

Miriam Latter Transcript

ROSALIND HINTON: This is Rosalind Hinton interviewing Miriam Latter at her home, which is 4821 Jeannette Drive in Metairie, Louisiana. Today is Tuesday, September 26, 2006. I'm conducting the interview for the Katrina Jewish Voices project of the Jewish Women's Archive and the Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life.

Miriam, do you agree to be interviewed and understand that the interview will be video recorded?

Miriam Latter: Yes.

RH: Okay. We'll just start simply. You seem to have started your life in Shreveport, so if you want to talk a little bit about your family and then how your family got here to –

ML: To New Orleans?

RH: – to New Orleans. Yeah. And then tell me about your immediate family, too – how many children you have, your husband.

ML: Okay. I was born in Houston, but my parents at the time were living in Mexia, Texas. I don't know if there was a hospital in Mexia, Texas. Anyway, I was born in Houston, and immediately we moved to Shreveport, and I was there for nine years. My father and mother both are from Shreveport, so that's how they met, and then we moved. When I was nine, we moved back to Houston because of my dad's job.

RH: Okay. And what was that?

ML: Originally, he was a lawyer and then didn't like that and went into retailing. So he went and got a different job at a department store in Houston, and we were there for three years and then moved here, and he was with Maison Blanche for the duration of his

career. So that's what brought us to New Orleans. It was 1964.

RH: Okay. And so you were nine years old. And what part of town did you live in?

ML: We lived uptown – grew up uptown.

RH: Okay. Do you remember the street?

ML: Well, the first house was on Versailles. The second house was on Pritchard.

RH: All kind of in the Broadmoor area.

ML: Yeah. But then we moved to Octavia, and that's where I was through junior high and high school.

RH: Okay. And do you have any memories of growing up in New Orleans when you were in high school?

ML: Yeah.

RH: I mean, as far as the Jewish community, if you can –

ML: Oh, yes. Ninety-eight percent of my friends were Jewish. I went to public school. I went to Fortier High School – McMain Junior High, Fortier High School. I was a member of a nationwide Jewish high school organization.

RH: What was it called?

ML: Like a sorority (AE Pi?). Now I can't remember it. There was a boy's counterpart to that, and that was my circle, were all Jewish kids.

RH: Okay. So tell me just if any lasting memories or impressions that kind of stand out.

ML: From growing up?

RH: Yeah. From growing up, being in New Orleans.

ML: Well, I guess I should preface this by saying my mother died when I was in Houston. Father remarried while we were still in Houston, so I have a stepmother, and that influenced life growing up. I stayed pretty much to myself at home, but today I still have friends that I had then. There's a whole circle of us –

RH: That are all still pretty close?

ML: That are all still very close.

RH: So from junior high on up?

ML: Right. Right. In fact, one of my friends – I married her first cousin, so now she's a cousin.

RH: Okay. And you were at Touro?

ML: I grew up at Touro. I went to religious school, confirmed, married.

RH: Okay. At some point, you moved to the Gates of Prayer?

ML: Well, we moved to Metairie. I got married in '71. We moved to Metairie in 1976, before the birth of my second child, and our friends were – well, first, we were members of Beth Israel because that's where my husband grew up. But I hated it.

RH: Yeah? Tell me about that.

ML: The men and women sit separately, and I didn't know Hebrew at the time. It was miserable. But we were there for years, and two of my kids had – the girls had their bat mitzvahs there, which weren't really bat mitzvahs as far as I was concerned because they didn't read from the Torah. They didn't have a haftorah. It was this little ceremony they did for girls, and after my middle daughter's bat mitzvah – which the rabbi was horrible –

we were already members at Gates of Prayer because the kids didn't have any Jewish friends. The religious school at Beth Israel was very small. We wanted them to have Jewish friends. Gates of Prayer's religious school was very large at the time, so we were members of both. My son was bar mitzvahed at Gates of Prayer.

RH: Well, tell me, first off, just how many kids do you have.

ML: I have three children. Shayne is thirty-two. Rachel is thirty, and Mark is twenty-nine.

RH: And two are here in the city?

ML: Two are here, Shayne and Mark. Rachel's in Visalia, California.

RH: So where did they go to school out in Metairie?

ML: Well, they went to a Jewish nursery school, which is no longer in existence.

RH: Oh, tell me about that a little bit.

ML: Communal Nursery School, which was around when my husband was preschool age, but it was funded through Federation, the Jewish Federation, and eventually there were just not enough kids, and they ended up closing it maybe three years ago.

RH: Was it out in Metairie?

ML: Well, originally, it was uptown, and then they moved to Beth Israel. They rented a space in Beth Israel. Initially, all three kids went to Country Day, but not every school is right for every kid, and my oldest one was having some problems. The middle one was sort of exhibiting some of the problems the older one was having, and so we decided to take all three out because it would have been easier for me, and they went to Ridgewood. Then the oldest one was still having some problems, and we had her tested

and evaluated. She ended up going to Chapelle High School. She was the first and only Jewish girl, I think to graduate from Chappelle. But it's what she needed – very structured, and she did well.

RH: It's a Catholic high school?

ML: It's a Catholic high school.

RH: That's what I thought.

ML: Right. Rachel ended up staying at Ridgewood, doing extremely well. Mark, on the other hand, should never have left Country Day. He was bored and acting out, so he went back to Country Day. I tried to get all three kids at the same school and ended up with three kids at three different schools.

RH: [inaudible] Was your husband from Metairie? I mean, what kind of brought you to Metairie?

ML: Well, no. My husband was born and raised uptown in the Broadmoor area, and what brought us uptown was that we had a home uptown, and I had one child, got pregnant with the second, and we couldn't afford anything uptown that [didn't] need major renovation. So we started looking in Metairie, and that's what brought us out here.

RH: How do you connect to your neighborhood? How do you like your neighborhood?

ML: Well, when we first moved in – we've been here for thirty years, almost thirty-one years in the same house. When we first moved in, you know, you'd go with the kids outside, and my neighbor across the street ended up with two girls my girl's age. We're the only ones left [of] the original group, but there were just kids. Everybody had kids. Everybody had kids the same age. Our first Halloween here, I bought a couple of bags because nobody really did it uptown, and I ran out within the first thirty minutes. Then

over the years, the kids grew up, went to college, moved away, and now, kids are coming back. Young families are buying homes with children. You see more children. My neighbor next door has two children. We love the neighborhood. It's very safe, and it's convenient. Because when we first moved out here, we thought it was, you know, so far out. Because we were so used to being uptown, but you get used to it, and you like it.

RH: Do you travel back and forth into town (inaudible)?

ML: Yeah. Well, my stepmother lives in a condo uptown, almost downtown, and so I go uptown frequently, and our business is in the Quarter.

RH: That's what I kind of wanted to get on the tape. [laughter] So tell me what business that is.

ML: Well, we have Tujague's Restaurant, which is the second oldest restaurant in New Orleans, established in 1856. We've had it for almost twenty-five years.

RH: Did you and your husband together decide to get Tujague's? (inaudible)

ML: Well, my brother-in-law bought the building and didn't know what to do with the business. The family didn't want it anymore. They owned the building and the business, and all these people were expressing interest in the business, and this was the year before the World's Fair, so we thought we're just going to laugh all the way to the bank, and obviously, it didn't happen that way. For the World's Fair or us. It was okay, but it's been a struggle. We were underfinanced. We just didn't know. I mean, we had never been in a business like this before. If we had to do it all over again, knowing what we know now, we would have never done it.

RH: But you still have it?

ML: Oh, yeah. We still have it. Yeah.

RH: And I guess you kind of grew up with it?

ML: Well, the children did. They definitely did. But it's hard on family life because the first few years, Steven worked seven days a week, and the kids, it was like three against one. It was not the easiest, but we all survived.

RH: Tell me about the Jewish community to you right now. How have you connected to the Jewish community, and what does it mean to you and your life?

ML: Well, it means a lot. I don't know everyone, but when you meet someone, there's always this connection. It doesn't matter what congregation you belong to now. I think it did before. There were more prestigious congregations.

RH: You mean before the storm?

ML: Yes. Before the storm. That's my opinion. But since the storm, the presidents of the four reform congregations have gotten together numerous times to form a united front for the reform community, and that is something that was never done before. So I feel an accomplishment, and I believe they do, too, with that.

RH: You being one of the presidents, one of the four – when did you become president and why? How did you get this role on the board?

ML: Well, several years ago, an incoming president, a friend of mine – his installation was a few months away. I saw him, and I said, "I really would like to do something on the board." I had been on the board before, did my three-year term, and got off. So he calls me up, and he goes, "How would you like to be financial secretary on the exec committee?" So I said, "Okay." Turns out it's the worst job on the board, but that was seven years ago, and I just – you just sort of move your way up. I was vice president, and then they asked me to be executive vice president, so you're that for two years, knowing you're going to eventually take over as president.

RH: And so when did you take over?

ML: Oh, I took over July 1st of '05.

RH: OK. So before the storm?

ML: Before the storm.

RH: Who knew?

ML: Yes. Who knew?

RH: Since we're kind of in that conversation now, why don't you tell me when Katrina came on your personal radar screen and what your family did to prepare?

ML: It was probably the Thursday before, I think when it entered the Gulf, and my husband and I went through Betsy in '65, so it doesn't affect him as much as it affects me, but every time something gets in the Gulf, I sort of freak out. So, we were keeping close tabs. We had never evacuated for any hurricane. My mother-in-law, who's ninety-one, lives in Metairie on the second floor, so she said, "I'm just going to stay where I am." My stepmother lives on the tenth floor, and she goes, "I'm just going to stay where I am." The kids and I were going down to the restaurant, and I had packed up – of course, there's food down there, so we didn't have to worry about food, but I had packed a bag Saturday of all the candles, the flashlights. I had these little lamps, some blankets and pillows just to get comfortable. I had a little portable TV that runs on batteries – things like that. Steven worked Saturday night. They closed up like normal, and at 5:00 Sunday morning, my stepmother called and woke me up from a dead sleep and said, "Our building's been evacuated," and I go, "Why?" She goes, "Because it's a hurricane." See, overnight, it went into a five, and I just – I don't know. I just wasn't paying that close of attention, so I said, "Okay. Pack up for a few days. Somebody will be there. I'll call you back." So then I woke up Steven, and I'm going, "It's a category five," shaking

him, and it took a few minutes to register. He goes, "Okay." Well, by 10:30, everyone was here. My oldest daughter, Shayne, Mark, my son, his girlfriend, the two dogs, a friend of theirs, my stepmother – my mother-in-law ended up driving to Houston with her brother and sister-in-law. Now, looking back, we should have taken her with us because they're all – I mean, my mother-in-law is ninety-one. Steven's uncle – I mean, they're both in their –

RH: Well up –

ML: – well up in their eighties, but that's what happened. Steven had Mark go to the restaurant and get money and make sure everything was locked up and whatnot.

RH: Was there a concern for employees or anything like that?

ML: Well, we had a list. We keep a list of employee's contact information here. We called as many people as we could get in touch with and told them to leave. Not everybody did, but we got in touch with almost everybody. And then packed up the cars, and we were ready to close the door, and the phone rang, and it was his secretary, who had left the day before, and she was in Lafayette with her husband. The La Quinta had two more rooms. Did they want them? And that was it – just two rooms. Well, Steven decided that he wanted to go to Lafayette to be closer, to be able to open up within a couple of days and check on the restaurant. And my stepmother – there's no way she could've made it. I mean, it would've been – with two rooms and all those people and the dogs, it just would not have worked. So reluctantly, we parted ways, and we were on our way to Atlanta.

RH: And who is we? Did everybody –?

ML: Shayne, my stepmother, and I all went to Atlanta.

RH: So the women went to Atlanta.

ML: Well, and then Mark and Steven, Candace, his girlfriend, Rebecca, their friend, and the dogs went to Lafayette. The other thing about La Quinta – I don't know. They accept dogs all over the country. Pets rather. That part worked out fine. Thank goodness for cell phones because about twelve and a half hours later, I wasn't even to Tuscaloosa, and Steven went to the front desk where he was. It took him about seven hours to get to Lafayette, which normally is a two-hour drive. They started calling La Quintas, and they were able to get us two rooms in Birmingham. It took us fourteen hours to get to Birmingham.

RH: Five-hour drive generally.

ML: Normally. Yeah. We were exhausted. I was ready to pull on the side of the road and say, "Let's go to sleep," but we made it and then, the next morning, drove into Atlanta to my aunt and uncle's house. That's why we were going to Atlanta. I learned how to text message because when the cell phones went out, you can still text message. Learned that, but we would've been up the creek without a cell phone, and my daughter had a cell phone also. Steven and that group were in Lafayette, and we were in Atlanta, and by Monday afternoon or evening, we realized – I don't remember the exact time when they recorded the flooding. Maybe it was Tuesday morning, or I don't know. We realized we were in trouble, that we were going to be here for quite some time. My nephew was getting married Labor Day weekend, which was just a few days away, in Birmingham, Alabama. So we knew we weren't going home. For us to sit around and mope would do us no good, so we went shopping for clothes because obviously none of us had any clothes for a wedding, and none of us were dressed appropriately for a wedding, but we were okay. We ended up going to the wedding. That Saturday of Labor Day weekend, Steven – they had traveled to Baton Rouge and stayed with a friend's parents that Mark grew up with that went to school here, and they retired and moved to Baton Rouge. So they went with them. So Mark and Steven came to New Orleans – Metairie. He had a FEMA pass that a friend got him to let him in, and there were several

people in the car, and they went around checking everyone's home.

RH: Is that right?

ML: That day, of course, I didn't realize because I couldn't get in touch with them, but our house was the last house they had checked. Well, I stayed in the hotel room all day long, and the longer it got, the more upset I was getting because I was fearing the worst, that he wasn't going to call me. Everyone's home was okay.

RH: Now, whose homes were you talking about?

ML: Friends of ours who were in Baton Rouge, friends of Mark's. We went to check on a couple of their parent's homes. I don't know how they got in touch with each other [or] how the group formed. I really don't know.

RH: Do you remember who you were talking to? I mean, you weren't talking. You were text messaging. I mean, were you finding your friends?

ML: Well, I knew where a lot of my friends were several days – by Tuesday evening, I started calling my friends, and some I got, some I didn't, but eventually, through e-mail, we all hooked up.

RH: Okay. That Federation e-mail that was –

ML: Well, luckily for me, I have Bell South DSL. My aunt and uncle had the same thing. I was able to get to my address book, so I had all the information to e-mail, and I sent out mass e-mails. "I'm in Atlanta. Where are you?" Things like that.

RH: That's how you found everybody.

ML: Right. Right. My real close friends, I got on the phone. I knew one had left Sunday morning. I think she got one of the last flights out of New Orleans to the West Palm

Beach area, where her daughter lives. So I knew where some of the people were going. I was able to get in touch with everybody I wanted to.

RH: Right. Right. Was there like a maid or anybody too that you were kind of trying to find?

ML: Well, my housekeeper was the wife of one of the waiters, so we knew where they were. So, I wasn't concerned about her. I was concerned about a woman who had worked for me for many years – for at least fifteen, twenty years. Turns out she and her daughter and sister – they did evacuate, so she was fine, which I didn't find out until I came home and started talking to other people. So, we went to the wedding. I found out that the house had been flooded but wasn't horrible. Our son had left his car here in the driveway, and it was okay. And Steven stayed.

RH: Oh, wow.

ML: And didn't leave. He had no electricity. He had picked up water and the MREs [meals ready to eat], and that's what he lived on.

RH: Why don't you describe some of the damage that you had because we're way out in Metairie (inaudible) what happened out here?

ML: We had a lot of roof damage. Our roof was sort of old and sort of patched here and patched there over the years, and we had major roof damage, some spots down to the wood. You can't tell it, but we've got two bedrooms and a bath upstairs. There was water damage upstairs from where the water leaked in through the wood. Downstairs, we had eight inches. We had hardwood floors in this area, and the polyurethane coating was peeling, and the floors buckled. The carpet in the back, which, obviously, we had to take up. Mold in the back of the house. You could see underneath windows where water had gotten in between the walls somehow because the sheetrock was peeling. My bathroom, which was the original tile, on the sides, it just sort of felt – the glue was just

gone, I guess, from all the water, and it was just black with mold. Our playroom was flooded. You could see water marks.

RH: So, what was the flood from?

ML: It was from the canal that had stopped working because they evacuated the pump operators, and they took them too far away. By the time they got back, all the damage was done.

RH: Right. Okay. So your husband lived in –? The water had receded.

ML: The water had receded, and that was almost a week later. The waters had receded in this area. Not all of Metairie, but where we are.

RH: Were you happy with his decision to stay?

ML: No. No. I mean, I didn't get home – I was gone a little over three weeks. I came home early, but three weeks to me was like three years. It was the longest three weeks of my life, and the more Steven – I was upset because Steven was by himself, and he had no support system other than me on the phone, and the phones still weren't working. It was hard to get in touch with him, and he was getting more depressed and more depressed, which made me more depressed.

RH: But you couldn't talk him out of it?

ML: No. No.

RH: What was he trying to do here? Because he couldn't get into New Orleans, could he?

ML: No, he could not. We knew that the restaurant was fine from eyewitnesses that he talked to that went by the restaurant. We knew the building was standing. We didn't

know about looting or anything like that, but we knew the building was okay. He just got on the phone, and he bought a cell phone, which is the first time in his life he had ever had a cell phone. He called the people that run the website, and he put on there, "If you're an employee, please contact us. We want to know where you are." He had the list of all the employees, the phone list, and he just started calling people's cell phones. I don't know what else he did. We have satellite TV, and of course, the satellite was out because the wind had knocked it out of range, so he just started – he turned up the TV as loud as he could and started moving around. He got the TV working, so he spent a lot of time watching TV. But night was hard, I think, and the electricity –

RH: What were some of the concerns that you guys were talking about? Do you remember?

ML: Well, we didn't know what was going to happen with our business. We worked so hard all these years, and we didn't know if we'd ever be able to reopen. We didn't know if the employees would come back. He had concerns about insurance. He couldn't remember, and his secretary couldn't remember – secretary/bookkeeper – the name the name of the company that held the insurance. But pretty early on, a friend of his told him about a lawyer in Baton Rouge that we hired very early, maybe in October, to work on helping us with insurance issues. We hired a CPA for the small business loan application, which ended up like this thick.

RH: My God.

ML: I think Lisa, the secretary, finally remembered, and we learned a lot of lessons of what we did wrong in evacuating. We don't have any laptops at work, but they should've taken – we realized the computer, not the screen and the keyboard, but the actual –

RH: The hard drive.

ML: – the hard drive. Because all that information was in there. But his secretary's home was fine. She lives in Belle Chase, which is on the West Bank, and their area was fine. No flooding. So and then eventually, some waiters came back that lived in St. Rose that had no flooding, and they all went – there was a bunch of them that went down when they were able to get into Orleans Parish, and they started cleaning up. You can imagine we had a lot of frozen seafood, and we had walk-in refrigerators and freezers, and Steven said the smell just was nauseating. I talked to him the evening of the first day of cleaning up, and he goes, "I can't talk. I'm so sick I can't talk." It took him several days, and this was all done – a friend gave them a generator because there was no electricity. They used the generator for electricity. Precautionary, they turned the gas off, and then the gas companies came over and turning the gas off in the Quarter, at least, because they were afraid of fires. There had been fires all over the city from broken gas lines. But they got it cleaned up and disinfected, and we had damage upstairs, roof damage that caused a ceiling in the upstairs dining room to collapse, but it wasn't a huge area, and that we knew we could fix. There was no looting, which was amazing because we have poker machines. We have liquor. It was just amazing. But we still didn't know when or if we could open. It's sort of funny to think back, but Steven and I were not used to being together twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, and that actually took some getting used to. Plus, we were so bored. I mean, we started cleaning up in the house, but there wasn't a whole lot we could do at that point, but we started boxing up and going and throwing out and whatnot. But it was nice because he always worked at least five nights a week. You get used to your own routine and this, that, and the other, but it was very nice.

RH: So tell me. Let's loop back a minute. You said it was the longest three weeks of your life. What were you doing in Atlanta? Were you staying with your –?

ML: The first week, I was in a hotel because my aunt only had two bedrooms, and my stepmother was in the extra bedroom. My daughter stayed in – they live in a condo, and

there's two guest suites in the condo that you rent. My daughter stayed there. It turned out that my mother-in-law flew to her daughters in New Jersey, and Shayne – we ended up shipping Shayne there because my mother-in-law could not have come home by herself – no way. So Shayne said, "Well, look. I'll go." My sister-in-law had plenty of room. "I'll go up there, and we're able to come home, I'll bring Mimi home." So anyway, when I first moved out of the hotel, and I think it was the best thing because I just wanted to be by myself and just focus on TV.

RH: You were watching the TV?

ML: Oh, yes. I hadn't watched so much TV in my life.

RH: So, what was your thought of the images you were seeing on TV?

ML: Unbelievable. Just unbelievable. And after the wedding, my stepmother has two sons who live in the L.A. area, so she went back with them because we knew we couldn't go home, and we knew that this house would not have been livable for her. So she went to California, and I moved in with my aunt and uncle, and it was just – I mean, I had trouble eating. I had trouble sleeping. Anxiety attacks. I was able to get in touch with my doctor, my internist, and he, in turn – I guess other states gave Louisiana doctors – not privileges, but at least they could refill prescriptions, so I got all my prescriptions refilled in Atlanta. I just – I don't know – watched TV and learned the area.

RH: What area was it?

ML: Buckhead, so it's really nice. Very nice. What was so funny about it was that I was staying at a beautiful multi-million-dollar condo, and all I wanted to do was go home. I'd sit on the balcony a lot. I used the computer a lot.

RH: You were really pretty isolated.

ML: Yeah.

RH: You were by yourself and –

ML: Yeah, I felt very isolated, although the rabbi and I were in constant contact.

RH: Well, that was my next question. When did what happened at Gates of Prayer come to your attention, and when did all that start?

ML: Well, I believe it was Monday afternoon I got a call from the rabbi.

RH: So right after the storm Monday afternoon?

ML: Right. He had left on Saturday, and I knew where he was going. He was going to Houston or, eventually, Waco, where his in-laws live. So, he called me and said he was in Houston, and that reports that he got was that the temple had flooded, like everybody else in Metairie, and then Tuesday, I got a call – we were on the phone again a lot after the whole flooding issue, and we both knew we weren't coming home any time soon.

RH: What was that conversation like? What did you guys say to each other?

ML: Well, he was very positive. I tease him because his optimism irritated me at times. I've told him this in person, so I'm not saying anything that – but he was going, "It's going to be okay," this, that, and the other. "This is what I'm doing." He spoke to our administrator, who was in Lafayette, and as soon as possible, he was going to get back to Gates – come back to Metairie and see what the building was like and "How are you?" and "where are your –?" I gave him information like where congregants were that I knew. He was trying. Over the course of several months, he tried to get in touch with every member, and he succeeded for the most part.

RH: So this was Rabbi Loewy?

ML: Yes. He was just fabulous. I got calls from Rabbi Jake Jackofsky, who was the rabbi for the Southwest region. I had calls from Rabbi Eric Yoffie, who is the president of the URJ, Union of Reform Judaism. They organized conference calls. This is all when I was in Atlanta – conference calls for rabbis, presidents, administrators. “What can we do to help? What's the situation?” In the beginning, it was like, “We don't know. We don't know.” Because nobody had been home yet. Eventually, our administrator, Louis Geiger, was able to get to Gates of Prayer. It had flooded. There was mold and fungus on every wall. The sanctuary has a well, and the seats go down. It had several feet of water in it. We had taken our Torahs out and put them in a congregant's office. She has a kitchen in her office suite that's in an inside room, and we wrapped it in plastic, so we felt very comfortable. We knew that building was okay. There were websites that showed flooding levels. I'm sure you saw that. Of course, this is on the fifth floor, so we knew the Torahs were okay. Steven didn't want me to come home until there was a gas station open and a grocery store open – just basic living things. We weren't that concerned about money in the very beginning because we had taken money from the business, and we were very careful with what we spent money on, but I don't even remember if there was a bank open when I first came home. I don't remember. But a couple of days after I came home, I went to the Gates of Prayer, and it was like – [sighs]. I was just like, “Oh my gosh.” It was horrible. Almost all of our books in the library were ruined from mold, just like the ones that were on the top shelves. All our prayer books were gone. It was just horrible. Thank goodness for Louis that he was able to get – he worked very hard commuting back and forth from Lafayette, which is a two-hour drive, and we were able to hire a company that does remediation work.

RH: The mold remediation?

ML: The mold remediation work.

RH: The new word everyone knows down here.

ML: Right. Right. I always thought remediation was a lawyer's term. So we were able to get the building gutted really early. We used a company called Servpro, and we were their first job in New Orleans – first big job. They just did a fabulous job. Then I remember there were so many decisions to make, and we were holding exec committee meetings via conference call because, by that time, we had gotten – we knew where everyone was.

RH: So you came back when?

ML: Around the 20th of September.

RH: So pretty early, really.

ML: Very early. Yeah. Very early.

RH: So what was in your decision to come back? There was a grocery store?

ML: Well, I just didn't want Steven alone anymore. I knew that wasn't good for him, and I wanted to come home. This is my home. So luckily, I was able to.

RH: So, were you in before they let people into Metairie?

ML: No. No. Actually, the day I came home was the day they lifted the curfew from 6:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m. I was going to stay with friends in Jackson and drive in the next morning. Steven called and said, "Do you think you can drive straight through? Do you think you'll be here by 6:00 because they just changed it?" I said, "Oh, yeah. I really think I will." I was a little late, but nobody stopped me. So I ended up driving straight through.

RH: Tell me what you thought when you first [inaudible].

ML: Well, it was dark, so I didn't get a chance. There were trees down in my neighborhood. Most people weren't back. My neighbor next door was back because she never left. She's a nurse at Ochsner, and her husband came back early, so she wouldn't be alone. I mean, you heard these stories of looting, and the looting was in Metairie, too, so he was afraid [and] didn't want her home alone, although he knew Steven was home at that time, but still. So the next morning, we got up, and Steven had a pass to get into Orleans Parish. By this time, he had cleaned out all the food and everything. It was so strange because you couldn't just get on the interstate and go. We ended up having to take the Huey P. Long Bridge going across the West Bank and then crossing the Crescent City Bridge back into Orleans Parish. I was crying because I just couldn't believe all the damage. I don't know why I couldn't believe it, but the trees down – because there weren't many people home, the grass – you're talking about three weeks. We never had a drop of rain the whole time. We didn't have a drop of rain for weeks – six weeks – until Rita. That's right. Until Rita. And then it rained for one day, and then no rain. So the grass was all – everything was just in disarray. But we came to Canal Street, and I looked down Canal – and I had been watching CNN and Fox News, and all along the neutral ground were the big trucks from different news agencies and cars and people and Humvees and armed guards, and I felt like I was in a Third World country. It's so hard to describe the feeling. We saw buildings that had burned, not in the French Quarter area but on the other side of Canal Street. Along Decatur Street, [which] was normally a parking lot, was a tent city for all the National Guard and all the rescue people, and it was just surreal. We get to the restaurant, and I had brought my digital camera along – was standing outside across the street to get the angle for the roof to take pictures of the roof damage. A news guy came over to me, and we just started talking. There was no cameraman or anything. I obviously wasn't big news because then he left, but I think that if it had been our first day back in the building, they probably would've filmed it just to get our reaction. Thank goodness he left. But there were news people all over. It was just weird. And then we drove – we left there, and we drove to our son's

house because we knew from the websites that showed levels of water he had over five feet of water in his home. He had just bought the home six months prior.

RH: Where did he live?

ML: In the Broadmoor area. And then, a friend of mine wanted us to drive

by her mother's house, and I think the water was to the roof at her mother's house. So, we were helping other people, so we had firsthand knowledge of what was going on.

RH: You would experience it with them, for them, call them on the phone?

ML: Right. Right. And it was just – we passed by Memorial Hospital, where the horrendous conditions were, and it was just very hard to believe. Steven went into the Ninth Ward – the Lower Ninth Ward – very early. We had employees who lived in the Upper Ninth Ward and the Lower Ninth Ward, and some had to be rescued off the tops of buildings. And one is back at work.

RH: Really?

ML: Yeah. But Steven wanted to see it, and for a long time, he told me not to go. He said, "Don't. You just don't want to see it." But eventually, I did. I'm glad I went, but I'm sorry I went. It's just total destruction. It just amazed me what water can do.

RH: So you took the disaster tour?

ML: Yes. Oh yes.

RH: In a sense, you were the first on the disaster tour, in the sense that you just had to – it seems like your ritual to just take in your world.

ML: Yes. And you had to do it more than once because the first time, it didn't register. It was so unbelievable that it just didn't register. Or it just numbed you. It's hard to explain the feelings, but I think everybody should go on the disaster tour, even now.

RH: Why?

ML: Because it's been over a year, and there are – I've been to the Lower Ninth Ward when the relatives have come in, and it's still bad. Or you see some steps leading up to what was a porch, and the homes are all gone. And to know that this was a community. I don't know if it will ever get rebuilt. So most people, I take, are just amazed at how many houses it goes on, mile after mile.

RH: Is there anything in your Jewish framework that helps you make sense of any of this or that just helps you cope or helped you then?

ML: That's a good question. I think I've said the same prayer every night since I was ten.

RH: What prayer is that?

ML: It's just a little child's prayer and the Shema after it. That helps.

RH: So you say it every day?

ML: Every night, for a long time – forty-five years. I think what saved me emotionally was the work at Gates of Prayer. It took my mind off my house [and] we had to go through to get this house back to where it is now because we lived in this house through all the construction – not that I wanted to, but Steven didn't want to move. But the Jewish community always comes together. I realized early on that this was something that I couldn't handle by myself, and I asked two past presidents to help in the rebuilding effort, and they both said yes. Another congregant, whose family business built the building

thirty years ago [and] renovated it six years ago, said, "Yes, I will renovate it again."

Because once it had been gutted. And some people that were on the committee from six years ago said yes. We started services lay-led early before the rabbi came back.

RH: So, can you tell me about that? What kind of decision? Who decided to do this?

ML: Well, one congregant called me, who has since moved away. She just couldn't take it. Said, "What about services?" We couldn't. We had to wait until all the mold was removed and everything was sanitized because it was just disgusting in the building. I didn't want any more people in there than had to be, but once that was done, we got – all our pews had to be thrown away. I said yes, and we put it on the website. Seven people showed up, including myself.

[Recording paused.]

RH: So, we're going to start this story as soon as we change the tape. Through Katrina's Jewish Voices, and I'm speaking with Miriam Latter. We were just talking about the first service, and you put it on your website, and so seven people showed up?

ML: There were seven of us, and it was lay-led, which – no rabbi. When it got time for the part of the service where the president gets up and gives announcements, I just almost started crying because I told them that no matter what happens the next two years of my presidency, this is the service I'm going to remember the most. And I do. It was just very nice, so from that point on, we –

RH: Can you tell me a little about who led the service and what was on y'all's mind at the service? What were y'all praying about?

ML: Well, we did the normal Saturday morning Shabbat service, and Ellen Clearly led it, who I miss.

RH: She left?

ML: She left. She's in San Francisco. And when it came time, she talked about – there basically was no sermon, but she talked about the Torah portion of the week, and she was really prepared, and it was very important to her because she came every Saturday morning, normally, and she had missed that. And then, after that, we started meeting every Saturday morning.

RH: Oh, wow. So do you remember about the date that was, by chance?

ML: It was before Rosh Hashanah. I don't remember the date of Rosh Hashanah, but it was in October. The holidays were very late that year. I went to Touro Synagogue for Rosh Hashanah services, and that was for the community. It was held in their chapel because they had had some air conditioning problems in their main sanctuary. It turned out that more people attended than they thought. So, people were out in this hallway, and it was just great. There were first responders there who were Jewish because it was on the Federation website, and I guess they looked it up. There were National Guardsmen and women, doctors, nurses, who came down to help. It was just great. For Yom Kippur, it was at Gates of Prayer, and we set up folding chairs. For the morning service, we probably had over five hundred people.

RH: Oh my word.

ML: And that was the three Reform congregations – Temple Sinai, Touro Synagogue, and Gates of Prayer. It was just an unbelievable feeling that we're back.

RH: Making a stand.

ML: Yes.

RH: For the Jewish community.

ML: Right. Right.

RH: So, was Rabbi Loewy back?

ML: He was back by that time. He has a daughter who was in ninth grade last year, and they had decided initially that they were going to stay until January. Well, I and some other people really told the rabbi, "It's time to come home. We need you." So his wife and daughter stayed in Houston until the semester ended, the middle of December, and then they came home. It was hard for him. His home was flooded. He lived in the upstairs of his home, and it wasn't easy for any of us. But as far as Gates of Prayer was concerned, we needed him there.

RH: What do you feel he kind of added to the congregation?

ML: Normalcy, for one thing, and then for me, a shoulder to cry on, just stability. URJ's biennial was in Houston, of all places, in November, and he and I went, and it was unlike any biennial. A normal convention – they have workshops. It was like nothing was relevant to us. I couldn't concentrate on anything. I was so glad to be in a hotel where there was carpet, a clean floor, and a nice bathroom. It was just so nice. But it gave us a feeling of community. It was an unbelievable experience, I think, for everyone from New Orleans, especially the rabbis and presidents. And the URJ just really stepped up to the plate, and the people of the United States stepped up, and donations went into the URJ and then directly to Gates of Prayer, and to the other congregations as well, to help us rebuild. One of the things that we had to get used to was being on the receiving end of charity. We're taught to give. It's tzedakah. It was very hard for some of us to receive. The Jewish Federation in New Orleans was giving away seven hundred dollars to every adult, and I hadn't signed up for it. They were using Jewish Family Services as the agency to administer this program, and the rabbi said, "But you need it," because we had no income for months. He says, "Don't be stupid." Then a friend of mine was volunteering for Jewish Family Services in this program, and she found out that we hadn't

signed up, so she called me one day, and she's [says], "Look, I'm just going to get the information over the phone, and you don't even have to come in." So I gave her my information, Steven's, Shayne's, and Mark's. When Steven and I got the two checks, one for him and one for me, I used it for a mortgage payment, which really helped. Although everything – mortgage payments were deferred, I had to pay them. They weren't going to forgive them. Anyway, it was just hard. But being in Houston and hearing comments – I know I use the word unbelievable a lot, but it just –

RH: Hearing comments?

ML: Well, they see on my badge, "Metairie, Louisiana," and the first thing you hear would be, "Oh, how are you?" These are strangers. You just say "Fine, we're plugging along." But when you're with your friends, you really – or I do, anyway – let loose with some emotion. But it was just being together, sitting through services together in Houston, being recognized. I mean, things have happened to me during my presidency that no other president has ever experienced, good and bad. I mean, the head of the Union for Reform Judaism knows who I am, maybe for all the wrong reasons, but it is things like that. So people ask me now –

RH: So you were kind of put into a spotlight, and you're not a kind of a person who likes the spotlight, I take it?

ML: No. No.

RH: So what has that felt like?

ML: It's sort of felt like being on exhibit or – it's been very hard.

RH: Have you been scared?

ML: Since August 28th?

RH: Scared that you wouldn't be able to do the job or –

ML: Oh, yeah. Oh, yes. Yes.

RH: That's kind of what I meant.

ML: Very. Very. I've turned out to be a much better writer than I thought I was, but I've had to give a lot of speeches and a lot of talks to groups that have come in that have visited Gates of Prayer, and just a lot more speeches than a normal president has to do. I'm very proud of myself that I've really done, I think, a really good job of that. I don't see myself as a highly intellectual thinker, but maybe this has just brought out something I didn't know was there. So, like I say, a lot of good things have happened to me that never would've happened if it hadn't been for the storm. So I look at this whole experience, there's been two sides to it, and I survived.

RH: What are some of the difficulties that Gates of Prayer has faced that you've kind of had to get the community through?

ML: Well, the whole community's down in number of Jewish families. Gates of Prayer is down about twenty percent. That's a lot of people.

RH: That's a lot of friends.

ML: It's a lot of friends. We have a budget. We have a responsibility. We have a mortgage. We did not know who was going to be able to pay their – dues is what we call fair share – who couldn't pay. Well, we were pleasantly surprised. We did not make our budget. We knew we weren't, but a lot more money came in from our members than we ever anticipated. I wrote letters before our first bill went out, which wasn't until like January or maybe December. It had a cover letter from me explaining we understand what you're going through, but if you can give us something so that we can keep the staff, keep our rabbi, keep our educator, and things like that. Money just poured in, and

then money poured in from all over the United States from congregations, organizations, just everyday people. Our rabbi is senior rabbi in New Orleans, although he's not old.

We're the same age, but he has more contacts, and he just started e-mailing his friends, rabbis from all over the country, and congregations just took up funds for us. We were able to make it through the year with a deficit, but what we call the Katrina money was put to one side. This is to make up for our deficit from last year, and this is not going to be a one-year thing. We will probably run deficits for the next two or three years.

RH: When did you kind of first realize that?

ML: Oh, immediately.

RH: You did?

ML: Oh, yeah. When businesses couldn't open, and we knew people had lost their businesses and their homes, we knew the impact on Gates of Prayer was going to be huge, and that's one of the reasons that we got together with the other presidents because we were all going to go through the same thing. And of the Reform congregations – we had the most physical damage.

RH: From the Reform congregations?

ML: Right. We had over a million dollars' worth of damage, but the donations just saved us. I mean, we had library books that were donated from different congregations – I would get a call from a woman who was chair of the Mitzvah Committee, and they want to know –their project was New Orleans, and I don't know why they picked Gates of Prayer, but maybe – I don't know. So they contacted me, and she said they're a small congregation – "What little things could we do?" I said, "Cookbooks. So many people lost their cookbooks." It doesn't have to be Jewish cookbooks, just any kind of cookbook. Well, hundreds and hundreds of cookbooks came in. It was just unbelievable. In August, we had joint services during the summer for the reform congregations, and

August was our turn. This was for Touro, Sinai, and Gates of Prayer, so when I gave announcements every Friday night during August, I'd say, "Please go to our library and take some cookbooks." There would be some Judaica there also that was donated.

People lost their Shabbat candlesticks or lost a menorah, and they would take one, and we have a few cookbooks left. [laughter]

RH: Tell me about how many of your people were in New Orleans and really lost everything? Do you have a fairly substantial New Orleans community here?

ML: Most of our – no. See, most of our members lived in Metairie, but we had a good number who lost their homes, and some also their business.

RH: Because of the Metairie flooding, even though it wasn't as long, a lot of people were out of business and out of commission.

ML: Yes. Yes. And one of the past presidents that I asked to help – the rebuilding effort lost her home. Her husband's a pediatrician, so they came back early so he could go to work, and they ended up buying a townhouse. Just recently, they bought a new home, and they're putting their gutted home up for sale. We've lost a lot of elderly members, which is a segment of a membership that would attend services on a regular basis, and a lot of people moved to where their children are. A lot of people have passed away.

RH: Really?

ML: Yes. We've had a lot of funerals lately. The president of the congregation usually attends funerals. I had one Sunday. This woman was ill, but I think that she just may have said, "This is too hard." I mean, the whole thing. So a lot of the elderly have passed away.

RH: So you've been kind of right in the middle of that, going to the funerals.

ML: Yeah. It's been a very unusual year with funerals. Many more.

RH: Any that were particularly close to you?

ML: People that I knew, but like a friend's mother. I'm having a Katrina moment. I can't think of any.

RH: Oh, it's okay. So tell me – I'm having one, too, here, as far as questions. What are some of the major challenges that you see in Gates of Prayer's future and the New Orleans Jewish community's future?

ML: Well, as far as Gates of Prayer's future, leadership – future leadership, I think, is a problem that we're addressing now because people's lives have been turned upside down, and to take on a responsibility like this is hard. We have rebuilt our congregation. Our nursery school's open. Our religious school, our Hebrew school. We have Shabbat services every Shabbat, but financially, we really, even at this point a year later, don't know where we're going to end up. That's a major concern. We're trying to get back to everyday normal things with Gates of Prayer – developing a leadership training program, working with the administrator on his duties, just normal, everyday temple things. But we're very conservative with our money. We have a nest egg that we have put away to make up for deficits, but there's going to come – and donations are still coming in, but there's going to come a time when we're off the radar, and there will be no more donations, and we know that's going to happen, so we're trying to plan for the future. As far as the Jewish community, I think we have gotten a whole lot closer, and we're in the midst of hiring a new Director of Federation. I have nothing to do with that, but I hope that the person that they hire is able to bring the community even closer. We're small, to begin with, and Federation has a big influence in programming and different things that they do for the community. It's also worrisome – like Jewish Family Services. I hope that their funding gets better. Jewish Children's Regional Service was established many, many, many, many years ago for orphans. Now we give kids scholarships and send

them out to camp. It's things like that I hope that don't – I mean, I hope they survive, and I'm confident they will. It's just going to take a lot of work. We've lost so many community leaders that – like our day school, which is for either Reform, Conservative, or Orthodox. They had eighty kids at one point, and I think there are twenty-five, maybe. It was up to eighth grade. Now it's only up to third. They were closed all last year. It's very important that we support the Day School because I'm sorry that there was no Day School when my kids were growing up.

RH: Do you have a vision? I mean, if some of these things have to go by the way? Do you not want to even go there, or do you –?

ML: No, I don't want to go there. I don't think that the national organizations that are over these groups – Federation, Jewish Family Services – will let that happen. I don't think that the Conservative Movement will let that happen to Shir Chadash or Beth Israel, which is the Orthodox, who lost their entire building, lost their Torahs, lost everything. They were using Gates of Prayer's building to hold services.

RH: How did that decision come about?

ML: Well, the Jewish part – the community's small. We all know each other. My husband's roots are at Beth Israel, and my mother-in-law's still a member, so there's a lot of connection. The president of the congregation met with us – with myself and the rabbi – and we had put out the offer first. If you want a minyan, you can have it here. Now they're holding semi-regular services.

RH: So you offered a minyan within the Reform –

ML: No. No. That they wouldn't have done.

RH: Okay, so explain.

ML: We have a room that we built as a multi-purpose room, but there's an ark that you can put into it so it can be used as a chapel, and we offered them that room if they wanted to have services, have a minyan – a nightly – you know, weekly minyan, and they took us up on it. At that point, they didn't know what was going to happen to their congregation because they lost all records. They lost everything. I think what we were offering them was a place to return, to gather their strength and move ahead, and we were also – no conflict. We weren't in competition with them at all because we're Reform. So they have been having services on a semi-regular basis. They held Rosh Hashanah services. They recently – which I attended – were given a Torah that a twelve-year-old girl or a thirteen-year-old girl started a fundraiser in the Los Angeles area and raised enough money to buy a Torah.

RH: Do you think opening up to Beth Israel has enriched your community in any way? Have you thought of it that way?

ML: No. No. I mean, we're so different that it's just helping another congregation.

RH: Is there anything you'd like to see more of in either Gates of Prayer or the Jewish community?

ML: I think more community programming. We had Hanukkah – the Federation put on a Hanukkah party last December. Over six hundred people attended. It was just amazing. I think more community programming. In April or March, we are having at Gates of Prayer a speaker, which is our Landau Lecture Weekend, which we have every year. Normally we don't share the person that we have with anyone else, but because we want to get someone that would attract people from the community, we're having Rabbi Telushkin. He is actually a Conservative rabbi who wrote a book on Jewish ethics, and he's a fabulous speaker. Well, what we decided – the rabbi decided to do was that he was going to ask Shir Chadash, which is the conservative, Beth Israel, which is orthodox, and Young Israel, which is Chabad, if they would like to go in with us financially and let's

set up a schedule for the weekend to share Rabbi Telushkin, and that's what's going to happen. So it's going to be a Metairie Jewish weekend, where each will have Rabbi Telushkin in their congregation. Of course, Beth Israel will have it at Gates of Prayer also because that's where they're meeting. I am really looking forward to that because it was a joint effort to get as much exposure to everyone and not just Gates of Prayer. We have a fundraiser every year, which every congregation does, and again, the rabbi had a great idea. He had got an e-mail from this company that sells Israeli art. So many people lost their artwork, so we're having a – obviously open to anyone – art show and sale the first weekend in November because we were trying to think of something that the community could be involved in. For our fundraiser last year, we decided to go ahead and do it. From contacts with my husband, we were able to get Harry Anderson, the comedian, I don't know if you remember, from Night Court.

RH: Right, right.

ML: Well, he has since moved, unfortunately. He had a comedy club in the Quarter, and he and his wife were married at the restaurant, so that was that connection. He gave us a ridiculous price, and we didn't charge. We did have a patron level, but the minimum was thirty-six dollars, and it was for dinner and a show. Well, if the fire marshal had been there, we would've been in trouble. It was an unbelievable night. The room was basically standing-room only. We basically ran out of food. We had a caterer, and then Harry did his show, and we wanted something to make them laugh for one night, to get their thoughts away from their homes and their businesses and the city and just to enjoy one another and laugh, and we accomplished everything that we set out to do. I mean, we didn't have a chairman, so the rabbi's wife, (Lynn?), and our Torah soloist, (Tory?), and I did it, and it wasn't a fancy thing. We had a little raffle. We had a few items, and we made our budget. So it was just amazing, and now this was pre-Katrina budget.

RH: Wow.

ML: Yes. Yes.

RH: That's pretty creative. Wow.

ML: So it worked out marvelously. So you just try and involve as many – we're trying to involve as many congregants as possible, and a lot of people are saying yes, not in big roles, but in little things, like bringing a cake to an oneg or one of our worries is lack of attendance at Shabbat services, and we have a summer delight series, which is continuing education, and the attendance was pretty poor, but a lot of people weren't in town, and I don't know. We really just gave other excuses. The last program for this series was a movie and popcorn, and we showed *The Bee Season*, which was with Richard Gere, who was the father of a Jewish family, and it was great. I don't know why the movie didn't do well. I enjoyed it. But we had over fifty people, so it told us we need to be more creative in our programming to do things that we think will attract people.

RH: So when you say creative, you think trying to figure out more – what do you mean?

ML: Well, maybe having a potluck dinner before services. If they come to eat, maybe they'll – we all know people love to eat, and if you offer food, they'll come. There was one thing we did last year because of donations was have congregational dinners for free. We're going to do three of those again this year. We put a certain amount of money away for three congregational dinners, and we're not going to charge. We'll still charge for our Sukkot dinner and our Hanukkah dinner and Seder – second night Seder, but these three we will not charge, and then a friend of mine came up and said, "Well, let's do a share Shabbat," which is bring a dish. We're going to probably do that, so we just have to think about what will get the people to services and try and work on that.

RH: Are you angry at all with people who have left or frustrated?

ML: I have mixed feelings, to be honest, and Steven and I have talked about this. If we didn't have a business, we probably would've left.

RH: Really?

ML: Yeah. But I am somewhat angry at people who have left. I mean, I've lost not close friends. I have a close friend who moved across the lake; sometimes, it seems she does live out of town. But I've lost three doctors, and my internist, who was a friend also, said that he just didn't want to wait ten years for the city to get back to normal, and he was in a profession where you could pick up and leave.

RH: Do you wish you were in a profession you could pick up and leave?

ML: Sometimes, but I have two children here. I have a stepmother and my mother-in-law. It would've been hard, but I think people gave up too easily. It was like – I don't want to – it is hard living here, still. It's frustrating. Traffic is horrible.

RH: Can you tell me a little about what makes it hard for you?

ML: Renewing a driver's license, you have to stand in line all day because there's only one place open. It's frustrating that business is so bad. Our business is so bad.

RH: Tujague's?

ML: Yes. And that so many people are suffering. If you want to go out to dinner – like for Rosh Hashanah, we always go out to lunch after. Well, it's a Saturday. I thought restaurants were going to be open. I must've called a dozen. They were not going to be open for lunch. Finally, we did find one, but it wasn't obviously my first choice.

Everybody's on an abbreviated schedule. It's very frustrating. I mean, my house is now pretty much finished, but the workmanship was shoddy. I knew my contractor before the storm, but it was the kind of people he was able to hire and that he took on too much

business. It's going to the bank, and it's like they're giving away money. I mean, there's so many people on line because there's so many people living in Metairie. Traffic is horrendous. If you want to go out to dinner without making reservations somewhere, forget it because you've got to wait. I mean, maybe that might not be as prevalent now. Of course, when no one had kitchens, that was a problem.

RH: You said you wanted to talk about the storm's impact on your family and just on your understanding of community. That was kind of my impression, at least.

ML: Well, on my family – my daughter – the Thursday before the story, we took her car to a shop to be fixed, and it flooded. She lost her car. My son lost his home of six months, which was a double, and had a tenant who was paying half the mortgage. This is the end of September, and I can say he's got the house sold. The sale hasn't gone through. It's been a year now, and he's been paying two mortgages. He ended up buying another condo. It really affected his life more. My daughter's apartment was fine. She was able to get a new car, so things worked out. Her job was fine. Mark's had a very hard time. Every mother worries about her children, and it's been a major concern of mine. Things are now turning around for him, or seem to be, but he had to hire a lawyer to sue the insurance company. He had plenty of insurance – homeowners and flood – but they didn't want to pay him. But things are looking up for him. This really has taken a toll on him and his girlfriend, which I tease them because if they're still together after what they've been through, they should be fine.

RH: So how is that like for you, I mean, to watch your kids struggle that way?

ML: It's been horrible.

RH: Are there any things you can do or have you done, or that you tried?

ML: It's hard to boost someone's – what's the word? – happiness if their lives are in turmoil. No. I mean, we offered – this was a refuge. Not that our home was in a

condition to be a refuge, but his girlfriend, Candace, lived with us for several months when I was able to move downstairs, and she moved upstairs. It just took what little pleasure two working people have – and there are a lot of good things to be happy about before the storm. It just took all that away. Their whole life changed. They weren't worrying about money before. They could enjoy a nice dinner and a movie and a vacation, and they can do all those things, and then, boom, it's all gone. So their whole way of life changed. Our way of life changed, too, but I guess because I'm older, it was just very hard on them, which made it very hard on us. But things were turning around and getting better for him, so I feel better.

RH: We'll move to a little different direction for a few minutes, and then we'll get to some other questions. What is your feeling about the city of New Orleans? Well, I guess what is your feeling about the whole response?

ML: Sickening. Again, that word unbelievable. I blamed the governor and the federal government. It's like they just can't do anything right. I blame the mayor now. I did not blame the mayor in the very beginning. To me, I think he was so out of his element.

What more could the guy have done? But since then, I've lost all faith in him because the process has been so slow. I remember watching TV in Atlanta, and Harry Connick, Jr., came in to bring food and water, and he goes, "If I came in, if I got here, where's the federal government?" I just lost all faith. I never had a whole lot of faith in Republicans to begin with, and now I don't have any.

RH: So you have Black employees, and in the Lower Nine. How do you feel about the racial situation in the city now? Do you have any thoughts on that? Is it worse?

ML: Well, obviously, crime's up. I don't know. I'm not that knowledgeable about race relations in the city. Most of my life's in Metairie. I've never had a problem. Our employees are very loyal to us because we treat them like human beings, which is something that nobody else did after the storm. That's what was so sad. We fixed up an

area in the building next to ours. It was an apartment originally. It was being used as a storage area. We fixed it up for an apartment, and an employee moved in. For months, I picked up another employee who was living in Kenner and brought her to work every day. So, Steven and I did as much as we could, which I think we did a lot, because if – they were just getting depressed because they didn't have a job. In fact, Steven talked to an employee who recently moved back in town but had not been feeling well, who was working for us prior to the storm, and offered her a part-time position in the kitchen, and she started crying. Steven gets very emotional with all that. We're very blessed to have a staff that is devoted to us because we're devoted to them. I mean, if it weren't for them, we wouldn't be around. The employees that didn't come back probably shouldn't have.

RH: I guess how do you feel the Jewish community's response overall, in general, before or after the storm – how does this interact with the larger New Orleans community?

ML: You're talking about the national Jewish community?

RH: No. The New Orleans Jewish community with the larger New Orleans community.

ML: I think it's very good. September 29th '06 was the anniversary, and there was an interfaith service at St. Louis Cathedral, which Rabbi Loewy participated in. There's a good deal of interfaith organizations that are quite active in this city. In fact, a man that just passed away was instrumental – a Jewish man, a member at Gates of Prayer was instrumental in establishing a program with Dillard University, Institute of Christians and Jews, and I never knew that – that he was – helped start that. But there's been a good bond with all different faiths in this community.

RH: What do you think –? Are there any things special that make you proud of this Jewish community? Are there any things that you think are unique about this Jewish community that you like?

ML: This will be edited, obviously. I just need to think.

RH: Take your time. It's okay to have gaps on the tape.

ML: I'm proud to be part of this Jewish community, and I always have been. I moved to New Orleans when I was twelve and got involved almost immediately. They work together. I think there's mutual understanding, maybe not so much with the ultra-Orthodox because they're just sort of on the fringe, so radical compared to the mainstream. I'm proud of what the Federation has done since the storm, the different organizations, and the people that run them. They're committed.

RH: Great. Can you kind of tell me what you want for your kids in New Orleans and what you want for your kids in general?

ML: Well, I want what every parent wants. I want them to be happy and satisfied with what they're doing in life. I think my kids are pretty much on the way there. I don't want them to have a hard life. I want them to make a contribution to their community, which, in your late twenties, early thirties, you don't think about that, but I hope one day that they will.

RH: Do you think that there's anything particularly Jewish in this want, this desire for your children, or are there any things that –?

ML: Well, I think a lot of that is universal. I would hope. I think giving back is a Jewish tenet. Mitzvah, doing unto others. I've tried to teach my children that. They're not particularly religious, which upsets me a little bit, but none of them are married, none have children, which upsets me a little bit. I'm hoping that once they have children, that religion will become a bigger factor in their lives. I know it did mine.

RH: You have any other hopes for yourself for the future here? Your husband and family?

ML: I hope it doesn't take the ten years everyone's saying – nine more – because we're going to be too tired by then. It's aggravating. Every time we get – and I'm talking personally – ahead of the game, something happens. We were doing so well, and then 9/11 hit and business just sank because people weren't obviously flying. There was no tourism. We were just getting back up, and the hurricane hit. And I'm tired of struggling. I'm tired of doing without – not that I really need anything, but you know, I'd like my husband take a vacation. He's been working seven days a week since we reopened in November. He's mentally and physically exhausted, but we don't have enough help. Business isn't good enough, so he feels like if he's asking his employees to come, he's got to be there. I just wish things were easier on our health, it doesn't take us long to get back.

RH: Are there any priorities that you had before the storm that kind of changed now for you? Things that might be more important?

ML: Well, I think family's more important. The congregation's more important. It doesn't bother me that I can't really go out and buy a car. Our car's almost nine years old. I'd love to go on a vacation with my husband, but time-wise and financially, we just can't do it. I would think by the time I was fifty-five and been in business all these years, life would've gotten easier. Like I said before, there's really nothing I need. There's plenty I want but nothing I need.

RH: You kind of answered this a little bit, too, but in case you think of something else. Are there any things you took for granted before the storm that you just don't take for granted anymore?

ML: I would think I took for granted the government's ability to help people.

RH: Wow.

ML: Because I don't have those thoughts anymore.

RH: Who are the heroes in your past year?

ML: Overall? I mean people that I know, or –?

RH: For you. Yeah. Just in your personal life.

ML: My personal life. My husband, for surviving all this, my son, my rabbi, our employees, and our congregants. The New Orleans Saints. Studies have shown that sports makes people – well, winning, I guess, makes people feel good. Last year, we had LSU in the basketball final four, and this year we have the Saints. It's little things in the scheme of the universe, but it makes people happy, and we need that.

RH: Yeah. You've had to rebuild your home.

ML: Yes.

RH: You've had to reconfigure and be away from your family and come back and be with them and worry about your husband and your son. What are your concepts of home now? What is home to you?

ML: Home is having my kids over for dinner and being able to cook again and just hanging out here and trying to forget about what goes on outside the front door and having my stepmother and my mother-in-law, and just friends – being with friends helps, too. It's the basic things in life.

RH: Is there any relationship to your Jewishness that's changed over this past year or your understanding of yourself as Jewish?

ML: I think I've become more spiritual. Certain prayers affect me more than they did before, and my connection with all the people at the congregation – I mean, their

gratitude for being president now, just the pat on the back and –

RH: What are you grateful for?

ML: Being alive, having a home, having my children here and healthy, having a business. Again, it's the basic things of life. I'm grateful to have a toilet downstairs or a tub downstairs, where I don't have to go upstairs to use the bathroom. It's things like that. I'm grateful my house is finally finished after a year.

RH: Is there anything you'd like to add to this interview that you would like to say that maybe I have not had the foresight to ask?

ML: I don't want people who will view this to think that I've been complaining or whining. That's just me. I am hopeful for the future and hopeful for my family.

RH: Hopeful for the Jewish community?

ML: And hopeful for the Jewish community. Yes. We will survive.

RH: Thank you.

ML: You're welcome.

RH: Okay.

[END OF INTERVIEW]