Allan Bissinger Transcript

Rosalind Hinton: This is Rosalind Hinton interviewing Allan Bissinger at his office at the Electrical Sales Corporation, 2500 L & A Rd, Metairie, LA. Today's August 3rd, 2006. I'm conducting the interview for the Katrina Jewish Voices project of the Jewish Women's Archive and the Goldring Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life. Allan, do you agree to be in an interview, and understand that the interview will be video recorded?

Allan Bissinger: Yes, I do.

RH: Okay. So, we'll kind of start with the basics. Where were you born, and if you don't mind, tell me your age, and how long your family has been here.

AB: I was born here in New Orleans at Touro Infirmary, as was my mother and my sister. I've been here fifty-four years as of a couple of weeks ago. My father was from Philadelphia, and he married my mother who was from New Orleans, and they moved back to New Orleans. His father was from Pawtuck, Mississippi, and when he passed away at an early age, they moved to Philadelphia, and his mother subsequently married a man from New Orleans who was Julius Dreyfus, who was an architect in the New Orleans area. My mother's family had been in New Orleans for a number of generations, at least three generations prior to my mother. My father's family actually, before they were in Pawtuck, was from New Orleans. My great-grandfather started the Chamber of Commerce in New Orleans and was instrumental in starting the business school at Tulane. So, I've been around New Orleans for a long time and feel like I have deep roots here in New Orleans.

RH: Can you describe your attachment to the region, or is it really through family?

AB: It's definitely through family and having grown up and gone to school here. I went away to school for two and a half years in high school, and then I went away to college. But other than that, I've been living here and working here all my life and still have a number of friends and family still in New Orleans.

RH: Tell me about your neighborhood, and if you can tell me what the neighborhood is.

AB: I live in the Broadmoor area, on a street called Vendome Place. Vendome is a major artery that ties together Jeff Davis and Nashville. It's an older area, and it's surrounded by, as a lot of New Orleans is surrounded by, mixed-income neighborhoods. Vendome Place itself is made up of mostly upscale homes. We've been there for about fifteen years, and it's not too far from Tulane University.

RH: What's your home look like?

AB: Now? [laughter]

RH: Not right now. What did it look like before the storm? [laughter]

AB: It's a two-story brick home. The first floor had the living area and the kitchen, and we had a backyard that has a swimming pool. The upstairs had three bedrooms and two bathrooms, then we had an attic area that we converted into a large bedroom for my son, my youngest son who's now in college.

RH: How many children do you have?

AB: I have three children, two boys and a girl. The oldest is a girl, she's twenty-six, and she's graduated from college and worked for three years, and is just now going back and getting her MBA at Tulane. She's just starting this summer. I have another son who graduated engineering from Harvey Mudd in California in engineering, and he's working out in the San Diego area, doing solid-state chip design. My third son, my baby boy

who's now twenty-two, is at Auburn. He'll be a senior next year at Auburn.

RH: Do you know if he plans to return?

AB: I think he does. He's expressed some desire to go into this business, and in fact, I have some friends in the same business that we're in, a business organization with from around the country. He's met them and would like to have him come work for them for a few years and learn the business, and hopefully return.

RH: Let's talk about what the business is because we're going to be into that some more. What is this business?

AB: Electrical Sales Corporation is somewhat of a misnomer in its name, in that my father started this business in 1949, and as I mentioned earlier, he's from Philadelphia and married my mother from New Orleans. He was designing televisions for RCA at that time in Philadelphia. And an interesting aside: his mother was living in New Orleans at the time, and he sent her a TV that they had made from RCA. This was in 1948, and she thanked him very much for the TV but said there were no TV stations yet in New Orleans. [laughter] So she had a TV before they had any TV stations. But my mother and father spent one winter in Philadelphia, and she decided it was time to come back to New Orleans, so they did. On his way driving from Philadelphia to New Orleans, he picked up a number of different lines of equipment – lighting fixtures, boiler descalers, fuses – and started the business here, and just called it "Electrical Sales Corporation" because he was selling a lot of different electrical products. One of the products he picked up was a communications product manufactured by ITT Selectaphone, and pretty quickly all the other products went by the wayside. He stayed with the communications and was almost primarily communications starting in the mid '50s. He worked with another gentleman starting around in the 19 – maybe late 50s, early '60s. It was just my father, Roger, and another man who worked with him. Then in 1975, when I graduated from Auburn electrical engineering, I came to work here, and we hired one other person. So it was just

the four of us for a while. The business has grown, and we now have nineteen people here. The reason I mentioned that he had hired one other person back in the late '50s, early '60s, is because his son is actually working with us, who is also an electrical engineer, and has been with us for about fifteen years. We have a lot of employees who have been with us a long time, but the business now is telephone communications equipment and data networking.

RH: Okay. Tell me about your community. Who do you consider in your orbit in your community? I mean, obviously your employees.

AB: Well, yes, and it is my community, but I don't socialize that much outside of work with the employees. I spend a lot of time with them all week, but we don't really see each other that much outside of work. I play tennis, and most of my social life is built around the people I play tennis with, and their wives and their families. My wife is the director of technology at a local high school, Newman High School, and so we know a lot of people from her sphere of people that she works with. Primarily, [our] social life is built around either people that I know from the different Jewish organizations that I'm involved in or people from the tennis facility, the tennis club that I'm from.

RH: You were president of that.

AB: I was president of that. It's the New Orleans Lawn Tennis Club, which is the oldest tennis club in the United States.

RH: Really?

AB: We had our 150th anniversary about – well, it's been a while now; it's was about twenty years ago. It's now about 170 years old.

RH: Why don't you tell me when you first heard about the storm, and when you became concerned? How did you guys make decisions about what you would do?

AB: We certainly all heard about the storm building up for a week, but it wasn't – historically, I'm not one that has normally evacuated, nor has my wife. We tracked the storm and watched it, as everybody in New Orleans did. First, it didn't look like it was going to hit here, and then in a couple of days it was going to hit here. Then in watching the TV closely, I determined that it was a big storm, and my wife should evacuate. She and my daughter left Sunday morning, early Sunday morning. Just to put it into perspective, the storm actually hit Sunday night and Monday morning. She left Sunday morning and went to her family's place in Pensacola, where her extended family is. Her father and her sisters and brother are all in Pensacola. And took my daughter, my sister, and her family with her to Pensacola. She couldn't talk my mother into leaving either. My mother said that she's been here for seventy-eight years and has never left for a hurricane, and wasn't leaving either. We tried very hard to urge her to leave, but she wouldn't leave.

RH: Give me your mother’s name.

AB: Her name is Marjorie Bissinger; her maiden name was Isaacson. My father also never used to leave. He passed away in 2004, in June of 2004. She was living by herself, but I could not convince her to go. She would shoot me if I said it, but it wasn't the whole reason why I stayed, because she was here, but in the back of my mind, it was partly that. But it was mainly because in the business that we're in, we're mainly a service business and communication business, and it's always been very important to be able to recover from a storm. It's always been very useful in most storms that we've had in the past, that right after the storm, you can go out and make sure everything's working and that if there's some power issues you can usually do some work around and those types of things. So I stayed here mainly to make sure that our house was okay, and the business was okay, and that our customers were okay. That was the main reason for staying.

RH: And your mother was okay.

AB: And my mother was okay, yes.

RH: So, tell me what happens. You're here. Where did you go? Did you stay in your home?

AB: I stayed in my home. We lost power Sunday evening. I actually slept right through most of the hurricane Sunday night. Woke up Monday morning and things were blowing pretty good, but it wasn't that bad. A funny story, which I hadn't thought about in a while. I had a friend who evacuated to Lafayette and his sister is a radio talk-show person in Lafayette, and she has a show called "Debbie in the Morning." She evidently called him and said, "Do you know anybody that stayed because we'd like to talk to people." So they called me Sunday morning, and I talked to them Sunday morning and told them I was staying and did I mind if she called me back Monday and talked to me a few times during the storm to get a personal view of what was going on. She called on the cell phone because the phones – actually, the phone was still working at that time, but she had called on the cell phone. I talked to her a couple times, two times, and told her what was going on, and we talked for a while, and what did I see outside. I told her the wind was blowing and the water was in the street, but not even over the curb, and it was a good blow, but not even the worst hurricane that I had seen. Then, the third time she called, I lost her. We got cut off, and I never talked to her again. We'll get to how I got out of New Orleans, but when I did get out of New Orleans about two weeks later, I went to Lafayette to visit this friend in Lafayette, and when I was at his house, the friend whose sister was "Debbie in the Morning" called and happened to be in the same complex. We went over and visited with him, and it came out that he was Debbie in the Morning's sister, so this guy that I was visiting mentioned it to his family when we went back to his house, that he had just met Debbie in the Morning's brother. His mother-in-law, and his wife, and his whole extended family was over there, and they said "Oh, we listen to

“Debbie in the Morning” all the time, and we're so concerned about Allan in New Orleans. We don't know what happened to Allan in New Orleans. We were listening to him, and we heard him twice and all of a sudden he got cut off." I said, "Well, I have to tell you, he's fine. He's right here and he's fine." [laughter] They never put it together that I was actually the Allan that they had been talking to on the radio. So that was kind of a fun story.

RH: Wow.

AB: I was in New Orleans watching the hurricane come in Monday morning, and it wasn't that bad. We didn't lose any windows. We lost a tree in our front yard; it was tilted over, but not even out of the ground. After the storm on Monday, I called my wife in Pensacola and told her everything looked pretty good, I think we survived, and we've made it. We have a tree that was tilted over in the front yard, but I think I can get some two-by-fours and prop it back up and we can probably even save the tree. I went out and washed my car because it had a bunch of leaves and trash on it, and sat in the car for a while because it was air-conditioned and cooled off. Then went inside, read for a while, just kind of took it easy, listened to the radio, and told her everything was fine. I talked to my mother, found out she had made it, and she was fine.

RH: Where does she live?

AB: She lives near Audubon Park on Walnut Street, which is in the same house that I grew up in. And she was fine, so I told my wife, "Tomorrow I'll start going around and checking on our customers, checking on the building and make sure everything was okay," and that I would talk to her the next day. On Monday, when I went to bed, there was water in the street, but it was clean water, and it was just sort of sitting there, and it was barely over the curb. Tuesday, when I got up and looked out, it was kind of dark water, and there was a considerable current; it was a distinct current. I just assumed that they had turned on the pumps on Claiborne Avenue and they were sucking the water

towards the pumps and all the water was just being dragged through the area and going to the pumps. You asked me to describe our house earlier, and I didn't mention that the house is raised about four feet off the ground, but our den is at ground level. When I went into the den area, the den had a couple of inches of water in it, which wasn't the end of the world. I took all the furniture out of the den and moved it up into the kitchen and the living room area which was raised up about four feet, and went back upstairs and read for awhile, and just figured – there was getting to be more water in the driveway, and I couldn't drive at that time; there was too much water to drive down the street. The car was still in the driveway. I went upstairs and came down, I guess a couple of hours later, and when I got down to about the second or third step from the bottom, the whole top part of the house was in water, in a couple of feet of water. I looked out the window, and my car was about halfway up the door of the car. Another story is [laughter] – the car died just a horrible death. I mean, when the water got into the engine, the alarm started going off, and I started hearing the "beep, beep, beep."

RH: [laughter] Oh god.

AB: As the water rose up, I started hearing "*beeeeaaaup, beeeaup*," until finally it just went "beep, beep, beep" and it died. The water actually ended up being halfway up the windshield covering the car.

RH: Do you have a sense of how many hours that took from the –?

AB: My sense is that it was about three hours from when I saw the water start to come up to when it was all the way up. It may have been four hours. It was about three or four hours. I waded through the water, and I went into the kitchen and was able to grab – actually, floating by me, there was one of these five-gallon containers of bottled water that we had. It was still sealed, so I grabbed that and brought it upstairs. In the kitchen, I had a loaf of bread and some peanut butter and jelly that was on the counter, so I took that. I had taken all the eggs that we had and hard-boiled them before, so I took all the

hard-boiled eggs and some cheese and took it all upstairs, and then just sat upstairs for a while and said, "Well, I'm still not sure exactly what's going on." I had a radio, but the radio people didn't know what was going on either. The people I could get on the radio which was WWL, which was the only station that was broadcasting at the time, were only getting reports from eyewitnesses that they could talk to, which were sketchy and nobody really knew. They said that the levee breached, but they didn't really say where it had breached or what was happening. Nobody really knew what was going on. So I figured there was nothing I could do, so I went upstairs and waited to see what was going to happen. My cell phone had quit working, and the phone lines didn't work anymore. So I figured I was there and just make the best of it. I had a good book, so I pulled up by a window and opened the window, and just read for a while. And then Tuesday evening, it stopped. The flow stopped. It was just still. I have to say, Tuesday night was the quietest. First of all, it was so dark, you could not see your hand in front of your face. Literally, you could hold your hand right in front of your face, and you couldn't see your hand. I had some candles and some flashlights. I had a radio and listened to the radio. I had a – which I made fun of my wife for getting, but it was a lifesaver I had sort of a miner's cap, which was a cap that had a flashlight built onto the hat. I read for a long time with that and went to sleep Tuesday night. When I got up Wednesday morning, it was quiet; there was nothing around. I looked through the second-floor window, and I could see some activity in the house next to me, and my neighbors were still there. They were on the second floor, and I was able to open that window and communicate with them. He's about seventy-eight, and she's about seventy-six, and I asked them if they were okay. They said yeah, they had water, and did I need anything, and I said, "No, do you need anything?" We agreed that we would check on each other. I went back and just kept reading. [laughter] I was actually resolved to the fact that we had a problem, and it didn't really dawn on me that it was going to be – I still thought it was just water that had come in, and once they got the pumps running, and once they got it going, it would go away, and that I would stay for another day or so, and once they got the water out, I

could get away. I had a bike that I was going to ride and go where I needed to go. Wednesday went by, and then Wednesday night was pretty miserable. It sounded like a war zone. Helicopters everywhere. That's all you could hear was just helicopters going back and forth all over the place. It was hot, and it was starting to get kind of buggy, kind of mosquitoey. The water smelled pretty bad, and it was kind of nasty. I had made up my mind Wednesday night that if, when I got up Thursday morning, and everything looked the same, that I would have to do something; I would have to swim for it. Thursday morning when I got up, obviously nothing had changed. I went downstairs and swam through the house and out of the backyard. As I mentioned, we had a pool, and I found a raft that we had in the backyard. I brought that back up into the house. I found some – I'm not sure what exactly they're called – they're like Tupperware big winterizing boxes that my wife had some clothes in. I took her clothes out, and I took my laptop and some papers, some important papers, and one change of clothes, and put them in two boxes. I had some duct tape, and I duct taped those boxes to the raft, and I was just going to use that as a kickboard. My mother, when I talked to her, was high and dry and didn't have any water. I figured she wouldn't leave me. She had a car, and I would just swim towards her house and see if she was okay, and go from there.

RH: So you talked to her before the cell phones went dead.

AB: I talked to her after the storm on Monday. That was the last time I talked to her, on Monday afternoon after the storm. She had said that she had no wind damage, no trees down, her phone was still working, and everything was okay at her house.

RH: How many feet do you think the water was?

AB: Well, it was over my head in the street. I couldn't stand up without swimming in the street. I guess it was a little over six to seven feet in the street. So Thursday, I guess maybe 9:30, 10:00, I decided it was time to swim for it. I opened the door – I told my neighbors what I was going to do, and told them that as soon as I found somebody I'd

send them back. Right when I opened the door, and I pushed the raft out, and was getting ready to swim to the raft, I heard a boat. So I yelled at the boat, which was going down about half a block away on one of the side streets, and I yelled, and he yelled back. I said, "Can I get a lift," and he said, "Sure. Ke said, “I'm not sure things are ..." You couldn't see over – it was over the tops of cars that were in the street, so he had to navigate very carefully. I swam down to the boat, and he grabbed my stuff and brought it in the boat, and I said, "But I've got to go back and get my neighbors who are here, can we give them a lift too?" He said, "That's why I'm here." [laughter] He was photographing the whole thing. Turns out he was from Shreveport, and he was in the film business and was filming the whole thing. I went back and got my neighbors. We had a hard time getting them out because their doors wouldn't open. Their doors had swollen shut, so we ended up having to get a crowbar and pry and break their doors open.

RH: You had to do this in the water?

AB: This was in the water. This is up to my chest high in the water. We finally got them out, and they had their dog with them. [laughter] And I took their dog, and threw him just towards the boat, and I figured it'd swim towards the boat. The dog just sank, like a rock. I'd never seen a dog that couldn't swim, but this dog couldn't swim.

RH: What kind of dog was it?

AB: I don't know. It was a black shaggy dog. I don't even know what kind it is. I was able to get the dog, and I put the dog on top of the raft, which I was going to use for them to get out on, but we managed to walk out a ways. That picture of the three of us in the water and the dog on the raft – the guy evidently took a picture because that's now at the New Orleans Museum of Art in the Katrina exhibit. There's a picture of the three of us in the water, and the dog up on the raft. We swam over to the boat and put the dog in the boat and the three of us in the boat, and we started driving around the neighborhood

picking people up. We ended up picking up fourteen people and three dogs and two cats. As we went down from our house down Octavia, which is the street we ended up going down, one of the people said, "There's an old lady who lives in the house over there, and I know she stayed. We need to check and see if she's there." The boat pulled up, and I stood up on the gunwales of the boat and was able to climb into the second-floor window of her house. It ended up that I was in a little study area of her house, and her name was Mary, and I said, "Miss Mary, are you in here?" I heard a frail voice from another room say, "Yes, I'm here." I said, "This is Allan, and we've come to get you and take you out," and she said, "Okay." I walked through the house which was a mess, and she was sitting in her bedroom in her chair at a little vanity, and she said, "Well, let me get some things." She packed up some makeup and some other things, and she said, "Wait a second," and she had to go make the bed. She made her bed and put the pillows in the right places and everything, then she grabbed my hand, and we walked through her house. I picked her up and took her and handed her through the window. Somebody else got her, and we took her away. We then went down Octavia, and we were able to go down Octavia all the way to Loyola, which is about two blocks on the St. Charles side of Freret until the boat started dragging bottom, at which time everybody got out. We all walked from there to St. Charles. We ended up at Danneel Park in St. Charles. From there, all of those people were going to head down to Napoleon and St. Charles because they had heard there was a pickup point at Napoleon and St. Charles. A few of them said they were going to the Superdome because they heard there was shelter at the Superdome. I had heard some stuff about the Superdome. We didn't know anything about all the bad things that were going on at the Superdome, but it didn't sound like a place that I wanted to be. I actually walked from there over to Newman to see how Newman was doing because that's where my wife worked. I walked from there to the JCC to see how that was doing, and the JCC was perfectly dry and looked fine. It was locked up, and there was no way of getting in.

RH: How was Newman?

AB: Newman had some water in the street, and a little bit of water, but most of the school was raised and looked fine also. It actually did fine.

RH: You're describing the boat. I'm kind of curious about what kind of boat it was that fit fourteen people and had gunnels. Can you describe it a little more?

AB: It was a big boat. It had two 225-horsepower outboard motors. It had a center console. I don't know how many feet it was, but it had fourteen people and these animals in it, and we could have fit more. It was a big boat. It wasn't the guy's boat who picked us up. It was a friend of his who had left, and he asked this guy to please go check on his boat which was in storage in a storage facility that was just across the canal on Jeff Davis. That was the first I had heard about any looting. Because he said that when he went to go get this boat, he was scared because there were a lot of people in there looting all of the storage facilities and so forth. He actually had a gun with him and said that's how he got this boat, which was his friend's boat, and he had the right to take it.

RH: Do you know this guy's name?

AB: I don't. [laughter]I wish I did. Unfortunately, he doesn't live in New Orleans, but I will find out. Because I haven't seen the picture at the museum. I'm sure they must know who the author is and how to contact him. So we ended up on St. Charles at Danneel, and most of the people were heading downtown. I talked to my neighbors, and I said, "Well, let's go to my mother's house which is over by Audubon Park, because she had a car there. She was here when I talked to her on Monday, and I know she wouldn't leave me." No way she'd leave her boy. We started walking down St. Charles, and somebody in a pickup truck picked us up and gave us a ride most of the way, which was very helpful. Couldn't get all the way down because of all the felled trees, but we got most of the way down. [laughter] When we got to my mother's house, she had left, which was good. I'm glad she managed to drive out. And she left on – I think she left on Wednesday morning. She left and drove to Plaquemines, where some other friends and

family were. Not Plaquemines Parish, but Plaquemines, Louisiana, which is across the river from Baton Rouge.

RH: She was probably in phone contact with those people too though. And they were probably saying, “Get out, get out, get out.”

AB: With those people, yes. They knew she was okay, and she was in contact with the people in Plaquemines. She got there okay. We went into my mother's house. I had a key to my mother's house. She has a swimming pool. The water was very nasty, and we were fortunately all in it so we couldn't smell each other, but it was kind of nasty. It actually burned; it burned your skin. I went upstairs and got some towels and some soap, and we [laughter] went in the swimming pool and took a bath in the swimming pool and dried off. While we were there, a neighbor from a couple houses down saw us, and came over and said that he had come back to pick up some things, and offered us a ride to Baton Rouge, so we were very fortunate there. Of course, we took the ride to Baton Rouge, and that's how we got out of New Orleans. He was in an old beat-up van and told us of all the looting, which was the first time that I had really heard that there were problems. I never saw any problems, but that was the first time I had heard of any problems. As I drove out of town, he says, "Listen, we're going to drive out of town, we're going to go down River Road, but if anybody tries to take the truck, here's a shotgun." I said, "Well, I'm not going to shoot anybody; I'm not going to do that." He said, "No, if they come up, just show them the gun, and they'll go away." And fortunately, we didn't see a soul. We drove sometimes on the levee, sometimes around, sometimes on sidewalks. We drove basically down River Road to the Huey Long Bridge, and went over the Huey Long Bridge, and the long way around to 310 and then caught the interstate to Baton Rouge.

RH: So, you were going around things that – I'm assuming you were going around trees and felled lines and just not water.

AB: No, not water; there was no water. We were right on the levee of the river. That was the high point. I don't think that point ever got water.

RH: Remind me again what time of day and what day this is.

AB: This is Thursday afternoon. This is probably – well, we got to Baton Rouge about 5:00, 6:00, so that was probably 2:00 or 3:00 that we were leaving New Orleans.

RH: What was going through your mind?

AB: Well, I was thinking how lucky I was that we had, first of all, gotten out of the house, and second of all, how fortunate we were that we had fallen into this ride to Baton Rouge. It was actually a neighbor that I knew, and we ended up going to – where he was going was somebody that I knew, maybe second or third-degree knew, and was extremely nice. Let me stay there on Thursday night and use their phone to call my wife whom I hadn't talked to since Monday and had no idea whether I was dead or alive, or where I was and what was going on.

RH: She must have been frantic.

AB: I think she was. Yeah, she probably was.

RH: What was that call like?

AB: It was very good. Maybe it was selfish or naive, but I never felt endangered myself. I just never felt that I was in any danger. This was just something that had to be done, and I felt even if the boat hadn't picked me up that I probably could have swam to where it was dry and used the raft and so forth. I just never felt really scared. I felt kind of maybe nervous, but not really scared and not really worried. I knew that the family was okay, so that was very important. I just felt, "I'm okay. I can take care of myself. I don't have to worry about anybody else, which was a big relief." I'm very glad that I didn't have

to worry about anybody else and only take care of myself.

RH: You weren't watching TV like she was.

AB: No, I didn't see anything, so I didn't know. But she said there was a camera on the top of the Blue Plate factory, which is not too far from our house, and they were showing, evidently, which could get the wide angle shot of that storage facility where I said there was looting going on, so she saw that maybe three or four blocks from our house there was looting going on and the water was way up in the buildings, and boats going by and emergency vehicles all over the place, so she was very nervous and thought the worst. I was completely oblivious to all of it. I had read Harry Potter from the front to the end and was completely oblivious and very happy. [laughter] In fact, that was the last quiet time I had for the next eleven months [laughter].

RH: All right. So, you're in Baton Rouge.

AB: We're in Baton Rouge.

RH: What happened? Did you meet up with your mother? What happens next?

AB: I did. I called my wife first, and then I met up with – I called my mother who was in Plaquemines, which was forty-five minutes to an hour from where I was. She immediately wanted me to either come there, or she could come to where I was, but I was nowhere. I was sleeping on the couch at these people's houses that were very kind. I hooked up with one of the people that we work with who was in Baton Rouge, and he had a car. I asked him if he would come get me Friday morning, and we would start seeing what's going on. I still had my cell phone, and when I got to Baton Rouge that had some service. I had a lot of voicemail messages, and when I had access to email, I had a lot of email messages, mainly from our customers and our employees that wanted to know where I was, what they should do, what we were doing, how was everybody else, and this type of thing. So Friday morning, James came and picked me up, and we

went and I got a Baton Rouge cell phone. That was the first thing I did because a New Orleans cell phone was very sketchy. I got a Baton Rouge cell phone, and then went to one of our customers in Baton Rouge who was nice enough to let me use one of their offices which had a computer and phone service, and "While you're there, can do some things to our phones and help us?" which was great. It helped them, and it helped us. From there, I used that as my base of operations and contacted a lot of customers, and contacted almost all of our people. I was able to get in touch with almost all of them. The ones that I wasn't able to get in touch with, I was able to set up a sort of a tree and asked each one of them to try and find one of the people that we couldn't find, so we tried to get organized. I was fortunate to find that two other of the employees also had evacuated to Baton Rouge and had places to stay, so we were established in Baton Rouge. I spoke to my mother and told her that I needed the day just to get everything organized, and she asked me what she could do. She didn't really want to stay in Plaquemines because she was staying in a house that had about fifteen or twenty other people in the house. I think she wanted to be with me or with my sister or whatever. I told her that I didn't really have any place to stay at that time and that I couldn't do anything, and I certainly didn't want to come over there. The best thing that she could do, is that we have some extended -- well, they're not really family, they're very good friends -- in Philadelphia still, and they had called and offered her to have her come up and stay with them. I said, "The best thing that you could do for me is that I could put you on a plane Sunday morning to Philadelphia so that I don't have to worry about you, and you could leave me your car so I can have transportation." We got together on Saturday morning and spent the day Saturday together. Fortunately, I checked in also with the Jewish Federation. I don't really remember how I got in touch – whether they got in touch with me or I got in touch with them, but I got in touch with Martha Bergadine in Baton Rouge who said that they had some apartments that they had been reserving for some of their professional people from New Orleans and any people that were of leadership in New Orleans. They got me a two-room apartment, which was terrific. [laughter] My

mother and I slept in this two-room apartment and actually on the floor; we didn't have a mattress or an air mattress or anything. My mother was a real trooper. She slept on the floor Friday night – must have been Saturday night – on the floor of this apartment. Then I got her on the airplane Sunday morning for Philadelphia. Saturday also, besides getting the apartment, I had gotten in touch with a number of customers who said that we were setting up shop in Baton Rouge and set up a lot of things on Saturday, and got in touch with our personnel that were in Baton Rouge, and called one of our distributors that we distribute equipment for who's in Dallas, and who was tremendous. The president of that company had actually called me a number of times, gave me his cell phone number, asked what they could do. I called them on Saturday morning and said, "I've talked to the customers, and we need about ten systems as soon as possible." He actually got people to go in on Saturday, load up all the equipment that we needed into a van, and drove the van over from Dallas, which I met at 10:00 Saturday night and unloaded into a space. One of our other customers had some extra space and allowed us to use that as a base to stock some equipment and so forth.

RH: This is replacement equipment?

AB: This is replacement equipment for people that were temporarily in the Baton Rouge area. So these were full telephone systems. Actually, on that Friday, I made contact with everybody, and on Saturday, I was able to get an apartment, get temporary office space, and get a whole inventory of equipment in all on that Saturday. That was a long day because the truck got in about 10:00. So we got through at 11:00 or so. The next morning, I got my mother out and then started going through the inventory and getting things together. The guys that were in Baton Rouge had been around their family, and everybody was tense, and they were very happy to come over and help work and get things going. So we got all of the equipment sorted out and got things ready to go. And starting Monday morning, we started putting in telephone systems for our customers in the Baton Rouge area and had gotten in touch with almost all of our employees. We

were still missing a couple but got in touch with almost 100% of the employees. Our Business Administrator/Office Manager lived in St. Bernard, and we were having trouble getting in touch with her, and I was very concerned about that. As it turns out, she had a very hard time. She lost her complete house and had her mother with her who was in her late 80s. Actually, her mother passed away at the evacuation site on Judge Drive, and they had to leave her there because they wouldn't let her take the body with her when they evacuated to Houston. Once they got to Houston and tried to find it, they couldn't find the body. They had lost her mother for a couple of weeks before they could finally find where she was, and she was understandably frantic that she had lost her mother and lost the body, and lost her house and everything in it. I was very worried about her both physically and just her mental state. And she's still having a hard time, but she's back, and she's a real trooper. She's doing okay now I think. But we got in touch with almost all of our people. That two-bedroom apartment ended up being myself and three technicians staying in that two-room apartment, which was fine. Again, staying in touch with my wife who was in Pensacola and wanted to know what she could do, and I told her the best thing that she could do was be safe in Pensacola. I didn't need a family there that I had to take care of. The best thing that could happen would be if she would take care of my daughter and whatever she needed to do in Pensacola and take care of things there, and let me do all of the things that I needed to do to take care of the things that I needed to take care of. At the same time, I was working with Martha and some of the other leadership. Sandy Levy, who was the Executive Director of the Jewish Endowment Foundation was also in Baton Rouge. The Saturday, a week later, I got with Sandy Levy and Howard – well, actually, during that week, on Wednesday of that week, Bobby Garren, who is the current president of the Jewish Welfare Federation in New Orleans at that time – and we were scheduled to have the annual meeting somewhere around September 7th or September 9th, which happened to be right around the day that Bobby was in Baton Rouge and I was in Baton Rouge, and some of the UJC people were in Baton Rouge. We got together to have dinner so that they could become involved.

They were sent down to analyze the situation and see what was going on. We had dinner, and Bobby says, "Oh, by the way, I think tomorrow night or the next night is the annual meeting when you're going to become president." He took his napkin and his silverware, and he said "Consider this the transfer of power. You're now the president of the Jewish Welfare Federation." So that's how I became president of the Jewish Welfare Federation. [laughter] It's been quite a ride since then. The Saturday after that, I got a call from Sandy Levy saying Howard Fienberg from UJC and another lady that escapes me now, were in town and wanted to meet over at Donna Sternberg's house. We went over to the house and literally sat around her kitchen table and came up with a plan for a partnership between New Orleans and Baton Rouge and a budget that we could come up with for lots of different programs. We listed all of the programs and the needs that we could conceive at that time and came up with a plan, and UJC was tremendous. They funded us very quickly and helped us get the infrastructure going, working with Sandy and Eric Sternberg who is the president of the Baton Rouge Federation. Because the Baton Rouge Federation really had no bricks and mortar building of the Federation, and really, Martha Bergadine was the executive director, but she was half-time, and they were working out of one of the synagogues. So they really had no infrastructure set up at that time, certainly not to handle the influx of people. And the Baton Rouge community was tremendous. At that time, and certainly, before that time, I wasn't as intimately involved because I was in New Orleans, but they were instrumental in getting a lot of people that couldn't get out of New Orleans to get out of New Orleans. Once they got out of New Orleans, giving them first shelter and aid. I can't say enough about the Baton Rouge community. They were there when we needed them.

RH: Can you recreate that meeting at the kitchen table? How did you guys come up with a list, and what was on the list? Give us a peek into that.

AB: Well, from a services standpoint, we knew that we needed help for the aged people that had no place to go, and were having difficult times. We knew that we needed help

for the people that were in schools that were displaced, all the way from the very young children to the high school kids and above. Really, we knew that we had to set up an office. We needed to have some sort of an office, and it had sunk in by that time that this was not going to be a week or two-week evacuation. But it still hadn't sunk in that it was going to be months. It hadn't sunk into my mind that it was going to be months. Maybe they realized that, but I didn't think that yet. So, we set up an office. We got all the infrastructure going. We got different programs set up. Martha became a full-time director. The different synagogues had meetings; their leadership was right there all the time, willing to help and organize and keep things going. At the same time, we were in constant touch with Eric Stillman and Roselle Ungar who were the staff leadership of the New Orleans federation who had evacuated to Houston. Again, Houston Federation was extremely helpful. They gave office space that was needed, the infrastructure, the telephones, the Internet, and so forth, because emailing and instant messaging were, a lot of times, the only way to communicate. We set up – I say we; I wasn't really involved in it – but they set up from Houston. Adam Bronston, Eric, and Roselle were, I think, the primary instigators of this, but they set up a Google – I don't even know what they call it, but it was a Google site such that everybody could check in, and everybody got emailed so you could ask questions of where is so-and-so, and people could answer. It was almost like a bulletin board.

RH: I saw that when I was in Seattle, and I was with Silvia Stern, and that was going. That was hot.

AB: It was hot. It got to be – we had some technical difficulties where sometimes everything got sent to everybody, and some people got overloaded with emails, but we got that straightened out. I think it was very helpful. That was the biggest – I think the biggest concern everybody had was: do you know where so-and-so is, or do you know where this person is or that person, and are they safe, where are they, and could you tell them where we are and we're safe. Communication was the biggest issue. We still felt

like a community, but we were in the diaspora. We were everywhere, and everybody wanted to know where everybody else was, and whether they were safe. We got a website up very quickly, and had lot of –

RH: You used the Federation?

AB: We used the Federation. Got a website up very quickly, communicated with everybody, and let people know where different services were available. Got in touch with a lot of people, and put together a list of where people were and their email addresses, and information that was available online to all these people. I think that one of the biggest services that the Federation performed, was working as a clearinghouse for the whole Jewish community to try and help everybody figure out where they were. That was a tremendous help to the whole community.

RH: What kind of budget did you have? What did all that cost?

AB: We had no idea. For instance, some of the things that we asked for, ended up to be way over budget, other things that we asked for were tremendously under budget. That first budget that we asked for was a million dollars. We actually came up with a budget of -–I don't remember exactly – but it was something like $800,000, and we said, "Let's ask for a million." UJC gave us the first quarter of it, $250,000, within a few days. It was a tremendous help. Once we were able to really determine what we needed, we ended up not even spending anywhere near the whole million. The fact that it was there, and we knew that it was behind us, and it was forthcoming without saying, "Spend the money first and then we'll reimburse you, or show us receipts and ... " Because it couldn't be done. They allowed us to be first responders to a lot of these people and allowed us to be there.

RH: So, the money really went to help people who were in need. I mean, it was infrastructure money, but also direct services.

AB: It was also direct services. That was one of the items that we totally underestimated, and we ended up having a whole separate program for direct assistance. Over a million dollars was given out in direct assistance alone, and that was managed by Jewish Family Services who joined in the partnership offices in the Baton Rouge area. Deena Gerber was involved in that, and some of her staff. Again, everybody chipped in, and everybody was working together. If nothing else, Katrina has coalesced this community really into one tremendous unit. We've had meetings where we've invited everybody in the community, including synagogues and agencies, constituent agencies, and non-constituent agencies, and we've had 100% participation, and no bickering. Everybody has been cooperative; it's been really a tremendous heart-warming experience because everybody has been so cooperative.

RH: So you're saying that it's still continuing?

AB: It's still continuing. One of the things that I want to make sure is that we build on that and that we are able to continue that. The community was coming together before. In the past, there'd been some Federation versus synagogue and that type of thing, but it was starting to come together, and we had a lot of new leadership on both sides that was bringing everything together, so it had started in that direction. Since the storm, it was an epiphany. I mean, it just all came together. It's been terrific, and we want to make sure that we keep it that way because it is one community. We're smaller. The people that are here are very committed. You have to be. As some people tell me, you're either committed to be here, or you should be committed. It is a very tight community. The ones that are here are involved in one sense or another.

RH: Is there anything that you see that keeps that moving forward? Are there certain kinds of values that everybody -- Is it a generosity of spirit?

AB: Well, it's a little cynical. It's the generosity of spirit certainly. Everybody's in this together. It's sort of a fraternity that everybody's been through an initiation together, so

everybody's had alike experience. As you know that when you see somebody that you haven't seen, first question is, "How did you make out?" Everybody has been through something together, which is when brings – a common experience brings people together. But the cynical part of it is, it's the generosity of the dollars that are available from the UJC, so that's certainly getting everybody's attention. As long as there's money available for these different agencies, that will certainly bring people to the table. But I am not that cynical; I don't think it's that alone, certainly. People have that spirit that they want to cooperate.

RH: So, how long were you in Baton Rouge?

AB: I was in Baton Rouge for about a month and a half solid. And then that second half of the month and part of the next month, I was splitting time between New Orleans and Baton Rouge. I spent some time at my mother's house when I was in New Orleans, and sometimes I would spend two days in New Orleans and three days in Baton Rouge, and go back and forth quite often; sometimes just for a day come to New Orleans. Because when New Orleans opened up, you still couldn't really stay in New Orleans. There was no electricity and no way of staying. Often I would come to New Orleans and go back. Our office here, where we are now, took about a foot and a half of water. It was just enough water to put it out of commission, and we didn't have any power in this area. As soon as we could get back in, I had two employees that lived in the Metairie area, whose houses were okay, and I told them that their assignment was strictly to work on the office, to hire labor if they could find labor to help clean it out, and just get it cleaned out and get it back going. I didn't even have them working on their normal job; they just strictly worked on getting the office back together, and they did a terrific job. They got the office up and running much faster than most of the buildings. In fact, we were one of the first people back on this street and one of the first people back in this area operating. We were operating for a while looking right through the walls because we had to tear the sheetrock out from four feet down, so we were working in the back of the building and all

over the place. Everybody was very much cooperative, and they were real troopers on the whole inconvenient –

RH: So were you up and running in November?

AB: We were up and running in this office in mid-to-late October. We got up and running fairly quickly. The building wasn't together, but we were working out of the building. We had enough of the warehouse together where we could bring most of the inventory back from Baton Rouge to New Orleans and work in New Orleans. We actually sort of flowed with our customers. A lot of our customers were in Baton Rouge, and most of the work was in Baton Rouge. For the first thirty days certainly, we worked all seven days a week in Baton Rouge for the thirty days. As we got them stable, and people then started opening their offices back in New Orleans, then we sort of started migrating back to New Orleans. We kept a few people in Baton Rouge. We have a couple of people that live on the North Shore, and as those businesses came up, we loaded up their trucks, and they worked out of their houses, and just stayed in the Mandeville/ Slidell area and worked on the customers there. The people in New Orleans we left in New Orleans to work on those customers. We had some people in Baton Rouge and I was floating back and forth between all of those places. I joke that I can't imagine how many different places I slept in those first 45 days. I kept an air mattress in my trunk.

RH: Did you really?

AB: I had an air mattress in my trunk, and didn't take it out that often, because typically there was a place to stay, but was just prepared to go with the flow. That was the whole mantra, just "Go with the flow." My wife has a plaque that she has now that says, "Home is where you are." That's kind of the way it was.

RH: This is a beautiful ending for this first tape here.

AB: Okay.

[END OF AUDIO FILE 1]

RH: – with Allan Bissinger for Katrina Jewish Voices. So you were saying that you have a plaque where it says – what was that again?

AB: "Home is where you are."

RH: Tell me about your first trip into the city, what you wanted to go see, what you did, what you thought.

AB: Well, that was quite an experience, the first trip in because I was able to get a pass to – we do the telephone work for Children's Hospital, and Children's Hospital was up and running for the whole time until they had to evacuate. But they didn't get any water and their facilities were okay. I got a call from Mary Parin, who was one of the vice presidents over there. She was able to contact me and ask me if I could come over and check out some things and take care of some things. This was maybe a week and a half, maybe two weeks after the storm. So I told her that I would love to, and I would be happy to, but they weren't letting anybody into the city. She was able to get me a pass. It was just a piece of paper, but evidently, it looked official enough because it got me into the city. As I drove down Henry Clay approaching Children's Hospital, there were barricades and two armed military people with M-16s, told me to halt, which I immediately did, and I told them that I was here to see Mary Parin, and they got on the radio and verified it, and escorted me into the hospital. They were there because the hospital had been, not attacked, but they were afraid that they would come in and try to get to the pharmaceuticals and that kind of thing, so they had very tight security around the hospital, as did Touro and some of the other hospitals. I came into the city, but driving through, I came in on Claiborne Avenue. On Claiborne Avenue, they had built a temporary levee there, because the 17th Street canal – actually, it's not the 17th Street canal; I'm not sure what canal it is – sort of backs up into the water works there, and had some water come over there. They built a temporary levee, and the water had evidently

receded enough and they just made a breech in that levee just enough to drive a car through, so it was very small. When I went through – I had never been in a war – but it looked like a war zone. I mean, it looked like a total – the first thing you noticed is everything was colorless. There was no green, everything was brown, and had sort of a film over it. It looked like a black and white, almost a sepia type color that was just sort of a brownish color. There was a distinct smell, and there was nothing but military vehicles. There was not another pedestrian, not another soul. The other thing I noticed is that you didn't hear any birds. I mean, there was no wildlife, no birds, no squirrels. It was just, I guess, what I would imagine a war zone, after the war had moved out, what the war zone would look like. Of course, I couldn't resist driving by my house, which wasn't really on the way to Children's Hospital, but I made it on the way to Children's Hospital to see the waterline still on the house, and to go in the house was still depressing. Everything was ruined. There was mold starting to grow on the walls and so forth. I did go upstairs and was able to get some more clothes because all I had was that one change of clothes that I had left with and then I had bought some other clothes, but didn't have really all my clothes, so I went upstairs and got some things, called my wife, and and asked her if she wanted me to get anything of hers, and got a few things of hers.

RH: She wanted mainly clothes, or were there other things?

AB: She wanted mainly clothes. She said she had – she's not a big jewelry person, but she had a little bit of jewelry, and I took that and got that out of the house so nobody would come in the house and loot and take anything there. Fortunately, we had moved the pictures and those types of things upstairs, so that had been saved. It was too much. I could not bring myself to really do anything major, certainly not clean up or do anything major. It was a visit to go upstairs. Again, fortunately, upstairs was pretty much unscathed. The mold didn't go upstairs, and the clothing that was in the closets and everything was okay. It was a snapshot of the way that I had left it. I'm always amazed – growing up with my wife and three kids in the house, the paper's never where you left it in

the morning, and you can't find this, or nothing's around, and I'm always amazed that when they'd either be on vacation in Pensacola because they used to go visit, or nobody was home, it was wonderful that you could leave the paper open on the sports section [and] when you came home, it was still open on the sports section, and you could finish reading it. This was sort of the same thing. Everything was exactly the way it was when I swam out that day. The bed was in the same condition, the chair was still by the window, [and] the window was still open. The bottled water was still in the same place. It was like nothing had happened in the last two or three weeks. It was kind of an eerie feeling. I got some things out of the house, closed it back up, drove over to the hospital, and took care of what needed to be taken care of over there. Drove downtown to look at some other customers that were downtown. Again, it was just a strange, strange thing. There were cars all over the place. There were cars on neutral grounds, cars that were obviously flooded out. It was just a mess. It was a brown line everywhere, where the water had gotten to. It was just very obvious exactly where the water was, and where it had gotten to. So that was my first visit back into New Orleans. And there were a number of subsequent visits where it didn't change for a long time. It was that same way for quite some time. There was still no power in the city. It was all military; it was all the camouflage vehicles and the big Humvees and the big military presence, and depressing looking.

RH: How did you feel? You were in Baton Rouge, there was all this life there, as opposed to being here. Did you think the city would ever come back?

AB: I had no doubt. It never occurred to me; it was just a matter of when we were coming back. It never occurred to me that we wouldn't come back. I never thought about giving up and not coming back. It was just a question of what can we do, when can we get back to start working on things, and getting things going again. You say there were plenty of things going on in Baton Rouge. There were too many things going on in Baton Rouge. Baton Rouge was packed. The traffic was tremendous. Any restaurant was

packed. All of the facilities were really overcrowded. It was also interesting because everywhere you went, you also saw people from New Orleans that were in Baton Rouge, and it was always fun. One of the things that my mother mentioned, and that I certainly realized in Baton Rouge is, there's nothing like being home when you can go out, and everywhere you go you see people you know. That's something that you miss tremendously when you're not in New Orleans, not in your hometown.

RH: When did your wife join you, and what was your decision about how to negotiate that?

AB: She had, as I mentioned, gone to Pensacola, and my sister and her husband, and their three kids were with them. Actually, two kids were with them; their daughter was spending her junior year abroad, but the two kids were with them. Sadly, or interestingly, their daughter was supposed to be going to college, and leaving the week of Katrina, or the week after Katrina, and ended up evacuating to Pensacola, and having to go to college from Pensacola with only what she brought with her from her house to Pensacola.

RH: That's your niece?

AB: That's my niece. She ended up going to Mount Holyoke in the Boston area, and with only basically what she had on her back and a few other things that she had brought with her. She had a tough first semester at college. My sister went up there with her. But they all evacuated, and fortunately, my wife's sister happened to be on a two-week vacation, so they all stayed at her house while she was gone, so it wasn't an imposition on anybody. At the end of those two weeks, it got a little tight, so my sister and my niece went to college, and my brother-in-law and nephew went out to Colorado where my brother-in-law's from, got my nephew in school out there, then my sister ended up going from Boston where she dropped my niece off at college out to Colorado, and my brother-in-law came back, then my mother who was then in Philadelphia ended up going out to

Colorado. So, my mother and my sister, and my nephew were out in Colorado and had an apartment out there for a good bit of the school year.

RH: And then your wife?

AB: My wife stayed with her sister in Pensacola. They're very close, and I think she really enjoyed that for a while. It was good. Tt was very cathartic to be with somebody. She was almost in denial. She didn't want to come back to New Orleans. She didn't want to see it. She didn't want to believe that everything was gone. She stayed with her sister for awhile, and then – we have some property in Poplarville, Mississippi, and we couldn’t get to that area because of trees down and still no power, but we have – my wife's sister's husband is in the marine patrol, and they had been called off the order and were patrolling the Gulf Coast in that area, and he was able to get up to our property around there as part of his patrol, and was able to tell us it was okay. We have a small house up there, and it was okay and clear. We have a telephone line with an answering machine, so when we were able to call the telephone line and get answered by the answering machine, we knew we had both telephone and we had power, because it wouldn't work without both of those two. Once she got answered by the answering machine, she left Pensacola and went up to Mississippi. Then, I guess, it must have been in late September or the beginning of October, I was able to get away for a weekend and met her up in Mississippi. That was the first time I had seen her since she had left that Sunday morning before the storm. We spent the weekend in Mississippi, decided that she was better off in Mississippi than trying to come back to Baton Rouge, because I was still living with three techs in a two room apartment and that wasn't working out. My daughter came back to Baton Rouge because she had a lot of friends that were going to school in Baton Rouge and working in Baton Rouge, and she ended up getting a job. She was working at a school here in New Orleans that wasn't back in session, so she ended up getting a job as a nanny for some people, which gave her a place to live in Baton Rouge, and she really enjoyed that. She bonded very closely with

this baby and the family and was in Baton Rouge, so I got to see some of her in Baton Rouge, and that worked out well for her. My wife stayed in Poplarville for a while, and I would go up there whenever I could on the weekends. LSU [Louisiana State University] played Auburn in a football game, and my son goes to Auburn, and he came down for that game, and we spent some time together at that game in Baton Rouge.

RH: You also said you had – in one way, you said that Baton Rouge was fun. Some people might find that odd that you've lost your home [and] your business is not intact. So, talk about that.

AB: I guess maybe in a perverse way, I find it fun to be able to focus and have a lot to do and feel like you're getting something done, and you're making progress, and you don't have to deal with a lot of red tape. I'm an electrical engineer, and running this business and sales is certainly important. You have to have a sale before you can put anything in, but I find sales to be very frustrating. You have to deal with people, and you have to go through the sales process. Once you do that, then I find it to be fun to be able to put in the equipment and make the equipment work and make it do what you want it to do, and be able to get everything working and be able to bring everything together, be able to put together the whole thing and get the equipment in in the right time and schedule the right things and make everything happen, and have a plan work out. While we were in Baton Rouge, there was no selling. "I need it. How fast can you get it in? We need it now. Can you work these miracles? Can you get what usually takes a thirty-day process in in the next two days?" Those kinds of things were fun. Working with people that were willing to work with you and everybody was on the same side and not trying to throw up any roadblocks or do anything, was fun. We were getting stuff done at work. We were making things happen for the community, I was able to – again, I don't want to minimize missing my family and my wife and being apart, but I was able to just focus on what I was doing and not have to worry about was I going to be home and was I spending enough time with the family, although I would like to. I didn't have to worry about any of that, and

I was strictly working on what I had to do. I could work all night if I needed to. I could get up early in the morning if I wanted to. I could do whatever needed to be done. It was sort of that freedom. I don't want to sound trite, but I think freedom is having nothing to lose. I figured I didn't have the house to worry about. I didn't have anything else to worry about. Everything was minimalist. It was just minimized, and I had two or three sets of clothes so I didn't have to worry about what clothes I had to wear, and nobody else seemed to care. It was sort of easy. No attachments, no issues, and you could just focus on what you were doing and get things done. I find that to be kind of invigorating and fun.

RH: I'm thinking you made a difference. You were really able to make a difference in a lot of people's lives.

AB: Well, I hope so. That's my style. I'm not a visionary. I don't come up with the visionary ideas and think, "This is where we need to be and think out of the box," and all that type of thing. That's not my forte. But, if you say, "This is where we need to be, and these are your assets, and this is what you have to work with," my forte is getting everybody together, getting it organized, and getting to that point. That was the situation that we were in. It didn't have to be a vision at that time. At that time, it was a situation of survival. We were in survival mode. Everybody had to figure out how to get a shelter, places to eat, take care of the person next to you, and just survive. We weren't in the mode that we're in today, where we're trying to figure out, "Where's this community going to be in three years, five years, ten years?" We were in this mode of putting everything back together. How're we going to get all of the people that are all over the place back to New Orleans? How are we going to provide those services? How are we going to get the Federation building back up? How are we going to get all of these things done? That's what I enjoyed, those kinds of problems that I could touch and feel.

RH: So, this is a good place to back into the Jewish community here, because you're now, as you've just said, more of a visionary type of place.

AB: Yes.

RH: What's that like?

AB: Well, I'm very lucky to be surrounded by a lot of people who are visionaries. I have enough sense to turn things over to these people. We have the community, the Federation. Again, I can't say enough due to – the largess of UJC has provided us with the means of doing what we need to do. I mentioned that we were in a survival mode. We've gone through very distinct periods of time. In the beginning, it was just that. It was survival, and what do we need to do to get through the tomorrow and the next day and the next day, not where do we need to be in six months or where do we need to be in a year. It's just a day by day. Once we got everybody stabilized, then it got to be, "Well, how are we going to get everybody back to New Orleans? How are we going to get the services back in New Orleans working? How are we going to get these things going?" We actually went to UJC and told them that we thought this was a two year problem. We thought that if we can keep our agencies going, if we can keep our synagogues back stable and get them going for two years, then we'll be back going and we'll be back on our feet and everything will be ready to go. Well, we were very wrong. We're finding that that's certainly one of the premises that we're still working under, and I do feel now, that it's going to take two years to figure out where we're going to have to be in five years or ten years. Because it's almost been a year now, which is amazing. It's been almost a year, and we still don't know exactly what the population of New Orleans is going to be. It's my sense that the population is going to go down more before it starts coming back up, and that in two years from now or in a year, we're going to have less population that we actually have now. But I feel very strongly that if we have the opportunity, and if we do it right, in five years we'll be back on the upswing, and hopefully

we'll be working from a much more stable and a much better base and that our upside will be much higher than it was before.

RH: When you say we, at this point, I'm getting a sense of the Jewish community is very much dependent on the larger community.

AB: By all means.

RH: In a certain sense. Are you thinking the Jewish community –? How do you see that interconnection?

AB: It's inextricably intertwined. Whatever's good for the Jewish community is good for the general community, and we're working on that premise. When we started our recovery process, we went through – we started a recovery committee, and it was made up of every agency and every synagogue. We went through the normal process that I think anybody that's been through one of these strategic planning type committees goes through, where everybody sits around a table, and they throw out ideas, and they put them up on the whiteboard, and you start putting them together and narrowing them down and coming up with different points. We figured very quickly that people were saying, "Well, our biggest problem is crime, and our problems are the school system," and these types of things. We said, "We can't do that. There's nothing we as a Jewish community can do about the school systems or crime. We have to only bite off what we can chew and do what we can, and be part of this big community and do what we can as citizens for the crime and for the schools, but as the Jewish community, there's nothing we can do about that." But, whatever we do, if we can get the Jewish day school up, if we can get the synagogues going, if we can get the JCC going to provide these services for the community, if we can get Jewish Family Services to do counseling and get all these different agencies going, it's going to benefit not just the Jewish community but the community as a whole. As the community as a whole becomes more healthy, so will the Jewish community, and vice versa. That's how we look at ourselves – when I say "we," I

say we as a Jewish community and we as people of New Orleans.

RH: The two seem pretty intertwined for you.

AB: They're definitely intertwined.

RH: What do you attribute that to?

AB: Well, I can't imagine being not part of the New Orleans community. I can't imagine not being part of the Jewish community. It's what I grew up with, and I think my children feel a certain sense of that. Certainly, my parents instilled that in me. My mother taught at the JCC nursery school for many, many years. My father was involved on many of the boards in the city and was head of the campaign one year, president of the Willow Wood, which is a home for the Jewish aged, and was deeply involved and had been a large contributor to the Jewish Welfare Federation. Our family has a legacy of being involved in part of the Federation and part of the city. Also, having done business in this community through him since 1949 and personally, since 1975, I feel very attached, certainly to our customers, and to the whole community in general. It's very important to me, the survival of the city. My wife is from Pensacola. She's had second thoughts, and I think that if she weren't married to me and had her job in New Orleans and other things, that she could leave. She asked me at one time what would happen if she moved to Poplarville, and I told her I would visit her every weekend. It's an attachment, and I think perhaps if you didn't have a history here, then it would be a lot easier to leave. Because it's not easy living in New Orleans right now; it's not an easy place to live.

RH: Tell me in your opinion, what is it going to take to bring the Jewish community back?

AB: The Jewish community is, as we mentioned, part of the general community, and the general community I think, is around 60% of it, whereas the Jewish community is a little bit higher than that. I don't know what we as a Jewish community can do. We can certainly do a lot, but we can't do enough to bring the quantity of people back that we

need unless New Orleans itself as a whole is functioning properly. We do have all of those issues that we talked about. We have the schools and the crime and the health care, and all of these different essential services are there for these people. New Orleans has to have that, or you can't talk people into coming back. What we can do is, again, only what we can do, which is make sure that we have vibrant synagogues, make sure that we have a vibrant JCC, make sure that we have all the other services that people come to expect from the Jewish community, and I think it's important from the Federation standpoint to continue to make sure that we organize the Jewish community and that they feel that it is a community and not just separate entities that happen to be Jewish; that we keep the sense of community in all of these organizations.

RH: So that sounds like your main goals are –? What you'd like your legacy to be, at least in your term? Is that it started functioning as one community and that that continues?

AB: Definitely. I'm very proud that we've not lost any agency or any organization. All of the Jewish organizations, agencies, synagogues that were functioning before the storm are still functioning. The only one that's marginal at this time is Beth Israel, the orthodox synagogue, and they lost their building completely, and they're still having services and minyans at some of the other synagogues and are still together, and there's a plan on the table for them to continue as a congregation. We're working with them to try and see that that happens because it's very important that we have an orthodox shul and an orthodox group in the city. I mean, there are people that won't come to New Orleans unless that is available to them, so it's important that that maintains. But, I am proud of the fact that we have made it through the first year, and everyone has survived the first year. My goal is that by the end of the second year, that we will have been made the Jewish community sized properly to its constituency, meaning that there will have to be some severe cuts. Due to the largess of UJC, we haven't had to do that yet, but there are going to have to be some sizing issues and we're going to have to work with these different agencies, and

there is going to be some realization in the synagogues, which we have no power to dictate but can only work with, but hopefully work with them and make sure that by the end of 2007 when this funding is perhaps no longer available, that they can maintain. I won't be the president at that time, but it would hurt me greatly to find that some of those were only here while they were being funded and then couldn't stand on their own legs when they became on their own. That's not what I want and I don't want to build up a false sense of security, and make sure that everyone's realistic and can survive, not just for these two years, but go on and keep the legacy going.

RH: Do you wish you'd asked for four years?

AB: Nope. I didn't ask for that. [laughter]

RH: No, I don't mean four years as president but four --

AB: Oh, four years of funding? [laughter]

RH: -- years of funding? [laughter] If you could reel the tape back, would you like to have --

AB: I'm working on that possibility. What's actually happening, and this is very interesting and I guess it's okay to talk about this at this time – the funding for these different agencies. We funded them in the first six months just based on whatever deficit budgets that they came up with, and no questions asked, just to get them the cash and make sure they could function. These next six months, we've asked for a lot of fiscal information from them, to determine what moneys they really need, and what deficits they're going to run, and what they need. We're finding that due to the largess of – for instance, the JCCA, the JCC national association, had raised money and was good to the JCC. A lot of private contributions and different foundations gave to the Jewish Family Services. The URJ gave to a lot of the Reform congregations. So, due to the largess of a lot of these different organizations, some of these agencies and synagogues

didn't need as much in the first year as they thought they were going to need. However, that funding is not going to repeat itself in the second year and ongoing. So I'm hoping, and I have to talk to UJC, and if you want to show this tape to UJC before I talk to them, that they will allow us, if we don't spend all the money that we had allotted for the first two years, to allow us to extend that out possibly. I've learned that a lot of processes are just as important as results. The process of forcing the people to then downsize, to meet the reality of what's their constituency, is a process that we really need to sort of force people to get into next year, because they are going to have to maintain and be on their own. If we say, "Well, UJC may be out there for another year, and may have enough more money," then they won't go through that processes, and it doesn't force them to face the reality, and it's just a question of delaying something that is inevitable. Sometimes the process is just as important as the outcome.

RH: Is there something distinctive about the New Orleans Jewish community to you?

AB: Yeah. I think the main thing that's distinctive that I've seen from talking to other people is the age – meaning the multigenerational age – of the Jewish community. Certainly not in Florida, but I don't even know about some of the other areas where you'll find – whereas my family has been in New Orleans for four or five generations, and it's not unique. There are a number of families that have been in New Orleans for multi, multi-generations. It's a very deeply embedded community. It's a very assimilated community. The Jewish community in New Orleans is also very involved in all of the different organizations outside of the Jewish community. You see them on all of the museum boards, and you see them on all the school boards, and so forth. It's very assimilated in that regard, but it's also very much a part of the general community.

RH: These are things you hope to keep. Are there things you want to keep –?

AB: Yeah, sure.

RH: Are there things you want to let go of, that need to be let go of, as you see the community –?

AB: There are a lot of things we want to keep. We certainly want to keep the multigenerational Jewish. I hope that people's kids will stay in New Orleans if the opportunity is there. Scott Cowen has mentioned, as well as a number of other very prominent and good thinkers, that New Orleans is a great place to be right now if you're young and have the energy and have the ability to withstand some downsides and are able to take the risk. It's a great place to be, and you can make a difference. It was very heartened to hear – it's a case-by-case basis. We're a small enough community – always, everybody matters – but we're in a community now where it's every family is important whether they stay or go, every person. I was heartened to hear that somebody who lives down the street from us, [their] son decided to come back to New Orleans to live, which probably he wouldn't have if it hadn't been for Katrina. It's an important place to live. As far as a legacy of the Jewish community, I hope that we can continue to have a functioning Jewish community where people will come and want to live and be part of it; that we can welcome new people because we are going to need new people coming into the community. It will eventually diminish if we just try to rely on our existing base; we have to bring new people in. That's why the universities and hospitals are important. Because they bring a lot of professionals in, and typically a lot of Jewish professionals into the community, so those are very important. As I mentioned a couple of times before, it's very important that we keep the synagogues, the Federation, and different agencies all working together as part of one big community.

RH: New Orleans was shrinking before, and I believe the Jewish community is getting smaller perhaps, from my understanding, and so it's almost like you're trying to reverse an older trend that was pre-Katrina.

AB: It's true to an extent. I think the New Orleans community – the greater New Orleans community, I don't know. I think it's been pretty stable for a number of years, in size. Certainly, New Orleans versus the region, has probably shrunk. People are moving out of New Orleans into the Metairie, Lakeview, Kenner – that type of area. I think the general greater New Orleans community has been stable for a number of years. I don't think the numbers have shrunk by that much. One of the other phenomena of Katrina is that Katrina just exacerbated any problem that you were having. If a business was marginal before Katrina, it's probably not around now. If people were on the cusp of whether they were going to stay in New Orleans or had a chance to move out, they probably moved out. So, any situation. If there were domestic issues before the storm, it just exacerbated everything. Any problems that you were having before, it just made worse. Any issues that were there, it accelerated them. The New Orleans school system was certainly in a world of trouble before, and if nothing else, again, it's opportunity. You don't want to use euphemisms and say, "We don't have problems; we have challenges and opportunities," but perhaps the reality is that Katrina helped us wipe the slate clean as far as the school system and allowed us to build it back up because that's what really needed to be done. I'm not sure the New Orleans school system was really reputable. It needed to be started over. Hopefully, we can do that. We have the opportunity. It's been slow, slower than we would like to see it. So, a little disappointed in that side of it.

RH: Why don't you talk a little bit about some of the frustrations that you feel right now? We were talking a little before about the city itself. It seems like you have more frustrations there than with the Jewish community.

AB: Very much so. Just as I said it was fun to be in Baton Rouge because you can get things done and you didn't have to worry about the need and the red tape and getting through all that, and it was just a question of moving forward and setting your sites on your goal and getting there, it's quite the opposite now with the city. It's nothing but red tape. Nothing seems to get done; everybody seems to want to find the reasons not to do

it, or the reasons for red tape, rather than saying, "This is what we need to do, and how are we going to get there." It's extremely frustrating in that regard.

RH: Any examples?

AB: Well, I mean, the insurance companies. The insurance companies and FEMA. People have beat up on FEMA and rightfully so. Small Business Association. These are agencies that were created exactly for this situation. If I had decided I wanted to work for the Small Business Association or FEMA, this is what you would have dreamed of. This was your chance to get in and help people and get things done, and make things happen. It seems that that's not the goal of these agencies at all. It's the goal of these agencies to follow their rules and to go by their books and their numbers, rather than to find out what really needs to be done and get to the root of things, and make things happen. And that's very frustrating. The delays that people have had with insurance. If we hadn't been fortunate enough to be able to start the reconstruction of our house before the insurance, we'd be two months behind where we are now. Insurance has been a problem and is still a problem for a lot of people. The city is frozen. There's just nothing happening. And it's easy to criticize, but personally, if I were doing things, I would just pick something that you could succeed in and get it done, and one success is going to breed another success, and it's going to become a successful attitude. You're going to get things done, and people are going to see things being done. Right now, just to drive by on the way to work, piles of trash are still sitting out. Some of the abandoned cars are being taken away now, but we're eleven months into it. There's still abandoned cars out there. There are still things that don't seem like they should be that difficult to get done and would be very visible signs of improvement.

RH: And you feel that if things don't get done soon, what do you –?

AB: I think people are going to start being beaten down, and hopefully not, but they will start giving up and moving on. So I think we still have some time, and the people that are

still here, I think will be here for a while. I think the people that are here must have some connection to New Orleans, either as I do, a job or a family or some connection to the city, where they don't feel that they can or desire to move. Eventually, people will throw up their hands and just say they can't fight it anymore. It's a fight. Every day is a fight, and it's baby steps. I've learned that I'm not a patient person by nature, and I've just learned to strictly just – as my wife told me in child raising – the best advice she ever gave is true – is just pick your battles. Don't fight over the little things. Just pick what your battles are. I think that's true today; you have to pick your battles. There's no sense in fighting a battle that you can't necessarily win, and it's not that important whether it happens today or it happens next week. You just can't get that upset about it. I'm finding other people feel the same way because just as a service organization, it used to be that people would call up and want to know, "How come you can't do it today or tomorrow," and now people want to know, "Can you get to it this week?" It's just a mindset now.

RH: I want to go back a minute to the Jewish community because I know you've got this incredibly long-range planning process going on. Did somebody internally set up the long-range plan? Are you borrowing a consultant from someplace, and could you talk a little bit about this?

AB: Sure, sure. This came out – the Recovery Task Force is what we're calling it. The Recovery Task Force came out of a meeting that we had between the presidents and execs of the constituent agencies of the Federation. Those constituent agencies are the Federation itself, Jewish Family Services, the Jewish Endowment Foundation, the JCC, and Hillel. Hillel was not in it as to the degree as the others because they're going through a leadership change over there, and it's not as much as a – well, I'm certainly not belittling it, but is not as much of a community agency as it is a college agency and so forth. From that agency, we decided that what we saw around us is that the city was going nowhere and that there was no leadership, and there was nothing, no plan. Nobody knew whether they could rebuild their houses or whether they could get

insurance or what was going on. And that we didn't want to have that same situation in the Jewish community, and we needed to take the lead, and help all the agencies and coordinate the agencies and the organizations around the community to make sure that we didn't duplicate services and that the services that were required were being given by somebody. So, from that, we decided that we should form a Recovery Task Force. That Recovery Task Force, we then asked all of the different synagogues, agencies, and organizations, to send a representative to a meeting that we had. The JDC, the Joint Distribution Committee, loaned us Michael Novick, who is an implementation person. He came down for the first meeting, and in that first meeting, it was packed. We had everybody. We allowed a certain number of representatives from each organization, and everybody that was allowed came. Everybody was vocal, and everybody was respectful and listened. Somebody even commented about that, how interesting it was to be in a meeting full of Jewish people where, not only did everybody talk, but everybody listened.

RH: When was this meeting?

AB: This meeting was – time is difficult now. Typically, everything is either pre-Katrina or post-Katrina. It's been maybe three months ago that the first meeting, and it went over about a two-month period. We had three meetings. It went through the normal strategic planning type process, where again, we threw out all the issues that were out there, and then from that meeting, we then, at the next meeting, put those together into five or six different main topics. In between the second and third meeting, we broke into sub-committees, and those different sub-committees met between those meetings and determined some action items that could be done in order to meet some of those goals. In the third meeting, we summarized everything and made sure everybody was on the same page, and said this is sort of where we want to go. From there, from those three meetings, we then established – and only the chairs of this committee have met; the chairs and the leaders of these five different action committees have met. That was just this week. We're getting ready to start that. We're hoping to form this true recovery task

force, this recovery committee.

RH: So what do you guys think needs to go into the recovery?

AB: Some of the items that are on the action committee are, as an example, how do we bring people back to New Orleans? In general, it's how we make New Orleans a place where it can be a destination where people want to come to. That certainly involves a lot of different issues, such as the Orthodox community, to make sure we have an Orthodox community. How do we reach out to all the people that are not in the community that were part of this community, and make sure that we communicate with them? One of the vision issues is, what exactly is our community now? How long does a person have to be gone before they're not really part of our community anymore, and have to move on and sort of cut them loose and say, "We have to take care of the people that are in New Orleans." What is our geographic area? Because we had such a relationship with the Baton Rouge people for a long time. How far does our community go? It certainly goes to Metairie and Kenner which it always has. It was going to the North Shore, but now there are a lot more people on the North Shore. How far out do we go? What is our geographic community? That is an issue and a thought. What is our campaign going to be? We just don't know. We don't know what we can support, what programs we can support, and where we're going to be. We've done a lot of empirical data to determine who's here now. So, if we take those people that are here and determine what they've given in the past, and if they can give the same that they've given in the past, then our campaign would be X. Then we'd work with that as a basis, but we don't know. Some people have been hit very hard and can't give what they've given. Other people, the storm's been not as bad to them, and could possibly continue to give, but we just don't know. We're going to run a campaign starting in December, so that will be our campaign. We have to be very careful in that campaign. We have to be empathetic to the people and their situations. Again, we have to get -- well, I'm getting off the subject of the vision and the recovery committee, but we have to be realistic. We have to start

taking care of ourselves because one thing that Katrina has certainly taught me, what I've taken out of this is that you better not depend on the government. You better not depend on the insurance companies. You better be able to take care of yourself and do what needs to be done to take care of yourself and expand that to the community – to your community. What I'm focused on right now is the Jewish community, so we better make sure that we can take care of ourselves and raise the money that we need to raise in order to take care of our services and our people that need those services. So the campaign is another part of that vision. There's a lot to it. And again, this is another one of those things where the process is just as important as the outcome. If we can bring our community together and process this and make them start thinking about the next two years or the next five years or the next seven years, then that process is moving people in the right direction, and getting them to think forward rather than to think backward as to what they've lost or what they've been through.

RH: Are you mad at people who've left?

AB: No, not at all. I've had any number of general conversations and very private conversations with people that have called me and almost apologetically said, "I'm thinking about leaving." I almost get the sense that they're saying, "I want to talk to you about it because I don't want you to be mad at me, and I hate to think that I'm abandoning the city, but I just have to go. I have kids that are school age," and the public schools are not available to them and they either can't afford or don't want to go to the private schools that are available. They really don't have a choice. I can absolutely understand why people want to go. I would encourage them to stay, and I would encourage them, if they do leave, not to cut the umbilical cord, and come back. Come back and visit and come back and see. I think that people are going to find that they miss New Orleans. When they go, they're going to miss it. They're going to miss not just New Orleans and the culture of New Orleans, but they're going to miss the people that they see all the time. When I talk to my wife about it, I said, "You know, where are we

going to go if we leave? Why would we leave? Where are we going to go?" We could go somewhere else. We could go to Pensacola, and I could try to build a business, but it's going to take me ten years to build a business. Why not put that energy into here? In ten years, I'll have a base, and then ten years I'll be that far ahead of time. It's the same with friends. I say, "We're in New Orleans. If I wanted to, I could pick up the phone and say 'Hey John, hey Charlie, hey Clay, what're ya'll doing tonight for dinner,' and we could all go out have dinner. Where are you going to find friends like that?" She said, "Well, you could make friends in new places," and I said, "You certainly can, but it's going to take years. It's going to take two, three, four years to make those kinds of friends, and in two, three, four years, this place is going to be back. So why not stay here and put our energies into this place?" That's what I tell people who are leaving. You're going to go off and the grass is always greener, and it is going to be easier in the short term, but you can say you were here when things happened, and you were here to put New Orleans back, and you can take a great pride when it is back that you were a part of it.

RH: What has being Jewish meant to you during this experience? Can you articulate that for me?

AB: I'm not a spiritual person. I don't go to synagogue that often, and that may be an overstatement. This hasn't made me any more spiritual quite honestly, but it has made me feel very proud of what the Jewish community has done, proud to be Jewish, and proud that the Jewish community from around the country and around the world, I guess, has come to the aide of not only the Jewish community, but the whole general community, has felt very caring about the whole community; has acted very honorably and well in this whole situation. That part of it makes me very proud. I think the whole Jewish structure is based on Jewish morals, and what that means I guess is a whole other topic of discussion and may get spiritual, but the Jewish morality and the Jewish value system is very important, and I think has helped – certainly me – get through this time.

RH: Can you articulate what some of those values might mean to you?

AB: I think it's certainly caring for your fellow man, for your fellow person. Making sure that the person next to you is okay. I mean, just that sense where I was just as worried about getting my neighbors out as I was about getting myself out. I wouldn't have thought about leaving without them, helping the other people around the city, and helping the rest of the community. The fact that every person is important, that you don't look at the big picture and say, "We can sacrifice the 9th Ward because we need to work on this." Although, I don't mean that entirely because I do believe that we do need to concentrate on certain areas of the community, but everybody is important. Everything that is done is important to somebody, and therefore it's important. I think those types of concepts. Things are not that important. You hear the Jewish stories, and you see the movies about the Jews being forced out of Poland and out of Russia and all over the world, and they're leaving with what's on their back. I think I could almost relate to some of those things. I felt like I was leaving with what was on my back. It was a sense of loss, but it wasn't a sense of desperation. You're always looking down the road. You're going to a good place, and something better is down the road, and this too shall pass, and things will get better. I think it's those concepts, and I think those are some of the Jewish morals and Jewish creed.

RH: That's good. Okay, we're going to finish tape two.

AB: Okay.

[END OF AUDIO FILE 2]

RH: So you had brought up the 9th Ward, and people talk about the footprint of the city. There's also been media attention on certain areas of the city, and I want to know if you have any thoughts on these issues.

AB: Well, in these areas I tend to be a little somewhat conservative on these types of issues. I mentioned earlier that everybody's important and I certainly believe that. However, I also believe that you can only do what you can do. I think we have to – the city has to consolidate. I think the footprint of the city has to be shrunk to begin with. Those people can certainly fit within that footprint. I'm not saying that the people of the lower 9th Ward or the 9th Ward or any other area can't be a part of that, but I think the city is going to dilute itself of its resources and of its energies and manpower if it tries to bring back the complete footprint of the city, versus starting from a base, which, it happens to be somewhat – well, it's not totally economic because you have the Lakefront, which is certainly an upper-middle-class area. Then you have the 9th Ward, which is a lower income area, so it's not necessarily around the income, but you have to build up areas that can be supported. There's no sense in putting money into infrastructure into a 9th Ward where the people that live there can't rebuild on their own, and there's not enough resources for the government to rebuild those areas, and those areas are not protected at this time from additional storms. I don't think that that is the right way to go. I think you can possibly expand in those areas as the need requires in subsequent years. And it may take many years. I also think that, personally, I'm very disappointed in [Mayor Ray] Nagin now mainly because I was very supportive of him during the whole hurricane process and immediately thereafter. I think he did as well as could be expected of anyone in that situation. I think that the Superdome was a tremendous human tragedy, although I'm not sure that it wasn't self-inflicted. I think the people that were at the Superdome were not going to leave the city had they been given the opportunity. It was a tremendous tragedy that they got trapped there, and I think the government and FEMA could have done a lot more to get them out at that time, but it was an after the fact thing. I don't blame that on Nagin or the city. Again, it ended up being a racial because it ended up being mostly one race at the Superdome, but I don't think the cause was racial or the reaction was racial. It was just that happened to be that socioeconomic group didn't leave the city. They could have left the city in some way or

another, by buses if they had chosen to. There was low cost of buses and trains and so forth, and could have. Just by example of how many cars are flooded out in the 9th Ward. If there were that many cars that were flooded out in 9th Ward, then those cars could have been used to drive out of the city. The problem is much, much bigger than that. The problem is, where were they going to go? That is the bigger problem. A lot of people didn't leave because they had no place to go. It does no good to get out of the city if you have no place to go. I think that is the bigger problem rather than they didn't leave or couldn't leave. It was that there was no place for them to go when they did go. As far as building back the city, it has to be done from a base of strength, and the base of strength is not only physical and geographic and topographic because of height, but it's also economic. You need to build back your base that can have a tax base. That's the practical reality of it. If you can bring the people back to Lakeview, that's a big tax base. That will then be able to fund the infrastructure that's necessary for the city to expand. Again, I'm trying to be sensitive and it may not be politically correct, but that's the reality of things. As far as bringing back the city, that's my thoughts on the steps that need to be taken.

RH: Let's talk about you personally then. Because you said some of your perspectives have changed on what you see as important and necessary. Could you expand on that a little bit?

AB: Well, I've become more of a minimalist. I was never much – I mean, I like nice things if you can have them, but I didn't need nice things. I don't think it was a requirement. And now, even more so, simplicity and minimalist seems to be much what I strive for. I would much rather things be simple. If it requires complication, I would try to avoid it. I've also found that interestingly – I mentioned much earlier that tennis was important to me. I was an athlete growing up and briefly in college, have been competitive all my life, and in tennis I was competitive, and I found that I don't feel as competitive. If I can go out and have a good time and enjoy it – it's not as important to win as it used to be. I find

that kind of disturbing because I still feel that I'm competitive, but I don't have the necessary desire. It's not as important. I found that winning that game is not as important as, perhaps, other things. That's been a kind of interesting thing that I've been able to see in myself. I'm just not interested. Our whole first floor was wiped out. I just can't get up any energy to go out and look at, or any desire, to buy new furniture or find neat things or fun things to put in the house. It just doesn't seem to be that important.

RH: Are there things you're grateful for now?

AB: Oh sure. First of all, I'm grateful that everybody I know survived, and did okay. Everybody that wanted to continue to work is working, everybody that had a house at least has a roof over their head. I'm grateful that my wife is now back in New Orleans and with me. I'm grateful that my daughter decided to stay in New Orleans and she's around, and that my son is thinking about it, and that my other son is happy where he is, and is doing okay. So all those things are terrific. I'm glad my mother's still around, and she's doing fine. My sister and her family are doing well. So all those things are certainly to be grateful for. The business has done fine. We actually did okay because of Katrina. We had to replace a lot of equipment. This year's been good, but I'm not sure what next year or the year after and so forth will be, but again, I think if we do the right things and stay in the right places, then we'll be okay. So, yeah, there's a whole lot to be grateful for.

RH: Is there anything that maybe you took for granted before, that you don't take for granted anymore?

AB: Yeah, everything. Just getting up and being able to get in your car and drive down the street without running into a pothole, going into a grocery almost any time of the day, just all the little things that are out there that you took for granted. I don't take anything for granted anymore. Don't assume that anything is going to be there. It makes you very much more appreciative of everything. Anything that happens, it makes you much more

appreciative. It really lowers your expectation. I'm very much against people that feel entitled to things, and I've never really felt that I was entitled to anything, that you have to earn and deserve anything that you get. Now I feel even more so that you're going to get what you deserve, and it's going to come to you if you work for it and do the right things.

RH: Are there any things you do now, like anything you consider more precious to you? Any rituals? I just mean things that kind of make you feel at home, or more normal.

AB: Well, normal is a rarely used word around here, and it's a question of – the whole "normal" is redefined. I think friendships, be it my tennis buddies or families, and just getting together and sitting around and talking to people are very precious. Just down time, and being able to have the luxury of not having anything that – the luxury of time. I think time is another tremendous luxury that has become much more precious. I feel that I guard time much more than I had before. Having the luxury of being able to spend time with somebody and talking until you're ready to stop rather than saying, "We have to go, or they have to go, or something else has to happen," I think is very much a luxury and something that's very precious that I guard carefully – time with my family or time with friends.

RH: You're in two rooms in your upstairs?

AB: Yeah, two rooms and a bathroom. [laughter].

RH: So, what does home mean now?

AB: Well, home is a destination, it's a place, and again, it's reinforced what you really need. The big thing that I miss is not having a kitchen or a place where we could have friends over; that's something that we miss. My wife and I were discussing that the other day. Other than that, we have what we need up in the bedroom, in the kitchen [laughter], which is our microwave, our refrigerator, and a little sitting room. We worked for a couple of weekends. We cleaned up the front yard, and we now have grass, and we now have

flowers in the front yard, and that's made a tremendous difference. Just to be able to come home and have it look clean. Even though the houses on the left and across the street still have a lot of rubbish and are not quite there yet, it makes it feel very nice to come home and have grass and flowers. That's trying to get back to normal. That's the normal that we're striving for.

RH: I think we're about done, so I'm going to ask you if you have anything to add.

AB: No, I appreciate this opportunity to talk to you, and to tell my story. I think it's very cathartic to tell the story and to hopefully let people know what New Orleans has been through. I don't think any words or any amount of interviews will be able to let people know what it's been like here, and what it will be like for a while. Come down to New Orleans and see for yourself. That's the best thing that I can ask you to do.

RH: Can I ask you to do a favor?

AB: Sure.

RH: Do not read Harry Potter during hurricane season. [laughter]

AB: Right.

RH: Which book did you read?

AB: I don't even remember the title of it. It was the last book that was out. I don't remember the title of which one it was, they all run together now.

RH: Right. Well, thank you, Allan.

AB: Thank you.

RH: I really appreciate this.

AB: Thanks for the opportunity.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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