Rachel Van Voorhees Transcript

ROSALIND HINTON: This is Rosalind Hinton interviewing Rachel Van Voorhees. Voorhees?

RACHEL VAN VOORHEES: Voorhees.

RH: Voorhees. At her home, 800 Amethyst on the Lakefront in New Orleans, Louisiana. Today is Thursday, August 2nd, 2007. I'm conducting the interview for Katrina's Jewish Voices project of the Jewish Women's Archive and the Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life. Rachel, do you agree to be interviewed and understand that interview will be video recorded?

RV: Yes, I do.

RH: Why don't we begin with a little of your own personal background, music and general education, Jewish education, and how you came to be in New Orleans.

RV: Well, I grew up in the New York area. I was very fortunate. I, during high school, started music school at Juilliard, and then I went to -- I thought I might want to be a premed major while I was still studying the harp. I went to Purchase College, which is also in the New York area -- it's a State University of New York. Then, I did my graduate degrees at Yale University. While I was there, there was an audition for the New Orleans Symphony. I came and auditioned and won the position. I just thought I'd see what an audition was like. I never expected to actually win and then move here, and that's what brought me to the New Orleans area. I moved here in 1977.

RH: Tell me a little bit now about your Jewish education.

RV: Well, my father was a Protestant denomination. Actually, he didn't believe in organized religion. So, when he died, we actually never knew what religion he was born into. My mom was from the Jewish religion. And all of my relatives were Jewish. So, I didn't really have any formal Jewish education. But all the family members that I knew and spent time with were Jewish. That really is the basis for my education as a youth.

RH: When you came to New Orleans, did you engage the Jewish community at all?

RV: Mm-hmm. I was very active at Touro Synagogue. I should say that when I was living in New York, I would go with my relatives to Temple Emanu-El, which is in Lynbrook, New York. When I moved here, I heard Cantor Slifkin speak. He wasn't actually an ordained cantor, but he was a great liturgical singer. I really, to this day, think he had the voice of God. I became very enamored with attending services at Touro because of his beautiful voice. I was a big fan of Rabbi Goldstein, who was there as well. Then, when I married, my husband had grown up in the Catholic faith but, like my father, didn't particularly believe in organized religion. We wanted to pick a religion for our children. So, we chose to raise them in the Jewish religion. They were both bar mitzvahed and confirmed at Touro Synagogue.

RH: Oh, at Touro? You mentioned in the pre-interview questionnaire that you're also a member of Temple Sinai.

RV: In New Orleans, you have the opportunity, if you have varying circumstances, to have a joint membership with synagogues. I really am a tremendous fan of Temple Sinai and Rabbi Cohn as well. Actually, I have just finished serving on the board. I've just rotated off the board at Temple Sinai. So, I'm a very big fan obviously of both institutions.

RH: So, I didn't realize that you served on the board the past couple years at Temple Sinai.

RV: Mm-hmm.

RH: How did you try to do a Jewish life for you and your children here in New Orleans? What was that like?

RV: Well, when you grow up in New York, and there's such a predominant Jewish culture, you don't really have to apply yourself very hard because it permeates the community.

So having grown up in a place that was predominantly -- or seemed to be predominantly -- one religion where I was living, living in New Orleans, which was predominantly Catholic, I found that you had to be more proactive about raising children in a religion other than Catholic. They went through all of the Sunday school grades at Touro's religious school. And, as I mentioned, they were both bar mitzvahed -- bar and bat mitzvahed there. They're members of the Gift of Israel program. Although I have to admit we've been very nervous about having them actually take the trip. Although I'm assured I should. But they are looking forward at some point to taking advantage of that wonderful program and taking a trip to Israel.

RH: How old are your children now? Tell me their names.

RV: I have two kids. My son's name is David Zachary Dixon. He goes by Zach. He just turned eighteen. He'll be a senior this year at Phillips Academy Andover in the Boston area. My daughter is twenty. She will be a junior at the University of Southern California in LA. So, they're on opposite coasts. They're on opposite coasts of the United States, and I'm in the middle.

RH: What did you say her name was again?

RV: Elexa. I'm sorry.

RH: Elexa. OK, if there's one memory that you had that would be a Jewish memory that describes your relationship to the Jewish community and the Jewish community here in

New Orleans, what would that be?

RV: Well, I think it's a very unique community. It's very mainstream. I'm always amazed at how wonderfully the culture of the Jewish religion as well as the religion, but I mean the culture of the Jewish religion melds with the culture of New Orleans and its history. I think the Jewish community in New Orleans does it particularly well.

RH: Really? Can you give me any examples of that?

RV: There's so many examples. I find myself thinking it just at random times. But for instance, Cantor Colman, who's the cantor at Temple Sinai, is a fire chaplain for the New Orleans Fire Department. If you think about the nuance of that, probably a large majority of the firemen are Catholic. If they're in a life-and-death situation and they need a final rite, that they wanted this Jewish chaplain to be their chaplain as opposed to somebody who can say last rites from the Catholic religion, I think that's quite a testimony to him. I see examples of that all throughout the community, which always impresses me.

RH: That's a great example. Thanks. Why don't we get into the Katrina story somewhat? You tell me, were you in town when it hit; were you aware what you do in general on hurricanes?

RV: Well, in general, when they say a hurricane's coming, I leave. I have a very flat -- firm policy. I don't stay. In the case of Hurricane Katrina, I play -- I have been very fortunate to play the Grand Teton Music Festival, which is in Jackson Hole, Wyoming.

It's a wonderful international festival in the middle of the most spectacular mountains on the planet. I was actually scheduled to fly home the day the hurricane hit. My friends there said, "You better stay here till we figure out what's really going on." So, my children had both left for school, so they were not here. And I was in Jackson. So, it wasn't that we had to evacuate. We already had left the area. But it was very interesting already being somewhere else and watching things unfold.

I don't know what's scarier, being here and not knowing what's happening to you, having evacuated where you're on the road, or being really far away where you're watching in. There are three scenarios. None of them are particularly appealing, obviously. But I was staying in this beautiful guesthouse on top of a butte watching CNN, and they always shoot from the top of the levee here at the end of Canal Boulevard. I actually saw my house. I'm watching my house. I'm watching this thing kind of unfold from Jackson Hole, Wyoming. It was very unnerving, I think, because any way you do this, it's very unnerving, so I really can't say, but it was an unnerving experience. There were some almost funny, they're not really funny, but funny moments. I remember I saw -- I had a safety deposit box on the corner at the bank on Canal Boulevard and Robert E. Lee. And I actually watched it go underwater on CNN. It's like hm. There's just like certain moments, and I'm like, "God, this is like an out-of-body experience. That's like real. Oh, this is bad." So that was unique. One of the things that I find so amazing about the hurricane is everyone has a very personal story of exactly what happened to them and how things unfolded for them; the impact, and how it has changed them for a lifetime. But I find that most people I know don't complain. I've often commented that I am amazed how I don't really know anyone who sat around having a pity party to this day. That people look around, and no matter how bad it is, they know somebody who has it worse or somebody who's having a harder time. I don't really find that people are so wrapped up in themselves, despite the hardships you see them dealing with through these past two years.

RH: When did you realize that you weren't going back? What went through your mind?

RV: Well, I'm sure, like for everyone else, it was a very surreal experience. The whole time you're thinking, "I'm sure this isn't really happening." A lot of it was the not knowing here at the lake that the 17th Street Canal -- going everything. My first response was, "OK, everything's gone. Let's just figure out how to deal with this." I'm sure that's what most people's response was. "OK, it's all underwater. Let's just get a grip." In my case, I

have to say I was very blessed. I can't begin to say how lucky I was. Because I had worked in Jackson Hole for so long, I really had dear friends there. It wasn't that I was just on a job. They really enveloped and helped me.

Just like everyone else around the country, total strangers really stepped up to the plate in the true meaning of *tzedakah*, really helped tremendously. So, like everyone, I had no access to money. I had no access to any of my papers, to accounts, to information, to insurance information, nothing. I remember one person in particular among so many. One of the presidents of a bank in Jackson Hole called me up. We didn't know each other. He said, "You're going to need some help, and I want to offer my senior staff at the bank to give you a hand." I remember saying to him, I said, "Well, sir, that's very nice, but I don't even know what kind of help I'm going to need. I don't really know what this will be all about." And he said, "Well, for starters, you're going to need to have access to money," because if you remember, there was no electricity, and there were no banks and no nothing. Somehow, he managed -- I bank with a small homestead. He was able through his staff to find the cell phone number of the manager of the bank who had evacuated to another city and gave me the number so I could call her to find out how I could get some funds, just all sorts of nice things. Everyone. You feel self-conscious describing some of the things that happened to you because so many people did so many small and huge things that were equally appreciated.

RH: Is there a Jewish community in Jackson Hole?

RV: There is. I know.

It seems more esoteric than a Jewish community in Mississippi.

It is a very growing Jewish community in Jackson Hole. They bring in a Rabbi once or twice a month. They have a lecture series. Kids there are now being bar and bat mitzvahed. I am, as you know, just here for this week. I'm going back to continue

playing there for the rest of the summer. I was just talking to Gary Trauner, who ran for the US Congressional seat. Although he didn't win, I met him the other night, and he told me he had just come back from Israel, where his son was bar mitzvahed at the Wall.

So, I would say, yes, there is a vibrant and growing Jewish community in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, of all things.

RH: Did you connect to that community in particular? Or was it more the broader community?

RV: I would have to say the broader community, only because they really just all enveloped me to try to give me a hand. I was so appreciative. If you were in a state like Tennessee or Texas or Alabama, surrounding states, there were probably lots of people. But if you're pretty much one of only a handful, on the one hand, they don't really have an apparatus to help you because it's so far removed from what was happening here in New Orleans, but by like token, people all over the country were only too happy to try to help where they could. So, I would say the broader community really gave me a hand.

RH: Who did you try to get in touch with?

RV: Well, of course, the first thing I did was get hold of my children to try to explain what was going on to them so they wouldn't be afraid. Even though, for instance, the college kids and my son -- because he was going to boarding school -- even though they were already gone, they were just gone. They had just left. My daughter had just started college. My son had just started this boarding school. So, all these young people that had started school that year, they just started school, and they're trying to figure out what happened and what was going on.

I had concerns for a lot of the young people to explain what had happened. Of course, all relatives and close friends. But it was so hard to make contact. The cell phones weren't really working. There were no phones. There was no way for me to call. So, the

internet really became the way that people tracked each other down.

My relatives in New York and around the country, the only way they could eventually try to find me was through computers, through the internet. I do want to tell you one beautiful story.

Actually, I've had it in my mind. I hope somebody from Phillips Academy Andover someday will see this interview. Because if I had my act a little bit more together, I always thought I wanted to write an article to *Newsweek* magazine to that column "My Turn" about Phillips Academy and the hurricane. I want to tell you what they did. Most schools across the country, everyone tried to be helpful. This does not in any way diminish what anyone else did.

But Phillips, my son, hadn't even started the school yet. He was just going there. He was actually at the soccer training camp. He hadn't started the school yet because it wouldn't have started till Labor Day. He spoke with the Headmaster -- Headmistress of the school. This school was so proactive; they decided they were going to offer twenty spots to New Orleans kids for school for the Fall. That's unheard of. Many schools offered a few spots or reciprocal relationships. But for this institution to have decided they were going to offer twenty spots to New Orleans children, they're just quiet heroes that no one would ever know this. So, here they interviewed -- the funny part is they talked to my son, gives them a list of kids that he thinks would be qualified. In his own generosity, he recommended all very capable smart kids he thought would really help them. Well, the parents -- and they were from all different schools here in New Orleans. But the parents had seen us go through the process of deciding on which -- that he had been accepted at both Exeter and Andover. They watched us go through this process during the past year to decide where he might go to school. Everybody was so desperate because suddenly their child had no place to go to school. So, the headmistress flew to Houston and set up interviews with these young people and offered

twenty spots. Eighteen of the New Orleans kids accepted this unbelievable gift from this institution and went. There was my son Zach, the big expert.

Well, he had never attended there a day himself. But he had actually planned on going. So somehow, he was the leader of this little entourage. The parents, I think, felt some sense of comfort or confidence in having watched us make this decision. They thought, well, if Zach's going, it must be a good place. Everyone was desperate for what to do. I always tease my son and say he's the only person that I know who would be so young and brave to leave this wonderful cocoon of New Orleans to decide he wanted to leave his friends and leave everything he knew to go so far away, but he got to bring eighteen of his friends with him to start out. But kidding aside about him is what an amazingly overwhelmingly generous thing for that institution to have done for these young people.

RH: So, he was surrounded with some friends, and not only that, they set up a situation where New Orleans people could be with other New Orleans people.

RV: Right. It was an amazing thing. I have always thought I need to write this to that column "My Turn" now that it's after the fact to explain what angst and anxiety these parents were under, just the small things like, "Where is my child going to go to school? It's bad enough the house is gone, our possessions are gone, our livelihood is gone, where are these children going to go to school?" Many of them were sophomores, juniors, and seniors. Their records are gone. They were taking my son's word that they were excellent students because they don't have records to show them or transcripts or SAT scores or anything else. I just really think there are so many quiet miracles that happened. But to me, that really is one that really should be noted, because inviting twenty young people. It's such an expensive school, and to have opened up their arms just blanketly and finding spaces when they had a full roster, finding twenty more spaces for an institution is not such an easy thing to do. And to do it as beautifully and generously as they did; it was amazing.

RH: How long were you away? Also, your own work dissolved.

RV: Yeah, it did.

RH: What happened on that front?

RV: Well, we can all talk about all the really bad things about the hurricane. But some really great things did come out of it. Before the hurricane, I was based in New Orleans, and while I still did recording work and did solo things outside of the city, I was primarily in New Orleans. Well, the Lakefront, as you know, was one of the last places to be opened up. Even now, it's unnervingly empty. We still don't have any services. There's not a supermarket or a drugstore. Now it's a big deal. We have a gas station and an Ace Hardware store, and a coffee shop. That is the full progress of two years' time. It's a very unnerving experience, I think, living at the Lakefront or the lake in Lakeview. It's also if you live uptown, while everyone was totally impacted, there is a semblance of real-life going on up there because they have all the services and everything. But out here, it's very different experience. So, I chose not to be here all the time. I didn't think it was going to be safe or a good idea. So, a little at a time, different orchestras started to call me when they would find out that I was now available because the orchestra here wasn't working. I never thought that there was a career description of freelance symphonic classical principal harpist. But apparently, if we could watch that show "What's My Line" I would win, because no one would get the job. But I started to get calls from a lot of the very big and just all sorts of size orchestras.

I spent this last year and a half -- I have been playing a tremendous amount of the time with the Los Angeles Philharmonic, the Saint Louis Symphony. I've played quite frequently now in Pittsburgh, in Detroit, in Salt Lake City. Just all sorts of different places. Probably with maybe fifteen or twenty different orchestras. Then they have now -- they keep inviting me back as they need someone to play. So, that's been very invigorating and wonderfully enriching professionally. I have had this chance to go be a

fly on the wall in many of the big cities in the United States and really get to see what they're like and get a sense of their communities and what they're about. In Jackson Hole, the music festival knew I had had a lot of experience in development work, and they asked if I would take care of their upper-end accounts for the music festival. I was based in Jackson and did this development job for the year while I was trying to figure out exactly how to go about doing things. It was great fun. I managed to raise 104% of the goal they had set.

It was very funny because I remember saying to them -- they congratulated me one day. I said, "Well, I would accept the accolades except I didn't know you had set a goal, and I didn't know I had surpassed it. So, I really can't take credit." But it was a wonderful experience, and I certainly learned a lot from doing that. But I have been touring most of this year with Gregory Fulkerson, who is an internationally well-known violinist. Between playing with all these orchestras and playing here in New Orleans, and touring with him, my plate has been very rich and full, and I appreciate it professionally.

RH: Did you rejoin the New Orleans Symphony?

RV: The first year -- a season would be from September through June or till -- the first year, they had just a short season in the Spring, and since everybody was dispersed around the country, it wasn't required if you weren't here to come back.

Of course, I was not really here, nor could I have been here in my house at that point. Then I applied for a sabbatical for the second year because I really thought it would be a good time to explore these possibilities, these wonderfully enriching things that were being offered to me, but also because I was really concerned about the quality of life living out here in this area of the city.

RH: Why don't you tell me about the first time you came back and tell me a little about what happened in the neighborhood, to your house, and your first initial experience with

that, and your ongoing experience?

RV: Well, some of these experiences have now blended together in my mind, I have to say. I wouldn't want to say something wrong. But it would just be inadvertent. But some of the things that I tactilely really remember so clearly, I remember how many times I had to show my license to be able to even drive into the Lakeview area with all of the military around all the time. I remember it was a very, very long time before we were allowed in the area. We wound up walking along the levee and sneaking in just because we couldn't stand it anymore to see what had happened. The whole house had been boarded up, and of course, there was no electricity for so long. I had all my harps here except for the one I had in Jackson Hole. The sheer heat with everything, with no ventilation whatsoever, and if you remember, it would have been in a very hot time of the year, it was a very unnerving experience worrying about things like that. There was a lot of --

RH: How many harps do you have?

RV: Well, I have five of the concert grand harps. So, four of them were here. I live on an interesting block. It's a unique place. Because we're so close to the levee; we're just slightly -- it's like a bowl, and we're just slightly up the side of the bowl. So, we didn't actually have the lake flow through our house the way -- my backyard neighbor is protected by my house. But then, across the street from him, as far as you can drive and see, is gone. Those houses just totally took it. But what happened specifically to my house is, since we're so close to the lake, a lot of the roof had damage and came off. The water came in through the roof and took out a lot of stuff in the attic and then the second-floor ceilings and stuff.

Then the water literally came right through the floor. While the lake didn't go flowing through my house, the water literally came through.

You can see all over the floor here. This is all marble, and this all sat in the water. Someday, I will replace all of this. The water probably came up about six inches on my harps. Because of the extreme humidity and the heat, there are a lot of metal moving parts on the harp, and they're all rusted and different things like that. The harps can be refurbished. That's the good news.

It's interesting in this block. My neighbor across the street, their entire roof came off, and the whole house had to be rebuilt. While we live in this -- and then my neighbor next door just had a little roof damage, and they replaced their roof, and that was that. It's very hit-or-miss on this particular two blocks right by the lake. I think probably all along the lakefront where some houses had extreme damage, and some had almost no damage. It was so random. Of course, the fact that a tornado went down the street after, that was more than I could stand. That was -- OK enough. So --

RH: Which?

RV: I don't know, you know how this stuff blends together in your mind? But shortly thereafter, tornadoes were in this area, and they went literally right down my street. Well, I laughed because I thought, great, there was all this stuff, and it just blew it away. Like whatever was left outside. It was like I didn't have to worry about the debris. That was for sure. But some of the other things I remember the most is just having to haul so much stuff out of the house. While the neutral grounds on Canal Boulevard were one of the staging areas for so much of the debris for the city, and they were literally stories and stories high like New York City buildings, I took pictures at one point of the debris in front of my house, and it was pretty impressive. It wasn't insignificant. They wouldn't be able to come and do the garbage for so long. It was so frustrating. They wouldn't come for a month. Then they would just say they were only taking black bags. It was just crazy. You think, like, well, these are white bags, couldn't you just take these too. And like they were only -- or they were only taking appliances. Or they were only taking wood. Or they

were only taking something. You feel like they were rooting through this huge pile of stuff in front of your house and only taking what that was the day, that was what they were taking. That was hard. Part of my roof came off and went in the swimming pool. This is my favorite insurance story. You have to have a sense of humor to get through some of these things. Part of the roof came off, and it trashed my swimming pool. I was sitting in my office, actually, in Jackson Hole, trying to deal with a lot of these things long-distance, which was very hard to do.

I called the State Farm guy, and I said, “Look, I’ve sent guys over,” they came with generators because there was no electricity. It was so mosquito-laden, you couldn’t walk around the property. It was really that scary. It was very intimidating. I had this company come, and their job was to drain the pool with a generator. To get the dead animals or -- it was pitch-black. You couldn’t see to the bottom of it. They took the roof out, the roofing that was in there out, and they put it on the street. It happened to be a day I was here. So, when I drive up now, they’ve emptied the pool, and they’ve sprayed it with some sort of chemical to disinfect it. It’s still going to be a dark green. But at least I know nothing’s in the pool now. They put -- all the roofing was sheet copper or some kind of metal.

It was huge, and these men had carried it out to the street. I said to them, “Would you mind putting that back in my driveway?” They were Spanish. I’m sure after I asked them, they said, “This woman’s crazy,” or something in Spanish. I don’t know what I was thinking, whether it was an artistic part of me thinking maybe I’ll make a sculpture out of it or do something with it. I do not know to this day whatever -- why I wouldn’t want the city to haul away this metal roofing is beyond me. But anyway, I kept it. I put it in the end of my driveway. I was talking to the State Farm guy, and I said, “So I need to have you take care of my swimming pool. It’s going to need to be rebuilt because it was destroyed from all this roofing stuff.” This man actually said to me on the phone, “Pools are only going to be covered by your flood policy,” which I had, “and the flood policy’s not going to be

covering pools, so you're not covered." I laughed. I didn't even get mad or anything. I just laughed. I said, "Did you actually just say that to me?" That's what I said to the guy on the phone. I said, "Did you really just say that?" And he said, "Yes." He was pretty serious about it. I was laughing. I said, "You know, sir, there isn't anybody in Iowa who now doesn't know that if your roof blows off and damages something, that's a wind claim. Everybody in America now knows that." So, then we went round and round for about six or eight months about that. And then he made his fatal mistake, and he said -- I had sent him an affidavit from the owner of the pool company saying what they had done. I had sent him the pictures. Of course, I showed up after it was emptied. The guys didn't want me to see what was in the pool. They were very nice about it, and I appreciate it. But I took pictures after when the pool was empty.

I took pictures of just what had happened. I had sent them to State Farm. The guy said to me, he said, "Well, we have no proof that the roofing is what did the damage." So, I laughed again. Those were the two times I really laughed in those bad moments. I said, "Lucky for you, I happen to have saved that roof." I had saved it, right? I don't know why I saved it. Then the guy said, well -- we went around another few months.

He said, "Well, I have no proof that's what is in the pool." Finally, I got, I wouldn't say mad, but I just got firm, and I said, "Listen, the roof came off, it damaged the pool, you have pictures, you have documentation, so I've had enough. You know perfectly well that I have all the insurance and the coverage, and you need to pay to have my pool fixed." Then they actually did pay me. But I'll never forget him saying the pools are covered by the flood policy, and the flood policy is not covering pools, so you're not covered. I'm like, I know I'm slow, and I know I'm stupid, but I'm not a moron. Even I can figure out that that was ridiculous. When I told him I had the roof, you could have heard a pin drop on the other end of the phone. He just had nothing left to say to me except -- it was like lucky for you. I said, "Lucky for you, I saved the roof."

RH: When did you first sneak in? Do you remember the date about or how long after the storm?

RV: I really don't, because if you ask me to figure out these last two years, and I think if you ask most people, they'll tell you it's a blur. I'm pretty sure, without having heard any of your other interviews, that most people feel that way. It's like a time warp. My overall comment when people ask me how I feel about what's happened is I think this is -- I'm not talking about the long haul for the city of New Orleans, but I think for individuals, this is a three-year nightmare. I couldn't have told you after year one how long the nightmare was. At the end of the second year, I can't tell you what the punch line will be at the end of year three. But I now have a sense of the pacing of it for some reason. I can tell that I'm most of the way through the tunnel on figuring everything out. And people have had to make very tough decisions. I think the biggest thing that it has taught everyone is to be so non-judgmental about the decisions that other people are making. Before, if somebody moved, you would say, why would they do that, that's crazy, or why would they want to do this or that or whatever.

But so many people have had to make so many tough decisions, and not ones that they've wanted to make, but they've made them because they've needed to just to survive or keep things going, keep their families together, whatever their story is, that I think it's made a whole community of people who are far more generous and non-judgmental than they would have been beforehand.

RH: Did you lose a lot of your friends and your networks of friends along with the loss of your home?

RV: I know that most people feel that many of their friends have left or gone to other places, or their community has changed. I don't know whether it's the nature of being a professional musician where I've been working all over the country anyway. I find that my closest friends in New Orleans are still here. We are just as close, if not closer.

Community-wide I'm aware of people that I really like who have made their own choices and don't live here any longer. But for me personally, I think my closest friends are still here. It's one of the compelling reasons why I keep being drawn back to being here.

RH: Well, that was the next question, because as this -- what did you call your new position? As visiting all the symphonies and so you could probably live in another city?

RV: Yes, and I've actually had several job offers over the course of this year and a half and have chosen to still be here in New Orleans and based out of New Orleans.

RH: Why?

RV: Because I really love New Orleans. I really love the community, the whole culture, and community of it. I think it's going through horrific pains at this moment. I don't feel wise enough to know what some of the solutions are or how to fix some of the most problematic things. But I don't think it's also unreasonable, even though it's frustrating on a personal level for everyone, to think two years after such a humongous disaster that things would be totally on track. I do think it would have been better if we had had great leadership for the community, which we have not. That saddens me to no end because I think a lot of the suffering could have been alleviated, and a lot of people could have been helped more quickly.

But also, when I look at it from a macro point of view, even if we had had a great leader, while I think things would be immeasurably better, I still think this is a huge task to rebuild an American city. It was bound to be fraught with all sorts of nightmarish problems.

RH: While you were gone, were there things that you missed?

RV: Yeah, the food, number one, there's no good food in America except for here. I'm the one who's been traveling to all these cities, and the people are as nice as can be, and they try, bless their hearts, they try, but I can't wait to come home each time just to

have some really great food I have to say.

RH: Were there any personal things that you lost that you can't replace?

RV: There are, actually. But on the opposite end of the spectrum, I lived out of one suitcase for an entire year traveling. It really taught me how little I actually really needed. I really don't need very much. I find now I don't really want very much. I'm more inclined to want to get rid of things than I am to acquire things. I feel no need to acquire anything, any material possession. I know a lot of people who feel the same way, just don't have any interest in it. It just seems more of a burden than an asset. So more than thinking about what I don't have, it's really realizing there are a lot of things I don't want to have now that I might have wanted to have before.

RH: How did you recreate a sense of home while you were away?

RV: That may have been the most difficult part because my kids were on each side of the country, and I was traveling throughout the country. One, I would say the cell phone is an amazing invention.

It's just a miracle, even when they don't work, even when the service in New Orleans is so bad you can't take it. But they really are a miracle. Since I would go out of my way to visit my kids a lot so they would have a sense of things, they did -- they came home for Thanksgiving. I remember right after the hurricane, I intentionally wanted them to come home because it's a short vacation. Thinking it was so bad, they -- from a historical point of view, they really needed to see what had happened. Visually, not just in their mind's eye.

But they really needed to see it. But I didn't really want them staying here. Then I took them on a vacation somewhere else for the Christmastime break vacation. Then they really wanted to come back at Mardi Gras to be with their friends because they had a sense of loss of their friends all being spread out. It didn't really quite dawn on them then

either because they were really hanging out with their friends. Then, when they came home for their spring break, it really dawned on them. It took them that number of times for them to really feel the impact of what had happened.

RH: You can feel it more perhaps out here. Why do you think that is?

RV: Because it's so devastated. It's gone.

RH: So few people living out here too.

RV: Right. It's just -- it's not living; it's existing in a surreal world. I feel so bad for the older people, and you see every one of these houses where there's now an empty lot or just a lot of the houses out here, they look like houses if you just drive by quickly, it looks like a house, but they're all down to the studs. When you look inside the houses, there's nothing there. These are whole families and generations of people in each of these pieces of property, and they've all had to make other decisions about where to live and how to live, and what to do, and it's so overwhelmingly frustrating dealing with the business of repairing the house and the insurance companies and all that stuff. Imagine if you're older, it's a very daunting thing. I will say very sadly, since I provide so much music around town for events for people -- I provide a lot of music for the funeral homes -- and there really is a hidden loss which they don't account as a Katrina loss, but so many older people are passing away prematurely. It's because it's just too hard. They've lost their friends, they've lost their will to live, they've lost their houses, they've lost what's familiar to them, they've lost their communities. If you talk to any funeral director in New Orleans, it's a quiet thing that's spoken about among the professionals, but there is a tremendous amount of death unnecessarily for so many of the older people in the community. It's a very sad thing.

RH: How do you manage to keep your spirits up?

RV: Well, because I'm working out of town, I'm not here 24/7. I think that's the fairest way to say it. I don't envy my friends who are here all of the time. I think it becomes daunting to them psychologically. By like token, if you have moved to another city, a lot of people are now feeling that they want to come back. They made this decision in a moment when they thought that's what they should do, and now they're regretting that or rethinking that and trying to switch things around. A lot of people here are so worn out, like true battle fatigue, that now they're leaving because they can't take it. That's why I say my one real philosophical thought about this whole experience is it teaches you a level of forgiveness and understanding of all the different kinds of choices people have had to make and to not have an opinion on what anyone else does. It's too daunting what's gone on here. It's really overwhelming when you get down to it. I find it amazing all the time as I travel around the country.

There's no one anywhere in the country who's not sympathetic. People think, "Oh, New Orleans, all the corruption, all the bad stuff," everything that you hear about the city. But there really is a goodness about the people of New Orleans, even with the comical horrible relief of our politicians and stuff. Everyone pretty much from every background, every political party, every religion gets it, all across America. Very often, I'm the only person that they will have talked to about it, and they are innately genuinely curious and genuinely feel bad. There's so many people I've met traveling around who have been to New Orleans with church groups doing work. I can't tell you how many people I meet all the time who tell me -- there are people I've met in other cities, and when they come here, I entertain them when they come to New Orleans to do volunteer work. I think that part of it is amazing. But the biggest misconception for me is when I think about all the areas, not just the Lakeview and the Lakefront area, but when I think about Gentilly and New Orleans East and Chalmette and the Lakeview and the Lakefront area and the Gulf Coast, when I think of -- there's so many areas, but these big areas, most of the people who have been ruined by this are middle-class people. The perception around the country is that it's poor people from the Lower Ninth Ward.

While no one wants anyone to have suffered, I just think it's a big misconception. There are so many middle-class and upper-middle-class people who have really been ruined by this. I have two girlfriends whose husbands have committed suicide on this deal. You know so many people who've been impacted for a lifetime, and it's not something that you can fix. You just can't fix it. So, if I had one thing for an archival piece to say, is I wish people would understand that to me, the largest majority of people who have been impacted really are middle-class people of every background. I'm not talking about any particular race. Every race, every religion, but they're mostly middle-class people. I wish the news had shown that so that when you looked in the TV, people in America would see somebody who was just like them looking right back at them. No matter what they look like.

People who are hardworking, who are industrious, who are probably two-wage earner families, just trying to do what we like to do here in America, raise our children, have a nice house, all the things. That's the thing, to me, that came across the least to the American public.

RH: Do you have any idea why that is? Have you thought about that?

RV: I really don't. I don't have a political opinion about it or a bias about why it happened. I just know that that's one of the things I always tell people when I'm traveling. That most of the people are just like you that have been ruined by this thing.

RH: OK, we're going to break for a minute.

RV: Sure.

[END OF AUDIO FILE ONE]

RH: This is tape two of Katrina's Jewish Voices with Rachel Van Voorhees. I was asking if you were going to rebuild right here at your home and the impact that the storm has

had on your family.

RV: Well, I am in the process of fixing up my house. I cannot honestly say whether I will stay in it or sell it. I can't honestly say for the long haul whether I will stay in New Orleans or not. Not because I don't want to, but because the situation is so precarious in the community. I would like to think that things will improve, and I certainly would hope to be part of the solution rather than the problem. But I think most people are feeling very daunted by the tasks that still lie ahead.

They mostly feel that the things that have been accomplished so far have really been done by individuals as opposed to any of the institutions that we would have thought would have really helped on a grand scale. I find that most people are very blue, very depressed, very unsure of what they're going to be doing. All of my friends, the topic is, "Am I going to stay here or am I going to move? Should I stay here, or should I move? Is the crime ever going to get better? Is the murder rate ever going to get taken care of, not solved, but is it ever? Are the police ever going to be able to really take care of the community? Are the services going to be back?" I still don't have a landline. Two years later, BellSouth can't get a phone working in my house. I can't have a fax. I can't have an alarm. All these different things that we take for granted. There are services that I just still don't have to this day. When you have to conduct all of your business with a cell phone, and we're on the fringe here at the lake, so I don't really get cell phone service in my house, I have to go drive in my car to make business calls.

How ridiculous is that? This is not what I expected at this point in life. So, me, myself, I would say I am grateful that it worked out that my children aren't here. I would say I am not hopeful that my children will resettle here. If you ask me today, on August 2nd, 2007, if I wanted them to settle here, I would say, "No." I hope my opinion will change because I think it's a wonderful place and I certainly have loved being here myself. But I don't envision a great future for my children if they were to be here, so I don't at this point want

them to be here.

RH: Let's move a little bit to the Jewish community because you said that you're on the board of Temple Sinai. Just came off.

RV: Just rotated off.

RH: Why don't you tell me about your involvement with the Jewish community in the recovery? And your interactions with them?

RV: Well, I want to say that there are so many extraordinary members of the Jewish community who have done such exemplary over-the-top things for the community; it's unbelievable. The president of Temple Sinai when the hurricane hit is Sandy Levy, who's also the head of the Jewish Endowment Foundation. She is the most inspiring woman I've ever met. Her sense of calm and productivity when she has her own personal nightmares to take care of in terms of the hurricane were mind-boggling to me, and just a source of -- continue to be a source of amazing inspiration, that she was doing so much for the entire Jewish community, as well as being president of a synagogue during that time. I imagine all the presidents of the synagogues in New Orleans are real heroes because the membership is dispersed, the services are dispersed, the religious leaders are dispersed, the physical buildings are in trouble, physically, and I don't know, to me, I don't know how Sandy Levy did it.

She's just a miracle woman. She's somebody who anyone and everyone ought to emulate, in my humble opinion. Not to take anything away from anyone else. But there are so many people like that that I think of who were so instrumental in pulling things together. While I was on the board and certainly tried to be helpful, and I tend to help more in musical matters and things like that where my level of expertise is, I remember traveling a good bit of the year not here, so I really wouldn't say that I was able to contribute as much as I would have liked to have or I would have had I been living in New

Orleans. But there are all sorts of people in the community who are just amazing.

It was really fun. At one point last year, I was playing, when I was playing with the Los Angeles Philharmonic, we did a concert, a private concert for the Jewish Federations of America, it was held in Los Angeles. Gerry Schwarz, who's a famous wonderful conductor, was the conductor. And it was so much fun. I was sitting on stage at Disney Hall, the most amazing concert hall on the planet, as we speak, waving into the audience at Julie Wise Oreck and a number of the people from New Orleans, thinking how cool is this. It was just such a thrill. It was so nice to see them. But what a great treat they were all in LA and were still connected to each other.

RH: Well, I did notice, too, that you've got a CD of Jewish music. Can you just tell me about that?

RV: I do. Actually, it was an interesting story how it came to be made. The record company I have a contract with, they ask you to make proposals on what your next project would be, what you would like to do. So, I gave them several proposals. Then, as one of them, I said, "You know, I find that so many people in the Jewish community don't really know the music. When you say to a Jewish bride do you want Jewish music at their wedding, they think you mean like 'Sunrise, Sunset,' and 'Siman Tov and Mazel Tov,' you know what I mean?" Like and so not to say everyone, but certainly lots of people, including myself honestly, but I've learned the stuff because I play it professionally. I was describing to these two guys, the head of the company and the chief recording engineer, how voices would be a little distracting, but I thought it would be fun to do a recording of all these great different kinds of tunes so that people could really become familiar with them and enjoy listening to them and become a little more educated about the music. The two guys looked at me and said they were both, those two Jewish guys, I didn't even know they were Jewish, and they told me they were Jewish, and they didn't know the music. So, they picked that one. So that's how that one got to be made.

I said, “Oh, I rest my case.” It was a lot of fun. It was recorded in Baton Rouge. The company is Centaur. And they’re a very big classical label, although quietly exist in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, but a very big classical label.

RH: Interesting. What has being Jewish meant to you during this experience?

RV: I think it’s been so overwhelming to just take care of the logistics of what’s happened that I haven’t particularly felt a spiritual connection to anything because I find that I spend almost all of my energy and time on trying to arrange my scheduling of work and scheduling of repairing my house. At the end of the day, I would love to be able to say to you I had some spiritual awakening, or it meant even more to me.

It doesn’t mean less to me. It still means a great deal to me. But I feel like I have a level of exhaustion, just human exhaustion, and if I can just get through the things I’m supposed to do to juggle each day to keep everything going, I think I’m satisfied with the day. I really haven’t had a large amount of time or energy to reflect or to be deeply introspective. I’m really just trying to keep everything going, I think.

RH: Are there any Jewish concepts that have come to your mind in the past two years? Or even family values, growing up, from your mother and her family?

RV: I would say the biggest thing that I have felt, though I always participated a lot in whatever community I was involved with, the musical community or the Jewish community or the greater New Orleans community, I find myself particularly going out of my way to help other people. Because I feel like so many people step up to the plate and gave me a hand, I’m very, very aware of it. I would say in the spirit of tzedakah, or just in the spirit of wanting to return the generosity, I find myself going out of my way to even more than I would have before.

RH: I’d always thought of you as a very generous person for your time because, as I said before, you were very kind to a friend of mine.

RV: It's funny because I don't even know what you're talking about. It's very sweet. People thank me all the time. I'm thinking I really -- I don't want to hurt their feelings, but I honestly don't know what they're talking about. I really -- do you know what I mean? I think, "Well, I'm glad that I did it, and I'm so glad that it was helpful to somebody else," I really --

RH: I think just by nature, you're a generous person. That's what I think I was saying. So, to say that you're putting your focus -- you were generous. I was going, "Wow." That's kind of what I was thinking. You have been vulnerable now. You've accepted help and kindness from others. If you were going to teach a course on what people need in a moment like this, what would you teach? What would you tell people? What would you tell young people?

RV: If they were trying to help somebody who was in a dire situation?

RH: Yeah, what kind of help do people need? How should a person be when they give help?

RV: Well, I am sure that there are great professional psychologists who have this down to a science. But using just common sense, I would say, first of all, people need safety and shelter. So, if they're in a situation where they're threatened, anything you can do to just provide safety and shelter to somebody is a huge gift. That would be the first thing. The second thing is just listening because most of the time, when somebody presents you with a problem, you listen, and then you tell them what you think, or you offer an opinion on what they should do to fix the problem. But I think we now know just listen, don't offer a solution, because there isn't a solution that you're going to offer that will probably be doable or right or whatever in this very moment. Just let the person have a safe place to talk about all their anxiety and fear and emotions and without offering a judgmental -- or an opinion on what maybe they should or shouldn't do because they will have to sort that out in their own mind. Even though you have the best intentions, and

maybe it seems clear as a bell to you, you are not on that emotional ride. So, let them have their time to decompress enough to work through in their own mind on what they need to do. Then thirdly, I would say any support that you can offer in terms of -- how do I want to say this? I don't mean in terms of somebody needs a job, so you help them get a job.

But I mean in terms of being a source of strength to them to help them move to that next level on decision-making without making the decisions for them. So, for instance, if you're a writer and I know that your job in New Orleans is no longer here because of the hurricane, but I actually happen to have a dear friend in another city, and I happen to know that they could use a great writer, it should be for me to gently say I don't know if this is something that you would be interested in, but perhaps you might want to contact my friend if that would be of interest to you. So, trying to help direct people without telling them what to do is a very tricky business. Even if you're a young person, I still think that's a kind, generous thing to do.

Or say, "I don't really know, I don't really understand exactly how to help you in the situation, but my parents can do this or that." I have to tell you that there's a wonderful bass trombone player at the music festival in Jackson Hole, and his wife is a harpist, and her mother is a harpist, and we didn't know each other, we just -- I knew him, and we liked each other, we just met in passing. But I liked them, and they liked me, whatever. When the hurricane hit her mother, so my friend's wife's mother and husband called me up. They live in New Jersey and insisted that what they wanted to do was have me move in with them -- because she had a harp and the music and a car and a dolly and all that stuff. And she knew I could play the harp well. She's like, "we want you to come live with us, and that way, you can make some money till you figure out exactly what you want to do." She was offering me everything that I needed to work professionally just as a generous thing to do. Now it turned out not to be exactly what I needed to do in that moment. But the fact that she thought about it and made that offer, genuinely made the

offer, by the way, they're Jewish so – I'll just say that -- but just something like that where you step up to the plate and you offer somebody something without saying, "This is what you should do." But, "this is what I'd like to offer you if you would like to do it." I got calls from all over the country. "We want you to come live here; we want you to come do this; we want you to come do that." So, that generosity, even though they weren't things that I chose to do, no one took offense that I didn't do them. I so appreciated the thoughtfulness and the generosity that went into it, the fact that they were enabling me to make some choices, they were offering me things, even if it wasn't a door that I was going to walk through.

I think that probably happened to a lot of people. Probably in a retrospective way, people probably feel like there were some doors maybe they wished they had walked through, and maybe there are doors they walked through that maybe they wish they hadn't. But think how nice it was that people made those offers to everyone. I'm sure everyone had opportunities where people just tried to help big and small.

RH: Were you proud of the Jewish community through this storm?

RV: Totally. I don't think they could have been more cohesive. As a matter of fact, I probably think the Jewish community in New Orleans is more cohesive today than it was before the hurricane. At least that's my impression. And more helpful. I think the Jewish institutions seem to be even -- not to say they weren't helpful to each other before, but I think that they're even more helpful to one another today than they were before the hurricane. It seems to me more of a sense of camaraderie in getting things done.

RH: I ask this question. You don't have to answer it. But different people's conception of God coming out of this kind of encounter with the world and with the storm. I don't know if -- you said you hadn't reflected a lot or been in a space to have had a lot of reflection. So that's why I was letting you off the hook. But if you have any concepts --

RV: Well, I definitely feel more strongly in a belief in God after this experience. I definitely overall believe in a greater goodness of people in people from this experience. I guess when any group of people go through such a humongous trauma together, it brings out both the best and the worst in people, but my overall sense at the end of the day is that it has brought out a much greater goodness in people. I would say that for sure. I do feel like the Jewish spiritual leaders in New Orleans have been wonderful throughout this experience for so many people. I think they've really been very tender and caring with their congregants and helpful in terms of the financial constraints of people with their memberships and things and just -- but I really think the rabbis in town have really made their presence felt. We're all the better for it.

RH: Is there any particular way? Because you not only experience it yourself, but you go professionally, you play at different events maybe that you wouldn't attend normally. Is there any particular memory of this that you've seen?

RV: I've seen so many touching moments. I'm there when people's children are born or when they're having a baby naming. I'm there when their parent dies. I do so many lifecycle events with the rabbis in town. It would be hard to single one moment out. But they've been touched by this whole thing. So why wouldn't they -- they understand that -- in a way, thank goodness the religious leaders have had the same experience as the congregants. Because they totally get it. Because it's a shared experience. It's a communal experience.

RH: Well, let's move to -- we've alluded to this a few times. The relationship to the larger community. What about your relationship and your understanding of the government, state, local, federal?

RV: No matter where you stand politically, when 9/11 happened in New York, whether you're a fan of Rudy Giuliani's or not, he's obviously a terrific leader. His city had a much stronger and deeper infrastructure than the city of New Orleans. I think it is just pathetic

and inexcusable that from the President, the governor, the head of FEMA, and the mayor of New Orleans all of them are not effectual leaders and have done a humongous disservice to the people here.

RH: Is there something that gets your goat the most about --

RV: There are so many things that each of them have done that have gotten my goat. It'd be hard to think of which one in particular. But I just think it's shameful. It's just horribly shameful that in the worst experience -- people say, "natural disaster." Of course, it's not a natural disaster.

But in the worst experience that an American city has had, the most catastrophic experience, that universally the city would be so ruined by such a total void of any leadership, just such total incompetent leadership. It has nothing to do with anyone's political party. Just maybe, in normal times, any one of those people would have been just average leaders, and things would have rolled along. But when you have an extraordinary experience, you need an extraordinary leader, and none of the people who have been involved in the hurricane aftermath, there is not one that is an extraordinary leader, not a one. It's criminal.

RH: Do you think racial tensions in the city are worse than they were prior to the storm?

RV: I think the answer to that question is perspective. Everyone comes to the answer from their own perspective. I don't particularly feel any greater sense of racial tension. I do do a tremendous amount of work in the African American community. New Orleans has always struck me as a place, and one of the reasons I have such fondness for it is it doesn't matter what you look like, it's do they do a good job, are they reputable, are they whatever, and if you're good, then you get recommended by word of mouth. By like token, if you're bad, there's pretty much nothing you can do to undo your bad reputation. But I think if you're good in whatever you're doing, then you are included in everyone's

party.

The miracle for me is as a Jewish woman, I am wholly included in the Catholic community. The archbishops will ask me what service, what readings we're doing, what responsorial psalm we're using for a Mass. I feel very lucky that I have learned the Catholic liturgy thoroughly inside and out.

I've been included in the Vietnamese community, the Spanish community, the African American community, the Full Gospel Baptist community, every different kind of religion, every kind of background. I have enjoyed the company, both professionally and personally, of so many different parts of this city that I'm not sure I'm the right person to ask about racial tension and the African American community, whether it's more or less now. Because I'm just out there working in every community, so I'm not really aware of it, and I'm included everywhere I go. So, I'm not sure I'm the right person to answer that question.

RH: Well, so, there is a way though that the people can work across race, across cultures in this city successfully?

RV: Totally. That's always been my experience. I play in bands with all sorts of famous Black guys, like they're like my brother, like I don't -- we were together because we enjoy each other musically, do you know what I mean? I don't know how else to describe it. I think just by the nature of my profession that I may not be the right person to have a pulse on it because I'm out there working in all these different communities, so I'm not really sure I know. I know that most of my African American friends feel exactly, exactly the same way I do about everything. They think the leaders are incompetent, think the graft is ridiculous, I mean, you name it, when we're talking or having dinner, or whatever, like they feel exactly the same way I do, to a tee. So, that's why I say I'm not really sure how to answer that question. Do I obviously know and am aware that there's a horrible murder rate in New Orleans currently? Of course, I do. Do I get a sense in the

community that there's a sort of split feeling of one, total outrage that it's so out of control? And by like token, like well if you're between eighteen and twenty-five and you're a drug dealer, and you have a gun, I guess it's the cost of doing business kind of an attitude.

I definitely am aware of hearing people express those two sentiments. By the way, they're both Black and white; they're not just like white people or whatever, Spanish people whatever, saying that. I do get a sense that there is some resentment for all of the Spanish people that have moved into the New Orleans area. My own personal attitude is if you're hardworking and you're going to contribute to the community, somebody let me move here, why am I going to tell somebody else that they shouldn't move here? But I do want to say one interesting story about renovating my house. I waited a very long time to get the crew of guys that I wanted. They've been in my house now, about six months. Probably have another few months to go.

Anyway, I can't talk to them, and they can't talk to me. They only speak Spanish. They're from all sorts of different countries. They didn't just come here. They've been here -- But they're some of the finest men that I have ever met. Over the course of six months, we've gotten to be friends. I've never had friends I can't talk to before. They hang out in my house all day, and we have this lovely time. They love listening to me play the harp. They don't turn on a radio or anything. If you listen as you're doing this interview, like -- and I play some Spanish music for them or whatever. But they're the nicest guys. I actually can't talk to them. They've taught me a little Spanish and they have me helping them with English. I have to say how hard they're trying to learn to speak English. I wouldn't want to now be learning English as a language. It's a hard language to learn.

Well, anyway, several weeks ago, I don't know whether it's because of the heat or something, I actually passed out, which never had happened to me before. I was here by

myself and just these Spanish guys. They saw me faint. I don't remember any of this because I was actually blacked out for about six hours. But they picked me up -- they saw me faint in my kitchen. They picked me up. They put me on my sofa. They called the one guy who speaks English and has EMS experience. He tried to revive me. They couldn't. They called an ambulance. They got me to East Jefferson Hospital. They stayed -- one of them stayed here with my dog so the dog wouldn't be alone.

They took care of my house. One of them came and stayed with me at the hospital. What would have happened if I -- maybe nothing would have happened if I'd been here alone. They were truly worried about me and took beyond tender care to make sure I was all right. And I can't talk to these guys, right? Did I have to talk to them? They knew how much I thanked them. They were genuinely worried about me. I say, when you talk about the things that have gone on, I think about people with all the bashing of all the Spanish-speaking people in town and all this stuff, I keep thinking, well, let me just tell you what my experience has been. It's not what you're describing. It's that I was in trouble, and I can't even talk to these guys, and they stepped up to the plate and just made sure that I was OK and took care of me. I would want somebody to know that.

RH: That's an amazing story. You've been through a lot.

RV: Everybody has.

RH: What would be your vision for New Orleans? What would you like to see happen?

RV: I would like to see extremely competent leadership. I would like to see people come to the forefront who are not corrupt and would not steal or take advantage of the system, would run the city like the good business it ought to be run as. I'd like to see the school system vastly improved. I'd like to see the streets vastly improved because it's impossible. A friend came to visit me from LA and said, "You know, I never actually thought I'd find a use for a Hummer." But he wasn't being funny. He said, "I think it'd be

practical to own a Hummer in New Orleans because this is unbelievable." That's somebody who drives the freeways of LA every day saying this is just unbearable. I'd just like to see a lot of people who maybe have not been inclined before or think it takes too much money or whatever step up to the plate and really run the city the way it certainly could be run and should be run.

Personally, I don't want to be traveling around the country anymore and hear about the money in Jefferson's freezer or David Vitter's sex life or any of these other guys. I think they should be so totally ashamed of themselves. That's the only words that come to my mind. If I were looking them in the eye, I would say the same thing. You should be so, so ashamed of yourself. So that's what I would wish for New Orleans is competent, excellent, not self-serving leadership.

RH: Are there some strengths you'd like to see preserved in the city?

RV: There are a lot of strengths. That's why it's still here. That's why I'm still here. Well, the indigenous culture is one of the most amazing things in the United States. It's a blend of every kind of culture living right here. I think it should be not only preserved but improved upon and encouraged to continue to develop. It really pains me traveling around the country to see so many of the great musicians I've spent the last thirty years working with all living in different places.

I can think of Clarence Johnson, who is this just amazing sax player, and he lives in Atlanta now. It's not that he wouldn't want to live here, but he has to go where the work is, and he's so extraordinary. Now all these cities have gotten the most amazing talent, and so New Orleans music is being exported out, and the talent is being exported. I would hope to not only cultivate the young people but bring the talent back. And for that, we have to have a vibrant economy for that to take place. I would like to see the musical and artistic culture really preserved and enhanced. There is truly no place in the United States that has more compelling food and a reason to be overweight or eat a lot of

wonderful things than New Orleans. I think it would be important for that to continue too. All of these areas in the city that are so devastated, I love the way people volunteer on Saturdays to work at cleaning up City Park. There are all these things; City Park and Audubon Park are great cultural, just wonderful assets for the city. The farmers' markets. All the great things that make New Orleans so great, I not only want to see them continue, I would love to see them thrive and be even more interesting. If you live in New Orleans, I go out to eat all the time; I really go try to participate in things to be supportive of what other people are trying to keep going as well.

RH: How is the symphony doing? I guess your sabbatical is almost over?

RV: It is. It is. In September, it will be back around. The orchestra is doing amazingly well. Unfortunately, the Orpheum Theater was seriously -- all the theaters downtown were really hit. The hard part for the orchestra is that it's a constant move now. A lot of other venues the orchestra plays in, both at Loyola, at Tulane, at the Convention Center, at several of the churches in town. That's hard not to have a home base, a concert hall, because orchestras usually have their own concert hall and then go out from there. It's hard not having a home base. But other than that, artistically, it's doing amazingly well. I'm looking forward totally to being back there. Financially, it's on very strong ground. So, that's a great thing too.

RH: Do you like the new conductor?

RV: I think he's awesome. Yeah, and he's a doll personally, too. But he's a wonderful conductor. He's a pleasure to work with.

RH: Because that's a shift. That's a change, too, just recently. It may have been on the way but --

RV: Yeah, it was because he was newly named right before the hurricane. Of course, no one expects to get a gig, and then, you know, poor guy gets this job, and then the

hurricane hits. I know the headmaster of Newman School. That's where my kids had gone to school before my son left for boarding school. It's like this poor guy takes over as headmaster, and the hurricane hits. If it's hard enough for us as some people who have lived here and understand the nuance of what happened, can you imagine being somebody from somewhere else, having just moved here and having to be the head of an institution, any institution, trying to figure out how to make a go of it? It must be a very daunting task.

RH: Rabbi Busch and Lichtenfeld both had that happen.

RV: Right, exactly. Can you imagine? "Hi, we're so glad you're here."

RH: Tell me now for yourself. I have two wrap-up questions that are kind of personal in a way. What does home mean to you now?

RV: Boy, that's a really good question. I'm not sure I know the answer to that yet. I'm not sure most people know the answer to that yet. It's certainly not a physical place. I guess it's the center of where your family and emotional life is. But I think most people from the experience of this hurricane have come to realize that home can be a lot of different places. I'm probably not giving you a very eloquent answer, but I'm not really sure I know what the exact answer would be. For me, it's where I am, I guess. I don't know.

RH: How do you create a sense of normalcy or home for your kids?

RV: That was the reason I renovated my house, primarily. Because I did think about just selling it or just renting it or just fixing it just minimally. But I had a very strong sense that even if they weren't here, in their mind's eye, I wanted them to know there was a place that had their room and their things and their center. While you ask me, my sense of home doesn't seem as important as my expressing to you that I had an extremely strong feeling of giving my children a sense of home. That was very important to me. That's

really why I took care of fixing the whole house back up.

RH: What do you think you've learned about yourself through this few years?

RV: We're all way more resilient than we would give ourselves credit. That people are way nicer than you think they are if you give them a chance. That you should -- if you're a self-motivated person or just somebody who's used to taking care of things, it's a nice thing to have people help you when you need help, to allow people to help you when you need it.

RH: Is there something you learned from allowing someone to help you?

RV: No, I wouldn't say that. But I can just tell you, I have so many people who are so dear to my heart from this experience, and they know it, and I've told them. There are a lot of people that I'm sure a lot of people wish they could thank, where it happened so fast, and it was such a blur. There are people you just wish you could thank. I hope there's something as what comes around goes around or that they know that if you did something wonderful for someone and it was just fleeting, you'll probably never know what a great impact it had on them and how much they appreciated it. But they truly did, and if they could, they wish they could thank you personally, and they won't ever have that chance, but they wish that they really could thank you.

RH: Are there any things you're just most grateful for?

RV: Yeah. I'm grateful for all the things that didn't happen. I'm really grateful. When I look around at so many of the hardships that everyone else has had to face, I'm just grateful. Why be sad about what you didn't get? I'm glad for so many things that didn't happen badly. My house is still standing. I think there are two sets of people in this hurricane, people who if you -- I know this is going to sound funny, but either you lost your pictures, or you didn't. To me, everything else, even my harps, you know what I mean? You'd think I'd be -- it wouldn't kill me. I wouldn't be happy, but I could get

another harp. I have pictures. I know too many people who don't have pictures. So, to me, that's the -- my line in the sand is I'm grateful I have pictures. That's what I'm most grateful for.

RH: Wow. Interesting. I guess, has the crisis spurred you into any new directions? It seems it has. Your career certainly.

RV: Yeah, it has. That's why I say the cup is definitely still half-full. It's not half-empty. Professionally, I couldn't be more thrilled or have had a more unique and wonderful life experience. I'm especially grateful that my kids are fine and doing well and thriving. I think that's part of my reason I don't want them here. I feel like it is -- philosophically, I feel like it is the adults' job to clean up this mess, and it is not for my children to be deprived of their young adulthood to take care of this. They're entitled to make their own mistakes and just be youthful people, successful or not, just dealing with their own lives, and it is the adults' job to fix this entire quagmire. I'm grateful that they're doing their thing.

I do have one just funny thing that I want to tell you. I was very adamant throughout the two-year period when I wasn't here all the time or whatever; I absentee balloted any time there was an election. There was an article at one point. The front page of the Times-Picayune had the dots of where people were voting from around the country. I just want to say for the archival purposes that I was the dot in Wyoming. My friends called me up, and I realized that was my true claim to fame. No matter what else I had done in life, I was the voting dot in the state of Wyoming during all the hurricane elections when you were absentee ballot voting. I thought that was a very funny experience.

RH: That's great. Is there anything else you want to add? That's such a great thing. But we're coming to a close. If there's anything else you'd like to say, please.

RV: I can't really -- you've done a very comprehensive job, getting me to visit with you. I really can't think of anything without being redundant. I think I've pretty well expressed my thoughts and opinions about it.

RH: You did a beautiful job too. Thank you.

RV: I don't know about that but --

RH: OK.

[END OF INTERVIEW]