Mississippi Oral History Program

Hurricane Katrina Oral History Project

An Oral History

with

Sister Jacqueline Howard

Interviewer: Rachel Swaykos

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Biography

Sister Jacqueline Howard was born June 9, 1944, in St. Louis, Missouri, to Mr. Blake C. Howard and Mrs. Jacqueline Judge Howard. She earned a BS at Maryville College in St. Louis, and she earned an MEd from St. Louis University. She is a member of the Sisters of Mercy, the National Catholic Educational Association, and the National Association of Secondary School Principals. As an educator, she has served as principal, teacher, and counselor. She is a member of Pi Mu Epsilon, and she has been awarded the Star Teacher Award three times. At the time of this interview, she was the principal of Our Lady Academy in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi.
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AN ORAL HISTORY

with

JACKIE HOWARD

This is an interview for the Mississippi Oral History Program of The University of Southern Mississippi. The interview is with Jackie Howard and is taking place on May 30, 2007. The interviewer is Rachel Swaykos.

Swaykos: —2007 and I am Rachel Swaykos interviewing Sister Jacqueline Howard, principal of Our Lady Academy, which is located at 222 South Beach Boulevard in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi. It is around one o’clock p.m.

Howard: I’m Sister Jackie Howard, principal at Our Lady Academy in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi. (Inaudible)

Swaykos: OK. And today is May 30, 2007. Before we get to the schools, I would just like to ask how you were personally affected on August 29. Were you down here already?

Howard: No, I left. As we had many times before, we prepared the school for storm. We—

Swaykos: How did you prepare?

Howard: —moved things away from the windows. We covered the computers, raised them off the ground, moved things away from the windows because we knew if the windows blew, it would blow through. And as we had many other times, we left.

Swaykos: OK. Do you live in Bay St. Louis?

Howard: I live in Long Beach.

Swaykos: OK. Did you prepare the same at home?

Howard: We left the area; we went north. We went north.

Swaykos: OK. Who is we?

Howard: Sister Alisa(?) and I. We traveled to—we have a convent in Clarksdale, Mississippi, and we went and stayed with the sisters in Clarksdale.

Swaykos: And how long did you stay with them?
Howard: Ten days because we couldn’t get back. We got up there; the storm hit, and we realized it was for real. And the National Guard had closed the area down a little bit, and we believed them. And we spent those days; the Sun Herald had a Web site set up, and we spent those days trying to communicate through the Sun Herald’s Web site with folks, trying to find our kids. Kids are real good at—many of them had left, and they were real good about communicating with each other.

Swaykos: Oh, good.

Howard: And so we kind of coordinated people getting in touch with each other from up north. And then we wanted to bring a lot of food down. We had to bring a lot of gas down. We knew there would be no gas. We had the batteries and the flashlights and all of that. And at that point we didn’t know if our house had stood. We knew the school had taken a beating. We didn’t know if our house had stood. Our house stood.

Swaykos: Oh, great. Did it have any damage?

Howard: We had five trees—I live north of the tracks in Long Beach. And we had five trees down in the yard, and not a one of them hit the house, and water did not get over the tracks. The tracks acted as the natural buffer.

Swaykos: So when you were up there for ten days, did you have a TV? You had the Internet. Were you watching?

Howard: Constantly. We were—everybody else was going about their normal life, and we were—of course, we had three pairs of shorts and changes of underwear, typical. Everybody’s telling you the same stuff. We left expecting to be gone three days, and we spent enormous amounts of time watching TV and working on the Internet.

Swaykos: How were the other sisters in the convent reacting?

Howard: Well, they were about—they went to school. Their lives were not totally affected. They felt for us, and they suffered with us and did what they could to make our visit up there pleasant.

Swaykos: Right. And when you came back down, did you come by the school first, or did you go to your house first?

Howard: By that point we had heard our home had stood. Somebody had gotten a phone call up to us; they’d gotten by the house. And we had had the house boarded, and so we knew the house stood. So we came straight to school, and I remember when we drove south. Well, first of all, we were carrying forty gallons of gas in the trunk of the car; we expected to blow up.
Swaykos: Oh, gosh.

Howard: Yesterday, you know, on the way down, it was hot, and we stopped every hour to turn the knob on the gas cans so that we’d let the pressure out. I remember we first started to see trouble when we got south of Hattiesburg. And it really wasn’t ten days. I think we came back on the fifth of September, so it was about six or seven days. And we started to see the trees down. And the thing that I remember is it was cedar trees, and the smell was wonderful, the cedar smell, just as we got south of USM [The University of Southern Mississippi] along [Highway] 49. And I remember rolling down the window and saying to Sister because the smell of it was just that glorious cedar smell. Then when we got down, we got to I-10, and then we had trouble getting here to school. It was six, seven days after the storm; they had cleaned major roads, so there weren’t power lines down, but there were a lot of roads with so much debris we couldn’t get through. Now, we did manage to get here, and I don’t remember the route we took, but we did manage to get here.

Swaykos: Did they close [Highway] 90 down?

Howard: I must have come in [Highway] 90; they must have had [Highway] 90 open by then. And then somehow I jiggled my way over here, finding some roads that were open. I remember when we got here, I don’t know what I expected to find, but I remember being in shock when I got here. We’re twenty-two feet high, and we had seven feet of water.

Swaykos: My goodness.

Howard: The water was above the— the waterline was above the door frame.

Swaykos: So in this building here in your principal’s office—

Howard: Right here where you’re standing, it was above the waterline. The waterline was above the door, and we were wrecked, just wrecked. We were wrecked. And there’s about three inches of sludge on the floor.

Swaykos: So the water had receded by then?

Howard: It was all gone. Yeah, it was all gone. There was two cars in our schoolyard. The air conditioners were washed all over the place. I mean, these are several-ton units. We had a building out in back; there was a tree through the building. That building had to come down. It was down. We had no roof on this building; the roof had blown off. The church pews had somehow washed out of the church and had pounded a wall out.

Swaykos: Oh, my gosh.
Howard: The school bus had pounded into the side building and knocked a big, gaping hole in the wall of the side building. We had the school bus sitting in the hall of the other building. We have a tree in one building. We had no roof and one wall out in this building. This end of the hall held.

Swaykos: What’s the name of this building?

Howard: This is McCauley(?) Hall. Well, it’s two halls. One was the 1994 building, which is the one closest to the water. Mercy Hall lost the whole front wall that faced the beach and the roof. This building held, and then St. Joseph Hall had a bus in the hall with that whole wall out, Johnson(?) Hall, and St. Joseph Hall had a tree just outright down the middle of it. So we were shook. We were shook.

Swaykos: Yeah. So when you first showed up and saw all that—

Howard: We couldn’t get in, you know. There’s all this stuff was washed against the front door. We had to force our way in. Doors were all locked; you couldn’t get any of the keys to work. They’d all been under salt water. These were solid doors. It was almost impossible to break in. Pitch black.

Swaykos: The power was not on yet.

Howard: Oh, of course not; of course not. It was two weeks before we got, three weeks before we got power. Pitch black, hot as blazes, it was pretty awful.

Swaykos: As you were coming down, did you come down Beach Boulevard here?

Howard: Couldn’t get down Beach Boulevard; couldn’t for eight months, ten months, a year and a half. I don’t know. (laughter) We just started getting down Beach Boulevard recently. Yeah.

Swaykos: So as you were coming towards the school and you saw all the other buildings destroyed, what was going through your mind?

Howard: I was interested in that, but I was naïve enough to think, “Oh, well. Oh, well, there’s a big, old concrete block building. What’s going to happen at”—I don’t think I thought about it. I guess we knew we’d see something we didn’t like, but I don’t think—I was with Sister Alisa. I don’t think we had any clue. I had no clue. I had no clue.

Swaykos: Right. And what did you guys talk about together in those first couple minutes?

Howard: Well, I don’t know. It was probably more, “Oh, my God. Now what?” And of course what would flash through minds: our permanent records. What
condition were they in? That’s the one irreplaceable thing around here. And I remember thinking, “I wonder if we can ever open again?” I remember thinking that.

Swaykos: You actually thought that.

Howard: “Can we do this? What can we do?” We’re private education. Could we pull this off? I remember that.

Swaykos: Was this area—how was this hit during Camille, and how was it different?

Howard: I came to the Coast in [19]75, and this is my fourth storm. I was principal in Biloxi at the old Sacred Heart Girls High School during Fredrick, and we lost the roof of the school. And I was principal at OLA [Our Lady Academy]; I was principal here during Elena. Remember how Elena swung around. And we lost two roofs to Elena. And we put the roofs back on. And then I was principal in Gulfport at St. John’s during Georges, and we lost a roof there. Katrina, I was back here for Katrina, and we lost the whole place.

Swaykos: So this was the worst you’d seen.

Howard: Oh, the other time was roofs, and down here was all—and we don’t have the water damage. And as you looked around, even the only places even standing, even the shells—and they were shells—were the buildings right here. We’re twenty-two feet high. The church buildings stood. OLA’s main, this building, stood, and Stanislaus’s building stood. Nothing else. Those are those big, brick buildings over there. There wasn’t anything else standing. There was nothing. And I remember we didn’t lose a student to this storm. The closest we came, we had a family that put three daughters through OLA, and the parents lived on the beach, and they thought the house was indestructible—

Swaykos: And what was their names?

Howard: And they died; they died in the storm. Oh, it’ll come to me. We taught all three girls, and she was just here for her twenty-year reunion.

Swaykos: Oh, my gosh.

Howard: The daughter, the three girls. Shoot. It was in the [19]80s. It’ll come to me before we’re finished.

Swaykos: OK. And the parents both died during the storm?

Howard: Yeah, the house stood, but they were washed out.

Swaykos: I see.
Howard: How come I can’t remember that name? She was just here. OK. Anyway.

Swaykos: How were your friends and family who live over in Long Beach? You must have a neighborhood and community over there. How were they affected?

Howard: Nobody had water, but a lot of them had trees through their houses. There’s a lot of trees over there. We’ve spent very little time at home. The house stood. We had water; the [force of the] water was so strong that it washed in under the door, the front door. And so we had some mold and some cleanup over there, but it was hot, and we really spent very little time at home. Our job was up here. And so I don’t remember really talking a whole lot to the neighbors. We checked on them; they were all alive, and everybody was—some were gone. They left and didn’t come back till—a lot of people were smart and stayed away until electricity came back on because it’s so awful down here.

Swaykos: It’s so hot.

Howard: And you can’t keep food cold. We went three weeks without a—

Swaykos: Hot meal.

Howard: Without a hot meal. We got to be real good at MR[E]s [meals ready to eat].

Swaykos: (laughter) OK. How about your staff, your teachers? How were they affected?

Howard: We had twenty-four employees before the storm. I think we had fifteen that lost their homes. As of today we have all but one; we have one still in a FEMA [Federal Emergency Management Agency] trailer.

Swaykos: And who is that?

Howard: The head of our physical plant, our maintenance department. The others, they were all in FEMA trailers; then they were partially in a FEMA trailer and partially in their homes. And then they got back in their homes. The vice principal still doesn’t have any power for her kitchen.

Swaykos: And what’s the vice principal’s name?

Howard: Sue Goggins. She’s still waiting on countertops. Countertops and cabinets are like gold. (phone rings) I’ll get Virginia to get that.

Swaykos: No problem. (brief interruption)
Howard: But the rest of them are rebuilt. We’ve got two, I think, still living with relatives, and the rest are—it’s two years later now. And the rest are sort of in their homes.

Swaykos: Is there any one person’s story that you would like to share?

Howard: My favorite—and you might want to talk to her yourself. Did you turn that thing back on?

Swaykos: Yes, I did.

Howard: Our maintenance lady’s amazing. She’s been with us eight years.

Swaykos: And her name?

Howard: Janie Lesay(?). And she decided to ride the storm out here. She lives in Lake Shore, and she knew she was going to flood. She floods down in Lake Shore. So she said, “Sister, can I stay up here?” And I said, “Sure.” She’s done it before. So she started out in Johnson Hall, she and her husband. And Johnson Hall is right behind the church, and she thought the church would protect her. But that’s fairly close to the water, that way. OK. They parked their car in the courtyard, which is protected on three sides by buildings. So they thought the car would be all right. As the water rose, they moved farther away from the water. They first moved into this building, and then they moved to the gymnasium, which is the farthest end, a couple of hundred feet from the (inaudible), from the water at that point. I mean, we’re sitting on the water. A couple of hundred feet from the water. She got to the gym, and the water rose so high in the gym, it got above the bleachers, and she worried what would happen if it got higher than she could stand. Now, remember they’re seven feet high on the top of the bleachers. And so she and her husband got our big fifty-foot ladder, and broke out a window—a typical window way at the top of a gymnasium is fifty feet up—and let the volleyball net out the other side so that if they had to swim out, they could lower themselves on the volleyball net.

Swaykos: I see.

Howard: And then swim their way out. Now, the water never got above where she could stand on the top of the bleachers, but it took her—she loves this little school, as we all do. And it took her eight weeks, ten weeks to be able to come back here and even—their car washed (inaudible).

Swaykos: Clear out.

Howard: We don’t know where their car went.

Swaykos: Oh, my gosh.
Howard: It just washed out. And I guess her shock—it’s one of the better stories; it honestly is. And there was a boy at Stanislaus, wasn’t one of mine, the boys school next door, the boy, the way I got the story was he was swimming out a window, and he had his grandmother’s hand, and he wasn’t strong enough to hold her. That’s tough. That’s tough. Um-hm. Anyway, so.

Swaykos: OK. When did the water rise? As she’s traveling, is Katrina still outside? Is she running through the rain? Or was this after?

Howard: Who is she?

Swaykos: Your custodian.

Howard: It was raining; yeah, she was moving from building to building as the water’s rising. She’s just a little bit ahead of the water. I can get her for you if you want her; she’s on campus today. I don’t know what she—she doesn’t talk a lot about it. She probably would for an archival project.

Swaykos: I understand.

Howard: OK. Go ahead.

Swaykos: OK. So when did you reopen school?

Howard: OK. Initially we wondered if we’d ever have school. I mean, we didn’t know if we could do this. Where could we have school? We had no textbooks; we had no records. Well, the records we found; they were in a cabinet. They were in the vault, soaked, under seven feet of water. Sister Alisa took them home to our house and laid them out one by one to dry them off; took her six weeks, one by one, to dry them off. I’ll never forget it. And St. Stanislaus just threw theirs away. Their records went back to 1854; they had too many records. We had about a thousand permanent records, and Sister was able to dry them out. We have since copied them and sent a set out of state. I mean, we’ve learned that. OK. So after the storm, the next day or two, Brother Ronald who’s principal at St. Stanislaus and myself met. And their second floor held. We had seven feet of water; we only have one floor, so we were toast. But they had two stories, and their second floor held. And we decided that we would put the two schools together for last year. We coined the term, “two schools, one spirit.” Very distinct schools. I was principal of the girls school; he was principal of the boys school, but we had a common curriculum. I had my teachers; he had his, but we had a common staff. You know, it was a mess. And we needed to maintain our separate identities; we are separately governed. And it was interesting. You have two principals whose offices are as close to each other as you are to me, (laughter) both with our own distinct ways of running schools. It was most interesting. Anyway, they felt like they could get their second floor functional by November, and my staff jumped in, and we had to do a schedule. We had to hire teachers. Who was here? Who was not here? Where we duplicated? What were we going to do? It was very,
very hard, and we were doing it at my house for a while because our house was
standing. And then Brother got a condo in Diamondhead, and they started doing it
from the condo in Diamondhead. They got power up there before we got it at our
house. OK. So we started November 1, and I remember some fun things. We had in-
service at the end of October by candlelight; we still had no power up there. We had
no water when we started, and so we had a hundred thousand bottles of bottled water
donated to us.

Swaykos: Wonderful.

Howard: I’ll never forget it.

Swaykos: Wonderful.

Howard: An eighteen-wheeler full of bottled water for the kids to drink.

Swaykos: Who donated that?

Howard: One of them, one big truckload came from Anheuser-Busch, and those
bottles, they took one day at the brewery, and instead of making beer, they put water
in the beer cans. I mean, they (inaudible).

Swaykos: So they came in beer cans?

Howard: No, they didn’t come—I mean, it was that shape. It was a can like a beer
can, but they had put water or some generic thing on the outside of it. And so we had
water for all of our kids to drink. The other thing, the plumbing broke regularly, and I
remember, every time you had a—something went all the time at first. And so the
kids would be tromping out to the Port-o-lets, outside, to go to the potty. We had
some books; we didn’t have a lot. We had power most of the time. I mean, you can’t
have school without power. So a few days it went down for a while, but on the whole,
we had power. You have to have power and running water to really have school, but
the water wasn’t drinkable. It wasn’t potable for months. So anyway, we started in
November, and we ran a funny schedule. Instead of meeting seven periods a day, we
met eight, and we repeated a period every day. Monday we repeated period one, and
Tuesday, we repeated period two, and we did that because we’d lost so much time; we
needed to make up time. And doing it that way, we got far more hours in than the
state required, so we were satisfied.

Swaykos: Oh, great. How many students did OLA have before the storm?

Howard: We had 280 the day before the storm. We started after the storm; we
thought between—the boys had about 550. We were about 800 on the two campuses.
They had a boarding school. And we thought if we started after the storm jointly with
175, we thought we’d died and gone to heaven. But we started in the mid-twos [two
hundreds]. We don’t know where they were living, but what you heard from the kids
was that their life had been turned upside-down, and the only stabilizing—they were in FEMA trailers; they were in tents; they were with Grandma. The families are separated. The stabilizing force for them was their school. And if OLA was going to open, they were coming back to OLA. Plus they were interested in going over to Stanislaus for a year, too. (laughter) They thought that’d be kind of an adventure. And time and time again, we heard parents say, “We don’t want to come back, but Sally won’t even consider it. She’s thrown such a fit, we’re coming back. We don’t know where we’re going to live, but Sally will be in school.”

Swaykos: How did you get the word out that you were opening?

Howard: Well, we had a meeting. There was one mass. First of all, I had girls. Now, I guarantee you; word gets around with girls. (laughter) It’s magic; it’s magic what happens. I remember after church one day; there was one mass, we had it out on the sand almost, the church steps because you certainly couldn’t go in the church. There was no floor. The air-conditioning had washed up from underneath and all kinds of stuff. There were no pews, and I remember saying, letting the word out to two or three people I knew, two or three of the Amali(?) kids that we were going to have a meeting after mass. And so the kids, about sixty-five of them met with me after mass, and I said, “We’re going to open November 1, and get ready.” And the word spread like wildfire because girls spread the word. The boys had a little more trouble; they could not have the boarding school, so they couldn’t have boarders. I think we opened with about 250 kids. OLA started with—I don’t know—a hundred and something, and we ended last year with 213. They dribbled in all year, 213 girls. We began this year with 240.

Swaykos: Wow, so that’s almost (inaudible).

Howard: And we will begin—no, we were at 280 before the storm. And we will begin next year in the 260s. And I think it’s a tremendous compliment to the little school. But I also think we didn’t play at education last year. While everybody else was playing at education, we had school. Eighty-four percent of my graduates last year had a college scholarship.

Swaykos: A scholarship.

Howard: Eighty-four percent had a college—seven out of forty-three had a college scholarship last year.

Swaykos: That’s great.

Howard: It was a fabulous year for us in the midst of just nightmares.

Swaykos: So none of your academics fell.
Howard: No, it really didn’t. Of course, with a smaller school, we brought back the best of the two faculties. So you know, you had a really good teacher; the teacher doesn’t need a book. The teacher doesn’t need—well, we had some books. Stanislaus had their old bookroom on the third floor, and so we had old books. We didn’t have any modern stuff, but I teach geometry, and geometry hadn’t changed since Euclid. So it doesn’t make any difference. (laughter) And there was a book from the [19]70s, sitting up, collecting mold up in the bookroom, and I taught out of that book. We all taught; administration taught. Everybody taught, and I remember thinking it was a fine book. I taught a course, taught a good course. And we really had an amazing year; it was amazing. It was a good year.

Swaykos: So how many, when you blended the staffs, how many people did not come back?

Howard: I brought ten back.

Swaykos: OK, out of twenty-four, you said?

Howard: Um-hm. And some of the others wanted to come back, but I didn’t have a position. It’s the hardest thing I ever did. You feel like the dog is down, and what do you do? You kick the dog. The bishop was very good; he gave a very nice severance package to all of our teachers.

Swaykos: Wonderful.

Howard: And ultimately, we hired every one of them back except for one. Those that could come back, all are now back at OLA except for one.

Swaykos: And that one, it was their choice, or there just wasn’t room?

Howard: I chose not to; I chose not to. And so it was pretty painful, but a lot of those people needed the year to get their houses back together, too. As they look back on it, they got a nice severance package; they got a year off, and the ten of us that fought through last year were just beat up at the end of last year.

Swaykos: I’m sure it was exhausting.

Howard: Then the second worry was, would we ever come back over here, or would the bishop leave it as one coed [coeducational] school? We want two distinct schools, and so my first goal was to get started. Stanislaus helped me do that. My second goal was to come home, and we managed that. We came home the beginning of this year, started on our own campus. We have the only all-girls school in the state. We pride ourselves on that.

Swaykos: Good.
Howard: We’re very good. And my third goal now, honestly, before I die, retire, whatever, is to get that back building built and to have one nickel left over. I don’t know if I’ll do that.

Swaykos: A nickel.

Howard: I don’t know if I’ll do that. One nickel. All I need is one nickel left over, and I don’t know if I’ll accomplish that or not. We’ll see.

Swaykos: What I’m going to do is, I’m going to turn the tape over now (inaudible). (brief interruption)

Howard: It’s my favorite story of all the stories. (Inaudible) we had CNN [Cable News Network], major TV stations all over the campus for weeks and weeks and weeks. At one point—it was about January—CNN wanted to come in and do a documentary on the kids. We said, “Fine.” No, it was before Christmas because I remember we were doing an Advent service. And so they sent the advance team at eight in the morning, and those were the people that took pictures. And they walked around with their cameras and took all kinds of pictures. And the people, the head guys were supposed to come at ten to do the interviews. And at about eleven, Brother came to me and said, “Sister, did CNN come in and do the interview for you?” And I said, “No, I hadn’t seen anybody. I figured you had done it.” He looks a little better than I do (laughter); he speaks a little better, and I’m perfectly willing to let him do it. Plus it was on his campus, and I was teaching. He was teaching, too. And well, anyway, about an hour later, we got a call, and CNN, whoever called, said that they were scrapping the story, that there really wasn’t anything happening here with us. And the line they used, I’ll never forget it. They said, “Sister, you’re just having school.” There weren’t kids passing out in the hall, all of this. And I remember walking away, thinking, “They have just paid me the highest compliment that could possibly be paid. Yes, we are just having school.”

Swaykos: So even, they looked beyond all the broken buildings, all the broken windows, and all they saw was school.

Howard: We had school, and we had a second floor. The place was still wrecked; you walk over there, it’s completely wrecked. We had school. We were just having school. Don’t you like that? That’s kind of—

Swaykos: That’s neat.

Howard: That’s kind of neat; that’s kind of neat.

Swaykos: That’s great.

Howard: Feeding them lunch was complicated. They ate MR[E]s for a while.
Swaykos: They did?

Howard: The girls didn’t like them so much, but for the boys, it was fine. As soon as we got any power, we set up our kitchen area. Ours was easier to get up. It’s a little canteen basically that goes with the—and we had a lady who came in and managed to put something together to feed us. So we actually ate over here.

Swaykos: Are meals usually included in tuition?

Howard: No, they pay extra for it, but the parents were so glad that they could get something hot. We don’t fry food here; we never do, never did. And she would cook. There were limits, but she could do spaghetti, and she could do jambalaya, and she could do red beans and rice. And she would do hamburgers some days. We had managed to get a stove and a refrigerator. People had donated those to us. And with that, we were able to start.

Swaykos: And at that point, where were you getting your groceries? I know a lot of places—

Howard: Well, I don’t know where she was getting all that. We still don’t have a grocery store in Bay St. Louis. We have Wal-Mart, and for the older people, it’s just too imposing to be at Wal-Mart. We need a grocery store so badly. She managed to get—I guess Wal-Mart was open by then, and even so you could get—before they got Wal-Mart open, they were in tents out on their parking lot, and you could get the staples of food there, and you don’t have to cook fresh meat and stuff. And we went months without meat. And you get to the point where you appreciate ice so much. (laughter) Every morning our process would be to get up; we’d go over to Long Beach High School. We’d pick up a cooler full of ice. We’d drive over here to school, and we’d work as long as we could. This was before we started class. We mucked it out, trying to save anything we could save. When we could no longer stand the smell and the dark and the heat, and ice was your—and then you’d call it quits. And we’re not young. And ice was just, it was just so wonderful to have ice. But other things (inaudible). You see the teapot behind you?

Swaykos: Right.

Howard: Before the storm, it sat on top of a four-door file cabinet. There was a bookcase over there, and when I came into the office after the storm, the water had washed the teapot; it floated over to the top of the file cabinet and was unbroken on a shelf of the bookcase. We lost a teacup; there were four, but it actually floated from there over to there and didn’t break.

Swaykos: And all the cups as well?

Howard: Three of the four; we lost the fourth.
Swaykos: I see.

Howard: Amazing. I mean amazing! And there was nothing here, and here’s this teapot.

Swaykos: What was the first thing you wanted to see that was OK here?

Howard: I was fixated on the permanent records. I was very clear that was what was irreplaceable. The rest of the stuff we knew we could—I’m not real sentimental. I care about my teapot, but I could have lived without that. I was after records, and then we hired these—the church people hired a company to come in and muck the building out, and it was people who didn’t speak English. And I remember standing and guarding my permanent records because they didn’t speak English, their job was to clean it out. They were pitching everything. And when I’d say, “Do not—read my lips. Do not take these file cabinets,” they didn’t understand me. And I thought, “Golly, these things are going to go floating away. Here we saved them, and they’re going to end up in the trash heap.” So I remember that. And the supervisors that spoke English, they were American, but they aren’t always right. And we’d lay into them, “Do not touch these file cabinets; these are our permanent records.” At that point, Sister Alisa knew she was going to tackle them. (laughter) I wouldn’t have. I would have thrown them away probably, but anyway.

Swaykos: What problems did those records cause you?

Howard: Well, Sister dried them all out.

Swaykos: They’re all back?

Howard: Well, there’s a copy of them all back. See, we lost all alumni lists, all alumni records. We had no idea who graduated what year. We had no pictures on the wall, and all the class pictures that were on the wall washed away. We still don’t know—our job all next year is to get our alumni database back. We haven’t had time to do that yet. So those were the only records that gave us anything. You know, I first came here in 1985, and I got to tell you; all this stuff flows together after twenty-five years.

Swaykos: Right. Was any of it kept on computer databases?

Howard: It was not.

Swaykos: It was not. Is that something you guys are going to do?

Howard: We had the records—well, that’s true. We had the records from the last two years in a computerized database, and one of our teachers took the computer tower home with her. And when the water started to rise in her house, she had gone to
Stennis, but her husband had stayed at home. He had a choice of saving the computer or saving their thirty-two-inch TV. He saved the computer, which was our records. We owe him big time. So we at least have the last two years of computerized—are we actually going to computerize them some time? Probably not those old ones, but we started about three years ago doing it, four years ago, now, and it’s all being maintained that way, now.

Swaykos: What computers and other equipment did you lose in the classrooms? Did you lose everything?

Howard: We did not have a piece of paper left when they got through mucking it out, except the two file cabinets with permanent records and a teapot. I mean, that’s it; that’s it.

Swaykos: That’s amazing.

Howard: There was nothing else here, and I must say; this is my forty-first year in Catholic education, and this is the first time in my forty-one years that there’s been any help for nonpublic education from the federal government.

Swaykos: I was going to ask you about that.

Howard: The restart dollars that President Bush signed with the HERA Act, the Hurricane Education Recovery Act, covered our schools, too. And so everything you see is owned by the federal government, but—

Swaykos: Owned or donated?

Howard: It’s owned by the federal—well, this isn’t actually. Hancock Bank, the big Hancock Bank building in Gulfport, they had water on the first three floors, and then they had a bunch of windows blown out. And they decided to overhaul the whole building, and so one of the vice presidents is one of my parents, and he went through all the rooms where the windows weren’t blown out and tagged all the furniture for OLA. So all the furniture you see in here is Hancock Bank furniture, but everything that’s not Hancock—we brought about six truckloads of Hancock Bank furniture over here. But everything that’s not Hancock Bank is owned by the federal government, and it’s about three-quarters of a million dollars worth of stuff.

Swaykos: And when did you get all this?

Howard: Over the course of the last year and a half. I remember two deliveries. One was a hundred and fifty-five thousand dollars in technology. We had this whole hall, and this is a long hall, just filled with computer boxes, and I am not a technologically skilled person. I’m an old nun, and I predate all that stuff. And I remember looking at that and thinking, “Oh, my God. What in the world is all of that?” I wear this because it looks good; I no more could use this flashcard than the man in the moon,
plus I lost the end of it. That’s the one thing I remember, and trying to figure out what you needed. The other thing I remember is the day 289 boxes of stuff arrived from Beerco(?), and we lined them all up and down the hall, and all 289 boxes was stuff that had to be assembled.

Swaykos: Oh, my gosh.

Howard: And I have a school full of women and no maintenance department. (laughter) And I was standing in the hall, looking at this stuff, thinking, “Hm, what am I going to do about this little task?”

Swaykos: Right. It got done?

Howard: It got done. The girls—I mean—

Swaykos: They’re smart girls.

Howard: We do, and this little school, everybody loves this little school, and I don’t know. People come out of the woodwork.

Swaykos: Speaking of that, all girls and everybody loving the school, what was their reaction like when they saw the school the first time?

Howard: Oh, it was shock. And could Sister do this? Could we ever have OLA again? And I was surprised at the number of—Dagnall is the one whose parents were killed. Georganna(?) Dagnall was. There are three Dagnall girls, and it was the Dagnalls, D-A-G-N-A-L-L. OK. They were on CNN, Nicole(?) Dagnall was on CNN a couple of times with Kathleen Koch. And what was I saying?

Swaykos: I was asking the girls’ reaction.

Howard: Oh. I was surprised at the number of alums that came back to check out the school, and they’d see Sister. Sister Alisa and I’d be out here in our shorts, and we’d have these big straw hats on, and we would be muck from head to toe, and they’d stop off just to hug us. And by that point, people knew pretty quickly we were going to move over to Stanislaus, and we were going to put OLA back together. And I think pretty quickly there was confidence that if it could be done, we would do it. I don’t think—not trying isn’t an option. You have to try. I guess it’s that simple.

Swaykos: Did you feel a lot of pressure from all the girls who were looking at you to do this?

Howard: No. No, they knew I was doing my best, and I had no doubt we would have school. At that point, I knew we would have school at St. Stanislaus. I don’t know if I could have done it myself. I was in shock, I think, for six weeks. I give St. Stanislaus all the credit in the world for us getting back last year. My staff was a huge
help, and my girls were a huge asset, but I don’t—I have no doubt it was—they pulled it off.

**Swaykos:** I was reading your Web site last night, and saw when you were starting school this year, that there were no desks, and they had to sit on the floor for a while. (laughter)

**Howard:** Well, we did that, and honestly, they don’t care a lick about that. They were fine; they were so glad to be back in school. And we did have—and the rooms are carpeted, and the air-conditioning, it was cool. It was fine.

**Swaykos:** How long did it take to get desks?

**Howard:** Oh, about three weeks. It wasn’t too bad, and we had some donated. We had about a hundred that were donated. So we had two or three rooms that had desks, and we were still—and it worked. I had forgotten about that. (laughter) Yeah, we started without desks.

**Swaykos:** How did the coed year go for the kids? What did you see in them? (laughter)

**Howard:** Well, they loved it; they loved it. It was, I think—now, this is my reflection only. When you have—I think there are advantages to single-sex schools, and I think in an all-girls school, you have rituals. They don’t mind saying they love OLA; they’ll say they don’t want to go to school, but if they got to go to school, they don’t want to be anywhere but OLA. And we have our old rituals and our own way of doing things, and my favorite story is one day—and we tried to maintain our rituals. And my favorite (laughter) story, and it’s such a difference between boys and girls. We wanted to have our big sister-little sister activity, and they decided they’d do their big brother-little brother activity the same day. That’s fine. So we had our typical little sister-big sister; we hugged, and we cried, and we gave flowers to each other, and we sang the alma mater, and all this frou-frou girl stuff. (laughter) And I bounced over to St. Stanislaus afterwards. We had ours over here in the community center, which was at least standing, by that point. Well, it had a roof; it didn’t have walls. And Brother had his in his main meeting area over there. And I went over to him afterwards, and I said, “Well, Brother, how was yours?” No. He said, “Sister, how’d your little sister-big sister go?” And I said, “Oh, fine. We hugged, and we cried, and we gave each other flowers, and we sang the alma mater, and it was wonderful.” And then I looked at him, and I said, “Brother, how did yours go?” And he said, “Well, the boys endured.” (laughter) And I think you have marvelous advantages to single-sex schools. You do things very differently. But I think where we’re so lucky is I can have all the advantages of an all-girls school, and there’s four hundred pairs of khaki pants across the street for all the socialization you want. So we worked very hard. There were more boys than girls who came back. Of course, Stanislaus was bigger to start with. And we worried; we didn’t want to get lost. The girls were a little bit timid; they hadn’t been on the boys’ campus before, and girls just tend to go about and
do their business, where boys can be a little rowdy and act out a little bit more. And we were worried the girls were getting lost. And so we tried real hard to really maintain their traditions and our rituals. We ritualize very well. And—

**Swaykos:** Can you share any of those rituals?

**Howard:** Well, that was the little sister-big sister I told you about. That’s the one that sticks in mind. We had May crowning, which is a religious event for the Catholic schools, and I remember that because we didn’t have a statue of Mary. They’d all washed out to sea. What are we going to crown for May crown? And so they found one statue; Mary had no arm and no nose. Mary was wrecked! I mean, it was out on the ground somewhere; they found this little statue of Mary, and I’ll never forget it. OK. “Now, is it sacrileges to crown a busted-up statue of Mary?” And I talked about it with the seniors, and they said, “No.” They said, “Sister, Mary’s still standing, and it’s just like all of us. We’re beat-up, but we’re still standing. We want to crown that Mary.” We crowned that Mary. And graduation is always deeply moving. There were no pews. There was hardly a floor. There was no altar. But they marched down the center of that church like they were big stuff; it didn’t make a lick of difference. (laughter) There was scaffolding all up the side, and they graduated with great pride.

**Swaykos:** How many of them that year?

**Howard:** We graduated forty-three last year.

**Swaykos:** And this year?

**Howard:** Forty-one. It’s always been a smaller class. We will graduate fifty-five next year.

**Swaykos:** Oh, my gosh.

**Howard:** And then we have some lean years, a couple more. And then we have three classes closed for next year. The kids are—they’re already full. And then, we’re bouncing back.

**Swaykos:** Were there any signs in the girls of some emotional distress? Did you have any mental health services, anything like that?

**Howard:** We had the mental health services. I think we had them as much for the faculty as for anybody else. I found the girls to be all right. The day school started; we had the kids raise their hands, “How many of you are in FEMA trailers or tents?” And well over 60 percent put their hands up. The day we started, we had Congressman [Gene] Taylor was here; both mayors were here. And we started with a bang. And of course, President [George W.] Bush was on our campus as one of his many trips. He spoke from the gymnasium; it was the only building standing of our
buildings. The story that tugs at my heart is the grade-school story. They started, and
they’re a little higher than we are. They only had three feet of water. So they started;
they’re right behind us. And they started in October, and the time I remember, I was
down there at the end of the day. They had aftercare till six o’clock. And at six
o’clock there was all these little kids who were throwing their arms around—they
were about as high as the teacher’s knees. They’re throwing their arms around their
teacher’s knees, and they’re saying, “We don’t want to go home.” I mean, who wants
to go to a FEMA trailer with stressed parents when they can stay at school and play
with their friends? And these parents had to pry these kids away from these teachers.
We realized the kids didn’t want to go home. And so we ran Thursday afternoon
movies; we fielded every sports team we could field. We fielded a volleyball team
and didn’t have a gym. I mean, it’s a miracle we could do any of it. And our soccer
team made it to the finals of the state; we lost in the state championship. We were
practicing on a field over at the seminary. So you had a lot more hanging around
school. Nobody wanted to go home. Last year, I found the parents just so grateful
that we were having school; whatever we did was all right. This year I have found—I
think we thought once we came home, everything was going to be fine. We moved
back to our campus; everything’s back to normal. Well, of course everything’s not
back to normal. And I have found the parents much more stressed this year, more
inclined to overreact. “Susie got a C because Miss so-and-so hates her.” You know.
Where last year, they didn’t care. The fact that Susie was in school they were happy
about. And I think we who thought this was all going to go away this year found that
we were just stupid. It got worse. I do not know of any cases of abuse or of
alcoholism. I know there was tremendous stress. We have been on the fringes of
several suicides, [but] not a student [has committed suicide]. We’ve had a couple that
are graduates of Stanislaus (inaudible) in a murder-suicide.

Swaykos: I did hear about that.

Howard: We’ve heard about several of those cases. We’ve had a couple of kids’
parents have broken up over all this. Who do they go stay with?

Swaykos: So then the divorce rate is higher?

Howard: Oh, sure. Who you going to go stay with? Yes, we have kids with
emotional issues that didn’t have emotional issues before. And we know about them;
we’re small enough, we know about them.

Swaykos: Right, definitely.

Howard: But the kids tend to pretty much cope. Our counselors were very good.
Our counselor is really a college counselor and a personal counselor. Stanislaus’s was
a personal counselor and a college counselor, and between the two, they were really
able to service the students’ needs academically and deal pretty much with their
personal issues. We have sent a few more than usual to professional counselors
(inaudible).
**Swaykos:** How many more do you think?

**Howard:** I don’t know. Numbers are different. I’d say percentagewise, probably twice as many this year. It might only be ten, but—well, it wouldn’t be five normally. I just said, “Oh, you’re getting past what we can handle.” On the whole, they simply had school, as CNN said.

**Swaykos:** What sort of behaviors are the teachers looking out for, to see that in the girls, to refer them?

**Howard:** It wasn’t that we referred them; they would refer themselves. They’d wander into the counselors and say, “This is just getting to me.” And we had a few of them with meltdowns, but they don’t melt down in the class. They’d go to the counselor’s office, or they’d get with one of their friends, and the friends would come to us and say, “She’s in the bathroom, and she’s having a meltdown, Sister. You better go do something about that.” We’d go get her. We had teachers who had the same meltdowns. They’d go sob behind closed doors, and somebody would hold them, and then they’d sniffle, wash their face, and go back to school because that’s what you did.

**Swaykos:** Do you still have the counselors around, or have they gone?

**Howard:** We both have our counselors. They kept up with some of our kids; some of the kids will be seeing them over the summer. On the whole, it might be long-term stuff, but day-to-day, they had something to do at school. They had their friends; they had stuff to study. Studying was very hard; they tended to stay at school later to study. You’re not going to find any place to study in a FEMA trailer, plus they really didn’t have computers in the FEMA trailers, and by that point we had gotten a few computers up that they could do some research with. Of course, the libraries were gone. You take a look at the senior class we graduated this year; 9/11 [September 11, 2001 terrorist attack on Twin Towers and Pentagon] happened in their seventh-grade year. We’re a seven–through-twelve school. That same week of 9/11, we over here were moving into this building. It was brand-new. [Five] years later, this building went. So we watched this building go. My senior class spent last year at Stanislaus; brought the school home this year. It’s been a tumultuous high-school career for those kids; they have grown up fast, much faster than anybody wanted to see them have to grow up.

**Swaykos:** Right. So you see more of a maturity coming out of them than problems, maybe?

**Howard:** Yeah, I’ve seen that. Also I think change—you can’t—oh, what do I want to say? They roll with change. Let’s just say that.
Swaykos: OK. Great. As far as your student makeup goes, did you have anyone come over from the public schools once you reopened?

Howard: We had three or four come over from the public schools. Bay High was in trailers, but there was not a lot of that. Now, a lot of my girls, the hundred that didn’t return when the year started, either dribbled back during the year or spent last year out of state, and then are still dribbling back, dribbled back this year. And there are some of them even dribbling back next year; we did not have a lot of movement.

Swaykos: OK. What’s the ethnic and racial makeup of your school?

Howard: It’s about 8 percent minority. The rest is white Anglo-Saxon.

Swaykos: And your socioeconomic status is that—

Howard: Would be upper middle.

Swaykos: —high middle.

Howard: You have to have fifty-two hundred dollars to pay tuition and fees.

Swaykos: A year, OK.

Howard: Now, last year we waived that. Well, no, we collected tuition last year. I mean, I had to pay my teachers something. We didn’t give them a free ride. Most of them managed last year; it got harder this year while they still couldn’t get—a lot of the businesses that aren’t back are the Mom-and-Pop businesses. The casino industry is up and booming, and a lot of my parents were small-business owners. And my parents lived on the beach, and they’re the ones, of course that are all gone. But they weren’t without means, and they were insured. Nobody was well-insured, but they’re coping.

Swaykos: How many of your kids do you think are still living with relatives, with Grandma and Grandpa and—

Howard: Ten percent. That’s a flat-out guess off the top of my head. That’d be sixteen, fifteen kids; that’s probably fair.

Swaykos: OK. Let’s see. What would you say was or still is your greatest problem in recovery?

Howard: It’s changed. Right now, it’s dealing with FEMA. FEMA is my new best friends, and I really do believe that the local folks are trying every way they can to get this building built for me. I believe that Washington, President Bush, and the Congress tried every way they could. They appropriated the money. Somehow between right here, with the guy I work with here, Larry, and President Bush, there’s
this paper trail, all this magic thing all through here. And that’s the problem, is working your way through that maze—

Swaykos: The bureaucracy of it.

Howard: —to get your buildings back up. And I see that as the biggest problem. Right now for us to get our building, and then we’re back where we were.

Swaykos: Did you have any private funding come in from alumni that weren’t here?

Howard: A tremendous amount. Sometimes the alums—I’m a Sister of Mercy, and we have thirty-four Mercy high schools in the United States. I belong to a major religious order. Enormous money came from the Sisters of Mercy and the Mercy Ministries in the Catholic church to this little school. It’s very well-connected.

Swaykos: Now, did the sisters that you were staying with in the convent, did they later come down and give any help?

Howard: No, I was actually staying with one sister in Clarksdale; she’s principal of a little school in Clarksdale. She has since been down, but not to help. Volunteers are a lot of help and a lot of trouble. (laughter) Where are they going to stay? How are you going to feed them? All of that kind of stuff. For a long time, the only showers in all of Bay St. Louis were in my locker room. We had every volunteer in the city coming into our locker room and showering. I finally got my gym put back together, and then they’re trashing it with all the volunteers in there. And of course, I didn’t have doors, so I couldn’t control anything.

Swaykos: Right. And was somebody helping with that water bill?

Howard: No. And that just—but you wanted those people to shower. Volunteers are a blessing and a curse; let’s just say that. I found that to be; although without some volunteers, I don’t know how this 289 boxes of stuff would have gotten assembled.

Swaykos: Right. What was the most touching volunteer experience that you had from a company or a single person?

Howard: A volunteer?

Swaykos: Volunteer, donation?

Howard: We had a little school, little grade school, and I got this big box one time, and it was all full of their pennies. And it was about $120, and they had collected all of this in little, bitty stuff, and these little kids wrote me these little notes, “Sister, we hope this helps your little school.” It was touching. Then we had—the other one I remember is we had—what is that? Family Radio Network, they have—Christian Family Radio, CFR, something like that. And they did a lot of broadcasts from here,
and now, they were—what I remember about them is—I don’t know if it’s touching, but they were so organized; they had maps of the area. They were sleeping in my gym, and they had maps. A hundred and fifty of them, they had maps of the area, all over, and they had like a general out there, directing them, “You five go here, and you four go there.” They did some really, really good work. You also got to the point where the volunteers needed to be skilled labor. Initially just mucking it out, you could use any kid, but you soon got to the point where you needed people that could do the electrical work and put the sheetrock up. And we had a volunteer group that was hanging the ceilings in the other building, and in the course of hanging the ceiling grid, put ninety-seven holes in my sheetrock; it’s a step forward and two steps back, going two steps backward. And I don’t think anything much touched—(brief interruption)

Swaykos: —volunteers, how much would you estimate you lost in dollars, and how much would you estimate that you’ve gained back in dollars?

Howard: OK. It was a million, one [\$1.1 million] to do McCulley(?) Hall. It was five hundred thousand for Mercy Hall; that’s a million, six [\$1.6 million]. It was two hundred [thousand] to do Johnson Hall; that’s a million, eight [\$1.8 million]. And it’s two million to put St. Joseph Hall back up, three, eight [\$3.8 million] is what we lost. As of this moment, from the insurance, donations, and some restart monies, we’ve gotten about a million, eight, and the other two [million], we’re hoping will come from FEMA as we rebuild St. Joseph Hall.

Swaykos: OK. Do you see any foreseeable increase in tuition because of this?

Howard: Certainly. We are tuition-based. We are hoping to put—we went up three hundred dollars this year. I mean, we went from forty-nine [\$4900] to fifty-two [\$5200], which is still about half of what any private school in New Orleans charges.

Swaykos: Definitely.

Howard: The inability to fund-raise—it took us a while to get that started back up. Also our development program laid dormant all last year. We didn’t have a development director.

Swaykos: I see.

Howard: And so those kinds of things that supplement tuition had to be made up in tuition this year. We now have our development program back up; we have our traditional fund-raising activities back in place, but there’s going to be an increase in tuition every year as long as I’m alive. You got to pay a salary raise every year.

Swaykos: Definitely. Did you experience any conflict between, “We need this, we need this, we need this,” and the values of safety, getting the girls their education back as quickly as possible?
Howard: Safety, every once in a while, I’d worry about all the boxes in the hall, if we would have a fire. And the fire department would snarl at me regularly because we had a path about this wide through the halls, but honestly, this is a one-story, concrete-block building with four windows in every room. If worse came to worst, they’d get out the windows, so I really didn’t—you worried more about a gas leak and stuff like that. You didn’t worry about intruders. Lord, I mean, we hardly had doors. Everything was wide open. No, I can’t say that overwhelmed me, safety and things like that.

Swaykos: OK. Being a Catholic school, how has religion and everyone’s faith in God played into the recovery process?

Howard: I think we’ve all gone through changing emotions. Right after the storm, I heard, we had an awful lot about, “mad at God.” “What in the world is he doing up in heaven, letting this happen?” And I remember people looking at the water and saying, “I can’t look at the water.”

Swaykos: This is kids or faculty?

Howard: This is kids. “I can’t look at the water. I’m mad at the water. I can’t look and enjoy the”—they said that. “I’m mad at the water. I’m mad at God.” Who do you strike out at when something this awful happens? Once they got back in school, and we started to rebound, that settled down, and they got to the point where their faith was a sustaining force. Well, and it helped, too, the church on Sunday became the social event of the week. That’s when they saw everybody, and they’re killing themselves, working, the rest of the week. So I think they would tell you now, their faith is probably greater. But at this age, who knows what they—I mean, who knows? I know I went through the myriad of emotions, “God, what are you doing?” And I have tremendous faith. I don’t know why bad things happen. I mean, I can quote you some theological answer, but why does a God who loves me so much let bad things like this happen? I don’t know.

Swaykos: In the beginning, were you trying to increase prayer, church, when everyone was in the process of coming back? Or did you leave it just the same as it had been?

Howard: Just stayed the way it was. Of course, prayer is a tremendous part of a Catholic school. Every ritual we do is tied up with our God, and every class begins with prayer. Every day begins with prayer. We just stayed with those traditional things. And getting a priest to say mass got to be real hard, too. There weren’t very many priests around for a while, and they were doing yeoman work, but they’re trying to rebuild churches.

Swaykos: Right. I understand that there’s some church issues going on between a couple of churches right now.
Howard: Yeah, the bishop has chosen not to rebuild one of the traditional churches on the beach, been on the beach since the 1850s. And it went in the [1947] storm; it went in Camille. It went this time, and he’s chosen to rebuild it out of harm’s way. And the traditionalists among the parish want their church right back where it was on the beach. And there’s tremendous controversy. I think it’s the conflict between a democratic society and a hierarchical church.

Swaykos: And what two churches is it?

Howard: It’s St. (inaudible) and St. Paul’s in Pass Christian. Well, St. Paul’s in Pass Christian was the one that set off controversy. And I think other people will say it’s not the conflict between a democratic society and a hierarchical church. The bishop’s words is that what you have is you have the individual rights in the United States, and you have the common good. And when that stays in balance, then life works. When it gets out of balance, then stuff happens. And he says that it’s out of balance, that individual rights have superseded the common good, and that becomes problematic.

Swaykos: We were discussing earlier that you had, even though you’re a faith-based school, you had some federal help, and you’re working with FEMA. Has the state of Mississippi, the Department of Education, or any local government helped you out in any way?

Howard: It depends how you take help. First of all, MEMA [Mississippi Emergency Management Agency] is working with FEMA, and all the federal money’s come through MEMA. So Mississippi Emergency Management is involved. The state department has been fabulous. They have waived all of our accreditation responsibilities for the last couple of years, all the paper trail. Certification, they’ve let ride a little bit for teachers and for the school. It’s very difficult to hire teachers, let alone qualified teachers. There’s no place for anybody to live. And so I got a staff because I went out; I’ve been here a long, long time, and I went out and pulled anybody who owed me anything. (laughter) I went and collected on it. And we have seven alums on our staff, and our school is very, very strong because of it. But I have found—and the Southern Association, which is our other major accrediting agency, has been very forgiving about things they would normally nail us for while we begin to try and put this whole (inaudible). We have not had time to deal with things like accreditation hours. Who has time to go do that? We (inaudible). People have been very good. They’ve helped us out with books. The restart dollars have been invaluable. We’d still be sitting on the floor.

Swaykos: Right. Was the school insured?

Howard: Yes.

Swaykos: And how has that come through or dealing with the insurance companies?
Howard: Well, we got 62.4 cents on the dollar of destroyed loss. They evaluate our loss at 3.6 [million dollars]. It’s going to come out around 3.8, 3.9, maybe even four million [dollars] by the time all the dust settles. And we’ve got—oh, I don’t know. A million, a million, three [$1.3 million] I guess. That’s not 62 [cents]. They must have evaluated—FEMA put it at 3.6 [million dollars]. The diocese, their adjustor put it much, much lower. We got a million, two, [$1.2 million] and we got a whole building to build, which is going to cost more than a million, two all by itself.

Swaykos: Right. So the other finances have come from FEMA, we’re hoping.

Howard: And from volunteers, too. And many different benefactors.

Swaykos: Um-hm. All of your kids—has this year’s school performance, education level, been as high? Last year, they came back, and they were working extra hard to make up the time. Now that the dust has settled, the scores have increased—

Howard: Well, we just finished this year. Last year we graduated forty-three; 84 percent had a college scholarship. This year we graduated forty-one; 76 percent had a college scholarship. Our ACT [American College Testing] scores are the highest we’ve ever had this year. We have ten girls with—ten out of forty-one had a thirty or higher in English. Wow. Ten out of forty-one. I would say the educational level has stayed very, very high. The kids will tell you that the teachers came back with a vengeance and just nailed them. We thought we were pretty liberal. We couldn’t require the readings we traditionally do; there was no place to get the books. We thought we were pretty wonderful. (laughter) They’ll say they thought that we were brutal, so I don’t know. Maybe we were brutal.

Swaykos: Where did you get the textbooks? Are they all back?

Howard: Well, the textbooks, we got a huge grant from the Raskob Foundation. It’s a group in Williamsburg, I think. And we bought all our textbooks with that when we got ours, although restart would have taken care of that. We didn’t know it at the time.

Swaykos: So that was everything back this year?

Howard: Yes.

Swaykos: OK. What do you see as the greatest remaining challenge in recovery for you right now, where the school stands today?

Howard: For me it’s to get that building up.

Swaykos: OK. How long do you think that’ll take?
Howard: Two years. Two more years, another year of negotiating and then a year building it.

Swaykos: And are you designing it the same way it was before? Are you taking an all-new twist to it?

Howard: No, it was—OK. For FEMA it is considered a footprint. It was six classrooms, two bathrooms, and a locker room, and we are rebuilding six classrooms, two bathrooms, and a locker room. It’s a footprint; it was a 1931 building. It was a wood building, a raised building, grandfathered every code in the world. The new building must be built to code; the new building will be concrete block. It will match this building. So it will be an improved building because of the new code requirements.

Swaykos: In rebuilding, have you-all taken into consideration another hurricane, in the way that you are building?

Howard: Oh, well, the real answer is no, but there’s a “but.” I think anybody can question why in the world we’d rebuild for the third time right here, ten feet from the water. I guess because we didn’t have anywhere else to go and because you walk down that hall, and you look out that far door, and you see that water, and you think, “You live in paradise, you pay for it.” I’m not sure we aren’t crazy as June bugs to be right back here on this [beach], but we are. We have taken a few precautions. We have decked all the roofs. We have done what we can with the concrete block to fill it in, but on the whole, no.

Swaykos: OK. What’s the most accomplished day you felt in this recovery process?

Howard: I think the day we started school. I sat there; we were exhausted. We had worked like—the day we started school last year, we had overcome so many monumental hurdles. The kids’ll never know what we went through. When we opened and they went to class and teachers started to teach, I don’t know how to describe, as an administrator, how you feel about that. And we knew we were doing something good. We knew those kids had to be back in school. And a bunch of them didn’t go to school at all; they waited for us for two months, trusting that we would reopen on November 1, like we said we would. What great faith. And we were able to deliver. It’s a little bit of a miracle.

Swaykos: What was the hardest hurdle? You said you guys went over monumental hurdles that they will never understand. What was the hardest one?

Howard: Well, just, a little (inaudible) no water, no plumbing, no lights, no textbooks, no faculty, no master schedule, no way to feed them, no way to get them to school. I mean, you think about it. (laughter) Unbelievable what happened to start that school year.
Swaykos: And now we’re almost there. The bus, you said, went through a building. Did you get a new bus?

Howard: No. Restart didn’t want to give us a bus. You see, the federal government retains ownership; they can’t give to a nonprofit. We’re a Catholic-based; we have separation of church and state. So they retain ownership of everything; so they own this chair. OK. Well, the problem is they can’t own the bus because what about insuring the bus? If there’s an accident that happens, do you sue the federal government? And so they’ve really not wanted to produce the buses although they’re perfectly willing to produce the chairs and give them to you. And they came one day last week and started to tag everything. Now, they’re probably—I have no idea. It took them three days to tag the hundred and fifty-five thousand dollars in technology, just to find it and tag it. I don’t know if they’re ever going to get it all tagged, every beaker, every—dear God. Anyway.

Swaykos: With Bush’s faith-based organization compilations, have you had any businesses or organizations trying to partner with you?

Howard: No.

Swaykos: OK. For money’s sake, not since then?

Howard: No.

Swaykos: OK. Do you have any of the kids’ stories that you could share, if I don’t get to speak with them, that you can think about?

Howard: None that I haven’t—they’re all the same. Scared, swimming out, coming back. Everything’s wrecked, living in a tent, being excited about a FEMA trailer. But I think this happened more recently. After the storm, everybody was in the same boat. They all fought for a tent. Then a little later, rich or poor, black or white, green or orange, everybody was fighting for a tent. Then a little later, everybody rich or poor, black or white, green or orange, everybody was fighting for a FEMA trailer. I think what you’ve seen more recently is the haves have worked stuff out, and the have-nots are still in FEMA trailers. And you’re seeing things like—and they don’t mean it, but it comes out this way. One kid saying to another, “How are things?” And the kid’ll say, “Oh, living in this FEMA trailer sucks.” And the first kid instead of commiserating like she would have before says, “You mean you’re still in a FEMA trailer? We’ve been,” wherever. And then the kid goes home to the FEMA trailer and says, “Mom, why are we still in this FEMA trailer?” And so you’re seeing some of that conflict, not meant to be conflict, but it’s once again the haves will figure something out. The have-nots are still sitting in FEMA trailers.

Swaykos: I see. So a lot of the kids, their interpersonal relationships are being strained because of that (inaudible).
Howard: I think that’s saying it too strongly. I think you see a smidgen of uncomfortableness with the kids who are still in FEMA trailers. “How come we’re still there? Mom, how come you haven’t worked this out?”

Swaykos: Right. How do you feel as a leader through this, for the school, for your staff and for the girls?

Howard: [sigh] I am very close to the end of my career. I’m certainly getting up in years. I think the longer one has been in Catholic education, the less prepared we were to deal with something like this. I’ve never dealt with the federal government; don’t even know how to do that, and I am the senior principal in the Catholic schools. So I found myself way out of my comfort zone; I’m still way out of my comfort zone. I couldn’t build a doghouse, let alone build a building. We made monumental mistakes, but we did our best, and I think all you can ever ask of yourself is to do your best. I think I can look back on it two ways, and so I had my poster over there, my glass half full or my glass half empty. I can look at OLA today and say, “By God, we’ve had two extraordinary years. We have produced two extraordinary classes. We are up and running. Damn, we did a good job.” And then I can look at the other way and think of all the things I should have done differently, that should have been done better, that I should have had enough sense to supervise differently, that if I’d had the wisdom of hindsight, I would have done differently. And I don’t know. What can I say? That’s the best I can do. I have never been so tired; I’ve never felt so inadequate. I’ve never been more humbled, and I’m beat to crap. It’s that simple.

Swaykos: Amazing, really.

Howard: I will be sixty-five before long. Most other people are long ago retired. Now, why me? The Lord put me here, and my job is to put it back together. And I will do that.

Swaykos: What a faith.

Howard: I don’t know if it’s faith. You just do it.

Swaykos: Right. With all the should’ves and the hindsights, what lessons do you have for—you say you’re retiring soon. Say, this happens again, a storm is coming, what lessons do you have for whoever is the principal—

Howard: I think the thing we need to do that I didn’t do, the day after the storm, I should have pulled together really the leaders of the school. Not just the school board, but the doctors on the staff—I mean on the—I have every professional person that is as one of my parents. I should have pulled the counselors together; I should have pulled the building people together. I should have pulled the architects together. I should have pulled the money people together and had a summit meeting and said, “OK. Now, how are we going to go?” I should have pulled somebody together to deal with the federal government. And the lawyers together. What about all the
records? What about all that kind of stuff? And pooled the expertise together and coordinated the expertise instead of trying to do so much of it myself. I don’t have those expertises. I am a school principal, not some of this. I am not a builder. (laughter) I am not a finance expert. I am not a mental health expert. I am a principal who happens to love kids, and that is what I do.

Swaykos: Right. And afterwards in the coping side of it. Before that, you say you’d gather everyone together. But once the storm has happened, what’s your greatest lesson for how to cope and how to move on?

Howard: Be gentle with yourself and take your time. Don’t expect it all to happen tomorrow. I want it all done yesterday, and I have had to learn a whole lot of patience I never had before.

Swaykos: You sound like this is really hard for you.

Howard: It has been hard.

Swaykos: How are you taking time to cope yourself?

Howard: I am leaving for Newfoundland three weeks from now. (laughter) First time I’ve been out of this area since the day of the storm, two years later, and I am going to— Sister Alisa and I are going to—we rented a little house in a little town with two hundred people, and we are going to sit and watch the whales jump with no TV and no phone and no computer for two glorious weeks, and I don’t know if I can stand it. I’ll be so hyper; I don’t know if I can sit still. (laughter) But I’m going to try. We have a convent in Newfoundland, and we have some sisters up there, some people we know. And so we’re going far.

Swaykos: Is she a great support for you?

Howard: She is. I belong to a religious community; they have been tremendous support. They have offered the mental health counseling for the sisters.

Swaykos: Wonderful.

Howard: We as religious women are very much in the help mode, and it’s like, you have to take care of yourself before you can help anybody else, and they have been very conscious of that. The leadership has been down on multiple occasions to chat with us, to check us out emotionally, to see that we’re all right. It’s a tremendous support system out there for me.

Swaykos: Do you think this is going to hit you when you get on your vacation? You said you’ve gone two years not taking time to feel? You think those feelings are going to come out?
Howard: Maybe. I don’t think I thought about that. You deal with life as it comes to you. I’m not real smart about anticipating it all. When it happens, I’ll—

Swaykos: Take it as it comes.

Howard: Well, I used to be a great planner. I’m not so much of a planner; I try and stay five minutes ahead of things now. And I am blessed with—this little school is fine because it has an extraordinary faculty who have just—and extraordinary young women. And from that I am humbled.

Swaykos: What surprised you most in all this?

Howard: Well, the immediate answer is the resilience of the Coast people, but I don’t know why that surprised me. They do it all the time. For me I suppose it’s really that the federal government for the first time in my sixty-five years on this earth has stepped in and helped nonpublic education. I never believed a second of everything everybody was telling me, that we were going to get all this help; didn’t believe a word of it. And I’m still shocked.

Swaykos: So did they contact you, or did you call and ask them for help?

Howard: It came through the diocese. The bottom line is there were a thousand children in Catholic education in these two square blocks, and we dump these thousand children with their parents and their parents’ expectations on the Bay [St. Louis]/Waveland school system, and you are talking—in their trailers, and you are talking a nightmare. It’s a lot easier to put us back together and let us go about our business than to dump all these kids on public education, and we could not have done it alone. I have no doubt. I shouldn’t say that; we would have managed, but it wouldn’t have been as smooth, and it wouldn’t have been as quick.

Swaykos: Does it make you less frustrated dealing with FEMA, just knowing that you get to deal with them and their process?

Howard: I have found them lovely to work with. It is all a process, and I have to be peaceful.

Swaykos: OK. Great. With the government helping you, the new legislation that you said Bush put through so that it could happen, do you think there’s any other legislation that needs to come through to further help faith-based schools?

Howard: I believe in separation of church and state. I agree with the ACLU [American Civil Liberties Union] on that. I had worries when Restart put in my gym floor, I had all the questions about, “Can I pray in that gymnasium? Can I pray before a ballgame in that gymnasium? You own this gym floor.” And I finally decided; I got real pragmatic about it. Originally I wasn’t going to take the gym floor because they didn’t have answers for that. I want my independence. And when it all push came to
shove, I decided, “Well, I’ll take the gym floor. If they tell me I can’t pray in that gym”—and it is a gym. It would not be used except infrequently for that. I would say to them, “Please come take this gym floor back because I’m going to pray in here, and please give me ten minutes to contact the press before you come and tear up my gym floor.” Be real pragmatic about it. They don’t have any earthly idea what’s going on in that gymnasium. It mostly is ball, and their rules were it can’t be used primarily for religious purposes. And it’s not used primarily for religious purposes. It’s used for athletics, and every once in a while, we have a religious service in there because it’s the biggest place we have standing.

Swaykos: So then none of their money is allowed to help rebuild the church?

Howard: There’s no federal monies going into the church, into the church rectory. They are building community centers, parish community centers; they’re building schools, building the gymnasiums, but nothing that’s directly aligned with worship.

Swaykos: How far along is the church in recovery?

Howard: The loss to the church on the Coast is around ninety million dollars. We lost fifty-four buildings, something like that, churches. That’s lost or so badly destroyed, damaged. Very little is really up and running. They’re like us; we’re marching through the process. Our Lady of the Gulf Church is back up. They’ve got pews to do; they’ve got an organ to put back together. They’re in better shape than almost anybody. We’re up and running with three of our four halls. Stanislaus hadn’t moved a spade of dirt, and they’ve got—every building needs stuff. There’s five, seven years to finish it off, I believe.

Swaykos: St. Stanislaus?

Howard: No, I mean. I didn’t say—Stanislaus will be five to seven; we’ll be two building our building back up. I think the thing on that if I could deviate a little bit.

Swaykos: Sure.

Howard: I think that the most interesting thing happening down here is that I think the culture of the Coast is changing. When I first came South in the midseventies, the area was a fishing area. I was principal in Biloxi of an all-girls school, and the girls’ goal in life was to marry a guy whose fishing boat was ten feet longer than their father’s fishing boat, and they will have made it. Most of them had never visited New Orleans. It was a fishing culture. The dominant ethnic group were what I call the “iches,” the Satonoviches, the Muladiches, the Polaviches, the Boranoviches, the Slovakian people. OK. In the [19]80s you had the influx of the Vietnamese, and that caused a whole culture shift. You’d hear the story down on the Point of Biloxi, all the dogs disappeared because the Vietnamese ate the dogs. You’d have the Blessing of the Shrimp Fleet, and people were shooting each other out there, the “iches” and the—
Swaykos: Um-hm.

Howard: OK. So you had a culture change when the Vietnamese people came in. The in the [19]90s, you had the enormous cultural change of the casino industry. All the fish factories that used to be on the Coast, the Shemper(?) Shrimp and Oyster Company, the Marver(?) Shrimp and Oyster Company, all gave way to the casino industry; changed the whole face of the Coast, another cultural change, and I think we’re living through another, fourth cultural change. The Coast will not come back as homes; this is going to be Destin, a Destin, Florida. If you drive from here to Biloxi, there are twelve major condo developments under construction. Under construction. It’s going to be condo after condo. The infrastructure’s going to have to change. We don’t have the [infrastructure and] electricity for all of that. Secondly, people that own condos don’t have kids that go to private schools; they don’t have kids. What is that going to do to Catholic education and our school? It’s the whole culture of the Coast is changing, and we’re watching it change. And I think long-term, that’s going to be the biggest single effect that this Coast has had, not necessarily good or bad, just different. I’m not smart enough to know good or bad, but different. And I’ve only been here thirty years, and I, myself, have lived through really four major changes. And this is—(brief interruption)

Swaykos: How is the condo industry and the way everything is changing going to affect the girls for having after-school activities, if it becomes a destination area?

Howard: Well, there are schools in Destin, Florida; there are private schools in Destin, Florida. The obvious thing is kids aren’t going to live on the beach; they’re going to live off the beach. Will the school be as big? I don’t know that. I really am not smart enough to really know the impact. Certainly the tax base will be higher; there’ll be more money floating around. That doesn’t come to me. That would go to the Bay/Waveland School District. That in itself is a threat to private education. You throw money at public education, can private education keep up with it? Can we keep up with the salary scale and things like that. I work for free, so it doesn’t affect me, but I mean, I think those are worries as we look down the road. I won’t be here then. It’ll take another ten years for this all to be realized.

Swaykos: On a closing note, can you just share your hopes for the school in their recovery process, for the staff, for the girls, for families, and for education’s sake?

Howard: My hope is very simple, that we continue to just have school, period.

Swaykos: That’s great. Thank you.

(end of interview)