

Interview with Joseph Bright

Narrator: Joseph Bright

Interviewer: Erin Rider

Location: Jacksonville, Alabama

Date: March 20, 2019

Project Name: Jacksonville Alabama Tornado Oral History Collection

Project Description: On March 19, 2018, an EF-3 tornado devastated the City of Jacksonville, Alabama, and had a significant impact on the campus of Jacksonville State University (JSU).

Using an oral history approach, a team of researchers from JSU's Center for Disaster and Community Resilience (CDCR) conducted in-depth interviews with 25 residents of Jacksonville who experienced the EF-3 tornado. Interviews took place in the Houston Cole Library, were conducted in private, and lasted approximately 90 minutes each. An article was published in 2022 based on the tornado oral history project in the *Weather, Climate, and Society* journal by the American Meteorological Society (AMS).

Principal Investigator: Tanveer Islam

Transcript Team: National Capitol Contracting

Abstract:

On March 20, 2019, Erin Rider interviewed Joseph Bright for the Jacksonville Tornado Oral History Project at the Houston Cole Library. Joseph Bright, a student at Jacksonville State University, shares his experiences of surviving the tornado that struck Jacksonville, Alabama, on March 19, 2018. Bright describes his life before the storm, including his plans for the evening, unaware of the impending disaster. The interview captures Bright's recollections of the tornado's approach, his disbelief about the severity of the storm, and his last-minute decision to leave his apartment upon hearing sirens and receiving a call from his girlfriend. He recounts his hurried escape from the third floor of his apartment building, navigating through worsening weather, and seeking refuge at the University Police Department (UPD), where he and others sheltered in a basement. Bright expresses a deep sense of panic and disorientation, struggling with the uncertainty of the storm's impact on his home and belongings. In the days following the tornado, Bright faced the challenge of being displaced from his apartment, staying with his parents, and dealing with the aftermath of the storm. He discusses the difficulty of returning to normal life, managing insurance claims, and the frustrations of not knowing the condition of his apartment. He also reflects on the broader impact of the tornado on his community, particularly the disruption to academic life, as many students, including himself, lost access to essential school materials. Bright concludes by offering advice on disaster preparedness, emphasizing the importance of planning and patience during emergencies.

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 20th, 2019. We are hearing from Joseph Bright, who will share his experience of the tornado and recovery. Our interview is taking place at the Houston Cole Library. How are you affected by the tornado?

Joseph Bright: With the tornado, I ended up feeling really helpless after the fact. It was really frustrating not being able to actually go back and find and make sure everything of mine that was fine. I ended up losing – well, not quite losing. I was kept out of my apartment for, I believe, over two weeks. No indication on when I'd be back. I didn't really know the condition of the interior of it. I spent a couple of weeks with my parents after the fact. Just because besides that, I have nowhere to live after it.

ER: Were you in your apartment the night of the tornado?

JB: Partially, yes.

ER: Okay. Do you want to walk us through what that evening was like?

JB: Oh, yes, of course. I remember that day I had – I think I was at my parents' house or something. I was driving back maybe around 5:00 or 6:00. The time gets – it's hard to remember, somewhere around that time. I noticed the sky being kind of an odd color. People talk about, when a tornado is coming, it's like a bluish green type thing, which I blew it off. That's stupid. Nothing would ever hit a college town. So, I went home. My roommates were gone for the weekend because I believe it was the week before spring break, if I remember correctly. So, everybody was gone. I had the whole house to myself. So, I thought it'll be fine. It's probably just going to be some bad weather. No big deal. Stayed there a couple of hours. Then the weather started to get kind of bad, just your typical thunderstorm. I had heard some stuff about tornado weather. But I really wasn't too worried about it. So, I just kind of chilled out and waited and kept an eye on the news and everything. After a while, I noticed my lights were flickering in the house. It was getting really windy outside. So, I thought, "If the power goes out, I could probably use some candles." So, at the time, I was living at the Reserve, which is right beside where – well, the Dollar General is there now again [laughter]. So, I thought, I'll just walk over there and grab a couple of candles. No big deal. So, I walk from my apartment. Maybe takes me five minutes. It's dark outside. The wind's blowing. There's a lot of lightning. But I mean, it's just a storm. So, I wasn't too worried about it. I go in. I buy some candles. Everybody makes fun of me because I ended up buying those really tall Catholic candles, for whatever reason. I don't know. I kind of walked back to my apartment. The weather was continuing to get kind of worse. Everything was really – it seemed like it had picked up a good bit since I went in. So, I get back to the apartment. I light all my candles [laughter]. I'm sitting there, looking out my window, trying to listen, because there were some sirens going off. I remember that. But I don't know if they hadn't checked them in a minute. But I really couldn't hear them. So, I called my dad and talked to him a little bit and just kind of waited to see what was happening. Then the power went out. So, I'm stuck there in the dark with just my little Catholic candles [laughter] with not a whole lot left to do. My girlfriend calls, and she's like, "Hey, you need to get out of your third-floor apartment because there's a tornado coming." So,

the lights were out. I'm afraid of the dark, even though I'm a grown man [laughter]. So, I decided to blow out all the candles and then run out the front door and get in my car. Well, at that point, I'm freaking out because I don't handle tornado stuff well. I've never actually been in one, but the whole concept of it just scares me to death. So, I get in the car, and I start it up. I noticed two people on the second floor of my building are just sitting there, just looking out there, out into nothing. I'm like, "Hey, there's a tornado coming." They go, "Really?" It's like, "Yes, really. I'm not going to lie about it." [laughter] So, I told them they could ride with me if they want. I waited a couple of minutes. They just weren't coming. So, I kind of knew that I needed to go. So, I went out of the apartment parking lot. I'm glad the speed bumps weren't too high because I was going probably way faster than I should have. I spat out past there. I decided to head towards UPD, which my girlfriend told me that was about the safest place close by. So, I ended up going down that street. I think I included it on one of the sheets you gave me. But I ended up driving probably 80 down there, which really wasn't safe during inclement weather, but I mean, you're trying to get away from it [laughter]. So, I pull in. As I'm going in, I hang up the phone with her, and a notification pops up. It's actually from Jacksonville. It says a tornado is actually touched down. So, I pretty much got there about the time I needed to, pretty much within that perfect timeframe. So, they put us in the basement. For whatever reason, they put us in the room with a window, which I didn't think was really good for a tornado. But I kind of hugged the wall and hoped for the best. I had one candle left. But it had blown out by the time I'd ran out of the apartment. That's really all I had with me besides my phone. So, I took a little time in the basement, called, and talked to my dad for a little bit. I ended up getting a hundred calls from just different people checking on me, which I had to go really quickly because I was trying to hear what exactly was going on. I don't know how long we actually stayed in there. But of course, eventually we were let out. There were trees everywhere. Of course, the power was out, so you could not see anything. I remember, for whatever reason, I couldn't get my car out, so I knew I wasn't going to be able to drive myself. So, my dad was trying to get up there. For some reason, I thought I may try to get back to my apartment. So, I started walking, just attempting to get there. I probably got maybe a quarter to half a mile away from UPD. But it was raining so hard, and it was so dark outside that I kind of realized that it wasn't a good idea to go. So, I just kind of turned back and waited. I called my dad again. He said he couldn't make it up there. But a guy I've known since I was a little kid who lived in the same apartment complex I did, said his dad was coming. So, I ended up meeting – leaving the UPD building again and trekking towards either Crow or Dixon. I can't remember which. His dad picked us up there and ended up taking me home. I got home maybe, like, 11:30, 12:00. It really wasn't that light, but it seemed like it took a whole lot longer [laughter].

ER: When you were leaving the UPD and walking, what were you seeing in terms of – ? Were you seeing damage at that point?

JB: It was hard to tell because, really, the only lighting I had – there were a couple of cars that were starting to pull in. So, I was able to see outside of UPD, there were these long, thick pieces of stone. I think it's from a little kiosk thing they had out there. I remember seeing those busted up along the ground. The road I had traveled down to get to UPD, there was a tree lying across the road. I think it was behind Curtis. Then other than that, I really couldn't see a whole lot. I never quite got to the Ladiga to see the damage out in that direction just because it was so dark.

ER: Then you get picked up by your friend's dad. So, then at that point, you go back to your apartment?

JB: Oh, no. He actually took me back to my parents' house. I'm pretty sure they were barring anybody off from trying to get back into my apartment complex.

ER: What were your thoughts at that point about the status of your apartment?

JB: I really wasn't super worried about it. I mean, of course, you're kind of worried about your materialistic possessions, that type of thing. But after having to deal with all that, I kind of just wanted to go somewhere and go to bed, just to rest because I was just worn out from the whole experience.

ER: In general, how far away is your parents' house from this area?

JB: Twenty minutes or so.

ER: Okay. Did you get any reports from anybody, from anybody else that lived in those apartments, or did you hear about the tornado touch down or kind of what the damage was? Did you have any sense of that at that point?

JB: While I was in UPD, they said that it had hit Pete Mathews. A little bit of it had touched down over in that direction. But I didn't really hear a whole lot at first. Of course, that guy who – his dad picked me up. He told me a little bit of what he saw while he was leaving, but that wasn't a whole lot of information.

ER: So, then you're back at your parents' house. Then did you end up going to sleep that night? What was your next activities that you took part in?

JB: Of course, that next day, I had to buy clothes because everything I owned was in my apartment pretty much. Of course, I couldn't get to it, which was fine. I mean, I got some sweatpants, T-shirts, stuff like that. Really, after that point, I went ahead and started working on the insurance claim for my things. Because, I mean, at that point, I didn't know what the condition of my apartment actually was. Within the time span, a week or so after the tornado, I don't think I went to work any, because I didn't have any of my shoes or anything, of course, to go. So, after getting clothes, I remember I went with a couple of friends. We actually worked that first day trying to clear some of the debris from one of the neighborhoods. We worked there for a couple hours. I'm trying to remember what else happened.

ER: When was the first time that you actually saw your apartment or got a sense of what the damage was?

JB: We were able to tell – yes, after a couple of days, we actually went back to get my car from UPD because I had to leave it there for a couple of days, just because the access was blocked. We got a general sense of how bad the damage was. Mine was kind of in an odd place in the

complex that was kind of really – it's hard to tell where exactly it was hit the most. But mine looked decent compared to some others.

ER: Did you have damage directly to your apartment? I think you mentioned earlier that you kind of felt helpless in terms of, like, where your personal belongings were. What was the level of damage that you encountered?

JB: My apartment, it was a complex. Our side of it, of that building, was not as badly damaged as the other side because it was split pretty much down the middle. I knew some of my belongings were safe because we were trying to contact the property managers because I actually had a handgun in my apartment that I didn't grab before I left just because I was in such a rush. They had grabbed that for me and a couple other items. So, they said everything was kind of damp in there, which, that could have meant a number of things. But I don't think it was quite as bad as some other people in that same complex.

ER: What was some of your greatest challenges?

JB: Probably waiting with uncertainty, not really being able to help much what was going on, just sitting, and waiting. It was kind of frustrating not to actually be able to take care of anything myself, and more so having to rely on people to check the building. I never actually got to go in and get my things later on when I really wanted to immediately. But it was fine living with my parents for a couple of days. I mean, they were very accommodating. It was just the big unknown of the apartment and everything in it, making sure everything was all right, that type of thing. That was frustrating. But it was just a big waiting game.

ER: Were you eventually able to go back in there, or did they move your stuff?

JB: They did actually let us go in. I can't remember if it was two or three weeks after the tornado happened. But they finally did start allowing residents to go in and get their belongings over the course of a couple of days.

ER: You were able to get yours?

JB: Mm-hm.

ER: You mentioned that you stayed with your parents. How long did you end up staying with your parents after the tornado?

JB: I stayed with them probably maybe a month or two.

ER: Okay. Was that –

JB: After – oh, I'm sorry. You go ahead.

ER: Oh, is that after that you couldn't move back into your apartment? Is that the reason?

JB: Yes. They wouldn't allow anyone back in. It was in pretty bad shape the last time we saw it.

ER: So, what was that process like? You had your parents' to move into. Were you starting to think about where you're going to live or what kind of – like you mentioned earlier, filing the insurance claim? So, can you talk to us a little bit about that recovery process?

JB: Yes. I went ahead and worked on the insurance stuff. Jacksonville was in so much disarray that I really didn't attempt to find a new apartment until some of it had calmed down. Yes. It was a pretty brisk move-in, move-out type situation. I tried looking for a new apartment as quickly as I could after the fact.

ER: How did that go?

JB: It was fine. I had had a friend who had stayed at another complex while he went to school here. I waited and eventually got an apartment in that complex.

ER: Okay. You mentioned earlier, kind of, how that night kind of unfolded. It felt like a sense to me, as you were telling it, that all of a sudden, it was like you had to get out there. What was that feeling like? Thinking about earlier in the evening that, okay, might just be bad weather, and then all of a sudden, your girlfriend's telling you that it's a tornado that's approaching, or that it's likely, and that you think to leave, what was kind of going through your mind during that time?

JB: It was pretty much just a complete panic. I ended up pretty much having tunnel vision. That's one thing I don't really remember a whole lot about the night is the actual drive from my apartment to UPD. Really, the only thing I can recall, I was on the phone with her. I remember it being like – well, of course, whenever the power goes out at night, it looks unnatural because we're used to seeing at least some streetlights. All I remember was just complete and utter darkness, except when lightning would strike because instead of it being over in one direction, just light would completely cover my car. It was very odd. But that's the only thing I really don't remember that much.

ER: If I remember right, was it your girlfriend the one that told you to go to UPD, or did you know to go there?

JB: Oh, she told me.

ER: She told you?

JB: Yes.

ER: Okay. I was kind of interested after you said you were at UPD, and then all of a sudden you were able to go, like leave. Did they kind of warn you about areas that could be damaged, or kind of what information did you have at that time?

JB: I honestly can't remember. I remember them saying that the weather had cleared up, and we were free to go. But I don't really think they were doing as much to push us out. They were just letting us know for the time being.

ER: Yes, I know. I was thinking that you were walking down the – they could be in this path of danger in terms of like it's stuck down. You said your car was stuck. Had a tree come down, or was it blocked in somehow?

JB: Oh, I had no way of getting out with it at that time because they were moving a lot of cars through that area. Of course, with the roads being potentially blocked off, I felt better just to leave it there because my car is not really one that you can drive over things with [laughter].

ER: Okay. Thinking about, kind of, your recovery process, what helped you cope with the challenges from the tornado?

JB: I just kind of accepted it for what it was. It was frustrating and all those things. But I really just kind of was patient with it, or I tried to be as much as possible and had to accept the fact that it really was out of my hands at that point. I just needed to wait until something happened.

ER: Was there something that you could point to that helped you recover more quickly?

JB: It was helpful, of course, having my parents. Of course, I had a lot of supporting people that were there for me. They, of course, made the whole experience a little bit more comfortable because I could stay with them instead of being just out on my own pretty much.

ER: I heard that sense when you were able to stay with them. It sounds like you were able to kind of have work be accommodating to just until you got clothes and things that you needed.

JB: Oh, yes. They've always been really good to me.

ER: What will you carry forward from this experience?

JB: I do have a better sense of watching the weather when [laughter] there is an advisory. This past week or so, we had another one. [laughter] I wasn't in bad shape for it, but I was ready to do what I did last time again. Sure enough, as soon as there was a warning, [laughter] we left, just like I did the first time. I have a lot more patience from that whole thing, but it also feels like it aged me too. I just felt old from it. [laughter]

ER: Can you kind of describe that, that feeling of feeling old from it? Is it –

JB: The whole event was so exhausting in its entirety that – [laughter] it's just kind of funny to explain it. I just feel – not quite that it took years off. Events like that will age you a little bit faster. It's kind of like a maturity accelerant, it seems like.

ER: I get that sense, as you were talking about it, that there was like a feeling of – you said a couple of words like helpless, a feeling of uncertainty, frustration, and then kind of having to

adjust, make some living arrangements. Even though you're able to do that, it still was a process to kind of go through it. You also mentioned just recently with severe weather, where were you planning to go with the recent tornado risk?

JB: Back to UPD again.

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

JB: Well, with me majoring in safety, I always believe in having set escape routes whenever something is about to happen. It's always good to preplan in the event of a disaster where exactly you should go, what things to have on you in the case that something like that happens, anything from some of those foil blankets that they have, anything that can really help you out in the event of either being displaced or having to hide and take shelter in the event of a disaster like that.

ER: I know that you are a student. How was your semester? How did you recover your semester? Did you have any challenges with your coursework or getting kind of back on track with school?

JB: The biggest issue I had, throughout the time of the tornado, we really had no instruction from the university how classes were actually going to go. So, of course, in my apartment – and I know of a bunch of others – my books were in my apartment. My laptop was. I didn't have any of the materials that I really needed to finish any class work. Most of the time, when we'd hear an answer to that question, it was kind of ambiguous. So, not just me, many other students included, we were pretty much sitting and waiting to see what was going to happen with the semester. How are our grades going to be handled? How are we even going to finish it out without any of our materials?

ER: What were your thoughts during that time, or how did that impact you?

JB: It was really more of a nuisance. We really – I say we because it was not just me. We really wanted a clear answer as to what was going to happen because we're already having to worry about our apartment. A lot of my friends ended up having damaged cars. We couldn't get to our things. It just put a little bit of extra stress on an already stressful situation.

ER: By the time that you knew about some of those options, did you feel like the option that you selected helped or allowed you to kind of get through the semester?

JB: Yes. I was very thankful they gave you a couple of options on how the semester would be handled for the duration of it. Because a lot of my notes ended up being ruined. Because I had a notebook on the floor. Then, of course, the room flooded when the tornado happened. So, I wasn't really fully prepared to take on the rest of the semester by the time it happened.

ER: Yes. I could imagine that being stressful to think about how you would recover those items and get back on track. Then are there any other things that you would like us to know?

JB: I think that just about covers it. It's really not – my experience really was not as bad as some other people's. I mean, I'm fine with saying that. I mean, I really did have it pretty easy. But it was still hard. I mean, it honestly was hard. But I can't imagine for some of the others that had it worse than I did.

ER: You still went through that trauma and that stress and that adjustment. I could sense it with some of the words you described. I mentioned earlier, but even things like saying kind of the frustration of it and the uncertainty, that does come across in your interview. Thank you very much for your time. We appreciate you sharing your story with us today.

JB: Thank you.

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Reviewed by Nicole Zador, 3/13/2025