

Interview with Mike Galloway

Narrator: Mike Galloway

Interviewer: Erin Rider

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, Erin Rider from Jacksonville State University interviewed Mike Galloway for an oral history project documenting experiences related to the Jacksonville tornado of March 19, 2018. The interview took place at the Houston Cole Library and focused on Galloway's personal and family experiences before, during, and after the tornado. Mike Galloway describes the impact of the tornado on his home and family, emphasizing the traumatic nature of the event. He had recently undergone back surgery, leaving him physically limited during the crisis, which added to his emotional distress. Galloway recounts how two large pine trees from his neighbor's yard were uprooted and struck his house, causing extensive damage. The tornado left his family seeking shelter in the hallway, holding on to each other and their dog, while the roof of their house was torn off. Galloway reflects on the immediate aftermath, describing the town of Jacksonville as unrecognizable, with widespread destruction, downed power lines, and a foggy landscape devoid of trees. He details the long process of recovery, including dealing with insurance companies, contractors, and the emotional toll of being displaced from their home for nine months. Galloway recounts how a visit from a young girl named Maddie helped him regain hope and motivation to continue rebuilding. The interview also touches on broader community efforts during the recovery, including the work of faith-based recovery teams and local law enforcement. Galloway praises the sense of solidarity in the town but also notes the challenges of working with contractors and the emotional weight of witnessing the destruction of a beloved town. The interview concludes with reflections on resilience and the hope for continued unity in Jacksonville's recovery.

Erin Rider: My name is Erin Rider from Jacksonville State University. We are conducting an oral history project of the Jacksonville tornado that occurred on March 19th, 2018. Today is February 28th, 2019. We are hearing from Mike Galloway who will share his experience of the tornado and recovery. Our interview is taking place at the Houston Cole Library. How were you affected by the tornado?

Mike Galloway: Traumatically. Me and my family was traumatized by the whole experience. I feel like it's my job to protect them and I don't feel like I did everything I could. But there's a reason behind that. Three days before the tornado hit, I was in St. Vincent's having my threeweek checkup for back surgery. So, my appointment was at 3:00 and we noticed the weather was going to be bad. So, we left like 10:00 hoping to get in. When we got there, we walked in because we were scared. We wanted to get back to our house. So, I wasn't much of use [laughter] because my back's still killing me and this didn't help any. But I guess it's made me think more of the value of life. Thank God nobody died. That's a blessing. So, as long as I live, I'll never forget that. I got a picture on my wall of my wife and my son squeezing each other, crying. Trent Penny, photographer from The Anniston Star, took it when he came to our house right after it was over. I'll always cherish that picture. It's a reminder of what we went through and a reminder of that they're both still alive. So, we were in the hallway with my son. We got back to Jacksonville about 5:00 after my observation. James Spann already had his coat off. So, he was serious. [laughter] About an hour later, my son has an apartment behind ours, but he doesn't live with us. He lives by himself. He said, "You all, come on," and we knew something was up. He got us all in the hallway. We hunkered down and then we brought the dog with us [laughter]. We just sat in a circle holding on for dear life. The roof came off on our end because – let me go back just a minute. I spent \$3,000 getting pine trees out of my yard because I hate pine trees. Two pine trees from my neighbor's yard, eighty foot tall each, came out of the ground and hit my house. Tore my house up. He's eighty-seven years old. He couldn't have done anything about it. But the big deal was after the first one came, we thought we were home free. But a second one came. But it didn't hit. It touched down. You go through one, you think you're safe, and then you got another one to deal with. So, all the faith in God I had came to the forefront then. My son wanted to go outside and I wouldn't let him because – down the electrical wires. So, we got to wait until the morning. About 6:00 or 7:00, we all got up, looked outside and it wasn't Jacksonville anymore. It was foggy. There's no trees. Power lines down everywhere. I said, "We're in this for the long haul." A big part about this town is, there's not that many contractors. When they're building houses, they got to take time away from their houses to help you get stuff off your roof and everything else. People got mad because they didn't get to them fast enough. They had their hands full. They couldn't. Then you bring in some outside contractors who ripped some people off. Big time. Older people. So, the best thing the city did for us was to put cops on every entrance into the avenues. It made us feel safe. They arrested eight the first night for stealing. But after that, there wasn't any problems. The people came from North Carolina – the faith-based recovery teams. They were fantastic. We had two different ones. They sang for you and feed you [laughter]. It was unbelievable. But I saw that this town, which has always been together, took the next step during this time and reached out to anybody around them and anybody that needed help. That made me feel good. Two days afterwards, I suffered from clinical depression. I have since I was thirty-one. It's in my mother's side of the family. So, I've lost six people close to me to suicide. I've been down enough once to try it. Didn't succeed of course. But I'm sitting there on my

porch, rocking, just saying, "Where do we go from here?" This little girl gets out of the car, don't know her from Adam, and brings me a plant. Her name was Maddie, and she's the niece of Riley Green, the singer. She just hugged my neck, gave me the plant, and told me everything was going to be okay. So, I quit thinking about hurting myself once I talked to her. She put it all in perspective.

ER: Wow. Touching moment.

MG: So, I put it down there. The little girl became a big hero to me. We still see each other. We celebrate birthdays together. So, I'm never going to forget her. That was the turning point for me. I quit feeling sorry for myself. It was time to go to work. But something didn't happen very quick. Golly, we was out of our house nine months. Slept in two, three hotels, a friend's house, an apartment – six different places. Every time we looked up, we were moving. So, I don't feel like I live in Jacksonville anymore. It's not home right now. But the contractors – and not just the contractors, but SERVPRO and people like that were just absolutely horrible. SERVPRO will tell you that we finish with your job in four days. They worked one day and didn't send the rest of the week. So, we were not making any progress at all. But we had some subcontractors who just didn't show up. It was a very tedious nine months. Our insurance agent was two weeks late – the person we needed there most [laughter]. But all in all, our insurance did well. They rebuilt the house and it didn't cost us anything. So, I just started talking to people and getting their side of the story. Found out I wasn't alone. So, trying to grow each day now. Our foundation was gone – structural damage. So, it was tough. I couldn't do anything physically because of my back. So, that bothered me. My wife, she just went the extra mile to help get that house rebuilt. She really did. I'm certain, with my son too. I just had to sit there. Oh, and that was my second back surgery. I had another one a couple months before that. It didn't work. So, that was my second back surgery. You can't feel bad because you're alive. You can feel sorry. All you've got to do is look down the street and see a bunch of people who are sorry. We tried to help the elderly. I don't know if you were here when we had the blizzard of whatever, but we had eighteen inches of snow. A lot of the men with four-wheel drives would go to somebody's house and get their prescription and bring it back to them. Now, that's love. So, this is a town full of love. So, that's where I'm at.

ER: You mentioned a little bit about the damage to your home and then the nine months living away. Can you tell a little bit more about the extent of the damage and kind of how you made arrangements of where you stayed?

MG: The insurance company told us where we stayed. I mean, water's gushing in from the ceiling. My nephew came up and put the tarp on the one part. But under those conditions, he couldn't get it all the way. So, there was this water pouring in our house. Nothing we could do about it other than try to get the hole covered up. But by the time we got the hole covered up, the floor was rotting out. Like, I said, the beams were broken. The structures were broken on this end of the house. The other end of the house was livable. So, they shipped us to a hotel, and we played email tag trying to find out when something would get started on our house. Like, I said, the agent was two weeks late. They sent a guy over from Mississippi. He was a week late. Then SERVPRO, when they did that, they're basically two weeks late because they're not doing but one day a week at the most. So, I mean, there's a month gone right there and we're dying.

We don't want to live in a hotel [laughter]. Finally, they got started and I had to call in a – well, my insurance company's adjuster got up under our house and he said there was no structural damage. I said, "Bull." So, I called in a guy from Mountain Brook for a second opinion and he got under the house and told him he was crazy. So, my insurance accepted his instead of their own. So, that was good. But we knew where to start and we knew we had to get the structure fixed first. So, they finally did. Once they got the structure in, we could chip away when people showed up. But I think they could have rebuilt the house in six months instead of nine if everybody would've done their job. Painters don't come, carpenters don't come. My contractor is a friend of the family, and he was trying to build four houses. He doesn't do rebuilds, but because of our relationship, he decided to help us. So, he was trying to build a house. He had carpenter over here, but we needed carpenter over here and we just had to wait our turn. He's got to make money too. We were paying him money, but – when we got a toilet in, we were excited. I mean, [laughter] we jump for joy. It's not working, but it's in [laughter]. We get a wall put up, we were just happy to see something. It don't take much to please us, but –

ER: You mentioned you moved six different times. What kind of accounted for having to keep moving?

MG: The first night, we were at the Gamecock and they promised us we'd only be there one night. The second night, we were at a banker's house. We spent the night there. Third night, we went to Oxford. They told us to go to Oxford and they treated us like royalty. Then they sent us to the Hampton Inn in Jacksonville, and they sent us back to the Gamecock. Then we negotiated with them if we could get an apartment because we knew it wasn't going to be ready in at least six months. So, we knew we had time to get that done. But basically, it's whatever the insurance people told us to do.

ER: But also, your son was with you at that time too? Was there damage to his apartment?

MG: A little bit. He lost some siding, broken windows. Because his ends of the house was kind of close to the man's yard that had the two eighty-foot trees. So, he got a little damage, but nothing like us. But I was just appreciative of him taking charge, especially with me down. Then taking care of us through the ordeal. The second tornado is what really scared us. I know it sounds silly, but like I said, we went through the first one, never thought about a second one coming [laughter]. If it had hit, we were in trouble. If the schools had been in, we'd have been in trouble.

ER: Yes. Had you worried about your neighbor's trees before the tornado?

MG: No, because we never had tornadoes [laughter]. Like I said, he's eighty-seven and probably got one of the diseases – dementia or something. I wouldn't ask him to cut down those trees at this stage in his life, but I sure didn't expect them to fall on me. Eighty foot tall and haven't got no roots [laughter]. I figured that. But there's a girl across the street from us. She's not in yet. She teaches English here. Just three or four has George Kline, who teaches in the biology department. He's not in his house yet. It's just not me. I can imagine the nightmares that kids have and older people have still to this day. I don't know how you get rid of them. I've always wanted to see one. I couldn't see this one [laughter]. But I never want to be in one. I

like to see them from afar – over the plains of Kansas where there are no houses. Oh, yes, my car was towed in the driveway. You don't even realize how many things you got to go get turned on and the deposits you've got to make, cars you've got to get fixed. You're trying to fix a car and fix a house at the same time, and it's not easy. It's the little things that add up to your frustration. Never heard it. It was not a train. Just the highway in. I heard the two trees [laughter]. I heard the two trees land on my house. Am I giving you what you need?

ER: Yes.

MG: Okay.

ER: How long since you've moved back into your home now?

MG: Thanksgiving.

ER: Okay. How's that process been now? How are you coping?

MG: Very strange. For a while, we didn't know where anything was because we changed our entire layout to an open look instead of the house that we had. I turn the light on in the bedroom and there's the bathroom down the end of the hall, and I couldn't find it [laughter]. I didn't know we had a bathroom at the end of the hall [laughter]. You put things, you don't know where they are after you put them there. There's just no familiarity to it at all. But every day is better. We love our house. Love our neighbors. Just thankful that we had the opportunity to share this in our life with each other.

ER: What were some of the things that helped you cope during that time?

MG: I didn't cope well at all until Maddie came. I was in that deep depression type thing. Because anytime I'm knocked out of my reality, I know what I have. I know I can judge myself when I'm depressed or when I'm really depressed. When I'm really depressed, I need help. If I'm just depressed, I get over it. But Maddie just gave me another outlook on life. She's four years old and a smile on her face. She's happy and I'm happy, and the whole world's happy [laughter]. She's quite a girl.

ER: Did you mention you hadn't met her before that?

MG: Never.

ER: She lived in the neighborhood or –

MG: Yes.

ER: Okay.

MG: Yes. One block up. Her mama knew me. She let her out of the car. But it don't matter. She came to see me. But even after that, it was a slow grind. My psychiatrist wanted me to

come in every couple weeks just to increase my medicine a little bit. Now, everything's back to normal just like it used to be. But I really don't think about that. I think about Maddie, but I don't think about that night. What could have gone wrong? What did we do wrong? Nowhere else we could have gone to be safe. I always heard, get in the hallway. Don't have a basement. Because it was too late to go somewhere and get in some of my friend's basement. We had to ride it out.

ER: You mentioned earlier something like this isn't Jacksonville or this doesn't look like Jacksonville. Return to that and comment a little bit more.

MG: There's no trees.

ER: Yes.

MG: Fog and mess like a TV movie in the background. Because all you can see is fog and you can barely see some houses. But one thing you notice is there's no trees. So, I knew those guys who had to come pick those up were going to be there a while, and they were [laughter]. Jacksonville was such a beautiful little city. Taking trees out of the equation just hurts. It hurts. People do their flowers all the time. They have beautiful flowers. But I know some people are planting trees now. But it's going to take a long time for them to get back [laughter] and they probably won't be around. But it really looked like a war zone. It really did.

ER: What will you carry forward from this experience?

MG: Confidence that the worst thing in my life didn't hurt me. It didn't kill me. There's always hope. There's always people like Maddie. As long as Jacksonville continues to care, this will be my home. I moved from Birmingham when I was eighteen. Never go back to Birmingham. [laughter] Because of my depression, I'm not very social. So, I keep everything inside of me. Don't go out to parties and stuff like that. So, I'm a pretty quiet guy. Like I said, I'll talk to the neighbors and things like that because I feel they're in my comfort zone because I know most of them. So, I guess occasionally having to get out of my comfort zone is when I get depressed. Dad died when I was five. My mother, like I told you, she had clinical depression. My brother had clinical depression. Everybody on my mama's side had clinical depression. So, I keep telling people it's nothing I did. I didn't shoot up or take a pill or anything. I was born with it. There isn't much I can do but control it [laughter]. They're scared of me. I've lost friends over it, but that's okay.

ER: People don't understand it or when people don't understand it –

MG: No, no. They don't know.

ER: – they're going to lack some empathy. Yes.

MG: I feel like I've been a God-serving asset to the community ever since I got it. I'm sorry, people can't see that. That hurts.

ER: Thinking of the tornado, would there be advice that you would give other people?

MG: Pay attention to James Spann. Sometimes, he doesn't get it right, but this time he got it wrong, and because he got it wrong, people saved their lives. I mean, he got it right and people saved their lives because of it. During the ordeal, the only thing you can do is cover your head and try to put a mattress over you. If you have a basement, by all means, get down there. But if you don't, just stay away from glass. Yes. Home is over. You're so happy [laughter] your family's safe. Then you walk out and a few hours later and you're so bummed out about what your town looks like [laughter]. I'm in love with that place. I always have been. I don't want nothing to happen to us again. We've lost students because of it. We had people give us over \$2000. We didn't want it, but they gave it to us. That was for the odds and ends on understanding [inaudible]. You've got to go do this. You've got to go do that. That's what we used that money for. Some of them were hit themselves and they still gave us \$2000. As a group, yes. I've written a book halfway about the ordeal. I don't know if you know this, but when people are depressed, like Hemingway and all that, Beethoven – they do their best work when they're depressed. So, I got half the book done and I wasn't depressed anymore. So, I got to wait until I get a little depressed [laughter] before I start writing again because the words just flowed.

ER: Is there anything else you'd like to share with us?

MG: I just hope the university and the city and the students can all join together and make this place great again. I don't know if that's politically right to say, great again. But [laughter] too much bickering. Students have really changed since I worked here. Much more vocal, which I don't have a problem with. But the manners, they don't have manners. They just demand stuff. Always got their hands out and wanting stuff, and they won't do anything about it. They're going to have to learn to do something about it. They're getting all up there in that age. So, that's what I'd like to see them – this town come together. Elian was my best friend in college. He and I were roommates. We were fraternity brothers and were roommates. He taught me more about characters than anybody else in my life. He loves this place so much and he's trying to do his part. I think his personality and the presence, personality don't really drive too much. I think Bill gets along with almost everybody. So, he wants – he's been here since '71 too. So, he just wants this place to be what it can be, and I'll follow him anywhere. He was up for the Valdosta State presidency job. He wanted me to go with him, but he didn't get it. But he's a tremendous man.

ER: It's been great hearing about the people that have impacted you and your ability to say that. Even just talking about how the community did come together and the resources that were pulled at that time. Sharing your story has given us so much insight on the recovery process.

MG: Right. I hope I've contributed some.

ER: Yes. We appreciate it. You're strong person.

MG: Thank you, ma'am.

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Reviewed by Nicole Zador, 3/12/2025