

## Interview with Bernice George

**Narrator:** Bernice George

**Interviewer:** Tanveer Islam

**Location:** Jacksonville, Alabama

**Date:** March 14, 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 14, 2019, Tanveer Islam from Jackson State University interviewed Bernice George for the Jacksonville Tornado Oral History Project. Bernice George recounts her experiences during the Jacksonville tornado, which struck on March 19, 2018, as well as her recovery process. George has lived in Jacksonville for over a decade and had never experienced a tornado directly impacting the city before this event. She describes the extensive damage her home sustained, including five trees falling on her property, with one tree crashing through her living room. George reflects on the emotional toll, mentioning that the sound of falling trees and strong winds continues to trigger anxiety. The interview provides insight into George's immediate response to the tornado, sheltering in her bathroom with her nieces and dogs as the tornado passed through. She details the challenges she faced after the storm, particularly dealing with insurance companies and contractors, as well as her displacement from her home during repairs. George emphasizes the importance of community support, crediting her church, neighbors, and friends for helping her cope with the aftermath. She also reflects on her role as a safety coordinator at Jacksonville State University, noting how her professional experience aided her response to the disaster. The interview concludes with George discussing her coping mechanisms, changes in her safety plans, and the lasting emotional impact of the tornado on her life.

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 19, 2018. Today is March 14, 2019, and we are hearing from Bernice George, who will share her experience of the tornado and the recovery. Our interview is taking place at the Houston Cole Library at Jacksonville State University. So, my first question is, how were you affected by the tornado?

Bernice George: I was affected a lot by the tornado. One, with my house. More than half of my house was destroyed and I had to rebuild it. Two, with my emotions and my mental status. I still can't hear trees fall and not go into panic. The wind blowing makes me worry that what few remaining trees I have are going to fall. The storm picking up makes it difficult for me to sleep at night. Reflecting back on it, on any aspect, brings me back to the trauma of that night. I'm still experiencing anger at what happened. I still feel grief at what happened.

TI: Where were you when the tornado hit?

BG: My nieces and I were in my bathroom. They were in the tub. I was sitting on the edge of the tub. We had the three dogs with us.

TI: Did you know that there was a tornado warning or something could happen?

BG: Yes, but it happened so suddenly. We had been under a watch for a little while, but the warning came. Then there was the two minute before it said, "Tornado spotted north of Jacksonville." Within that time frame, we were in the bathroom and then the tornado hit within another two minutes.

TI: Okay. Did you thought about going to a shelter or did you have any of the chance – ?

BG: Honestly, no.

TI: Go ahead.

BG: The warning beforehand, it was very sudden. I didn't think about going to a shelter. I've lived here for probably fifteen years at this point, ten to fifteen years. In that time, we've never had a tornado actually hit Jacksonville. You hear all the community talk about how a tornado never hits Jacksonville, how we're geographically located, and it would not – it tends to go around the edges of Jacksonville.

TI: So, you had experience with the 2011 tornado, but it didn't came here?

BG: It didn't come into Jacksonville, yes. It hit in Webster's Chapel and the surrounding areas, but it never actually came into Jacksonville. We had some power outage and some heavy wind, but that was all we had in 2011.

TI: So, you thought that this would probably be something like that?

BG: Yes, I did.

TI: So, after the tornado, what were your greatest challenges?

BG: One, the emotional upheaval from it, and just the fear and the anxiety you feel – or I felt, in the middle of it. And two, honestly, it's the insurance and the contractors that are really the greatest challenge. It's the rebuilding process that is the greatest challenge. It's an insurance company that is fighting to keep its money even though you need it and you've paid for it. It's contractors who are taking on more than they can handle and having to wait on them to actually do the work. It's when you have the outside of your house to build, the rain and the weather that delays those things. And when you're displaced, and I was displaced. When you're displaced, everything like that creates more stress. I was blessed to have church family that let me stay in their house while this was going on. They weren't dog people, but they even let me bring my dogs. But even in being in someone else's home, it's not mine.

TI: So, as far as I remember, it occurred around 8:30 p.m. So, your house was damaged. So, you were rescued, or somebody came, or did you go somewhere for that night?

BG: I did go somewhere for that night. I had a neighbor two houses down that didn't have as much damage, and his roof and stuff wasn't torn up. The house beside me was worse than mine. I was the next worst, and then it got less as it went down the street. He let us stay there for the night. Actually, he and my other neighbor came to the door to check on us. He helped me take my nieces and the dogs across the downed power lines and everything else to his house, where we spent the night in his house.

TI: What kind of damage has [he?] got in the house, the roof, the walls?

BG: A tree fell through my living room and spare room. The living room ceiling and parts of the spare room ceiling completely caved in. The tree had to be cut out of my house. I had to replace the flooring and the ceilings and the roof. I had to replace the entire roof. The entire roof suffered so much damage that they even replaced all the decking. There wasn't a piece of decking on my roof that did not suffer damage from the trees that fell on it. I had five trees total fall on my house.

TI: Wow.

BG: So, then the rain poured in for the night. It saturated the walls, so then the walls had to be replaced in those rooms. The floor was saturated as well, so the floor had to be replaced. It's not just – When you get to that point, it's not just a matter of what was broken. You get into saturation from the water, and that creates a mold growth place. So, anything that is saturated, and everything was at least 60 percent saturated or more, they had to tear out and replace anyway.

TI: So, what kind of challenges, I mean, you get from the insurance company that you feel they're not cooperating?

BG: Not at all. A small section of wall, they argued about wanting to pay for to replace because it wasn't actually hit by the tree, but it was completely saturated with water. They argued with replacing my driveway because it's technically not a structure. They argued with replacing specific pieces of furniture based on their pricing. They argued with the siding and tried to say that it was old damage, but it wasn't. I mean, it was just almost every aspect. The contractor would have one estimate that he said it was going to cost. The insurance would have another.

Then we would have to go through an argument for why it would cost that much more. Because they want to replace the original value, not necessarily the current value, and those prices change.

TI: Yes. The replacement value is always higher than –

BG: The original. Yes.

TI: – the original. Did you get any assistance from the government or in the university from that time?

BG: No. Ultimately, I was able to get insurance to pay for it all. It was not an easy process to do that. But I had some really good friends who had already gone through this kind of thing who were advising me and guiding me throughout the experience. They helped me to argue effectively for everything I needed to have done.

TI: So, is it now completely rebuilt?

BG: It is almost. I have some minor things like some gutter repair. They have to touch up the paint on the house. While I was displaced, I had a leak that I didn't know about, and it messed up my bathroom. So, now I'm repairing the bathroom. So, there are odds and ends of that nature that need to be repaired. I just rediscovered, as I was getting ready to use my chimney, that it sustained more damage than they originally realized. So, now I'm having to deal with the chimney.

TI: Where did you stay while the contractor was rebuilding it?

BG: With my church friends.

TI: They are –

BG: They had a basement apartment that they let me and the dogs move into. My sister, who was living with me at the time, went and stayed with one of her friends during that time too.

TI: So, you mentioned that you were not prepared for the tornado. Was there anything you did prior to the tornado that helped you to be prepared for this experience?

BG: Or to be able to deal with this experience? I'm the safety coordinator for the chemistry lab at JSU [laughter]. So, definitely having made emergency plans and stuff like that for the lab's more than enough and prepares me for what I needed to do while the tornado was actually going on. I give these kinds of safety talks to my students. So, yes, I'm prepared to know how to respond in the event of an event. So, just knowing that – planning on where the central location in my house is if a tornado hit. Knowing that if I had enough warning, I could have gone to the safety complex near Walmart if I needed to. Since then, my neighbor has made it clear that if another tornado comes, I can come sit in his basement with my dogs and my family if I have my family there. Because I had my nieces there that night. So, I have several options now for where I can go if there's another tornado.

TI: I know it's hard, but can you share the experience when the tornado was – I mean, how was it? How did you feel? Can you share the environment at that time?

BG: Yes. When the tornado hit, my nieces and I were sitting on my couches watching TV. I have Nixle on my phone, so I had already known we were under a tornado watch. I just wasn't expecting to be hit. They were asking if we should go to a shelter, and I was reassuring them that no, tornadoes never hit Jacksonville. So, we're sitting there watching TV more, and then I get a warning from Nixle that we're under a tornado warning instead of a watch. Two to three minutes later, I get a warning that a tornado is spotted north of Jacksonville. So, I tell them, "We don't have time to go to a shelter. If it's north of Jacksonville, we're going to have to go to the bathroom." That's the only safe place. So, I said, "Grab whatever animal you can find. We're not going to spend a lot of time trying to find them. If they're available, get them, but get into the bathroom." So, then we went into the bathroom.

TI: Where was your kid at that time?

BG: She's my soon-to-be niece. She's not my kid.

TI: Oh, okay.

BG: Her parents' childcare fell through, so I'm a last minute –

TI: Okay. I'm sorry.

BG: That's okay. But my nieces were 14 and 17, and they were 16 and 13 at that point. So, they were in the tub, and they took the two small dogs. I had the big dog sitting on the edge of the tub. Megan was crying, and she couldn't stop crying, and she couldn't stop panicking. Brianna was a lot more calmer, but she was still panicking. So, I sat on the edge of the tub, praying over them for the entire duration of the tornado. It was less than two minutes before it hit after that warning. I could hear the wind. The wind, they say it sounds like a train, but it really sounds more like the train whistle. It is just such a high-pitched screech. I had thirty-four trees in my yard, and there are four standing now. I could hear all thirty fall. I could hear the one tree that crashed through the ceiling, and I could hear it crashing through the ceiling. I was terrified. The sound had more impact than the wind, but the whole house was vibrating. But in that moment, the only thing that I could do was be focused on my nieces and bringing calmness to them. The praying brought calmness to them, and the praying brought calmness to me. It felt like it lasted hours, but it was probably less than five minutes. When it was still, I told the girls to stay where they were at, and I cracked open the door to the bathroom. I could see the tree. The branch had hit the couch where I was sitting just before the tornado hit. I could see the rain pouring into the house. I had friends texting me at that moment, trying to check on me. One friend who was saying that she would come get me, to stay where I was at. But I told the girls that we were staying in there for a little bit longer to be sure that everything had passed. So, we stayed in there a little bit longer until my neighbors came knocking on the door. At that point, I had to grab them some things. Brianna is diabetic, so I was making sure we had her insulin supply with us. My neighbors led us to their house. We had to crawl over trees. There was no inch in my yard that was not covered in trees. We had to avoid the downed power lines, which were still live at that point. We had to get the dogs to avoid these downed power lines. We couldn't find any of the cats. So, we guided them to one friend's house, or one neighbor's house. Then at the end of the night, we went to the others and slept at his house for the night since my house was still not in a position to be slept in. We had to wait for trees to be cleared before we could even get out of the house.

TI: So, besides insurance and contractors, are there any other challenges?

BG: Well, for me, as the JSU's chemistry safety person, yes. At 6:00 a.m., Calhoun County EMA was looking for me in a golf cart, so that I could come up and direct them through evaluating the chemical hazards that are in the McGee Science Building and being sure that there were no major cleanups that were necessary or people that needed to be rescued from the labs. They came, and when they came, I was at my neighbor's house, and I did not want to take his food. So, I said, first and foremost, I have to feed my diabetic niece. She can't have her sugar drop. So, they took me to my house, let me get food, and then brought me back to them. I got my nieces set up where they were okay to be by themselves. Then I came here and directed the Calhoun County EMA through their evacuation pass, their entry pass, what rooms they needed to check, what kind of chemical hazards they were going to face. I stayed with them until probably 2:00 p.m. in the afternoon, having left my nieces with my neighbor, who, honestly and truthfully, I just met.

TI: So, even you were affected, you had to respond to work after?

BG: Yes. Even though I was impacted, I had to respond to work. Ultimately, at work, with the job that I do, it presents a hazard to the community. So, yes, I have to place that above my necessary needs, immediate needs, for repairing my house and for cleaning it up. It's a challenge to ask people for help. When you go through something like that, you don't have a choice. Insurance doesn't cover downed trees unless they're on structures, so that's thousands of dollars that I don't have to spend. So, I had to ask people like my church and the CR community, my neighbors, Samaritan's Purse, to help me deal with that. I had to go to UMCOR and ask for supplies that I didn't have. I had to ask my friends to let me stay in their house. Not that I even had to ask that, they offered that, but I had to be willing to accept it. It's hard to do that. I am independent. It is a part of my character. I am used to not only taking care of myself but taking care of other people. So, being willing to accept help and even ask for help from other people was a challenge. It is definitely a challenge mentally to deal with, to deal with the fear, to deal with the panic that wants to come up naturally. I have never been afraid of storms, ever in my entire life. My family, when I was growing up, was just disregarding them. That's the attitude that I grew up with.

TI: So, this is the first time you're experiencing a disaster?

BG: Of this level? Well, no. I've been through a hurricane. But we evacuated during the hurricane and we came up here. Then the house didn't get hit, and then nothing happened. Do you understand what I'm saying? This is the first time I've had an impact. This is the first time I've had an impact from a tornado or a natural disaster. It's different to be in one and nothing. Even growing up, a tornado watch or a tornado warning, we never left our house and it never got hit. The hurricane, even though there was torrential rain, we never saw any other – that was Hurricane Opal.

TI: Okay. 1995?

BG: Yes. But we never had any, our house didn't receive any damage. We didn't actually stay in the middle of the storm, so there was nothing. There was no negative impact from it. This time I was in it. This time I felt the whole house vibrating. I heard the ceiling crashing. I

heard all of that. This time I have to deal with the fear that now comes from being in that. The desire to be even more cautious. It's just panic. That's what I feel now with a storm, it's just panic. Panic as a safety person is not something I typically experience because I'm the calm person who guides other people. So, there's a sense of disappointment in myself. There's a sense of, I should be able to do better than this, but I can't. There's learning to have some grace with myself that I have fear at this storm now. There's trying to be more empathetic toward people who have to deal with this. There's trying to calm the fear that I feel when things like this happen. There's having to even do that now, even when I have to face that here at JSU, if it happens again at JSU. Having to be able to have the self-control to keep the panic from taking over and to be able to still be the calm person who guides other people in what they do.

TI: Okay. So, our next question is more about disaster resilience and how you cope with or adapt to the challenges. So, could you tell us what helped you to cope with the challenges from the tornado?

BG: The biggest thing was the community. It was the friends who guided me with the contractors. It was the church who, when my insurance company wouldn't come out and tarp my roof for three days, came out the next day in the middle of a storm and tarped my roof. It is the students at JSU that showed up in my yard to help cut away my trees. It was the students here that would come up to me in the chemistry labs that know me, that would check on me repeatedly to be sure that I was okay. It was – even though I didn't take money from JSU, they kept offering it to me, offering it to me repeatedly to be sure that I had all my needs covered. It was the church family that sat and prayed with me. It was Samaritan's Purse who didn't just come into my yard and do cleanup but brought ministers with them to comfort me. It was my CR family. It was all of that that combined together that helped me to cope.

TI: So, having a pre-existing relations and network with friends and family and church.

BG: Yes.

TI: That was helpful.

BG: That was the biggest thing that was the most helpful. Of course, each individual task that people did was helpful, but more importantly, it was the relationships that existed and the blanket of support that they enveloped me in during that time.

TI: Do you think your prior experience with the job was helpful to recover in this challenge?

BG: Definitely. My prior experience with the job teaches me emergency response. It's an aspect of it. So, having that knowledge and being able to draw on it and know what to do was helpful. But with the contractors, I have experience with vendors here, but nowhere near the level of construction language or never really had to file a claim with my insurance company before. Those things I was unprepared for. I was unprepared for the arguments that I would have, and so the community is what gave me what I needed to be able to face those challenges. But most assuredly when you do safety training and you've done it for ten years as I have, the knowledge you obtain from that definitely teaches you how to respond in an event like that.

TI: Any other things that were helpful other than network and experience?

BG: If I were to suggest to anyone else, I would say, read your insurance contract. We all sign it and we skim it, but we don't really read it. Read it. Know specifically what it's going to cover and what you're going to need to cover. Whether you think something's going to happen or not, stick back money that's designed specifically for events for that purpose. I would tell someone that, don't expect instant results.

TI: It will take time?

BG: It takes a long time. It takes longer than you think it should. So, building your patience levels and being able to stay calm no matter what frustration, and frustration not disaster, but what frustration you're facing, will go a long way to maintaining your sanity throughout the battle of the contractors and the insurance. Understanding that you're not the only one going through it, that for your contractor, he's trying to help you. He's trying to help your neighbor. He's trying to help six people down the street. And he's trying to manage his time between all of those. Those would be the kind of things that would help in going through this.

TI: So, you mentioned that you responded to work the next day. Were you able to get some time off?

BG: Yes. For all the time that we put in at work during the weeks that we were off for the tornado, JSU told us to take off time in the interim. Sincerely, my department head and my dean were both very understanding if I started to feel overwhelmed and needed to leave. That was something I was allowed to do for the first several weeks after the tornado, even after we returned back to school.

TI: So, what will you carry forward from this experience?

BG: One, a greater understanding of insurance and contractors. Two, I now have a better plan for what happens if there's another warning. I still don't know that in a watch I'm going to go anywhere. But in a warning I would definitely go to my neighbor's basement with my dogs and whoever's in my household at that time. I'm getting married, so I'm going to have stepchildren that are in and out of the house and my future husband. We will all go to my neighbor's basement as needed. The other things were kind of harder to define. I will still have the fear. The fear won't go away. So, now I have coping mechanisms in place and things that I can do to bring calmness in those situations. I take with me the community. Not just the community that I had, but the community that grew with the experience of the tornado. I have reevaluated our safety plan here and our evacuation plan here for Martin Hall. So, I take forward a better plan for the university, or at least the parts that I'm responsible for in the chemistry labs. I take forward a better plan for them and for how they're going to react in that. So, I've revamped our safety plan. I take with me a notion that I can survive anything. That with the proper planning and procedure in place that we can get through it. I take forward with me, it's so easy in this world to just see the negative things. So, I take forward with me a determination to look for the positive. I take with me the knowledge that for every person who does the looting, there is another person who is there to offer a helping hand. That is a big thing. Our UPD camped out at my neighborhood. The JSU Police Department, the JSU and the city police put blockades up all around our neighborhood. You had to show your driver's license so that people couldn't get in there and get to loot our homes. So, I take forward the knowledge that our police are really doing their job. That they care about the community that they're serving.



TI: Yes, there were curfews in place, I think, after the tornado.

BG: Yes. When you can't be at home to watch and be sure your house is safe, that is a reassurance. So, that's what I take forward. Most of the things that I take forward are more emotional. They're more relational.

TI: So, I think that's all of my questions. Is there anything that we should know or do you have any concerns or comments that you'd like to share?

BG: I think JSU as a whole has to make a wider and better plan for emergency response to events of this nature. More safe shelters. But I know for a fact the university is already working on that. So, they're developing more safe shelters for people to be in. They're developing more infrastructure that we lacked. JSU is doing that. So, I think as a community, we have to do that. We were fortunate in that most of the students weren't on campus or even in the local housing that was available. So, my hope is that the community as a whole puts in better infrastructure for people to be in when something like this happens. That would be my greatest concern. It's not just for myself. I have developed a better place for me to be in the event. But there is no way to keep a tornado from hitting your house. There is no way to make the house more stable. I mean obviously, the brick house is more stable than the wood house. But if you already have a wood house, short of finding mass tons of finances to make your house brick, you're not going to be able to do that. But having a plan for a neighbor's house that you can go to the basement. Having businesses or something have basements or something that they can go to are safe places. It's really just establishing safe infrastructure.

TI: You said you have a lot of trees.

BG: I don't have a lot of trees anymore. I have four. I have four trees. I had thirty-four trees.

TI: So, you think a house without trees –

BG: No, the weird thing with the trees, the trees are what did the most damage to my house. But I still wonder if the trees weren't there, how much of my wood house would be standing after. Does that make sense? The tornado picked up the trees. The tornado did not pick up my house because it was picking up the trees. But without the trees, will the tornado pick up my house? There'll be nothing there. I had friends –

TI: [unintelligible] Like a barrier, right?

BG: Yes. I have friends who didn't have a lot of trees and their house was almost gone entirely. Half of mine was, but almost all of theirs was. My neighbor's house took more damage because it had fewer trees than my property did. So, no, I can't say that having – that way you're just going to get damaged one way or the other. Either the trees are going to damage your house or the tornado is going to damage your house. I would guess, it would be a toss-up as to which would do more damage depending on how many trees actually hit your house or how big of a tree hits your house. Where it hits your house. So, I can't say that is going to help. The bigger concern is what people have for infrastructure. Where do they have for a safe place to go? Are they aware of what they need to do? Are they stubborn like me and staying in place when they should be fleeing? That's the same true for the JSU community. So, that would be my bigger concern than anything else, is being safe in that moment. What can a person do to be

safer in that moment? Having more than a two-minute tornado warning, and then tornado, having more than that time would have been great. But I don't even think that's something they could have predicted.

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

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Reviewed by Nicole Zador, 3/05/2025