

Interview with Jay Hagan

Narrator: Jay Hagan

Interviewer: Erin Rider

Location: Jacksonville, Alabama

Date: February 26, 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 26, 2019, Erin Rider interviewed Jay Hagan for an oral history project at Jacksonville State University, documenting the aftermath of the Jacksonville tornado on March 19, 2018. The interview took place at the Houston Cole Library, where Hagan shared his personal experiences of surviving the tornado and his subsequent recovery. Hagan begins by recounting the night of the tornado, which initially seemed like a routine thunderstorm. He describes how the storm escalated rapidly, catching him off guard while he was alone in his apartment. Hagan details the moment the tornado struck, causing severe damage to his building, including part of his apartment roof collapsing. He sought refuge in his bathtub while staying in contact with his father, providing a vivid account of the fear and uncertainty he experienced during the storm. Following the immediate aftermath, Hagan describes the process of evacuating his apartment, navigating debris, and awaiting rescue by a police officer. He explains how he and his neighbors worked to check on each other and assess the damage. Hagan's reflections extend to the challenges of recovery, including finding a new place to live, salvaging personal belongings, and dealing with the emotional and logistical aspects of displacement. He also discusses his role in helping others during the recovery process, drawing on his previous experience with disaster relief efforts. Throughout the interview, Hagan emphasizes the importance of preparedness and community support in the face of such events.

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 26th, 2019, and we are hearing from Jay Hagan, who will share his experience of the tornado and recovery. Our interview is taking place at the Houston Cole library. So, how were you affected by the tornado?

Jay Hagan: I was affected by the tornado when it hit me. When the tornado hit me, it ended up destroying part of the apartment I lived in at a random, unexpected time throughout the night, when I was off-putting it as a just a normal, thundery night, not expecting much to happen that night, and then in one minute, it destroys most of what I have. I have to find sanction and look for a new place – and just an unexpected turn of events.

ER: So, thinking about how that kind of night started, what kind of information did you hear? What were you doing at the time that things were taking an adverse effect?

JH: On the night of the event, I ended up, was finishing some homework for the night, and then I had some time to play some games with my friends that I played Ultimate Frisbee here with. I ended up finishing the homework, going online, playing some games with them. I got a text from a couple of friends about bad thunderstorms in the area and tornado watches. Living in Alabama for a long time, I just off-put it as it's normal, to be expected. My friend on the game ended up saying, "Hey, there's really bad weather." He started to head home towards Oxford. As he was leaving, he saw the lights go out, everything like that. That's when all my lights cut out, and all the power went out. That's when I started taking measures to get into safety. Living at a third floor balcony apartment was not a very safe area, but that's the pre-precautions that were given. My parents were just texting me updates throughout the night of what was going on with that, until the storm actually hit.

ER: Were you living alone?

JH: I lived with a roommate at the time. But this was during spring break, and he already headed home. I was getting ready to leave the next day, and then the tornado hit right before I was able to leave, and I was only one home at the time.

ER: Okay. At what point you said you started taking these measures? What alerted you to take these measures, and what were they?

JH: I took these measures whenever the storm started to become louder, heavier rain, heavier thunderstorms, and all the power goes out, I'm starting to think like, "All right. This is starting to get a little bit more serious." So, the only pre-precaution I'd really took was to just put a lot of the electronics on something higher, watch for any, like, damaging to the building, and then go. I sat in, like, a narrow corridor. I sat in the bathtub with just a blanket on the base of the bathtub, and just on the phone, just listening to music, waiting for it to pass by, seeing that there's nothing that could happen, really.

ER: Okay. Then what happens?

JH: Well, the storm eventually picked up and came over to where I was living. I started hearing trees tear apart around me, and the building starts to get somewhat shaky. Living on the third floor was the highest point, so I felt it shake the most – which, I thought it just be a storm passing over. Get it done. But the whole building's shaking, I'm starting to hear tree limbs and things break apart over me, and just feeling the ground shake beneath you is kind of a unreal feeling at the time. I'm sitting there just kind of in a panic mode with music playing in the bathroom. Just shaking, kind of having anxiety, and just freaking out a little bit about what's going on in the moment, really.

ER: You had said that you were getting updates from people. Were you talking to anybody at this point?

JH: I phone called my dad after a while. When the storm started getting louder, I was calling him. I ended up calling him before the storm got louder. I paused the music, called him, and I was just telling him the updates. I tell him like, "It's getting louder. It's getting louder." Then I start feeling the room shake, and my dad just says, "Scoot down the tub. Just relax." I'm sitting there, he's on the phone listening to me in a storm tear apart my apartment above me. He's sitting there, freaking on the other side, thinking this could be the last time I'm listening to my son. I'm just sitting here talking to my dad, and I'm like, this could be the last time I talk to him.

ER: Wow.

JH: So, all the emotions are kind of all over the place right now.

ER: What are going through your thoughts, hearing trees, the building shake?

JH: Well, just hearing the trees snap, I'm expecting to hear the typical saying of like, "It sounds like a train coming right over you." I didn't hear a train. I guess I might have tuned it out or something, but I heard trees snapping, and building, and things getting torn off the side of my building. I lived on one of the edges where there's a brick wall on my side. I hear that crash over. I'm assuming it's the bricks, because I hear a large crash and thunder below me. I'm just thinking, like, "I could collapse through the building at any moment." Everything's breaking around me. Things are getting ripped apart. It just sounds like a large metal storm of like a junkyard being ripped apart around me.

ER: What's your sense of time at this point?

JH: Since the time, it's just the middle of the night. I wasn't expecting anything to happen near the middle of the night. Everything goes in slow motion, it feels like. You're processing everything in slow motion. This could be the last moment and everything feels like it's in slow motion. It takes forever. In reality, it was just – I think it was less than a minute, but it felt like it was 10, 15 minutes of just going through.

ER: You were in the bathroom, right? In the tub.

JH: Yes.

ER: Did you see any devastation visible from the bathroom area?

JH: I saw no devastation in the bathroom. When I left, though, I ended up seeing holes in my roof, part of my wall torn down, balconies torn apart, everything like that. It was pitch black because there were no lights in the area. So, all I had was my phone light, walking around everywhere, trying to just get out of there. Water's leaking everywhere, staircases are bombarded as I was leaving. So, I saw nothing until I finally ended up leaving the bathroom and look around. My apartment is starting to flood, and there's holes all over the place in the room.

ER: What activities did you do at that point, as you're coming out of the bathroom?

JH: At that point, my father contacted my stepmother to call the JPD and get them an emergency vehicle out there to try to escort me out to one of the safe zones that they had. So, I'm out there trying to just navigate down three floors, three staircases and get to the street where I can look for this police officer. After trying to go down one staircase with it blocked, I went to the other one and moved some pallets out of the way. I ended up getting down there and just waiting for a police officer in the rain. I grabbed a phone charger for my phone, and that's what I had on me at the time.

ER: Did you see anybody else at this point?

JH: I saw nobody. I knocked on a couple of doors just to see if I could find anyone there. I couldn't find anyone. Either they were out somewhere, or they were in there and too scared to approach and I couldn't find anyone. Me and the police officer knocked on a couple of doors, trying to see if anyone's here, and no one answered anything. So, we just went ahead and left.

ER: Did you know who your neighbors were at that point?

JH: I didn't know all my neighbors, but in the complex we lived in, I lived with twelve other tenants, and then their roommates or their neighbors there. We all didn't know each other, but we would chit chat along the times. There were a couple people I knew on the bottom floor, from school or some sort of group I'm in here. Then next door neighbors, I knew one of them just because I see him all the time walking around. But I didn't know any of them really exclusively.

ER: I imagine spring break, that you maybe didn't know if they were there or gone home.

JH: Yes. With spring break happening too, I couldn't tell if everyone was gone or who was gone. I know my next door, my neighbor had their kid. And I didn't know if they were gone – which I was just trying to check on them, make sure they were there. They wouldn't answer. So, I didn't know who was there at the time, and we just decided to leave.

ER: You said you'd get down to the ground level. Was the police officer already there?

JH: He wasn't there quite yet. It took another couple minutes for him to get there. I'm just kind of walking around, scoping out the area. I tried to go see, check on my car, but I can't see it in all the debris. I'm just looking around all the rubble, looking around across from me, where there's a graveyard with fences ripped apart, shambles of different buildings ripped all over the place, the bleachers from soccer field over an entire parking lot gone – just different elements and different things all over the place. Just looking around, living a surreal moment here.

ER: That sounds like it, just the shock of it all. I can't even fully process it at the moment. Are you still talking to your dad at this point?

JH: Yes. I still talk to him. Yes. He's still father in the picture, and I still see him and talk to him all the time about it.

ER: I meant as you were coming down the staircase, were you still on the phone or communicating?

JH: He said I should probably get to JPD and seek out shelter there and wait, and just to contact friends – see what they're up to, see if everything's all right. I got off the phone with him as I was leaving down the staircase.

ER: Okay. So, then you see the police officer, what happens next for you?

JH: After we get to the police officer, the police officer asked me if anyone else is around. I say I'm not too sure. I knocked on a couple doors, but no one answered. So, we checked the bottom floor of two buildings and no one's there. We end up getting in the police car while it's raining still, ridiculously. We try to turn around a bend, and we end up rolling over bricks. He says he's going to get fired for it. It's just a funny remark to get past time, sitting in the front of a police car and just rolling over curbs, trying to get out of there, go to JPD – their cellar for their safe area. We're just trying to bow through the storm, get over there. There's no power, there's nothing there, just debris everywhere we're trying to avoid. It's just trying to navigate all the way there.

ER: Sounds like that was intense as well.

JH: Yes. He was in a panic mode a little bit as well. The officer that took me, he was kind of shaken up. It looked like a little bit – not shaken up as in, like disturbed, but just shaken up as in, he's not too prepared for this scene, neither. He's trying to figure out what's best to go along this route here and get everyone to safekeeping.

ER: Also the little humor part of it.

JH: Yes. The rolling over the bricks.

ER: Like all the [badge?] and anxiety. So, where did you both end up going? What happened at that point?

JH: He ended up taking me to the police department there. They have an underground. I think it's just a basement they have, where they were taking a bunch of people that are affected by the storm, or that didn't have somewhere, or needed help. Just a safekeeping safe ground for them. I walk in, there's a couple people with dogs. There's a room to the right of me that has thirty, forty people in it, just kind of sitting around, waiting. I walk into the main room, and there's groups of people, maybe another twenty, in there, just collectively talking. I see a couple of friends. I go chat with them, sit down. I was calling my roommate, updating him on what happened to the apartment, what was going on – because he was questioning it. Because at this point, after the tornado hit and everyone realized, I was just getting spam-called. Spam text, like, "Hey, are you all right? What's going on here?" I'm updating on Facebook, like what's going on and what should be avoided. I'm calling a couple of friends in the area, making sure they're all right. Then a couple of friends are asking me if I know what's going on because they were there for a while and I was the last one to come in. Like, what I saw, if anything's all right out there, what's going on, really. I just sit down with a couple of my friends and relax until they say it's safe to go home or safe to do what I need to do. I end up getting in my friend's car at the time. We drive back to check my apartment. He drops me off. I make sure I have all my stuff, gather stuff, check on my car, make sure it's drivable, see if I can get out and then go to a hotel. Or go see a family that live in Anniston, with them for the night, and then come back in the morning, check everything.

ER: This was the first night?

JH: This was the night of the tornado, yes.

ER: You said you did go back to your apartment and check on your car.

JH: Yes.

ER: What was that experience like? What was your assessment of the damage?

JH: He took me back, and I was just getting out of the car, ready to grab clothes. Just stuff that is survival from the storm, that isn't flooded, isn't ruined. Important things like any sort of big electronics that I need to take, like my work laptop, everything like that. Clothes enough to sustain for a week or so, and just put them in a place. Anything of importance, just grab it right now, make sure. When I got back, people were around collecting things and moving things around, making sure everything is all right. With the laundry building tipped over, they were trying to move it back up. I went in there, just grabbed what I could. Now, the kitchen and then the living room were flooding out, and there was water seeping in from the ceiling. Part of the balcony was ripped apart. The ceiling ended up collapsing on top of my bed so there was debris all over my bedroom with clothes. The chest of drawers, everything like that, was getting messed up and destroyed. I ended up just grabbing both my laptops, both their chargers, my phone charger, about a week's worth of clothes and important sentimental items. We just ended up leaving to mom's house for the night, after checking on everyone else, making sure they're all right, checking on the car if there's any damage I had to my vehicle, just making sure, in general, what was going on. Then I also was going around at the time of leaving because I was driving myself. I was just checking around the city, making sure everything was – if anything was really

destroyed and keeping updates on Facebook because there were so many questions going along. I was like, I want to update people on Facebook, making sure if they need the new information, I can tell them. The Reserve got hit as well, and Gamecock Village and my apartment complex. We all ended up getting hit, and no one can get in or out here.

ER: As you're going through your apartment getting things, how much time did you think you had? Was that a couple of minutes, a little lengthier?

JH: They said they weren't going to let anyone stay the night there. Just grab what you need. Take as much time as you need. I took about fifteen, twenty minutes of just looking around the apartment, looking at what I would need. I filled up about two trash bags worth of values, electronics, clothes, bathroom essentials, stuff like that. Just stuff I could use and still need for the week upcoming, because [knowing?] to come back and clean. So, it took maybe fifteen minutes of just loading my car up and then driving out to Anniston. Just looking around the apartment and checking everything else.

ER: At that time, did you also, were trying to get stuff of your roommates? Or were you trying to figure out, [was someone?] asking?

JH: I called my roommate to see if he wanted anything out. He was asking about the damages to his part of the apartment, if it was his room. There were no damages to his side of the apartment at the time. So, he was saying, "Just make sure you put my TV on my bed, put big electronics that could be sitting on the floor up above so they don't flood out. Just put bigger stuff there. Make sure you grab my computer for us." I grabbed his computer and put it in my car – make sure that doesn't get damaged overall. Everything else, he said, just to leave it. He's going to be up the next day, checking out everything as well, coming back from home.

ER: That part, going back to see your apartment for the second time – previously you were surviving the tornado –

JH: Yes.

ER: – going back in your apartment, what's kind of going through your mind at this point? Returning and seeing the –

JH: At this point, I'm just living in a surreal moment, like that was a tornado that just hit, this just destroyed everything around me. I've been a part of a couple of disaster reliefs before, of like helping out with Tuscaloosa tornado and my hometown Prattville's tornado. Not being affected by it at first, or not being affected in one of the tornadoes, it was a different picture. But now being affected, it's like I'm one of the victims here that was destroyed by the tornado, and now I'm living the moment of, I need to get everything situated and stuff. I was just looking around, trying to help everyone out that I could – knowing the past of what I've helped out with tornadoes – make sure if they needed anything. It was just a different moment of a different picture, I guess. Going back and seeing everything that I looked over for almost a year, and that apartment being destroyed or being ridden out. Just everything around me in shambles and different elements of the land in general, being ripped apart, just things I've normally been

seeing completely ripped off, and tons of emergency vehicles everywhere, wasn't a picture I was expecting to paint.

ER: Yes. If you think back to what you were doing prior to the tornado, you weren't, you didn't seem that concerned at the time about the weather. I think even at one point you were like, "Well, this is Alabama," or "This is tornadoes, yes, we have these warnings."

JH: Yes. I was just thinking beforehand, I was like, "This is just a tornado. It's not going to hit." We've had these warnings my whole life like they're nothing to be a big deal about. They're just a normal, like once a month we expect them. Then now having the effect of it actually hitting me, I'm like, "Okay. Tornadoes are actually a major [key?] and they need to be looked out for." Now, ever since the tornado, every time I hear a warning or some sort of watch, I'm always a lot more alert, looking into it a lot more, usually taking pre-precautions way earlier instead of waiting five minutes before a storm hits me, and looking out like, "Okay. This could hit me again, and I could destroy everything again." We're just back to square one of it taking everything.

ER: Thinking about that kind of information for other people, what kind of precautions are you more cognizant of taking now?

JH: I'm definitely more cautious of, whenever I hear any sort of storm or any sort of weather warning coming in. Like the week before, the day before, I'm looking into it more. I'm searching satellite radars, looking at the actual picture of what could hit. Anytime there's a chance of a thunderstorm, I'm usually looking at it a lot more closely, like, where is it supposed to hit in my area? Is it supposed to be cooling? What type of weather pattern's going into it? Just to make sure it wouldn't form again. Just checking to see if friends are also looking at it like, "Hey, have you seen a storm coming in? It's supposed to be a bad one tonight." Like, "If you need anything, let me know. If you want to hang out, let me know so we can be around when it hits." When the first one hit, right after the tornado, my roommate was looking at me funny, which was the friend I was playing the video game with before he left for Oxford. He found an apartment here after that, and the storm, because we stayed for the summer here in Jacksonville. Then before the storm hit Jacksonville, I jumped right back in the tub with his dog, just listening to more music, and he's like, "You good? Are you all right?" I was still kind of a little bit paranoid about thunderstorms and just them coming through and bad storms hitting us. I was just in the bathroom for a while there, still having the paranoid factor of it all. But definitely like right after the storm, I took a lot more pre-precautions when it came to weather hitting us here.

ER: You mentioned earlier that when you were leaving to check on your car, was there damage to your car?

JH: I was expecting a ton of damage to my car, since I was parked next to the building. I was parked one spot right next to the building. I get to my car, and there's a couple of roof tiles on it, and a fence kind of lined up against it. I just move the fence, take off the tiles, but there's a car next to me that ended up getting smashed in a little bit by the bricks being [towed in?]. So, I was one car lot away from getting most of my car damaged and having it be refurbished and all that.

ER: Yes. You said you went to a family member's house that night. The car was drivable, and you were able to navigate getting it out on the road, with any debris?

JH: Yes. I was able to navigate out [fairly?] well. I ended up going around just the campus, like taking a first self-tour, just looking around at the damage that could have been affected. There were a couple of points on that little self-tour where I couldn't go past the road because of a telephone pole down, or there's too much debris in the area. So, I'd have to turn around completely on the campus roads. I was able to navigate through Anniston fine once I hit Pelham Road, right after the McDonald's lot. Right after that, all the cars coming in and out were starting to settle, and I was able to was able to navigate to Anniston but the entire path up there from Pelham Road, most of it was closed down. Tons of roads were closed down. They weren't letting anyone in because it was a state of emergency. They were only letting people out or letting people in that had to get in to check on their family members. There wasn't too much of a breakdown, besides my little self-exploration of seeing what was going on. A lot of people were closing down roads or closing down entire lots of just buildings in general, because of all the damage around.

ER: As you're driving around, and you saw power poles down, and you said it was not only at night dark, but was the power still out?

JH: Yes. Everything was still pitch black out there.

ER: What were some of the sites that you were taking in?

JH: As I left my apartment – I lived right next to the Coliseum, so that's the first thing I looked at. I was going over there and smelling the gas and looking like, "All right. There's a gas leak over there, from what we were hearing." So, I'm just driving around the entire Coliseum. The front's been taken over. There's a car that was from the parking lot all the way up on top of the staircase. I was like, "How did a car end up above, on stairs up there, upside down?" Then I drove around and I could hear the gas leak to the left of me with people working on it. There was a ton of vehicles over there working on that. I navigated out, went on the JSU circle, the center circle, just all the buildings. At one point, the telephone pole blocked me off from that little lot where the buses are and the stadium. That's where I had to turn around. A lot of the buildings were being damaged. There was a tree in a couple of the buildings, like the Mason Building, I think. A lot of the buildings just ended up being torn apart, destroyed. As I drove by my friend's and ex-girlfriend's apartment, I looked and their building is in shambles. There's nothing left there. The Logan Hall, the Dixon, all that, were starting to fall apart. Logan didn't have a roof anymore. International House and Martin were being torn apart. I didn't get a chance to look at any of those, like Stone Center or the business building, but I know they were probably damaged as well, just looking at how campus was in general, just looking at most of it being destroyed. Then the Houston Cole library, with parts of it ripped off as well. All right. Most of the buildings are damaged, and after that, it took a while to navigate out, but yes.

ER: So, you get to your family member's house, what does the rest of you there that night, or the next couple of days, look like? What kinds of activities, or what were things that you were dealing with?

JH: The activities that night was just, I unloaded my car, got in, my mom was there, making sure I was all right, making sure everything was fine. Because I was keeping her updated as well, since my uncle works here at the University. He was also asking questions about what was going on, and I was just updating them. What I saw, the pictures I took I showed them, just updates, in general of what was going on. I unloaded most of my clothes. I ended up taking a shower. My dad drove in from hometown up to here, made sure I was all right when I got here. We ended up staying the night at my aunt's house, and then we left the next morning, just to come back to Jacksonville and clean up the damage that was done, fix up anything that needed to be fixed. We found out from our tenants, like, "Hey, we're just going to remodel our building so you have a couple of weeks to get everything out, but we're going to try to get rid of everything." It was just a lot of cleanup and a lot of people trying to fix up the entire campus in general. My dad took a driveby. I was just riding in, looking at all the damaged buildings during the daytime, where you can actually see everything, instead of the pitch black with it raining really hard. Just seeing all the damage to it the next day was another drastic change, especially my friend's apartment, which didn't look too bad, like there was a lot of shambles. But seeing buildings collapsed in like, "Okay. It destroyed a lot more than we thought." Getting to my building, seeing more, the neighboring buildings and all that were starting to crease in or starting to damage in. Seeing everything laid out all over the place was another moment that was just, "All right. Let's hit my building." Then climbing all the way up the stairs, having to move debris, cleaning everything out my apartment, seeing more roofs that are caved in in my apartment, just looking at all my roommate there, it's just a day of cleaning, getting everything out and moving it to another place, really, since it was just move out time at that point.

ER: As you're going through your apartment, what were you able to save or take? Was there anything that was destroyed or things left behind?

JH: A lot of the things in my apartment ended up being safe. Most of my things on my roommate's side, everything he had, was perfectly fine. He didn't have anything damaged. My side, all my clothes were soaking wet. They were surrounded by the cottony stuff that's in the ceiling. I can't think of what it is.

ER: Sheet rocks?

JH: Yes. There are shambles over the bed. We decided just there was no point to keep it, with it destroyed in. A lot of the furniture we ended up wiping off and trying to save. Lost a lot of the clothes. The clothes we didn't lose, we went to a laundromat and sat for hours just washing clothes, trying to get all of the filth out of it, the dirt. All of my electronics, most of them were ended up being saved. There was a desk and a couple of power cords and some chargers and an older phone that was damaged completely beyond – because it was just flooded in, the balcony, the grill ended up being destroyed. There's just a lot of damage overall. A lot of the kitchen appliances and kitchenware were ruined because of the roof caving in there. So, there was no point to get into any of that. All the food was ruined because of the electronics going out, all the

power going out. So, all the food in the fridge was gone or ruined in some way. That was mainly everything that was destroyed there. It was just the process of moving everything out and loading it to a truck and to a storage unit.

ER: Did your family already have a storage unit at that point or you went to get one?

JH: My roommate came up the day before. Or coming up that day, he went ahead and rented one for both me and him to move stuff into, and just to have for a couple weeks until we can sort everything out because of all this happening the day after. So, we put everything that we're not going to need for the little bit before I head home and before he heads home into a storage unit so when we get back to Jacksonville the next week, we can sort through it and look for what needs to go on happening. We end up putting most of all the furniture, all the electronic – like bigger electronics, in there just to sit for a while until we figure out what we need to do with it all.

ER: You said the next couple of weeks, you were starting to sort things out. So, what activities and what things did you have to resolve? You mentioned that your landlords already had a plan. What were they going to do with the apartments?

JH: They didn't know if they wanted to completely demolish the buildings or they wanted to remodel. They ended up remodeling, but they didn't know what they wanted to do at the time. They just wanted all the tenants out of there, because it was a danger zone to be stuck there for too long before they decided. So, they ended up with everyone just moving out within a week. My plan of action was, I stayed in my family's home, back home for five or six days, before I moved back into Jacksonville. Stay with my aunt a couple more days. And just sorting everything out in general, looking at what's going to go on, what's going to happen with the campus, what's going on here with school. Since we still have a couple weeks left, maybe I think about a month left, something like that, before school gets out. Everyone's freaking out about grades, what's going on here. My whole plan of action is, I'm just thinking about, "Where am I supposed to sort all this out? What about my grades? What do I need to do here?" The main plan of action was just getting back in Jacksonville, trying to get everything fixed up and repaired that were necessities for me, and helping out a couple friends that needed it. I stayed mainly with my aunt, and then back home just until we had our feet sorted – until finding a new apartment complex for the next year, during the summer, was sorted out.

ER: You're a student at the time, was your plans to go home for the summer? Or were you staying? Were you originally planning to stay on campus?

JH: My original plan was to stay on campus just because I already had a job here. So, just stay here, work for the summer, save some money up for next semester, just sit around the area, hang out with the friends that do stay in town or that lived in town, go travel to Birmingham here and there, play your sports that you need here, but just stay in Jacksonville, come home when you need it, all that sort. So, it's basically like living back at campus, but just you're working all summer instead.

ER: Then what did you end up doing?

JH: I ended up staying in Jacksonville. Not my old roommate, but my roommate at the time was my good friend – was looking for a place, and he ended up finding a place with his girlfriend, with the tenant, and they had a spot. He texted me like, “Hey, there’s a spot here. I know you work in Jacksonville, and we need to stay in Jacksonville, because I have to as well.” So, we ended up getting the apartment together. I moved in a lot of the stuff from my storage unit, my part of it, into the apartment. We put the storage unit into my roommate’s name so he can keep his stuff and when he needs to move it out. I ended up living here all summer, working at the restaurant I worked at, and then just traveling in between here and Birmingham for different sport events, and just living in Jack Hill for the summer with him.

ER: Then did you stay in that same place for, starting the fall?

JH: Yes. I still live in that place right now. Like, I still stay there, just because the tenants are awesome about knowing the storm hit. They know we’re affected, and they were, like, the price decrease. They worked with me on the deposit, getting it through because of the tornado, and the apartment’s overall a really nice place. So, I’ve just been staying there the entire time.

ER: Okay. What happened with classes?

JH: I know some classes got canceled, depending on their circumstance. A lot of the online ones stayed online, from what I’ve heard. They ended up just staying online, finishing your coursework from a different place. Some of the classes ended up getting totally canceled, where there were no more classes for the semester for them. Then some were, we’ll pick them up later in the semester. We’ll try to finish them out, take a final exam, maybe a quiz, settle out, or you can take the grade you have now and not show up. It just depends on your circumstance. All my classes, I ended up having a good enough grade in, where I didn’t need to come back for them. One of them I had a B in, and I stayed here for the summer. So, I did, I went to class there, took the exam just to bump it up, see if I can get the better grade in it.

ER: What were your greatest challenges?

JH: The greatest challenges, I guess I would say, were just overcoming the entire effect of what would happen. There wasn’t really a post-traumatic stress or any sort of like anxiety after the fact, besides the initial couple of times the storm came through of just being paranoid. The biggest, I guess, was just finding a new place to settle here and get used to coming back to campus, because I was going to stay. This is my second year here when it hit and I was planning on being here for my four years. Finish up here and just finding a place I can stay, where I have a roof over my head that won’t be destroyed, or hopefully won’t be destroyed, and nothing like that – where I can just settle and finish my schooling here. That was the big plan for that. It’s just finding a place in general. Because everyone was looking for a place, or looking for somewhere to stay, everything like that.

ER: Sounds like you were able to be resourceful and make those decisions and find a place and account for your things and take those measures.

JH: Yes. My first plan of action was just to settle everything realistically like, “This is what happened. We need to get everything settled out before we do everything really.” I didn’t really have a big factor of – I didn’t really need any counseling, no therapy. I felt fine. I just wanted to get everything settled and everything situated before any of the big factors came in. So, a big part of it was just finding a place, trying to work with my work, and just settle everything in general. Trying to be an adult, I guess, or coming to college, learning, being an adult, all that. Just trying to get everything settled first before trying to find extra measures, everything like that. Just having a realistic approach to it all. I’m still going to be here more. I need to find places where I can stay, not just about this.

ER: I sense that. I mean, even as you’ve talked about the initial event, and trying to leave, and you were checking for other people, and then even when you came back, you were still checking in to see if people were in their apartments or if anybody needed help that, it seems like you took on that leadership role, in wanting to help and serve others. I see that.

JH: Yes. When I was in high school, a big person was like, “I liked [to do?] emergency management.” I always thought it would be a good little field as well to get into. I kind of just took the measure of I need to see what these people need help with, see what they need to be around, if they need anything. Just look around and try to help out your fellow neighbors around here, because we all got hit so we need to kind of stick together and work through it. Because it’s a lot better to stick together and work through this, rather than just look alone. For me, it’s not a big deal of, it hit me, now it’s affecting me, really. It was just more of the effect of I need to see who I can help, because I know a lot of people will need help at this time. So, me out there just to make sure everyone’s all arriving and sure they need what they need helping. If they need to move out some stuff, just taking on a role of being a – not really a guardian, but just more like a helper for them. Because I know people are going to need to help at this time.

ER: Very selfless, very remarkable. You said you had worked doing relief efforts for other disasters. How did you get involved in that?

JH: I ended up because my aunt and uncle, before they became working here, they lived in Tuscaloosa, where my uncle was getting his PhD to teach here. He lived in Tuscaloosa, went to the campus there. When the Tuscaloosa tornado hit in 2011 – the F5 – they ended up going through disaster relief. With the church they were a part of, they were setting up food deposit stations, stuff to help people that were now homeless – and then have homes, have a source of food. So, we were there, setting up food plans. Then there was this one point where a bunch of the older guys, we all got together and went to neighborhoods to help move things around, move things into different places, trying to help people that couldn’t lift heavy stuff into storage units, anything like that. We were helping them move around, maybe like twenty of us guys were moving different things for people in these destroyed neighbors that were completely flattened. There was nothing remaining except maybe their washers, their dryers, electronics that they needed, their bed, everything that they wanted, that we helped move back out. Then the food shelter we helped out. Then just the overpassing, of they need canned goods, bathroom supplies, accessories, stuff like that. We would donate them as we had them. Then back home with the Prattville one. It wasn’t as bad as Tuscaloosa, but we still had an effect of helping out with canned good drives and looking for shelter for the people that didn’t have it, that homes were

also destroyed. Looking for a different solution for the kids that went to the school that got hit, seeing where they could go or what they would have to do. A lot of them transferred into the school I was at the time just to finish their schooling for the year and then settle out.

ER: Very important work. Did aspects of that helped in your recovery? That prior experience?

JH: It definitely did help, especially with the food and helping people move aspect. Knowing people are going to need bottled water, canned goods. They need to get all this out. They need to move all this. What's perishable? What's non-perishable? What they can get out of here. That element kind of came into effect, I guess, when this tornado, the day after it hit. Moving and helping people move out, getting things settled in, what could they throw out, what they needed to get rid of, elements of helping, especially with some of the drives they had here, of helping out in my own way, of donating what I could, or going to help out with a drive, of having someone manage and store things that they needed. Then just overall, supplying what help I already had experience with just putting into Jacksonville here.

ER: What will carry you forward from this experience?

JH: I guess what carried me forward is Jacksonville was a big factor of my home at the time. There's a big drive for if it's our home. I wasn't really thinking about the time like that was just a place for college. But after seeing it and living, I was like, "This kind of place is home." I don't go home a lot. I go home maybe once or twice a year, for a week. So, I'm here 95 percent of the time, here, and I just kind of took it as a home. After that, I realized, like, "This is where I live, this is where I stay. I know everything about the area, or I'm learning a lot more about the area." So, I took a big [effect?] in the home. So, I kind of want to defend it, protect it, do what I can with it, make sure everything's fine with it. A big factor is just to look out for the community in the area here – make sure everything's going good with it.

ER: Sounds like a really positive look, kind of part to be – a greater sense of this community that you interact with.

JH: Yes. At first it was just a big, "Oh, I'm here for college, and then I'll be done with it and never look back." But over the years, it's definitely grown on me. Especially after the tornado, like "This is home." This is where all my stuff is. This is where all my friends are. I talk to maybe one of my friends back home in high school, but I have countless friends here I hang out with, and they all come here, and this is where we spend all our time hanging out. It's just kind of grown as a community. I go to local shops here, go to eat, get my haircuts even, they talk about the community here and just staying together as a community and finding a home, I guess, is a good sense, especially not being home in general. It gives me an element to stay here for a while and get to enjoy what I have here.

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

JH: Advice I would give is to definitely look out before. If there's a tornado watch or a warning, to definitely look into a little bit more and just not off-put it like I did. Don't stay on the third floor of a building. You need to get down. I was on the third floor because I expected nothing to

hit. But after it hit, I realized – I already knew the first floor is the best place to go, but I didn't think it would hit. Then after the fact, now, every time a storm comes in, I try to get to the lowest point or go to a safe haven if it's really bad. Look out for friends and family as well. Make sure everyone's all right. Just try to settle in where you're at or find where you need to go. Police officers, Fire Departments can help you move if you need to. Just to be on a lookout overall, make sure everything's alright and look out for each other here.

ER: Great advice to give. Are there any other things that you think we should know?

JH: I can't think of anything else off the top of my head right now.

ER: We greatly appreciate your time and sharing your story and being able to share with others who have gone through this experience, or people that haven't gone through it to get better insight of what recovery and resilience looks like. So, we appreciate you sharing your story with us today.

JH: Thank you.

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Reviewed by Nicole Zador, 3/12/2025