

# Gail Chalew Transcript

Rosalind Hinton: Okay. All right. This is Rosalind Hinton interviewing Gail Chalew.

Gail Chalew: Chalew.

RH: Chalew, thank you. At 6310 Fountainbleau Drive, in New Orleans, Louisiana. Today is Tuesday, August 15 [2006]. I'm conducting the interview for the Katrina Jewish Voices Project of the Jewish Women's Archive and the Goldring-Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life. Gail, do you agree to be interviewed and understand that the interview will be video recorded?

GC: Yes, I do.

RH: Thank you. Why don't we just begin with your name and where you were born? Tell me a little bit about your family. If you don't mind, give me your age.

GC: Okay. [laughter] My name is Gail Chalew. I'm fifty-four. I grew up in Baltimore and lived there until 1998 with my husband and four kids. And in '98, we moved down to New Orleans. He got a wonderful job offer. He's in academic medicine, and that's the kind of field where you have to move around to get ahead, and we decided to try this. At that point, my oldest was just starting college and had one daughter going into tenth grade, one going into sixth, and one into second grade. We've been here ever since. Now, as I was saying before, three of the girls are away at college or graduate school, and my son is in tenth grade now. I'm a freelance writer and editor, and for five years, I actually edited the Jewish newspaper of New Orleans.

RH: Oh, you did?

GC: Yeah.

RH: Okay. Was your husband at Tulane?

GC: No, he was at LSU [Louisiana State University] and at Children's [Hospital], and he was very fortunate that Children's didn't flood. He kept on getting his paycheck, which was wonderful. He was able to go back to work there pretty immediately.

RH: Now, can you describe the neighborhood here that you're in and even describe your home pre-Katrina? And maybe your attachment to this area?

GC: Well, when we decided to move down from Baltimore, we looked all over. Our main consideration was that we wanted our children to be able to go to Ben Franklin School, which required us to be in Orleans Parish. But even if not that, we would've chosen to live here, as opposed to the suburb of Metairie, because we love the old homes. Each home is different and quirky, and the neighborhood is so diverse. Next door is a house painter, and on the other side of us is an environmental activist. There's physicians, professionals, [and] working-class people as well. As I said, each house is different. We fell in love with our house because the third floor is a completely redone attic space, where every inch is covered by wood, and we were told, though it turns out it was apocryphal, that it was a ship captain who had gotten mahogany from a ship to create this third floor. It turns out that's not true, but it's a good story. He created two bathrooms in the eaves; he used every single inch of space. Each room has a built-in bed, a built-in bookshelf, and a built-in dresser, and is completely paneled. So that was great for our three kids at home, and that's their – they're on the third floor. The second floor is my husband's and my space, and the family's; our kitchen and dining room are there, as the living room. Our first floor, which was, when we bought it, originally a separate apartment, we made into – we combined into our house. On our first floor, we had a pool table, ping pong table. That was also the kids' floor. Our TV room was down there. We had a kitchen that we stored our Passover dishes in and used just for extra storage. But the kids had great parties there. It was really a great party space for them.

That floor is gone now.

RH: So is this area – what is it called? Do you know?

GC: Well, it's officially Marlyville Fontainebleau, but it's close to the – I think Broadmoor starts a few blocks down. We always call it Uptown, though I think officially it's not Uptown. The location is really centrally located and close to my husband's work and downtown, and just everywhere. It just seems like a really good place to be. Yeah, we were really glad that we were able to come back here.

RH: You're saying your kids had great parties. You talked about Ben Franklin. Ben Franklin is now a charter school, but it was at that time, a public magnet school.

GC: Yes, and actually, my second daughter went to NOCCA, which is the New Orleans Center for Creative Arts. She's a visual artist, and maybe later, you can see some of her work. It's all around the house. The combination of NOCCA and Ben Franklin, both free public institutions, was incredible. She got an amazing education, half a day [in] academics and half art. The quality of it was great. All three of my kids are going – two have already graduated from Ben Franklin, and my son is a tenth grader there. In fact, today was his first day of school. Yeah, I mean, people talk about New Orleans having horrible public schools, and I guess, for the most part, it did, but we were very fortunate to be able to take advantage of that.

RH: Why don't you tell me –? Let's move into the Katrina story. You had told me that you were out of town.

GC: Yes. And Katrina, I guess, really snuck up on everybody. I was taking my third daughter, Hannah, to Brandeis. She was a freshman. So, I guess we had left the Thursday before. And really, at that point, I don't even remember – maybe it was in Florida, but it just didn't seem – it wasn't on our radar screen. Then, on Saturday, my husband called, and he and Ari were home here, thinking they had to get away. Actually,

from Boston I made the hotel reservations. I took care of that. So, they drove, and they drove early enough in the day on the Sunday before, so it wasn't a horrific evacuation experience. They went to Memphis, and that Monday, I flew into Memphis, even though, at that point, the hurricane was probably there. It was a terrible flight. But I really wanted to be with them and to do that. But as a result, because we were taking so much stuff for my daughter, I had packed as little as possible for – I had two changes of clothes. I did have a bathing suit because I thought maybe we'd swim in the motel or whatever. So, I had very little clothes. But we were able to – I joined them, and I guess it was Tuesday or Wednesday of that week when it became clear we weren't going back. And we went to – there was no decision. We went right to Baltimore, which is where we had both our family and friends.

RH: So, there was no struggle for decision. Your husband and you felt –?

GC: Yeah, but right, that was very easy. Also, they packed for – my husband's thinking was this was maybe worse than the other times we had evacuated, and they had packed – whereas before they packed three days of clothes, here they packed a week of clothes. But still, it was pretty inadequate.

RH: So, tell me what went through your mind. You were in a motel in Memphis. What were you doing? Were you watching TV?

GC: I couldn't stop watching. But I know it was really bothering my son. So, we tried to limit it a little bit. Yeah, we just kind of – I was just riveted. Yeah, really scared, of course, and then we did go to the library to use the Internet and signed up for FEMA [Federal Emergency Management Agency]. We were in a town outside of Memphis, Millington, and actually, three or four other people at the library were from New Orleans and signing up for FEMA as well.

RH: What was that like? What day was that about? What day did you finally start to do that?

GC: I guess that may have been – that may have been Wednesday, I guess. Yeah. Because we came to Baltimore. No, it must have been Tuesday because we left Wednesday and arrived in Baltimore early Thursday from Memphis. But yeah, it was a feeling of commonality. And then, actually, where we stopped along the way in a little town in Virginia, we came across another evacuee. So, you do feel a bond.

RH: What did it feel like?

GC: Yeah, it felt like – well, it felt great, actually. Someone from home, and we could share the experience. But I guess, in some ways, it reinforced that we were all refugees together.

RH: You said it was hard on your son?

GC: Yeah.

RH: You want to describe that?

GC: Right. He did not like watching. I mean, it really bothered him to see all the people – well, he's very sensitive, and to see the people suffering was – in fact, actually, throughout the first few weeks, he would get mad at us, annoyed with us when we seemed down and upset about the whole thing because he said, “Well, just look at the people in the Superdome. We didn't have to go through any of that.” That's true. We were very fortunate in many ways. But I think the sight of that really affected him. In some ways, it was an adventure, missing school and whatever, but that really was very upsetting.

RH: So, did you feel responsible for any other people?

GC: No, and I'm thankful for that. I mean, it made it a lot easier because we moved down here in '98, but we have no family or anything here. I know if I had had older parents or even young kids, it would've been much [harder]. I mean, just evacuating with a fifteen-year-old was a breeze. He was a big help. He carried a lot of stuff. He was good to be with. I really felt bad for the parents of small kids, particularly for those with aging parents. It was very hard. Also, my husband too, he's a physician, but he wasn't on call. He's in pediatric endocrinology, which does have emergencies, mostly juvenile diabetes, but he didn't have any patient responsibilities, so he was able to leave as well.

RH: Who were you on the phone with those first days? Who were you kind of contacting? Trying to find?

GC: I guess mostly my parents. Stuart's parents, my sister-in-law, brother. Part of the problem is that I realized I didn't have the cell phones of many of my friends. I didn't have them memorized or in my phone, which I since have done that. So, that was so frustrating and scary not being able to get in touch with so many people. Once the Internet came on, that's how we reconnected and got each other's cell phone numbers. So, yeah, it was mainly with family outside of the area.

RH: Were your other kids calling you too?

GC: Oh, yeah. No, I'm glad you reminded me. Naomi, who just came down, was in India at the time, on a semester abroad. And it was very hard for her being so far away and only being able to see limited – it was on CNN or BBC, but not – of course, the coverage here. So, that was very hard, and we were able to talk to her. She had close friends, one who turned out was at Charity with her mom and had a horrific experience. My daughter at Brandeis – it was also very hard because she had just gotten there, and the normal adjustment to college isn't so easy, and to have to deal with this, too – so, she was very teary a lot. That was hard. We spent a lot of time on the phone and helping her through that.

RH: What did you think when you saw the flood waters rising?

GC: Yeah, the flood. Actually, what really scared me were the fires because it just seemed that they were out of control. The fact that there was no water pressure to fight them or firemen to get there, I really worried that the whole city was going to go up. We knew right away that we would get some water because just before we moved in, I knew in the storm of '95, we had gotten water, and that wasn't – I mean, it was upsetting, but that seemed something we could cope with. But the fires and then the total anarchy. I guess it was mainly – I was really angry and then kind of ashamed at how – even though I know people had no other choice how to act than to act what they did. But sometimes, when I see all the looting – I guess I am also really ashamed of the government that they would treat people or not – just utterly neglect them. Even when you saw the people waiting on the interstate, even if someone could've just provided a tarp or some kind of shelter to keep them from the sun and some water or whatever, it really was very shameful, yet I couldn't stop watching, even though I hated it. It was like this push-pull kind of a thing.

RH: So, what kind of resources did you and your husband draw upon for this?

GC: Emotional or financial?

RH: Emotional. Well, both really. –

GC: Right. Well, fortunately, the financial part wasn't a problem. As I said, initially, we had enough money to be able to go to a motel and to incur those expenses. He is a state employee at LSU, and he never stopped getting his paychecks, so that was wonderful. We also had support of family and whatever. Emotionally, I guess we just kept trying to remind ourselves that we were fortunate in so many ways that we did have the resources to escape, and we had each other, and everyone was healthy, and nobody – we didn't lose anyone in the storm. So, we thought a lot about that. I guess I just

personally adapt very easily to things. And sometimes I think too easily. That stood me in really good stead.

RH: So, when you went to Baltimore, where did you stay?

GC: Yeah, we stayed with my – both my parents and in-laws are there. They happen to be in the same condo building even, and they're best friends, which is wonderful. We're very fortunate all four are still around. But they're all old; the youngest is eighty-five. I think they were just so upset by the whole thing. Whereas we'd always stayed with them before, but as they've aged, it's gotten harder. They're basically in one-bedroom apartments. I think the combination of them being so stressed out and us just arriving suddenly wasn't great – I mean, we just were disrupting them so much. So, it was very fortunate that a very good friend of mine – their father had just recently died. That's not the fortunate part, but his condo had not sold, so we were able to move into his condo.

RH: Was it in the same place or a different –?

GC: It was in the same area, same neighborhood. And it was a one-bedroom, which was not great for my son; he slept on the living room sofa. But it was a place. It was our own place, that was the best. My husband ended up – actually, in the middle of September ended up driving back to New Orleans. Children's Hospital was setting up in Baton Rouge, and he was in Baton Rouge until about November, then stayed with friends in the city and moved back here at the end of December. But Ari and I were in our friend's father's condo until December. All along, people had been very generous and kind to me in Baltimore. But I decided to ask for help, and it was very hard. I'm so used to being on the giving end and being fortunate enough to be able to give to others. But we did ask for help. I went to the local Jewish Federation and asked if someone could find us housing. And they did. A leader in the community stepped up and offered us a rent-free apartment, a two-bedroom apartment also in the Pikesville area close to where Ari was going to school. So, we moved there in December until we moved out again in



June. It was great that Ari could have his own room and that he could invite friends over and have a more normal life.

RH: Is that what went into your decision to ask?

GC: Yeah, yeah. It was not a great situation for [Ari]. I mean, being in that condo was better than being with our parents, but it wasn't really a great situation for him.

RH: Tell me about Ari and his school. How did you make those kinds of decisions?

GC: Well, that was also pretty easy. My eldest daughter had graduated from this Jewish high school. That's when we moved to New Orleans, right after her graduation. But we're driving up from Memphis, and at that point, we didn't know really if Stuart had a job anymore. We didn't know quite how much damage our house was getting. But we decided we'd call Beth Tfiloh, which was the school that my daughter had gone to, and the principal said, "Sure, start the next day." No questions asked, and we never paid a cent of tuition. They were just so generous. It was great. We arrived at 10:00 PM Thursday night and finally got a chance to speak more fully to the principal. He called us then. They had a uniform, which is just basically khakis and a polo shirt, but he only had jeans. So the principal said, "Of course, he can wear jeans," but Ari didn't want to do that. He actually borrowed my eighty-nine-year-old father's pants to wear, and he had to double belt them. But he went to school the next day, which was actually their second day of school. But it was great, the principal – we agreed that the sooner he got there, the better. It just so happened this was Friday morning, and every Friday, they have an assembly. This assembly was on Katrina. They showed video images, and they were raising money for the school. Then they introduced Ari, their very own Katrina person. He was so embarrassed. Everyone applauded him, and he got to be very famous in the school. He was the only – he was the Katrina kid. It also helped very much that he's really very good in soccer. And fall was the soccer season, so he was on the JV [junior varsity] team, and he ended up bringing them to victory. They got in the championship,

and then he scored the only goal. So, that was amazing.

RH: Wow.

GC: Yes. [laughter] It was like a storybook ending, particularly because his team in New Orleans was never a winner. So, it was a great experience. But boys and being jocks, and he was just – it really helped him make a lot of friends quickly. So, he had a really good experience. By the end, he was – I guess in January, we had the choice of coming back, [as] Ben Franklin was opening. But frankly, he was having such a good year, and we wanted to – we loved having him in a Jewish high school, so we figured let's take advantage of it. It was hard, obviously, missing my husband, but we felt that it was important to do that.

RH: To give him that experience.

GC: Right. In some ways, I mean there were some unexpected side benefits [such as] being with my parents and Stuart's parents. The reason wasn't great, but they were thrilled. It was good to be with them. I reconnected with old friends. Also, I was writing for the Baltimore Jewish Times, which is a really good, high-quality Jewish paper. I was writing about Katrina and just reporting on things in Baltimore. So, professionally, it was a really good opportunity for me as well ...

RH: Well, in some ways, you made the decision to stay in Baltimore because things were going so well there.

GC: They really were.

RH: Your career.

GC: Yeah.

RH: The school.

GC: The school, yeah. I mean, I hate to say it, but things did go very well, other than the city being destroyed and our family not being reunited. But Stuart came up. We saw each other every two to three weeks. Either he would come up, or somehow we would meet at other places. But we found a way to see each other.

RH: And when you talked about – you mentioned to me the generosity of the Jewish community, and certainly the apartment, the school –

GC: Yeah, the day school. Really, every Jewish organization gave us free membership. We didn't ask for it, but the JCC, our synagogue, gave us High Holiday tickets, which, in Baltimore, you needed the tickets, and they cost a lot of money. Actually, people would always come up to us [and ask] how to help. Well, actually, I did get some clothes for Ari, some blazers and sports jackets. We really didn't feel comfortable accepting clothes from people, but I would ask them to invite us for dinner or Shabbat dinner. We were pretty busy. Almost every week, we would go somewhere else. I mean, we were – because there were so few Katrina people there, we were kind of celebrities in our own way. Everyone was just so eager to hear about it and also so eager to help. We used to joke that we were performing a public service by giving Baltimore people a chance to help or a way to connect to the tragedy, putting a face on it. So, that was our job to do that.

RH: So what was the synagogue?

GC: Chizuk Amuno, which is a Conservative synagogue, where the Jewish day school – another one, a Conservative Jewish day school – was housed. That's where our kids went from kindergarten to eighth grade. Only the ones who – Ari actually left when he was only in first grade, but the others went much farther. So, it was really nice to go back to that. I ended up doing a few speaking things, engagements about Katrina – people, again, were always so eager to hear – and then writing about it as well.

RH: Tell me a little bit about your writing. You said – and you're speaking. Did you come back to the city a couple of times for visits? How did you choose your subject matter?

GC: Right. Well, that's a good point because one of the problems about being in Baltimore was that you only heard the negative things about New Orleans and about all the problems they were having. We decided that our first visit would be over Christmas vacation. Frankly, I was really dreading it. I mean, I was happy to see Stuart, but I really didn't want to come back at all. What really surprised me, what I ended up writing about, was that there were good things about the city. There's still all the bad, but the spirit of the people, people being – the pioneer spirit and the friendliness of everyone. We went to a couple of events in the Jewish community. Well, our synagogue, which here is Shir Chadash, had a Hanukkah party, and it was just so great. Everyone was telling their story and hugging and kissing each other. Then, there was a Hanukkah celebration at Riverwalk. Again, it was wonderful just seeing everyone. There is a sense of excitement, a feeling that you can contribute to building up the city. I compared it to maybe being in Israel, not so much now, but in the early days when you were building a country. So, that kind of surprised me that I would feel those positive things, and I wrote about them and talked about it. We also came down for the first weekend of Mardi Gras. That was President's weekend, and that was a good visit, too. So, I called [and] kept in touch with people. One of the things, which was really neat was I'm in a Rosh Chodesh group, which is a monthly group for – about ten women get together to study and to share things. It has a specific Jewish focus. So, I guess it was – was it October, maybe? I read that there was this website where you could get free conference calls. So we emailed each other, and we got on a conference call. I arranged it for the Rosh Chodesh group. So that was great. It was wonderful.

RH: Lovely. What did you guys talk about?

GC: Yeah, well there were – mainly, we just shared where we were, what kind of experiences we had. There were a lot of tears. Fortunately, everyone had done pretty okay.

RH: Was this part of the group that you were really anxious to find?

GC: Yes, it was. I didn't have anybody, any of the people's numbers. So it was really good to connect. We did it a few times. And then, actually, enough people came back, I guess by January, that they started meeting in person, which was wonderful.

RH: Were there any of your other kids that you – you got Ari settled, but you were more concerned about?

GC: I guess with Hannah, because you know, adjusting to college –

RH: She was the one at Brandeis.

GC: At Brandeis. So yeah, I think she would've done – I mean, it would've been much easier, obviously. So, there were many weepy moments. But actually, they provided a wonderful opportunity for her. They had a teach-in about Katrina, and the Rabbi there happens to be from New Orleans. So, he had gotten all the New Orleans kids together, and then he knew that Hannah was very good in art. So he gave her the opportunity to do an installation at this teach-in, which was so therapeutic. It was, in this museum case, a horizontal one, I guess. She had blown up satellite maps of the picture – of the area and then had done some paintings and then photographs of her friends. She just wanted to do normal things, not the touristy things. So, it was just a lot of her friends who were at Tulane, and them sunbathing, just going around the streets, at parties, or whatever. And then she had trays of water and put the photos in. The water was at different depths. It was just really kind of neat. And then it actually evolved because it was up for about a month. So, by the end, the photos were all blurred and kind of icky, moldy. So, that was really good. And I guess for me too, the writing was very therapeutic for me. Just being

able to write about it really was great.

RH: So, did you kind of connect with some other people in Baltimore who were there?

GC: Yeah, there [was] Paige Nathan, who was a Hillel director, was from – we would get together a couple of times. There weren't really that many people. I know Kitty Greenberg from Newman was there. We ran into her. But no, I mean, just – I really threw myself into my new life.

RH: More so than connecting?

GC: Yeah, yeah.

RH: So, tell me about your first visit back and what you were anxious about. Then, where did you go when you first got here?

GC: Right. Just coming on the plane down and seeing all the blue roofs was really – I guess you came in over Kenner, but there were just a sea of blue roofs. Then, of course, we did – we didn't actually – I still haven't been to the Ninth Ward, but just going through Lakeview doing the disaster tour was very upsetting. Then, initially just seeing this was – even though Stuart had sent millions of photos up –

RH: So, describe this, post-Katrina, your home.

GC: Okay. Well, where the pool table and the ping-pong table was – and then we used to have a shrine to the Orioles on one of the walls and some of the artwork and then our Passover kitchen, and the walls too themselves were beautiful. It was kind of mahogany built-in cabinets. That used to be there, and when you walk in now, it's totally just nothing. We had gotten three and a half feet of water. How many weeks was it? Three to four weeks, it was standing. So, my husband, himself, and some Guatemalans that he had found just gutted it. So now it was just down, the walls are down to the studs and the

concrete floor. Just nothing is there. Again, though, my kids used it for parties. They had a post-apocalyptic New Year's party with extension cords strung like Christmas lights. They also spray-painted. They had a great time spray-painting everywhere – graffiti – because they could. So, there's still all this graffiti around.

RH: So, you stayed here a little while at Christmas time.

GC: Yeah, we were here about – at least a week. I mean, in some ways, it felt – even though it was here, it was like I was on vacation in a way. Each day, we went out to lunch with a different friend. There were a couple of Jewish community events. We went out to dinner a few times. I think my husband was really trying to show me all of the good parts. It ended up being a really good visit. What also made it very special was there was a group from Baltimore, Baltimore volunteers, that had come down, and they actually helped us out at our home. Our first floor was gutted, but the garage still wasn't. So, they ended up – it was like eight or nine people, ranging from teenagers to forties, who chose to spend their Christmas vacation in New Orleans. They threw everything out in the garage, and it was actually their suggestion – we had this little patch of ground in front, which was all dead plants. They decided to dig it all up. That was really the most wonderful thing because I don't think we would've asked. We probably didn't have the energy to do it, but it was so ugly before they did it. It looked so much neater. It just really boosted our morale. So, that was wonderful.

RH: One of the things that struck me when you talk about the ugliness is the brownness of everything because of the murky water. So, I assume your front was very brown, and that's what they dug up.

GC: Yeah, it was shocking too because the nicest thing about New Orleans is that all winter long, it's colors and pretty. Up north, it's ugly in the winter, but this usually wasn't. But yeah, they dug it up, they made it neat, and then actually, later that day, we went with them to another house to help someone else. My son went with them for a couple of

days, actually. We helped remove things from an elderly person's house. What was lovely, the day before we left, it was Shabbat dinner. We had the volunteers over at our house. And there were thirteen, including us. It was actually the first real meal in this house. So that was very exciting, and the first time I had cooked, basically. One of the ways I got through this past year is I didn't – when I was in Baltimore, I just didn't cook. We got prepared food or went out for food. But it was really good to be back in the kitchen to cook a meal. I think they really – it was so good for them to see that normal life goes on. So, that was a really good way to end the trip.

RH: Were you at any time thinking, “I really don't want to come back to this?”

GC: Well, I did before I came back. But then I was ready. Yeah, I said I want to come back. But then again, I went back to Baltimore, and then I began just hearing again all the negatives and just focusing on the hardships of it. Life was very easy in Baltimore. Frankly, I mean, I think if Stuart could've found a position that was good professionally, we probably would've stayed just with the family and all our other connections there. He did look, but there really is not – there was not really any opportunities. So, by June, I wasn't so – I guess I'd been talking about focusing on the negative. My kids were always trying to get me to see all the good things because they really love that. The funniest thing is after [Ray] Nagin was reelected, which I was very shocked by – but anyway, I had forgotten – that Sunday, I'd forgotten to look in the paper. I wasn't online or whatever to listen. They were trying to keep it a secret from me because they knew it would upset me. This is one of my daughters. Anyway, I did find out eventually that he did, which did upset me. So yeah, I really wasn't eager to come back. But being back here, I mean, it feels good. I can't guarantee that we'll be here for the long haul. My husband is semi-looking at other opportunities. Part of the problem is with the staffing there, too; he's lost two of his nurses, and he's not sure if the hospital has the commitment to keep up. He had a whole multi-disciplinary program for diabetes, and whether they're committed to keeping that up – and also, he did research. So, there's a



lot of questions. But for now, it feels good to be here.

RH: So since you've lived this a little [inaudible] in New Orleans. So why don't we talk a little about New Orleans? What, for you, makes New Orleans special or distinctive?

GC: Yeah, well, certainly it is – I mean, the culture, the atmosphere. I think there's a really good balance here between life and work, and people don't take work too seriously or don't let it dominate their lives. I just was always struck at – I used to work in a tall office building in Metairie, and by Friday noon, that parking lot was cleared out. But I think it's good. People know there's more to life than working. The whole sense of making everything a celebration and partying. I mean, I don't drink or anything, but just that sense, the joie de vivre. I guess also, we really love meeting the people. There's so many interesting people here. Everyone has a story. Maybe that was just in Baltimore, where it's very segmented. The Jewish community is completely Jewish. I had no non-Jewish friends there, really. That happened again when I moved back. But here, we have friends from all communities. And I was saying, our neighborhood, we've met different kinds of people. I mean, soon after I came back, our daughters wanted a bicycle. So, we went to a place with pre-enjoyed bicycles, is what they called it, which I thought – this guy was just such a character. He had it open like two hours a day, whenever he wanted. I just never met people or [had] a chance to see people like that. So that's a side I like. The music is great, though I must admit I can never stay up long enough to go to any music clubs. I wish they had started at 7:30, not starting at eleven or whatever. But the music, the food – that's great. The Jewish community is small, and that took some getting used to. Baltimore is maybe ten times the size – the Jewish community. But people are very warm, and you feel like you do make a difference here. Your participation is important and valued, and there's enough. I mean, maybe I would like more Jewish education classes or whatever. But generally, we like our synagogue, and so that's good too.

RH: So, tell me about how you interact with the larger New Orleans community.

GC: Well, I guess one of our main activities is soccer with my son. He actually, [on] his old team, was the only Jewish person on the team. It was wonderful. They all came to his bar mitzvah, and they actually missed a tournament to do it.

RH: Really?

GC: Yeah. I've always felt a great deal of respect from non-Jewish people, I guess because religion is so much more important here. I think if people have a sense that religion was important to me, they respected it. I mean, I would get a lot of questions like what Jewish church do you go to? There was some ignorance there. I was very worried moving down here eight years ago that it would be anti-Semitic or being Jewish would be a problem. I haven't seen any of that. Just really everyone on the soccer team really respected our Judaism and, as I said, came to the bar mitzvah and asked questions and [were] very intrigued and respectful. So we made a bunch of friends through that. When I've worked, it's been in the Jewish community – when I worked outside the home. Now, I do freelance writing and editing, and it's kind of solitary. But we live in an area that's not hundred percent Jewish. So, we interact with our neighbors, take advantage certainly of the restaurants and some jazz fest.

RH: Do you feel more or less involved since Katrina in the city and the life of the city?

GC: Yeah, well definitely more involved on the local level. I've been to a couple of meetings of our neighborhood association. I feel like I want to do more. I feel kind of helpless in many ways, but that's something we can at least get involved in planning things locally.

RH: You feel like you're here for at least a while, and you feel obligated to build the city?

GC: Well, I know if we do leave, we'll feel guilty. Stuart, I think, in particular, because there's such a shortage of doctors. I know every time that I hear someone leave, it really makes me sad. I know if we do leave, it's going to make other people sad. I don't know. I guess we'll have to – on the bottom line if it's better for the family and whatever, we will go.

RH: You've talked a little about frustrations with the city. So, why don't you vocalize on that?

GC: Well, fortunately, I guess, I've only been here a month, so I haven't had to – I don't have to tell you, just the slow pace of recovery, the inaction by the mayor. I mean, even his decision to – he wanted the comedy night and fireworks to commemorate the anniversary just seems so tasteless and out of touch. I just don't know what he's doing and waffling back and forth on the landfill. I mean, I'm very upset with the government at all levels. There just doesn't seem to be a plan. When I read, too, that they're just now starting setting up centers in Houston for evacuees to encourage them to come back to New Orleans with housing and information about housing and jobs. I mean, why wasn't that done ten months ago? Chris Rose really put it well. I guess it was his column this week. Sure, we can go out and clean storm drains, and individual citizens can pick up trash, but the city's crumbling around us. I guess I do worry. I hope we haven't reached the tipping point, but it does seem that there's way more for sale signs now than – I was also back in May for a wedding. It just seems more for sale signs now, and whether people are just giving up and this is going to turn into an avalanche or a stampede of people leaving. I guess it kind of keeps me up at night, yeah.

RH: Keeps you up at night?

GC: Yeah, it's funny. I get through the day pretty well, but yeah, I don't sleep well. I really don't. I often fall asleep, but I'm usually up every night at some point during the night.

RH: Is this a post-Katrina –?

GC: Yeah, yeah. I guess I would always wake up maybe once, but I would be able to go right back to sleep. But yeah, sleeping is –

RH: Is it just the unsettledness of –?

GC: Yeah, it's just, who knows what's going to happen? Yeah, and then personally, if we're going to stay or not. But then with the city, I mean, it's just –

RH: Are you concerned about the anger some people have over people who leave? Do you experience that?

GC: I might get more sad, I guess, because I can understand why people are going to leave. I mean, we may be doing it too. Who knows? So, I just get sad there's a few less people here.

RH: You said you've been to Lakeview. Have you been concerned about the escalating kind of –? Does it feel like – is a better way to put this – the racial problems, the color line, and the divide – does it feel more intense now to you?

GC: Yeah, I think it does. I guess I was always naïve, but it seemed that race relations were really pretty good here. I mean, Black culture was really esteemed. The culture is so Black in so many ways – the music and whatever. Even Mardi Gras and all the traditions – the marching bands. I mean, obviously, that was maybe just superficial things, and the whole poverty and poor education is really more important. I mean, we're worried about crime too, and the fact that I guess people aren't finding their way to jobs or housing in an easy manner. Or the city's not making it easy for people to do that – people who want to come back and work. I'm also very saddened for the Black community, just the loss of all their support and traditions. I did meet a Black evacuee up in Baltimore, and she had so many – on her block, she had so many different family

members, and they would get together for meals, and they were all involved in marching bands and second lining and all of that is gone. I mean, it's such a loss to them and really to the city, too.

RH: So, how do you feel the Jewish community has conducted itself? That could be at different levels through this crisis.

GC: Yeah, well, I think as inept and inefficient as the government has been, that's how efficient and "ept" it's been. The organized Jewish community has really responded wonderfully. I know that initially, they ended up rescuing – Adam Bronstone of the Federation – I don't know how he got connected with a Baton Rouge sheriff, but [they] rescued individuals. Again, there's been so much funds donated by the American Jewish community, and we've taken advantage; each adult got seven hundred dollars, and there was a whole debate of whether we should do it, take advantage of it, but we did.

RH: And what was your decision why?

GC: Yeah, well, we felt that we were in need, not desperate need, and that also we would be spending it in New Orleans, maybe redistributing in stores, and whatever. So, helping the economy that way. We also got funds – we submitted our receipts for the expenses of moving back here, which we ended up renting another van, and then I had a car. We didn't have furniture or anything. We just stuffed everything in there. So, that was good. Yeah, I mean, I think the Jewish community – I mean, I guess I haven't really thought much about its responsibility to the larger community. I know they didn't participate in interfaith services and things like that. But I haven't really thought about that too much.

RH: Do you wish that every community had a Jewish community?

GC: Yes.

RH: Or something akin to it?

GC: Yeah, I really do. I mean, I feel very fortunate to be part of it, and I wish that it could be – I guess efficiency, and then also willingness – seeing every member as part of a community is really strong.

RH: Has your relationship to the Jewish community changed any since you've been back?

GC: Not really. I had been editor of the paper in Federation. That made me a staff member of the Federation. But I had resigned in March, before Katrina. I definitely think that coming to synagogue now, you feel like you're more important and that everyone should be going. I sense a much higher proportion of people who are here are going. I mean, I think Shir Chadash probably lost more members than any other synagogue. Just from the demographics, it's a Conservative shul, which is not kind of native to New Orleans. So, I would say ninety percent of the people were transplants. I mean, I could count the number of people on one hand who were natives. So, people didn't have family ties, and I think a lot have left. I know a lot have left. But the ones that are here, they're coming. I mean, I've been going, and I see the same people each week. And it's nice. Poor Rabbi. He came, and his first day was August 1st, before Katrina. Not what he bargained for, but he's been great.

RH: And who is this?

GC: Ted Lichtenfeld. He's a young guy. His wife was pregnant, and they ended up – she ended up going back to her parents to have the baby. But they're here. I had to interview him for this article, and he said he's glad he's here.

RH: Is that right?

GC: Yeah, which was good to hear.

RH: We'll take a little break.

GC: Okay.

RH: And then we'll move to the second tape. [RECORDING PAUSED] We're on tape two of Gail Chalew's interview for Katrina's Jewish Voices. Gail, we were talking a little about the Jewish community, and you were saying just how important each member is now, especially at Shir Chadash, where you feel like a lot of people – it's lost a large part of its congregation.

GC: Yes, particularly in people in their sixties and seventies, the age group that has grown children elsewhere. So many of them have left; I guess the biggest problem with that is that these were all the big machers, the big wheels; they had the money and the time to give. They're retired and whatever. So, some of the biggest donors are gone, and the ones who volunteered the most are not here. I know the synagogues lost a lot of young families as well. So, those are both big losses. But the people who were here have redoubled their efforts. I think the synagogue has become more important. It's a place of comfort and getting together with people. What I've always liked about Shir Chadash is that after every Saturday morning service, they always serve lunch. And it's not a fancy lunch; I mean, it's cottage cheese and fruit and maybe bagels, but it's a chance to catch up with people. So, thankfully, I look forward to that. It's more of the social thing now for me. Of course, I want to be in the Jewish atmosphere, but the social part is very important.

RH: Can you describe the Jewish community and talk about its distinctiveness here in New Orleans, especially as – you've got a little more perspective than somebody who's grown up [here]?

GC: Yes, it is very distinctive. It's, I guess, primarily Reform, many third or fourth-generation, which really surprised me. I didn't realize the community was that old. Many people have really tied into New Orleans and to the Jewish community but [have] very deep roots. I don't know there was such a Jewishly knowledgeable community, but very committed, very active in the Jewish public life and raising money for the Federation and raising money for Israel. Very warm community. I think for a community of its size, it was very active – programs all the time from different agencies and synagogues. I guess another strength of it was its pluralism; the fact that Reform and Conservative and Orthodox and even Ultra-Orthodox really got along and did joint programs. Chabad, which is the most Orthodox, [and] we've gotten friendly. I mean, they reach out to everyone. We've gone to a couple of their weddings. In a place like Baltimore, that never would happen; you wouldn't go out of your little orbit of people, so that's been a really good part of it.

RH: So you talk about education. Do you expand on what you mean by that? Not knowledgeable, I'm sorry.

GC: I mean, I don't want to get in trouble here, but in terms of – I just think the younger generation, kids are getting good Jewish educations, but it had been a very, I guess, pretty much a secular community in generations past. People my age, many of them didn't have bar mitzvahs. Their kids are having them, but they didn't. So, I think maybe more of the adults just weren't really given good Jewish educations. But the community is really [offering] some kind of neat trends; I mean, the Federation offers an adult Jewish, a two-year adult Jewish education program that meets once a week. It's pretty comprehensive and intensive. You don't do homework, but there's reading, and it's a big-time commitment. I think that's definitely improving, and they've had trips to Israel and whatever. I guess in Baltimore, that's kind of the polar opposite because that was – this community is dominated by Reform; that's dominated by Orthodox. There's many day schools and just more opportunities to learn.



RH: So what has it meant to be Jewish to you through the experience?

GC: It's really been a source, I guess, of comfort and of strength. I've just written an article, it was for National Jewish Weekly about the – we just celebrated or commemorated Tisha B'av, which is a fast day that really everything bad that ever happened to the Jews supposedly happened on Tisha B'av. I think some of that is creative license, but it's a time to mourn, and the original catastrophe was when the Jews – it was 586 BC, somewhere around then – were exiled from Jerusalem and made to go to Babylon. And I said that nothing in American history really prepared us to abandon an entire community and go somewhere else. But Jewish history did have this model, and one of the ways they actually were forced by their captors to sing songs of joy about Jerusalem. I said this is a way that we can think of singing songs of joy about New Orleans. And then certainly the generosity or, I guess, the feeling of peoplehood among the Jewish community is so strong. The fact that of course, in Baltimore, I think we had connections, but I think we could have gone to any Jewish community from New Orleans and would have gotten the same amount or similar amount of help. So, just the feeling that some – you have a responsibility to help other Jews. I'm just so proud of that and so grateful for it. I mean, for this latest article I did, I found out that the United Jewish Communities, which is the umbrella organization of Federations, have contributed seventeen million dollars and nine hundred thousand dollars in aid to individuals. Then, the synagogue movements contributed maybe another half million. So, it's overwhelming, the generosity. The fact that it is, I guess, motivated by a feeling of responsibility for each other.

RH: What would you say you're enjoying and going more regularly to synagogue? Are there any other family rituals that have become more important to you now?

GC: No. Well, we've always tried to make Shabbat dinner a special occasion. It's actually been harder in the summer – my son's schedule. He was working at an ice

cream parlor, and he had to work Friday nights. We still have tried to do that, but no, I don't think anything really has changed. Yes, I guess a renewed commitment to helping Shir Chadash and to being in a community there.

RH: Are there any frameworks in Judaism that you talked about with your children or that they brought up?

GC: Right. Well, there certainly have been many instances of suffering in Jewish history, and we have talked a little bit about some parallels with the Holocaust. Of course, this is much less – very few people have lost their lives, but the sense of just being uprooted, and at a moment's notice and then people being – this also didn't happen to many Jews, but people being flown to wherever and not knowing where they're going. What I found interesting – I don't know. Interesting may not be the right word, but in the recent crisis in Israel, it took me a while to get engaged in it, and I was talking about it with the kids and to be concerned by it. And then I stepped back and realized, I guess I was so focused on my life and having struggles, whatever, that it was hard for me to focus. But then, I guess after a while, we got much more concerned. It really did strike me how, I guess, self-absorbed we were.

RH: In your opinion, what do you think of the –? What does it take to bring the Jewish community back? Are you concerned? What are you concerned about?

GC: I am concerned because, particularly in the Jewish community, it kind of snowballs because community is so important. You can't be Jewish alone. You need a community. And even the very basic, you need ten people to be in a service for – well, traditionally, to even say certain prayers. It snowballs. People won't come unless there's a Jewish community, but if there's no Jewish community, it's almost like, how do you get it going? You have to get it – you have to keep a big enough nucleus here so that others will be attracted. I think it's really dependent on the fate of the city. I guess sometimes I'm optimistic that if we get through this year, then everyone is saying about the billions that

are coming in that will bring jobs, and young professionals will need to come too. Many of them hopefully will be Jewish – or some of them will be Jewish. If that happens, then we'll be okay. The community population – even before Katrina because of the economics of the region. I think when I got here, the standard figure was like thirteen thousand. Even before Katrina, people were saying maybe ten thousand Jews were here. It's just the young people couldn't find jobs and are going elsewhere – Atlanta, Houston, whatever. So, if New Orleans does okay, then we'll do okay, too.

RH: So you feel that the Jewish community within the city are pretty tight?

GC: Yes, I mean, certainly, if all those anti-Semitic propaganda that the Jews control everything, maybe that would be good. [laughter] We could have some impact on things, but I don't think that's true.

RH: Well, let's move to just a few other things. I'm curious now that you've been through one hell of a year: has the nature of home changed for you?

GC: Well, in some ways, I've been very schizophrenic about it because, in some ways, Baltimore felt like home. I felt when I was going there, it felt like that was coming home. But coming back here, it does feel very good. I mean, I don't have family, I don't have long roots here, but it just feels – it does feel like home once I'm here.

RH: Is there anything that was important to you to try to recreate home when you were away and that you maybe don't take for granted now?

GC: That's interesting. I can't really think – as I said, I adjust to things very easily, so I kind of threw myself into – well, this is so superficial, I guess, but one of the things – books. I actually tried for a week not to buy books and to go to the library in Baltimore, but that didn't last either. [laughter] I started buying books; I guess I loved old books or whatever.

RH: I'm the one sitting behind the bookshelf if you could see a sense of collection. Was there anything that surprised you, you were glad to kind of be rid of?

GC: I really loved my little two-bedroom apartment and the fact that I could straighten it up in like three minutes, and kind of glad to be rid of all the stuff. Obviously, I'm glad our house, our main stuff, wasn't destroyed or anything. But, realizing that we have so much and striving for simplicity was part of my motivation, too, and I had to convince my husband that we should make this a two-family home again. We don't need all that space. We don't need all that, and simple is better. Well, I guess once you're here, you kind of lose it, but I still feel it's important.

RH: Was there anything when you got back to town that you thought, oh my God, I wish I had taken, or you suddenly realized you'd missed?

GC: That's true. Yes, I'm trying to think. Well, certainly, some of the clothes and things like that. As I said, I did start buying more books and being surrounded by them. No, but I guess what I've been finding since we're here is that I'll look for things, or I'll assume that things we have and they were on the first floor, and we don't have them anymore. I can't really think of anything really crucial.

RH: Are there any ongoing challenges right now for you that stand out?

GC: Well, I guess it's just the general uncertainty. Because I work out of the home, I don't have to contend with traffic that much. Actually, in terms of writing, I've been getting more assignments because Katrina's such a great story, so that's been good. I think the fear of what's happening and if another hurricane is coming. But even worse, though, just the general direction of the city, worrying about that.

RH: Do you have any rules for yourself as a writer about how to frame a story here?

GC: Well, that's a good question because this article I just finished could be in every Jewish paper in the country. I don't know if everyone will. I think it's the anniversary story. I think most papers will probably pick it up just because. Not that it's so great, but just because of the topic. I could have easily written a very negative piece, but I deliberately made that a really positive piece, and it makes me – journalists aren't objective; that's such a myth. In my personal piece, I talked about some negative things, but in the part about the Jewish community, I just focused on the rebuilding and all the things that are coming back. I end it with this eighty-one-year-old guy who had lost their home in Lakeview and had to buy a new home, but they said, "Who would have thought at eighty-one, I'd have to buy a new home? but that's life, and I'm doing it." So I deliberately made that really positive because I think it could have been really very destructive if I didn't. I felt kind of an obligation to the city.

RH: I was going to say that it sounds like you – it's part of how you're rebuilding the city.

GC: I hope. Also, my older daughters were kind of mad at me that I didn't come back in January. They were saying, what am I doing up there in Baltimore. I said. "Well, I'm writing about New Orleans, and I think that's making a big impact. That's where my contribution can be."

RH: They couldn't be back so they wanted you back there? Any other tensions like that? The timing, you choosing to do things a little differently than your family thinks you should be?

GC: No, I guess not. All the kids really loved being here, and I mean, I love it too, but it's easier being a kid, I think. They don't have the worries. So, they hate hearing me if I would ever say anything negative. I think I mentioned before [about] my son; if we would complain, he would say, "What are you complaining about? You have it so good." Things like that.

RH: Are there other stories that you've chosen to cover that have been important?

GC: Well, this doesn't really answer that question, but I was thinking – in writing this latest one, I looked back at what I had written in January. What was upsetting was not that much had changed. At that point, there were more streetlights, and I guess there were definitely more things open, but the problems and the pace of recovery were still not that much different from January, but I didn't want to write about that. Well, I'm doing that story on fried green tomatoes for NPR, talking about – and that's highlighting – well, it's just also the importance of food as a comfort and a way to bring back memories and then to highlight the kind of quirkiness of New Orleans, I guess.

RH: So you're writing articles not just about the Jewish community?

GC: Right, yes.

RH: Is that different?

GC: I guess so, and I would like to do more. It just happens that a good friend works at NPR. I haven't really gone out and sought it, but I certainly would be interested.

Actually, one of the most exciting things – I had done this big article, a cover story, on my return to New Orleans. On the website – this is in the Baltimore Jewish Times – people can put comments. So this non-Jewish guy from Tennessee had written that somehow he had come across it, he saw it, and was the best thing. He also [was] an evacuee. He said [it] the best thing written about the storms, so that made me feel really, really good.

RH: What was in the article?

GC: It was a personal piece – and then what was going on. I used the metaphor of my home as destruction downstairs, but then if you went upstairs, it was good that you had to look for the ups and then forget about the downs, and it worked. [laughter] That's how

I still feel now. Sometimes, I'm very optimistic, and sometimes, I'm really depressed about the city and its prospects.

RH: Have any of your responsibilities changed since the storm?

GC: Well, I mean certainly being a single parent last year and for most of the year, and I know I wasn't as good a parent as I should have been. I was just preoccupied with stresses. I think Ari definitely could have benefited from my supervision, and even here, we're trying to become – well, now that both of us are here, it's much easier, but just to, I guess, be more involved. That's the problem, I guess; if you're so wrapped up in your concerns, it's hard to be as involved in your kids' lives. That's something I'm really looking out for, and trying to make sure that we are.

RH: So single parenting is a little bit of a challenge, too?

GC: Yes, it was. As I said, I didn't cook; that was my way of dealing.

RH: Anything now that you appreciate about the double adults –

GC: Yes.

RH: – that you want to share?

GC: Well, certainly, just to have his companionship and friendship is wonderful and to have someone else be there with the kids and also to help when there's issues. It's been great.

RH: Has Ari had any changes or difficulty that you can attribute to this storm?

GC: I don't know. I've been thinking about that because he's definitely changed, but I think it might just be teenagerhood. He's fifteen now, and I remember my second daughter kind of went through the same thing. I mean, there's definitely a lot – he's more

withdrawn and kind of sullen at times, but I think it is – I know he was affected by the storm, but we're attributing it more just to teenager-ness. But, actually, within a half hour of our coming back in June, he had friends over, and he has a lot of friends here, which is great. It's nice he can be more independent here. I mean, he bikes a lot of places. He also has a summer job. That's been very good; at school [inaudible].

RH: What's your vision for the future?

GC: Well, good days – I guess that's what makes me so upset because the potential is so wonderful, and being able to start anew, clean the slate or whatever, was so exciting for this city, and I feel like it's being wasted. But if the federal money comes in and things are rebuilt, I'm confident it could be as good as it ever was. If enough people are able to return, people who are, I guess, instrumental in creating the culture, if they can return – I don't know if that's going to happen now.

RH: Is there anything special you'd like to put if you were going to create priorities that you'd like to see?

GC: For the community?

RH: And for the Jewish community.

GC: Yes. Well, certainly, the one thing I am encouraged by is the education. It does seem that, with the new charter schools, that's working out well. But yeah I guess, certainly improving the quality of life and the housing, just enabling people to come back is very important. Jewishly, I think it's doing pretty well. I think the synagogues have become stronger, and I guess there is a real commitment to rebuilding and working together.

RH: It sounds almost like one of the things that really gives you hope for now is the Jewish community. It's working a little better than the city.



GC: Yes, for sure, which is good.

RH: Is there anything you want for your kids?

GC: Well, certainly, on the basic level, I hope the safety of the community improves, the crime. You worry. Will there be enough physicians? The whole medical [and] mental health system. Well, I would hope that – they really have loved – it is great to be a teenager here and to – and that New Orleans gets back to being a place where it can get back some of its carefree spirit.

RH: That's a nice thing to hope for. Have you sat around and discussed your evacuation plan?

GC: We actually have not. I mean, it's terrible. I haven't done anything. Well, I guess I've thought about what I should do, but we haven't. I mean, I guess because we're not natives, the least little semi-serious hurricane we've got, we've left for. So, this was our fourth evacuation since 1998. Hopefully, I will get it together. I guess we did move photo albums upstairs. I would definitely want to get more important papers together. I didn't even know who carried our flood insurance – things like that. A friend of mine actually took the school transcript from her child. I would never have thought of doing that, but then she went to Miami, and he was going to Ben Franklin, so he was able to get into a comparable magnet school there. Those kinds of things I definitely would take. I don't know what else.

RH: So, those are the things that would have been helpful?

GC: Right.

RH: Might be better to take along next time. [laughter] Would you go back to Baltimore again if you had to?

GC: If it was the same situation, I guess. I've heard this from everyone I've talked to basically. If it happens again, we're out of here. I think a lot of people feel that way. I mean, it was wonderful. It was like coming home in many ways. So, if I had to do it, that would be it.

RH: What's been the biggest change in your life since the hurricane?

GC: Well, I mean, in some ways, it really hasn't changed that much. Still, basically, professionally – maybe I'm doing different stories. I guess just getting through the past year was hard. The struggles now [is] hassling our contractor [who] was supposed to start last week. It's the daily hassles and stresses of life. It's not about to explode, but – well, this happened the other night; one of the neighbors was weed-whacking, and a rock hit the windshield of the car. Fortunately, he immediately offered to pay for it, which was fine, but I really had to hold it together not to – because the computer wasn't working. It was just the normal things in life and then that, and then in general. Definitely, more stress. I also find it with salespeople; I just have no patience. I really have to try to control myself.

RH: It's just harder to live, so those little things kind of really feel like they're going to put you over the edge faster than you normally do.

GC: Yes, exactly. [laughter] Thank you. Yes, because fortunately, I mean, we didn't lose anybody or really anything that we couldn't replace, and we got enough insurance, I hope.

RH: That's stressful too, isn't it? Trying to balance that financial world, the insurance world, the contractor world?

GC: Oh, it's all that, for sure.

RH: Has anything in your worldview changed?

GC: Well, I guess realizing that your life can change in an instant, and I've been very fortunate, I should knock on wood. I really have had – I mean, I really haven't had any major losses. Both my parents are alive. This obviously was a loss of a different kind, but realizing – and I guess I always felt kind of immune from – I felt very fortunate and realizing that no one's immune from this loss and change.

RH: Made that a little more present.

GC: Yes, exactly.

RH: Any of your priorities different?

GC: Well, I guess definitely I haven't been as good at keeping this resolution but realizing that friends and family really are the most important and trying to keep in better touch with everyone. I haven't been as good as I would want to be. But realizing the material stuff doesn't matter. As I was talking about before, sometimes it's even freeing to get rid of some of that. But then focusing on the people that really matter.

RH: Anything you learned about yourself?

GC: Well, I mean just having to deal with – as I said before, I guess the ability to be flexible and adaptable is very important. I guess I can sublimate a lot; it comes out at night, sleeping, but during the day trying to be available for others and getting through the day and able to then push that off to the night.

RH: How about things you're grateful for?

GC: Well, yes, that's another important lesson. Yes, obviously grateful for the people in your life and your family and grateful that we had the means to – we weren't stuck in the Superdome, and very fortunate that my husband, Stuart, didn't lose his job and our house. I guess it's focusing on the positive. When I talk to people about the house,

everyone else seems really upset. I said, "But no, we only lost the first floor." So, I'm really not upset. Obviously, it would have been better if it didn't happen, but it's not that important.

RH: So, I'm thinking here when I hear you say – I'm glad that you weren't in the Superdome. It doesn't sound like you think it was their own fault.

GC: No, no. No, I mean, obviously, people didn't have the means. There were people who stayed, and maybe they were foolish to stay, but nobody deserved to be treated like that, even if they should have gone and didn't. I mean, that was really inhuman.

RH: Is there anything in your group, your Rosh Chodesh group, that has come up that is particularly meaningful?

GC: Well, it's interesting. We actually had started before the storm, but it was really – and then I was gone for most of this, so I can't really speak that well to it, but we had gone through the 23rd Psalm line by line. Actually, Margot led them. There's a small book which goes with the Psalm line by line by Rabbi Harold Kushner, and these were really rich discussions. You wouldn't think that one line you could spend two hours discussing, but we would. Each month was a different line, and it goes with your philosophy and theology; it really evoked all of that. As I said, I wasn't here for most of this, but I got the sense that after the storm, it got a bit harder to focus on that, that everyone had a real need to just share what was happening with them. A lot of the sessions, we usually meet for about two hours. It might have taken an hour of the sharing to get to the study, but that was important, too. I think now it's kind of settling back into where we schmooze a little, but the main thing was to learn and study together.

RH: Sounds like the sharing is a bit of the prayer, too.

GC: Yes, I think so, I like that. It was very – I mean, there is a real need to tell your story; that's why I love this. [laughter] I get a chance to tell it. We were just at White

Linen Night, and I just happened to walk by a group of people, and this guy was saying, “Well, when we evacuated to Lake Charles.” He's just telling – people are still just talking about it.

RH: That's an art event here, in town, White Linen Night, and you were down on Julius Street.

GC: Right. That was wonderful to see everyone; it seemed so normal and pre-Katrina like, everyone just enjoying art, very – a lot of hip people doing that.

RH: Is there anything you took for granted before that you hope never to take for granted again?

GC: Yes, I guess having a home, having the certainty of being in one place, and knowing that's where you'll be. Home seems so permanent, but it not always is.

RH: I feel like we've had a wonderful conversation, and I want to thank you.

GC: Thank you. As I said, I've enjoyed it. It's been good for me to tell this story again.

RH: Is there anything you want to add?

GC: No, I think this is a wonderful project that you're doing and collecting all this. I don't know if people are ever going to listen, but I think it's really important to put it in a place where people can learn from it later.

RH: I hope people – they will have access to these, and I agree. In one way, I hope people understand that New Orleans isn't different from their communities. Even though I've asked you about the distinctiveness, that it could happen in Baltimore, and it could happen in Miami. We're learning it could happen in places that aren't even near an ocean with rivers overflowing and that kind of thing.

GC: Yes, I agree, and I think that's what ultimately was so upsetting: the failure of the government to respond to an emergency. It could be a different kind of emergency or disaster, but it could happen anywhere, and governments are just not – I guess that's another important lesson, or what we've had to take from this is that you can't rely on government; you have to rely on each other. I'm fortunate to be a member of the Jewish community; I can rely on that. And neighbors, we've gotten together, but government really – at least in New Orleans – is not something you can rely on.

RH: What are you most proud of with your family and yourself?

GC: Through this year, I'm really proud of – I think we all did well. Ari and I did really well in Baltimore. He did great at his new school and was able to adjust. Hannah was able to use her artwork, and she actually just did another painting on Katrina and was able to use that to get out her feelings and cope with it. Fortunately, we didn't have any real traumas, but yes, I guess, being able to go on with new lives and not having our lives dominated by Katrina even though we do talk about it all the time. Being able to go forward, I guess.

RH: Well, thank you.

GC: Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]