

T. Harry Williams Center for Oral History Collection

ABSTRACT

INTERVIEWEE NAME: Gwendolyn Ridgley

COLLECTION: 4700.1955

IDENTIFICATION: Retired teacher, New Orleans resident who survived Hurricane Katrina

INTERVIEWER: Myrna Matherne

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

INTERVIEW DATE: May 4, 2007

FOCUS DATES: 2005-2007

ABSTRACT:

Tape 3815, Side A

Introduction; rainy weather on day of interview brings back memories for Ridgley; she grew up in New Roads, Louisiana; attended Southern University, then worked in New Orleans as a special education teacher; hearing that Hurricane Katrina was approaching, friends wanted her to leave but she always stayed; she and her dog, Galaxy, went to her friend Pat's home during Katrina; the storm passed in the night, the next morning damage seemed minimal; suddenly noticed that water was getting into the house and alerted Pat; she and Pat used to tease about people getting trapped in their attics in Hurricane Betsy; she and Pat prepared to get in the attic, Pat had her elderly mother put shoes on; water knocked down the front door of the house and they retreated into the attic with some tools; nine to ten feet of water was in the home within minutes; making themselves comfortable in the attic and praying; sleeping in the attic with no means of communication, although they had a working television; reports on TV asked people to get to the Superdome or Convention Center; water receded a bit and they ventured downstairs, got some food and water out of the freezer which was floating; deciding to cut through the roof when the water seemed to be rising again; busted out a turbine and began sawing to widen that opening; she was speechless at the first sight of her completely flooded neighborhood; had no idea the whole city was flooded; they waved a towel at passing helicopters but none stopped because they were rescuing people from the water; speaking with neighbors on nearby roofs; retrieving a ladder from Pat's garage; praying for the Lord to get them out and a boat appeared just at that moment; boat pilot was rescuing people from their flooded homes, she asked him to come back for them and he did; used the ladder to help them get into the boat with Pat's mother and Galaxy; the man who rescued them was a good Samaritan in his personal boat; many other people like him helped to rescue people from the flood; they got off the boat at Chef Menteur Highway after picking up other people; rough crowd on Chef Menteur Highway, where they were told a bus would pick them up; declined opportunity to let Pat's mother be evacuated with other elderly because they didn't want to be separated; a van took them to Loews Bus Company; lucky that she was able to bring Galaxy with her; shelter they arrived at had only around twenty-five other people there, was stocked with food and water; guards came the next morning and ordered everyone be taken to Baton Rouge; they got on a bus, other people had dogs with them;

leaving the city in Interstate 10, they could see the extent of the flooding; people stranded on the highway in wheelchairs and with babies; no room on the bus so they had to leave people; bus went through Westwego, stopped in Sorrento for fuel and continued to Baton Rouge; her mother's neighbor picked them up at a Holiday Inn there; she's blessed not to have ended up at the Superdome or Convention Center; she never gave up hope; after arriving in New Roads, got clothes at Wal-Mart and went to the doctor; she's glad to be back in New Roads with her mom; Pat and her mother are now living in Houston, Texas; Ridgley misses her friends, is sad that there are many people she'll never see again; travels to New Orleans often because she's active with the retiree chapter of the United Teachers of New Orleans; she witnessed some negative things on Chef Menteur Highway but doesn't dwell on them, instead focuses on the positive; people in Pointe Coupee have been helpful in getting her through; she was surprised and blessed that she was able to evacuate with Galaxy, had come to grips with possibly having to leave her; schools in New Orleans are up and running again, she foresees them moving forward with the help of her teacher's union; disaster responses need to assist all people, not just a select group; she assumed that the recovery process would be slow, opted to sell her home rather than apply for Road Home funding to rebuild; she's heard about people having problems with Road Home, wanting to return to live in New Orleans but are unable to; people should be allowed to return to their homes; some people are better off now, if they accepted help that was given; being back in Pointe Coupee, the library and the fitness center were welcome distractions for her; State Farm insurance agent who helped her and provided a gift card; getting reacquainted with women at the hairdresser that she went to school with; it's sometimes difficult to adjust because she didn't live in New Roads as an adult and is used to living in a big city; getting used to merchants taking a lunch break; Pat relocated to Texas because she got a job there, worked for Shell Oil Company; Ridgley was on leave from her job when Katrina hit, formally retired in December 2005; as a retiree, she didn't envision being in New Roads; "God has plans for us. We think we're in control, but we're really not"; she hopes to travel and volunteer; she does after-school tutoring work; does not intend to go back to teaching; Ridgley is impressed with the oral history project; discussion of her interview's importance and future availability; she hopes that people in charge will get things right in terms of building levees; if levees are not built correctly, someone should be held accountable; Ridgley is not familiar with the experimental farm for Katrina evacuees near Simmesport, Louisiana, doesn't think she'd be interested in that; Matherne and Ridgely discuss visiting it one day; she has no other family in New Roads other than her mother; she's an only child which explains why her mother was so worried during Katrina; conclusion.

TAPE: 1 (T3815)

TOTAL PLAYING TIME: 43 minutes

PAGES TRANSCRIPT: 27 pages

PHOTOGRAPHS / PHOTOGRAPHER: 1 photo of Ridgley. Photographer David Breidenbach.

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

RESTRICTIONS: None