered in these kids, who are just growing up, in what they’re seeing?
Hamilton: I think it’s a really great kind of growth experience for them to come down here. Most of them leave—I think everyone who comes through here leaves a little bit of changed. You’re seeing stuff you haven’t seen other places, and you hear stories that you hear firsthand instead of on the news, and I think that affects everybody. We’ve had a lot of kids come down that were—particularly I’m thinking of one volunteer who was eighteen. She came down two days after she graduated high school.

Swaykos: Oh, my gosh.

Hamilton: And she’s been here now for just a little over a year, and the growth that we’ve seen in her to go from this eighteen-year-old that didn’t know what she was doing with herself, and she’s developed and is running her own program now.

Swaykos: Is she really?

Hamilton: Um-hm.

Swaykos: Oh, my gosh.

Hamilton: Yeah.

Swaykos: So it’s really fostering people. It’s helping the volunteers as much as it’s helping everyone they’re building for. What program is she running?

Hamilton: She does animal disaster response and rescue.

Swaykos: Oh.

Hamilton: So she takes care of feral cats in the neighborhood and does the trap/neuter/release program with them and is getting some local folks involved with that through the Humane Society, and then also is doing disaster prep animals. And she’ll run an animal shelter in the event of a hurricane, is doing a lot, is sharing a lot of information with folks to let them know where those resources are for their pets in a hurricane.

Swaykos: OK. And after people stay that long, they’re creating programs for you, and all that. Do you have a place as a staff member for them, or does it just mean they need to understand their continuing as a volunteer?

Hamilton: What we have now, starting in this January, we received a large grant fund from the Mississippi Commission for Volunteer Service. And it’s a AmeriCorps grant, which gives us space to hire. Now the total is eighty-three positions through the course of the year, and they range from six weeks to nine months. So there’s a couple of different, we’re staffing for a couple of different time lengths in there, and they all come with a small stipend, as well as an educational worth, so once they finish—they
all have a number of service hours that they have to complete with us. So, so far what we call full-time members, they come down for nine months, and they have to serve seventeen hundred hours with us. And at the end of that nine months, from those seventeen hundred hours, they’ll get $4,725 that they can use towards school. So it’ll either go towards loans or future schooling, and then through that process, they also get, like, a weekly stipend that they can go out to a restaurant. We ask a lot of them to get houses in the community, so they are able to pay rent on that.

Swaykos: And what kind of positions are those?

Hamilton: A little bit of everything. We’ve got people who go out and build our houses during the day. We have caseworkers. Kristin who works the Animal Rescue Program is an AmeriCorps member. We’ve got people who are removing mold. We’re doing Latino outreach.

Swaykos: Really?

Hamilton: Um-hm. Tutoring programs, we’ve got a public art program. We partner with a few other community organizations as well and put some of those positions into them. So there’s an organization called Coastal Women for Change, and we have a couple of women who are going out, just on a daily basis, going door-to-door, trying to find the elderly folks and single parents in the neighborhood and making sure that they have the resources they need. I think that covers a lot of it. We’ve got some folks working with our volunteers directly, too, to develop projects or coordinate volunteers, and things like that.

Swaykos: OK, good. Tell me a little bit about each of those programs, about your tutoring program and go on through.

Hamilton: So in the kind of youth wing stuff, we have a couple of different programs that we do. We started out helping out at Pass Road Elementary in Gulfport. So we’ve been doing that for, I think, about a year and a half now. And they already have a tutoring program in place, so we just support it by sending volunteers there. And we’ve also helped out in their library. And then we also have the Nichols Elementary School tutoring program. We have an AmeriCorps member, who had a teaching degree, and so she went in and set up a really intense, one-on-one tutoring program during the school day and then also helped them get their after-school program off the ground. So we’re still providing volunteers to that after-school program as well as the Boys and Girls Club. So during the school year when they have their after-school program going, we send folks on a regular basis. And then we also, right now, are in the Summer Camp Program. We’re sending folks over there to help develop programs, so coming up with those special arts and crafts projects, and also just providing additional support for the staff because they have more kids than they have enough staff to manage. So we’re able to provide a little bit of extra support that way.
Swaykos: OK. So how many volunteers do you think you have working in the youth arena?

Hamilton: We probably have about, right now, four of our AmeriCorps members; so they’re there all the time. And then on special days, we’ll bring in some of what we call short-term volunteers, the folks who are here for just a few days. We’ve really started to kind of shift that. We used to take short-term volunteers there all the time, but it’s hard on the kids to meet one for a day and never see them again. So we try to keep it a little bit more consistent with people who we know are committed to be here for a while. And then we’ll run a special kids’ day in the park or something like that to get everyone involved. (Side 2)

Swaykos: So that’s your kid’s arena. What other services do you have?

Hamilton: We have a kind of parks and gardening, sort of, program. So our biggest project in that was John Henry Beck Park in East Biloxi. It was a kind of unfavorable area before the storm. People didn’t really want their kids to go there and things like that, and the storm came through and uprooted the trees and dropped a bunch of debris in it. So starting in about May of [20]06 we went in, cleared out the debris, including, like, huge slabs of concrete and started over. So we built a playground there with an organization called KaBOOM!. We laid fresh sod; we laid an irrigation system, planted trees, put in new plants, made a community garden where people could come in, and they rent out, or they’re just given, assigned a plot that they can plant whatever they want in there. And then we are also just about to complete the, what we proudly call the Red Barn. It’s a big, red building in the middle of the park. So we have some architecture students who’ve redesigned it, and we’re reconstructing that right now. So it’s supposed to become a combination community center and satellite police station. So we’re hoping, and we’re seeing it a little bit right now already, it becoming a place that the community uses again.

Swaykos: Yeah, I’ve seen it out there. It looks great.

Hamilton: Yeah. We’re pretty proud of that.

Swaykos: Good.

Hamilton: And then we do some smaller park cleanup things, planting a few trees here and there. We’ve done some trail cleanups. We’re working with the Gulf Islands National Seashore to do trail clearing there and starting to landscape some of the residential homes, too, once they’ve been rebuilt. So the homeowners have a beautiful home on the inside, and then there’s still nothing on the outside, so planting some flowers and things there.

Swaykos: OK. And then the homebuilding, that’s the biggest one, right?

Hamilton: Yeah.
Swaykos: OK. How many volunteers go out a day to build?

Hamilton: Anywhere from maybe fifteen to fifty, depending on what’s going on, and how many people we have in town. We actually started out our homebuilding program with very little skill. We did not have a construction manager. We just had a couple of people who knew a couple of things, and a few people who were willing to come in and support us on it. So we actually started our first home, which belonged to the Bartons in East Biloxi. We started that in August of [20]06 and completed it in October of [20]06.

Swaykos: Are these full rebuilds, take down and rebuild, or are they fixing—

Hamilton: It is taking it from the studs up to the point where the family can move in, so it’s not taking it all the way down, but taking out the entire insides, basically. And there’s usually some reframing that has to go on, on the inside, especially because some of the homes are so old that they weren’t probably well constructed to begin with. So to make sure that they’re a little more stable, and we do a little bit of mitigation, as well, to make the homes stronger, in case of another storm, that they’ll hold up a little bit better.

Swaykos: OK. How many houses have y’all done?

Hamilton: We have completed six, and that’s start to finish. We’ve also done a few houses that are just the drywall here or just the flooring there. There’s a lot in that category. But we’ve done, worked very closely with six families from start to finish.

Swaykos: Can you tell me any of their stories?

Hamilton: Sure. There’s a lot of good ones. The Thorntons, Pat and Sandy, they are in about their sixties, I think. They purchased their home in 1969, about three months before Camille.

Swaykos: Oh, my gosh.

Hamilton: So they got three feet of water, three or four feet of water at that point, and had to fix that up, and raised—I think they have three kids. So they raised their family in that house. And then Katrina hit, and they got eight feet of water.

Swaykos: Oh, my gosh.

Hamilton: So they started over again. They actually had made a line on the stud where the Camille waterline was. They made another one for Katrina. So they’re a wonderful family, and we rebuilt for them. That was the first one that we did. And unfortunately, Mrs. Thornton just passed away about a month or so ago.
Swaykos: Oh, my gosh.

Hamilton: She was diagnosed with cancer. So we’re still close to Pat, and he comes by from time to time. So we’ve also worked with the Mannings, and they, it’s a mother, her mother, and her daughter. So it’s three generations in there. And they have a—the problem they ran into is that they have a rather large home that had been passed on through generations. So it was a lot for any one volunteer group to take on, but the mother had had surgery right before the storm and elected not to evacuate because she wasn’t healthy enough and in a condition to evacuate herself. So she kept the three of them in that house. Fortunately it’s a two-story house. They were able to go upstairs, and they made it through OK.

Swaykos: Where was their house?

Hamilton: It’s in East Biloxi, as well. And so after the storm, they had their trailer, but her mother was in need of surgery, and they couldn’t do the surgery until they got her out of the trailer because there wasn’t enough space for her to properly recover in there. So they actually moved her to a nursing home in Alabama, so it’s the mother and her daughter (inaudible) and trying to get things done. And the Guiding Light came in, and through their funding was how we were able to take on the whole house. And so they’re just about to move in. They’re going to get their certificate of occupancy just in the next couple of days here.

Swaykos: Good.

Hamilton: So there’s also Miss Gerda(?); she’s also in East Biloxi. And she is about, she’s in her eighties, and she’s originally from Germany but has lived in Biloxi for most of her life. And she actually did not even get a FEMA trailer until, I believe it was in September of [200]6.

Swaykos: Oh, my gosh.

Hamilton: Almost over a year later.

Swaykos: Where was she?

Hamilton: She’d been staying with her son in Gulfport and just had kind of slipped through the cracks. And at that point we were kind of getting to a point where we weren’t seeing a lot of house gutting going on anymore, and then we found her house, and it haven’t even been touched since the storm.

Swaykos: Oh, my gosh.

Hamilton: So we gutted that in October of [200]6 and also through Guiding Light had the funding to rebuild her home; so she’s getting her certificate of occupancy today.
Swaykos: Oh, my gosh, how wonderful.

Hamilton: So she’s very excited.

Swaykos: Good.

Hamilton: And Miss Ethel was another one. She’s raising—I think she’s got three or four boys that live with her that are a combination of her sons and nephews, and (inaudible) one of them. I think, two of the boys, their father’s in Iraq right now, so she’s taking care of the kids. Also another home that was passed down family member to family member and is now owned by her and all of her siblings. So she had a lot of trouble trying to get rebuilt, too. A lot of groups have a hard time building if you’re not the sole owner of the home for fear that someone else might come in and then try to whatever. But we knew the family pretty well, and I talked to her. No one’s taking her house away from her. She’s never going to sell this house. So we’re rebuilding for her, as well.

Swaykos: Are you guys doing that a lot, trying to make sure that they’re not going to sell, that you’re renovating this beautiful home, and then they’re going to profit off it?

Hamilton: Yeah. We do make sure of that, that we’re working in, putting in kind of a formal agreement. And at this point, everyone that we’ve worked with has been—Miss Cynthia’s in an area that might be taking—some people are trying to get her to sell land to the casinos, and she is putting up a huge fight.

Swaykos: Good.

Hamilton: Her grandfather built the house, and she’ll go kicking and screaming before she sells it. So we feel really confident on that and all the folks that we’ve rebuilt for so far.

Swaykos: So most of the people are really rooted here.

Hamilton: Very much.

Swaykos: And the woman from Germany, but she’s been here forever, 1969 with Camille and everything. How are you picking who to work with and who to do this miracle for?

Hamilton: Um-hm. We have a case management system. Our goal is to pick up people who are slipping through the cracks. So like I mentioned with the home that was too big for one group to take on, or that wasn’t owned by a single person, or whatever it is, different people are falling through the cracks for different reasons. So we’re making sure we pick up on a lot of those folks. And we target people who are in the most need, as well. So if you come to us and you say that you have a significant
amount of insurance money already, you’re probably not going to be at the top of our list because there’s people who have absolutely nothing to start with. And we actually have a point system that if you have this much money and you have this many kids and this much to do with your house, our case managers kind of work with all of that to figure out who’s in the highest need. And then we’ll only take on homes that we know that we can take through to the finishing point. We’ll pick up a job from another volunteer group that isn’t able to do the drywall in the house or something, but if we make a commitment to a family, we make a commitment, and say, “We’re there all the way through.” (brief interruption)

**Swaykos:** OK. When you’re rebuilding, how do you have to deal with FEMA? I saw your *Building with FEMA* book out there. (laughter) What’s that like, how to figure out how to make sure you’ve trained your volunteers to build on there with their scope of work or whatever?

**Hamilton:** Yeah. The number one thing or one of the big things is that FEMA’s got this rule that if your house was more than 51 percent damaged by the storm, then you have to kind of start from scratch, which means you have to raise your home to the new FEMA elevation points. If your home was less than the 51 percent damage, you can go ahead and rebuild as is. So everything that we’ve built so far has still been at its previous elevation level because it’s been within that.

**Swaykos:** They don’t consider full gutting, taking down everything, 51 percent?

**Hamilton:** Because the outside structure of it is still standing; so if you don’t have to take down that whole structure—

**Swaykos:** So pretty much if it’s not demolished.

**Hamilton:** Yep. So that’s made it easier on us because it’s expensive and difficult to raise a house up that high, especially with a lot of the folks that we’re working with are elderly. By the time you raise some of these houses to the recommended levels—

**Swaykos:** They’re not going to be able to get in it.

**Hamilton:** Right. And then if you put a handicap ramp, a proper ramp has to raise one inch for every foot. So figure if you raise a house twenty-five feet—

**Swaykos:** You’ll have one steep ramp.

**Hamilton:** Right. (laughter) Yeah. You’re going to have a circle of the ramp that goes around your house. So everyone that we’ve built for at this point has been at their previous elevation level.

**Swaykos:** Have you had anyone come in who has just a slab and asks for your help?
Hamilton: Um-hm. We have. We get a lot of our houses through the East Biloxi Coordination Center. So they take in all the work in East Biloxi and give it back out to the different volunteer groups. So we have considered doing complete rebuilds that have nothing left. At the same time with the resources that we have and stuff, it has been just kind of easier for us to do the rebuilds at this point versus the complete reconstruction. There is a group that we work closely with called Architecture for Humanity, and they received a grant with the East Biloxi Coordination Center. It’s called the Model Home Program. So they’re taking, I believe it was five or seven families that had just a slab, and they had architects from across the country come in and design these dream homes, meaning that they’re economically efficient but meet all the FEMA standards, as well. And so they got to choose one of those houses, and they’re being rebuilt for them. So actually one of them is having its opening tomorrow.

Swaykos: Oh, good, good. How many do you have in progress? You said that you’ve completed six. How many?

Hamilton: We are just, we’re kind of at a weird point right now where we’re just about to get certificates of occupancy for the last three there and then about to start probably two more. So we’re kind of in between.

Swaykos: How long does it take to build a whole house, and how many people?

Hamilton: Let’s see, anywhere, I’d say about five months or so from the point that we start to the point where they actually are able to move in, for the average house. We have one house that’s an exception because what we try to do now is get all the funding for a house upfront. So like I said, we know that we can promise that homeowner that we’re not going to leave them hanging. We’ve got the money to do it. We did have one house, which was the first one that we started, Mr. George’s house, and we kind of pulled a little bit of money for his floors here, and someone else gave a little bit of money for his drywalls; someone else gave the paint. So it was a little piecemeal kind of thing, so he took longer to get into his house.

Swaykos: OK. Are your students and the younger people coming in, are they understanding the severity of FEMA, how it has to be FEMA’s way or no way, otherwise there’s no funding and no insurance and everything like that for the occupant?

Hamilton: I think so. We try to make sure that our volunteers get the full education on things, and I think at the same time, we know a lot about FEMA and all the regulations, but I don’t think anyone out there has the full story because there’s just always that extra little line of information here or there. So we try to let them understand what the residents here are facing, between FEMA and everything else that’s going on.
Swaykos: Have you gotten the feeling that the people you’re helping are very grateful? There’s been some stories about volunteers rebuilding houses, and the people showing their distaste for what the volunteers have done.

Hamilton: We find that our clients are very happy with their work. We’re pretty proud of our work coming in, especially that we now have a construction manager, and he’s a—we’ve got two people on our team who had some construction skills. Everyone else has learned as they’ve gone. But we take pride in almost to perfection that we’ve gone in and made sure that everything looks good before we leave the house. Most of the homeowners that we’ve worked with have come out, and spend their days with us, especially the elderly folks that might not have a job during the day or something, and they’ll cook lunch for the volunteers.

Swaykos: Well, good.

Hamilton: We occasionally have a dinner. We serve all our volunteers dinner here every night anyways, but every so often, we invite community members to come in, and most of those are the homeowners we’ve built for. So they come in and thank us.

Swaykos: Oh, good.

Hamilton: Yeah, they’re very appreciative.

Swaykos: Are any of them with you when you’re gutting their houses?

Hamilton: Some are. Miss Gerda, in particular, was. We actually had that set up because she is in her eighties and kind of getting to that kind of dementia point a little bit, that it’s very hard for her. It’s hard for anyone to see that happen to their house, but she was having difficulty with it more so than others that we’d seen. So we actually set it up where we brought in extra volunteers so we had one group who was in there gutting her house, and then they would kind of rotate out and kind of sit with her and talk to her about things and distract her basically and still talk to her about what was going on with her house and some of the things that were coming out of it, and making sure that she wasn’t just sitting there alone at that time.

Swaykos: What percentage do you think y’all were able to salvage, if any?

Hamilton: Very, very little. Especially around here in East Biloxi, most people had eight feet of water, and if you have a single-story house, that’s most of your house.

Swaykos: That’s the whole house, yeah.

Hamilton: Yeah.

Swaykos: That’s really hard on people, I’m sure.
Hamilton: Um-hm.

Swaykos: Especially elderly people who have spent a life in that house.

Hamilton: Um-hm.

Swaykos: I can’t imagine what it’s like. So what is your job in this whole thing? What do you do?

Hamilton: I am managing our AmeriCorps Program, so I have two people who work with me to kind of coordinate the ins and outs of our—right now, we’ve got forty people who are currently working with us in the AmeriCorps Program, and making sure all of us kind of—it’s a federal grant, so there’s a lot of details that come with that, so reporting on that and making sure that their hours are logged correctly, as well as creating the projects and making sure they’re well supported. And then with that, there comes just kind of managing the overall organization in this building. We constantly have volunteers coming in and out, so sometimes it’s simple stuff like helping a volunteer find the crew that they’re supposed to be going out on that day, or working with some of the other organizations in the area to support them and create partnerships. We are, currently we are a project of the Hands-On Network, which is actually a national organization based out of Atlanta. They have, I believe it’s sixty-nine affiliates, so those are all independent organizations across the country with a few internationally, as well. But we are still housed under their nonprofit status, so what we’d like to do is become our own independent affiliate, as well. So we’re looking at trying to develop our own board of the directors, get our own 501C3 status and root ourselves here as a local organization. So our goal is that within a couple of years we’ll have a local staff—

Swaykos: I see.

Hamilton: —and all local volunteers. Our projects will be kind of called locally friendly because right now our projects are from eight to five, Monday through Saturday. So if you live here, you probably have a job or a family or something that prevents you from doing eight to five, Monday through Saturday.

Swaykos: Right.

Hamilton: So we’re looking at creating, maybe it’s just five to seven on Wednesday nights, or nine to twelve on Saturday mornings that fits those schedules a little bit better, and we’d like to be able to engage a lot more of the local residents in their own recovery, but also to see other ongoing needs here, whether it’s education or community green spaces, things like that.

Swaykos: OK. So you have a lot to do during the day, (laughter) a lot of program management. Have you found yourself, to the young kids, the eighteen-year-olds
coming in, having to be kind of house mom? Are they overwhelmed by what they see, and they just need to talk to somebody, that kind of thing?

Hamilton: Yeah. I think we joke sometimes, have people joke with us that we’re mom and dad and director, kind of running this place, and whether that’s the simple stuff like yelling at folks to keep it down because it’s quiet hours, and lights are out, and it’s time to go to bed, or having those conversations with folks.

Swaykos: OK. Have you had anybody who just couldn’t handle what they were seeing, and what they were doing?

Hamilton: I can’t think of anyone who’d been here for just a couple days. I think a lot of times the people who come in for a couple of days, think about it when they leave. I know personally, when I left—you’re so busy when you’re here. You’re working these long days, and you’re around all your friends, and there’s always people around you all the time, that you don’t really process it until after you leave the area, and then you think about it. I think we’ve definitely seen it in some of our more long-term folks. People who usually, sometimes, like three or four months after you’re here, people get real burnt out from between what they’re seeing, living in a communal living situation, and just working the long hours that they do, there gets to a point, especially with some of those folks seeing the struggles that the residents go through, it sometimes seems like there’s just no way out. And I think that gets to people from time to time.

Swaykos: Yeah, I see. Where do you guys—can you talk a little bit about your funding? Where you get it all, and just how you even keep this place going, not just to rebuild and do your resources, but how do you feed everybody and all that kind of stuff, pay the bills?

Hamilton: Uh-huh. We have a large development fundraising team up in our Atlanta office, and through that organization, we have some strong corporate partnerships. So we got a large grant from the Home Depot when we first started. We got a grant, a federal grant that helped us out a lot for the first year. Our AmeriCorps programs give us a lot of funding that way. We get some smaller pieces of grants here and there, like foundations. The Bush/Clinton Katrina Fund just gave us some money. The Beau Rivage just gave us some money, and individual donations, as well, from our volunteers who’ve been down.

Swaykos: OK. Do you have one person who just coordinates funds?

Hamilton: Not on our ground here. We do a lot from our Atlanta office (inaudible).

Swaykos: OK, I see. Have you seen any effect, maybe not here because of the Atlanta thing, but a lot of people are starting to pull away Katrina grants? Because, “It’s two years. You’re fixed. You’re wonderful now.”
Hamilton: Yeah.

Swaykos: Have you seen that pull on money?

Hamilton: Absolutely. I mean, I think when things first got started it was people throwing money at us. This Challenge grant that we had from the government throwing money at us, and everybody was just, like, “How can I help? Here’s money! Here’s money!” And now we’ve got to ask for it a little bit more. We’ve got to try a little harder. It’s still there, and it’s still possible to get it, but it is a little more challenging.

Swaykos: How do you see the funding impacting where you guys are trying to go?

Hamilton: I think it’s kind of—it goes both ways, I think. The funding impacts where we’re going, and I think where we’re going impacts where we get the funding because as we do look to become a more locally rooted organization, we are going to be looking for more money from the Beau Rivage or Mississippi Power versus the national chain of Home Depot. And we’ll look more to those local organizations than the national ones.

Swaykos: How long are y’all planning on staying? They’re talking about a ten-year recovery period.

Hamilton: In the kind of current incarnation of what we’re doing, we’d like to be here through at least the end of 2008. And then we’d like to be here permanently after that, maybe doing a little less of the day-to-day building and a little bit more of those kind of local volunteer engagement projects. We don’t ever want to leave the area as (inaudible) the Gulf Coast, but as far as it being able to house volunteers the way that we are and be able to do that, we’re looking at hopefully at least through 2008.

Swaykos: OK. And at that point, do you guys kind of want to move into your own place and create a more office, volunteering-type thing?

Hamilton: Yeah. That’s kind of the thought right now, but at the same time, when we initially signed the lease for this program, we signed up for two years.

Swaykos: Oh, I didn’t realize you had a lease.

Hamilton: Yeah. We do lease it from the church. We signed a two-year lease that started, and it was for [20]06 and [20]07. So initially we thought we’d be out at the end of [20]07, and now we’re looking to extend that through next year. So something could always happen that extends that time again.

Swaykos: I had a couple of people tell me that they’re really surprised that they’re getting no Mississippi volunteers, no one from Northern Mississippi, Hattiesburg, any of that. Have you noticed any Mississippi people coming through?
**Hamilton:** We have had a handful, definitely less than other areas. (doorbell rings; brief interruption) Yeah. We have had less from Mississippi than other areas, I think. I’m not sure why, but I can definitely name—but I guess the folks that are from Mississippi kind of stand out to us.

**Swaykos:** OK. How are you insuring safety for all your volunteers as well as the housing site you’re in?

**Hamilton:** Um-hm. Safety like on a job site?

**Swaykos:** Everything, being here in a communal living, where you have people coming in and out that you don’t know who they are, and you can’t possibly screen everybody, and also on job sites, as well as for other people who are going to move into this house.

**Hamilton:** As far as within kind of this building goes, it’s been a lot of, I don’t want to say honor system, but there’s a lot of people around, and we’re pretty good at being able to figure out who doesn’t belong, somebody who’s just wandered in off the street, and kind of there’s—I don’t know—some sort of different vibe we’re feeling. And most of our volunteers are pretty good about if they notice someone they haven’t seen before, kind of going up and saying, “Hey, what’d you do today?” And if they don’t answer, “I was out at Mr. George’s house, building,” you know that they might not belong, and we’ll kind of address that right away. We’ve really had very few incidents here. We’ve had a couple of minor thefts, and that’s about it as far as safety within our volunteer community goes. We feel pretty lucky about it. And on the job sites we have our trained construction manager that goes through and says, “This is what you’re allowed to do, and this is what you don’t do.” We make sure that we train people on power tools thoroughly before we allow them to use them. (laughter) We don’t just hand a power saw to someone when they step onsite. We provide all the safety gear that they need, as well, whether it’s safety goggles or work gloves and things like that.

**Swaykos:** OK. Have you had anyone—you’ve talked about people who come who maybe don’t belong. Have you had anybody in the community kind of try to take advantage of the help that y’all are trying to give? Take more than they need?

**Hamilton:** I don’t think so. I mean, I think that sometimes—I know we had one guy that wanted us to do a new construction home for him on, like, what was left. It was a slab, basically, and it was this beautiful five-bedroom home when he had a little two-bedroom, and he wanted the brand new dream house rebuilt.

**Swaykos:** Oh, I see.

**Hamilton:** So, I think—I don’t think we’ve ever gotten ourselves into a situation where that has happened, but we have seen stuff like someone asking for more than
what they had before, and our kind of line is that, “We’re not remodeling your home. We’re rebuilding it. So you get exactly what you had before. If there’s something simple like moving a wall a little bit because it makes more sense to have a bathroom there or something, we’ve done some really minor tweaks like that, but we won’t turn your back bedroom into a master suite.

Swaykos: I see.

Hamilton: Uh-huh.

Swaykos: OK. Have you felt really welcomed as a volunteer organization into the area? Have you had a lot of people accepting what you want to do and welcoming you in?

Hamilton: Yeah, we really have. I know it’s nice when you wear your Hands-On tee shirt in the community, especially out in East Biloxi. Everybody knows us, so they’ll wave to you, even if you haven’t met them before. It’s, “Hey. How’s it going?” We’ve had times when, out at the pub or something, and someone will see a Hands-On tee shirt and buy a round of drinks for everyone on that end of the bar.

Swaykos: Oh, wonderful.

Hamilton: People who (inaudible) dinners after we did a little bit of work for them and just purposely thanking us, so it does feel really nice.

Swaykos: Have you [done] any work alongside or bring in maybe police officers, firemen, that kind of thing? Have you had to work with that arena at all?

Hamilton: Because of like a safety situation?

Swaykos: Maybe just working alongside them, making sure, maybe having them drive by every once in a while to make sure you guys are OK, having them drive by the houses you’re gutting to make sure nobody’s looting. Have you had any relationships with them?

Hamilton: Not really. A couple of times we’ve had some. I guess it was regarding Guiding Light. We asked for some extra security for the actors that came down, but that had more to do with that than it was any sort of concern about the neighborhood. We hired a security guard at one point during spring break when we had three hundred kids here. But that’s really the only [time] that we’ve really done into that.

Swaykos: OK. Did you have any kids who forgot they were here to work?

Hamilton: Yes. (laughter) Yeah. We’ve had that situation several times.

Swaykos: Really?
Hamilton: Whether it’s just the one that comes down for a week and just signed up for the trip because his friends were going and decided that it’s really a great time to go to the pub every night and wake up drunk and hung-over, and things like that. We’ve also seen it in folks that stay a little longer, especially if you stay here long-term, we offer you free food and housing. That’s a pretty good deal.

Swaykos: Yeah.

Hamilton: And I think most of them start out with the right intentions, but you get that burnout, and you haven’t been working for so long that now you have this place to live and eat, you stick around, and you just kind of, you see their work kind of taper off sometimes, which is where AmeriCorps Program really helps out. It puts some like kind of checks and balances on folks for us that we can kind of manage it a little better.

Swaykos: Good. You do a lot of work in East Biloxi. Have you guys thought about moving into the other areas that were really ravaged, the Waveland and Bay St. Louis, that kind of thing?

Hamilton: We have. I think, kind of what happened when the groups came down, like different groups went to different areas and kind of settled there. So we just ended up in East Biloxi. And it is an area of high need. It was low income, and it was hard hit, so the combination of those two factors. And we feel really kind of personally, I think, as individuals, but also an organization, rooted to helping those folks. But we do do side projects out in Gulfport and Bay St. Louis. We’ve got an organization that we’re pretty close partners with in Bay St. Louis at St. Rose, St. Rose de Lima Catholic Church. They have a St. Rose Outreach and Recovery, which was actually founded by one of our former volunteers who grew up in Pass Christian and then moved. I think his parents are in Montana, or something now, so he went to boarding school, went to Dartmouth, graduated, came down here, volunteered with us, and set things up with the church in Bay St. Louis. So we do do a little bit of work, but we’re really focused on East Biloxi because that’s just kind of where we rooted ourselves.

Swaykos: OK. If you guys want to stay and be permanent, what plan have you put out for yourselves should there be another hurricane because you still want to be a helping force? You don’t want to have damage and need help yourself.

Hamilton: Yeah. We have a pretty detailed evacuation and reentry plan that involves us making the decision pretty much on our own rather than waiting for the evacuation order from the City. So we can get out a little sooner. What we have to do is everything that we have in the backyard, all of our tents, all of our tools, all of our everything has to be brought inside the building so that it’s not dangerous debris flying through the air. So you’ve got to break all that down. We’ll evacuate all of our long-term folks and any of our short-term volunteers who are not able to reschedule flights
or anything to get out. We’ll probably go up to Jackson and sit there. And then we have selected a small team of what we call first response, but it’s not, like, emergency first response. So what they’ll do is they’ll come back in as soon as the storm clears and check out our building, come out and remove debris, and things like that. And we have it set up so that we’ll hopefully be self-sustained with our own food and water supplies, and then they’ll call our second response team, our base response team that will come and make sure that this base is set up and ready to accept volunteers again. And then at that point we’ll start welcoming people from outside the area and bring all of our other volunteers back in and start working in with some of the other groups in the area, like the Red Cross or Salvation Army, by clearing debris, handing out water, and things like that.

**Swaykos:** OK. And lastly, as an outsider who didn’t live here, how far have you seen the Coast come in almost two years? And where do you think they need to go?

**Hamilton:** I think it’s come pretty far. It’s hard because you get used to seeing the destruction, so it just seems normal. I think what gets me sometimes is just the sudden—suddenly a building out on [Highway] 90 is gone that I’ve been used to seeing. I know Sharkheads is down there, and like if Sharkheads ever disappeared, like, if they ever take that down, I don’t know what I’m going to do because it’s like a landmark for me. I tell people, “Turn at Sharkheads. It’s a big pink building. You can’t miss it.” And then the new Surf Style went up in a matter of a few weeks. So it’s the rapid loss and gain of buildings, I think, is what triggers things for me. But I have seen a lot of people move back into their homes.

**Swaykos:** What are the hurdles for continued growth?

**Hamilton:** I think it’s going to be that the time—(Tape 2)

**Swaykos:** —to recovery.

**Hamilton:** I think it’s just the timeline as we got further and further out from the storm that it’s harder to get funding, and it’s harder to remind people that it’s still a problem down here. And we do need help from the rest of the country, not just from the people who are on the Coast because I think continuing to be able to get that, the money and the volunteers for a continued period of time is going to be the biggest hurdle.

**Swaykos:** What do you think the rest of America needs to know, still, about the area?

**Hamilton:** I think that the news needs to start showing that it is still, that there is so much destruction down here. It’s hard when it’s just every so often they’ll say something about it because FEMA’s made a new ruling or somebody else is pulling out or something like that happens, and I wish it were just in there on a more regular basis.
Swaykos: Is there any legislation or anything like that that would help y’all run smoother, or would help volunteers maybe getting quicker?

Hamilton: Getting quicker in the event of another storm?

Swaykos: Um-hm.

Hamilton: Hm. I think what needs to happen is I think that the state agencies and the nonprofit agencies need to start working together better because I know, since some conversations I’ve had recently to the MEMA and FEMA are very—they have their way of doing things, and to bring in volunteers to that is almost a hindrance to them. And finding a way that these people who come from across the country ready and willing to work can be effectively brought in. I know that the group that started Hands-On USA was able to do that. They might not be skilled; they might not be trained first responders, but they can remove a tree from the middle of the road, no problem. And finding a way that that’s instituted that people can work into that, I think would be great.

Swaykos: OK. How do we give credit to everyone who’s gone through here? Is it possible?

Hamilton: I think every volunteer who’s come through here when they hear, “Thanks to all the volunteers,” everyone knows that that’s them and kind of speaks a little bit of pride in that.

Swaykos: OK. What about you? How attached are you, and how long are you going to stay?

Hamilton: I really enjoy what I’m doing and enjoy being a part of it. I don’t think that I’ll live in Mississippi forever. I don’t think I’m going to be a permanent resident. I’ll probably leave at some point, but when that is kind of depends on the trajectory of this organization and my role here. It does, it burns a lot of people out; you work long hours; you see a lot of stuff, so it’s not something you can do forever. So I’m kind of gauging what my own kind of stability is in that.

Swaykos: I see. Thank you.

Hamilton: Um-hm.

(end of interview)