

Interview with Hannah Yarborough

Narrator: Hannah Yarborough

Interviewer: Tanveer Islam

Location: Jacksonville, Alabama

Date: February 28, 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 28, 2019, Tanveer Islam interviewed Hannah Yarborough for the Jacksonville State University Oral History Project, focusing on the Jacksonville tornado that occurred on March 19, 2018. Hannah, a resident of Gamecock Village at the time, shares her firsthand experience of the tornado's impact on her life, her immediate response to the disaster, and the process of recovery. Hannah's apartment complex was directly hit, with the entire top floor destroyed. At the time of the tornado, she took shelter in a downstairs apartment, experiencing shattered windows and significant destruction. Her car was damaged beyond repair, and she was displaced, staying with friends and later moving to a university dormitory. The aftermath left her without most of her belongings for over a month, relying heavily on donations from friends and family to regain essential items. Yarborough discusses the emotional and psychological challenges she faced, including panic attacks and signs of PTSD triggered by storms or thunder. She emphasizes the importance of her support network, including friends, family, coworkers, and the university community, in helping her cope and rebuild her life. The university played a significant role in her recovery, offering guidance and support for students affected by the tornado, including facilitating her return to academic life. Hannah offers insights into the value of renters' insurance, which partially covered her losses, and stresses the importance of preparedness for such disasters. She also reflects on the need for improved communication and more shelter options during emergencies.

Tanveer Islam: My name is Tanveer Islam from Jacksonville State University. We are conducting an oral history project of the Jacksonville tornado that occurred on March 19th, 2018. Today is February 28th, 2019. We are hearing from Hannah Yarborough who will share her experience of the tornado and recovery. Our interview is taking place at Houston Cole Library at Jacksonville State University. So, Hannah, the first question is, how are you affected by the tornado?

Hannah Yarborough: The apartment I was living in was actually one of the apartments that got directly hit by the tornado. It was in Gamecock village. It was building number 4, and the whole entire top of it was destroyed, which I was there when it happened. I was actually in the bottom apartment underneath my apartment. I went down there for shelter. I went down there and we didn't think it was actually going to be a tornado like we just thought, it's just going to blow over and we'll be fine. Well, we got inside, and the last two of us were walking into the closet when the window shattered. So, we kind of just walked right in there. We stayed in there for a good, I would say, about thirty minutes to an hour, because there were two tornadoes that ended up hitting. So, we sit in there for a good, like, thirty minutes to an hour. When we walked out, there's just glass and water all over the floor. The door was ripped open. I looked outside and like my car was in the breezeway, like where you walk in to go to the doors to the apartments. My car was up over the curb in the breezeway. So, that kind of affected me, because I lost my car that night. So, we kind of stayed there for a little bit, and then we moved to another apartment sometime after that. We stayed there for about fifteen minutes after and we moved to another apartment because we were afraid the building would collapse because of how much damage we could see. So, from there, we just kind of waited until rescuers could find us. After that, I didn't have any place to go. So, I was just kind of sitting in the middle of the road, like trying to figure out what I was going to do. My parents couldn't come because the roads were blocked from where they live, so they couldn't come. So, I just ended up going to Talladega and staying with a friend.

TI: So, your parents live here?

HY: No, my parents live in Arab, Alabama. That's where I'm from. So, they live there, and it would have taken them along the road of Pelham, like Pelham road and all that and like heading towards Gadsden. They would have taken that road, and that road was completely blocked off from the trees and the power lines and stuff.

TI: So, you mentioned that there are two tornadoes. So, was there a gap between those two?

HY: There was maybe a slight gap. We think what happened was the first tornado started around that – I can't remember the name of the church. But it started at a church and went all the way up to Gamecock Village, picked up –

TI: Angel Grove, probably.

HY: I think so. I can't remember the name of it. It picked up, what we think picked up, and then another one formed right beside the Reserve. So, that's why we think the Reserve had more damage than Gamecock Village did. Because Gamecock Village only had three buildings that were really severely damaged. All the others just had the windows blown out.

TI: So, what about the one that you –

HY: The one I was in, the whole top floor was ripped apart. It was ripped off. So, our third floor, you could see into all the rooms and stuff. The bottom two floors, they just had their windows busted out, and then the sidings were off. It just looked like chaos.

TI: So, it's a third storey building.

HY: Yes. It's a three-storey building.

TI: You lived at the third floor?

HY: I lived in the second floor. So, yes, I lived in the second floor, which, like I said, all the windows were blown out. So, a lot of my stuff got water damaged.

TI: Did you have renters' insurance?

HY: I did. They required us to have renders' insurance. So, I did. Thank goodness they did, because if I didn't have it, I don't know what I would have done.

TI: So, they reimbursed you for all the stuff and properties?

HY: Yes. They reimburse me for everything but my car. They didn't cover the car because –

TI: Did you have car insurance?

HY: I did not. I had liability because I paid cash for the car. So, I ended up having to turn around and buy a whole new car. Because my maintenance man that works on my car, my mechanic, he said that it would have taken more to fix the car than it would just to buy a new car. So, I ended up just having to buy a whole new car. So, he just bought that car from me, and then I went and bought another car.

TI: So, the first night you were in friend's place?

HY: Yes. I stayed in Talladega with a friend.

TI: After that, what happened?

HY: My mom came to pick me up from Talladega. She drove all the way to Talladega to pick me up. Then I stayed with her for the first two weeks. Then when school opened, I moved into a dorm, that way I could finish my classes. So, I lived in a dorm until the end of classes. Then I moved into a new apartment after that. I moved into apartment in the end of April. So, I was kind of constantly going somewhere.

TI: So, how is your life disrupted? I mean, all the moving out?

HY: Well, I didn't have a lot of my stuff for a month. I wasn't allowed to go inside and get my stuff. So, I was basically with everything that I had when I got out of the tornado. So, that's all I had on me, was my clothes, my phone and then my dog. Well, we had to wait a whole month to get all that stuff. So, thankfully, a lot of people donated to me and my two roommates. It changed, because I was not living on my own anymore, and I wasn't in Jacksonville. Because I had been living in Jacksonville for so long. It just kind of messed everything up. Because I couldn't go to work, because my work is in Oxford. I couldn't go to class because we weren't having any classes. So, I was just kind of like a sitting duck, like I didn't know what was going on. Like I said, I didn't get any of my stuff back. So, I was trying to figure out, well, how am I going to get all of that back? What am I supposed to do with that? How am I supposed to rebuild? Like I was at the bottom having to rebuild to the top.

TI: For the academic, like, for your classes, did you take the option for like, they are giving options like, you can choose your grade.

HY: I chose my grade for some of them. The ones that I had good grades in. But the other classes that I didn't, I went back. I came back and finished those classes just so I can kind of raise my grade on them.

TI: So, you took an incomplete?

HY: I guess you can call it an incomplete. But yes, I just ended up taking my grade for some of them.

TI: Do you find it challenging, like, after the tornado, to concentrate on some of the coursework?

HY: Yes, very much so. Because, like I said, I was still trying to figure out what to do and how to get all my stuff back for a month. So, that kind of took me away from, like, actually doing my coursework. Because I was stressing about that, trying to figure out about that. Which I should have just ended up taking all my grades, because it just made it worse. The tornado really, really messed up everything.

TI: Were you able to get your laptop?

HY: I got my laptop about a week after the tornado. They were going in and getting specific stuff that we needed. So, I was able to get my laptop then, which thankfully, it wasn't damaged. So, yes, I ended up getting my laptop back.

HY: Okay. So, having said all this, what were your greatest challenges? What did you find it so difficult that time?

HY: I think my greatest challenge was getting over the fact that that had happened. Because afterward, when it would storm or lightning or thunder, like I would kind of panic. I would be in a panic mode, and I'd start having panic attacks. What my doctor said, I started forming a sign of PTSD a little bit. So, whenever I would hear a train, or thunder, lightning, when it would be like how it is outside, rainy. I just kind of panicked, because I'm like, "Oh, crap. What's going to happen? Is it going to turn into a bad storm? Is it going to turn into a tornado?" I think that was my greatest challenge, is trying to just get over the fact that it had happened. Because that whole night when I was in the closet, I was thinking in my head. I was like, "Is this going to be my last night? Like, is this going to be my last day on earth?" Because it was scary. Like the whole building was shaking. When they say it sounds like a train, it sounds like a train.

TI: So, did you actually hear the train sound?

HY: Yes. It was just so terrifying that I ended up calling my parents, telling them I love them. Letting them know, "If anything happens, I love you all. I just want you all to know." That's all I wanted to do. I would never wish that upon my worst enemy. I would never wish someone to go through what a lot of us went through that night. A lot of us thought we were going to end up not surviving that night. We thought the building was just going to collapse on us. Like I said, I would never wish that upon someone, because that was my greatest challenge, was getting over that and accepting that I'm okay, everything's okay. I'm alive. It's not going to happen. It's truly terrifying. I will say that. It's truly, truly terrifying to go through something like that.

TI: So, when the tornado hit, it was a spring break just started. So, were there a lot of students at that time?

HY: It happened, I think, that Monday. So, spring break had just started. So, a lot of people had already left for, like, the beach or go home. There wasn't a lot of students, to be honest. There was maybe about fifteen with us when the whole thing happened in that one apartment. But from what I heard, there was more than that. They estimated about thirty to forty were still on, like in the apartments and stuff at Gamecock Village. So, I'm glad it happened over spring break. Because I feel like if it had not, I feel like more people would have been hurt considering how bad it was. So, yes, there's about thirty to forty of us that were still in the apartments.

TI: You mentioned that you didn't think of it, that the tornado might occur. Did you receive any warning or anything? Did you watch the news or Facebook?

HY: I did watch the news. I had the news on while I was watching something else. Me and my friend – she lived in those apartments too. We had just went to go get pizza. We kind of saw it in the distance. We saw it in Gadsden. From the time we went to go get pizza to the time we got back, it had started getting dark. So, we were like, "Okay, well." I opened the windows so I could hear the sirens, just in case. I had the news on. So, we kind of got a warning, because the sirens went off. We went downstairs. I knew my downstairs neighbor, so I knocked on their door and they let us in. We kind of sat there for a good five to ten minutes without hearing any more sirens. So, we were like, "Okay. We're fine." So, we kind of walked out to go to her apartment, which was on the third floor. Three girls ran out and were like, "Hey, do you know anybody with a bottom apartment? It's about to hit us." They had been watching the news and stuff. We're like, "Yes. We'll go in here." Right as we walked into the door of that apartment, that's when the sirens went off and that's when it hit. We got barely a warning when it actually hit.

TI: Okay.

HY: Yes. So, in my opinion. Because the sirens went off, and then two seconds later, the tornado was hitting us.

TI: Was there any basement or shelter nearby, the residence hall?

HY: Yes. I think the closest one was the residence hall. But by the time we had driven over there and got there, like we would have been in the tornado. Then there was another shelter at the police station. So, like I said, by the time we had found out that it was actually hitting us, like we –

TI: So, you actually thought about going to a shelter, but there was no basement or shelter.

HY: We didn't think anything of it. Like, like I said, we didn't think that it was actually going to be a tornado. We just thought it, "Oh, it's going to be thunderstorms. It's just going to blow over, like it always does." So, we didn't actually think about it. So, we're like, we'll just go to the bottom apartment. We'll just chill there because they don't have basements there. So, we were just like, "We'll just chill at the apartment and figure things out and wait." So, really, honestly, we weren't prepared for it, because just like I said, we thought it will just blow over like nothing's going to happen. It will just be some winds and some lightning and rain. But we didn't actually think a tornado was going to form. So, we were not prepared.

TI: So, the next we'll talk about disaster resilience. By resilience, we mean how you cope with the [unintelligible] and what happened in the aftermath. So, can you talk about how you were able to do this? What helped you to cope with the challenges from the tornado? Is there something that you can point to that helped you to recover more quickly?

HY: I think it had a lot to do with the people around me, like my friends, family, coworkers. They helped a lot when I was going through that. My family was there when I needed someone talking to and my roommates were the best, though, I think, because they helped me, they were in town when it happened. So, I was by myself in my apartment. They were at home, and they helped me kind of get back on my feet. People had donated stuff to them for me. I think my biggest blessing was them, because they were always making sure I was okay. Making sure I had stuff that I needed. They had clothes donated to me and to them too, because they didn't have clothes either, except for the ones they went home with. So, they were a true blessing. Then my coworkers, they helped me a lot, and kind of get back on my feet. My roommate now is my coworker. She went and bought me a bunch of work clothes, that way I could go back to work and kind of get the money to build myself back up and get my stuff back. So, honestly, I think that's the best thing I could have had. If I did not have that circle around me, I probably would have been ten times worse than I was. Because they were the biggest blessings, and they helped me cope with a lot of things. Like I said, whenever I start panicking and stuff, one of them would be there to hold me and calm me down. My mom is a big blessing too because we live so far apart. I called her, actually the other day when the lightning was really bad. So, I started panicking and I called her and she kind of calmed me down. Just her being there for me helped a lot. So, I think that was my biggest blessing, was my group of friends, coworkers, family that helped me cope with the fact that I had just went through a traumatic experience.

TI: So, circle of friends, families, coworkers, that's helpful. How did the renters' insurance help you?

HY: The renters' insurance kind of helped me get a lot of my stuff back. Which I didn't get a lot from them because they had \$1,000 deductible. So, I didn't get really all the money that I needed to officially get back up on my feet. But they did help me recover a lot of my stuff.

There was some stuff that I could never get back because it was sentimental stuff. But they helped with clothes and shoes that I lost. I lost a lot of my bedding. So, they kind of helped with that. Helped get me back on my feet, start from the bottom, and then work my way back up. So, I'm very blessed to have renters' insurance. Everybody needs to have renters' insurance. So, they helped a lot. I'm kind of glad they require that.

TI: Anything else that was helpful after the tornado?

HY: The university was very helpful. They helped people who had been hit by the tornado, and they helped kind of guide us along to how we were going to finish the semester, what we needed to do. The university helped in a lot of ways that I could not have done myself. So, they kind of guided me along with how I was going to finish the year, how I was going to keep going. So, the university was a good, a good way of coping. They helped me cope a little bit better too.

TI: So, when you moved to the dorm, it was through the university?

HY: Yes.

TI: You mentioned earlier that you're a nursing student. Did it help you to cope with the situation? Because I guess, there are a lot in the class that probably go through those kind of stuff.

HY: I'm not in the nursing school yet. I was still doing my basics. But my advisor helped me figure out what was the best situation, how this would affect my nursing GPA, how it would affect getting into nursing school. So, my advisor helped a lot with deciding what I was going to do with school and how it's going to finish it.

TI: So, from this experience, what will you carry forward? What advice will you give others, especially, the young people, like, how to deal with such an event?

HY: I will give this advice, be prepared no matter what. Don't be stupid and think, "Hey, it's just going to blow over. We'll be fine." Make sure you're prepared. Make sure you have a bag of clothes, like a small bag of clothes, like your phone charger, your keys, some money. Make sure you're prepared just in case a disaster does happen because you never know what could happen. You never know, there could be no signs of a tornado and then boom, a tornado or a hurricane, or something, anything that disaster wise. That's a good advice you could give people is, always be prepared no matter what. If it does happen, lean on your friends, lean on your family, like they're going to help you. They're going to be there for you. Don't think that it's going to be okay because it's not okay. Don't put in your mind like, "Hey, it's okay. I just went through this traumatic thing. I'm going to be fine. I'm going to be fine." It's okay to feel not

okay. That was what I would tell people. Because I know a lot of people that went through the tornado like how I did. They're like, "Oh, I'm okay about it." "I know you're not okay, because we both just went through the same traumatic experience." It's okay not to be okay, especially going through that, because that's a traumatic experience. So, and just lean on your friends and family if you do go through that, because they're going to help you, no matter what.

TI: Did you get any help, like counseling?

HY: I did go see my regular physician, because I had started panicking a lot. She kind of talked me through it. We've come to the conclusion that I was having panic attacks and anxiety attacks. She had said it was a form of PTSD from the experience I had went to. So, I did go see her. She's a family friend, so I did end up talking to her a little bit about it, and that kind of helped. But I really didn't get any counseling from it, mainly because I had so much going on. I just didn't have a time to go sit down and actually talk. But, like I said earlier, like my mom was always there, so I could always talk to her, and she kind of helped. I did talk to my youth pastor a little bit about it, and then my pastor's wife, they helped me get through it and talked to me about it, and kind of sat me down. It was like, "Hey, are you okay? What's going on? How can we help?" So, I think that I would kind of count that as counseling, because they came up to me and made sure I was okay. We sat down and talked about it. But, yes, I didn't really get any counseling from it.

TI: So, if there is something you face in future, something like this, like a tornado, would you go to a shelter or find a shelter or prepared to go?

HY: I would go to a shelter. Even if nothing happens, I would still – if they say there's a possibility of a tornado or something bad happening, I will definitely go to a shelter. Because I'd rather be safe than not okay. I'd rather be safe than be somewhere where I'm not going to be safe. So, yes, I would pick a shelter over anything, any day.

TI: You said that there was no time when the tornado came. So, how do you prepare for that kind of situation?

HY: Which they had told us that day that there was going to be severe weather. But they didn't really say what all was going to happen. The university had sent out text messages and stuff.

TI: So, did you get those?

HY: Yes. I got the alerts and stuff. But by then, I feel like it would not have helped, because it had already started hitting by the time. But if other stuff happens like this, I would be prepared and listen to the news more that day. When they do say, "Hey, there's going to be a tornado," I

would go to that shelter then. I would go before it even hits, before there's even a storm, because they had opened it before. At least go somewhere where there's a basement or something. Go to a friend's house or something. But yes, I would definitely go to a shelter or a basement or something, not the bottom floor of an apartment.

TI: Do you have any recommendation for the university, like how they could help more to the students or this kind of situation?

HY: I feel like they should have opened more places to go. Because if I remember correctly, they only had two places that were open. They had the one that was under the police station, and then they had one that was in a residence hall. I feel like if they had opened more, more people would have been able to come for shelter.

TI: You're talking about shelter?

HY: Yes. Shelter-wise, like that would have helped. Then I don't really have anything about what they did after. The university did a good job. They were instantly picking themselves back up the next day. I don't think I would ever recommend them to do anything different than what they did, because it was amazing and how fast they got the campus ready for people to come back on. I don't really think I could do anything better than that, or say anything better than that, because they were fabulous. They were fabulous the whole time.

TI: Is there anything that you think that we should know, or do you have any concerns or comments that you'd like to share with us?

HY: Not that I can think of at the moment. I didn't really have any concerns. Like I said, everybody was so great about it. The university was great about it. The people were great about it. I do feel like there should have been a little bit more communication. There wasn't a lot of communication. Because some people would hear one thing, and then some people would hear another thing. I feel like if we had communicated a lot better, a lot of people wouldn't have been confused, especially with classes and stuff. So, I do say we should kind of communicate a little bit better than what we were doing. We did a good job. The university did a good job, I will say that. But it could have been a little bit better.

TI: In terms of communications like through social media?

HY: Yes. Then with the teachers and stuff, I would ask my teachers, like, "Hey, what's this about?" They would be like, "I don't know." So, I feel the university should communicate with everyone, including the staff and the teachers, and the professors. Because like I said, a lot of my teachers or professors were just like, "I don't know what to tell you. You'll have to go here."

So, I feel like if the head people of the university had communicated a lot better with our professors and our teachers and the staff, that would have been a little bit easier with everybody.

TI: Yes, absolutely. Well, that concludes our interview and thank you for sharing your experience of the tornado and your story of resilience.

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Reviewed by Nicole Zador, 3/10/2025