

Tornado Oral History Collection
Jennifer Jones 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 February 27th, 2019, and we are hearing from Jennifer Jones, who will share her experience of the tornado and recovery. Our interview is taking place at the Houston Cole Library. So, how were you affected by the tornado?

Jennifer Jones: So, God, that day was so weird. I had gone to work, came home, and I had seen the weather reports. We were supposed to get thunderstorms and that kind of thing and that there could be a possibility of tornado. So, in the back of my head, I always know where my flashlight is. So, I had my flashlight hanging out in – my most interior room in my apartment is my bathroom. In my bathroom, I have a 1970s modular tub that's kind of enclosed. So, I knew, okay, if I have to get somewhere, that's where I'm getting. But I had put pillows and blankets in a place where I could grab them. I made sure to – I had stopped on my way home and bought bottled water, for whatever reason, just to replenish. I was like, okay, I should probably grab some snacks. So, I had gone to the grocery store. Then I guess it was around – it was before 9:00, between 8:00, 9:00 when we did have the tornadic activity. I don't have internet or cable. So, I rely on my cell phone. So, I was streaming James Spann. All of a sudden, he's like, "Jacksonville, you need to hunker down. There's some activity coming." I had friends texting me, and they're like, "Where are you?" I was like, "I'm in my apartment." They're like, "Okay. They're saying it's coming towards Jacksonville." I'm like, "All right. I'm getting into my safe space." So, got in the bathtub – I actually have a picture of me in the bathtub that I sent people – and kind of just hunkered down. When the tornado actually came through, I could feel the pressure drop and your ears pop. I know it's really cliché that they say it sounds like a freight train, but that's kind of what it sounds like. Then I can remember it got really quiet. Then I started hearing the sirens of the EMS and the first responders. It was still pouring rain really hard. I was texting back and forth with a friend because, basically my service got kind of, I guess, janky. I don't know. The live stream stopped. So, I had to go back into Facebook and find the page. At that point, my boss had called me. He's like, "Where are you?" I was like, "I'm in my bathtub." He's like, "I'm watching the news." He's like, "Are you okay?" I was like, "I think I am." I don't know if my apartment's okay. But I remember sitting in the bathtub, thinking to myself, I was like, God, if you get me through this – because with the straight-line winds that came through on March 1st, it had knocked a tree into the neighbor's unit, which had – my apartment was deemed stable by the building inspector for Jacksonville. But I kept thinking, if this roof blows off, that's it. So, I was like, if you'll just keep that roof on and let it stay there, when I get out of this, I will go volunteer. I will do whatever I need to do tomorrow morning. I heard the siren go off over at the EMA building, but I couldn't understand what the message was saying because it was really garbled. But once I realized it had been a good fifteen minutes, I was like, okay, I'm just going to sit here for a minute. I got out of the tub. I tried to go out my front door, and there was a power line that was laying across my apartment. So, I was like, okay, shut that door and don't go out that way. So, I went out the back way and looked out towards the intersection of Forney and Mountain Street, like cutting corner from Struts Restaurant. They had the roadblocks off. I mean, there's just flashing lights everywhere. So, I was like, okay, this has to be bad. So, I was like, I'm just going to try to live stream, see if I can see some – the news reporters are reporting whatever. Phone is still blowing up from people checking on me, which, I mean, I never realized how – I guess, because it was the week of spring break for Jacksonville State, there really – it's a good thing that there weren't really that many

students in town. Because in the back of my mind, I was thinking, oh, if I had been a college kid, like I'd be standing on my front porch with a drink in hand, trying to see what's going on and – instead of getting to my safe space. But I was really thankful that, I guess, my apartment didn't get as – hit as hard as like in The Avenues. I remember I finally went to sleep around 1:00 a.m., I think. I had set my alarm to call out for work the next day at 6:00 a.m. So, I called out, and I just went ahead. I didn't have power. But I do give props to Alabama Power. Because my power was restored by 10:00 the next morning. So, that was really impressive. Probably just because of the proximity to the EMA building maybe, but I'll take it. But I remember I took a quick shower and brushed my teeth. I didn't even put my contacts. I just walked around with my glasses. But I was a working adult here at JSU. One of the girls that was active at the time, she's actually in grad school, (Olivia Dahl?), lived in the Boardwalk Apartments just around the corner. She was like, "Let's go look at campus." I was like, "Okay." I had texted a friend, Melanie Sumner, who lives over on Burke Avenue. I was like, "Are you okay?" Because I had seen the pictures of Dollar General and the Star Mart and the apartment complex, and I knew that her street backed up to the reserve. So, I texted her. She's like, "We've got trees down everywhere." I was like, "Okay. Well, let me know what you need." She's like, "Well, we have a roof leak right now." I was like, "Okay." So, I – we ended up running to Walmart. I bought six of those plastic tubs to take to her. So, we walked those over. But I just remember the trees being everywhere and walking on campus seeing these giant, 100-year oaks just toppled over like pickup sticks. It was just really disheartening. I was like, my poor little town has been ripped apart. I was like, where are those people now? We're like Tuscaloosa. Okay. In my mind, I'm thinking, how much money and insurance is going to be coming into this town, kind of thing. Working for a bank, I knew the next couple of weeks we would probably be inundated with homeowners coming in with their claims and stuff, and us doing either processing emergency insurance checks or the real deal. So, having that empathy for everyone that came in and just sitting there and listening to their story was, I think – it has helped me feel, I guess, better about the whole situation. Because I do think, out of this disaster, our community did rally around each other. I know for a minute it was the university versus the town. But I think people in the town have realized if the university wasn't here, you wouldn't have the economic impact that you have in Jacksonville. So, that was an eye-opening experience for me too, about – especially knowing people that did lose their homes and did get misplaced for a while, what their housing options were, and how people are like, "Hey, I've got this for rent," or trying to get the ordinance changed so that more than two unrelated people could live together. That was huge. I give props to the university for really going live and sharing information. I felt like I was constantly in the know, and that gave me that reassurance. So, if anything, having access to social media, whereas, experiencing earthquakes, living in Japan, that kind of thing, usually there wasn't that presence. But I feel like now, something happened like that, I can just whip out my phone and have real time information. But being able to tell people, "Hey, I'm safe," that was key.

ER: I wanted to go back to that night when you stepped outside of your apartment.

JJ: Yes.

ER: What were the activities you did?

JJ: So, I just stood there in awe. Okay. It's pitch black. The Alabama Power crews, I think they were pretty much staged and ready to come in because they knew that there was going to be storms that day. So, obviously, their crew's ready to come in. I want to say, around 10:00 p.m., there was an Alabama Power crew that parked in front of my apartment, and they were taking down the down wire and marking off the area. The guy had told me there's an— or there's a cable, one cable that's going to be laying across, but it's not live or anything. So, you don't have to worry about being electrocuted or whatever. But it had caused – in the unit next to me, there is a power pole, and the transistor thing, I don't know what you call it, it was leaking mineral oil. So, they had to replace that. But once they got that replaced, that's when we got power back. But it was just so crazy to see, like the flashing lights. I'll never forget seeing that many blue and red lights in one intersection because how they were directing traffic, I guess, to get around the university but to still be able to get down Mountain. I guess, with UPD headquarters being right around the corner from me, which has always made me feel safe, knowing I was in a centralized location – but I just really – those blue and red light flashing, that was the memory that's burned in there, and then it just being so quiet, except for the next morning, all I could hear was chainsaws. That was like, okay. You know they're clearing a path. I know I had walked outside. My trash can and my recycle bin were knocked over. So, I up-righted those and picked up, like leaf debris and just put it in a pile out by the side of the road. But I just – I don't know. My neighbors that had been affected by the straight-line winds were two college boys from Center. They obviously had moved out. So, I didn't have a neighbor to the left of me – excuse me, to the right of me. My neighbor to the left of me, he worked for Gamecock – or he still works for Gamecock Village. He does maintenance. He was like, "It's bad." I remember seeing him out on our front steps. He's like, "It's so bad, Jen." I was like, "Oh." He's like, "I'll show you pictures later on." I was like, "Okay." But everyone else that lived there was pretty much gone for spring break. My landlord had actually been in town. He was actually headed up (Roy White?) Road, out to some family friends out there when he had to, like, pull off and get in a ditch.

ER: Wow.

JJ: I mean, the fact that he was even driving in it blew my mind. But I can remember our maintenance guy, the guy that collects our rent, (David Bunn?), he had texted me. He's like, "Are you okay?" I was like, "I'm fine." Because he knew I would be in town being a working adult. So, I was like, "I think I'm good." We don't have gas. We just have electric appliances. So, I didn't have to worry about that. Because that was one thing I was concerned about, living out in Weaver, was, okay, if something does happen, we're on natural gas, I need to know how to cut that off. But just the flashing lights really stuck in my mind and then it being eerily quiet after, I guess, the tornado had done its thing and moved on. But just feeling the rain, seeing the power line, and then seeing all the flashing lights, I was like, okay, I think I'm done now. I'm going to bed. Or I'm going to try to sleep. I didn't sleep very well. I woke up the next morning. I was like, okay. I have all this nervous energy. I need to go do something. So, people start posting on Facebook about meeting at the First United Methodist Church in Jacksonville. So, that's where I ended up going with two friends. We helped unload tornado kits for a couple of hours and moved bottled water and that kind of thing. Then being an alumnus of Delta Theta, we did a survey. Because most of the girls were still on spring break. So, they had no idea if their stuff was still in their apartment or not. The ones that lived on campus, we could say,

"Okay. Well, these dorms –" yes, there was some – two of them had lived, I think, in Logan. I know that they had to move out for a short bit because they had been on the fourth floor, and with the roof getting blown off, they had to relocate. But I think there were just sixteen out of like, seventy girls. So, that's not too bad. But immediately, one of them was like, "Let's do an Amazon wish list." The next thing I know, everything was being shipped to my apartment. So, my apartment became like this little staging area. So, we had sorority chapters in Kentucky, Idaho, and Auburn that mailed us boxes of clothing and cleaning supplies. They had just gone on Amazon. They're like, "Give us an address, and we'll send it." So, my apartment became, like, the distribution site. So, I had donations – I couldn't sit on my love seat for probably a month and a half because there was just stuff. So, we finally got it all organized and distributed. Whatever was left over, I just told the girls, "You can take the blankets to the Humane Society if you all don't want them. You can take these old T-shirts to interfaith ministries in Anniston. Anything else, let's take to Second Chance." They were like, "Okay." So, that's what we did. So, the ones that needed stuff, they came and went through. Dr. Gina Mabrey, who's here – she's in the Exercise Science Department – she had a student randomly reach out to me and was like, "Hey, I've got three boxes of men's clothing. I don't know what to do with it. Can I just bring it to your apartment?" I was like, "Sure." So, I hit up the girls. I was like, "Hey, if you know any fraternity men or anyone on campus that needs clothes, just tell them to come on by." Because, I mean, there were, like, Brooks Brothers, stuff with tags on it. My mind was blown. My coworkers did a small collection and ended up getting – one girl, she coupons. She gave me 50 bottles of laundry detergent. I just ended up taking it to the truck that was parked in front of Mahan and was like, "Here you go." Then the rest of them had gone and gotten \$5 gift cards to Domino's and Pizza Hut, like different food places. So, I just took those to them. I was like, "Here." Because I knew they've got to be tired of eating in the caf. I guess that comes back to seeing the community come together during a tragedy. That's really stuck in my mind. When they're like, "Jacksonville was strong," I'm like, yes, I know Jacksonville really is strong. Because I've seen people lose everything and still show that they're good people and would still give you the shirt off their back and that kind of thing. Going to the relief concert and just seeing it – now, it's almost a year – it's kind of mind blowing. Because the campus looks so different. The avenues look so different. Every time I go to Chimney Peak, I look down, and I'm like, "Well, there used to be a bunch of trees right there." So, seeing the physical changes. But I think emotionally, people are a little bit kinder now in Jacksonville, at least, I like to think they are. Really asking people, "How are you doing?" I know everyone processes a traumatic event like that differently. That's why, I guess, I am kind of grateful that there weren't as many college kids on campus. Because I do feel like, as a young person, you're still – your mind's not fully developed yet. So, to have a trauma like that, that can totally carry on into your adulthood. Because I know for sure I now have a kit for sure that has snacks and water and extra batteries. I had always been kind of raised that way. Just because living overseas, we would have typhoons. We'd have to worry about our earthquakes. But we always had an emergency kit. So, I always had chem lights or hand warmers, like silly stuff in there. But now, it's like, okay, I've got one in the car, and I've got one in the house. But I'm really hoping there's not another tornado that comes through Jacksonville. I feel like we can wait another hundred years for something like that again.

ER: Thinking of that kit you're talking about, you had said before that, that night you got water –

JJ: Yes. I had stopped for water. Yes. I hadn't done my big grocery store thing. I had gone to New York City for a long weekend with some girlfriends and really hadn't gone to the grocery store to – and when you're just one person, buying groceries is kind of daunting sometimes. Because it's like, this stuff's going to go bad before I can eat it all. But I was like, I know I'm out of water. Not that there's anything wrong with Jacksonville water, but I prefer to drink bottled water when I'm in Aniston, just because [unintelligible]. But I was like, I'm going to stop and get some water and get some granola bars or something. So, I just happened to do that and wasn't lazy and left it in my car but actually brought it inside. But definitely keeping either one of the big, bottled waters or having a pack of water in the apartment is something I try to keep. Then having – I usually – stuff that doesn't have to be microwaved, that are nonperishables, I guess, just having something just to get me through until I could get somewhere where I had access to power or whatever. But, yes, it really made me kind of think, okay, well, that was – some foresight, to stop and get that bottled water. I was able to pass them out to the Alabama Power guys, and they were like, "Thanks." "Well, no, thank you for getting my power back on the next morning by 10:00." Because I didn't – I expected to be without power for a while. In fact, I had texted a friend that lives in Oxford. She's like, "If you need to come stay with us, you can." I was like, "Well, I think I'll be okay. Because I have power now." So, I can take a hot shower. Taking a cold shower was not fun. But in the back of my mind, I was thinking, this could be so much worse. Then actually walking around campus to see the destruction, that's when it set in. Then when you find out, okay, no one died during this, that's even more impressive. I mean, I know that there were some injuries but nothing that was super life threatening. So, that was good. But, yes, just kind of being prepared for I don't know. I was in Girl Scouts. So, I think that's where I get that from. But I'm also that person that when I pack for like a three-day trip, you would think I was going away for a month with like, clothing options and whatnot. Because I'm like, "Well, what if this happens?"

ER: In terms of you now having a kit in two places, like at home –

JJ: The car, yes.

ER: I was thinking of what types of things did you think that you needed in there, and maybe even advice for other people.

JJ: Right. I always had a first aid kit in my vehicle, but I was like, "You know what? I'm going to go buy this super jumbo, good one and then move the smaller one into the apartment." Then I had bought a Rubbermaid tub. I've got a blanket in there that's kind of – it's just a fleece blanket. I even put a travel pillow in there, a couple bottles of water, some, just granola bars or KIND bars and then the first aid kit. Then I have a flashlight with extra batteries in there too. Then my jumper cables are the one – are in the car. Then it's pretty much the same thing in the house. It's just the first aid kit is not as extensive. Because I figure, worst case, I can go to the car and get that one if it's with me, but just making sure that I have fruit in a can or just something that it wouldn't be completely horrible to eat if I didn't have a way to heat it up. I think I even threw in a can opener because I have an electric one, but just silly things like that that seem – you're like, okay, but if this really did happen. I put a lighter that's still just in the packaging in the one in the house. But I do have some, just chem lights in the one in the car. In case I break down or something like that, I can put those out so that no one tries to run me over. I don't know. Knock

on wood. But yes, just kind of being a little bit more, I guess, prepared and thinking ahead, like I do – oh, and I do have a weather radio now in my apartment. So, that's probably a good thing to have. It was funny because I was joking when I was doing my taxes, they talked about – they were talking about the tax-free holiday for weather stuff. I was like, "Oh, that's kind of cool that you can get your weather radio without having to pay a tax on it now." That was kind of cool that they're going to do that holiday. So, that was something I was like, "Okay. Yes, I definitely need to go invest in one of those." But other than that, there's not a whole lot else in there.

ER: One thing that you mentioned early on is that that next day, it was like, "How can I help?"

JJ: Right. Yes.

ER: You have this sense of resourcefulness. I mean, just the idea that you started to collect things and reach out to people.

JJ: Right.

ER: How did you kind of get that organized? Were there specific things that you helped organized for?

JJ: I had people that I had gone to high school with, overseas. "Are you okay? What can I do?" I was like, "Donate to the Red Cross." Do this. Do that. Then when JSU got their GoFundMe going, I was like, "Donate to this." But really, it was reaching out to the girls and being like, "Okay. What do you need? What do you need right now to function?" So, some of them had lost – most of the stuff that was lost was stuff that could be replaced. So, it wasn't anything that was super valuable. It was like some clothes, bedding that had gotten wet. So, I went and just got rolls of quarters for – I bought rolls of quarters, and I was like, "Here, you can go do laundry now if you don't have access to a washer and dryer." Because I knew my friend Melanie and her husband, because their power was out for so long, I finally was like, "Give me what needs to be washed now, and I'm going to go and throw it in the washer for you. I'll dry it. You can pay me back later. You don't even have to pay me back. It's not a big deal." But I had people bringing me shampoo and conditioner, toothbrushes, toothpaste, ibuprofen, you name it. If Dollar General sold it, it was showing up in my apartment, I felt like – trash bags. The coolest thing we got was someone went and got the work gloves. So, if they were picking up something, they didn't have to worry about cutting themselves, that kind of thing. Because we did have a girl that lived out towards 204, in Pleasant Valley that, I mean, they had several trees down. She was kind of stuck in her house until her dad could get there and have chainsaws to move some limbs and stuff, so kind of crazy.

ER: Yes. Think of what items seem to be the most requested.

JJ: Probably trash bags, trash bags were huge, and Ziploc baggies to separate out – one of the girls, all her jewelry got knocked over off her dresser. So, when she was finding stuff, trying to group it so that she could account for in the inventory. One thing I did learn, so when the straight-line winds came through, I didn't have renter's insurance, which I know is really stupid. So, the next day, I got on the phone with USAA, and I was like, "Hey, I need to get renter's

insurance." They're like, "Sure." I was like, thank God I did that. Because then the tornado happened. But the guy told me, he's like, "The easiest thing you can do is take a video." I know with USAA; I was able to load that video and some photos. So, if something ever does happen, that's already sitting in like a database somewhere. But they said, "Walk around your apartment and film, open drawers, closets. So, you can show what was in there." I had had a sorority sister in February of last year, their – her and her husband lived in an old – It was built in like, I think, 1905. It was an old farmhouse in Summerville, Georgia. It caught fire when they – her daughter has a coon dog, and the dog had had puppies. She had knocked over the heat lamp, and the heat lamp – this was in an outbuilding of – on their property. But it burnt up so quick. It caught the house on fire. So, luckily, no one was home. But her mother-in-law happened to drive by and saw smoke and called 911. They put it out. Then it reignited later on that evening. So, it was a complete loss. So, they're almost done building their new house. But she was telling me, she's like, "Jennifer, trying to remember what you have is the hardest thing." So, that would be one piece of advice, is – and this has really made me not be a hoarder anymore. I used to save magazines and all kinds of stuff. Marie Kondo, my life, right? I have cleaned out and just went through clothing donations. I don't even know. I think at one point, I think I counted over 1500 pieces that had just shown up in boxes between the three sororities. That wasn't even what people brought me. I don't know. It was crazy. The funny thing, at the end of it, if you think about it, the girls that – I mean, they really didn't lose a ton of stuff. But it was like, some stuff had gotten broken. One girl had had a lamp that had been her great-aunt's. That kind of sentimental stuff, you're more heartbroken over. One of the girls couldn't find her sorority badge. So, we all chipped in and got her replacement badge. Because even after she had tried to inventory, she's like, "I don't know where my badge is. I can't find it." We keep thinking, someone's going to have a metal detector one day and be out in the field. It's just going to show up. I think a lot of people realize it's not about the material stuff. It's about having your life and your loved ones and that kind of thing. You can replace shoes and purses and that kind of thing, but you can't replace people. But I think also being prepared comes down to having an awareness of – I check my weather app every day now. That's something I do. I'm like, okay. If I travel somewhere different, like, when I was in New York, I was like, "Okay. I know it's going to snow at least one day we're up there. It's going to be windy. But they don't have really tornadoes up there. So, I was okay with that. But when I travel places, I keep an eye on the weather, just so – yes.

ER: I think also, when you mentioned getting the renter's insurance and videotaping and taking pictures.

JJ: Yes.

ER: I would think too, in addition, to trying to remember everything, how hard that could be and a trauma.

JJ: Yes. Because your brain is not going to be thinking, okay, how many T-shirts did I have sitting in that drawer? Something that Mary Beth had pointed out to me, she's like, "I didn't realize how expensive my makeup and my –" when she started going through the contents of her makeup bag and what she puts on every day. She's like, "I had \$500 worth of makeup in one bag, between my face cream, my night cream, my face –" I was like, "Yes. You really don't

think." So, when she was trying to do the itemization, I was sitting there, thinking, "God, if my apartment blew away –" I mean, that's why I started purging and cleaning out stuff. I had gone through my closet and more clothes than I know what to do with. I'm only one person. So, I've now instituted that role, where it's like, you hang the hanger one way. Until you wear it, you can flip it the other. You turn everything backwards, and you flip it back, right? So, that helped me. Because I was, I don't know, just – then you start thinking, "I probably wear the same twenty pieces of clothing on a regular – I have a work outfit. When I'm not at work, I'm in leggings and a T-shirt." I started thinking, "How many damn T-shirts do I own?" I mean, just from the tornado, I think I bought four, trying to support. But I don't know. At the end of the day, I do think it's good to have an inventory, especially of major things. I knew, after the Tuscaloosa tornadoes, I had been up in Nashville. I have an aunt and uncle who live up there. We had gone into this little shop. This woman had taken 2x4s that she had found in her yard after the tornado, and she painted angels on them. So, I bought one of those. It's actually in my living room. I remember the next morning, looking at it that, and I was like, that was my guardian angel looking at – I mean, I know some people aren't religious. But that was like, okay, my aha moment. All right. When I looked at that, and I was like, "Okay." Because I kept thinking – I was sitting in that bathtub, and I could hear the winds whipping stuff around outside, I guess. I just kept thinking, if this roof blows off, I'm just going to look up to the sky. I kept thinking, okay, how many towels do I have that I can start putting out? That was the other thing that people donated, was towels, washcloths, even paper towels, and toilet paper. When Amazon delivered, I had six boxes of toilet paper and six boxes of paper towels. I was trying to just give people. I was like, "Here, take this." But most of the kids, if you live on campus, they're, like, "I don't need all this toilet paper." So, I was like, "Okay. Well, we might be donating some of this because – or putting it in storage. Because I don't – there's no way. So, yes, just little things. But a lot of people, when people would ask me, I'd be like, "Well, just buy some gift cards or something so that if they need to go replace something, they can." I'm also in the Junior League, and we had done a gift card drive. We had a young lady that we – one of our members had worked – she had run the Hampton Inn in Jacksonville at one point. So, we reached out to (Casey?) and asked Casey to ask the people that had been living there for a while, what did they need? She said that they had a young lady there, and we had gotten her \$100 gift card. Well, somehow, it didn't get activated properly. So, I had to mail her another one. But she was like, "You wouldn't believe the kindness of people, just random strangers." I was like, "Well, I hope this helps pay for whatever you need this coming semester." I had asked, especially some of the students, if they took their grades or if they wanted to try to improve. I know a lot of people are like, "I'm just taking my grade and running with it." So, I'm kind of curious to see, especially this semester, how the kids fare now that it's been one year. Did their GPAs all go up or level out, or did some people drop off? So, that's been kind of interesting to see how that's going to play out. Having friends that work for the university, I know Buffy Lockette and Sydney Jones. Every time I see them, "Thank you for getting that information out there." Because there were so many unknowns. If you were down at Panama City Beach, coming back up to Jacksonville, you probably weren't prepared to – I mean, the pictures didn't do it justice. I know I've spent a lot of time as an alumnus in Houston Cole when I was studying for my series to be a licensed banker, for my Series 63 and 65. I would go to work, study all day, and then I would come to the library and stay until close, studying. So, when they told me that it did like a 12-degree whip around, I was like, "Oh, okay." Olivia, who I had mentioned earlier, she worked for Learning Services. She was over – I guess it's like, I don't know, tutoring study hall over in Merrill. So, sometimes

if I got bored being over here, I would go to her classroom and just hang out or whatever and study. Being a communications major, I didn't spend a lot of time in Merrill, but I always appreciated the quirky [19]60s-ness of Merrill. So, when I saw how devastated Merrill – that just broke my heart. I've learned a lot about insurance and how coverage works and that kind of thing. It's been interesting to hear the stories of the customers that come in. We had one guy in particular. I don't know why they just didn't cut him one big check, just condemn the house, and be done with it. But they've let him rebuild. I mean, seeing the before and after pictures has been really eye opening. So, going to city council meetings and listening to people freak out has been eye opening too. But I do want to give – especially the first responders that came from everywhere. Then, of course, people are going to take advantage of a tragedy. So, when I heard people had come from Huntsville to start looting in The Avenue, that blew my mind. So, the first time I had to be escorted to my friend's house that lived back there, I was like, "Oh, wow," that it had to come to this. He's like, yes, it's kind of crazy. I don't know. I guess, just being prepared and having a game plan, knowing where your safe space is. I mean, I joke at work, "We have that – if something happens at work, okay, this is where we have to congregate." But knowing, okay, if this happens again, where am I going?

ER: It's really been great listening to how you describe the community, all the actions that went to helping people, and even people that were greatly affected still contributing and to give you a lot of credit for just getting involved. I mean, you're telling everybody else, but it's listening to you and how much you organized and how much you were there for people.

JJ: I think it's just because I was in a really good central location that people – they knew where Mountain Street was. I was like, "Okay. If you know where the off-campus bookstore is and if you get to Stretch, you've gone too far." So, I was like, "Just look for the little brick house and then the brick apartments, and you'll be able to find me." I mean, some girls, they're like, "I didn't even have my –" they had left stuff down at the beach and come straight up. The girls had been on vacation with their families, and they just took off. They're like, "I didn't think that I wouldn't be able to get into my apartment or whatever." I'm like, "Okay. Well, here's some PJs. Here's a toothbrush and toothpaste, contacts solution, whatever you need." I don't know. It's really sad, but at the same time – and there are still, obviously, physical scars in Jacksonville. But seeing the new rec center open and – I just feel like we're kind of rising out of the ashes. So, it feels good. The library is almost done. It looks like the big cranes are gone. I noticed that they've been working on Stone Center. I'm really excited. I know a lot of people were super upset about the Alumni House, like, super upset. But I was reassured that they took care in removing things so that they could be preserved, and just like with Merrill. They're taking down the mosaic and numbering it so they can put it back up somewhere. I was like, okay, they really did care about this. It's not like they're just tearing stuff down to tear it down. I do have a brick from the Alumni House that I pilfered that day that they started tearing it down. That's my little keepsake. But yes. Because I've been to baby showers, I've been to weddings there, wedding showers, birthdays, you name it. I had a lot of memories from the Alumni House. So, I just hope, when they do rebuild it, they keep it in that, maybe same style, maybe on a bigger scale, just to be able to accommodate more people. But I feel like the community in Jackson, I know some people are still – and it's always going to be that way in some cases. But I had to stop when I read in the paper that someone in Oxford said that the reason why the tornado came to Jackson on the Oxford was because we have Sunday liquor sales. I was like, okay. I can't even

with that right now but all right. So, things like that, it put things into perspective. On the flip side, would I want this to happen anywhere? No. But I think if it had to happen somewhere, the fact that it happened in Jacksonville, and Jacksonville is such a strong community and was able to rally around people that lost more than others or whatever the case is. It's refreshing to see people – I hate to say it takes a tragedy like that, but to see the community come out and support. Even with the relief concert, when it was pouring rain, people were still out there having a good time. Because they knew it was supporting a good cause.

JJ: You mentioned earlier, talking about thinking about your role at the bank and anticipating what those weeks were going to be and thinking about, at first, you said the insurance or how people are coming in to do their claims. But then you mentioned empathy.

JJ: Yes, having empathy for them. I know in Jackson, they were a million times busier, but I know sometimes I would tell people, "If you don't want to have to wait, we've got our McClellan and our Aniston branches." It's funny, because before Piedmont branch closed, when I worked in Piedmont, the tornado that took out Goshen Baptist Church in the – I think it was the early [19]90s. It was funny because I drove past there the other day, and they have their memorial area. They've got where their new church is. I was thinking, I was like, Jackson is going to recover like that. People will come – the students now will come back with their kids and be like, "So, this happened when I was in school and look at how campus has changed." Now, it breaks my heart that all those trees had to be cut down. It really, truly does. Because I have pictures of events with those trees. I'm like, okay, but they're trees. They can grow back, kind of thing. So, I think it's cool that they're trying to re-tree Jacksonville, which is great. But there was an influx of businesses coming in too, for roofing and contractors to do rebuilds and stuff. My landlord actually bought two properties in the midst of this because people were just willing to walk away. They didn't want to have to deal with it. They'd rather make it someone else's problem. So, he's actually – I joke that he's of profited off of it, but at the same time, those properties just would have sat looking like a hot mess. So, I'm grateful that he did do that. Then he was grateful that when the straight-line winds hit, he'd already lined up his contractors to take care of the unit next to mine. I was kind of thankful because I was able to pick my new neighbor, who actually works for JSU. I wanted someone that wasn't necessarily a college student that was living next to me, that wasn't playing Fortnite at 3:00 a.m. So, it was really nice when I got to choose her. But at the same time, I know that there was pushback from the city. Because they didn't want students to really move into The Avenues. Because they had fought so hard to get them out when I was in school. I did have a few friends that – four of them – lived in a great house back on Ninth Avenue, back in the day. It had a huge backyard. So, they were able to have their animals and that kind of thing. But for the most part, they kept their rowdiness down. But I know college kids can be rowdy. I mean, I live across from Struts now. Now, there's Struts after dark. There are some days, I lay there, and I'm like, "Okay. I just want to go to bed." Then I'm like, "You have earplugs. It's okay. Let the kids have their fun because – they're able to have their fun because the school's still here." But yes, just having empathy for those that had been through something that – like having your whole house blown away, basically, and having to make those inventory lists and trying to keep some kind of normalcy in your kids' life. I know one of my customers has a daughter that goes to Jacksonville High School. He was like, "Yes. We're just trying to keep it as normal as possible while we're living at the Hampton Inn." I was like, "I know that can't be easy." So, I am thankful that the Hampton

Inn had been built. Because then everyone would be trying to crash at the university. So, I think that was – that they're – people have come together to check on others and really just love on each other a little bit more and go that extra mile. I know people were – anytime I went out to eat, they'd be like, "Oh, do you live here in Jacksonville?" I'm like, "Yes." They're like, "Where do you live?" "Across from the university." They're like, "Oh, my God, were you affected by the tornado?" I was like, "No. I was on the opposite side of campus." But it was still – I mean, seeing all those trees, just the debris everywhere, was just mind blowing.

ER: Yes. The way you just describe it has been so vivid. You've mentioned too, being in the bathtub and the pressure.

JJ: Yes. You can feel the pressure drop. That was the weirdest feeling ever. Because I've flown a lot. Usually, you only get that pop, you know your ears need to pop, when either you're in a higher elevation, or you're going up. Just knowing that I was near the ground, and I could feel this pressure come through, I was like, "This is so weird." That's what I knew. I was like, okay, just stay here. Hunker down. Don't move. I think I even laughed at myself because I closed the shower curtain, like that was going to do anything. But yes.

ER: What would you carry forward from this experience?

JJ: Just to always be aware of where – if I'm traveling, where I'm going, what the weather is like there, especially now that spring is about to approach. We are about to go into tornado season. Just making that you're checking on people to be like, "Hey, do you know where to go? Do you know where the shelters are?" I mean, I probably shouldn't have been so lazy thinking, "Oh, it's not going to hit Jacksonville." But seriously, maybe going to a friend's house that has a basement or something like that might have been a better choice. But knowing to get into the most interior spot, I think if something had happened, I think I would have been hopefully okay. But it was funny because I joked with my mom. I was like, "Well, my old baseball or softball helmets at your house, I should probably get that the next time I come home." So, putting helmets on your kids, for sure. Because nine times out of ten, if something is going to – if it's going to fall out, you're going to get hit on the head. So, that's why I was like, okay, grab pillows. So, I was sitting there with a pillow over my head. But definitely, just watching the weather more, I guess. James Spann is the man. I give him mad props for trying to keep us safe and giving us the heads-up. But weather is unpredictable sometimes, so just knowing, okay, yes, it can happen to you.

ER: I know you mentioned a little bit of advice earlier, but any other advice you would give to people you know that may deal with a tornado a little bit?

JJ: Try to be prepared. I'm sure others have a way more traumatic experience than mine. I don't think – I don't feel like I have any real PTSD or anything. But I'd definitely say, you should talk about it. If you are not feeling so – and there's nothing wrong with seeing a professional either. It's okay. My best friend from college – her name is also Jennifer – when we were in college, if it was storming, she was the first one in the bathtub. We still joke about it until today. She's like, "Jennifer, there's no way I could have done what you did." I'm like, "I know. You would have been in the corner crying." But she has always been weather aware. So, I think sometimes

we rely on our phones a lot, but we don't pay attention to – because I got the alerts. It was like, okay, yes, we're under tornado watch. Or we're being upgraded. This is for real. So, definitely not standing out in it. I feel like some college students – I don't want to say that they would all do that, but I just feel like one or two probably would have done that. I don't want anybody to get hurt. So, just making sure that you're paying attention to what's going on and take – I know people were like, "Oh, well, we were supposed to get snow, and then it didn't happen." I'm like, "Well, I'd rather them not put kids on buses and then hit an icy patch. Then you're trying to sue the school system." I believe an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. So, I guess it's like old school way of thinking. But at the same time, I think, just kind of having a game plan as to – or if this does happen, okay, what do I do next? A lot of people didn't know how FEMA works or how their insurance policies work. Maybe doing some reading ahead of time. I know a lot of people's – something I've experienced is a lot of people's property, like their homeowner's insurance has gone up. Because now, Calhoun County is in this – okay, there's flooding going on, and there's this, there's that. So, just definitely being aware of the potential for natural disasters to happen in the area and what steps you can take to prepare yourself, that kind of thing. I'm really thankful that the apartment I chose was built in the late [19]60s, early [19]70s. It's mostly brick. I mean, it's really well insulated. My power bill is super cheap. But I just feel really thankful that it was able to withstand – even though it had already gotten damaged on the other unit's side, that it was able to still be there. Because I kept thinking, okay, if another tree falls, where is it going to land? So, just being prepared. It was really weird. When they finally removed all the big tree stumps off of Mountain Street, just seeing this big tractor trailer driving by, and they're picking these things up with -- I was like, wow, that tree had been there for how long. Now, it's just a stump. So, definitely just thinking about how this will impact, twenty-five years from now, when people talk about the tornado. Will we have a lot more new trees? I know every time I look out, going down 21, heading north towards Piedmont, I'm just like, there used to be houses there and a ton of trees. You can even see the apartment complex. It's just weird the things that you can see now that you can't – even parking here at the library. I was like, I could never see where those apartments are the First Baptist Church. Now, I can see everything. It's so weird. So, I don't know.

ER: Thank you for that advice. It's definitely helpful for people to prepare themselves. Anything that you would like to share that we didn't cover?

JJ: I don't know. Just be kind to one another. I don't know. I feel like, if anything, when I left South Metro Atlanta, people were like, "You're moving to Podunk Alabama. What are you doing?" It really solidified my choice though. Because people came out of the woodwork to check on each other and to be there for each other. I don't feel –I do know that there was a tornado that touched down in South Fulton County, not at the same time, but I think a couple weeks later. Watching the news reports from Atlanta on that, just how people really didn't rally around that one little community. I mean, it was just really one neighborhood that was affected. But I keep thinking, those people, their roof is gone. I'm just glad that I live – that Jackson was just a place where people do – it's kind of like Mayberry, I guess, in a sense. But people really did come out of the woodwork to check on each other. Even if you'd be in the grocery store, you're like, "Oh, how are you doing?" They would generally want to know how you were doing. How are you coping with this? How are you affected? I think it worked for the next three weeks. I have people, they're like, "Oh, you work in Jackson. Well, how's everyone doing in

Jacksonville?" I'd have to give them the rundown. But I think the more I've talked about it, the more I'm like, okay, if this were to happen – I'm glad it happened to my little town. Because anywhere else, I don't know if they would have rallied like we've rallied, I guess.

ER: That strong sense of that community spirit.

JJ: Yes.

ER: Thank you very much for your time and sharing your story.

JJ: You're so welcome, Erin.

[end of transcript]