

Tornado Oral History Collection  
Sherri Cunningham Oral History  
Date of Interview: March 13, 2019  
Location: Jacksonville, Alabama  
Length of Interview: 00:41:52  
Interviewer: JK – Jane Kushma  
Transcriber: NCC

Jane Kushma: My name is Jane Kushma from Jacksonville State University. We are conducting an oral history project of the Jacksonville tornado that occurred on March 19th, 2018. Today is March 13th, 2019, and we are hearing from Sherry Cunningham who will share her experience of the tornado and recovery. Our interview is taking place at the Houston Cole Library on the campus of Jacksonville State University. Sherri, how were you affected by the tornado? Where were you when the tornado hit?

Sherri Cunningham: When the tornado hit our home, we were in the bathroom of our home, which was the closest room, the most central location, with no windows to the outside.

JK: So, you heard the warning to take cover.

SC: Yes, ma'am. Yes. We have a siren that is right outside of our house, not too far away. We were watching TV. James Spann had come on the TV and said that people in Jacksonville needed to take cover. So, typical, we did that. But it's more along the lines of I thought, "Okay, whatever. We'll go to the bathroom." So, we were in the bathroom. It was me and my husband and our dog, Daisy May. I don't know, we were probably in there 10 or 15 minutes when you could hear the weather changing, and you could feel it. There was a lot of noise, and it almost felt like the air was sucked out of the house. You could hear the roaring. I kept saying, "Oh, my God, oh, my God, oh, my God, it's a tornado. It's a tornado. It's a tornado." Ben had grabbed a hold of me and put himself on top of me. I had the dog, and I was holding on to her. It went on for what seemed like forever, but I know it was just a few seconds. So, when it calmed down, we just sat there. My phone was going crazy with text messages. His phone was going crazy. Only certain people could get in – could get through. So, we just sat there. You could hear the rain. The first thing I remember, once we knew that something bad had happened, I could smell fresh pine.

JK: Wow.

SC: Yes. We don't have pine trees. So, it was that moment that I thought something bad, something really bad has happened. I guess it might have been a tornado. You could hear the blinds blowing. I asked Ben, I said, "You didn't happen to open any windows." He said, "No." I thought, "Our windows are blown out of our home." Then you could hear the rain. I thought, "There's no roof to our house." I wanted to step outside to look. Ben told me, "No. We need to stay right here. Because we don't know –" it's loud still. So, we stayed put. Then text messages came through our phone again. They told us to stay in the bathroom. Our friends were texting us, "You need to stay in the bathroom because there's another round coming through." I don't know how long after, but we heard hail. Not the same, like the air was being sucked out of the room, and the pressure dropping didn't happen again, but it was very close to what we had just experienced. So, I thought, "There's no way a second tornado could hit our house." But we stayed put. We probably stayed in that bathroom an hour and a half before we knew it was okay to come out. We didn't come out at all during – I mean, we just stayed there, me, Ben and the dog. So, when we came out, there was water in the hallway. We have a huge picture window in front of our house. I thought, "My picture window." I don't know why. Everything else was blown out, but that picture window was perfect. It was still there.

JK: It was all right.

SC: I was like, "It's my picture window."

JK: Wow.

SC: Yes. But we had windows blown out in the kitchen. The whole casing of the window actually came out. It was on the other side of the kitchen, and that window had been blown out. Even our cabinet doors were open. They weren't open before we went in there. Cabinet doors were open. I don't know. When we saw, all the other windows had blown out. We have a great room that was an addition built on and a storage room at the end of that, and the roof had been taken off the top of it. So, it was at that point that we knew, yes, a tornado had hit our house. So, we didn't know what to do. We just kind of stood there. I mean, it was just chaos. Our stuff was everywhere. Pine needles were in the house. Again, no pine trees.

JK: No pine trees in your yard.

SC: No pine trees, yes, and I mean, debris and glass. It was pretty awful. All of the ceiling – what do you call that? All the stuff that was in the ceiling, the insulation was everywhere. It was all over everything. I don't know how long we stood there. Then Ben said, "Let's go outside and make sure everybody else is okay." So, he got the flashlight. We went outside. Rufus Kenny came from down the street, banging, and he asked, "Are you all okay?" We were like, "Yes, sir, we're fine." He said, "Well, everybody down the block so far is okay. I'm going to –" he was going to another person's house that was elderly to check on them. We walk out. Everybody on our part of that neighborhood, on our block, and the next block over, we were just – I mean, everybody was standing outside. But we were afraid to go anywhere because power lines were down. It was pitch-black dark, and you couldn't really see anything. So, we were all hesitant to move. But at some point in all of that, all of us wound up standing in the middle of the road at Ninth Street and 12th Avenue. There was probably 20 of us just standing there. You couldn't see anything, but we were all just so happy to be there together. Everybody on our street was okay. We had all survived. At least that part of us had survived. We knew that much. Somebody cut the flashlight on, and you could see part of the destruction. But you couldn't really see because it was dark. We knew that it looked awful, but we really didn't know how awful because it was dark.

JK: Just surreal, I would imagine.

SC: Yes, ma'am. I mean, all of us were in shock. I mean, we just stood there because we didn't know what to do. But we all knew we were okay. So, at some point, we all went back inside our homes. The end of our home was fine. Our bedroom was fine. The guest bedroom was fine. The bathroom that we were in was fine. So, that part of our home was fine. So, we went into the bedroom. I remember dozing but not really sleeping because of everything that had happened. We listened to chainsaws all night long. That's what I remember most about that night, was that the chainsaws ran all night long. You could see the emergency lights in the background, in front of our home. I knew that there were people trying to get to us, but there was no way to get to us. Nobody could come up our street because there were trees everywhere. Nobody could get to us

at that point.

JK: So, that's why the chainsaws were out. They were trying to clear the roads.

SC: Yes. They were trying to clear the road so that somebody could get up here and make sure. Because those people didn't know we were okay. All the emergency people didn't know that everybody was fine where we were. I just remember that and the lights all night long. At some point, I dozed off. I guess it was about 4:00 a.m., 4:30-ish a.m. Somebody yelled into the home, "Is there anybody in here?" It startled me. I said, "Yes, sir, we're in here." He said, "Who is we?" I said, "My husband and I and my dog." He said, "I need to see you." I was like, "Okay." I had taken my shoes off, and I was looking for my shoes. So, so we got there. It was a fireman. He said, "You're okay?" We were like, "Yes, sir, we're fine." He said, "Is there anybody else that was in the home?" We were like, "No, sir." What I remember most about it is that he went out to the road in front of our mailbox, and he drew a circle with like a star or something in it. I always see that when there are tornadoes or whatever. Everybody here is okay. It was that moment, I guess, that I thought, "I'm okay. I'm a survivor."

JK: A survivor.

SC: That's telling everybody that I'm alive. I guess it was a huge, profound moment that I thought, "I could have died." I mean, this could be a lot worse. I knew then that they had worked all night long to get to me to make sure that I was okay. I've never forgotten that. I think about it all the time. Because they worked all night long. Those chainsaws ran nonstop. You could hear them talking. You knew they were close, but they couldn't get to us. That was a big deal to me to know that. Yes. So, I mean, that was the night. Then the sun came up the next morning, and all of us found ourselves in the same exact spot we were at the day before. Well, when the sun came up, that's when we knew it was okay to come out. So, as the sun's rising, we're all standing out there, and we were literally in shock. Because at that point, you could see the damage that had been done.

JK: All around you. Right.

SC: I know it's, I guess, cliché to say, it looked like a war zone, but it looked like a war zone. There was trees everywhere. The road – I mean, it was a disaster. Trees are inside houses. Where did our roof go? I'm still wondering where my ceiling fan went. I thought, "You've got to be kidding me."

JK: Such a powerful story.

SC: It was. Yes. That morning, we just stood there. People started coming in and wanted to know what they could do to help. Literally, we could not process even what we needed help with or what we should do. The first people that got to us was my school nurse, Nurse (Gwen?) and her husband, Scott. They brought us water. He said, "I know you guys are going to need this." I thought, "We might not have water." I knew we didn't have electricity [laughter]. I thought, "Water. Where there any water?" They were the first ones. What do you need? I thought, "I don't know what I need." We have no idea. We just got hit by a tornado.

JK: So, they brought you water.

SC: Yes. I mean, we were in shock. They stayed. There were people everywhere and chainsaws and people working. I remember my friends coming up and helping me clean off what I could salvage. They had enough sense about them. They all brought tubs to put stuff in. My teacher friend, (Brandy?), said, "Where are your wedding photos?" I was like, "They were right there." They weren't there anymore. I was like, "I have no idea." So, we dug through the debris until we found my wedding album. She took everyone out and wiped it down. Never occurred to me. I was still just standing there. What am I supposed to do? So, I was really thankful for those people who had enough sense about them to come and help. Otherwise, a lot of things would have been destroyed that I wouldn't have even thought to – at one point, somebody said, "Have you called Alabama Power to let them know?" I thought, "They can't be charging us any electricity. There are no power poles. There's no lines. There's no electricity." Then someone mentioned, "Where are you guys going to stay?" It hadn't occurred to me, where am I going to stay? Because I'm still just standing there like, a tornado hit my house. A tornado hit my house. So, I thought, "Oh, my gosh." So, it was right then that I – I still had cell service. I could Google Hampton Inn. I called the Hampton Inn to see if they had a room. For some reason, I had enough sense to say, "Can we book it for two weeks?" They had a room, and we booked it. I'm so thankful that somebody said, "Where are you going to stay?" Because I was like, I'm going to stay right here. Yes.

JK: So, you were fortunate the Hampton could accommodate you.

SC: Yes. It was booked solid after that. I don't know why – I mean, we were lucky somebody got to my house early enough to say, "Have you thought about where you're going to stay?" Because I had not thought about that. So, yes, we were lucky enough to be at the Hampton Inn. We wound up staying at the Hampton Inn for three weeks. I wound up lucky enough to get a duplex on Ladiga Street, where we could live. The lady there signed us a six-month lease, and we could stay for however long. But she was like, "It's usually a year lease, but –" I saw it on Facebook, "Is anybody –" and I thought, "Oh, my gosh, oh, yes." So, we were lucky that we got that.

JK: Oh, wonderful. What about Daisy May?

SC: Well, Ben's family lives in Saks. We could have taken Daisy May to the hotel with us. They were allowing him. But Daisy was sick. She had cancer. So, she was having bathroom problems. So, we didn't want to take her. So, we took her to my mother-in-law and father-in-law's house, and she stayed there for three weeks. So, we went and visited her. I knew that she was getting sick. So, we had her at the duplex, a week, and then she passed away. Yes. I told people that I'm a country song in the making. A tornado hit my house, and my dog died. I mean, I'm a hit.

JK: That's a lot of loss.

SC: Yes, it was. She was 15. She was our first-year anniversary present. So, we were married

16 years, and she was with us for 15 of them. So, that is probably the worst timing. But we got to spend a whole week with her at our duplex. They let us bring her. It was a no-pets policy. We had to pay a pet deposit. I was like, "That's fine." It was a week, and I'm thankful for that week. Because if she would have passed away while we weren't –

JK: With her, yes.

SC: Yes, I would have – but she was fantastic through the whole thing, like all the noise and everything. She just slept on her bed. There were people cutting trees down everywhere, and there she was, my cute little deaf dog laying there.

JK: That's sweet.

SC: But yes, so –

JK: Just all kinds of –

SC: Yes. I was a mess. I took off three days from work. Because I teach, and then the next week was spring break. So, yes, the whole thing was a mess.

JK: Right. But here you are now, a year later. Are you back in your house?

SC: Yes, ma'am. We moved back in late August. That's another thing. When this happened, everybody that knew somebody was calling a contractor. We couldn't find a contractor. We had to have two estimates. Could not find a contractor.

JK: For insurance purposes?

SC: Yes, ma'am. So, we had one guy come out and look at it, and he gave us an estimate. I thought, "Okay. We'll go with him." Ben was like, "No. We're not going with the first person that comes up here, Sherri." I was like, "I just really want to move back home." Because I want to leave to start with. So, we had to have two estimates. It took well over a month of trying to find somebody to – and our insurance company said, "Hey, we've got these guys we usually use. No obligation to call them, but I just thought." I called him and asked him, "Would he be interested?" He said, "Absolutely." He said, "Let us come up there and meet you guys, and we'll talk about it." They were amazing through everything. It was like a Godsend. He knew that if I sat and waited long enough that He would send me somebody that would take care of us. Hands down, the best people ever.

JK: That's good to hear.

SC: Yes. I mean, we were lucky. Because the guy that I was like, "Okay. He's got us an estimate. We're going to use him," he wound up messing other people's houses up. He was from out of town. That was another thing they said. I kept reading the boards and everything. He was from out of town. He doesn't have any local ties. This company was out of Pell City, but one of the owners lives in Saks and had gone to the same high school as my husband. I mean, he

was a local boy. Not that it would have – I guess it did make a difference. But they were amazing to us through that.

JK: Oh, that's good.

SC: Yes.

JK: So, you've talked about some of your greatest challenges that you experienced in at least that first evening and the next day, being able to just figure where to start and what to do. But were there other challenges that came up in addition to finding a contractor?

SC: I guess just we had to take time off work, and my husband had to take time off work. Not knowing what to do that whole entire spring break. We were going to go to the beach for spring break. So, that whole entire spring break, we didn't know what to do. Ben had gone back to work, midweek. Every day, I went to the house, and I swept. That's all I did. I swept for days. They were like, "You know somebody's going to come in." I was like, "What am I –" just being lost was a big – it had a great effect on just not – it was a big challenge, not knowing what to do. What should I be doing? Why isn't anybody here at my house working on it?

JK: So, we should maybe now talk about this idea about disaster resilience, which is the capacity to cope with or adapt to the challenges that you were facing. So, can you talk to us a little bit about how you were able to do that? Did you kind of step back and think about this enormous challenge that you had in front of you, to recover from this tornado and getting your house repaired? Was there anything in particular that that you did that helped you through that experience?"

SC: Yes. I lost my dog a month later. We have no children. So, Daisy had been our child for all these years. I did have to seek outside counseling. It was the best thing that I did. Because I couldn't cope with the loss because I'd never had a loss like that. That's what my counselor told me, I'm very – everything. I'd had the same car for eleven years. I had lived in that house for thirteen years. My dog was fifteen years old. We had been married sixteen years. I didn't have a lot of stability when I was younger. So, as an adult, that is one of the things that I thrived on, was stability and making long-term relationships and things like that. So, when that happened and the whole world was ripped out from up under me, I had a really hard time being able – I cried. I'm not a crier, but I would cry every day. I mean, every day, I would be weepy about it. So, I went and found a counselor, and she was my sounding board for probably four months. When she finally said, "I don't think you need to see me anymore, Sherri," I said, "I think you're right." But I told her that she was the reason that I survived. She's the reason why I recovered. Had it not happened the way it did, I don't think that I would have been in the place I am now. So, that was my coping mechanism. She made me step back and do things for myself. You know, I teach. I take care of kids all day. I'm a special ed teacher. That's my job. I go home, and I take care of everything. It's always been less about me. She's the one who made me step back and go, "You have to take care of yourself. You have to do things for you." So, yes.

JK: Particularly because of all the trauma that you've been through.

SC: Yes. That's what she said. "You've experienced a lot in a very short period of time." So, she helped me. Yes.

JK: So, it sounds like having somebody to listen – you used the word sounding board –

SC: Yes.

JK: – to talk through what you have experienced, and where do you go from here?

SC: Yes. I mean, she's the reason – she is the sole reason, I believe. I told her that. She was like, "No." I was like, "You're absolutely the reason that I've gotten through this. There's no way." She taught me a lot about myself.

JK: Yes. It's funny how events like this cause us to learn things about ourselves.

SC: Absolutely. Yes. So, I still try and do better about taking care of me. She would text message me, "What have you done for yourself today?" I'd be like, "Oh." Then one day, I texted her, "I went to the coffee shop today and just sat. That's what I did for myself today." She was like, "I'm proud of you." Yes. She made me ride my bike a lot more. Because I have a little cruiser bike. That's another thing that I did to help myself cope, was ride my bicycle on the trail.

JK: Great.

SC: Yes. We took a trip. Every day, we went to that house. The only time we didn't go to the house was in July when we went to New York for a family reunion. But every day, we would go to that house to see what was going on with it. We did not miss a day except for that. So, at one point, we were like, "We should just go get away."

JK: Yes, a little change of scenery.

SC: That helped a lot. Because every day was work and then going to the house. Living someplace new was very difficult. Because we're used to living in a house, and it was just us. Now, we shared a duplex.

JK: So, you said you got back in when?

SC: Late August.

JK: Late August.

SC: So, probably all of April – they must have started work in May. May, June, July, yes, it took them a little over three months to finish our house.

JK: Did you think that was fast?

SC: In my mind, I had thought, "This is going to take at least six months, maybe a year."



JK: Yes. From what you've described, that's what I would have said, too.

SC: It didn't [laughter].

JK: Wow.

SC: Yes.

JK: What a nice surprise.

SC: Well, initially, we thought that maybe the house would have to be torn down. What if it's not salvageable? But everything, the foundation was fine, and the lower part that got blown away was just structural damage. They took the lower half of our house completely down and rebuilt it. So, that saved a lot of time. They didn't have to take it all the way down. All of our houses in that area that were hit have done the same thing. So, it wasn't like did a shifty job or anything. But all of our houses have been done the same way and so. But three and a half months was a long time [laughter].

JK: I can imagine.

SC: Yes. But we were the second people to come back on our block of the neighborhood right there. It was a lot faster. Because I thought it was going to be a lot longer. I just remember Dr. (Barr?) had posted on Facebook something about Southerners. I thought, "I'm going to miss all four seasons." I'm a retired southerner. So, you can hear Southerners from our steps, and you can sit outside and listen to them. That was one of the things, is I'm not going to be home. I'm going to miss all of the seasons. I'm going to miss all of them. We were just lucky. They worked hard. They did a beautiful job. They took their time, and it only took that long to do so.

JK: I'm so glad you're back home.

SC: And it's a beautiful – I mean, it's everything that I – if you had to pick out your house, my house looks like the inside of what I would pick out.

JK: Wonderful.

SC: Yes. I tell people now, "Everybody needs a tiny tornado." I wouldn't have said that in March or April, May, June. I wouldn't have said that. But everything was redone inside our home, everything. It's a brand-new house on the inside.

JK: Well, and gosh, such a powerful experience through this awful – and you made it through, okay.

SC: Yes. We're all right.

JK: You're happy in your house, and it's the way you want it.

SC: Yes. I got a new car out of it. Because our carport had these huge windows in it, and they were old windows from the old Jacksonville High School cafeteria.

JK: Really?

SC: Yes. They were huge and metal. One of them was blown out and thrown on top of my car, the car that I was going to drive forever. Because remember, stability. I've been with this all these years.

JK: So, what do you think you'll carry forward from this experience?

SC: I guess that I'm a lot stronger than I thought I was and that even though, at that time, that was the worst thing that was – I mean, that's the worst thing that had ever happened, and it was a violent storm; after all of it, everything is fine. I got a brand-new house on the inside, out of it. I mean, even though it was horrible, I survived it. I'm a lot stronger. I'm a lot more laid back now than I was. Because I'm a special ed teacher and I'm very set. Eighteen years in education and things just go, so, so, so. I was pretty high-strung. Now, I'm a lot more laid back about things.

JK: You know that you're going to be able to handle it. So, you don't need to stress.

SC: Yes. In the grand scheme of things, is it really necessary to get that wound up about it? No. I survived a tornado. Absolutely not [laughter].

JK: That's a nice thing to carry forward, I think.

SC: Yes.

JK: So, do you have some thoughts to share about how people who haven't been through an experience like this, maybe what they could be thinking about to prepare?

SC: Yes. A lot of people store their memories in their computers with photos and pictures. I know it seems simple, but all of that stuff stored on an online site where you can access them, because a lot of our memories were gone. Yes. I didn't have my computer in that room that night. You don't think about those kinds of things, you know, your mementos and –

JK: Sure.

SC: Yes. Flashlights and batteries.

JK: More flashlights and batteries, yes.

SC: Yes. Your important documents stored. We lost the whole entire end of our storage room that had certain things in it, you know, a safe where you can store all the important things and a battery charger. Yes.

JK: Yes. You remember all those things that were really hard to find or put your hands on.

SC: Oh, yes. Absolutely. I mean, it was just the small things that I've thought about that you don't – I mean, when something happens, where are you going to stay? I didn't think about that. I guess, you know, have a plan. In my mind, I had always said, "We live on the side of a mountain. What tornado is going to come up a mountain?" It was literally the next day that James Spann shredded my idea of – he was like, "I know a lot of people think if they live –" and I was like, "That was me, man." Obviously, the tornado doesn't care. I had the mentality of what tornado is going to hit our house, whatever.

JK: I think everybody has that mentality. It's not going to happen to me. But you're here to tell them.

SC: It'll hit your house.

JK: It can happen.

SC: Yes. It doesn't care. It doesn't mind. It doesn't care. Not at all.

JK: Yes. You know, another thing that sounds like was important for you was you had quite a network of people that were checking on you and asking you questions and prompting you.

SC: I was lucky. My girlfriends from school, my teacher friends came in like an army. Everybody had totes. I don't know, it was probably mid-morning, 11:30, 12:00, when they could all finally get through and get up to me. They had already talked and knew what they were going to do when they got there. I was lucky. Because, again, we were all just standing around like, what are we supposed to do? We were all in shock. I had not processed.

JK: Right. But that spirit of people reaching out to each other is really what it means, I think, to be a community.

SC: Yes. When you see hurricanes and tornadoes and stuff online and on TV, and you see the people that go out and help them, and you're like, "Oh, gosh, that's great." I mean, you don't really think. The people that came to help us just that weren't friends or family. I mean, the churches showed up. The Salvation Army showed up. The Red Cross showed up. There were people there to feed us, morning, noon, and night. They would bring food. They brought toiletries. The lady was like, "What do you need?" I said, "We're fine." She said, "You're not fine. You're going to need these things." I thought, "Well, we don't need –" and it was a bag. It had toilet paper and paper towels and cleaning supplies and gloves.

JK: You used them all [laughter].

SC: I used them all, all of them, everything that they – and then the Salvation Army came through with what are called a tornado bucket. I thought, "What do I need this mop for?" But they had a mop. They had big trash bags. They had this really great cleaning supply that I hoard now because I don't want to use it all. Because it's great. It doesn't even have a name. But I

thought, "What's in this?" But wow, does it clean.

JK: Oh, good.

SC: Yes. The community, it was unbelievable what people did for us. Because we pretty much couldn't do anything for ourselves at that time.

JK: Right. Do you feel differently now about the community and your ties to the community?

SC: I came to school in [19]95 in Jacksonville, and a little bit about my childhood is very shifty. I moved a lot. I lived with my aunt, and she helped raise me. When I came to Jacksonville in [19]95, it was the first time I ever felt like I had a home. Then when I moved here when we got married, this has been home. Then that happened. I can't imagine that it could happen anywhere else because of the people and the way that they treated us and how everybody – I mean, people came and cut down the trees in our yard. They didn't ask for a dime. They moved cinderblocks, and they pulled fencing up. I can't imagine that that would have happened anywhere else, the way people took care of us. We didn't ask for it. We would say we are fine, and they would – you know, my husband told the guys that had cut the trees down, "Yes, we're okay." He went up the road, and he came back down. He was like, "We're here to cut your trees down and move them out of your yard." My husband was like, "Okay." Because we don't ask for help. The way people treated us and took care of us and loved us and – I mean, we lived at the Hampton Inn for three weeks. The churches came. You know, something happens in the South, people are going to feed you everything. The little ladies from the church made baked goods, homemade baked goods, so that we would have – you know. The community was amazing.

JK: Just, it's so special.

SC: Yes. Sometimes I think, "Man, I'd like to live someplace bigger, where there's things to do, like Chattanooga or somewhere else." Then I think, "This little bitty town, it's pretty great little town." I mean, it is home. After the tornado, it became – if I didn't already know how much I love the place, it would make me love it even more. Yes. It's a fantastical town.

JK: Well, I think your story of survival is just incredible.

SC: Thanks.

JK: We're sure grateful that you would share this with our oral history project. Is there anything else that that you would like to share or say?

SC: I don't guess so.

JK: Okay. Well, again, we're very thankful that you could tell your story today. That'll conclude our interview.

SC: Yes, ma'am. Thank you.

JK: Thank you.

[end of transcript]