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Mississippi Oral History Project

Hurricane Katrina Oral History Project

An Oral History

with

Ruth Christian

Interviewer: Kristen Wallace, Lucy Maynard

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An Oral History with Ruth Christian, Volume 809

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Biography

Ruth M. Christian was born on August 9, 1927, in New London, Connecticut, to Mr. and Mrs. Ralph H. Brooks. Her father was an electrical engineer and her mother (née Tillinghast; born September 20, 1905) was a housewife; her parents were married in New London.

Ms. Christian married Richard L. Christian (born: January 23, 1926, in Sacramento, California) on December 10, 1955, in New London, Connecticut. They moved to the Mississippi Gulf Coast area when Richard came to work at Ingall's Shipyard (now Northrop Grumman). Together they had one child, Brian R. Christian (born: May 21, 1958). At the time of this interview, Ms. Christian relates that Richard is deceased.

Ms. Christian enjoys swimming, walking, volunteering at the local library, and oil painting. She is a member of the Art Association and her religious preference is Methodist.

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AN ORAL HISTORY

with

RUTH M. CHRISTIAN

This is an interview for the Mississippi Oral History Program of The University of Southern Mississippi. The interview is with Ruth M. Christian and is taking place on February 21, 2007. The interviewers are Kristen Wallace and Lucy Maynard.

Wallace: This is an interview for The University of Southern Mississippi Hurricane Katrina Oral History Project done in conjunction with the University of Guelph, Ontario, Canada. The interview is with Ruth Christian and it is taking place on February 21, 2007, at 9:10 a.m. in Pascagoula, [Mississippi,] at St. John's Episcopal Church. The interviewers are Kristen Wallace and Lucy Maynard. So first I would like to thank you, Ruth, for taking the time to talk with us today and I'd like to get some background information from you, which is what we usually do in our oral history interviews. So I'm going to ask you, for the record, could you please state and spell your name?

Christian: It's Ruth Christian, R-U-T-H C-H-R-I-S-T-I-A-N.

Wallace: Wonderful.

Maynard: OK, Ruth, can you just start by telling us where and when you were born?

Christian: August 9, 1927, and at the hurricane I was seventy-seven years old.

Maynard: And where were you born?

Christian: I was born in New London, Connecticut.

Maynard: And for the record, what was your father's name?

Christian: Ralph H. Brooks.

Maynard: And what was your mother's maiden name?

Christian: Tillinghast.

Maynard: And where did you grow up?

Christian: Connecticut.

Wallace: And how long have you lived on the Mississippi Gulf Coast?

Christian: Forty years this year.

Wallace: So, like, how many generations have your family—

Christian: Just my generation.

Wallace: Just you?

Christian: Yes, my husband and I and my son.

Wallace: OK, what is your husband's name?

Christian: What was that?

Wallace: What was your husband's name?

Christian: Oh, Richard—

Wallace: Richard.

Christian: —L. Christian.

Wallace: And your son?

Christian: Brian Richard Christian. (laughter)

Wallace: So what brought you to living on the Mississippi Gulf Coast?

Christian: Ingalls, at the time—it's Northrop Grumman now—was hiring people to come in to set up the new shipyard, and the shipyard at that time was a small one, and they were going to go across the river so it would be on two sides, and his job was to set up all jobs like warehousing and purchasing. He set that whole department up and that was what he was asked to do.

Wallace: And what was the name of that shipyard?

Christian: At that time it was Ingalls.

Wallace: Ingalls.

Christian: Mm-hm.

Maynard: So could you describe your attachment to this region?

Christian: Well, it's a great place to live. The weather is fantastic. In fact, I used to call Connecticut all the time to tell them in the morning I was in slacks, but the afternoon I was in shorts. So it's like that almost all the time, nice, and we have only a couple of weeks of cold weather. There's plenty of boating. You can go up rivers, you can go out on the islands, and if you get an opportunity you ought to do it. And it's full of sports and they have all children's games and they have different fields to play them in. It's really a well-rounded area for entertainment and enjoyment. There's a church practically on every corner, you know. So it's a small town but a very close-knit town.

Wallace: Did you raise your son in this area as well? Was he born here?

Christian: No, he was in the fourth grade when we came.

Maynard: And where was your neighborhood?

Christian: Where was my—

Maynard: Your neighborhood that you lived in?

Christian: Oh, my neighborhood. During the hurricane?

Maynard: Mm-hm.

Christian: Oh, I was on 2805 Washington Avenue and that's the second street up from the Gulf.

Wallace: So can you describe your neighborhood before the hurricane?

Christian: Uh-huh. I had a golf course in the back and that was always busy all the time, and then I had the City Park in the front. It was sort of catty-corner from my house and there was activities always going on there. We had band concerts always there. There would be early morning fishing down to the pier, and every morning in almost all those years I walked the Gulf for about three miles every day.

Wallace: Yeah.

Christian: So it's wonderful, and people are out walking all the time or bike riding.

Wallace: Mm-hm. So that area means a lot to you?

Christian: Oh yeah, it's sort of like being on a vacation spot. It really was nice.

Maynard: Did you stay in your home during Hurricane Katrina?

Christian: No, I left to go, I was heading up for my son's, but my son's mother-in-law—she and I travel up there every time there's an announcement, but her brother was sick and he couldn't go, and so I said I'd stay home with her. She never had water in her house and the house is built up three feet off the ground. So we didn't have any problem going through the hurricane. It was just the water coming up to the house and stopping, but the damage to my house was complete. The house and everything in it went, and the whole neighborhood. When we went back the roofs were down. That's why I had the pictures to show you what it looked like—

Maynard: Yeah.

Christian: —with the roofs down on slabs. There wasn't any furniture left. The force of the waves coming in sucked all of the furniture out into the Gulf, so nobody in town had any furniture, all over the yard it was just houses that were around that were all damaged.

Wallace: So would you say it was more affected by the wind or the water?

Christian: Well, in my case it was the water. In fact, I think it's the same case for everyone because if you have rain, that's separate. If you have a flood, it's separate, and if you have a surge, it's separate. And when you put them together you've got a hurricane. But if they're separate, like rain or flooding, I don't understand how they can pull it apart, but insurance companies have done it.

Maynard: Can you describe to me what a storm surge is?

Christian: That comes when the hurricane is making circular motions, going around. You're on the wrong end of the water because it will come smashing in and the other, when it's going around would be pushing it out to the Gulf, you see, that circular motion. And when that pushes it in, that's the surge. And in this time it pushed way up almost to Highway 90, which has never been done before.

Maynard: Right.

Wallace: OK. So what was your opinion of the local, state, and federal politicians before the hurricane?

Christian: We had very good ones. Have you heard of Trent Lott?

Wallace: No.

Christian: Well, he's been a politician for Mississippi for a long time, and Gene Taylor. They spearheaded all industry coming into the area before the hurricane. After the hurricane, they put all their personal problems aside—they all lost their houses and everything, too—they really worked with the government to do the best they could. They got every kind of assistance that we could get, so they were

fantastic. The local ones worked just as hard. We had, all along the Coast, all new mayors, young men, and it could've been a mess but they really went to the governor, they went to the other politicians that worked, and they all, it took all of them to get us the things that we got. They did a fantastic job.

Maynard: Mm-hm.

Christian: And that's a split ticket. (laughter)

Wallace: What do you mean by a split ticket?

Christian: One's a Republican and one's a Democrat.

Wallace: Oh, I see.

Christian: But we split the ticket because everybody loves both men and both men have always done their best.

Maynard: So what about the politics after the hurricane?

Christian: Well, they did as much as they could possibly do to get things through the government; I mean, the state's government, and then the federal government. They were going for *everything*. They were flying around right after the hurricane. Helicopters were a thing every day, all day long you heard helicopters, everybody coming. They were all coming down from Washington, too, to survey everything.

Wallace: OK, and how has the storm changed the way that you think about your community?

Christian: Well, I admire everybody that had lost things and I never heard one person say, "Poor me." Everybody started rolling up their sleeves, they're working, they're pulling things out of water, were trying to save things. Everything you got you had to stand in line for, and I stood in a lot of lines and never once did I see any fighting, jostling, or saying, "Well, that's my spot." This was mixed race and everyone was great. Everybody stood aside and they listened to what you had to say. It wasn't, shove you out of the way because it's my time. It was really good. It was amazing. I kept speaking about that when I was coming back.

Wallace: So how and when did you hear about Hurricane Katrina?

Christian: When the first wave left Africa. (laughter)

Wallace: Yeah?

Christian: We're so focused on hurricanes that when they start saying, like Tommy on our station would say, "Well, here's this wave we're watching from Africa coming

along.” So, you got it way in advance, and then you say, “Well, it’s a storm, but it could be a hurricane.” And then you get that for several days. Then finally they said, “Well, now it’s heading for this and it’s heading for that,” you know, so you get—you zone in on it and you say, well, now you got to take off. Or breathe a breath and say, “I feel sorry for them.” Nobody takes any glory in anybody going to another area because you know you’re going to get the same thing, too.

Wallace: Mm-hm. You said Tommy, who is that?

Christian: That was on Direct TV, Tommy on Channel 2.

Wallace: Uh-huh.

Christian: He’s a weatherman.

Wallace: Mm-hm.

Christian: He starts early.

Wallace: I see.

Christian: Everybody in the area—every state around the Gulf is very hurricane aware, so when they say hurricane you just pick your eyes up and ears up and just wait for where the bull’s eye comes.

Wallace: So when did you hear about like evacuation for the hurricane?

Christian: Well, generally that’s probably about four or five days before everybody’s alerted. We don’t know where it’s coming but be prepared, see. Then they’re kind of zoning it down and then you—you can decide at that time if you’re going out of town or if you’re going to—where you’re going to go. Since we were always going to my son’s, it was already done. We didn’t have to—because they wouldn’t get hit and get hurt as much. They’d lose trees but we’d have water, we’d have electricity and all that up there.

Wallace: Where is your son?

Christian: Where you just came down from.

Wallace: Oh, OK, from Hattiesburg?

Christian: Yeah, well, he’s in Richton, which is a little town, and Hattiesburg is thirty minutes away.

Wallace: I see.

Maynard: So you said you started to hear about it about four or five days before?

Christian: Uh-huh.

Maynard: So what was your initial reaction?

Christian: Everybody said, "Not again." But it's a foregone conclusion because you're living in an area and you're going to have hurricanes.

Maynard: So you just think of it as inevitability?

Christian: Yeah. Then you start thinking, well, you're already—I do and I think the majority of people do—you have a bag, I have a little bag and like just an overnight thing, but in it I always keep all my insurances there and as I pay the premium I stick it in it. So my file cabinet is this black leather bag and I have bank books in it and I have any personal papers that I have to have. I keep it in there and when the hurricane's coming, well, then I go out and I get—oh, I think this time I got about \$1,000 out of the bank—you go down and you get the car loaded with gas, and then as the days get nearer you do like all your laundry, get it all caught up so that you can just take it, because when you come back you may not have water. You take your shower and you do your hair. Now, that may sound very frivolous, but you don't know when you're going to get your hair done. In this case, I know all of us staying at Victoria's house, we were pretty ripe for about a week and a half with no showers. It was hot, we were sweating, couldn't wash your hair, and it was like that. Any water you could get you had to drink and, you know, kind of wipe and wash your face off a little later, but water was precious to drink. Chevron gave all the local only people the water free. They were going around giving it to you, but for basic cleanliness.

Wallace: So your friend Victoria is the one who—

Christian: My son's mother-in-law.

Wallace: —stayed behind with her son?

Christian: With her brother.

Wallace: Her brother.

Christian: Yes, and her other brother was across the street, and her son and his family was on the one side of us. Only one had got water in the floor, and he died about three days later after the hurricane.

Wallace: From what?

Christian: It wasn't hurricane related; it was an illness that he had gotten. He had gotten out of the hospital, was out for about a week and then he got worse, he got an infection.

Wallace: I see.

Maynard: So what was your experience as Hurricane Katrina approached? You were just preparing?

Christian: Yeah, uh-huh. You don't mess around with it. You always prepare and all. You will have to go out and buy batteries, and you get a jug of water and canned food and snack stuff, like that.

Maynard: Mm-hm.

Wallace: So you evacuated, you went up to Hattiesburg or—

Christian: No, that was our aim, that's where we always went, but this house was on Barb Street, which is probably a half a mile from Highway 90 and it was high ground. And I said, we didn't get water in the house at all. All her family was right there except her daughter-in-law who was up with my son. Victoria had another daughter whose husband worked at Chevron and they had two children. And they had a bayou by them; that's a little overgrown creek. (laughter) And that flooded her house. It was a brand new home. And so eventually she went, after the hurricane, to her brother and stayed with him. Then later my son brought the RV down and I went into the RV, and that daughter came over and lived with Victoria, so we were always there to help us. Victoria's job was to cook—she had gas in her house and she did the cooking, and I did the grocery shopping. That meant every morning I'd get up at six o'clock and we had to be at the grocery stores, and it was a long line all around the parking lot. When you go in, at first all you could buy was like paper plates and everything that was high on the shelf. Only one store was open and that was about three days later. A bread truck come in and we were able to get bread and snacky stuff, like Hostess cupcakes and anything that you could get that you could snack on, potato chips, anything. We were feeding sixteen people and it would cost me about a hundred dollars a day, and the next morning you had to go out again because there's no electricity to keep or preserve anything, and with sixteen people there was nothing left over.

Wallace: So you said your initial plan was to go up to your son's—

Christian: Yes.

Wallace: —and what's the name of the place near Hattiesburg?

Christian: Richton.

Wallace: Richton. So how come you weren't able, like how come you didn't do that?

Christian: Because I said Victoria's brother was so ill, he couldn't go.

Wallace: Oh, right, OK.

Christian: Yeah, and I didn't want to leave her alone. And her brother, another brother was across the street and her son was in the house next to us.

Wallace: Right.

Christian: We all went through it very fine.

Maynard: So there was sixteen people there?

Christian: Yeah, and more than that at meal time because people were bringing people and we had Victoria cooking on the stove and we had the grill outside. We'd start the grill and we'd have hamburgers or hot dogs, and before that we were trying to pick up stuff that was coming in that was all pre-packaged so that we knew it would be safe. And then we were picking up frozen fruit because they were getting fresh frozen food in. And then by that time the store was getting its regular stuff. So then they could just pick up anything.

Maynard: So all sixteen people were in the house like during the hurricane?

Christian: No, Victoria and Gus and I and her son would—he and his wife and two children came in to stay with us and they brought a couple of dogs with them. When you have animals or pets, you can't go to a shelter, and when you're in the shelter you're not released until everything's cleaned up, practically. So you may be in there from one day to a week. Where we were the City immediately started going down the beach with bulldozers to clean off the streets in order for—to have people come in, the police come in and like that. But they had to be cleaned up because houses would be in the middle of the street, so they had to bulldoze everything.

Wallace: So were people kind of weary about going to a shelter because of those reasons?

Christian: Yeah, and if you've been to them once, you know, everybody's crying, there are long lines to go to the bathroom, even though there are a lot of facilities. You bring your chair or something to sit on so, and you're all grouped together. It's the last place I wanted to go. (laughter) And if you have animals like that, you can't take them and you just can't put them out and you can't put them in the kennel because the kennel gets hit just like the rest of the town.

Wallace: Yeah.

Maynard: So how long did it take for help to arrive?

Christian: Oh, that was great. Our church, they had a group from South Carolina packed the night of the hurricane and they were allowed in the third day, see, for the streets to be open where help could come in. They went down to every church, every denomination kept bringing everything. First it was water and toilet paper. Then they would, every time they'd come they'd bring ice and then bring more food. They would bring buckets, and the bucket would have everything you'd need to clean the house—cleansing brushes, brooms, cloths to clean, rubber gloves, everything that you would need to clean the house, if you had one. Some people had some rooms on the second floor that came through and just the carpet had to be repaired, you know, because, you know, you lost everything. Like all my tools, we lost all the tools and everything. So everybody—oh, and Lowe's, the hardware store, was very good. When we had all these people come in, some brought tools and some didn't, and so Lowe's let a lot of people on consignment—like we had a special ticket for the Methodist church—and they would allow us like an electric saw and to set it up for us, and they would work on it. It was things like that. It was such a wonderful group effort on everybody—people coming in, the local people, the local stores and like that. We had to wait for the stores to get repaired enough to open up. Small groups were allowed in, probably five, ten, fifteen people at a time. There's no power in there so the lights were out, the cashiers were out, and you had to pay cash or pay by check. If you didn't have enough cash and you ran out of credit, with some people the way they did, Wayne Lee's would let you sign a book, and the same like when you'd go to the bank. Finally, a bank was open thirty miles away so we could go to the Hancock Bank and you could get two hundred dollars just on your signature and your bank card, and you could get money that way. But all the banks in town were all closed, you couldn't get money. So you have to make sure you have, no matter where you are, money available to you because in this case it was feeding sixteen people a day.

Maynard: So what is Wayne Lee's? It's like a financial institution?

Christian: It's a family grocery store, and they've been in this business for a long time, the family, and Jerry Lee and his father is Wayne Lee. Wayne Lee's opened first. Jerry's was at least five weeks before he could open up because he had more damage. It was Wayne Lee's above 90 Highway and Jerry Lee's is below, probably three blocks up from the Gulf of Mexico.

Wallace: So can you describe Hurricane Katrina for us?

Christian: Well, it's the first hurricane that I've been through that was in the daylight. Where I was, we were up higher, and it was raining. We were out on the patio lots of times looking around, and then when the rain started to go horizontally, (laughter) we went in. Then, just in a matter of time, the surge that I was talking about came up from the Gulf—and where I was is a mile and a half—and it came right up the highway and then it branched out on all the [side] streets. We have big garbage cans here that they pick up and dump into the truck, and they were floating down the

street. And white caps, white caps—can you believe that—on those streets. As they say, the yard was all full of water. My car was over at Victoria's and [water] only got on the tire, up that far, not to the rim, and that was only on one; we were under a carport. The wife of the son next door got a call from her mother; she had five feet of water just come in as fast as we saw the white caps go down, and they had to get up on all of the counters and stuff like that. So J.K., the son, he owns his own business and he has a tow truck.

Wallace: A tow truck.

Christian: Yeah, he has a big one, and the fenders are up high and all. So he said, well, he'd go down and get his mother-in-law and father-in-law, and he could only go to the end of the street. By that time it was higher. And it stayed at that level and then it went down because as the hurricane came in, it stayed for a while and then, it sucked everything right out into the Gulf. There have been some people that stayed in their house that had to break holes in their roof to get out. Now, you probably think it's funny—why would anybody stay? Well, it's because a lot of people come in, knowing the hurricane's going to be there, break into houses and steal things. Now, you can't stay; they've got the police, they got the National Guard, but it still happens. I don't think the majority of the people have ever thought it was going to be as bad as it was. I went through [Hurricane] Camille, which was that big one, and I was here in Mississippi a year before that, and that came up and I had a foot and a half of water in my house. This time I think if I was in the house it would be over the roof; that's how high it was. The town has never, ever had that. Half the town wasn't covered with flood insurance because it never got water, like Victoria's. Any little brook or bayou was full of water, so even in areas not right on the Gulf it would flood up, because of the downpour of the rain and bringing the surge of the water up.

Wallace: So what are some interesting or horrible or funny experiences that you had during the hurricane?

Christian: Well, I can't think of anything that was really too funny except that a mood that everybody had. You sort of were in shock. You may see something down on the ground, it may be your beautiful crystal (laughter), may be a Rolex watch. You look at it and you just don't have the energy or inclination to bend down and pick it up. (laughter) You're in a state of shock, and this is why I think we didn't have a lot of rioting and stuff that would happen because everybody was in a state of shock. Everybody was in the same boat. But then we started having help come in and a lot of them did a lot of good. A lot of them just weren't qualified to be doing their jobs, and a lot of them were setting up things in order to hurt the people. And this was one thing that was kind of bad. I have a girlfriend, she's the same, like we're the same age. She's a widow like I am. She had her own house all paid for. She had a good, healthy bank account. And so her whole bottom floor went down, washed out. And her upstairs had to have some repair but it was still OK, and a bit of work to be done on that, so a lot of her stuff was saved. But when it came time to hire somebody she had what she thought was a reliable man said he would come in and he'd do this and that,

and how much. You have to give them the money or they don't start it because they don't have any money to subsidize you in this hurricane. So she gave him nine thousand dollars and that was the end of it; she never saw him again. She went to a lawyer and they got him, and he had done it to several people in Mobile and he done to her. He was out on bail and he was in Ocean Springs, which is the next little community over there, doing it again. So there's people like that, that you trust, you know, and it cost her nine thousand dollars. If she continued to try to pursue it, it would cost her more with a lawyer than she'd ever get out of it because he was out on bail and he was doing it to everybody else.

(brief interruption)

Christian: So it was pretty much on the same line with, um, when you have to prepare with bathroom facilities, you have to have jugs of water and all for the flushing. So we ran out of water. So J.K., next door, had a swimming pool. It was built up above the ground and so we'd go over there and get buckets of water from there and flush with it. But either that or you go outside behind the buildings.

Wallace: Yeah. So how long did it take you for you to be able to go back to your house?

Christian: I couldn't go back to it. It was completely destroyed, the house and everything in it. I stayed at Victoria's I think it was about three weeks, and then my son—and the highways were clearing up, so he brought down the RV and we used the facilities at Victoria's connected, and then her daughter and husband and two daughters, two grandchildren came over and they took the bedroom that I was staying in. So that meant when we were getting water and everything, we could start washing clothes because all of Francis' clothing in the house was sopping wet, drapes were wet, bedspreads were wet. So Victoria and I would do our laundry when I got back from grocery shopping, and we'd try to catch up on it because Francis' job was with an insurance company and she had to be down to answer telephone calls and leaving messages on the door, so Victoria and I kind of helped with her children. Then we had some of the others that were going to go out, another son Robert and his wife were going to help her in-laws, so they brought the children over to us, so we were sort of like glorified babysitters. I got a total of sixteen, it was, either way depending on who was dropping everybody off.

Maynard: Yeah. When did you know that your house was totally destroyed?

Christian: I asked J.K.—because you couldn't go out, you could get fined if you went out before you were allowed to go on the street because of the bulldozer. To be insured you have to have bonded people working on things. J.K. was able to go out because he had that wrecker truck, tow truck, so FEMA asked him to pick up any car, just give the people a ticket and he was to bring them up like at the Fair Grounds, a big area, so then the insurance people can go up and all those cars were insured. He would go out and he'd be gone almost all day long bringing cars up, and so I said,

“When you’re out, would you swing by the house and see what’s happened?” When he came back that night, he said to me, “I hate to tell you this.” I said, “You better tell me.” And he says, “Well, at first I could hardly find your house, but it’s flat on the ground.” And he said—I live next door to a Dr. Millett. J.K. came on up to him and he asked, “I’m looking for Mrs. Christian’s house. Could you tell me where it is?” He said, “Right there on the ground.” His house, it was a gorgeous thing, and it was ripped apart in like three great big sections, you know. And he’s going to have to rebuild but he’s going to have to go up, I think, seventeen feet before he can put anything up. Before it was just gorgeous; all flat on the ground, gorgeous shrubbery, and he lost everything.

Wallace: What was your reaction when he told you that your house was gone?

Christian: I said, “Oh, my God,” because I’d had a wonderful time here for so many years. You have to be ready for shocks and shifting of everything in your life. Everything you get used to, pretty soon it’s going to shift, so you better be open to it. I started accepting it as a lost member of the family. If a family member died, I would feel this strong attachment but I have to let them go, and I was one of the first ones that they were going to do a trial run on to take the house stuff away, and FEMA was doing that free. Some people were in earlier, and for seven thousand dollars—one man stopped and said for seven thousand dollars he’d clear it all off. I waited a little bit; FEMA came in and did it for nothing. FEMA said that they’re going to check everybody out, there’d be about forty young men running around checking things on the house to see, on the slab. But like even your TV, if they could find your TV, it’s got gas in the tubes, you have to put it in a separate pile. You have to put all your white things, which is your refrigerators, your washer, your dryer, and I had a garden swimming pool—I mean bathtub, you know, one of those you walked up on it and then you’re in this big square thing. It was half in the tree and half on the ground. The toilet sat in the front yard, three of them, and you could see where it was just ripped right out of the cement. J.K. hated to tell me. So every evening what we did, because no air conditioning, no lights, we sat out on the front porch and he and his wife and children would come over and we’d sit and we’d talk, just like people used to do years ago. They’d come across the street and we’d all just talk and talk. It was a nice—it wasn’t sweaty, it was cool in the evening, and then we’d see people coming in, like New Jersey would be working on the lights a couple of blocks over and we’d try to judge when they’d hit us, and that kind of thing. We were able to tell different people, like J.K. could swing around and tell someone to make sure that person’s all right. So it was that kind of thing.

Maynard: Kind of brought a new dynamic to your community.

Christian: Yeah, yeah.

Wallace: So what did you do before the hurricane, like what was your job?

Christian: Oh, I was retired at this age. I volunteered for a couple of days down at the library and I do oil paints. I had shows and everything, and my house, I had it all decorated with paintings and sculpture and like that, and so I would be working on all that type of thing. I'd go to the library to work on some of my genealogy stuff, plus volunteered two days. So that would be about it. We'd go to church and we'd have different friends that'd stop by and we'd go out to lunch. That would be it.

Maynard: How did it make you feel to lose all your artwork?

Christian: Well, I got eighteen pieces back. Can you believe that? I had a little repair work to do on some. I had to scrape mud off of some and it was like clay and it had leaves in it, and I'd use a paring knife and I'd scrape right down to the canvas on the backside, the front side having oil and have it sprayed, that was always pretty good; all I had to do was take cotton tee shirt, a little bit of mild Ivory soap and I'd wash the front. Everybody was calling me. A frame shop called me, different people called me, and I had one friend going to a girlfriend's house, and the girlfriend said, "Look at the painting I found." And Mary said, "I know who that belongs to." So she just took it; she brought it up to me where I was staying and it was a painting I had done of my son when he was fifteen years old. He was in an electric band with a guitar, and church related, they went all over Mississippi playing. But his painting was all right. I got in, and what I did with this new apartment—it's just a big one-room apartment, but it has a kitchen and bathroom and four closets which were empty for a long time. (laughter) I didn't buy any dishware, I just used paper plates, and tended to do that for a long time. I decided that all these people that bought my paintings over the years had lost their houses or were rebuilding, and they were morally just exhausted, so since the hurricane I have spent almost every afternoon doing paintings and getting them framed and giving it to the different people who had purchased one, and everyone has been so thrilled to have something new that I had done for them, you know.

Maynard: That's wonderful.

Christian: You know, I enjoy doing it, too. I only got three pieces of sculpture back. I had a nativity scene where they were about this tall and about ten pounds of clay in it. I've only got three pieces and it's got all little nicks on it. I bought a dining room table for a desk, and I just bought three chairs so that I can do my genealogy—not cook, you notice—just do my genealogy, put my sculpture there, and it's sort of like a hobby room now. I like that. I don't have much housework to do; fifteen minutes, it's all done for the whole week. (laughter) Instead of spending a whole day out gardening and getting help to clean the house. I tell you one thing that kind of struck me funny was getting things back that you have to do, like your hair. You have to—you need to get the shampoo, you had to get the conditioner, you had to get the curling iron, you had to get the dryer, you had to get bobby pins, you had to get rollers, I mean, just to do your hair. That was with *everything*. I had to take one subject and then work around it, see. One would be, "I'll go out shopping for underwear today," you know. Or if I saw a blouse, I said, "Oh, I think I'll buy that. Oh, no, I've got

three of them at home.” You don’t have anything at home, you don’t even have a home. So you get caught up like that, see.

Maynard: So it would kind of be like an aftershock, like you would think of something and then you’d be like, “Oh, wait, I don’t have that anymore.”

Christian: You don’t have it and it lasts for a long time. I had terrific things for me because they were family related, and you don’t have it. I had photographs, I love photographs a lot, and I had a photograph of my grandfather having an old car, a Model-T car, and I was a child sitting on the ground in front of it about four years old and, of course, I don’t have that now. I mean, it’s priceless to me, but anybody else. That’s another thing that people did that was priceless, they—if there’s a piece of wood or cardboard or anything they could put things on, they set it up in the yard and were putting photographs on it. Everybody had photographs in their yard. I had, also, a toy chest, all plastic and it was about, probably about that deep and about that wide, and it was on wheels. I opened it up and it was full of water but it was full of toys, and you know, you’re wondering if that child knows that his toys have survived or are they real old and they were kept as keepsakes. So what I did was I rolled it to the front of the yard and, well, a man did it because it was so heavy and he tipped it so that the water would be out. Then I just took the cover off and put it by it so anybody that was walking by, they may recognize their things, see. Nobody did. So I brought it over to the place I live—the toys were excellent—rinsed them off, and then there’s a group in the church that was bringing toys to kids that had nothing, so we just took the whole thing over there and gave it to them.

Wallace: So you said that there were children with you when—

Christian: Yeah.

Wallace: —the hurricane happened. How did they take it?

Christian: Well, the ones that were with us were older. When Victoria’s daughter came over, hers were younger children, they probably were in the fourth and fifth grade, that type of thing, and they weren’t affected too much. At that age, most children just think of themselves, and we’d give them little jobs to do. And one of the—the older daughter, I think she was ten or eleven at the time, we went to her house. Franny asked me to come because I’d been through storms before and she just didn’t know where to start. And so some people had gone in and pulled all the flooring out they had just put in. They have new flooring down, it was very beautiful. And they just threw it in the back yard, so I said, “We’ve got to get that all out of the backyard, because everything will mildew,” and they come around with trucks to pick up everything. Franny and I decided to make a game out of doing it because near the end of the afternoon Olivia was just exhausted. So I said to Franny, “Well, how many more trips do you think it’ll take before we get this all out?” And Franny said, “Well, I’m not sure.” And I said, “Well, I think the winner ought to get this big bottle of soda.” (laughter) So Franny and I, we’re like, “I know I’ll make it. I know I’m going

to make it.” You know, with the numbers, like I took fifteen minutes, and Olivia took less, so boy, we had to hustle so Olivia would get it. She was thrilled to death with the prize. So, you know, with children you have to entertain them.

Maynard: Yeah.

Christian: Yeah, and they were—every time we went to get groceries every morning, a child wanted to go with me. I said I’d take one at a time, and they would help me. We needed a lot of *chips* and stuff, so we got *a lot* of chips and stuff. (laughter)

Wallace: So what issues do you anticipate in rebuilding the city?

Christian: What did I what, now?

Wallace: What issues do you anticipate in rebuilding the city?

Christian: Well, the governor did one of the smartest things I’ve ever seen done. He, before the hurricane—I mean, you knew it was coming—he sent out to all the different people who work in cities modernizing them or putting up what is the most prized thing now in architecture, to redo the whole Coast because it was all old cities and all hit-and-miss type thing. So he had this whole group come in and they come down and each had a section, and they looked at it and every one of them wanted us to build up higher but make like fruit stands or little boutique stuff that could be washed out on the bottom, and that people like to live more in the *active* area so that they would have apartments for rent upstairs but small, knock-away things downstairs and eliminate a lot of the car traffic and let it go around the town, and have a bicycle, go-cart type work and then live in a little city. And all of them went that way. They used one town in Florida and it worked out so good—they had done Florida after a storm—and it worked so beautifully that it’s more like stepping a little bit back into the past to take and have places of these to get together to have walking trails, bicycle trails, and even like we have a train goes through now but they are thinking of moving the whole train up over to 10, Interstate 10. So the train tracks would be moved up there, but where train tracks were left put like trolleys to go over to Mobile.

Wallace: Mm-hm.

Christian: And go to New Orleans, that type of thing. And everybody kind of likes the idea, and so I think we’re all going to kind of go that way. Everything else, all like the schools have—people have adopted and come in, all the schools have all the newest equipment. We had computers before, but now they’ve got the new computer stuff. Instead of blackboards, everything is projected on the walls, electronic, people come in and set it all up and that type of thing.

Maynard: So like, what went on with your property? Like it was bulldozed, right, the remains of your house?

Christian: Yeah, they came in, it was five truckloads on an eighteen-wheeler truck and the last one was all that white stuff in the front. And a tree, they just had the small little bulldozer-type thing. It would grab a tree and pull out the whole root, and pop it on the cement slab and then go up on it and reach down and grab a limb off of that big tree, snap it back and then put it up and into the truck, and then the dozer, it would push it down into the truck. I found—my mother was blind, my mother lived with me for over ten years—she had crocheted me a beautiful afghan, a cream colored little afghan, and Robert and his sister and brother and I were walking all over the house, the roof, and looking around, and there was this gray thing and it had all holes in it and stuff. I couldn't imagine what it was, and then all of a sudden it hit, it was my mother's afghan. I took it home and Victoria laundered it for me for about two or three times and I've laundered it since, and it's back to its original color. I mended the back of it so it doesn't show and I got my afghan back. And there's one other thing, when J.K. would go down after work, he came back the first night and he said to me, "You won't guess what I found." I said, "What?" I was so amazed you could find anything. He brought me the gold bracelet that Dick had given to me on our first wedding anniversary. And then the next night he found a silver mirror which had a head on it with hair, those old fashioned type, well it was my grandmother's and she had given it to my mother and my mother had given it to me, and that came through. The silver was sort of, not shiny—

Wallace: Tarnished?

Christian: —it was sort of dulled up—yeah. The glass was a mess because water had gotten behind the glass. But, you know, when you pick it up you thought of the relationships and how it come down to you, and it was like getting it new, the enjoyment came to you again. So I started wearing that bracelet that Dick had given me and I looked down on the floor in my apartment, and there it was on the floor. So I said, "I'll lose it if I wear it." It's a snap kind of a thing and so I just put it in the drawer, no jewelry box, of course, just put it in the drawer. It was little things like that that would lift your spirits up. Every time you walked into a store or something—this is the beauty of being in a small town—is that you see someone you knew and everybody would come up and hug you, and they'll say, "Well, how are you doing?" you know, just your health. Then a period of time would go by and they'll say, "Well, how is your house coming?" Then a period time would go by, and so, "Well, where are you now?" (laughter) I mean, everybody was worried about everybody else. And that's a small town; the beauty of a small town. Big city, I imagine they'd have some bonding, but not like this.

Wallace: So what did you do with your property after it was—

Christian: After it was all stripped down, I didn't do anything for about a year because I didn't know what they were going to do. Well, finally, after all the different meetings with the superintendents and then with the government still being slow on figuring out how high to make the flood water [elevation levels], I waited to get it, so I got all that information now. Anybody that rebuilds, they have to go up seventeen

feet, and I'm sure there's fifty million other things, like you have to get hurricane windows and like that. I had told my son the next time there was another hurricane I wasn't going to rebuild. I had gone through Georges, too, and had about a foot of water, so I had redone my whole house. I put extra money into it and knocked down walls and modernized it. I had all new cabinets and all new bathrooms, and it was a brand new home. And I said, "That was great; I had it for seven years. I don't want to rebuild and have to go up those stairs, I'll just bury it and I'll just go to a place that I would've eventually gotten to probably in about another ten years, because yard work would be too hard for me then and a lot of housework would be, so I got a little bit of play time in early." (laughter)

Maynard: So how would they build the houses up seventeen feet?

Christian: Hoping that when another surge came in it would go right underneath.

Maynard: Oh, I see, like up on stilts?

Christian: Yeah, but there's nothing underneath. You cannot enclose it, so it looks horrible. And you can only put that boarding is like batten board; it's only about that wide -- it's just a light trimming board.

Maynard: Oh, lattice?

Christian: You make the squares. It's just the little squares, lattice work.

Maynard: Yeah, mm-hm.

Christian: OK.

Wallace: Oh yeah.

Christian: Well, you could put that on a stand and put it in front of the basement but you can't nail it into the basement. You have to have everything under there that will be just a breakaway.

Wallace: Yeah.

Christian: Or nothing, see. You have to go up all of that. That means you've got to bring all your sewer line up and your gas and your water, and I didn't want to bother with that.

Wallace: Mm-hm.

Christian: The building I'm in is hurricane proof, although the bottom floor did get washed out because of the hurricane. It's already repaired and they've already had the apartments rented, but it was built out of cement block, but either with cement or sand

in every block in the whole apartment. Each apartment is cement block, soundproof; you don't hear anybody. It went through the hurricanes from Camille on, no trouble.

Maynard: So when did you move into this new apartment? How long after?

Christian: I moved in September the nineteenth and the hurricane was, what, the twenty-ninth of August. I stayed that little bit with Victoria and I changed my driver's license and everything. Then after I got into the apartment I had to go back. That meant I had to wait, people changing, getting their license and getting all the paperwork. It was at the fair grounds and it was packed, and you had to sit and you progressed a chair at a time. Since I had already done it the weeks or two before, I had to pay five dollars more just to have it changed out.

Maynard: Mm-hm. So did you have a car then after the hurricane?

Christian: Yeah, I was so fortunate because I had this old car. My husband bought me an Oldsmobile. It just ran so well, it was twenty years old. Something went wrong, the air conditioning wasn't on, and I said, "Well, shoot, I'm going to get a new car." Everybody used to tease me about that car. So, I decided "Well, I'm going to buy a new car." So I went over to the garage there, and I told them, "Now," I said, "have you got a woman [sales person] in here?" This woman said, "Well, I'm the only one." I said, "OK." I said, "I just want to talk to you." I said, "Now, I want a car." I said, "I've got this old one. You don't have to tell me about anything because I don't know a thing about the running of the car." I said, "I just want a car that's going to go when I want it to go." She says, "Well, I've got this Taurus." So I bought this Taurus. It was a little old—I think they had, the people before used to own the Collie Towing System with the big boats, the tug boats. She and her husband took a new car every year, and then they traded it in. Well, I had her car. I got it Fourth of July weekend, and then August we had the thing [storm], and I put it under Victoria's carport in back of hers. She had a Taurus and I had a Taurus. Just the back end of mine was sticking out and only about that much in the one wheel. So I had a car and it was full of gas, but everything I had to do took gas. We had to get money out of the bank. I had to go thirty miles up to Escatawpa, which is a nice little town, and get some money. Then everything you did you had to go out of the way in order to get it.

Wallace: So did a lot of people lose their cars?

Christian: Oh yeah. Now, this is the sad part, see, is because all of those people had those beautiful homes down on the Coast, they worked hard for everything they got, so they have their beautiful home, they have probably a couple of kids, they have a couple of cars, they have at least one boat, and they probably had a business and it's all wiped out. The insurance is fighting and fighting and fighting, and unless they had flood insurance, which they may have had on the house, but it depends upon your insurance company, how much you're going to get. The cars—either FEMA would only allow you so much, you know, how old it is and all of that. If they needed money to feed their kids, and I think they were—when they finally got to the banks they were

trying to take out the kids' college money in order to feed [and clothe] the kids. And, I mean, the kid had to have all clothing and school supplies because after the hurricane they had to go back to school in a couple of months. Some of the schools doubled up and some are closed while it's being repaired.

Wallace: I remember seeing some pictures of cars in trees, and stuff.

Christian: Yeah.

Wallace: Did you see a lot of that?

Christian: Well, I didn't in the small town, but the hurricane before Georges, there was a man, he had a business and he had a heavy machine and his wife had a brand new car, so he put it underneath, lifted it up as high as it would go, and that may have been one of the cars up high. He was trying to save his wife's car because it was brand new, but that was during Hurricane Georges that that happened—this time, no. There was cars in swimming pools.

Wallace: Mm-hm.

Christian: And J.K. had to pull them out of the swimming pool.

Wallace: Oh, in her own swimming pool?

Christian: Some of them had it—yeah, a couple of them went right into the swimming pool. They probably took the one car for the family to get out of town and if you don't go out of town early enough, you're stuck on the highway like you're just crawling. And you may be on that highway during a hurricane because the motels are filled. I don't know if you do this up in Canada but hurricane is coming, you get the notice, the policemen and the firemen take the families up to a point for all the motels that they stay in, then they come back. So their mind is free, knowing their family is safe.

Wallace: Yeah.

Christian: And then they stay and work all kind of hours, and they live in the fire company house or like that, see. And that is one of the things that you've got to keep in mind, too, about it. With the car that would be left at home would be damaged, the water would come in. Even if you clean the outside, if you go buy a car maybe in Alabama or Florida, you should lift up the mat and everything and look because it's probably that same car. They hurry up, change the oil in it, and sell it to unsuspecting people.

Wallace: Yeah.

Christian: And that's what they do if they have a flood up any place, and it should be against the law. And now there's a law passed that you have to give a history of a car, so that protects the people.

Maynard: So did you see some interesting things in the debris, like—

Christian: Oh yeah, everything like—our minister was looking for three weeks to find his other kayak. He and his son used to go kayak riding when they'd take vacations, and he found his son's but he never found his own. The same family had a beautiful nativity scene and they lost the whole thing out in the yard, but she was walking around and she found one of her beautiful China cups, and in the cup was the baby from the nativity scene.

Wallace: Aw.

Christian: In the cup, and it was porcelain. I mean, my roof was down and I got about eight porcelain cups I got up in that cabinet. Isn't it amazing?

Maynard: So you found some of your things in the debris, then?

Christian: Oh yeah. At night—the little things like I told you, the bracelet, the sterling set with the mirror, and my mother's afghan, but that's about it. The stuff was sort of underneath that roof and they'd go down and pick around and find it.

Wallace: There were a lot of people doing that with their houses, too, trying to find whatever they could?

Christian: Yeah, and sometimes people were doing it and it wasn't their house. That's why I say, if you can get back into the town right after, you can protect whatever you have. Of course, this time there was not much to protect, but the other hurricanes—I remember the first one with Camille, truckloads of people were going around and seeing which houses were being evacuated. So when the storm come, everybody should be out of town, then they make hits on the house and break into businesses and steal bicycles and TVs and you have that.

Wallace: Yeah.

Maynard: So how far from your old house is your new apartment?

Christian: Beachwise, up from the beach. I'm probably about a block further up, but to go from the apartment to the house I'm probably about two to three miles. I'm in Market Street and the next street, it's in between Chicot and Fourteenth Street. Fourteenth Street and Market Street; I was right down there. So, you know, it's probably about a mile, maybe a mile and a half. I could walk it without much trouble.

Wallace: So do you think a lot of people have abandoned their houses for good? Do you think they'll return ever or—

Christian: Well, see, that all depends upon their finances.

Wallace: Yeah.

Christian: What they're doing—this is a thing that I think is wrong, too, is that they're putting up big homes. I mean *big* homes. And the majority of the people are in a moderate income. Those houses should be being built back, the people that are in the trailers that need the home. Now, we had a section of old homes that were repaired and that was, we used to call them “Navy homes,” they were built in World War II. Those houses stood up because they were all well made. They had good wood in them, they over-crossed [had diagonal boards], bound on the side, with the things. They all survived. They had a little repair work on their roof and like that, but the new houses, they come in with all of this fiberglass this and staple gun that, you know, and all, and they all blew away. (laughter)

Wallace: Yeah, so it was mostly the newer homes that were gone.

Christian: Yeah, but see what they're replacing them back with is all of the big homes. And when you buy [a house like] this—I don't know if you're aware of it, but if I still owed on my home and I lost it, I'd still have to pay that mortgage payment off before I can build a new one. Now, that means you have to take a loan out to cover your losses; that might be the house, the car, and the boat in order to get back a house. Now, you know, you can't go back with the quality that you had before because you have to pay off the old house.

Wallace: Yeah.

Christian: And what a lot of them were doing, in order to get a bigger house, people were having it financed, but low payments so that all they were doing was just paying on the principal of the thing, not on the whole main loan to pay it off. They wanted a big house, and the only way to afford it was to stretch everything out longer.

Wallace: Hm.

Christian: So a lot of people had been doing that because of finances before, they built and bought their great big homes, great big ones.

Wallace: Yeah, so has everything been pretty much cleaned up then, where you're from?

Christian: Yeah, well, they're all slabs. If you get an opportunity, this is what you would have to do is drive down—almost all the streets go down to the Gulf—and drive down and ride the Beach Boulevard and see the houses. Some are being built

back, and it all depends upon—how waves come in, you know; some come in and then you have the swooping ones. Well, where the (inaudible) part was probably just some damage to a house, a house might be standing, but then when the wave part comes up the whole house is gone and just a slab and big hunks of the road was pulled out, and trees were pulled right out, great big, big trees, live oak trees and all, and they were pulled out.

Maynard: So our time is almost wrapping up.

Christian: OK.

Maynard: And I just wanted to—how has Hurricane Katrina changed you?

Christian: Well, I went from owning my own home to renting an apartment. I think I still intend to stay here. I love the area. I think anybody that lives on the Coast, whether if it's here or if it's on the East Coast, West Coast, people will have storms. If you're in the middle of the country you have tornadoes; no matter what it is. But with a hurricane you get a warning. You have, (laughter) from the wave of Africa you have a week or so or more to adjust. And every night on TV somebody's hurting somewhere, a front's come in or they're up on a snow blizzard some place, there's always something.

Wallace: So is there anything that you would like to add that we haven't asked you?

Christian: Well, no, I think I've embroidered on everything enough so that you get kind of a clear picture of everything. Most of my girlfriends have their house all built back and the hardest thing was to get contractors to come back. They say, "Well, we'll be there Friday and lay your floor." They'll bring the floor in and start in boxes, and they'll say, "We'll be here Friday; we're going to lay it." So you're home Friday, you're home Saturday, you're home Sunday, and two weeks later, three weeks later, finally they come in and lay your floor. It's been like that with everything. Everything; electrical work, all the contractors, subcontractors, and sometimes the quality of the work wasn't as good as the original contractors would have done, you have all those problems.

Wallace: And they probably take advantage of older people, too.

Christian: Yeah. But there also was a flood of all these people come from all over. This was the most fantastic thing. The town was, you could say, destroyed, but the force of the storm to do that was horrible, but the force of the love and understanding of the people that came was just fantastic. It was sort of like a religious revival, and hope and love of the state. And every church, we got some denomination that had people coming and working and we had people that were staying in our upstairs, the bottom part of the church had been flooded, and they were sleeping on Sunday school rooms on the floor to help us. These buildings still had five feet of water that went flying through, but they gave up their air conditioned homes or heated homes and

come down to this filth and the crud and, the buildings are coming down and they got all this stuff in the air. Since I didn't have much that I had to do, at four o'clock in the morning I'd go down to the church and we were feeding them [the volunteers] breakfast and stuff. And then another group would come in and do their lunch and supper. And we did that until the whole group left. But they kept coming back to us, coming back to us, and we had people that had come back at least four and five times from South Carolina, North Carolina, and we had some from California. Every state had come down and had done it [helped us]. And they keep coming back and coming back, and you can't imagine, unless you're on the receiving end what this is like to know that *everybody in the whole country* is worrying about you. OK, I think it's time for me to go.

Maynard: Thank you so much, Ruth.

Christian: OK.

Wallace: That was wonderful, thank you.

(end of interview)