Erich Sternberg Transcript

Rosalind Hinton: -- 1520 Steele Boulevard in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Today is Sunday, November 5, 2006. I'm conducting the interview for the Katrina's Jewish Voices Project of the Jewish Women's Archive in the Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life. Erich, do you agree to be interviewed and understand that the interview will be video recorded?

Erich Sternberg: Yes.

RH: OK. So if you can begin with how old you are, and a little bit about your background, how your family even came to New Orleans, to Baton Rouge.

ES: Sure. I'm 38 years old. I was born here in Baton Rouge. My mother's family is originally from, I believe, Russia and immigrated in the early 20th Century to the United States and ended up in Little Rock and Texas.

My father's family immigrated from Germany when he was a year old in, I believe, 1934. They left Germany after Hitler closed the schools to Jewish families and ended up -- had family in the Carolinas and in the [20-second break in audio] while he found a place to live and a livelihood, and then sent a coded message back to Germany telling them it was time to come.

RH: Wow.

ES: So that's how we ended up in Baton Rouge, and the family has been here ever since. I moved back in 1998 with Katie and our children.

RH: And moved back from where?

ES: Well, we had -- I went to Princeton and Columbia and ended up living in New York, working in New York where I met Katie at the Estee Lauder Companies. And we were overseas a couple of years in Australia with them. Came back to New York a couple of years later. And a couple of years after that moved to Baton Rouge.

RH: So tell me a little about your connection to this region. What do you like about Baton Rouge?

ES: Well, when I grew up -- my childhood here was sort of idyllic. I mean, the family had -- my family, including my grandmother, my dad, my uncles, aunt, all ran a department store company called Maison Blanche. And so I literally lived a few blocks from here, and we lived across the street from my grandmother, and my aunt -- my father's brother and his family and my father's sister and her family -- lived on this street here, which is several blocks away from where we all lived. So, we were always together as a family. We, I guess because of the roots in Germany and everything else, we were very an observant family. Certainly, in Baton Rouge, there are two synagogues. One is reform, and one is even more reform. So the -- but our family was observant.

When I was a child, we closed the stores on the High Holy Days. Didn't after a while, but for most of my childhood, we did. And so I grew up in that very close to my grandmother, who is devout and grew up in an Orthodox family. But, here in Louisiana, there is no -- especially in Baton Rouge, there are no kosher foods, you know, no kosher restaurants or anything like that. So I grew up going to Henry S. Jacob's camp. For a couple of summers, I went to Jewish camp in Maine. So we observed. We didn't keep the Sabbath in the traditional sense, but we observed.

RH: Did you go to Sunday school?

ES: Absolutely.

RH: Bar mitzvahed?

ES: Yes.

RH: How's your Hebrew?

ES: Actually, I took two years of Hebrew in college, but it's not great. It was better back then than it is now.

RH: Are there any memories that you have that kind of would be symbolic of your relationship to the Jewish community? Anything special?

ES: To the Jewish community here?

RH: Right. Right.

ES: Or just to the Jewish community in general?

RH: Well, either way, because memories are how memories are. If --

ES: Well, certainly, I remember standing out in school because there were not many Jews. When I was in school, high school, in particular, there were -- I had two sisters and a brother and three cousins, and we were all born within the same four- and five-year period. So we were all in -- we all went to the Episcopal high school here, so that was -- there were seven of us. And there were other Jews, but there were not very many, so we were always sort of the Jewish group around. We had a wonderful youth group program here. In Baton Rouge, the two synagogues are very competitive and very different. But the one thing, at the time, the two synagogues collaborated on was the youth group, so I remember that being a really neat experience, having the unified Temple Youth Group, which continues today. And I remember, really, my first really interesting Jewish experience for me was when I went away to a summer camp in Maine, to a Jewish camp there, called Modin, which is still around. It had so many Jewish kids that I had never met and just a different way of observing, much more Conservative than we were here.

That was a real eye-opener for me. But I sort of remember becoming Jewish as a teenager at that point in time.

RH: So it kind of attracted you, and you moved more toward --

ES: I would think -- I would say so, yes. I mean, I went to Israel for the first time when I was in college, and that was an incredible experience. And then going to school in the Northeast, at Princeton, there was a very tight-knit Jewish community there as well. So, you know, it was an evolution for me. And then, of course, I lived in New York City, which is a totally different world, and loved every minute of that.

RH: So, was there much discrimination? You talked about going to an Episcopal school.

ES: I never experienced any -- none that I can remember. It really was not something that was a factor for me or, I think, for my siblings.

They may have other stories, but it really wasn't. I remember when I was in college, David Duke was getting very popular, and he had his run for Governor, and that was about as disturbing as it got for me. That was a very, very upsetting time. I remember I was registered Republican at the time, and when the Republican Party let him run as a Republican, I became an Independent, and I'm still an Independent to this day. So, you know, that was -- that's -- that's as shameful a time as I think I can remember, at least from my early adulthood, when I was truly ashamed to be from this state.

RH: I remember suddenly at parties with law firms in New Orleans, I was living there at the time, and suddenly antisemitic jokes were OK at cocktail parties. It opened up a kind of day-to-day behavior in people that was appalling.

ES: Yeah. I will say that I am, you know, my parents were very active in opposing everything he represented. I'm very proud of that. I think the Jewish community and the community at large really stood up, and I think that -- one of the things that I did when I

was in college, what I wrote my thesis about, some of the racism, the political things that were happening here in the 50s. And one of the things that's consistent is that while Louisiana is part of the Deep South and does have a history of discrimination, I think Louisiana, in particular, compared to other states like Mississippi or Alabama, really did have an undertone, I guess driven probably from the Catholic base in New Orleans that sort of rejected a lot of the discriminatory things that were happening.

And so sometimes things still do go too far, and I do think that certainly there is an element here in this state that is not desirable in that aspect, and I don't think it will ever go away.

But I think there's a good strong basis of support to fight against what they do, and typically that group wins.

RH: Well, let's get to the Katrina story and tell me what do you do to prepare for hurricanes up here in Baton Rouge.

ES: I'll tell you our Katrina story because it's -- hurricanes here are nothing unusual. I mean, we have storms that come through, and they knock down trees, and they knock out power. So we batten down the hatches for a day, and then it's over, and we move on in Baton Rouge.

I mean, there are no issues of traumatic flooding or devastation or people losing their homes or their lives. I mean, you might have a tree fall on a house or something like that on occasion, but it's not that big of a deal. And so, I guess it was probably the Sunday, the Sunday before Katrina when everyone was sort of getting ready. I moved back in July of '98, and for the first couple of years we were here, there really weren't any hurricanes.

And I guess over the past few years, more and more activity started to build. And we were -- pretty much for us; it's routine. We take in the outside furniture, and we just buy

extra water and food, and we're ready for maybe a couple of days without power. So, on the Sunday before Katrina, we actually got a call from Howard Feinberg, who is still up at UJC, and he's their emergency preparedness guy, and he's, you know, I've never heard from anybody at UJC. And I guess -- I joined the Federation Board here at the end of 1998, and I've been on the Board ever since. And I became president, I guess, the year before Katrina.

And it's a two-year term. So I guess I was just about to start my second year of my term, and for me, Federation board service is one meeting a month, maybe an hour or two hours of my time a month, and that's about it. I mean, even as president, it was not -- this is a small community. We raise about $220,000 a year for our campaign. It sort of runs itself. We have a part-time director. It's not a big deal. And so, Howard Feinberg from the UJC called me, and he says, "Are you guys OK. Are you getting ready for the storm?" And my wife answered the phone, and we're just talking, we're like, "Well yeah, no big deal. We're sitting in the living room reading." He called us again on Monday during the storm, and we had power at that point, and everything was fine and no problem. I mean, Baton Rouge, a lot of people were out of power. There were a lot of roads blocked, but you know, the sort of thing that would be fixed up after a few days. And then sort of everything really -- and I told Howard, I sort of laughed at Howard. I said, you know, "We're fine. I appreciate the call, but actually, there's nothing." And I wrote down his cell phone number in case we needed to call him and, you know, obviously, on Tuesday, all hell broke loose, and we had -- from a Federation's perspective, even from a business perspective, we didn't have dramatic plans. I mean, there was no expectation that this was going to be a big problem, but I would say all hell really started to break loose late morning after it became really public knowledge that the levees had broken and water was flooding into the city.

We were -- I was getting calls from mainly, I think at that point, from people, business associates, people who knew people in New Orleans who were looking for a place for

them to stay in Baton Rouge.

RH: Could you tell me your business?

ES: Sure. I run a company called Starmount Life Insurance Company. We have about 120 employees. We sell employee -- we underwrite employee benefits and life insurance.

RH: OK.

ES: So -- and so we started getting calls and people coming into the office needing a place to set up shop and all this sort of thing, and I think everything really business-related really turned off for the next month. It was -- it became -- very quickly, we realized that there were all kinds of problems that we didn't realize we were in for. I'm going to grab my itinerary at this point because, I mean, on August 30, Baton Rouge basically doubled in size. I mean, we had about 1 million -- by all accounts, over 1 million people here.

We didn't really know what we were dealing with. And on August 31, we actually had people going in with the East Baton Rouge Parish Sheriff's Office rescuing people and pulling people out. The Jewish Federation of New Orleans had set up shop in Houston, and they were calling us and asking for help with people that they knew where they were. We had lists, and I still have them of who we needed to go in and find, where we thought they were, and who we thought their contact people were.

RH: So you remember the first phone call you got to where suddenly you realized that this is going to be a big deal?

ES: Yeah. I mean, it was on -- I'm trying to remember which day. On August 31, we started going with the sheriff's offices, so I guess it was on August 30 I got a call from Richard Lipsey who -- Richard's got a very close relationship with the East Baton Rouge

Sheriff's Office. And Richard had gotten a call from some -- Richard has family in New Orleans, and he probably has told you his sequence on his side.

I'm not sure how it got started, but Richard engaged the Sheriff's Department here to try to help pull a few people out. And I think word got back to the New Orleans Federation and other people that this was happening. And so Richard called me and said, you know, Erich, I need Federation help to get people and trucks and vans to go down and help get people out. And I need you to help organize this list of people, and we need resources and time. So, I pulled Ralph Fender, who was our Treasurer at the time of the Federation.

I got him to the house, and Rabbi Bergadine, and Rabbi Bergadine, at the time, was sort of our part-time director.

She runs the religious school at Beth Shalom, and she was doing this on the side, and she was teaching in New Orleans as well, and I said -- we were just getting inundated with calls. And people needing help and people wanting to help and all of this other stuff. And we just said -- we said, I can't do it by myself, so we basically -- we had Rabbi Bergadine in here, and we said, you're going full-time, which she, thankfully, said she would do. We basically set aside roughly $100,000 Federation reserve dollars for emergency needs, and we determined at that point that we would set aside all of our endowment, which was about $450,000, in case we needed to do something because we needed apartments; we needed food, we needed plane tickets, whatever. Meanwhile, I called Howard Feinberg back from UJC, and I said, "We actually do need some help." And so they made arrangements to start -- and committed to us that they would be there to help us, and they started to arrange for a couple of their guys to come. Barry Schwartz and Burt -- I'll tell who they are -- Burt Goldberg from UJC to come down in the next week to try to help us evaluate what was going on. And so, meanwhile, we were just trying to get organized. We set aside these funds.

RH: Could you tell me the decision-making process in setting aside those funds because all of you guys are sort of casual about it, but I think it's extraordinary that you just said, our endowment is open to New Orleans.

ES: Well, it was one of those things. Our Board members were -- everybody was here but embroiled in all of this in their own ways, so basically I had a group of people here who said, this is what we're going to do, and then we started calling the Board members and got verbal, you know, OK's to do it. But the executive committee -- I think Melanie Fields was here as well and Eric Abram -- but we basically decided that this is what we were going to have to do, and we just did it. I mean, for us, I mean, we did not have to use one dollar of our own money there in all of this because what happened next was that UJC came down the following week. And basically, what ensued after this was a week's worth of back-and-forth to New Orleans with and without the Sheriff's department.

We had people that just showed up to start to help us do this. I was -- Rabbi Bergadine and I were on the phone and emailing back and forth with the Jewish -- with the New Orleans group in Houston constantly updating this list of names. I mean, this is the list of all of the people that we were trying to find and help, and I think there were over 70 people at one point or another. But we were on the phone at all hours trying to update that list, figure out what to do with people. We would send people out. We had search-and-rescue people from New York that just showed up. Hasidic search-and-rescue people that somehow found us through the Governor's office. It was bizarre. So we just started sending them down with addresses and lists, where to go, and they would bring people back, and we had a triage unit set up at Beth Shalom, and the people that we brought back, we got them -- we tried to get them reconnected with their families or into shelters, whatever we could do. I mean, they were Jews, non-Jews; it really didn't matter.

I mean, we went down there specifically looking for Jews, in most cases, but whoever wanted to come out, we helped pull out. And a lot of people didn't want to come out. That was what was amazing. People were just sort of in a daze. They didn't really understand, I think, what had happened around them. I mean, we had people that -- Martha may have shared this example with you -- but an elderly African American couple that we went down to get, they refused to leave. And finally, one of the Sheriff's deputies realized that the gentleman was a war veteran and appealed to him as a veteran. So the gentleman went into his bedroom and took all of his money and his savings out from under his bed, counted it twice, and then they agreed to come. And then I think we got them to their family in the Washington, D.C. area. So, it was a bizarre situation.

And then you had elderly Jewish couples who didn't want to come, and another story was the Jewish couple who -- the wife had cancer and was not getting treatment. The husband didn't want to go. And finally, they convinced him they needed to go in order for his wife to have a chance to stay healthy. So, but they went in with boats and cars and trucks with the Sheriff's Department and pulled people out in those initial days, and that continued through the first weekend after the storm. And then things started to calm down a little bit in terms of the search and rescue.

RH: What were you specifically doing? Had you --

ES: You mean, from here?

RH: Yeah.

ES: I mean, we were basically -- we were a couple of things. A) We were trying to direct resources, and trying to -- we were communicating with the New Orleans Federation leadership there and coordinating everything that had to happen, everything that was going to happen. We had -- for a week and a half, let's see, Katrina was on a Monday for -- our annual meeting was scheduled for two weeks, the second Sunday after

that. So we had our annual meeting coming up, which we canceled, but then turned into a giant community meeting to try and get everyone together. We had a very big Shabbat at Beth Shalom -- this must have been the second Friday after Katrina -- with both communities. And the --

RH: Both communities being?

ES: New Orleans and Baton Rouge and B'nai Israel was a -- this synagogue here, B'nai Israel, was a shelter. They turned themselves into a shelter, so both communities, both Baton Rouge synagogues and the New Orleans people who were here, went to Beth Shalom. We had the Mayor there and other people from the URJ there, as well as people there from UJC. And this was the second Friday after Katrina. On the -- the week after Katrina, we had the two disaster recovery people from UJC come, and they sat down with us, and we talked -- they sort of evaluated what was happening so they could help us come up with a plan, and on the -- on Shabbat, the second Shabbat after Katrina, we actually organized -- Richard and I organized a Torah rescue operation, so the New Orleans Federation operation folks called us and said we have to get our Torahs out. And would you help us with that.

And we -- of course, we said yes, so we organized another caravan of people with the Baton Rouge sheriff's department, and we went down on Shabbat, actually, to get the Torahs out of the synagogues, and we rescued, I think, about 25 Torahs from Sinai and we had Rabbi Cohn with us -- we actually had four rabbis. Rabbi Cohn and Rabbi Bergadine, Rabbi Zamek from Baton Rouge as well, and Rabbi David Saperstein from URJ was there. And we went down to Sinai and Touro and to the Jewish Community Center in Metairie and also to the Conservative synagogue that's right there in Metairie as well. And except for the Conservative synagogue, which we couldn't get into, we rescued about 25 Torahs and brought them back to Baton Rouge, which was another surreal experience because it being, you know, in those parts of New Orleans and have

basically no one out on the road and with all of the --

RH: Did you go?

ES: Oh yeah.

RH: You did?

ES: Yeah. Sure.

RH: So what was that like? From start to finish, if you -- or how many of you went?

ES: Well, I can show you pictures if you want to see them, but there were about 15 of us that went, and we had sheriff's deputies as well. We met at Richard Lipsey's office early in the morning, and we got ready there. Then we went down. And you know, the Sheriff's Deputies were wearing their bulletproof vests and their automatic weapons, and we went down, and you go through the National Guard stops, and New Orleans at that point was totally in ruins.

And then to go to the synagogues, which -- Uptown was largely untouched. There were a lot of trees down, and you could tell where the water had been, but the synagogues were in great shape there. And then, in Metairie, you could tell how the water had come up a couple of feet into the synagogue and into the Jewish Community Center.

But there was just nothing going on.

It was just extremely quiet, eerily quiet, and just nobody around. So it was surreal. It really was.

RH: And the city's just abandoned?

ES: Totally. Totally.

And we brought -- I don't know if you know Josh Pailet, but Josh, he owns a gallery for fine photography in the French Quarter, and Josh came along, and he took photographs of the whole thing.

RH: How did you get connected with him?

ES: Josh is an old friend. Josh grew up in Baton Rouge, and when he had to leave New Orleans, he ended up at our office with a couple of his friends, so we let him use some of our office space and when we realized that we would be going down to New Orleans to rescue Torahs, which, I mean, for us, even to be thinking about doing something like that is kind of bizarre. If you think, has that ever occurred in this part of the world since after one of the World Wars or something. When was the last time that somebody had to go and rescue Torahs from a synagogue? Certainly, it hasn't happened in North America. So we realized there was some gravity to that, some importance to that.

Josh was there, and I said, "Josh, why don't you come and take pictures." And so he did, and it was -- it was a bizarre day. And then we brought them back, brought the Torahs back to Baton Rouge, and we actually brought them to the two synagogues and put them in the two synagogues, and actually, there were kids at Beth Shalom that carried them into the synagogue and put them away. And then, unfortunately, I think it was a week or two later with Hurricane Rita, Beth Shalom actually had -- the roof was breached, and the synagogue flooded from the roof, and so we had to take the -- rescue the Torahs again and bring them somewhere else after that. So they were rescued twice. But it was a very surreal day.

RH: How do you make sense of all of the -- of all that you did? Do you have a framework for it? I mean, certainly, there were communities that were much more guarded and cautious about helping evacuees from New Orleans. And yet, you guys were not.

ES: Well, I mean, this has always been -- I mean, one of the things that I like about this community is it's a very giving community, and when in need, this community has always been able to come together. And we've got some really strong leaders here and people that pitched in and did things.

But, at the end of the day, it wasn't really a decision of are we going to help people or not help people. It was only a question of how much could we do.

I mean, it wasn't an option. I mean, Baton Rouge -- we really picked up over half a million people here in a day. We were in it whether we wanted it or not. Didn't want it. Baton Rouge is now going through the roof from a development standpoint and everything else, which is -- it is what it is. Certainly, you don't want to benefit from that kind of catastrophe, but at the time, I mean, it was just a question -- it wasn't a question of doing or not doing. It was just a question of how much.

I mean, that's all. We just went into action mode. Certainly, my wife and I, that was the way we handled it.

RH: So, what kind of conversations did you have with her during this thing? Do you remember?

ES: Well, Katie is a marketing consultant, and Katie -- immediately after the storm, she was called in by the Baton Rouge Area Foundation, whose Public Relations Director was on maternity leave and they were in the process of raising tens of millions of dollars that were just pouring in, and they needed -- they had people approaching them from everywhere, so they actually pulled her in and asked her to be their full-time Communications Director for a period of about three or four months, which she did. So she was buried in this. The biggest challenge for me was balancing business and managing this crisis mode that we were in. But, for about two to three weeks, there was really no business going on for me. I mean, it was kind of -- it was out of the question, so

we just managed it. But it was a lot of late nights for both of us.

I don't know if Richard told you this story, but on one of the nights where he actually -- or a group of people went down to New Orleans and rescued people, they came back late with two gentlemen who had, I believe, I'm going to get the numbers wrong, about seven dogs and a parrot. And they were convinced by the Hasidic search and rescue guys that they needed to leave, and they -- the two gentlemen, who were partners, and Richard went to Walmart and Petco and a couple of other places at 11 o'clock at night to get cages to put the dogs in. And he couldn't get into Walmart, and he banged on the door at -- Petco, I think, is the store -- until he could get in. And finally, he got them to the synagogue, and we found people in town who would take the nine dogs. And then we ended up somehow getting them to people -- up to, I want to say, somewhere in Pennsylvania where there was a community, a Jewish community, that would take them and help them. So -- and they stayed there for several months. And then we brought them back because they had outstayed their welcome.

RH: So, you were also engaged in trying to find people places to stay? You had the money to do this, or did you fly them out? Did you pay to get flights out?

ES: Well, we had the money to do it. We never really had to use it, and the reason is, when a group of us went down to New Orleans to rescue the Torahs, at the same time, we had several representatives from UJC who were there as a follow-up for the guys who had been there before, and a group -- they and Eric Stillman from the New Orleans Federation and Allan Bissinger, who is the new President of the New Orleans Federation, my mom and dad, Donna and Hans Sternberg, and a number of other people met at my mom's house down the street and put together an emergency plan and budget. And basically, they requested -- we formed a partnership between the New Orleans Federation and the Baton Rouge Federation to manage the disaster. And we requested $1 million in funding from UJC, and they brought a check for half of that, I believe, to our

next -- to our community meeting, which was our original Federation meeting on September 18. So, I mean, we were doing things like, let's see -- the Torah rescues were on September 10, and on September -- and that was the same day that we formulated the itemized budget with the UJC folks.

RH: Just in case you need one more thing to do that day.

ES: Right. And on the 14th -- on September 14, UJC approved $1 million dollar grant for the community partnership, and then we had established -- within days of that, we had established an office and a team -- we had JFS professionals here, insurance professionals, we had our first Web site up and running. We had never had a Web site up before the storm. We received hundreds of grants for scholarships and expenses. We got a grant for $120,000 to our only Jewish Day School, which is at Beth Shalom.

It's called the Ranyer Center to enable it to expand and take on new students. And the Ranyer Center turned away no Jewish students that needed to go to school. And they picked up quite a few students for an interim period there.

RH: How many grades is that Jewish Day School?

ES: Only -- it's from pre-K, and it ends -- it's a Day School that ends -- the highest level is pre-K. So, when you go to kindergarten, you leave the Ranyer Center. We actually were able to put a Hillel professional on campus for a period of time as well because the New Orleans folks were displaced.

So we had these people here, and we were able to fund activity on LSU’s campus, which had been largely dormant for Hillel.

RH: So, did New Orleans Hillel work at LSU Hillel?

ES: Some of the staff was here. I think Lila Pinsfield was here for a period of time.

So we kept her on the payroll and let her work. And the Hillel on LSU's campus had started to revive over the last couple of years, but this sort of threw them over the top. And we had a Sukkah at the Union and all kinds of other activities happening.

So Hillel at LSU has actually benefited from this. And just through sheer energy and mobilization. There are a bunch of great kids down there.

RH: Was there kind of a pick-up of the pace or of the public face, like you're talking about the Sukkah. Were there more activities like that that maybe Baton Rouge -- that your two communities were a little more modest? But you were able to do it in a larger way?

ES: I mean -- there's no question that I would say this community stepped up its activity levels and has done more during that time and since. We're going to have our first Jewish Film Festival here, at the Shaw Center downtown, in January. So there is no question that a lot of people who were not involved and not engaged saw what was happening and raised their hands and said, “I'm ashamed of myself for not being” -- I literally had people call me and say, I'm ashamed of myself that I haven't been involved. Especially after our community meeting on the 18th. People just sort of -- they didn't line up, but people called. And if you needed something, people did not say no.

I mean, they got engaged. We set up this office, which we still have, where we were able to give out grants. We were able to help people who needed help and resources. We had never had a JFS presence here before. We now have that for the foreseeable future. So -- we never had a real strong Hillel presence on campus before, but we'll have that, and we have resources to potentially put a part-time or even full-time person on campus at LSU. It's a campus of 30,000 students. I mean, there's a nice Jewish population there that needs to be served. So, you know, it's created all kinds of opportunity for the community. There's no question. And people haven't shied away from it.

RH: Let's go back a bit to this community meeting because this sounds like a significant moment also. It was supposed to be the Federation board meeting or the Annual Meeting, and can you tell me about the thought of throwing it open to the entire Jewish community?

ES: Well, we had decided to cancel the meeting because, I mean, there was -- we weren't going to be able to finish our campaign, and we weren't going to be able -- I mean, there's just nothing -- there was no reason to have the meeting, and typically those meetings aren't that well attended.

And we had it at the Faculty Club, and basically what we said was, you know what, we have the venue. We have all of these people from all over the place.

We should get together. And the place was packed. I mean, it was a great -- it was very interesting.

RH: So when packed is -- what's that?

ES: I don't even know. It was hundreds of people. Hundreds. And I don't know -- I honestly don't know how many people. It was by far the biggest meeting we've ever had here, and it was a joint meeting between the two communities. Leadership from New Orleans was there as well. And we talked about the challenges and what the opportunities were, and what we needed to do together. And we started telling people about the resources we were bringing in and if they needed JFS, where do they go. And building this database of people and where everybody is. Just trying to get the word out to what's happening between the two communities. So that's what it turned into.

RH: So it was kind of co-led with you and Allan Bissinger?

ES: Yeah. I opened the meeting, and Allan worked it with me. But it was -- you know, it was definitely a first for the Baton Rouge -- because, typically, Baton Rouge and the New

Orleans Jewish communities just go about their own merry way. They have been and continue to be a much bigger community with a lot more resources that we do. And we're 60 miles apart, but it might as well be a couple of hundred miles apart, for many reasons, but it worked very nicely -- we worked very nicely together during the whole disaster time. And I think we needed each other to get through that time.

RH: Did you form any friendships that might be lasting friendships with people down in New Orleans that you really didn't know too well?

ES: Sure. I mean, I know a lot -- Allan, I never would have met, I'm sure. The whole team that stayed on after Eric left. Great people. Sandy Levy, I didn't know before. So, I mean -- yeah. And for us, we have a lot of friends that we didn't see much of that were here either temporarily or permanently that we got reacquainted with and continue to be friends with. So it definitely brought the two communities closer together. No question about it. And for me personally, and for us, it's been nice to have those people closer.

RH: So, did it pick up your social life, in a sense.

Were you opening your home a little more to some of your friends that were from New Orleans that happened to be up here?

ES: I mean, sure. There were people we hadn't seen in years that we were suddenly seeing a lot more of, and there were certainly people that we had been seeing that we don't see much of now because they've left the region. But, you know, it's an interesting question. Yeah, I mean definitely, we're seeing more of people now that we wouldn't have seen before because some of them have relocated here. And there were definitely people we were cordial with before, that I worked with before, who we're very close because of what we did together and what we went through.

We made a point of bringing some New Orleans members on to the Baton Rouge Federation Board, and those guys have been very productive, particularly Rusty Levy. I

don't know if you know Rusty, but Rusty actually relocated to Baton Rouge, and he continues -- I think he continues to serve on the Jewish Endowment Funds Board there, and he works with us, and he was a campaign leader in New Orleans a number of times. And so, Rusty has been a big help in terms of bridging the gap between the two communities.

It hasn't been all easy either.

RH: So what are some of the difficulties?

ES: I think that it's hard for me to understand, but maybe it's not. I mean, we obviously -- this community opened its doors and did a lot for a lot of people.

And then a lot of those people went back to New Orleans, and there's a perception from a lot of people here that none of what we did mattered or that there's no reciprocation. And I think that's not really fair. I think the last thing you need to worry about when you're trying to rebuild your life is thanking the people, potentially, that helped you. And there have been plenty of people that have thanked our community for what we've done, but I think there was a sense at a certain point of going back to old roles where Baton Rouge used to be sort of like the stepchild in the background and New Orleans was always the regional leader. And I think there's a reluctance in this community to say, well, we're going to just step back into that role, whereas I think there's an assumption from a lot of New Orleans leadership that that would just automatically happen. So --

RH: Can you tell me how that might play out in a specific instance?

ES: Well, let's talk about money.

RH: OK.

ES: I mean, in terms of UJC grants and funds, the initial partnership was largely controlled by the New Orleans leadership.

So we're now at a point where we have a period of years where we are dealing with a much larger community, probably 25 or 30 percent larger. A lot of that increase is in the form of elderly people who need support and help and can't go back to New Orleans, and don't necessarily have family members here.

So, we still have a $220,000 campaign for the foreseeable future. We haven't had an influx of people who are going to be increasing that, so we've gone to the UJC, and we've made sure that we have a separate grant from New Orleans at this point because they have very different needs at this point than we do.

So we wanted to make sure that future grants and future partnership with UJC at this point was New Orleans and Baton Rouge because I just think that that's the best way to handle it.

Because we still are very separate.

So I think that sort of thing. I think making sure that the right leadership is in place for each community to have the right support that it needs.

But there are still wonderful partnerships. I mean, JFS has been fabulous. The endowment is incredible. So there are still lots of good partnership opportunities.

RH: Is there something that -- if there's an undercurrent, an undertone from some of the members of the Jewish community up here, that there hasn't been thanks. Is there something that they would like to see done?

ES: I think that what I'm describing is something that was really happening, probably -- I'm trying to think about the timeline. Probably six or seven months ago, when people

started really going back to New Orleans.

I don't think the same sense exists at this point in time. I think there's a lot -- you've got a lot of stress and a lot of everything. I just don't think that it's so much an issue now as it was at that point. But you know, everyone came together so quickly, and then the separation -- I mean, there are certainly people that we saw a lot of when they were here, and we really don't hear a lot of from anymore. And that's OK.

RH: Leadership?

ES: I'm talking about just --

RH: You're just --

ES: -- not just -- no. Not really leadership. No. Because Allan Bissinger and I talk pretty much once every week or two.

RH: Is that right? What kind of things are you guys working out now that you talk --

ES: Well, I'm not President of the Federation anymore.

That ended in September. But we were just -- I think the most important thing that we tried to do was maintain the communication. Because before I left, it was right before hurricane season started, so the last thing we needed was to have another -- to have no communication in a situation where we needed to come together again. So, I think there was a lot of preparation there and just making sure that everybody had the right resources and knew what was going on and just trying to make sure that we're all on the same page.

RH: Is there any stories or -- that touched you personally that you kind of personally witnessed that meant a lot to you?

ES: Well, I mean, there were a lot of people that we tried to help. And there was one woman who was on our list from -- really from the first day. Her name was, I want to say, Rachel Palmer.

And her daughter, Hannah, who I think lives in Colorado, you know, was really on the phone with us very early on, starting on about the sixth. And we had sensed -- she was an elderly woman. I want to say she was a Holocaust survivor who lived in Israel for a long time, and she then moved to New Orleans at some point. And I think she was lost very early on in the storm, and she was down there by herself. And we searched for her for weeks and weeks and weeks. And finally, they found her in a morgue, I think, in Hammond. So, dealing with her -- talking with her daughter and dealing with that over a long period of time was really tough.

And, you know, at the end, it was really -- just glad that there was at least some closure there for her. But, there were so many stories like that, and so many people that we were able to get out and to help and in talking with the people -- the phones didn't really work very well, to call into New Orleans, but when you were able to get somebody on the phone, people were disoriented and had a hard time, so when we were able to get them out and get them to their families, that was always wonderful. And I remember one call -- in the insurance business, we work with different insurance agents all over the country. And one particular time, I had the name of a guy to call in Phoenix, and I recognized the name. And it turned out that it was an insurance agent we worked with. We were trying to help find one of his family members, and we were successful with that. So that was just -- it's a small, small world.

RH: Wow.

ES: And then just, you know, talking with some of the people and then seeing all of the generosity coming in from all over the country from people we had never heard of, in terms of donations, whether it was foods, or in-kind gifts, or other sorts of things. People

were just unbelievable. I mean, one of my college roommates works for a real estate firm in Atlanta, and they were remodeling one of their hotels -- a hotel -- and they had 280 or 250 mattresses and bedsprings, box springs, and where could -- he wanted to send them somewhere, so we -- that didn't happen until late November, early December. But, when it was all said and done, we needed somebody to bring them into New Orleans because we couldn't find anyone with trucks. So I will just say, throughout the whole thing, the UJC folks in New York were just incredible. They found somebody with trucks to go pick up the mattresses to go bring them to Jackson for -- and I think they gave them to some shelters in Jackson, Mississippi.

So, the people -- we raised --

RH: You were kind of coordinating and ending up -- you were getting so many people being generous here, you were coordinating almost across the South for the disaster of Katrina.

ES: Well, it was all over the country. Katie did the same thing at the Baton Rouge Area Foundation. It was remarkable how generous people were. And the most frustrating part was that there was so little organization here from a state-government level, from a Federal-government level, that you didn't know where to send people. I mean, it was just total chaos and very frustrating.

RH: So, what do you attribute the fact that your response, as a small community, was so successful? And what did you think of the state and city, and federal government response?

ES: I think the state -- New Orleans city government and the state response here was abominable. I think the federal government was terrible. I think it wasn't just us. It was everybody in private enterprise and, you know, the non-profit community here and across the Deep South and the region. Everybody was -- there are so many people that really

stepped up and helped people. I mean, the churches here were incredible. There are just so many people who did amazing things. I think that our government here in Baton Rouge did a great job. But I think it was, you know, it was a very tough time.

RH: So you think the government of Baton Rouge did a good job?

ES: I think so. I mean, there was a lot of potential here for big problems, and for the most part, I think they avoided big problems. They kept things under control as best they could. And so I think from that respect, there was a lot of stuff that could have gone really wrong, but it didn't. And that made things a lot less difficult than it might have been.

RH: Have you ever thought of, you know, why they were able to and why someone else might not be able to?

ES: Well, I mean, here, people didn't lose their homes.

I mean, people didn't, you know -- people didn't lose everything they had. So, I think from that perspective, the leadership here was at an advantage because they could at least have some perspective.

RH: Have you thought of how -- have you reflected on how this should come down in the future disasters? Like, what ingredient federal government? What ingredient state? What ingredient city? Have you thought any about that? About the roles, these different things should have?

ES: I have. I don't know if I've reached any conclusions, other than at the end of the day, everybody is responsible for themselves. I mean, you know, just -- as an individual, I'm first responsible for my family. And then, once my family is OK, I can help other people. So I -- I don't know. It's a -- I think you have to have competent, strong leaders who can step up when times are tough, and you don't know what that means. You don't

know what that -- until there's a tough time. You don't know it until you experience it.

RH: Right. Were you disappointed in the leadership -- the government leadership?

ES: Sure.

RH: I mean, are there things that you wish they'd done, and can you name any of those things?

ES: Well, I wish they had gotten themselves more organized more quickly. I wish they had been better prepared in advance. I think if there is any lasting lesson, it’s that you have to have tried and true and tested disaster recovery mechanisms. I mean, we didn't -- and I would say in our business, we didn't have them, but we've got them now. So, I mean, you really, I guess, I think a lot of people put their heads in the sand for a long time and said that the disaster was not going to happen, and it did, and everybody wasn't ready.

RH: So, about your business. You had a lot of -- your client base and people calling you to ask for some assistance?

ES: We -- well, I'm part of an organization called YPO, which is the Young President's Organization. It's sort of a global network. And after -- on Tuesday, after the storm, I started getting e-mails and calls.

I mean, everybody is very networked through. They have a very intricate networking system through the Internet, and with phone numbers are accessible -- I started getting e-mails and telephone calls from people in California and other places who had family members in the area who couldn't find them or needed a place for them to stay in Baton Rouge and that sort of thing.

So we actually helped a few people find places, interim places, to stay here in Baton Rouge. I convinced one of our employees who had bought a new house and who was trying to sell his house, I convinced him to let people sleep on mattresses in the house he was trying to sell. But that was not unusual. We had reporters here from various news organizations. My mother-in-law is with CBS News, so we had various reporters sleeping on our foldout couch in the family room here. So that was -- we had that coming and going for a couple of weeks.

But I would say that there weren't many people in this town who didn't have somebody sleeping in their house who wasn't a member of their family for some amount of time.

RH: Let's -- tell me about your ideas -- this is a good opportunity -- we've heard a lot of people talk about race in the storm.

It's kind of an uncomfortable topic at times, but it's a good time to have people who are on the inside -- to get their perspective. Because it's been shaped so much by other communities. Do you have any thoughts about race in the storm?

ES: I think the people -- well, race became an issue here in Baton Rouge as well. And there was a big controversy at Temple B'nai Israel because they opened up the synagogue as a shelter, and Rabbi Weinstein brought in a lot of people.

Most of them, I believe, were African Americans. And the synagogue is not licensed as a shelter and all of these other things, so there was some controversy over there, and there was some concern that that might be perceived as a racist issue, that the synagogue didn't want to have a shelter for minority people, which is not the case. I mean, I think the -- from a Jewish community perspective here, we wanted to help whoever needed to be helped and who could be helped. We directed ourselves to New Orleans to pull out and help Jews because that's, you know, that's our first priority.

Along the way, we helped people regardless of race, religion, anything. Whoever wanted to leave, because a lot of times the people we went to get didn't want to come. We brought others as well, so people just appeared. And we took care of whoever we could find to take care of. I think that what I said before about the government not being prepared, which I think is the critical thing, I think the people who got hurt the most were the people who couldn't afford to take care of themselves, and that happens to be the minority community. And, you know, I think the government let them down in that respect. People just didn't have the vision or the foresight to know what they needed to do and to do it. If that makes any -- if that answers your question.

RH: Well, and also, changing demographics of Baton Rouge.

You've got a larger part of the African American community here, and has that put a strain on the city, and are people concerned about that? I mean, there were reports of gun sales going on right after the storm.

ES: I haven't seen -- personally, we haven't seen any issues in that way. I haven't.

RH: It's not coming up in your business life or anything like that?

ES: No. I mean, the traffic is worse. I mean, there are certainly more people eating at the restaurants. There is a ton of development going on, new housing, and restaurants and stores and malls -- all that stuff. Baton Rouge is growing, and the infrastructure is not there.

Supposedly, we're going to be getting more infrastructure, but no, I really haven't seen a marked decline in our quality of life in any way.

RH: Let's go on to the Jewish community a little more and tell me a little bit about this experience for you and being Jewish and -- has being Jewish, going through this, meant anything to you personally?

The idea that you're Jewish?

ES: [Pause] Sure. I mean, this experience has shown me, really, how powerful and amazing our global Jewish community is. I really didn't understand what the UJC was all about. I didn't understand what they could do, and honestly, for me, Judaism is about tzedakah, and it's about giving of yourself. It's always been about taking care of people that are in, you know, that are in Russia or the Ukraine or Israel, Ethiopia. And so, to have, actually -- to actually have to have that support and experience and ask for help here was totally sort of frame-breaking for us and humbling. And to be part of that, that support, and to be part of that effort to help people was certainly, for me, a very spiritual experience.

RH: Can you explain that a little bit?

ES: [Pause] I don't know. I feel like it brought our community here, at least for a little while, closer. I feel like it brought other people closer to us. For me, it was important for our kids to understand what was happening as well.

And they're young, eight and four at the time. But they certainly remember the storm, and they talk about it.

RH: What do they say about it?

ES: You'd have to ask my wife. You know, they certainly remember the storm, and they want to know when there's a hurricane coming. They want to know about it. And certainly, at my son's school last year, there was a huge influx of kids and lots of new kids in the class, so he knew when they came, and he knew when they left.

And we had to talk a lot about that and what it meant. I think they don't talk about it so much anymore, but I definitely think it will be part of their psyche as they grow up. And for me, it was pulling the Torahs out of New Orleans that really struck me as to why this

was so important, and why we were doing -- we had taken care of the people, and then pulling out the Torah scrolls was sort of -- that, sort of, for me, it wasn't so much about religion as it was about what we were doing at the time and the symbolism of that action really sort of -- it was shocking for me, I guess. And that -- that really sort of opened my eyes to the religious aspect of that experience. And then dealing with the recovery and having those community dialogues in terms of what the Jewish community should be and everything else -- I guess that's the part of it that really has sort of shook us up there as well. What are we? Where are we going?

RH: It seems a little like, when you went down to New Orleans, it kind of put you into this stream of history with a larger Jewish community. Should I say that?

ES: I don't know.

RH: It's what comes to me when you say that. So it may not be your words. I don't want to put words in your mouth.

ES: I don't know. I mean, I also don't want to make it sound bigger than it was. At the end of the day, the synagogues were in great shape, and hopefully, one day, they'll be thriving again. But at the time, we didn't know if they would ever be brought back. We didn't know -- I mean, that was the first time I had been down to New Orleans since the storm. We didn't know what we were going to find. So it was -- I just keep coming back to the word "surreal" because it really, really was.

RH: OK. We're going to wrap up this tape and just have a few more questions.

ES: OK. Sure.

[END OF AUDIO - PART ONE]

RH: -- continue interviewing Erich Sternberg.

Erich, you talked about being able to go up to Toronto and to -- what was the event?

ES: It was the UJC's General Assembly.

RH: OK. And -- so this is actually a nice moment because you get to thank them.

ES: It was nice.

RH: So tell me a little about that. How it felt.

ES: It was neat. We -- Katie and I went up literally for one night and made the presentation the next day. I think we were there one night.

RH: What kind of a presentation was it?

ES: Just -- they had their general opening assembly and a giant auditorium and lots of presenters, and we were a very quick piece.

They were focusing on a number of things, and Katrina was one of them, and so there were some representatives from New Orleans as well, and I was asked to make a short presentation as well for Baton Rouge, which was nice. So we were able to talk about what we did. I had about 30 seconds, and I presented a couple of Josh's photographs to the head of the Assembly. I was able to thank the UJC for their funding, and to talk about, just briefly, what we did.

RH: So, you said that it was kind of nice being a small community that you could have an impact?

ES: Well, to get that kind of recognition, you know, for a community that has 1,000 Jews. And we're in Toronto, and Toronto has a couple hundred thousand Jews. So, you know, to be able to make that kind of an impact and a difference -- that's important to a community like this because being a Jew in Baton Rouge, you're a very small minority.

Our community is small, and we have our issues in the community, so it's nice to be able to have the community recognized in that respect.

RH: How do you feel the relationship to this Jewish community to the larger Baton Rouge Jewish community?

ES: I think it folds in pretty well. I think that Rabbi Weinstein, over the years, has done a lot of good work in terms of community outreach. I think Rabbi Zamek has done a lot of good work in that respect as well. As I've said, I've never really experienced a lot of antisemitism here. A few months ago, we definitely -- somebody threw rocks at both windows, broke some windows, so we have that sort of thing happen on occasion, but largely, we've been -- I think the Jewish community here is very accepted. It's -- Baton Rouge is a very, I want to say very Bible belt community if that's the right phrase for it. So we definitely are a little bit -- we stand out a little bit. But, you know, in all, it's a good place for -- certainly, Katie and I have experienced it to be a nice place to raise our family.

RH: And it seems like quite a few of the business leaders in the community are Jewish.

ES: There are definitely quite a few.

Absolutely. In fact, in -- Business Report does this top-100 company, private businesses, every year. And us and Richard Lipsey's company and Lee Berg's companies were all right one after another in the top-100. So, I mean, certainly, certainly there are.

RH: You were talking a little while ago about the recovery and that you're already starting to say who are we, what are we, where are we going. Could you talk a little about that? That this Jewish community and the recovery. What are your visions?

ES: You know, I think it's a question that the community's got to deal with, and no one seems willing to be able to deal with it head-on. You've got B'nai Israel, where Rabbi

Weinstein is stepping down, and they will be looking for his replacement over the next year. And you've got Beth Shalom as well, which is rebuilding from a serious flood. And their insurance claim was denied, so they've been raising money to try to get that community rebuilt. So I think you've got two small synagogues, one smaller than the other, who are both struggling a little bit. You've got the Federation that holds its own, that I think has an important place here and serves as an intermediary in a lot of respects between the two synagogues.

And I think the Federation is doing well, as well as it has, and should continue to do well. Has good leadership in place. But I think, long-term, the Baton Rouge Jewish community, except for picking up people after Katrina, is not growing. It hasn't been growing for a while and has been steadily shrinking for a little bit. So, it's a big question for me -- as to whether the community can continue to sustain two synagogues long-term and what really needs to happen here. And I think a lot of us, a lot of people, don't think that two synagogues make a lot of sense, but, you know, it is what it is.

RH: Are you the minority? I mean, the way you say that, it was kind of --

ES: I certainly think that in an ideal world, it makes much more sense to have one synagogue here than two because I think you take those two buildings and those two infrastructures and turn them into one, and all of a sudden, you can do lots of things you couldn't do without -- right now.

I don't know if I'm in the minority, but I think that there is a lot of people that like the status quo, and there are a lot of people that don't. But sometimes, it's easier to let things keep going the way they are for time being until you reach a crisis point. And we're not at a crisis point.

RH: Are there any things that you'd like to see since the storm to continue?

ES: Well, we're having our first Jewish Film Festival in January, which is great. Hillel has gotten a lot of activity at LSU, and I think that's probably the most important thing that we need to make sure keeps going, that they keep getting resources and support and are able to keep building their presence on the LSU campus.

I think that's really important.

Having Jewish Family Services here is also really important to this community, so you know, I think making sure that we have the infrastructure and the support mechanisms to support the increased activity and the increased population are critical. And that's about money. And I think for the next two or three years, we're in good shape in that regard. And the question is, really, no one can predict what this community is going to look like three years from now. So there is definitely going to have to be some planning and hard work to make sure that we have the pieces that we need to keep going.

RH: On a personal level, are there any Jewish observances or rituals that you've come closer to in the past year that mean more to you than prior, or maybe even that you're doing now that you didn't do before?

ES: You know, I think there's no question; we sit down together for meals more as a family now. Part of that is because the kids are getting older. You know, Katie and I make sure the kids say their Shema and their prayers every night before they go to bed. But that's something we've always done, even since they were infants.

Gosh, you know, I don't know. I think that both of us certainly feel more observant. Have we really changed that much of our routine since then? I don't think so. I don't think we have.

RH: Has this crisis spurred you into any new directions?

ES: Well, after Katrina, I decided I was going to learn how to play golf because I really didn't have any hobbies. So I've been trying to learn how to play golf. Haven't been doing much recently. Actually, went hunting last year for the first time in my life, so I decided that I was going to try to do some other things. And that I've tried to do and I'll continue to do. So --

RH: So, a few ways to relax from work?

ES: Yeah.

And trying to make more time for the family. It's important.

RH: For you, has their been any changes in your worldview?

ES: Sure. Pinning down what those are is a different question. I certainly don't think that anyone can depend on anyone but themselves in a time of crisis. I don't think any promises that a government can make or anything -- none of that is going to matter. I think that you have to always be aware and wary of what's happening, and there are just so many people that lost so much and weren't prepared, whether it's from insurance or whatever. You just can't take anything for granted. And I certainly feel closer to what I would call the Jewish movement through the UJC or whatever you want to call it. I certainly feel more tied to that than I have before and realize that Israel is more important than ever. All of these things.

RH: So, you've asked the UJC to be more involved in this community?

ES: We have, and they are. We submitted a grant request for half a million dollars over the next two years to help support the infrastructure needs that we have, which we have received that grant. So, the UJC is involved, and they're helping the community with strategic planning.

And they're providing resources which we very much need. They've been truly amazing.

RH: How has being a part of the Jewish community made you feel?

ES: As Federation President, or as Erich Sternberg?

RH: Well, go down the list here. As Federation President and as Erich Sternberg.

ES: So, how has being part of the Baton Rouge Jewish community made me feel?

RH: And, if you want, the larger Jewish community.

ES: Well, I was -- I've been -- I was and continue to be very proud of the way this community reacted and what we did. I mean, we really, I think, did some amazing things that we only were able to accomplish because everyone pitched in and did what they needed to do, and no one asked any questions. I mean, that was -- I mean, I'm very proud of this community and what we did after Katrina.

It was a great -- it was an amazing time. And I'm very proud to be a Jew and very proud to be part of the global Jewish community.

And so grateful to the rest of the Jewish world for what they did for us and New Orleans and what they continue to do.

RH: You talked earlier a little bit about suddenly you were in the position of asking for help. And you were certainly giving help as you were asking for help. Has it given you a new understanding of how people ought to be helped?

ES: I definitely think that the only thing you can do is help facilitate people being able to pull themselves up and move on. You can't force help on people. You can't force them to do something that they don't want to do. And you can't force them to change their mind or swallow their pride unless they're willing to do that. So you just have to be willing

to hold out a hand and let people grab it or not. There were definitely points in time when Katie looked at me and said, you've got to stop. There were things that I thought we should be doing for people that, you know, we didn't need to do. And --

RH: Like what?

ES: I mean, there are only a certain number of times that you can call somebody and try to get them to leave their house. You can't force them to do it. And so -- but we all took that on very personally here and got wrapped up in it, and that really didn't help anything. So you have to maintain your perspective, and you have to be willing to do whatever people will let you do for them, but beyond a certain point, if they're not willing to accept the help, you can't do anything more than that.

So just, I think, you know, there are very successful attorneys and doctors that got $1,000 or $2,000 grants to help pay for private school for their kids from us. Things like that. Didn't really necessarily need the money but were so grateful to have it.

You've just got to put yourself in a position where you can do what you can for people, and then hopefully, what you do matters.

RH: And have you -- when you had to ask for help, what was that like? You said it was humbling.

ES: I mean, I think you said it. We were really asking for help, so we could help other people and help the broader community. We also -- we raised a lot of money, a lot of it without really trying. People were just very, very generous. People wanted to help, and people wanted to do whatever they could do. And that, I think, was the most humbling part, was that you had so many people that wanted to fly things in and fly people out, send in Angel Flights and resources and food, medicine, whatever. And the humbling part is A) they wanted to do it, and the challenging part is you couldn't necessarily facilitate that. So, you can only do so much.

RH: So you kind of came up against your limits also.

ES: Oh, there's no question. I mean, and our limits were the same as everyone else's. You can't force the Governor to let in airplanes with supplies fly into the Baton Rouge airport. So --

RH: What did you learn about yourself this past year that you didn't quite appreciate before.

ES: I think that I learned about myself and my family, that if you set your mind to doing something, you can get it done. And then you can rally others to help you do it. And that you can't do it all by yourself. I mean, a lot of people pitched in, and, you know, it was truly a community effort, what we did. There is no way I or Katie or anyone could have done what we did without a lot of help.

It's not about me. It's about the whole team. It's not about any one person. Does that answer your question?

RH: Yeah.

Yeah. How about -- what are your hopes for your kids? And has that changed any?

ES: Oh no.

I mean, my hopes – and I think Katie and I would share this -- is that our kids will get great educations and go on and do whatever they want to do in the world. And that they could do whatever their dream is.

RH: What are your hopes for this Jewish community?

ES: My hopes for this Jewish community is that the lessons we learned from all this work we did together as a community will continue and that the community will come closer

together rather than grow further apart, which is what I think it's done over the past decades. And I'm not sure. I don't know.

The jury is definitely out.

RH: What are your hopes for Baton Rouge?

ES: My hopes for Baton Rouge is that it will continue to grow and deal with the issues that it's got and become a great city.

RH: And New Orleans?

ES: My hope is that New Orleans will revive and become, again, a great city. It's probably going to be a different city than it was, but I don't see any reason why New Orleans can't be a wonderful place.

RH: So you don't join in a small chorus that says people shouldn't go back there and they shouldn't rebuild the city and --

ES: Oh, absolutely not. No. I think New Orleans is a great place. You know, Katie and I have loved being able to go to New Orleans ever since we've moved here. I think it's a wonderful, unique place and -- sure, there are issues with New Orleans, but New Orleans has a place, a big place, in this region.

RH: Do you have any thoughts on what it's going to be to bring back New Orleans? I mean, you're an insurance person, so, you know, people are cursing their insurance agents. A different kind, but --

ES: A different kind, yeah.

RH: -- a different kind for sure, but do you have a sense of some of the larger issues that need to be tackled? Have you thought about that from the state's perspective?

ES: I think the main issues involve housing and jobs and what's, you know, the people that fuel the hotels and the restaurants and everything else, there's no place for them to live right now. So where do those people go, and how does the economy rebuild? You know, I have to say that I'm not close enough to it to have a good sense of where it is going, but I do sense that it will be different.

RH: Just a little armchair quarterbacking --

ES: Yeah.

RH: -- asking that.

ES: Yeah.

RH: I guess we could just close. I certainly want you to add anything that you want to say, but also, if you could just, after watching people, after going into a city and seeing people's homes destroyed, if you could tell me kind of what home means to you.

ES: Well, for me, home is my wife and my two children.

RH: OK.

ES: And whether that is here in Baton Rouge or in New York or California, wherever it is, to me, that's home. So, clearly, the other pieces of the puzzle are community; the synagogue is important, but it's all right here is what's critical for me. It doesn't matter where in the world that is. The family -- my family is the most important piece.

RH: Is there anything that you would like to add to this interview?

ES: I don't think so. I don't think so. I mean, I think it's been -- the whole Katrina and Rita experience was an amazing time. I would never want to go through it again. I'm proud of the way my family reacted. I'm proud of the way my community reacted. And I

hope that the lessons we all learned from that continue to push us forward and that people don't forget it.

RH: Can you kind of summarize the lesson for you in this?

ES: I think the lesson for me is that no matter how small the community, no matter how limited your resources are, that if you set your mind to it and you focus on what matters, you can get amazing things done. And that requires reaching out to other people, reaching out to other communities and organizations, but there is, especially in our Jewish community, there is a global focus, and there is tremendous ability to make a difference. And if you speak loudly enough and are firm enough, you can get things done. Amazing things.

RH: Thank you.

ES: Sure.

[END OF INTERVIEW]