Roselle Ungar Transcript

ROSALIND HINTON: This is Rosalind Hinton interviewing Roselle Ungar at the Goldring/Woldenberg Jewish Community Center in Metairie --

ROSELLE UNGAR: Jewish Community Campus.

RH: Jewish Community Campus.

RH: Thank you.

RU: Jewish Goldring/Woldenberg Jewish Community Campus.

RH: Community Campus in Metairie, Louisiana. Today is Wednesday, August 30th, 2006. I am conducting the interview for the Katrina's Jewish Voices Project of the Jewish Women's Archive and the Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life. Roselle, do you agree to be interviewed and understand that the interview will be video recorded?

RU: Yes.

RH: Thank you. Let's just begin with basics. If you don't mind, we've got your name, but where you were born, and if you don't mind giving me when you were born, or your age, and how your family came to be here in the New Orleans area.

RU: OK. I was born in New Orleans on March 1st, 1957. I was born at Touro Infirmary in uptown New Orleans, so I am a native New Orleanian. My brother, who is ten years older than me, was also born in New Orleans, and my parents were originally born in New York. They both moved here towards the end of World War II due to business opportunities in New Orleans. There were very limited business opportunities for

advancement for them in New York. So, they moved to New Orleans probably in 1945, just towards the end or close to the end of the war. My father was born on the Lower East Side, and he was either born in 1912 or 1914, in that range. My mother was born in 1920 in New York, originally lived in Brooklyn, then moved to the Bronx. They met and married in New York and moved to New Orleans, and I've lived here my entire life.

RH: So, tell me a little about your pre-Katrina neighborhood, and where it is, what it's like, and why it's important to you, what you loved about it.

RU: Well, I live out here. I live about six or seven blocks away from the Campus. I live right next to Pontchartrain on a very small, little street, Rivage Court. My street itself, my one little street, did not flood.

The house behind my house, one house closer to the canal on West Esplanade, did take in a little bit of water. We were very fortunate. The levees -- I live right across the street from the levee.

The levee is very high in my neighborhood. The levee was not breached in my neighborhood. Out here in Metairie, the majority of the flooding was because the canal -- they stopped the pumps. And when the pumps stopped running, the canals did not drain out to the lake, and they overflowed. A lot of people in my neighborhood have been living either not in their houses, or they've been living in trailers, but a little bit different than in actual New Orleans itself, because the average amount of water in anybody's home in my neighborhood was around 12 inches. So, it was enough to disrupt your life, but it did not destroy your home. It's a very quiet neighborhood. I've lived here for 16 years in this neighborhood, and it's very convenient. I love my home. I had wind and rain damage to -- a hurricane, it was actually hurricane wind, and wind-driven rain damage to my home. The house across the street from my house that's directly on the lake, on the levee, a tornado hit that house. So, there were pieces of that house that ended up slamming into my house, which caused the majority of the damage to my

home. I've been back in my house since October, about the 8th or 9th of October, 10th of October. My husband came back the end of September. Our house is livable. It needs work, but it's basically fine, and in that respect, I was very fortunate because I was able to come back to my home.

RH: So, are there any, in your neighborhood, any routines, anything that you like to do. Any --

RU: I loved walking on the levee. I always enjoyed walking on the levee, especially when the weather's nice. Right now, it's 120 degrees outside, so I don't want to walk anywhere except from the air-conditioned building to the air-conditioned car. But especially when the seasons would change, would enjoy walking out on the levee. Well, we built our home 16 years ago. From the second floor of our home, we were actually able to see Lake Pontchartrain.

Because over the years, they've been raising the level of the levee, you can no longer see the lake from the second floor of my home now. You have to get practically up onto a roof to actually see the lake. So, that's one of the changes that's occurred in my neighborhood since I moved into it. That's kind of sad, but this year I was very thankful that they raised the levee.

They had just finished raising the levee in my neighborhood before Hurricane Katrina hit. But primarily in my neighborhood, it was convenience. I love my home. I love being in my house but didn't really do a lot of things in my neighborhood, per se. Was used to my neighbors being around, but most of my life, really, was not centered within my neighborhood. It was more centered out here in the Jewish community and other activities that I was doing.

RH: Why don't you tell me what other institutions and groups -- where your life does center>

RU: My life centers, first of all, with the Jewish Federation of Greater New Orleans. I'm currently the Interim Executive Director. I assumed that position in May, at the beginning of May, when the current Executive Director decided not to return to New Orleans but took a position as the Exec of Broward County in South Florida. I have been very active in Federation life, probably the last 20 years.

But the last eight and a half years, I've been a professional here. I am also a National Vice President of Hadassah. Been involved with Hadassah for probably 15, 20 years and have moved up into the ranks of leadership. Now, I am the second person in almost a hundred years from New Orleans to rise to this level of leadership with Hadassah, and I'm very honored, and I enjoy doing that. It requires a lot of travel. I travel once a month for that, and, of course, work takes up a lot of my life.

RH: Who was the first person?

RU: Barbara Paylett, who lives three blocks from here, and she was the National Vice President about eight, nine years ago.

RH: OK. You're living in Metairie, but it's really greater New Orleans.

RU: Correct.

RH: Are there things about New Orleans and about this region that come to mind, that engage you?

RU: I love living here. When we evacuated to Houston, I think my husband and I took maybe about five minutes of our life and said, "Well, suppose our house is underwater, suppose we really can't go home. Do we want to live someplace else?" We kind of looked at each other, and we smiled and said, "No. We really like living here." I love the culture. I love the mixing of the cultures here, the mixing of the community here. I love the fact that people in New Orleans, you can stand in line at the grocery store, and the

person in front of you and the person behind you will start up a conversation with you like they're your best friend. They might be discussing the items in your grocery basket. But everybody talks to everybody, and in so many respects, it's a big -- it's a small community, but a big community. Prior to Hurricane Katrina, we were just large enough to be afforded the opportunities of certain experiences that happen in a big community, but we were still small. I think there's nothing more special than being out on the streets during Mardi Gras and stand in the streets with everybody, where your banker can have a pair of underwear on their head Mardi Gras day, and the next they're Vice President of a bank. And you're standing next to somebody who works in somebody's house as a domestic worker.

Everybody's equal. Everybody's the same. Everybody enjoys it. I love that part of the city. I love the fact that it's a fun place. I love the fact that it never closes. It doesn't mean I'm up all night, every night, rioting the streets. But I loved that part of living here, and a lot of that right now is gone. And that's very, very, very sad.

RH: Why don't we go into your Katrina story. And when did you first become concerned about the storm?

RU: I'm the hurricane junkie in this building. I'm the one who always tells everyone when the hurricanes are coming, if we should worry, if we shouldn't worry. I was actually supposed to be in Florida the weekend that Hurricane Katrina made us evacuate from New Orleans. My trip was canceled on Wednesday of that week because I was supposed to be in Fort Lauderdale for a workshop and training all weekend. They called me and said, "Don't come, Katrina's coming. And we're not going to have the meeting." I said, "Well, that's ridiculous. It'll be over by Thursday night. I'm not coming till Saturday. Why are we not holding this meeting?" They said, "No, no." Obviously, by Thursday night, they had had enough damage, they weren't going to have power by the weekend, so I canceled my trip. But at that point, they kept saying, the Florida peninsula,

Pensacola to Apalachicola -- in that area, don't worry about it. I kind of ignored it all day that Friday.

I have a friend who lives on the west coast of Florida who got hit two or three times a year before with the hurricane, and at five to 4:00, she called me; she said, "You're it." I was sitting in my office, and I said, "What do you mean, I'm it?" "You're it! You haven't been checking because I automatically check every three hours to track the storms. And I put on the computer, and I looked it up, and I went, oh, my God, it was a bull's eye to New Orleans." I just said, "OK, gotta go." Hung up.

That was Friday at 4:00. By five after 4:00, I had a hotel reservation in Memphis, Atlanta, Dallas, and Houston. I was evacuating with my son, who's 23 years old, who at that point was not living home anymore, and his dog, my husband, and myself. So, we had to find accommodations for a dog, which we'd never done before because it's my son's dog. We've never had a dog.

RH: So, just tell me the name of your son and your husband's name --

RU: My son's name is Hal Ungar. He is now 24 years old. He, last year, was a rising second-year law student here at Loyola University. And my husband is Stanley Ungar, and he is my age -- he's also 49. And he, we've been married, last year it was 26 years. It's almost 27 years now. So, I went home that evening, and my son's girlfriend at that time was in town, and we had planned on taking them that Friday evening to the Rib Room for dinner.

I had my reservations, I was -- but we weren't going anywhere till Sunday. The reservation was going to start Sunday because that's part of the game here is that when you make the reservation, when do you think you need it? Because you don't want to book a room too early, but you want to make sure you have the rooms when you need it, and how many days do you think you need the room when you evacuate? Because for

the last few years, we've evacuated at least once, if not twice, every year. It's just been an ongoing thing. But you always evacuated for three days. So, I booked my reservations for Sunday. We booked it for three nights because usually we're gone three to four nights. We went out to dinner with my son and his girlfriend. We went to the river, and we were down in the French Quarter. We had a lovely dinner. Went home that evening, started doing a little bit of stuff in my house. We'd figured I'd take all day Saturday.

Saturday morning, I woke up, the city was freaking out. People were starting to freak out. There was tremendous traffic everywhere. It took my son four hours to go three miles to get his girlfriend to the airport Saturday. He came over Saturday evening at about -- at quarter to 4:00 Sunday morning. We walked out of my house; I packed my bags for three days like we normally do. My son took his golf clubs. He took his car. I took my car. We got in the car, and I turned the radio on, and the storm had gone from a category three to a category five. I looked at my husband, and we had spent a good part of Saturday moving pictures and photographs to an interior room on the second floor of our house. Because you can't take everything with you. I was more concerned about rising water on the first floor of the levee -- if it overflowed the levee. So, I got the stuff that was important up high and also trying to cover and protect those items that were important to me in case a tornado or something hit my house. But it was all kind of protected. I sat in the car, and I looked at my husband, and I burst into tears, which I usually do when we first pull away from the house. Then I calmed down, and I said, "Oh, my God, I packed stupid and wrong," I said. Because if it's a category five, everything we left on the first floor is not going to be salvageable.

We could lose the whole first floor of the house. Not dreaming what would happen, we got to Houston. We drove; we decided to go to Houston because they -- on the news the night before, they kept telling everybody, "If I was you, I would go to Houston. Go to Houston." I think that's why 250,000 people ultimately ended up in Houston, besides the

people from the Superdome and the Convention Center. But they kept saying, "I'd go west. Go west because the east side of the storm is the dirty side." It took us about six and a half hours to get to Houston. We checked into the hotel. My cousins were staying at the same hotel that I was staying at from New Orleans, so they were having a hurricane party in the hotel that night. We had dinner. We visited with them, didn't sleep all night, and woke up the next morning, watched the hurricane come onshore, and they kept saying, New Orleans dodged the bullet, New Orleans dodged the bullet. We decided to go to Sam's Wholesale Club that day and buy things that we figured we needed to come back to New Orleans.

Because we figured we're not going to have power for a few weeks. We have to buy those items that we'll need to eat and to clean the house. We were buying all these supplies at Sam's to bring back, and we had all the supplies. Brought them back to the hotel and went out to dinner that evening and the next morning -- my husband and my son have a tradition when we evacuate for hurricanes. The first day, usually, we watch the storm. Everything's usually OK. The next day, my son plays golf. My husband drives the cart because he doesn't play golf. And I go shopping.

That's what we do, and then we go home. It's great! Well, Tuesday morning, we woke up, and Brian Williams was on television, and he said, "Everything has changed within the last two hours." And they panned back, and they showed him standing in the central business district with water halfway above his ankle. We knew that our lives had changed. We knew if there was water in the central business district, the city's underwater. Starting at that point, I went to work. My mother lives in Woldenberg Village, here in New Orleans.

She's 86 years old now, still around, and for the hurricanes, I don't take her with me. I evacuate because I'm next to the lake, and I'm less concerned about rising water because I have a very large house -- high ceilings and I have an huge, enormous attic.

It's not a squat house attic. You could build a room up in the attic. I was never concerned about getting out of the house. I was more concerned about tornadoes.

We leave, but I leave my mother at Woldenberg because it's a very safe, secure building. They have a generator. Nursing staffs stay. Her sitter was going to stay with her, and I visited with her on Saturday, and I told her, I said, "Mom, you're going to be fine. I love you dearly. I don't want to sleep on the floor here. We're going to go away for a couple of days. I've got the dog. I'll be back by Wednesday, but you'll be fine here." Well, I thought she'd be fine. Didn't speak to her Monday. Frantically kept trying to call her sitter Monday, couldn't get through. Out of a bizarre happenstance on Tuesday, I got a phone call from her sitter, who sounded so frightened. She says, "The building's fine, we're OK, it's hot, it's dark, there's very little power in the building, and we can hear shooting outside -- because it was right next to a Wal-Mart." There was a lot of commotion. Very frightened.

I said, "Don't worry. We're going to get you out. Just stay put. I will get -- you will know -- somebody is going to come and look for you." My brother, who is ten years older than me, was in Breckenridge, Colorado. He has a second home there. I called -- I spoke to him on Sunday. He teases me on Sunday -- he always teases me around the hurricanes because I'm the hurricane prognosticator. Everyone gets nervous when I make the hotel reservations. But he always teases me about it. Even on Monday, he didn't really understand the depth and scope of the storm, just like I didn't when Katrina was hitting Florida.

I said, "Oh, if it hits Thursday, I'll be there Saturday. It'll be fine." He was supposed to fly home Tuesday night, back to New Orleans, and he said to me Monday, he says, "Oh, no, I'll get out Tuesday." And I'm like, I don't think so, Ira, and Monday night, I spoke to him, and I said, "The airport's not going to be open tomorrow, Ira." Even though we thought, at that point, we had still dodged the bullet, Tuesday morning, he sends me an e-mail

and says, I'm not getting in tonight. Could you get somebody who's in New Orleans to go over Wednesday, go over and pay the sitter tomorrow, because I won't be in. I called him up, and I said, "And what planet are you on?" I said, "Nobody's getting in. The city is underwater. Turn the TV on." Then he panicked, and he started calling me. He says, "I'm going to get an ambulance. We're going to bring an ambulance from Houston. I'm going to fly mother out. I'm going to do this; I'm going to do that, we're going to air-vac her, we're going to get a helicopter." He just got totally off the wall with me. He just really panicked. Sometime during that window, I was in the Federation office in Houston, where we had set up, at that point, a temporary command center. I called it the war room later on, but a temporary command center for the Federation.

RH: When did you do that?

RU: This was Tuesday. This was all Tuesday.

RH: You realized you were going to have to work in --

RU: We -- Eric Stillman, the Director, and Adam Bronstone, who was the Planning and CRC Director, were also in Houston. We decided, Tuesday morning when we realized that this looked like we were going to be here a little longer than we had planned, that we ought to combine forces in the Federation office in Houston. They offered to give us some space -- a computer and some phones if we needed to make phone calls. At that point, we kind of understood but didn't understand what we were getting into. But we met there, and out of the clear blue, Don Morris, who is the Director of Woldenberg Village, had spoken to Malcolm Slatko, who is the Director of Seven Acres in Houston -- he's an amazing, amazing man -- about an evacuation plan to get the residents out. I had spoken to Malcolm, and Malcolm was able to get -- and he told me, "Call Don," because his phone was working at Woldenberg. How that landline was working, I guess God was looking over them. Because nothing was working, it was like so random if you could get a call in or out, but it wasn't a landline. I'd spoken to Don. I told Don, I said, "Don, I think

I'm coming in at some point tonight. My brother's got a helicopter that's going to be waiting for us right outside the city. We're going to get an ambulance in. We're going to airlift my mother out. We're going to do this and that." Don said, "Roselle, you can't evacuate anybody at night. You hear gunfire here at night. It's not safe. I have three buses coming on Wednesday morning to evacuate everybody." I'm thinking, OK, that's good. "Don, how many people are you evacuating"? He said, "250 people, including staff and their families."

It included the remainder of the residents of the nursing home and the staff and families because, like all hospitals and nursing homes, you have to work. That's part of your commitment of your job is you have to work, but you can bring your family with you, and your pets, and your whatever. He said, "Please don't take your mother separately. I have three buses coming." I said, "Don, you can't get all those people on three buses." He says, "Well, that's all I could get." So, I hung with Don, and between the help of the Red Cross and National Guard, we were able to muster seven buses for them.

The buses arrived Wednesday morning at Woldenberg, and I couldn't get a call into my mother at that point, couldn't get a call in. But the seven busses arrived at Woldenberg. It took them about six hours to load the residents in the buses because you have to pick them up one at a time. They have to go in feet first. They had to be seated sitting up. My mother's sitter got on Don's phone and called me Wednesday with my mother, and my mother said, "Am I supposed to get on this bus, or am I supposed to wait for you to pick me up?" And I'm like, "Get on the bus!" That was at ten o'clock on Wednesday morning, and I told her, I said, "I will see you when you get in Houston. You will see me when you get off that bus. Just get on the bus, and just relax." I said, "You know, you've driven this ride to Houston. It normally takes six hours. You're going to be on this bus a long time, Mom, but I will be there."

The buses arrived at midnight at Methodist Hospital in downtown Houston. My mother had been on the bus since ten o'clock in the morning, and it --

RH: Wow.

RU: Sitting up, and she was fine. She was really OK. They evacuated all of these people, and we got to Methodist, and Malcolm Slatko was in charge of finding placement for all of the residents, so that when every -- so there were like 30 nursing homes throughout the metropolitan Houston area that just took these residents in. They each came in; they got them off the bus one at a time. I was there till about 3:30, 4:00 in the morning, assisting with the triage team that was there. They had about 150 people doing triage on these residents because they all came in, they had to do a quick evaluation. It makes you see how compromised they were if they could actually release them to a nursing home or if they had to stay in Methodist. I was assisting them because most of the residents knew me. I've been going around there for years. I knew the staff and helping them. My mother was, like, halfway through taking everybody off the buses; my mother finally got off the bus. She got off the bus, and she was looking for me. But she was OK, and I vowed, at that point, that I would never leave her again for a hurricane. I always did.

When she was ambulatory and healthy, she'd show up at my house with a suitcase, and off we'd go. But at this point in her life, she's in a wheelchair; she is totally dependent. Her mind is all there. She can use her arms, but she can't walk. She's totally dependent on the care of others to help her, and she's on medication. I really never really had to handle her that way. I have a bad back, I was worried I couldn't take care of her, but I had vowed at that point that I would never leave her. She spent one week at a very nice nursing home on the outskirts of Houston, and thanks to Malcolm, he was able to get my mother into Seven Acres, where she remained from the beginning of September until the beginning of December when she actually was transported and came back home to

Woldenberg. But it was a very stressful week for us. Starting that Tuesday morning, the day after the storm, I started working 16, 20-hour days, just doing search and rescue with the Federation staff that were with us in Houston. It was very stressful but very helpful because I felt productive. I felt like I was doing something. I wasn't just sitting or obsessing on the news, which was heart-wrenching enough. My son and my husband played golf that Tuesday. I did not go shopping. Came back that evening, and we didn't know what to do with my son because he had been in law school for a week. His classes had just begun for his second year, and he didn't know what he was going to do. He was sitting on the couch in the hotel room that we had. He says, "Well, I'm, my world, my life is a mess now. I just might have to take the semester off and not do anything." I said, "No, you have" -- he says, "I'm going to Atlanta to hang with friends." I said, "Well, you have a choice. You either get a job, or you go to school." I said, "You're not just going to hang with friends." I said, "It's not going to happen." The law school that he was at, Loyola, gave him an opportunity to go to law school in Houston if he wanted to. They were going to re-setup classes. But by that Friday, he received a phone call from them from the Dean of the law school at Emory University -- we have a family member who's an alumni from Emory. The Dean called and asked my son his class ranking and what he was involved in.

He obviously had the correct level of grades and involvement. But he offered him the opportunity to come to Emory's law school for a semester. So, that was Friday. My son told the Dean he had to think about it, and the Dean said, "Son, you've got 24 hours." Of course, I came back in Friday evening before Shabbat, and he told me, "Yeah, I got a call from the Dean of Emory's law school." I said, "Yeah." He said, “He told me I could come there this semester. I've got to get there next week." I said, "And?" He says, "Well, I told him I had to think about it." Of course. I start screaming, "What are you, crazy? You got to think about it? Thinking about it?" I'm calling the airline; I'm booking a flight for him; I'm kicking him out of the building. So, he ended up at Emory that Monday, which was Labor Day. He flew to Atlanta, and he had a semester living in Atlanta.

He lived on a friend's couch for three weeks till he found an apartment. It was an amazing experience for him. On Wednesday of the week, in the middle of getting ready for my mother to arrive, with everything going on with Woldenberg and doing a lot of search and rescue of residents in New Orleans, I found a corporate apartment.

I never realized -- the storm hit on the 29th. On the 31st, I signed a lease, a month-to-month lease for a corporate apartment in midtown Houston. My husband said, "Well, let's think about it. We don't have to rush into it." And I said, "You know what? You think as long as you want." I signed it.

We're moving in Saturday. It was a furnished apartment. It was lovely. I was there till the second week of October. But it was really very displaced and didn't know for the first six to eight days whether or not I'd even have a house to go back to. I knew I had family members that lived in Lakeview. I have a niece who lost her home. They demolished it about six weeks ago. She lost everything. She walked out with three days' worth of junk clothes, shorts, t-shirts, flip flops, and lost everything. I have relatives who live -- I have one relative still living on the second floor of her house with a FEMA trailer at her back door for a kitchen. I have another relative who is living in a rental apartment because she had structural damage to her house, and is not back in her house, although she only had 12 inches of water in her house. I have another relative who just moved into her house who was living in a trailer in front of her house. So, I'm very fortunate. But it was very trying times for us. It was hard because I was trying to balance keeping a family calm -- a husband who buys and sells previously worn jewelry, has a private clientele across a desk. He is self-employed. He's a quintessential Mom n' Pop, he's it, and was very concerned he had no income, no business, no nothing. What was he going to do? I had a job. I worked crazy hours, long days. It was extremely gratifying. We were able to connect with the East Baton Rouge Parish Sheriff's Department, Colonel Greg Ferrys, who is wonderful. He had a group of men who volunteered. They kept waiting to get the call from FEMA to go into New Orleans to do something.

By Wednesday, they had had enough. They said, "We'll work with you."

And they were doing search and rescue with us through the Jewish community. We were able to contact people in Baton Rouge, who, with a two-way radio, were able to get a hold of these guys that had a Hummer and a boat.

Just did this as volunteers, these members of the Sheriff's office. We'd give them addresses and people's names because we would get frantic phone calls, oh, my God, so-and-so didn't leave, oh, my God, I don't know where so-and-so is. Oh, my God, so-and-so's mother refused to leave. She's in her house. They went door-to-door in areas, and they found a lot of the members of the Jewish community that had stayed and were able to rescue them. That was very gratifying. As the days progressed, we -- after about five days there, we commandeered --

RH: So, people had a sense to call into Houston, to where you were?

RU: They found us. We started by e-mail. Our e-mail went down to a degree. But through cell phones and word of mouth, and this one heard this one, and this one heard from that one, that they started to find us.

Yes, and it just happened, and we just started collecting people's names -- where are you, what are you doing, is everything OK, where's this one, where's that one. After a few days, our e-mail system went down. It was one of the casualties of the storm. We lost our e-mail system, so we had to, we had to set up with another company so that we could reactivate our e-mail system, and we activated our website at the same time. We had just -- I was in the process, all summer, of populating a new life interactive website for the Federation here. It was something that I had been fighting for.

RH: Talk about [it] a little because this becomes a crucial point.

RU: Yeah. We, for years, quite a few years, we had a website here. It was dead, not stagnant, not live, not interactive. I wouldn't even tell people the website address, wouldn't even tell them where it was; it was that embarrassing. Finally, last summer, I won my battle, and we were able to move on to a different type of website. I had been populating it all summer, and it was supposed to go live the first week of September. Well, when Katrina hit, we were almost at the point of going live, but then we had to go live very quickly, and we did. That really became the lifeline of connecting to the community. Between the e-mails, and the e-mails that we collected, and the website, we were able to start a running list, which we did on an Excel spreadsheet, found out where people were. Where are you, how can we contact you, whether it was a cell phone or a landline or we're here, we're here, we're doing this, we're doing that. It went from the first day -- I think I put 20 names on the list, to over about 2,800 names, now, we have on that list. We finally took it off our website about a month ago for various reasons. But it really became the lifeline of the community. We became the central receptacle of where you are, where you're going, where's this one, where's that one. We started to drive the information out of people. We had community meetings. It went through the website. Any information people needed for anything, they came to us. We created, we became the central place within the war room that we created at the Federation, for people that, volunteers were coming to us. They were helping us find housing for people, find clothing for people, get the kids in school. It's an interesting phenomenon with the Jewish community. Different cultures do different things in times of an emergency.

Within a few days of the majority of the members of the Jewish community evacuating -- as soon as they realized that they weren't going home so quickly, they made decisions quickly. Are we staying where we were? Are we moving to the next step, if they had children, because they wanted the kids in school?

They didn't care if they were living in their car, if they were living in a hotel, if they were living in an apartment, or they were living with strangers or relatives. Had to get the kids

in school, and that was the first thing we did that first week. By the day after Labor Day, within a day or two after Labor Day, every child that I knew of was in some type of a school. They were, in the majority of them, in Jewish day schools. The Jewish day schools really across the country opened up their arms and their hearts and took these kids in, no questions asked, took them in.

RH: So, you're not talking about just in Houston. You were --

RU: We did this all over the country.

RH: When you found a family in a certain city, you connected them with whatever resource has offered itself.

RU: Every support, whatever resources. Through the UJC system, through the national system, we used them as well as the national system of Jewish Family Services throughout the country, as the initial lead contact in a lot of the communities, to say, we found out about this family, and they're living in Birmingham. We know they're in Birmingham. They need, the kid needs to get in school, they're looking for housing, they're looking for employment, they're just, they're looking for a place to stay, whatever they need. They needed to get a prescription refilled; they needed medicine. We would contact the Jewish Family Service or the Federation -- there it was the Jewish Family Service, or we would give the family that phone number to contact them.

They took over, they adopted them, and they took care of them. It was really amazing, and we were joking about technology a few minutes ago, and about computers, and e-mail, and so -- it was truly our lifeline. Cell phones, e-mail, fax machines became our lifeline throughout the country to help get our people placed.

The first issues for most of the families was education for their children because they felt if their kids were in school, there was a little bit of normalcy for them. Then they were worried about housing, and we had people living, like me, in a corporate apartment.

Some people were -- people opened up their homes and their hearts to us.

We met a couple, a woman from Beaumont, Texas, while we were still in the hotel. My husband who talks to everybody. I try not to talk to a lot of people when I'm not at work at all because sometimes I just want to be alone because I talk a lot. He talks to every stray he can talk to. Out of the clear blue, the woman's putting stuff in the trunk of her car. She says, "I'm from Beaumont, Texas." He says, "I'm from New Orleans." She turns around -- this is about three days after the storm. She starts crying. She goes, "What can I do for you? Come stay with me. Come live in my house." Never met this woman in our lives. She wanted, they couldn't do enough, and that's how people were, and it was a blessing to us. I mean, I don't know if I would be that way. I don't know if I would just turn to a total stranger and say, come live with me. My son lived with us for six months when we came back to New Orleans, till we found new housing. I didn't want him living with me, and I love him dearly.

I don't know if I want a stranger living with me. But that's how people were. We did this; people could not do enough. We spent as much time talking to people from throughout the country who wanted to help and didn't know how to help, as much as we spoke to our own people who were looking for help. It was a very strange -- I primarily fundraise here. That's the pride of Katrina. That was my job. Even though I was the Assistant Executive Director, my primary focus was campaign and missions. Now I was on the receiving end, myself personally, as well as my community. To get us to accept it and to switch gears was a great challenge.

RH: Was there anything emotionally that you had to go through, not just for yourself but collectively, to switch gears?

RU: Came back to New Orleans the second week of October, and I went over to a Red Cross site, distribution site in Lakeview, at Saint Dominic's Church. Now you have to understand, in October, they hadn't even, they just started ripping out some of the

houses. Everything had that white dust, the sheetrock dust. Sheetrock dust everywhere. It hardly rained, except for Rita. I'll tell you my Hurricane Rita story on top of this because my Katrina becomes my Rita story. But everything had that white dust because the only time it rained between Katrina and, like, November was when Rita came through the western part of the state.

I'm standing in line -- I didn't want to go, but I knew I needed to go because I wanted the check, I needed the check. I got FEMA money. I received money from Red Cross. I had food stamps. I did, I played the system like everybody else did, and that was very strange. At the beginning, it was strange, but it was important because my husband had no income. I had my job, but he had no income. We did not know what would happen. I felt secure with my job for several months, at least through the end of December, because I knew UJC was taking care of us, and helping, paying our salaries, basically, for us to do our work. But I didn't know beyond that. But I knew I had to go get this check.

I pull up, park my car, and I go get in line. Everything's outside, and they have these tables. They had this long line. They had this woman, this Red Cross volunteer. She was working the line. She was entertaining. She was visiting with people while they were waiting in line to fill out their forms. I'm standing there, and I had jeans and a t-shirt, and I've got people, and it's New Orleans, people behind me, people in front of me. Everybody's telling them, now everybody tells you their war story.

How's your house? Where're you living? What did you do? Dah, dah, dah. People are just talking, and these were people primarily from the neighborhood that had started to come back to start to clean up their houses. It looked like the atomic bomb was dropped on Saint Dominic in that area, which was very strange to start out with. This volunteer comes up to me, and she goes, "How are you doing?" I looked at her, and I burst into tears, and I said, "No, no, no."

This is wrong. I'm supposed to be you. I'm always the one who works the line. I'm the volunteer that always talks to people, keeps them company, makes them feel good. I just burst into tears, and I said, "I'm not supposed to be standing here. I'm supposed to be you. There's something wrong with this picture." She put her arm around me, and she said, "It's really OK. It's OK." I said, "You know, I'm the one who writes the check to the Red Cross. I'm the one who -- I've never been on this side." It was very, very uncomfortable. I filled out my forms, and when I was finished, I got up to go leave, and she grabbed me by the hand and she said, "Now you need to go get in the other line."

The other line, they were giving out mops and brooms, and MREs, and bottled water, and cleaning supplies. I said, "No, no, no. I don't need that stuff. I'm really OK. Let other people take it that need it." She goes, "No, I bet you need that stuff." She walked me through the line, and she helped me carry all these things back to my house. I really did need, and I really did use. But it was a very difficult thing for me to do. Applying for my FEMA money was not difficult.

Fighting with my insurance company is still not difficult. Getting my food stamps was actually kind of interesting and fun because I went to Doornacks with them, and Doornacks grocery store always had a big sign, no food stamps allowed. But when people pull up and their Cadillacs and their Mercedes and their BMWs, and all they have is their little Louisiana debit card. They took that sign down, and everybody else was in line with me, with their cards. So, that was interesting. That was a change, but what happened to me at the Red Cross was just -- it was very, very, very difficult.

Another experience that took place in September, about three weeks after the storm, I was asked by UJC, United Jewish Communities, to come up to New York to be part of an audience participation program for Fox News National. They do a daily talk show during the day. They wanted people that had Hurricane Katrina stories to come up to New York. I travel to New York once a month as a National Vice President of Hadassah. I did

not go that month to my meeting because I was elsewhere. I was a little preoccupied in Houston. But I went to New York. I flew in on Sunday. I was on television on Monday, and I flew out Monday night. I got in early Sunday. It was a nice, nice day in New York. I said, "Yeah, let me go walk around Soho." I had been so absorbed in what I was doing, I had never -- I love to shop in Houston. I never went shopping once to the Galleria. I just couldn't do it. So, I walked around Soho that day. I figured it would be nice. I'll get out; I'll really walk. It'll be great.

I kept thinking -- all these people have their normal life. They never said the word Katrina. There's a whole world going on outside of my life. It really bothered the crap out of me. I had to leave. I just, I couldn't get into it, I couldn't enjoy. It was a beautiful day. I needed to be around everybody else who was dealing with what I'm dealing with. Now I'm real happy to get away from Katrina. I'm real happy I was in Israel for ten days in June, and I didn't hear the "K" word once. It was great. It was terrific. Those are situations -- the Red Cross situation was very powerful and difficult for me. Going to New York and realizing there was a world outside of my world -- that's very difficult. We evacuated for Rita. I don't know if you want to hear about that.

RH: Well, I do. I want to --

RU: Can I grab --

RH: Oh, please.

F1: Grab your drink here.

RU: I'm sorry.

RH: No, it's quite all right. I need to -- (overlapping voices) --

RU: I'm sorry.

RH: -- to tell you it was fine (laughs). If you ever want to stop at any point, to just --

RU: You get the real me when I stop like that, so --

RH: (Laughs) Let's go back a minute, just one more minute, to Woldenberg. Because it sounds like you suddenly, because your mother and you had this personal connection, you took upon yourself the responsibility to evacuate all of Woldenberg. I mean they had two buses. Two buses wasn't enough.

RU: Three buses, yeah.

RH: Three buses. Or, perhaps in your position as in the Federation, too, that you were wearing two hats. So, it's your personal and your professional kind of overlapped at that moment.

RU: Right. It's interesting. Yeah, I could have gotten, probably gotten an ambulance in there, and gotten my mother out, and taken care of her. I made that decision to say that, you know, we really needed to help Don get everyone out. I know a lot of the staff, their families, the residents. I didn't do it all on my own. Don did his thing, Malcolm did his thing, Malcolm made all the arrangements with Methodist, and worked with the intake of the residents in Houston. But trying to connect through our resources with Red Cross and with the National Guard, to get more busses, to get them all out, because, at that point, we knew we had to get them out. The nursing home was designed -- it was on a generator, and they did have power in the nursing home. But at that point, they don't air-condition the nursing home. Only people on life support, those rooms get some air conditioning.

Every third plug has electrical power within the building. That's how, when they go on generator, the whole building doesn't just stay lit up like it's a normal day. They have about three or four days' worth of generator power, and in a normal situation, within two or three days of a storm, a hurricane, they come in, and their priorities as to who gets

power first -- hospitals, nursing homes -- they're restocked, they're taken care of. So, they're really -- you shelter in place. That's what you're supposed to do, is shelter in place. In Saint Bernard Parish, at Saint Rita's, they should have never sheltered in place because of where they were located. I could have told you it was going to flood. You had to evacuate those people. Where my mother was, was really fine.

Yeah, I really took it upon myself as something very personal. I was very worried about mother, so selfishly, I worried about her. But I really cared about the residents. It was something that was very important to me. It was not necessarily important to everyone I was around during that time. I won't -- not state names because I don't think it's appropriate. But I felt it was a personal responsibility to me. In one respect, I have history in the city.

This is my city. I was, several years ago, on the board at Woldenberg. I care deeply about the facility. The residents, many of them I've known since I'm a little girl. These are people that are part of the Jewish community that I know. The staff I've known for years, way before my mother even became a resident there. I felt, in a way, it was part of my responsibility that I could try to help them. That's why I stayed at Methodist all night, and I visited with the residents, and I visited with the staff.

Two residents died before they -- during Katrina. They did not evacuate them. One of the residents had a heart attack on the bus, and ultimately, they had to stop the buses and get her off the bus, and she was still alive then, but she passed away. It's a member of our staff up here was her aunt. And it was, you know, I've known Lena since I was a little girl.

She was hospice. She was terminal. On a normal situation, they never would have evacuated her. She was too compromised. But they had to evacuate everybody that was alive. So, they put her on the bus. Remarkably, out of everybody that they evacuated, only one person passed away on the bus, and it was Lena, who had a heart

attack. Everybody else made it.

RH: People weren't -- I mean, you're talking about a bus, and I'm thinking everybody's sitting up --

RU: Seven busses.

RH: There's some people --

RU: That's exactly right.

RH: -- were not well enough --

RU: That's exactly right.

RH: To be sitting up.

RU: That's exactly right. A lot of them were not well enough to be sitting up. A few people that they absolutely could not sit up; they had to lay across. But I'd say 90, 95 percent of the residents sat up on those busses for hours. They stopped in Lafayette, and there were Red Cross volunteers that had food for them and water. But they couldn't get them off the bus to go to the bathroom.

You couldn't take everyone off the bus to get them back on the bus. They were happy to be on the bus. My mother, first thing my mother said is, "The bus was air-conditioned." It was like 110 degrees in the nursing home, like today.

After a hurricane passes, it gets hot. There's no rain; there's no energy. It's just that all that heat comes from the Gulf. It's very, very hot, and usually, it's very still like it is this afternoon. It was very hot in the nursing home. So, they were happy to be in the air conditioning. But it was a very long -- it was a very hard trek, and I feel very personally gratified to know that we were successfully able to get them out of there. I really love the

staff at Woldenberg. I always tell everybody, “They’re God’s angels.” They really were because there were staff members that left. They were supposed to stay, but when all hell broke loose, these people could have taken their cars -- it was dry -- and just driven away.

They wouldn’t leave those residents. The staff were also supposed to have housing for them when they got to Houston. And one of the nursing homes in the outskirts of Houston was assigned to take in the staff and their families. At 4:00 in the morning, they were bused over to that nursing home. Now, you have to understand, people don’t look their finest when they’ve been in the same clothes for three or four days. They were working in shorts and t-shirts and the coolest things they owned. It was hot. They didn’t look the nicest when they arrived. A lot of the members of the staff were black, which makes the stigma even more difficult. They would not let them in this nursing home, at 4:00 in the morning, that was supposed to accept them. They kept the gates locked, and they left them in the streets. I got a phone call on my cell phone when I was in my hotel room. I had finally closed my eyes. My mother was safe, she was fine, she was OK, everyone else was OK. I was going to get about two hours of sleep before I was going to get up in the morning and go to work.

My cell phone rang, and it was one of the members of the nursing staff. In fact, it was their RN that was on duty. It was their Chief of Staff for the RNs, and she’s just crying. She says, “I can’t take this. I can’t believe it. We stayed with the residents. We cared. We were promised housing and were locked out.” I said, “Where are you? What are you talking about?” She says, “We’re in front of such-and-such nursing home, they refuse to let us in the gate, they said there’s no place for us to stay here.” Because they supposedly had a wing of the home where they had beds and food, and everything was to be taken care of for them. They wouldn’t let them in. They were not the nicest sight to see, these people standing in the street. Of course, just like the people that were at the Convention Center, after you’re under that level of stress for so long, and you’re hot, and

you're tired, and you're hungry, and you're exhausted, you're not rational. People just aren't rational. She's screaming, and she's yelling, and what am I going to do? The two buses that took them over there left them because the buses had to turn around and go. They needed the bus back to go back into the New Orleans area, so they wouldn't wait for them to take them someplace else. So, I called the Police Department, and called Red Cross, and got the police to go out to get them. The policemen went in the nursing home. The nursing home still refused to take them. But fortunately, there was a Red Cross shelter set up 45, 50 miles outside of Houston, all the way on the other side of town, that took all of them in.

It was a church. It was a school or church building, a New Life Center that they had converted, and they had cots in there. Thursday morning, before I went to work at 6:00 in the morning, I drove -- it took me almost an hour to get there. I checked on my mother. Then I went over there to check on all of them and make sure they had money and they had everything that they needed because, unfortunately, that was the kink in the armor -- that they weren't really taken care of. But the church community there were wonderful to them. They took care of them and made sure everybody had money. They had clothes; they had food; they needed groceries, whatever they needed. Because these were God's angels, they took care of my mother. They took care of all these people. They didn't have to stay. Quite a few of those staff members did not come back to New Orleans. Quite a few did, and back to Woldenberg. But that was as important to me as it was to move the residents because these -- I'm a registered nurse by profession. I became a registered nurse in 1979. I haven't practiced since the early '80s.

But I really understand, and I respect these people that do this type of work. That was the other piece of that Woldenberg story for me. That was very important.

RH: Do you know if Woldenberg had an evacuation plan? I mean, because they were a mandatory evacuation on Sunday morning, I guess.

RU: The policy for nursing homes is, in certain areas, you shelter in site. You shelter in site. You don't evacuate a nursing home. It's a total last resort because it's a miserable experience. You have many elderly, compromised patients, residents who end up going to another facility. They're sleeping on the floor; they're sleeping on a mattress on a floor. It's not a glamorous evacuation. It's not like, oh, I evacuate, I went to a hotel, I had -- it was very comfortable. It's not that way at all because they're tremendously compromised.

When my mother evacuated, they took her wheelchair, and she had one plastic bag with clothes, two changes of clothes in it. That's all they could take for them because you're moving all these people and their wheelchairs and this stuff. There's no space on those buses to move your things. They don't normally do that. The way Woldenberg was set up is that they would evacuate as a last resort if they really had to. They really -- the west bank because they're right inside Orleans Parish, but they're right next to Jefferson Parish. The decision at that point, where they were, is that you don't evacuate them unless you have to. So, they decided they were going to shelter in place, and Touro had said, "As soon as the storm passes, we'll send over additional supplies and things that you need." Because Touro didn't evacuate.

Touro released any patient that could go home, but their most critically ill they kept, just like Baptist Hospital, Memorial Baptist, and just like Charity, and Tulane. You don't move compromised people if you don't have to. So, the answer is yes, they had an evacuation plan. No, it really was not designed to evacuate pre- a storm unless they were absolutely mandated to do so. They really were not because even though it was a mandatory evacuation for the community, it still wasn't for the nursing homes, and it wasn't for the hospitals. They did have a plan that afterwards, if they needed to leave, they would

leave.

They always had planned on going to Baton Rouge, to this nursing home in Baton Rouge that was going to take in all their residents. Their plans are very different now. They will evac within 48 hours, within an anticipated of arrival of the storm, either you come get your family member, or they're taking them with them. They're going to Baton Rouge 48 hours prior. They really don't want to do that. You don't want to move all these people. It took that many hours to get them all on buses. My mother will not move with the nursing home anymore. She goes with me because three weeks after Katrina, we had to evacuate Houston because of Rita --

RH: Tell me that. Tell me about Rita.

RU: So, we're working with the staff in Houston. Their Federation office is wonderful. We've set up this room. We've commandeered this huge conference room. I had a computer bank set up, tables, volunteers, all this stuff organized.

Then, all of sudden, Rita starts coming their way. We all looked at each other, and they said, "Well, what are you going to do? Are you going to leave? You're going to not leave; you're going to leave; you're going to not leave?" People in Houston said, "Well, I'm not leaving." I said, "You can do what you want. I'm leaving." "Well, my house is fine. I'm staying."

I said, "You don't understand; I'm not staying here. It's real easy. It's not going to happen." Went over to Seven Acres, which is right half a mile away from the Houston Federation, told my mother. I said, "I promised you I would never leave you again, and I'm taking you with me, and we're going to evacuate to Dallas." I picked her up the next morning at 3:00 am. I walked into the nursing home. I took my mother. I picked her up, got her in my mini-van. My husband followed with my son's car because he flew to Atlanta. I had car and dog -- dog's now mine -- (whispering) I'm very happy about that.

I get to keep dog. Got her in my van, and normally a drive, it takes about, from that place and for that point in Houston takes about three hours and 15 minutes, three hours and 20 minutes to go to Dallas. Went to a friend's house in Dallas. Took us 15 ½ hours to drive from Houston to Dallas with my 85-year-old mother in my car, who is incontinent. So, I have to clean her and change her, and there's no place to do that on the side of a road because she can't walk. I would have had to literally lift her, lay her down on the ground to get her cleaned up to keep going. She's a tough, old broad. She talked to me for 15 ½ hours as we went bumper to bumper through the boonie side roads all over Texas to get to Dallas. We spent five nights in Dallas at a very dear friend's house.

She stayed there with us with the dog. Then I brought her back to -- we all went back -- took us two hours and 40 minutes to drive back to Houston. But that was very traumatic. But in one respect, it was easier because when we walked down to the corporate apartment in Houston, it wasn't a decision, what to take or what not to take.

I took all my stuff. I didn't have much stuff there. I took my stuff, and it was in my apartment, so I didn't own the place. I really didn't care. I had a month-to-month rental. It was their problem, and we left. If it would have been a direct hit on Houston, we would not have been able to go back to Houston. I told my husband driving to Dallas -- he's in one car with the dog, I was in the other -- I said, "I want to go home. I don't care what kind of shape home is in. We're going home. I've had enough." We had already gone home once to check on the house, and by that point, we knew we had power.

RH: So, what was the date of Rita, or around the time --

RU: It was around the --

RH: I'm just trying to remember.

RU: 20th, 25th of September. Came back, and within -- came back to Houston on a -- oh, God -- on Tuesday? My husband drove that night back into New Orleans because he

was trying to start his business, get his business put back together. Start to put our house back together. It must have been around the 25th of September. Then, Sunday night was Rosh Hashanah. We came back Tuesday, Sunday night was Rosh Hashanah, and we spent Rosh Hashanah in Houston. Then between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, I was -- which was towards the end of September, beginning of October -- I was flying into New Orleans, driving into Baton Rouge. Spent, worked in Baton Rouge, spent the night in New Orleans -- I'm sorry, flew into Baton Rouge, worked in a Baton Rouge office, spent the night in New Orleans, drove back to Baton Rouge, worked again, and flew out to Houston. Did that twice. Then, immediately following Yom Kippur, I came home. So, it was, and that was very difficult too because I had to leave my mother in Houston. I had to leave her at Seven Acres. She was really *farmisht* at that point. I knew I was *farmisht*. But this is somebody who is 85 and had her whole life uprooted and really lived through the storm and heard the explosions in her neighborhood.

A tornado by the nursing home -- a tornado hit a building behind their building, and I mean, lived in the Quarter, lived in the heat, and everything. So, I had to leave her in Houston, which was very hard. I saw her from the second week of October until -- I didn't get to see her until she came home the first week of December. I couldn't get away from work. Between my work responsibilities, I couldn't get to Houston to go see her, and that was very frustrating to me. I couldn't do it. I couldn't get away. Then she came the first week of December. She was great. She's been great ever since, but yeah, it was a crazy time.

RH: How did you find -- OK. We're going to stop with --

[END OF PART 1]

RH: -- who you wanted to get in touch with. Obviously, your mother. But your friends, your family. Who was your circle of concern? Did you have domestic help that you were concerned about? How did you kind of -- you were setting this up for everybody else.

How did you do this for yourself?

RU: That was hard because I was always so busy worrying about others that periodically I'd find out about my own. Stanley has a cousin who lives in Gulfport, Mississippi. She always evacuates for the storm. She lives on one of the back bays, beautiful home, big home, lives on the back bays. A year before, we saw her in Memphis when we evacuated to Memphis for the storm the year before that was also around Rosh Hashanah time. I assumed she evacuated. Her husband won't evacuate. He's just stubborn. But she always leaves. The morning of Katrina, Stanley called her. "So, where are you, Hope? What's going on?" Monday morning, early, maybe eight, nine o'clock in the morning. "So, are you in Memphis?" "No, we decided to stay in Gulfport." Then we could not connect with her for over a week. I was convinced she was dead. I kept telling my husband. I said, "She's dead. She stayed. She's dead."

I can't believe she stayed.

All the years, she never listened to her husband, and she left him there. This time she decided to stay. We finally connected with them. They were fine. They had some damage to their home. They were on the back bay. They were far enough off the Gulf that they had no flooding. But they had significant damage to their home, and she said she'll never stay again. She decided that was the stupidest thing she could have ever done. But they stayed. I knew that Stanley's sister had evacuated to Shreveport with the matriarch of the family, who just turned 94 years old. This is a charming Black woman who's been with them forever and raised those three kids. She and Mamie got in the car. Saturday morning, they decided to make a weekend out of it. She took Mamie. She went to Mamie's house, she picked her up, took her in her car. They went to Shreveport, where Stanley's sister's daughter and son-in-law were in medical school last year, and showed up at their apartment, and about 20 people ultimately showed up at their little two-bedroom apartment. But they went to Shreveport, and that's where they stayed for

about six, eight weeks until they came back. They got a little apartment there, and the two of them stayed, and they've been living together ever since. Mamie's in the hospital right now. Mamie had a stroke two weeks ago, so she's not doing real well. But she made it through the hurricane OK.

RH: So, Mamie stayed with Stanley's sister --

RU: Stanley's sister. We called them, and they were living in a FEMA trailer together. We called them Ebony and Ivory. Mamie's the matriarch of the family. She's in charge. She can keep *kashrut*. She knows all the rules of Passover, and she raised those kids and raised the grandkids.

She's really, really -- it's very funny, we go to the hospital now, and they ask -- they have questions, they want to meet the family. We're legally her family, and it's very strange when you have this 94-year-old black woman who's at the hospital, or anywhere that we're out with her, and she says, that's my son, that's my daughter -- you know, she -- because it's her family, and they all cannot figure it out for the life of them. But we knew where Myra and Mamie were and that they were OK. Stanley's brother ended up in Houston, which we knew. My brother was in Breckenridge, and then he ended up in Dallas. Then, little by little, we started finding family and other family members. We knew -- we normally go to Memphis. So, a ton of our family ended up going to Memphis, and we didn't go to Memphis this time. They were all surprised because we went to Houston. We knew where they were. Direct family members, we knew where everybody was. It was kind of strange because unless it was somebody that I was exceptionally, exceptionally, exceptionally close with. I knew where all of those people were, people that I were friends with. I was so wrapped up in everything we were doing in New Orleans that day to day I didn't say, "Oh, my God, I didn't speak to this one, I didn't speak to this one."

Then, all of a sudden, they would surface or appear, and I'd go, "Ph, my God, they're OK." That's how I reacted. I really didn't have the time to sit and start to find people that were my own. Selfish, my husband was doing it, but I really didn't. Sometimes it took months to figure out where people were.

We had a meeting in Houston a week after the storm hit. We just had a community meeting for people from New Orleans, just to give them information, and these people just showed up that I had -- it was wonderful to see members of my -- everybody loved each other then. Everybody was happy to see each other. They don't now, but it was a different type of bonding and connection that you'd see people. It was so wonderful just to see people and be with them and to connect with them.

My husband this past weekend told me, he says, you know, why don't we take a ride to Houston, because there's a little Greek restaurant he likes. Then, there's Specs, which is a liquor store. I went to him, and I said, "You want to go to Houston?" He says, "You don't want to go?" I said, "No, I really don't want to go to Houston." "You don't like Houston anymore?" I said, "I love Houston. I just don't want to go to Houston during hurricane season. I just don't want to do it."

RH: Tell me what you did when you first came back into the city. Did you kind, it sounds like you came by yourself?

RU: We came within a week.

RH: Oh, you came with your husband.

RU: They allowed us in for sunrise to sunset, dawn to dusk, to come and survey your property, secure your property, and they, at that point, said take out enough items, and figure you won't get back in for a month.

RH: So, you're in -- this is a little different because you're in Jefferson Parish, so their --

RU: Correct.

RH: -- rules. You got in earlier to Jefferson.

RU: I got in to see my property, but they didn't want you to stay, and they would shoot if they saw you out at night. But there was no utilities. There was no infrastructure. We got up; we left our apartment in Houston at midnight on a Monday, Tuesday night? Tuesday night. We drove into New Orleans. We drove with the dog because we couldn't leave the dog because the son was gone. We drove into New Orleans, Metairie.

It was a six-and-a-half-hour drive. It took about -- we walked into our house about 9:30 in the morning because it became bumper-to-bumper traffic on the Interstate north of Gramercy. You had to get off and go around, and they wouldn't let you on.

It was just very creepy because the National Guard were at the big intersections. We had to drive past the airport -- you saw the helicopters taking off and landing at that point. They had just completed the evacuation of the Superdome two days earlier. The airport was chaos, but you could see, in fact, today, even today when I hear the helicopters coming over the levee because they still fly them real low over the levee, it just conjures up bad stuff for me, because that -- especially that first day, when we came home, all you heard was the buzzing of the helicopters that are flying back and forth. We drove in to check on our house, and it was very scary because we drove on this street right here in the wrong direction because we had to drive around limbs that were down. You couldn't necessarily drive through the neighborhoods. We had to drive on somebody's lawn, one of our neighbor's lawns, to get around trees and limbs that were down, to get into our property.

They told us to clean everything out of your refrigerator and freezer. I thought I did a really good job. I was so smart. I got rid of the eggs and the milk, and I thought I got rid of everything in my freezer.

I forgot to throw away a package of raw chicken that I was going to use to make soups. It was just lovely. They told you to dig a hole in your backyard, to bury the stuff, because wild animals -- and they weren't wild before, but they became wild animals -- were trying to find the food. They were rummaging through all the trash and to bring in the streets. It was about like today, 95 degrees, hot as can be. My husband had to dig a hole in the middle of the backyard and bury the refrigerator contents. We were in the house till about five o'clock, and we drove back to Houston. We walked back in -- and we were exhausted. Because it wasn't like, oh, the house looks good, it's fine. I have a flashlight in my closet, and I'm trying to pull more clothes and things that I need out of my closet. I'm trying to secure my home or to get somebody there to board up some big windows that we had that were completely busted in. I was as concerned about -- I wasn't as concerned about looting as I was about when it would start to rain. It would rain in my house, which meant it would just make things even worse than it was before. It didn't rain. We were very fortunate that the house wasn't looted. But we secured the house. We filled the car up with more crap. Now, understand, when you drove into New Orleans, there was no gas here. So, we carried two gas tanks, which I had never done in my life, those little, big containers, with them open and the back windows open, so that they are ventilated and so that we would have gasoline to get back to Houston. There were two accidents on the highway going back to Houston. We walked into the apartment at about one o'clock in the morning the next day. We had been up for 25 hours, and we had to drive it back and forth. In hindsight, I told my husband we were really stupid.

We should have just really slept at our house and then gotten up the next morning. But they told us you had to be off the street. I was scared that I could get stuck in the city. The cell phone didn't work here because there were no cellular towers. You did not have phone service in your house. Within a few days of us seeing our house, we got electricity fairly quickly in my neighborhood. My power went up quickly. But you couldn't -- you had no -- once you got here, there was no means of communication.

There was nothing. There was no water. There were -- obviously, no groceries. There was nothing. So you had to come in, self-contained, and you had to leave. It was very creepy. Then my husband came back. We didn't clean up debris or anything around our house. We just secured the house and left. He started coming back right after Rita, and he cleaned up the house in between. It was very strange and eerie feeling. We did drive past my cousin's house that live on [Inborn?], and I saw my cousin walking in and out of our house, just slinging the first floor of our house into the street. She had just done a whole bunch of work. She had about 12 inches of water, and everything was molded and ruined, and she was just slinging stuff on the street, and I didn't get near her because she was a wild woman. It was like -- but then I didn't come back home, then, for another month.

RH: So, I'm curious now. How did your husband get his business going? I mean, he's kind of dependent on, from what you're saying, on clients, that the last thing they wanted was jewelry.

RU: Well, you know, it's interesting.

RH: Or was it the local, or --

RU: People were buying and selling, and he, the jewelry that he had, he had put into the safety deposit box at the bank next door. Try to understand, we didn't know till four o'clock in the afternoon Friday that there was going to be a hurricane here. Banks all closed at three; he put everything away. He put everything away, all the contact information, all the clients he was working with. Everything went into the safe. Fortunately, their safety deposit boxes were on the second floor, so they didn't flood. He didn't lose it. But he couldn't -- and when he first came back, he couldn't get it. The bank wouldn't even allow him in the bank to get to his stuff. He had to sign a release after he was here for a week or two that if he breathed in anything, the bank wasn't responsible, and the building wasn't responsible. Then the HAZMAT team had to go in with them --

oh, excuse me -- to go into the vault, to get his stuff. His office is on the third floor of a building, and it was many months before the elevator worked, so he had to go up and down the steps. Little by little, he started making his contacts with people around this area of the country because people will bring him jewelry to sell, and he has contacts around jewelry stores, etcetera, around this area of the country that he sells the jewelry to. So, he needed them as well. There's a gentleman in Gulfport that he does a lot of business with, and we were convinced he was dead. He's alive.

We just didn't know. He had a very good Christmas because people were buying and selling jewelry, and women wanted jewelry, and they wanted something that felt good. In the long-term, will his business survive? I don't know. I hope it will. He loves what he does. But I don't know. But it was a scary time for him because he had no income.

RH: While you were gone, is there anything you missed most?

RU: (pause) Everybody says they miss their house. I missed my house. I liked my house. I love living here. I love the culture. When I came back, you were so excited when you knew a restaurant opened.

I missed the restaurants, the crazy stuff. I was determined; I ate at a sushi place the first week I was back. I wanted to go some -- I wanted to be out and be with people and have normalcy. There was a sign nailed on a light pole on Magazine Street. I had been in town for maybe a week or so. Domaleesi's had reopened. It was hand, you know, felt a marking pen, and it said, Domaleesi's is now open. It felt so good, and they nailed it to a telephone pole. We're, oh, my God, Domaleesi's is open! I had to go; I gotta Po Boy. Everything was open, what, three hours, four hours, it was a limited menu. They were serving you off of paper and plastic. I missed that part of the normalcy, the pace of the community, and the things that, you know, you just take for granted.

I just -- that's the kind of stuff I missed. It's strange.

RH: The pace of the community.

RU: The pace of the community. I just -- I love it here. I just all the foolishness that goes on. I was in the French Quarter last night. It felt so good to be out there for the bell ringing, and I went to Saint Louis Cathedral for the service. Just being with the people. I just -- I love that. I think that's really what I missed. I missed that.

RH: Was there anything -- were you -- like you talked about going to Rosh Hashanah services in Houston. So, were you -- what community were you in there? How did that work?

RU: Everyone invited you to everything in Houston. We could have walked into any services we wanted with open arms.

Several of the New Orleans congregations were in services there. The first day of Rosh Hashanah, I went to services at Seven Acres with my mother. My brother flew in from Dallas. It was the first time I had seen him since before the storm. We had lunch together with Mother, and it was very, very nice. At the day of Rosh Hashanah, I went to one of the orthodox synagogues in Houston, and that's where I went for services for Yom Kippur as well.

But I didn't go to Kol Nidrei services. Stanley was in New Orleans. He got up in the middle of the night to drive back to be with me for Yom Kippur day, my husband. But -- and I always go to Kol Nidrei services, but I just didn't want to do it. I just figured I'd been through enough.

I just went back to my apartment with the dog, and I watched television that night. I didn't talk to anybody. That's just not me because I really -- I love -- I love Kol Nidrei services. I love the Yom Kippur service. I think it's just very spiritual and very meaningful to me. I grew up going to the Orthodox shul. I was not Orthodox. Orthodox-observant but grew up going to the Orthodox shul in New Orleans. Going to Beth Israel. So, I'm very

comfortable, and I love Orthodox services.

But I couldn't go. I went Yom Kippur day with my husband and didn't stay all day because I figured I had repented enough. I guess I had done enough, and I had been through enough, and I'd had enough. I just didn't want to do it. But they were all very warm and welcoming. The year before, when we evacuated, I went to Baron Hirsch in Memphis for services for Rosh Hashanah. This year, I'm not making any plans for Rosh Hashanah because when I make these big plans, I'm in another city. So, I'm really hopefully hoping that this year I'm not. I'd like to be here.

RH: So, if you're here, where will you go?

RU: If I'm here, I'm a member of Shir Chadash. I will probably go there for some of the services. My son, who is more observant than I am, will probably -- although he's gone with me to Shir Chadash for many years, I have a feeling he might want to go to Beth Israel, which would be fine with me. I will go to my Beth Israel family, which would be nice.

RH: So, he's back here at Loyola?

RU: He's back at Loyola. Loyola reopened in New Orleans in January, the law school. He lived in my house from the beginning of January to the beginning of June because his roommate moved to Atlanta because she lost her job at the JCC, and she got a job in Atlanta, and he was sharing a house with this girl who's been his friend forever. She moved to Atlanta, and he could not share the house. We couldn't afford to pay the rent on the entire house.

It was ridiculous. He moved out of the house that he was renting half from her and moved into my house for six months. It was really fun. I joke about him not living in my -- living in my house. There was really no problem. He lived in half my house. We hardly saw each other. But I didn't want him in my house, and he really didn't want to be there.

So, he moved out at the beginning of the summer, and now he's back at school now. Last week, when we thought maybe we were getting Ernesto, my husband and I kept going. We just want to get him out of law school. Can we just get him finished with school, just to have some stability? So, he's back, and he hopes -- he plans on staying in New Orleans, and I'm really, really --

RH: Really?

RU: -- happy, and I hope that pans out. He wants to practice law here.

RH: That's good to hear.

RU: Yeah, it is. Actually, it is. Yes.

RH: You've given me a lot of information here. Why don't we talk a little bit -- let's shift to the Jewish community. Describe what the Jewish community is like here in New Orleans -- and if there's anything distinctive or special that you feel about it.

RU: Everybody will say their Jewish community is special. Everybody's Jewish community is unique because every city is unique. This community, before Hurricane Katrina, had approximately 10,000 Jews -- some people say 9,500, some people say 11,000. There's about 10,000 Jews stable, number of Jews. Would pick up about 2,500 to 3,000 Jews when school was in session, primarily Tulane, a few at Loyola, and UNO. But primarily Tulane. So, even though they were not permanent residents of New Orleans, we serviced them as a community as if they were. The community is 80 percent Reform. I grew up in the Orthodox shul, so there were a lot of members of the Reform community I didn't know. For many years, it was a predominantly Jewish, German Reform community, and I came off the boat. I was, what is it, a wetback that came off the boat because they were here 50, 75 years before my family came off the boats in New York. So, it was, to a degree, growing up splintered, intentionally or not intentionally. It's just very different. I didn't really run with the Uptown Jewish crowd, the

Uptown Reform Jewish crowd, because those were not the people my parents socialized with. They didn't socialize with them. They socialized with people predominantly from the Orthodox shul. I grew up involved in the community. I was involved in the BBYO here. I got to meet more members of the community because of that.

I was also involved in Young Judaea, which was not really Reform-driven. It was more Orthodox-Conservative-driven. I was also involved with my synagogue youth group, which was Orthodox-driven. To a degree -- New Orleans, there's a large chunk of the city that, for many years, were very assimilated and -- or attempted to become assimilated. It's as assimilated as you can be in a community where you still can't eat in the Boston Club because you're Jewish, but if you're Black, you can work there. Or you can't be a member of New Orleans Country Club if you're Jewish.

I've eaten meals there, but I could go in there if I was Black and work there on a regular basis. It's just bizarre. But, you know, something that, when you tell people outside of New Orleans, they think you're crazy that you accept it. But it's just part of our culture here. Growing up, I was involved -- I became involved with Hadassah, and they're more mixed as the years have progressed, where the -- more members of the Reform community over the years have become much more involved in the organization and the community, which is really nice. It gave me an opportunity to meet more members of the community. The Federation, on a whole, here in New Orleans, up until recently, I'd say up through the 1980s, was really -- although they had quite a few members of the Federation here that were Conservative -- (voices in background).

Although there were lots of members -- I tried. Put that in the Library of Congress -- I tried (laughter) -- who came from the Conservative and Orthodox community. The majority of the people are very active in Federation life here, and the majority of the big dollars came from the ultra-Reform community.

I'd say ultra-Reform because it's more of the Temple Sinai and then Touro -- although Touro's become more mainstream Reform. The majority of the community came from -- the majority of the Federation-active participants came from that community.

As a younger person, I was not as involved in Federation. But as I got older and became an adult and became more involved in the community, I started to get more involved in the Federation as a lay leader. Then I jumped over the dark side and became a professional eight and a half years ago. So, it was a community that, in a lot of respects, was very split.

RH: OK. I was going to come back to that. You said, splintered. I think probably if you're Reform, that wouldn't be your characterization of it.

RU: That's correct. Would not.

RH: So, it's --

RU: That's correct.

RH: -- really from your position in an Orthodox shul.

RU: That's correct.

RH: And so, when you say, splintered, tell me what you are split.

RU: Split --

RH: What do you mean?

RU: As an adult, when I started working with the Federation, I was introduced to a lay leader who I knew of very, very well. When I was introduced to her, and she grew up very classically Reform, very ultra-Reform, she looked at me, and she goes, "Well, who are you, where did you come from? How come I haven't met -- I've never met you

before?" I thought to myself, that's because I grew up Orthodox, and your family really wouldn't speak to my family. Not that it was ugly. They just -- there was no reason for them. They never felt that they needed to go out of the way to meet me. That's because I grew up on the smaller side of the community. And I'm OK with it. It might sound like I'm not. But I'm really OK with it, because as you get -- when you're younger as child, sometimes it hurts you. It didn't hurt me that much. I had plenty of friends. That's one of those things that never bothered me. I didn't have to be everybody's friend, and everybody didn't have to love me. And as I became an adult, I started to understand the culture of our community.

The people in New Orleans -- the Jewish community that came to New Orleans in the early to mid-1800s came in primarily were German descent, a lot of bankers, a lot of professionals.

They really made their mark, and their goal really was to assimilate as much as possible into the community. That's what they had to do to become part of the society here. When the more Orthodox community came in after the turn of the century, that came in on that wave from Eastern Europe, they didn't really care. They didn't really feel like they had to be part of the community. They were merchants. They were peddlers. They provided a service to the community. But they didn't always feel that they had to have a seat at the table with all the community leadership. I grew up different. It was OK. It was a wonderful life, and they were very successful, very wealthy people, and very successful people that were members of my shul growing up. It was fine.

RH: What neighborhood did you grow up in?

RU: I grew up in an uptown New Orleans. I grew up in the Broadmoor area. I lived on Louisiana Avenue Parkway, which had eight feet of water in my house for this storm. We stayed there for Hurricane Betsy because we figured it was fine. This time, they took in eight feet. But I grew up living Uptown until I was 12 years old. Then my parents moved

to Metairie. They wanted to move into an apartment out here, which they did.

RH: Where did you go to school?

RU: I started out at -- Beth Israel had a nursery school -- and I went to Beth Israel's nursery school for three years. Then I went to a school called Hebrew Academy. We had a Hebrew Day School here in the Uptown area, a few blocks from my home. I was there for one year. It was a not a successful school. At that point, my parents put me in the public school in the neighborhood. Wilson School had a lot of Jewish kids in that school because they all lived in the neighborhood. I was there until fifth grade and went to McDonough 14 because they integrated Wilson -- not that it was a white school beforehand.

It was not. It was a racially mixed school. But when they went into full-fledged integration, they bused kids in from all over the city to try to balance out the schools, and I was put in a classroom, entering fifth grade, with kids who did not know how to read and write. My parents said, no, no, this is not good. So they moved me into another public school, and I went to -- I was there fifth and sixth grade. Then I went to McDonough 14, which was a -- which was a junior high school and not a middle school. They had junior high school then, seventh, eighth, ninth grade. Then, in tenth grade, I went to Ecole Classique for three years. I wanted to go to Newman because I started to make some friends with people that were at Newman, and I really wanted to go there. My parents told me, "No." It was not a financial issue. It's just my father really didn't want me going to school with those kids because those --

RH: Those kids being Reform --

RU: -- kids, meaning Jewish Reform, but they were also very privileged, very wealthy children. They were a lot of -- they all weren't, and as I got older, I realized that. But the perception and the majority of the kids that were going there were coming from very

comfortable, wealthy homes because it wasn't cheap to go to Newman. My father really wanted me to be exposed to everyone and not just go there and just meet elitist people. My son is a 13-year Greenie. He went to Newman School for 13 years. So times change.

RH: What do you feel the relationship of the Jewish community is to the larger New Orleans community?

RU: On a whole, the Jewish community has a very good -- I think they have a very good relationship with the general community. We have worked very hard to build those relationships. I believe we are very well accepted in the general community, not necessarily in the blueblood society community as much, because that's a private, insular world. That's their world, and that's fine. But as far as economic opportunities in this city, I don't find nowadays that we are -- there's never a roadblock for economic opportunities, for educational opportunities. Now, when I went to Ecole Classique several years prior to that, they really tried not to accept any Jewish kids into the school. But then they figured out that we were a source of income, and there were enough of us that wanted to go there, and they accepted us. They didn't do it graciously, but they accepted us, and I got a good education there. But I think on a whole, we're very well accepted, and we're very fortunate. I really find very, very few antisemitic incidents that I'm aware of in the city. In my position, I'm a little bit more knowledgeable of what happens. I find very few in this city, whereas in other southern cities, it's, to a greater extent, it's much more visible. We've had members of the Jewish community have run for political office. There have been heads of banks, heads of major -- business here. I think we're part of the fabric of the community now, and I think it's a good part of it.

RH: How do you feel about the Jewish community through this crisis? How do you feel they handle themselves?

RU: Well, since I was one of those people trying to put the Jewish community together, I think we did a hell of a job (laughter). I think the community really came together. I think we all paused and really started to appreciate each other. I talk about classically Reform and the Orthodox community. I think all of that melded together. It's really interesting to sit around a table now, where we're grappling with serious issues about what's going to happen with Beth Israel. They're our only -- they're the modern Orthodox community. They're the modern Orthodox shul in New Orleans. But within a regional area. I think the closest modern Orthodox shuls now are in Houston, Memphis. The closest, I think Birmingham has one. So, it's very important. When you sit around a table now with people that are members of Touro and Temple Sinai, and you hear them talk about how important it is for our community to have a modern Orthodox shul, I'm blown away. Because I think, maybe before Katrina -- and not that they wouldn't have cared, but they wouldn't have cared. It would not have been a big deal. But to understand the dynamics of our Jewish community and how you need that balance. And having conversations with the Chabad rabbis, talking about our vision of building another Mikvah in the city. We had two mikvahs in the city before here.

Chabad had a mikvah uptown, which was a very restrict -- a very strict Orthodox, halachically Orthodox mikvah. And then Beth Israel had their mikvah in Lakeview, which was also a strict, Halakhically strict mikvah. But during the daytime hours, they would allow the entire community to use the mikvah. So you could have Reform and Conservative conversions in that mikvah. The Chabad mikvah Uptown, they won't allow it. But the Chabad rabbis are willing to supervise a mikvah out here in Metairie for the general community. They talk about, yes, and you can have Reform conversions there, and you can bring your dishes in if you want to -- if you want to immerse them to make them kosher." All these things that -- or they want to bring a baby, and nurse a baby, for the baby to convert. They're very -- it's wonderful conversations, and I'm enjoying them.

Because sometimes, I feel like I'm a bridge because I understand both worlds, and I try to get them -- I understand the modern Orthodox world, I understand the Lubavitch world very well. I have friends in that community and the Reform community. To have these conversations now, this is a result of Hurricane Katrina, where some of the barriers are down with a little bit of the mistrust because of the lack of education and knowledge. Because people often mistrust each other because they really don't understand where people are coming from. I think that's very exciting, and I think that's part of the new community. The fact that the synagogues, I think, are starting to feel very comfortable to sit around the table with the Federation's constituent agencies and organizations to discuss community issues as a community. I think that's an outgrowth of the funds that we're receiving from UJC, the fact that through the funds that were raised through their national system, close to $28,000,000 for the whole Gulf Coast region -- we've made a commitment, through UJC, to subsidize their -- the different entities, budgetary shortfalls. That includes the synagogues and the day schools, and the organizations. So, that for '06 and '07, we can give them an opportunity to do, to a degree, business as usual, without always having that worry about money, money, money, while they take the time to create a plan to reinvent themselves, based on the needs of their constituency, whether it's by the population age or the size of their membership, or where their community has moved.

I think, because they're sitting around -- they didn't believe it when we told them, the synagogues, "Oh, we're really going to give you money. You need to give us your budgets, and we're going to see where your shortfalls are." The end of May, we gave the synagogues checks, and you should have seen their mouths when they were sitting around the table. They said, "Yeah, we thought it was lip service." We gave them a lot of money. It's not the Federation's money. It's the money that was raised, that was given to UJC, that we are really the -- we're really the fiduciary -- they're the -- we're the fiduciary agent. We're the one doing the due diligence to see how much money they need, and we're the ones that are actually giving them the check. I have another check coming next

week, so it's going to be a lot of fun around here when they get the check. So --

RH: But explain to me, a little bit, because Alan mentioned this before, and I'm not quite understanding. There's been, in the past, tension, and it sounds mainly around finances, between synagogues and agencies. And --

RU: And tensions between agencies, and tensions between synagogues. It's all money.

RH: It's -- basically, it's -- you might be getting some of my money, or the kind of -- that's my person from my synagogue who's giving you --

RU: Oh, yeah.

RH: That kind of money.

RU: Right.

RH: And -- so that's kind of typical. I just wanted to make sure --

RH: That's --

RH: -- I understood it (laughter).

RU: No, it's very typical. It's very typical. I could have a donor or the Federation, who makes a very significant gift to the Federation, and they might give us more money. Then all of a sudden, a synagogue's having a capital campaign, and they're not giving them as much.

Or the synagogue could be having a capital campaign, and that major donor that's my -- considered my major donor, it makes a significant commitment to that capital campaign, and they look at us, and say, you know, for the next two or three years, I have to cut my annual campaign gift because I'm giving to the synagogue. Finances are always an issue, and everybody gets mad.

But I don't really get mad because, in the end, we have to understand that we have limited resources -- we have a limited community. We have great capacity to give -- even post-Katrina, there's a lot of capacity out here to give, and people who are doing well, who can give. But in the end, you really have to stop and say, we're all one community. The end prize is that we sustain Jewish life here. I know that might sound, to a degree, simplistic, and I'm looking at things.

I'm a Pisces, I -- rose-colored glasses. But I really believe that way, and sometimes when people get mad because somebody will cut a gift to the Federation because they've made a commitment someplace else for a certain amount of time. I really don't get mad. My whole attitude is just give. If you're going to give, give. Don't not give. The person that angers me is the person that has the capacity to give -- that I can't get through to them why it's important to give. Those are the people that anger me, not people that, one year they give me a thousand dollars, the next year they give me five hundred, because they've made a commitment to a capital or this or that for their synagogue, I don't get as angry. Am I answering -- is that what you're looking for?

RH: Well, I'm curious, too. You -- the community still has -- there's some people here, still, with the pockets --

RU: Yes, absolutely.

RH: -- in the community as a whole.

RU: Absolutely.

RH: Still has the capacity to --

RU: We have people who are doing very well post Hurricane Katrina. After Hurricane Betsy, here, in '64, there was a chunk of our population that did really well. We had a lot of people that moved in. Whenever I hear people are moving here, I'm thrilled because

there're wonderful economic opportunities in this city, not necessarily for the people who originally lived here. But a lot of the people that lived here are doing just fine and have the capacity to give.

They did fine, and they will give. We have people. We have many people in this community who might have been a major donor before who don't have the capacity to give right now. We're going to run an annual campaign beginning the end of this Fall. We did not run a formal campaign in 2006. People gave us money, but we didn't have a formal campaign. In 2005, our campaign closed at $2,825,000.

We have a goal of $1.8 million this year. I think it's a realistic goal, and I think we will achieve the goal. We will have new donors who really were not donors before, who, I think we've helped this year, that will want to give back.

We have people who are doing better that I think will give more. But you know, in the end, it's all got to shake out. In the end, I just want them to give, and I want them to feel good about giving because I think that's part of coming back -- that's part of becoming normal again, part of that normal ebbs and flows of life here -- is that, oh, no, here's Federation knocking on the door, looking for money (laughter). Things are back to normal. Now, but that's OK. It's a good thing.

RH: That's a great way to kind of see normalcy, is their knocking on my door, fundraising again.

RU: Yeah. Yeah, it's true.

RH: (laughter) That's nice. On a personal level, what has being Jewish meant to you, going through what you've been through?

RU: Being Jewish has always been a very important part of my life. My parents, my father. My mother enjoys being Jewish. My father loved being Jewish. He thrived on

being Jewish. It was part of him that nothing made him prouder than to see me get involved in synagogue, to see the things that I was doing as a child. So, being Jewish was really -- besides being a religious experience -- people say it's a social -- it's a lox and bagels experience. It's more than a lox and bagel experience. It's just that whole feeling of being Jewish. Knowing that I've had a Jewish community to work with, I think, was really, truly, really wonderful for me during Katrina.

You don't get into Jewish non-profit work because you're going to make a lot of money. You're not going to make a killing. There are people that make a lot of money doing this. You do this because you really care. If you're going to be in non-profit work, you really have to care about what you're doing because you really don't get paid a lot to do it. But you have to really care about your community. I was really blessed because I get to do Jewish -- I tell people 24 hours a day, seven days a week because even on Shabbos, I get attacked at services, etc. I love being Jewish. I love being part of a community. I love the network of being part of a community. I love watching a television show and watching The Daily Show, Jon Stewart.

They won an Emmy again; I'm so excited. They list out all the writers, and my husband [and I] are watching it Sunday night, and we're trying to figure out, oh, Jewish, Jewish, Jewish. It felt good that it's part of that club. I love it. I think it was very strengthening for me. I think if I would have been -- prior to working here, I worked at the Greater New Orleans Sports Foundation. I worked with them for about two and a half, three years. I was hired as their volunteer coordinator to recruit and supervise 7,000 volunteers for a Super Bowl in 1997. Did some other work with them, a lot of volunteer work. Love working, love sports, love working. It was great.

But after Hurricane Katrina hit, if I would have evacuated, I think I really would have been lost because I had a purpose to my life, and I think that really helped me get through it. By working with the Jewish community, reconnecting the Jewish community, finding

members of the Jewish community and plucking them off of roofs, or working with the Jewish Home for the Aged -- although it's not completely a Jewish home anymore -- but working with them. Just the things that I did with the Jewish community gave me the strength to deal with the rest of the garbage. My husband and son kept reminding that first week because I would come back exhausted and strained and stressed, and I'd talk about everything I did that day, and they looked at me and they said, "You don't get it. We don't have that. We don't know what to do. We're watching television. We're sitting here, and we're looking." I said, "You have a purpose to your life." So, being Jewish is very important. It gives me a purpose.

RH: Are there any frameworks in Judaism, or concepts, religious concepts, spirituality, that you think about or that you feel you function through?

RU: People like me would say, "Oh, well, I believe in *tikkun olam*, and repairing the world, and all these big issues." I don't like to classify them that way, I guess, because of the way I was raised, that it's just -- it's all normal, it's expected. Being part of the Jewish community is expected obligation. It's not an obligation. It's just an expected part of my life. I don't know if I can box it out into those categories that people use now. It's just part of me. I could not imagine my life without being involved in the organized Jewish community in one way. I think sometimes I need to be a little less involved and learn the no word, you know, because sometimes I do too much, especially on a volunteer end.

But it's just -- it was expected. In my household, you belong to a synagogue; you paid synagogue dues; you made donations to your synagogue. You made a donation to your Federation. I was involved in Hadassah. I'm involved now. Youth -- I was involved in youth groups. I was part of fundraising for the community, to make the community -- to help the community, to improve the community. Israel's a very important part of my life. I think I grew up in a very Zionist household and hope to someday make aliyah. My husband doesn't want to move there. I told him he can visit me anytime he wants. But I

think that's all part of it, also, because that was instilled in me.

My mother has been to Israel twice.

My father never got to Israel before he died, and that was one of the places he always wanted to go. And I went on my first trip to Israel three months after he passed away in 1976. That was very moving to me because that's part of my Judaism, is my Zionist passion and belief. But that doesn't mean everybody has to make aliyah to fulfill the Zionist commitment.

That's another whole discussion, but --

RH: But you really want to do that. You --

RU: Yeah.

I was in Israel at the end of the June, and the Gilad Shalit was kidnapped while I was there. The Prime Minister spoke to us at the World Zionist Congress the week before and then spoke at the Jewish Agency meetings that I was also at that week. He came the day after Shalit was kidnapped, and you could see the fire-anger in his eyes. And I didn't want to get on that airplane. I wanted to stay there. I was really mad that I had to come home. Of course, what, a week or so later, they kidnapped those other two soldiers. I really wanted to be there.

There were several solidarity missions this month, and I couldn't go because of my work obligations. I think if I was the Assistant Executive Director, instead of the Executive -- Interim Exec, I would have been on a plane and gone.

Because I feel like I need to be there and support them. I was in Jerusalem -- I was a block and a half away from Sbarro's when it blew up that day. And I wear a bracelet that I've worn almost every day of my life since then. I just turned the corner from Sbarro's a

block and a half away and hear a big boom. I was there. It's a very important -- I think it's part of my Judaism. It's in that package.

RH: Do you think that Katrina has heightened your intensity around that? I mean, does --

RU: Katrina --

RH: -- your coming right here in this experience that you had this past year. I mean, not to compare them as (overlapping voices; inaudible) and the same.

RU: No, you know, it's interesting. We had a speaker in, talking about Israel, fundraising for Israel several weeks ago, and he was from Kiryat Shmona -- been there -- and he was talking about how they starting shelling, and you're deciding with your family, should we evacuate, shouldn't we evacuate. Should we take the kids, should we stay home, should we just send the kids, what should we do, making all these decisions, how long are you going to be out of your house, and there were a lot of parallels. It didn't really affect or change me, but it -- I've almost sickly said I've enjoyed watching the reaction of people and the Jewish people in my community, hey, does this sound familiar? Change the word to Katrina, and families being displaced, and families being separated. I think I've gotten satisfaction out of watching members of my community start to relate to it. As far as I'm concerned, my experience in Katrina has not really strengthened my Zionist commitment. That's just part of me. I mean, that's why I'm involved in Hadassah, and it's a given. I was active in Young Judaea as a child, and my son lived in Israel for a year. He went on Young Judea year course. He was in Israel the first year of the Intifada. I saw him ten days before the Intifada started in September of 2000, and he stayed in Israel for ten months after that. I wanted him to come home.

RH: (overlapping voices; inaudible)

RU: No, actually, let me rephrase that. In October, I told him at one window that there might be a window that I will call you and tell you you have to come home. He says, “I’m not coming home.” I said, “No, you don’t understand. If things get bad, you can’t stay there. They don’t want you because they can’t take care of you if they’re warring with the country.” I said, “If I tell you you have to come home, you have to come home.” All he said to me on the phone was -- and this is long-distance from Israel -- he said, “Mom, you know if you were here, you wouldn’t leave.” I said, “You’re right.” And I never brought it up again.

RH: Wow. Let’s go into what you think -- what the Federation is doing to build community, and what do you think needs to happen?

RU: OK. Good question. We started a recovery -- we put together a recovery task force in March. Representatives from every entity of this community, synagogues, day schools, organizations, agencies, all sat around this table, three different meetings, one meeting a month.

We came together as a community to identify core issues that we will need to grapple with as a community three years from now and five years from now to create a vibrant Jewish life in New Orleans. I’m very happy with that process. We identified five core issues that have now become action items. We’re in the beginning of the implementation stage, where I can do all my strategic planning lingo. We are populating action teams, as we speak, who will really grapple with these action items, and really talk about budgets and timelines and realities of what we need to do. It talks about community, retaining members of the community that have come back. Encouraging people to return, and how do we create a large enough immigration of new Jews to come to New Orleans. Talking about looking at how we can creatively raise more funds outside of the city to fund the things that we need to fund. Those are the type of issues. What type of services we can provide? We’re very excited about this process. We’re in a slow portion

right now. Summer is really tough to try to get people moving and motivated. But we're going to be completing the population of the action teams in about -- on the eighth of September. Then, we will move forward with that process through the Fall. I always tell people that it's a struggle to come back to New Orleans. Look at a family that's a two-household -- income household. The mother and father work -- could have two kids -- maybe only one of them has a job now.

Maybe neither of them, but suppose one has a job. You have synagogue membership, JCC membership, you have day school membership.

I don't want people to worry now about what it costs to be Jewish. I want it to be easy to be Jewish. I don't want that to be the issue, number one, of staying in the community, or staying connected with the community, because I can or cannot afford something.

In the same respect, I want to make sure that we have Jewish experiences and opportunities within this community to encourage people to stay and new people to come here. That it is a strong, vibrant Jewish community, over-programmed as hell right now. I mean, I went to four things on Sunday. It was like, please, people (laughter), you're killing me. But that there are options and choices and that there's a vibrant Jewish life here. I always tell people, just be easy to be Jewish. I don't want you to worry about that part. That should be a non-issue to be here. A quality modern Orthodox shul would be great. They'll be small. They're not going to have three or four hundred families in it. But something that has a visible presence, stability within the other synagogues within the community but maybe looking different.

Our day school is struggling right now. We have K through three classes, 21 students. Downstairs last -- before Katrina, we had 80 students, K through eight. It was a nice, small school. I'm anxious to see our community create an environment that we will be driving -- encouraging parents to put their kids in our day school here. It's a very quality day school. Kids got a great education.

RH: This is my next question. Would you put your son in it if he was little?

RU: It's an interesting question. At this point right now -- when he went to Newman, there was -- this day school was not in existence when he went to Newman. He always teased me and said, "I wouldn't have been a guinea pig."

I said, "I don't know." I said, "Right now, at this point, at this very minute here, I don't know. I don't know." Now that school's up and running, maybe, but I don't know. It's -- and that's very hard because that's part of the problem. This is a community that's driven to these ISAS private schools, where, if you can afford it, that's where you try to send your kids.

If you can't afford it, there are alternatives now. Now, there are a lot of magnet schools and charter schools, and public education is becoming a whole different focus here, where they're trying to upgrade the schools.

They're trying. Who knows if it'll work? But they're trying. Ultimately, in the end, we might end up back in that model that we were in when I was a child, where the majority of us went to public school, and in the afternoon, we went to an afternoon Hebrew school program where we mixed with the community. Sunday schools became really more relevant and important, and Saturday activities at the synagogues were more relevant and important. I don't know. I don't know. I hope the day school survives. I think it's important to attract new people into the community that are looking for a day school education. I don't know.

RH: What, in your opinion, would be -- what's the downsides of the way it is right now? I know that they have two classes in each class.

RU: That's actually good because --

RH: You think that's good.

RU: -- it's K1 and 2-3, and they are taking all three -- four of the grades. They resource the kids into a center room and based on their levels. So, because you're not stuck in a kindergarten or a first or a second or third grade, and that's your grade, they're evaluating each of the students as to where they are academically, where they are with their Hebrew, their Judaic studies. They're resourcing them in and out so that they don't hold any kids back. So, I think that's very good, and I'm very comfortable with that. I think it's good, but the school can't survive with 21 children. They can't financially survive. They can't financially survive in this building, where they're not paying any occupancy right now, because they don't have the money.

Or the JCC that's in this building. This building can't survive unless we have a day school that's reasonably vibrant, that's drawing in enough income. JCC has good membership numbers here right now. We'll see how they are in six months. We don't know.

RH: So, are there any hard choices that you think are going to have to be made?

RU: Yeah. Do I think they'll make them? Knowing the culture of New Orleans? Tomorrow. Everything's avoid -- tomorrow. Yeah, I think there're going to have to be some hard choices that people are going to have to make, and organizations and agencies are going to have to make, because there will be -- there'll -- the money's going to dry out from UJC next year, and we are going to reach out to raise funds outside of this community, to help us continue the programming and services. But unless you can give them a return on their investment, these major funders are not going to fund you. There's some talk with the -- with the Reform synagogues on St. Charles Avenue -- would they merge, would they not merge? God, anybody listens to this, I don't think it'll happen, power that be. Beth Israel should have sold their building quite a few years ago, but there were several members of the congregation who were financially supporting it, that we've been here, and we've been here since 1969. My father sat here, my mother

sat here, I was bar mitzvahed here, I had my confirmation here. We don't have to go anywhere, and it was now, I was screaming for years to do it, and of course, now I can say, I told you so because if they would have sold that building in Lakeview, moved into something smaller, whether it was Lakeview or Metairie, their whole situation would be very different. There are two-day schools in the city right now.

There is a Chabad-based day school, and there is the community day school. This Fall, they are going to sit around a table, and they are going to try to link arms as best as they can, and they are going to try to see if there is any validity to merging those schools. That is going to probably be the biggest issue that we are going to be grappling with this Fall. I am adamant that they are going to sit around the table. They are going to have this conversation, nice, mature adults, and hopefully leave most of their personal baggage at the door. In the end, it might work, and in the end, they all might say, hey, not going to work. Chabad school, right now, Touro Academy, as far as I know, they have 25 students, pre-K through 8. You can't give people a quality education in pre-K through 8. You can't. You can't with one person -- one child in this grade and two in another grade. You don't have that interaction of that school environment. Both schools can't afford to be open, with very small numbers of students. So, that's going to be a big, big issue. I think --

RH: Do you bring in a facilitator for that?

RU: Absolutely. We're going to bring in somebody. Oh, yes, because you're never a maven in your own backyard. I'm going to bring in somebody from the outside who has no vested interest or stake in the outcome, except that they come -- that they mediate and come together. You know, in the end, it might not work. But we have to sit down, and that's an outgrowth of Katrina, is to -- and both of the entities are willing to sit down now. Will they have a fair, levelheaded, intelligent, appropriate conversation? I hope because my goal in it -- my personally -- should the two schools merge? Paper wise,

yeah, they should merge. You could have 50, 60 kids and run a reasonably good program. But there are a lot of other issues involved. In the end, whatever will work out best, or whatever will be will be, but they have to give it an honest shot.

The Federation's really going to have to evaluate itself because we are doing about three times the amount of work within this Federation as a staff, and we worked before Katrina on major burnout and overload. All we hear from our lay leaders is the community's small, the community's small, and the Federation has to cut their budget. But they only look at the staff budget. I just came from a finance committee meeting, and we're -- staff are always overpaid, and we spend too much money on staff. I always remind them, I say, "When you work on a budget, you have to decide your priorities and the things you want to accomplish. And that's the way you create a budget and say, well, can we afford to do all of these things? Because these are the resources we are realistically going to need, and I'm going to be battling those battles." If I become the Executive Director, I will battle those battles. I was interviewed for the position to become Executive Director because I've applied for the position. I was very upfront and honest with them about how I feel about this, that they are going to have to decide, that we cannot be all things for all people and cut our budget. Because right now, we have become the main resource of so many things for this community.

In the end, if we are strictly a fundraising entity, it changes our whole budget. Fine, if that's what they want. If they want to do more than that, it's going to cost them more money, or they can't do it because there are -- the volunteer force is no longer there to say, well, volunteers can do this, and volunteers can do that. Because it's just not how the working world works. The Federation's going to be grappling with some very hard decisions about the Federation itself and the future use of this building. So, that's a long answer for a short question.

RH: So, this building -- now, I'm beginning to understand the campus aspect of this. This is a building that's housing many different kinds of organizations.

RU: The Federation owns this building.

RH: Oh, the Federation does.

RU: The day school and the satellite JCC are tenants of this building. The building was built for the day school and for the JCC.

Prior to Hurricane Katrina, they were assisting with some of the -- they were paying rent. I say it loosely -- not full rent, but they were paying rent to help maintain this building. Post-Hurricane Katrina, they're not putting in any money in right now. It's going to be a real serious issue, space usage of this building, starting in '08, if it's a small day school, and depending on what the JCC is doing, and bringing in some other resources as tenants within this building, which will be appropriate for this building to be used for us to be able to keep this building. That's one of the big issues that the community is going to have to grapple with.

So --

RH: So, is, there're two JCCs right now, is that correct?

RU: There's the main JCC uptown, and then there's this satellite JCC. The JCC used to be down the street at a building that's now been torn down that was sold several years ago. When they decided to -- that the large percentage of Jewish population was moving to Metairie, this area, they felt they needed to put a JCC out here, and I was one of those people screaming for one. Then put it out in this building that was like an insult to the people in Metairie because the JCC Uptown is this big, enormous, elaborate building, and it was like in three sheds. It was an insult. I was furious, furious that that's what they considered. We have -- a large percentage of our population is living here now.

RH: What is the percentage and, if you know it, in Metairie, as opposed to in New Orleans?

RU: I don't know the exact numbers right now. We're in the middle of a survey.

RH: OK.

RU: We have a lot of people that have moved to the North Shore.

RH: Really?

RU: The largest percentage of our funders, even as people were moving out here, the large percentage of our dollars were coming from people uptown, that still lived by the river. Dollars drive, often drive decisions. But I would venture to say that right now, a larger percentage of our population is living in the Metairie and North Shore area. Although more and more people are moving uptown because we had a large population living in Lakewood South and living in Lakeview.

Their houses, they're just nonexistent. These people have been displaced to other areas of the city.

RH: Well, that's interesting because I would think that the Lakewood and Lakeview were using the Metairie JCC --

RU: Not necessarily.

RH: Not necessarily.

RU: That was the middle.

RH: That was --

RU: You came this way, or you went that way. That's why Beth Israel went out there, because it psychologically was, like, living in this population out there. But that's in the middle. Sometimes we would hold meetings at Beth Israel because everybody felt they were driving equal distances. Nobody was going uptown, and nobody was going to Metairie. We go, oh, let's meet at Beth Israel. And so that's getting tapped.

RH: That's just -- OK. Let's --

[END OF AUDIO FILE 2]

RH: Oh, let me (overlapping voices; inaudible) --

RU: Take three.

RH: We had forgot to say take two.

RU: Take three.

RH: So, this is tape three.

RU: The one that there's no announcement on is two. (laughter) The Thursday after Katrina hit, we had a meeting in the Houston office -- Houston Federation called a meeting of all of those entities, their emergency committee. Rabbi Rifkin, Zelig Rifkin, the Senior Rifkin of the Chabad community here, who I've known since they moved here since '70, came to the meeting, and I had happened to mention to him because I had gotten one hour sleep because I was dealing with the staffing of -- the staff from Woldenberg, and going to see them. Then came into the building.

It was that Thursday. Wednesday night, Thursday morning was when everybody arrived from Woldenberg. Then I was dealing with where the staff ended up at this Red Cross shelter Thursday morning and then drove in for this 10:00 am meeting at the office. I went up to Zelig, and I told him what I had done and what was going on. I had mentioned

to him that Myer Lockoff had passed away at the nursing home, and I don't know how we're going to get him out. They left -- I said that they had to leave him, that they -- there was -- I -- first I thought that they were -- the two people that had passed away, that they were on the -- in the bus, that they had them on the bottom of the bus. But there was no place for them, so they left them in the freezers. So, he started this chain reaction of trying to get (ZAKA?) in to get them. It was not a normal time. Whatever happened, happened. What didn't happen didn't happen. But it was trying. Then I got a phone call from the (ZAKA?) on Friday that they were coming in, and they were going to try to get to the nursing home. At that point, I left it alone because it was out of my hands. But it was very, very difficult. It was for family members that lost family members during this time, and to be separated from the deceased was just heart wrenching.

RH: So, were you involved in (ZAKA?), going in for the Torahs at Beth Israel?

RU: No, not at all.

RH: That was --

RU: I saw those pictures after they came out, just like everybody else did, and it totally blew me away. That's my shul. My father's name is above the front door. It's the Harry Middleberg Memorial Touro. The water didn't hit his name, though. I'm convinced he was up there pushing the water below his name, saying, oh, no, no! (laughter) The water went just below that plaque. So, yeah, that's my shul, and it was -- that was -- it was very emotional for me to see those pictures.

It took many, many months for me to show those pictures to my mother because they were shocking.

RH: Are there Jewish institutions that you feel more committed to now. I mean, obviously, you're working here at the Federation. But, on a -- just a personal --

RU: I don't know. It's really hard to say, because at this point, because of my role in the Federation, and the importance of the institutions that we're working with, I really -- that's a hard -- I don't know. It wouldn't be fair for me to give an answer to that because I really can't pinpoint one is more important than the other.

RH: You certainly expressed across the board -- you think we need an Orthodox and the Conservative.

RU: Sure.

RH: Those two communities have really lost -- the Conservative community and the Orthodox have lost a lot of people.

RU: That's correct.

RH: Is that right?

RU: That is correct. They've lost the largest percentage of the Jewish population that was affiliated, synagogue-affiliated.

RH: Is that right?

RU: Yeah. It's tough.

RH: Do you see any challenges, or do you have a way that you think they can build up -- any ideas?

RU: I think the Conservative synagogue will be fine. I've heard rumors from, well, they're now slowly dying. I don't think that's true. I think they're going to have to, to a degree, reinvent themselves.

I think their biggest challenge is to realize that their population that they're serving is smaller now than it was before. It doesn't necessarily mean that it's going to be -- it can

be cheaper to service them, but they're going to have to really identify what they need to do to have a quality synagogue, but with a smaller population. They're going to have to downsize on the things that they're doing because they are not going to generate enough income. I think they'll be OK. I think they learned their lesson not having flood insurance. I think it was the stupidest thing they could have done because their mortgage was paid off, and the mortgage was paid off, you know, the bank don't -- there's no bank saying, you have to have flood insurance.

Well, they learned because they learned a very tough lesson over there. They had just finished a renovation. They had -- they were in the middle of partly renovation. They had added on that small sanctuary. They were in the midst of a capital campaign. Then their membership tanked. Not completely. There are a lot of people that are back. So, I think they've learned their lesson because they had to put so much of their working capital into putting that building back together.

They're not small by any stretch of the imagination as Beth Israel is. Congregations Gates of Prayer, the Reform congregation out here, probably has about 85 percent of their congregation is back. They'll be just fine. They'll be fine. They were always a growing congregation out here. Touro Synagogue uptown was very strong. It's been very strong. It continues to be very strong. I think they'll be OK. Temple Sinai has an old guard that's holding on to them. Don't know what will happen to them ten years from now. It'll be interesting to see if they do to themselves what Beth Israel did to themselves, where they had a very, very -- they barely got a minyan on Shabbos at Beth Israel, and they were in this huge monstrosity building that was a waste. But I think it's important that you have a vibrant Orthodox, Reform, and Conservative community here. I'm very happy that the Chabad community is here. I think they're doing wonderful, wonderful work, and they're part of the fabric of my community.

RH: Now, what do you think they add to the community?

RU: They -- their -- they do really quality outreach, first of all, on Tulane's campus. They reach out to so many students. Forget about what they do out here, but just on Tulane's campus alone. The outreach they do to so many students who are having problems, problems at home possibly, problems with drugs, social issues that they, number one, reach out to them and provide a nurturing environment is very important. They're a stabilizing force. They're everywhere; I always tease them. I said, you know, they -- they're like Energizer bunnies. I said, "When do you sleep?" I know I don't sleep. I don't know when these guys sleep. I really don't, the husbands or the wives. I think they're an important part of the community. You can ask other people, especially members of the Reform community, and they don't understand them, they don't like them, they don't trust them, and that's it. I don't find them threatening. Some people do. I understand they're wonderful people, and I think they add -- they have added a lot of stability. They were the first groups back in with the city to help us, you know, create an Orthodox presence in this city.

RH: Let's move a little bit and go into the New Orleans community a bit.

RU: OK.

RH: What do you think is going to need to happen? Are you happy with the progress in New Orleans --

RU: Oh, nobody's happy with the progress. Oh, my God! Anybody who says they're happy with the progress is lying, or they're running for election. No, I'm not happy with the progress. Am I surprised? No, I'm not surprised. That's part of what I love about living here. This was bigger than anybody ever anticipated. I -- and I will admit that. I think everybody, up and down, made the mistake -- made big mistakes. It doesn't matter if you're a Democrat or you're Republican. They all screwed up. They all screwed up. Consistently, equally, everybody screwed up. They can all say, yes, I screwed up, and don't feel that they screwed up more. Everyone screwed up down the line.

Politically, we're struggling because we have leadership right now in our community that the -- meaning the New Orleans community. I say that but I don't vote in New Orleans, so I vote out here. I think the leadership has not been able to lead. I don't think that's the entire reason why the community's not coming back. I think one of the things that we've learned from this, and I've been saying it all along, is don't wait for government. You put your hand out to government last. Now, look, I got my FEMA check fairly quickly because I filled out the forms correctly. I know somebody who lives in New Orleans East, he's -- whose house had 12 feet of water.

She didn't qualify for FEMA. Excuse me? She lost everything! But she didn't fill the form out right, and then she went back and tried to collect it. Never got a FEMA check. So, that's government issues. That's federal government issues. City issues?

No, they didn't have their act together. There're areas of the city that looked as bombed out as before. I think there're a lot of people. It's very hard to lead when you really, truly can't lead because you're leading by a majority. You're not, in certain respects, at a time like this, you need a dictator. You do. You're going to do this; you're not going to do that. And you know what? Everybody's not going to be happy. I love Scott Cowan at Tulane, and if you speak to some people in the medical area of Tulane, they won't agree with me because they're having some issues with Scott. Scott made some very hard decisions in the Fall, dissolving Newcomb College. That was real touchy -- that's like, that was my college -- dissolving the college, dealing with the engineering school.

A lot of decisions that he had to make to downsize. But he got to be dictator. The only reason he got to be dictator is because his board allowed him to do it.

They gave him the ability. Now, in the end, will it be -- will it work?

I don't know. But somebody had to make hard decisions and hard choices, and it had to be done, and somebody had to step up to do it. The current Mayor of the City of New

Orleans does not have the mandate to do it, and he doesn't have the political backing and savvy and people behind him to stand up to him when he has to make those hard decisions.

So, in one community, he says, "We're going to do this, and the next one we're going to say, do that." In the middle, he's going to say, "Do this," and then they don't do anything. So now, neighborhood by neighborhood and street by street, people are making their own decisions. Is it smart?

I don't know, but it's -- that's the way we're going to have to survive. And that's the reality now. It's hard for President of the United States -- and again, it has nothing to do with Democrat or Republican. I'm a Democrat. I love Bush on certain issues. When it comes to Israel, he's the man. When it comes to domestic, he and I are on different planets. But he also doesn't have a mandate to say this has to happen, that has to happen. There's so many checks and balances, good, bad, or whatever. The government moves slow. Government moves slow everywhere. And don't let anybody kid you that everything's better in Mississippi.

Go drive through Waveland with Haley Barber. And Mississippi got all this money.

I have a friend who has a house -- had a house in Waveland on the beach. She says she hasn't seen a nickel. She's waiting. They're not moving any quicker. So, I think the city's got serious issues to deal with.

I think they -- I don't think, though, government-wise, they'll learn their lesson from this. Governments never do. People do. Governments don't. People -- the Katrina Crew is a fine example. Local people got together and started to clean up the city, and it was great.

RH: But how does this -- the slow movement impact the Jewish community?

RU: Oh, it's very frustrating for us because what's happening now is, we've stabilized more or less at about 64.3 percent of our identified community as back. Now, people are coming and going.

We had waves of return. They came back immediately, meaning within the first six or eight weeks. Then we had a group of the population that came back over the Christmas break because kids were going to go to school. Then we had another one that came this summer. Now we have some people that we're hearing, they're starting to leave, they're fed up with getting their house taken care of, or they now have a job someplace else. The kids are happy in the school, the wife is happy, and because of the slow progress in the city, it makes our job more difficult. Am I surprised? No. I told people a year ago, when Katrina hit, within that first month, it's going to be 18 to 24 months before we really shake out and stabilize who's coming from our old -- our pre-Katrina population.

Who's coming, who's going, who's staying. It's going to be 18 to 24 months now. Immigration of new people? That's another whole ball game. To a degree, the community, the slow pace of the recovery of the community is driving that, but not as much because the people that are going to come in are coming in for economic opportunities. A whole different ball game for them.

RH: Do you see them coming in already?

RU: Slow. Yeah, we're finding them. We have spies. (laughter) No, we don't. We do. We're slowly meeting and finding people. We are actively working on Tulane's campus on the graduate schools at Loyola and Tulane, too. We had a habit here because we're very polite Southerners, even though we're really not that Southern of a city, when people would come, especially kids that came to Tulane. We try to take care of them. We take care of them through Hillel, or through Chabad, or however they were here, to make their time in New Orleans pleasant and nice and hopefully make them feel at home.

But nobody ever looked in their face and said we want you to stay here. You make your life here. You have an opportunity to raise a family, make money, be financially successful, and be a pioneer, a *chalutzim*, come and rebuild our city, make a life here. We've never been in their face with that. Sunday, I was at Hillel's Open House for their freshman students, and I met a graduate student couple that are here. I said, "Great." And I said, "So, you're starting graduate school." The guy says, "Yeah, we'll be here. We're going to be here for two years." I said, "No, you're not. We're going to make sure you stay. We want you." Nobody did that before! That's what we have to do.

RH: Did you scare him to death?

RU: He looked at me; he says, "We might." I said, "We'll have this conversation in two years. You're going to find a great job. You're going to love this place. Think about it while you're here these two years that this is not just a stop in the road. Look at our city as if maybe I want to stay here." That's very different. We have to challenge young people to do that, and the Jewish community has to do it. But the slow recovery of the city is really stifling members of my community from wanting to come back.

RH: How do you feel the Jewish community -- was it responsive, do you think, to other races and religions in the crisis, or do you know?

RU: As a national system, a lot of the 20 -- quite a bit of the 28 million dollars was earmarked for non-Jewish causes, which I think is nice, but I don't think was that nice.

RH: Tell me about that.

RU: I give to the American Red Cross because I want it to go to the general population. When the tsunami hit, I wrote -- no, it's not as good an example -- 9-1-1 -- I sent a check to the American Red Cross immediately, and I also sent a check to the United Jewish Communities. Because my check to the American Red Cross went to the non-Jewish community, and my check to the United Jewish Community was to take care of members

of my own community because, selfishly, you have to take care of your own first. I think we have very good relations with the non-Jewish community. I don't think it's a race or class issue, any stretch of the imagination. We've helped create partnerships through funding that we've received from Jewish sources with organization in Tremaine that's rebuilding their community. We're helping to be that bridge, and I don't think we've tried to stop the money, but it's very difficult when you tell members of the Jewish community that UJC raised 28 million dollars, but six, seven, or eight, or ten million of it might end up ultimately going to food banks.

We got a phone call, a man who was on the emergency committee for UJC decided that UJC needed to build a trailer park in St. Bernard Parish, and it would be the United Jewish Communities Trailer Park, and we put trailers, FEMA-type trailers for people because it would be good for the non-Jewish community see that the Jewish community cared. I said, "Excuse me, wait a minute. There are churches; there are other organizations that are doing those things. Your limited dollars will be much more impactful within this Jewish community."

So, it's --

RH: Did you win that one?

RU: Yeah, I did. I won that one. He wanted -- I don't know -- he wanted to put $150,000. I said, "Well, that's nice. They need several thousand trailers down there. What are you going to put up, what, ten trailers? Five trailers?" I said, "It's no impact. I said $150,000 here can redo the floors at Shir Chadash. Can we, you know, refill a library here. Help us clean something out, give scholarships for Jewish kids to come to the day school." There are other things. So, then they stopped and paused and said, "OK, OK." But I think we have a very good -- all and all. I think we have very good relationships with the non-Jewish community here. I really truly do. I really, really, really do.

RH: So, how does it feel when -- did you see the TV, and see what was going on at the Superdome, and --

RU: Oh, my God.

RH: How did that make you feel as a New Orleanian?

RU: It broke my heart. My father had an employee -- one of his employees, during Hurricane Betsy, lived in the Ninth Ward. Still did up until Katrina. He's like 85, 86 now. He's rebuilding again. That's what he keeps telling us. And we went down there as soon as the waters receded into the lower Ninth Ward to find him. He was in his attic and had kept climbing up, and climbing, bringing his furniture up there. We as a family have always had close relationships with members, quite a few members of the Black community. As a human being, it broke my heart. Then again, I kind of knew when they opened it as a shelter for last resort. This was really not -- you didn't really -- didn't want to go here. It broke my heart that those people were in the Dome, that they were at the Convention Center. I feel bad for them. To a degree, I blame society and culture for the fact that they did not leave. I know a lot of people didn't leave but that they had no means of transportation to leave. They got themselves to the Superdome but couldn't get themselves out of the city.

Then they expected, because of the way we have -- the culture and the environment we provided, that they expected to be fed, and to be clothed, and to be given a bed at the Dome, where they weren't. That's our fault as a society. I watched a lot of the -- I was watching NBC Monday night, and I was watching especially Brian Williams because he was just so tremendously moved by what he saw. I sat there and cried because these are people. It's just like I feel like I want to be in Israel, and I want to help them. In a way, I felt bad that I wasn't here to help those people. But then, what could I have done, as one single person? It was horrible. But I've seen there were white people in the Dome, too. There was a elderly couple from New Orleans, Jewish couple ended up in

the Dome because they stayed in the house -- they got evacuated to the Dome. So, everybody that -- again, everybody that you saw on television was not a poor Black person who doesn't work, who lives in a housing project, who deals drugs.

Because that's the image everybody assumed. There were so many people that were in the Superdome that didn't have a car that worked, that had to get there, or ended up at the Convention Center because they stayed in town. Everybody looked the same. Everybody was dirty, filthy, *schmutzig*, been walking in *schmutz*, in clothes, same clothes for days. Everybody looked disgusting. It's like Mardi Gras with your banker that had underwear on his head. You don't know who these people are. It just broke my heart. It really did. It was just very, very sad. That was a big mistake of the federal government because they could have -- it's just like they were flying helicopters over the city, they could have dropped food and left them supplies there, and they didn't do it. Whoever's fault it was, it was the federal government that would done that.

RH: Is there anything that you see is a Jewish community now that -- I don't know -- might need to be done to heal whatever happened at that moment? Did something happen that needs healing?

RU: We --

RH: And then, whose responsibility is it?

RU: You know, is it such surprise? Everybody was so surprised that this happened. They were so shocked that this happened. I wasn't. When you call a shelter for last resort, the initial people that ended up in there were the lower socio-economic level Black community that was close enough to the Superdome to get there, not the people living in New Orleans these -- a lot of those people came out of the housing projects downtown, that are -- and I wasn't surprised it, that it happened, that those were the people that ended up there.

I wasn't surprised that the government didn't have their act together and didn't have enough food and medical supplies and water, even, and they called it a shelter for last resort. Was I surprised that people didn't come with their own provisions? No! I knew they weren't. They came in, entitled, and expected they were coming in like a Red Cross shelter, and it wasn't a Red Cross shelter -- that they were going to be fed, and they'd have a cot. The Jewish community alone can't heal. I think we have good relations with the community. I think we have maintained those good relations with the community.

I think the Black community knows that we're not the government. I don't think they expected us to save them if you want to separate them out. I don't think they're really angry with us.

Do I feel -- I'm devastated by what happened. I think it was disgusting and horrible. Do I think it would not have happened in Orange County, that you know, Nagin, a Naginism? If this would have happened in Orange County or in South Beach, would this have happened?

Well, gee, no, because in Orange County, everybody drives a car, you know? Everybody's got a car, and everybody's going to get out. Or you know somebody who has a car, and you're going to get out. So, it's really not a good example of a parallel because these people didn't have transportation. They couldn't get out. The city had a plan that they didn't implement, and that's other political issues.

But it was a plan that had been on the books for years, of trying to move people out of those, especially out of the housing projects. The current mayor did not even open the book to look at the plan. All those school buses sat there.

RH: So, tell me. I'm -- as the Federation, what -- does the Federation have an -- do they do anything to keep those good race relations going, and kind of what --

RU: We do. We're involved in a lot of interfaith and faith-based groups. We have a very close working relationship with the Arch Diocese of New Orleans, with a lot of members of the Black community, a product of the Black churches. We do a lot of interfaith work here. We continue doing that post-Katrina. We will not -- probably be not be doing it as the level of intensity that we were before, simply because it's a staff issue here now. It's time-consuming, and it's a -- need somebody at the meetings, and serving on these boards, and on these committees. We have community -- Jewish community priorities. You gotta go take care of yourself again, first. But we are maintaining those relationships. They were there before, and they're still there now.

RH: New Orleans, as always, just had a kind of a difficult racial relationship. Do you feel that or no? Do you think it has, or it hasn't?

RU: Compared to other communities in South? Other communities in the North?

RH: Urban centers.

RU: I don't think it's any --

RH: An urban center?

RU: -- different than a lot of other places, to be honest with you. I -- maybe it's my Pisces in me again. I really don't see anything different.

In certain respects, like I talk about Mardi Gras, where you stand in the street, and everybody talks to everybody. I think that happens in a lot of places. I think there's a lot of -- I think there's antisemitism in the city. I don't think it rears its head. I think it's very low-key, and I think it's squashed. That's why we have -- it's very quiet. Is there a lot of bigotry in this city? Oh, yes. Am I living in the bastion of it in Metairie? Oh, yes. People move this "white flight." White flight is a reality. When we sold our house in Broadmoor, we were the first family in Broadmoor that's -- we broke our block in the 19 -- late 1960s

because we sold to a Black family.

It was a major to-do. My father could care less because that's not how he looked at it. He said, you know, "This was a nice family. They took care of our house. They could afford to buy the house, and they deserve to live there." We broke our block. So, yeah, that's been going on for years. I don't think it's worse. I don't think it's better or worse than in other cities. I think Katrina made the whole country stop and realize how bigoted the whole country is and how racially divided the whole country is because many people could say, like me, that I have friends in the Black community, I like the Black community, duh duh duh duh. I really do. We really do as a family. We really do. I don't look at it that way.

It's just very different, but there are people here that were very upset when all of a sudden you could sit -- a Black person could sit anywhere on the bus. My father was in the -- one of the businesses he was in, he had purchased coin-operated laundries, Laundromats. They called them washeterias then. At one point, he had about 30 of them around the city. Early to mid-'60s, he bought them. I remember, as a little girl, going in many of them, and they had signs that said, whites only. I wasn't used to that. We were white, so my father always had members of the Black community and members of the white community that worked for him. The first thing my father would do when he bought them is he got rid of the whites-only sign. He says, "That's ridiculous." There were people that were members of the white community that would not go to his laundromat. He would say, "Don't come. It's ridiculous." I do remember as a little girl, riding downtown on the bus with the lady who was our housekeeper, and I had to sit on the back of the bus with her because -- I mean, I was really little -- because she couldn't sit on the front of the bus. I couldn't understand, I'd say, "But Betsy, look, there're two seats up in the front of the bus." "No, honey, I got to sit in the back." And I would -- she says, "Honey, you can go sit in the front of the bus, or you can sit back here with me." When I got older, I understood what it meant. I thought it was disgusting and stupid and

appalling, but --

RH: But, let's move on here, and talk about your vision for the future. What would be your vision, I guess, in the Jewish community, and also in New Orleans -- or the Greater New Orleans area, because that -- because you seem to see New Orleans as a more regional --

RU: I do.

RH: -- than I'm hearing so far.

RU: Because I live in Metairie (laughter). When you speak to somebody who lives uptown, this is all the way to Metairie (laughter). Twenty minutes, I mean, you know, I go to New York once a month. Twenty minutes, God, that's nothing. It's five blocks. I -- my vision -- we will be a different community. I hope we bring back enough of a balance for the New Orleans community to be able to be a little bit of what we were before. You can't build a community without somebody who drives the bus, is the garbage -- that's the great thing about Israel. The garbage collector's Jewish. The guy who drives the bus is Jewish. The person who works for the sewage company is Jewish.

The mailman is Jewish. Then the banker's Jewish. You have to have a little bit of everything in diversity and community. You can't open a restaurant unless somebody's willing to wash dishes. It's not an insult. It's a reality of how you create community. I see us smaller for a while, and it's not necessarily a bad thing -- Jewish community and non-Jewish community. New Orleans will come back. They had a lot -- answered a lot of these questions right after Betsy.

Oh, my God, what are we going to look like? What -- our Ninth Ward went underwater! That's where the Black population that were homeowners lived. Lower Ninth Ward went underwater, they had to rebuild after that, so they started all over. Of course, they had to do it again. And part of Chantilly. I don't think it's going to happen overnight. I think now

that we're past the first anniversary of Katrina, psychologically, I think people are just going to move forward a little bit quicker.

I think it will be five or ten years. Will we keep our sports teams?

That's a big issue. Oh, my God, we're going to lose the Hornets and Saints. They're not going -- neither team are going anywhere right now, as long as there is enough funding. There's a small group of people that'll write a check. They'll stay. The Jewish community? I would like to see us continue to be a community with diversity within the community because I think it's important. Everybody can't be Reform; everybody can't be Chabad Orthodox. I like the diversity. I just hope my vision is that I hope we can all continue to feel comfortable coming around the same table, and grappling with serious issues, and hopefully, coming most of the time, to some kind of an agreed-upon consensus. That's what I hope.

RH: What were your fears?

RU: Oh, that that won't happen, that the minute one thing'll trigger something, and the mistrust will start again, and everybody'll go into their little silos again, and they'll -- As they say, they'll make their own Shabbos. Everybody makes their own Shabbos and does their own thing, and it's going to be a challenge. My other fear is that we will lose our personality as a community, that we don't make it -- encourage people of all races to really want to come back and make a life here. Look, I don't want them reopening the housing projects. I want those people to get jobs. I don't want them going back into those housing projects. It's a dead end. Those were supposed to be temporary living facilities for people when they were having economic hardship and in between jobs. You're not supposed to live there multi-generations within that housing project.

I want them to tear them all down. I'd like to see some mixed-use neighborhoods in our city, and I'd like to see some real opportunity for economic advancement. I'm really

scared that they will not solve the problem with the education issue in the city because if they don't properly educate people, we'll never get out of the situation we're in now.

RH: Have there been any surprises for you that you think are kind of good things? That -- education came to my mind. It's kind of surprising how, to me, the direction it's gone.

RU: I'm not surprised yet. (laughter) I'm waiting to see. Every block, they have a charter school, you know? That's going to have to hash out, too. The fact that I -- I'm not that surprised that they're letting them have this opportunity to evaluate charter schools and to see about taking some of that responsibility. No, I've had no surprises, to be honest with you. I've had -- I guess a percentage of the medical community leaving, Jewish medical community, and non-Jewish medical community leaving, to a degree, was a surprise, and that was just me being naïve.

But no big surprises.

RH: What are the strengths that you'd like to preserve, both as a city and as a Jewish community?

RU: As a city, I want us to maintain and preserve our culture, that attitude of just getting out in the street, dancing and having a good time, and enjoying life. That's one of the best things about living here, is that people, you know, just stop and really enjoy life. They have a good time. God, I loved Mardi Gras this year. I was standing on a step stool a couple blocks away from Napoleon on St. Charles Avenue, and there were thousands of people. And somebody put a big boom box on, and everybody just started dancing, and having fun, and feeling good. And I don't want to lose that. And I was, you know, I was scared we would lose that. Jazz Fest was great, just being out there with people and just enjoying life. For the Jewish community -- I don't want us to lose our Jewish community. I want us to have a vibrant Jewish community, no matter -- you can have a vibrant Jewish community, and have a thousand Jews in your community, have

500, get 250. I just -- I don't want us to lose that part of it, and I don't want the in-fighting to start that could cause a hemorrhaging of any good work that we've done because people will get territorial, and we've got to create an environment where they won't be. And it's going to be very hard. I'm scared of that.

RH: Can you pinpoint for me what a vibrant -- even if it's a 500 -- what that would look like?

RU: That we have a -- we have choices, as far as synagogue affiliation, that we have a Jewish community center type of place to go to, where we can mix and mingle as a community. Those types of things. Do we have to have a day school to be a vibrant Jewish community? Maybe yes, maybe no. I think it's an important component for bringing people in. Is it -- if we don't have a day school, will we not be a vibrant Jewish community? No, I don't think so. We didn't have a day school here for years, and we were, I considered, a vibrant Jewish community. We also have to feel good about ourselves. In order to be vibrant Jewish community, you have to feel good in the end of the day as to how you end up -- what our footprint -- you know, they always talk about the footprint. What's the footprint in the city of the neighborhood of this? What's going to be the footprint of the Jewish community? And don't feel that we failed if we only end up with 5,000 Jews here, but we feel good, and we feel Jewish, and we feel good about how we participate in our life Jewishly. I don't want people to feel that we failed because I'm hearing that, you know, God, we're only sixty-five hundred, oh, my God. We might only be five or six thousand Jews; that's so terrible. I said, "Maybe it's not. This is what's dealt to us. Let's create something positive."

RH: Well, it doesn't seem like it would be too big a percentage difference compared to the rest of the community. Is --

RU: Oh, a higher percentage of Jews are back than the rest of the community.

RH: (laughter) That's what I thought.

RU: Yeah, they're back. They're business people; they're homeowners; they have economic -- a vested interest in the economy of the community. That's why they're back. Many people aren't back because they don't have jobs, they don't have homes, they don't have a place to live, and they have no reason to come back. But a lot more people are going to start coming back now that FEMA's no longer paying people's electricity bills and their rent in those apartments in Houston. You know, I think there're going to be a lot more people showing up and living, where you don't even realize they're living in houses that are gutted out with no power.

RH: Exactly. Let's talk a little bit your personal journey here. What are the biggest changes have there -- in your life since the hurricane?

RU: My job has changed. Up until a few weeks ago, I really wasn't fundraising. I was, but people were coming to me with money. I've taken on a lot more responsibility. I've taken on a lot more responsibility here in the Federation, and it has taken a lot more of my energy and my time. That's the biggest thing. I think I'm a little more patient over certain things. I don't freak out when I go to the restaurant, and I'm not served in two minutes, or they come back to me and say everything's not on the menu. Whereas before, I had no -- it's stupid things. People come in from out of town that used to live here and say, "What do you mean the menu -- Serrano's -- what do you mean the menu is only half the size what the menu was before? Where's this, and where's that?" I'm like, "No, this is all -- this was like in Christmas." I said, "This is all they can handle." Or if it takes an hour for food to come out of the kitchen, I'm real calm. I think that part of me has changed. I still trigger a lot and lose my patience over certain things. I'm really very passionate about creating a quality Jewish life in my community, and I'm even more so now. It's very, very important to me. I don't think I would do this work if it really wasn't important to me. I think it's consumed a lot more of my life. I have night frights.

RH: You do?

RU: I asked my husband. He says couple times a week, I'm screaming and yelling, telling me it's yelling at him.

No, I'm really not. I -- you know, things trigger. That's post-Katrina. That's part of what I'm dealing with. Plus, a lot of the stress and pressure here, because the expectation levels are so high with what I'm doing here, and you know, it's one thing if you have an annual campaign, and you don't raise as much money as you normally need. But if we fail with this community recovery plan, Jewish community recovery plan, we're failing -- it's a bigger failure. If I raise a million dollars or a million and a half, it's not as big of a failure as if we can't succeed in the things that we set out to do. So, I have a lot more pressure on me. And it's my community. I don't really plan on going anywhere. If you don't live here, you know, when you come and go, it's a whole different ball game. A lot of the executive directors come into the community three to five years. They care, they care, they care, but then they leave. I'm not really planning on leaving. If I screw up, we screw up, it's my community that I'm going to live in that's been screwed up.

RH: Has anything in your worldview changed -- the way you see things?

RU: Because of Katrina?

RH: Yeah. Are any priorities different?

RU: I was really blown away about the response that we had in Houston when we first got there. Again, I don't know if I would have responded that way. I've had family living down during Hurricane Andrew, and we've, you know, helped. But just to drop everything and just open up your heart and your life and do the things that we -- they did for us was just overwhelming. I know people that lived in people's houses.

They'd never met them before. They'd live in the houses for a month.

People just took people in. I'm like, I couldn't do that. I don't think I could. I think that really blew me away. The power of the strength of the Jewish community when it's together didn't blow me away because I know when we put our mind to something, we are -- we can get the job done. Validated my lack of confidence in government, and I'm a political junkie, so you know -- I love politics. It's a sport.

It's a hobby and sport for me. I love it. But validated the fact that government really don't have their act together. They're clueless. They're clueless.

RH: Are there any things you've learned about yourself that --

RU: I can exist on -- I think I can exist on less sleep than I did before (laughter). I -- the first two weeks after Katrina, I lost eight pounds. Then I gained 18. So, yeah. Dealing with my stress level has been very, very hard. What have I learned more about myself? I don't know that I -- I think I've really figured out that I really care -- I really care about this place, which is just really strange. Because there are a lot of places I could live that would be just much easier to live, but that -- I mean, I can't say family is more important to me, or my health is more important to me. A lot of people tell you those things. It's just that I think I can exist on a lot less sleep, and as crazy as committed as I was before, I'm even more so now.

RH: How about, are there any things that you took for granted before that you try not to take for granted now?

RU: Oh, my God, yeah. Let's see, air conditioning in my house, having a refrigerator that doesn't have living fruit flies in it. My insurance company wouldn't replace my refrigerator, and I had to pay for it.

Even though I showed them the fruit flies that were living in the refrigerator, and I had that it was a science experiment, they refused to replace it. So, I learned how to live without a refrigerator for four months.

I also have a house that has, that's, to a degree, still a mess, and I never thought I could live that way, and I'm learning to get used to the fact that I have an old bedroom sheet on my big giant windows in my dining room, and I have cracked marble floors, and I have peeling sheetrock, and stuff like that in my house. It's not bothering me as much. It's crazy stuff like that. Take for granted that I can go to a grocery store at night, get gasoline at night. Oh, my God, Wendy's is open from, what, 11:00 am to 1:00 am in the morning? Oh, my God, not that I'm going to Wendy's, but crazy things like that. Trying to go eat at a restaurant on a Monday, where there are limited restaurants on a normal day, and driving all over uptown, trying to find a place to have breakfast. And, not open, not open. Those kind of things. Just --

RH: This is a question, I guess, that's come to my mind here, and that you are -- you've had to be the Federation, you've had to protect your staff, you've had to create things that never existed before, and consensus is you -- it's been great. The Jewish community is not unhappy with the Jewish community.

RU: Right. I feel that way, too.

RH: From what I hear. How are you -- what would happen -- and let's just knock on wood here -- if they bring in another director?

RU: I, obviously, would be very disappointed. I would be angry. No, I'd feel sorry for him. I have a whole new attitude about this. I had an epiphany about two months ago because I decided that, you know what?

I'm doing a damn good job. I feel really good about what I'm doing. Am I perfect? Am I doing everything right? No. Nobody does.

I'm doing really a damn good job in a very difficult situation, in a community that I care tremendously about.

I know I'm doing the best job that I think I can do. I'm very honest with them. I don't think they like the honesty, which is (inaudible). I'm not going to lie my way into the job. I think it would be a very stupid move. But I've also decided that I don't have to have this job for my life to go on, and I'll see where it'll bring me. Am I going to stay here forever if they hire somebody else? I'd be a fool if I did, to be honest with you.

RH: You mean in the Federation or in New Orleans?

RU: No, in this job. No, I'm not leaving New Orleans right now. No.

I think, obviously, it would -- it puts me in a very embarrassing position because I have lots of people saying, "Well, how come they haven't given you the job yet? Why don't you have the job?" Because I tell people I've applied for the position. I say, "Yeah, I should get the job. I'm qualified. I can do this job. I can't control what they're going to do." I can't control -- it's at the point that it's out of my control. I've done the best that I can do. I've sold myself. I think, and I hope, they understand my commitment and my passion. I think they should understand my level of knowledge and expertise in the areas that I -- they might perceive that I'm weak in.

I might be, I might not be. I'm reaching out and trying to learn so that I -- you know, every Exec doesn't know everything. They just don't. They're -- and just -- you know, it goes back to you're never a maven in your own back yard.

I speak all over the country. I'm a trainer for Hadassah. I do significant major gift fundraising and strategic planning training throughout the country. I can tell them the same thing that somebody else in their own community can tell them because I'm from away, I'm brilliant, and I'm right. So, it's very hard when you're inside. It's very hard, when you're a woman, to move up in the Federation world. Will I be totally surprised when they bring that out-of-town man in here to be the Exec? Absolutely not. Do I expect it? Yeah.

Am I angry? No, I feel sorry for them, because it's really stupid. Am I going to sit around here forever? I'll sit around here as long as I need to, and I'll just do my job. But I won't do the community's job because for the last year, especially since Katrina, I've been doing a lot more than just my job when my Exec was sitting in Houston. It's true. He was sitting in Houston doing -- he did stuff, but he really didn't run the day-to-day life of this building. We opened on October the 17th because I sat there the third week of September and said, within a week, this building -- third floor of this building was fine.

We had a million and half dollars' worth of damage on the first floor; they completely gutted it down to the stud. The third floor of this building was a frozen moment in time, including my plant that I never watered that was half-dead before, that was totally petrified by the time I walked in here a few weeks after Katrina hit. I said to him, "We must go home. We must open. We must hang our shingle back in our building because our community needs to know that the Federation is back."

He looked at me and said, "I can't leave Houston. My family's still here." Then he looked at me, and he says, "Oh, but you can. You have no reason not to leave." I looked at him, and I said, "My mother is here now. I have lots of reason not to leave. I'm leaving a woman who lived through a hurricane, and I now evacuated to another city, and I'm now abandoning her again."

I said, "I have a lot of reason not to go home." I said, "But we have to go home." So, from that point on, I just knew that I've been, to a degree, running a lot of the show. So, that's a long answer again for a short question, but -- so --

RH: Well, that does seem -- I don't know if this has changed because I didn't know you before. But it's a very strong statement to say it's not a fault with you; you feel sorry for them.

RU: I do. I really --

RH: It is.

RU: Ask my --

RH: That says a lot about how you --

RU: -- husband this question?

RH: -- see yourself.

RU: He sees it differently. Yes, it is. I really had an epiphany. I really -- I think, maybe I'm almost 50, 49. I think I'm in a different point in my life, and I've worked so hard the last eight and a half years that I've been here, but the last year especially -- that I put my whole heart and soul into everything that we're doing here. I do feel sorry for them because I'm not going to necessarily sit here and hold the next exec's hand to make sure everything's perfect and wonderful and easy for them. The last exec, I offered to do it, and he told me, "No." So, I'll let the next one -- I don't want to say I'll let him drown because I won't let him drown. But I'm not gonna do my job and then do half of the next person's job because that next person has no clue about who this community is. I know this community. I've talked about them. I know the dynamics. I can go through that whole list of anybody you're going to speak to. I can tell you all about them after you speak to them because I really know. Honestly, I know them, good, bad, and ugly. They're going to have that learning curve.

Forget about a map to figure out how to get from uptown to Metairie; they'll have to have a bigger learning curve. But they won't find anybody more passionate about the work I'm doing than me. I -- oh, well.

RH: Is -- this might be -- we'll just segue into this final little section here because I'm curious if this has become your home, I think. I don't know -- has your home expanded in any way. Has your idea of home changed in --

RU: The Jewish community in New Orleans has always been my home. I mean, Israel's my home, too, because of the work I do with Hadassah. It's a very, very, very, very, very important part of me. But now -- I think it solidified what I consider to be home.

When you sit there, and you say, well, gee, where can we live, because we might have nothing to go back to, and all you want to do is go home. It's the city; it's the community; it's the Jewish community; it's the general community; it's just being here.

RH: Is there anything you do to make yourself more at home?

RU: I don't know. It's just part of me. I don't -- I don't know, that's a hard question. I don't know. It's --

RH: Is there anything you can tell me that you're just utterly grateful for?

RU: I'm utterly grateful that we all, my family, made it alive through Katrina, that my mother made it alive through Katrina, especially since I left her here. I'm incredibly grateful for that because that was probably the biggest screw-up of my life. I won't leave her again, so --

RH: Anything you want to add?

RU: No, I'm exhausted.

RH: I know. This has been a long interview.

RU: I'm exhausted.

RH: I thank you. Thank you all for your patience.

RU: No, thank you because this is very important. Thank you.

RH: Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]