Mark Schleifstein Transcript

Rosalind Hinton: Okay. All right. This is Rosalind Hinton interviewing Mark Schliefstein at 6508 Hastings Street, in Metairie, Louisiana. Today is Sunday, December 10, 2006. I'm conducting the interview for the Katrina's Jewish Voices project of the Jewish Women's Archive and the Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life. Mark, do you agree to be interviewed and understand that the interview will be video recorded?

Mark Schliefstein: Yes, I do, and do understand.

RH: Thank you. Why don't we begin with when you were born, where you were born, and a little bit about your Jewish and general education?

MS: Sure. I was born November 25th, 1950, in Greenville, South Carolina. I lived in Greenville for about seven years, ended up in the Virginia suburbs of Washington, DC, where I pretty much grew up until my last two years in high school, which I spent in Miami [and] graduated from high school there. Started in college at the University of Florida, ended up at Florida Atlantic University for a while, ended up at Santa Fe Junior College in Gainesville, and then finished my undergraduate college degree at George Washington University in DC in 1975. I've been a reporter for daily newspapers from 1975 until the present, first in the Norfolk, Virginia area, then in Jackson, Mississippi, and then came to the Times-Picayune in April of 1984.

RH: How about growing up Jewish?

MS: Growing up Jewish.

RH: [laughter]

MS: My parents were not really practicing, religious-wise. We celebrated the holidays, but that was about it. We're not members of a synagogue. When I was bar mitzvah age, I basically forced my parents to get me bar mitzvahed, which I did. The hen when I was in high school in Florida, I became involved in United Synagogue Youth Conservative movement. From there, when I went to college at the University of Florida, was involved in Hillel. I actually ended up working at the Hillel Foundation, in Gainesville, for a couple of years, off and on, and followed up with that, after college, wherever I'd been affiliated with a synagogue, where possible, Conservative, but sometimes that meant with Reform, like in Jackson, Mississippi.

RH: When you came to New Orleans, where did you affiliate?

MS: At the time, it was Tikvat Shalom, a Conservative congregation, which then, several years ago, just merged with Chevra Thilim, which was uptown, in New Orleans, and we became Congregation Shir Chadash.

RH: So, tell me about where you live, about your neighborhood pre-Katrina.

MS: We lived in an area called Lakeview on Fillmore Avenue, which is a pretty active cross street through that neighborhood. Lakeview is mostly white, in fact, almost all white, upper-middle-class neighborhood – actually about seventy-percent working class, even though it's upper middle class, but pretty high salaried. The houses there, pre-Katrina, range from $150,000 to $600,000, somewhere in that neighborhood. It's as suburban as a New Orleans neighborhood could get without being in the suburbs. There's actually a number of Jewish homeowners in the community. There's an Orthodox synagogue Beth Israel, about eight blocks from where we lived. A number of members of our congregation in Beth Israel and the Reform congregations lived in the neighborhood.

RH: Tell me, if you could –describe the house that you lived in.

MS: We had a house that I think dated to the 1930s. It's a split-level, two-story house. The one side of the house was two stories and was on a slab, and the other side of the house was one story and on piers. So it was raised up a little bit on one side and flat on the ground on the other. It was stucco on the outside. By the time we had renovated it a couple of times, it had wooden floors in the main living room area – we had just expanded the living room area, as a matter of fact, to take in an outside porch. The house was about 2,200 square feet by the time the storm hit.

RH: Can you tell me what you liked about the neighborhood?

MS: Sure. When we came to New Orleans, we were looking for a neighborhood where we would be able to put our kids into public schools, that were good public schools, and a place that was fairly safe and that was convenient to both my job and my wife's job. My wife was working way out in Eastern New Orleans at the National Finance Center, which is part of the Department of Agriculture. It's a big payroll center, and it's actually out at the Michoud facility, where they make the external tank for the shuttle. It's on the same footprint of space. We needed someplace that was close to the interstate where she could get out to that and someplace close to downtown where I could get to the paper. This was perfect. Our kids were able to go to public schools all the way through in New Orleans.

RH: Tell me how many kids you have.

MS: I've got two youngsters. See, now I'm going to get into trouble. Mike [was born in] 1978. He's twenty-nine, and he's married. He now lives in New Orleans. He had an apartment in Metairie that flooded, he and his wife. My daughter Rachel is twenty-five, and she lives in Atlanta, works for CNN.

RH: What was it like, and what kind of rituals – being Jewish, raising your children Jewish here in New Orleans?

MS: Congregation Shir Chadash is an interesting place to be a member. They expect a lot of kids. Both of our kids were bar mitzvahed there. Basically, what we require of youngsters is that they learn everything and that they are able to lead the entire service from page ten, all the way to the end, on Saturday mornings and on Friday nights – a similar sort of a thing. And for some odd reason, it works. Our congregation is – I'm trying to think of the word – yeah, I can't think of the right word. But basically, we make sure that both men and women are treated equally. We don't have a cantor because we believe that we want our members to be leading the service along with the rabbi. The result of that is that we have a great vested interest in making sure that the kids who are going through our bar mitzvah program are properly trained and are able to literally step out and lead the services from that point on. And it works out pretty well. The service itself is very traditional in nature. We use quite a bit of Hebrew, very little English, although we have been trying to add a little bit of English in the last couple of years. The congregation itself has been a pretty good mix of people from all walks of life and has been pretty successful.

RH: Do you have any vivid memories that kind of capsulize, for you, the Jewish experience in New Orleans?

MS: Wow. Let's see.

RH: Or even at Shir Chadash?

MS: Well, let's see. When we merged the two synagogues, we had these celebrations where we basically marched the Torah out of Chevra Thilim and had a little parade down the street in New Orleans, and then marched it into the old synagogue, but with the new name in Metairie, what was Tikvat Shalom and what became Shir Chadash. That was a pretty neat thing. Our congregation has historically had Purim celebrations, where the members put on skits, and in various quality, shall I say, some of which had been a lot of fun to do. I'm trying to think what else. Other things just generally in the community that

come to mind are, in the last several years, the Chabad organization has had these riverfront celebrations for Hanukkah that had been well attended and pretty interesting.

RH: Pretty interesting?

MS: That everybody would mix together, all the Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, and take part side by side in this celebration. We had a lot of fun down there. That's been enjoyable. I'm trying to think what else.

RH: Well, some people claim that the Jewish community is very assimilated; other people say that there's a strong Jewish identity... Do you have any thoughts on that about the Jewish identity, the Jewish community in New Orleans, in general?

MS: I've lived in Southern towns all my life and dealt with the question of assimilation in Jewish communities and the tensions that they feel here in town. That has included the period when David Duke was at his height, and there were real concerns about what was happening in the Jewish community. We've been pretty vocal about who we are and what we are. There continues to be concerns about assimilation, but I mean, we've been – I don't know – pretty Jewish about who we are, is, I guess, the way to say that. I've been sort of fortunate in that each community that we've lived in, we've pretty much been in a similar sort of a situation. When I was in Jackson, I was a member of the Reform Congregation there, that was dealing with real, significant problems long before I got there and during and after I got there with the Klan and things like that, the synagogue being shot at. Long before I was there in the ’60s, it had actually been blown up by the Klan. So, I understood a lot of the tensions. I've always understood the tensions that have dealt with that, and growing up, understood what discrimination was against kids. So, coming here, what I found to be interesting was that, even with all the David Duke junk that was going on at the time, there didn't seem to be any problems with expressing your identity as being Jewish in this community. It pretty much had the support of the vast majority of people, David Duke notwithstanding.

RH: Well, why don't we talk a little bit now, shift gears, and go into the Katrina story? Tell me how you prepare, what you have to do for your work, such as that?

MS: Okay. Actually, I really do have to go back a little bit to explain this. I'd been at the newspaper since '84, and pretty soon – well, actually, even as I'm arriving, I am already starting to plan how the newspaper covers hurricanes because that's always been a part of my role as an environment reporter for the paper. Over the years, I've pushed, over and over again, for the newspaper to do more aggressive take outs on how preparedness should be. That's been a part of my role at the paper. There came a point in time, in 2001, when I was finally able to convince the newspaper that it was time to do a real serious look at the increased risk from hurricanes. So we did. We put together a series that ran in 2002 called Washing Away, which did indeed address a lot of the issues involved in what would happen if a catastrophic hurricane hit the city. We basically laid out a what-if scenario that said, “If a major storm comes in, what will it look like?” We explained that the levees would end up holding the water in for weeks; that a vast majority of the city's buildings would be destroyed; that there was a chance for a high loss of life... and all these different things, basically. The part that, as it turned out, we got wrong was what would cause the problems with water. We basically were assuming that the levees would be overtopped and the water would be captured in the city and wouldn't be able to be gotten out. We did not expect that the levee walls would fail in parts of the city or that the levees would wash away in other parts. We felt the Corps of Engineers knew what they were doing when they built these things and that they would withstand the storm and reduce damages as a result of their ability to withstand, and that it would only be a truly catastrophic storm and not a smaller storm. As large as Katrina was, it was not the catastrophic storm that we had predicted.

RH: So what is catastrophic? What was Katrina?

MS: Well, that's one of the problems. Katrina actually was a very large storm. Larger than anything that the city of New Orleans had seen before. But it did go to the east of the city.

RH: So, the difference between a catastrophic storm and what Katrina was.

MS: Right. Basically, the levee system prior to Katrina was assumed to be able to withstand a fast-moving, category-three hurricane. As Katrina actually went ashore, that's what it was, although it actually was a larger storm, because the storm surge that it produced was being produced when it was a category five offshore. But a truly catastrophic storm would be something slower, a category three storm, or a larger storm. So this was sort of borderline in peoples' minds as to what this was. Of course, what made it much worse – it was going to be bad for eastern New Orleans and Saint Bernard Parish, and places south, there's no question about that. For those parts of the community, it was a catastrophic storm. But for the Western part of New Orleans and Jefferson Parish, it should not have been a truly catastrophic event. And it ended up being so. And that's sort of the difference.

RH: You have now also written a book. Part of the work is from Washing Away. From, your research from that?

MS: Right, right. Path of Destruction is the name of the book. And what we did with that was that we tried – there were a lot of books that ended up getting produced as a result of Katrina, but most of them focused on the tick-tock of the storm itself. What we wanted to do was to take a look at drawing together the history that resulted in the risk that was Katrina as it hit – ow the levees were built, how the system of canals was built, and why they were there. What was the history of hurricane predictions, the Corps of Engineers' own history, and the city's own history? And the history of past storms. And to put it all together so that people had an understanding of why it was that the city was built the way it was, and how people expanded into areas that really had never been lived in during the

worst kinds of hurricanes in the past. So that there's a better understanding of why this storm happened.

RH: One other question here that I thought we would just move out of the way at the front, and that is, maybe you could explain exactly the difference between overtopping and breaching and failing because it sounds like there were three different kinds of things happening.

MS: Yeah. What we assumed was that when you had a real high storm surge, the water would rise to the point where it was higher than the levees, and so you would have water that would go over the top of the levees and fall into the area that was protected by the levees and start filling it up. That's overtopping. What happened that seemed to be unexpected, or it was unexpected by the public at least, was that in areas that were protected by earthen levees that were overtopped, when the water ran down the other side, it eroded away the levees, so those levees just basically disappeared in many places. In other areas, like in Western New Orleans, where there were canals, the water went from Lake Pontchartrain up into those canals, and it caused – the weight of the water, with some other things going on, the engineering problems of the way the levee walls were built caused the levee walls to actually fail. They either moved away or fell down, depending on where they were, and those are the breaches that everybody talks about.

RH: And can you kind of say where the breaches were, as opposed to where –?

MS: Sure. The overtopping areas were largely in Saint Bernard Parish, south of the city, and also in large parts of Eastern New Orleans, the easternmost part, where there was a five-mile area of levees that just disappeared. The breaches occurred along the

industrial canal, which is the middle point that separates what I call western New Orleans and eastern New Orleans – the industrial canal – and the levees on both sides of that canal failed in several places. There are three drainage canals in the city of New Orleans, the western part of the city. To of them had breaches, and the other one, the levee walls were not complete, and water ran out the southern end of those levee walls and just got around them into the city.

RH: Where was that?

MS: That was on the Orleans Avenue Canal.

RH: Really?

MS: Yeah, which is why the Orleans Canal never failed because the water never got high enough in them because it was running out the far end.

RH: What areas did that flood?

MS: City Park. It largely added to the amount of water that was in the other areas. Its effects are hard to take out to show exactly what its effects were as opposed to the other breaches. The other breaches were the ones that caused the oceans of water to come in because they were much bigger. And then, the other two – the 17th Street Canal is the westernmost canal. It's the border between Metairie and New Orleans. It's the end of Lakeview. Those canal walls failed. The London Avenue Canal is between City Park and the Industrial Canal. Those canal walls also failed. So, those are the major places where things occurred. There were some other places – think there was some overtopping that occurred on the lakefront at the Lakefront Airport. But I think that's about it.

RH: Did somebody dynamite the – going into Lower Nine?

MS: No. [laughter] Actually, I got called by Cynthia McKinney's staff about that.

RH: And Cynthia McKinney is –?

MS: Until this last election, she was a member of the House of Representatives from Atlanta, who had basically been – oh, I don't want to say she was pushing the idea, but she was investigating the idea that had been brought up that people in the Lower Ninth Ward had heard explosions that they believed to be the result of someone dynamiting the levee walls. Her staff said, “Well, we heard this happened, and the proof is that people who were several blocks away saw debris in the air at the time they heard the explosions.” And I said, “Well, what time were the explosions heard?” And they said, “9:30 in the morning.” I said, “At 9:30 in the morning, the winds in that area were between ninety and a hundred miles an hour, and what those people were seeing were their roofs blowing off,” which is true. What they heard were the walls falling. Those walls are huge, and they were made of concrete. And part of the noise also was this huge, two-block long barge that went over the top of the walls as they were falling and ended up in the neighborhood, hitting houses as it went through. They also heard the houses themselves basically blowing apart and moving as the water poured in when that wall fell. So, that's what all the noise was. There definitely was noise. It definitely looked like somebody had blown it up, but there's no proof of that, and there's no way that anybody could have been there. There was only one Corps of Engineers employee in the area, and it was a guy who was a bridge tender and he was on the bridge. He wasn't getting down in that water. He would have been killed. That's the short answer. There were also similar sorts of rumors at the very beginning about the 17th Street Canal walls. If one believes the theory that people were blowing up the walls to get rid of poor people, they wouldn't have blown up the 17th Street canal walls because that's the canals where some of the richest people in the city live.

RH: I have one more science question here, which is, what is a storm surge, exactly?

MS: Storm surge is – let's see, how can I describe this? As a hurricane grows, the pressure in the inside of the hurricane gets lower and lower. As the pressure gets lower, that allows the water to start rising. It's not quite sucked up, but there's not as much air pressure above it, and so it has the ability of rising. So that begins the rise. And as it rises, it's in the area, in the northeastern quadrant of the storm, where the highest winds are. So the winds take that water and make it blow even harder and higher until it gets to the point where it's basically waves, and they're rolling until they get to the point where there's no room for them to roll over. At that point, they get even higher, and they start building up higher and higher until they find a place where they can be relieved, and that generally ends up being on the levees, or over the levees, depending on how high they are, as a combination of surge and waves. The waves are what is blown at the very top by the wind. In this storm, what that meant was that you had water that was higher than average, higher than the regular high tide, to heights as much as twenty-eight feet high along some of the levees in Saint Bernard Parish, and easternmost Eastern New Orleans. In the Industrial Canal, it got as high as fifteen and a half feet high, and in the canals in Western New Orleans, about eleven and a half feet high. How does that compare to the heights of the levees? Well, in Saint Bernard Parish, the levees were about seventeen and a half feet high, so you had about ten feet of water going over them. In Eastern New Orleans and along the Gulf Inter-Coastal Waterway leading to the Industrial Canal, the levees were also about seventeen and a half feet wide. And then in the Industrial Canal – I'm sorry, seventeen a half feet high. And then, in the Industrial Canal, the walls were about fifteen and a half feet high.

RH: So had they held, it would have barely topped if the wall is fifteen and a half and the –

MS: Well, yeah, in the industrial canal, in several places, the water did go over the top. And indeed, that helped erode away the back side of the levees that the walls were in, and the walls failed because of that. In other parts of the canal, it was just the pressure

of the water in the canal that caused the wall to fail.

RH: Well, I appreciate this indulgence of the science. [laughter]

MS: Not a problem.

RH: And I do want your personal story, as we move into this, too.

MS: Sure. OK.

RH: So I do want to go back and know what you personally – after knowing, also, all you know.

MS: Yeah, why did I stick around? Well, yeah. Why did we live in the lowest part of the city? Because all the city is low, and we understood what the risk was. I knew that if a catastrophic hurricane were to hit, I'd probably lose my house. In fact, the joke was that my neighbors would be out boarding up their windows, and I would not. People would ask me, "Well, why didn't you board up your windows?" I said, "Well, if we get winds high enough to blow out my windows, the house is going to be flooded anyway, so it doesn't really matter. I guess our story begins on – my story begins on Friday before the storm, really Thursday. By Thursday, I was already reporting on what this hurricane was doing way out before it hit Miami. On Friday, as it moved across Miami and started going into the Gulf of Mexico, the question became, what's it going to do? I'm reporting on it on a daily basis and starting to make plans for what we're going to do. It became clear by Friday night that this was going to be a major hurricane that would cause an evacuation. We made arrangements for my son and daughter-in-law to switch cars with me, and they would leave, and I'd have his car, which was expendable. [laughter] And they would have mine, which wouldn't break down. My wife would come in with me. And they we went to – and then, Saturday morning, I went to services first in the morning. At some point during the service, I went out in the hall, and the Rabbi's wife was walking in with her youngster, and she was like seven months pregnant at the time. I pulled her aside,

and I explained to her that she needed to make plans to leave as soon as Shabbos was over, that they needed to get out of the city. A couple of other people asked me for advice, and I freely provided it. [laughter] After the service, I got with the synagogue –

RH: You had a new rabbi too, so he was not –

MS: Yeah, yeah. Ted Lichtenfeld had begun there barely a month before the storm, and indeed he had fair warning; I had given him a copy of Washing Away, our series, during his interview. I was part of the interview team, so at least they had educated knowledge of what they were getting into, sort of, although nobody ever really understands it until they get down here. But they knew. After services that day, I talked to the manager for the synagogue, who's also a member of the synagogue, and I said –

RH: Kancher?

MS: Yeah, Mike.

RH: Mike, right.

MS: I said, "Mike, we need to move the Torahs over to the JCC building to the third floor." Which they had done in the past, and I could tell that they had forgotten about it, so I reminded them [laughter] that they needed to do that. And indeed, unfortunately, I had – one of my regrets is that I had hoped to get to services at Beth Israel. I used to go to minyans a lot at Beth Israel, afternoon minyans. But the timing of it was – it's summertime, and I hadn't been going for a while because the minyans were so late that I was still working at the paper, with everything that was going on, and then that week ended up being a very busy week because of the hurricane, and I was just never able to get free in time to go to services. I wanted to tell them to do the same thing, and

unfortunately, they did not. I'm going to assume that the reason they didn't is because the other half of the building was locked because it was still being used as a public school – the city of New Orleans was using it as a school building. But they didn't move their Torahs, and of course they lost all their Torahs. Anyway, after services, drove home and then went into work and started working. Started putting together a story for the next day, which was, by that point, it was very clear it was going to be a story about evacuation, how the evacuation was occurring, what needed to be done, and what the mayor was doing, and all this sort of stuff. About four o'clock, the phone rings, as basically some editors are meeting around my desk, trying to figure out how we're going to put all this stuff into the paper. I pick up the phone, and it's Max Mayfield, at the National Hurricane Center, the director of the Hurricane Center. Before I even have a chance to say anything, he says, "Mark, I have to ask you two questions. How high is your building? And what kind of wind speed can it withstand?" I answered the questions, and I said, "Max, why are you asking me these questions?" He said, "You know why I'm asking you. Because this is the big one, and it's coming right at you. And y'all need to be prepared or get out if you can't be prepared." I explained to him that I thought we were safe, that we had a place inside the building that we could retreat to in case the windows blew out. And he took my comments, and I also gave him some advice on the mayor, and then he went on, and he did his thing.

RH: Did you ask him to call the mayor?

MS: No, I did not. That's not my role. I didn't have to worry about that. I knew what the mayor was doing. The mayor was actually doing an excellent job, in terms of – one of the big misnomers here that the national press doesn't understand is that there is a process for calling for an evacuation for the metro area. The mayor followed it exactly as it was supposed to be, in terms of the timing, except for when he actually triggered the

actual mandatory evacuation, but it didn't matter. His message was extremely clear and was the most intense message of any mayor in advance of a major storm in the history of the city. He gave the right message at all the right times, and that's been proved – I actually have proof of this, by the traffic count on the roads leading out, which showed on this Saturday that they – the cars per lane average, nine hundred cars per lane a minute going out of the city, in both directions until about 5:00, until they dropped off. 5:00 to 7:00 was when that press conference that he gave Saturday night was. At 7:00, they jumped to 1,300, and they stayed there until midnight when everybody decided they were going to wait it out until the morning. The next morning, they picked up again, it was the same 1,300 going out until 6:00 when it went down to zero because the evacuation was over. It was, as it turned out, the best evacuation in the history of the United States; eighty to ninety percent of the people got out.

RH: Wow.

MS: Yeah. So, he did the right thing. What happened was that after Max – I told Max what was happening, and I gave him what I thought my opinion was of how well it was going. He asked me whether more pressure needed to be applied, and I said that I'm sure that any more pressure couldn't hurt. What happened after that, as I learned later, was that he then called the Governor, got the mayor's phone numbers from her, and ended up talking to the mayor later that night and impressed on the mayor the importance of calling for a mandatory evacuation, which the mayor was going to do anyway; he was just concerned about the legalities of it. He was getting some conflicting advice, I'll say, from his own staff. That advice didn't really mean anything; it didn't matter anyway as it turned out.

RH: Back to you.

MS: Back to me.

RH: Thank you for clarifying that.

MS: Okay. So, Saturday night, I went home. I think I went home and slept that night. And then, prepared everything, prepared what I was going to take with me, and came back in. Diane was making her own preparations to bring what she was going to bring and bring her car in. Se both parked at the paper on Sunday morning and started working on what we were going to be working on. Diane was basically just there, and I was working pretty much full-time from that point on. Overnight Sunday, the storm comes in. I somehow have become the mouthpiece of the Times-Picayune and am called by radio and TV stations around the world all night long. Also, putting stuff up on our website as it occurs – little bits of stories and whatever information I can get overnight. Monday morning, I'm basically doing the same thing. By, I guess, about 1:30, I get a call from the reporter who's at City Hall, who tells me that they've got a report that the 17th Street Canal's failed. I write that up and put that out on the website. It goes up at about 2:00, which, of course, nobody looked at, unfortunately, for a lot of people. By that time, we already knew that the Lower Ninth Ward was flooded, Saint Bernard was flooded, and that people were being rescued from rooftops, and everything else was going on. When I filed that story, I brought a copy of it over, and I showed a couple of people, and our living editor and our art critic went out by bicycle to Lakeview to find out what had happened. So this is as the storm is finally beginning to clear out. The winds are down to the forties, and they're making their way through what debris there is in the inner city to find out what's going on. They, of course, find out that Lakeview is completely flooded.

RH: Really? They find out – they go out about after 2:00?

MS: Yeah. This is 2:00 in the afternoon on Monday.

RH: Right, on Monday.

MS: Right.

RH: And so, they ride out, and they –

MS: Yeah. And they're back at around 5:30, 6:00. We now have photos of the intense flooding and everything else. In the meantime, I'm writing a story basically. I'm trying to remember what the story was. Basically, I'm writing about story about what the extent of the flooding is and what can be done about it. That goes into our paper for the next day, which now is being published online because we're flooded. And the water is beginning – I'm sorry. Beginning Monday, in the afternoon, water starts rising in our parking lot. Now, this is not necessarily unusual. After a major rain event, we often have flooding in our parking lot. What made this one unusual was that it didn't stop rising. So, by Tuesday morning, we wake up, and see what the newspaper looks like online. One of the pictures that is used is a picture that these guys had taken at the corner of my street and the Orleans Avenue Canal that shows water up to the rooftops of houses, so I know my house is flooded for sure. I'd already assumed it was the night before. As I am waking, we get word that the management has decided that the newspaper will evacuate because now we look outside, and the water is about four feet deep in the parking lot. The publisher had been told by the truck drivers that he had about an hour before the water was above the engines of the trucks if it kept rising, and that was their window for getting people out. So everybody scrambled, and we went downstairs and got into the backs of trucks. My wife got on one of the first ones, which ended up intending to go to Baton Rouge, but somehow didn't quite make it that way. At some point, it pulled over to the side because one of the people in the back of the truck was not feeling well. Somebody across the street from where it had happened – this is like Thibodaux or something like that, or near Thibodaux – says that they're going to Baton Rouge, does anybody want a ride. She and one other guy take this person up on it and end up getting

delivered to the airport in Baton Rouge. She has to overnight there, and the next day, she flies to Atlanta.

RH: Are you in contact with her?

MS: No. No, I'm on another truck. She's on one of the first trucks to leave, and I am on the last truck to leave.

RH: And your phone's not working there.

MS: No, the cell phones aren't working. I, among many others, have not quite figured out that you can message people, use text messaging, that might get through. We hadn't quite figured that out yet. But to be honest, I knew that she was going to take care of herself. She was out of the city, so I knew she was safe. I wasn't horribly worried about what was going to be happening to her because I knew she had gotten over the bridge and onto dry land.

RH: She, on the other hand, didn't know where you were.

MS: No, she didn't, but we trust each other. I'm on one of the last trucks, and what we did was we went up on the other side of the bridge, so we're now on the West Bank, and we went to our bureau, our West Bank Bureau. At that point, there was a lot of basically, "Okay, now what are we doing?" decision-making going on. The editor and some reporters volunteered to take a truck and go back in. When they made that decision, I looked around, and I said, “I better go with the editors who are going on to Houma, who are going to be putting out the paper for the next day,” because my concern is that without someone representing the reporters there, and somebody who doesn't know how to take dictation, that the editors might have some problems. So, I took that role upon myself and ended up in Houma. Turns out it was pretty good that I did that. As we are driving to Houma, which is sixty-five miles southwest of the city, I am in the back of the truck, in the back of one of the trucks, and these are like paper delivery trucks; they’re

like big boxes, and the back door is open. So, I've got this huge box and nothing else there. Anyway, I'm listening to WWL radio, which now has all these officials taking refuge where they are, which is in the Jefferson Parish Emergency Operations Center on the west bank, and they're actually talking about what's going on, whatever information they have. I ended up writing a story about that as we are traveling to Houma. That story is ready to go as soon as we get to Houma, and when we get to Houma, it turns out that the Houma Courier, which is a New York Times newspaper, has set up a newsroom for us in a conference room with computers and wireless and all this sort of stuff ready to go. I'm literally able to get off the truck, walk over there, sit down, and start filing a story that's up on the web in a couple of hours after that. So, that process went on throughout that night. We finished putting together our second online paper Tuesday night at about 2:00 a.m. I guess I wrote one story that was – I can't even remember what it was, but it was some story about some governmental issues involving the flooding and took a lot of dictation from other reporters to get their stories in. The problem that we had was that reporters in New Orleans could call us, where they were able to find a landline, but they were moving around, so we couldn't call them because none of the cell phones were working because all the cell towers were down. We also couldn't call Baton Rouge, but Baton Rouge could call us, and that was also a problem with who-knows-what, but it was a mess. At one point in time, the editor of the paper is really concerned because he's been trying to get a hold of the Louisiana State University's Journalism Department, the Manship School of Mass Communications, because they're holding space for us. But they had had a deadline for when they would give that space away if we hadn't gotten in touch with them. He had been unable to get a hold of them or to get hold of the other editors who had already gone to Baton Rouge to look for temporary space elsewhere, to tell them what was going on. I happened to have a contact with the American Red Cross, who was in Houston. We could call Houston, and Houston could call Baton Rouge. So I gave him her number, and he called her, and she called Baton Rouge. So, that worked out, fortunately. It’s all a bunch of little detail-type junk. Wednesday

morning, we woke up and started doing some additional blogging that morning. Then the decision was made that the reporting/editing people would leave Houma and just leave the production people there, and we would go ahead to Baton Rouge, where indeed, they had set up a newsroom now at the LSU Communications Department. So we drove up there, got in about 6:00 because traffic was a complete disaster, as you can imagine. Trying to get anywhere from anywhere in Louisiana was just terrible. At that point, ended up trying to figure out what it was I was going to be doing if I needed to do anything more that night. Turned out I didn't, so ended up being put into one of several dorm rooms where we were now staying ten to a person.

RH: Ten to a room.

MS: Ten to a room, sorry. Right, ten persons to the room at LSU. So, that gets you through Tuesday night. [laughter]

RH: OK. We'll wrap up. Go ahead.

[END OF PART 1]

RH: – with Mark Schliefstein. So, Mark, you really have just gotten us up to Wednesday after the storm and you're in a room with ten other guys.

MS: Actually, ten other girls, as it turns out. I ended up being the last person in, and I ended up sharing the space with the women. I had my own room, which sounded really good until I learned that it was the one with the air conditioner for the unit in it that was set at like forty-five degrees to cool off the rest of the area.

RH: Yikes. So, there goes the first good night's sleep in a while. [laughter]

MS: Yeah.

RH: So, just continue on your odyssey, please, if you don't mind.

MS: Okay. I'm sorry, I have to think about this to get the days straight. So, Thursday, I am basically – I started doing reporting. I really didn't know all I was doing, but one of those days, I ended up in an airplane flying over the city, putting together an environmental story about all the oil spills down the river, including the big one, Murphy Oil, that flooded. It basically spilled oil over much of Chalmette. I'm just basically doing reporting, is what it amounts to. At some point during the next several days, two reporters went back into the Lakeview area by canoe on a cat-fishing trip. Not catfish, but fishing for cats.

RH: Oh.

MS: They were actually going to rescue cats from newspaper peoples' houses, including, as it turned out, one of mine. They ended up breaking into the second-story window of my house and capturing one of my cats, one of the six that they got out. That next night, at 9:30 at night, all of a sudden, they knock on the door, and here's my cat in a bag [laughter] being delivered to me. So, now it's ten of us in the dorm room and a cat, which I now have with nothing – no supplies, so I have to go run out in a town –

RH: Get a carrier.

MS: Right. You have to understand that in Baton Rouge at this time, 200,000 people have now inundated Baton Rouge and bought everything that is in any store that you can possibly find. I am bouncing from store to store looking for cat litter, cat food, and things like that, which takes a little while. Finally, [I'm[able to get back, set up my cat, and go on with my life from there, and the cat was well taken care of.

RH: So, let's just think a little bit about the fact that you've lost your home. At what point did you realize this?

MS: Oh, I knew that – I knew that Monday night. I knew it Monday, actually – I had the mental knowledge of it Monday at the time that I heard that the walls failed in Lakeview. Tuesday morning, I knew it for sure when I saw the picture. I was not horribly upset. As strange as that sounds, I had already processed this information before the storm. I knew that if we had a major hurricane it would happen. Afterward, there were certain things that we lost that were upsetting to me. It's part of the risk. I had processed it, I guess you could say. It makes no sense, but that's what it is.

RH: What were your thoughts? Had you really processed what was happening to the city before? I mean, I know intellectually you understood what could happen, but when you really start to see what was going on?

MS: Yeah, it was really hard to get your hands around a lot of this stuff, especially the – some of the reporting that I was doing had to do with – I mean, I'm talking to some of the parish officials who are very angry about what the response has been. That was sort of difficult to deal with. These are people who I consider more than just acquaintances; they're people I've worked with for years in the role of reporter and source who are deeply upset about it. That was hard to deal with at times. The continued reports of people who were dead and the lack of response of the federal government to – doing things quickly during those first couple of days was – I felt a feeling of frustration about it. Beyond that, I don't know how to describe what I felt.

RH: So, you ended up in a number of different places, living circumstances?

MS: Yeah. We bounced around. After about a week at LSU, the students were coming back in, and things had to move on. We were the things that had to move on. We ended up having to leave both the workspace that we were in there and also the dormitory rooms because they were needed for students coming back. So, at first, there were some attempts by staffers to try to find rooms for us in houses in Baton Rouge. I ended up in a room with an elderly gentleman who did not understand that reporters work

different hours than he did. That worked for about two days, and then we politely left because we didn't want to bother the poor guy anymore. Then I ended up on the couch of an LSU journalism professor for a week. He also had a journalist from France on another couch and a buggy driver from New Orleans in a spare bedroom. It was an interesting collection of people – and his kids, a couple of kids, too. That lasted for about a week, and then John Pope, one of my fellow reporters, decided that he'd had enough, and he was going to buy a house. He went out and bought a house, and it became the place for everybody to crash. And that's where I stayed until October 10th when we went back to the newspaper. In that period of time between when I left LSU and the time I got into John's house, I then had another problem, which was that I had this cat. I ended up having to put the cat into the shelter at LSU, which was this huge – the shelter itself was in the “Cow Palace” up there – it's a stadium used for livestock shows and things like that. But they were very well taken care of. Once we were able to get into John's house, I went and got the cat again and got it back. By this time, I was able to get hold of Diane, and we found out what was going on with each other. She ended up having – she had stayed with her dad at the Jewish Towers in Atlanta. Then she ended up having to go to Texas for her work; a portion of her work groups had been transferred there to a temporary space there. She ended up there for a little while, but then her dad had some sort of surgery that she had to go back and help him out with. After that, she ended up being transferred to Washington, D.C. – Arlington, Virginia, actually, where her particular group had been moved to and ended up there until right after Thanksgiving when she came back into the city. For me, I'm continuing on, doing whatever it is I'm doing for the paper. My role evolved from covering a lot of environmental stuff to covering pretty much just the levees. And then on October 10th, a Monday morning, we are required to be back in the city at the newspaper and to start work there. The water had stopped rising before it had gotten into the building, fortunately. So the effects on the building were that it was without water or electricity for quite a while. Once they got those reinstalled, we were able to return to work there. At that point, we all had to find someplace new to live.

I ended up finding – a friend of mine owns a bar in the French Quarter – actually owns several bars in the French Quarter, and he made available to me – actually, she made available to me, an apartment, and that's putting it politely. It was a room, a hole, above the bar – made it available to me as a brief place to stay while we were looking around for something more permanent. I stayed there for about a week until I just couldn't take it anymore because of the noise, and then ended up moving into an apartment behind the last two rooms on the end of a very large house that one of our other reporters owns in uptown and lived there until February.

RH: And your wife came back. Did she live with you there?

MS: Yeah, she lived with me there.

RH: There's one other thing, I think before we leave Baton Rouge.

MS: Oh, yeah, let me talk about – that first Saturday, after the storm, I decided I'd go to services. So, I went to Beth Shalom. The service is being led by a member of the congregation, and there are no rabbis there, and I'm going, "Hmm, this is interesting. I thought there were two Rabbis at this congregation."

RH: I think that's the other one then. Beth Shalom had –

MS: No, Beth Shalom had the – it is Beth Shalom. It's the one on the east side of town. Sorry. It was a very nice service and everything. I actually knew some people there. There were some people from my congregation who were there, who had evacuated to Baton Rouge. At the end, where we have Oneg Shabbat, and right at the end of the

oneg, all the sudden, there's all this commotion. I'm looking around, and the two rabbis from this congregation come in with other rabbis from elsewhere, and they're all carrying Torahs. I'm looking, and they're my Torahs. They're Torahs from my synagogue, walking around. I'm going, "What is this?" It turned out that they had arranged with the East Baton Rouge Parish Sheriff's office to be accompanied to go on a rescue mission to bring Torahs back, and the only day that the parish would do it was on a Saturday when they weren't doing other things down there in assisting other agencies. So they ended up doing it, and they basically pulled out all of the Torahs from the Conservative and Reform Congregations that were in any sort of danger because there were concerns about not just whether or not they were flooded but also looting and things like that. So, the only ones that they didn't get were the Orthodox – some of those didn't need to be rescued. But as it turned out, Beth Israel's were – as we learned later, they were destroyed, or they were flooded, completely flooded. Anyway, they ended up here, and I ended up breaking Shabbos by taking pictures of the Torahs, doing a story, and getting it in the paper the next day. It was an interesting sort of experience.

RH: How did that first service – really, if you think about a Sabbath service, it's to cease and desist from what you've been doing all week.

MS: Oh, I needed it. Oh, man, I really did. It was a good time to get away and to actually get with human beings as opposed to just newspaper people and add some reality into my life. That part of it was nice. And just getting into the mode of doing the prayers and being through the service was very useful. There is another piece to the Beth Shalom story, which is that on the eve of Rita, Hurricane Rita came in, it was a Friday night. As Rita is coming in, I stupidly drove over there to see if somebody was dumb enough to have services. It ended up that nobody was as I should have known. So, that night the storm comes in, and it leaves, and there's more devastation

everywhere in the state, as it turned out, including in Baton Rouge, where there's lots of wind damage. So the next morning, I went to services, saying, “Well, gee, they'll be back.” I drive up, and the synagogue has had this horrendous thing happen to it, which is that water had built up during Rita on the roof, and the roof had collapsed. Now, they're the ones who are having to move Torahs out of their synagogue to deal with the damage there. It was like, “What is this? Everywhere I go …”.

RH: It's destruction.

MS: Yeah, it really is.

RH: So what did you do?

MS: I helped out for a little while in mopping up the water, and that was it. That was my Saturday.

RH: With Rita coming in, did anyone turn to you? Were there any thoughts in your mind about, oh my God, a second storm?

MS: I mean, we did stories about it. No, by that time, we were well beyond the "Oh my God" stand there. It was, "Another one? What's it going to do?" Actually, a lot of what I did in advance of that storm was to ensure that our reporters were placed in safe places as they were going to cover that. My role continues to be covering the science part of it as opposed to going and covering, you know, things falling down sort of junk. But at that point in time, the editors wanted a reporter to go to Lake Charles and be at the Lake Charles newspaper, where they had been promised space. I thought that was a bad idea because I knew that this was an equally large storm, that the storm surge would go up the Calcasieu River, and that Lake Charles would flood. I knew where the paper was, and I knew that was an area that was fairly low. It had a pretty good chance of flooding. Indeed, after I called the newspaper, I learned that I was going to have to do everything in my power to make sure the reporter was not there because, as it turned out, unlike our

paper, the presses of the Lake Charles paper were on the second floor, and the newsroom is on the first floor. So if you have flooding, number one, the newsroom would be flooded, and secondly, you had the potential of, if it were a catastrophic storm surge, that the presses would come down on the first floor. So, I basically called several editors late at night and said, "You will not do this. You cannot do this." As it turned out, it made no difference anyway because the newspaper evacuated and had no one at their paper and told our editors that they weren't going to go anyway. But that was another one of my little scary moments there.

RH: Was there a surge there in Lake Charles?

MS: Yeah.

RH: Did it go up to their second floor?

MS: It didn't go that high, but I think they had water on the first floor, where their newsroom was, so, yeah, it was a problem.

RH: There was a synagogue there that had trouble, too, I believe.

MS: I would imagine so. The area just south of there – Lake Charles is very well inland, but the area to the south of there, on Cameron Parish on the coast, was – I mean, it's gone. It was just wiped off.

RH: How did you keep yourself together? Do you have any –>

MS: Well, [laughter] here was this one night where we – I guess it was the night after the night after I got to Baton Rouge, when things were – by that point, things had pretty much built up, and everybody was pretty edgy. We just went out on the porch, a bunch of us,

of the dorm area and basically got drunk. [laughter] That was it. Beyond that, I don't know, things actually got even more crazy because, in the middle of all this, I made the agreement to write the book. So, I'm now not only doing work for the newspaper full time but in my non-spare time, I'm dealing with that.

RH: And when did that start?

MS: That started a week after the storm.

RH: Oh my God.

MS: Well, two weeks after, because it was when we had moved over to the temporary space. There was another thing that was going on as well, which was I was having some personal life problems as well, which was that my younger brother had been in an accident in Los Angeles; a car he was in exploded. He was burned over thirty percent of his body and was in an intensive care burn unit.

RH: Oh my God.

MS: I had just visited there before Katrina came in. At that point in time, I had this sort of relationship – his wife is Filipino, doesn't speak English absolutely well, shall we say. My brother's doctor would call me every couple of days when my brother was having a really bad day, and what would happen is that his temperature would spike, and then he'd start having heart problems and other things going on, so they were afraid that they would lose him several times. The doctor would call and say, "Can you please tell the wife that we don't think he's going to live through the night?" This is going on – I got about seven of these calls. The last three of them were while I was in Baton Rouge at the newsroom, working on these stories. So, that added a little more tension to what was going on. Strangely enough, added a bit of – I was able to place into perspective a little more what had happened to us. As bad as it is, there's worse.

RH: How did you communicate with the wife if the doctor couldn't communicate with the wife?

MS: She spoke English well. The problem was that the doctor didn't believe her when she would say, "I understand you. He's not going to die." She just knew that he wasn't going to die. He was very concerned that she just didn't understand what he was saying. It was almost a joke at the end where she would say, "Yes, Mark, I know what he told me." I said, "Yes, I know you know, but we need to go through this," and said, "Okay, fine." I could hear her say, "He told me. Okay, thank you," and that's how the conversation would end.

RH: Oh my God. And did he come into a zone where at least he was stabilized?

MS: Oh, it was a couple of months later, actually.

RH: Wow.

MS: Yeah, it was a while. He finally got stabilized at the ICU, and they then moved him into a nursing home situation, and then he finally got out. He's back home now. But it was a mess.

RH: Wow.

MS: Yeah.

RH: Sure was.

MS: Yeah.

RH: Is there anything in this period of time that surprised you? I mean, you're the science guy. You kind of knew a lot of things were happening.

MS: Yeah. I don't know that surprise would be the word, but disappointed me, probably. That was the response of the federal government to the storm in those first couple of days. That was very disappointing that they continued to make all these promises but did not respond adequately to deal with what was going on. Beyond that, no, not really. I mean, Katrina was a big storm; it was an interesting thing. Once you were able to get around what it actually did to people, it was a fascinating thing to look at. I don't know. Most of the stuff that I – I am so used to thinking about this in terms of my job and the reporting aspect of it, in terms of how I'm affected, it sort of gets a low thing on the totem pole.

RH: So, again, as a science writer, what was so fascinating about the storm?

MS: That it was so big. The way it blew up. The relationship between how the storm occurred and what it actually did, and the way it was perceived and/or used by the national media to talk about global warming, or emergency preparedness, or the Saints, or whatever. I found a lot of that to be fascinating. In terms of the hurricane itself, hurricanes are interesting characters; each one has its own personality. This one's personality was the way that it blew up when it was over the Central Gulf of Mexico and then held on to enough of its power to create that huge storm surge.

RH: Are they, in a way, a beautiful thing?

MS: Yeah. They can be visually beautiful. But, in a rather – well, I don't like –

RH: Force of nature. I guess I'm trying to get at something about that.

MS: I try desperately to avoid anthropogenic – making human – giving them human aspects.

RH: Like, "Katrina, you bitch." [laughter]

MS: Right, that sort of a thing.

RH: Which is the side of a lot of things.

MS: I am reminded of a conversation I had had with a woman who called me. I had done a story about Hurricane Lily in 2002. I had done a story explaining how Lily went from a category four to a category one in twelve hours as it was going ashore and thus became really not a horrendous hurricane as it came ashore in Western Louisiana. I got a call from a woman in the Lake Charles area who said, "You don't understand. We prayed to St. Jude, the patron saint of lost causes, and that's why the hurricane fell apart. Your writing about it this way makes it seem as if God had nothing to do with this." I said, "No, you misunderstand. All I'm doing is explaining how he did it." I see that as my role.

RH: Was she satisfied with that?

MS: No, of course not. [laughter] But I was. But that's one of the interesting things that I'm always trying to deal with, is explaining how these things occur and understanding where the hand of God in something like this is. Well, he's created the world, and He's created these forces, and He gives us free will with the understanding that these forces are here, and we have the free will of being here, or leaving, and that's the way things are.

RH: Were there other people who came to you and asked you, in your capacity as a Jewish man, about how could God do this? Did anybody ever –?

MS: I'm trying to think if anybody – no, I don't think so. It may have happened, but I don't know. A lot of conversations. [laughter]

RH: Did you make a Rosh Hashanah service? Were you able to?

MS: Yeah – actually, in Baton Rouge, I went to Rosh Hashanah services. Next door to Beth Shalom is a Baptist Church, and they allowed Beth Shalom to use it, so I went there for Rosh Hashanah. And Yom Kippur, I came back to New Orleans, and was back in the city, and so we had Yom Kippur services there in Shir Chadash, which had been – by that time, it had been mucked out by National Guardsmen.

RH: Because it flooded?

MS: Yeah. But it was clean enough that we could hold services there.

RH: Do you recall what that was like?

MS: It was touching. Again, the people who normally run the service who were still in town put it together as they could. I think we had someone who was a cantor who has some relationship with someone in the synagogue who came in and helped lead services, along with Will Samuels, who's held several roles at the synagogue, but he's a layman, is what it amounts to, but knows the services back and forth and everything else, and was in the choir, and was able to basically lead the service, act as rabbi for the service, that part of it. We got it done.

RH: That's a proud moment, huh?

MS: It was an accomplishment, yeah. It was something that nobody thought was going to happen. And it just got done.

RH: Why was it important?

MS: There were a lot of people who were in town, and we needed a service. It was important to get it done.

RH: Let's stop for a second. [Recording paused.] I generally end with a few questions, like, what are you most grateful for out of the past fifteen months?

MS: Wow. A couple of things. I'm happy that we survived and have been able to get through this with – we're in very good shape, comparatively speaking. We have the chance of being almost whole if things work right, despite everything. I'm happy that my kids are back in town and they've survived the economic disruption that they've gone through. In terms of the event itself, I'm happy that things are not worse than they are. And they could have been. That's the thing that a lot of people really don't understand about this. As bad as this is, there are significant things that could have been much worse. The death toll could have been much, much worse than it is, and that didn't happen largely because if there's one thing that did happen properly out of all this, it's that the evacuation worked. People got out. They got the message. I'd like to think I had a little bit to do with that. I don't know. I'm glad my synagogue survived, and I'm glad our congregation, for the most part, survived. We've lost a number of members, who've died, and we've also lost a significant chunk of our membership who've left the city because they don't have jobs or because they couldn't take living in post-Katrina New Orleans, or whatever.

RH: Do you have a sense of how large? The percentage?

MS: I'd say about a third.

RH: A third?

MS: About a third have left, and I haven't really done a census on how many people died. But a lot of our older members – a chunk – have died post-Katrina. We had one or two who died as a direct result of the storm and its immediate aftermath, but most of them have been elderly people who have died since the storm and who were not as well off after the storm for whatever reason.

RH: I just want to leave it open to you, at this point, to finish how you would like to, if there's anything you feel like you want to say right before we go here.

MS: Wow, I don't know. I really don't know what to say. I'm at a complete loss of words here.

RH: Okay, I'm going to ask you one more question.

MS: Okay, ask me another question.

RH: Because it's another question I ask a lot, which is, is there something that you've learned about yourself in the past fifteen months, about your capacity for different things?

MS: I've learned I have a huge capacity for pain. We didn't even mention this. In February, as everything is moving to a close, I'm having to get into the hard part of writing the book and doing a lot of reporting, I take three weeks off to work full-time on the book, and it happens to be the same time that we're moving into this house. In the move, I ended up hurting my back – ended up having to have emergency surgery on the back. I learned a lot about pain during that next week or so, which was fascinating. Also, I guess I've learned that it helps to have good friends who are able to help you out when you need help, and who are able to work with you, like on this book project, and are able to hold up what needs to be done to assist you as that's going through.

RH: Thanks a lot.

MS: Okay.

RH: I appreciate it.

[END OF INTERVIEW]