



David Smason Transcript

Rosalind Hinton: This is Rosalind Hinton, interviewing David Smason at his family's home at 2125 Broadway in New Orleans, Louisiana. Today is Monday, August 27, 2007. 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. David, do you agree to be interviewed and understand that the interview will be video recorded?

David Smason: Yes, I do.

RH: Okay. Let's start off a little bit with your family history here in New Orleans and your Jewish and your general education.

DS: Both sides of my family are Jewish. There was the Smason side and the Sobel Side. I went thirteen years to the Isidore Newman School, so kindergarten through twelfth grade. Before that, I think I spent a year at JCC at a Montessori. After that, I went to the University of Kansas for a year and a half, and now I am currently going to Tulane University.

RH: What synagogue did your family affiliate with?

DS: My father's side of the family, which is pretty much where I get my Jewish identity from, we were affiliated with Beth Israel. I made my bar mitzvah there. That's pretty much where I always identified myself with. However, my mother's side of the family was Reform, so they were always members of Touro Synagogue. I have a slight affiliation with there. I wanted to do youth group when I was young, so I had to become a sort of associate member there. Something like that.

RH: And so you did youth group?



DS: Yes. Actually, I was very involved with NFTY Southern. I, through Touro, which their youth group is ToSTY – I was various positions on the board there, and then my senior year, I served on the regional board as the treasurer of NFTY Southern. That was a big deal.

RH: What did you like about it? Why were you so involved in it?

DS: To be honest, at first, I wanted to be around my friends. But, after that, I really enjoyed it. It really focused my Jewish identity. I went to Henry S. Jacobs Camp, which is very much how I got introduced to NFTY Southern, and it just really focused my Jewish identity much more than the Orthodoxy, where you have all of these – you have the specifics and you have all of the rules and, yes, I appreciate those rules and I understand them, but, for me personally, that's not how I want to live my Jewish life. And that's what NFTY really helped me see.

RH: So, was it kind of the activism?

DS: It was very much the activism, especially the community service aspect. I always loved that and it – you know, it was a very, very positive experience. It was one of the more important things I've done.

RH: Mm-hmm. So, you went away to Kansas.

DS: Yes.

RH: And you're back.

DS: Yes.

RH: Could you talk to me about that journey and tell me what happened to your family in Katrina and why you came back?



DS: Well, I'll start with just how I ended up in Kansas. I basically wanted to – the goal has always been to come back to New Orleans because New Orleans is my home. New Orleans is my city. But I wanted to experience another place. I wanted to get away from home. So, I applied various places, and I ended up picking Kansas. When Katrina happened, I had already been at Kansas for a year. I was actually just beginning my sophomore year, and I was living, at the time, in – I was a member of Alpha Epsilon Pi fraternity. I was, at the time, living in my fraternity house. When Katrina happened, my father – I'd like to say my family sort of lucked out because we had never left for hurricanes before ever. My father had left town. He went to Cleveland, Ohio, to go visit his girlfriend. He was scheduled to come back on that Monday, the 29th. Of course, that didn't happen. He ended up staying there. My grandmother, she was on vacation, which she goes on quite frequently. She loves cruising. That's what she loves doing. She loves being on the ships. We really lucked out because none of us were here for the storm. After Katrina happened, it was very hard to communicate with each other. Cell phones were down. I didn't have text messaging on my phone at that time, so I couldn't get through to anybody. I ended up, actually, getting a second phone. I went and got another SIM card from Cingular, who was my cell phone provider at the time, and I made sure I had text messaging because you still couldn't really contact, but we were able to get through, piece together. It took about three weeks to find everybody.

RH: Who were you trying to find?

DS: Aside from friends, the first thing was really family. I wanted to know where my family was. My grandmother and my father, I knew where they were. They were safe. My grandmother, I had been communicating with through e-mails. I knew that she was on a ship, and I knew that after that, she was going to go to Cleveland where her daughter, my aunt, lives. She was going to stay with them for a period of time. Now, when I was younger, my mother actually passed away when I was nine years old, so it was, pretty much – I was raised just pretty much me and my father. There was a woman,



she was our housekeeper, Laura Boseman – I'm not sure. She was married, once, and she doesn't go by Knight anymore. Or she might. Laura Knight. Laura, pretty much, for the most part, raised me. I like to call her – she's my Black mama. I was very worried about where she was because she lived out in mid-city, and I had actually – just before that year, I had purchased a new car, and that's what I drove up, and my old car, I had given to her so she could have some form of transportation and such. I didn't know whether or not she used it to get out of the city. I had no idea. Last I heard was that she had actually stayed and so I was very, very worried about that. So, I got online and I started going through the Red Cross lists, and I put her name out there. I actually ended up getting in contact with her ex-husband's new wife, who is a woman named Priscilla. I spoke with her briefly to see if she had any notion as to where Laura might be. It took a long time but, eventually, I got through to her. We found her in Dallas, Texas. For a couple of weeks she stayed at Reunion Arena, I think, was what it was called. It's the basketball arena in Dallas.

RH: So, she did stay, and she had to be evacuated?

DS: She made it out of New Orleans, actually, before the storm, so I was very, very happy that I had given her my car before because otherwise she wouldn't. [She] and her daughter and her mother went to Natchez, Mississippi, where they had family, and they waited there for a few days, and then they made their way from there to Texas, and that's when they filed with the Red Cross and all of that and became refugees, so to speak.

But she was the last person I found. It took about three and a half weeks. My mother's side of the family, I found all of them. They were living in Natchitoches, Louisiana/Alexandria for – it took about two weeks to find them. That was sort of the – that was like the immediate after-effects of Katrina. Post-Katrina, while I was still at Kansas, I didn't necessarily know how to take it. You see the destruction, you see what's happened to your city, and you have no idea what's going on with your home. You have no idea what's going on with any of your friends, and it was a very lonely time, I guess I



could say, because being in the Midwest, in Kansas, I think there were maybe three kids from New Orleans enrolled at Kansas at that time. So there really wasn't a whole lot of a support group. I had my friends in the fraternity, but they never really – they didn't understand, of course. How could they? It's a difficult thing to understand, even if you've gone through it. I guess I had a survivor's guilt type thing, and then there was the loss of my house and whatever.

RH: Why don't you say what happened to your family home?

DS: Okay. My home that I grew up in was 3810 Nashville Avenue. We had approximately eight feet of water. We lived in a two-story home, and the first floor of the home was divided up into two – part of it was a downstairs apartment, which we rented out, and the other part was our area of the downstairs, which was mostly used as a storage area. When I was younger, it was a play area, but it mostly became storage as I got older. So, a lot of my mother's possessions, family albums, videotapes, just a lot of stuff that you don't want to lose was lost, unfortunately. If the water didn't destroy it, the mold did, and we had to gut the first floor entirely. Everything upstairs, for the most part, remained the same. But we lost a lot. I mean, just like everybody did, unfortunately. If I have to say, the worst thing to lose was definitely the photo albums because when you lose someone like your mother at such a young age, you really want to keep those, and that was definitely the hardest thing for [me] to grasp.

RH: Your friends, where were they, and who were you getting in touch with of your friends? A bunch of your Newman friends, I'd assume.

DS: A lot of Newman friends. Because, for the most part, my friends from youth group and NFTY, they, for the most part, weren't really New Orleanians. If they were, they had evacuated to various places: Texas, Memphis, and wherever. But, for my Newman friends, the kids who were in my grade, as a matter of fact, no one that I can think of was actually here when Katrina happened. They all were away at college. The ones that



went to Tulane, if they had evacuated – I wasn't really that close with them, but I knew them. They were in my grade. I graduated with a hundred and twenty people, so you knew everybody. It was very hard. The best way I found to get in touch with them because you couldn't use the phones [so] you couldn't call them was through Facebook online. [We'd] be sending messages constantly – “Where are you? Are you okay? How's your family? How's your home? Do you know anything?” And it was really – it was very much information – we were just swapping a lot of information, trying to find out where everyone was, what had been affected, and such. It was very different.

RH: It must have been really hard to go to school.

DS: It was terrible.

RH: Because you really needed to stop and be a part of it all.

DS: I'm not going to lie by saying my grades didn't suffer that semester. My grades suffered terribly that semester. I mentioned that I was in a fraternity. I was very active in the fraternity. I was rush chair, and I was going to be running for president of the fraternity, so I was very gung-ho with all that. When Katrina happened, I didn't really know what to do with myself. I didn't go to classes as much. When we would have fraternity functions, for the most part, I'd show my face. I wasn't enjoying myself. I was lost is basically the best word I can say for it. I really didn't know who I was anymore because New Orleans was such a strong part of my identity. I mean, my favorite meal is a Domilise's shrimp and oyster po'boy with a bottle of Barq's. I mean, that is absolutely my favorite meal on the planet. To know and just think that everything that you had growing up is just gone, especially when you're still that young – it's rough. It's real, real rough, and a lot of my friends – for a long time, I was the advice guy, I guess, and when the phones would work, I would dread it because I would get phone calls. I mean, one of my best friends would call me nightly just crying. I mean, he was away at school. He was at Michigan. His name is (Stu Crane?). He would call me bawling every couple of



nights whenever the phones would actually get through because we were trying to call each other every day, but, of course, it wasn't working. I remember him saying, "Everything is gone. Everything we used to do in high school, all of the restaurants, all of our friends' houses. We lost it all." And to have to be on the other end of that phone in a fraternity house, in the Midwest, so far away from him, so far away from home. What he's describing is just gut-wrenching. The only thing you can do is listen, and it really, really – it was bad. I mean, it was Katrina.

RH: Yeah. You've given me an insight into another group of people that really suffered, which were all of you guys who were isolated, but it happened to you, too, because it was your homes and your families and your friends and your city.

DS: Katrina does so much to stir up all of these things that people just didn't know.

Things that weren't important. Things that you look past suddenly were so much larger than anything you can imagine. I mean, I remember when I – one day, when I finally let it get to me, I was in my room, I was by myself, and I had been in there for a long time.

This was in the fraternity house. I had been in there for, I don't know, maybe about four and a half hours. This was after dinner. And people had tried to come in, and they'd try to cheer me up. They could tell that I was upset, but I wasn't letting anything show because I was on the exec board of the fraternity. I had to keep a strong image. And then also, I mean, I don't think I wanted to really admit it. At this point, this was about a month after the storm. I was still sort of in denial that anything might have happened to my house. I was still trying to convince myself that maybe my house didn't flood because I had seen a picture from the twenty-ninth, from literally a block away from my house, and there was no water on the street. This was right after Katrina had struck. Of course, the levees were breaking, and that's what actually flooded my house. But I was just very much so in denial. I didn't want to admit to myself that I could have lost all of those belongings, all of those things, all of those memories. My big brother in the fraternity, Adam Shapiro, who is from Austin, Texas, walked into the room, closed the door behind



me. I was actually sitting at my computer watching WWLTV.com and just walked up. He asked me how I was doing, and I told him, "I'm all right. I'm okay." And he says, "You know what? Get up." I go, "What do you mean?" He pulled me up, turned my monitor off, turned my speakers off, and it's not the type of thing that you'd expect to go on in a fraternity, but he just put his arms out and was like, "Give me a hug." As corny as it sounds, that was the first time I cried about Katrina.

RH: Wow.

DS: I mean, I broke down. I was incapacitated for the rest of the night. Just a real, real powerful moment, and that was really when it all hit me. Wow, my home might be gone, and there was nothing I could do to stop it. There was nothing I could do now to change it. I was very, very much a different person after that. That was pretty much when I decided I need to leave Kansas. That was pretty much the tipping point, and it was rough. It was very, very rough. After that, I finished out the semester. There was one more big event, where I went and visited my father in Cleveland. This was just before Halloween, so the week before Halloween, I guess, was around – it was the week of Yom Kippur, whenever that was. I decided that I needed to be around family, and that's not to say my family is very close. We're very much – we're whatever. We're family. But I wanted to see – I wanted to be around people who were going through the same thing. So I flew to Cleveland. My father, at this point in time, had been set up in some rent-free place. He talked to me about this place on the phone, like, "Oh, it's great, whatever. I have my own little deal. I'm keeping kosher now" and all this stuff. He was sort of like, "This is like a new beginning." But to hear it over the phone, you think, "Okay, maybe things can be all right." Well, when I finally saw this place, I was very much – I realized things could not be all right. Things were definitely changing. My father had been set up in this place on the campus of, I believe, it was called the Belmont School. It was just behind John Carroll University. It's a school. I guess it's a boarding school for delinquent children, and he had been given a place in sort of an apartment complex on the campus.



It was a two-story apartment complex, just this little rectangular apartment complex with – I don't know – twelve apartments and it was all bricked up. It honestly looked like they may have built it and forgotten to put windows in and realized about a week before they were opening it, "Oh, we need windows." So, there were like these little, tiny windows. I walked inside, and I looked around. It was a one-room apartment. The kitchen is to the left. There were dishes everywhere. My father is not the cleanest person. He has dishes everywhere. I look immediately to the right, and there is a little tiny sliver of a hallway going into the bathroom, and then just the rest of it was one room. He had a couch, and he had a bed, and he had a computer and a TV that was probably older than me. But this was where he had been living for about a month and a half at this point, maybe two months. I walked into the bathroom, and there was just this heavy stench of sewage backup. It just smelled terrible. It was coming in through the air vents. This was not a very nice place, and I walked out of the room, I walked over to my father, and said – because we were about to go to services for Yom Kippur, evening services. I walked up to him and I said, "I have to make a phone call," trying to hold back or whatever. Walked out into the hall, closed the door behind me, [and] I got on the phone as quickly as I could. At this point, I had a different phone number with that SIM card that I got when I was in Kansas. I could make phone calls to other people. Unfortunately, I could not get through to anyone with the 504-area code, but what I was able to do was I was able to get through to one of my close friends, who I had known through camp and through NFTY, Joel Simon from Little Rock, Arkansas. He was at UNC at the time, and I got through to him. I just told him, "I need to talk. I have to talk to somebody now. I don't know what to think." He couldn't talk. He was in services. He told me, "I'll call you back." He could tell I was upset. I stayed out in that hallway for probably another five minutes after that, just trying to collect myself. I walked back in. My father says, "Come on, hurry up. You've got to get dressed. Get in your suit. We've got to go to services." I just stood there, staring at him, and he goes, "What's wrong? What? Come on. Get dressed, get dressed, get dressed." I said I wasn't going to services. The next day, I



called up my aunt and asked her, “Would it be all right if I came and stayed the next two nights at your house?” She said, “Yes, I totally understand.” The next day I went and stayed with her. The next two nights, I was there, and then I came back to Kansas. Shortly thereafter, about a week later, I had been dating a girl for about four months. Shortly thereafter, I broke up with my girlfriend because I just saw everything as a worry. Everything was a worry. I needed to clear the slate. Fresh start. I really shut myself down, and this was very common for a lot of my friends. One of my best friends, Stu, reverted to drinking and partying. That was how he coped. His mom had been here through the storm, and so he was relieved when she made it out fine and all of that. But he lost a lot of his stuff, too, and we really didn’t know very much how to react to this because when you are so far away from something that’s affecting you so severely, you’re just – there is no other word for it other than just you’re lost. I know I’ve said that a lot, but that really is the best term to describe it. It’s just a real loss of identity, which I’m sure a lot of people – a lot of people in New Orleans identify with this city. Yes, I’m Jewish. I’m an American. I’m a New Orleanian. Absolutely, I’m a New Orleanian, first and foremost. You care about it, and I think that’s why people will come – that’s why people will come back, and it really hurts when people don’t. I understand. I really do. I mean, let’s face it, the city of New Orleans hasn’t had a strong economy since – what? – the cotton gin. But you tell yourself there’s got to be a way, there’s got to be a way to change things. That’s what you hope for, and that’s why I came back, really.

RH: What was it like for you when you were watching the TV and saw the Superdome and saw what was going on there?

DS: At that time, I really was in a state of disbelief. For the longest time – this is even going into up until recently – whenever I would see images of the Superdome, whenever I would see images of all of these people pleading, “Help me. What is going on? We’re Americans, too. Why aren’t we being helped?” You see that, and you see images where you’ve driven your car, you’ve ridden your bike – who knows – you could have even met



these people, and you see this. And it doesn't matter if they're Black or white; it doesn't matter Jewish, Catholic, Christian, whatever. You see this, and it really was horrible. I mean, for the longest time, I would see those images, and I would tear up. It really affects you. I didn't live through the sludge water. I didn't trudge through all of that, but I was very much affected by Katrina. I'm a different person because of Katrina. I don't think there's a person in the city of New Orleans who can't say that. It was a very, very equalizing effect, I guess. It didn't care. The flood water didn't care whether you were rich or poor, and that's what a lot of people, I don't think, understand. And that really bothers me.

RH: Some of the media coverage or the concentration on certain areas, like the Lower Nine or something –

DS: Absolutely.

RH: – does that bother you?

DS: At the time, it didn't because, obviously, I don't believe I was thinking very clearly, but it definitely – as the months went on and you just kept seeing it over and over and over again, the only thing that runs through your mind is just why – what about now?

What's going on now? That's why I think people were so angry, especially when they got – I can't really complain about the media coverage because the media coverage, as overblown as it was at one point, still let people know that this city was hurting, that people here were hurting. But the fact that once the media coverage slacked off and went away, it was almost as though people were, "Oh yeah, everything is fixed.

Everything is good. We're great now." I would get people coming up to me – it's funny because right around the time the media coverage was ending, I'd still have people coming up to me, even up until probably a couple of months ago, and dead serious, not joking – "Is your house still flooded? Is the city –?" They still think the city is underwater, it seems. It just blows my mind how people – not people – I'm not saying that the media



should have kept up that mass coverage, but this is almost two years later. I mean, it's August 27th right now. In two days, it will be two years. There is something wrong with the fact that this city is still essentially like a war zone. There is something wrong with that.

RH: So, we're moving into something I thought we'd get to later –

DS: Oh, I'm sorry.

RH: – but we might as well stay here. The coverage has changed some over time, and did it upset – I want to clarify, did it upset you? Did you feel like African Americans in Lower Nine were getting too much attention –

DS: Yes, I did.

RH: – at one point, when you knew your home was underwater?

DS: Yes, I did. One of the things I always do now whenever I have a friend who comes to town or whenever I meet somebody who is visiting, and they say they want to see the damage or they want to help or something like that, they say, "Oh, we want to go the Ninth Ward," and I go, "I don't mean to sound like this, but the Ninth Ward was a shithole before the storm." I really hate to say that, but it was not a nice place before the storm.

Yes, there were a lot of people who lived there, a lot of underprivileged people lived there, and that is a shame. That is terrible. That is part of the reason I came back to New Orleans because I want to have an effect on areas like that, but I immediately – I will say to them, "It wasn't just the Ninth Ward. I'll bring up Lakeview. That was a middle-class neighborhood. Lakeview, in some places, got twenty feet of water. Lakeview South, one of the wealthier neighborhoods in New Orleans, completely flooded.

Completely destroyed. Even if you drive through it now, it's still a shell of itself. The houses there are still boarded up. They still have the X's on them. They still have the trash, the garbage everywhere. I don't even know if all of them have been gutted. That



was my greatest beef with the media coverage was that they really didn't show all aspects of it, all economical aspects of it.

RH: The complexity of it.

DS: Yes, yes. Thank you. Yeah, these people were stranded; they didn't have transportation. Okay. The others were able to get out. Okay. First of all, not everyone was able to get out. I have a friend of mine who I grew up with whose family was actually taken out by helicopter from Lakeview South. They were found on the roof of their home, and this is one of the wealthiest families I know. The mother, actually, just completed last year climbing the Seven Summits. So, she's climbed Everest and all of this stuff. I mean, this is a very – the [Klosdy?] family. The media really, really focused too sharply on that, and I remember, I think it was – there was a march between – this was way after the storm. I think Bill Cosby was involved in it, and it might have been Sharpton or Jesse Jackson, one of those two, maybe both of them, I don't know. I'll tell you, I lost a lot of respect for Bill Cosby because the march was obviously against the African American whatever – and I'm not putting that down. His march was to raise awareness against that. At the same, St. Augustine Church, St. Augustine High School, was struggling to be able to re-open. They weren't going to be able to re-open. Now, you want to talk about landmarks in society in New Orleans. St. Augustine is one of the oldest institutions I can think of, and especially most important with regards to its high school. I mean, it's marching band, that's an institution of pride, it really is, and not just for them but for the city of New Orleans. We love to see the Purple Knights when they go marching. At this same time, they were faltering. If you ask me, they really missed the boat. They didn't – now they were able to open, but just barely, and I think it took some time. They actually had to join, I think, with other schools, other institutions. I don't know exactly – I can't remember off the top of my head. This march, to me, was pointless. It was meaningless. It was a media extravaganza. That's all it was. It wasn't going to accomplish anything, whereas, say, a fundraiser or awareness about St. Augustine, an institution that meant



something to the community, to the city of New Orleans, would have not only had the immediate result of possibly keeping it open and helping it open much sooner but really helping the morale of people just getting back some element of normalcy. I don't know. I didn't think we needed that kind of attention, I really didn't, and I thought they were really capitalizing on the media's portrayal of the effects of Katrina. It just really bothered me when that happened. I think it was a march across the Mississippi River Bridge or something like that.

RH: Let's go back a little bit, when were you first able to come into the city?

DS: I actually – I took some time off – well, I left one or two days early. Thanksgiving. Thanksgiving of '05. Thanksgiving break was coming up, and I had the option of either going back to Cleveland, which I was not in any mind ready to do or willing to do or stay in Kansas with zero family [or] friends. My grandmother came back here in October very early, and she was able to get electricity back to her house before the end of the month. So, she had been – she was living here. Now, everything was still very much messed up here. Downstairs still hadn't been fully gutted.

RH: So she had had, you said, five feet of water?

DS: Five feet of water.

RH: We're pretty high.

DS: Oh, yeah.

RH: The living area, itself –

DS: The living area itself was fine. The living area itself was fine. This area was not affected. It was the downstairs.

RH: But still, she had mold –



DS: Mold. Actually, just recently, they found mold in her air vents and stuff like that. They had to install all new air vents.

RH: Wow.

DS: It's still creeping up on us. Anyway, since she was down here, I decided, "You know what?" I had a car in Kansas, so I said, "I'm going to go home." My friend at the time, Jacob Loeb, who is one of my roommates now, is from Baton Rouge. He had been a student at Tulane. He had to evacuate. He decided he was going to come up to Kansas for the semester. It was good having him around, but as much as I enjoyed having him around and whatever, he still wasn't a full-on New Orleanian, and he understands that. He loves the city, too, now. He's living here. He's already decided he is a New Orleanian. Now he is. But, before, I mean, he just went to Tulane. He came up to Kansas and it was good to have someone around like that.

RH: Why did he decide to go to Kansas?

DS: Because I was there.

RH: Oh, yeah? And how did you know him since he was from Baton Rouge?

DS: We had gone to camp together. We were always in the same cabin. We did NFTY Southern together. He wasn't as active as I was in NFTY, but we were friends. People used to always ask us if we were brothers, too. We kind of look alike, I guess, I don't know. The olive skin. Since he was up in Kansas, I told him, "Look, I want to drive down to New Orleans for Thanksgiving. I want to go see my house. I want to see the city. I want to be there." And he's like, "Yeah, fine. I'll drive it with you." Because it's a fourteen-and-a-half-hour drive. Rather than stopping somewhere overnight, if you have someone there, you can split the drive time, and it goes much easier. So, we did that. He actually met his parents halfway. Well, not halfway. In LaPlace. I dropped him off with his parents, and he came back to New Orleans with his parents once or twice then.



But for the most part, he was in Baton Rouge during that break while I was here. I drove into the city by myself, and I remember coming in off of the Bonnet Carre Spillway and seeing all of those lights leaving New Orleans, just all of those lights leaving New Orleans, and there were maybe like two or three cars in front of me going into the city of New Orleans. It was dark out. It was probably eight or nine at night, and we had been driving since five a.m. So, I was tired, but I was also at the same time very excited to get back into New Orleans. This was one of the few moments of sheer joy that I had at that point because I wanted to be back. So, I got back and the first thing that I did – I was going to come here, but I was so just – I had to see it, so I drove over to my house, and the street was just deserted. I mean, there was no one around. There were dumpsters everywhere, garbage strewn about everywhere. There were still cars – I remember about five blocks away from me there were two cars, and one of them was inside a house, and one of them was upside down up against a tree. And, I mean, this is in the Broadmoor area. This isn't in Lakeview or whatever. I was surprised to see that because I didn't think the water had had that kind of force in that area. But the sheer destruction was – it was just really something to take in. So, I walked up to my house. I had a flashlight with me in my car, and I opened the door, and I just remember this cold air coming out from outside. It just really felt like a ghostly present, just dead, and I was mortified. I couldn't go in. I just stared at my front anteroom, and I was like, "Okay."

After a few minutes of that, I shut the door, and I came over here. Later that night, I couldn't sleep. I kept thinking about it. So, I said, "Okay, I'm going to go." So, I left while my grandmother was asleep. I went back over to the house, checked it out, went all over, went into the downstairs where it had been gutted, and it was gutted down to the studs. So, I could literally – actually, one of the steps was missing, and so I had to hop over this big gap, and I looked down, and I was like, "Oh, that's the floor." It was a somber moment. It was almost like being before a grave. After that, I came back here. The next day I went to Lowe's, which was packed. I went and bought a bunch of cleaning supplies, and I went back over there, and for the rest of the week, I cleaned and



organized my house the best I could. No one was helping me. It was just me. So, I was scrubbing the floors. I went downstairs and pressure-washed with bleach and pressure-washed with water our tiled floor downstairs. I had a guy who was coming, a mold inspector was coming to check out the house, and also an exterminator to make sure there were no rats or anything like that. I don't know. It was weird because the whole time, of course, I felt like, "Why isn't my father here?" But, anyway, this was my role. I took it upon myself to do this.

RH: Why wasn't he there? Do you have any idea?

DS: He couldn't – to be completely honest, I don't. But he was working in Cleveland. He was up in Cleveland. You know what? Whatever.

RH: Did you get a sense he had kind of removed himself?

DS: Very much.

RH: He was trying to start a new life, maybe?

DS: I don't know if he was trying to start a new life, but he was looking at this as a new beginning, I guess. I don't fully understand it, but whatever. At the end of the week – the end of the week came. [I] picked up Jacob in LaPlace, which is, I guess, a midway point between New Orleans and Baton Rouge, and I drove back up to Kansas.

RH: Were any of your friends here that week?

DS: No, I was the only one here.

RH: Wow.

DS: And, yeah, it was very lonely here. I had my grandmother, and it was me. I was online – she was able to get Internet back here as well, just before I got here, so I was



able to go on instant messenger, and I was able to talk to people, and they were asking me – people who hadn't been here – how is the city, how does it look, and the only thing I could say was it looks desolate. I mean, there were no lights on in the city at night.

There were stop signs at every corner. The only thing I could say to people was it's a very different place right now.

RH: You went and finished out the semester, and then where did you head?

DS: After that, came back – drove back down here. Stayed the winter here. I actually remember the date. It was January 8th, I made a decision. I was talking with my aunt, and I was like – my aunt who lives in Cleveland. I was just telling her –

RH: Now, I'm trying to remember, was this aunt your mother's –

DS: No, it was my father's –

RH: Your father's sister. Okay.

DS: No, this was my father's sister, and I was talking with her, and I told her I really don't know why I'm going back to school in a couple of days. I don't want to be there. I stayed at my grandmother's house, so here, the entire break because obviously, I couldn't go to Nashville Avenue. My childhood home actually didn't get power until, God – I think it was October or November of 2006. So, over a full year until we finally got power. Of course, Entergy [said], "Oh, you have power." Entergy kept giving us bills, and we were like, "There's no electric box. There's no meter. How can we have power?"

RH: They were giving you bills, and you didn't even have an electric box?

DS: Oh, yeah. Yeah. We had nothing. And we were still getting bills.

RH: Oh, wow. High ones, too, I bet.



DS: Yeah. That went on for a while. But, anyway, she basically – she was like, “David, you don’t seem like yourself.” She was being honest. She was like, “Something is different in you right now. You need to take some time. You need to figure yourself out.” She was right. I really didn’t know myself, and up until then, I pretty much just – I was just pretty much going through the motions, especially that last semester. I did a retroactive withdrawal from Kansas, and I said, “I will put myself on academic leave with the intention of possibly coming back.” At that point, I wasn’t thinking about leaving. I wasn’t thinking about school. I wasn’t thinking about anything. I was just thinking about getting out and figuring myself – who I was. So, I drove up to – I had to drive to Kansas, actually, because I needed to get some stuff. I stayed two nights in the fraternity house, moved out, and then I drove up to Cleveland, Ohio, and I lived in my aunt’s house from January until May of that year. While I was there, I went and sought therapy, to sort of figure out what was going on, what was important to me, and get a grip on things. It really stirred up a lot of emotions, a lot of feelings of loss, a lot of confusion, and what have you.

RH: Right.

DS: By the end of it, I had a better sense – not a full sense because it was only five months, but I had a better sense of who I was. At that point, I was – that was when I realized while I was up there, “Okay, I want to be in New Orleans. This is where I need to be.” So, I applied for a transfer to Tulane. I got in, despite them going like a rabid dog at my credits. I got in, and so I was – I began that fall. So Fall ’06, I began at Tulane. But my friends – when I got back that May or whatever, the first thing I did – actually, the next day – was I went to Jazz Fest because it was the last weekend, and I’m like, “I have to go to Jazz Fest. I have to get a crawfish sack,” which is just something I always used to get with my mom and my father when I would go there as a young child. “I’ve got to get crawfish bread. I’ve got to get a muffuletta. I’ve got to do all of these things.” As much as I wanted to go for the music, which I did, and I loved it, of course, I was very



much going there for the culture of New Orleans. I wanted to be a part of it again, to feel at rhythm, feel the city. So a lot of my friends at that time that saw me – for that summer and into the fall, they would be like, “You’re on a New Orleans high right now.” They would say that to me because I was very much a representative of New Orleans, I guess you could say. It was tough to come back because you still get back, and you’re like, “Okay. I’m going to make a difference,” so you do Habitat [for Humanity], and you do all of the functions.

RH: Did you do a lot of them?

DS: Oh, I still do Habitat.

RH: Yeah.

DS: Obviously, not as much because I’m in school and things like that, and school is about to start back up, but, I mean, you do every little bit that you can. This is our home. If we’re not going to fight for it, no one will. This is my city. I grew up here. My family grew up here. I’m damn sure I’m going to die here. I mean, I know it. If I don’t, I will be upset. God’s going to have to explain to me why I didn’t die here. This is my hometown.

RH: So you feel like you made the right decision for you?

DS: Absolutely. Absolutely. And you make friendships or whatever, especially in college. It’s your best years.

RH: At your frat house, you’ve got some good friends there, I’m sure.

DS: I go to visit them once or twice a year. I went there actually last spring. During the summer, I went and visited, and I’m hoping to visit for a basketball game in the fall. I don’t know if I’m going to be able to get – first of all, I’ve got to get KU tickets, which are hard to do. But I still have a close friendship with them, and they come down and visit



often – well, not often enough, not as often as I'd like, but you have to do what's right for you in the end. As much as I miss Kansas [and] the fraternity life – because I did not re-affiliate with my fraternity when I got here. There is a chapter at Tulane, and I did not re-affiliate. I chose to focus more on school and New Orleans specifically. But you make sacrifices for what you believe in, and that's –

RH: Wow.

DS: – why I'm here. That's why I feel that people want to – people will come back. You have to believe it. Otherwise, we're screwed.

[END OF FILE ONE]

RH: So, this is tape two. Would you tell me your last name, because I think I mispronounced it last time?

DS: It's okay. Smason.

RH: Smason.

DS: Yes. Mason with an "S" in front of it.

RH: Okay. Smason.

DS: Yeah.

RH: I'm with David Smason for Katrina Jewish Voices. This is tape two. You are a person who obviously had to reach out and – you've not only taken care of yourself, it seems, raised yourself, and put yourself through this past year or so, but you've also had to figure out how to reach out for help. Can you tell me what you feel is the best kind of help?



DS: You have to have a support group. Monetary help is nice. The FEMA money and all that – that’s nice, too. But if these people are affected in any way like I was – I mean, you had – getting your house fixed up is awesome. That is a great semblance of normalcy. But if you’re going to look at me and tell me that Katrina didn’t affect you emotionally in any way, shape, or form, I’m not going to buy it. I’m not going to buy it. You have to have a support group. You have to have somebody you can talk to. That was the greatest help for me.

RH: Who was your support group?

DS: I was an only child, and my father and I don’t necessarily have the greatest relationship, so it was difficult. In Kansas, I didn’t really have one. I had my friends, but nobody could identify with me. Now that I’m here in New Orleans, you find people that have gone through this same thing, and you identify with them. Who helped me get through it, and I still call her – my aunt, the one who I stayed with. My father’s sister. I talked to her today. I speak to her very frequently. She helped me get through a lot of tough times. I love her for it, and I can’t thank her enough. My grandmother – she’s another huge helper. Not necessarily the most – I don’t know how can I say this. A lot of times, she will go for the quick fix, but sometimes she can surprise you, and that’s great when that happens. And then you have your friends who have gone through this before. Not before, but with you, and they’re experiencing it in their own ways, and you talk about it with each other. You tell each other how you feel. Yeah, it’s corny. Yeah, it’s whatever. But it’s necessary. This was a big deal. This was a big deal. You can’t just sweep it under the rug. You can’t just sweep it under the rug, fix your house up, and say, “All right, back to the way everything used to be,” because things aren’t the way they used to be. I don’t know if they will ever be the way they used to be. If you ask me, they shouldn’t be. Things need to change. That’s why people need to talk about this stuff. Only by talking about it are they going to get it out in the open, are they going to get it off their chest, are they even going to have a chance at feeling better. If they want a shot at



normalcy, at feeling normal, they need to find someone to talk to.

RH: Have you been involved since you've been back in the Jewish community at all?

DS: I'm going to be totally honest with you. No, not really that much at all. I guess I've been focusing so much on the other aspect of New Orleans --

RH: It's all right. The bigger New Orleans.

DS: Yeah. The Jewish community has slightly been neglected by me. I mean, I go to services every now and then, and my childhood synagogue congregation, Beth Israel, which was out in Lakeview over on Canal Boulevard, got flooded horribly. All of the Torahs had to be buried and everything. Some amazing Torahs. Some of them were like a hundred and seventy years old. And these were from Eastern Europe that had been transported, and here comes Katrina, and out they go. I mean, they currently -- that building is still in shambles, and I think just recently, maybe even a month ago or less, some vandals broke in and stole all of the copper piping, and it flooded again.

RH: Yes.

DS: I mean, of course, it didn't flood, but it flooded again. All of the piping spilled into the main sanctuary and all of that other thing, and it wasn't necessarily the most youthful synagogue. I don't know how much you know about Beth Israel, but Beth Israel, when I was growing up, I remember looking at it and just being like, the average age here must be around seventy-five. I was the first bar mitzvah in God knows how long. So, I'm proud of Beth Israel. The family on my father's side all went there. When I was growing up, I would see all of the confirmation class photographs. My father had one there, my aunt, [and] even a bunch of other adults -- parents of my friends. I'd even see them up on the walls. Their parents, as they got older, either went Conservative or Reform or whatever, so they've left Beth Israel, and it was an aging congregation, but it still existed. Now, currently, they are meeting, I believe, at --



RH: Gates of Prayer.

DS: – Gates of Prayer. Yes. Thank you. I've gone there for services every now and then. Not as often as I used to. When I was growing up, my father used to have me go there. I probably went every other Shabbat, if not every Shabbat. So it was a big part of my life growing up. I went to Sunday School at Beth Israel up until the year I was supposed to make confirmation, at which point the congregation was so old, there was no youth there, and there really wasn't the money to continue it. There was no point in continuing it, so they shut down the Sunday School. So my father, since I was already active at this point in NFTY and ToSTY at the local level, he went over to Touro and said – he went and talked to Rabbi David Goldstein and said, "I need a favor. I'd like you to accept us as associate members or something like that." Rabbi Goldstein had married my parents actually because my mother's family went to Touro, so this was what they worked out between the two of them when they got married. They'd get married at Touro, but they'd go to Beth Israel. That was how it worked. So he asked him if I could join their confirmation class, and I was totally against it because I had been at Beth Israel all my life, and I was like, "Why do I want to do this?" Now, I did know the entire class, because, obviously, if I didn't know them through NFTY, I went to school with them at Newman, and most of them I did go to school with at Newman. But, so, I ended up – I made confirmation at Touro.

RH: But you didn't really want to?

DS: I didn't want to. No. I figured if my picture isn't going to be up on the wall at Beth Israel, I don't want it to be anywhere else. I was very much opposed to it. It's happened. It's done. I was sixteen. But, no, since then, I really haven't been very involved in the Jewish community down here. I have gone to a few Hillel functions at Tulane. I did one or two Chabad functions, but really, I haven't. It is a shame because I do miss it. I identify myself very much – like I said, I am Jewish. One of the first things that comes out



of my mouth is that I am Jewish.

RH: You said you get your Jewish identity --

DS: I'm a New Orleanian.

RH: -- from your father's side of the family?

DS: Yeah.

RH: So, describe what it means to be Jewish to you if you can.

DS: Judaism to me? I was raised going to an Orthodox synagogue. Don't let that fool you. I am far, far from Orthodox.

RH: There are the crawfish and oysters and shrimp.

DS: Like I said, shrimp. Judaism, to me, is very much a living religion. It's unlike Christianity and Islam in the fact that we're not trying necessarily to get anywhere. We're trying to live now. You know? That's pretty much how I live my life. I am living for me. I am living for my loved ones. I am living for the things I care about, and Judaism -- nowhere does it say that I need to fear for -- I'm trying to word this. I'm sorry. If I can live in a secular society as a Jew, I mean, that is how I wish to be. I'm actually about to throw out a name I don't think I'm expected to use, but I'm very much a Jew in the model of Moses Mendelssohn, how he was -- "you live for yourself." You live to be -- life is short. Life is way too short to care about the endgame. Way too short to care about the endgame. It's things like Katrina that really shock you. Events like that really shock you into seeing that. And people need events like that. I did. I didn't see it. My family is Orthodox, but I love the fact that I know what I know, but at the same time, I have choices. I don't like the way I worded that, but I love how I was brought up. I love that I know all of the prayers. I love that if I ever wanted to one day, I could go in there, and I



could lead the services. I could be the chazzan if I wanted to. But, right now, it's not the most important thing to me right now. I mean, maybe someday it will be, but right now, I'm choosing my community.

RH: Can you describe your understanding of God?

DS: God, that's a tough one.

RH: I know. I apologize.

DS: That's all right. I think everybody, because, in Judaism, God is so – I guess God is very much a mystery. Obviously, no images and anything like that. So, everybody has their own opinions on what the afterlife is like, what God is, and who he is or she is.

Personally, I have no idea what or who God is. I don't. But there's got to be something. I can't go through life thinking that when I die, I am not going to see my loved ones again. You have experiences throughout your life – and I'm not just talking about paranormal experiences, which I've actually had a few weird ones, one or two of them in this house actually – you go through experiences, you go through moments in your life, and I know I'm only twenty-one, but there are moments when you are down, or everything is wrong and just totally screwed, just nothing is right, and then, just like a flick of a switch, you feel okay, things aren't all right. Nothing necessarily has been fixed. Things are still bad. But, as bad as they are, you can manage. You can get through. And that's when I think God is there. That's when I think your loved ones are there. That's when you're being helped. I'm not saying that no one is ever alone, but I don't think anyone is ever forgotten, and I don't think the people that pass – I don't think they ever forget us. I don't think they can. I mean, there is just that strong emotional feeling, that strong emotional attachment to believing, and to just that feeling. That warmth that you feel when you're with someone that you love when you're with your family, when you get home for the first time, and there's something special in that. There is something godly in that. God is very much a part of whatever goes on, and the good and the bad,



God is going to help out. It might not necessarily be the biggest help, but he will give you a little hint here and there. I'm young, so I haven't experienced everything, but I've experienced a whole lot, and what I have experienced, there is more to it than just me.

RH: Does some of your commitment to New Orleans and the larger city, that kind of a commitment to something bigger than you –

DS: Absolutely.

RH: – is that –?

DS: Everything goes into making you who you are. That primary socialization that you go through, every interaction that you go through at an early age, every image, everything you see, every event, shapes who you are. It completely and utterly makes you unique. And, I mean, Judaism, for a long time, was that for me. I'm not going to lie. When I was in high school, I was active in NFTY and going to Jacobs Camp and working at camp after that as a counselor, that made me – okay, I am Jewish. My children are going to be Jewish. This is important. But there are other things that go on behind that, and that's where New Orleans comes in for me. Right now, and until I can change that, New Orleans is going to be on top for a while. I mean, hopefully, I can find a little mesh someday, but we'll see.

RH: What do you think the role of the Jewish community in the larger community is?

DS: In New Orleans?

RH: In New Orleans. Well, what do you think, for you, it has been, and what do you think it should be? What would you like to see it be?

DS: God, that's a tough one for me. Well, New Orleans is very much a small town. As big a metropolitan area as it was or is, or whatever modifier you'd like to use, everybody



knows somebody that knows somebody. Everybody knows another person. Word gets around quick. The Jewish community in New Orleans is the exact same but just so much smaller. Word travels fast. I don't know. I'm sorry. I might need a little clarification exactly [what] to say for that.

RH: I guess I wanted to think – I was curious what you thought – it's a couple of questions, and maybe I didn't ask it as a couple of questions. So, one is, what is it like to be Jewish in New Orleans, really, and how does the Jewish community, in your mind, fit in the larger community? That's one question.

DS: Okay. Growing up, I went kindergarten through twelfth grade at the Isidore Newman School, which is pretty Jewish. That's fine. Growing up, not that I would think about it, but my best friends were Jewish. I had friends that weren't, but my best friends were Jewish. I don't necessarily know how that happened, but it did. I guess likes attract. The Jewish community as a whole affects – it really does sort of affect a lot of things. With regard to Newman, this is a little bit of social commentary, and I totally disagree with this, but Jews that don't go to Newman or sometimes non-Jews will say, "How come you don't go to Newman? What's wrong? Are you a poor Jew?" I've heard that before said to people, and, of course, that doesn't make any sense to me because people are people. If you can afford it – yeah, Newman is expensive. I will be the first to admit that. I am glad I got the education that I did because it's a great school. But it is a private institution. Not everyone can afford it, and Jews in New Orleans are – they're a little different in the fact that – you know what? I'm going to backtrack a little. Jews in New Orleans, they are – God, I'm trying to word it, and it's not quite working well. [Doorbell rings. Recording paused.]

RH: Are you proud of being Jewish in New Orleans?

DS: Absolutely. Absolutely. There are different areas in New Orleans, I guess, and there are different kinds of people you're going to meet. Of course, you are always going



to meet those stupid, ignorant people who are going to try and go against you. They're going to say bad things. But New Orleans, as far as has been my experience, is a very accepting community. Very open. I don't know if I've ever – any place where I've actually been where I am me, I don't know if I've actually ever felt completely outcast as a Jew. Now, I've had experiences. In high school, I dated a girl who was Episcopalian, much to the chagrin of my father. Actually, like I've already said, my father and I don't have a good relationship, but he actually used to growl at her whenever she would come into the house. Once, I remember, I went to a brunch for her – I think it was her grandmother's birthday, and they invited me to go along with them and their whole family. It was at the New Orleans Country Club, and I guess it has a bad reputation for things in the past about not allowing Jews, much like the social clubs for Carnival and what have you. I don't know why it was a big deal, and when I found this out, I was very, very upset. But I didn't find out until about a year afterward after we had broken up. For some reason, they had to declare, "Okay, this is my guest." I don't know why, but apparently, Smason sounds too Jewish. So, they changed my name. When I found out, I was upset, but I didn't know then. So, of course, I walked in, wearing my suit, and looked just like a nice whatever. I found out a year later that they had changed my name to get me in as a guest, which is probably the most idiotic thing I've ever heard of because Smason doesn't really sound that Jewish. At least, I don't think it does. I haven't really met that many Smasons, though. But other than little stupid things like that, I've never really felt out of place in New Orleans as a Jew. I've always – the Jewish Community Center isn't so much a Jewish Community Center; it's very much a community center. Everyone can belong there. Their summer camps – I remember when I was little going to the camp, and some of my good friends weren't Jewish at those camps. Some of them were Black. I had a Chinese friend who went to camp with me there. There are little things like that, like the social clubs and things like that – little things where I think they make a bigger deal out of Judaism in the city than it actually is at this point in time. I feel sorry for them because that's idiotic. But I've never really felt out of place. Ever. I was told once, one



time, and this was, of course – a couple of times on Bourbon Street, but it's always with the same group of people, the people who hold up the signs that say, "You're going to hell," and things like that. This was me, being a stupid immature guy or whatever, – go up to them and pick a fight. Something I'm not necessarily proud of, but mistakes happen. I've been told by them and by one or two other people at random moments, which I've never given much mind, "Jews are going to hell." But everybody I know is going to be there, then, so all right. I mean, New Orleans is a very, very accepting community if you ask me. I guess a lot of that is because they are such a Catholic city, and, I mean, the Catholics in their own right have been slightly looked down upon in this country. Like I said, there has never been a point where I haven't felt at home.

RH: So, tell me, what did you think of the city, state, and federal response?

DS: It was awful. The fact that Bush – I'm sorry, I might rant – the fact that George Bush did not leave Crawford, Texas, until Wednesday is ridiculous. The fact that it took him so long to get water and supplies and ships and all that to New Orleans. Like, a port city. You'd think they would have been able – yeah, maybe the roads are blocked, but we're still a port city. You can get things to a port city by water. I'm sorry. It doesn't make any sense to me. FEMA? Yeah, FEMA screwed up. Especially Mike Brown, big time. Especially when he said, "Dead bodies don't cause disease." Excuse me?

RH: I didn't know he said that.

DS: I'm definitely adding on to it, but it was basically like that. In not so many words, he said that. So, the response was very poor. Here's something that I found out, and it just doesn't make any sense to me. When the 1906 fire happened in San Francisco, I believe it was – I don't know, the 1906 fire. They got troops there faster than we got supplies down to New Orleans. It was 1906. I'll be the first – I'm not a history buff. I am much more in the present times. There are technologies available. There are transportation devices available. There are ways. There are means. We're the United



States of America. Things can be done much better than they were. It was embarrassing. It was absolutely embarrassing to be an American for me during that period of time. I've never felt that before ever. I've always felt privileged. I'm an American, and I have all of these freedoms. I can own a gun if I want to, which if you ask me, they need to – they just didn't care, it seemed. It wasn't, "Oh, they don't care about Black people." No, they didn't care about a region. In 2001, there was a – I remember reading it because I actually wrote two papers on it throughout high school. There was a big five-day publication in the Times-Picayune all about the big one, about what would happen if a Category Five, the big one – you grow up and you always hear about the big one, the big one is coming, and it's going to wipe us out. What would happen if it actually did? In this 2001 release, they say, "The levees will break." Even at Category Three forces, they say this. This is in 2001. This is way before Katrina. They say the Superdome will be used as a –

RH: As a last resort.

DS: Yeah. Last resort. All of this is lined out. All of this. And it was brought before Bush. It was brought before the government. They knew about this stuff. And you're just going to write it off? Now, it just makes me wonder where else – what else would have happened had it been in a different city? Say it was New York. They say New York – what is it? – they say a storm surge from a Category Two hurricane would put New York under twenty-seven feet of water. Is that what they say? I don't know. You wonder, okay, what if it was New York? What if this study had been done for them back in 2001? Would systems have been implemented? Would things have been put in place? Would a better reaction have been formulated? I don't know. I really don't know, but it really upsets me to think that our own government can brush something like that aside. It's easy right now to look back on things and say, "Oh, they knew then what they knew then and point the finger." It's easy to say that. But, goddammit, they knew then.



RH: Has it changed your attitude toward the government?

DS: Absolutely.

RH: How so?

DS: Aside from the fact that I don't trust them at all, I feel something needs to be changed in our government. Something is wrong with the way we do things. We are confused. The bureaucracy that we have set up is flawed. It's horribly, horribly flawed when things like that can slip through the cracks. Something needs to be done, and it's just stupid to me. It doesn't make sense.

RH: Is that also another reason you came back?

DS: Absolutely.

RH: Where do you see your place in that?

DS: I very much intend to become – I'm looking to one day be involved in policy writing. I love this city. I am damn sure I'm going to fight for it, and I know things are – things are fucked up here. Have been for a long time. Things have got to change. A lot of that starts with just the basic organizations, just the littlest – everything starts at the community level. Everything starts at the community level.

RH: What would you like to see?

DS: I would like to see the community get more of a voice. I would like to see people demand these changes.

RH: What kind of changes would you like?

DS: Our education is horrible, and I know that's so – "Oh, education is bad." No, it's pathetic. It's absolutely pathetic, and this goes for the United States as a whole. It's



absolutely pathetic. I mean, one of my roommates is – I live with three other people. One of them is Catholic, a great friend of mine, but he is very much a hardcore conservative, and we fight all of the time. The government needs to be involved. They need to stop caring about what you do with your personal life. They need to care more about what you do for the system. Part of the whole social contract theory is that you give up part of your freedom for – basically, for closure. You give up freedom for that feeling of being taken care of. We don't have that in New Orleans, and I don't even think we really have that in America. The only reason why, if you ask me, why we haven't been invaded, screwed up so badly is because we're here, and they're all the way over there. If we were a European country, we would have been screwed so long ago. Something is not right. Something is really not right. I wish I could give you specifics. They need to change the way money is used. They need to change the way we use our resources. They need to develop better resources. I mean, look at computer technology. They say every two years they release chips that are – what is it? – twice as fast. I read this somewhere. Basically, every two years, technology doubles in computers. Okay. I'll step outside my apartment where my neighbor drives a '67 Chevrolet, which runs on fuel, like runs on – it doesn't make any sense to me why one aspect of our technology can be advancing so quickly, so quickly, and yet the technology for transportation, for everything else, for educational purposes, is not there. Medical purposes. None of it. I mean, research is what's going to get us through. Research is how we're going to figure out how to put New Orleans back together. We're not going to figure it out right away and do the right things. We're going to screw up a bunch. We're going to need to figure out what we need to do. I mean, these are the types of things that we need to invest in, and I'm not just saying – oh, I'm not saying – I just used the car – I'm not using that as a greenhouse or a green global warming type thing. I just used it as an example of just neglect of certain aspects of the important things to me.

RH: After going through Katrina, what are some of your priorities now?



DS: Well, my priorities, aside from the saving – you come back, and you want to fight, and you want to find the opportunities to do that, to make your stand. I mean, I’m still in college, so I can afford to be idealistic, so to speak. My priorities are very much centered around my friends and family. I came back because this is where I’m from, this is where they’re from, this is where I’m going to be. People are more important. People are always more important. That’s pretty much where I stand on almost every issue. Every issue.

RH: What are some of the biggest changes in your life since Katrina?

DS: Well, I moved.

RH: That’s a big one.

DS: Personally, I’ve done a lot of digging. You have to know where you’re going, you have to know where you’ve been, you have to understand it. I did a lot of digging into my family history, finding out who my parents were, where they’ve been, what they’ve done. That helps to understand yourself. Understand your upbringing. Understand, “Okay, this is why I was raised this way.” You see the similarities, and you figure out what worked, what doesn’t work. It’s research. To figure out what works, you’re going to screw up. If there were screw-ups beforehand or screw-ups on me, I’m going to try to work out a way to fix them before, especially with my personal life. That’s what being human is all about. You mess up, you move on, you try to fix it.

RH: What are some of the things you’ve learned about yourself?

DS: I’ve learned I can live through a lot. I really have. I’ve learned that you need to voice your opinion. You need to speak up. You can’t just sit there. You have to get out, and that’s just not on a government-government thing. That’s on a personal thing. I mean, everyone is an opportunist, everyone, and if someone falters, if you falter, someone is going to jump you. I’m not saying you’ve got to be on the offensive, but you



have to be willing to speak, you have to be willing to talk.

RH: This is true. I mean, everybody has an agenda, and if you don't get yours out there, they're going to –

DS: I mean, everything. With family, with friends. I mean, it's like living with roommates. If you don't say, "Don't eat my food," they're going to eat your food. It's that simple.

RH: So you speak out more?

DS: Oh, absolutely. Growing up, yeah, I was active, I was in leadership roles, but you still keep a lot of your opinions to yourself. One of the biggest things I've learned about myself is to hell with what everyone else thinks. You have to worry about what you think. You are your own biggest critic. Always will be. I mean, just think about all of the times you mess up, or you do something that upsets someone, or something happens that upsets you. What happens? That person who took advantage of you, they're not up at night pissed off about it. You're the one who is up at night and can't sleep. It's very much just like my Jewish beliefs, you know. You live for yourself. You live for those around you. You act for yourself, and you act for those around you. If anybody gets in the way of that, you let them know. I mean, you have to be willing – you have to be willing, otherwise, like I said, you're going to be up all night. You'll never get any sleep.

RH: What are some of the things that you took for granted that you're not going to take for granted anymore?

DS: I mean, there were so many things. Just the value of a picture.

RH: Do you have any pictures of your mother left?

DS: A few. Very few. In the end, everything is going to boil down to memories. I'll probably go senile. Pictures never forget. It's hard for a person, a single person, to



always leave a mark on – this is kind of like a small – this is kind of like man versus everything. It's hard for one person to always leave a mark on society or leave a mark on people. But you can leave a mark on your family, you can be remembered in your family, you're loved in your family. That's the smallest form of government on this planet. I mean, you're delegating, you're negotiating, you're doing all of that stuff there. If you can manage to sort of make a difference in your family, that's the important stuff. That's really what matters. And coming from someone who's had a lot of his family – when my mother passed away, I lost touch with my mother's side of the family. Very much so.

There was a little bit of a falling out. And I'm upset that that happened. But you've got to fight to fix things like that. I've spent the last couple of years trying to do that. They say people don't change, but people definitely change. You just don't notice it.

RH: Well, you've changed a lot.

DS: I mean, I was a floater. I really was. I graduated, and then I went to school. I went to college because that's what you do. You go to college. I had no aspirations. I had no goals. God knows what I wanted to do. I probably could have had a good idea, though, if I would have just sat and thought about it. Yes, Katrina really shocked me into realizing just how important New Orleans was to me and how important everything in this city was, but if I would have just sat back one of those nights, one of those afternoons when I was running cross country or playing soccer or whatever, I know I would have known. I mean, New Orleans has always been where I've wanted to be. New Orleans has always been a huge part of me. I mean, you have to listen to yourself, and you have to listen to people. Like I said, people change. People change, and you don't know it. I don't know how else to verbalize it.

RH: Well, tell me some of the things that you are grateful for.

DS: Aside from being back home, my friends. My friends. I could not have – I would not be around like – I would not be functioning if it weren't for them, if I wasn't able to speak



with them. My aunt. The ability to get a good education that I had growing up and the ability that I have now. I'm not going to lie. I know I'm lucky I can afford a Tulane education. It's not cheap. I know that. I mean, society – it's hard. It's hard out there. But you've got to take advantage of these little things, and that's where I've changed because I went to Newman, I was an okay student. I was a B/C student. I got a couple of A's here and there. But they were mostly – if they weren't in PE [physical education] or whatever, they were maybe in English class. You use your advantages. That's what I love about this city. Aside from, okay, yeah, there are those who are less privileged than I. Culturally, though, this city is just amazing. It has some of the best cultural advantages that you can have. The food, that's huge. You've got Mardi Gras. When I was growing up, up until my freshman year in college, I had never been to school that week of Mardi Gras. That Monday through Friday, I had never been to school. I wanted to protest class. I did not want to go. Of course, I did, because if I didn't, I would have been screwed. But the ability to take time off to go and party, to go and have fun with you friends and family. I mean, that doesn't happen anywhere else. That's why this place is special. I mean, people think we're crazy because we're loud, and we dance when the music ain't playing, and we speak improperly, we mispronounce every single street sign – I mean, that's New Orleans. That's the essence of New Orleans. If there isn't a more community- and culturally-based city on the planet, I wouldn't be surprised.

RH: I feel like you've captured the essence there. Is there anything else you want to say in this interview?

DS: I don't know. I really don't know. You can always hope. You can always, always hope, and that's why I'm back. That's why I hope more people come back. It's got to get better.

RH: You've got to be part of the solution.

DS: That's exactly what you've got to do.



[END OF INTERVIEW]