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This is an interview for the Mississippi Oral History Program of The University of Southern Mississippi. The interview is with Ursula Daxecker and is taking place on April 26, 2006. The interviewer is Holly Werner Thomas.

Thomas: Today is April 26, 2006. My name is Holly Werner Thomas. I am an oral historian conducting part of the project for the Hurricane Katrina Oral History Project at the Northern Virginia Family Services in northern Virginia. Today is, once again, April 26, 2006, and the time is about 1:05 p.m. And I’m here with Ursula. Ursula, can you pronounce your last name for me?

Daxecker: Daxecker.

Thomas: Daxecker, Ursula Daxecker. Ursula, do I have your permission to record this interview?

Daxecker: Yes.

Thomas: OK. Let’s get started. First of all, I’d like to ask you—I know you said you’re from Innsbruck, Austria, so some of these questions won’t be relevant, but you’ve lived in the United States for about three and a half, almost four years this summer. How long were you in New Orleans?

Daxecker: Well, all, through all that time.

Thomas: All that time. OK. And you said the neighborhood was Lakeview?

Daxecker: That I lived in before the storm? That’s right.

Thomas: That’s right, OK. And so you had been there for a few years, and did you have any family from that area?

Daxecker: No.

Thomas: No, OK. Why were you living in New Orleans?

Daxecker: Well, University of New Orleans is a partner university of my university in Innsbruck. So they have an exchange program, and I came originally to pursue a master’s degree. And the university gave me a nice scholarship, and I decided to stay and work on a PhD and met my husband and got married.
Thomas: And what are you studying?

Daxecker: Political science.

Thomas: OK. This might not sound relevant, but three and a half years is still a while. Can you describe your attachment to the region, if any?

Daxecker: Well, I think it grows on you. The first year I didn’t really like it too much there because everything was so different. I didn’t know too many people; things were a lot slower than I’m used to in Austria. I had a hard time understanding the accent, the Southern accent. But I mean, it’s a great city to live in, in terms of if you like music, if you like listening to music. People are very relaxed and laid-back, and I don’t know. So yeah, I do think I developed an attachment to the region.

Thomas: And you said your husband’s from that area?

Daxecker: Yeah, he’s from the area. He’s from the suburbs, and he grew up in a suburb of New Orleans.

Thomas: I see. So he’s from Louisiana and from the area of New Orleans.

Daxecker: Right. I mean it’s basically one city; it’s just like a lot of big cities where the suburbs are (inaudible) different.

Thomas: OK. Can you describe your neighborhood before the hurricane, Lakeview?

Daxecker: Well, the main reason we moved to that neighborhood is that the public school in that area is a lot better than in others, and the public school system in New Orleans has a lot of problems throughout the years with bankruptcy and corruption and failing schools and turnover in terms of the superintendents. And so the main reason that we moved to that area was that the public school there had a good reputation, and people in that area, I think, tend to have a little higher incomes than in other areas of New Orleans, which may have something to do with it.

Thomas: And how old is your child? You mentioned you have one child in school.

Daxecker: He’s six years.

Thomas: Six years old; so about first grade or second?

Daxecker: He’s in first grade right now.

Thomas: What was the neighborhood before you lived in Lakeview? You said you had been there about a year. Is that correct?
Daxecker: Right. Well, at first I lived close to the University of New Orleans. I didn’t live on campus, but really close to campus. I don’t know what the name of that neighborhood is officially, but a year later I moved to Midcity, which is pretty close to Lakeview, but which did not flood.

Thomas: Midcity did not flood?

Daxecker: Well, not all parts of Midcity, but the part that I lived in did not flood, and then we moved to Lakeview a year later in order for my son to get in that school.

Thomas: We have a map here of the neighborhood of New Orleans. Can you show me on the map where Lakeview is?

Daxecker: It’s right here.

Thomas: OK. So it’s close to the lake, then; I see. OK. Very good. Thank you. What would you describe as your community’s problems and strengths prior to the hurricane? It sounds like you’ve already described one in terms of the school system, meaning Lakeview. What about any problems that you want to discuss?

Daxecker: I mean, it would be easier if you asked me that before, because, now, I don’t know. Problems, I mean, not specifically for the neighborhood. I mean, most of New Orleans, the streets are terrible.

Thomas: Meaning?

Daxecker: Huge potholes everywhere, no public transportation or limited public transportation, and I just read that they’re going to cut most of it now because they’re running out of money because FEMA doesn’t give them emergency support (inaudible). I just read that in the paper today. Yeah. I mean, the lack of public transport, that was something that bothered me, but that’s not something specific to that neighborhood that I lived in.

Thomas: Well, go ahead and talk about New Orleans more generally then in terms of, you’ve mentioned some of the strengths and weaknesses, but anything else that you can think of?

Daxecker: Well, I guess crime is an issue. The street I used to live on, somebody was shot on the street; I mean shot and killed on the street, middle of the day. Well, not middle of the day, but eight o’clock at night; so it was dark. That was during Jazz Fest, and that was a person that wasn’t involved in any gang activities or anything. A person that—

Thomas: A tourist?
**Daxecker:** Well, no, a New Orleanian that went to Jazz Fest to listen to music, and we lived in that neighborhood. I mean, when things like that happen, it’s starting to bother you, and then I was kind of happy that we moved out of that neighborhood because it was close to bad neighborhoods. In New Orleans it’s not concentrated in one region. You have good neighborhoods and bad neighborhoods right next to each other, and sometimes you have to be a little careful, which was really hard for me to accept because where I’m from, I’m not used to that. I’m used to being able to walk around wherever I want and being able to go out by myself at night or go home by myself at night. And so I wouldn’t maybe necessarily have done that.

**Thomas:** Right. Did you pay attention to local or state politics when you were there as a student?

**Daxecker:** Well, to an extent because I’m in political science. I mean, that’s not my main research area, but I read the paper.

**Thomas:** What was your opinion, if any, of local—you know, the mayor, governor?

**Daxecker:** Well, the mayor—well, and I only know that from what other people told me—was supposedly a lot better than for many years, which were even, you know, just very corrupt. And he was a businessman, and that’s what brought him, I think, the election or the election victory. And I think a lot of white people voted for him originally, [when] he was first elected.

**Thomas:** That’s true. I’ve read that as well. But you didn’t—in other words—

**Daxecker:** My opinion, I mean now or before the storm? Are you talking before the storm?

**Thomas:** Before the storm.

**Daxecker:** Well, I didn’t think he was doing too great of a job, honestly, because of some of the issues that I already mentioned.

**Thomas:** I see. So it sounds like you didn’t see changes to some of those major issues?

**Daxecker:** No, I didn’t.

**Thomas:** OK. Interesting.

**Daxecker:** And the school board, actually, just forced the superintendent that was (inaudible), and they forced him out, and put somebody in place that is now, still making $140,000 a year even though only ten of the schools are open at this point. And that person I don’t think is—
**Thomas**: How is that possible?

**Daxecker**: —really qualified. Yeah. You’d think they’d find a way under emergency powers to disband the school board, but I guess it’s not possible or there’s no political will. I don’t know.

**Thomas**: What about your view of federal politicians before the storm? The administration.

**Daxecker**: Well, I’m not a big fan of the Republicans or Bush for that matter. I mean, Republicans, I guess it depends on which ones, but I mean I personally don’t agree with this compassionate conservatism infused by religious motives that Bush is so (inaudible) for. But I mean, that’s just—in terms of policies, I don’t know. Something personally that applies to me in person, immigration issues, I don’t think that’s something that’s dealt with very fairly by the federal government in terms of (inaudible) this is.

**Thomas**: What about after the storm in terms of politicians at any level? What is your opinion? Federal, local, state, did they change your opinions of those people? Ray Nagin, for example, mayor of New Orleans?

**Daxecker**: Well, if anything, they got worse.

**Thomas**: I see. And why is that?

**Daxecker**: Well, I mean, on the one hand, I understand that this was a huge catastrophe, and I don’t think you can expect that things are going to be back soon to where they used to be, but on the same hand, if for example, the mayor said repeatedly that he wants people to come back; he wants everybody to come back. I mean he said that to people when not even the most basic services were ready.

**Thomas**: Yeah, I’ve heard that as well.

**Daxecker**: And then they had another hurricane [Hurricane Rita, September, 2005], (laughter) and everybody had to evacuate again. So it was real embarrassing for him, I think. But the thing is, he keeps saying that now, and then a few weeks back he comes out and says, “Everybody can rebuild, but we may not be able to offer you sewage or water and sewage service or garbage collection or anything.” And to me that’s just wrong; in a situation like this he has to make some tough decisions, but saying to people that they should come back and move back and rebuild their houses and spend a lot of money on that, and then, you know, afterwards comment and say that, “Well, but you know what? You really do it on your own (inaudible).” You may just lose all the money that you put into it because if you don’t have any services, then how are you going to ever be able to sell that house? Or if you don’t have neighbors that because they—
Thomas: What if you need an ambulance?

Daxecker: Right. I mean, things like that, I heard that the health care situation is really bad right now; there’s not enough—

Thomas: And everybody needs sewage and water and electricity. So it doesn’t sound like he’s actually promising much.

Daxecker: Right. I just think it’s wrong for him to say that, entice people to come back but then not give them any promises for services.

Thomas: And yet you’re planning on going back. (laughter) But I’ll get to that a little bit later. Let me ask you; did you know about the levee system in New Orleans in terms of, did you have an opinion of it either way? Did people talk about it?

Daxecker: See, I mean, every now and then whenever hurricane season came or whenever a hurricane was coming that could potentially affect New Orleans, then people would say things like, “Yeah. The whole city could be flooded.” But nobody really took it seriously I don’t think. And the levees, I was aware there are levees because they’re everywhere. And I was aware that there are canals because you pass them on the street, but I never really questioned if they were built up to standard.

Thomas: Right. I’ve heard people say, “We never thought it would happen in our lifetime,” in other words a flood. That hurricanes would come and go, but New Orleans is (inaudible).

Daxecker: Right. I mean, it hasn’t happened in that extent ever. And the city’s old. It’s an old city, and people have lived in that area since the 1700s. It’s not a question of whether people can live there or not because they obviously have quite successfully.

Thomas: Good point. Again, I don’t know because you’re not from there originally, but let me ask you, having only been in that area for a year, Lakeview, or you can talk about New Orleans more generally, how has the storm changed the way you think about your community? Did you feel that you had a community before the storm?

Daxecker: Yeah, we had a great—I mean the block that we lived on was great. We had great neighbors. My son was best friends with the neighbor’s daughter. We had other neighbors with three little kids next door, and we all got along great. And we’re still in touch, and yeah, well, I think that’s one reason that draws us back there, that it was a great community, and it was a great neighborhood.

Thomas: And has your feeling about that changed? Have you been back to your particular neighborhood?
**Daxecker:** Um-hm. We’ve been back twice. So one time was just for Easter, just now, and one time was in November, I think. Well, I mean, obviously it looks horrible. All the houses are destroyed. There’s a few people that already live back in the houses; there’s a few others that have trailers, but the majority of houses is either not even cleaned out or is gutted, at least. You hear noises; you see that there’s some rebuilding going on, but it’s just going to take a long time.

**Thomas:** Yes, but you sound both discouraged and hopeful because, again, you are moving back.

**Daxecker:** Well, discouraged; I mean I don’t know how many houses. I just read it somewhere, but it’s just a huge area, block after block after block, every house was flooded up until the middle or up until the roof. It’s just not a pretty sight.

**Thomas:** No, and not enough is being done to fix the problem even all these months later, it seems like.

**Daxecker:** I think a lot of people are still dealing with insurance, or they’re overwhelmed. They don’t know what to do. But Lakeview, actually the neighborhood, they just passed an ordinance that everybody needs to clean up their house until August 29. So that’s been one year (inaudible), which is good because I think it’s a hazard for people that move back. And you can’t have kids run around and the houses are collapsing or—

**Thomas:** I see; very good point. Tell me where and when did you hear about the hurricane? Where were you, and how did you hear about it?

**Daxecker:** I found out about it Friday night before; so that was—August 29 was Monday, right?

**Thomas:** I think so.

**Daxecker:** So the twenty-sixth, and that was pretty early, I think. The only reason I found out is that my husband used to work in Mississippi at the [John C. Stennis] Space Center. And some of the things that he was doing had to do with weather whatever, prediction. So he found out real early that this might be coming, but on that day, nobody I think really—it was still too early to say, “Wow! This is something where people should evacuate.” But what we did that night because he knew it was a big storm, we reserved a hotel in Mississippi.

**Thomas:** Oh, you did?

**Daxecker:** Yeah.

**Thomas:** And when did you reserve the room for? For the next day or for Sunday?
**Daxecker:** Yeah, for Saturday because I’ve evacuated previously, and it’s always a big nightmare because everybody’s trying to leave. And last time, the summer before, I think, we were stuck in traffic for six hours and couldn’t even get farther than Baton Rouge, which usually is an hour away. And so we decided that, “If we’re going to leave, we’re going to leave early.”

**Thomas:** And did you leave, in fact, on that Saturday?

**Daxecker:** We left on Saturday because on Saturday morning they had new projected paths, and it showed that it would hit New Orleans pretty much directly, and that’s just not something that I’m (laughter) to take the risk.

**Thomas:** It’s funny you should say that because so many people who are from that area felt almost lackadaisical about staying, you know, in terms of, “Well, maybe, you know, it won’t be so bad.”

**Daxecker:** Well, but I mean, previous storms that threatened the area—I think I’ve evacuated three or four times before.

**Thomas:** Have you really? Wow.

**Daxecker:** Um-hm. So twice a year is not rare, but I think it was a very strong storm, and they knew that on Saturday morning, and it was projected to make a direct hit, basically. And previous storms weren’t that bad, but I still wanted to leave for maybe a Category One storm. I think I’ve stayed for, like, a Category One or Two storm. And it was just bad rain, and the electricity went out for a little while. It’s just not very convenient. So if I know that (inaudible)—

**Thomas:** At the very least, it’s not convenient.

**Daxecker:** Right. So you’re better off going somewhere else for a few days because without electricity, without AC [air-conditioning], it’s really hot (laughter) in August.

**Thomas:** Exactly, yeah, it’s impossible.

**Daxecker:** So to me that’s just—and especially a strong storm hitting directly, to me that’s just pretty much clear what you should do.

**Thomas:** So when did you leave on Saturday, and where did you go in Mississippi?

**Daxecker:** We left on Saturday around noon, and I put all my books in the (laughter) (inaudible); they were on the floor everywhere. I thought, “That’s the smart thing to do.”

**Thomas:** That was wise.
Daxecker: Well, it didn’t help.

Thomas: Oh, you’re kidding.

Daxecker: It all flooded. I felt really stupid (laughter) afterwards—

Thomas: Oh, I’m sorry.

Daxecker: —because I put them, like, two feet up. And we went to a hotel in Jackson and had a pool, and we just thought we’ll hang out there for two days. We brought stuff for two or three days, and that was it.

Thomas: What did you bring with you?

Daxecker: Well, basically just clothes for three days and my laptop.

Thomas: Did you bring any valuables? In other words, you just said you thought you were just leaving for two or three days.

Daxecker: Right.

Thomas: So you didn’t bring photo albums?

Daxecker: No. Well, we did bring some money we had in the house because we had just gotten married.

Thomas: And then basically clothes for a long weekend.

Daxecker: I brought the laptop but nothing much else. I brought passports; so that helped.

Thomas: Right. And then describe that weekend for me. Did you watch the hurricane arriving from the television in Mississippi?

Daxecker: Yeah, pretty much. I mean the first day, Saturday, Sunday a lot of people arrived from the area. The hotel was full. And that’s the other thing, that we booked a hotel so early because the hotels fill up, and last time we couldn’t find a hotel. The closest hotel we could find was in Houston, and there’s no way we could get there because the interstate (inaudible).

Thomas: It took you six hours to get to Baton Rouge. Incredible.

Daxecker: So we just hung out there, and yeah, the next day we started to watch TV. But you didn’t really know until Monday that something serious happened. I think on Monday morning they were still talking that the worst was avoided.
Thomas: Yes. Yes, people thought that until the levee broke.

Daxecker: And then I think Monday—I don’t remember what time, but we didn’t have electricity anymore in the hotel. The electricity went out because the storm pretty much took a path that went right through Jackson, and I think it was still a Category One storm when it hit Jackson, even though that’s, I think, two hundred miles inland.

Thomas: So you didn’t really miss it, but you missed the worst of it in terms of personally being there.

Daxecker: Yeah. I mean it wasn’t dangerous, but it was still inconvenient then because we didn’t have electricity.

Thomas: Right. I see. Did you feel safe during that time? Or sounds like you were feeling fairly safe for most of the weekend.

Daxecker: Yeah, safe in terms of my own health, right?

Thomas: Um-hm. I know you left, and you had decided to leave on your own. When did you hear about the official evacuation if at all?

Daxecker: I think that was on Sunday. Well, I think one problem with this storm was—and it was different from other storms that I’ve seen—is that it happened so quickly. It really was very fast because on Friday afternoon I was in my department at the university, and I was talking to my advisor about some things. And we didn’t even discuss the hurricane because nobody knew about it at this time. And we didn’t even discuss the hurricane because nobody knew about it at this time.

Thomas: And this was Friday afternoon.

Daxecker: And this was Friday afternoon, and usually whenever a hurricane would threaten, everybody would talk, “Where are you going? What are you doing? Are you going to leave or not?” Blah, blah, blah. And nothing, I mean, because really nobody knew at that time. And then you had two days, and those were weekend days. And Monday it hit.

Thomas: Interesting. How was it evacuating the city when you did? Obviously it was a little early. So did you meet traffic, or were people starting to leave?

Daxecker: No. It wasn’t bad at all.

Thomas: Was it quiet?

Daxecker: Yeah. I think most people left late on Saturday or Sunday.

Thomas: Um-hm. Interesting.
Daxecker: I think we knew about it kind of early; that was one thing. I mean, it didn’t really help us. (laughter) We still didn’t bring anything.

Thomas: How can you predict?

Daxecker: That’s for sure.

Thomas: Let’s see. So who was with you when you left, husband and child?

Daxecker: Yeah, my son and my husband. And we were talking to a lot of other people, and most of them left on Saturday that I know.

Thomas: Why did you decide to go to Jackson, Mississippi?

Daxecker: Well, because we didn’t plan on going anywhere, obviously. And my husband has family in Shreveport, but that’s a six-hour drive from New Orleans. So we decided, “Let’s just have a nice weekend, where we have a swimming pool and a room, and we can go out to eat or whatever.”

Thomas: How far is Jackson, Mississippi from New Orleans?

Daxecker: It’s about three and a half hours.

Thomas: I see. So that’s not really as far.

Daxecker: So that’s why we went there.

Thomas: OK. How long, if at all, was it before you came into contact with government officials, relief workers, and charity groups? Anybody at all in Jackson?

Daxecker: No. Well, we left Jackson I think on Tuesday. So nobody knew what happened at that time.

Thomas: When you say you left, where did you go?

Daxecker: Well, we decided that we couldn’t stay in a hotel because—it doesn’t seem like we can go back.

Thomas: So at that point you knew that you weren’t going back; Tuesday it was becoming clear?

Daxecker: Yeah. We knew that we wouldn’t be able to go back right away. We thought it would be a few days. We still didn’t know. When we were driving to Shreveport, we didn’t know how bad it really was.
Thomas: So you went from Jackson to Shreveport?

Daxecker: Right, and we listened to some AM station, and they started to talk about water being everywhere, but still it was far too early to really know the extent. But we thought if we keep staying in a hotel, we’re going to rack up a bill, and you know, we didn’t really want to spend that money. So we decided to just go to my husband’s grandmother and stay with them.

Thomas: I see. And what made you say that you knew you couldn’t go back to New Orleans, and yet it didn’t seem that bad? What was the culmination of information you were getting there?

Daxecker: Well, we still didn’t have electricity in Jackson. And that didn’t get the brunt of the storm because it’s inland; so we figured that, you know, it would take a while to get electricity back and (inaudible) stuff. But we didn’t know that we would never be able to go back or might not be able to go back for months. We had no idea at that time.

Thomas: OK. How long were you in Shreveport?

Daxecker: I think about three weeks.

Thomas: Oh, really? Three weeks?

Daxecker: Um-hm.

Thomas: Describe that time for me. So you were there three weeks, and were you sort of deciding every day as the story unfolded what you would do? Because obviously now we’re sitting in northern Virginia, and I want to get to that. (laughter)

Daxecker: Well, I mean at first we were just—I think we watched a lot of CNN; they basically had reports about New Orleans twenty-four hours a day. Well, the first thing we tried to find out is what happened to our house.

Thomas: Describe that time for me. So you were there three weeks, and were you sort of deciding every day as the story unfolded what you would do? Because obviously now we’re sitting in northern Virginia, and I want to get to that. (laughter)

Daxecker: Well, I mean at first we were just—I think we watched a lot of CNN; they basically had reports about New Orleans twenty-four hours a day. Well, the first thing we tried to find out is what happened to our house.

Thomas: Um-hm. How did you try to find that out?

Daxecker: Well, call people we know. One thing was that you couldn’t really call because the cell phones didn’t work. The whole cell phone system, I think, broke down, and I don’t know. We just tried to find out, and it took a long time. I think it took several days until we found out that (inaudible).

Thomas: And this was mostly trying through personal contacts, people in the neighborhoods.
Daxecker: Right, and there was—I don’t remember when they put this up, but at one point they put up a home page with pictures of flooded New Orleans where you could see streets, (inaudible) streets and houses.

Thomas: New Orleans Times Picayune, or when you say, “they,” just different Internet sites?

Daxecker: No. I think NOAA [National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration]; that’s some government agency, and they put pictures on a Web site.

Thomas: So you had the news, the CNN, and you had the Internet, and you were looking at those things.

Daxecker: Right.

Thomas: And (inaudible) the report come through and also trying to get hold of personal contacts and trying to put it all together, it sounds like, to see what happened. Did you ever find out? When did you get information about your house.

Daxecker: Well, in those pictures we could see that it flooded, but we couldn’t see how much because it was bird’s perspective; so we couldn’t really see how high it is. And we had parked one of our cars in (laughter) the (inaudible), which is really silly; I mean (inaudible).

Thomas: What happened?

Daxecker: One of the cars, we had two cars; we parked it up on a little hill, and—

Thomas: Did it help?

Daxecker: We could see it on those pictures, but—

Thomas: You could see it?

Daxecker: Yeah, we could actually see it, but it flooded. I mean it didn’t flood until the roof, but it flooded.

Thomas: The house and the car, you mean?

Daxecker: Yeah, the car, too. But the house, I think we found out through our neighbor who has her brother, I think is in the National Guard, and they were able to fly in and look at her house. And it was flooded, I think, probably six, seven feet, something like that.
Thomas: So by that time, somewhere along the process, several days you said, you sort of figured out that your place was flooded. You didn’t know how much, but it was obviously you weren’t going back any time soon.

Daxecker: Right. And I was just still hoping that it would only be two feet or one foot, and so, I mean, I really wasn’t willing to accept (laughter) anything more than that for some time, especially because I was studying for comprehensive exams. So all my books, a hundred books, I had them—you know, I put them on that table. (laughter) But it didn’t really help; so I just didn’t want to believe it.

Thomas: No. Of course, that’s a very natural reaction. I can imagine. So tell me how you got from Shreveport to where we’re sitting now in northern Virginia.

Daxecker: Well, we were just thinking about options; I didn’t know anything from my university. I think that took three weeks until I heard something from my department chair.

Thomas: Were you trying to get ahold of the department during this time? Again, I know it (inaudible).

Daxecker: That wasn’t really my main concern because I figured that, you know, getting paychecks and things like that wouldn’t be really possible for some time, and going back wouldn’t be possible for some time because of all the news that we kept hearing. So I mean, my husband used to work in Mississippi. Right? And they told him relatively soon that they wanted him to go back to work, but at the same time we didn’t have a school for my son because his school was flooded. I didn’t know what would happen to my university. I was supposed to take a course, my last course, and I didn’t want to miss a semester waiting for a course that never comes, and Shreveport doesn’t have a PhD program in political science. And there was no way I could do something there; there was no way he could work there.

Thomas: What does your husband do?

Daxecker: He’s a government contractor.

Thomas: Doing?

Daxecker: Defense contract; I don’t really know. (laughter) Well, I kind of do, but I don’t understand too much of it.

Thomas: OK. Just out of curiosity, to sort of place you where you are in (inaudible) because you said he used to work in Mississippi, but obviously you were located in New Orleans.

Daxecker: Well, it’s about an hour commute, about forty-five minutes. So he just drove there every day because New Orleans didn’t used to have a lot of professional
jobs before the (laughter) storm, and it's even worse now. So that’s one reason that he worked out there because it was just hard for him to find something in the city, and they had NASA Space Center out there. But, so yeah, that was one option, to go to Mississippi, but we didn’t have a place to live. All the hotels were booked; all the apartments, people were just going crazy booking all the apartments that didn’t flood.

**Thomas:** Where are you talking about in Mississippi?

**Daxecker:** Stennis—

**Thomas:** Were you looking statewide?

**Daxecker:** Well, we were just looking close enough where he could drive to work, but it didn’t—

**Thomas:** Right. And you mentioned where? I’m sorry.

**Daxecker:** Stennis, Mississippi; close to—but that was also on the Coast. They didn’t have flooding in the building, but the whole area in the streets, and the street he used to drive, the interstate, it was just ripped in pieces.

**Thomas:** And so, again, tell me a little bit more about the process. You were there in Shreveport for three weeks. Were you looking during that time in Mississippi and kind of using Shreveport as a home base and kind of going to Mississippi and coming back (inaudible)?

**Daxecker:** Well, no, that’s too far. I think that’s an eight-hour drive, but we were thinking about maybe moving somewhere close to where he could keep working his job and whatever, I guess nothing. But the schools, I mean the schools in Mississippi (inaudible) the best, but then you had all these evacuees. So we started hearing things like they’re doing shifts, three hours in the morning and (laughter) three hours in the afternoon and—

**Thomas:** (Inaudible) students, actually.

**Daxecker:** Right. And at one point we just decided that there’s just no way we can stay in the area because there was no housing, no schools. I don’t know where I would have gotten my books because there was no mail because I had to think about getting my books again.

**Thomas:** So there was really no way in to sort of start—

**Daxecker:** No options, yeah. We felt like we have no options, and we didn’t want to just do nothing. Right? I mean my husband—so he basically quit his job there, and we came up here. He has one uncle that lives here, and he kept saying that we should come up here and stay with them.
Thomas: This uncle did?

Daxecker: Right. And so we were just thinking over different things, and that seemed to be the best option.

Thomas: Um-hm. And so that’s what you did. And when did you come here then?

Daxecker: Sometime late September, I think.

Thomas: And how did you arrive here?

Daxecker: With the car.

Thomas: You drove up.

Daxecker: We drove the car all the way up. We didn’t really have a lot of stuff (laughter) (inaudible) that wasn’t a problem.

Thomas: A few day’s worth of clothes. And this uncle lives in Vienna?

Daxecker: In Reston actually. Well, no, I think it’s still Vienna, but he also has a child that is the same age as my son, and they already talked to the school when we decided that we would come up here. So he could start school right away.

Thomas: So he’s enrolled in school here?

Daxecker: Yeah, and he’s still in that school, same school.

Thomas: And what school is that?

Daxecker: Sunrise Valley. It’s in Reston.

Thomas: OK. So you arrive here. And what happened? You stayed with the uncle?

Daxecker: Yeah. We stayed with them for about four weeks, and we just decided that we need our own place eventually because I got tired of staying with other people. Well, we all did; I mean it’s just hard. Right?

Thomas: Right.

Daxecker: And my husband found a job right away. So that wasn’t a problem. And I found out that UNO is going to keep paying me for the semester. And then it’ll pay me for this semester, too. So I didn’t really have to worry too much, I mean, because I’m not allowed to work because I’m not a citizen, and I’m not a resident yet. And
that was another thing with this storm, that I lost my birth certificate and all that kind of stuff. So I had to get that again from Austria to start that green card process.

**Thomas:** When did you get married? Because you are planning on getting your—

**Daxecker:** Three weeks before the storm.

**Thomas:** Three weeks before the storm. Wow. Did your marriage license get lost in the shuffle?

**Daxecker:** No. That was the other thing. I think we waited for that for four months until we got it. I think I got it in January.

**Thomas:** Coming from Louisiana, then.

**Daxecker:** Right. It was hard to get it.

**Thomas:** Yeah, I can imagine that. So did you have to pursue that?

**Daxecker:** Well, I just had to make phone calls.

**Thomas:** OK. And you said your husband got a job right away; it wasn’t a problem. Was this in defense contracting as well?

**Daxecker:** Right.

**Thomas:** OK. And you said you’re planning on going back.

**Daxecker:** Um-hm.

**Thomas:** Tell me; it’s going to sound maybe strange, but why are you planning on going back?

**Daxecker:** Well, I guess we just don’t like it too much up here.

**Thomas:** And tell me a little bit about your experience here.

**Daxecker:** It’s always hard when you move to a completely different area that is far away from everybody that you used to live close to. I know that because I moved to New Orleans from Austria.

**Thomas:** Absolutely, yeah, talk about different.

**Daxecker:** So I think that’s one thing, that we just don’t really have a lot of support here. We don’t have a lot of friends here. I don’t have any family here, obviously, but
my husband’s uncle, they’re both in very high-powered jobs; so they don’t really have a lot of time to spare, either.

**Thomas:** When you say both, you mean uncle and his wife?

**Daxecker:** Yeah. And the area is huge; housing is really expensive. We live in an apartment. I’d like to have a yard for my son to play. I’d like to have a porch. (laughter)

**Thomas:** You sound Southern now. (laughter)

**Daxecker:** Well, you know, the thing is, the U.S., it’s a lot of cities where you’re able to afford a yard. Right? I mean I know in Europe it’s hard. A lot of people live in apartments, and all they have is a small balcony.

**Thomas:** But you expect more of a yard; you’re accustomed to that now.

**Daxecker:** Yeah. And for me to finish my dissertation, it would just be a lot easier if I could be closer to my advisor and would have the other grad students around. It’s very hard to do everything by yourself. And I’ve studied for (inaudible) exam, and I passed it in March. And you know, it was very solitary, (laughter) but it went OK. I just don’t want to do that for another year. And my husband’s not too happy here, either, because he thinks it’s crazy how much people work. And you just look at the Metro parking garage, and people get there at six, and they leave at five or six o’clock at night, and then they drive home. So you just don’t have much of a private life.

**Thomas:** OK. And so when are you planning on going back?

**Daxecker:** This summer.

**Thomas:** And you said before that you were waiting for a trailer from FEMA. So tell me, what are your plans, then?

**Daxecker:** Well, we’re looking to buy a house in Lakeview, which we couldn’t have afforded before. But since they all got a lot cheaper now, we can buy a house, and we can also pay for the renovations. The thing is it’s not going to be done in August, I don’t think, because at the earliest, the contractor could start in May. And he says it’s going to take four months. So we want to get a trailer on the property in order to live in the trailer until the house is done.

**Thomas:** OK. And have you heard back from FEMA, or what has been your process with working with FEMA? Tell me about that.

**Daxecker:** Well, we registered for FEMA pretty soon after the storm, and we got, I think, a one-time two thousand dollars cash that everybody got. And we got rent
assistance twice, but not anymore because it’s all income-based right now. And you know if people have jobs and make a decent income, then you’re not eligible.

**Thomas:** You’re not?

**Daxecker:** No.

**Thomas:** You were originally eligible it sounds like.

**Daxecker:** Right, at first they didn’t have strict income requirements because they knew that people wouldn’t have any documentation, and a lot of people lost their jobs, but now they’re becoming more strict. So that was one thing. Well, they’re hard to deal with, but the thing is, it doesn’t really make a difference how often you call or how much you freak out about it because as long as you send in the required documents, things worked out for us the first two times, and now we realize that we won’t be able to qualify, but the trailer program, I think everybody that has a place to put it and as long as you can get electricity and water hooked, then you should be able to get that trailer.

**Thomas:** OK. And have you chosen a place to live in Lakeview yet? You said you’d been back twice to New Orleans.

**Daxecker:** Right. Well, we should be closing on the house soon.

**Thomas:** So yes.

**Daxecker:** So yes, if things work out.

**Thomas:** Um-hm. What happened to the rental property? Obviously where you were living, it was rental. So how was that in terms of responsibility? Clearly you lost your belongings.

**Daxecker:** Right. Well, and we didn’t have renter’s insurance, which, you know, I wish we would have. But I don’t even know if they cover floods; so I don’t know how it works. Our landlords were very good, and actually the wife is now a real estate agent. So she’s helping us with the house that we’re buying. They gave us our deposit back, no problem, and they even said that, you know, when she’s done renovating it, we could live there again. But we would like to buy a house if we can. And she didn’t hold us responsible to clean up the house or anything, which I don’t think she could have, given the situation.

**Thomas:** So where in Lakeview? Is it near the other? Is it still in the same community?

**Daxecker:** Yeah, um-hm. It’s pretty close to where we used to live.
Thomas: So what is your goal, then? You said there’s this August 29 deadline for the cleanup, but you might not meet that because your contractor might not be able to start right away.

Daxecker: Well, no. That’s not what they’re talking about. August 29 is that you do something to the house, at least clean it out. Clean out the silt stuff, out, and have it hauled away. And Army Corps, I think, is still doing that; so people don’t actually have to pay for it. They just have to clean it out. So you can’t have your house just sit as it was since August.

Thomas: Is that just for Lakeview, or was that New Orleans-wide?

Daxecker: I think there’s something that they’re planning on doing; I think you had something from the City, too, with that same date.

Thomas: Right. I wonder.

Daxecker: Yeah, I don’t know.

Thomas: Tell me; you said you’d been back twice. When was the first time that you went back?

Daxecker: In November.

Thomas: OK. And how long were you there?

Daxecker: I think for three or four days, something like that.

Thomas: And why did you go back? Again, it sounds obvious, but why did you go back then?

Daxecker: Well, I felt like we needed to see the city. It’s very hard when you, you know, you think you’re going for a two-day vacation, and you’re not able to go back for months. So we really felt like we needed to see the city, and we also wanted to see some of our friends and family because we didn’t even say goodbye in a proper way (laughter) because we didn’t know. So.

Thomas: A lot of your friends and family stayed then?

Daxecker: No. They didn’t stay, but they—

Thomas: Or they had come back?

Daxecker: Yeah. I mean some of them were able to move back because they lived in areas that didn’t flood as badly, and one friend moved to Baton Rouge. And that’s an
hour; so we could visit them as well. So yeah, but, well, I know a lot of people that
moved away, and I know a lot of people that stayed. So it’s both kind of.

**Thomas:** How did seeing the city affect you when you went back in November?

**Daxecker:** I saw a lot of pictures before; so I kind of knew that it would be hard or
bad.

**Thomas:** Was it as bad as the pictures?

**Daxecker:** Well, I think it’s worse if you actually see it because, I mean I don’t
know, to get that (inaudible) explain it.

**Thomas:** People talk about the scale.

**Daxecker:** Yeah, um-hm, the scale. I mean just, you know, house after house after
house destroyed.

**Thomas:** And when did you go back the second time?

**Daxecker:** That was just for Easter, just a few weeks ago.

**Thomas:** How had it changed in that time, the city and your neighborhood, whatever
you saw?

**Daxecker:** Well, our house was cleaned out the second time, the house we used to live
in. It was very different because we had started to make plans to come back. So we
had to take care of a lot of things with the house, the house that we’re trying to buy.
In terms of progress, I mean yeah, I think a lot of people at least cleaned out their
houses. You could see a lot of construction going on. But like in terms of in the really
devastated areas in terms of stores and things like that, there’s still nothing.

**Thomas:** I read a couple of days ago that there are still cars in trees and houses in the
middle of the streets. Did you see anything like that over Easter?

**Daxecker:** No. But I did not intentionally go to the worst, to an area where I knew
there would be a house in the middle of the street because I don’t think that’s my
business. And they’re doing these disaster tours now, which I think some of the
money at least goes to the City. But to me it’s just kind of wrong. (laughter)

**Thomas:** Think it’s opportunistic?

**Daxecker:** Well, yeah, at least I think all the proceeds should go to the people that
actually suffered from it.
Thomas: Absolutely. I agree with you there, absolutely. So how far did your rental home flood? Was it on—

Daxecker: It was raised for about two or three feet; so not that high, but inside I think six or seven feet.

Thomas: Incredible. So you know, a good nine feet maybe.

Daxecker: Yeah, I guess about nine feet, um-hm.

Thomas: Wow. Was there also wind damage from the outside?

Daxecker: Not really. I think really most of the damage—I mean, we had a tornado a few weeks after the hurricane, and you can see the path because those houses, they're gone. There’s nothing left except debris, but I think those are actually the lucky ones because when you have tornado damage, the homeowner’s insurance pays because otherwise they don’t actually give you anything.

Thomas: Could be lucky. (laughter) Who would ever have thought that? Amazing. How is your son? What is his name? How is he responding?

Daxecker: Felix. It’s hard for him, too, because you know I don’t think he wanted to go to a different school and, like, have all different people and have none of his friends.

Thomas: It’s very hard to move when you’re a child.

Daxecker: Right. And I really—this was the hardest thing for me because I just really didn’t want this for him right now because I moved with him to the U.S. when he was three. And I think he managed that pretty well, but now he’s older; so he, you know—

Thomas: Yes, more aware.

Daxecker: Right, he’s a lot more aware.

Thomas: Has friends at school, all those things.

Daxecker: I mean, he still has that relationship with my family and people in Austria because we go back twice a year, and he usually stays for the summer with his dad. But I just felt so bad that I had to pull him out of all of—well, I didn’t. I mean, I know it wasn’t my responsibility, but I still wish I could have done something to make this easier for him. And he has a great teacher; he really likes her, but it’s very hard here in terms of just finding other kids in the neighborhood that he can play with. I think life here is much more structured, and if kids play with each other, they go on play dates. They don’t just play outside. And those are the things that I really don’t like
about this area. I mean, I know it’s also a time process; so it will probably be different in a year.

**Thomas:** And how is he feeling now? Are there other children at school that you’re aware of who also evacuated from there?

**Daxecker:** No.

**Thomas:** Interesting. And is he responding OK now to being here, or is he happy to be going back?

**Daxecker:** I think he’s happy to go back. We’ll go to Austria first, and he’ll come back later, which is good because the house is going to be closer to done when school starts. But I just found out that his old school reopens in the fall.

**Thomas:** It does?

**Daxecker:** Yeah, which is great because I really didn’t want him to start all over again.

**Thomas:** That’s great.

**Daxecker:** Yeah, that’s good.

**Thomas:** So he can actually go back to his old school after just one year.

**Daxecker:** Right. Well, I don’t know how many kids will still be there, but I know at least two people that will send their kids back there.

**Thomas:** And what’s the name of that school?

**Daxecker:** Hinds(?) Elementary.

**Thomas:** Hinds Elementary, OK. What would you like to see in the rebuilding of your community of Lakeview and of New Orleans?

**Daxecker:** Well, I think the most basic things would be, yeah, the fact that we do have a school in the neighborhood, a grocery store, which I think they’re trying to reopen, but I don’t know when, maybe a restaurant and a bar. (laughter) I mean something like a normal environment.

**Thomas:** Are those things that you had before? Obviously the school and the grocery store, but the restaurant?

**Daxecker:** Right, we—
Thomas: It was lively in that way.

Daxecker: Yeah, I guess you could say that.

Thomas: Was the grocery store local, by the way, or was it—

Daxecker: Yeah, it was a local store.

Thomas: It was local, OK. And what about New Orleans in general? What would you like to see? You mentioned things like public transportation and basic services, but it sounds like those might not be forthcoming (laughter) right away if at all. It’s already been a struggle.

Daxecker: Well, they do have garbage service now; it depends on what area. The area that we’re moving into, which I guess it’s kind of unfair because it was one of the areas where people were better off. So I think they’re making more of an effort to get those people back because they know they can also get the taxes back from them.

Thomas: Wow. What do you know about what will be done? You said garbage service. Is there anything that won’t be taken care of for you in terms of electricity, water?

Daxecker: Well, we need to have that because we can’t even get a trailer if we don’t have electricity and water. But there’s a trailer on the block; so I’m assuming that there is. I mean I know it’s hard, and it takes weeks for them to come out and do it, the electricity company, but I know that that is available. I hope that those ordinances that people have to at least clean out their houses and board them up so not everybody can just walk in and get hurt or something. I hope they’re going to do something like that. I hope they’re going to make more of an effort to reopen schools.

Thomas: What about your neighbors or friends, people who have left? What are you hearing from other people in terms of people moving back? I know there’s a great desire from people I talk to for people to move back. I mean there’s a huge amount of homesickness; I’ve never seen such (laughter) homesickness. But a lot of people also are planning on staying here even if, you know, it just means for a while or some people permanently because they feel like, like you said there’s this contradiction. Yes, they want to go home, but they’re not able to have—it’s complicated. They can’t get the insurance money, or the basic services aren’t guaranteed. And they just don’t see a way in; whereas you’ve obviously found a way in.

Daxecker: Well, it’s complicated, but it’s not undoable. I mean the thing is, the type of loan that we’re getting for this house is for the affected area. So it’s for people that rebuild houses. It has a very nice interest rate, and we’re not getting a big SBA loan or something like that because we didn’t own our house. So we’re not in the best situation to make this happen, I don’t think, because people that owned houses before, they can get, I think, up to $200,000 from SBA. And that should be enough to rebuild
your house in most cases, I would think. But we can’t do that, but we found this type of loan, and we’re hoping that the money is going to come through soon so we can close on the house. I mean, I think it’s complicated, but it’s doable. And I think if that’s what you really want, then you just have to work for it. I don’t know; I mean it’s—

**Thomas:** What are you hearing from friends and family who have left? Are other people planning on returning?

**Daxecker:** Well, most of the people that we know stayed in the Metro area. I don’t know anybody that went as far as we did.

**Thomas:** Wow. Really? OK, interesting.

**Daxecker:** I know some people that went to Texas. None of my close friends or family went as far as we did; I should say it like that. I know some people that went far, but I didn’t really have too much to do with them before. Well, I mean some of them are rebuilding. They’re in the same boat as we are in now, and to start this process. My husband’s parents, they can still live in their house, but the house needs to be torn down eventually. So they’re trying to figure out what to do. My husband’s mother is really sick; so she’s in a wheelchair. There’s no apartments because rents are for two bedrooms, $2000. I mean DC prices right now, and people with (inaudible) salaries can’t afford that.

**Thomas:** No. So they’re trying to figure out what to do then it sounds like.

**Daxecker:** Right. Well, that’s one reason why we’re buying a house because I don’t want to waste my money for some crazy rent amount, and that gives me nothing. This might be a big risk, too, but we’ll see. Sometimes you just have to take it.

**Thomas:** Well, if enough people take that risk, then it’s going to work out.

**Daxecker:** Yeah. We do know some people that are building.

**Thomas:** Tell me. How did you get in touch with this agency, Northern Virginia Family Services? Or what was your reception like here? You have your husband’s uncle, but did anybody come knocking on your door to help, or did your uncle put you into contact with people?

**Daxecker:** No. We did it ourselves. I think someone at the Red Cross because we signed up with the Red Cross because they were helping people in terms of finding housing. Then as it turned out pretty soon that we wouldn’t qualify for anything because my husband found a job. So we would have been better off being unemployed, I guess, but I don’t know. I don’t think that’s funny, either. So they helped us with our first month’s rent. So that was one thing that was great.
Thomas: The Red Cross did.

Daxecker: No. I think actually Northern Virginia Family Services did. Yeah. Most people we know that (inaudible) the area from New Orleans because they had a Christmas party, and they had I think something for Mardi Gras. Most other people, I think, were able to get rent for the apartment for a year, something like that because—

Thomas: Yeah, I have heard that. Some people six months, some people a year.

Daxecker: So, yeah, that didn’t really work out for us. (laughter)

Thomas: But happily your husband did find work pretty much right away, which is unusual in terms of people I’ve talked to as well. What about work in New Orleans because you said it was difficult before in terms of professional jobs? But you’re planning on going back, and your son’s school will be open.

Daxecker: Right. I have a scholarship for another year.

Thomas: Um-hm. And what about your husband?

Daxecker: Well, he doesn’t have anything definite yet, but I think especially him being up here, there are some companies that are looking for people to look down there right now, and they have a hard time finding them because there’s no housing. So he might find something like that. He’s had, I think, one interview already, and he hasn’t heard back yet. So I think he’ll find something. In the worst case if he doesn’t find something until August, then I will just have to move down there with my son so he could start school. And he could move later.

Thomas: Right. OK. What are your hopes and fears for the future?

Daxecker: Well, I hope they’re not going to have a major hurricane. (laughter)

Thomas: Especially soon.

Daxecker: Right. I mean because we’re doing this thing with the house. I mean, you know, I’m ambivalent about it sometimes because if it weren’t risky, then everybody would be doing this right now. This might turn out to be a great thing, and maybe we can sell the house with a profit eventually, but maybe not. And we’re just going to make sure it’s properly insured, and if something happens, then at least we have the insurance money.

Thomas: Can you get hurricane insurance?

Daxecker: Well, you can’t get hurricane insurance.

Thomas: Or flooding?
Daxecker: Flood insurance, yeah.

Thomas: That’s what I meant. OK. Do you have anything to add that you think is important? Nothing right now? You can always let me know by e-mail or phone if you do think of something. Again, I just want to ask you one more thing, and I want to say, again, I mean because you’re from Austria originally, I’m not sure, but you did live there three and a half years, how much this applies to you, but in terms of getting out of New Orleans, the coastline itself, were you aware of erosion? Is that something that people talked about, or that you had seen personally?

Daxecker: Yeah, I was aware of that. I guess that will be one good thing to say about Louisiana politicians and local politicians, that I think they always tried to make an effort about that or the Louisiana senators. They always tried to raise (inaudible) for that, and it just never got the proper funding from the federal government, and I don’t think it does now; I don’t think. So that was one thing that, yeah, I knew about this. I mean, I think most people that live in coastal Louisiana are aware about that.

Thomas: I guess that’s it unless you have anything else you wanted to add, which it doesn’t look like.

Daxecker: No. I think we talked a lot. (laughter)

Thomas: Well, thank you very much for your time; I really appreciate it. And this concludes the interview with Ursula, and it is about two o’clock.

(end of interview)