

Interview with Brianna Cooper

Narrator: Brianna Cooper

Interviewer: Erin Rider

Location: Jacksonville, Alabama

Date: July 16, 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 July 16, 2019, Erin Rider interviewed Brianna Cooper for an oral history project at Jacksonville State University focused on the tornado that struck Jacksonville, Alabama, on March 19, 2018. The interview took place at the Houston Cole Library. Cooper shares her personal experiences of the day, beginning with her decision to stay in Jacksonville rather than attend a concert in Atlanta due to severe weather warnings. She describes the moments leading up to the tornado, including her cautious decision to take shelter at her boyfriend's apartment near the police station. As the tornado hit, Cooper recounts the intense fear she felt, the structural damage to the police station where they sheltered, and her relief at having narrowly avoided being in her own apartment when it was struck by the tornado. Cooper provides vivid descriptions of the aftermath, detailing the destruction of her apartment complex, the broken windows, and the damage to her car. She reflects on the surreal and eerie atmosphere in the town following the storm, marked by blaring alarms and widespread destruction. Cooper also discusses the challenges she faced in the days and months following the tornado. She speaks about her displacement, the difficulty of finding a new place to live, and the emotional toll of simultaneously dealing with her father's terminal illness. Despite these hardships, she highlights the support system of friends and family who helped her cope. Cooper emphasizes the importance of counseling and community support in recovering from such a traumatic event and offers advice on disaster preparedness and resilience.

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 July 16th, 2019, and we are hearing from Brianna Cooper who will share her experience of the tornado and recovery. Our interview is taking place at the Houston Cole Library. How were you affected by the tornado?

Brianna Cooper: Okay. So, on the day of the tornado, I had planned to go to an A Day to Remember concert in Atlanta. I saw that the weather was predicted to be really bad along I-20 and they were even calling for tornadoes in Atlanta. So, I decided that I wasn't going to go to Atlanta, that I was just going to stay here in Jacksonville instead. School had already gotten out and everything, but I stayed behind just kind of – because it was peaceful at my apartment. My roommates weren't there and so I was just enjoying the quiet. So, that night, I was actually playing video games on my computer which was right beside my window at Gamecock Village. I was in building five. So, my boyfriend at the time had been on the computer playing video games with me. He called me and he said that his mom called him and told him that there was supposed to be really bad weather coming through Jacksonville and that he was going to come pick me up because he wanted us to be together and it was safer at his apartment. Well, his apartment was Campus Inn which had the roof ripped off of it at one point in time from storms. So, I was really hesitant about that. I was like, "I don't think that's the safest place. I feel like my apartment's going to be the better option." But he said that his mom had pointed out that it was right by the JPD or UPD so we could run over there really quickly and they had a basement in case of bad weather. So, I was like, "Okay. That makes more sense." So, he came and picked me up and I had taken time to pack. I had a couple candles and stuff and flashlights that I had, but I didn't have a lighter to light my candles. So, I was like, "Okay. Well, we need to stop by the dollar store before we go to your place so that we can get a lighter so I can, you know, light the candles if the power goes out." So, we stopped by Dollar General and then we had just gotten back to his apartment when the tornado sirens started going off. It was that quick. So, we got out of his car and I was like, "I'm not going up to your apartment. I'm going straight to the police station." I just took off running. He's not a runner so he just kind of walked behind me. But I'm terrified of storms, like terrified. Whenever I was younger, I used to hide in my closet whenever tornado watches and stuff were going on and look at tornado encyclopedias. So, we got to the police station. Almost immediately when we got there, it started getting really bad outside and started pouring down rain and the building started shaking. We figured out later that that was the roof collapsing, part of it, on the police station. Part of the bricks came off and then water started coming in on the inside. Whenever everybody went into the basement, I noticed that everybody was just kind of sitting around on all the chairs and very spread out. Then all of a sudden, when they heard the bricks and stuff and all the doors started shaking, everybody moved to the inside of the room, which was where I was to begin with. I wasn't sitting in a chair just so I was closer to the floor. So, once it was over, we came out. At first, we didn't think it was that bad. We just thought that the wind had gotten up really bad. But then the police officers came in and let us know there actually was a tornado. There was damage. They told us kind of where they thought it had come through. Because at that point, they weren't really a hundred percent sure. But that they thought it was closer to the other side of campus which, of course, was where my apartment was so I started panicking. So, we also had another friend who was in Patterson at the time that got really hit by the tornado. So, we were worried about him too just because we knew he was one of the only people that was still in the dorms because he was in an RA at the

time. So, we checked on him and then we went to check out my apartment. Luckily, I was on the bottom floor. So, the only thing that really happened to my apartment was all the glass from the windows got broken in. So, there was glass shards all over my room. There was some stuck to my furniture and stuck in my bed and everything. It just blew out all the windows. I guess I was really lucky because that's where I would have been sitting had it been ten, fifteen minutes later that he called me. Because I had no idea that it was supposed to even get bad weather in Jacksonville. I knew it was supposed to get bad in Atlanta, but not in Jacksonville.

ER: When you were leaving the UPD, how quick did you get to your apartment? What was that time frame?

BC: Because we were walking, because there was no way that you were driving at that point in time. It took – We stopped to check on our friend at Patterson. We stayed there a few minutes trying to help him get some of his stuff out of his apartment. Then we went to my apartment. By the time we got there, they were actually cutting trees to kind of clear a path into the apartment complex, but we just kind of walked around just to make sure. We got to see all of the damage that there was, not my apartment building but one of the ones in Gamecock Village. There was actually one of the toilets or sink or something that was broken on the third floor apartment. There was water just pouring off out of the building onto the ground in front of the building and then running off to the side. My car had been parked right in front of one of the buildings that got severely hit. So, I checked on it and it was okay other than part of the roof had caught the back end of it and ripped off my bumper. I actually have a picture of it and you can see the piece of the roof and then my bumper and then my car. So, I got really, really lucky just based on, like, we could have been out in it. We could have been at the dollar store. We could have been at – I could have been at my apartment. We could have been on the road somewhere.

ER: The dollar store was devastated.

BC: Yes, it got completely wiped out. We were just in there right before the siren started going off. We weren't in that much of a hurry because we didn't think that it was – she said bad weather. She didn't say tornado weather. She just said severe storms so we're like, "Okay."

ER: When you were walking to Patterson and to your apartment, how dangerous did it feel? Were you worried about down power lines or trees or – was it dark at this time? Because it was in the middle of the night by the time you're walking over there.

BC: So, it wasn't that bad until we started walking into Gamecock Village because the downed power lines were kind of parallel to where we were walking. When we crossed them, they were, the ones were still up. But yes, we didn't go across down power lines and stuff like that to get to my apartment. We kind of just weaved in and out of them so we didn't have to cross them.

ER: What's going through your mind when you're seeing the damage? Then getting to your apartment, seeing the damage there, what's your thought process like?

BC: Well, at first, I was thinking, "Oh, my goodness. I hope nobody was hurt." Then after

seeing the damage and stuff, it's really a shock because I never experienced – I mean, the 2011 tornadoes that came through Alabama, like one hit really close to my house. But we didn't really see it until a couple of days later whenever we could go volunteer to help clean up and stuff. So, it wasn't right afterwards and it's just completely different. It was very eerie because all of the sirens were still going off, like all of the alarms for all the buildings. It's just deserted. There was nobody. Nobody was out. I mean, a lot of people were gone. It was really silent.

ER: You said you had roommates, right?

BC: Right.

ER: Were they in contact with you or you were in contact with them?

BC: Well, I let them know that our apartment had its windows blown out and that they might want to come get their stuff. But that was before we realized that they weren't going to let us get our stuff. They shut down the apartments, but that was before. I actually went in and got my stuff because I didn't have any – All I had were the clothes that was on me because I hadn't packed a bag or anything. I mean, I had my candles, but – [laughter] So, I had to go in and grab my stuff just enough so that I would have clothes and stuff to stay with somebody. Because I knew that we wouldn't be able to stay in the apartments, especially ours because part of our building had the roof ripped off too. I just knew they were going to shut it down. But my thought process for that was, "If I don't get it now, I may not be able to get it in the future." So, I got all of my mementos and stuff more than clothes and that kind of thing. But then after we got all that, we started to walk out. Then they were finally, we could see the cops and everything were finally coming out and closing off the areas and stuff to keep people from going in. But somehow, we beat them, I guess [laughter].

ER: So, what happens later that night and the next couple days? Where do you stay? How do you start that process of trying to make sense of everything?

BC: So, because my car was in the apartment complex, I didn't have a way to get home. So, I stayed that night with my boyfriend in his dorm room – or it's an apartment through campus. But I stayed there that night. Then the next day, my mom tried to come down and get me. It took her – We live two hours away and it took her close to four and a half hours to get here just because of everything from here to there that she had to go through. But she finally made it here and picked me up and made it back to my house up there. By that point, I mean, all of my books and stuff, I didn't grab any of those. They were all in my car in my backpack. So, I didn't even think to grab those. So, I had no books for classes and we didn't know what was going on with that till later on. It was a lot. I don't know about everybody, but it was kind of perfect timing for me. Because just a couple of days after that, my dad got put in the hospital and he was diagnosed with liver failure. So, he passed away two weeks later. I wouldn't have gotten to spend that time with him was it not for the tornado and us not being out on break and everything.

ER: Sorry to hear that. Then to go through all that, that tragedy and then to be disrupted from your home.

BC: It was a lot to handle at one time mainly because I was having to deal with – because I'm the only child. He was divorced from my mom and his wife had passed away the previous September. So, it was just him and just me. So, I was having to deal with his house stuff and all his everything and then trying to find an apartment for myself because I had to come back. I actually worked for JSU. I was a teacher for the MS-100 classes. So, whenever school started back whether I chose to end my classes or not, I still had to come back to work. So, it was really hard to go back and forth in the meantime while I was trying to find somewhere for me to live permanently.

ER: Thinking about, then, your apartment, so when did they say that it was that you couldn't get access to it? Was that pretty right away?

BC: I think it was the next day that they said that right now it wasn't accessible and they would let us know if it ever would be – if we could ever come in and get our stuff. Because at first, they didn't know. They did say the buildings that weren't as affected as mine and the other two that got hit the worst, that those would be able to come in and get their stuff, but we didn't know about ours just because of the integrity of the building. But they eventually ended up saying that unless we were in these few rooms in our building that we could come in and get our own stuff. The other rooms, they actually went in and got the stuff for them, but we were lucky. I mean, I had so much help moving all my stuff out. All of my friends and family came together. We were moved out in fifteen minutes. It didn't take long at all. I had a lot of stuff.

ER: Did your stuff encounter any damage?

BC: So, I had my comforter and stuff on my bed got pretty damaged just because of all the glass and stuff. I didn't trust it trying to pick all the glass out. My furniture that was right by the window actually had some glass shards in it, but I got those out. I mean, it wasn't like it was destroyed. All of the stuff around the window just from the rain and stuff, I didn't get to keep, but it wasn't like where I had gotten rain damage all over my apartment because I was lucky and had a bottom floor so I still had those people above me. I didn't have as much stuff damaged as much as my car and not being able to come back into my apartment.

ER: You said you were searching for a new place to live, how'd that process go and how long did it take?

BC: So, I was avidly searching for three months. A bunch of the places that I called said that they had openings, but that I would not be able to see the apartment before I moved in. That was a lot of the places that I was looking at. I really just, I don't like to move into places sight unseen because they didn't even have pictures of what it looked like before the previous tenants moved in. So, I finally found a place that had pictures of what it looked like before the last tenants moved in. They basically told me it was still going to be sight unseen for that apartment, but I could at least see how it was going to look, hopefully. So, I actually got to move in on the 29th of June, finally. That was a lifesaver.

ER: Well, I'm thinking because you said that you're going back and forth from where your family is and then you're trying to return to work. You haven't gotten to school yet. What was

that like then in between not being in a permanent place until June 29th? What were your living arrangements?

BC: So, I was still working that summer. I was still taking classes here, but my classes were online. So, that was also lucky. But I was either staying with friends or I would stay with my boyfriend during the weeks. Then on the weekend, like every weekend, I would go home. But the other problem was that I didn't have a car. So, my mom would have to drive down every Thursday because I didn't have Friday classes. I only taught on Tuesday and Thursday. So, she would drive down, pick me up, and then bring me back on Monday whenever I had to be back for class. Then she did that every week. Then my boyfriend would drive me around or my friends drive me around. It was basically like I was fifteen again.

ER: I imagine that'd be an adjustment.

BC: It really was an adjustment.

ER: How's your car? What was the damage on your car?

BC: So, they ended up totaling it just based on cosmetic damage from shingles and stuff like that. But I found someone who would fix it for less. So, they didn't have to total it because it was under that amount. So, I got it fixed. It was never the same after the tornado. I should have definitely just had it totaled. But I was like, "It's still such a great car. I had low miles; nothing had ever been wrong with it." I was like, "I don't want to total it. I want to keep my car."

ER: But did you notice what's different about it?

BC: So, they had to actually repaint it because of all the cosmetic damage. So, when they put the doors back on, they didn't put them on correctly. So, they didn't shut it, which means – I have a mustang. So, the top part of the window is actually the door where it shuts. So, because it wasn't put on correctly, it leaked. So far, I've had to take it back three different times to get them to try to fix it, but it's never been the same.

ER: It's so hard.

BC: Yes.

ER: What were your greatest challenges following the tornado?

BC: Actually, one of the worst things was sleeping afterwards because I'm already so scared of storms. Just scared that another one was going to happen especially if there was bad weather or if it was super windy outside and I could hear the trees knocking against the house or anything like that. I didn't sleep at all really the next week. It was very minimal, only a few hours at a time. I just kept waking up. Then after that, it was with bad weather. I still have trouble with bad weather. I still panic. Another challenge would probably be the car, like finding people to take me different places because I lost a lot of freedom. I didn't really realize how much freedom I had when I had a car until I didn't have a car anymore and then I had to ask for rides

and different stuff. I guess, I took it for granted and I got to see kind of what it's like on the other side.

ER: In terms of your classes and work, did you struggle or was that disrupted in any way?

BC: So, I ended up taking my grades for my classes because there was just so much going on, there was no way – I had two ten-page papers due within the next two weeks if I would have kept going on my classes, there was no way. So, I took my grades with those. So, I didn't really struggle with those once I figured out that we could keep our grades. Before that, I was struggling because I was trying to keep up with my schoolwork and that kind of thing without having books. Work wasn't bad because they were working with me. They kind of understood my situation and they had a couple other people that was working with them that had gotten damages or were affected. They made it to where it was easier for me. I didn't have to stress out as much about working all the time. So, I ended up working, but it kind of worked out that they gave that option that you can kind of take your grade because a lot of people ended up not coming back. So, we only had a few that we had to come in for and then we worked with them kind of on when they wanted to come in. So, we didn't have to work normal hours. We kind of worked whatever hours that they wanted to come in. So, it worked out better.

ER: You said you got to the apartment around June 29th. When was your car fixed?

BC: It got fixed probably right around that time, too. Because it took me a while to find somebody to actually fix it, that would fix it instead of totaling it.

ER: Makes sense.

BC: Yes.

ER: So, when we think about disaster resilience, we're talking about the capacity to cope with or adapt to the recovery challenges brought by the tornado. Can you talk more about this? Maybe think about what helps you cope with the challenges from the tornado?

BC: So, after the tornado and in conjunction with my dad and everything, it was really, really difficult for me. I didn't know heads from tails for a couple weeks. One of my friends suggested counseling. So, I actually started going to the counseling center on campus. She was amazing. She helped me. She listened to me. She helped me devise strategies on ways to cope and different – I guess, coping mechanisms that I could do. So, one of those was actually the coloring pages, that helps me forget about everything else and just focus on that and jigsaw puzzles. So, that helped me with the emotional coping part. Listening to music helped a lot. Then as far as not having a car or a place to live or anything dealing with that, I had a really great support system that would help me, that took me anywhere I needed to go. They let me crash on their couch if I needed to, anything like that.

ER: It really was like three months of you don't really have your own permanent place to stay.

BC: Plus, JSU helped with that, too, because at least, during the last part of the semester, they actually gave me a dorm room that I could stay in until classes were over. So, that helped during that time. But then after that, whenever I had summer classes, I had to kind of couch surf for a little bit.

ER: You had people there that were able to help you with that, right?

BC: Yes. I never had to worry about it. I mean, somebody was always there to take me in. I tried to rotate so I wasn't with one person all the time because I know having an extra person that you're not used to is a lot.

ER: It sounds like they wanted to help though?

BC: Yes. They really did. I have a really good support system.

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

BC: Counseling, definitely, or just having someone there that they can talk to. Maybe not necessarily counseling, but as long as they have somebody that they can talk to if they have any problems or questions or fears or anything, like. That helped me so much. Also, being prepared for such a disaster. Because even though I'd never experienced one, just being in emergency management, I kind of knew what to expect and the series of events that would happen afterwards. I mean, just being prepared, have your tornado kit ready.

ER: I know I thought, when you said that you already thought about going to UPD, you were already thinking about what structure would be best in that kind of event. Even when you didn't really think that, people weren't really talking about that it was going to be a tornado yet or not, you were already thinking about that.

BC: Yes. But just in case, know where you're going to go because knowing where you're going to go, at least you have a plan. Have a backup plan just in case that plan doesn't work out, in case that gets demolished or something. Always have a backup plan.

ER: Now, thinking back to like, you finally get into your apartment stuff, any other things that you were doing to help out with the recovery in addition to counseling?

BC: Volunteering helped me a lot, too, getting out in the community and helping with cleanup and stuff. That really helped. I didn't really get to volunteer as much as I wanted to just because I had to drive two hours to volunteer, but we did get to volunteer a couple of days. Then that summer, we worked with [Five Star?] Academy. They have to do service learning. We chose to do it on the disaster and like giving back and stuff. So, we helped out then, too. We tried to do a canned food drive and different things like that to give back to our community and learn about different things that the students could do. I thought that was really –

ER: Sounds like perfect timing and helpful.

BC: Yes.

ER: Is there anything else you'd like us to know kind of about your experience or anything that we didn't touch on?

BC: I don't think so. No. I'm not sure.

ER: Okay.

BC: I think I covered everything unless you have any other question.

ER: I don't have anything specific. Well, we thank you for sharing your story with us –

BC: Thanks for listening.

ER: And being able to recover as well as you have, especially with the multiple tragedies that you went through. It sounds, like, kind of gave helpful advice to people in the future that may be able to listen to this and get some better insights. So, thank you.

BC: Thank you.

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Reviewed by Nicole Zador, 3/05/2025