

T. Harry Williams Center for Oral History Collection

ABSTRACT

INTERVIEWEE NAME: Angel Nicosia Aucoin

COLLECTION: 4700.1949

IDENTIFICATION: Nurse at Memorial Medical Center / Southern Baptist Hospital at time of Hurricane Katrina

INTERVIEWER: Mary Price

SERIES: Voices in the Storm: Hurricane Katrina Survivors in Pointe Coupee Parish

INTERVIEW DATE: March 22, 2007

FOCUS DATES: 2005-2007

ABSTRACT:

Tape 3809

Introduction; Aucoin born in 1968 in New Orleans to Ronald and Judy Nicosia; grew up in Poydras, St. Bernard Parish, Louisiana; always wanted to be a nurse; went to nursing school in New Orleans after having two children; nursing jobs at various hospitals; at time of Hurricane Katrina, she worked in the emergency room at Memorial Medical Center, commonly known as Southern Baptist Hospital; decision to stay in New Orleans through the storm; her children were with their father and evacuated; the hospital was busy leading up to the storm, elderly people were being dropped off by family members who were evacuating; no attempt to evacuate the hospital before the storm; hospital had no emergency food or water; generators in the basement were flooded right away; danger of addicts seeking drugs in the aftermath of storms; Aucoin left briefly to get her cats, met up with her parents and grandmother who refused to evacuate, all returned to the hospital; it was hard on her having them there, trying to take care of them; storm arriving on Sunday night, windows blowing out, flooding, structural damage to the building; next morning after storm passed, they began cleanup efforts; tried to talk her dad, mom, and grandmother into leaving the city but they refused, which probably saved their lives; flood water started rising rapidly; she monitored the rising water in a stairwell; decision to start evacuating patients, starting with the sickest; coordinating staff and helicopter crews to evacuate patients to other hospitals; Coast Guard helicopter working between her hospital and Tulane; describes route that staff had to take through the hospital, carrying patients in wheelchair and stretchers through dark hallways, stairwells, and the parking garage; assembly line for moving patients continued for hours, they needed to keep a steady flow of patients for the helicopters; hospital staff broke a hole through a wall of the parking garage to speed the process; difficulty of staying safe while operating two helicopters on a single helipad; by Monday after the storm, lack of food, intense heat, operating in survival mode; evacuated most patients before the helicopters left to assist other hospitals; lack of communication by radio and cell phone made evacuation

difficult; a good Samaritan in an airboat started evacuating patients; Aucoin sent several nurses along with patients being evacuated by airboat; airboat captain had friends with airboats come and assist in evacuation; there was no plan for evacuation, they just waited on people to come; got down to only forty-four patients; people hadn't eaten for days, no food or water arrived while she was there; after all she did to evacuate patients, she felt it was time to leave with her family; hospital CEO said she would lose her job if she left, so she quit; there was no plan to get people out; prior to her leaving, people were wading through floodwaters with elderly and dying people, attempting to leave them at the hospital; one man had several children on a makeshift raft and they had to turn him away; hospital was unsafe and unsanitary with no bathroom facilities; she and others were distressed, crying, while waiting for rescue; she couldn't wait anymore, had to get her family out; hospital was completely open to people seeking drugs; helpless feeling of seeing patients struggling when she and other staff could do nothing for them; breaking windows to get airflow and light into the hospital; conditions indoors were intolerable; airboat dropped them off at intersection of Napoleon and St. Charles Avenues; used a pay phone to try calling her brother, Perry; contacted a friend of Perry's and reported their location; waited for hours and Perry never showed, later learned that police roadblocks kept him from entering the city; area where they were waiting was dangerous, drunks and looters everywhere; she appealed to a military officer to get them out of the area, they were in a group of seventeen people; moved by truck to the Convention Center; she had a bad feeling that was confirmed when they saw a Red Cross golf cart turned on its side; the place had a stench, they went from bad to worse there; people seeking drugs in the hospital and on the street; used a payphone at the Convention Center to try reaching her brother again; people waiting for the phones were rude to her; assumed there had to be a government plan for evacuating when there was none; at the Convention Center, enduring several shootouts, people were being raped and murdered; people started running when a shooting started, probably rival gangs meeting; devising a plan to get away from the Convention Center, approached a man with a Ryder truck and negotiated for him to take her and her group away; she promised him payment and lied about having a gun so that he would take her group; driver's girlfriend was pregnant and Aucoin examined her in the truck; her plan was to get to West Jefferson Hospital where she used to work; told driver to go the wrong way on the bridge to avoid the police barricade; disappointed herself in turning away an old man and his sick wife who wanted to get on the truck; arriving at West Jefferson Hospital and having guns drawn on them, being told to leave; Aucoin saw an EMT she used to work with and begged him for help; driver refused to take her money but she gave it to him anyway; ER director that she used to work with came out and allowed them to come into the hospital; newborn baby in their group was taken care of by two ER nurses; they were able to eat and she cleaned off with a gallon of water; they had until 8 am to leave the hospital; was able to contact her brother who explained the police roadblocks; got word that her children had evacuated; contacted state troopers to arrange for her brother and another driver come get them out; they made it through the roadblock thanks to coordination with police, arrived to pick up her group of seventeen; made several stops to drop people off in different cities, she wound up in Lake Charles, Louisiana; later rented a car and went to Baton Rouge but it was overcrowded; learned from her brother that she lost everything in St. Bernard; New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin refused to evacuate hospitals ahead of the storm; at the Convention Center, staying together as a group to protect themselves; praying and wondering how this situation happened; she only encountered one police officer at the Convention Center, never saw any military presence there; she never slept the whole week she was at the hospital, had to keep watch; the period after the storm brought out the best in people,

not during; her current home, furnishings, clothes are all donated; keeping in touch with people from her group of evacuees; reads a thank you note that she wrote to Connie, director of the ER at West Jefferson, who sheltered her group; she arrived in New Roads, Pointe Coupee Parish, three weeks after Katrina; her parents and grandmother are there with her now; she owns a Christian bookstore in town, decided not to return to nursing; stayed in New Roads because of the people; was able to get her kids in school for no cost; First Baptist Church donated household needs; a local woman, Nancy, let Aucoin live in her barn temporarily; lucky that she and her family had no major health impacts from floodwater; where she lived in St. Bernard Parish is completely devastated; she can deal with her temporary living situation and hopes to own another home one day; conclusion

TAPE: 1 (T3809)

TOTAL PLAYING TIME: 1 hour, 31 minutes

PAGES TRANSCRIPT: 54 pages

PHOTOGRAPHS / PHOTOGRAPHER: 1 photo taken during interview. Photographer David Breidenbach

OTHER MATERIALS: Voices in the Storm reception program (2 pgs)

RESTRICTIONS: None