Toni Weiss Transcript

Rosalind Hinton: This is Rosalind Hinton interviewing Toni Weiss at the JCC on St. Charles Avenue in New Orleans, Louisiana. Today is Wednesday, July 11th. I am conducting the interview for the Katrina's Jewish Voice Project of the Jewish Women's Archive and the Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life. Toni, do you agree to be interviewed and understand that the interview will be video recorded?

Toni Weiss: I do.

RH: Okay. To begin with, let's just get a little bit about your background, your Jewish and your general education, and how you came to be in New Orleans.

TW: Okay. Well, I grew up in Tucson, Arizona, and was raised in the Conservative synagogue there. Then I went to college in Southern California, the University of Redlands, which is right between San Bernardino and Riverside, right at the base of the mountains. My senior year of college, I began dating the brother of my sister's husband. We met at their wedding. So, my senior year, we started to date. He was in his first year of law school here in town. No, I'm sorry, he was in his third year of law school. So, I was looking to graduate, what am I going to do? I wasn't that serious at the time. I thought like I'll go anywhere in the country. He helped me get a job here. So, that's how I got here right after college.

RH: Okay. Was he at Tulane Law School?

TW: He was at Tulane Law School, yes.

RH: Okay. So, you have children?

TW: We have three children together. Jordan is my oldest. She's seventeen. And Tova is my middle child. She'll be fifteen in a few weeks. I have a son, Gerhardt who just turned eleven.

RH: Okay. Tell me what it's like to be Jewish in New Orleans.

TW: As my life has gone through phases, the ability to be Jewish has changed here. When I moved here, I was more observant, I was more committed to living a somewhat more religious Jewish life. My husband, he's my, actually, my ex-husband now, is from a Southern Jewish family. Extremely Reformed. In those early years of marriage, I think I kind of adopted some of that and started to eat crawfish and seafood of all types.

RH: Southern kosher is the name for it.

TW: Southern kosher, right. When my children were born then, educating them and observing the holidays, I kind of found my way back to very mainstream Conservative observance. I have since been divorced for a number of years and, just a few months ago, remarried an Orthodox man. Now, trying to kind of live an Orthodox life here is a very different experience.

RH: Did you meet him here?

TW: I did. He's a professor at Tulane.

RH: Can we have his name?

TW: Oh yeah. Gary Remer. And he has two children. Amos, whose bar mitzvah actually is on Monday. And Ezra, who is nine.

RH: Where do you belong? What synagogue do you belong to?

TW: Since the storm, it's been very different. Before the storm, I belonged to Shir Chadash out in Metairie. I'm very committed to it. All my friends were there. I felt like it was kind of a vibrant place. Since the storm, Shir Chadash has lost a number of members, and a lot of my friends and their children didn't come back. It really lost its appeal to me, so I have not been active there. My husband belongs to Anshe Sfard, which is an Orthodox synagogue down on Carondelet and Jackson in the heart of the old Jewish neighborhood. We'll go to Chabad.

RH: Okay, and the Chabad –?

TW: On Freret. Freret and Broadway. I have kind of been dividing my time and really struggling, lately, with where I fit because I'm not feeling there's really any space that I'm perfectly comfortable with. I'm trying to – I thought about maybe joining Touro, which is down the street, but then that's Reformed. But then I thought if I mixed the Reform with the Orthodox and put it in a pot, then that comes out kind of Conservative.

RH: That's a true gumbo. A Jewish gumbo.

TW: But living in Orthodox and trying to keep kosher and keep the Sabbath is not easy here. I mean, it wasn't easy before the storm either, but it's more difficult now.

RH: Can you kind of tell me what some of the difficulties are?

TW: The biggest is a lack of community. Particularly my children. My three children are not Sabbath-observant. His children are. But there's no community for them. There's not a ready base of kids to play with on Saturday that are all doing the same things. There aren't a group of kids where they can easily go over to their house and eat, and these kids can come over to our house and know that they're getting a kosher meal. There are two kosher restaurants in town. It's a lack of vibrancy. You can do everything, but without the community doing it with you, it's very isolating.

RH: You've really had a change. Are the children moving towards kosher? How are you guys doing with that?

TW: They feel much more committed if they had to draw where they were. They were much more committed to Judaism and to observance than their father is. They'll spend all the holidays with me. Passover – I have always, long before I was remarried and met my new husband, have kept a very strictly kosher home for Passover, so they identify with that. But then they go over to their father's, and there's the shrimp and the crawfish, and they do that, too. I think as they go out in the world, they'll have to kind of find that path themselves. I think it will be one that's very committed to Judaism and to a Jewish life. Their level of observance, I don't know. We'll have to see.

RH: In raising your children, I'm getting the sense that originally, prior to the storm, Shir Chadash was kind of their center also.

TW: It really was. My oldest was bat mitzvahed there, my middle one would have been bat mitzvahed there.

RH: Except for the storm.

TW: Except for the storm. The holidays – we had this really nice group of people who were not from New Orleans and didn't have family here. Every holiday – Rosh Hashanah, we'd divvy up the meals. Okay, you're going to do Erev Rosh Hashanah, you're going to do lunch, you're going to do Kol Nidrei, you're going to do break fast. We would divide that up, and you just knew that you always had a home with people to go to. Since then, you know, a number of them have left town.

RH: How many friends have you lost to the storm?

TW: I would say of really close friends that didn't come back, I'd say five groups. Five families of really close friends who didn't come back.

RH: I'm thinking at this point that it might be a good idea to kind of get into the Katrina story for you. When did you first realize that this was a major storm and you needed to do something about it?

TW: Well, first of all, I never evacuate. I evacuated for one storm ever before, and that was when my daughter was born. It was Hurricane Andrew in August of '92. I was in labor. I was two weeks overdue. In those two weeks, you really lose complete touch with the outside world. You're really pretty inner-focused on this child has got to come out of me. I remember my husband, who'd call me from work every day – "Walk, walk, walk. " Hurricane Andrew comes along [and] decimates south Florida, which I'm oblivious to. Tells me it's in the Gulf, headed to New Orleans and he calls me, he says, "Stop walking. Lie down." It looks – you know the path – and even in these fifteen years, the technology was not as good as it is now, to really kind of mark the path. On Monday night, I'm lying there – contractions that are between five and ten minutes – saying, "I don't want to go." He's saying, "We're going." "I don't want to go." We left, got on the road, and ended up in Alexandria, which is where I had her. That was the only other storm I ever evacuated for.

RH: Did you have her at the hospital?

TW: I did. I made it to the hospital. But we were trying to get to Shreveport, but we didn't make it. Ivan, George's, other big storms that other people left for, I did not. Katrina – it was so strange. I'm sure you've heard this so many times, that most storms you have so much more warning about. People have been tracking them from the moment it came into the Gulf. But Katrina was always headed towards Florida. It was a very last-minute shift so we all left work on Friday. It was not on our radar screen until Friday night, people started realizing. Well, in my home on Saturday, the TVs aren't on. But my oldest daughter, who I said is not Sabbath-observant, was in her room looking at it, going, "Mom, we've got to go. We've got to go, Mom. We got to go." I said, "Well, we

can't go. It's Sabbath. We can't leave." "We've got to go." "We can't go." So, as a compromise, I got the car gassed up on Saturday. I said, "Okay, we'll get the car gassed up." She took it to get gassed up. But that it's it. Sunday morning when we got up and we saw it really just kind of covering the entire Gulf, I said, "All right. We probably need to go." We packed up two days' worth of stuff because I still didn't think it was coming. I've always been the kind – "Oh, it's not going to hit us, it's no big deal, it's no problem." Two days' worth of stuff and got in the car.

RH: Any animals to evacuate?

TW: Oh, yeah. I had a cat, and my ex-husband had two dogs. He was out of town. I went to his house and got his dogs. It was myself, my husband – he was my boyfriend at the time. His ex-wife and children were in New York, so he was with us. My three children, two dogs, and a cat. I didn't have a cat carrier, and he was just wandering, and it was a disaster. I had somebody empty their duffel bag, and we stuffed the cat in the duffel bag. Then you start the really slow process of trying to get out of town. We took a few false moves – we thought maybe the west bank. We went over on the west bank. We realized that wasn't going to work. Came back over on the east bank and decided to just kind of bite the bullet and take the interstate on out.

RH: So, you were headed towards –

TW: We went up to Shreveport because my sister is up there. It was interesting because, at the time, I was teaching at a high school. I had given a quiz on Friday. On Saturday night, I guess, after Sabbath, I think, I pulled out these papers to start grading them. I'm looking at the thing, going, "I don't know. I'm not sure I need to grade these now." I put them away. Then, as we're leaving – by the time we got to Shreveport, it had actually shifted east a little bit. It did hit on the Mississippi Gulf. I pulled the papers back out to grade, and then it looked like New Orleans was hit pretty hard, so I put the papers back. But then it looked like, no, it was fine. I pulled the papers back out to grade.

Those papers just kept coming back. Then, when the levees broke, I decided I don't need to grade these.

RH: I do not need to grade these papers.

TW: I do not need to grade these papers.

RH: So, you were with your sister at her home?

TW: Actually, we were staying in my ex-in-laws home. My ex-husband and his wife were in Colorado. My ex-husband has a lot of family up in Shreveport, so that was the house we were just staying in for a few days. My boyfriend, who's my husband now, was giving a paper at a conference in Washington. He left town on Wednesday morning. I think he went on to Washington to give his paper. His ex-wife and kids met him there so that they could figure out what they were going to do. My ex-husband was coming back from Colorado on Thursday, and we just kind of had to figure out what we were going to do.

RH: Back to Shreveport –

TW: In Shreveport, right.

RH: Tell me, when you got up there, did you and your kids – did you watch the TV?

TW: We really didn't. It was very surreal because we had spent – because their grandparents live up there, they've spent lots of occasions up there. It felt like just a vacation. We weren't in a hotel. We didn't feel all that displaced at the time because we've done that trip hundreds of times, going up to Shreveport to visit family. I'm also not a news junkie. That's just not my style. I was not glued to the TV. I just couldn't watch it over and over and over again. We were kind of out, doing things in town.

RH: At some point, how did it –?

TW: It's not like I didn't watch at all. I just know that there were people who were pretty much tied to that TV eighteen hours a day. That's just not me. I mean, certainly, I stayed informed. I would watch. At any given time, somebody was watching the TV to see what would happen. You'd wander in, "What's going on?"

RH: Were you alarmed?

TW: Shock. It really is just kind of this numbing shock. I don't even know what – nothing in life really prepares you for that. What are you supposed to do? Because everybody was scattered to the four corners, and our cell phones didn't work – it took the kids to figure out you could text message. We're all still trying to call people. You can't get in touch with anybody. There was this site that showed up very quickly where it was an aerial view of the city, and you could zoom in on your neighborhood to see if you had roof damage. There was this innocuous little white cloud that everybody saw. It was right over my house. I couldn't see my house. I couldn't see any roof damage, but I certainly saw all the water around. I knew my house was –

RH: Tell me where you lived at the time.

TW: I lived on Joseph and Willow. I had six feet of water in my house.

RH: Wow. That's an amazing amount of water.

TW: It's a lot of water because everything floats. Like people who say, "Oh well, I had eighteen inches, and that's just as bad because you have to replace everything." That's true. But the difference between eighteen inches and six feet is that in eighteen inches, things don't float. In six feet of water, everything floats. Tumbles and lands in different spaces. You have that visual when you walk in of not only the disgusting mold. But nothing is where it was. I always keep my washing machine – I now have front loaders – but at the time, I had the top-loading washing machine. I always keep it open when I'm not doing laundry to keep – dry out. Because it's so humid, I don't want any remaining

water. The things that were in that washing machine because things floated up above that water level. The debris and stuff then, as the water receded, went down.

RH: What was in it?

TW: Oh, like cat bowls and pillows. To be honest, I didn't dig. I'm sure the people who gutted my house found – you know, I don't know what else they found. I didn't dig too far.

RH: Were there some things that you brought out when you left that you were really glad you did?

TW: Well, no. I'm sure my tenants were bummed. I have a typical raised home. My main living area was okay. It was called a basement, but it wasn't a basement. It was part of my house. But in that floor was an apartment I rented to graduate students who lost everything. Then a laundry room and just the room – like a rumpus room or whatever. My valuables were fine. I lost a lot. The apartment that I rent to my graduate students was furnished, so all their furniture was my furniture. That was all destroyed. But I had my great-grandparents' antique furniture from Germany. I have some neat things from my family – family heirlooms – and thank God those were all okay.

RH: Your father was –

TW: From Germany.

RH: From Germany.

TW: Yes. Yeah.

RH: Okay. I believe I read that he had come over in the ’50s.

TW: Yeah, he did not come to America as a quote-unquote immigrant. I mean, by the time he came to America, he was established in a field. He was out of university. He was working, and he moved here.

RH: Did he teach?

TW: No, he did not. He was an engineer. But he had a very interesting life. I mean, he came over, and he would work, and then get some money and then go travel and move to another part of the country. He spent time down in Mexico. He was kind of a nomad.

RH: Did you get to travel with him?

TW: No, because by [that] time, he had to settle down then when he got married and had kids.

RH: How would you characterize your feelings when you were up in Shreveport, kind of looking at your home?

TW: Well, in those first two weeks, it was really just kind of shock. I mean, I really can't – I can't even put myself back in there. I don't want to by any means compare it to a person who has gone through any sort of injury or illness because it's not fair at all – but that sense of time stopping – almost this loss of memory from this shock. I can kind of remember it, but it just was this very numbing experience. It's just too surreal. You cannot believe that this is happening. You're going through the motions because certain things have to be done. My kids had to be put in school, I had this little apartment, and I had to get it furnished, and so I did those things.

RH: Tell me about the decision-making process with your kids and the school.

TW: Well, and I don't want to sound bitter, though I am still really rather bitter about it. [laughter] My ex-husband and I got along extremely well until he got remarried. Then,

things didn't go nearly as well. I was there because when my sister was there, and he was going to be there – and so that we could kind of be with the kids together. But there was no – I didn't feel any sense of – we need to work through this together. I really felt like I was kind of over there, and we can't worry about you. We have this big family, and we're all going to kind of band together. There you are over there.

RH: So, he doesn't have other children with his –

TW: No. There aren't a lot of schools up in Shreveport. It's not like there were a lot of choices. I have nieces and nephews who had gone to school, so the schools – you kind of knew where they needed to go, so we just kind of put them there.

RH: Were they in public school here?

TW: No. My two youngest are at Country Day, and my oldest is at Franklin. We got there, and I actually put my oldest in a Catholic school, which was really, for us, kind of funny. Then, my two youngest went to a private school, very similar to Country Day. It's a school that their father had gone to, their grandmother had gone to, nieces – cousins, aunts, uncles, everybody went to this school. But it only went through eighth grade, so they were there, and then my oldest was at a Catholic school.

RH: What was her experience like, and what was your experience like having her at a Catholic school?

TW: She loved it, actually. She did. She's always had a bit of trouble making friends. She could kind of go in – and I think that's one of the things that kids don't recognize. We were stars. I mean, everywhere people went, across the world, they were stars. I try and tell my children that it wasn't reality. That if we were to pick up now and move to some city, we're not going to be welcomed with open arms. They're not going to walk into school and have all the kids go, "Oh wow, you're here. We're so excited." You're going to be held to the same standards. And all those things that they weren't. My daughter

also really liked it because she's at Franklin, which is an extremely hard school. She's very bright, but so is everybody else there. Then she was in a school where it's a very good school, but she was – she was the star not only because she was Katrina, but because of the education that she'd had was so good.

RH: She was so far ahead.

TW: She was so far ahead, yeah. That feels good to be the one getting the highest grade in all your classes.

RH: Was there a Jewish community there that you –?

TW: There is a very – because my sister – there's a history in Shreveport, and my ex-husband's family has been there for years. The Jewish community that's there is – and again, that was awkward because they were all very – there's this big, huge family there. It's all very well connected and all close.

RH: How big is the family? Do you know?

TW: When I talk about big, it's not like any one individual family unit is big, but they're close with fourth, fifth, sixth cousins. It's just this –

RH: Southern.

TW: – Southern Jewish clan. I grew up in this little family. My father had one brother; they had no children. My mother had no brothers and sisters. We were like this little pea. So, this big family was there. I mean, the Jewish community was lovely. It's very small. Very, very small.

RH: Is there a synagogue?

TW: There are two. There is a Reform temple, and then there is a Conservative synagogue.

RH: And is your sister and your ex-husband's family –

TW: Very Reformed.

RH: Very Reformed.

TW: Very Reformed.

RH: Your sister too?

TW: Yes. I went over to the Conservative synagogue. That was actually – that was kind of my little space because that wasn't a spot that that family had been – ever really been much a part of. It was kind of nice to have that little space that I felt like I could – that I could be me, and I didn't have to – I wasn't constantly Jim's ex-wife. Well, that's the ex-wife. That's the one over there. [laughter]

RH: Did you go to the high holidays there?

TW: Well, actually, what I did for Rosh Hashanah – Chabad here – the Chabad community kind of split between Houston and Memphis. So, for Rosh Hashanah, they got a hotel in Monroe, Louisiana. Then, they bused people in from Memphis, and they bused people in from Houston. While I was never much of a Chabad community, when I saw this, I thought, that's what I want to do. It was an hour away from Shreveport. So, I took my kids, and we went there for Rosh Hashanah. It was really wonderful to see people from New Orleans, to feel like we were all kind of coming together. It was a really, really nice experience.

RH: I heard about this. Someone mentioned it in passing and said you have to get somebody who was there to tell you about it. And you were there.

TW: It was really amazing because this was a hotel which was also a FEMA shelter. So, you had this very large group of people who were about as far away from the Jewish community as you could get. That was occupying one part of the hotel. Then we were occupying another part of the hotel. The discrepancy was just – it was almost funny. These just two completely different walks of life from New Orleans in this one hotel. But they had all the kosher food. They had these big, refrigerated trucks that they brought in with all the kosher food so that we could eat. Breakfast, lunch, and dinner. It was all there. They took over one of the banquet rooms and made a little sanctuary. They brought the Torahs and created a – it was like a retreat. It was the first time that many people had seen each other. Certainly, the first time that many of the people from Houston had seen the people from Memphis and vice versa, and that emotional connecting again – even people you weren't necessarily that close to here. Just to see familiar faces, people who were going through the same thing. That same feeling of being displaced and trying to carve out a little bit of normalcy in there. It was really heartwarming. I really enjoyed it.

RH: So, how long were you there?

TW: I was only there for the first night and first day because Rosh Hashanah is actually two days, but I left late in the afternoon of the first day.

RH: Were there any other events that you partook of?

TW: That where people were kind of coming together?

RH: Yes.

TW: No. There weren't any that I took part of other than that one.

RH: What was the service like? Who led the service?

TW: It would have been the same people – the rabbis – the Rifkins were there. This was also nice because here in New Orleans, there's the uptown Chabad, and there's the Metairie Chabad. There's no competition between the two, but because on the holidays, you can't drive – holidays and Shabbos are very separated, you can't connect with each other. To have everybody together in one room was really kind of nice too because that's not an experience that they get all that often.

RH: That's true.

TW: Then we took time to kind of go around the room and talk about what we were thankful for. (Sora?) Rifkin, I remember, was talking about how we've been handed this really unique opportunity because, so often in life, we take things for granted so many times. We realize we've taken them for granted when we have lost it and can no longer get it back. But here was an opportunity where we might have been taking things for granted. We had lost it, but we can rebuild, or we can – we have an opportunity to come back and try and make it more meaningful another time. It's not gone forever. I thought that was interesting.

RH: Does that feel like the experience upon coming back?

TW: No. I wish it did. Because when you say it, and in that venue, it's very kind of spiritual, and it sounds great. But then you come back, and it doesn't feel that way at all. Especially when you first come back. It was just so hard to live here. It was just not easy. Everything took so long – services, the main service of life, the electricity, and the water, and the this and the that. Everything – just kind of difficult. I also am one of these people – and I am ashamed to admit it – I don't love New Orleans. I don't have that – "Oh, I can't wait to rebuild New Orleans" spirit. I wish I did because I think it's easier for people who feel that way. But I don't. I'm here because my kids are here, and their father is here, and now my husband's children are here, and his ex-wife is here. That's why we're here. If we could all – this whole group of people all decide to go somewhere

else, I would. But I can't. That's why I'm here. While I think it's a great city, and it's a historic city, and it deserves the national attention and the national dollars to save it, I personally don't have a huge love for it.

RH: What makes life here difficult for you? Not just Katrina, but even before Katrina.

TW: My main problem –

RH: Complaint.

TW: – there's no topography. There's not a hill. I grew up in the mountains. I went to school near the mountains. I want a hill. I want a something. I'm going, in just a few weeks, we're going to Glacier National Park in Montana. I need that mountain fix. I need something. And it's isolated. So, if I can get in my car and drive two hours, three hours, and be somewhere really cool. That would be fine. But you drive two or three hours in any direction, and you're still in water. You go one way, and you'd be in the Gulf; you go another way, you'd just in the marsh. It's just so far from everything else.

RH: It's true. You're right.

TW: It's just not easy. In so many other ways, I think it's great. It's got amazing culture and great food if you can partake in it. It's really pretty. I mean, just sitting here looking out at the oaks and when the streetcar runs, and that's something that we all miss a lot. But it's just so isolated.

RH: Did you miss New Orleans, or did your kids miss New Orleans while you were in Shreveport?

TW: My kids did miss part – there were things about New Orleans that they missed very much. They had a very good experience, and they had good friends that they made up there, which was nice. They had so much family, and that was nice to be around for

them, all the family. I don't think they realized how much they missed it until they came back, and it just – for them, it just really – it fits them. Now, my oldest daughter says how she doesn't like New Orleans, and she's going to leave, and she wants to get out. That's fine. I think, though, New Orleans does have a way, particularly for children who were raised here – they take a lot for granted. They don't realize how special some of the things that we have – all the festivals that we have. Mardi Gras and Jazzfest and the restaurants and the oaks, and the streetcar. I don't think they recognize. Even my children, who have traveled extensively, don't recognize that other cities don't have the character that New Orleans has. I think when they start to make their way in the world, wherever they settle, they will start to realize that New Orleans has a character – has a vibrancy in some way that other cities don't have.

RH: Tell me about coming back and when you first came back.

TW: It was really hard because I was so alone. Now my boyfriend was – they settled in Silver Spring, Maryland, he and his ex-wife. Do you know the area?

RH: I did the interview.

TW: Oh, you did their interview with Karen.

RH: Karen.

TW: Okay. So, that's where they were. Even their divorce. They had each other to work with.

RH: She did want to make it clear they never lived in the house at the same time together.

TW: They did at times, and that was fine. I didn't have a problem with that. To me, I thought the whole thing was kind of silly. I mean, why not? I mean, I didn't have

problems with that. But there was this kind of common – they were working together in a way that I just didn't have. So, when I came down to check on my house, I came down by myself, which was a horrible mistake. Because to stand there and look at your home all by yourself and see it like that, and just the helplessness that I felt was overwhelming. Just the gargantuan task of – I don't even know how to do this. So many people have fathers or brothers or friends and husbands. They have this group of – it doesn't have to be male, but you have to have strength to get this house cleaned out. They had this kind of group of strong people who could come in and help. I didn't have any of that. My father was eighty-five years old, and no brothers and brothers-in-law – well, that was all that family.

RH: The other family.

TW: The other family. I just felt completely overwhelmed, with no kind of clue of how to even – how to even begin to do this. Also, being up in Shreveport, there were very few – there was no other Jewish evacuee up in Shreveport that I was aware of. I also missed out on that whole kind of word-of-mouth stuff. Like, “Well, we're doing this.” People who were in Houston or in Memphis were getting together frequently. “Well, I'm doing this, and I'm doing that. Have you heard of this person?” There was a lot of transference of information that I, being up there, completely missed out on and didn't get. That felt isolating as well.

RH: When did you first come back?

TW: To live or the first time I came back?

RH: No, just to come back –

TW: My daughter's bat mitzvah was September 24th, and I came back the following weekend. September 30th was the first – or October 1st was the first time I came back.

RH: You didn't even bring your oldest back with you.

TW: I didn't. I should –in hindsight, again, or I have a dear friend in Chicago who I know if I called him on the phone, he would have said, "Absolutely," and would have come down with me. But I didn't realize how difficult it was going to be. Again, just kind of flying by the seat of your pants. I don't know. I just came down. I came down because I thought that's what I was supposed to do. When I opened up my house, and how dead the city was. I mean, it was so dead.

RH: Are there any places you drove around to?

TW: I drove all around. I think I ended up at Cooter Brown's. I think Cooter Brown's was open. I am not a bar person, but I went in and had a couple beers because people were there. There were people in Cooter Brown's, and I needed to be around people. Because my neighborhood was gone. I mean, nobody was there. There was no sounds of construction. There was no activity. There was nothing. Absolutely nothing.

RH: Did you spend the night or –?

TW: No, because my ex-husband, whose house – he didn't lose a blade of grass, wouldn't let me spend the night in his house. Said, "No, you cannot." I didn't have – know anybody else I could call. So, I didn't.

RH: Do you know why he said no?

TW: Because he's a [inaudible] –

RH: Okay. Never mind.

TW: We're being recorded.

RH: That was an unfair question. So, you had to leave immediately?

TW: Well, I stayed. I cleaned out my refrigerator, which was futile. I ended up having to trash it anyway. But I had to do something. I had to do something. I was downstairs. I took a few cushions out to the trash. It was just so kind of pathetic. But I couldn't have driven down there and not accomplished something. I cleaned out my refrigerator, which was just horrific. My middle daughter's birthday had been the weekend we left, and she wanted brisket. I got a brisket, cooked this brisket, but we didn't eat all the brisket, so it was in the refrigerator – just awful. In fact, I was scared of my refrigerator up in my little apartment for three days. Like I couldn't go near it because the sights and the smells were just too fresh in my mind.

RH: The first case of refrigerator post-traumatic stress.

TW: It was. I'm looking at the refrigerator, going, "I can't open that. I know what's in there." I'll tell you what: I'll never evacuate again. Other people have got these evacuation – they've got whole file cabinets with their papers. I'm not that organized. I know I'll never be. But I will never evacuate again without putting all my food in garbage bags and sticking it back in the refrigerator. That is one thing that I will do. Then you can just toss it.

RH: I do want to go back again to – and I guess since you came in and went back, it's okay for us to do this. Your daughter was supposed to have a bar mitzvah at Shir Chadash?

TW: At Shir Chadash. It was really interesting. This is the daughter that was born during Hurricane Andrew. So, her birthday was on the Friday before Katrina. We always do kind of birthday weekends. We were supposed to go tubing on Sunday – the Sunday we evacuated. We didn't get to do that. Then there were a group – this whole – I talked about this kind of vibrancy. There was this whole group of people who our daughters were scheduled to be bat mitzvahed one weekend after another. Four straight weekends. We'd been going to shul every Saturday for a year as these girls got ready,

all sitting together, and the girls sat together. Then we all left. All of them had to kind of scramble and redo and find. What made my daughter's story just a little interesting was – one of the first things I did was a called the Conservative Rabbi up in Shreveport and said, "What are we going to do?" My daughter was hysterical. "I can't do it. I don't want to do it. We're not doing it." I said, "We have to." It's very date-specific because she learned that week's stuff. So I said, "If we don't, that weekend it is going to come; it's going to be like an elephant in the room. We're all going to know what's supposed to be happening. We're going to do this." They were lovely. He worked with her. His wife did the luncheon for us. Many, many people in the Jewish community were going to come to support her. Hurricane Rita blew through that morning, and the weather was horrific. Just awful. The wind, the rain. They were telling people don't go outside. Stay in. It was storming outside while she was trying to do this. We went forward, but not only did we not get to do it here with all her friends, then all the people in Shreveport who were going to come out to support her didn't. It was this very small little group of people.

RH: Kind of immediate family.

TW: Immediate family and my boyfriend flew in. So, it was lovely. It was lovely. But not really what she – that any of us had hoped for.

RH: How did she do?

TW: She did fabulously. I have a Torah that it was my great grandmother – my great grandparents' wedding Torah that made it out of Germany, that was used for my first daughter's bat mitzvah, we used it. It was stored at the day school in Metairie. I had no idea what had happened to this Torah. The Rabbi up in Shreveport took it upon himself to find out – to find this Torah – and it had gotten rescued with a number of the other Torahs. It was brought to Baton Rouge. I drove down to Baton Rouge and picked it up and brought it back so that she could read out of this Torah. So, that was just kind of neat. The path that this Torah has taken from Germany, out of – smuggled out of Nazi

Germany to England where it sat in a shul for forty years, and then brought to me here, and then to Baton Rouge. It's still up in Shreveport, actually.

RH: Tell me one more time. It was your –

TW: It was my great-grandparents' wedding Torah. The Karlabach family.

RH: Wow, that's really something.

TW: Yeah, that was nice.

RH: It's made its way back here.

TW: It has not, actually.

RH: It hasn't?

TW: It's still up in Shreveport.

RH: It is?

TW: Yeah. I need to go and get it and bring it back down. I'll wait until hurricane season is over.

RH: Good idea. Who did you keep in contact with within this kind of isolated situation that you were in at Shreveport? I mean, how did you keep in –?

RH: Well, I didn't so much. Certainly, I talked to my boyfriend frequently. There were a few close friends, but I just felt like everybody was kind of dealing with their own things and dealing with their own issues. I tend to be very shy. It wasn't like me to – I'm not going to put myself out there. I have a difficult time kind of making that first step of contacting people. A lot of the isolation that I felt was of my own doing, I'm sure, because I wasn't making contacts and trying to get in touch with people. When I would, it was

nice, but I just always kind of got the sense that every – I mean, everybody was trying to figure out their own lives too.

RH: This friend in Chicago was an old friend?

TW: It was a college friend.

RH: College friend.

TW: Yeah.

RH: Were you in touch with any of the couples from Shir Chadash who also had their bar mitzvahs – bat mitzvahs?

TW: I was, and I thought about going to some, but it just all seemed so difficult. I'm sure if you look at the symptoms of depression, you could check off – life seemed difficult. That nap I had to take every afternoon because I just was exhausted. I just wanted to sleep away and not deal with life. I could take care of my kids; I could do that. But everything else just seemed so overwhelming. I didn't even know where to begin. How do you even start?

RH: Did you think about at all the issues of race when you first saw the TV and the fact that the Superdome or the convention center? Did you have any impressions about –?

TW: Well, I am an economist. In addition to teaching at Tulane full-time, I do a lot of consulting work. A lot of the consulting work that I had done before the storm was for Total Community Action. I was intimately aware of the levels of poverty in this community because that was the bulk of the work that I would do. I did their reports on their VITA [Volunteer Income Tax Assistance] sites. They provide tax return sites and the earned income tax credits. I did a lot of that reporting. In doing that, I knew the census like the back of my hand, of the income levels of different neighborhoods around.

So, the level of poverty was not a surprise to me at all. I never thought of it in terms of race. It certainly is racial. But I believe in many ways that the issue of race goes back a lot of generations, and now it's just an endemic problem within a population. But I don't believe that because they were Black, they did not receive the help they needed. They were poor, and they didn't have a voice, and they didn't have any power. They happen to be Black. But I don't think it was the color of their skin that created that problem. I think it was their poverty and their lack of education, and their lack of voice and any kind of power in knowing how to work the system that created such horrible conditions.

RH: At least in the immediate aftermath, do you think there were ways to work the system?

TW: I don't think there were, but I also think they wouldn't have known. This is a group of people that are so poorly educated. We often talk about this idea in this country that you can – for instance, you can take a bright child from one socio-economic group, from living in poverty, say, and pluck them out, and put them in this great school, and give them a great education, and that's what they need. But you can't do that because there's too many unwritten rules in life that you don't know. You don't know how to do it. They know things – this group living in poverty that I don't know. I don't know the public transportation system. I couldn't tell you how to get from one spot to the next on the bus. That's a group of people that could. I know my middle-class rules. Then there's this whole group of extraordinarily wealthy people who could tell me the best restaurant in Paris and the best flights to whatever. I don't know that. There's a knowledge base that different socio-economic groups have, and we just – because nobody ever taught us these things, we assume that it's intuitive. But it's not intuitive. So, for us to say, "Well, why didn't you just leave?" Because we know how to read the map and pick up a phone and try and make a hotel reservation or how to do that somehow implies that another group of people can do the same thing, and they just can't because it's not part of what they – of their knowledge base. So, it's that poverty and that lack of experience and

education that created the mess. Even so, I think, and I'm quite sure that in the immediate aftermath, it was that much more difficult to work the system. I think you still could have. I think there's ways that you could have – if you have some experience, you probably could have tried to make the – your outcome a little bit better. If you had some knowledge – some understanding that maybe you could walk away from this whole group of people who are waiting for a bus. Just because somebody told you a bus is going to come, maybe it's not. Maybe you need to walk away and go flag somebody else down. You know what I'm trying to say? I just think that there's – that as we grow up and as we experience life, we learn different sets of coping skills. I always think –

RH: Do you think –?

TW: I was just going to say, I'll never forget, it was Tulane Freshman day – moving in day, on Saturday. My boyfriend walked to Chabad, and all these people were moving into Tulane, all the freshmen with their parents. Walked back, they were all gone. As we were driving out of town, we heard about this mother and daughter from Connecticut. She was going to Tulane, and they went to the Superdome. I've always wondered whatever happened to that person because I'm sure here they are. They're going to Tulane, so that already sets them at a certain socio-economic level. They're from Connecticut. The mother heard, "Oh, you can ride out the storm in the Superdome," not having obviously any concept of what the Superdome was going to be like. I've always thought about that poor mother and daughter and wondered how they fared because it would have been an eye-opening experience.

RH: Well, do you think some people – not just the knowledgebase to make a phone call and get a hotel, but didn't have the money?

TW: Beyond a shadow of a doubt, they didn't have the money, but I also know that even if you had handed them money, they just wouldn't have known how to do it. Again, I think we take so much for granted. We just assume everybody knows how to pick up the

phone and call a hotel and book a room. But you don't. Or how to get in a car, read the map, and figure out how to get out of town. So, by all means, a lot of it was money. But the problem of the money was not just the immediate money, cash on hand, but the generational poverty that created the culture that survives very well within their – what they can do – but that created the mess at the Superdome.

RH: Since we're on the topic, I'll ask you another question. What did you think of the Spike Lee movie?

TW: I actually really liked it, and I didn't expect to. I didn't watch it in installments. I watched it one whole time. It was what? Four hours? Five hours? I thought, "I'm going to do my ironing because this is really long. I'll get my ironing done."

RH: I forgot. We need to stop and change the –

[END OF AUDIO FILE 1]

RH: Okay. This is tape two with Toni Weiss for Katrina's Jewish Voices. I've asked you what you thought of the Spike Lee movie.

TW: I was saying that I didn't expect to like it. I actually had had chores I was going to do. I was going to do ironing. I figured, oh, it's something I can do for this five-hour movie. I was mesmerized. I sat and watched the whole thing. I thought it was very, very well done. I thought that the criticisms that I had heard that it focused only on one side of the story, only on the African American experience – I just didn't have a problem with. It was Spike Lee's movie, and he was allowed to focus on any part of the experience he wanted to. I didn't understand why that bothered people. If somebody wants to focus on another part of the story, then, by all means, you can do that. But this was Spike Lee's part, and I just thought that it was extremely well done. I think it gave – it certainly, I think, provided people outside of this community a very good picture of what happened, and I thought it was very good. I really enjoyed it, and it helped me see insights and

things. I remember – this was years ago – hearing a journalist talk about news and the ability to reflect. You get a better, say, coverage with weekly magazines because there's a little bit of time where you can pull pieces together, and you have a little bit of time to pull these pieces together and make a more comprehensive story than CNN or the internet, where you just have to throw it out there as fast as you're getting it in. I think one of the things that helped with Spike Lee's story was his ability to kind of synthesize what was happening and put it together in a coherent – somewhat chronological – although he had the different parts to it – story, without some of the sensationalism that you have to wade through with CNN or Fox.

RH: Tell me about – you came back, then you went back to Shreveport. When did you decide to come back to the city, and where did you go?

TW: It was never a decision. It was always just something that I just knew was going – the only thing I kind of hoped was that maybe my ex-husband would decide to stay in Shreveport, and then I felt like all bets were off. If he wasn't going to come back to New Orleans, well, then I certainly didn't have to, but I didn't have to stay in Shreveport either. Maybe then I could go somewhere else. But when he was coming back to New Orleans, I knew I had to come back to New Orleans. That wasn't a choice that I could make.

RH: Because of the kids.

TW: Because of the kids, yeah.

RH: That's interesting because I'm going to ask – you've got a very blended family now. Some people wouldn't work so hard at that. A blending of so many families. Could you tell me why you guys work so hard at that?

TW: I don't even think about it. I mean, there are a lot of things that I do where I have to struggle to do, and I have to think about why I'm doing this, but this isn't one of them. It's just what you do because these kids need their mother, and they need their father, and

he's very involved in their lives, and they spend a lot of time with him, and I certainly am not going to be the one that takes them away from their dad. There is no way in hell I would not be with my children. This is what you do. You don't have to think about it because it's not a choice. It's what it is. You just do it. I have to think often about certain ways that I'm going to conduct myself while I'm here. There might be something that flares up, and I have to make the choice to take the high road or to take the low road, or is it worth fighting over? There might be specific issues while I'm here of how I'm going to get along with different parts of this blended family. But to be here where everybody is, it's not a choice.

RH: So, you came back. Were you able to live in your house?

TW: I was able to live in my house because, again, remember it was up – my main living area was up.

RH: When did you come back?

TW: December 25th. I came back on Christmas. I figured the roads would be empty.

RH: Were they?

TW: Yeah, they were pretty empty. I came back. At that point, I had managed to get the air – I had managed to get the air conditioning replaced and the electricity back on. My downstairs was completely gutted.

RH: Who gutted it?

TW: A guy from Shreveport who wasn't really a contractor or a carpenter from Shreveport came, and he pulled a crew together and gutted the house and began to rebuild this apartment. I needed the rental income from this apartment. What we ended up doing is, as you know from Karen, they – Karen and the kids – and their kids stayed

up in Silver Spring that semester. My boyfriend came down because he had to be back at Tulane. He had an apartment on General Pershing. My tenants were coming back to Tulane. They wanted a place to stay. I felt a responsibility as their landlord, and as a mom, I felt like they needed housing. What I did was I moved my boyfriend into my house, and I moved them into his apartment.

RH: Oh, that was really thoughtful.

TW: In hindsight, I should have gotten a FEMA trailer because I wouldn't have felt guilty putting them in the FEMA trailer. I'd say, "Look, I provided you housing. You can stay in the FEMA trailer." But it worked out fine. They stayed in the apartment; he stayed with me until the downstairs was finished.

RH: How long did that take?

TW: It took forever. Because I had this guy from Shreveport who turned out to be really flaky, quality work, but just difficulty with follow-through, at one point, he said, "I just can't do this anymore." I guess he was talking to his brother, who works offshore, and I think his brother was just horrified that he was like just going to leave me in the lurch. So his brother came in and started doing some of the work and told him, "Look, you can't do that." He got ninety-seven percent of it done before he said, "I'm out of here. I don't want to do this anymore." Then I just had to finish those – that last little bit. I'm pretty sure my tenants were able to move back in July. About six months, they stayed in Gary's place.

RH: What other things have changed? What's the impact of the storm been on your life?

TW: I think that there's much more – at least I feel, a much greater sense of instability. Even now, two years out, everybody's going on about their lives, and you're finding a sense of normalcy within your own day-to-day life and a certain sense of structure. But even to this day, you put two, three people in a room together, and it still can be one of

the main topics of conversation. It's a breaking point in your life as you look back – as I look back over the last five years. It's a huge break – that Katrina. There's not the sense of continuity that you're used to having, where you just kind of had this kind of stream of conscious back there. There's a break in it. Dating things – just trying to – "Well, how long ago was that?" Everything is pre-storm, post-storm. It's a very marked point in our lives. I think it creates, at least for me, a level of instability and a certain level of insecurity – not personal security – I have plenty of those. But just with life – of just not feeling like you can breathe a sigh. You can't ever, at least for me, completely relax. Because you just realize that in a matter of twenty-four hours, everything can just get turned around. I've never been scared of hurricane season. Ever. I actually was one of those people that I found it all kind of exciting. Oh, and we'd get off of work. That's what everybody would talk about. There was like this air – there was this energy in the air. I always kind of liked it. Now, I hate hurricane season. It's not a fear for my life. I can't do it again. It was too difficult. It was too depressing and hard and isolating and all that. To think, oh God, do we have to do that again? I wonder, and as I put in that interview, I wonder what the mark on my kids' souls will be. I really wonder as they grow up and move out into the world and they're sitting around a dorm room or a cocktail party, and the conversation turns – and oh, you're from New Orleans – and somehow Hurricane Katrina – I really wonder what their take-home message is going to be, and how they're going to relate it to people. If it will affect their – I don't know – sense of security. It was interesting; my daughter was in Israel last summer, and she was up north right before the fighting broke out. They were having this tour, and this woman – she was not with any other people from New Orleans – and the tour guide from northern Israel was trying to explain to the kids what it's like to live up in northern Israel. She was saying something like, "Can you imagine what it would be like where you have very little warning and you have to evacuate your home? You don't know what's going to happen. Can you imagine what that would be like?" My daughter raised her hand, and she said, "Well, actually, yeah. Been there." That sense that you can go – leave your home and not get to come

back. My kids had it great because they didn't lose much. People lost all their possessions. That just intensifies it that much more.

RH: You said you thought your kids missed things more when they got back than when they were gone because they were in the bosom of their families.

TW: Right, I just think they recognized more of what New Orleans has to offer. I think they appreciate it a little bit more. I certainly know that my middle daughter appreciated her friends more. She made great friends up in Shreveport – and this, I really think, kind of sticks with her.

She had these friends up in Shreveport. She was the hurricane person, and oh, everybody loves you. She thought they were really close friends, and then she left and came here, and then it was as if she was never there. They kind of just went on with their lives. They never called, and they never contacted – and she would go up to visit, and they just really didn't make the time for her because the very foundation of the friendship was built on "Oh, you're the hurricane …". That's not to say they didn't like her, but it just didn't – it didn't have the grounding that she has with her friends here. That kind of stability where it's built on what friendships are supposed to be built on. On-time and common experiences and common interests and all of that that she didn't have up there.

RH: Did the storm affect your work at all?

TW: It did, but positively. Well, I had been a full-time adjunct at Tulane for years, and then they changed the rules and said that you could only be – you could only teach full-time adjunct for three years, and then you can never teach at Tulane again. I lost my job at Tulane and had to find another job. That's where I started working at this all-girls Catholic High School.

RH: Which high school?

TW: Dominican. Despised with a passion.

RH: Why was that?

TW: Well, for a lot of reasons. I grew to really kind of appreciate high school. But when you go from teaching four classes a week to full-time every day in this very rigid environment in which every movement you are making is being watched and evaluated and critiqued by the administration – where at Tulane, there's nothing – and making significantly less money doing that, it was just a very kind of difficult transition. Then we had a lot of problems because when I was up at Shreveport, I actually worked at that Catholic high school that my daughter was at, and that – when I was here, I had three jobs. I worked at Dominican full-time, I taught one class at Tulane, and then I did my consulting work. I needed all three jobs to make ends meet for my kids and myself. So, the storm comes. I have no idea about anything. Dominican continues to pay, but that's not – as I tried to tell them, they don't realize how low their pay is, that if I didn't have these other jobs, I'd qualify for government assistance. That's how low the pay is. I couldn't just do that. I got this other job up in Shreveport, teaching at this Catholic high school. That created all kinds of problems. You weren't supposed to – you weren't allowed to take another job. "We were paying you. You couldn't do this, too." I said, "But I couldn't make ends meet on just this." So, that created a lot of hostility between us. Tulane, in their reorganization, started a teaching line faculty position, which I had been telling them for years [was] what they needed. I was able to get one of those called Professor of Practice. I'm a Professor of Practice over at Tulane, which is strictly teaching three classes a semester. No research. You don't get tenure, but it's a renewable contract. I was able to get back to Tulane and do that. Then, with Lusher High School starting, I have to teach one class at Lusher. So, professionally, the storm was great.

RH: One class at Lusher High School.

TW: One class at Lusher High School.

RH: Which is a new school.

TW: It's a brand new –

RH: Is it a charter school?

TW: It's a charter school, and it's in the old Fortier campus right on Freret – and they've done millions of dollars of renovation to that building. It's an amazing building.

RH: What is it like being at a charter school?

TW: I really, really like it. In fact, I was offered a full – I was going to leave Dominican, regardless if I had another job. I just couldn't stay there. Put in applications – and I was offered a full-time position at Tulane and a full-time position at Lusher. I shocked myself into being unsure what to do. Because I had mourned this job at Tulane for so long, but I grew to really like teaching at the high school level. So, I was conflicted. I ultimately went with the more money, less hours, which was not a bad decision at Tulane. I turned down Lusher, and three days before school started, they called to see if I could just teach one class, which has worked out perfectly. I'm hoping to do that again next year.

RH: What are you teaching?

TW: I taught geometry. I'm high school math.

RH: At Tulane, you –

TW: Economics.

RH: Economics. Have you created any classes that are Katrina-related?

TW: I don't, because as my contact, I teach the intro level classes.

RH: That was a good idea. You're a professor –

TW: Professor of Practice, right.

RH: Professor of Practice.

TW: Which a lot of universities have grown to do is have some teaching line faculty and research. I don't know – so often that students – it's not the case across the board, but some of the most respected professors in the academic world are some of the worst teachers. I mean, they're doing their research. They don't want to be in the classroom.

RH: Are you back consulting at all?

TW: Oh yeah, I have a very large consulting practice. Larger than I'd like it to be. Larger than I'd like it to be.

RH: Oh, really?

TW: I don't like consulting work; it just pays really well. So, I do it.

RH: Well, let's switch gears a little bit to the Jewish community here now. I understand that you are now the president of the JCC. How did that come about?

TW: Well, I had been on the board for years, and I was positioned to become president, but not quite so quickly. The president, Weezie Margolis, at the time evacuated to Dallas and decided fairly early that she was not going to return. So, Jake Schwartz, who was the executive vice president, became president, and I became the executive vice president. He evacuated to Atlanta and decided not to come back. So, in kind of short order there, I became president. We would just kind of joke about being all fast-tracked. It was the same – and we lost twelve members of the board – people who didn't come back. I mean, that's just typical of all the Jewish leadership in town. It's not like the leadership of the JCC was anything special. Everybody lost leadership. All the agencies

and the synagogues.

RH: So tell me, what are your challenges here?

TW: What's extremely challenging is that we have now lost about a third of our Jewish population. There's a demographic study that's being conducted now out of Baton Rouge that the Jewish Federation is sponsoring. But we estimate that we're down to six thousand Jews in this community. We have an infrastructure, however, for ten to fifteen thousand Jews. So, the challenge is how to maintain that infrastructure. If you can't, how do we pare it down to be a community that we can – that's self-sustaining that we can support? But that means we're going to lose services and lose things that nobody – you never want to lose. It's going to be quite a struggle in the next few years. We have been blessed with a lot of national dollars. One thing that I – that really hit home to me was that Jews really do take care of Jews. The amount of support, not just financial but emotional and in every way of life, that the Jewish community around the world has reached out to us is unbelievable. But financially, it has helped us – it has helped us be here. We were able to open our doors in October, which we never would have done without the financial support of the Jewish community at large.

RH: Were you in contact with the JCC when it opened in –?

TW: Oh, absolutely, we had many, many telephone conferences. Arlene was in Houston, Jake was in Atlanta, [and] I was in Shreveport. We would speak. We would have conference calls frequently.

RH: So, that was kind of one way you did stay connected.

TW: That was certainly one way I stayed connected, yeah.

RH: What kind of decisions were you guys trying to make?

TW: As far as opening the doors, you know, this became a FEMA site. So, working, doing that. The level of programming that we would offer. Just how to move forward and what we should be working towards in those first few months. When we first opened, we had a number of people who came just to take showers. They didn't have showers in their home. They could come here and use the showers. I'm very proud that we were able to open as early as we were and to provide a place for people to come. The people who were back to work out. On the one hand, it seems kind of frivolous that you want to go up and work out, but it just created a little spot of normalcy for people.

RH: Did a philosophy kind of emerge of how the JCC wanted to be in the community?

TW: No, but we're really working on that now, actually. We're in the middle of a strategic plan. Most people think of a strategic plan, they say – most people think of it as being bigger than it should be, I think. Industry standard says you should think five years out. We're thinking eighteen months to two years is what we're trying to do right now because all of our national dollars stop. We stop being supported the end of this year. We're in the middle of budget meetings, actually. We had a meeting Monday night; I have meetings tonight to try and do our budget and try and make this place self-sustaining in 2008, which is going to be extremely difficult. So, as part of that, and because we recognize that we now have six thousand Jews in a community where we used to have ten before the storm. It had been shrinking for a number of years – what our priorities are going to need to be, and how are we going to continue to serve the Jewish community and the community at large in a way that we can then be fiscally responsible and do that.

RH: I guess you've heard this. I mean, is there a need for two campuses?

TW: It is a big conversation. It was a conversation that we were having before the storm. We had – in fact, right before this interview, it was actually funny. I was downstairs getting this coffee, and I was talking to the controller, and we were discussing

it because we really are right smack in the middle of our budget process. The controller was saying, "Well, were you at that meeting right before the storm? Like August 22nd or whatever, right before the storm?" I said, "No, you don't remember? I wasn't President then." I've been fast tracked. We were in the middle of seriously looking at what we were going to do in Metairie because we were not self-sustaining out there at that time. Then the storm and they have national dollars, so we were able to do it. Now we're right back where we were. What are we going to do there?

RH: Are you connected there, or you're president here?

TW: No, no, no. They're connected. They're one entity.

RH: Oh, it's one entity. So, you're president of two domains.

TW: Two domains. That's right.

RH: You have two kingdoms.

TW: Yeah, and it's made more difficult out in Metairie, too, because we have the Jewish Day School out there. Again, before the storm, their numbers – the Jewish Day School numbers had dwindled to about sixty, and we were wondering how are we going to be able to do this because it's a very symbiotic relationship between the day school and the JCC out there. The day school needs the JCC because our space in the building help keeps the overhead and the occupancy costs lower for the day school. The day school helps us because it provides kids into our programming. So, at sixty kids, we were wondering how we were going to do this. They're down to twenty-two children. If we weren't sure how we were going to do it with sixty kids, having only twenty-two kids in their day school is that much more difficult. So, it will be one of the major topics of conversation.

RH: So, there's no preview here?

TW: There's no preview here.

RH: Do you believe, or do you have any – I know there's no demographic, so I guess this would be more anecdotal than anything. Do you think a larger part of the community would move towards Metairie, or do you think a larger part is more in this part of town?

TW: You mean in the Jewish community.

RH: Jewish community.

TW: I don't know. I mean, certainly, there are a number of people who lived in Lakeview who live uptown now. I'm not out in Metairie, and I'm not at Shir Chadash, which is out in Metairie, which draws a lot from people who are in Metairie. I don't really have a good pulse on where they went. Anecdotally, I think people in uptown would say they've come here, and people in Metairie would say they've gone there. I don't think really anybody knows, and then, at one point, a huge chunk were over on the north shore. But then I read – because I think we all believed others – a bunch of people moved down the north shore. But then I read, well, at this point, the Jewish community really isn't larger there than it was before. So, I really, I don't know. I do know that we're not done losing people, though, and that's the sad thing. There are still Jewish families that are moving out of town.

RH: Why is that?

TW: Whether they always planned to, and it was a matter of finding a job – I mean, I think what happened was, in the wake of the storm, people who – there were a number – people fell into a number of different categories – people who had no interest in coming back were able to find a job somewhere else – didn't come back. People who didn't want to come back but couldn't find a job so quickly, so they came back and looked for a job. That, I think, is what's happening, is a lot of people have been actively looking for a job. Once they find it, then they're moving. Then I think there are people who move back who

really wanted to stay, but the pace of the recovery has been so slow. The government's response on all three levels has been so pitiful. A feeling that it's just not going to get better. As much as they might have liked to have made it work, they just can't. So, they're leaving.

RH: I have a few more questions. I'm trying to decide which direction to go. The Jewish community – the JCC and its relationship to the larger community, do you think you'll be more reliant on that?

TW: We're certainly going to be more reliant in terms of membership. The percentage of our Jewish members has gone down significantly, so that in order for JCC to be self-sustaining, we're going to have to rely significantly more on the general population.

RH: Does that change what the programming looks like?

TW: Well, I think it's interesting. I think it's going to be a challenge for us, and it's something that we certainly sit around this table often and talk about. You have to walk this fine line between providing services and making the community at large feel very welcome while at the same time maintaining your Jewish atmosphere, maintaining your Jewish identity, and not losing track of what your mission ultimately is, and that is to be a Jewish Community Center. But you can't alienate the general population, either. I think one of the things that – the JCC will emerge, I hope, in the community at large is a community institution because we are here because we were one of the first places to open after the storm. We did have the FEMA site here. A lot of people know about the JCC, but I think we can be an active role in the community at large and in the rebuilding of the community at large. I think that will be a real plus for us and a valuable thing that we can do for the community.

RH: Can you give me an example of what that might look like?

TW: I'm not sure. At this point, we are in talks to work with the neighborhood at large and be one of the partners to redo Danielle Park across Saint Charles. We have community meetings here. All the neighborhoods, free of charge, you can use our auditorium to hold their neighborhood meetings. We are going to be redoing our auditorium. So many of the theaters and the auditoriums were destroyed, and to be able to have a space where people can come and rent the stage and the sound equipment and so forth so that they can put on their productions. I just think that we have this facility here that the community at large, hopefully, will be able to use.

RH: How has your own Jewish identity – has it changed at all since the storm? Or your relationship to the Jewish community changed at all?

TW: Well, it certainly has changed upon getting remarried and marrying an Orthodox man. That puts me in a different part of the Jewish community than I was before. That's not storm-related, but it has occurred since the storm – and made more difficult because the fragile Orthodox community that was here before the storm is that much more fragile. A lot of the Orthodox community did not come back. Huge chunks. That's made it that much more difficult. I think for my children – I think they'll have a – I was always told growing up that the Jews will always be there for you, and it's a community that you can rely on. Well, my children have seen firsthand, and I think all the Jewish kids in this community have seen firsthand that that's really true. As they, again, as they go out in the world, I think they'll have a much stronger connection to the Jewish community and, hopefully, a much stronger sense of contributing to their local Jewish community wherever they settle because they recognize how important that is and how much you can rely on it, and how necessary it is.

RH: Did you connect with the Jewish community to get the seven hundred dollars?

TW: I did.

RH: Some people have talked about how hard it is actually to be the person who gives and suddenly have to be the one who's in a place where they need.

TW: It is. I had much more difficulty with that – not with dollars as much as, as I said, reaching out, asking for help. Coming down here by myself, I could have asked people for help, and I didn't because I'm not used to being that person that needs help. I'm used to being the one that helps other people and let me do whatever I can for you. Again, I think the good thing is, hopefully, that people will then turn around and recognize how important it is to give because at the other end of our giving is somebody who needs. Hopefully, that circle will – if you grow up and you're just always giving, and you're told that people need, but you can't really experience it, that giving becomes more difficult. But when you're on the other end, and you have to then be the receiver, you suddenly realize then how important it is to give, I think.

RH: Does being on the receiving end – has it changed how you give, what you give, or what you even think people need?

TW: Yeah, I think I was always pretty generous with my giving to the extent that I could. When I got divorced, my financial situation changed dramatically. But giving was still a top priority; I just could do it at the levels that I had done it when I was married. But yeah, I think it does. I think it does make me – it does push me to give a little bit more and to recognize the need for that. But again, I think I focus more on the non-financial, the non-monetary needs to give.

RH: Tell me about that.

TW: I've often wondered, too, I think that our children will be much more politically aware and involved in their lives because I think our children have seen firsthand how big a part of your life the government is and how helpful or how awful it can be. That when you go to the polling place, and you're voting for somebody, you really are voting for somebody.

That person really can influence your life. Positive or what they've seen for the negative. That you can't let other people make those decisions. You can't just say, “Oh well, it's just a mayor's race. What's the mayor? What can he do? He's just sitting there.” I mean, he really does impact our day-to-day lives. I think our children will certainly have seen that, and take that away, and become much more active in the whole political process than children in other communities who didn't have an opportunity to see how our public officials can affect our lives.

RH: Do you feel the Jewish community has conducted itself well?

TW: Oh, very much so. Very much so. I just think that – yeah, I mean, I've absolutely – I think it's been fabulous. Certainly, outside of the community, no criticism. In all walks, I think that the world at large has supported us and been there for us, and I think this community has taken what we need but has an – I haven't seen any kind of abuse of that. I just think that it's been a model of what can happen. I wish that other communities have that. I heard that the Vietnamese community I heard very similar to the Jewish community. I have no connection in the Vietnamese community, but I heard that they, too, had dollars pouring in from all over the world and that there was that strong sense of community. Just because you're Vietnamese, if you're living in New Orleans, or you're living anywhere, we're all part of the same kind of family. I heard they had that same kind of experience.

RH: Tell me also if your worldview has changed from this experience.

TW: I think I certainly have much more empathy for communities in the throes of problems. Before, the most – what was it, the tsunami was when? Like a year before? Or a year and a half before?

RH: I don't think it was even that long. I think it was the same summer.

TW: Was it just this – well, it was in December. The tsunami was in December.

RH: Oh yeah, that December. Yeah.

TW: It was horrible, and it was awful, but I don't think I recognized – I mean, there were people that lost their families certainly horrible. But even the people who didn't lose loved ones – how disruptive and how horrible. Just because you come from a different community, you speak a different language, and you lived differently, how disruptive that all is. I think I have much more empathy for people. [telephone rings] Oh, I'm sorry. Not just my children, but I think we all recognize the political process and how it really – our votes really do matter, and who we put in office really does matter. It does influence our lives.

RH: Do you have a different understanding of God? Can you conceptualize your understanding?

TW: No. I don't think this was – I don't happen to think this was a natural disaster. I think this was a manmade one. I've never really had this view of God as somebody who controls nature. I never really had that view before, so no, I don't think it does.

RH: Are there any Jewish concepts that have come to your mind as you go through the recovery process that you may have even learned as a child that has new meaning?

TW: No. Again, it's kind of muddy because of the difference my life has taken upon getting remarried, where it coincidentally is after the storm. But I can't say because of the storm that – except, as I've said over and over, that the Jewish community and the strength of the Jewish community and the idea of helping Jews wherever they are was brought home to me with this. But, no, I don't think it was like a new …

RH: What's it like at Anshe Sfard? Is that where you've been going?

TW: Yeah, I'll go occasionally. It's really small. They lost a lot of members because it was an old congregation. And it didn't have very many members, to begin with. But the

elderly, if they had – for the most part, if they had any health problems, they didn't come back because there wasn't – you wouldn't want to be here. So, they would go, and they lived where their children were, and they didn't come back. Anshe Sfard lost a lot of the old men. They have difficulty sometimes making a minyan, you know, getting the ten men. I go with my husband occasionally. My stepson will be bar mitzvahed there, so I'll be there. That's one of the sad things that's come out of the storm, is that I, like I said at the very beginning, I don't feel like I have a spot that's mine. I've just been recognizing – you can only do so much, and you kind of try and make your way – and I guess the recovery is happening because I'm now able to think on a more spiritual level. I guess that you're so focused on the day-to-day, the actual workings of your life, and how are you going to get this done and get that done that there's really no time to think any deeper than that. I've been lately thinking about where do my children and I fit within the structure of the Jewish community. What place of worship can we feel comfortable that we can kind of make our place in?

RH: So, you lost your spiritual home in New Orleans.

TW: I feel like I did. Yeah, I just don't feel – at Shir Chadash. It just doesn't – it's depressing, is how I feel. It just doesn't feel the same at all. So, I just need to kind of try. I don't believe I'm going to find the perfect mix. I think I'm going to have to kind of piece together little bits and pieces.

RH: What's important in this spiritual home that you've –

TW: I want a place where my children feel comfortable – particularly my son – and I think – he's my youngest. He has the hardest time. If we go to Chabad, men and women don't sit together, so he can't sit with me. So, if we're there with my husband and his kids, he can go over there. But he doesn't feel all that comfortable because he's not observant, he's not Orthodox, so he just doesn't have – he doesn't feel comfortable over there. I guess it was last Shabbos, we went there by ourselves, and he wouldn't have

had anybody to sit with. For him, an Orthodox setting is not at all comfortable. My daughters and I can sit there – we can have each other. I want to find a place that he – I also feel like he's in the most formative years. My daughters – certainly my oldest daughter at seventeen – she's got a very good foundation. A very strong Jewish identity and a sense of commitment to the Jewish identity. My next daughter is pretty strong. She's a little younger. But my son, I feel, is still in those formative years. Because his father is completely non-observant, I feel like he's still kind of teetering there, and it's important that I get him in a place that he feels comfortable, that he feels positive about, that he views being Jewish as a positive experience because I don't think he has viewed it as a positive experience lately.

RH: Is there a Sunday School he can go to?

TW: There is, and he was, but it was kind of depressing because there weren't really any kids.

RH: At Shir Chadash.

TW: Yeah. Then there was Hebrew school, but I didn't send him last year because it's all the way out in Metairie, and that was difficult. He dances ballet, and that was important to him. But he doesn't do all that well academically, so to take up yet another afternoon for him to do that, and I didn't want to give up the dance for the Hebrew. We didn't do that, which I don't regret the decision, but it was just one less part of his life then that was Jewish. I need to find – it's kind of one my goals for the fall – is to find a place where – that we can all feel comfortable. Where he can have a positive experience and think, oh, this is good. That, if I said, “We're going to services,” he doesn't go, "Ugh," and rolling around on the floor, complaining.

RH: Got you. Tell me if any of your priorities have changed since the storm.

TW: Yes, absolutely. I care much more about, and I've worked so much harder at being President here, about the Jewish community at large. I certainly took part, and I gave my money, and I was on the board of the JCC, but I didn't have such a strong sense that it's really important that we have to work to maintain a Jewish presence and a Jewish life here. That has certainly changed. I feel even more strongly –, and I always did – but even more strongly that your life are the people around you and that your home – the physical part of your home is not nearly as important as the family, and that you – it's very important to maintain those relationships and those connections. I think I feel more committed to reaching out to other people and trying not to be quite as shy because, ultimately, I felt like it left me very lonely, and I don't want to do that. I want to have those outside connections a little bit stronger in my life.

RH: I guess this kind of follows on the same thing – things you've learned about yourself through this.

TW: On one hand, I'm stronger than I thought I was, and on another hand, I'm a lot weaker than I thought I was. I like to think that I was the single mom that could just get in there and do it, and I'm not. I'm not that person that they show on TV that can do everything and isn't fazed by hardships. That just plows through them. That's not me. I spend a lot of time in bed up in Shreveport. I'd like to think that I was, but I'm not. Therefore, I need people in my life. On the other hand, I did make it through, and I did get my house fixed, and I did accomplish it – I did accomplish things that, back in September and October of '05, I thought I was never going to be able to do. I did it. So that was really good. But I didn't do it easily, and I didn't do it with grace, and I didn't do it happily. I don't get a sense of satisfaction – I didn't get anything out of it except that it had to get done, and I was able to do it.

RH: So, if you could change some things, what would you change?

TW: If I could go back?

RH: Yeah.

TW: If I could go back, I would have certainly – I certainly wouldn't have stayed in Shreveport. That would have been number one. I think that that just kind of also – it created – it worked on itself. It was almost a snowballing effect being there. I would have found a community – I would have tried to have put Ben in a community that had more – either more New Orleanians where we could kind of work together, and I could be part of that community. Or, like I said, I would have gone somewhere really different and had a really unique experience.

RH: Like Israel or Switzerland?

TW: Like Israel or yeah. Or France or anyplace, just to go. I think the biggest thing I would have done was reached out for help and not let myself be so alone. But asked for people to help.

RH: What do you think the presidency of the JCC is giving you?

TW: An unbelievable opportunity to do something big. I think this is an extremely – exciting isn't the word that I would use – but important time in the history of the JCC to figure out – it's a different world. It is a different world now than it was four years – three years ago. In reality, it's a different world than it was ten years and twenty years ago, but we didn't see it as – it was a little more gradual. It's a very different world, and I think this is a really important time in the JCC and in the Jewish community, in Jewish communal life, in the different Jewish organizations to figure out who we are and what our priorities are and we need to be in the years to come. I think to be a part of that is an incredible opportunity. I feel very lucky to be able to do that. I'm blessed to have Arlene Barron as the Executive Director because she's just a phenomenal woman. I don't think the Center would be where it is under anybody else's direction. It always amazes me because she's just the sweetest, warmest, loveliest woman, and yet she has this mind – I mean, she's

just able to see things – and she has a strength. I guess that's what I'm trying to say. She has the strength that you don't see right at first. Then it comes out, and you're like, well, wow, she just really is an amazing person and with a great sense of humor, so she's fun to work with.

RH: Well, what are you most grateful for?

TW: I think I'm very grateful for my family. I'm very grateful that my husband was able to come back and that we can start this life together. It feels really good. I don't talk about it because it sounds like the wrong reason to get married – that you got married because you didn't want to be alone. I don't like to go there, but to be able to have this other person in my life that we – I can go from here and move forward and I'm not alone and that from now on – it's not the same as a young couple starting out, building this family together. We have different children, and we have different needs. So, it's not a complete meshing, and I don't necessarily know if you want it to be. But to be able to now start to build this life, and to kind of have dreams together and work towards goals together, I'm very grateful for – I feel very blessed that I'm in this position now, that I can do this.

RH: Is there anything you took for granted before?

TW: I certainly took for granted the Jewish institutions. I work here at the JCC. I don't work here, but this is where I've centered. I don't have an interest so much in working at Shir Chadash. I'd love to see other people do it, but at all the different Jewish organizations, I just kind of all assumed they'd just all be there. They'd just all be there. I know they won't be. I certainly took that for granted. I took my public officials that they would just do the right thing. I don't mean the right thing. I despise the President, and I don't mean the right thing in all venues, but just on a personal level. People's personal lives would – the right things would be done. That's clearly not the case. Just the whole political process, I think I took for granted. And we can't. If you want something done,

people are just going to have to do it themselves.

RH: That's a lesson.

TW: Yeah, a huge lesson. A huge lesson. I think it's one of the reasons that people are so discouraged with the progress here because I think that individuals and different organizations have taken it almost as far as you can take it. That the bureaucrats have got to step in at some point. There's things that we can't do. We can't fix the roads. We can't fix all the lights. They're still not all done. There's a point where you can only take it so far. Because of the way that the structure is – because we have this government in place and we have all these restrictions, and we have all these problems, private organizations and individuals can only go so far, and the government's got to come in. There was an article in the paper the other day – I thought it was so interesting looking at the different schools and how the private schools in one neighborhood – did you see this?

RH: No.

TW: They're up and running. The public school is so mired in bureaucracy; as much as the parents want to get in there and clean it out and get it up and running, they can't because –

RH: I did see that. They weren't allowed to even clean the school. FEMA wouldn't let them go in.

TW: So, you can only go so far before you bump up to the bureaucracy.

[END OF AUDIO FILE 2]

RH: Okay. I just had a few more questions, but I just felt like I wanted to ask them. One is you were just talking about what you were grateful for. I also wanted to know what you

think now that you've looked at your home, and it was a disaster, and you've reconfigured your home both with your family and the house you built. What does home mean to you?

TW: I was never a material person. When I say materialistic, not just did I not want a lot of things around me, I never really cared that much for the things around me. If you saw my home, you would certainly understand. I'm not fastidious at all. You know I have certain things that have meaning to me or I particularly like, and I want to keep them nice and proceed. But for the most part, objects mean very little to mean. So, if anything, it's even that much less and that it's the human – it's the family, and a home is wherever you are with your family. You can make that home anywhere. If you're all together, you can make it work, and you can make it comfortable, and you can make it a place where people laugh, and people cry, and they're comfortable doing that. I think I would have arrived – certainly would have arrived – I think that it would have been a longer – what's the word I'm trying to think of? It would have been a greater discrepancy pre-storm and after the storm if I didn't feel or have those feelings a lot before, anyway. It's just much stronger now. We just got new leather couches, and I have this cat that – he was our cat before, and my husband was like, "He's going to scratch the couches." I said, "Well, I hope not, but maybe, but they're just couches." We all love this cat. That's more important than the couches.

RH: Is there anything you have a sense of relief about?

TW: I am very relieved that my children came through it as well as they did – I don't see any fears, I don't see any insecurities, I don't see any – I don't see any psychological damage. Like I've said before, I think it'll be really interesting to see – you can't go through this without it affecting you. I don't think everything that they've come away with is necessarily positive, but I don't think that anything they've come away with is detrimental to them. I'm very relieved that we were able to get through this with their kind of psyches intact. I hear about children who, when it rains, get so nervous, or when they

start to hear thunder, they get very scared. My children don't have – they don't have that at all. For the most part, they came out fairly unscathed, and I'm very, very grateful for that.

RH: They're back at school with their friends.

TW: They're back at school with their friends, yes. I am very grateful that we have – that enough people came back to the JCC, and they came back to the Jewish community here at large – enough Jews came back to New Orleans that we have something that we can work with – that we can – it will be different, and it will look different, but there's enough critical mass of people that we can create a community and make it what it's going to be. I'm very grateful for that.

RH: Have you headed in any new directions since the storm or even because of it?

TW: What do you mean by new directions?

RH: I guess you were going to get married anyway, and that's certainly a new direction.

TW: True. In fact, it kind of postponed it.

RH: Now you're president.

TW: It postponed it for probably about a year. Now I'm president and I have a different job than I had.

RH: I guess any personal goals that are different.

TW: I've talked in different ways about maybe different sets of priorities. I think that I will find my energies used in different ways. I suspect that I'll be much more involved in the political process than I ever was. Or at least take more of an interest if I'm not out passing out pamphlets. I think I'll work harder for the Jewish community and for the

institutions. In so many ways, I fell into it. I fell into being on the board of the JCC. I didn't really give it much thought; I just kind of fell in there, and I kind of worked my way through, and I didn't think about it so much. I think I have a better understanding of what the work means and how important it is.

RH: That's interesting you just said that because I was trying to decide whether to ask this question. I often hear women say they've fallen into this. They look back at their careers, and it was a pattern. But on the way up, it wasn't a direct – "I'm going to do this, this, this, and this, and this." I was wondering if you've seen, in this entire process, a gender difference in roles and responsibilities or coping skills.

TW: Well, it's really hard because I did it for the – a lot of it alone, so I didn't have a husband there or whatever to see those kinds of differences. I don't think I'm really in a position to see that. If you look at – just kind of anecdotally, I mean you have the Women of the Storm – you have these – some of these grassroots that seem to be more female-driven than some of the other. But I don't know if that's true or if I'm just not necessarily as aware of some of the – the organizations that are kind of more driven by men maybe aren't as –

RH: You see more female leadership in the Jewish community than you would expect from another community?

TW: No. I don't know if it's necessarily the storm. Right now, we have – four of the synagogues all have female presidents, which is kind of an interesting – but I don't know if that's – I don't think that's because of the storm. I think that's a sign of the times than due to the storm. It might be due to the storm, like myself, because other leadership has gone. But it's not that I don't think that women kind of stepped up to the plate more than men. I don't think that's necessarily the case.

RH: That's interesting – sign of the times. That's a good way to put it.

TW: I think women just have a much bigger role in communities and in leadership than they had, certainly, when I was growing up. Women could be head of the Sisterhood when I was growing up. I think that's very common, kind of this falling into this role for women a lot in my generation. I fell into this life. I was kind of the hippie in college. To find myself – I woke up one day and found I was living in a suburb, driving a Suburban, and I had three children and this big house. I woke up thinking, "How did I get here?" Giving all this money to Jewish Federation and being on the board of the JCC. It was just such a – different from where I would have thought that I was headed. So, a lot of my personal growth – that's part of it too, is that the storm – just a few years before that, I was divorced. There's a lot of personal growth that comes from that. I can't – some of the things – I mean, I've kind of focused on the storm here, and a lot of my personal growth, I think, also came from just being divorced and kind of having to make my own – and figure out who I am and what's important to me. Working for the Jewish community was something that I fell into as part of marriage to this wealthy Jewish man, who wasn't religious at all, but that always had community involvement. I never took it on as my own. It's now my project. It was just really interesting. When I was married previously, we would give all this money to Federation, and that's what we did. We were invited to the big – that kind of upper echelon of giving. I always felt a little bit like a fraud. I never knew really what I was doing. I grew up in a very low-middle-class environment. After becoming President of the JCC, I had to take part – I was invited to one of these upper – when I think of upper echelon of giving Federation events. It was very surreal because it was a group of people that I had been with when I was married, but I always felt like I didn't belong. Now I'm back, but I'm back because of me because I'm President of the JCC. Not because of who I'm married to, not because of the money he can give, but because of the contributions I'm making. It was very empowering to realize that it was about who I am and not who I was just married to. Not this life that I just kind of fell into, but because of choices that I personally had made and directions that I personally decided to take.

RH: That's very interesting. I think this is a good place to stop. I just want to know if there's anything you feel like you want to add that we haven't talked about.

TW: No, I mean I feel – and I told you this before – I think there are other peoples' stories out there that are much more dramatic, who lost more, who struggled more, who've made bigger contributions. I just feel like I'm one little bit of the whole big picture, and that my story – I had water, but I didn't lose as much. I evacuated, but I had some family to go to. I just feel like my little personal story isn't as dramatic as other people's. I don't know. I guess I feel like I hope this wasn't a waste. [laughter]

RH: This was not a waste at all. This was an excellent interview, and I really appreciate it.

TW: Well, thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]