# Lee Isaacson Transcript

ROSALIND HINTON: This is Rosalind Hinton interviewing Lee Isaacson at his home and the home of his parents originally, 3504 Broadway in New –

LEE ISAACSON: Napoleon. 3504 Napoleon Avenue.

RH: Oh, Napoleon. I'm sorry. 3504 Napoleon Avenue. I knew that. I showed up. In New Orleans, Louisiana. Today is August 30, 2007. I'm conducting the interview for the Katrina's Jewish Voices Project of the Jewish Women's Archive and the Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life. Lee, do you agree to be interviewed and understand that the interview will be video recorded?

LI: Sure, yes.

RH: Okay, so let's just begin with the year you were born and tell me about your marital status, your children, such as that, first.

LI: Well, I was born in 1956 here in New Orleans. We moved to this house when I was seven or eight years old. So this house has wonderful memories for me. After Katrina in 2005, my wife and I decided to buy the house from my parents, who decided they couldn't fix it up and maintain it after Katrina. I grew up in New Orleans in this house and left this house when I went off to go to college. Subsequent to that, I lived in various parts of the greater New Orleans area, on Camp Street, then Lakeview. Then I moved out to Metairie. That's where I lived when Katrina hit. I've been married for three years. I have no children of my own. But my wife has two children and four grandchildren.

RH: And tell me a little bit about your family's history. How far do you go back in New Orleans and such as that?

LI: We go back several generations. And I don't have the family tree, but I can tell you that my father's uncle bought this house in the '40s, right around 1940. So this house has been part of our family since then. So long before I was born this house was part of the Isaacson family.

RH: And your Jewish and your general education?

LI: I went to Newman in grammar school and then to Country Day to graduate from high school, and then I moved on to the University of Texas. I was confirmed from Touro Synagogue but never received my bar mitzvah.

RH: Were they doing – I guess they were doing bar mitzvahs for boys then.

LI: They were doing a few bar mitzvahs, but most of the people that I grew up with weren't having bar mitzvahs. It was considered too much work, and Judaism was not an important part of our lives.

RH: Okay. So would you say –? What was the center of your social life then in New Orleans if it wasn't the synagogue?

LI: My friends in high school – grade school and then high school. So Newman being a more predominantly Jewish school, I had more Jewish friends when I was at Newman. When I moved on to Country Day I suppose you could say I allowed what I had of Judaism to lapse, and I didn't pay much attention to it except as a heritage more than a religion.

RH: So, Country Day is another private school, and it's a little more Protestant?

LI: Country Day is a private school in Metairie. Yes. It certainly has several Jews there but not nearly as many as Newman.

RH: How would you describe how the Jewish community functions and interfaces with the larger community in New Orleans?

LI: I see most people don't even know whether I'm Jewish or not. I typically don't pay much attention to whether they're Jewish or not. My social life does not revolve and really never has revolved around the Jewish community. I'm very proud of my Jewish heritage. We have our Passover Seders, but I'm not a synagogue goer. I don't actively practice.

RH: What now is the center of your New Orleans life?

LI: I have a broad circle of friends that I socialize with. I'm active in community projects. Most recently, the Broadmoor Development Corporation, which is our neighborhood community development block corporation, designed to try to rebuild the neighborhood. I do go to the Jewish Community Center, which is a wonderful organization. I don't think of it that much frankly as being a place for Jews to congregate as much as a nice place for people to be.

RH: And you do some work out of there too.

LI: I'm the computer consultant for the JCC. That gives me more ties to them that I wouldn't otherwise have.

RH: Let's get into the Katrina story. Because I feel like so much of yours is the recovery story too, and I don't know the first part of it. So when did Katrina come in on your radar screen and your wife's radar screen, and what did you do?

LI: Well, we had been watching, of course, since Katrina was formed off the coast of Africa and as it traveled across the Atlantic Ocean and into the Gulf of Mexico. We watched it like we watched every hurricane. But with a little more apprehension, perhaps than your typical one. And maybe three days before the hurricane hit is when we began

serious preparations for our evacuation. We boarded down the house we were living in in Metairie. My parents who lived in this house, were out of town, so I came over here and boarded this house down as well as I could. We packed all of our important possessions into my car, and we drove – two days before Katrina hit, we drove to Vicksburg, Mississippi, where we met –

RH: So that was Saturday?

LI: Saturday.

RH: Saturday.

LI: And there we rendezvoused with Nancy's son, daughter-in-law, and two of their children, and we had one of our friends along for the ride as well. We stayed in Vicksburg for a couple of days. Of course, Katrina also hit Vicksburg, unfortunately, but not as hard as it hit New Orleans. After the second day in Vicksburg, we had no running water. We had no electricity. We realized that things were not going to get better quickly in Vicksburg and that [in] New Orleans, the levees had broken, so there was no chance of going back to New Orleans any time soon. So from there, we evacuated again and went to Austin, Texas.

RH: And what were your thoughts when you were watching? Did you watch TV from Vicksburg? Were you looking at what was going on?

LI: We watched CNN about sixteen hours a day. It got very old seeing the same pictures over and over again and desperately hoping for some new information, desperately looking at every camera angle trying to get a feel for what part of the city they were filming and whether it was someplace that we could recognize. Of course, the film crews from CNN and the national crews didn't know the city well enough to really identify it. I remember they said there was a fire burning two and a half miles southwest of the Superdome. Well, anybody who knows New Orleans has no idea where two and a

half miles southwest of the Superdome is; it's just not how you describe things in New Orleans. So we really had no clue whether our house in Metairie had survived. We had assumed that it was in better shape than this house. And we were correct.

RH: So you had some idea that this house in the Broadmoor area on Napoleon was damaged?

LI: Broadmoor floods more often than our house in Metairie did. But in 1995, the SELA [Southeast Louisiana] project was completed, and that project was a major drainage project along Napoleon Avenue and along Claiborne Avenue which provided significantly enhanced drainage to this area. As a result, there was very little flooding in Broadmoor after 1995. There were a couple of floods which caused maybe a few inches of water in our basement, but nothing significant. Prior to that, there were floods in 1980 and 1982 that were major plus several other minor floods. Pretty much whenever it started to rain hard, we would worry about picking things up in the basement that were valuable and bringing them upstairs. Since '95, we had gotten very lax because we felt that we really weren't going to flood anymore. Of course, Katrina changed that. The pumping system couldn't help because the pumps were out. And there was no place to pump it to because the canals were full, and so even had the levees not overtopped, I think perhaps there would have been some flooding in our neighborhood. But when the levees overtopped, we knew that – I mean when the levees broke, we knew that there was little chance of this house not sustaining significant damage.

RH: So, how did you make the decision to go to Austin?

LI: It's where I went to college. The University of Texas at Austin. I still have good friends that live there. I knew that anything closer than that – there were a lot of New Orleans evacuees as far away as Houston. There was not a hotel room to be had. So we knew that if we didn't get far enough away, we would be struggling to find a hotel room. We knew we had friends there, so I'd rather stay at a friend's house than a hotel.

RH: So, how long were you in Austin?

LI: Well, once we got to Austin, we talked to my parents, who were already in Atlanta for a bar mitzvah. And, of course, they couldn't come home, and they were staying at a hotel room in Atlanta. We suggested that they fly from Atlanta to Austin and meet us there. At which point, we rented a three-bedroom apartment on a three-month lease. My parents basically stayed there for the entire three months. My wife Nancy and I came back and forth between our house in Metairie and the apartment in Austin. The apartment in Austin was a wonderful refuge at a time when the entire city was broken down when there were no services. We were without running water and electricity, and we would come into the house, and we would try to spend a full day there cleaning the house. We even spent the night in a house with no air conditioning, electricity, or running water just because we had too much work to do to be driving back and forth to Austin.

RH: What was it like the first time you came in, do you remember?

LI: We came in when the Jefferson Parish president announced a window of four days that he would allow people to come to their homes, recover their possessions, and determine how much damage was caused to their homes. When we got here we realized that we had a lot of work to do. We had to tear out all the carpeting. We had to cut away the sheetrock to let the walls breathe. We had to throw out everything that had been on or near the floor, which had grown moldy. Perhaps the worst experience was cleaning out the refrigerator.

RH: You didn't just move it out there without opening it?

LI: We considered that. We actually had two refrigerators. We decided that we could probably salvage – since it had been less than ten days since the electricity had gone out and it had flooded, that we could probably salvage it. It was not a fun experience trying to clean out the freezer, I can tell you that. Most people talk about the meat that has

decayed in the freezer. My worst experience was trying to clean out frozen blueberries. When I touched the Ziploc bag of frozen blueberries it exploded everywhere, and so we had blue walls all over our house – all over the kitchen.

RH: Oh my god.

LI: It was amazing how far blueberries travel when it explodes.

RH: So your house flooded in Metairie.

LI: The house in Metairie got about four inches of water, which might not sound like very much. It might sound like an inconvenience. But when four inches of saltwater sit in your house it crawls up your sheetrock, and it causes everything in the house to mold, and of course, the lack of electricity and air conditioning makes that significantly worse. So we came into a house that smelled terrible and had mold growing up the walls and moldy carpeting that had to be torn out. And of course, there's nobody in town to help you do that. You have to do it yourself. So you learn to go – we left town, came back with all the tools that we needed, including hammers and screwdrivers and pliers and a big garbage can full of tap water that we hauled into the city to use for cleaning, because we had no running water, and you can't clean a house without running water.

RH: Wow. That was a smart thing to do.

LI: It was all we could do.

RH: How long did this process take? You were going back and forth between Austin and New Orleans.

LI: We were going back and forth between Austin and New Orleans. I would say we spent about – over those three months, we probably spent about half of our time in New Orleans and half in Austin. Austin was a refuge from the madness of New Orleans, but

we knew that we were really doing nothing except sitting around watching CNN in Austin, and we really needed to be in New Orleans getting our lives back in order.

RH: Were there other people you tried to get in touch with when you realized you couldn't get back in the city?

LI: I had a friend who was a contractor, and he had a permit, and so I was able to slip in with – once we were at the house in Metairie, I was able to have him pick me up, and I slipped into the city with him to see what my parent's house, this house, looked like at the time. We were very, very fortunate to discover that there was no damage on this, the main floor of the house. It was only the basement that got flooded. Now, the floodwaters actually reached the ceiling of the basement, but not the floor of the main floor. So, we were very fortunate in that sense. Probably another six inches of water, and certainly, this house would have been devastated. It was about seven feet of water. Had it been seven and a half feet, we would have been in terrible shape.

RH: I was going to say. Because we're up pretty high.

LI: Yes. We have pictures I can share with you. The people who were in the neighborhood actually took pictures of the house with the floodwaters coming up to the top step of the porch.

RH: Wow. And so, did you lose a lot of valuables in the basement?

LI: Well, at the time, they were my parents' valuables, not mine. Yes, there were some family photos and things like that that we lost. We had gotten accustomed in the 1980s when we had floods that things that we left in the basement typically got flooded. Of course, we lost one of the cars that was left here. The other car was amazingly at the New Orleans Airport parking lot and was just fine. It didn't flood there.

RH: So, what was your next move? What were you going to try to do when you saw your parents' home?

LI: The decision my father made was that the home was salvageable, and he went about attempting to fix the home. It's difficult at my father's age, and he's eighty-two, to go through the processes post-Katrina of trying to fix a home. I think it's hard for people to visualize that to the extent that there are contractors out there who will install – who will first of all gut your home, tear out all the sheetrock, tear out all the moldy products in the basement, and then contractors who would install new air conditioning and new electrical systems and new heating systems and new plumbing and basically rebuild an eighty-year-old house, an eighty-seven-year-old house I should say. It is very difficult post-Katrina to find the people and know that they're trustworthy to get them to do it. After about a year of – maybe six months, excuse me – of my father trying to do that, he basically threw his hands up and said I'm going to sell the house. And at that point, my wife and I stepped in and said, "If you're going to sell the house, we'll consider buying it." And it was probably one of the hardest decisions I've ever made.

RH: Tell me about that. Why?

LI: I have great memories of this house. And I think when you grow up in a house, and it's always there, you assume it's always going to be a part of your family. At the same time, I had built – I had worked my way up to where I had what I felt was the perfect home for myself and my wife to basically retire in Metairie. So we had to really decide do we want to be Metairie people or New Orleans people. And I think that with the hurricane, we realized that if we were going to live in the greater New Orleans area, we really wanted to live in the heart of New Orleans and be part of the rebuilding process, not a suburbanite looking at the city from the outside.

RH: Wow. So, then you decided – I guess both you and your wife were back here in the city. Were your parents back in the city at that time?

LI: Yes. So my parents moved back to this house while we were living at our house in Metairie. At that point, they decided to buy a condominium at the Carol Apartments at Jackson and Saint Charles. So we coincided our move-in with their move-out.

RH: I think part of the interesting story here is also this commitment that you made to rebuilding the city by moving back into the city. And so what happened there?

LI: I felt that either you go headfirst into the process of rebuilding, or you decide to move on with your life and perhaps move to Austin. There are several beautiful cities that we would not have minded living in. So we decided, "Do we want to be New Orleanians or abandon ship?" And if we weren't going to abandon ship, it didn't make sense to look at it from the outside, from the suburbs, we had to come back in. It gave us the opportunity to move into a house that we considered to be a much larger house and a much more fun house for us, as well as having wonderful neighbors. The amazing thing we find about the inner city is that there's a sense of community, that people know the neighbors, attend neighborhood association meetings, and are very interested in what happens in the neighborhood. Whereas in the suburbs, I find people are more worried that nobody's walking across their lawn or parking blocking their driveway.

RH: So, in some ways, it's been a surprising, enriching experience.

LI: Oh sure, sure, any experience like this, I think. I would never want to go through it again, but I'm certainly proud that I've been through it and proud of what I've learned and experienced from it.

RH: How did the evolution begin with getting involved with the neighbors and the Broadmoor community here?

LI: My father, first of all, was very active in this neighborhood. He was on the Broadmoor Improvement Association board. And regularly, they had meetings here at the house. So I think that people associated our family with Broadmoor. My brother Walter is very

active in the national arena as the vice chair of the Louisiana Recovery Authority and a Broadmoorian with a vested interest in Broadmoor, trying to help rebuild New Orleans and rebuild all of Louisiana.

RH: I know that this association in the Broadmoor area has been like a model for the rest of the city and that it was a community – I think at one point – they said can't come back. Is that right?

LI: Absolutely. That was a pivotal moment in the history of Broadmoor when the Bring New Orleans Back Commission announced its plans for New Orleans and said that some parts of New Orleans needed to be green space. And apparently arbitrarily chose Broadmoor as a green space. Had they done their research properly, they would have discovered that Broadmoor was not the appropriate place to describe as green space. By green space, they meant a park but also a drainage area where when it flooded, they would just – rather than pump the water out, they would let it accumulate in holding ponds. So that was their plan, was since we didn't need as big of a city as we used to have, let's not rebuild part of New Orleans, and let's rebuild other parts. While that might be a good plan in theory, the trouble is no politician is willing to tell his constituents that their part of the city is not being rebuilt. So the Bring New Orleans Back Commission felt that it was their job to do it, and they arbitrarily chose Broadmoor. They couldn't have made a worse choice. [laughter]

RH: So why was it such a bad choice?

LI: Well, because Broadmoor has a history. Broadmoor is a community that's diverse culturally, ethnically, economically, and people here know each other and feel that they live within a very close-knit community. So, as a result, the reaction within Broadmoor was quite large. People came out in large numbers, and we had our first Broadmoor Improvement Association meeting post-Katrina in our side yard with tents, and hundreds of people showed up, all of them very upset. And making sure that they were not going

to be told that their house was going to be destroyed to make a holding tank or a tension pond for part of the green space of New Orleans.

RH: So, about when was this?

LI: I would say that this would be maybe six months after Katrina, perhaps four or five months after Katrina.

RH: And so they just – this neighborhood just decided no. It was that simple?

LI: We had hundreds of people who were willing to do whatever it took, march on City Hall, march on the state capitol, march on the White House, whatever it would take to say that Broadmoor was not going to be a green space. Fortunately, the politicians backed down quickly when they realized the power of the Broadmoorians.

RH: And so what did they do? What else happened here in this neighborhood, in the Broadmoor area?

LI: Well, we formed what's called the Broadmoor Development Corporation, which is a community development block corporation, and I'm proud to say I'm a board member. We brought in consultants, we brought in students from Harvard and Bard and several other prestigious colleges, and they all did research and analysis to number one, prove that Broadmoor was a viable community and, number two, develop a plan for what needed to be done to revitalize Broadmoor, and number three, to get grant money to supplement Broadmoor where the city and the state and the federal government weren't going to be picking up the tab because while Broadmoorians have a lot of pride, we don't have that much money. Broadmoor is not a rich part of New Orleans. The rich part is the Garden District and along the river, the part that didn't flood.

RH: Do you think that's a coincidence, or that was just fate?

LI: I don't think it's a government conspiracy. I think that people – the older homes were built there because that was a smart place to build. And we didn't need the Corps of Engineers to tell us that. The city was originally built by Indians, and we watched where the Indians built, and the Indians figured it out because they watched it rain, and wherever the rain drained off quickly, that's where they figured they'd build their tepees, I suppose. So, in any case New Orleans was built, and the French Quarter and along the river both toward the Chalmette direction and to the Faubourg Marigny and beyond as well as uptown in that, what we call the sliver by the river.

RH: So, this is pretty ambitious. Tell me about your role in all of this if you wouldn't mind.

LI: I don't mind at all, and I have to say that I have not been the key player by any means. We have LaToya Cantrell is the Chairman of the Board of the Broadmoor Development Corporation and the Broadmoor Improvement Association, and she's been the driving force. Hal Roark is the Executive Director of the Broadmoor Development Corporation. I'm a board member, and I give my input where I feel it's appropriate. So we have managed – I guess our key projects as a committee have been to reopen an elementary school known as the Wilson Elementary School, to reopen the library, the Keller Library, and to build a corridor in the heart of Broadmoor so that the children will go to school, the adults can go to the library, people can meet and have social gatherings, and make it feel like Broadmoor is not just several people living next door to each other but a community that actually interacts and gets to know each other.

RH: So, do you think it's more of a sense of community than even before the storm?

LI: Yes, much more. I think the storm has brought Broadmoorians together where we recognize each other – "Oh, that's the person who lives down the street" – but now we actually get to know each other. We have Walk Broadmoor nights where we all walk around and get to say hello and greet our neighbors, and everybody who doesn't want to

walk it or can't walk it will typically sit on their front porch and wave and applaud us on as we walk. We have nights out against crime. Broadmoor has amazingly remained relatively crime-free, where other parts of New Orleans very near Broadmoor have had serious crime. There have been no murders in Broadmoor.

RH: Wow. So what is your vision for this area?

LI: For Broadmoor or for New Orleans?

RH: Well, for Broadmoor first. And then we'll talk a little about recovery in the larger part of the city.

LI: I think Broadmoor is going to have a long struggle, and New Orleans is going to have an even longer struggle. The problem we're facing – we have the resources, we have the money, we have the plan, and we are unable to implement it because of the bureaucracy and the red tape in the city. Because for example, we have the money to rebuild the Keller Library, but that's on city property, and until the city figures out how to put it out to bid and gets the bid out for the library, we can't build a library. Well, we've been trying and trying and trying and calling them every day, saying, "Where do we stand on this? Where do we stand on this?" They are so disorganized, and the city government is so out of control that we simply can't get anything accomplished. So it's very frustrating. What can we do about it? We're not sure. We've been discussing it at our meetings. We would like to do it without the city and say we'll just do it our own way, but you can't really build a public school or public library without making it a part of the community, without making it a part of the broader New Orleans system.

RH: There's been other plans too. The unified plan. Did yours feed into that?

LI: It did. Since Broadmoor was the only one to have the plan of their own, the rest of the city hired a consulting firm whose name I can't remember, Lanier or something like that, who developed their plan and agreed to incorporate the Broadmoor plan into their

plan.  As part of the typical government bureaucracy, they somehow forgot to include the Broadmoor plan in their plan, and we had to march on City Hall and protest, and they had to announce at the meeting – “We’re sorry, Broadmoorians.  It was a simple misunderstanding, we meant to include the Broadmoor plan.”  So after we spent hundreds and hundreds of hours in different committees developing plans for rebuilding the infrastructure and developing the community and developing the school and developing evacuation plans in case the next hurricane came and all these other committees that we formed and a complete  250 – I believe it is – page plan outlined for what Broadmoor’s recovery was going to be, the city forgot to include that in the broader UNOP plan, Unified New Orleans, United New Orleans –

RH:  Did they really forget?

LI:  They really did.  Apparently, it was a pure oversight.  I don’t believe there was anything malicious.  I think that simply it’s chaotic at the city level.  They don’t have the structure in place to rebuild the city.  I’m hoping that’ll change, but I’m not holding my breath.

RH:  So that gets into another question.  There’s a couple of parts to this question.  When you watched TV and saw all these people left behind, what went through your mind in the immediate crisis of Katrina with the people in the Dome and the Convention Center?

LI:  I was in a state of shock.  I was devastated.  I had seen crises like Bangladesh and Sudan, and since then, the tsunami.  But never anything like that so close to home to actually recognize the place, recognize not some of the people on the rooftops, although I certainly could have.  Both my aunt Margie Bissinger and my cousin Allan Bissinger, who I believe you interviewed, chose to stay behind during the hurricane.  Of course, we were worried to death.  And part of our watching TV was we’d lost contact with them during the hurricane and didn’t know if they were dead or alive.  So but watching – I think it sent a – basically, it made me very angry and very frustrated.  I’m used to being

somebody who, when I see a problem, I take the bull by the horns and fix it, and here was something that was way over my head that I couldn't fix, and that, for whatever reason, the powers that be weren't fixing it. What we needed, from my point of view, was all the resources of the federal government to come in immediately in the same way they – if they can do it in Baghdad, they can certainly do it in New Orleans.

RH: So you felt at that point it should be whose responsibility? City? State? Federal?

LI: All three are to blame, and who you blame more doesn't really matter to me. I think that it should have been handled by the President of the United States, and there were things that should have been done by Mayor Nagin. There were things that should have been done by Governor Blanco. And if they weren't done, the President of the United States, I think, has the obligation to say I don't need to wait for the governor to sign some form telling me to do it, I'll do it. If people don't like it, we'll deal with it later. I think we didn't have an evacuation plan prior to the hurricane. We never planned on how to get – when the mayor ordered a mandatory evacuation, I knew that's all fine and good for those of us who have cars, and say okay, if it's time to go, it's time to go. But so many New Orleanians don't have a way of getting out of the city. There was absolutely no plan for getting them out. As far as I'm concerned there should have been, and still should be, a very basic plan where every school bus and every public transportation bus in the state is – and if necessary from neighboring states – is apprehended and taken by the National Guard or whoever we need to, the Army, the Navy, whoever we need, and they should use those to evacuate people from designated spots around the area, be it New Orleans or wherever the hurricane is, wherever the hurricane is coming I should say. And no plan like that was in place. So there was no plan for evacuating, there was no plan for rescuing after the hurricane, and there's no plan for rebuilding per se. So the whole process is just an infuriating example of how inept government can be at all levels.

RH: So, do you find because of the way the recovery – I mean because of the way the crisis was managed, do you find racial tensions more intense or do you find – or less intense than prior to Katrina?

LI: I think there's always been racial tension in New Orleans. I think some of the African-American community believe that the canals were bombed in order to push the Blacks out. I think the majority of them are smart enough to know better. I don't sense within my framework of friends and neighbors who are white and African-American that there's any more racial tension. I would say perhaps there's less because we've gotten to know each other better and trust each other more.

RH: So, are you involved in cross-racial community action now?

LI: Not specifically engaged in racial issues. LaToya Cantrell, who's the executive director of the Broadmoor Improvement Association and the Broadmoor Development Corporation, is an African-American woman. Beyond that, I'm working with African-Americans, whites, and Hispanics [on] our Boards, and we don't see race as being a key issue. It occasionally comes up in discussion, especially with respect to politics of whether a white person could get elected to a citywide position, and therefore we might as well focus on the African-American leadership to help rebuild the city. But that's not in any kind of racial sense, just a realistic understanding of New Orleans politics.

RH: So, is the Broadmoor area –? Is it pretty interracial?

LI: Yes, it's sixty percent African-American, forty percent white and other ethnicities. That's pre-Katrina. I'm not sure how that's changed post-Katrina. I suspect it's about the same.

RH: It's interesting to me. Do you think it became a green space because it was a primarily African-American community, I mean, in the initial plan? Or do you think it was because people forgot that they'd fixed the drainage and just perceived it as a flooding

area?

LI: I think not only did they – well, first of all, I don't believe in massive government conspiracies because I think the government is so inept that they can never have a minor government conspiracy. I do believe that their calling it a green space was ineptitude that not only did they not remember that the SELA project had pretty much eliminated the flooding in Broadmoor, I think they still don't know it. I think still the powers that be hear us explaining our position, and they tend to nod their heads and smile and not really listen.

RH: Like you're children who don't know any better?

LI: I suppose. I don't have children of my own, but yes, I suppose that's an analogy. I think what I find surprising as I travel around the country is that the majority of Americans don't realize that Katrina didn't destroy New Orleans, that the federal levees breaking down destroyed New Orleans. Katrina destroyed Waveland, Mississippi, where my wife's home was. We lost our home in Waveland, Mississippi, and we blame that on Katrina. But Katrina didn't destroy New Orleans. The levees breaking destroyed New Orleans. Had the levees not broken, we would have gotten minor flooding in our basement just like we did in the 1980s, and we would have dealt with it.

RH: So, what is your vision for New Orleans? And what do you hope to see?

LI: What I hope to see? I hope to see major revitalization. I hope to see the billions of dollars promised by the President and Congress and the billions of dollars in grant money by private corporations actually put into productive use to rebuild New Orleans better than it was before the storm.

RH: And what does better mean to you?

LI: Schools that teach our children, 21st century libraries that aren't just a place with old dusty books but have computers and conference centers and perhaps a coffeehouse and perhaps offering engaging discussions amongst neighbors of ways to collaborate on projects to improve the neighborhood. I think it all starts with education. New Orleans is the worst in the country in education. And that was pre-Katrina. We all saw Katrina as somewhat of an opportunity to rebuild the educational structure from the ground up. As a result, we've opened up charter schools all over the city, and there are some very promising things coming from the charter schools. I certainly hope that they come to fruition, that we actually see significant improvements in education and in test scores just as a basic gauge of how well we're doing with education.

RH: But Wilson now is not a charter school, is that right?

LI: Wilson is a charter school.

RH: It is a charter school. Oh, okay, I didn't realize that.

LI: And Wilson School Board – my wife is a school board member, so I'm only indirectly involved as a Broadmoor Development Corporation Board member, where my wife is directly involved as a Wilson School Board member, as a charter school, and they've engaged the – excuse me – lightbulb –

RH: Yeah, it's like a corporation to run it, you mean? And which one it is?

LI: Who invented the lightbulb? Help me out here.

RH: Edison.

LI: Edison. Edison Schools. [laughter] I drew a blank on that.

RH: Oh, you really meant the lightbulb. I thought you said the lightbulb wasn't working.

LI: The lightbulb people. Yeah, there was a lightbulb there, but it was Edison's lightbulb. So Edison Schools has had great success throughout the country in setting up charter schools that have worked, that have outperformed all the other schools in the area and have a basic curriculum that has succeeded for them. And so the Wilson School Board, I think, very smartly chose the Edison Schools to set up the school in Broadmoor. Unfortunately, there's no building. So while we've got the Wilson School Board that's designed to reopen the Wilson School and set up the elementary school in Broadmoor, unfortunately, the city can't get the school's physical premises even gutted, much less ready for children to come to it. So we've had to put our Broadmoor school, known as the Wilson School, outside of Broadmoor. Hopefully temporarily. That's another one of the frustrations.

RH: So, is it in a public-school building outside of Broadmoor?

LI: Yes, maybe a mile or a mile and a half outside the region of Broadmoor. So it's as close to Broadmoor as we could get, and we're hoping that it's a temporary facility and that we'll have a permanent facility at the original Wilson School about four blocks from here.

RH: So what is the delay in getting –?

LI: Again, it's the city. It's the city's job to repair those school buildings. While they're requiring that private individuals gut their homes, and they've had a deadline for that, which has come and gone for gutting your private home, they have not gutted the schools. As a result, there's mold growing in them. They're not secure. So people are coming in and stealing. They're stealing all the copper, all the air conditioning systems. Millions of dollars' worth of air conditioning has been destroyed in order to gain hundreds of dollars in copper at the recycling plants.

RH: Wow.

LI: It's a horrible situation.

RH: So tell me about what's the problem with the city. Do you have an idea?

LI: It starts with the mayor, who is – the best thing I can say about him is that he's not a crook. But he lacks the competence and the skills to be a coalition builder, to bring people to the table, and to find ways to solve major problems. We elected him mayor, and I voted for him in a time when we had a reasonably sound city prior to Katrina. And I certainly did not vote for him for reelection after Katrina when he so badly boggled the evacuation and so badly boggled the relationships with the Governor and the President in trying to find ways of quickly getting the city back running. So I blame the mayor, I blame the governor, and I especially blame the President.

RH: And do you have specific things you blame them each for? Or it's just –?

LI: Sure. [laughter] Lots, but I'll try to keep it brief. The mayor should have developed a plan for evacuating the city. The mayor should have made people aware of that plan. The mayor should have used every resource at his disposal. And many people, I believe, would have given him resources. As I said earlier, I think the plan for evacuation, if we had taken every public transportation bus and every school bus in the state of Louisiana and said we're apprehending that, and we're taking that under martial law and using it to evacuate New Orleans, people would have understood that if they were in Shreveport, because there's a hurricane in New Orleans, they would have to drive their children to school that day. People would have understood that they would have trouble getting to work on public transportation because we're evacuating New Orleans. So between the mayor and the governor, we could have come up with a plan for evacuation. Instead, they just crossed their fingers and hoped it wouldn't happen. And when it did happen, they threw their hands up and said, "Get out of town. We don't know how. Just do it." And I think that's a crime. I think that if nothing else, we could have used those buses to evacuate people to the airport, where we could have used the

Army transport planes to get people out of the city, just get them to Baton Rouge, and shuttle them back and forth. Instead, people were relying on the private system, which there's no way it could have handled anything. On the other side, what we did do right was for people who did have cars, the contraflow on I-10, I think, worked very well. People pointed at Houston during Hurricane Rita and said, "See, they know how to do it." They had no clue how to do it. If Hurricane Rita had hit Houston they would have been in worse shape than we were.

RH: Yeah, they were saying it was pretty – their evacuation of Houston didn't go as smoothly as the New Orleans one.

LI: They didn't use contraflow and didn't bring in extra gasoline until well after the fact when cars were broken down all over the highway because they ran out of gas. The trouble with Houston, being a more wealthy community than New Orleans – I know we're digressing here – was that when a family of four evacuated, they typically evacuated with three cars. [laughter] So, they filled the highways with cars because people didn't want – one of their worries was they didn't want their cars to get flooded, so they better get them out of town.

RH: I didn't realize that. That's interesting. Large carbon footprint, that evacuation. So what about the federal response?

LI: What federal response?

RH: Okay.

LI: I blame President Bush more than I blame Governor Blanco and Mayor Nagin. I do believe that the Mayor and the Governor were overwhelmed. But the President basically sat back and did nothing and assumed that Chertoff and Brown, who had no concept of how to run an emergency management agency [and] were throwing their arms in the air and doing nothing productive. This didn't affect me personally, thank goodness. But for

the people who were stranded at the Convention Center and at the Superdome, they should be so angry. They should never ever forgive the federal government for how they were abandoned. That we would not – I mean that we would provide better protection to the people in Sudan or in Baghdad, which I certainly believe in helping our neighbors throughout the world, but that we'd do so much better of a job there than we did in New Orleans is shocking to me. Basically, New Orleans got abandoned. I think that the attitude by the federal government was: we told them to evacuate; if they were too stupid to evacuate, why should we help them? I'm not saying they said that. Of course, they didn't say that. But that's the attitude I feel they had.

RH: How did you and your wife manage during the most stressful times? How did you take solace, cope? What were some of the great stressors to you?

LI: I think the worst stress was the first – was the night of the hurricane sitting in a bed and breakfast in Vicksburg, Mississippi with Nancy's son, daughter-in-law, and two grandchildren and watching CNN news and watching as the levees broke and watching the devastation. Having that sense of absolutely no direction. It's so much easier in a crisis when you can do something about it. When you can at least try as hard as you can to fix the problem. But all you can do in this situation is to sit and wait and do that in a bed and breakfast in Vicksburg, Mississippi, and wait and wait and then eventually decide that you've got to somehow start figuring out how to rebuild your life. It started by saying we've got to get far enough away that we can see this clearheaded, and that's when we went to Austin. Once we were in Austin I felt like at least we could see clearly. We were in a place that provided us with a lot of comfort, a lot of support. We ended up volunteering while we were in Austin for the evacuees who were brought in from the Superdome who had gone through the hell that was in the Superdome. We figured, as New Orleanians, we could give them some level of comfort if we were there when they were at the Austin Convention Center, as the evacuees came in from New Orleans, to be able to listen to their stories. So, we volunteered for two weeks at the Austin Convention

Center and listened to other New Orleanians tell their stories. At one point, when they were serving them cold turkey sandwiches, my wife and I said, “These people need Popeyes.” [laughter] And we went to Popeyes and bought like twenty boxes of chicken and brought it back to the Convention Center, and the poor New Orleanians said – you could just see in their eyes that finally, they had something that they could connect to as being part of New Orleans.

RH: Wow. So what kind of stories did you hear at that moment, were you hearing from people, what were people – what were they needing, what were they saying to you and your wife?

LI: Many of them had no idea where their other family members were, whether they were alive or dead. There was total chaos, where there were several different sources for letting people know whether you were alive or dead and where you were. I think we tend to forget that when your answering machine is out and your email is out and nobody knows how to reach you that there are thousands of people you’d like to say, “I’m alive and well and living in Austin, and am at this shelter,” and really, they had no resources. I say email. Of course, these people typically didn’t have email addresses. But they had no real way of letting their children or their parents or whoever know that they were okay. That was part of what we did, was try to get them in touch through the American Red Cross. I’m also angry at the American Red Cross, who I think did a pitiful job in New Orleans and in Mississippi in trying to help after the hurricane.

RH: Explain that.

LI: They had no presence in the most devastated areas. We went to my wife’s home in Waveland, Mississippi, and the churches and synagogues and other volunteer organizations were there giving out food and giving out water. And everybody that we spoke to in Austin said, “Well, we gave to the Red Cross. Is that helping?” And we saw no presence of the Red Cross at all. From what I’ve heard they –

RH: You mean in Mississippi?

LI: As well as in Louisiana. But Mississippi is where I think people needed it at that time the most. They were there trying to recover their possessions, which had been just literally wiped off the globe. Their houses were wiped off the globe. Where I talk about how bad it was to have four inches of water in Metairie or have seven feet of water in Broadmoor, our house in Waveland, Mississippi was literally blown off the map, the entire street was gone.

RH: Really?

LI: Yeah. When we went there to try to find it, not only could we not find the house, we couldn't find the street that the house was on. It was buried in rubble. So we dug through rubble for two hours trying to figure out – is this a piece of rubble? Is this a photograph of anybody that you recognize? No, I don't recognize it; it must not be ours. When we thought we were in the neighborhood of our house. Probably after about two hours of wandering in wider circles around the area we thought the home was, we actually found something that belonged to us. Now we couldn't find the street that she lived on, Aiken Road, because there were no streets anymore. Everything was just buried under several feet of rubble. So all you could do was walk across rooftops. And, of course, rooftops were on the ground. To try to get to your area. And there were nails and all sorts of hazards. It was a horrible process to go through.

RH: When did you get over to Waveland? When were you able to get into Waveland?

LI: Really, they didn't stop us from – like they stopped people from coming into New Orleans, and they had the National Guard surrounding the city, so while we were in Metairie, we had to, as I said, had to get my friend who was a contractor to help us get in just to see the status of our house. But we went to Metairie soon after that, and there was no – I'm sorry. We went to Waveland soon after that, and we could have gone

sooner, there was nobody securing Waveland, Mississippi from looting or whatever, which was probably smart because there's really nothing to loot. Sure, people went through your rubble, but there was nothing valuable.

RH: So, was this your wife's childhood home?

LI: My wife's from Boston, Massachusetts. She and her first husband moved down to Mississippi when she was in her twenties, and after her divorce, I met her, and she was living in the house. After her divorce, she bought the house in Waveland and moved into it by herself, and that's when I met her.

RH: Wow. So she had lived there, I guess –

LI: She had only lived there about four years. But that certainly – it was the only home she had had on her own that she hadn't bought with somebody else. So it felt like an important piece of her life.

RH: Have you been –? Okay. Why don't we actually stop here, and we'll start up again on tape two. [Telephone rings.] Perfect timing.

LI: Perfect timing, absolutely.

RH: Okay, yeah, make sure you get that.

[End of Track 1]

RH: This is Tape two with Lee Isaacson for Katrina's Jewish Voices. You were talking about – we were talking about Mississippi. I think you're the first person that I've interviewed that might really have a sense of the reconstruction in Mississippi as a comparison to Louisiana. I wonder what your thoughts on that are.

LI: I think clearly the federal government was more willing to give support and money to Mississippi than to Louisiana because Haley Barbour was not only a Republican but also a personal friend of President Bush. And Governor Blanco and President Bush never saw eye-to-eye.

RH: So do you think that the more money – I mean, that they had more of a similar vision to how the reconstruction should go, so they released more money to Mississippi or –?

LI: I think that there was political – I think that Haley Barbour probably called the President of the United States on the phone, on a private phone, and they worked out what he needed to get done. As it is, FEMA has invested considerably more per person per capita for the person damaged, if you will, to Mississippi than to Louisiana, and it's gotten through, even though Congress has allocated billions of dollars for the Katrina recovery in Louisiana, it hadn't been spent. There's roadblocks where they're so concerned that there's going to be mismanagement of it, that there's going to be graft and corruption, that they won't let any of it get spent without all these very complicated processes we have to go through. I appreciate that because Louisiana has a history of corrupt politics and corrupt politicians, and we have some now, like William Jefferson, who should resign. He's just a horrible, horrible example of corruption in Louisiana. But nevertheless, we can't allow that to completely block the rebuilding of Louisiana, and that's what's happened.

RH: Do you have any personal experiences with that type of red tape?

LI: The red tape that I'm seeing is in getting the library built, the school rebuilt. The Road Home program, I feel, did a reasonably good job, and it's taking the huge brunt of the criticism. I say that from a personal experience. They did a good job for me, whereas I do know that other people, for whatever reason, have been calling them every day and calling them every day, and they simply can't get any good answers from them

and aren't getting their Road Home money. So I'm not sure I'm answering your question.

RH: Well, you are. Was also the insurance when you made a claim in Mississippi, was it different than –

LI: Well, the big issue is whether Hurricane Katrina caused wind and hail that knocked over people's houses and flooded or caused a flood that destroyed people's houses. Most people had wind and hail insurance but inadequate flood insurance, and the insurance companies both in Mississippi and in Louisiana have been fighting to say well, if you had flood insurance, we'll pay that, but wind and hail doesn't kick in because you were flooded first. Typically, people, including people with mortgages, had a minimal amount of flood insurance because they weren't expecting a flood, and they had a lot of wind and hail insurance. So after many years of paying considerable insurance premiums, they got nothing or very little from Katrina. And that's you can say unfair, but it's hard to blame an insurance company for looking out for the interests of its stockholders. When a horribly devastating situation like this comes about, it would be nice if they would say well, we know the letter of the contract says that specifically if it's caused by flooding and then by wind and hail that we don't pay it, but we're going to pay it anyway. But they aren't doing that. I think your question is, is it handled different in Mississippi than Louisiana? I don't know. I think that the Mississippi Insurance Commissioner filed a suit against them, and they made an out-of-court settlement, whereas the Attorney General in Louisiana is just about to file a suit, but it could take many, many years to get resolved. But I don't know. I'm not an expert on that.

RH: Well, I didn't know if in your personal – if you were able to get your insurance there –

LI: My wife was very fortunate. She had insurance [for] both flood and wind and hail, and she got paid off to the max on both of them. So we were very fortunate. Many people had only wind and hail, or basically, they had only what their insurance agent

recommended or only what their mortgage company required, and so the real liability, I think, for the insurance company might be with the agents who didn't recommend the flood insurance.

RH: Are there any other differences between Mississippi and Louisiana that you've noticed in the recovery that are worth mentioning?

LI: I don't know. I see Mississippi as coming back. Right now, our land in Waveland, Mississippi, is not coming back. We're not rebuilding on it just yet, but we plan to soon. The area of Mississippi that Nancy's house was in is an area where many people from New Orleans had summer homes. So Hurricane Camille hit Mississippi maybe forty years ago, and Hurricane Betsy hit New Orleans maybe fifty years ago. Camille destroyed the Gulf Coast of Mississippi, but it came back relatively quickly in five to ten years. But I think that the recovery there will take much longer because the recovery there was primarily from people who lived in New Orleans. So now that New Orleans has been destroyed by Katrina, Waveland and Bay Saint Louis aren't going to be coming back in a hurry because that's where people from New Orleans rebuilt their homes – rebuilt their summer homes or their weekend homes. So if they don't have a home in New Orleans, they certainly aren't worried about building a weekend home in Bay Saint Louis or Waveland.

RH: Right, yeah. And how about your work? What kind of work do you do? How has that been since the storm?

LI: I'm a computer consultant, and I help small businesses, typically businesses who can't afford or don't need a full-time MIS [Management Information Systems] director, somebody on staff who comes and runs whenever the printer won't print or you can't get on the Internet. And that's my job, is to come figure out what's going on and straighten out their problems. My work has changed pre-Katrina to doing routine maintenance and fine-tuning and upgrading computers as needed, to right after Katrina, when I did get

back to New Orleans, the first thing I attempted to do was salvage people's computers who had been underwater. And, of course, salt water wreaks havoc on a computer. And there's virtually no way to recover data from a saturated hard disk. Trying to recover data off of backup systems and rebuild networks became my immediate concern when I came back to New Orleans from my evacuation to Austin.

RH: And what kind of things did you help the JCC get –?

LI: The JCC was in good shape. They're in what you call the sliver by the river, where they sustained some wind damage. They weren't flooded. Their computers weren't destroyed. And so they were not a crisis situation. We were also very fortunate that we had developed an evacuation plan for them, and one of the rules that I've learned is not to take a backup of your data when you evacuate but to take your server when you evacuate. They had to come back and get their server, and then they could set up, with just their server, a temporary JCC in an alternate location. In their case it was in Houston. While I was in Austin, I actually went there and helped them with that. So that was nice.

RH: Yeah? So did you witness anything else with the Jewish community as they worked in the recovery of how it was going?

LI: I've worked with other Jewish organizations in terms of their computers. No, I would say that I've not been an active participant in the recovery. I've worked with Temple Sinai [and] with Jewish Endowment, but as their computer consultant, not as a member of the Jewish community per se.

RH: Have you been observing or want to comment on how you think the Jewish community conducted itself during Katrina from what you could see?

LI: I'm not an expert on that. I can't really say. I think that as they usually do in crisis situations, they come to the aid of their neighbors, be they Jews or otherwise. I think that

it brings out the best in some people and the worst in others. In the Jewish community, I think it brought the best in a lot of people.

RH: What do you think are some of the ongoing challenges in New Orleans for the recovery?

LI: Well, many people still don't have their homes, still are displaced, still living in Houston or Baton Rouge or wherever else they evacuated to, and simply don't know what they're going to do with their lives. I still feel slightly displaced. My business is different than the way it used to be. My home is still in need of some repairs. But I feel like I've gotten my life back in order. I think the hardest part is for people who really are – I know what it was like for three months to have my life turned upside down and to not know where I was going to live and to not know what I was going to do for a living and to not know where my life was headed, just to be in an absolute state of misdirection. I think the hardest part must be people who, two years later, still feel the same way, still don't know where they're going. Three months was long enough to feel like that. So those are the people that I really have the most empathy for.

RH: Do you think that's a problem? I mean, do you think that that's been a problem with the recovery? That it's shameful that two years later, people don't know where they're going to live? Or do you think that's just the way it goes? And I guess that's about resources.

LI: It's a difficult question. For me, I'll find my own path. I don't need somebody to find a path for me. And so it's a very difficult question. If I say, I evacuated," I don't want to say, "Why didn't other people evacuate?" It's like saying, "I don't smoke. Why should other people smoke?" You have to say that other people make their own decisions in life. And the fact is we have to, as a society, accept people and accept decisions that they make for what they're worth – for what they are. I think some people generally lack direction, they wait for somebody else to tell them what to do. If I needed to, I was

prepared to set up a computer consulting firm in Austin. I was prepared to consider all sorts of options in my life, if New Orleans was just going to be bulldozed and not come back as a city, which we considered a possibility, I was ready to move on elsewhere. But so many people, I think, are used to working for the man, working for the boss, and just doing what they're told to do to get by, and they expect that there's some sort of a contract that says if I'm willing to just go to work every day, work hard, mind my own business, not get in trouble, that I'll live a decent life. I think for so many thousands of people, that basic philosophy of living life has been turned upside down. They now need to find a way of drawing from within themselves to get their lives back in order. They simply have never done that and don't know how.

RH: So do you think resources and like – I mean, a certain level of wealth or class has been a part of the recovery? I mean people who have more resources versus people –

LI: Sure. I think if you have money it's awful easy to say, "Oh, we'll just go buy a house in Austin." Where so many people in the greater New Orleans area live paycheck to paycheck. So when they get on FEMA-subsidized housing, they don't really – it's not just the money, but money is a large part of it. They don't have the inspiration and the direction and the focus to know what to do with themselves, to know how to rebuild their lives from the ground up. It's difficult enough for them to get out of bed, go to work and make enough money to pay the bills and pay the rent. When their life's turned upside down and they're told they have to find a place to live in a new city and a job in a new city and get started all over again, then they simply don't have a means of doing that. It's outside of their zone of what they do.

RH: So you see that as one of the great challenges for the city? Is it to repopulate the city with –?

LI: Well, repopulation – do you put people there and then try to find things for them to do? Or do you find things for them to do and then get the people to do it? I think we

need a working city. I worry that we need the right people here, and it's a little scary because there's racial implications and racial overtones to saying – one of the city council people said if you're the one – I'm paraphrasing it, but if you want to sit on your butt and watch soap operas all day, we don't need you back in the city; we need people in the city who are going to rebuild the city. I basically agree with that, but I understand how people were upset by that. So I think it's very hard. [For] people who want to come back, I'd like to find jobs for them. I'd like to get the city to be a bigger – not bigger, but a better city than it was before.

RH: The question I just had vanished from my head just now.

LI: Let's take a break for one second if we can, because may we?

RH: Yes.

LI: OK, because I see a – [break in tape]

RH: I was wondering if you think in the recovery, some people have been left behind that probably could use more resources, that more resources should be allocated for them – I don't know. Renters has been one issue. People who were in subsidized housing, who have a harder time just coming back to see things.

LI: That's a very difficult question. I don't necessarily have a good answer for it, but I'll try. [laughter] I'd love to say yes, we should give everybody a whole lot of money. The fact is we know – you know and I know that there's a limited amount of money. So, if you give money for people living in Houston who are saying I really want to come back, I really want to come back, but I need to live here for longer because I can't figure out what I'm doing with my life, the more subsidized housing you give New Orleanians who have moved to Houston and are just sitting there and not putting their lives back in order, the less money there is to really rebuild New Orleans. So, while I have a lot of empathy for people who are displaced, people who don't know how to get their life back in order, I

guess rather than continue subsidized housing in other cities for displaced New Orleanians, I would like to see some sort of programs, be they government or private, to help people find a way to rebuild their lives. Not just to give them a place to live. I think that's probably the fallacy of the welfare system, and the fallacy of all the government subsidies is that while it's a nice thing to give people a helping hand when they need it, when they stumble, when they get laid off from their job, or when they find some devastating problem like Katrina happens to them, they need some sort of process to get their lives back in order. If you do it on an ongoing basis for years, and it's been two years since Katrina, at some point, you have to say, "No. The money that we're spending on giving you an apartment in Houston needs to be spent on rebuilding the infrastructure of New Orleans instead." And so we have to draw the line. So yes, a lot of people have been left behind, and I feel a lot of empathy for them, and I don't want to be cold and merciless, but I also want to say we want to rebuild New Orleans, not just disburse a bunch of money to former New Orleanians to sit around and try to figure out how to rebuild their lives.

RH: Do you think if more housing had been made available here that maybe some of the money to bring people back –

LI: Well, housing in the form of FEMA trailers, no. I think FEMA was an absolute disaster. I told you I blame the mayor and the governor and the President. I also blame FEMA directors and Homeland Security directors, and I don't think that – I don't have much confidence in Homeland Security. I'm shocked that we haven't had a terrorist attack since 9/11 in this country, but in any case, I don't believe in putting Homeland Security in charge of FEMA. So Michael Chertoff and Michael Brown are equally to blame in terms of being totally inept in their preparation for and response to Katrina. I'm forgetting your question at this point.

RH:  I think I was just wondering if there should have been more housing here, and you said not FEMA trailers.

LI:  For the price of a FEMA trailer –

RH:  Are you surprised that so few houses have been rebuilt in New Orleans?

LI:  Yeah.  For the price of a FEMA trailer, they could have built a little Katrina cottage and had permanent housing instead of temporary housing, and many people would have been happy living in those homes.  I wouldn't want those in the French Quarter or the Garden District, but I think that New Orleans East – I won't say the Lower Nine, but certainly New Orleans East and Lakeview could have benefited from something like that.  Broadmoor could have benefited in some areas.  So, all the disasters with these wasted FEMA trailers that are sitting in Arkansas because they were stuck in the mud and couldn't get them out, and the FEMA trailers that are here but they couldn't plug in electricity or get running water to them, or they're here, and they don't need them anymore because they finished rebuilding their house, but nobody from FEMA will come and take them away, so the whole process has been just a total disaster from the beginning.

RH:  Very expensive disaster.

LI:  Extremely expensive.  And so people talk about how much they've already spent on New Orleans, and I guess that's the original point of the question I was trying to make, is what we really need is more money spent on rebuilding New Orleans, not on giving people FEMA trailers and not – buying FEMA trailers that aren't given to people, and not on providing long-term housing for former New Orleanians who are living in Houston.

RH:  Have you had a lot of –?  Have your networks and relationships changed any since the storm?

LI: I've made some new friends, especially neighbors, people in the Broadmoor community. But no, I've managed to keep a close-knit group of friends that I stay in close contact with. A few of them have left New Orleans, and I stay in touch with them. I suppose that'll fade away.

RH: Are you angry with people who've left?

LI: No. Everybody's got to do – I think everybody's got to do what they have to do for themselves. I prefer for good people to stay, and I can tell them that I prefer for them to stay, but of course, they aren't there for me; they have to be for themselves first.

RH: So when you say you think after a while, you stay in touch, but you think that'll fade, why?

LI: I think I tend to – I have a few close friends that I don't see very often that I speak to on the phone, and when we get a chance to see each other, it's wonderful. But many of my acquaintances – many of my friends I realize that the depth of the friendship is more somebody to do things with than somebody that I could sit on the phone and talk to for hours long-distance or that I'd be willing to fly across the country to do something with them.

RH: You mentioned that your work has changed considerably. You explained a little about initially recovering data and that type. How is it different now, your work?

LI: One of the problems I've experienced is that people have become much more price-sensitive, cost-conscious post-Katrina. People in New Orleans maybe don't have the same amount of money they did prior to Katrina and they worry about spending it, and they worry about making investments. So I see people making tentative investments in the greater New – in their businesses in New Orleans. If they're not sure their business is going to survive – and one of my good friends just decided today to shut down his business, but if they're not sure their business is going to survive, they're not going to

invest in new computer equipment. They're going to be hesitant to say how much is it going to cost for you to come figure out why so-and-so can't print to so-and-so's printer when they can print to their own printer just fine. So that kind of concept – it makes people say, "How much is that going to cost?" So I become more aware of that when I make suggestions to my clients. If I know that they're very sensitive to – "Oh, this would be convenient, but it would cost a couple of hundred dollars to get it done. Is it worth that much to you?"

RH: So your business, to be blunt, has it taken a hit?

LI: Oh, sure. So I lost three months' worth of work. When I was in Austin, I did nothing. When I came back, the people that needed me needed me on an emergency basis, and they couldn't afford to pay very much because they had taken a hit as well. And everybody was waiting on Road Home money and waiting on insurance money and waiting on whatever else – waiting on getting paid by their customers, many of whom had gone out of business.

RH: Are you optimistic about the business climate in New Orleans?

LI: Yes. I'd like to be more optimistic. I think New Orleans will come back. New Orleans already has come back. But it has a long way to go.

RH: What do you think is going to bring it back? What kind of an economy? I mean, what mix of businesses, I guess, is what I'm curious –?

LI: Well, the big industries right now I think we need to focus on first, and that's tourism, oil and gas, and moviemaking. The moviemaking is new. But it's a great concept. I would love to bring more of that. New Orleans, as a tourist destination, has been hit badly by Katrina. People don't want to have a fun weekend or fun week in a city that's been hurricane-devastated even if you tell them, "Oh, don't worry, the part of the city that you're in wasn't devastated." It doesn't make them feel much better. And New Orleans

had tried to change from being a weekend destination for people to get drunk on Bourbon Street to being a week destination where people would come, bring their families for, like say Friday through the following Sunday, a ten-day destination, and they could go to the aquarium, and they could go to the zoo, and they could take a riverboat cruise, and they could – we're building an insectarium – things to bring a family rather than a bunch of drunken college students to New Orleans would help tourism dramatically, because you're not going to build a city on thirty-two-ounce beers for a dollar on Bourbon Street. [laughter]

RH: That's an interesting way to put it. So you'd like to see that come back first. Your livelihood, one of the reasons I ask, seems to be connected to small businesses and more entrepreneurial ventures.

LI: Absolutely. And that's been a decision. When I started my business, we tried to focus on large corporations. The fact is they typically have their own MIS director. We weren't in that much of a position to be helping their computer person, their MIS director. Frankly, I just didn't enjoy it as much. I connected with the small business environment, where people were watching their money carefully and people had a very close pulse on their business, whereas in a large corporation, you typically see them spending money because it was in the budget. Government as well. I did some work for the city of New Orleans years ago, and I was shocked when they would call me and say, "We have $25,000 we need to spend before the end of the year. What can we buy?" I'm like, "What do you need?" And they really said, "No, you don't understand. We don't really need anything. It's just that we have to spend this money before December 31st, so what should we buy?" And I would have to go figure out what they could use and spend it. I didn't like that. I didn't like the whole process of feeling like the bureaucracy just needed to spend money so they wouldn't lose their allocation for next year. That's how I felt both big businesses and government were, and that's why I focused on small businesses.

RH: So, do you think there can be some plans to encourage small businesses in New Orleans in the recovery plan?

LI: Yes. I would like to see that happen all around. I would like to see the money that the federal government is eventually going to infuse into the city to be used by local businesspeople to not only build the buildings but the infrastructure, rebuild these pothole-riddled streets, and [have] the Sewage and Water Board fix the sewage system, which is just in devastating shape, and some of the sewers are a hundred years old, built when the city was first built. So there's so much to do to rebuild New Orleans. I would like to see it green. I would like to see houses that have solar and that are energy-efficient and that are insulated better. So many things we could do. If we're going to rebuild the city, let's do it right.

RH: You talk about oil and gas, but what about the fact that you say you want green, and then you say the oil and gas business, how does that work together?

LI: Oh, I suppose there's a slight conflict there.

RH: [laughter] Little contradiction.

LI: Well, if we're going to have – I would like to see clean, affordable energy replace oil and gas, but to the extent that it's not doing it, if we're going to drill for oil and gas off the Louisiana and Texas coast, I'd rather see the jobs in Louisiana than in Texas.

RH: You think it's possible to do?

LI: Oh, sure. We used to have them – One Shell Square used to be filled with employees from Shell. And they basically moved all but a small part of – and not just Shell, but all the big oil companies, have left a small contingent of people in New Orleans and in the New Orleans area and moved everybody else to Houston. That's great for Houston but not for New Orleans. I think perhaps it's because we're not a business-

friendly climate in Louisiana.

RH: Okay. I remembered my question that I'd forgotten a little while ago. And it's what would you like – what are the things you'd like to preserve in New Orleans?

LI: Certainly, the architecture, the food, and the music. We have so much in the city that I think a lot of people in Cleveland or wherever don't appreciate. They just see it as being why rebuild a city under sea level, which is only partly under sea level. But that's what they perceive. The rest of the country perceives that New Orleans flooded because it was under sea level and that we didn't build our levees right. The Corps of Engineers didn't build the levees right, but they don't typically see that. New Orleans is the only European city in North America, or at least in the United States. It has so many cultural things that make it unique. As I said, the food, the music, the architecture. And yes, there's things I'd like to see go, like the corrupt politics, like the "I'll scratch your back if you scratch my back" approach to getting jobs done. But if we could find a way of preserving that part of New Orleans that is so beautiful and getting rid of things like the bad politics [and] the worst education system in the nation, then I think we could be an amazing city for the 21st century. I don't care about being – we used to be the tenth-largest city in the country. I don't care about that. We never will be, and I don't want to be. But I would like to make it a special place to come, a special place to live.

RH: I know that you say that you're not really – you identify with Jewish heritage and not necessarily religious aspects of Judaism.

LI: Yes. Right.

RH: Are there any values that you operate out of that you think are either family – you get from your family, your heritage, or that are religious values that people might call religious values that motivate you?

LI: Well, I guess I'll start by saying I'm an agnostic. I think that religion –

RH: That's not an atheist.

LI: I used to be an atheist, but I think I've backed away from that. I think that religion has caused so many more problems than it's solved. Judaism amongst them. I think that the fighting of the Jews and the Arabs, like the fighting of the Catholics and the Protestants in Ireland, like the fighting of the Shiites and the Sunnis, is just horrible. To the extent that if there is a God, he never would have wanted to see people fight over which religion was right and kill other people because they had a different religion. So I think that to the extent that religion goes that way, including Jews who hate Arabs, I think that religion is bad. I think that Judaism holds a lot of strong values, community values, family values, the Ten Commandments. I tell the story of when I became an atheist, is when I heard the story of the Passover story and how the angel of death came and if you didn't have the blood of a lamb on the door, then the angel of death would kill the firstborn child. And I said, "If there is a God, he could have come up with a better plan than that." That's just such a horrible, cruel story that would make any schoolchild who heard that for the first time, I think, just convulse – their stomach would convulse by the whole idea. To the extent that we believe in being good people, not just good to other Jews but good to the world, and accepting of a culturally diverse world, we need to accept that some stories from our history are bad and that we can say well that was the way it was back then, but that's not the way it should be. I'm not sure I'm answering you very well here. I'm trying to give you a broad perspective on my take on religion. I'm proud to be Jewish not because of the stories of the Old Testament but because of what Jews have accomplished over the centuries, because of how they are the most learned, are the most respected, and have made the most serious accomplishments in so many different broad areas. I suspect that most Jews, like me, laugh at the story of Genesis, and it's funny that it's the born-again Christians who scream that we shouldn't teach evolution in schools because it goes against the Old Testament. Jews would look at that and say that's ridiculous. We knew better when we heard it, and we certainly know better now that God did not create the world in seven days and that we really did evolve from

monkeys or from the common ancestor of monkeys, that we will not, as Jews, allow ourselves to be offended by that kind of education.

RH: So a certain kind of a critical eye already at the stories in the Bible that learned Jews have always had? Is that what you're saying? You always knew it was a story and not really science?

LI: I suppose. Although the story of Moses and Passover and the angel of death, when I heard that, I didn't think it was a story, I heard that as being a God who was malicious and vindictive, and it made me walk away from my religion for a long time.

RH: Are you proud of being a Jew in New Orleans?

LI: Sure. And I think the Jewish community in New Orleans has a lot to be proud of. And I'm certainly proud to be a part of it. So while I avoid synagogue, I go to synagogue when my nieces and nephews get their bar mitzvahs and bat mitzvahs, and I'm very proud to sit in the synagogue and watch them go through their ceremonies, I think it's a very wonderful – the tradition of it and sitting through a Passover seder and going through the process of saying the blessings, even though I don't – the blessings don't have much meaning to me, the family ritual has a lot of meaning to me.

RH: Have there been any family rituals or observances just in your community or network that have become more important after Katrina than perhaps were before?

LI: I would say no, I'm not a ritualistic person. It's funny, as you were asking that question, I remember that where I'm sitting right now is where our Christmas tree used to be. So we were part of that group of Jews that grew up with a Christmas tree in the living room and believed in Santa Claus. So now what I see is that my cousins' children grow up and have their bar mitzvahs and their bat mitzvahs and take their religion very seriously, and if somebody says, "Merry Christmas" to them, they will say, "I'm not Christian," which I never would have said. I would have said, "Oh, thank you," and

thought, “Gee, I’m glad I don’t have to miss out on Christmas even though I’m not Christian.”

RH: That’s interesting, actually. That you make a point of saying I’m not Christian.

LI: No, I wouldn’t say I’m not a Christian. My nephews and nieces, if somebody were to say, “Merry Christmas” to them at Christmastime, would say, “I’m not Christian,” and they would be proud of saying, “I’m Jewish. I’m not Christian,” where, to me, when I heard people say merry Christmas, I just heard it as being just a generic greeting of that time of year, and it wasn’t in any way an implication that I should be observant of Christ or of Christianity.

RH: Okay. Now I understand. Are there any other concepts or teachings that come to your mind that have guided you in the last year? Or the last two years, I should say?

LI: That’s a tough question. I have to think about that. Can I get back to you on that one? [laughter]

RH: Sure, sure. Have you, in the past two years, felt more vulnerable and felt more like you needed help?

LI: Yes. I don’t know about help per se. One of the things that happened to me post-Katrina that really upset me was I got arrested. I got arrested for – after being pulled over for allegedly changing lanes without using my turn signal, I got arrested for an alleged speeding ticket from three years ago in a neighboring parish, in Jefferson Parish. It was totally uncalled for. The ticket had already been taken care of. But the records of this bureaucracy were so messed up that they didn’t have it as being resolved. As a result, I spent six hours in central lockup in New Orleans and got angrier and angrier and angrier. What I discovered while I was there was that this was nothing. My six hours compared to the average day before it got resolved of eighteen hours. If I didn’t have money and didn’t have a lawyer and didn’t know judges, I would have had a much, much

worse experience. What I see as the process of rebuilding the city, and I was very adamant, and I called my council people, I called the – I wrote letters to the Chief of Police and to the criminal Sheriff and said, "If you want to rebuild the city, you can't take good citizens like me who are very active in the community and alienate them from the process of rebuilding and make them fear the police and fear authority." I'm still planning to work within the system and still work very hard to rebuild the city. But when things like this happen to you, it really changes your whole process. And I feel like there was no real response to it. My council person sent me back an email saying I agree, and so Arnie Fielkow, who's a councilman-at-large. But beyond that, I got no response from anybody. I feel like that kind of almost a rape to have been just hauled away on my way to an important appointment, wearing a coat and tie and thrown in jail and having to wait four hours before I could make a phone call was such an invasion of me as a person that I truly just couldn't deal with the system for several days after that. It's happening. And what shocked me about it was not that this was some isolated thing that happened to me but that I now – when I told my story, other people told me similar stories of what had happened to them.

RH: So what happens when you start to see that it's not an isolated incidence and that there's other people like you, or who have fewer resources than you, and they're being picked up? What's your response on a larger level?

LI: Anger, empathy for the people, frustration. I think the whole process is just that what it turns out in this situation is that the city can make more money – and I don't know the details of how they do it – by arresting people for small crimes than by going out and actually catching the people that are committing murders. Prosecuting a murder is very complicated and expensive, and prosecuting a speeding ticket is much easier to prosecute, and therefore, they'll get money quicker [and] faster, and the city is, of course, in dire financial straits.

RH: Wow. So I have some other questions. What do you feel like you've learned about yourself in this entire two-year process? Are there any new things you've learned about yourself?

LI: I think I've always wanted to be active in my community, and I think one of the good things from Katrina is that it gave me a purpose and a direction and a realization that I could be active, that I could actually make a difference. Making a difference – I used to think the only way to make a difference was to vote, and I had become disillusioned with the whole voting process because, for example, we can't really help elect a President because the state of Louisiana is always going to vote Republican. If you're a registered Democrat as I am, your vote is pretty much a waste; there's no point in even bothering. I still vote, but I am also very much aware that that's just a ritual that I'm going through. I realize that if I'm going to make a difference in my community, it has to be doing something besides voting. And so that's where I think that perhaps the whole process of moving from the suburbs back to the inner city, joining the Broadmoor Development Corporation, and trying to be an active participant, and not just in that corporation, but in neighborhood meetings, and helping my wife in her participation in the Wilson School board, those are things that I see as being where I'm trying to make a difference and feeling like at some level I'm doing something besides just making a living.

RH: So, are there any things that you took for granted before that you just won't ever take for granted again?

LI: Many things. I think that's a wide-open question. But yes, from the simplest things like running water. One just assumes that when you turn the tap, water should come out and that you should be able to drink it and bathe in it. And having a place to live. I'm very fortunate in that I don't live paycheck to paycheck. I can only imagine what it would be like to be displaced from your home and have no money. But going through the process of evacuating and coming back home and trying to figure out now what do I do,

how do I rebuild my life was just an extremely powerful process for me and made me a stronger person.

RH: Do you have any changes in your worldview now?

LI: Sure. You asked me earlier if there was some – the implication of your question, I think, was there some government conspiracy. I now believe that the government is totally incapable of conspiracy because they can barely tie their shoelaces.

RH: Have you become a Libertarian?

LI: No. I'm still a Democrat. But I'm a Democrat that believes that I think the Democratic Party needs to move beyond spending more on government social programs to solve people's problems. Because government is the least efficient, least effective provider of services, and it should be a provider of last resort. We would be much better off giving government resources to private sector forces or synagogues and churches or whatever that could spend the money – I know that gets controversial – but that could more effectively put the money where it needs to go. I understand everybody's fear of President Bush when he talked about let's put money into churches to help do social programs. But at the same time, I say at least you need to give it to somebody who has a finger on the pulse of how the money's going. After having watched FEMA and other government agencies blunder through this recovery, I just feel like there has to be better ways of doing it.

RH: Are there things that you're grateful for now?

LI: I'm grateful for everything. I'm grateful for my family, for my home, for my community, things that you would maybe take for granted that you could – that I'm back here in New Orleans and that I'm recovered to a sense of normalcy. You still wake up and forget certain things you don't have, like maybe one of your favorite restaurants isn't here, or maybe the library isn't open anymore, or things like that that you took for granted, and

you just would only use them occasionally. The fact that you can't use them saddens you. Nevertheless, I'm so grateful that we're back to a sense of normalcy right now in the world and in the city, at least in our small part of it.

RH: Does your sense of home –? Could you describe what your sense of home means to you now that you've been misplaced, you're back in your childhood home?

LI: Well, the home is, of course, people and a place to live. My wife, my immediate family, my parents. Having all that together is more important than four walls. But this house, of course, is very important to me as well because it is the house I grew up in. So it has some very deep roots in my heart. But beyond that, having my friends – I play tennis and having a place that I can play tennis nearby, knowing where the grocery store is relatively nearby, and drugstore, and having the basic things that I need where I'm not displaced, where I don't have to ask somebody, "How do I do this?" I remember the process of trying to move into an apartment in Austin, furnish it, stock the refrigerator, and make it into a working home for my wife and my parents. It was such an amazing process of saying we're going to make a home for three months, so we're not just going to live in a hotel room; we're going to rent an apartment, and we're going to go buy inexpensive furniture that we know that we're going to give away when we're done and we can go back home. And some of it we'll take with us. So that process. It's amazing when one just has to rebuild a home short-term.

RH: Did you rely on any –? Did you get involved, or did your parents get involved with the Jewish community in Austin at all?

LI: We did. One of the requests my stepmother had was to be near the Austin Jewish Community Center, so we did that, and we did go to the Jewish Community Center a few times.

RH: And did they give you any help? Or did you ask for help?

LI: They did, actually. We basically said, “Look, we hate to go out and buy silverware and pots and pans. If anybody wants to donate it, we need it for three months, and we’ll give it back.” I mean, we were proud, but we said we figure – people asked what can we do to help, and we said we need pots and pans and silverware. And sure enough, the next day they – I think one person actually just gave it all because he said, “I’m not even going to ask for collections. I’m just going to give them everything they need.” And we still have it. Of course, we have our own silverware again, but we kept some of it, mostly as – some of it we liked, and some of it was just a nice memento of that good experience we had.

RH: Wow. So again, back to this vulnerability question of now that you’ve been on the receiving end, are there things that you would say – as a person who’s generally been on the giving end, are there different ways you would do it? Or are there things you think this is the most important? If somebody’s vulnerable, this is what you need to do.

LI: Hold that thought. I’m going to answer this man here, and it gives me a chance to think about it. [break in tape] And I have.

RH: Okay. Now the question I was asking was if you were in a position to give, would you do it any differently than you did prior to Katrina?

LI: Yes, and I have. There have been a lot of people in our neighborhood who are somewhat, I hate to say, migrant workers who don’t have direction in their lives. Not migrant. That’s not the right word. We’ve given a lot of them help. We’ve loaned them money. We’ve given them jobs to do that we could have done ourselves. They’ve done very good work for us. So, we’ve added to our sense of community by knowing handymen around the neighborhood who can do little odd jobs for us. It’s helped us out quite a bit. I think people, when they need a helping hand, you need to listen to them and hear what they really need more than just giving them a twenty-dollar bill. If they’re just looking for – frankly, if they are just looking for a handout, I have no real interest in them.

Now if there's a woman who's eight months pregnant in desperate need, that might be a different story. But typically, just the bum who's looking for a handout, no. I think that so many people have so many – it's wonderful to be able to tell my story because so many people have incredible stories to tell, and I think that nobody wants to hear them. So the ability to listen to people is perhaps the most important thing that I could say I've learned from this. Generally, I didn't take the time to listen because I felt time was money, and I was losing by taking the – if it wasn't something that specifically pertained to how to fix their computer, I didn't have time to listen to it. I always felt that people who were therapists for a living, it was amazing how they could do that because I would always want – when people told me their problems, I'd want to say, "You think you got problems? Let me tell you about my problems." So I have learned I think to listen better, to hear what people's needs are, and to try to help people in any way that I can, not just financially, including sometimes finding people work. That's been a nice process. Is that answering your question?

RH: Yeah, that's a really nice answer, as a matter of fact.

LI: Thank you.

RH: And really, just the last question, and you partially answered it, is just to be more direct and see if there's a fuller answer. Has Katrina sent you in new directions? One new direction you said is the activism.

LI: Yes. I've learned the only way to build the city is through activists and neighborhoods, not through elected officials. It would be nice if we had elected officials. Frankly, I think Mitch Landrieu would have been an excellent mayor, and he would have done an excellent job of building coalitions to rebuild the city. But we don't. And it doesn't look like our – I hate to say I'm disillusioned with democracy, but I don't think that the average voter in New Orleans is intelligent enough to really understand what their best interests are. And in that sense, democracy is a failure in the city. Not much we

can do about it. We aren't going to overturn democracy. But we're going to do things like appoint recovery czars, which is almost a frightening concept. Why do we need a recovery czar instead of community leaders forming committees and coalitions to make decisions and then designated people or elected officials or whatever going out and just – and doing it? But that isn't happening, so I think we need activists within the community or a recovery czar or somebody to make things get going, to get them going in the right direction.

RH: Is there one memory that you have from these past two years that's a fond memory?

LI: Sure. There's been several. I'll tell you one story that I don't think my wife will mind me telling. Is that the day I told you that we came back to Metairie to try to rebuild our home and tear the carpet out and tear the sheetrock out and clean out the refrigerator, well, of course, after twelve hours of doing that it got dark and we were supposed to leave the city, but we smelled like all the stuff that was in our refrigerator and all the mold that was in our carpeting and all the sweat that we had built up over the day. So, we took that fifty-five-gallon trashcan full of clean water, and we took turns. We put a little bleach in it, and we took turns bathing in it in the dark outside of our house. We just started laughing about did we ever dream that we would be standing naked outside of our house bathing in a garbage can? And we both just got a wonderful laugh out of it. It's like this is just what you have to do sometimes to make it happen, and we did it. So we're proud of it. Proud that we were able to get through it all and make it all work.

RH: That's a great story. If there's anything you want to add? This has been a great interview.

LI: It's been a pleasure talking to you. Giving me a chance to vent about some of the things I feel and to just express my feelings and emotions about it all. So, I enjoyed the process. Thank you.

RH:  Great.  Thank you so much.

[END OF INTERVIEW]