

Joel Brown Transcript

ROSALIND HINTON: Really.

JOEL BROWN: Yeah, we catered. It's nice to -- you know, new people being born. Jewish people being born.

RH: -- feel good here. Yeah, I'm like so happy every time I see kids.

JB: Tell me -- where are you from?

RH: I actually grew up in Mobile, Alabama, but my father was from here. My mother was -- I grew up in retail. So the shmata business.

JB: OK. My grandparents too.

RH: Really.

JB: I'll say -- in Hazlehurst, Mississippi.

RH: Oh really, I know exactly where Hazlehurst is.

JB: That's where my mother's from, the Shermans, Sherman and Company, my grandparents had a clothing store there.

RH: Oh really? My mother had a dress shop but her grandfather -- her father, my grandfather, had founded the union for the salesmen, the traveling salesmen, the clothing. So she came --

JB: Oh wow, I'm sure they know the same people. And they'd go to -- I remember my grandmother would say when they'd go to market, or they'd come to New Orleans a lot,

they'd do a lot with Wembley Tie Company. I know they'd come. I just saw a salesman who --

RH: All right. This is Rosalind Hinton interviewing Joel Brown at his restaurant, the Kosher Cajun in Metairie, Louisiana. Today is Monday, October 23rd, 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. Joel, do you agree to be interviewed and understand that the interview will be video recorded?

JB: Yes.

RH: Let's just begin with where you were born and your early education, both general and Jewish. And talk a little bit also about your family and how they came to New Orleans.

JB: OK. I'm 39 years old. I was born here in New Orleans. My father moved here in the early '60s from Philadelphia. He went to Drexel University engineering school and moved here with the Apollo space program and worked out at Michoud. And my mother is from a small town in Mississippi called Hazlehurst about 30 miles south of Jackson. And that's where she grew up. And my parents both met through mutual friends and cousins and were married. And I have a sister Miriam who's four years younger than me. And she lives outside of Jackson with her husband and one son and one on the way. I'm married. My wife Natalie. We've been married for 17 years. We have three children. Ruth, my oldest, is -- Ruth is 15. And Sarah is almost 11. And Rebecca is seven. So I -- just to let you know, I was born here in New Orleans. My education -- went to communal Hebrew Day School. And then went to Lakeshore Hebrew Day School when it was on the lakefront, housed in Beth Israel Synagogue. And school was doing very well at the time. I think in its heyday had probably K through eight with 150 kids plus. That was good for the Jewish day school at the time. I was at the day school at the time when they moved out of the Beth Israel facility to Metairie, which was being

developed, to a piece of land in a building on West Esplanade, past Transcontinental. And that's where Lakeshore Hebrew Day School opened and had been around. And I graduated from that school. My sister also went to that school. Graduated. Pretty nice size, about eight to ten kids out of the eighth grade. After Lakeshore, continuing my Jewish education I went to Dallas, Texas, to a school called Torah High School of Texas, which was a small boys' yeshiva. And very good education there. We were able to dorm there and able to come home for vacation and holidays, but that was continuing my Jewish education in Dallas. After high school I went to Israel for six months to another yeshiva in Jerusalem called Machon Meir, which is a very Zionist yeshiva, part of -- it's called Mercaz HaRav Kook in Jerusalem. And after that coming home I went to Yeshiva University, which is in New York, did a semester there. And I had I guess about two years of college under my belt when I decided to get into the workforce and kind of start Kosher Cajun. But I'll go back and just tell you a little about I guess my upbringing. We belonged to the Conservative shul. My parents always kept a kosher home. And we grew up going to what was called Conservative Congregation at the time. Think it was on Napoleon and Magazine. My father became very involved in the congregation with a family who he had met when he came down here, a family kind of befriended him, and they were almost like his parents while he was down here. And grew up going to that shul.

RH: Did you live in that area?

JB: We lived across the river first and then my parents bought a house on Cleary in Metairie. So we lived in Metairie and my parents built a house also in Metairie close to the lake. About six blocks from the store. And that's where I really grew up in this area in Metairie.

RH: Go back to -- I didn't mean to interrupt you -- about the Conservative shul.

JB: Sure, the Conservative shul, went to. My father was the president of the shul at the time when they bought their new piece of property where they are now on West Esplanade, which has been beautiful facility when it was built, and which houses next to it the Goldring/Woldenberg Institute where the JCC is and the New Orleans Jewish Day School. So he was instrumental in buying that piece of property with the congregation at the time.

RH: So is that Shir Chadash?

JB: Which is now Shir Chadash, right, right. Continued to go to the Conservative shul. And I had my bar mitzvah there, which was very nice. Right as we were going to the day school our family was becoming a little more religious. There was a group of families that came down called a Kollel, which is a group of families that come. Sometimes the women teach or the men teach at the school. And they learn with families also. And sometimes it starts with the kids. As me and my sister would come home from school with more questions about kosher and keeping Shabbos our family became a little more religious. And we, I guess, became Orthodox right before I turned 13, right around that time. Which was a nice step, and I in my life also, I definitely see -- I say thank God for Shabbos. It is a day of rest and I really need it, and it's great to be with the family. There's nothing else that's done, we know that that day, Saturday -- or from Friday night sundown to Saturday night sundown -- is Shabbos and I think I learned that from my parents. And we do that in our family also. But, as we became religious my family, I had my bar mitzvah there, and as we became Orthodox we -- me and my father would -- we started, there was a shul where they were davening at the day school. That's where a lot of the Rabbis lived, down West Esplanade. And as some of the families started becoming religious, and we'd walk to shul. It was like three miles from here. So we kind of made an agreement, let's put something in the middle where some of the families on this end could also. And things started moving closer in I guess to this area around Shir Chadash and Gates of Prayer on West Esplanade. We had bought a house and were

davening in the house. That's where we were going to shul then. Was called Young Israel of Metairie. My father was very instrumental in that beginning. And I was too, growing up and being able to lead services there and help, because it was a small group, and ten men make a minyan and everyone counted, everyone really counted. But it was nice, and it's been a nice transition, becoming Orthodox and taking on some of the different, keeping the Sabbath fully and keeping kosher fully. It's kind of led me into my business also.

RH: Tell me, it's primarily a Reform Jewish community in New Orleans. Did you -- how did that feel? Did it --

JB: Was kind of -- I think I learned from my parents. My father was I think on the Federation board and on different boards and a very big part of the Jewish community. And I saw him in many different aspects with Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox people, and being a really good go-between. I think I learned that meeting all the different, you know, friends of the family and I had friends that even going to school, not all the kids were necessarily Orthodox. Reform, Conservative and Orthodox kids that were going to the day school, and those were my friends. And we would go to different bar mitzvahs of friends at different shuls or temples. And when I played basketball at the JCC, you know, just I think it's close-knit, New Orleans has always been I think a close-knit community with for the most part all the different sects, groups getting together. And I think I learned that in my business here having a kosher restaurant, that I'm servicing a wide spectrum of customers. Of course, starting with kosher I would gear to Jewish people who keep kosher for the religiosity part and then there are many people who come for the ethnic foods. It's New York deli, so corned beef and pastrami and knishes, things like that. On the other end of the spectrum, I'd say a good portion of our business is the non-Jewish trade. People are coming again also for the good New York deli. Kosher is quality, kosher is clean, and a lot of people are seeing that kosher products are -- I think if someone is in the mind to shop at Whole Foods then they know they're going

to get a quality product that they might pay a little more for but they know exactly what they're getting. And I think I've seen that and been able to in my business be able to talk to the whole community and bring everyone together. We do different catering at all the different shuls. The Reform shuls Uptown and all the ones in Metairie and --

RH: So tell me how you decided to go into this business.

JB: Sure. I'd say I guess around 13, 14, growing up in a kosher home and my father loved to cook, and just seeing all the different recipes and different foods that he would make, and he'd love to copy like make a kosher jambalaya or a kosher gumbo. Because he had those things before but now in a kosher home, strictly kosher, everything had to be, you know, correct, and just seeing my parents and living in the house and like things that were readily available, and things that were not readily available. I remember many times we could not -- and we still can't even today -- buy kosher white bread in a grocery store. Which seems to be like a staple item, but there's no -- there just happens to be in the city no kosher white bread. I remember many times, I think it was in -- might have been Mobile -- a grocery store called Pantry Pride I remember. Each one of the families would take once a month a ride, in whoever had a station wagon. And would literally go and buy a month's worth of bread. If it was hamburger buns or hot dog buns, white bread, to bring back. And everyone would put it in their freezer. And I know I joke every Jewish home has a chest freezer. Every Jewish home has an extra freezer. Because people buy in quantity. They're usually always cooking for a lot of people. People don't come in and buy one chicken, they always buy six, put some in the freezer. But I know that's one thing, they would do that. I think there was a group of people, I know my parents were part of it, that would bring in kosher meat from out of town. They get people together who kept kosher and would order, I think I remember a company out of Denver. It was the -- and it was that's something they wanted to do. kosher was what they wanted to keep. And whatever it took to -- it was definitely more expensive for the product itself and then for shipping. But I saw that, and I saw what my parents were

doing, and I guess as I came back -- and always whenever I would travel they're always looking at other cities, what did they have new that we don't have, go to different restaurants. Of course the major cities, New York has tons of kosher restaurants. And Florida, you know, Miami. Philadelphia has some where my aunt lives. So I thought just looking around like what does New Orleans -- it looks like New Orleans definitely had a void of kosher food. So that's when I -- kind of a light bulb went off about this might be something to start. And I did, I think it was like December of 1987, there was the first kosher food show in Miami. I went there for a week, and I had a good friend of mine's parents live there. I went and I stayed with them. And I went to this kosher food show and just started making contacts with different people. Empire, the kosher chicken company, and Best's Kosher Deli out of Chicago. Started making these contacts, putting things together. I think I was 19 at the time, and some people -- really I started out of my mother's house is where I started. Bringing in small orders. I bought a few chest freezers and I had a little shelving. She had a little solarium in the back of the house. And it was a small group of people who I knew that kept kosher. And I just started bringing in a few new products or making it easier for people who might have had to order stuff from out of town. Might have done that for six months, I can't remember exactly how long, out of her house. It's even harder to remember people coming over to the house to buy. But I've been in business, it's been 20 years now, and I saw, you know, as each month went by possibly a retail location was in the near future. A friend of mine owned a building, the one back on North Hullen Street. It's a quadruplex, had four spots, and he had a spot open downstairs. Not the best street that people would pass by and say oh there's a -- but if I put a sign up and people will search out kosher food. If you keep kosher, you'll go the extra mile, you'll travel across town, because you keep kosher and you need that food. So I still thought it would be -- the price was right. He had an opening. And I needed a good -- and he really helped me along. Really good close friend of mine. I went to the electric company. I paid my deposit to turn the electric on. But I got cold feet and I shut it off. And I waited 30 days until I got enough courage

and I just waited a month and then I said OK, I'm going to start this. So I had a small retail location, about 900 square feet. Just groceries. And around that time I met my wife Natalie. Her family had gone to the traditional shul Chevra Tehillim Uptown. And we might have known each other from different Jewish youth events, but never really clicked let's say. We met, were introduced by kids that I went to day school with and Natalie went to high school with. So those were mutual friends of ours, because I had gone away to high school. She had gone to high school here. So some of my friends had graduated day school and then went on to high school, became Natalie's friends, and they introduced us. And we were married. We were married for 17 years. And she, even as we were dating, she started to help me in the business. Taking some of the hours and being here and helping. And I still vividly remember I was representing a really great cake company out of New York with gourmet French kosher cakes. And Federation had asked me to cater a dessert buffet at one of their annual meetings at the Uptown JCC. This was a pretty big event for me. And I thought and I thought and leading up to it and I proposed to my wife that night at the JCC. It was special. If I can -- this is a nice event and I think I can make some money in this, think I'm ready to get married and start a family. So that was a special time I always remember. We got engaged there. And married about a year later. And --

RH: So tell me, do your children go to the Torah Academy or where do they go to school?

JB: I'll tell you, my kids -- well right now -- I'll go back. They started at -- they all started at Gates of Prayer at the nursery school. And we live about six blocks from Gates of Prayer. So it was a great location and we always knew that the day school there, the nursery school was excellent. Yes, it was a Reform shul, and we're Orthodox, but we didn't think that that would be a problem. We were looking for our kids to be taught the basics of Judaism. Yes, when it came to kosher we made sure to send kosher snacks, and again I wanted my kids to interact with Reform kids, with Conservative kids, and be

able to go over to their houses. And if it meant having to bring, you know, kosher food for my kids, they could do that. And it was very nice, even the parents would want -- what can I do to make your child feel -- said you don't need to do any -- we'll send, we didn't want anyone to do anything extra. But it was a nice learning experience for other parents and the kids got along very well. From Gates of Prayer I was pretty instrumental in part of the beginning Board of the New Orleans Jewish Day School. And my kids have gone there. I was also -- I'm very supportive also of Torah Academy. And that is housed in where Lakeshore Day School used to be. It's a very fine school. But we chose for ourselves to send our kids to the New Orleans Jewish Day School. Which the concept at the beginning was to have Reform, Conservative and Orthodox kids together with the priority of having an excellent English education and an excellent Judaic education. And that's exactly the way I was brought up with Reform, Conservative and Orthodox friends and just being a whole part of the community. And we were very happy. I was on the Board for many years. And happy the way things were going. My oldest, Ruth, was in the first graduating class. That was right before Katrina. She got an excellent education, excellent. And my second daughter, Sarah, who's four years younger, was in the school also at the time. Right before when Katrina, that school year, my oldest, Ruth, had started at McGehee, which is an all girls' school Uptown. My two younger children were at the New Orleans Jewish Day School. My youngest coming into kindergarten. And unfortunately the storm hit and that ended, of course, that year of education in New Orleans. But I can tell you --

RH: Well I think this might be a good place to talk about the storm. Why don't you tell me when you first realized Katrina was about to happen, upon us, yes?

JB: Upon us. Yeah sure.

RH: And how you prepared too, because you had to prepare your home and your business.

JB: Sure, absolutely. I can tell you we're always vigilant of course in this area, watching for hurricanes. Always watching what's brewing in the Gulf. We'd had a little -- I think exactly the year before there was another hurricane that was coming, which finally turned at the last minute. But we had never evacuated for a hurricane. Watched and ready to go if we needed to, but I know we stayed for that hurricane. But this one as we started seeing was tremendous, as we all know. 100 miles wide, possibly Category Five. Wherever it came on land, New Orleans was going to be in its path. We keep Shabbos, so we don't watch TV or listen to the radio. So leading into Shabbos we knew that it was brewing on that Friday. Saturday walking home from shul we could already see, we saw people boarding up their houses and getting in their cars and going. We knew right when Shabbos ended. We turned on the TV and we started to see what was upon us. I know evacuations were already going on. And we got together, my personal family, talked to my mother, and my in-laws, my wife's parents and my wife's sister, and family, and we all kind of together decided we're going to definitely evacuate, and where were we going to go. At that point I think the Governor was saying the arteries going west to Houston were jam-packed, no one else go west, go north, and if you go north, go far enough north because the strength of the storm, you know, once it makes landfall then they usually die down, this one is going to still be very strong for many days as it goes across land. So we thought, where we knew Memphis, Tennessee, that's what clicked in our head. Memphis is a pretty close community to New Orleans. I remember some of the Jewish youth groups were kind of in the same region. And we went to different weekends together or they came to New Orleans. I had -- me and my sister both had gone to a Jewish sleep-away camp there. And we had friends. And we also on both of our family sides had cousins in Memphis. So that's what we -- we had decided Saturday night that's what we were going to do. We decided first thing in the morning, of course, we have our business, that we needed -- and I have a lot of glass. A lot of glass frontage that we needed to board up. And I had had boards cut for the first time the year before. So I was pretty prepared, but it's still a long process of -- I was out here with -- I hired a

gentleman to come and we boarded up the store. Boarded up both front and back entrances. Took our computer systems and raised them higher. Took some essential papers and locked everything up and hoped for the best. At the house we also boarded up. I had some sandbags that I was able to get. I put sandbags at the front and back doors. Both the store and the house. No idea what -- maybe this would help. We took basically, you know, packed suitcases for three days. Figuring, you know, it'll come and pass. So we started I guess out around maybe 11:00 in our car. My wife and three kids and our dog, our pug, has been part of the family. And we started out. We started going -- so we're going to head to Memphis. And my sister lives in Jackson, right outside of Jackson. We had the dog. So I called her, Miriam do me a -- as I'm driving, and we're sitting on the Causeway, which usually can take you 25 minutes to get across, it literally took us close to three hours to get across the causeway, bumper to bumper traffic, as everyone saw on TV. It was mind-boggling, the traffic getting out. I called my sister, Miriam, do me a favor, we're going to Memphis, I'm sure we're going to stay in a hotel. Do me a favor, I need to board the dog. Do me -- call around, I know it's on a Sunday, try and find me a place. So she was working on that as we're driving. A horrible unfortunate situation, our dog had a heart attack in the car from the stress of all the evacuation and the storm coming. Pugs always have a nasal or a heavy breathing, and just from getting in the car. He was fine for the first few hours. We were going, we went to a rest stop, got out, had water, plenty of food. He got back in the car, his heart was beating fast, he was around the car on my wife's lap, in the back, he couldn't get comfortable, and he was panting and panting. And I'm just telling Natalie something's wrong, something's definitely wrong. It was just most horrible, in front of the kids, in front of us, he went and laid on my wife's lap and then went down by her feet and just he threw his head back, she was trying to pet him to calm down, she's got -- she says his heart's still beating, and then she took her hand off, his heart stopped beating, and it was just we were all crying tremendously, this was -- for us, and I felt for the kids to have to see this in such a close family pet, and you feel helpless, we're in traffic. If your child is sick you rush to the

hospital, if your pet is sick you'd rush to an animal hospital, we couldn't do anything, we were just -- it was horrible. To start off which later on to be this horrible event, this was the beginning. So I covered our dog Jack with a blanket and we drove, we drove, we were still in traffic. I called my sister, the next call to her, was please find me an animal hospital that -- and I know there are emergency animal hospitals that would take -- that our dog had died. We didn't want to of course just put him on the side of the road, we wanted a proper -- and it was the next few hours as we're sitting inching away in the car were really just heart-wrenching. We met my sister. She called. She found a place. We met at this place and the kids -- I mean, all of us still crying. We went in. The lady even told -- we go into this veterinary hospital and she says we're like the 12th person, they had more than 12 dogs that had died from stress, which was amazing, that's what they had been doing all day unfortunately, was many animals that had passed away with all the -- they could sense just the packing up and in the car. And 12 other. And I had to -- just I couldn't, I had to have one of the technicians go out to the car and take the dog out and I wanted the kids to say their final goodbyes, but he said by that time, it shouldn't be their last glimpse of their dog to see the position and situation he was in. So we said our goodbyes and remembered the good times, but that was the beginning of a long evacuation. We got back on the road. I'll say my mother evacuated and went to Jackson. She was going to stay with my sister and her husband. And we continued on to Memphis. Lo and behold, the storm like they said, it went straight up and hit Jackson too. And they were without power for two weeks. So I know my mother and my sister, they were jockeying around Jackson to different friends. And I have cousins there also, whoever had power. They stayed, they were in Jackson, but they also, you know, were moving around, but it took a good two, two and a half weeks until they got power back at their house. But we continued on to Memphis. Another close friend who I knew in the hotel business, I had his cell number, I called him, said Pace, can you do me a favor, we're coming up to Memphis, can you find me a hotel room in possibly one of your locations. So he called and he called me back and gave me the number. They're

holding a room for you at this hotel. Told him thank you very much. So we had a point of where we were going to. So we arrived, it took close to -- a six-hour drive from here to Memphis, took more 12 to 15 hours. It was we got there in the middle of the night after what we had gone through, and it was just crashing in the hotel. So Monday morning came and we were all really glued to the TV. My family was there. My in-laws and my wife's sister and family. They had gone to some cousins that we had there. They were staying there. Monday we were in Memphis seeing some friends. They have plenty of kosher food available there. So we're able to go to a restaurant there or see friends or go to cousins. But we were like everyone glued to the TV, what's going on, watching what's going on in New Orleans. And I felt very -- I was getting calls from a lot of my friends around the country, Joel, where are you, what are you doing, I mean, everyone around the country, around the world, were seeing what was going on. It was very, a good heart feeling that people were concerned, and I was glad I was able to tell them that we evacuated and were all together. We're safe. I don't know what's going to be after that, but we're safe right now. So that was Monday. And a lot of the New Orleans people, it just so happened a lot of from our congregation, I go to Chabad of Metairie, which is what I call Temple Corridor on West Esplanade, there's three shuls within a mile, a Reform, a Conservative and an Orthodox. So again it's everyone together, everyone gets along, and you get your pick, you get to choose where you'd like to go on a Shabbos or a Yom Tov or holiday. But it seemed like a lot of people from our congregation I guess, just talking, went to Memphis. Because we saw familiar people up there, and as we were all getting together saw a lot of people from our congregation up in Memphis. We got together and were thinking, you know, the kids, we need to start some sort of stabilizing for the kids. So they've got an unbelievable excellent school called the Margolin Hebrew Academy, which is a K through eight Orthodox Jewish day school. They have a girls' high school and they have a boys' high school. It's an amazing community. I'll tell you plenty about. They opened up their arms, not what can we do, they did it, food, clothing, they banded together and it was like an army of people to help. The community opened

up their doors, and I continue today to say it's good feeling, thank God I'm Jewish, the Jewish friends, and even other as we were in Memphis for many months, even the non-Jewish, just people in general were so generous to us in every way. But the Jewish community in particular. I remember at the JCC all the organizations there got together and had all the New Orleans people come, and the head of Federation was speaking from the front, everyone fill out a questionnaire, your name, where are you staying, what do you need, do you need clothing, do you need money, do you need a place to stay, do you need furniture, whatever you need we're here, we're here, and I mean it just kept on pouring in. The support and help. And I can tell you we got there Monday morning in the wee hours of the night. By that Friday right before Shabbos my family, my in-laws, my sister-in-law and her family, we're a total of 11 people, we were in a house, a couple who had moved from Memphis to Detroit had a house for sale, they took the house off the market and opened it up to us to move in. I just can't even start to -- how we could ever repay these people for the kindness that they gave us. Furniture was arriving. They knew wherever people, you know, we were lucky we had a house. Some people, wherever people could stay were staying, with families, apartments, wherever. We were maybe one of the first families. We -- in a beautiful area. The shul, Baron Hirsch Synagogue I could throw a rock at and hit, it was right behind where we were living, a beautiful Jewish neighborhood. We were so thankful. And furniture was showing up. Hotel -- people -- brand new beds. People were saying come to my house, I have this, I have that, what do you need. When Shabbos started we were in a house fully furnished, 11 people, everyone had their own bed, no bunk beds, everyone had a bed. It was a big house too, you think, oh my God, 11 people. With my in-laws and my sister-in-law. One, we get along great together. We're a good close family. It was a gigantic house, it was like 5,000 square feet, probably a house that I would never maybe able to afford, but it was beautiful. And we were so gracious. And as months went on we did work out an agreement to definitely pay these people some rent but we were very gracious at the beginning of opening up their house. And my family ended up staying, the families

ended up staying there for ten months.

RH: Ten months.

JB: We stayed in Memphis.

RH: So tell me what was that first Sabbath like, the week after. What was going on inside of you that Saturday, Friday night?

JB: At shul many people coming up to me who I might have known over the years, very welcoming. Glad to have you here. We've always tried to get you to come open a kosher place here in Memphis. You know, very premature, very premature, but people were coming over and lending support, and that community and that area, the kids, I almost call it like the Jewish ghetto, there's so many Jewish people live in that area, the kids can walk from house to house. So it was very good. The kids had plenty of friends to play with. They were very occupied. School was going well for them. For us we were trying to take it day by day. Of course people ask you questions, what are you going to do, what, I couldn't -- so many things, a thousand thoughts go through your mind. I asked myself also what are we going to do, all we see is what's on TV. Do I have a house? Do I have a business? Is any of New Orleans or Metairie left? What is there, until you can see for -- you can see on TV, which we saw some pretty horrible sights, what all was going on and then with the levees breaking was even worse, it's like it went from bad to worse. Unfortunately for people in areas where the levees broke, they were definitely the hardest hit. I'll tell you what happened to us personally. The store we got two inches of water, at the house we had seven inches of water. The house is a one-story house, so seven inches of water -- or two inches of water, anything from the floor up is ruined. The floors, the walls, all the furniture, everything. You sit back and 17 years of marriage, 39 years of being accumulation of things can be gone in an instant, but those are just things. We definitely thank God that our family was together and alive and well. We know unfortunately other people, some people did not have -- many people

did lose their lives.

RH: When did you first find out about your business and your home?

JB: Think it was the first -- of course as we were watching reports on TV and the main source of information a lot was computer. I'm not computer-literate myself, but we huddled together with other people from New Orleans around computers and as reports started to come out -- Jefferson Parish is opening up on this certain like ten days after the storm, and you have to have proper ID and you have to have a certificate, we were reading hourly things were being updated on when people could come back and what restrictions were, what things being -- nothing available, no water, no electricity, no food, if you're going to come bring everything with you. So we were watching that. And it was four men, four of us decided we were going to come back. We left. We took two cars because we wanted to come back and possibly be able to take items and more cars out. So four of us drove down. We left in the middle of the night maybe around midnight, knowing that there was a curfew we knew from 6:00 p.m. to 6:00 a.m. you couldn't get in the city, and Metairie was the only thing that they were opening up first. New Orleans was many months down the road. So about 4:00 in the morning we get close, maybe 100 miles out, and just parking lot, stop. There are cars for miles and miles just everyone had stopped because way way far up they weren't letting people in the city. So we were like 4:00, 4:30 in the morning we got out. We stretched, looked at the stars, talked to many people out in the pitch black just waiting for daybreak to come. 6:00 came and we're looking, 6:30 comes, and we finally started seeing engines starting up and people starting to slowly creep in. I guess it was about 8:00, 8:30 and the route we had to take was I think going through Baton Rouge and taking I think Airline Highway from Baton Rouge, this two-lane highway, all the way in. And as we were coming in we see the military and the checkpoints and it's just so -- a new phenomenon. What's the next thing that we're going to see? It's like we're driving through a war zone after going through and being checked in. Just driving on Airline Highway and just looking left and right. And

seeing the devastation. Trees, 100-foot trees just pulled up out of the ground with their roots and just pulled up out of the ground. Of course houses with no roofs on them and power lines down all over the place, and I'm thinking is this safe even. They let us back in. As we're driving down, and I see power cords. But I guess they went around and checked, but still I'm sure -- how safe is this for us. And we knew also, we brought gas, we brought like 50 gallons of gas. I had my van. I had my kosher Cajun van. I'll tell you how -- because we went out with my wife's van. And I parked, I left two of my cars here, my car and my store car. My father-in-law's car was parked here also at the store. I'll just go back a little bit. My Rabbi, Rabbi Nemes, stayed through the storm. He's the Chabad Rabbi, Chabad of Metairie. He's got a family I think of eight. And he had a bunch of people at his house. I think it was a convention going on, and said everyone evacuate, and the airports started to close. Jewish people, you know, gosh, the Superdome or the Convention Center, where do we -- you pick up the phone and you call the Chabad Rabbi, his door's always open. So he had I think there were like 15 people at his house. He lives on Lake Villa right a block from Lake Pontchartrain on one side. He's got the Seventh -- a canal right behind him and a canal on West Esplanade. He stayed, he took the Torahs from the shul to his house as the water started to rise. He put them on the second floor. Then he put them up in the attic. I just -- I mean, I've talked to him many times, but still just imagine riding out the storm, and just the water rising, and not knowing what is around you. When will the waters go, we're running out of food, water. A friend of mine, Sam, who had helped me start business with my building, he stayed too with two of his boys, his older boys. Told the Rabbi, Rabbi, if you're staying I'm staying. I want to try and be able to be here and help you if you need, which I think was a tremendously courageous, not sure how smart, but a tremendously courageous thing. Somehow we were able to be in contact, even though people's cell phones were so erratic, working, not working. Periodically be able to get in touch with Sam. He's about half a mile from the store. In this area. We live in the same area. Sam, how are you doing, what's going on? He'd give us live updates. The water's rising. It's not in my

house yet. I've got sandbags around. I've got each boy at each door. We're going to keep the water out. But it kept on rising. And couldn't stop it. We thank -- us in Metairie thank Mr. Broussard for, right or wrong, evacuating the pump operators. And unfortunately no one had the insight to push the button to turn them back on. So most, a lot of us, we feel in Metairie that we flooded because the pumps weren't turned on, not because of the storm with the rising water. The pumps were working. We feel that the water could have been pumped out. But talking to Sam and being very worried of course, not being able to talk to him, and I talked to his wife and some of his younger kids were able to fly out to go to Miami where her family lives. So I talked to Susan, Susan have you heard from Sam, we're trying to update what's going on, we're very -- we're safe and we're worried about friends that we know that stayed, worried about the Rabbi. The storm had passed, got a little more information from Sam. Kind of joked, I talked to him, says the water's going down but I'm not going out yet. Because of course with all the debris from the roofs and nails, didn't want to -- you drive in your car, flat tires. And you want to be able to see what -- if there's water in the street you might still be able to drive in it but you don't know what power lines are there. So he waited. And he waited another day. And I joked. I said Sam, are you waiting for the dove to bring you an olive branch to tell you. He said yes the dove has come, the olive branch, I'm ready to go out. This might have been Tuesday. If it came across Monday. Or might have been Wednesday truthfully, I think Wednesday. Wednesday at some point. He was able to first go over to the Rabbi's house, check on them, and thank God, they were OK. Getting very harrowing with that many people in the house and the water rose I think on the first floor and they moved up to the second floor, thank God he had a two-story house. The water subsided. They had one car. Plus the Rabbi had a big van. Couldn't get the van started. Tried and tried and tried, couldn't get it. Sam said come over. I left him with the keys to my cars and the key to the store. Come, I know where there's kosher food and possibly -- you know, so he brought everyone, packed up, they knew that was the time they got to -- now's the time to get out. They rode through the storm, thank God they're

both all alive and safe, it's time to leave. They came here to the store. So I'm talking to Sam, it's like there's no water in here Joel, it's like oh my God I was like, I was elated like are you serious, are you sure, are you just telling me that, said I'm telling you I'm standing in the store, there's no water in here. So I was kind of happy at the time. Said are the windows broken, some boards have fallen off, but your -- it's OK. Of course they were able to get whatever food they wanted, whatever refrigerated stuff was still available that wasn't -- take or whatever dry goods. So they took stuff in the van and they were able to get my van started. And it's a little miracle. I'm glad the Rabbi was able to drive out using my second car. And we all waited. We knew they were driving and coming up to Memphis. He was going to come up to Memphis. And then eventually try and go from Memphis to New York where he and his wife's family lives. We were all his congregation, was waiting, waiting, waiting for him to arrive. Because we -- very close to him, and our spiritual leader. He even had some instances I think on the way. Of course there was -- very hard to get gas. And on the way up pulled into a gas station. Had all these people. And there were lines. And fights started breaking out, people I need gas, I need gas, think the police came and shut down the gas station. I think they had run out of gas. They were waiting for a tanker to come. A lady comes up to the Rabbi, non-Jewish lady, Rabbi, I see you and your family. Leave your cars here in line. Come to my house. You shouldn't be -- she sees the situation going on. You shouldn't be out here. Please come. I have beds, food. Well, I keep kosher. Don't worry about it, whatever you need, we'll go to Wal-Mart 24 hours, we'll go get you food. It's another great compassionate story that this lady helped them. And then they were back in line the next morning. They got their gas. But just a gracious heart, an innocent bystander wanting to help these people. But we were all waiting. We went to the Chabad Rabbi's house in Memphis and we knew Rabbi Nemes was on his way. And they pulled up. I saw my white refrigerated van. It was a good sight to see, and his whole family got out. We were just -- we cried, we were just all joyfully crying that they got out safe. And kinda the congregation was back together in some sort. A lot of the families were together. And we sat around

talking for hours, hours and hours, just talking amongst ourselves, how are you doing, how are you doing, what are you planning, and we were all just trying to lean on each other at the time. I remember that.

RH: OK, we're going to wrap up this tape and move on to the next tape.

JB: OK.

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RH: And this is for Katrina's Jewish Voices. So Joel, you were talking about being with your community, kind of regathered, reformed in Memphis, and what did you do there together?

JB: It was good to see familiar faces. To see people, of course on TV, where are people, where are people, and cell phones were not available. So it was a joyous like seeing a family member, a brother or sister who lives out of town and you saw a familiar -- you know, not just a regular hello, a hug and a kiss, good to see you, and just really the week or the two -- first few weeks in a grocery store or in the shopping center oh my goodness, you see a familiar face from New Orleans. And you let your mind a little more at ease, this person's OK, then you start to think what about another person. But we continued to get together and stay in touch with each other. We all had agreed definitely at the beginning to put the kids in the Jewish day school there, which was amazing. Again, to thank the Memphis community. They took in over 30 kids. Jewish education is not cheap. They took these kids in, our kids. No tuition. Provided us with books, supplies, the kosher meal program. It was just whatever was needed was given to us.

RH: How did your community -- did you create a little Chabad community within the Memphis community because you -- there were a number of you there?

JB: Not really. A lot of us lived close -- in Baron Hirsch Synagogue, which is a large Orthodox synagogue in Memphis, I'd probably say most of us, the Chabad Rabbi, Rabbi Klein, lives further away, and Sabbath-observant people who don't drive you need to live close or stay close to shul if you're going to walk to shul. It's like how it is here. The nucleus is the shul and people buy their houses around the shul. But in that area I think Rabbi Nemes might have stayed with Rabbi Klein for the first Shabbos but I think most of the rest of our congregation stayed around the Baron Hirsch Synagogue area. And that's I think, over the many months, that's where a lot of families became very comfortable as their new congregation for the time being.

RH: How did you stay in touch with friends and such as that?

JB: As we'd meet we started a call list. Everyone passed around a pad of paper, write your name, write your number, where you're staying so we can all be in touch. And everyone was passing out email addresses. So everyone could be in touch. If there was an email that everyone could get it. So everyone could be up to date. Wouldn't lose sight of -- no one would fall through the cracks. We wanted to make sure that we stuck together and wherever people were in certain circumstances if we could help each other and just to see if we knew anything new in New Orleans, what was going on, if people were -- one thing, were people making the drive down there, did you want a ride, could I go with you, could you help me do this. So we definitely wanted to stay in touch with each other to help each other as much as we were close here in New Orleans, we wanted to stay close in Memphis. And as the weeks went on people -- a good amount of people stayed but some other people went further where they had family. Some people went up to New York, some people -- wherever other family was. If they weren't necessarily like in a permanent place in Memphis they might -- moved on, because we still could not make any definitive future plans, I don't think anyone could. So many things were --

RH: So what was that like, trying to live in such an uncertain space?

JB: It was very tough. Not knowing -- again do I have a house, do I have a business, how will I support my family, where do you begin when you have -- and we're talking material. Thank God we had our family, but where do you begin when you have nothing? Should I go look for a job? Do I start something and we're going back in a month? What do we do? We were in limbo. We were really in limbo. I don't take too many vacations. This was definitely no vacation. But looking back on it, gosh, I had two, three months of no work. Wasn't a vacation but I could have almost used it. But we were really in limbo. Thank God we got the kids on track. They were taken care of and their lives were back on track and it was an amazing year for them. What they learned and the friends that they made will go on with them for a whole lifetime. And even now we're over a year past, and we've made -- even with the family moving back, and I'll tell you about that, but moving back to New Orleans we've gone many times, just today I just got back from Memphis. We went up for a wedding. We've gone up for kids' bat mitzvahs.

RH: So these are new friends really.

JB: New friends that will be lifelong friends. Some of my kids' friends have come down to New Orleans to stay for a few days and visit. And they've had really really great times together. And they stay in touch, talk on the phone, on the computer. And they make plans of the next time. Not see you next year or whenever. And I see them even making sure my kids stay in touch with these other kids. It's every few months. Maybe they'll miss a day of school and we'll go up for a Shabbos. That's our little vacations, we go somewhere and drive up before Shabbos, be there over Shabbos, over a Sunday, and be back for school on Monday. But I really think it's very important, and the kids have had a great experience in their school year in Memphis.

RH: So when did you find out that you had water damage and --

JB: So that first time when we came back we pulled up in the back parking lot and I saw my signs were smashed all over. Pieces there, pieces gone. There was tremendous debris all over the parking lot. I walked up to the door and just so many things going through my mind, please, what am I going to see, what am I going to see. I opened up the door and of course the most horrendous smell. Being in the food business and having a fully stocked store and no power for a minimum of ten days things were -- it was overpowering, the smell, rancid meat and chicken and fish. It was the store -- things had not -- when I came in there was no water in here. I almost could not tell that there had been water. Because there weren't lines on the wall like some other people had seen, lines on their walls from water. I guess I have a two- or three-inch rubber molding that goes around and I'm thinking that the water might have just gotten a few inches, got up to the molding, and the water went out when things did start pumping out. Walked in, I could tell some things had fallen over. Some displays that if water got under it they fell over, gefilte fish, I had smelly broken jars of gefilte fish all over the floor. And I had -- OK we had masks on. We all got shots before we left Memphis for whatever disease they were -- might be picked up. We did that, but I thought OK I see this on the floor. If I can clean this up the smell will be better. I had big plans when I came. I'm talking to my father-in-law, because we stuck together, like OK we'll be here for two days, we'll go in the store, I'll go door by door with the garbage can rolling, I'll put stuff in and bring it out to the dumpster. One door at a time and we'll get the stuff out. I started on the gefilte fish on the floor. After scooping up and sweeping, and no water, no water to clean with, I got all that out, smell of course was still there. I ventured over to the freezers, which were just -- the doors were ready to bust open. I could see the packages of food just had expanded and were ready to pop. I think I opened the door a crack, I shut it fast, and I got sick. Had to run outside and get fresh air. I turned to my father-in-law, I said this is -- we can't -- this is it. Let me look around the -- let me get some essentials. Thank God the store was in pretty good shape. It was standing. I had a business that was standing. The main thing was all the spoiled food. I guess I could see what maybe the first to let

me know that I had water, I did see some mold growing up one of the walls. But it wasn't devastating, it wasn't -- it was yeah definitely devastating to see, but you know what, you say two inches, oh, what's two inches. Of course it's still probably calculating overall about \$300,000 worth of damage is what we estimate everything. Thank God I had good people who taught me some good business sense. I had insurance, thank God. Both flood insurance and commercial insurance. Some business interruption insurance. Thank God today I can say my store is back, built up. We still have some things to talk over with the insurance company, we're not done, but I'm thank God very satisfied. I know it's very very rough dealing with the insurance companies. It's a hard process. But we saw what was here. I took some memorabilia that I had here. We're thinking what's going to be if we would possibly be looted later on. We didn't know what would be, there are no police out, and what would be, but tried to take some important papers with me, and just locked the doors up and went on to our houses. That was the next. Went with my father-in-law first to his house. About two miles away. Back towards New Orleans but in Metairie. We drove down his street and again looking left to right just devastation all the way through. He goes to his front door, puts in the key, the key turns and unlocks, but the door won't push open. We're pushing and pushing, the both of us, won't budge. Goes around to a side door, fumbling, do I have the key, I never use this door, do I have the key to this door, finally finds the key, we're able to go in through the garage. The stench had already -- they had a little less than two feet of water in their house. They have a one-story house too. So the smell of the wet carpet, the dampness, the mold, the food spoilage also. It was just -- we come around to the front, it's like why won't the door open, the hardwood floor had just buckled up and made a brick, you couldn't open that door. All the hardwood floor had just buckled all up, there was nothing, we were like crunching as we walked. Said OK Norman let's see what we can do. We got to get this wet carpet, thinking what can we do, to start the cleanup. Said let's start one room. We started moving furniture. We're sweating and huffing. We had some cold water but we definitely didn't bring enough we soon found out. That was gone very early. After we

finished moving furniture out of one room and had our knives and started cutting the first bit of carpet we go this is too much. We can't do this. The two of us, we need -- at some point we need professionals to -- Norman, I'm here, let's go through the house room by room, gather essentials, pictures on the wall, memory's sake, old pictures of good times and pictures of family. Let's get that. We did that, probably spent an hour, and again we just went back out the door, locked it up. Next stop was my house. Drove. I remember driving down West Esplanade towards my house. Was a bright sunny beautiful day but quiet, not a sound, there were no birds, just like time had stopped. You'd see one car, just might have been a holiday, maybe Christmas Day and no one around. Drove down my street, maneuvering around, pulled up at the house. I probably said please God a hundred times. I put the key in the door, please God, maybe I'd be spared, open the door, and of course the devastation that I saw, I could smell, I could see my hardwood floor also had buckled, mold growing up the walls. We had no power, some power had come back to Jefferson Parish. My neighbor's tree fell across my power line. So some people's power had come back on but mine had not. So I open up the door and my worst fears and nightmares came true. I had never been through a hurricane or a flood or -- it was a new horrible experience. My life, my married life, memories just rushing through my head like the house we lived in and our kids grew up in and it's material things but it was of course I broke down crying. I called my wife, was able to get through, and just we cried both on the phone. It was -- and I told her what I saw, I told her about the store, and my father-in-law, we had decided, both of us, he had gotten his essentials. I said I'm going to do -- we cannot physically do, I'm going to go also room to room. My kids made -- each of my kids made a list and gave me, Daddy, could you please -- could you get me this out of my room, could you get me this out of my room, could you get me this book, this toy, these shoes I left behind, so I went room to room also taking family portrait pictures off the walls. I went to each of the kids' rooms and starting with their list trying to fill them as much as I could with things that were not ruined. I told my kids when I got back whoever had a clean room with nothing on the floor did good. Whoever had a

dirty, a messy room, will teach you to clean, put things in their place. One of my daughters -- not, of course shoes can be on the floor in the closet, one of my daughters was lucky, she had her shoes on a hanging rack. A lot of their things. I was able to take a lot of clothes. Of course if there were two racks, the bottom rack all the clothes were moldy, smelly, wet. The carpet of course walking through the house, sloshing in wet carpet, there was no water in the house -- the water had gone out, no standing water. I filled their list as much as I could. Even some things I thought let me -- I have plenty of garbage bags. That was the suitcase of choice, garbage bags, heavy-duty garbage bags. Even I'd find something, this Gameboy can possibly be saved or this let's see. You just got to wipe it off. Of course being waterlogged, what you can't see. But I do remember getting back, driving back to Memphis, and walking in. It was like it was Hanukkah time, it really was, or a birthday, the kids were elated with each of their garbage bags filled with dolls, teddy bears, a lot of their clothing. They'd had nice but borrowed, possibly new clothes, some used, they had some of their own. They were very happy. It was -- just thinking they're happy with those things. I was just thinking of all the things that they lost. They didn't say well you didn't bring me this, you didn't bring me that. They were elated with what they did get. They fared very well through this I do have to say. They fared very well. But my father-in-law and I decided, you know, we were going to stay for two days. When that 6:00 p.m. curfew first day come we're getting out. We just got the essentials that we were able to get and knew that's all we could do now. We'll have to regroup and make another plan. The many many many trips back and forth, I think I could drive the 400 miles in my sleep, went back so many times. But it was hard that first time getting back to Memphis and talking to my wife and just --

RH: What did you talk about in the car after -- on the way back to Memphis, you and your father-in-law? Do you remember?

JB: There were many times of silence, just wondering in our heads. There were times of agreeing with did you see that, can you believe that tree that we saw -- can you just

believe that we were just reminiscing the day that we had. But for the most part a pretty quiet drive. Drove a little extra fast. I wanted to get back, I just wanted no tickets but I got back quickly. Just was again the middle of the night, probably got in midnight, 1:00, probably was up, just all of us. The kids were sleeping but the adults were up and we were talking, and what we saw and it was a very sad, sad night. Beginning of many many sad, sad days and just -- because that was the beginning of seeing firsthand for myself what had happened. And then the process of what will the future be. That was very hard for me. I have this business for 20 years, I've worked in this business, I haven't done really anything else, and I'm thinking what am I going to do, how am I going to support my family. Am I marketable? It was -- we always think, we always -- on a day-to-day basis, in good times you think what will the future be and so on, but this was -- I've lost, I've got everything invested in my business, this is my business, me and my wife have over 20 years, thank God, we went from 900 square feet to 1,800 square feet to taking some space upstairs. Our next major expansion was buying this piece of land, adding on, building a brand new building, 3,000 square feet connecting. This was something we did it piece by piece, the two of us. We did it with money we had. If I had money I bought another freezer, and I just did with what I had. When I had more money I bought another freezer. That I think is part, I think a part of our success. I didn't go to business school. I asked a lot of questions, had a lot of good advice from friends and family. Think some people who might invest a lot of money up front and don't see a return right away, many businesses fail. Thank God I could always I guess go to sleep. I own every piece of -- I own it, I don't owe any money. Yes, when I did my major expansion, that's when I -- my second marriage to the bank. We did. But we were really in a, thank God, a good position, business was going well. Also I was thinking back, the storm, I had just -- we had done this expansion out probably six or seven years ago, things were going well. I had just six months earlier refinanced my loan. Things were going good, great. A better interest rate for shorter years, and things were -- and then everything just, it's like time stopped. And when -- people that you -- in Memphis or

friends, what are you going to do, it's like the questions, it's like I wasn't rude, but like please stop asking me, I don't know what I'm going to do. In my position I had a building that was standing, the structure was standing, yes I had some damage, but around me there's no people. What -- you know, I had a unique situation. Some people their house is blown away, you know what to do next, either you rebuild or you move on. I had a building that was standing. I had a mortgage on the building. How am I going to pay that note with no income? So that was going through my mind for the next beginning month, two months. We had Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur and Sukkot were all right after Katrina in that September and October. So it was hard to -- as many trips going back and forth and back and forth, it was hard to get started on the rebuild. I think when my mother came back her first time she was leaving out also, we can't do anymore. It just happened to be someone across the street said what y'all doing, we're trying to pull the carpet out, says I'm in the -- my son and daughter-in-law live right here, I came over to help them. I'm in the flooring business and carpet business. We're getting started into work. She said here's my key, go right ahead, she called me, I got on the phone, so thank God we -- to minimize the damage within I'd have to say two weeks or less we had our houses gutted, all the flooring out, four-foot sheetrock cut, the things that we couldn't do were done. I asked this gentleman on the phone I've got a business a few blocks away, can you -- said the main thing is the smelly food, he says I really -- that's not my -- but he goes wait, there's a company, a truck drove by with a phone number that he gave me. People were already here. Two and three days after the storm there were companies from around the country who the mold remediation business or contractors or these people I guess they -- Florida keeps them very busy. And I was able to get in contact with a company and the work had begun. We were very lucky to get contractors to start and to minimize the damage and to start. Two of my main employees, I had like ten employees, we also when -- we exchanged phone numbers and we wanted to stay in touch. For a period we did and then as phone contact started not being available and some of my employees had moved from city to city. We lost track. I think I can say now

everyone thank God is alive, most of them are in other cities. But some were totally devastated. Everything they owned if they lived in New Orleans. And some of the lower hit areas were really devastated. But my manager Mary and my head cook Janice, Mary had come up to Memphis, think she has some family or her husband has family, and they were up there. Her husband was one of the people who drove down with us the first time so he could go see their house. And thank God their house was OK. But he was able to take one of my cars also and drive out. But as Mary and Janice again also making trips back and forth, I'd say they were the thrust that really kicked me in the butt and said come on, two months, we're ready to get back to work, we're ready. Come on, Joel, and I'd been back and forth. But they had come back and they were in here themselves overseeing some of the cleanup, cleaning themselves. The freezers where a lot of our main -- the company came in, they did it. My employees did it again with bleach and cleaning. And every remedy you could think they tried and they cleaned, and they were working. With the holidays and Yom Tov and Shabbos was hard for me to be here until the holidays were over. But one of my last trips coming back and forth I remember -- I do wholesale business and I sell to some grocery stores. I'd come back and went to Dorignac's which is one of my main accounts. I went there, the store was open, I went to their manager and said I'm back, I'm standing, my business is not open, but would you like to be restocked. A definitive yes, right away. So I started -- my business in my head started to roll again. I'm a salesman and I started to sell. I wrote an order for them. I called another few people, a few people. So if anyone in Memphis wanted anything that I could bring back. So what I did was of course I had no refrigeration here. So from the orders I got I was able to place orders from my suppliers in New York. They would have a truck come down and not meet me here but meet me at the grocery store. And most of the stuff's going there, so that's the place to unload rather than coming here, because I had no -- so that was -- and Mary met me and Janice and Janice's daughter and Mary's husband, 6:00 a.m. in the morning waiting for that truck to show up. We worked -- it was a long, it was a good long day. It was on a Thursday. We worked from morning till

evening stocking.

RH: Was it October? November? Do you --

JB: Think towards the end of October, towards the end of October. I was kind of feeling a little better. Let's see. I started to look around and see. Restaurants were doing very well. Places to eat, people needed food. And so many places were devastated, of course help was hard to -- essentials, we all know, my stuff mostly came in from out of town. So suppliers locally weren't -- I was able to bring in my product from out of town. So the ball started rolling just a little -- we worked that day and some of Friday and then I knew I was driving back. Thanked them. They're so loyal, such good, good great employees. No one could ever ask for anyone as loyal. The business is like it's theirs. They care. When they go home they care what goes on in the middle of the night or if that door is ready to open the next morning. Thank God I was able to continue to pay them through that time and knew they definitely deserved it and hopefully in some way insurance would kick in and so on. But on that ride back I remember that Friday drove back to Memphis, got there right before Shabbos, and I was exhausted, absolutely exhausted from the excitement when I left Memphis to getting back to New Orleans to doing, and then getting back. Went to shul, we ate, went to sleep, and 2:30 in the morning on Shabbos, I wake my wife up, Natalie I don't feel good, pains in my chest, my left arm was numb. Something I had never, it's like I've heard, is this a heart attack or stroke? Just let me get up and just walk around. After ten, 15 minutes taking aspirin, Tylenol she says we're going to the hospital. She woke her sister up and told her that we're leaving, she rushed me to the hospital, checked into the emergency room, Baptist Hospital in Memphis, they took some tests and things didn't look -- something was puzzling to the doctors, they wanted to do -- can't remember the name of the surgery, but they did a surgery where they --

RH: Angioplasty or --

JB: Where they cut my thigh, they sent a tube up to my heart to see if there was any blockage. And at that time if there was they could do angioplasty I think. And thank God there was no blockage, but this came, the tests came back with some irregularities and I was in the hospital for probably three days, four days, and not a definitive determination, but definitely a stress-related mild possible I don't want to call it a heart attack but doctor told me you need a -- and this was I was ready to -- like I had a date, I was only going to be in Memphis another few days. We had decided I was going to move back to New Orleans and the holidays were over and the next 30 days would be devoted to every single day getting the store back open. Says you need to find a cardiologist and take the stress out or slow down. It's like sure. I heard what he said but of course the situation, of course I've got to watch my health, but I probably didn't slow down but thank God I haven't -- no reoccurrences, but that was a very scary scary time. But I did come back right at the end of October, and for the next 30 days from morning to evening I was here with Janice and Mary and we pushed the contractors and we pushed the workers every day. Why did only two guys show up? Where are the ten guys that were supposed to be? Up to the point when I did have to back up because I thought I might cause myself, because I was getting so worked up. But I was still very lucky to be able to open the week before Thanksgiving, and thank God, business at the beginning was tremendous. We were three out of ten people doing the work of 15 people because we were one of the few restaurants that were open, and we were mobbed, it was really -- we like, we thought is it Passover, because Passover time is just wall-to-wall people, it was a good, good feeling. I missed my family tremendously. That was the hardest thing. Leaving and I told my wife and kids of course I'll see you but I don't know when I'm going to see you because I'm open six days, the seventh day is Shabbos, I don't travel, so it was really hard. I spoke to them every day, each of the kids before they went to sleep. Probably spent, probably, looking back, more time, precious time with my kids on the phone than I might have on any given regular. I come home late from work, they're doing their homework, hello, hello, go to sleep. But I made a point, they made a point before

they went to sleep we spoke. And that was a good connection. I missed them tremendously. Being very lonely. Trying of course different times whenever I could steal a day to possibly -- literally for a birthday drive up for six hours, stay for a one-hour birthday and drive six hours back. But it was -- I'd do it again, it's so worth it. But I was able to do that, but we definitely take for granted, that's for sure, what we have until we don't have it if it's family close to you or material things that you have and then you don't. But in the long run, the store, the house, I try and put a positive spin on after. Thank God the store is built back, business is pretty close back to what it was. In a different sense we know we've lost a good 35% of the Jewish community. And those people of course will buy certain things that other people might not. We shifted gears. I might have a different kind of mix of what I -- mix of what I had I sold, but we've been very busy, and I've definitely seen a growth. And I'm very satisfied that we're back to where we were and moving forward, and so many new people that found us right after the storm and continue to come, and new people, and we've had so many groups that have come down to clean and to help. Many many Jewish groups, groups of 20, 30, 50, they keep kosher, they need kosher food, we're the place they call. And those were also people that we couldn't thank enough for what they were doing, taking their vacation time, their own resources, bringing gifts, Hanukkah time there was a group, think the Ramaz High School group that came with 30 to 40 kids and some advisors, they brought -- the Headmaster wanted to ask how old are your kids. Brought presents for my kids. I think it was -- might have been Sunday night, the first night of Hanukkah. To be here in the store, 60 to 70 people all lighting a big menorah, singing and it was a great, great feeling. A great time to be able to one, the family came down, they took the train down, that was something they -- no, of course, my wife didn't want to drive, that's a tough ride for a lady, and safety. They like the train and they use that many times going up and back. So they got to come down on the train a few times, which was very nice. Whenever my wife could get away for a few days would come down and it was great, it was really great spending time. But the house, thank God, I said Natalie, take it as an

opportunity, we got a brand new house. The brick was fine, got new floors, all new furniture. The kids got to -- it was fun -- pick out your furniture, pick the colors of the walls. One picked pink, one got yellow and one picked blue. If that's the colors you want. Natalie, you got a brand new house, you can pick whatever you want. Up to a certain number that the insurance will pay. But we did OK, thank God, and we're happy. Family moved back when school ended. That was our plan, in June. The kids went, and again programs that places around the country were helping kids go to camp, Jewish camps. My oldest daughter went out West to called Achva West, which is part of the Young Israel movement, a bus tour for two months around the West, which was another amazing trip that she'll never forget with the friends she met. My second daughter stayed in Memphis and went to Camp Darom, which is a camp that I went to growing up, which was really nice. She'll make the same great friends that I did, that I in times of need I was able to call on, in Memphis. My youngest, when school ended and waited another week or two till camp started for my second daughter, and then it was great, the moving van showed up at the house up in Memphis, they packed up three families, my wife had bought like -- bought the furniture up in Memphis, they loaded it, and came down, went from house to house. Here's yours, my mother-in-law and father-in-law, my sister-in-law, and to our house. And started the beginning of the family together rebuilding together.

RH: Been through quite an amazing year, and I'm thinking I want to know what your thoughts are at the end of this on the other side of just this portion of it, of your understanding of home. What does home mean to you?

JB: Think growing up, knowing the Jewish home is the basis, the home is the base of what we live around. Keeping a kosher home, eating together, celebrating the Sabbath every week, being able to bless my kids every Friday night, singing Sabbath songs, the blessing to your wife. I remember nice times at my parents' house having guests over, and I too, I might work late and not get to eat with the family during the week sometimes, but every Friday night in our home we're all there. And every holiday. That is definitely

our basis. And I've told people about it and we have people come over. They really -- you know, I need to try that. It looks good. It looks -- it's a joyous time and they see, I tell them I'm telling you thank God for Shabbos or I'd be working on that day too. God definitely put it there for a reason, to rest, regroup, be with your family, and through the whole ordeal definitely learn how special it is to have close family, friends, people you can count on, and will never ever take for granted what you have today. Because we saw in an instant you can lose it all.

RH: Do you have for yourself any priorities that are different now?

JB: Not missing -- definitely not missing, trying to be at as many functions with the kids, if it has to be school, sometimes I might be late showing up to a birthday party, but making it a priority to -- family is definitely first. The business is what supplies income to sustain the family, but definitely being closer together. I've definitely learned about helping people, other people, that a sense that we got so much help, people say oh I know if we were in the same situation you would do for us. I've really -- I want to be able to give back and help. And I've tried I think over the past year as things got better for me. I've tried to give more charity to people less fortunate. Helping either through Federation or through people personally, helping people along. One thing I'll tell you that I'm very proud of, something I started with Rabbi Nemes and another lady at our shul, when I came back late October I was here by myself. Again we talked about Shabbos. I'm not going to cook for myself on Shabbos, was nice, I was staying with my brother-in-law, my father-in-law was also there, the three men came back. But we weren't going to -- Shabbos meal. And the shul was very important to me, I'm the Gabbai at Chabad of Metairie, and I say Rabbi Nemes, we need ten men to make a minyan. We put together a kiddush fund and we put together, I call around to get people, would you like to come to shul, we're going to have Friday night dinner and Saturday lunch. Davening starts, prayers start at this time, and an hour later we have a full meal. Since the end of October till present we haven't missed a week. We have fed thousands of meals. Every Friday

night we probably average 60 to 70 people. New people, any congregation, come to -- and again it's the family, it's the shul pre-Katrina with some different people, but it's building the family back, and it's religious, not religious, come back next week or not, people know. People know in the city Chabad of Metairie every Friday night full dinner, not just chicken and potatoes but matzo ball soup every Friday night, salad, I'll give you part of the menu, gefilte fish, and a main course, chicken or meat, turkey, vegetable, starch and great desserts. And this Kiddush fund, it sustained itself, people donate to it. Something that I've given is I'm heading this Kiddush Fund. I use my resources that I have here. Able to buy the essentials wholesale and my staff cooks part of the menu every week. We make -- I make a menu with another person I'm working with. She takes some of the stuff, I take some of the stuff. She does some of the shopping, I do some of the shopping. And that's something that I'm very proud that I've been able to give back to our community.

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RH: -- Joel Brown for Katrina's Jewish Voices.

JB: I was telling you about the Kiddush Fund that we had set up and just the joy in seeing people every week. People who were lonely, by themselves, who might not have a place to -- they might not go to shul. But they come to shul, they have a place to eat, a meal, friends to be with, people to be with, just making new friends, it's like building the congregation. And Rabbi Nemes and his wife are -- came here years ago devoted in their work to building a community in Metairie. And I think they've taught a lot of us, some of the congregants, and have really -- like they used to do -- the Rabbi would open his house up. He'd have probably 15, 20 people to dinner on a regular Friday night. Services were over, do you have a place to go, come out. But now the shul, the beautiful Gerson Katz Chabad Center where we daven at, which got hit by the storm also, which thank God is totally rebuilt, we just had a rededication about a month ago, a joyous time,

it's really good that the shul is rebuilding and meeting new people all the time. We got a nice Israeli contingency that has come to New Orleans that I've personally become friends with some of the young gentlemen. Some of the boys came from California in the mold remediation business. They came and that's their work, and they started working, and of course at the time when there was nothing around, searching for a place for Shabbos. Whether they were religious or not, they might drive there or not, but looking for a place, looking for other Jewish people, looking for kosher food. And the connection started and these boys started and I think business was good for them and some more friends have come, and some of their girlfriends have come to meet them, and there's almost like a small -- there's a small group, and I'd say we do like every Friday night, we look around, there's a new Israeli, a new Israeli has come. I just remember we just finished the holiday of Sukkot and Simchat Torah, which is a joyous time of the festival of eating outside. We had a sukkah, which was donated by someone, a gigantic sukkah at the shul. We probably seated 60 people inside. Tight but we fit them in. And there were tables inside if there wasn't room. But it was -- you know, to have everyone there singing songs in the sukkah. And in the last days, Simchat Torah, when we finished reading the Five Books of Moses and we danced, remember Saturday night, Simchat Torah, dancing with the Torahs for hours and hours inside. Then we went outside in the parking lot and just thanking God for giving us the Torah and being part of living a Jewish life and the Israeli boys just added such a great aspect. They're dancing and teaching new songs, some of the boys have -- with our Kiddush Fund a few times the boys have cooked. We're going to do the -- we'll supply the supplies and they'll make an Israeli menu. That's another thing, people are getting involved, like Thursday night there are four or five, six ladies, some men at the shul helping, cutting up vegetables, whatever. It's every -- a lot of people are pitching in. If it can't be financially it's time. It's special.

RH: So in some ways what are some things that might be better now since the storm? Not that you want to have had it to happen this way, but what do you like about the community now, the Jewish community?

JB: I'm not sure if I would use better. Things are different. We've lost a lot of good friends who have moved to other cities, and still I'll have people come in to say goodbye, that they're leaving. And I just -- a year plus after, people stuck it out as long as they could, and moving on. That's the sad part, but I also see new people moving in. Sort of a business sense, I see when I read the paper, it's the building of a new city. There's tremendous economic possibilities. You can almost possibly mold it the way you'd like it to be, possibly. In the bigger picture people can build certain buildings or not build certain buildings or build certain sections back. I'm seeing as people have left, there are jobs that are available that people are moving in and filling. I see Jewish entrepreneurs that might be buying property and rebuilding. It's an opportunity. And the New Orleans Jewish community might have been at a stagnant point. It's definitely taken many steps backwards with all the people we've lost. Maybe we can even get closer, work closer together, using the resources that are available to the congregations, the schools. New possibilities have opened up and hopefully for the better. It's still going to take I know a long time to rebuild, to replace all the people that have left, but I personally, and I think people, feel a sense of we can really do something, we -- when you're a pioneer at the beginning stages, your efforts are really leaps and bounds. What might on any given day be a small thing. When you're a pioneer, you're really taking big steps and I think a lot of people, some people see that and hopefully more will, and I'm not sure better, but hopefully someday, like some people say, it'll never be the same, but we can hope for better.

RH: You going in any new directions now? Either with business or --

JB: Well, new direction, my children are in a new school. It was a tough decision on where to send the kids. They've always had a Jewish education. That is very important to us, me and my wife. Unfortunately the school situation in New Orleans was also hit with Katrina. There are some schools open. Some with only a few grades. Some of the kids are not of age, because the schools start or stop at a certain age. My oldest

daughter had started McGehee. She was happy there. And so we looked into -- and that's where we did decide we put all three girls. They're at McGehee, which is an all girls' school Uptown. So we now take the trek uptown twice a day. When people would say oh my goodness, I have to come out to Metairie to your store, I said it's not that far. And we're doing, we go the opposite way bringing the kids up there. They're doing very well. We definitely, we see some -- we definitely see a void. They were having Hebrew subjects every day in Jewish day school. We've gotten a tutor or to have some extra classes for my oldest daughter, is learning with Rabbi Nemes. Her and her cousin, who were both in school in Memphis together. And the younger kids we're still working on, but we definitely want to get them some extra Jewish education. We try and do at home, what we can teach them, but that's something that I would really like to be a part of, helping rebuild the Jewish community schools. There are two schools, city's too small. There's some different ideas, but I think I've learned to bridge the gap in my life and being part of this community. I've had some talks with people, and there's the possibility of possibly getting the schools together. That's a --

RH: Do you have a sense of what it might take to get those schools together, besides people like you who really do -- very few bridge both worlds so completely like you.

JB: Without -- people have certain lines drawn, barriers, things, religiosity that they can't and won't and understandably can't cross over, understandably. But there is also the fine line, not sure if the word negotiation is the right word, but they can get I think the Boards of both, and I think with more talking and more discussion that they can get together and make one stronger school. Servicing all the Jewish kids of the community. A great English education, that I think everyone would agree on. The Judaic part is where there might be we'd like -- some kids would like a certain track, the parents would like. Some kids would like a different track. They've talked about I think the possibility of electives. OK, it's time for the Judaic portion of the day. If you'd like to go into Door A that's your curriculum. If you'd like to go into Door B that's your curriculum. And as long as they

meet the school standards and state standards, I think it could work. I think after -- there was discussion at the beginning of the year. But it was shelved. But I think there's as this school year is underway and there may be 20 kids in each school, it's a tremendous financial -- and there has been help but it's not going to be forever. Tremendous strain on just running the school. You still have to do everything but you only have 20 kids. We need to regroup, put our resources together, and rather than two floundering, one strong, hopefully. Hopefully for that possibility.

RH: What are some of your frustrations in the recovery, either Jewish or just in general?

JB: Well I guess in the business sense it's very hard to get help. Help is definitely a very hard thing to do. The pay scale has gone up tremendously. I'm willing to pay, of course, for a good worker. But when you sell a turkey sandwich for \$4.95 it's hard to pay someone \$10 an hour. So there are some frustrations on trying to get good help. I'd say our customer service base around the city, it's not there anymore. People are so in need of everything. Of course building supplies and you'll call for a service, and sure, someone will call you back in 30 days. It's like 30 days. I need to get my car fixed. Sure, you have an appointment in two weeks. But I can't drive my car. We used to be able to bring your -- sure, bring your car in today, I'll see what I can do. Sometimes it's taking twice or three times as long to get somewhere, because of traffic. Longer lines in the retail business because there are less employees to wait on people. Time which is so precious that we've learned from the storm, it's being wasted waiting in line, as the days go by. That's frustrating. Choices. Choices, you don't have ten choices on flavors of ice cream or flooring. This is what's available, do you want it or not? Quickly, got to go to the next person. So that, missing that. Missing the Southern hospitality, which is still there in certain -- but it's tough. In the retail business that I'm in, and I see around town, servicing, giving services to the customer is until we get many more people back into the workforce, which means building a lot more housing far quicker than we've seen, it's going to be, it's going to stay, it's slow, very slow, very slow.

RH: What has being Jewish meant to you during this experience? Has anything changed in --

JB: I'd say at the beginning started questioning God, thought you promised the Jewish people you wouldn't bring another flood, that's what the story of Noah and the Ark and the rainbow was. That was a flood that destroyed the world. But in a smaller sense to us personally this was a flood that devastated our lives. So you question God and we're reminded that God gives us many tests and more tests, and each time we overcome the next test we're stronger. It's life a give and take, give and take, test. But after the questioning you come to the point of thankfulness, thank God every day for what we do have. And for the graciousness of people to help. They say helping a single person is like saving the world. So many people have done that ten times over, a hundred times over. I've just seen the groups that have come down to get dirty, gut houses, come down and bring financial aid, or they come down, what can we do, whatever it is, what can we do. Groups and groups. And that's a good feeling being Jewish.

RH: There any Jewish observances that are more meaningful to you now than prior to Katrina?

JB: Holidays and Shabbos, when we're together as a family, from the ten months that I missed out being with the family. Togetherness each of the holidays are more precious. We a few months ago, I think we were -- it was either the end of August or first week in October -- September, I mean -- we were still of course having the Friday night meals, but we had a family bar mitzvah to go to at Shir Chadash. So we didn't go Friday night to Chabad, we went to services and then we ate at home, and before we started looked at the date, said it's one year to the day or the week that we sat together as a family having Shabbos together in our house and that was just an amazing thing. That weekend happened to be out of every single week that we go, we were home that weekend, the five of us. Looking around the table, sitting at our table, missing the dog. When things

would fall on the floor. But that was special.

RH: Do you remember what your children said about that?

JB: They were just really happy. They were -- it's good to have a home cooked meal or Mommy-made matzo ball soup. So we've been eating meals at the shul. Natalie of course has been helping cooking here, but we have certain set menus that we have every Friday night. We like to take the challah and wrap it in tin foil, have it in the oven, and then when I make the blessing we have hot challah. That's something, there were special things that the kids, that we all started feeling a little normalcy, bringing back good memories.

RH: When you bless your kids, what goes through your mind? What blessings do you most want to impart upon them for the future?

JB: To be safe, good health, true to their faith and their tradition, always treat their fellow friend, fellow person like they would like to be treated. And just remember the kindness that was done for you that you can do that kindness back and be able to to someone else, for someone.

RH: Is there anything else you'd like to add to this interview at this point?

JB: Just I thank you for having the opportunity, thank God I am here to have this opportunity to be able to tell my story.

RH: Well I thank God I'm here too to be on the other side and hear the story. Thank you very much, Joel.

JB: Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

