

Donna Sternberg Transcript

ROSALIND HINTON: This is Rosalind Hinton interviewing Donna Sternberg at her home at 2375 Kleinert Avenue in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Today is Tuesday, November 28th, 2006. I'm conducting the interview for the Katrina's Jewish Voices project of the Jewish Women's Archive and the Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life.

Donna, do you agree to be interviewed and understand that the interview will be video recorded?

DONNA STERNBERG: Yes.

RH: I would appreciate if you could recount again your upbringing, your Jewish, and your general education, and I thought you started in Little Rock but moved very quickly.

DS: Five years old, I moved to -- with my family to Tyler, Texas. I had a very rich Jewish home life and was involved very dramatically at a young age with B'nai B'rith Youth; very deeply involved, very interested, and while I was living in a small Texas town, I traveled widely to larger cities, attended many conventions, had many friends from all over Texas and Oklahoma and New Orleans and even then and as a senior in high school was on the national BBG board.

RH: So what -- you said you got into B'nai B'rith even a year early.

DS: Well, my cousin was a few years older than I, and she and her friends were always involved with these wonderful Jewish activities with B'nai B'rith Youth, and so I would tag along, and I was so eager that they did. They took me in in the ninth grade. And it wasn't a minute too soon, and I probably would have stayed in it for another eight years, but once I graduated from high school, it was time to move on.

But it was highly formative in my life, very formative, and when I graduated from college and married and moved here, it was really the bedrock that I drew from to help organize the Jewish community here in Baton Rouge.

RH: So talk a little about your college, where you went to college, and then --

DS: I went to University of Texas, graduated in 1966 Phi Beta Kappa, and attended the Columbia University School of International Affairs until we decided to get married in 1967, and I came home for a couple of months, prepared, and married Hans. And we will be married forty years in February. And actually, I was studying India. My degree was in international relations, and I was studying India in graduate school. Only because there had been no Middle East studies department at the University of Texas, and I was influenced by a professor who was an expert in India as well as international relations in general. Or I'm certain that I would have been in a master's of Middle Eastern affairs and, in a sense, have created my own degree program because it's been an incredible part of my life.

RH: Well, explain -- it has been. You married in '67, which was also the '67 War, so what did your husband want to do?

DS: Well, my husband had been to Israel the year before for the first time and was very inspired, and he woke up with the war, and he said, "I want to go fight," and I said, "Well, I don't really want to be a young widow. Why don't we raise money instead?" So we organized a group, literally broke into my mother-in-law's home to have the meeting because our apartment was too small. And I'm certain that it was the first major fundraising that was done for Israel in Baton Rouge. And it was certainly the first activity that we had co-chaired and the first of many.

RH: Tell me also because you mentioned that you were one of the first Zionists in this region.

DS: Well, certainly one of the first active Zionists in this city. I don't know about the people who -- there may have been a handful who came before. And I came in '67, and so I don't really know what the activity was prior to that. I do know that the congregation split over the issue of Zionism in 1948, and there were two congregations and still are since then. We are both very pro-Israel, very visibly actively pro-Israel, and that has been a large part of our shared experience and today, I serve, and have for almost ten years, on the national board of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, AIPAC, which is the pro-Israel lobby, and there are about forty of us from all over the country, and we spend a great deal of time studying the issues, meeting in Washington, lobbying our legislators, senators, representatives, and we spend a great deal of time in Israel together.

RH: What does Israel mean to you, if I may?

DS: It's a critical part of the Jewish existence. It's critical. We've had centuries of attempts to destroy us as a people, and we still face those kind of existential threats from Iran and from Hezbollah and from Hamas. It's not over. But at least the Jewish people have their own state, their own place, their own identity, and they have been able to develop an extremely successful economy, a military that can defend against existential enemies, and frankly, the United States is its greatest ally and most important ally, and so I feel that my role is to in any way possible see to it that our government maintains that close tie and that support and I spend a lot of my time doing that.

RH: Tell me about -- you talked about some ties that you forged in the New Orleans community through some of these early fundraising activities for Israel.

DS: Well, from our initial activity during the Six Day War came the decision to organize a Federation in Baton Rouge. And my husband was the first president. The Federation was organized in this room. And people like Max Nathan from New Orleans and Herb Garon and Joan Berenson all came and helped, served as mentors. And so, we forged

very early bonds with Jewish leaders in New Orleans, and we maintained much of that over the years. I served on the national women's division board of UJA with Joan Berenson, with Rosalie Cohen, was there in the days that Sara Stone was in her young and vibrant activities, and of course, she's still, at 90, young and vibrant.

And I have worked very closely until his death with her son David as he became very involved with AIPAC in the later years of his life.

RH: And you said -- I'm trying to remember now. Who was your mentor? Joan --

DS: Joan Berenson, who was one of the New Orleans refugees that her -- let's see, Susan Lipsey is Joan Berenson's niece.

RH: Susan was a Haspel.

DS: Susan was a Haspel, and Byrde Haspel was Byrde Berenson, and she and Joan Berenson's husband are sister and brother. So Joan and Gerald Berenson were on the list that Richard Lipsey took to New Orleans with the boats and the Baton Rouge Sheriff's Department and the bulletproof vests, and they brought out among many others Joan and Gerald Berenson, who have lived -- in fact I think they've finally gone back, but they lived here for almost a year.

RH: So this rescue and the Katrina operation was very personal for you. And do you want to talk to me a little bit about what started to happen in the Katrina event, the hurricane? First of all, just what do you do when a hurricane happens?

DS: Well, I was in New York. I had gone to New Orleans on Thursday. I had three meetings, one with Bill Goldring, one with my political group in New Orleans, and Congressman Charlie Melançon.

And one with the political group again.

We have a very active pro-Israel PAC, and we meet as individuals without the PACs -- not necessarily as members of the PAC but as individuals who try to organize and decide how we will raise money for candidates, how we will get the message across, and so on. So several of us had met with Congressman Melançon, and then we met again. David Stone had passed away, and he was the chairman of the PAC. He had been buried probably a week or two before that. So there was discussion about how the leadership would be implemented, the transition, and so on. I parked my car on the ground at the New Orleans Airport at Park and Fly; then, I flew off to New York. And I went to -- my children in New York have a country home in upstate New York, no television, no radio. So we were there for the weekend. And we drove back to New York City on Sunday, and I'm a news addict, so of course, the first thing I did was turn on the television. It was the afternoon of Sunday, and this enormous orange ball was charging through the Gulf of Mexico to New Orleans. New Orleans. By Monday morning, of course, it had hit, and I was on the phone. I had my Palm Pilot and all of my friends and business associates in New Orleans because we had been in business there also. We had five department stores there. So we spent many years not only with the Jewish activities but with business in New Orleans.

RH: Maybe you should just stop for a minute and tell me about the businesses that you --

DS: Well, we bought Maison Blanche in 1982, and I was very involved with the management of the company at that stage. I was merchandise manager of our designer area and our fur department. And we ran those stores until we sold the entire business in 1992, so we had ten years that we were not only involved with the Jewish world there, but we were involved with the much larger world. And we spent a great deal of time in the stores, meeting the customers, running the business, and also in the evenings many social activities, many charitable activities. So we really felt that New Orleans was our home as well. And when we sold the company, there were five stores in New Orleans.

So you can imagine how we reacted to the thought that we could have really been ruined business-wise. Well, Canal Street --

RH: Just if you had held on ten years more --

DS: The Canal Street store is the Ritz-Carlton today. They haven't yet, I don't think. Now we would have pushed to open. The Clearview store, of course, survived, and would have been huge, would have become very huge. We would have by then probably been in Oakwood Shopping Center, which burned.

We were in Plaza Lake Forest. I don't know if the lights have ever gone back on in New Orleans east. I don't know.

I know they were off for a long time.

And we were in Slidell, and I know that Slidell had a lot of damage and flooding. So the thought that there but for the grace of God was with me the whole time. Not only that, but when my father-in-law came to this country to find a place to bring the family in 1936, he went to three places, one of which was New Orleans, each of which had members of the family already located. So he went to New Orleans, and the family there actually found two stores for him to look at. One in New Orleans and one here. And he decided to come here. Well, it would have been just as easy, just as possible, that we would have been living in New Orleans.

RH: Right, you would have been in the deep generational community.

DS: That's right, that's right.

RH: As opposed to being here --

DS: So why do things happen, I don't know.

RH: So let's get back to the narrative for a minute and talk to me about you saw Monday the storm had come.

DS: So I got on the phone, and I started calling all my friends, everybody whose number I had in my Palm Pilot with a 504, and of course, couldn't get through to anyone. I couldn't get through here either, except I realized that we had a toll-free number.

And I tried it and was able to get through to the office, our office, using the toll-free number. But otherwise, everything was down. And, of course, by the middle of that day, the news was all about the floods. That was Monday, wasn't it? So, fortunately, my son-in-law was able to get me on a plane to Houston, and I was actually booked on the last seat available, Houston to Baton Rouge, on Tuesday. And I --

RH: So you could have stayed in New York.

DS: Oh no, I would never have done that. Oh no.

RH: What was your thought process?

DS: Get me home. Hans was here, my mother was staying here with him. Although she had electricity. But I wanted her to be here with him. I think she moved home after probably the second day. And she did have -- she had air and lights, so that was good. And our office never lost electricity or air conditioning. We're in a place where it's underground. And so, by the time I got home, many meetings were already being held, and many things were being held in our office in our conference room.

There were crowds of people.

RH: What type of meetings?

DS: Well, we had to organize the community. Richard Lipsey needed volunteers. We needed -- we're a small community, and suddenly the Jewish community -- I'm not going

to even talk about -- I can talk about the larger community.

I'm talking now about the Jewish community doubled and maybe more overnight. And it was clear that people were not going to be going back real soon.

They weren't going to be able to go back. I couldn't even go to get my car at the airport for three weeks, and of course, didn't know what shape it would be in. So there was no question that many people were going to be staying. And my first thought was that it's critical that they feel at home and that their needs are met, and we have to get this community organized so that those needs can be met, and it had to happen very quickly, and that wasn't going to be easy. Now UJC sent people down right away. Rabbi Saperstein came right away.

RH: Saperstein is?

DS: The Reform Movement out of Washington. And one of the things that helped me a lot, and it's very interesting, I got home, and I got a call from one of my friends in the general community.

Her daughter -- and I don't remember where the daughter lived -- told her that a reporter from the Baltimore Jewish Times was coming down to cover the story from the point of view of the Jewish community. Would I house him? And I said I would not house him, but I would take him from place to place. I would be his guide. Would she house him? Because by then, I had Bill and Susan Hess and four dogs, and the phone was ringing off the wall, and the lights and the air weren't working, and I needed to be out of here. I didn't need to be taking care of a stranger in my home; it was more important for me to be where the meetings were taking place, to be part of the brain trust that was organizing and making decisions and raising money and whatever it took to put this together. And so, I selected that role. And anyway he came, this young man, Alan Feiler, came in. And may have been Wednesday, so it was very early on. I took him to both congregations.

B'nai Israel was at that time a shelter. And I met -- I had been there the day before, and I met one of the women who said, "We were standing at a filling station, we had just been dropped off at a filling station, and the Rabbi came along." She called him *padre*, Rabbi Weinstein. And he started an ingathering of people who had no home. So I took the reporter there, and I took him to Beth Shalom, which by then had become a triage center, and they had people there who were willing to organize housing or actually fulfill the need for housing, transportation. They had social workers, they had doctors, if they weren't on site, they were available for help. And they were as the refugees -- as the survivors were coming out on Richard Lipsey's boats, they were coming to Beth Shalom. And so I had the reporter there, and while we were there, they brought an African American retired colonel from the army and his wife, and he was determined not to leave New Orleans, he was not going to leave his house, and she was determined to leave. And they managed to get him in the boat with her, and they brought him out, and they brought him to the synagogue, and I was there with this reporter when they found and relocated this couple with their daughter in Baltimore. She didn't know what condition they were in; she didn't know if they'd even survived. And they managed. They found a place for them to stay with one of the members of the congregation, I think, for a couple of days, and then they sent them on Angel Flight to Baltimore. And this couple was written about in the article, and then we went to Erich's house where they were participating in a conference call with UJC and with all of these, let's call them the frontline communities; Jackson, Mississippi, Houston, Baton Rouge, I don't know what others, small and large Jewish communities that were receiving people from New Orleans who were evacuating. And they were attempting to determine what the exact needs were, and they were already raising money; I can't remember, I think they raised between \$20 and \$30 million in the end, United Jewish Communities did, for the Katrina relief. By the way, I don't think they want to be called refugees, so we shouldn't do that.

We should not call them refugees.

RH: You called them survivors --

DS: Evacuees, evacuees.

RH: Evacuees or survivors. What was it like for you to like see this colonel and witness this moment of reunification, at least by phone, with the daughter? Did you --

DS: Well, it was certainly very emotional. It was symptomatic of the best that was happening. And, of course, we were very worried about those who were not getting out, those who were stranded, those who were at the Superdome or in the Convention Center, or those we had seen out in the floods trying to get to boats. And this couple was blessed in that they were found and brought out, and there were still major doubts in their minds about what would be left of their home, would it be flooded, would it be ransacked, would it be looted, would it still be there when they came back? But at least they were able to survive it and be reunited. And rather quickly. I'm sure there were many who weren't that fortunate.

RH: What was discussed on the phone call, and probably many phone calls that you had between the different communities, you called frontline communities?

DS: Well, I think there are probably things that I can talk about that would -- I really don't remember that much of that. Erich would be much more -- but I do know that after that, they sent two of their -- UJC sent two very accomplished people in to help organize the needs, recognize the needs, organize the needs, and help us determine what kind of financial support we would be receiving. Soon after that, I realized that without a plan, we would not be able to receive the monies that we would need as quickly as if we did have a plan.

And Sandy Levy had settled a few blocks from here; she left. She is the director of the New Orleans --

RH: Foundation, the Jewish Endowment Fund.

DS: Yeah, Jewish Endowment Fund. And Baton Rouge has a member of that board, and they manage our endowment as well.

And so, I learned early on that she would be coming and that she would be working with the New Orleans Federation.

Allan Bissinger, the president of the New Orleans Federation, was here, and in and out would be Eric Stillman, their director at the time, Adam Bronstone, who was also a very important member of their staff who spent a great deal of time here, and what's the woman's name, can't think of her name, Roselle --

RH: Ungar.

DS: Ungar was here. So I called Sandy Levy, and it was a Saturday morning. It was the Saturday after the first Shabbat. And that night that Shabbat, there was a huge service at Beth Shalom for members of both communities. And Rabbi Saperstein spoke, and the mayor was there, and it was really like a major reunion. Many of these people hadn't seen each other, didn't know where their friends and families were. And so after that, I called Sandy, and I said, "We need to get together and come up with a plan" for what became a partnership of our two Federations and her agency. And so she came the next morning, and we sat in the kitchen for, I'd say, from 8:00 to probably 6:00 at night. Allan Bissinger joined us. It was the day that the group went in to rescue the Torahs. So Eric Stillman and Adam Bronstone, and one of the Rubenstein sons all came from Houston. They arrived here at about midnight Friday night, and they spent the night here, and they left with Erich Sternberg, and I think Martha Bergadine went. And they went to New Orleans and rescued the Torahs.

Sandy and I and Bissinger -- Bissinger may have gone also. And later in the day, Howard Feinberg from UJC, Howard Feinberg, and one of his assistants who had been

here for the weekend, they were traveling the region, and they had been here for the weekend, they came. And by the end of the day, we had put together a plan for office, for staff, for all manner of computers and copiers and fax machines, for activities that would be needed, for apartments, for funding for Hillel, for the youth, for -- as I said, for staff, for programming for the elderly. All kinds of aspects of organizing a community, which would be managed jointly by a board or a committee selected from the three agencies. And we asked for \$1 million, and by the middle of next week, that had been approved. And a plan was structured with all the specifics, and they rolled out the requests as needed, and they hired the staff, and we had -- and I'm sure Martha talked to you about this, the Jewish family agency, Jewish --

RH: Jewish Family Service.

DS: Service.

And the people who were here who made their homes here, Sandy and her staff, eventually most of her staff moved here.

Martha Bergadine ran the office with Sandy. And Roselle Ungar came and stayed. Adam was in and out. Eric was in and out, Stillman. And as those activities began, I went to as much as I could. I went to the campus; I went to the first program that was held for the elderly. And that was very moving.

RH: And tell me a little about that. What type of -- who did you have here? You say you had elderly, you had --

DS: We had many evacuees who were of the senior citizen community, some who had family here, others who did not, who simply evacuated here and found places to live.

And we tried to organize some activities for them, and I think that those activities are still going on. Our Jewish senior citizens and those that are still here from New Orleans,

some of whom have made their homes permanently here.

There was early on a seminar on insurance, how to file insurance claims, how to find -- many people had lost all of their records, all of those kinds of things. Counseling, immediately, people were counseled. There were people who needed cash. Cash was given. My role changed a bit then because -- because of my activities on a national scale, I have a lot of friends in many parts of the country, and they were very concerned and called and emailed and so on. And we were on a conference call about probably a week and a half, two weeks into the crisis, and I asked if I could speak, and they said yes, and by the time another week or two were out, we had accumulated gifts of close to \$400,000 from people all over the country directly to our Federation, in addition to the monies that were given through UJC. And these were direct grants given to our Federation. So we organized a disaster relief committee, which I chaired, and which had participants from both congregations and people who were very involved with Federation. It operated as part of the Federation. And we proceeded to allocate funds. And I think I became extremely involved on a day-to-day basis with seeing to it that those funds were administered, and it became like -- well, I guess it's hard to even imagine today what it was like to wake up every morning knowing that this huge responsibility had befallen our community and we had to do whatever we could to see to it that people were helped. That they were comfortable, that they were comforted, and so this windfall of money was a huge responsibility because I wanted to see to it that it was spent and spent in ways that would be beneficial. So we, in the end, helped probably 60 children with funding for education; many displaced children had no money to pay for their schooling. We set aside a great deal of money for camp scholarships so that children who couldn't go to camp and wanted to in the summer -- this past summer -- would be able to go on scholarship. We gave money to the food bank, to Saint Jude's pharmacy, free pharmacy program.

There's an organization of -- conference of churches and synagogues, which was doing a great deal of work in the evacuee community, in the general community, and we gave money to that. We received a \$50,000 grant from a Jewish foundation which was interested in education projects, and so with that and money from UJC, we were able to expand the facility at the Rayner Center, which is a preschool program at Beth Shalom, which is open to all children in the community, there's always a waitlist, but we were able very quickly to expand the nursery areas. The money was used to add sinks and changing tables, things that we needed to meet code.

And I think there were probably close to a dozen infants from New Orleans. Very quickly, as soon as we could take them, they were enrolled. And then we were able to purchase a building, which sits outside, double classroom, which was found and brought in and outfitted and equipped and set up, and it took us weeks and months to get all the codes. I don't know if Steve Winkler talked to you about this, he worked very hard on this. And so we're now in a position -- God forbid if this happens again, we have certainly more space. And I think there's still some children there from New Orleans.

RH: So you were really working for the entire community, this was not strictly -- it was an effort from within the Jewish community, but it wasn't confined to Jewish people.

DS: That's right.

RH: And so the food bank, the education --

DS: Well, the monies for education grants went to Jewish children, but we did give money to the -- there's an organization called RISE, which was founded with the YMCA or the YWCA, which helps people with AIDS, and there were many people affected I think through that, and we contributed to that. I guess in about October, it became clear to me too that some of the funds should be used to help people mend, and so I have known for several years Irwin Kula, who's the president of *CLAL*, which is the Center for

Learning and Leadership, Jewish think-tank in New York, and he's a very impressive and thoughtful Rabbi.

And so I began to communicate with them, and in the end, Hans and I had contributed to this disaster relief fund, and we decided that our contribution would be used to fund three days of events with Irwin Kula and one of his coworkers, Rabbi Tsvi Blanchard, who is also a Ph.D. psychologist. And so they came down in December, and we had a community meeting here. We had a meeting at LSU with the Jewish student population and with some high school Jewish students who came. We met the next day at our home with members of the young adult leadership of the Jewish community. And then after that some of the senior citizens. And then we went to New Orleans, and this was the first communitywide event in the Jewish community after Katrina. And they first toured the city. I think it was Adam Bronstone who drove them down. And then Hans and I met them, and they had a meeting -- oh, in Baton Rouge, they also had this meeting. They had a meeting. They wanted very much to meet with Jewish staff. The Rabbis, the Federation people, the Jewish Family Service people.

And also, at the meeting in Baton Rouge were two ministers who had been very involved, who were and I'm sure still are very involved with the evacuees, and there's still many indigent people here living in trailer villages, FEMA villages. So these people are still quite involved. But anyway, they came to the meeting with Irwin Kula in Baton Rouge, and then in New Orleans, there was a meeting with Jewish staff with Rabbis and Jewish professionals. And then the community meeting.

RH: Tell me what kind of things that you witnessed that came up. Because I've heard other people talk about this.

Their gratitude in New Orleans for this, and this -- I didn't know who had sponsored it, who had even thought of doing it. Now I'm finding out. But it's certainly come up.

DS: We had 39 people to break fast here Yom Kippur last year; 39 people, at least half of them were friends from New Orleans. This is my family.

RH: So this is what you do for family members in pain.

DS: We are blessed in many ways, and there was just never any question, you wake up every day, and you think about what else. I still have an email. Howard Kohr, who's the director of *AIPAC*, emailed me, "How are you?" and I wrote back, "We're fine and trying to help others." And that's exactly what we -- that's what we did. We had people in our office. In fact, Josh Paillet, the photographer, we had spaces, and we just said, "Please make these cubbies your office." And he stayed, and Rita and Mark Murov, they're attorneys who have unfortunately since left New Orleans, they moved to Austin, but they shared our office for five months, ran their business, their law firm, out of our office. We would have had more, it's just -- it's what you do.

RH: It's not what everyone does.

DS: It's what we do. There was no question. We'd do it again in a heartbeat. I hope we never have to, but we would. We'd be better organized; we'd be more ready. We'd know more about what we have to do. And we'd have many more people in place professionally. We also have two grants from UJC to keep us in business this year and -- let's see, this year and next year. Because with it all, we're a small Jewish community. We don't raise the kind of money needed to allow us to have the kinds of facilitations for these people. We just don't do it. So we're still functioning with outside help, and in fact, the disaster relief fund, we kept a small amount just in case. Fortunately, we didn't have a storm this year, but we felt that we should have a fund waiting.

RH: Can you -- I feel like I come back to this. But this overwhelming generosity from Baton Rouge, this unquestioning, and you're doing it too, this response from an entire community, Martha Bergadine, saying, "We made the decision early. If we had to spend

every dime we had in the Federation budget, we would."

DS: Yeah, and they were ready to pull from the endowment. You just do it, this is a disaster. We're used to helping people in Israel. We're used to helping people in the former Soviet Republics. We're used to helping people in North Africa.

We're not used to being the ones who need the help. But it's the same innate reaction.

RH: So this is what you're talking about, your formation, all your life you've actually been formed and shaped to respond.

DS: Guess so.

RH: So what was it like to be here and be in a position where you had to ask other people to help this community?

DS: Just natural. We went to them with a plan. We knew they had the money. And I'm a good listener, and I have a lot of contacts, and I realized very quickly that without a plan, it wasn't going to happen. And so we sat down, and we made a plan.

RH: Called it the *kitchen cabinet* here.

DS: The kitchen, yeah, the *kitchen cabinet*. Howard Feinberg said we were in the dining room. I said, "Howard, you were in the kitchen. You were in the kitchen all day long, and you had pizza for dinner, and we gave Allan Bissinger pillows and blankets." You know he swam out of his house.

RH: I do.

DS: And he spent -- he was here for about four or five months sleeping on beds out of our house. We were remodeling, so there was furniture that didn't have a place. So a lot of the furniture went to Sandy Levy's house because she had a house with no furniture.

Beds went to Allan Bissinger. And that house not only was Sandy's but whoever came in and out of town if they needed a place. And after she moved back to New Orleans, I know Adam stayed there a lot.

RH: So was this a house that was purchased?

DS: No, it was leased.

RH: Leased.

DS: But everything was rented or purchased or leased like that. And Marcus Hirsch, who is another member of our community, and is on the board of the Jewish Endowment and knows Sandy very well, and is in -- he's not a real estate broker, but he builds and so on, very -- has been involved over the years and knows the real estate community, found this house.

And I said, "I'll meet you there because it's in our neighborhood," and that was the first time I'd ever met or talked to Sandy, but we became very close. Her mother was here with her and her brother. And her mother and my mother became friends. In fact, I still have a recording on my answering machine of her mother's calling just to thank us when they went back. This is another example. We have a life insurance company, and we had had some fleece jackets made for our staff and for gifts, and we had a lot of fleece jackets, and we had fleece blankets. And the first day that it got cold last fall, I realized that most of these people had come with summer clothes. So I gathered up the fleece jackets and the blankets, and I took them to the Federation office and gave them the --

RH: So many people, I think, have been helped, and they're not quite sure where it came from, but they're just overwhelmed with the generosity, the beds, the furniture, all these material goods that just appeared when they had nothing, absolutely nothing, knew not when they were going to get anything. And didn't know what their life was going to be like at the end. So Baton Rouge -- talked about mending, those --

DS: Well, the most we can hope for is that they were helped and that in some way unburdened in ways that we could help and unburden them, because Lord knows they were in a terrible state, and many still are. It's not a good scene. And I think 30, 35% have not come back or have come back and have left again. So, where there were 10,000 Jews in New Orleans now, there's 6,500, which is a huge drop-off. And from a very significant community. One thing else that I participated in that I do want to discuss is the IsraAID, the group that came from Israel. The prime minister had offered help. The government had basically turned it down. But there's a group in Israel called IsraAID made up of young doctors and psychiatrists and sociologists and psychologists and divers, and they had been in Sri Lanka for the tsunami. And as it turns out, and I found this out in January after it was all over, a colleague of mine from Philadelphia actually had funded not only their trip to the tsunami to help but had funded their trip to the United States.

And they came as a group, I think maybe less than a dozen of them, young gorgeous vital people. And they brought tents, and they brought food. And all kinds of meals ready to eat and supplies, everything totally self-sufficient. And they went to Houston, and the AIPAC regional director there was in touch with me immediately. Having a terrible time getting them in because nobody would take the responsibility or say, "Yes, you can come." And they got the licensing they needed to be able to do the work. And they made their way to Baton Rouge, and the whole time we were on the phone with the lieutenant governor's chief of staff, with Congressman Bobby Jindal's staff, I think Congressman Melançon's staff, all of these contacts that we've built over the years, the political contacts. And in the end, this friend of mine, unbeknownst to me, is paying to bring this Israeli relief team, which ended up in Saint Bernard Parish, with the help of Jindal's staff and Melançon's staff. And they had on their Israel T-shirts, and they were working with the fire department from Saint Bernard Parish, and people would come up to them and they would say, "You're from a small country; you have so many problems of your own, why are you doing this?" And they were going from house to house, helping to

rescue people, discovering the dead, taking care of animals. The divers would go under the water, whatever was needed. And we had a community Federation meeting during the time that they were in New Orleans in Saint Bernard. We had a joint annual meeting. It was our Federation annual meeting, and instead of canceling it, we had a joint meeting with the New Orleans evacuees and our community at *LSU*. And we invited them to come, and they were part of the program. And it was so unusual, such a strange and sort of miraculous feeling, to be in Israel in January with Mark Solomon from Philadelphia.

And he started telling me about what he had done. And I said, "Mark, you were working on it from your end in Philadelphia. I was working on it in Baton Rouge; we never knew." He said, "Donna, I would have sent the money directly to your Federation. It would have been a lot easier." But that's beside the point. The fact is that we both were doing the same thing and really didn't realize it.

RH: What was that meeting like, that joint Federation meeting? Can you describe that a little bit?

DS: Well, it was very large. Very large.

We had a lot of food because I didn't know. I said whatever -- we had the money. I said, "Get the food. Have food.

I don't know whether they're eating. I don't know what they're doing." Erich, of course, chaired it, and we had the Federation director. One of the people from the UJC committee, Carol Smokler, I think is her name; she chairs that disaster relief committee. She came and presented the first of the checks. I think it was like that check may have been \$330,000, and that was really the base for the initial organization that went on, and we recognized Deputy Sheriff Greg Phares and his deputies who had gone down to New Orleans with Richard Lipsey and Erich and others to rescue the people on the list and

others. They rescued Jews, but they rescued whomever they found. The list was from the Jewish community.

RH: It was generated from the Jewish community.

DS: Jewish community. So they were really heroic in all our eyes, these sheriffs who said, "Sure, we'll do it."

They went down armed with these guys in vans, and then they got in boats, and they were wearing bulletproof vests, and they went from one location to the next looking for people.

RH: When you look back, are you even surprised at how much you did? When you look back on this period to see how much your Jewish community generated?

DS: Well, I'm surprised in the sense that it had to happen so quickly. And I'm not surprised that we were able to pull together the way we did and get it done. I think one of the great benefits of it was that so many of us who knew each other but didn't really know each other came together and worked so hard together. And also there's -- while it happened under extreme and extremely unhappy circumstances and a true disaster, having a large Jewish community for the first time in my life, living in a place that had a large Jewish community, and seeing on a daily basis friends who -- or talking to friends with whom I'd worked for many years, having them as neighbors, selfishly it meant a lot. And I hated to see them go. I wanted them to stay.

RH: You talked about going down and with this program to meet the staff to mend.

Do you remember what that meeting was like and what it was like to go down to New Orleans then? That was in December.

DS: Well, it was our first time to go, and we were stunned, particularly as we got off the expressway and we saw the devastation in really old built-up areas.

It was very upsetting. And it was a very emotional meeting. People were -- many had been away, they had come back, their congregations were broken up, people had died, people weren't sure if they were going to stay, people hadn't come back. It's a 24-hour ordeal. Nurturing, helping people mend, helping people understand what was needed to make it from one day to the next. Many people lost their homes, their businesses, and these were the professionals, again the frontline. Medical community there was decimated. Legal community, many lawyers haven't gone back. Hospitals gone. Many of the professions that these people, the Jewish community, were so much a part of.

RH: Do you recall any advice that the people you brought in -- was it just listening?

Active listening or was there advice to people?

DS: No, I think that they encouraged people to tell their stories. Much as you're doing. And in sharing with one another, we were able to gain strength. And realize that what we were doing was helping the community and helping individuals and that we would get beyond this.

And seeing a flower bloom or seeing a tree come back to life or hearing a bird for the first time in a place where you thought you'd never hear a bird again. Having the first family meal together. Having people for the break fast. All of these events --

[END – PART ONE]

RH: Interviewing Donna Sternberg in her home. And you were talking for a minute about the disaster relief fund and some of its ongoing things that it's funding. So do you want to talk a little about some of the directions that the fund has gone in?

DS: Well, we're actually helping to fund this Katrina relief project that you're working on. I think we were one of the original funders of that. And also, we have contributed to a sociological survey which is being done by a member of the LSU sociology department. He's studying the Jewish community of New Orleans and Baton Rouge as it pertains to the storm, the evacuation, the relief efforts, and also our money is going to that study, but he's also doing work in the larger community. And we have helped to fund the restoration of Beth Shalom, which was heavily impacted by Rita. There was a roof problem, and there was a great deal of flooding in the synagogue. The sanctuary and the social hall. And we also contributed funds to B'nai Israel to help with expenses incurred with the shelter and also ongoing activities which they have with Renaissance Village, which is the FEMA trailer village here in Baton Rouge. So our activities are ongoing.

RH: Are you still fundraising for the --

DS: No.

No. And much of that money was really a spontaneous outpouring from people all over the country.

RH: It's a big responsibility to suddenly have to be responsible and the caretaker of a fund like that. Can you talk a little about the decision-making process of how you prioritize what you think ought to be funded?

DS: Well, Martha Bergadine was a big help because she knew what was going on in the community and where funds were needed in the general community. What agencies were out there. And she's very meticulous in how she analyzes those agencies.

We worked in tandem and in cooperation with much of what was being done by the joint Federation partnership. And for example, we knew we wanted to help with education. We knew that funds were not being specifically channeled in that direction by the

Federation partnership. So we took that on. And literally, every day would wake up and throw out a challenge to people. "What are the needs, what can we do?" And then, we would send an email to each member of the committee with a description of what it was that we hoped to do. And some things, like give extra money to Baton Rouge Youth Group, they call it *BaRFTY*, to help with their programming. That was a no-brainer. And it was like *manna* from heaven. There were plenty of needs, and fortunately, we were able to accommodate many of them.

RH: Also seems like there's been some opportunities to come out. Like to develop Hillel in the larger community.

DS: Hillel has been a remarkable achievement. But really, it emanated more from the students than from the overall Jewish community. Just because we had people like Adam Bronstone come in and Lila Pinksfeld and other professionals who came from New Orleans. We were able to take advantage of their skills and their knowledge and really build upon that. And so, there are lasting aspects of the community that would have probably taken a lot longer to build. But because of this tragedy, we were able, in some ways, to build goodness from them.

RH: So the diaspora community had some energizing impact.

DS: Absolutely. Oh absolutely. I told you I hated to see them leave. Selfishly.

Yes, it was energizing. It was. It was important, I thought, for the members of this community to see what could be done. And they certainly rose to the occasion.

RH: And what's your vision for this Jewish community? And tell me about where this Jewish community is right now.

DS: It's hard for me to know.

RH: Size-wise or --

DS: It's hard for me to know, really. I moved back into my world, which is a national scene. It's just not a good --

RH: Question for -- OK.

DS: It's a better question for others.

RH: OK, so, though, do you have a vision of what you would like to see in this Jewish community now that after 15 months of working with New Orleans in such a setting?

DS: Well, I would love to see the two communities stay close. I'd love to see activities, joint activities, be established.

Certainly, I enjoy seeing those who have stayed here and are making a contribution. And I think that we've learned that we can all work together, and we don't need a crisis to bring us together.

RH: Has this affected how you perceive yourself or your relationship to the Jewish community in any way as a Jewish person?

DS: I guess only in the sense that I knew what I needed to do. There was never any question that I would do whatever I could.

Fortunately, I'm in a position to do a great deal, and my husband and I share that closeness to our community.

And --

RH: Were there any Jewish teachings or concepts that surfaced for you throughout the past 15 months, came to the fore?

DS: Well, I guess I acted on things without verbalizing them. And if they were Jewish concepts, then so be it, but I just acted, and there was a quotation from our liturgy, we pray as if everything -- I can't think of it. I have it written down, though; I should go get it. Let me go get it. Turn it off. "We prayed as if everything depended on God. We acted as if everything depended on us."

RH: That summarizes it.

DS: And also Elie Wiesel's comment that, "Some things are beyond language. You can't express it, you just do it."

RH: Again, when the formation takes effect.

DS: You just do it. But also, it was an indescribable situation that we found ourselves in.

RH: When you look back on the events, what are your thoughts about the city, the state, the federal government, and the Jewish community and their various responses?

DS: Well, I think that the Jewish community of New Orleans knew, and I hope they knew, and we wanted them to know, and we worked like hell to make it happen, that there was a community here and that we would do everything we could to help them.

I'm not sure that others in New Orleans had that same advantage. And many people suffered mightily because the relief services and the state and the federal government certainly were not prepared and let them down. And of course, I because of the work that I do, and I worry very much that we are not prepared. God forbid if that had been a terrorist attack on a major scale, we're in no way prepared to take care of those kinds of things. It's very discouraging and very worrisome. You don't want me to talk about my politics.

RH: Sure I do.

DS: No.

RH: But do you think race played any part of the lack of response?

DS: No.

RH: Do you have any thoughts on race in Katrina?

DS: I think that there were people who were able to get out and did, and there were people who should have been helped, and they weren't. And I don't -- and they happened to be primarily poor and African American. And there is an underclass in the city, but I don't think that it was specifically because of that that they weren't helped. I think events got ahead of everybody. The disaster played out before they realized what was needed.

Now was that wrong? Of course, it was wrong. Were they not prepared? They were not prepared. And that was wrong. And I can't say that they'll be any better prepared the next time. Just as I can't say that a lot of those neighborhoods will ever come back.

RH: Are you concerned about the Jewish community in New Orleans at this point?

DS: Sure, sure. I think there'll be a time when very hard decisions will have to be made.

Institutions that duplicate will have to be consolidated, closed. I can't see that they can continue to support all that they have had in the past. Lots of key members of the community have left.

RH: Are there any opportunities that you see coming out of this disaster either for New Orleans, Baton Rouge as a region, or the Jewish community as a region?

DS: Well, again, if the two communities could stay engaged one with the other, that would be a wonderful opportunity. Baton Rouge has grown and prospered from this.

Which is difficult to say because it hurts; you never want to be in a better position because of the misery of your neighbors. But this city is now the largest in the state. There have been many real estate transactions, many new companies coming. There are problems, and the school system is overtaxed, the highways and the streets are overtaxed. But there are a lot of new businesses, even from New Orleans that have located here.

And frankly, it would be -- if more of the people who left had come here, it would be even better if they had decided to stay here. But I think some wanted to go to larger Jewish communities and so on. But I really worry about New Orleans. I'm not sanguine about it at all. Hans and I are both very worried about it, and we were there a few weeks ago with a lot of friends, and there's a real sadness.

RH: And what are your fears for the community, and what are your hopes?

DS: I hope that it'll rebuild. There are a lot of people who have been very strong and are working very hard. And I hope that it will rebuild and strengthen.

And I hope that there will be stronger and better political leadership. And I know that hard decisions have to be made, and it's a difficult place to make hard decisions. So we'll see. Time is not our friend.

RH: No.

So when you say that, things are moving a little slow?

DS: Things are moving very slowly.

RH: What do you think you've learned about yourself in this past 15 months?

Anything new?

DS: Well, I know what my strengths are, and I was able to utilize those strengths.

And it was just an innate reaction, and I would never look back; I would have done nothing differently. I would have just tried to do more. I would have kept Gershanik's phone number.

RH: Explain that. Juan Gershanik?

DS: Yes, Dr. Gershanik came with -- he evacuated 16 premature babies from a hospital in New Orleans. And he and I have been friends for a long time. And he called, and he told me his story, and he told me he was in Baton Rouge.

And I failed to make a note of where he was and what his phone number was. So I had to use all my resources to find. Finally, someone said well, his son has bought a house in Baton Rouge and gave me his email address, and I was able through that contact to find him and --

RH: You picked up someone else on the interstate also? You had another friend call from New Orleans?

DS: Yes.

Susan and Bill Hess called from a truck.

They were en route. They were on the interstate en route from New Orleans.

They had been told they had to evacuate their home. And so they joined a neighbor in a truck and brought their four dogs and two bags and called me from the interstate and moved in for a couple of days with the dogs.

No air, no lights.

RH: Here at your house, you had no air conditioning, no lights. How long were you without electricity?

DS: We now have a generator. Yes, we'll be better prepared if there's a next time. About five days no electricity.

RH: So how many months did you have people just coming in and out of your home and --

DS: Well, through Yom Kippur, we had a lot of activity, a lot of phone calls, "Can we use your couch?" Many of them never came. And then for the Seder -- not the Seder -- for the break-fast Yom Kippur, we had 39 people at our home, about half of whom were from New Orleans.

RH: So describe that. Why did you take on the extra burden?

DS: It was not a burden. It wasn't a burden. It was not a burden. Temple Sinai's Rabbi used -- we had no Rabbi. Rabbi Weinstein took a leave. So Congregation B'nai Israel needed a Rabbi, and Rabbi Cohn from Sinai in New Orleans needed a congregation. So we had Sinai's High Holy Day services. And so many of my friends came back for the High Holy Days, and I invited them for the break fast, which I was having for my family and some friends anyway.

But it was particularly meaningful to have them at our table.

RH: Do you remember any of the discussions that were around at the time?

DS: Not specifically. We had the Gershaniks and their son Esteban, who had been very involved at the basketball arena at LSU. He was a resident from Tulane Medical School. And several of them just came and set up shop and helped rescue.

RH: So the basketball arena had a temporary hospital, is that right?

DS: Right.

And he was one of the organizers, and we talked about that a lot.

RH: I'm wondering because it does seem like what you did was try to in the best way you could recreate -- maybe not recreate, maybe that's too big a word, but give people some sense of home once their homes were lost, so I wonder if you could tell me what does home mean to you, and what you tried to provide on a personal level and on a larger level for people you came into contact with?

DS: Well, just the physical place. And I didn't -- I worked on that to a small degree. I helped with furniture, helped with food. I really had the larger role of helping to bring the resources in so that others could take care of all of these aspects of life. People were totally torn from their everyday lives.

So there was nothing too small and nothing too large, and we did it within the context of an organized Jewish community which had to be revved up very quickly, so I guess I'm a fundraiser, and I knew that we couldn't do anything without the money. Once we had that backing, we were fine; we just had to work quickly.

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

DS: That New Orleans would always be there, that New Orleans would always be there.

And you read about it, and you realize that so much -- I always knew it was under sea level, but so you say, "Well, New Orleans is built under sea level. That's why the graves are above ground." But then, all of a sudden, the levees break, and you realize what it means to be under sea level, and the city flooded, wasn't the wind, it wasn't the rain, it was the flood, and it was a great natural disaster, and we were part of it.

And it's an experience that you never expect to have, and we were very grateful that we were on the receiving end and not the fleeing end. We were very grateful. And I guess maybe that was part of the motivation. We knew that we could, and we would do whatever was necessary, whatever was in our power to do. But that city, those -- we land at the New Orleans Airport coming back from New York frequently at 5:00 in the afternoon, and the traffic going out of the city is bumper to bumper, and they're heading to the Hammond exit and the La Place exit and the Mandeville exit, and they've moved north and west of the city. And they're moving to Ascension Parish, and they're moving to Donaldsonville, and they're moving to South Baton Rouge, and they may be commuting back in, but that geography has changed, I think forever.

And the demographics have changed.

I'm very involved politically.

It's going to be extremely hard for a Democrat to reassemble that demographic group in New Orleans.

RH: So that will change the politics in the entire state.

DS: And you already saw it with the secretary of state's race, Jay Dardenne, who's a Baton Rouge Republican, basically came in first. There were three major vote-getters in the open primary.

The Democrat from New Orleans came in second. Another Republican came in third. So the runoff was between Jay, the Republican, and Senator Heitmeier, the Democrat. And all he had to do was count the number of votes that the Republicans as a whole got and realize that Jay Dardenne, the Republican, got almost as many votes in New Orleans as he did. And he dropped out. So yes, there could be a major shift. We also could lose a congressional district. It's possible. Don't know that.

RH: Do you want to talk a little more about the politics of the situation, and what are your hopes and fears in that area?

DS: Well, I think our state leadership is very poor. And I don't, no, I really don't.

RH: You don't really want to go there.

DS: Bobby Jindal's a very good friend of mine, and I supported him for governor.

And I like Kathleen. I know Kathleen. But I think that we needed stronger leadership. We still do need stronger leadership.

RH: At the statewide level.

DS: Absolutely, and this *Road Home Project* is moving much too slowly. There's a great deal of federal money that's been allocated but can't seem to get it through the channels down to the people who need it so desperately, the small businesses that need it. It's been a bureaucratic nightmare.

RH: Do you think some of that's from the fact that the federal government was so concerned about graft and corruption in Louisiana?

DS: Well, I think there's something -- there is some of that certainly.

RH: But there's almost too much work to try to dot all the I's and cross all the T's and --

DS: I don't know where that all comes from, but I can certainly imagine that they would be overly cautious. But I haven't followed all of that so carefully. I do have a very good friend who's one of the primary members of the Louisiana Recovery Authority, though, if you wanted to talk to him. He would be wonderful for this. I guess. I don't know whether -- he wouldn't have the Jewish story. But he could certainly give you that story.

RH: What else would you like to tell, to talk about? Is there anything else you'd like to say, part of the story --

DS: I think that if you can do it, you should interview Irwin Kula, Rabbi Kula, because he was extremely participatory in all of this, and would have wonderful insights, and would be able to talk to you about the spirituality of the situation.

And how he saw the Jewish messages in it. And he also was on WWL a couple of times as a resource and received many phone calls.

He came back more than once. And his reactions to the stories that the people told, and there's one in particular of an LSU student, Jewish student, who was so proud of his father because their house was on the market before Katrina, and he said my father did not raise the price of the house after the storm. And he was so proud of his father.

RH: That's a nice story.

DS: I would never raise the price of anything. I would lower the price, but I guess --

RH: There's been a lot of price gouging and a lot of people taking --

DS: I guess maybe there was but --

RH: -- advantage of the storm, raising rents, raising -- seeing what they could make out of the storm. But that seems to be a very different story than the Jewish community, which has been really to relief, to give relief on quite a large scale, for the small size of your community. Are there any new directions that you're going in?

DS: Yeah, I'm worried; I'm working on Iran and *Hezbollah*. I've already fought a war this summer with *Hezbollah*. *Hamas*, we're talking about a foreign aid package for Israel. We're very concerned about -- I'm certainly concerned about Israel having enough armaments to take care of the kind of neighbors they have now, very vicious neighbors,

uncompromising neighbors, neighbors that want to destroy her. And make no bones about it. And so that's where I am now. And I'm a grandmother of seven. We had two grandsons this spring.

RH: Two new grandsons. What do you hope for your grandchildren?

DS: Well, I hope that they will understand and appreciate the kinds of things that we have done and will be good citizens, will do themselves. They all have good parents. Their parents are very worthy. And I hope they won't take anything for granted.

RH: Thank you. If you could just describe what you're about to play.

DS: Well, there were many, many messages on this answering machine, and unfortunately, I have lost most, but I have two that I would like to share with you. The first one is from Bernice Manocherian, who is a very dear friend of mine from New York and the past president and chairman of the board of *AIPAC*, who was responding to the news that we were about to be hit by a second hurricane. And the second message is from Sandy Levy's mother, who lived with her in this neighborhood for about three months. I think she was Mrs. Katz is, probably in her early 90s. And her message was one of, "Goodbye, we're going back and thank you."

F: Nine messages. Message one.

MANOCHERIAN: "Hi Donna. It's Bernice.

I just wanted to know what's happening and how if you are being affected by this new business. It's unbelievable. Give me a call when you get a chance. You can call me until 11:00 at night. Thanks, dear."

F: 12:39 a.m. Sunday message two.

KATZ: "Donna, this is Mickey Katz, Sandy's mother. We're leaving tomorrow, and I just want to say thank you very much for being so nice and helping us. And it's very much appreciated. And I hope you stay well. Please remember me to your mother too. Take care, and thanks for the lovely gift. Take care of yourself. Bye-bye."

RH: How many people?

DS: We probably had 500 Jews under one roof at the faculty club at LSU, which was undoubtedly a first, to have that many Jews under one roof at LSU. Then we had this amazing group of Israeli rescuers.

And in the parking lot was the *Chabad* Rabbi who came with the food for the Israelis, the kosher food, and I thought to myself, "This will never happen again on the LSU campus to have so many Jews under one roof." It was quite a night.

RH: That's wonderful. One of those surprises that you just take pause and you think about, can't believe your eyes or --

DS: This community was greatly enriched by those Jews who came and stayed and eventually went back. But this Jewish community was greatly enriched, and I hope that we'll never forget that.

[END OF INTERVIEW]