

Interview with Joni Ginn

Narrator: Joni Ginn

Interviewer: Erin Rider

Location: Jacksonville, Alabama

Date: February 21, 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 February 21, 2019, Erin Rider interviewed Joni Ginn for the Tornado Oral History. The interview was conducted at the Houston Cole Library as part of a project documenting personal experiences of the tornado and the recovery process. Joni Ginn begins by describing the significant damage the tornado caused to her home, which included a large oak tree crashing through the roof while she and her husband were sheltering in the basement. This incident occurred while the couple was already navigating her husband's recent cancer diagnosis and upcoming surgery. Despite the damage, she highlights how their immediate concern was coping with the destruction while ensuring her husband received medical care. She discusses the challenges of managing home repairs, including securing contractors and dealing with environmental hazards like asbestos, all while her husband was recovering from surgery. Ginn recounts the overwhelming support from friends, neighbors, and even a church group that helped clear the debris from her yard, sharing that this assistance was a major emotional and physical relief. Throughout the interview, she emphasizes her reliance on faith, family, and friends to navigate both the personal and logistical difficulties of the recovery process. Despite the length of time it took to repair her home, Ginn reflects positively on the experience, noting how it strengthened her faith and brought her closer to her community. The interview also touches on the emotional and financial toll of living in a hotel for 129 days while repairs were underway. Ginn describes how she kept busy by working part-time and how reimbursement from insurance helped alleviate the financial strain. She concludes by reflecting on the resilience the experience instilled in her and offering advice to others facing similar challenges: to rely on others and have faith that everything will work out in time.

Erin Rider: My name is Erin Rider from Jacksonville State University. We are conducting an oral history project of the Jacksonville tornado that occurred on March 19th, 2018. Today is February 21st, 2019, and we are hearing from Joni Ginn, who will share her experience of the tornado and recovery. Our interview is taking place at the Houston Cole Library. So, how are you affected by the tornado?

Joni Ginn: Well, we have a big oak tree right beside our house, and the wind blew half of the tree onto the house. My husband and I, at the time of the tornado, we were listening to James Spann on my cell phone, and he said that it had crossed Highway 431 coming down towards Crystal Springs – down 204. My husband and I, we had a kerosene lantern because at that time the power had gone off, and we ran down to our basement. We live in a very old home. It was built in 1947. So, we were standing in the basement, and we heard a big crash. We knew that we had been hit. All the years that we had lived there, we had never been hit. We were so fortunate about that. After everything sort of settled down, my husband walked upstairs, and the tree had come through the house. Rain was coming through the house everywhere. I mean, it was just pouring through. As my husband was walking through the house, the ceiling in the kitchen fell. Of course, you let out a big scream because you don't know what else is going to happen. So, after everything had settled down – the lightning and the rain had calmed down – I went around. I didn't know what to do. I was a nervous wreck. I was getting pans and pots and buckets and trash cans trying to catch the water, because we have old hardwood floors. That was Monday. On Tuesday, my husband had to go to the hospital for pre-op – he had been diagnosed with cancer in his kidney. So, we couldn't get out. There were trees blocking the road. During that night – Monday night, early Tuesday morning – one of the neighbors had taken his big tractors and road equipment, and he was clearing the road. But in the meantime, there was the tree on both of our cars – limbs and heavy limbs. So, my husband had to walk down the street, and our neighbor took him to the hospital so that he could get his pre-op done. Then on Thursday of that week, my husband had his kidney removed. While my husband was gone that Tuesday morning, I walked outside, trying to evaluate the damage. It was like, "Oh, my gosh." I'm snapping pictures. Our girls were petrified that, you know, "Don't stay there. You can't stay there." My daughter was – my other daughter – from Florida. She was coming up to be with my husband, her dad, during the surgery. So, I said, "You can't come here. We can't stay here." She has two babies and another little girl. So, we all made reservations in a hotel down in Oxford. So, I was walking around outside that Tuesday morning, and all of a sudden a car truck pulls up. It was a friend of mine and her husband. She had her work clothes on. He had his chainsaw and water and rope and everything. All of a sudden, they tore in. All three of us, we tore in. We got the car out from the tree damage, and we just had big piles and piles of brush and limbs and logs and stuff. So, that day was over with. Then Wednesday, we went back out to the house with the insurance adjuster. We looked around. He evaluated and looked at all the damage. We took pictures of everything. But it was so odd during this whole time. My whole house had just practically been destroyed. Nothing broke. Nothing broke, but this one little tray that was leaning up against on this shelf against the wall. It was a wooden highchair tray that when my brother and I were young, this aunt, this special aunt of ours, had put mosaic tile on it. That was the only thing that broke. I had glassware all throughout my house. I just could not believe it. So, we have paintings in the house, and we had all this glassware. I knew that the furniture would have to be moved, and all this glassware would have to be packed up. I didn't trust anybody to move my stuff – my good stuff that I really enjoy looking at. So, my daughters and I,

we spent the whole night with a kerosene lantern wrapping up all of my little precious stuff and putting it in the basement. We took all the pictures off the wall. We stored all that in the basement. Anything that we could physically pick up and move to the basement, that's what we did. Thursday, my husband had his surgery. He came through it really good. Everything was confined – the cancer was confined within the kidney. It was 4 centimeters, which is the size of a small egg, which to me, that sounds pretty big. I stayed with him that night, and my daughters stayed in the hotel. We got up the next day, and we went back out to the house to see what else we needed to do. But in the meantime, on that Thursday, the insurance had a company to come out to take the tree off of the house. That Friday, we went back out, and there was holes everywhere in the roof. Of course, it was fixing to rain again. So, we were trying to get everything patched up. Some friends of ours came. My girlfriends, they, at that time, they were able to go to the, I guess it was the Jacksonville Methodist Church, to pick up supplies. So, they picked up all these tarps and all of these cardboard boxes and big plastic containers, and we were able to put those tarps all over the roof. These friends of ours did this for us. That helped us to maintain the floors and all that. We had a company to come out, and they set up dehumidifiers – big, huge industrial dehumidifiers. That went for about a week until the floors were able to dry out and lay back flat again, which that was a blessing. My husband came home, and we stayed 129 days in the hotel. In the meantime, we were dealing with contractors, trying to get the house back into place and get a new roof on the house. The tresses had to be rebuilt. Framework, the main beam across the house, all that had to be replaced. They even pulled out a log outside, from inside the house. It was a huge log. But we were blessed. We were very blessed. I mean, things worked pretty good, you know, so –

ER: It sounds like just the help from friends and people coming by to help and –

JG: Oh yes.

ER: – I can't imagine at the time when your husband's preparing for surgery, how did you guys kind of cope with that kind of balancing here's the surgery coming up, and then the tornado damage?

JG: We did it the best we could. We were just sort of in shock. But we knew that this had to be done. It had to be done. I mean, we had to get it out. My husband, he got a little ill because he's not the best patient. Most men aren't the best patients when they're in the hospital. He was getting ill, and I just had to tell him, "Look, I can't deal with your attitude right now. So, straighten up. Just be a good patient for the time being." He was in the hospital for about a week, I guess.

ER: When you talk about him being kind of ill, was it in relation to just knowing what happened to the house and what you were kind of going through?

JG: Well, he had a tube down his nose and drawing the fluid out of his stomach, trying to keep his kidney, I guess all of his internal organs, operating correctly. Several years ago, he broke his hip, and they didn't do the same thing with a broken hip as they did while taking an organ out, you know? He was comparing the two, and he couldn't figure out how come one hospital wasn't doing what the other hospital had done. That was why he was getting ill. We had a discussion.

ER: Okay. You said before, he was in the hospital for a week?

JG: Yes.

ER: So, during the time he was in the hospital, were you going to the house every day?

JG: Oh, yes.

ER: Okay.

JG: Yes.

ER: Check in. Then once he was released from the hospital and you were staying at the hotel, how often were you going to the house over those 129 days?

JG: Practically every day.

ER: Okay. Could you tell me a little bit about what that experience was like and what kinds of activities you were doing there?

JG: Well, I was trying to meet with the contractors, trying to find the right roofer who was licensed. We came across several people who told us that they were. But after we did some background check, we found that that information wasn't true. So, the search was all over again. We had to do all that over again, trying to find somebody good. We did. They were really good. They were very nice and very reassuring to us, because they knew what we were going through. Then we – come to find out, we had asbestos in the joint compound of the sheet rock in the ceiling. So, we had to have environmental to come out to check for any kind of asbestos. Then we had to have all the sheetrock removed. Our house is old, and the only thing that was sheet rock was the ceilings. So, that was an ordeal. That was an ordeal in itself. This company from somewhere, I don't know, trying to do all this research, trying to figure out who was the right one. Is the insurance going to accept this? I mean, we had fantastic insurance. My little insurance adjuster, he was so nice every time. "If you've got any questions, if you feel any concern, have any concerns, please call me." I did. I mean, me and him became the best buddies, which was very reassuring to me. But we found a young man who had just started his own construction business several years ago. He used to drive for the UPS, and he delivered a lot of packages to us. So, he came out. I know of his family – he comes from good stock, I guess you could say. He redid our home. I know the thing now is shiplap – the tongue and groove boards on your walls. My whole house is nothing but a shiplap. So, we had all the sheet rock with the asbestos, it was taken down. So, we had all of the ceilings, which was the tongue and groove or shiplap, refinished. They were very nice. This construction guy was very nice. We got to know him really well, because after going out there every day or every other day or discussing what we need to do next and how we're going to do this. What do I want? How can I make my house look a little better than what it did before? Of course, he was to paint the inside of the house. At this time, everybody, all the construction people, were very, very busy with everybody else, which is understandable. Here I am and my husband, we're wanting, we're

needing to get back into our home. We took on the task. Me and my family and some friends, we took on the task of refinishing the ceilings, sealing the boards up, painting, and cleaning the house up. That way, we were able to get back into the house within the 129 days.

ER: Did you have an idea that it was kind of that time frame?

JG: No.

ER: Okay.

JG: No. I was praying it was going to be sooner, but we learned how to put our faith in God and to have patience. Patience is truly a virtue, which grew very thin. By the time the 129 days living in a hotel room – which was a suite. I mean, we had a kitchen. We had a little couch. We had the bed. But it was all one room.

ER: I wanted to ask you a little bit about that. What were your challenges in the hotel, compared to being used to being in your own home?

JG: Well, you got very tired of eating out. We tried every restaurant in Oxford and Jacksonville and Anniston. We got to know the people at the hotel. They're very, very sweet. I mean, very sweet. They would just make over my husband – the little ladies would, because he's a very quiet, calming – he looks calm – person. I'm just a nervous wreck. I was a nervous wreck the whole time. I couldn't stay in that hotel room. Just couldn't stay there. I do a little part-time job, and I would ask, "Let me work. Just let me work. Let me get out of this hotel room." I can't take it, you know. And as soon as I'd come in, I'd say, "Okay. Let's go." Then we'd go out to eat. Then it's time to go to bed, you know. The cycle would continue, so –

ER: Was your part-time job in Jacksonville?

JG: I worked for FEMA, the Center of Domestic Preparedness. I'm a role player. I am a casualty. We train first responders. It's people that came to help with the Boston Marathon. We also do riots. We're protesters, and it teaches the young policeman how to deal with riot situations, which is a lot of fun.

ER: Very interesting.

JG: Yes. I was able to get a lot of my anxiety out. Because you're a casualty. You have like a nail coming out of your head or a broken arm, and you're crying. You're carrying on. Well, you really were crying, and you were carrying on because you had a broken heart. But, yes, that was really a tension release there. I was able to get all that out.

ER: Thinking about the hotel and the eating out more often and so forth, how were those expenses? Were they covered, or are they coming out of your own budget?

JG: Well, at that time, yes, they were coming out of our budget, but we were reimbursed. We kept the receipts of anything that we spent for the home or our food, mileage. We were reimbursed for mileage. So, that was all a blessing, right there to us.

ER: And were you reimbursed frequently?

JG: It was after everything was submitted. Yes.

ER: 129 days seems lengthy. Was that nerve wracking at any point, even though you knew you were being reimbursed to cover – ?

JG: Well, my husband and I were very blessed. We did have our savings account. So, with the reimbursement check, that sort of replenished the savings, yes.

ER: I want to go back to that first night. So, at one point you said that here comes all this rain. You come up from the basement. Then you said that even the ceiling fell in the kitchen. What was that first night like, in terms of how you coped with –

JG: Oh, I was static. I mean, you couldn't see outside. The lightning had not really started yet, but you could see out this window. This oak tree is just within 50 feet of the house, and it's huge. I mean, it's a huge oak tree. There was a window right beside this tree, and water was just pouring in like a water feature. So, I told my husband, "Go get the trash bag. Let's catch the water in the trash bag." Of course, that didn't last very long. I mean, we just had to let it pour, you know. There was this tree and leaves and branches inside the dining room. It was just mind boggling. Then all of a sudden, the lightning – the whole sky just lit up, you know. You could look out, and you could just see. It was like, "Oh, my goodness. This is a war zone." I mean, there was trees down everywhere. We had four huge pine trees in the pasture. They were uprooted. We had a pecan tree in our front yard. It was uprooted. I mean, there was limbs everywhere in the windows. We were just, "Oh, my goodness." But then, after everything settled down, my husband says, "There's nothing else I can do. I'm going to bed." I'm like, "You're going to bed? What are you talking about? You're going to bed?" So, of course, I stood up. I would go from the front door to the back door to the front door to the windows, looking out. All of a sudden, I heard all this noise. I mean, I couldn't figure out where it was coming from. I saw lights, and you heard chainsaws. I mean, it was like a miracle. Why would anybody pick our little old road? Our little road is nothing but a little country road. You saw this flashlight flashing. There was a lady, my neighbor. She was at the corner service station. I guess she had just gotten off work or whatever, and she was there during the tornado. She was walking back home, and our other neighbor, on the other side of us, was helping her get through the downed trees. Of course, when I saw them out there, it had stopped raining and stopped lightning. I walked out, and I said, "Hey, is everybody okay?" She said, "Yes. He's just taking me home." You notice people don't know their neighbors like they used to when I was growing up. I met my neighbors and, "Is there anything I can do? Let me know. I can help you. You got hit. Are you okay?" "Yes, we're fine." Or, "Nothing hit us." It was just amazing that night. This guy, this neighbor who lives way down the road from us – who brought all of his big equipment – he cleared the road. He just pushed the trees out of the road. It was just amazing. But during that time, let me tell you this – this was several days later. We still had the big, huge

pine trees, and there was brush everywhere, all in the yard. My grandsons and I, we had slowly burned the big brushes from the oak tree, but there was still the pine trees. My grandsons and I had all gotten together, and we said, "Okay. Today's the day we're going to try to do something with the yard." There was nothing else we could do with the house. My husband was recouping. He couldn't lift. He couldn't do anything. So, they came, and we started raking and picking up pinecones and burning and had a little pile here and a little pile there. All of a sudden, here comes this church bus, and these men just pile out. There was, I don't know, at least ten of these men. They had come from Birmingham. They said, "Hey, we understand that you need help." I just broke down. They stayed. We were taking everything. We were piling all the brush across the street. They used their chain saws. Then all of a sudden, my neighbor from up the street, he comes down with his tractor. He has these big old forks on his tractor. He was picking up the big logs and taking them across the street. We worked until 3:00 or 4:00 that afternoon. I told those gentlemen, I just broke down. I said, "I am so tired." I said, "You're going to have to go home. I can't do anymore." The yard was clean – cleaner. It was to my satisfaction. I just never dreamed that we would ever get all that done. They had two huge piles of stuff, of brush and logs and pinecones. It was such a blessing that day. We had prayer, [little men?], they loaded up their trucks. They took off, and they left. Me and my grandkids, we just sat there and cried. We were just so thankful that people actually were there to help us. It was just glory to God, you know.

ER: Yes. What an uplifting story at that moment.

JG: Yes.

ER: Kind of lifted off some of the burden that you were facing, and that your husband and family were facing.

JG: Yes.

ER: Coming back to talk a little about disaster resilience, just a little bit. So, we talk about this word, disaster resilience, we're talking about the ability to cope or adapt with the recovery challenges. What helped you cope with the challenges from the tornado?

JG: My faith in God, my family, and really special friends.

ER: The first night, were you able to get in contact with your family?

JG: Yes. We have a daughter who lives in Huntsville, and we have another daughter that lives in Florida. The next day she was on her way up, which was Wednesday, I guess. My daughter in Huntsville, she's, "Mother, you need to get out of the house. Mama, you need to get out of the house. You and daddy don't need to be there." I said, "Say, we can't leave. There's no way we can leave the car, you know." She says, "Well, don't go to sleep. Something might happen." So, no, I didn't. I couldn't go to sleep. There was no way I could sleep.

ER: Is there something you can point to that helped you recover more quickly?

JG: Getting back into my home.

ER: You mentioned earlier kind of trying to figure out which contractor to contact and researching these contractors. When you knew that somebody wasn't going to work, what things were you looking for? How did you make some of those decisions?

JG: Well, we had one to man to come up, and, oh, he just knew all about it. He was just going to fix our house and fix this roof and all that. I don't know, I just had an odd feeling about him. So, I called Jacksonville to see if he had license with the city, and they said no. So, I said, "Well, I'll call – " I think Calhoun County or Alabama, who is it? I guess Calhoun County. I called them and asked them if he had a work permit or license, and they said no. So, we quickly called this young man and told him that we didn't need his services. We felt like we made the right decision by his remark after I told him we no longer needed him. But we went to Home Advisors. They were very helpful. Then word of mouth, I have friends who know a lot of people in the community. "Is this a good guy? Is he good? Will he do me fair?" I guess just putting my faith into the person, that was a big deal. That was a big part of it. If you got the good vibes, I guess you could say.

ER: Your intuition kind of kicked in.

JG: Yes.

ER: What will you carry forward from this experience?

JG: To know that I can deal with almost anything, I can move mountains. That my faith in God is stronger, that I know that everything's going to work out all right because God told me so. I just have to have that faith. I have to keep that faith. I think I'm a pretty resilient person. My husband and I, my family and I, have gone through different situations that has been pretty overwhelming, which I'm sure a lot of people have, lot of families have. But we always seem to get back up, dust ourselves off, and we're just a little bit stronger, a little bit better than we were before.

ER: I can sense the faith, too, your deep faith carried you through.

JG: Oh, yes.

ER: What advice would you give others about how to deal with an event of a tornado?

JG: To depend on others, rely on others. That was very hard for me to do because I'm a very independent person. If you can't give me what I want right now, I can go out and get it. I can do this. I can. I'm stubborn, I guess you could say, but I had to learn to depend on others.

ER: I'm thinking about, you said that you had the roof damage, the ceiling damage, and then to your cars.

JG: Yes.

ER: Any other damage? Yard damage that you had mentioned?

JG: Oh, yes. Well, we have five tree stumps in our yard now. Unfortunately, the contract with the county or with this disaster has ended. So, now we have five stumps that we need to do something with. Burn, that's the conclusion we have come to. We didn't know the car was damaged. We just knew some limbs fell over it, and there was some scratches and bumps and stuff, not a big deal. So, I filed a claim, but I told him that I couldn't deal with that right now because I had other issues. So, my grandson, my youngest grandson and I went to wash the car. Water poured through that car. It was unreal. I had taken off a day from the house, from all my little troubles, checked him out of school early. We played hooky. We went out to lunch. We were going to do our own thing. We was going to do anything we wanted to do. I said, "Well, first, let me wash the car because it's dirty." The whole dashboard lit up. I said, "Okay. Get the book out. Tell me what this says. Is the car going to quit on us? Because we're on the other side of Huntsville and we're planning a big day." And "Oh, nana. We need to turn around. Let's go home, nana." "No. We're not going home. Come on. We're going to ride until the car stops." We did. Nothing happened to the car. Everything seemed to dry out, and all the lights went out. But I figured that my car was a little more damaged than what I had figured. So, come to find out, it was totally destroyed. It was destroyed. Talking about the yard, we had somebody to come out, and they ground up the roots and the stumps, pushed everything back down. They cleaned up the yard for us. That was a blessing. We had this one man to come and get the pecan trees. I asked him to take a log and to slice it lengthwise. Now, I have ten pieces of this piece of tree, pecan tree, and my children and I are going to make something out of it. So, you take something – a disaster – and you make something pretty out of it. So, we're in the process of trying to figure out what we're going to do with it. So, everybody gets a piece of wood – piece of the house. We had already closed the account with our adjuster. We had already closed the claim. My husband – we have a full-size basement, and downstairs is a washer and dryer, and the wash water goes through this main drain out to the ditch. Well, he was washing clothes. The basement flooded. The drain stopped up. So, I was at work, and he called Roto-Rooter. They said, "Well, the drain's busted." So, I had to reopen the case with the insurance, and we were reimbursed for all of our expenses, which that was another blessing. Everything happened to our good.

ER: Yes. I keep thinking, because it's like one thing and then another thing, just from the car to the flood in the basement. But your take on it, that you just have to cut some positive way of looking. Or even your humor with your grandson, it really comes through.

JG: Well, that's not the only thing that happened. Okay. The tornado hit. My husband lost his kidney. In the process of moving things to the basement, I broke my glasses that I had just purchased. So, I was going to Super Glue them. Well, I got a piece of Super Glue across the lens. So, what do you do? You naturally take a tissue, and you try to wipe it. Well, that smeared it. So, I had to buy new glasses. Okay. I was at work, and I had my cell phone in my back pocket. Well, evidently I moved the wrong way, and that phone popped out, shattered the glass. It was just not cracked, it was shattered. You couldn't even swipe it without getting glass on your finger. So, I had to get a new — nothing went right. Nothing.

ER: It's also about the little things, too.

JG: It was just, "What else?"

ER: Where are you at right now, then, for kind of your recovery? How are you feeling about where you're at now, with the house? You had mentioned that you have the stumps. Is there anything that still needs to be done or that you're hoping to – ?

JG: Well, we're enjoying our home. It's nice. We've got new shiplap ceilings, got new appliances. We were going to do that anyway, prior to the tornado. So, we said, "Well, might as well go do it now." Got new countertops. We're enjoying our home. It's very nice. We like it. It's big enough for us. The house is back in order. That's the main thing that keeps me calm and my husband calm. We're able to enjoy each other more. His health is good [knocks on wood]. Thank goodness. My nerves are a whole lot better. The car is good. We still have the three, four, five stumps out in the pasture that we plan on burning. That was the advice we were given. So, I'm sure there will be a lot of burning out of 204 this spring, letting everything dry out, you know. So, it'll just burn to a nice little pile so –

ER: Well, thank you very much for your time. Are there any other comments or insights that you would like to share that I didn't cover in my questions?

JG: No. I think this is it.

ER: Okay. Well, we appreciate hearing your interview.

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Reviewed by Nicole Zador, 3/13/2025