



# Arlene Barron Transcript

Rosalind Hinton: This is Rosalind Hinton interviewing Arlene Barron at the Uptown JCC. Does it have another name? Might as well? At Jefferson and St. Charles Avenues in New Orleans, Louisiana. Today is Thursday, December 14th, 2006. I'm conducting the interview for the Katrina's Jewish Voices project of the Jewish Women's Archive in the Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life. Arlene, do you agree to be interviewed and understand that the interview will be video recorded?

Arlene Barron: Yes.

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

AB: Okay. I was born in Passaic, New Jersey, in northern New Jersey, and lived there for the first ten years of my life, and then moved to Western Pennsylvania, where I grew up and graduated high school in a small town outside of Pittsburgh, a town called McKeesport, Pennsylvania. My Jewish upbringing really was just based around going to Sunday School. We belonged to a Reform congregation. My parents had diverse upbringings. My mother was first-generation American in a fairly Orthodox home, and my father was sixth-generation in a very Sephardic home. So his whole family was very assimilated. They even celebrated Christmas at one time. My mother was brought up, as I said, in a very Orthodox community. So, they settled on a Reform synagogue, and that's where my two brothers and I were educated. But I was not bat mitzvahed until I was an adult where my brothers were bar mitzvahed. From the Orthodox background, women did not have bat mitzvahs in her growing up. Therefore it wasn't even considered for me. I did that here in New Orleans when I was an adult.

RH: Oh really? Well, tell me a little bit about your general education.



AB: Well, I graduated from Temple University with a bachelor's in science and my background was business, but I taught in business courses in high school before I had children. Then it evolved into this career in the Jewish community, the Jewish communal world.

RH: So, how did you get to New Orleans?

AB: We came to New Orleans in 1976 when my husband, Paul, took a position at Tulane Law School. He'd been teaching law in the business department at Wharton and wanted to teach in a law school, and that's what brought us to Tulane and to New Orleans. That was a big move. We'd been in Philadelphia. He had gone to law school there, and I had finished at Temple University, so we had been in Philadelphia for eleven years and found ourselves in the Deep South.

RH: That must have been – you must have had some conversations around that.

AB: A lot.

RH: You must have had some stereotypes. Well, it was the '70s.

AB: Right. It was a unique experience. Leaving a city such as Philadelphia, which is so diverse and affiliated with the university – and it gave us a very different lifestyle than when we came here to New Orleans. And also, Jewish life was so different. We lived in a section of Philadelphia that was predominantly Jewish. In fact, when we moved here, our children were five and seven at the time, our two sons, and one of the boys wanted to play with a neighbor on a Sunday morning. I said he wasn't home, and he said, "Where is he?" And I said, "Well, he went to church with his mother." And he said, "He's Christian?" He had never had a Christian neighbor. It gives you an idea of the difference, and so what evolved from that, though, is being easily – being so easy to be Jewish in Philadelphia, our neighbors were Jewish because we were in the neighborhood. Holidays were all celebrated as a neighborhood. And then, coming here,



where it was not easy to be Jewish. And then, coming here, we immediately recognized that we had to make an effort. And our children – we joined a synagogue for the first time because in Philadelphia – they were just getting ready to go to Sunday School, and we always participated in services at Hillel. So, all of a sudden, we had to make an effort as a family, and we affiliated with Touro Synagogue, which was a wonderful choice. We've enjoyed that tremendously. My husband is a past president of their board, so we were very involved. And actually, my one son that's in town is now on their board. We just started celebrating, making a greater effort in our celebration of holidays and so forth. We just didn't take it so casually. That's kind of what brought us to the JCC, also. It was the first thing after moving to town that we realized we wanted to be affiliated. We had belonged to a center in Philadelphia, but just a center to send children to camp one summer. It wasn't a part of our life the way it has become here.

RH: Well, so, when you say it's – well, I know one reason it's become part of your life is because you're executive director of the JCC.

AB: Right. Right. But not at first.

RH: But, even before that, what was the kind of center of Jewish life for you and your family here in New Orleans?

AB: Well, I think the synagogue, mainly. But I didn't come to work here immediately, so we did join so the children could do some camping here when we first moved. And then I actually went on staff in a program that was housed here at the center and that's kind of how I got involved. And then people started to become acquainted, myself and my family, and moving, being the newcomers in town because we kind of became known as the newcomers. Then I went on the board. I actually was invited to be on the board and was on the board and was hired as a staff person just to work with seniors. I had to go off the board to do that. So that was kind of the progression. And then that was twenty-five years ago. So, it's been a long time since I've been on staff.



RH: So, tell me a little about what it's like to be Jewish in New Orleans.

AB: Well, there are a couple of things that come to mind. First of all, as I said, at first we had to work at it. It wasn't as easy. I think the biggest – one of the key components of being Jewish here is the closeness of the Jewish community. I loved knowing so many people and being a part of that community, and that happened right away. We really wanted to belong and made an effort and tried to. It's always hard to move into a new community, and we just made up our minds. No matter what anybody asked, we'd always say we loved it, and we would be – we really enjoyed being in New Orleans, and so I think that positive attitude embraced us to people in the community, and I think that's one of the critical things. I think it's even going to be more so post-Katrina because we are smaller and, I think, stronger for that because we are such a close community.

RH: Tell me your neighborhood where you live.

AB: I live uptown near – about ten, fifteen blocks from the JCC, but also only maybe eight blocks from the law school where Paul has spent most of his career. He's now in administration, so he's a little further, but basically, we're all – our lives have been focused and centered in the uptown area. Our children went to the Isidore Newman School, which is halfway between our house and the center, so our lives really have evolved around the uptown area.

RH: And can you tell me anything, Arlene, about what you like about New Orleans?

AB: Having lived in a very major city, I like the smallness of it. And not just as I stated about the community but just I like the convenience of – it's almost like a village. Particularly the Uptown area, as I said, we've just stayed – we have focused our lives. It's culturally a wonderful community. I don't like the fact that it's more isolated than other cities. One of the things we did like about Philadelphia is you could be on the beach at the shore, you could be in the mountains, you could be in Washington, [or] you could be



in New York with an easy trip. And this is more isolated, and that's one of the disadvantages. But, other than that, we really do like – this is home. It's where we've made our home, and we have the history with our friends, and they've become like family.

RH: Have you ever experienced or do you know of any experiences of being Jewish and discrimination?

AB: Truly, no. Not in New Orleans. I know I've had that experience growing up, and I can remember, as a child, being called derogatory names because of antisemitism. I can remember not being included in groups when my high school – not even high school, really, but when the middle school friends were being invited to – there was a garden club in our town, and I couldn't understand why I didn't get an invitation, but there were no Jews permitted in that group. Personally, I haven't had a problem. Now, I don't know about my children, with social clubs and so forth, there's – as I mentioned, I have two sons, and they were perfectly happy and never felt excluded, but they may have been at some point in some groups that their friends might have been, as far as Mardi Gras and balls and coming out parties and stuff like that. But they seemed perfectly comfortable. They didn't feel it.

RH: All right. Well, why don't we talk a bit about Katrina? And you tell me when it kind of came on your radar screen, personally.

AB: Okay.

RH: And how you guys – how you prepared here at the JCC, home, such as that.

AB: Well, I did not know about Katrina until Friday evening. I can remember around 4:30 in the afternoon, I got a call from one of my officers who said, "I think this storm is coming toward us." And that night, we were going to – we were preparing for a major event, the JCC Maccabi Games. We had been doing a lot of meetings and so forth, and we'd been



invited – some of the key leaders for this program had been invited to a Saints game to a suite. A lot of us were there, and there was a lot of discussion around the storm because just then, it was really getting on people's radar screen. So, I went home. My husband was with me, and we went home and got in bed, and I said – and we don't evacuate. I said, "I'm worried about this storm. I think I'm going to go ahead and make some reservations." And he thought I was crazy. This was around 11:30 at night. We were tired. Anyway, I got out of bed, and I got on the Internet, and I made some airline reservations. This is not just for my husband and I, but it's for my son and his whole family. There are five of them. They have three small children. So we made airplane reservations. I even said to him, "Where do you want to go? Houston or Dallas?" He said, "I'll go to Houston. It's closer." So, we made reservations. I made plane reservations on Southwest, and I made hotel reservations so I held two rooms. But I didn't do that until – I didn't plan on leaving until late Sunday because we had a huge day here at the JCC programmatically. We had more programs scheduled that day than any normal Sunday. And I said to my husband, I've got to stay through the programs, and then we'll close up, and we'll leave Sunday afternoon. And then, of course, everyone was watching the storm, and I came in Saturday to close up. My accountant came in to do the payroll, which was a little early, but she wanted to – we do it over the Internet, and she wanted to get it out just in case we couldn't get back. I think we were supposed to send it in on Tuesday, and she says, "I'm just going to send it on in." So, she was here, and in more ways than one, it was a Godsend because it really did help a lot of people in the end. So, we did that, and we picked up some things. We had flooded once in this building in the 80s. The only time I can remember – anybody remembers the flooding. And it was just a couple of inches, but it's a big building. And a couple of inches filled – so, we have a system where we pick up our computers and our towers and lift them. And so we just kind of prepared. We cleared the pool, helped with every – the maintenance came in to clear the pool, lounge chairs, and all of that. We also cleared our nursery school yard because if there is any wind, we secure all of that and some other items. So,



maintenance worked a few hours, and I worked a little bit, and staff and so forth. I then started thinking – we thought about leaving Saturday night. But in the end, we left Sunday morning, and we wound up driving because we were afraid to wait and chance it as we saw the storm in the Gulf and how large it was. We were afraid if we waited – I think we had a 4:30 plane reservation – that they may stop the planes before, and we won't get out, which may very well have happened as I understand as far as the timing. So we drove. We caravanned with our son. There were two cars. We drove to Houston, which took – we left in the morning around 7:00, 7:30 in the morning Sunday. That took about twelve and a half hours for us to get to Houston. Thinking that we'd be back in a couple of days, so that was pretty much it until – and of course, as we realized that we weren't there just for two days and two pair of shorts aren't going to make it for – but then I realized – I took as much as I could think of that I might want to have out of the building. We have a strong box within our safe that has – that includes our original charter and some important papers. I took that.

RH: Wow.

AB: We took our backup. We took some important things, but I have a laundry list today of everything I need. I hope we never have to do that again, but there were so many things that I needed immediately that I wouldn't have thought to bring.

RH: Can you name some of that?

AB: Yeah. Account numbers for our checking accounts. Stationery. Stamps. Everybody's phone number. I now have numbers – not just their cell numbers, which I had anyway, but I know where their mother lives, and I have her number, and I have her e-mail. So I know if you're leaving town and you're going to go to your mother's, I can reach you there because that was one of the greatest struggles was that we didn't have – because we lost our area code, we couldn't reach each other after the flood. I mean, at first, you could. It was tied up, and it was difficult. But once it flooded, all the towers



went out, and that's when we just couldn't reach anybody. I mean, I was literally calling cities and saying just give me every – I would remember maiden names, someone's wife's maiden name, and I would call and say, “Just give me every one of these phone numbers.” I would just go through, and I would say, “Do you know so-and-so? Do you know so-and-so?”

RH: Wow.

AB: It took endless hours and days and days of constant phoning to find people because our staff is fairly large and everyone disbursed. And we just didn't know where anybody was, and you had to kind of get –

RH: How big is your staff?

AB: Well, we have about a hundred full-time employees during the winter, and we swell to about two-hundred in the summer. And that's full-time. And then, of course, we have quite a large number of part-time people that come in as trainers, babysitters, camp counselors, things like that. But just the key staff, professional staff, there's eighteen. We were probably twenty at the hurricane, but we're now a little less than eighteen. But we average around eighteen full-time professionals. But that doesn't include all of our full-time support, our accounting, our maintenance, our secretarial – all of them – receptionists. We just had to find people just to make sure they got out and that they were safe and, of course, determine how we were going to do our business after that.

RH: Did you have some of your staff who lost their homes and such as that?

AB: Oh, yeah. Yes. Yes. We were luckier than a lot of organizations and businesses. As I think about it, percentage-wise, we probably did better than most, but several of my key staff lived on the West Bank, so they weren't – they were affected, obviously, but they didn't flood. And then several live in Metairie, so they were okay. So we really did better than a lot of people, but I had flooding in my house. My assistant director –





Uptown assistant director – had flooding. And our nursery school director didn't flood, but her mother had nine feet of water and was ninety years old, and so she was dealing with it anyway, and so there were people, of us, that dealt with that. We have people that live in – maintenance people that live in the Lower Ninth Ward. That was one of our biggest problems is it took us months to find one staff person who'd been here probably thirty-five years. We couldn't find him, and we were really worried. He had just been going – he had been sheltered, and he'd just been moved around, shelter-to-shelter, Arkansas, Texas, and so forth. We finally found him. I mean, we didn't know if he was alive, and we were really worried about him. A lot of people – I mean, it was just obviously the people that could least afford it were the ones that were hit the most as far as our support staff. A receptionist lost her home. Two receptionists lost – yeah. So a lot of people were impacted fully by the hurricane.

RH: Describe what it was like when it was – when the light was dawning, that this is a serious problem. Were you watching TV in the hotel?

AB: Constantly. Constantly. I mean, it's hard to believe how we were so glued to the television. Well, obviously, when it started flooding, the water started coming in, we realized we had a major problem. We started getting on the satellite, on the Internet, to check satellite maps, and that would show you also where the water was and how that impacted where we were living. And our son had – they had about eight, nine-feet of water in their house, and we could literally see it on the Internet. You could actually focus into the house and look at the windows and the waterline.

RH: Wow.

AB: So that was kind of – well, it's surreal. I mean, you see this happening to you, and you don't believe it's really you that's in the middle of a catastrophe. Our first reaction – I remember this – with both my husband and I was, “Oh my goodness. What are we going to do with ourselves?” We're used to being busy, working every day. We thought that



we were going to be done. We had this time we had to fill until we could get back, and it would take months before we get back and how could we not work and so forth, which never – was so much the reverse. It was unbelievable. I've never worked so hard in my life, and my job is very – a very full job under normal circumstances. I mean, I probably worked fifteen, sixteen hours a day, straight with just trying to find people. Once we found people, brought my key staff to Houston. We had to build budgets. We were great beneficiaries of wonderful United Jewish Community support, but they needed numbers, and they needed – we had to rebuild our staff. We had to let people know that we couldn't bring them back. I mean, we did not stop. And then, my husband also became part of the recovery team for Tulane University. So he went into administration. And he was working 24/7 because they worked out of Houston. There was a team of the president and staff, and they worked seven days a week. They did not stop to rebuild Tulane and get it back up and running. So the two of us barely saw each other, and we were just as busy as can be. There were a lot of people that didn't have to work and traveled. And I said, "There's something wrong with us." We have lots of friends that are just traveling around, filling in the time until they can return, and we were really working really hard. I started commuting back to New Orleans on weekends. I have a friend who lived on the Sliver on the River; I could stay with her. They were back in, I guess, mid-October, and then I started commuting until – well, no, I guess it was the beginning of October because I came in a couple of times, and then I was back here – we opened in October, on October 20.

RH: Tell me where you lived –

AB: In Houston?

RH: – in Houston. You didn't stay in the hotel, I'm sure.

AB: No. Just about two weeks. We were very fortunate, but we spent a lot of time helping our son and his family get settled. Tulane provided us. They took over



apartments in a corporate apartment building, condo, or whatever, and they furnished and put us – because the staff was working so hard that they just dealt with it. They had a staff person that provided, so we literally walked into an apartment for us. But for our children, we had to find a place, and they lived in another part of Houston near the JCC and near the Jewish Day School where they needed to be for their children. We – well, me particularly – helped try to get them settled, which was quite a job because you couldn't even rent furniture. There was a run on everything in the city of Houston because there were so many people there settling in. We had to go buy furniture and get – they had nothing. I mean, they are a family of five with a little suitcase of belongings and three small children. So we had to get them settled in an apartment. And there was a run on apartments. I mean, you literally had to grab whatever you could because it was so hard to –

RH: Do you remember how they found their place?

AB: Yes. Jewish networking. My assistant director, who settled in Montgomery where her mother was, her son, who went to Indiana University, his roommate's mother was a real estate agent in Houston. The woman took us under her wing. She was finding everyone we knew in New Orleans apartments, and the people in Houston were amazing. I mean, they were absolutely amazing. They were so accommodating, helpful, and caring. I mean, she had us for the High Holidays to her home. I mean, it was just amazing how much they helped.

RH: Wow. So, you had mentioned before going to either Houston or Dallas, so did you have some connections in Houston other –

AB: None. None.

RH: No?



AB: I knew the exec. in Houston, just because he's been there for so many years, and we knew each other, but not close friends. Just professional acquaintances. And that was it. We had no family or anyone there. No. No one. Actually, we had a closer friend in Dallas, a friend of my husband's from when they practiced law together. But Dallas was just a little further. And it worked out well that we were in Houston because it allowed him to be able to work for Tulane and keep working. Even though, like the people who stayed on, like the law faculty, they all stayed on. They all would have gotten paid. But this allowed him to do a very exciting project that he's gotten a lot of satisfaction out of because I think it helped him keep his sanity. He's a person that I think – he would have had difficulty not working.

RH: It's kind of a story of be careful what you wish for.

AB: Right.

RH: Because you were worried.

AB: Exactly. Exactly. Exactly. It was a strange experience living in another big city again, which I don't – I really love the smallness of New Orleans. It's a comfort level here. And I did not like living in such a big city.

RH: Were you in the loop or –?

AB: Yeah. We were right by the Galleria.

RH: Yeah.

AB: And the kids were near Braeswood. You know, right off the loop. So we used the loop – oh my goodness. We spent most of our time lost. I mean, we really did. We really struggled. We really did struggle. But the community was wonderful. I can't complain. They were just fantastic.



RH: Now, did you connect to the Houston Jewish community in any particular way?

AB: Not really. We were not there that long. Because, in the end, we had to – I opened here on the 20<sup>th</sup>, so I was back – both Paul and I came back at the end of October, partly because I was open and Tulane had to be back by November. That recovery group had to be back in place by November 1st. It was kind of interesting – we did not want to set up another apartment. Paul was convinced that we could get back into our home sooner than if we had to sign a lease and commit to an apartment. We have a raised house, so we had four feet of water, but it was my basement, basically. We lost the laundry room, a lot of storage and all of that, the kids had a pool table down there, and kind of that. But it wasn't our personal items, really.

RH: Did the water sit where you are?

AB: Yeah. It was disgusting. It had to be all gutted. And the mess –

RH: Pretty disgusting.

AB: Right. But the problem we had – so that really was solved very quickly, but we had a lot of roof damage because the roof tore off a section of the house, and all of our ceilings fell in except for our master bedroom. So, Paul was convinced that we could get back. He's not a person who likes change well, so he was anxious to get back into the house. We lived in the nursing home for a few weeks when we came back. The Woldenberg Nursing Home.

RH: You did?

AB: We did. My husband is on the board. He's a past chair of Touro Infirmary, and we knew that the nursing patients were still in Houston. They have a well-aged section that's little apartments that were empty, and we knew – so, through some conversation, because he was keeping up with what was happening at the hospital, realized, "Let's pay



them some rent for a month and then we'll get back into our house.” Which is exactly what happened. So we wound up staying there. A funny side story is the place was empty, and the people there didn't know us from Adam. I mean, they just set it up as they were directed. We wound up in the same unit my mother had lived in, which was the most bizarre detail. To add to the surrealness of all of this happening to us, we wound up in my mother's apartment, where she had lived before she had passed away. But anyway, we stayed there for a few weeks, and then the gas came on. We had electricity already, but we didn't have gas. And then the gas came on, and we lived in our one-bedroom, just literally the bedroom, that's the only place we had in the house. But we lived in there for months during the renovation until they repaired –

RH: Did you have to do mold remediation?

AB: We did mold remediation in our attic and in our basement but not – the house didn't need it.

RH: I was wondering –

AB: The main floor – the main floor –

RH: – with you living in there if you needed –

AB: No. We were okay. We were okay.

RH: I did notice your mother died in 2005.

AB: Yes.

RH: She died –

AB: In January before the storm. My mother was going to turn ninety-one that year, and I feel like I'm blessed that she passed away before the storm. I can't imagine. She



suffered from Alzheimer's and was pretty much wheelchair-bound. I can't imagine her having to have gone through the evacuation, how hard that had to have been for those patients, and the confusion if you moved her out of her room, let alone moving her into a new facility. And what that would have meant for me in Houston to deal with that because it was a very draining responsibility under the best of circumstances. So, it really was a blessing that she didn't have to go through that. It really was. Plus, we had a second evacuation that was from Houston during Rita. That was probably the worst experience of my life. I mean, that was horrific.

RH: Tell me about the worst experience of your life.

AB: Well, two weeks after we were in Houston, Rita hit, was hitting, and Houston panicked. They panicked. I have a brother in Austin, Texas, so we had already been there to visit him the first weekend we were there to get out of the hotel. We all went to Austin. And then we said, "All right, we're coming back the next weekend because of the hurricane and the evacuation." It's usually a little over a two-hour drive from Houston to Austin. It took us fourteen hours.

RH: Wow.

AB: It was horrific. And it was just the emotional – I can't believe this is happening to us again. Two weeks later, we had to pack up again, and we had to get on the road. We knew what it was like to leave in an evacuation, how hard it was. This was much worse. I mean, we changed drivers without pulling over. We were at a standstill almost the entire time. People were walking faster than we were driving, as they were running out of gas and no food on the road. It was a nightmare because they did not do any contra-flow. They weren't aware of that, and it was a nightmare. It was absolutely horrific. I think it was just the emotional toll of – I cannot believe we have to do a second evacuation in so few days. So that was pretty horrific.



RH: It sounds exhausting.

AB: It was. Oh, we were – my husband did something. We had two cars again, and he was by himself because our son had come back to help to start the gutting of our houses, so he actually wasn't in Houston that weekend. I was in the van with my daughter-in-law and their children, and Paul was in the car because there just wasn't enough room in the van for all of us to go in one car. There might have been, but maybe we just didn't want to leave one car because we had already lost one car here. Anyway, it didn't matter. We were in two cars. And Paul, at one point, told me – he was by himself at that time because I was switching back and forth – that he put the strap that goes across your chest from the seatbelt – he put it in his mouth so when he fell asleep it snapped him awake.

RH: Wow.

AB: And that's how he stayed awake because it was fourteen hours of driving. We didn't leave until late in the day, so we drove through the night. It was pretty horrific.

RH: Oh my God.

AB: Yeah, it was horrible, but it was more the emotion piece, like, how can this be happening again? How can we go through two evacuations in two weeks? So that was pretty terrible.

RH: How long were you in Austin?

AB: Just for the weekend because the storm never hit Houston, so then we returned. I think we were only there two, three nights, and then we returned. And I was still working on – this was before I went up to New York. I went to New York to meet with our national board to talk about this problem for the center. I mean, it's overwhelming when you're running a business, and I'm sure this was across the board. I mean, everybody in New





Orleans – as of August 29<sup>th</sup>, revenue stopped. I mean, all of the bank drafts stopped. We're a membership-based facility, and the majority of our members are on bank draft, and if there's no banking, there's no money coming in. I have staff to pay, so I went and met with our national board. I think it was September 12<sup>th</sup> or something like that. I went up there. I spent a lot of time in Austin, still tracking people down and making the arrangements to go to New York and went back to Houston, and then I went up to New York. I cannot stress how much time it took tracking people down. That was one of the most challenging pieces, as a result of the hurricane, and I have a maintenance man here who was in on Saturday, and I had said – before the hurricane – and I had said to him, “Are you leaving?” And Roy is this amazing man. Very, very bright. “I've studied the maps. I know my house is safe. It's on the highest point of New Orleans. I'm not leaving. I cannot afford the gas. I don't want to drive. I'm staying. I'm fine.” He said, “Where are you going?” He said, “Are you leaving?” Because they know I never leave, and I said, “Yeah, I'm going to Houston. I'm nervous about this storm.” He said, “Well, I'm not going.” A few days after the hurricane, I get a call and it's Roy. And I said, “Roy, where are you?” And he said, “Well, I'm in Houston. You said you were going to Houston.” And I said, “I am in Houston.” I said, “Where are you?” And he said, “I'm at the Jewish Federation offices. I want to wait here until we're ready to go back to work.” And I said, “Roy, I don't think we're going back so soon. Maybe you ought...” I knew he had a sister in Albuquerque. “Maybe you need to go to Albuquerque. I will buy you a bus ticket and send you to any...”. He started to cry. And this is a man – a big burly guy, and he started to cry, and he said, “Don't put me on a bus. Don't put me on a bus again.” And then he starts telling me that he had been on the very high ground, but he lives next to the 17<sup>th</sup> Street Canal so his house flooded and the water started coming in and coming in. He wound up being evacuated by helicopter from the roof of his home. And then sheltered at UNO [University of New Orleans], which he said was the worst thing he's ever lived through. He said, “You couldn't sleep. People were using classrooms for bathrooms, and anything you had on you you had to protect.” He said he



felt very threatened. Then they air-boated him across the lake and then bussed him to Baton Rouge, where he was lucky enough to be able to go to the bank and get his money because we had done the payroll that Saturday.

RH: Yay.

AB: And it was an automatic deposit. He said Corinne, who is our accountant – he said, “She’s an angel.” He said, “I had no money.” He didn’t have his wallet. He had nothing. He didn’t have a toothbrush. He had nothing. But because he could get his money, he could buy the personal items he needed, and he got himself to Houston, waiting for me to go back to work. So I told him – I said, “Look, tell the Federation.” They had set up this amazing office, working with all of our people at the Jewish Federation in Houston. And our Federation people were there also, and I said, “Look, tell them to make arrangements. I’ll fly you to Albuquerque. We’re not going back to work yet. I’ll fly you to Albuquerque. Tell them to buy a Southwest ticket and to call me back and to let me know, and I’ll pay for it.” So, I get a call back from the assistant director of the JCC, and he said, “Arlene, I’m meeting with your maintenance ... I’ve met with your maintenance man. He is so traumatized. This man needs to go home. I’ve got him on a plane to Albuquerque.” I said, “Fine. I think you’re right. How much do I owe you?” And he said, “No, no. I’ve got him on an angel flight,” which I had never heard of. So, Roy wound up flying in a private plane to Albuquerque when he didn’t want to go by bus. They flew him by private plane to Albuquerque. And then we flew him back once we were open, and actually, he lived here in one of our classrooms until we could find him an apartment and so forth. He’s still on staff. We have a couple of people that lived in the building, and I bet people are still doing their wash here. I know I did for months. I brought my laundry every day. And we just kind of made do with what we could to help people.

RH: You tell this in a way of, of course, this is what we did, but a lot of businesses let go of their employees. They certainly didn’t fly them around.



AB: Well, we did let some go. We had to.

RH: Yeah.

AB: Yeah, unfortunately, we did. But our key staff and as many as we could – the people who had the most tenure and so forth, we kept. And then we rebuilt. But what a lot of – we paid people basically through the end of the year. By then we could start bringing people back, and we started adding people on so we could lose as few people as possible. And some people chose not to come back. I mean, it's interesting how it all kind of, in the end, fell into place so that very few people actually lost their jobs because they either stayed in their evacuation city or found something else. But we did have to make some tough decisions. We did. And that was very tough. As I mentioned, I brought my key staff in, and I realized after a week or less than a week that I just couldn't do this alone. I mean, this was really overwhelming. I needed my key people to come in, and we needed to come up with a plan, and this budget was required. So the day after – the morning after I got back from New York, meeting with the board, my staff was waiting in Houston. There were five of us total, and we spent forty-eight hours, literally. It was almost non-stop in my apartment in Houston, revamping the staff, redoing the budget, and just trying to get a plan. The plan wasn't clear when we could open until we were back here and saw what the damage was. Although, by then, I was starting to get phone calls that people wanted our building. I mean, the army. People were riding by and looking at this building that looked pretty pristine, and medical units were calling me and so forth. We knew we were in pretty good shape. In addition, my building engineer, who has been here thirty years – his wife worked for Entergy. So he was able to get back to the city with one of her passes. He moved back to his home on the West Bank and started working on his own, just cleaning up. Still, even without damage, it took weeks to get the place – just to clean the roof took two weeks from the debris. It's a huge roof.

RH: It had just been shut up for a while?



AB: Yeah. I mean, it takes a while. First of all, we didn't have electricity. We got electricity once the Oklahoma National Guard wanted to get in here, and that helped. That put electricity into the building very quickly. And they used the building. And then, starting in the beginning of – the first week in October, FEMA came. We became one of the largest FEMA centers in our auditorium. So we were up and running. We were in good – we were in great shape because of FEMA.

RH: So, tell me about this, though. I mean, how did you make decisions about letting –? Were you allowed to let in the National Guard, or did they tell you they were coming in?

AB: They asked. They asked. They did not use – I forget the term, but they can take your building over. They did not. They asked. Dennis was here, and so he negotiated it with them. I mean, there was no negotiation –

RH: Dennis is your building –?

AB: Dennis is our building manager. He was here, and he let in the guys. And they offered to help clean up, and they actually worked with him. They assigned people from their unit, and they worked. They used the back as a helicopter pad, and they landed their helicopters. I mean, this did look like an Army base; between De La Salle, the high school next door, and us, it looked like an Army base. And then Oklahoma moved out, and then the place was clear. And then FEMA moved in.

RH: What about FEMA? How did you kind of make that decision?

AB: That I negotiated. That's a great story because I got this call, and it's interesting. I got a call, and they wanted to sign – I mean, we talked about what we had available for their use and so forth, and within an hour, they were over here. I mean, they moved very, very quickly because they were desperate to find the space they needed. We were up and running because we had electricity and gas, and a lot of that was because of Oklahoma National Guard. They said, "We want to open tomorrow." I mean, it was that



quick. They wanted it within a few hours. “Who can sign?” Helping make the decision, the question you asked, I was able – through a lot of phone calls, I found I knew where my president was and one of my vice presidents, so I conferred with them. One was in Dallas, and one was in Atlanta. So I was able to talk with them. And by then, also, everybody was getting new phones, and we all had cell phones again. They were all from different parts of the country, but the communication was beginning. So I was in touch with enough of my leadership to confer with them about the decision as far as renting to FEMA. But then he said, “Well, can I come over and sign it.” And I said, “You don't understand. I am in Houston.” And he said, “Oh, my. What are we going to do? You're in Houston.” And I said, “You know what? You're the federal government. I bet you have someone here who can handle that.” And within an hour, I had someone in my apartment with a contract this thick that they were there, and it was done very, very quickly, and within a few days, they moved everything in and set up, and they were in operation by October 7<sup>th</sup>. FEMA was operating out of this building.

RH: How did you decide to think that it was okay for FEMA to be here?

AB: Well, there was revenue involved, and I knew I had no other revenue coming in. So that played a key factor. I mean, I have to be honest; it wasn't just the humanitarian – trying to be a good citizen. It was a business decision along with – I knew we were a good location and that there were going to be people who needed the services of FEMA, and it was a full-service center. You could see the Red Cross. You could see any agency, the SBA, all of those entities, all of the social service organizations that were functioning at that time were here. So, yeah, I saw a lot of our uptown neighbors and Jewish members of our community. They were in line here, and I felt good that they had a comfortable place to come to. Plus, I also knew we have a fabulous facility. They were going over and over about the cleanliness and the bathrooms. And I said, “You don't understand. You can eat off the floors of our building. You are getting a fantastic facility,” and they loved it. I mean, they hop around from center to center, and they move



around, and they were just – the people that would come in from other centers could not believe how comfortable it was here because everything was functioning. I had by then, maintenance people were coming back, and they were terrific, so it was a great marriage. They were thrilled to be here, and we were happy to have them here. My biggest concern was security. That was my biggest concern because I knew I wanted to eventually open a daycare, which we did by the end of October, and it worked beautifully. They had phenomenal security because I was worried. I knew there was a shortage of police in the city, and if they were just going to try to hire off of the police force, they weren't going to be able to get them. But they brought in security from – they were called Blackwater. They were this –

RH: Private company?

AB: Private. I mean, the first time they walked in –

RH: A division of Halliburton, I think.

AB: – I wasn't here – they came in with machine guns. They thought they were going to be sleeping here and everything. It was really a riot, but they wound up being very comfortable. So it was great. It worked out quite, quite well. We were one of – we were the busiest FEMA centers in Louisiana.

RH: Really?

AB: Yep. Yep.

RH: So, tell me when you were in Houston, did you have time to go to services? Where did you do High Holidays?

AB: Well, we did, yes.

RH: How did you do anything other than work?



AB: We forced ourselves to go to services. It was really hard. It was hard to – it was very emotionally – it was emotionally difficult to even think about the High Holidays. It was right after the hurricane. I mean, it was within weeks, and to be in a strange community, but we did go to the synagogue. I'm drawing a blank of the name – Temple – I want to say – David. It was one of the Reform congregations connected to the Schlenker Day School that the kids were in and I'm drawing a blank on the name of it. But we were there, and it was hard. And that's part of what we missed so much about New Orleans was the sense of family and community because this was one of these very large congregations that you find in large cities. I am sure we were one of thousands in that room. There were five or six rabbis, and it had a sound system. They had a sound board system, and it was huge. There were a few thousand people there at services. But we still did dinner with our family. We were lucky. I mean, our children were there, and our grandchildren, so that made it a little bit easier. But it was depressing to be away. We're used to being in our congregation and a part of that community, and we didn't have that. I explained to someone that I ached to get back. I really ached. It was very hard to be away. It really was.

RH: Did you connect at all with other New Orleanians in Houston? I mean, you certainly had your staff.

AB: They weren't in Houston. My staff wasn't in Houston. I brought them in for that forty-eight-hour period. Eventually, my assistant director in Metairie wound up in Houston. She had gone – interesting story. Her daughter's bat mitzvah was that weekend of the hurricane. So, she wound up going up to Cincinnati, where her in-laws live, and they did their child's bat mitzvah there. And within forty-eight-hours' notice, her family put together an entire bat mitzvah in Cincinnati. And there have been some articles about it – Jody's bat mitzvah – but it was amazing, even to the point where they had a party and got yarmulkes. They called someone in New York, and they said, "This is a Katrina situation. You've got to do it." They printed yarmulkes. So they actually had



a full-blown bat mitzvah in Cincinnati instead of New Orleans. And then, she came to Houston in the end because her husband is the executive director of Jewish Children's Regional Service, and so he realized he wanted to position himself in Houston. His agency has a great deal of – it's a regional agency, and there is a great deal of work that he does in Texas. So, she wound up joining us about a month later. But up until that point, there was no one there. But I brought them in. As far as connecting – the question was connecting to –

RH: Well, to other New Orleanians –

AB: New Orleanians.

RH: – who were in Houston.

AB: We all connected.

RH: There was, I think, Rabbi – Gates of Prayer –

AB: Rabbi Loewy was there.

RH: And did you go to services at Rice or –

AB: Oh, yes. Yes. We did that.

RH: You did?

AB: Yes. We went to services at Rice, where Andy Busch ran services. Yeah. The Federation did a superb job of networking all of us on the Internet so that as soon as people connected, they started publishing who was where and so forth, and that was very helpful. But you ran into people all the time. At least where I was. I mean, it was amazing. There's a delicatessen called Ziggy' – something and Ziggy's – in Houston, and it was like a New Orleanian spot. I mean, you couldn't sit down because you were





going from table to table because everybody had to hear your story of how they got out and who – what do you know about this one or that one? So you couldn't go in there without running into New Orleanians, so it was really – and we happened to live near there. But we saw people all of the time. Julie Wise Oreck lived across the street from me. Her mother, Carol Wise. So we did see – we did connect. And then, I established, also, an office at the JCC in Houston. They gave us some office space. When Wendy wound up in Houston, we set up and just shared an office. We used it less than we thought we would, but it gave us kind of a home base for us to meet and work out of. And all of our New Orleanians were using the center for – they were giving free use of the center. We ran into people at the JCC all of the time. And I think the day school – I don't know how many children were at Schlenker, but I think they took in, at the various day schools, eighty children from New Orleans.

RH: Wow.

AB: So you saw New Orleanians at the day schools and – the day schools were amazing. I mean, for instance, the school my grandchildren went to, they have uniforms, so you went there to sign up, and they just – all of the families brought their old uniforms, hung them up on coat racks, and you just picked out uniforms and shopped there. Bookbags. Whatever. They just gave you everything. It was amazing. They did a phenomenal job. They met with the Katrina children once a week to do some group therapy. Just their guidance counselor, the school social worker, whatever she was, met with those children, and they just were so amazing and caring for these children, and every family there had a buddy. Another family there that buddied up with them to help them. They got baskets for the High Holidays [and were] invited to people's homes. It was amazing. It was amazing. Absolutely – they were phenomenal.

RH: We're going to stop this tape for a minute.

AB: Okay. All right.



RH: And then we're going to do –

[END OF PART ONE]

RH: – and this is tape two for Katrina Jewish Voices. I was interested in when you first came into the city. I assume you didn't stay. You just came in to –

AB: Actually, we did.

RH: You did?

AB: I did. My son had been staying in Baton Rouge and coming in and out to deal with our homes because they both had to be gutted. But, when Paul and I first came in, and I want to tell you it was around the first of October, we stayed. My accountant aunt's home was operating, and she wasn't even in town, but she offered that we could stay in her home. And this was still when you couldn't get food, and I mean it was really – you were still going through checkpoints to get in. And so we came in to assess the house and the Center and so forth and get some of our belongings. We stayed overnight and stayed in Metairie at her place, which was really quite lovely. I mean, I had never met her. She opened her home and let us stay there. So, that was the first time. It was very eerie. There were no lights in most places, so you just couldn't believe how desolate the city was at that point. To see all of the Humvees and soldiers and military – the military. That's basically what it was. We tried to get some food that night. We didn't want to – she offered us [to] eat whatever, but we didn't want to – we basically told her, “Let's go out. We're tired.” There's got to be something in Metairie because Metairie, Jefferson Parish, was open already. It was New Orleans that wasn't open. I mean, it was quite an effort. We finally found the one place, Raising Cane. Have you ever heard of it? It's a chicken place. I mean, the line was all the way down Veteran's Avenue. Veteran's Boulevard. We were able to find some food, but that was really one of the few places open. It was pretty difficult. So that was the first time, and then I started coming in. My



friend had returned to New Orleans by then because she lived below St. Charles, and her house was really – she was complaining that she didn't have satellite and Internet. I didn't feel real sorry for her. So I stayed with them on the weekends, during the few days, and then go home, go back to Houston for the weekend. Then I would come in each week, do a little business, and get us up and running because FEMA was here, as I said, after the first week in October, and that's when we made the decision. It was a really amazing – I think I'm proud of our staff for helping us do this because we picked a date – October 20<sup>th</sup>, we'd open the fitness center, and we did it. There was still no mail or – obviously, mail was forever to get that, but we just put up a sign in the front, and we thought, “Well, how will people even know?” And the first day, we had fifty people come and work out and just thank us for – we didn't charge anything. We just let people come in and use the facilities as a member. I don't think we charged – nothing in October, the few days that were left. And then we had a very minimal charge if anyone wanted to join just so we could activate them. And then after the first of the year – and we started accommodating people by going month-to-month because people didn't know where they were going to be, whether they were going to stay in town, they were coming in to renovate, or just get their belongings. So we allowed people to join, and we rolled back our prices to when we renovated the facility and built the new fitness center. It was in 1997. So we rolled back our prices to 1997, so made it very affordable, and we opened. And then daycare was in great demand. Phones were ringing off the hook. People wanted to go to work. People working in hospitals and other services. Tulane people that had to come back. So we opened our daycare October 31<sup>st</sup>.

RH: Wow.

AB: And it was kind of an emergency daycare, and we managed. Now, I look back, and I don't know how I managed it and got enough staff to run it, but we had fifty children here immediately in our daycare.



RH: They weren't the same children that had been in before?

AB: No. A few, but not – no. No. But people desperate to find daycare and be able to start working, so it was – our staff did an amazing job. They really, really did because we knew we needed to get the revenues rolling again, and even though we had this UJC support, we have a big facility. And we were kind of – because Metairie was closed – Metairie flooded. The Metairie facility had eight inches, nine inches of water, which isn't a lot compared to – but it does the mold and all that. So the whole first floor of that facility had to be cut away, and gutted, and so forth. We couldn't do anything in Metairie. We could focus on Uptown because Metairie was going to be closed until the renovation was done. That allowed us to put all of our energy into this facility. So that by January, we were really kind of – January '06, we were fairly normal. We still didn't have the front of the building for usage because FEMA was here. But, from the back, we got fitness. We started doing some senior programming, and we did our daycare and nursery. The nursery school opened in January as a regular nursery school. Along with our daycare. I mean, your original question was what was it like when people first started coming back. I mean, I ate off of the Salvation Army truck. It was parked out front here. We got our shots here. It was crazy, but you couldn't buy food. Any stores that were open had very limited hours, and that was what you had to do. Anybody that was working flex-time had to – you couldn't go home and pick up milk on the way home. Stores weren't open. If they were open at all, you were lucky they were open until five. So everybody had to go do that kind of stuff during the day in order to be able to manage. As I said, people did their wash here, and we just kind of made do, and there were no services. I mean, one of the funniest things – on one of my trips in, before I moved back, Paul had said to me, “Go and get...”. They announced our zip code. We can go and get our mail. So my girlfriend took me, who I was staying with, like two bags. I figured I'd take some garbage bags. You know, supermarket bags. Brown bags to fill up with my – because we had so much mail at our house. And you wait in line. You had to get a number, and they had to go search for your – I mean, it was a process to pick up your mail. As I said, it was like



the Wild West when you had to go to the post office to pick up your mail. That was the only way you could get the mail for months. It's the way you could get your mail. And I had three pieces of mail. And the mail has just – we don't know where the mail went. We'll never get it. But I had three pieces of mail, one of them being a JCC flyer that somehow got through. It was really comical because I thought I'd have bags of mail, and we did not get catalogs for a year. Just starting now to get catalogs. It's evolved, and everything gets better and better and better. But it took so long to get phone service and TV and cable and all of that. I mean, it just was a slow progression of trying to build back, but all anybody wanted was some normalcy. I think back to the JCC and why it was so – people flocked to the center. It was something normal. They could, first of all, stay healthy and get rid of some of the stress that we're all going through by working out, but it was a normal place. And then we really became kind of the shower for people. I mean, people didn't have showers and plumbing. And so people would come with their bath towels and just go upstairs and shower and leave and then try to go to work or whatever. We had a family here that showered here, I think, almost a year. I have a feeling they were a little slow in their renovation. They did. They trekked in here every day for almost a year.

RH: So that was okay with you?

AB: Yeah. Yeah. I think that's the least we could do. If we didn't all try to help each other – and we were all in a terrible situation. I don't think anybody took advantage of any of that. We just tried to be as accommodating as possible. We changed our format for classes. We never took children in daycare until they were nursery school-aged. It was just the way we – we never had the space. But I have less seniors now because so many seniors haven't returned to New Orleans. I took over some senior space and made it into a Walking One's class so that we could do daycare for that younger group. Then I took over the game room, which was a bit of a sacrifice for our children and our teens, and I've made it another nursery school room because we needed that. So, you just



have to juggle and accommodate the needs of the community, and we've tried to do that as best we can.

RH: Well, you must have been one of the first nursery schools.

AB: Yeah. Yeah. Definitely.

RH: And the fact that you decided to expand in that –

AB: Yeah.

RH: Have you had trouble getting help?

AB: Yeah. It's been a struggle.

RH: Yeah?

AB: But we lost some people. We have a very fine – I mean, one of our best nursery schoolteachers relocated to Nashville, and that was a tremendous loss. She'd been here twenty years.

RH: I just meant you can't use your senior person in the nursery school.

AB: No, but my Jewish Enrichment person became my senior director. She's doing two jobs.

RH: Wow.

AB: So we've done a lot of juggling, and we've downsized some. We have definitely downsized our programming a little bit, not much, but in our staffing because we need to. I mean, we have funding from UJC in '07, but then we're on our own. I worry about how this agency is going to make ends meet with so many less members in our community and the city being smaller.



RH: So, how's your membership? What does it look like now percentage-wise?

AB: Well, first of all, the membership – we measure our membership by units, not by the number of people. So, if you join as a couple, you're counted as one unit, and if I join as a family, I'm counted as one unit. If you join as an individual, you could as one unit too. Our units are actually up right now, but it's very fluid that we don't have a reading on because people can come in and out on a monthly basis because it's a month-to-month membership. That's kind of the trend nationally, and that's probably where we were going to go anyway. But we don't have a reading, and it's a little more precarious now because we don't know what our community is going to look like, where other centers that have gone that route have at least had some history. Now we don't. So, our units are actually strong. I have less Jewish membership, and that is, I think, indicative of the downsizing, as I'm sure you – the numbers may vary slightly, but we estimated that we were about 9,500 Jews. Some people said 10,000 prior to the hurricane, and now we're around 6,000 or 6,500. It's unclear where that number is going to go if that will decrease or not. So our Jewish membership has declined substantially percentage-wise.

RH: Do you worry about a point where your – about your Jewish identity? As your numbers of Jewish people decrease and the larger community starts to use –? Have you had some discussions around that?

AB: Yes. Yes. I've worried about it, and I think it is – I think our mission is strong. I think that we will be fine. But one of the first things that I thought of, and I'm delighted that we were able to do, [was] we asked for funding through the Willy Wolf Foundation, which is held at the Jewish Endowment Foundation, to host a community shaliach, which is an emissary from Israel. These are volunteers from Israel, young adults, who go into the Diaspora and bring Jewish and Israeli culture into communities. WE have this young woman now who came in September who is here for at least a year, maximum two years if we can afford it, but at least funded for a year, who is here only to bring Jewish culture



and Israeli culture into our community. She's fabulous, and I think that that in itself is going to be – it's wonderful for the entire community because she provides programs in the synagogues, at the Jewish Day School, at Torah Academy, for the agencies, and here at the JCC. So she just is a very busy young woman who is providing a lot of programming.

RH: Can you describe a little of the programming?

AB: Well, Monday, she has brought in an Israeli speaker, a gentleman who is going to speak on the Holocaust denial. She's doing Shabbat programming at each of the schools on a monthly basis. She's going to teach in the Sunday School. She's spoken at Temple Sinai already. She's scheduled to speak again there in January. And she's done a bunch of our senior programming on Israeli culture and Jewish holidays, and that's just the tip of the iceberg. She's just been here a short while, and she's really done a lot already. She'll work on Israel Independence Day, obviously, and then she'll stay in our camp, and she'll supervise some of our counselors at camp. We'll bring in some – we always bring in Israelis from – two to three Israelis to be a part of our summer camp program. She will supervise. So we'll get even more programming from her. She's very talented. And these are young people who have finished the service. She's actually spent two years in law school, and she's taken a break to do this as a community project and to bring Israel to other parts of the world, and then she'll go back and finish her schooling. So we've done that. Another thing I've done – to respond to exactly what your question. My concern about keeping our Jewish mission is because there will be less Jewish children in the nursery school. I found the funding for a program, a national program from the JCC Association called "An Ethical Start." And it's a program for nursery schoolers on ethics and values, and it's based on *pirkei avot*, and it's – there's a study from the parents, and it's Jewish and non-Jewish because it's values, but it's all based around Jewish texts and Jewish scholars. Four of our nursery school staff went to a training and after the first of the year, they'll bring that program into a nursery school.





Again, bringing in more Jewish content. So we're addressing it through those programs, but I think it's going to be important that we don't lose sight of our mission of providing Jewish culture and Jewish life to the community. So I think the center will play an even greater role in that, in this community, than we did even before the hurricane. A perfect example, and partly because everyone is welcome here and someone doesn't feel like they want to go to an Orthodox or they don't want to go to a Reform Congregation – we came back in December after the hurricane. There is a foundation for Gary Rosenthal. He was an artist, a Jewish artist, and he wanted to do something. He gave a Hanukkah Party here at the center for the community. And again, this was without mail, really no e-mail to speak of or anything. We had six hundred people come. The place was packed. He gave away two hundred menorahs. When he put them out, I thought, I'm going to be beside myself. We're going to have twenty people we don't know, and here he had people around the country make these menorahs because he knew that people had lost their Judaica because the Judaica is usually on your first floor, and that's where everything got thrown out. He had these, and I'm telling you, we had no idea who would show up. It was the first real community gathering after the hurricane in this city. There had been gatherings around – in evacuation cities but none here. It was the most heartwarming, everyone was hugging each other and just so thrilled to see each other. And it was just an amazing event. Just amazing. So it was great.

RH: It sounds wonderful.

AB: It was. It really was. It was a wonderful gift to the community.

RH: You really were right on cue because I was just about to ask you about Hanukkah. And if there was any programming here last year.

AB: There was. Yes. Then two weeks later we did a welcome back concert, too, with the Jewish rock kind of star, and we had about the same number of people. Both events provided dinner. That was very important. Because we still were struggling. Everyone



was struggling to feed themselves and food and restaurants and so forth. We didn't charge anything at either event, and he did hot dogs, and then we did a spaghetti dinner. We all cooked it. I mean, all of us got in the kitchen and cooked spaghetti dinner so we could provide food choices. But even then, it was still a struggle for people to eat. But it was fun. And then this next week, we'll do another Hanukkah celebration. We're bringing in Debbie Friedman, for a concert, as a gift for the community, and she's a popular Jewish singer, and I think hopefully we'll get a nice crowd.

RH: The kids will love that.

AB: Yeah.

RH: Well, it occurred to me, as you were talking, that it's kind of the same way when you came from Philadelphia to New Orleans. You had to be more intentional.

AB: That's true. That's true. I haven't thought about it.

RH: And so you've had some training.

AB: Yeah. I haven't thought about that. You're right.

RH: So you suddenly find yourself really having to think about how you're going to be Jewish.

AB: Right.

RH: And what are the priorities.

AB: That's right. That's right. And to work harder. We do. We have to work harder.

RH: Have any of the priorities of the JCC changed because of the storm?



AB: I don't think so other than trying to be as flexible and as accommodating. I don't think so at this point. Now, we are hoping to do a strategic plan. I think we have a lot of work to do to see in the next two to three years what we want to look like and how we want to carry forward our mission because, again, we're apprehensive because of the size of the community. We are one of the – we are, I'm sure, the smallest community in the country with two facilities. Even though we share that building with other entities, that's going to be a big hurdle for us to jump over to try to keep that facility up and running with such a small community base. Right now, actually, we're doing fine because there are some fitness centers that haven't opened, and so our competition isn't there. As those voids are filled, that's going to make it even tougher.

RH: I was just about to ask you – see, you're very good. You're right on cue again – about the other campus and how you work with the other campus.

AB: Well, we're one board.

RH: So, you're one board.

AB: One board. And I have an assistant director, Wendy Goldberg, who has been there for many years. She was in the old building before when we were in the old school that we had converted into a center, which was on Bissonnet Lane but closer to Power Avenue/Boulevard, or whatever it is. Now we're closer into Causeway at the new facility, but she's been there for years and lives in Metairie and really knows the community. She oversees that branch, but its governance is through our main board. And there is only one board. And our committees are even combined. Originally, they weren't, but they have been since we opened the new facility they have. So, for instance, we have a health and phys. ed. committee. We have Metairie representation on that committee. Or it's co-chaired by an Uptown person and a Metairie person so we get input and make decisions together because our programs mirror each other. The difference is that there is no nursery school in Metairie, so she doesn't have that kind of program. They don't



have that kind of programming, and they don't have the full fitness facilities we have. We have a spa area. We call it the wet area because we have a Jacuzzi, a sauna, and a steam room. They do not have that, so it differs in that respect. Otherwise, it pretty much mirrors. And we have staff that provide programming at both sites. Our senior programming is the same person that we work with.

RH: So, where's the majority of the community now? Are they in Metairie? Or are they here in Uptown?

AB: We don't know. We need a good demographic study to know that. A lot of the Lakeview people, I think, did move Uptown. I think Uptown has more of our Jewish community than we did before the hurricane. But Metairie is still pretty densely populated. But if I personally had to guess, I would say that about half.

RH: Really?

AB: I would, but I have no proof of that. So don't quote me.

RH: Just anecdotal. Anecdotal. Yeah.

AB: Right.

RH: Who you run into at the Langenstein's.

AB: That's right. That's right. You got it. How you measure everything.

RH: So, do you anticipate a power struggle about what facility to keep open?

AB: That's a very good question. I don't know if it will be a power struggle. I think – and I could be objective. I don't know. I believe that this facility will always be the main facility. The Metairie facility, unless it underwent a great deal of renovation to expand the spaces for our programming, could not be the full facility. It couldn't sustain the kind of



programming I think we'd like to offer. We also don't have a nursery school there because Gates of Prayer runs a nursery school, and we don't compete with them. That's something that was agreed upon many years ago when we first went out to Metairie. A nursery school is a main revenue stream for any JCC, and the nursery school is uptown. I do believe that the question will be, can we run two facilities? Or do we downsize the programming in Metairie to be able to afford to function as a center but maybe run some programming out there – a summer camp, you know, things like that? One of our challenges is the day school. We were dependent upon the day school and their children using our services after school and being a part of our camp program and our vacation camps and things like that. And the day school has decreased in numbers tremendously. And right now, there are twenty-one children. Well, when things were still a struggle out there but much better, there were eighty-two children. So that does impact us directly, and how that plays out in the future, I don't know.

RH: Now, when you say – those kids were part of the day camp also.

AB: They fed into our day camp.

RH: They fed into it. Now is the day camp Uptown or did you have it both?

AB: Both.

RH: Oh, you had both places.

AB: And still do. We ran a day camp in Metairie last summer also. That was really our first big program. We opened in March of this year and ran our summer day camp. It was very successful.

RH: So, how did you do in Metairie?



AB: We did well. We did well. Children's day care – people need quality programming, and there is less and less because of the hurricane. So we did well. And that was a strong program. But it leaves the after-school classes – those revenue streams are not there right now because of the size of the –

RH: Community.

AB: Yeah. And the Day School.

RH: Oh, the Day School.

AB: The Day School. Yeah. We'll see what happens with that. So those are challenges that we are going to have to face and make decisions around. It's going to be community – it's going to be some hard decisions for the community at large.

RH: What are you seeing through your Center in the various communities? I mean, how are the seniors doing? Can you tell some of that?

AB: Well, I think the ones that are back are doing pretty well. They're looking for programming. Our programming, senior programming, is actually pretty strong. Because the people that are here are well enough to get out and do stuff. The frail did not come back. They couldn't. The families absorbed them into other communities, and this was not the place to come to if you needed good medical care. So, now, as the seniors that have returned age, then we'll see whether they drop off. Will there be people to replace them? I guess, yeah, there will be a continuum. But the seniors that are here are pretty active and looking for programming, and our numbers are strong. I also have a very talented woman – I'm very lucky – that's the Jewish Enrichment Director who came on board right before the hurricane and was able to take over for our senior director [who] didn't return from Chicago. She absorbed that programming. And her background had been in senior programming, to begin with, so she's just done a fabulous job and has connected with people and so forth. But I think they're pretty resilient. We have another



group that has really declined in numbers, and that's our Holocaust survivors who participate in programs here. Their numbers were declining to begin with, but not many of them stayed.

RH: Stayed away?

AB: Stayed away. Yeah. Our kids are good. I think they're fine.

RH: They are fewer.

AB: Right. But I think people are looking for programming. So because there is less available and they want to connect to the community, I think we've had pretty good numbers. We really have. And people seem good. We're not a social service agency, so we don't – JFS, Jewish Family Services, would probably give you a far greater handle on what this community is. I can tell you that [for] staff, it's been tough. Emotionally, I've seen a couple of staff people kind of reach their limit. They've been through so much, and we've just tried to – we've said to a couple of them, take care of your personal – you can't work anyway, so take the week and get the house back or do what you have to do, or take care of your mother because you just need to. We've had to have that kind of flexibility. No one doesn't take a call from a contractor. I don't care what meeting you're in. It's still that way. I mean, it's kind of the joke of the meeting, but you just kind of know if a foreperson calls, you take it because you're desperate to get that next step of whatever you are in your renovation. But there's been a big emotional toll. Also, the staff really worked hard, and how do you compensate the staff. You try to do – we did parties. My board did a dinner. They really appreciated that. So they're really working hard. Maintenance is working with less people. Not everybody came back and you can't hire, so they're doing more work than they did before. Now they're working for more people – they're doing other people's jobs and working extra hours, and the same with the secretaries. We can't afford all of the support we had. Then they have all this personal stress and demands from families. So it's all taken an emotional toll. I've seen



everybody kind of hit a wall, and we've just had to deal with it, and then people bounce back. But that part's been tough because those are the people that you see on a day-to-day basis, and you hear their woes. But again, we were fortunate. A bunch of our people were fine. They lived on the West Bank, now called the Best Bank, but that allowed us to keep operating without too much crisis because of that.

RH: I'm hearing you, and it's like the JCC is a family.

AB: It is.

RH: So, how is your family?

AB: Oh, we're good. My son can't seem to get his house done, so his children, his family, have been hopping around. They came back from Houston in December of '05, and they still are not in their house. So this has been a long haul for them. They went back into the house and lived on the second floor – I call them the second-story dwellers – and they made a kitchen out of a laundry room on the second floor. And they did that for a while. But then the renovations – they're revamping their house a bit. They're living in a neighborhood that's – it's Broadmoor, which has gotten a lot of publicity and questions. So they're actually taking a very large home and turning it into a duplex because they just don't know what that neighborhood is going to be. It's going to become an investment property at some point. But they're going to live upstairs. So, because of that, it's been a major, major renovation. It's been tough for them, so it's been tough for us to see them struggle. They moved to my daughter-in-law's family's house because her family did what a lot – her parents did what a lot of people are doing that can afford it; they immediately bought a condominium, and they're spending – they're from Chile, so they bought a condominium in Santiago, Chile, and they're spending hurricane season there. They are moving out every year. They've moved out so my kids used their house. But now their house still isn't done, so they're juggling that, and that's tough. Their children –





RH: How about you?

AB: I'm in my house.

RH: When did you get in?

AB: Well, remember, I lived in the one room.

RH: I know. But when did you take over your home?

AB: Over the house? I'm trying to remember. I think it was in April or May. I still have floors to do, but I'm just –

RH: Did you have a renovation for each room as it –

AB: It was such a battle. It was such a battle because just finding laborers was just a nightmare. In fact, I still have to replace my floors. All of the ceilings sat wet on the wooden floors, so they have to be replaced. They're warped. I'm going to do it in a few months. Even though I know I'll have to move things around again, I just –

RH: Can't do it right now.

AB: Couldn't do it. I just couldn't emotionally go through another step of that renovation. So we just live with little – floors that are not very pretty, but they're fine, and we're living very – the difference was like night and day once I really felt like I was back in the house. You know, eating out all those months. We had to all re-do our kitchens and tore out refrigerators and all of that. So it was really – that was a big step in recovering was getting the house back. And I feel badly that my kids are struggling with that because it doesn't feel normal until you get back into your place.

RH: So you can kind of really see that their recovery is not as far along emotionally because –



AB: Right. Well, they're young, and they'll manage, and their kids are fine. But it's hard. My granddaughter just turned nine, but at the hurricane, she had just started school at Newman, and then she went to Houston and went into school. And then when she came back to school in the middle of the year at Newman, her teacher never returned. So she had to adjust to a new classroom teacher, and the kids were just – and now she's in another school. It's been a lot of change for these kids.

RH: Are their friends back? Are some of their friends –

AB: Yeah. A lot of their friends are back. Not everybody but a lot. That age group – it's kind of interesting because they do pretty well. As far as the JCC, I lost a lot of my young leadership, people in their early forties. I lost twelve board members.

RH: Wow.

AB: That didn't return. They were doctors, lawyers, people who were professional –

RH: In their forties with kids?

AB: Yeah. Right. Right. It was kind of a phenomenon. The communities were so wonderful and so welcoming that people, I think, fell in love with their adopted communities, their evacuation communities. When you move into a new city, it's usually a struggle until you break through and meet people. But people embraced them.

RH: It's kind of a tribute to the other Jewish communities.

AB: It is. It is. And therefore, it was their gain – our loss, their gain. But people questioned what kind of life they would have back here. If they were mobile, and doctors were. That was easy. And you question the quality of life here. When they were making those decisions, it was really tough to live here. It's better now, but it was a lot tougher. People didn't know how soon it would get better. It was just easier to stay. So people



stayed in Houston, Texas, Atlanta, Salt Lake City, a couple other communities – Florida.

RH: So how does that affect what you do?

AB: Well, it has impacted tremendously my leadership and succession. I've lost two – I'm on my third president. I don't know if I mentioned that.

RH: No, you didn't.

AB: I'm on my third president since the hurricane.

RH: Wow.

AB: I know. And that's your real leadership. That scares me more than anything.

RH: That's kind of interesting because that's unusual. I mean, compared to some of the other –

AB: Unusual. Yes, that's right.

RH: – organizations that have had pretty stable leadership –

AB: That's right. Couldn't stay. They were older. I'm a young institution.

RH: You're right. You're right.

AB: My clientele, my membership, my involvement is with very young people because of the nursery school and the camp. Those are our users. Those are the people that – in fact, I've often thought of us as a good training ground for a lot of other boards.

RH: Wow.

AB: People are here. They come on board when they're pretty young. So those are the ones that left town. But the woman that was our president when the hurricane hit, I think,



was a seventh- or eighth-generation New Orleanian. This was a woman who left a lot of roots, but her husband is a physician, and he could reestablish himself quickly and easily, and she loved Dallas. They wooed her. I mean, I used to kid her. I said, "I can't reach you. You're always out to lunch." And this was when all of us were struggling and not knowing anybody in our community. So she left, and then the next person that stepped in never really returned. He thought he was going to come back from Atlanta, but his in-laws were in Atlanta and –

RH: Didn't come back.

AB: And there's a vibrant Jewish life in Atlanta. He has a child in day school. And our day school was – what happened, I don't know if I said, but those twenty-one children are only K, 1, and 2. So, they're going to re-grow. Well, he had a child that was older, and there was no day school, and that was important, so they stayed. So I'm on my third president. We've lost a lot of the board.

RH: You're not to the point, though, where a short straw gets to be president?

AB: I'm very fortunate. She is a very strong leader. Has held positions that have trained her exceedingly well for this job. Very hands-on layperson. And I have some people that my next person in line is really strong. So we'll be okay. We have a few years of time to grow more leadership. We're in pretty good shape. I feel lucky, even though we've been hit hard, I think we're okay. But we do have to build board leadership during a time when we have to make some big decisions. It's going to be – those will be the challenges. But it's a good group of people. The people that are here are committed. It might have been Sandy Levy who said, "You're committed to New Orleans, or you need to be committed." One or the other. I thought that was –

RH: You said in some of the material that you wrote that in some ways, for you and your husband, I mean, both of you – he's rebuilding Tulane. You've been rebuilding a vital



part of the Jewish community – that this has actually been an exciting time in a sense. Can you expand on that a little bit?

AB: Well, it's been exciting, and it's been rewarding. Even more so for him because I'm doing my own job, what it was. It's just become more challenging. He took on a new job. He became a part of the recovery team and then was asked to stay on in [the] administration. He's actually vice president of technology, managing that department. He doesn't know much about technology, but he's a good manager, so he's managing that department. And he's also the interim provost right now. It's been very exciting for him. It's been exciting being a part of rebuilding Tulane. I mean, Tulane is a very critical part of the success of New Orleans –

RH: And the Jewish community.

AB: – and the Jewish community, too, you're right. I think that's been very rewarding for him. He's tired. He's worked very hard. But it's been great. And then he'll finish out and go back to law school, and then he'll start working through his retirement schedule. For me, it's been less unique in that, I mean, I'm still doing and working with a lot of the same people, but it's exciting in that I really think I am making a difference. I mean, I think the Jewish Community Center is a very vital part of this community and very important. I think sometimes people lose that perspective because we're always somewhat competing with synagogues and so forth. Everybody wants a program. Everyone wants to build their membership. And this is, to me, the center of the community because we are open to everyone, and I think that we need more than ever now that we are rebuilding. It's been a wonderful experience because it has brought this community closer. We know now that we need each other. We're doing this Hanukkah party concert next week, and even though we're hosting it as far as taking care of all of the expenses, we wanted everybody's name on that invitation. It's a community event, and we want every synagogue and organization to be a part of that because we're re-building our



community. It has brought us closer together, and that's felt good. That really has been a wonderful part of it. We can't make it without each other.

RH: What has it meant for you to go through this experience and to be Jewish?

AB: Well, it's been interesting. I've always been proud to be Jewish. I've always enjoyed being Jewish, even as a small child.

RH: Really?

AB: I don't know if it was because I was a little different and because I grew up in – at one point, I was really growing up in McKeesport, Pennsylvania. Not growing up in the center of the Jewish world. But going through Katrina, I have been overwhelmed by the Jewish support around the country. It really has made me proud to be a part of a Jewish community that takes care of each other. I mean, it's just been amazing how people have cared so much about us, worried about us, understand the plight that we have, [and] the fight that we have to rebuild the community. [I] do not want us to lose our Jewish community because this could devastate a community. There's no two ways about it. I just have been overwhelmed by that kind of support. Then just being a part of this Jewish community has made me a stronger New Orleanian Jew, if there is, in fact, such a thing. I feel even more connected to the Jewish community.

RH: Tell me what that means.

AB: I've worked in this community, and so obviously, I've been a part of it. But I really didn't realize how important this community was to me personally until I couldn't be here, and we were all spread all over the country. It was a tremendous loss. I can't really explain it, but I just felt it. All I wanted to do was get back here and be with people I know and care about, and I know care about me. And you realize that when it's – people may move. They make that decision to move here. When you are plucked out of your community within hours, and you're stuck somewhere where you didn't really want to be,



you just miss that connection and all that history. And that's one thing unique about New Orleans is that there is a lot of history. We're newcomers. We've only been here thirty years. Thirty going on thirty-one years.

RH: That's not intimidating to you?

AB: No. Let me tell you – it was for a long time. Everyone is here generations and generations, so there is all that history. I love that. I love still making the connections between families and this cousin and that cousin just because – even though I'm not a part of those families, I just love the history of the Jewish community here.

RH: Has your identity as a Jewish person changed any through this?

AB: I don't think so. My Jewish identity was strong just because of so much of my career. As I explained, I didn't have a strong Jewish upbringing particularly. My husband did and brought a lot of enrichment to my Jewish life because of his upbringing, which was more, he calls it, Conservadox – small town, it was a Conservative Orthodox community [and] synagogue. He had a very strong Jewish background. My career created a lot of my Jewish identity, and so I would say that there is a stronger feeling toward the community. But my Jewish identity is probably pretty much the same.

RH: Have you talked to God this past fifteen months?

AB: Yeah, I think so. I think so. There were times where – I mean, I don't pray to God – I feel very guilty when I pray to God because it's only when I need Him or Her. I'm one of those people that abuse the right. But I worried mostly about my family. You know, my kids. They lost not everything. Some people lost everything because they lived on one floor. As my son said, we lost all of our good stuff. We didn't lose any of the junk in our kids' bedrooms and stuff. So they fortunately – their children didn't lose everything. So much of their stuff was in their bedrooms. But they lost everything. They're married ten years, and they have not – they do have their pictures, which is a great story. They



insisted on taking both cars to Houston, which I was furious [about] because it meant three cars with four drivers. It made the drive harder. I was just livid. But it was a good thing because they didn't lose a car like we did. They didn't. But then, the only apartments – as I said, it was very hard to find apartments, and they needed a three-bedroom apartment. There are five of them. They wanted a three-bedroom apartment. The one three-bedroom apartment they could get in the area, which was in Meyerland, a nice area in Houston near the JCC, was a third-floor walk-up, which was really tough to move into. They open up their trunk; every album is in their trunk. At this point, I don't know that they've lost everything. And I'm like, "I cannot believe that we have to carry every one of these picture albums up to the third floor." It was just like, "Oh my God, one more thing." The whole trunk had nothing – my daughter-in-law is big on albums – had nothing but their picture albums. All of their baby, wedding, everything. And they would have lost them all. They would have lost them all if they had had – they had eight feet of water. They would have lost every single photograph they had. So that was such a blessing. I don't know what possessed them to take them, but they did. I took nothing. I just kind of walked out of my house thinking I'll be back in two days, but they took that, and she was smart enough that she took their birth certificates and passports. So a lot of people had so much trouble registering the kids in schools because you need some proof. And she had all that. So they were smart enough to do that. But anyway, I'm rambling. That was nice that they had that. But back to your original question, I worried, and I still worry about them. I mean, we're fine, and we're lucky we're back. They spent a lot of time at our house, and that's a good thing, but they've got a long haul. They're not going to get back into their house for a few months. So it's a struggle. It's hard.

RH: How's their work?

AB: Okay. My son is in the mortgage business, and so he's going to struggle. I don't know. He may make a career change. He has to make some decision. My daughter-in-law teaches at Newman and was one of the teachers that was kept on. They cut eighty





teachers –

RH: Wow.

AB: – when they downsized. So those are the kind of emotional highs and lows. “Oh my God, is she going to have a job?” And then that big announcement came out, and fortunately, she was one they kept. But a lot of people with a lot of tenure got cut from that school. So they are okay. I worry about them in this city. I do. We're going to be fine. We're getting close to retirement. We'll be okay. But is this a city for a young family? Will it offer them the careers they like? I don't know. I don't know yet.

RH: And so you worry about that?

AB: That's when you pray to God. You worry about your kids.

RH: We're going to stop this tape.

AB: Okay.

[END OF PART TWO]

RH: – for the future, what is your vision?

AB: Well, they're going to make – they'll have to make some hard, difficult decisions in order to be able to move forward. I believe. I think that unless there is something that happens to bring people back in masses – we're smaller, and there is the threat that we'll be smaller. There are still a lot of people that I hear who haven't made their decision yet, whether they're going to stay. And unless things improve with the government and politics and all that, and people have choices, I think they're going to – I think there are still going to people that will leave town. So that leaves the community with some very tough decisions on downsizing. Whether there will be synagogues that will be merging. How we'll handle the second site in Metairie. Agencies. The really new Federation



executive brought the executives in to meet with the Nashville Federation executive director just to hear about a smaller community and start to learn what a smaller community looks like. The first thing he said to me was, "I'm shocked you have two sites. You weren't that big, to begin with, that a JCC would have two sites." Which I knew. I knew we were unique in that respect, and he mentioned that their Jewish Family Service has three full-time staff. Our Jewish Family Service has eighteen. Now, we need that, so that may not have to change because of the needs of the community, but we're going to have to look at all that and make some hard choices because we have an infrastructure for ten thousand people, and we don't have those people to support it now. Nor will we in the near future. So I don't know how we'll look. I think we'll be smaller. Just like the city needs a smaller footprint, our Jewish community needs to address that smaller infrastructure for the Jewish community.

RH: How did it feel to go to the meeting with Nashville? I know how I just felt when you said that.

AB: Yeah. It was kind of an eye-opener like we were starting –

RH: How big is that community? Do you know?

AB: It's actually bigger than we are. I think it's eight thousand.

RH: Wow.

AB: Yeah. That was an eye-opening –

RH: Sobering.

AB: It was sobering. That's a very good way to describe that. We've been kind of on automatic pilot just in recovery, get back up and running, get this going, do this, do that, and now we're starting to do planning, and it is sobering. We've done a really good job.



We're back up. Things are more back to normal than we ever thought we would at this point. Again, a lot of it because we had the kind of funding to cushion us – you can open up in October when you know you have support to pay your staff. If you didn't have that kind of financial support, you wouldn't be able to keep that staff so that you could re-open so quickly. So we had all that. But now we have to face reality, and we have to start making some hard decisions. I just spent this week talking about getting a strategic planner in here to start working with our board to start making some decisions, create benchmarks. I don't know. I don't know what that plan will look like, but we've got to do it because we have to start looking at what we're going to – what we're going to be like. The Federation is doing that, and so are the other agencies. I don't know exactly what we'll look like, but we're going to be smaller. There's no two ways about it, which is a shame because we weren't that big, to begin with, but we had this history and this strength and commitment to this community before. Now, it's in flux, people aren't sure.

RH: Are there any Jewish frameworks that have helped you over the past fifteen months? Some say *tikkun olam*. Just anything that over the past fifteen months has kind of come to your mind.

AB: Well, I don't know if it's a Jewish framework, but just the sense of community. I think that's been the pillar, and I don't know if it's Jewish or if it's just – well, I don't know. I don't know if the rest of the community has that sense of closeness and tightness with a community as the Jewish community has. I mean, we spent a lot of time, and this is kind of a different response, making our community comfortable in receiving rather than giving. You know, our community – Jews are taught to do *tzedakah* and mitzvah projects and so forth. And it's been really weird having to be on the receiving end of that, and it was awkward at first to tell people it's okay to take the money that JFS was giving out. You do have losses. Even though you feel like you're not in dire need and you didn't lose your home completely, but you've had expenses and so forth. And that's been kind of an odd thing. It's the reverse of mitzvah and *tzedakah*; we've been on the receiving end. It's



been really very, very strange. But I think, really, just the sense of a Jewish community.

RH: After being on the receiving end, what would you advise people about giving? How to give?

AB: I think Jews are very, very generous. I think of myself as very generous. We give a donation – we give as much as we possibly can to Federation and so forth. But what I have learned from this is when I hear of a tragedy or something, I don't just ignore it and say, "Oh, it's terrible." But I will write a check. It's that I have learned just how critical those dollars are to recover from a catastrophe. And I think that people have learned – I certainly have personally realized that even though I've given generically but not to specific causes, that I will not ignore them the next time. Because I see how people – their generosity has just been amazing. And it's not just money either. It's also time. I have been overwhelmed with the amount of volunteers. The Jewish organizations – over the winter break, my phone was ringing off the hook. "So-and-so told me to call you. Do you know of a program? We're going to be here celebrating my wife's birthday. We want to do a mitzvah project." I mean, when I go out of town, I want to rest, but people want to come and clean up a park or do – it's amazing. I just am overwhelmed at the generosity of people, not just financially, but they want to literally get in there and do some hard work to help rebuild the community. I've been impressed with that.

RH: How do you feel the response was locally, nationally, statewide, not in the Jewish community but the general response in the recovery?

AB: I think the United Way took a while to come on board.

RH: Really?

AB: Yeah. I was kind of surprised how they were kind of in the background for a while. They're doing fine now, but we're a United Way agency, and I didn't hear from them for a while, and then they found dollars. And have been supportive because they now have



gotten the national dollars, but I thought that was a little slow. In their defense, I think they really got splintered. I mean, they just couldn't connect. They got scattered around the country, and the local United Way just couldn't regroup. And one of the things – and this is an aside – that our Jewish Federation did that was just amazing is saw the need to immediately bring everyone into Houston and work out of Houston, and they shared – Houston Federation gave them office space, and they set up a command control so that they were in control together. I think other organizations didn't have the initiative to do that. The Federation leadership should be commended for that because it's made an enormous difference in their response. The Jewish community – keeping the community together. I think that nationally, it's a crime. If this happens in another country, I think this response would have been greater. We're struggling with the levees to get them fixed, and all of that is just – it's unacceptable.

RH: What do you think the Jewish community's interaction with the larger community has been?

AB: That's a good question. I think there's been a good bit of action – I mean, I'm a member, so a part of a group called Common Good, which has started – as far as addressing the needs of the community. But one of my colleagues said this, and it's so true: there is so much going on. It's almost very splintered. Everybody is doing something. Every neighborhood and different organizations and the state, the city – that having a place at that table, which is basically what you're asking, is almost a full-time job. You can't do everything you're doing to recover, and it's really a struggle to be able to be there as a part of that. So, I think that it's been minimal. As I think about our leaders, our Jewish leaders, I don't see them there. Now, we are fortunate, though, that Arnie Fielkow, who won the councilman's position and is a strong member of our Jewish community, has, at least, a seat on the council of the government. That's a good thing. Although, he's settling into that. But other than that, I'm not sure how much of the Jewish community is involved. I mean, just post-Katrina – Carol Wise has always had a big role



in the United Way and still does, and Flo Shorenstein has a role, also, through United Way and Women's Leadership Initiative. I don't know if there is a whole lot of other groups out there. I don't know.

RH: When you talked about just a minute ago – having a place at the table is a full-time job. What kind of table are you talking about?

AB: Well, there are these meetings at various initiatives that are going on all of the time, and those are the meetings – I'm a member of this Common Good, but I haven't gone to that many meetings because I just don't have the time. They conflict with the Federation planning meeting. I mean, we're involved in so much, and my first loyalty is to be attending all of these strategic planning meetings with the Jewish Federation. It's been very time-consuming. Those are the things that have been going on in the city. All of these neighborhood planning meetings. A lot of them even take place here. We've tried to be available to let a lot of these meetings take place at the center for the neighborhoods in this area, but I can't get to a lot of things like that. There's just so many things going on.

RH: Do you think racial issues have been exacerbated with this storm? Is there more racial tension? Less? Do you have any thoughts on Katrina and race?

AB: Well, I always, growing up in the northeast, I've always found it hard with the racial tension in this city. I've always struggled with that part of living in the South. It's the one thing that's made me uncomfortable. I'll still go to a cocktail party and hear a racial joke, and I just find that unacceptable. But I think that there has been a lot of conflict, racial conflict, over – and it was terrible. I think it's unfortunate that many in the Black community believe that we blew up the Lower Ninth Ward, the levee. I've been down there. I saw that barge. I know exactly what made that boom. That barge going through the levee made that boom, not – I think it was just ridiculous. But they believed that, and that's so unfortunate. And then around the election and people feeling that Nagin had



brought people in for his votes. I think it's unfortunate. Originally, I thought when I came back that everyone was struggling, and that would bring us all closer together. I don't think it has. I think there is still that division, which is unfortunate.

RH: That's kind of a hope that's kind of died?

AB: Yeah. We all kind of had that, you know, equally –

RH: The leveling experience?

AB: The leveling, right. Crisis. We all lived through it. I felt there was more camaraderie when we first returned because [we're] glad to see each other, you had someone working in a store or whatever. But now, of course, crime is up, and people are – and it's the racial divides. It's unfortunate.

RH: Tell me what home means to you. Now that you're finally back in yours and you were away.

AB: It's comfort. Comfort and normalcy. I mean, what we did learn is that we don't need as much junk as we had. So, home isn't where the things are. But I'll tell you a story that – when we got this apartment in Houston, as I told you, we didn't have to do anything to set it up. Tulane was very generous, and they rented the furniture and the stainless or whatever. It all went in there. It was very easy. And the weekend we were moving into that, it was ready, I was in New York at this board meeting for JCC Association. So I called Paul. “How is it? How is it?” Because we haven't even seen it. He said, “It's really lovely, but nothing is ours.” And it was just such a – it's so depressing. There's not even a picture of ours. It was just like a hotel room, I guess. We didn't even have a suitcase. We just had a bag of clothes that we threw in. So anyway, it is those personal items. And lots of people lost that. I mean, I feel so sorry, particularly for the older people. I mean, there are people – Leslie Fischman, our assistant director – there are five members of her family living in New Orleans. Four lost their homes. Her mother-in-



law, who is probably in her late seventies, early eighties, lost everything. Everything. Every piece of silver. Just everything. She was in Lakeview, and it's gone. I thought, "Oh my God. That's a lifetime of memories. That's everything that she shared with her husband, who had passed away." I mean, it's just really so tragic. It is really, really tragic. I mean, I feel badly for my children. They've been married for ten years. But that's ten years. They'll rebuild. But here's a woman, like our nursery school director – her mother, ninety years old, lost everything. Everything but what was on her back. She had a little house that they had downsized to that was one-story, and there was like nine-foot of water. You can't save anything. You can't even open the dresser to try to get in it because everything swells, and you can't pry things open when they sit in water for that long. And all that mold. That's that. But back to the home. I do think it's comfort. We felt very blessed that, really, even with all of the damage we had, we lost very little, and we could go back and sleep in our own bed and just have that comfort of being in our own home.

RH: I'm trying to think of ways that your family gets together now that's different from before. More meaningful?

AB: Not really. Well, the kids are using my house for respite. They come more often than they used to. But they've always been around a lot. So, not really.

RH: Come home and do the laundry.

AB: Right. Exactly. Exactly. They like the way I fold laundry. A lot of laundry goes through our house.

RH: Has Katrina changed your worldview in any way?

AB: Worldview?

RH: Yeah. How you look at the world.





AB: It does. Absolutely. Before Katrina, I would never have believed that I could live through a catastrophe and that, first of all, I would have to deal with the results of something like this. Like I said, I was not impacted nearly as much as some people. To watch a whole community yanked from their city. It's unprecedented to have a city close down for two months. You realize you're much more vulnerable in this world. You really are. Part of it also was this sense of – this sense of security that was – I moved here thirty – it will be, as I said, thirty-one years. It was thirty years in August, and we hadn't had a real threat. I kind of thought that there was never going to be that big hit. And there wasn't even, actually – we didn't get the big hit. We just had the –

RH: The flood.

AB: – the flood.

RH: Are there any things you've learned about yourself this past year?

AB: Yeah. I have. I've always known that I'm a pretty strong person. I am kind of grounded. I view myself as a pretty grounded person. I don't get shaken up too easily, and this really shook me up. I had my period of depression. I'm lucky that I don't think it was as bad as some people because I think a lot of people are very depressed, but you really felt like you were just going to lose your mind. Right before I got back into my house, I thought, this isn't – it was just like pulling my hair out, and I just don't usually get shaken like that. But it was like we could not get back into that house and get it finished and get things back to normal. I thought I was going to just scream. And that's not my personality. So I saw myself fall into that. And you kind of – it was this whole phenomenon that you couldn't face everyday life. We didn't pay bills for months. We just couldn't deal with it. We just couldn't. My husband, Paul, is meticulous about all of that. We went for months just – we just ignored them. We didn't pay anything. It was like we couldn't deal with them. We couldn't deal with everyday life. We were busy. Maybe it was because we were so busy doing what we had to do, work-wise and family – it was



just amazing, just amazing – but I did see that I was vulnerable to the emotions of something like this.

RH: Is there anything you want to do differently now? Are there any new directions you personally would like to take?

AB: Personally? Downsize. It's kind of funny. But you do realize you don't need – my husband says you don't need all the things. You realize what's important in life is not a piece of art or whatever. It's just keeping your family intact and safe. But it's time in our lives to start downsizing and getting rid of the clutter. Katrina kind of did. As I told you, my basement flooded. I used to say to my husband every year, “We must clean out this house. It is not fair to our children, if we should die, that they have to deal with thirty years of junk.” You know, stuff that you throw into the attic. Well, we lost everything in our attic and everything in our basement. I have no junk left. I have absolutely no clutter. But you learn that you just don't need all that. If we want to start to pull our lives together as we face retirement – we're in our early sixties, and I foresee that in the near future. We're starting to look at life maybe a little more seriously after this event than we might have if it hadn't occurred. I don't know. But we just kind of want to get things under control, I guess, is the best way.

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

AB: No. This has been very pleasant. I hope I've given you some information, particularly around the Center because that's my life, just like everybody else's, but the Center has a very proud history. We're 151 years old this year, and we've survived this storm, and we may look a little different in the end. I don't know. But I think we're still a very vital entity in this community, so I hope that the information about how we dealt with the hurricane and stuff is useful for the archives.

RH: Oh, it will be. Thank you.



AB: Thank you. I enjoyed it.

[END OF INTERVIEW]