Biography

Sarah L. McPherson was born December 16, 1946, in Inverness, Mississippi, to parents Arthur (b: December 26, 1924) and Lillie Bell Enoch (b: January 23, 1925) McPherson. Arthur McPherson was born in Sunflower County, Mississippi, to a preacher; his mother died when he was a baby, and he moved to St. Louis, Missouri, at an early age. He lived there, working as a machinist at Ottis Screw Company. Ms. McPherson’s mother Lillie was an only child and worked as a nurse’s aid. The family moved to Pascagoula, Mississippi, when Sarah was about thirteen years old, and she has lived on the Gulf Coast since that time. Ms. McPherson reports that she graduated from high school and worked as a senior records clerk at the Chevron Refinery (1983-2004) in Pascagoula when she retired. She is currently employed with the Pascagoula Public Library in Pascagoula, Mississippi. Ms. McPherson has one child, Johnjalynn McPherson, who was born December 31, 1967. She is a member of Shiloh Missionary Baptist Church in Moss Point, Mississippi.
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This is an interview for the Mississippi Oral History Program of The University of Southern Mississippi. The interview is with Sarah L. McPherson and is taking place on February 22, 2007. The interviewers are Lucy Maynard and Kristen Wallace.

Wallace: This is an interview for The University of Southern Mississippi Hurricane Katrina Oral History Project done in conjunction with the University of Guelph, Ontario, Canada. The interview is with Sarah McPherson, and it is taking place on February 22, 2007, at 3:30 p.m. in Pascagoula, Mississippi, at St. Johns Episcopal Church. The interviewers are Lucy Maynard and Kristin Wallace. So, first of all we’d like to thank you, Sarah, for taking the time to talk with us today, and we’d like to get some background information about you, which is what we usually do in our oral history interviews. So first I’m going to ask you if you could please state and spell your name for the record.


Wallace: OK, Sarah, so our first question is when and where were you born?

McPherson: Inverness, Mississippi, December 16, 1946.

Wallace: OK, and for the record, what was your father’s name?


Wallace: OK, and what was your mother’s maiden name?

McPherson: Lillie Bell Enochs.

Wallace: And where did you grow up?

McPherson: I grew up partially in North Mississippi. I was in the seventh grade when we came to South Mississippi to Pascagoula.

Wallace: And how long have you lived on the Mississippi Gulf Coast?
McPherson: Oh God, wow, since seventh grade, I don’t know how many years that’s been. (laughter) A long time.

Maynard: So how many generations of your family have lived on the Mississippi Gulf Coast?

McPherson: How many what?

Maynard: Generations of your family.

McPherson: Oh, it’s just my mother, just—well, my grandmother.

Maynard: And why did you decide to move here?

McPherson: Well, I was a child, and my parents moved here, so I had no choice.

Maynard: Do you know why they chose to move here?

McPherson: I think for employment opportunities.

Maynard: So what is your attachment to this region?

McPherson: Wow. The weather, I mean, I like the weather, and I’ve got a lot of good friends here, and I worked and retired here, so this is home.

Maynard: So what does this region mean to you?

McPherson: You know what? Since Katrina I just, I don’t know. I don’t know. It changes everything since the storm has just, you know, just turned your life upside down. I’ve been through other hurricanes before, but nothing like this. So I don’t know. I don’t even know why I stay anymore. I don’t know.

Maynard: So where was your neighborhood before Katrina?

McPherson: Where was it?

Maynard: Um-hm.

McPherson: Off of Ingalls Avenue in Pascagoula, Sunset Street.

Maynard: And what did your neighborhood look like before the hurricane?
McPherson: Well, it was a beautiful little neighborhood. On my street there are only seven houses. So it is in a commercial area, also, so it was a kind of quaint little neighborhood, little street.

Maynard: Did you know all of your neighbors?

McPherson: Sure did.

Wallace: Can you describe your home before Katrina?

McPherson: It’s just a little quaint house, three bedroom house, got a lot of pine trees around it in just a little quiet neighborhood, just a nice little home.

Maynard: Did you have one story or two?

McPherson: One; three-bedroom home.

Wallace: Was it affected by wind or by water?

McPherson: It was affected by both, but the water mostly; I mean, that was the thing that really tore it up.

Wallace: Are you close to the beach?

McPherson: Some wind damage but—not far from it, yeah.

Maynard: So did you stay in your home during Katrina?

McPherson: No, no. I always leave. I went through Hurricane Camille, which was in the 1960s, and that was more than anything you could ever imagine; so since that time I don’t stay anymore. And I’m so glad I left because I found out after I got back that it was mandatory evacuation where I live; so I always leave. I can’t take it anymore.

Maynard: Where did you go?

McPherson: Montgomery, Alabama, to a friend’s house.

Maynard: Yeah.

Wallace: And when did you decide to leave for Montgomery?

McPherson: When did I—oh, on Sunday. We left Sunday afternoon around one, I think it was.
Maynard: Um-hm. Was it just you who left, or did you leave with some other people?

McPherson: With a friend of mine.

Maynard: Yeah.

Wallace: What were some of the ways that you prepared yourself to evacuate?

McPherson: You know what? This friend of mine is a very good driver, so he was the one that prepared everything. I just jumped in the truck, and we were out of here, the car or whatever. I didn’t take anything. I didn’t take any pictures. I took my most important papers of valuables, insurance papers and stuff like that, but that was it. Birth certificates and stuff like that.

Wallace: How did you prepare your home?

McPherson: I didn’t.

Wallace: No.

McPherson: I don’t do that anymore. And after Katrina, good Lord, if you taped the windows up, when you got back, and there’s nothing but a slab, so what’s the point. I don’t do that anymore.

Wallace: Is that what you returned to, was a slab?

McPherson: No, when we got back, not a window was broken. You would not believe that the thing was torn up. No windows broken, no trees down. There was a lot of debris, but the house, until you went in it, you couldn’t even tell. And I had all awnings on it; of course, those were pulled off the window, but as far as thinking the house was torn up inside? There was no way. Lots of debris, though, trees and stuff like that, power lines down.

Maynard: What about the rest of the houses in your neighborhood?

McPherson: One house was lost and had to be torn down. And everybody’s house sustained damage, lots of damage.

Maynard: What was it like coming back?

McPherson: Well, driving back in from Montgomery on Highway 90, coming back into Pascagoula, we didn’t say a word. We were just speechless. I mean, you saw so
much debris and so many torn up houses and just stuff everywhere, just speechless. I mean, you just were speechless is all I can say.

**Wallace:** What did you think you were going to arrive to?

**McPherson:** I didn’t know because when I locked the door, I told my friend, I said, “It’s just things, you know; your things are going to leave you, or you’re going to leave your things.” So I left in that frame of mind; it’s just things.

**Maynard:** So what was your experience during the hurricane; leaving and, like, where were you, and what was it like there?

**McPherson:** It was fine. In Montgomery there was a little bit of wind, like that Sunday evening, I think. Or when did the thing come in? Monday morning. It might’ve been Monday afternoon, had a little wind but nothing. No damage or anything.

**Maynard:** And what about leaving, was it busy?

**McPherson:** Busy, busy.

**Maynard:** Yeah.

**McPherson:** Traffic, traffic, traffic, traffic.

**Wallace:** How long did it take you to get to Montgomery?

**McPherson:** He knew some back roads, so he was able to bypass the interstate somehow and pick it up later on down the road, but it was just bumper-to-bumper traffic.

**Maynard:** Yeah.

**McPherson:** And we left Sunday afternoon, early afternoon.

**Wallace:** When did you first hear about Katrina?

**McPherson:** I heard about Katrina, like, days; you know, they have it on the news, the Weather Channel and all that’s kind of telling you what it’s going to do. So it was days out, might’ve been a week, I don’t know, days; lots of time ahead. And then I watched the Weather Channel and whatever news channels I could while I was gone, and I remember [Jim] Cantori, I think his name is—he’s the weather reporter—telling the people in Biloxi, that Sunday evening late, that this is going to be large, “You need
to get out of here.” And I can remember seeing people going down the beaches—it was sun shining, really pretty—not paying it any attention.

**Maynard:** So you evacuated when you heard about the mandatory evacuation—

**McPherson:** No.

**Maynard:** —or did you leave on your own?

**McPherson:** Left on my own. I can’t stay anymore. After Hurricane Camille, I mean, it’s just—and it’s been some others, but I can’t stay anymore.

**Maynard:** Did you know some people who stayed?

**McPherson:** Yeah, my brother lives in Moss Point, and he stayed.

**Wallace:** Were you worried about him during the storm?

**McPherson:** Yes, worried about him, and also my mother is in a nursing home over in Ocean Springs. I would’ve left sooner, but I was trying to see where they were going to take them, if they were going to evacuate, or what because I needed to know which way she was going. And I couldn’t go with her because they couldn’t be responsible for anybody being with her, not a family member. So I had to stay as late as I could to see what was going on, which way my mother was going to go.

**Maynard:** So what ended up happening with your mom?

**McPherson:** Well, you know what? Before I left, they had decided not to evacuate. They didn’t take them out that time, and we had had a hurricane, uh, let’s see, goodness, about a year before that. I evacuated to North Mississippi, and she did, too, to Meridian, Mississippi, I think; they had them in a church. So I was able to be in constant contact with her with a worker who had a cell phone. But for some reason they didn’t evacuate this time, and it was the right call, but it was very dangerous.

**Maynard:** And everything was OK there?

**McPherson:** Everything was OK.

**Maynard:** Wow.

**Wallace:** And where is this nursing home located?

**McPherson:** In Ocean Springs on Highway 57, and it’s down in a low area. I don’t know how they made it. I don’t.
Wallace: Did they sustain any damage?

McPherson: A little bit, but in the neighborhood, there was severe damage. I was worried to death about my mother, and I was able to talk on the cell phone as long as the lights were on, but when I got back she was fine. Now, that was something, not knowing whether your mother was going to be alive or—but I think they made the decision not to move. I think time may have run out, and they might’ve waited too late. I don’t know, because if you wait too late and get trapped on the highway, you’re in big trouble. And my mother can’t walk or anything, so they just made the decision not to move them, which was the right one, but it was risky.

Maynard: So what were some of your most vivid memories of your community before Katrina?

McPherson: Oh gracious, we had, like I said, it’s about seven or eight houses on that street, little flowers in the yard and very few kids, but it’s a nice little neighborhood. Everybody friendly and a nice neighborhood.

Maynard: So what were some of the community’s problems and strengths before Katrina?

McPherson: Wow, let’s see, problems; wow, I don’t know. I don’t know. I don’t know.

Wallace: What about strengths?

McPherson: Oh gracious, I guess with people that’s—you know what? I can’t think of anything; I don’t know. I can’t think of a thing.

Maynard: By talking to other people, I really get the impression that it was really a family type of atmosphere, and a lot of people grew up here and raised their—

McPherson: Oh yeah.

Maynard: —families here—

McPherson: That’s correct.

Maynard: —and stayed here.

McPherson: That’s right. Yeah, that’s correct.

Maynard: So there’s a lot of family bonding and—
McPherson: Family and friend bonding.

Maynard: You know other people’s families?

McPherson: Oh, lots of families and friends.

Maynard: Yeah.

McPherson: Yeah. And even with my neighbors, you know, everybody know everybody.

Maynard: Yeah. So what were your opinions of some of the local and state and federal politics before Katrina?

McPherson: You know what? I don’t get into politics.

Maynard: No.

McPherson: No. No, I just don’t. I just don’t get into that.

Wallace: And has the storm changed the way that you think about this community?

McPherson: Wow, I still love this community. Um, and I think we bonded more since Katrina. We were in a small town, you’re just like one. You’re really one large family. But since Katrina, on my street everybody was affected, and I mean, we bonded even more. I mean, if you got—we’ve bonded more because everybody had to help everybody. Everybody’s in the same boat. So we’ve just grown closer, I guess you could say, as neighbors and friends.

Wallace: It’s a good thing.

McPherson: It’s a good thing.

Wallace: So why did you decide to evacuate? What were some of the thoughts that went through your head when you decided to leave even though your mom and brother were here?

McPherson: Well, I knew that I couldn’t stay because I went through [Camille] as a young woman.

Wallace: Camille.
McPherson: I mean, Camille, with an eighteen-month-old baby, so we’ve gone to shelters before, numerous times. And I’m older now, and I just cannot take it. I can’t take it. I just cannot take it. We’ve been through storms before and it’s just, it’s too much. And if you can get out, and if it’s a serious storm, and even if it’s not, if it’s not a Category Five, you don’t know what the tornadoes are going to do. You just don’t know.

Maynard: So why do you decide to come back after all these storms?

McPherson: Because this is home.

Maynard: Yeah.

McPherson: And where can you go without some kind of natural disaster or something? Where can you go?

Maynard: Yeah.

Wallace: Would you ever consider leaving for good?

McPherson: You know, I would. If my mother had not been ill and in a nursing home, or if my mother was deceased, I would definitely not be here now. I have a daughter, one daughter that’s retired, and she resides in Virginia; so I certainly would’ve relocated. My mother, really, and some family members, but mainly my mother is the reason that I’m still here.

Wallace: Yeah.

McPherson: But where can you go? It’s disaster everywhere. I mean, it’s something everywhere.

Wallace: Can you describe how you felt and your reactions when you started to come back from Alabama towards your home?

McPherson: Wow. When I locked the door to that house, I said to myself, “It’s just things. I mean, we’re going to leave our things, or our things are going to leave us.” And that’s the frame of mind that I left with. But coming back in and seeing so much devastation, I was just speechless. We didn’t talk driving back in because you’re just in a state of shock. My brother told me when I went by my mother’s house—that’s where he lives, at my mother’s house—he said, “I went by to check on your house.” And then he said, “I don’t think you’ve got any damage. No windows or anything is broken. Don’t see any damage at all.” So when I got back and turned the key and went in that house, I—you’re just speechless. I mean, it was just tore up. It’s got
about four, four and a half, five feet of water in it. So the furniture—[was turned over.]

Maynard: Was the water in there when you arrived?

McPherson: No, they said the water came in and went out so fast, and say it came up through the floor, through the windows, just everywhere water could get in. All the furniture was turned over, refrigerator turned over, mud and slush. Oh God, I was just speechless. But I made my mind up that it was just things. And I did fine until—I lost everything; I did fine getting all this stuff out of the house and putting it on the street. But when they brought this big machine thing, looks like the jaws of life thing, to just kind of scoop your stuff up, and I’m thinking, “Gee, I’m retired; I’m sixty years old.” I was fifty-nine at the time, fifty-eight or whatever it was. I just can’t describe it to you. You just see your whole life scooped up and stuff hanging off—but one thing I’ve learned, I like to shop. If it’s on sale, and the price is right, I’m going to buy it. I saw so much stuff with tags hanging off that I never even wore. I’ll never do that again. I’ve learned a valuable lesson. I’m a changed woman. (laughter)

Maynard: Well, that’s something. (laughter)

Wallace: How long after—how long was it after the storm that you came back?

McPherson: Came back, OK, the storm came in on—was it Monday morning? I came back Wednesday, I think. But then my daughter was retiring—I’m trying to think. Well, maybe I came back Tuesday. And I already had a reservation to leave for Virginia for my daughter’s retirement party; she was retiring from the Navy after twenty years of service. So the airport in Gulfport—that’s where I had my reservations—it was closed. It was severely damaged. So my daughter’s on the phone calling on a neighbor’s cell phone. My cell phone didn’t work anymore. So she was busy calling a thousand times, “Well, Mama, when you are leaving?” “Honey, I can’t leave; you know, the airport is torn up.” She said, “Well, can you go back to Montgomery?” I said, “Gas is a problem; you know, you can’t get gas.” I said, “So, Honey, I’m not going to be able to come.” Well, she breaks down with that crying on the phone. OK? It’s an only child. I says, “Well, let me try to call Mobile.” So I called Mobile, Alabama, and the airport opened back up. So I left here Sunday; I came back Tuesday, and I flew out Wednesday night going to Virginia, so I didn’t get a chance to do anything, really, because that was major, twenty years in the Navy. That was her retirement party, and I had to go. So the stuff was still in the house; so I went to Virginia. I think I might’ve been gone a week, and then I come back and started trying to get that stuff out of there.

Wallace: So as you were cleaning out your house, were there some things that you found that survived?
McPherson: Yeah, some things. I had a favorite coat that I had hanging up on a door in the closet, not in the closet, but just hanging up high on the door; it was saved. And like I say, I had my major papers, my most important papers with me; I did take that. And just some things that you think would’ve been destroyed, pictures; some pictures I found that were not destroyed. But it’s just amazing. It just blows your mind on how much devastation could be in a place, and you actually found a little something that’s not gone.

Maynard: Yeah.

McPherson: It’s horrible, though, y’all. It’s horrible. Horrible, horrible, horrible.

Maynard: So your house was structurally OK?

McPherson: No, the house had hardwood floors, so of course, they’re—all of that.

Maynard: Buckled.

McPherson: All bad, bad, bad. And like I said, not a window was broken, but the electricity that—my brother calls it a gooseneck, some kind of thing where your wires come to; all that was torn off. Of course, no lights and roof damage, and all in the house things tore up inside. Everything turned over, it’s mud; you name it.

Maynard: So did you keep the house as it was and just got the inside?


Maynard: So since you were gone for a while, did you notice mold and all that kind of stuff when you got back?

McPherson: Well, you know what? It was a little bit, but my sweetheart stayed, and he went in and raised the windows and would try to go over there during the day and do something. I just couldn’t do anything, and he did what he could do and not to throw away whatever he thought that I might want to keep. So I did have somebody trying to do a little something over there while I was gone. But I had to go. I had to go.

Maynard: Yeah.

Wallace: So where were you staying while you were getting your house back together?
McPherson: At my mother’s house. Stayed at my mother’s house and a neighbor’s house, hotel some.

Wallace: What about insurance?

McPherson: Had insurance, flood.

Wallace: Flood insurance? Did they just, um, were they like helpful towards you?

McPherson: They did the right thing.

Wallace: Yeah. Good.

Maynard: That’s good.

McPherson: They did the right thing. But it’s so much damage and with those floors, the floors buckle, and I think they call them joists or something under there, under the house, oh, it’s just a lot of money’s been spent and expensive. I mean, the material and labor is so expensive—it’s just gone up tremendously. But it’s just like a big puzzle. It’s coming together.

Wallace: So did you receive any help from outside people during your rebuilding of your house and everything?

McPherson: No, just my sweetheart, and I’ve got a man that’s working. He has a full-time job, but he has his license; he’s kind of a part-time contractor. So—oh and yeah, I did have a little bit of help. I retired from the Chevron Refinery here, and so with the retirees, they sent people over to try to pull up hardwood floors, take out sheetrock, or stuff like that, a little bit. But one of the men fell through the dining room floor. I mean, they were trying to be careful, but one of them did fall, didn’t hurt himself; so the company just had to pull the crew out. They couldn’t chance anybody getting hurt.

Wallace: Yeah.

(brief interruption)

Wallace: So this is just a continuation of the interview with Sarah McPherson. How did you think of the response from the local, state, and federal officials?

McPherson: Hm, I really don’t know how to answer that because it was so much devastation; it was so much devastation, and you couldn’t get to every neighborhood at the same time. You just couldn’t do it. So, to be fair, I just, I can’t, I don’t know how to answer that because it was just so much. I mean, it was just so massive, and
they might’ve been in one area and not made it to yours yet. I don’t know how to answer that one.

**Maynard:** Did you have any experiences with any volunteers who came down to help?

**McPherson:** Not really. Not really. I mean, I saw some next door, but I didn’t. No.

**Maynard:** I was just going to ask you, did you have any interesting or horrible experiences at all, like, while being evacuated or when you were coming back, like, anything funny that you found or saw?

**McPherson:** No.

**Maynard:** We heard a lot of stories before, finding cars in their swimming pools or bathtubs in trees.

**McPherson:** God, no. And you know what? Because I had to leave shortly after I got back, about a week later, and I mean, you’re just so busy until—no, no, I didn’t see any funny stories or anything. (laughter)

**Maynard:** No? So you just like, things were moving in a blur for you?

**McPherson:** Nightmare.

**Maynard:** Yeah.

**McPherson:** It’s like a nightmare; I mean, it’s like a dream. The only peace that you have, and still for me is because my house is not finished, and I’m still in not good living conditions. The only peace that you have is when you’re asleep, and when you wake up, you know, you’re back in a nightmare again. But I really can’t complain because my situation is a whole lot better than some. It really is.

**Maynard:** Did you hear some pretty bad stories?

**McPherson:** Bad stories. I was in Gulfport last weekend, and in coming on Interstate 10 there was a tent—I think it was between Biloxi and Gulfport. I looked down over a little bridge, and I saw the blue roof that people had on their houses, where somebody has pitched a makeshift tent by a stream of water, looks like somebody is living there right up under that little overpass on the highway. I mean, it’s some—you know what, though? I think the worst thing that I did see, some food was thrown out of Jerry Lee’s, must’ve been out of the produce department, might’ve been stuff that wasn’t any good; I don’t know. But I saw small children and people digging through that
stuff, taking it away. I don’t know whether they were hungry or what; I don’t know. I don’t know.

**Maynard:** So what about some of your friends in the area, like, what happened to their houses?

**McPherson:** Well, everybody’s in the same boat on that street. I mean, I think we bonded. It was always a close-knit little street, but we’ve bonded with some of the people that were not so friendly. I mean, everybody’s a big, happy family because you all in the same boat. Everybody needed everybody, and everybody had a piece of something that they could offer, if it was just a kind word.

**Maynard:** Um-hm. Were there some of your friends that moved away that haven’t returned?

**McPherson:** There was a little lady in one of the houses. The lady was probably eighty years old, and I don’t even know whether she’s still alive or not, but she didn’t come back; so I guess her kids might have her or something. And it was another neighbor that left, too; she was an older neighbor. She just relocated. And those homes are for sale; one of them sold, and the other one hasn’t yet.

**Wallace:** And how does that make you feel that you’ve been displaced for almost two years?

**McPherson:** You know, some days I’m just tired and discouraged. Other days I’m just grateful because I still have, I’ve still got a house. I’ve got a piece of a house, and when you see the slabs, people didn’t have insurance, hadn’t even started. At least I’ve started; I mean, it’s a big puzzle, but progress has been made. I’m just so grateful to be alive and to have had some insurance and a place to go back to, and not in a FEMA trailer.

**Wallace:** Um-hm.

**McPherson:** So.

**Maynard:** What have you heard about the FEMA trailers?

**McPherson:** Well, I saw on the news where lots of keys fit the same trailers, the same lot. I’d have lost my mind (laughter) had I’d known that. But I decided to go back to my house; there was a room that had a concrete slab that was the back porch, so I decided to go back home after some weeks. You just want to go home.

**Maynard:** Um-hm.
McPherson: You can see through the walls where the sheetrock’s out, but that’s OK.

Wallace: Have you had any contact with FEMA?

McPherson: Yeah, after I got back, of course, I had to go; the little funds or whatever everybody was eligible for, just enough to try to get you to survive some kind of way. Yeah.

Wallace: And were they helpful?

McPherson: Yeah.

Wallace: Yeah.

McPherson: They were.

Wallace: That’s good.

McPherson: They were.

Wallace: How were you treated during your time of evacuation?

McPherson: I went to my mother’s house with my brother, so you know that was family. Stayed with a aunt for a while, so I’ve just been with family.

Wallace: Um-hm. What are some of the things that you miss most about your community?

McPherson: Let’s see, my neighbors that left.

Wallace: Um-hm.

McPherson: And in the one house that’s right next to my house, that was one of the ones that was torn down, and we’ve been neighbors for over fifteen years. And I just miss them—it’s new faces in the neighborhood in a couple of houses. I miss my neighbors.

Wallace: What do you miss most about your home?

McPherson: A big bed. (laughter) A big bed. Just a bed. (laughter)

Maynard: How long were you without power and water?
McPherson: Wow. Oh wow, let me see. The wiring and all that stuff was torn. Oh goodness, you know what? I don’t know because I stayed at my mother’s.

Maynard: Did she have power and water at that house?

McPherson: She had power and water at the house because, see, Moss Point was not affected as Pascagoula. Well, Moss Point wasn’t affected as bad as Pascagoula at all. Oh Lord, I don’t know. Wow. When did I go home? I don’t even know, because see it’s just all just a big blur; you just don’t know time and days and—wow, several months, I guess. I don’t know, because it’s just all a bad dream, so you lose track of time.

Wallace: Did you have a hard time finding food or supplies?

McPherson: Not food, no, because like I say, I was with my mother and family some and in a hotel some in Moss Point.

Maynard: So you were able to get a hold of those kinds of things?

McPherson: Um-hm.

Maynard: Did you see long lines for that kind of stuff?

McPherson: Everywhere.

Maynard: Yeah.

McPherson: At the bank the lines were so long. And you could only get a certain amount a day.

Wallace: Did you have to wait in those lines?

McPherson: Waited in those lines. If you went to get food, you had to wait in a line. God forbid if you had to go to Wal-Mart, when Wal-Mart finally got back open. Oh, it was lines and lines and lines everywhere.

Maynard: How long did it take for some of the stores to reopen?

McPherson: Goodness. Wow, let me see. When did Wal-Mart and Lowe’s open back up? I can’t even tell you because you’re so busy trying to drag your stuff out. I don’t know. I can’t even tell you because you lose, you just lose track of time.

Maynard: Um-hm.
McPherson: I don’t know.

Maynard: Are there still some small businesses that haven’t come back to Pascagoula?

McPherson: Yeah.

Maynard: Which ones do you remember particularly?

McPherson: Can’t think of the name of the restaurant down the street from my house. Oh God, it’s an Italian joint; I can’t even remember that, but it’s not back. There’s a dancing hall, a dance studio, down the street; I don’t even know the name of that place; it’s not back. It’s lots of businesses that’s not back, small businesses.

Maynard: Are there any that you really miss?

McPherson: No, because I didn’t go to those places very much. I can’t think of any that I really miss, no.

Wallace: So how has Hurricane Katrina changed you personally?

McPherson: I’ve always tried to be a kind person, and I pride myself in that, but I’m changed in a way that you don’t take anything for granted; you go along on this earth and you get comfortable here, and you forget about you got to die. And with this Katrina business, you’re going to leave your things, or your things are going to leave you. I mean, it’s just made me a better person—I’ve never really had a really hard time in my life before and been uncomfortable. And I’ve been uncomfortable, and I’m still uncomfortable in my home. It just makes you a better person. I mean, you just don’t take anything for granted. Don’t think that you’re going to be here by the end of the day, or you’re going to have a car or a home. It’s just makes me more grateful for every day that I do have and to be with loved ones. I mean, it changes your whole outlook on life; that’s about the only way I can put it. You don’t take anything for granted anymore and don’t think that it’s not going to happen to me because it can.

Maynard: Um-hm.

McPherson: But I’ve learned some valuable lessons. I will not shop and buy that stuff; I don’t care if it’s on sale, or if somebody giving it away. I’m just not going to do that anymore because it was so many things that I bought that was on sale. All that stuff (laughter) was scooped up with the tags hanging off of it. I’m not going to do that anymore. If I don’t need it, I’m not going to get it. That make sense?

Maynard: Yeah.
Wallace: It sure does.


Maynard: So did you have to replace all of your wardrobe and all of that stuff?

McPherson: Everything, still working on that. Still don’t have any furniture or anything because the house is not finished, but it’s come a long ways.

Maynard: Yeah.

McPherson: And I really, you know, I’m uncomfortable still, but I believe in God, and I know that He’s not going to put any more on you that you can bear, and I feel like I’m being tested. And I’m hoping I’m passing the test. I really do because there’s some people that didn’t get, they didn’t have insurance. Some people don’t have anything, just like that tent that’s up under that overpass, or whoever that is, they can’t have anything. So I’m ashamed of myself when I try to complain about not being able to go in my bedroom and crawl over in a bed with 300-thread-count sheets on it. (laughter)

Wallace: Yeah.

McPherson: The little things that you miss that you took for granted.

Maynard: Oh yeah.

McPherson: Um-hm.

Wallace: Is it almost exciting in a way to start new?

McPherson: I think it’s going to be (laughter) if I ever get my house finished. If I can ever get the house finished and get furniture and curtains. I think it’s going to be a fresh, brand-new life. God don’t make no mistakes. It’s a reason for everything.

Wallace: It must be so frustrating for it to be almost two years, and you’re still not back home.

McPherson: I’m so tired of it I don’t know what to do. But some people do not have anything—when I look out the window and look at my neighbor’s house, which is just a slab, I can’t complain.

Wallace: Yeah.
Maynard: Um-hm.

McPherson: I can’t.

Maynard: Do you think some of your priorities have changed at all after the storm?

McPherson: Definitely.

Maynard: Yeah.

McPherson: Definitely. I’ve always been realistic, but you know, you go along and you get comfortable here on this earth, and this is the worst time that I’ve ever had in my life, and it’s just being uncomfortable. And that’s a selfish thing to say because a lot of people lost their lives; they didn’t get another chance. A lot of people are sick. I mean, it’s a lot of people that’s gotten sick; high blood pressure, heart attack, strokes and—I’m still alive. Lost some weight, but I needed to. (laughter)

Maynard: Would you say that you see different things as being more important now?

McPherson: I sure do.

Maynard: What are some of those things?

McPherson: I’ve always put family first. Family is still at the top of my list. Things are not important to me anymore. I don’t care nothing about things anymore. On Market Street in Pascagoula, which is not far from my house, there were caskets floating down that street, from what I understand. And I’ve got some loved ones that’s deceased, and they’re still where they were. And I mean, it’s just—it changes your outlook on everything on this earth. It does; I mean, you’re going to leave your things, or your things are going to leave you. It’s just, you have to go through it to believe it; it’s just unbelievable.

Maynard: Do you feel like you wish you lived closer to your daughter after the storm?

McPherson: Do I feel what, honey?

Maynard: That you wish—do you wish you lived closer to your daughter?

McPherson: Oh definitely, yes. Yes, my daughter had to have two major surgeries since Katrina, last year, February. Oh, that’s another thing, too. I had to leave in February of last year. She had major surgery—very, very ill. I’ve got just one child. So I was gone about three weeks that time, and then I had to go back in October, major surgery again. So I just wish that I could be—I need to be closer to her, but I’ve
got to stay closer to my mother. My mother has seven living children, but God chose me to be the one to do what needs to be done for her. So if my mother had not been here, I definitely would’ve been gone. But I can’t leave her, and I can’t take her with me.

Maynard: Yeah.

Wallace: What’s your daughter’s name?

McPherson: Johnjalynn; we call her Teri. Left school at eighteen years old after finishing high school. Says, “Mom, I don’t know what I want to do, so I’m going to go to the Navy till I figure it out.” She said, “But I promise you I’m going to get me a college degree.” She retired from the Navy in 2005, I think it was, and it might’ve been the end of 2004, I can’t remember. It was right after Katrina. And she got her college degree from the University of Southern Illinois, and she’s got another associate from Hampton University or some college in Virginia. She’s doing good. She did exactly what she said she was going to do. And she came in last Friday; this is the first time she’d been here since the storm, and she was devastated. Unbelievable. When I went to see her the last time, I took a video. Seeing a video is not like seeing the real thing. But in the midst of that, my mother has been in and out of the hospital, and my daughter has, too; so I’ve had to go from one hospital to another. That’s one reason the progress at my house has been slow because you’ve got to be at home to pick the stuff out. But I had to go and see about my baby and my mother—what are you going to do?

Maynard: Family first, like you said.


Maynard: Um-hm.

McPherson: So it’s been, it’s been a ride.

Maynard: How is your daughter dealing with coming back and seeing the community she lived in?

McPherson: She was devastated. She called me a week or so ago; she says, “Mom. I’m coming home.” I said, “Well, why are you coming? It’s so cold here.” But it was cold in Virginia, too. She said, “Mom, I need to come home.” And she did; you could tell in her eyes she was just shocked. And when we rode down to Biloxi—you been to Biloxi?

Maynard: We drove through yesterday.
McPherson: Well, you should have seen it before. Nothing is standing. You know, if you grew up there, the beach and all that stuff? She was just speechless, which I knew she would be. I mean, she just was shocked. You can’t believe it unless you see it. How did you come—when you came here, were you shocked? Have you been here before, though?

Maynard: No.

McPherson: So you didn’t know. You didn’t know what to expect, did you?

Wallace: We’d seen things on TV, you know, but like you said, you know, pictures, video don’t do it justice, you know, to—

McPherson: You got to see it.

Wallace: Because when you’re watching something on TV, you’re external from it, you know, but when you’re here, and you’re seeing it, it hits you like—it’s like this is real.

McPherson: It’s real.

Wallace: These are people, these are—you know, just the magnitude, really.

McPherson: It’s massive.

Maynard: Just seeing a pile of bricks that you thought would probably be somebody’s house.

McPherson: I know.

Maynard: It’s unbelievable.

McPherson: I know, and the people that lost their lives and stuff, you know, I mean, it’s so touching.

Wallace: And, you know, like we don’t experience hurricanes, so, like, this is, you know—

McPherson: Well, this is massive for us. We’ve been through them before, but this is—but if anybody telling you it’s a Category Five hurricane coming in this place, you need to leave. I don’t care what category it is because you don’t know what the tornadoes are going to do—you need to get out of this place. You need to get out of here. I mean, you need to get out.
Wallace: Yeah.

Maynard: There’s been a lot of concern over environmental problems in North America and all over the world. Do you think that this was a good sign of that?

McPherson: Wow, I don’t know.

Wallace: Or like a chance for people to wake up and realize that, you know—

Maynard: Some things need to change.

Wallace: —the environment is changing?

McPherson: That’s for sure, definitely.

Maynard: Um-hm.

McPherson: Definitely. It just blows your mind. And when you grow up here—I mean, it just blows your mind. Driving back into this place, I couldn’t believe; I was speechless. You just can’t believe it. And the stories that you hear of the people that lived and some of the stuff that people went through. And then down the street from my house, a lady stayed, and she said they had to get out in water up over her head, almost, and go in a house where somebody wasn’t there to try to stay alive—I can’t stay. Mm-mm.

Maynard: How would you like to see your community rebuilt?

McPherson: Wow.

Wallace: Or do you think there’s any point in rebuilding?

McPherson: Of course, yeah. This is home. If something is going to happen to you, I do believe that it could be anywhere. And where can you go where it’s not something? Where can you go? What happens in Canada?

Wallace: Ice storms.

McPherson: So it’s something everywhere. Well, where can you go? This is home.

Wallace: Um-hm.

McPherson: So it’s definitely worth rebuilding. I mean, you do it over and over until you just can’t do it anymore, I guess; I don’t know, but I would’ve been gone if my mother had not been here.
Wallace: Um-hm.

McPherson: Definitely, to Virginia, I’m sure. And they have hurricanes in Virginia, too. (laughter) I was there for my daughter’s—was it the retirement party? No, it wasn’t the retirement party; it was something that was going on. Now, maybe I was just on vacation. Honey, and a hurricane, a Category Three came through there; I’m going, “Oh, my God.”

Wallace: I can’t escape it. (laughter)

McPherson: I can’t escape it.

Wallace: It’s following you.

McPherson: Yeah. So it’s been a nightmare.

Wallace: You’re retired, you said, right?

McPherson: Supposed to be.

Wallace: Supposed to be.

McPherson: And I’m working at the library now full time.

Wallace: OK.

McPherson: Um-hm.

Wallace: Did you do any volunteer work after?

McPherson: No, I didn’t do any volunteer work because shortly after I retired, that’s when my daughter was sick, and my mother got sick, and had I not been retired, I would not have been able to, you know, to just pick up and go where I was needed to go. And I think I’ll—I don’t know; I’ll probably always work. When you’ve been working all of your life, you don’t go home and sit down; you can’t do that. You just can’t do that. But I worked twenty-one years for the company that I retired from, so it was time for a change.

Wallace: Um-hm. So you started at the library after Katrina?

McPherson: Yeah, I just started at the library a month ago.

Wallace: Oh yeah, OK.
Maynard: And what are you doing there?

McPherson: It’s a clerk, clerk that’s handling patrons. That’s what we call the customers, patrons; and the phone, and filing books, and pulling books. It’s a challenge. (laughter)

Wallace: What are some of your hopes and fears for the future?

McPherson: Hopes. I sure hope we don’t have another Katrina. And my fear is we probably will. (laughter) Probably will. And I hope (laughter) that I’m not here.

Wallace: Hope that your house is done soon.

McPherson: Hope that my house is done soon.

Wallace: So when you eventually move away from Mississippi, will you just, will you sell your house?

McPherson: Probably.

Wallace: Yeah. How do you think that your life has changed by living in different houses, by not having your own?

McPherson: Hm, when you’re used to having your own space and you’re an adult, it’s different when you’ve got to live someplace else. And even though I went back to my mother’s house, because that’s where my brother lives, but it’s just something about being at home. And I mean, nobody was cruel or anything like that, but comes a point when you just need to be at home. No matter what home looks like. (laughter) If it’s a half home or what. (laughter)

Wallace: So is there anything that you want to say that we haven’t asked you?

McPherson: Hm, I can’t think of anything; can’t think of anything. No.

Wallace: All right. Well, thank you very much.

McPherson: That’s it? That’s a wrap?

(end of interview)