

Interview with Harris McDaniel

Narrator: Harris McDaneil

Interviewer: Erin Rider

Location: Jacksonville, Alabama

Date: July 16, 2019

Project Name: Jacksonville Alabama Tornado Oral History Collection

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

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

Principal Investigator: Tanveer Islam

Transcript Team: National Capitol Contracting

Abstract:

On July 16, 2019, Erin Rider from Jacksonville State University interviewed Harrison McDaniel for an oral history project documenting experiences of the Jacksonville, Alabama, tornado that occurred on March 19, 2018. McDaniel, a lifelong Alabama resident, was working at a Lowe's store in Oxford when the tornado hit. His roommate repeatedly called to inform him about the tornado and his missing cat. McDaniel immediately left work and drove through the storm's aftermath to his apartment, encountering widespread power outages, fallen trees, and blocked roads. Upon arrival, he found a group of people trapped outside their apartments and managed to access his own, rescuing his cat and gathering some belongings before a second tornado struck. The interview covers McDaniel's experiences during the tornado, including his frantic efforts to reach his apartment and the damage it sustained. He describes his apartment being flooded with broken windows and scattered debris, but he was able to rescue his cat and a few personal items. McDaniel also discusses the aftermath, including the financial and emotional challenges he faced. He lost most of his possessions, struggled to find temporary housing, and experienced job-related issues. Despite receiving some assistance, McDaniel ultimately quit his job and returned home to regroup. The tornado, along with subsequent personal hardships, profoundly impacted McDaniel's outlook. He reflects on his process of recovery, emphasizing resilience and self-reliance, even as he dealt with emotional struggles. The tornado became a catalyst for change in his life, leading him to focus on improving his financial stability, education, and personal growth.

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 19, 2018. Today is July 16, 2019. We are hearing from Harrison McDaniel, who will share his experience of the tornado and recovery. Our interview is taking place at the Houston Cole Library. How are you affected by the tornado?

Harrison McDaniel: So, just kind of a narrative. So, on the afternoon of March 18th, I was getting into my car to go to work. I kind of saw storm clouds and that sort of thing. But I'd seen it before. I've lived in Alabama my whole life, so I've seen that. I wasn't worried about it. I got to my car and went to work. A couple of hours later, a guy named Spencer, who was one of my roommates, who was her boyfriend at the time, started calling me. I don't take phone calls at work that are personal. But he called me, like, nine times. So, I was like, well, number one, he never calls me. He doesn't even text me. He just has my number in case something goes wrong. It was nine phone calls. So, I picked it up. It was weird. The first thing out of his mouth was that there was a tornado. But that was followed really closely by, we can't find your cat. I was in Oxford, working at Lowe's. When I heard tornado, I'm like, well, we'll just have to reset and figure it out in the morning. Then when he said he couldn't find my cat, I jumped in my car. I actually ran out of Lowe's. I didn't clock out or anything. I just told my manager, "Hey, I'm out of here. Tornado. Got to get my cat." So, I jumped in my car, drove down 431. By the time I got to Jacksonville, it was pouring rain. You couldn't really see in front of you. From what I remember coming down Pelham, it was almost like the left side of the road had streetlamps. Then most of the electricity was out on that side, kind of towards, I guess, where Cook Out is. Then the right side of the road had no streetlamps, no power at all at that point. So, I was going really, really slow down that road. I came up Pelham, kind of to the top of the hill there in front of Bibb Graves because I lived at the Reserve. So, I was going to go left. I guess that's Nisbet. I was going to go down Nisbet to get to the Reserve. That big oak tree that was on the corner at the top of the hill by Bibb Graves had obviously fallen down. It's not there anymore. So, I had to kind of maze my way through the campus. I remember turning left, driving over downed power lines. I don't remember exactly how I got there. I know I ended up on the road where it's got a [stadium in Martin?] on that main road. You couldn't get through to the Reserve because there was debris in that road. So, I parked at the Dollar General while it was still there. I ran in there and kind of kicked the door in, which I found out later was actually unlocked. Our front doors were electronic, the locks were. So, since all the power went out, you couldn't get in. We were a first-floor apartment. So, actually, when I got in there, there were about fifty other people in there. Because they had been caught outside when the tornado hit. They couldn't get into their apartments. So, we all just let them in there. Kind of the gist of it is, I got in there, I just told everybody, "Shut up." I yelled my cat's name. She came running out. She was under a cabinet. So, I put her in the carrier. I grabbed my guitar, kind of some clothes, a few things. I put them on my back. I saw the rain had let up. Then it was calm. I told everybody, like, "Hey, if you're going to get out of here, now will be the time." So, we all took off running. I remember carrying a guy named Austin, who was living there at the time. He had broken his foot. So, we were having to get him to his car to get him out of there. But anyways, then I got back to my car at the Dollar General, kind of threw everything in there and took off. I found out later that there were actually two tornadoes that were kind of right behind each other. I had gotten in, gotten all my stuff and gotten help right before the second one came through. That's the one that actually took down the Dollar General and supposedly did most of the damage to the

Reserve, from what I heard. Because at the time, it was already flooding, and all the power was out. But it was pretty much okay. The glass was broken into my apartment. So, that night, I just drove out of Jacksonville. It's kind of funny, if I'd have waited at Lowe's a couple more minutes, they wouldn't let me leave. Yes, they took everybody into the back and had them in storm-ready position, I guess. So, after that, it's kind of blurry, I guess. I just went into like, I guess you call it "figure it out mode." I called my parents. I was like, "Hey, there's been a tornado. I'm good. But I don't know what to do. I'm thinking about driving home," which is Prattville, two and a half hours. We ended up getting a hotel there. I just got some things for the night and went to sleep that night. I woke up in the morning. I wanted to get the things out of my apartment. They weren't letting anybody on the property. So, aside from all the traffic, people spectate and other people trying to get their things. We ended up getting kind of gridlocked there for about an hour. The rest of that week was pretty much just moving between hotels. Because I couldn't really stay in one. Because they had had it booked. So, they would help me and they would get me another hotel room.

ER: Where were you staying, what hotel?

HM: Oxford. At first, I was staying in Home2. I stayed there for two nights. Then they shuffled me over to – I can't remember the name of the hotel. But there's another one back over there. For that week, I basically was trying to go to work while trying to figure out what was going on. Because communications were still pretty much down. I had to go to Old Navy and buy a bunch of new clothes. Because I grabbed clothes. But as it turns out, most of what I grabbed – I grabbed two pairs of pajama pants. I grabbed some underwear and a T-shirt. So, I really didn't have stuff to wear to work and that kind of thing. All I had was what I'd been wearing that night, which was a T-shirt, jacket, boots and jeans. But all that was soaked. So, I had to kind of figure out how to let that dry and how to get to work and that kind of stuff. So, that was kind of that week. There's a lot more that happened after that. But that's all spaced over about two months.

ER: Okay. We'll get to that. I want to go back a few things. So, you're in your apartment at first, and did you notice damage at that point?

HM: Yes. I wasn't really focused on it. Obviously, I kicked a door. So, that was damaged. But I thought it was locked. We always kept it locked. I should have knocked. I just didn't expect anybody to –

ER: With all those people there.

HM: Yes. I didn't know they were there. So, I kicked the door. I'm standing there like a boogeyman.

ER: Just to rescue the cat.

HM: Yes. Just to rescue a cat. I was in my room. It had blown my curtains off the wall. It had blown the glass in. My laptop was soaked. We found out later it was dead. I had an Xbox. It was dead. My bathroom was flooding. Apparently, a water pipe or something had burst. Since

we're first floor, it was pouring down. So, yes, all my rug was soaked in there. The bed was soaked. It was just debris everywhere, basically. Most of the damage was outside. It was on the lawn. I saw power lines that were down. I saw pieces of roof and that kind of thing all over the place. We saw a mattress outside, it'd gotten sucked out. We saw people's cars that had just been peppered. I'm glad mine wasn't there. It's kind of morbid, but I was glad it wasn't. Yes, it was kind of messed up.

ER: Yes. What's going through your thoughts seeing all that?

HM: I wasn't thinking. I guess I'm good in a tight pinch. I was just thinking, get the cat, grab what you can, and go.

ER: Yes. How was your cat?

HM: She was fine. She actually died recently of other complications.

ER: Sorry about that.

HM: Yes. It happens. She was fine after that. She was freaked out. But she was a lot more calm once I got her in her cage, especially once we got to the hotel and I let her get out. I kind of cleaned her off because she had stuff all over. Actually, that jogged my memory. I went outside at first, when they said, "Hey, we couldn't find your cat." I went outside first and started running around with a flashlight.

ER: Yes. Thought she got out somehow.

HM: Yes, the worse. So, I was thinking she was dead in the trees somewhere. I went back in. I just yelled "Shiela," one time, just to see if she'd come out. She was hiding in a cupboard and ran out. But that's all I was thinking was I need to get what I can. I need to get out of here. In more words, this is kind of messed up.

ER: Yes. When you said you were trying to get back the next day, were you able to go get into your apartment that second day?

HM: No.

ER: Okay.

HM: We tried to sneak in. The trail runs right there beside the Reserve. There's that cut in. So, when they wouldn't let us into the front gate, I went through that trail with my boots and my wet jeans and climbing over trees and stuff to get in there. They caught us there, turned around, and actually drove down Pelham, a little bit further. There's a field right behind it. So, I walked through the field and climbed a fence. They caught me again and said, if they caught me one more time, they were going to arrest me. I had some choice words with them. But I ended up just going back to the hotel that day and going to work.

ER: Okay. So, you're staying at the hotel for that first week, then kind of what happens?

HM: So, I was working at Lowe's. I don't want to say anything bad about Lowe's. They were pretty good to me. But they always kind of bragged about their relief fund that they had for all employees. I applied for that to basically assist me with paying for the hotel. They never got back to me on it, actually. Even months later, they didn't have a response for it, which really kind of sucked. I ended up paying for the hotel. So, I ended up quitting Lowe's. They were going to fire me anyways. I kept having things that I needed to do. I just basically lost all my possessions. So, I was trying to get that going. They kept wondering, "Well, hey, why are you calling out of work so much?" I was just, "There's been a tornado, don't know if you heard. But I'm busy with that right now." So, it was either they were going to fire me, or I just quit. So, I just went ahead and quit. So, I was without a job. After the hotel, I went home. I grabbed everything I could. I just went home for a while, for I'd say, about a month. Then I came up here and stayed in Dixon for a little while, for maybe a couple of days. Because my cousin was actually moving out of his apartment. So, I moved. That's where I live now, at Park Place.

ER: So, was that around a little over a month afterwards that you got to move in?

HM: A month or two, maybe.

ER: Okay. Thinking about just that first week of paying for the hotel, did you have money kind of set aside? Or how did you kind of have to pay for that?

HM: At the time – If the tornado happened now, yes.

ER: Okay.

HM: But no. At the time, I just kind of had a credit card and just put it on there. The hotel managers were really understanding. I think they had to deal with a lot of us. They ended up trying to give us discounts where they could. But it was still expensive.

ER: Yes. It was still pricey per night, I'm sure.

HM: Yes. It's really frustrating. Especially, my friend Thomas, actually, that week was getting reimbursed by – he was working for Ruby Tuesday's at the time. He's getting reimbursed. I think they reimbursed him for a month of staying. He never had to go home. But Lowe's, I applied several times. They just – I'm not trying to say that Lowe's – I like Lowe's.

ER: Yes, that's disappointing.

HM: But it was a letdown, yes. Especially, when it's not a questionable disaster. We were declared by FEMA a disaster area. So, it seems like you probably have the best chance with that.

ER: Yes. Briefly, you said you weren't as prepared. Are you prepared now? Is that where you kind of alluding to?

HM: I'm more prepared. I'm not where I need to be.

ER: Okay.

HM: It's really funny for a finance student – I'm a finance major. I'm really horrible with my own money. I'm good with other people's, but just not with mine. But I'm trying to be better. I'm trying to save more. I think that definitely had a lot of impact on that.

ER: It's hard probably being student, though, and trying to get work in and just get yourself –

HM: Well, yes. There was a while there I was working 60 hours a week and doing full-time student.

ER: Wow, that's a lot.

HM: Now, I'm down to just 40 and 12 hours, credit hours.

ER: Yes. That's incredible to be able to do that. That's beyond the full-time load.

HM: You give up a lot of sleep. You kind of have to do it, just keep moving. My family's never really been the kind to have it easy. We always just kind of say, "Oh well, and keep going." So, that's where I'm from, what we do. We just keep going.

ER: Yes. I can tell that from your character of just like, I have to get through this, sort of process this and figure out my strategy.

HM: Yes. Well, you learn how to dig out of a hole pretty quick.

ER: Yes. So, going back to you had stuff lost in your apartment. Were you ever able to go back to your apartment?

HM: Yes, they let us in. I got a lot of clothes out of there. Actually, I got everything out. The problem was that most of the expensive stuff was broken. Oddly enough – I have two guitars. I have an acoustic and electric. So, I grabbed the electric. That's the one I wasn't leaving without. But oddly, my amp still works. I have a big one. I couldn't carry it out. My acoustic was fine. But then the TV was broken. The Xbox was broken. My laptop's broken. All my books for that semester, which, of course, we ended up not really needing them, but they were all just destroyed. Basically, all we could save was my clothes and my bed sheets. Because we could wash that. The rest of it was just kind of, total loss.

ER: You said you kind of saw that night you saw your apartment, kind of from the first hit of the tornado, so when you were able to go back in, did you notice more damage that you think was caused by the second tornado?

HM: I think so. Because when I got in there the first time, there was a lot of leaves and a lot of branches on the ground. There was glass. Obviously, my curtains had been blown down, and it

was wet, of course. But then when I got in there the second time, I noticed bits and pieces of drywall. Things that weren't necessarily other people's belongings, but that didn't belong there. The weirdest thing I found was actually a single shoe.

ER: Interesting.

HM: I found just a shoe that, I guess, it got blown out of an apartment and into mine. That was the weirdest thing. The rest of it was just pieces of roof were in there, a lot of drywall – trying to think. But yes, there's more the second go around, getting back in there.

ER: So, then with the expensive equipment, and that was stuff that you'd eventually have to replace or think about replacing.

HM: Yes. I ended up replacing that. I did get assistance from FEMA –

ER: Okay.

HM: – and from the school. I was really grateful for the assistance. But it ended up, I bought a laptop with it and that was kind of as far as that went. I was happy to have the laptop, just to not have to pay for that for school. But I've ended up kind of accruing the other things as time moved on.

ER: You said, at one point, you went home for a month. After the hotel, you went home for a month. So, is that at the time when you ended up quitting from Lowe's?

HM: Yes. Like I said, I kind of got tired of them. I understand that they're running a business. But at the same time, you got other people that can do the job that aren't involved. It wasn't like, oh, I just don't feel like coming to work. It was literally like, hey, they gave me an hour to get into my apartment and get my things. I'm not coming to work.

ER: Yes, understandable.

HM: I'm going to get my things. I quit Lowe's. I went home for a month. I tried to go on leave, actually. So, I applied to take just a personal leave from Lowe's, and didn't hear anything back from that. So, I quit.

ER: Then when you were home for a month – because would this been around March to April?

HM: Right. Yes, kind of April – I really want to say, part of early May –

ER: Okay.

HM: – as well. It was a while.

ER: Then you were in classes. So, what did you end up determining for your classes?

HM: I've become a lot better student. I wasn't doing great in classes. So, I took the finals and ended up doing not as well as I wanted to, but pretty good with them. Yes, that's about all there is to have.

ER: So, you did finish out that semester?

HM: Yes.

ER: Okay.

HM: I never dropped the courses.

ER: Okay. Were you in face-to-face classes or online at the time?

HM: Face-to-face. I had one online class.

ER: Okay.

HM: But she was actually not my favorite teacher. I really did not enjoy it. But she was, for once, reasonable and nice and said, you know, "Hey, just take the final if you want to. That's what the university said. So, that's what we'll do."

ER: Then for your face-to-face classes, were you trying to finish those up? Were you doing that from being back home?

HM: No. I would come up here, and I would stay with someone. There are a couple of friends that had apartments that I could stay in. So, for, I think a week I ended up – or no, it's about three days, I ended up staying with my friend, Thomas, just to finish the classes up.

ER: Okay. Yes, pretty impressive that you were able to kind of finish the classes and be kind of commuting in that sense and changing job.

HM: Well, I think if you kind of figure out what your needs are, failing a class isn't an option for me and that sort of thing. So, if you figure out what your needs are, you can kind of give up other stuff, sleep, and that kind of thing.

ER: Yes, quite the adjustment. Then at that time, you said – when did you start kind of making plans? How did you determine that you were going to get into that, your next place to live?

HM: I didn't. I didn't make any plans.

ER: Okay.

HM: I just kind of winged it. It was all based on necessity. It was based on what do I need right now and dealing with things as they arose. So, right now, I need a place to sleep, and I need to go to work, so hotel. Then, well, hey, you can come in for an hour or two and get your things

out. So, I need to go do that. So, I need to give up work. I need to get that done. I need money. I can't keep paying for a hotel like this. It'll kill my credit. So, if y'all aren't going to help me, then I need to go home, just kind of dealing with things that way. Then I need to find an apartment, so I can go back next semester and starting applying and all that kind of process. That was annoying. I was driving back and forth to get applications, turn them in, and that kind of thing. Then it just happened. My cousin was like, "Hey, I'm a senior. I'm graduating. We still have six months on our lease. You can sign over our lease and take the apartment and then just stay in it." So, it just came up. That's what I did.

ER: So, what month did you end up moving into that apartment?

HM: I've been – end of May, early June.

ER: Okay. Then at what point did you get another job?

HM: I'm trying to think. It would have been end of May, early June, right about the time I got back in. My friend, Thomas, actually, oddly enough, we don't hang out. We both come from Prattville. We actually live right behind each other. But he's a music major. I'm a business major. So even though now he lives behind me as well, we still don't hang out. But he helped me get a job at Ruby Tuesday's. I went from there to working to Olive Garden, first [stint?]. Now, I'm at Allstate.

ER: Okay.

HM: I love it.

R: Oh, good. So, did getting the job and then the place kind of ease a little bit of the financial burden at that point?

HM: Not really.

ER: Okay.

HM: You'd think it would. But to get the new place, I had to put down a \$500 security deposit, which is standard. Then I had the \$50 application fee, which is standard. I was ready for that. Then I went from living in a place that was \$365 a month. That was with a cat. That was power paid for, water paid for, Wi-Fi paid for, and then rent. To living in a place that was \$600 for rent. It was \$50 for a cat, so \$650 a month. Then I had to pay for power – it wasn't much, it's about \$100 a month. Then I had to pay for Wi-Fi, which was \$80 a month. So, I went from paying \$365 a month, to almost \$800 a month. I'm still paying for that.

ER: Okay.

HM: Not really. I went from making just \$10 hourly, getting about 30 hours a week, to working at – I hate to say it, because they were so nice to me, but a failing restaurant where you might make \$5 in a shift.

ER: Oh, wow.

HM: So, it was really tight for a long time. Then I got better at Olive Garden. Because a lot of people eat there. You can make good money. It's even better now. Because I'm pulling 40 hours a week with an hourly wage.

ER: Okay. So, at what point did you feel like it kind of felt like a little bit back on your feet financially?

HM: Definitely working at Olive Garden.

ER: Okay.

HM: Because I could kind of begin to – yes, not just have money to pay the bills, but I could start to have money to save, to put away. Where, if I wanted to go to the bar one night, I didn't like – I still have gotten weird about every time I spend money, I feel super guilty. But I could do it. That was big. Because used to, I would go to the bar and feel guilty. Then not have money for rent at the end of the month. So, I thought I was grown. Then the tornado happened. Then I realized, yes, I'm not really that great of an adult.

ER: It's a challenge. I think that'd be hard for a lot of people. When did you kind of get on with Olive Garden? Do you remember which month that was?

HM: No.

ER: Okay.

HM: I want to say, would have been September or October. It should have been about four or five months later.

ER: I just can't think what your rent used to be, and what it is, I mean, it's double.

HM: My parents kind of helped subsidize me a little bit. Then a lot of it was just pulling as many hours as I could. I started doing odd jobs. Like I said earlier, you realize what your needs are, and you give up accordingly. So, I started cutting grass, painting houses, anything I could do. My family has a farm. I almost went and worked on it for a while. That's all there is to it. You just do what you have to do.

ER: I can tell you're resourceful, trying to find, to make that all work.

HM: I try to be. I do my best.

ER: Thinking about all those, what were your greatest challenges?

HM: Money was a big one. I don't really want to get too deep off into it. But I definitely kind of had a lot of emotional issues because of it. Especially when my cat died. Yes, it's just weird

with the cat. I expected her to be dead in March. I expected her to be off in a tree somewhere. She was fine. She'd never had a health problem before that. The short version of the story is she kind of got – I don't know what happened to her, but she got beat up. Somebody beat her up at my property. I was getting dressed to go to work, came down, and she was in a bad state. So, we don't know if it was a dog or someone. But I took her to the vet. They were like, "There's not a lot we can do for her." She had to get put down. So, it's weird. Kind of that feeling of like I ran through a tornado to get this cat. Then she just didn't get to finish it out.

ER: Yes. I'm sorry to hear that. But that was difficult.

HM: She was helpful with it. Because for a long – and still, now, I love the rain. I love rainy weather. I'd actually like to live in Oregon or Washington.

ER: That's right. Well, I'm from Washington.

HM: Oh, really?

ER: It rains all the time.

HM: It's beautiful up there. But I love rain. I like a little bit of snow. I couldn't do four months of it, five months of it. But a month or two, sure, sign me up. But definitely, every time I hear thunder still or lightning or it gets really dark out of nowhere, I get antsy. She used to – would either, if it was really loud, she'd go onto the couch. But most of the time, she would just come curl up with me, and we get under a blanket. So, that was helpful to have her. So, it kind of hurt not having her there. I won't go all the way into it. But I ended up getting in some trouble and wrecking my – I had a car that I loved. It was a Challenger. I'm a muscle car and a motorcycle guy. I got kind of a mommy van because it's cheap. But I ended up, the day she died, I wrecked my Challenger. I always joked that if I wrecked it, I'd want to die in it. So, I wouldn't have to see it wrecked. But you move on. So, actually, the worst of it, the worst of the tornado probably happened a few months later in October. Financially, it was hard. But I think a lot of the problem was emotionally. Because I didn't know that I was hurting. I was just like, let's deal with it and keep moving. But financially, I felt like it was actually easier to deal with as hard as it was. Because if I need money, I can just go cut a yard. I can find money. But it's just, yes, I didn't really know I needed to talk to somebody, I think. I didn't know that I was struggling as much as I was. I knew about the tornado or the thunder and lightning thing. I knew it was weird that I got super antsy and nervous. But yes, I figured that's going to happen. But I guess I didn't realize I was as depressed as I was, or whatever it may be.

ER: Yes. Those were major tragic moments. Then a series of things that happen, that is normal to have that feeling of being depressed and overwhelmed.

HM: I think I didn't really realize that it was happening until the wreck and the cat and everything. Because I've always been the guy that – I've always kind of been the rock. "Harrison doesn't have emotional problems. You can go to Harrison with any problem. He'll help you figure it out." I don't get tired, that kind of thing. I just do what I have to do and do

what I need to do and just keep moving. Mom always likes to say, “Just do your job. Just do what you got to do.”

ER: Yes.

HM: So, I was always that kid. I was playing football, whatever it was. Even physically, I don’t hurt like other people do. This is a weird thing. But my mom always talked about when I was playing football that she thought there was something wrong with me, with my nerves. Because I would break bones and things. I would never go down. I didn’t get checked out. It’s just like, there’s a game on. We have got to keep playing. We have to keep playing.

ER: Yes. Stay driven and focused.

HM: Yes. We got to keep pushing and never get it checked out later. Because, well, they’re going to sit me up next week, and I’ve got to go, we’ve got a good play. I guess I never really realized that I needed help, because I never took it before. I’ve always just done the thing.

ER: Did you find ways to cope at some point during that?

HM: Yes, a bit. Are you talking about right after the tornado, or after kind of the breaking point?

ER: Breaking point.

HM: I play golf a lot more. Because a lot of that was just stuff that had been building up. I think the tornado was a big catalyst. Yes, I’ve been drinking more and more. I started smoking. I came here to play football on the team. I ended up getting in a car wreck, actually, with a log truck. It gave me a concussion. At that point I had eight, that was the eighth one. So, they told me I should stop playing football, which was my life. So, it was all that. Then losing the scholarship, I had a full ride scholarship, lost that, had to go to work, and just dealing with stuff. I just never sat down, I guess, to say, “Hey, am I okay?” Because I just felt like I couldn’t. So, after that, quit drinking, quit smoking. I play a lot more golf, start going to church again. I got busy. I like to clean. I like going to work. I like making decent grades. So, no, I guess I didn’t really figure out coping mechanisms. I just, true to form, just did what I had to do.

ER: But I think all those things turned out – those were really positive. I mean, think that’s really hard for a lot of people to do, and you go into the things that allow you to kind of grow.

HM: Yes.

ER: I mean, great hobbies and better life changes.

HM: Yes. Just right after the wreck, I figured my head was not working. So, just pick up and keep going.

ER: Yes.

HM: You've never not done it. You're not dead, keep going.

ER: Yes. Well, I think a lot of people don't have that level of strength and resilience. I think it's pretty impressive to hear. You really just kind of pushed on.

HM: I think it's just a lot of stupidity and stubbornness. That's all it is.

ER: I give you a little more credit than it has been. Was there anything prior to the tornado that helped you prepare for it?

HM: A bit. Not really. So, the big Enterprise High School tornado that came through in '07 I think, my aunt was a teacher in the high school. Her students were some of the ones that died in that. My granddad got trapped in his house. We had to go cut him out of his house. So, we had to deal with that one. Then there was a tornado in Prattville that wiped out half the town that we tried to help with that one. Actually, I didn't write it down, but my sister went to Alabama right around the time that tornado happened. Luckily, she wasn't in, and it didn't affect her. But I had to get up there and kind of see it. I witnessed it. So, I had to witness kind of the three big Alabama storms.

ER: That's crazy to think that. Those are the big ones.

HM: I think it's why I wasn't worried, going to work. Because I've seen big storms, and it doesn't happen to me. Then, weirdly enough, Wetumpka is our crosstown rival, and Prattville, they just got hit last year by a big storm. They had a lot of damage down there. So, yes, it's just one of those things. You just got to see it. You're like, "Oh, that happened on TV." Since it happened on TV, it doesn't happen to me.

ER: Yes. It's easy to be removed from it.

HM: Right, yes. You hear the sirens, you get in your car to go to work, and you're like, "It'll be fine."

ER: Yes.

HM: They'll make a big deal about it. I'll come home and just go to sleep tonight. It just didn't happen that way.

ER: Yes. When we think about resilience, we kind of think about this capacity to cope with or adapt to the recovery challenges brought by the tornado. So, I'm thinking about what helps you cope with the challenges from the tornado?

HM: Like I said, after the wreck, I started playing golf more. I always liked being on the golf course with my grandfather, before he died, he's a big golfer. So, I started golfing. I started going back to church. You said you're trying to give me more credit, but I think it does come down to just maybe not so much stupidity, but a lot of stubbornness. Just a lot of – honestly

saying, “whatever.” Just kind of pick up and keep going. Because I think the logic is, what else am I going to do? I can sit here and do nothing, and nothing’s going to get better. Or, and I did this, but I didn’t think I was doing it. Or I could just go backwards and just do what’s comfortable. And things will get worse. I didn’t realize they were getting worse, but they did. I think I’m moving in the right direction now. I’m trying to.

ER: It sounds like you are.

HM: Doing my best guess. I guess it’s all you can do. But yes, I think as far as coping with it, my parents helped me out a lot. But especially just kind of the family motto, just keep going, just be stubborn.

ER: Yes. It sounds like you have a good line of some family support and kind of –

HM: Yes.

ER: – to get through it.

HM: Yes. They bend over backwards for me, more than I really realized at the time.

ER: Yes.

HM: So, they were a big, big part of it.

ER: Thinking about what you carry forward from this experience, is there any advice that you would give to others about how to cope or prepare for a tornado-type of event?

HM: A little hypocritical, because I have a go bag, but I don’t keep up with it like I should. Because I think I’m removed from it again. Because it’s happened now. Lightning doesn’t strike twice, but it can. But definitely, if I had a go bag ready where I could have just grabbed it and it had a proper change of clothes, not just my crappy tie-dye T-shirt and some pajama pants, that would have been great. Definitely trying to focus on your finances, it’s a big one. Now that I’m a little more prepared for bad things to happen, it’s not as stressful thinking about it. It would hurt. It would all be gone if it happened again. But it’s nice to know that I’ve got it there.

ER: Does that mean, kind of putting things that money into savings account, that type of –

HM: That could be good. A lot of my savings is just in my checking account.

ER: Okay.

HM: I do play around in the stock market a bit. Just because that’s fun to me. I’ve always liked it. I wanted to be an astronaut before college. Then I was 6’2”. They don’t send 6’2” people to space. It sucks. So, randomly, my next interest was the stock market. So, it’s what I’m here for. So, I do that. But that’s not a primary source of savings. It’s more just kind of just play around. When I’ve got a couple dollars, I’ll throw it in at something but, see what sticks. See, I mean, as

far as preparing, definitely have some sort of money, not necessarily set aside, but just kind of have money, which isn't possible for everybody. But definitely the big one is kind of know a plan. If something were to happen, what do I need to grab? How do I need to get out of here? Where are the exits? Then having a go bag, as they call it, just something with some clothes. It's a good idea to carry a phone charger. Because I didn't realize I didn't grab my phone charger that night. So, I had to go back to Walmart and get a phone charger. It's just that kind of stuff.

ER: Right.

HM: As far as carrying forward, the only thing my family has ever done and ever said is, "You can't stay here. It's not smart to go backwards. You can't stay here. So, just get up and keep going. No one is going to feel sorry for you." This may sound cynical. But I tend to believe that. I don't think anybody really feels sorry for you ever. They may not like to see you hurt, but I don't think that there's anybody that isn't family that would really bend over for you and try to help you. So, you've just got to be self-reliant. You've got to be a little stubborn. Sometimes being a little dumb helps.

ER: Yes. I was going to say you have to have that – take control of your circumstances the best you could.

HM: Yes. It's weird to explain. But you don't think too much. I'm not a dumb guy. I've been told I'm pretty smart.

ER: Yes, I can tell.

HM: But sometimes, you have to be a little stupid and just kind of don't think. Just go. Just pick up what you can and keep going and try to figure it out. Because nobody's really going to feel sorry for you. You're going to have to do it. You can't just sit there and wait for someone to help you.

ER: Yes.

HM: You got to keep going.

ER: Yes. That makes sense how you say it.

HM: Yes, trying too, anyway. I've never really put it into words.

ER: Yes. Is there anything else you'd like to share kind of about your experience, or anything that didn't come up?

HM: Randomly, the tornado was probably a very positive thing.

ER: Okay.

HM: As much as it kind of threw my life in a blender, so to say. It actually, several months later, caused me to kind of have a Jesus moment. Kind of try to start moving forward a bit with my life. I thought I was pretty good student. I made As, Bs, and Cs. Now, I'm trying to knock out all As. I made the Dean's list for the first time this last semester.

ER: Congratulations.

HM: Thank you. I've started trying to really focus on getting my life planned out, mapped out, that kind of thing. Just trying to be better every day, I guess. But yes, the only other thing I'll add is that sometimes being stubborn and moving forward, even when bad things happen, you can learn something from it. It can be a positive experience. You just kind of have to wrap your mind around it.

ER: Yes. [inaudible].

HM: Yes. Take some time and have some hindsight with it. The worst thing that ever happened to you could randomly pop up and be a little positive.

ER: Yes.

HM: So, my dad is the one that actually told me that. I sat down and thought about it for about a month. I was like, "Well, the old man's right."

ER: You've got some life experience and some wisdom and some positive changes that you've made from it.

HM: Yes. I've done my best, absolutely. But yes, I just never really listened to anybody else. Then after the tornado, I kind of had to. I learned some things. But I think it's about all that I've got with it.

ER: Well, thank you for sharing your experience with the tornado and your story of resilience. It's really helpful for us to know. We thank you for sharing your story.

HM: Yes. No, thanks for the opportunity. I enjoyed it.

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Reviewed by Nicole Zador, 3/11/2025