

Gail Chalew Transcript

Rosalind Hinton: OK. 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. 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, where you were born, and tell me a little bit about your family. And if you don't mind, giving me your age.

GC: OK. (laughter) My name is Gail Chalew, I'm 54. 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. And 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. And 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: OK. And what was your husband -- at Tulane?

GC: No, he was at LSU and at Children's, and he was very fortunate that, you know, Children's didn't flood. And he never -- he kept on getting his paycheck, which was wonderful. And he was able to go back to work there pretty immediately.

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

GC: OK. Well, when we decided to move down from Baltimore, we looked all over. We -- 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 -- you know, the old homes. Each home is different and quirky, and the neighborhood is so diverse. We have -- next door is a house painter, and on the other side of us is an environmental activist. We have -- there's physicians, professionals, working class people as well. And as I said, each house is different. Our house -- 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. And each room has a built in bed, a built in bookshelf, built in dresser, and 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 -- is my husband and my space, and the family's, our kitchen and dining room is there, and living room. And our first floor, which was when we bought it, originally a separate apartment, we made into -- we combined into our house. And on our first floor we have a pool table, ping pong table. That was also the kids' floor. And you know, the 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. And 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 you know, 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. But there's a -- the location, it's really centrally located, and you know, close to my husband's work and downtown, and just everywhere. It just seems like a really good place to be. And that's -- yeah, we were really glad that we were able to come back here.

RH: I'm sitting here -- is there -- is there any -- you're saying your kids had their 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. And she's a visual artist, and maybe later you can see some of her work. It's all around the house. And that, the combination of NOCCA and Ben Franklin, which both of them were free, public institutions, was incredible. She got an amazing education, half a day at academics, and half art. And it was really -- the quality of it was great. And all three of my kids that were going -- are going, two have already graduated from Ben Franklin, and my son is a tenth grader there. Today was his first day of school. And 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: Mm-hmm. 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. But I had -- was taking my third daughter, Hannah, to Brandeis. She was a freshman. And 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. And then on Saturday my husband calls, and he and Ari were home here, and thinking they had to get away. And actually, from Boston I made them the hotel reservations that was -- I took care of that. And so they drove, and they drove early enough in the day on 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 -- was there, it was a terrible flight. But I really wanted to be with them, and to do that, you know. 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. But so I had very little clothes.

RH: Mm-hmm.

GC: And -- but we were able to -- I joined them, and I guess it was Tuesday or Wednesday -- Tuesday 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 was it -- it was, there was no struggle for decision. You both -- your husband and you felt --

GC: Yeah, but right, that was very easy. And they also, I mean they packed for -- you know, 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 wasn't -- you know, pretty inadequate and -- so.

RH: So, tell me what, what went through your minds. 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 -- it was really bothering my son. And 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, and found -- 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. Cause we actually -- we came to Baltimore, we arrived -- no, it must have been Tuesday, cause we left Wednesday and took -- 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 know, you do find --

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 that 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 really, 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 -- and 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 think, 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 you know, I think that's the sight of that that really affected him. And you know, 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, I'm very -- and I'm thankful for that. I mean, it made it a lot easier, because you know, 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 easier. I mean, just evacuating with a 15 year old was a breeze. He was a big help, he carried a lot of stuff, he you know, he was good to be with. And it just, you know, I really felt bad for the parents of small kids, and for particularly for those with aging parents. It was very hard. Also, my husband too, he's a physician, but he wasn't on call, and he's in a -- he's in pediatric endocrinology, which it does have emergencies, mostly juvenile diabetes, but he didn't have any patient responsibilities, so he was able to leave as well.

RH: And so were -- who were you on the phone with, those first days? Who were you kind of contacting? Trying to find?

GC: That's interesting -- yeah, I guess mostly my parents. Stuart's parents, you know, sister, 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 to be able to get in touch with so many people. And once Internet came on, that's how we reconnected and you know, got each others' 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, because you know, 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. And she had close friends, one who turned out was at Charity with her mom, and had a horrific experience. But and my daughter at Brandeis, it was also very hard, because she had just gotten there, and you know, the normal adjustment to college isn't so easy, and to have to deal with this too, so she was very teary a lot. And yeah, that was hard. We spent a lot of time on the phone, and helping her through that.

RH: So, what -- what did you think when you saw the floodwaters rising?

GC: Yeah, the flood. Well that and actually what really scared me were the fires. And it -- because it just seemed that they were out of control. And it just -- the fact that there was no water pressure to fight them, or firemen to get there, it just -- I really worried that the whole city was going to go up. We kind of 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 just knew -- and that wasn't -- I mean, it was upsetting, but that seemed to, something we could cope with. But the fires and then the total anarchy and 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, but, and I guess, and also really ashamed of the government. That was really, you know, that they would treat people, or not just utterly neglect them. And 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 water or whatever. So it really was very shameful, and as much as -- yet I couldn't stop watching,

even though I hated it. It was like this, kind of a push-pull kind of a thing.

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

GC: Emotional, or financial or --

RH: Emotional, well both really. It's --

GC: Right, well fortunately the financial part, you know, wasn't a problem. And as I said, well initially, we had enough money to be able to go to a motel and to incur those expenses. And then he is a state employee at LSU, and he got his -- never stopped getting his paychecks, so that was wonderful. And we also had supportive family and whatever. Emotionally I guess we could just keep 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, you know, we didn't lose anyone in the storm. And so we thought a lot about that. I guess I just personally adapt very easily to things. And sometimes I think too easily. But, so I guess that step 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, which is -- and they're best friends, which is wonderful. And we're very fortunate all four are still around. But they're all old, the youngest is 85. And so and they were, I think, they were just so upset by the whole thing. And whereas we'd always stayed with them before, but as they've aged, it's gotten harder. They're basically in one bedroom apartments. And I think the combination of them being so stressed out and us just arriving suddenly, it wasn't a 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 he had a -- he has -- his condo had not sold, and so we were able to move into his condo. And --

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 till about October, or November, and then stayed with friends in the city, and moved back here at the end of December. But Ari and I were in this -- our friend's father's condo until December. And then 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 you know, 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. And also, in the Pikesville area, close to where Ari was going to school. And so we moved there in December till we moved out again in June. And that was, again, he had -- 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 -- it was not a great situation for -- I mean, being in that condo was -- it 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. And that's when we moved to New Orleans, right after her graduation. But we're driving up from Memphis, and you know, at that point we didn't know -- really if

Stuart had a job any more, 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. And you know, no questions asked, and we never paid a cent of tuition. They were just so generous, it was great. We arrived at 10 PM Thursday night, and finally got a chance to speak more fully to the Principal. He called us then, and you know, Ari needed -- 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 89 year old father's pants. [Which he still wears?]. 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. And it just so happened this was Friday morning, and every Friday they have an assembly. And this assembly was on Katrina. And they had -- they showed video images, and they were raising money for the school. And then they introduced Ari, you know, their very own Katrina person. He was so embarrassed. And everyone applauded him, but 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 at soccer. And fall was the soccer season, so he was on the JV 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, he goes -- his team in New Orleans was never a winner. So this was -- 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. You know, by the end, he was -- I guess in January we had the choice of coming back. 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. So --

RH: To give him that experience.

GC: Right. And in some ways, I mean there were some unexpected, or side benefits, being with my parents and Stuart's parents, you know, the reason wasn't great, but they were thrilled. And it was good to be with them. I reconnected with old friends. And also, I was writing for the Baltimore Jewish Times, which is a really -- it's a very 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.

[Background noise] I think one of them is here.

RH: Well, so in some ways, you just -- you made the decision then 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. It was -- I mean, I hate to say it, but things did go very well, you know, 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 I'd -- 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 --

GC: Yeah, the day school. Really, every Jewish -- every Jewish organization gave us free membership. You know, 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. And actually, people would always come up to us, how to help, and -- well actually, I did get some clothes for Ari. Some blazers and sports jackets. But 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 very -- we were kind of celebrities in our own way. And everyone loves to hear -- was just so eager to hear about it, and also so eager to help. And 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 Amun0, which is a Conservative synagogue, where the Jewish day school, another one, a Conservative Jewish day school was housed. And that's where our kids went from kindergarten to eighth grade. Only the ones who -- Ari actually left, you know -- he 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 were always so eager to hear. And then writing about it as well. You know, people just --

RH: Tell me a little bit about your writing. You said -- and your speaking. Because did you come back to the city a couple of times for visits, and how did you choose your subject matter?

GC: Right. Well that's -- no, 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're having -- they were having. And we just decided that our

first visit would be over Christmas vacation. And 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. And then -- and what really surprised me, what I ended up writing about was that there were good things about the city. And there's still all the bad, but the spirit of the people, people being -- like the pioneer spirit, and the friendliness of everyone. And we went to a couple of events in the Jewish community. Well, our synagogue, which here is Shir Chadash had a Hanukkah party, and you know, just it was so great. Everyone was telling their story, and hugging and kissing each other. And then there was a Hanukkah celebration at Riverwalk. And again, it was wonderful just seeing everyone. And and 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, 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 it was like -- and then I called, kept in touch with people. One of the things which was really kind of neat, I was, I'm in a Rosh Chodesh group, which is a monthly group for -- a monthly -- about ten women get together to study, and to share things. And it has a specific Jewish focus. So I guess -- was it October maybe? I read that there was this website where you could get free conference calls. So we e-mailed 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 -- 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, you know. Fortunately, everyone had done pretty OK.

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

GC: Yes, it was. And yeah, I didn't have anybody, any of the peoples' numbers. So it was really good to connect. And 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 -- which was wonderful.

RH: Were there any of your other kids that you kind of -- you got Ari settled, but you kind of 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, there were -- you know, 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, and she -- it was in this museum case, a horizontal one I guess. And she had blown up satellite maps of the picture -- of the area, and then had done some paintings, and then photographs of her friends. And 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, or just going around the streets, or at parties, or whatever. And then she had trays of water, and put the photos in. And 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. And 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 -- that was great.

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

GC: Yeah, there were Paige Nathan, who was a Hillel director, was from -- you know, 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. And then where did you go when you first got here?

GC: Right, well we -- you know, just coming on the plane down and seeing all the blue roofs was really kind of -- I guess you came in over Kenner, but there were just a sea of blue roofs. And then you know, 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. And then initially just seeing this was, you know, even though Stuart had sent millions of photos up --

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

GC: OK. 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 things, you know, cabinets. Anyway, so 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. And I think -- how many weeks was it? Three to four weeks it was standing? So my husband actually, himself and some Guatemalans that he had found just had gutted it. So now it

was just down, the walls are down to the studs and the concrete floor. And just nothing is there. Again though, my kids, they've used it for parties. They had a post-apocalyptic New Years party. (laughter) And strung, you know, with extension cords, strung like Christmas lights. And they also spray-painted. They had a great time spray-painting everywhere, because you know, graffiti, because they could. So there's still all this graffiti around. But yeah --

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

GC: Yeah, we were here about -- at least a week. And you know, it's a good chance -- I mean, in some ways it felt, even though it was here, it was like I was on vacation in a way. And each day we went out to lunch with a different friend. And there were a couple of Jewish community events. And we went out to dinner a few times. I think my husband was really trying to show me all of the good parts. So we, you know, and it was a -- it ended up being a really good visit. What also made it very special was there was a group from Baltimore, Baltimore volunteers that have come down, and they actually helped us out at our home. We had -- our first floor was gutted, but the garage still wasn't. And so they ended up, you know, it was like eight or nine people, ranging from like teenagers to their forties, who chose to spend their Christmas vacation in New Orleans. They gutted the -- 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. And it was -- that was really the most wonderful thing. Because I don't think we would've asked. And we probably didn't have the energy to do it, but it was so ugly before they did it. And it was just -- it looks so much neater. And it was really -- it was 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.

GC: Yes.

RH: And so I assume your front was very brown. And that's what they dug up?

GC: Yeah, that was -- and it was shocking too, because the nicest thing about New Orleans is that all winter long, it's -- colors and pretty. And up north it's kind of 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. We -- and my son went with them a couple of days actually. And we helped remove things from an elderly person's house. And then what was lovely, the last -- the day before we left, it was Shabbat dinner, we had the volunteers over at our house. And there were 13 of them, there were 13 including us. And it was actually the first real meal in this house. So that was very exciting. And the first time I had cooked, basically. Since one of the ways I got through this past year is I didn't -- when I was in Baltimore, I just didn't cook. I just -- we got prepared foods, or went out, you know, went out for food. But it was really good to be back in the kitchen to cook a meal. And 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 that 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 -- focusing on the hardships of it. And life was very easy in Baltimore. And frankly, I mean, I think if Stuart could've found a position that was good professionally, we probably would've stayed. You know, just with the family and all our other connections there. But, and he did look, but there really is not -- there was not really any opportunities. So you know, by June, I wasn't -- I wasn't so much, you know -- and I guess I'd been talking about kind of focusing on the negative. And my kids were always trying to, you know, get me to see all the good things, because they really love that -- and the funniest thing is after Nagin was reelected, which I was very shocked by -- but anyway, I had forgotten, that Sunday I'd forgotten to look in the paper, you know, or

listen. I wasn't online or whatever to listen. And 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. You know, I can't guarantee that we'll be here for the long haul. My husband is semi-looking at other opportunities. Part of the problems is that 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, or just, you know -- and also, he did research. He wants to do, you know. 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, in New Orleans. So why don't we talk a little about New Orleans?

GC: OK.

RH: What -- what for you, makes New Orleans kind of special or distinctive?

GC: Well 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 mean, they -- 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 -- I think it's good. People know there's more to life than working. You know, 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. You know, it's really, it's going to -- also, we really love meeting the people. There's so many interesting people here. Everyone has a story. And maybe that was just in Baltimore, where it's very segmented. Like in the Jewish community, it's completely Jewish. And I had no non-Jewish friends there really. And 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. It's just -- I mean, we'll soon be back here -- 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. And which I thought -- and you know, this guy was just such a character. He had it open like two hours a day, whenever he wanted. And I said, I just never got a -- I just never met people, or 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 like at 7:30, not starting at 11 or whatever. But the music, the food, that's great. And the Jewish community is small, and that took some getting used to. Baltimore is maybe ten times the size, the Jewish community. But it's -- people are very warm, and you feel like you can, you do make a difference here. You know, your participation is important and valued, and there's enough -- I mean, maybe I would like more Jewish education classes or whatever. But generally, you know, 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 and he's actually -- at his old team, was the only Jewish person on the team. And it was wonderful, they all came to his bar mitzvah. And they actually missed a tournament to do it.

RH: Really?

GC: Yeah. And really felt -- that's what, you know, I've always felt a great deal of respect from non-Jewish people, I guess because religion is so much more important here. And I think if people have a sense that if 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? You know, there was some ignorance there, but you know, because I was very worried moving down here eight years ago that it would be antisemitic or I couldn't be -- being Jewish would be a problem. And I haven't seen any of that. Just really everyone on the soccer team would really respected our Judaism and came to -- as I said, came to

the bar mitzvah and asked questions, and very intrigued, and you know, respectful, whatever. So we made a bunch of friends through that. I guess I might have always -- 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 100% Jewish. So we interact with our neighbors, take advantage of -- certainly of the restaurants, and some jazz fest, whatever.

RH: So since -- 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. And I feel like I want to do more. And I feel kind of helpless in many ways, but that's something we can at least get involved in planning things, you know, locally.

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

GC: Well, I know if we do leave, we'll feel guilty. And yeah, Stuart I think in particular, because you know, there's such a shortage of doctors. Yeah, and also every time -- I know every time that I hear someone leaves, it really makes me sad. And I know if we do leave, it's going to make other people sad. But 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: And 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 -- and, but I mean, I don't have to tell you, just the slow pace of recovery, the inaction by the mayor. I mean, just -- you know, even his decision to -- he wanted the comedy night, and fireworks to commemorate the anniversary, just seems to out of -- 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 government at all levels. You know, there just doesn't seem to be a plan. And 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? So yeah, I mean, Chris Rose really put it well. I guess it was his column this week, you know, just like, sure, we can go out and clean storm drains, and individual citizens can pick up trash, but the city's crumbling around us. And 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 you know, and this is going to turn into an avalanche, or a stampede of people leaving. I worry -- 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. It's hard -- I often fall asleep, but I'm usually up every night at some point during the night, and so that's --

RH: Is this a post-Katrina --

GC: Yeah, yeah. And I guess, I mean, 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. And then, 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, so who knows. So yeah, I just get sad. That's a few less people here.

RH: Have you, you said you've been to Lakeview, have you been concerned about the escalating kind of -- or does it feel like there's 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. Because I mean, I guess I was always naïve, but it seemed that, you know, race relations were really pretty good here. And that -- I mean, black culture was really esteemed, and I mean, the culture is so black in so many ways -- I mean, the music and whatever. And you know, even Mardi Gras and all the traditions, the marching bands. Yeah, it does -- I mean obviously, that was maybe just superficial things, and the real, the whole poverty and poor education, whatever, is really more important. Yeah, I mean we're worried about crime too, and you know, the fact that I guess people aren't finding their way to jobs or to housing. And you know, 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 by the -- you know, for the black community, just the loss of all their supports, and the traditions, and I did meet someone -- a black evacuee up in Baltimore, and you know, 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 in 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? And that could be at different levels through this crisis.

GC: Yeah, well I think it's as inept and inefficient as the government has been, that's how efficient and ept (laughter) it's been. I mean, it's you know, the Jewish -- the organized Jewish community has really responded wonderfully. And 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 you know, rescued individuals. And then again, there's been so much, you know, funds donated by the American Jewish community, and we've taken advantage of each adult got -- you know, \$700, and this whole debate of whether we should do it, take advantage of it, but we did. And --

RH: And what was your decision, why?

GC: Yeah, well we felt that, we would -- we were in need, not desperate need, but that -- and that also we would be spending it in New Orleans, and maybe redistributing, you know, and stores, and whatever. And 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 and just -- 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 how it's responsible 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, whether --

RH: Do you wish that every community had the 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 yeah, I wish that it could be, it's you know, I guess efficiency, and then also willingness to seeing every member as part of a community is really strong.

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

GC: Not really. I mean, I think in -- 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. So, but I definitely think that coming to synagogue now, you do feel like you're more important, and that everyone should be going. And 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 90% of the people were transplants. You know, maybe some very -- I mean, I could count the number of people on one hand who were natives. So people didn't have the family ties, and I think a lot have left. I know a lot have left.

RH: Mm-hmm.

GC: So -- but the ones that are here are really -- they're coming -- I mean I've been going, and I see the same people each week. And you know, but it's nice. And the -- our poor Rabbi, he came and his first day was August 1, before Katrina. And he has -- 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 you know, now they're here, and he said -- I had to interview him for this article, and he said he's glad he's here, so --

RH: Is that right?

GC: Yeah, which was good to hear.

RH: We'll take a little break.

GC: OK.

RH: And then we'll move to the second tape.

[END OF AUDIO FILE 1]

RH: We're on Tape 2 of Gail Chalew interview for Katrina's Jewish Voices and 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 -- its lost a large part of its community.

GC: Yes, in particularly in people in their 60s and 70s, the age group that has grown children elsewhere. So many of them have left, and I guess what 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. And then 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. And 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 have always served 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 I really -- 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 and (inaudible) grown up?

GC: Yes, well, I mean 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. And many people have stayed really tied into New Orleans and to the Jewish community but you know, very deep roots. I don't know there was such a knowledgeable, Jewishly knowledgeable community, but very committed, very active in the Jewish public life and raising money for the Federation, raising money for Israel. Very warm; a very warm community. I think for a community of its size it was very active - programs all the time from different agencies and synagogues. And 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 you know, did joint programs. Chabad, which is the most Orthodox -- 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, I just -- 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 educated, do you expand on that, what you mean by that; it's 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, or the kids are getting good Jewish educations, but it had been a very, I guess, pretty much of a secular community in generations past. Like people my age, many of them didn't have bar mitzvahs or -- 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 you know there's reading and it's a big time commitment. So 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. And, it's just, 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: Well I -- It's really been a source I guess of comfort and of strength and I've just written an article, it was for National Jewish Weekly, about the - we just celebrated or commemorated to Tisha Bav which is a fast day that really everything bad that ever happened to the Jews supposedly happened on Tisha Bav. And 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 that Jewish history did have this model and one of the ways they actually had to, 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 the -- I guess 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 -- that you have a responsibility to help other Jews. And, you know 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, they've contributed \$17 million. To which \$900,000 in aid to individuals and then the synagogue movements have contributed maybe another half million, so, I mean, it's overwhelming, the generosity. And the fact that it is, I guess, motivated by a feeling of responsibility for each other.

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

GC: No. Well, we've always had Shabbat; tried to make Shabbat dinner a special occasion. It's actually been harder in the summer just, my son's schedule, he was

working at an ice cream parlor, he had to work Friday nights. So, but we've still 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 going, being in a community there.

RH: Are there any frameworks in Judaism that you talked about this 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 and of course, this is much less, knowing, I mean we haven't, 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. And I guess -- 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 you know on my life and being; and having struggles, whatever, that it was hard for me to focus. But then, I guess after a while we got much more concerned. But 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 you know even the very basic, you need 10 people to say; to be in a service for, well traditionally to even say certain prayers. And it kind of snowballs you know, 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, you know I think it's really

dependent on the fate of the city. And I guess sometimes I'm optimistic that if we get through this year, and then, you know everyone is saying about the billions that are coming in, that will bring jobs, young professionals will need to come too. And then many of them hopefully will be Jewish or some of them will be Jewish. If that happens then we'll be OK. You know the community population even before Katrina just because of the economics of the region. I think when I got here the standard figure was like 13,000 but even before Katrina people were saying maybe 10,000 Jews are here. And it's just the young people couldn't find jobs, and you know, going elsewhere, Atlanta, Houston, whatever. So if New Orleans does OK, then we'll do OK too.

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

GC: Yes, I mean, certainly if all those antisemitic propaganda that the Jews control everything, maybe that would be good. (laughter) We'd have a -- We could have some impact on things, but you know, I don't think that's true.

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

GC: Well in some ways it's been, I've been very schizophrenic about it, because in some ways Baltimore felt like home. You know I thought when I was going there, it felt like that was coming home. But yet here, coming back here, it does feel very good. I mean I don't have family, I don't have long roots here but I love -- it just feels 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 of -- As I said I adjust to things very easily so I kind of squeeze myself into; well, this is so superficial I guess, but one of the things, this is so superficial I guess but, like 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: That's the -- I mean in some -- Yes, I really loved my little two bedroom apartment and the fact that I could straighten it up in like three minutes and I guess 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. And actually that was part of my motivation too, and I had to convince my husband that we should make this a two-family home again. We just -- We don't need all that space, we don't need all that, and you know 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 that? 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 in the first floor and you know, we don't have them anymore. I can't really think of anything really crucial.

RH: Is there any ongoing challenges right now for you that kind of stand out?

GC: No, well I guess it's just the general uncertainty. You know, because I work outside of the home, I don't have to contend with traffic that much, yes, and actually in terms of writing, I've been getting more assignments because Katrina's such a great story, so that's been good. But yes, it's just I think, really, 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, I mean it could be in every Jewish paper in the country, I don't know if everyone will. But I think it's the anniversary story and I think most papers will probably pick it up just because, not that it's so great, but it just goes with the topic. I could have easily written a very negative piece, but I deliberately made that a really positive piece and it makes me, you know journalists aren't objective; it's really, that's not, that's such a myth. Because I did talk, 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 81 year old guy who had, they lost their home in Lakeview and had to buy a new home, but they said, "who would have thought at 81 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 you know very destructive if I didn't. I felt kind of an obligation to the city.

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

GC: I hope. Well that's -- most of my older daughters they 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? And I said well, I'm writing about New Orleans and I think that's making a big impact. That's where my contribution could be.

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

GC: No, I guess not. Well, all the kids really loved being here and I mean I love it too, but it's easier than me being a kid I think. They don't have to worry; they don't have the

worries. And, so they hate hearing me if I would ever say anything negative; and I think I mentioned before of my son, if we would complain, he would say, what are you complaining about? You have it so good. And things like that.

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

GC: Well, I didn'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, which, you know, at that point, there's more street lights, and I guess there's definitely more things open, but the base, the problems are still, and the pace of recovery is still not that much different from January, but I didn't want to write about that. Yes, 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 kind of 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 so I, I haven't really gone out and sought it, but I certainly would be interested and actually one of the most exciting things -- I had done this big article, a cover story, on my return to New Orleans and on the website, this is in the Baltimore Jewish Times they have, you know, 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 like the best thing he had read. He also evacuated and he said the best thing he had written about the storms; that made me feel really, really good.

RH: What was in the article?

GC: I merely talked -- It was a personal piece, I mean and then what was going on but I kind of used the metaphor of my home as destruction downstairs but then if you went upstairs, it was good, that you kind of had to look for the ups and then forget about the downs and it worked. (laughter) And that's how I still feel now. Sometimes I'm very optimistic and sometimes I'm really like, just so depressed about the city and its prospects.

RH: Do you, is any of your responsibilities you feel 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. You know I was just preoccupied with you know, oh stresses and; I think Ari, he 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 as, so 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. That was -- As I said I didn't cook, that was my way --

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

GC: Yes.

RH: That you want to share.

GC: Well, it certainly, just to have his companionship and friendship is wonderful and just -- yes, 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 kind of changes or difficulty that you can kind of 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. Because my - he's 15 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, I mean, I know he was affected by the storm, but we're attributing it more just to teenagerhood. But now actually within a half hour of our coming back in June, he had friends, whatever, and he has a lot of friends here which is great, and it's nice he can be more independent here. I mean he bikes a lot of places, he always has summer jobs, so that's been very good, and then there's school besides.

RH: What's your vision for the future?

GC: Well, you know, as good days, I guess that's what makes me so upset because the potential is so wonderful and being able to start anew, wipe off, 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? Well --

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 bringing -- enabling people to come back is very important. Jewishly, I think it's doing pretty well. You know, perhaps, I think the synagogues have become stronger, and there's, I guess there is a real commitment to rebuilding and to be 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, that I hope the safety of the community improves, the crime; you worry, will there be enough physicians; the whole medical, 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.

GC: yes.

RH: Do you have -- Do you guys, 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; this was our fourth evacuation since 1998 but, no, I mean, hopefully I will get it together to you know, I guess we did move like photo albums upstairs. I mean I think I would, I would definitely to get more important papers together. I didn't even know who carried our flood insurance you

know, things like that. A friend of mine actually took the transcript, 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. So those kinds of things I definitely would take; I don't know what else, you know.

RH: And 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, yes. I mean I think, and 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. Yes, no, I mean that was wonderful, it was like coming home in many ways, so, if I had to do it, that would be it.

RH: And 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 but, well I guess just getting through the past year, and it was hard. You know the struggles now, and you know hassling, I mean our contractor had some asbestos [start?] last week; it's just those, it's like the daily hassles I guess and stresses of life, kind of more, I guess more, it's just, 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 and fortunately, I mean, they, he immediately offered to pay for it, which was fine, but just, that, I really had to hold it together not to -- because the computer wasn't working, it was just like the normal things in life and then that, and then in general, so definitely, you know more stress. And I also find it with like salespeople, I just have no patience, I really have to try to control myself.

RH: So 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 wanted to go.

GC: Yes, exactly. (laughter) Thank you. Yes, because fortunately, you know I mean we didn't lose anybody or really anything that was, 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: Are -- 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, so this, 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, you know lost and changed.

RH: Made that a little more present.

GC: Yes, exactly.

RH: Any of your priorities different?

GC: Well, I guess definitely that I haven't been as good at keeping this resolution but realizing that friends and family really are the most important and that, trying to keep in better touch with everyone, but I haven't been as good as I would want to be. But yes, realizing the material stuff doesn't matter, and 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, you know, is very important. And I guess I can sublimate a lot, like 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, you know 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. You know like when I talk to people about the house, they all, everyone else seems really upset, it doesn't, I said, but no, we only lost the first floor, you know so, I'm really not upset. Obviously it would have been better if it didn't happen, but you know, 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, has, it doesn't sound like you think it was their own fault?

GC: No, no, no, I mean, you know obviously people didn't have the means and then and there were people who stayed and maybe they were foolish to stay, but nobody deserved to be treated like that even if you know, 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 and actually Margot led them. There's a small book

about, 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. And many, a lot of the sessions, you know 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. And I think now it's kind of settling back into where you know we schmooze a little, but the main thing was to you know, 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'm loving this. (laughter) I get a chance to tell it. But I think, you know, 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, you know he's just telling, people are still just talking about it.

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

GC: Right, and that was wonderful to see everyone; it seemed so normal and pre-Katrina like, everyone just enjoying art, very -- a lot of hip kind of 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's just, you know, not always is. So yeah, that.

RH: I feel like we've have 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 just -- I think this is a wonderful project that you're doing and you know, collecting all this I hope. I don't know if people are ever going to listen or but I think it's really important to keep it, 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 I hope; 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, but that it could happen in Baltimore, it could happen in Miami, shoot 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, no I agree, and I think that's what ultimately was so upsetting was the failure of the government to respond to an emergency, you know 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 point or 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, it's not something you can rely on.

RH: What about -- What are you most proud of with your family? And yourself?

GC: Well 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 and Hannah was able to use her artwork and she's done, she's actually just done another painting on Katrina and was able to use that to get out her feelings and you know and cope with it. You know fortunately we didn't have any real traumas but, yes, I guess, being able to go on with

new lives, well you know, and not being, not having our lives dominated by Katrina even though we do talk about it all the time, but, you know, being able to go forward, I guess.

RH: Well thank you.

GC: Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]