Susan Levitas Transcript

Stuart Rockoff: It's August 31st, 2007. We're in the home of Susan Levitas, in Atlanta, Georgia, and I guess I have to ask you this. Do you consent, agree to be interviewed for the Katrina's Jewish Voices Project?

Susan Levitas: Absolutely.

SR: OK. So, just to get some background, tell me when and where you were born, and your name, basic information.

SL: I'm Susan Levitas. I was born in Atlanta in 1961.

SR: And then, we'll get to New Orleans quickly, when did you move to New Orleans?

SL: Moved to New Orleans in 1997.

SR: What prompted you to move there?

SL: I had actually produced a film, a narrative feature, in '95, '96, in Cajun country, called Dirty Rice. And was actually married at the time to a different person, and we had been living in Washington DC, and then Santa Fe, New Mexico, and my husband at the time also had a job offer to teach at U.N.O., and was launching a national radio program from New Orleans. So we both had sort of work opportunities. So we came there in '97 and the film that I had produced had just been completed, and so I decided that that was the right place for us to be.

SR: So what were your thoughts moving to New Orleans? I mean, was it there just for a job or something about the city kind of appealed to you especially?

SL: Yeah. We had visited the city quite a bit. My husband at the time had been the state folklorist, the first one for Louisiana, actually, in the late seventies or I guess early eighties. So I had actually lived in Baton Rouge for a year, '84 to '85. And so, had a great deal of fondness for the state, and, you know, had been involved in producing folk life festivals myself. So I had a particular interest in the cultural life of the area. And so New Orleans had a particular appeal from that point of view. Especially having come from Washington DC, which had sort of the inverse sense of itself. It was a city of work, not so much aware of its cultural history, and the notion of play, whereas New Orleans, maybe to its detriment (laughter), was the complete opposite.

SR: Right, right, interesting. So, thinking back, what did you most love about New Orleans?

SL: When we first got there you mean, or just in general?

SR: Yeah, prior to Katrina.

SL: That it was a place completely unlike anywhere in the U.S., and yet a place that was a part of the U.S. That it was a place that brought together so many different cultural influences to create this sort of new Creole whole. How it looked, how it felt, how it smelled. The way people talked and interacted. I mean, even in the Jewish community I found that the way people were, and how they fought, and the way they interacted, was different than the Sunbelt Jewish experience, than the northern or mid-Atlantic Jewish experience. And so it was a feeling of living somewhere else and yet living in the United States. That there weren't boundaries between work and play, that it was all part of a piece, and that it surrounded you everywhere. You could go to a gas station and get a good meal. (laughter) You know, so that all of the senses were bombarded and delighted, and it just, especially as a folklorist, really appealed to me in that way.

SR: Yeah. Well, you talked about the Jewish community, how was the Jewish community different from, you said, the Sunbelt, you grew up in Atlanta, right?

SL: Yeah, I grew up in Atlanta, and we were raised conservative although the generation before had been orthodox and then became conservative. Well, I think it's the acculturating to more of a Protestant versus a Catholic worldview. And certainly it's a smaller Jewish community in New Orleans and mostly a reform community, so those boundaries were a little bit different. I mean, we had grown up keeping kosher until I was eleven, and that just wasn't as prevalent in New Orleans. But it was also this idea of acculturating more to a society that celebrated Mardi Gras, that was Catholic. And so that the way that the Jewish community, the way Jews were, how they enjoyed food, the combinations of food, the creations, that they would be involved in Mardi Gras, that they were involved in that culture, made them different in a way than the experience of the bible belt Jews. That's how it felt to me. They just seemed different. You know, more relaxed and there's more of a joie de vivre in the Jewish community.

SR: So, where did you live in New Orleans prior to the hurricane?

SL: Uptown. Uptown the whole time, at different locations, but always uptown. Closer to the river until I got remarried and we moved to more of a down spot where we got flooded, but yeah, always uptown.

SR: Yeah. What was your neighborhood like?

SL: The one that, right before?

SR: Yeah.

SL: Yeah, well, it was sort of, kind of a Tulane neighborhood a little bit, so there were some students. It was also near Claiborne Avenue, we were only a block away, so that there was -- and in New Orleans in general is much more of a checker-boarded city than

a place like Atlanta that's much more atomized communities, white, black, Latino, whatever -- so that there was an African American community sort of right across, I think, Jefferson from us, which was one block away as well. And then families. It was not far from the Jewish Community Center, so there were also some Jewish families that lived close. The Executive Director lived in the neighborhood and some other friends of ours lived in the neighborhood. So it was sort of a students, young couples, and families, and then some African American communities as well.

SR: Well, I guess we can get to Katrina. When did you first hear about the storm, do you remember? When it came on your personal radar screen?

SL: I can't remember the exact day, but I would say that when it came most onto my radar screen, I mean, I certainly was paying attention to it a couple of days before the Saturday when I really paid attention to it, because I had evacuated before and I'm married to someone who is from Pittsburgh, and he moved down seventeen years ago, never evacuated, said he would have ridden out Katrina had he not been married and had kids as well. But when he came home from synagogue that Saturday, and had just had a conversation with Schleifstein (sp?), Michael I think is his first name, who was a writer for the Times Picayune, had followed and covered hurricanes for years. He belonged to our shule, and he pulled Jake aside and said, this is the one. You have to leave. And he knew Jake was someone who would never leave. So when Jake came home that's when it really popped onto my screen. I mean, I was sort of ready in a way before him. And I felt nervous and ready to evacuate. But it was that Saturday after shule when he came home and told me that that it just popped.

SR: Which shule was it?

SL: Shir Chadash.

SR: So what did you do once you decided? Did you begin from scratch? Were you sort of prepared?

SL: We had been through it before a little bit. You know, I'm not a native but we had evacuated -- or I had evacuated for Georges, and there was one that came after that, I can't remember the name --

SR: Ivan?

SL: Maybe, the one that went to Houston.

SR: OK.

SL: That was after Georges, and we were, you know, I sort of convinced him we should evacuate, but by the time we made the decision it was too late, and so we had to just sort of batten down the hatches and wait it out. And then it went somewhere else, I think it went to Houston, but… So, I had been through this process where, you know, I had all my boxes on the ground floor. There are no basements, as you know, in New Orleans. And the ground floor, we had rooms. My husband had an exercise room, and we had an air hockey table, and a TV, and some furniture, but we also had a big storage room where I kept every scrap of memorabilia from my life, and some clothes, and fieldwork from around the world, photographs, and slides, and whatever. And what I had done in the past is schlepped the boxes upstairs and it had taken the better part of half a day, because, I mean, I'm the kind of person that saved every note I passed in the third grade (laughter) so I had a lot of boxes. My collection of airsickness bags from the last twenty years (laughter).

SR: Really?

SL: Uh huh. Musical instruments from little villages in Africa and, you know, and Indonesia. I mean, all of that was downstairs and it just was such a pain. I said to him,

you know what? This time let's just put all the boxes about five feet up, because, you know, I mean, we could get flooded, but you know, five feet. So that's what we did. Our preparation was taking my boxes and lifting them up five feet. I think I took maybe one or two little boxes and brought them upstairs.

SR: What did you put them on? Tables or --

SL: We had some shelving down in this sort of storage room. There was some shelving and I think that's what we did. Yeah, we just sort of found spots that were about five feet up on the shelves and we put them there. But we didn't, you know, I don't think we did anything with the chairs or any of the furniture. The musical instruments, I might have put one on a chair or on a hockey table or something. And then we just thought, let's go to Atlanta, that's where my family is living, and you know, it could be bad, so we may be there a week, and we might as well have a comfortable place to stay. We had had plans in the past to evacuate with our friends, Bruce and Ellie Wainer (sp?), who are also Jewish community there and he's a long time family from New Orleans, to go to Mississippi. But, you know, you stay in a hotel and so – [cell phone buzzes] no, it's fine. That would be the buzzing of my cell phone, but it's fine. -- And I just, you know, I was pregnant, three months pregnant, and I just felt it'd be more comfortable, and that we had Sydney, my stepdaughter, with us, that particular weekend so she was going to come with us wherever we went, and we just felt like it'd be a more comfortable arraignment for all of us if we just went to Atlanta.

SR: So what did you bring with you?

SL: Well that's the funny thing, isn't it? Because on the one hand there was this idea in my mind that we'd be gone maybe a week at the most, so I took about three days worth of clothes thinking, you know, you just wash your clothes. And yet at the same time, I took my passport, and all of my fine jewelry that I had, like, stuffed in a sock in a cowboy boot, you know? And so there was this weird kind of thing going on in my head that I

wasn't really admitting. I mean, I took my papers, I took other paperwork, other personal papers of import, like insurance documents and stuff, which I think I did for Georges as well, but the bare minimum. Jewelry, the passport, and then three days worth of clothes. So there was this thing going on that was like, I may be coming back, I may not be coming back ever.

SR: Yeah, just in case.

SL: Yeah, but not a real acknowledgment that I might not be coming back ever, because who brings three days worth of clothes?

SR: Right.

SL: So, when I think about that, it's just sort of an odd and interesting thing. We didn't just throw the clothes in, we took -- and my husband brought some of our nicer bottles of wine out of the wine refrigerator, you know, those kinds of things. And I guess his thinking was, you know, we'll probably lose power, so that refrigerator will go out, we can at least save some of the nicer bottles of wine.

SR: So when did you end up leaving New Orleans?

SL: And we have a dog. We left Sunday, and the hurricane hit Monday. We left Sunday morning, I can't remember exactly when, but whenever it was we left, was sort of the sweet time to leave, because a couple of hours after that it just got really crazy in terms of traffic. So we left, and we were driving through Mississippi, and I think we were somewhere near Gulfport, I want to say, when our tire blew out. And let's just say, I'm the one with the hammer in the relationship (laughter) and the screwdrivers --

SR: Fair enough.

SL: He wasn't exactly going to change the tires, so we found a filling station and these incredibly nice people who worked there who changed our tire, and off we went. And the reason I tell that is just sort of in retrospect, I know that place was obliterated, you know. And they were like this weigh station, these little angels for us along the way, where we didn't have to just get stranded. And so that happened, but then off we went. We didn't encounter traffic really so to speak, we were --

SR: That's because you were heading east, everyone else was heading in the other direction.

SL: Yeah, although later in the day people did start coming to Atlanta, and it did get more crowded. So we got there that Sunday right before the storm.

SR: How long was the drive?

SL: My husband does it, without exceeding five miles over the speed limit, in about six and a half to seven hours at the most, but it was about eight hours with the blown out tire.

SR: And then why did you come to Atlanta?

SL: Well, again, feeling that, you know, this is my home, at least in terms of having grown up here. I hadn't lived here since high school, but I have a huge extended family. My grandparents had been here, I have cousins, and my family home is here, and that's where my folks are, my brother's family is here, so I felt like, if we've got to be here a week, wouldn't it be nice to see the cousins and hang out with my folks, and it would be an easy place, and Jake could get his work done, and that sort of thing.

SR: And so you're in Atlanta on Monday when the hurricane hits, so what are you doing on Monday? What are you thinking?

SL: We were obsessed and terrified. I mean, my husband is a weather weenie anyway, I mean, the tropical storm season would come along any year and that is all he was doing was watching The Weather Channel.

SR: Wow.

SL: Yeah, he's really into it. So that was like -- it was like the Super Bowl for him, always. So we were really nervous, and we were listening to the radio all the time. He was out on my parents', like, front porch area with a little portable radio so that he could pick up WWL, which is a New Orleans AM station, which we would listen to as much as we could. Whenever we could pick it up, that's what we would listen to, not just CNN and the national news, but the local.

SR: Why is that?

SL: The feeling of connection, and we knew that the information we were going to be getting from them would be really accurate and on the ground, and from a New Orleans perspective. I mean, he listened to WWL for at least a year after the storm, every night, with his headphones on the radio. He would listen to it in his car whenever he could --

SR: So he could get it so far away.

SL: He could get it at certain times, and especially at night, for some reason. I guess, I don't know if the bands open up, or what happens, but he could pick it up. Sometimes we'd sit out in the car in my parents' driveway and just listen to WWL.

SR: Was it news station, or --

SL: It's a news and talk station. And it was one of those ones that then they wound up, you know, broadcasting constantly, and doing the interviews, and the on-air folks were stranded there, so it was this, like, intense experience listening during those early days

was incredible, listening to that station. So, that Monday, I also think I was just sort of, you know, we were all kind of in denial and yet terrified at the same time. And, you know, my brother's family didn't get it at all. They did not understand that this was as serious as it was. Yeah, you know.

SR: They lived in Atlanta?

SL: Yeah, they live in Atlanta, they just, you know, it's going to be fine, everything's going to be fine. But we were starting to get real nervous when we saw the size of the storm and how it really just seemed like it was coming right there. So I think we just spent a day obsessing. Well, we spent the whole week obsessing, watching news all the time, Jake would get up, you know, five o'clock in the morning, run down and listen to CNN, or listen to WWL, and track what was happening, and that's what we did on Monday.

SR: So what was it like to be at your parents' house, back after not being there since you'd been in high school, during that week?

SL: Well, the week was surreal and I felt like it was a safe and great thing. You know, I mean, it was ten months that we wound up spending there, and that's a different story, but that first week I was so grateful, because we were so out of sorts, especially when the levees broke, that having familiarity, somebody else to cook some food, help clean it up, while we were dazed and freaked out was -- I can't imagine what it would have been like to be in just a hotel room with just your family, and nobody else that you necessarily knew. So, I felt huge sense of comfort and relief to be there that first week.

SR: How did being pregnant effect your evacuation, or, you know, impact it?

SL: Well, hugely. I mean, the first thing, and this sort of consumed my time for the first few weeks during the time that I was also planning this bat mitzvah to happen again here, which is another story, but I had had an amniocentesis in New Orleans the week before

the hurricane, because I'm an older mom and I wanted one. And the results were due the week of the storm. And suddenly the levees broke, the city looks like, I really thought it was literally going under water, that was it, the end of history of that city, so I was kind of panicking. And I couldn't find my doctors. I couldn't find my OB/GYN, I couldn't find the guy who did the amnio, I have cousins who are doctors. And a cousin in Columbus got on the phone with all the national, the labs that are national, the ones that possibly could have had -- I mean, this was this amazing thing. So he is calling all the companies with my social security number and everything, they're trying to find the results. I'm trying to find the doctors in all these circuitous ways, you know, I think it was something to keep me busy on the one hand, but I finally, I don't know, days later somehow found one of the doctors in Baton Rouge somewhere. And then she was trying to help me find the guy who did the amnio, when I finally found him, he surmised, even though I had gotten this done at Touro, which was one of the hospitals that survived, that they had sent it to Tulane hospital, and that was one that just got obliterated. So, I always say that the results just sort of floated down the Mississippi River. So, it's hard enough for somebody to kind of make the mental peace with getting one amnio, but I wound up getting two. So I had to find a new practice here, I was three months pregnant. You know, you do all that before, you get your practice, you're comfortable with who you're with. And there was a practice here it turned out that my sister-in-law goes to, and they were accepting New Orleans people, just come in, we'll take you. And so I went there, and I had a window that was quickly closing during which you can get the amnio done, and I had to make the decision whether I was going to do it again, so I did it again. And I'm thrilled that I did, but it was that sort of thing. You know, I mean, I can't explain really what that week or two was like, constantly on the phone trying to find these doctors who were scattered to the winds, not knowing where your records were.

SR: So who did you call? How do you go about (overlapping dialogue; inaudible)

SL: Yeah, I mean, I started with the hospital. You go on the website. They were trying to track where the doctors were. You know, I would call the sanitation department, I mean, I'd call anybody in these, I'll call any number I could, and then they would send me to someplace in Baton Rouge, and I just also had some cousins, you know, like the doctor cousin, trying to help from that point of view, in a way that I couldn't have done just as a patient. So that was sort of the primary thing, and also I was so freaked out by what was happening that I actually became worried, you know, I can't be this freaked out. I've got this baby now growing inside me. So, I mean, I remember when the levees broke and looking at the images that Jake would say, come look. And I'd see the water, and the house, and that's when I thought New Orleans is gone. It was like being told someone had died in a plane crash. I mean, it was, like, that visceral. And I remember going upstairs to my brother's old room and just hysterically crying, and then I stopped. And I said, you can't do this to the baby, you know, you can't do this to the baby. I was thinking of all the cortisol and, you know, that was being released, and the stress hormones, and I just I thought, I got to pull it together to some degree. You know, I can be sad and I can be anxious, but I've also got to worry about the baby, and that was really hard. I mean, I guess for people with kids they probably had a similar experience, with young kids having to put on the game face, when all you really want to do is be in grief. And so I really worried that I needed to take care of the health of the baby. So that was another thing, is not being able to completely let go, and wiping off the tears and coming back downstairs, and trying to keep it together when I wasn't together.

SR: So then you were watching the news all the week. And when did you realize that you were not going to be going back in a week or three days?

SL: I don't remember the exact day, but certainly when the levees broke I think it became clear that it wasn't any time soon. My husband actually went back pretty early, I mean, whenever it was that you could kind of get back and go through those checkpoints, which may have been, like, five days, or, it was not, and the water had

receded. I don't know, seven days or eight or something? He did go back. And when he saw the house, then it became really clear that it wasn't going to be habitable, that the city wasn't habitable.

SR: Hmm. So what happened to the house?

SL: Well, this house that we lived in at the corner of Willow and Octavia was a three story house on the corner, and we were renting it, because we were going to look to buy something. So I always say that's the good news, because it wasn't our burden to bear from the ownership point of view. But the house got seven feet of water, so, you know, roll the tape back to the five feet that the boxes go up, and the water's seven feet. We got seven feet of water, and we had these great landlords, just lovely people, a young couple with kids, and you know, she came in and just pulled everything out, put it on the street, took care of all that for us. But when Jake went, actually I have a videotape, he took my camera, and he filmed walking down the stairs to the ground floor, and he filmed the outside of the house where all of our belongings were just sort of, for the whole block, just stacked up on the street. You know, it was an insurance thing partly, but also he kind of narrates a little bit, and then gets in the car and drives around, and I know I need to give that to y'all. Yeah. (laughter) So that was like really soon after, and it's pretty compelling, and really was really hard for me to watch. Because, the thing is, I never, ever, I didn't go back for ten months. I mean, I'm one of those few people who didn't, because I was pregnant, and I was advised that it was so unsafe for me to breath whatever was there, and then here comes a baby, so you've got a newborn with a system that's incredibly fragile. So I always like, you know, I was there one day, and then now it's ten months later. So I never got to see and touch the stuff, and say goodbye to it, and, you know, whatever, so for me there's been this incremental process. When I remember suddenly something else that's in the box, you know what I mean?

SR: Mm hmm.

SL: As opposed to going back and sifting through the cinders, I didn't get to do that. So that was really weird.

SR: So was anything salvageable in your house?

SL: The whole second floor, which we also lived on. Things that are in this house now that I live in are things, you know, what was fine. I mean, we didn't have mold problems on the second floor, weirdly enough, so our furniture was fine. Our clothes were fine. All of that was fine. It was the furniture downstairs, the TV floating, and the things just got topsy-turvy. And then every scrap of anything that mattered to me in my life. I would have rather the second floor than the first floor, honestly. You can buy furniture. And that, I think it would have been more painful to have to be there, I think there's a part of me that just hasn't ever had to plum the depths of that feeling, because I didn't see any of it except on this tape, but I mean, there's, like I say, there's fieldwork from all over the world, and, you know, baby book photographs. But I'd say to people, plenty of people lose their homes in fires, I know family members who have, and that's something people can wrap their heads around is losing everything. But what was different about this was that it wasn't just losing a house, it was losing your coffee shop, your friends, your house of worship, your school, your frames of reference entirely.

SR: Your community.

SL: It was more like being a refugee from a war, in a way, because you lose your house and it's devastating, but you can still go down the street to the coffee shop and be all bummed out sitting there, and see your same people, and be in your same environment. So to be away from it for ten months, like, at least my husband went back all the time, and so did a lot of other people. That was really surreal. I can't even begin to explain, except that I guess if your village is being bombed, and you have to go, that's what it's like. So it wasn't just the house, it was the whole world.

SR: I guess we can talk about your stepdaughter and her bat mitzvah. She had a bat mitzvah coming up, right? What happened with that?

SL: Yeah. So, my daughter, Sydney Schwartz, was scheduled to have her bat mitzvah September 17th of 2005, and as is generally the case, the date had been actually chosen three years prior, and the plans had been in effect for at least a year, as you have to do for these things. So this was another huge stressor on our family. You know, we have the pregnancy, and now we have this thirteen-year-old freaking out about her bat mitzvah, who has been planning, and who's ready, and all that, and whose mom isn't with us, I mean, she's in Houston. Her mom evacuated to Houston, and the kippahs and all that were in my husband's office in downtown New Orleans, like the imprinted kippahs. And then Sydney's dress and all of her clothes were in her mother's house, so that's really like the reason that Jake went back so soon. I mean, he went to that town and got this stuff way before a lot of people did. You know, he got into the house and got the dress, he got into his office, there was no power so he climbed the ten flights of stairs with his secretary, and they're, like, you know, getting the kippahs so that we can have them in Atlanta. And unlike a wedding, or another event like that, where you can just pick another date, you can't. The kid has learned this parsha, you know, they've learned their Haftorah, they've learned their Torah portion, that's your date. If you're going to do it, you're going to do it the following year, so we had to make this decision really quickly in the midst of this turmoil. And I think, I just knew instantly, because I'm, you know, fourth and fifth generation on each side of my family here, I just knew that we could pull it off. At least that she could go to the synagogue and do her thing, if nothing else. So suddenly ensued the craziness of three weeks we had to prepare this thing -- less, really. If the storm hit on the 29th and the levees broke on the 30th, and it was the weekend of the 17th, you know, we had to make that decision really quickly, call everybody, and make arrangements. So here's what happened. I grew up at Ahavath Achim, AA, synagogue here in Atlanta, and had been bat mitzvahed there in, like, 1974, and we called the Rabbi who, you know, the newer Rabbi -- and parenthetically would,

every time we picked up the phone and made a call and anybody knew what was going on, I mean, they couldn't have been more gracious, and generous, and helpful, and open, and I mean, just anything we wanted -- and this is a synagogue where people were having bat mitzvahs and bar mitzvahs together, you know, dates had been booked for years, and in fact there was a b'nai mitzvah, two cousins that day. But the little chapel was available, and so they said that we could stage it there. But what's interesting is that the b'nai mitzvah of these cousins, the girl is the daughter of the person I got bat mitzvahed with in 1974.

SR: Wow.

SL: So, here this just bizarre set of circumstances, it's her daughter and my daughter now, having a bat mitzvah on the same day, just by complete chance. So, in fact we did, and our Rabbi, the new Rabbi from Shir Chadash, he's just on the job two weeks before storm --

SR: What's his name?

SL: Lichtenfeld. Ted Lichtenfeld, I think. Literally been on the job for a couple weeks, you know, comes in to do --

SR: Did you know him before?

SL: Just had met him briefly, you know, once or twice maybe. But he evacuated, or they were here for a while --

SR: Here in Atlanta?

SL: They were here for a while, so we were able to work with him on it. And his wife was pregnant too, a lot farther along, and she had to go up to New Jersey, but he came back to officiate. So that was really lovely, because he would have been the one doing it at

Shir Chadash. So there she is, that's happening. And the other thing is that we were able to do the entire weekend. You know, this is the kind of thing that takes a year to book. You know, we got a hotel, we did a Friday night dinner at the synagogue, which was catered, Sydney's mom does parties and table décor, so she got everything sent in, and we had the Saturday night party. And what's interesting is that the local Fox News affiliate came to the Epstein School where Sydney, and the Furman family's children, and a couple of other New Orleans families' children were now in school, to do a piece on kids in schools around Atlanta. And they interviewed Sydney and Melissa Furman. And in the course of the interview, Sydney said, you know, my bat mitzvah is in three weeks, and I'm going to be really sad that my friends and family won't be here. Well, this was seen by a woman, it turns out she's Jewish and owns a DJ company in Atlanta, and she called up the school and got our number, and called me and said, we've been looking for something to do for Katrina people, we would like to offer our services for the night. And it turns out, I mean, this is the most sought after company for these parties, it's thousands of dollars to hire them, completely free. Came and threw a party, brought dancers --

SR: Where was the party?

SL: We did it at the Grand Hyatt in Buckhead. They were amazing. They accommodated us. It was a great party, and the DJ was amazing. We did the Sunday brunch, people came in. Her family came in, some friends came in, some New Orleans stalwarts of the Jewish community.

SR: So how'd you get in touch with the people from New Orleans, because --

SL: I know, it was hard to reach people. Email, I think, was the primary way. I mean, obviously the people who were non-New Orleans people, no problem. But in the Jewish community, I think through the email trees and the phone networks. I mean, I think it was the Jewish Federation had started a -- I think it was the Jewish Federation, to locate where everybody was and to get contact information as soon as possible. So we had

some people like Hugo Kahn, and others, make the trip here. And so, I joked that I should write the book on how to throw an event in three weeks, because we can do it apparently, but yeah. So that was really, I mean, all of the circumstances surrounding it, that it was the daughter of the woman I'd been bat mitzvahed with was pretty cool. And they were amazing at AA. They were so incredible to open their doors like that and to make this happen. And in our synagogue in New Orleans, the kids do everything, the entire service, Shacharit, the Torah portions, the Haftorah, and Musaf. In the synagogues in Atlanta it's different. They're bigger, they have assistant Rabbis, and this, that, and the other. So the kids do the Haftorah, maybe some Torah stuff, but that's it. They often have cantors who lead the other parts of the service, and so they were a little uneasy about agreeing to let Sydney do everything when their kids don't, but they did it, they accommodated it, and they let her lead the entire service. And then some of the kids from Epstein, who were already going to that other bat mitzvah, ran over to catch part of Sydney's, and so there was this wonderful synergy. I mean, it was really very intense and emotional.

SR: Let's talk about Epstein. So coming here with Sydney, thirteen years old, when did you realize you need to get her in school?

SL: Gosh, that's a good point, because I think it was pretty soon. I think it was that second week -- it would have to have been the second week, it was that soon. And my husband had been involved in the starting of the New Orleans Jewish Day School, was a big believer in the day school movement, Sydney had been in that school, and so really felt like that would be the easiest fit and the best fit. And I think Epstein was really the primary one we were looking at, in fact, I don't think, we weren't looking at Greenfield, or Davis, or anywhere else. We went to Epstein and --

SR: (inaudible)

SL: Well, it was originally in the seventies, and their preschool is still there. But the campus is now a big school in Sandy Springs. And you must understand that as a native Atlantan growing up in town, that was always the hinterlands, you know, just the idea that our life has now become that is just really hilarious, because now she's in school in Alpharetta, but that's a different story. So we went there and they, again, it was just the most beautiful and awkward of experiences. If you can imagine the two things coexisting at once, because it's exactly as the way that I would imagine I would want to be and that I would be with anybody else in need, and yet it's that feeling uncomfortable about being the person on the receiving end of generosity and giving.

SR: So what sort of generosity did you receive?

SL: Oh, my gosh. I mean, not only did they waive tuition for the year -- waive tuition for the year -- but they let us go through their boxes of clothes to pick out uniforms for the kids, which just, I mean, I'm not even sure I can access what that emotion is, that feeling, it just felt sad, and wonderful, and pathetic, and incredible. But I think the thing that really freaked us out the most was that they had this meeting where they brought in, I think there were four families at the time from New Orleans who had kids at the school, and this was just in the first couple of weeks, and the head of school, and the this one, and the that one, and the other one, all going around the room saying, here's what we can offer, here's what we want to offer. Anything you need, an apartment, pots and pans. Then they gave us each $200 in American Express traveler's checks, and I can't, I mean, we just, all of us, we were stunned, and overwhelmed, and embarrassed, and grateful. And I think the great lesson from that was how arrogant it is to not be the one graciously accepting. You know, I mean, I think for all of us realizing that accepting help is such a gift to people giving, and that if you don't, you think you're being prideful and, self-sufficient, and all, there is a wonderful gift in the way you make someone feel who gets to take care of you. And it was a big lesson, because we are, you know, obviously we're people from middle, upper-middle class backgrounds. I mean, my husband's an

attorney, we were all people from families who could make their own way, and yet we had lost so much, and it was just that feeling of awkwardness. But I realized that saying thank you and taking it was the biggest you're welcome I could have given. That if I had said no to the money, not the right thing to do, really not. So that's a great lesson, to be on that end and see what it feels like, you realize that the giving is about you to some degree, as the giver, feeling good yourself, not just altruistically giving. You know, it makes you feel good, so if people don't accept it, you can't feel good. So that was really intense. Really intense. And everywhere we turned, I mean, I think they call it Jewish Child and Family Services in Atlanta, gave people gift cards to local grocery stores, gift cards to Target, you know, there was all this stuff. I'd go to the drive-thru Starbucks here at Briarcliff and La Vista, not too far away, and somehow I'd be picking up my coffee and I'd be saying something about, yeah, well, New Orleans, whatever, we didn't pay for coffee for three weeks. Everywhere we went. But the Jewish experience, I mean, that's one thing, that feels incredible. But I think it was the giving from the Jewish world that was the most intense feeling.

SR: So, did that realization you so eloquently described, did that sort of come later, I mean, after thinking about it? I mean, what were your first impressions?

SL: My first impressions were I just, I felt undeserving, and I felt awkward about taking it, and I felt exposed and vulnerable, like, all these really unfamiliar feelings. It's different than when your dad gives you some money (laughter), you know, when you're an older adult. You might say, oh no, dad, whatever, and then you take it. Because they were me, and I was them, but for this storm I'm sitting on the other side of the table doing the exact same thing. And it wasn't long thereafter. I mean, I don't know if it happened that day, but as I reflect on it I realized that this is a great gift to give to them, is to be gracious and accepting, and let them feel they're helping in taking care of us, because people felt so helpless in seeing what was happening to us that they were suffering too in their own way. And it really, I think, for the first time in my experience, I mean, you know, I had

made this film Shalom Y'all, I certainly had seen and felt what it meant to be a Jew in small towns around the South, that you could always find and feel connected even if you weren't from there, because we are part of a community that exists sort of outside of region, this was the first time I realized we take care of each other. No matter where we are we are not strangers, ever.

SR: So, how did that change the way that you sort of related to the Jewish community? Think of, you know --

SL: It made me want to be, you know, I want to say it made me want to be a better Jew, or a better member of the Jewish community, I'm not sure exactly how that's played itself out, except that my husband's a regular Saturday shule-goer, and I did go with him now and again in New Orleans, but I would go with him before the baby came more than I ever had before. It made me want to never say no when being asked to do something, be on a committee, or something that might feel inconvenient to me, because it's not really, you know, that kind of involvement's not something I choose to do really, it's not my thing so much as it is my husband's and other peoples'. But it made me feel that there's an obligation that I have to be a part of that community in a way that is meaningful and significant. And it also just made me look at these people and be grateful to them, and see them not just in passing, but as true brothers and sisters.

SR: So you talked about how the institutions with the Atlanta Jewish community helped you, how did the people, you know, other Jews that you came across -- parents at the school, people in the synagogue -- kind of respond to your personally?

SL: Jewish people who weren't just institutionally affiliated were also unbelievable. You know, cousins and friends, which I do have here, but then random strangers, would offer, I mean, I was pregnant, so people were offering maternity clothes, baby thing -- I didn't have anything. I didn't have a crib, I didn't have a bassinet, I mean, stroller. People were bringing things over to the house and offering them. Offering meals, you know, we were

with my folks so we didn't need that, but there was that sort of offer. It was an outpouring of generosity and support, and sort of an anything you need. The Rabbi, Rabbi Nori (sp?), and his wife, Joanna, for example, one thing they did for us is they called their pediatrician. He's a solo practitioner in a neighborhood in Atlanta, called Little Five Points, he's a very hard practice to get into, he's popular, kind of old school guy, and it's not some big office with lots of doctors. She called him personally, explained our situation, and said, you know, she's pregnant, she's going to have a baby here, will you take them in? Of course, what he didn't realize (laughter) is that we stayed, and we have a teenager too, but he's been great. So that kind of, at that level, I mean, that wasn't an institutional thing from the synagogue, it was a personal gesture. So all kinds of things like that.

SR: So, talk about what it was like to live back with your parents for ten months.

SL: You know, it's one of those things that until we moved out and got into our own place, I didn't realize what we were doing to just -- how it was affecting us. I was thrilled on the one hand, because I was freaked out, and overwhelmed, and now I'm going to have this baby here, and for me it was like a great thing on the one hand, because I had the baby, and I was in their house, and I had, you know, from zero to four months it was like living in a village compound, the way it's probably supposed to be. You know, I got to go pee, my mom's going to hold the baby, and when we got to our own house, I didn't know what to do with the baby, because I had all these people around. I never felt alone, I never felt abandoned, I liked it. And Jake, before he joined the firm here he's with now, was with another firm just with an office, but he could work from home, so I knew he was downstairs, so there was a real big comfort level for me. It was also a huge challenge, because, you know, my parents are my parents, and they're in their seventies and they've got their way of being with each other, and their way of being in the house, and my dad comes and goes from Washington, but has an office here. And also was on a slide towards hip replacement surgery, and so this slow slide, I mean, he was just getting

less and less able to, you know, he was walking with a cane, he was practically in a wheelchair, it was like the worst case the surgeon had ever seen, because he's one of these guys who just doesn't go get it dealt with. So then he had surgery in the midst of me having a newborn, which meant he was around all the time, and my mom was having to deal with that, and the physical therapists are coming over, and it was -- you know, until we moved into the new house, we were all able to sort of think about what our different experiences were, whereas for Sydney, she felt so at home at their house. Like, she felt more at home in their house than where we lived for a whole year in this house in Morningside -- not where we are now, but.

SR: Why do you think that was?

SL: Because it was carpeted, and it was like a home.

SR: It was set up.

SL: It was set up, it felt like a home, it was, like, comfortable. Her grandparents were there, I mean, this is her nana and papa to her, she's known them since she was nine, but they are her nana and papa. And I think it felt like a family home, whereas this place we moved, great house, but not the same. Wooden floors throughout, and the rooms aren't as big, and she shared a bathroom as a guest bathroom, and we were taking care of ourselves. And I think it was challenging for my husband, because everything he had and knew was in New Orleans. He knows and loves my family, but it's not his. So it was challenging. It was challenging, but it was also really quite amazing, and honestly, I can't imagine what it would have been like not being there.

SR: Did it change your relationship with your parents?

SL: Very much so. My mother really, not so much my father. She, it really is kind of like one of those things where it takes a village to raise a child thing, her relationship now with Annie, my daughter, is beyond imagination, because it's so formative in Annie's and

my mother's experience. And now I see her and talk to her every day, my mom.

SR: So how often did you talk to her before the storm?

SL: Well, you know, once a week. And the nature of the conversations are much more open. I will reveal more to her about things, and so it definitely deepened that relationship.

SR: So you talked about when the storm came and destroyed houses, destroyed your neighborhood, your community, so how do you go about recreating that in Atlanta?

SL: Oh, it's interesting, it was like a project for me. And I don't know if I would have done this anyway as a mom in New Orleans where we had no family on either side, just because that might be my nature, my personality for survival. I mean, I was kind of freaked out about this whole thing. But what I did, and it's a hypothetical, I don't know if I would have done the same thing, but what I did here was I -- I mean, I was pretty freaked out, especially --

SR: Freaked out about?

SL: I didn't know that what I was freaked out about was really Katrina, primarily. I thought that I was freaked out and hugely anxious around having this baby. And I was just anxious a lot, and I'd just be like, yeah, it's not Katrina, I mean, come on. You know, we lost some stuff, but look, we didn't die. We weren't sticking our head through a roof, and we're here, and we're in my family's house, we got it good. I was so deluded. I mean, I can't believe that I wasn't aware how profoundly I was being impacted in that sort of post-traumatic stress way. So I felt really lonely and alone even though I wasn't. And so what I would do, I refer to it as being like a guy at a singles bar, I'd, like, pick up moms. (laughter) You know, I'd like run into these moms, who, we'd run into each other at places, and I'd be, oh my gosh, how old's your baby? And mine's blah, we should get together. And so I went about this project of, like, creating, I belong to a playgroup, I

went to this pregnancy yoga class. I would just voraciously seek out people that I could get together with and do things with in common. Like I say, I don't know if I would have done it in the same way in New Orleans, but I know that it was, like, I had to do it for survival is how it felt. And even doing it didn't make me feel completely at ease, but at least it was like something, like the beginning of trying to create a sense of community.

SR: So was it, I mean, did you play the Katrina card? Did you say, explain your background, or --

SL: Oh yeah.

SR: Really?

SL: Absolutely. And, in fact, it's like, what is the time limit on saying happy new year to somebody? You know, like, when does it end? Is it two weeks after new years, is it a month? You know, I sort of got to the point of wondering, have we played it out? (laughter) But I mean, yeah, I'd go to a pregnancy yoga class and she would refuse to let me pay for months, and that sort of thing. So, yeah, that was my trope, that was my story, and everybody knew that was my story, and it was my story for a while. And so for me mostly it was seeking out people around this common experience, which was having a baby, and trying to form quick and close bonds with at least somebody, to feel like I had an anchor, because none of my friends were here, but my family was, so it didn't feel as hard for me as it has been for Jake, who, all his friends are there. And he didn't have an experience like mine around which you just meet people. Hey, you're a lawyer, I'm a lawyer, let's -- you don't do that (laughter). But with a baby you do it. So I've been able to do that in a profound way that he hasn't been able to, and so that's been a difference. And then just, yeah, just I mean, in every which way, even in the Jewish world, old friends or old family friends, I mean, I was just willy-nilly calling people to do stuff, and have much more social contact here than I did in New Orleans after eight years and I'm a social person. But I think it was just this window in which everything's new, this sort of

blank slate. You can call anyone, you can get -- it's all new, so I would just, there were no, eh, I'll do that later. Or, ah, I'll call her when I get around to it. I was just calling people all the time to get together.

SR: So has that project paid off two years later, I mean, you being able to create that sort of --

SL: Yeah, and some have come and some have gone, as things happen in friendships and in need. I mean, I got to the point where Annie was a certain age and I didn't feel like I wanted to or needed to be around the playgroup girls anymore. But, yeah, it's very much paid off. There's kind of a group of gals, and then to my great delight, my best friend in New Orleans up and moved to Atlanta two months ago, having gone back and tried to make a go of it. So she's here now and that's a great anchor, and through her we're expanding into another kind of world of Jewish New Orleans ex-pats, that are different than my baby friends, you know there's -- actually there's now a little Jewish group of baby friends, but most of them in the beginning were not Jewish baby friends.

SR: Why don't we take a break.

SL: Sure.

END OF AUDIO FILE 1

SR: We're beginning tape two. And so you were talking about creating this social community in Atlanta. When did you and Jake make the decision that you, in fact, were not going to go back to New Orleans?

SL: The decision not to go back was incremental. I mean, there wasn't a -- all right, we're going to decide by next week. We kept putting it off, and putting it off, and putting it

off, because, I mean, he'd still like to go back at some level, and -- I mean, hypothetically, not really. So, we just kept putting it off. I mean, the whole time we lived at my folks there was still some sense of indecision. Neither of us wanted to say it out loud. We just really, we even acknowledged that we didn't want to say it out loud. We couldn't quite come to terms with the fact that we wouldn't go back. I think him much more so than me, since I'm from here, and since I felt comfortable here now that I had this baby and sort of couldn't envision what a life would look like going there and struggling with a newborn, without family. But I still didn't want to say it out loud, it just seemed weird and hard. I don't really remember exactly when the decision became clear, but I think it got to a point where he had to tell the firm in Mississippi, and he had to look for a job here. And when that sort of confluence of things came together, that was when the decision had to be made that we had to decide to stay. Now, unlike a lot of kids, my stepdaughter Sydney was thriving here, happier here than she had been in New Orleans.

SR: Why do you think that was?

SL: I know why it was. She went to a small, really small Jewish day school there in New Orleans. She was in a class of nine kids, and there was one really mean girl. So, there were maybe four girls in the class and the mean girl picked on her, and everybody else, but she didn't have a lot of friends. And she was, you know, it was a smaller, more sheltered world. So she comes here to Atlanta as kind of a celebrity, really, is thrust into this class of sixty kids her age, it's the year of the bar and bat mitzvahs, so it's like debutantes. Every weekend she's out at a party and a bar mitzvah, I mean she was -- she's now found her best friend. Her best friend is now here, a Jewish girl she met at Epstein, she had a crowd of girls, she felt happier at the school, and she had our family, which I know meant a lot to her. We have Shabbat dinner with my parents every Friday night, which I certainly wouldn't have done in New Orleans. My brother's family comes, and he's got two kids that are now ten and eight. And so I think that she felt, I know she just felt more at home. She felt happier than she'd ever been in her life. She was thriving

as she was becoming a teenager, whereas a lot of people were really longing for home. So that contributed to our decision, her doing so well. And then obviously the baby, knowing that she was going to grow up around family, knowing that I was more comfortable here, that it would be really hard in New Orleans with services and everything, the crime situation, the health situation. Jake, in making his peace with it, it was all about family, which is the most important thing to him. And he saw that his family was doing really well here. But it was probably, in fact it was, because now I think about it, I went back ten months after Katrina. Why? To meet the movers. That was my big, first coming in, was to say hello and goodbye. And it was right around the Fourth of July. And so we must have made the decision eight months after, it took us that long. I would say at least eight, maybe nine months, because then we made the decision and it was hire the movers, and get our stuff, and find a place to rent here, and move.

SR: What do you remember about going back ten months later? What were your thoughts?

SL: Well, it was weird. I felt like I'd come late to the dance, you know, and then the band was packing up their instruments. You know, everybody had come, except the people of no means. I was sort of in the same boat as the people who had no means, who really couldn't come back. I was the only person I knew of means, meaning I had a way and I had money enough to find my way back, who hadn't come back over and over, or who hadn't even moved back. And so they were all sort of on a different path a little bit farther along than me. And here I was for the first time coming, and yet at the same time, it wasn't just me coming. It was me, now the mom of a four month old, who was with me. And so I think that shielded me in a way, because I was so focused in a way on her, and on this job at hand. I have to, the movers are going to pack everything up as well as move it, and unpack it, so I didn't have to sit there and do that, but I had to just go to the house and supervise that. So there was a bit of an arm's length, I think. And yet at the same time, as thought time had stood still, because I would go to my favorite restaurant

or whatever, and have my favorite dish, and it was just --

SR: What was that, I'm just curious?

SL: Well, oddly enough considering it was New Orleans, it was a Lebanese restaurant that had this, like, fabulous vegetable dish on rice with this melted feta cheese on the top. Lebanon Cafe. Yeah.

SR: OK, sorry, I was just curious.

SL: No, yeah. And so I think there was an arm's length side of it and then this sense that it was a blink, even though it had been ten months, that I knew exactly where to go and whatever, and especially in what people termed the isle of denial, that I could just kind of go where everything seemed like it was OK. And then, of course, went into the Ninth Ward, and went everywhere else, and was videotaping it, which I did, and yet that was a hugely emotional experience. I think I cried quite a bit on that trip.

SR: And so had you been paying rent on the apartment the whole time?

SL: Yeah. Well, they thought we were coming back, and we thought we were coming back. So they were renovating it and what have you. But we paid a reduced rent. They were kind enough, since we weren't living there, I think it was like half. But we weren't paying here, so it wasn't like we had two rents to pay, and that made it feasible. Plus we figured we'd be paying a lot for storage, so.

SR: So during that period, and even 'til today, are you still in touch with people who have stayed in New Orleans?

SL: Yeah.

SR: So what's that like? How do they respond , or react?

SL: In the beginning there was a tremendous amount of guilt. Like, I knew we were staying, and I'd still kind of play it a little bit like, well, we're staying for now, but we'll probably come back eventually. I think a lot of people felt that way. I mean, I, just, eh, well, it's what we have to do for now. Sydney's in school, we're just renting a house, but I knew full well. But, I mean, part of it was not, the unwillingness to kind of let it go, too. And story you've heard so many times, that those who went back just felt like, you have to come back too, you have to come help us. What do you mean you're staying in Atlanta? How can you do that? And I was to be, I was the incoming President of the New Orleans Film Festival. And so I was giving that up, but I wasn't ready to make peace with giving that -- well, you know what Michael, why don't you be President again this year, and when I come back next year I'll do it. So it was putting it off and sort of fudging a little bit with folks, and partly fudging with myself.

SR: So was there a point when you kind of came out and finally admitted to people that it's not --

SL: Yeah.

SR: When was that?

SL: But it wasn't like a coming out, it was sort of like, oh yeah, we bought a house. You know? (laughter) And I think then it was just, again, incremental. I think it became more obvious to others that we weren't coming back than it was to us, that we were convincing them, until the buying of the house, when I finally admitted that. As long as we were renting there was always the possibility. Oh sure, we're coming back.

SR: Yeah, but buying a house, that's sinking (overlapping dialogue; inaudible)

SL: Right, sinking the money, sinking into the land. But still, to this day, I have my New Orleans cell phone, and I don't need it. I don't need a 504 area code, I should get a 404 area code. I say it's because, you know, then you got to call everyone, and you've

changed your number. Is that true? I'm not sure. But it's like, I think I don't want to let that go.

SR: Yeah. So, what does home mean to you, the idea of home?

SL: I think, for me, home means feeling that you belong somewhere, and you have a sense of place. And being part of a generation that's somewhat transient, not necessarily living where you grew up. This didn't feel like home to me, because I lived other places, and those places were home and they were home because, I was either married, or I had work and friends, and a place that I would go back to that felt like home. But this felt like foundation. This felt like the foundation that I always knew I had to come back to, and that I had history. So I think that home is feeling connection to a place.

SR: And what do you miss the most about New Orleans? Or your life there?

SL: I just miss the way of life that's so different in New Orleans than it is anywhere else in the U.S. that I've ever been. I miss how it looks architecturally, I miss how it smells. I don't, you know, people joke about the seasons, you know, you've got the termites, the roaches, the mosquitoes, and the caterpillars. I don't miss that, but even the corruption of it's politics, and the virulence of its vermin, the things that you complain about all still wrap up in making this place feel so different. The way the trees hang over the streets, the way the coffee tastes. And I miss Mardi Gras really a lot. And just the way that people are there. The way they talk, and just that whole world.

SR: So, and you sort of touched on this, but talk about what the Jewish community has meant to you during this experience, and how your relationship with the Jewish community changed because of this experience.

SL: Yeah, I think as I mentioned before, that the most profound way that my experience, in relation to the Jewish community has change, is really, you know, accepting that we can all be part of the stream of suffering at some point in our lives and not always the

givers. And to accept that as a part of this community it is my obligation both to participate and to give, as well as to be willing to receive, and to see that in the people and the community. And it's just made me more grateful, really grateful, to the people who really are committed Jewishly, and committed to Jewish institutions in a way that I'm not. I mean, I have such great respect for what they did, and who they are, and what they do in a way I didn't really profoundly understand. I mean, my husband was on every board, and the president of every Jewish thing, he probably knew that at a more profound level than me, so that I guess would be it. Really accepting, and understanding, and appreciating who people are who take on those roles of responsibility.

SR: How do you think the Atlanta Jewish community's different from that in New Orleans?

SL: Well, I think that one of the biggest ways that the Jewish community in Atlanta is different is its sheer size. I mean, that's just an obvious statement, but because of its sheer size, there is an influx of Jewishness and Jewish living that has been able to pervade here in a way that never would happen in New Orleans. First of all, the New Orleans community was primarily reform, so that here in Atlanta, when this huge influx of orthodox Jews came, and there was already a big conservative community, and there was a Sephardic community, there were all these communities, but suddenly the place that I grew up where we were the second Jewish family to live in this neighborhood, over near Toco Hills, has now boomed as a Jewish neighborhood. So that here you can get kosher food all over the place, at various supermarkets. I think that it's the ability to live a Jewish life, if you so choose to be kosher or a little bit more religious, or to at least know other people are able to, and to see that visibly. That's a difference. And I also think that, you know, it's what I said before a little bit, that there's more of a -- well, first of all, there's now much more of a Northern Jewish influence. But the Southern Jews of Atlanta are more acculturated in a kind of Protestant way. It's a little bit more straight ahead, where the New Orleans Jews are -- even those who've come from elsewhere, Pittsburgh,

New York, whatever, who've lived there, have acculturated to that world -- and it's ceiling fans on the porch and, you know, just a more relaxed way of being as a person and as a Jew that's just more laid back. But here, everyone's so involved, that it's almost like you're not needed in the same way. I mean, here my husband was on every board as I say, he's just gotten asked to be on a board here, but he was the incoming president of the JCC in New Orleans, had to give that up. And all that sort of thing, so it's a place, it's a Jewish community that's very self-sufficient because of its sheer size and its history.

SR: How do you think your husband has sort of adjusted? I mean, it sounded like he was the one who was the one who had the hardest decision to stay here.

SL: Yeah, I think it's still really hard. We talk about it. I mean, I think the hardest thing for him is that he had these, like, great friends in New Orleans, especially like a handful of Jewish friends, but others that, you know, he was recruited out of law school in Pittsburgh and he was there seventeen years in New Orleans. And even though he's a Pittsburgh boy, New Orleans is in his blood. And, I mean, that's just so funny, because he's such a straight ahead guy and such a Pittsburgh guy, that for him to be acculturated into that climate is really interesting, and that's what happens. New Orleans just brings you in. But he's really happy at his job, and with his firm, and with the people he met there, and he's glad that I have family here, that's great for him. But I think it's a really hard adjustment, especially because the Maccabiah Games were coming to New Orleans that summer, and he was the incoming president of the JCC. Really had been instrumental in bringing the Games to New Orleans, was on the Federation Executive Committee and all of that. So for him there's this greater Jewish kind of sense of loss, but he loves our shule here. I think he does like it better than where we were in New Orleans, and he loves the Rabbi.

SR: Are you at AA?

SL: No, we're at Shereth Israel. We broke away from the family. We're at the synagogue in our neighborhood here, which is very much like Shir Chadash. Well, it's young families and alter kockers. It's got a great history, Rabbi's really cool, from New York, we're really close with him and his wife, lots of young families --

SR: So what prompted you to make that change? I mean, you probably just described it --

SL: Because we feel at home there. AA just wasn't our place. It's much more of that Atlanta, old, somewhat stodgy, you know, we speak to you from up here and you are down there, even architecturally they've talked about trying to make a change, because it's really that old Atlanta thing. And Shir Chadash is much more free flowing and young, and the kids are running up around the bimah --

SR: Shereth Israel.

SL: I mean, thank you, I still do that. I do, I just went out of town and said, well, when we go back to New Orleans (laughter) -- yeah, Shereth Israel is very much, you know, at the end the kids all run up on the bimah and the Rabbi sits there like the pied piper and gives them fruit leather. I mean it's just, whereas if the cantor's kid's running on the bimah at AA, the Rabbi is really not happy about it. So that's more of our style. And we can actually walk from here if we want, it's that close.

SR: And you have a choice, there's more than one conservative congregation.

SL: That's right. I mean, most of them are out in the hinterlands as I like to call them, but yeah. I mean, this is much closer than AA.

SR: So, has the experience that you went through changed your feelings about spirituality, about God, anything? Did it have any impact on that?

SL: Not my relationship to God, because even though this is the first really personal experience with profound and supernatural tragedy, or whatever you want to call it, that I've had to experience, as opposed to seeing others witness, I'm certainly aware of our community going through so many others that if you're going to question God's existence or any of that, I would have done it a long time ago.

SR: You had chances.

SL: Yeah. A lot of opportunities to do that. So it didn't from that point of view. And honestly, I don't think so much spiritually in relationship to a divine entity as much as spiritually in terms of a relation to my people, if that makes any sense whatsoever. It's not a divine spirituality that sort of has been opened up. Like, I don't feel more religious. But I feel more spiritually connected to the Jewish people.

SR: What role has the various synagogues you've been here in Atlanta and other Jewish institutions sort of helping you adjust to kind of make this community a home?

SL: Well, I mean, Shereth -- well, start with AA, of course, because what they did for us with that bat mitzvah. I mean, you know, a lot of it had to do with my family's history there, I mean, we were like really matriarchal patriarchal involvement, and they would have. But I know that our friends, the Furmans, whose daughter had a bat mitzvah a few months later, they don't have family connections here and their synagogue was equally amazing. But so right there off the bat, AA. But Shereth Israel brought us in and welcomed us, and, again, waived all membership, and high holidays, and all that, and then we did the baby naming there in June of 2006. And actually, I should probably mention, because even though it's a parenthetical it's related to what we're talking about, which is that we designed a service, and my brother-in-law played cello, and my cousin played guitar, and whatever, we did all this stuff, but I had one piece that I did that I decided I really wanted to do during the course of this service, which I called the three rivers of home, where I had water from New Orleans in a cup, and water from Atlanta in a

cup, and then an empty glass. And I wrote a piece about home that I read, and about the three rivers being the Mississippi, the Chattahoochee, and the Jordon, so that one day Annie would visit Israel, and that this is part of our people and our home. Atlanta has welcomed us, this is part of her family history, it's where we are now, and of course New Orleans is where she came from and where we came from, so that I had Sydney come up and pour bits of the water into one glass to make it whole. So I have that in a program written out, I can give you as well, but, yeah. So, that made me cry. That was really emotional for me. But the synagogue, to get back to your question, was so incredibly giving, and open, and welcoming to us -- and in fact one thing that we're doing for them is my filmmaking partner, Brian Bayne (sp?), and I are going to do a showing of our film Shalom Y'all as a fundraiser for Shereth Israel, and they're partnering with the JCC. So sometime this Fall, you know, we don't want them to pay us any kind of fee or anything, they're going to bring Brian in and we're going to do this as a sort of way of thanking them for opening their arms and bringing us in to their family, so that way. And then of course the JF's, you know, Jewish Family and Children Services and the Federation, and the JCC, frankly, all offering anything we needed, and giving to us, were the ways that the Jewish institutions here really impacted us.

SR: How do you think the experience of being pregnant and giving birth in those first intense few months, intense few years (laughter)

SL: Yeah.

SR: How did that, you think, made your experience different from someone who would maybe have had a similar story but wasn't? How did that make it different?

SL: Well, for starters, Annie would have been from New Orleans. Annie's from Atlanta. And even though I'm from here, that was a little sad for me, because first of all, her sister's from New Orleans, and there's this sort of, like, I love the idea of her being from there, which is part of the three rivers of home, you know, is that she was certainly there

for three months, that's where she came from to some degree. So there was this sense that my baby's home is now going to be here, not there. We're like the people who came from Europe and, you know, your parents were from Poland but you're from America. So she's from Atlanta. And I think also that all the stresses that are related to being pregnant, and giving birth, and having a newborn, were enmeshed with the stresses that we were experiencing post-Katrina so soon. And I couldn't divine which was which, I didn't frankly even think that Katrina was part of it. I didn't. And it was so majorly a part of it. I felt, obviously, even though I was from here, I didn't feel my footing at all. I just felt confused and free floating, and I thought that was because I just didn't know what to do with a newborn. And I didn't know what to do with a newborn, but I also felt so freaked out about -- you know, like I say, I'd wake up one morning and I'd go, oh, I can't believe that was in the box too, because it wasn't just some sort of closure, it's been this process of remembering what's lost. So, anyway, I think that trying to put on a game face for everybody, and for my body, and for the baby, contributed to a lot of that turmoil, because I wasn't feeling that way. I wasn't feeling, yeah, everything's just great.

SR: So, why did you feel it was important to have the Mississippi River and water from New Orleans as part of that ceremony? By then you'd already pretty much decided or close to decided you were going to be here.

SL: Yeah, we had decided. Because, I mean, I think I really wanted there to be a record for Annie that our intention was that we were going to live in New Orleans and you were going to be from there. This is where you are from. This is where your footprint is. And that, just as surely as she's never been to Israel, she is a member of the Jewish community, and the Jordon is sort of something that will always be there for her. I want her to always feel that this was, in a way, your home. And by circumstances you didn't get to experience it, you didn't get to live it as your home, but it's your foundation, it's your history.

SR: So how do you think Katrina and the experience of it has changed you as a person?

SL: I think Katrina has changed me in some profound ways. First of all, Jewishly, as I've mentioned, accepting that at some point in anybody's life you can be the person who has jumped in or been pushed in to the stream of suffering by no choice of your own. And that, on the banks of that river, are your brethren waiting with a hand to pull you out, and to clothe you, and to feed you, and to care for you, and to do it without any sense of a need to be thanked or repaid. So that I hope that I have the opportunity to do the same, you know what I mean? But what I think that it changed me that way, Jewishly, and as a person, to not, because I mean, sometimes giving can be arrogant when you don't ever receive. It's made me feel that things are temporary. You know, I just did some oral history interviews for the high school that I went to of the early days of the school, and they said, well, you know, why don't you keep the tapes at your house? And I said no. It's never going to flood here, I mean, maybe a tornado would come through or something, that's what we get in Georgia, but the sense that things can get lost and I don't want to keep them, because what if they get lost again? I think there's part of that. And thinking more about how you save things, and where you put them, and who has extra copies. And the ability to let go, also. It's also made me realize that I can survive something hugely overwhelming, and that I know what I'll be like when I have to do it, and it's going to be ugly and hard, but I can do it.

SR: What about, I mean, losing the stuff that you lost, has your understanding of things, possessions, and memory, I mean, how has that affected you?

SL: You know, at least in my prior profession as a folklorist, a collector of things, as well as ineffable things, or things that are not animate, that are stories, so I certainly was aware that memory is valuable, and is a thing in and of itself, and that memory passes down, and stories pass down, but just like the cobbler's kids has bad shoes, and the dentist's kids has bad teeth, the folklorist has possessions. And I mean, I truly mourned

the loss of my things. Like I really understand and respect the oral tradition, and yet I come from a paper tradition, and a thing tradition, and material tradition. So it kind of brought me up against that. I want my stuff back. I want my things back. And I don't have some grand sense of, well, things are transient and everything. You know, I mean, they are, that's the reality, that's the truth, but I don't like that truth, because I like things, and I miss them, and I want them. I like having a record.

SR: What do those things represent to you?

SL: An accumulated life, you know? A footprint.

SR: And finally, or towards the end, is you spoke so eloquently earlier about what made New Orleans unique prior to the storm. I know you've been back at least once or a few times, what is your sense of the city today? And is that unique culture still there or has it been torn?

SL: Yeah, I mean, it's a great question. I wish I was more --

SR: Thought question.

SL: Yeah, it's a thought question. No, what I was going to say is just I wish that I had been able to be there more to give it more reflection, because when I've gone back, like the second time I went back, was really to be out in the Cajun part of Louisiana and I could reflect a little bit about that. But my sense of it is, like, I guess a surgeon friend of mine metaphorized that in the beginning the patient was in triage in the emergency room, the patient being New Orleans. And now the patient is, I guess, in outpatient rehab, but has a limp, and the knee goes bad in the weather. That sort of, my sense of it is this sort of duel experiences of both joyful spirit and tenacity of brining it back and making it there. Because it kind of is there, it's sort of like that movie Brother From Another Planet, where they would go into Ellis Island and the alien guy would touch the wall and all the voices would come. I mean, there's some sense, in a spiritual way almost, that because

of all that history of the music being played and the people walking the parade routes, that it's there whether they're there or not. It's somehow in the earth, it's in the atmosphere. So there's part of it that's just there and reviving. But there's part of it that's so wounded and not back, and broken, that there's a sadness too.

SR: Is there anything else you'd like to add? Anything that we didn't cover that we could have covered?

SL: No, I don't think so. Just that, you know, I do remember, though, the other night when we had a little gathering of Jews from New Orleans in Atlanta, and somebody's little snip-it was being read. And all the person had to say was the name of that Louis Armstrong song. I can't even say it now, it's still raw -- all this time later. Even for those of us who haven't gone back that much and have moved on, it's still part of our healing, is moving on through life, and missing New Orleans.

SR: Susan, thank you so much for taking time to speak with us.

[END OF INTERVIEW]