

Interview with Katelyn Schneider

Narrator: Katelyn Schneider

Interviewer: Erin Rider

Location: Jacksonville, Alabama

Date: July 16, 2019

Project Name: Jacksonville Alabama Tornado Oral History Collection

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

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

Principal Investigator: Tanveer Islam

Transcript Team: National Capitol Contracting

Abstract:

On July 16, 2019, Erin Rider interviewed Katelyn Schneider for a Jacksonville State University oral history project documenting experiences of the March 19, 2018, tornado in Jacksonville, Alabama. Schneider begins by recounting the events of the day, detailing how her car broke down after a long workday and the challenges she faced before the tornado hit. She describes picking up her friend from work at Subway and making the decision to return to her apartment complex, the Reserve, to rescue her dog despite warnings to take shelter at the university police department. Schneider vividly recalls the moments before the tornado, observing power outages and forming clouds as she rushed to secure her belongings and dog. The interview captures Schneider's experience of the storm, her narrow escape, and the aftermath. She discusses the damage to her apartment complex and how she was temporarily displaced, staying in a hotel with her father, who rushed to help her after hearing about the tornado. She explains how the disaster forced her to leave her job, sprain her ankle, and ultimately relocate to her sister's home in Georgia while seeking a new place to live. Schneider also reflects on the emotional impact of the event, describing lingering anxiety triggered by bad weather and how the experience strengthened her relationships with her family and best friend. The interview explores her thoughts on disaster resilience, emphasizing the importance of preparedness, having a support network, and maintaining a positive outlook amidst challenging circumstances.

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, and we are hearing from Katelyn Schneider, who will share her experience of the tornado and recovery. Our interview is taking place at the Houston Cole Library. How are you affected by the tornado?

Katelyn Schneider: I was pretty largely affected, I would say. The day of the tornado, I actually had a rather long work day anyway. Then on my way home from work, my car broke down. So I was kind of stranded at a gas station for a few hours. I got AAA on the line, got all that sorted out, but my friend's mom had to drive from Roanoke, Alabama, to pick me up and drop me off. So I drove her back in my best friend's car. And when I got back, I got – I lived at the Reserve. I got back to the Reserve, I walked my dog, and my best friend, who was spending the night with me, she called me and said, "Hey," – she worked at Subway – she said, "Hey, we're closing early, can you come get me?" I was home for, like, maybe ten minutes. Then I went to go pick her up and as soon as I came into Subway, the manager called the phone and said, "Drop everything that you're doing now and get out." So I grabbed her and then her co-worker. I dropped her co-worker off at her apartment, which was next to the UPD. Madeline and I went into the UPD because that's where we were going to hide out. But I just couldn't leave my dog. He's part of my family. So we left the UPD even though the officer said that it wouldn't be the best idea. As we were driving back, I remember looking down, I think it's Nisbet Road, and watching all of the lights shut off. I could see the cloud, kind of, forming. But we went in, I grabbed my wallet and her wallet, because we had both forgotten them. Then got the dog. Thankfully he was well behaved, because I guess he knew something was going on. We got back to the UPD, and pretty much the moment that we got in, we could hear the wind hit the building. So it was kind of scary, but because of how much damage did happen to the Reserve, I'm thankful that I went back for him. Then following, my dad ended up coming down. He's retired military, so when he found out about it, he left and came straight to us. We had found a hotel room in, a little bit down into Anniston. So the next day he showed up and came and helped us. We couldn't get back into the Reserve, of course. But I picked up my car from the place I had it towed to in Anniston, and we went back to Georgia, where I'm originally from. That's where I ended up having to stay. So I had to quit my job. Then the following, I think it was the following week – well, two days after that was my birthday, so that was fun. But the following week, I believe, was when I was allowed to go back into my room at the Reserve. I did end up having to leave a few things. My room, thankfully, was pretty untouched, but because we had such a short amount of time to get our things out, I ended up losing two valuable things, but for the most part I was okay which I'm thankful for. As soon as I got home from getting my stuff, I was unloading my things from a truck, and I sprained my ankle. I had to be put in a hard cast. So that is the reason I decided to finish my classes – or take the grade I had in most of my classes. Because I couldn't make the three hour drive. Because then it was my right ankle. But fortunately my grades were okay enough, and I finished my online classes. That was pretty much like the major days and stuff with the tornado.

ER: Thinking back, at what point of that night did you know that there was bad weather? At what point does it start to – because I mean you're just, your car breaks down. You worked all day, coming back, and then, I mean, to me, it's like you're at the Subway picking up your friend,

and they're like, you know, "This is it," like you have to get, yeah, so, what's going through your mind throughout that?

KS: Well, even when I was waiting with somebody, when my car was broken down, and they were, like, you know, "You guys ready for the bad weather?" And because of where we are, tornado warnings are pretty common. So I just, I really didn't think anything of it.

ER: Okay.

KS: When I was driving back home, right before I had to turn around to go to Subway, I could see a bunch of lightning, so I was like, oh, you know, it's a little bit different, but there was no rain, and it was like the – I can picture the sky perfectly, there were like dark clouds on one side and then nothing on the other side. So I was like, shouldn't be that bad. Then when I was driving to Subway to get Madeline and I noticed the wind picking up, that's kind of when I first knew that it was, like, okay, this is actually going to happen. So honestly, everything – knowing it was going to be bad and it actually happening was probably only like 20 minutes tops.

ER: Yeah. It sounds like it went fast – because you said you went to UPD and then it's like, also you have to get your dog.

KS: Yes.

ER: What was what was going through your mind at that point?

KS: I remember my best friend and I were just kind of looking at each other, like, should we really go get him or should we just chance it? I mean, I was terrified because I didn't want anything to happen to me, but I just knew that if I don't try, I'm going to regret it, which, that might be naive and silly, but I just care about him.

ER: [Attached?].

KS: So mostly just fear at the time, but, like, having a sense of purpose to want to protect the things I care about, I guess.

ER: What kind of dog?

KS: He's a lab pit mix named Davis.

ER: Okay. How did he do through the – you got him to UPD? Did he experience any kind of stress or notice any change in his behavior?

KS: I would say so. He is already kind of a skittish dog. We had gotten him in November from the [Cheaha?] Animal Shelter. He's very well behaved, like, getting into the car, I guess he could sense the emergency. But he did well while we were hiding out, like he sniffed other people. People were petting him, and there was another small dog, so he was distracted. But for the next few days, he had trouble going outside, like, he had trouble pottyng. I think he was just very

stressed. Even now when there's bad weather, like all of us – we have another dog and she's like, what's wrong with you guys? But even now when the weather starts to act up, it's like, he's kind of skittish. He'll go under the bed or just, like, lay in a corner away from everything.

ER: After you were able to leave UPD, did you go back to your apartment that night or did you?

KS: We did. I walked in, we had to climb over poles and stuff. When I got into the room, we grabbed a bag of dog food, a change of clothes. Thinking back, I should have grabbed more. But we just grabbed some essentials for ourselves and for Davis, and then we left after that.

ER: So you're going back to your apartment, what's going through your mind seeing, kind of, what it looks like?

KS: It was more so crazy outside, because when we left the UPD, I had to, like, keep turning around because there were trees down in the road, and I just couldn't get anywhere. So it took longer than it even needed to to get there. I couldn't park in the Reserve, like I couldn't even pull in. So we walked from that church that's in front of it. My feet were sinking in the dirt and I had to climb over electrical poles and I remember seeing one of my friend's cars – he worked at the Learning Tree with me – and the whole driver's side was messed up from something that had come and hit it. So I was really scared to see what my room and what our unit was going to look like because my room sat on, like, the back end. But from what I could tell, nothing in my room at all was messed up. I didn't notice a broken window. It was just crazy to be in my room and none of the lights worked, the sirens are going off, and it was very unreal and real at the same time.

ER: So you grab a few things and then you said your dad came that night or how, where did you go that night?

KS: That night we went to Knights Inn in Anniston. I tried to stop at the close, one of the closer ones in Jacksonville, but because we have a dog, they didn't let us stay. I didn't, I just didn't want to lie and try to sneak him in because I was like, I don't want to make a bad night worse.

ER: Yes.

KS: So we did end up at the Knights Inn. I had called my sister before the tornado, like, when we got settled in the UPD, to tell her. But she was asleep. So when my dad and my sister and family, like, they heard about how bad it had gotten, they tried calling me, but once I fell asleep that night, I was exhausted and my phone had died. By the time I got it charged and on, I had so many missed calls and because they hadn't heard from me, my dad just came. So he was in his truck with, like, he had brought dog food and water and all this stuff. So he picked my best friend and I up. Once I got my car, we just followed him and he kept Davis in the truck with him. But because my dad is in the military, or retired military, he was very like, ready to go, help anybody he could, like, that was just his attitude.

ER: Did you find that helpful?

KS: I did, it was nice. Because when I called him and I had seen the messages from him, I was like, you know, “You don’t have to come, it’s fine, I promise I’m okay.” He was like, “I just crossed the Alabama state line.” He’s like, “Just wait where you are, I’ll be there.” I was like, “Yes, sir.”

ER: So at that point, how long do you stay in the hotel and where’d you go next?

KS: We didn’t stay in the hotel very long. My dad was probably only like an hour away. So we went to the place where we go where we always just want to feel better. We went to Sonic. That’s kind of our, like, hangout spot. But we went to the one in Anniston, and we got some breakfast and then we waited in the Walmart, the Lindlock Walmart parking lot with Davis and we honestly, we just kind of sat there, like, we didn’t even talk. We were just, like, so that happened, and we hadn’t seen it in the daylight yet, so we didn’t know exactly what to expect. We just knew that it wasn’t going to be great.

ER: So then, take me back a little bit. Do you go back to your apartment at this point or do you go home to – where do you go for like the next couple days or however long?

KS: Once my dad got there, we decided to try to see if we could get back into the Reserve since he had his truck and we could’ve potentially gotten things. So we got to see all of it in the daylight and it was still, like, traffic was horrible and having to be redirected. Once we finally got to the Reserve, we walked again across the street. There was an officer there and he was telling us that we can’t go in, that they’ll contact us in the future for when entry is ready. So after that, we went to my dad’s house in Griffin, Georgia, in that area. So, that was the 20th. As soon as we got there, we tried to get, we went to the store and bought new toothbrushes and brushes and things like that. Then, the following day was my birthday. We had already had a trip to Savannah planned and my dad, we tried not to go and my dad forced us to. He was like, “There’s nothing you can do right now.” He’s like, “Go, have fun. Try to forget about it.” He’s like, “Because you’re going to lose your money anyway if you don’t go and stay in the hotel.” So we did that and then when we got back it was when we were allowed to come back in and get our stuff.

ER: Okay, and then you come back and get your stuff and what was the condition of your stuff? Any damage?

KS: No, my stuff, thankfully everything was fine. There was no water damage and my room didn’t get opened up at all from the tornado, so I had everything. The only thing, I just left stuff that wasn’t super important to me because of the time frame that we had to get our stuff out. In the quickness of doing that, I lost. I just, I just forgot to get, so it’s my fault, but I forgot to get two important things. My class ring, and then a necklace that my dad gave me from his first deployment to Iraq.

ER: You never got those back?

KS: Mm-mm.

ER: So it just kind of got lost? You never were able to go back into your apartment after that, or?

KS: Yeah, after that – because they did it like one building area at a time. By the time I was able to go through all my stuff, because I didn't go through it when I got home, just because of hurting my ankle. When I was able to go through it, it was totally shut down.

ER: Did they tell you at the time that you were not going to be able to kind of move back in? Did they have any idea of, like, kind of what they were telling you about your apartment situation?

KS: No, I heard everything from, everything was just going to be torn down and that they would be fixed and ready to be open again. So I don't know what the truthful answer was at that time, but I heard both.

ER: Okay. So what's going through your mind at that point in terms of your living arrangements? Like, what kind of ideas did you have or what did you kind of put into works?

KS: I think I'm lucky that I have – my sister lived in an apartment and when she moved in, she got an apartment with two rooms because she knew that we would stay with her a lot. So I moved in with my sister. My best friend and I both moved in with her.

ER: How far away was she from, like, was she in the Jacksonville area?

KS: She's in Griffin, Georgia.

ER: Okay, okay, so you're still –

KS: After that, I stayed in Griffin for about a month. When I got home – thankfully, I'd saved money from the Learning Tree. But after I hurt my ankle, I knew I couldn't go back there. Plus, I wouldn't have anywhere to live. So I quit my job there. Then Madeline and I just looked every day. We drove here a few times. Well, she drove. I just was in the passenger seat. We looked for apartments that were dog friendly. That was probably the hardest part because what we could afford didn't allow pets or something like that. I had already started the process of getting another job. So I found out for sure that Learning Services was going to hire me. So, I had that. I was just waiting for it to start. But that was also kind of difficult because the only reason I was planning on taking the job at Learning Services was because I knew I would be able to more comfortably afford or still comfortably afford the Reserve and my general cost of living. But where I live now is noticeably more expensive, so I had to get that job and I work another job.

ER: Okay. Before you just had one job?

KS: Yes.

ER: At what point did you get into a new apartment?

KS: We moved in May 1st.

ER: Okay. And then, so you said it was higher, so you had to go in on a higher, like, rent per month?

KS: Yes.

ER: Okay. What thoughts were going through your mind for that?

KS: It was really scary because during the month that we stayed at my sister's house, you know, I didn't work, Madeline didn't work, so we were all going on what I had saved by myself. I mean, fortunately it got us started but at the Reserve everything is included as well. The only thing I would pay extra is if I went over my allotted water or anything like that, but this was higher rent, utilities, water, internet, all of that. I'm already kind of like a stressed person, so it was really scary to me. I knew as soon as I moved back, I was like, I'm not going to be okay if I just have one job. So I started with Learning Services and then I got a job at a cleaning company. Madeline, she worked, came back to Subway for a little while. But it wasn't like, we were just very, like, hitting what we needed. And not having room for, like, groceries and things like that. So she left Subway and started working at Longhorn, which, that did a little bit better for her as a host, but now she's a server. So there's a little more comfort there, but still not that much.

ER: Is that where you currently still live in that apartment?

KS: Yes, ma'am.

ER: Then thinking about that, then you also have school that you're managing, too. So, how have you been able to kind of juggle all these responsibilities?

KS: I'm kind of a perfectionist, so I just, any spare time I have, if I'm not at work, I'm going straight to my schoolwork. So, grade-wise, I still maintain a 4.0 which –

ER: Good for you.

KS: Yes, I work very hard. So that I've been fortunate enough to keep, but it was just, it's hard because I worry about, like, buying my books and things like that. It does get frustrating when all I want to be doing is my homework, but I have to pick up a cleaning shift. But, you know, it's life. You do what you gotta do. You stay up later or wake up earlier.

ER: What were your greatest challenges?

KS: I think having to move home was difficult because it meant I knew I had to find a new place and because a lot of these surrounding areas don't allow pets, and I wasn't really willing to get rid of my dog. Which again might be naive, but he's my family.

ER: That's understandable. [inaudible] pet.

KS: Yes. Finding, I think finding a new place to live was probably one of the hardest. But mentally, it's still difficult when the weather gets bad because my mind automatically goes to that. Or even when I see the sky, if it's darker on one side and not on the other, because that's what it looked like, I'm like, I get nervous.

ER: Yes.

KS: So mentally that would probably be it.

ER: Yes, that makes sense though. You went through a lot. Was there anything that you did prior to the tornado that helped you be prepared for the experience?

KS: Honestly, not really. I think because I knew – I heard and heard that the weather was going to be bad that day. But, work was just, like, it was probably my worst day at that job and then my car and everything. I was so flustered that by the time it was all happening, I was just happy that when we went back to get Davis, I remembered to grab my wallet. So prior preparation, no, not at all.

ER: Well, your day, even as you were describing it, sounds very overwhelming. You work a long day, car breaks down, you're waiting for that. Someone picks you up, you have to take them back home, and then, you even said at one point, it was, like, you were home for like 10 minutes and you had to go get your roommate, and then it's like, here comes the tornado. So, I just imagine that would be really overwhelming. Then, I mean, even in your recovery, just getting injured, like, I think you said that affected your driving.

KS: Yes, then I relied on Madeline to take me everywhere, because my sister and her husband work, of course, and I was, like, dependent on this one person and because my car had broken down, the person in Anniston fixed it free of charge. He was very kind because he knew that I was a student and he was, like, "This will get you to your hometown." He's like, "But then do not drive that car." My dad helped me get another car. But when I hurt my ankle, I couldn't do anything about it. So, that was kind of hard on me because I don't like to just sit. Then it was like, I was forced to sit and think about stuff like that more. So yes, it was, it was tough.

ER: Well, let's talk a little bit about disaster resilience. So what we mean of course is that it's your capacity to cope with or adapt to the recovery challenges brought by the tornado. So what helped you cope with the challenges from the tornado?

KS: I think having my family there, even though I was suddenly somebody who was willing, willing and able to support myself, I really just needed help. My family was there for me, and my best friend, who experienced all of it with me, like, she knows exactly what that night was like for me, and I know exactly what it was like for her. So we really stick together, and we still live together, so, I know that when the weather's getting bad, she's right there with me. So, as soon as it gets bad, even if it's just a thunderstorm we make a bag. So, like, we get food together for the dogs. We get water bottles. We pack multiple days worth of things. We get food for ourselves, that kind of thing. I think that's probably the biggest, depending on, like, the time

frame of when the weather's going to get bad, we know whether or not we're going to drive to my family or her family or just, like, near a shelter. We kind of pick spots that, where we would feel comfortable going. I think that's the biggest way that we have, or the biggest thing we've done to make ourselves feel better about it.

ER: Okay. Thinking about some of those things, what advice would you give to others about how to deal with an event like a tornado?

KS: I think if it does happen and you do go through that experience, to be mentally and emotionally okay. Like don't let yourself feel bad for being afraid. Reach out and talk about it. Because not everybody will have a Madeline who experiences it right next to them, so don't be afraid to open up about that, [scaring?] them. I guess, like, more physically being ready, actually listen to the warnings. Even if it's just like, "Oh, hey, whether it might get bad later," listen to them every time because you never know when that warning is going to turn into your reality. So, just take it seriously, and if, you know, have any idea about it coming, try to have some kind of go bag ready, or just have one ready at all times anyway, and kind of plan what you would do if something bad happens. If you move, make a new plan because if your surroundings change, your driving route might change to get out of somewhere.

ER: Good point. Yeah, that's helpful for people to know and to take those seriously.

KS: Yeah, I couldn't, when we were leaving the Reserve, I couldn't turn left because everything in Merrill was blocked. Turning out the major way, we had to, like, sneak through cars because there was a car, like, wrapped around the pole.

ER: Oh, wow.

KS: So, it's definitely, it's things you don't think about at all. But they happen.

ER: Yes. Is there anything else that you would like to share with us that we didn't bring up?

KS: I think overall, JSU did the best they could. I mean, it's a very frustrating, very sad experience that we had to go through, and I've, you hear students getting frustrated, and even faculty getting frustrated about all the work and everything, but I really do think that JSU tried, and they did the best, and maybe this experience will even help the university as a whole be prepared more. Overall, I'm just, I'm very thankful for the tornado because it helped me in my personal relationships as well as personal, like, self, grow up. So it might've been a bad thing, but it reaped positive results.

ER: Yes. Can you describe a little bit more of that? Like how, that part where you're saying it's helped you in your relationships and then for your sense of self in a positive way?

KS: Yes. Well, my best friend was also my girlfriend. We had issues with our families. But, she had to come live with my family. It's just because she has anxiety, so she was never willing to be her total self. That's very hard for me because my sister and I are very close. But having to live with them, now the four of us are super close. We do escape rooms together.

ER: Oh, fun.

KS: For both of us, we're not the kind of people who ask for help. But I did not know what to do when I woke up that next day, and my dad was already right there. I didn't want to go on the trip, I didn't want to do anything, and he was like, "Yes, go." Like, it's okay to ask for help. Then, on top of the tornado stuff, hurting my ankle, it really forced me to have to ask for help. I think another thing is, I learned that you can't look at the big picture all the time. The days after, all I could think about was, oh my god, I have classes to finish, and I have to find a new place to live, I need another job, and then I'm going to need another one because this is so expensive. It didn't help me to think about all of it at once. Just one piece at a time. So, it's like, if you're doing a rock wall, you don't stare at the top, you look for the individual rocks.

ER: Yes, because it just would have been probably really overwhelming.

KS: Mm hmm –

ER: I mean –

KS: Yes.

ER: Just kind of going through all that.

KS: It would hit me in waves. I remember my best friend was super upset the following two days. I was, but I was just kind of ready for it to not be real. Then, we had gotten home from Savannah, and we were going to see the Reserve the next day, and I just started crying, because I was like, "My home is gone," like, I don't know what to do. Then after we were kind of upset, we were like, okay, well, we have to start doing something. You can't not do anything. So just, it helped me learn how to, like, process things better, I think, and being more open to expressing what I'm feeling, instead of always shoving it down, shoving it down.

ER: I can tell you found, like, a sense of purpose in, like, little things you got to do.

KS: Oh, absolutely.

ER: To that positivity.

KS: Yes, I remember the day that we found where we live now. We were on top of the world because we got a little bit closer to something normal.

ER: Yes, some stability and –

KS: Yes.

ER: Probably one big thing off the checklist of things that had to be figured out.

KS: Yes, and it was nice. We would, my sister and her husband would get home from work and we would go out to dinner and we'd come home and we'd play board games and it was nice to know that just because a lot was wrong that something could still be right. So, it was a good thing.

ER: That's really meaningful. It takes a lot to make sure that you kind of think positive and stuff. So, your ability to do that shows a lot about your character.

KS: Yes, it wasn't always easy, but it was nice to have those shining moments. Even our dog, he's such a big part of our lives now, and the fact that he can tell the difference in the weather. He recognizes that we struggle with it, too. He'll be playing, and then, all of a sudden, he hears thunder, and he just comes to us, and just sits. There's always something positive to be taken from positive situations, but also negative situations.

ER: What a good message. Well, thank you for sharing your story and talking about your experience and the resilience that you were able to process. So, this concludes our interview and thank you again.

-----End of Interview-----
Reviewed by Nicole Zador, 3/24/2025