Frank Levy Transcript

ROSALIND HINTON: -- interviewing Frank Levy at his home, 714 Marc Court, in Abita Springs, Louisiana. Today is Sunday, September 3rd, 2006. I am conducting an interview for the Katrina Jewish Voices project of the Jewish Women's Archive, and the Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish life. Frank, do you agree to be interviewed and understand that the video will be video-recorded?

FRANK LEVY: Yes.

RH: (laughter) OK. Let's begin with simple things, like... tell me about your family, and how your family came to be in New Orleans, the New Orleans area, and give me a little of your background.

FL: All right... anywhere else in the world, to say this, it would be an oddity, but in New Orleans, it's not at all uncommon that my family is sort of split down the middle, Jewish and Catholic. That is to say, my great-grandfather, Marx Levy, came to America as an immigrant, at the end of the 19th century, from -- it's not a country now, but it would have been somewhere in Prussia, in Western Poland, Eastern Germany, somewhere in that area -- he came out of a village there. And when he came to America, he fell in love with a Catholic woman, and had to sign a document that said that the children would be brought up Catholic. So, although my heritage for 7,000 years is Jewish, for two generations, we skipped a beat, and we were all raised Catholic, on my father's side. On my mother's side, the Catholic side, my family name was Dueñas. And, that originally was from Spain, by way of Mexico, and my family on that side immigrated up from Mexico, right after Pancho Villa's revolution -- they were provincial governors in the state of Tabasco, Mexico. Tabasco, Mexico. And they came up -- they had been wealthy, land-owning gentry, among the upper class in Mexico, and then they were impoverished,

because of the revolution. So, my family on one side is Spanish Catholic, and on the other side is a mixture of Catholic and Eastern European Jew. So, I grew up, born in New Orleans, oldest of six children -- in the French Quarter, and my father -- I was born in Touro Infirmary, out of the French Quarter, as my father was also born in the French Quarter, and my grandfather, also. And, I was raised as a Catholic, but it was sort of -- it would be like, somebody would say, "Are you Jewish?" And I'd say, "Well, yes. I am Jewish. But I don't go to synagogue, I go to a Catholic Church." And they'd say "What? How is that?" And you know, as a child, you're not asked, when you're two years old, what are your choices among the religions of the world? So I was raised Catholic, although I had a Jewish heritage. So... my father was never able to say things like, "I'm no rocket scientist, but... " -- because my father is a rocket scientist, and when I was four years old, we moved from New Orleans to California so my father could pursue a career working in Aerospace, and he worked on surface-to-air missiles, satellites, fighter aircraft -- the soonest I would ever find out about anything my father worked on would be ten years after, he'd send me a photocopy of an article in Time Magazine that would say, "Pentagon Reveals Existence of Spy Satellite," and he'd circle it and say "I did that." (laughter) So -- but I would find out ten years later, I never have been to where my father works, because he would go -- I mean, I know where the property was, but they had big guys with guns at the gates, and... .So, I had this odd relationship with my father's work, in that he was a rocket scientist, so he went to do that. So we lived in California, but I spent my summer vacations where I always have and always will be from, which is New Orleans, fourth generation, French-Quarter born. So, I came back and spent my summers with my grandparents -- both sets, who lived in the French Quarter -- across the street from one another, as a matter of fact, that's how my father met my mother. They lived on the 1100 block of Royal St., and they met from gallery to gallery, and fell in love, and so my father and mother were both from the French Quarter, and so that's my heritage from childhood. So I would spend my summers with my grandparents while growing up in California, and as soon as I graduated from high school and had my life in

my own hands again, I came back to New Orleans. And -- except to go on tour, I go all over the world doing shows of course, but, I am a New Orleans person. I happen to live in the town of Abita Springs, which is a less than one hour drive from the heart of the French Quarter -- I have to be within an hour of my roots. I can go all over the world, but I am from New Orleans, I am from the French Quarter, and... the thing that happened, with the storm -- I had a lot of things to do, after the storm was over, and I suppose I'm supposed to talk about that. But the thing that happened that's maybe ended up being the most profound, longest-lasting effect, was the loss of this thing that I've been talking about since I sat down here, which is the loss of our society, of our culture. And it's such a great culture... you know, it's funny, I go all over the world doing shows, and I'll be in a city, I'll be in Sydney, Australia, or Rome, or London, and somebody will say, "Where're you from?" And for years, I would say, "I'm from New Orleans," and they would say "Oh!" and they would know all about it, they would say, "Oh, Mardi Gras! Oh, great food!" 'Cause they knew about where I was from, I was so proud of that! Now, when I say I'm from New Orleans, they get this stricken look on their faces. And I know what the look is about, because the thing that they're stricken about, I lived through. I'm -- I know, I'm digressing. But --

RH: No, you're not.

FL: OK. So about my roots in the city. So, we moved to California, but as soon as I could I came back to New Orleans, and accepted a scholarship to Loyola University, and went to college back in the city. To explain the roots thing just a little bit more -- although raised Catholic, being Catholic didn't work for me. I like to tell people, it started when George Carlin asked this joke on TV about if it was a sin that punished you for all time, to go to hell, for eating meat on Friday, and then one day they repealed that -- what about all the people who are already in hell on a bum meat rap? So -- I thought that was a real question. And I said, "You know, there's something wrong." And, there was something wrong for me about being in that religion all my life. And I remember when I was a little

boy, I was reading Bible stories, and I asked my father, the rocket scientist, I said, "Dad, boy, the Jews are so neat in this book!" I said, "I wish I was Jewish." And he said, "Ung. Well, you are." And so I thought, at that moment, as a small child, that maybe fathers could grant wishes. So I said, "Well I want to be a Native American, like Tonto." And he said, "Well, you're not an Indian." So I thought, maybe you only got one wish, and I had accidentally wished to be a Jew. (laughter) But it turned out that, having to spend my early years explaining to people, "Yes, I'm Jewish, I'm proud that I'm Jewish, but I don't go to synagogue, I go to church." And, we had -- my wife Bonnie, my wonderful, college librarian soul-mate wife Bonnie -- Bonnie Bess Wood, she loves me, but won't take my last name. (laughter) Well, she had a different name with another man to whom she was married, and then she left him and went back to her maiden name, she said, "I will never change my name again!" I think Bonnie Levy sounds kind of cool, but... Bonnie Wood. OK. So, Bonnie and I started looking into the prospect of getting back to what being Jewish was all about. And on the Northshore here, where we live -- I came across here to teach, I had tried to get into teaching on the South Shore when I got out of college, but it was during the Vietnam War, and... a lot of people were teaching! (laughter) Gee, wonder why? So, I couldn't get a teaching job, and I eventually got in St. Tammany Parish, so we moved over here, where my grandparents had retired anyway, so that was kind of nice. And so, I was living on the Northshore, and I had met Bonnie here -- Bonnie was a librarian at another school here, and we started looking into this new synagogue that was being formed, called the Northshore Jewish Congregation -- it didn't even have a name, then. And as it became -- as it bloomed from a group of people meeting in the Methodist Church -- and so the first thing you would have to do every meeting was hang some respectful cloth over the crucifix, because it just wasn't a comfortable thing for us to be in a room trying to have a service, with that -- as it grew, I grew, and returned to my Judaism. And, my father will say to me, "Well, you know, you're a fallen-away Catholic!" And I'll say, "Dad, we were only Catholic for two generations. We were Jewish for 7,000 years, so actually, you're a fallen-away Jew, if it's necessary to say that." And I'm proud

and honored to say I'm a founding member, and I've rediscovered my Judaism, for lo this last decade as a member of the Northshore Jewish Congregation. Rabbi Jeff Kurtz-Lendner -- a wonderful name, a wonderful guide in my life, and I have been a participant in my synagogue, and hopefully a positive voice in the lives of our synagogue members and children ever since then. At least I do my best, so... that's the background. Does that help?

RH: Yes, and I have one question though. You moved across the lake in '72, which is where this fits across Lake Pontchartrain, Abita Springs. Can you kind of explain why you moved across the lake? Was that to teach?

FL: Well, I was looking for a teaching job out of school. I applied in Orleans Parish, there were no openings. I applied in St. Bernard Parish, there were no openings. I applied to work in the Archdiocese of New Orleans -- there were no openings. I had a teaching certificate, I had a degree in it, I had been captain of the speech and debate team, competitive speaker for the (16:52) University across the country. I had even taught part-time at St. John prep school -- while I was going to school I taught speech and coached their speech team, and made the city championships as a matter of fact -- but there was no opening! So, when I graduated there were zero teaching jobs, so I took a job in Texas for six months selling mobile homes. Not exactly my ideal job, but at least, if you're selling mobile homes -- you know, if you work at a car dealership, you always have a car. Well, if you sell mobile homes, you always get someplace to live. So I lived in a mobile home, and sold mobile homes until the teaching job came up. And in the middle of the school year, at a school that's called by the government a "target school," meaning more than 45% -- I think this is how it goes -- more than 45% of the students in the school are on the free lunch program. So it just means that the school has a lot of students who are struggling. At this school, kids who had issues -- the teacher had quit. (laughter) They asked me whether I could lob myself for my first teaching experience into this school in Lacombe -- Bayou Lacombe, Louisiana. So I moved back here, and I

was married to someone else at the time, her name was Janice Eastborn. We got married while we were in college, and... it didn't prove to work out -- I wish her well, she's an educator living in Pennsylvania now, but Janice and I moved here, and I started teaching at Chahta-Ima Junior High School, in 1972. And I taught here in this parish, St. Tammany Parish, for the next 21 years. Well, I taught longer than that, but I was in the public school system for 21 years.

RH: I'm going to stop for a second. (Smoke detector beeped.)

FL: Look how high that is! [I can't reach it to put a new battery.]

RH: (laughter)

FL: That's like a hundred feet!

RH: OK. After this little segue --

FL: I think you can see Europe, you can see Europe from --

RH: -- from, that...

FL: You want me to mention it, in the --

RH: When I stop the film, you can mention it.

FL: OK.

RH: The tape from running. (laughter) The other question, because you were a schoolteacher for 21 years, but that's not what you do now, and it plays a big role in our story, post-Katrina. So, I wonder if you can describe your work now.

FL: OK, well I guess to talk about what I do, I would have to begin by talking about why I quit doing what I was doing. I taught in the public schools for 21 years. Five years at

Chahta-Ima Junior High School. The school burned. By the way, if you're picking this up, there's a -- and we stopped the video for a moment, because of a -- there was a chirping sound -- that's a fire detector that needs a battery, but we have a lot of fire detectors in the house but this one is probably 18 feet above the floor, and we do not have a ladder that high, to get up to change the battery. So that's part of the drama of living in my house, that we have this sound, and if that's edited out, then you really missed a thrill, because I've lived with that for three years, that chirping thing that you can't replace. We have another one with a brand new battery in it that a human can reach, though, so we're in no danger. OK. Teaching. I was teaching for 21 years in the public schools on the Northshore. Five years at Chahta-Ima Junior High School, and then the school burned, and I was transferred to Mandeville High School, where I taught for 16 years, then I coached the speech team there. We were thirteen times national finalists. Our highest finish was fourth in the country, which, to come from Mandeville, LA, and end up fourth in the country, that's -- that's good. So, in '88, about 16 or so years into my teaching, I contracted Crohn's disease. Or, you know, that's genetic, so you don't contract it, it comes out. Which, by the way, is very common in descendants of Eastern European Jewish people -- what a surprise. And Crohn's is very, very stress-related. And the doctor told me that if I kept teaching high school, that it could kill me. That it would certainly make my life very, very difficult. So, I had to learn that instead of forcing my way through problems, that I had to learn to unclench, to relax, to focus on the goal better, and yet do it without pressure. Because, for me, it used to be, if pushing didn't get it, maybe if I push harder. But I had to learn other ways, to be more liquid, to take the shape of my container. And, he said I had to change my life, and so I did. I left teaching -- I didn't leave it entirely, I taught part-time at a Catholic school, I thought probably teaching part-time would be good -- I did other things, that I had been doing on the side with my wife Bonnie anyway -- we had always done summer programs at the libraries for children, and that sort of thing -- and I started doing something that I developed with my wife Bonnie called Interactive Theater, where, I decided that, if theater is supposed to

achieve -- if the ultimate goal in theater... well, it's two things; to have catharsis, to achieve this release where this learning experience happens, and then, to do it by way of suspension of disbelief, to cause the audience to believe in the reality of the show rather than the reality of the theater, or the seat that they're in, but, now they're in the emotion or the reality of the show. So, I thought, if the goal of theater is to achieve suspension of disbelief, then the ultimate goal would be to obliterate the fourth wall, between the actors and the audience, and to suck the audience -- not mentally into the show, but physically into the show, to say something like, "You know, if I was better I could probably do this by myself, but I could use a little help from somebody in the audience." And then, you say, like look, here's just a piece of plastic. I would say, "You could be the sound rain. In the story that we're about to do, whenever I say 'rain" -- and they all had this perception that I'm going to be a storyteller, but I think I've really failed, if I'm a storyteller. It's either a higher calling -- I don't know, it's just a separate calling from what I do. I'm more of a audience empowerer... and let them tell the story, and I'll be their guide, and they don't see the experience, or feel like they're part of the experience -- they create the experience, so they're marinated in it. And they walk out of it saying, not only do I learn the lesson of this story, but I also got this valuable training in getting up in front of people and doing what I call "Standing and delivering," which is the number one thing people fear most on this earth -- more than the dentist, more than death, people fear getting up in front of people. So I'm like -- I think of myself as the Johnny Appleseed of communication and cooperation skills. I run summer camps that do that; I do shows on the road, all over the United States, into Canada, and -- I've been fortunate enough to have four tours of Australia, where I work with groups of kids, or adults -- it can be a setting like the jazz festival, it can be a school, it can be a library, a church, a synagogue; it can be an in-service workshop, it can be teacher training, it can be corporate training sessions... and I come in and I craft a story where I pull people out of the audience, and I'll say, "OK, look. Whenever I say the word 'rain,' I'm going to hold the microphone out to you, and then you just crinkle this against the microphone." So I'll say, "At the beginning

of our tale, the rain was falling." (crinkling sound) And I try to show them that great art -- see, I think kids grow up today, and then the adult generation, too, thinks that great art comes from two things: it comes from a lot of real good technology, real good technology, and then sink a lot of money into it. So if they tell you there's a movie and it has lots of rays and beams, and it cost $140 million, you're there. But I don't think great art comes from technology and money. Great art comes from here (points to head), and here (points to heart). And so if I can show you that, sure, you can buy a CD that has a rain sound on it, or go download it, and then at the appropriate moment when I say rain you hit the button and it makes a sound, or how about you do this? (crinkling sound) Just 'cause it happens to be sitting there. And I give you a bag of pots and pans, and I say, "... And thunder crashed." And you drop the pots and pans, and we build a show from that. And so I say, "You know, I need a mighty woodsman." So you be the mighty woodsman, and I need a sound effect for the mighty woodsman. We need a river; I'll take a bolt of blue cloth and I'll unroll it through the audience and spread that out through them, and I'll say "Waves were kicking up on the river." And they'll wave the -- "Not that -- we don't want a hurricane!" Lately in the shows we make a lot of jokes about not too many waves. (laughter)

RH: (laughter)

FL: Anyway, so... I'll pull people out of the audience, so I get the benefit, not only of illustrating the lesson of the story, which can be the story of the Battle of New Orleans, or it can be Peter Pan, it can be something that illustrates conflict resolution, or something about...

RH: (inaudible) the Jewish stories --

FL: -- anti-drugs. I have a whole raft of Chanukah shows, I do the Purim spiel... You know, in synagogues, every year, there's kind of this issue -- the Purim spiel is mandated, for our synagogue, so you got to do the Purim spiel. You got to do the story

of Esther -- got to do it. And so one year they do the Purim spiel, and they say, "There, we acted it out, we did it." But then the next year comes, they say, "Well, we don't want to do that again." So one year they do it, the children do it for the adults, and another year the adults do it for the children, and another year they do it like a Broadway show, if the Purim spiel was West Side Story. In some synagogues, like there are several in Washington DC that are famous for the different ways they do it every year. Well I get brought into town -- to Washington, to New York, to different cities, where they say "Come do the Purim spiel -- that way." And so I'm another novel way of doing it for synagogues. And of course we're very fortunate -- well, we're fortunate as Jewish people in a lot of ways, but Chanukah isn't like a one day holiday, it's eight days. So I can go eight places, (laughter) and I can do Chanukah for more than a week, and perform in eight different places. So I guess what you were asking me, was how does that relate to what I did after I left teaching? I still taught -- I taught Media Arts at Tulane University, and I taught Theater and Southeastern Louisiana University, but that was just one or two classes. I started going on the road doing these shows -- at schools, libraries, festivals. I have an agent, a man who discovered me doing a performance, and now he books me into Sydney, Australia. And then I work with a group called Young Audiences, a non-profit, that schedules me into various, really worthy, worthwhile places where I can do work, mostly with kids. So, my job leading up into the hurricane, was I would do maybe a hundred shows a year, all over Louisiana, various places in the United States, and like I said I've had four tours out into Australia to do shows too. And, I had bookings set, and my wife's a college librarian, and our life was pretty set. I had the opportunity, I was blessed to be able to, because of the way my work is scheduled, I was very often able to schedule those shows to help with fund-raising programs for the poor. To work at things like Camp Dream Street, which is for severely disabled children at Henry S. Jacobs Camp, in Utica, Mississippi. And then I would turn right back around, and do more shows, for the regular children, I mean for the regularly scheduled children at Henry S. Jacobs Camp. And I would go up to Wisconsin, and perform at a Jewish camp up there

called Camp Ojibwa. And, I really felt like I had a life that had some merit to it, that I was fortunate enough that the thing that I was paid to do was the act of doing good for people. So my job was to do good for people. I guess anybody's job is, if you do a good job. I used to tell people when I did lectures on the subject, that if I was a bricklayer -- I have a friend who's a bricklayer, and he told me that a good day for a bricklayer is a thousand brick day. If, in a day, you have a thousand bricks laid that day, you have done a good day. Now, in laying those bricks, you can slam the bricks down, if you feel like. You can not talk, if you're not in the mood. You can curse the bricks. You can be a little irritable with the bricks. You can be hung over with the bricks. All day you can do it any way you want, if you get the bricks slammed down, and clean and nicely done, thousand brick day is a good day. When you work with children, you can't be a bricklayer. You can't curse the children, you can't have a bad day, you can't be hung over and get by, because you owe them better than that. Maybe the thing that you do with them -- especially in my line of work, because I put them at risk. I say, "Come, get up in front of everybody you care about." Very often it's their parents and their grandparents in the audience -- I'll say "Come, get up on stage, and turn around, and take the biggest risk of your life, and trust me. Trust that I will build the bowl of dignity and integrity, and put you in a space that it will work." And they do. Well, that's why I start (crinkling sound) with the rain, I don't start with saying come up and be little red riding hood. I say "Look how simple it is," -- I want them to see that you're not going to fail. I don't -- none of my programs ever set children or adults up to fail. I figure in life we set ourselves up to fail so many times, you don't need me to help you with that lesson, you going do that to yourself all kind of times. So I show you, maybe every now and then you get all green lights. I mean -- it's so uncommon to get all green lights that, you know, on a day that you went to work, and maybe there's eight or ten stoplights between your house and work. On a day that you ever got all green lights, the first think you'd say when you got to work would be, "Hey! I had all green lights today!" Because it's just such an amazing phenomenon. People would say, "Really?" Because you notice it after a while, you're

getting through all the lights! Well, life doesn't usually give you all green lights. Life -- you zig, and life zags. They say that history is what happens while people were busy making other plans. So, I try to show them that every now and then you can get all green lights. You can pick your own part -- you're going to succeed, everybody's going to clap for you at the end, and you'll have got up in front of people, and... done it. A hard thing, not an easy thing. Standing up and talking in front of people is a hard thing, but if I can seduce you into doing it, and then make it a positive experience... you know, in synagogue, we call it tikkun olam -- "heal the world." Our mitzvah, our number one job in life, is to help heal the world -- not the Jewish world, the world. The one that we all share. You know, people always ask me, you know, when I moved away from Christianity back to Judaism, what the central theme of that was for me. And I tell them, look, and I don't mean this in any way in a negative way, it's just about a vector. In Catholic -- sounds like something my dad would say. In Catholic prayer, or Christian prayer, the dominant theme -- they'll even tell you, the dominant theme is your personal relationship with the Almighty. And in some cases, some people would call it a perversion... people have even done things like wear hair shirts, and barbed wire under their clothes. There were even orders of nuns that were told to do uncomfortable things on purpose, and then you "offer that up." All this suffering you offer up, and that's supposed to go to some merit for you. OK. Jewish people would say, that's crazy. If you're going to endure anything, endure it doing something for somebody else. Heal the world. Don't do some secret wound to yourself and say, "Oh God, I offer you this thing that I'm doing. I'm going to kneel for 22 hours in a row and offer that up to you." Why don't you go help poor people for 22 hours? I mean, that's just -- I'm not saying that Christians don't and Jews do, I'm not saying that, I'm just saying that the crux of Christian prayer is about your personal relationship with God, and the thrust of Jewish prayer is: what have you done, to make the world a better place, for the people around you. And that is what my work is about, to try -- in this world, where we seem to make quite a hash out of it, to try to teach people communication skills, cooperation skills, and then the

content message of whatever the story I'm doing is, so that if it's conflict resolution, or anti-smoking... and to do it by way of them participating, so that they have this enriching, wonderful... I mean, you know, if I do a show, and the child gets a standing ovation at the end of the show from being in that show, I tell them, "Ask your Mom and Dad how many standing ovations they've had in their whole life. Ever. How many? Because you just got one." So, I think I've been given the opportunity, and some amount of skill in it and the training in it, to do some good, if not for my generation, for the next generation. You know, at my age -- I'm 56. So I don't think... I look good for 56, I think. That's on the video now, so now the world will know that I... OK. (laughter)

RH: (laughter)

FL: So, I just think that maybe we don't have time to make this world better. I mean, it's such a wreck. All the cruelty and insensitivity... but if we -- we can't tell children how to fix it, because if we knew how to fix it, then, we would fix it. But we can teach them good values, about respect and dignity, about regard for one another. And then teach them the two things that everybody seems to lack in this world, which is, communication skills, and cooperation skills. Because if the world could communicate, and if people could cooperate as they communicate, that would be the answer. There would be no violence, if people were communicating and cooperating. So maybe...

RH: So is this your idea, tikkun olam, two elements --

FL: Tikkun olam, is to do it -- you know, there's a theory in government called "trickle-down," where if the President does it, then it affects everybody... But I think, we should trickle up. We should work with children. There's technology right now in businesses where you can play a real high-pitched sound that only children can hear, and they feel real uncomfortable when they hear it, and you play that in your store to keep children away. There's a gas station in the Midwest that plays Mozart all the time around the pumps to keep the skateboarders from going back and forth in there. The idea being that

we come up with all these psychological and technological solutions to get the children away from us, to give us some space. I say, embrace the children. Not because we can teach them how to make the world better -- that's the mistake we've been making -- but we can teach them how to communicate, which we know how to do, how to cooperate, which we know how to do, and teach them fundamental values. And then let them put that together in a way that we have failed, and then they give us -- it's the Frank Levy "trickle-up" theory. And I don't believe that I personally can do it. But, there's a quote at the end of Camelot, where King Arthur is talking to this boy, about what he's about to try to do, which is fight for justice. And he says, you know a lot of people say, what can one man do, what can one person do? And in Camelot, King Arthur says, "It's true that I'm only one drop of water in a huge ocean. But you know, some days, if you look at the ocean, and the sun hits it just right, each one of those drops does sparkle." And that's -- that's what I'm trying to do, and I think if I teach children, that I pass it on, and it really can trickle up. I think there's hope in what I'm doing, and that all comes from my Judaism. All of it. From my synagogue. And that's what I was in the middle of, when we had the hurricane.

RH: The red light. (laughter) The big red light, the Katrina. So why don't you tell me, where were you when Katrina kind of came on your radar screen as something you needed to pay attention to?

FL: Well, being from here and living here, we're used to seeing storms, these pinwheels coming up in the Gulf, and we watch them, and we have our food supplies for several days, and we have our water. You have enough for like three, four, five, six days a week, maybe. You don't really -- where we live now, we're in Abita Springs, which is, I don't know, elevation maybe a foot. So it's real high ground for Louisiana. It doesn't flood where we live. We know it doesn't flood where we live, because four years ago we lived in downtown Covington Louisiana on the river -- I would say, after tropical storm Bill, in the river. And so, we've already been flooded, unfashionably not at Katrina. We were

devastated by flood, two feet of water in our house from Tropical Storm Bill, so we moved to the highest land in the area, in this house -- see, look, light coming in, we're above the water. (laughter) We moved to this house two years before Katrina. So we felt like we would be safe here so long as there wasn't bad wind. (laughter) My wife is the director of a library for St. Joseph's Seminary College, it's a seminary obviously, and it's also -- there's a monastery there, so it's called St. Joseph Abbey, St. Joseph Seminary College. And so -- and we have cats. So we decided we would stay during the hurricane. We had a friend of ours, Wendy Mauer, who lived on the lakefront in Mandeville -- right on the lakefront. And she had told us that she was not going to leave, because she had been through a lot of storms, and it wasn't -- a that's a common philosophy around here, that "I can handle this, I was in Betsy." So, as the storm looked worse and worse, and they predicted that the storm surge was going to take out part of Mandeville, I physically drove to Mandeville, to her house, and got her out of there. I said, “Come stay with us.” And Wendy was the beginning -- and I don't mean this in a negative way, it's just a fact -- Wendy was the beginning of a parade of people who stayed with us after the hurricane -- a menagerie of men, women, children, dogs, cats, two Brazilian tree frogs, and we had to have special food... I mean, what do you say? "Can I come stay at your house, by the way, I have my two Brazilian tree frogs?" "OK, my dog has to stay indoors because he's very old, and I'm so sorry but he's incontinent." And I'm -- "But -- ", I mean, you don't say, “No,” these people are fleeing the hurricane. So, we stayed here, in this house, looking out this window at the storm... and you know, it's a funny thing about -- I didn't know this. We always picture, when the wind blows -- I'm trying to think of something, you can tell I do theater. When the wind blows, that the trees would be like those palm trees that you see in the movies, that it goes "Wroooo," or like that. But it doesn't, the winds in gusts, and also the tree goes over, over, over, until it reaches some point of resiliency and it snaps back, so the trees are constant- they're not blowing like this (motions back & forth with his fingers) at all, they're doing this. The whole time. That's why so many trees snap, the wind makes them go "Wrooo, wrooo, wrooo." So the storm's blowing, so where

-- we're looking out the window at all these big trees doing that. As a matter of fact in our whole neighborhood, after the storm, all the trees were blown over, and then a week later Hurricane Rita came and blew the other way, straightened them out. So, a lot of the trees that were bent one way, Hurricane Rita came back and bent them back the other way, so that was a dubious distinction. Anyway, so we sat out the storm here, gradually watching what was happening, becoming more and more afraid, as it was obvious the storm was like right on top of us. Then the power went out, and so we didn't know -- the power went out early in the morning that the storm hit, and from that point on -- it's funny, there are people in Norway who know more about what was going on than we knew. I knew that I was in this house, there was no electricity, trees were blown down everywhere -- as a matter of fact, later on, because we had to get out, I counted a quarter of a mile worth of road, counted how many trees were down across the road -- it was 150 trees per quarter mile. And I'm not talking about 150 branches that you could drive over, or pick up and toss out of the way. I'm talking about trees, that you had to climb over, trees, some of them as big around as the height of my car off the road. Giant trees, just knocked across the road, 150 per quarter mile. So the first day, you couldn't go anywhere, people had to cut their way out. So we were in here with no electricity, the warning was out that -- this was word-of-mouth warning, and then eventually as the media, or WWL radio was the only thing that was available, and you got that on your battery set. They said you couldn't drink the water. We had some food, and we had water, and we thought, in a day or two, everything was going to be all right -- you know, in the city, we're told, it was the same way, people started coming out, and then all of a sudden, things got a lot worse instead of a lot better. Gas stations did not reopen. The power did not come back on. And Bonnie was told -- it's pretty routine around here -- you're told the day after the storm, either come into work, or if it's bad where you live, call in. And, you know, when you're in the storm area, you only know about immediately around you, so we thought, "Wow, it's bad here, let's see the rest!" Well, our friend Wendy's house was completely destroyed. Now, since then it's been bulldozed, and it's

gone. She ended up going to stay with other friends, and as like I said, we've had to have this parade of people who first stayed with us -- it took us, it's about a 12 minute drive to Bonnie's library from here; it took us over three hours to get there, after a day of waiting to go there. And that was because people, just irritated local people would get out of their pickup truck with their chain saw, and they'd do this circuitous route like this (motions snake-like with his hands), to get down a highway that runs like this (motions straight with his hands). But you'd be all over the place, and then cars would be coming toward you, and you'd have to -- so it took forever to just get right down the road to Bonnie's library. And the last half-mile or so we had to climb over downed trees. When we got there, they had intermittently operating -- which is another story -- a generator, because they had to protect the books in the library, or they would mold. So, the monks at the library where Bonnie works allowed us to sleep on the floor at her library. And so, we slept for more than two weeks on the floor of the library at St. Joseph's Abbey, so it's been a year since the hurricane, and I'm still seeing a chiropractor about that (laughter) -- really messed my neck up. But we were very grateful for it. I mean -- it didn't occur to me at the time. I know I'm getting ahead of myself, but I ended up going to shelters. I've only been thinking about this the last couple of days, but -- if you worked for the Red Cross at a shelter, you went to your shelter. If you were a person in charge of shelters in a given area, you would go to maybe five or six of them. If you were regional director, you would go to those shelters maybe and check on them. If you were a news reporter, maybe you went to a couple of shelters. But I ended up doing my shows at the shelters, and I went to a dozen of them. So I maybe saw more shelters than anybody else, just by coincidence, because my job was to go from shelter to shelter. But not at first. At first, you know, we had a little bit of food, and that ran out. And, we had some bottled water, to last for days, but we didn't have it for weeks. Whoever plans on this lasting for weeks? And, it turns out, that after the hurricane, there was no water, no electricity, there were no stores open. But if there was something open, no gas stations open, money was no good. I mean, cash money was good, if somebody would take it, but credit card

machines in this whole southern Louisiana didn't work anymore. ATM machines didn't work. Nobody would take a check. So, basically, the night of the storm, whatever amount of money you had in your wallet, that had to last you for about the next three weeks, until some bank or something... and if you say, "Well, why couldn't you just get in your car," and like, you know, I always had that philosophy, you got to have a full tank of gas, enough food for a few days, and you got your credit cards, and a couple of hundred dollars, you ought to be OK. Ha! Look, how you gonna -- you got a full tank of gas, OK. You have to drive -- I had to drive across the river on the other side of Baton Rouge, to West Baton Rouge Parish, to find the first gas station that I could get gas -- that's more than 70 miles from here. So I drive 70 miles to get a tank of gas with the last gas I had after a few days driving around here -- so I drive 70 miles to get gas, then I come back again, and I'm 70 miles into my tank of gas, and I have to have 70 more miles to go get more gas. So I'm only good for about, I don't know, 150 miles of driving around, and then I got to figure, I got to go back and get more gas. So every day, for the first eight days after the hurricane, was a search for food, water, and to maintain your supply of gasoline. That took all of your time and energy. It's sort of like we were hunter-gatherers again. Food was not a given -- they had food at the Abbey, but the food at the Abbey was there for the monks. And we ate there for a couple of days at the beginning; they were very generous to let us and a lot of other people stay there after the hurricane. The least we could do was to support ourselves while we were in there, so we got a little microwave oven that I bought in Baton Rouge, (laughter) and plugged it in, and bought a little (inaudible) can Cup O' Soups, and we would buy our meals, but -- you have to drive 60, 70 miles to do that. So every day became a quest for the things that I need to survive. And, I wasn't thinking about what I could do for other people at that moment, not because I didn't want to, but because I, probably like everybody, it was as time passed, and some more things came online -- not television, and not the Internet, and not the telephone, and not cell phone, none of that worked, but -- you would hear it on some intermittent news broadcast if you could get your antenna high enough and put a piece of

foil on it or something, if you had a battery-operated TV, and you'd see these newscasts, and they'd talk about what was happening in the city of New Orleans. And they would talk about how widespread the devastation was, and you'd realize that... this wasn't a thing that we were just all going to come back from, and roll up our sleeves and clean up, that... we were really screwed. I mean, we were in a lot, a lot of trouble. The synagogue... the roof was blown off of the synagogue. A hole was blown in the roof of my house, my fence was blown down in my yard, trees down in my yard, stuff blown everywhere, water no good, no electricity, and look, these houses, nice house, huh, looks OK -- but these windows only open a little bit, and these are not designed for air to come into the house, so if it's end of August, early September, and you don't have any air moving in here, it's 90 degrees in this place, and no air moving -- you can't live in this house like this. So, the house was unlivable -- besides the hole in the roof. So we were staying at the Abbey, in very awkward circumstances, questing, literally, for food, and for water, and for gasoline, just so we could make it around, and I was really in despair. My wife, suddenly instead of just being in charge of a library, that was St. Joseph's Seminary College, they absorbed all of Notre Dame Seminary, from New Orleans -- a school more than twice as big. All of those seminarians, now, are in my wife's library, as well as her own. And the archbishop, and the two previous archbishops -- they fled to the... And so my wife is working there, plus, St. Joseph's Abbey being in the middle of the forest, there were thousands -- tens of thousands of trees down, all over their property. So she would work in the library to somehow have some sense of normalcy for her seminarians. Then we would live in that library, and then she would in her spare moments go out and pick up branches out on the property. Among the monks and the brothers and the seminarians she'd be out there doing that; what was I doing? I would sit and stare at the wall. I was... I thought, "I don't do roofing, and I'm no good with a chain saw." I do this stuff, this vanity, these tikkun olam things I was trying to do -- what is the meaning of all of that in the midst of this darkness that we are in now? And I lost ten pounds in a week... I didn't eat, I just would stare into the distance. And... they had a phone line, that

started to work, and I don't know why, but I was worried about my friend Harry Lowenberg from synagogue. And so I call Harry to see if he was doing OK, and he was doing fine, he had like 20 or 30 people staying at his house, and he had a generator going, and he was doing what he could. And I said, "Harry, it's eight days after this storm, and I don't do roofing, and I don't do chain saw. And I think I've just suddenly discovered that this life that I thought was full of meaning has none." I was just in this dark, dark place. And he, he read me a poem over the phone, called "Kindness," about people who help others. And how the thing that's the most needed is kindness. (begins to cry) And he gave me the name of somebody at the Red Cross. And I said, "What am I going to do at the Red Cross, you know I'm not a nurse." And he says, "Just go to the Red Cross and tell them who you are." So I went to the Red Cross, and I said, "Hi, my name is Frank Levy, I do interactive shows for children," and I was going to say I'm no good with a chain saw, and I don't know how to do roofing, Harry Lowenberg told me to come here. I was so depressed. And the director of the Red Cross said "Where have you been?" It turns out that the agency I worked for in New Orleans, Young Audiences, the director of Young Audiences was evacuated to Houston. And -- oh thank you. And the off-camera hand that just handed me the Kleenex... (laughter) I'm sorry.

RH: It's all right.

FL: It seemed that our director was evacuated to Houston, and our office manager was evacuated to New York, and they were trying from Houston to New York to get in touch with us, the people who worked in healing with children, to try to get us out to the shelters. And there were 40 of us, who did that kind of work. And they could only find two. Thirty-eight of us were missing. And one of them was a lady who was not able to do shows, she was just -- had gone to New Iberia, and was surviving there. So, I was the only one. I was the only one. And they had lots of people -- lots of kind, loving people who said "Let me go help at the shelter." And that's -- the things I saw at the shelters are really probably, of all what I saw other people doing, would be a much better, bigger

story, but... there was nobody to do children's shows at the shelters. There were people volunteering to do it, but the Red Cross can't just let people walk into shelters who say, "Hi, I'm here to help with the children." I don't want to go into a lot of detail, but for example, inappropriate people try to take advantage of the shelter. People who want to get in there for financial reasons -- it's a horrible thing to say, but I saw that. People who want to get there for inappropriate reasons with children. Child molesters, of all things, take the opportunity to say, we're here to help, I'm here to help, and they would have false credentials -- I was even at a shelter where, the same moment I'm arriving to do a program for children, a child molester shows up and says "Hi, I'm here to do the show for the children." And they're throwing this guy out, they have the police holding this guy, and I walk up and I say, "Hi, I'm here to do a show for the children." So we had to sort all that out. Because I was -- anyway, the point is, they were really, really glad that I arrived. And I was -- not because of me, but because of the nature of the work that I do. And they immediately started sending me out to shelters. I ended up doing -- I was asked to count them up later. I ended up doing 16 shows. And, I wasn't at 16 shelters. I was at, I think 12 shelters. It was my honor that several of them asked me to come back. They would say, "Could you come back?" I would say, "When would you like me to come back?" They'd say, "Later today? Tomorrow?" (pause) I probably, thinking back on it now, I wish I had done more. I was told there was something -- I'm probably getting the number wrong, but this is very close. There was something like 1,470 shelters, across the Southeast. Two months later, when my work started coming back, a little bit -- actually, my work didn't come back, but the Rabbi connected me with synagogues in the Northeast and told them, "Look, this guy is OK, and what you would consider to be a mitzvah to help him, would end up being his mitzvah to help your children if you let him come do programs for you. And so up around Chanukah time, in November, I got booked all over the Northeast and up into Toronto, because of the generosity of the great heart of my Rabbi, whose own home was crushed by a tree, and who's living a three-hour drive away administering to his congregation, a synagogue that

has no roof on it, he took care of me. And he got me work. But two months after I started doing the shows, they still had 400 shelters. So they were down 700 shelters, but if that had been the number of shelters at the beginning, that would have been a national record for the Red Cross -- 400 would have been a record, if there hadn't have been the 1,100 before that, a couple months before. So there was no way I was going to get to all of them, but I ended up doing a total of 16 shows.

RH: Why don't you tell me about one or two of the shelters that you went to that kind of stand out for you?

FL: OK. First of all, for me to go to a shelter, a shelter could be as close as five miles away, or it could be a thousand miles away, and the farthest they sent me was about 150 miles, I went to Ville Platte, Louisiana, and did shows there. (pause) This is not -- it wasn't easy to go to do shows at shelters because there's no -- I mean, it's not like a job, so you had to figure out... the same gas issue, I still had to get the gas and then get to the shelters some kind of way. So... I guess it's in my mind, while I'm talking to you now, I'm thinking gosh, why didn't I do more shows than that? It was the most I could do. As a matter of fact, when I would come to the shelter, I'd say, "Could I have something to eat?" And they would feed me. Sometimes if I timed it right, I could get two meals, you know, I'd get a meal, I'd bring it home to Bonnie, I'd say, "Look, we got food!" I mean, I make a good living, and my wife has a job, but not then, there was nothing. I mean, you know, you can say, you can say, "Well, this is America, why didn't you go get some food?" It was like being in Nagasaki. There was nothing! I mean, it was just blasted! There was no stores, no nothing! So, the shelters were by and large places that had survived, that were supposed to be, you know, by definition, it's a shelter, so it survived the storm. But the shelters were, where I went, with very few exceptions, were in the middle of neighborhoods that were absolutely devastated, and the shelter was like a drier building, or a second floor of a building, or it was on a little knob of ground that somehow survived. Because, the blast area of this storm -- it's just inconceivable. You drive 100

miles, you're still in the middle of it -- you don't drive away from it, it's just everywhere! It's out of your range of gasoline, to get to the other side of it. So, I guess the first thing to say about going to a shelter is, you're already an emotional wreck when you get to the shelter, because house after house after house after house after house after house -- all the guts of that house are spewed out onto the street -- and I don't mean like the chairs, I mean the sheet rock, the ceiling, the carpet, everything -- the walls! Every possession of every person, to the tune of millions of people! And then you get to the shelter, and there those people are, who have nothing. And with one exception, every shelter I went to was composed of the Red Cross, the National Guard, local police providing security, and they were in either a cafeteria, a rec hall, or a gymnasium. So it would be the assembly hall, or the gym, a commons area, whatever -- it was churches and schools mostly. And the people in the shelters were comprised of people who had been lobbed there from all over the place, and I don't mean lob in a rude way, I just mean -- they didn't know each other. You know, you were in this city, and you were in that city, and the storm hit, and you got picked up off your roof by a helicopter or you were put on a bus, and then the next day you're at this shelter, and none of these people knew each other. And so, there was this issue of, you're in this shelter, and you're among all these strangers, and you're desperately trying to find your wife, your spouse, your grandma, your grandpa. You were all in line, and they got on this bus and you got on that bus, and now they're all, all over the place. And you know... I'll give you one example. I go to this shelter. Now, it's the one where the child molester tried to get in, so first I had to really prove my credentials, and he had pretty good credentials. Matter of fact, they said his looked better than mine.

RH: (laughter)

FL: So, they had to call -- and they had to use this bizarre way of calling, like the person at the shelter had a phone from Washington -- state of Washington. And then the person at the Red Cross headquarters had a phone from Houston. Phones like that would work sometimes -- if the call would be routed around that way -- if you try to make a local call,

it wouldn't work. So they would get them on the phone, and they would say, this guy Frank Levy is here to do a program, is he... ? And they'd say, "Oh yes! We want him to do the program." And so, I tried -- it's always my job, like I said before to be liquid and take the shape of my container, whether I come to a school, a library, and I say, "Where do you want me to set up?" But in a shelter, your heart would stop. I mean, there would just be people, this ocean of people, on the floor. I wouldn't even say with the barest necessities, just a blanket and a pillow. Maybe no shoes, maybe... you know, I heard a man say to the director the shelter, "Look, they won't give me any help with anything, until I give them my ID. But, I didn't get out with my wallet! I don't have anything -- the water came up, I ran upstairs, suddenly I'm in my attic. And I don't have anything, what am I supposed to do to prove I'm myself?" And so, here's all these thousands of people, tens of thousands of people with struggles like that, and I'm supposed to walk in and do a show. Now normally, in my business, you show up a half hour, 45 minutes before the show, they know you're coming, they say, "Set up here," you hook into the system, they'd adjust their PA, and then you'd do the show. The audience comes in... The shelter -- they would try to make an announcement, they would say, "OK, there'll be a show," -- a lot of these places had stages, I mean it was at schools, and libraries... but nobody would come to the show. I mean, the people needed it, but they wouldn't move. They had this black lethargy of despair, the same that I had the first seven or eight days just... but, you know, I tell people, anything that I went through, so many, many tens of hundreds of thousands of people suffered more than Bonnie and I did. And yet, it's the worst suffering I've ever had in my life, so I -- it's the worst I've ever been through, and everybody else had worse than me, I mean, I ended up -- my house is back together again, and I have a life; there are people that are still living in shelters. So I'm not claiming anything special for me. But anyway, I would go to the shelter, to go to set up, and they might say, "We have a medical emergency. Can you wait?" And of course, I mean, it's the Red Cross, and I'm with the Red Cross, and I'd say "Of course!" So I wait an hour, hour and a half, and I go to them and I'd say, "You know, what do you think?

Should I do the show?" And they'd say, "Oh! We forgot all about you!" And my record, out of 16 trips to shelters, was four hours, I had to wait. And many times, they'll say, "Maybe you should come back another day, this just isn't a good day at the shelter." And I learned to say, "No that's OK, I'll wait." Now the same thing that I think saved my life from the Crohn's disease, the ability to unclench rather than to feel like I had to punch my way through. I just felt like... there are no good days at the shelter. They're always going to have these emergencies, these are people at the bottom of the bottom, who have nothing. Literally nothing. And -- so I would just wait. Whatever amount of time, I would just sit there, and I mean it's not easy for me to do now, if I go to a school now to do a show, I want to get ready with the show. "C'mon, let's go." (points to his watch) But not when I was at the shelters. It was just -- however long... where better could I be? What better thing could I be doing with my life, than whatever moment they let me have with those people? And after awhile, when they would say, "We want you to go be on the stage," I would say, "I rather not." They would say, "What do you mean, you don't want to be on the stage?" I'd say, "They're not going to come." I already knew. I'd say, "Let me just set up in the middle of the room, or by that wall over there." So, this one shelter I went to, I go in, and I say, "Where do you want me to set up?" And they say, "By that wall over there." And I say, "Oh, great." And there's a lady living -- living... lying on a pallet on the floor there, right where the wall socket is. Now look. If you're lying on a floor in an auditorium, you don't have much left. And for me to go up to her and say, "Ma'am, I need you to move, I'm going to do a show here," I never was able to do that. So I walked up to her, and I said, "Ma'am, excuse me for interrupting you. But, they've told me to come set up to do a show here -- do you mind if I run a wire around you here to that socket?" I said, "If you want, I can go back to the director and I can go to another corner of the room, or something, I don't mind at all." And she said, "Aww... " And she was sweet about it too. She said, "No, I don't care." She said, "Look. When the hurricane came, I was on my roof, with my husband and my baby. And a helicopter came down, and a man leans out of the helicopter and he says, 'We can take two.' And I

told him 'It's just a baby!' And he said 'We can only fit two more.' So I gave the baby to my husband because he's stronger than me, and he took the baby. And the next helicopter came and took me. And they brought me here. And that was two weeks ago. And I want my husband and my baby. You ask me if I can move, I don't care if I move, or where I'm laying, I want to find my baby, I don't know where she is, or where my husband is." And she says, "They tell me use the telephone, there's no telephone. They tell me 'go on the Internet, they got a database,' there's no Internet. There's nothing! So two weeks, I been laying here on this floor. If I lay over there, if I lay over there, I don't care." And she was sweet about it, that was the thing, she wasn't angry! And so she just kind of moved a little bit. And the Red Cross... when they sent me to do these shows, I thought I was going to help the children. But the children actually were doing OK. They were out of school. They were in a gym. They were with their friends. Now it wasn't the best of circumstances, but they were all right. The adults, who knew what was really happening, who knew that their lives were altered forever, were crushed. Absolutely devastated. And the shows helped them, got smiles on their faces. I did a show where the whole show, a woman sat on a cot with her head up against her suitcase like this, and didn't move for an hour. I mean, she was like that when I arrived, she was like that when I left. So... I really felt pretty early on that... that Harry Lowenberg was right, and I had quit on what my mission was maybe a little too early. That if I could get to as many of these places as I could, that I could really do good for these people. I could help them, even for just a moment, to lift them out of despair, to make them smile, to give them hope, and to show them that somebody cared. I mean, they were in a place where the Red Cross was caring for them, but for me to just lob myself in there and say, "Tah-dah! Come on, we can have a good time here." Maybe, especially parents and the children at the show at the same time, maybe that would really be a help, and the Red Cross people seemed to think so too. There was one shelter, however, that was different from all the rest. And that was at Emmanuel Baptist Church in Hammond. And I went there twice. That shelter, every single person in the shelter was from the same community. I don't -- the

people themselves don't know how it happened. They all, you know, were evacuated like that poor lady I was just telling you about. But they all, you know, woke up the next day in this big auditorium, and they all knew each other.

[End of levy10-1]

RH: -- Jewish Voices Project. And we were just discussing your experiences in the shelters, and you were talking about the Immanuel Baptist Church?

FL: I went to -- two times, I was honored that they asked me to come back again. Which, for them to ask me to come back is not easy, because they have to make a lot of attempts at a phone call to get through to somebody to say, send that guy back again. So they have to really want you, 'cause remember, the phones don't work. So that's kind of neat. But Immanuel Baptist Church is the only shelter out of a dozen that I want to, where everybody in the shelter was from the same town. They were all from a little community on the edge of Port Sulphur, Louisiana, which is in lower Plaquemines Parish. Which is... gone -- it's gone. About six months before the storm, I had been booked by the library system to go to all the libraries, and then earlier, at the school system, to all through Plaquemines Parish, all the way down to Burris, which is south of Port Sulphur. And, one of the scenes that was on the news of the hurricane, after it came through, was the Burris water tower, knocked over and laying across the whole town, basically. So, these are people from a community that no longer exists. The gulf has reclaimed that. And they all were put in the same shelter. So, rather than be this mob of people, disassociated, trying to figure out some kind of balance for themselves, they were with their grandmas and grandpas and cousins -- more than 10% of the people at the shelter were related to each other. So, they set up in the shelter their neighborhoods -- the same streets, and people were next door to their neighbors, and the same teenagers who baby-sat people's children baby-sat their children. Outside the shelter, at sunset, people would take their chairs and sit out on the stoop of the shelter,

with the same people that they sat out with in the community that they were from. They took over the shelter from the Red Cross. The Red Cross provided security, and medical help, but -- they said, "Y'all people don't know how to cook our food." And so they gave the Red Cross a shopping list, with things like "Tabasco, please," on the shopping list; the Red Cross would bring them the food, they would tell Red Cross "Go away," and they'd cook their own food for all the hundreds of people at the shelter. They did their own childcare -- the Red Cross helped some with that, but mostly they did it themselves -- and they cleaned the shelter themselves. The Red Cross would have done it for them, but they... it's been over a year now, since the storm, and about two months ago, I went to a seminar about healing, about how to work -- with a doctor from Harvard came down and worked with us to work with kids on healing. And he told us that there was an ongoing problem with the society of children damaged by the storm, and their families damaged and displaced, and that there was a social element that was missing, that where you went in the morning to get your coffee, and your Coke, and where you liked to eat out, and who your neighbor was, and where you went for your card game once a month, and what clubs you belonged to -- all the normal things that you do in your life every day were just obliterated. But these people hung on to that. At this one shelter, the great social damage, which we're still just learning... ah, that behind me, by the way, if you're noticing her, is our cat Shiva -- we rescued her from the hurricane, she was locked in a house for two weeks, in New Orleans, and her previous (inaudible) owner, who can't live there anymore, finally got to her, and she was starving to death locked in this house, and we took her on, so now she's a chubby cat who may wander all around here -- she can go anywhere she wants. She had two weeks like no animal or any living creature should ever have to endure, and so -- she lives in this basket on the shelf, if she wants to, or anywhere else she wants to go. So we're happy to have saved that little survivor from the hurricane, too.

So, anyway, at this shelter the people put their neighborhood together, and so... some of them even, like the only thing they got out of their house -- one man had his

recliner, his La-Z-Boy chair. How he got all the way to the shelter with a La-Z-Boy chair I don't know, but he could sit back in his La-Z-Boy, amidst his children and his grandchildren, and... keep a grip on something in our culture that is of course special to anybody who comes from a neighborhood or a place where they're habituated to live -- but in New Orleans, everybody knows there's something really special about New Orleans, everybody. That's why I was never able to move away, that's why even in childhood, I came back. It's a very, very special place, with a great amount of meaning, and a culture, and... you know, you can go on and on, you can start with food, and go on to carnival, and all the other things that I've grown up with that are so much a part of me -- but this community hung on to that. Now maybe it was only artificial, because that shelter's not there anymore, and those people didn't go home, they all had to be relocated. But for a crucial month or two, they were able to hang on to family, and to not be like that lady I found on the floor at the other place who didn't know where anybody was -- these people knew where everybody was, they were all together. So... there was a magic that I saw wrought by the people themselves who in groping for some sense of normalcy did something that the psychologists are now saying is absolutely fundamental -- the fabric of your society, the habituation of your days, to have that sense of normalcy, that you're in this bowl of integrity, that you're safe, and secure, and outside forces aren't going to throw you off anymore -- they were able to have that inside that shelter. Now you asked me to talk about the shelters I went to, and every one of them was unique, absolutely unique. However, another one that I probably ought to mention was at Covington High School. Covington High School, where my wife was the director of the library, years ago; Covington High School, where I taught summer school. So, it's a local high school that's a part of my life anyway, where when I was a younger man I was a basketball official, I called ball games at Covington High School. The reason I mention that is because they told me -- Red Cross said "Go to the shelter at Covington High School and do a show." The Covington High School shelter was what they called a "FEMA Special Needs Shelter." It wasn't just run by the Red Cross, it was run by FEMA.

The reason it was run by FEMA, was that got it number one on the priority list for electricity. Now obviously, you want the fire department to have electricity, and you want the police to have electricity, you want emergency services to have electricity, you want the Red Cross to have electricity, you want the hospital to have electricity. This place was at the same level of importance as a hospital. To get into this shelter, you had to be dependent on electricity to stay alive. So... .So, I walked into the Covington High School gym, where I had called ball games, and did teacher workshops, where I met my wife, at a teacher workshop at that gym, and it was an ocean of cots, just an ocean -- the whole huge floor area was cots. And there were these towers, and these towers -- I'm probably misnaming everything, this is an outsider's perception, but there were these towers with power cords running to them, from a big generator outside, and the power cords ran to towers of surge protectors -- the same kind you'd buy at Wal-Mart, but dozens of them, and then all these wires plugging into all these surge protectors, and each one of these orange wires snaking out to some piece of apparatus next to a cot with a human being lying on it. So, it had heart monitors, and it had oxygen equipment for people, and drips for people, and just -- equipment that monitored their life signs. For every one of these people -- hundreds of people. And so I show up and say, "Hi, I'm here to do a show." And they said, "The people can't turn toward you. They're attached to equipment," and they said, "There's really no way you could do a show, they can't move." And I said, "What if I go to center court, I mean, what else to call it? Where you jump, in a basketball game -- dead center of the place, and I'll just do a show, and I'll face in all directions, and I'll run all around, and I'll just bring the show to them. I mean, that's what my shows are supposed to be about anyway." I just -- I realized that, you know, I was bothered because it was hot, and because there was no electricity and no water, and I'm sleeping on the floor, and I'm on this quest every day just for survival stuff, but that's nothing -- these people were so destroyed! And so I did this show, and they were grateful to me, they'd come up, wanted to touch me, to thank me. One lady at one shelter comes up to me and says, "I lived in this house that we just finished paying for, with my husband and

my dog. My husband died the week before the hurricane. My dog died in the storm. And I was rescued from my house with nothing, and brought here. And you are the first person who's made me smile since the storm. And what you're doing is so valuable." And she reached in her pocket and she pulled out this little crumpled five dollar bill and she said, "Take this five dollars to help you get down the road." Now, look, nobody was paying me to do the shows, or, you know, not like I tell the Rabbi -- I was getting paid really well, I mean, the highest pay you could get. The best pay I've ever gotten was the good I could feel that I was doing. But to take that lady's five dollars, I mean, no way. And so I said, "No, no, no," but clearly it meant a great deal to her, a great deal to her. She even helped me load the car, to get the next place, she says, "You should go get to the next shelter." So I drove to a gas station, and I walked in -- you know, gasoline, even then, well especially then, it was three dollars a gallon, if you could get it. So I went to a place, it was three dollars a gallon, I gave this guy five dollars, and I said, "I want five dollars worth of gas." Because I wanted it to be that lady's five dollars going into my tank. And, you're not supposed to be in touch with any of the people you do the work for the shelters for, for their good and your good. But, she had found out who I was, because... it's written all over me, you know. She phoned me, later -- it's funny, she phoned me to say that she was distraught that she couldn't get a place to stay, and I think she was going to ask me for help, but in the middle of the conversation, I heard somebody ran up to her and said, "It's FEMA, they have your trailer for you." So I happened to be at a moment in this woman's life that was her lowest low, she said "I'll call this performer." And then I found out that things were going to work for her -- a FEMA trailer is indeed, you know, the height of success. But anyway, so I ended up going to all these places where I got to see real suffering, people who had nothing. And we were going back to nothing. And for a couple of months, my life was devoted to getting up everyday, doing what I needed to, for my life to survive at some kind of minimum, and then get out there and get to the shelters and do these shows. And...

RH: Why don't you tell us a little about, you also went into -- around nationally, to the Jewish community, because I assumed, where the schools weren't up, so you didn't really have a regular schedule of work.

FL: There were no schools here. The schools started up -- the best of them started in October, November. And when they started back up, they didn't say, "Hey, we need Interactive Theater, that's what we need," -- they already were, like the teachers told me, "We have two-thirds of a year to get a full three-thirds of education in these kids' heads, 'cause next year, when they go to the next grade, they got to know whatever they needed to know from the previous grade, and there's no like, you're allowed to be dumber because of the hurricane -- you still have to know the material." And so many of the schools didn't reopen in the first place, you know, like Plaquemines Parish, they only had one elementary school in the whole parish. St. Bernard, they had the St. Bernard Unified School -- there were probably, public and private, 40 schools in the St. Bernard Parish, and then -- one. Because that's the only county in the history of America that's been completely obliterated -- every building in that whole parish was under water. So, the Rabbi sent out this e-mail that I think I mentioned earlier, to other rabbis, saying that Frank is good at this, you should hire him. And, e-mails started coming back, sometime in October -- you know, the hurricane was in August, and now it's October, we're finally getting electricity back, and on-line, and television -- and that's nice, find out what's going on in the world. And, I started getting these e-mails from Pennsylvania, and New Jersey, Virginia, Washington DC, Toronto, all these rabbis and heads of Jewish organizations saying, "Rabbi Kurtz-Lendner said that you might be somebody that we could help, and maybe you could do us good." And so they -- and I told them, "I'm no good at booking myself, I mean I could book a show with you, but for me to come to New Jersey -- you couldn't afford to take me there... " You know, they wanted to do something for me, but they couldn't... so, a lady named Lynn Aarons, in Washington, said "I'll take care of that for you," because she knew all these other synagogues that were trying to book me, and she strung it together, so that once they got me up there -- you know, the idea of a tour is

you get in an area and then you do this cluster of shows -- I ended up doing 11 shows in seven days, in nine cities -- from Washington DC, all the way up to River Edge, New Jersey. Where each synagogue, I would show up, they would say -- it would be for different reasons, usually built around Chanukah, but not exclusively -- and I would do a show, either at the Washington Hebrew Congregation, or the Anshe Emeth synagogue in New Brunswick, New Jersey, or any of a dozen of them, up and down the East. And in each one, they would ask me, "Before you do your show," -- these Interactive Theater shows that I do, these were mostly for Chanukah. They said, "Would you talk about the hurricane?" So I became the de-facto representative of the South going up in the Northeast, right after the hurricane, and it was -- I wouldn't say it was my privilege, it was my responsibility to somehow talk to them... you know, I would say, "First of all, I want you to know we're not stupid down here. We didn't just get caught unaware, we got hit by the worst disaster in the history of North America." So that's going to shock anybody. When you say, "Why didn't you have food, why didn't you have water?" I did! I was good for a week... who knew it was going to be months? And they'd say, "Well, why don't you go buy what you need?" Credit cards were no good. I tried to explain that, you know, I went back to where I was born, into New Orleans, as soon as I could -- weeks after the storm. I couldn't find anything. I don't mean that it wasn't open. I mean it was so devastated I didn't know where I was. I was at the intersection of Elysian Fields in Gentille Boulevard. I knew it must be someplace important, because it was big and wide... I was born there! I didn't know where I was! I tried to go back home, you know, simple things, like the restaurant you ate at, or where your friend lives -- it's all gone, it's all just gone... it's where I grew up. I mean, I went to California, and it was so awful for me, I had to come back to New Orleans. And now I'm, now I'm -- honored, obligated, committed -- to being a part of putting it back together again. Not to get back what we had -- for better or for worse, that's gone like the 19th century is gone. We have to put something else back together, hopefully with the same heart and soul and love -- it may be better, maybe we can do a better school system, I was always about that in the first

place. So, the Rabbi connects me with these synagogues up in the North and the East -- and schools too -- and I go on this tour up there. And... I'm sorry, I'm just so -- emotional about... .I go on tours, and one of the places that books me Temple Shalom, in River Edge, New Jersey. And by absolute coincidence, River Edge, New Jersey adopted Covington -- here, where I live -- as its sister city, to give help to, after the hurricane, and they'd sent us tens of thousands of dollars of help, all sorts of help. So I mentioned to the Mayor of Covington that I was going to River Edge, and so the City Council of Covington passed a proclamation of gratitude to River Edge, and I was the official ambassador of the City of Covington to the Mayor of River Edge, New Jersey. So I delivered a proclamation from Mayor Watkins, the female Mayor of Covington, to Major Watkins, the female Mayor of River Edge, New Jersey, just coincidence -- of gratitude, from us to them, because I was up there, doing that. And everywhere I went, like I said, they would ask me to talk about the hurricane, and I would say, "Look!" Here, I got one to show you, because you know now that there's still some of these left, we decided these might be a good thing to hang on to, with storms still around us. This is an MRE, a Meal Ready-To-Eat, and I would say, "This is how we lived, for months after the storm. Not because we didn't have a better lifestyle, or a better way to be -- this was the only food there was. There were no groceries, there was no way to buy anything, and if you didn't have cash, you couldn't buy anything anyway, so you lived on these. There was no kosher, there was no nothing, and now I'm Reform, but my Rabbi keeps kosher, and he was unable to, because everything kosher in Louisiana was wiped out, and the only three kosher stores were wiped out, so he was vegetarian. Now, this one is meat loaf, but everywhere I went, I had a box of these with me -- I also ate while I was traveling -- and I would say, this is an MRE, and I'm going to leave this with you, and I would tell them, "I don't know if I'm leaving it with you as a conversation piece, which you'll have up on the shelf, and you'll look at that, as a memento of the visit by the guy who came up from the hurricane, or maybe, maybe you open it up. Maybe you see what it was like living in the hurricane, and then you'll learn... " I used to call it the two ways Jewish people read

directions. One way is, we don't. And the other way is, we read them as we go. And either way, if you're doing an MRE, and you're trying to do it without reading the directions, or reading it as you go, you're going to suffer, because there's a point where they tell you, put the water in there, and then you put the food packet in there, and they tell you, as soon as you put the food packet in there, twist it up tight at the top, because it's going to swell up with the heat of the water when it hits the heating element. But you're reading that, right -- you put the water, and then you put the packet, and you go, "After you put the packet, be sure... " Whoa! And by then, it's too late, and it's all smelling, and there's steam everywhere, so one of the big jokes at the shelter was get somebody new to open the MRE and watch them go through that. But I would make a point of telling everybody that the harm -- to which all these synagogues, they were just so kind and so generous -- the harm down here was not less than they might think, it was more than they might think. And that successful, upwardly mobile people with savings, had nothing. I mean, you had nothing, your life was just totally devastated. And I thought -- I thought I knew, I mean, because I really am serious about trying to be a good Jewish man, and going to synagogue just about every week, doing the best I can. And I thought that tikkun olam was what Harry Lowenberg had helped me find in myself, going to those shelters, and doing my shows for the people. I talked to a Red Cross worker about that, I said, "You know, when I go to the shelters, I'm so distressed when I go into the shelter, I'm just crushed by the time I get there, because of the devastation in the neighborhood, and then I see these people, they're -- they're wrecks! And it affects me! I'm having a really hard time saying, 'And now we're going to do Peter Pan.' Because I want to sob, I just want to cry!" And the Red Cross worker said, "Oh, we have training in that. Here's what we do. You get up, you face these people -- you show up to do the show, you unload, you set up, you're positive, you pull people out of the audience, you have your goals, you have a great time, everybody laughs, you hug, you leave, you wave goodbye, and you smile, and you say, 'You were great, you were great!' Get in your car, you smile, you wave, you drive away, you get about a mile. And then you pull over, and

then you cry as long as you have to. And then you get it back together again and go to the next shelter. And that's how you do. You don't let them see the pain that you're sharing with them, because they don't need that." The last -- the main thing they said is, "They don't need you to show that you feel their pain. They feel their pain. They need you to do something else for them. You need to be the light at the end of their tunnel. You need to show them the joy, and hope, and love..." And I'm in this dark place in myself, you know, but as I would go to the shelters, you know, maybe... I thought at the time I was doing it for them, but maybe -- I don't know, maybe it was for me too, maybe that was for me. So...

RH: Tell me a little about -- I was thinking about the Toronto experience that you had.

FL: I was trying to do my understanding of what tikkun olam is all about -- heal the world, go to the shelters and do good for people, and maybe grow as a human being and as a Jewish man. But I decided, after my travels, that it's a pale version of tikkun olam, to wake up in the middle of it, and to say, "OK, let's roll up our sleeves, and do something." I felt great about it, I still feel that I did some good, I hope... .Red Cross gave me a certificate for it -- a lot of people got these, but the Red Cross certificate. But, I think the real, the highest -- or, a higher value of tikkun olam, is when you don't wake up in the middle of it. When you don't get up and say, "Oh my gosh, I'm in the middle of this, what am I going to do?" You wake up, like in Toronto, where I went to the Beck Day School, the Hebrew school of Toronto. I went there to do speeches at a teacher workshop... although they had hired me because I was from here, the workshop had nothing to do with here. And yet, all the walls of that whole school, all down the corridor, were pictures from the hurricane, and testimonials to what they had done, relative to the hurricane. And they had told these children, there's a couple of hundred kids at the school, you could bring money to donate for hurricane relief, but don't bring anything larger than a coin. We just want coins. We don't want you to be taking big money from your parents to donate. Bring what you can, and we'll send that down for hurricane relief. This one

little school collected six thousand dollars. In Toronto! When I went up there, most of the people I met in Toronto, I was the first person from New Orleans they ever met in their life! They weren't even from this country! But... so, I decided that my version of tikkun olam, me trying to do what I could, that's nice, and that's a nice try, but the real, the real core of the thing, the golden thread of it is, when you don't have to, when you could just change the channel, or you could go get a ball, and go out and play ball -- I don't have that option, I'm in it regardless. Children in Toronto, they could have just walked away from it, and instead they made it a project, they focused on us. That's the real thing. You know, in all my Jewish experience, inadvertently, I've ended up over the years, I've been in a hundred different synagogues, so I've like -- I happen to be this guy who's been to a lot of shelters, and lot of synagogues, because it's the nature of my work, and most people don't go to a lot of shelters, or a lot of synagogues. And, I discovered, you know, as all Jewish performers do, that it's a little awkward if you're going to go to an Orthodox synagogue, because they don't touch. And it's a little different if you're going to go to a Conservative synagogue, because what they eat is going to be different and the way they do the service is going to be different from what you're used to -- so there are a lot of jokes among Jewish people about "Oh, you don't want to go to that synagogue! No, no, you don't want to go to that -- " There's even a joke about Robinson Crusoe, you land on the island and there's three synagogues that he built. And you say, "Well, what's with the three synagogues?" And he says, "You don't want to go to those synagogues!" And he built them, so... there's all these jokes, not without foundation, that different synagogues rose up, because the people broke away from other synagogues. And so, there's often antipathy between synagogues, and certainly -- although not antipathy perhaps, that's too strong a word, but -- you're not always buddies, if they're the Orthodox, or they're the Conservative, or the Reform, or Hasidic, or whatever they are. But not after the hurricane. Jewish people helped Jewish people. A Conservative synagogue in New Jersey sent their people down with big boxes full of everything that we would need to do Passover, because we didn't have anything to do Passover with. You'd be lucky if you

could get a turkey, if a store would be open, much less kosher things. We didn't have any of that stuff. And although we're Reform, and we don't do a lot of kosher, we do for Passover. And so we were at a loss of how we were going to do Passover. So, this synagogue in New Jersey just sent their people down, a big truck of everything we needed, and you'd show up and they gave us -- not only did they help us with our Passover at our synagogue, second night Seder, but we could do first-night Seder at our homes, like my wife and I did with what they sent us, and we were able to do it. And that was a Conservative synagogue! It's a synagogue that if I was in that town, I would say I probably shouldn't go to services there because maybe I had got -- my yarmulke's the wrong kind, or they stand up when we sit down, or... I'm always worried about that, because I travel so much, and you know you're at the one synagogue where they all stand up for this prayer but they sit down for that prayer, so I always sit at the back. They're always asking me, "Frank, why do you always sit at the back, you're the guest!" I'm afraid I'm going to zig when everybody else zags, and they're going to think I'm the stupid Jewish guy. So, I'm always at the back. Everybody's up, I'm up, everybody's down, I'm down. So I make sure not to do it inappropriately. And since the hurricane, it's been a lot less of an issue. It's sort of like Jewish people have always been unified about our regard for Israel, now Jewish people are all unified about our regard for helping others of our own people in this country, or in this continent. Sort of like the Red Cross was. You know, when I went to work at the Red Cross shelters, I'd see people from Red Cross France, Croix Rouge, I saw people from Norwegian Red Cross. And that's got to be what tikkun olam is really about, that you're sitting at home in Norway, and you say, "I need to go help these people, because I can't not." You know, Hillel said, a hundred years before Christ, "If I am not for me, who will be for me? If I am not for others, then what am I? And if not now, when?" And obviously, that "not now, when?" and "not for others" is what tikkun olam is about, and... can I give you one more example? And it's not Jewish, but it is Jewish. I go to this shelter, to do a show, and there's all these trucks and buses parked in the lot. Now you'd say, "Well of course," but they were odd-looking,

like it would be, I don't know, like a 1962 school bus, that has all kind of stuff piled on top of it -- You'd think maybe Jerry Garcia's band would be in that bus. It's painted with all kind of colors, or with an American flag, and duffel bags and things on top of it held with bungee cord, and there would be little pickup trucks just like that, with plastic covering over it, and then bungee cords -- so that was odd, at a shelter, to see all of those things, and so I asked, I said, "What's with all the kind of odd, the singular looking, you know, travel across America looking vehicles?" They said, all across North America, including up into Canada, that these were the results of different people, for reasons and different thresholds that they reached at different critical moments, that couldn't take it anymore, and they loaded up and came down. So I went out there, and I just walked up to a man, and he was a big man with a big gut and a big grey beard, and he had an old Datsun pickup truck down almost to the bumper dragging in the back, and it was full of toilet paper, and Pampers, and he said, "I'm a welder. I live in North Carolina." And he said, "I lasted until Wednesday." I said, "What do you mean, you lasted until Wednesday?" He said, "I watched it on the TV all day Monday, I didn't leave my house. Tuesday, I watched it. About half past Wednesday afternoon, I said, screw this, I can't take it anymore." And he said, "I took my money out of the bank, I went to Wal-Mart, and I bought stuff I knew that the Red Cross would be able to use. It looked like nobody was doing anything, so I just started driving." And it turned out that this particular shelter where I was, was the triage point for people like that, who hit St. Tammany Parish. When they got to this parish, that's where they sent them. And then the Red Cross would go through it, and would see that the people got it. And I -- I saw the results of this, because they didn't just come in school buses and pickup trucks, semi trucks would come, and the back would open, and it would be completely filled with book sacks, or shoes, or just -- a wide, wide, wide variety. And some of this was done through the synagogue -- in this case it was done through the shelter... but there were people who just said, rather than argue about who was right or wrong, or what the government should have done, they said, "I will not be able to live with myself if I watch documentaries in the future about this

devastation and my grandchildren say to me, 'Well, so Grandpa, what did you do?'" The man said, "I'm going to be able to say, 'I got in my truck, and I brought diapers to those babies,' and things -- not perishable stuff, but things that the people would need." And the Red Cross said they'd never seen anything like it; individual people bringing tractor-trailer loads -- I mean, there was a man who had a drugstore, he emptied his whole drugstore into a truck. He rented a tractor-trailer, dumped his whole drugstore into it, and came down. There was a synagogue up north that ran into a drugstore and just went down the aisles with their arms like this, into boxes. You could tell! Because I was at that place, because we needed those supplies, and the Rabbi said go to this place, they're unloading the truck. And the boxes came out, and you could see, it was just whatever was on that shelf. You know, everything from diet bars, to hand cleaner, to toothbrushes, to -- just too odd an assortment that anybody would have picked it out. You just say, oh, they have alike that they were all on the same shelf. They just emptied the store -- bought everything in the store and brought it down.

RH: Tell me about the first service that you went to, at your synagogue -- which was not really a functioning synagogue, as you said that it lost their roof...

FL: It was -- you'd have to check with the Rabbi about this, I think it was five weeks after the hurricane... which is to say, much of Mandeville, where the synagogue is, was still flooded. There's still -- I mean, even now they're still discovering bodies, but it was still -- the city was still closed, the city of New Orleans was still closed, the causeway was closed --

RH: And say the name of your synagogue?

FL: We're the Northshore Jewish Congregation.

RH: And where is it located?

FL: Mandeville, Louisiana, on the north shore of Lake Pontchartrain, about 50 miles by the highway from New Orleans, and about 25 miles from New Orleans as the crow flies, across the lake. We lost the roof, it was blown off of the building; the building flooded, not with water that came up to the building -- the flood from the lake didn't quite get there, but rain came in. And so the building was horribly damaged. Normally, the way you know about services I guess is it's posted on the building, or you get it in an e-mail, or it's in your newsletter, or you get it in an e-mail -- some kind of way, but there was no way for the Rabbi to tell us that he was trying to have services -- he had to get special permission to have a service, because although it was Shabbat, the building wasn't a functional building anymore... it's a year later and I'm happy to say it's repaired now, but for months and months, there was something about you're not supposed to have services in a building that has a big hole in the roof. (laughter) The sanctuary was not damaged -- I mean, the rain came in, but where the Torah was, was not hurt, and so the Rabbi got special permission to have services, and we were told that if the building didn't do well during the service, that he could even go outside. So we were the first synagogue to have a Shabbat service in the disaster area, after the hurricane. And the way it worked was, I was driving by... you know, you drive by the synagogue, and you look, you want to see, is somebody there, maybe you can see how they're doing -- because nobody knows how anyone else is doing, there's no phone! There's no cell phone, there's no newspaper, there's no television... the only radio is WWL, and you're just hearing all these disaster stories on the radio. So you really -- we were in it, but not knowing how huge the damage was. And you don't even know what's going on at the synagogue, so I would drive by and look, and look -- and it was Shabbat... were you with me?

BONNIE WOOD: Yes.

FL: I'm pointing at my wife, off-camera, sitting over there -- my wife and I are going by the synagogue, and there's a few cars there. So, we stopped and went in to see what was going on, and the Rabbi was having what he called a refugee service. There were

only six of us, so it wasn't a minyan, the minimum number necessary to have a service, but he said there was no way to tell anybody, there was no e-mail, no nothing, so we were going to do the best we could. During the hour, that kept happening. People would see, and they pulled up, and it takes ten people for a minyan, and by the time we were in the middle of the service there was a minyan! And, we had 24, there were 24 of us by the time -- thank you -- there were 24 of us by the time we got to the end of the service, and it was a great renewal for us, that we were able to put our synagogue back together again, spiritually, if not substantially. Since then, we've had it fixed and we're doing much, much, much, much better. But without the help of others, we'd still be in so much trouble.

RH: What did that service feel like, as people kept coming in, and -- I guess they were all just seeing the cars, and --

FL: He didn't go up and do the service like up on the pulpit, and do it like a regular service. He came down and sat among us, and said, "We're all in this together. We're all evacuees," and, you know, he was living in Opelousas, three hour drive away, a tree came through -- he said, "My daughter doesn't want us to fix the house, she feels like she's living in nature now." (laughter) Until it starts raining. So, we shared our stories a little bit, and we prayed together. And it gave us a sense... like the Rabbi said, "We're not going to be the same congregation. Everything's not going to be the same. But this is a beginning, a way to come back, and to help each other." And immediately -- immediately, he connected us with Jewish Family Services, with counseling services, and our synagogue became a center for relief, and for counseling, and I've been for some counseling, and we've gotten a lot, a lot of help from our own people. Oh -- so much help. Things as simple as a Wal-Mart card, or a Target card, that would let us... because for months, there was no income. You know, I talked about how first there was this devastation, and then for me and for my wife there was rebuilding, where we were doing these shows at the shelters. Then the synagogue comes back in the middle of all that,

and then the next thing was the schools. And the area came back. It's not back in any way now, I mean there's still horrible devastation -- there's places right now, if you went and drove by them, if you could get to them by car, you'd say the storm was yesterday. And the storm was 13 months ago. A year and a month ago, and it looks like it hit it yesterday. I know, because I've been asked to go there. To help with the same, hopefully... positive message that I brought to the shelters, I've been asked to go to Bell Chase Primary School, the only elementary school that's come back in that whole Plaquemines Parish since the hurricane, where those people were from at the Immanuel Baptist Church. The same neighborhoods, a little north of there, where it wasn't quite as devastated, they have one elementary school in the whole parish. They asked me to come back there. St. Bernard Parish, they have one school, the St. Bernard Unified School. They asked me to come there, and do a show. Grand Isle, all the way down out in the gulf -- Grand Isle School has come back, they asked me to do a show there. When the New Orleans Museum of Art opened back up, they asked me to do a show there. And the only reason I mentioned that, is because for years and years, since '92 when I started doing these shows on the road -- so that's 14 years -- thousands of shows, the show is always either curriculum-driven, and make it fit social studies, or make it fit what we wrote the grant for, or make it fit conflict resolution, or anti-drugs, anti-smoking, or make it fit the holiday -- do something for Chanukah, do something for Christmas, do something for Thanksgiving, or do something to commemorate the Battle of New Orleans, or the Louisiana Purchase, or... something. This is the first time ever, and it was uniform -- they all had the same request. "We would like your show to please make the children smile." Could I please make the children smile? Because many of the schools are still in the middle -- you know, these are people living in tents, and people living in -- you know, you say you get your FEMA trailer, but a FEMA trailer is like the size of your kitchen, and it's like you're living in your kitchen. You have a bed there, you have a bathroom there, you have a kitchen there, you have a table there, but it's about the size of -- the kitchen in my house is about the size of a FEMA trailer. So these people are still

living in horrible conditions, and I'm supposed to make them happy. When I went to the St. Bernard Unified School, after the show, I went up to the principal of the school, and I said, "Sir, this is the best faculty I've seen that I can remember. I do a hundred shows a year, and I never -- I mean, I never go up to the principal and say 'what a great faculty.'" Not because they're not great, but because teachers are professionals, and they know what they're doing, and they manage the children, and the children behave, and I do the show, and it's a great show. There was something about these teachers -- boy, they were great! They were in touch with the kids, the organization was excellent, and yet they had this flexibility with them, and they all -- I just noticed. So I went to the principal afterwards, and I said, "I don't know what it is, it's just some feeling I get -- these teachers are great! They're really excellent." And he said, "It's not really a compliment. We had a lot of schools in this parish before the hurricane, and now we have one. So, the school board had no alternative but to let the teachers go in order of seniority. So all of the teachers in this school were principals of schools." They all -- if they wanted to keep a job, they had to go back to being classroom teachers. I have no idea what faculty meetings must be like, where every single person in a room is a principal. I do know, that I went into the next parish, Plaquemines, just as devastated, about, as St. Bernard, they had one elementary school, and they had this -- you know, every big room, a cafeteria room, auditorium -- they had these double doors, that open up, and inside there, there's all kinds of chairs stacked, and tables that fold up. You know, you say, "Where's all the --" -- when you know, you're going to see a lot of people, like "Oh, we got the chairs here," and you open these double doors, and there's all these chairs. And I had been to Belle Chase Primary before, so I knew about that closet and what it was for. And... I needed a chair. And I'm really self-sufficient, I didn't need to say I need a chair, I know where the chairs are kept, so I went there and I opened the door to the closet, and there was a man sitting in there on a little desk, doing work. I said, "I'm sorry for disturbing you," and I closed it. And so I went to my host after the show, and I said, "Uhm, what was with the guy in the closet, there was a man -- a heavyset man sitting in the closet in there, I went

in the door, and he was in the closet." And he said, "Uhm, he used to be the principal of an elementary school in Burris, and Burris was destroyed, so they made him the guidance counselor here -- they created a job for him, but we don't have any place for him so we put him in a closet. And he's very sweet about it." So he was a man -- I mean, you have to understand what a principalship at a school is like. It's like a fiefdom -- I mean, it's your own little domain -- you rule that little kingdom -- and justifiably so, you've worked for years, and you get these promotions, and now you're in charge of your own school, and you mold it to be the school that you think it should be. This man was that, and now he's in a closet. He's in a closet at Belle Chase Primary School, and he's lucky to have the work there. So that's the yin and the yang of what I'm doing, you know -- there's these highs, there's these lows -- it's touching and sweet, but it's also part of the personal devastation. Not are you hungry, are you suffering physical pain -- what's going on with your dignity, you know? I mean human dignity is the one fundamental thing that we all try to cling to, and maybe the most profound thing that the hurricane robbed us of was that.

RH: So, if you had a vision of the future, what would that vision of the future look like? For the Jewish community, for the larger metropolitan area, as part of the --

FL: I think New Orleans has to get used to being the second biggest city in the state now, instead of the biggest city. Baton Rouge is going to be the biggest -- maybe, in 50 years, New Orleans. Right now, I'm told that it's, the latest statistic is 40% of the population, at most, is back. And, as a many, many year teacher, and as a person who works in all of these programs, I know that until the schools come back, the grown-ups can't come back. I mean, you would like to say that your school is the place where the children are educated, and learn the skills they need to go into the world, but in a much more real sense, the school is daycare. You put your child in school, so you can go to work. Now obviously, they have to be educated, and there's laws about that, and you want your child to be educated, but if you don't have a place for your child to go, whether

it's a school, or a bag hanging from a tree, or something, then you can't come back here, because there's no... So right now, the biggest problems are housing, and education -- you got to have a place to live, and a place for your child to be cared for. And -- I guess there's some hope that in rebuilding this system, we can reclaim some of the backsliding that Louisiana has done in the last century, where we have slid down to become the fiftieth-ranked education system out of 50 in the country. You know, I'd spend my years teaching in St. Tammany Parish, which is number one in the state. But to be number one in Louisiana is like being the best restaurant in Detroit -- I mean no offense to Detroit, (laughter) but Detroit's not known for restaurants, it's known for cars. And Louisiana's not known for its great education system, but we need to -- that's bad! Sorry, the cat just jumped up -- but this is a cat who we let do what she wants, because she's a hurricane survivor, so... as we're talking, the hurricane survivor cat is doing what she feels like. I think the community as a whole has an opportunity to maybe rebuild something better. If we don't get outside help, it's not going to happen, because our infrastructure was as destroyed, as sure as in a war -- as sure as if we were bombed out. And if the state of Louisiana doesn't get a better handle on where their funds should be allocated, then we're going to have a huge struggle. When gambling was passed in this state, and we were told the money was going to go to education, they said, "We didn't promise," so the money didn't really go to education, so... the state has to make some kind of commitment. But if we get some outside help, I think there's hope that we can have some kind of return, some kind of dignified life to say that you live here and that it's a good place to live, not a blasted, devastated place to live. As a Jewish man, I'm encouraged. I'm not encouraged to say that now there will be more Jews here, or now we will have better Jewish structures or systems. We are a part of the country that has a declining Jewish population, and this is in no way going to help that. But I'm encouraged for a different reason. You don't live your life as a Jew in the hope that the Jews will become the biggest religion in the world, or the most populous, or the best sports team. We're in this for that same thing we started at the beginning of this interview -- we're in

this for tikkun olam, to help heal the world. And I am enormously encouraged, because -- in a small scale, because of how the people locally banded together to survive, and on a gigantic scale, because of how people outside taught us tikkun olam on a much more profound level, by reaching out to help us. And like always with charitable endeavors, by far at the forefront of that was my own people -- by far, the greatest givers, and helpers were Jewish people. And it was not the Hasidic Jewish people, or the Orthodox Jewish people, or the Conservative Jewish people -- without one exception, with zero exceptions -- including Orthodox, where I was asked to come -- they never asked Reform people to come, but they asked me to come, as a reaching-out, to help fellow Jews. They said, "It's our people in need specifically, and humanity in need in general," and I'm proud -- I've never been prouder to say I'm a Jewish man, because of what I saw our own people do, to help one another, regardless of denomination, and to help all of the people hurt, and not just in New Orleans, but of course across the South, because the devastation is just so gigantic. That we're sitting here talking about it a year later, when so many things have happened since the storm, and it's still the biggest topic, still.

RH: Tell me what being Jewish has meant? Has it been a source -- I mean, I feel it has been, because you've been functioning out, but are there any other ways that being Jewish has -- just what it's meant to you, through this experience?

FL: I've always felt when I went to synagogue that I was the odd guy out at synagogue -- you know, I mentioned before that sometimes I stand up and sit down at the wrong time. Because for me, going to services is not about the letter of the law. It's about the spirit of the law. I'm looking in the prayers that we say for real answers for me, in dealing with my humanity, and my relationship to my fellow human beings, in the eyes of whatever made us, and whatever direction we're coming from or going. And rather than have a lot of answers, I just see myself as having questions, that aren't answered. And... I couldn't have guessed, in my wildest imagination, that coming out of the hurricane, I am so proud and honored to say that the Jewish answers are the right ones. What they say you

should do as a Jew, is what you should have done coming out of the hurricane. What they say you should do for others as a good Jew, is what Jewish people have been doing since the hurricane. So I feel a sense of pride, not in myself, but in my people, of which that blood is in my veins, and I feel, maybe more importantly, an identity with the philosophy of Jews, like Heschel, and Hillel. And Martin Buber, who -- turns out, in our experiences, coming out of the storm, these guys were right. They were absolutely right, it's about our relationship with others, and how we can't justify the breaths that we take, if they're at the expense of someone else. And, I couldn't be more proud of being Jewish, and of seeing what our Jewish people have done to pull together. I'd hug them all, except the ones who won't let me of course.

RH: Has this crisis spurred you in different directions?

FL: Well I think everybody who's come out of the hurricane -- we all say that we're not going to ever be the same again. But... there is a, there's a harm that has been really deeply felt by children. Now adults, I talked about the harm to adults, and now they're putting their lives together some kind of way, but there are children across the South -- right here where I live, this population of this parish has grown by like 70,000 because of the... so that's maybe a one-third jump in the population of this parish, this county, because of the hurricane, and it seems to be permanent. So, there are a lot of displaced children, who need a lot of healing. There are... I've been allowed to participate in some seminars, and some workshops, that are going to help me to do better... as a matter of fact, it's a new word! They call it "healing". I mean, that's not a new word, but to do that -- to say, we want you to come into school and do a program for healing -- that would normally have been the most nebulous, vague thing, but now, I know exactly what they're talking about. Like Dr. Woodward told us, we need to build the bowl. We need to help restore dignity, which is about personal integrity -- to feel like you're not being disrespected by those around you, and children who are in a new environment, families that are blowing all over creation, father's got a new job, everything's different, different,

different. I can be a part of putting them in a place where they can feel worthy, and worthwhile -- and, if I can encourage them in theater, if they walk away from a workshop, or some program that I've done, sometimes I'm allowed to stay more than an hour, and I'm allowed to really push my agenda of communication, and cooperation. I always believed it was important. Now, I don't believe it's important anymore, I believe it's a mandate. I believe that the work I do is vastly important. Not because I do it, or because I do it so specially, but because I happen to be in a place with a skill set and a training, that it's taken me a year to figure this out, but I don't do chain saw, and I don't do roofing, but I do something that's just as important. I'm clearing the trees, and I'm putting a roof on people's sense of well-being. And I'm important, and I need to get out there and do that. And if I can train others, so that like Johnny Appleseed, I walk away and other people can do that too, then maybe in the middle of one of the greatest wounds on this planet right now, I'm helping heal that, and helping establish a model for how we react to these things in the future too. Yes, my life is changed forever.

RH: What have you learned about yourself, in all of this? I mean, you just told me, you don't do chain saws, and you don't do --

FL: (pause) I guess I've learned that I can't take suffering very well. Because, if I -- you know, I tell people, it's such a rip-off, that I want to describe the horrible year that I had unemployed, and no water, and no electricity, sleeping on floors, living from shelter to shelter, and then -- but it's nothing! I mean, my friend Hal lost his sister, she died in the storm. How do you compare this with that? You know, I tell people, look, in your life, you got maybe there's four things that the whole balance of your life revolves around. Your work -- whatever you do for a living. Your home -- the place you go, your home. Your worship, whether you go there a lot, a little -- whether it's your Jewishness, or your Calvinism-ness, or whatever you are -- your Catholicism -- your religion. And then if you've got kids, or family involved in it, school. So school, work, church, home. That's the four things that 99% of your life revolves around. All those four things. So you get up

one morning, and they're all gone. School is all flooded, destroyed. Synagogue, roof is blown off the synagogue. Your home is so seriously damaged, you can't live in it. Your work -- get real. Your job's gone. Gone, gone, gone. So you're recovering from those four things. The four solid things that everybody knows they can count on. And if you lost any one of those things, you would say it was the most devastating event in your life. If you said "Our synagogue burned down last week," -- my God, your synagogue burned down! Or, "My house was destroyed," or, "I lost my job." Or "My child's school -- all three of my children's schools, all three of them were destroyed." But now, you take the school destroyed, the church destroyed, the house destroyed, and the job wiped out, you throw them all in the same bag. So, I've learned about myself, on the one hand, I've learned, I guess, maybe that since I've come out of this, that I'm more resilient than I thought I was, in some sense, but not without the help of others. But in another sense, I've learned that I need to be able to tell the difference between harm and inconvenience. And I think my litany of, what I would have in the past called "the harm of the hurricane," to me, even damage to my house, are inconveniences. When I see people in war, or I see what happened to my cousin, whose house was annihilated in Araby, and now he lives in Greenville, Mississippi. That's it, he can't come back, Araby's destroyed. But... they were harmed. I was just inconvenienced. So I want to tell people, videotaping me, that there are -- there's a line literally a million people long who suffered more than me, who took more harm than me, and I cannot comprehend how they came out of that. Like the lady who gave me the five dollars, and said, "Take this on the road." Those are people who have tales to tell. But I came into contact with those people, and if my testimony can in any way facilitate an understanding of how people can recover from this, then there's greatness in that. But not -- my ego took a beating in this, and I learned a much better sense of values, and I learned that I can take more than I thought I could, but not nearly as much as many, many people I saw around me, who I will honor the rest of my days, that they have come out of this. And I somehow -- like at the FEMA shelter, I was surrounded by people who were in worse shape than me, and I was given the

opportunity to, maybe help them be propped up a little bit more by my work. So I learned that there's a profound value to the work that I do, that I should not ever lose sight of; I learned that I can handle more than I thought I could, but I learned that there's a lot more that other people have handled, that I hope I never have to. I hope I don't ever have to suffer as much -- I don't know how they do it, I don't know how. I don't know how. But I honor them.

RH: So through this whole year, what are you --

[end of levy10-2]

RH: -- talked to, so, what Cantor Coleman said, I think, is most true -- he said, something to him that was most like the Holocaust, and he said, not to compare this in any way to the Holocaust, but that everybody he's ever met who went through it had a story to tell, and that everyone he's met who's gone through this has a story to tell.

FL: People --

RH: Oh, OK. Take three, with Frank Levy, for Katrina's Jewish Voices. So, we were just talking about telling stories here.

FL: Other people have bigger and more profound stories than me. If there's any merit in what I say, it's just because I was in a position where I came into contact with so many of other people's stories, like a doctor who was there -- not a doctor, but I mean... I was just at a place where I was allowed to minister, literally, to thousands of people -- huge audiences of people -- I guess you could call them captive audiences, because they couldn't go anywhere, especially the ones laying on beds, but -- I was able to see the good that I could do for them, and yet I was able to see what real pain is. You know, you get up in the morning, and you say, "Man, I had a bad day! I lost my car keys, I couldn't believe it took me a half hour to find them, and then that made me late; then I had a flat tire, then I got a rock, went right in my windshield... " All that stuff, that would have made

a really horrible day for me -- that could be the best day of the year for some of those people, if they could just have things like that. So... I guess like people who come out of war say, we just really had an adjustment in our perspective. We really learned what loss is all about.

RH: And this whole thing -- you talked about, really, this constellation of home, school, synagogue, family... and when all of it's in flux, and disappearing -- what were one or two things that kind of held it together for you, that may have helped you recreate until things stabilized? And they're still not stable, you've already said that.

FL: I've thought about that, that's funny you would ask me that, because I thought about what kept me going, and I would say... to begin with, the first and most important thing was my relationship with my wife. We ended up sleeping at her work. She was a librarian -- we slept on the floor of her library. And so, in a very real sense, being able to be with my wife, and for our life together to go on as we've struggled through this was very, very important, especially when I saw people at the shelters who didn't have that, didn't have their own spouse, didn't know if they were alive or dead. And I would think, "Gosh I know where Bonnie is," -- and we were together, every night. We weren't always getting along... it was a very, very, very difficult time. I called our daughter in California -- I said, "This marriage is not going to last." I mean, we've been married almost 30 years, but, you know, our daughter's like, "It's the hurricane, it's not the marriage." And I was like, "Arggh." So number one -- would be Bonnie, by far. And number two -- is the exact opposite of what I thought. It was finding meaning in my work. The Red Cross people said -- they even pointed that out to me -- they said, "You know, this obsession you have with going to the shelters, going to the shelters... " Because I kept coming back. See, normally, like your agent would book you -- you'd have all these bookings -- but the Red Cross was doing things like saving people's lives, making sure they had water. Thousands of people! So, I would show up, and I was the anomaly -- I would show up, and say, "Hi, I'm Frank Levy, I'm here to do a show," and you would say, well, wouldn't

they just say "Hi Frank, where's your next assignment?" They keep rotating new Red Cross people in, all the time, all the time, all the time, all the time. They rotate them. So I would walk in, and there would be a whole new staff, and I would say, ugh, here we go again -- "Hi, I'm Frank Levy, I'm the -- I have credentials... " And after a while, I would say, after they would book me to go to a place, I would say, "Would you please, when your replacement comes, would you mention there's this guy Frank Levy who'll be coming in?" So then, after a while, it got to be, "Hi, I'm Frank -- " They'd go, "You're Frank Levy! You're the guy who does the shows, they said you'd have a Stories in Motion shirt." And so, they would say, "Good, we want you to go here," or "We want you to go there." But they never had a plan for me, because they had other stuff -- much more important stuff going on. So, the number one thing was my life with my wife. And keeping a grip on that, so many didn't have. And then the number two thing was my work -- defining it with the Red Cross. You know, I get in touch with the agency, Young Audiences -- this is a month after the storm. You know, he's got this New York phone number, and I got my, I get a phone working, and I say, "Richard!" And he says, "You're only the second one of 40 that we've been able to contact. Look, they want you to go do shows!" And I say, "Richard, I've been on the road doing shows for weeks." In our name -- you know, whoever it helps. If I say, Young Audiences -- you know, Frank does a show. That means Northshore Jewish Congregation did a show, because I'm a member of that congregation, and I'm speaking with the voice of our congregation. If I do a show, then Young Audiences did a show. If I go do a show in New York, then that means a Louisiana performer did a show. So suddenly, that becomes -- like I said earlier, I have become de facto a part of this, while in it, or while out of it. And so number one was my life with Bonnie. And then number two was reclaiming the center of balance of my work -- the real, the genuine value of my work. I got two shocks. One of the shocks was that my work was of any value at all anymore -- because I really, my life had just gone down to just roofing, and chain saws. I didn't see anything else as being of value. So, finding that my work was of value, immediately, and then finding that this whole foundation that I

had been trying over the last decade of building myself as trying to be a better Jew -- that all that was correct. That, although I had too much of a personal view of tikkun olam, I had to look at it as "Look what all these other people are doing to really learn what the greatness of it was," so, finding the value, the real value of helping others... as a matter of fact, the Red Cross gave me an explanation like this: they said, "Everybody thinks that we come in for medical emergencies, to help people who are wounded. Or, shelter emergencies, to provide people with -- to get them out of the weather. Or, food emergencies -- to give them the minimum things they need to eat. And everybody -- " You know, the Red Cross -- this is one of the directors said this. "And then, that's all correct. But we have seven, we have a list of seven things, and they're all equal. And one of them -- and it seems to go by the boards all the time, people don't notice that that's in our top seven -- along with medical, along with food, along with shelter, is mental health. And that's the longest-lasting damage, and the most profound damage, and maybe the deepest damage -- it may be worse than food and shelter; I mean, we get food and shelter pretty quick. But fixing that mental health -- we could be a century fixing that." I'm still working on mine. I mean, I can't even tell you stories about this, that weren't even my damage, directly, and it just destroys me, thinking about what I saw in these people. So... like I said, the two things would be my wife, and finding the real value in the healing that my work can provide, if I do it right. And I have become way better at it, since the storm, because unfortunately, I've been forced to do it under circumstances I never would have thought I would have had to perform, and in ways, and in directions, and on subjects I never would have thought of before -- I'm humbled, and honored, that I do that now.

RH: What are some of the subjects, that you... ?

FL: Well, one of them is called healing. I mean, they say, "We want you do a program on healing." And I never would have done a show on healing. I would have done, the story of the Battle of New Orleans. Or, conflict resolution.

RH: So what does healing look like in a story?

FL: Healing is about, first of all, an awareness that you have some harm, and that you have to do something to get better, to improve, and it's about... the main reason I was asked to address this subject, was, there's a grant being written to work among schoolchildren in Houston. And, children in Houston -- there's this huge, like, it was hundreds of thousands, I don't know how many it is now, but children who were evacuated from both Katrina and Rita, that Houston has this huge New Orleans population, and now, they have to do what's called "teaching tolerance," because there's become this pecking order of the local kids versus the New Orleans Kids -- and so there's this whole new polarization and real difficulty in the schools. The Louisiana kids feel like second-class citizens. Maybe they come from a poorer school system to begin with -- I don't want to address that, that's as divergent as the divergent schools they came from. But, they've come -- they're behind in school, because they're a month or two behind when they arrive; they're assimilated into a new school system that they're not familiar with, and new textbooks, new everything -- and maybe they're living in a shelter and going to school. I was at many shelters where the children were picked up and brought to school, as schools started back up, and they're still living at the shelter, and so they're bussing... you know, one of the drops of the bus is the shelter -- what kind of way to live is that? So, healing is programs and storylines for me to develop that have to do with children accepting one another, with controlling your anger, with being able to deal with change, with being able to accept others, and so -- I'll give you an example. There's a famous -- old, famous Jewish story, called The Noisy House. Where -- I don't want to tell people stories that they already know, but in the noisy house, this man is just going crazy with all the noise in his house, and so the Rabbi tells him, "Well, bring the cow into your house." And then the man says, "It's worse!" And he says, "Well bring the horse into your house. Bring the dog into your house." And he tells him, bring all these creatures into his house. And he says, "Now my house is terrible!" And he says, "Well put the dog back out. Put the -- " And eventually, he ends up with what he had before. And he loves

it, when he gets to see by contrast what he had before. So if I can do programs with the children... well, I'm still in a stage right now where most of the programs, they just want them to be happy, where I can get a sense of joy. And please remember, I've always got my agenda of cooperation and communication, which is really going to be the key to everything, whether it's Katrina or not. But now they're letting me blend those in with stories about compassion, and tolerance. And it used to be much more difficult to do programs that had that in it. Because that wasn't good enough -- they would write the grant, and the grant would have to be about the Battle of New Orleans, or the story of the Louisiana Purchase. They would say, this is social studies... Now, there's a lot more flexibility -- and a lot more venues -- for example, synagogues -- that book me to come in and do programs that are more about human dignity, and about people respecting one another, and caring for one another. And, I was even told that if my program doesn't even have that as a subject matter, but it provides a matrix where the children can come in and feel comfortable, even for the short time of the program, then I've done something for their healing, that I've showed them that positive things can happen. And you have to remember, wherever I go, I'm from here, so if I have an uplifting, positive show, here's a guy from here who's recovering. Things are better for me. I never claimed that they were horrible before -- I mean, they were horrible for me... but, you know, I always have this scale issue, because I didn't die. And thousands did. They say it's 1,800, but... we're from here, we know it's a lot more. They're still discovering that.

RH: OK, I'm going to go back just for a minute, because you brought it up, and I'll see if you want to talk about it a little bit, because -- there are tensions in marriages, around these issues, and we hear about it in town. What are some of the things that were difficult, that create tensions in this --

FL: My God, we were living at my wife's work. So, you know, you get up and you go to work, you come home -- how about you bring your husband to work and he stays? I slept on the floor in my wife's office. So every morning it would be my job to get up -- and

they have a bathroom, it's a library with a bathroom. So I would hurry to the bathroom before the library opened, and the seminarians would be coming in, to get my teeth brushed, and to get cleaned up, and then I would have to stand up my mattress against the wall, and make it like I wasn't really living there, and I had to get out of there. I mean, I can't just -- lounge around in her library, at the seminary. So -- besides, I had to be about my business of working at the shelters. So... I was in my wife's work. And when she finished work, she was still at work, and she lived at work. And then I would come in. And there were issues that in your normal life, you'd say, you know, "Well the heck with that guy! Well, if you don't like it, too bad!" Not when you're living on their floor, under their generator. So -- and this is nothing in any way negative about the monks at St. Joseph Abbey -- they were wonderful to us. But you don't go into a monastery because you're a social person. (laughter) You go into a monastery because you want this routine where you get away from the world, for ever and ever. They have a bridge that leads into this place that goes across a river. It looks like a moat to me! I mean, you get across this bridge and you're in the place! They're not there because they want me to visit them, they're there because they want to be in this cloistered community, and so... My cat... So, it was very awkward to live in my wife's work at the seminary, and try to have any integrity as a person, where you can't tell them, well, you know, "Well the heck with you!" Whatever they said, was fine. They would say, "You know, we're working on the generator, so the power will be off for two days." (pause) You'd just have to go, "All right. That's fine." So that wears on a marriage, too. And, and Bonnie bent over backwards -- it looked for a long time... I was wrong, you know, but it looked for a long time like I was just going to be unemployed. Like I said, I didn't do roofing and I didn't do chain saw, and that's all there was. Now, I had lots of work with the Red Cross, but that wasn't work for income. And, we had the 60 -- depending on who your creditors were, you got 60 to 90 days grace. Now, there were two kinds of creditors like that. One kind was, at the end of 90 days the bills started up again. The other kind was, at the end of 90 days, now you owe three months' worth. (laughter) So that was dubious distinction,

and... she had to keep her job. Because if nothing else, we knew she had a job. And so, whatever the monks wanted her to do, and whatever she could do that was proactive to helping, like walking out on the grounds, picking up branches -- my wife is five foot two, and 61 years old. And she's out there in the sun picking up branches, to be a part of the healing of that place. And it was the right thing for her to do... but it wasn't always the best thing for our marriage, for her to be so devoted to making the monks happy, that I moved to a second place in the situation. It was the way things had to be, but it was very, very, very tense. And, you're in the dark. And it's hot, it's hundred degree weather. Sometimes there's electricity, most of the time, there's not. (pause) And she was working in that. And I was trying to go back and forth to the shelters, and -- so there was a lot, a lot, a lot of tension. There was no -- you could watch TV, if you got the antenna right, and you held it with a piece of foil in your hand, you could get one channel kind of fuzzy, and the channel was all about the devastation of the hurricane, there was no other -- you know, after two weeks of that, I would have watched Star Search, anything. I mean, I hear a lot of people watch that, it's not one of my shows, but -- I don't watch anything besides, now more flooding, here's more people on rooftops -- I know, I know, I was in all that! So, we were under a great deal of stress. We didn't ever want to see each other for a while.

RH: Is there anything you took for granted that you'll never take for granted again?

FL: Electricity. (laughter)

RH: (laughter)

FL: You know, we have this belief that you either have electricity, or it will be back on in an hour -- that's the two beliefs we have in America. We have it, or it will be right back on. Not only did it not come on for weeks, but then after it went out, it came back on, it would go back out again, easily. And then Rita came, and it was back out for a couple more days. So, we just -- everybody here, now, when there's a wind, or there's rain, or

something, you get real uncomfortable. And the lights flicker, you go "Oh no!" I've still got -- I have the best-stocked pantry right now. I am so ready -- you know, I'm just so ready if a storm comes. And we managed to save our refrigerator, because since we didn't evacuate, as soon as the power went out -- I mean, as soon as it was out for about half a day, we said, "That's it," we got everything out of the refrigerator, so... we just threw it out to begin with. You learn.

RH: So... go ahead.

FL: You learn. I mean, we thought we knew -- I was born here, I grew up here, but, now we know what major disaster really is. I thought that things like this were things that you saw on TV about Sri Lanka, or Bangladesh. And you say "My goodness, how do those people live like that?" We lived like that. We lived like that, we were thrown back into the Dark Ages for weeks, and we found out what that was like.

RH: So, is there anything you would like to add? I think we're about ready to wrap up. And it's been a great interview.

FL: If something I say can push the agenda of, in some way or other, we do better the next time... if it can be an affirmation, that there is a substance, a real substance to the Jewish community, and that I am happy to say -- I'm sorry we had to find out this way, but that if there are people at your synagogue that you don't get along with, or there's another synagogue that you quit, because you know you didn't like the way the Rabbi did sermons, or something, and now you're at this synagogue -- you know, all congregations of all denominations are full of stories like that -- I used to be a Methodist, now I'm a Presbyterian -- I'm not saying that's unique to Jews. But as a Jew, let me say, I am overwhelmingly reassured at the way my little synagogue -- a tiny synagogue to begin with, one of the few new synagogues in America -- we're still here, and we got it put back together again, and we're better than we ever were, because we reached out to one another, like this, like one piece of cloth. Not like a lot of threads that were all raveled,

but like one cloth. We did it as a community, we did it as one congregation, and nationally and internationally, we've done it as a Jewish people -- managed to have this storm help us to better be able to say what we're about. And -- you know, if I was going to say what we're about -- it's about two things. We're about our integrity as Jews, and what we stand for, and it's about this philosophy, of healing the world. And so I learned about what it meant as a recipient, and as a participant, and I learned about what it meant much more, as I saw it come showering down on me -- there's a word, grace. I felt grace. I've never been more proud of what I am and what I'm a member of, and... I hope, in years to come, I will talk less and less about the harm of this, and more and more about the greatness of Americans, and my fellow humans, from all over the world, and at the forefront, we're Jewish people. At the forefront of everywhere I went, the Jewish people were giving the most, doing the most, and offering the most without any expectation of anything in return. From here to Toronto, I'm here to tell you, I saw it. So, if what I say, what I did -- forget what I did, I did so little anyway -- but what I saw -- what I saw is of value. And I saw people helping people. And I saw love when they didn't have to do it. You as a mother would love your child. I love my daughter. But I saw people love people they didn't have to love. Because it was the right thing to do. And that is enormously encouraging to me, as an American, as a human being, but more, more, as a Jew. The end.

RH: (laughter)

FL: The beginning! The beginning.

RH: The beginning.

FL: Thank you.

RH: Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]