



Joan Berenson Transcript

Rosalind Hinton: This is Rosalind Hinton, interviewing Joan Berenson at her home on 505 North Line in Metairie, Louisiana. Today is Friday, August 31, 2007. 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. Joan, do you agree to be interviewed and understand that the interview will be video recorded?

Joan Berenson: Yes, I do.

RH: Okay. Let's begin with just the year you were born, where you were born, and a little of your family's background.

JB: I was born here at Touro Infirmary. My family has a long history in New Orleans. Three generations at Temple Sinai, my grandmother was a charter member of the Sisterhood. She and her mother were born here, and their family came from Ohio. On my mother's side, my mother and her mother were born up in the country -- New Roads, and I can't think of that other little community, but close to New Roads, and then they moved down here when my mother was very little.

RH: So, it's a lot of generations here. Where were they from in Europe, do you know?

JB: Germany.

RH: Germany?

JB: On both sides.

RH: Germany on both sides. And were they here prior to the turn of the century in New Roads?



JB: Oh, yes, oh yes. My mother passed away in [2000], and she was already, what, ninety-two, I think. By chance, did you interview Julie Grant Meyer?

RH: No, I didn't.

JB: Because my grandfather built the house on Saint Charles Avenue, which is right across from Temple Sinai. He built that house in 1906. It was put on the Preservation Resource Tour several years back, and I think it cost about six or seven thousand dollars to build it.

RH: Isn't that amazing? So, do you mind telling me what year you were born?

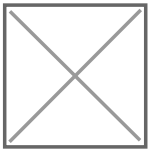
JB: 1930.

RH: Okay. Tell me a little about your general education and then your Jewish education.

JB: I only went to one school, and that was Newman from kindergarten on. It really, really was a big influence on me, I think. Everybody else who ever went to Newman. My Jewish education is in two parts. When I was growing up, my mother and her mother were regular temple-goers at Touro Synagogue. They went to services almost every Saturday morning, and I went with them. But at Chanukah time, they gave us those little tin, which we called menorahs, not chanukiahs in those days, and sometimes we lit it and sometimes we didn't. Marginally Jewish. I was Jewish, but I hadn't internalized it. I became Jewish in 1961 because Gerald and I went on the first national UJA Young Leadership Mission, which completely changed my life. It was a "wow" experience. It was a life-altering experience. I never felt terribly connected to Judaism. I certainly didn't feel connected to Jews out there. And it's completely changed. We first went to Vienna, and because this was a first, they brought everybody from the Joint JDC, UJA, [and] Jewish Agency into Vienna to talk to us. They were learning, but we learned more. We met a train early one morning coming from Yugoslavia – cold, it was winter. They didn't know if they were going to be met, and the Joint didn't know if they were going to be



meeting anybody. So you simply said, “Shalom,” and there was a look of recognition on their face and relief. That afternoon, we went to the [inaudible] feeding station. So, almost from the very beginning, it was slow but dramatic, and it had such an impact because when we walked into this great, big room, where everybody was congregating, there was some man standing on a chair screaming, and of course, we didn’t understand him. What he was saying was, “Thank you. Thank you for getting me, my wife, and my two children out, but please, please don’t forget all those others that we had to leave behind.” That’s quite an introduction. And then we walked through – it was like a dormitory. This had been a concentration camp initially, and we walked through these dormitories, and we met – I don’t know if you’ve ever read *The Last of the Just* by Schwarz-Bart, who was a martyr, who instead of leaving when he could, walked with these children that he was protecting into the camp. This was a book that I have upstairs; it was one of those things that once you’ve read it, you don’t forget it. There was somebody there who I met who spoke French, and I know a little bit so, and he knew this guy. To know somebody like that [inaudible]. Then, there was this little girl, who attached herself to me, and we had left Ann at home with the other children who were just about – she was probably a year or so young, and she stayed with me the whole time. At that point, I was wearing those old-fashioned rain bonnets that you put on. They were accordion-pleated, and you tied them under your chin. Well, she loved that. She wore my wedding ring. She put on my watch. She just would not – she sat on my – she hugged me, and this was the – we were going to be gone quite a long time and to leave your kids at home. I loved this, and I think she loved this, and then we left. That was the beginning of this trip. I think it was from that point on I realized that I had so many connections that I didn’t even know about. Up until then, I knew the bible stories, but I didn’t feel any personal connection to the Jewish people. And then, of course, we went on to Israel from there, and I’ll tell you that story because it picks up from Vienna. That made me realize the past that I had, but also the depth of Judaism and why these people were willing to forsake what they did and what gave them the courage and the power to



cling on when everything was against them.

RH: So, where in Israel did you end up?

JB: Well, we went to Israel. And then, when we went to Haifa, we were supposed to meet the boat with the very same people that we had been interviewing in Vienna, to meet them. In three days, they had interviewed all of these people, they knew where they had come from, they knew what their family situation was, and they had already mapped out where they should be going. It's quite a feat. We were there hours, and I was really upset because I was looking for that little girl. And Gerald kept saying -- that's my husband -- Gerald kept saying to me, "She will get out. She was in Vienna. She just didn't make this boat. She will get out." We were leaving the port to board the buses, and all of a sudden, I was hit from behind by a pair of tiny arms. She had found me. So, that brought me to Israel.

RH: Gosh. Wow. So, this journey began for you --

JB: In 1961.

RH: This is a new journey for you. I mean, it changed your life.

JB: It was not a mission. That's a good word because it was not a mission; it was a journey that began there. Yes.

RH: Can you say one more time just exactly how you think it changed you?

JB: Oh, yes. Before that, I was working for the United Way, for Red Cross, and the Tuberculosis Association for very valid reasons. I realized how many more people could be doing those things, and in those days, you have to understand the Jewish community in New Orleans was very polarized. The reform German Jewish community was here or there, far away. The Eastern European Jewish community was way over there, and they



just rarely met. I realized then that it just was wrong. I'm not going to say I realized it then, but it was over several years that there were so many ways that we were alike more so than what had divided us. So, it has completely changed my life, and I have done nothing but be a – I don't want to say but be a volunteer, because I don't mean that, but I have done nothing except volunteer and work in the Jewish community all these years. But because I feel that the Jewish community cannot be strong if the general community cannot and that they really must be – that it's wrong to work solely for the Jewish community, that is not one of the reasons that I was so active in the New Orleans section of the National Council of Jewish Women, because it brought the two together and I still work for United Way minimally, and things like that.

RH: So the NCJW was a place where you could bring –when you say the two together –?

JB: The Jewish and the general communities.

RH: Okay, the general and the Jewish. So, what was it like being Jewish in New Orleans?

JB: Growing up?

RH: Well, growing up and then when you started working with NCJW, too.

JB: Oh, yeah, but that was still back then. [laughter] Growing up, as I said, I knew I was Jewish, but it really wasn't anything. I'm ashamed to say it, but to be truthful, somewhat ashamed. I mean, it was not something that I would proudly wear on my sleeve. I didn't feel any antisemitism growing up at Newman. However, it was very divided because even though we were very friendly with those girls that would go on to make their debut, it was strictly an after-school friendship. It's changed. It's not like that today. But you asked me when I was growing up.



RH: Right, right.

JB: I had never heard of chopped liver. I had never eaten a bagel. I didn't know what lox was. I had never been to a Bar Mitzvah. All of this came about after I met Gerald.

So that's why I said that this was really very divided. I guess one of the things that I feel good about was that the first time that I sat on a Federation nominating committee meeting was the year after I chaired the women's division in '61, and I saw in action that here were people who a few years before would not even have known each other. We're talking for or against, but it was not based on where their ancestors came from, but it was really on – I'm not saying there were no politics involved, but it was based on the abilities of the nominees.

RH: So, what year did you marry Gerald?

JB: '51.

RH: His family background was more Eastern European.

JB: Eastern European. He grew up in Bogalusa.

RH: When you married, was there some tension that you were marrying an Eastern European?

JB: No. I was marrying Gerald.

RH: Oh, okay.

JB: Not even from my family, because my husband said he really married me because of my mother. [laughter] She adored him from the beginning.

RH: Oh, that's wonderful. So, how many children did you have?

JB: Four.



RH: Four? Wow. And tell me their names.

JB: Leslie, now known as Les. He lives in Seattle. Ann, who is in Houston. Bobby is also in Seattle. Laurie is in Baton Rouge.

RH: What were some of the things you did with the NCJW?

JB: That was not how I got started.

RH: Oh, it wasn't?

JB: No. Because I really got started with Federation as soon as we came back from the mission.

RH: Oh, okay.

JB: And I did not – I mean, having a lot of small children, I couldn't be two places at one time, or really three, at home. So that, when they were little, I really had to decide where was I going to be. So, I was active in the Federation and the campaign.

RH: Oh, okay. I'm just curious because you're talking about a time – and we already talked about you living across the street from Sylvia Stern. I'd done an interview with her once, and she talked a little about the Civil Rights Movement.

JB: I marched with Sylvia for civil rights.

RH: You did?

JB: Yeah.

RH: How did the Jewish women get involved in the cause for civil rights?



JB: This has always been a very strong — we say NCJW now; we were councilwomen then. It was Council. But we learned to say NCJW. But this was always a very strong Council town. One of the things that Council did was at the port of embarkation. I don't know if you've interviewed anybody to talk to you about meeting the displaced persons as they came through from New York right after the war.

RH: No, did you do that?

JB: Yeah.

RH: Really?

JB: Yeah. That's one of the jobs the Council has done traditionally. When it was meeting the boats in New York, they would meet so that the Jewish women wouldn't be constricted into being prostitutes. So, they shepherded them away from that kind of life, and this is what Council did here. We did it differently from any other of the agencies. I mean, there were Catholics. There were Protestants. There were Baptists — the whole (full wave?). They picked up — what you did is you got in a line in your car, and you met the boat, and they assigned you a group. If you were meeting anyone else but Jews, you picked them up, and you dumped them at the bus station or the train station. They might not have been leaving until 11:30 that night on a bus. Okay. You didn't have food for them. You didn't do anything. You just dropped them. Occasionally, they would want to stop at a store and buy their little one a dress, and when they'd walk out, it was the frilliest, fanciest, ruffliest dress you could ever imagine, but they loved it. Not so in the Jewish community. They set the old JCC up, and they had tablecloths, and this meant a great deal to these people coming in at that point to have tablecloths on the table. They had nurses, we had doctors, food, anything to — they were treated as a guest. Then, when it was time for them to leave to go wherever, someone else was there to bring them to the bus or the train station.



RH: Did some of the displaced persons end up in New Orleans?

JB: Oh, yes. They called themselves the New Americans, and they had a very strong presence here. Many of them are no longer here. And they have very strong ties with one another, but they're also important people in the community.

RH: Wow. I think I talked to Anne Levy, and she was telling me about being greeted by the Jewish community, so you're kind of telling – she must have been one of those people. You're telling me from the other side of the story.

JB: Yeah.

RH: Wow. So, what other things did you do with the Council?

JB: Well, I became president.

RH: You did?

JB: Yeah. I guess at that point, volunteerism was so strong – could we stop a minute, please?

RH: Sure. [RECORDING PAUSED] You said you were president of the Council.

JB: Yes.

RH: When was that?

JB: Late '70s. Oh, and what I was saying, at that time, volunteerism was so strong, and there were so many people who wanted to be involved so that there was a progression. You didn't just become an instant leader. So, you were vice president of Services, and Ways and Means, and Administration, and Membership, and then you finally evolved.

RH: Once you'd kind of done everything?



JB: Yeah.

RH: Wow. So, how were relations between the Jewish community and other religions [and] other races?

JB: Well, the Jewish community and the Black community were very strong together. In fact, one of the first things that I did when I was president – I was called to ask about who would I put up for some award that a very prestigious Black organization was putting up. They took my recommendation, and Millie Charles, who was out at SUNO [Southern University at New Orleans], was the one that received the award that year, and I was told no one else had put her up. I mean, she, to me, was such an obvious choice.

RH: I just saw her two days ago.

JB: Did you really?

RH: [laughter] Yeah. Yeah, she's such a grand lady.

JB: Oh, she is. She is. She was very helpful to Council, too, later on, in – I'm trying to remember – in writing up a booklet for HIPPY, Home [Instruction] Program for Preschool Youth. She helped us translate the little books that you give to the children to read into the New Orleans Black vernacular.

RH: Oh my gosh.

JB: So that it became – it was indigenous to them.

RH: How wonderful.

JB: That was a long time later.

RH: Also, you said you marched with Sylvia in the civil rights [movement]. How did Council get involved in civil rights?



JB: Always. It's a major platform. Individual rights, civil rights. We have resolutions, and in those days, there were like twenty or twenty-one of them, and they were quite long. They spelled out exactly what we worked for. Civil and individual rights was a major platform.

RH: What was your children's Jewish education?

JB: I wish it had been more. They went to Sunday school, just as my mother said to me, "You have to go," I said that to them. When it was time for our oldest, Les, to be bar mitzvah a couple of years before that, I said to Gerald that I thought it was – and Temple Sinai had not done a bar or bat mitzvah then. I said to Gerald, I can't see just having him bar mitzvah and our joining a congregation for that at the last minute. So we joined an orthodox congregation, Chevra Thilim, and arranged for Leslie to take lessons so that Hebrew would be more comfortable for him and to learn a little bit more [inaudible] before his bar-mitzvah came.

RH: Wow. That's a little different.

JB: And went sent our little one to a day school. So, by the time Laurie came along, she started off at Trinity, and when it was time for her to – it was just time to leave, so she transferred to day school.

RH: To the day school, the Jewish –

JB: This is Lakeshore. Lakeshore Hebrew Day School, which is no longer in existence.

RH: I was going to say I didn't even know there was a Lakeshore Hebrew Day School.

JB: There was.

RH: Wow. What year was that about?



JB: Well, she was, you figure it out. She was born in '63. So this was probably –

RH: In the '70s.

JB: She was probably around fourth grade, and we decided that she shouldn't be [inaudible] Trinity. The headmaster there was wonderful, ecumenical, and great.

RH: Trinity is an Episcopal day school.

JB: Right.

RH: Okay. So, were there any other rituals or observances that were important in your family or as you raised your children for your Judaism?

JB: Well, I was brought up in a house that had a Christmas tree. It never had a star. It had a pointed – and all those wonderful ornaments that were made in Czechoslovakia, which we gave to an Indian family, from India, that would work for my husband. But when the kids were – when Les and Ann must have been around five and six, four and five, I decided it was really wrong to make somebody's religion part of our interior decoration. I love Christmas. We used to decorate – I mean, the whole living room [and] the dining room were decorated, and it smelled wonderful, and it seemed wrong. So, from that point on, my dedication and commitment to Judaism was really growing.

RH: So, that was the last –? At some point, no more trees, no more Christmas.

JB: Yup. I still like the smell, but not in my house.

RH: Right. [laughter] Just get a little Pine-Sol. So, you started to engage Judaism a little more, like with Chanukah and different –

JB: Oh, yes. Whereas when I was little always went to the Seder at the synagogue. We started having it at home with the family.



RH: You did?

JB: I don't eat shellfish, pork, or [inaudible], or any of those things. My husband sometimes slips, and he was the one that was brought up on it. [laughter] It's very hard for him not to eat. But he sometimes slips.

RH: So, were there any places that served as the social center for your family in New Orleans?

JB: I'm not sure what that means.

RH: Just where you and your family tended to hang out, I guess, socialize and be. Was it at the synagogue? Was it at –?

JB: No.

RH: No?

JB: No.

RH: Was it more of going out to dinner in New Orleans, which is kind of –

JB: Of course.

RH: — very typical. [laughter]

JB: Yeah, I mean, when you say hang out, I don't think in my day or my mother's day, and father's day, people didn't hang out. I mean, everything was in the home, you know. They had a regular group that the men played poker and the women played cards, and it was once a month, and it was a big, elaborate supper first, and then they'd play cards, and they'd talk, and very social. But going out to restaurants. We didn't hang out anywhere. I don't think I knew that expression even then.



RH: It's a little later expression. You're right. But so that's interesting, so the social life was in the home, but there would be –

JB: Or at a restaurant.

RH: Or at a restaurant. But there would be these – the monthly card games and the couples would get together.

JB: Yeah.

RH: The men would play poker. Seems like someone was telling me, too, that there was a card game at the JCC. Do you remember that ever? It must have been a long time ago, I can't remember who told me.

JB: In fact, my mother had a reservation to go to a Council meeting the day she went into the hospital when she passed away. She was very active. When they would have something for the senior citizens at the JCC that I knew she would love, she wouldn't go there – "That's for old people." She is the only woman that ever chaired the Women's Division Campaign two times.

RH: Oh, really?

JB: Yeah.

RH: She must have been effective.

JB: She was.

RH: Yeah. This has been a great story. Is there one vivid memory of the Jewish community pre-Katrina that kind of speaks about the Jewish community to you?

JB: [inaudible], but it's a very cohesive community. And the interesting thing, I think, is that while being so small – because even in its heyday when we had thirteen thousand



individuals, it was still small. We've really done and been a very important force in the general community. The rabbi at Touro Synagogue, Rabbi [inaudible], started what we then called the Community Chest, which is now the United Way, based on the way the Jewish community raised its funds. They've been terribly important, and I know you've heard this before, but in terms of the museum, or the symphony, or United Way. But we talked about marching for civil rights, and I don't think of myself as being – aggressive is not the word I'm looking for.

RH: Assertive?

JB: No. No, not exactly. Oh, I'll tell you the story. Yeah, maybe. But we had a chance to march for Soviet Jewry here at the time that the people who were caught in an airplane in the Soviet Union were imprisoned. We had a chance to march for Soviet Jewry through the Federation at just around Passover time because it was going to be – to talk about how important it is to get Soviet Jewry free. There was going to be a fifth cup of wine. So, I was not president of Council – I was two administrations back – and we met as the Executive Committee. I felt very strongly that we should march for Soviet Jewry. We had marched for civil rights. Why not? There were a lot of people who felt that this was wrong, but we marched from Audubon Park down Saint Charles Avenue to the JCC and had a service there. And this was right. I flew up to DC for the Soviet Jewry march with 250,000 people on the mall because it was right.

RH: Wow.

JB: When the Bolshoi was here, and we were going, and this was when people were wearing long dresses, I [inaudible] in my long dress, and then walked in and saw the ballet. So I, by then – whereas in those days you went to the beauty shop – even in high school, you went to the beauty shop once a week and had your hair done. I would never have thought about reading a Jewish book. I wouldn't have wanted to, but I would not have done it. Here I was now, and this is the way I am today.



RH: Wow. That's a good story. Why don't we move into the Katrina story and talk a little bit about what you generally do around a hurricane, what you did this time, and when Katrina came on your radar screen, your personal radar screen?

JB: Whenever there is a hurricane predicted, I secure the house. You could not tell it, but we had wonderful furniture; it's all 18th century. We have old Chinese lamps. We have many decoupages, which are paintings on glass on the reverse where they are safe. It takes me about three or four hours to get everything: bring the hoses into the garage, bring the plants into the garage, bring all the lamps and either put them under the beds or in the closets, take the pictures off of the wall, bring the furniture away from the windows. It takes a long time. We've only evacuated once, and that was one time, and I don't know for which hurricane, and Gerald said, "Why don't we go up to Bogalusa and be with mom." All of this has been done and didn't think it was going to be much. And I said, "Oh, sure." So we went to Bogalusa, the hurricane did not come to New Orleans; it hit Bogalusa. The trees were crashing. I was delighted we were there because we were company for Gerald's mother and her sitter. The trees were crashing. Fortunately, all these huge pine trees were falling away from the house, not on the house, so I was really glad. That's the only time we've ever evacuated. This time was no different. If something was going to happen, I wanted to be here because for Betsy, when we lived on Audubon Boulevard, which was the house I had grown up in and across the street from where Sylvia and George lived, fortunately – nobody thought about evacuating in those days, but fortunately, we were there because the glasses were all breaking all night long. My husband was up in Bogalusa; he just had some knee surgery, and he was recuperating. Eva had a pool in her backyard, and he could do laps, so he was up there. The water was coming in, so all the towels in the house were being soaked up. So, from that point on – and then we didn't do anything. There was no security. I mean, we just didn't have things like that happen. And with Betsy, Laurie, who is the one born in '63, was just a baby, and was in her crib, and was walking [inaudible] I don't remember when that was but walking and she woke up in the middle of the night, and I picked her up, and



she walked around with me putting all these towels around, and twenty minutes later, the banister from the house next door upstairs galley came flying through our window, and all that glass fell in her crib. So, if she had not waken, she would have been covered by tons of splinters of glass. So, it never occurred to us that we had to evacuate. We didn't do it. First of all, we sit on the high side of North Line. We've never flooded. The water comes halfway up the front yard, and then that's the end of that. We dropped our flood insurance in '05 because we never flood. So, Gerald said -- he's full time down at Tulane Med School, and he said, "Well, let's go," come on down to where his office is on Canal Street. So, we made plans to do it. I called him up, and I said, "This is crazy." We have a new baby Labrador now, but we had a Labrador. I said, "What are we going to do if there's no electricity? If we need more food? Here at the house, we're set up for a hurricane. Down there, we're not." He said, "Oh, but it's safer up there." He's on the 18th floor. So, I said, "I'm not coming." He said, "Okay." So we really were set up here. I had gallons of water and all the things that people do, votive lights, flashlights, radios, food you didn't have to cook, paper plates, and garbage bags. So, we were ready. The hurricane hit Monday morning.

RH: Yeah, I believe so.

JB: I think so. We woke up early and went downstairs. I think it hit like at 2:00 or 3:00. We weren't aware of it until around 6:00 or 7:00 when we came down. These windows that open up here all had blown off. The French doors in the den had blown open. Then the door right there, the back door of the hall had blown, was pushed open. So, Gerald is in the den holding the doors like this, and I could not hold those doors because I wasn't strong enough, so I had to sit and put my back against it and hold it like this. Then the cell phone started ringing. Ann in Houston, and Laurie in Baton Rouge, and I finally had to say, "We love you, but I don't have a third hand." Ann wanted to know, "Do you have life preservers?" [laughter] You know, she was so far ahead of the game than we were. I said, "Ann, don't be ridiculous. Goodbye, we'll talk to you later." Well, that was the last



of the conversations with our children. That afternoon, the water was halfway up the front yard and receding when we went to bed. We wake up early, and so I got up around quarter of 6:00 and walked down the stairs in utter disbelief because we already had a foot and a half of muck in the entry hall. I could not believe it. I could not believe it. So, I said to Gerald – because before we’d both been coming down, and we had some TV tables upstairs, and we were just eating up there, it was better than down here, and I said, ‘You know, this is ridiculous, we can’t both go down.’ We lost water on Sunday night because normally I fill the bathtub so we can flush the – we don’t bathe, but we can put it into a basin and wash off, but I had filled one bathtub and was going to bathe, and then fill the second one, couldn’t. The water had stopped by Sunday night. So I said, “We can’t both go down. We can’t wash.” So we would take turns. He would go for one meal, and I’d go for the other. I had this infection on my thumb, so I had all these bottles of Purell around the house because I didn’t want to get it wet. Fortunately, because the water by then was up to our knees, and that’s how we could be clean by using all this Purell. I don’t know what we would have done without that Purell. So, we did fine. It was almost like a second honeymoon because I have a husband that works long, long, long hours. Here we were with no telephone, no television, and a radio that was always just rebroadcasting the same hurricane news, so it was just us. I did remember that upstairs – and we have an attic, and we have four children with attics, but I still have all of their stuff upstairs, and how I remembered where these two fans were, the old-fashioned ones on the wooden sticks? So I found those immediately, so that was really a huge help. So, Tuesday night, I decided that we had to get out. I mean, I knew that we had to get out because the water was rising, and I knew it would be very soon that we wouldn’t be able to open the fridge or anything. So, the dream of the second honeymoon ended, and reality began to set in. So, when Gerald woke up Wednesday morning, I said, “We’ve got to get out of here.” He said, “Oh no, we’re fine!” I said, “Just like you wanted to go to the 18th floor of Tidewater. No, we’re not fine.” So he said, “Okay.” So I came downstairs, and the house right across the street was loading some people up in a



motorized raft. It was full. I said, “Curtis, will you come back or send somebody?” “Yes, Ms. Berenson.” I said, “Curtis, do you promise?” He said, “I promise.” Well, he never showed, and neither did anyone else. So, thinking he was, I only had to pack a very tiny duffle because three weeks before Katrina, our daughter in Baton Rouge, Laurie, was diagnosed with MS, multiple sclerosis, and so I was spending Monday through Friday with her, taking care of the kids, and then Dale would be there for the weekend, so I’d come home. So, I had all of this kind of stuff up there already. I just needed a few things. I packed and hid my jewelry. Gerald had to pack more because, of course, he had nothing up there. Curtis never came back, and so I got out some white hand – I think I still have one. [RECORDING PAUSED] So, I had made these before Gerald woke up because I knew we’d have to leave. And so I had gotten out these – I had three hand towels and wrote “help” on them with a magic marker, and then he and I together helped tape them on the columns outside on the porch with duct tape because hopefully somebody in a boat, somebody, would see us, because there would be no way for them to know. So, we waited, and we waited, and we waited, and finally, we saw these two flat bottom boats coming up. And Gerald said, “Are you from the (Cannizaros?)?” That’s the neighbors across the street. They said, “No, Mr. Lipsey sent us.” And he said, “We’ve been looking for you all for almost an hour because our GPSs aren’t working.” So, they had Laurie sitting in Richard Lipsey’s office in Baton Rouge, and seeing where they were on his screen, she could tell them – but it took them a while to figure this out, of course – to tell them how to find us because the water was so high that even when we got onto these flat bottom boats, they had to go very slowly because they didn’t want to scratch the tops of the cars. The street signs were down, so they had no way of knowing where we were.

RH: So, was this Thursday?

JB: No, Wednesday afternoon.



RH: Wednesday afternoon.

JB: So, they pulled their boat into the entrance hall – [laughter] that was a first – and picked Gerald and me up, put us in the boat, picked our Labrador and put her in the boat, and they were all dressed in camouflage, with Uzis, or the equivalent, because they really had been sent down by the Colonel who had the East Baton Rouge Sheriff Deputy's office [inaudible] pick up prisoners. They were diverted to pick us up instead, and they were wonderful. So, Gerald asked them if they would mind going up and down and around, to make sure that there was no one else still in homes. So, we did pick up a couple and a Labrador down where the Pulitzers are. They were house-sitting for Sydney and for Arthur. We went all the way around, and they didn't even need megaphones; these guys they just called, and their voice carried. But they were so nice. We went down to Fredrick, which is about two blocks down and two blocks up, and we had to get out and walk because they really do sit on the ridge, the Metairie Ridge. We always thought we sat on the Metairie Ridge here. We don't. You have to get closer to Metairie Road to be on the ridge. So, five blocks from our house, there's no water, and we had six and a half feet of water in the back of our house, and three and a half or four feet of water in the front of our house, inside our house, and six and a half inside our house. The reason there is less in the front is because the lawn slopes, and then we had the steps up, and it's flatter in the back. We got in their van, and they took us above Lakeside, and we were met by another van that had our son-in-law, who was just – by the time he saw us, I mean, he was just in tears because he didn't know what it was going to be like. We didn't drive to Baton Rouge; we flew at ninety miles an hour. I mean, they just were going on the side of the road, so we got up there very quickly. I never, never wear shorts. Ever. I work out, I wear either tights or long pants because my legs are so badly – I have bad varicosities. I had on very short shorts. I had on the shorts that I work out in that I usually wear tights with. Gerald, who when our kids were born, I always made sure that he shaved before going to the hospital, even though there was nobody there because it was in Chicago, has not shaved in days. So, that's the way



we looked. They took us to Richard Lipsey's office, and Gerald's two sisters, and Richard, and his daughters, and his wife were there, our niece. Richard said to Gerald, "Gerald, I've seen you dress better." [laughter] In fact, he says, "I'm not even sure that either one of you smell so good." [laughter] So, anyway, they were wonderful. We were the first ones the Baton Rouge Sheriff's Office evacuated. Richard realized that something really needed to be done because our son, Les, in Seattle, had been calling him, I don't know how many times a day, saying, "You've got to get them out. I mean, we don't even know what's happening. You've got to send somebody down there to see." It was only on Wednesday morning that Richard realized that he had to send them. He really did. He needed to ask a friend to send help.

RH: There's a little geography here, Jewish geography, in the sense that – how is Richard related to you?

JB: Richard's wife, Susan Haskell Lipsey, is Gerald's niece. Susan's mother is Bertie Haskell, Gerald's sister.

RH: We're going to stop the tape for a minute and change the tape. [RECORDING PAUSED] Well, what I'm curious about is you sound so calm in the telling. Were you ever scared? It sounds like such a frightening thing.

JB: No, my mother would have said, "No sense, no feeling." [laughter] No, we really were not afraid. I mean, as I said, Gerald didn't even think that we should get out on Wednesday. We were so cut off then that we really didn't know the enormity of it. But no. No.

RH: Where did you think the water was coming from? Did you realize it was [inaudible]?

JB: Well, we knew that because we had radios. So by then, we knew that there were breaches in the canal, and there's a canal not that far – in fact, when they evacuated, they had trucks up there on the levee throwing – building it up with sandbags. So, we



knew that there were breaches. But see, by Monday afternoon, there was no rain. We were fine.

RH: So, Richard in Baton Rouge is getting these messages from your kids, and he's realizing Wednesday that if he doesn't mount some type of rescue, no one will. He's a little worried about that.

JB: I don't know. I don't know what was in Richard's mind. All I know is that he did not realize that there was a real emergency until Wednesday morning because Leslie had really been bugging him to do something. Had we not gotten out on Wednesday, the only thing that was bad by then was that the water was half – you see, in the old refrigerator, the freezer was on the top and the refrigerator on the bottom, so that by then, by Tuesday night, I could not, once I opened the refrigerator, all that muck was in it. That was the only thing, I think, that was plugged in that I was aware of because I would unplug any of the electrical things, except Gerald's office is such a mess; we're both packrats, but he just has things just piled up like this, so that while I had taken all of the photograph albums, and brought all the chairs upstairs -- not the upholstered chairs, but all the, and all the side tables, everything that I -- and Gerald has a bad leg, so he couldn't help me lug all this stuff up the stairs. So, once I had brought – and these are all wood, very heavy tables. I mean, they're 18th-century wooden tables, and they're heavy, but I was able to get them, all of that upstairs. I never even thought about that room. In the desk drawer, and it was the desk that I had given Gerald as an engagement present, in the drawers were all the 35-millimeter slides of our children – of birthday parties, when we were engaged, everything. Then in the cabinet that's over here are all the 16-millimeter movie film of before I even knew him, of his two sisters, Sarah Stone and Byrde Haspel – their children when they were little. And our wedding pictures. So, all of that's gone.

RH: Oh gosh. Wow.



JB: We're still that much better off than too many other people.

RH: Do you really feel that way after having been rescued?

JB: Oh, absolutely. Absolutely. We didn't lose any lives in our family. And that happened right across the street with the Handlemans. Maurice was ill, but he had to be helicoptered out. I don't know if you want to say this, but I'm sure that Katrina speeded up his demise and a lot of other people, too. Yes, of course, I feel that way.

RH: So, were you surprised at the reaction of your family? That they were so upset?

JB: No. We're a very close family. We went over to Houston not long after that, and one of her friends said that Ann had sat in services for the High Holy Days, and the tears were just running down her face thinking about — because by then, we were out thinking about it. Another one told me that she said, Ann said, "I don't know if mom and dad are alive or dead. But if they're alive, I'm going to kill them." [laughter]

RH: So, what did you do after you got up to Baton Rouge?

JB: We went to Laurie's house, which is not meant to have an extra two people, and they were wonderful. We stayed there for three weeks. Her husband and Laurie and their two children never once made us feel like we were making it difficult for them. The difference between Gerald and me, when we first got up there, he never turned the television off, and I never, for two or three days, I didn't want to look at it. So, as soon as he could, which was like — and we got ourselves together, and we rented cars — we were able to rent cars, by the way. He worked over at the Pete Maravich Trauma Center for, I think, three weeks as long as it was open, and then moved over to the cardiology lab at — what's the Baton Rouge hospital? Something Long. Earl K. Long. He was there for about six weeks, I guess. And about the third day we were there, I started looking for an apartment, and they were appalling. I found one that I really liked. She said, "Well, you're sixty-two or sixty-three on the list. I just sat there and talked, and I told them what



Gerald's job was, that he was a professor of medicine, holds the Endowed Chair of Preventive Cardiology at Tulane, and that we would take as good care of their apartment as I did of my house. I told them the tale of having been evacuated. Laurie and I went back to her house, and within an hour and a half, we had an apartment. [laughter] Then, the bad thing was, though, it was on the third floor, and there are no elevators. So, when I went back over to sign the contract, I started explaining that – as soon as an apartment on the first floor opened up – no, they can't do that. You have to be in an apartment six weeks. So I again started talking and telling them about Gerald's bad leg and three bouts of knee surgery. I mean, all of this was true, but I just strung it out. She said, "I'm sorry." I said, "Well, can you just ask the manager?" So she went over, and she came back, and she said, "No, I'm sorry." I said, "Well, could I talk to the manager?" So Rebecca came into the room, and I told her the same story, and we ended up with a two-bedroom apartment downstairs right across from the main. It was wonderful. It's a great apartment complex. It was gated and had a pool and an exercise room, and they were so nice. You could fax, and they didn't charge, and they would provide – if I didn't know how to do something, they would do it for me. They couldn't have been nicer. I think Gerald liked it better than I did because they had a kitchen, and they put out everyday bowls of candy. [laughter] He loves sweets. And you could go in and they had a fridge with soft drinks and water, and you could go in and help yourself. But it was that candy that really – but they were very nice.

RH: So, how long did you stay there?

JB: A year.

RH: Really?

JB: Nine months. We signed a six-month lease, maybe nine months, nine months, because the six months was very cheap if you can believe it. For a two-bedroom, a huge bathroom, it was immaculate. They kept it so clean. It was \$815 a month. We couldn't



have been any happier anyplace else. It was just a mile and a half from Laurie's. I could take the kids to school and help her out. It worked out really well. On one of the first trips down here, when we could get in, and Gerald could use his – could not get back downtown to go to Tidewater in the beginning. They wouldn't let anybody in, even if they'd see the Charity Hospital pass, that didn't work. But we could get here because we got off at Bonnevillie. He was loading up six bags with stuff in the refrigerator/freezer, and he passed out. Fortunately, there was a sewage and water truck, or whatever it's called here – Jackson Parish Department of Water – truck that was passing. These guys came out, and they were so nice. So they helped me bring him out and carry these great big bags out because the smell was just horrible, but then the door slammed on us. You have to have a key to get in. So, they took one of their crowbars and had to pry open the door, and because of that, we're having all this trouble. I had to get the door redone because it doesn't meet and fit well, but they were wonderful. Everybody's been good.

RH: Wow. So that must have been frightening, too, though. For him, no?

JB: No. I mean, I just, you know, would I have had enough strength? I don't know. I think sometimes you might, you know, you read about people rising to the occasion to have this adrenaline rush or something – I don't know. But it worked out. Because there were no neighbors around. We still don't have any neighbors around.

RH: Really? About how many people are back?

JB: Well, this yard was a vacant lot anyway. And this was a vacant lot. So that's not a Katrina vacancy. But if you drive around in the neighborhood, there are far too many empty houses and torn down [houses]. This was a perfectly beautiful street. This area and the Garden District are the two top neighborhoods in the city. It was beautiful, and it was kept. When we drove up, all we saw was brown, because of the water that had been here for so long. The first thing I did was get the front yard green because it was



just too depressing to see it all brown like that.

RH: So wherever the mucky water was, everything was brown.

JB: Well, it stayed here for a long time.

RH: When you were you first –?

JB: It was still wet. Three weeks.

RH: Three weeks?

JB: And it was still wet. The floors were still really wet, and we had beautiful floors. They were wide, old planks, and it almost looked like furniture.

RH: Did you connect at all with the Jewish community up in Baton Rouge?

JB: Yeah. The Federation, Sandy Levy with the Jewish Endowment Foundation, and Jewish Family Service were wonderful up there. They had a meeting set up where they introduced Colonel Phares to the Baton Rouge community. They also brought in people who were in the insurance business, and I can't remember what else, suggesting how to handle insurance and return. Because of Laurie being president of the synagogue at the time, we joined there and were there for the High Holy Days.

RH: And this was at Beth Shalom?

JB: Yes.

RH: They had a little flood, too, didn't they?

JB: No, they had wind damage.

RH: Wind damage from Rita?



JB: They had no flood. Rita pulled the roof off.

RH: So you joined the synagogue up there?

JB: Yes. In fact, we have retained, I don't know whether it's called an associate member or whatever, but an out-of-town membership.

RH: So, what were the High Holy Days like there?

JB: In the Baptist church? [laughter]

RH: I think I forgot about that.

JB: But very nice. It was good to be there. We found out that two of my ancestors – my maiden name was Seidenbach – were members of B'Nai because they're getting ready to have a hundred year, 125-year – some kind of a – it's a big year celebration was then coming up. In looking for their charter members, they found two Seidenbachs who were members, and they were there on my father's side because we have a family tree, and they're there.

RH: Oh, wow. So, other people you were concerned about? You had a housekeeper that you –?

JB: Margaret.

RH: Margaret.

JB: How'd you know that? [laughter]

RH: How do I know about Margaret? Because we just met her. [laughter]

JB: I mean, how did you know I was concerned about her?



RH: Well, I assumed you would be. [laughter]

JB: Oh, yes. Well, I was able to find Margaret because –

RH: So, did she leave, or did she stay?

JB: Well, Margaret will do anything, but she won't go near the pool because she's frightened to death of water. She would never fly with us over to Ann's house because she has never flown. So, she and her husband, Richard, lived in Gentilly, and Richard had to take like a crowbar or a hatchet – hatchet, I guess – to break the roof, and that's how they got up there. All this water is swarming around. So, finally, somebody came and rescued them. Now, here she is surrounded by water, and fortunately, they did not go down to the Superdome, thank goodness. They took them not too far away, and there were a lot of neighbors in the Gentilly area, and they were there for three days, and they got clothes, and food. Margaret said they were well taken care of. And then she flew someplace, which I've forgotten now – someplace in Texas. El Paso, maybe. I don't know where. They took their first plane ride someplace in Texas, and then she was bussed to Shreveport, but I found out where she was because I called – I remembered her sister's name in – Eunice. No, not Eunice. Vacherie. I called her sister by calling information and asking, "Was there a (Sorelle?) there?" – her name. Then I talked to her sister, who told me where Margaret was. So then, when she got to Shreveport, we were talking to each other every day or every couple of days, and they wanted to come down and see how the house was, so they took a bus from Shreveport to Baton Rouge, and they stayed on the sofa bed that we had been using at Laurie's house at night, and then they were spending the day with us over in our apartment. And we rented a car for them from the same place we were able to get a car because Richard Lipsey's daughter knew the guy who is head of the Enterprise. So, we were able to get a car for them to rent. And then she was staying in Vacherie.

RH: So you found her.



JB: Yeah.

RH: Were there other people that you were concerned about?

JB: No.

RH: No?

JB: No.

RH: Did you use the Federation website and kind of look up people or do anything? You didn't do any of that?

JB: No. There was no – I mean, by word of mouth, because seeing people – “How is so and so,” and that way, but no. There were a lot of telephone calls going back and forth from friends. By word of mouth – “Do you know where so and so?” Through the Federation – had a telephone list that you could find, but I never had to use – I don't know how to use the internet. That's why I didn't do it.

RH: How did you kind of make sense of it? What were you thinking about? Did you know how long you'd be there or where you were going to end up? I mean, what was one of the harder things to deal with?

JB: The hard thing to deal with was Gerald's deep concern. He is the Director of the Bogalusa Heart Study, which is a thirty-five-year-old study looking at a biracial population of children at risk. He had all of these samples, blood samples, etc., which it was very hard for him not knowing. So, early on he talked his way into going to the CBD, got over to Tulane, crawled through a window, scratched with broken glass, and scratched his face, walked up eighteen flights of stairs, and down 18 flights of stairs. But when he got up the first time – I was here at the house, I had said, “Take a flashlight.” He had a flashlight. He didn't have the keys to his office. [laughter] But fortunately, there was



somebody else up there, and the keys fit, and so he was able to get in. Of course, there was no electricity and whatnot. So, he put in a lot of miles on his car, going back and forth. He is recognized worldwide for the work he has done. He is invited to go to Europe on a business class ticket frequently each year, and because they will provide a business class ticket for him, and we have a Platinum American Express, he will say, "We'll buy the ticket; you can just reimburse us," and I get to fly free because that's the freebie you get, which is really very nice. He was being given another Lifetime Achievement Award in Nashville right after this, and at that point, he and I were about equally computer un-savvy, and he didn't know how to do the PowerPoint presentation, etc., and so one of his fellows flew down to help him put this together – only there's no electricity. So I said, "Well, why don't we go over to the [inaudible] Capital One Bank, which is on Metairie Road, and I'll ask them if you can use one of their unused offices."

So, he and his fellow sat there all morning using their air-conditioned office, and he put his talk together. And then, when we got to Nashville, he started talking about Katrina, and he said, "I've learned a lot since Katrina. I know how to pick out eggs that aren't cracked and the latest date on milk. I know where they have a plumber's friend at Home Depot. I can take my own clothes to the cleaners." He said, "If had to do all of those things before and Joan hadn't been there, I would never have been able to receive an award like that." [laughter] So, he's lost a lot of the people who were working with him. He lost a lot of samples, and that's been hard.

RH: So his study was compromised?

JB: I don't want to use that word because that's not so. Fortunately, he had samples in other places. So he hadn't lost all of them, and they're still doing research. But so many of the key people that he had working with him moved on. And that's tough. And recruitment is – he had somebody come in yesterday from Turkey, but it's not easy.

RH: Yeah, so Tulane – he was at Tulane.



JB: He was at LSU [Louisiana State University] for thirty-four years before.

RH: So, had he just moved to Tulane?

JB: About thirteen years before.

RH: How many years?

JB: About thirteen.

RH: Oh, thirteen.

JB: He was at Tulane when we were first married. Then we had two years at the University of Chicago and came down to LSU and stayed for thirty-four, thirty-five years. And he's been over at Tulane now about fifteen years.

RH: So, the change in his life and his work has really affected you too, both of you.

JB: Yes.

RH: And they have a new dean, I think.

JB: Yeah. A Jewish dean.

RH: Yeah.

JB: A nice Jewish boy.

RH: From Harvard.

JB: Yeah. Who I understand is active in the Federation. [laughter]

RH: So he'll get to get the loan [laughter] from the Federation that they're giving for new people coming into the city, I think.



JB: Oh, I didn't even know that. I don't know.

RH: Yeah, there's a few incentive packages now. The Federation's trying --

JB: Yeah. I chaired the Federation task force, there were five task forces set up by the Federation. Before the task forces met, the executive directors and presidents of all the organizations and agencies met to talk about what the needs would be. They decided on the task forces, and then they prioritized it. The first one was how to attract new people to the city and how to retain those that are here. That was given the first priority, and that was the task force that I chose. Julie was head of all the task forces.

RH: So, let's step back a bit, and then we'll get back into that story. So, when did you feel like you could move back to New Orleans?

JB: When there was enough of this house done because we were not aware of how bad it was at that point. Our contractor did a pretty good job in the beginning. His crew, who came down with him from Wisconsin, in the first couple of months, I thought were really quite good. And it just got worse.

RH: So, did you start this from Baton Rouge?

JB: I bought a new car two weeks before the storm. I wish everything else had gone as easy as that. All we lost was our deductible. That was easy. The car that I had traded in, I was driving about seven thousand miles a year. And in three weeks, I had been going back and forth to Baton Rouge because I go up there once a month to see the kids, and then a lot because Laurie had surgery before that. I put on ten thousand miles in seven months, going back and forth between Baton Rouge and New Orleans.

RH: Wow.

JB: Yeah.



RH: So that was one of the hardships of being away.

JB: It was a hardship because I was not here on a day-to-day basis, and that was a hardship. Not so much the driving, but not being here – like saying to the contractor when we were looking at paint samples, “I want to see this much and a couple of different colors close to it on two different walls so I can decide.” And when I came down, I had a whole room painted the most vivid shade of blue you could ever imagine. I mean, it was aqua. It was screaming. I mean, but had I been here, that would not have happened. Had I been here, I would not have let them – couldn’t understand why they didn’t put the cabinets in before they did the furring down because then they wouldn’t have that – no distance on one side of the cabinets and a space this big on the other. But not being here to say, “David, this is wrong. Stop.”

RH: Right. So, when you got into the house, a lot of things –?

JB: But I was still willing to put up with it. Just glad to be able to put the house together, move back in, get everything to [inaudible] and it was just not.

RH: Well, okay, then so when you got back, you reengaged with the Jewish community?

JB: Oh, yeah.

RH: And you got involved with the task force.

JB: Well, Julie called and asked if I would share the task force. After finding out that I would still be able to come and go and set the meeting dates that would work for me – and this is a good time. New Orleans is still a good place to be. It’s a better time to be Jewish here than it was when I was growing up.

RH: Explain that.



JB: Because it's not homogenized, but it's a good, cohesive community. It's a good community.

RH: Well, I guess that's one of the things. I have a lot of questions about the Jewish community. Has your relationship at all changed to the Jewish community in any way?

JB: I don't know what that means.

RH: Are you more involved, less involved, about the same as prior to Katrina?

JB: Probably less.

RH: Less?

JB: Yeah. Because, well, the task force meetings have stopped. We have only one more, which is coming up in two weeks, because what we were supposed to do was to find out what is needed and then come up with suggestions within our task force. And then that's passed onto the Federation, and the actual doing, we were the planning – we were the planners, we passed that information onto the Federation committees, and they will be doing it, evaluating, setting timetables, etc. So, I sit on the board of the Jewish Endowment Foundation, and that meets sometimes once a month, but it's not all the time, particularly over the summer, because there have been meetings that have been canceled. I sit on the day school board, and that last meeting was canceled. I co-chair the Education Committee for the Jewish Children's Regional Service, and normally, we meet every week from mid-May to whenever, and we've not been meeting as often. I sit on the Federation board, and it doesn't meet during the summer. And the Council doesn't meet over the summer, and I haven't been able to meet. Sometimes, for the board meetings, it hasn't worked out that I could go, so the only thing that I was really doing on a consistent basis was the scholarship meeting, the education meetings of the JCRS, and task force meetings, which I could arrange to fit my schedule.



RH: Some people would say you're pretty involved in the Jewish community. [laughter]

JB: Oh, maybe. [laughter]

RH: What's your thought on the Jewish community and where they are right now? What do you think needs to happen? What are you optimistic?

JB: Yeah, but it's going to take a long time to happen. This is not a quick fix. I don't think there's anybody in the city who was not affected by Katrina. I think that we've done a good job in trying to see where we need to go. I think the things that we must do, but a lot of it hinges on the perception of the general community. I talked Michael Weil, the Executive Director of the Federation long before the task forces met, that PR and marketing for us was absolutely dead rock crucial because, yes, there's crime, but not where we are. It's a neighborhood you never come in contact with. We've been in Asia and in Europe, and they either ask me, "Is there still water in the street, or are you back to normal?" So they don't even know. We have to tell people that there are lots of places in the city that are not below sea level. We have to let them know that they have corrupt, terrible politicians, even though ours might be worse. They still have bad ones; it just doesn't make the headlines. Our restaurants have opened. There's music here. If New Orleans goes down the tube because either the money doesn't come here – and this is the general community – either the money is not forthcoming from Congress and the president, or that only negative things are said, it's going to make a huge difference. But you have to remember that the port is not just the port for New Orleans. Our [inaudible] probably maybe as much as half of imports and exports come through our port. If New Orleans goes down, gas for cars is going to be twice as much. Now, that's not what I know; it's only what I've read. So that everybody will gain, and they have been wonderful – the Jewish have been wonderful to this community in sending either Federation grants, or Federation contributions, or individual. I mean, they have been wonderful.



RH: That was another one of my questions, is just how you feel the response in the larger Jewish community.

JB: It's been wonderful, and it hasn't stopped. It slowed down.

[RECORDING PAUSED]

RH: So I was asking about how you thought the response of the larger Jewish community –

JB: Oh, it's been wonderful. In visits, in volunteering – and it hasn't stopped. It's slowed down, but I just had an email yesterday from the Federation office to Lions of Judah that there is a group coming down this coming May. They have been individually major givers to this community of Katrina, and they want to come down and see where we are.

RH: Oh, wow.

JB: Yeah. So it's slowing, it has slowed, but we really need to market how badly we need this. And not only that we need it because I don't feel that we're going to get help on a laundry list of needs. I think they have to know how strong and viable we are, that we really have a chance, that we really will have a future. We need their help, but we are in a very good position.

RH: What do you perceive your role to be in the community? Where do you feel like how you're best able to contribute?

JB: I've been a fundraiser. I don't really want to stop being a fundraiser. I co-chaired the Metairie campus that was put up, I think, around 2000. We had somebody come down from Federation, from UJA, to see what they thought we could raise, and they thought a realistic figure would be two to two and a half million, and we raised eight. So, to a great extent, I've been a fundraiser, but I really – I'm going to be working as one of the co-



chairs in the Lion of Judah division this year, but I don't really want to fund – I'm going to fundraise for the day school, but I don't fundraise for a lot of things. I only fundraise for Federation and Council. I don't even do it for the agencies, except for the ones I'm really substantively involved with, like JCRA. I like getting my hands dirty. There was a group that came down in the middle of summer, and I helped dig up the neutral ground on Canal Boulevard. It was hot. No, I mean, it was just like this. Four hours, then came back on Sunday, and I could take it for about two hours, and then I said, "I just have to go." I mean, I just wilted. I mean, lifted heavy things, and planting – fortunately, there were guys there so that they could do a lot of the digging. I need to get back to that kind of – I don't want to dig, but I want to move away from any major fundraising.

RH: What has being Jewish meant during this experience?

JB: I would think that it has been thousands of years of terrible tragedies, one in my lifetime, the Holocaust – and I think that Judaism gives us, through tradition and values, the tools to move forward and the optimism that we can make it work, that we can do something. We have to do something. We should do something. We can't sit back. We must do something. It might not end up exactly as we perceived it in the beginning, but we're going to go forward. We have a future.

RH: Has any of your feelings about being Jewish changed at all because of Katrina?

JB: For me, it's strengthened them, but I don't think it's changed. Unfortunately, I know someone who is Jewish and has always distanced herself from the Jewish community and received help from this Jewish community, and I don't think she's any closer to it. I think the one thing that I hope people take away from this is that the money we raise is not just money that is just for others. It really is for us, too, that we have benefited. I hope that people realize, I think too often solicitors for the campaign go out and ask for money, and they don't really know how the money is used, so it's anonymous, or there's nothing that links the contributor to where it's going to end up, and I hope that this will



break that pattern.

RH: Because the Federation's been very generous to the New Orleans community, so they could kind of see tangibly, I mean, this money helped me [inaudible].

JB: Absolutely. One thing about this community is that our agencies, because we're so small – I mean, we're like ten thousand now – no, six thousand now, ten thousand before, that we have these agencies that were reflective of larger communities that had as many. We've tried to do the best we can, the most we can.

RH: Are there any Jewish teachings or concepts that have been present in your mind the past year or two?

JB: Only now that you ask the question, I have to tell you those were not things that I consciously thought about before, but certainly how important family is, tolerance, patience, caring about other people, and trying to do something for them, it cuts across all kinds of lines, how important the community is, the Jewish and the general and how important it is that you try to teach the values that you have to your children.

RH: I guess it was a moment where the values that you taught your children kind of had to show themselves, whatever they were, in a crisis.

JB: And they to their children.

RH: Since you've been back, are there any type of rituals or observances, and they don't necessarily have to be religious, that you're more conscious of, or more aware of, or try to incorporate more in your life?

JB: No, I think we're just picking up the pieces that we had to push aside. What we do is we try to take a grandchild when he or she is around 11 on a special trip. Only that one child and someplace that he or she really would like to go and do. And Benjamin, who is



going to become a bar mitzvah next year, is only getting his trip this year, a year late, and he is so good. He never bugged us about planning and doing and this. But soon as we brought it up, you know, he was at it like that. So, no, I don't think so. I mean, maybe you could suggest which might trigger a thought, but I can't think of anything.

RH: Well, I was just even thinking, between you and your husband, just to keep the stress level down, or if there's anything that you've had to do because it could be very stressful to be in New Orleans right now. You have a home, and two years later, we're sitting in the breakfast nook because it's not complete.

JB: And I used to keep my spices alphabetized. [laughter] I don't really know.

RH: Has your understanding of God changed at all?

JB: No.

RH: Could you kind of tell me about your understanding?

JB: Well, I guess there's a correlation between what has happened with Katrina and the Holocaust — and I don't mean that they're equal, but did God cause the Holocaust? Did God cause Katrina? No. But He certainly — I still say He [inaudible] But God, for me, is a source of solace.

RH: Do you feel like you're more engaged in going to the synagogue or less engaged than before?

JB: No, I do the same.

RH: You're the same?

JB: I do it the same.

RH: And what's the same?



JB: Mostly Saturday mornings. I say my prayers every night. I say the Shema in the morning. We got to service. I was at Sinai. As I said, we joined Chevra Thilim. It became Conservative and then merged with Shir Chadash, so we now have membership at Sinai and Shir Chadash. So, I try to go to services – actually, things have not always worked out. I'm going almost less now to regular Shabbat services on Saturday mornings than I used to. I mean, things just seemed to – just a lot to do. We would go for all the holidays, and we try to support whatever they're doing.

RH: Have you noticed some of the challenges like Sinai has versus Shir Chadash? What are some of both of the synagogues' challenges that you've noticed?

JB: Loss of membership, loss of membership, loss of membership [inaudible]. Sinai had to postpone its renovations that they had planned from before Katrina, they're doing it now. Shir Chadash had grandiose plans for redoing part of the sanctuary and the auditorium, and that's been changed. Beth Shalom in Baton Rouge has put off getting a new, not a roof, but like the girders that – it looks sort of like the Pompidou Center in Paris because all of the girders and everything is showing. They've just gotten a wonderful contribution, and they're going to be able to go back and do everything they had planned except for a skylight. The new president of Sinai is really attending all of the Jewish Education national meetings with the cantor so that they are really – it sounds like they are doing a great job and have been focusing on improving their Jewish education.

Besides the members, loss of faculty, and of course, that means funds, too, to do all that we want to do.

[RECORDING PAUSED]

RH: This is tape three of Katrina's Jewish Voices, and I'm interviewing Joan Berenson. I thought we'd switch a little bit and go to New Orleans and just ask how you feel about the national, state, [and] city response to Katrina.



JB: How else can you [inaudible] but just be horrified and mad? It's just all wrong.

There's too many people that – there's no cooperation, there's no correlation, and again, I don't think that the President, for all of his 15 trips down here, gets it because he's getting it in Mississippi because of his political ties to [Haley] Barbour and Trent Lot.

They're getting twice as much money as we are, and they had, I think, something like a third of the houses decimated that we did. It's wrong. They should be responding – politics should not have come into this. The tsunami problems were solved a lot sooner than ours.

RH: Do you think there was a racial element in how long it took them to get to the city?

JB: I don't really know. I don't know whether they were using that to stir the waters. I don't know whether this was said for political reasons. Do I think that there's a difference pre-K [Katrina] of the way the white community and the Black community are treated?

Yes, I do. I did tutor in a Black public school for three years, and it's really sad. These children, the oldest one I had was in seventh grade, and she was reading at a second-grade level, maybe. There were no books in her house, she never read when she got home. Nobody ever asked her about doing her homework. I'm sure in a lower socioeconomic group in a white school, it was probably the same, and that was why I was really so involved in the HIPPY program with Council for schools because what this was was training mothers how to be better mothers so that the children could progress in school at a faster rate. They were taught things that, to a great extent – and this is in New Orleans; it's pretty much a Black program. They don't speak to their children before and after, and night and day. They just tell them what to do. But concepts of what comes next, and this is behind that, what turns it – they just weren't doing. And that's one of the things that Millie Charles helped us to put it into the Black vernacular so that when they got to school, they wouldn't just tune it out, it was not just words coming at them; they made sense. That's why I was involved at the national level and was instrumental in getting some major grants for New Orleans.



RH: What would you like to see happen for the city of New Orleans?

JB: Better schools.

RH: What do you think of these charter schools?

JB: I think they're wonderful. I've met a couple of the principals at Langston Hughes. I think that's going to be a great school. [inaudible] I don't know.

RH: Yeah, they have certain company – kind of.

JB: Yeah, he's a Harvard graduate. He's young. He's starting school early; the day's going to be longer. It's conceived the way school should be. I think that Tulane is taking over one of the charter schools to help – and they did it, I know, for a little bit selfish reasons because that's where they're putting faculty members' children. I don't care the reason if it can be done and the other schools can see what can be done; it's bound to have a ripple effect.

RH: So, are you working in any kind of cross-racial alliances at this time?

JB: Now? No. No.

RH: As a fundraiser, how do you think all these charter schools are going to pay for themselves? Are you worried about that? Have you thought about that? It's kind of a personal question.

JB: I hadn't thought about it, but all I can say is that if they can make inroads and if they can show that they're being successful, I think it's going to be easier for them to do it because I don't know how they're going to work out with taxes. I mean, taxes are just fritted away here because I don't know how it's set up. I never thought about that before, whether they were going to get city and state taxes for it or not. I know the autonomy is there so that they can choose their curriculum and choose their textbooks, etc., choose



their own faculty, and set up their own guidelines. I don't know how the economics work. But I don't care what kind of a mission you have and what kind of passion you have; if you don't have money, you can't do it.

RH: Right. Do you feel like the Jewish community's been pretty active in the recovery of the whole city?

JB: I don't think as much. I don't think there was – in the Women of the Storm, I don't know that there were Jewish people in it. I had hoped that the task forces were not going to be – in the beginning, we sort of had to learn what we were doing because in the beginning, we really didn't know that we were going to be the planning only. The fifth task force was one on public relations, and I think they need to get started. I think they should have been – they had their work cut out for them, I think, before this, and I don't think they should have done it on a grand scale because you didn't want to move too fast and not know what you're doing, and then have to overcorrect it, but I think that we need to get – it would be good if we could be more involved and more visible.

RH: How do you think the best way is for the Jewish community to engage the larger community? Do you have any ideas about that? I know on an individual level, there's a lot of that.

JB: Yeah. I mean, there are individuals at charter schools that are already very involved, and some people have moved out here as they came, simply through their young leadership group or whatever to come down, and now they're staying. But how to get engaged? There are individuals who are involved with Scott Cowen at Tulane, and Walter Isaacson was the co-chair or vice-chair of it. There were some people whose names I've seen in that. I don't know of any organized – Council has been – there's so many people that are away, but they haven't been terribly active, that I know of, and I think I would, during this past year.



RH: And they would be a natural?

JB: Yeah. It's important because I think it's not only important that the general community see that the Jewish community is involved, but the Jewish community needs to know that it should, for its own sake and its own self, be involved. I think it'll come. I think that we're just overwhelmed. There's so much that needs doing on a personal level. I don't know how much extra time a lot of people have at this point.

RH: So, for instance, where is your house right now? Here we are two years later.

JB: Take your camera and see the boxes. We have a half-done kitchen. We have a half-done bedroom. We've had to put on a second new roof. And I am waiting –

RH: The first new roof wasn't done right.

JB: No, that's why the ceiling on the second floor, and we have a finished attic on the third, why the ceiling – the paint and the plaster is hanging down like a fringe all the way across in a straight line because the first new roof didn't work. So, we're no different now than we were a year ago.

RH: What would you like to see preserved in the Jewish community as they move forward and in the New Orleans community?

JB: I would like to see continue the coalitions and the coordination that has been growing for thirty years, forty years. I would like to see Jewish education – I hope the Melton – I was in the first Melton class. I would hope that this new Melton class is really well done so that people not only know the outward signs of Judaism, of their own Judaism, but they understand its roots, ethics, values, history, and traditions – the why. I would like to see more people – I would like to see enough people move in that we had before so that we can continue building and strengthening our agencies. The main thing that I would like to see, I think, is that the day school establish itself as an important link



to Jewish future.

RH: You're working a little with the day school in fundraising?

JB: No, I sit on the board.

RH: Oh, you sit on the board. What are some –?

JB: For me, it was the impetus that made me work so hard to have – because the day school was at the Metairie campus, and that to me was the push to have as great a campaign as possible because I wanted a really good day school. A community day school.

RH: So, the reason you raised eight million instead of two million was to make sure that that day school –?

JB: There were other things, but that was, for me, the push. It was the hot button.

RH: I have a couple of questions –

JB: You ask tough questions.

RH: A group of us put them together. They are tough. But we're coming to the end.

JB: But they're good ones.

RH: Is there anything you would like to change about the community? What would it be? Is there anything? The Jewish community, as you move forward.

JB: Pie in the sky? Turfdom. You never get rid of that. And that's really just an aside. What would I change? I would want to change the perception of Federation from too many people. The Federation and its campaigns are not receiving any funding at all from people who have little understanding of Judaism, of the place of Israel, in being Jewish.



And they do not support. There was such a push for when I was growing up and my mother and father's generation of assimilation that there was not the understanding or the support of the organized Jewish community in terms of the Federation. And that we raise – unfortunately, we don't have any major businesses. We don't have any manufacturing base. So we don't have mega-gifts. If it were not for the Goldring Woldenberg Family and Foundation gifts, we would be really so much poorer in raising funds. They have done a phenomenal job. Alan Franco and Bill Goldring have been just unbelievable in terms of their generosity, their understanding, and their perception of needs and what should ought to be. So that the people that I'm talking about shouldn't be afraid of being Jewish. Is there anything else that I would want to change? I think we were going in a pretty good direction, and I would just like to see it continue and be able to have the wherewithal and the people to do all we want to do.

RH: What's been some of the biggest changes in your life because of the hurricane? Have there been many?

JB: Well, I don't like living this way, and I don't like my husband saying, "When are we going to get there? Are you going to call the contractor today? When is he going to start?" I don't want to be thinking about all this. I really think that the main thing that I would hope to get out of all of this is that people will forget talking about Katrina and start talking about tomorrow and how to get there. I don't really like all of this focusing and constant attention to what was so destructive because it makes other people not want to come. It makes people want to leave. I'm just not pessimistic that way.

RH: Has Katrina changed any of your priorities?

JB: No, I don't think so. I don't even know what my priorities were. I don't think so. I don't know.

RH: Did you learn anything about yourself during Katrina?



JB: Yeah, I think so. I think I learned going back a long time ago, that I not only wanted to do certain things, but I was capable of doing certain things. I think that came about through Council because I was able to do things that I didn't think I could have done.

Federation helped me by showing me the importance of community and my Judaism. I have been able to do things over the years that I think have mattered, certain things in every area. But I think that with Katrina, I have become a more positive person and realize the importance of not letting things get me down. Maybe that's why I'm able to live in a house like this, but it really is me to be like that. To not always find the fog. I think growing up, I used to see what was wrong, and now I don't. I see where we've come.

RH: Are there any things that you took for granted before that you wouldn't take for granted now?

JB: Yeah, that our levees were strong, that in an emergency –

[RECORDING PAUSED]

RH: If there were things that you took for granted that now you would never take for granted. You said that the levees were strong was one thing, and I didn't know what else.

JB: And that the parish, city, state, and federal governments could be so petty in their thinking that people's well-being came too far down on their list. It never occurred to me that personal ambitions or just being plain stupid would make this city – that there are still certain sections of this city that have no telephone service. The lights downtown in the central business district are still blinking; they can't get them to work. They were brand new lights that we paid a gazillion dollars for to have them so that they reflected. That was pre K. Yeah. One of the things I'd like to return to were the prices before Katrina. Everything is more expensive now. Cleaning, groceries – everything costs more for



everything because they were out for so long with no income coming in that I think they're making up for it now.

RH: After you've had to evacuate your home and then go to Baton Rouge and live there, and now you're back here, but you're kind of not really in your home, even though you're living here –

JB: I'm in my house.

RH: You're in your house.

JB: But not my home.

RH: So what is the meaning of home to you?

JB: Well, it's welcoming. It's pleasant. It's orderly. It's a sanctuary. It's a place where you can entertain your family and your friends. What am I going to do for dinner for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur? Our family from Baton Rouge always spent, we would go for one of the holidays there and the other one they would come here. They can't come here. They can sleep here. You know, what do we do for – we haven't had a friend in this house since pre-K. I don't want to just have to go to a restaurant.

RH: Tell me some of the things that you're grateful for.

JB: I'm grateful that I married Gerald, because had I not, I would not have had the life that I've had today. Because it was through Gerald's sense of being Jewish, and that he signed up to go on that young leadership mission that I went. I am grateful for the kind of life I had growing up, that my mother and father were wonderful. They did not know the basis of what they were doing; they just did it because of them. They were honored by the Jewish Children's Home because of all that they did for the three children from the Home that were in my class. During the war, mother worked down at Red Cross rolling



bandages, and she took me with her, so I worked with her. She was active at the Well Baby Clinic at Touro. Since they were well babies, she would take me with her when I was really very little, and I played with the kids. My father died too early, but when I think about it, I realize how often he did the right thing, even though it might not have been the easiest for him. I learned a sense of family, and of tolerance, and... they wouldn't have known the word, but tzedakah and tikkun olam. They sure didn't know either one of those words, but they were there and passed on to me.

RH: What is it that you would hope for your children and your grandchildren?

JB: Can we turn this off?

[RECORDING PAUSED]

RH: I was asking what your hopes were for your children and your grandchildren.

JB: I think I'm a better grandmother than I was a mother. So I would hope that my grandchildren will be – I think that I would want my children and grandchildren to have the same kind of understanding that I think that Gerald and I have in terms of, I know they have a sense of family. I would want them to feel supportive of one another. I would want them to grow, that their affection for one another would grow. And that they would make their own contributions to their own communities, and strengthen them, and strengthen their own feelings about Judaism, and strengthen their Jewish communities as the general communities. I think my grandchildren will be worthwhile citizens from the way I see them now, and we have nine.

RH: That's wonderful. I like the thought of —

JB: Yeah, they are wonderful.



RH: I like the thought of nine worthwhile citizens.

JB: But I don't have a minyan. [laughter] And I just told you I wasn't negative.

RH: If there's anything you would like to add here at the end, we've covered a lot of territory, and this has been a beautiful interview.

JB: Thank you. Not always easy. I really can't, except I think that oral history is so important, and I know it's important because of what I don't have from either Gerald's side of the family or my own. I wasn't aware of how important it was to ask my mother and my father to tell me about what it was like when they were growing up, and I didn't know either one of my grandfathers, they both passed away before I was born. I didn't ask my grandmothers what it was like when they were growing up. This is something I've really missed and that I was sorry about, and so I think that even though this won't be someone else's story, it may be insightful and helpful.

RH: Thank you.

JB: Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]