Stephen Richer Transcript

Rosalind Hinton: You ready? This is Rosalind Hinton interviewing Stephen Richer at the Office of the Mississippi Gulf Coast Visitors and Conventions Bureau in Gulfport, Mississippi. Today is Monday, November 27, 2006. I am conducting the interview for the Katrina Jewish Voices project of the Jewish Women's Archive in the Goldring/ Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life. Stephen, do you agree to be interviewed and understand that the interview will be video recorded?

Stephen Richer: Yeah. I'm very pleased to do this.

RH: Thank you. And if you wouldn't mind beginning with just a little of your general and Jewish education and how you came to be here in Gulfport.

SR: Well, I grew up in New Jersey. I came from a very large Jewish family, all of whom settled in North New Jersey. They came from Austria, Poland, and Russia, starting in the 1860s, and pretty much everyone was here before the turn of the century. And, in fact, a common cousin introduced my parents. They were -- this common cousin, her name was Rhoda Kreuger -- she was my mother's second cousin through her dad, my grandfather, and my father's first cousin through his mother. So my parents actually met because of relatives. And at that time, everyone lived in Newark, and I'm privileged to have been taught a lot of the family history on all four lines.

RH: Wow.

SR: So, I'm pretty excited about that. And I just recently celebrated my 60th birthday in August of this year, not last year, and one of the celebrations included going to the New Jersey Historical Society where the papers of my uncle Jack Richer, my grandfather's younger brother, are kept. He kept a full set of correspondence during World War I,

which the Richer cousins gave to the New Jersey Historical Society in 1978. And I was president of the Cousins Club. So we have a long, long tradition, particularly on holidays like Passover and Hanukah, of all getting together. We still do it. Of course, there are different faces around the table than when I started out. I grew up mostly in Randolph, New Jersey, in Morris County. I went to Hebrew School and Sunday School at the Dover Jewish Center which no longer exists in Dover, New Jersey, where I also went to high school. I was bar mitzvahed at the Dover Jewish Center, and I was sometimes active, sometimes not active, during the time from high school through my marriages. And the raising kids. At one time, I belonged to a Reform Synagogue in Reno, Nevada. At another time, I belonged to a Conservative Synagogue in Linwood, New Jersey, when I was working in Atlantic City. And when I came here to Mississippi in 1996, I found a real home with Congregation Beth Israel, which was just a very small congregation in Biloxi. And I've been very active and involved in that congregation since 1996, having served, now, in my fourth year as President. Not consecutively, by the way. And, quite frankly, the reason I was President during Hurricane Katrina, is that by tradition the immediate Past President is chair of the nominating committee and I couldn't talk anyone else into taking the job, so it was probably poor work on my part that I ended up being President again. But it turned out to be a life-changing experience.

RH: So, tell me a little bit about what it's like to be Jewish on the Gulf Coast.

SR: Well, actually, it's pretty amazing. First of all, when I came here to Mississippi, I went through an interview process and quite frankly, Mississippi was the very last state that I ever even visited out of 50. I still was kind of angry about what happened here in Mississippi when I was growing up, namely Goodman, Schwerner, and Chaney, and I avoided coming to Mississippi. But I wanted to see all 50 states, so this was the very last one that I came to. And I actually came here to the Gulf Coast on a vacation to do that. And I found it much friendlier than I had read or seen in the movies or newspaper reports, and I just sort of had that in the back of my head. And what happened is this job came

up in tourism and my background is in tourism destinations that happen to have casinos, both Nevada and Atlantic City, and I applied for the job. And during the interview process, the Chairman of the Personnel Committee, George Watson, who is, himself, a hero, having saved a whole batch of people while he was an Assistant Superintendent of Schools during Hurricane Camille -- he was the Chairman of the Interview Committee, and he said, “What things matter to you?” And I said, “Well, I probably would get involved with youth activities, cultural activities,” and I said, “I'm very committed to great race relations.” And I figured that question, that comment, would either tell me whether I wanted to be here or whether I didn't. And I could hear them smile on the other end of the phone that they liked that. And so -- I have found, since I've been here, that it's been really great in terms of race relations and also in terms of the respect for the Jewish community, small though it is, here on the coast. And what I found was that it's not what you believe that's important to Mississippi. It's whether you believe. And I happen to have a pretty prominent position because it is a tourism economy, and I get more than my share of experience with TV interviews and other things like that in this community. But I found out that as much airtime as I've had and newspaper visibility, the time I got the most comments from the general public was when they saw me simply sitting in a pew during a Yom Hashoah service and people would say, “Gee, we knew you were great on tourism, but we didn't know you were a person of faith, too.” So it really underscores how much people here are comfortable with others who believe in God and if there ever was a time when believing in God mattered, it was right after Katrina when hope was the currency of the day.

RH: So why don't we get into the Katrina story and you tell me what you did to prepare and when you left.

SR: Well, that's an interesting story. I was supposed to be on duty at the courthouse during the storm as one of the key members of the county government. We had a meeting at three o'clock on Friday, right before the storm, to go over preparations and at

that meeting, we were instructed, by the county, to shut off all of the computers and put gas into all of the cars and then let the employees go home. That was Friday. On Saturday, there was another briefing which was a lot more ominous, and I pretty much spent all day Saturday in my office and I did call some of the staff to take some things out. I, myself, took a few things out of my office, and spent most of my time like rearranging the furniture so it was away from the windows because we had beautiful floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the Gulf of Mexico in our building, in our boardroom. I put some tarps over some of the things that mattered to me in my office, and I took the pictures off the wall and stacked them on the desk. And some people came in and took some things out. Unfortunately, I left most of my stuff in the office, and I went home that night and continued to follow the weather reports. And, as I said, I was supposed to go on duty on Sunday and when Sunday morning came, I live in a Zone A area in Gulfport because of the proximity of my house to the bayou. And I called over there, because I have two dogs, and I said, “You know, what should I be doing. I'm sitting here. I'm in Zone A. I know I'm supposed to be on duty. But I'm wondering whether I should stay or whether I should evacuate.” And the person on duty said, “You should evacuate because you're in Zone A. Don't worry about it.” So, pretty much --

RH: So what does Zone A mean?

SR: It's a very high propensity for flooding.

RH: OK.

SR: So I decided primarily because I thought the dogs would drown if I stayed, plus I didn't know what else was going to happen. I made the decision with that conversation to go, and I was planning to go to the Florida Panhandle but the danger zone for Katrina was there, too. I mean, what good it is fleeing from one dangerous area to another because they both were storm warnings Sunday morning. And I made an impromptu decision to continue on to my sister's house in Sebastian, Florida, which normally would

be a 10-12 hour drive. It took 17 hours because of traffic. You know, driving with the dogs and I had a couple of friends with me who also needed to flee. They lived on the front beach. And by the time I got to my sister's house, it was close to 3:30 in the morning, and I got there just in time to watch the Mississippi Gulf Coast go underwater on national TV. What I had just left, I watched it being totally destroyed on television. I knew some of the people I knew being interviewed later in the day, having swam to safety or climbed out of windows in their homes. I mean, it was incredible. But, although I wasn't here to deal with the emergency here, I did have a working computer. I did have a working telephone. And people could reach me to correspond and communicate about what was going on. So I played an active role in getting the word out with the national media about what was happening because I was getting other communications by e-mail from some people who could communicate back here, plus -- and this was sort of an amazing thing, too -- WLOX, our local TV station, and the Sun-Herald, our local newspaper, were covering everything. And I could pick it up by computer. So I could interpret from what they were saying what was going on here and then I re-interpreted it as a spokesperson to the media and other people who were trying to reach me because they could get through on e-mail. That was on Monday when the storm hit.

RH: Who was -- who were you corresponding with on e-mail? Who was sending you information?

SR: It was incredible. I got e-mail from Jewish groups. I got e-mail from people in the travel industry. I got e-mail from people who knew me in the national media. I got e-mail from organizations who wanted to help out. It was so much e-mail -- I've never had that much e-mail except for that time immediately following the storm. And what I decided to do, after driving all day Sunday, watching what happened most of Monday, I decided to go to our advertising agency offices in Miami, Florida, which was less -- it was about a three-hour drive from my sister's house, and set up shop and had some help from the advertising agency dealing with the national media who were trying to find out more

about what was going on. So it was fortuitous in a big way that I wasn't here because I could deal with some of the issues of the day where people wanted information because I was able to get that offline and other sources as well.

RH: What type of information were people looking for from you? What was the most important thing you could be doing at that --

SR: Well, number one, “Are you OK?” Meaning, me and the community. You know, “What's going on? What does this mean for the future in tourism? What kind of help do you need?” And, you know, we did some things like -- I work with a guy named Bruce Turkel who was the owner of the Turkel Agency, who also happens to be Jewish, by the way. And we started something like on Wednesday, two days after the storm, called Build Back Our Coast Fund. And we got some organizations to give money to that, and so far, that fund has given away three-quarters of a million dollars to different organizations who have needed assistance. Cultural groups, community groups, and it's worked through the Gulf Coast Community Foundation. We found a way to work with them by reaching them by cell phone. And we set that up and had a press conference in Miami to say that if people wanted to help, they could send money to that fund. So we just tried to help answer some of the questions and, you know, do our little piece of getting folks to be of assistance in ways that were meaningful.

RH: What was going through your mind when you saw where you had just left go underwater?

SR: Well, I actually had enough distraction to not worry about what had happened in the sense that -- in other words, I call it like -- there was a faux euphoria around here, you know, a false sense of everything is OK, because people were comparing whether they lost their houses. Or, you know, “Did you lose your car?” “Yeah, I lost my car.” “Oh, I did, too.” So, people were sort of feeling, well, it can't be that bad because my neighbor had something worse happen or they had the same thing happen. Where I was, I had so

much to do and so many people to contact to try to tell them what kind of help we needed, that I buried myself in the communication. And it wasn't until I got back on the following Monday and saw the devastation firsthand, you know, how dramatic it was. And it's just not something your mind can comprehend. I mean, people that I know really well, you know, they didn't have any underwear except the pair they had on when the storm hit. People didn't have drinking water. People didn't have a place to sleep. You know, it took a better part of a few weeks to find out if all the staff and members of this commission where I worked had survived. And shortly after I got back we had a board meeting of Congregation Beth Israel. You know, we had Milton Grishman's office. We met over there. Couldn't meet at the synagogue. It was too full of water and wind damage, even though it was still standing. And, you know, we decided to try and do three things. Help any congregants who needed it. Help the community. And then try and figure out what we were going to do about rebuilding our congregation, but that was third. So, short-term, our little congregation, this small band of Jews here in Mississippi, Gulf Coast --

RH: Tell me how many.

SR: Well, we got up to about 75 units, which means either one individual or a family of five, but that's just a unit. So we had almost 75 units of members at the peak in the last 10 years. Right now, we're closer to 50. So, yeah. We lost some. Some moved away. When I say, lost some, it's from moving away. We didn't lose anybody in the storm itself, although, certainly other people drowned or went missing. And have never been found. But that didn't happen to us. So we had phenomenal help in the very immediate days after the storm. You know, we had help from UJC. We had help from USCJ, which, of course, is the United Jewish Communities, United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, who came down here, brought some cash to give to people who were without homes, without anything, so they could, you know, at least get some food. And if they needed to have some place to stay -- I mean, it was really a tough time. And then the thing that I'm

really proud about is we were able to stimulate a lot of giving from Jewish organizations around the country who sent truckloads of stuff. You know, different synagogues, different federations, corporations, associations, you know, people came and helped -- it was so amazing. The very first day we were able to go over to the synagogue and take a look at it, which, I think, was Tuesday or Wednesday, you know, after I got back on Monday, that very day, the Chabad Relief Motor Home showed up from Brooklyn, and it's really quite a moving story. They showed up at the shul and they wanted to see who they could help. And we sent them to different places to try to help out. And one of the things they did is they came to my house and they took out the wet rugs.

RH: Why don't you tell me a little bit about what happened to your house in this Zone A.

SR: Well, there probably was about three or four feet of water and unfortunately, I had a floor-to-ceiling library and I had a lot of things that were closer to the floor that I had not moved. So, I lost all of my yearbooks, including the Princeton Yearbook that I was the editor-in-chief. I lost my mother's yearbook, my uncle's yearbook, my father's yearbook. All kinds of other books I had collected. Family furniture that had been in the family for years. Documents. All of my photo albums. It just went on and on and on. But they came in and they took out the rugs and I have cousins that are Lubavitchers too. So they went to school in Brooklyn at the Chabad school there. My cousin, Shlomo, has 10 kids. So far, three are Rabbis and one is married to a Rabbi and the other six haven't yet made the age yet for that but -- so I'm talking to these people who came from Chabad and, you know, we were having the Jewish geography deal, and of course, some of them knew my cousins. So I called my cousin Shlomo and his wife, Tzora, and said, “Hey, some people are down here. They're helping out.” And I said, “I was so moved that they should come.” And I said to them, “It's like my relatives are here.” And Tzora said, “No, Stephen, they are your relatives.” So, I mean, here are people who, you know, made this really tough trip and were here within a matter of days giving relief to anyone who needed it. And there was a ecumenical moment at that synagogue, too, while we were still

dealing with the Chabad relief, two people come by on an open flatbed truck, Baptists from Oklahoma City, and they've got bleach and they've got food and they've got diapers and they've got all this other stuff and they said, “Do you people need anything? Whatever you need, just take it off the truck.” So here are Oklahoma Baptists stopping at the synagogue offering us something. And it was such a clear advance notice of what was going to happen because what happened thereafter and still is happening is that people are coming from all over America to help. They help everyone. They don't care what your religion is. They don't care what your race is. They don't care what your economic status is. They just want to know if you need help. And, in the past year, if people could bottle the spirit that's been here on the Mississippi Gulf Coast in terms of ecumenical, cross-religious understanding and cooperation, the whole country, if not the whole world, would be a better place, because I have worked with, of course, Jews and Baptists and Methodists and Presbyterians and Muslims and Catholics and Lutherans and boy -- you can go down the whole list. We've had the Amish down here. You name it, people have been here from every walk of life, every race, every faith just helping. And it's -- if anything could reaffirm one's sense in the overall meaning of religion and being kind to one's brothers and sisters, we are immersed in it. Just immersed in it. And in my job, as well as my involvement with the synagogue, I've had more than my share of opportunities to meet with all of these different kinds of people who have come to help and that's the only thing that breaks me up is the unlimited amount of kindness from people who come asking nothing, giving everything, and then they feel better when they leave because they're so appreciated and so acknowledged. I mean, it's just a beautiful thing. I really can't put it into words. But it just -- it really -- it breaks me up to see how many people are coming here. People who are here, who gave up their jobs and their leases on apartments in New York City and in other places around the country, and they're working with Hands On and AmeriCorps and all of these other volunteer groups and they don't even know when they're going to go back. They just want to be here and help. I mean, how do you even begin to acknowledge somebody who is willing to do

that? It's just amazing.

RH: As a Jewish man, you're used to being on the giving end. What is it like to be on the receiving end? Have you thought about that?

SR: Yeah. I think about it a lot. You know, it's kind of a funny thing, and if I can go back to the time -- I think it was about late-September, early-October, 2005, we had our first meeting of our congregation and it was really amazing how things happened because there were some very wonderful things that happened at that time. And I want to pick one up and mention it at this time. But, we had the first meeting and it was actually, I think, after the High Holiday services. And before we got to any business at all, we just asked everybody to stand up and tell us how they were. It was a very big turnout. We had 50, 60 people there. And it was just so heart wrenching to see people stand up and say, “Well, I'm doing fine. It's true that my house is gone and everything that I've ever owned in my whole life is gone, but I'm here to tell you about it. So I feel pretty good and I know things are going to get better.” But, you know, one after the other after the other. You know, telling these heart-wrenching things. People who swam to turn off the gas to their stove because they had eight feet of water in their house and everybody was upstairs and they found out that the gas was on, that a pipe was broken, and you know that the man in the house and his son had to go swim out and shut if off underwater. People who watched their belongings float away. People who came back to homes that were either not there or were dramatically damaged. People who didn't have jobs anymore because the jobs were gone because the place they worked was gone. I mean, there just were so many different things. But people had this amazing spirit. Amazing. And along with that, we were able -- actually, for two years, now, to hold the High Holiday services at Keesler Air Force Base with the permission of the, you know, the Commander of the base. It was two different Commanders, two different years. We had Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur services and last year we actually had Simchat Torah on the base as well. This year we were able to handle that ourselves. So, here we are on the

base. People are gathering. We've got all kinds of challah showing up from the Princeton Jewish Center and cards from kids from Israel and Washington, D.C., and people are sending us stuff, and new Tallit and, you know, all kinds of things. And our congregation for that first High Holidays after the storm, FEMA workers, volunteers, medical people, all kinds of folks that were coming through -- it was a big, national, group of people who came and were on this Air Force Base. And probably the single-most moving part of the whole ceremony -- when they got to the point in the services where they asked for everyone who has either suffered an illness or been through tragedy recently, you know, to stand up. Sort of the Prayer for the Sick. The whole congregation stood up and we had a visiting Rabbi, Rabbi Eisenberg from New York City and he said -- he was a retired Rabbi -- he said he never, in his entire career, saw an entire congregation stand up for that prayer. Because everyone had just been through so much grief, so much pain. And the highlight for me of the whole High Holidays in 2005 was right before Kol Nidre, David Lord, the Base Commander, General David Lord, now at the Pentagon, came and spoke before Kol Nidre. And he gave the most eloquent speech on why it was the military's role in the United States government to protect religious freedom. And everybody's heart was like pounding. Here's this guy whose own base had millions and millions of dollars, close to $1 billion dollars worth of damage on the base. His enlisted people and other leaders were out helping restore the community. They lost the hospital temporarily because of damages, and he comes to our High Holiday service and says something so eloquent about religious freedom in America in the height of this devastation. You know, so many individual moments like that in the last 15 months -- kindness, understanding, even the fact that our congregation received an unsolicited invitation to meet at the Beauvoir Methodist Church while we relocated ourselves for as long as necessary. I mean, can you imagine. Here's a church that sees our plight, writes us a letter, and says, “You know, you've been allowing our students to come from the confirmation class to observe your religious practices and we appreciate that so much. And we know you're homeless right now so you can come and meet in our

church for as long as necessary." And not only have we met there and had a gigantic Passover Seder, which included the congregation from the church and other people in the community, not only have we shared our Hanukah party with them, but a year ago, not quite a year ago, we had the Yom Ha'shoah service in April, in the church, we had civic and church leaders and, just coincidentally, a group of Rabbis from Southern California were here doing volunteer work and they brought with them ministers from one of the black Baptist churches in Southern California. So we had Rabbis and ministers and local clergy and people from all walks of life including the minister from the Methodist Church, all reading names for Yom Ha'shoah. I mean, you can't invent this stuff. It's all a by-product of the spirituality and kindness that came out of Hurricane Katrina.

RH: You sound like you're grateful to be a witness to this.

SR: It's a life-changing event. It's hard to be here and go through this because there is so much loss and so much grief. But, on the other hand, there is so much spirit. If nothing else, you have to change your value system. You know, I suffered a lot of material losses, but it's just stuff. The people who survived is what counts. You change dramatically as to what really is important in life and it's relationships. It's friends and family. I don't think there's a single person here who hasn't learned that lesson in a very emphatic way. And then to see what other people come and bring in terms of their own willingness to give -- that's a people-to-people thing. And, as I said earlier, the more people who come here and can feel the spirituality, feel the sharing, learn about what true giving is, everybody is enriched. And you know, I think we went too far in one direction with materialism in recent years and at least, in this community, along the Gulf Coast, materialism is not where we're at. You know, spirituality is where we're at.

RH: Now, I have to say that that seems to be an irony, if we think about the Gulf Coast as this casino area.

SR: Right.

RH: And as being the Las Vegas of the South.

SR: Right.

RH: Have you thought about that irony?

SR: I don't really see the irony.

RH: OK.

SR: Because the casino people, the ones who own the casinos, have been among the most giving, the most caring -- I mean, for example, the Isle of Capri Casino, even though it didn't open from August 29 until December, nobody was ever removed from the payroll at all. Other people got their folks back as quickly as they could. Some corporations did national fundraising within the corporation to send special assistance to their employees here. So they weren't any different than the rest of us. They had the same experiences, the same issues, and worked in the same way to try to bring the place back. In fact, if anything, re-opening the casinos has helped put people back to work. And they're also very heavily involved in addressing the problems of the housing shortage. So --

RH: Are you involved in that?

SR: We're involved in everything. We have to be. I don't work directly on any of the committees that are dealing with housing, but I am part of the Gulf Coast Business Council that is dealing with that. I am more involved in the economic resurgence issues.

RH: Why don't you tell me a little bit, since we've moved on to this, a little bit about the process of recovery. In your hat as the -- with the tourism and convention --

SR: Well, there's certainly --

RH: -- the losses and the recovery.

SR: -- there's certainly a recovery process for different aspects of the economy, and we're trying to build back our accommodations and our meeting space and our attractions and all of those things. But the best way that I've heard the whole recovery process described is sort of building up Maslow's Pyramid of Needs. You know, we started out with, “Is there water? Is there shelter? Is there clothing? Is there medical care? Is there food?” You know, right at the bottom of the pyramid. And, little by little, we keep going up the pyramid. You know, are there cultural resources. Is there transportation? Is there communication? You know, until we get to the point where there is discretionary, luxurious items which certainly are at the very top of the pyramid. But I mean, we really were right down – “Who's got bleach? Who's got diapers? Who's got breakfast cereal? Who's got socks?” That's where we started. So to go through the entire process like that. I mean, I had one of the Commissioners who sits around this table, in fact, the one who was the Chairman of the Personnel Committee and the hero, one of the heroes, of Hurricane Katrina, he got his first outfits from one of the charitable organizations that gives out clothing until he got back into some place to live. He lived with his daughter for a long time because he lost his life entirely. Another one of our Commissioners, in fact, the President of the Board, lost most of his house. The only thing, the bedroom was still standing, but the rest of the house was gone. And he didn't get enough insurance money, nor enough of a state grant to build back. So he's moved up to Madison, Mississippi. Can't stay, because he can get a bigger house, his wife and he, there.

RH: Has this been the great equalizer?

SR: Well, you know, equalizer is the wrong term. Because, you know, that implies something to do with means and affluence and possessions. To me, it brought people to a common point in our value system. And that is, “How is your health? You know, “How is your family? Are you OK?” Really important stuff. You know, what you own isn't what's important. It's how you are. And, I think we all could learn a lot in America, and really across the world, about what's truly important and it's not about stuff. It's about

people. And how we treat others. And I've been treated so well by so many people from so many places with so many different backgrounds and so has this community. It's a gigantic lesson.

RH: If you were going to teach someone about giving, what have you learned about giving that you would want to let others know?

SR: Well, the first thing, and it's often stated -- the act of giving doesn't require the recipient to know who gave or even to acknowledge the giver directly. True giving is something that the act, itself, is its own reward. So, I feel really good about that kind of giving that's happened here. If you happen to get acknowledged, too, wonderful. But, if it's really giving, what you did is going to give you so much more than anything else. You know, it's nice to be thanked, but if you truly gave, you're going to feel that inside so fully that the acknowledgement is almost superfluous. And there's been a lot of it here. You know, just so much.

RH: I heard an interesting story about cosmetics. I don't know if you can remember.

SR: Oh yeah. I sure can.

RH: Can you tell that one?

SR: I had a little bit to do with that.

RH: OK.

SR: One of the things that we were doing early on, because we had a pretty big list of people who were kind of looking after us and sending us donations and we were doing some things by e-mail, and particularly some of the Jewish organizations, you know, in New York and around the country who had helped us, different Federations, anyway, we kept asking the people at the locations where they were giving out food and bleach and

clothing and so on if there was anything that they needed because we would mention it in our newsletter because people kept asking, “What is it that people need?” Anyway, at one point in one newsletter we said, “Women need make-up because it will make them feel more complete.” Just a comment from one of the people operating one of the shelters, you know, relief areas. Somehow, from one Jewish organization, it got to the Lauder family. And $100,000 worth of Estee Lauder make-up showed up in Hancock County. They didn't publicize it. They didn't announce it. Whoever showed up, it was there for the taking. And I don't even know if an adequate “thank you” was even made for that generous gift. It just showed up. And we had another one that was kind of like that. When it got into December of last year we said, hey, it's getting a little bit cold. People are still living in tents. Some of them have FEMA trailers. They don't have houses. We need warm blankets and hats and gloves and scarves and so on and so on. So, a nice young lady saw that in one of our little bulletins, I don't know how she got it, but she was from the Lion Yarn Company in New Jersey over in Hudson County and she called me and said, “Is this true?” And I said, “yes. It's absolutely true.” She said, “Give me where we can send things and I'm going to mention it in our 300,000-member e-mail knitter distribution.” And all of a sudden, from all over America, blankets and hats and gloves and scarves and all these things start showing up. And there have been other stories like that. Somebody mentioned kids didn't have prom dresses and tuxedos and there, you know, some other people over in Diamondhead -- Sue Halperin, she's like this one Jewish organizer over there. They have a small group that meets at the Diamondhead Country Club for like an impromptu service. I think it's a very small group. But anyway, she got on that project and she got hundreds and hundreds of prom gowns and tuxedos to distribute. It's just been amazing. Just amazing.

RH: So this is really -- when you say, in our little bulletin, you mean Beth Is -- you mean your Jewish bulletin?

SR: No. It was a little newsletter about how we're doing that we wrote and sent -- and we e-mailed it out to the people who had been in touch with us, both from organizations and individuals.

RH: And "we" is --

SR: Congregation Beth Israel.

RH: Beth Israel.

SR: Yeah. I wrote a little thing. Here's an update. And we didn't do it all that often, but in the beginning we did it because we were getting so many e-mails of tell us what you need, tell us how you are, so we just kept sending it out in bulk. You know, we still have hundreds of names on a list of people who -- just in the Jewish community -- made contributions. And mostly it's a synagogue or organization or whatever, but there were so many people we heard from -- I mean, people were so kind. They just would call. Somehow they would find Congregation Beth Israel on a list, or they would see an article in one of the Jewish media -- however they found us, they found us. And they said, “Here's what we're willing to do. Tell us what to do.” It was like a full-time job. We couldn't keep up with it. There were so many people trying to help. And I'm sure that is absolutely true with every faith, every organization, every town. It blows you away. It just blows you away.

RH: So, tell me about how you feel the response of the Jewish community has been? I mean, you're telling me, but let's talk about it specifically.

SR: Well, do you want to talk about our Jewish community to what's happened to them, or do you want to talk about what the national Jewish community has done to help?

RH: Both. Both.

SR: Which one would you like first?

RH: Start with the last, the national Jewish community.

SR: It's just been phenomenal. I mean, here we are, probably a few hundred Jews in Southern Mississippi, so it's not about helping a few hundred Jews. I think the whole idea of tikkun olam and mitzvahs and all of the giving that's been taught. People have reached out, and I know sometimes they use us for advice. Like, for example, the Lauder product, I don't know if any Jews got any of that. It just came down here because they saw that we needed it. I am absolutely sure that all of the things that came from the Lion Yarn Company, very few of it went to Jews. It went to the general community. One of the things that I'm very excited about is United Jewish Communities has a $1.5 million dollar project to assist in mental health issues, which was prompted by a visit they made probably eight months ago to see what they could do to help, because they were sitting on the money they'd been given rather than spending it all at once. And General Joe Spraggins, who is the head of emergency operations here in Harrison County, said, “We're going to run into a situation where mental health is going to be really critical because people are going to start getting answers like, ‘no,’ to ‘are you going to get insurance money? Are you going to get a grant? Are you going to get a loan from the SBA?’ And people are going to be really stressed.” So they've put together a million-and-a-half dollar mental health program to work on mental health. There is a consulting rabbi down here who is working with clergy and lay leaders in three states. They have a $275,000 grant to the Mississippi Gulf Coast Mental Health Association to get programs started for kids. So here's the national Jewish community -- those dollars will primarily impact people who are not Jewish. I'm really proud of that. And I'm proud of all of the other Jewish groups that have sent money down here to help others. But I think that that's what we believe in, and here we are carrying it out in a really big way.

RH: What does that say about Judaism?

SR: It says something really good. But I also have to tell you that we can, you know, walk around the coast and visit other houses of worship and look at what their national organizations have done, like Presbyterian Disaster Assistance has been here in a tent camp since September of 2005 with hundreds of workers, volunteers from churches, you know, Presbyterian churches, and they haven't stopped yet. The Lutherans are here. You know, there are all kinds of long-term commitments by different faith-based organizations all over this coast. And it's hard to say, “Well, look at us.” And I wouldn't say that we did something nice. What I'd say is, “We, too, did something nice. We're part of the overall community, despite our small size.” Our national community is as much of a participant as any other faith-based organization, and that's the way it should be.

RH: It sounds a little like your community has had a greater impact, I mean, has had an enormous impact for its size.

SR: Well, I think we've had a very good impact, but you know, I feel almost as though the national Jewish community, you know, whether it's B'nai B'rith or others, will be here, whether there were Jews here or not. They help. They look at where help is needed, and that's what I feel really good about. They weren't here because there were Jews only; they're here because people needed help, just like a lot of the other faiths. So, did that work with us and through us and, in some cases, help us? Sure. But I think in a very significant way, there's been a lot more effort made for the whole community than for the Jewish community, from the national Jewish community. And that's good. I mean, I've had people, you know, sit across the table from me in the last year and say, I really didn't know that much about the Jewish community before, but I'm really pleased about how much they cared. You know, it's opened my eyes a little bit. So that's good for everybody. I mean, there's a really nice feeling to be sitting on the other side of a conversation from somebody who really wasn't tuned in very much at all. And there have been a number of people that have come and been guests at the Yom Ha’shoah service

and that's their exposure. But people are now getting more exposure. All of these kids are going to have some mental health counseling. I just feel really good about that. And you know, the Jewish community is not the only ones helping on mental health. There are a lot of other people helping on that, too. But I just feel good that we're helping.

RH: Tell me about Beth Israel and its relationship to -- we talked about the national Jewish so now back to the first part of the question. Their relationship to the larger community and how that's working.

SR: I think it's working as well as any other part of the community. You know, I think we're respected for who we are. People know there is a synagogue here. We've had lots of different visitors over a period of time and perhaps one of the great anecdotes for right now is just a few months ago, the Lynn Meadows Discovery Center Theater Workshop Group did a production of "Fiddler on the Roof."

RH: OK.

SR: There was only one Jewishly trained kid in the production who happens to be a black girl who played a white -- actually, just played a Jewish guy. Not a white guy, just a Jewish guy in Russia, so you can surmise -- so she was wearing aware that high silk hat and the -- she was teaching all of the other kids how to do the Jewish dances. It was really great. But anyway, the entire cast came to services to ask questions about Judaism, about, you know, how we got here and we try to say, “You know, the story of Anatevka is a true story. A lot of our relatives came that way.” And they came back after the show to thank us for helping them. And it was really great. When Raven was in the show, that's our affiliated member, she was the coach. So, Raven did a great job. The only thing she didn't like about it was she had to play a guy. She's a very attractive young lady and very smart.

RH: We're going to wrap up just for a minute here for the first tape.

SR: OK.

[END OF PART ONE]

RH: This is Tape 2 for Katrina's Jewish Voices interviewing Stephen Richer. And what I wanted to know was what's the hardest part about being back here in the Gulf Coast.

STEPHEN RICHER: I think the hardest thing is the time it's going to take to get back to some semblance of normal, whatever that means. There's always that story that you hear about places that have had big changes and somebody asks for directions and they say, “Well turn left where the Esso station used to be.” We're at a point in some cases where it's “Turn left where the rubble used to be from the Esso station.” (laughter) You can't recognize the place. And so much is changing and certainly not fast enough. And it's almost like time is on two different cycles. There's time is speeding by because there's so much to do. And time is crawling because so much is undone. So in the same day I'll feel like where did the day go, and then I'll look at what needs to still be done and go, “Oh my gosh this is taking so long.” And I see a lot of things like that. It's really hard to get a fix, because it's well over a year since the storm, but when I go to my house it seems like it was yesterday.

RH: Tell me about that. How is your house? Where is it now?

SR: Well, my house has all of the sheetrock up and the floors are gone. I went through all these different phases with my house. When I came back I couldn't get into the house and I ended up sleeping in a car, which I have since sold, in the back seat of a van. And the next morning when I got up what I found out was that the door -- I'd opened the door with my key -- was swollen from the water. But somebody had cut down some trees near the house. So I took the stump of a tree and ramrodded my way into my house. Now this house still had the furniture in it, still had all kinds of things in it. And at first glance it looks pretty good. It isn't until you get real close and find the squishy rugs and mold in

everything, seawater in your dresser drawers, and all of the books and things that looked good from a distance looked terrible up close. And at first I wanted to try and save my house in the way that it looked. And I had the boards taken down carefully and stored, to put back the same finish. And it's going to be a totally different house. And took months to negotiate with the insurance company, months to make applications for SBA and state grants. And it took forever to try and do the inventory of the contents. Really never did that as well as I would like to have done it, because I had so many things in storage from generations of things, and my own stuff was over 50 years' worth of stuff. I lost -- just a stupid little example, a completely well kept set of Boys' Life issues from age eight to age 18, every single issue all in good condition waiting for somebody to enjoy, totally destroyed. I had Mad Magazines from fifth grade till the present. And books. And just like any time I would open my -- I had the paper published the day after Kennedy was shot I had saved. Destroyed. Every little thing was like more pain. I almost feel like the people who had everything washed away were luckier because they didn't have to revisit their losses. So that was pretty tough and what I've learned to do in a mentally healthy way is just push all that stuff away. I have memories of when I enjoyed it and I can't do anything about its condition now and it's gone. But inventorying it was horrible, just horrible. So and I think that's what hurts people the most, is all the things that are gone. Because it prompts memories. So they now have to reconstitute their memories without the things that prompt the memories. And a lot of things will just be forgotten as a normal course of time you forget about things that you did, because there's nothing there to remind you. I think that's probably the hardest.

RH: That's a real definition of loss, isn't it, when you have --

SR: Well, this is a really funny comment, but I want you to appreciate this for what I think is its depth. But what's happened to a lot of us is we've almost gone to our own funerals and heard from so many people how much they really loved us and cared about us. People don't usually get to have all these expressions of caring until after they can't

receive them. I think we all get a healthy dose of them. Some more healthy than others. But people who have been victims of this storm and other natural and sometimes manmade tragedies get to hear that. We who are the survivors have had such an outpouring of caring from people through our whole lives who've reached out for us and our neighbors and our friends. People from all over the country, you can see right behind us some of the volunteers who came from the travel industry to work on cleaning up projects here. Something called Tourism Cares. And they signed how much they cared about the Mississippi Gulf Coast. And they also raised money and I think we got $50, $60,000 in gifts from selling those kind of wristbands that Lance Armstrong wears. But it's a really funny feeling to have everybody acknowledge you ahead of time. (laughter)

RH: Do you ever ask yourself why am I here. Is there anything that would tip you to --

SR: Yeah it could be that I need to be here. I actually applied for a job since the storm, which luckily I didn't get, because I really need to be here. And if you don't mind I'm going to do something and tell you an anecdote that I happened to hear because of another Jewish group that came from southern California. And they stayed I believe with one of the Presbyterian churches in Gulfport. So it was farewell time for this group going back to California. And I was invited to come speak and thank them and one of the people who also came to thank them was the volunteer coordinator from the church. I'm going to make this as quick as I can but this is about --

RH: Take your time.

SR: -- why am I here. I have to speak after this woman. She's from New England. She went to what was called a laugh convention, people who believe in the power of laughter to heal, and met a guy from here, and they're both in their 50s. And she was a speaker and while she was speaking she asked for questions afterward and this guy stood up and said my question is will you marry me, and she said well I'll deal with that question later. And he was serious and he pursued her and eventually introduced her to his parents and

went with her to meet her parents in Oregon, all this stuff. So anyway she ends up here on the Mississippi Gulf Coast with this guy married. Then she tells us that in the middle of one night 3:00 in the morning gets up, says he has a pain in his chest, and dies. So here she is from New England in Gulfport and she's asking herself the question why am I here, this man I married is gone, what should I do. And Katrina comes. And she decided that she was here to help people through the storm. So OK, that's pretty heart-wrenching to start, right? So she says you never know why you might be where you are and where you're supposed to be. So she tells a story of a group of volunteers that she sent out to do a work order, which is somebody needed help so they have a work order, sent them out. They go out and they clean out this elderly couple's house, I think they're both in their 70s. So they get finished and the man says to the volunteer leader I can't tell you how much it meant to us that you came to help us today. He says it's OK, we do this all the time. We're glad -- he says no. You don't know how much this meant to us that you came here today. He says no it's OK, we do this all the time. He says you really don't understand. It's February, and nobody has asked how we were since the storm, and last night my wife and I had agreed to commit suicide, and you came today, and we've changed our mind. So the volunteer leader said well that's great, and I'm glad that that happened, but somebody cared about you, because the work order sent us here, and the man says let me see that work order. And he grabbed the work order. And he said you're at the wrong address. This address is a mile from here. So you never know why it is you are where you are but there's got to be a reason. And I think that's a big part of what we all believe. So maybe I wasn't supposed to find somebody to be president this year and maybe my career led me here because I have something to contribute. I'd like to believe that. And I think a lot of other people who are here believe that too. And in that sense of spirituality, it's easy to feel that we're in the right place at the right time despite the hardships. But there won't be anybody who comes away from this experience diminished, I don't think anyone will.

RH: What does spirituality mean to you? Can you articulate in any way?

SR: Well, to me it's a belief system based on a whole body of knowledge and teaching, some of which can't be fully answered because there are not answers for some of the things that are the basis on how we even exist. So if you can wrap your arms around God and God's ability to make decisions, even something as horrendous as Katrina, and move ahead, then you have spirituality with which to exist in this life and whatever comes hereafter. It's not something that's necessarily set by any particular written word, but I think it's something that we communicate with each other in lots of different ways. And sometimes it's body language, sometimes it's touching, sometimes it's an anonymous gift that shows up in an envelope, people are moved by a lot of different things. And I've been very lucky in my life to do a lot of traveling, and I don't know that anybody has a monopoly on wisdom, so I don't have any hesitation wherever I might be to go into somebody else's place of worship and pray either how they pray or how I want to pray. Because I think God has lots of ears and will listen. If the God we believe in is the one true God, God's going to be listening from anyplace at any time in any form. And I've been in Buddhist temples and Hindu shrines and Catholic churches and I feel comfortable knowing that the same God is in all of those places. And to me how people celebrate their spirituality is perfectly acceptable as long as they have some sense of brotherhood and sisterhood and helping others and a value system that comes pretty much to the same place. Might be through different teachings, might be through different traditions, but it still needs to come to the same place. I've always found that we have more in common on this planet than we have that's different. Everybody wants to be loved, everybody wants a safe place to live, everybody wants respect, everybody wants to be healthy, everybody wants to have a loving family that they're close to, nobody wants to be hungry, pretty simple stuff. What they eat, how they look, what they wear, what they speak, that's immaterial, those are small differences, things to enjoy.

RH: Things to enjoy? The differences?

SR: Oh yeah, sure, absolutely, being Jewish and living the experiential life that we choose -- I think Jewish people are famous for trying other things. I even went to a kosher Indian restaurant in New York one time. So we're the people who like the differences. We like our own traditions, but I think we can enjoy those differences as part of an enriched life.

RH: Well, has being Jewish meant -- is there anything to you this past year during this experience?

SR: Oh absolutely. Talk about a sense of community, there is such a strong sense of community throughout the country. There've been more people who have come to see us as if they were close relatives, and you would think the behavior was as if they were close relatives, how can we help, what do you need, not strangers. And it's been one of the most beautiful things I've ever seen, is how people have rallied to make sure we know that people are out there willing to help us and our community. It's just deepened my sense of being part of something bigger than our synagogue, bigger than my extended family. My cousin Tzora had it right when she said they're not like your relatives, they are your relatives. (laughter) That's what's happened. I just feel so close to everybody and I'm sure our community does too. We've had so many visitors at Friday night services from all over the country. And to find a synagogue that's meeting for Friday night services in the fellowship hall in a Methodist church, you got to do some work. (laughter) But people have found us and they really have wanted to be part of it and see our story and sometimes retell it. It's been incredible.

RH: Are there any Jewish observances that have meant more to you since the storm than before?

SR: All of them. Something as simple as just the Friday night services. And I'll tell you one of the things that's happened is when I first got here a big issue was could we have a Rabbinic presence. There were three issues. One was having an administrator, one

was having Sunday school, one was having a Rabbinic presence. Boy do we have a Rabbinic presence. (laughter) We have the most frequently visiting Rabbi ever, Noah Farkas, who is the student body president at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York. We have Myrna Matsa, who is -- it's really her name, M-A-T-S-A, Rabbi Myrna Matsa, who is here with a mental health program. Two weekends ago we had our previous student Rabbi Annie Tucker here with a group of volunteer tenth graders from the Princeton Jewish Center. And then we have things like 20 Rabbis showing up from California, people leading different groups coming in here. We've had leadership from the Simon Wiesenthal Center in Los Angeles. We've had 500 kids last year from Hillel. The Chabad relief group. The Reform Judaism group. Itinerant Rabbi from the Institute for Southern Jewish Life. So we've got more presence here -- of course all the Chabad people were Rabbis too. They're all Rabbis. Three Rabbis came that first time. I didn't mention they were all Rabbis. So it's kind of interesting that it took Hurricane Katrina to introduce more Jews to Mississippi probably than any other single thing. Maybe the casinos brought a lot of people down on vacation. But in a religious sense there have been more Jews visiting Mississippi because of this hurricane than probably any single other reason. Isn't that amazing?

RH: It is pretty amazing.

SR: And if you look at what's come out of it, is the Jewish community nationally and Mississippi through the Jewish community here have become much closer. And some of the work that we're doing with the national community has involved our federal legislative delegation, particularly Senator Cochran and Senator Lott. It's involved the governor. Let me tell you a little interesting story about Governor Barbour. We've had pretty close to 20 kids from all over America who have helped raise money for their bar or bat mitzvah project for Mississippi. And Mississippi has an annual picnic in Central Park. And last year in addition to having our normal Mississippi college alumni and friends of Mississippi come to the park, we found as many names that we could of volunteer groups and

individuals, including ones that had worked with Congregation Beth Israel, who lived in the New York-New Jersey-Connecticut-Pennsylvania area. And we invited them to come to the picnic. So Governor Barbour got to have his picture taken with this young lady from Montville, New Jersey, who had raised money to help Mississippi for her bat mitzvah project. So we introduced them and this is why she's here, and he was proud of her, and he had a picture with the parents and all this stuff. So imagine all that, plus both our Cantor and our Rabbi for the High Holidays live in New York City. They both walked over, because it was on Shabbos. And got to say hello to everybody. So here's all these Jews who schlepped all the way down here to Mississippi coming over to Central Park and getting to meet the governor and being recognized as volunteers and thanked where they live. So it all brings things together. And we need more direct conversation between a lot of people in this world. And I think that's one of the really important and very meaningful byproducts of the storm, is all this communication. And it won't be undone. Our ad agency that -- actually they're no longer working with us -- had as one of its ad strategies, it's called “Hearts, then Minds.” The idea is if you get people by the heartstrings they logically will follow and want to be involved with you. We have hundreds of thousands of people who came here to volunteer. Maybe half a million or more, who are emotionally involved with the Mississippi Gulf Coast and its residents. And they keep coming back to help. They follow what's going on here. They tell our story. They understand what human caring is about. So as painful as it's been for a lot of people, myself included, there's great positive results coming out of the storm's aftermath. A lot of it's intangible. But a tremendous amount of it is so enriching. Would I pick to have the storm again? No. But do I like some of the things that have happened as a result? Very definitely.

RH: So what does Mississippi Gulf Coast have to teach the nation? Or just the experience of the past 15 months?

SR: Well, there's a funny thing about Mississippi. And while it isn't number one in many things, one of the things -- actually two of the things that Mississippi is a top-ranked state, it's not number one, but it's in the top few, percentage of gross income that is devoted to charitable giving, we're way up there, way way up there. People give freely. And secondly we're way near the top in terms of people who go to a house of worship on a weekly basis. And probably those two things are interrelated, because I'm sure that a lot of the giving has to include faith-based organizations. So I think what people can learn from Mississippi, which is by anyone's measure still one of the lowest per capita income states in the country, is that there's a quality of life that comes from giving and spirituality that in many ways surpasses stuff. And I got caught up in stuff. I had not only my stuff but my father's stuff and my grandfather's stuff, and in some cases my great-grandfather's stuff. It's still stuff.

RH: 20 years of Mad Magazines or more.

SR: Oh no, it was more like 45 years' worth. More than that even. 50 years' worth, yeah. I enjoyed reading them.

RH: How has your work changed?

SR: Oh it's been tremendous. Before the storm we were really a top destination on its way really moving way way up. And it really was a matter of expanding markets, getting more messages out, attracting more product to invest here. And once the storm hit we were down to inventorying what was left, what's opened, going from international and national drive-in markets to trying to entice people who could drive over here to come back. Working hard to get the product reopened. And we did a very extensive trip -- in conjunction with that picnic, by the way -- to New York to talk to the national media about why it was a sound investment to come back to Mississippi whether it was going to be casinos or restaurants or retail. Any of the kinds of things that would both improve the quality of life and make it more pleasurable for visitors. And what's happening is

Mississippi miracle part two, we're seeing billions of dollars of new investment here. So we're going to end up being a top destination probably better than we would have been without the storm. It's just going to be a few years of getting things put back together that quite frankly don't know if really want to go through that. But we have to. But we got in to see more national media this time than in all of our eight or nine prior trips, and I'm talking about Business Week, the Wall Street Journal, Fortune, Forbes, the Daily News.

RH: And what's the angle that you're getting in?

SR: The Mississippi recovery.

RH: The recovery.

SR: Key word. Recovery. And we weren't the only place that was impacted. People here in Mississippi, including the governor, the local leaders, federal legislators, the private sector and the communities, all worked together to come up with plans on how to rebuild. Right away. So while we were dealing with Maslow's pyramid of needs on the lowest level, we were also envisioning what we could be if we got the resources. And people have worked here incredibly well together and things are coming back and there's a tremendous amount of confidence in investing in Mississippi, probably more so than ever before.

RH: So what's the engine that's driving the recovery?

SR: There's a lot of engines. Some of it is simply there's just so much money coming in the rebuilding of homes, which is coming from federal grants, some insurance, some SBA loans and things like that. Private sector investment, particularly from the casinos and some other people that are putting up condo hotels and a lot of subdivisions. And federal and state government investment in replacing infrastructure, which creates jobs. The money for all that circulates. So there's been some really phenomenal in-depth stories done in a lot of the key national media about what's happening here in

Mississippi, and I'm really happy to be a little part of that. That's another bright spot. It's always good to talk about the future in positive terms. So we're trying to look ahead, not back.

RH: Are there any people being left behind in the sense that communities that were poorer, that can't afford to come into the new Mississippi?

SR: Well there's a lot of little issues. For example, a phenomenal proportion of the rental housing market was destroyed. So people who were renters, a lot of them had to leave because there was no places to rent. And even now places that are available to rent are at higher rents. So and there's been some adjustment in terms of the job market, because for a while the jobs weren't all available. But we're back now to ten casinos out of a dozen. And more on the way. So the jobs are coming back too. The big laggard is the housing stock. We really need a lot more housing. So were some people left behind? I can't say they were left behind, but if there was no job or no housing, I think a lot of people relocated and did other things. And some people will come back and some won't. The one thing that's positive here in Mississippi -- and this is real simple. Two things really. One is everything here is above sea level. So we don't have to build as high and with the same kinds of codes and setbacks and flood zones that our neighbor to the west in New Orleans has to do. And secondly the storm was different here. Our storm the water was in and out in eight hours. Left a tremendous amount of damage, 60,000 buildings gone, another 150,000 damaged. But it was in and out. Whereas our dear friends in New Orleans when the levees broke, some of those houses below sea level sat in water not for eight hours but days if not longer. And that caused a different kind of damage. Most of those houses are still there, they weren't washed away or blown away, but they sat in very tough circumstances. So they have a different set of problems to address. It was really like two different storms.

RH: You came because -- to the Mississippi Gulf Coast -- because you wanted -- well one of the things you said earlier was race relationships were very important to you. What do you think about Katrina and race?

SR: Well, I think there's different circumstances. I have the pleasure of working with a lot of different people in the community here. And I think there's been a tremendous amount of help given to everybody in Mississippi. I think the one big differential is homeowners versus renters in terms of what the federally funded state grants deal with. And that's not really race but it's class possibly in terms of who owns a home and who rents a home. But I haven't seen any exacerbation of race-related issues here in Mississippi from before and after the storm. There's been tremendous amount of new housing like that Habitat for Humanity and others have come into the state to help develop. And as I started out by saying people have been helping everybody. And it's almost an irony of sorts that some of the prototypes of people who are depicted nationally as not getting along are the very ones who are helping each other here in Mississippi right now.

RH: What do you mean?

SR: Well sometimes you get the idea of race division on a political basis in terms of how people look at voting in the South. But that's not what you see when you see who's volunteering and who they're helping. Today I went to go get a screening on my vascular system and it was in a black church. It was a reduced price for four different tests. And this white couple came in, saw the woman who runs the church, and they immediately embraced because they're old buddies. Now if I took that image and tried to convince people in other parts of America that that could happen here in Mississippi they probably would think I'm making it up. But it happens all the time. And it doesn't play itself out the same way politically -- at least not here on the coast. People work together all the time. And I'm really pleased with it. I wouldn't have come if I felt there was going to be an

issue. And I've been here now 11 years and I've seen people of various backgrounds working together on the same issues and getting results. Because we're all in the same boat. Probably bad analogy when we're talking about Hurricane Katrina, because a boat wouldn't have lasted. But people know how to work together and this whole thing I'm telling you about the Mississippi recovery, it had to be across political lines, across racial lines, across geographic lines for it to happen. And it has. And that's because people are putting what's good for Mississippi first.

RH: Do you have a changing demographic? Are you getting more Latinos?

SR: Yes. Yes. It's interesting what's happening here. Number one we are getting a lot of Latinos who are coming in to do some of the reconstruction work. But we're also getting retirees. We're getting people who are coming down to visit. Like what they find. They like the quality of life and move here. So this is like one of the hot places to retire. And with these big corporations that are coming here, moving a lot of people in from other states like New Jersey and Nevada and California, and I think we're going to see more of that.

RH: Corporations?

SR: Well, big ones that the gaming companies represent, but there's also other corporations like Chevron and Dupont. There's a lot of very professional scientists and engineers over at NASA Space Center. The banks. So people are coming here from all over the country and they find that they really like the lifestyle. They like how people are. It's -- if I could summarize it, there's a phrase around here called “mom-an-em,” you've probably heard it, where somebody'll say, “How's your ‘mom-an-em’?” which is short for how's your mother and her friends (them). That's what people will ask first before they ask almost anything else. They want to know how you are. And that's really nice. Forget about going right to the business deal. It's really interesting. About four months ago now there was a Meet the Press session where they had a whole bunch of clergy on

with Tim Russert and they were talking about what's going on in America right now in terms of differences between different religions and so on. And actually the Rabbi, who was part of this group, they had a very good cross-section, evangelical and a priest and Protestant clergy and so on. He said somehow or other we've gotten to the point of thinking in terms of well what can Rosalind do for me, what will knowing Rosalind do for either my career or my bank account, and somehow there's a big hole that we've left in ourselves about how will knowing Rosalind allow me to grow as a person, what can I do, how can our friendship make me richer in a spiritual and human way. Well, guess what? That Rabbi was talking about what's going on here right now. And that's why so many people are coming here. Every single time I go to a farewell party for a group of volunteers, the universal comment is we thought we came to help you but you helped us. We feel so much better about ourselves having been here because we ended up being the recipients because their giving was a gift to them. It filled that hole of their humanity. We didn't give them anything material. We gave them something that truly was spiritual and much more valuable.

RH: Tell me about Beth Israel. How is it doing in the recovery?

SR: That's a great question. We've lost some members. They've moved away for other jobs. To be with family. If they lost their homes. We have new members who have come to the community too. We're now into pretty much our second year already at the Beauvoir Methodist Church. But we have finished plans, at least the preliminary ones, for a new synagogue, in Gulfport. Land which was donated by one of the families in our congregation. We have a goodly sum of money that was given to us by different Jewish organizations and individuals. And we're in line to receive a small grant from the Bush-Clinton Interfaith Fund. And we're going to sell the building lot where our current synagogue which is unusable is located. And we're going to move. And we're very busy looking at what Judaic items need to go in there, what's the layout going to be. Plans are for a big room which can serve as a sanctuary. Maybe half-filled with movable chairs.

And when we need to we can take the movable chairs out and make it possible to have a bar mitzvah or a wedding or a seder. And there'll be two apartments in it, one for a caretaker and one for a visiting Rabbi. And it'll be expandable. And we're pretty excited about that. And knock on wood, everyone is well, we still have good turnouts for meetings. We have great turnouts for High Holidays and other holidays. And we've pretty much made a minyan I think all but once every Friday night since the storm, which is kind of amazing.

RH: Is it different than before?

SR: Sure it's different. We're meeting in a fellowship hall in a church.

RH: No. I meant were you able to make a minyan before or --

SR: Sometimes it was hard even on Friday night.

RH: In New Orleans they've noticed that attendance is up even though congregations are down.

SR: Sure. I think attendance is up. Because people get enriched by being with each other. Plus everybody wants to see who's coming this week. Because we get so many unusual guests.

RH: Do you have any concerns about the future for the congregation?

SR: Actually I'm very optimistic. I think the storm has brought everybody closer together. We have some really great dialogues. We've got some new leadership that's being developed. In the last month or so we had a Jewish wedding. Was in Destin, Florida, but it was one of our congregants. So a lot of nice things are happening.

RH: And how about are there any things that you feel like you want to see happen?

SR: Oh there are so many. I don't know where one could start in terms of the community, in terms of the economy.

RH: Well give me a few hopes for the future. And give it to me in both terms of the larger economy -- they seem to be intertwined. But also your hopes for the Jewish community on the Gulf Coast.

SR: Well, I think everything probably boils down to quality of life. And in the quality of life that I envision people are nourished a lot of ways. They're emotionally nourished, they're spiritually nourished, they're intellectually nourished. And that can be by who lives here, what things are happening, what things there are to do and experience. And we've actually got quite a lot of that. And some needs to return. Like our cultural treasures. People are very friendly. But the cleanup and rebuilding is going to be very helpful. But it's so amazing because almost everybody has a plan to improve what they had before. And we're not going to go backwards into something that was worse than we had before. It's going to be something dramatically better than we had before because everything's going to be so new with a lot of tradition put in there. So people are reaching out to do a little bit better than before. They're making improvements. So I want to see the quality of life improve for everybody. And that has every element in it. Quality of education, quality of medical care, quality of cultural attractions, quality of food, everything, quality of shopping. And then in that same quality of life vein I'd like to see if we can't keep everybody talking and sharing. It's been absolutely amazing how easy it's been to be a synagogue in a church. If you go to that church right now and read their reader board outside it's got our time and our services posted and their time and their services posted on the reader board. Doesn't create a problem. And the Methodist members come by, say how proud they are that we're there. This same church, by the way, is hosting the Hands On Network in a building behind the church. And that's the same place that President Bush stopped when he wanted to recognize volunteers. And I'm pleased to say also that Friday morning we have 19 visiting media from Europe who are going to

come and hear remarks by General Spraggins -- actually Saturday morning, excuse me -- on what happened during the emergency. And they're going to get to meet some of the volunteers over breakfast who have come here on their own nickel to help out. So it'll be 19 media from Ireland, the UK, Netherlands, Germany and Austria. Are all coming to see what's going on in this recovery and how we're doing all that and what's being built. So it's going to be really great. That's the most media from Europe ever to visit Mississippi ever. Ever ever ever all at once. So that's exciting.

RH: Well it's occurring to me that some of these things are happening because of your dual role. That the synagogue is enjoying some of the dual role here as if you had been a Methodist. The 19 media might be visiting.

SR: Well sometimes those of us who belong to -- whether it's a fraternal organization or a civic club or a religion, people will react to whatever your affiliation is and say well I know so-and-so who's affiliated with such-and-such and they must be nice people or not based on what people they know. And I think the people here in the Jewish community have made a pretty good impact on their neighbors. The fellow who just got married happens to be a TV news reporter who's very well known. He's also vice president of the synagogue. Brad Kessie. Milton Grishman, whom you met, is a past president of Biloxi Chamber, and his family's longtime real estate people. Then there's other people like the Goldins who gave the property where the synagogue is going to be erected who are well known in the community. And I think people look at individuals and say oh it must be a nice community because so-and-so is a nice person. So the best all of us can do is to try and live up to being an asset for our community and to anything else with which we're affiliated.

RH: Tell me what you've learned about yourself in this whole process.

SR: Oh far too much to try and delineate here.

RH: Summarize?

SR: Well, I think the one thing I learned that was surprising is how much I really could let go of and not be in pain for very long. I'm a packrat. My son Jack who is very close to me always was saying Dad -- I have a lot of houses -- says you got to clean up all the stuff in all those houses, because I don't want to do it. So he's like thrilled that all this stuff is gone. He didn't want to go through it all. And I actually was able to get some relief from Jack. I called him up and I said Jack of all the stuff that got destroyed how much of is it that you wanted. He said well maybe one box worth would have been enough but I didn't want the rest of all that stuff you've accumulated. So I said thank goodness. (laughter) Because now I don't have to feel guilty that he was deprived. So I learned that about myself. And I also learned I'm much more resilient than I thought I could be. But it hasn't been easy. It's nice to be resilient during an interview like this but I think there isn't a single one of us who hasn't curled up in a fetal position since the storm. There isn't a single one of us who hasn't wished it all away. There isn't a single one of us who didn't want to go off in a corner somewhere and just cry our eyes out. And not so much for what's happened to us but what's happened to others. We really haven't talked about people who drowned. Two nights ago I was watching Titanic and I remember the Guggenheim family I think it was curling up in bed, an elderly couple, waiting to drown. There were elderly couples here who didn't leave their house. Some of whom I know. Who drowned. One was a doctor in his 90s and his wife. They're just gone. It's hard not to think about the people who didn't survive because as much as I can kvell about all the generosity there are still people who paid the ultimate price for the storm. Not as many here as in other places, but you have to wonder. Joe Spraggins, the general, has a lot of wisdom. He's a roughhewn guy and he fits the military image just great but he's a real first class human being. And he was telling a story to this group from United Jewish Communities that came here to try to investigate how to help out. He said he met a single mom with two kids who said General, you need to be very selective when you make these mandatory evacuation orders, because every time you do that and

I have to leave, it's a choice between leaving, paying for the gas, paying for a room someplace, or paying the rent and feeding my kids the way I normally do for that particular time period. So General Spraggins said why don't we have a different system, that if someone has to make that kind of mandatory order we at least have the ability to pay for their evacuation on the front end. How many people didn't evacuate here in the Mississippi Gulf Coast because it was August 29th, and their monthly welfare check, Social Security check, pension check, hadn't come? How many people in New Orleans didn't leave because they didn't have transportation and they didn't have a way to pay for an airplane ticket or a railroad seat or whatever it was to get out of Dodge? Why are we taking care of the people on the back end after they've gone through all this and some of them we have to deal with them in body bags? We need to change how we handle these kind of disasters. I know I'm traveling a little bit further from the question that you asked. But these are valid questions. And I really admire Joe a lot. I've known him for quite some time because he was involved with -- believe it or not -- the Military Affairs Tourism Committee to attract reunions here and active duty events. And he also was the host, and still is, by the way, over at the Air National Guard, when we put together meals on Thanksgiving and Christmas to distribute to the needy. But you know what he did? He found a shelter that the next time there's a storm you can come with your pet. And you want to know why Joe did that? There's a whole batch of elderly people refused to leave their home because they couldn't bring their pet, and a lot of them died for that reason, because that cat or that dog or more than one was their only close family. Stupid rule, you can't bring a pet to a shelter, and people died. So it's really great to have a guy like Joe Spraggins who is one of the people who now is excited about the Jewish community because of what UJC is doing, who's thinking about those kind of small but very important issues, whether a single mom can afford to evacuate, whether somebody's going to stay in their house because of their pet, good stuff. Having a water supply immediately ready and you don't have to wait for three days. He's got all this stuff figured out. I'm real proud of Joe. But he's a good representative of what this community is

about. And no he's not Jewish, but he's real proud to know a whole bunch of people from Los Angeles and Chicago and Florida and New York who came here who are Jewish to help him with a need that he felt needed to be addressed.

RH: Is there anything else you'd like to add?

SR: Yeah, it probably has permeated this interview, and come up in a lot of different ways, but I can't possibly end an interview without saying as emphatically as I can the currency of the Mississippi Gulf Coast and all those who were affected by this hurricane and others immediately after the storm was really one word, and that's hope. And I hope that whoever sees this interview or reads about it will take this one message. The thousands and thousands of people, hundreds of thousands, who came here to help. And others who sent supplies or cash or prayers or good wishes gave people hope at the most difficult time we had faced. And our hearts go out to you. Our thanks will never be adequate. But that's why we're here to look at a brighter day, is that so many people cared enough to say you're not alone, there's a helping hand here, too.

[END OF INTERVIEW]