Rebecca Mark Transcript

Rosalind Hinton: – Rebecca Mark at Newcomb College Institute in New Orleans, Louisiana. Today is Monday, November 6, 2006. I am conducting the interview for the Katrina's Jewish Voices project of the Jewish Women's Archive and the Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life. Rebecca, do you agree to be interviewed and understand that the interview will be video recorded?

Rebecca Mark: Yes, I do.

RH: Why don't we just begin with how old you are, where you were born, how you got to New Orleans and your Jewish and general education?

RM: I am fifty-one years old. I was born in Alexandria, Virginia. Grew up in the Washington D.C. area my whole life. I went to Stanford. Got a Ph.D. at Stanford. I got my undergraduate degree at Purchase New York at SUNY Purchase. I got very excited about English literature there. Became an English literature Ph.D. at Stanford, and then ended up here. It was actually my second job. I got a job at St. Olaf College in Minnesota, which was a wonderful job. I enjoyed it thoroughly. But I am a Southern Literature specialist, so being in the South was much more exciting for me. The job opened up at Tulane University, and I ended up taking the job down here. My Jewish education is a little different and interesting because my father was Jewish. My father, Albert Mark, was raised Orthodox, and then he himself rejected organized religion, although he was very Jewish culturally. He rejected organized religion as a young man because both of his parents died. There was a lot of grief around that. He was sitting shiva, and he just felt alone in the world and didn't really want to continue. He felt sort of betrayed by religion, I think. Then he wanted to go off into the world, and being Orthodox, he wanted to join the Army. He was just seeing things, and I think he let it go.

He didn't have parents around then. So, he married my mom, who is not Jewish. In many traditions, I would not be considered Jewish. I, then, as an undergraduate, went to SUNY Purchase, and most of the people there were either Jewish or Italian/Catholic. But I felt right at home. It was that whole sense of a sort of New York spirit, and I began to get more interested in my Jewish heritage. Many of my relatives live in New York. I got to know them. I started to really spend time in that heritage. And then, when I moved to Stanford, I just happened to be living in an all-women's house with a woman whose father was a Rabbi. She was very observant, and we were at the feminist stage where we were re-writing the Haggadah and doing all kinds of Passover changes and got very excited about my Judaism in those circumstances. And much more of a women's community. And then, I started to become much more serious [about] practicing my Jewish tradition at that point. So that was when I was – oh, how old was I then? I guess I was about twenty-three, I really saw myself becoming Jewish. Started going to the High Holidays and all that, so a very different experience than most people who are raised Jewish. I didn't have that same experience, although my father spoke Yiddish in the home. So much of what he did was from having been brought up in Orthodox Jewish tradition. He didn't keep kosher, but just his way of being. He looked like he was right off the boat in our mind, and he really was very influenced – and all of my Baltimore relatives were Jewish. We would go to all of the bar mitzvahs and all of the weddings, so I had a lot of experience with Baltimore Jewish life and got to see the synagogue where he was raised. And that was all just part of my tradition – all of my aunts and uncles. Really exciting but a very big contrast with my mom. You go to my mom's house, nobody talked. You go to my dad's house and everybody talked. It was just a completely schizophrenic upbringing. We all used to tease my parents that it was surprising that we weren't schizophrenic because we had this just diametrically different – the house in Connecticut with the Chadwick tradition and barrets, and the whole New England thing. Then we had the Jewish tradition in Baltimore. I always felt more comfortable in the Jewish tradition. And then, as I got older, I really became much more interested. When I

had my son, and that's a whole story in itself, we chose to raise him Jewish. When we chose to raise him Jewish, I thought, if I am going to make this kind of commitment and ask him to be committed in this way, I need to do something. So I was an adult b'nai mitzvah, and that was a very exciting experience for me because I learned Hebrew and was able, then, to follow the prayers, and now when I go to services, I feel like I'm part of what's going on. And I've been going to services now for twenty-five years.

RH: What year was he born?

RM: Ben was born in 1994. He was born here, in New Orleans, so he's a New Orleans boy. We go to Touro Synagogue, and we are very much a part of the Touro Synagogue community, and we are very involved in – I'm very involved in the community of people at the JCC who has a book club. I often, as a professor of American literature, will talk – they'll ask me to do a book. Sandy or somebody will say, “We want to do a book,” and I will review a book for them. So I've gotten to know not only a lot of the older women in the Jewish community but a lot of the Holocaust survivors, also, through doing those book talks. And then that made me feel that many of these people were elderly and were not going to be able to tell their own story, so I've been teaching a course on literature of the Holocaust. In that course, I ask the students to become witnesses to the Holocaust. I'm very interested in the concept of second-generation witnesses, that we have a responsibility, not just to know about the Holocaust, but to know so much about it and with such great detail and with such a direct impact on our – to see the visual images, to have been to the museums, to see the movies, to talk to Holocaust survivors, so that it's a visceral feeling for us, and so that when we tell about it, we can tell about it in detail. I ask my students who are in that class to approach their study of the Holocaust in that way. They have been very committed to it. I can only teach it once every two or three years because it's a course that has a lot of emotional impact for me. So, that's what I've been doing. I feel that depth of understanding of Judaism has been very important to me. We have relatives who are Holocaust survivors. My cousin, my father's first cousin's

husband, Dick Seinfeld, just finished writing a book, and his book is coming out. He is a Holocaust survivor. Another cousin, (Ferny?), her husband was a Holocaust survivor. I've been very close to them. I've heard their stories. We've talked a lot. Most of my father's family came after the pogroms, so they came with the Russian Jewish immigration and came over here then. My father has a wonderful story of his sisters which – I mean of his aunts. His grandfather had five daughters. He was a wealthy man in Russia, but he was watching the pogroms really taking away his livelihood. He told the girls that they needed to go to America to be educated. He sent all five of his daughters to America to be educated. Well, you know what happened when they got here. Certainly, it was not education. They came here, and they worked in textile factories. They had nothing. They eventually got married and did fairly well for themselves, but it was a very rough time. The eldest sister did not come. He was so embarrassed sending the eldest sister to America without her having the proper gowns to meet her sisters in America that he sent her to Paris first, and she bought Paris gowns, then came to Baltimore to visit her sisters who were living in a ghetto in Baltimore.

RH: Wow.

RM: And they would put on the gowns. Each of them would wear a different gown so their father would never know how poor they were. I have a lot of stories. I am named Rebecca for Rebecca [inaudible] Mark, who is my grandmother who I never met. She had died before. I have a lot of stories. My life has been full of those stories.

RH: Well, let's move into another story and talk about Katrina. If you could just begin at the beginning, which is when did you start to worry about Katrina?

RM: Friday was a very busy day for me. It was the beginning of school for my son that week. I had been getting all that ready and getting him off to school and doing that. He had been in school, I guess, a week or something, but it was a lot of that preparation. School was going to start for me. I had a lot of reading to do to get classes ready. I was

doing my syllabi. So I was not thinking about the National Hurricane Prediction Center or anything – and I always looked at it. I'm usually glued to that screen, and I wasn't even thinking about it. I went to swim team practice with Ben over at the UNO, and my friend, Susan, said to me at about seven o'clock, “What are you going to do about the storm?” And I said, “What storm?” She said, “There's a storm in the Gulf.” And I said, “Oh, there can't be.” I had been one of the few people who evacuated for the storm prior to that. I don't remember what the name of it was, but it was something in late June or early July, so I was so done with evacuations. I was like, “I am not going.” And I told her that. I said, “I am not going.” And she said, “You better check it out. It looks pretty big.?” And I said, “It's not going to come here. I am not going.” This is a person who evacuates for anything. I evacuate. They mention a storm, and I evacuated. So I got home. I called Mark, and it's important to know that I'm co-parenting with Mark Townsend and Jeff Lockman, so we've had a different kind of family all along. Ben is Mark and Jeff and my son. We are a gay family. We've always co-parented since the day he was born. We chose to have him. So, I called Mark, who's usually like, “Oh, don't worry about it.” He's lived here much longer. He grew up in Baton Rouge part of the time. I call him, and he says, “We have to worry about this one.” So, that was about nine o'clock Friday night. He said, “Look, get everything ready. Get yourself ready to go, and we’ll check when Mayor Nagin comes on at nine o'clock Saturday morning to decide whether we're going.” Well, I just went into automatic pilot. I got everything ready. Packed the bags. Put the gas in the car. Got the money. Did the whole thing Friday night. Saturday morning, got up and thought, “Well, we're not really probably going to go.” Then I looked at the storm, and I thought, “We probably are going to go.” And Mark called at nine o'clock after we heard Mayor Nagin, and we said, “We're leaving.” We decided to go to Perdido Key, Florida, which is in the opposite direction of where everybody else was going because Mark and Jeff had a condo there. So we were going to go to the condo. And this was a big – we thought, “Is this crazy or what?” But we thought, “Once we're there, we can evacuate anywhere. We can go north wherever we want. We're early enough. We’ll go

there." The strangest thing was that Jeff had gone to the condo the week before to furnish it. It had never been furnished. They had just bought it. Hadn't been furnished. So he's down there with an interior designer. Only gay people have an interior designer when they evacuate. He's there with an interior designer who's helping him put the furniture together. He decides to come back Friday night. He comes back Friday night and helped Mark get the house all done with the interior designer because she can't get out by now. She can't get a flight out. I don't know why she couldn't get a flight out Friday night, but I don't think she could for some reason. Or her flight didn't go until the next day. I don't know. So, anyway, Ben and I get ready. Saturday morning, we leave. It's just totally out of character because the guys usually take forever to get ready. It usually takes us forever to leave. But I think they wanted to get back down to the condo to put the furniture together and get everything kind of set up there. So they were willing to leave. We left at nine o'clock, and I remember on Freret Street, passing Freret Street, and seeing all the kids emptying all of their stuff into their dorm rooms, the freshmen, and thinking, "Oh no. Hasn't anybody told them they shouldn't be doing this? This is a real evacuation." So I was very concerned about the freshmen students at Tulane. I remember that. I got back home. We were ready to leave. I said to Ben, "I'm not taking the cats. I can't do it." Three cats and a very geriatric dog who was about to die of heart disease. And I just thought, "Sadie alone, she's got all of the pills. We have to make her food in order for her to eat." I thought there was no way I can make it with the cats, too. I can do the dog, but that's it. I tell Ben we're not taking the cats. And he just looked at me, and he was just so clear, and he said, "Mom, you're taking the cats." Thank God. I said, "I'm not leaving." He said, "You're leaving. You're taking the cats." I did not bring anything. I brought clothes for a weekend. Little shorts. A little top. Clothes for the weekend. I had nothing with me. I had no computer. I didn't take the two books that I'm working on. I had no backup disks. None of the pictures of Ben growing up. None of all of my videos – I didn't have the videos from the Unsettling Memories Conference – nothing precious. Maya's quilt. Nothing. We just walked out the door with the cats, dog,

and Ben. I had all of the important things. Then we rode down to Perdido Key to put furniture together for hours and hours, and I was the one who had to do it with the little screwdriver. Try not to think about the storm. Put the furniture together. Try not to think about the storm. Put the furniture together. Did that all day. Made a home for Ben there for Saturday night. I thought we'd leave Sunday. Sunday, Jeff says, we're going to have to evacuate. So they evacuated Perdido Key, which is a long way from New Orleans. The wind was already blowing. We could already feel the storm. We had to get out of there. We had to take all three cars again, so they wouldn't flood, and we evacuated to Dothan, Alabama. This is an interesting Jewish moment. We get to Dothan, Alabama. For no good reason whatsoever, we're in Dothan, Alabama.

RH: This is north of Perdido.

RM: It was on the map. We only had a map that only had a few cities. Our map didn't have all of Alabama, and we didn't think of buying one, so we just went like this, and we said, “Dothan.” We get to Dothan, and everybody from New Orleans – people from around the street are in the Hampton Inn in Dothan. What? Then I call my mom, and I say, “Mom, we're in the Hampton Inn in Dothan.” She says, “What? Your cousin lives there.” I said, “There's no way.” My dad's first cousin, his dad's brother's daughter, lives in Dothan, Alabama. She's the same age as my dad, like eighty-six. Her father was a rabbi in New Orleans, and he helped start Anshe Sfard. It's just bizarre. And that is the moment – I must say, at that moment, I felt like I was part of a Diaspora. Because I had done all of the work on the Holocaust and because I had come to my Jewish identity so consciously, I suddenly felt, right there at that moment, what it was like to be completely displaced. That was the moment when it just hit, and from that moment on, I was conscious. I am a writer. I've written a lot, a lot, a lot of poetry before, but I had never sort of come out as a poet because I had always been a literary critic and a teacher. I had done a lot of my poetry in Los Angeles, and I taught a poetry workshop in Los Angeles, but not in New Orleans so much. And that moment, it was just hitting me; I

have to write. But I didn't write because I was too in shock. Tuesday, the levees broke, and so it was just an enormous amount of grief. Mark has been saying – he'd been joking, “What if this is the one when the levees break?” I was like, “Mark, it's not going to happen.” I was exhausted by that time because I have arthritis, to begin with, and I'm very challenged with a chronic illness. By then, I'd been carting cats and litter boxes and dogs with arthritis and heart disease and keeping Ben calm, and I was exhausted. And then, when the levees broke, it was horrible because all of the people around us were from St. Bernard and the Ninth Ward in the Hampton Inn. They're calling on the telephone, just like, “I can't get my grandmother. I left her in the house. I can't get her.” It was very, very frightening. We felt very lucky because we had everybody we cared about with us. But all of our friends, we didn't know who had gotten out, who hadn't gotten out, where they were. We started calling – what everybody did, but the cell phones didn't work, and we couldn't get anybody, so it was very frustrating. Family members were panicked, and then I must say that the Jewish women in my life, the really close Jewish women in my life, were the ones who were most worried. These are a friend [inaudible] who is from LA, and she's the daughter of a Holocaust survivor. Both of her parents are Holocaust survivors. And then my friend Emilie Conrad Daoud and my friend Harriet had all had been just absolutely panicked because they could not look at the convention [center]. They were all watching the convention center. Even though they knew I wasn't there, I was there in their minds. They were just terrified of the whole thing. They called me a lot, and they were enormous support because they were just emotionally present from the moment it happened. I do think it has to be due to the Jewish experience of being diasporic people who are driven from one place to another. I went to the JCC presentation on the Holocaust and Katrina, and people don't like us to make the comparison. It’s not a comparison of what happened. It's not that people died in the same way they did in the Holocaust, or that it was as horrific, or if there was the fear, but it was the displacement, the enormous displacement of the people. And then, for me, the racism, too, surrounding what happened to people in the Superdome and the

Convention Center. I literally couldn't stand it. I was watching it, and it was like, for me, it was watching a kind of Holocaust. A kind of abandonment of the people to let them be in that situation. And of New Orleans, too. I felt it was a – the mean-spiritedness, the crime against humanity, of letting people starve and having nothing to drink. The rage in me and the sadness was enormous. I was just overcome. And trying to hold this whole family situation together. And then we were – we went back to Perdido Key, and we were in the parking lot, and Mark and Ben and I are all trying – you have to load up the car, and it was dog food and kitty litter. It was just very, very hard to do. We're loading up the car, and this woman comes up to Mark. I didn't see it. He saw it. She comes up to Mark, and she says, “Young man, young man, I would love to help you out. I would love to take in a refugee family and put them up in my house. I have a big house. But I want a nice, Christian family. I don't want any of those gay people. Those homosexuals.” She said, “I don't want any of those homosexuals.” I thought, “Okay, even in the midst of this, there is going to be prejudice of this kind.” I mean, what kind of insanity is that? So Mark just turned. He was great. He said, “I'm a homosexual man, so it's not us that you want. We're not the nice family that you want.” But we were just horrified about that.

RH: That happened in Perdido, or that happened in Dothan?

RM: That happened still in Dothan.

RH: In Dothan.

RM: As we were leaving Dothan.

RH: In Dothan.

RM: I think that things are circling back. I'm telling it circularly, but I think the way you lived it was circular, too. It was just a sense of being – and Bess (Carrick?), the cousin in Dothan, had us to dinner. She told me all about her father, who I had not known was a

Rabbi in New Orleans, and we saw their blueberry farm. Her husband had made a blueberry farm, and he had an airport strip. We sort of felt like we were in some very odd movie. Mark kept saying, “We will wake up. We will wake up.” It was very strange. But the thing that was wonderful for me was that we all stayed together. I thought that if any moment, I would have had to have been separated from Ben or separated from Jeff and Mark, I would have fallen apart. But the fact that we were all together just helped so much, and I know so many families weren't together. That was the hardest thing watching the news. So when we got back to Perdido Key, we really knew we were staying there for a while. But we didn't know what to do. Mark is a psychiatrist, and he's an LSU psychiatrist, so he was being called back to work immediately. Emergency. Get back to work. But there was no Charity Hospital. There was no Psychiatry Department. So people were piecing it together out of their homes and out of just – they were talking about faculty living in FEMA trailers, living with their parents, living on the boat. So he had no idea what was happening. But he wanted the whole family to go to Baton Rouge. But by the time, just that little delay, us driving to Dothan and driving back from Dothan and getting to Perdido Key, everyone had rented everything in Baton Rouge. The schools – we applied for Ben to go to Episcopal – didn't get in. I mean, he got in, but we would have had to pay the full amount. Mark was an Episcopal graduate. So we had all of this – trying to set up a home in Baton Rouge. We even tried to buy a home in Baton Rouge. This is the middle-class evacuation. Nothing. Nothing. We couldn't get anything. We kept trying to make that work, and it wasn't working. Even though we knew Mark had to be there, and we had done so well staying together, finally, we had to just make a decision to move to Alexandria, Virginia, where my family was. My mom had worked very hard to get him into this wonderful school that all of my friends had gone to, Burgundy Farm Country Day in Virginia, and they let him in – free tuition, free everything. At that point, the doors just opened in Alexandria, Virginia. They did not open in Baton Rouge. We ended up going to Alexandria, Virginia.

RH: So, you split up.

RM: We split up. And that was a moment – a real crisis moment. It was very hard for Jeff. It was very hard for me. It was very hard for Ben because he was going to be away from his daddy, and we were going to have to do flights back and forth. Jeff had been walking in the waters of the Gulf. By then, all of the debris was coming in from Pass Christian and Bay St. Louis and everything. Ben and I had been swimming there, and we hadn't even thought about it. But Jeff had a little cut on his leg, and he ended up getting blood poisoning. So he was in the hospital in Perdido Key, so we were doing – Ben was in a little school, Creative Learning Academy in Perdido Key, which was absolutely wonderful to us. They were so sweet to us. We would drive miles from Perdido Key all the way up to Pensacola to get Ben into school, and then we would have to drive back in the afternoon to visit Daddy in Foley in the hospital. So sometimes I was driving a hundred and fifty miles a day. It was a constant – trying to make Pensacola work. Pensacola did not work for us. We had no friends. No family. And I was just on the road, and Mark was in Baton Rouge. And Jeff was sick in the hospital. So a lot of it was falling on my shoulders. That's where I wrote my first Katrina poems. At a – what was it? – a car wash on the back of a napkin, I wrote the first Katrina poem. These sounds kept coming to me. Like whack, smack, back, Katrina, back, smack – and all of the sounds were just these cracking, cracking sounds. I wrote a Katrina poem, and it was very angry because already people in the media had said, “We'll build New Orleans back. We'll bring it back stronger. We'll build it back better.” I just said, “How are you going to do that? You don't even know what New Orleans is.” So I wrote my first poems there. I got on the phone to (Hannah?), who is the Holocaust survivor, and I said, “(Hannah?), I just wrote a poem,” and I read it to her, and she just – I mean, it was like fire. It was just this part of her that had been through the Holocaust because she was actually – her parents conceived and bore right after the Holocaust. She was still in post-Holocaust Europe when she was born. It just came through. She said, “You are a poet. You were there in a historical moment. You have to write. You have a responsibility.” And it wasn't a sense of, “Won’t this be nice for you, or you can make it as a poet. There was none of

that. It was, “You have a responsibility.” It was like what I had heard in the Holocaust stories of the woman who was falling to the ground, and her mother said, “You will get up. You will get up. And you will live to tell this story.” Then the designated survivors from the Holocaust, whose whole village made them survive against the most horrible odds so that they could tell the story. (Hannah?) was just that kind of fire, and she said, “You will write, and you have to write, and the poet's voice has to be there because that's the voice that needs to be heard.” And when she did that, I really heard it. I heard it so much. The whole thing of me that would do my poetry and would be sort of a dilettante about it ended. From that moment on, I wrote every day. I wrote all of the time when we got to Alexandria, Virginia. I wrote constantly. The poems were just coming out of me in response to the whole situation. So my story is really from the evacuation on through all that went on in New Orleans, all of our trying to rebuild and insurance and the whole thing. It’s an ordinary story in a lot of ways. I mean, except for the fact that we're gay, and we had to negotiate that whole thing. Jeff being in the hospital was not great. But it is very ordinary. It's not like some people who had a thousand catastrophes. We did not have a thousand catastrophes. We did very well. We had a very nice life in Virginia. I got to spend the last – I spent six months with my father, who died this August.

RH: Oh, really?

RM: So, he died, and I would have never had that six months if it were not for Katrina. So there was a lot of – and Ben had the most wonderful school. He loved it. He had a good experience. He went to Beth El Synagogue there and learned his Hebrew. Had a wonderful cantor. The Jews in that community were amazing. The Jewish Federation got paid for our rental. Beth El Synagogue – [phone rings]

RH: You need that?

RM: I'll get it.

[Recording paused.]

RH: Tell me about the Jewish community in Alexandria and your connection.

RM: The Jewish community was really amazing in Alexandria. One of the things that happened that was really an important deciding factor in us moving to Alexandria was that my friend (Karen Remer?) ended up in Silver Spring. So Ben and (Amos?) are good friends, and I wanted Ben to be near at least one of his good friends, one of his best friends. (Karen?) told me about the Jewish Federation. They ended up paying our rent at the house we were staying in, and Jeff and I, who have never lived together, Jeff and I and Ben lived together in Holland Hills right on Rebecca Drive, right near where my parents lived, in the same community where I grew up. So that was kind of miraculous that that happened. Then we joined Beth El Synagogue, which is the synagogue that all of my friends went to growing up. So Ben lived the Jewish life that I did not live growing up, which was very strange. He was only a year away from bar mitzvah. The cantor there – we became very good friends with the cantor, and she ended up singing to my dad as he was dying, singing Yiddish songs. It was so beautiful. And I just think about that. It was just amazing. And we would never have had that. We would have never known her. And then she did the service at my dad's burial just a few weeks ago. So lots of nice connections. They completely furnished our house. Beth El Synagogue completely furnished our house – everything. I mean, we're talking about forks, knives, linens, beds, everything. Just from people donating. People gave us beautiful things, like breadboards for Shabbos. Just amazing stuff. So I have such respect for our community's ability to recognize an emergency and do something about it. My friend, who is a very good friend of mine said she was going to be Jewish next time because the Jews got it together a little better. So I thought that was a good thing.

RH: Did you go to Rosh Hashanah up there? The High Holidays?

RM: Yes, I did. That was very hard for me. It's an exercise in living in the moment because going to Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur down here was so important to me. I would go there, and I would know everybody, and it was Touro Synagogue, and I'd been there for years. I went to Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashanah services up there, and I was like, “I don't know anybody. What am I doing here?” It was really hard. And then I said, “You lived here as a child. Look up. Look up.” I remember saying to myself, “Just look up, and you'll know somebody.” So I raised my head up, which is what we were all trying to do, sort of pick our head up off the ground, and I raised my head up, and there is (Becky Rosenfeld’s?) mother, and I am just – Barbara (Rosenfeld?). (Stephen?) and Barbara were the parents when I was a girl that I helped babysit for. She was in my children's theater company. We know each other very, very well. I was a major mentor in her life. There were her parents. I got to see them, and we went to lunch together later. There was the counselor at the school where I grew up. And there was my mom's therapist. There were all kinds of people when I just looked up. So that was a wonderful Yom Kippur. And I went back – my dad's funeral was Yom Kippur this year, so I went to Beth El for Yom Kippur services again. So it was really a diaspora. There is a place where you can go, and you can hear the same prayers, and you can be part of a community. People were extremely nice to Ben. He made friends in his religious school. Our only problem was we would have liked to stay longer. You become friends, and then you have to leave again. That was hard. Coming back was a whole different story. It was kind of wrenching in itself.

RH: How long were you up there?

RM: I was there October, November, December. And then I came back. I came back twice. I came back three times. I came back in October for the first look. October 1. My house had been flooded four feet but in the basement. It was a crazy story because everything that I had owned as a child had been sent to me in the basement and was sitting there. Because my mom had just sent it a few weeks before Katrina, and I just

hadn't moved it upstairs yet. We had packing crate peanuts, and my childhood pictures and poems I'd written as a child and pictures that Ben had made, and everything got lost. So all of the really – in some ways, the most important stuff got lost. I didn't lose any furniture. The upstairs was fine. The kitchen was fine. Everything was fine. I think that this album of my dad – my dad was not very rich growing up, so he had one photo album, and I had taken it right before the storm. I told my mom, I'll get it re-made and made really nice, and we lost all of the pictures of his family.

RH: Oh my God.

RM: These are things I can't even think about. I mean, you just move on. My brother and I went through everything. We gutted the house immediately, and we had the whole thing – I knew I was going to be asked to come back to work to be a professor January 1st, and I couldn't bear living in a FEMA trailer, so I got online and looked up mold remediation people on September 23rd. September 23rd. Who did that? I was neurotic. I found this company – Environtech Mold Remediation. It was a national company. I called them, and I said, “Are you doing any [mold]?” They said, “Oh, yeah, we're going down to New Orleans next week.” So I was the first one to have air conditioning, the first one to have mold remediation, the first one – I just got it done. It was done. It wasn't very hard because it was a basement, so it wasn't like other people had.

RH: So you didn't wait for your insurance or anything?

RM: No. What I did was I put it on credit cards. I took out a loan. I just paid upfront. Which most people couldn't have done. I borrowed some money from my mom. I paid on credit cards. I think I owed fifty thousand dollars in debts before the insurance came. Then the insurance guy came right away too. I just happened to have a good insurance – so I'm a bad – I mean, people hear this story, and they're just like, “Ew, this is not what happened to me.” The guy came on October 3rd because he hadn't gotten any calls yet, so he came. The air conditioner people came because they hadn't gotten any calls yet.

So, that's why. Traveler's Insurance was just better. It is a Minnesota-based company. Who knows? I don't know why. Thank you. Thank you flood insurance kicked in.

RH: So you had flood insurance.

RM: I had good flood insurance. I was very paranoid about it, so I got flood insurance. I got everything done. That was not the hard part. The hard part was I didn't know – (Anne?), a woman who worked for me, I had no idea where she was.

RH: So she was the housekeeper?

RM: She was the housekeeper and a friend of mine for twelve years. That was really hard. I didn't know whether she was alive or dead. I talked to her on Friday, but she hadn't promised me she was leaving. She wasn't in my house. She usually came over to my house during the storm. She wasn't there. I didn't know what had happened to her. I didn't know until March. I got a call from her finally. She had been trying to get through, but the phone lines had been down. She just figured I wasn't there. Since, we talk a lot. I've written a whole piece on her. She's in San Antonio, and I help her out. She's had a rough, rough time. That was tough.

RH: Does she want to come back?

RM: No. She's terrified. She was in the storm. She did a great – their community was amazing. They were on Carrollton and Earhart, I think, is the cross street, where the Shell Station is. They set up shop, and they had the old people, the kids, and the people with guns, as she calls them, and they got their food from Popeye's, and they went into Walgreens. They took care of the necessities, and they were very well taken care of. She said it was neat as a pin, clean as somebody's house. They cooked on the – they got – I'm losing my words but the –

RH: Kind of a grill?

RM: Grills. They got grills from people's houses. They grilled everything. They got chicken from Popeye's. They got tomatoes. She said, my job was the tomatoes and lettuce. Once (Anne?) was back, I knew where (Anne?) was, I was better. But up until then, it was very, very hard. Then lots of my friends went through – I lost – the last time I counted – forty-four members of my community. Ben lost lots of friends. Twenty-five percent of his class. Not dying – just moving. Some of those people I haven't talked to. Almost everyone I've talked to, but they just don't live here. Lots of professors left. I think a lot more professors will leave, and it's been a really – I walk past. "That's where Deb lived. That's where Cornelia lived. That's where …". And then two of my close Ben/mommy friends lost everything. Ten-feet over the house. Most of the people I know lost everything. It's more rare that they didn't lose everything than that they did. It's just the people, the Sliver by the River people, who didn't. Then everybody else. Lots of lesbians live in Lakeview. Lots of them lost their homes. People I've known well for many, many years and spent a lot of time in their house lost everything. So for me, it's been – and I was very involved in the grassroots African American education community here. So, a lot of those people that I knew from that lost everything. Ninth Ward was terrifying to me because I had taught at Douglass, and those kids – I don't know what happened to half of them. I don't know where they are.

RH: You still don't know?

RM: I still don't know. Yeah. They were much closer to Jim Randall and (Kalamu?) than to myself, obviously. I just taught there one semester. They didn't know me well at all. Jim said he's relocated most of them. Jim and (Kalamu?) have done a great job keeping track of them, keeping the programs at the center going. A lot of them are at McMain. Most did okay, but a lot of people did not do okay. A lot of people lost a lot of family members. Died.

RH: So, how does that make you feel? What do you think of the city, state, and government response?

RM: I am appalled. I am so appalled. I am enraged. A poem I'm writing now, right now – because you wait. You think, “Okay, well, it takes some time. The Road Home money will come.” And now I think it's just crimes against humanity. I think they should be – I think we should have a tribunal. I think somebody wants this – the conversation I had the other night was somebody wants this city to die, and we don't know why. We do not know why they want this city to die. We cannot figure out any good reason why they want this city to die.

RH: What makes you feel that way?

RM: Because nothing is being done. Even the simplest things that – so many people have done so much, so you don't want to say that because so many people have worked so hard. My friends turned out to be the pioneers. They've rebuilt their houses. They've rebuilt their houses when there is nothing around them but that one house, and they've rebuilt their house. But we can't pick up the streetlamps on St. Charles or something as seemingly as simple as that hasn't been done. The schools – that's the travesty. The public school system – that's the core of a city – has been left to the state-run schools. They are nightmares. You should talk to the teachers working at Lafayette School, or to charter schools, which are equally a nightmare. They have been cleaned properly. Many of them, there is still mold in the basement. They don't have the resources. The teachers aren't being paid regularly. It's such a disaster. It is such a disaster. We're hearing it from a lot of the people in the community. We have everything from very wealthy women to very poor women who have been cleaning up and putting this city back together. People are doing everything, whether it's the levee group, the Katrina crew, the Lakeview Homeowner's Association, or the People's Hurricane Defense League. I mean, all of these groups have been doing an enormous amount, but we don't

have a government. I don't see a government. I don't see any government doing anything, either national or local. A little bit of state, but just a little bit. When you look at the statistics of who has gotten the Road Home money, I can't even believe it. Then the levees are a disaster. We had to teach a book on – we had to teach articles on Katrina when I got back to being professor in January. I read all of those reports on levees, and there were over a hundred breaks in the levees. Small ones. We need a complete new levee system if we're going to live here. I have a lot of pessimism now. I'm very discouraged. I have enormous pride and confidence in the people here, in all of the people. They let us live together as a group, and I think we can break through some of our racism. I do. But I don't see it through the government –

RH: So you attribute a lot of the government problems to racism?

RM: I don't know what it is. I don't know why the federal government responded in the way they did. I have a lot of conspiracy theories why I think they might have, but I don't know why they did. I do think the initial response was racism and anti-poverty classism. Terrible classism. And terrible – "Those poor Black people. They live like that anyway. Just put them on a bus." No sense of what that meant. As a Jewish person, to see that happening in 2005, I mean, I don't think that it was – I think those people, many of them, had experienced that kind of hatred and that kind of awfulness before, and their school systems were not good before Katrina. They were terrible. I had taught in them. The neglect was awful. Why would there not be an interest in making this one of the great cities of the world? I think they don't have the value – they don't value the culture that New Orleans represents. The federal government does not value that. It doesn't value –

RH: What do you attribute that to?

RM: I attribute it to ignorance. I attribute it to lack of imagination, lack of caring for the things of the imagination. What New Orleans has to offer is this absolute outpouring of root culture. An unbelievable root culture. The music alone – the music alone should be

– national preservation trusts should be keeping the music alone. Then you talk about the Mardi Gras Indians, the Second Lining, all of the culture, Creole culture has an amazing outpouring here. To let that just die, not care about that, I find that – as I said, there are organizations that are doing that, but I don't see that coming from the government at all.

RH: And you think that's the responsibility of the government?

RM: I do. I do. When we're talking about the level of catastrophe that's occurred here, we need governmental input. We can't do it all on our own. We just can't. When I read these poems, and I've read them in LA, and I'm going up to Memphis, and I've read them here, people can't believe – my mom couldn't believe it. She's watched everything. She couldn't believe the city looked like it did. She just kept going, “Oh my God, oh my God,” and that was seven months after the storm. She couldn't believe it. I came down here December 1st for the People's Hurricane Defense Fund March, and I marched with people from Jackson and here into a pretty deserted city, and I gave a speech at that. One of the African American women who had lost her house, her son had died in Iraq in early August, and then she lost her house in the Ninth Ward in late August. She got up and said – and I'm not willing to say this because I don't have any proof, but she said, “There's oil under here. There's oil under here.” She just kept saying that. “There's oil under here.” When I tell people that, [they say], “Oh, that's crazy. That's crazy.” And I'm like, “Well, there is oil under here. There is oil under here because there is oil everywhere in the Gulf.”

RH: So, the sense of a land grab? The sense that people clear the land and let –

RM: I don't know. I don't think developers are going to come in here. I don't know. Maybe they will. They come to the Florida coast even though – I don't really know the reason. I know that I'm looking at a historical moment when what is going on – I'd love to see somebody do the figures – if FEMA, every one of those trailers, the thousands up in

Hattiesburg – and I've been up and seen those trailers in Hattiesburg. The thousands of trailers in Arkansas that couldn't be used that were made for Katrina and are just sitting out there – how much did each one of those cost? What if we had given the 250,000 people who want to come home and make themselves whole –? Just giving them the money to do that probably would have been less than all of those trailers. I would love to see the mathematical statistics on that. You can call it a complete and utter boggling stupidity, or it's some sort of plan. I have no idea. I wouldn't begin to say. For me, it's been very, very hard to watch.

RH: Tell me what you've been involved in since you've been back.

RM: Well, the two things that have been most pressing to me – one is that I've been writing the poetry and getting the poetry out, and that's been part of it. I've been a professor. I came back to be a professor. Getting my son back situated in his school. You've got to remember, everybody with a child has watched them go through major changes and shifts, and it's been a big deal. I was lucky enough to be wealthy – I'm not wealthy myself, but Ben's parents all together are – and to be able to put him back in a private school that had completely come back together beautifully.

RH: So where is he in school?

RM: Country Day School has done a fabulous job. They had the money to do it. Get Ben back in school. And then in April, I was called by the provost to – I thought I was being called by the provost because I'd been active in all of these groups around town. I was called by the provost to be interim Executive Director of the Newcomb College Institute. Just at Tulane alone, it's important to remember that many graduate programs, including the English graduate program that I was involved in, the Deep South Regional Humanities Center that I was involved in, many other graduate programs, the engineering school, and then Newcomb College were phased out after Katrina. All of the endowment of Newcomb College went into the Newcomb College Institute. I was asked

to serve as interim Executive Director of the Institute. I had a lot of mixed feelings because I am very attached to Newcomb College. I've done a lot of work with Newcomb College. I didn't see it as a choice, like, we're going to get Newcomb College back. Some people feel that we could get Newcomb College back. I feel that right now, the endowment is at the Newcomb College Institute, and I would like to see girls right now, women at Tulane, freshmen, get the benefits of that endowment, the programs, the leadership programs, the enhancement of education, the fellowship, the grants, all of the things that that endowment gives right now, so that's why I chose to do it. It's a very political situation. Many Newcomb alumni are extremely upset by the closing of Newcomb. Newcomb is an old tradition in New Orleans. It's a fantastic tradition. It went back to 1886, when many women were not being educated in colleges. One of the first co-coordinate – it is the first co-coordinate women's college in the country. Co-coordinate means that there is a men's college and a women's college together. The first one had a wonderful tradition of Newcomb pottery, which is just beautiful pottery that came out of the southern tradition. The women did not make the pots, but they painted them. There are incredible designs on the pots.

RH: Is that one of them?

RM: This is actually a replica. I couldn't possibly have one. It does look somewhat like this, but the colors are much nicer on the real pottery. The greens are deeper, and the blues are deeper. But this is a replica of one of them. But that kind of design is very much – so I've been doing that, April, May, June – I'm still a professor until June, but April, May, June, I was doing both jobs at once. Many people are doing this. Three or four jobs. Plus, you're doing the insurance. Plus, you're still fixing up your house. All of the plumbing in my house went down in April because of the storm, but it was not seen at first, so I was dealing with that. All of my staff members either lost their houses or their jobs with all of Newcomb College changing. So major, major big deals. Friends who didn't have jobs who didn't come back. So that's what I have been doing, and we have

decided to see it as – we're going to go ahead. We're going to just do this, and we're going to have a wonderful year for women students here. So we're doing programming. Ila Berman – you're probably interviewing her. Are you interviewing her? You should be interviewing Isa. Ila Berman is a Jewish woman, who is the Assistant Dean of the architecture school, and she is giving a talk tomorrow night on rebuilding New Orleans. She has been very involved in the build and design program. We've got a Newcomb Neighbors program that's involved in rebuilding New Orleans. We've got the alumni who are trying to find projects that they're going to do. We've got speakers – we've got Bernice Johnson Reagon coming in from Sweet Honey and the Rock to do community building. The Hurricane Hunter, Robbie Hood, is coming to speak. So we're just taking it as an opportunity to do as much programming as possible, help the students through this transition as much as possible, and really see women as the leaders. We just honored, I don't know if it was eight or nine women who are alumni of Newcomb who are majorly involved in rebuilding projects. So a lot of activity. It's very exciting.

RH: Do you feel positive about the Newcomb Institute?

RM: I feel very positive. I needed to be involved in a positive project, or else I would have been really sad. I'm taking it as a positive project. Some days I think the levees are going to break. What am I doing? Some days I think, “Get out of here as soon as possible. Some days I think, stay until the next storm comes and then forget it. Then you'll know.” Sometimes I think I can't live with how much community I've lost. I don't know.

RH: Were you part of the visioning of this new institute?

RM: Absolutely. The vision came from a task force, and they gave us rules to follow, but how it's going to be created has been my job.

RH: And the task force was made up of?

RM: The task force was made up of alumni, staff members, students, professors, administration, and me.

RH: You felt like it was a pretty representative community?

RM: It was a representative committee. It was a very Newcomb-friendly committee. People wanted to keep Newcomb intact, and they did. They saved the endowment. So we have a lot of plans to move toward the future, but we'll see how – Newcomb is only as strong as Tulane. Tulane is only as strong as the city. The city is only as strong as Tulane. Tulane is only as strong as Newcomb. It goes both ways. Newcomb needs to be here. We cannot lose Newcomb. It has a really central role in the identity of Tulane.

RH: A lot of Jewish women have gone to Newcomb over the years. Do you know the relationship of the Jewish community to Newcomb?

RM: It's a very, very strong relationship. Newcomb has been the home to many Jewish women. Thirty percent of our students here now are Jewish students from the East Coast. Many of our Jewish alumni have helped those students feel comfortable here. We are the school of choice for many East Coast Jewish families. We have a long history of that. I don't know the particular history, but I know that many of the women that I work with at the JCC are Jewish alumni of Newcomb, and they've always played a very strong role in creating the strength of Newcomb and the civic involvement of Newcomb. Newcomb has always been civically involved.

RH: That was my next question.

RM: Yeah.

RH: Newcomb's relationship to the city.

RM: Has always been strong. Not as strong as it could be. I think it could be better. I think we could make much better ties with the African-American community. We've done a lot. We could do a lot more. That's why we started the Newcomb Neighbors Program, and that program will allow students and faculties to submit grants that would be directly for helping the community. We have seven grants submitted for this granting program right now.

RH: Do you know what they look like?

RM: I don't. I just got them in. I don't know. But they look good from what I can see. I'm not entirely sure.

RH: Let's talk a little more about being Jewish in this experience.

[END OF FILE ONE]

RH: Let me mark the tape. This is tape two with Rebecca Mark for Katrina's Jewish Voices, and I asked you to read the first poem that you said you wrote in Perdido.

RM: This is called Part One: Bringing the House Back, September 21, 2005. "They, those big men say they will pour their oil money into this bowl, rebuild, better, stronger, new New Orleans. How do they, those big men, think they can rebuild the house back. Snake house. Rack-shumble-sack. Not (fat back?). Shotgun two-time rumble tumble po' boy white slave shame. Spy boy pride. Rot iron-rich. Coffee seething. House back. So slack. This rat-snake-lake. This river-hopping dance. This palmetto breathing, drum beating, Congo square crash. This sole riveted dinosaur amphibian DNA-crushing ooze. Oh, my heart broken watery land. I hear, even so far away, I hear a monster still gnawing, not on water-soaked muffulettas or on sucking up crawdaddy heads. Not on Zatarain's or thick gumbo. But on the rattered, tattered, coiling soul of New Orleans town. So shingle down shanty town. Live wild Tchoupitoulas Child. How do you do, big man? Haliburton hand. Gunslinging cowboy fan. Hollywood. Dollywood. Mickey dick

mouse man. How are you going to bring this house back? I want the house back. Slap. Back. Slatter. Crack. I want my house back. Not my house. The House. The house of the rising sun. New Orleans. Slatter. Crack. Katrina Whack. I want my house back. Rita whoosh and slush. Mold, red, gold, brown, black, blue. I want my house back. Katrina flush. Don't hush. Children crying. She only asked for water. On top of roofs, grandmothers. Ancestors dead in attics. They will haunt us. They want their house back. Creek. Scratch. Roof smash. I want my house back. She cries, 'We don't live like this.' (Slutter fact?). Crash back. Trees slaughtered. Bodies bloated. Stench filling. Never stilling. I want my house back. Slatter. Cracker. White man. Rich man. Taken what was not yours and want more. Slatter. Crack. Slash back. I want my house back."

RH: Well said.

RM: And you had asked me –

RH: I was going to ask you a few questions just about being Jewish and making it through this year. I was wondering if there were any Jewish teachings or concepts that come to your mind or have been present to you.

RM: Well, I think that everything about being Jewish got me through the year. In fact, it was conscious for me. Very conscious. I thought if I weren't Jewish, I'm not sure I would have made it through the year. It was a toughness more than anything. It was a sense of we live in this world now. We're not looking to the hereafter. It was also the concept of – I don't know if it's tefilla. I'm not sure what the name – that's not the right word, but the word being in the present moment, of living in the present moment, and of doing mitzvahs in the present moment. So, at every point that I felt despairing myself, I was always in the moment of the community. In reaching out and also giving to the community. I probably gave away about ten thousand dollars of my insurance money. I'm a middle-class, lower-middle-class person most of the time. This job's been better – but most of the time. That was very important to me to do that. To say, "Where's the

need? Who needs something? What can we do? What can I do right now?" To me, that feels very much like a Jewish teaching. That was where I could be going. Finding out my friends lost five hundred trees at their house. How could I help them? They needed money for insurance to pay their medical insurance. At that moment, send them a check. (Anne?) needed money for food. Send them a check. I gave money to – I wouldn't say that I gave it because my mom did too. But I gave money to students at the center with (Kalamu?) and Jim. A wonderful organization. I gave money to (Charisse?) and [inaudible]. I gave money where it was needed. In the giving, I felt connected to the community. It was on a deeper spiritual level, too, for me. I was watching connections. I felt myself watching connections, and I think this poem might show some of how I felt about that because it wasn't the money so much. It was being part of a historical moment. And also thinking, if my ancestors could go through what they went through, with the pogroms and the Holocaust, I can certainly go through this. I can certainly make it through this. I can help other people who are really suffering. In reading all that I have read about Jewish history, how people came together to help each other – of course, there are moments when we didn't, but there are many, many moments when we did. The most striking thing happened to me right when I came back. It was December, and I'd only been back for a few – it was Hanukkah. Karen is part of the Orthodox community, so we went down to the celebration they always have on Riverwalk with the menorah, and they have a lot of – they serve latkes and – it's a nice celebration.

RH: Some music?

RM: Well, this year they didn't, but they had second lining through the French Quarter. It was amazing to me to watch this mixture of Orthodox tradition and then the second lining. Ben just went wild. He just loved it. He was just dancing and dancing. It was amazing. There was a clarinet player in the Klezmer band who was doing the second lining, and he had been in Austin during the storm. There was an African-American man on the street, and they saw each other. The African-American man was just getting

groceries and walking along, and he said, “Hey, I know you, man.” They knew each other from the music community in Austin. They were both jazz musicians. He was saying, “You sure can play that horn.” And then the Jewish guy said that back to the African-American guy, and there was this unbelievable connection. I was just watching that and thinking in terms of diaspora. All along, I thought in terms of the diaspora. There was one moment in Pensacola when I was making a tuna casserole which turned out to be horrible. But we didn't have much in the house. So, I mixed matzo – I don't know why we had matzo, but we had matzo meal and Zatarain’s. So I mixed matzo meal and Zatarain’s and made the covering for the tuna casserole, and I thought, “This is diaspora casserole if I ever saw it.” This is the poem that I wrote. Remember that I was home with my father in Virginia when I wrote this. He was, by then, almost speaking entirely Yiddish because he had some Alzheimer's. He was still very much with us, but he spoke a lot of Yiddish. “Dance me to the end of love. Aye, yi-yi-yi-yi. Dance me to the end of love. Rocking on the stereo. I sit in my parent's home. Let me see your beauty. It is December. I should be teaching. With a burning violin. Aye, yi-yi-yi-yi. Oy. My father holds the yarn of my mother's worried knitting in his hand. An umbilical cord. Fifty-seven years of love. Dance me through the panic until I'm gathered safely in. Where are you going tonight, Pa asks. To Comedy of Errors at the Shakespeare Theater, I say. Oy, he says. Stay here. We will have a comedy of errors. Aye, yi-yi-yi-yi. Kinehora, kinehora, kinehora. My homeward dove. It is Hanukkah the week we get back. The Orthodox community has a celebration on the river. We dance through the streets led by a klezmer band. The clarinetist is a virtuoso. An old Black man with grocery bags spots him. Hey, man, you were in Austin. I heard you play. The old man with grocery bags says, yeah. You got it, man. You blow that horn. Across diasporas. Second lining Hanukkah through the streets of the French Quarter. December. I'm an old European lady packing and unpacking bags, moving from one house to another, shuffling along gray platforms. Where are we going? Strapping her baby to her body. Not to lose. Not to lose. Not to lose. Not to be sold downriver. Separated. We are

boarding trains. Listening to levee reports. More news. Floating on barges. Huddled around laptops. Jeff, beside me, muttering. Berlin, 1935. Berlin, 1935. (Charisse?) says next time, I am Jewish. Jewish Federation checks come in the mail right away. Fast, so as to beat the terror of suitcases torn open on platforms. Nail this to your doorpost. Take enough to eat. If it can happen, it will happen. Nobody wants you. No one will save you but your own. The levees are never high enough. We don't really live anywhere. Dance me. Dance me to the end of love." So that was the last poem until my dad died, and then I wrote another poem. The last poem, now, is called "The Missing Poem." "I knew that there was a poem missing, a poem I did not want to write. It is your poem, my Papa. It is my goodbye to you. My papa, Albert Mark, died on August 15, 2006, in my brother Andrew's arms, with his Katherine and Rebecca holding, and his Charles on his way, and his Elizabeth Betty holding on. I talked to him every day. There is work to be done, I say. Help me along the way. And he tells me, don't shrink." The writing was very, very helpful. I think because I was writing and so many Jewish themes came up because it's a really long collection, and so much of my father came in, and so much of (Hannah's?) words and so much of so many of my relatives came into the writing that I think it made me conscious of me of how important it was. Karen was in an Orthodox community for the first time, to really be living in an Orthodox community where almost everyone was Orthodox. I got the watch the boys, (Amos?) and (Ezzy?), really enjoying that. And visit them. Because we were right near them. It just made me proud of them taking – they took Karen and the boys in. And Gary. It was a very different experience. It was just a different experience. And I think if I hadn't had that, I would have had a much tougher time emotionally. For me, it hasn't stopped. Katrina. With Newcomb College Institute, it's a daily reminder, and then, with my father dying, it's sort of been – and I think that's true for everybody. I think that we're still right in the storm, most of us. I don't think it's something that we're over or gotten beyond or anything. We have normal days, and we can pretend. We can go out to the nice restaurants and everything, but I think there's that lingering fear of getting through the hurricane season.

We're almost through it. Has helped. But I think it's still very much present. I hold the Corps of Engineers, the federal government, our mayor accountable. And I'll keep looking.

RH: Tell me, what do you feel about the Jewish community here? Do you feel a need to help them rebuild?

RM: I do. In individual cases, I've watched closely as people have been coming back together, and many of my friends, some have had a rough time, a very rough time, many of my Jewish friends, but some, it's – they've had enough money. They've had insurance. They've really gotten back up and running. I think for the Holocaust survivors and the daughters and sons of Holocaust survivors, there is an uneasiness that will – that has now been re-traumatizing. I don't think it's going to be easy to get over that. I don't know anybody, specifically in the Jewish community, who is in a FEMA trailer without a house. But just because I don't know them doesn't mean they're not there. I think the community itself – I feel an enormous amount of sadness about Beth El Synagogue and getting that back together. And the Jewish Day School. I've followed that very closely because (Ezzy?) and (Amos?) went to school there. And (Amos?) can no longer go to school there. He goes to Lusher. He's doing a great job at the Lusher Middle School, but he lost his school. It was of great importance. He's the only Orthodox kid in his class. It's a much rougher thing for him to do. I look at Anshe Sfard now, and I was just there yesterday, and I want to give – I'd like to raise money to keep Anshe Sfard going. It's a synagogue from the 1920s that was the heart of the Jewish community in that area near the Lower Garden. Beyond that –

RH: Yeah, Dryads neighborhood.

RM: Dryads neighborhood.

RH: Central City.

RM: Central City. I would love to see it – and it's falling apart. It needs a minyan in order to keep it going – in order to keep having services, and it's hard to make a minyan after –

RH: What would you like to see in the Jewish community as they rebuild?

RM: I would like to see two things. One, I'd like us to be very – I'd like to just undo racism everywhere in this city. Where it still exists in the Jewish community, I'd like us to be leaders in rebuilding and reaching out to neighbors where we can, where there's wealth. I'd like to see in our community that there is a Jewish Day School that kids can go to all the way up to twelfth Grade. Not eighth Grade but twelfth Grade. So that the Orthodox kids can stay here. I'd like to see, for the Reform kids, that they have – Touro has really come back, and it's really doing almost what it did before, but it's still hard. You know, things are smaller. A lot smaller. I'd like us to have a cantor. I hope we have a cantor. And I'd like to see enough diversity so that people who are Conservative or Reform can find a synagogue and that we're a stable Jewish community. I would like to see us honor history because I feel the fragility of history, and I don't want to lose our history in New Orleans. Touro is a very old synagogue. It has a very old history. I think our southern Jewish history is very interesting. I'd like us to – I hope that we'll be able to keep our cantors and our rabbis and our community intact and to reach out to those people who are having a hard time. I think there are a lot of mental health issues that aren't addressed. Mark is a psychiatrist, so I'm very aware of them. There are only eighteen adult psychiatrists in this city, and up until a few weeks ago, there were only sixty beds. Now, they're going to take over a hospital in Algiers, and there will be a few more beds for adult psychiatry, but we're really looking at – and I think there are people hurting in our community who don't feel they can say it, in the Jewish community.

RH: This past year, tell me about yourself in the sense that – what have you learned about yourself?

RM: I've learned that I'm much stronger than I thought I was. Much stronger. I've learned how to just pick up and go on. I've learned that my son can go to any school, anywhere, that he's a tough guy, and I don't need to worry about him so much. And I've learned to cherish my community. It's a little late in some places.

RH: Do you have any priorities that have changed since this storm?

RM: Yeah. Being kind to people. Just appreciating them. Just appreciating the people. Whether it's somebody at the synagogue that I see once a month or the neighbor down the street – I am much more part of my community. I enjoy them. I go out there, and I'm going to – even if they're totally unlike me. I'll go and watch the Saints games. I don't watch football. I don't know anything about football, but I watch the Saints game. I enjoy New Orleans. So, just enjoying myself. My priorities have way changed in – self-aggrandizement is not nearly as important as – I don't feel it was that important to me, but just holding up the community. Holding it up in the community. I may not live here my whole life. I don't know if I can or not. But if I don't live here, I will always grieve it. I have fallen in love with New Orleans in a way that I always was, but not to this degree. It's just a passion for – I don't even know if we should live here. Who knows? But I know what New Orleans is, and I love what New Orleans is.

RH: Can you articulate that a little bit?

RM: I think it's there in the lines of the poem about the – just the mixtures and the unexpected, the mysteriousness of it, the cultural gumbo, the whole sense that it's – you could never like – you could never say this is New Orleans. I'm going to rebuild it back. You could never do that because it's history upon layers of history upon layers of history on layers of history. Languages and languages and all put together and people who wouldn't meet who are best friends and cultures that don't go together that are together. And music comes out of that. That's what jazz is. That's what Zydeco is. And you can't reproduce it. That's what our dancing is. It's hundreds of cultures mixing together, and it

is the feeling of being marginal and maybe fleeting. The sense that we're in a place that may not be around. That you have to just enjoy it as it comes. There's not a stability here, and there never was. Snakes, rats, and roaches. Broken streets. Houses that are falling down. They've always been part of New Orleans, and it's always been a mixture that you can't really articulate easily. The only place I can articulate it is in poetry. Even that fails. Even that fails sometimes. But I can only articulate it in song. The song is what it is, and it's jazz. It has to be there. If we lose that – what infuriates me about our country is here, you have the heart and soul of the country. I can't go anywhere where somebody doesn't want to take me to a Cajun restaurant or have me go hear New Orleans jazz. When I'm in New York, and I'm like, "Do you know where I'm from? Hello. Do I want to go to your Cajun restaurant? No. It's not as good as mine." And everywhere. Seattle. New York. Los Angeles. Washington. Alexandria, Virginia. And then they say, "Oh, we don't need it." You take that heart and soul in this country, and it is a one-of-a-kind place. We are not strip malls. Every place looks the same. That drove me crazy in the evacuation. I was going from one strip mall to another. Kmart's and PetSmarts and Whosidarts – and I want to – blech. I was going crazy. Not that we don't have a little of that here, but it isn't the same. It's unique. It is New Orleans. And there is no place like it. The Jewish community here is completely different because we're a Jewish community that lives in the middle of – and I'm Jewish – of an African-American city. That's an interesting combination. And Touro, those roots, the mixture of African Americans and Jewish, goes way back in Touro's history. That's another story. But I think we have a lot of – and I was very involved –

RH: You mean reaching out to the community, or do you mean inter-marriage?

RM: No. I mean reaching out to the community, and also that the Touro family was very – the African American people in the Touro family were important. Let's just put it that way. But it's a long history. It goes way back. This city, there's absolutely no – everybody is a brother and sister to everybody else. If you try to see that any other way,

you're just going to get yourself into trouble. I think we did get ourselves into trouble. I think we cut off the poor African-American community, and I think it was causing terrible problems.

RH: So what's the first step to undoing racism for you?

RM: We have to listen to each other. We have to talk to each other. And it's slow. Slow. We have to have story circles. We have to sit down and hear each other's stories. We have to get behind the myths, accusations, and incriminations. I live in lots of different communities. I live in rich Metairie white Country Day world. I live in Newman Swim Team World. I live at Tulane University, which has got its whole set of history of awful racism. If you took every building here that was named after a racist and you changed it, we'd have to change all of the names of the buildings. I live in the Douglass world with the grassroots education. They're all contradictory. Why am I sending my child to Country Day when I'm in grassroots education? A thousand contradictions. A thousand and one contradictions. I'm good friends with people in the Ninth Ward. I'm good friends with people in Lakeview. I'm good friends with Republicans and Democrats and half the time, they just don't get each other. I'll hear a story over here that's absolutely false about this group. I'll hear a story over here that's absolutely false – people have the totally wrong idea of each other. They need to talk to each other, and we need to make lots of opportunities where people can talk to each other. In the primary way that would happen is if our kids were going to school with each other from day one and being taught by African American teachers, white teachers, Jewish teachers, and Hispanic teachers. We've got a Latino population now that we need to bring into our community. It's going to be a substantial population. So we've done gumbo but we don't exactly know how to do it right. And we need to know how to do it better. Some communities have done it fabulously. Some are doing a great job. But a lot of communities are not, and we need to do better. When you hear about the Gretna Bridge, and you hear about St. Bernard, you'd better stand up. And if you're not appalled

– what's the bumper sticker say? – if you're not appalled, you haven't been listening. I mean, that's horrible. And you know what happened in St. Bernard saying you can only rent to white people – there's just a lot going down that has to be – we have to talk to each other. Every time we have to have an event, we have to say, is everybody in the family invited? And when we evacuate, we have to say, is every member of the family in the car? And if every member of the family is not in the car, then we can't leave. We cannot evacuate without half of the family in the car. That's the bottom line. I didn't do that well. (Anne?) wasn't in the car. I think this is a hard thing for us. It's going to take a long time. And I think I have to go.

RH: I think you do. And I think that's a good way to end.

RM: OK.

RH: So I appreciate that.

RM: Okay.

RH: Thanks.

[END OF INTERVIEW]