



Karen Weissbecker Remer Transcript

Rosalind Hinton: 1735 Milan Street, New Orleans, Louisiana. Today is Wednesday, September 27, 2006. I'm conducting the interview for the Katrina Jewish Voices Project of the Jewish Women's Archives in the Goldring Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life. Karen, do you agree to be interviewed and understand that the interview will be video-recorded?

Karen Weissbecker Remer: Yes.

RH: OK, let's just begin with where you were born and your education, both Jewish and I guess just your general education.

KWR: I was born in New Jersey but my family moved to Richmond, Virginia, fairly; I think I was 6 months old, and so I grew up in Richmond and I went to Douglas Freeman High School and then I went to the University of Virginia for my undergraduate. I was back in Richmond and went to the Medical College of Virginia. I got a Ph.D. in Genetics. And then after the Ph.D. I went to UCLA for a post-doc and that's where I met the man I was going to marry, my husband. And we both got jobs here in New Orleans, that's how we got to New Orleans. I was raised Conservative and went to Hebrew School Sunday School kind of thing, a very small synagogue and you know --

RH: About how big is small?

KWR: We started it with like 7 to 10 families, so it was really little when I first, you know, when I was like 5. So, the people who went were like Aunt Bernice and Uncle Alvin, and Aunt Tasha and Uncle Herman, they weren't really related to me but it was like family. And I don't remember how big it got, eventually it couldn't be maintained on its own and it merged with a bigger Conservative Synagogue in Richmond. My now ex-husband was



raised Orthodox all the way through and he had the full range of Jewish education including Yeshiva High School and Yeshiva in Israel and stuff. So, I've learned a lot since, you know, as an adult because I've taken on sort of a, I'm not fully Orthodox but I'd say I live on the Orthodox lifestyle, so, that's sort of my Jewish background and my education.

RH: Tell me, when you say an Orthodox lifestyle, kind of explain.

KWR: Well, we keep Kosher, strictly Kosher in the house, you know separate pots and pans, separate dishes, only Kosher meat, all that stuff, and we keep the Sabbath. We don't turn the TV on or the lights on, we don't drive, we don't shop, you know, all that stuff. We try to go to Shul if it's not raining because it's a long walk. And, you see my kids, my boys wear *yarmulkes* and *tzitzit* pretty much all the time, I'm, you know, having been brought up Conservative I'm actually a little less strict than they are so I'll eat vegetarian out. But you know, basically I think I would put us closest to the Orthodox, modern Orthodox.

RH: OK, can you kind of tell me about your transformation from Conservative to Orthodox, I mean why spiritually, emotionally, did you feel like you --

KWR: Well, it took a while. I don't know if I would have come to it if I hadn't fallen in love with Gary, my kids' father. But I took it slowly and sort of tried to figure out where do I fit in with this, what am I taking on. Some of it I took on for him, to marry him, some of it I took on because I liked it. I like keeping Shabbat. I like keeping Kosher, I like holding on to traditions. When I say I'm not fully Orthodox I think it's sort of more of a philosophy thing. But I like, I think it's important to pass on these traditions so they don't get lost, and I wanted this type of family life, where once a week we have; well we always have dinner together, but we really have dinner together. And there's no TV and we make a nice meal of it, and on Saturdays, especially when they were little, we played games, we really have that time where we're not answering the phone and we're not here and there.



We'll have company over but I really like the kind of family life that observing the Sabbath brings, so.

RH: So, tell me a little bit about, you've been in New Orleans now for how many years --

KWR: 16.

RH: 16, OK.

KWR: That's right, we came in 1990, and as I said we both got jobs, trying to coordinate careers.

RH: And, what do you think of New Orleans?

KWR: Well, you know it really does grow on you. It's hard to explain to people who aren't here, even though I'm not a native, it does have such a nice flavor, it has such a rich culture. I'm sure a lot of people, you can't explain it but it really does have this thing that pulls at you. So, I think it's a very special place. Since I'm not from here I could live other places too, but I do like it.

RH: So, tell me about your neighborhood.

KWR: Oh, this neighborhood here?

RH: Right.

KWR: I moved here about two years ago and I don't know my neighbors that well, unfortunately. I mean it's just; some neighborhoods you know, like at my old neighborhood I knew them more than I do here. And there's been some change, we were; I think the time I got to know them best was after I just moved here Ivan was coming, which was another hurricane and it was right before Rosh Hashanah and if we were to evacuate we would have been gone -- I think people were evacuating and



Wednesday night started Rosh Hashanah and then it flowed, so it was Thursday, Friday, it flowed right into the Sabbath, so if we had evacuated we would have been gone 4 days minimum, even if the hurricane didn't hit. So, we decided just to watch and look and check the TV and hope that it turned, which it did, but in the meantime, and a lot of my neighbors were also deciding not to go, but we started boarding up the windows and stuff and that's when I got to know my neighbors from when we were all boarding up together. And, we went together to go get the plywood and, which, now that plywood is my Sukkah. I used the plywood for Ivan to make my Sukkah. (laughter) That's just typical New Orleans.

RH: That's great. And tell me this, are there any traditions that are New Orleans' kind of traditions that you enjoy?

KWR: Whenever I have people visit I make Kosher jambalaya, you know because a lot of our Orthodox friends, people who keep Kosher, can't get jambalaya very easily unless I make it myself, and gumbo and red beans and rice. So, we've certainly taken on a lot of the foods, my kids love all those New Orleans foods. I probably don't make it often enough for them. (laughter) And, like you don't realize, I don't know how many people have crock pots. I do the red beans and rice in a crock pot for *Shabbos*, you can keep a crock pot on and usually a lot of Orthodox will make *cholent* for *Shabbos*, it's a slow-cooking thing. Red beans and rice is also slow cooking but I put *kishka* in my red beans and rice, I think that's pretty unique. *Kishka* is the thing you usually put into *cholent*. It was originally stuffed derma but now it's, it's like flour and carrots and things like that. I don't think there's too many people who put *kishka* in red beans and rice.

RH: So you've moved a Monday tradition to Saturday?

KWR: Yes, we did, but we don't do it every Saturday. (laughter) And we do Mardi Gras, there are those who; some stricter Orthodox would not partake in Mardi Gras because it does have roots that are Catholic or related to Ash Wednesday, but we like it too much. I



think it's a lot like Purim, that's what I say, because you got a king, you got a queen, you're drinking, you're dressing up, you're costuming. So, it's our Purim.

RH: Do you want to talk to him?

KWR: Yes, do you want to stop it for a minute.

RH: Sure.

KWR: Do not be throwing things at me.

EZRA: I want to say something. (inaudible series of words) I have to recite it?

KWR: You have to what?

EZRA: Recite it.

KWR: OK, but you can't do it while I'm doing this, OK? Maybe you can do it for daddy later.

EZRA: OK, daddy said I have to do all my homework and (inaudible).

KWR: OK, he'll understand, you can't recite it now. That's it, you can't. You can't. Yes, you and then we're not doing this again. You are in big trouble, he's making faces at me behind you Rosalind.

EZRA: I didn't know you put kishka in red beans and rice.

KWR: I do. Enough. You're not doing your homework, you leave the room.

EZRA: Well, I was.

KWR: Go, do your homework now.



EZRA: I don't like the kishka as much in the red beans and rice, I think you should drop it. (laughter)

KWR: OK, go, go. I should not have let you come. Go. In New Orleans most people do red beans and rice on Monday.

EZRA: Why?

KWR: I don't know.

EZRA: Because they're weirdos --

KWR: All right, we are going to start again and no one is going to make noise. You, I'm serious Ezra, go do your homework or you're in trouble with daddy and me, both.

EZRA: (inaudible)

KWR: I'm going back to this, no more interruptions. Thank you.

EZRA: Did you know they were recording you?

KWR: No, they're not recording me now.

EZRA: Yes, they were.

KWR: No, you better not be.

RH: Come on. Ready? OK. Let's see, where were we. You were telling me you did, you enjoyed Mardi Gras. I know too, where you're living right here, you're --

KWR: I live two blocks off the parade route in two different directions. If we wanted to we could catch on Napoleon and then switch over to St. Charles and catch; so we got the lucky bathroom close by, which is key for Mardi Gras.



RH: Right. Probably have a little company too, around then?

KWR: Yes, we usually have company. When we were up in where we evacuated to, we made a Mardi Gras party for the people up there because we were missing it; up in Silver Spring, Maryland.

RH: Well, so we're now into this discussion of Katrina here. So, why don't you tell me when it kind of came on your personal radar and what you were doing at that time.

KWR: Well, we were in New York for a family wedding and Friday morning before I left I looked at the newspaper, you know, you do that, and it wasn't heading anywhere near us. So, we go, and we're staying with family and Saturday night I'm driving to wedding, and after *Shabbos* I called back to the fellow I'm dating, and I'm like "Hi, honey, how are you?" He goes, "You don't know what's happening here, do you?" Because it was *Shabbos*, and as it turned out, normally we wouldn't have the TV on at my cousin's who aren't Orthodox, the TV was on but the kids were watching like Nickelodeon or something so nobody knew. So I get to the wedding and I have cousins who were also at the wedding going, "Did you hear?, Did you hear?, What are we going to do?" Well, at that point we figured, all right, we'll take our Sunday return reservations and just extend them a few days, right, that's what happens with these hurricanes. And so, we were at one cousin's, we moved over to the other cousins so we don't spend too much time at one, you know, overstay our welcome. And then we extended again. Then we moved the plane reservations another time and then realized, we don't know when we're going back. So we were up in New York. I was with the boys. Their dad was here, he had evacuated to Shreveport with the woman he's dating and her 3 kids, 2 dogs and 2 cats or something like that. So, you know, then you realize you don't know when you're coming back. So we had like 3 pairs of shorts and I had my evening gown, which, I always joke, isn't that how you should evacuate with -- 3 pairs of shorts and an evening gown? But that's because I was going to a wedding. So, I rented a car and we drove to my sister's



house, who's in Northern Virginia.

RH: So, let's back up a little bit. When did you kind of get the sense, I'm not going home?

KWR: See as I said, Saturday night was the first time I heard there was a hurricane heading that way. I would say Monday, Monday night or Tuesday, I can't -- We're watching the news and I, on Sunday I took the kids into New York because that's where we were and we played, and Monday we did other stuff. I let them know what was going on but I didn't sit and watch TV all the time with them. I didn't think that was good for them. And, I kept them informed when we'd watch a little, but obviously, I guess it was Monday night when you just saw what everything was coming down and it was really scary.

RH: And so, then what kind of went into your decision about what to do next?

KWR: Well, obviously, cell phones were hard to work and stuff like that, but obviously the main thing was talking to my ex-husband who's their dad, and we have joint custody, what were we going to do. So, he had a conference up in Washington, DC, which he had planned on going to anyway, so, and my sister was in northern Virginia, so we started talking, but we knew we could get together then and try and figure out what next. I mean it happened so quick in some ways. My parents wanted us to come to Richmond, Virginia and his family wanted us to go to New Jersey. And it sort of wasn't fair for either one of us, so; can you stop it again, please?

RH: Yes, OK, stop it, let's go. (pause) So, you had this, you had to kind of make decisions with your ex-husband here, is that what you're talking about?

KWR: Right, and you know we get along well, and we worked out a lot of things for a divorced couple, I'm very proud of that. I can't say there weren't arguments. You know he wanted us with his family, I wanted to be with my family; we both wanted our support



system. And, we decided on a compromise to go to neither and we figured we had to get the kids in school, we didn't know for how long, but getting kids in school was primary. So, we looked at a school in Baltimore and in Silver Spring. He knew about Silver Spring because he had done a fellowship at the Folger Library in Washington, DC and he had gone up there some *Shabboses* so he knew the kind of Orthodox community it was. And, he had a friend who said, "Look at this school." And both schools, no questions asked, didn't know what was going on, said, "We'll take you, don't worry about tuition." Right away, it was just amazing. People were giving us their names, give me a call if I can help you, incredible. Sort of based on what we felt comfortable with on the schools, we picked the one in Silver Spring. And, I had a friend who used to live in New Orleans who had moved to Detroit and I emailed people, "OK, this is what's going on, you know, all my friends, we're in northern Virginia, we're looking to settle to go to Silver Spring." And she said, "Well I have a cousin who lives in Silver Spring in Kemp Mill area, give them a call." So I did and that cousin ended up to be a really close friend. But what she did is, she put an email out, they have a list-serve for that community and said --

RH: This is a Jewish community?

KWR: It's a modern Orthodox Jewish community. I mean it's like all happening so fast, you know, we picked the school. They got us -- the people at the school introduced us to a real estate agent, we were lucky we found a house to rent on short-term, you know short-term lease, which most of them won't let you do, and it turns out the family that owned the house is Pakistani and; but, they were in Pakistan, they had hoped to come to the States but they couldn't at that point. But the mother had done her Master's in Public Health at Tulane.

RH: Oh my gosh.

KWR: So, they actually came down a little bit on the rent for us and you know, their son had gone to Lusher, which is where my son is now, you know, so it's kind of a small



world. So we found a house to rent. And then this now friend, the cousin of my friend who's now a close friend, put out an email saying you know, there's a family from New Orleans who's settling here, they're going to need to borrow furniture and, like I had fairy godmothers, that's how I describe it. I had a few, people I didn't know at the time, who I became close friends with most of them, one, took over getting clothes for the kids, one took over getting toys. We had dinner appear at our door every night for like two weeks. One got all the furniture organized, one just started taking my kids to school for me. So it was, just people, no questions, and they would come to me and say, thank you so much for letting us do this. I'm like, yes, you're welcome. I mean it was sort of like, they said, you know, you gave us an opportunity, we felt, it was frustrating just writing a check to Red Cross or just writing a check to the United Jewish -- UJA, is that what it was, didn't feel like enough. They wanted to feel like they were helping somebody, and I was happy to oblige them. (laughter) No, I would have preferred another way but, what we ended up doing, and this is why we had our little time on CNN, we got a house that had four bedrooms and I had one, and Gary, my ex-husband had one, and the kids each had one. I'd be there for one week with the kids and he'd be someplace else, and then he'd be there with the kids for one week. So we did one week, one week.

RH: This was kind of to honor the joint custody?

KWR: Right, honor the joint custody and try and keep, for the kids, we wanted them to have a stable life, as soon as we could get them in school, give them as normal of a life as possible, and you know, when they're here they flip back and forth between us, but we're just a block away and you know, they were used to it. But this way they were in the same -- they had some stability and we both, we both put that first and primary. Because it wasn't easy packing up a suitcase every other week, being a wandering Jew, but, I mean we said compromised on going in between where the two were, but in fact I was closer to my family. I was really close to my sister so I could see her a lot.



RH: And she was in?

KWR: Northern Virginia and I'm in Silver Spring, so it's like the other side of the beltway in Washington, DC. And so, no, OK sweetie you got to go.

EZRA: But mommy.

KWR: No, that's the rules. Do you want to stop it again?

EZRA: But mommy I need to do, I have to recite it. And also I want to play basketball.

KWR: OK, so go play basketball if you finished your homework. Sweetie, you can't do this.

EZRA: I have to recite it, is that OK?

KWR: Not to me. Not to me. OK, so then study. Will the basketball make too much bouncing?

RH: I'm sure it will be OK.

KWR: I'm sorry.

EZRA: Can I take my glasses (inaudible). Do you want to stop it again?

RH: Go ahead and stop it. (laughter)

KWR: All right, so where were we? I think I was talking -- I did luck out, I was closer to my sister than he was to his sister.

RH: So, every other week you went and lived with your sister?

KWR: Well, sometimes I'd go stay with her and sometimes I would come back. Once the city opened up; so like I think the end of September I flew back here to see the state



of the house because I was right on edge of the flooding and you know, you get stuff off the Internet and you saw two blocks away, there was a 1-1/2 feet and another block away there was no water, so you're like, where am I on that? So, I'm thinking, my house is up a few feet, and, so I didn't know. But I came back, my car was fine, it had been parked at the airport, my car was perfectly fine. My house, thank God, was fine. I had a tiny bit of water in my back shed, but really didn't lose anything. So one time I came back here and then, so the fellow I'm dating, he moved back here I think the beginning of October. So, occasionally I'd come back here trying to get into my office to get my work going again, but often I was with my sister, or I had friends in Baltimore because I got a guest researcher position at NIH. So I would go up to Baltimore to work; that's, it's usually in Bethesda but the people I was working with were in Baltimore. So these are friends who had been at LSU when I was at LSU and so they had emailed me and said, "We can give you a desk, a computer, a project." So, that was the other reason we kind of went for the Silver Spring/Baltimore thing. And Gary had a room at the Folger Library, which is where he had done his sabbatical, those 7, 8, 9 years ago, so that's why he had known Silver Spring. So they gave him a visiting scholar room for free, and he would also come back to see his girlfriend, you know, so, we, various things those weeks that we weren't with the kids, various places we stayed. I think one time I counted, over the course of the 9, 10 months we were gone, I think I counted 21 different, sort of, movings. You know, packing the bags or something. But, one of the silver linings for me was, yes, I'm close to my sister but she's in Virginia and I stayed with her a lot, and my nieces, one's now in college, but it was her senior year, and one is a junior in high school. But, I got to spend real time with my nieces and getting to know them now as young adults, it was really nice, and spending the extra time with my sister, I miss it now. So, Lord knows, this is not the way I wanted things to go, but there were a lot of silver linings.

RH: So, tell me a little bit about how you normalized things; how best you -- certainly the housing arrangement?



KWR: Right, I mean it was really important for us to normalize it for the kids, I mean that was primary. I don't feel like I normalized for a long time. (laughter) At one point, what we decided was what to do about their education and they got into a very good Orthodox Jewish Day School and they, thank God, made friends, were happy, learning a lot, and the Jewish Day School here in New Orleans decided not to open in January. It went back and forth, I was on the Board, so I was one of the people trying to find out who's coming back, what grades are they in, who, if they come back, would send them to the Day School, you know getting the numbers. And in the end, between having less numbers, people not coming yet and the fact that the school had flooded and the facility wasn't ready yet, they decided not to open in January. So, when you come back here, it was like, what school are you going to put them in? We'd have to figure out another school, and then if the Day School opened in the Fall, they'd have another school, we'd said, we're just going to stay. So, and by that point I found out I'd lost my job at Tulane, so --

RH: Let's talk about that for a minute.

KWR: Another effect on us making decisions.

RH: So, when did that happen?

KWR: Twice. You know, you're on the Internet and trying to figure out what's going on. Tulane set up a website and you're following it, and it said "Research Faculty", which is what I was, I was at the downtown campus, I was non-tenured, part-time research faculty. I forgot the part-time part because it was 80 percent. So I kept thinking, it said research faculty would be decided month to month, and no one ever told me, so I assumed I was still employed. Well, then I called my Chairman to ask him something and he said, "No one told you Karen, you got laid off at the beginning of October." This was mid, mid-to late October. I didn't even know I was laid off, never got a notice. That was really hard. After a little bit of crying I started looking around for thinking, "What can I



do?”, thinking Barnes & Noble, I don't know, whatever I was going to do. Then, but he and the Chairman of Genetics, because I have two chairs, they worked very hard and they got me reinstated, but it took a little bit of time because they said, “We need her, at least for teaching, we need her back.” They got me reinstated and then the big lay-offs came in December. So, it was like really, they got me reinstated and within a week I got fired again. At least that time I got notice. It was a big layoff, I think 180 faculty and staff at the Medical Center, and I forget how many on the Uptown Campus, so a lot of people lost their jobs. And I was non-tenured, research faculty, and I was in between grants so, it made sense, sort of. I hate to say that about myself, I think I contributed to Tulane all those years, but at that point when you're, when you got a natural disaster that totally wipes out the city in your university, somebody's got to go. So, then they hired me back at 20 percent, but like off-on contract. I don't know how they did it, to teach this one course that nobody else teaches, and to help with graduate students. So I kept the 20 percent position at Tulane and I would fly back and forth to teach the class. It was a graduate class, so I could kind of tell the graduate students when it was being taught. So, when I'd be here we'd have 3 classes a week, and when I wasn't here, and I did some over the phone -- I sent in my Power Point slides and did it with a speaker phone, we were pretty creative. And then the people at NIH who had given me this guest research position, said, “Well, this project, we got a little bit of money if you work on this project, we can put you on a contract for that.” So I pieced together some stuff. And now that I'm back in town I also, I had been working just a tiny bit at Children's Hospital doing genetic counseling stuff and now I'm doing 30 percent at Children's Hospital.

RH: So you're 20 percent now at --

KWR: 20 percent Tulane, 30 percent Children's, I have a little NIH contract that when I work on the project I charge them by the hour for research, and I'm back in school.

RH: You're back in school?



KWR: I'm back in school. Well, I decided that, I'd been thinking about this, but I didn't want to upset the kids' lives again, we'd gone through a divorce and other things like that. I'd move houses, and it takes, it certainly takes your time away from the kids. But I'd been thinking, I did research in obsessive/compulsive disorder, I did psychiatric genetics research, looking for the genetic component in psychiatric disorders, specifically anxiety disorders. And I'd been getting frustrated with writing grants, not getting them funded, you know, it's just very hard to constantly be looking for sources for your research and I was tired of it. And it's hard to do when you also want to be a mommy. I mean it takes a lot more than the 80 percent position that I was doing. So I'd been thinking about wanting to try and get into more of the treatment aspects of it, and so I'm not sure if this is the right way to go, but I'm working on a degree, part-time, in social work. And so I'm hoping I can then go into therapy. And I'd like to be able to keep some genetic work. I've been doing genetic counseling, so there is counseling in that. And, I'm hoping I'll be able to do some genetics and some therapy, so, you know, in terms of how Katrina affected it, I tell people I didn't want to, I wanted to get a little bit of calm, I didn't want to make things unstable, you know, but after Katrina it's like, unstable, everything is unstable. You know, there's no such thing as sort of calm and normal, so I decided, I'm only working part-time, I might as well try it now, see how it comes out. I think that's my biggest change from the storm is from the change in my financial situation I guess.

RH: So, your financial situation as far as losing all -- I mean you've kind of had a double whammy, because you had a financial situation when you divorced and then you had a financial situation losing all your work with Katrina.

KWR: Yes. I'm a little bit in denial, I haven't really looked at it again. I've been OK because of, you know I got some severance pay and I'm the type who saves so I'm getting by OK, but I think at some point that extra, you know, buffer that I had is going to run out and I'm going to have to figure something else out.



RH: (Child whispering in background.) OK, we'll keep going. Can you tell me, I mean you're describing a lot of other people, but for you, what sustained you?

KWR: What's that?

RH: What sustained you during this period?

KWR: My kids. Being focused on taking care of someone else I think had a lot to do to keep me going. I had to keep going. And, the incredible support from family and friends; I mean my sister being there, and the people in Silver Spring who I think are going to be, I hope will be friends for life. That came out of the storm. You know, I said to them, it's one thing, they came to help when somebody was in need, but I didn't necessarily have to become friends with them, but we fit, we clicked, you know, and my kids became friends with their kids and stuff, so. It's, I guess that's sort of, trying to stay focused on the kids, and as I said, having help of family and friends and my boyfriend was a good emotional support.

RH: Was he here in New Orleans?

KWR: Yes, he moved back to New Orleans mid-October, beginning of October. His house, thank God, was fine, and he's a lawyer and they felt they needed to get their work going, he and his partners, it's a small, small firm, they wanted to be there for their clients and to try and get things going, and that's where his livelihood is you know. So that was hard too, being apart from him, it was another thing that was a little difficult.

RH: Was -- Can you tell me about this, can you tell me the name of this community?

KWR: Kemp Mill is the area of Silver Spring.

RH: Was it a synagogue?



KWR: No, the area is called Kemp Mill and there's a couple of synagogues around there. And, it's amazing because we're modern Orthodox so that, and there aren't a lot of us in New Orleans, there's a lot of more religious you know, but, the, there were sort of two synagogues we would sometimes go to. To me it was incredible because we had a choice of *minyans* like on Saturday morning we could go to 7:00, the 8:00, at this synagogue, that synagogue. We kind of had like 9 *minyans* that we could choose from. Here we'd schlep a mile and a half or two miles, so sometimes they'd get a *minyan* at Anshei Sfard, sometimes they don't. They usually get it at Chabad, but you know, and there's one time, and that's it. And there was a pizza place there and there was a bakery, Kosher, you know, it was, and you'd see people walking with yarmulkes, my kids weren't the only ones in the area, that kind of thing. So, it was really amazing, we kind of really fit in the community that way, and I miss that too. Jewishly, and as I said, the kids made friends with the kids at their school. The school was really good and Amos, who's my 12 year-old, he really got a lot out of going to the school where they really emphasize the Hebrew and Judaic, he really loves it and he really blossomed, made friends, fit in, and I had a hard time bringing, I mean I knew I had to bring him back. His dad didn't lose his job and his dad is here. And for us, if we wanted to move, we have his father, his father's girlfriend, she's got kids, she's got an ex-husband, I have a boyfriend, you know you're talking about moving a small village. So, my little guy, Ezra, also fit in, made lots of friends in Silver Spring but he missed New Orleans more than Amos did. He wanted to come back, his best friend, his school, but you know the kids up in Silver Spring are still asking about Ezra. It's just very lucky, he fit in very well, made some close friends, and he's luckily back at the New Orleans Jewish Day School and they came back for K-3 and he's in third grade and I couldn't be happier. I said this morning, they had a little recruitment thing, that sort of the one part of, it's very stressful being back, it's just, even with your house OK, and I've pieced together work, just living in New Orleans, telling you, it's just the little stresses, it's just different than living someplace else.



RH: Why don't you kind of -- if you can kind of describe why it's stressful? I mean, what do you find hard about it, being back?

KWR: Of course my first thing is worrying about the kids. I think Amos is having a little trouble adjusting to a new, big public school when he'd been in this, had Jewish school the whole time. I worry about him. Ezra, thank God, is the one I don't worry about because the school came out great. He's happy, he's learning, he's challenged, so that's one thing. I'm a little stressed because I'm trying; I have a whole new life now, where I've got 3 jobs, 2 kids and 2 classes, you know, trying to juggle it. But then, for being in New Orleans, you're always hearing sad stories, you know. You meet the secretary at work who lost everything, and the news, when you read the news, what people have lost and you still got stuff, and you know, the pot holes, the fact that there's no recycling, the fact that you feel like nothing is happening in the city, so, in terms of getting it back together. Some places, it's such a schizophrenic thing, some places are like you never knew it happened, things are coming back, it's great; and then other places you drive a little bit further and it's like a ghost town. And, it's just sad, you care about the city, you care about the people and I think just living here, you know as I say, you're kind of always hearing a sad story. And you feel a sense of community so you feel for it. And you know, the Jewish community is about 2/3 the size it used to be, so you notice people missing. I've lost friends who moved and are not coming back and I miss them.

RH: Are you angry at some of the people who aren't coming back?

KWR: No. No, I mean everyone has got to do what's best for them. I've considered moving back to Silver Spring because of the kids' education, the Jewish education won't go passed 5th grade for Ezra so, but as I said, we're talking moving so many people, it's not going to be so easy, but --

RH: Is there any tipping point, does your village discuss a tipping point for what might have you move?



KWR: I don't think we've thought about it. I think, you know, that's one of the things, as I said, that sense of normalcy, wanting things to be calm before I go back to school, or whatever, that, there's, you realize that you don't know what the next day will bring. I mean, who would have thought, who would have thought I'd go to a wedding and not be able to come back home, really move into my house for another 9 to 10 months. That's crazy. So, you can't, you sort of, can't, you want to plan for the future, sure, but you also have a sense of anything can happen, you know, so.

RH: So, that's kind of an interesting question, do you live a little more close to the bone in the sense, close to the next day, than you used to?

KWR: A little. I mean I think you kind of balance it a little differently. You look to the future, you think about it the same way you did but you also have the sense of things can be so unpredictable, life can be unpredictable, I think it does affect how you do that. So, I don't think I've come up with, I mean clearly if we, another hurricane hit and our levees aren't set up and we flooded again, I think that might be a tipping point, but it's so hard to be able to say it ahead of time. Right now, I feel like we're making the best we can with what we got right now, what's left, and doing the best we can, you know, that's the way you've got to go.

RH: How do you normalize this world in New Orleans for yourself and your family?

KWR: Well, I think getting the kids in school with a schedule, getting them into what they need to do, getting myself a schedule and busy, that's about it, so.

RH: Are there any kind of rituals or routines since you've returned that have become more important --

KWR: Can we turn it off again, I'm so sorry.



RH: OK. Well, we've kind of moved back into New Orleans and let me ask you, when you first came back, did you do anything special when you came back? Of course you came to your house, you told us about that, but was there anything, how did you react when you came back? What did you go do?

KWR: Well, it was just more practical than anything. You know, I'd say, oh my house is fine, thank God. What I'd tell my friends outside New Orleans was, "My house was fine, thank God, I only had \$50,000 worth of damage or so." I mean that's the thing, everything is relative, if you were in another city and something caused that kind of damage to your house, you'd be upset. I mean I was really upset a month or so before when Cindy brought down one of my chimneys, which was just a minor, they called it a tropical storm. But now, you go, but I mean I had to, my electricity was pulled off my house, I had a tree that had ruined my roof, my roof is leaking in, I still have to fix the interior. I had to get stuff to take back to the kids so we checked my car was fine. And then I was working, my boyfriend and his sister and brother-in-law had also come to town so we were at his parents trying to get water out from their, it was a, almost a basement thing, but I mean it was not a big deal, they didn't lose too much stuff but we were trying to get the water out from it. We were trying to get into Gary's garage to help get his car out to bring his car up. We were getting -- you know it was a short visit so there was no sort of time to think of things other than the practical I think. We were lucky because one of the nights we went over a friend's house to just, we knew he was going to be there too so we stopped by and see if my friend Allan was in. He's like, he comes out of his house, "My electricity just turned on, and I got TV." And we looked at him and we went, "You've got company for the night." (laughter) Because we had no electricity, we had no TV, it was hot as heck, you know, so, we were lucky that way, so then we drove back. No, I don't think there was any major, I think I was still just sort of on action mode. I don't remember when I finally like cried, or let the emotions in. It feels like it was like months later. One year you're sort of in the action mode and you keep going on the adrenaline, you just sort of, it's almost you feel like if you let in it would, everything would fall apart



and you can't. And by the time it kind of came, it was like a weird time, it was like, "Why am I upset now, why am I depressed now?" But it's sort of like I had the time to mourn the city and my friends and not being with people and things like that. So, and also I just knew all along that I was one of the lucky ones, too. I mean even with losing my job, I'm still one of the lucky ones. So, you know, you got to look at it that way. And as I said, there were so many positives that came out of: that time with my sister and her family, the friends we made, and it sort of, it was such a strange mixed blessing. Not that I'd want another Katrina to happen.

RH: Well, let's move to the Jewish community, because you've lived in a few different communities and so kind of tell me the pluses and the minuses of the New Orleans Jewish community, in your opinion.

KWR: Well, it's got a family feel. You know people. Through the Jewish Day School I've made friends and so if I go to a Jewish Federation meeting I'm kissing this one and hugging that one. You know people, so I feel like I finally sort of found a way to fit in. But, as I mentioned before, being modern Orthodox is hard in New Orleans. I'm sure it's hard to be Orthodox at all in New Orleans but, as I said, we kind of, you know, not sure of where we fit, things like that, especially having just been in a place where they sort of match the way we do stuff. So, I do, I love the Jewish community in New Orleans, but as I said, it doesn't have some of the resources you want when you want to raise your kids that way, you want them to get a Jewish education. Right now we're getting tutors for Amos, who's the 12 year old, because there's no source for him to have to learn his Hebrew and his Judaic here. Having been at the Orthodox Day School and having the background he had, he's beyond the Sunday School/Hebrew School that is offered here, so he doesn't have a peer group to learn with so he's learning on his own, and that's hard. I think before the storm, even if we did want to go with the route way of having one on one, there were more teachers, more Hebrew Judaic teachers. You know Rabbi Shiff who was at Beth Israel, I had him for Melton, I took a Melton course with him and he's



such a great teacher and I really miss him now. We were associate members of Beth Israel, so which, since we didn't live nearby and we keep *Shabbos*, obviously we didn't go to most of the holidays and *Shabboses* but I saw him as, you know, someone who could really teach in the community; he's gone. And we had another friend, Natanel Daneshrad, who did some tutoring with Amos, he's gone, you know, so, the resources are less, it's clear.

RH: So tell me about the two communities that you kind of go between now, is that what you do?

KWR: Oh you mean the two synagogues?

RH: Synagogues.

KWR: It's not really, I mean one of them is 1-1/2 miles and it has trouble sometimes getting a minyan but it's trying to come back. It's a beautiful old synagogue, it was in what was a historic Jewish area of New Orleans, down on Carondelet, near Jackson.

RH: Say the name.

KWR: Anshei Sfarad. So I don't know; I'm hoping it will come back on its own. And then, we also sometimes go to Chabad Uptown which is on Feret on the Tulane campus. You know, we know the people there and they're wonderful, you know, it's a warm community there too. So it just sort of depends on the day and who needs a minyan and what the weather is like, I guess, that's why I go between the two.

RH: What do you think the Jewish community's relationship to the larger New Orleans' community is like? Do you have any thoughts on that?

KWR: Not too many thoughts on it. I mean, I know that the Chabad group brought students in. There were a lot of Jews who came in from different groups throughout the



thing and Chabad came back pretty early and helped organize and they were helping all sorts of people. And, I think the Jewish community works well within the New Orleans community. It's such a rich, multicultural place, I don't know if I have too many thoughts in terms of that.

RH: So, have you ever felt discriminated against, in any way?

KWR: A lot of people don't, especially being Orthodox, they like have no clue, it's like something they're not aware of kind of thing. But, no I don't think I've felt discriminated against. I mean it's harder when you're taking off all the holidays, and most people don't, even most Jewish people don't, to try and explain it, but you know, I haven't felt it.

RH: OK. Do you feel any particular need to bring back any part of the Jewish community at this point?

KWR: Well, I put my efforts into the Day School, the Jewish Day School.

RH: So tell me about that, what you're doing, even from the earliest moments, what you were doing.

KWR: Well, you know, things just, we had just at the beginning, it was two weeks of school, and there was a new Principal and a new head of Judaica, I don't know, everything was new anyway and they; you know the Principal had started two weeks and then you get this major flooding. And, she ended up going back to California so we didn't have a leader, a head of the ship, and it took a while before people kind of figured out, "All right what are we going to do and to pull it together?" So, eventually we got phone calls out and tried to find where people were. The Jewish Federation was really amazing, being organized, getting the website up, finding out who's where, register with us, get in contact with your local federation, who, by the way, also the Jewish Federation in Maryland helped us out also quite a bit. So once we sort of got it going, as I said I sort of headed this task force where we had a questionnaire and we had you know, a certain



number of parents calling other parents to try and find out where they were, were they coming back, what their experiences were with Katrina? We had to decide if we were going to have a middle school, which we had, and it was hard to keep up because it was small. We chose, you know the Board decided not to have a middle school. We had to decide, "Are we opening in January, do we have enough kids to open in January, what about the facility?" So, a lot of major decisions. It was supposed to be K-5 but for some reason, depending on demographics or who came back and who didn't come back, the fourth and fifth grade class -- because they're combined classes -- wasn't enough. So they decided to really go for their strength and went K-3. They have 20 kids. They've done an amazing job in terms of, Even though they're in combined classes, the kids are challenged. They are doing, you know, teaching kids on their levels and stuff. So, I'm so happy, that it's come back well, because that was, when I was up Silver Spring trying to decide, that was my main concern was my kids' education back here and what was to be with the day school. And thank God, at least for Ezra. Now, as I said, Amos is at a big public school and now we're trying to piece together Jewish and Hebrew education for him. It's going to take a little bit more time to get that right. And I feel like that's where we're doing the best we can. And then Ezra, they're going to add a year each year to the day school, up to fifth grade. So I'm real happy, I mean I did put efforts into that and I'm happy that it's coming back. I think it's an asset to the community, I really do.

RH: Explain that, what do you mean, how?

KWR: Well, I think because there's been studies that have shown kids who go Jewish day school stay involved Jewishly when they become adults. So they're the ones who are going to be involved with the Jewish Family Services and the Federation as adults. It also has been shown, I lost my train of thought as to what I was going to say, it's also a matter if you want, we're going to have to be, you know we brought some new Rabbis who also, these poor people have been there a month and Katrina hits, two new Rabbis in town. One at Shir Chadash and one at Touro and thank God, both came back, even



after Katrina, but I know with at least one of them, is there a Jewish Day School for my child made the difference on whether he chose to take the job or not. So, when you're bringing in people for the various jobs within the Jewish community with the Federation or whatever, having a source of Jewish education for their children is probably part of the things that makes the decision. So, I think it's important to the community. I know the community, thank God, supports it financially and all that, but I think it's good, I think it helps. You know education has always been primary in the Jewish religion and I think the Jewish community needs to have a Jewish day school. And there's also Torah Academy, which is also a very good school, my kids went there, that's run by the *Lubavitch* and they went there for pre-K or kindergarten, that's also a good school and it's back.

RH: Do you think your kids are getting why you are committed to this type of education? How do you think it affects their formation?

KWR: Well I -- You know what I, a couple of things, one is I never liked Hebrew School/Sunday School and they didn't learn that much. (background conversation with child) Excuse me, they can hear you sweetie, you can't talk like that. They're learning stuff in a way that they love it and they're learning more than I ever did, and it's not really taking that many more hours of the week then when you have to go schlep out to the synagogue for Sunday School, Hebrew School and all that. They love it and they have a positive feel for it. But, the other thing too is that, what I found is, that when you sort of incorporate Jewish values throughout the day even, and you've got things like learning about tzedakah, giving charity, and tikkun olam if I said that right, healing the world, it's sort of part of the learning process and character building of getting the Jewish values so that when you're in; and I'm sure that Catholic schools and Episcopal schools do that too, when you sort of bring in ethics and values into the education as sort of part of it, I think it's creating the kind of character. I mean I want, I want my kids to get their English and their reading and their writing and their math and to come out *mensch*s. You know, how



to be a *mensch*, and to respect others; they're also learning to respect how all Jews practice because it's a community day school. So, you got Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, some people who don't do anything, and I think, unfortunately Jews tend to sometimes not always get along, I think kids who can grow up and see this one practices this way, this one practices that way. It's that a good thing for them to respect all forms of Judaism. So I think it builds their character the way I want. The same way taking on *Shabbos* and becoming more Orthodox, I felt brought in the kind of family life, God I hope I don't sound like George Bush now, family values, please, but, I do believe in family values even if I don't follow George Bush, so, yes, I think they're getting that kind of stuff too.

RH: Have you reflected any on just going through this experience as a Jewish person and are there any frameworks that have helped you kind of pull through?

KWR: Well, you know, the other thing that I had that helped support me was there was this Yahoo! Group, the NOLJDS group, I don't know, it's the Orthodox Jewish ladies and we email each other, and the sense of humor that would come through and things like that. And in that, there are discussions, you know Jews have picked up and moved a lot, we've been flooded out before, we've survived a lot and you see that, you know, there's a -- Jews help Jews too. So that in the Times-Picayune they have a little thing, almost every day, advice on evacuating or something, advice you have. So I was thinking I was, I don't know if I really will, but if I were to write one, I would say, "Go someplace where there aren't that many other people," because I got a bigger piece of pie, when they were cutting the pie up in Silver Spring, Maryland. And there aren't that many you know, people, like the Jewish Federation in Houston is trying to help all the Jews who move there, there are hardly any up there. And then the other thing is to have a community. So my student, who is Chinese, he lost everything but the Chinese community helped him. He also was in Maryland, helped him out; people who are Vietnamese, their community helps them out; if you're Catholic; already sort of having some connection to



some community I think does help, and I think I realize it now even more than ever. So, I guess that's the --

RH: Has anything in your sense of being Jewish changed since the storm?

KWR: No. (laughter) No, I don't think so, I think it plays the same role it used to play. I think, last year Rosh Hashanah, when we were up in Silver Spring, that it was a real big help. Do you want to say something?

EZRA: (inaudible)

KWR: Well, you can't do that, but she said she could talk to you about stuff. All right, but not with crackers in your mouth. Put the crackers down. Do you want her to ask you a question? I just said no crackers in your mouth. So, when you're done, all right? Rosh Hashanah, last year of course, I think that was actually, now that I think about it, remember I said I couldn't remember where I let the emotions in because I; I think Rosh Hashanah made me stop, and *Shabbos* too, made me stop, and I couldn't be in the action mode, I had to stop and think, and I did get depressed. Not clinically depressed, but it was good for me, it was good to give me a time where I could be sad and I could go through that, "Oh my God, what just happened" kind of process, because all the rest of the times I was moving, so. Swallow your crackers and then she'll interview you, if you want.

RH: So tell me, you went to Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur in Silver Spring?

KWR: Yes, in Silver Spring.

RH: And so, tell me a little about that?

KWR: As I said, it gave me time to reflect. The other thing is, we got invited out for every meal again, so we were making, that's one of the places we started making friends



because everyone invited us. And so, I just thought, OK, it's a new year, and we were lucky because Jews got to start a new year sooner than other people because our New Year (laughter) came just a few, a month and a half after the storm. Whereas, and you kind of have the sense of, "OK, let's start again, let's try again," which is kind of a good thing.

RH: So, it really was a help to have a (turns to child) -- it will pick up, it will pick up if you just talk. So, tell me about your Jewish Day School and what you like there?

EZRA: I like that because from last year I was supposed to have a teacher named Miss Becker and now I have the teacher named Miss Becker.

KWR: The same teacher; not just the same name.

ERZA: So, I have the same teacher and I like that because I don't have to have a brand new teacher, I can have an older teacher that's been teaching there for a longer time and at JDS for a longer time. And also, I have a few of my friends, I have a few of my friends there. I only have one boy in my class from last year but in the second grade, but we have every single girl, well, we're missing one.

KWR: Most of his class came back, and that's just by chance, the third grade, the now third grade came back.

RH: What's your favorite thing you like to do at day school?

EZRA: I like social studies and I like science.

RH: Oh, excellent. What was the thing you missed most when you weren't here and when you were away in Silver Spring, Maryland?

EZRA: I missed my friends and I missed just being able to be in New Orleans and I just missed New Orleans, because in Silver Spring it wasn't New Orleans.



RH: Right, so, what did you like about the school up in Silver Spring, did you like anything there?

EZRA: Yeah, I liked it because they were a lot more people and I could have more friends, and also a lot of them were Orthodox so like, because my friends now, sometimes I have to go over and my mom has to give me special meals because they don't keep Kosher. But there I could go over to a friend's house on the Sabbath, and they have Kosher food and I could play. One of my best friends was right next door to me, because here my best friend and my closest friend is a mile and half away. And, I have other friends, but my other friends are like 15 miles, or like Ben --

KWR: He's across the river. So on *Shabbos* it's harder to just bop next door and have a play date, you know, you can't drive.

EZRA: And also I liked my teacher there because I really like sports and my teacher liked sports.

KWR: And what was your teacher's name there?

EZRA: Mr. Becker.

KWR: He went from Mrs. Becker for two weeks to Mr. Becker and now back to Mrs. Becker.

RH: (laughter)

EZRA: And I also liked the day school because there is less people and you can get to like meet at the day school, like at the day school compared to the other school, there's less people and you can, you're sort of be friends with everybody unlike the other school, you dislike more people than you like. OK. You can talk now.

KWR: OK, all right, you want to stop it for a second?



RH: OK.

[END – PART 1]

RH: Interview for Katrina's Jewish Voices. One thing we haven't gotten is, you talked a lot about the Jewish community and how much they helped, but what is it like being on that end, on the receiving end?

KWR: It's not easy, you don't want to be on that end, it's; yes, I know a good thing to say, when we went to look at one of the schools, Rambam. In Baltimore, they had; it happened to be Labor Day Weekend, they were having a little barbeque, hot dogs and hamburgers, and they wouldn't let us pay for our hot dogs and hamburgers, you know right then and there. But they were selling some little thing to raise money for Israel and Amos said, "Oh can we buy this thing?" And I'm like, "Amos, they just gave us free hot dogs and hamburgers, they're talking about giving us free tuition, I'm not sure we're supposed to be, you know, putting our money out, I don't know." And he said, "Well, the Torah teaches that even if you're poor, you have to give *tzedakah*, even if you receive *tzedakah* you have to give *tzedakah* in your way. So he's -- he was 11 at the time, and I just thought, "You know he's right". So we bought the little thing for Israel, so even though of course, I didn't feel I could give the way I normally did, I still tried to give *tzedakah* or to help at the school or do what I could do, and that's how I handled being on the receiving end. And the people at the Jewish Federation in Maryland, I think it was the Greater Washington, handled it really nicely. They called -- You're supposed to register, let them know you're there. They called me and said, "What do you need, and come in, let's talk." So I went. They said, "What are your financial burdens, what's going on, do you need counseling?" So I said, "I'm paying rent, I'm paying mortgage, you know, I the thing about the job, and they end up, I didn't say anything, I didn't ask for anything but they sent me a check that covered a couple months of the rent. And then later they asked me again and I did have a little bit of free counseling, you know talking about some



of the problems, you know, basically trying to get through the loss of the job I guess was probably my biggest stressor. But they did it in such a nice way, I didn't feel like I -- nobody; I didn't ask anything, it just came. It was very overwhelming. So when we left, I was trying desperately to find where to put; I had all my furniture here; I didn't need to bring back the furniture that was lent to me. That was all, you know it was used, it wasn't like I; but that, some of it the people wanted back so I had to arrange to get it back and some of it, you know I was trying to find a good place to donate to. And actually the school was having a family come in from Israel so they took a lot of it for the family coming in from Israel. So, as I said, I think the only way I could deal with it was a sense of I'm going to try and give back, when I can and how I can. And still in my mind, if I feel more financially stable, I want to donate back to the Jewish Federation of Greater Washington, not just this Federation, which of course I try to do. I guess that was the only way I could handle it. It was not -- I don't like, I said to people, "I don't like being on the receiving end of *tzedakah*, I'd rather be on the giving." They say it's better to give than receive, it's true.

RH: Did you learn anything about giving from being on the receiving end?

KWR: You know there was one of those discussions on my little Yahoo! group, the little Jewish ladies, when we were discussing that if someone comes up to you and says, "What do you need?" It's -- You can't say, "Oh, I need a mixer"; I mean you don't do that. "Oh no, we're fine," you know? What was best was when someone just sort of saw what you needed or they just said, gave you a gift card from Wal-Mart or something. It was -- That, I wouldn't have thought about that beforehand, but then when you're on that end, sometimes finding a way to give without making the person; you want to give what they need obviously, you don't want to be giving them something they don't need, but still, if there's a way to give without them sort of having to ask, I think. I think that was one of -- one of the ladies had, was very funny, she just kept saying, "Just gift cards, just gift cards, just send them, send them here." (laughter) And I could use a trip for *Pesach*



on one of those, one of those places where they take care of it all (laughter). Like another discussion, this is off the subject a little, another little discussion on the thing was Koshering your FEMA trailer for Passover (laughter) and what, how do you cook when you got limited things like that?

RH: Two burners and no oven and microwave.

KWR: Yes, yes and I had the biggest Seder I ever had because I had a place I could have it so I invited whoever I could to have Seder.

RH: Oh really, tell me about that -- last year?

KWR: Yes, this past year, when I came back here the kids had two weeks off of school and Gary, their dad, had returned in January so I stayed up there and he returned here in January to teach at Tulane. And he would fly up whenever he could and I'd bring the kids down whenever they had a break or, and as I said I was flying back and forth to do my teaching, so Passover we came, and the kids were for two weeks and they could spend time with their dad. What we've done for Seders is one night Gary and his girlfriend does it and we're all together, plus whoever, and then the other night I've done it with Aaron, my boyfriend. So, he had a bunch of students from Tulane, I mean it was totally, it was almost all students. So he had a bunch for the first night. And the second night I had Aaron, my boyfriend, and his parents, and his law partner who's, you know, moved five, six, seven times since, because he lost his home in Lakeview, a friend of mine who also lost her home and her family and you know we just, I think there was 26 people or something, and it was nice. And again, bring the holidays in, the sense of the wandering in the desert, being kicked out of Egypt, and everybody being not where they should be. You related to that in a different way reading the *Haggadah* then you did in the past I think, too. So there are certainly -- there was a thing from Song of Songs, and I wish I could quote it exactly, that I found but it's basically about sort of the love of God but it's a "the waters cannot wash it away nor the floods and the waters can't wash away



sort of the love,” that kind of thing; and I've kind of used that for a quote sometimes, I wish I could quote it exactly but it's really; it was a nice quote, it was not related; it felt like it was related to this, that it was spoken.

RH: Do you have any other things, spirituality, kind of like that that kind of, you kind of remind yourself of on a regular basis?

KWR: Yes, you try, I mean I think, you, when the tape was off you said something to me about being somewhat of an optimist, but I'm not always. You know, you're not, you can't always, there are times you got to feel sorry for yourself too. And I'm not sure I necessarily turned to religion for it, but religion had already been sort of a part of my life. And, as I said, having, taking time off for *Shabbos* to think and do what you need to do, I think it's been helpful, I do. It's no great epiphanies for me, no great. Now, the secretary I work with who already was becoming somewhat religious, she felt like she's gained -- and she lost a lot. She's gained a new appreciation for what's important in life. I mean, it sounds like she looked at it as a big, powerful positive thing she got out of it, was how she looks at things in life and doesn't take things for granted and sort of doesn't let the little stuff worry her. I don't know if I've had quite that much, you know, but, I feel when I needed it, I had places to turn. I don't think any great religious -- you know, revelations or anything, no.

RH: So, tell me, (phone ringing in background)

KWR: No, there's no one to answer the phone, so it will ring. Do you want to turn it off?

RH: We can just let it ring.

KWR: Because the answering machine is going to come on.

RH: We'll let it go for a minute here.



KWR: Yes, turn it off.

RH: Let's talk a little about New Orleans. How do you feel about the nation, the city, the state, and its response to Katrina?

KWR: (laughter) I've been so positive, so upbeat, so far. (laughter)

RH: That's why I asked, I wanted to bring you down.

KWR: Oh my God. You know when they did -- The House had their investigation, the Senate had their investigation, the White House had their own investigation and I told people, "You know what, let me give you my two cents, don't spend millions of dollars on doing these investigations. Everyone screwed up." The city, the mayor; I had less problems with the Governor of Louisiana, I guess, than others, FEMA clearly, to me the federal government, I had this idea that Bush was watching Dallas on one station and a few days later, after Katrina hit, someone came in and said, "Sir, could you change the channel to CNN and see what's going on in New Orleans?" You know, I felt like he was totally unaware and finally it kicked in, you know, but it was way too late. Now, obviously the spirit of America and the individual people who came and helped and the people who came to New Orleans and gutted houses and on an individual basis, the way people rallied, American people, is amazing and heart-warming and really, I'm making a positive out of this you know, but the way the government-- now the thing is, this has never happened before, but I still think we should have been able, we, the American government, and the government throughout, should have been able to handle it a little bit better and it was just, you know, this is not the way it should be in America. So, I said, "Don't spend the millions, just give me my two cents and I'll tell you every one screwed up." And what are we going to learn from it? I don't know, but it was like a lot of money was put into these investigations and I'm not sure they made any improvements afterwards, so.



RH: So, did you have higher expectations?

KWR: You know the main thing is, as I said, thank God I never had to -- like I had mixed feelings about how Tulane has handled things because Tulane has affected me obviously, but I always say, "Well, I think they made a mistake here, this decision and that decision," but then I've never had to bring a university, major university back after the largest natural disaster in the last 200 years, you know. But I think the biggest mistake that, to me, is sort of unforgivable, and there's sort of no excuse for, is the four days before they brought in the help from the Feds. I think that's the part that still ticks me off. They should have; there were so many ways. And it's just constant, too, where the FEMA trailers are not making sense, and there are other solutions and they can't seem; they have these Katrina cottages that can hold up against bitter wind, and they're quicker, they're cheaper to make, but we can't because FEMA only provides temporary houses and Katrina cottages are almost permanent, they're not on wheels. There's got to be a way around this, you know those kind of things. Then I said it's the stress of living here is those constant stories in the newspaper, you know someone who ripped FEMA off and someone who can't, has to apply four times for the Road Home help, the, all the crap that, that's where the stress comes even though it's not necessarily affecting me. Now, I've called FEMA I don't know how many times, I never got my renter's assistance from them, I asked for so little (laughter). I got a little bit for evacuation and then I was, I couldn't live in my house, I had no electricity or gas, and I had to pay rent in Silver Spring. To me, that was qualified for renter's assistance that everyone else got, and I called, and I called, and I called and they denied me and I appealed it, and they denied me and finally you go, "Forget it." But, that's the stress. You do get so frustrated with all levels of government. And why I was really excited about the Super Bowl -- the Super Bowl, it seemed like the Super Bowl, the New Orleans game at the Superdome, it was an incredible shot-in-the-arm for the city, and having that back is really good financially for it. But then part of me says, "OK, you got the Superdome put together with multi-million dollars, what about Charity Hospital three blocks away?" Because being in, we're going



into social work now, and having worked in psychiatric genetics I'm very aware of the mental health services, which were lacking before the storm and now it's really bad. So there are like 42 practicing psychiatrists in the city, or something, and you know you got homeless people who need medications who have no place to go to get their medications. There -- When people are having mental problems they are trying to take them to emergency rooms that don't know how to deal with mentally ill patients, so, that's where all these frustrations come out. And I don't want them to just jump and do and not think about it, you want planning, but, you just feel like no one's making a decision, OK, we've gotten in our urban planners, we've gotten this in, we've had our this commission and that commission, but no decisions. Like, what's going to happen, are we going to rebuild here or are we going to say, "No, we've got to leave this for swamp land because we shouldn't have built there anyway, we shouldn't have developed that area." And, I think we should take a lesson from Israel, this is one of my ideas, but I don't know who to tell it to, when they made people move out of Gaza, they moved them as a community. They said, "OK, the whole community can rebuild here." In New Orleans community is very important, the people in Lower Ninth Ward and the neighborhoods, it's, you know, their cousin's next door and the mom is over here, they've known each other for years and there's those neighborhoods, and if they do say, "We can't rebuild here, we got to leave it for wetlands." Say rebuild over here as a community. Pay attention to the communities, but no one's making decisions. A few places, what's working is when people on their own, in a small group say, "Let's do this." Broadmoor area is another area that's coming back because they got together, they got people from Harvard helping them out, figuring it out how to do it and they're doing it, you know. So that's, there you go, there's my frustration and my anger.

RH: So, do you think, I mean, to make a decision it always comes as Lower Nine or New Orleans East, but what if we said, "OK, everybody in Lakeview, you have to come in?"



KWR: You mean -- however it works, I don't know enough to figure out how we can rebuild these levees and these pumping stations and this and that, somehow they've done it in the Netherlands, there are people who do know, not me. It is hard. You can't; like we did have a group come in and basically they said, "You shouldn't rebuild here, you should rebuild here". But they didn't take into account the emotions and the neighborhoods because they weren't from here. So, somehow you need to take that, and take that sort of intellectual information, academic information, and work it with how we are. I don't know the answer but I feel like someone should figure it out. Some answer has to come at some point (laughter). And it's weird, I told you, the schizophrenic, when people are not from New Orleans they don't get it, and I think that's where I, you know I have enough people from some other place, you know who talk to me, "Is New Orleans coming back? Is everything back to normal?" Well, yes and no, parts are very much back to normal, and then you drive and there's nothing. It's a very bizarre situation.

RH: Do you feel it's hard to explain?

KWR: Yes, as I said, how do you say -- I don't want to whine and I think people are tired of hearing (whining to herself) and as I said, I do have a job, my house is relatively OK, but how do you explain to somebody who's not here that it's just stressful living here. I was going to make T-shirts, to make money, that said, "If you're not from New Orleans you just don't get it", (laughter), you know, for a while.

RH: Do you think racial tensions are higher now, or more difficult, or do you have any thoughts on it at all?

KWR: I was up in Washington, and the Washington Post did a whole lot of sort of white/black and how it's coming back and I do think there are some differences. I think, like the people in Lakeview tended to have insurance more than some of the people who were homeowners in the Lower Ninth. But I think somehow, I don't know, I feel like



maybe it was played up a little bit too much, there were a lot of people in Saint Bernard, which is all white, that lost their homes and you don't hear about that. In the national news you hear Lower Ninth Ward, well, yes, I think the hard part there is because of lack of insurance and stuff but I felt like, well I think New Orleans is pretty cool, like when you go to Mardi Gras and you're fighting for beads, it doesn't matter black, white or whatever you're going to share your beads or not share your beads (laughter), I don't know. It's easy for me to say, I'm white. I think if I were African-American I might have a different take on it. But I, you know when they, the flood was indiscriminate, the flood did not pay attention to race, because if you look at what percentage of people whose homes got flooded, it reflects the percentage of African-Americans and Whites in the city. It's almost the same percentage of people who live here, that's the percentage, which is more African-American. So, yes, more African-Americans were flooded, but that's because that's the racial make-up of the city. So, I don't know, I wish people didn't fuel that, I feel like we all want to work together, and I think that New Orleans tends to do that, or I thought, so I don't want people to fuel the racial problems.

RH: Do you think New Orleans is any more corrupt or less corrupt than another city? Did you think about that?

KWR: Corrupt. Historically, and I feel like Louisiana is more corrupt than other places, I don't feel like it's that rampant here. I mean, look we got Jefferson for our senator.

RH: Congress.

RWR: Congress, and he might get elected again (laughter). So I can't say what we're; but you know, it's sort of everywhere too, I mean, maybe historically maybe there's more --

RH: Do you think that should impact how much New Orleans gets?



KWR: No, no. And I think, though, you know I think, in terms of, because I'm getting this social work, we're learning social policy and stuff, the question is, "What is the government's responsibility, to help who?" And, sometimes, even though someone in Kansas may say, "Well, why should I give so much money to New Orleans?" Because, Lord knows if a tornado comes through Kansas, or an earthquake in San Francisco, you want the country to come and help. You know, and I think because, who else is going to do it? There's a lot of grassroots, a lot of private people, but you also have to feel your country is going to take care of you and help rebuild. I mean, we're helping to rebuild in Iraq and other countries, which is good, but we should be able to help our own too. So, I feel the government, on all levels, has the responsibility to help out; I mean I went on, it wasn't much of a march, we had a little group across from the White House, once up in Silver Spring, on like the coldest day, in Washington DC, on like the coldest day ever, these mummies, it was like mummies who got together, not very many men or whatever, holding up signs, you know, that said, you know, "Rebuild New Orleans." It was before Congress gave the money, and they took forever to say, "Yes, we'll give the money," and then it's not even coming. They finally said, "yes, we'll have it", and it's not here.

RH: What's your vision of the future for your family, for the Jewish community and just also perhaps for the city?

KWR: Depends on what day you ask me; I think it really, some days I am more pessimistic than others. I do sometimes consider going back to Silver Spring when, for their education, because it fits us religiously, because it's close to my family, there are a lot of good things there. But then I would have a hard time leaving New Orleans too, because New Orleans does pull at you. I mean it does have something. And I have friends here, and my community here, it's not easy to leave it, so I really, it really can sort of depend on the day. And I, it's so hard to know in terms of, I think New Orleans will come back, I think it will come back as a smaller city, it's just so hard to predict. I really --



RH: What do you want for your kids?

KWR: Well, see, that's why I have the mixed thing. I think my kids being here, one thing that they've learned from this, they are really resilient, they can adapt and they learned that at an early age that life can hand you some problems and you can work it through and keep going. And I learned from them because they were so resilient, they were so, they were just troopers. So I think that it's been hard but they've really grown from it; there are some positives that they've gotten out of it. If it weren't for the fact of being Orthodox in New Orleans I would be happy staying here, but as I said, there are certain resources that we don't have so I, I'd like to get Amos back to Silver Spring because he was happier there. Ezra, now that they're not here I can say a little bit more, Ezra adapted both places, he's come back to where he was, he's back in the same school with a lot of the same friends and he's just really done well. Amos has not; he's doing OK, he's not complaining, but I saw him really fit in up there, and find his buddies and his friends, because he's a shyer kid and he just fit with that group, other kids who were Orthodox and wearing *kipah*. So for him, I'd like to go back to Silver Spring, so I have very mixed feelings. But, right now we feel the most important thing is keeping the family together, so that even if I got a job up there I wouldn't take them away from their dad. I think having both parents totally involved in their life is really the best thing for them right now, even if it means giving up the Jewish education for now. You know, some of the other things that we want for them for now. I think, at this point, having both parents involved in their life is primary. And so you kind of have to make your decisions step by step by step, and set your priorities.

RH: So, how can the Jewish community rise up and support you and your kids' futures? Can you see that happening here?

KWR: You know a lot of what was missing was sort of missing before the storm and now it's just missing a little bit more. So, the Jewish community has been pretty great you



know, and has rallied, I mean, like the National/International Jewish Community has really contributed amazingly to the New Orleans Jewish Community and they; from what I can see, and I'm not there, from what I can see they've made sure all their different constituent units are getting help so all the synagogues, and all the Jewish family services and all that. I think that they're there for them, I mean, it's, I can't expect them to provide a modern Jewish, a modern Orthodox community in New Orleans, it's just never really existed here, you know, it's just sort of, but we've all, I do feel like we've rallied together.

RH: Do you think the Jewish community is recognizing the importance of the Orthodox community a little after this storm than before?

KWR: No, I'm hoping, I always hope that we kind of work together more when you need to rally together, that some of the differences and things would become less important. You know when you go through hard times sometimes you realize some of the petty things that people, but I don't know, I don't know if I can answer that question.

RH: Are you worried about the future of the Day School?

KWR: Not today. I have a real positive feeling of it; it's going to go through, I think they're going to build each thing and I just was at a recruitment thing this morning and the kids are just so happy, I just feel like it's got to; as I said that's the thing that's been just a real positive for us, is that they got, the old Principal came back, the one who was there for only two weeks left. The old Principal who had retired came back, and that brought back stability. Mrs. Becker, his teacher, came back. Rabbi Kurtz-Lender the Hebrew teacher came back. Mora Lor who was another Hebrew teacher came back. They had a lot of the same teachers come back. The kids went back to the school, they made it look the same way it was, so that they got back to what they were at. Yes, it's a lot smaller, but you got that, oh yes, we got that back again, good! Lot smaller, but I hope, I hope that, you know we can pull more families in and grow back to, as I said, they're not going



to rebuild the middle school, that takes a lot of resources and a lot more kids than I think we'll get, but, K-5, I think.

RH: Who -- Do you have a recruiting strategy? Where are you at on the Board?

KWR: I'm head of the Recruitment Committee on the Board, so, before this storm and we were bigger, we had been always saying we needed to get someone in recruitment and development, a professional staff, because parents had been doing it, it's a lot of, a lot of work. So we hired someone right before the storm, and that's actually someone who we kept on. In a way it seems like a luxury to have a salaried person but I don't think it is; I think that's going to make -- and she's doing a great job too, so, I think it's, I think that's; you know it's costing money to have someone's salary to do just that but hopefully we'll get people in and then it will all pay off.

RH: Any other opportunities you've seen from coming out of the disaster?

KWR: What do you mean by opportunities?

RH: For the Jewish community or for your family -- more challenges than opportunities?

KWR: Well, more challenges than opportunities. I'm a little disappointed that, I would hope that some groups would work together more, but they kind of retain their, you know, "I'm not going to step foot in that synagogue." I'm exaggerating it, but I was sort of hoping that maybe we'd see a merging between Anshei Sfard and Beth Israel. Beth Israel lost their synagogue and we have very few congregants, so bring yours to us -- but that's not going to happen, just different philosophies and I guess history that I don't know since I didn't grow up in New Orleans. I had also hoped that the Jewish Day School could somehow work out with Torah Academy, which is the Orthodox Chabad School, somehow maybe with a dual curriculum on the Judaica, because again, you can't make one person practice the way someone else does, you have to respect it. And they, they haven't given up on the idea, but it's not going to be easy. So I guess I was a little



idealistic that because the Jewish community is smaller, I was hoping we could merge some things and work things together, but unfortunately some of the ideologies and differences still remain, and it's easier said than done in the end, so. I guess that's an opportunity that I'm afraid, something I thought made sense, but maybe I'm being idealistic about it.

RH: It seems the Beth Israel community is more out in Metairie now?

KWR: Yes, that's basically what's happened. They're going to rebuild out in Metairie, and thank God, it seems like they're working hard to come back too. They really are. I admire everybody whose really come in; I felt like I kind of concentrated on my little family and I haven't, other than the Day School, I haven't really felt like I've done what I should do to help rebuild New Orleans. But, I got to put my kids first and my family first, so, but that's part of the reason for going back to social work is sort of finding a mechanism, to eventually be able to give back in maybe a more formal way.

RH: Well, I have a question here that almost makes me laugh to ask it here, but, the biggest changes to your life because of the hurricane, what are they? I mean you've had so many (laughter). Is there any kind of emotional changes because we certainly, you've got an awful lot of changes in direction?

KWR: I think for me it's related to my career. As I said, there are things I wasn't, I was sticking with what I was doing because it was working, if it ain't broke, don't fix it, and I liked genetics, and I love it. I'd already had a few things that, you know I don't think I would have had the guts or *chutzpah* or the timing to just say, "OK, I'm going to try something else now." And it's scary for me and I'm worried, "Have I thought it out?" So for me, the biggest sort of shift here is in the, what do I want to be when I grow up at the age of 46? You know, trying to rethink that in a way it's both an opportunity and a challenge, no one wants to lose their job, and I did my best to immediately say, I put out -- I did have some grants that I continue to work on, I did, you know talk to people at NIH,



I immediately just sort of put it off. If everything had come through, I'd be working at 150 percent, but enough came through. So, it puts you at a, maybe a little prematurely, at a time in my life, something I probably needed to address in myself, "What do I want to do? How do I want?" I've wanted to do something that's made me feel is helping people more directly. Not that research doesn't, and something that's more people oriented. I don't think I would have bothered looking at that, except I was forced. So, I feel like I'm not quite ready to look at it still, but it's sort of, that's for me personally. The rest of things are sort of kind of a little bit back. I mean I think, I think that's sort of the thing that's had the biggest effect on me, is it sort of forced me to do something I wouldn't have done otherwise, or at least not now.

RH: Any kinds of ways you look at the world, changed?

KWR: Well, as I said before I think you realize that nothing is certain, that things could be turned upside down any minute, and you can't live your day to day life that way. I mean otherwise I'd be out gambling, drinking, God knows what, whatever I thought to be fun, spending all my money. (laughter) I mean you can't live that way; you still have to save for retirement. But, you can't live your life that way but it does sort of have an effect, I think, on how you think about things is knowing that nothing is for certain. And also what it is, like, don't sweat the small stuff. My sister's TV up in Northern Virginia went out on her. And it was, oh man, and then she said she was all ticked off the way you would get, and then she stopped and she went, "I can't be complaining, look at Karen, she's not in her house for nine months," you know. I said, but it can still tick you off, I'd still be ticked off if I had to take the TV and get it in the back of the car and bring it in, you know, but it does sort of make everything relative. So, I feel very lucky, but as I said it's relative. In another point in time if I had all this damage to my house I'd be moaning and groaning, but it's all relative, so that's another way of looking at things too.

RH: Tell me what you've learned about yourself this past year.



KWR: That I can survive. I learned it when I went through the divorce and all that that was. I learned it in a different way here, that you can make it through with help, with friends, with family, stuff like that. You know, my parents also, I mentioned my sister more because that was -- she was right there, but my parents came up from Richmond and helped out with the kids a lot and you know, I don't know I guess the resiliency of my kids, of me. As I said, I learned from my kids too, so I guess that's what we've learned, is that you can survive a lot.

RH: And, if you could tell me just what you're most grateful for at this point in time.

KWR: Can I name more than one thing?

RH: You can name many more things. (laughter)

KWR: What I'm most grateful for is clearly the people around me, my children, Aaron, my parents, my sister, my friends in Silver Spring, my friends here, I'm sure. I feel like I'm at the Academy Awards and I'm sure I'm leaving out someone, my producer (laughter). I think it's everything that comes to mind, is all the different levels of people who have, are there for me, so, I guess that's what I'm most grateful for. Even my ex-husband, who's worked with me through all this.

RH: Really?

KWR: Yes, I'm grateful that we've able to work together through difficult times too.

RH: Pretty amazing, I keep wondering what it would be like to go back and live in the same home with my husband, my ex-husband.

KWR: CNN, when they were doing it too -- "divorced couple under the same roof again" -- I kept going, "Not at the same time." (laughter) There were a few nights that we overlapped, but you know, I'm grateful that we both, again, I'm leaving out, it's not there



was no arguments, it's not like it was all easy, I'm leaving all that out, but, ultimately, we both put the kids first, so, I'm grateful for that.

RH: Tell me about the meaning of home now, for you, if you were going to think about what home is?

KWR: You're getting harder and harder questions.

RH: I know, I'm sorry. We're almost done though.

KWR: A lot of my friends who lost a lot learned that home is not your stuff. I don't know if I really learned that. I keep thinking, oh my God, what if I lost; what they learned, losing their pictures, their memorabilia, their kids' drawings from kindergarten, that's what hurt them the most, and my heart just goes out to them for that. But really I have learned, not as well as they have, but I have learned that home is not your stuff. Home is your family and your friends and stuff like that, so, as I said, thank God I didn't have to learn it the way they did to the full degree, but I think I can learn vicariously from them. Home's not the walls and the furniture and the TV, even if you get mad when the TV breaks.

RH: When you tried to recreate home, was there any kind of one thing that was most important that was your priority when you had to recreate it in a different place?

KWR: (pause) I mean I even put some pictures on the walls. Getting this kitchen set up, getting the kitchen set up, that's always my first priority when I move to a new house is, of course I have to do the meat and the milk and all that. I mean Silver Spring people, I had milk and meat pots, milk and meat silverware, plates, I mean we're talking 1, 2, 3, Kosher home you know? I don't know. What's the first priority in making a home is just getting back to normal life and getting the kids in school and you know, making it so it's livable, I mean, we made the beds and we got the kitchen up and we started living life as soon as we could.



RH: This question, when you were away, was there anything that you were glad to be rid of? And is there anything maybe that you're not doing anymore because you learned you could live without it?

KWR: (pause) I can't think of anything. I mean I really do feel like I'm kind of back to where I was in a lot of ways, again, I'm lucky. I haven't finished fixing up the house and I feel guilty about it, but I'm not the best decorator anyway. I feel I think I'm lucky because I didn't have to really give up much. I have had friends and family and I've watched how they've dealt with not having a, you know a single place, or they've learned to live in a smaller place, or they've learned, you know that kind of thing, but I haven't really had to give up much. I mean the traveling a lot, back and forth and packing a suitcase, that was hard, but I learned how to do that. I learned how to move around, and right now I'm not moving much, I'm trying not to go to too many places. (laughter) I am so tired of getting on an airplane or driving in my car.

RH: Anything else you want to say that I've kind of missed?

KWR: You've been very thorough. (laughter) I think, and there are so many things that you know, you read in the paper and the commentary years ago, is in terms of how New Orleans is, it really does always make you have very mixed feelings. Things that get me mad about the way it is, pre-Katrina as well as post-Katrina, the school systems and the government, but it does pull on you. I can't explain it, I didn't even grow up here, but I know like we really missed Mardi Gras and you know, it's got, it's a very special place, and I just hope it comes back with all of its mixed culture, you know from the African-Americans, the Mardi Gras Indians, we had a Honduran -- you know, I want it all back in its multicultural gumbo. See, Nagin should have used the word gumbo instead of chocolate city, how we're a mix of people and that's a wonderful thing about it. I think it's hard to explain to people New Orleans, and how people feel about New Orleans, so, that's as I said, you love it, it's sort of like family, you know their faults, they drive you



crazy, you love them to death, and don't you ever say anything against them. And the same thing with the New Orleans Jewish community too, I guess.

RH: That's a good place to wrap up I think.

KWR: Good. Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]