Mark Samuels Transcript

ROSALIND HINTON: [Rosalind] Hinton, interviewing Mark Samuels at 5301 Marcia Drive in New Orleans, Louisiana. Today is Thursday, August 2nd, 2007. 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. Mark, do you agree to be interviewed and understand that the interview will be video-recorded?

MARK SAMUELS: Yes, I do.

RH: Okay. For the beginning, why don't we just get a little background of your life, your Jewish and your general education, and your life here in New Orleans, maybe who your family is, when they came to be in New Orleans.

MS: Okay. My father was in the oil business, worked for Shell Oil Company, and moved to New Orleans in 1968 when I was six years old. So, I went from, I guess, first grade through high school here in New Orleans. We belonged to – almost immediately, my father and one of his college fraternity brothers, Hugo Kahn, moved to the city, I think within the same month, and both families were very close. We both joined what was called the Conservative Congregation of New Orleans, which was later named Tikvat Shalom, when it moved to Metairie and then renamed Shir Chadash when it merged with Chevra Thilim. I went to Ben Franklin High School, which is a public magnet school. I was involved in B'nai B'rith, in the Fried Goldberg AZA chapter – president of that. I was also involved, I guess, in the Jewish Federation as the co-chair of the Youth Division of the annual campaign when I was either a junior or a senior in high school.

RH: Really? What exactly –? Explain the Fried Goldberg division of B'nai B'rith. If you could explain that to me and what you did, who was in it?

MS: Fried Goldberg was an – I don't know if it's active now or not. But it's an AZA/BBYO chapter. It was pretty active when I was in it. I think, when I was a freshman or eighth grade, maybe, it kind of got a good rejuvenation. If I remember correctly, there were probably twenty to thirty active members. We would get together and do stupid things on weekends.

RH: [laughter] Stupid things such as?

MS: Maybe go bowling, a swim party. It was hanging out with Jewish people, but I can't say we were doing anything that was too religious or Jewish. So, no. I'd hate to say anything like we were drinking or anything like that.

RH: Okay. What was the budget for the Federation Youth Division? Do you remember what you had to raise [laughter] and how you had to raise it?

MS: No, I really don't remember what they were asking us to raise. Only while I was just being asked that question I remembered that I was involved in that. I don't know that they always have campaign people, heads of the Youth Division. I don't know that that's something they still do. But if I remember it correctly, Laurie [Levy?] and I were the co-chairs. Actually, it was somebody who later became my cousin through my marriage, Phyllis Herman, who had lived just down the street from where we are, who I think was the person who kind of coordinated what we were doing. But I really don't remember how much we were asking for from high school kids but it's probably asking them to make twenty-five and fifty-dollar contributions.

RH: What was kind of the center of Jewish life for you and your family and also for you and your friends?

MS: The synagogue was. I mean, my brothers and I were all bar mitzvahed at –I was bar mitzvahed at Conservative Congregation when it was still in uptown New Orleans. My brother Greg was, I think, maybe the first person who was in the new synagogue on

West Esplanade, if I recall. So the synagogue – my parents basically were pretty active. I mean, they were very active and very active at the congregation. My mom was the first president of Tikvat Shalom. The first female president, I should say. I don't know. She may have been the first female president of any congregation in New Orleans. So, we were very active in the congregation and then, like I said, the B'nai B'rith. It was something that I was president of and, I think, vice president of. With a brother – my brother Greg and I were a year apart in school. So there was the Samuels brothers. We decided we were going to have an – by the time we were a junior or senior, we wanted to have something, and that we planned a function.

RH: Got you. Were there networks –? I guess I want to know what it was like to be Jewish in New Orleans and your impression.

MS: Well, you know, I went to a variety – my parents did a – I guess I ended up okay. But I changed schools to third, fourth, fifth, and sixth grade even though we lived in the same place for three of those four years. But I grew on the West Bank of New Orleans. I went to elementary school. My best friend was Jewish. His name is Howard Stern. He and I went to first, second, and third grade together – actually, fourth and fifth grade. Then we ended up in high school together as well. So Howard and I were two Jewish guys who hung out and were good friends through all of that time, all the way, like I said, from first grade through – With the exception of a few years where I was at a different school for middle school and where I had moved to the East Bank, he and I were – that was my Jewish compadre, if that's the word, at school. I don't recall ever having anything negative about being Jewish. But I also can't say that I was ever somebody who would sit there and talk about that with my friends who weren't. I just maybe would keep it more quiet. But at Franklin High School, there was maybe – we had 150 people in my class, and I guess there were about eight or nine of us that were Jewish. For the most part, those eight or nine, at least, I guess, five or six of us all went to Shir Chadash or Tikvat Shalom, at the time.

RH: So a lot of your friends were also – [cell phone rings] I can't believe this. [Recording paused.] So were a lot of your friends growing up –? Did you mix with people who weren't Jewish?

MS: Yeah. Yeah. I mean, I always had a variety of friends, especially in high school. Franklin's is a great school. I mean, I was in a band with Wynton Marsalis. I was in a summer program with Victor Goines, who's the head of the jazz program at Juilliard. I guess he's the director of Jazz Studies at Juilliard. And Lolis Elie who's a writer for The Times-Picayune. Rene Coman, who's a bass player for the Iguanas, actually belongs to our synagogue. And now, when I go back to some of the reunions, I find out the groups that people that I was friendly with – a lot of that was from band. A lot of my contacts that were outside of the Jewish contacts were as a result of my involvement in the band in high school.

RH: What was your instrument?

MS: Saxophone. But there was also older – not just in my class. But there were family friends who went to high school with me. Again, that would have been the Jewish families. But for the most part, I would say my friends were Jewish. Certainly, social activities with AZA were centered – I guess two or three weekends a month, there was something that we were doing with a group of Jewish people. I would say, for the most part, my friends were Jewish.

RH: Do you have any particular memories that kind of encapsulate your experience growing up?

MS: Well, I mean, planning, organizing the spaghetti supper fundraiser for AZA was doing something with most of the people that I socialized with that involved raising money, which I was generally involved in, in different aspects. So, I guess that was – if you're looking for something, some event. I was also involved in USY, now that I think

about it. That was a synagogue-based conservative movement – synagogue-based. So that was also a social organization that I would go to meetings for. I wasn't as involved – I may have attended one or two meetings of Young Judaea – but I had several friends who, you know, were very active in Young Judaea.

RH: Did you go to Israel when you were young or –?

MS: I didn't go to Israel when I was young. I went to Camp Judaea for one year. I guess before entering sixth grade I went to Camp Judaea. Then I went to Camp Ramah in Wisconsin, I guess before eighth and before ninth grade. Or perhaps it was before ninth and tenth.

RH: Were those good experiences?

MS: Oh, yeah. Had a good time. Now, I don't know why I stopped going. I guess I just wanted to work. I think that next year I just wanted to work. I ended up working at Morning Call Coffee Stand, selling coffee and beignets. But my children have all gone to Camp Ramah for several years now, six, seven, eight years.

RH: Tell me how many children you have.

MS: I've got three. Geoffrey is seventeen, Eric is fifteen, and Naomi just turned thirteen. And she'll be bat mitzvahed on September 1st.

RH: From Shir Chadash?

MS: At Shir Chadash, yeah.

RH: Have you been involved with them in that experience?

MS: Well, I've been involved, and as far as taking her to her lessons. I've listened to her read her Haftorah a couple of times now. At our synagogue, not everybody, but – you

can do everything – I mean, lead everything on Friday night. You can lead all of the services and read from all of the Torah. We read one-third of the Torah each year. So she can read all the Hebrew from the Torah, chant it, and chant the Haftorah. She'll do all of that, I think. She may do only five out of the seven aliyahs of the Torah. Because, for some reason, one of her aliyahs is forty-three verses. You have to read it in its entirety. So she may get a reprieve and not have to do that. Then, one of her brothers or her uncle may end up doing another one just to have something – to have an honor. But she'll do the whole thing. So. Unfortunately, their mom hasn't been around for any of their bar mitzvahs. Yeah.

RH: You told me your wife passed away?

MS: Yeah, she passed away in a car accident in November 2000. As far as my children go – our children, between Patti and I, she was the reason that they – I traveled a lot. She was the reason that they would go to services. And she really enjoyed synagogue life and enjoyed the rummage sales and setting those up. She was heavily involved in the formation of the New Orleans Jewish Day School. We were one of four families who said, "We're going to send our child to the day school, regardless." Before there was either a principal or a teacher hired, there were four families that basically committed to it. So, Patti was one of the people – and I did to a smaller extent –where we would go out and recruit more families. So my oldest son, Geoffrey could go to the day school, we ended up spending two years recruiting families and ended up with a kindergarten class in – I guess that was eleven years ago or so, ten years ago – a kindergarten class that had fourteen kids. And it opened. And it first opened in another facility, and then, I guess two years later, moved into the brand new JCC in Metairie. And then they grew by a grade each year. At the time of the storm, my oldest son Geoffrey had actually been the one and only class that went from kindergarten through eighth at the school. Then my son Eric had just started his eighth-grade year when the storm came.

RH: And they don't have an eighth.

MS: And now they just have kindergarten through third. After the storm, they've had to reconfigure the school. Hopefully, they will grow once again. This time they probably won't try to tackle the middle school, from what I understand. But since none of my kids go there anymore, I haven't been quite as involved. The school is named in memory of – it's not named for her, but the school's called New Orleans Jewish Day School, in Memory of Patti Arnold Samuels.

RH: Your own parents had been contributors to –

MS: My dad's a generous man.

RH: – the day school?

MS: And my mom's generous, as well. And they were – my dad's contributed to – whether it be Jewish Federation or Israel bonds or the Jewish Day School, he's always been a generous person. He was extremely generous with the school. I'm sure it was a huge loss for him. I mean, not just losing his home and having to move, but I'm sure having that school change from what was beginning to become a thriving K-through-8 back down to a K-through-3 with about – I guess there's about fifteen to twenty kids there now, this past year. I'm sure that has hurt him. But he's turned his attentions toward Austin, and he's involved in the day school there.

RH: So let's get into Katrina because there's been a lot of changes in your entire family network. When did Katrina kind of come to your consciousness, and what was your plan? What did you do? [laughter]

MS: I don't think I've ever evacuated for a storm. I've had family members who have left, and I've stayed. I've always had too much stuff to have to move, and I never felt like moving it. I decided, on Saturday night, that we were going to have to go. I did a decent

amount of moving a few things upstairs. Sunday morning, though, came, and my parents came over to the house and said, "We're leaving. We recommend that you do the same," and put a whole lot of pressure on me to leave. So, I did what – and they took – I can't remember now. I think they took one or two of the kids with them and said, "We're going to head toward Memphis. I hope you catch up with us." Then my girlfriend Kara and her dog and at least one of the kids and I followed two or three hours later after I'd just spent a little more time putting a few more things away. Now, and fortunately, we did get a few photo albums put upstairs and there were a few things that we saved, but I basically lost everything on my first floor. And then I lost a whole lot of stuff at my office because I never had the time to get to my office and try to salvage anything.

RH: Where was your office?

MS: On Canal Street.

RH: Oh. Yes.

MS: And it had about eighteen inches of water. I had about five feet here in my house. But that was a storm where I saw what was going on, and there was no doubt in my mind that I was going to leave. I'm glad we left when I did because it took us about eight hours to get to Memphis, which would normally have been maybe a six-hour thing. But that was no big deal compared to the twenty-four hours that it might have taken people to get to Houston or go to the west.

RH: Reason why you chose Memphis?

MS: Just because we knew we didn't want to head west because everybody else was heading west, and we had heard that it was a mess. Also, we had a wedding that we were invited to the following weekend in St. Louis. So we actually evacuated with maybe a couple of pairs of jeans and a couple of T-shirts, and the equivalent for each of us, whatever we could put in a small bag. We each left with a ¬– it was a black-tie-optional

wedding, so we each also left with at least a suit and nice clothes for a wedding. So, I'm probably one of very few people who evacuated with two pairs of jeans, two shirts, and a tuxedo. Because we figured – we had tickets to fly to St. Louis for this wedding the following weekend. It looked like we might not be back for two, three days, and we just figured if we were stuck in Memphis until Tuesday or Wednesday, we may as well just drive up to St. Louis. So that's what we did, and we had a great weekend. We were the best-dressed homeless families at the wedding and probably best best-dressed homeless families in the U.S. for that day.

RH: So when did you realize you couldn't get back?

MS: I think it was Monday afternoon when we started seeing that the levee broke, that we realized we weren't coming back any time soon. Because I remember being in Memphis – I guess we were there for maybe Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, something like that. My parents were already looking for houses in Memphis to buy or rent while we were there. So that realization came pretty quick. When we got on Google and checked out the satellite photos, I could see the roof of my cabana. So, I knew that there wasn't more than nine feet of water at my house. But I had no idea how much there was. I don't remember when I was first able to see that map. But I'm thinking that was sometime during that week. And then we went on to St. Louis – and again, my parents up there – my girlfriend is from St. Louis. So we gave that a very, very small amount of consideration as far as staying there. It was just maybe – while we were up at St. Louis, I was coming up with cities. I knew I needed to figure out a place for the kids to go to school and get them there quickly. Since my oldest was just about to start high school when – he had had two weeks of high school. My middle son was in eighth grade. It was kind of an important – for us to start. I mean, I guess any year is important. So, I was coming up with cities, whether it be Charleston, Birmingham, Jackson, Baton Rouge, or St. Francisville. What else did I look at? I guess I didn't give much consideration to Atlanta, but there was about fifteen –

RH: What was your criteria? Why were you picking some cities –?

MS: You know, I wanted cities that – Well, first of all, my girlfriend, who by the time anybody sees this, she'll be my fiancée – she's a lawyer. She needed to work in New Orleans or in Louisiana. But I also wanted to get the kids into – she's not Jewish. Judaism, to me, and being involved in the synagogue and all is not something that I feel strongly about personally. I feel strongly about it for my children, though, and giving them the opportunity to make their decisions on where they want to go. It was an important part of my growing up. So I wanted to stay in a community that had some Jewish people. St. Francisville wouldn't have necessarily met that, but that would have been close to New Orleans, on the western side. I didn't want to be on the eastern side of New Orleans because I had seen where the I-10 bridge had been destroyed. I was afraid it was going to be real hard for me to get back and forth. The one thing is, that I knew from the very beginning, is that I was going to do everything I could to come back to New Orleans and rebuild. So once I made the decision, what actually happened is all of a sudden – I had this list of like ten cities that I was considering. I said, "Wow, how about Austin?" I had gone to college there. I loved it when I was in school. But it was really one of the last thoughts. My brother Will, who also didn't know at the time whether his house was okay or not – it turned out he was fine. But he had also gone to school there. I called a fraternity brother. I was in Sammy [Sigma Alpha Mu], a Jewish fraternity at Texas, and I called a fraternity brother who lives in Austin, and I said, "We're considering moving to Austin." He says, "Mark, come on. Your little ones will go to the day school where my two sons go, and Geoffrey can go to the high school where I plan on sending my son next year." So Rob and members of the Jewish community in Austin bent over backward and were amazing and made our transition and going to Austin super easy. He just said, basically, "I'll call you later to tell you where your hotel is. Your kids will be registered on Tuesday." Again, it's Labor Day weekend. So we're up in St. Louis. "The kids will be registered for school. Just show up. I'll give you a call a little later or send you an e-mail and tell you where you're staying." So they put us up – they had arranged

for us to be in a couple of two-bedroom suites at like a Residence Inn for two weeks. And that was taken care of at that point. We knew that when we got there, that we had at least that. As it turned out, the Red Cross and FEMA and all ended up picking up the tab for our hotel for several weeks. Then my parents, who just were looking – once we got Austin, we were looking for rentals and something other than living in a hotel for a full school year. Because at that point we knew we were – really, once we got there we knew we were there for the school year. My parents were like, "Well, we're not going back to the way we lived forty years ago," when they were living in apartments, although we did go look at some apartments. My dad decided to liquidate some stocks and buy another house, and bought a house that was big enough for all of us to live in – not Will – Will got back here – but my three children and I. Then it allowed me, by having them all living in Austin and well taken care of and very close to the school – Austin was wonderful. I mean, my parents bought a house in Northwest Hills, and everything that we had to do within a course of a day, whether it was school or the grocery or the JCC or whatever it might be – or the high school that my son went to, everything was within a mile-and-a-half. So I spent – and my parents have always been supportive, particularly so after my wife died – living in close proximity since I bought this house five years ago. They've just always been there to take care of the kids and help with the kids. They've got a really great relationship with them. I took advantage of that and drove back and forth to New Orleans twenty-three times for several days at a time each time to either take care of my business, which is Basin Street Records, a record label. We represent nine New Orleans-based artists. We've always been recognized as the top label in New Orleans for New Orleans music. The music, the culture, and the food is what make New Orleans something different than every other city. And if it wasn't for that, I probably would have been happy staying in Austin or wherever else. But that's why I say I always knew that I was going to come back and rebuild in New Orleans because I feel strongly about the city. It's one of the most amazing cities in the world. So I'd come here, and I'd spend four, five, six, eight, ten days at a time here with my girlfriend, who fortunately had

an apartment uptown.

RH: What happened –?

MS: And keep an eye on my business and spend time with her.

RH: What happened to your work?

MS: I had a full-time staff of five people. I had a 3,000-square-foot office on Canal Street. Initially, everybody spread out and did their own – for whatever they were doing to evacuate. One of my guys, my art director, we actually couldn't find him for about five or six days. I had reached out to everybody else, through text messages and found everybody but couldn't find (Hal?), and actually had, started the process of putting his picture up on websites, looking for information and all. Turned out he had been stranded at his parent's house on Esplanade Avenue and was stuck, basically, for five or six days. Some of the horrendous things that he saw while he was here ¬– when he did get rescued, he went to Washington for a while and recuperated. He just saw some horrible stuff.

RH: Really?

MS: And he told me he saw truckloads full of bodies and things like that. He was pretty traumatized. So, he stayed away for a while. I just realized that I didn't have enough insurance on my house. I didn't have the insurance on my business. I had some insurance on my home but not enough. So I just really didn't know – my business was at a point where I was kind of fueling it out of my personal funds to keep it going, and I just was no longer in a position to do that with all the uncertainty. So I had to let everybody go, and I just scaled back, and I started doing all the functions that everybody did. But the office, which didn't get a lot of water, height-wise, had wall-to-wall carpeting and was just a disgusting mess afterward. We had to throw away an awful lot of stuff when I did get around to getting in town and working on it. But between the cleaning up of my home

and the cleaning of my office and all the fighting with FEMA and the Red Cross and the Small Business Administration, I wasn't in a position to manage a staff of people. But what did happen as a result, which is an extreme positive for New Orleans music, is that our artists were involved in some of the most amazing activities that occurred after the storm. Irvin Mayfield, who lost his father as a drowning victim to the levee break, played "America the Beautiful" at the first Saints game, which was up at the – which was the Saints' home game, but it was played up at the Meadowlands. He played "America the Beautiful" there. Kermit Ruffins played at Madison Square Garden for an event that included Diana Krall, Elvis Costello, and superstars. Irvin Mayfield played at the Higher Ground benefit at Lincoln Center. Dr. Michael White participated in the Our New Orleans compilation CD, which was all these superstars, like Norah Jones and Diana Krall, I think was on that too. So we started getting a lot of attention, and I was able – I did a lot of interviews, and our artists did a lot of interviews. Jon Cleary was out on the road with Bonnie Raitt, as her keyboard player, during that time, and she was always touting the support efforts to New Orleans and was singling out Jon on all her shows. So our music got a lot of attention. And fortunately, because our music was still available through my distributor and through digital means, as well, people could still access it, whether or not I had lost all the product I had here in stock in my office. People really reached out just to support us and help us by doing that. It was an easy way for people to help – when people asked, "How can I help," it was like, "Buy some CDs and book our artists for some shows." We have examples of that goodwill. The Clearwater Jazz Holiday, which occurs in October, called me and said – I'd had a good relationship with them. They called me and said, "We want to, last minute, bring in some New Orleans acts." So they brought Kermit Ruffins and Irvin Mayfield in and paid them a good chunk of money and –so that was a great way to support these guys at that time, just let them do what they do. Then, in turn, when those two guys were both invited to play at a festival, were able to sell a lot of CDs at that festival. So we didn't have to really – although I certainly was asking for grants and was a recipient of a few grants that I would consider to be charity, we didn't

have to ask for a lot of charity. We just had to ask for some support. But I still am faced with Henry Butler, who's stuck in Denver and can't come back here because he's a blind blues and R&B pianist and lost two homes here. He lost his mom's home, and he lost his own. He can't get through all the red tape with the bureaucracy to get his house rebuilt. Dr. Michael White's stuck up on the London Avenue Canal [and] doesn't even know whether they're going to continue to – they've already taken six feet of his land. He doesn't know how much more they're going to take in order to rebuild the – so, he can't rebuild his home yet. So he's stuck going back and forth between Houston and New Orleans. But for the most part, all of our artists have come back here. Most of the people who did work for me – all of them are back here in New Orleans now. But I've decided that I'm going to still keep my company small – smaller. I don't have any smaller aspirations for it than I had before, but I'm going to try to operate out of the house for a little while and with maybe one or two staff-people.

RH: Where do you record?

MS: Our recording has always been done in a variety of recording studios that we contract out for the particular project. Sometimes it's Bill Summers' home studio, Piety Street Recording Studio. Before the storm, we recorded at Ultrasonic, which got flooded, and it's not available anymore. But the engineer from that is still available with a mobile rig. So the first full-length CD that we were able to do was Kermit Ruffins' Live at Vaughan's. Steve, the engineer from Ultrasonic, came out to Vaughan's and recorded that. So I still used – and again, it's a trickle effect. When I get some support, when I get a grant, small business grant, or economic development grant, I spend money on artists and engineers and graphic designers. We've been able to do that once now with a full-length CD. I also, a year ago, released a record by Theresa Andersson. That was a five-song CD that was something that she was able to afford to do by herself at a small budget. I reimbursed her. But I didn't have the staff to supervise it, so it was like, "Sure, we can put something out, but if you bring me the finished product." We're hoping in

2008 to release four records. And that'll get us back. I've released as many as six in a year. And prior to the storm, I had released as few as three. So this last couple years of releasing one a year is, that's not a growing business.

RH: No. Does that also mean, if you can't release or can't afford, I guess, to front, that you could lose artists from your stable?

MS: Yeah. Yeah, I mean, at this point, most of them know that I'm prepared to – if the records are presented to me with modest budgets, I'll try my best to have a record for them out in the first half of 2008. It may be that we end up – if they all take me up on their offer, then we may have four, five, or six records out before June next year. But the reality is that, as much as I'm dealing with, they're also dealing with the same. Although Michael White knows that he's free to go into the studio and record – he could go do that tomorrow, as far as I'm concerned. He also needs time. He's dealing with a sick mom who evacuated from New Orleans and is in Houston with bedsores and an infection, and he can't transport her back here. There's no doctors. There's no hospitals for – they're telling him he's run out of money in Houston for her, for Medicare. He's trying to apply for Medicaid. So, you're an artist. You're trying to be creative, trying to write new music. In his case, he lost a lot of music that he had written – excess music that he had written prior to the last record. He lost it in the flood. He lost everything. He lost fifty clarinets. He's a historian.

RH: So he lived around –

MS: And he lived in –

RH: – London Avenue?

MS: – one-story – yeah, and he lived in a one-story home. So he lost everything. As much as he'd like to put a record together for us, he's not able to. He just can't find a – he told me the other day he needs to find two weeks to do nothing, go sit in a retreat.

The last record he did, he sat at a retreat over on the West Bank, and he was with nature and wrote and, you know, had very little outside influence.

RH: I'm trying to remember the name of that place on the West Bank.

MS: A Studio in the Woods.

RH: Studio in the Woods. Right.

MS: And he'd love to have that kind of an opportunity again, but he doesn't know when that's going to happen, with his mom in Houston and sick and –

RH: Right. He can't –

MS: – not having a house.

RH: – leave her either.

MS: He's got a trailer here, and near the – he's a professor at Xavier University, and he's got a trailer there – a house. Henry Butler's prepared to do a solo record for me. And I hope to work with Jon Cleary on his next record soon.

RH: So Henry Butler also wants to come back to the city.

MS: I think he –

RH: He just can't.

MS: – wants to come back. But again, he needs to know that there's certain facilities that are available. See, a guy like Henry Butler, and a blind man who could get out of a cab on Frenchman Street, and you wouldn't know that he's blind because he's so aware of all of his surroundings and everybody knows him – I mean, it's hard for me to imagine what it's like for him to lose the comforts of all of his surroundings and know how his

room is configured. I guess he does it all the time when he goes on the road and stays in a different hotel, but that's got to have its own set of difficulties. With Henry, it's him being in Denver and his band members being in different ones. I think maybe they're perhaps all based out of New Orleans. One's always been out of Mississippi, but it makes it more expensive, makes it more expensive to tour when you've got people coming from different cities. So he does a lot more solo work than he did before. But the answer is my attitude has to be these days, I can do whatever it is I can do. In making my girlfriend happy and raising three children and dealing with the trauma in their lives for the second – second major event of trauma in a seven-year period – in a five-year period, when it happened, right? My children have been through a difficult loss twice. It's amazing. I get a lot of strength from watching how they've bounced back from both losing their mom and losing so much of their possessions and now losing their grandparents to Austin, in many respects. Fortunately, it's not too far away, and they get opportunities to see them. My parents are retired so they can come back here. But all of that is – my attitude these days has to be I'll do what I can do. I want to make everybody happy – as happy as I can make them, but if I'm not able to do something to make one of the artists happy and they have to go somewhere else, then that's what they're going to have to do. I can't do it all anymore. I pride myself on dealing with ninety-nine percent of my e-mails within twenty-four hours and every phone call within twenty-four hours, and sometimes I just don't do that anymore. There's no way I could. I've been fortunate in that I had a second floor, so I didn't lose everything. I've been in a position where I was able to live in my home as I fixed it. The kids and I, when we were in Austin, you know, for me to be able to come back here. So few people had that opportunity. If you evacuated to Jackson or Houston or Austin or Atlanta or wherever you might be, and you've had a one-story home, and you lost everything, if you want to try to maintain that home and make your payments on your insurance and your mortgage and everything else and you have a new job that's in Atlanta, you're not going to take off for ten days. You're trying to make ends meet. All you can do is work. You don't have the opportunity

to come check on your property and make sure that – I did have my house ransacked, and somebody did break-in at one point but there are people still dealing with that kind of thing. I've had snakes in my pool and rats in the first floor of the house and caught two rats in traps while we were living upstairs. [laughter] But I've been able to deal with that, have a house that I can move into and fix at the same time. I've fought through the Road Home program and, just a few weeks ago, received a full $150,000 Road Home grant after an initial letter from them saying I was going to receive $64,000. I fought it, and I fought it. I had stories on National Public Radio and in a variety of different publications. I can get press. So, I used that. The fact that I have a voice and can get press, I used that. I was a very outspoken critic of our governor. I've been a very outspoken critic of our mayor. Currently, my focus is [to] do what I can to force the district attorney to step down from the city. I think he's an incompetent buffoon. Now that I've received my Road Home money, it takes some pressure off, but I still want to fight it because still, out of 180,000 families who have now applied, only 27,000 or 30,000 families have received their money. Of the ones who received their money, I heard something the other day where somebody was told the day before they went in for their closing, "We're still going to have your closing, but your grant award has been reduced by $55,000. We suggest you take it because the program's running out of money." Now, that person needs to file a lawsuit.

RH: What's your channel for fighting this?

MS: Well, being outspoken, I mix my business and my politics. I try to be careful about it because, on top of all these things, I still think New Orleans is the greatest city in the world despite the fact that we have horrible politicians here. We have a horrible mayor. We have a horrible governor. We have great civic people. The community in the city, since the storm, has shined. There's 25,000 people in the city that are great community activists now as a result. That's a guess at the number. But it's a very large percentage of the population that's living here who are really in tune with what's going on and want to

see some change. I will send out a weekly newsletter through my company. Sometimes I might say something like, "Thanks to the incompetency of our governor, who I'm looking forward to her spending her time visiting her grandchildren rather than running our state, I still haven't received my Road Home money." I'll put a sentence in there like that. But I also recognize that, because I have an audience reading that newsletter that's scattered as far as Japan and Germany and France – and we're trying to make sure that they come to New Orleans and visit and spend their money and encourage others to do the same – that I don't paint a bad – I can't paint a horrible picture of what's going on. What I can say about our city and what I always do is that ninety-nine percent of the things that I did for the year before the storm are here, are available for me to do. I can go to Tipitina's, the Maple Leaf, Snug Harbor, House of Blues. I can go to the Southern Rep Theater. I can go to Le Petit Theatre. My girlfriend's not only a lawyer but also an actress. I do a lot of theater things, as well as the music side. We have more restaurants here than we had before the storm. So, come to New Orleans and have a good time. But if you walk – and you won't see any of the devastation if you're a typical tourist. Ninety-five percent of the people who come here for conventions or whatever, they're not going to see the devastation. They have to search it out. You may only have to go ten blocks away to find a neighborhood that's been devastated, but you don't have to see it if you don't want. You can come here and have a good time. But there's still 100,000-plus families who want to come back who can't because of the lack of leadership that we've had here. If people will wake up and vote for some people who make some sense – wow, we've had – I mean, we have some people working on the City Council now that are tremendous: Arnie Fielkow, Oliver Thomas, Stacy Head, Shelley Midura – there's an infusion of new people. The other people that are – Shelley Midura is my City Councilperson, and Stacy Head was my girlfriend's City Councilperson. They're new talent on there. Arnie Fielkow's an at-large. So he represents me. And Shelley Midura represents me. As far as I'm concerned, they're both doing a fine job of representing me on the City Council. I know Oliver Thomas because I'm involved on the board of the Satchmo Summer Jazz

Camp, and I've worked with him on that for several years now. From what I can see, the other members of the board are also – there's other new members – of the City Council. I think that there are good people on the City Council. I think our mayor's just been traumatized and isn't doing anything these days. I'm not afraid to say it – even though, from a business standpoint, it may not make any sense for me to be saying anything bad about the mayor when I'm in business in New Orleans, and he's going to be mayor for three more years.

RH: Do you think the recovery's been racist?

MS: I think the coverage of the recovery has been racist.

RH: Tell me about that. What do you mean?

MS: I mean, because it makes for a better story, I guess. This neighborhood is – to be frank, this neighborhood, Lakewood South, we had five to nine feet of water in every home. There was probably as big a percentage or bigger percentage of people that have left this neighborhood, never to return to the city, than in any neighborhood in the city. The two women on either side of me – I bought my house from a woman who was a widow. And the two women on either side of me were all widows. They've all gone. None of them live in New Orleans anymore. Of the twenty people that I can see from my front door, the twenty homes, there's only three of us who are the same people living in our homes. And only forty percent of my neighborhood is occupied right now. To be frank, though, there were no minorities living in this neighborhood. Lakeview is predominantly a white neighborhood. It was completely wiped out. I think it's got less going on recovery-wise there than the Lower Ninth Ward that they talk about a lot – or the Ninth Ward. I think it's as devastated and as unlikely to recover. But the focus is always on the Lower Ninth Ward, which isn't just – it's not just a Black neighborhood either. It was a neighborhood of working-class people. I suppose there would have been more outrage if the shots that people saw of the Convention Center and the Superdome

hadn't been, I mean, of people in – maybe there was racism there. Maybe, had that been all of my neighborhood stuck in here, perhaps there would have been twenty helicopters sent into the neighborhood. I don't know. I don't know. I can tell you that I didn't look any better than any of those people for the two days after the storm. I hadn't shaved. Bags under my eyes. I was up all night.

RH: You're in shock?

MS: Yeah. I didn't even know that I had flood insurance when I left. It turned out that I had $100,000 in flood insurance. But I wasn't sure about it. I thought I'd lost everything. But I think that the people who could be – my parents lived here 40 years, extremely – and they're not the only ones. Members of our congregation – our congregation's probably sixty-five to seventy-percent of what it was. But it's a lot of the established families that left because they could. In our case, the grandchildren lived here, and my parents, perhaps, one day will come back or will at least spend more time here. But other people, where maybe the couple who had retired and were living in New Orleans, ended up going to, let's say, Dallas and living nearby their children in Dallas and their grandchildren. So, they're in Dallas, and they're staying there. Or they're in San Antonio, or they're in Birmingham, Alabama. I know a lot of families – and they're not coming back. And that's of my parents' generation. But there's also been plenty of my generation that have left, and I don't think are coming back.

RH: Have you lost some of your network of friends? They aren't coming back.

MS: I've lost some. But to be honest with you, my life revolves around my business and music. I guess I was kind of letting my network of friends deteriorate before the storm. [laughter] Because if you wanted to go do something with me, you had to go see Kermit Ruffins on a Thursday night at Vaughan's, or you needed to go to the Maple Leaf and see Jon Cleary play, or you needed to go to Snug Harbor and see Irvin Mayfield play because that was what I did. As much as I'd like to have most of the population listen to

jazz and blues and R&B, most of the population doesn't listen to that.

RH: Did you do that for business, go to all those places? Or did you do it just because you love it?

MS: Both. I mean, I got into the business because I had a love for music. I started the record label as a hobby while I was in the energy business. I was in a family business with my father, in the energy business.

RH: Okay. We have five minutes, but why don't we just wrap up this film? And then we'll move into another.

[END OF AUDIO FILE 1]

RH: – for Katrina's Jewish Voices. This is tape two of our interview. So let's go back just a minute. Tell me how you got into the music business.

MS: I guess the quick answer to that is, through my involvement in band in high school and knowing Wynton Marsalis, Victor Goines, a variety of other musicians, people who turned out to become musicians, I stayed tuned in to it. Even when I moved to New York City after college, and during college, I still was following Wynton's career. I was acquaintances with Harry Connick, Jr., so I was following some of what he was doing. But after college I ended up being, first, a consultant and then came back to New Orleans, actually, to be in a family business in the energy business. After several years in that I realized that I wanted to do something different. My brother Will, who at the time was the conference manager for the Cutting-Edge Music Business Conference, because of my connections, asked me to produce, just for the fun of it, some showcase events for that conference, where there would be like five bands, each play for forty minutes. So one of those years I had, for example – my late wife Patti, going back, had booked Kermit Ruffins for a synagogue function one time. I had started having conversations with Kermit and his manager to help her book that. So I had this event where we booked

Kermit Ruffins, Jeremy Davenport, Delfeayo Marsalis, who I'd been a family friend with – he was also in the band with me at Ben Franklin – Wes Anderson, who was a connection that I knew through Wynton, and Michael Ray and the Cosmic Crew. So I think those were the five. And that was one showcase one year. And then, the next year, I did another showcase with young talent. Those were just for the fun of it while I was in the energy business. That was the only music thing that I was really doing. Then I started having these conversations with Tom Thompson, Kermit's manager. We decided that we would start – he asked me to invest in Kermit Ruffin's live recording. This was while I still had my energy job. Instead of invest in the live recording, he and I started a label together, which I did on nights and weekends. We recorded the Kermit Ruffins' the Barbecue Swingers Live at Tipitina's in November '97. We started the company in September '97, recorded the album in November '97, and released it in February '98. And all that time, it was a hobby, and I was still working full-time for the energy company. In March '98, I ran into Irvin, who was sitting in with a friend of mine, Matt Dylan, a drummer, at the Funky Butt. And I had read these two stories about a band that Irvin had put together called Los Hombres Calientes. Actually, at the time, I think it was called Irvin Mayfield and Los Hombres Calientes or something. But I read these two stories. And it include Jason Marsalis, who, again, I'd known since he was three years old. When I was in high school with Delfeayo, we'd go to their house, and I'd listen to Wynton's recordings that he was making before they'd be released and all that stuff. So I knew – And I've watched Jason. So that band was with Jason Marsalis and Bill Summers. And I got into a conversation with Irvin at the Funky Butt that night and found out that – or the article had said that he wanted to have a record out by Jazzfest. So we started talking. He said, "I understand you're doing well with Kermit's record. Would you be interested in putting this out for us?" So I said, "Well, sure. Bill Summers – and I've got one record under my belt. It's a hobby. And you're asking me if I want to have Irvin, who is a pretty young talented musician, with Jason and Bill Summers, who's an accomplished, world-class percussionist? Yeah, I'll do that." "But we have to sign a deal

within the next three or four days." "Let me get Tom involved. We'll sit down in the next couple of days." So we did. We signed a deal four days later. We recorded an album. And again, that was March 7th, that meeting with Irvin. April 16th, we had the record available at the French Quarter Festival. Then it turned into the top seller at the Jazzfest two weeks later. Then, a year later, it won the Billboard Award for Latin jazz album of the year. But after the Jazzfest that year, when Los Hombres was the top seller, and Kermit's album was either number two or three, I realized I could quit my energy business and devote full-time to the record label. So that's how it all started.

RH: Wow. You were just also telling me off-tape about some other things that you're involved in, trying to get New Orleans back on track, I guess, or more on track than it was perhaps before the storm.

MS: Yeah. I mean, Basin Street Records has – I send out a newsletter to over 10,000 people every week. I use that forum – I try to keep – I carefully include politics in that, periodically. A lot of people come back to me when I send out something that's a little bit too hot, they say, "Come on. Music is what we – this is our release. Please keep that out of it." So I created a blog. If people are interested in what I've been through for a couple of years, they can go to the website, they can go to the blog, and they can go through the archives. And I've kept a pretty good – it's not day-to-day, and it's not even every week, but it's the highlights, whether it be dealing with the U.S. Postal Service and the incompetence there after the storm, whether it's dealing with the governor's Road Home program, which has been a fiasco, whether it's the Catch 22's in dealing with the Small Business Administration loans, whether it's dealing with insurance, whether the Levee Board consolidations, the assessor consolidations. I point people to levees.org, or I point people to Citizens for One Greater New Orleans, and these real grassroots, fine organizations that have been the difference – Desire NOLA, staylocal.org – these organizations that have really made a difference in helping people rebuild, and support – whether it be to point peoples' attention to the fact that, if you have a choice between

buying your hardware from the family store, where all the money stays in New Orleans, or going to Wal-Mart, buy from that family store. If you have a choice between – so I try to be part of that community. But I also, on the periphery, have watched what people like Irvin Mayfield and Ronald Markham are doing with the Jazz Orchestra. First of all, they're great ambassadors – not – I mean, Irvin's an official cultural ambassador of the city and the state. But all the New Orleans musicians are great ambassadors for this city. I've traveled, not so much in the last several years, as a single father, but before that, I would travel extensively. If you go to any city in the world and you say you're from New Orleans, they know where it is. The same can't be said for Topeka, Kansas, or Tulsa, Oklahoma. You just – you know, New Orleans has its own identity. It's a great brand. That was before the storm. Now, obviously, people are also like, "Oh, wow, New Orleans. How is it down there?" But Irvin and the Jazz Orchestra hit the road with seventeen guys in October after the storm and did a significant tour. They kept it together, even though they had all the people spread out all over the country, and they made that tour happen. Irvin and Ronald are working now with Lawrence Geller, who owns Strategic Hotels, and trying to create a national jazz complex, which would be an icon for the city, like the Superdome or the Arena or the St. Louis Cathedral, that would be a shining star for what we are famous for here, what needs to have – call it a mecca of a national jazz complex, a living museum, performance, a place where, when somebody comes to this city, and they get off the plane from Germany, and they say, "Where can I go hear jazz? Where can I go see what a second-line parade is all about?" They may not be able to go to the second line, but that place is going to have all the information. They've been heavily involved in trying to create that, on top of being cultural ambassadors and setting up major tours. Kermit Ruffins was on the cover of Downbeat magazine in November, after the storm, with the title, "We Will Swing Again." He was on the cover of – these were things that we, as a record label, helped create through our publicists.

RH: Is that right?

MS: I mean, how valuable is that to the city, to have Kermit Ruffins on the cover – Downbeat doing their – first of all, my hat's off to them for reaching out and doing something that draws attention to our cause. But how valuable is it to the city to have Kermit Ruffins on the cover with "We Will Swing Again," or when he was on the cover of Global Rhythm magazine – with the cover story with "Blowing the Blues Away in New Orleans." I can't ask, as a record label. Kermit can't ask, as an artist, for anything greater than that. If I spent three thousand dollars on an ad in the inside pages of Downbeat, what is that worth on the outside? And what's it worth to the city and the state and everybody else to have that kind of publicity? So, in helping us do our thing, I can help generate that kind of press that helps everybody out. We've had stories on the negative side with Michael White on NPR, on the NewsHour with Jim Lehrer, about his devastation of what's going on. But on the positive side is how he's overcoming all of that loss.

RH: Let's move, for a minute, into the Jewish community again. Did you connect, the year you were in Austin, to the Jewish community in Austin? Did your family?

Your children were at the day school, of course.

MS: Yeah, the Jewish community in Austin reached out and helped us. I'll always be thankful for them. It started with my friend Rob Solomon and his wife Tracy, but it really extended to all the families at the day school there. We didn't pay tuition there. Again, they didn't know it, but later on, I think they were able to get some tuition money through some voucher program that was created through FEMA. Initially, they gave us some gift cards for the grocery store. When we first checked into the hotel there, they gave us a ton of groceries and just brought it to the place. We had people cooking dinner for us for the first two weeks we were there, bringing dinner over every day. I mean, the Jewish community really reached out. There was also some of the music community that helped me out over there as well. The kids went to the Jewish day school, and it was like they

just popped in and they were immediately accepted. There was, I would say, absolutely zero transition for them. Even though the kids – the class that Eric, my middle son, ended up graduating with, there was the first class that, at that – it wasn't the first graduating class at the school because I think when they started their school it was kindergarten, first, and second. When he joined that eighth-grade class, those guys had all started in kindergarten. So even though all these other kids in the class had started in kindergarten and were there for the eighth grade, he was accepted. He had a great social life. He was always at one of their houses, or someone was staying with him at my parents' house. It was really tremendous. I went to services a few times. I really liked the – I could say I know the cantor at the synagogue there. What's it called? It's on the campus with the JCC. I can't remember the name of it. I don't remember the name of the synagogue. The cantor there is a musician. He's been at Snug Harbor, and Rob and a few other guys from the synagogue had come in town on time, and I saw the cantor sing at Snug Harbor; he improvised jazz. So I knew him a bit. I like him a lot. I went to services a few times. But other than setting an example for my daughter, who's being bat mitzvahed this year, I'm not a huge fan of actually going to synagogue. I feel strongly about Israel, and I feel strongly about the tradition, I want my kids to grow up Jewish, but I have a non-Jewish girlfriend who I plan on marrying. I'm through that phase of my life where I've had children, and I feel like they have good roots and good grounding. With my son in Israel now, I think he's got a new appreciation for his Jewish identity. But, back to Austin, it was wonderful, and the experience. Really, looking back, since my kids were born and raised here, it was really a good opportunity for them, looking back now. It's great that they got to see another community and make all those friends. My daughter invited all the girls from her class, maybe all – I don't know who she invited. But I'm sure that at least a couple of them are coming to her bat mitzvah.

RH: Wow

MS: That whole class may have been invited to her bat mitzvah.

RH: How did you sustain yourself?

MS: I look back – I try to think of that first time that I came back to New Orleans, and I walked into my backyard, and I saw the pool full of slime and mud. It was a black cesspool. And breaking down into tears, crying. My brother and my girlfriend were with me. Just breaking down into tears and crying out of control for about a half hour. And where I am now. I guess I got there by never stopping. But I also got there because, in losing my wife, I dealt with all of this kind of stuff to a much greater level already. I knew that there was a light at the end of the tunnel. I knew that I had fallen – by the time that Katrina hit – and I don't even like to call it Katrina hitting. By the time the Army Corps of Engineers allowed the levees to break – because Katrina – my house lost three shutters. I only suffered the devastation because of the levees breaking. I had already fallen in love again and knew that I could overcome disaster and loss. So I knew that I would be able to overcome all of this. It wasn't easy, especially that I had eyed this neighborhood for fifteen years and I had bought the house, at the time of the flooding, three years earlier and had spent six months before I moved into it redoing every ceiling, wall, floor, countertop, appliance, faucet – everything. The only thing I didn't replace at that time was the windows, which I've now replaced. [laughter] So, I would say it was just staying busy and always working toward getting back here again – and that focus.

RH: Why was there no chink in that focus, it doesn't sound like? I mean, you were so sure you were going to come back to –

MS: I actually wasn't – I was pretty sure. I told a lot of people – I actually had another two days of crying after the mayor was reelected because I told a lot of people that I was not going to move back here if Nagin got reelected. For two days, with my girlfriend here and me in Austin and having said that so much and being so confident that Mitch Landrieu was going to win, I really debated, at that point, about whether I was going to come back. I decided that I wasn't going to let the mayor or a bunch of people who had

made such a stupid decision, who probably weren't going to have an opportunity to move back to New Orleans – because I really do believe that it was people, for the most part, who weren't living here or who were so firmly rooted here and had no devastation, one or the other; that's the groups of people that voted for Nagin. Because nobody who was suffering or dealing with the tragedy like we were, in terms of trying to rebuild, and actually physically doing it here, could have been stupid enough to vote for him. Now, I say that, but I have since found out that some people who I respect greatly in this community, long-time friends, and my family's best friends, have voted for him. And they had their good reasons for it, as it turns out. But that was my attitude at the time.

RH: What were their reasons? I'm just curious.

MS: Oh, it was more, I guess, having to do with whatever feelings they had about the Landrieus or lumping Mitch in with his father or whatever it may have been. I don't know. As it turns out, Nagin is a – I say this a lot, and I actually had a really vivid dream about him recently. He's a guy that is very friendly. I think I could easily be friends with him. I just didn't think he was much of a leader after the storm. But, as bad a leader as he might have been, our governor was ten times worse. Because it was really her responsibility, not the mayor's. The mayor's responsibility was to come up with some ideas for the building of the city. The governor needed to pull the mayor and all the other political allies and foes together and come up with a united plan. And she failed.

RH: Well, to move back, I was asking you how you sustained yourself. You were saying that this isn't the first time that you had a trauma before that tested your mettle.

MS: Yeah. And it was that knowing. Going through the first time, I never knew. I mean, I would sit there sometimes at intersections and just start hyperventilating. Because I didn't know what the next day was going to come. I knew I had to stay strong for my kids. I knew, in this case, that I needed to stay strong for my kids. I knew they couldn't see a father break down and have bad days. And certainly, I had bad two-hour periods,

bad four-hour periods, where maybe I just kind of shut down. But I dealt with all of this without medication. This time around, I didn't go see a psychiatrist, a psychologist, or a social worker. I think one of the ways that I've coped is I've always been very open with people. I can talk to people for the first time and get into a fairly meaningful conversation, deep conversation, talk about loss, talk about overcoming tragedies. So I'm able to talk through things. You know, if I can sit there and commiserate with someone else, who's got a teenager who's causing him problems. Some people don't like to be that open about things. So having the outlet, having the ability just to vent is important. Although I don't feel any more like I have that really – that best friend, other than my girlfriend, that I can call and say, "Hey, I've got to talk" – that's just not who I am. I feel like I can talk to any variety of people and vent. I think a lot of people shut down. I think my mom's one of those people who just prefer not to talk to anybody about anything about it and hold it all in, and it's really dangerous for her that way. I'm running a business and doing the activities of all five of my former employees. I'm trying to keep nine artists happy, three children happy, a girlfriend and her dog. Again, there was a balancing act in dealing with the tragedy of the loss of my wife in making other people around me realize they were going to be okay if I was okay and if the kids were okay. So the same thing here. It's like my parents are going to be okay from this if they see that I'm okay and the kids are okay. They'll be okay with the fact that they've left town. But if the kids are calling him and saying, "Dad shut the door in his room, and he hasn't come out for a day," which maybe once in a while I want to do, but I don't, then that would have an adverse effect on my parents. It'd have an adverse effect on my girlfriend. So, I feel like I'm the center of that little world. If you talk to my girlfriend, I also have a sense of humor in that I often would say that I'm the center of the world and that everything else is a figment of my imagination. [laughter]

RH: Do you think that your Jewish identity and your Jewish background has helped you, even if, you know, you're not calling on it?

MS: Yes. I think that as some people – although I think that my dad has worn off more on my brother Greg and even on my brother Will than on me, I think there's elements of my father and my mom as well. I mean, people have always said I'm very much like my mom. They have Jewish values and Jewish identity instilled in who they are. They both grew up in a small town of Cape Girardeau, Missouri and although they weren't – if they had to be Jewish at all, they had to really be Jewish if that makes sense. I don't know whether I'll ever be as philanthropic as my father, but certainly, some of that wears off. Some of the social activism wears off. And those are Jewish values.

RH: Now that you've been on the receiving end of Tikkun Olam, or tzedakah, do you have a sense of ways that are better to help people than perhaps you did before the storms?

MS: Yeah, I would say this. There were a number of organizations, Desire NOLA, the Idea Village – each gave my company $2,500. Economic Development gave us a grant of 10,000. The Jewish Family Service offered me – I just never filled out the paperwork, and I won't now. I'm not in need, like I may have been at another time. But I could have filled out some paperwork to receive a few thousand dollars for moving back to New Orleans. There were people who gave us – I got all the tuition paid for at the school. No, I don't know whether we actually got back – my father pays for the tuition of the kids at the Jewish Day School. So those Jewish things my dad has paid for. So I don't know whether he got or asked for reimbursement of the tuition that he had paid for the year at the Jewish Day School in New Orleans that we never had. But the community paid for it. They were prepared in Austin, actually, to pay for, I think, as many as six families. That was going to get paid for by the community, by the people in that school – had made the decision. Their board, I guess, made the decision that they could accept up to six or eight, some – maybe it was as many as ten children, for a one-year scholarship. I told Michael White, who had evacuated to Houston – this was also based, again, on what I had to accept from people when Patti died. Everybody wanted to reach out and bring

dinners to me and see how they could help and take the kids for an afternoon or take them for a hamburger. There were a lot of people who volunteered to do things. The most difficult thing was accepting that. I told Dr. White, "The most difficult thing you're going to have to deal with right now is the fact that you need to accept what people want to give you. You need it. They'll feel good giving it to you. You make people happy with the music that you put out." I just feel like what I would do – you asked me what I would do for people. I think I would just do. A lot of people, in both circumstances, also say, "Call me if there's anything I can do." That's an empty invitation. When I returned from my vacation last week, I found out that I had a good friend who had had a – the day that he was supposed to go pick up his wife – these are people my age. The day that he was supposed to go pick up his wife from the hospital because she had had a cyst removed, he didn't show up. It turned out he had a stroke. So they're both at home now, and they're both recovering. I wasn't going to – I haven't talked to them yet, because they're overwhelmed. But what I did do, when I posted on their website, was, "I'm not going to ask you if there's anything I can do. You'll just accept what I do." And through the grapevine, I've heard that this is a wakeup call for him, and he wants to be able to afford to go to a health club and work out and rehabilitate. So, my intention is to make sure that he's able to do that for some period of time once he starts his rehab and he's able to do that. But I'm just going to do that. I'll just call the place that's nearby and say, "You've got three months," or "You've got six months' membership at this club," and take care of it, as opposed to waiting for them to call me and say, "Hey, Mark, we're in New Orleans and can [Quad?] come over and spend the night with you guys?" Just do. People could help me if they didn't want to actually write – at the time, people didn't want to write me a check or give me a gift card, when I really didn't know – I mean, there was a point where I stopped accepting anything when I realized that I was going to be okay. But people, behind the scenes, could always just go buy or tell their friends to buy CDs. In a case of whatever it is you might do, I mean, if somebody wanted to help – not everybody's in that kind of a position, where they can just have something purchased that's going to directly

affect them. If you work for Shell Oil in a 9:00 to 5:00 job, you can't really do something that's going to – but you can go buy a bunch of groceries and bring it by their house and just not wait for them to say, "Okay." I would just make sure that money goes either straight into the hands of people who can use it or straight into those organizations where there's a high confidence that it's going to be used properly. A lot of groups did sprout up. Some of the ones that I received money from sprouted up only afterward. You just have to be more careful about those organizations, about contributing to a nonprofit that's set up only at the time of a storm. You want to know that there's a track record and that the money's going to get to the ground. There was an awful lot of fundraisers, an awful lot of benefit concerts. Who knows who got what money? I do know that all of our artists were the recipients of significant amounts of grants. It was wonderful.

RH: Do you have a concept of God that was shaken by any of these events?

MS: Yeah. I mean, I'm not a lover of attending synagogue. I played on the men's club softball team. I like the social aspect. I even enjoy going to synagogue ten minutes before the services are over and going for oneg. Actually, if I did that I would actually try to arrive at least twenty minutes before the services are over so that I could save the ten minutes before the services are over for this woman who's famous for that. I wanted her to have her –

RH: Oh, that's considerate.

MS: I would never want to intrude and make her feel like she was getting there too early. But, no, there were times, certainly, where I would drop – when my son would be preparing for his bar mitzvah or something. So I like the social aspect. I like the social aspect. When Patti was in my life, she was heavily involved in the Sisterhood and in the fundraising and in what was called the Mitzvah Dinner, the different events, the annual social events. And she was heavily involved. Then I'd periodically go just because I could have my kids sitting with me at synagogue. I liked that aspect of going – I also

appreciate the idea, although I haven't ever had this luxury in my life, of taking a Saturday off and not doing anything. But I really have become a little more appreciative of downtime lately. So the idea of a Sabbath, however you take that – it could be taking two hours off in the middle of the week and going and watching a movie and just turning off your phone. But the idea of downtime is, I think, important for everybody. Israel is important to me. God is what allows me to know that those bougainvillea are really pretty and that the blue sky and the green grass and the clouds are pretty, and that if I go to my neighbor's house and steal, I feel bad for that. That's what God is to me. If I ask God right now to strike me down because I want him to prove that he's there, that's not going to happen. That's probably contrary to other people's vision of God and the awe of God and all. But I realized that – and this goes back first to losing my wife – if that is God, then I don't really care about God. If God has an impact on day-to-day life, from what can happen to somebody on a particular day, from an accident, from the bridge in Minnesota yesterday collapsing, if that was a result of God, then to hell with Him. But I don't believe that that's what God is. If you turn the camera off for a second, I'll explain something to you.

[Recording paused.]

RH: Tell me, what's your relationship now to the Jewish community and how you feel the Jewish community relates to the larger New Orleans?

MS: Well, our Jewish community, I think, like a lot of Jewish communities, includes a lot of civic- and community-oriented people. Some of it's sort of built into our wiring, I suppose. There are a lot of leaders, mostly behind the scenes or in the civic organizations, that are a big part of what's happening in New Orleans. Arnie Fielkow is one of those Jewish guys who happens to be a city councilperson and seems to be doing a great job. I watch a lot of the proceedings on TV. My Jewish involvement, like my involvement in everything, is minimal because I'm just so busy dealing with all the other

things that I've had to deal with. So I can't say that I've done too much of anything. My Jewish involvement this year has been because I've felt an obligation and wanted to attend services with my daughter in preparation for her bat mitzvah. I've gone to services maybe every five or six weeks. Before she left for camp, I was going with her at least every Friday or Saturday, one or the other, but for about four weeks. So I've gone to more services this year than I've gone to since my son's bar mitzvah – or I've gone to more in the last few months. I sent my son to Israel, and I sent my children to Camp Ramah for the sixth, seventh year. So, my Jewish involvement is through my children at this point. I had not attended anything else. I was a graduate of Lehmann Stern. But the combination of both losing my wife and then the storm has kept me from ever really getting involved in any Jewish organization, whether it be Jewish Family Service or Jewish – I'm supportive of that because they provided me a lot of support. I think it's a great group of people. They gave my kids and I a lot of support after both tragedies. The Jewish Federation, through the Gift of Israel program, helped pay for the trip to Israel through the savings plan that I put up a certain amount, and then the Rosenblum family provided funds through the Gift of Israel, and then my synagogue provided some funds too. I'm appreciative of a lot of the Jewish organizations. I've been involved through Lehmann Stern – I had been involved, back ten years, eleven years ago, and in what was going on at Hillel. That was the board that I sat on at the time. But really, my attention is really more toward the music business and my business, which I treat it – it's a business. It is my job. But I treat it more like a hobby. I feel like I'm doing something good for the city by keeping it running and by hoping to make it flourish again. I'll leave it to my brother to keep the synagogue together, but I will also encourage my kids to go to things like USY conventions, and I guess there's a – that's the thing that they'll primarily do.

RH: What are your hopes for your kids? Do you see them staying in the city?

MS: I actually hope that all of them go away to college and then decide whether they want to come back. I'm not sure whether they'll all do that or not. My oldest seems to have a lot of interest in music and could conceivably get involved in music or the entertainment industry. Talks about wanting to run a club. I mean, you know, he talks about a lot of things. But I'm going to encourage him to go away to school. I'm pretty sure that my middle son will go away to school. He's a very independent kid. I'm pretty sure my daughter, who's brilliant, will – I don't know what she's going to do, but she's brilliant, and I'm going to encourage a lot out of her. So. But they can do whatever they want if they're happy. They're recipients of – it's kind of been forced, but they're recipients of a village raising a child. Whether it be grandparents or friends or the parents of classmates, they've had a lot of influences. Another one of the tragedies for Naomi was that her best friend – the Furmans – moved away to Atlanta after the storm. That was a family that had three girls, and that gave her her dose of having some girls around.

RH: Oh, wow.

MS: But she's since become best friends with like her friend Ally, who, unfortunately, is moving from a few houses away to uptown New Orleans. So they'll still see each other at school every day, but they won't be spending the night together as often as they did this past year. But the kids, I think, are pretty well rounded and have demonstrated – I tell them regularly that the strength – that what they've demonstrated in their ability to deal with what they've dealt with –fortunately, most kids don't have to deal with that kind of thing. Oh, that's not true. Unfortunately, a huge number of kids in this world go to sleep hungry every day and deal with a whole lot more than my kids have ever had to deal with, in some respects. The idea of going to bed hungry is sickening. There's a lot of people that way in the world. But as far as the kids that they go to school with, the public schools that they go to now, and they've all, fortunately, shared Katrina. All the kids that they go to school with now have shared that loss and that day-to-day distraction. But the

kids had already demonstrated an ability to overcome adversity and tragedy, that, when they're studying for a final, and they start getting really worried about it, I hope that they remember [that] this is no big deal. This is just a test. They should have the confidence in themselves to know they can deal with anything. And it should provide them well.

RH: For you, have any of your priorities changed? One thing you said was more downtime. Any other priorities change that you –?

MS: I think, over the past several months – and now, I'm fortunate in that I do have the Road Home program behind me. I got my grant, and my house is almost done. That's a lot of my day-to-day aggravation, and a lot of my day-to-day time has been on those two things. If everybody stays healthy, and maybe I can focus on something else and maybe take a little more downtime. I would say that I try to give each of my kids – even if it's just a few minutes, where I do maybe walk away from the computer, do walk away from business, not necessarily turn off my phone but maybe ignore the phone call. It doesn't have to be very much time. It can be just giving them five minutes of my undivided attention five days a week. These days, though, my kids' social agendas are so tight. As of a week ago now, I have three teenagers. So I might even be willing to go see a movie with them, but they're going –

RH: They don't have time for you.

MS: – but they don't have time. So I may have already missed my opportunity. But I try to do that. I try to sit – even if it's just sitting for a half hour and watching The Office on television once a week. I give my kids just a tiny bit of television during the school week. But even if it's just watching a TV show with my boys, who love that show, I try to do that kind of thing. I try to spend time with my girlfriend. The time after the storm was interesting for us because the kids were in Austin. So I had kind of two lines. I had the being in Austin and dealing with my business from a coffee shop, at my computer – or a computer at my parents' house, while I was there, and dealing with taking kids – picking

them up or taking them to school or something. But then, when I would come to New Orleans, I didn't have my kids, and I was able to spend my time, again, with my business at a coffee shop because I didn't really have any other good place to work or spending time going out to dinner with Kara. So, we had kind of an interesting year, where we didn't have all of the combined, with my children and a relationship with a girlfriend. So since we've been back here for a year now, it's worked out nicely. Kara has really dealt with a lot, in moving in and being a part of our family and dealing with all the things that I have to deal with with teenagers. So I have to find time for everybody and balancing it all. I also taught last year at Loyola. I was an adjunct professor teaching Introduction to Music Industry Studies at Loyola. So my day was pretty occupied, between rebuilding and teaching, and three days a week.

RH: Are you going to do that again?

MS: I'm not doing it this fall, as far as I can tell. I taught at the last-minute last year because they had enough kids that they needed a third section of it. But I think the first two sections are taken care of by the people who have been doing it for years now. But who knows? They might call me up at the last minute and ask if I can teach it. I don't think I'd want to teach anything else because I've already got all that planned. It was a lot more work than I thought, between preparing lessons – this time, at least, I would have most of it prepared if I taught the same course. I have to find some downtime. Now, with having the nice house back and the pool, my Saturdays and my Sundays, where I [could] never before, I can actually take five, six hours off, not see my phone and not look at a computer. That's something I could never do before.

RH: Is there anything –? What are you most grateful for, coming out of this storm?

MS: I'm grateful that I still have a loving girlfriend. I was going to have my kids, one way or the other. They have no choice. Kara had a choice. Kara could have not – she reminds me – we lived in this house. She had her apartment for a while, but we lived in

this house, like I said, with rats in the first floor and snakes in the pool and a kitchenette that had a toaster oven, a microwave, and a refrigerator and I grilled on the outdoor grill. Most of our meals were sitting around a coffee table in the cabana. And for her to get away from the kids and have some time to herself required basically for her to go close the door in the bedroom. That was her space. That was all the space once she actually moved in here and gave up her apartment, which may or may not be knowledge that all of her family members know. So I'm thankful that she's still with me. I'm also thankful that my – I think that the storm, for me – my company was kind of out of control. I was spending an awful lot of money every month keeping it going. It forced me to get a handle on things again, take on more responsibility – take on all of the responsibilities. Now, I don't do everything that was being done before, but I do everything that I have to to keep it rolling. There are certainly aspects that – so, it allowed me to basically get the company under control without having to cut anybody's hours, fire anybody, get rid of my office. I mean, I had ridiculously high utility bills, a broken air conditioner, all kinds of problems going on at the time of the storm, which I have to be reminded about now.

RH: Your office is in your house now?

MS: Now the office is in the house. To cut two thousand dollars a month in rent, seven hundred a month in utilities, 150 a month in phone, and 150 to two hundred a month in Internet access and then the payroll and everything else, I've got a whole lot less overhead. The overhead of running this company now is not really any more than it is for me. There's no additional overhead any more than it would have cost to just have my house. So, it's allowed me to get the company hopefully into a position where it's going to be able to grow in a smart way. I was really in jeopardy before the storm, having to make some drastic changes, which would not have been very comfortable. The storm allowed me to make a lot of those changes – or forced me to change all of it even the way I do bus – even the just electronic payments of bills, going through my online bill-pay at my bank, not having to wait for mail. I mean, the mail – from New Orleans, right now,

the U.S. Postal Service, they still won't guarantee an Express package. It's still two days is what Express Mail is. I mean, we lost – that goes back to the Ninth Ward, Lower Ninth Ward – lost a lot of people that do those jobs, including Irvin Mayfield's father, who died, who worked for the Postal Service for, I think, twenty-five years.

RH: What are your hopes for your business?

MS: I hope that my business can – I'm going to try to enjoy life a little bit and not stress myself out too much business-wise and not try to tackle too many projects without being really organized at it. I want to bring back a staff. I want to bring – not necessarily back. It'll be somebody different than before the storm. But have a staff person or two that I can trust, have the mechanics of the business in a shape that I can grow it in a smart way. I want to release records by all of the artists that I want to continue to work with who I'm working with now, which is not necessarily all of the artists on my label right now, but certainly a majority of them. I'd like to release records for them this coming year, so we can get caught up. And then I would like, by the end of next year, to be signing new artists, maybe two a year for the next couple of years. I can help a lot of people. I'll help a lot of musicians. Long-term, I can help them a lot better if my company is in good shape, on good ground. So that's my first priority, immediate priority, is to make sure it's all on good ground, that I can pull a staff person in and give them real straightforward processes so that it can go from one person to another if need be, that type of thing [inaudible]

RH: I guess, and rather quickly, the next question was just your hope for New Orleans.

MS: My hope for New Orleans is huge. We have an opportunity in New Orleans that we can have an education system that's created from scratch that's designed to be the best in the world. We have a healthcare system that's been devastated. We can create something that can be the best model in the world. We can provide a transportation system that can be the best in the world. We're not necessarily pointed in that direction

right now. We have a community – a lot more people in this community than ever before – many of them, though, are getting a bit tired, I find. But there are – because we've been at it for a couple of years now – fighting. But there are opportunities for civic change. We've made improvements. We got rid of seven assessors. If you go to the Assessor's Office in New Orleans, there were seven counters. Each one had a staff of people. All the assessors did was leave people's assessments alone year after year after year. Because the way you get reelected is by having happy people. If you buy a house for $150,000 and your assessment never goes up –you can never argue about the fact that it was worth 150 because that's what you paid. If it goes up to one million, as many people in uptown New Orleans are finding today, you should be paying your share of taxes on the million-dollar home, not on the $150,000 home that you purchased twenty-five years ago. Well, we may change. People spoke up, forced that change. We forced the change of having a levee board. Now, personally, I would have had one levee board, not an East Bank and a West Bank. Because if I'm on the East Bank Levee Board, my flood control response will be to blow up the West Bank levee. So that was an improvement, going down to just two levee boards, but I think that they should really have thought more closely about that. But there's lots of things. People recognize that the district attorney and the police chief – Law and Order's been on TV for a long time now. I don't think that the police chief or the district attorney ever watched it. I don't think they ever realized that they were supposed to work together in order to get people put away for long periods of time. I think maybe they're waking up to the fact that they're actually supposed to work together. Personally, and I'm sure that most of the people in the City Council would actually like – but they're being a little weak, in my opinion. The City Council and the mayor should be demanding that the district attorney step down. But we have an opportunity to overhaul all that because it's all been devastated. There is a movement to, I think, consolidate the mechanics of the civil and the criminal court system. Seems logical for a city that's only got 250,000 people. I'm a proponent that believes that maybe we should be looking at this area, and the Jefferson Parish and

Orleans Parish and St. Tammany and St. Bernard perhaps can share some resources. Maybe not necessarily the criminal justice system in all those areas, but maybe some aspects of it can be combined. Maybe we can privatize the Sewage and Water Board and have a company that's in charge. I don't know. These are just ideas. I think the bottom line is we had a blank slate for a while. The further along things go, the less blank it is, and the more things just start to get done in a piecemeal effect. But that would be my hope, is that New Orleans is rebuilt into a greater place than it was. I hope that we have the vision to build a place like the National Jazz Complex because I think what we've realized now is that our music, our food, and our culture is why this city is being rebuilt. If it was Austin, Texas – there's a lot of Austin, Texas – Austin and Nashville – I mean, there's a lot of cities that are places where you can go and go to a convenient spot and have all of your resources in a one-mile area. And they're all the same. They're cookie-cutter. Cape Girardeau, Missouri, where my parents grew up, you'll find the exact same restaurants – the Taco Bell. Every exit's going to have the exact same cookie-cutter thing, the Taco Bell and a Burger King and a MacDonald's and a Wal-Mart. You want to move to a city like that, you can find five hundred cities in the United States. Cape Girardeau had sixty-thousand people, thirty-thousand when my parents grew up there. You can find that there. If you want to live in New Orleans and appreciate what we've got, let's build something that celebrates that. We need to do things like that. There is the balance of how can you do a thing like that when people also can't get back into their homes. But we have to do both at the same time. We made a huge mistake – the mayor made a huge mistake when he allowed people to rebuild everywhere. He should have shut down many square blocks of multiple neighborhoods – off-limits. We'll pay you. Come up with a plan. This is where the governor also screwed up. Come up with a plan that pays people for their homes so that they don't live in certain areas, gives them incentives to move into areas that they do want to repopulate. But now what they're going to have is – like this report on the TV the other day, where a woman living in New Orleans East, her street, every time it rains, turns into a lake. They're not going to put

resources out in New Orleans East for a street that has one or two people living on it. The Sewage and Water Board came by my neighborhood the other day. If I have a second, I'd like to add this. The reason I live in this neighborhood again is the beacon of –

[END OF INTERVIEW]