Richard Perles Transcript

Rosalind Hinton: We're looking good? OK. This is Rosalind Hinton interviewing Rick Perles at 2209 General Pershing, Rick's home in New Orleans, Louisiana. Today is Friday, September 1, 2006. I'm conducting the interview for the Katrina Jewish Voices project of the Jewish Women's Archive of the Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life. Rick, do you agree to be interviewed and understand that the interview will be video-recorded?

Rick Perles: Yes.

RH: Thank you. Rick to start with, tell me a little bit about your family, and if you wouldn't mind giving me your birthdate or your age, and also tell me how you came to New Orleans.

RP: Well, I'm 49 years old and I grew up in Boston. We moved around a little bit, but primarily I grew up in Boston. My grandparents came mostly from Eastern Europe and settled in Boston before the Depression. And my parents, I believe, were both born in Boston and spent most of their lives there; they're retired in South Florida now. I have two older siblings, but I'm the only one in New Orleans. And I came down here initially to go to Tulane Law School, back in 1979 – it seems so long ago (laughs) - and fell in love with the place and never left.

RH: So what did you fall in love with? What made New Orleans interesting to you?

RP: The music primarily, because I'm a musician, very classically trained. I spent a lot of my youth at New England Conservatory and Boston Conservatory and studying with private teachers around Boston and people who played in the symphony there.

RH: You might want to tell us your instrument.

RP: I'm a violinist and I played a solo with the Boston Symphony when I was a kid so I was kind of precocious on the instrument. And during college I picked up an electric violin more as a conversation piece than anything else; I had never done any improvised playing. And I had it hanging up on the wall in the dormitory room and somebody called me up one day and said, hey, we know you've got one of those things in your room, we want you to come play with our band. I said I don't know anything about that; they said, it's OK, we'll show you how to do it. And it was a really good band, in fact Stanley Jordan was the guitar player in the band.

RH: Wow.

RP: Yes, so I think Stanley had more talent than the rest of the band put together, but nevertheless it was a good band and we played a lot around New Jersey, and at the end of the summer we thought we were going to get a recording contract and all that, which didn't pan out. The keyboard player said, well I'm going to graduate school at CalTech, and packed up all his instruments into his little Opel station wagon and headed for California. And I said well, if Chad is going to graduate school, I guess I'm going to New Orleans, I'm going to law school, I'll see you guys later. And came down here, met some of the local musicians, and I hadn't thought about this in a while, but this, when I got to New Orleans I met people who really truly could not read music and were some of the most talented musicians I'd ever worked with. And that really fascinated me, that there's something inside each of us that allows us to be incredibly expressive and creative musically without having any of that kind of formal conservatory, wrap your knuckles training, that I had gotten for years and years as a kid. And I think that's one of the things that really attracted me to the city and the music here.

RH: So, tell me about the first person you played music with here? And how you met him?

RP: I didn't play much music in my first year of law school, other than just practicing in the apartment. And, I was coming home from exams at the end of the first year and this little guy picked me up, I was hitchhiking, he picked me up on Saint Charles Avenue and we got to talking about music, and it turned out that was Charles Neville. And, we had a nice chat, we got along very nicely. He invited me to come out and play with him so we, the first gig that I played here in town, was with Charles at the Dew Drop Inn, which back at that time was held at the Contemporary Arts Center, tons of great musicians on that gig that I got to meet, and as a result of that, I worked with Charles on and off for years, and met a lot of the local musicians through him; it's all about who you know and if you're nice to people they'll be nice back to you. And, I've played a lot of music here over the years and I still do.

RH: So, tell me about your neighborhood here, where we are here. Does this neighborhood have a name?

RP: We just call it Uptown. It's not as uptown as that part of Uptown, but it's still Uptown. It's kind of an interesting neighborhood, before the storm, I think it was sort of the transitional neighborhood, there were maybe more people coming in and fixing up properties and it seemed like it was on the upswing. We bought this house about 10 years ago because we got it when Suzette was pregnant and Aaron is 9 years old now. It seemed to us that the property values were steadily going up in the area so we thought it was a good place to be. What's been more interesting since the storm is that this was sort of the dividing line of where the deep water was. We probably had about between 2 and 3 feet of water, I don't know exactly how much, that came up in this area, but as you saw from outside, the house is raised up, it's an old pier-and-beam construction, the house was built sometime in the 1800s and those guys really knew exactly how high they had to build if the water came up. So basically the water covered up our front steps and came up to the porch, but it didn't come up into the house, thank goodness.

RH: So there was 3 feet of water out in the street and it never came in the house, kind of tells us how high this house is.

RP: I think the house is probably raised up about 4 feet above street level, the lot is a little bit higher but we, I mean the high water mark before this was the, I forget the year, everybody just calls it the May 9th flood, I think we got 18 inches of rain in 24 hours or something horrendous like that. We might have had this much water that came up under the house, this is a pretty high block. Nothing at all like Katrina, I mean nobody in this area of town has ever seen flooding like that before. Toward -- Claiborne Avenue is back, behind me and Saint Charles' is up there, Claiborne Avenue, that must have been under 6 or 8 feet of water. I don't know exactly, but you can see the lines on the buildings down there, and between here and Claiborne Avenue is still largely uninhabited and when I came back the next town, the next block down from us just looked like somebody dropped the Neutron bomb, it was awful. Those people are homeless and basically everybody came back to this block and we would wake up in the morning and go out, and if I turned to the left and looked up towards the Avenue, it was kind of normal, you could see some blue tarps and some debris, and you know people working in their yards and that sort of stuff. But back the other way it just looked like the end of the world. So, you know I think this block is the dividing line. We've become pretty close with our neighbors, we were always friendly before but, you know, much more so after the storm. And we had a little Katrina-versary last week, or was it earlier this week -- yes, I guess it was this week.

RH: Tuesday.

RP: Tuesday, yes. Time has gone very funny on us since the storm, but we've got a couple of professional chefs on the block, this guy is a psychiatrist, we've got some engineers, a guy who manufacturers saxophones down the end of the block, a real diverse group of people. And everybody got together and brought a dish, or two, or three

and we had a big potluck, and ate and drank excessively, (laughter) but it was nice. The neighborhood has really come together I think, and become more cohesive as a result of the storm and what everybody went through.

RH: Well, let's backtrack a little and let's hear about this Katrina, what you did before you arrived back here in the city. So, when did you first become aware of the storm and when did it kind of come on your personal radar screen?

RP: My parents live in South Florida, so they're sort of like my advanced warning system and they're elderly and so I would always call them and find out if they're going to go inland or if they're going to stay on the beach and make sure they have the hurricane shutters closed and that sort of thing. And Katrina was a Category 1 when it went through South Florida, it was not a big deal, and I talked to my parents and they said the wind howled; it was a hurricane but you know, nothing, nothing terrible. And then we kept an eye on it as we always do, and it got in the Gulf and it turned into a 2 and then a 3 and it started heading towards New Orleans. And I usually get up early on Saturdays and ride my bike up on the levee, that's part of my weekly drill. I woke up early, like 6:30 Saturday morning before the storm came and just flipped on the weather to see what the storm was doing and it turned into a 4 and it was directly south of New Orleans and it was heading straight north and it was projected to become a 5, so I went back and shook my wife and said, come on, we're getting the hell out of here. The first thing I did was I went down and topped off the gas tank in the car and by noon we were on the highway.

RH: Did you have a -- what is your work?

RP: I'm an attorney, I'm self-employed, we have a small law firm downtown.

RH: So, did you have to do some work down there or --?

RH: Not too much, we make the Office Manager do that all, frankly. (laughter) But we ran around and we taped up the windows, and closed up as many of the blinds as we

could, and took some of the more valuable artwork and brought it down to the office because the office is a big office building and we always think that that's sort of bullet proof, come back to that in a second, but, so we took irreplaceable financial information and computer back-up discs of things that are important and family photos and stuff that's irreplaceable and some of it we left in the office where we thought it was bullet proof, and some of it we put in the trunk of the car. And I drive a little Honda Civic so there's not a great deal of room. In the past, we've always gone out to my in-laws who are out in the Lafayette area and we'd stay 2, 3, 4 days and then come home again, and that's what we figured this would be. So, you know we had 2 or 3 days of clean clothes and went out and stayed in Lafayette for a few days and then the levees broke. On the way out of town we were listening to the radio and somebody came on from the National Oceanographic Atmospheric Administration and said in a very matter-of-fact voice that among other terrible things that would happen if the Category 5 storm hit directly on New Orleans, they said that tall buildings would sway uncontrollably and some would topple. And I'm in a 52 story office building downtown, about half-way up the building, or more than half-way up the building, and I thought, oh that's great, you know, we'd just put all the family jewels and everything in the office and the building is going to come crashing down, I thought, that's the first time that it really hit me that they're talking about the complete and utter destruction of the city of New Orleans. When I thought about buildings downtown going over and crashing on each other, it was just, you know I had images of things like September 11 except it would be the whole city. He said, "all gabled roofs in the city would come off and all trees would be completely defoliated." I was like, it's the end of the world, and we're not turning around to go get this stuff because the traffic is already awful. But we were well out of harm's way when the storm hit, Lafayette is about 2, 2-1/2 hours west of here, which was far enough away, it was just a breezy day out there when the storm came ashore. And then we started watching Fox and CNN and all the news channels and the images of the water coming up and I was trying to get online and look at the satellite photos to see if our house was still here. You

know, I saw the water in between the houses and was like, my God, it's never done that before, you know. It didn't look like any trees had fallen through the roof of the house, thank goodness, and I could tell that the house hadn't blown away, I could see it in the satellite photos, but I was really worried because I saw the water was all up in between the houses and completely through the neighborhood and I couldn't tell how deep it was, and I didn't know if it was in the house or not.

RH: So, were there any other people that at this point you were kind of contacting or talking with? Or…this is that first day after?

RP: Yes, the first few days it was insane; a lot of cell phone towers blew down and the cell phone service was awful. And, I couldn't reach a lot of people, I was trying to talk with my partners and figure out where they were and what they were doing. It was weeks before I could get those guys on the phone, cell phones all the phones were just gridlocked, it was terrible. This time around we're using a Voice-Over-Internet system because apparently the Internet worked fine, so, we've all gotten laptops and gotten the software and our little headsets, so we'll be able to talk to each other, God forbid this happens again. So, we're a little bit better prepared this time. (laughter)

RH: Tell me when you first realized, we're not going back?

RP: I was still a little bit in denial, you know because they were reporting that the 17th Street Canal had been breached and the London Avenue Canal had breached; it was miles from here. I was like, no water can get Uptown, how far can it go? Could go pretty far. (laughter) But when they started showing all the looting, I was surprised to see the water in Canal Street because that; Canal Street is the dividing line where all the streets change from north to south, it's half-way through the city. And when I realized that the water was passed Canal Street, it was like, oohh, that's serious, you know.

RH: What do you mean all the streets change from north to south? A little geography lesson here.

RP: OK, well, for example, we've got Claiborne Avenue, when Claiborne crosses Canal Street it goes from South Claiborne to North Claiborne. So you know, they kind of run like that. That's, you know, Canal Street runs through the middle of town in that respect. But it was pretty scary to see the news footage and the aerial shots from the news helicopters of gas fires bubbling up through the water, the Yacht Club on fire out at West End, and out on the Lake Pontchartrain, you know some real, recognizable landmarks that were destroyed. It became obvious within 24 hours that New Orleans was never going to be the same again. And I remember thinking, was it a Monday the storm came in, you know, did that little jog to the east, and went off to the Mississippi, which hurricanes do, a lot, I don't know, I remember thinking, we've dodged a bullet, this is great. Initially there were newsreels being shown, it was sunny in New Orleans and the city was still standing and you know, everything was great. A couple of weeks ago I heard some musician, I don't know who it was, being interviewed on WWOZ, which is the local jazz and Heritage Foundation station here, he was saying that they were Uptown, they stayed through the storm and they were Uptown and the sun was out and the storm had gone by and everybody was happy and out, marching around, not knowing that creep and death was coming across town, because they, like us, had no phone service and there was no communication, all they knew was that the storm was passed and everything appeared to be fine. And then the water started coming up, and coming up, and coming up and talked to a court-reporter friend of mine who lives out in Old Metairie, and she said that she watched the water come up out of the canal and across the cemetery in the space of about two hours. Her house went from being high and dry to having about 3 feet of water in the living room. I mean when it came up, it really came up fast. Yes, so when I started seeing those kinds of images on the TV, I knew we weren't going to be going home any time soon, you know, it was sort of like a bad movie, you can't stop watching it. (laughter) And Spike Lee made a good movie out of it and I

couldn't stop watching that either. It brought back a lot of those memories recently when it was aired. But, you know, we watched it, nonstop for several days, while we were high and dry out in Lafayette. I started thinking, well, we got to figure out what we're going to do for the next six months, or longer. I really wasn't sure but I knew we weren't going home anytime soon. And a friend of ours had just moved from New Orleans to Atlanta to become head of school at one of the Jewish schools over there. By the way, before the storm our son was enrolled at the New Orleans Jewish Day School.

RH: Oh he was?

RP: Yes, which we were very, very pleased with. He was a -- got a great education there. The school didn't do so well in the storm, but anyway, I called my friend Matt over in Atlanta and I asked him if there was a website where I could find out where there were other Jewish Day Schools around the country. And he said, well, there's a group called RAVSAK which is the umbrella organization for Day Schools, why don't you look them up and I'm sure they'll have a list there. Terrific. And 10 minutes later the phone rings and, I'm embarrassed to say I forgot the gentleman's name, but he says, hi, I'm the director of RAVSAK, I'm calling from New York, I understand you're a friend of Matt's, and I want you to know that we have Jewish Day Schools everywhere, (pause) (crying) your son's tuition will be waived for the year, we'll cover three months of rent for you, and if you need it, we'll fly you there at our expense.

RH: Here, I'm going to pass you these.

RP: Thanks. That's about the same reaction I had when I got the phone call.

RH: Right.

RP: So then we set about trying to decide where we wanted to go and knew that our burden would be greatly eased, and he said it's not because you're a friend of Matt, you know if you run into any other families from the Day School, have them call me, the offer

is good for everybody at the New Orleans Jewish Day School. So, and that's how you take care of people. It's not what FEMA did, it's not what the state of Louisiana did or what the city did. So we wound up going to Austin for a few reasons, I'm licensed to practice law in Texas, it's a day's drive from New Orleans, it's got a great music scene, and the Day School there is at the Michael Dell Jewish Campus, whatever it's called, but it's a beautiful, beautiful campus, it's a fabulous school there. So, it was a good choice for us, it was a good fit for those reasons. And --

RH: So, you didn't really go because you had family there?

RP: Oh no, we didn't know a soul in Austin, didn't think I knew a soul in Austin. And, we got there, and the nice lady who runs the office at the school, asked if there was anything you can do to volunteer with the kids. I said, well, I can play Klezmer music for the kids because I had played in the New Orleans Klezmer All Star Band for eight years here. And she said, oh Klezmer music, gee that's great, you need to come meet our Cantor, our Cantor knows everybody in the Klezmer business. I'm thinking, yes, sure, so we go down the hall, and she knocks on the door and she says, Cantor, there's someone I'd like to introduce you to. And we walk in and he looks up and he goes, Rick? I said, Neil?

RH: So who was this?

RP: Neil Blumofe who has been at this table over here for Seder in years past, I think I still have his Seder plate up in the cupboard. Neil was happy to see me, wanted to know if I had brought my electric instrument and everything, I said no, I only had room for one violin in the car and the electric instrument doesn't get there. And he said, well, you got to go see this guy Mark Rubin, he works at a violin shop, he'll set you up with whatever you need. So I trooped off to see Mark Rubin who's, as I put it, a new old friend, one of those kinds of people, great guy, and Mark promptly set me up with an electric instrument and everything I needed. And he said, this is yours to use as long as you're in Austin. I want you to come play with my band on Wednesday, so I went and sat in with those

guys. A nice bunch of guys, a Texas swing band, which I had never played before, but it worked out. And all the guys in the band decided yes, Rick's in the band, so as long as you're in Austin, you're part of the band, so immediately I was playing some music up there and got out at least once a week to play some music which really helped me maintain some level of sanity while we were there. And that's part of the reason I went to Austin, because it had a good music scene. I just didn't expect to get plugged in so quickly. The people of Austin were extremely good to us, by the way.

RH: Tell me a little bit about that. How did you, how did you get settled there? Where did you live? What communities did you connect to there?

RP: The core community for us was the school community at the Austin Jewish Academy. And they arranged for us to stay in a hotel, and actually there were a bunch of people from New Orleans staying at the hotel. And we started calling it the ghetto a little bit, facetiously, actually, it was a nice place, the manager there was very solicitous to all of us folks from New Orleans. We stayed there for about a month. And then a Jewish realtor in Austin donated her time to help New Orleanians get settled and she took us around, and she found us an apartment complex that gave us 60 days free rent and a short-term lease. And when we first got up there, just a little aside, we checked in with FEMA and the Red Cross and the Red Cross gave us a voucher for a month's rent, but then they extended our stay at the hotel beyond the original 10 days or 2 weeks, whatever it was. When we got in to the apartment, we turned in our housing voucher which was promptly rejected by the Red Cross because they said, well FEMA was funding this program, and that program is over, they've pulled the funding. So, within I don't know 90, 120 days of our evacuating, you know we've gotten a voucher for a month's rental and then FEMA wouldn't honor it. So I paid one month's rent while I was in Austin, you know, I can afford that, I'm not complaining, it was no hardship, but it just kind of chapped me that they gave us this piece of paper and then they took it back. A bunch of Indian-givers, politically incorrect, but I don't have any warm and fuzzy feelings

about FEMA.

RH: So you ended up in an apartment building complex?

RP: Yes, a big apartment complex, nice people, nice neighbors.

RH: Did the rent to own thing, for furniture --

RH: Somebody affiliated with the school donated new beds, faculty at the school scrounged up a dinette set for us, one of the guys in the band gave us a chest of drawers, the school provided pots, pans, dishes, a little $100 gift card for the local grocery store, and just all kinds of stuff that made life easier, shampoo, laundry detergent, everything you can imagine that you need to set up shop, was handed to us when we arrived. We bought our own bedding, we bought our own margaritas (laughs), but we didn't have to pay for too much, utilities, really, we were very well taken care of in Austin, all because of the Austin Jewish Academy. So, as far as I'm concerned the Jewish community is the only community that was not dysfunctional. They did a fabulous job, you know, that's how you're supposed to treat people, as far as I'm concerned.

RH: So how did you and your family kind of get along day to day and kind of recreate your lives with --?

RP: Well, Aaron was in school, and I became a very involved parent at the school, went up and played music there, a few times anyway. Drive him up in the morning and hang out at the office, sort of get the buzz on what was going on in school, who's doing what, what events were coming up. So, it was really luxurious for me, to be able to devote that much attention to the day to day things that were going on at my son's school. It was a level of involvement that I don't get to do when I have to run off to the office, try cases, and do all that sort of thing here, so I enjoyed it tremendously. I had a little bit of work to do, not much, I think everybody from New Orleans tried to order a Dell laptop at the same time and it took forever to get the laptop up there, but eventually we got some computer

equipment into the office and then I could access our computer servers at the office here and got a little work done, but not very much. And I guess we could have come home sooner but the school was so good, and we knew that the school in New Orleans had not reopened, and we wanted Aaron to finish out the semester there, so we stayed through the end of the winter semester.

RH: So, while you were there, are there other people, you know once you got settled, that you kind of started to contact, and wanted to find out how they were. Did most of your friends evacuate?

RP: Oh yes, almost everybody evacuated that I know. I understand that some people didn't appreciate what was about to happen, I don't know, I mean I sort of never expected the levees to burst. I thought that maybe they'll be over-topped but that's a different situation, didn't expect them to burst and I didn't expect the city to be under water for 2 or 3 weeks, I don't know how long it was, pretty long time. But --

RH: What thoughts went through your mind when you saw the people at the Dome?

RP: Like hell on earth. And the Mayor had said in advance, well we're going out of our way not to make it too comfortable for those people so we don't have much food, we don't have much water, because we don't want people to get too comfortable there. They didn't expect the levees to break, they didn't think people were going to have to stay there for an extended period of time. You know, but then the sewage started backing up because the city was flooded, and you know, it just became a catastrophe. The Convention Center was a catastrophe as well. I've always wondered why they just didn't get people out on the river. I mean New Orleans is a port city and I don't think you're from here are you?

RH: Yes I am.

RP: Are you?

RH: From around the area, Mobile, I grew up there.

RP: There are different levee systems and somebody ever watches this who's not from New Orleans, there are different levee systems that protect different water bodies and the levees that broke were the levees that go around Lake Pontchartrain and the canals that come in off of Lake Pontchartrain, and there were some others as well down in the industrial canal. But when most people think about the levee in New Orleans they're thinking about the Mississippi River levee, those levees were fine. I mean they're much bigger, they're armored with concrete for the most part, they, I mean I'm not an engineer, but they seem bigger and stronger and sturdier, and during Katrina the river wasn't at risk of breaching the levees or coming over the top of the levees, it was everything coming in from the lake. And those are smaller, they look kind of like jerry-rigged levees to me, turns out they were. So, I don't know why they couldn't have brought barges up river, or some kind of boats up river, parked them right, docked them right behind the Convention Center. The Convention Center is on the river, why they didn't get those people, not to mention the people at the Dome, onto boats and bring them up river and have the Corps of Engineers set up a tent city with proper toilet facilities and drinking water is beyond me.

RH: They are going to put you in charge next time.

RP: You know rather than letting those people sit there and die in the sun without having any drinking water; I have no idea, but I'm not in charge. I don't know how we got; I've lost the thread of where I was going.

RH: Yes, that's OK, I kind of interrupted you actually. You were talking about Austin and I kind of backtracked to see what you thought about because you said you kind of became a TV junkie; it was like a horror movie you couldn't stop watching.

RP: Oh yeah, yeah. You asked me what I thought about seeing the people at the Dome and all of that. Yes, it was pretty awful. It's a poor city, I mean we're fortunate in that we're affluent, we have two cars, I think anybody with half a brain would look at this thing coming north out of the Gulf and say, boy, this is a real force of nature, we don't want to be in the way of this thing. Let's scram, and that's what we did. That's what most people did, but it's a poor city and you know a lot of people just didn't have the wherewithal to get out. Fats Domino was at the Dome, I'm sure Fats could have chartered a jet and left if he wanted. You know there's all kinds of stories, people had all sorts of rationales for doing what they did, or what they didn't do. But a lot of the people were just poor people who probably don't own cars and really couldn't get out of town as readily as we did. And I feel bad for those people. You know, next time they better do a better job of evacuating the city.

RH: So, tell me about Austin and tell me what kind of experiences stand out for you in Austin.

RP: Kind of a blur, but clearly a bright spot in our lives because everybody was so nice and we felt so welcome. And they made the transition so very easy for us. You know, the thing that stands out is that we made some really good friends in Austin that we will be friends with for the rest of our lives. And, Katrina was sort of an opportunity for us to make new friends.

RH: So do you want to tell us about one or two of them?

RP: Well, guys like Mark Rubin who I mentioned and people at the school. We had a lady from Austin, her son and our son were in the same class at the school, and Aliza Orent, she works for the JCC out there, you met her a couple of weeks ago when we met on the street, and she volunteered to come to New Orleans and help gut houses and do some really hard, physical work to help the city get back on its feet. She was here for about a week, I don't know if she was sensitized to the situation because of our presence

in Austin, but nevertheless we were delighted to be able to play host to somebody from Austin who came down here to New Orleans. And the kids e-mail each other back and forth and stay in touch, so we think that's great. And Aaron made a handful of really good friends from his class at school; e-mail is a wonderful thing.

RH: So when did you guys -- You decided, sounds like it might have been a hard place to leave.

RP: Well, it was. Life's pretty good out there, the quality of life is quite nice and there were people who put a little pressure, friendly pressure, to try to convince us to stay out there. But I just couldn't, you know seeing what 80 percent of the city went through, I could not leave the city knowing that my house was here and my business was still in tact. I couldn't just give up on New Orleans just like that, so. Yeah, we came back.

RH: Did all of you agree on that?

RP: Yeah, yeah we did. I knew my son had put down some roots when he said, dad, can we keep the directory from the school in Austin? Because I knew he wanted to stay in touch with his friends and we had a long discussion about the meaning of the word “bittersweet” because he was happy because he was going to get to come back and see his old friends from New Orleans but sad that he was leaving his new friends from Austin. And as it turned out a lot of his old friends from New Orleans have left New Orleans, but when we got back here we discovered that the Jewish Day School was a shambles because the Mayor of Kenner didn't turn on the pumps, so the school was in the flood that was caused by that. And they had to go in and strip out the first floor of the school and throw away all the furnishings and a lot of the Jewish community of New Orleans lived in areas out near the lakefront that flooded very severely, 12 feet of water and that sort of thing. I've heard about half of the Jewish community has moved away, and push come to shove, I think they only had something on the order of 20 or 25 kids who re-enrolled in the school, and at first they were talking about collapsing grades into

single classrooms and then finally they decided that they would cut back the school to primary grades. So now my son is in 4th grade so he's too old to go to the Day School, and basically they have to grow the school from ground zero again, and build it up. I agreed to be on the board, I think I'm supposed to be the development person on the board, so it's going to be my job to find new students for the school and I'm happy to do that.

RH: Now where is your son, where is he going to school now? Has he adjusted?

RP: He goes to St. George Episcopal School, which is just up the street a little ways here. It's a very good school, he's done well there. It's convenient for us, we don't have to commute out to the suburbs to bring him to school, but convenience wouldn't be the governing factor if I had my choice with where to send him to school. And he's done amazingly well, I mean he's just a nice level-headed kid, he was in three schools last year, and excelled at all three of them, has made friends at all three of them, and he seems to roll with the punches, he's a good kid.

RH: So tell me about when you first came back to the city and what that felt like?

RP: I first came back Saturday after the storm.

RH: Oh, you snuck in?

RP: I did sneak in, a friend of mine faxed me a piece of paper to tape up in the windshield of my car, you know all the guys at the checkpoints went like that and I zoomed on through. Then I tried to, I knew there were certain underpasses on the interstate system that would still be full of water so I got off and tried to come into town the back way. There were cars upside down and boats in the middle of the street, it was insane. I wound up wiggling around through these industrial parks and you couldn't do it unless you had a good sense of dead-reckoning of where things are in New Orleans and I had no idea where I was, but I finally made my way Uptown and came up Napoleon

Avenue, which we're just a block off Napoleon here, and got about 3 blocks from the house, and then there was a guy from FEMA with a large gun who was standing at the edge of the water because the water hadn't receded yet. He said, you can't go in there. Well, I've got the thing in my windshield. He said no, I'm sorry, you can't go in there. What's your business here in town and you know, I made something up. I said, look I can almost see my house, I won't even go inside, I just want to go by and see how high the water is, I've even got my own hip boots and I'll be fine. He said, I'm sorry, I can't let you in. So I drove all the way from Lafayette and got 2-1/2, 3 blocks from the house and I couldn't come to the house, which was kind of frustrating. I drove all around the neighborhood, every possible way I could think of to get in and I was looking down the side streets and the debris field was amazing. The whole neighborhood was full of this black inky looking water that was just deathly still and I said, you know, that's really dangerous, if I go in there, if I step on a shingle that's upside down and I get a nail in the bottom of my foot through my boot, you know they're going to have to chop my whole foot off, I'll get some horrible infection in my foot. Or, if there's packs of dogs wondering the neighborhood, you know, there's going to be nobody there to come get me if I need help. You know I just, I wasn't willing to walk more than a block or two to get to the house, and I'd drive that way and that way, every possible way to get into the neighborhood. But, it was still full; the guy was right, it was still full of water. I just couldn't get in. I drove way up around River Bend, to the top of Saint Charles and Carrollton and came down to Claiborne and Carrollton where the trolley tracks end, and there was an ambulance, the water was down there, but there was an ambulance out in the middle of the intersection. You got to understand, I was the only car on the road, I saw these big enormous military things but I hadn't seen any other civilians. I don't think I saw a single civilian while I was here, and they had these huge military outposts set up on the front of Audubon Park when I drove by and it was kind of strange to see that. But I drove around this ambulance and I thought, gee, what's this guy doing out in the middle of the intersection, so I went and drove all around the ambulance; it had a flat tire, it had been abandoned

there. But I couldn't believe the water line was way up, at least half-way up the back of the box on the ambulance, and I thought, good God, how could water be at least 8 feet deep up here. It was kind of an eye-opener, so I drove up Claiborne thinking I was going to come to the neighborhood the back way and got to Broadway and at Broadway it was open water to the lake, to the river, and downtown everywhere as far as you could see, it was just open water.

RH: Wow.

RP: And I certainly wasn't going into that with my little Civic. But there were four guys from the National Guard on lawn chairs at the edge of the water, and they go, “hey you, come here.” So I drove up and jumped out of the car and chatted with the guys and they were very friendly; they just wanted to make sure I wasn't looting people's houses. They were pretty cool. So I gave up on coming to the house and went down to my office and ran into a guy I assume was from that Blackhawk Security or something like that.

RH: Blackwell or one of those.

RP: Yes, something with black in it, I forget. And I only assumed he was with them because the guy was completely in black and he had no distinguishing markings or any patches or anything, no identification at all. Very large, M-16, you know the reflector shades. He had taken up position in the intersection outside my office building. As I drove up, I sort of rolled down my window and said, “Would I be out of your way if I parked over here and ran up into my office building?” This guy was really, he was quite intimidating actually, and I said, “So I should turn the car around here?” And he said, “mmhmm.” He never said a word to me but this, but he had his finger on the trigger the whole time and I felt like a target. (laughter) So I parked on the other side of the building some place and ran into the building and ran into the maintenance --

RH: He was great security, wasn't he, because you got into the building?

RP: Well, I got into the building anyway, and ran into the maintenance guy in the building who recognized me, and said, “Well, if you want to go up through the stairwell you can. Here, take a flashlight, but you know, we have no power for the elevators. You know, I got to warn you, there's no light in there. There's no emergency lighting left in the building so the stairwell is completely dark, but if you feel like walking up 41 stories to your office, go ahead.” So he gave me a flashlight and I had the foresight to bring a couple of beach bags with me and I went up and got the firm checkbook and trust accounts and critical things and held the flashlight like this on my shoulder and walked down the 41 flights of stairs with my two beach bags of stuff and gave the guy his flashlight back. So that's how I rescued the --

RH: So your firm sent in the one who rides the bike every week on the levee?

RP: Yes, that was a good thing, I was in training for this. It was just crazy, but the city was really scary at that point. It was completely silent. You know when I had left the week before it was August in New Orleans. Everything was green and lush, came back all the trees had been stripped, looked like the middle of winter when I came back in because all the trees had been stripped off, there were branches everywhere. There was a big church up on Saint Charles Avenue the steeple had come crashing down in front of the church and it reminded me of some image of London during the blitz. The place was a wreck - trolley tracks were destroyed, all kinds of trees had fallen through the wires across the trolley, and it's been a year and the trolleys still aren't running on Saint Charles Avenue. Great big oak trees down across the Avenue and somebody had taken a chain saw and cut away enough wood so that traffic could move on the Avenue. And there were, at that point, even at that early date there were front end loaders clearing debris, and you really had to be careful because these guys were flying through the neighborhoods with the blades down, just pushing everything out of the way. Didn't want to get in front of one of those things, and there were, you know, great big military transports and guys from 82nd Airborne with the red berets running around with machine

guns everywhere. It was pretty surreal. I came back Uptown hoping that my friendly roadblock out here might have gone away and then I could see he was still there, so I just parked around the corner where I could keep an eye on him. I thought, well, there's plenty of daylight before I have to get out of town. I'll sit here and maybe wait an hour and see if he leaves. And he never did, but I was just sitting there and realized, except for the sound of an occasional military helicopter, I couldn't hear a thing, not a bird, not an air conditioner, the usual boom-boom-boom of rap music and passing vehicles, nothing. It was just quiet as a tomb. It was really pretty hairy. So that was my first trip back to New Orleans. In subsequent trips it wasn't quite as futuristic as that, but it was still a mess. It's gotten a lot better.

RH: So how, when you, the second time you came in with your family, were there things that they wanted to go see or things they missed, that you guys missed, that they were like so happy to have when they got, or all of you, really, not just being?

RP: Just being home was the main thing. It was so nice to come in. I came in with my brother-in-law a couple of weeks after that first trip, and Tom and I just did a day trip in from Lafayette to, you know, put tarps on the bare spots on the roof and do whatever needed to be done for the house. And that was the first time I actually got to see the house and I took a deep breath and opened the door, and was like, oh thank God, the stuff was here. You know, we'd seen all the pictures on TV of flooded homes and everything jumbled and topsy-turvy and upside down on everything else. It was nice to see my furniture the way it's supposed to be, the way we expect it to be. So, that was a great relief. Cleaning out the fridge was a powerful sensory experience.

RH: What did you wish you hadn't left in the fridge?

RP: I think the fish filets that my father in-law had caught for us were the worse things. I thought the shrimp was, you can tell we don't keep Kosher, I thought the 10 pounds of shrimp that one of my clients had given me was going to be the worst thing, but no, it was

the sac-a-lait filets, they got the prize. It was pretty funny, my brother-in-law said, “Look, I'll go up on the roof, I'll do a lot of work, I'll fix broken windows, but I ain't touching the fridge.” (laughter) So he ran the video camera and we just made a circus out of it, put on rubber gloves, and dust masks and goggles and we lit candles to Marie Leveaux and put them around the fridge and sprayed Lysol and got a furniture dolly with a trash can on it and double bagged it. The idea being that as soon as I filled one up I was going to seal it, roll it to the front door and whisk it right out of the house and it was like OK, ready, set, go and flies came out and it just, everything was rancid and horrible, but we just turned it into a carnival. It was like, “Hey, do you want some of this, any takers on that? Don't know what's in the Tupperware, but we're not going to find out,” and it was just, it's one of the funniest home videos I think I've ever seen really, but the freezer part was really frightening. That was about the worst thing I think I've ever seen. But we cleaned that out, and even when we had our Katrina-versary party the neighbors across the street remarked at how funny it was the day that I was cleaning the fridge because they were in their front yard surveying the damage and every few minutes I'd come out of the house screaming and tear off the mask, try to get some fresh air, and bring out another load of rotten crap from the fridge and the freezer. We weren't able to save the fridge, which was sad, but I tried. Somebody said, well if you put charcoal in the fridge, just put down some newspaper and put charcoal, it would get the smell out, so I did that. We left it that way for a couple of months and it still stunk. We had bleached it out, we had spent a long time working on it, but it just was never quite the same after that, so we got a new one. That was pretty funny. It was an experience not to be repeated.

RH: So that you did before you went to Austin?

RP: Yes, that was before we left Lafayette and then we took the drive up to Austin and I came back into town a couple of more times without the family before we came back, but the main thing was, just being back in our own house and having the luxury of being around all our possessions, which is a luxury. I've heard a lot of people in New Orleans

say this, who were away for evacuation and lived sort of like in college dormitory conditions, where, you know, you have a cinder block for a bedside table and that sort of thing. But everything was very spartan, everything was also very uncluttered and very neat and easy to clean up and I came back thinking, man we need to go through the house with a vengeance and throw away at least half of everything that we own because we don't need it, we don't use it, it just gets in the way. It's just more stuff to dust and otherwise clean up, and a lot of people in New Orleans came back feeling that way. I think there was 300 years of people cleaning out their attics. (laughter) And we haven't been as diligent about that as I wanted, but we've gotten rid of some trash.

RH: That's kind of an interesting picture, a whole city cleaning out 300 years of residue.

RP: It's an old, old city and you know, people just tend to be pack rats, and especially here, people are very steeped in their traditions in New Orleans, and it's just interesting to see people coming home saying, oh the heck with it, we don't need that, get rid of it. I think --

RH: OK, I think we're going to have to stop right now and change tapes.

END OF PART 1

RH: Rick you were talking about being back and kind of settling in and just being glad to be in your home, and ridding yourself of -- realizing how little you could live off of --

RP: Yes, I mean, we got by very nicely on a car full of stuff for four months. Of course, you know, people donated lots of stuff to us while we were there, and we donated it back to a local charity when we left. I mean, we didn't bring any of that stuff home with us. But it is nice to be back, and be able to look at our favorite artwork and, you know, just -- (interrupted)

RH: Are there friends of yours who haven't come back?

RP: Oh, lots of them.

RH: Really?

RP: Sure, good friends, yes. And even people whose homes didn't flood but their jobs went away and they couldn't pay the mortgage anymore so they had to leave.

RH: So, how is New Orleans different for you now?

RP: Well, it's an interesting question. I guess it -- (pause) I like to talk about drawing circles and how big a circle you want to draw. Because, you know, I can draw a circle right here and say, well, my house is here. And I can draw a circle that's a little bit bigger and say, well, I can get in my car in the morning and go to my office, and my office is there. Business is pretty good, and you know, we're getting along just fine. So, on a day-to-day basis, maybe it's not that different for me because I do the same stuff every day that I did before Katrina. Then I go a little bit wider, and say, well geez, people in the next block are still homeless and I can draw a bigger circle and say, God, 80 percent of the people in the city are homeless. And the demographics of the city are in flux and I don't know that anybody really knows what's going to happen with that. But, I think it stands to reason that if, because, you have to understand, it's not like it was paradise before the storm, everybody is very, you know, wistful about things they used to do before the storm. But the truth of the matter is, it wasn't paradise before the storm, it was a good place to live, we liked it, but it was, in large part, a poor city and the housing stock was kind of run-down and it was pretty inexpensive to live here, depending on where you want to live. But if you're a landlord and you've had a couple of hundred thousand dollars damage to your property, and you sink all that money into it, you fix the place up, the rent is going up after the storm, and it just stands to reason. You're not going to put the place back on the market at pre-Katrina rent. And I've heard that on average rents are up 70

percent since the storm. That's going to change the character of the city and there's a huge talent pool here and I think it comes out of the rough and tumble of living in a poor city, in a poor urban area and some really great people come out of that, because in New Orleans playing music is still a way to get out of that. And, some really horrible people come out of that too. And some people say, well, all the horrible people are going to go away, so the city is going to be great. I'm a little concerned that, in that process, some of the good people are going to go away too. So, I'm not sure what it means for the future of the city and in a generation, who's going to be left here. I really don't know how it's going to shake out, I don't know that anybody does.

RH: Is there a tipping point for you?

RP: If the city floods again (laughter), I think that's a tipping point for a lot of people. And, I was talking to somebody the other night about what defines the personality of s city, you know, Beirut is a war city, New Orleans is antediluvian; I said, no, I don't think you're right. I think the personality of New Orleans is that it's prediluvian, everybody's waiting for the next one. And, you know, last week I can't tell you how nervous people were about Hurricane Ernesto, which turned out to be nothing, for us anyway. And certainly nobody wanted an anniversary hurricane. That was the last thing anybody wanted. But people were really nervous about that, and I think everybody's waiting for the next one. I think a lot of people just aren't going to go through this twice; you know, if the city floods like it flooded last time, I think it's curtains. I mean there will always be a port here and it's the mouth of the river, there has to be a port, that's why the city was here to begin with. And there will probably always be a certain sort of Bohemian set here just because of the history of the city, but whether it continues to be a big thriving metropolis, I don't know. I don't know where the city's going.

RH: That story is not written yet.

RP: No, no, we're just going to have to wait and see how that turns out.

RH: How does it feel to be in the…it's almost like the between times, the way you describe?

RP: Yes, it's an interesting time. My friend Mark Rubin up in Austin was from Oklahoma originally and he lived in towns that were wiped out by tornadoes, and he said, one night we were sitting there in a hole-in-the-wall bar in between sets, and I was saying I had to go back and be part of the solution in New Orleans. And he said, “Well, you know, what we used to see in Oklahoma is that there was a time to go back and there was a time when it was too early to go back. And the people who went back too early were always the first people to leave.”

RH: Interesting.

RP: And he said, “I think it might be too early for you to go back to New Orleans but I'm not sure.” Then he came down here for a visit and he looked around at the house. He said, “Now I understand why you wanted to come back, it's worth fighting for.” Yes, it is an interesting time to be here. I wish the city had better leadership. I wish there was some kind of a plan to rebuild the city. It seems completely disorganized to me.

RH: So, what's your little piece of the solution?

RP: My little piece of the solution is that I employ about a dozen people and I participate in the cultural life of the city in my own small way.

RH: Have you been playing music?

RP: Yes, I play in a group called The Rites of Swing and we play old swing standards down on Frenchmen Street on Sunday afternoons. And a nice lady who comes out to the gigs pretty regularly had evacuated up to Boulder, Colorado and she was saying how great it was to be back in town and hear the band, you know, of course they had live music in Colorado but it wasn't like here. You know, it's --

RH: So tell me about that, what do you mean it wasn't like here?

RP: Well, it's like, you can't go out on a Sunday afternoon and just hear this, go into any club on the street and just hear all this great live music, real jazz being played. I said, “Well I'm glad I make it feel like home for you.” You know, it gave you sort of a warm fuzzy feeling that my musical performance made somebody feel like they were at home. So, that's how I try to be part of the solution. And even if I only affect one person in that way, it makes me feel good; it makes me feel good to get out and play every week. So that's two of us now. (laughter)

RH: That seems like an important piece, making people feel like home.

RP: Yes, well you have to connect with people. Maybe that's one of the important lessons of all this. It's not about all this stuff. As much as we like being home, it's about connecting with people, be they your neighbors or people in the audience, you have to have a connection with people. You know, I guess that's the big thing.

RH: How have your connections changed? Have they changed much since before the storm?

RP: Maybe I'm a little bit more patient with people, I try to be.

RH: Let's talk a minute about the Jewish community. Tell me about your involvement in the Jewish community.

RP: Well, it's sort of an up and down thing (laughter).

RH: So pre-Katrina and post-Katrina, OK?

RP: Years ago I was asked to join a group called the Lemann-Stern Foundation, which, you know my friend Tamara?

RH: Right, she said that she met you through that.

RP: Yes. And we went on a mission to Israel and we went to Latvia --

RH: Leadership cultivation kind of program?

RP: Right, right. And as a result of being in the Lehmann-Stern group you get to sit on different boards for Jewish Federations, so I was on the Hillel Board for several years after that. And, you know, you're on the hit list for donating to this and that, and you know, that's fine. Happy to do it. And I, not through any particular desire or effort, but, worked my way up through the local synagogue membership, I must have gone out of the room to go to the bathroom or something, and was elected to be president of the Brotherhood by the time I got back.

RH: Which synagogue was this?

RP: Touro Synagogue. (laughter) And did that for a couple of years, sat on the board for the synagogue as well. Got a little bit less active after that and, not to go into any of the details, but I got very inactive after that. But now I think it's time to get a little bit more active.

RH: Well, I don't know if there was some discouragement there and if you want to talk about it you can.

RP: No, it's ancient history.

RH: But you certainly switched gears because you were involved with Klezmer music for a number of years.

RP: And New Orleans Klezmer All-Stars probably was the best, you know one of the best things I've ever done in my life and certainly one of the best musical things I've done in my life. And I felt that we were doing something important musically and culturally and,

you know, I've heard so many young people complain that there's nothing contemporary and meaningful in Judaism and it's old and dusty, you know, it's just not very exciting for a young person. And I felt like we really put New Orleans on the map with that. We put out several albums and we did concerts in New York and London and all up and down the west coast. I've picked up a few books on Klezmer music, modern Klezmer music, and found a few pages dedicated to our little group so we made a little splash in the world of Klezmer and, you know, I thought we did something very cool and relevant that put New Orleans on the map and it wasn't in any way associated with the Jewish Federation or any of the synagogues here. It was just something we did ourselves. And I kind of felt like we drove the thing home when we got a couple of our songs that we recorded got picked up by a German record label and put on a Klezmer anthology. I said, “Wow, we're selling Klezmer music in Germany, what a fabulous thing.” (laughter)

RH: Was there anything you thought your music was unique coming out of this culture of the brass band and trad jazz? tradition?

RP: There's not a lot of traditional elements to the New Orleans Klezmer All-stars repertoire, maybe more closely akin to the brass band tradition and parade music. And we picked up a lot of New Orleans' rhythms and because oddly enough they're not so different from some traditional Jewish dance rhythms and sort of commingled those things and came up with something different. So it was a lot of fun, I really enjoyed it. I don't know how this ties back to what I've done at any of the synagogues or anything but it was something I felt that we contributed to New Orleans culture and Yiddish culture at the same time.

RH: Did you feel you enlivened the Jewish community? Or where was your base, was your base more large outside the Jewish community or inside?

RP: Oh no, it was definitely outside the Jewish community, we were very active in the club scenes, you know, and we drew pretty big crowds at Tipitina's and all the usual

clubs around town that we would play in. And we would get hired to play weddings and bar mitzvahs and that sort of thing, but the base of our support was not really the Jewish community here. It was just something that six guys decided to do. At a certain point a couple of us fronted the money to get into the recording studio, and geez, I think we sold 10,000 CDs off the bandstand. And you know, record companies started to take note of us, because, you know, it's a lot of CDs to sell off the bandstand with no marketing at all. And we wound up on Shanachie Records for a couple of albums and I went up to Long Island and recorded an album up there in one of the studios, and we had a pretty good run of it for a while. It was fun. And the band is still going. When my son got to be two and I was starting a new law firm, and I just went, “It's too much stuff.” It was insane, I had to get out of it.

RH: Well, I have to say, one of my fondest memories, this isn't my oral history so, but I want to say this. I was at a French Market Festival, I think, and you guys were playing, and your gig was over, but the Zydeco band hadn't shown up yet, so all these Zydeco had shown up and I happened to be one of those people, but I had been there earlier. And you guys, since the band didn't show up, agreed to play longer and all of these Cajun dancers and Zydeco dancers started to all dance Cajun and Zydeco to the Klezmer All-stars. That's when I knew there was something very unique about all the mixing of this music, it seemed very special.

RP: Well, there's something that happens in New Orleans with the music and it's hard to define exactly, but, it's a lot of fun.

RH: Well, so, I'm very interested in this Jewish Day School that you're now still involved with, right, the development person, but why was it important for you to send your son to the Jewish Day School when there are a lot of other schools in the city, private mainly?

RP: They're mainly private. Well, we were looking around, you know, I really have to go back a few years and think about that. We sent Aaron to the JCC for preschool, which a

lot of people do that Uptown but after those years people go in different directions. And, we were looking at different schools, including St. George's, and trying to figure out what would be the best fit for him. My wife grew up as a Catholic and went to 12 horrible years of Catholic school as she tells the story, and completely rejects it, and really has very unpleasant memories of school. And, because of that I never really gave much serious consideration to sending him to a religious school of any stripe because I thought she would just veto that out of hand because of her own personal experience. But she went to an Open House at the Day School and she just came back raving about it, and how great the Rabbi was, and what a wonderful school this would be, and you know, as we sat down and looked at it, you know, and the class size and his personality traits, I mean we really tailored it to what we thought he needed educationally rather than trying to impose some religious education on him. We were just trying to find the best school that we thought would fit with his personality type and she thought that that was it. And I didn't disagree with it, I was just kind of surprised that she thought a religious school would be so good, and it really turned out to be terrific, his knowledge of Hebrew I'm sure far outstrips my own and he just soaks it up like a sponge. He's very good with the language and I need to find him a Hebrew tutor because I mean he's, when we came back from the storm we put him in the little Hebrew school that they have at the JCC and the Cantor who was teaching the class said, “Well, geez, you know, he's far ahead of kids who are four years older than him.” So, you know, eventually those curves are going to flatten out and he's going to fall back to that sort of average curve that kids who don't go to Jewish day schools are on, that level of proficiency with the language. And I would rather he stay ahead of that, so I'm looking around trying to find a Hebrew tutor for him.

RH: Well, so, why do you think it's important for a Jewish day school in the city, because certainly you've been here when there hasn't been one; and there was one, and now there's a small one?

RP: Yes, I mean I'm glad the school is still in existence and I want to support it however I can, and if that's to be the development director, whatever it is, so be it. Well there have to be Jews, you know, we're a force of nature and we're survivors. (laughter) So, and I don't know how there can be Jews if there's not Jewish education. I didn't get it as a kid because I was too busy playing concerts and my parents decided I should practice. And then when I got to be about bar mitzvah age I got a crash course for a year or two, maybe it was just a year, and I read my Torah portion and chanted the Haftorah and all that. I mean I was able to do all that but I learned it in a year, and I didn't get the depth of the study that my son received at either of the day schools, the one here or the one in Austin. And I can tell it's good for him and he likes it. You know, when we talked with him the other night about getting a Hebrew tutor for him, he was charged up. He was very excited about it. So, as long as he likes it, and I know it's good, I'm not going to tell him it's good for him, as long as he likes it, you know, we'll keep providing that for him.

RH: Has being Jewish helped you through this in any way or have you thought about that?

RP: I hadn't really but maybe it has; it probably has. And you have to -- Well, when you go through an experience like this you really have to think about what's important to you and find out where your strength is, and being Jewish is a source of strength for me. You know, and I say that I don't know how heroic I can be when my house is still standing and my business is still here, and so many of the people in the city have it much, much worse than we do. But still, it's been a source of strength.

RH: Your activism, do you think that's tied in any way to being Jewish?

RP: I think so. Most of the things that I've been active in have involved Judaism or the one other thing I did, was actually how I met my wife, was through Operation Mainstream which is a literacy tutoring program. And you have to take a little weekend course to learn how to be a tutor and that's where I met my wife many, many years ago. And then I

taught a couple of young men how to read. And they had, gosh one of them had graduated, was a proud product of New Orleans public school system, graduated from high school, put in a couple of semesters at Southern University before they discovered he really couldn't read. Or, like a lot of New Orleanians, sadly, was reading at about a fourth grade level, and certainly had difficulty with college textbooks and that sort of thing. No amount of money in the world will fix that problem. That's a serious, serious problem that New Orleans faces in that the school system is largely ineffective. Instead of people dropping out people are being pushed out of the system. We call them push-outs. I think the statistic I remember from when I took that little course was that, I don't know. It was like 60 percent of the people in New Orleans were functionally illiterate, meaning that they read at or below a fifth grade level. You know, parents need to sit down with their kids and read; it's not enough for parents to send their kids to school and say, it's the teacher's job, I don't have to be bothered with it. Parents have to read with their kids. And, maybe that's a Jewish notion, I don't know, people of the book, but I take that issue pretty seriously, secularly and religiously. And I think that, except when I've been out of town on business, I have read a story to my son every night since he's been born.

RH: Wow, wow.

RP: Maybe that's a Jewish trait, I don't know.

RH: Are you proud of the Jewish community through this crisis?

RP: Very proud. You know I've seen every level of government be completely ineffective, in a lot of ways counter-productive, hurt people, kill people. The only community that took care of us was the Jewish community; it wasn't people from New Orleans, it was people in New York, like the RAVSAK and people in Austin, can't say enough good things about them. They had a cocktail party for New Orleanians a couple of weeks after we got up to Austin, they let us settle in, and then they had a cocktail

party. It was sort of a meet and greet the people from Austin, and I remember one fellow saying, “Well, I'm sure if the situation was reversed you would do all of this for us.” And I thought, boy, I sure hope so. I wasn't sure. I mean the treatment we got was really over the top there, it was terrific. But, you know, that's the way people should take care of one another. You know you don't let them sit out on rooftops for 10 or 12 days, you just don't do that.

RH: So, do you feel more invested in helping the city or the Jewish community and just how do you see those intertwine?

RP: Well, I want to help both and they're not mutually exclusive. It seems like nothing in New Orleans is mutually exclusive, everything bleeds into everything else. But I'm happy that I'm still here, you know, it makes me sad to see how slow the reconstruction is. I don't know if you've heard Spencer Bohren's song about the long black line, had everybody sobbing at Jazz Festival, I hate the long black line. I really come to loathe it. Every place you go it's that horizontal line, across the storefronts, the houses, and it’s just a constant reminder; that line shouldn't be there anymore. I just think it's dreadful it's taken so long to put the city back together. Saw the Mayor on the TV the other day saying that they had a dedication of a memorial in the Lower Ninth Ward, which by the way I still haven't been to. I really don't want to see it firsthand. I know it's bad but we have not gone down there. But the Mayor was saying, “The road home money is coming, so y'all go ahead and build your mansions and put a hot tub in the master suite, build your mansions, the money's coming.” They don't even have potable water in the Ninth Ward and he's talking about spending that money on luxury items. I don't know what the guy is thinking. I -- Don't get me started. (laughter) We need some leadership in this city. We need somebody to do something constructive and direct, you know, I liked General Honore, who was here and he came in and he got everybody away from the Convention Center and he turned to his guys and he said, “You see all this trash, it's gone by noon.” And it was gone. It's amazing what a dozen guys with front-end loaders

can do. What we need is somebody to come in and not set up the bureaucracy and a block grant and administer it and you know, have a mayor and a governor that are at logger-heads delaying everything. We need somebody to come in and do things simply and directly and just get the job done. And what's going on now is dreadful and people are caught in the middle. The city has told people to go into areas that probably really won't be habitable by most civilized standards for another 10 years, and told them to what little capital they have left in areas that, you know, may not ever have electricity again. Why should -- They're putting people at risk and maybe it would've been different if it wasn't an election year. I think the fact that Katrina happened in an election year was a bad coincidence, and I think there was a lot of pandering for votes and people said things and took positions on issues that really have hurt people and put a lot of people at risk physically and financially, just by pandering for votes. But again, time will tell how that plays out.

RH: Well, as you said, there's this notion in Judaism of repair the world, Tikkun Olam.

RP: Well, this should be the most Jewish place in the world then. (laughter)

RH: But you've had to be on the receiving end. How does that feel?

RP: That is very difficult. I mean, I'm self-employed, I make my own fun, I don't rely on anybody and it was very hard to accept Tzedakah. I mean I'm one of the guys who writes the checks, I mean I don't collect that stuff. It was difficult, it was kind of emotional. I had a little bit of a breakdown at the Red Cross line in Austin.

RH: Did you?

RP: Yes.

RH: Tell me about that. (cell phone ringing.)

RP: Kill that thing. (laughter)

RH: I had no idea, I thought I did kill it earlier.

RP: That's all right.

RH: I don't know where it is.

RP: It's a catchy tune.

RH: I bought this phone second-hand so it had all things downloaded on it. Sorry.

RP: Yes, I think it was when the lady asked me if I wanted to get a food stamp card.

RH: In Austin, at the Red Cross?

RP: In Austin, yes. I was like, whoa.

RH: Did you take it?

RP: I did take it and I was grateful to have it. And, I almost felt embarrassed accepting it. It was just difficult, because it makes you feel, when you realize that you need the help, well, I mean, could I have paid for my groceries for four months in Austin, yes, sure I could have; dipped into savings and it wouldn't have been a huge deal. But, not knowing if I was ever going to see a paycheck again, not knowing how long the evacuation was going to last, I felt pretty fragile at that moment. I said I think I'd better take the card. And, you know, when you realize that you're in a fragile position, you know, in a way I feel like I'm sort of at the mercy of the world, or whatever. And it was a very uncomfortable feeling. You know, she was very nice and comforted me and was very understanding, but it was sort of an emotional moment there, all of the sudden, it's a great leveler when you have to go and stand in line for four hours with a mass of humanity to accept Tzedakah, it's a leveling experience. I don't feel like I'm any better

than anybody else, I'm just not used to being there.

RH: So how do you think that these kinds of experiences, this year of experiences, do you feel changed? How has it changed you?

RP: I'm very skeptical about government and about bureaucracies. I never did have much tolerance for bureaucracies. I guess that's why I'm self-employed. And standing in line is about my least favorite thing in the world to do. Yes, it has changed me. I saw a funny bumper sticker back in Austin. It said, “love your country but fear your government.” And people have been great. I can't tell you the places we've gone and seen signs that said, donation center for Hurricane Katrina, closed, we're full. I mean the outpouring of charity and support from people all over the country was tremendous. The government, well, you know I feel about the government. I don't really feel like, you know, although the federal government will maybe fix, or maybe improve the levee system, otherwise I feel like we're on our own down here.

RH: That feels a little vulnerable too doesn't it?

RP: Yes, I mean New Orleans is, people describe it differently. They say it's America's most European city. Some people call it the northernmost outpost on the Caribbean. It's always been a little bit different and that's part of the reason I'm here. I mean, I like being different but I don't really like being neglected to the extent that we have been. So, it reinforces a lot of those feelings. I mean I haven't really, for all the talk that we hear from Washington and changing and getting rid of Michael Brown and putting somebody else in charge of FEMA, I haven't really seen anything change. (laughter) It's a window-dressing.

RH: How about you, has your worldview changed any do you think? Your approach to life?

RP: (pause) Yes, life is fragile, I mean 1,600 of our fellow New Orleanians perished. I mean I have friends who lost family members in the flood. So life is fragile, you have to

take the time to do the things that you want to do because you never know when time will run out.

RH: So over this past year, what are you most grateful for?

RP: That my family is in good health and that we're all still together and still here. You know, we have 3 out of 10 hospitals still running in New Orleans. I'm not looking forward to the next time one of us needs to go to the hospital but, thank God, we all enjoy basic good health. We had a little episode up in Austin where we almost lost -- we thought we had lost the cat and my son was just dissolving in tears because he loves the cat. And after chasing around the hotel complex for hours and hours and hours, I think it was about 108 degrees that afternoon, came back wringing my -- I'm sorry I just can't find the cat anywhere. Well, we just, we just got Aaron to take a shower, it was time for bed, opened the dresser drawer and meow, there's the cat. I'm like, give me the cat, I'm going to kill the cat. (laughter) But it was, you know even though it was just the cat, it was awful to contemplate that we might have lost one of our little band off in a strange place. So, you know, we've been strangers in a strange land.

RH: Is there anything that you've learned about yourself this past year?

RP: I like salt with my margaritas (laughter). Well, lots of things, lots of things, I think we've covered a lot of them.

RH: OK. Anything you took for granted, you'll never take for granted again?

RP: Yes, when you feel like you're sitting on top of the world, and just one good rainstorm away from standing in the bread line. (laughter)

RH: You told me earlier you had a little evacuation, well it wasn't really an evacuation plan, but you were talking about, I guess it was more of a change of priorities. You remember what you said, invest more?

RP: Right, right. You know as part of this notion of coming home and weeding out the stuff that's really non-essential in life, I just, I don't want to acquire any more stuff and I think what I said is that I'm going to eat it, I'm going to drink it, I'm going to invest it, but I ain't buying any more stuff. We don't need it. I mean really; once you have food in the fridge, never mind the fridge food on the table and a clean place to put your head at night, you know the basics of life have been covered. And anything beyond that is really lagniappe so does it help to have three weeks of food stored up in the freezer. Not if it's going to go rancid when the power goes out. I think life is better if you keep it simple, and frankly if you don't blow all that money and you invest it, you can retire earlier and enjoy life that much more. So we should stop wasting our money on all this dreck (laughter) and get on with living life and not worrying about how much stuff we have piled up in our houses.

RH: So, what's your vision for your family, for the Jewish community? What would be your hopes and what would you like to see? And also for the city of New Orleans?

RP: Well, New Orleans had a lot of serious societal problems before Katrina, the level of illiteracy being the root of a number of them, I think. This is a tremendous opportunity. You know I hate to refer to it as a cleansing event, has a lot of bad connotations, but certainly it wipes the slate clean and it's a great opportunity for the city to come back and re-vamp the educational system, to fix infrastructure that was done in, cars get eaten alive by the streets of New Orleans. Let me digress a minute, we were on our honeymoon and we went to the island of Grenada and ran into some local guys and started talking and I was saying, “Boy, this is fabulous! It's an island paradise,” and they were saying, “Oh, we're just wasting our lives on the God-forsaken rock, where are you from?” I said, “I'm from New Orleans.” “Oh, that's the greatest place in the world!” And we started comparing notes about what we didn't like about our respective homes, and we both decided the weather's too hot, the streets are bad, and the people are stupid. (laughter) But, this is a great chance for the Mayor to repair a lot of those problems and

start fresh. And undo a lot of the problems that have developed in New Orleans over many, many years in political administrations and I think he's squandering it. You know, he could go down in history as a great leader and the guy who rebuilt New Orleans; “Y'all go ahead and get your hot tubs, build your mansions and put a hot tub in the master suite!” What a waste of an opportunity. So, I mean my vision for New Orleans, you know, I hope it comes back and it's bigger and better than before. I hope there's more of the good stuff and less of the bad stuff, though I think you have to take the good with the bad, but you know, that's my vision. I hope it comes true. For my family, I have actually learned a good bit about the local geology and geography of Southern Louisiana because of some of the work that I do and I think, you know, in terms of geologic time New Orleans is doomed. (laughter) But, I never thought I would see this event in my lifetime. I really worried that, absent a big infusion of capital to really recreate the wetlands and ring off South Louisiana with a major system of protection levees and locks and dams and that sort of thing, that my son might not get to live his adult life here. But I thought it was a problem that would happen in his lifetime, not mine. Boy, was I surprised, it came faster than I expected.

RH: And the Jewish community?

RP: I’ve got to get a little closer. I need to reconnect with the Jewish community. In fact I have a -- I still have a lot of friends at Touro and have an application on my dresser. I'm going to go up there Monday morning and re-up --

RH: Really?

RP: Yeah, I think it's important and they've lost, from what I understand, a big block of membership, and I'm very concerned. Jews have played a very important role in the history of New Orleans. The first King of Carnival was Jewish, and the major philanthropists that have set up so many educational institutions and hospitals in New Orleans have all been Jewish, a lot of the locally owned businesses are owned by

Jews. Historically Jews were very important for the development of New Orleans and I hope they will be important for the future development of New Orleans. I'm very concerned when I see half the community get up and leave. I understand why, if you got 12 feet of water that goes roaring through your living room and kitchen, and your business goes away, I can understand why people leave. That's pretty discouraging. Happily I didn't have to confront that, but I hope the people that stay will be active and do something good for the community.

RH: Is there anything you want to add?

RP: Well, (pause) it's been emotional having this little interview.

RH: Yes.

RP: I've enjoyed doing it and hope it's of some value to you. It's Shabbat, I hope you'll stay and have a drink with us, it's part of what New Orleans is about.

RH: Thank you. That means we should shut the camera down. (laughter)

RP: Thank you.

RH: Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]