Mississippi Oral History Project

Hurricane Katrina Oral History Project

An Oral History

with

Tom Higgins

Interviewer: Kristen Wallace and Lucy Maynard

Volume 821
2007
Biography

Tom Higgins was born on May 12, 1945, in East Grand Rapids, Michigan. With three sisters trying to control his every move, he managed to escape to the University of Notre Dame, where he received a BBA in 1967, then an MBA from Michigan State University in 1968.

Subsequent to a twenty-four year career in the US Navy, he and his wife Dorothy relocated to Pascagoula, Mississippi, where he was employed as a Logistics Manager at Ingalls Shipyard for ten years. He retired in 2003 and currently devotes his time to church and community affairs.

Mr. Higgins enjoys reading, tennis, and yard work. He authored *Sunshine on my Shoulders*, his first-person account of life after Hurricane Katrina. The Higgins currently live in their remodeled home and enjoy the benefits of retirement with their three dogs.
# Table of Contents

Introduction/background information ................................................................. 1  
Personal connection to the Coast ........................................................................ 2  
Life before Hurricane Katrina .............................................................................. 2  
Home before Hurricane Katrina ......................................................................... 3  
Home after Hurricane Katrina ............................................................................. 3  
Reflections on pre-Hurricane Katrina community .............................................. 4  
Reflections on pre-Hurricane Katrina local politics .......................................... 4  
FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) ........................................... 5  
Impact of Hurricane Katrina on community ....................................................... 6  
Impact of Hurricane Katrina on local politics .................................................... 6  
Hurricane Katrina and community bonding ....................................................... 7  
Initial news of Hurricane Katrina ..................................................................... 7  
Experiences during Hurricane Katrina ............................................................... 8  
Preparations for Hurricane Katrina ................................................................. 8  
Decision to stay on Coast during Hurricane Katrina ......................................... 9  
Reflections on loss of home and property ......................................................... 10  
Financial reimbursement/insurance .................................................................. 11  
Spouse’s response to Hurricane Katrina ............................................................ 12  
Impact of Hurricane Katrina on marriage .......................................................... 13  
Reflections on post-Hurricane Katrina neighborhood ..................................... 14  
Post-Hurricane Katrina neighborhood injuries/fatalities ................................ 16  
Post-Hurricane Katrina volunteer efforts ............................................................. 18  
Reflections on post-Hurricane Katrina community impact .......................... 20  
Coast community reconstruction efforts ............................................................ 21  
Reconstructing life on post-Hurricane Katrina Coast .......................................... 23  
Hurricane Katrina and personal changes ......................................................... 25  
Final reflections .................................................................................................. 26
AN ORAL HISTORY

with

TOM HIGGINS

This is an interview for the Mississippi Oral History Program of The University of Southern Mississippi. The interview is with Tom Higgins and is taking place on February 21, 2007. The interviewers are Lucy Maynard and Kristen Wallace.

Maynard: This is an interview for The University of Southern Mississippi Hurricane Katrina Oral History Project done in conjunction with the University of Guelph, Ontario, Canada. The interview is with Tom Higgins, and it takes place on February 21, 2007, at 10:35 a.m. in Pascagoula, at St. John’s Episcopal Church. The interviewers are Lucy Maynard and Kristen Wallace. So, first of all, I’d like to thank you, Tom, for taking the time to talk with us today, and we’d like to get started with some background information about you, which is what they usually do in the oral history interviews. So first I’m going to ask you if you could please state and spell your name for the record?

Higgins: My name is Tom Higgins, H-I-G-G-I-N-S.

Wallace: And when were you born?

Higgins: May 12, [19]45, which makes me sixty-two this May.

Wallace: OK, and where were you born?


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

Higgins: Thomas Patrick Higgins. I’m a junior.

Maynard: And your mother’s maiden name?

Higgins: Eldred, Barbara Jane Eldred, E-L-D-R-E-D.

Maynard: OK, and where did you grow up?

Higgins: Grand Rapids.
Wallace: And how long have you lived on the Mississippi Gulf Coast?


Maynard: So it’s just one generation of your family here?

Higgins: It’s my wife’s hometown.

Maynard: Oh, OK. So you moved here to be with your wife?

Higgins: I moved here because I retired from the Navy in [19]92 in Virginia, and I had to go somewhere. Her hometown, invalid mother-in-law, and a shipyard.

Maynard: Right.

Wallace: Can you describe your attachment to this region?

Higgins: Well, I was stationed down here in the late [19]70s wearing the military uniform, fell in love with it; lived in Gautier, Mississippi, which is the next bedroom community west. And when it came time to get out of the Navy, we had to live somewhere, and I knew I could get employment down here, so we chose this for a myriad of reasons. My mother-in-law passed away, and we could’ve gone anywhere, and this is the first time in my life that I’d had roots; so I decided I liked the area, and we’d stay. It offers everything I was looking for in a small town, with geographical proximity to the big cities.

Maynard: Good. So where was your neighborhood?

Higgins: I live in Delmas Estates, east of Pascagoula, three quarters of a mile from the Gulf of Mexico. It’s a bedroom community, upscale subdivision, so we built a house there on a new street in [19]92 and have lived there since.

Maynard: What do you mean by a bedroom community?

Higgins: No industry. You know, it’s just a subdivision with a couple of hundred homes in it.

Wallace: Can you describe your neighborhood before Hurricane Katrina?

Higgins: Family oriented, upscale. Out of two hundred homes, maybe five or six for sale. Very eclectic, very friendly, and I don’t want to overuse the word “upscale,” but it’s a very nice subdivision and very few vacant lots. And although we didn’t know everybody, we certainly knew everybody on our street. The Catholic church is four blocks away, so I can walk back and forth from there. The yacht club was about a half mile away, so I could play tennis down there two, three times a week. And as the crow flies, we’re only three quarters of a mile from the Gulf Coast. Very conveniently
located in the city, and our sphere of influence was probably with all our friends. I was retired. It would’ve been Ingalls [now Northrop Grumman Ship Systems]. [We live less than a mile from] the water, and then westward about three miles, so that’s, you know, about three full square miles, and that was where *most* of our friends lived and where most of our friends got hit hard.

**Maynard:** Can you describe your home before the disaster?

**Higgins:** It’s a large single-story house about thirty-two, thirty-four hundred square feet, double master bedroom suite because my mother-in-law lived with us. We designed it and built it in [19]92 for entertaining and for our retirement home. It sits on the largest lot in Delmas Estates; it’s a full acre, all under grass and gardens. My wife and I both love to garden, and we take it seriously, so perhaps not the best yard and gardens in Delmas Estates subdivision, but probably one of the five best yards in the city of Pascagoula. And we do a lot of entertaining, have held open houses there, have been on garden shows, held art shows, antiques; we do a lot of entertaining. It was a *very nice* home. I’ve traveled the world in my military and marketing for Ingalls, so it had a lot of antiques, orientals. I was born and raised in Michigan. I wrote my thesis on furniture. Coming from Grand Rapids may not mean anything to you, but we had a house full of Grand Rapids furniture. So when you mention Baker, Irwin, Sligh, Schoonbeck, J. B. Widdicomb, those are some very good, old, old name furniture manufacturers, and we had a house full of it.

**Maynard:** Wonderful. I love antique furniture.

**Lange:** OK, did you stay in your home during the hurricane?

**Higgins:** We did. And we evacuated about nine o’clock in the morning to a two-story home directly next door.

**Lange:** Your home was—how was it? Was it affected by the flood or wind?

**Higgins:** Both, we had six feet of water in the house and lost the front door; so when we evacuated, we were probably knee deep in water at eight thirty, quarter to nine in the morning. So, I made five trips next door escaping through the front bedroom window; the garage was impossible. Two cars, all the porch furniture, all the plants very dangerous, and the front door wouldn’t open, and so I made five trips next door, once to unlock the house. I happen to have a key, but that wouldn’t have kept me out. And then trips two, three, and four with dogs one, two, and three. And the last trip with my wife. And when I stepped out of the house, the water was probably at waist level, and my last trip over there, the water was probably at my shoulder level, and that was adjacent to the house. The street would’ve been over my head.

**Lange:** Wow. What’s your wife’s name?

**Higgins:** Dorothy.
Lange: So you saved the dogs and your wife. Did you grab anything else from your house, any possessions?

Higgins: Nope. Purse around her neck, glasses in the purse, I think a couple of bottles of Coke, some leashes that were on the dogs. And before—I mean, we designed the house so the kitchen countertops are four to six inches higher than normal; so we put all the photo albums on that. And I’d emptied out some of the file cabinets and put files on top of the desk. The only smart thing I really did was I took the insurance papers and a dry notebook that I’d made some notes that morning and threw them on top of the TV, which was—I had to reach to put it on top of the TV. And the following morning, that was the only dry paper in the house.

Maynard: What are some of your most vivid memories of your community before the hurricane?

Higgins: Well, I have more vivid memories afterwards, but before, I mean, I’ll give you an example. The Friday before the hurricane we were all at the yacht club, and there must’ve been a couple of hundred people there, and we were entertaining with a table of six or eight couples and just good times, you know, wonderful people. I have a very enjoyable lifestyle. I’m blessed to be retired now; I’m retired at fifty-eight. And I’m married to a wonderful woman for twenty-five years; so I spend my time volunteering and pretty much doing exactly what I want. It’s a very eclectic lifestyle where I can control my destiny. We’re people oriented. So my memories before the storm are of daily mass; every day we’d go to mass. I mean, the camaraderie, the friendship of people. I’m a very social person. I’m probably extroverted to an extreme, but have no problems spending a lot of time by myself. And a default day for me will be staying at home reading a couple of books. So it’s just the socializing of the community. I love Pascagoula. I love everything about it. As a military guy, I was a nomad and comfortable with it, and as was my wife for twenty-five years. So we lived overseas; we roamed the US. We had a great life, but for the first time of my life, I really put down roots here. Born and raised in Grand Rapids, I never lived in a home longer than three or four years. We were moving around; same city but constantly moving around. So this is the longest, by about ten years, I’ve ever lived in the same dwelling. So, bottom line, it’s a small community. We know, between the two of us, we probably know everybody who lives in Pascagoula, and I love it.

Maynard: What was your opinion of the local, state, and federal politicians before the hurricane?

Higgins: Probably no opinion. I live right next door to the city manager and the lead dog at Chevron; so they’re a power couple. I’m not terribly political, mandated by a career in the military. But my wife is, so, you know, I take an interest in voting and doing my civic responsibility. But for me the government—I mean, I was always a benefactor. I’m a check writer; I’m a volunteer. I never thought I would be a recipient. So my opinion was N/A, not applicable to me. You know, I’m doing just
fine. I don’t depend upon much. If I get Social Security, that’s fine. I have investments; I have retirement monies. I live well; my wife and I are blessed with good health, good friends, and a lifestyle that we find quite comfortable. We give back to the community, and that’s part of what life is, much like you two gals are doing here, and I don’t use the word gals in a derogatory sense. It’s more of a you’re so young and beautiful.

Maynard: We don’t take any offense. (laughter)

Higgins: No, you’re so young and beautiful; so I could say women or girls, but girls, you know, you’re too old to be girls, but you’re not too old to be gals. So, you know, life was pretty good for us.

Lange: And then what about after Katrina, like how about the politics?

Higgins: After Katrina—well, let’s—let’s say FEMA [Federal Emergency Management Agency] organizationally because that’s the easiest dog to throw a brick at. Organizationally—I mean, I knew nothing about FEMA. I had flood insurance; I didn’t know that was funded by FEMA. I saw the tsunami on TV. I’d often wondered how people survive. You know, the government goes and does great things. I’d never been involved in a natural catastrophe; personal catastrophes, yes. And I’m the type of guy who can handle pressure very well, by my own self-assessment. But after the storm—FEMA, organizationally dysfunctional to an extreme. And Mike Brown getting fired, probably, was a good thing. FEMA lost the audience before they set up shop here. Inexcusable that you can’t set FEMA up until about Katrina plus—I may have my dates wrong, but probably not—Katrina plus ten, I think, Pascagoula, you know, opened the FEMA office. The delivery of trailers, the turnover of keys, I mean, it was just complete dysfunctional, organizationally speaking. Now, the people were angels. The people for FEMA and Bechtel and the appropriate subs, every single person I met was an absolute angel. Mississippi was blessed with a state governor who went proactive. Mississippi was blessed with a neighboring state that provided immediate National Guard services because Alabama was on the scene instantly. So, K plus, Katrina plus three or four days the streets are manned, Black Hawks [helicopters] are overhead. I mean, it’s a military war-zone lifestyle, but the government was here. Locally, Pascagoula had their act together very quickly. The city manager runs the city, as opposed to a mayor, if you’re familiar with the difference. We have both. And her name is Kay Kell. And FEMA—several examples, I have a couple of friends that live in this subdivision who are policemen; I don’t think they had a day off for thirty days. You know, twelve on, twelve off, eighteen on, six off, working around the clock. And everybody checking on everybody. The fire, the services, I mean absolutely wonderful. City manager allowed a garbage pickup, even though FEMA said not to; she let it immediately. So the second Saturday after the storm, mathematically K plus ten or eleven—storm happens on a Monday—we have garbage pickup in our subdivision. That’s important, ladies, because my specific pile of trash was probably twenty by forty by eight feet high. That’s what I generated, you know, in the first ten days, and I probably
generated fifteen piles that big. So I thought the city services were pretty good. The
ice distribution and the water distribution started about K plus four, I think. The
problem with that distribution process is at the Civic Center. I don’t know if you
know where that is, but as the crow flies, it’s four or five miles from our house, easy
drive, but there’s not a car in the city. If you stayed, you lost your car. It was that
easy. If you evacuated, you had a car, but you weren’t back yet; so how do you go to
the distribution points, you know, to get water and ice, which is what you really
needed. Food wasn’t really a consideration, but you needed the water and ice. So,
FEMA flunks, but the people all get A’s. The state gets a superb grade, and the city
gets a grade, you know, a terrific grade.

Lange: So how did it affect the way that you thought about your community?

Higgins: Ah, OK, now here’s the good news. I’m an optimist; my glass is always
half full, and I believe in the inherent goodness of people. And my entire professional
life, my employees have my trust to lose. Now, that makes me a little unusual by
Navy standards or military standards, but you’ve got to lose my trust. You have it
automatically. You don’t have to earn it. If you lose it, you have to earn it back.
After the storm, the community had to get close, and that was feudal living. It was
European. It was fourteenth century Europe. So my—and because we stayed, I have
my corner of the cul-de-sac, so I’m in charge of, by my own self-definition, of about
six or eight houses. So I turned all the circuit breakers off, as the police tell me to do
to cut the electricity. There is none, but turning everything off. And nobody’s back;
very few of our neighbors are back until that Thursday and Friday. But when they do
come back, it’s communal living. Because we stayed, we had the entertainment set up
in the driveway, the Higgins’ Bar and Grill was open for business, happy hour every
afternoon. (laughter) I had three wheelbarrows and two dollies, which makes me
almost a feudal chief. (laughter) I mean, that’s really what you need, wheelbarrows
and dollies. And you became close with your neighbors. Now, here’s the good thing
about the storm. The level of goodness in Pascagoula—define level of goodness
however you want to—was pretty good before the storm. After the storm, it is so
much better because we’re all in the same boat. It made no difference what my
wardrobe was, how many suits I had, how expensive my cars were, or what my bank
account was, or what my stock portfolio was. Every car in the city is dead; everyone’s
clothes are gone; the banks aren’t open. You have no computers, phone, electricity or
water. So it just doesn’t make any difference who you are; you’re all the same. Now,
you ladies, when you think about it, we all know that God loves us all infinitely
equally. And whether we’re the mother in Somalia with a small child, or we’re the
tens of millions in Africa starving to death, or whether we’re the Aborigines in
Australia going crazy, God loves us. All right? But we don’t all live equitably. And
Tom Higgins lived pretty darn good. Now, I run St. Vincent de Paul, so I know what
it’s like for the unemployed and the poor. And I—we always ask ourself the question
of, I have sympathy and I have empathy, but I’ve never been in their shoes. After the
storm, everybody is the same. Now, your personal traits don’t change. If you’re a
down person, you certainly have a reason to be down after the storm. If you’re an up
person and a humorous person, then you probably can stay that way, although I
slurped the self-pity, you know, drink here and then. But life was good. Neighbors—you knew your neighbors; you knew their thoughts, their feelings, their, uh, you know, and you helped them. That’s the upside to it. Whoever had food shared. So everybody was concerned about everybody; that’s a good thing. Now we’ve lost a little bit of it since the storm as we kind of revert back to our, not isolationism, but our personal life now. But it was—Katrina made the community stronger, not weaker because we’re not made—Pascagoula is not made up of buildings and homes and businesses. It’s made up of Marys and Joes. People make a community. Now, that’s hard to understand until the community’s been knocked on its ass, but it’s really the people. It’s really the people, and the hardest thing is that we probably lost 30 percent of our friends who just moved away, and we never had an opportunity to see them, or they evacuated and never came back. And totally understandable if they’re in their seventies and eighties, they don’t have time to rebuild. But that’s the downside; we lost a lot of close friends that we didn’t get a chance to say goodbye to. But the community after the storm, everybody was doing what they could to help everybody else. Churches are all open. Strangers from Tennessee, and Ocala, Florida—K plus two and three—dropped semi-loads off in Delmas Estates. Semi-loads, you know, so of just everything we needed. So it was the kindness, acts of kindness by a myriad of people. Long before the government was here, people were here from the various states; Tennessee, Alabama, and Florida specifically hit our subdivision. So that goodness of life really went up. Now it’s regressed a little bit, but I think we’re stronger from the community spirit today than we were August 30, 2005.

Wallace: Um-hm. So how and when did you hear about Hurricane Katrina?

Higgins: Well, week before the storm, there’s some hurricane out there. I had lunch Wednesday before the storm, and the subject never came up with two or three of my compadres who I hadn’t seen for a while. But it whaps through Florida, and it’s going to do the horseshoe effect. You probably don’t remember the Weather Channel, but it went through southern Florida and was going to do the horseshoe through the Panhandle again, too bad for Florida. And the Thursday and Friday beforehand at morning mass, we’re all wondering, “What are you going to do?” If you’re going to evacuate, you evacuate, if you’re going to stay, you stay, nobody really knows; it’s too early. The yacht club, Friday, nobody really knew. People were going to go here or there. By the way, 70 percent of the people that I saw at the yacht club that Friday night lost 100 percent of everything, 100 percent of everything. Saturday morning I bring everything in. This K gal is pretty big, but on the other hand, you know, we’re going to stay. The house is strong; we’ve been through this stuff before. But we’re kind of glued to the weather station, as everybody is. Sunday we wake up to absolutely the worst possible news. Katrina is big. She’s a Cat[egory] Five, Category Five. She’s absolutely huge, but it’s going to be in New Orleans. Jim Cantori, the weather guy [Weather Channel reporter], says if you live between New Orleans and Pensacola, go north of Highway 90. I thought the guy was absolutely crazy, but he did say something that I’ll never forget. He said that K—and I use K to abbreviate Katrina—“is the biggest, most perfect hurricane” he’s ever seen or studied in reality or theory. It’s just better than any computer model he’s ever seen. He says, “It is
absolutely huge, and the storm surge is really going to be something.” So Sunday morning my wife and I look at each other, and [say], “What do we do? The roads are clogged.” But we know friends in Hattiesburg. We have friends in Jackson. We can go to Atlanta; we have friends there. But we’ve laid in everything in the house we need to lay in. We got three dogs. And I’m operating under the wrong paradigm; wind damage, not storm surge. So we both look at each other, and she says, “So we stay?” Which can be taken as a statement from she who must be obeyed to a question, “Be a man and disagree with me.” You know. So I look at her and say, “So I guess we stay.” And accordingly by not making a decision, we stay. I’m not comfortable with that decision, but George was a pretty bad hurricane seven years ago, and we were one of the few houses that never lost power, and we were up north when it hit, terrific damage externally, but we had people living in our house for a week before we came back because they had phones, washer, dryer, refrigerator and beds. We wake up Monday morning, and for the first time in the history of dogkind, our three dogs will not go outside to do their morning business. Now, they’ve been outside in driving rainstorms before and quickly do their business. I couldn’t get them out of the garage, and that had never happened before. So I walk the yard line at five o’clock in the morning with a flashlight, can’t wear glasses, and you can hardly stand up due to the wind, but the yard’s dry. There’s no flooding. Damage externally is more severe than George seven years earlier, and it’s only five o’clock in the morning. Huge trees down, all the fences down, half the roof is off, shrubbery’s gone, arbor’s off the house, and all my beautiful gardens are just, you know, totally destroyed. So Monday morning we were nervous, and about eight o’clock when I saw the water outside of the sliding glass den door, which was eight feet tall and runs the length of the room, the water outside is two feet deep, and we’re sloshing on wet carpet. That’s when I knew—pardon my French—we had rolled snake eyes, and we’re fucked. I mean, at that point I knew that we were in sad shape. So it’s an evolutionary process. I mean, you watch the hurricanes, and living in Canada, when you say, “Why don’t people leave?” Well, if a hurricane is 150 miles away moving at six or eight hours, that’s still twenty hours away, you know. But it was going to hit New Orleans. It was going to hit New Orleans; we’re in the right quadrant, which is the wrong quadrant to be in, but New Orleans is a long ways away, so I still felt bad for New Orleans. We’d get a little wind damage, and that was it. Little did we realize that the entire city would flood; nobody had really thought that.

**Wallace:** So you and your wife hadn’t really done any, like, preparation?

**Higgins:** Oh, staying, not to be confused with preparation.

**Wallace:** OK.

**Higgins:** The bathtubs are full. We got batteries. We got radios. We got candles. We’ve laid in water. We’ve laid in extra dog food. I sandbagged the front porch. A hundred percent of everything, to include hoses have been disconnected and are in the garage. The cars have been moved up, you know. We have done all the preparations.
A hundred percent were useless because we lost our front door and side lights due to the storm. Side lights are those glass things that go on either side of the door.

**Maynard:** Right.

**Lange:** Um-hm.

**Higgins:** We’re at the north end of the cul-de-sac, so that blew in so the water has a place to go in our house, as opposed just coming in and going down, the waves rocking our house unobstructed by a front door. So *all* our preparations are useless. And, ladies, six feet of water in the house is a lot of water.

**Lange:** Yeah.

**Higgins:** So all the [bottled] water in the house washed out. There’s not a dry piece of paper. Every battery, radio gone, or wet, destroyed. Nothing, you know, every piece of furniture, kindling. So, yeah, I mean, our preparations—and, of course, the first foot of water in the house is not seawater; it’s sewage because the first thing that happens is your toilets, your sinks, your showers overflow because the water has no place to go. So all the toilets are spitting water up long before you have flooding in the house. And the showers are all coming up through the shower drains; that’s dripping out. So the first foot of water in a home is maybe clear sewage, but it’s definitely sewage.

**Wallace:** So did the proximity of friends or relatives in your community influence your decision to stay at all?

**Higgins:** Yeah, no kids, no relatives, so I don’t have to worry about anybody except Dorothy, myself, and three dogs. And there is the blessing, Kristen. I, by hurricane standards, am so lucky because after the fact, I’m retired; I’m making as much money in September as I was in October, don’t have access to it, but I don’t have to go back to work; I don’t have kids to worry about; I don’t have to keep the family—I mean, gosh, think of how hard this is for a mom and dad with three or four kids. I mean, it was hard enough with three dogs trying to keep them in safe haven, you know. But with children, you have to keep the family going first. I [know] where—I’m the oldest of my clan, so I don’t have to worry about anybody living in this area. I have three younger sisters, but the youngest is fifty-three; they’re all worried about me, but you can’t communicate with everybody, anybody. Phones are down; cell towers are down, and the batteries only last on a cell tower about a day. So even with a cell phone you can’t communicate. And your home phones aren’t working, so we got to my wife’s twin sister about fifteen or thirty seconds, and luckily she got into our computer, extracted the e-mail list, and our daily updates of fifteen or twenty seconds for the first week, or minute. Eventually the [cell towers] came back so she could e-mail all our friends with the Higgins’ saga. So all our friends knew what was happening, not to be confused with nobody, you know, nobody in Pascagoula was on our e-mail list; so you didn’t know what was happening with any of your friends in Pascagoula till they stop...
by. So family and friends, you know, we made the preps, but I didn’t have family to worry about. Now, the downside is, for a week and a half afterwards, I didn’t have family to help, you know, which means the workload is he and she of the house, the master and the mistress of the house were the only staff I employed. Then I hired three high school kids, and that was a blessing.

Wallace: So what was—like, can you describe the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and your house and what happened?

Higgins: The house is internally destroyed, floor to ceiling. I salvaged four pieces of furniture and sent over to Mobile to recover, spending four thousand dollars to refinish one of them, two chairs and a small table. The stuff I took to the drycleaners, I walked into the drycleaners, one trip, with some of my clothing. I walked back into the house, and I’m not prone to over-emotionalism, but when I walked back into the house late Sunday afternoon, slogging through, I sat down and just looked and said, “Geez.” Said some very bad words. And then my wife had to go through it; that’s much harder than me. I’d been through it. But having to let your partner in life, your best friend, the person you share the thousands of minutia moments that comprise a life, having to bring Dorothy in and knowing she was walking into Dante’s Inferno was—and absolutely zero preparation for it except to say we pretty much lost everything—very, very difficult. So your question is, What am I thinking? Everything except two things didn’t enter my mind, Kristen. I never went to the “Why me, Lord?” I never go there because I’ve been so lucky in my life. So you can’t say, “Why me, Lord?” when a catastrophe hits you. And I didn’t go to the anger mode; I went straight to the frustration, worry, depression, planning. I think in timelines mathematically, so I got a million plans going through. Tuesday we wake up and—wake up, we never went to bed—but we finally get up about three or four o’clock, no sense trying to sleep in the upstairs of the neighbor’s house. And we save a few possessions. We do what everybody does; you walk through the house, and you try to find something that’s not broken and put it on a shelf. And then we went for a walk down to the beach, and that’s where I knew we were lucky; “we” being Tom and Dorothy were extremely lucky in comparison to our friends. Slab after slab after slab. The condos gone. I knew half a dozen people that lived in the condos. They’re not standing. Such destruction that, “Which house was theirs?”

Wallace: Yeah.

Higgins: I mean, you’re walking, and it was a bit of a walk down there, but you walk and you see nothing—slab, slab, slab, slab, and you know everybody that lived there, and there’s nothing. I was shocked at how little debris there was. As the water went back it probably took everything. So I was so sad, and we got back to our house, and we just held hands, and I said, “Oh, God, we are so lucky.” And how sad we felt for our friends because had you driven by our house, you would’ve looked at the house and said, “Oh gosh, how lucky” because you would’ve seen a house.

Wallace: Yeah.
Higgins: You know, there was plywood on the front door, and it needed shingles, and that’s what your eyes would’ve told you. Well, basically, when you walk into the house, it has to be gutted, floor to ceiling. [So] when we left to go up north and respite for a couple of months after Thanksgiving, I mean [wood] studs to the ceiling. Nothing in the house; they had to rip out everything, all the toilet fixtures, all the cabinetry, all my beautiful woodworking, all the build-ins, all the vanities, all the showers, all the tubs. I mean a hundred percent of that is ripped out, but folks, we have a house. We have a house, and it has wood and it’s all—I mean if you’ve ever gone through the building of a house or your parents have, as I told everybody, it’s already framed in. We’ve already got the slab laid, and it’s framed in, so we’re making great progress.

Maynard: Yeah.

Higgins: And I had insurance. I had flood; I had homeowners; I had money in the bank; I had all my investments, so I was worried about when, w-h-e-n I was going to get my money, not if or how, or what’s going to happen. Now, it took frikking forever. The insurance is a horrific story, but I knew I was covered. So, and I knew I could borrow money; I didn’t have a mortgage, so I could go down to see my local banker and borrow bucks, which I did. So the finances I sweated, but I time-lined them sweated it. I wasn’t, you know, I wasn’t worried about how I was going to come up with it. But walking the community, it was absolutely devastating. And I think I put it in my book. I wasn’t sure whether it was a knockdown blow, but in boxing terms it was a standing ten count. I mean, this city was hit hard, so hard, Lucy, that had we—and we were the easternmost city hit. OK? Nobody east of us was truly hit, so Pascagoula was hit. Had we been the only city hit—forget New Orleans, forget Long Beach; they had it much worse—but had the destruction just been limited to Pascagoula, Air Force One still would’ve flown overhead. The president still would have visited here. It still would’ve been unbelievable as you drive for three miles and see nothing. As you see nothing by the beach, on Washington [Street], I mean, you see nothing except slabs. That is a very, very depressing sight because when you see it on TV, and New Orleans is a depressing sight, but I’m not emotionally committed.

Maynard: Yeah.

Higgins: I feel bad, and I pray for the folks, but I don’t know them. But when you know, when you’re walking by, and you know them, and, “Where are they? God, where are they? How do I find them?” How do you find people?

Wallace: Yeah.

Higgins: I mean, no cell phones, no phones, no cars—where are they living? You know, it took a long time to get an address book of our friends.

Wallace: Yeah.
Higgins: So we were pretty, we were pretty depressed, yeah. Now, the secret is you can’t stay depressed because anger and depression need nothing to feed on, except other emotions; they’ll destroy every emotion you have. And anger especially. We knew a lot of people who were really angry. Well, God, you can stay angry forever because it feeds off every positive emotion you have, so you can’t really go there.

Maynard: How did your wife handle everything?

Higgins: I would say terribly well. She’s a planner; she’s a spark; she’s really a rock-solid person. Now, we’re religiously committed; we know we’re lucky; we also are pretty independent people. I mean, we’re not dependent upon, you know, too much. I think she lost it Tuesday or Wednesday night when she was crying to her sister. Guys take to Camp K a lot easier than women do. This is a factual statement; this is not a sexual statement. I can use the hose and rinse off five or six times a day in water that has not been cleared to bathe in or, you know, drink, and put on a dry t-shirt. Now, I don’t particularly like that lifestyle, but I basically did it for months. We didn’t have hot water for about six weeks. But women have, have to have a higher standard of cleanliness, biologically if for no other reason. And the filth, the slime, the dirt, the grime, it’s 100 degrees all of September; the sweat’s just rolling off of you, the stink, the filth of the environment we’re working in, she was unbelievable, and after working twelve hours a day, she would cook for the neighborhood. I am blessed with a wife who’s a gourmet cook and can take rice and Spam and chicken out of a can, and the next thing find some couscous. So she served, she served the subdivision food they’d never had before. I mean, Thai chicken curry, nobody had ever had that before, and Teddy Roosevelt’s country jack chicken, and grilled Spam and pineapples. I mean, Dorothy is really a good cook. Now, you get all done, Spam still tastes like Spam, but when you’re hungry, you’ll eat anything. And so that the salvation was, we would allow everyone to bitch and moan until they came over for cocktails at six o’clock when I lit the candle. See, I saved my liquor. I lost everything in the house except liquor. But I store my liquor high, real high so I had bottles of champagne, cases of wine, except for the expensive vodka and gin, you know, lots of liquor, and I just put it in a lawn mower cart, and there it was, the finest bar in the subdivision. I’m not a beer drinker, so they were out of luck. But, so people could come over and bring maybe a bottle of whatever they had, but for literally for six weeks we were the bar and grill of the area. And just like the wedding at Canaan, when I took inventory and we packed everything up as we were putting it in storage to have the house [gutted] out, I looked in the lawn mower cart, and God I almost had as much liquor as when I started, so the neighbors were very generous in their restocking, you know. But my wife handled it well; she really, really did. And she had the opportunity to leave. You know, there’s no reason we both had to stay in this cesspool. So are either one of you married?

Maynard: No.

Wallace: Mm-mm.
Higgins: Well, I knew I had to have the conversation, and I knew what the outcome was going to be, but there’s no sense both, you know—I can get her to Mobile; our friends have given us a car. She can be on an airplane, or she can drive to Virginia and stay with her sister and, you know, and get out of this. Now, I knew she wasn’t going to do it, but we had to broach the subject. So we broached the subject, and she tells me exactly what I can do with myself, and I said, “We won’t discuss that again, but thank you.” Because I wanted her to stay, but there was no need for both of us to stay.

Wallace: So did the hurricane bring you closer as a couple, then?

Higgins: No—well, I don’t know if it brought us closer as a couple, Kristen; we’re not joined at the hip. We’re close, but we have to book if we’re going to have lunch together. OK? Like I’m doing my shtick with you, and I went to church this morning, and she’s substituting for someone at the hospital. She does the emergency room hospital auxiliary work over there, and tomorrow she’s got some club meeting, so I mean, it wouldn’t be, you know, we don’t spend twenty-four/seven at the hip. But certainly we were working side by side, you know, this whole thing. It certainly brought us closer together in that the values-of-life—a term that’s totally overused—and what’s really important can be interrupted by a phone call. You sweat your little universe; the phone rings, illness, death, accident, and all of a sudden everything is re-prioritized for you, if you follow me. You’re not worried about this thing, you know. So when Katrina hit, I knew this was the one percent. Let’s be honest. If you can’t sweat life after Katrina, your priorities are totally screwed up, and we both got on a wave length. How lucky was I to be married to a woman who was able to stay on the wave length. Neither one of us were really hard down at the same time, you know, because when she really went hard down, I had to kind of pick her up. Normally by just saying, “It’s just shit. Granted it’s our stuff, but I mean, you know, you’ll be able to buy new. You wanted to”—she wanted to paint the house inside. “Well, you get your wish.” Katrina made the remodeling effort a little bit more significant than we would’ve been after, but so, yeah, it certainly brought us closer, but I’ll be honest with you, twenty-four/seven, side by side, shoveling out the inside of your house, sweating your behind off with no utilities, no water, no A/C, and living in absolute filth. I refused to live in the guest bedroom I shoveled out. She put a mattress down and said that was fine, so, but I mean I put a recliner in the driveway and slept out there for a couple of months. That was just cooler and easier and better for me. Now, I’m not—I wasn’t much of a sleeper, so I’d cat nap a little bit here and there, but I was awake probably twenty out of twenty-four hours. And for a woman who tosses and can never fall asleep, it amazed me wandering through the house at midnight to see her sound asleep with a couple dogs laying on the mattress with her, so, you know, but I just couldn’t take the closeness, you know, of the heat, the sweltering heat. And you feel so bad physically. But, yeah, for sure it brought us closer. It doesn’t have to, however. Follow me?

Maynard: Yeah.
Higgins: It doesn’t have to. So if you ever choose someone, your goals and aspirations have to be alive and well on both spouses. You can’t give up your aspirations for love. You can postpone them; you can detour them, but love is not asking a person to give up their goals and their aspirations. It’s just kind of how do we achieve a compromise of sorts? And Dorothy and I have always been pretty darn good at achieving compromises where we both can still maintain where we want to go. So Katrina brought us closer; it certainly made me appreciate her more. It took all this—and no one worked harder than she did, as far as a woman in the neighborhood. I put her on wheelbarrow duty because anybody can do wheelbarrow duty, but I didn’t put her on shoveling stuff into the wheelbarrow; that’s too depressing.

Maynard: Yeah.

Higgins: That’s too depressing, and when I started to see what I was shoveling into the wheelbarrow, I had to go to a different room. You can’t be thinking about it, your once precious—I mean, you know, you’re just taking stuff out to the curb. But she worked as hard as it was humanly possible to work and made the house or the garage or the driveway a home. I mean, candles lit and this and that, and I mean she had a cookout there and comfortable chairs. I mean, it was for shit living, but it wasn’t bad by neighborhood standards. It wasn’t bad by [neighborhood standards]. Now, granted, you know, if you got cars in the garage, you’ve got to use the cars for storage, outside the cars. You don’t open the doors in the inside; you don’t want to go in there; Mr. Mold is working. But I mean, she had stuff organized, and everybody came to our house because we stayed, and we were set up for that type of stuff, so an angel, she really was.

Maynard: Yeah.

Higgins: Love her to death, and she proved that at least once in my jerkdom of history, I was a pretty smart guy getting that woman to marry me. (laughter)

Maynard: Can you describe to me, like, when you decided to leave your house and like the experience of doing that?

Higgins: Leaving it for up north?

Maynard: No, like just during the hurricane.

Higgins: OK, yeah. And if you get a chance, read the book, not because it’s my book, but because you will get empathy of everyone that comes in here. Between five and seven o’clock Monday morning, we must get fifty phone calls; everybody’s worried about us. So we parrot, “Hey, we’re fine. We’re going to get some rain, going to get some wind. I mean, the damage is extreme outside but, you know, we’re high and dry.” We lose electricity at seven and—

Maynard: A.m.? 
Higgins: Huh?

Maynard: A.m. or p.m?

Higgins: A.m. Monday morning, that’s when Katrina hits. So at seven o’clock, we lose phone and electricity. Well, you’re still just kind of looking outside for about fifteen minutes, but then water’s coming through the bathrooms or this or that. So five minutes of towels and sheets and, you know, blankets, the quick, “Oh, we got to stop the water coming in.” Water comes in everywhere, and you don’t see it pouring in; it just comes. And then you’re walking—and we’re walking in knee deep water in the carpet, and I see how bad it is outside, and Mayo, the golden retriever puppy who’s about—he was born on tax day—so he’s about six months old—he decides that Dorothy is not busy enough and because he hasn’t been outside, he squats and pees right in the middle of my beautiful den. And Dorothy immediately says, “Oh, Mayo,” and runs in for paper towels or something. That’s the first humorous thing that happened, and I say, “Dorothy, fuck it. The house is gone, I mean, you know.” And somewhere, sometime after Mayo peeing on the carpet—because time stands still; truly time stands still here. Sometime in ten minutes we go from no water to, “We’re out of here.” When it’s over your knees, you know, you can’t stay. So we try to get out the front door, can’t do that, can’t go through the garage, that’s a mess, so Dorothy says [to use] the window. I throw a leash around my neck, and I take off my glasses, and we’re leaving, and we have to leave. I mean, this happens very, very quickly. It took forever for the water to come between the previous week and eight o’clock Monday morning; you’re waiting, waiting, waiting. But bingo, it’s here. And when I crank open the window to the [guest] bedroom—they’re casement type so you crank them open, and the window is maybe, yea high, so you got to really step up and out. But when I opened that window, the water’s cascading in. It’s close to the house; it’s already three or four feet deep out there, and you cannot hear yourself think. It’s 150-mile-an-hour wind. I mean, it’s raining, it hurts, you can’t keep your eyes open, you can’t see your hand in front of your face. So that’s when I know this is pretty serious business, really serious business. So I mouth, “Love you.” Her parents are deaf, so we can talk out our hands to each other. So “I love you,” and just, uh, step through the window with no thought process. This isn’t the little kid trying to be coaxed off the diving board. I mean, you’re now id, no thought process, you must go from point A to point B, and I just hoped that she didn’t see in my eyes “holy mackerel.” I mean, I’ve been in battle, I’ve been shot at, you know, I know what, you know, serious business of life is. This was serious business. And so, yeah, that’s what was going through our mind on the evacuation. But the water was clear; I didn’t see any debris in the water. But it was extremely, extremely rough. I mean, if you’d had a canoe, two people weren’t going to, you know, paddle south in the wind. If your eyes were open, it hurt, and I mean it hurt your forehead, your neck. I mean, it really hurt, but of course that’s absolutely nonsensical because you don’t care; you’re just sloshing barefoot. Dorothy hates to go barefoot. You have to be barefoot outside because the current will take sandals or sneakers or twist you. I mean, you got to be barefoot. And you also have to be barefoot to know where in the hell you are. Are
you on grass, or are you on a driveway? And your feet tell you where you are; your eyes can’t. So we got to the house next door, and then I did some more traveling around the subdivision, checking on people, and then we just waited for about six hours and looked out the window waiting for the water to go down. And when we started seeing the tops of the mailboxes, that’s when we knew the water was going down.

Wallace: Yeah. So was the neighbor’s house flooded at all?

Higgins: Same amount of water in their house, except they have a two-story house.

Wallace: Oh, OK.

Higgins: So we’re sitting on the stairs going up, if you follow me.

Wallace: Um-hm.

Higgins: Now, their house is a step up to the porch and then a step up. And, yeah, so he had four or five feet of water in his house. I felt real bad, though, the first time I opened the door up because he had—not much water went in. The last time I opened the door up, we had trouble closing the door because the water was coming in, you know, at eyeball level, so we had trouble really closing the door. And I felt real bad as his entire house is flooding, you know, to a great extent caused by me opening and closing the door a half a dozen times, but the reality is, it would’ve made no difference because it was going to flood anyway.

Wallace: Yeah.

Higgins: But then, yeah, we lived upstairs. And that’s scary; I mean, you hear refrigerators and freezers, you know, falling over and furniture floating, and you know, but no critters; nothing was alive.

Wallace: So when did your neighbors leave?

Higgins: Sunday, most of them decided that that was the time to get out of Dodge. So Sunday everybody left except two people that live kitty-corner to us; they stayed upstairs with their daughter who was visiting, and an elderly couple two houses away stayed. So I had to check on them before I rested; so that was my most dangerous journey, heading south to see how they were doing. I was going to try to talk them into coming because they live in a single-story house, but they stayed and went to the countertops and then from the countertops climbed on top of their kitchen hutch and rode it out there.

Wallace: And they were all OK?
**Higgins:** Uh-huh, although there were some deaths on our street. A couple at the end of the street lost their father who lived a couple of blocks away; he got cut by a piece of sheet metal. Remember, hospitals aren’t open, disease, illness, and he succumbed to the leg injury. And the guy living a couple of houses to our left, different subdivision but with all the fences down you could walk there, I went over to see him on Wednesday, and his son was there. And I was a track guy and a jogger in a different life, so I’d had the sprains of multicolored, and I looked at this guy, and I said, “How did you sprain your ankle?” He’s on crutches, a policeman. He said, “I didn’t, I cut it on a nail.” And that was infection. So you had to be kind of worried about it. I mean, people were getting sick. We were coughing. And my feet were terrible because I’d been barefoot for two days, so you talk about blisters, and I mean I was fire—the fire ants had had me on one of my travels; so I got a million fire ants on me, but my feet were of concern to me because I had blisters and a lot of cuts. And as soon as I saw what happened to that guy, I just had to lance all the blisters, cut them open—don’t recommend it, but it’s always worked for me—and then I just washed my feet incessantly.

**Maynard:** Yeah.

**Higgins:** Put on wet socks, but I mean I washed my feet. The only—and Dorothy’s ankles swelled. She looked like an eighty-year-old woman. And she’s got great legs; she’s really, you know, a skinny gal, but with her ankles. So the doc comes over, a friend of ours, and they lost their house, but he’s traveling around. And Dorothy says, “What about my ankles?” He says, “Well, stay off of them for two or three days, and the swelling will go down.” Yeah, Kristen, that’s going to happen. The only serious thing that happened to me is I was ripping up carpet, and I had a flashback of the splash. And now, if you give me a jackknife, I can take a splinter out of my hands. You know, I’m really pretty good about picking, and pain doesn’t really bother me. Do you wear contacts?

**Wallace:** No.

**Higgins:** Oh, OK. I cannot get an eyelash out of my eye except by pure luck. (knocking on the door)

(brief interruption)

**Higgins:** I love my wife. (laughter)

**Maynard:** So let’s see, beyond your, you know, feet, were you injured at all?

**Higgins:** Just the eyes; I got the splash back from cutting the rug up. I was using a pair of scissors, wrong tool. Nowadays, use your bread knife, your serrated bread knife to cut carpet.

**Maynard:** Yeah.
**Higgins:** Because it’s so wet, you got to get it up; I mean that’s part of the chores. So, but I was using scissors, and I got a splash back, whether I was wearing my glasses or not didn’t matter, but I got the water in my eye, and we know what was in the water, and the bacteria, and you talk about a blinding poker in both eyes. So luckily, she had a bottle of—Dorothy had a bottle of saline solution, and I had no problem wiping my eyeballs. But as soon as I cleaned up, my eyes were as red as your blouse.

**Maynard:** Yeah.

**Higgins:** I didn’t have any eyes for about three days, scared to death because I’m a wuss when it comes to my eyes.

**Maynard:** Yeah.

**Higgins:** But I mean, so at any rate, I cleaned them up, and then I say, “Well, I’ll go back and continue ripping up the carpet.” She says, “But”—and I say, “Yeah, like is somebody else going to do it on my behalf?” So that was really our fear. By the end of the first week, we were in pretty good shape, physically, healthwise, but we were also lucky because neither one of us got tetanus shots because we couldn’t get to the hospital.

**Maynard:** Right.

**Wallace:** So you volunteer at St. Vincent de Paul’s. Did you do that during the hurricane as well?

**Higgins:** Well, I mean, the Wednesday beforehand, and we didn’t do it Sunday; we meet Sunday mornings, but a couple of weeks later, we did. We started it up immediately. There wasn’t much we could do. We didn’t have access to funds, or all our food was gone. Seven out of ten of our volunteers were slab.

**Wallace:** Yeah.

**Higgins:** Gallows humor: I mean, lucky them, they didn’t have any cleanup, a very common expression. And then the other three out of ten were like me; you got a house, but it’s not inhabitable. But, yeah, we continued to run St. Vincent, and money came in from all over the world. We lost a complete thrift shop and everything in it, but we redid that, and so we’re back in business. But there was a lot of money, Kristen; there was a lot of money down here. And the good news is, God, the American Red Cross, FEMA, two thousand here, I mean there’s money, there’s food, there’s clothing after the first couple of weeks. So the poor don’t jump on the employment wagon because they don’t have to. I’m not being harsh; it’s a statement of life. There was so much money being thrown at everybody that they didn’t get a job. And now with the unemployment back to where it’s always been, jobs are a little
tougher to get, but if you wanted to work the first month after the hurricane, there were no minimum wages. It would’ve been $10 or $12 an hour doing anything.

**Wallace:** Yeah.

**Higgins:** But, yeah, we brought St. Vincent de Paul back a lot faster than we brought our own homes back because it was important we do something.

**Maynard:** Did you have a lot of people coming to you?

**Higgins:** Not as much as you would imagine, but in the last six months, we’re running out of the FEMA trailers, we’re running out of this or that. So yeah, the people on call this week will probably field fifty phone calls, and the two people I have over at clinic on walk-ins will probably see twenty-five people.

**Maynard:** So you’re seeing more of the effects now?

**Higgins:** Yeah. And the fact that a lot of services are out of money. Red Cross, your schools, your federal programs, I mean, a lot of those folks are out of money. In twenty-two years, Jackson County St. Vincent de Paul has never been out of money. Do you believe that? God really works in mysterious ways. I’m one of the youngest people we have working there, and then I’ve only been working for about nine years. We’ve never been out of money. Oh, we’ve been close, but every other outfit in the world’s been out of money here and there; so we’re not out of money. And, of course, if you’re going to play the field, you cannot be judgmental. I can’t ask Wendy, “How’d you get in this fix? Don’t you know better?” Of course, I mean, that’s not where we come from.

**Maynard:** Yeah.

**Higgins:** We’re going to help, or we’re not going to help based upon the need, not based upon the situation of how she got there; unimportant to us. Important that we find her a safe haven, maybe, but yeah, so St. Vincent de Paul is a good deal. Thank you for your efforts on their behalf. I think it’s one of the best charities going. No overhead; you know, all the money goes to the poor, and who is our neighbor? I can’t do a goddamn thing about Africa. I can’t do much about AIDS and the millions starving to death, other than write a check. But, gosh, that guy on the corner, or Wendy who knocked on the door, I could do something about that. Change her life—no. Take away a problem this week—yes. We can do something about the people we see, and whether they’re ripping me off or not bothers me not at all. We’re not result-oriented. You can’t volunteer your time and be result-oriented. OK? I mean, if you want to be a statistician, you volunteer—you both volunteer your time, and you’re busy, and you’re not. It doesn’t make any difference. You both volunteered your most valuable asset—your time. So you can’t say, “Oh, geez, I shouldn’t have come because I didn’t have anything to do.” No, you volunteered your time; you were there. And the fact that our clients are working the system—of course they are. How stupid
do I look? I know they’re working the system, but they’re needy, and they’re not living very well regardless of how they’re working the system. And do we get all the truth? No, but who cares. We get enough of the truth, and we get a bill that needs to be paid, and we pay their bill, and we give them food. And we can’t—we only help them once a year, in theory. Food whenever they want it. So, yeah, I like it because the money goes to your community, and you help those in the community, and baby steps—life is nothing more than baby steps. You don’t take giant steps; you crawl. You do your best, and if everybody makes—if everybody does a little bit more good today than bad today, we’re doing OK. I always thought God gave me family and friends to berate myself. There was no need for me to go there; I have enough external checks on people who love me that I can always hold a [ten card] for myself.

Wallace: How long do you think that you will continue to see the effects of Katrina as a volunteer?

Higgins: I don’t know how to answer your question. I think Pascagoula is going to be three to five years before the visual scars are gone. OK? If you’re talking about the St. Vincent thing, the poor will always be with us.

Wallace: Yeah.

Higgins: The needy will always be with us. But I think Pascagoula, this is not going to be a quick and easy, not going to be a quick and easy. And you know, to a great extent the people who wound up with slabs were the best-heeled of the city, socially, financially, politically. I mean, they lived in proximity to water; you know, that’s the well-heeled. And if they lose, you know, if the rich and the young doctors and the budding lawyers and the retired businessmen, if you take a hit of $500,000 or two or three or five million, that’s a hunk of money. That’s really a hunk of change; I don’t care how wealthy you are. So this city’s rebounding. There are signs of growth, but I would say it’s, on a calendar year, it’s very, very early spring; we got a long way to go, and it’s been eighteen months, but we are making progress.

Maynard: What do you miss most about your community?

Higgins: The loss of friends. The as is, where is—do you understand the concept of as it was, where it is now?

Maynard: Um-hm.

Higgins: Change is hard; there’s nothing wrong with it, but it helps if it’s guided by a personal mandate as opposed to an external directive. Life changed after Katrina; too bad. You didn’t have a choice; you got to go along with it. Life is really different today. Our social structure is different. Our friends are different. It’s impacted my wife far harder than me. And guys, acquaintances are fine. Women have a stronger social structure of friendship. I’m phrasing that poorly not knowing what I’m talking about, educated on Mars, but I think you can pick it up intuitively. You know, a
bunch of guys, if you ever asked a guy, “Gosh, is he a boyfriend, a close friend?” I mean, “I don’t know. I know him; he’s a nice guy.” I don’t want to tag it. But women [have] close friends, and Dorothy lost a lot of her close friends who moved away; so the letter writing, the e-mail isn’t the same.

Maynard: Yeah.

Higgins: And she got a little frustrated in the pastor, so she hasn’t come back to the church quite as quickly as I would’ve liked. I can’t go there. She’s a very, she’s a very religious person, and God’s everywhere, and if she wants to get it in the backyard meditating as a Catholic, that’s fine with me. I’m not hung up on—be the best that you can be with whatever your bedrock is.

Maynard: Yeah.

Higgins: And I mean, if you’re agnostic or an atheist, be the best goddamn agnostic there is. You know, be the best you can be; you know, God will sort it all out. I can barely handle a, you know, planning for next week; so I’ll let Jesus sort it all out. I have my faults, but envious and judgmental aren’t necessarily the top of my list. But that’s what we miss. We had a different life before the storm, and our friends were all here, and they all had homes on the beach and, you know, life was really wonderful. And now a lot of them are living in Mobile or have gone away; the church hasn’t rebounded back. A lot of our close friends are gone; that’s sad. That’s sad because going—you lose them by—bad enough to lose them by death, but at our age you don’t usually lose them by moving away from their hometown.

Maynard: Yeah.

Higgins: So that, for me and for my wife, is our—that’s the number one downside to where we are now, loss of some really good friends. And everyone suffers that, by the way.

Wallace: Yeah. Have you been able to get in touch with everybody?

Higgins: Yeah. It takes a while to figure out where they are, and who they are, and who might know, but yeah, I don’t think we’ve lost touch with anybody. But if they’re living with a relative in Tucson, Arizona, you know, a Christmas card or the occasional phone is not the same. And close friends who move even to Mobile—I have close buddies who are living in Mobile. Yeah, I get over and see them, you know, once a month or at a bar for lunch. That’s not the same as seeing them every day at mass or stumbling into them or always being able to call and say, “Well, let’s just get together. What are you doing?” Just not the same.

Maynard: How would you like to see your community rebuilt?
Higgins: Well, efficiently. OK? I really—that’s difficult for me to answer. I’m a capitalist; I’m an individualist; I’ve always believed that self help is a lot better than waiting for official, sanctimonious whatever, because that usually comes encumbered. So I, for being such an opinionated SOB, Lucy, I’m not sure where to go on that. Better than ever? No, that’s not going to happen. With a thoughtful process that we really make intelligent decisions today that stand well a decade from today. Yeah, I’ve never believed in the ready-fire-aim approach, and if you’re going to rape and pillage, then you probably should burn last, OK. It doesn’t do any good to burn first and then rape and pillage; nothing left to rape and pillage. But you can ready-aim simultaneously. You don’t have to spend years planning. I mean, you can kind of implement while you’re planning and then change your plan. So I just don’t want to see mired, mired, and like everybody else I kind of like homes rather than condos. But on the other hand, business responds faster than residential. OK, businesses can come in, buy up property, and in a couple of years, you know, you have stuff. You got a paradigm shift. You know what I mean? Your road maps got your—road maps got to change, and we all want it the way it was. Well, they can’t have that, so let’s just make sure that what we’re doing bears well under the future. And just because Katrina happened doesn’t mean that you have to plan for every storm to be the severity of K. So I think it’s nice that we’re changing the building codes, and you got to go up a little bit, yada, yada, yada, but I mean if it’s the worst catastrophe that ever hit the US, statistically speaking—and I’m pretty good at statistics—it doesn’t mean it could happen next year, but the probability isn’t [lessened]. So don’t be so stupid on the mandates that you price yourself out of the business. You know, I think banks and insurance probably have a better handle on it than the city, state, and FEMA regulations. Insurance and mortgages will pretty well work out, supply and demand based upon the risk. I don’t think the federal government’s got to mandate a whole hell of a lot. The banks and the insurance companies will take care of that for us. So, a poor answer. I didn’t feel confident with that answer. (laughter) But on the other hand I’m kind of back, and I’m willing to help my neighbors, so.

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

Higgins: Some of my hopes and fears?

Maynard: Yes.

Higgins: Well, we debated long and hard as to whether we’d, you know, stay.

Maynard: Yeah.

Higgins: And I was the catalyst for staying, and my wife was kind of the catalyst for leaving because we had an opportunity. And so I really talked her into it, although we looked. I mean, give me a tennis court and a bottle of Absolut Citron and a couple of decent books, and I’m good to go for a month, you know. So, for me, just I’ve always been—I’m a straight-line biorhythm guy. Those lines are up relatively high, but shit happens, and I don’t necessarily sulk about it, and I win the lottery, and I’m going to
go crazy over that. My wife is a little bit more of the terrific highs and the deeper lows than I have. So my aspirations are that we continue to be comfortable, and if I can maintain mental and physical health in a lifestyle in the next five years based upon the last five years, even with the one-year interruptus by the aftermath of Katrina, that’s good. Not wanting to sound sanctimonious, but I’d rather be part of the solution than run away from the problem. And I’m young enough at sixty-two and have some mental wherewithal to be able to, you know, do my little paddling in the community. And I don’t want to be organizing it, and I don’t want to be part of the political; I mean I’m not that type of guy. I’m more of an operator, so let me just operate and kind of do what I can to make things a little bit better. And that’s fine, and if everybody just works to their strengths. Now, Dorothy would say, if she were here, “Well, the social inner structure.” She’d like her clubs to be tighter and to have some more friends come back and to have some more people. What you’ve had is you’ve had a lot of people have been so wrapped up in bringing their life back together again that the social fabric is lost. You don’t see them as much, if you follow me. I mean everybody’s really, really busy trying to get cabinets, carpets, I mean, their house back or their business back, and I really understand that concept. But you know you have to go along and give people time. Give people time. So I—the community will come back, and however it comes back, I hope it’ll be entertaining, you know, for all of us who live here because that’s what a community offers, you know, fresh oxygen; poor simile, but you know, a freshness of life and of the ability to breathe, inhale, and be a part of it. You know, and the water’s moving—the ripple of the current. Many times it doesn’t matter what the temperature is; it’s the movement of the waters that are kind of important. And you know, our city and the whole Gulf Coast will come back; communities have no choice. And we have no choice but to go along with it. And if you object to that concept then, really, find a community you like. There are a million communities you can find, you know, but they don’t have our friends and what we’re looking for that this place does. So it’ll come back. Again, that’s optimism but not Pollyanna vision, which is why I say from three to five years. Three to five years is a long time from today.

Maynard: So what did you do with your home? Did you rebuild it, or did you move on to a different—

Higgins: Yep—no, no, we have completely redone the whole thing, so we’re back in it. It’s a hundred percent beautiful, you know, all new furniture. Now, I saved a lot of stuff. I saved a lot of antiques. I saved all the high stuff, all the crystal, silverware, china that she was so worried about; sets and sets and sets of that stuff we saved. All the oriental rugs. We had—you know, I’ve collected oriental rugs all my life. Now, they were flooded, but a good oriental rug you can’t destroy. Take out, throw over the bushes and lug them into Mobile and have them cleaned up. The four pieces we had restored came back. We bought a houseful of furniture. She lost her fur coats, but we got insured for those, and she got wool coats, and I blew the rest of the money on furniture, whatever I [wanted]. And she lost a Rolex watch, but that was insured, so she got another vintage Rolex watch. I’ve refurbished my wardrobe. I was a clothes horse before; I’m not. I now live in jeans. You know, the gardens have come back. I
need another year to really make them look pretty, but the yard looks fantastic by other people’s standards; still a shade weak by mine. The house is gorgeous, inside and out. It’s completely different, save from my room. See, I have two rooms in the house; the garage, which I sometimes lose control of, but my den I don’t. The one room in the house that is my room is my den. It’s a huge room. And people walk into the house, and they say, “How lucky; the entire house flooded except for Tom’s den.” (laughter) Because it’s back exactly—new furniture, you know, new furniture and a different desk and a different leather sofa and a different recliner—but the same; the walls are the same color; the [furniture] looks pretty much the same because I saved them pictures. The art work is hanging in the same places, if it wasn’t destroyed. Prints don’t make it, but oils make it, you know; water [can’t] flood oils, and they make it. So my den is pretty much exactly like it was, much to the chagrin of the lady of the house, but she’s got every other room in the house. (laughter) So, we’re back, and other than a few contractor [fix-ups] we’ve got to take of, and we’re in no hurry take care of, we’re a hundred percent back and aren’t out too much of our own money. Aren’t out too much of our own money. You know, two brand-new cars, you know, and everything in the house from one end to the other is a hundred percent new. I was afraid that my comfortableness level would be different. You know, you take away everything you have and the fact that they give you the money to buy it all new, well, there’s no emotional attachment to new stuff.

I mean, really. I mean, I can go out and buy furniture. And the furniture loss hit me the hardest because I was just a custodian for my kids and my family; being the oldest, I was a custodian of that. And I don’t want you to think it was farmyard antique because you could look at it, it looked like brand new furniture because it was, some of it was French Provincial and this and that, but I mean it wasn’t old stuff. Chronologically it was, but it stood up well. And that was a toughie. Losing all our books, that was a toughie because you don’t replace seventy-five coffee table books, even if you could. She replaced her cookbooks because she could go on eBay and find a lot of cookbooks, so I blew a picture up for her, and then she could go on and replace her books. I had 1500 cassette tapes; that was old school. That really, really was hard because I had about twenty collage tapes for myself and five for her that were the forefront of iPod, but I now gone twenty-first century. (laughter) Nono-iPod.

Maynard: Nano.

Higgins: And so I truly have been forced to upgrade. But life is very good. If you walk through the house, it’s very much different, but it’s our house. It’s our house, and the antiques and the clutter and the stuff we have on the shelves, we saved. So if you say, “Well, we lost all the kitchen, all the appliances, all the furniture, all the clothes.” But the stuff that makes the stuff a home, all our travels from the world, why we had so much stuff. We might’ve lost a third of it all, but I mean we had way, way too much. So now when you walk through the house, there’s room to walk. We had too much good stuff as opposed to too much stuff. We just had too much stuff that we couldn’t afford to get rid of because it was this or that, so. She did a great job remodeling the house.
Maynard: And the photos that you tried to save, did they make it?

Higgins: That’s pretty gut wrenching. It’s a happy ending but not the way you think. I threw all the photo albums out on the sidewalk. They don’t save; I don’t care what anybody says about a picture. And I, like Jay Leno, I must document every moment of my life, by law. So we’ve taken a lot of pictures, and I’m anal, so I immediately put them in a—

Maynard: —an album?

Higgins: Yeah, and the albums are numbered, and whenever we start a new album, today’s date through, so I mean, we’re very organized. And have lived overseas and traveled extensively, so we had a lot of pictures. So one time I told the crew, I said, “Take the albums from the driveway and put them on the street.” And she finally went down there and spent about, oh, three hours and saved maybe twenty pictures and put them in the kitchen. That night she went to bed, and I went to the kitchen, and, “God, who is that young guy that’s getting married?” I think she might’ve saved one or two pictures of the wedding, but I mean, you know, the colors have—but a few, twenty or thirty. Luckily, I had about a thousand sets of negatives in my safety deposit box—

Maynard: Oh, good.

Higgins: —randomly put in there, not every one, but I mean I had a thousand. So I went up north and found a guy up there from Afghanistan that owned a small photographic shop and, God, I think he brought me back five by sevens for something like seventeen cents apiece. He must’ve lost money on me. But he really wanted to do something for Katrina because he had immigrated to this country twenty years ago, and so I was the recipient of another act of kindness. And so I sorted them all out at the library with some help from strangers who wanted to know why I needed four tables this big. Thousands of these things. What’s the difference between Christmas 1994 and Christmas 1987? I don’t know, but women are much better on hairdos and what they’re wearing. So I did recoup, maybe, 60 percent of the pictures, enough for our life, here we are. Although as she looks at it, one of our best trips was to India for three weeks. It was in May, which is not the time to go to India, but I mean we really went to the Rajasthan, the northern desert area, New Delhi and the Taj and that part. And I can’t find a picture of India. And she’s always wanted to go back to India. Well, now she just says, “Well, I want to go India.” And unless I can find a picture that shows she’s been to India, she’s denying the fact she’s ever been to India, so we may have to go back to India, but we have—we were able to, by pure happenstance because I kept, uh, you know I’m so organized, and I threw them in the safety deposit box where I had pictures of all our household effects for the insurance, this and that, so some of my anal retentiveness paid dividends with the insurance companies.

Wallace: Um-hm. All right, so I think we’re out of time, actually.
Maynard: I just want to ask you one more question. So, overall, how do you think Hurricane Katrina changed you?

Higgins: I would hope for the better. Not that we were bad people beforehand, but as I kind of alluded to earlier, there’s something about sympathy and empathy that you think you have. But how do you put yourself in the other person’s shoes when you’ve never been there. You try the placement factor, but it’s based upon your mental mindset, how you live, this and that. How do you really put yourself? And I think that trying to put yourself into the impoverished shoes is darn near impossible. Now, that doesn’t make me any less efficient or good at it, but knocked down and being there for a short period of time, I really understand their worries, their concerns. Now, I had the ability of upward mobility in coming back; I mean I had all the educational, the academics, and you know, all the merit badges of life I had that some of our poor are not going to get an opportunity to have, but I’ve been in their shoes now. I know what it’s like to be sweating, food, clothing, and shelter, short period of time. So I think all of us should be better people. We should be more religious. We should have a stronger sense of community; define that however you want. We all define it differently. But if a natural catastrophe will not give you that sense of community, then nothing will. And for that I think that, you know, the state of Mississippi deserves pretty high grades. Getting terribly poor grades on all facets of life, OK. You look at any standard of listing of the top fifty states and Mississippi is going to rank—and I’m a Yankee; I burned the carpetbag; as I tell everybody, I’m here until I die, but at least I had burned the carpetbag—but Mississippi ranks dead last on education, payment of school teachers, yada, yada, yada. Pick one and if it’s not Mississippi that’s dead last, it’s Arkansas or Louisiana, with one exception. Do you know what that one exception is? Take this to the bank because it’s true. For the last five years the sovereign state of Mississippi—three syllables; if you’re not from here it’s four syllables—has ranked number one as a percent of income, where we rank number forty-nine or fifty, for charitable contributions. The average person in Mississippi gives more percent of his income to charity than any other state in the Union based upon a wage level that ranks, if not last, almost last. Now, [Highway] 90 south [of] I-10, we’re very eclectic. This is upscale life. But if you go north of 90 to the Delta, it’s pretty impoverished up there. So that’s a powerful statistic that the people of Mississippi have always been pretty strong on giving to charity, giving to church, giving to community, financially speaking. And if you do it financial—we need check writers, and you need people who volunteer their time, and then you need people like me who can do both, because the rich may not volunteer their time, and the poor may not be able to write a check, but if we all do what we can, the communities are strong. So I think sense of community. I’m a—you know, I think that’s one positive aspect that if you don’t have, you should have.

Maynard: Yeah. So is there anything that you would like to add that we haven’t asked you?

Higgins: No, I don’t think so. Personally, I’m damn proud of my efforts, Dorothy and my efforts. I think we did pretty good, and I think the book will show that without
it being—Lucy, this isn’t bravado, you know, or ego—maybe a little bit of ego—it’s almost like who we are. When you go through a long evolution of your life successfully, there is a feeling of accomplishment. But when you go through that same evolution post-Katrina where the environment and everything is damn hard, and nothing is emotionally easy, therein lays the biggest problem after the storm. Whatever you’re doing, you can’t forget. There’s not a moment when you can forget; you know, you’re living it because you’re shoveling out your house, you’re doing this, whatever job you’re doing reminds—it’s not like you can go to the office and get involved in something, your entire, you know, evolution, every story you hear, every conversation—it forces you to stay mired. So if you’re not—if you don’t have the ability together—and a couple has to do this together—you’ve got to lift yourself out of that. Hard work helps. Emotional strength really helps. And a foundation of religious, or ethics or morality—call it what you want; for me, I just say religion—that helps. Partner in life, that really helps. And optimism helps. I’m blessed that I had a lot of it, and I had a partner who had a lot of it, too. And if one of us was a little low on one portion, the other one was pretty well there. We really didn’t stay down too much, or not for [long]. You can’t stay down for longer than like thirty, forty-five minutes. You just can’t dwell on it. So I’m kind of proud of that aspect that we got through it together as a team and are better for it. Do I want to do it again? No. Do I want to wish it on either of you? No. But all my life when I saw a natural catastrophe, I wondered, how do people do it, you know? And Tom Higgins doesn’t have the secret, and Kristen doesn’t have the secret, and Lucy doesn’t specifically. We all have it. You do it because there’s no fucking choice. OK. We all have the grit inside us, but given a choice, who wants to take the hard road when there’s the easy road. You know, but when you have to buckle up because of something like this, everybody to a great extent, does it; there’s no choice. So the answer is, how do people do it? We all do it, we all do it by baby steps of life and getting on with it. Richard Dreyfus is my psychiatrist of choice if you ever saw that movie, baby steps; What About Bob? is the name of the movie. But that’s how we do it.

So I’m kind of proud that Dorothy and I got through the baby steps OK without any of the emotional scars that really stayed with us. I mean there are some—it’s almost like it’s been long enough, and at eighteen months, I’m kind of bored with the discussion. And a lot of people aren’t, but I’m kind of bored with the discussion day after day—not this. But I mean, day after day, this isn’t what I talk about. But it’s surreal. God, this Katrina really, it’s almost like actors and actresses who look just like Dorothy and myself are living the part on film, and we’re sitting in the bleachers in our driveway—memorywise—watching them go through it. It really wasn’t us. We couldn’t have gone through that. How would we have stumbled through that? But, you know, I’d be played by Robert Redford, and Dorothy would have to be played by the love of my life, Jamie Lee Curtis. (laughter) And she nods her head and says, “Yeah.” And I said in her early days of being Jamie Lee Curtis because obviously there were such wonderful lovemaking scenes the first thirty days after the storm that, you know, Jamie Lee Curtis, and that’s very facetious, you know, the odiferous smell of life. But it’s surreal, and you have to progress; you just have to progress on. How boring is it if—you both know people, you know, who aren’t going to get over the tragedy of so long ago that it really is yesterday’s newspaper that needs
to be thrown out. So the events that make us who we are, it’s like the constant wave, the constant current; if it stops, if you stop based upon what happened a year and a half ago, for crying out loud, you’ve missed a lot of birds chirping, and you’ve missed a lot of good things that are happening. So, you’ve just got to get on with it. So, yeah, a terrible thing that happened; I think we’ll be better off; had to happen to somebody, and I dodged a lot of guillotines in my day. Couldn’t get out of the way of this one, but if we go through it again, we’re probably going to evacuate. I don’t think I’m going—I don’t think I’ll have 50 percent of the vote anymore. I mean a clap of thunder during hurricane season, and she’s going to have the dogs in the car and say, “Are you coming or not?” And Dorothy always asks me what have I learned from this experience. Men don’t learn a whole hell of a lot—let’s be honest—but I’m constantly forced to guess. What’s the answer here? I don’t know what I’ve learned. I obviously learned something. She said, “Tom, if you evacuate, you come back with a car.” And that’s the truth of life. Had we evacuated, we would’ve come back with transportation. That give you enough to play with?

**Maynard:** Sure does.

(end of interview)