



Sally Bronston Transcript

Rosalind Hinton: This is Rosalind Hinton interviewing Sally Bronston at her home in 5009 Senac in Metairie, Louisiana. Today is Friday, August 10th. I'm conducting the interview for Katrina's Jewish Voices Project of the Jewish Women's Archive in the Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life. Sally, do you agree to be interviewed and understand that the interview will be video recorded?

Sally Bronston: Yes.

RH: Okay. Let's start out with a little – well, what year you were born.

SB: 1991.

RH: Do you have brothers and sisters?

SB: No, I'm the only child.

RH: Okay. And tell me a little about your Jewish and your general education.

SB: It's a long list. I started out at nursery school at my synagogue.

RH: And tell me your synagogue.

SB: Gates of Prayer. Congregation Gates of Prayer, which is also in Metairie. I started at Mother's Morning Out at Gates of Prayer Nursery School. I was there through pre-K. I was a member of the founding class of the New Orleans Jewish Day School. I was at the day school for nine years. We were the first to eighth grade graduating class when we graduated. In addition to that, I attended Henry S. Jacobs Camp for seven years. I've attended the URJ Kutz Camp for two years. I feel like I'm missing something.

RH: What is that camp?

SB: Kutz Camp is another URJ, Union for Reform Judaism, Camp. It is specifically a NFTY leadership camp. NFTY is the North American Federation of Temple Youth. It's my youth group. I'm very, very active. Kutz is the National Leadership Academy, I guess they call it. I was there for two summers, and this past summer, I spent five weeks on a NFTY in Israel trip. I was in Europe for a week and then Israel for four weeks.

RH: So, I want to ask a couple of questions about some of this. Tell me what the Jewish day school is like.

SB: Well, when we started the school, it was really our parents who were dedicated and a core group in the community who weren't parents of prospective students. I think it's something that people wanted to happen for a long time. So they started the school, and when I was in kindergarten – and there were fourteen of us in my kindergarten class and two teachers, and one rabbi. I think we had a Hebrew teacher also. But that was the beginning of the school. So when we were in kindergarten, there was no one else. And every year, we added a grade until I was in my eighth-grade year. By then, we had a new building along with the JCC and Federation. The three groups came together and built a new building on Esplanade. It's really nice. We were the first graduating eighth-grade class in 2005 – May of 2005.

RH: What was some of the things that you liked about – because this is very different from maybe some of your friends.

SB: Yeah.

RH: What do you think you got from the Jewish day school?

SB: One of the most important things to me that I got was really learning about the foundation to be Jewish. Since my years at the day school – all two of them – I've grown

a lot as a Jew, but I would not be the same person I am today if I didn't have those nine years of core education behind me. Also, there were ten people in my graduating eighth-grade class. And really, the ten of us, and friends of mine who left, either in seventh or sixth grade, I still feel so close to them. There's kids who I couldn't stand when we were at school together, but I know when I see them, I just give them the best greeting. There were five of us actually on my Israel trip this summer. It was really nice to just be with those kids who I share this really, really intense connection with.

RH: So, you're where at school, now?

SB: Ben Franklin High School.

RH: Okay. And what year are you there?

SB: I'm about to start my junior year.

RH: Okay. So, you also said you were involved with NFTY and that that's really important. What kind of things do you do and why do you like that?

SB: I guess my first introduction to NFTY would really be through Jacobs Camp because Jacobs Camp and my region of NFTY is NFTY Southern. Going to Jacobs for so many years, the older kids are always in NFTY and they talk about going to the NFTY events. Throughout the year, there's four regional events a year. The region is Louisiana, Arkansas, Mississippi, part of Tennessee, part of Alabama, and part of Florida. It's kind of a zig-zaggy shape. So, these are all the kids who go to Jacobs. It's always the cool high school kids who are in NFTY. It's just something I always looked forward to. My first event was at the end of eighth grade, and I loved it. After eighth grade, I decided with my best friend to go to Kutz Camp, and that's where I really – that's where it really all began for me – my love of NFTY. It's a wonderful organization, and I'm really active in leadership roles.

RH: What does that mean when you're active in leadership roles?

SB: So, I'm trying – there's all this lingo, and I'm trying in my head to get through it all. NFTY is broken up into some different levels. The first level is the temple youth group, and that is everything that takes place for the high school youth at Gates of Prayer. There are youth groups called GoPTY – Gates of Prayer Temple Youth. And so there's first the TYG, which is the Temple Youth Group, and then there's the region. So, it takes a bunch of TYGs to make up a region. And our region is NFTY Southern. And then there are nineteen regions in all of NFTY. So, all across the country, Canada, the Bahamas, and Puerto Rico, also.

RH: Do you put on events?

SB: Yeah, every level also has a board, an executive board. That's what I meant by leadership. So there's always a president, a programming vice president, a social action vice president, a religious and cultural vice president, a membership vice president, a secretary, and a treasurer. So, my first leadership position really started out on the GoPTY board. When we came back from evacuation, one of the girls – the girl who was our religious and cultural vice president had moved away, so my best friend and I decided to be co-RCVPs. Then the next year, last year, sophomore year, I was programming vice president for GoPTY, and I was also spirit chair for the whole region, which means I was in charge of leading cheers at – we have four regional events a year. And then, last spring, I ran for programming vice president of our regional board, and I won. So, I'm on the regional board now, which I love. It's something I always wanted to do. We're coming up on our first event Labor Day Weekend, and I could not be more excited.

RH: So, what's your event?

SB: It's the first event of every year is called Institute. It's leadership training institute. It's introduction to NFTY for the freshman, and for all the other grades, it's really how NFTY works, how to write programs, how to be a leader in NFTY, and our theme this year is NFTY-lodeon. It's all around Nick [Nickelodeon], old school Nick. Like our favorite shows, like Rugrats and Clarissa Explains it All, so I'm really excited.

RH: That sounds great. So, you really honed a lot of leadership skills, it sounds like.

SB: Yeah. I really say that started for me, I guess, at a young age. I've always liked speaking up, saying what I really feel, whether it's in class or just at camp or something. I was president of student council in eighth grade, and after that is when everything really started with NFTY. I was on student council my freshman year in high school, and I'm president of Young Democrats at Franklin this year. Yeah, that's in addition to everything NFTY.

RH: So, can you describe to me what it's like to be Jewish in the New Orleans area?

SB: Yeah. Now, or before bridging the –

RH: Well, start with just in general, before. And we'll get into now also, how it's changed.

SB: Okay. I've always loved this Jewish community. People talk about – I know we're not a big Jewish community at all. We're a small one, but in a way, I really liked that because we'd always see people we know, pretty much wherever we go. I like that feeling like – it's kind of like the whole it takes a village to raise a child sort of thing. I feel so close to – I just feel a connection to anyone who's Jewish in this city. There aren't many people who my family doesn't know my. I think I'm a fourth-generation New Orleanian, so we've been in this Jewish community for quite a few years. I love the homey sense of community. Growing up, I did all the clubs and sports at the JCC, and I went to Sunday school at Gates of Prayer. My parents were always active. I used to say

between both of my parents, they were on every board in the city. Mom was on Gates of Prayer board. They were both on JCC board. Dad was on Federation board. Mom was on Day School board. So, we've always been really active in the Jewish community, and that's something I love about my family and I love about this community.

RH: Do you mix with other religious groups, other ethnic groups, other – across religions? Not necessarily a religious group? Do you have friends that aren't Jewish?

SB: Yeah. I didn't for a long time because going to –I was in Jewish school for fourteen years of my life. When I was younger, my only non-Jewish friends were friends that I took dancing with. Everyone thought it would be a really hard adjustment for me going – Franklin's a public school. It's a public magnet charter school. I started my freshman year in August of 2005, and everyone thought it would be a really hard adjustment for me, but it wasn't at all. Especially coming back after evacuation, I really found my place at Franklin, and my best friends are Catholic. I've gone to church with my best friend before. She's come to temple with me. And I just think that's really nice. Most of my school friends these days are non-Jewish.

RH: Does your social group cross into other ethnic groups or racial groups also?

SB: Yeah, some of my good friends are Black. As far as religion goes, a lot of my friends, I guess, are more secular. Maybe they don't practice a religion at all, but I have some Catholic friends, and I have some Protestant friends also. There are a couple of kids in my grade who are Buddhist, so I think that's pretty cool. I like hearing about the kind of things they do at their temples.

RH: Yeah, the different religions is interesting. So, for you now, what's kind of the center of your social world?

SB: In New Orleans?

RH: Yeah, in New Orleans.

SB: I'd say, my school friends. I have a lot of NFTY friends who live in the city. We go to different schools. I actually have NFTY friends who – that's how I categorize my two groups of friends, either my NFTY friends or my school friends. I hang out with my school friends a lot. A lot of us live in uptown in New Orleans, which is where my Dad lives now. We walk around Magazine Street, get some ice cream, get coffee, go shopping, go to the movies. That's really the center of my social world, although I have a lot of schoolwork. So sometimes being social takes a backseat.

RH: Got you. Okay. We've talked a little about the evacuation, and when I look at August 2005, you were a freshman.

SB: Yes.

RH: So, you had barely started school.

SB: I had been at Franklin for seven days when the hurricane hit.

RH: So tell me what happened to you.

SB: So, I was really, really excited about starting my freshman year, and we started school on a Thursday. So we were at school Thursday, Friday, and then the whole next week – the last five days. I remember my geography – my crazy geography teacher telling us that we, under no circumstances, even if we were evacuating, we would have our quiz on the states and capitals the first day we got back. He was expecting that to be Wednesday, I guess. The following Wednesday. And so I studied. I made my note cards. I was ready to go. Even in the car, making my note cards. I'm studying for this test.

RH: You mean while you evacuated?

SB: While we were evacuating. Friday, I came home from school, and we kind of heard there was a hurricane in the Gulf, but we weren't really sure. We went to a good friend's bar mitzvah that night. Then I stayed home the next morning while my parents were at the Saturday morning part of the bar mitzvah. I'm watching the news, and Ray Nagin is telling everyone to evacuate. My parents were in the synagogue; I was calling them, and I was freaking out. I packed. I'm not one of those people who you hear, "We just took a small bag with us." I packed five suitcases.

RH: You did?

SB: I really did. I take everything so seriously. I take with me anything I don't think I can lose. Like one of those suitcases was all pictures. And then I brought my signed Broadway posters. I just brought everything I could think of. I'm a very proud book collector. I took pictures of my bookshelves in case they were ruined and I had to replace my books, because I would not want to leave any book out.

RH: What's your favorite books that you have?

SB: I'm a huge Harry Potter fan. And I also love Jane Austen. I love *Pride and Prejudice*. I love to read. I got through two books a week if –

RH: So, you didn't carry the books in a suitcase, but you did take photos.

SB: I brought a couple with me, because I needed – well, I know books can be replaced. Pictures really can't. So, I brought my computer, because I had a laptop. I brought a lot.

RH: And what clothes? What kind of clothes?

SB: Everything. I really did. I brought all my cute little skirts, all my shirts, all my dresses, and my jeans. I love jeans. And my T-shirts, because all my T-shirts are from something, really, so I didn't want to lose any of them. That's pretty much how I go about

evacuating every time. It wasn't like, oh I think this is going to be a bad one. I thought it was going to be just like the other ones. We'd come home two days later, and it swerved like a false alarm. But I figure, why tempt the fates?

RH: Okay. So, what happened next? When did your folks get home?

SB: My parents got home – or they called me after services, and I was like, “I know, I'm packed. I'm ready to go.” They called me to tell me I should pack. I was like, “Oh, I'm ready when you guys are.” That Saturday afternoon, my Mom and I drove to Alexandria, Louisiana, which is where we always evacuate to. We have really close family friends who live there. But my Dad had to drive his parents to Houston because that's where they wanted – that's where they wanted to be because my – the rest of my Dad's family was evacuating to Houston. Or his brother and his family. I wasn't with my Dad, but I was with my Mom, and we drove – it was a really long drive because of the traffic. I just remember Alexandria should only be three and a half hours away. I'm pretty sure we were in the car for twelve hours. But my family going to Houston were in the car for twenty hours.

RH: So, I just want to clarify, where you packed all your stuff from. Was that from your –?

SB: This house.

RH: This house.

SB: Yeah. I didn't get a chance to go back to my Dad's house, but I didn't have many personal things there because I was staying at my – I was at my Mom's house this trip, but this is the house I've lived in most of my life, so whenever I go to my Dad's, I'm packing a bag to go. But we lost a lot of family things. My Dad, I think, took a few days' worth of clothes, and that's it, really. If I had the chance to go over there, I would have put everything in the car. But there wasn't time to go over to his house.

RH: So what happened in Alexandria? Tell me a little about being in Alexandria.

SB: Well, every time we evacuate to Alexandria, the only thing on TV is the Weather Channel. We were really thankful that we just got out, and it wasn't that terrible of a journey. So, we waited. That's what we do. We sit around the living room, we watch the Weather Channel, and we wait. If I complain enough, my Mom takes me to the mall.

When I get bored enough. But we just wait. So, Sunday night, when we went to bed, we knew when we had woken up, it was – either the city would be there or it wouldn't.

We were so excited when we heard in the morning that it only hit at a Category 3 instead of a Category 5 like they thought it was going to. We knew there would be wind damage, and we knew there would be flooding. They were saying on the news this could have been a bad one. New Orleans really got lucky. Then we find out as the day goes on about the levee breaches. And the most vivid image in my mind is watching the television and seeing the Target, my Target, where I shop, and I love, completely surrounded by water. It's only ten minutes away from here. But I just remember seeing the parking lot, and it was a swimming pool. I guess the view was from helicopters up above. I just remember that so well. I was like, "That's Target." I was there last week. And it was weird. It was so weird.

RH: So what happened next?

SB: So, after it became apparent that we wouldn't be going home for a while, it was kind of like – what do we do now? I had to go to school. So the next big –

RH: Were you upset when you figured out you couldn't go to school?

SB: Yeah, I was, but I didn't really have any time to make new friends yet. So, it wasn't like I was leaving all my friends. My only close – I only had really a handful of close friends in the city because my day school class was so small. I hadn't really had time to make good friends at school yet. I knew I would be going back. I knew this was just a

break. But I just kind of accepted the fact that I needed to find a place to go to school and tried to make the best of it. It was kind of – it became a competition between our friends and family where we were going to end up. My aunt, who lives in Atlanta, really wanted us to come to Atlanta and go to a school – and she wanted me to go to a great school by her. Our friends in Baton Rouge really wanted us to come to Baton Rouge. We'd be closer to home. Our friends in Memphis wanted us to come to Memphis. But we ended up going to Houston because that's where a lot of my family was. I don't have a huge family. But my aunt and uncle and my two younger cousins were going to be – they decided to stay in Houston, and so did my grandparents. My Dad was already there. So, Mom and I just decided – well, Mom and Dad decided that Houston would be a good place to wait it out, I guess. My Mom works for the Times-Picayune, so she knew – she wrote children's and parenting stories. She knew since there were so many evacuees in Houston, she could still write really good stories from there. It ended up working out. I ended up at the Jewish Day School, the Jewish high school in Houston, with my best friend, which was really good.

RH: What was your role in making any of the decisions? Did you just agree, or did you have some input in where you wanted to go?

SB: I was in favor of Houston.

RH: You were in favor of Houston?

SB: Atlanta is too far away. Memphis, we didn't – I mean, we have close friends there. We didn't have any family. Baton Rouge, we didn't have any family. I'm so used to always being around my family. My entire family lives or lived, before the hurricane, in New Orleans, except for my mom's sister, who lived in Atlanta. But my whole family lives here. Everyone. I wanted to be around my cousins. We have Monday night dinner at my grandmother's house every week. We continued to do that in Houston. So, Houston was definitely the right choice as far as where we ended up. Also, another nice thing was

going to school in Houston wasn't a huge adjustment because there were – this was not a huge Jewish high school, but there were a good twenty of us from New Orleans, so I knew a ton of the kids. Like I said, my best friend and I were there together, so I think that was good.

RH: Do you remember the name of it?

SB: Emery/Weiner School. Or Emery is the high school, Weiner is the middle school.

RH: Did you know those twenty kids before?

SB: I knew most of them. I knew most of them. A lot of them had gone to Gates of Prayer. There were a bunch of us from Gates of Prayer. People ask me if I've kept in touch I think anyone from Houston, and kind of, but I really hung out with the kids from New Orleans. It's not that people in Houston weren't friendly to us or whatever, but it was just convenient having a bunch of – like having two – well, my best friend, and then another good friend, and then we hung out with everyone else from New Orleans. Social life wasn't the greatest for those four months, but we lived with it.

RH: What do you mean not the greatest?

SB: We didn't really do much on the weekends. We went to the mall, or we went to the movies. But it's just we didn't – I don't know. We didn't do that much outside of school. I feel like there was always something else to do as far as with families. I guess I was with my family a lot. But there wasn't a whole lot of hanging out on the weekends.

RH: Did you like the school? What was the school like?

SB: It was okay. It's definitely an interesting – it's a unique school. I enjoyed it.

RH: What does unique mean?

SB: I had gone to a Jewish school – Jewish day school for nine years, and I was used to that. I had gone to public school for seven days, and I really liked that. It was hard at first for me because I was so excited to finally be at a big school – to get yanked out of that and put back in a smaller school, although it's bigger than what I was used to. It was sixty kids, I think, in the grade. But it was a very laid-back atmosphere. The teachers were absolutely wonderful to us. They were so wonderful. But it's a very laid-back atmosphere. Not what I was used to at all. I remember having five minutes in between each class, and that's leisure time for me. Not what I was used to at all. And the campus is beautiful. That is one thing I miss. The school is absolutely beautiful. State-of-the-art, new facility. And it was a cool place to go to school. It wasn't bad at all. It was also nice because I got to keep doing Jewish Studies, which I enjoy. So, that's one of the classes. I didn't take Hebrew because I knew I wouldn't be taking Hebrew the rest of high school. But I took Jewish Studies, and I thought that was pretty cool. We celebrate the holidays, and I enjoy that.

RH: Did you go to the high holiday services in Houston?

SB: My rabbi was in Houston. Actually, that's my best friend's dad. We had a New Orleans high holiday service with members of the community. There's also a cantor from New Orleans who was there. Rice University let us use – not an auditorium, it was like a room of theirs. We just had anyone from New Orleans who wanted to come to this – it was Rosh Hashanah, the evening service, I want to say – could come. It was really nice seeing the familiar faces. My rabbi was up there leading services. For our high holidays, that's what we did for Rosh Hashanah evening. And then, on Saturday, we went to one of the Reform synagogues. And then for Yom Kippur – oh, God. This is an interesting story. Yom Kippur was the first time I went home. I came back to New Orleans because Gates of Prayer was going to have Yom Kippur services at our synagogue.

RH: So, that's why you came back?

SB: Yeah, that's why we came back. I'm off of school because it was a Jewish school, and it was a weekend. My dad had been back already. I want to say my Mom had already moved home because she had to come home in early October for her job writing for the newspaper. She tried to come to Houston on weekends, but she was living in this house already with her parents, actually. They lived here too. So, my dad and I were going to drive back to New Orleans. Our car broke down right in Orange, Texas. Right in the middle of where Rita had hit the week before. So there was nowhere open to fix our car. It was awful. It's like two hours outside of Houston. So, what ended up happening is my Dad knew someone who was currently driving from New Orleans to Houston. So, he was going to go back to Houston with them. But I was like, "No, I'm going to New Orleans." I think already had a flight to come home, also. So, our friends from Alexandria – we were only an hour and a half outside of Alexandria – came and picked me up. My mom came to Alexandria to get me. We totally missed Kol Nidre services. So, my mom came to Alexandria to get me. We spent the night. We left in the morning. I think my fast started at 10:30 that night. I still fasted. But it didn't start until 10:30 that night because I didn't get dinner until nine. Then my Mom and I drove home in the morning, and we went to – she had to work, but I went to Yom Kippur services in the afternoon. It was my first time coming back to New Orleans, so it was interesting.

RH: Tell me what that was like.

SB: I took a lot of pictures.

RH: You did?

SB: Yeah, I took a ton of pictures. I'm a huge picture person. I'm never without my camera. I took a lot of pictures. They're all still on my computer. It was hard. Mainly, it was the blue roofs, which we had one, the blue FEMA roofs for people waiting to get their new roofs on their houses. I remember the debris. There wasn't any water still by this point, but the debris [was] everywhere. Driving in, we come through Baton Rouge, and

then you drive in on the Bonnet Carré Spillway. As soon as we got off the spillway, I couldn't believe it. I had seen trees down and everything. Okay, I expect trees to be down. That's wind, that's what a hurricane does. The debris wasn't like it was tree trunks or anything. It was the complete insides of people's homes lining the streets.

Every street you go down, you see refrigerators everywhere. But just everything from the insides of peoples' houses, and also we had – that's when we had already started to see sheetrock on the street also, insulation, I mean everywhere. It was so hard for me to get my head around at first. It didn't look like the place I was used to. It looked nothing like the place that I had left just six weeks earlier. It was very eerie coming back. It was just kind of like – I recognized things. Like, "Oh, there's my favorite restaurant," but it was a very different environment. It was weird. That's just my best word to describe it. It was very weird.

RH: Where did you go and look around the first time you visited?

SB: We drove around this neighborhood, which – thank God, we were lucky. We were very lucky at this house. Our back door flew open, so we had rainwater in our house, but we did not flood. We had wind damage also, but we were really fortunate. In this whole general neighborhood, there wasn't much actual flooding. Like water pouring into houses. So, we drove around this neighborhood. But then my mom took me to my dad's old neighborhood where we lived in Lakeview. We lived on Pontchartrain Boulevard, three blocks directly behind the breach in the 17th Street Canal. We had a first-floor apartment. I want to say we had nine feet of water. So, by the time my mom took me there, it was already stripped down to the –

RH: Studs.

SB: Yeah, stripped down to the studs. That's the saying. So, there wasn't really much to see. I went to my room, which wasn't really my room anymore. Everything had already been cleared out. We lost a lot of family stuff, like pictures of my dad growing up.

We lost a lot of artwork.

RH: Anything in that house that you were really sad that you lost?

SB: The thing that has stuck with me that I'm sad that we lost is this painting that used to hang – that used to hang in this house. My dad took it when my parents got divorced. It always scared me as a kid. I don't even know what the real name of it is. I always called it "Wolf Man" because it's this profile. On the one side is a man, and on the other side, it's like a wolf's head coming out the back of his head. It's a completely weird picture. It always scared me as a kid. But I kind of grew really fond of it. I was really sad that we lost it. I was so sad that that was one of the things that we lost. But I will say we were very lucky as far as losing things go. Because we hadn't lived there very long, so we didn't have a lot of stuff there. So, we were really lucky.

RH: Did you drive around that neighborhood too?

SB: Yeah, we drove around Lakeview. It was weird. My mom was explaining to me what the spray paint marks mean, how if there's a number, that means how many dead bodies they found inside. We saw the holes in the roof where people escaped with axes. It was just weird. We drove by my school, which is also in that neighborhood on UNO's campus. School had like five or six feet of water. So, that was really weird just seeing it. There were trees down everywhere. On my dad's street – he lives on one of the main – we lived on one of the main streets in Lakeview. It's Pontchartrain Boulevard on this side and West End Drive on this side. In the middle is this huge neutral ground, like huge, grassy area. It had turned into a dump. That's where people were dumping things because that's where they were told to dump them because that's where they would be taken away from. It was huge. It was higher than our house. Things had just been piling up, and then I remember after that – it had been all cleared away, they started using it for old trees that they were cutting down. So, all the trees started going there. I drove by yesterday, and it's interesting to see it now. It's weird. I can't really remember too much

like living there, though, because we weren't there for very long.

RH: What was the service like that you went to? What was it like to go back to your first service at Gates of Prayer?

SB: It was really weird because there was no – everything was stripped from the synagogue. You could see part of the sheetrock was gone. About two feet around, there was no – two feet above the ground, there was no sheetrock. And then, in our synagogue, we have what we call a well. The synagogue, the seats go around – like there's the bima. The seats go around like this, but they go down. It's kind of like a movie theater with the raised platforms or whatever. So, there was water sitting in our well for two weeks until anyone could pump it out. So, all the carpeting was stripped up, we were sitting on folding chairs. It was so good to be back. I love my synagogue. I love it so much. I can't wait to get married there one day. But I love it. I love Gates of Prayer. It really felt more than anything, like there was a lot of hope. I've felt very hopeful for the city. I try to be an optimistic person in general, but it was really powerful. It was just so good to be back. I don't even remember services, specifically. I just remember sitting and looking around and seeing the familiar faces, and I was just like, "I love it here." I never want to be anywhere else. There was never any doubt in our minds that we would move back to New Orleans. It would have been a question had my Mom lost her job, but she was fortunate enough to keep her job at the newspaper. It was never a question of – it was when are we moving home, not if.

RH: So, how long were you in Houston?

SB: I stayed through the first semester. First semester ended December 16th. I was in this house December 18th.

RH: Let's stay in Houston for just another minute because you had some of your other family and cousins there. Where did you guys live?

SB: We lived in an apartment in one of the areas of Houston called Meyerland, and we were right across the street from the JCC, so that was nice. My cousins and grandparents lived in a different apartment complex five minutes away. We had – we have a few good friends who live in Houston also, who have actually moved from New Orleans a long time ago. Both of our good sets of friends lived within ten minutes.

RH: What did your family do to sustain themselves and to make a place like home?

SB: Really, Monday night dinners were completely going full-on. I get so annoyed by every Monday we have to go to dinner at Bubbe's house. But it was so nice to just have that taste of home. It was just weird. Obviously, we weren't sitting down at the same dinner table like we do usually. But that first Monday night dinner, it was really something. It was me and my dad – well, this is my dad's family, but my mom is still really close with my dad's family after they've gotten divorced. So me and my mom and dad, and my aunt and uncle and two younger cousins, and my grandmother and grandfather. It was great. It was really great. So every Monday we were there.

RH: Did you contact friends who were not in town, and how did you do that?

SB: Like friends who were –

RH: Scattered around.

SB: – not in Houston? Yeah. I guess I really had three best friends, or close friends from the day school. My friend Micah was at school with me. My friend Simone was in Memphis, and my friend Sarah was in Atlanta. It was really hard at first, using the phones. Thank God for text messaging – but we could not get calls through because every single person in New Orleans was on their cell phone. We got new cell numbers when we got to Houston. I actually still have my cell phone number from Houston. Then, it started to be easier to get in touch with people. But I talked to friends I had made at Franklin that first week – I talked to them online. I have AOL Instant Messenger, so I use

that a lot. Then actually, speaking of – that reminded me of communicating with people.

I did something really interesting. When the hurricane hit three weeks earlier, I had gotten home from my first summer at Kutz Camp. So, I had friends now, all over the country who were trying to contact me, who didn't know what was going on. So I started sending – they weren't really weekly – they were whenever I felt like doing it – emails to everyone. I had this huge, long email list of thirty people. Some of them were just friendly to me; I wasn't good friends with them. Some of them, I was very close with.

The first one was just like, "I'm in Alexandria. My family is okay. Thanks to everyone for your concern." Then, as the months went by, I think I only sent four or five of these total, but they became – I don't keep a journal, but they became my outlet for, I guess, emotions, really. It was really nice just writing everything out and having people read it and then respond. I got really, really nice responses.

RH: What were some of the things you wrote about?

SB: I wrote about that my family was safe, that one of my houses was ruined, but the other was okay. I wrote that I'm definitely moving home. I wrote about life in Houston.

At first, it was like, "This sucks. I hate it here. I want to go home." And then, after a while, it was like, "Okay, I'm going home. For now, I just have to deal with it, I guess.

What can I do? There's not really much I can do except try to make the best of it." That was one thing I really enjoyed. Actually, one of my friends who I wrote to was on his NFTY regional board in a different region. He called me one day, and he was like, "Sally, do you mind if I use your emails for a program I'm doing on Katrina?" I was like, "Please.

I think that's wonderful." NFTY was actually amazing as far as raising money. They started this whole challenge to every youth group to raise a hundred dollars – every youth group across the country and Canada to raise just a hundred dollars. I think they ended up raising – I know it was in the tens of thousands. I can't remember exactly. It went in with all the other URJ money. The NFTY money paid for all of us to not have to pay for our regional events for the rest of the year, which was nice. Our first event of the

year was in –

RH: You mean for the New Orleans people?

SB: Yeah, for the New Orleans people, we didn't have to pay to go to any of our NFTY events. For our first event – our actual first event was canceled because it was the weekend after the hurricane. But what became our first event was in November in Little Rock, Arkansas, and they flew in everyone from New Orleans no matter where you were. It was wonderful to see everyone who you hadn't seen in a long time.

RH: Wow. So, you hadn't seen some of the New Orleans people, and then you also –?

SB: Yes. Hadn't seen my camp friends and my NFTY friends also. I was expecting to see them Labor Day Weekend because our first event of the year is always Labor Day weekend, but at Henry S. Jacobs Camp, it was canceled because it was the weekend after the hurricane.

RH: Wow. So that's a pretty nice thing.

SB: It was.

RH: Did you get to travel any other times to go see friends or anything?

SB: I went to Atlanta once. Me and my friend Micah, who were in Houston together, went to Atlanta for my friend Sarah, her younger sister's bat mitzvah. It turned out it was supposed to be here, but a synagogue was really amazing to them, and it's the synagogue they still – they stayed in Atlanta – the synagogue they still belong to. We went to Melissa's bat mitzvah. It was so good to see everyone. A ton of New Orleans people came in for the bat mitzvah. That was another really good memory of just seeing people. I saw my old kindergarten teacher, who's one of our mentors. That was great. Besides that, I visited New Orleans a couple of times. I came home a couple of times. I

think two or three times. I can't remember exactly.

RH: And what did you do when you came to New Orleans? Do you remember?

SB: I went to my favorite restaurants. I remember, for Yom Kippur, that first time we came home, we broke the fast at my favorite sushi restaurant. My grandparents – my other set of grandparents – were already living here. They actually lived in our house for nine months, so that was interesting. I don't remember. I tried to figure out – we did whatever was open. I guess we did a lot of restaurants. I can't remember. Maybe the movies were open. I can't remember.

RH: Well, when you first got back in December, and you just moved back, what were some of the things you wanted to do when you moved back?

SB: Honestly, I remember coming home on my first night and getting on the computer and talking to – not my friends from Houston because I didn't – I didn't really keep in touch with anyone – but my friends from camp who lived in other places besides New Orleans. I was just like, "Oh my God, what am I going to do here?" Because, like I said, I only had three really good friends from the day school. Only one of them was back, the one who was in Houston with me. And we were kind of sick of each other. I mean, we love each other very much. We're like sisters. But we were kind of sick of each other. I was just like, "I'm going to be bored out of my mind." I remember just being so frustrated. I was just like, "There's nothing to do. I don't have any friends." I had a month off for a winter break also because my school – I got out of school December 16th. Franklin wasn't scheduled to open until January 17th.

RH: That's a long break, isn't it?

SB: Yeah. I was just like, what am I supposed to do with myself? We found things to do. Me and my Dad had to find a new apartment, a new place to live. So, that took up a lot of time.

RH: Where did you guys move?

SB: The first place we moved was uptown, a block off South Claiborne Street on Cucullu in between Nashville and Joseph. This past November, we moved to where we're living now, which is on Peniston Street, a block from Saint Charles. Great for Mardi Gras parades.

RH: Is that why moved there?

SB: That's why I moved there. I think that's why my Dad moved, too. I can hear the parades from my bedroom, so it's wonderful.

RH: That's fun. We're going to take a short break and change the tape.

SB: Okay.

RH: Great interview.

[END OF TRACK 1]

RH: Okay, this is tape two of Katrina's Jewish Voices with Sally Bronston. So I was just saying it's pretty hard not to have a group of friends around, isn't it?

SB: It really was. I didn't know what to do with myself. I didn't have a driver's license. I didn't have a car. I couldn't go anywhere. I was stuck in this house most of the time, although my dad could take me places because he wasn't working. He lost his job. I didn't have anything to do. I was bored out of my mind. One of the things I did over that month that I had was I did have a NFTY event. I'm trying to remember what I did for New Year's.

RH: Did you do the Hanukkah downtown? The Hanukkah event? Were you around for that?

SB: Oh. I wasn't around for that, but I was at – I remember one of the things. I went to a Rick Recht concert at the JCC. I am a huge Rick Recht fan, and I got to meet him and talk to him. That was the event – I don't know if you've heard about this – where there was this artist. I forget his name, but he does menorahs and dreidels. He does that glasswork that you melt – you put the glass, and you melt it together. But he actually had people at his congregation design the actual colors, and they were all laid out on this huge table, and they told us, "Please take menorahs. Take dreidels. We know a lot of people lost all of their Jewish ritual objects." This was one of the first nights of Hanukkah – I can't remember. So, that was the event, and then it was also – I want to say – maybe that wasn't the Rick Recht concert. Maybe that was a different time, now that I'm remembering, but I know they were both at the JCC. They were both in that time period.

RH: Did you take some stuff?

SB: Yeah. We have a menorah and a dreidel from that. They're really pretty, so it's a good memory.

RH: It was somebody not from town who made them.

SB: No, for the life of me, I can't remember the artist's name. They were beautiful. So, they shipped all of those in, so that was really cool.

RH: Where was Rick Recht concert?

SB: The Rick Recht concert was also at the JCC.

RH: The uptown JCC?

SB: The uptown JCC. Both of these events were at the uptown JCC.

RH: Were you able to do any – too many things at the JCC uptown or not really?

SB: No, there wasn't a whole lot going on. There just wasn't a lot going on anywhere. People were rebuilding, and that's really good. I mean, people were still tearing down, but people were rebuilding, and that was encouraging to see. I hadn't had time to make friends at my new school, so I was really, really looking forward to going back. I was so excited.

RH: So, what was your first day of school like when you got back?

SB: It was great. For all the upper grades, it was coming back and seeing your friends, but I even thought it was great as a freshman not knowing anyone. There were some upperclassmen that I knew, but I just loved that school. It was really a good place for me. My dad went to school there. It was decided before I was born, really, that that's where I would go to school. I loved Franklin for my first day. They actually had an essay contest during the evacuation. Why should Franklin reopen? I actually won the essay contest, so that was really cool. I wrote about – my paper was called "Seven Days." I talked about how even though I'd only been at Franklin for seven days, I knew it would be the place for me, and I miss it, and I can't wait to come back, and there's no doubt in my mind that Franklin will be thriving once again. So, coming back was great. Although I will say we had a very hard day because Franklin is a really hard school. They didn't accept all of our credits from our other high schools. My grades from Emery are still on my transcript, but they didn't – well, some of my grades from Emery are still on my transcript. They didn't accept my English class. They didn't accept my math class because they need everyone to take Franklin English just to go with our curriculum or whatever. I don't really understand it still. I mean, English class is English class if you ask me. We went to school from, I want to say, 7:30 in the morning until 4:15 in the afternoon. We had five ninety-minute classes a day and a thirty-minute lunch. It was to make up time because they weren't – some schools just went into summer, and they didn't want to do that to us. They had to make up time, so we ended up – since we doubled the class periods, we had first semester and second semester. First semester was January to March and

second semester was March to May. So, that was the hardest part, having those – getting used to those long classes and – it was a long day.

RH: Wow. You be careful what you wish for, huh?

SB: Yeah, but in the end, I was actually only taking – I had four academic classes, and then student council was one of my class periods. The day evened itself out pretty well. It was hard to get used to, but once you got used to it, it wasn't too bad. It was really great coming back and making new friends. The people who I really connected with, even that first week back, are still my best friends at school now. It's an interesting bond that we all have. It's very interesting. It's different for younger kids who are actually growing up. Their parents are really involved in all of the rebuilding or whatever, but I'm old enough to understand. I was always old enough to get it. So, it's like my age group is really growing up with the hurricane and the aftermath. I'm reaching adulthood in this whole generation, and everything going on with the hurricane. I think we all feel like that, and it's all something we share. So, it's an interesting thing to think about.

RH: If you were going to tell a student at another school what that's like, this reaching adulthood, how you're different from, say, them living in Atlanta, what would you say the difference is?

SB: I feel like we really had to grow up. 2005, I was fourteen when the hurricane hit. I mean that age – I'm only sixteen now, but that age – it sounds so young, and it sounds so long ago, but I was just like – we had to grow up. It's not fun to see your parents cry. It's not fun to see your grandparents cry, either. It was hard. It was wearing on all of us. We would fight sometimes, and that would suck. It would be terrible, but you have to get your emotions out somehow, I guess. But it's just like – we really had to grow up. I was bored when I came home. I had nothing to do, but I tried my best not to complain about it because we had to worry about rebuilding our house or fixing everything that needed to be fixed. If I wanted to keep living the same lifestyle I was used to living for fourteen

years, I needed to shut up and not whine and complain. I mean, everyone went through that. I'm sure you know this from doing all your interviews – every single person has a unique hurricane story, but every single person my age we have a totally unique perspective from our parents and even from my friends who have siblings, either younger siblings or older siblings. It's just like fourteen was so young. It's weird. It's weird thinking about – I really went through all of that. But I really feel like I'm a stronger person today. I would not be the person I am today if this hadn't happened. I'm not grateful it happened or anything, but it happened. That's life, and you have to deal with it, and you grow up.

RH: Wow. Yeah. You explained that well. Did you, on the student council, do anything special?

SB: Not on student council, specifically, but with other organizations in the school, we'd have volunteer cleanup days. There was this organization that two boys from a Catholic school started to get all of New Orleans' high schoolers to start being active and cleaning up the community, and we would have big cleanup days in Lakeview, where we would gut houses and pull weeds.

RH: What was the name of the organization? Do you remember?

SB: It was like Youth Rebuilding New Orleans, or something along those lines. Yeah, YRNO, Youth Rebuilding New Orleans. That's what it was. The YRNO.

RH: So, you did some of that?

SB: Yeah, I did some of that. As far as other student organizations related to the hurricane go, last year, I was asked by one of the teachers at school to go to this conference/meeting thing with a couple of other kids from school. It's called the – well, we named it the New Orleans Youth Leadership Council because it was kind of an initiative started by students at Edna Carr High School. They invited every high school in

the city to send representatives to their school to have a meeting. Not many schools showed up. It was between six or eight public Orleans Parish high schools. We were the only ones who came. Franklin isn't your typical Orleans Parish public school. But we went, and the mayor came and talked to us. It was very interesting. So, we started an organization, and we called it the New Orleans Youth Leadership Council. A lot of the kids who were the representatives are on the student councils of their schools, so I described this to people as a student council for all of New Orleans. It's still a growing organization. We have lots of ideas. We have monthly meetings during the school year. At another meeting, one of our state congressmen came and talked to us and invited us to come to Baton Rouge and sit in on an education meeting session. An education committee session. Another group contacted us. I don't know if you've heard of the group Students of the Storm. It was started by some girls at McGehee. Well, it has a different name now. I can't remember. But they asked our group to come with them to Baton Rouge for a training session on how to lobby for New Orleans.

RH: Did you do that?

SB: Yeah, I went, and it was a really great experience. The man teaching us is one of the biggest lobbyists in Baton Rouge. So, that was really cool. That was really cool. So, I think that this group has a lot of potential. So we'll see when the year starts up again.

RH: Is it mixed across race, class, and such as that?

SB: Yes. I'm not going to lie. My first meeting, I was in the minority. I was definitely – and that was something very interesting for me. Out of a group of thirty, maybe, I was one of three or four white kids. That's fine with me. I don't have a problem with it at all. It was the first time I'd ever been in that situation. And it was just like, “Yeah, this is pretty cool. Something different.” But it was definitely different for me.

RH: That's a different feeling, isn't it?

SB: It was. I mean, I'm used to being the minority as far as being Jewish goes, but this was a different kind of minority, so it was totally fine with me. I really liked meeting – I would never meet kids from other New Orleans public schools.

RH: Do you think post-Katrina there's more of a chance to do that kind of thing now?

SB: I think so. I think it's really brought us together as New Orleans Youth. I was talking about how my friends at Franklin all had this intense connection. But really, it's all the high school students in New Orleans. We know each other's pain. We know what life is like now. It's not even so much like life today is really hard as far as – there's not a whole lot of people rebuilding still. It's changed everyone. It's affected us all. I want to say there's just an understanding. We just kind of know. It's just one of those things.

RH: Right, that you don't even have to verbalize.

SB: Yeah. So, it's a cool organization, and we're trying to grow and expand schools. When we had the day in Baton Rouge with McGehee, we tried to get them in on the organization. Also, private schools who hadn't really – not that they hadn't been interested, but they didn't really know what it was about. I completely understand that. We started an organization. We can't just expect everyone to come running. But it's pretty cool.

RH: So, are they involved now?

SB: I guess this happened at the very end of last school year, so we'll see where we pick up this month. I hope it's strong. But I know everyone who is in it, going into it, we're all really dedicated, and we're talking about writing our own constitution, having a set foundation so we can really start to do something, whether it's volunteer work, whether it's lobbying. Our main focus –

RH: Do you have a mission?

SB: Yeah. Our main focus really has to do with education and getting the schools in better condition because who better to tell everyone what the schools need than the students?

RH: Were you involved with the group that complained about the bathrooms? Or is that a different group?

SB: Some of those kids are part of this group. So that's cool. I'm pretty sure. They talk about how their bathrooms are in terrible condition. But some of those schools are part of this group. My school is not like that. My school is in pretty good condition now.

RH: Well I did note that when you first got back to Franklin, there was no cafeteria, right?

SB: Oh, yeah, there wasn't a lot of things. We didn't have the entire first floor, which is the cafeteria, the gym, and the auditorium, and the library. We lost all of the books in the library and several classrooms on the first floor. My whole freshman year, up through last year, they were working on things, rebuilding. We had five or six feet of water and that's the first floor, right there. I remember it was a big deal when the gym reopened. It was a big deal when the cafeteria reopened. Most people bring their lunches from home anyway. Actually, it was nice; while the cafeteria was under construction, they had pizza for us every day. It was free. If I felt like having a slice of pizza, I'd have some pizza.

But it was a really big deal. We had our first thing – the play this past spring. It's taken that long for the auditorium to be complete. It was this past spring for our spring play, was the first time we ever used the auditorium. I think we're pretty much done now. The library is still – the room itself is rebuilt, but our books definitely aren't. I think we got a grant from Laura Bush's organization to buy library books. So, that's pretty cool.

RH: Do you think from your friends that there was a difference in who coped and how people coped? Did some people, do you think, cope better than others? Boys or girls?

SB: I don't really know.

RH: Do you know who had the hardest time?

SB: I know I have friends who really lost everything. And I think although – and actually, the friends that I'm thinking of who really lost their entire houses, they lived in Lakeview. Their houses were completely wiped out. They are boys, and they are – I guess, I don't know if stoic is the right word. They talk about it, and they're sad, but they're not overly emotional. One of my good friends, whose house was destroyed, moved to Houston. It's really sad that he didn't come back. He comes to visit all the time, but he lost everything except for what he took with him. I cannot even imagine that happening, if we had lost – this is the house where I've lived my whole life. I can't even imagine. I'm so grateful. I'm so grateful. But yeah, it was hard.

RH: What were some of the tensions like in the family? Because you said also your grandparents – you lived with your grandparents in this house for nine months.

SB: Yeah. Well they were actually living here before me or my Mom got home.

RH: Did they lose their house?

SB: They flooded on their first floor. So they had to – they live in Metairie also, but they live in that area where the pumps were turned off, and so they flooded from the canals. They had to completely redo the first floor of their house. They lived in our guest room for nine months, and that was interesting. We have some funny stories, looking back on it. But it was frustrating. My grandfather would always complain about how I'm always in my room and I never come down and visit. I'm like, "I'm doing homework. It's not like I'm always watching TV or something." So, it was just like – I just remember – all three of the bedrooms where we were living in are upstairs. My Mom's room, my room, and then our guest room where my grandparents were. My grandfather would get up in the middle of the night and turn off the air. And Mom would wake up, and like, "Why is the air off?" And go and turn it back on. And down here, too. It's stories like that. It was an

interesting few months. I love my grandparents. I've always been close to them. I never want to live with them again. It was a very a happy day when they moved out. For them too.

RH: For them too, yeah.

SB: I'm sure. I'm sure they never expected to be living under their daughter's roof. We have all done things we've never expected to do. That's one of the biggest things that this hurricane brought, like unseen – not even opportunities, but just experiences. Every single person did something they never thought in their life they'd be doing. So one of my things was I lived with my grandparents. It was weird.

RH: Let's get back a little bit to the synagogue. How is the Jewish community to you different now?

SB: Well it's smaller. The way it's most different to me is that a lot of the families who I really cherished as part of this Jewish community, no longer live here – have moved away. Some of my close friends, and just some really active, wonderful members of the community either had jobs, other places, they were scared of another Katrina happening. We lost a lot of amazing members of this community. But overall, I think everyone in the Jewish community, no matter what sect of Judaism you are, has really come together. And I think that's something really amazing, I think. I was talking about how all of the high schoolers in New Orleans have a bond. We definitely have a Jewish community, post-Katrina bond. Everyone just kind of understands what everyone else is going through. And this is really like a family thing. Just understanding what everyone else is going through. It's good to have this community that you can rely on for support and for strength when you feel like everything is frustrating. The contractor won't call you back, and you can't get your new roof on, and your insurance people are giving you problems. And this is just like – I didn't personally have to deal with any of this, but I know that's what everyone was going through. It's this built-in community, and it was good to have.

RH: Do you have any emotions around the people who have left? Different kinds of emotions?

SB: I'm sad. It's been almost two years since the hurricane, and I am still – my aunt and uncle [and] my two younger cousins stayed in Houston, and that was really hard. They lost the entire first floor of their house. They lost a lot. They have younger kids – well, kind of. I guess they were nine and five, around those ages, when then hurricane – in 2005. They like their schools in Houston, they made friends, and they were happy there, and that was really hard, them not moving back. Because I'm used to everyone living in New Orleans. That's my Dad's brother and his family. On the other side of my family, one of my Mom's sisters has lived in Atlanta for seventeen years. Her other sister moved to Atlanta, also. So, that was hard. We had the same favorite coffee place, and we'd see her several mornings a week, just getting her coffee in the morning. It was nice that I'd see my aunt all the time. And then a couple of my best friends from middle school have moved. My friend, Sarah, and her family stayed in Atlanta. I was actually just visiting Atlanta, visiting my family, and I got to spend a lot of time with her. So that was great, and I was just like, "I can't believe that it's been two years since you've lived in New Orleans," and she's just like, "I can't either."

RH: Were you able to pick up pretty well with her?

SB: Oh, yeah, we've definitely stayed in touch. We stayed really close. I mean, since my family is there, I go to Atlanta a lot. But one of my other friends – actually, this is kind of an interesting story. She was in Memphis during the hurricane, and she was at – she's Orthodox, and she was at a girl's yeshiva, an orthodox girl's school. Her family all came home at the end of the year. They came home in May or June. She went back to the school. She was going to a magnet school in Jefferson Parish. She went back first semester of sophomore year, and she hated it. So, she went back to – in December, she went back to the school in Memphis, because she had really liked it there, and she's

living in the dorm there now. Her family is still here, but it's been really hard having her leave, too.

RH: And that's Micah?

SB: That's Simone.

RH: Simone, okay.

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SB: Me and Micah are the only ones from –

RH: Here.

SB: – that group still here. That was really hard.

RH: Have you visited her in Memphis?

SB: I haven't visited her in Memphis, but she comes here a lot because her family is here.

RH: Is your group involved in any rebuilding of the Jewish community?

SB: I guess we're involved – as a Jewish community we're involved in rebuilding. That's mainly been – the rebuilding that we're doing has mainly been outside of the Jewish community. We volunteer. One of the projects that Gates of Prayer took on last year – and this is really interesting – we kind of adopted the Upper 9th Ward women's shelter. That's been really cool. I've been there a few times. We decorated for Christmas. That's one of the things we bought – a Christmas tree – and we went and decorated with all of the kids for Christmas. We also baked Christmas lunch for them, also. Or cooked Christmas lunch for them.

RH: Now, who is in the women's shelter?

SB: I don't know if it's – it's not a battered women's shelter. It's just women and children who, I guess, don't really have any other place to go. Some of them lost their homes or wherever they were living during the hurricane, but they decided to come back. The residents kind of change. People come and go when they get back on their feet. There's always a bunch of kids around. We tried to collect new toys and new clothes for Christmas presents. Actually, I think that's still going on throughout the year because it's nice for them to have a new toy to open on Christmas morning. That's been really cool.

Another one of the things that we do – at our synagogue, we have – we call it “scrip.” It's like gift certificates that you buy through temple, but it's to stores. It's hard to describe.

I've never heard of any other synagogue doing this. I guess we're weird. But I could buy a gift certificate to go to their movies at temple. We have this whole program. So, we started this whole thing where you buy “scrip” – the gift certificates – for the people who live in the women's shelter. So, I think that's also been successful. A gift certificate to the grocery, so they can go and make groceries. So I think that that's also been – that's also been one of the – that's been a really, really cool thing that we've done in the Jewish community.

RH: And you've also been asked to talk to some groups?

SB: Yeah.

RH: So, tell me a little about that.

SB: I can't even remember now – I've lost track – of how many groups I've spoken to. Mainly, they've been students. A few months ago, I spoke at a restaurant with a few other kids from New Orleans to the Kehillah Jewish School. They're a Jewish high school from the Bay Area of San Francisco. We spoke to them. They were in town, volunteering for their spring trip. I've spoken to several other Jewish youth groups that

have come to New Orleans, and Gates of Prayer has taken them in. We did youth group events together. GoPTY, my youth group at temple and whatever their group is. I remember we did one day where we talked about everything and talked about our personal experiences. Then they go out and volunteer while we're in school. And then at night – that night, we went bowling. So that was interesting. Then one time, I spoke to a group of young – a young adult leadership group that came to New Orleans – all of these groups have been Jewish, actually. They're through the Jewish community. And I spoke. That was interesting, talking to grownups for the first time, about – I said, it's –

RH: Was it different?

SB: Yeah. And I was telling them, “I know you've heard from a lot of people in the community, but I think I'm the first kid you've heard from. So I have a unique perspective to offer.” And then also – this wasn't really a group I talked to, but I had some friends who I'd gone to camp with last year at Kutz Camp, which is in New York. A couple of my friends were coming into town to do some volunteer work, and they were just like, “Hey, do you want to come out to dinner with us?” I was like, “Yeah, okay.” We talk over dinner, and I talk to the rest of their youth group, also. So, there's been casual things, and then there's been more formal things. I enjoy doing it. It's important for people to know – I know people are interested, and it's important for people to know that it's not all better here, but life isn't terrible. I mean, my life is good. I like it. I know not everyone is as lucky as me.

RH: Do any of them say, why should New Orleans be rebuilt? Do you have an answer for them?

SB: I personally haven't encountered that question, but it's the history and the culture and the art and the food and the people. New Orleans is a unique city. Also, I appreciate New Orleans itself so much more after moving home. I live in Metairie with my Mom, but I also live uptown with my Dad. I am such an uptown girl now. I love New

Orleans. I love that. I love walking down St. Charles Avenue. When the streetcars finally start running again, I love taking the streetcar. I love going down to the French Quarter. I love going to Saints games. I'm going to a Saints game tonight. I love it. I love it.

RH: Mardi Gras?

SB: Oh, God, yes. JazzFest, Mardi Gras. It's all these things, but mainly the people, that really make New Orleans what it is. I think it's the greatest place on earth to live. I love it. I have so much fun here. I complain a lot, like, "Mom will never take me anywhere, there's nothing to do," but really, there's always something going on. So it's fun.

RH: What do you hope for New Orleans?

SB: I hope that we really get the money we need to rebuild and rebuild better than before. Right now, I think we're close to what we were pre-Katrina. I feel like the city can grow a lot. Money is one thing that we need. We need people in the government who know what they're doing and know what's right for New Orleans. So, I hope that we elect good leaders. But I hope that people across the country understand that this is an amazing place to live. New Orleans is really – it's a treasure. I hope people move here – just find it interesting and move here. I hope people who live here stay. And I hope everyone – even if you don't move here, people visit, and they understand and they appreciate New Orleans. I know the people – one of the groups I talk to – they were only even here this past summer – this summer, they were still saying things like, "We didn't believe it until we saw it." And to me, it's like, well, is there still really that much to see? I'm just used to it now, but I hope people keep coming, and keep visiting. Just keep New Orleans around.

RH: Let's shift one more time to the Jewish community. Did you draw on your Jewish identity in the time you were away? The past two years?

SB: Yeah, I've definitely grown a lot as a Jew over the last two years, and I think a lot of that has to do with everything we went through over the hurricane. My Jewish identity has always been very strong, but it's kind of a different kind of strong now. Part of that is just growing up, in general. Part of that has really changed by my summers at camp. Camp is one thing that always has a strong impact on my Jewish life. My life is always Jewish. I definitely feel like I'm a stronger person, a more connected Jew, and a stronger Jew.

RH: Is there any way that that plays out when you say you're a stronger Jew?

SB: I mean, when I think of it, when I think of being a stronger Jew, I feel like I'm really active in the Jewish community, and that is the most important thing to me. It's not so much the religion. I love going to services, don't get me wrong. I love going to services. I love going to services at Gates of Prayer. I love our songs that we do. I love our prayers. I enjoy going to services mainly because I like the community. I like being active in this Jewish community. I don't know what I would do if I wasn't an active member of the community. It's not even so much the religion for me. It's more of the culture.

RH: Has your understandings or experiences about feelings about God changed? Or have you thought about that?

SB: I have thought about it. I don't really know what I think about God. It's a very, very complex concept, I guess. I'm not one of those people who say God was trying to teach us something by sending a hurricane, or how could God let this happen? I feel like my view of God is that God's always there and looking out for us as best as God can, maybe. But there's a point where – I feel like there's only – just like parents protecting their

children. There's only so much a parent can do. I kind of feel that way about God. I honestly believe God cannot control everything. There are forces of nature – and I feel – that are powerful and destroy lives sometimes. And that's hard. It can only go – God's protection can only go so far. But maybe if we – I feel like giving back to the community is one way that we can really start to feel God within us again. Maybe people who feel betrayed and everything – I really love the phrase, b'tzelem elohim – everyone is made in the image of God, and we all have God within us. I believe that.

RH: Are there any concepts or ideas from Judaism that came to your mind the past couple of years?

SB: I mean, the first one that comes to mind is tikkun olam, which is repairing the world. I've always been really active with tikkun olam and social action work, even before the hurricane. This has brought a lot of new experiences, as far as tikkun olam goes because I try to do a lot of rebuilding type of things. Also, I think even just talking to groups – that's tikkun olam. That's helping them understand what happened. Yeah, tikkun olam is a biggie.

RH: Any other ones?

SB: One of the things I think about when you talk about the Jewish community is Kehillah Kedosha, which is holy or sacred community. I really feel like this Jewish community, if we weren't before, which I think we were, but if we weren't before, we definitely are a Kehillah Kedosha now. We've been through so much, and we're still here.

RH: Did you kind of feel like you had to ask people for help?

SB: Yeah.

RH: Or watch your folks ask people for assistance or help?

SB: Yeah. It was weird because I think one of the things people talk about, at least in the Jewish community, is we're so used to giving tzedakah. Now, it was our turn to accept it. Accepting it can be really hard sometimes. We used food stamps. It was things like that. It was more of – that was kind of a convenience that we didn't have to spend money on groceries. We kind of got used to it. Thankfully, we didn't need – we had insurance, and that covered everything. My Mom was still working, so she was still getting her paycheck. As far as monetarily, we didn't need too much help. But what was available – my NFTY events being paid for for the year was really nice. That was just something very nice that was done, and we really appreciated that. It's little things like that. It was very nice.

RH: Did the kind of help you received – did it change your concept of how you want to help other people?

SB: It didn't really change my concept because I feel like I was helped in the same way I would help people. Personally, I found it to be nice, and I found it to be effective and not belittling. It wasn't like that at all. I was very grateful in the way that it was done, and that's how I would treat other people, as well. So, it just kind of affirmed my idea. It's kind of like we were guinea pigs – like, hey, this really works. So next time, when we are no longer on the receiving end, or when it is our turn to be the givers again, I think we bring new ideas to the table. So that's something interesting. That's something we can definitely give back to Jewish communities across the country.

RH: What are some other new ideas or new ways of giving that you would kind of – what were some of the best ways?

SB: Really, people coming here and people are volunteering their time. At least in my memory, since I've been alive, there's never been anything like Hurricane Katrina to happen anywhere else in the country, but if there ever was a hurricane, a tornado, or a fire, I would want to go and help them rebuild. Because that is so effective. That's

something I never really thought of before. Donating money, yeah, that's great. We donate to the Red Cross. That's great. People need money. But I never realized how great it would be to see people come inside your synagogue and rebuild a house next to you. That's something that I would definitely do if anything similar were to happen in another part of the country.

RH: So, has it changed your idea, too, about your relationship to people in need or what you thought about people who needed things?

SB: I wouldn't say it's really changed my feelings toward that. I feel like it's always important to give when you can give. I know not everyone in New Orleans is in that place where they can give yet. But I still feel like it's really – there's people in our own community right now who still need a lot of help. I think it's important to love thy neighbor as thyself.

RH: Are there any Jewish rituals or observances that mean more to you now, or that you've found yourself being more involved in while you were gone or within the past two years?

SB: I've always been really involved, so I wouldn't say more involved. I have some really good Jewish memories. I told you the story of that Yom Kippur. We have great memories from that first Hanukkah back. There was so much going – so many events going on in the Jewish community. That was great. It's even the lighting of the menorah at the Riverwalk. It's things like that that happen every year, but they had a special meaning that year. They've had a special meaning all the years since. There are some not not-so-good memories, but there are a lot of good memories too.

RH: Any not so good memories you need to share?

SB: Nothing really specific. It's kind of a blur. I try to forget the bad things. But I just remember being really upset at first when I found out I wasn't going home for a while. I

remember being so frustrated with not having any friends around, yelling at my parents after we've been cooped up in this apartment, and them yelling at me. But it's just nothing too specific comes to mind, and that's the way I like it.

RH: Yeah, okay. I got you. Has your worldview changed any because of what you've been through?

SB: What do you mean?

RH: I don't know. Does your faith in, say, the government change any? Or your faith in institutions?

SB: Yeah. Everything involved with the government has been an absolute nightmare as far as rebuilding New Orleans is concerned. When I think about it, I was never a huge President [George W.] Bush fan. But you always think that something like the government is going to be there when there's a natural disaster, even if you have opposing political ideologies. That's what the government is supposed to do, especially with natural disasters. That's something no one can see coming, but the Army Corps of Engineers was New Orleans' downfall, basically, because of building the levees wrong, and they broke. But even President Bush and Governor [Kathleen] Blanco, and Mayor [Ray] Nagin – you always expect the people you elect, even if you don't agree on gay marriage, abortion, or healthcare, everyone is in the same boat, and some people really were in boats, I guess. But everyone's in the same boat. When a natural disaster hits, the hurricane doesn't care [about] red states and blue states and who's a Democrat and who's a Republican. And it was really – maybe I was naïve before. So, that's something that my view has really changed. You can't really, at least, I feel – I hate to say this. You can't count on the government. But that's also something that even before the hurricane – for a long time, I've wanted to be a lawyer, and I've wanted to work in politics, so maybe that's something I'll change one day. I hope so. I mean, I think people should be able to rely on government. I feel like that's what government is there for. It sucks that

we couldn't do that. I feel like it was kind of like this understood trust, and the trust was definitely broken.

RH: Do you think that there have been people kind of left behind in the recovery that you've noticed?

SB: I think that people are still waiting to rebuild in the Lower 9th Ward and the poorer areas that were really affected. Personally, I don't know whether this is lack of government support, or them just not knowing what to do, or having settled other places. Nothing specific. I'm sure there are people who have been left behind. Nothing specifically comes to mind other than that, though.

RH: When you saw the people at the Superdome and the convention center, what were your thoughts?

SB: It was heartbreaking. It was hard. Especially the Superdome. Especially this place where I had gone to Saints games and Tulane games. I have great memories at the dome, and it was a zoo. The people were being treated like animals there. It was heartbreaking to see. Not only the place was ruined, but people shouldn't be treated like that. They weren't even treated humanely. That is just something that I hope never happens again because that was terrible. That's one of the biggest tragedies of everything surrounding the hurricane. It was awful what those people went through in the Convention Center and the Dome. It was terrible.

RH: Did you see Spike Lee's movie, When the Levees Broke?

SB: No, I didn't.

RH: You haven't seen it?

SB: I haven't seen it yet.

RH: I was curious what you thought of it. So you're going to have to watch it and let me know, sometime.

SB: Okay, I will.

RH: Well, I have a few more questions, so we might have to go into another tape. Did you or your family have a housekeeper or someone in your employ that you were kind of concerned about or worried about?

SB: Yeah. Our housekeeper, Rosa. We didn't know where she had gone, if she had left. But we ended up seeing her name on a list, I want to say, of people who had relocated to North Carolina or Virginia. North Carolina, I want to say. We don't know if she's moved back since then. But from what we know, she was okay. So, yeah, I miss her.

RH: I also wanted to ask what you feel for yourself is one of the strongest memories of the past two years?

SB: So, this is one. This is something I haven't talked about yet. When I was living in Houston, the URJ Biennial, which is the big URJ convention, was also supposed to be in Houston that year, and I went under the NFTY track. For Saturday morning –

RH: Okay, I'm going to stop this because I don't want to run out of tape. So, we're going to start this. Then, we don't have too much more to go because I know you –

[END OF TRACK TWO]

RH: Okay. This is tape three of Katrina's Jewish Voices, and I'm here with Sally Bronston. So, you were talking about the biennial of the URJ, and you were there on the NFTY track.

SB: It was in Houston. So, it was convenient. I went. One of the really good memories I have is Saturday morning services. It was huge. I don't even remember how many people were at this event. It was in the thousands. We were all in this – we were at the Houston Convention Center. We were in this one room for services – and this is so big. We had screens with the rabbis up on the screen or whatever. But I remember our Torah from Gates of Prayer was the Torah they used on Saturday morning to read from services. I just thought that was really nice. The night before, although I hadn't been there, people from New Orleans had done a march through at the opening ceremonies of biennial, and that was really cool – and with our Torahs. When I think of nice memories, that's stuck with me.

RH: That's nice. You read from that Torah for your bat mitzvah?

SB: I don't know if it was that one specifically. It could have been. It definitely could have been. They all look the same. I can't tell them apart.

RH: I have just a few questions left. What's one thing you've learned about yourself through this?

SB: I guess really that I can be a strong person. Growing up, I was the crybaby. I was the one who was always in tears when I didn't get a good seat in the classroom or didn't get on the swing at recess, and I have no problem admitting it now. I was always the one who was the first to be crying. I cried a lot. It lessened in middle school, but it was there. I was always the crybaby. I just had that reputation. But I think that I really started to put that reputation behind me after the hurricane. I can be strong. As long as I have people I love around me, I can do anything, and I can get through anything. It's always important. Another thing I've learned is that I couldn't have done it alone. You can't go through something like that by yourself. I'm so grateful for my mom and my dad and my family and my friends because I don't know what I'd do without them.

RH: Well that was one of my next questions. What are the things you're most grateful for?

SB: My family and my friends, which are really like extended family. I wouldn't have survived without them. I don't know if it's just part of growing up, but I've always been really close with both of my parents. We got closer after the hurricane, so that was a good thing.

RH: Is there anything that you took for granted that you probably will never take for granted again?

SB: This city. Ever since I remember, I have been talking about – “I can't wait to leave New Orleans to go to college. I can't wait to get out of this stupid city.” I guess part of that is just like being an obnoxious little twelve-year-old. But this city – I did not fully appreciate it until I moved home. I can't put my finger on exactly what it was, but I just have a deeper love and a deeper understanding of New Orleans since I moved home. That doesn't mean that I necessarily want to live here the rest of my life, but it's something that I would consider, whereas before, it was not even an option. I was just like, “I'm gone.” But I love it.

RH: Is there anything about your life that you want to do differently, that you've changed, or want to change since the storm?

SB: Right now, I can't say that there is. I think there are things that kind of changed for me without me really having any control over that. But I've tried to make the best out of everything. I really like the way I'm living my life. I like the way life's going right now. So, I'm lucky that I'm happy.

RH: Are there any directions that you kind of started to go in after the storm that are new directions?

SB: Not quite new, exactly, but for a while, I've wanted to go to law school and be in politics, and that's definitely stronger. That's been stronger since the hurricane. I don't know. By the time I've graduated law school, hopefully, New Orleans will be completely rebuilt and won't need the attention of the government as much anymore. But I hope I can help other communities, and that's something I've always wanted to do, but it's been a lot stronger in the last couple of years. I'm sure part of that is me getting older.

RH: Are there any things in the Jewish community that you kind of want to be doing at some point in your life?

SB: Well, I can't say that I haven't thought about going to rabbinical school. It's something that I've definitely thought about, and it's definitely on the table. I love being Jewish, and I love being Reform. I've always loved being Jewish, but in the past couple of years, through camp and NFTY, I've really found an appreciation and a love for Reform Judaism. I know [that] whether I become a rabbi or not, I will always be an active member of whatever Jewish community I live in. Even my love of politics is kind of intertwined with my love of Judaism.

RH: Can you explain that?

SB: I stand up for causes. I started the movement – not the movement, really, but the Save Darfur awareness at my school through the Young Democrats. We sold t-shirts to raise money. The “Stop Genocide in Sudan” shirts. But everything I've learned about the situation in Darfur, I've learned through NFTY. So, those are two passions of mine that are forever intertwined. It's hard to describe, and some people don't get it, really, but that's definitely something I want to continue to pursue.

RH: This is a little off the track, but since you've spent five weeks in Israel, why don't you tell me what that experience was like for you?

SB: It was absolutely amazing. It's so recent. I'm still getting my head around all of it. We spent our first week in Prague and then Poland. And then we spent four weeks in Israel. It was my first trip to Israel, and I just had the experience of a lifetime. We went everywhere. I don't have any plans to make aliyah anytime soon. But I really love Israel. I know this is going to be the first of many visits. I loved hearing Hebrew. And I definitely brushed up on some of my old Hebrew. I'm not fluent by any means, but I can get around. I just had wonderful experiences. I climbed Masada, I floated in the Dead Sea. I just did all these things that I hear you're supposed to do when you go to Israel. I finally got to do all those. So it was great. It was absolutely wonderful.

RH: Did it feel like a break from New Orleans and Katrina?

SB: Yeah, it was nice. I've always gone away for the summer. This is my tenth summer away from home, I want to say. It's always nice to get a break from wherever I am. Even before the hurricane, it's "Oh, it's so good to get out of New Orleans." Now, it's refreshing to get a break, but I always like coming home. By the end of the trip – even though I miss it a lot – I miss my friends a lot, new friends that I made, but it's always good to come home.

RH: So tell me, this is – one of my final questions is, what does home mean to you now?

SB: Home means New Orleans. This house, really, is home. It's been my home for sixteen years. New Orleans, for the rest of my life, when – I feel like whenever I think of home, it's going to be the place where I grew up and the place where I became who I am today. Whether or not I live here when I'm an adult, that's one thing, but New Orleans is home. I love it.

RH: I have no more questions. So, if you have anything you want to finish with –

SB: I really don't. I think I've talked a lot.

RH: You've covered a lot of territory. So, I just want to thank you for a great interview.

SB: Thank you. I'm really happy to do it.

RH: I'm glad.

[END OF INTERVIEW]