

## Interview with Shannon Siskey

**Narrator:** Shannon Siskey

**Interviewer:** Tanveer Islam

**Location:** Jacksonville, Alabama

**Date:** March 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 March 16, 2019, Tanveer Islam interviewed Shannon Siskey for an oral history project about the Jacksonville tornado that occurred on March 19, 2018. The interview took place at Houston Cole Library, Jacksonville State University. Shannon Siskey shares her experiences as the property manager of a student apartment complex during the tornado. At the time of the tornado, she was at her home in Saks, but her immediate concern was for the residents of the apartment complex in Jacksonville, where she managed a property that housed approximately 500 residents, mostly students. Upon arriving at the complex after the tornado, Siskey describes scenes of chaos, debris, and frightened residents with nowhere to go. With no basement or shelter available, residents gathered at the front office, but it was unsafe due to falling debris and live wires. Siskey emphasizes the challenges of ensuring residents' safety, rescuing trapped animals, and helping individuals retrieve their belongings in the aftermath. She explains that many residents, especially international students, faced difficulties without access to identification or essential documents. Siskey also shares her personal struggles after the tornado, including losing her job and the impact on her family's finances, as well as the challenge of finding another job in the area. Despite these hardships, she highlights the vital role of local ministries, community support, and donations that provided shelter, food, and other necessities. The interview concludes with Siskey's reflections on the importance of preparedness and the need for clear communication about shelter locations in disaster-prone areas.

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 March 16th, 2019. We are hearing from Shannon Siskey who will share her experience of the tornado and recovery. Our interview is taking place at Houston Cole Library at Jacksonville State University. So, my first question is how were you affected by the tornado?

Shannon Siskey: Well, we were at home in Saks when the tornado hit. We also had an apartment here because I was the property manager at one of the large student properties here. So, my family was there. I thank God that my kids were there with me. We weren't here in Jacksonville actually when it happened. A lot of my residents were here and a lot of them were like family to me. Then I have my son and nieces and nephews that lived in the area. So, as soon as the tornado hit, of course, we waited a few minutes to get out on the roads. But we got here as soon as it was clear enough to see. Basically, as soon as the rain slacked off just enough to be able to see to drive over here. What was normally a fifteen-minute drive was probably a forty-five-minute drive just because of all the debris and the detours. Just seeing everything coming into Jacksonville, no power, trees everywhere, cars everywhere, it was just frightening. We had a little bit of trouble getting to the apartment complex. But after I explained who I was and why I was trying to come there, that I had keys to get into buildings and that I knew my way around the property and things like that, they allowed us to go into the area and over to the property. So, there were people everywhere. People didn't know where to go, what to do because it was still raining even though it had slacked off a little bit from the tornado. It was still just very wet. People had come out of their apartments with not much clothes, maybe no shoes, no IDs, no belongings, anything. So, everyone was scared and just wondering where to go. So, we just tried to help everyone we could. We were hearing people say that there were people trapped in places, that there were animals trapped in places. So, that was the first thing we tried to do is to go and make sure there was actually no one trapped inside places to where they couldn't get out because of roofs falling in or walls or whatever the case may be. So, that's what we did.

TI: Were there mostly students?

SS: It was mostly students. I had a few non-students who lived there. Thankfully, a lot of people, I won't say every [laughter]. Definitely not every. But thankfully, a lot of people were on vacation or gone for spring break. So, we had a lot less people than we would have had had it not been spring break because there were about five hundred residents for that property. So, that night, I don't know, there was probably still a couple of hundred who were still on site and not on vacation. It seemed like maybe they had friends over and things like that it being spring break because there were a lot of people I didn't recognize. Of course, it could have been from other apartments or houses or whatever in the area and just people were coming together just trying to find each other maybe. So, yes. But they were mostly students. I did have some, like I said, non-students and just a couple of families who were also employees who lived and worked on the property. So, not a whole lot of children or anything like that, but there were a few.

TI: Was there any basement or shelter?

SS: No basement, no shelter. Everybody was kind of congregating at the front office as kind of a go-to point. But unfortunately, the roof was falling in on it. It was a dangerous place to be as well. There were live wires and water everywhere. So, we were trying to keep people away from as much as we could that they could get injured on. So, there was really nowhere for anyone to go from that point immediately until we started talking to authorities and talking to people about shelter and things like that.

TI: So, this was the night of the tornado?

SS: That was the night of the tornado, yes. So, we stayed as long as we could and worked every day after that to make sure people could finally get their belongings and shelter. Tried to help some people get IDs. We rescued a lot of animals [laughter]. So, that was good because there were a lot of animals, a lot of pets that had gotten left behind or had run away when they heard it or felt it coming or whatever. So, we tried to help rescue them and get people shelter they needed and their belongings that they needed.

TI: So, what happened after that night?

SS: Well, like I said, we worked day and night basically to try to make it to where people could get into their apartments to get their belongings. There was just a lot of debris removal.

TI: But it was not livable anymore.

SS: No, not at all. We had to completely evacuate the property because of course, no power, flooding because it was still raining. But no power, no water. A lot of them were flooded and there was potential of fire because of exposed electricity. There were power lines down across the property. There were cars in trees [laughter]. There were dumpsters turned upside down up against it. It was a mess. It was so dangerous just to even walk around. So, we tried to keep people from walking around. Tried to keep people from going in and out of apartments as much as we could until we could get it as safe as we could for a limited time and get people to be able to get in there and get their stuff. I know it was hard. It seemed like it was harder for the international students, simply because of the ID situation. They couldn't call a friend or relative that lived a couple miles away to bring a copy of their birth certificate or to get them help them get a new driver's license or whatever. They just didn't have that accessibility. So, we tried to help get their documents and things like that so that they could go and get new IDs and things. So, it seemed a little harder for them. A lot of them were like family to me. So, it was like my kids [laughter] because my actual kids are around the same age as a lot of my residents were.

TI: So, do you know how many students and how many international students lived at the apartment complex?

SS: I don't know because we didn't separate or anything. We didn't keep count or anything. So, I'm not sure how many were international students. But I know we had a lot of international students.

TI: How many total residents in the complex?

SS: Well, we had a capability of 504. But I'm thinking we had four-ninety something during that time. So, right around five hundred total residents. We had very few vacant apartments during that time. We usually stayed [laughter] fully occupied. Like I said, there were a lot of non-residents there during that time just because it was spring break and people visiting and stuff like that and partying, I'm sure [laughter]. But yes, there were a lot of people I didn't recognize there too.

TI: So, how was your life disrupted?

SS: Well, I guess my biggest change was I lost my job and my apartment. We didn't have a lot of belongings in the apartment. Had very few there because we didn't live there full time. I have a family of six, so it was kind of hard to live in an apartment [laughter]. But I'll just say there's some especially during certain times of the year. But losing my job was the biggest thing because that was my insurance, my 401(k), health insurance, life insurance, dental. It was everything. I had been in that position for three years, so I was really invested in it. Losing that job was a big change in my life and my family's life. There's not really any other availability in this area for that type of position because there's just not a lot of student properties that and there's not many apartment properties of that scale. We were able to stay employed through the end of April just to help clean up and help do everything. Not everyone on the property was. Unfortunately, I did have to let several employees go, which was pretty heartbreaking because they had just lost their homes and now, they were losing their jobs too. They were like my children, like my family. We were really close there. So, that was a hard time having to let them go. But them being in school, working on their degrees, and having family, I know that helped them cope. There were a lot of ministries in the area that helped a lot of people find shelter, find food, find clothing, whatever it was that they needed. So, that was a big help. The community really came together to help each other. It didn't matter where you lived or where you came from or who you were. It didn't matter. Just everybody came together and helped and that was the biggest thing. To be able to get through, it was everybody coming together and helping each other.

TI: So, you were unemployed for several months after the tornado or did you find –

SS: About six weeks after the tornado, yes.

TI: Six weeks.

SS: So, until the end of April. Then I was unemployed for a few weeks until I found another job. So, I was able to find another job. I was able to get unemployment, so that helped. Of course, that amount is nowhere near what I was making for employment income. But it did help to have something during that time of unemployment. Just having a job loss like that, I don't know, it's not like you got fired. You didn't quit. You didn't cause it to happen in any way. So, it was just a little tough to deal with losing a job like that. Everybody's documents and everybody was wanting to know about their deposits and about their rent they had paid and about their money. They needed it. We didn't have any access to any of that because of course, all the systems were down, all the power was down.

TI: So, how was that taken care of?

SS: All of the paper files that weren't damaged were sent to the company's corporate office. They kept those and finally got everybody's deposits back to people who had paid deposits and things like that. I'm not sure if they finally wound up reimbursing some of the rent for that month or not. I had heard that they were going to. But then when I was no longer working with the company at the end of April, I basically lost touch of what they were doing or not doing. Unfortunately, well as of yesterday, I had still spoken to a couple of residents who used to live there who said they were still waiting on money and things like that even at this time. So, I don't know how true that is. But I tried to help them get whatever I knew they were owed. But having that many, there was no way to know what everybody's balance was and what everybody's deposit status was because there were times where we didn't take deposits. So, we had a lot of residents who did pay deposits and a lot who didn't. There was just no way of me knowing who did and didn't. But as soon as they got all of the information from the property, corporate office was able to access everything and start doing what they needed to do with that.

TI: Have you had any prior experience of such a disaster or this is your first time?

SS: This was my first time. I had seen things from a distance but never really been involved or had family and friends involved in my direct community of this type of disaster and damage and things like that. The damage, it looked like it was an F5 instead of a three. I had people come and film and things like that who had gone when the F5 was in Tuscaloosa after that and had filmed that area. Said that a lot of our damage looked as bad, if not worse than theirs and in two different types of category storms there. So, the damage was just unreal. There were things in places you would never think that they should be. So, it was crazy to see what that wind did. I was just glad nobody lost their life during that time because it could have been a lot worse had the properties been full of people and people not been away on vacation and things like that.

TI: So, personally, do you have any preparedness plan like what to do if there's a tornado warning or –

SS: Well, right now with us looking for another home, we are very aware of how close are we to storm shelters [laughter] or do we have a basement. Those are things we're looking for in trying to find a home now. It's making sure we have somewhere to go. If our home doesn't have a basement or something to shelter in place, how close are we to where we need to go? That's what I would tell anybody, it's just to make sure you know where to go before the time of year even comes around. Not the day before, not the day of. Make sure you know somewhere to go and grab IDs, grab what you can. Don't try to pack a bag [laughter] while there's a tornado coming. But grab what you can as far as identification or medication. A lot of people were out without their medicine. It was just heart wrenching to see because they couldn't get it. A lot of medications are controlled and you can only get them every so often or whatever and doesn't matter what the situation is. So, that was kind of hard to see people just being without the basic things that they needed. We've already decided we have a place in our home where we have some extra water, extra non-perishable food, clothing, and first aid and just a little something to

grab and take with us if we ever have to go because of the tornado. It sounds like you're paranoid, but it's really just trying to be prepared. Just knowing where to go is the biggest thing.

TI: Some of the students who lived in the apartments told us that since they didn't have renter's insurance, they lost all their belongings and couldn't get any reimbursement because of that. Have you had that experience or have you heard anything like that?

SS: Yes. Unfortunately, that was true. It was written into the lease that they signed that the renter's insurance was suggested. We even had a \$10 fee if you didn't have renter's insurance. Because renter's insurance also is liability insurance for the property. It's the way that works. If someone, for instance, had a candle burning and they knocked it over and caused a fire in their apartment, well that renters and liability insurance would cover their personal belongings and it would cover the structures of the building to where the company wouldn't come back and say, "Hey, you owe us \$50,000 for this apartment," or whatever. Or if they busted a toilet and flooded it or something. Crazy things like that happened a lot. People who had insurance were able to get their belongings paid for and the property was covered as well. But for people who didn't, they paid a \$10 fee per month. That went to cover the structures. We explained to them, "This does not cover your personal property. This does not cover anything except the actual property itself." Because we provided all the furniture. We provided all of the appliances. They were fully furnished except for electronics. So, that \$10 per month went to replace those things when the property got damaged by fire or flood, tornado, whatever it was. But a lot of people whether it was ignoring what we said or whether it was not caring or whether it was just not understanding, there was a lot of communication back and forth of whose fault it was that someone didn't have insurance or that someone's belongings were gone. Or they thought the \$10 per month was to cover their belongings. But we partnered with an actual insurance company who offered them insurance at \$12 a month that did cover the personal belongings. Or there was a \$20, I think, a month plan that covered extra belongings for people who had a lot of electronics or a lot of extensive items, heirloom items or what have you. There was a couple of insurance plans available for companies we partnered with. We sent their brochures out, sent their flyers out, advertised for them, basically because we wanted those people to have insurance. Just like you want to have insurance on your car or your life or whatever, it's necessary. But there were a lot of people who didn't and they lost everything they had and it was tragic. It was tough to see the loss, people not having just basic necessities, clothes, and things. Not to mention game systems or electronics or whatever.

TI: Laptops.

SS: Laptops, yes. After everyone had gotten in and gotten everything that they wanted, there was a lot of stuff like that left. We could see people had left laptops and game systems and clothes. There were pantries. There was, I don't know, thousands of dollars' worth of food that was left. So, during those six weeks after the tornado, we donated everything that we could to the community and to the shelters. Took a lot of stuff to whatever ministries would accept it, or to the Hampton Inn because they had that thing set up for a long-time taking donations of things. So, we got everything that we could to be able to donate before it was thrown away. So, anything that was good, we got out and took and donated. So, hopefully, it helped someone somewhere. Or maybe even it got back to the original owner, who knows [laughter].

TI: So, now we'd like to talk about disaster resilience. By resilience we mean the capacity to cope with or adapt to the recovery challenges brought by the tornado. So, can you talk a little bit what helped you to cope with the challenges from the tornado?

SS: It was really the ministries in the area. They would come and they would bring food or money or batteries or flashlights. They were constantly bringing things to help cope during the times that we were here. So, that was a huge help. For the ones who set up shelters, that was the biggest help because people just didn't have anywhere to go. So, that was a huge thing for the shelters to be set up and for people to be able to get to wherever they needed to go. Just people coming together that weren't family, but they were coming together like family. Just all the prayer and all the funds and everything that was coming in from everywhere was the biggest thing. Everybody coming together and using it for everyone and not being just selfish with it. There were some who were trying to take advantage of it. There were some who were trying to break into apartments and trying to loot and things like that. So, that was a little tough to deal with. But everybody came together and tried to prevent things like that and just tried to work together to help as many people out as they could. So, that was the biggest coping thing. Had people not worked together and if we didn't have things being brought in that everyone needed, it would have been even worse.

TI: Did you get any help to look for jobs or finding jobs?

SS: I didn't. No, I didn't. There were a lot of people that got help from FEMA and things like that. But I didn't because that wasn't our primary home. So, I didn't want to take anything that someone else could get. We had a home and we had our belongings. Like I said, I did get unemployment when I lost my job at the end of April for a few weeks until I was reemployed. Then a lot of my other employees that worked there, they were able to find jobs. A couple of them stayed with the same company who had owned that property. But then some of them didn't. Some of them went back home to Georgia or to Birmingham or Huntsville or wherever they were originally from to be with family and have somewhere to be, whether they transferred schools or whatever and got other jobs.

TI: Is there something that you can point to that helped you to recover more quickly?

SS: My biggest thing was my church family. They helped us out a lot just the support, emotional, physical, whatever kind of. My church family played a big role in being there for me and helping in any way they could.

TI: Do you also have family members around here?

SS: Yes. My children of course and my husband and his family. A lot of my family live in this area. So, we just came together.

TI: Do you think that was kind of helpful or helped you better than others who didn't have a family around here or they were by themselves?

SS: I think so, yes. Like I had mentioned earlier, the ones who didn't have close family around, it seems like it hit them harder. You can make friends while you're in college. You have friends for a couple years at a time, but those aren't your lifelong people, people that you grew up with, the cousins or neighbors or whatever, people you've known for twenty years or your whole life, or people that raised you. It's different to have those type of people in your family than just people you've just known for a year or two. But to see people come together and take care of each other as if they were family, that was just a huge thing to watch people do that and help each other out especially for those who didn't have family and friends close.

TI: Have you thought about looking for a job elsewhere or moving out to other places?

SS: I did. Up until I found the job that I'm at now in Anniston, I did look at several jobs in Birmingham, Huntsville, even down close to Mobile and in those areas because the money was so much different than what I could find around here. Even the job I have now, as thankful as I am for it, it's a lot less money than what I was making there in that position.

TI: Any other information that you can share about the recovery that helped you that you can think of? You mentioned about the church family, your immediate family from employment. Any other thing that you can –

SS: All the donations were a huge help. So, when any community is going through something like that to have the donations of the basic needs, water, food, flashlights, shelter, things like that, those types of donations are essential to have as much as you can of that type of stuff you don't think about. Or anything to help people. You don't even have a place to take a bath during those times when something like that happens. So, just to have those basic necessities donated to you, that was a big help too.

TI: What will you carry forward from this experience?

SS: To just try to be prepared. To be patient with people because people are scared, people are angry, upset. There's every emotion you can think of when something like this happens. So, to just be patient with each other and understand that everybody is going to cope with it differently and everybody is going to deal with it differently. Some are not going to deal with it as well as others. Just to be patient with them and try to support them even though you may have gone through the same thing. Just try to be patient with each other and give each other the support you need when something like that happens.

TI: You mentioned that you're looking for a basement or close to shelter for new housing?

SS: Yes. We keep that in the back of our mind [laughter]. Not too far back [laughter]. It's definitely important to be able to know that we either have a ground floor to go to an inside area, to go to a basement, or to be close to a shelter. We want to stay away from manufactured homes and apartments just because of that little fear that's still in the back of our mind of what if we would have been in the apartment that night. Even though the apartment I had was on the ground floor, it was flooded, windows were shattered, things like that. So, we're not wanting an apartment or a manufactured home just because of what we saw during the tornado.

TI: Do you have any advice for the students living in the apartments because you saw them displaced after the tornado? Can you give them any advice that they can follow?

SS: Renter's insurance, it is so worth it. If you cut out a soda every other day, you have enough for renter's insurance. It's really that cheap. It's so well worth it. Even if you just think, well, all I have is my clothes. But what if you didn't have clothes? To have the renter's insurance and have a plan of where to go. Know where to go before tornado season gets here.

TI: So, where should they go if the apartment doesn't have a basement or a shelter? Where should these students go when there is a tornado warning?

SS: As far as I know, the Public Safety Complex is open to the public. I've heard that the Houston Cole has a basement that they can go to. I know the hospital used to, but I'm not sure since the hospital is no longer a hospital, whether they have that anymore. But even if not, if something's happening and you can just get to someone's home, get out of the apartment. Find a structure on the bottom floor. Get to a bottom floor. Take your ID with you. Grab what you can and get out of there. Don't stay in a top floor or even a middle floor apartment during tornadoes. Even if it's just a watch, be on alert. Don't just sit around and ignore it and think it's going to go away because it doesn't always go away. Sometimes it takes everything away. So, just be prepared. Have a family member that has extra copies of your ID even. It may be a good idea.

TI: Or maybe scanned and have electronic copies.

SS: Electronic, right. Grab your phone or email it to yourself or whatever it may be just to be able to get to those things if you can't grab your wallet or your purse or whatever. If you can't grab anything at all, to be able to get to it in case it's destroyed is a big help to be able to have that identification. Even to be able to have something at someone else's house even, a change of clothes or whatever, may be helpful too. But just have somewhere to go even if it's not a public shelter, whether it's family or friends or a neighbor that has a bottom floor. Just to be able to have somewhere to go. Know ahead of time that you have somewhere to go.

TI: Well, thank you very much for your time. Is there any other thing that we should know, or do you have any concerns or comments that you'd like to share?

SS: I would like to say simply because I was still questioning myself where are the shelters in the area? So, it would be helpful for Calhoun County, state of Alabama, whoever, on a larger scale to make sure, oh, okay, here's a list of shelters across the state, or here's a list of shelters across the county. Because you may not be at home when something like this happens. You may know where your shelters are around your house, but you may not be there. Or you can't get to what you've planned to. So, it's always good to have a backup plan. It would be helpful for everyone to have those lists readily available or on your phone or put them out on social media or whatever they could do to make sure people know where shelters are.

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

SS: You're welcome.

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Reviewed by Nicole Zador, 3/14/2025