

Florence Schornstein Transcript

Rosalind Hinton: This is Rosalind Hinton interviewing Florence "Flo" Schornstein at her home at 1530 7th Street in --

Florence Schornstein: 1530 7th Street

RH: -- 1530 -- I don't know why I put that -- 15 37th Street in New Orleans, Louisiana. Today is July 31st, 2006. I'm conducting the interview for the Katrina Jewish Voices Project of the Jewish Women's Archive and the Goldring Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life. Florence Schornstein, do you agree to be interviewed and understand that the interview will be video-recorded?

FS: I do.

RH: Thank you very much. Florence, let's just begin with some background. Where were you born?

FS: I was born here in New Orleans at Touro Infirmary.

RH: What neighborhood did you grow up in?

FS: I grew up in the uptown area, not very far from here.

RH: OK. And do you mind giving me your age? Or your year?

FS: I'm 71.

RH: Seventy-one. OK.

FS: And you're supposed to fall off your chair right now.

RH: OK. (laughter) You're a very young 71.

FS: Thank you, I hope so.

RH: How did your family come to be in New Orleans in this Gulf Coast area?

FS: My grandmother was born and raised in Donalsonville, Louisiana, and she married my grandfather who had immigrated from Alsace-Lorraine and was a merchant in this area -- first in Baton Rouge and, then, later in New Orleans. And that's what brought my mother's side of the family here. My mother and her sister were actually born at home on Milan Street, not far from where we are right now. And my grandmother who lived to be 91 never, ever in her life was in a hospital. She had her two children at home and she had a healthy, charmed life. So, that's how that side of the family came to be here.

My father was born in Cincinnati but he was raised in Pensacola, Florida and he came here as a young salesperson and met my mother, actually, in Vicksburg, Mississippi where her sister had married and moved. And they married here in New Orleans actually at home and lived here all their lives.

RH: OK. Could you describe the neighborhood you lived in, really before the hurricane because you're living in the same neighborhood now? What does the neighborhood look like and --

FS: You know, I have to tell you that my neighborhood looks exactly as it did before the hurricane. I was thinking about this earlier. If I'm at home and if I'm in the general area that I spend most of my time in -- whether it's to go to the grocery store or the dry cleaner's or out to a restaurant or even to some of my friends -- I would not think anything had ever happened here in New Orleans.

My neighborhood is in tact. My neighbors are all back, their homes are in tact. We all had some -- not all but many of us had some degree of damage that was easily

remedied. We had no flooding here. We had a tree on our roof here. It was an annoyance because we had inside work that had to be done as a result. We had to wait awhile to get all this done but we were able to live here, once the power and the drinkable water were available to us here. So I cannot tell you that there has been any change here in my neighborhood.

RH: OK. Tell me, how do you feel about this neighborhood? Tell me about your connection to this. We're in what I would call the "Garden District"?

FS: We are in the Garden District, and it's a pleasure and a privilege to live in the Garden District. It's a beautiful neighborhood, it's a historic neighborhood, it's a part of the city that people all over the world recognize. It's a wonderful neighborhood to walk in or to drive in. It has all sorts of facilities that are available to us. We're close to Magazine Street, we're right, one house off of St. Charles Avenue. So we feel very blessed to be here, and we love this part of the city.

We lived, for most of our married life, on Soniat Street which I think is thought of as the University Section, not far from here at all. We've never lived very far from where we are right now.

RH: And I'm going to call that like five minutes away.

FS: Yes.

RH: When you (laughter) --

FS: At the most.

RH: Are there any traditions or stories or rituals that were important to you to be involved in the city, the life of the city pre-Katrina?

FS: Well, I've been involved in the life of the city for most of my adult life. I did grow up and go to college here. I've never lived anywhere else in my whole life, and I've always loved New Orleans very deeply and still do.

I became involved originally in the community through my activities and association with the Council of Jewish Women. I was president of that organization from 1968 to 1970. Prior to the presidency, I was, of course, very involved at the highest levels as vice-presidents of every department in that organization.

But I was very privileged at that time to become involved
in

Civil Rights Movement, and that was, really, as a result of my association with the National Council of Jewish Women and the tremendous learning experience I had in that capacity of the need for equality of opportunity and for the human rights needs of our community and, indeed, our country. And I became very involved at that time and remained involved always.

That, of course, leads me into the general community outside of the Jewish community where I became friends with and associates of many people in the community -- African-Americans, as well as white people who were involved in trying to make things better for everybody.

And I was very active at the time in the organizations that were formed for desegregating schools, public schools here, desegregating, really, the community, and one thing has led to another.

I became very active in the community at large and was asked to take the position, the first one I had ever had, paid, as the only aide to a member of the New Orleans City Council. And I served in that capacity for about five years, and then when the Council Member left that post, I ran for his office and -- It was a district race. There were

something like 26,000 voters in that district and I lost the race by a little over 200 votes.

RH: Oooh.

FS: New Orleans just wasn't ready for me yet. It was an all-male Council. I --

RH: Who did you work for? Do you mind saying --

FS: Frank Friedler.

RH: OK.

FS: I don't know if you know that name.

RH: Mm-hmm. I do know the name.

FS: He was on the City Council in the '70s.

RH: OK.

FS: And --

RH: And what year did you run for office?

FS: 1980.

RH: 1980. OK.

FS: And it was a great learning experience, and it was a heartbreaking experience. But it also led to my next position with the city which was becoming the Director of the city's Parks Department. The Mayor at that time was our first African-American mayor, Dutch Morial. I had known him from back in the '60s, him and his family, and he was Mayor from 1978 to 1982 and did a good job. But as our first African-American Mayor, there were a lot of people in town who would have liked to have seen him replaced and he had

opposition. And he took it very seriously. He had strong opposition because his opponent was well financed and well supported by a lot of members of the white community, and I supported him.

And so, after he got re-elected, he asked me if I would take the position as Director of the City's Park Department, and I said, "Oh, you've got me mixed up with somebody else. I don't have a green thumb. I don't know anything about plants, trees, flowers or anything like that. He said, "No, you'll have the expertise on your staff who do know that. I need somebody there who can engage the community because we will never have a big enough budget for that department to do it justice."

So he really challenged me to go into the community and to try to activate the community in the work of my department. And I took that seriously and I created the Parkway Partners Program at that time, which still exists. It's a not-for-profit organization that is linked to the department because it asks people in the community to either help with their own sweat labor on City Property, to cut grass, to pick up weeds, to pick up trash, to plant whatever [or all] and also is privately funded as a non-profit organization. It never has gotten any direct funding whatsoever from the City. It doesn't even ask for it. We raise all of our funds through fundraisers, contributions from corporations, individuals, businesses, foundations, locally and nationally.

It's a one-of-a-kind program. It's been copied all over the country. We've even had some people from other countries to study it, and that's what I did for the community at that time.

RH: So, are you still involved with the Parks and Parkway?

FS: I'm still involved with the Parkway Partners Program.

RH: Program.

FS: Oh, yeah.

RH: OK.

FS: And it really strengthened my abilities in development and fundraising which have been very successful. I went -- Well, I'll tell you the beginning of it. During all of the years that I worked full-time, whether for the City Council or in the 15 years I was Director of the Parks Department, I remained a very active volunteer as well and I became the first woman to chair the Governing Board of Touro Infirmary and so far the only woman. And after I did that for about two years, the CEO of the hospital said he wanted to meet me one day because he wanted to make a change in the position of Executive Director of the Touro Infirmary Foundation.

We went to lunch and I said, you know, what kind of person are you looking for? What are the qualifications here? And he said, "Well, what do you think they should be?" because I had helped to found the Foundation as a Member of the Governing Board. And I said, "Well, I think you really need somebody who knows this community, who can reach powerful people, someone for whom CEOs will open their doors to tell the Touro story and to appeal for funds, and someone who knows the Touro constituency, which is fairly limited but very deep. The affection for that hospital, the affection for the traditions of that hospital run very, very strong."

RH: Do you mind telling me a little about the constituency of the Touro Hospital -- Infirmary?

FS: Well, the constituency is former patients --

RH: Mm-hmm.

FS: It's the medical community that serves the hospital --

RH: Mm-hmm.

FS: -- and its families, long-time New Orleans families, primarily from the Jewish community who have tremendous affection for Touro, a good experience with Touro and who want to see it supported as the not-for-profit, full-service hospital that it is. Touro's over 150 years old, and its roots go, run very deep in the Jewish community. It existed originally because Jewish doctors didn't have anywhere to practice. And, of course, that is no longer the case, and the patient load at Touro is very, very diverse. And Touro doesn't turn anybody away and, today, is having a real challenging time because of that because there's no charity hospital and because people come into that emergency room and need attention and nobody pays. They can't pay, the state can't pay, the federal government doesn't pay. If they don't meet certain qualifications, Touro has to pay, and that is taking a tremendous toll on Touro Infirmary at this post-Katrina time. But Touro was the first hospital to open back after Katrina and continues, from what I can tell -- I'm no longer, as you know, the Executive Director of the Foundation but I believe that the fundraising for the hospital remains successful. I did serve in that capacity for five years.

RH: As the Executive Director?

FS: As the Executive Director of the Foundation. I did because --

RH: So, the CEO said, "Well, what I really brought you to lunch for --

FS: No, the CEO said, "Well, you just described you."

RH: (laughter)

FS: And it was a really big decision for me to leave the City and to give up the Chair of the Governing Board, which I felt I was making a real contribution in, to take this position. But it was another challenge and it was for an institution that I had grown to love and I did it and I'm glad. After that, I retired and I still work very hard but nobody

pays me anymore.

RH: (laughter) OK. Let's, let's move a little -- This is a great baseline here because I think we're going to come back to some of these things post-Katrina. But, right now, let's hear your Katrina story. Where were you when the storm was on its way? And --

FS: Well, we have three daughters and they're all married and have children of their own. And one of our daughters lives in Atlanta and her daughter's bat mitzvah was on August the 27th.

RH: OK.

FS: Our whole family -- and even our extended family, Richard's sister and her family were there. And my cousins were there and, of course, my daughter and her family from here were there. So the good thing about that is that we all went to Atlanta on Thursday the 25th with no knowledge that the hurricane was going to come here. We knew there was a hurricane in the Gulf. It was going to Appalachicola, Florida, at that time. We went to Atlanta and had a wonderful family experience, and we went with party clothes for three days and, of course, didn't get to come back.

Richard and I stayed in Atlanta at the hotel for 18 days and we're very fortunate that we have a second home and we were able to go there in Florida and stay there for two months or longer until we could come back here, until there was power and drinkable water.

RH: When did you, when you were away, you started watching the news, I assume.

FS: Yeah.

RH: What did you think when you saw the TV?

FS: At first, we were very concerned that there was a hurricane coming here, that it might be a Category 5, which we were very frightened about. But we were glad we weren't here and that we were all together. And I was so relieved, particularly, that our daughter from New Orleans and her family were with us, and I didn't have to wonder, where were they? Were they on a highway in bumper-to-bumper traffic somewhere with the storm coming? Or how would I reach them and find them? So, thank God, they were with us. The people we loved the most were all in Atlanta.

But then when we heard about the breach and our daughter and her family lived in Lakewood South. She became, of course, very, very upset and said, "I know that we are losing our house." And we were trying to say, "Well, let's wait and see. We don't know." And we really didn't know, for sure, how bad it was, even though we knew about the breaches from CNN. We were just all glued to the television and, of course, as time went on, she did learn that their house had been flooded and worse even than that was that their, my granddaughter's beloved cats were drowned.

RH: Mmm. Gosh.

FS: So, it's been a very painful, it's been a very painful experience for us in the ensuing months because of the great sadness that our daughter and her family had experienced in the loss of their home and in the loss of their pets. They stayed in Atlanta until Christmas. Very fortunately, our granddaughters were accepted at the private school where their cousins, go in Atlanta --

RH: Could you tell me the name of this school [they went to]?

FS: It's the [Padeia] School, a marvelous, wonderful school, and they took in those girls and -- They did well not only academically but they did well in acclimating themselves to the new environment. They're big girls. One of them is going to be a senior in high school. And the other one was in eighth grade and her first cousin in Atlanta was also in

the eighth grade, so that was helpful. But they did well socially and academically and, really -- Although they missed their school here and really wanted to come back they're students at McGee, they were doing fine.

My son-in-law who is in the same business that Richard's in -- the financial services business -- really had a hard time because in that kind of business, it's a business based on relationships. People trust you to give them the right advice, whether it's estate planning or insur-- life insurance or whatever and if they don't know you -- as they didn't know him in Atlanta -- it's pretty hard. He tried very, very hard.

They rented a lovely home. My daughter was totally depressed and miserable the whole time she was there. In spite of the fact that her sister was there, in spite of the fact that they, her sister, did everything in the world she could for her, and they have a very close relationship, she missed home, she was very, very unhappy. And, of course, you know, if your child is unhappy, you're unhappy.

RH: Right. I was just about to say I assume that you were feeling a lot of their feelings with them.

FS: Oh, I was just, I was really worried about them. I really was worried about them. And when they decided that they were coming back, Richard and I looked all over the city for a suitable place for them to rent. And Wendy came back once and looked herself. It was hard to find any place to live because the area that they wanted to live in which was the area that hadn't really been terribly damaged was very much in demand.

So, fortunately, it all turned out well. They have what might be one of the loveliest apartments in the city on Jefferson Avenue, and they are looking for a house and they're going to -- Their house in Lakewood South is on the market. It hasn't been sold yet.

The other good thing was that they had a two-story house and my daughter, has, well, the family has a very extensive library. And all of their books were upstairs. So they

were fine. My daughter has been both a professional and an amateur photographer; she's very, very good. And she had 29 picture albums of every minute in both of her children's lives, every family event -- even trips and scenes that she would see that she would photograph. She had 29 albums filled with pictures, and they were downstairs.

But, for some reason, on Saturday night, when we were at the bat mitzvah party and it looked like the storm was coming here, she called the security guard of her neighborhood and said, "Please do me a favor" -- he had a key to her house -- "just go in and get my photo-albums upstairs for me." So, she saved her books and she saved her pictures.

RH: Oh, how marvelous.

FS: And that, oh, that was so important, that was so important. You know, that's when you know what really matters? So, they've had a really, a really hard time; they had a really hard time.

RH: Talk a little more about, you know, that priorities change and you learn what really matters. How did that kind of come about for you and your family?

FS: Well, I guess, you know, when you get to my stage of life, you kind of do it with a sense of what's important in terms of your values, and I think they did, too. But I'm just noting the fact that of all the things that, that needed, that if you could have saved something and you had those two things -- your books which they loved so much and your photographs -- and you think about having no record of your family --

RH: Right.

FS: And so many people don't. I mean, people are still trying to resurrect what's left of their family history that way. And it's got to be one of the greatest losses people have had throughout this whole experience. So we're really happy now that they're back. They have a lot of challenges. They do need to, you know, have a permanent dwelling

because spending all this money on rent is just, it's, you've got nothing to show for it, they do have this lovely place but it's a lot of money just month after month. It would be better to be buying a house and they're, they're looking very, very hard.

Their elder daughter who is going to be a senior in high school spent the last semester of her junior year just recently at a high school in Israel that was planned before Katrina and, fortunately, Katrina did not change that, and she went for four months. It's a Reform Jewish school for American Jewish children, young people. There were over 100 kids -- I think she said "101" American kids were there in that program. It was the most fabulous, wonderful experience. And Wendy, my daughter, was able to go for two weeks on the parents' pilgrimage and saw for herself how wonderful it was. And, fortunately, Allison, our granddaughter, returned a few weeks before the war broke out.

RH: That's a blessing, too.

FS: Oh, dear Lord. I said, "Now, all I have to worry about is her driving around New Orleans." (laughter)

RH: And, for our video viewers, actually, tell, explain why that feels dangerous, driving around New Orleans right now.

FS: Well, driving anywhere is dangerous.

RH: Mm-hmm.

FS: Driving is a dangerous thing. Driving around New Orleans is a challenge now because we don't have traffic lights working at every intersection. We have people running red lights when we do have them working. People speed. I've never seen traffic police anywhere, stopping anybody for any of those things. I think driving anywhere is dangerous. Driving in Atlanta's probably more dangerous than driving in New Orleans.

RH: OK. I was thinking perhaps, post-Katrina, you felt that --

FS: I don't think so.

RH: -- it's a little more of a challenge.

FS: I do think that post-Katrina, without traffic lights -- I know that it was announced last week that 80% of the traffic lights had been repaired and it was announced with a sense of accomplishment. And I, frankly, think after 10 months, 100% of the traffic lights ought to be fixed, and I think a lot of people feel that way.

RH: OK. Well, before we get -- I want to get back to that, too. Let's just finish up with your story. You and your husband left Atlanta and went down to where in Florida?

FS: We have a place on the beach, in Santa Rosa beach. It's between [Sandestin] and Seaside.

RH: Mm-hmm. And how long did you stay there?

FS: Over two months? We came back three times. We came back one day just to see our house and it was 98 degrees out. And, of course, there was no power in the house and the house was pretty much of a mess. We did have some water come in from the patio. It wasn't floodwater, it was rainwater, you know, that had come in because our generator wasn't working during the storm. And the generator wasn't working because Entergy cut off the natural gas in the city and that was what powered the generator.

So we did have some water that had come in, not enough to, thank goodness, ruin anything. It did stain our drapes downstairs but it didn't ruin any of the furniture or rugs in the house. So we saw that but a lot of bugs had come in with it and [leaves] and it was pretty much of a mess. And it was just too hot to clean up. We just got some things from upstairs and put them in our rental car and went back to Florida. We couldn't drive our

car because our gates were electric.

RH: So what kind of things did you decide you needed when you were --

FS: Well, we took our passports, and I don't know really why we took them --we weren't leaving the country -- and jewelry which was a mistake because the jewelry was in a safe, and I don't have one in Florida. And I packed it all up and took it with me. We took clothes. We had no clothes. And that was pretty much what we took, that was pretty much what we took.

RH: When was that first time you came --

FS: We came back; a couple of weeks later, we brought it all back.

RH: (laughter) When was that, when you first came into the City, what were your thoughts when you came in?

FS: Oh, it was, it was just a disaster. First of all, just being able to come into the City was a tremendous problem; they weren't letting people in. You could drive all the way from Florida which is a little over four hours for us and get here and not be able to get in. So, we got a signed letter from the Mayor saying we could come in, and it was very hard to get because it was hard to communicate back and forth and it had to be faxed to us in Florida. It wasn't the original because we didn't want to wait for the mail and we got it. But by the time we got it and got here, nobody wanted, nobody asked to see it. We came in, we had to come in through the causeway because the Highway 11 bridges were out, came across the causeway and came down the river road and all the way down St. Charles Avenue to 7th Street. We were just shocked at what we saw.

RH: Did you come back in in September or October, do you remember?

FS: I think it was early October, I want to say. It was still hot and the trees on St. Charles Avenue which had been something that I had nourished and cared for for all those years were, were just -- It was just a shock to see. It really was.

And the downed metal light posts and, of course, no traffic signals anywhere. And debris everywhere and refrigerators lining St. Charles Avenue. It was just, it was a total shock.

The day we drove up here, we were the only people here anywhere. The building was empty, there was no security or anything there. Seventh Street, no one was out there, nobody had come back yet. It was very eerie. When we walked up to our gate to come in, it was totally blocked by leaves and branches. We had to push things out of the way.

I said, "I feel like Scarlett returning to Tara after the War." It was, it was devastated, the whole front of, the whole front, the sidewalk, the streets, everything was just full of trash. And we went outside to look at this tree on our roof and it had not come through the inside of the house but it had caused rain to come in in our master bedroom and bath and we had a, big mess up there from that.

And, of course, the refrigerator had to go. We had been on a cruise to Alaska right before this and had salmon flown down for our freezer.

RH: Oh, dear.

FS: But you can imagine, you can just imagine. We found some guys working in the next block from Atlanta who had been hired to do some tree work for the City and we asked them when they got off work, would they come and help us and they did. They got the refrigerator out and they got the tree off the roof. So that was helpful.

RH: Did you spend the night?

FS: Oh, no. Oh, no, we went, we went to the Royal Sonesta where I know the General Manager of that hotel and I had called him from the road and said, "Is it possible for us to have a room for the night," and he said, "Oh, Flo, you'll have a room." And we were the only people there who were not with FEMA, CNN, the FBI or the 87th Airborne.

RH: (laughter)

FS: There was no food in the hotel and there was no drinkable water there either; we had brought a lot of bottled water with us. But we had an air-conditioned room and a TV because they had power, they had generators that were working. So we spent the night there and then we went back to Florida the next day.

And then the other two times I came back, I came back to see my dentist who luckily was in his office on Metairie Road and could see me. And one of those nights, we spent the night with a friend in Metairie who had air-conditioning. And the other time, I think we came and went on the same day.

We came one day to try -- I think it was all at the same time -- to try to get our car and we still couldn't get our car out. It was so hot. Richard said, "If I had an hour-and-a-half, I could get that gate open, but I think I'd faint in the heat." We had our car. We had a rental car, so we just continued to use that.

And then, once the power was back and we could drink the water, we came home on November the 2nd.

RH: So, basically, your decision to come back was based really around power and --

FS: Power and water.

RH: Power and water (laughter).

FS: Power and water. Exactly. Exactly. And it was hard for us to come back and know that our kids were still in Atlanta, you know, and they couldn't come back yet. It was about six weeks before they were able to come back between the time we came back and they came back.

RH: Was there any time that you thought they may not come back or --

FS: Yes, oh, yes. Yes. They were seriously considering staying in Atlanta. My daughter would not have been happy there. I guess, she could have finally adjusted -- I don't know -- but it was because it was just going to be very, very hard for my son-in-law to get a business started there. He tried really hard to do it. He was very concerned about business here, you know, what he would find in terms of his clients and the base of his business that he had established for over this long period of time here in New Orleans.

So he continued even after they came back here, he continued to try to develop business in Atlanta on the basis that if business wasn't as good here as it needed to be for him that he would also have some business there. But it just really never worked out.

My son-in-law in Atlanta who is a partner at the largest law firm in the Southeastern United States really tried hard to introduce him to people, and he had other friends in Atlanta who tried to introduce him, but it just takes a long time, and you have to be very full-time at it.

RH: You had your family with you and once before you mentioned that was a real blessing --

FS: Oh, absolutely.

RH: Who else did you want to find and how did you find [them]?

FS: Well, you know, I was still looking for people. Every now and then, I'd think of somebody I haven't seen -- and I don't know if everybody's had this experience -- but I find when friends run into each other after all the time, you embrace each other, even though you probably never did that before --

RH: (laughter)

FS: -- you know. There's a lot of hugging and kissing and "How's your house?" and "Where are you?" and that sort of thing. And that's still going on. Yesterday, when we left the concert, we ran into some people that we hadn't seen and we had that same experience where we were all so glad to see each other and saying, you know, "Where are you?" and "How's your house?" and "What about the family?" and that sort of thing. So that continues to go on.

I really looked early on for people that I do work with. I chair the Women's Leadership Initiative now, the United Way, and I looked for the staff, the United Way staff. And they were, they were active in doing the important work that the United Way had to do at that time, but they were all spread out. Some were in Covington, some were in Baton Rouge, some were in Lafayette, and they had a network that was going and they were working, which was a wonderful thing because their assistance was needed more than ever.

RH: What type of work were they doing?

FS: They were answering a lot of emergency kinds of questions: Where can I go for this? How can you help me with that? United Way up until Katrina always had a system of a family of agencies that performed different services in their field -- family service, traveler's aid, food bank, all kinds of, many, many agencies. With Katrina, they changed their procedure and began to give support to all kinds of groups that -- they have to be not-for-profit groups -- but who were aiding families and who were meeting needs in the Greater New Orleans area, and they are continuing to do that. The Women's Leadership

Initiative which I chair focuses its work on the unique human service and health needs of women and children, and our focus is on child care. It has been all along but particularly now. Of the 271 child-care centers that were open in New Orleans before Katrina, only 58 have opened so far, and we're working to help get some of them open.

I had a wonderful experience with one of the child-care centers that we had singled out for -- We had three centers that we chose before the hurricane through our Success by Six Program to work with, to receive national accreditation and to be mentored by three other organizations in the city: The Jewish Community Center, Kingsley House and what was then Memorial Hospital. And, of course, that one doesn't exist anymore and the others have picked up the slack.

But we got a playground built at one of our centers a couple of weeks ago, from scratch, starting at 7:00 in the morning and finishing at 2:00. And it is the most fabulous thing. It's done by a national not-for-profit called, "Kaboom." It's about a \$70,000 installation and we got 225 volunteers to go out there and build this playground under their guidance and they insisted it be done in one day and it was, and it's fabulous. And that child-care center is going to open on August the 15th.

RH: That's marvelous.

FS: It is. It's --

RH: This is what have you been doing since the storm --

FS: This is what I've been doing --

RH: (overlapping dialogue) This is what you've been doing --

FS: This is what I've been doing since the storm. I'm also an appointed Member of the City Sewerage and Water Board, and that is a very criti- -- but it's always a critical agency

but it is especially critical right now. The infrastructure is crumbling. I won't go into all the details but every day another problem surfaces with our sewer and water system, and I don't know if, I think most people here have experienced very low water pressure from time to time and it's a very serious hazard in the face of fire. And the FEMA heli-co-water helicopters have gone and there are some very, very serious problems being faced there. FEMA has promised funding that hasn't come through and the Sewerage and Water Board doesn't have the money to do a lot of what needs to be done. It's the same story all over town. People say, "Why aren't we spending the money?" Well, we don't have the money. The money has been appropriated. It has to come to the City through the State. This is all those billions, the \$11 billion, the \$13 billion, that the President has signed off on. We don't have that money here in New Orleans yet. So a lot of things that need to get done are not being done because there's no money.

RH: So that's certainly got to be a frustration that you're, you --

FS: Well, I think it's a frustration for everybody, but it's especially a frustration for the people who can't come back, who need that money to either repair or replace their housing. It's a real problem because without housing, they can't come back. But even with housing, they can't get jobs if there's no public transportation and if there's no childcare. So there are lots of problems facing us out there and -- There is a tipping point. I just don't know when it is.

RH: When you say "a tipping point," explain (overlapping dialogue) a little bit...

FS: I think there's going to be a time that could -- There could come a time -- and I'm praying that it doesn't come -- but there could come a time when without a solution to the problems that we face in this community, we're going to lose too many people.

RH: And if we lose too many people, the City will not be --

FS: It can't thrive. It can't thrive. And tourism, which is our number 1 industry can't succeed, if we can't have workers. And the service-industry workers that we have all relied on and taken for granted all of our lives are the ones who are missing. They are the ones who need the housing and the public transportation and the support services to be able to live and work in this community. They are the people who work in the hotels and the restaurants and the dry-cleaning establishments and the drugstores who have been servicing all of us all of their lives and serving our visitors to the community, and if they can't come back -- I mean, how many of us go wherever we go and we're told, "We have shortened our hours because we don't have enough help" or "We used to be open for lunch but we can't do that anymore. We're lucky we can open for dinner because we don't have enough help in the restaurant." Or they might be anywhere. I mean, hotels, the only way the hotels opened in the very beginning was that they housed their workers and that couldn't continue. So, there are tremendous problems here, tremendous.

And when you say, "How do you feel about your neighborhood?" I feel great. I can go for weeks without knowing what's out there.

RH: Mm-hmm. But (overlapping dialogue; inaudible)

FS: But I know, but I know.

RH: -- But in a sense you don't feel great, though, because you also know what's --

FS: Because I know. Exactly. And it's important to know. It's important to know and it's important for people to come to this City and see it for themselves.

RH: Well, you've been involved in politics for years. How did you feel about the Mayor's race? How do you feel about the Administration right now and what's going on?

FS: Well, I have to tell you. I have been involved in politics for years.

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RH: -- Schornstein's interview with "Katrina's Jewish Voices." I think since we've had a little break in the tape, it might be a nice time to go into the Jewish community --

FS: OK.

RH: -- because we certainly don't want to, we want to spend some time here. Describe the Jewish community, what it's like to you. What do you feel is distinctive about it?

FS: I think one of the distinctions of the New Orleans Jewish community is that there is such a large part of it that is native to New Orleans. This is not a community that's had a whole lot of people come in and out. New people have come, but they stay, they've stayed. Now what that is like after Katrina is another matter.

Several years ago, when I was on the Board of the Jewish Federation, I chaired a demographic study of the Jewish community and, at that time, there were 13,000 members of the Jewish community. And that's --

RH: When you say "several years ago," could you tell me when?

FS: Oh, it must have been in the '70s some time --

RH: In the '70s?

FS: -- I think -- or early '80s. But now I'm told that that number is about 6,000. And that is for the Greater New Orleans area, that's the North Shore and Jefferson, as well as Orleans parishes, etc. Now this has tremendous, tremendous implications for the Jewish community, the shrinkage --

RH: Do you want to talk a little about that?

FS: I think that -- Of course, it's going to have a tremendous effect on fundraising for the Jewish community. The Jewish community after Katrina has received large sums from other Jewish communities as well as national Jewish organizations, and that's going to see us over the next couple of years. They are asking members of the Jewish community who can to continue to contribute individually. But I think that services within the Jewish community are going to have to be carefully examined. I'm not active in this area at all, but I was speaking to someone just today who is. And whereas we need the services that we have, I think they need to be looked at, combined wherever possible and reduced wherever possible.

First of all, the Jewish Federation has no Director, no Executive Direction. The Executive Director has left for another position, and I think it's going to be hard to replace that person, although interviews are being held and they will replace him, just as we'll all be replaced one way or the other, some time or other. But I do think that the challenge of the Jewish community post-Katrina is to be able to serve the Jewish community within the constraints that are going to be there, both in terms of the size of that community and the funds that are going to ultimately be available when some of this outside generosity is no longer there.

And I think that's true of everything. It's certainly true in the United Way. The United Way has raised millions of dollars from other United Ways and from United Way of America which is the national sort of umbrella group -- and I served on that Board as well. But, you know, that outside largesse is going to go away in a couple of years, and we're all going to be faced with what can we do with the limited resources that we will have at hand? And right now we have two Jewish Community Centers. And I'm not saying we don't need them both but I'm worried about how we're going to support our agencies in the Jewish community, given the circumstances.

RH: Do you see yourself involved in any of those decisions?

FS: No, I don't think so. I don't think so. I don't think I'm going to be involved in any of the decision-making or planning. But as someone who has been in the past, I know what the processes are and I am concerned and would certainly want to participate in any way I could.

RH: What do you think the Jewish community's relationship has been to the larger City of [New Orleans].

FS: Oh, it's been a model relationship. The New Orleans Jewish community has always been very integral to the community at large. And, in my own case, and I believe in the case of many other people, too, we see and have seen our participation in the larger community as an expression of our Judaism and the special qualities that Jews can bring to programs and services that are for others.

You know, Hillel has taught us: "If I am not for myself, who am I? But if I'm only for myself, what am I?" "And, if not now, when?" And I think a lot of us have made that a mantra in terms of service to the community-at-large and have brought special Jewish values not only to the community but have enhanced them within ourselves as a result of our involvement in the community.

RH: So, it's a very interesting thought that you've enlivened the social services in the City --

FS: Absolutely.

RH: -- with a sense of some of the frameworks of Judaism.

FS: Well -- Absolutely. And we are taught that it is not for us to undertake all the challenges but neither is it for us to refuse. That's part of our teaching. And we are also taught that to save a single life is to save the whole world. And I think that those of us who take those teachings seriously have felt very comfortable in our participation in the

larger community. The Jewish community also has contributed not only talent and time and expertise to the larger community but tremendous, tremendous funding. The Jewish community has always been so generous to the community, and it's supported the museum and the symphony and the opera, as well as organizations and agencies in the community that serve the community-at-large. We've had some exemplary examples in this community in the past whose footsteps the rest of us can only barely tiptoe in.

RH: So what do you think about being pulled in all of these different directions, too, because the Jewish community has been so integral in the funding of a lot of the City, as you said, the art museums, the social services, the -- But the community now is in great need, the Jewish community --

FS: Well, the whole community is in great need. And the Jewish community can only thrive as long as the general community thrives. We can't isolate ourselves and expect to really succeed. So those of us who can have to do what we can within our ability to do so. And it's always been that way. No, that hasn't changed.

RH: How do you think the Jewish community, the New Orleans community and the larger Jewish communities conducted itself through Katrina?

FS: Oh, I think exemplarily. I think that the Jewish community has certainly done what it can. There haven't been a lot of events, but our synagogues have certainly been active, our community has risen to the occasion to the extent that it can. The current turmoil and war in the Middle East is pre-occupying all of us at this time and we've had meetings in the Jewish community that we've attended. And I hope that the community-at-large is there with us on that.

I think that the Jewish community, to the extent that it can, will always be in the forefront of seeking progress for the whole community and that we're all doing what we can.

People are pre-occupied with their own life, there's no question about it -- more so maybe than in the past, trying to get their lives back together, trying to make sure that their children's education is not drastically changing as the school populations shrink. The whole matter of public education is a problem in the community, with the fragmented system now, with charter schools and school-board schools and State schools. We have a three-legged approach now to public education that is concerning a lot of people.

RH: Tell me about that because, again, you have been involved in the Civil Rights Movement with SOS, which was a group that was integrating --

FS: I was a part of that, I was part of that, yeah.

RH: -- integrating the schools. And so you've really been very active in the public school system.

FS: Well, I haven't, in all honesty. I have not been active in the public school system. I was active in SOS -- Save our Schools -- because it was so important to integrate the schools. Now, of course, a lot of people think that today the schools are not integrated.

But most of us sent our children to private schools. I went to private school, my husband went to private school. Public education in New Orleans has not been an exemplary aspect of our community throughout history, much less now. And we have supported private schools in New Orleans to a great extent, financially and as well with our kids, a lot of us.

RH: Do you see that changing any?

FS: Oh, no.

RH: No?

FS: No, I do not. Benjamin Franklin has come in as an answer for a lot of people and, of course, Luscher which is a model elementary and middle school is an exemplary school. But that's only two schools. There probably will be some others as time goes on.

I was speaking to someone yesterday about the charter schools, and they've been very active in getting charter schools up and going and very, very positive about the future of charter schools. I don't know enough about it. I think the jury's still out, probably.

RH: So, what has it meant to be Jewish during this experience?

FS: Which experience?

RH: The Katrina experience.

FS: I don't believe that being Jewish has had much to do with my Katrina experience. Being Jewish is who I am. It's what I am. I can't isolate it as something that has influenced me in coming back into the community and in serving the community except to say that I bring my Judaism with me wherever I go. Whatever I do in the community at large, I'm doing as a Jewish woman, first and foremost, and I bring whatever that is to the task.

RH: Has any relationship to the Jewish community changed post-Katrina for you --

FS: No.

RH: -- in any way? Have any rituals become more meaningful or routine --

FS: No, no, because I don't, I don't have a lot of rituals that we follow in truth. We spent Yom Kippur in Atlanta. We were in Florida at the time but we went to Atlanta to spend the holiday with two of our three daughters who were living there at the time. And it was hard for us not to be here at Temple Sinai, which is our temple and where we grew up and where our grandfathers were on the board and all of that stuff -- a long history with

the temple. And my granddaughter, one of my young-- my younger granddaughter from here, really did not like not being at Temple Sinai for Yom Kippur. She said, "I never thought I'd say this, but I really miss Temple Sinai." It just wasn't the same, we don't --

RH: What was the temple in Atlanta?

FS: Also, Temple Sinai.

RH: Oh, OK. (laughter)

FS: (laughter) It was another Reform Congregation and we had just been there for the bat mitzvah. We felt comfortable there, people were very nice and the Rabbi was very nice. It wasn't home, it wasn't home. But I don't think that anything much has changed in our lives as a result of Katrina in terms of our Jewish activities or our Jewish affiliations, or anything like that. I really don't. I am concerned about -- [beep] Oh, [he's here]. I am concerned about the Jewish organizations.

RH: Do you want me to shut this off for a minute because we can take a break and --

FS: I don't know who that is. Yeah, could we? (inaudible) ability to continue to be effective. I'm especially thinking about the Council of Jewish Women when I say this. We don't know at this point where a lot of our members are and the organization has not been able to fundraise this year with its traditional means -- we will get back to it -- and we have not because the members who are here, and the leadership as well, because everybody's been so pre-occupied with getting re-established in the community, those who are back, they have not been able to focus on a lot of the programs of the organization.

I worry greatly about the future of the organization, I have to tell you quite frankly. I'm an honorary national Vice President as well, and I had hoped that the national organization would have been here by now.

RH: And they haven't?

FS: We had a very important staff member from Washington here in May. She is the Director of our Washington office which does all of our legislative issues-related work, and she was here, you know, overnight. And she did have a devastation tour and was terribly moved by it, as you can well imagine, and has gone back to her office and is encouraging members in other communities to do what they can to get their lawmakers in Washington to come to New Orleans to see for themselves. And a lot have, as you know, been here -- not enough -- but a lot have.

And I think there's a lot of understanding at the national level in Washington of the needs here. I just, I hope that people realize that this community was not destroyed by Katrina. Katrina was the catalyst but what destroyed this community is the breach of the levees, which is a federal failing and which needs to be remedied and rectified by the Federal Government.

I'm not sure that that is -- You know, people talk about Katrina and they don't talk about what really caused all this devastation here. We have all lived through hurricanes. That's why people thought they'd leave for two or three days and they'd come back and they'd turn on their lights and they'd go about their business because had it been -- Katrina did not come in as any Category 5, and the community could have survived Katrina had it not been for the breaches in the levees which is purely, purely the fault of the Corps of Engineers, totally. And that just needs to be known and needs to be acted on.

And the Corps is perfectly happy to just say, "Oh, we were supposed to put those pumps in there but we're not going to be able to get around to that yet." And, "These gates that we were going to put up to keep Lake Pontchartrain from coming in these canals, well, we're not going to meet our deadline. We may have it done by fall, maybe." I mean, very laissez-faire, you know.

RH: So, you have a real frustration at --

FS: Oooh!

RH: -- the federal level?

FS: Absolutely, absolutely, I have, I have. And I think that that we're all scared of what could happen as a result.

RH: And as far as the national, with the NCJW, what would you like to have them do for the local -- Would you like some funding?

FS: They've been helpful in forgiving funding on our part, for the national organization, which is very important. You know, I would have liked if a delegation or even a national officer would have come to New Orleans right afterwards, when we were back, to get the state of the organization and to see what our needs might be or -- That didn't happen.

The National President, actually, is coming in October to speak to the organization at a meeting, at a general meeting. And I asked if she would have time for a tour, a devastation tour, and the answer was, "Well, we're not sure. She won't be here very long." I feel if she comes and doesn't see, then her visit will not be as valuable.

RH: I, I understand. So you must feel, how do you feel about the lateness of the hour in regard to --

FS: Oh, I think it's late, I think it's late.

RH: I'm sitting here looking at some of these questions.

FS: And they don't apply.

RH: Well, they do and they don't.

FS: (laughter)

RH: The people who have moved. How do you feel? Do you feel --

FS: I feel deserted.

RH: You do?

FS: I unders- -- You know, I've thought about that because I understand why in a lot of cases certain individuals have left. I do understand in a rational way but emotionally, I feel like they've deserted the City. I have one friend who's been very active in a lot of the organizations that I've been active in who -- a member of the Jewish community -- whose homes were flooded seven times through the years, in different parts of the City. And this last time, they totally lost their whole house which was on one floor in Lakewood South. They lost everything in it. She had to leave, she could not stay here.

And I understand it, but I miss her and the community misses her, and I'm sorry she had to leave. Other people, I feel that they were precipitous in their decision-making, that they should have given the City more of a chance. I'm talking about people my age who were not educating kids anymore, who aren't worried about the schools, who aren't worried about -- their husbands have probably retired, they're not worried about their jobs. And why did they leave?

RH: Has it changed your relationship with some people?

FS: Well, I don't know because they're gone. (laughter)

RH: (laughter)

FS: They're not here. I don't know.

RH: Are you making long-distance phone calls?

FS: No, I'm busy, and they are, too. They're getting settled in wherever they are. You can't second-guess people's decisions but I feel that people who left immediately or who said, "I'm not going back there," whose homes were not touched made snap decisions that maybe they could have waited on and stuck it out with the rest of us. You know, New Orleans is a very special, unique place.

RH: That was my next question. So tell me a little bit about what makes New Orleans home to you.

FS: Well, it's home, of course, because it's always been home. I mean, when you've been born and raised in a place and you've learned to love it, it's very much home. My history is here. My family history is here. I've been very lucky to become well known here. I don't go anywhere where I don't know somebody or a lot of people. And that's a really good feeling. I feel like I have made some contribution to this community and want to continue to do that.

And New Orleans is just a very special place. There is no other city like New Orleans, anywhere. We all love to travel and we've been to wonderful places all over the world, but coming back here, you realize that it's different. And it's different in good ways and it's different in maybe not good ways, but it's a wonderful, wonderful city. And we've all got to do what we can to keep it so.

RH: What are the things that you like to do in New Orleans? What are the rituals?

FS: Well, I love my friends. I love, you know, being with other people. You can imagine that I love that. I have a very wide circle of friends from all aspects of my life, people that I would never have had a chance to meet had I not been involved in this or that.

I also am very close to the women I grew up with from grammar school on up. We have maintained a very, very close relationship with each other -- not only the women, but the men who were in our school with us.

We went to Newman School where you go through, you know, the whole school 'til graduation from high school. And, then, most of the women and I went to Newcomb and we married and lived here and raised our children together, and we're still together. And it's a wonderful thing. I don't know anybody else anywhere in the country who has that wide a circle of life-long friends that I have, and it's wonderful.

So, I love my friends, and I love my new friends and my old friends and people that I've become friendly with that I never would have met if I hadn't done this or done that. So that's important.

And I'm very at home with the organizations that I've been involved in for so long. I would never move somewhere else and start over. Never! I would never do that, and I don't think most people my age are going to be doing that, frankly.

But I've never been a sports person. I don't play golf and I don't play tennis. I work for the community. That's what I do. And this is my community and that's where I want to do it.

The other things that I love. I love the culture of this City and I love the fact that nothing's far away. I love being able to go into the French Quarter. Within a few minutes, I can be down there. I love going to the museum and being there within a few minutes. I love the nearness of things here. And, yes, it's very sad when you go to some of these places and you have to get there by driving through isolated, empty places. But then you get where -- you reach your goal -- you get where you were going.

And we love the music here. We go to all the symphonies. We go to the Friends of Music. We love all of that and we love the art community. And we love the food, a lot. We go out almost every night to a really good restaurant.

RH: That would be hard to find anywhere.

FS: Well, I think you can find it in New York and you can certainly find it in Paris --

RH: A different kind of food.

FS: -- and San Francisco. But, yeah, it's different.

RH: Has any of that changed, any of the things you love that you feel like you miss since the storm?

FS: I guess the thing that I miss the most is taking it all for granted. We have to check and see if things are open. We find out that an exhibit's been delayed because of this or that or a musical artist isn't coming because of the storm. You know, the Symphony has no home now. It's performing in churches and auditoriums all over the City.

I personally don't mind that. I think it's kind of nice to pull up to a church and park and go in and not be all dressed up and worry about, you know, going downtown and parking in the garage and waiting in line at the end for your car. It's kind of nice.

But the Symphony needs a home. We don't go to the opera but it would be true of the opera as well. So, you really can't take anything for granted. You can't assume the restaurant's open. You've got to call first. And it used to be open on these days but now it's only open on those days -- that kind of thing. It's not a big deal, it's not a big deal at all, but it's a little bit different.

RH: What are your major areas, now that you're back, that you feel you are wanting to be involved in rebuilding?

FS: Well, I really want to do what I can to get childcare available to more people, and we're doing that through our Success by Six and Women's Leadership Initiative at United Way. That is what I'm focusing on right now, and I feel that we can make a difference there, if we can be successful and patient.

RH: Are you doing the fundraising?

FS: Oh, yeah, we do a lot of the fundraising because United Way, basically, is a campaign organization and to belong to the Women's Leadership Initiative, women have to give a minimum gift of \$1,000 a year. So, yes, you know, to build the membership is to build the fundraising along with it. So we do, we do that.

And this service I have on the Sewerage and Water Board has become a very interesting thing, and it's become very time-consuming as well because I'm on a couple of the Committees of the Board and I'm on the Executive Committee of the Board, which, fortunately, doesn't meet (laughter) very often; the Board meets monthly. And the work of that agency is just absolutely tantamount to being the most important thing we can do here because if you don't have water, you don't have anything.

RH: So what type of things do you do with the --

FS: Well, we hear reports and we get information. Primarily, it's an information, an opportunity for information about the whole system. It also is a decision-making group in terms of the expenditures of the Sewerage and Water Board which are in the megamillions, and I am on the Finance Committee for that. And we get reports also from the Corps and from FEMA and make decisions about where to go from here.

RH: And you never knew you'd be so involved infrastructure --

FS: (laughter) No, I didn't. Pipes, pipes.

RH: But it's a whole city now, I think, that's very aware of infrastructure.

FS: I think that's true. I think that's so true. And, you know, every now and then, we can't figure out what buildings are open, what buildings are closed. You drive by certain places and you say, "Oooh, I guess, they never re-opened," you know.

But, basically, the services that we need seem to be available. The loss of physicians in this community is just astounding, it's just shocking. But Touro Infirmary is all staffed up.

RH: And how do you feel about Touro through the storm, since you were so involved in the Touro Infirmary.

FS: Well, I'm very proud of Touro. I'm very proud that Touro was the first hospital to re-open in this community. I'm very proud of the new CEO at Touro who was only there three days when Katrina hit and who had to evacuate that hospital and had to treat those patients and had to take care of his whole staff. I mean, it was just overwhelming what that man had to do three days into his being here. It would be overwhelming for anybody.

But for him to be a newcomer to this community, and that position and that hospital and do what he did, he ought to get the Nobel Prize. The Board did say to him after that, "Look," you know, "we know we have a contract but if you don't want to stay here, we're not going to hold you to it because you did not agree to come to this." And he said, "No way, I'm here."

So we have a wonderful CEO and I'm very proud of that. And I'm proud of the service that Touro gives and has given historically in this community to those in need of medical care, regardless of their ability to pay. And it's becoming harder and harder.

But Touro is fully staffed with physicians. We got a lot of physicians from the closed hospitals like Methodist Hospital out in New Orleans East and, of course, Memorial Hospital and some of the others. So we have physicians there and we...the last I heard were able to -- We had about 250 beds operating which, for Touro, was a good number. So I think things are going well there.

RH: What's your vision of the future?

FS: What, whose fu-- my personal future?

RH: No, you can do your personal future, too, but also for the City.

FS: For the City. Well, I think that the City has a chance but I don't think it's a foregone conclusion. I don't think that the City can rest on its laurels any more than you and I can rest on ours. I think the City has to continue to be able to compete with other cities.

You know, you and I have talked about the culture and the food and the wonderful architecture and all of the things we love about the City, but the City is a very important city in this country. We sit at the mouth of the largest river in America. We are sitting on the way to the Gulf of Mexico. We have tremendous, tremendous traffic here. Our port is absolutely essential to this country and this City has got to survive for those reasons, as well as all of these other reasons that we, as citizens, would like to continue to enjoy.

We have strong economic reasons to make it here, and we need all the help that this country can give us to make sure that happens.

RH: What do you hope for your grandchildren? Do you want them to stay here?

FS: Oh, I don't have strong feelings about that. I think everything has changed. You know, I grew up here probably never thinking that I'd be anywhere else. My own children have gone far a field. They're not far away. I have a daughter in Indianapolis and a daughter in Atlanta, both with their families. And, luckily, my local daughter and her family are back. But I don't have any strong feelings that my grandchildren need to be here or any reason to believe that they will be here. They can go anywhere in the world now that people choose to go.

I know that my granddaughter who just got back from Israel can't wait to be back there. And my own daughters went away to college, two of the three of them did and I guess we're just lucky they're not further away.

RH: What would you like to see changed here in the city?

FS: Well, I'd like to see, I'd like to see people with a better, "let's get it done" attitude. I think that's what I'd like. I'd like for people to be less patient, to demand more progress, to do what they can to make it happen. Nobody can do it by themselves. It's not really fair to focus it all on one person, the Mayor. He's got to take the leadership but the rest of us have our parts to play. And I'd like to see us, you know, New Orleans has always been, had the reputation of being the sultry, sub-tropical, lazy kind of place, and I think it's time that we all got up and --

RH: And rolled up our shirtsleeves.

FS: And went to work.

RH: (laughter)

FS: Absolutely.

RH: Do you see any opportunities coming out of this?

FS: I think it's nothing but opportunity. I think it's all opportunity. I think we have to stop focusing on the roadblocks and the attitude that, "Oh, well, you know, this'll never happen" and "that'll never happen." It's all about opportunity.

And I'm hoping that this planning process that is being funded by the Rockefeller Foundation, under the auspices of the Greater New Orleans Foundation, will really make some progress in terms of planning for the neighborhoods in our community. I think they've divided the City up into 13 neighborhoods.

And, you know, the people who really want their neighborhoods to come back are doing the most amazing thing. It's just incredible what they're doing and if they just got the help and support they need from the rest of the community and from the elected rest of the

community and the funding that's needed from the national level, there's no telling what we could do here.

RH: Well, you've been in politics, so you know that you seldom get your dreams when --

FS: Well, I don't think it has to be a dream for people to take charge and make things happen. I think, if I thought, if I didn't think that was the case, then I couldn't have done the things that I've done, either in the political community or in the community at large or in the Jewish community.

You just have to take the leadership role that you can and do the best that you can with it and not take, not take "No" for an answer. You have to have, it's an attitude-thing.

And I think, for too long, New Orleanians have felt like, "Oh, well, that's the way we are here" and, you know, "nothing ever happens fast and so-and-so really isn't any different from so-and-so." That's not true. It's not true. Let's get on with it. But we have to all help, we're all in this together.

But I think there's tremendous opportunity. There's tremendous opportunity to make some of these neighborhoods what the people living in them want them to be. And there's tremendous opportunity for the City to provide the services that only the City Government can provide. [You've] got to do it.

And I don't, I mean, it's easy to say when there's no money there. But if we don't fix the streets and if we don't fix the traffic lights and if we don't cut the grass, the quality of life is not what it needs to be.

And, of course, the first and foremost thing that, I think, the City needs to do is to address the crime problem because it will run people out of here. A lot of people said, "When that starts again, I'm going to leave."

RH: Do you know a way? Do you have a suggestion there, how to address the crime problem?

FS: Well, we need more police officers, for sure, and we need to pay people a comparable wage. Our criminal justice system is practically non-existent. We don't have the lawyers to try the cases, and I understand that the pay at that level is so poor that you just get novices with no experience who really can't -- You know, it's one thing for the police to arrest the people, it's something else for the trial to take place and for the decision to be made and if there's a sentence involved, to meet the sentence. And all of that takes money.

I don't have any answers, really, as to where the money can come from. I just know that it all needs to get done and if it doesn't get done, then we won't have the City that we all need to have and want to have.

RH: What has been for you, has there been any really big life change because of the hurricane?

FS: No.

RH: No?

FS: No. I have to tell you, there hasn't, there hasn't been. I think the biggest life change for me was when our daughter and her family weren't here and wanted to be here so bad and we really felt that we had a problem. We had a family problem as well as a geographic problem or any other kind of problem because we had this very unhappy child.

And, of course, aside from the fact that we missed them here terribly and really wanted them to be here, we were really concerned, but that was pretty temporary. And I think that they've had experiences that are life-changing experiences for them. But they're

coping with that, you know.

And our granddaughters have not had a lot. I mean, they've had the experience of living away from home and of losing their pets and losing the house where all their happy memories were. But, you know, they're young and they will move ahead with their lives and have all the good experiences that, you know, the grandparents hope for them and the parents hope for them. And I don't think any of that will ultimately be a big change for any of us.

We've been very fortunate through this. And, you know, you really need to talk to the people who lost everything and who don't have a roof over their head and who -- I mean, we've just gone on with our routine here pretty much.

And I guess, in a sense, you feel like, "Well, we should have experienced some of those experiences." But I'm glad we didn't and I hope if it happens again that we won't have that experience. I can't say that I've had some life-changing experiences as a result of Katrina. I can't say that.

RH: Are there any things you want to do differently now, since the storm that --

FS: I don't think so.

RH: Any priorities that are different?

FS: No, no, I don't think so. I think if I wasn't active in the community, I'd want to become active. But I am, and I'm really active in the arenas where change can make a difference and where progress can make a difference.

The one thing that I have not done that I've always wanted to do is feed the hungry. I feel that that is so elemental and that feeding hungry people has to be one of the most rewarding things a person can do, and I haven't done it. And one of these days maybe I

will.

RH: What other, I feel like a couple of times I've cut you off because I know you're involved -- I just want to make sure I get all the things that you're doing here in this City post-Katrina. And you're on the Sewerage and Water Board, you're working for child care. It was critical before the storm, it's a critical issue now.

FS: Absolutely.

RH: Are there any other things that you are engaged in?

FS: Well, I'm still, I'm still working to try to get trees planted and replaced in the City which is absolutely crucial because the trees of New Orleans are one of the things that have made New Orleans what it is, and they've been lost all over the City. I mean, anybody knows that. We're trying to replace as many of them as we can throughout the City on public land. We can't go on private property, but along the neutral grounds in the space between the sidewalk and the street and in some of the parks as well where we've lost so many trees. So I'm working on that as well.

RH: What are the priorities here? Are there community priorities?

FS: There are some priorities that have been established; they're not carved in stone. But some of the broader boulevards where we've had broad neutral grounds and they've become denuded, we're working on those.

RH: Do you have a lot of volunteers?

FS: Well, it's hard to have volunteers to plant trees. What we're really trying to do is raise the money to have the trees planted by professionals.

Here, in the Garden District, we've had a tree-planting program where we're trying to replace some of the oak trees. And this is not necessarily storm-related, this goes back

to before the storm. And the Garden District Association in concert with Parkway Partners and the Parks Department has asked businesses and residents in the Garden District to consider having an oak tree planted in front of their business or home, especially where one has been in the past, with the agreement that they will water the tree because there are no facilities to water the trees (laughter) once they get planted, but for the rain. And we have a number of those in the Garden District that have been planted.

But we're trying to, you know, we lost almost all the magnolia trees in the City, and they were one of the, sort of emblems for New Orleans.

RH: I think as the beautification and the parks and the trees has -- and also the community gardens, you've been involved in that.

FS: Yeah, that's part of our Parkway Partners Program. And a lot of those are coming back, interestingly enough, they're coming back -- maybe in a different form or in different places. A lot of them were lost. We had a lot of them in the 9th Ward and parts of the City that have been devastated; so you know you're not going to have gardens or gardeners for those. But a lot of them are coming back. And we're working with a lot of the public schools to do gardening at public schools.

RH: Oh, that's nice.

FS: Yeah, we had been doing that before the storm, and we're doing it once again. So -- And we're trying to get people to help us take care of the neutral grounds because the City Department, before the storm, had 35 work crews of three people each. It wasn't enough. They now have five. So if you're driving around the City and you see an overgrown neutral ground, that's why. But those are all quality-of-life issues, those are all things that made people feel good about being here.

RH: It seems to me a part of safety also.

FS: Well, it can be, it can be a part of safety, and it also -- I mean, we used to say at budget hearings before the City Council that overgrown neutral grounds bred crime because people could actually hide in the weeds.

RH: (Laughter).

FS: But the City needs to look good in order for people to feel good, and when you go into these potholes or these little knee-high stop signs instead of stop lights and overgrown, weedy public spaces and trees that are hanging by a thread, you don't feel good.

RH: Just part of the City's, the aesthetics.

FS: Well, and it gives you a sense of hopelessness because you feel like, "Well, here it is 10 months later and this is the way the City is."

RH: What are you grateful for personally?

FS: My family, my family. I'm grateful for my family and for good health for all of us. That's all we need. If you don't have that, you don't have anything worthwhile.

RH: Has there been anything special about home that you think about a little more or the ways you comfort yourself in the City now?

FS: Well, I'm comforting myself because I'm harboring some optimism that we're going to get our City back -- that's what I'm counting on -- and doing whatever I can in my own small way to help move that along. But I don't think any of my values have changed as a result of the storm. I don't think much about me has changed since the storm. I really don't. I mean, our life just has gone on pretty much the way it was.

RH: Your concerns, have they changed?

FS: I don't think so. I don't think so. I mean, I do have concerns probably that I didn't have as much before about the future of some of the organizations I'm involved in, as I've said. And I do have concerns about the quality of life because these are the things that make a city. And I'm very concerned that if we don't start making some progress, we're going to lose the momentum -- "Momentum," probably, is not a good word because we haven't had much of that. But we're going to lose the ability to really move forward if we don't move forward. Does that make sense?

RH: Mm-hmm.

FS: And that is a large concern that I have and I think a lot of people have that concern. We've waited, we've been patient. We knew it would take time. Now it's almost a year. I think once the year has come and gone, a lot of patient people are going to become very impatient. Once we reach that milestone and say, you know, "What do we have now to show for the last year?" I think it's going to be very hard. I think the Mayor needs to be prepared to answer that.

RH: Are you going to go up to him and ask?

FS: Oh, I would, I would.

RH: (laughter) I know you would. (laughter)

FS: (laughter) I would, and I don't think it would necessarily have a tremendous influence on whatever it is he will do. I think he thinks he's doing what he can and, you know, it gets back to, "We're making progress, you just wait and see." That kind of thing is not going to fly.

RH: So is there anything you would like to add to this interview, anything that you feel like you would like to say that I haven't asked?

FS: No, but I just think, in my own case, it's important to underscore -- and particularly since this is for two Jewish groups -- I think it's important to me to leave you with the fact that it is my Jewishness that has shaped me and that has put me into the arenas I am in. And I think that's a Southern thing to a great extent possibly, and it's certainly, it's a Reform Jewish thing to a very large extent because I was brought up with, in my Temple more than in my home even, with the concept of the value of social action as an expression of my religion and my Jewishness. And I've taken that very seriously.

And what I've done in my life, whether I've done it through a Jewish organization or a community organization or a national organization -- and even, in one case, an international organization, I've been very involved with the International Women's Forum -- my Jewishness is what has moved me in those directions. And I've been able to get a lot personally from all of those experiences. They've enriched my life, and I think they've enriched my sense of Jewishness as well.

RH: Thank you for the --

FS: Thank you!

RH: I think this was a beautiful interview.

FS: Thank you.

RH: And --

FS: Thank you.

RH: -- I hope it went as well for you.

FS: You know, it's fun to talk about me.

RH: (laughter) Well, you're quite articulate in talking about yourself. (laughter)

FS: Thank you.

RH: And I'm pleased I finally got to meet you.

FS: I am, too. I am, too. And maybe while you're across the pool, I'll get to see more of you all.

RH: I hope so.

FS: Every time I talk to Celia, I say, "Well, I haven't seen them yet." (laughter) But I'm not at the pool. Richard swims every morning.

RH: I told [Tamara]. I had seen Richard around and she said, "Well, I don't know how."

FS: Yeah, that's --

RH: And I said, "I think I've seen him --

FS: He swims every morn-- Well, he's mostly at home now. I didn't get to tell you this. This is ter- -- Oh, you've got to turn this back on. This is so important.

RH: OK.

FS: Richard lost his office, and I have this terrible habit of talking about "Wendy lost her house and the cats -- And I always forget to say, "Richard lost his office in the flood."

RH: Well, why don't you talk about that.

FS: I have to tell you that.

RH: -- for a [minute]. Let's talk about it.

FS: I have to tell you that. Oh, I have to tell you -- He had an office in Lakeview.

RH: Oh, I didn't know that.

FS: And 40 years of work went off in the flood. He lost his files, he lost his computers. He lost, of course, all the furnishings of the office, but he lost everything. And he is, I don't know if you'd say "semi-retired" or "partially retired," what the proper description would be for his status but he is still working. And, of course, now he's working out of home and, you know, he's still got his administrative assistant who has been with him throughout his whole career, with whom he meets every week and she takes care of a lot of our business for him -- and that sort of thing. But that has been a very devastating experience for him and it's been a very hard experience for both of us because the mail that used to go to the office comes here and it kind of stays here pretty much. And we had a terrible time, a terrible time when we were in Florida for that period of time. We had to rent a post office box because his post office box for his office was under water.

RH: Oh, my gosh.

FS: His bank box was under water because he was doing all his business and, you know, that kind of business, in Lakeview. And we rented a post office box in Florida and it took forever to get anything transferred from the old PO Box or this house, this home address, to that post office box in Florida. It was just awful.

We were there two and three times a day, every day, looking for mail and asking them to trace things and why weren't we getting it and, you know -- There was no main post office here at all at that time. They ultimately opened some trailers down by the Superdome but there was no main post office. Everything was coming through Houston, I think, at that point, and, then, later through Baton Rouge. It's just been terrible.

And as recently as Saturday, we got a piece of mail from some company that was saying to Richard, "Why have you not deposited the check we sent you in November?"

And one day, he got a phone call from a woman in Iowa saying, "I traced you through the Internet. Are you Richard Schornstein, Jr.?" blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. And he said, "Yes." She said, "I don't know why but I have a check that was sent to me that should have been sent to you." And, of course, all of his records went down. So we don't --

RH: Has he been able to reconstruct?

FS: Oh, he can't, he can't reconstruct it. He can't. It can't be done. It can't be done.

RH: Well, that had to be pretty traumatic for you, both of you, to [realize] --

FS: It has been. I don't know how I didn't mention that.

RH: (laughter) You've repressed it. (laughter)

FS: I think so. (laughter)

RH: So, and having him move in here --

FS: Oh, it's just awful --

RH: He's here all the time.

FS: Oh, it's just awful.

RH: So that's a life adjustment for both of you.

FS: It is. But, you know, I get up and I go. I'm gone. I'm at the United Way or I'm at the sewerage or water -- I'm somewhere else. And he goes some, too. But, you know, his business has been his whole life outside of the family. He's not somebody with a wide circle of -- He doesn't play golf. He doesn't play tennis, you know. What's he going to do? Sit around a room with some men somewhere? It's not going to happen.

RH: So his business was --

FS: Sure.

RH: -- his primary life.

FS: Yeah.

RH: And --

FS: Away from the family, it was. And he keeps busy. I don't know. He seems to always be doing something. But he does swim every day and he's always done that. And he -- You'll see him around. I don't know --

RH: Have y'all had to struggle with depression or anything like that?

FS: You know, I asked him the other day. I said, "Do you think you've been depressed?" He said, "No, I don't think so."

RH: And you?

FS: No!

RH: No?

FS: No. I really have not. I think my daughter was very depressed, and she didn't get any help. But she seems to have come out of it, please God. I hope so.

RH: And your granddaughters?

FS: Yeah?

RH: How are they now?

FS: They're fine. They seem to be -- Well, the older one, who's going to be a senior. She'll be 18 in September -- she is just -- I don't know whether this is a reaction to what happened or whether it's just the way she is. But she has hardly been here. They came back after Christmas. She went to school for a few weeks, then she went off to Israel, which had been planned prior to the storm, and she came back and she was here for about two weeks, and, then, she went off to camp. And she came back and now she's back but -- I said, "When she goes off to college, I mean, she's just going to be gone because she's -- (laughter) I think that's the plan.

RH: She's pretty independent.

FS: I think so. And they went last weekend up East to look at some campuses and schools. I think, wherever she goes, that's going to be --

RH: Where she is.

FS: -- where she is.

RH: (laughter)

FS: Absolutely. And the younger one is running around with all her friends all the time, so -- No, they seem to be, they seem to be fine. And, academically, they're fine.

RH: How did it feel like, suddenly --

[END OF INTERVIEW]