Julie Harris Transcript

Rosalind Hinton: -- at 1208 Pine Street in New Orleans, Louisiana. Today is Saturday, October 14th, 2006. I'm conducting the interview for the Katrina's Jewish Voices project of the Jewish Women's Archive, and the Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life. Julie, do you agree to be interviewed and understand that the interview will be video-recorded?

Julie Schwam Harris: Yes, I do.

RH: Thanks. So, why don't you just begin with a little bit of your background here in New Orleans and how your family came to be here?

JSH: OK, I was born in New Orleans. My father came to New Orleans after the war. He had a GI Bill Scholarship and came to Tulane. He had spent two years at CCNY, New York, because he's from Brooklyn, and came to finish school here at Tulane. My mother, who was born here, although she lived a short while elsewhere but basically grew up in New Orleans. And they married and stayed. I have the New York grandparents that spent their adult lives in New York. They came from Europe, from the Poland area -- Krakow area. And then on my mother's side, my grandparents were from Estonia. But one was born in Estonia, and I think one was born here. But they lived here in New Orleans and in the south. So that's how my family got here.

RH: OK. So tell me, what neighborhood did you grow up in?

JSH: I grew up Uptown, probably within about 20 blocks of where I'm living now. I've always lived within this circumference of Uptown area. Went to the public schools, Allen, McMain, and Fortier. And I've just always been an Uptown girl.

RH: And did your family, were they involved with the synagogue at all --

JSH: Not in any --

RH: -- with growing up?

JSH: -- very active way. Well, my mother was a Sunday school teacher for quite a while, but then she had trouble with her back. She taught first grade and was very good and well loved by the kids, but she had back problems, and ended up having to stop teaching Sunday school.

RH: And where was that?

JSH: At Touro Synagogue.

RH: Touro, OK.

JSH: But and her family, the family from New Orleans had been members of Touro for many, many years. My father was from a more religious background in New York, although when he came down here, my family joined Touro, and a Reform synagogue, and they -- you know, we weren't particularly involved in Jewish life in any overt way through most of my early years.

RH: And any bat mitzvah or anything like that?

JSH: Actually no.

RH: Confirmation?

JSH: I made a confirmation.

RH: Confirmation?

JSH: My brother actually had a bar mitzvah but my sister and I -- we were confirmed. My sister actually got very involved in Jewish life in her high school years, and she actually moved to Israel with her husband and she got bat mitzvahed at conservative, sometime when she was in college, I believe, after she had spent a year in Israel studying. Came back, got bat mitzvahed. And they moved to Israel for seven years, but they're back in this country now. They live in Florida.

RH: OK, and tell me where you went to college.

JSH: I went to Tulane. I had a scholarship and I stayed in New Orleans and went to Tulane.

RH: OK, and when did you meet your husband? Was he at Tulane, or?

JSH: No, my husband, Seth, is also from New Orleans. Seth grew up -- His family was affiliated at that time with Gates of Prayer, Uptown, Reform, and we knew each other only by sight in high school. I actually can picture seeing him one time in high school, but I never spoke to him ever until after college. We met through mutual friends and dated briefly and then got married.

RH: OK, and tell me how many kids you have.

JSH: I have two children. Joshua is the elder. He was born in 1985, and he is now traveling a bit around the country. He's graduated from college in the northeast, Bates, in Maine and he's trying to figure out what he wants to do. He just did a bicycle trip from Portland, Maine, to the Hudson Bay in Canada. He sort of challenged the weather and went north to Hudson Bay and made it on his bike, and he's now traveling back. He's on his bike today traveling from Montreal to somewhere on this side of the Canadian-US border. I don't know.

RH: Wow!

JSH: I get calls from him periodically to tell me, "I'm OK, Mom. I didn't get hit by a truck today." And then my other son was born in -- I'm sorry, Josh was born in '82. Jonathan was born in 1985. He's in college. He's at Brown University studying theater, and I'll get to see him in a few weeks because I'll be up there to see him in a play.

RH: OK, and describe your attachment to this region.

JSH: To New Orleans?

RH: Yeah, to New Orleans.

JSH: Well, I've always been proud of being from New Orleans. It's a badge of distinction wherever you go. Whatever I did, in youth group or whatever traveling I did, being from New Orleans, people just take note. You know, it's different. It's special. And I've always been very proud of being from here. I've developed what I would consider an almost irrational love and affiliation for the place. I feel very protective of it, particularly since I've been in government because I've worked in government now for 12 years. And I've worked in jobs where people came to me or my office for many years with problems, and so part of my job was to help try and find them solutions to their problems. It's called the Office of Public Advocacy, and so as I dealt with people from all over the city and from -- neighborhoods all over the city, participated in clean-up efforts and projects to paint schools, to do whatever, all over the city -- I have cleaned gutters and streets and lots in every single neighborhood of the city -- I've developed this sort of protective feeling for New Orleans, and so I don't know, I'm just really tied up in it and love it very much.

RH: OK. Is there any particular place that kind of serves as your social center or your community center?

JSH: Not really. First of all, the last 12 years that I've been working in government, that has pretty much taken up my life. I'm sort of a workaholic. I am a workaholic. I have to admit that. Alcoholics are supposed to say, "I'm an alcoholic." Well, I'm a workaholic.

And my job takes up a lot of my life, so I don't have a huge social life. I have some very good close friends. I have family that live around me, and so what time I spend away from work I spend with them. So I don't really have a large social network or what you would consider a social center. I like theater. I like film. So on a weekend, if I do anything it's to go see a movie or see a play. And during the day, I like being outside because I'm always in my office and I never get to feel the air so I'm always trying to just do something outside, whether it's run in the park, which I try to do on the weekends, or cleanups en plein air, whatever it is. I really like being outside during the daylight hours, and then at night I just go see a movie, let that wash over me, and then I can go to sleep.

RH: Oh! That sounds pretty good.

JSH: Mm-hmm (laughter).

RH: Do you have any really vivid memories of New Orleans or special memories prior to Katrina that kind of -- I don't know, that just mean something to you, about --

JSH: Well, I have quite a few. I mean, there are a few that I find particularly poignant because they are in the lower 9th Ward. I do a lot of political work, volunteer political work, as well as my government work. And I'm particularly active in Democratic politics. And so during presidential races, I get very involved in doing grassroots politics. So, I've done a lot of door to door, knocking on people's doors trying to make sure they're registered to vote, encouraging them to vote if they are registered or get registered if they're not. And it's coincidental, ironic, whatever you want to call it that the last presidential election I spent a lot of time in the area of the breach where the barge hit in the industrial canal and caused the 9th Ward to flood. The streets all back there that were the first hit by the waves of water were streets that I had walked for weekends in the time right before the storm. And so, there were actually a few particular people that I was very concerned about. There was a man that I actually befriended. In fact, we even helped him to vote in that election because he needed a ride. He was a paraplegic from

an accident. He had been a longshoreman, retired, lived in this kind of, you know, pitiful little house there. But it was his house. And he actually called me because he needed a ride to the polls and it was storming that day. This is Mr. Fleming. And so I remember Seth and I went to go help him, and he had one of these ramps that was an automatic ramp that would lower his wheelchair. So he was pretty independent when the ramp worked. Also he had called me a few weeks before the election because his ramp was broken and he couldn't get down and could I help him find somebody?

RH: Well, he had an ear in city government now. (laughter)

JSH: Well, yeah, and I would always -- Anyway so it's people like him, Mr. Fleming, and others that I had met on those treks that I was really most upset about. So I remember the fall days when I went walking on Saturdays in that neighborhood and then -- and that neighborhood had a lot of problems before the storm, but it was still a neighborhood with people and houses, and so that was all gone when I went back. That was kind of, just upsetting. When you talk about memories of New Orleans, another thing that comes to mind, which is a much more personal thing, when I was in high school and feeling those high school feelings of, not so much -- well, loneliness or just itching for something to happen -- you didn't know when it was going to happen. You knew something was going to happen, but it wasn't happening yet, and you were kind of anxious for it. I took a lot of long walks to Audubon Park, and there was a friend that I was very close with, and I remember sitting up on that concrete fence in the front of Audubon Park, and watching people and streetcars, just on afternoons after school, just kind of waiting for life to begin after high school, and it was -- But, you know, just that part of town which I'd grown up in is very special to me, and especially that St. Charles area, beautiful.

RH: It is gorgeous.

JSH: It is, and I'm very concerned because some of those concrete pillars -- there is some cracks and pieces that broke, and I think it was during the storm. The National

Guard used Audubon Park as an encampment, and they brought in a lot of heavy equipment, and this is when things were flooded in the rest of the city, and they were sort of maintaining spots where they would patrol from, and so there was this huge encampment in Audubon Park of National Guard, and I think that the heavy equipment or whatever it was -- I don't know what. You know, something caused pillars to, in certain spots, crumble. So I'm hoping that one day I'm going to have time to call Audubon Park and say, "What are you going to do about those pillars?" Because we need them fixed.

RH: (laughter) OK. Why don't we -- I'm kind of torn, because the other thing -- you've been, you've worked in the city government, but you've weathered a lot of different administrations. Because you've also been in politics. And I'm kind of wondering, I guess, about how you've done that and how you've negotiated your own politics and the politics of whoever the administrator was that you were involved with.

JSH: Well, I've only been in two administrations. I've worked for Marc Morial. I've worked for Mayor Nagin. And at the time of that transition I was asked to stay by Mayor Nagin because people that were advising him on what to do and who to hire -- you know, he was trying to get help on filling the complement of positions that are -- they call it, "at the pleasure of the mayor." They're unclassified positions. I suppose my work just caused him to decide to keep me. There are quite a few people, actually, that stay through one administration to another. I mean, not huge numbers because often a mayor, an executive like that, they really do -- I understand why -- need to bring in people, A, with fresh perspective, B, that are loyal to him or her and understand the kind of tacks, tactics that he's going to take to do whatever. But I was asked to stay, so I did. I wasn't active in his campaign and I didn't know him at all. I hadn't even ever said more than hello to him, or I shook his hand at a reception once, when he was running. And he certainly didn't know me. But he asked me and he asked some other people that I work with to stay. And I think it's smart for mayors to do that. You need some institutional knowledge and it's good to keep people over from one administration to another even

though you do need to sometimes break with the past and try and do new things, do things differently. That's why people elected him in the first place, to do things differently.

RH: Right. So why don't we get into the Katrina story here. And tell me when Katrina kind of came on your radar screen, and what you planned to do, how you planned to do --

JSH: Well, you know, I look at storms from two perspectives because I worked in the city and because I'm a resident of the city. Working in the city in the past I actually had stayed through some storms because I was considered at one point to be essential personnel, and in fact in George, I lived in my office through George, and at that time it was before we had more thorough plans for family members, and I even brought my kids with me. So we stayed through George. Luckily George didn't hit, and everything was fine pretty soon after. For Katrina -- I'm not considered essential personnel right now. They really are keeping mainly Homeland Security type people, first responders, and only a few administrative personnel, usually executive assistants to the mayor and people that have an absolute role. So I found out about Katrina -- I hadn't really paid attention to the news -- the Friday night before. Because we had a dinner party here with friends from France that were in town, and friends that actually -- we have a mutual friend. And as one person was leaving, they must have heard something on the radio in their car, and they came back and they said, you know, "That storm's really coming this way." And so we were all, "Hmm, well, we'll see." And I got a call at 6:00 in the morning from my mother-in-law, "What are you going to do?" and I said, "Well, I don't know. I'm just waking up." You know, so my husband and I watched the news, saw that indeed it looked pretty threatening -- and called my parents because for the storm before that -- and I think that was Ivan, a year ago -- we had evacuated with my parents. So we were going to evacuate again with my parents. And we got in the car and drove to Jacksonville, it took us two days. We went to Jacksonville with my parents. And --

RH: How'd you pick Jacksonville?

JSH: My sister's there.

RH: Oh, OK.

(laughter)

JSH: Well, a place to stay. We thought about going to Houston, but going west didn't seem smart because there was still some question of whether the storm was going to go west. So we decided to go east, and drove that corridor where actually it ended up hitting and knocking out the I-10 bridge over in New Orleans East on the way to Slidell. Anyway, we went east to Jacksonville and stayed with my sister. But I knew that I would be needed back as soon as possible, as soon as they could get me back, to do city work. So, within about three or four days, we drove back to the Baton Rouge area where I have a cousin. My parents stayed in Jacksonville with my sister. And I stayed with a cousin in Baton Rouge, and stayed with a friend in New Iberia. I kept going back and forth. But worked out of Baton Rouge with some city people who were given an office to use. Because City Hall was shut down, no power. The mayor had established his emergency operations center at the Hyatt, but we were working -- there was no place for people stay and of course no potable water, no electricity. So we were working out of Baton Rouge until -- I believe it was around the 9th that I came back. No, I think it was the 14th, the 14th that I -- I got inoculated on the 9th. But we came back on the 14th and stayed on the ship with the other city people that were working here.

RH: So, tell me, like, what went through your mind when you started to watch TV? And what was your role when you got to Baton Rouge? What were you involved in?

JSH: Well, what was through my mind? I've got to say, I don't know that I had anything in my mind. I was just sort of watching, really, don’t even know what to think. It's sort of unreal. I just knew, as hard as I thought my job was before the storm, and I always

thought my job was hard -- You know, this is a poor city, a city with a lot of challenges, a lot of people that need help, a lot of -- So I just knew, boy, if it was hard before, it's really going to be hard now. My job, when I got back, was basically to start helping the administration figure out what we were doing vis-à-vis the federal government, how to get the help we needed. The emergency response people, of course, were still dealing with saving people, stabilizing physically the infrastructure of the city, getting the utilities back on. I mean, there was this whole, you know, set of tasks that were happening out of the emergency operations center in the Hyatt. I actually got to start working in my office very quickly, because even though City Hall was more or less closed, and had no power, it had a generator. My floor, for some reason, my computer was working. And so I could sit there during the daytime, because at night there were no lights, but I could sit there during the daytime because my computer must have been on a circuit that received power from the generator. The generator is tied into the 9th floor which was the emergency operations center. But it got so big after Katrina, they had to move it across the street. And for some reason I got to sit at my computer, and I could actually think. And we were trying to, you know, write letters related, early on, to FEMA and the public assistance program and trying to really fathom how we got the money and the tools to do what we needed to do. Things were extremely chaotic, and even though there were all these people supposedly that were brought in to help through FEMA, through the state, through emergency operations, it's just amazing how hard it is to just start a city from scratch. And they were still, again, doing rescue, recovery. The city was still flooded in certain parts. The water was just receding in others. They were still patrolling streets that had trees and downed wires and trying to clear parts of the city, just even move around it. But all I did was just stay focused on some of the paperwork and administrative stuff, anything that anybody needed done, whether it was letters or some kind of contacts with our legislative delegation, trying to keep track of what they were doing in Washington. I don't know, kept me busy. Because it was always a lot to do!

RH: So, were you kind of backing up some other people, or were you initiating projects, or...?

JSH: Well, I mean, I'm Deputy Director of Intergovernmental Relations, so I'm working closely with the executive team that deals directly with the mayor. So I suppose that's sort of like backing up -- I mean, I don't organize the fixing of buildings, but I help figure out how we're trying to respond through paperwork, through -- and at that time, of course, it was just getting access to money. We kept thinking that if we asked appropriately, we would actually get money to run government. And because government runs on income that comes in daily, sales tax. It runs on property tax, which is collected once a year. And luckily that property tax for 2006 had been collected already. I mean, it's collected at the -- wait, I'm trying to think. This was 2005. The property tax for 2005 had been collected in the first part of the year, so that there was some of our budget there. There was no new money, no sales tax coming in because nothing was open, and nobody could be there. So, just the money to operate, to pay people for the weeks that they had worked right before -- and then everybody got a few paychecks before we had to quickly go into cutting half of the city employees. And they cut quite a few city employees a few months after. But it took us a while just to figure out, what are we going to do, who do we have to bring back, what are we going to be allowed to bring back, and what are going to be our sources of money? And like I say, at one point we thought that we could ask and maybe get operating cash. Well, there's only one program for operating funds for cities and jurisdictions that are in disasters, and it's called the Community Disaster Loan Program. And so we figured that out, and applied for a loan. The problem was the loan program, the way it was written, had a cap of $5 million and we had a budget of $460 million, an annual budget, which stopped in August. You know, August 29th, that budget stopped. And so there was not going to be income. We're talking about hundreds of millions of dollars of revenue loss. So, it obviously didn't fit our problem, a $5 million cap. There's also a cap -- and this is, like, the arcana of federal legislation, which is just -- people have no idea how crazy it is. But there were limits of 25%. Whatever your loss

is, the maximum you could apply for would be 25%, or $5 million, whichever was lowest. Well, I mean, both of those caps were ridiculous, and it took a couple months just to change the law to lift the $5 million cap. And then it took more months after that -- and we borrowed our first 25%, $120 million. But it took months after that to lift that cap again, because we needed more than $120 million. We couldn't operate on just $120 million, plus the sales taxes that started dripping in. The other thing that happened in this legislation was that they lifted the cap but they took away the provision that every other jurisdiction had had before us, that the president could forgive the loan. They took that away. There is no forgiveness for the loans for Katrina. Which is just incredible, isn't it?

RH: So what's that about? Do you have any idea --

JSH: What is that about?

RH: -- what is that about?

JSH: It's about money. It's about the federal government not wanting to incur as massive a loss of money as it would cost to help make us whole. Anyway, so we spent a lot of time on that, trying to fight.

RH: But I'm just going to ask you --

JSH: That's fine. Ask again.

RH: Because, I mean, I remember the hurricane in Charlestown, and certainly all through Florida the year before, all of their loans were forgiven, if they borrowed.

JSH: At least portions of them, if not -- yes. The Virgin Islands --

RH: So why suddenly the decision --

JSH: That was the deal at the time. When you pass legislation you have to have a majority. And to get the majority -- and this was negotiated at that time through Senator Vitter. There was a big fight on the Senate floor. But Senator Vitter felt that he wouldn't be able to get anything through -- meaning lift the $5 million cap -- if he didn't negotiate giving up the forgivability. And there was this big fight with Senator Landrieu, because she felt that we shouldn't give up the forgivability. But then he said, "Well, you won't get anything then." So, you know, they had this little tiff on the floor. Whatever it was, we got the loan. We made that loan. We, a few months later, expanded and got us to -- and we're in the process of getting our second loan. So we'll have borrowed $240 million from the federal government. And so, one of our next tasks among many, is to now try and get Congress to allow the president to forgive the loan. So that's going to be a big lobbying push.

RH: OK. So, you just --

JSH: So like what do I do? I earn a li-- Whatever needs to -- (laughter)

RH: Nothing's ever permanent.

JSH: Nothing is --

RH: You just keep going back (laughter) --

JSH: You keep pushing back that envelope.

RH: -- and changing the laws. Yeah. It's --

JSH: And you never can get everything you want, but you just keep trying to push it, massage it, and tweak it. And it's a constant battle and challenge. And that's just for operational money for city government and for city entities, because these rules apply to other entities in government. For example, the airport is a public entity. It too has the

ability to borrow money from the government for operational losses, because that's what the Stafford Act says for disasters. And so the airport borrowed its 25% that it could show of its revenue loss. But then when we pushed the envelope back to 50% just a few months ago, the airport couldn't go and borrow more, even though they lost more than 25%, because the way the law was written, it said you had to show that your loss was from tax income, not just income. And though the city could show we had lost more than 25% of our tax revenue, a lot of the revenue of the airport is landing fees. It's a different kind of revenue. It's revenue, they lost it, they need the money to operate. That's not the question. But the way the law was written, unless it was tax revenue that you lost, you could only borrow up to 25%. You couldn't borrow further. So they were prevented from borrowing further, even though they needed it just as much. That's the way laws are written, and there are people that know what they're doing when they write those laws. They're trying to limit your access to money so that it's not costing the government more than they want to cost the government.

RH: Well, you just got me into another question here --

JSH: Yeah (laughter).

RH: -- just about who is writing the laws for your side, I mean, for the city's advocate?

JSH: Who is writing the laws?

RH: Do you have a legal staff, or is --

JSH: No, no, no. We don't write the laws. Federal laws are written by Congress. We have people -- I am the key point person on the federal agenda. I advise the mayor. I work closely with my executive assistant, who does -- because our division does federal, state, and local. We are the liaison for intergovernmental with all governmental agencies. But, and we have lobbyists who work with us who help keep us informed, and we have relationships. We're constantly in touch with the Louisiana delegation, who

have all fought to help New Orleans and Louisiana get beyond some of these limitations. But, that's just a delegation of a few Congresspeople and two Senators, and they have to fight for what Louisiana needs from the rest of Congress, which is in the hands of people who are trying to control spending within this country, because it's being bled out through -- for other purposes.

RH: (laughter) OK. Let's get into a little more personal now, and tell me what it was like to come back into the city and what you did.

JSH: OK, well, the first time we came back, we sneaked in.

RH: OK, and when was this?

JSH: It was probably around the 8th. It was when there was still water in much of the city, including Uptown where my parents lived. Because we were trying to come in for two reasons. One, even though we thought we had planned well for the evacuation, we forgot my husband's passport and his papers that he needs to ship out. Because he's a ship captain. And so, if we were forced, like we didn't know, to stay away from the city because the mayor and the powers that be said, you know, "I can't have people back in the city yet. It's too dangerous. We can't support a large population." And they had shut the city down. But we needed those papers because if it were months before we could get back in, my husband couldn't go back to work. And that would really have been a problem. So we needed to get home for that. We needed to get home because my father was going crazy. He had left the pilot on, his gas stove, and he was so afraid that somewhere along the line they were going to let the gas on again, and his house was going to blow up because he had left the pilot on. When he had evacuated a year before, he had remembered to turn the pilot off. And I had kind of rushed him and he had forgotten. So, we wanted to get in there. Plus, he wanted his Torah books. He had forgotten his books, and he wanted to do his Torah study. So we had these two missions, to get my husband papers and to get some stuff done for my father. So, we

came from -- and I really -- I didn't know how we would get in, because even though I have a city ID, that wasn't really going to work. I had no official role to play. But we came the back way, from New Iberia. I think it was highway 90. And we crossed the bridge. And we came along River Road to Jefferson Parish, and could see a lot of the wind damage. Because the river areas didn't get flooded, but you could see a lot of wind damage as we came in. And came in on Oak Street, and got to the cordon of the National Guard. I showed him my ID. I showed him our address. I said look, we're just going to pick up some things at our house. And luckily, at that time they weren't as tight as they got later on, and they let us through. So, we were able to, by avoiding certain streets -- because trees were all -- things were down. There were live wires down, which is why they didn't want people in the street. There were branches all over the place, and certain neighborhoods that had not been cleared. Only some major thoroughfares had been cleared. We were able to make it to within a block of our house, which was not flooded, but there had been water in the street, probably like about two feet, and it had freshly drained, because even though the weather was dry, it had been dry, you could see the street was still damp and all of the trees and leaves on the ground were still damp because the water was just still slowly draining from the higher areas down to the lower ones as they pumped it out. So, we had been very concerned about our house. We have a sycamore tree -- it leans quite a bit -- in front of our house. And everybody -- I don't know if you know this -- but everybody was looking at satellite photos of New Orleans trying to find their house, to see did it look flooded, you know, what they could see. And the day they took the satellite photos that everybody was looking at, there was a cloud over our house. So, we couldn't see our house through the satellite photo. We didn't know if the tree had fallen. We got here. It hadn't fallen. I mean, lots of branches were everywhere. We could barely get to the house. But we got there. Got my husband's stuff, and basically saw that everything looked like the day we had left, but there was nothing we could do. We took a few things and then tried to go to my parents' house which is only ten blocks away. But they're further downtown, and their area

flooded. We're sort of at a bend in the river, so we're higher here because we're closer to the Carrolton area of the river, and we're not that far from the St. Charles side of the river. We're on the inner side of St. Charles, but we're not that far. My parents live a little further in, which is further away from the river, down by Jefferson Avenue and South Robertson. And they were on one block, the other side of Freret Street, that flooded about four feet or so, five feet, in the street. So they had 18 inches in their house at the maximum. When we got there, we couldn’t get all the way to their house. We had to park about three blocks away because the water got too high for a car. And we saw some more National Guard people patrolling, and they -- we showed them our identification. We showed them we were going to my parents' house. And we had the key. And we had to get something for my father. I don't know. And they let us alone. And we had bought hip-waders when we were in New Iberia -- or actually Jacksonville. So we put on our hip-waders and we walked into my parents' neighborhood where the water came within an inch of the top of my waders that came all the way up to the top of my leg.

RH: And now we're 8th of September.

JSH: Oh, yeah.

RH: Wow.

JSH: And this was Uptown. This is not in the worst parts of the city. This is where it only flooded 18 inches into a raised house as opposed to five feet.

RH: Wow.

JSH: So, really, we literally walked up along the upper parts of people's property. If I had walked in the middle of the street there might have been low spots where I would have gotten water in my boots. And at that time we also didn't know what was in the water. There's all these rumors. Nobody knew. There was lots of stuff in the water. Nobody

knew exactly what the water was, the air quality, all kinds of questions. So, we tiptoed along the edges of the houses and just crossed the low part of the street to get to my parents' house, where I had to be on tiptoe to keep my hip-waders this far above the water, not to get it in my boots. We made it into their house. It was very dark because their house doesn't have a lot of natural light. The windows tend to be, you know -- they don't get a lot of the natural light. Even though it was a sunny day. It was a surreal scene because there were helicopters flying overhead, there were airboats going down Joseph Street. It was very dank in the house because, obviously, it had been wet, and it was very hot. This is still in September, so it's like summer. And I realized I had forgotten the list my father gave me of the books that he wanted, the clothes he wanted for my mother. You know, she needed some more schmatta. She needed this, she needed -- you know, things that they really wanted. I figured whatever I could get. So, it was just this -- and we wanted to get out of there because we knew that in a sense we were breaking into the city, that we weren't supposed to be there, we were in a hurry to get out. I would try on my cell phone to call my father. We could connect, and I would yell into the cell phone, "What shelf, daddy? What shelf?" because I was trying to figure out what shelf his book was on, and some of his shelves had caved into the water in his back room, where his books were. So I didn't know if it was -- it was just crazy.

RH: Was there water in the house when you were there?

JSH: No. When we were there, the water -- you could tell where the water had gone up to. The carpet was gooshy and soaking wet. There was wet stuff everywhere. And the refrigerator in his house, because the water didn't get up as high, you know, it hadn't fallen over. Like, in houses that truly had high water, refrigerators floated and fell over and stuff was all -- but theirs, you know, everything was in place. It was just, you could see the water line and all the -- oh, I'm trying to think of the word -- on wood -- the facings of furniture had just kind of peeled off, if it wasn't solid wood furniture. The dining room chairs, we didn't know it, but they weren't solid legs. They were in two pieces, and sort of

part of the bottom of the leg had fallen off. Stuff like that. It was really funny. Anyway, we gathered some books. We gathered some of the clothes that they felt were essential and a few other things, and packed up and left. But trying all along to contact him by phone, but, you know, there are no towers up. A lot of the towers had been blown down. So the cell phone -- everybody complained after the storm for weeks. It was impossible to make cell phone calls in the whole area because of towers down. But we got what we needed. We turned off the gas pilot. The house did not blow up, and in fact, weeks afterwards we learned that before they turned gas back on -- it was weeks before they turned gas back on or if not months, because the whole system had been infiltrated by water, which was a serious problem. And so they were blowing out the system. They were turning off gas at individual homes throughout the whole city. You had to prove that it was worthy before they'd even put gas back on. So it probably wouldn't have blown up anyway, but we got that done. And then went back to New Iberia for a few days, because this is before we actually moved back to the city.

RH: What were your thoughts after seeing it? Any thoughts?

JSH: (laughter) What can you think? It's like, "Well, I don't know, what's going to happen? Who knows?" You know, we couldn't even get to my friend's house. She had hoped we would get to her house, but it was in the bowl down in Broadmoor and I had to tell her, "No, I couldn't get --" Couldn't get to my brother-in-law's house. It was too deep, too wet. You know, we didn't have a boat. We just had hip-waders. So we didn't really know what else there was that was going to be found until a week or so later when we actually got to come back to the city. So, you know, people -- you see, what are my thoughts? What I have to do is just keep focusing on my tasks. I can't think too much. I can't ask too many deep questions because I don't have the answers, and they don't really get me anywhere. If I focus on tasks, then I can get somewhere, so that's what I do.

RH: That's your survival mechanism. Who else was in your circle of concern? Because it kind of expanded now. You've got some friends and family.

JSH: Oh, well --

RH: Were there people you were trying to contact to see if they were OK or if their homes were ok?

JSH: Right, anybody we had -- You know, we called people on cell phones, those that had cell phones. You know, people were gradually checking in with each other, if they could get through by phone, which was always a challenge. I think Marly, one of our mutual friends, moved to Colorado, or she went somewhere, and then Colorado, Martine, other friends of ours. My mother-in-law, I knew where she was. She had gone to Birmingham with my brother-in-law and his wife and children. We had evacuated with not only my parents, but my cousin and her baby. So we were all staying at my sister's house in Jacksonville. Gradually, just checking in with people to see where they were and see what had happened. I mean, that first trip I couldn't tell them much about their houses when I got back. And I was able to come back and live on the ship with my husband and my son. Because we got to come back early, we actually could go open up people's houses for them. We had keys to a friend's house. We opened that up, you know, to let some air and light in before she could get back. My husband and son gutted my father's house pretty quickly, you know, started throwing out the wet stuff and working on gutting it so that they could, so that we could start figuring out what he was going to do, rebuild, whatever. My father didn't get back until December, but, long distance, we would keep them informed. Every night we would go back to the boat -- this is when we were living here -- and --

RH: Kind of talk about the boat a minute.

JSH: Oh, the boat...

RH: Because you're the first boat resident.

JSH: Well, the first responders, that were here before I was, you know, those two weeks, the first responders were here, and they were living on the floors of schools, of their fire stations, of their police stations. I mean, they were living in horrible conditions because there wasn't enough place for people to live. So, they finally, you know -- FEMA contracted to bring these ships down, and the first responders, police, fire, EMS, city workers, and others could gradually -- could move to the boat and live, and have food and have water. You know, you had potable water on the ship because the ship fabricates its own water, or gets it from tanker -- probably from barges, from tankers, because I think barges would line up and unload water and fuel. But so for those essential city workers that came back early, and I was allowed to bring my family with me, we were given a room on the ship. So, I would work all day at City Hall. And there was still a curfew in the city. The city was surreal. It was black. It was like being in the country. Where there was traffic it was like military traffic, you know, trucks and -- I mean, there were some contractor type traffic but this was earlier on before even contractors were allowed back in. So it was basically the military, the first responders, the federal and state people, and some of us. But it was very bizarre, and you felt like, really --

RH: Were you driving around? Did you have your car and were you --

JSH: Yeah. Well, we had come back with our car, our van, and eventually I got to get my city car. I had parked, as we were instructed to do, my city car, in the Superdome. We have plans for those vehicles that don't get evacuated with families. So families are allowed to evacuate with city vehicles if they're not needed for first response. So, in fact, the city is glad when a vehicle evacuates because it means, if there's a problem, it doesn't get flooded. If you left your vehicle in your driveway and your house got flooded, you know, there goes the -- so, you're supposed to drive your vehicle, at least those of us

in the mayor's office and some of the administrative personnel -- are supposed to bring their vehicles to the Superdome before we evacuated. So, I brought my vehicle. And then I was able to get it back. They had actually siphoned gas out of cars all in the Superdome because they were running short of fuel and supplies, but I was able to get my car back and get some fuel. So I had it. But it was basically just to drive from City Hall to the ship and back. For a long time we used a shuttle because a lot of people did not have cars, if they didn't have a city car or if their vehicle had flooded or if their own cars flooded. People were using shuttles to go back and forth to work. And so these were shuttles paid for by FEMA. Life on the boat was very interesting. Because the preponderance of city workers in the city at the time were police, there was huge numbers of police on both ships, both boats and they all had their guns. I've never been around so many guns. It's just incredible. They would walk around at breakfast and they all are like packing guns. And I remember a big sign, when we went on the boat one time, no long guns. They weren't supposed to bring their rifles in. They could bring their other (laughter) -- but, you know, it was such a strange time because so many of those people -- 80%, I think, of city workers lost their homes. So many of them lived in neighborhoods that were flooded, Gentilly, New Orleans East, upper and lower 9th Ward, parts of uptown Broadmoor, that you were with all these people who just look shell-shocked because they just had no idea. At least they had a place to live. They had food. The food was fine. You could get three meals a day there, although those of us -- You know, and they had food even coming into City Hall, and the EOC. They would bring in food every day for the workers because there's no place to go to buy food. You couldn't make you own. But everybody was just kind of trying to figure out, besides what they had to do that day for work, "What's my life --" And people got to bring their family members, gradually, onto the boats with them as there was room. So, some of them got to actually be with their family for the first time in a long time. It was a really good thing that they brought those ships, just to get any place to live.

RH: So, was there anything memorable like in the evenings? What were the evenings like on the boat?

JSH: Well, we were so lucky because we had a balcony. There's only one floor on that ship that each of the staterooms opens up to a balcony, and because we stayed three in a room, and it was my husband, my son, and me, we got a balcony for some reason. So we would sit out on the balcony and try to get cell phone connections to my family members. We spent every night -- they would come in totally disgusting from mucking out somebody's house or whatever they were doing that day. And they would get there before me and shower and clean up, and then I would come back from City Hall, and then we'd go down to eat, come back up. And just all of us, because we have several cell phones, would sit out there and call and talk to people. Like, they would tell my friend Aurea, "OK, we did this in your house," you know, and she would say, "Well, did you see this?" You know, try and keep people informed of what we were seeing, what we were doing. Talked to my father about his house, and my mother, you know, just checking in with people. So, it was very odd in that our days were spent working intensely, and at night, it wasn't just relaxing. It was sort of keeping that social network going of information about what was going on, firsthand from here. So that's what we did every night.

RH: So, which son was this? Was this the one who --

JSH: The older son, Joshua.

RH: Joshua. So he's --

JSH: Because he had graduated from college and had spent the summer working at a restaurant in Massachusetts, in Woods Hole, and he just said, "I've got to come down." So he quit his job, even though the job was actually going to continue through October. It's a summer resort area but he was going to continue through October. But he quit and

came down to spend a few months with us just trying to get stuff done here.

RH: So tell me, what seems different now that you're back?

JSH: That I'm back?

RH: Yeah, and you're back in your home.

JSH: Well, I think it's important to remind myself of what's different because you could really slip into an easy life Uptown. So much of this area is affluent and didn't flood, and if you go and shop on Magazine St., if you only stay in the unflooded areas, life seems kind of normal. I mean, obviously there are people in just adjacent areas that are still working on their houses, bringing houses back, but you forget about these vast areas that are so much slower to recover and to come back. So, in my personal life, on weekends, it's sort of -- you have to constantly remind yourself of what's still happening out there. During the week, it's very easy not to forget, because (laughter) I'm constantly working on things and issues related to Katrina and city government, post-Katrina. But I think that for some people, the impact was not as devastating. It will mark their lives. It may have scarred things. They may have lost financial security or some sort of financial benefit, but they will recover. But there are so many people who will never recover, emotionally, financially. They are truly lost. And that's sort of what I have to focus on through my work. And with the city, you know, it's part of the city's responsibility -- it's everybody's responsibility, but certainly probably the city's responsibility is to try to figure out how to keep helping them. And they are so helpless and lost.

RH: Tell me about that. Tell me about who they are and what you're doing.

JSH: Well, if you go anywhere into the 7th Ward and the 8th Ward, past Elysian Fields, and even between the Esplanade and Elysian Fields, and you're going into areas that are predominantly low income, or even in areas further east, in New Orleans East, where actually there are pockets of middle class wealth, but basically so many people have

been totally thrown off financially and emotionally, and they don't know what or how they're going to -- be able to rebuild their lives. There are some who have been able to, through family members, through whatever wealth they have, or just their ability to scramble -- who are fixing back up or back in their homes. But there's just huge swaths of area and tens of thousands -- more than tens of thousands of people who don't have that wherewithal, financially, emotionally, familial, whatever, to bring themselves back and get it done. And the government, the funding that is appropriated but is so slow to come to individuals to do what they need to do to get their lives together -- that they're stuck. They're stuck. They're stuck in a lot of cities around the country. They're stuck in Houston. There are thousands of them in Houston, thousands of them in other cities in Texas, thousands in other cities in the South, and scattered elsewhere too. I'm sure there are quite a few people that don't want to come back -- they just need to sort of tie things up and live wherever they are -- but many, many that want to come back, that just don't know how to even start.

RH: And are they your responsibility?

JSH: Not mine personally, but all of ours. The city has opened one -- besides what FEMA has established -- FEMA has these DRCs, the Disaster Recovery Centers, which is where everybody went and they checked in and they got their FEMA money or whatever it was, and sort of registered that they were a victim of the disaster. But we actually opened what's called a -- we have Welcome Home Centers that are here and a Journey Home Center in Houston, and if we had the funding we would open more, where there are actually New Orleaneans, displaced New Orleaneans with social work background trying to just, on a come-as-you-are basis, help whoever comes in the door figure out whatever they need to figure out to try and get back. Whatever it is. You know, and there are so many things holding people back: not being able to afford the transportation just to get here and see what's going on, not being able to find a place to stay. If you don't have a relative that has a big house or that can take you in or that has

a house at all that can take you in, where do you stay when you come back if you don't have the money for a hotel? How do you come back just to see what's going on? How do you come back to just hang out and gut your house yourself, if that's what you've got the physical ability to do? How do you get somebody to gut your house? If you don't have the money, you can get on a list and wait, and many are on the list, and some have been done and more will be done. But it's just, how do you hire a contractor when you can't live here? And some have trailers. Those who have property, own property and the right to put a trailer on their property, if they're so lucky and FEMA's brought them a trailer, they have a trailer. But if you had rental property, where do you put a trailer? You don't have a place to put a trailer. So, there's just -- and over 50% of our people rented, didn't own homes, and there's not a lot of provision for them.

RH: So, are these Welcome Home Centers and such as this, are they manned by volunteers? Or is there --

JSH: No. No, I mean --

RH: You were talking about social workers, and I was -- They're hiring people?

JSH: The one that exists in Houston is -- it's staffed by a couple of people that we can afford to staff it with. You know, they may be able to use some volunteer help, but basically you're talking about trying to get people whose job is to just help do case management work for every individual that needs help figuring out what to do and how to do it. If you own property, you register with the Road Home Program. And there's all kinds of homes. It's Welcome Home, Road Home, Journey Home, This Home, yes. Everybody's talking about home.

RH: Got to get home.

JSH: And they're very confusing.

RH: But nobody's getting there.

JSH: (laughter) Not if you don't have the money. You know, if you have the money you can do it, but if you don't have the money it's very, very hard.

RH: OK, we're going to wrap up right now with this tape --

JSH: OK.

RH: -- and then --

END OF PART 1.

JSH: Right.

RH: This is tape two with Julie Schwam Harris, Katrina's Jewish Voices. And, Julie, we were just talking about some of the things that you've been involved in with the city government, and trying to get people back here. And just in general, why don't you tell me how you think the response, the federal government, state government, local government -- and how governments should work as compared to -- because there's all this talk about private organizations and it really should be all private organizations. And you're in government. From an insider's perspective, what do you think has been going on this past year? What do you think of what's been going on?

JSH: That's so big. OK. Government -- you're going to have to get some of my whole philosophy of government. Government is made up of people, and people are flawed. It's just like business is made up of people, universities, social service agencies. Anywhere you've ever worked, anything you've ever done in your life, you hit up against people because that's -- and so people want government to be better than other human endeavors, and it isn't. It's like other human endeavors, the ones that they're in:

dysfunctional families, dysfunctional businesses, this -- And so I think that you always have to strive to make things better. But you just have to understand and accept human nature and work to make things better. The federal response, obviously, was totally inadequate and terrible after the storm. I mean, that's been belabored in the news. The federal laws that deal with disaster recovery are extremely complex, very bureaucratic, and make it hard for this kind of an event, for a city or a parish, because other parishes are experiencing the same kind of difficulties we are, or a state to recover. The money that has been appropriated, and there has been large numbers of dollars, billions of dollars, $10.4 billion to Louisiana -- but the way it flows and how you use it, it's very difficult to use. And this is similar to the way federal grant money always is. I mean, anybody that's dealt with federal grants: federal grants are hard to implement. They're for specific purposes. You may know what you need, but you can only apply for what the grant says you can apply for. So, you try and make your need fit what the funding is there for and use it as best you can. And it's similar like that. I think it's similar to that here. And, so the local response, which was also flawed -- I mean, you know, did we know the levees were going to break? Was the plan there? It had been talked about as a possibility and there was some planning for it, but the reality of it, there's never been the kind of funding to set up the mechanisms and the responses that would be necessary to truly be prepared for what happened. Nobody would ever appropriate that kind of money at the local level, the state level, or the federal level. So, I think that you just have to accept what happened, and then figure out how you're going to put everything back together. The private world has given a lot of money and private dollars are actually so much better in some ways than government dollars because they don't come with all the little boxes and categories of use. The problem with private dollars is, if they come for government purposes, sometimes government has trouble using private money. We have to go through very strict procurement processes so that when money is donated to do something, technically we're not supposed to just take the money and hire a contractor. We still have to do the kind of long processes of procurement and RFPs,

request for proposals, so it makes it hard to use money in the way that people want to see it used. They just want to see it go out and fix it. And so there's this, I think, disconnect between some of the funding coming in and how government can use it. If it's used privately for private purposes, it gets there. But then a lot of times people want to give to public purposes and it makes it a little hard. I think if people just helped one-on-one, if they could just, like, find families and just say, "OK, what do you need to get back?" "I need $50,000. Then I can muck out my house, I can get some money from the government to raise it, but I can use that money to complement it because it won't be enough, you know, what I'm going to get from the Road Home, and I can be back in my house and happy." I mean, if there were some mechanism for doing that, but -- I don't know, it's hard to marry that private money with the private need. The connect is really hard to make. I didn't answer your question.

RH: Well no, you're doing a great job answering. (laughter) What do you think about people now who are leaving, who are kind of frustrated with the slowness and have just decided to give up on the city? Or --

JSH: Well, people leave for lots of different reasons. I mean, there may be some that are frustrated with, like you say, the slowness. I think people leave because they're not emotionally prepared to deal with a difficult situation, and this city is going to be in a difficult situation for a long time. It's like a city -- or it's like a country after a war. After a war, you've got so much to do. You've got rubble to clear. You have unexploded bombs to find. You've got wounded people -- I mean, physically wounded people that you have to incorporate back into your society. Well, we've got emotionally wounded. We don't have bombs that we're still trying to detonate, but we are trying to just clean up large areas of the city that were hurt. And so the timeframe for that is not as quickly as people want. This is a world where if I don't get my food fast, I'm irritated. If I don't find the dress I want today -- because I'm used to having 50 stores, and there's no shopping malls close by or I can't get what I need when I want it, right now. I think people have to

expand their expectation of time, especially for what's going to happen in large parts of the city. The Uptown area, you can live here and be very comfortable. You have to have a bit of money because rent is expensive, but you can live and live quite well in large parts of the city, Uptown and downtown. But the areas that are going to take longer to fix -- the people who I sympathize with are not the ones that are -- they're frustrated that it's taking too long and they're going to leave. It's the ones that can't get it done because they don't have the resources. Those are the ones that I'm concerned with because they would be here, given the choice. They just haven't been given the choice. The ones who choose to leave, let them go. They'll come back if they want. If they get lonely for New Orleans and all the wonderful things here, they'll come back when it's an easier place to live. Those of us who are here and want to stay, those who are coming in, and there are people flocking here -- there are a lot of young people. There are people that they're using Katrina as a reason to come, and say, "You know what, I want to be here. I want to help fix it up. I want to make it better. I've always loved New Orleans, and I'm going to come and spend some time here." And whether the numbers will be equal to who leaves, I don't know. But if they can't make it here, emotionally, whatever, they should go, and then we'll build with who we've got.

RH: So what do you think about people who say, though, that New Orleans is going to be a white city, that it's going to be a Santa Fe, it's going to be a playground with people with second homes. Do you have a response to that?

JSH: I mean, I don't know what New Orleans is going to be. I think it's just going to be a city. I think it'll rebuild. It won't be as quickly as possible. It'll rebuild incrementally, but, oh, I just -- I don't know. I don't see that. I see as many African-Americans try to come back as I see, you know, Caucasians coming back. Now obviously, it was the more affluent parts of the city along the river that didn't flood. So they're here, and it's easier for them, but it would also have been easier for them because they had more money anyway. But, I don't know. I think that we'll just have to see how the city rebuilds itself.

And I think there are a lot of people that are working very hard to make the city the eclectic, diverse place that it was. I think there are a lot of people trying to help those people who are stuck, those people who just, you know, haven't been able to make that transition back. There's a lot of effort going into bringing them back, and I think that that will keep the city diverse for a long time.

RH: Do you think that there was ever a lack of response because it's a majority African-American city? Have you thought about --

JSH: You mean whether it was a purposeful lack of response because it was an African-American-majority city?

RH: Yeah, or that there's been kind of more severe restrictions placed on the dollars to come in because it's perceived as a corrupt city, which is partially people, say, Third World or --

JSH: I do think that there have been a lot more restrictions placed on the federal funding that's come in, and the way it's going through the state. Because a lot of the holdup on the funding coming into New Orleans is through the conduit of the state, which is a whole other issue. But yes, I do think that some of that reputation is an excuse for slowing down some of the flow of those funds, or making the hoops you have to jump through differently. New York City got an outpouring of sympathy, as we did, and funding, for an area that was -- I mean it was awful. The numbers of people hurt were high -- you know, killed were high. The horror of a terrorist attack, you know, really strikes at people's hearts. But then the numbers of people hurt by this are so many more. The devastation to the geographic area, which I've heard is, like, seven Manhattans geographic area -- seven Manhattans that were destroyed. And so, New York got funding that was available for much broader uses than the money that's come to us. It's not proportionately equal, and it's not as free as the money. I mean, no money is free. There are rules and regulations for federal money. But they had much more latitude, and I think some of that

is political. And it's going to be hard for us to overcome that, but that's the hand we've been dealt, so we're just going to have to deal with it.

RH: There's been a lot of criticism of Nagin, and even in his rebuilding, that he's too slow. Do you share any of that? Do you feel --

JSH: You know, to say that he's too slow, everybody wants a knight in shining armor to cure the problems. And though I never have agreed with all of the things that the former mayor I worked for did, this mayor, other elected officials that I've worked with and supported, I mean, they're all human. They all have strengths and weaknesses, and I think that Nagin made a lot of decisions that were very good. They were hard to make, but they were very good. He was slow to let people back in. I think that was needed. I don't think the city had the ability. And he created a lot of anger by holding people out, when the city was still underwater and still a difficult city to police and patrol. And that started making people angry. I think that his refusal to automatically say, "We're going to shrink the footprint in the city, and we're going to focus our resources on this area rather than that area," and the way he's couched it and the way the planning process has evolved, I think people are using that as an excuse to be angry with him and focus a lot of their frustration with just the situation in general on him. He's a good man that has made mistakes like any good man that would be mayor, or good woman that would be mayor, would make mistakes, because it's a superhuman job and nobody's superhuman. So, I certainly can figure out what I think I would have done differently given that power, but I didn't have that power, and I also can see where things that he did that I might not have done have turned out to be right. So, I try to reserve judgment and just keep, again, focused on the task, because there are no knights in shining armor, and we all have to just keep working, pushing, and making the process and trying to influence the decisions in the way we think are right at the time. But if they get made differently, then we work with that given, and move on and influence other decisions. You know, people -- you shouldn't pick up your marbles and go home. You know, democracy says

that if a decision is made politically because a majority of people said they wanted it that way, OK. It's going to be that way. Now, keep influencing it in the direction you want, but through a different channel. Do something else. And that's what I think people should be doing, focusing on what they can control in the future, what they can influence in the future, and stop trying to blame people for things that are now decided, done. It's over. Move on.

RH: So, for the future, what would you like to see Mayor Harris, if you were able (laughter) to --

JSH: Ahh -- I never would want to be mayor. (laughter) What do I want to see? I mean, I wish people could figure out a way -- and this is wishful thinking because government doesn't work that way -- to just help more individuals figure out how to solve their puzzle, because it's like each of these lives, each of these buildings -- when you're out in a neighborhood and you see a house that's been fixed up and you see one that's just there, you know, it's not gutted out -- or overgrown, and that house is a puzzle. And there's somebody that lived in there or owned it or owns it. And, you know, government doesn't have all the resources, all the people, all the time to figure out every one of these puzzles. And the neighborhoods that are doing it as proactively as possible are succeeding. I think Broadmoor is a good example. They are trying to figure out each puzzle on the blocks that they live on. You know, who lives there? How do I find them? How do I work to solve that problem that's in the middle of my block, or those problems on my block? Not all our neighborhoods are that together, or have enough people with resources that are even back the way Broadmoor -- enough people came back. They could start solving the puzzles for their neighbors and working with them and -- but the more we can get that kind of cohesiveness in a neighborhood, where it's not just, "OK, government, solve this one because we can't," the better off we'll be.

RH: So, what are you proudest of? What do you think's working now with the city that you think are some real successes? What do you like better, even, about New Orleans today?

JSH: What do I like better?

RH: Is there anything --

JSH: I mean --

RH: -- since the storm?

JSH: It's not that I like it better. I'm proud of the progress that we've made. I'm proud of the fact that there are so many people here and that houses are being worked on, and people are helping each other, and people are engaging in planning and meetings and cleanups and -- I like that. I can't say that I like anything better, in the sense that I wish that we didn't have to work so hard just to try to get back to where we were. Some of the people that are here and have chosen to rebuild their houses are going to be better. Their lives might be better. I mean, my parents, their house hadn't been worked on for 40 years. If they ever get back in it, and it's taking a while, it's going to be a better house, and I think they'll be very happy in it. But it's just a shame they had to go through that to get to that better house. My sister and brother-in-law, they did some things they would not have done, to make their house better, more livable, you know, roomier, lighter, airier, and they're going to be very happy with it. They hope to be in it in a few weeks. So, you know, there will be some things better. Overall, will the city be better? I don't know. People have hope for the education system because of the sort of way everything sort of went up in the air and came back down differently. Some of those charter schools are going to do well. Some won't. Some of the public schools were doing well before and will do well. Some won't. I don't know. I don't know if that's going to be a greater gain, that we've actually started from scratch. We'll just have to see. But I want the good

things. Like I want the streetcar back. I want the options, you know, to live in various parts of the city. Not all have to live along this river. I want those options there for people. And I'd like to see more regional cooperation that some people talk about. I don't know if we'll get it. I'd like to see more public transportation. I don't know if we'll get it. It'd be good if we could. But people are still going to be the way they were before. You know, life -- we'll build it back and there will be some improvements, and there'll still be a lot to complain about and a lot to worry about, but that's because it's comprised of human beings.

RH: So tell me about your personal, kind of your family life because you've opened your home. Who's living here now?

JSH: My mother and father are living here now because their house ten blocks away is under renovation. They came back in December. They had planned to come back all along. It was just a question of whether they were going to demolish, rebuild, gut and sell and move somewhere else, and they ended up deciding to rebuild their house. So, they've been working on it, you know, it's going to be close to a year, and we hope that they'll be in in January or February. And it will be beautiful. So they're here. My mother-in-law is selling her house and leaving New Orleans. So that's going to be a big change in our family. My cousin and her child who we evacuated with, she's not coming back, at least not right now. She's going to live in Jacksonville where she found a job. My brother and his wife, who've been in L.A. for many years, he actually is planning to move back. He wants to be a part of the rebuilding. So that's exciting. So we're going to lose some. We're going to gain some. I think it's going to be sort of like the rest of the city. Some will go and some will come, and then we'll see how it works out. Today in the cleanup, I was with a young couple. He's a med student. He's a resident this year. So they've been here for three years. So they're both from Texas. One's from Houston and one's from Dallas, and they're married and they live in Algiers. And they moved here for his medical education at Tulane. They love it. They're never leaving. They just -- you know,

they're part of that young breed that's here, and thriving, and want to be a part of the rebuilding of it. So. And they were out there. They're active. They go to cleanups. They work with Save Our Cemeteries. He's a doctor, which of course is needed. We need medical personnel. So that's exciting. She is a photographer and a landscaper, and does a lot of volunteer work. So they were very refreshing, to be with them for the morning.

RH: So tell me about this other work you're doing, this cleanup, and gutting houses.

JSH: On Saturday.

RH: Talk about this a little bit.

JSH: Well, gutting houses. In the beginning we were basically taking care of family and friends and just helping out mainly my parents and helping some others, but mainly my parents. One of my sons brought his a cappella group in for the spring break, so that we could gut houses as a team. My husband led the team. And so it was really kind of moving. Because we were assigned a house. This was through Associated Catholic Charities. We were assigned a house in New Orleans East, went to the house, started work. And they said the family member -- because when they have volunteer teams to a house, they try to have a family member come to meet the team -- and also in case there's anything they want to point out. Or if the team finds anything in the house, they can give it to a family member. So they said the family member will be out shortly. And we started working. Well, about an hour into it, a woman drove up, got out of the car, and it's a woman that I work with in City Hall. And apparently we were gutting the house of her father, who had evacuated. Her mother had died the year before. And she and her family had put her father's house on the list, because they didn't have the wherewithal to get it gutted. And we just, like, started weeping and it's, like, (weeping noise). Anyway, so it was just kind of funny. But my husband worked with them the whole week. I just took one day off because I had to work during the week. But they

gutted two houses. Just that little team of ten kids -- college kids and my husband gutted two houses. On Saturdays I did cleanups --

RH: So they were the a cappella group that your son --

JSH: From Brown, right.

RH: For Brown.

JSH: Brown University.

RH: So. (laughter)

JSH: Some of them had never done physical work. You could tell it was very enlightening for them to gut a house. But on Saturdays, what I try and do, and it's really -- I call it my recreation, I just -- I like cleaning up things. And so I load up my van with my tools. Because you can always borrow tools from the cleanups but I prefer to have everything I need, you know, clippers, grass clippers, limb loppers, shovel, rake, broom, and go to wherever there is a cleanup that week. We get an assignment. And then it's funny, if you have any experience cleaning up, usually people will sort of -- I become leader of the team wherever I go because I say, look, they'll see what I'm doing and then they'll start doing it, and so then I'll leave them doing that and go on and do something else that they might not note to do or know how to do, like digging really in those little gutters. You know, when you clean out catch basins, you don't go in them but you clean out the front. They have a grill, and if you don't dig out the dirt, the water can't go into the catch basin. Well, you need a little tool for that so I bring my little shovel, and so I teach them how to do that. Then we do the catch basins, all in the gutters, and we trim and pull up weeds. Because often they'll just go down a street picking up the visible trash. Well, there's trash under weeds and behind these overgrown bushes, so you really have to trim things back to see all the trash, plus to sort of keep it neat for longer than just two days, you know. And so, anyway, that's my recreation, cleanups on weekends.

RH: Well, so it’s -- you're doing it with Parks and Parkways --

JSH: No, no, no.

RH: -- or are you doing -- ?

JSH: They're run by neighborhood groups. Sometimes it is the city that coordinates it. For example, sometimes they're NORD cleanups. They've reinstituted cleanups on NORD playgrounds the last few weeks. For a while it was the Katrina Crew. And even before the storm -- I mean, they weren't nearly as frequent as they are now. But I actually ran a program, through city government, that coordinated cleanups in various neighborhoods of the city, in the past. So I have some experience cleaning up. But these are mainly volunteer things.

RH: So what do you get out of it?

JSH: Oh, I get exercise. I get to do something that's not paperwork. (laughter) I get to meet other people. I get to see houses. Because when you're in front of a house or in a neighborhood on the street -- I mean we drive by wonderful neighborhoods all the time -- you don't really notice details. But when you're actually on a block for a while, you notice architectural details, plants. You'll find -- sometimes in neighborhoods you'll see these beautiful rosebushes that are just kind of hidden behind leaves and trash, that you rediscover, or you -- I don't know. It's just fun. Exercise.

RH: So, let's move a little bit. I just want to talk to you -- oh, and I lost mine here -- about -- you've chosen to work. You grew up Jewish. You've chosen to work in the larger community. Have you ever thought too much about how you find the interaction of the Jewish community with a larger community here in New Orleans?

JSH: Have I thought about it?

RH: Yeah, and if so --

JSH: Well, we're --

RH: -- what do you think about it? (laughter) That's the question.

JSH: We live in a part of the country that is extremely religious and overtly religious in its Christian, Catholic way. And though I'm not a -- I'm not an active Jew. I'm actually an agnostic who is Jewish, and I don't participate in organized religion. But I think that my Jewish traditional roots and the education I got as a Jew in Sunday school and just through my family has sort of caused me to be an activist in politics and in government. And I would like to see more separation of church and state. I work in government circles where -- or in government entities -- where it is very common to open with prayers, praying to Jesus, and where there's this real mixture. And I think -- and though I try not to offend people, I often make a point in discussions, just with people at the office and people in general, of saying, "Oh, by the way, I'm Jewish," or saying, "Well, you know, for Jewish people, this is not really something that we really relish." But without trying to censure or cause any friction. Because a lot of people feel that their religious beliefs is what motivates people to be good or do good or -- I don't know. I'm not motivated by my religious beliefs. I'm motivated by an inner ethic that makes me do things, and I would like that other people would be too, but -- I don't know. So, I see my being Jewish as important in helping me point out that difference, and just keep them at least aware of that difference in others, even though it hasn't changed a lot of practices.

RH: (laughter) So just kind of, it becomes almost a respective diversity?

JSH: Yeah, just to try and make that point that they need to be aware of and respect that religious diversity that they are totally ignorant of or unaware of.

RH: And so, you've been so political and, in a sense, politically active. Can you name some of the other reasons or some of the moments or turning points to where you just

felt, "Yes, this is what I want to be doing?"

JSH: Well, the reason I got politically active was because of the pro-choice movement, in 1989. There was a Supreme Court decision that threatened the choice --

RH: Roe v. Wade, or what is it?

JSH: No, it was Webster decision. It legally showed that there were going to be erosions to the ability to choose to have an abortion, if needed or wanted, and that -- I don't know. It moved me for some reason and so I began to learn how to organize grassroots efforts to influence political decisions and became a part of a local coalition, a state coalition, and became a professional organizer just by virtue of doing it for a long time. And then through that, saw that, well, you can lobby all you want. If you don't get people elected that believe the way you believe, you're not going to get anywhere. So I got involved in electoral politics, very soon after that, in working in campaigns -- and have stayed active in campaigns ever since. It's funny. I was involved in a lot of campaigns where people lost, and my husband suggested that I start a political consulting firm with Madalyn Schenk and call it Kiss of Death Consultants because everybody we worked for was losing (laughter)! Of course, they were the best candidates but they were losing. But, yeah. Yeah, my husband. Anyway, when I worked for Marc Morial, he won. And so I was asked to come help in that campaign. Actually, I did work in a campaign -- I worked in the Clinton campaign and he won. So that was exciting. But that's how I got involved in the city politics, by having worked for Marc Morial when he won as mayor, and he asked me to come into his administration. And I started working in the Office of Public Advocacy, which I referred to earlier. It was an office that was there to help people. So, I just started learning how to help people one by one by one.

RH: So, have you ever thought about what it would have been like if Marc Morial was still mayor? Would things be different? Do you ever go there?

JSH: I mean, no, not really. The whole thing, when people talk about mayors and they -- Marc Morial was elected at a time where I think he did some really good things. There's a lot of controversy, and some of the people that worked with him have been found to have done things that benefited them financially, and there are a few people that are going to go to jail for that. I think he was a very talented man, and a talented mayor. And, I don't know all of the things that have -- I don't know where all -- some of those things went wrong, but I know that there were good things done under that administration and that some of them were done because of his abilities, his abilities as a politician, his ability as a leader, and as someone who could think through a problem. Mayor Nagin came in and people were very excited because he really did have and does have a different attitude towards government and contracting that's very hard to put into practice, but that fits people's perceptions of cleaner and less self-interested. It is very, very hard. What people don't understand about government as opposed to private life, when you want to do something in your life, you figure out who can do it for you. If it costs more, you pay more. If you know them, whether they're your relative or not your relative, a good friend, you make the decision based on where you think you're going to get the best work done. And you have the freedom to do that because it's not public money. It's private money. So, I go to my good friend, who's a contractor, who charges me a lot more than if I would, like, go price shopping. But, A, I like him, B, I trust him, C, I know his work, and I don't mind paying more. And that's my decision. I can make it unilaterally. And in government it’s very -- you're not supposed to do that. There's a very -- there's supposed to be a very objective process. Nothing is objective when you're dealing with people, but it’s a -- there's supposed to be a relatively objective process. And it doesn't always get you the best contract, or it doesn't always get you quick action on a problem. And so, if people could understand how difficult it is to implement these good government rules and good government processes and actually get what everybody wants, which is the efficient use of public money -- it is just -- it's hard. It doesn't matter how conscientious you are. It doesn't matter how smart you are. It is

really, really hard, and I just don't think people will appreciate that. So.

RH: OK, I'm going to circle back one more time here, and talk about -- you know, you talked about that you're not a fan of organized religion, but you do believe that the --

JSH: I'm not a participant.

RH: A participant.

JSH: Did I say fan?

RH: No, I probably said that.

JSH: Yeah, you said fan.

RH: (laughter) So, is there a reason for that, that you've --

JSH: Oh. I think that people are motivated to do things for different reasons. And many people are motivated by religion and feel that religion helps make them who they are, makes them better --

(sound of jets?)

RH: Hold on one second. Let this pass for a minute (laughter).

JSH: Yeah. Wow. Religion doesn't motivate me. I don't know what motivates me. Whatever my parents did, there is an inner motivation to do what I do, and I think that though I -- I'm very lucky. I have a pretty affluent existence. My husband works very hard (laughter) at being a ship captain and sacrifices quite a bit, but he makes a good salary. I'm doing fine on my public salary. And we have been very lucky. So I'm comfortable. But I'm good in the way that I think I am just through some inner desire to do what I do, to work hard, to work at a job where I think it helps people benefit some in the long run, if not always immediately. I think it's -- I'm part of a -- I'm a cog in a wheel

that's working towards public benefit. And, I'm glad to do that, and it has nothing to do with religion, at least not that I am overtly aware of. And yet I can see where, for other people, being a part of a religious experience, whether it's praying as a group -- because prayer as a group supposedly is to help you think not just about yourself but about others. The reason you pray together is so that you're aware of the other and not just totally self-consumed with your needs and your wants. I feel like I get that awareness of others in other ways. I don't need it through prayer or organized religion, and therefore I just have chosen not to participate. I think that organized religion in some instances, in all religions, is used to exclude people and to do harm. And though anything can be used for harm, I suppose, I just have chosen to not participate.

RH: How do you try and pass your values on to your children --

JSH: I --

RH: -- and what kind of expectations of your children do you --

JSH: Well, I have to say, and I don't know exactly how I did it, but my children, I admire my children. I find them as humble and as giving as just about anybody I know, and I -- you know, I mean, not like Mother Teresa. But they're mensches. They're wonderful, wonderful guys. And somehow, whether it was by example, whether it was by -- they didn't go to Sunday school. They didn't take ethics in Sunday school, and they didn't study the Torah. I think they learned from example, from conversation. Because we treated our children to us. You know, they participated in everything with us. They came with me to public meetings. My friend Madalyn Schenk remembers Joshua, my older son, when he was a kid, just -- he would go sit in a corner. We'd be at a public meeting or at some political meeting, and he would just sit in a corner and read or look around. And he would have to be there because I needed him there. I didn't have a babysitter. And he'd be a part of it. He's walked, you know, streets and campaigns with me. He's been to lots of political events. He knows the ins and outs of politics and government

because I've talked about it for years. And yet he's involved in political action in small ways. I mean, he's not politically active in a major way. But he cares about issues and he has participated, in college, in certain issues and certain campaigns. And it's like he had to quit and come home right after the storm, and just do stuff around here for people because he just felt like he needed to be a part of something. And my son who is in school, the other one, he had to talk this a cappella group into not going to Las Vegas, but to come to New Orleans to do this project, not just sing -- because they travel to sing -- but to do this service project. Because he thought that was important for them and important for us. And they're just -- I don't know. Somehow we've instilled it in them. I don't know how.

RH: What do you hope for your kids?

JSH: I want them to be happy, healthy. (laughter) I don't know that either of them will ever move back to New Orleans because New Orleans may not have what they need. Joshua, my older son, likes cold weather, mountains, ice, rocks. He rock climbs. He hikes. He bikes. I just don't know that he would ever choose to live for long periods of time in the swamp. My other son, who's in the theater, I think he's going to need bigger cities than New Orleans to do the kind of work he may want to do, whether it's onstage or offstage. Because he's going to be involved probably in theater or in entertainment in some way. I don't think he would choose New Orleans. We'll have to see. I just want them to be happy and healthy.

RH: What are your hopes for New Orleans?

JSH: I want New Orleans to be a city that people not only love, but admire. I think people love New Orleans for all the wonderful things it has: the music, the culture, the food, all the stereotypical stuff. They don't admire New Orleans the way they may admire a city that somehow is doing things right, where its people are a bit more successful, where there is the less crime, the better education. So I would like New Orleans to be a

city that's not just loved but admired. And that's going to take a lot of change.

RH: And what kind of changes do you think need to happen?

JSH: Education, sharing of wealth. I mean, New Orleans has historically been a wealthy city. Louisiana's been a wealthy state. But the wealth doesn't seem to get shared. It's not shared through well-funded school systems and well-funded public entities. I mean, part of it -- I don't know how much you can attribute it to, but part of it is the tax structure. Part of it is just how you move money from where it's not needed -- because some people have so much it's really not needed. How do you move it from those pockets where it's not needed into where it's needed, without wasting it, you know, without throwing it away or giving it away to undeserving people? It's the movement of money in a way that helps for the greater good. And I mean, that's a bigger problem than I know how to tackle objectively. You know, I focus on my past and I do what I need to do. (laughter) But I see that that's a need in the world. Because there's money, there's wealth, there's lots out there. But it just tends to get stuck in pockets and not work its way down. I mean, there is no trickle-down. The trickle-down is totally bogus. It doesn't trickle down. And it isn't shared willingly by a lot of people.

RH: Has Katrina changed your worldview in any way, and the way you look at the world?

JSH: No.

RH: No?

JSH: Unh-unh.

RH: Has it changed any of your priority?

JSH: No. I don't think so. I mean, my priorities have always been family and work. And they are still there.

RH: Even more so, huh?

JSH: (laughter) Yeah, with my parents here --

RH: With work. And your family. (laughter)

JSH: Yeah. So, no, my priorities haven't changed. You know, I haven't thought, "Oh, you know, we could lose it all in a moment so I should enjoy life more." I don't enjoy life any more than I used to. I'm still working as hard as I ever did, if not worse. No. It's the same.

RH: Have you learned anything about yourself over this past year?

JSH: I mean, we're always learning things about ourselves, but I don't think I've had any breakthroughs recently. I mean, I think my breakthrough into myself came when I had children and then went back into the work world, and when I focused on those two aspects of life, you know, the raising of children, which I've got to say, my husband and I did very -- with help from grandparents -- very, very successfully -- we have wonderful children, good people, objectively. And when I realized my value in the world of work. Because I think I had, in my early adult life, a lot of doubts about myself and my abilities. And I still have doubts. I mean, I still wake up sort of panicky and worried. "Am I going to be able to do this?" Generally speaking, I'm very -- I'm proud of what I do. I get worried that I'm not going to be able to do enough of it fast enough and good enough to really make a difference. But I'm still proud and confident that I'm needed to keep doing it. So my breakthrough came a long time ago. Basically, my worldview, my view of myself is pretty much the same. Sometimes I tend to cocoon more and be less social, just because I'm tired, you know, and kind of worn out from all that I do, but I don't think things have changed radically since Katrina.

RH: So, is there anything that you took for granted before that you'll never take for granted again?

JSH: Before Katrina?

RH: Before Katrina.

JSH: Streetcar (laughter).

RH: Streetcar.

JSH: No, just that the city was there. It's not there any more. I just knew it was there. I have a real love for the historic, physical infrastructure of the city, the buildings, and I worry about those. And there's not a whole lot more I can do about it more than I'm doing, but I just -- And you have to let go of things. I guess, if anything, one thing that has changed, I think that I tend to be a bit of a preservationist, and I don't like change, even though some change is good. I tend to resist change, and be afraid of major change. But I think I have learned, after Katrina -- is that we have to let go some things. I mean, we will not be able to fix every old house. We will not have the same physical neighborhoods that we had before. We will have much of them. They will be different. We are going to have to accept that they are going to be different. We are going to have to accept that they're not going to all be beautifully renovated old structures. I think before Katrina I thought just, you know, if we've got the right amount of money and the right amount of dynamics, we can go in, and all the 7th Ward, all these beautiful old buildings in some of the rundown neighborhoods, you know, we've just got to get in there and fix them. And that wasn't going to happen before. And it's certainly not going to happen now. We're going to lose a lot of that, and we're going to lose -- sad, but there are people who will never be whole again. But we have to just accept change and work to make it productive and make it as best as we can for as many people. So if anything, I think I'm starting to accept that there's going to be bigger changes than I might have wanted, in the city, after this.

RH: You feel like there's a grieving period, there's a need to grieve some of the loss?

JSH: Definitely. I mean, I've been kind of hair-trigger, you know, emotional the last year or so. I tended to always be a little bit emotional. I could read something in the paper and get really moved to tears, even in the morning while I'm having my coffee. But much more so after this. We're just all under a lot of stress. I mean, there are just -- all this change and all this suffering and all this uncertainty about how it's going to come back together, and when it's going to come back together, and how much of it will come back together makes us all very stressed. And so we just -- we have to learn to live with that kind of stress and work it out as best we can and keep helping each other, and see what happens.

RH: How do you kind of deal with that kind of stress?

JSH: I guess I just work. I don't know. (laughter) I do cleanups. I am much calmer after a physical clean-up where I'm just filthy grimy and full of little stickers of seeds, you know, from these weeds. I'm much happier after that than I am before.

RH: Now that you've had your parents back in your home with you now and kind of reversed the order of parent and child a little bit maybe, I don't know -- I mean --

JSH: Well, I wouldn't say we've reversed the order of parent and child, but we certainly are living together.

RH: And, have you thought any about what home means to you now?

JSH: No, but I do prize solitude, and I think I'll be glad when my house is more mine rather than shared. I like solitude. I like quiet. And I can imagine for those families living in trailers it must be so difficult because you're in such a small spaces with people. But, no, as far my concept of home, unh-unh, that hasn't changed.

RH: Is there anything over the past year that's kind of given you more comfort than --

JSH: More comfort. I've really -- I can't think of an answer to that.

RH: Well, you don't have to have an answer --

JSH: Yeah.

RH: -- to every question.

JSH: Good. (laughter) Good. Because I can't think I have an answer to that one!

RH: Tell me what you're grateful for.

JSH: Well, just the fact that I have a loving family and enough financial wealth to be comfortable and confident that much of what I want to do or need to do I will be able to do, and I've got abilities to do things at work and in my active volunteer life that give me pleasure, the abilities to -- I like my physical ability to do what I do because I feel good afterwards and people admire me for it. And I like my mental ability to do what I do at work because people admire me for it, and I like what I do accomplish when I accomplish something. So, I mean, I'm grateful for all that. I live a very, very charmed existence in some ways.

RH: Anything you want to add to this interview?

JSH: No, I don't think so, except that I still think that my father would be a great interviewee.

RH: (laughter) OK, I'm going to keep that under --

JSH: You keep that in mind.

RH: I will.

JSH: And I'll tell you all about my father so you can figure out (laughter) why he would be such a good interviewee.

RH: OK. Well, it's a wrap.

JSH: That's it? It's a wrap? We used up two tapes.

RH: Mmm-hmm.

JSH: OK.

[END OF INTERVIEW]