

Tornado Oral History Collection
Pam Smith Oral History
Date of Interview: February 26, 2019
Location: Jacksonville, Alabama
Length of Interview: 00:57:05
Interviewer: TI – Tanveer Islam
Transcriber: NCC

Tanveer Islam: My name is Tanveer Islam from Jacksonville State University. We are conducting an oral history project of the Jacksonville tornado that occurred on March 19th, 2018. Today is February 26th, 2019. We are hearing from Pam Smith, who will share her experience of the tornado and recovery. Our interview is taking place at the Houston Cole Library. So, Pam, how were you affected by the tornado?

Pam Smith: Well, I live directly across from Logan Hall, which is on the campus of Jacksonville State. So, I was basically in the middle of the tornado. Yes. So, I was at home. So, I heard everything, knew what was happening, recognized all the symptoms. So, I was in the hall bathroom of my home and I heard when it hit the campus. I could hear the train – the classic train sound. So, I knew exactly what was happening, where it was coming, and the direction in which it was coming.

TI: How was your life disrupted after that?

PS: Well, when your house is directly hit, yes, it makes a big difference. The trees in my yard – I was very fortunate in that my house was not destroyed. I believe that the tornado was about maybe twenty feet off of the ground, which probably saved the house. The direction in which it hit my house, it hit kind of in the corner. So, the trees actually laid down on either side of the house. The one that was in the back, that was actually in my neighbor's yard, the trunk of that tree was probably – the diameter was probably four feet. So, it was a large tree. It clipped the back corner of the house, which was my bedroom, and where the power comes into the house. So, when it laid down, the trunk was about three feet from the edge of the house. It went the entire length of my house. Basically, almost into my neighbor's yard on the other side.

TI: Were you at the basement? Do you have a basement?

PS: I do not. Like I said, I was in the hall bathroom, which was the only place that doesn't have windows. Center of the house, no windows. While I was in there, again, I could hear the train coming. Ironically, I had gotten one of my cats in there with me. So, when I heard the train – the wind, I told the cat, I said, "Well, the long black train's coming." [laughter] Then I started hearing all the debris hitting the house. Then you could hear it pass on. I knew when the tornado had passed. Because you can tell by the train, it had passed the house. At that point, just before it started, it –

TI: So, when it's coming, it felt like a train is coming?

PS: Oh, yes. It sounds just like a train. It sounds, woo, woo, woo. So, you could hear. I could tell the direction that it was coming. I knew it was going to hit the house directly because you could just tell by the sound. I've heard that sound before from being in previous tornadoes. So, you know the sound. Once you hear it, you know what it is exactly.

TI: Previous tornadoes means like 2011?

PS: Yes. I lived in Walker County, which is West Alabama. So, every season, just about, you have a tornado.

TI: So, it seems like it is following you.

PS: [laughter] Well, I've been through a lot of them, but this was the first direct hit that I've experienced. The one in 1974 was like a major tornado in the state of Alabama.

TI: Yes. There was another outbreak in [19]74.

PS: Yes. Well, I lived where that happened as well. It hit downtown Jasper at that point. It was on a Wednesday. I was in church. So, I remember the sound.

TI: Same sound?

PS: Same sound. Once you hear the sound, you know exactly what it is. You can tell. So, I knew exactly when I heard the sound.

TI: So, near Logan Hall, that means like 204?

PS: Right. I'm right off 204. So, I mean, directly, the front door of Logan Hall faces West Avenue, faces my street. So, yes, just right there. So, part of Logan Hall was in my yard, debris. [laughter] So, you knew that. But what I was saying that when I was in there, once it started passing, the next thing was, I could feel the suction. I actually know that the roof raised about three inches. Because I could see the corner and I told the cat again. I said, "Oh, boy, we're about to fly." Because I knew if it took that roof off that we would probably be sucked out. So, about the time I got that statement out that we were about to fly, it set back down. I think what happened is when the tree that came in the back, all of the limbs were laying on top of the roof of the house from that big tree. I think having the limbs from the tree on my roof actually kept the roof on the house and kept it from completely flying off. So, that was a good thing.

TI: So, having lived all these previous tornado experience, did you take any precaution or preparedness plan?

PS: Well, I knew ahead of time where I was going to be.

TI: In the hallway.

PS: I knew I was going to be in that hall bathroom because I knew that was the safest place that I had in my house. I knew to close the door. So, the bathroom door was closed. I was laying – not laying down, but I was kneeling down in the floor around the commode. You know how you [laughter] – it's a small bathroom. So, I had done all of that. I had some pillows in there and had taken some of my valuables.

TI: Covering your head?

PS: Yes. Yes. Probably should have done a little bit more on that, but hindsight – the flashlight was in there with me. Cell phone, what I needed to contact other people was in the room with

me at that time. So, that was preparation ahead of time.

TI: So, how many people in the house? Just you?

PS: Just me.

TI: Just you and the cat?

PS: Just me and the cats. I had three cats. I only got one in there with me. But that's just how it works. But you know ahead of time, if people will pay attention to the signs. I think I put that in the notes. If you'll pay attention to the signs. I kind of had an inkling that it might occur along between 6:00 p.m. and 6:30 p.m. You see the sky turns a different color. It goes like a yellow green.

TI: Yellow green?

PS: Yes. It gets really still, and it's light. You don't hear birds. You don't hear movement.

TI: It's like peace and quiet.

PS: Yes. I mean, it is an eerie feeling, and that yellow green color is really eerie. So, anytime I see that, if it's daylight enough that you can kind of tell –

TI: So, yellow green color in the sky?

PS: Yes. Yes. The outside, like, now, it kind of looks hazy and kind of a bluish color. It'll turn a kind of a sick green yellow. When you see that, and I've always thought it was kind of a clue. Generally, when I see that yellow color, somewhere around, there's going to be –

TI: Have you seen that during previous tornadoes?

PS: Oh, yes.

TI: Same thing?

PS: Same thing, and the stillness. If it gets steel, like, no wind.

TI: Like, no wind, no movement in the place?

PS: No movement, and it gets very heavy. It is a very, very heavy feeling. So, I had seen that about 6:30 p.m. I had gone out to take the trash out. Of course, you had the weather, the TV on. But it was more like –

TI: So, you were watching TV as well?

PS: Yes, I had the TV on.

TI: Do you follow social media, like Facebook?

PS: Yes, I do. I do.

TI: Was there any updates?

PS: I usually take all of that with a grain of salt, just to be honest with you. Because having been in so many of them, I rely more on the previous signs. I pay attention to the weatherman and the weather reports.

TI: James Spann?

PS: Yes. Well, honestly, no. I watch somebody else other than James Spann. Just saying. Nothing against him, but I do use my common sense and previous experience. So, I was more on high alert because of what I had seen at around 6:30 p.m. that the possibility was really there for my area.

TI: So, the yellow green, is it in a certain direction or it's all over?

PS: It's just the atmosphere becomes like a yellow green. Like, when you see a sunset that's kind of the pinkish and yellows and stuff real pretty.

TI: So, the tornado hits around like 8:30 p.m., I guess.

PS: Yes.

TI: So, before like two, three hours, you can still have the –

PS: Sometimes you can – yes. Yes. So, I'm watching the news and I've got it on. I had actually turned it off and turned to another show at that point. But I was going back and forth. But a friend called and said, "Hey, you do know we're in the little polygon." Well, yes, it'd be okay. I'm still checking back and forth. So, when she called, I went back to the TV and I went, "Hmm." The little polygon, at that point, was west of us. You know, the typical area where it's going to go.

TI: Yes.

PS: So, I kind of went, "Hmm." So, I went to the front door and I opened it up and I'm looking at it and I still see the yellow green just barely. It was very still, very quiet, and I kind of went, "Okay." About that time, the pressure dropped. It went from that very humidity, heavy light, and it went real cold real fast. I mean, the barometric pressure just dropped completely.

TI: So, you had a feeling that –

PS: Oh, it went cold. It went like just freezing cold almost. Just, whew, and I went, "Okay.

This is major." Because when the pressure drops that you've got minutes. So, from the time that I did that, opened the door, looked out, felt the pressure drop, I had about two minutes.

TI: Have you thought about going to a shelter? I know the Jacksonville there started a new storm shelter [unintelligible].

PS: I thought about it, but at that point in time, I knew I didn't have enough time. You know, at that stage, and having been through them –

TI: So, when you felt that pressure, it was not –

PS: Oh, I knew at that point that I had minutes. Not enough time to get anywhere itself.

TI: Did you hear the train sound at that point?

PS: After I got in the bathroom – I had about two minutes. I had gotten the cat and had grabbed my camera, which is important to me. The stuff that I could grab really quick, throw it in the bathroom, closed the door, and started hearing the train. About that time, my phone started blowing up with people going, "Are you –" "Well, yes. Yes, it is a tornado." I actually said that before it hit the house. Somebody had texted me, and I said, "Yes, it is a tornado." All the classic signs. So, I actually have that still in my phone. I was texting people going, "Yes, I know. I'm okay." I mean, I almost couldn't answer one person because by that time, James Spann had finally said it's on the campus – Jacksonville State. By the time he said that, it had already – so, I'm going, "Yes, I know. [laughter] But it's okay." But that's the main thing. I think if people would pay attention, not to just the weather people, but actually pay attention to the signs that are out there and use common sense. You can kind of tell if the possibility is there. But it's, like, up until the time, everybody was predicting that it would be west of us until really, it was too late for anybody to get to a shelter. So, that's another thing I think people have to be careful of is, yes, you do need to pay attention to the weather people. They are very good at kind of predicting. But just because they can kind of see how the path's going to go, a tornado's going to do what it's going to do. So, it could be sometimes, people get too lackadaisical that it's going to be within that polygon and it can turn.

TI: So, when it hit your house, how was the feeling? Can you describe like –

PS: It shakes, and then you hear everything hitting the house, and you know it's more than leaves and that sort of stuff. You can actually hear the shingles and the debris hitting your house. Your house is shaking. It's like being really close to a railroad track. So, it's shaking and things are hitting the house.

TI: More like an earthquake or?

PS: It's not a shaking per se, but it's a vibration. It's a low vibration.

TI: Like, when a train moves?

PS: Yes. Yes. Then, again, you're hearing everything hit, and you can hear when it's something big hitting. So, you're kind of wondering what the outside –

TI: Do you feel the suction when it –

PS: Oh Yes, and I could see in the corner. I could kind of see it lift. So, you go – and you hear it and you kind of see it lift up. You almost can feel that the suction is trying to take that roof off of you. Honestly, if that tree hadn't have been there, the roof would've been gone off the house. Even though I would not have gotten a direct hit. Two doors down, it did land and just kind of went, poof. So, I'm kind of in a low little area.

TI: So, the tree saved originally from the wind. The wind, I mean, it was –

PS: The suction.

TI: Suction.

PS: By having all of the limbs – because like I said, it was a huge tree. So, even though the trunk didn't hit the house, when it laid down beside the house – and again, I have pictures. But when it laid down beside the house, all of the big limbs were on top of the roof, laying on the roof basically. So, all of that weight of the leaves and the limbs and all, on the roof, kept it from being sucked off. So, I was very fortunate. Didn't have any structural damage. I had several inspectors come out and look because I kept telling everybody it did try to suction it off. But the foundation was fine. So, it literally just lifted and then sat right back down. Just like stretched. It was almost like it stretched.

TI: So, no major structural damages. Wow.

PS: I had a limb go through the back of my bed, the back corner of my bedroom. I had a limb kind of go through that came down through the roof. So, I had water damage and all in my bedroom. The weird thing was I had just had new double pane windows put in the previous summer, and it had taken the outside pane of two of the windows. It broke the outside pane, not the inside pane [laughter] of the double pane windows.

TI: Is it a new house? When was it built?

PS: It was built in 1985, because I moved in in 1987. So, it was a well-made house.

TI: With all the building codes?

PS: So, I'm very, very lucky.

TI: Is it a brick house?

PS: No, it was a Masonite siding. Which, and I will say this, I have a garage outbuilding that I had recently, within the past six years, had built. I had put the siding that they have now, the

vinyl siding.

TI: Yes, the vinyl siding.

PS: It just ate it up. All that stuff that hit it, it just peppered that and just demolished that vinyl siding. Just cracked it. The Masonite –

TI: Really?

PS: Yes. The Masonite held up. I know it was being just peppered with the same stuff. I mean, there's a couple of places that you can see something hit it. But now, the Masonite held up, but the vinyl siding, just ate it up. I just about replaced everything on the outbuilding – the vinyl siding on the outbuilding. So, for me personally, now, I'll never use vinyl siding because that was kind of useless [laughter], from my opinion.

TI: Yes. I think these are great information. How about the roof? Is it different than the regular or is it like the –

PS: No. It was just a regular shingled roof. Now, I have a metal roof. I replaced it with a metal roof.

TI: After the tornado?

PS: Oh, yes, because it just stripped. I'm still picking up shingles [laughter] in my yard. My shingles, Logan Hall shingles, neighbors' shingles [laughter].

TI: So, the damages, those are covered by your insurance? The house?

PS: Yes, pretty much. Yes. I did find out with insurance, that unless the trees actually hit your structure, they don't pay to have your trees removed. Because I was fortunate enough that the trees landed –

TI: Outside?

PS: Yes, of our house. They didn't pay for it except for the one that actually kept the roof on. So, I had another tree in the front that was huge. The diameter of it was probably 5, 5.5 foot. Huge tree. It was on this corner of my lot. It laid down and went all the way across my lot, and it went halfway into my neighbor's yard. That's how tall that tree was. So, it laid all the way across. So, it blocked. It was tall enough, when it laid down, all the limbs and everything were tall enough that you couldn't see my house from the road. So, it laying on its side, that's how tall the limbs and all were. So, that laid all the way across. It blocked my driveway, my exit point. So, they did pay for me to have my exit.

TI: The insurance?

PS: The insurance gave me an allowance to remove the tree on my driveway, but not the rest of

it. So, that was a learning experience. That unless the trees hit a structure, they don't pay to remove your trees. Learning.

TI: Yes. I didn't know that.

PS: Yes, I didn't know that either until you go and you explain. They go, "Well, we can't pay you for that." You are like, "What?" [laughter]

TI: So, who removed the rest of the trees? The city?

PS: Well, yes, that's another thing to discuss because this was really a learning curve too. I'm thankful that I have been through other tornadoes. So, I knew to kind of wait and a lot of people didn't. But the city allowed volunteers to come in the last of the week, that Friday, Saturday, and on past that. They removed the trees and all for free.

TI: Volunteers?

PS: Volunteers, because they wanted to help, which was outstanding. On a Saturday, there was a group that was allowed to come in – no, on Friday. They started at the front of the street. Mine was one of the first houses that they came to and it was a whole church from Birmingham. I bet there was thirty people. They just walked up and said, "Can we help you?" They had ten or twelve chainsaws. I said, "Sure, I'll accept your help." They cut up the tree. Now, they couldn't remove the big root balls and the bases of the trunks. They couldn't because they just can't do it. But as far as all the limbs, so that all that was left when they finished was the big trunks that the city had to pull out anyway. So, they were moved and moved to the side of the road where the city had told us to place that. So, I think that's a major thing that people need to understand, that if you can wait and have patience, that people will help you with no charge.

TI: So, this is like within a week after?

PS: Yes. But you had to wait. It wasn't going to happen the day after. You weren't going to have –

TI: Yes, because people need to mobilize and –

PS: Right. That was a great thing that the city did. The day after was chaos because people were trying to come in to help. I had a lot of friends that knew I needed help. Unfortunately, you had a lot of people who were taking advantage of the situation and were taking advantage of people. A lot of people don't understand. They would just wait. And again, my previous experience of going through this, I knew not to jump on the first contractor that came up and said, "Hey, let me prepare your roof for you for this amount of money. Can you sign this contract?" I mean, they were out by daylight. By 6:00 a.m., 6:30 a.m. the next morning, they were in our neighborhood, canvassing the neighborhood. Passing out business cards, trying to get people to sign up.

TI: The next day?

PS: The next morning, by daylight the next morning. Tree removal companies were in the neighborhood and they were taking advantage of people. They were charging people to do something that if you could get people to understand to wait, that volunteers – people who just want to help would do it for you for nothing. Because they want to help you, not make a buck off of you. So, I'd take their business cards, but I'd say, "No, I have a contractor," which I did. I've had someone that does work for me – has always done work for me, and I knew I would get them. The same thing with the tree removal, I knew somebody that goes to my church that had the tree removal equipment and a side business. So, I knew I would get that person. So, I could honestly say, "No, I don't need your help. No." They were very insistent, a lot of them. They'd see a female and they'd go, "Come on. Let me do this for you. I can do this for you. I'll get to you." Blah, blah, blah. And you're like, "No, I don't, I'll" –

TI: I'll wait.

PS: Yes, I'll wait. They're like going, "Well, no, I'll do it for you for \$3,000." And you're like, "No. I'm not going to pay you that." They'd say, "Well, your insurance will pay me. You can just pay me off your insurance." Well, I didn't know at the time, but now I know now that your insurance is not going to pay if it's not on your structure. So, a lot of people got bit that way that – just wait. You can't do in thirty hours – repair something. It may have taken thirty seconds for it to get that way. It's not going to get all cleaned up in thirty hours or thirty days. So, you've just got to kind wait. So, that was a big issue, I think, or it was for me.

TI: Can you talk some of your greatest challenges after the disaster?

PS: I think, again, just [laughter] trying to be patient as far as repairs. Because there was so many people who needed repairs and who needed a place to live. Yes, I was inconvenienced, but I had two other bedrooms that I could move into just. [laughter] I couldn't live in my bedroom, but I could still live in my house. I just needed to move to another bedroom. So, it wasn't crucial that I have my bedroom repaired immediately. There were other people who needed a house or a tree removed out of their bedroom. So, sometimes, you had to prioritize and –

TI: So, did you feel safe at that point to live in the house or you wanted to move to like a hotel?

PS: I felt safe. If I felt like I needed to move, I would've moved. But I could see almost immediately how lucky I was. There were other people who were in a lot worse shape than me that they had water pouring into their house. I didn't have water pouring into my house. I had water leakage. I knew I had roof damage because I could see the leak. But I knew it wasn't crucial. I wasn't in danger. I was inconvenienced, but I wasn't in danger. So, sometimes, you've just got to kind of say, "Hey, other people need this before I do." Just kind of be patient and let the contractors go with what needed to be done immediately. So, patience [laughter] is hard for me because I want everything done and done right away. But one step at a time. I needed to be able to get out of my driveway and I needed a tarp on my roof. I had some friends who contacted me the night of and said, "Are you okay? What can we do? We'll be there in the morning." So, thankfully, those friends who actually live out of town – but my friend had worked for Alabama Power. So, she kind of knew, and her husband kind of knew from her

working in Alabama Power, kind of what I needed. So, they actually had gone and bought tarps and rope and stuff. When they got there that morning, again, he got on the roof and we got the limb off of the roof where he could put the tarp on the roof to keep the leak from getting any worse. So, once I got the tarp on the roof and nailed down, then again, I knew I was okay. I was going to be all right for a few weeks. So, it wasn't crucial for me to get the roof on the house right then.

TI: That was covered by the insurance?

PS: Yes. That was covered by the insurance. They really didn't question on that. Of course, they –

TI: Did they send anyone to inspect?

PS: Yes, I did get someone fairly quickly. Again, I had to wait because they're trying to pull in inspectors and extra riders. I'm not the only one. I was one of what, five hundred homes? [laughter] So, they've got to have time to get to you to assess. I knew I'd be okay. I just had to wait. The immediate need was, get out of my driveway where I could actually function. I could move.

TI: You didn't have any car damage or anything?

PS: No. [laughter] Again, where I was sitting, it was just like, I couldn't have been any luckier. That's what it was. It was just the angle. If the tornado had come at a slightly different angle and had hit the front of the house, it would've been entirely different because those trees would've hit the house. But the angle in which it went, it caught the corner of the house and just laid the trees down on either side. So, I was in great shape as far as that goes. You can't control any of that. You can't change the path of the tornado. You can't stop it. You can't change it. You just have to kind of be prepared, think about surviving. At that point, when you're in that moment, you're not really worried about possessions, per se. Yes, I grabbed a couple of things. But you don't really worry about whether or not it's going to be there or not afterwards. You're just kind of in the survival mode. You worry about your neighbors. After it was over with, I needed to be careful because I knew my yard floods anyway. I get a lot of water in it. So, when that rain came, I knew it had gotten the power line to the house. So, I knew that was dangerous. I also know from previous tornadoes that there's power lines down everywhere. Well, common sense, don't get out [laughter] in wet and power lines down. My friend was trying to get me to come down to their house, and I'm like, "No, I'll stay right here. It's not safe for me to get out." Because I went to the front door, opened it, got on the front porch area and could see the trees down in the water, all the way around the house. I'm like, "Oh, okay. Well, can't get that way. [laughter] Can't escape this way. Not safe." So, I go to the back door. Well, the tree was in the way of the back door. I could see out my back windows and my window at my bedroom, the tree limbs were all the way up against the house. So, I knew I couldn't get out that way either. So, I only got far enough out that I could kind of see that the house on either side of me was pretty much there. I could tell they were still there. I knew at that point, the house beside me had just become vacant because the guy had died. So, I knew it was vacant, and I knew the house on the other side of me, the renters had just moved out. So, it was vacant, just within a

couple of weeks prior to the tornado. So, I knew both of those houses were vacant. I could tell the house behind me was intact, but I couldn't get to those people. I knew the house directly across from me, I had seen them leave earlier. So, I knew they weren't home, which helped when the fire and rescue people did come by. I was at least able to tell them, "No, there's nobody home at these areas." That was helpful.

TI: Was there any curfew after the tornado?

PS: That night? There wasn't that night. Thankfully, the city of Jacksonville did instigate the curfew. They also, after that first day with the people, all the contractors and tree people come in, they actually told them not to come in. They closed down the neighborhoods, which was a blessing. You had to have permission to even get into your neighborhood.

TI: So, that was a good thing.

PS: Oh, yes. That was tremendous. The only regret, I wish they had thought to do it the morning after the tornado hit to keep those –

TI: Contractors?

PS: Yes. There's another name that I use for them, but I won't use it in a public setting. But, yes. Because they just took advantage of people. Strongly took advantage. Really, people need to understand. If that contractor is out of town or out of state, they're only there to get your money. They're not there to really help you.

TI: So, the Dollar Store is not far away from –

PS: [laughter]

TI: So, there was some looting in that –

PS: Yes.

TI: – place? Okay.

PS: Yes. There was some there.

TI: Was it done by people from outside?

PS: No, that was locals, I think. It was almost immediate.

TI: That night?

PS: Yes. My church – I go to the Church of Christ, which was right beside the Dollar Tree. One of the people that was contacting me was church people. My elder, who's a friend, I actually texted him and said, "Hey, I'm okay, but you better check on the church." Because I

knew if my house got hit, that the church would've gotten hit as well. So, he was trying to get to the church to see the damage. I think that's the hardest thing, is, I'm sitting there knowing what my damage is looking like. Then I'm thinking, well, so and so down the road, or so and so's here, I wonder if they're okay. But you're kind of worried about yourself – surviving yourself. It was whoever came in the night of that cleared the roads where the people the next morning could get in. They were a blessing. I think they were just, again, a group of church people that the EMA called or somebody called. I could hear them about – I want to say about midnight. They had started at 204 and they were coming down my street. What they were doing was all of the limbs and the trees that were blocking the street, the road, they were cutting them so that you could get a vehicle down. They were cutting it and just throwing it on the sides, which was great because the next morning, you could actually get up the road. So, that helped. That helped the rescue crews to be able to get in to assess whether people were trapped in their homes. So, that was a great thing that happened.

TI: I think the next big question is about the resilience. You mentioned about your previous experience and help from the church and the volunteers. So, again, if you have anything like what helped you to cope with the challenges from the tornado, is there something you can point to that helped you recover more quickly?

PS: You've got to be humble enough to accept help when people offer help, regardless of what it is. Even if it's just, "Hey, let me get you some water." Or when they say, "What can I help you do?" Just come up with something. Say, "Well, I need help move these trees. Can you help me move these tree limbs? Can you help me?" Be willing to ask and accept help when it's offered. That's a big thing. When people ask you, "How's it going? How are you doing?" Be honest and tell them. Don't sugarcoat it. If they're asking you, tell them. "Well, it's not going real great today. I'm having this issue." It's a great source too, because sometimes, if you say, "Hey, I'm looking for a contractor. I need somebody to do this." If you say that to enough people, somebody's going to come up and say, "Well, hey, I know so and so. They can help you with that. Let me see if I can get you their number." So, that's a great source.

TI: So, networking with people.

PS: Networking, and be honest if they say, "Hey, what can I do to help you?" You go, "Well, I don't know. But right now, I need somebody to put the sheet rack up in my bedroom." Then they'll go, "Well, I know so and so. So and so did that for me. Let me get you their number." That's a great source. Then just talk to people. Talk to your friends, talk to your church friends, and be willing to ask for help. Take what you can use. Then if you can't use it, sometimes you can pass it on and say, "Hey, well, I know so and so down the road, they need help doing this. Could you go help them?" You may not use their help, but you can say, "Well, I know this neighbor down here could really use some support," and pass the help along. Even if you can't use it, pass it along to someone who can.

TI: Can you think of something, like, if you would've done it differently, you would recover more quickly? Or you're satisfied after what happened?

PS: Well, [laughter] I'm still recovering. It's kind of a never-ending process. You almost can't

see the end result. You just kind of have to keep plugging along. But I would say this, I think you can get overwhelmed to the point that you don't think you're going to get out of the situation, and it's okay to take time away. I did take a short little trip with my mom in May when I got finished with teaching classes and all. I said, "Hey, I just need to get away for a few days." I said, "How about if we just go up to the mountains?" So, we went up to the Smoky Mountains for a couple of days, and that helped.

TI: To release the stress?

PS: Just get out and not have to see devastation. Not have to hear reroofing and pounding and chainsaws from seven to seven, seven days a week. That's stressful for those of us who live in the direct areas and who stayed there. I was one of the few neighbors who actually stayed in their home. So, it was daylight to dark, seven days a week. You heard chainsaws and hammers and debris removal and trucks. Just the noise of all of that and constantly seeing the devastation. So, get away. It's okay to take some time. You can't do everything. So, let it go. Take some time away. Then when you do come back, you're able to get back at it. Then try to celebrate the small accomplishments [laughter]. Small things, like, yay, I got my windows replaced today. Okay [laughter]. Yes, I can clean my windows now or wash my house. Just stuff. Just step at a time. You can't accomplish everything. It's going to look like this for a while. It's okay [laughter].

TI: So, what will you carry forward from this experience? What advice would you give others about how to deal with an event like you're doing now?

PS: Okay. Know about your insurance a little bit better. In other words, know kind of what your insurance really is going to cover. I wasn't as aware of that as I should have been. Hindsight's 2020 [laughter], I didn't actually know that when I did get an insurance check – just FYI, when I did get the insurance check, it had my name. Because I'm still paying a mortgage, it had the mortgage company's name. I got the check on a Sunday. I could go pick it up on a Sunday. So, I signed it. So, I went to the bank on Monday to deposit my insurance check to help with all of this stuff. Well, no, [laughter]. I can't deposit this check because it has the –

TI: Mortgage company name.

PS: The mortgage company. I went, "Okay, nobody told me this." So, I had already endorsed my end of it. Okay. So, they said, "Well, just mail it." So, I had to go back down to the insurance company, and they said, "Well, just mail it." I went, "Well, I'm not going to mail this check for this large amount that I've already endorsed and have it mailed back to me." Or even certified mail or whatever. They said, "Well, you'll have to go have them sign it." Well, the closest one was in La Grange, Georgia. So, I actually had to take the next day [laughter] and take my check.

TI: So, you had to go there?

PS: I had to drive all the way to La Grange, Georgia. I first had to call the mortgage company. Again, I'm not going to say the name of the mortgage company. But I had to call the mortgage

company and say, "This is what happened."

TI: But did you tell them you were a victim?

PS: Yes. Well, that's a whole another story too. That was the funny one. When I called the number and got ahold of a person, it was from somebody up north or whatever. So, I was telling them, this is what happened. She says, "Well, where do you live?" Well, I said, "Jacksonville, Alabama." But she didn't hear the Alabama. So, I'm saying, "Well, this is what happened. I had this tornado hit the house. So, I have my check. You all have to endorse it." "If you will mail it to –" "Well, no, I'm not going to mail it to you because –" Then she says, "Well, how much notice did you have?" I said, "Well, two or three minutes." She says, "Okay. Two or three minutes?" I said, "Well, yes." Then she asked me, "Well, how long did it last?" I said, "Oh, about thirty seconds." [laughter] She was like, "Okay, thirty seconds." Then she asked me, "Well, what was the name?" I said, "Well, it was an F3, F4 tornado." She said, "Well, no, what was its name?" I said, "Ma'am, it's not a hurricane. It was a tornado. I live in –" She went, "Oh, okay. Well, just do this." I mean, she totally, at that point, had no idea what I was even talking about. She had no clue about a tornado. She knew hurricane, but she didn't know tornado. So, at that point, she just said, "Well, here it is. Here's your number. Contact this person." So, she set it up where I could go to La Grange and have them sign it. The people in La Grange were great once I got there. But that was an hour and a half there, hour and a half back and gas money, and time away. So, I had to have somebody at my house [laughter] while they're doing work outside [laughter] for me to drive to La Grange and back to get that. So, know your insurance and know little things like that, that, "Hey, if you do get a check and you are paying a mortgage, I mean, chances are, nowadays, your mortgage company is not your local bank anyway." So, that was a big thing. So, know what your insurance is going to cover. Know about your mortgage situation. Don't sign anything directly after the tornado with anyone, from contractors to tree removal or whatever. You're just kind of opening yourself up for fraud. People are going to take advantage. Some people will. There are more good people than there are bad. There are. There's more people that's going to do stuff for you and help you just because they want to and it's the right thing to do and not charge you. Then there are that's going to try to cheat you out of the money or whatever. So, just wait and be very thoughtful about who you allow on your property, even after a tornado. You have to be careful. But that's the main things that I can think of.

TI: How about the preparedness?

PS: Oh, best thing was a portable phone charger. It was absolutely a godsend.

TI: Portable phone charger?

PS: Yes. There were so many people texting me and trying to get in touch with me through Facebook or whatever that my phone was quickly going dead. You want people to know where you are and you want to have that lifeline out. So, thankfully, a friend of mine, just that Christmas, had given me a portable charger. I thought of it beforehand and had it in my bathroom along with the flashlight. So, when the phone started going dead, I was texting people going, "Hey, my phone's going dead." I knew I could get at least two charges. So, I was hoping

to get to the next morning still being able to use my phone, which was my lifeline that night. Because you can feel very alone. So, that was a great thing to have. In fact, I gave some of my relatives a portable charger for Christmas. Said, "You need this."

TI: That's great.

PS: "When you do the weather preparedness, put that in there." In this day and age, we're tied to our phones, put that portable charger or a couple of them even. So, I had that, the flashlights, wouldn't it be smart to have a helmet [laughter]. It is kind of silly thinking, but it is kind of smart to think about that. Or even having blankets or mattresses that you can put on top of you. Consider the thought of getting in a bathtub.

TI: In the bathtub?

PS: Getting in the bathtubs. It's not going to help a whole lot if you got the fiberglass, but it helps some. Or like I was, I was thinking, well, this toilet's pretty big and heavy [laughter]. Let me hold on to it, type thing. Just basic little things like that. Being inside, close the door. I need to not leave the door open to the bathroom, but actually close the door. Because that's just another wall between me and –

TI: Yes, another layer of protection.

PS: – another layer of protection. Yes. It was just a hollow wooden door. But if it's closed, it's helping with the suction and all too. So, just another thought. That would be useful.

TI: And having like a plan ahead of time.

PS: Have a plan ahead of time. So, a lot of people get caught trying to get to the shelter when you might have done better just to stay where you were. Then if power lines are down and there's water and everything, and you're relatively safe where you are, you need to stay where you are. Like I was. Don't mix down power lines because they could be live. Walking around outside with live wires down everywhere, it's not real smart either, if you don't have to. Got to be careful with that. It was an experience [laughter].

TI: Well, thank you very much for your time. Are there any other things that you think we should know? Or do you have any concerns or comments that you would like to share?

PS: I really did think that the city did a good job in how they were handling things, both the day after and the night of. I think it went very smoothly, all things considering the amount of devastation. It was almost immediate. I had fire, police knocking on my door, making sure I'm okay. That's very comforting. I think the city did an outstanding job when they closed the neighborhoods down and enacted the curfew. That helped tremendously. Then when they organized and let all those volunteers come in, wonderful. There was a lot got done on those two days that they allowed those volunteers to come in and work, and that was great. I appreciate you all doing this.

TI: Well, thank you very much for your time. That concludes our interview.

PS: Okay.

[end of transcript]