Vivian Cahn Transcript

Rosalind Hinton: -- Street in Faubourg St. John, in New Orleans, Louisiana. Today is Saturday, October 21st, 2006. I'm conducting the interview for the Katrina's Jewish Voices Project of the Jewish Women's Archive and the Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life. Vivian, do you agree to be interviewed and understand that the interview will be video recorded?

Vivian Cahn: Yes.

RH: Okay. Let's start with how you came to be in New Orleans and a little about your life [and] growing up in New Orleans.

VC: I am not a native of New Orleans. My family is from Knoxville, Tennessee. My mother is Swiss. She was the first Swiss War Bride to come over, and she didn't know anything about America, but she did want to get out of Switzerland. Switzerland was neutral during the war, and she was Jewish, and she lived on the German side of Switzerland. I'm sure her whole childhood was filled with terror that any moment the Germans could come in. And so, she married. She met my father when he was on a little break in Switzerland, and they really couldn't speak each other's language, but her father saw him in synagogue and invited him home for some Schnapps, and then he met her, and they had a courtship, and she came to Knoxville, Tennessee, and they married. My brother and I were born in Knoxville, and we moved to New Orleans in 1962 when we were still children. My father took a job in New Orleans with a man who was developing different properties, among them Lakeside Shopping Center, which became the most successful shopping center in America. He worked with this man for a few years and then went off on his own and did some smaller real estate things. And so, I started junior high school in New Orleans –

RH: So, where'd you go to junior high school?

VC: I went to McMain. Everything was different then. It was in the '60's, and basically, McMain and Fortier were Uptown children, and kids who lived out by the Lake would go to Kennedy.

RH: You were talking about McMain and Fortier.

VC: Yes.

RH: So, tell me a little about going to school in the early '60's here.

VC: Early '60's?

RH: Were they white schools --

VC: You know, I don't remember.

RH: -- at that time?

VC: Were they what?

RH: Were they segregated schools?

VC: There was no integration when I was in school. My last year at Fortier -- I graduated in 1968 -- it was starting to become integrated. But they were basically white Uptown schools. The Jewish kids who didn't go to Newman went to Fortier and went to McMain.

RH: Did you hang out with the Jewish kids?

VC: Yes.

RH: Or, did you have other friends?

VC: Well, it's interesting because at that time -- I don't know how long it lasted -- there was actually Jewish sororities -- a Jewish sorority and a Jewish fraternity in high school, and you had to be voted in. I was in STP for, I guess, two or three years. I was in Young Judea, also BBG. I was in BBG, and then I left that to go into STP. And some years later, they did away with those. But, yes, I hung out with Jewish kids.

RH: Were those in any way meaningful to you, Vivian? I mean, did it create a social circle for you?

VC: It did. It did. New Orleans is social, and so, in high school, we went to lots of formals and we went to lots of parties. I certainly had more dressy dresses in my closet then than I do now. [laughter] I had a lot of long formals. So, that was fun.

RH: What synagogue did your family --?

VC: I was just going to say that. That's interesting too, because at the time, it was called Conservative Congregation, and it was on the site where my son now attends St. George's Episcopal School. It was on the corner of Magazine and Napoleon, and my brother was actually bar mitzvahed at what is their library now. And my son is there. That synagogue moved to Metairie, and it morphed into Gates of Prayer. But at the time, it was Uptown, and that's where we went. I had a small graduating class. There might have been eight of us when we were confirmed.

RH: So you had a Confirmation and not a bat mitzvah?

VC: Didn't have a bat mitzvah. Girls weren't doing that. My brother was bar mitzvahed, but maybe Orthodox or more religious girls were having a bat mitzvah then, but I never knew about it.

RH: Do you have any really vivid memories of any particular events in the Jewish community that made an impression on you growing up?

VC: No. [laughter]

RH: Just no.

VC: I mean, I didn't like Sunday School. It was the typical thing. We're Reform, although it was called Conservative Congregation -- we belong to Touro now. I just thought that Sunday school -- it was excruciating to sit through services when I would go once or twice a year for the High Holidays, and it was hard for me to do. I was just a typical kid who wasn't focused on it at all.

RH: So, is the Greater New Orleans community more your playing field than the Jewish community?

VC: Then it was. That's not the case anymore.

RH: Right. I meant growing up.

VC: Growing up? You know, I did Jewish things. I was in a Jewish sorority, but I wasn't focused on it and really didn't do that much about it until I was about twenty-one, and I went one summer to Israel.

RH: Want to talk about that a little bit?

VC: Just a little bit. [laughter] I went to Israel, and I worked on a kibbutz. My parents wanted me to go to get in touch with my Judaism, and you know I was so -- I don't know what the word is -- independently thinking. I stayed in some little hotel, and I ended up sharing a room with this woman who wasn't Jewish. She was actually a Baha'i, and when she told me about Baha'i, I thought, "Wow, that sounds cool." [laughter] So I decided to -- we probably won't use this, it's so stupid -- but anyway, decided I would go to the Baha'i temple and become a Baha'i so I could embrace everything in the world. I remember I left the kibbutz one weekend. I made the trek into wherever it was -- I think

it's in Jerusalem. I went to the Baha'i temple to become a Baha'i. I got there, and there was a sign on the door that said, closed. So I said, "Hmm, I guess it's not meant to be. I shouldn't be a Baha'i. I should stick exactly with who I am and where I am." Then I went back to my kibbutz, and that was the end of thinking about any other religion. [laughter]

RH: That's a great story. [laughter]

VC: It was the early '70's, what can I say?

RH: The moment of seeking.

VC: Yes. Enlightenment.

RH: So, talk about now the neighborhood you live in and how you connect to both the Jewish community now and to the city of New Orleans. What are things that are important to you?

VC: Well, right now, is post-Katrina, and the Jewish community has changed. We lost at least thirty-five percent of the people, of the families. Now, I think it's more important than ever to be a community, and people feel that, whether they're Jewish or not. I mean, everybody in this city feels that they want to come together, and they want to do things as a community, and they want to help each other and pay more attention to each other. I think it's especially important, being part of the diminished Jewish community, to do as much as I can to make it vibrant. We always talk about being a family and helping each other. That's more true than ever before. I want us all to be together and feel like we have help, feel like we're a family. I think people do feel that way because the Jewish community has helped each other so much during this crisis. It's just been there for all of us. I'm running the campaign now for Federation -- I'm co-chairing the campaign. We were supposed to do the 2006 campaign. That was a washout. And my co-chair is a pediatrician in this community. They asked us to do it again for 2007, which of course we're happy to do. It's just a whole different story now.

RH: So, let's go into the Katrina story, and then we'll circle back to this. Tell me when Katrina came on your radar screen, and what you were thinking about those few days before Katrina.

VC: My little boy's birthday, his tenth birthday, was August 24th. That weekend, the Saturday prior to Katrina, I had put together a little party for him at Six Flags with some of his friends, and that's what we were going to do. That morning, we started hearing the weather might not be so good. And then one of my friends, the mother of one of the little boys who was coming, called me up, and she said, "You know, I don't feel very good about this. I'm going to take my children, and I'm going to head up north, and I want to be out of the way of any potential hurricane." I said, "Well, I don't blame you at all, and I'm not sure what we're going to do." I called Six Flags, and they weren't sure what they were going to do, and then I called them back, and they said, "We think we're going to close." We're not going to run today. Well, as it turned out, that was the last time they were ever open because it was totally destroyed. So, I canceled the party. We were going to fly out Sunday. I didn't want to be around for a hurricane. I was around for Betsy, and it blew off a jalousie porch in our house, and my father's office was in it, and they found his blueprints in swimming pools blocks away. I didn't want to be around for a hurricane. My brother had rented a private plane, and he was going to fly us all out on Sunday. My father, who is now, thank God, ninety-one years old, said, "You know, if we're going to fly out on Sunday, we might as well be even safer and fly out on Saturday." That was such good advice, and we decided we would do that. My husband decided to stay for the storm. He, for various reasons, decided to stay. He has an elderly aunt, and he wanted to make sure that she was okay and be with her. She was in an assisted living facility called Lambeth House, so he went with her to Lambeth House. They did not want to let him in. They only wanted their staff, the staff's family, and the people who are residents there. He said, "You're going to need me a lot more than I'm going to need you because I can help you." They did let him in, and he spent the whole time there during the storm -- the residents couldn't be in their rooms because they had

glass windows; they all had to be in the hallway. So, he helped them do what they needed to do that whole long night of the storm. But my son and I, my brother, his family, and my parents -- my mother and father -- all got in a plane at the Lakefront Airport and flew to Houston. We took my mother's car there. I wanted to leave mine here, which ended up being a real good move. We took my mother's car there, and she said, "Well, are you sure it's going to be safe?" I said, "Oh, it'll be fine, I'll park it on the far part of the lot." Well, her car was swept out to sea and never seen again. That airport was just totally demolished. It sits right on Lake Pontchartrain. And her car was gone. So, we took her car, we parked at the airport, we walked on the plane, and we flew to Houston, and from that moment on, including everything that subsequently happened, I've been nothing but grateful. I mean, grateful that we left, grateful that my family was together, grateful that we could come back to our homes – some of us, not all of us. My parent's home was ruined. But we flew to Houston. We stayed at the Galleria. There was a whole bunch of people we knew who were all staying at the hotel around the Galleria. We had all packed – as you've heard a million times before, we'd all packed for a weekend. We went down with the kids. Everybody was roller skating. There was a bunch of people from New Orleans. Everybody was happy and chatting, and a lot of Jewish people were there that we saw. We were there in a group. We knew a lot of the people there. So, that was Saturday, Sunday. The hurricane -- we start watching it, and then we find out that the city had flooded and that everything was different than we thought it was. The whole mood in that Galleria was like a tomb. It was just dead quiet, and everybody was walking around like a zombie in shock. We are all standing in front of television sets, and they had newscasters from out of town who would just -- they would just plunk them somewhere on a flooded street and not even show the street sign, not show where it was. We were all craning our necks, trying to look sideways on the screen. We were dying for information, and we didn't know where we were seeing in the city. We didn't know what was what. So, suddenly that's what everybody was doing, just watching TV, talking to each other, and trying to figure out what to do. So, my husband is

still in New Orleans. He was at the Lambeth House. He helped all these old people all night long go to the bathroom and do this and do that. And then the next day, the hurricane had passed. He walked out -- this is situated right by Audubon Park -- he walked to the park. He saw a lot of trees down. Everything looked okay to him; it looked like a hurricane but not so bad. We've been through it before. He got in his car. He said to his aunt, "I'll be back in a little while. I'm just going to check our house." He got in his car. He drove around town. It seemed okay to him. This is kind of before the levees had broken. He drove through the French Quarter. It seemed okay to him. He started driving towards our house, and then there was water, and he thought that the water was just storm that would drain because it always floods when it rains here. We're on what's called the Esplanade Ridge; it's one of the higher parts of the city. We didn't get flood insurance. In June, they sent us something saying, "It's hurricane season, do you want flood insurance?" We're not in an area that requires it. I looked at the policy. It was only three hundred dollars. I said to my husband, "We don't need this." I said, "If our house floods, the whole city's ruined." So, I didn't get flood insurance, and it turned out our house was raised. The basement flooded; our house didn't. But the whole city was ruined. Anyway, he just thinks it's floodwaters from the rains, and he wasn't able to drive. So, he parked the car around Rampart Street, and he started walking in the water to our house, and the water got pretty deep. He starts walking, and he looks to the right and left. He starts seeing people looting stores and things starting to happen. But he looked like a hapless guy. He was in his shorts and a T-shirt, and nobody's going to bother him. So he walks past all these crazy, beginning to be crazy scene – nascent craziness. The water gets pretty deep. He trudges and trudges and trudges all the way up Esplanade Avenue. He gets to our house. We had locked the dog in the house for a day during the storm. He lets our dog, Belle, out. Looks around; everything looks fine. He encounters a neighbor of ours, and he said, "Look, I'm going to just drive to Houston and pick up Vivian and David. Would you please watch our dog, and feed our dog? I'll be back in a day." The friend said, "Fine." The neighbor said, "Fine, no problem." He

leaves our dog on the porch, and then he trudges all the way, wades back. Oh, then he took some amazing pictures. He went to Bayou St. John, which was a few blocks away. It was totally over the banks onto the houses. It was just like one big bayou. We had huge trees. Our house was built in the 1890s. We have some trees that were planted probably around then. We have one of the tallest palms in the city, a huge magnolia. Those have all blown over and totally crushed the carriage house next to us. I mean, it was like a pancake. Our iron gates were down. I mean, there was a lot of destruction here from the wind. Anyway, he goes back. He trudges back to the car by the French Quarter, gets in the car, and just starts driving. He didn't think to turn on the radio or the news. He was just listening to music. It was several hours to Houston. It's funny. I can't even remember now. I think it's a six or seven-hour drive. The whole drive, he's just listening to tapes and the Grateful Dead, and music, and this and that, and didn't think to turn on the news. He gets to our hotel, the Galleria, which is a dog-friendly hotel, and he said, "I'm here. I'm here." I said, "Oh, thank God." I said, "Where's our dog?" He said, "Well, I left her on the porch." And I just started crying. I said, "Don't you know what happened?" And he said, "No," and I said, "Well, the city's flooded. It's ruined. We can't go back and get her." And he was just totally stricken. We were so upset that we had left our dog on the porch. Then our housekeeper, who has been with us since David was born -- she's part of the family -- lived in Gentilly. We begged her to come stay at our house, which was high up, and we knew it couldn't possibly flood in our house. It did down below. But we knew she'd be safe. We begged her to come be with Richard and stay in the house. She said, "No." She's very religious, and she said the Lord would take care of her. So, we could not locate her either after the storm. So, it was a real bad few days. We talked to her family, and they didn't know where she was, which just -- I didn't even want to think about this dear woman drowning in her house in Gentilly. I mean, I couldn't even go there. But we couldn't find her, and we didn't know what to do. Finally, a few days later, one of her relatives called us, and they said, "We heard from her. She's at some dome in Texas." And we said, "Well, she must be in the Astrodome here." I

mean, it was early in the morning. She called at 5:00 [a.m.]. We just got in the car, drove straight to the Astrodome, went in -- they had twenty-something thousand people there, and several different domes. We went through every single dome. We walked up and down all the aisles. We had them announce her. While I was there, I ran into George Bush Sr., former President Bush. I talked to his Press Secretary, and we had a wonderful conversation and she said, "Oh, I really want the President to meet you, let me bring you over to meet him." I said, "Well, no offense, I'm happy to say hi, but I'm looking for Eloise." [laughter] So she did get the President over to meet me. I said, "Hello, I'm looking for my housekeeper, goodbye." And then I ran into President Clinton, who was also there with George Bush.

RH: So, do you remember what day this was? Wednesday? Thursday?**

VC: This was -- let's see -- maybe Wednesday or Thursday. Wednesday or Thursday. I really don't remember the day, but it was shortly thereafter. I ran into Oprah Winfrey, and that was strange because Oprah was crying, and all these women were there who were big fans of hers who had lost [their homes] and were displaced, and they were going, "Don't cry, Oprah. Oh, don't cry, it's okay" And they're the ones who should have been crying, you know, but they were comforting her. Oh, I saw Barbara Bush there. Marc Morial was there, but my purpose was to find Eloise. Then we found someone to announce, if she is there, please come forward. I see this woman starting to come forward. It wasn't her, but it was her friend, Terry, who we also knew quite well, who worked for my mother-in-law, my late mother-in-law. So, Terry came up, and we made sure she was okay, and we gave her the money that we had brought for Eloise. She had family to go to, and she was fine. She was set up, and she was fine. We didn't find Eloise. But as it turned out, she was in the dome in San Antonio, and she was very resourceful. As soon as she saw water, she knew something was wrong. She ran to her friend's house down the street. She said, "Something's going on here," and then the water started coming in. They ran to the friend's second floor, where they lived for a

week on the second story of her friend's house. People would come with boats, Red Cross workers, and FEMA [Federal Emergency Management Agency] workers, and say, "Are you okay, ma'am?" "Yes, I'm fine, we could use a little more food. We could use a little more water." They were bringing things with boats. After a week had passed, Eloise looked at her friend and said, "You know something? This water ain't going nowhere." [laughter] She said, "We got to get out of here." So, when they came with the boat again, she said, 'Now, you can take us." They did take her, and they took her to an airport, put her on an airplane, and flew her to San Antonio. She was either bussed there or flown there, I can't remember now. When she got there, everybody said, "Oh, we're so glad to see you, we're so glad to see you," and she said, "No offense, but I'm not glad to be here. I want to go home." She made her way to a bus place and told them her story. They gave her a half-price ticket, and she went to her kinfolk in Mississippi, where she stayed until a few months ago when she could move back to the [city].

RH: Wow. She must have [inaudible] --

VC: So, we found Eloise, and then we, through a friend of ours who showed up where we were -- by that time we had moved to Lafayette -- we heard about a guy who was sneaking into New Orleans. He lived a block away. They tried all day to call him on his cell phone -- cell phones were crazy, all phones were. They finally patched through. They said, "Vivian and Richard's dog is at their house. Can you rescue the dog?" And he said, "I'll go over there and do it." But he couldn't get two blocks. The streets were so mucky and so full with gunk, he simply couldn't walk. He couldn't navigate over. So, he called up and said, "I couldn't get there." We were heartbroken. The sun kept shining. It didn't rain again. He snuck back in a day or two later. It had parched over like the surface of a planet. And he walked over there, and the dog was on the porch. Our neighbor had never left. It was keeping his sanity just to go over and give our dog food and water. So the dog was well cared for. When this man, Richard, got to the gate, the dog started barking at him, and he called her name, and she wagged her tail. He went

up, he got her, [and] she kept him company the whole [day]. He put her in his car. He drove back to where he was staying. While he was on the road, he patched through and got my cell phone. Meanwhile, I was buying appliances for where we had moved. He called me at Sears, and he said, "This is Richard, I have your dog." And I just threw my arms around the saleswoman [laughter] as she was showing me a dishwasher. I said, "I'll come pick her up wherever you are." It turned out he was staying fifteen minutes away from us in this big cow pasture in a little house. And so we went there, and our dog was running around and happy as could be. So, we got Belle back, and we got Eloise back. I said to my husband, "You know what? Whatever else happens, I am fine." I said, "We have the things that matter, and I'm fine."

RH: Now I have to ask about the aunt and Lambeth House. What happened?

VC: She was fine, except that Richard said, "I'll be back pretty soon," and he never came back.

RH: So, she was worried.

VC: And we had no way to phone. She was worried. Lambeth House lost all of their utilities. There was looting. There was a lot of crime going on, and the man who directed it made an executive decision to get all those people in busses and get them all to Baton Rouge, which he did. He took them to, I believe, St. James Place. There was not enough facility in St. James Place to take on this enlarged population, so she basically sat in a chair. A lot of people laid on little pallets in the hallway. She was basically on the chair until we could come and get her and rescue her. She just turned eighty-nine, and so she was eighty-eight. We got her. We had decided not to stay in Houston. We had a lot of help there. The Jewish community was great. They were enrolling David in a Jewish day school free of charge. An executive apartment was made available to us, but I just looked around and said, "The people have been so nice, but it's so big here. It's not Louisiana. We have to get close to home so we can go back." My husband does a lot of

business in Lafayette -- he's familiar with it -- I said, let's just go to Lafayette and rent a place that we can go home. So, in one very long day, we drove from -- we left our son at the hotel with somebody, with our family, we got in the car early in the morning, [and] we made the four-hour drive from Houston to Lafayette. We had something set up. We enrolled David in a school. He was accepted into a school, which he had to be accepted in. And they had, in two days, a twenty-five percent increase in their enrollment. But they said, "We're going to do it. We're going to take every child. We're not going to leave one child aside." And we met with the real estate agent. We went all over. There was not one single rental available in Lafayette. So, I ended up buying a house while Richard was in a meeting [laughter]. I just said, "It's either that or really high psychiatric bills." So, we did buy a brick, ranch-style house in the center of town that had been on the market for months. Nobody wanted it. But to me, it just looked so wonderful, and it looked like the home I grew up in. An anthropologist told me that during trauma, people tend to revert back to stereotypes, to this Jungian behavior of their past. So, suddenly I ended up in a small, southern university town, in a brick, ranch-style house with my parents living with us, just like Knoxville, Tennessee, where I grew up. [laughter] It was the same thing all over again. But that house was very comforting to me, and we moved in it. It was the quickest [sell ever]. We made an all-cash offer on it on a Friday, and we bought it on a Tuesday. All cash, as is. We stayed with these very nice people who wanted to help Katrina victims. We stayed at their lovely house for a week until we could get the utilities turned on, get some furniture, some beds, some this, that, some food, a refrigerator, and move into that house. We did it all in a week. David was enrolled in school as soon as we got to Lafayette.

RH: So, you lived in Lafayette for about four months.

VC: Yeah. David's school, here in New Orleans, St. George's, was the first private school to reopen. They were great. They were heroic. The school didn't have a lot of damage; people stayed there throughout and worked on it. They reopened October 24th,

and they had at least over half, maybe seventy percent, seventy-five percent of the kids come back because it's Uptown, and Uptown didn't sustain the damage that other areas did. Richard had to go back. He had relocated his business to the little town of Cottonport. Then he brought everybody back. He was able to reopen on Tchoupitoulas Street downtown. A lot of his people lived in Chalmette. One man had thirteen family members who all lost their homes. There are close communities where they see each other every day, and people were dispersed. So he had his hands full. But he moved back, he took care of his staff, [and] they got back up and running. He distributes industrial machinery. They got the company back up and running, and he went back, and he said to me, "Look, there's no reason you can't come back. Our house is fine. David's school is up and running. People are back. There's grocery stores," so forth and so on. I said, "There's no real reason, but psychically, I just can't do it. I just can't go back there." I love New Orleans. I just psychically couldn't do it. I said, "I feel comforted being in this little house in Lafayette." So, he went back. We were only two hours away. So, David and I came back all the time. Every weekend, we would come back immediately to New Orleans, spend the whole weekend, and then drive back to Lafayette and start the school week again. I wanted him to have a continuum of finishing the semester in Lafayette. And I had friends there. I just wanted to stay there. My parents had moved to Baton Rouge, my brother bought a house in Baton Rouge; they were all living there. I just couldn't go back yet psychologically. So, we stayed in Lafayette. His school was out December the 16th. On December 17th, I moved home, and put the [Lafayette] house on the market.

RH: You put it --

VC: Oh, yeah.

RH: You didn't keep it as the escape home?

VC: I thought of doing it, but we had enough friends [there] then and had enough alternate plans where, if we had to evacuate the following hurricane season, we'd have people to stay with. We knew what to do a little bit more than charting new territory like we did last time.

RH: So, tell me what it was like the first time you came back into the city?

VC: The first time we came in, we snuck in. [laughter]

RH: Oh, yeah?

VC: We, Richard and I, had fake IDs. I hadn't had that since I was fifteen in Fortier. [laughter] We had all these fake IDs, and we were architects and this and that. Turns out, we didn't need it. When we got on the bridge, they looked at us. We didn't look like we were up to no good. We were in a big mini-van, and we looked nice, and we didn't look like looters. And they, the guards on the bridge, waved us through. I was so unprepared to go back. I noticed all these people in front of us; there was kind of a caravan going back. People had bleach, mops, and utensils. I had a little bag of organic foods, [laughter] some water -- I did think to bring that. Just went back. And our mission that first trip was, we had to go to Richard's company, Dixie Mill. They desperately needed some computer things to put up in their temporary headquarters so they could do business. They needed a few important things to get out of the building. We go in, and it was just so weird. I was the only woman I even saw. It was totally quiet because there were no utilities, there was no electricity, there was nothing really up. It was either totally quiet or a really loud noise of Humvees -- military everywhere, helicopters all over the place, policemen, men in uniform. The man who owned Bella Luna, Horst Pfeifer, the chef, had opened up a restaurant where he was just serving people right off of Tchoupitoulas Street, a block from Richard's office. He was just serving people, making food, big plates of food that people could come in, eat, and get back to what they were doing. And it was just all men. So, Richard and I pull in front of his company. We go

inside. It was hot. There was no air conditioning or anything, and it was dark in parts. They didn't have windows in some of the rooms. We brought flashlights. We went in. We had a list. We gathered everything we could, we made a big pile, we put fit furniture, everything we needed in the back of the minivan -- computer data, put it in the back of the minivan. Said hello, stuck our head in that restaurant just to see the scene. It was like the Wild West. I said, "It's like the Wild West now." We started calling it the wild, wild South. Anyway, we went to our house, and I was just in shock. I mean, there was just trees everywhere; we had to circumnavigate to get there. We get to our home. Our home is raised ten or twelve feet above the ground, so our home was fine, but the carnage -- it was a totally altered landscape, and nothing green had come back yet, so everything was brown. Our yard -- we have a huge lot that's three-quarters of an acre, and it had been these gardens which for years I carefully tended, and designed, and planted, and they were mature. Everything was just totally dead and brown, and I just walked around -- we have a pool in back. The pool looked like the creature from the black lagoon. It was totally black. It was just grotesque. I didn't know if it was snakes or sea monsters, what was in it, and I just couldn't -- it really didn't register. So I just stood there, just looking around. Richard, fortunately, could think and look, and he could think a few steps ahead, and he said, "Isn't that our skylight by your feet?" And indeed, it was the skylight that was in our kitchen ceiling, and I said, "Oh, so it is." It was way in back, in the backyard. He said, "We have to pick it up and put it back to protect the kitchen because if it rains again, everything's going to be really ruined." I said, "Okay," so we picked it up. It was really hot; it was just hot as hell. And it was deadly quiet. Every time I said something, I was afraid to talk because I felt like my voice was carrying miles and miles, and I didn't know who was around. Nobody was around. So we got a ladder. He climbed up through the [skylight opening], onto the tin roof -- it was a hot tin roof -- on our kitchen. I handed him the skylight. He refit it. We got some tarp, put that on top. And then two of our chimneys had totally blown down. We have real tall chimneys. I went back and forth, like some builder of the Pyramids with bricks. And I would hand [them] to

him on the roof, and he would put all the bricks around. And finally, we made it as secure as we could. And then I looked up at him and said, “How are you going to get back down?” He had climbed up through the opening [laughter] onto this roof, and then we had made the opening secure, and he was on this hot tin roof. I said, “How are you going to get back down?” And it was just the two of us. If he had fallen, that would have been it. I mean, there’s no phone service, there’s no -- so, I carried another ladder upstairs, I put it on the side, and he tied a rope to something. He took a rope and -- I held on to part of his body. At the end, he got down. He got down off the roof, and my hands were all bruised and torn from handing him bricks. And we locked the house up. We left. As a footnote -- we left a note on our neighbor’s door that we had the dog. He wasn’t there at that point. What had happened with him, he came the next day [after the dog was rescued] to feed the dog as he always did. He had a dog and a parrot to take care of, and that was how he was keeping his sanity. He had those two jobs because he was here, and he was all alone, and he didn’t know what was going on. When he came to feed our dog the next day after the dog was rescued, she wasn’t there. And there had been a pack of feral dogs running through the neighborhood, and he thought that they had killed her, taken her off and killed her. And he didn’t know how he was going to tell us when he finally made communication with us. So, we left a note on his door saying, sorry that a couple of weeks have elapsed, but we have our dog, everything’s fine. And then we just got in the car and drove back to Lafayette. I came in a lot. We came in again. The second time we brought our son. He was the only child, and we had a real adventure. We came in -- again, it was totally quiet, it was totally dark, there was a 6:00 pm curfew that everybody had to be in their homes; nobody could be on the street past 6:00 pm. So we snuck in, and by that time, a few neighbors here and there had come to their houses to take some things and look around dazedly. So we found them, and true to our fashion and New Orleans fashion, we said, “At 5:00, we’re having a party at our house, please come.” Well, we had ten people show up, which, by those standards, was -- that was an incredibly huge party to have then and there because nobody was back. I

don't know how they did it -- somebody brought ice. [laughter] I don't know where they got it, and I don't know what it was made out of, but they actually brought ice, which was astonishing. That was like a miracle, and of course, we had lots of liquor here -- our house wasn't looted. I was very happy about that. Because I didn't know the status when we were gone. We brought lots of liquor. That was the new post-Katrina beverage. Lots of things to drink, ten people -- we had a wonderful time. We were so happy to be together. It was just psychological -- everybody was just so happy, and we talked, talked, talked, talked, talked, and we were so happy. And then we said, "Okay, we're going to the French Quarter, who wants to come?" Well, a little group said, "We'll come." So about half a dozen of us drive through the French Quarter, and it was just like roving people. It was the first day that electricity was restored to the French Quarter. It was the first day that they had gotten [light]. Tthe people who had stayed had just been by candlelight and dark. The electricity had just come back on. So we get there, and we run into people we knew. And we run into more people we knew. And people were just like roving around, trying to find someplace to eat. So there was a guy who was cooking on the street. A few people just had grills on the street. And he also had a stove -- I think it was at the A&P, or one of the corner buildings on Royal Street -- and he made red beans and rice, and he was grilling something on the street. We sat down, and we knew all these people there, and everyone was -- it's hard to describe -- everyone was so glad to see each other. One of our friends who lived there, I managed to get his cell phone, and he walked down to join us. You see someone for the first time after all of this -- you're just like survivors together, and you just embrace each other, and you really look at them. It's like one of my friends said, she was even happy to see people she didn't like because you're back. So we all ate together, and we walked through the Quarter, and other people had their grills up, and they were just giving away food. It was just different. It was just the few people who were there, and they were so happy to be together. It was just adventurous. It was like going into a town for the first time in the Wild West. Then we get to our car, and we drive back home, and it was pitch black. It

was so black, pitch black, that Richard just ran through a main intersection. I'd say, "Oh, my God, that was Broad Street." We didn't even know. The next thing we see, lights behind us; the police pull us over. "Who are you? What are you doing? You're supposed to be off the streets." It was 10:00 at night. We had broken the curfew by four hours. So I gave him a little story. I said, "We're going home, it's safe, isn't it?" And they said, "Well, hopefully." Then they leave us, and then we go up to this pitch-black house with our child, and it's a pitch black house. So, we had flashlights. We go in, we lock the doors -- it's hot. We go to sleep. And the next morning, by that point, we're so grimy, who knows what all is on us. I just said -- you know, my son was ten -- I just said, I'm giving you a bath. I know the water wasn't potable, and who knows what it was, but I just was willing to take that risk. We all took baths in whatever that water was. None of us got typhoid or malaria, or whatever you could have gotten. A lot of people were getting –

RH: There was tetanus, too.

VC: Tetanus, yeah, and he hadn't had shots. But I wasn't really worried. Deep down, I felt it was safe. What is the other thing that you get in Mexico? A lot of people were getting –

RH: Diarrhea --

VC: Yeah, but it was -- it's one of those diseases. Anyway, we did that, and we drove back to Lafayette. And we had our adventure. Nobody got ill. And then I came in all the time. I'd come in all the time, sometimes alone. I'd stay at a friend's house. My friend, Orissa, came in real early. She's a pioneer, and she was Uptown. I would stay at her house. But every time I came in, I did the same thing. I would meet a host of insurance adjustors, contractors, carpenters, tree people, yard man. I had a huge agenda. I'd hit the ground running. I'd work, work, work, and then I'd go to a dinner party. Even if it was by candlelight with no electricity. I would go someplace. I would drink a lot, like everybody did, spend the night somewhere, and then the next morning, get in my car,

totally freaked out about the city, and race back to Lafayette. I mean, I'd get there in record time. I would just drive eighty, ninety miles an hour, race back. The next weekend, I'd do it again. And that went on for a while.

RH: Well, you really saw the city kind of come back to life in a lot of ways.

VC: Yeah, and still. I'm still seeing it come back to life.

RH: Did you connect to the Jewish community at all in Lafayette?

VC: Immediately. When we were in Houston and thought I didn't want to stay there, I said, "Where should we go?" We had our laptop, and it was on a fast-access server. I said, "Well, maybe Lafayette." So I turned to the website that the Jewish Federation had put up for everybody. Right off the bat, they relocated and did great. I turned to the website, and *boop*, Lafayette just came up like that. I mean, a minute before, this wonderful woman, Elise Bouchner, in Lafayette -- it's a very small Jewish community, there's no Jewish Federation there -- but she said to her Temple, "We have got to do something. We have got to do something to help people in New Orleans and the Gulf Coast." So she called the Jewish Federation, and she said, "This is my name, this is my number, if anybody wants to come to Lafayette, tell them to call me." Well, *boom*, that came up just as I turned to the computer. I picked up the phone, and she answered her cell phone. She's a young woman. She's in her early thirties with two very young children, and she took it upon herself to make this happen. So, she answered the phone, and I said, "Hello, I'm Vivian Cahn, I'm from New Orleans." From that moment on, she just took care of us. She just did everything. She said, "What do you need?" I said, "We need a school for my child, we need a place to stay, we need -- we want to move there." She said, "My children are at a good school. I'll call the headmaster right now and set up an appointment." She said, "I have a real estate agent for you if you need it. Please come see me when you come to Lafayette." I said, "My husband's elderly aunt is with us." She said, "I will go to a place I know that's assisted living." She gave them a deposit

from her own money, which we immediately paid her back for. But she went. She's busy; she has her own business, too, and two young children, and she just handled everything for us. When we came in, the school thing was set up, we had a real estate agent, Richard's aunt was able to move into this assisted living facility, and we became -- she's a good friend, she and her husband, and her mother, who's also a leader in the Jewish community there. It's very small. There's like sixty families, or sixty people, I'm not sure which, there. We joined their temple, Temple Shalom. We became members of their temple happily. And immediately, I read for Yom Kippur. [laughter] I mean, here [in New Orleans], you have to be a macher to get up on the pulpit and read. You have to have been with them, and so forth and so on. But they asked me if I would honor them with doing one of the readings, and it was an honor for me, too. And lovely -- made up of all ages of people. There's a university there, so there was some professors who were Jewish, and their young children, and middle-aged people, and older people. And then, of course, there was a lot of evacuees who were in Carencro and little towns around there, who all came in for the high holidays.

RH: Did you see other people you knew at the high holidays?

VC: And people I got to know. There was a member of Touro, who I really didn't know, and she was with her two sons. They had evacuated, and so I got to know her. And Sue and her great sons, and a couple that's friends with my parents, my parents' age, and they were in some little town. Their son is an attorney, and they ended up staying with a client of his. They didn't even know him. They stayed there several months until they could get into Willow Wood, until they could come back. And there was one Orthodox family in Lafayette, a husband and wife; their kids were grown, originally Israeli, he was a surgeon. He had some sort of post there at the hospital, and they had thought, "Okay, we'll just go, He'll stay for a few weeks, a month or two, and do his technique, then we'll leave." Well, they had been there years. For some reason, it evolved into years and years. Lafayette's one of the more trayf towns you'll ever be in, and they [these two

people] keep kosher. They had never eaten outside of their home at a restaurant. They'd been there five years, actually, and they had never -- she made every single meal at home. The only place she would go is TCBY, which is apparently a kosher product. We became friendly with them. They were terrific. He had a Torah study class at his house every Saturday morning, to which a few people went. One of the women who came who was so interested wasn't even Jewish. And she came to it. My husband came to it. We became friendly with them. They know our friends at the Chabad House here. We had met before, at one of the daughter's weddings. We became friendly with them, and I loved going to their house for Shabbat. We would go, and then (Tzipora?) also taught me how to make challah, which is one of the mitzvot that women do. So, I would go to her house, and we would spend the day Thursday making these beautiful loaves of challah. She has a terrific recipe, tried and true, and we brush honey on top and knead honey in it. I made challah with her, and then the next night, we would come over and eat it. [laughter] And I really enjoyed my time with her. That's something I wouldn't have done necessarily in New Orleans, hang out for an afternoon with somebody and see the video of her daughter's wedding in New York, and make challah. Usually, my pace is different here. But I loved it, and so we spent time with them, and we spent time with the community. They would have Oneg Shabbat potluck. I always made something, along with everybody else. They would have lovely dinners, actually before services. First, we'd have dinner. Then we'd go have the service on Friday night. So, we attended the synagogue regularly there and were as much a part of the Jewish community as we could be.

RH: Did it begin to change anything about your sense of your Jewish self?

VC: No, because we've both been moving that way anyway and more involved. My husband, years ago, wanted to know what it was about the Torah that attracted so many brilliant minds through the ages. And so, he embarked on Torah study years and years ago. And then, when we had a child, we became more involved in lots of ways. I'm

taking the Melton School now. I don't think it made us feel more Jewish and more related to the synagogue, but certainly just confirmed, again, how important it is to support your Jewish community because really we take care of each other. We take care of a lot of others, too, in the outside community. But I don't see it measure for measure, that the outside community takes care of Jews, the way Jews support institutions, and so forth, in the non-Jewish community.

RH: What was it like to be on the receiving end?

VC: It's sort of like standing in my yard and not seeing the skylight at my feet. I didn't know how to do it. A major temple, this enormous temple that looked like the Metropolitan Museum in New York -- I walked through this temple, in Houston. [They] invited us immediately that first week we were there to come to Shabbat services. It was for the victims. They had a special program, so we went there. We walked through this hallway, I said, "My gosh, this is like a museum." And indeed, things were displayed, amazing things were displayed there. Maybe it wasn't as big as I thought because I was totally shell-shocked, so things you think -- like you think a hill is big when you're a kid, and then it's just someone's front lawn. But I was shocked. We went there, and they had a beautiful program for us, and then they brought out boxes of clothing. They said, "This is for you all. We wanted to do something, and we thought that since you just took a few things for the weekend, and now it's going to turn into significantly more time, here's clothes for you all." I sat there, and I said to Richard, "Well, we don't need to take clothes. We're staying at the Galleria. I can just go buy something if we need it." And he said, "Go take some clothes." I said, "Well, I guess my father -- he's not going to go shopping, and he doesn't like to buy things. So, I guess I'll get a shirt for my father." So I walked up, and they had these polyester shirts. I mean, it's nothing I would have bought, but I thought, "Well, Dad will like this color." So I got one or two shirts for him. And then I saw people I knew. They were out there getting clothes. I thought, "Well, then I guess maybe I should get clothes." They're offering them. So, I got this, a color I really liked, a

sort of -- not chartreuse, but -- I don't know, this sort of cool color blue. So [I got] this for my husband, and now we call that his Katrina shirt. And he still wears it to this day. That shirt is meaningful to us. It's polyester. [laughter] It's a button-down polyester shirt. But he wears it, and he's not going to get rid of it. It's in his closet. And he wore it a lot. So I got some clothes. I didn't get any for myself. But when we got to Lafayette, this woman said to me, "Do you need clothes?" I said, "Well, yeah. When I go home, I'll bring back some of my clothes. But I don't know when I can go home." And she said, "Well, I have a lot of clothes that don't fit me anymore." And she had great clothes. She gave them to me, and I wore them. So, in very short order, within a week or so, we had lost our city, lost being able to live in our home, moved to another city, bought a new house, furnished that house. I was in new clothes, clothes I wore -- I don't really wear skirts, or I didn't then, now I do all the time -- but I was in different clothes. When I went to this place to set up a charge account, they said, "What is your address?" I gave them my address that was new -- city new, zip code new, telephone number new. And then she asked me my name, and I was in clothes that were not mine. She asked me my name, and for a moment, I thought, "Am I still Vivian Cahn?" I couldn't remember for a second if my name was the same. It was just strange. It was just all surreal.

RH: My God. Wow. So, now, you came back fairly early. There was still -- it was an undeveloped city. How did you normalize your life here in New Orleans, when you started back?

VC: Well, Rosalind, as I told you, from the moment I had the resources to evacuate, I felt fortunate. And I have always felt fortunate. I've just felt fortunate throughout. Our home -- we had to rebuild the chimneys. There was damage, and it's -- it was a garden. It will come back. Green grass did come through. We lost thirteen trees. I've replanted. I think it's important to grow food, so it gave me the opportunity to plant orchards where I can grow tons of citrus. We'll have much more than we need. I can give it to schools. I can give it to friends and family. My son's school is up, so a lot of our lifestyle is the

same. I do all my shopping at Whole Foods, that's back up. All my best friends are back. I feel fortunate. We have more or less the same patterns. It's not the same, but the daily things I do are very similar. I carpool to school. Yes, going down Broad Street is totally demolished now, but getting better. The cityscape is not the same. I'm kind of getting used to it. My son was not traumatized by this at all. We do everything we can to make our kids comfortable. And he had a good adventure. He loved the school he was in there. He liked Lafayette. He likes New Orleans. He's happy to be back. His friends are here. Ninety percent of his school came back in January.

RH: Have you changed any of what you consider your responsibilities since the storm? Are there things that you do differently or that you've taken on?

VC: Well, on the shallow side, I did not want to shop or buy anything [laughter] for a long time. I've gotten back to liking to shop again. But for a long time -- and most people were like that -- we went through a very strange thing with things, with possessions. When you thought everything was lost, it was like, okay, it was just things, we're all fine, we're all healthy, our family's together, nothing else matters. My mother, like most people of her generation, everything at her house meant something to her. She was very careful with it -- don't make [anything] dirty. The whole bottom floor of their house was ruined. And the sofa they loved, everything they loved, was ruined. I went back with her a lot, and my father, who has trouble walking, but we went back there, and we had to throw out stuff, and it was just sort of, "Okay, just get rid of it, get rid of it." I sat in my father's office and went through fifteen of his files. All of his important things, stuff he had saved since the war. And he sat on a chair and just watched me dump everything into trash bags and put it outside.

RH: Well, let's wrap up on this tape and begin again in a minute.

[END OF PART 1]

RH: OK. This is take two for Katrina's Jewish Voices, and I'm interviewing Vivian Cahn. Vivian, if you could finish your story, talking about your father, and him watching you throw out his life since World War II.

VC: Since before World War II, I think.

RH: Before, wow.

VC: But, he just sat there, and he said, "I can't take all of this with me," and it wasn't exactly damaged, but just file after file, he wasn't going to need all those records anymore. And he said, "Let's just get rid of it." They were traveling light. They were then in the stage of throwing things out. So he sat on a chair, and they were four files high, a wall of them, and he just watched me. I would open each one and say, "This is so and so, this is so and so," and he'd nod. I'd put it in a big trash bag. Then I'd carry them downstairs, and I had tons of bags. Finally, the last file was emptied, and my little boy was there. We were dragging them [the files] to the curb, and the curb was all messy. There was debris and trees down. And my son asked his grandfather something about the war, a battle or something. His grandfather said, "You know, David, I actually wrote a little book about that, but that book was in one of the files that your mother threw away." And he said, "But one day, I'll sit down and tell you the story." So, I felt bad that we just didn't even keep anything. David said, "Oh, Mommy, you threw it away? But that was important. That was important." I said, "Well, I know, David, but it was too overwhelming. I can't go through everything." I said, "Now help me carry these bags to the curb," because they were heavy. So we started dragging them to the curb, and one of the bags we dragged broke open as we were going to the curb. And a mess came out, I said, "Look, there's glass in here, be careful, we have to get another bag. Let's pack this back up and take it to the curb." As I reached into the bag, a book fell out, and it was that book that my father had told David about, that he had written. It just fell right out, and so, I picked it up, and I said, "Here's the book." And he took it, and he ran back

upstairs, and he gave it to his grandfather.

RH: Oh, my God.

VC: We have that.

RH: Where did they live, that they were flooded out?

VC: They lived off of West Esplanade, near Shir Chadash, near the Goldring/Woldenberg Center. They lived on Napoli Drive, and they had a two-story house. The bottom was totally flooded. They had it gutted, so it was just like raw studs, and then you walk upstairs, and it's carpeted and the same. The upstairs looked the same, the downstairs was gone.

RH: Wow. So, I also wanted to ask you before we move -- well, we've already moved into New Orleans -- just about one other thing you did in Lafayette. What was these open houses that you were holding?

VC: Oh, well that's -- well, there's two different kinds. In Lafayette, we had that ranch-style house, and there was extra bedrooms in there. So anybody who needed a place to stay could stay there. It turned out nobody did because they were settled. However, Jewish Federation brought someone from Jewish Family Services in town to give money to people who needed money. We housed him in a little section. He had his own bedroom and entrance, and he set up a little office there to talk to the people. A little line formed of people who came and needed help, and so we made our house sort of his headquarters. He came in several times to help people because a lot of people were in the position -- especially these little towns around Lafayette. They had been donors to the Jewish community, and suddenly, they were wiped out, and they needed help. It was just like that; it was amazing. So, he set up his office there. He came in two or three times and stayed with us and ran things from the house. But what you're referring to is, as soon as I moved back in town in December -- and I really did this as much for myself

as anybody -- I started having open houses once a week, every Wednesday night. I called it the Cahn Bar and Lounge. And I had this big pot -- it's like several gallons, and I would cook up a big old pot of beans and rice. I made a different type of stew every week. I did it every Wednesday night, and it was just open to all of my friends, anybody who heard about it, the whole community, and it was so much fun. I had eight of them. I did it for two months, and the smallest one -- every single one was fun -- I think the smallest one, we had a dozen people. The largest one, we probably had sixty or seventy. I always had enough food. One of them fell on my husband's birthday, and I made a fabulous big dinner. And of course, I had lots of things to drink, alcohol, [laughter] lots of alcohol. People just loved it. They came. I put extra lights out so everything would be real bright and lit up. And they ate and drank and talked and were with each other.

RH: Was it mainly natives who showed up?

VC: Yeah, everybody -- people who were here, friends, friends of friends. I met some new people. One of my friends would come over from across the lake. He loved it so much he'd drive in and just eat and eat. And I am so glad he came to those, because a few months later, he died unexpectedly, of some blood clot thing that took his life when he was sixty-five years old. I'm just so glad (Windle?) was there to party with us very shortly before his death. So, it was meaningful for everybody.

RH: You said you did it more for yourself than for anybody else. What do you think --? Can you articulate what that was about, why you needed to do that?

VC: I just, like everybody else, had to have a community around me. I had to have people who had gone through the same things, who were there, and who understood what I was thinking about. Because in other towns, they were just carrying on their normal lives. There was just something so important and special about being together. I had to do it. And I had a whole lot to do. I had to get my mother resettled, my father

resettled, Richard's aunt resettled, get our house rebuilt, my child -- I'm an interior decorator; I was working with some clients. I just had such a full plate. And then, on Tuesday, I go to the grocery store to buy beans so I could soak them, and then all day Wednesday, I'd be cooking. I'm thinking, "What am I doing? I don't even have time for this, am I crazy?" I knew the answer to that. But then, Wednesday night would happen, and I'd have all [the food] out, and all these people would come over, and they would just thank me so much for doing it. And I was so glad to have done it. I was just so glad to do it. I had to do it for my own well-being.

RH: Did you, after you -- you're talking about giving, really, to the community, in a kind of, you probably think, a modest way, opening your house on Wednesday night. But you also watched the Federation. Have you thought any differently about how to give since you were on the receiving end? You've been on the giving end.

VC: I actually had to make a speech for my campaign cabinet opening dinner the other night, and I did say that because I saw firsthand where money goes -- it's not abstract. I mean, you certainly want to help someone in Russia or Argentina. But you're not going to necessarily see or ever meet a lot of the recipients. But because I saw it so firsthand, when all of a sudden, we were helped immediately, I felt even happy to give, to give that money as a gift, to keep on helping people.

RH: Tell me about taking on the responsibility of the campaign for the Federation, if you can give me some more details. Have you been involved with the Federation a long time, because certainly you were engaged during the evacuation?

VC: Not heavily, heavily involved, but doing things. I was asked, prior to Katrina, and then that campaign was washed out, and then we're taking it over again, but as I also said during that speech, I had a little folder that I'd saved prior to the storm of nice inspirational things, and reasons to give money, and letters, and articles. They were very, very good about why people should give money. But I just tossed that folder after

the storm because [this is] so immediate. This is why [we give]. We've all seen it now. Jews, historically, help Jews, and we experienced it. There's no teacher-like experience.

RH: That's true.

VC: That's just it. There's just no teacher-like experience.

RH: What do you think is distinctive about the New Orleans Jewish community? Is there anything special that you think about or why you like it? And also, maybe why it frustrates you sometimes.

VC: Well, first of all, there's no place like New Orleans. That's true, more than ever now. [laughter] There's no place like New Orleans, so that rubs off on everybody who lives here. I mean, up until not that long ago, Temple Brotherhoods were having crawfish boils. I don't think you see that in other places.

RH: True.

VC: And now they don't anymore. But our Touro did years ago. I can remember they'd have brotherhood crawfish boils. But the Jewish community here, I don't know because I haven't lived in places to compare with other Jewish communities. We believe it's important to have a Jewish day school on the one hand. On the other hand, people who support that idea, including myself, have sent their children to other schools, Newman, St. George's, and McGee's, and so forth. We've had trouble getting a Jewish day school really going strong. How it's different -- I don't know, we like to have a good time, that's New Orleans. I'm not sure how to answer that question.

RH: Okay. Maybe the Jewish community -- do you see it as really a part of New Orleans, not kind of separated from New Orleans? I mean, the life of the city?

VC: Oh, sure. I mean, the Jewish Community Center is open to everybody. It has a membership that likes to work out there or do some of the other programs. So, it's open to everybody. People in New Orleans are assimilated, as you know. I mean, Jews are assimilated. A lot of the institutions in New Orleans, the museum, TV stations, and businesses, and so forth, were all founded and funded by Jews. Edith Stern lived here, and she started so many things -- Country Day School. And Jews still support so many things, considering that we're such a small part. I think we're one percent of the overall population. Interestingly enough, now we're more than one percent because sixty-five percent of the Jewish community is back, but only half of the New Orleans community is back. But you look at any fundraising list for any organization, you see a disproportionate amount of Jewish names.

RH: Do you have any concerns in the rebuilding, now in New Orleans, for the Jewish community?

VC: It's real hard to look ahead and see because we're just kind of blazing a new path. But we have a strong Federation staff. We have strong people here who want to rebuild. I think that we can become a smaller but very, very vibrant community, and that's our goal, to be a very vibrant Jewish community. Right after the storm, we had, for instance, at the JCC, they had a Chanukah party this past year. They were astonished at the amount of people that showed up. It was mobbed, it was packed. Every time we have something, a huge amount of people show up. You would think that the whole community was here by the number that shows up because I don't know if that many showed up when the whole community was here. But we just have a huge turnout. People want to be together as a community. And we're going to keep that feeling and make it as vibrant --

RH: Other than the size, do you see any changes, post-Katrina, in the feel of the community, or the --?

VC: I think each person has a slightly different story. If you've lost your house and your business is suffering, you're going to feel different than someone who is more or less back on their feet. Overall, the community is probably a microcosm of the general community in New Orleans. And I know there's a lot of mental health issues going on. Everybody jokes about the two questions. "How's ya Momma, and which drug are you on?" [laughter] Pharmaceuticals are running rampant [laughter], apparently. I'm not on anything except an occasional glass of wine or frequent glass of wine. But I've even cut that down. In the early days, I would come back to the house, look around, grab a bottle of rum, take a swig at 11:00 in the morning, put it back down, keep going; it didn't even take the edge off. But I think people -- to varying degrees, I think there's some heavy psychological issues going on. There's a lot of depression, a lot of feeling of hopelessness.

RH: You have some friends who, firsthand, are kind of dealing with some of those issues?

VC: No, I'm happy to say my real good friends are strong, and they're doing fine. One of them had to evacuate to Princeton and stay there, actually, until June. And she loves New Orleans, and even though she was in a very nice situation in Princeton, she was [feeling] depressed the whole time she was there and didn't feel good until she came back here, even though her neighborhood's [only] partially settled. This year, they're trick-or-treating with us instead of in her area because a lot of it got damaged. In the general community, yeah, people tell me all the time how depressed they are. But we still manage to laugh and pass a good time.

RH: How do you draw your strength now?

VC: I feel fortunate. I'm in my house. My family is fine. My family's okay, and we have Eloise and Belle, and actually, three weeks later, we came back, and we even rescued David's fish that we had forgotten. The fish had survived, although he's dead now.

[laughter] But they don't live forever. I don't know. I just feel fortunate.

RH: Intact.

VC: I feel intact. It's been very interesting. I think it showed people's colors, or sides of them you wouldn't expect. There are certain people who have always been so strong intellectually and so strong in a lot of ways. And this totally did them in. I've been shocked at a lot of people who I thought would weather this storm, so to speak. And it's been very, very hard on them. They've taken it hard. And there's also people who I liked before and thought they were good people. But who I've come to just admire and hold them up as heroes because of the way that they stepped forward. And they were so strong, and their constitutions were so strong, and came back early, and just went above and beyond, and really heroic in overcoming huge odds without a road map. This didn't give anybody a direction to go or what to do, and they still did it. And now, these people I was just friendly with before, I kind of hold in awe, and I have a whole new respect for them.

RH: Not that you need any more projects with the campaign [laughter], but are you involved in any other things in the city? I mean, you've been involved with children's issues, and you've been involved, I know, with the Mardi Gras krewe?

VC: Oh, yes. Thank God for that. [laughter]

RH: So, tell me about that.

VC: This is my twentieth year as Captain of Krewe of Mama Roux, which is a subkrewe of the Krewe du Vieux. And last year we marched, and it was fabulous. We have a nine-hundred marcher limit, and they threw open the gates because whoever wanted to come and march could come, and we exceeded that limit. It was a fabulous parade. It was just great. This year, we have zero population growth, and I'm in the uncomfortable position of having to whittle down all these people who want to march, and just take a smaller

number for our subkrewe. So, I'm working on that and playing with that. It's fun. We're marching February 3rd of 2007.

RH: So, tell us what a captain of a krewe does, a Mardi Gras krewe?

VC: You go to captain's meetings. We're basically just our own [planners]. We devise everything, so there's a creative part, and there's a structural part, where you have different [jobs]. Some people take care of getting the mules, some people take care of [costumes]. There's a lot to do.

RH: To make a parade happen.

VC: In the twenty years I've been doing it, I've had to do everything, including getting a policeman to open a padlock on a place that [was shut]. [laughter] Pulling a string or pulling a cart. We had a horse that freaked out, and we all had to [hand-pull] the cart one year. There's lots we do.

RH: Do you have a theme for the --?

VC: We do, and it's so perfect. This year our theme is Habitat for Insanity [laughter], and our king is Chris Rose, the Times-Picayune columnist, who has really been charting our mental, psychological processes through this whole thing. He never left after the storm.

RH: Any special throws.

VC: Well, we'll see. Our subkrewe is going to come up with its own theme. And actually tomorrow, I'm having the meeting at the house for the krewe, and we're going to discuss what we want to do. We have some ideas, and we'll see. We'll see what the throws are.

RH: Well, it's one of the few opportunities we get to share with a larger public --

VC: Mardi Gras?

RH: -- just like the insanity of Mardi Gras. But also, why would you want to do it? Can you articulate that?

VC: Yes, yes. [laughter] I can, and it boils down to a very sybaritic, hedonistic side of me. I've done it for twenty years. It's just so much fun, and my krewe is great. I love everybody in the krewe. We've had very little problems, and even when we have had problems with someone or a clash of ideas or personalities, I've found it interesting, I've found it interesting to deal with. It's work, you know, and time and so forth. But then, there would always be one moment, as we were marching, it would be this, just perfect moment. And I'd forget everything else -- all the time and effort and so forth -- for that one moment. I would just do all this effort so I could experience that one high, that one moment. I guess there's a name for it in the drug world. [laughter] That's why people do heroin, but it was a drug. But I would have that one moment, and it was great. So that's what I did, that one moment.

RH: Does it feel a little different after Katrina, the meaning?

VC: Well, everybody -- all these people called me and said, "I have to march with you this year." And we had seventy in our subkrewe. Our average is forty-eight. We had well over nine hundred in the krewe overall. We got our brass bands. Krewe du Vieux is a venue to highlight and give respect to the marching brass bands in the city. And lo and behold, we had almost as many back. They all came out with their instruments, and they marched, and they played. It was just great. So a lot of people told me last year was the best one ever for them because it was so meaningful to be back and to do Mardi Gras. And it was. But for me, every single one's the best one. [laughter] It really is, because they all have a different -- but last year was tremendously meaningful. Our particular theme was Home is Where the Tarp Is. And we all, we like to be color, so we were all blue, we were this marvelous FEMA tarp shade of blue, and we made our costumes -- we got tarp material, and we made our costumes out of that. Subsequently, Women of

the Storm had a fundraiser at Antoine's several weeks later, and they asked us to model our blue costumes. So we were all onstage, and they had an auction, and we all -- we sold the costumes off our back and raised a good amount of money for them.

RH: That's wonderful.

VC: Yeah.

RH: So, the money from that went into advocacy --

VC: Correct.

RH: -- for the state, for the city --

VC: That's correct.

RH: -- for the city, with federal advocacy.

VC: That's exactly right.

RH: That's marvelous.

VC: What else do you want to know about Mardi Gras? [laughter]

RH: Well, are you involved in any way with the Mardi Gras Indians or any of the --?

VC: Oh, it's good you asked that question because this year my husband thought, , so many people, Black people, lost their homes in the Ninth Ward, and in areas where the Indians lived. He said, "We can't have Mardi Gras without the Mardi Gras Indians." So he called Bo Dollis of the Wild Magnolias. He called the people connected with him, and [told them], "We have a big house, and we have an upstairs where we keep guests with extra bedrooms." He said, "We want to open our house to anybody who needs to come back, so that they can parade in all their finery Mardi Gras." And we had Bo Dollis, his

wife, his son, and his wonderful drummer, and a few other people stay with us. And we took all the furniture out of our double parlor, which wasn't much. But we made the rooms available, and they brought all their feathers and costumes and everything. They moved in a good week before they had to parade, before Mardi Gras, and they were up day and all night. It was such a treat to see an icon like Bo Dollis. He didn't talk to me that much. He was totally, totally focused on what he was doing. I showed him my costume. We have a funny picture of me with my little, you know, it takes twenty minutes to make, my Krewe du Vieux costume and him with his.

RH: Your blue costume, your blue tarp.

VC: His son's costume was so big, it was almost like a goldfish in a bowl. Since we had a big room to put it in, he filled the room with his costume. And when he wore it Mardi Gras day and went down the street, the feathers went from one side of the parked cars to the other. It was the biggest costume he had ever made because he had the space, and he did it. They worked day and night. It was just really an amazing Mardi Gras, and they stayed with us. I got to be good buddies with his wife, Rita, who's very gregarious. We had a great time together. Then I would bring friends in to see because we had a long table spread out in the double parlor, and the costume was on there, and I'd invite people over to visit these extraordinary costumes that they were making.

RH: Did his wife share with you what it meant to them to be able to come back?

VC: It meant everything. It really meant everything. I mean, they have to make the costumes, and they have to be there [for] Mardi Gras. And they just didn't know what they were going to do, to find a place to live and to find a place to do what they had to do. And they were so -- it was just great having them here.

RH: Are they back now, or did they get --?

VC: Some of their fans offered them a place to stay. It wouldn't have been big enough to also create a costume. Now they have a place to live again, and she's reopened her hair salon. Bo has been in and out of the hospital because he's diabetic. And he's not as old as he looks, but his life – smoking, drinking, working hard. It's just [not] a lifestyle [that] promotes good health. He's been in and out of the hospital. Mardi Gras day was amazing because they came back [to our house] after us. We were already home, and we had lots of food. And they just came and ate, and they were just glowing. I mean, we had gone out to -- we usually march with the Krewe of St. Anne, but we wanted to be with the Indians that morning, so we had gone to the Downtown section of Uptown to see them. And they were out, and all day long they were doing stuff, and they ended up at a club, and they were singing and dancing, and doing their Indian ways. When they came back, they were just high as a kite because they had more than that one moment I have. They have all day. And they were just glowing. They were really glowing. Bo got out of his stuff -- I mean, these things weigh a hundred pounds; they're really heavy. He got out of the stuff, he sat on our staircase, he couldn't even make it upstairs -- he sat there for a really long time. Then they got him upstairs, and then I just really didn't see him again. I don't know when he got up, or when he left, or what time it was, or anything. They brought him some food. But he had given it everything. He had given it every last ounce of strength he had. He had given his all.

RH: Wow. So, we're in New Orleans, and tell me how it felt to you to watch, if you were watching TV, the Superdome, and what was going on in New Orleans. And the rescue -- and tell me how you think the different levels of government responded. And what are your thoughts about that?

VC: I think it made me -- aren't Libertarians the ones who believe you should just govern yourself [laughter] or something? I mean, I was -- disappointed is not the word -- the federal government just seemed like this big cog, wheels that weren't oiled, weren't running, one didn't know what the other one was doing. It was horrible. It was horrible

that we were treated like a Third World country here, [and] that they didn't respond immediately. I actually talked to an attorney to see if I had to pay taxes. I wanted to be a conscientious objector. And he said, no, I'd go to prison; I had to pay my taxes. I said, "I'm willing to do all sorts of work. I just don't want to give the government any more money. It was horrendous, what happened." "No, you have to pay taxes." It was inefficient. I can't say all the way across the board. FEMA did do things, do things for us, do things for my family. The Red Cross did in some cases. I just don't think we're organized in a way we need to be organized, with the big things. They have what they call the Cajun Navy. It was guys in Lafayette. These guys know how to manage a boat, and they are good-hearted people. And they said, "We've got to go in and help." They got their boats, their neighbor's boat, and they went in -- I mean, one guy alone I read about in the newspaper in Lafayette -- he saved, like, five hundred people. One citizen on his own. It wasn't related to the government. Lots of people were like that. They just saved people, risked their own lives to save people.

RH: Is there anything you'd like to see in the rebuilding happen in the city of New Orleans?

VC: Oh, a lot. I think this country and this city, I want things to be more child-friendly. I think children aren't just our future. They're our present. And I'm also on the board of a group called KID smART, which uses the arts to help underserved kids gain confidence. Studies show that if you work in the arts, that can also translate to math, and geography, and other studies [and] gives you self-confidence. I'm on that board. Another little coincidence I'll tell you about real quickly. I work with the National Council of Jewish Women. Two years ago, I chaired a program they have called *Those Who Dare to Care About Kids*, and they honor individuals who have done extraordinary things for children, over and above their job description. We honored five people. It was a wonderful event. This is pre-Katrina, of course. It was at a hotel. We had this cocktail party for them at a gorgeous home. One of the people that was honored was a man named Tony Recasner,

who was a full professor at Loyola. He looked around and said, “We need to have charter schools and better facilities for children.” He left his post [and] founded a charter school. We honored him. Okay, flash forward many months. I’m in Lafayette, displaced in Lafayette. The new headmaster at David’s school said, “I really want to have a little cocktail party for all of you evacuees to get together and see each other and talk.” He did. I walk in, and there’s Tony Recasner, who had also evacuated there with his family [and] bought a house a block from the one I had bought. And I walked up to him, and I said, “Tony?” He said, “Yeah.” I said, “Gosh, last time we were together with cocktails in our hand, we were in the old New Orleans, honoring you.” Anyway, he has come back, founded a school, [and] got it up and running. He’s partnered with Alice Waters of Chez Panisse in Berkeley. They’re doing an organic garden. I’m so behind that. One of my friends is now the new President of NCJW in the post-Katrina New Orleans. And I said to her, Let’s do something. Let’s partner, help support all these things, initiatives for children.” So, that’s in the works. I have a lot of ideas of things to do. [laughter] I’d like to see more attention to nutrition because if you get your body healthy, your mind will hopefully be healthy, and then you can go out and help other people stay healthy.

RH: This is one of the few moments that, again, another moment where we can get an insider’s opinion, a New Orleanian’s opinion, about race in the storm. And do you have any thoughts on that issue, on race, racial issues in the storm?

VC: Well, I’ve just read something that, in the demographics, it’s changed because of the people back. I think it’s like two white people to one Black person. And New Orleans has always been such a mix, and the neighborhoods are right next to each other. We’re mixed. I mean, the Garden District, a block away, it’s Black, or Black and white. Probably if this had happened in Orange County, California, the helicopters would have been there real quickly and it would have been rebuilt, and everybody would have been saved. Maybe a lot of people say it was racial because it was just poor people and the Black people, and they just herded them like animals. I don’t know, I hope that’s not the

case. I would rather it be incompetence from the government than a racial thing. But in the city, I mean, we want everybody; we want to try to get everybody back. Everybody who wants to come back and be a part of rebuilding, we want them back. It's what makes New Orleans different. There's a lot of nice places, I'm pretty well-traveled. I've stayed in a lot of places. But none of them are funky. You just have that funk, and the music, and the art; it's Black and white people. But that trombone and a lot of the jazz has Black roots. That's what makes New Orleans unique, the way we talk and think. I understand a lot of stuff that people in other places don't because they're just segregated.

RH: So, the community's enriched your life, as far as it being a diverse community.

VC: Well, I guess, maybe I sound like a person who just goes for moments, but there's just all these New Orleans moments that won't happen any place else. They just won't, and it's not like they're big and lofty; they're just these quirky little moments that are so cool and fun, and they're just naturally New Orleans.

RH: Can you kind of name any of them?

VC: Brocato's opened two weeks ago. All these Lakeview people were in line, just waiting, and Benny and the Grunch [Benny Grunch & the Bunch] were playing, and an Italian guy was singing, "Fly Me to the Moon" -- he had a great voice. I said to Richard, "Look, these are the Lakeview people. They're back. Or maybe they've just come in for this opening." But people just talk to you. Once I was following a jazz funeral, and it was in the projects. I was with some friends and my father-in-law, who recorded those for a great part of his life. We were just standing there, and the music was playing, and I don't know, I'm trying to remember where it was. Martin Luther King? I can't remember what street it was on. But I'm standing, looking at the building, and looking at the house where the deceased had lived, the projects. Then I turn around, and behind me, down the street, come all these Mardi Gras floats. Blaine Kern was getting all of his floats lined up

for a parade. It's all this jazz playing, and I'm standing in the projects with all these people. And then the Mardi Gras floats are whizzing past us, behind us. And I thought it's just this strange moment, this unique moment that wouldn't happen any place else in the world.

RH: Being stopped at a stoplight because Mardi Gras floats are going by really doesn't happen [laughter] very many places in the world.

VC: That's exactly right.

RH: Do you have a vision of the future for the city or for the Jewish community that you would like to see?

VC: Well, I want people to be more appreciative of each other. It's how it was right after the storm when we all came back, and that woman said she was even happy to see people she didn't like before. She said, "Every night you go out, it's like New Year's Eve. You're just so happy to see people, and everybody's in a celebratory mood." We can't always be like that, but it certainly showed us what the fundamentals are. Every cliché became true. Someone said, "Yeah, that's why they call them clichés." But every cliché was very meaningful. And I'd like to see us just -- myself included -- be conscious, really be conscious and be aware of what's important. Now, as far as physically, on a less spiritual plane, we have a lot of rebuilding to do. Personally, I'm an environmentalist, and I see everything as being connected to everything else. So, I'd like to see us be healthier in our building, in our eating, in our habits. I'd like to see just healthier things, things focused on children eating correctly and being nurtured and cared for and having child care, having mothers who have to work, or fathers who have to work -- having children be in a good, safe environment. After this happened, I kept saying, we have an opportunity to rebuild, and New Orleans can be a light unto the nations. I mean, we can be -- of course, it's not going to happen because [of] our politics, and it never does. But there are some good people out there, and we can do some things better than they've

been done before and be an example. I would love to see that.

RH: What do you hope for your son, growing up here in New Orleans?

VC: Well, I hope that he has lifelong friends, which is one of the things about being a native of New Orleans. You somehow tend to, when you're sixty years old -- you're still hanging around the guys you were hanging around with in high school. They're still your friends. I want him to have an appreciation for those things that make New Orleans unique, the music, art, architecture. I don't know that he'll stay here. You never know what's going to happen with the next generation. But certainly, wherever he goes, to be proud that he's from here.

RH: Are there any particular opportunities that you see coming out of the storm?

VC: For?

RH: For the city?

VC: I think a lot of kids who are in underserved schools are getting better things. Some of these schools didn't even have air conditioners. If you weren't inclined towards school, anyway, why would you want to sit in a hot box? Yeah, I think some of the underserved communities now -- look, it's just appalling, the way poor people lived. I met a doctor in Lafayette who had come down from the Midwest with a whole team of people. She was with Johns Hopkins, a very, very accredited doctor. I met her in synagogue -- she was Jewish -- and it hurt her to be away from her family during the high holidays. But she had to go down, and she wanted to help people. She said, "I came down here to help victims of the storm and people who needed it." And she said, "Then I realized these people were horribly needy before any hurricane ever happened, so I opened it up to the whole general community, anybody who needed us could make use of our resources." She was just stunned at the poverty she encountered, not a result of the storm.

RH: So, has Katrina changed your worldview in any ways, how you look at anything?

VC: It's a lesson that you can't live in a bubble. I think 9/11 was a lesson about that. And Katrina's another trauma. You should appreciate -- it's another cliché -- you should appreciate every moment because you don't know when it can change, and it can change in a moment.

RH: Anything you found out about yourself this past year, that you didn't know about yourself?

VC: I don't think so. I mean, maybe tonight I'll wake up and go, "Oh, why didn't I say that?" But I don't think so. I just did what I had to do. I want to remember how I felt, though, because I do tend, and a lot of us tend to just go back into automatic pilot, and go through the day, and not pay attention. I know I need to pay attention more.

RH: Are there any kind of observances, Jewish or otherwise, that are more meaningful to you now? You said Shabbat was -- earlier in Lafayette, how Shabbat services –

VC: Yeah, I think just being with the community, I appreciate it even more. Some things aren't as abstract. There's no degree of separation now between how I feel and an encounter or an event, or giving, or helping. I mean, it's more immediate. I just think it's so important to enforce the idea of the community and the reality of the community.

RH: Is there anything you want to talk about now that we haven't gotten to, or anything you want to say? Let's circle back again to Lafayette and tell me about these Mezuzahs that you had mentioned.

VC: When we bought our house, at that point, our friends, our good friends, were scattered all over. And it was so sweet because one of our friends was in New York, and we received a package after we moved in, and we opened it up, and it was a Mezuzah with a parchment for our house to make it our [home], a Jewish [home]. Then, my

husband's aunt's niece sent us this huge package and the sweetest letter. I really now wish I kept all the letters and e-mails. But she said, "I can't even imagine what you've been through, but I thought about it, and I thought there might be things you'd need." So, she sent us a Mezuzah, another Mezuzah for our other door. She sent us Shabbat candles. She sent us a Menorah and the candles, which was great, because it was traumatic. You needed to have every single thing. It's not like you just pick up a box of matches -- you didn't have it. I had to go out and buy screwdrivers and everything. Every single thing we needed to operate a house for a few months. Anyway, she sent me some organic rice, because she knows I like [laughter] health foods. I mean, it was just this big, thoughtful, wonderful box. Then my mother, who had stayed with us for a week -- my parents stayed with us for a week and then moved into our brother's house, my brother's house in Baton Rouge -- she sent me a Mezuzah too for our new house. So, it was just a wonderful thing to have that. When you are traumatized, every little thing really means something, it really does. Every little thing. That's why Richard kept that polyester shirt, and I'll always keep the Menorah that she sent us.

RH: It kind of makes the Mezuzah a little different when you've moved, it is a new home, and you're putting it on there. But it's in the face of all that's been lost, it seems like, that you've experienced –

VC: Yeah, I always felt safe and secure. I can't imagine how I would have felt if my home had been lost and all this stuff that you have. Everybody has a story, and a lot of stories are a lot more compelling than mine and traumatic. Still, no matter how you fared, from just fine to horrible, everybody has suffered with this, and everybody has had post-traumatic stress syndrome. I mean, everybody has, it's just the nature of the beast. I know I had it, not heavily, but I had it. Then, just a few weeks ago, I was just walking along one day, just walking along. It was a pretty sunny day. I was in the French Quarter, I had met some friends for lunch. All of a sudden, *boom*, I just felt a little shift. It was like just cells changing. It was just a little shift, and I felt like myself again. Nobody

would have noticed me before or after being any different. But the post-traumatic stress syndrome just left, and my next thought was, "I am over this. I'm over this now." Not that I'm not grieving. I'm totally grieving for the city I love, seeing it in shambles. I'm still grieving, I'm still upset, I'm still heartbroken. But something else that was there just left. I just felt like myself again.

RH: Wow. Tell me about -- you were talking about some other friends of yours, too, and you'd mentioned Marcia Ball.

VC: Yeah, Marcia Ball, the beloved wonderful singer, is a very good friend of my husband's and mine. She loves New Orleans and is loved here. She's from Vinton, Louisiana, which is around Texas. But she plays here all the time, stays here, stays with us when she can. She knows New Orleans, and she has a lot of friends here and a lot of connections here. As soon as this happened, her heart totally broke, and her spirit of doing something overflowed. And she immediately got together with other musicians, a lot of whom had evacuated to Austin, which is where she lives. In fact, she said there was a joke going around Austin that if you didn't have a Neville brother staying with you, you just weren't anybody [laughter] because all the Nevilles went there. A lot of the Nevilles went there, initially. Some are still there. She got with other musicians and started having lots of benefit performances. They founded a group that would give money to musicians who needed it. I just got an e-mail from her a few days ago. She's continuing an organization to provide instruments. A lot of musicians lost their instruments with their homes, and therefore, they immediately lost their -- not just means of livelihood, but I don't know, their spirit; this is what they did. They are musicians and artists, and they lost their things. So, she's collecting instruments, and the e-mail -- she's funny. The e-mail even said, "If you have an instrument for us, let me know, we'll take it, and we'll haul it over there. Got a tuba? We'll figure it out. We'll figure out how to get it there, but we'll get it there." So, she was doing things right off the bat, along with a lot of other people. And she did come to visit us in Lafayette and here. And then she went

with her momma, Hope. She and her momma came to town early on, and they drove around and took what we call the Misery Tour.

RH: Have you taken anyone on the Misery Tour?

VC: All the time. We call it the Magical Misery Tour, although it's not very magical. Actually, this past month, I had two different sets of Israelis, old friends from Israel, come visit us. I took them around, and they were just -- like everybody, just stunned. They were really quiet. They saw the Ninth Ward, and they saw Lakeview because I wanted them not just to see the Ninth Ward, which is always televised, but Lakeview, where middle-class and upper-middle-class Jewish people live. These nice homes were also totally destroyed and uninhabitable. And they just kept saying, "Oh, it looks like a ghost town here, it's like a ghost town, it's like a ghost town, it's like a war [zone]." I say it's a pretty sad state of affairs when Israelis have to comfort you [laughter] because they're getting traumas, bombings, and everything all the time. But they were just -- they couldn't believe it. My husband took Japanese associates through these areas too. He distributes a major industrial Japanese line, and the Japanese were totally stunned that the government hadn't stepped in, and everything looked the way it did a year afterward.

RH: This is a kind of a ritual that I think a lot of New Orleanians are engaged in with their friends. Why do you think it's important, this Misery Tour ritual?

VC: Well, I'll tell you. Not everybody does it. I have a friend who lives a few blocks away. He does lots of stuff in New Orleans -- he's an artist, a photographer, a nurse. He's planted green spaces all around this neighborhood. He has not even driven to the devastated areas. He knows they're devastated. This is how he's keeping his mental health. He's not taking the tour. The rest of us -- I didn't take it for a long time. I mean, just driving in town from Lafayette just freaked me out so badly, driving through Lakeview. I didn't go to the Ninth Ward for a long time and don't do it that often. You just have to bear witness, as they say. Now when I go to the Ninth Ward, as horrible as it

looks, it looks so much better, which is so crazy because it's a disaster. But it's a better disaster than it was before. It's going to take ten years. I really think it's going to take a good ten years to get this city back up and running, and people back in, and things built. But we have a lot of opportunities.

RH: So, you mentioned a few minutes ago, just this suddenly, you felt the post-traumatic stress had lifted, and you felt normal. Can you describe what normal feels like or the difference between the two? Do you have any words for it or images?

VC: It's just like a cellular shifting, I can't describe it. It's like if you tell me my eyes look a certain way, I would say, "Well, you should see them from this end." It's like I can't describe what goes on inside; it's just a little change I felt inside. But I did read a newspaper article, and it said in that article that it usually takes people about a year to get over post-traumatic stress syndrome. So, whatever they meant by that, that's what happened to me. It was thirteen months, actually, almost to the day that I just -- not freaked out anymore. Although it is upsetting, I just -- I don't know. I don't know how I'll feel next month, but I just feel like myself.

RH: That's lifted. You feel like yourself.

VC: I feel like myself. I go out, and I feel good. I feel fine.

RH: One more time, is there anything else that you feel like you would like to say?

VC: There's just so many stories, and so many people I've encountered have amazing stories. Just to take anything for granted.

RH: Is there anything else that you think people who have lived so intensely, for such an intense moment in time, have to offer the rest of America, the rest of the world through their experiences?

VC: I don't know. I wasn't that interested in hearing my parents' stories about the war a lot. I was just in New York at a convention with my husband, and [people] were like, "How are you? Is everything okay?" One lady asked me if the antiques were okay. They don't know, and people don't want to hear. I mean, the people watching this do -- but people don't want to necessarily hear something they can't relate to. They want to hear it a little bit because you have your own things. So, I don't know what we can give people. You could talk about people, you can move people, and some people can be moved by things. It's just lessons we all learn from each other. I mean, even if you live in a placid place, nobody's immune from trauma. This would get into a whole other tape, but a lot of times, people say, "How can God let this happen?" That question has always seemed naïve and embarrassing to me because it's like, things just happen. It's life, and it's not God making it, or not making it. I don't know. I can't see the huge picture. But I don't think anybody's immune from a trauma. It's just part of life. You can find someone who has a seemingly perfect life, and then you dig a little deeper, and things have happened to them you wouldn't have wanted to go through. So, everybody has their own little world within. I don't know what we can give each other, except just try to be there when something happens.

RH: Do you have any sense, now, of this home? What does home mean to you?

VC: When I came back here, and it was altered, the landscape was definitely altered in the city, and in my yard, and in the house. We had to build some of the kitchen and build the chimney back. The downstairs was a mess, but we got people to just take every single thing out. And now it looks better than ever because it's finally cleared. But the house -- again, I had that little shift. It took about two weeks and one day. I was just standing in the kitchen, and all of a sudden, all of the molecules just changed in the house, and it felt like home again; it came back. There wasn't that strangeness about being back in my house. The house just became my home again.

RH: Can you account for what that means? What does home mean?

VC: It's just like you put on an old jacket, and it fits you -- as opposed to something new or foreign. It just fit again. It's just the size. I don't know. That's the way I see things. It's just how things work with me.

RH: No degree of separation, again.

VC: Right. That's right.

RH: [inaudible] You're right with it.

VC: The molecules have realigned themselves. [laughter]

RH: This has been a beautiful interview, and I really, really appreciate you sharing what you've been through for this project.

VC: Thank you. It's great for me, too.

[END OF INTERVIEW]