Mississippi Oral History Project

Hurricane Katrina Oral History Project

An Oral History

with

Stacey Goldsmith

Interviewer: Beth Morgan

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This is an interview for the Mississippi Oral History Program of The University of Southern Mississippi. The interview is with Stacey Goldsmith and is taking place on October 19, 2005. The interviewer is Beth Morgan.

Morgan: Would you state your name?

Goldsmith: Stacey Goldsmith.

Morgan: And Stacey, where were you living when Katrina hit?

Goldsmith: In Meadowlands, Brandon, Mississippi.

Morgan: OK and when did you start preparing for the storm?

Goldsmith: Well, we didn’t think it was going to hit us. We were kind of prepared for family to come. We didn’t realize how many families were going to actually evacuate to our house. It started with just a few families fleeing.

Morgan: What cities were your families in?

Goldsmith: Three of them were in Kenner; one was in Meraux, which took the whole front of the storm; we also had some from Bellechase, Louisiana, and we had some from Harvey and Marrero, Louisiana. And it’s amazing, right before the storm took place my brother and another family member did not want to leave and it was now a day and a half before and I had to literally, you know, convince him that you got family and so what if it’s an inconvenience, you never know when the big one is going to come because, you know, Louisiana has been spared so many times and threatened and everyone leaves and then the hassle of coming back. And so I managed to convince them all to come. And—

Morgan: Why were you not lulled into the false sense of security? Was there something in particular that really peaked your concern?

Goldsmith: Well, they’re my family.

Morgan: I mean about the storm, because so often we all tend to ride it through. So was there something about this that made you think, no this time it’s going to be really big?
Goldsmith: Well, I take it serious every time. I just feel that you never know when Mother Nature is going to call. We don’t have that insight so I take it serious every time and I’ve never had the opportunity to really open our home up to our family like this.

Morgan: Where did you grow up?

Goldsmith: I grew up in New Orleans, but my husband and I are in the military so we’ve been in San Diego, California, for the last six years and we just bought our house two months ago before the storm hit. We had just painted our walls, unpacked, and then before we knew it we didn’t even have the chance to really enjoy our home, you know, Katrina’s coming and all of this started, and we started getting phone calls and worried. We were worried about loved ones and before we knew it they were all here, and we bunkered down in our house, not really anticipating that we were going to get a Category One here. So at first it was kind of a sign of relief that everyone was here and safe. Then it was, you know, when we got hit with Category One that night with the winds, we only could imagine what it felt like in New Orleans when it was—you know, at when it was a Category Four. And we were going through different emotions, you know. One minute you’ve got someone enjoying the company of family and then the next minute you’ve got another one breaking down crying because they don’t know if they’ve lost everything, what are they going to do. Then we lost electricity for five days and we weren’t expecting it; they didn’t prepare Brandon for the extent of what actually hit us. And we had gotten quite a bit of rain and wind, and we had a lot of wind debris. Like I said, we were out of electricity for five days and it was a convoy mission with our family. The first panic that I had was one, how long is this electricity going to be off, and how am I going to feed and take care of everybody for I don’t know how long with no electricity and no food? Because as the days were going by we were realizing we had to clean the refrigerators and the freezers out so that meant that we lost everything. Then each day with eight hours in a line in the sun we would drop some off to go get water, some to go get ice, and you know, because everybody had their vehicles but then gas became scarce. So then it was kind of like everybody was like, “OK, what do you need? We’re going to go make one trip.” And we never did get our generator because we waited and waited two days in the sun and then when we finally were up to our number, they weren’t getting any more generators out. I got to tell you something in the story that my family may kill me about, but it’s funny. We can look back on it and laugh now. We have septic tanks, OK, and this is a new home. It’s only, the subdivision’s only two years old. And so we have our own sewage lines in our backyards. So, if you know anything about septic tanks, when you have electricity off and your pumps aren’t running you shouldn’t use any source of water because it has no natural source of cleaning and pumping its way out, it’ll just back up. So we had to take what we called “duty-shift showers” in the garage. (laughter) And that’s how we survived. At night it was miserable because the day after the storm we had a cold breeze, but for four nights it was just chaos, chaos. I mean everybody was dehydrated, the heat, um, you know trying to take care of the pets, making sure they weren’t dehydrated. I mean you
couldn’t sleep at night. We were putting cold rags on all the kids just to keep them soothed at night. We didn’t get sleep those nights. You couldn’t sleep, it was just too hot.

Morgan: And so total you had how many in your house?

Goldsmith: We had twenty family members including my family.

Morgan: And how many of those were children?

Goldsmith: Four children and three teenagers.

Morgan: Who got here first? And then sort of go through the evolution of who showed up when.

Goldsmith: Well, we had my mother and my stepfather showed up on a Thursday.

Morgan: From?

Goldsmith: From New Orleans. And they were coming with the intent to visit us for the first time in our new house. They had no wind at this point that Katrina was even a threat to them. So they were the most unfortunate family members because they only brought three sets of clothes. They didn’t get a chance to bring their pets.

Morgan: What are their names?

Goldsmith: Barbara and Wayne Dufour. And it was kind of sad because the whole time my mom’s going through the pain of, you know, I left my babies. I mean their animals are like her babies; they left that behind. They didn’t get any important documents, pictures or papers.

Morgan: Did the pets survive the storm?

Goldsmith: Yes they did.

Morgan: It was a miracle.

Goldsmith: It was a miracle because they didn’t return because of the martial laws after Katrina hit and then Rita coming, they didn’t return till almost three and a half weeks later and their cats—they had some neighbors that stuck it out or would come back and they would go and put food in the garage but they never did see them, so she went on for almost a month, not knowing whether her two cats were alive or not. But they survived.

Morgan: And after your parents, then who came?
Goldsmith: After my parents then it was, I would say actually we—the night before, my brother, I had to keep calling him. He would call me and my sister-in-law—well, I don’t know what my brother’s going to do. And finally I called him and I said, “You know, Tracey, pretty soon they’re going to close the streets down and then you’re going to be trapped out there.” I said, “Get in the car, I don’t care what you bring, get the animals and get over here.” And he listened. It took him till about 12:30 at night before he got up and moved, but they got in at about 3:30 that morning and there was no traffic at this point because a lot of people were doing the same things as he was, waiting till the last minute. And so they arrived, my brother Tracey, and Kim Marcell(?), and their daughter Megan(?), and their dog and their cat, and we were all, you know, just preparing and having a good time enjoying each other’s company. And then some family, all of my husband’s side which is where the big group comes in—you have my mother-in-law Sandra and Gene Goldsmith, and they have three cats and a dog that came. And then my husband’s sister Jamie and her husband Don and their teen son Brent, and then they have two younger ones Zachary and Rachel. And then you had Michael Goldsmith and his son Brandon. And they all fled over here and they were kicked out of their hotel because they had people that had reservations for family reunions in the midst of the storm. They weren’t anticipating on coming because they knew my mom’s side of the family were here. And they finally got a hold of us and realized that, you know, hey we don’t have a place to go. And at first I was hesitant; my heart was a little hard because I thought to myself, “How am I going to manage all of these people?”

Morgan: So how many bedrooms are in this house?

Goldsmith: Four bedrooms.

Morgan: OK.

Goldsmith: Four bedrooms. What we did is we gave up each bedroom. I made myself, my children, and we had a spare room upstairs, we each gave up our rooms so each family could have a place to claim their space. And then my family, we had blow-up mattresses and then we have a sectional with a queen, so we kind of had whoever, you know, the adults would sleep in the rooms and the kids and my family would just kind of branch out in the living room and the dining area.

Morgan: And how many total pets ended up here?

Goldsmith: Ten. Ten total pets. (laughter)

Morgan: So what were your tricks or plans or you know, Mary Poppins creativity with all these children? No TV, no amusements, no radio—what did you do with the kids?

Goldsmith: Well, first thing I had to do is humble myself out each day and go in my closet, on my knees, and just beg God for strength to get through this because I knew
that I wasn’t going to get through it without Him. There was just no way. I look, I can look back at the story now and just feel so blessed of it all but going through it and looking back at where we were—no electricity, twenty humans to feed and ten animals to feed, you know, and baths and food, I mean it was hard. After we got electricity back on the fifth day things started to get more calmer, you know. We couldn’t get through to FEMA [Federal Emergency Management Agency]. Actually people were getting checks as they were leaving, so it was three weeks that we went with no, everybody came with the money they had, their banks went underwater so they couldn’t pull money and transactions out, it was just horrible. We didn’t know where Red Cross was. It was emotional in that area of it all, not knowing how am I going to take care of all these people, you know? How am I going to do this? So I just started praying and I started getting on the phone and I called, you know, for four or five days we couldn’t get through to anyone as far as help, and then finally I just started calling news stations and churches and then that’s where our relief came in. And we had neighbors, I mean thank God, we just moved in and we didn’t know anyone but two neighbors, and managed to have every, just about every neighbor stop somewheres through these three weeks and ask what do we need. And we had three churches; we had United Methodist, we had First Baptist of Old Fannin(?), and Pine Lake. That was our main feeding source that we had for those three weeks.

Morgan: Pine Lake, what denomination is it?

Goldsmith: Pine Lake is I think a Christian/Non-Denominational.

Morgan: OK.

Goldsmith: And then the others are Baptist. But, um, and the other one’s Methodist, I’m sorry, United Methodist. But I mean we would pull up with my truck not knowing, we were just expecting water and a few cans. And I mean they were preparing stuff in the Coliseum for Gulfport and because of our situation there were just bulks and bulks and bulks of food, so we were really blessed. I mean, you know, and I believe that prayer is a strong thing and I believe that a lot of us were joining hands through this and praying, you know, calling on a higher source. And I—it was a miracle that we all got through this. And then when the electricity came back on, it was a mission every, you know, now we had food, now we had electricity, now it was like a camp being ran. You know you had, I mean they laugh, now they look, I look back on it and my family calls me and they joke about, “Yeah,” I told my husband, “Your wife had her whipped out and she was barking orders, you do this, you do that.” I mean you almost had to. I mean my husband and I are both military and I was grateful for that learning experience in my life because I think it taught me how to be a leader and I had to step up to the plate for my family and be a leader and say, OK, this is what we’re going to do, this is how it needs to be done and I was just focused every morning and I mean we were up at seven every morning and going to bed at two in the morning, and that was just to keep my house the way I wanted it ran, you know. And I didn’t want it any other way. It’s just the way I am so that’s the way it was. And we had some times where we were all laughing, and one would break down and cry, and
others would draw strength off of those who were strong at the time. Then you would have another one who was smiling that was crying thirty minutes ago supporting—you know, just real emotional. For two and a half weeks no one knew what their damage was, so we were anticipating the worst, the very worst that they lost everything, you know, and it was hard. I had to put myself in their shoes and say, OK, if this had happened to me where would I want my family to be. And it’s sad because there’s a lot other, I’m sure, stories out there that went through this and they didn’t have family members there for them, or they had access and they didn’t open up the access. And it was stressful, but if I had to do it all over again I would. It was like what I like to say “the never-ending family reunion.” It just kept on going and going, but it managed to bring a lot of us a lot closer. They had some relationships that had had some hard times through the years and you know it really mended it and it really, I think, showed us all what family is about, what families should be like. And I know that if in the future something ever happened, God forbid, here, I know that I would have a place to go, without a shadow of a doubt.

Morgan: Well, did your family members lose their houses? It took two and a half weeks to find out.

Goldsmith: Right, because we would look up on the Internet and we would hear stories but you know you would have one person in an area that lost everything and two blocks down it was there. So when it was all done and said and everybody was packing up and the martial law was being lifted, there was still a curfew but they could at least get in. OK, because they had to at least make it livable to an extent that people could survive. I mean that’s how bad New Orleans got hit. I mean they had to wait until they could restock stores, get generators, and make sure that it was safe for them to come in and you know. And yes, we had three family members that did lose everything and it’s still hard. We’re still collecting donations to help rebuild their life, and they’ve been blessed and we’ve had a lot of people that have really reached out to them. There’s four other family members that, a lot of the same thing, they were on the, not the New Orleans side, the other family members were on the, what’s called the West Bank; Marrero, Harvey, Gretna, Bellechase. And those family members that lived there took a lot of debris damage. They said that when they arrived home it was like a third world country, like a war had gone, you know it was like bombs had gone off. There was logs and trees, and cars here and there, and you know just clothes and trees, just horrible, you know devastating. It took them weeks. They’re still cleaning up. After they left, it was about the fifth week, and I wanted to go but I couldn’t, my kids were in school, and my husband you know felt, you know, OK, I want to do something, I want to help. And he was—all through the time that we were taking care of our family when they were in our house, I was running the fort—my husband was deployed to Gulfport. So I was running all that by myself. And when my husband finally was no longer deployed and they came back, he wanted to go to New Orleans to do what he could do to help out. And when he arrived he said that it was just so devastating to look at. There was dump sites all through the city where people had dropped their washers and dryers and refrigerators and freezers and just, you know, the worst you can imagine that would give you the picture of what they went home to,
you know, just flies and maggots, you know, not to get so into detail but that’s what they had to go home to look forward to, you know, throwing stuff out, cleaning, you know, and some of them were fortunate to be able to say that that’s all they had to do. The others moved on. Two of the families—three of the families stuck together; the grandmother, the cousins, and his Aunt Kelly. They weren’t staying with us but they left and went to Florida and they have no home to go home to. The huge family, the Carters, what was it, Carters, God I don’t even know his—yeah, Carter, Carter, yeah, Jamie and Don Carter, that’s her married name. Sorry, I’m not too familiar with it because we were in California. But they lost everything and they live in Virginia now. He’s a pastor and he found a job and he’s doing security at night at the air base, so they’re trying to rebuild. They’re waiting for FEMA, they’re waiting for their insurance to be (inaudible), and they’re living in a hotel, FEMA’s paying for that right now in Virginia. And their plans are to rebuild, you know, their home and life in Virginia. And the rest were able to go back, minus those three families which are now living in, I guess that’s Florida and Virginia, and the rest of the family are still cleaning up and waiting for their adjusters to come out. And the biggest thing is that some of them that lost shingles and lost their back patios (phone ringing), it’s going to take months for them to get a contractor because it’s just (phone ringing) it’s haywire. It’s absolutely haywire right now, so there’s no telling how long that’ll be. And I don’t know, is there any other questions?

Morgan: Are you still having family through periodically or (inaudible)?

Goldsmith: We had one family member come back to get FEMA mail and food stamps that came here to our address, and when they left they were actually so blessed between all the churches, that each family member, if we had to add it up, probably left my house with about $400 each worth of food and toilet paper, paper towels, necessities that they were going to need because they were looking at waiting hours. And then the first week they arrived home they were saying that they would wait eight hours to get into the one store that was open and then when they’d get in half the stuff they needed was sold out, no longer stocked, so. It’s gotten back to a normal somewhat on the West Bank side. There’s a lot more open. There’s still a lot destroyed and damaged, like there’s no theater for them to go to, there’s a lot of restaurants that they can’t go to, so they’ve kind of got to pick and go to the ones that are available. So I’m sure it’s still taking them time. They’re estimating Louisiana to take a couple of years to get back to where it was before this hit.

Morgan: So is your family determined to go back and re-establish and stay? Have they talked about selling?

Goldsmith: Yes. My mother and father came, my mother and my stepfather came down this last weekend when Canton Fair was down and we went ahead and had a nice outing and spent the day at the fair. The next day they woke up they wanted to go look at the condos by the reservoir where I live because they, you know, they said if someone’s going to offer them, you know, a good bit, which the houses, people are just paying anything right now to get a house because everyone’s lost so much over
there, so houses are selling like wild fire. Yeah I do have some family members looking to come this way and I have like my brother, he would love to, but can’t because he has his own business. And his business is pest control and now it’s like booming, so of course he doesn’t want to leave because of that. But I really do believe that if something like this ever hit that area again, I could almost bet my life on it that the entire, my entire family would move. I just don’t think that they’re, they’re in denial that this could happen again to this degree, so I guess we’re all living on a prayer.

Morgan: Were your parents in New Orleans when Camille hit?

Goldsmith: I know that my mother and father were in the service, so my mother was not but my mother-in-law and them were. They said that they were in their attics with hatchets busting their way out of the attics for survival. So I couldn’t really give you that story because I don’t know a whole lot about it, I just know that they did experience that. That was when they had to make a judgment call and they broke the levee on purpose, and really actually flooded some people with that intent to save the rest of the city; that’s what they were forced to do and a lot of people lost their lives. But they’re judging that this one was more devastating worldwide because it hit so many different states. It affected not just New Orleans, Louisiana, it affected Mississippi, parts of Florida when it first hit Florida, and I think even Alabama, so this was one of the worst in history from what I’m reading and, you know, seeing in the news, so.

Morgan: Have you been back down to New Orleans or to the Coast yet?

Goldsmith: I have not. My husband has seen the devastation of Gulfport. Gulfport, right? We’re still new to this area.

Morgan: Yes.

Goldsmith: And we saw pictures on his camera where buildings and casinos were picked up from one location and the shores were just wiped away. There was just nothing there. And I’ve only heard descriptions from my family what it looks like. Honestly I don’t think that I want my last memories to be—I want it to be what I remember it as and I’m kind of glad that it didn’t really, I mean I’ve seen enough on the news and in the papers to get a picture and a glimpse and I don’t think I want to go. You know my husband, like I said, he went for four weeks, five weeks after the storm and it was hard. It was hard for him to fathom, you know, what they said, a third world country is what it looked like. Just really smelly everywhere and garbage piled up, debris everywhere, houses torn down, you know just—

Morgan: So you’re holding onto the old memories.

Goldsmith: Yeah. Yeah. And I just have hope and faith that New Orleans will be rebuilt. They have too much history there to just let it all go away. And it’s funny
though, of all the things I wished would’ve been destroyed, Bourbon Street and all that is still intact. Go figure. What is that? (laughter)

**Morgan:** I don’t know.

**Goldsmith:** So, um—

**Morgan:** It sort of nips the judgment theory in the bud.

**Goldsmith:** Yeah, you would think that, mm-mm, you know it’s sad, I think we’re living in a generation that sometimes I think we need to be humble and unfortunately it takes a disaster to humble us to call out to God. And I’ve had family members here that just would look at Rob and I funny when we’d pray at the dinner table when we’d be at their house or if we would talk about how we had gotten baptized some years ago when we were in Florida. You know when you experience something like that in your life it’s hard to retain, it’s hard to keep in, you want the whole world to know. And I feel through Katrina that it’s been a blessing because my family has seen the face and the eyes of God for the first time. You know they, I had nights where they were crying like, you know, “I’ve never seen so many neighbors.” You know they were just stopping off, dropping off loads of—you know you wouldn’t think you would appreciate garbage bags and papers plates and toilet paper and paper towels, but let me tell you when you got twenty and ten pets, you appreciate the multitude of those things. You don’t realize how important they are until you don’t have them and you’re in a situation like we were. And you know we had, like I said, it was a blessing. I saw God move in many ways. The thought that, you know, my heart went out to each and every one of them in so many different ways that, you know, yeah, there was times that I wanted to pull my hair out my head. There was times when, you know, I won’t name the names but there was the younger kids that went in my room and put lotion in my candles and garbage in my tub and you know was strangling the cat, holding him upside down by the head, you know, had a makeup field in my daughter’s room and went through all her good expensive makeup and smeared it into my new carpet. Yeah, those times I wanted to just scream and just, you know, go without. I just wanted to break loose with my anger and my stress, but it’s amazing the strength that God gave me because I think it was because of what they were going through. You know normally I probably would’ve handled this in a worldly way, you know. I handled it in a proper way. I disciplined, you know, I told the parents and I disciplined the kids and I think I did it in a loving way, but I don’t know how else to say it but looking back at it knowing that I got through it through God, there’s no way that I could’ve gotten through all what I had to cope with; everyone’s feelings and crying and emotions. Just to give you an idea of what our day was like. We would get up at seven. I’ll start with the night because our mornings started with nights. OK, meaning that at 2:00 a.m. in the morning is when we went to bed and that was right after we set the coffee pots. And we had to have continental breakfast and lunches, and that consisted of like oatmeal, grits, fresh fruit, cereal. We laid it out all on the counter and I figured, you know, somebody’s got to to like something out of this. And we would, first person to wake up would set the coffeemakers up, people would help
themselves. At 11:30 we would make an announcement, “We’re breaking the breakfast down, if you haven’t eaten, then you skip breakfast and you go to lunch.” And lunch would usually consist of cold cuts and whatever we cooked the night before. We had people, you know, the dinner, we had people, you know, it would take eight or nine of us to prep dinner. You’d have one doing the potatoes. You’d have one doing the side dishes. You’d have one doing the meat. And I refused to cook more than one time because that many women in the kitchen, it was really, it was a task. And you know, like I said, then by the time that was over, dinner, and we’d clean up from that by seven, we were catching up on laundry and you know, getting baths with the kids. We had a neighbor, I forgot to mention, that opened up two of her bedrooms upstairs so we would get a break from the kids, not the little ones but the teens, and send them over there at night, bathed and fed, and then they would sleep over there which kind of gave, that was kind of like what we called “the downtime.” We’d all be out there, we’d have a few beers, we’d socialized, we’d be folding clothes, prepping and planning about what we were going to fix the next day, and you know we got through it, though, that’s the most important thing. I mean you know never in a million years would’ve thought that I could survive three weeks with that many family members and their animals. And honestly, their animals were more behaved than, at times, than the kids, because they were just hiding, you know they knew something was going on. I think everybody kind of you know humbled out. You saw a lot of humility in people’s eyes. And when my family left, you know I thought when the day came and everybody was packing up their stuff that we had gathered through the churches, you know because I wanted to make sure they had enough to go home with and survive off of, I thought it would be a sign of relief, yeah I got my house back. And actually we bonded so much that I cried. I cried in front of them, I cried for like a week after they left. It was almost like I didn’t know how to function back to one family, you know. I was so used to it being a day-to-morning-to-night event and having so many priceless stories and moments and memories and, you know just so many things that happened that then might’ve been stressful and now you look back on it, and I’m glad I have this story to tell. I’m glad that I actually can sit with you today and say that my family did survive. We got through a hard time and it was only because we stuck together as a family and we drew on a stronger strength to get through a hard time. And we made it, we survived. And my family’s all doing well. Even the ones who lost everything are managing to pick up their lives. And now we’re somewhat, you know, back to our normal lives and that’s it, that’s pretty much the story.

(end of interview)