

Leslie Simon Transcript

ROSALIND HINTON: This is Rosalind Hinton interviewing Leslie Simon at her home, 307 Champs Elysée in Lafayette, Louisiana. Today is Saturday, July 14th, and I'm conducting the interview for the Katrina Jewish Voices Project of the Jewish Women's Archive and the Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life. Leslie, do you agree to be interviewed and understand that the interview will be video-recorded?

LESLIE SIMON: Yes I do.

RH: Let's begin first with when you were born, and then something about your Jewish and your general education in New Orleans.

LS: I was born in New Orleans, Louisiana, on March 25, 1951, at Touro Hospital. I grew up in New Orleans. I went to public school. I went to Allen School for elementary. I went to McMain for junior high, Fortier for high school. I went to university at LSU [Louisiana State University], but ultimately graduated from the University of New Orleans with a Bachelor of Art in Education and taught special education for six years. I went back to school, earned another degree in Communications. [laughter] Never, unfortunately, got to use that degree. Then I went to Tulane University, and they had a program for Paralegal. It's a degree program, but having two degrees, I only had to go at night. I received a certificate from Tulane in 1984, and I've been a practicing paralegal ever since. My religious upbringing was through, as I said, Touro Synagogue. I was confirmed there. When I was growing up, I did youth group, and as I got older after confirmation, I did not have as much as I guess I should have involvement with the Jewish community – charitable organizations. I was always too busy. I'm still affiliated and still a member of Touro Synagogue.

RH: Tell me, where was your house when you grew up? What area of town did you live in?

LS: It was in uptown New Orleans. It was 2220 Joseph Street. It was right off of Freret Street. Many people don't relate to New Orleans. When we give directions, we give river side or lake side. It's not north, it's not south, it's not west. We're bounded by the lake – Lake Pontchartrain – and we're bounded by the Mississippi River. So you either lived on the river side of the city or the lake side. We lived on the lake side.

RH: What is it like to grow up Jewish in New Orleans?

LS: There was a very large Jewish population when I was growing up. So there was always a network. A lot of the kids, Jewish children in my era, went to public school. Nobody really singled anyone out. I guess because New Orleans is so diverse, with so many different ethnic groups living there.

RH: Do you have any memories of your favorite things – either to do in New Orleans or even within the Jewish community, that you–?

LS: Favorite things. I loved Mardi Gras, especially growing up. It was fun – not so much necessarily Mardi Gras day. I liked the night parades. I liked the parades leading up to Mardi Gras. I enjoyed going out to dinner and eating – the experience of eating. People who do not live in Louisiana, especially in New Orleans, don't understand that it's a religion – food. [laughter] And we enjoy good food.

RH: What's your favorite –? You have favorite places?

LS: Oh, yes. I like Brigtsen's. I love August [inaudible], Susan Spicer's Bayona. Oh, gosh. I love the smaller ones – Jacques-Imo.

RH: All the greats.

LS: All the greats, yes. [laughter]

RH: [laughter] All right. I know you're a true foodie –

LS: Oh, yes.

RH: – just by the ones you name. Can you tell me if you traveled? Did you travel? Did you like to say you were from New Orleans?

LS: Oh, I always did. And people liked that. I used to like to travel abroad. I always liked meeting new cultures. My first major was art history, so I loved museums and lived in museums. When I would travel, and it didn't matter the country, people would ask where I was from, and they instantly related to New Orleans. "Oh, I'd love to go to New Orleans. Oh, it's so beautiful. I've seen pictures and your food. I've heard of the food." Always very, very warm, very nice. Even in Paris, where people have rumored – which I've never had a problem – of having the French be standoffish. I've never had that.

RH: And, I guess also, I'm curious – you mentioned that you were in youth group.

LS: Yes.

RH: Was it called NFTY, SFTY? One of those?

LS: I cannot remember, to be honest. I think it may have been SFTY. But I cannot remember. And we'd go on conclaves – I remember going to Alexandria, for a weekend.

RH: And was this in high school?

LS: Well, this was pre-confirmation.

RH: Oh, pre-confirmation.

LS: Pre-confirmation. And I can remember going out to conclaves and coming up to [inaudible]. We never came to Lafayette. I do remember Shreveport and then to Alexandria. That's about as far as I traveled.

RH: Did you ever go to camp in the summer or anything like that?

LS: Occasionally, over to the Jewish communities some. A lot of towns when we were growing up, the kids made their own fun. [laughter] We weren't afraid to get our – well, of course, it was also a kinder, gentler time [inaudible]. There were very few instances of whackos out there that would grab us. But, when I did go to camp, it was over in the JCC [Jewish Community Center].

RH: Were your friends kind of a mixture of Jewish and Gentile?

LS: Yes, definitely. Definitely. It was never an issue of religion as far as what our friend was. If they happened to be Jewish, fine. If they happened to be Gentile, that was fine also. We have to live in a world with everybody.

RH: [laughter] True. Okay. That's a good background. Why don't we move into the storm? The storm entered your personal radar screen kind of late. Why don't you tell us why?

LS: Well, the Friday before Katrina, which I think was the 26th – I'm not quite sure of the date without counting back on the calendar – I was at work, and I used to take power walks at work. At lunchtime, I would leave the office. I worked in the downtown area, on the fringe, on Poydras and St. Charles. I would power walk into the Quarter and see how fast I could get there from the office, without getting hit by cars obviously, to the French – walk it, and back again, within an hour. Also to sit, generally, in Jackson Square, take a little time, smell the roses, watch the people, help the tourists. I took a little later lunch than usual so that when I got back to the office, the receptionist was motioning for me to come see her because I used to sneak into the back door. She said, "Call home." I said,

“Call home?” She said, “Darling, don’t get upset. Your Dad fell.” I said, “Hello. You don’t tell people ‘Don’t get upset.’” So, I called home, and my dad had been having stomach problems. We thought it was maybe a virus. We had previously gone to the doctor the Wednesday before. He had a new internist, and she said, “Oh, it’s probably just stomach flu.” So, I went home – called him up before I ran out. Mother answered the phone, and I was able to talk to Dad he said he had fallen, he had brush-burned his hand, and I said, “I’m on the way home.” By the time I got home and gave him the alternative – either an ambulance [or] taking an ambulance Leslie to Tulane Hospital – he relented and said, “I’ll go with you.” So we went down, and we went to the emergency room. It was a little after 2:00 [PM] on Friday. I knew Katrina was out there, but the emergency room in the hospital, at least in Tulane, did not have TVs. I had no idea. We were in the emergency room until 2:00 o’clock in the morning because they had to take tests and ascertain what it was. And they found out it was a hernia, a twisted hernia, in his bowels. By the time we got a private room, and it was 2:00 in the morning, I left my mother down there with my dad. My dad at the time was eighty-four; my mother was eighty-two. I went home, and I was very tired, but I knew I had to go home, get a couple of hours of sleep, take the dog out. I didn’t turn the TV on. So I still had no idea Katrina was out there. So I got up again. It was a little after 4:00 [AM]. Couldn’t go to sleep, had some coffee, took the dog out again, proceeded to get dressed, went back down to Tulane. He was slated to be operated on – it’s now Saturday morning around 6:00 in the morning. I knew he was going to be operated on by 8:30. I get down to the room – they’re asleep – I’m not going to turn the TV on. [laughter] Still, I don’t know. So then, the surgeon comes by, the anesthesiologist comes in, they prep Dad, they take him up – it’s about 8:30. Mom and I go into the waiting room, and the TV’s on, and there’s Katrina. There’s a graphic of Katrina, and there’s a man on the TV saying, “By the way, it’s a category five, headed straight for New Orleans.” I went, “Ah.” [laughter] I kind of rolled my eyes, and my mother said, “I’m staying.” And I said, “Well, I’ll stay” – because I really thought it was going to turn. We’ve been very lucky. Dad went through the operation. It

took a little longer than I thought. I was a little apprehensive because I kept checking my watch. Instead of two hours, it took three hours. My aunt had come down to stay with us – my uncle's wife, who was my father's brother. We're listening to the TV, and she hung with us because we wanted to see my father in intensive care. We had to wait two hours to get into intensive care, [laughter], after the surgery because it was an in-between time, and they'd only let you in at a certain time and only two family members at a time for fifteen minutes. Well, [inaudible] got in there a little after 2:00, got to see him. He looked a hundred percent better, and we left. I asked my aunt if she could follow me in her car with my mother so I could put my car downtown just in case anything happened, even though my head kept saying the storm's going to turn. Which it didn't. So, she followed me down. I put the car upstairs in the parking garage. I worked at the Pan American building, so I put it right behind the Pan American in the Whitney parking garage, where I had a contract. She took us home.

RH: So that's kind of a typical drill for a lot of people to try to get their cars up high?

LS: Pretty much so. Because New Orleans is below sea level. Way below sea level. And it's kind of funny to think that, with the flood, we would put our cars in the highest spot, which was the median, which we called the neutral ground. Not that high, but every little bit helps in New Orleans. I just thought it was a better idea to keep it high and dry, just in case. Which was a good idea. [laughter]

RH: So then, Saturday –

LS: Saturday, I kissed my dad goodbye, and when I kissed him goodbye, the nurse told me the hospital is going into lockdown – hurricane preparedness lockdown. I said, "What does that mean?" Because I thought maybe we could come back to the hospital. I'll leave my mother. Actually, I was going to leave my mother, and I was to go home and weather the storm with the dog. He said, "No, can't do it." The only people that were allowed in the hospital during hurricanes are doctors, nurses, doctors' family – that I

found out later – and the reason being – it's twofold. One, they don't want to be held liable if they have any other people other than patients, and they have to give their total attention to the patients – and food. Food and water. If a hurricane hits, and they only have so much food [and] so much water, it has to be distributed among the patients and the staff rather than everyone else. So, I knew we couldn't get back into the hospital, but I really thought that Katrina was going to turn, that it would be a matter of days before we went down to get Dad out of the hospital. I was a little off on that one.

RH: [laughter] Yeah. So tell me what happened. You ended up, you and your mother –?

LS: My aunt dropped us at home. My father – I took his car because we didn't have any of the canned goods we needed. I wanted to get some more bottled water, although in Louisiana and along the Gulf Coast, you do try to prepare for hurricanes. To a certain extent, you take precautions. You get the bottled water, you get the canned goods, you have a can opener, a manual can opener, in case you lose electricity, and you just get the staples – batteries for the flashlights and flashlights. And so I thought, well, I'm going to run over to the marketplace on Tchoupitoulas and get some staples. I noticed on the way over there I had had less than a quarter of a tank of gas. And I thought, "Well, this isn't good, but I have to keep focused. Let's get food. One thing at a time." And the market was crowded – oh, lots of people pulling things off [the shelves]. There was a cute young couple – I'm guessing or assuming they went to Tulane – they were college-age, and the young man said, "Spam – ooh, that's nasty. I said, "You'll be happy to have it. Take it." [laughter] I loaded down and got what I thought would be appropriate for three days' worth of food. And went back to the car and thought I'd go get gas. That was not the correct thought because, obviously, my brain wasn't working because everybody was trying to get out of the city. They were gassing up. There was no gas to be found. Not a drop. So I said, Okay, go back to the house. The house was a duplex. My parents had sold their house, oh, probably about twelve years ago because they didn't

want the burden of the house, as they're getting older and rented this apartment duplex on South Claiborne, which was on the river side, in between Joseph and Octavia Streets, near Ursuline High School. I put the car on the neutral ground, and I schlepped everything upstairs that – I live downstairs. Mom and I – I made her take a bath when I came in, and then I took a bath, out of caution, in case there was no electricity – bathing by candlelight is [inaudible] to a certain degree. [laughter] We had a nice dinner, and we went to bed. I took the dog out, went downstairs, and she and I went to bed. Sunday morning, I got up, and it was pretty much desolate. I mean, a lot of people, if they hadn't gone at all – the remaining ones that were in my neighborhood were going. You could see them packing up. I got a little worried since we were a downstairs apartment, so I called the landlord. His name was John, and I said, "John, can I have the keys to upstairs?" Because I knew that Chris and Amber who are our neighbors, a young couple, had already evacuated. They are originally from across the lake in Mandeville. So they had gone over there to their parent's house – I'm ninety-nine percent sure. He had no problem and brought me the keys. He told me that he was staying in town with his wife, and his wife and himself and his mother-in-law were going down to Roosevelt Hotel to weather the storm, but if I needed anything to call him, and I said, "No problem." So that was [Sunday] morning around 9:00, 9:30. About, oh, noon, the wind started picking up. By 2:00, the wind was getting stronger, so I said, "Okay, I'm going to start bringing things upstairs to the apartment." So I started carrying, in a garbage bag, the canned goods. I carried the water – I had a little black-and-white TV that ran off electricity and batteries that was five inches. I said, "I'm bringing this up." Brought the radio up, and then I brought Mom up and the dog. I said, "Let's have a nice dinner." And decided we should eat something substantial just in case we lost electricity for some reason. And we ate dinner – it was about 6:00 or a little after, and about an hour later, we did lose electricity. By now, the wind was howling. I should backtrack. Prior to dinner, though, Mom and I laid down in the master bedroom, along with the dog. [laughter] He, under the bed because I thought it was better if we took a nap because I

knew the storm was going to be coming in after dark, in the wee hours, actually – the worst part was going to be in the wee hours. So I said, “I don’t know how much sleep we can get. Let’s go take a long nap.” And, then after – we lost the electricity after we had dinner. Then when the winds were really whipping, I said, “That’s it.” I put two chairs into the hallway, closed all the doors – because I didn’t want to take a chance of flying glass – and turned on the radio because I figured I had more batteries for the radio than the TV, and I wanted to use the TV sparingly. We sat there just listening to the radio and the newscast. However, Mom did keep dozing off, which was good. I, on the other hand, got very panicky because I kept thinking there was this big old oak tree in front of the house, and I thought, “My Lord, if that thing comes in the house, we’re going to get killed.” And I kept checking the oak tree. And then, at dawn, [inaudible] I need to check also to see if there’s access, should we have to, for some unforeseen reason, go into the attic. Not possible. The way into the attic – there wasn’t access to the attic, but not a way that – I could shimmy up’ Mother could never make it. It was not an attic where you pull down the stairs; you had to get an aluminum ladder. Now when you had to get the aluminum ladder, you had to climb over a ledge once you shimmied up the ladder to get into the attic. So, I kind of wrote that one off – I said, “Not going to happen.” But my biggest fear was that oak tree. And every three minutes, I kept running around looking at the oak tree. In retrospect, it was stupid because if it had come through the window, I would have been hit first anyway. But it just kind of gave me comfort. About 1:00 o’clock, the house started going off the foundation – it was like, oh Lord. [laughter] You could feel it move. Mom luckily slept through the whole thing, but the dog, at that point, when it started moving, jumped right into my lap, hugging me for dear life and shaking – I kind of related to him. That went on. The rain started coming in about 2:00, 2:30. And it went on like that until about 4:00 the next day. Things started to calm down. In the morning, I could see a little better outside – I saw that water had gathered in the streets.

RH: You had some water in the house, too?

LS: The next morning was – well, we're up to Monday. And it was Monday 5:00 o'clock.

RH: In the morning?

LS: In the afternoon.

RH: In the afternoon.

LS: The storm started coming in about 2:00 in the afternoon Sunday on the channel side, intensified about 10:00, 11:00, and then just went until about 3:00 or 4:00 in the afternoon on Monday.

RH: Wow.

LS: It was quite intense. And once it went through, Mom was very tired, even though she'd been dozing, so I said, "Why don't you go lay down?" I said, "Let me check the bedrooms." This is Monday evening, about 5:00, 6:00 o'clock. And I figured I'd lay down, then I'd open one of the cans or something. So, I let her lay down. I didn't get any sleep because I was too scared to close my eyes. I was sitting there, and I turned the TV on. I kept turning it on intermittently during the evening, usually when she was asleep. I'm sitting there listening to what they're saying on TV, and I hear this sound. I said, "It sounds like rushing water." I said, "Wait a minute. These apartments do not come equipped with water pumps." So I got up and very tenuously went down the hall following the sound. I opened the door to one of the back bedrooms – there were three bedrooms. It was somewhat a mirror apartment to our apartment downstairs – opened it up, and water is running the length of the ceiling, through the light fixture, and pouring out the light fixture. And I'm like, "Okay." I'm noticing my poor neighbor's computer is getting wet – I'm trying to save the computer, running to find buckets or anything to catch the water. About the third trip with a bucket, I'm pushing back – because we sprung another leak in the ceiling, and the back-right-hand corner of the ceiling started falling in. I said, "Whoops." And then, Boo started coming – the dog wanted to come in. There was too

much debris, so I shooed him out, found a board, to which I tripped over, and cut myself, but kept him out. Thank God it stopped raining. I said, "That's it." And Mother slept through the whole thing, which was also... gosh. [laughter] And then I decided this is it. It quit raining. I went in, she was still asleep, I opened the door to check, [and] I pulled the door to. And I laid on the floor and just went to sleep. Next thing I knew, it was Tuesday morning. Neither she nor I had anything to eat that night. [laughter] We both slept through that night. Tuesday morning, I decided I needed to get more towels from downstairs and to see what was happening in our apartment downstairs. So I proceeded to go down the stairs and out the door. So I thought, well, it seems like with all that rain and being an old house – this was an extremely old house; it was built in the late '40s. I couldn't get the door open. I'm pulling on the door, and I'm using a few explicatives, and I'm kicking the door, and the poor dog is just sitting on the step going, "Look it, everybody. She's lost her mind." I'm throwing myself against the door, going, "Oh, Lord, open the thing." Must have heard something because it came open. So I pulled the door to put it on the latch. Nobody was outside. I noticed there's water that is still in the streets, and the house we lived in, it was recessed down – the sidewalk and all, had kind of sunk a little bit, [laughter], thanks to the city not preparing it. And all the wires were hanging down – that was something that hit me. Rather than trying to go through the wires and water, I said, "No." I jumped off the side of the porch, went through the flower bed, got to my apartment, and climbed up to our porch. For some reason, our door opened. No problem. No problem. I put the key in, and it opened. I went in, and I felt the carpet. It was squishy. And I said, "Well this is odd." But then, it had so much water. I said, "Not totally odd." I started walking through the house, and it was squishier and squishier. I know the water was up to – the house was raised about three, four feet up. It was already up that high outside. All of a sudden, the phone rang. I ran down the hallway, put some of our treasured valuables, and tripping over things – I couldn't believe – because the phone was working, and it was my aunt from California. She said, "How are you?" I'm very cheerful, "Oh, I'm fine. Everything's cool," I said. "But I need to get

off the phone and see if I can call the hospital, Aunt (Mack?).” And she says, “Okay, I’ll try to call you back.” I hung up, pulled the phone book out, and proceeded to find Tulane’s number. I thought, “Not a snowball’s chance in hell am I going to get the hospital.” Not only did I get the hospital to answer, but I asked for ICU, and the receptionist goes, “Oh, sure.” I get ICU. I get the head nurse, who happened to be Dad’s nurse – I said, “Jules, where’s my dad?” “Oh, we’re getting ready to evacuate him. He’s one of the first to go because of his age.” I said, “Great. Where are you sending him?” “I don’t know. You’ll have to call back.” I said, “I’m not sure that’s possible.” So I gave them my cell phone number because my cell phone was still working. So, I go back downstairs, grab some towels. I had turned the TV on before I left to keep Mother company. I come upstairs –

RH: Now, I’m trying to picture this because you were in the other part of the duplex.

LS: I was in our apartment –

RH: But now you’re in your apartment, I know, but –

LS: – and then we went upstairs. We spent the storm upstairs.

RH: You spent the storm upstairs, but I’m trying to picture when you left the upstairs apartment.

LS: Not the upstairs apartment. They were side-by-side apartments. There was a door here into our apartment and a door leading – that was the second apartment to go upstairs. And there was a landing with three steps on both sides. And rather than going down the steps into the water, where all the wires from the telephone poles were down hanging and were swinging, I said, “Okay, I’m going to jump off the stoop, walk through the flower-bed, climb up to my stoop, and go in.”

RH: Okay. So you weren’t in water when you jumped into the flower bed?

LS: Oh, yes, I was already in water. Water was about up to about here.

RH: Okay. That's what I was trying to...

LS: Yeah, it had filled up because the property we were on was a bit sunk-in. New Orleans is below sea level, and we are sinking because [laughter] the river's taking us back, as well, so that if it pulls down [inaudible] at times, and the house is starting to sink. Occasionally, you have to have them raised after a number of years. The amount of water that was dumped, had already gone – like I said, we were about three, four feet – already elevated the homes. But it was already up to the stoop and went in. It went over the stoop, actually, over the step. I mean, the driveways were filled up. Some worse than others, like the house that was next door, one side is even lower than our house, and the water was already covering the front door of those people's house [inaudible]. Then the house that was on the other side was a little higher up, and it was only up to the stoop, like our house. But the other one, it was already over the door, the front door.

RH: Wow.

LS: Oh, yes. And the carport – it, too, was an apartment. There was an upstairs and downstairs, and the upstairs, the driveway for that was underwater because it was partially covered, the carport. It was already over the carport. [laughter] And that I noticed immediately. Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. The levees hadn't even broken yet. [laughter] So, when I made my way back upstairs, the TV was on, and it was on channel four, they broke in and said that there was a breach in the levee, and that's when I went, "Oh. My. Gosh." When you live in New Orleans, born and raised, you know if you lose a levee, give it up. You don't have much hope. You're either going to lose levees that are holding the Mississippi back, or you're going to lose the levees that are holding not only the Mississippi but the lake back. So, I knew we needed to get to higher ground. So I went upstairs, and without alarming my mother, I said, "We're leaving." I grabbed the food,

and I grabbed the water, and I grabbed Mom, put her in the car, went back and got Boo, [and] put him in the car. It's my dad's car that had less than a quarter of a tank of gas. As we're driving off the neutral ground, I'm looking down the side streets, and they are also low. Octavia and Joseph were already underwater. It was kind of weird – it was always weird, though, because they would go underwater, but not underwater by us. [laughter] You could just look down a block away, it's underwater. So, I figured – “Okay, with a quarter of a tank, I can't afford to get water into the motor because that would mean I'd have to ...”. My mother doesn't swim. The dog can dog paddle. I can dog paddle. So, I said, “I'm going to go straight down Claiborne Avenue and get out of town that way.” Wrong. I got as far down as Claiborne. And the police were up on the overpass as you go up Claiborne like this. “Turn around.” And I looked over – everything. Tulane Avenue and out – underwater. So I said, “Okay, got to turn around.” Turned around. Now I'm going back up Claiborne. I notice as I'm going back up Claiborne in my rear-view mirror [that] water is following me. [laughter] And I went, “This is not good.” So I get back to the apartment, I pull the car back on the neutral ground, I take Mom out, put her upstairs, take Boo out, put him upstairs, tell her, “Turn the TV on. I'm going outside, see if I can find a way out for us.” I went downstairs. By now, more of the levees are breaking. I don't know because I'm not by the TV. And the only reason I know this is a number of people – mainly Black, walking up on foot. I'm watching them walk, and all of a sudden, I see two National Guard trucks. We all start waving at the Guard trucks. They only had maybe two or three – one of maybe a half-dozen people in back. They just passed us by. And my first thought was, “How dare you?” My father just set me straight that they were going in the area of the town – I wasn't thinking – where people really were drowning. [laughter] One Black lady got so mad, she picked up a rock. She started throwing rocks at [inaudible] and she's yelling, “They're wrong. Aren't they wrong?” I'm going, “Yes, ma'am.” So, they continued walking. I'm just standing there, and I'm looking down the street at the Guard trucks going. I'm turning the other direction, and I see houses burning. That was on Jefferson Avenue, and it was on the lakeside of

Jefferson Avenue. I thought, “God, this is horrible. These are people’s lives going up in smoke. And there’s no firemen to put it out, that’s for sure.” Not going to work. I just stood there, and I was like, “Wow. What am I going to do? What am I going to do?” And just when I thought – I knew I could survive, that I could stay up there. I knew the dog could survive, but I knew Mother would never survive. I hear this voice go, “Can I help you, ma’am?” And I turn around; there’s this guy and his big, big, big truck, comparable to trucks you’d see for moving services, maybe a little smaller. I turned around, and it’s a nice guy. He’s about, I’d say, the twenties, and I said, “I need to get to the Superdome.” And explained to him [that] I thought the Superdome would be the place we should go because [laughter] it has a special needs section, and my mother has a pacemaker. He said, “Well, I have to take my friend home.” There was another young man in the truck – “and he lives over on Napoleon – I’ll be back in twenty minutes.” I said, “That’ll give me time to get my mom.” So I run upstairs. I knew we had to bring some food and water with us because the Superdome didn’t provide you with food or water, so I got that together, and I started spreading food around the house – I had enough food for Boo for two-and-a-half weeks and about two-and-a-half weeks’ worth of water. I was finding pots, pans [laughter], anything that I could put water in for the animal. I thought I’d be back in three days. I got Mom downstairs. I got the food downstairs. I put all on neutral ground. Threw the food over the purses because people were still walking past us, and I prayed to myself that she’d be okay. I ran back in, and I got a flashlight I wanted to have with me. Don’t ask me why. [laughter] It’s like when we evacuated upstairs. Do not ask me why I brought my passport. [laughter] To this day, I’m trying to figure it out. I had grabbed my good pearls to bring them up with me upstairs and two other pieces of jewelry I had that were in with the pearls with the necklace and the earrings, and I grabbed my passport. I had on a pair of jeans, I had a pair of shorts, and I had two T-shirts, no bras, and two pairs of underwear. I made sure Mom had three skirts, three blouses, three pairs of underwear – three of everything. We got dad’s bag packed to make sure he had – because I thought, “Well, this is going to pass. We’ll get him out of

the hospital. He'll need to have his shoes. He needs a pair of pants, and he needs his hat." So, I virtually had nothing but the clothes on my back. That was another thing, getting Mom downstairs. To digress back, waiting for the young man – when I brought Mom downstairs, I had to make her hold – pulled her skirt up [and] tucked it into her underwear. I told her, "We're going to play like you're a mummy," because all the wires were hanging. I made her cross herself, and I steered her through the wires. Then I ran back through the wires. I got good at doing that. We got downstairs. I got her downstairs, got everything downstairs, and looked at Boo. He's running after me, and I looked at him, and I said, "Stay." And he just stood. He gave me this look that said, "Why are you leaving me? You just took me last time. What are you leaving me for this time?" And that look haunted me for two weeks. I closed the door, did not lock it, because I thought, if I can get somebody to – in retrospect, now, I'm glad I didn't do that to a point – that maybe it'd be easier to get back in if I didn't lock it. So we go and sit on the neutral ground – twenty minutes, thirty minutes, forty minutes. I'm panicking. Forty-five minutes, he's back. He gets us into his truck, and he proceeds down Claiborne.

Well, guess what? The water's now starting to come down on the river side. It becomes a game – let's outrun the water. He's looking at me. I'm looking [inaudible] him. But the truck was high enough. He gets to Napoleon. When I think about Baptist Hospital – it wasn't underwater at that point. He turns on to Napoleon, where he's trying to dodge trees, trying to dodge the falling wires – we head down Napoleon. Nobody's out. It's a ghost town. We turn on to St. Charles, and he had a little problem with some of the fallen wires. And he says, "I don't know if we're going to make it, between the wires and the trees." And I said, "Okay." I said, "We've got to get down. Tell me what to do." He said, "Nothing." And so, we had to kind of – he just manipulated – he said, "We're just going to go through the wires, say a prayer." And we did. Then I looked at his gas gauge when we were at Jackson and St. Charles. He was on empty. [laughter] He looks at me and says, "I'm running on fumes." I said, "Yeah, I see that." But again, we make it down. We get down. He's going down streets one-way. Big deal. Nobody's out. Nobody's around.

We get to Loyola Avenue, which is leading to the Superdome. We get to Loyola and Poydras, and the Superdome is on Poydras, and it's underwater. And the reason we know it's underwater is because the armored vehicles – the National Guard [inaudible]. I mean, it's already [over] their vehicles. The nice young man looks at me – he says, "I can't go that way." I said, "No." I said, "I understand." I said, "Get me to Hotel Monaco," because I remember my car is in the garage, and I also remember, maybe we'll go stay with John. He gets me to Hotel Monaco.

RH: Do you have any idea why you thought Hotel Monaco?

LS: Because it was right across from the Whitney parking garage where my car was. It was also a little nearer to the Roosevelt Hotel where the landlord was staying, and I thought maybe we'll go stay with the landlord. I get Mother – mayhem is in the street by now. They're running around. They're throwing rocks into windows. There are people with guns – and that's people other than the police. I just want to get off the street. So he stops at Hotel Monaco, and we hugged. These two girls and a young man with British accent came out, begging him – pleading with him to take them to Baton Rouge, they'll pay anything. He says, "I'm wondering if I can get home. I'm on fumes. I wish I could." They started to hike off – I don't know why, but they just took off. Where they went, to this day, I don't know. I got Mother into the lobby, sat her down, put – I still had the food – put the food over the purses, took my driver's license out because I had my jeans on, put them in my pocket, and had my car keys in my pocket. Told my mom to stay, and this nice Black lady walked over to Mom and said, "She's okay." I said, "Okay." And I go in the streets, thinking, I'm going to go down to the Fairmont. Well, they're running around – people are acting crazy.

RH: Can you tell how many people—?

LS: Oh, lots of them. [laughter]

RH: Lots of them, really. The streets were pretty full with people, huh?

LS: Pretty full. Mostly were Black. There were a couple of younger ones that were white, but mainly it was Black. Some fights broke out. Some of the fathers with some of the younger ones running around in the streets, and I felt for them, telling them, "Go away. Leave good families alone," which is true. I just proceeded to walk. I got to Place St. Charles to Common Street, and I said, "Okay, I'm going to cut down this street. I can get to the hotel." Well, right before cutting down, this gentleman, who was over six feet, started walking. Water hit him, and I said, "I don't think this is a good idea," and I backed up. Well, all of a sudden I noticed, when I backed up, there was metal in the back of my spine. I started thinking, "It can't be a gun, but it could be a gun." [laughter] I heard a voice say, "You really don't want to be out here, ma'am." I turned around, and there were two gentlemen. One had on an NOPD T-shirt, and the other had FBI. I said, "You're right. I really don't." I just kind of backed away. And I didn't run, because I didn't want to show fear. It's not good to show fear to the animals, so they say – the natives – and I just speed-walked it back. I got back into the lobby and checked on Mom. She was fine. I said, "Stay here, I'm going to the garage." I got over to the garage. People are milling about in the garage. Now, what you have to understand, which at the time I had heard on the TV, but I didn't really know the extent – some of the guys I worked with, some of the attorneys from up there, their cars were in the garage as well – didn't have cars. They were vandalizing the cars. They were siphoning gas. They were destroying cars just for the sheer pleasure of say, "Hey, here's a Lexus, let's do it in." So, I thought about walking up the ramp. But there were a lot of people up the ramp, and I said, "I don't think I'm going to go up the ramp by myself." There was no lights, to begin with, and I had my flashlight, but I said, "No, too many people on the ramp right now," at least on the second level because where I was parked – there were double floors for each level, so I was on the tenth level. I had ten flights to go up. So, I went very quietly, trying to be very inconspicuous, and opened the door, didn't hear anybody, and figured, "Okay. [inaudible] let me start going up the steps." And I'm running. I'm not walking. I'm running. [laughter]

I get to about, oh, not quite halfway, and a gentleman coming down with a tire iron like this, and I went – in my mind, I didn't say anything, and I just thought, "Oh, God." I gave him this dirty look, and he smiled, and I smiled, and he ran past me. I said, "Please don't let that be my car that he had the tire iron to." I ran up. I didn't even think maybe there are more people on the stairwell. I said, "I got to get up there." I get up to my level, which is right below the roof. I wanted as high up but not on the roof. There's the car – I'm going, "Yes!" Got in the car and said, "Please let there be gas." Yeah, there was gas. I had only about half a tank of gas because I had not filled up Saturday either. But I had more than [Dad's]. And my car, I need to preface, was brand-new. It was only three, four weeks old. I got it in July.

RH: What kind of car was it?

LS: Well, one of my friends said, "Why did you get a refrigerator box on wheels?" I said, "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder." It's a Honda Element.

RH: Oh, okay.

LS: Ugliest thing I've ever seen, but I love it. When I got it, I told friends I just bought it. I said, "Anyway, you know how it rains around here; we need to be above the water a little bit." How prophetic was I? So I got the car. The first thing, when I read the manual, it said don't take curbs over fifty miles an hour. Well, like I could care less. Extraordinary circumstances. Because, when I got back – and I forgot to mention this – when I got back from my foray to try and go to the Roosevelt, went back in the lobby. It was about ten of [inaudible] –

RH: At the Monaco to check on your mother.

LS: At the Monaco. The lady on the Monaco gets on the loudspeaker. "All hotels in the city are closing. Martial law is going into effect at 3:00. You either get out of town, or you

go to the convention center.” And that’s when I immediately thought of my car because something deep down said, “Do not go to the convention center. Do not go.” So I said, “Okay. I’ll get the car. So I got the car, came down, left it in – not the bottom part, but the outside part of the parking lot. I didn’t put it in the street. Why? I don’t know. I could have put it right in front of the hotel. Didn’t. Ran in, got Mother, got her in the car. I thought, “Okay. I can go back and get Boo.” So, proceeded to start the car, and I’m getting to the corner, and I see water is starting to come into the streets, and I said, “No.” The only way out, they told me, actually, on the loudspeaker – they did say the only way out of town was the Mississippi River Bridge by way of the west bank. So I knew I had to get to the west bank. I didn’t have time to get Boo. I am going one-way, wrong direction, get the right way, realize I’m on the expressway but pointed the wrong direction. I turned around [inaudible] and said, “Who’s going to arrest me?” [laughter] I’m going the wrong direction, wrong lanes. I don’t care. And there was – my rear-view mirror, four other people behind me. They also realized – they were following me. I was like, “Don’t follow me. I don’t even know where I’m going.” I was not even sure which direction – because I’ve only gone to Baton Rouge by I-10. So I turned the car around. We get across the river, and I said, “Okay, we’re just going to go straight for the time being.” And then there were other cars, and they’re going in the same direction. I said, “Ah, Okay, I’m going in the right direction because I’m going to follow these cars.” So I started following these cars – by now, it’s around 4:00 o’clock in the afternoon, a little after. I notice I’m running out of gas. I’m near Gonzales. We’re on I-10 now. There are not many of us. I pull off to see about getting gas. And there were lines at the gas pumps, and I’m thinking, “This isn’t good.” I pull up. I’m thinking, “Eeny meeny miny moe, where do I pull in to?” And I just picked one arbitrarily – luckily, luck was with me because right after I filled up, I looked in my rear-view mirror. A man started attacking the gas pump. It had run out of gas as did the other two lanes. We pulled into Baton Rouge. It’s after 5:00, nearly 6:00. I knew the hotels were filled. I don’t know anyone in Baton Rouge. I’m thinking maybe they’ll just let us stay in the lobby. It’d be more comfortable for Mother. I could stay in

the car if they didn't – the seats do fold down, but Mom has a bad back, and it's not a good idea. So, I start making the hotel rounds. Now granted, I'm not dressed to kill. And I have this T-shirt on from the Lincoln Park Zoo in Chicago. [inaudible] I have my jeans on. Actually, I didn't have my jeans on because I took the jeans off and put them in a bag. I just had my shorts on. I thought it was easier to get through the water. So I look like hell. None of them would let us stay in the hotel. "No, can't do it, can't do it, can't do it." I'm going to every hotel in Baton Rouge, including by the airport – a fleabag hotel, and it's packed. I'm pleading with this lady, saying, "Please, just let us sit in the lobby." She was willing to let us, but the manager told us to leave. But before leaving, the lady had given me two numbers – she said, "Your mother can stay here. If I get fired, I get fired." One was to Red Cross, and one was to Salvation Army. They wouldn't let me use the phone, either. I had to go down the road to a pay phone. I called Red Cross. I called for five minutes, hung up for five more minutes. They didn't even have the courtesy to put a message that said, "Under the circumstance, please bear with us. We will get your call." Nothing. So I called Salvation Army. They wanted to come out and lead me to their place. I said, "No, just give me directions." [laughter] I got there – by now, it's after 8:00 o'clock. We walked in. They were very nice – they had sandwiches, they gave us some treats, and they proceeded to call around. I said, "Look. A shelter. I don't care. We need somewhere just to lie down." I'm mentally exhausted and physically. So, they called the shelters. There were no shelters. There was no space. I said, "I'll stay here. I'll sleep in the lobby here." "You can't. It's a men's shelter." "Then we'll sleep in the car." "You can't do that either." Thank God one of the workers passed by and asked what the problem was. He said, "Wait a minute. There's some people in Plaquemines and the surrounding areas who've volunteered their homes." So they went off, they called, they said, "[inaudible] is coming in to get you all." By now, it's 10:00. They came in. It was an hour's drive away – 11:00. We got back to their trailer at midnight. [laughter] That's when sent out the SOS. I called my brother, my aunt, my uncle, my friends. I said, "Find daddy." [laughter]

RH: You hadn't even been able to think about that at that time?

LS: I had no idea where he was. I knew he was safe because they were evacuating him, so my primary responsibility now was to my mother and myself. And Boo. So, I sent a call out, told them, "Please find him," and we just went to sleep, Mother and I. It was now about 1:00, after 1:00. We were both so tired. Got up Wednesday. I was afraid to use my cell phone because I didn't bring my charger. I had no charger. It was my only lifeline, so I kept turning it on and off, and I told people, "I'm not going to waste the battery. I don't know how long it's going to last. So, I've got to turn it off and on, so that I can at least keep contact with you guys." The next morning, the nice people who we're staying with, who were not wealthy by any means, the husband had stayed home. He worked in a factory in the area, and his name was Earl. I said, "Earl, what are you doing home?" He says, "We're going to find your Daddy." He says, "I got the preacher helping me." And the preacher – he has a computer, and I'm doing it by the old-fashioned way – phone – because they didn't have a computer. And I said, "Don't do this. Go to work." "No, we're going to find your Daddy." So then we sat down, and his wife, Tina, fixed us breakfast. I was getting my mother's medications, and I went, "Oh, blank." She said, "What's the matter?" I told her what's the matter – I said, "She's running out of one of these medications for her heart." He says, "Hold up," gets on the phone [and] calls the preacher. He says, "I'm going to go pick the preacher up. We're going over to Donaldsonville, which is about ten minutes away, and we're going to go get a prescription refilled. Where's the bottle?" I said, "Well, let me give you money." He says, "No, no, don't worry. They're filling everyone for free." All the pharmacies – Walgreens, CVS, everybody – which they did for, like, six weeks.

RH: Wow.

LS: They were very nice. So they went off – they were awfully nice. I'm sitting there with myself, calling, double-checking with my brother and with a couple of other people.

RH: Well, what we're going to do is go ahead and stop the tape for right now.

LS: Okay. [inaudible]

RH: Yeah. Go ahead and tell the story.

LS: These are the pictures, and these pictures I'm holding that are part of my life now came from the preacher. The preacher had three daughters, and the three daughters ranged in ages from five years old up to twelve. They knew what was happening because they had a TV, and they knew about Katrina. They sent me these pictures; on the back of them are narratives – actually, I forgot about that – where they apologize, and that they feel bad and that they're sorry for what has happened to me and my family. As you see, it's a little man with an ax, and the water coming up, and the other is a tree that's fallen, but I like how the little girl put the flower down there. It shows in this life even though that tree fell. There's the rain and the lightning. There's a little hope there. I don't know if she realized she did that, bless her little heart.

RH: And the little umbrella, too.

LS: And the little umbrella, right. I forgot about that. That was very sweet of these children, very sweet of them. That's one thing about the hurricane, with Katrina; it affected the children. It not only affected the children who were in the city but all children. They all have fears. It could happen to them. Kids are very smart about that.

RH: Wow. So, do you know what religion he was, by any chance?

LS: No, I don't. I think he's Baptist. I'm not sure, but I think he was Baptist.

RH: So, they went and got the prescription filled for you.

LS: They got the prescription, and they passed by the house to pick the pictures up and also to see if his wife had found out anything about Daddy. [laughter] It was kind of two-

fold because the little girl said, “You got to pass back. We’re going to make the pictures,” so they had to pass back. [laughter] Which was very sweet

RH: Wow, that’s nice. And you have a third one, you said?

LS: The third one is at work, and the third one has mommy, and Daddy, and – Earl – I had told her all about my dog because they had a dog of theirs that was a sweet dog, a Chihuahua Heinz 57 mix. The little girl had drawn Mom, Dad, me, and the dog, so that one is at work, and I keep on my desk so it stays there.

[END OF PART 1]

RH: This is tape two with Leslie Simon for Katrina’s Jewish Voices. You were saying you forgot to tell us that the police – how people react on the street and when you were trying to leave town?

LS: Right. We all react, I guess, differently to crises. Of course, you do expect a little more out of the people who protect, serve, and are there to try and help you. When I was thinking of maybe taking a chance and going down the side street and trying maybe to get to Tchoupitoulas Street, which is a high part of the city – and that’s one way I could have gotten to the Mississippi River bridge, was to Tchoupitoulas. But getting to Tchoupitoulas, I didn’t know if they had any water – and I didn’t want to – you can’t take the chance and then be stuck in rising water. So there were two policemen on the street, and this was by Napoleon and Claiborne. I asked them if they knew if the water was – what side streets leading to Tchoupitoulas, what streets in general leading toward Tchoupitoulas could I go down. And they looked at me – “I don’t know.” I said, “You all don’t know? You’re not communicating?” He says, “We got too much on our mind.” Well, what they had on their mind, when I asked them, was just standing around. One was smoking a cigarette, and the other was drinking a Coke or something. I can’t even remember what it was. I was furious. I said, “Forget it.” And then I just decided to go

back to the house.

RH: And you said it was strange how the water was rising also?

LS: The way the city is, the way New Orleans is built, areas you just don't know sink quicker than other areas – become lower. That's why on the lake side, it was filling up quickly, very quickly. The river side not as quickly. But when it did start filling and coming from out toward Jefferson on the river side, it was coming quick. When we got in the truck with the young man who took us downtown, it kind of became a chase – the water was chasing us, and he was trying to go as quickly as he could.

RH: And so, you finally – you were with this family in Plaquemines, Louisiana, which is not Plaquemines Parish –

LS: No. [laughter]

RH: – because that was kind of underwater, too, I think.

LS: They were already underwater. Totally unrelated to Plaquemines Parish. It's Plaquemines, Louisiana. It's right on the other side of Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and it's going west, it's going toward Lafayette, Lake Charles, and that area, going west.

RH: So, how did you –? You started to try to find your father.

LS: My mother's on the way back with the preacher and with Earl from getting her prescription refilled when my cell phone started vibrating. I took it out of my pocket. I had just called one of my best friends because her father is a retired pediatrician. So since he's a doctor, he could have maybe network – and he was trying to network to find out where they had taken Dad, through the hospitals. It turned out it was a text message, and it said, "Your dad is at Southwest Medical in Lafayette, Louisiana." It was from my aunt, it turned out. I wasn't sure who it was from because, at the time, it didn't register. I

didn't find out until we got to Southwest Medical Center in Lafayette to my dad, who it was that had sent me the text message. Well, when Earl pulled up, I grabbed him, I kissed him, I said, "Look, we found Daddy." He was elated. We thanked him profusely, Mom and I. I got her into the car. We were two hours away from Lafayette. I did it in like about an hour. Had no idea where I was going because I had only been to Lafayette maybe three times in my life. I finally stopped, got out of the car, went into this shop, and said, "Hey, I need to find Southwest Medical." They gave me directions, stopped about another two times, found him, went in – he was in tears. He was crying. I was crying. I said, "Boo's dead." He was yelling, "God is merciful." I was saying a few other things at the time. [laughter] He thought we had gone to Tupelo, Mississippi, to be with my aunt and uncle because we used to evacuate whenever there was a there seemed a legitimate threat from a hurricane to Tupelo, Mississippi, where my aunt's mom lives. And that, by the way, is who found [inaudible] daddy. She had gotten up Wednesday morning, turned her TV on in Tupelo, Mississippi, was making her coffee, turned it on to the local TV station, and the commentator said, "We can find anybody from any hospital in New Orleans, where they were evacuated, at the local hospital." She turned the TV off, she turned the coffee off, she got dressed – this lady at the time was eighty-six years old – got in the car, went to the hospital, came back. My aunt had just gotten up. She says, "This is where Julius is at." My aunt text messaged me. That's how I found out where Dad was at.

RH: So how did the hospital in Tupelo, Mississippi, find everybody?

LS: They have a computerized locator service that tapped into the hospital network they're affiliated with, which I'm not sure who they are affiliated with, who were sharing with other hospitals. There's Tenet? and there's Humana, but all of them were working in concert together to make sure to get the word out, you know, this is where this patient is, tell that family this is where he is. So they kind of pulled down the barriers to help each other out, so that people could be found.

RH: I'm trying to picture where Tupelo is.

LS: Tupelo, Mississippi is up in – it's right below Memphis.

RH: That's what I thought. It's in the northern part of Mississippi.

LS: Northern part, right. It's an hour away from Memphis. Birthplace of Elvis Presley.
[laughter]

RH: Yeah, that's the other thing it's famous for.

LS: They claim the glory. [laughter]

RH: [laughter] So, was this the aunt that had come down?

LS: This was the aunt who came and sat with us, yes. In fact, bless their hearts, they live now in Fairhope, Alabama, because they lived at Mariners Cove, which was on the lakefront, which abutted – they were condos, townhouse condos. They had a three-story townhouse condo. They were right behind 17th Street.

RH: Oh, right, right.

LS: [laughter] Oh yeah. They did a little worse than we. [laughter] They got some of the stuff that was on the third floor out. Like I said, by the time, which was not until October, that they opened up my zip code to let us back into New Orleans – and our zip code didn't open up until, oh God, until October, first week of October. When I went back with my brother, everything that was above five-and-a-half feet was saved. Which meant we didn't save much. [laughter] Dishes, china – it was very eerie. We got the crystal, which should – all the furniture was scattered, I mean, everywhere. I kept jokingly saying, "How's my computer? Is it okay?" Because I had it up a little bit. And my brother says, "Which part of it? Some's in the living room. Some's in the bathroom." I said, "Oh, well, I'll take that as a no." So, in the dining room, the table, which was a very old and heavy

table, was thrown asunder, partially into the living room. The breakfront that had the silver – heavy – [makes crashing sound]. The breakfront that had the crystal, not one piece was broken. Go figure. My brother and I just stood there, and I said, “Shut up, I’ll take this as a given.” And then, when he went to touch it, I said, “Don’t do that. It made it through Katrina; it’ll never make it through you. Let me pack it.” [laughter] But it was eerie how water works because the water in the house didn’t go out the picture window. It imploded the side windows. We had a solarium. It blew out the solarium. It blew out every window on the sides of the house. But didn’t touch the picture window – bay picture window in the front. Oh yeah, it’s very bizarre. [laughter]

RH: Well, let’s go back. You found your father, and you’re in Lafayette.

LS: In Lafayette. We’re in the hospital. We now have a new home – Southwest Medical Hospital, for the time being.

RH: So they let you and your mother stay?

LS: They let us stay. I was calling the SPCA [Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals] every day – my mind just wasn’t with me – trying to get Boo rescued. We were watching TV every day. By the time we got to Dad, it was Wednesday. By Thursday, it was getting even more dismal in New Orleans. By Friday, my dad said, “I’m not going back. It’s never going to be the same, not in my lifetime, I doubt in yours.” I said, “I’d be afraid to live there without level-five hurricane protection.” I said, “I’ll go halfway with the house.” So, I called Friday evening to find a realtor – called Merrill Lynch, where my dad has his accounts. They found us a realtor. The realtor came over Saturday morning. The Saturday after Katrina, it was a madhouse because Lafayette was a very packed city with people from New Orleans. They were not only bussing the people they were saving – and I’d like to add, with heartfelt love, that these people up here – if it wasn’t for them, the Cajun army, as they euphemistically call them – they went in and rescued so many people in New Orleans compared to the National Guard, who kept trying to decide

how to go about to rescue people. [laughter] The Cajuns went in and said, “We’re just going to get them out.” [laughter] “You don’t decide; you get the boat, and you go, and you bring your gun. If they’re going to shoot – if somebody’s going to shoot at you, you shoot back, but you save the people that you can save.” They opened up the Cajundome for the evacuees. Southwest Medical was a clearinghouse for them, and we know that because Dad – out of his window, you can look outside, and you could see all these people getting off buses. I finally asked a nurse, “What’s going on?” She said, “These are the people that were bussed out of New Orleans from the convention center. We’re bringing them to the hospital, taking them to the third floor, letting them take a shower, giving them scrubs and a duffel bag with a toothbrush, deodorant, and some water before they take them to the Cajundome.” But I digress. You had all these evacuees up here who had been rescued from the convention center. Then you had the people who were from New Orleans. I mean, people who were like attorneys that I worked with. Some of them from New Orleans law firms have offices in Lafayette – they were coming up here. Other people were coming up here, and they were saying, “We’re staying up here. We’re not going back.” [laughter] There’s nothing to go back to, so people, they lost everything, they just didn’t want to go back and start over in New Orleans again, and we have a very large number now of New Orleanians living in Lafayette. [laughter] So, going out the Saturday after Katrina to find a house was not easy. Everybody was looking for a house. Some wanted ones already available. Some wanted to buy that were in the process of being constructed. So, it wasn’t easy, but we won out. [laughter] We got the house.

RH: You said that you found the place we’re in right now, and there was like a bidding war?

LS: When I saw it, the people who owned it were still in residence, and I just fell in love with it. This is a perfect size. It has the indoor garage – with two elderly people, good to have. It’s nice and quiet out here. We’re right on the outskirts of the southern side of

Lafayette – very tranquil. I’m becoming one with nature. I turned to the realtor. I said, “I want the house.” It wasn’t being listed with her. We had to go to Coldwell Banker. She came out and said, “Good news and bad news.” I said, “Story of my life. Give me the good news.” “Well, the house is available.” I said, “Give me the bad news.” [laughter] She says, “Four other people want it.” I said, “Let’s go back to the hospital.” So we went back to the hospital, and I told my father, who hadn’t seen it. I said, “We want this house. Trust me, we want this house.” He looked at the realtor and said, “Whatever it takes, get it.” And we got it. It was kind of like the New York Stock Exchange in Lafayette, especially for property. It went up, it went down, it went up, it went down. [laughter] But mainly up because so many people just wanted to stay. There were about 50,000 evacuees, and out of 50,000, about 30,000, 35,000 have stayed.

RH: Really?

LS: Oh yeah.

RH: Wow, that’s a statistic I hadn’t heard before.

LS: A large number. This was in the paper last year. Now, I’m not saying they all live in Lafayette. There’s a lot of outlying areas because a lot of people can’t afford the property now because all of a sudden – since there’s a land rush in Lafayette, property values have gone up tremendously. So you have areas like – and when they talk about Lafayette, they usually also include – there’s a community called Carencro, which I’m sure you saw on the way in from I-10. There’s Scott, Louisiana; Broussard, Louisiana; Duson, Louisiana. [laughter] So you have all these little communities. We’re the big city, Lafayette. And a lot of people have now chosen – Youngsville, Louisiana – to go into that area to build houses, to buy houses, because it’s a little less expensive than in the city.

RH: When were you able to move into the house?

LS: We went to the closing on the 19th of September. I told the realtor they had to be out by the 19th. Well, they were kind of in a rush because the husband had a job in Houston, and they had to move into the new house and get settled.

RH: So, that interim period, where did you stay?

LS: In the interim, we lived in the hospital. [laughter]

RH: You really did?

LS: In Dad's room. Southwest Medical Center is all private rooms. And they have the couch that pulls out into a bed. That was Mother's. Then, they had the recliner chair that you flip back. That was mine. Except, I did graduate to another one of the beds because when they moved Dad, it was about two weeks prior to the closing – they moved him down to the rehab floor. And Mom still stayed there, I still stayed there, but they had another couch there, which was a little more comfortable for me. So we had two couch beds there. [laughter] In between, I was traveling between Lafayette and Baton Rouge to work.

RH: Who else did you try to connect with, and how did you make connections?

LS: Well, after I found Dad, I knew I had to try to find my boss. And my boss was from Baton Rouge, and his wife is from – oh, gosh. It's right outside of Shreveport. I can't think. It's not Bossier. I can't think of the name. I want to say New Roads. It's somewhere up there. I was thinking maybe they had run up there, but I didn't have the number, and I couldn't remember her maiden name. So I took a chance, and I said, "Wait, let me call this attorney in Baton Rouge." That's his boyhood friend. "He would know." So I call him up. John goes, "My God, Ralph's going beside himself. Where are you? We've been trying to call your cell." I said, "I can't turn my cell on. I don't have a charger. I've been looking for a charger since I've been here in Lafayette, but as soon as they get them in, they sell them out." I said, "Tell me how to get a hold of Ralph." He

says, “Where are you?” I told him I’m in a hospital and tell him Dad’s in the hospital up here – because I talked to Ralph Saturday after the operation and told him I was staying, and he said, “Don’t do that.” I said, “I’m staying.” He said, “Please don’t do that. You and your mother leave. The hospital can take care of your dad.” I said, “I’m staying. We are staying.” And that was the last time I had spoken to Ralph. Well, I gave him the hospital number, and about ten minutes later, Ralph called up. He had told me that half the firm had gone to Houston and had found space to rent in Houston in an office, and the other half had gone to Baton Rouge, and he had found an office to rent there. I said, “Okay, I’m coming. Do I still have a job?” He said, “Yes.” And they knew I wasn’t going back, but they let me – because they went back in December, the 15th of December, but they let me come in to work even though my head wasn’t completely screwed on for work. [laughter]

RH: So, you knew pretty early you weren’t going to go back?

LS: Yeah. I mean, it kind of said it all – I said the house was half mine, half my parents’. They knew it, but they were very kind and let me stay until they moved back. So, I’m commuting every day between here and Baton Rouge. I’d leave here at 6:00 in the morning, and I’d leave Baton Rouge – they were letting us leave – because everybody was traveling from different directions. One attorney was with her aunt in Alexandria, so she was traveling not quite three hours a day one way. There were other people – one of these secretaries was over in Breaux Bridge; they had evacuated and were staying in Breaux Bridge, which is right down the road from Lafayette. They made a deal that [if we] got in around 7:00, [we] could leave by 3:30 because traffic’s no fun. So I was doing that for three months. That was no fun, although there were a lot of people in Lafayette, residents, who do actually travel forty-seven miles one-way every day to Baton Rouge to work.

RH: So, tell me a little about the decision-making process. I mean, it sounds like the decision-making, from what you just said, was your father said, "I'm not going back." And so you guys just said, "Well, we're here."

LS: We're here. I mean, we missed New Orleans. I missed New Orleans. They came back with me with the insurance adjuster, and they saw the devastation, destruction. I went back to clean the house up prior to them –

RH: When did you go? When did you first go in?

LS: When they let us into our zip codes. They went by zip code – and our zip code was one of the last. It wasn't until October, which actually benefited us because it was still hot, but not stifling hot – I mean, luckily, all the windows got blown out, so there was a breeze going through. [laughter] When we went through whatever garbage we could find, but that helped tremendously.

RH: But really, you going in, you already knew [you were] not staying.

LS: I already knew. I did know. It's just a recovery mission at this point.

RH: What, when you looked around, were you gladdest to see and say, "My gosh, I'm glad this is okay?"

LS: My parent's wedding picture. I thought I had put the pictures – not all the family pictures – I got a fair representative number of them. They were in the closet, and the closet was about fifteen, twenty feet high ceiling – they had a ledge. But with the shaking of the foundation of the house, the boxes went into the trash – some of them. And some of them helped shield other ones. My mother's wedding book – gone, destroyed. So the only thing of the wedding I have is that picture, so I was thrilled to death to see that. We had [inaudible] that up with their fiftieth wedding anniversary, and it was above the fireplace. And I was happy – we had given Daddy, for his eightieth birthday, a

reproduction of George Rodrigue, "The Blue Dog," and he has a black cat there, too.

The frame was starting to bow, and I thought – I ripped off that frame so fast to make sure that picture didn't get ruined. But, it was able, thank God, to survive. Mom's bell collection. She liked to collect bells. Every country I would go to, I would collect a bell. [laughter]

RH: Oh, wow, and that was okay?

LS: Which is fun. That one was okay. Unfortunately, the vitrina it was in was already – even though it was high up, it already had mold on it, and I was not letting [inaudible] mold. We got three boxes out of the house, and it took me over a year and a half to just bring myself to clean everything and make sure it was mold-free. They all lived in our garage in boxes.

RH: What is something that you were really sorry to lose once you got there?

LS: I had a ring that was given to me when I was thirteen, an old gold ring. It floated. I had a ring that was given to me for confirmation by a friend of my grandmother's, and it was an antique, and it was part of her family. She had no children. It was gold with turquoise and a sea bead; it was from France. That went, and I was sorry. And my grandmother's earrings – those went. Everything else – the clothes – that's inconsequential. And actually, I was laughing at one point. When we went in, I said, "Maybe the DVD player is okay." Because it recorded as well. And there it was, up on the shelf and water. [laughter] And I said, "Maybe I can save it." [laughter] And then maybe not. But I mean, you have to laugh. What are you going to do? I was a little sad. My stuffed animals were gone. I had a teddy bear named Nebbish. [laughter] And he floated.

RH: Well, you know what? We need to go back because we haven't rescued Boo.

LS: Oh yeah.

RH: So, I don't know what happened. [laughter]

LS: Boo. Let's see. Every day I called – well, my cousins in California, and my aunt – their daughters, every day they were calling – there was a humane society that came in from Los Angeles. They were calling them every day. I was calling the state SPCA every day and giving the exact location. Well, when I finally got back to work, they talked to everyone. It was not quite two weeks after Katrina. And it was on a Friday. Monday was going to be the two-week anniversary. So I went in. Everybody hugged. We were all crying, and we were all relating our stories and what-not – whatever. I was the only one who was in town when it hit. And one of the partners who lived five blocks from me came in, we hugged, and I just bawled. He said, "Come on." And we went in the other room, we talked, and I told him what had happened and that Boo was still there. He says, "Leslie. I'm going to try to get him today." I said, "Frasier? You can't get in.

They're not letting people in." He says, "I have a special pass. I represent the Mayor of Plaquemines, Louisiana." I said, "That'll do it." He said, "Also, I need to go by the office, and I was going to go check my house." Now, he lived on State Street Drive. Way down. [laughter] Oh yeah, he had the ceiling pulled down – well, he had a townhouse, a two-story townhouse. His main property is – talk about living dangerously – a 150-year-old house in Florida. Mary Esther, Florida. Oh yes, which is right by – not too far from Destin.

RH: Yeah, I was going to say – Panama City, Destin – somewhere in there.

LS: Exactly. Not a good area either, talk about hurricane-prone

RH: Yeah, but pretty.

LS: Thank you, but gorgeous. So, that's their main property. So the townhouse is bad enough, but they're redoing that. So, I'm all excited. I'm primed. I'm just thrilled to death. So, he leaves. It's about 9:00. Well, around 3:00 o'clock, he calls. "Leslie, I can't get to my house. I can't get to your house. The water's too high." Well, I keep calling it the hospital. After a while, I kept telling people I've been staying at – the hospital, but as I talked, [I said,] "the hotel," and they'd go, "hospital." That was my hotel. You go to your hotel. I'll go to my hotel. All weekend, I kept bugging the SPCA. I kept calling my cousins to bug them, but the good news was I had a charger now. So I could use my cell phone more often. I had gotten a charger. A nice lady at Cingular said, "Shh. It's a travel charger. I have one left, don't say anything, or they'll kill you, the rest of these people," and she sold it to me, bless her heart. So, Monday came. I go into work. Frasier's not there. I figured he's with the Mayor of Plaquemines. I didn't even think about Frasier. I decided to go to Lamar Dixon. Now, Lamar Dixon is in Gonzales, Louisiana, which is right outside of Baton Rouge. And Lamar Dixon is an exposition hall. It's huge. After the hurricane passed, many organizations around the country, humane organizations, came in to rescue cats, dogs, birds, snakes, gerbils, you name it – they were coming in. They were bringing them over to Lamar Dixon, to the exposition hall. So, I happened to mention to one of the secretaries, "I'm riding over there. If there's a snowball's chance in hell Boo is there, I'm going to find him." So, she said, "I'll go with you," because she has two Rottweilers, but she had them with her. So we go over there, and I signed the papers, whatnot, and I proceeded to go through Lamar Dixon, and it was the saddest thing I've ever seen. All these poor little dogs and poor little kitties and the vacant looks in their eyes; I wanted to take them all with me. But no Boo. So I said, "Okay, let's go back to work. We have to." I said, "But I'm coming back tomorrow and every day because if there's a chance I can find this dog before they let me into the city, I'm going to find him." So we go back to the office. Well, the receptionist is in Houston, so we all got to take turns playing receptionist. But at 3:00 o'clock, we break because not much was going on [laughter] because we were all in flux. And it wasn't only us; it was

all companies that fled New Orleans because they all had to find places to rent. Some had a very difficult time doing that. So it was hard to try to keep businesses going to begin with. Luckily, most of the country realized this. But we were sitting around, and it was the secretaries, and there was one, two, three, four secretaries. I'm a paralegal – I was the sole paralegal there. The other paralegal had gone to Houston. One of the young associates had been with us about three months but was only practicing there. We're sitting around. We're just kidding around. And the assistant to the bookkeeper – the phone rang – she said, "Leslie. I have a Lieutenant Colonel Williamson with the Fort Worth National Guard on the phone to talk to you." I went, "Oh, good. What did I do now?" I get on the phone, and the man says, "What is your name?" I said, "Leslie." He said, "Leslie what?" I said, "Leslie Simon." He said, "And where do you live?" And I thought of Boo. So I gave the upstairs apartment number. He said, "Do you have a dog?" And I yelled, "Boo." I start crying, and everybody, including the young man Bill started crying. He says, "Did you authorize anyone to go get him?" I said, "Frasier." He said, "Give me a last name, honey." I said, "Rankin." So Frasier takes the phone, and he says, "Leslie, I have Boo. He stinks to high heaven. He's dirty. He's matted. I'm bringing him to you. Don't leave." I said, "Hell will freeze. Bring him to me." So he brought him up to me, so he was able to survive the two weeks. He didn't eat a lot of food, Frasier said. I had scattered all the food. He was almost out of water. But he made it. [laughter] He was only four years old then. He's going to be six – so his age worked for him. And he doesn't hold it against me. [laughter]

RH: No?

LS: No.

RH: Any residual effects for him?

LS: When it rains now. Rain never used to bother him. Poor baby. He runs to the bathroom, puts himself between the toilet and tub, and just shakes until it quits raining or

until I hold him, one or the other, which makes it hard to eat dinner.

RH: Wow, see, you got the whole family back together.

LS: That's the most important thing, thank you. [inaudible]

RH: Tell me about Lafayette. What do you like about Lafayette?

LS: What do I like? God, what's not to like about Lafayette? Lafayette is – unfortunate for New Orleans, tourism's not big. What's happening now is there's a reversal. There's a reversal in the tourism industry from what I've been reading in Conde Nast and Travel and Leisure. People will go to major cities. But they're not really happy with major cities; they're going more out into rural areas. [inaudible] states or even countries for that matter. Breaux Bridge, which is not too far – about a ten-minute ride from here, Breaux Bridge is – I think Expedia did a survey, and between Breaux Bridge and Lafayette, it's one of the top traffic destinations domestically and internationally. I said, "Who would've think?" But I can understand why. Acadiana has a different mindset. I guess you could almost say they're not totally into the 21st century yet. The crime is minimal. People still have values up here. People still have respect. Children are raised to have respect, they are raised to know good from evil, what's right, what's not wrong, you don't give lip. You pay the consequence. Neighbors still care about neighbors. Example: Rita. When Rita passed through, my neighbor's tree, which is not a big tree, it's a small tree, part of one of the branches fell into our yard. My father passes by it the next day after Rita, back door – we have a big glass back door – and he goes, "Leslie, we got about fifteen people in the backyard. Any idea who they are?" I noticed my neighbor, so I go outside, and I said, "Judy, what's happening?" She said, "I apologize, the tree – we're picking up the tree." I said, "I'll help." She says, "You've been through enough. Sit." And everybody's going, "Sit. Sit. Sit." They're bringing me things. It's my backyard. They're giving me iced tea – and I'm like, "Right. That quit happening in New Orleans around about 1980, for God's sake." But they still have that nice, home-town, country, we'll-take-care-of-you

– if you were on the street and you asked directions, they will take you there. They won't give you the directions; that's too easy to do. They'll go, "Come on, follow me. I'm going that way anyway," like they were really going that way. But that's the kind of people they are. If your car breaks down in front of the house – "Come in. We're having dinner. Sit down. Now. Tell me all about it." [laughter] And that's the kind of atmosphere I grew up with in New Orleans, back in the late '50s, '60s, until the '70s, which we don't have anymore. The food here is wonderful. Culture here – people think Lafayette, they look and think "rural town." It's very cosmopolitan. There's a lot of money here from the oil fields. And it's old money; it's been here. They have theater. They have symphony. They have opera. They have the popular singers. I mean, some of which I don't keep up with, like McGraw. McGraw coming – it's like, "Oh, that's good." It's very diverse. A lot of diversity to this place, and a very giving place, on the whole. The companies give a lot, like the law firm I'm with; we do a lot with the United Way. In August, I'll be participating – there was a young man named Miles Perret. Five years ago, he had cancer – he was ten years old – and died. His father is an attorney, and he and the mother wanted to give back to other children. So they raised money, opened a hospital for children and adults with cancer, and every year, this is one of the fundraisers they have, and it's the Miles Perret Festival. It's for children. The community just bands together and gives gifts.

RH: So, you don't feel like an outsider? You feel like they've let you in?

LS: No, no. They are so warm and so good. I'm always contented when I tell friends – I have friends scattered across the country courtesy of Katrina. And one of my good friends lives in the Woodlands right outside of Houston. She went to school at the University of Lafayette in Lafayette thirty years ago. She said, "I hate you. You won. You got the best place." I said, "Yeah, I know." [laughter] And they're just good, down-to-earth people. They just opened their arms. As I said, the Cajun Navy didn't hesitate. Douglas Brinkley's book is wonderful – [The Great Deluge: Hurricane Katrina, New

Orleans, and the Mississippi Gulf Coast] – to capture the spirit. They just said, “We’re going.” Not a moment’s hesitation. My father, I found out, had vascular surgery, and his nurse, Anna, is a young lady, and her husband is a police officer. They didn’t hesitate. They volunteered. They went into New Orleans. Didn’t think twice. They needed medical help. They needed his expertise as a cop. They didn’t think. They said, “We went in. We just got in the car and said, ‘Well, we don’t know what we’re doing, but let’s go.’”

RH: Is the racial situation different here?

LS: Yes.

RH: How is that?

LS: It’s very much different. In some ways, it’s alike, in some ways, it’s different. Yes, you’re going to have some of these young ones [inaudible] drugs, and up to no good, and that’s going to be anywhere. You can’t escape that. That’s called utopia, and I haven’t found it yet, so you’ll never escape it. But you don’t have it on the size that you have in any major city, including New Orleans. To be quite frank, they don’t put up with it. I mean, the juries will just – and when I say juries, I’m including the Black people who sit on the juries. They don’t put up with it. They don’t put up with – in fact, they’re more harsher on the ones that are on welfare. I can dig a ditch; you can dig a ditch. It’s an honest day’s work. The aides in the hospital would get so mad when they were on TV, after Katrina, with some of these people who misused the funds, like \$2500, and got the Gucci bag. They would go, “You don’t give them one red cent. You make them go with them. You can’t trust those people.” I’m just sitting there, and she’s going, “Right?” And I’m going, “Uh-huh.” [laughter] You know? I’m not going to argue with anyone, I’m like, “Mm-hmm.” But their values are much higher. They’re very big on making sure the kids stay in school and encourage them to start early and get jobs – I mean, kids working – Sonic – sixteen, fourteen. And it doesn’t matter color. Get a job. [laughter] Much more

so – it used to be that way when I grew up in New Orleans, and it kind of changed there, but here it's kind of like in New Orleans – here, respect is – you learn how to take care of yourself at a young age.

RH: Have you connected at all with the Jewish community here?

LS: Not as large a Jewish community here. Next door, Judy is Jewish, but her better half is Catholic. They have a traveling rabbi, but he only comes around, from what I understand, really, mainly just for religious holidays. If you go to synagogue on a weekly basis, you –

RH: There is a synagogue?

LS: Yes, but there's no rabbi around except for the traveling rabbi, and I think Baton Rouge is getting a – they just got a permanent, or they, too, still have a traveling rabbi. Because for a while there, they had a traveling rabbi also.

RH: Well, there's more than one –

LS: Shul?

RH: – shul in Baton Rouge, so they do have Stan Zamek, and –

LS: Yeah, because I know up here there's no –

RH: – Martha Bergadine –

LS: – there is a temple, but we don't have a large Jewish congregation [laughter] to warrant a rabbi, and they only come up mainly on the holidays.

RH: Did you connect with them, like, to let them know you were here like you needed help, or anything like that?

LS: No, when I first got up here, I was kind of like in tunnel vision, in shock, trying to pull myself together, trying to think – what am I going to do now? I got to make a livelihood. [laughter] I need money. [inaudible] So, I really didn't do it. And then, after Dad got out of the hospital, we had to [inaudible], and that took a while. Then I had to find a job, so actually, I haven't had that much time. [laughter] My life is not overly exciting. We'll put it this way – it's kind of like, work, home – domestic. [laughter]

RH: How did you find your law firm? How did you switch law firms?

LS: Oh, that's a sweet story. Again, life is very strange, you just never really know. One of the attorneys, one of the senior partners, I had spoken to a couple of times on the phone. I worked primarily, with my last firm, with toxic dumping cases, asbestos, benzene – I like the environmental cases and toxic ones, mostly. But Ben, who was a partner, does a lot of – and it was insurance defense. They do insurance defense, and it was also with asbestos. He was in town. This was back in February of 2006. And he was in town for a hearing at court. And he ran into Ralph, my former senior partner, and they started talking, and he told him about me. And he said, "Do you have an opening for Leslie?" Because we kept in touch, and still do, occasionally – not as much as we should, but we're both so busy. He said, "Do you got an opening for Leslie at the firm?" He says, "I don't know. I'll check Monday, but I don't think so." So he came back to work, back to Lafayette. On Monday, he went in. Well, as fate would have it, he goes down to talk to another senior partner, Jim Pate. The firm is Laborde and Neuner. He tells him about me, and he says, "Do we have any openings?" He says, "Don't think so." Well, his paralegal comes in and says, "I got to tell you all goodbye. I'm resigning." She's pregnant. She's almost nine months pregnant. [laughter] She wants to be a mommy. Well, they both looked at each other. Their eyes bug up. In the meantime, I started sending resumes out. I get online, into Martindale-Hubbell's website, which is a directory of every – if you registered with them – an attorney in the United States, in each city in the United States – extrapolating firms up here, and kinds of people maybe to send

to. Well, I had sent a resume a week before to them. Well, as luck would have it, the bookkeeper/office manager's passing by, and they call my name out, and – no, she hears them talking. Jennifer goes, "Wait a minute. I think I have a resume from somebody from New Orleans." They bring it in. Sure enough, it's mine. They call me up on Monday. I interview on Tuesday. I get the job on Thursday. [laughter]

RH: Oh, wow. Meant to be, huh?

LS: And I've been with them now – was that kismet? [laughter] It's been now a little over a year [since] I've been with them. Again, when you look at different styles – in New Orleans, like in any city, meh! You go into work; everybody's nerves are like this at times. Stress. I told them during the interview one of my major assets – I handle stress. I taught special education for six years. I can deal with attorneys. Doesn't bother me. Nothing upsets – everything works itself out. They start laughing, "Leslie, we don't have stress up here. What are you talking about? We have a different stress, but you got to be kidding me." Both of my senior partners, Jim and Ben, went – well, no, I take it back. Ben didn't. Jim lived in New Orleans for, I think it was, ten years. He's originally from Monroe, and his wife, Shreveport, and he was working for a large law firm in New Orleans for ten years, then they decided they wanted their children to grow up in a more wholesome environment and moved to Lafayette. So he was acquainted with New Orleans law firms and stress. And he's like, "Done." [laughter] They're very nice. They bend over backwards. I've had incidences with elderly parents. I've had to take off more personal days than I wanted. I'd rather work and bank the personal days, and they've let me work at home or from hospital rooms so that I don't have to use those hours, which is very nice on their part.

RH: This story is so amazing. [laughter] I guess what I'm interested in knowing is just a few things if we kind of reflect back on what you've been through, and these are a little more contemplative kind of questions. Now that you've lost a home, you've settled in a

new place, what does home mean to you?

LS: Not a house. The people you're with. Not possessions. The people you're with. Including four-legged people [inaudible]. [laughter] That's basically what home is. Like I said, I came close at one point to calling the Southwest Medical Center home [laughter] because we were there for so long that they wouldn't let us – the hospital only had breakfast and lunches. But they wouldn't let us pay for breakfast and lunch; they would send a tray up for lunch for my mother when I was at work, so it was almost like being at a home at this point. Oh yeah. It was amazing.

RH: Has any of your priorities changed because of this experience?

LS: What sort of priorities?

RH: Well, I don't know. Whatever your priorities were before the storm, have you reorganized your priorities in any way? Is there anything more important now than used –?

LS: One of the things I've learned – well, things that I've learned is don't put off to tomorrow. If you can do it today, do it today. Don't wait to tomorrow. [laughter] I got very good at that, lost a lot of digital camera pictures that way because – oh, I'll do it tomorrow. Because I didn't download to the CD, and it was in the computer, and I could kick myself for that. So don't put off until tomorrow what you don't need to. Again, as I said, possessions are just possessions. I've never been one of these people – as I've gotten older, less intense about things, much more relaxed. Priorities? My priority is to one day retire. That one I still keep. But other than that, no. I mean, the storm really has just taught me that the most important thing is to cherish the ones you're with. Let them know you cherish them. Don't take them for granted.

RH: Let them know.

LS: It could've gone so easily the other way. He could have been in the hospital and maybe not have made it out because of the heat and may have died. So, I mean, we were very fortunate. We may not have gotten out. My mother could never have taken that heat. And the smells – we didn't have enough. Actually, we probably could have stretched the food because they had food in cans in their cabinet – the neighbor, in the house we were in.

RH: Is there anything –? What are you most grateful for?

LS: I'm grateful that I'm alive and the ones I love are alive. That I have a new life, a new lease on life, so to say, as trite as that sounds. I'm just grateful every morning that I can just get up and move. [laughter]

RH: I'm trying to think of how to put this – is there any kind of way that your value system, or your Judaism, or the way your parents raised you – are any of those kinds of things that you feel like you drew on, to sustain yourself?

LS: Actually, it was a lot of anger. [laughter]

RH: Anger?

LS: Anger. After everything, after we all got together, found each other, things were in flux, and didn't know what was happening really with life. Well, actually, just after the storm passed until, maybe, we finally got this house, things started kind of, somewhat settling in, there was a lot of anger. A whole lot of anger.

RH: Anger at God?

LS: Oh, yeah. [laughter] Yeah.

RH: Really?

LS: How did you do this? It's like when you look at – you sometimes doubt – look at the Holocaust. How could, if there was a God, [He] do something like that? You have to question things like that. So there was a little anger there, but once things started falling into place, I just went back to my old self, which has always been what my parents have taught me, that you treat people how you want to be treated, and it doesn't cost anything to be kind. And if you don't like what someone's saying, here's one ear; it goes through that ear. It's fine.

RH: Has your ideas of God changed any?

LS: Somewhat.

RH: Can you kind of tell me about that?

LS: Somewhat dubious if there actually is one, to be perfectly honest. I don't really dwell on God. I was never extremely religious to begin with. But you kind of question things when you have natural disasters, and it doesn't have to be a hurricane. It could be a tornado. How do you [inaudible] this? [inaudible] It's kind of shaky.

RH: Is there any other things that kind of shake you up now?

LS: Not really. [laughter] I'm pretty laid-back. I started that when I was about fifty. You get to a point in life – as you get older, it's wonderful. Those little things that used to drive you crazy, you can sit back and watch the younger ones, going, "Ah-hah." [laughter] You got about twenty more years, maybe thirty, and then you'll get over it. [laughter]

RH: Yeah. What did you find out about yourself through this incredible event?

LS: One, that I was not as sheltered as I thought. [laughter]

RH: That's interesting.

LS: That I can be self-reliant, I don't have to depend on somebody else telling me. I can actually figure out how to do this without trying to take the easy way out and have somebody else take care of things for me. It made me stronger. It made me realize that I'm not helpless. I can do [it].

RH: What are your thoughts about the government and the way the city, state, federal –?

LS: Oh, they were all wrong. They were all wrong. They were all off base because that's bureaucratic mumbo-jumbo, which will be around long past you and I [inaudible]. Nothing is ever going to be solved. It's like, I love to hear them now say, "Well, we've learned our lessons." No, you haven't. [laughter] I can guarantee you, another major disaster – major being, like, the big one in L.A. It's going to be even worse. God help those people. Because if they're going to wait for help, good luck. I think the arrogance of the mayor up in his ivory tower in the Hyatt. He is God [inaudible]. That didn't help. Then you had Governor Blanco, who thought that she was Queen of the May. She had to keep control of the state, God forbid they let the feds do that. Get over it. [laughter] Everybody needs help. I was not proud. I asked for help. I asked that nice young man. I asked the police. I'll ask anyone. I've always been taught [to] ask for help. Forget the pride, deal with it later. The government – politics is politics. They have an idiot who didn't know anything except about horses.

RH: The FEMA guy?

LS: [inaudible] That's broken, and I don't see that being fixed anytime quickly, even though they say it's on the mend.

RH: When you saw the TV – boy, you didn't really ever see the TV, did you? By the time [laughter] – I was wondering if you thought there was any racism tied to –

LS: No. Absolutely not. Denzel Washington, right after, made the statement when he was in town, and I think it was right after – I think it was when he was planning to do Déjà

Vu, and then Katrina came in. He made the statement – and he is Black – that the Blacks were not the [majority of the] ones who died. It was those elderly people in Lakeview who either chose not to leave or their loved ones chose not to get them out. And most of them were white. So it's not a racial thing. It was a mess-up on everybody's part. Now granted, if you enter raw socioeconomic background, whether you're Black, white, Chinese, whatever, yeah, it's going to be tougher to get out. And yes, that is racially, I guess, maybe, linked if there were no plans there. But then their neighbors said, "Come join us." "No, I'll stay at the house." So, again, it's their personal choice. It was my personal choice, as Blanco said – it always stuck in my head Saturday night, watching TV, "Write your Social Security number with a Marks-A-Lot on your arm," and I'm looking at the TV, and this was Saturday night before Katrina. I'm thinking, "God, she's right." [laughter] But it was my personal choice. I didn't expect them to come and rescue me.

RH: You said that you let go of your pride, you took help, you asked for help.

LS: Right. People have pride. [laughter]

RH: Tell me, if you were going to help people now, would you help them in a different way because of what you went through and what you found you needed, what you didn't need? Does that make any sense?

LS: No, it doesn't. I would help people if they needed – it would depend on the individual. There's certain individuals you think you're helping, but it's a stab. So you want to make sure that you're helping those people – that either individual or family. I mean [inaudible] the heck with the children. It would have to be on a case-by-case, but, oh yeah, I would help anyone possible.

RH: Well, I know sometimes with some of the people I've interviewed, this idea of tikkun olam and repair the world and help is a Jewish concept, but suddenly, they are moving from having to give or feeling like they give, and then they're having to receive.

LS: Nothing wrong with receiving. [laughter] As [inaudible] said, we all are going to go through a period of life, and I don't buy that there's not one person that does not need help. And sooner or later, it's going to happen. Take it. But then it's your obligation to turn around and give it right back. It's a reciprocal thing, and that's how it should be. I'm not saying that's how society is or how society will ever be. But that's how I feel it should be. You give me help; I turn around and give you help.

RH: So, we're wrapping up here. Tell me if there's anything that you'd like to say that I haven't asked.

LS: I think we've covered everything. The only thing I could ever emphasize is, especially – I don't know who is viewing this and is going to see it. I think what really worries me is that this can happen again, and it can happen in New Orleans. It can happen – tornado, wildfire. But what people have to remember is after. That's when people are going to need help is after. I think that's what really bothers me more now is that people are just totally saying, "Well, it's fine. They'll build it back themselves."

Which is true. We have to do it ourselves. You have to pull yourself up by the bootstraps. Mississippi has shown that. But you also may need some help. And I really think – if I had money. Let's put it this way. If I could start my own organization, it would be one that would be for all disasters and that everybody gives. I don't want the government, actually. [laughter] I don't want the government touching anything. It would be something that people, just people – they give pocket change, whatever. Fifty cents, twenty – and it just becomes [inaudible].

RH: That's nice. That's a nice way to finish. Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]