

Tornado Oral History Collection
Laura Duckworth Oral History
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Interviewer: ER – Erin Rider
Transcriber: NCC

Erin Rider: My name is Erin Rider from Jacksonville State University. We are conducting an oral history project of the Jacksonville tornado that occurred on March 19th, 2018. Today is March 5th, 2019, and we are hearing from Laura Duckworth, who will share her experience of the tornado and recovery. Our interview is taking place at the Houston Cole Library. How were you affected by the tornado?

Laura Duckworth: Oh, goodness, it was indescribable basically. The day was beautiful, absolutely beautiful, blue skies, birds singing. It seemed like they've been telling us that there were going to be storms for, like, a week in advance. But I've grown up in Alabama my entire life, and tornadoes are probably how hurricanes were to New Orleans. We always hear the tornadoes coming, and it usually hits somewhere else. It always happens to somebody else. So, that day, we were working on my daughter, Marley's room. We'd said, like, "Okay. We'll clean out this closet just in case something happens." But there's no clouds. I don't think anything's going to happen. So, we cleaned up the closet. It's got a bath hole door. So, we even put a little hook, so we could close it easy. Set up the kids watching TV and started painting the room. I called my father-in-law over. Because he used to (stripe?) cars, so he could tape off superfast. So, he came over and helped us tape off. We got an alert on the phone that said, Tornado warning. Take shelter now." So, I said, "Okay." I got the kids in the closet. My husband got in the closet. My father-in-law even got in the closet, very, very small closet in our hallway. It was really hot in there, So, we kept the door open. My husband and my father-in-law were like, "Nothing's happening. We're going to get out." So, they went back. My husband was literally painting the ceiling. My father-in-law's taping off the window. The power goes out. I didn't realize that the power was out because we were in the hall closet. So, my husband comes in, gets in the closet with us. With the power going out and the alert to the phone, I had still not heard any rain. Nothing. With the power going out and the alert to the phone, I was telling my father-in-law to get in. He's like, "No. I'm going to go home and check on your grandmother and your mom and see how that's going." He's talking to my husband. So, he leaves. I'm telling him, "I don't think it's a good idea." It's still really hot and stuffy in the closet. So, we have the door open. All of a sudden, I hear the train sound. I'd always heard about it. You grow up in Alabama. You always hear about the train sound, and you don't know how to describe it. So, I just looked at my husband, and I was like, "Do you hear that?" He was like, "What?" I was like, "The train." My girls are seven now. At this time, they were six, twins. So, they've got their tablets that we had charged up, and they've got their little go bags for a six-year-old, you know, their favorite stuffed animal and a book. So, they're in the closet with us. He closes the door. We could hear our dogs on the outside of the door scratching to get in. Then we hear everything just get a lot louder and then just this big boom, and the whole house shakes. I'm sitting there holding my girls, and this is five minutes into this tornado. I'm just praying. I'm saying, "Please, just help us. Help us. Help us." My little girl was like, "Why are you saying that? Why are you saying that?" Then my other daughter that's sitting on my lap – my husband's holding the door as hard as he can, and my other daughter sitting on my lap. She's just focused in on her tablet, just playing. I'm so thankful. Marley starts crying. Then the water starts coming in. At first I thought that I had peed. Then I realized it's rain that's pouring in. We hadn't heard the dog. So, I had no idea what was going on out there. So, everything kind of calms down a little bit after that. We can still hear the storm going on. My husband kind of tries to open the door a little bit, and he can't get it open. So, we're sitting there. I call my father-in-law. He said, "I saw the tornado." He was headed down 204, and the tornado had turned him around on the wall.

Because he was going down to Broadwell Mill. It turned him around at Jacksonville Auto Body. So, he came back. He was under the awning of Star Mart. He's got the guys from Star Mart in the car with him, and he's on the phone with us. He was like, "Star Mart just blew away." I'm like, "You need to get out of the car. They say never stay in the car. Never stay in the car." He was like, "If I get out, I'm going to get hit by debris. I can't get out." So, we're talking to him. Then I call one of my other friends, and she's like, "You've got to stay in there because there's two other tornadoes headed in our way." I'm just thinking, "Our house is not going to survive another hit. We're going to die." The other two tornadoes didn't hit. But when we got out, our house was basically cracked in half from this tree that had gotten thrown into our bedroom and landed on the beam right on the closet that we were in. So, that was a very long story for – we were very much affected by the tornado. We were out of our home for four months. We're back in it. But we're supposed to have severe weather this Saturday. The last time that we actually had severe weather, I didn't sleep. I stayed up all night with 15-minute alarm clocks. So, if I did go to sleep, I would check the weather and make sure everything was okay. So, I think that's the biggest thing, is I will – every time that our county is yellow, or the county above or below us is yellow, from now on, I'm like watching it. If there is a story about a tornado near us, I'm reading it. I will never be able to not do that, I don't think.

ER: So, think about this is like the new reality that you're facing. Because you started off just saying that you'd grown up in Alabama, and you just thought that you were only used to hearing about it but not directly affected. I could sense how traumatic and vivid that must have been, just in your emotions, talking about.

LD: Yes.

ER: Stepping away from that part, thinking about the moments after, can you walk us through –

LD: Getting out of the closet?

ER: Yes.

LD: When we got out the closet – our yard, apparently, when the house was first built, when the neighborhood first started growing, it was called Five Pines. We had these huge pine trees, over 100 years old, huge, huge pine trees. The second largest one is the one that hit our house. So, when we finally managed to shove open the door, there was like all this insulation and sheetrock and just debris in the way. There was this big pine limb that had come down and stabbed into the hardwood floor. So, we're coming out, and we're looking at everything and trying to make sure we don't step on any power lines or anything like that. We start calling our dogs. Because we didn't know if we were going to walk out with our kids and see our dogs lying there. So, we called them. They must have sensed right before it happened, because they were both in my daughter, Lila's bedroom. So, we called them out. Abby, which is a Boxer, she comes out, and she sees us. It's like she looks at us, and she's like, "Nope." She goes right back under the bed. Then Maggie, Lab mutt that she is, calms over everything, comes to us. My husband had to go get Abby. So, we came out, and we go into the living room. Everything has just happened. I'm calling the police department, letting them know, we're here. The dispatcher has probably received one too many phone calls of this nature. She's like, "We're severe strain right now," or

something like that. So, I'm like, "Are we under any more tornado advisories? Is it safe for us to be out of our safe space?" She was like, "Ma'am, we can't come get you." She hadn't understood what I was asking, and so couldn't get any help from that. But I'm still steadily checking the phone. I'm like, "Okay, severe thunderstorm warning. I don't know how bad this is going to get. If there's any trees that are damaged, are they going to end up blowing over," that kind of thing. So, we were preparing to bunker down for the remainder of the night in our living room. We can see the lights from the fire department and the police officer. Everybody's out. They're knocking on doors, making sure everybody's alive and okay. I'm calling the insurance company. Some people just really don't understand what a tornado is. But calling the insurance company and letting them know what's happened, and they're like, "Oh, we'll come get you." I'm like, "No, you won't. You can't get in." My father-in-law was already trying to get into our neighborhood, and it was a war zone. You couldn't get anywhere. They're like, "But no, we can come get you." I'm telling them, "You can't come get us. Just get us a hotel room for tomorrow night. We're going to have to sleep here tonight." So, somehow, my brother-in-law was able to walk into the neighborhood, and he helped us get one of the girls' mattresses over all the debris in the hallway, into the living room, so we could sleep that night. We kind of pushed everything up against the inner wall. It's ranch-style house. So, there's one big wall. So, we pushed everything up against the inner wall in case anything did come down. At least that wall might help us, that big beam. So, we slept there. The next morning, we got out, and we looked. The tree that hit our house was broken into three different pieces. The first piece, it broke off about 80 feet up, and the first piece took out our shop. We had a two-story shop. It's like it (stair-stepped?). The second piece was thrown into our house. I say thrown because it didn't just fall like this. It was one piece, two piece, and the third piece was stabbed into our front yard. Then we had some pine trees that were just uprooted. Then we had one that fell right across our driveway. So, we couldn't get our cars out. But there were already volunteers out cutting the stuff off, of what they could, helping people. It was amazing to see.

ER: Anything about the trees had you worried about them previously?

LD: We knew that we loved the shade and how big they were and pretty. They were a pain in the butt to clean up after every fall. But we had looked at having them taken down, but it was going to cost \$10,000 to take them down. So, we ended up, after everything was said and done, the ones that were there – like our insurance company had already sent out somebody to clean up debris, and they did actually clean up trees out of our yard. But after everything was said and done, we paid to have the last ones taken down. Because the ones that did fall, they took the brunt of the wind. So, if that wind came back, it was going to end up knocking the other ones down. But we ended up getting the last of them taken down for like, \$4,000. So, it was worth it. We have no more pine trees in our yard.

ER: Thinking about that night, like the next day, how were your children coping?

LD: That night, Lila is one of those people that she doesn't show when she's upset until she has just lost it. Marley wears everything on the outside. So, she was scared. Right now, she's terrified of trees. Lila, she internalizes a lot. So, that night, like during the whole thing, she just played on her tablet. She didn't show anything. Then the next time we had a storm, she got really, really scared. She was afraid of thunderstorms after that. But it seemed like they were

okay. They were just afraid of any – I don't think they truly grasped what was going on, just because of how young they were, and that was a blessing.

ER: What were your greatest challenges?

LD: Living in the hotel room for a month afterward and finding a rental house afterward. We couldn't find one that accommodated our dogs. Then going back to renting after being homeowners was really hard, the logistics of everything, and then trying to help the kids understand that every thunderstorm is not going to be like this, that the tornado was a once in a lifetime – hopefully, it was a once in a while thing. It wasn't an everyday thing. So, every time there's a thunderstorm or something like that, that another tornado isn't going to happen, and trying to get myself into that mindset too.

ER: You mentioned the difference between being in your own home and then being a rental home, can you elaborate?

LD: I will start off by saying that finding a rental home was extremely difficult because we were, by far, not the only ones displaced. We knew that we had to get out of the hotel room because they had bookings coming up. We were going to have to check out then check back in, all that stuff. When I first found a place to rent, we kind of snatched it up just immediately and didn't think too much about it. Then going in, as we're moving stuff in, like the power is on at the place when we're finally moving in and noticing that there's like a smell going on and then finding like a rat's nest in there. Then every single day, there was a yellow jacket or a wasp in the house and dealing with plumbing issues and stuff that, if it's our house, we would fix and all this stuff. But going to renting, you have to go through the landlord for stuff, and the landlord doesn't necessarily want to fix things. Oh, yeah, the roof leaks and that kind of stuff.

ER: Was that rental house been damaged by the tornado?

LD: No. It was just old.

ER: I thought so.

LD: Yes.

ER: At the hotel – because you mentioned you have two dogs.

LD: Yes.

ER: So, was that a challenge to keep your dogs?

LD: We had to keep our dogs at our in-laws' house. Their house received minor damage because it was on the outskirts. So, they had like, roof damage from the winds. But our in-laws had to keep our dogs. They already had three dogs there. So, they went from having three dogs to having five dogs. They have Yorkies and we have a Boxer and a Lab. Then our Boxer – they're spoiled, so getting on furniture and all that stuff. But yes.

ER: I imagine that's kind of the challenge of accommodating and then the different breeds.

LD: Yes, which Abby, the Boxer, she was okay with them because we had lived with them before. But Maggie is old, and she's the classic old dog that doesn't like other dogs. They graciously dealt with our dogs. But then we had to hear about how horrible our dogs were.

ER: Did that cause any kind of challenges to your relationships or any kind of stress that you may have encountered during that time?

LD: When we finally did get back to our house, our fence was torn up, understandably, by the tornado. So, when we finally did get back in, in order to get other things done, we said that we were going to put up the fence. But we had run out of money at that time. So, they still had our dogs. So, we're trying to get the fence up. Then my mother-in-law is calling me. She's like, "I tripped over Abby today." Because Abby likes to stay under you all the time. I should mention, Maggie was afraid of storms before this happened. So, anytime there was a storm afterwards, she's like clawing at somebody to be near them. Then she was telling me, "I tripped over Abby. You've got to come get her. She has to go home." I'm like, "I know you've had them for a long time, but we have no place for them to get – I can't build a fence. You have to talk to my husband and your husband about that. They need to get together and build this fence." But it definitely put a strain for a while on that relationship.

ER: You mentioned before, for time frame, so you were out of your house for four months.

LD: Yes.

ER: Was that a month in the hotel and three months until –

LD: Yes.

ER: Then before the dogs came back in, how long were you in your house?

LD: Probably another two months, so, yes, six months out of the house.

in terms of you said, a little bit of the challenges coping with the rental house, how was coping with the hotel?

LD: The biggest thing there, everybody was so wonderful about my clothes. The tree fell, and my husband came to get to his side of the room with the drawers. But we couldn't get to my side. So, all of my clothing, my shoes, anything that was in the closet was – we couldn't get to it because the way the doors were. So, everybody was so kind. They had this, basically a free thrift store in the hotel. Because we were at the Hampton Inn, and we were able to basically go shopping and get stuff. Then people from the kids' school donated things to us. The biggest challenge with that is trying to get back and forth to the house to help and then trying to get things to eat. There was a lot of eating out. My cholesterol is now up. So, I have to watch fried foods now from eating out so much after this. The kids thought the hotel was wonderful and a

giant adventure, but four people in a two-bed hotel room is really difficult.

ER: I imagine without kitchen amenities.

LD: Yes. No, there was no kitchen. We had a microwave and a little mini fridge. But the community really came together, and people took different shifts. Breakfast was free. I mean, that was amazing. Because it was – they had the breakfast bar every morning. Somebody would bring lunch, usually for everybody. Then different groups would take over dinner for everybody. I forgot to mention that the tornado hit the day before we were supposed to go visit my brother for spring break to go have the very first vacation that we've had in two years. So yes.

ER: Who's to think a vacation to the most stress?

LD: Yes. But my husband actually had that time off because he had already asked. So, he didn't have to go back to work during that time.

ER: Where was the rental house in proximity to your house?

LD: It's in Weaver. My father-in-law was at our house basically every single day, like to the point that the construction crew – my husband used to be in a band years ago. The lead singer of his band worked at Remodelers Outlet at the time. So, he knew this wonderful contractor, Kenneth James. So, he got us a phone call in with Kenneth James, who was able to start work on our house. That's the only reason we got back in four months. His crew called my father-in-law, boss. They called me trouble. But that's different [laughter].

ER: So, can you tell us a little bit about the extent of the damage, and what that repair process was like?

LD: So, our house was built in 1957, I think. I think it was built in [19]57. So, it was already dated, but it was very, very strong. So, when the tree came through, like I said, it came through the middle of the house and on the backside. So, from the road, everything looked fine. It was when you got around to the back, it had caused the back bricks to buckle outward and then hit our bedroom and into the hallway. It caused water damage to the hardwood, through the hallway, and both of our bathrooms, because it got underneath the tiles. Our bedroom was a complete loss. Then we had this lovely room we called the funky room because it had no real purpose. But the water had come in there. Eventually, from minor leaks, we had to do a few small repairs in my girls' bedrooms. So, it affected 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 rooms of a ten-room house. So, through the process, though, when the repairs got started, we asked if we had put everything back exactly how it was. As long as we didn't change – because we were in our mortgage – as long as we didn't change the amount of bathrooms, like we couldn't make it a one-bathroom house, and we couldn't get rid of a bedroom. But through the process, we got every renovation that was on our wish list. So, we call them tornado presents now. We have the fence that we always wanted. We have a deck. We have French doors. Our house is way nicer than we ever could have done it. I've got a massive bathroom and closet now. Our funky room is now our bathroom, and the bathroom is now our closet. It uncovered what was years of a small water leak that we never knew, that had actually started rotting a floor joist. We found a few cool

things, like when my husband was tearing out this horrible shower. It was big – it was a walk-in shower with a seat. But when he was tearing that out, like we found a note where the person that put in and said, "I hope you had more fun taking this out than we had putting it in." Because we did some of the demo work. Apparently, back in the fifties, they didn't have the same grout that we have now. They used concrete, so 1.5-inch concrete on 50-year-old tiles is not easy to break. What was the girls' bathroom is still a girl's bathroom, but it was dusty rose and baby blue. So, I got to break up that cast-iron tub, which is not easy. Do not recommend. I found this little card. It was, "Elect –" somebody from the fifties. Elect somebody to the city council and old playing cards and little stamps that you used to use to cash in for things at a grocery store. I think, in the cleanup process, they got thrown away. But there's pictures of them. So, we found some really cool things. We got to leave our own mark on a few of the – if this ever happens again, somebody's going to find on a few of the walls, like, "Lila was here," and different things like that. But the reno process afterward, it was really awesome. If you have a good insurance company and a good contractor, it doesn't have to be as painful. Now, having to get everything approved through the mortgage company and basically having to be the go-between, between all three of them, that was not fun. I'm very happy I did not work during that time. Because that would have been hard.

ER: Yes. I think some things that people may not know is, working with the mortgage company.

LD: Yes.

ER: You mentioned earlier about the impact to your health even now. Maybe people don't think about, in terms of recovery.

LD: Yes. I'm on a daily antidepressant, anti-anxiety. My doctor says I can't eat fried foods anymore. Yes.

ER: The little stories you were saying about the renovation process, did you feel like that helped the mood in some ways?

LD: Yes.

ER: I could see a little smile here and there when talking about those – what you found. You mentioned earlier the funky room now has a purpose.

LD: Yes. I love our house now. I absolutely love it. I told Mark, my husband, if anything like this ever happens again, I'm like, we're staying. We'll just live here. I'll put a tarp or something. We're staying. But we have a brand-new metal roof. The girls got a new carpet, new bedroom furniture. Our furniture, it was very much like college hand-me-down chic, but not chic. But we were able to pick brand new stuff out because the insurance company paid for it. Little stuff like, when one of the trees fell, a limb stabbed through the roof of our carport. It shook and hit the carport supports. The carport supports, from where it had been a rental house for college students before, they had already been dinged. But insurance companies cannot replace something to the condition it was before. They have to replace it. They can't give you back a

freshly broken support. They have to give you back a support. So, we got brand-new supports on our carport and things like that. Things like, oh, yay, this is no longer something that we have to worry about. Because nothing was underhanded. It got damaged. But basically, it got damaged more. It was not new beforehand. But little things like my daughter has a very purple room, and the other one has a very aqua room and their bathroom purple. I love our home now. I love being home a lot. It's very nice.

ER: You kind of mentioned some of this, but were there any other ways that you coped from the challenges from the tornado?

LD: I threw myself wholeheartedly into the secretary of the family, basically going in between and trying to get everything done for the contractor. We had an awesome support system in some of the best friends that like people that we did not even think about before as being such good friends came through, fed us, and clothed us, true, true friends that – I mean, somebody just walking up to you, giving you a hug, and slipping you \$100 bill on their wedding anniversary, during this. It's like, I can't take this. They're like, "You're going to need it. You might not need it now, but you will need it," and that kind of thing. It's amazing. Just allowing yourself to lean on those friends is great.

ER: What would you carry forward from this experience?

LD: I will never say that a tornado will not hit here. Because I did say that the Sunday before. I told my friends that was worried about it, that we're going to be okay. But I'll carry forward the friendships from this, and just not in a depressed way, but I'm not scared of dying now. When you come that close to something like that and really realizing – especially seeing the Lee tornado that just hit and knowing how bad it could have been, you just have to live to be grateful and to carry your family and friends. We had this plaque made when we were in the rental house. The girls were really sad about not being home with our dogs. It said, "Home is wherever we are together." I love our house. But if this happens again, I know exactly how to handle it, and we'll be okay. We might not move back in this time, but we'll be okay. Things are just things, and a house is just a house. But we have each other, and that's the biggest thing.

ER: As you say that, I mean, you're just a strong person being able to positively cope and make sense of things. It has been touching to hear some of the things that you've focused on that were positive, even as you went through all the trauma then tried to spin it positive.

LD: My husband and I were talking about it a week or two after it happened. We were telling friends. He was the first person to bring it up. It's true. We really thought we were going to die. We did not think that our house would sustain another hitch, and we knew there were two more coming. I mean, we spent, I think it was two or three hours in that closet, in that tiny closet, but we made it out. Our girls made it out. Our dogs, our 11-year-old dogs made it out. Our cake topper for our wedding got broken. Okay? We've been able to let go of so much stuff and declutter and get rid of things. I can't look at it as a bad experience. I would never, ever want to live through it again. But we've gained so much through it. Our girls are terrified of storms, but they have each other. They love each other. They've lived through something – like afterward, we were telling them, we were like, "You guys just lived through something that we had never

lived through." Lila, the little macho girl that she is, just looked at somebody. She was like, "We lived through three tornadoes." Like, okay. There was only one that touched down. You can still drive through our neighborhood and see houses that are not even touched, that still have tarps up. Everything's fine. We're okay.

ER: Going back to what happened to your father-in-law. The last time, you kind of mentioned that he was under the awning. So, what ended up happening in terms of him reaching safety?

LD: I think his car got dinged, which is amazing, because the awning stayed. Afterward, you could ride down to [inaudible], and apartments are gone. There's a tractor trailer that is less than a football field from where he was, and it's over on its side, upside down kind of thing, across the street from where it was. His car got dinged in, and the windshield got cracked. He was fine, absolutely fine. I mean, it kind of moved him. He said that he felt it kind of moved and picked him up inside him, like to the next place. He saw the tornado. He watched Star Mart get blown away. Because, I mean, after everything was done, the only thing that was there was the cooler. He's fine. He's absolutely fine, made it through, not even a scratch on him.

ER: Wow.

LD: Yes.

ER: Amazing.

LD: He said he was driving down 240 and turned his car around, headed back to our house, and then he saw something on the way. He's okay. Mind-blowing.

ER: Just came into just a miracle.

LD: Absolutely.

ER: A blessing.

LD: Yes. I mean, nobody died. I think I saw there were four injuries. Because I was making our yearbook the other day for our family. There were four injuries. An EF-3 tornado tears through and demolishes apartments and houses, and there were four injuries and no deaths.

ER: What advice would you give to others about how to deal with an event like a tornado?

LD: Take a deep breath. You can focus all day long on what you lose. But if you have made it through a tornado, you have something to be grateful for. I mean, there's practical advice that you can look up on any Google, but really, just take a deep breath. If there's counseling, take the counseling right away. Do not wait. Because PTSD will hit you eventually. It's like I tell my girls, like, there's always something to be afraid of. You can always find something bad, always. But you have to look for the good. You have to. Because that's what will get you through to the next thing is look for the good in things. Being scared is not the same as being weak or being as not having courage. It's just acknowledging it And moving on. That's where you get your

strength. Like you have to say, "Okay. I'm scared. But there's something more important than this." Find your blessings and focus on those. Because that's how you get through. That's how you have to get through.

ER: Are there any other things you would like us to know?

LD: I never want tornado hit again [laughter]. Yes. I think the year anniversary is going to be hard, especially knowing we're coming up on a year. We're entering the true tornado season that we have here, because fall is never as bad as spring is. If you talk to me after a few more of these severe weather things. I might not be as positive [laughter]. But it'll be what it'll be.

ER: Well, thank you very much for sharing your story. I think that's going to be very insightful to kind of get a sense of what the experience in recovery looks like and the trauma that you've endured and just hearing how you've been able to cope and what your challenges are and positive moments. So, thank you for your interview today.

LD: Thank you.

[end of transcript]