



# Sandy Levy Transcript

ROSALIND HINTON: Interviewing Sandy Katz Levy at 427 Millaudon in New Orleans, Louisiana. Today is Tuesday October 3rd, 2006. I'm conducting the interview for the Katrina's Jewish Voices project of the Jewish Women's Archive in the Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life. Sandy, do you agree to be interviewed and understand that the interview will be video recorded?

SANDY LEVY: Yes.

RH: OK, why don't we begin then just with tell me how your family came to be in New Orleans and a little of your family background. And I'd like to also know about your education here and both Jewish and I guess secular education, since you were Orthodox as I recall reading.

SL: I was raised Orthodox. Yes. Let's see. I was born in New Orleans. My mother was born in New Orleans. Her family came to New Orleans in around the turn of the century, the late 1890s. And her father came first and he was from Vilna, Poland. And then he made enough money to eventually send for his wife, my grandmother. And his name was Aaron Lay Paillet and her name was Rose Sofnas Paillet. She came over in steerage class with two children. She was desperately ill. They tagged her children so that if she died someone would take her children to their father. And miraculously she lived through the voyage. She came to New Orleans. She had four more children. She had six children altogether. My mother was the baby. My mother was her very late in life child. So and I was my mother's last child. So I was the baby in my family as well. My mother had considerably older brothers and sisters. My mother married my father in -- let's see. I'm trying to think. My mother is now 92 years old. She was born in 1914. She of course lived through the Depression.



RH: What's her name?

SL: Miriam Paillet Katz. Her family lived on Rampart Street. She grew up on Rampart Street. She remembers -- in fact for my mother's 80th birthday my gift to her was doing an oral history. And I wanted to make sure. She was the last really of the six brothers and sisters. And I wanted to make sure that we had a record of what her family had been through and what her history was in coming to New Orleans. And what her life was that she experienced living here. She met my father probably when she was 20 years old. So that would have been around 1934, '35 she was married. And they were married for I think probably short of around 55 years. My dad was from Columbus, Ohio. I discovered at a family reunion, at our first family reunion, which was in Columbus, Ohio, and I went to -- the Paillet family here in New Orleans is a very large family, very well established here. And when my cousins were organizing a family reunion, the genealogist was in Columbus, Ohio, I thought oh I'm going to Columbus, I'm going to meet all my mother's relatives and a lot of the family. And I get to the reunion and I had first cousins on my mother's side and I had first cousins on my father's side. So it took me about 60 seconds to figure out that I was related to myself. I was one of the only ones there who had a flower from each side of the family. And indeed and in fact my mother and father were not close cousins, but they were related. And when my father came to New Orleans on a visit he had relatives here. And because the Jewish community was certainly very segregated from -- it's not like today where we're a highly assimilated society and community. But then it was very segregated. So if you wanted to meet a nice Jewish girl they might introduce you to somebody who was your relative. And lucky for us it wasn't a really close relative. But my mother and father married. I was the one who realized you had to have been related at some part of the way, because otherwise I could not possibly have first cousins on the Katz side of my family, my father's name is Benjamin Goodwin Katz and he was from Columbus. After my mother and father got married they lived in Columbus, Ohio probably until right after the war. My mother really hated the cold winters and she really longed for her family in New Orleans. So my father agreed. They



moved back to New Orleans. My brothers were both born in Columbus, Ohio. I have a brother named Allan who is a journalist. And my brother Ron is deceased and he was an architect and urban designer. And he died at 46 years old. He died of AIDS. And miss him terribly every day. I was very close to both of my brothers and still remain extremely close to my brother Allan. My parents came back here. I was born in 1947. And they lived on -- they built a house -- they lived on Versailles Boulevard with my grandmother. And then they built a house on Joseph Street. And I grew up on Joseph Street across from Fortier High School. I went to all public schools. I went to Allen School. I went to McMain. And then I went to Benjamin Franklin, which was -- it had been around I guess for about five or six years, maybe seven. But it was a gifted high school. And at the time I went to high school you had to have an 85 average to pass. So fortunately for me I somehow eked out a high 80s average and I managed to pass and graduate from there. Two thirds of my enrolling class in the tenth grade did not keep the average. So those of us who graduated were automatically in the top third of our class. I wound up going to the University of Arizona and I got a Bachelor of Science in Public Administration. And it turned -- I was interested in not staying home at that time. I really felt like it would probably be good -- I was a child who grew up -- I grew up in an Orthodox family. My father owned a kosher food store. My mother was an entrepreneur in an age when women really were not that. She owned a maternity and children's business with my aunt. I grew up working on Saturdays in my mother's store. So I learned the retail business. I started in the sock department, moved my way up. And worked in the summers and spent Saturdays.

RH: What's the name of the shop--

SL: It was called Maternity and Baby Lane and it was on South Carrollton and Earhart. And my father's store was on Louisiana Avenue and Baronne.

RH: And what was it called?



SL: Katz's Kosher Foods or Katz's Fine Foods, something like that, I believe that was the name of it. And as I remember we had a really -- a very strong family life. We had Shabbat dinners every Friday night. We invited guests over and we had family over. So that was a real -- that was an imprint on me. Because when I married and I had a family that was very important to me, that if we didn't go to my mother's, until my mother stopped having Friday night dinners, there was a transition time when it became easier to come here, when my kids were little. And then I started having the Friday night dinners. And I'm always reminded of the scene, I think it's the scene in the book, *The Diary of Anne Frank*, when she says she longed for those Friday night dinners, those times when the family was together. And I always think about how binding those memories of those Friday night dinners are. And the time that we spent together. And my children really knew that unless there was something extremely compelling they were really expected to be at Friday night dinners. But they could always invite a friend over. They could always go to a movie after dinner or watch television or do something else or spend the night out, but the dinners were important. And that also brings back a memory. I recently had -- I don't know, I hate to say it, I think it was probably a 40th high school reunion, and one of my friends, someone that I knew in high school, wrote me a note and said that she had come to my house for Friday night dinner and her family was having a lot of problems, and it was very special to her to come to a Friday night dinner, and it's one of those things that I just simply took for granted, but it didn't happen in everybody's house. And I think that even though my kids went to a private school and they were certainly among children who were more privileged, more financially -- I don't know if you want to -- more financially privileged than they were, I don't think that all those kids actually had dinners with their families on a regular basis. I think that -- but besides the Friday night dinner, dinner was always important, that we all gather together. It was a time -- I worked from the time basically that I got married and I'm still working to this day. So it was important to me that it was a time that we could all be together. I went to the University of Arizona, graduated with a Bachelor of Science in Public Administration. I came back home. I



dated someone when I was in college. And I really didn't feel like I wanted to stay out west and I didn't want to go move to a strange place. I really had missed my family a lot. I came back to New Orleans. I had dated the person that I later married. I was married in 1970 to Bruce Levy, who was studying architecture at Tulane University. I went to work for the city of New Orleans. I had a career with the city until 1991. I rose rather quickly in city government and became the federal programs administrator in really probably about two years after I went to work for the city. And I used to write grants and get federal money for the city under Mayor Moon Landrieu. And ultimately I became the director of the Historic District Landmarks Commission. Moon Landrieu said that if I could pass the ordinance for that department and get it created that I could be the director of it. They were looking for someone who was neither a dyed in the wool preservationist nor someone who was totally allied with the business community. And I think I probably represented something in the middle. So I was very fortunate. They appointed me the director. Well, they appointed me to the position to become the director. I worked with the City Council. I got the ordinance passed. I was the director of that agency from 1975 until 1991. I worked there for 16 years. I retired from that position but I didn't retire from --

RH: Explain exactly what you did in that position.

SL: What I did? Well, I did several things. As the director I worked and developed legislation, got it passed through the City Council. Then I hired a staff. We regulated the exteriors of buildings in the Lower Garden District and on Saint Charles Avenue between Jenna and -- I'm trying to think how far up the avenue -- and Jackson, Jackson Avenue. We also had the Lower Garden District. We regulated the exterior of those buildings. We were successful, and later I became the director of the Central Business District Historic District Landmarks Commission, which also was staffed by me. They let me add one or two staff people. I don't think I ever had a full staff complement, but we worked really hard. We won over the hearts and minds of the City Council. When the ordinance



was established the councilmen admonished me. It was like a five-to-two vote or maybe a six-to-one vote, maybe it was six-to-one, but I remember being admonished and saying if you don't do this right we can call this ordinance up again and really disassemble this organization. And so with that in mind I knew that I had to build a coalition and a coalition of support. And I worked really well with the preservation community. I also worked with the business community. Preservation does not have to be bad for business. It can be good for business. And managed growth is very important. Historic preservation is extraordinarily important. I used to always say that tourists do not come to see the skyscrapers. They can stay home and see those. They come to see our neighborhoods. Until Katrina we had one of the most incredible historic housing stocks in the country. And it breaks my heart, because although the uptown area and many of the historic areas were spared, there were other areas that had houses and structures that really contributed to the scene. And I think that a lot of those buildings are going to be unable to be salvaged. I'm glad that the preservationists will be having a role in making recommendations about buildings to be torn down. But there are going to be a lot of buildings that are not going to be able to be saved. And I saw that Victorian building go down on -- let's see, it's Melpomene and Saint Charles. And it was the last of its kind really. And it's tragic because once the building goes it goes. I have to tell you that my most searing memory, and there were many, and passing the ordinance was exhilarating, and then passing the CBD ordinance was exhilarating. But shortly after we passed the New Orleans Landmarks Commission ordinance we landmarked what was the old Temple Sinai on Carondelet Street. And I went down and I registered the landmark, the address of the building. We suspected that the building was going to be demolished. And so we got it. If you landmarked a building, if you nominated it for landmarking, it was as if you had landmarked it. So we were trying to protect and preserve that building. And I remember somebody called me and said they're tearing down -- I think it was probably Jack Stewart, because he was always a watchdog over those buildings, and he still is. I think that he called me and said Sandy they're tearing



down the building, and if I became the director in '75 this was probably like right after. It was like in 1976. And I went down to the building. As a child, when I was six months old I had polio. So it left me with a limp, a noticeable limp, and it affected my right leg. So it wasn't all that easy for me to go up the stairs. But I managed to go all the way up the stairs to the top of the building to the rooftop of the building, which is where the demolition contractor was. And I remember his name, because his name was Luis Velez, and somehow or other there was a television station that found out about that we were going over there. So they were there. And I told Mr. Velez, I said you cannot demolish this building, I'm putting a stop work order on it. It was all very dramatic. And it was all captured on the news. And I think I was completely out of breath probably by the time I got up the stairs of what was then probably a three- or four-story building. But I managed to do that. I found out -- I did try to dissuade the owner of the building, Mr. Besthoff, from tearing the building down. Because I found out that to my chagrin he had taken out a demolition permit according to the Safety and Permits Department before I had gotten a chance to landmark it. Or we had a different address than he had and whatever. The upshot was that the city was going to give him a demolition permit. So the only thing that I could do was really talk to him and say please don't, I think you're going to be sorry that you did this. If you could just leave the shell of the building, demolish the inside of it, park cars inside, you'll never be able to bring this building back once -- and it was a magnificent Byzantine building in the way that temples were built in the 1870s. And it was very much a landmark. And in fact gosh I can't remember the name of the person but -- his name is Bottinelli. He's a plumber. He actually took the turrets when they demolished the building. Obviously I was not successful and the building came down. And but Mr. Bottinelli took the turrets from the building and he placed those turrets behind the Jewish cemetery. He had a plumbing business on Bottinelli Place, which is off of Canal Street. And there's a Jewish cemetery there and whenever I go to that cemetery, which is where my grandparents are buried on my mother's side, I look at those turrets. And it is pretty heartbreaking. I think that for



whatever reason -- and when Temple Sinai built the new Temple Sinai -- and I do have to tell you it is a magnificent building. And there was a small constituency, I remember the Rabbi at the time of Temple Sinai was Rabbi Blackman. Moise Steeg, who was a past president of Temple Sinai, and is really a historian of Temple Sinai, he's now 90 years old. I called him and tried to garner some support for preserving the building. But in fact I don't think there was a real outcry in the Jewish community, don't do this. I think that there would be now. But I don't think that there was. I think preservation in New Orleans, although it had been a force in this community since the days of the Vieux Carré Commission being established in the '30s, and Vieux Carré is the second oldest historic district in the country, so we do have a legacy. But I think that when Jews left a synagogue they really -- they left it. And that's actually happened with Beth Israel. That happened with the old Chevra Thilim, probably happened with wherever Touro was in the beginning, that we didn't retain ownership of the building and we therefore did not retain the history of the building. We left that to someone else, whoever the private owner was, and in many cases the private owner really ultimately was not necessarily interested in preserving that history for us. So that always -- I always felt really badly about losing that building, because I really felt like that was a piece of the fabric of the Jewish community here. And I certainly did not in 1976 ever expect to be the president of Temple Sinai, which I am today, and I'm very proud to be that. And still I really regret that that happened, as much because of the history of Temple Sinai as I feel about the architecture of the building. That it was a real tour de force in terms of synagogue architecture at its time. As is the current Temple Sinai on Saint Charles Avenue, which is a magnificent facility, and I certainly understand that they left that one to move uptown and build this new building, and I think wisely so. Our forebears did the right thing when they did that. It's just a shame that we couldn't preserve that other piece.

RH: Tell me, Temple Sinai when you were growing up was not your temple.





SL: It was not. I went to Beth Israel. My parents belonged to Chevra Thilim, which at that time was Orthodox. And I remember going to Chevra Thilim. I remember the separate seating. It's very interesting because someone whose parents were very good friends with my parents, she is now the Director of Temple Sinai and I am the President, and we both grew up at Chevra Thilim, both grew up as Orthodox Jews. And I went to Chevra Thilim for Sunday school for a while, certainly grew up with Young Judaea, grew up with B'nai B'rith Girls and BBYO. And I went to Beth Israel later because they didn't have much of a Sunday school at Chevra Thilim. They didn't have a lot of young people there, children. So I wound up going to Beth Israel, which was also Orthodox. It was on Carondelet Street. And I was in fact confirmed there. And they also had separate seating. I remember that very distinctly. And I discovered Reform Judaism when I married Bruce Levy and his family had belonged to Temple Sinai for many generations. They had come to New Orleans in the early 1800s or the mid 1800s. So his family had been here from Alsace-Lorraine. And I fell in love with Reform Judaism. I had not had a Bat Mitzvah. My parents had wanted me to, but I was the only girl on the Hebrew school bus and I was teased relentlessly by the boys, teased about everything. And I cried when I went home every day from Hebrew school. And my parents finally gave in and said OK you don't have to go. What they didn't do is they didn't say but we think it would be good for you to have a Bat Mitzvah. So why don't you get tutored at home, since you can't stand the teasing that the boys are doing, let's just -- you don't have to go on the bus ride and endure all that, and I certainly had enough issues about being teased. I had enough things that people could tease me about. Having had polio I no longer -- I think when I got past kindergarten or first grade I didn't have to wear a brace anymore but for a long time I was really different than other kids. And of course even when I didn't wear a brace I was different. So I was always very sensitive to the teasing aspect. And to this day I really wish that my parents had said but we can get you a tutor. So of course I didn't make that mistake when I had children. I actually didn't want them to get turned off at Hebrew school so I never sent them to Hebrew school. I just got a tutor. And my kids



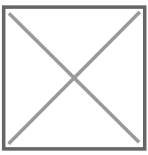
were raised as Reform Jews. I have a daughter Lauren and a son Jonathan. And I got a college student to tutor Lauren, who could also be a role model for her, so that she could see that you could be cool and be Jewish and have a Bat Mitzvah. And for Jonathan this wonderful wonderful person came into our lives and tutored Jonathan, and he was a second -- yeah I think he's either first or second year medical school student. And he did it as a mitzvah and he wouldn't even take any money for it. And he became a role model for Jonathan and in fact he took Jonathan -- I'm jumping around. But he took Jonathan on his first trip to Philadelphia. Adam went to the Naval Academy on a scholarship and went to Tulane through a Naval scholarship to the medical school. And he really became very attached to Jonathan. He was like a big brother to him. And probably when Jonathan was 14 he said why don't we go to an Army-Navy game. And he asked me if I would send Jonathan. I said absolutely. So they went to Philadelphia. Jonathan went to the campus of the University of Pennsylvania, fell in love with it, matriculated at Wharton, which is where he is today and is a senior, so some good things have happened. I really -- yeah I fell in love with Reform Judaism. I really should get back to that.

RH: Tell me what that means, falling in love with it.

SL: Because there was so much that was English. It wasn't all Hebrew. It wasn't things that I didn't understand. It wasn't basically -- it really wasn't run by men who were davening. There was a real place for women. Although Temple Sinai --

RH: So as a child do you remember the davening and that you felt it was really a man's world?

SL: Oh I thought that it was because women had to sit in a separate spot and I remember that my mother didn't read Hebrew, she didn't know what they were doing, she didn't know what they were saying, she was just very -- if you ask my father he didn't really know exactly what he was saying, but he knew the Hebrew prayers. He was really schooled in Hebrew. Whereas my mother really was not. So there wasn't anything that



she was -- and to just read the English when the congregation wasn't reading English, they were all reading Hebrew, and there was no transliteration. So you really couldn't participate. There wasn't a real -- I always felt like it was somebody else's. It belonged to somebody else. And I really -- I didn't like the -- I don't think that I realized how much I didn't like the disorganization or the disunity until I got into a Reform congregation where people prayed together, like they read English together.

RH: Oh interesting, yeah.

SL: Some of the Hebrew that I knew, certainly something had rubbed off on me, and the songs that I knew, I could know that. But I could also have a service in English and --

RH: So when you say disunity, what exactly do you mean?

SL: What do I mean? I mean that everybody, when my dad or -- would be at synagogue and he'd be praying there'd be maybe 100 men standing up. But each one was saying it in his own time. They were davening individually. And then one would sit down. And other people you would hear this -- whatever they were saying, but they were all saying it at a different speed. And I'm sure that that works for a lot of people. And I don't mean to say -- I'm not making a judgment against anybody who practices that. I'm just saying that for me it just didn't -- it wasn't a good fit. I learned a lot. I certainly -- there were lessons that I took with me about -- certainly I understand kashrut, I could practice it if I wanted to. And I certainly can do kosher affairs and really understand all of that. But I really felt like a whole world opened up to me. The possibilities, and the possibilities actually of leadership. And I think that that was all very -- little did I know that I would wind up -- I served on the Temple Sinai Board, I probably went on the Board in the early '70s. And it was early in my life for me. I hadn't done enough. And I was on the Board, but I went off -- I was on the board for however long you could stay. If it was four years or six years. And I certainly enjoyed my service. But I was too young. I was in my mid 20s. And I was too young to really go to some other level. But later in my life when I was in my 40s I



was brought back on the Board. And then I was elevated to the Executive Committee. And I was privileged and given really the sacred honor of becoming the President, and I really want to say that I also am most grateful to my Jewish Endowment Foundation board, because I'm the director of the endowment. I'm sure that I'm one of the few people in the country who could direct a Jewish organization and be the president of a temple at the same time. And my endowment has been wonderful to me. My Temple Sinai board has been terrific. Because I just -- we don't allow for conflicts there. I don't really -- I do not do specific fundraising for Temple Sinai, I leave that to other people. But I do do the leadership and the administration. And it's been a challenge, because I became what I would call the Katrina president. So but I should probably just get back to my life. I was --

RH: What I'm actually curious about is since we brought up the Foundation, why don't you explain to me --

SL: When did I go to work there?

RH: Yeah, not only when you went to work but explain exactly the role of the Foundation within the New Orleans Jewish community.

SL: Well, let me just first say that in 1976 when I was still employed with the city -- or by the city -- in 1991 rather, I was still employed by the city. Helen Mervis, who was a family friend, was the director of the Jewish Endowment Foundation. I kind of knew what it was, but I'd never been -- I don't think I had been to a Jewish Endowment Foundation event. And if I had it would have only been to one. I was like at that time I was in my 40s. I've been the director now 15 years. So I would have been 44 when I became director there. And they were looking for a director. And I have a friend Ruth Kullman, who was with Federation. And she's now the president of Touro Synagogue. And I said to Ruth -- she was the Campaign Associate for Federation. And I said are you going to apply for that job. And she said -- of Jewish Endowment Foundation director. And she said no. And I



said well I was thinking about it but I don't really know too much about it. I don't know exactly what's involved. She said well I think it might be an interesting job for you, Sandy, and I'm not going to apply, so feel free, because I didn't want to apply if she was going to apply for it, and so I wound up submitting my resume. I knew nothing about endowment. I'm not an attorney. My bachelor's degree is in public administration. But they obviously saw something in me that they thought would be positive. I wound up -- I was told that I could learn about endowment but that I knew a lot about the Jewish community, having been raised -- so here's the benefit. Having been raised Orthodox and then becoming involved with the Reform community, marrying into a family that had been here a very long time, I knew a lot of people. And I didn't know everybody but I did know a lot of people. And I feel like those that I didn't know I think I've come to know. And it has been an incredible experience. The Jewish Endowment Foundation is the repository of funds for the Jewish community. What I do is I'm the administrator for it, but I'm also the development person. And we do planned giving. We do not do an annual campaign. We do end-of-lifetime gifts or lifetime gifts. You can do something with us during your lifetime or you can leave a bequest. But we're really not talking about -- we're not trying to raise \$100,000 in 2006. What we're really talking about is raising millions of dollars ultimately for the benefit of the Jewish community. And when I came to JEF 15 years ago we probably -- think we had about \$8.5 million under management. And I believe that our general fund was probably at about \$1.5 million. And we now have about \$34 million under management and we have about \$5 million, \$5.5 million in our General Fund.

RH: When you say General Fund, is that what you have --

SL: That's money that belongs to us. When I say to us, that belongs to the Jewish Endowment Foundation to do with as it will. The money that does not belong to us is money that belongs in our donor-advised and designated funds and supporting foundations. And that money is either available for donors to designate how they want



gifts given or someone may leave instructions how they want a fund to be managed. If you, for instance, wanted to leave a fund to benefit Federation and endow your Federation gift you would do that through me. And that's -- if you want to endow a Lion of Judah you do that through me. And we have had during my tenure we've had a family that has given over \$1 million to the general fund. I've had several \$1 million donor-advised funds open -- well one \$1 million donor-advised fund, another designated fund for over \$1 million. There've been -- we have had a steady rise in both the number of funds and the amount of money under management. And I'm very appreciative. I have a very devoted Board. The Jewish community here is a very assimilated Jewish community. Which presents some challenges, because some of those Jewish members may want to also open a fund at the Greater New Orleans Foundation.

RH: About to ask.

SL: And so we are -- but what I hope that people will do is I hope that they will open -- if you're going to open one at the Jewish -- at the Greater New Orleans Foundation I hope that if they're Jewish they will open one with us. Because only Jews for the most -- for 99% of the time only Jews are going to open endowment funds with JEF. Whereas the Greater New Orleans Foundation has both Jews and non-Jews and they can have everybody in the community. So for the benefit of our organizations and the lifeline of the Jewish community it's really important that people -- that Jews look to us. I don't -- they certainly don't need to exclusively look to us, but I think the other thing that we do is if someone opens a donor-advised fund with us, if I have the Sandra K. Levy Donor-Advised Fund at the Jewish Endowment Foundation, when I make a donation to the University of Arizona or Tulane University or to the United Way the check comes from the Jewish Endowment Foundation. So there is a Jewish face and a Jewish name on that philanthropy. And I think that that's very important too. We in New Orleans have such an incredible and rich history of philanthropy in the Jewish community, whether it was Isaac Delgado or the Goldrings today, the Rosenblums, Judah Touro, these are just all names



of people who have been incredible philanthropists for this whole community, not just for the Jewish community, but for the whole community. And they're really -- they're legends. And the Woldenbergs. Name is on Woldenberg Park. The Goldrings' name is on many institutions. And Isaac Delgado's name is no longer on the Museum of Art, but those of us who remember know that Isaac Delgado was a Sephardic Jew and he left that money and left that magnificent building. And we have to be indebted to so many Jewish philanthropists in this community. And I'm very proud that we continue that legacy today.

RH: It seems to me you're at a wonderfully interesting place at the crossroads of the civic community of New Orleans and the Jewish community. And are there any other things you can talk about that you feel that are special about this New Orleans community and how it interfaces with the larger city of New Orleans?

SL: Oh I think that we really interface incredibly well. I think that we have real leadership in our New Orleans Jewish community that transcends the Jewish community. Several of the Times-Picayune Loving Cup winners have been Jews. I can't think of all the names of those. But the one that's most recent that I really remember that's really a very dear friend is Moise Steeg, who is just a brilliant attorney. But he not only is a mentor and a contributor to Temple Sinai and other Jewish charities, but he has given generously to the wider community. And he's not the -- I get to see, because I see the checks that people write through their philanthropic funds, I get to see what kind of an impact we have on the greater New Orleans community. And the Jewish Endowment Foundation through its donors might have sent out almost \$2 million worth of checks last year. Many of those checks went to non-Jewish charities. And so you have to say where would some of the schools be, the McGehees, the Newmans, the Country Days, without these Jewish donors who become major donors to these educational institutions. And it's not just for the -- and it's not just to a day school. It is to a general school and it benefits so many. I see it with the SPCA. I see it with United Way. We become -- the Jews in



this community become the chairs and the presidents of not-for-profits and civic organizations. And we take a very strong place in the greater New Orleans community. We have -- right now we have an elected political leader, Arnie Fielkow. Previously Frank Friedler was a City Councilman at another time. I think that those Jews who may not be elected officials are certainly -- they are involved with elected officials. I think we have a real impact on the political system as well here in the city of New Orleans.

RH: Why don't we get into this story, your Katrina story, because in some ways I'm so interested in how your role as temple leader and everything plays in after the storm. So why don't you tell me about Katrina for you, when it first comes on your personal radar screen and --

SL: OK, I guess that -- and I don't know whether I need to just back up a step and just say that I have two children. I became divorced in 2002 and so then I became a single parent. I have two children. I have Lauren who is now 26 and lives in Los Angeles and she's a creative executive at Miramax Films. And my son Jonathan's a senior at the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania. And I think that what I really want to express there is that I am a mother, I'm a daughter, I'm very blessed, my mother is still with me, she's 92 years old. I have a brother who lives here. So we're a very small nuclear family but we're very close. And I can get to Katrina from that, somewhat from that vantage point. I really left work on Friday and wasn't paying a huge amount of attention to the storm. I knew that somebody said there's a storm that looks like it's in the Gulf. And I don't think it was really headed directly toward New Orleans on Friday. I don't remember but I don't remember, maybe I was just so involved with something in my office that I really wasn't paying attention. Well, I think on Saturday one of my employees at my office, I think it was Ellen said she was going to go by the office, she was going to do backup. We always do backup, but she was going to go do more backup. She wanted to just make sure that she had the flash drive and Doris -- maybe they had done this on Friday -- had -- we had these flash drives that they wear around their neck. And





that later became very important in this whole scenario. But I had staff that went to the office. I didn't go to the office. I remember not going to the office. I remember Saturday, saying ooh, this doesn't look -- sound so good. And Rabbi Cohn called me and he said where are you going, where are you evacuating. And I said I never even thought about -- I hadn't gotten to that point. Whatever I was doing, I was -- oh I know what it was. For August 28th, for Sunday the 28th, we had planned a -- we have something called B'nai Maimonides. And we had planned a get-together with our 13-year-old Bar and Bat Mitzvahs who belong to B'nai Maimonides. And we were having a get-together to help them decide where to distribute some of their charity money. So I was thinking about that. I wasn't thinking about the stupid hurricane. I was thinking about my B'nai Maimonides program and that it was -- where I was going to go to pick up different snacks, or I had somebody that was an employee, a contract employee, she was going to pick up snacks. And we were thinking about it. Then she called me on Saturday. She says I don't think we're going to have this, because this storm doesn't look so good. And so I said -- I was -- then I looked at the news and said ooh I think you're right, we're going to have to call it off. So we called it all off because we were figuring, well, who's going to come. Well, and Rabbi Cohn wanted to know where I was going. And I said I don't know. And he said well I -- he had made a reservation in Jackson, Mississippi at the Hilton and he had made an extra room. I guess he had a feeling that I probably would not have made a plan. That I might not have made a plan. So I called my brother. We started talking. And he said yeah I think we do have to leave. This does not -- we didn't wait for the mayor to give the final word, but he said I think this really doesn't look good, Sandy, and I think that we are going to wind up needing to leave. Well things started escalating. And then I called my mother, and my mother, who worries if there's a really strong rainfall, she'll say you shouldn't be driving, Sandy, all of a sudden this major hurricane is in the Gulf and could be coming to New Orleans and she's saying do you think we really have to leave. And I said yeah Mom, I think we really have to leave. I said I don't think we really want to ride this out. And the year before we had left for Ivan.



It had taken us 13 hours to get to Baton Rouge from New Orleans because contraflow didn't work. Nothing worked. So we swore that we would probably never do that again, because it was such a nightmare. But then we started looking at the size of this hurricane and thinking maybe we need to really go. And they're talking about contraflow working and you're starting to see that people are getting their houses ready. I'm a single -- my kids weren't here. I didn't have anybody to help me get my house ready. I remember my son calling me at probably 10:00 on Saturday night. And he said what time are you all leaving. I said well I think we're going to leave at like 6:00 in the morning. We're going to get up Sunday morning and leave at 6:00 in the morning. And I remember Jonathan saying you can't wait that long, Mom. He had been watching the television. My kids were getting very anxious. But he said you just can't do that. You are going to get stuck in traffic. You need to call Uncle Allan, you need to call Grandma, and you need to tell them that they have to get to your house by 3:00 in the morning and you all just have to get on the road. And I said to Jonathan, I said oh I hate to wake Uncle Allan up. He says I'm going to wake him up. And then he woke my mother. I talked to my mother. And they came and left their cars in my driveway and we took my car.

RH: So where was your mother living? She lives on her own?

SL: My mother and my brother both lived in what was a condominium arrangement from them on Bellaire Drive, which was five blocks from the 17th Street Canal. So I have to tell you that there was no way that anybody ever anticipated. We knew this would be a bad hurricane, we expected to lose power, electricity, we thought we'd have trees down and hurricane damage. I don't think anybody could have ever guessed the magnitude of this storm. I remember my mother -- God bless -- I brought a jar of peanut butter and some bread. And brought -- oh and I have a puppy dog. I had a Maltese terrier named Sugar. And Sugar had a heart defect. She had had an atrial tear and she had been doing just fine for over a year. But taking Sugar you had to take her medicine, her



special food. And Sugar was definitely a pampered puppy dog. And so anyway so it was packing up Sugar's stuff to take with her. And packing up enough food for a couple of days. We thought we'd be gone probably four or five days. Because I didn't want to -- the one thing I don't want to do is come home and not have air conditioning and refrigeration. You just don't want to do that. But little did we know. But my mother, being a wonderful Jewish mother, she packed salami, she's got corned beef, she's cleaned out her freezer, she's got smoked salmon. What she doesn't have would be her jewelry, which she left in her house, for -- she put it all in a box, and instead of putting the box in her travel bag she just figured it'd be just like every other time. We'd be gone three days, two days, whatever, we'd come back, everything would be OK. She put it in a box in her closet. And closed the closet door. But had it all in one location. We never thought to take any photographs or anything like that. We left. It didn't take us that long to get to Jackson. My brother and my mother both left their cars here. Because I had a covered carport. They had a driveway, but it wasn't covered. So I said leave your cars here, we're all going to take my car, that way yours will be under a covered carport. And they did that, and actually that's the only thing that saved their cars from -- because otherwise their cars would have flooded out. Flooded out -- they would have been up against a tree somewhere, like other people's cars were. So their cars were left here. Drove to Jackson. The three of us and the puppy dog stayed in one room because that's all you could get. They didn't have another room that first night. The second night another room opened -- oh, and it was on the 11th floor, and my puppy dog discovered that she was terrified of elevators. She had never been on one. So I didn't know she was terrified of elevators. But I figured that out. And not wanting to terrify the puppy dog, after a fashion, I really just hated to take her out, because it was just so traumatic for her. So besides everything else that was going on and not knowing what the storm, and watching the news and say OK well the storm hits here, this is going to be bad, or if it hits here it's going to -- it didn't look good. So that was another worry. And then remember taking -- having to go down those flights of stairs once to take Sugar out. And then go back up.



And thank God, the next day they had a room on the second floor. And we took that room. The problem -- and my brother stayed on the 11th floor. We went, my mother and I went, to the second floor. So I didn't have so far to walk. And by the second day in Jackson we did not at that time know that the levees had broken. I don't believe that we did. I don't think that -- they broke Tuesday morning. And this was still Monday. Because the hurricane went through New Orleans. And I remember that we heard it was bad, but the city was going to be OK. That it had gone slightly to the side of us or -- it wasn't a direct hit. And it was on the better side for us. So we all were breathing a sigh of relief. And I remember being in the hotel and by Monday evening -- I guess it was Monday evening, the storm came through New Orleans and Monday -- I mean through Jackson -- or Monday afternoon, it came through Jackson. Knocked out all the electricity. The rain starts pouring through. It was like Hotel Rwanda. There was no -- when the electricity went out -- and this is a Hilton Hotel, when the electricity went out the toilet stopped flushing, there was no running water. It was a nightmare. By Tuesday morning people were just -- all you could do was say get me out of here. I don't know -- everybody was packing up and leaving. Nobody could stand it to be there anymore. Because we had all gone through Monday night. And then you start thinking about what people who stayed here for the hurricane, we were upset because we were living in those circumstances for 24 hours, and people here were living in so much more dire circumstances for days. And I think that we began to -- it was only afterwards -- when I say afterwards, it was after you saw the story evolving that you realized that we in fact were among the very lucky ones. Because we had a place with a roof over our head. The next morning, that Tuesday morning, I took Rabbi Cohn to one hotel and my brother to another one to see if we couldn't find a hotel that still had not -- every place in Jackson lost electricity, but our side lost electricity. Amazingly, Rabbi Cohn was able to get three rooms at the Days Inn, and there was running water, you could go to the bathroom, you could take a bath, there was air conditioning and there was television. And then we were just glued to the television. And it was so horrible. It was -- I couldn't -- you couldn't tell

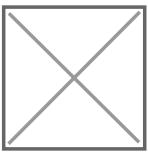


whether uptown, whether this house was going to have water, but you knew that my mother's house, once they said the 17th Street Canal broke you just knew that her house. She lived downstairs. My brother lived upstairs. You knew that her house was not going to be salvageable. Well, when I say -- nothing in her house would be salvageable. The outside of her house might be OK but there was not -- everything that she had was going to be gone. And it was very hard. I think that she kept on hoping that there would be things to save. It'd be hard to imagine that all of a sudden you could literally lose everything. And I think the reality of that, the tears, I think we were all very numb to it. I think and then the magnitude of the devastation, and then seeing what happened in the sea of humanity that was left here, and that this was really a place in the United States, and that people weren't being rescued, that nobody that -- Harry Connick could wind up at the foot of the Convention Center giving an interview but the Army couldn't get there. And no Navy helicopters, no nothing, to get to these people and give them food and water. So I think our hearts were broken. And our hearts were broken for ourselves and for the people that were stranded here. And really I think for the soul of the city. Because I think that we all knew that it probably would never be what it was before again. It would -- we weren't even sure then. Mayor Nagin was saying it could be six months till you can get back to the city. People were being raped in the Superdome. People were being shot. And a lot of that turned out -- can we take a break? Let me undo this.

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RH: And Sandy, I was very interested, and you were talking about how you were just numb and glued to the TV and watching what was going on. Were you able to cry? Did you -- or were you numb? How did that --

SL: No, I think that I did cry. I think that it was interesting. I think that I felt like I needed to be strong for my mother, because at some point Jonathan, my son, had gone on the



Internet and could see that my roof looked pretty intact. In fact, I had put a new roof on this house literally three weeks before Katrina. Probably four weeks. I needed to do some repairs to the roof. The roof really needed to be replaced. I found somebody that would replace the roof and I just went ahead and did it. And PS, I had hurricane damage here at my house, but I did not have flood. I didn't have any flooding. So I really was one of the very lucky few. I really count my blessings. But I really felt like I needed to be strong for my mother. But I think that the part -- I think that I was so overcome by the magnitude and by the suffering that on the one -- I felt like I was crying on the inside even if I wasn't crying on the outside. I think that I was so unbelievably shocked by what I was seeing. And what seemed to be the complete failure and breakdown of government. There was the personal loss, the terrible personal loss, but then there was this human loss. Then there was this loss that just seemed to be ongoing, because I didn't think that it wasn't that somebody didn't care, I thought the American community really did care, I think they were embarrassed along with everybody, I was embarrassed, but of course it was happening to our community. So it was much more personal than just being embarrassed but I don't think that you could be an American and not be embarrassed by the failure of government at every level. I thought poorly of Nagin. I thought poorly of the Governor. I thought poorly of the President. And I felt like this is more than a local or a state level problem, this is a national problem. And where is the national government? If the first thing is to protect the people, we certainly weren't feeling very protected. And I can't remember exactly. I remember that we stayed in Jackson. I think Rabbi Cohn and his wife Andrea, who we're very close to, and we shared more Popeye's chicken than I think we ever want to eat again in our lives. And we're happy to have Popeye's chicken. In Jackson a lot of places closed down. Because of the storm. And you had to ration gasoline in Jackson. You had to ration ice in Jackson. We didn't have -- we realized we didn't have clothes to last us. So we had to do some shopping in Jackson. When it became evident that we weren't coming back home any time soon. The mayor's talking about we could be gone for six months, the city's totally flooded, he doesn't know when



the water's going to come out. It just -- and all the stories were very jumbled, it was very hard to get any kind of really clear and concise information. So we were in Jackson at the Days Inn. And eventually we knew that we weren't going to be able to stay there. That we would be moving on. I had -- the Jewish Endowment Foundation holds the Baton Rouge Federation's endowment, and I have a board member from Baton Rouge, Marc Hirsch. And I was able to get in touch with him. I was not -- I actually -- oh and this is the other terrifying thing that I had to do, and I really -- this is a humorous thing actually. I had to go out and buy a laptop computer and I had to figure out how to get it to work all by myself, which was really terrifying. My son always does all that stuff for me or I have somebody in my office who is a technical person. But I am the nontechnical person. Somehow or other, I asked people that were just walking through the lobby of the Days Inn if they knew how to help. And nobody could really help. So then I had to actually do the thing where you dial the 1-800 number and you tell them I know nothing about what I'm doing, you have to walk me through this and help me figure out how to do -- and the other thing I think that was -- is that my kids couldn't get through to us. The cell phone lines were all down. And what we found out is that if the cell phone towers were down in New Orleans they were the same cell phone towers that worked in Jackson. So no one could get in on our cell phone. I couldn't call out and my kids couldn't get us. But they knew that we were in Jackson. They knew that we were at the Hilton. They did not know that we had moved to the Days Inn. I wound up going to the drugstore and figuring out that if we bought phone cards that we could call out from the hotel. And I could get to my kids to let them know that we were OK. And they could get to relatives and we could start. I went through a lot of phone cards.

RH: So you were contacting who? You were trying to find your -- let your kids know --

SL: I was trying to find my staff, I was trying to contact my kids to let them know we were OK. And then of course they were really upset about everything that was going on. And then trying -- I wanted to get in touch with my staff and make sure they were OK and



know where they were, because we did not set up a communication network. We just didn't. Thank goodness somebody remembered, they remembered my cell phone number and some -- I can't remember. At some point people were able to get in touch with me. When the cell phones started working. Or they left me -- I don't remember how it was. Or I have an AOL account and they could get -- while our JEFNO account didn't work, our AOL account did work. Ultimately I found all my staff. Ultimately and very soon I talked to Marc Hirsch in Baton Rouge and said we really -- my brother and my mother and I and Sugar wanted -- my puppy needed to -- we wanted to go to Baton Rouge. I thought that would be important for me to be close to New Orleans. But the Jewish Federation staff, their professional staff, was going to Houston. And there really wouldn't -- and I knew there were going to be a lot of people from our community in Baton Rouge. And I thought that that would be a better place for me. Amazingly, Marc Hirsch through some connections that other people had was able -- they were able to get me a building, a house, that we could rent. And so we rented -- they rented this house. They got furniture in it. It was really amazing. And so we had a place to go. Rabbi Cohn and Andrea were going to go to Atlanta. They had -- we could not -- I wanted to try and get a place for them in Baton Rouge, but it was just impossible to get places by a week after the storm. It was just very difficult to find anything. Rabbi Cohn and Andrea wound up going to Atlanta. They have a daughter that lives there. I think that the moment when I got the most upset was when we were telling them goodbye. Not that we didn't think that we would see them again, but we really didn't know at what point we would see them again, when the next -- and they had been really a mainstay, particularly for me, but also for my mother and my brother, but very especially for me. And they had their beagle with them. So we had all really spent this unbelievable time together. And I felt like it was a scene out of Fiddler on the Roof, where he was going one way and we were going another way and we just said -- we know we're going to get back, we just didn't know when. We didn't know how. And then we were hearing -- they were hearing from people and I was hearing from people. And people were spread all over the country.





RH: And people you mean friends and --

SL: Our friends, our temple members, our friends --

RH: Temple members.

SL: -- our associates, our -- the Federation people. As little by little you started gleaning that they set up a Jewish NOLA site where you could register so people would know where you were. And how they might be able to get in touch with you. So little by little we started getting a network. And talking to people. And people who could say they were in Houston, they were in Atlanta, they were in Birmingham, wherever they had gone. And then being worried about people that hadn't left, and what had happened to them. So that parting of the ways, that -- because that was initially how we got through the storm. And then we went on to Baton Rouge. They went to Atlanta a couple of days before our house was ready in Baton Rouge. We got to Baton Rouge. That was the next time that I cried was I certainly could have never imagined in my life that I would walk into another house and be renting a house and not know -- at that point we didn't know what waited for us in New Orleans. I knew my house probably wasn't underwater but I didn't know what condition it was in, and I didn't know if my house had been looted, because then they were talking about all the looting. And my son had a friend whose father had stayed, and he had stayed with his father, and they said they had to leave because the looting and the shooting and the lawlessness was so bad uptown that they had to get out. So you really still -- all you could think of, I could think of I had plate glass windows, I have sliding glass doors. Did somebody break in? There's no burglar alarm anymore. And that was probably the least of the worries, because I think the most unbelievable thing to me was that my mother's house might be standing but none of her possessions, nothing that she had, and that her life would never ever be the same again. And who could have ever dreamt that? And my brother, he lived upstairs, but he still -- it was never going to be the same for him either. He had -- by the time we could get back to



their house, we had the mold, we had -- it was terrible. So to make a long story short, I got to Baton Rouge. Marc Hirsch, Paula -- I can't -- why am I having a hard time, I can see their faces and I'm just not remember their names. But people were just -- were really wonderful to us. The Sternbergs were wonderful, Paula and her husband -- I just had cell phone numbers and was calling people, and he got the furniture for us. And I remember her maiden name was Paula Ross, and she was married to someone and lived in Baton Rouge for a long time, and they helped get furniture. And Rabbi Bergadine was incredible. She did an incredible job in Baton Rouge in helping people get situated and adjusted. And I remember getting to Baton Rouge on a Thursday, walking into this house that was owned by somebody who wasn't Jewish, but seeing this house and knowing how lucky we were to have it, and just absolutely breaking down, just -- and my mom broke down, we just really both broke down, we were thankful for what we had, and I think just thinking about how could this be, how could this be. And my mother kept on saying she didn't know what God had done, what we had done that God would be punishing us like this, that was my mother's -- her take on all this. And I said that God wasn't punishing us, thank goodness I had read Rabbi Kushner's book, and I said it's just nature. It's just -- and then it became manmade, it wasn't even nature. The hurricane wasn't terrible. My mother's house, I remember my mother saying to me when we were in Jackson, she said gosh Sandy, I hope a tree didn't fall on my roof. And I said I hope a tree did, because if a tree fell on your roof you can collect from homeowner's and from flood. If it didn't fall on your roof you're only going to get flood insurance. And at that time my mother couldn't remember -- my mother's 92 years old, 91 -- she couldn't remember if she even had flood insurance. She just knew she paid for something but she wasn't sure what. So but if a tree fell you were lucky. It was like you won the lottery. But if it didn't, in her case her roof had like maybe three little openings. It was really -- it was the water, it was not the hurricane. A tree fell in her backyard and it missed her house by six inches. So so much for that. And when we ultimately came back to New Orleans and looked at the buildings around my mother's house, the ones where you saw



the trees on top of the house, you just realized they were the lucky ones because they could collect -- if they didn't have flood they got homeowner's. If they had both they were going to collect from both. And so there was this sense of this can't be happening, but at the same time there was a sense this is our reality for now, and we don't even know when we're going home. So then I was in touch with the rest of my staff. I flew in my administrative assistant, Ellen Abrams. She got in. We got her a place to stay. Rabbi Bergadine had someone that she knew who had some apartments and I wound up getting my entire staff, my four -- well, when I say entire staff, all four people besides myself, to Baton Rouge. Doris Gauthier, who's my CPA, we got Doris and her father, because he needed a place to stay, and they were in Houston. So they left Houston to come to Baton Rouge. Ellen left Albuquerque. Harriet was -- my secretary was in Birmingham. She came from Birmingham. Let's see, Nora was in Lake Charles, she came from Lake Charles. So everybody ultimately got back together in Baton Rouge.

RH: What went through your mind to decide to reconstitute your office in Baton Rouge? Did you just think that was --

SL: I thought it was the most important thing to do.

RH: And why did you think it was --

SL: Because I thought we were going to be needed. We were the deep pocket. We were the repository of funds for the Jewish community, and if we -- whatever we had to do we would have to do. And that I couldn't do it without a staff and I needed to have my staff together, and that whatever the future was going to hold, we were going to -- and same thing that I'm sure went through the Federation director's mind, they needed to set up, because there is this unbelievable Jewish network, and I think that we became the beneficiaries of the strength of the Jewish community, which is that we take care of each other. And it really -- I never felt so embraced and so cared about. Also by the United Jewish Communities and by the Union for Reform Judaism, because as president of



Temple Sinai I was getting calls from Rabbi Yoffe. I was getting -- we were getting conference calls with Rabbi Yoffe, we were getting conference calls with United Jewish Communities. Everybody wanted to know how we were doing -- what they could do, everybody started raising money. Which really became a lifeline. But we wound up becoming the administrators for what became the Jewish Community Partnership in Baton Rouge, which was the Federation of Baton Rouge, the Federation of New Orleans, and the Jewish Endowment Foundation. And we administered -- we got a \$1 million grant from United Jewish Communities and we administered that. And we've just -- the one year anniversary is really up, so that grant is we have to do a final accounting on it, but I think that we provided a very important and a much needed service. I was in touch with my president, Ellen Yellin. She was in Lake Charles and Chattanooga and she was in Chattanooga. And we would talk on the phone like at 11:00 at night. And once we both had cell phones that could reach out to one another. I got a Baton -- I had a Baton Rouge cell phone, I had a Jackson cell phone, my New Orleans cell phone didn't work. So I had to try and get cell phones in other ways -- excuse me -- that would work. It was really a time of both needs and the ability to communicate. I remember saying at the Rosh Hashanah services at B'nai Israel, and they were kind enough to allow Rabbi Cohn -- through something that had happened their Rabbi was not going to be on the pulpit for the High Holidays, and Rabbi Cohn was able to come in there and do services. And I just remember saying thank goodness the Jewish community does not follow the FEMA model, they don't wait to be asked or be told what they -- they just do it. And we were really blessed by that network and that ability to get money to people and to get --

RH: Well, that was my next question is you obviously didn't follow the FEMA model, but how did you make decisions about what to do with the \$1 million even?

SL: Well, because we came up with a budget. The way that that happened was if I came on -- I got there on Thursday. On Friday I remember going to a meeting at the Baton Rouge Country Club where we talked about a few different things and then they



said they -- we're looking for a Rabbi for the High Holy Days and I said I think I have one, my Rabbi doesn't have a pulpit in New Orleans. And that was when we were told that we might not get back for months into New Orleans. So the thought of being able to be back in New Orleans for Yom Kippur or Rosh Hashanah was very remote because Mayor Nagin was talking about bodies in the street, floating bodies, 12,000 dead, and nobody knew that he was exaggerating, that was part of the problem, he was just talking but nobody realized how far off the mark he was until the waters receded and they started looking at what the situation was. But that was several weeks down the road. Let's see. So I remember that Friday, and then that Sunday Donna Sternberg called me in the morning and Donna said Sandy we need to do something -- we have to get some money here. She was really a tireless worker for saying we've got to pull something together. And so I went over to Donna's house. Howard Feinberg from United Jewish Communities was in town along with someone else on his staff. He came over. Allan Bissinger, who is the Federation president, was in Baton Rouge. That's where he was located. And I got to work very closely with Allan, which was really a pleasure. He came over to Donna's. We really literally had a kitchen cabinet. The Federation, our Federation exec had flown in from Houston on that Sunday was the Sunday when they -- Richard Lipsey had gotten the Baton Rouge sheriff to put together a caravan to go to New Orleans to rescue some of the torahs and to rescue people. He had been -- Richard Lipsey had been rescuing people off of rooftops and off of their houses in New Orleans. He's a great, great guy in Baton Rouge. He's somebody that would have a story to tell. And he's not from New Orleans but his story would be very important. So we got back. We went over to Donna's. We're all sitting around the kitchen table. We came up with categories. We just said we think we're going to need social services, we're going to need social workers, we're going to need to have services for the elderly, we're going to need to provide some services for Hillel students from New Orleans that go to Baton Rouge for Hillel. We're going to need to provide some staff positions, help for families. That's one of the times when we very soon after that came up with stipends



for individuals 21 or over of \$700 a person. And we started giving out checks, and people that you would have never dreamed would have needed that money wound up applying for that money.

RH: That whole plan of giving cash to people and the sense of respecting that they'll know how to use it, which is something that the government hasn't managed to do in many ways, I was wondering about the mindset that said it's OK to give people \$700, do you have any thoughts about that?

SL: Well I think that you just had to figure that if they asked for it -- I don't -- and I think that for a lot of people they were not used to being -- to receiving, they were used to giving. But all of a sudden now they're out two weeks or two and a half weeks or however long it is, and maybe they've maxed out some of their credit cards, maybe they didn't bring enough cash with them, they maybe can't get to their cash, can't get to their bank. People needed money. And what happened was that first they started doing it I think in Alexandria, Louisiana, someplace, and then we heard about it and people heard about it and then we said well we really are going to need to do the same thing here, because people are getting desperate in Baton Rouge as well. So really United Jewish Communities allowed us to do that in several different locations. I don't know, I think that Houston did something, but we did something in Baton Rouge, and then ultimately that whole program went to New Orleans, and Deena and the Jewish Family Service took it over through Federation. Initially we did it through our Baton Rouge office and then ultimately Federation was handling it. But she had some intake questions that she would ask, but it wasn't -- no one was asking anybody to give them their tax return. We knew people were needy for sure. And I think that for a lot of people they were panic-stricken, and like people who were doctors who all of a sudden had really no clientele. And to this day there are doctors that have left and some of them have left permanently and some of them have left temporarily. So there's been a huge loss in the medical community. I know of lawyers that have left. I think that we lost a number of what I would call young



professionals with families who perhaps felt as though it was difficult on them, but it was most difficult on their children to be pulled out of school, pulled out whatever it was that your normal life was. It's one thing to inconvenience yourself. Really, I often said, thank God, my children were grown, because I would have felt so much -- it would have been so much more of a responsibility. Sorry.

RH: Yes. So I wanted to talk a little bit about your first Rosh Hashanah in Baton Rouge.

SL: We weren't sure exactly what we were going to do about -- well we certainly knew that we could go to services in Baton Rouge. We had been to Beth Shalom for services as a community, as a community in exile so to speak, for one of the first Shabbats, and I just remember how good it was to see a lot of people. And then I guess it was in that first meeting at the Baton Rouge Country Club when there were a couple of people who belonged to B'nai Israel who said that their Rabbi was not going to be able to do services for Rosh Hashanah. That he was going to be taking a temporary leave of absence. And I said well Rabbi Cohn doesn't have any place to do services for Rosh Hashanah because he was in Atlanta. And I said maybe he could come to Baton Rouge and do services at B'nai Israel, help you all out and also help out the New Orleans Jewish community and particularly Temple Sinai who had a lot of members in Baton Rouge, but we would certainly -- anybody who's in Baton Rouge would be able to go to those services. And lo and behold it all worked out. And Rabbi Cohn was able to with our cantor conduct services at B'nai Israel. Cantor Colman flew in from Michigan. Rabbi Cohn flew in from Atlanta. I think that the Baton Rouge community was very appreciative of the services that we had. And we certainly were most appreciative to them. In fact this Rosh Hashanah I sent an email to their congregation as president of Temple Sinai, Rabbi Cohn and I thanking them for what they had done for us a year ago. And they in turn sent an email to us wishing us the very best and thanking us for helping out, having Rabbi Cohn helping out with services last year. So it was really -- I think there were a lot of friendships that were formed. I went to the Southwest Regional Conference for the



Union for Reform Judaism and saw Robbie Rubin, who's going to be an incoming president at B'nai Israel, and I didn't know her before, and we've become friends, and I think that there are bonds that were formed with people in the Baton Rouge community, certainly with Rabbi Bergadine and Rabbi -- and her husband Rabbi Zamek, and those things were blessings. They were blessings in a very difficult situation. So we're very thankful for the hospitality and the warmth that they extended to us.

RH: Do you see any opportunities working now that you've worked with the Baton Rouge Federation? Do you see any opportunities coming out of that experience for the future?

SL: Well, interestingly, well there are a couple of things. One is because the United Jewish Communities started funding this partnership there was somebody there from Jewish Family Service. There's now a permanent -- there are two part-time permanent people there who actually are now employees of Jewish Family Service, but who staff out that function in Baton Rouge. So that's a permanent situation that would never have been before. We wouldn't have had that before and Baton Rouge wouldn't have had that before. But they're there to really assist relocated New Orleanians as well as the Baton Rouge Jewish community that already existed. But their community grew by a certain number of members and those members are of course in need of both emotional and sometimes financial support. So the Baton Rouge community's been very welcoming, and that has worked out really well. I'm sure that there will be links between Baton Rouge and New Orleans. And we just did a name change for our Jewish Endowment Foundation. And changed it to the Jewish Endowment Foundation of Louisiana.

RH: Oh really?

SL: Yes.

RH: That's a big deal.





SL: Yes, well we hold Baton Rouge's Federation's endowment. We hold money for the temple in Monroe. We -- I got a call, maybe we might hold money for the temple in Lafayette at some point. So we're really -- we would love to function in that role because right now in some of those Jewish communities there is no Jewish foundation so in Baton Rouge there's a Baton Rouge Area Foundation but that does not directly help the Jewish community. So Baton Rouge families that would want to do something for the Baton Rouge community and the Jewish community could certainly do something with the Jewish Endowment Foundation, and in fact we hold a couple of donor-advised funds in Baton Rouge. And in Monroe we have the large supporting foundation and another fund besides that. So we're really -- we're reaching out and branching out to those areas. It's just -- it's very hard to travel the state and to -- we only -- the development person is also the director of the Jewish Endowment Foundation, and that would be me. And as time allows I really hope to be getting out more and getting to other locations. And I just wish that the airline, the DirectAir or whatever, would start, because that would make it a lot easier, if there were nonstop flights that would go to Monroe, go to Shreveport. But I hope to get to Monroe sometime this year for sure or in 2007 is the plan.

RH: So is the name change and -- is this after the storm, or was this a plan in place before the storm that's been a little accelerated?

SL: I think it was maybe discussed before the storm doing that, and I think it was really to be more inclusive. It's a doing business as. Because going in and changing your letter, your articles of incorporation, everything, is very involved. But we want to do business as the Jewish Endowment Foundation of Louisiana so I think it certainly was accelerated by what happened in the hurricane and really the recognition that we were just the Jewish Endowment Foundation, it didn't say necessarily of New Orleans. But we certainly -- I think people thought of us as a New Orleans foundation. And so I think that by just saying Jewish Endowment Foundation of Louisiana that -- and really when I talk about it I'm still going to call it the Jewish Endowment Foundation, but really we want to



be known as the Jewish Endowment Foundation of Louisiana, encourage families that are in the Jewish community all throughout the state to consider doing something with us, caring for their communities through the Jewish Endowment Foundation.

RH: Interesting. Why don't we talk about now your return to New Orleans? When did you first get back and --

SL: Well, I think I first came back maybe three weeks after the storm. I remember coming in with my administrative assistant Ellen Abrams. And we drove in. I showed my Jewish Endowment Foundation business card, because they were only letting people come in who had businesses. But I really -- we couldn't go to the downtown office building because there was no electricity in it and we were on the sixth floor. And we just felt like two women, we really -- I can't walk up the stairs and Ellen really felt as though -- I didn't want to see her doing that all by herself. But we wanted to come in and see what was going on at our respective homes. I think it was probably three weeks after the storm. And -- or maybe -- and I just remember walking -- actually what I remember most is driving in, seeing the hurricane damage in Metairie. And what you'd seen is roofs blown off and you would see trees down and you would see buildings maybe that -- what you really realized is how important good construction is. Because the buildings that were poorly constructed were the buildings that completely fell apart, even though the damage was not a direct hit. If there were 50-, 60-mile-an-hour winds, if your building was not well constructed, it was just going to get clobbered. And so you really saw that coming in. And we drove in through Metairie. And then got off and I remember coming into Orleans Parish is where we saw the National Guard. And that's where they -- you had to give them a photo ID and show them your business card and they asked you what you were doing and I said we're going to go down and see where -- how -- what the condition of the building is where we have an office. And so that was all fine. And they let us go through. And came to my house first. And there were a lot of trees down on the route to here. It didn't look that terrible in terms of the buildings, but it certainly looked --



we'd come River Road to get to Saint Charles Avenue and drove up to the house, and I saw that one of my windows was blown out and walked into the house. And my kitchen was just in horrible condition, because for three weeks there hadn't been any electricity. I had not emptied my freezer before I left. Obviously thinking I'd be back in two days. Maybe I'd have some spoiled food, but never dreaming that what I would have would be just these maggots all over the place. They were on the outside of the refrigerator. And I certainly didn't want to open it to see what was on the inside. And that was really pretty alarming. And water had gotten in, there was stuff that had come out of the refrigerator. But I was really one of the lucky ones. That was hurricane damage. And that was not terrible. And then I walked further into my house and I really wasn't sure what had happened but part of my carpeting had been eaten. Well I didn't know that it was eaten. I thought it was some kind of mold had started growing in my house. And it was very strange and I didn't know what it was. And I really didn't find out what it was until my insurance adjuster came in probably a couple of months later. But I just remember thinking OK that is the weirdest-looking thing I've ever seen. And so anyway I then later came back a couple of weeks after that, maybe a month after that, and my brother had had some -- they had -- his business had found some employees who were willing to come in and take my refrigerator and my freezer out of my house. But mind you it had probably been in my house for eight weeks, so you don't really even want to know how totally disgusting it was. And I really have to say if it were not for the illegal aliens that came to New Orleans to do work that spoke no English but they were willing to do really the most awful jobs, I don't know who else would have been doing that work, really and truly. That's who came in. They came into my kitchen, they undid my refrigerator, they undid my freezer. Unfortunately we couldn't communicate because I didn't speak Spanish and they didn't speak English. And they couldn't figure out how to turn off the water supply to my icemaker. So then I started having like a miniflood in my kitchen from that. We finally -- I found a wrench or something that they used to just clip the line so that just a little bit of water was seeping out. But I remember thinking, oh my God, the



flood didn't get me and now I'm going to have water throughout my house because of this. But I put like a pan underneath it to collect the water and then I was coming back in a few more days. So it wound up that I didn't. My kitchen was so horrible anyway because of all of the maggots and the gnats and the flies. One humorous thing would be that one -- on my trip to New Orleans when they took my refrigerator and freezer out I had a bottle of vodka. And it was a good vodka, it wasn't Grey Goose, but maybe it was Grey -- I don't remember, but anyway, I didn't realize that it was -- that someone had taken the top off, and it was open. So that the pouring spout was -- and when I went to go put that in the car because I thought oh well maybe I'll bring that to Baton Rouge, then I realized it was open. And I left it on my kitchen table. In October, in the middle of October, because it was Rosh Hashanah, or Yom Kippur, and my kids had come in, because that was -- there was a Rabbi that had come to Baton Rouge who was from the Jewish Healing Center in San Francisco. And he was there to help those of us who were in the frontlines who were helping other people. And I think we were so busy that we didn't really stop to feel whatever was going on with us. And I remember him taking me into the sanctuary at Beth Shalom and having a quiet moment and saying what would be the thing that would make you feel the best right now, and I remember getting very emotional and saying it would be very important for me to have my children here for the holidays. And so he said well you just need to make that happen. You need to call. And I did, I called my kids, who were wonderful, and they both came, they both flew into Baton Rouge and were there for the services, and we came to New Orleans and they got to see New Orleans for the first time, and besides the shock of what the kitchen looked like and later when I showed them the carpeting and told them what -- later what it was, anyway my son noticed that the bottle of vodka had attracted gnats. I still -- I keep the bottle to this day because he said Mom you have inadvertently discovered an incredible thing, which is that vodka attracts gnats and they go into the bottle and they can't get back out. So I had like gnats that were that thick, that part was disgusting, but better than having all these gnats that were flying around in my kitchen that I didn't know when



I'd ever get rid of them. But a lot of them wound up -- once we got the refrigerator and the freezer out, the maggots were outside, everything was taped up, nobody ever touched that until they came and disposed of it, and I don't think they disposed of that until maybe December or January, it was really horrible, you just -- the smell on the street, because it wasn't just mine, it was a lot of people's, we just looked like refrigerator and freezer city, everybody's refrigerators and freezers were taped and were on the sidewalk if they could get them out of their houses. So that part of it was -- that was difficult. And then in November I guess it was I wound up, I had a handyman that had worked for me and he was very reliable when he'd worked for me before, and he came in and supervised people who were fixing my kitchen, so I didn't have to come in every day from Baton Rouge. I was able to work, knowing that he had a key, and I got my kitchen back together so that we could come -- so that my family could be home in December. We could come back to my house in December, my mother and I. My brother moved back to New Orleans probably in the beginning of October and moved into the Quarter, the French Quarter. He got an apartment there. My mother and I came back around the beginning of December. When the insurance adjuster came to my house I found out what all of the carpet thing was. Which was that rats had come into my house and they had come in through the open window. If you have food anyplace they are going to do whatever they have to do. When I'd come to New Orleans the first time I think that that was the time that I like closed the kitchen doors. I closed the door that led to my hallway and to the dining room. Because the smell in my kitchen was so disgusting, I thought well if I close the doors maybe it won't get through all of my house. And what I did was I kept the rats from food that they wanted. I had dog biscuits that were like these chlorophyll, it was like this package of dog treats that were actually breath-enhancers that were for my Maltese terrier, and when I went to the back, I had seen that like the package had been completely opened and the dog treats were out. So I realized I'm not sure what's going on here. And what they said is the rats ate through the carpeting, they ate through part of my doors, to be able to get to a food source, which was the food that



they wanted in the back of the house. And the other thing that I found out is that my insurance policy has a rodent provision, and that that damage was not covered by my insurance policy. And as you can see, all of my carpeting is one color. So that having that carpeting eaten in four -- they ate it over here, they ate it there, they ate it in four or five different places. And ate some of the woodwork. So I have to replace all of my carpeting in order to take care of it, and none of that is covered by insurance. I was fortunate that most of the damage in my kitchen was covered by insurance. So I think that the people, my insurance -- no one will say that any insurance people were sympathetic, but I honestly felt like mine felt badly for me about the rat thing. And I think that they were nice to me about some other things. To try and just say oh my -- they said you're not going to believe this, but there's a rodent provision, and there's no way they're going to cover it. So it becomes a loss. I think that in New Orleans we have all learned more about our insurance and our hurricane coverage than we would ever have wanted to know. And I can say this both as a homeowner, and I will say it even more so as a president of a temple. There's no way that you would know the things that are not covered and what things they tell you and they argue over. So that's a continuing saga and for Temple Sinai I guess what I'm really saying is I was dealing with insurance on three different levels. I was dealing with my insurance, my mother who lost her house, my brother who lost his house, and they had this condominium arrangement so I was handling all their insurance for them, and then I was involved in the temple's insurance issues. So I would say that I was dealing with on a lot of different levels a lot of different insurance issues and trying to figure things out. So that period was definitely and continues to be challenging. I'm not sure that I've figured out everything, but between insurance and then if you want to go -- if they want to go back to their house, and my brother wants to go back, there's SBA loan things, there's the Road Home. It's really -- I tell you, I feel badly for anybody who does not have someone who is extremely knowledgeable to help them in this process, because one of the things that I've really learned is people that are elderly or somebody who really doesn't have a college degree,



I don't know how they handle it, I really don't. Because none of this -- it's not like any of it is really easy, it's all difficult, it's a lot of legalese, it's a lot of paperwork, and I really feel as though the Jewish community made it really easy for people to get help. If people self-identified and said I need this \$700 because from Baton Rouge when we were doing the Jewish Community Partnership and they just -- they had to fill out a form that said that they lived in a hurricane area, what had happened to their house, what their situation was, and we signed a check, we cut a check for \$700. I'm sure that Jewish Family Service when you talk to them, the programs that they have are so much less onerous than these other programs if you need some sort of assistance. Of course they're not giving away hundreds of thousands of dollars, but nevertheless it just seems that there ought to be a less complicated way to do this, and I'm talking about on the federal government's part, and on the state government's part, that we get money to people in a quicker fashion and an easier fashion. Because it just seems to me like it's keeping people from moving forward. It's keeping people from making decisions. And I think that we're actually seeing a second wave of people leaving. I'm not just talking about in the Jewish community. Talking about in the community as a whole. And I think that that's --

RH: Do you have some personal -- do you know some people who are leaving or --

SL: It's a sense that I get. It's just a general sense that I get. Yeah I do. I have a couple of friends who I think are leaving, or a couple of professional friends that I think really see the recovery as being very long-term. And I think really feel as though they might just do better, and they are not native New Orleanians, they're people who moved here and maybe have lived here for a couple of -- a decade or two decades. And I think that the lack of a definitive plan, the lack of being able to say by this time you will get a check and you will be able to start working on your house. And I think the planning process here, oh my God, having in a previous career done something with historic preservation, done something with urban planning. Our process is a mess. And I wouldn't mind being quoted on that. I just can't believe that there's such a lack of organization to it, and I think



that not saying that certain areas are going to have the concentrated public service, the infrastructure fixed, and that we're going to make sure that all of the traffic lights are working in a certain area, by not having a plan like that, not to mention the urban planning aspect of how you bring a city back that's been so decimated, is just a huge -- it's a huge impediment. And I really think every day that the people that are staying here are very -- as I said many -- a couple of months ago, I wasn't sure whether those of us who were committed to staying here should in fact possibly be committed, as in to an institution, because it's a very -- it's a long road, and it's very challenging, and I do know of a number of Jewish families who did not lose their homes but they were maybe 70 years old and they just said I don't think I can do a ten-year recovery, I don't think I want to spend from 70 to 80 waiting for the city to be whatever it's going to be. Because this is going to be a different city, there's absolutely no question about that. I still think all of that is just yet to unfold, I think we don't know exactly what the city's going to be like, but I think it'll definitely be -- it's different now.

RH: Well, what would you like to see happen with the city?

SL: Do you mean on a political sense? Or are you talking about what -- I'd like to see the city solve some of the problems that we've never been able to solve, whether crime, education, I'd like to -- because I think those are the underpinnings of a good solid overall community and a solid Jewish community. I think that those are important aspects for everybody. I'd like to see us have something maybe besides tourism as an economic base. Well we have the port as well, but it would be nice to see if we could come up with a real -- well coming up with a medical corridor now is going to be much more challenging than it would have been before the hurricane. Because now we've lost so many -- somebody told me that 80% of the psychiatrists are gone. So at a time when we most need them it's a time when a lot of them have gone. And I think that just regular health care, just the regular aspect, I guess just as a for instance, my secretary at the Jewish Endowment Foundation, her son was living in Los Angeles and he was hit by a





car. He was very seriously injured. She was able to after several weeks finally get him back to New Orleans. He's well enough to travel. And I really have to put in a plug. One of my board members helped raise money for her to get her son back here. The Jewish community has really been incredible to us on a national level. But I think it's that taking care of one another and my secretary is not Jewish, but she's been with us for a couple of years and we've all been very distressed about this. So she's come back to New Orleans now with her son. But it took her ten days to get an appointment with a neurosurgeon. She's got to wait several days to get an appointment with a rehabilitation specialist. For myself, I had to -- I was having terrible trouble with one of my legs. I was in excruciating pain. And I had to have an epidural. And the soonest I could get one in New Orleans was three weeks, and I said oh my God, I can't wait three weeks to get an epidural. Three weeks of this pain, I don't think I can stay on Vicodin and whatever else for that long, I don't want to. So I drove -- I was fortunate. Within a week I could drive to Gonzales, which is Baton Rouge. I drove to Baton Rouge because the doctor that I would have seen here happens to have an office in Baton Rouge and he had an opening there. So I was able to get it. But that is the state of what -- I think it's not easily accessible. I will say that for my regular health care if I need appointments or the emergency room, I use Ochsner, and so the emergency room there if I've needed to go there has been really excellent. I have absolutely no complaints about that. But some of these other specialty kind of things when I leave that system and I go into something else, oh my gosh, it's really not as easy. Definitely not as easy as it used to be. You can't just call and say I'd like to see the doctor this week. Because -- and if you need to see a doctor really badly then you best go to an emergency room, because that's where you're going to wind up getting seen, unless you have a special relationship with a doctor who's going to just say come see me, I'll squeeze you in.

RH: How's your mother settling in?



SL: I think that she's making a transition. Interestingly, there was a program today at Temple Sinai for -- it was really on stress and people who had -- for seniors who were feeling stressed and overwhelmed, and it was an opportunity to talk with these two -- they're really from the psychiatric department at LSU. And I said, "So how was it?" and she said well I had a very -- my mother has a severe hearing loss. So she said I really couldn't hear that much, she says, but we all lost so much, it's just people lost everything, and what can anybody do for us? And so I think that it was an opportunity for them to share that, but there isn't anybody that can put it back together again. I think that my mother's really remarkable, that at 92 she's moved on. She very often says that she'll go to the closet and she'll say well I want to put this on, and then she'll remember she has nothing. When we gutted her house, and that I think -- I think I didn't talk about that yet. So I should really talk about that. Because that was -- I really did not want my mother to do that, to go. I was -- I had arranged it. I saw that there was somebody, I got a name of somebody who was gutting houses. This is really at the beginning of October. And I contracted with them to come in and take things out and see what we could salvage. And I really didn't want my mother to go. I thought oh my God she's going to have a heart attack, she's going to look at her house and it's going to be agonizing for her. And she said I have to go, I have to be there. And she really -- I think that she needed to say goodbye, I think that she needed to see the reality of how terrible it was, and I commented to somebody in Spike Lee's movie there is one of his musician friends, I think it was Terence Blanchard or something, was going to Gentilly to his mother's house. And she's probably in her late 80s or 90, and going into Pontchartrain Park and she was going to get to see her house for the first time. And the words that she said and the words that my mother said were so similar, I was just really struck by it didn't matter what economic persuasion you were, it didn't matter what religion you were, it didn't matter what color you were, that it was the overwhelming sense of loss, and oh my God, I can't believe this, and look at the -- I think they were all like when they -- when my mother saw, when she walked into the house, and we didn't even let her walk in for a while, until they could get



all the flooring out, I didn't walk in. I was terrified that I would fall and slip, because it was all this muck, it was all this -- her personal possessions, her pride and joy, all the things that she was really -- came out in wheelbarrows, that was it. It just -- it came out in wheelbarrows. You could maybe recognize a headboard. You could maybe recognize a chest if it -- but you just saw pieces of what were beautiful things come out as trash. And I remember the one thing that I really wanted to save was my mother's -- ooh, sorry -- was my mother's wedding portrait that had been done -- gosh I have to think about what year she was married. I don't even remember. Let's see. If she was born in 1914 and she was 20 so it was done in like 1934 or '35 by a painter in Columbus. But it was a very John Singer Sargent kind of a painting and she was in her wedding dress and she's -- such beautiful portrait, and that was always supposed to go to me. And I in turn always assumed that would go to my daughter. It was -- the frame came out and we never found the painting. All we could find was the frame, or part of the frame. I couldn't believe that we couldn't find the canvas, but I never saw the canvas, I think water just came up and got up so high it was eight feet in her house, she had nine-foot ceilings, and I think it just must have floated it out of the frame and it must have come out in a wheelbarrow, but I never even saw it come out. I never even saw it come out in a wheelbarrow. That was just of everything that we lost in the house I think that was the hardest thing for me.

RH: I'm going to stop the tape for a minute.

END OF Sandy Levy19-2

RH: I'm OK, so are you -- it's what you're talking about and the lights are --

SL: It's OK, I'm OK, it's OK, it's all right. So anyway I'm sure I can go on at this point, but --

RH: Let me identify the tape here.



SL: Sure.

RH: This is Rosalind Hinton with Sandy Levy for Katrina's Jewish Voices and this is Tape 3.

SL: This is getting to be an epilog.

RH: It's hard to believe that you couldn't find the canvas.

SL: My mother also, we couldn't find that, my brother who's deceased -- and really I think it's the personal things that are really the hardest. He had done a beautiful drawing for them that was like from he quoted Kahlil Gibran and the part of The Prophet about your children are not your children or whatever it -- about something, and he had beautiful, beautiful handwriting and he'd done this beautiful watercolor drawing for them for probably their 35th or maybe their 50th anniversary, and that was another thing, that anybody that saw it just really remarked about it. And that was just -- it was just destroyed in the water. I couldn't see how we could even bring it back to anything. And my brother had -- my mother had a couple of my brother's paintings that we really loved. And those were all gone. My mother had before she left for the hurricane, she had put all of her jewelry in a box and put it in a closet, and I joke and I laugh about the fact that my mother took Nova Scotia -- she took lox with her, she took corned beef that we would have to eat, but she left all of her jewelry, better she should have not taken the food and taken the jewelry because when whoever these guys were that were cleaning out her house, let's just say that there were some pieces that were just never found and there was insurance on them, but I would have much rather had the piece of jewelry that my mother had than have any -- that was not a policy or something that she really wanted to collect on. That was again something that in particular there was a bracelet that she really wanted me to have and again something that would go down, but it's gone. They said they never found it. They didn't see it. On the other hand, they did find like a couple of things that had sentimental value. And amazingly, this was the part that was really the



most amazing to me. The pieces that came through the storm, my mother has these pieces of like porcelain that have little tiny fingers, and little tiny things, and you would think if anything was going to happen it would have happened to that. Those pieces would -- they must have floated in the water and then they must have been let down in what this muck was. Because these pieces, there isn't even a finger missing, we couldn't find her portrait, but these pieces of Lladro amazingly survived. A few of those pieces survived and then just a very few things. But you just really have to say we're OK, we survived, I think it's what you think you -- and I can really identify with anybody who has lost things that they thought were precious memories really. And that's all that they really become at some point. I wish that I had a picture of my mother's portrait. But it's in everybody, it's in my memory, it's in my children's memory, they'll really remember it, and the only thing that I can say is if another hurricane's coming I don't know exactly what I'm going to do with my portraits, because I have one for my daughter and one for my son, and I just -- I think I'd like to wrap them in plastic and put them on a second floor or do something with them, because it makes you realize that if you don't do something with some of those -- like who would have thought. We would never have thought that something like that would have happened. We could have never imagined that that levee would have given way, that -- that part of it was much more manmade disaster than it was a hurricane. So I don't think anybody can fault anybody for what they did, everybody was in the same boat. It was a terrible thing. When I think about that I think about how silly in some ways it is to attach yourself to things like that. And I certainly am -- I don't want to say that I feel silly for crying over that, but when I heard a story when we were in Baton Rouge, Anne Freedman, who was heading up the Jewish Family Service effort there, there was a Jewish woman who lived in Lakewood South on Sharon Drive and she lived alone with her little dog. And her daughter lived in Chicago and had begged her to evacuate and she said no, I've stayed before, I'm going to stay this time. And this poor woman, I think her last name was Palmer, I don't remember her first name, and I didn't know her, but she -- the water started coming up. Her daughter spoke to her right after



the hurricane and then she lost touch with her. She lost contact. And she ultimately identified her mother's body after them not knowing where she was for weeks. She ultimately went to Saint Gabriel, which is where they had the bodies, and identified her mother. And what an unbelievable tragedy. I think she wound up learning the story of what happened from neighbors who were across the street who were rescued. Her mother had gone across the street to these neighbors' house because they had a two-story house. And the water was coming up and I guess they were older too, and they could not figure out how to open the door against the water, the pressure of the water. And they didn't think about breaking a window or doing something. They told her to go back to her house, that she would be OK. And she went up into her attic with her little doggie but they never made it. So things like that and stories that you hear about so many others who you know died horrible deaths, and just couldn't be rescued. The painting's sad but it's still just a painting. We were lucky we -- listen, if I hadn't called my mother and said you're coming with us, I'm not sure my mother wouldn't have said -- if I was leaving she was leaving, but I don't think that she felt the sense of urgency to get out that I did.

RH: Is she living with you now?

SL: No. She lived with me for a while. We lived in Baton Rouge together. Then we lived in New Orleans together for a while. But I was trying to get her a place. She really needed to be with people because she couldn't -- she wasn't driving and she was really marooned here at my house. And she really needed to have a social life. And so we were very very fortunate that we were able to get her into Woldenberg. I really wanted to get her into a place called Lambeth House, which is literally five minutes from here, from my house, which would have been so convenient. But after the storm Lambeth House changed its rules and if you wanted to be in independent living you could not have a sitter. And if you were in assisted living you could only have a sitter for a certain number of hours a day. And my mother really did not want to be in assisted living because she



wanted a real apartment that had a separate bedroom, a separate living room. So she could have been in the independent living, but she -- you had to be able to walk up and down the stairs in case of a fire. Their help situation at Lambeth House had deteriorated because there were so many fewer service people around. That's still the problem that everybody has. So they needed people to be more responsible for themselves. My mother could not walk up or down the stairs. In fact in Baton Rouge my mother had a terrible fall, and only by really the grace of God -- I do not even know how something horrible didn't happen. I just remember that she was walking in front of me to go into the house and I would always say please wait for me. And she's very independent. She didn't want to wait for me. And she was -- we had two steps to get up into the house and she was walking up into the house and all of a sudden I saw her falling backwards. And she -- and there was nothing, it was almost like it was happening in slow motion but I couldn't get to her because I was still by the car, I was like at least six feet away. And I saw her fall back and fall on concrete and hit her head and I thought oh my God this is horrible. Amazingly she did not go into shock and she wound up not having anything broken. Which was really unbelievable. But after that I got her a sitter, well, she had a sitter, I was getting a sitter for her for part of the day because I really felt like she's having equilibrium issues and balance issues. But I just really thought oh my goodness and I was very lucky again that I had friends in Baton Rouge because I called Marc Hirsch and I said -- well first of all I called 911 to get an ambulance to get her to a hospital, then I called to say who do I get as a doctor. So having -- and luckily nothing was broken and she was able to go back home. She was bruised but it's just been -- that part was a nightmare. But she's been living in Woldenberg in the villas, which are really lovely, they're just beautiful. It's geographically 25-30 minutes from my -- it's a 25-minute ride each way. And so I can't get over there as easily and as often as I'd like to, but I think it's the right place for her, I think she's happy there, I think that she's making a new life, she's made some new friends. I think it's all very very hard. Here's a woman who worked all of her life really basically, owned her own business, did all of her own books, did



everything. She lost -- when I tell you she lost everything, she lost everything, there wasn't a checkbook. There wasn't -- the other problem is that all of whatever her life insurance policies were, they were all -- they were like just compressed mush, it didn't matter. She had things in a strongbox, but water gets into a strongbox. If she'd had it in some kind of Ziploc bag it would have done better. But who would know? Now we all know. Put everything in a Ziploc bag. And then put it in a plastic container that's sealed and put it way high up somewhere in your house. But she lost all of the copies of her insurance policies. We don't even know where -- and some of them were really old. So I don't even know what some of them were, we can't track everything. And I'm sure she's not the only one that has a situation like that. And all of her recordkeeping. I think that's been the most frustrating to her is that she's had to recreate everything. And she's 92 years old. And I've helped her to the extent that I can help her. In fact I tried to help her a lot and it was really -- it was more involved than anything that I could really do. And it's not something that I do extraordinarily well. But I was able to ask somebody and they recommended somebody to me. So I have somebody who helps her and I think that's been -- it's been helpful to her and it's helpful to me. And again I feel --

RH: Secretary of sorts --

SL: A bookkeeper.

RH: A bookkeeper.

SL: Lovely person who is trying to do -- but my mother's still very much involved in it. My mother doesn't want to really -- she was willing to give up some of the control but she's not willing to give up all the control, which is wonderful, I really -- I think that that's great. And she gets out and she goes to the grocery, she goes to -- she just is -- unfortunately there's just so few places to shop in New Orleans for clothing or anything anymore. But she absolutely gets out and tries to do as much as she can and she's a very remarkable woman, very resilient beyond what you would really imagine. Both of my kids have said





that for Grandma Mickey to get up in the morning and face every day is pretty much a miracle. That if we were that age a lot of people in her age range have really either -- they've died of broken hearts, broken spirits, and I think that then they wind up getting physical ailments. And I just really cannot begin to tell you how amazing it is that she's playing bridge, playing mah-jongg. And if you -- she's actually as I said to somebody in my Temple Sinai Rosh Hashanah remarks, I said who could have ever imagined that my mother would become the subject of a Forward -- an article in the Forward or in the Union for Reform Judaism that she would be -- essentially become part -- for lack of anything better, part of a poster child for what happened in Katrina. Most of us would think we live fairly normal mundane lives and it comes, and here's my mother whose story has really been so compelling, and when anybody's come to -- if they've come to interview me and they wind up meeting her they wind up interviewing her. And I'm the postscript. My mother is the one who has the really -- not just the compelling story because of what she went through, but how she can survive that. And yet make a life for herself at this point. And she's lost almost all of her -- when I say she's lost them, one of her friends, the husband just died the other day. They're somewhere in Texas. Another friend is in Atlanta. Another friend is in Birmingham. This was a group of women who played cards together every week. My mother, God bless her, was the driver. If they wanted to go to a movie or they wanted to go to lunch my mother was the one that was still driving. My mother got her driver's license renewed at 92 years -- for her 92nd birthday she got her driver's license renewed. She doesn't really drive. But it's knowing that she could I think that's very important to her. I think so many things have been taken away and so much has been lost that I didn't want to be the one to say no you shouldn't have a driver's license, I just said promise me you're not really going to do any driving. So we have a sitter who can drive. But --

RH: Well I was thinking just because you were talking about her at Rosh Hashanah and at Temple Sinai, and I was thinking maybe we could shift to that other duty of yours as the president of Temple Sinai, and talk a little about what you've had to be involved with



with their recovery and --

SL: That's been another interesting -- what should I say? Another interesting challenge. And as president I think I consider myself the Katrina president. The four Reform presidents decided that we would all work together, that we wanted -- all of us wanted to be able to survive intact and we all worked together. And the Union has been wonderful to us, to each congregation. They've given us a lot of support. And then because of my position with the Jewish Endowment Foundation the Union for Reform Judaism was concerned that they were not the most -- what should I say? They were not the best fundraisers out there. They had -- but they said if your foundation could put up a match of like \$250,000 and then we could do a campaign to say we need to match that gift, and so my endowment foundation, I went to my foundation and I said well can we put up \$250,000. But of course what we really needed to do is on whatever basis we did it for we needed to do it for Conservative, Orthodox, Reform, all the congregations. So basically the Jewish Endowment Foundation put up \$400,000 and said that any congregation that got money from their national movement we would match, and for 100 membership units. For every 100 membership units you had we would give you \$12,000. You had to get \$12,000 from them and then we would match it with \$12,000. So we've given out close to the \$400,000 at this point. But it was a great way to do it. Because it leveraged our money and it leveraged the Union's money. The Union has continued to be generous. United Jewish Communities actually through Federation has also given money to the congregations. That's more based on need. That's not based on this 100-member unit. So that's been a different type of an allocation. I think that as presidents we really formed an alliance and I think that was very beneficial. I think we've all gotten to be closer. I think that we're not sure ultimately how all of this winds up, because we all know that we've lost members. Temple Sinai, we started at 825 members. We think that we're probably -- I don't know, my executive director would say somewhere probably close to around 750 at this point. But we'll know more at the end of the fiscal year -- of this calendar year too. It's very hard to find where your members are,



to track your members. Some people who are members have moved to different locations, maybe like to Florida. So what they're doing is they may have paid X amount in dues before but now they -- we've asked them to consider being an affiliate member, and that -- all the four congregations got together and said our affiliate level membership would be \$250 as a basis. Because we didn't want somebody saying well I can be an affiliate at Temple Sinai for \$100, so why should I go be an affiliate someplace else for \$300. So we all really did -- I think it was really good planning. The city should only plan as well as we did really. But I think that that was all very good. I still -- we're dealing with a lot of physical structural issues, we had to replace a roof, the insurance company's fighting with us as to what was hurricane damage and what was wear and tear, we've had to replace an air conditioning system, there were things that we -- the hurricane came in and we've got a water -- we've got to repaint the sanctuary because of water damage. It's really -- it's been a lot, and plus more than ever our congregants really need us. And we're very lucky, I have a wonderful relationship with our Rabbi and I have a wonderful board. And meantime our executive director retired and we've hired a new executive director who came back to New Orleans. She had been in New Orleans and moved away for a few years and then came back. So we were lucky to be able to get her. Our cantor has been terrific. We've been doing more programming than ever. Just it really -- we've been doing more programming. And I remember this was a very emotional thing. I was in Baton Rouge and I said to Rabbi Cohn, I said I think we ought to have a Thanksgiving dinner at Temple Sinai. And I said I think we should have one because I think a lot of people don't have kitchens. And I think that it would be a really good thing, and I remember people saying I don't know, is anybody going to come. So we ordered from Langenstein's, we had a traditional Thanksgiving dinner, maybe on a Sunday night instead of Thursday night, and 100 people showed up, and that was really the beginning because we really got started having services back at Sinai I guess it wasn't until sometime in November that we started having services again and really getting back to a regular schedule. We've done a lot of mental health programming. The



Union has generously provided some assistance so that we could do mental health and support programming at each of the Reform congregations. Today there was this program I was telling you about at Temple Sinai for seniors where we had the seniors come together, have lunch and talk and talk about relaxation techniques and stress-reducing techniques. We had something for parents with kids in religious school last week. I'm just trying to think. We had Rabbi Harold Kushner come in.

RH: That one was open to the public. Are they generally?

SL: It was. We did it -- no. Generally it's not but that one we did do open to the public because we really felt like what he had to say could be important to a lot of people. And if you were there you saw we had over 800 people. The sanctuary was really filled, and I thought he was wonderful, and he did a huge mitzvah because this man normally charges a really large fee and he did not. He really came because he wanted to be here. And we are eternally grateful. That was a great mitzvah that he did. And I think he's just the real deal. He just -- he showed up and people needed to hear what he had to say and I think that Rabbi Cohn actually from a Catholic priest must have recorded his talk or something because he gave Rabbi Cohn an outline that was almost like -- it was like paragraphs of what Rabbi Kushner, and he said how important it was to hear those words, and that he would communicate that to his congregation. So just it made you feel really good that we were able to do that. And we had a Gan Tikvah program where we had the little kids plant a garden, a healing garden, recovery garden. It's been very very busy. And I think that it's been a challenging time to be president, but it's also been -- it's been such an important time to be president that I feel as though what we've accomplished has been really significant. I feel like our congregation is more engaged. It may be a little bit smaller but it's more engaged. I think we're more spiritual. I think that --

RH: When you say more spiritual can you define that for me, what to you that means?



SL: I think that it means that in some ways there's more of a searching for some answers that would come from a relationship with God and trying to figure some of these things out and the whys and the wherefores or at least I think there's -- I just thought that when Rabbi Kushner was there and he just really said that it's -- and the way that people have responded. I think that that's part of the way the congregation has responded to one another, to the situation that we're all in. And I guess the spirituality side of that is that going to services seems -- I think it seems more like a gift than it does a given. And I'd really like to personalize this and just tell you that I was really pretty much overcome with emotion at Rosh Hashanah because two things, one I realized, and I said this in my remarks, it's my first and my last time to be on that pulpit for Rosh Hashanah in that really magnificent sanctuary. The flowers were incredible. Rabbi Cohn's sermons were incredible -- the people that turned out. We were just filled for Rosh Hashanah Eve. We were filled for Kol Nidre. We were pretty full Rosh Hashanah Day. And it really just for me on a personal level what really struck me was who would have ever imagined, and again I said this in my comments because it was really very heartfelt. I grew up on Joseph Street across from Fortier High School. I was raised as an Orthodox Jew. Could I have ever imagined myself standing at Temple Sinai being the president of this, the largest Reform congregation in New Orleans, and also being the director of the Jewish Endowment Foundation? It just -- it was like one of those awestruck moments when you just say, my God, how did I even get here, how did these people have enough faith in me to entrust me with this responsibility at this moment in time. And I think that I really would like to say and to think that I think I've lived up to that responsibility. I won't really hesitate to say. And if I haven't it isn't for lack of trying. I've been very compelled to do there and to be whatever needs to be done as president. Again I've had great support at every single level. And I feel the same way about the Jewish Endowment Foundation. I feel as though I -- as I said to somebody, I actually have a meeting tonight as soon as you and I finish. I'll be going over to the JCC. And I said I have a feeling that I'm doing -- because good thing I have no life besides either doing the Jewish Endowment



Foundation or Federation meetings or Temple Sinai meetings. But it's been that period of time. It's the like if not now when, you get called upon to do things at a moment in time and you need to be ready to say I'm here. That's my job. And I feel as though I've done that with the Jewish Endowment Foundation, I feel like I did that with my staff, I feel like a mom there trying to take care of my staff, take care of the community to the extent that I can. I certainly feel as though I'm a senior member of the professional Jewish community in New Orleans, amazing that I would say that, because this was a whole new career for me. And now I feel like I'm the mom so to speak.

RH: You opened the Jewish Foundation, you said you knew you had deep pockets, you had to set up, you had to start working. The temple you've worked to keep it going. Is there anything in your Jewish background that makes you unquestioningly almost just open what you have to the Jewish community?

SL: I've thought about -- I think that I've thought about the fact that I really felt -- and I really don't want to say that -- well I think it's probably important that -- let's just say that when I found Reform Judaism I found a place for myself in the Jewish religion and that was very -- I'm definitely a woman of the -- I don't want to -- I'm not like some card-carrying feminist, but I'm a feminist, and it's very important to me that I be able to participate on a level equal to anybody. I would not feel comfortable taking a position that I would not feel was a really equal position. So I think that was really important, but I just remember when I was in high school I had -- my father's brother said you really ought to go get -- you could probably get a scholarship to go to college if you wanted to be a Jewish professional. And at the time I said I don't want to be a Jewish professional. No, but my undergraduate degree was in public administration with a social work thing, and so I guess I really could have done that, but it wasn't, I was really interested in politics. But I was always -- I always had one foot in politics or in public service. I guess that that's the thing that rings through everything, is the public service. And so this is just public service in the Jewish community. And I think that what I'm probably doing is



paying back. I think that those who went before me -- I very much believe in that those who -- that we plant for future generations and they planted for us. And so here I am doing my part. I'm not wealthy, there's -- I can't say that I can write a check, but I can give of myself. And I feel like I've really done that to the extent that I can. I've been very rewarded, and I really don't want to use this as -- I know everybody says I get more than I give, but I really -- I have been I think really felt the love and the embrace and the warmth of the Jewish community. And the respect, and I think that's -- I really value that. I absolutely value that tremendously. And I don't -- that kind of thing really can't be bought with money. I think that that's really been very important to me, and I found a place. Who would have thought? I can't say that I ever thought that -- I think that it was probably meant to be, but I didn't know that it was going to be meant to be. Interesting. I remember when I applied for the Jewish Endowment Foundation job I asked my good friend Ruth Kullman, I said are you going to apply for it, and she said no, and I said I've been thinking that maybe I wonder if I could do that. And she said you ought to apply for it, Sandy, because I was feeling burned out in what I was doing. So yeah I think that somebody -- once again, this is the interesting -- see, here's the interesting part. And I guess I'm not sure exactly what it says about me, but I think that it is that I think that others have tended to see something in me that maybe if I didn't see it in myself that I thought well that's a possibility, but they've really seen it. And I think that whether it's been in the Jewish Endowment Foundation that somebody said we ought to hire her or at Temple Sinai when they reinvited me, I was on the board when I was in my 20s, and that wasn't the best time in my life to be on the board, because I just wasn't ready for any important position, but I got reinvited back on the board when I was in my 40s. And then got invited to the executive committee, and they -- and I really also have to say that I am extremely grateful to the Jewish Endowment Foundation for allowing me to be president of Temple Sinai. And to not say that's a conflict, and to be able to be really Jewish in every -- a Jewish leader in the fullest sense of the word. And I really am very appreciative and I could not say -- if we haven't covered enough about the Jewish



Endowment Foundation, I think that is the most wonderful group of people. I get to see people doing the very best things. Making lives better for other people. Giving to charities. They're really wonderful people and they're out there doing wonderful things and doing mitzvot all the time. And I think that I'm doing the administering, I'm running the organization, I'm doing the day-to-day, but I really don't lose sense of the fact these -- that's -- we're living our Jewish values. These are people that are living their Jewish values that are volunteering their time making a real commitment, making a real statement. And Jewish Endowment Foundation is just wonderful. And the leadership there has been extraordinary. And Federation likewise. I've just made such great relationships. And the directors of all the agencies, we have a lot to be proud of here in New Orleans. We have whether it's Arlene Barron or Deena Gerber or Roselle, we have a new exec at Federation who I think is going to do a wonderful job, Michael Weil, and the lay leadership. I got to know Allan Bissinger so well because he was in Baton Rouge and I was in Baton Rouge and he's the president of Federation. And my president, Ellen Yellin, during Katrina. These are just people during Katrina. We just did whatever you needed to do. And JEF has committed \$1 million. We have an unrestricted fund of \$5 million and we committed \$1 million to the recovery effort. And if it takes more than that, we'll be there. That's -- this is the rainy day in more ways than one.

RH: Can you attribute this magnificent leadership, which I think I've seen too, to anything special in the Jewish community in New Orleans?

SL: I think there's a real passion, a real engagement. And I think that this Jewish community is a historic Jewish community. I think that the philanthropy here has been very historic. The Jewish philanthropy has certainly outshone any numbers that you could say that we have of Jews, whether you're talking about Isaac Delgado or the Woldenbergs or the Goldrings or any of -- or Judah Touro, I think that the -- and I think that the leadership just springs forth from this great Jewish tradition. And I think we're an assimilated community, highly assimilated community actually, but I think that there's also





a recognition of the importance of this Jewish community. And the other thing I think, and I think that my generation will be -- unfortunately will be the end of it, but I think that people came here and they stayed, and they stayed for generations. And they knew their families were here. But I think a lot of our children and a lot of even the generation before us, the children moved away, because that's the economic piece, that's the piece where we don't have the opportunities for young people that an Atlanta or Houston or Dallas have. And I think that that part has made our kids not -- I'd hate to say that I think that we are where -- if Natchez is where a lot of the Reform Jews started who came from Alsace-Lorraine and they wound up coming to the big city of New Orleans, the next step for those families is the big city in Texas or -- and I think in some ways unfortunately that that is part of the reality. But I think that for generations we have been a part of this fabric of New Orleans. I'm the third generation here in New Orleans, but I feel very devoted to it. My kids feel very devoted to New Orleans, but I don't think they're ever going to come back here and live. I think they'll feel devoted enough that if they are financially successful they'll probably keep an apartment here, they'd like to have a place to be -- or maybe they'll just come down for different holidays. But I don't think they'll live here. I think that their heart will be here, but I don't think that their physical presence will be here. But that's not -- I just think that the leadership is going to take on, I think there are going to be new people who are going to come forward, and maybe it's not going to be somebody whose family settled here at the turn of the century, it's going to be somebody who moved here in maybe 2000, maybe after Katrina, who knows?

RH: That's a big change for this community.

SL: I think that there are big changes. I think that when I was on the Temple Sinai board the first time you would say most of the board was composed of people who had been in New Orleans a very long time. The Temple Sinai board right now has a lot of people whose families have been in New Orleans a long time but it has a lot of people who have moved here recently. And I think that that's -- and we're not unusual about that. I think



that that's just happening.

RH: Do you think that Temple Sinai, have you lost a lot of your membership with deep pockets or multigenerational?

SL: It's very hard -- I don't think so, but I think the sad part is that some people who had belonged to Sinai for a very long time who lost their house in Lakewood South or Lakewood North or in Old Metairie, they've moved. So and they moved to a different community. They haven't lost touch with Temple Sinai, but they've got to establish a relationship with a new synagogue wherever they are, so they have to -- and then they're going to keep some relationship with Sinai. So I think that's really yet to unfold for us. I think that we don't know the depth of -- for all of us I think it's a moving target right now. And I think that there's -- I think that's the element of uncertainty.

RH: And it's a moving target because?

SL: Because you don't know where everybody's going to wind up. You don't know if there are people who have not moved back who are going to come back. You don't know if there are people who are here now that have been so distressed financially, and I know that there are people that we've definitely reduced dues or we've just said if you got to take a year, if you've got to take however long or if you can't pay us what you'd normally pay, what can you say, you have to say we -- that's where the Union has come in as a huge support. They have not asked us to pay national dues, any of the congregations, for last year and this year. And that's made a huge difference in our budget. I think that we're just --

RH: How much of your budget in the past has been the dues, do you know?

SL: At Temple Sinai it's fairly substantial, I don't really want to say specifically, but let's just say it's a fairly substantial number. It's not insignificant in terms of the budget. I would say that it's probably less than 10% of the budget, it's maybe 8-10%. That's big,



it's a big figure, so that was a huge gift. For them to give us that and then give us money on top of it was really -- that was a wonderful thing for them to do, and just the outpouring of support. They gave us all these gift cards to give to our congregants. They would send Target gift cards, Home Depot gift cards, Wal-Mart gift cards to give to people who really needed clothes or -- and people are so surprised when -- I'm sure you're going to interview Deena Gerber at some point, but they're so surprised. Oh how could there be these Jews that really need this? I sign checks all the time through JEF. We raised I would say close to \$100,000 from -- we didn't do any kind of a campaign to raise money, but if people sent donations we had a hurricane fund. And we segregated the money. We probably have \$100,000 that we went into this program and I asked Deena Gerber at Jewish Family Service, we came up with this program between she and Federation and JEF, it's called Helping Hands. Well I have to tell you I -- it's for a one-time grant of up to \$1,000. Today I signed a check for somebody. There are Jewish people in this community I never heard of. You'd think that -- but we're still a Jewish community of 6,500 people. We started at 10,000 we believe and we're down to 6,500. But it was -- I signed a check to a dentist, because somebody had to have dental work and they couldn't afford to do it. I can't begin to tell you the number of checks I've signed to Entergy for utility bills or Allstate for insurance or to a doctor so that somebody's child who was autistic could get therapy. There's a lot of need out there. And so I just -- I look at that and I just think there are those of us who are really blessed and then there are those people who are struggling. And I'm glad that so many people can be there for those who are struggling so much.

RH: Do you have any specific things that you think the Jewish community in the rebuilding need to do?

SL: I think number one we need to keep on doing what we're doing, because I think what we've been doing has been significant. I think there's a lot of programs out there. This Hebrew Free Loan program that JFS is doing is an important program. I think that I think



we need -- there's a -- Federation has a strategic recovery plan. In fact that's the meeting I'm going to tonight. And I think that it's the reenvisioning. I think it is seeing what kind of a Jewish community do we want to create. We want to have a very vibrant Jewish community. We want to be one of the most desirable Jewish communities in the country to come to, in the intermediate -- in our range. I think that I'm not sure what that looks like at this moment. But I think we want to do whatever we can to bring people to New Orleans, to bring Jewish families to New Orleans. We lost a third. We need to get it back. People keep on telling me there's going to be so much money coming to New Orleans. I just hope that people figure out a way to get people to come back who can make money off of whatever is going to be happening here. I hope there are a lot of Jewish carpenters out there.

RH: Right.

SL: Whatever the trades are I hope that there are Jews that want to do them, because we need to rebuild and build back a Jewish community. We need a lot of young families to come here. And I think that that's part of the mission right now is to keep on raising money and doing what we need to do to bring people back.

RH: This past year has it changed the way you look at the world or look at anything?

SL: Well it certainly has changed the way that I look at the federal government, and it's not for the better. I have a very negative view. I feel as though there was a huge disconnect between what should have been done and what was done, and I understand that there's more money coming here, but between the federal government and the state government I still think that we haven't seen it. We haven't seen enough of it. Well I'm so disillusioned with the leadership of the mayor in particular. I didn't vote for him again. I can't imagine that people actually did that. I can't -- I can only imagine that the strangest coalition in the history of probably certainly in New Orleans history that blacks and uptown Republicans would have gotten together to elect a mayor is pretty shocking.



But nevertheless, and whenever I travel, and I do travel, I do go to -- and if I go to a Jewish Endowment Foundation directors meeting and there are people, there could be 80 or 100 people there and the first question that everyone wants to know is how in the world did you ever reelect the mayor. I think that has negatively impacted our city more than anything else, because I think that people felt as though, see, those people are crazy. And I really say no, 52% of us did the wrong thing, but 48% of us did the right thing, and it's a democracy and we lost. And we are paying a huge price for that mistake.

RH: Do you think foundations and those type of organizations are less likely to open their hands? Have you noticed that?

SL: I don't know. I hope honestly -- and this is going to sound very strange. I hope there's a pity factor there. Because it certainly isn't because we look like we know what kind of -- I hope that people feel bad that a lot of people are paying the price for the unfortunate decision of the majority of the voters. So I hope that people, because I really say we deserve better. I think the new City Council is really fine. But we needed a strong mayor, and we needed a mayor who was going to lead, and who was going to -- particularly because this mayor is in his second term and he has nothing to lose. To say that one of the best -- it was the worst, but one of the things is he endorsed Bill Jefferson for Congress again. Please give me a break. We are really -- we need incredible leadership. This is a guy who doesn't have to run again. And he could really -- he could do some of the tough stuff and say the things that maybe not everybody wants to love to hear but needs to be heard. And I think that that is really -- I think that is holding us back. I don't think -- do I think that somebody -- I don't think that that's going to keep a Jewish foundation from helping our day school if they want to help our day school. Do I think that that is going to keep Congress from voting some additional money for something? Yeah, I think it really could. Because I think they'll look at it and I'm sure they're -- I didn't get to read it, but somebody said there was an editorial in USA Today that said why are these -- why save New Orleans, some crazy -- something about



something that was very negative. And you just feel like this is not right. This is -- that it didn't help us. And every day Ray Nagin is going to be Ray Nagin, and that is not going to be a leader. I didn't think he was a leader in his first term. And I was very -- and I guess I'm more of a critic than a lot of people would be because I've been in city government. And when people tell me that this is a man who doesn't have staff meetings, this is not a man who really is governing. On any number of levels. He should be appearing before the City Council. He should be having press conferences about we're doing this and we're doing that and the city's moving forward. And there's a big blank canvas. So I think that part -- I'd like to think that people will say that's not going to keep me from giving these people money. But if you're giving money because you think that there's a plan out there, I don't -- I haven't seen it.

RH: Well we haven't talked specifically about race and the storm. It can be an uncomfortable topic but it's a nice -- it's good to hear -- it's been shaped by outsiders and it's nice to hear the opinion of people who live in New Orleans, what they think about race and the storm. Do you have any thoughts?

SL: I do. I think this was an equal opportunity disaster. I think that at every level -- do I think that it was harder on people who didn't have resources that we did to get out of town? Absolutely, no question about it. I think they were very poorly served by their government. And I don't think it's just the federal government, I think it was the local government, I think there wasn't really a plan for them to get them out of town or any kind of discernible plan. And then I think that the government who can manage to fly helicopters to Iraq or fly missions and people all over the world couldn't get people here to the Convention Center or the Superdome. That just doesn't add up for me. But I don't think that that was -- but I don't think that was racial, I think that was just total ineptness, that was governmental inept -- that was not having the right people in the right positions of administration. And I think that that was at -- and that was Bush's fault. He just picked the wrong people to run programs. They had no clue what they were doing. But I don't



think that was to hurt black people more than it was to hurt whites. I think it was just stupid. It was just not being able to get a job done. And I also think that it just -- there's no one that was unaffected. Maybe somebody who lived on Audubon Place was less affected than somebody else, but I think everybody's lives were changed to a -- anybody who lost a life was certainly more terribly affected, and did they lose more black lives? Possibly. I don't even know what the racial thing was. But I know there were people in Lakeview who drowned in their houses. And I know there were people in New Orleans East who drowned in their houses. And people in Chalmette. And I think it's terrible for everybody. But I really -- I do not think that there was a particular racial -- we had a black mayor here. You can't say that he wasn't looking out for black people. Any more than -- he got reelected by black people basically. Go figure that one. I felt as though he was the guy that left them on the rooftops. And left them at the Convention Center and the Superdome. And then they voted for him. So if there was a racial element to it I think I would have been frustrated with him if I were black. But I also -- and on a personal level, I had two different people who -- I had a housekeeper who worked for me for 20 years. And she is now living in Oklahoma City. And she was rescued off of an overpass. And it wasn't because she couldn't have come and stayed at -- she was staying at somebody that she worked for, at their house on Saint Charles Avenue. And after the storm everything looked like it was OK, so she started walking. Her daughter said well we should go back home. Well she started going back to her house in Treme and the water came and she wound up -- it's a weird noise -- she wound up being rescued off of an overpass. She's now in Oklahoma City. She got a payment from FEMA -- and I'm not saying this to say that this is -- this makes anything right, because some people -- I think that in some cases some people like this did better than others. She got a payment from FEMA for her possessions. She now has somewhat of a nest egg that she didn't have before. She has a subsidized -- she has an apartment that FEMA got for her in Oklahoma City. She said it's a much better place than she's ever lived in. She's not happy. She would love to come back. Where the government has let them down is



they're not making affordable housing accessible here in New Orleans again. And I don't think there's any plan to do it. I don't see the plan. But I don't see Nagin working toward that either. I'm not saying that's his responsibility, but I think it's his responsibility in concert with the federal government to try and do something. But in the meantime I think she's going to head to Atlanta because she has no family in Oklahoma City and I think that the FEMA, whatever that is, is maybe going to let up and she's going to be left to being on disability or something like that. So but she has not fared terribly in the -- I mean she fared terribly in the sense that she lost the place that she was renting. But she doesn't say I've wound up in a worse situation than I was in before. And another lady who worked for me is in --

RH: I think we're running out of tape here.

SL: OK. Let me drink my sip of water and --

RH: OK and let's switch out the tape.

END OF Sandy Levy19-3

RH: For Katrina's Jewish Voices. I just wanted to ask you personally what are some of the biggest changes in your life because of Katrina.

SL: Well I don't know that it was a direct result of Katrina, but I lost my puppy dog, so she was ten years old, but is my Maltese, Sugar. And she was an amazing dog, and she had a heart condition. She made it to Jackson, she made it to Baton Rouge. She made it all the way through and I think I just think that her little heart just -- I think it was a lot of changes. And I wouldn't say that it was directly related. She had outlived her prognosis, so I can't say that. But that's been a huge change. That was a big loss for me. And I haven't gotten another pet, I haven't gotten another puppy dog. And not because I wouldn't like to have one. And my children wanted to give me one immediately. This was in December that Sugar died. And she actually like waited for my -- both my kids





had just come home and we had all spent the evening together talking. And she literally, she just died in my arms. And I think her heart, she just had a massive coronary. But my kids really want to give me a new puppy dog. And I've really said my life is so crazy right now with all the meetings and all the everything that I just think it would be a disservice to do that to a puppy right now. So maybe when Temple Sinai's presidency is over and my life has a little bit less of a hectic pace then I'll wind up with another puppy dog. And I think that the other way that my life has really changed is that I don't get to -- I feel as though I don't get to be with my mom as much as I really should. But then it's very hard. It isn't that I don't make time. I definitely do and I definitely am with her at least one day out of the week or one -- an evening out of the week. I try to -- I wish I could just get there twice. And sometimes -- but we talk every day. And I stay -- I think that I'm much more engaged in her life at this point than I was before. And I do have sitters and I do -- but I still have to be involved in all that. I just think that we're all -- and you asked me what I think had changed personally in my life. I think the feeling of security really has changed the most. That you have no control over whether they're events of nature or events of man, there's very little control that we have over these big things, and all you can do is do the best that you can do and react to them. And I think that sense of security or that everything that I have in my living room is going to be here and it's going to be here for my kids, I don't know that's going to happen. Another hurricane could come up the river and wash the uptown part away. Who really knows? I say certainly I have one hurricane in me, but I don't think I have two. And if you interview people I think you're going to find that they're going to almost uniformly say that you feel like OK I can do this once but I don't know whether or not I can do this twice. And that's basically from people who probably didn't lose everything. I really admire people who are going to go back and rebuild. I really do. I have a lot of -- I think that I admire everybody who said you know what, I'm here. I'm really here to stay. And I feel as though I'm definitely -- I'm here to stay. But if there's another hurricane and it washes it away again honestly I think that it'd just be too heartbreaking, I can't even conceive of that. I think there's this -- I



don't think I've ever felt as sad as I feel a lot of the times now. I think that's -- I think that that -- this is a beautiful, beautiful city. I think this was one of the most beautiful American cities in the country. And certainly from a historic perspective it's just a beautiful city and it's very sad to me, it's very very tragic to see so much of it so changed and even though I can't tell you that I thought that Freret Street was a beautiful street or that Claiborne Avenue, but just to see those areas and just see the level of destruction, and that they're not really coming back, and that there's no real plan to bring the forces to bear to get those areas back, I feel as though it's like there's just this lack of control, lack of -- the only control you have is really over yourself and your own life and maybe the things you can do within a small circle or some context. But the larger picture is just the larger picture.

RH: Any priorities for you have changed since the storm?

SL: Well I think when I have a little bit more of a break, I think I'd like to -- I don't think I've had a vacation in a really long time, and I think I'd really like to take a vacation. I think I'd like to stop and smell the roses a little bit and take -- I actually was thinking about whether or not there was such a thing as a -- not a yearlong sabbatical but maybe a monthlong sabbatical for a Jewish Endowment Foundation director who just found like she needed some time. And I was thinking about that the -- because I think I need -- I just -- this is -- I'm not attending to my own life. I think that's really where it is. I guess that's really what I would say is that if there's a forgotten person it's probably me. And I just keep on going. And I think there's this -- I think the malaise that I feel in the city is also on a personal level too. It's very hard to feel -- I'm optimistic that we're going to get through this but I don't think we're going to get through it quickly. And the other part of it that's very upsetting to me is that I feel like there are bad stories out there about New Orleans so we're not getting even the tourists. I feel terrible for the businesses in the Quarter. I feel terrible for everybody. I don't want to say that I take everybody's persona on myself, but it's agonizing. I have a job. I know I'm secure in my job. I just feel terrible



for people who are living on the edge not knowing whether or not they're going to be able to make their rent because no tourists are coming. So and that's -- and I do believe that the way that New Orleans goes is going to affect a lot of people. It's going to affect a lot of different aspects of our community. And I guess the reality is I worry too much about a lot of things that I can't necessarily fix.

RH: So do you have any ways to nurture yourself through all of this, do you have any?

SL: No.

RH: No?

SL: I don't think so, I don't really think so. I think I really do not think that I do a very good job of that. And I think that that's not necessarily a good thing, but I think that maybe at some point I'll figure out what it is that I'd like to do to be able to do that. And I think a lot of it has to do with finding time and finding some outlets or something. But right now I'm going to go from this interview to a 7:00 meeting. I'll be home at 9:00. And honestly if you say what do I do, I really -- I'll watch, I have a TiVo and I'll TiVo television shows and I'll get at least lost in some of that. But I'm very lucky because I have really a devoted family. It's small but it's very devoted. And they're really there for my support. Particularly my kids are great about staying in touch with me. So that's a huge boost.

RH: Well you've just said one thing you've learned about yourself. Not good at nurturing yourself. What else? Are there any other things you've learned about yourself this past year?

SL: Definitely that I'm a lot -- I think I've always known that I've been a very strong person. I've had a lot of challenges in my life. And I think that I just think that this is another one. That these things are just -- they're just things that you deal with. Like you deal with the things that are good in your life or the things that are disappointments or the things that didn't quite turn out the way that you wanted them to but you move on and



you move forward. And I think that I have a lot of strength. I think that I've always known that. My mother's a very strong woman and so I think that that's something that's definitely been passed on to me and so I think that I just consider what -- I think that I feel very fortunate that I've had so many blessings in my life and that the things that -- this passage is not going to be easy but it's going to be another passage. I guess for me like the lessons. I had polio when I was six months old, so I think dealing with that has been a lesson in itself.

RH: Is there any way that you look to the Jewish community, I mean other than holding it up, for -- or look at it any differently now than you did before?

SL: I think I'm just in awe, not just of our local Jewish community, but I'm just in awe of the Jewish national movement and of the national organizations, Jews on a national basis. I think that we take care of -- we didn't just take care of Jews. That's the unbelievable part. Is that the same people that wrote a check to the Union wrote a check to the Red Cross. And we didn't just take care of Jews. We took care of Jews but we also took care or -- the Union that gave us money gave \$1 million to Houston to take care of people who were in the Astrodome. And I think that that is the story that we did wonderful things for our Jewish community and we were so lucky to have these wonderful national organizations, who got money from wonderful individuals and foundations. But that they didn't say the only thing that we're interested in is the Jewish community. They were interested in helping people who needed help. And it just -- I really -- I have a tremendous amount of pride, tremendous amount of pride in the Jewish community as a whole, everywhere. It really -- I went to Los Angeles and I went to services at the Wilshire Boulevard Temple and although I had never met Rabbi Leder before, my daughter had known him. And so I introduced myself. And he called me up at services and just said we have a guest here with us. And I really decided if I -- whenever I go to another community it is an opportunity to say thank you, and that's really what I want to be able to do. I really want to be able to say thank you because



there but by -- it certainly is by the grace of God, but it's also by the grace of this incredibly wonderful caring and loving Jewish community that we're all here. And we're here to the extent that we're here. And I will -- when you talk about a personal moment, I had written an email that I sent out to a number of people, and it was after probably a month or -- it was after I had been there to watch my mother's house be gutted and saw things coming out of her house, and I wrote an email, it's fairly emotional I'm sure. But I didn't mean for it to be something that would later either be published in the Columbus Federation's newspaper or something like -- which wound up happening. And it wasn't a bad thing, but I didn't write -- there were personal things in it that I really wasn't thinking oh my -- let's everybody publish this, but I remember getting a note from Vicki Agron, who is a vice president at Jewish Federation in New York, United Jewish Communities in New York. And she sent a note and she said enclosed is a check and she sent me a very nice check and she said and I want you to spend this on yourself. Do not give this -- I'm not giving this to charity, I'm giving it to you personally, and I want you to go and do something really nice for yourself. And I was so touched by that, because it wasn't like she was a best friend who was saying go do that. She was somebody that I knew professionally but she was somebody who was really touched by my email, she said that somebody had shown her my email, because she wasn't on my email list, she wasn't that close a friend. And somebody had shown it to her and she reached out in that way and sent me that check, and I went and I had a day at a spa. That was how I nurtured myself and if my daughter's around that's how I get nurtured, because she'll say you need to go do this, Mom, we're going to go get facials or we're going to go do manicures and pedicures -- or whatever. It's that little kind of thing, it's not so much nurturing whatever you're going through spiritually or -- but it'll do. And I remember thinking what a lovely gift that was, that that was really a wonderful thing that she did for me. It was so sweet and so sincere and so thoughtful. And really very touching, and that's the Jewish community.

RH: What are you -- to kind of wrap up here, tell me what you're grateful for now.



SL: You mean besides waking up every morning and --

RH: That's a good start.

SL: That's a good start. And I really am grateful for that. I think I'm grateful for being able to wake up every morning, get out of bed and walk. I think that I'm really grateful for my family now. My family has been extraordinary, particularly my kids, I am just really -- I'm very very fortunate to have two really wonderful children. I'm fortunate to have a brother that really cares and is concerned and is there for me in the same way I'm there for him. And a mother who calls me when I'm going to meetings and says -- and if I don't call her when I get home she's going to call me and say I just want to make sure you got home OK. And so it's nice at that age that little does she think that I'm the one who's calling her in the morning to make sure she's OK, and she thinks she's checking in with me instead. But I think I just have a lot of gratitude for the wonderful friends that I have in my life too, wonderful, wonderful friends. I can't say that it's a huge group. I have a huge group of people that I would consider to be people that I know. I'm very -- and I think that's what I would have to say, that I'm very thankful that I have this wide circle of people that I know who I think are caring people. But the close friends, that's really what gets you through stuff. And I really -- I am very -- I'm grateful that I have this very wonderful friendship with my Rabbi, which has got me through a lot of things. Katrina notwithstanding, because that was he really was there during a lot of the -- and we've been shoulder to shoulder through a lot of this. I just am grateful that I've been able to -- so here's the Jewish thing -- lead a useful life. I think that when I think about it I think that's really -- that would probably epitomize everything, that I've given love and I know love and I've been able to really lead a very useful life. And I think that's probably as much as anybody would have a right to expect or want. And there's a lot of gratitude for that.

RH: That's a good place to end.



SL: OK.

RH: If you have anything you'd like to add you certainly can.

SL: Oh my God, don't you think that we've done --

RH: OK.

SL: I think we've covered the waterfront, maybe -- I don't know, maybe I forgot something, but I don't know how much of anything.

RH: Thank you.

SL: Well this has been very -- you did a great job, you certainly opened up a lot of veins. This is like when my son did something. I forget what he -- he had a school project and he --

[END OF INTERVIEW]