

Interview with Princess Rogers

Narrator: Princess Rogers

Interviewer: Erin Rider

Location: Jacksonville, Alabama

Date: March 4, 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 March 4, 2019, Erin Rider interviewed Princess Rogers for an oral history project at Jacksonville State University documenting the Jacksonville tornado of March 19, 2018. The interview took place at the Houston Coal Library. Princess Rogers, a student at Jacksonville State University, was significantly impacted by the tornado. She begins by describing the emotional toll the event had on her, especially her heightened anxiety about bad weather. Rogers shares that she lost all of her possessions, accumulated over five years, in her apartment during the tornado. She recounts the day of the tornado in detail, from monitoring the weather to hearing the warnings and ultimately sheltering in her apartment's bathroom. Her vivid recollections include the sounds of the tornado, which she compares to a helicopter, and her experience of hiding in the bathtub while the storm wreaked havoc around her. She emphasizes the fear and confusion she felt, being alone and unsure of what to do, particularly as her phone battery dwindled. Rogers also reflects on the aftermath of the tornado, detailing the physical destruction of her apartment and the emotional recovery she continues to face. She discusses the challenges of receiving aid and the difficulty of accepting help, given her usual role as someone who assists others. The interview highlights her journey of coping with the trauma, including her struggles with anxiety, hypervigilance during storms, and seeking counseling.

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 March 4th, 2019. We are hearing from Princess Rogers who will share her experience of the tornado and recovery. Our interview is taking place at the Houston Cole Library. So, how were you affected by the tornado?

Princess Rogers: Well, I know emotionally it has really taken a toll on me especially when it's time for bad weather and stuff like that. I basically had to start from scratch. Everything that I had [laughter] in my apartment for five years, it was in there. I can't really replace any of that stuff. So, it's memories and just stuff that I worked hard for is gone just in a matter of minutes.

ER: Thinking back to that day, can you walk us through what it was like and what happened during that process?

PR: Well, I know that morning I knew it was supposed to be bad weather, but I didn't know how bad it was supposed to be. I think I was starting an internship thing. It was the first day of spring break, and I was excited about that. All day I was monitoring the weather, and nothing really happened. It was really calm, but it was like an eerie-type calm though. I was so tired that day, so I went home. My phone was dead. I charged the phone, and I went to sleep. The crazy thing [laughter] that I posted on social media was, "If you're not Jesus or my mom, don't call me, don't wake me up." Because I was that tired. I laid down, went to sleep. Then I woke up, and I saw I had a missed call from my mom. She was just saying, "I hope you're out of the weather because I'm out here couponing and just playing around." She was like, "I hope you're safe at home. You don't have to call me back or anything like that." I was just going to just go back to sleep, and something told me, "Go ahead and call your mom." So, I called her. She was like, "What are you doing?" She was like, "I would think that you would come over here since the weather is supposed to be bad." I'm like, "The weather?" I was like, "I didn't hear anything else about that." So, I turned on the TV, and I saw how the county was red. It was a mess on the news. So, I was like, "Well, maybe I should put some clothes on just in case anything bad happens." After that, it was like everything started happening really fast. I remember being on the phone with my mom and just saying like, "Man, that's kind of close." Then I was hearing, I want to say it was James Spann. He was like, "Jacksonville State University, if you're at Jacksonville State, these different places." I'm like, "Hold on, wait, I'm at Jacksonville State." He was like, "You all need to get in your safe place because you all are under tornado warning." I was freaking out. I was like, "Mom," I was like, "What do I do?" I can't go downstairs because everyone was gone for spring break. So, I'll basically be playing Russian roulette trying to find somewhere to go. I was on the third floor in my apartment. I only knew to get to lower ground. I didn't want to go out there trying to find a place to go. So, I was like, "Well, I just have to stay here." So, my mom and my stepdad were actually on the phone together on speaker. They were like, "Get in the bathtub." I was just like, "Okay." So, I grabbed pillows, I grabbed the blanket. For some reason, I had the strength of Hulk. I guess in my survival mode I was able to sling a whole mattress off my bed in one jerk. In the apartment, they have this headboard that doesn't really attach to the bed. But I thought if I put it against the window, if anything was to come through, it would kind of get that before it came through to me. I didn't know the thing about the mattress, you're supposed to put it over you. I put it against my door [laughter] to the bathroom. So, I shut the bathroom door, put the mattress up, and threw the blankets and pillows in the

bathtub and covered up. I was just sitting there. I was just like, "I'm in my safe place." I was scared because I've never heard of a tornado warning in Jacksonville, Alabama. We usually get a watch or something like that. So, I was on Facebook kind of saying, "I'm scared you all," to my friends. Then my mom was like, "Hey, are you okay?" Just keeping me calm and stuff like that. They were watching the weather, but they wouldn't tell me what was going on because they didn't want me to freak out. Then next thing I know, I started hearing something. It was like, rumbling. People say it sounds like a freight train. To me, it sounded more like a helicopter. It sounded like somebody's tire was flat, and they were trying to speed on a flat tire. I said, "It's here. It's here. It's here." [laughter] I was like, "This is it," what I was feeling. I was like, "Mom," I said, "It's here. It's here. It's here." All I was doing is just screaming on the phone. The crazy thing about it is that this whole time my phone, I think it was on 40 percent even though I tried to charge as much as I could. My phone's battery is very weak, so it doesn't really last long. I've been on speaker for about an hour now with my family. So, I was surprised that my phone lasted that long through that, because I wouldn't have been able to go through that whole experience without my parents guiding me. But while I was in the tub, I could just feel the whole bathtub shaking. I could hear stuff knocking around in the room. It was just chaos. I just closed my eyes. I sunk down as deep as I could in the tub. I'm taller than the tub, so I'm just shoved in there. I covered my head. I got my phone because that's the only thing that I could really hold onto. I remember just thinking like, "Oh, my gosh, something could hit you in your head, and you could be gone right now." All I said was like, "God, I have to pray, so I'll start praying." I repented, and I was like, "I want to go to heaven." Then I just screamed Jesus' name over and over and over again. While I was doing that, my parents were on the phone. They were praying. I was like, "I just want this to be over." I just remember crying. I probably peed my pants literally. After it was over, I didn't know if I should get up or do something. I was like, "Is there another one?" Because they said it was multiple that came that night. I didn't know what to do. All I could do is tell my mom, I was like, "Mom, come get me out of here." She couldn't do anything. I know she felt helpless because she can't get over there. I just remember this very eerie sound. I know it was cold. I was wet from where the pipes had burst. The water started leaking into the tub and then just all around me. The one crazy thing is I remember seeing a crack in the ceiling where I could see it looked like the sky. It was cold all over me. The wind, the cool air was hitting me. I could smell pine. I could hear the fire alarms going off, the things, and I could see flashing from the fire alarms. So, every time that I smell that smell, it just reminds me of that night. I know it took a while for them to get me out. I was like, "Well, I don't know how long it's going to take for them to find me up here." My phone was dying. I think it was God that kept the phone on because by now that phone would have been dead. Me being on it on the internet trying to let people know where I was. I was like, "I'm on the top floor. I'm in the bathroom. This is my apartment building. Can somebody hurry and get me out of here?" Because I didn't know if there was going to be a fire, like what. I didn't want to be stuck in there without communication. I was yelling. I remember hearing, I want to say it was somebody downstairs. They were screaming. They probably were panicking. I was just like, "Did this really happen?" I was starting to being, now like, "Well, it's not that bad. I know there's some roof damage." I was like, "The pipes burst, probably some flood damage and stuff like that." I said, "It's not going to be that bad." Then finally when the fire department was able to come get me, they basically had to kick down my bathroom door because I was basically pried in there. Oh, my heart's beating. So, I tried to grab as much as I could. But I was like, "Oh, I can come back and get it," because I was still in denial that this isn't as bad as it was. But when I

walked out, my roof to my room, it's like my bathroom was a shell for me. I knew the roof had lifted because I could see where it lifted, and it came back down. But in my room, there was no roof, there was no window. When I walked into the living room, there was no side of our living room. It took the roof off and the top of the window. So, it was basically open. If I walked any closer, I could fall out of the apartment. That was scary. All I could do is just look around and shake my head. The fire department, they were like, "It's okay. All these things can be replaced. As long as you're alive, that's all that matters."

ER: Take your time.

PR: I was trying my best not to cry.

ER: It's okay.

PR: I was just looking in that bathroom while I was waiting. One thing I remember seeing was this foam wig head. It's the lightest thing that could probably be in that bathroom. It was still in place. But one thing that really caught me by surprise was the fact that my door was closed to the bathroom. So, obviously the wind sucked it back in. The curtains that were in my room were inside the bathroom. I was just like, "So, how could this pull curtains that were inside of my room into the bathroom, but not mess with this wig head that weighs nothing?" That baffled me. I'm like, "What kind of tornado was this?" I really knew that something was in there protecting me because I couldn't do anything. When I went to tell people about it, well, they were like, "The bathtubs nowadays, they're not safe." She was like, "Basically, you were in a death trap because now it's not cast iron anymore." I'm on the top floor. It's plastic. So, how can that really save me or whatever? I was like, "What?" I was in the worst place possible on the third floor of my apartment in a flimsy bathtub by myself. I was just like, "What?" People were like, "You're very lucky." It was good also because my roommates weren't home. Their rooms sustained a lot more damage than mine. Our apartment was one of the worst ones that they found. Of course, we couldn't really save any of our stuff. The stuff that they did to have, it took so long for us to get back to it that it was just pretty much you couldn't save it unless you wanted mildew clothes for the rest of your life. But that whole night, everything happened so fast. It was chaotic. It was something I'd never want to experience ever again. The bad thing about it is that you can't control the weather. So, all you can do is just really just be prepared in the best way possible. It's still kind of scary that it could happen again. I don't want that to happen. Because even when we've seen tornadoes that hit closer to us, there's still damage, and those happened five, six years ago. That's probably even longer than that actually. There is still damage, and people are still recovering. I'm like, "Why can't they do more?" But now that I've experienced it, I understand why they can't do more because it's just that devastating. Especially not the infrastructures, to the building and the trees and stuff. Those trees can't come back from stuff like that. So, that's why they have to cut everything down. My heart really goes out to people now that have suffered from natural disasters because I know how it feels now. I'm not really one that asks for help. So, when I did have to go to these places and get food and clothes and toiletries and stuff like that, I almost started crying because I was like, "I'm really here. People have to help me." I'm like, "I don't know how to accept this." Because I'm just like a person that basically just helps other people. When now it's my turn, I'm like, "I can't do this." I don't know the right word for it. I guess I felt helpless, I guess. I just never expected myself to

be in a situation where I have to ask for toothpaste and a toothbrush. But I'm still better off than a lot of people because my family, they lived in the same city, so they could pick me up that same night. But I felt bad for the international students and for people that didn't live in town. So, it took hours for their families to get to them. So, that's one thing I can say that that I'm happy about is that my family were there. Even after that experience, I remember being up that whole night. My mom would get some rest, but I couldn't. I couldn't turn the lights off. Every time I would go to sleep, I would think I hear wind. I would wake up, and my heart's beating. Basically, having nightmares from that. I would just be sitting there sometimes. Then I would just start crying because I'm like, everything that I had is gone. Then even the processes of trying to process the insurance stuff, where I had to sit there and think about everything I owned. That really caused a lot of depression because it's like, who wants to sit there and think about a t-shirt that you had that can never be replaced from family reunions, from high school, from prom? Sentimental items that you can never get back. So, that really made me even more depressed. Then you have to think about, in my apartment, I stayed there for over five years. When I came in there, I didn't have much of anything. As the years went on, I just started customizing and just adding more stuff. Then now I'm like, I'm back to square one. People that you wouldn't think would help you, they've helped you. I got a lot of support from my church and from my job. People that I didn't even know that actually cared, they came out and they helped me. Me being a social work major, it basically just kind of helped me to understand the kind of people that I would probably have to deal with too. The best kind of social worker is a person that's been there and have to ask for help or take advantage of services that I would probably have to offer to people that I'll work with one day. So, I'm just like, "Wow." I'm like, "I'm living the life of a client right now." So, that's one thing that I could say with this whole experience is that I can now help others and have more sympathy and know where people are coming from. When people say, "I don't have this, I don't have that," I'm like, "I understand how it is not to have a toothbrush or have anything to do your hair for a couple of weeks because you have to get transportation to places because your car is still stuck where your apartment was." I think that's the biggest thing about that experience. Also, being able to be back home with my parents, even though I didn't want to be back home. But it's just sometimes you don't really know how much someone does for you. I can appreciate them even more because they were there the whole entire time. They were there for me. Because they didn't have to let me come back home. They could have just said, "Well, you could stay for a couple of weeks, and then we'll find you somewhere else to stay." But I really do appreciate them for taking me in and letting me use their showers and stuff like that. Because a lot of people didn't have that opportunity to do that. They had to get back on their own. It's good to have that support from my family.

ER: I know one thing that as you were talking about that, is how appreciative you were for the help that you received and your support systems that were there. Then also the empathy that you have for other people, that even though you were struggling, you were still noticing that other people were struggling and understanding that trauma for them or that pain that they went through. It's pretty amazing that you were able to think of those things even as you're dealing with your own hardship. You mentioned the firefighters coming and that they had trouble getting into the bathroom door. So, that probably meant that you wouldn't have been able to get out on your own.

PR: Yes, I couldn't. The bad thing about it is that I didn't have any shoes on, which they tell you to prepare for that. Well, a lot of my friends they were – advised me, "Don't move because there could be wires down." You never know if there was a current, and I could get electrocuted. Also, there was glass. Because I remember because I was hardheaded, I tried to move around a little bit, and I actually cut my foot. So, I was like, well, maybe I shouldn't move. So, that's another reason why I couldn't get out. But there was stuff all over the ground, and I couldn't see. So, basically, it was just I could be stepping on anything. Because what I did was, I shut my room door. Then basically, I barricaded myself in my bedroom. So, they had to get through my room door. Then they had to get through the bathroom door. So, that was another issue, just trying to get me out of there like that.

ER: How long did you think it took between after going through the tornado into the fire department getting there?

PR: I really can't say because it felt like it was hours. But it was only 11:10 p.m. or 11:00 p.m. when we got out, I believe. So, I want to say it was probably an hour or two hours.

ER: Your parents were still on the phone with you at this point?

PR: Yes, they were on the phone. I think the phone stayed alive until the firefighters got me out. They busted down the door. I looked at my phone, and it was dead. I was like, "Oh, wow." I was like, somebody was looking out for me because I was on the phone with my parents. I was on Facebook on the internet trying to check the weather. So, I was doing everything. I know my friends freaked out because everything I posted, I was like, "Hurry up. Somebody get me out of here." Because I didn't know. It could be hours before they can get to me. Because I remember at one point, I heard somebody knocking or something like that. I was like, "I'm in here." I guess they didn't hear me, and they left. Friends that I didn't even know cared that much were saying, "Hey, text this number. This will get you to the EMS people and all that stuff." They were asking me questions, telling me, "Hey, I'm going to contact this person." I probably had a good twenty people rooting, trying to get me out. My friends even though when I talk about it, they say, "Hey, you had me so scared. I was about to come drive up there." I'm like, "You live an hour away. You can't do that." It made my heart warm to know that people really cared about me. Some people, they were really calm in the situation while I was freaking out. They were like, "Just hang in there." You didn't even think they were worried, but they were. The first person I saw was actually a friend of mine as soon as I walked out of the apartment. We had to walk. My judgment was so off. My apartment building, there were four other apartments before you could actually get out of the gate. Well, I thought the fire department and the ambulance were all inside the gate. No. They were all at the end of the gate. I had to walk all the way. I'm like, "You mean to tell me that this is how bad this thing was?" There were so many trees down, power lines, they couldn't even get to us. They had to basically walk from the end of the road just to find whoever was there. That's how bad it was. The first person I saw when I got outside the gate was one of my really good friends. All I could do was just cry in her arms. I think it was good. I'm glad that it was her face that I saw because it was somebody I knew. Just the way that everybody came together like students. You just lost your apartment, and you're trying to help get other people out of the apartments. I think that's probably the best thing about this experience because everyone knows how to come together when they need to.

ER: Thinking about then once the firefighters were there, so what was that night like in the next couple days in terms of activities?

PR: Well, I tried to sleep because I couldn't sleep during the night. But I tried to sleep as much as I could during the daytime. Then I had people calling me, "Hey, get up. You got to come down here and get these vouchers, get what you need." Because at the end of the day, I still have to live. So, for the next few days I got my debit card, I got my driver's license. Because a lot of places, they wouldn't give you anything without a license. I'm like, "Well, I lost it in the tornado. That's the whole reason why we're here." But I got all the basics taken care of. I had to go to the bank and just basically hitchhike around to get my little basic needs taken care of. A lot of stuff I didn't know about until the last minute. So, I think that they maybe should work on that another time. But it's the first time this ever happened. But yes, that's basically what I did, was try to just get back to normal. That's the only thing you can do, is just try to get back into your regular routine. I did take the week off of work, which I really wish that I would have taken more time because I wasn't emotionally ready to go back to work and everything. But not all employers are sympathetic when it comes down to things like that. They'll give you a little time, but the show still must go on. So, I quit that job too [laughter]. But yes, I just tried to get back into the swing of things even though emotionally I was still trying to deal with it. Then I want to say the worst part about it was when we got a couple of storms. It was some pop-up storms. They weren't severe, but they sounded horrible outside. I was like, "Oh, my God." I remember it was the first night that a bad thunderstorm had come through since then. I was watching the weather on my app because we don't have cable. So, I was watching the weather on the [applause]. I was just sitting there in bed. My parents were asleep. It was 2:00 a.m. I got up because the wind and rain were bothering me, thunder. I said, "I'm going to go sit in the hallway." It was like, "Go sit in the hallway because there's a storm [laughter]." It was really irrational because I'm like, it's just a thunderstorm. They didn't say it was a severe thunderstorm. They didn't say it was a tornado watch. They didn't even say a warning. They didn't say any of that stuff. I'm sitting in the hallway in a fetal position over here hyperventilating. Then my mom walks out of the room. She's like, "What are you doing?" She's half asleep. She's like, "Go get back in the bed." That's when I realized, I said, "This messed me up." Because I just could start. All I could do was cry because I'm like, this really is going to be tough to get through. I denied trying to go to counseling, even though I think by this time the counseling services had started to wrap up. So, I don't know. Then there was another bad storm where I was at home by myself, which put me back in that same position that I was the first time. It was just a popup storm. I was calling my mom. I was hoping that she would hurry up and get home, but she was just doing her own thing. I'm sitting in the hallway hyperventilating. I'm halfway in the interior closet in the hallway. I'm over here watching the weather, and the power goes out. So, I'm thinking like, "What in the world is going on?" It freaked me out so bad. My heart, I knew. I was like, "This is a problem." At that moment I said I have to go to counseling. I have to talk to somebody about this because I knew that wasn't healthy. I had to be rational again. I'm like, "They didn't say it was a tornado warning. They didn't say it was a watch. They just said it's just windy, heavy rain, and some thunder. I don't think that could hurt you." So, I had to really think and just calm myself down because no one else was there. I'm like, if I keep on, I'm going to pass out because I'm hyperventilating. But then I decided to start going to counseling up here at JSU. Basically, she was just like, "We can't control these things. The only thing we can do is be prepared. That's

making sure you have your app, stay weather alert." She said, "Get you a helmet." She said, "Anytime it starts storming bad, get your helmet and sit in the hallway with your helmet on if that's going to make you feel better. Do everything it's going to take for you to feel better." I really liked that she told me that. So, every time it storms like last night, I had my weather app. I kept checking it every couple of hours. Then I think it was another storm I think, yes, a couple weeks ago. I still feel the panic coming and the sweaty palms. I just had to calm myself down. Just remember this is okay. The odds of this happening to you again are very slim to none. But it's just trying to get through my head that this is not going to happen again. Then a good friend of mine told me, he was like, "You know what, you've been getting through storms your whole life. That was just one storm that impacted you." I was like, "You're right. I've been living through thunderstorms all my life." So, it's just a storm. It's not going to be anything worse than that. If it is, that's why I have my apps and my alerts. I think those are the worst parts. It's just like we try not to relive the moment, but not freaking out. Because people think you're crazy if you're freak out. But they won't ever understand unless it actually happens to them. I don't really like when I do get upset about the storms because my friends are like, "It's okay." I'm like, "You don't understand. It's a different feeling when you've actually gone through that stuff." Even when I was watching news last night from when those tornadoes hit in, I think it's Auburn. I'm not really sure where they hit. It was Auburn. I was just watching the devastation. It was like a replay. I'm just like, "Okay." I said, "I can't [laughter] watch that." So, I think it's going to be a lot tougher to get through it than I thought it would be. Even though some nights, I can sleep through the storms, but I have to convince myself a lot that it's nothing serious. I have to prepare myself early on.

ER: Your feelings are normal for that because you did experience that trauma. I think as you're talking about it, those are your now normal reactions to it. That it's not just a light storm that's going through that has a significant impact on you. Listening to you, you're a strong person. To think that you're recognizing that, okay, I may need to ask for help, or I may need to start thinking about how I'm going to cope with this, I think that's been really important to hear. I think that may help other people just to start to be already thinking through that and trying to figure out what you could do to help yourself in that sense. That's good too.

PR: Yes. I always try to think of ways to – dang it, I lost my train of thought.

ER: Coping or to –

PR: Yes, it's with the coping. I think that sometimes you just have to get yourself out of the denial because the more you prolong it, the worse you'll get. I've never really liked storms. I don't know why. I try to think back to why I don't like storms. But I never really liked them. I finally got over the fear of it. My worst fear with the weather is a tornado hitting my home, and a tornado hit my home. So, I'm like, "Oh, God." I think another crazy thing about it is even after that I couldn't sleep with the light off. I couldn't. It was like any fear that I've ever had growing up, it all came back at one time. I don't know if there's something related to that to happen. But I couldn't sleep with the light off. I said, "Mom, why can't I sleep with the light off?" She was like, "Because you were in that dark apartment by yourself." I'm just like, "Well, now I don't know if that's it, but that probably is." Even now when it does storm, if the power goes out, I do kind of freak out a little bit just because obviously it had to be something really powerful to

make it go off. But I try to make sure all the lights are on. I don't know. The experience I think is different for everybody. But with me –

ER: Thinking back, did you go back to your apartment to try to look at the damage or to try to determine if there was anything you could save?

PR: Well, we couldn't because that's how unsafe it was. Basically, they took all of our items and belongings that they could and packed them up in a pod so they could start fixing the damage. Then they let us come in. We had to sign waivers. But basically, some people got a chance to go into their buildings. But in particular our buildings, we couldn't get into those. So, the last thing I saw in that apartment was what I saw when they were taking me out. So, I never went back there.

ER: That was your home for five years.

PR: Yes. I did have a little angry outburst on the apartment Facebook page. They were like, "If you lived in these buildings, you can't go in there." I'm like, "Well, I'm angry. I want to get my stuff." Then people were like, "Well, don't say angry." I was like, "No, I am angry because this is all my stuff that I've had for over five years and stuff that I've brought from home that I had most of my life." It was actually a couple of things. I had my wallet that I wanted to get. Then there was a teddy bear. There was a hat that my grandmother, she had passed away a couple of years ago, that she gave me and that I wanted to get. I couldn't get those things. It's like finding a needle in a haystack. Some of the stuff, they try to take it by room. Well, some stuff that was in my room was in my roommate's room. So, it's no telling where that stuff was. But I remember when we were trying to do the assessment of all my possessions and stuff, I remember this teddy bear this lady had given me that I used to go to church with. I was in love with her. She was just the sweetest little lady in the world. She gave me a teddy bear. I was inseparable since I was a little kid. I think I was six or seven years old. When I realized that I couldn't get it back, I cried. I was like, "Mom," I said, "Finally –" This storm is what separated that from me. I'm twenty-five years old with this teddy bear that I'm crying over. Luckily, I was able to find him. So, yes, that was like, I don't know. I was like, "Somebody else is looking out for me." Because I was looking through the stuff. The longer it sits in that dark and wet environment, the moldy gets and stuff. So, it was like we had to rush to find stuff. When I opened one of the boxes, there he was just sitting there looking at me. I was like, "Oh, my gosh." I started crying because I didn't expect to get that thing back. I wasn't going to settle for it. So, I kind of knew deep down I was going to find him regardless. But I found him, and he wasn't wet. I don't know how he didn't get wet. I was like this tornado thing is really kind of weird. Even if you look around the community, you would think – there was a trailer park. I think one trailer got blown off. It just got blown over a little bit off whatever the blocks it was on. Then you have the baseball stadium, that didn't get damaged. Then you come on down some more, they knock over all this. I'm like, what kind of storm was this? You skip this, this, and this. You hit this and then you go. I'm like, what kind of thing is it? Then the fact that majority of the students were gone and that I think they only had one injury in the whole city or during that storm system, which I thought that that was a blessing as well. Just to imagine if their students were here, how much more damage, how more catastrophic it would have been.

ER: I think that's been a scary thought that people have thought about is that what if it wasn't spring break?

PR: Yes. So, that's another thing. I remember I was thinking about going to the clubhouse of the apartment complex, and that was flat. I don't know, it's just some of the decisions that we made that night. I heard people were jumping out their windows because that was the safest thing they could do. The fact that there were no fatalities, it's like a blessing and a curse because we had to do all this crazy stuff. We didn't know how strong we were or could be in this situation. Especially me, I'm a big crybaby. I don't do anything. So, to say that I hunkered down in an apartment by myself, it actually makes me feel stronger. Because I'm like, if I can get through this, I can get through anything. I can get through school. I can get through whatever. I can get through anything. Since I've handled this experience, I know I can.

ER: What does your recovery process look like in terms of where you've been living and accumulating things that you need?

PR: Well, I'm staying with my parents. We worked out an agreement for me to stay there until I finish school, which that's a good thing for me. I got a lot of donations from different people, from church, and just from the community. Actually, I got too much stuff because I don't have any room to put anything. People are still trying to give me stuff. I said, "I can't [laughter]." So, I actually have to give stuff away. But that's pretty much it, just trying to just keep going and rebuild and just trying to look on the bright side. That means I get a whole new wardrobe. I get to save my money while I save my parents until I can get my own place. But thinking about it, when I do get my own place, I'm thinking about how am I going to feel when bad weather comes? That's another thing that's really been on my mind a lot since I'm getting closer to getting ready to move out. So, I don't know what other steps I should take to try to get through that. But I think it's just going to be one day at a time. That's all I could say.

ER: That shows a little bit fear coping right there.

PR: One day at a time.

ER: Then let's think about what helped you cope with the challenges from the tornado?

PR: My faith. I'm a big, strong believer in God. So, I really feel like he helped me through a lot of this. I can't think of anything else. Between me and that apartment, I'm saying the mannequin head didn't even move. But a whole curtain flew into the bathroom, and the door is still shut. So, I can't fathom it. I don't want to be too religious or spiritual or whatever, but that's what's been getting me through. It's just like other little things. It's just the craziest thing, my car. Through all of this, I've seen cars, big, old trucks flipped over. People's windows out of their cars bust out. But then there's my car sitting here with just a couple of scratches when my insurance lapsed that one day. So, I'm just like, what? It's just crazy to think somebody out there or something out there covered me through that night. I really believe that it was God. So, that has really been getting me through.

ER: So, it's your faith and beliefs.

PR: Yes, faith.

ER: What will you carry forward from this experience?

PR: I don't really know. I just try to, like I said, take it one day at a time. But just know that I can get through it regardless of anything. Even if it's another tornado that comes through here one day or something, I know how to be prepared for that. Maybe I can even help out now. But I really think that me being stronger is what's helped me. It's not just weather related, but just being stronger as a person.

ER: Do you have any advice that you would give others about how to deal with an event like a tornado?

PR: I'd say try your best not to panic. Don't panic and just try to have an emergency plan in place always. Regardless if you're living at home by yourself at school, just think of a place that you would go really fast in a situation like that. I think just being prepared for the weather and just take everything seriously because I didn't. Even though I'm a person that really, I try to take the weather seriously, that day I was just going to go back to sleep. If I wouldn't have woken up or called my parents, then I probably would have been still laying in that bed and probably wouldn't be here. So, I would say just make sure you take the weather seriously and make sure you have a good plan in place in the future.

ER: I wanted to bring up one other aspect. You were a student at the time. How were your classes or how did that impact you in terms of that semester?

PR: Well, I know the teachers, they did work with us a lot. But I couldn't drop any of my classes because they were all social work classes. That was the bad thing about it because I couldn't drop any classes. I was stressed out. I still had to get assignments done, and I still had to deal with that trauma that I experienced. But one teacher in particular, the first day back in class, he brought us breakfast, and he just sat down. He said, "We're just going to talk." I was just like, "What?" We cried. We chuckled a little bit. I really appreciated him for doing that because we didn't need to worry about assignments in school. We needed to worry about our emotional health and our mental health after that. I really appreciate him for doing that. But I was really surprised I passed the semester. That was probably one of my best semesters out of all my college career [laughter]. It also made me remember to put forth your best because you never know when something can happen. You have to rely on what you started with. I was like, "Oh, I've got time to make up this work or do this assignment and get my grades up." But when something like that happens and basically you either take your grade – that will have less stress on me if I would have been able to just take my grade. But I couldn't because I had to do that extra work. Well, that was one of my best semesters that I had. A lot of my friends were like, "I thought that you were going to quit because a lot of people did that." They were like, "But I'm proud of you for staying." I was like, "Thank you." But yes.

ER: Kind of maybe a positive thing that you may have needed at that point, just to have a good semester even dealing with the trauma.

PR: I think I had to write a paper. The teachers were lenient. They understood that we didn't have our laptops anymore. Stuff that was saved on our thumb drives was gone. So, they really did work with us a lot. I was surprised that I came out that well in school. So, yes.

ER: Are there other things that you would like to share with us that we didn't get a chance to ask?

PR: No, not really. I think I've said everything [laughter] that I could think of.

ER: Well, we thank you very much for your time and willingness to share your story. I think it's going to be very helpful for other people to hear about your experiences and the recovery.

PR: You're welcome.

-----End of Transcript-----
Reviewed by Nicole Zador, 3/13/2025