

History
of the
U.S. Food and Drug Administration

Interviewee: Natalie Guidry

Interviewer: John P. Swann, Ph.D.

Date: September 26, 2007

Place: Metairie, LA



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Interview with Natalie Guidry

New Orleans District Office

September 26, 2007

TAPE 1, SIDE A

JS: This is an interview with Natalie Guidry at the Metairie Resident Post of the New Orleans District Office on September 26, 2007. We're here to talk about Hurricane Katrina and FDA's experience with that and Natalie's experience with the hurricane.

So, Natalie, let's get started by just talking a little bit about your own background, where you grew up, and how it is that you came to the agency and to the New Orleans District Office.

NG: Okay. Well, I was born here, not right in New Orleans but in Metairie, which is the suburb right outside, in Jefferson Parish. Pretty much born and raised here; my family has been here generations. I can't even count back how many generations. They came off the boats from Ireland and Germany, and settled in New Orleans. So we've got our roots in New Orleans.

How I came to the agency, I'm a CT hire, so right after September 11th, I was a counterterrorism hire, so I've been with FDA about five and a half years. My first full-time job was with the Food and Drug Administration.

JS: And you came on as an investigator?

NG: As an investigator, yes.

JS: So you have a background in science?

NG: My background, I'm a dietician. So I went to college and have my B.S. in dietetics, and I have a master's in business administration.

JS: What interested you in FDA?

NG: At the time, I was looking for any job in New Orleans, went on the website, and found it. Now that I look back at my application, and what I wrote, it was a perfect match. I wanted to go into quality assurance, and I couldn't have asked for a better job. I absolutely love what I do.

JS: This was a time, when you came on, the agency brought on several hundred employees as investigators after 9/11, so you came in with a large group of people.

NG: I think it was the biggest hire they'd had in several years.

JS: Certainly among the biggest in the history of the agency, absolutely.

And were there any others that the New Orleans District brought on at the time?

NG: I think the day we started, there were five or six of us, and then a couple more gradually over the next few months. I think there were three or four extras that came on. For the most part, everybody stayed, until Katrina, and then people started moving.

JS: What did you do when you got on board? What were some of the things you were tasked to do?

NG: I was mainly in food work since my background was in dietetics and foods, and New Orleans was such a huge food industry, mainly seafood, so I focused on that. I did some warehouse inspections, and was just starting to branch out into other program areas before the storm.

JS: And you enjoyed that.

NG: I did. I enjoyed it. Right before Katrina, they had offered details to the Public Affairs position. Our PAS [Public Affairs Specialist] at the time had transferred over to Investigations. She was promoted to a supervisor.

JS: What was her name?

NG: Stacey Below. She's now in Dallas, since Katrina. Stacey was the Public Affairs Specialist in the New Orleans office, and when she moved over to Investigations, they

opened up six detail positions for two months at a time. My detail was March and April of '05. So I was on detail for two months, and actually two other people followed me, even during the time of the hurricane.

JS: So, what interested you in the Public Affairs position?

NG: Why Public Affairs? A lot of people ask that, because investigators are investigators, you know, the whole way through. They love their job.

But it was my background in community outreach, especially dietetics, community nutrition, dealing with the public. It just worked really well. It interested me. I learned so much more about the agency. Investigations is wonderful, but you're so focused on certain program areas, and you know those regs like the back of your hand. But Public Affairs opens you up to a whole new world of what the agency is about.

JS: What kind of training does the agency offer in public affairs work?

NG: Not much. It's kind of on-the-job, learn as you go.

I think the last training for PAS's was in 2006. They brought all the Public Affairs Specialists to Washington for a few days. I didn't go because I was only acting. They wouldn't take an acting public affairs person.

JS: That's too bad.

NG: And I think the PAS training before that was 2002. So maybe every five years they hold some kind of training/conference.

JS: Well, obviously you knew the area well, and the public that FDA works with on a regular basis, and our so-called stakeholders, certainly in the consumers' world. I know that's what your primary interest was in.

So at the time, as of August 2005, you were on detail?

NG: No, August 2005, I was back as an investigator. Some of the work carried over, so I was kind of finishing up some of the things I had started on my detail, but for the most part, back into investigations, which, in September 2005, that changed.

JS: Now, life in New Orleans, what's it like, for somebody who doesn't know the city? Obviously, it must be a pretty close-knit city from everything I've heard so far.

NG: Post-Katrina?

JS: Pre-Katrina.

NG: Pre-Katrina? Very close-knit; it's a big city but it's still a very small town. People, many people who were born and raised here, they never leave. If new people move in, those are the ones who move away. It's not like going to Houston or Dallas or

Atlanta, where people are moving in and out all the time. People here know you. I run into people who see me on the street, and they knew my grandparents, they recognize the names, and they recognize your features. You mention one thing, and they know who you are, which is kind of frightening, because then they know your entire family history generations back.

JS: You usually don't see that sort of thing in a large city, do you?

NG: No, no, but that's one thing that's very unique about New Orleans. I think that's one of the reasons why so many people want to come back, and why the rest of the country can't understand why you want to come back. But family is a big part of it. You've got your roots here.

JS: I guess the same thing happens in other parts. It depends on where it is in the country. But after floods or fires or so on, home is home, right?

NG: Right.

JS: But over the years, storms haven't been entirely unknown to the city over the years: hurricanes, tropical storms, and other problems. And the way the city is built, it's -- someone once described it to me as something like a bowl, like it sits in the bottom of a bowl surrounded by water.

NG: We all knew that. We all knew, and they'd been putting that fear in us for years. Somebody said the other day it's kind of like California just breaking off into the ocean. You know it could happen, they talk about it, it's a threat. So was Y2K. So is everything, you know. But does it really happen? You might plan for it, but you don't really expect it to happen.

Since I've been here, living here, the first time we evacuated was in 1998. That was the first time. So all of the threats, all of the hurricanes in the '80s and '90s, I was born in '75, so I'd say from the '80s on that I remember, we weren't worried about it. You'd just ride it out. You never left, never evacuated.

JS: I guess you make some local preparations, buy certain goods or something.

NG: I'm sure they did, but I don't remember. But it wasn't the panic that we have now. In 1998, that was the first big one. It was Hurricane Georges, only a Category 3. They've always had this scenario of a hurricane coming up the mouth of the river, and Georges was right on track.

JS: Did it make landfall?

NG: It made landfall, I want to say in the Mobile area. Maybe it cut across just the very tip of Louisiana and then turned. That was the first time we all evacuated. But since then, it seems like every hurricane has been a Category 3, 4, 5, so something's going on

with Mother Nature. Things are definitely changing in that aspect, where Category 5 is almost the norm now.

JS: And getting frightening.

NG: Very frightening.

JS: When you left around '98, where you evacuated to kind of depended on where the hurricane was heading, right?

NG: You just want to get out of New Orleans, get away from the coast; everybody thought Baton Rouge was a safe place to go. Baton Rouge wasn't hit as hard, but the farther north you go, the more safe you feel. Even though, Katrina left damage all the way up through northern Mississippi; I think they even had damage in Alabama, not severe flooding, but still power outages and everything.

JS: Well, do you have family or friends or someone that you would go and stay with when you evacuated?

NG: We did in Baton Rouge. That was, like I said, the first time we evacuated. I think there were 40 of us that all evacuated to a cousin's house there.

JS: Forty?

NG: Forty of us. It was interesting, because we had never left before, and she said, “Come on up.” She had a patio home in Baton Rouge, so we moved all the furniture around, went and bought blow-up mattresses, and hung out at her house for four days, glued to the television.

We’ve evacuated a couple times since then. Georges was the first; Ivan; and then Katrina. Those are the three that I’ve evacuated for. For Katrina, Baton Rouge wasn’t far enough. We wanted to get farther away. So by the time I started making hotel reservations, Memphis was the closest I could get.

JS: I’m going to get to that in a second.

NG: Okay.

JS: Kind of moving up now to August of 2005, when the storm, Hurricane Katrina, comes into the Gulf after going across the Florida peninsula. And it looks like it’s going to take the track that they often do, going up the Florida Panhandle. It doesn’t do that. In fact, within a matter of just a couple or three days maybe, it not only doesn’t take that track, but it strengthens considerably. And it looks like it is the one that’s going to make that direct hit on New Orleans.

Now, that weekend, say, the Friday before the Monday that the hurricane actually makes landfall, are you at work that day?

NG: I was at work. I think that's important to know, that everybody that Friday left thinking it was just a normal weekend. I left the office around 7:00, 7:30 that Friday night, went over to my supervisor's office, told her goodbye, have a good weekend, and little did we know life was changing dramatically that evening.

I went home that night and turned on the news, and they were talking about a storm in the Gulf.

JS: Where in the city is your home?

NG: In Metairie.

JS: Metairie. Okay.

NG: So I guess from the office, I lived about 15 miles from the office. Nothing unusual about that evening, though, just went home, had dinner, turned on the 10 o'clock news, and they start talking about a hurricane. So, watched the news, got on the phone, called my mother, and I said, "Did you watch the news? Did you see what was going on?"

She said, "Yeah, they're talking about Hurricane Katrina."

We still had no idea. So I said, "Let's be safe. Let's start calling for hotel reservations."

I guess I was the last one in the city to watch the news or even think about it. The closest hotel we could get was in Memphis. We tried every hotel. The Houston area was booked. For Memphis, we knew we had a straight shot; we could get there. So we booked a hotel in Memphis and . . .

JS: That's a long drive from New Orleans.

NG: About six hours.

And we made reservations for that Saturday night. We were leaving. Just to be prepared.

They still didn't know if the hurricane was coming to New Orleans, but they had a good idea it wasn't taking the course that they had thought, to Florida. But by Saturday morning, things had definitely changed, and they were on the news, the mayor, the governor, everybody, saying "this is it, this is the big one, this is the one we've been talking about. You need to start making preparations."

JS: What did you do around your home?

NG: Nothing. I was more concerned about getting back to the office because I knew, wherever this hurricane hit, it wasn't going to Florida. So since our district covers Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana, I knew it was coming to one of our states. So I called a coworker of mine and we started moving the government cars. We weren't

going to let the government cars flood, because we knew that area could flood if it was going to happen. So about 9:00 in the morning, I met her at the office.

JS: Saturday morning?

NG: Saturday morning. We started moving the cars, got our computer, packed up our disaster gear, got our credentials, we took everything with us because we knew we were going to have disaster work sometime, somewhere Monday morning.

JS: So you get all these cars. And how many cars are we talking about?

NG: I don't know the exact number. I'd say anywhere between 12, 15 -- under 20.

JS: It's a lot of cars, though. So you're out . . .

NG: Gassing them up.

JS: You're gassing up these cars, you're moving cars around. Meanwhile, a lot of other people in the city are probably heading out of town.

NG: Heading out, yeah. The mayor was on the news talking about Contraflow. They were going to start shutting the interstates down or making them all to go in one direction

out of the city. So we were a little worried about that. We didn't want to get caught on the wrong side of the interstate and not be able to get home.

But we waited and got the cars gassed up.

JS: Got them moved up to a higher level in the parking garage.

NG: Got them moved on the elevated parking garage.

JS: And got your, did you say you got your computer out as well?

NG: We took our computers. One of our supervisors was also there in the office that morning doing the same thing. She was going to move the cars, but we'd beat her to it. And we were ready to go.

JS: So then you head back home and . . .

NG: Head back home. My parents had already left. They started on their way up to Memphis, or to, yeah, to Memphis.

I don't know why, but you automatically start thinking you've got to get everything up off the floor because you just assume water was going to come in maybe an inch, two inches, something like that, so you start lifting things up. You start picking up boxes, anything that can get water damage, taking all the family pictures down, putting them in plastic totes.

JS: Down off the walls.

NG: Yes. Everything came off the walls because one thing is you start worrying about the windows breaking, so you board up the windows, close the shutters, just make sure everything is secure so you think it's not going to get damaged; pack it all up in your car. I think I left the city that day by maybe 3:00 and started driving.

JS: And how long did it take you?

NG: It wasn't bad.

JS: You had your mementos and so on with you?

NG: I have an SUV, and it was packed. I couldn't fit anything else in there. Because you don't know. At that time, you didn't know, so you just took what you could. And a lot of it, sad to say, even now, I still haven't unpacked the boxes. All those family photos, they're still packed up, just in case the next one comes. You just pack them right in your car -- insurance papers, photos, jewelry, anything like that.

JS: Had you ever thought about doing this before, I mean, sort of packing up all these vital things, both the logistical things you might need in the event that you wouldn't be able to go home, plus all the photos and things like that?

NG: I did. I can't say everybody did because I know a lot of people still lost several items or lost everything.

We had had some practice with Georges and Ivan. I learned from my grandfather, you keep everything in one or two boxes -- I mean, he'd been doing this since Betsy and Camille and all the hurricanes before. You just have all your important papers in one spot, and you take that box and you go.

I know if we would have had significant damage, there would have been a lot that I didn't take, that I didn't think about. But at that time, at that moment, when you've got a few hours to get what you need before you need to leave, we did the best we could.

JS: So, anyway, you head up to Memphis. It takes you how long to get up there?

NG: It wasn't bad because I left right when they started the Contraflow, and I got on at a good section, and it took me seven or eight hours, which was nothing compared to a lot of people who headed towards Houston. Houston could take you 19, 20 hours, which is normally a five- or six-hour drive.

My brother and his family, they left a few hours after me, and they decided to go a different route. They went north across the lake, and they were stuck for hours on the Causeway bridge, just sitting there, no way to get off or turn around.

JS: On the causeway. That must be kind of a frightening thought.

NG: Two cats, two dogs, one six-year-old, and a wife that was eight months pregnant.

Yeah, they couldn't get off the bridge.

JS: Wow. So your family all makes it up to Memphis by the end of the weekend, right?

NG: We all went up to Memphis. We were there by Saturday night.

JS: And glued to the TV.

NG: Glued to the television. And by that time, by Saturday night, they knew it was coming towards New Orleans. I knew it was important to New Orleans, but I didn't realize that our country was watching it also.

But it was interesting. We went to dinner, I think it was at a Steak 'n Shake, and people were asking us if we were Katrina evacuees. This is before it had even made landfall. They offered to buy us dinner. We didn't let them. But people were so nice up there. They knew we weren't leaving because we wanted to. It was because we had to. And I guess by then they had made it a mandatory evacuation at some point. I'm not sure when it actually happened.

JS: Yeah, but they did at some point.

When was the first time you heard from or were in touch with the office? I guess there were procedures in place on what one would do, what you would do as an FDA employee in a circumstance like this? Did you have any idea?

NG: I guess there were procedures. We had an emergency plan -- I'm not sure what it was called at the time.

JS: Well, you take care of some of those at the office.

NG: Going into the office on Saturday morning, we weren't told to do that. We just knew we should move the cars so they wouldn't flood. If the cars flooded, we wouldn't have had any government cars to go out to do our job with the disaster work, so we were trying to stop that problem before it started.

I'm sure there was an emergency preparedness plan. I don't remember what it was called at the time. There were phone numbers that we were supposed to call. But when it actually happened, none of the numbers worked. Cell phones didn't work. You couldn't get in touch with people.

So a friend of mine -- a coworker, the one who helped me move the cars -- we were both in Memphis together, so we just started trying to contact people. We had our computers with us, so we just logged in and started trying to communicate with people in Nashville. This is after the storm actually hit.

That Monday, there was no communication. Tuesday, when we found out the significance of what had happened, that the levees had broken, we knew we weren't coming home. That's when we started trying to make contact with Nashville.

JS: And were you able to?

NG: Yes. Got in touch, I think it was with . . . This is where it gets blurry. I can't remember time frames and everything. But I think I spoke to our District Director. Maybe it was a supervisor. It might have been our DIB; I'm not sure. They were just trying to make sure if we were okay. They wanted to know where we were, if we were okay, and they asked about our families and wanted to know if everybody was accounted for. That's what they were concerned with at that time.

JS: Did they know how to contact you?

NG: Not at that point. After we made contact, we gave them phone numbers, and then they could get through.

Local cell phones, if we had a 504 area code or a 985 area code, those phones weren't working. It was very hard to get in touch with people. But if you could give them the hotel phone numbers, that would work. Or e-mail; we'd get in touch via e-mail.

But, yeah, that was a scary time because you still didn't know where you coworkers were.

We had one friend, a good friend, a coworker, who actually stayed -- her home was in Slidell -- and we didn't know if she was okay or not. Last time we had talked to her was, I believe it was Sunday night, Sunday morning, about 4:00 in the morning, right when the hurricane was coming, and they were taking shelter in the bathroom.

JS: She was going to ride it out.

NG: Just going to ride it out.

JS: Who was this?

NG: Wendy Blame. She's going to kill me for saying that. But she was okay. They stayed. They had their reasons for staying.

JS: A lot of people stayed during the storm.

NG: Yeah. Their house didn't get severe flooding, but they couldn't get out for a few days. And after that they left, and they made it up to Nashville okay. For three days, we didn't know if she was okay or not, so that was tough.

JS: What was it like up in Memphis? You were in Memphis several days, weren't you?

NG: I was in Memphis. We got there Saturday night, and my brother and I left, I want to say Wednesday. We left Wednesday to get back to New Orleans. My family, my mother, stepfather, grandmother and sister, they went on to Missouri to stay with friends.

But I don't know. My brother said he needed to get back to work. He works for the Department of Transportation, so he figured there was going to be a need. He needed to be close to this area.

And I was going with him to see what I could do here, because at that point I still didn't know that we were going to report to Nashville. We were just touching base every now and then with the office. They hadn't actually made the decision that we needed to report to Nashville.

JS: But you didn't know what kind of condition your house was in?

NG: No idea.

JS: Didn't know if there was flooding in the part of Metairie where your home is?

NG: I knew that Tuesday morning. I remember waking up and turning the TV on. One of the anchors was on, 7:00 in the morning. He said, "I think we have a problem in New Orleans," because where he was standing, the water was rising, and the water wasn't there the day before. So then I went and woke everybody up, had them come out there, and that's when they said they didn't know what the issue was yet, but something

was wrong. That's when they started flying over with the helicopters and they noticed that the levees had broken. So at that point, that's when we decided . . .

JS: The levees on the lake?

NG: It must have been 17th Street Canal. They still weren't sure, but they knew water was coming in and it shouldn't have been. They didn't have that clear for weeks or months afterwards on actually how it happened, till they started interviewing people.

But we decided to come home. And I knew that by my mother's house, her house hadn't flooded. She lived out in Saint Rose. And I had a cousin who lived on that street as well. So they were able to get back to their home, so we knew her house was okay. Still no electricity, but we knew we could get to her house and figure out what was going on. So that's what my brother and I did.

We headed back down to Louisiana, but had to make several stops, no gas stations had gas. There was nowhere to stop on the side of the road. I mean, it was just chaos, lines of people trying to get out and we're trying to get in. And we made it back. We made it back to a little town outside of Lafayette, Opelousas, Church Point, down to Houma, and then back into the greater New Orleans area. It took several days to get back. The National Guard was blocking off the roads. You couldn't get in. They were telling you that you actually had to leave the area, but we could get into my mother's neighborhood because she was in a different parish. She was in Saint Charles Parish. But to get into Jefferson Parish, where I lived, the National Guard was blocking you.

You couldn't get in. But once you had access to Saint Charles Parish, you could come into Jefferson with no problem. So, it didn't even make sense.

JS: You could get around the blockade?

NG: You could take the back roads. They were blocking it off on the main highways, where you couldn't get in without a proper ID. But once you were in, they didn't stop you.

JS: So you saw your home?

NG: I was able to get in. I can understand now why they didn't want people in. It was very dangerous. I mean, New Orleans is still under water. Helicopters are flying over -- I don't even know the names of the military helicopters, but rescuing people off the rooftops. That was at the time when everything was going on at the Superdome and the Convention Center, which I didn't even know about because we had no electricity. So I didn't know that was going on. I knew it was dangerous because when you could get the radio stations on, it was just chaos, what was going on on the radios. So you were hearing that, but you didn't know what you were coming into. Power lines were down and we were driving over that. Nothing was the way you had left it. Debris was everywhere. The military had taken over.

JS: You could move down your street, though?

NG: No, not with a clear shot. You had to drive around debris. The trees were still down in the roads.

JS: You almost had to have a four-wheel-drive vehicle.

NG: My brother had a four-wheel-drive truck, and we were able to maneuver around. And if you couldn't get down one street, you'd back up. And then if you couldn't get through, we actually got out of the car and just walked to our houses.

But we were okay. We just had minimal wind damage and minimal flooding, but nothing that we couldn't repair. I mean, as long as we were there, we started ripping out carpet, tearing things out that were flooded.

JS: So you did get water into your home.

NG: Some water, but nothing like the majority of the people. Ours was nothing to even talk about when you had people who had eight to 10 feet of water and lost everything. We were very fortunate in that way.

JS: How long did you stick around there?

NG: We actually left Memphis on Wednesday. We made it to my mother's home, I believe it was Saturday. And that Sunday, we heard they were opening the roads to

Jefferson Parish residents later on that week. They were giving you four days to come back to your homes, and then you had to leave for three weeks to a month. SO you had four days to come in and see your property, grab what you can, do what you need to do, and then leave. And that was hard.

And that's when they had made the decision to move everybody up to Nashville, or to have everybody report to Nashville. And I remember getting on the phone with our District Director, and I said, "I've got four days. My family's not there. I've got to go get things for them, check on the house. I'll be in Nashville as soon as I can, but I can't waste these four days and not be able to go home for another month."

And he said, "Do what you need to do and get to Nashville when you can."

So I think I was up there by the next week.

Again, all blurry. I don't remember time frames.

JS: Right. I think they had issued a call to report there about the Wednesday after Labor Day, maybe the 7th, September 7th or so.

NG: I'd have to have a calendar in front of me. I don't even know.

JS: From what I've heard from people, there are blocks of time that people just don't remember, or certainly the details are very hard.

NG: At least the first six months, it's all a blur. You can remember little bits and pieces of it, but nothing, no details.

I think the most vivid memories I have are when I first came back. I remember that.

JS: When you came back to New Orleans?

NG: When I came back to New Orleans, driving around the city, nobody around, nobody on the interstate. You could just see debris and I guess what they had used as the triage center on the interstate when they were evacuating people from the Convention Center or trying to get them out of town. All that debris was still in the middle of the road, which is just right outside this window right here. All the windows in the Galleria, the Galleria area, Lakeview, the buildings that you could see, all the windows blown out, trees through people's homes. And that's when they were saying all the looting was going on, even in this area here that wasn't under water. I was checking on people, where relatives had lived, to see if they had actually evacuated. Going through military distribution sites with the military trucks there that were giving out ice and MREs. We ate MREs for that first week because there was no electricity, nothing. The closest grocery store, I believe, was, from here, about 45 minutes away, in La Place. And I did that. I knew my family was coming home within the week, and went to that Wal-Mart because I had heard that store was open.

The most interesting thing I'd ever seen, armed guards everywhere in Wal-Mart, the National Guard with their machine guns, and empty shelves. There was no produce. The cold items, everything had been thrown out. You'd go to buy milk. They wouldn't even put it on the shelf. They just had it on the racks, and it was one type of milk. There

was one type of bread, and it was off the rack before people could even grab it. I mean, as soon as they rolled the rack out or the little cart, it was gone.

It was an interesting time. I mean, to see that and just to know that the military were there at distribution sites asking me how many people had a need for ice or for food.

JS: So the military was distributing things like ice?

NG: Yes.

And they did have church groups here at some point. Red Cross was here. They had sites set up all over the city where you could actually go in and get items: bleach, gloves, mops, brooms, cleaning supplies. They were distributing that. Ice chests to put the ice in, because everybody's refrigerator was damaged. And that was all -- we did that before, within that first week, so before I'd even gotten back to Nashville, that was going on here. I was delivering food to a group of senior citizens that were in a retirement area that just refused to leave. They had no gas in their cars, nobody there. When they wouldn't evacuate, their families left without them. And I was going up to the distribution sites picking up ice and food to bring over there to them. They were tough, tough little ladies, 90-something years old, sitting in the heat.

JS: These were their own homes?

NG: Condominiums. And they own them. And it wasn't like an assisted living. It was more of a condo complex, but all senior citizens.

TAPE 1, SIDE B

JS: Where were these condominiums where the seniors were?

NG: Just right here in Metairie, in this area. There are some diehard people that, even with a Category 5, they were not leaving their home, just didn't want to. And there were probably, I'd say at least 20 or 30 of them, and you didn't know how many were there until you walked into the courtyard, because it was a gated community. I'd walk in and I'd just yell, "Hello, is anybody there? I have ice," and they'd start opening their doors. That was touching. I felt like I was actually doing something good there.

And the day when I knew I had to leave to go back to Nashville, I told them I wasn't coming back, their family wasn't even back yet. And when I was leaving, I saw a police officer on the corner and I went and told him that there were people in there and if he would check up on them, and he said he would. So I'm hoping they all made it.

My aunt, who did live there, my great-aunt, she actually went to her son's house in Dallas, and I told her what was going on, and they still remember me coming over there and bringing ice. And I was teaching them how to use the MREs, how to heat up the food packets, and they were appreciative. A lot of people that you didn't know were there. You would never have known they were there. So that was just by chance, just going in there to check on her friends.

So, yeah, little things you could do. I mean, that was a little part that I could do. The rest of the city is still under water, and you've got first responders who are taking them off the roof. But if I could bring them ice and some food, I did what I could.

JS: So, when you got back to Nashville, that must have been of some comfort to you to be around people that you had worked with here in the District Office. On the other hand, being around so many other people that were finding it, I'm sure, very difficult to concentrate on work and in a strange place, it must have been hard, too.

NG: It was definitely a bonding experience. We all got along in the office. It was wonderful. They were friends and coworkers. It was the FDA family. But that was a different FDA family up there. That's when you knew everything about everybody. It was very emotional in the office, in the hotel, because FDA put us in a Residence Inn. FDA was wonderful, took care of us all that way. Very emotional. A lot of people were just walking around in a daze, not knowing what was going on, trying to do their job. But what can they expect? I mean, your lives were just turned upside-down. I'd say 75 percent of the people hadn't even, maybe even more, hadn't even been back to their homes. They had no idea what condition their homes were in. The city was still under water, so they couldn't get back to their homes. We just watched the news. And FDA understood that.

We had a couple visits, I think. I missed the first one. I'm not sure who was there. But the second visit was with the Commissioner. I think our ACRA [Associate

Commissioner for Regulatory Affairs] was there; several people who came and listened and let us say whatever we wanted to say.

JS: Was the Commissioner there?

NG: Yes, he was. I think it was Dr. Crawford. I believe it was Dr. Crawford at the time.

JS: Okay.

NG: But it was good. It was tough, but we needed each other at that point, too. It was nice to have that family. If it wasn't your immediate family, it was still your FDA family there with you.

JS: I guess there was very little pressure put on employees, I mean, considering the state of mind most people were in, though, people were set up with workstations and so on.

Let me ask, what did you do when you were up there?

NG: When I got to Nashville -- again, it's a blur -- they had to acquire new space. I remember that. I didn't know; I thought that was part of their normal office, but I guess they had rented out another section of an adjacent office. And within a week maybe, maybe -- I'm not sure -- furniture started arriving, supplies started arriving, computers

started arriving, filth kits -- all this equipment. And somebody had to organize it, so that's what they put us to do, just start setting up office space, setting up desks, opening the boxes of pens and pencils. I mean, it was setting up a District Office or a section of a District Office for, gosh, I think they brought in about 40 of us maybe. People started straggling in little by little. But for the most part, we were all there, and they had to put us somewhere.

They didn't ask us to go out and do inspections. We couldn't do that. None of us knew the area up there, and none of us were in the right state of mind for that. But they let us deal with our personal issues, anything we needed to do with FEMA or Red Cross or anything disaster related, they let us handle that, and we did that on work time, and they took care of us that way.

And our management was dealing with the same thing. Everybody was uprooted. And the wonderful people in Nashville just welcomed us, and we invaded them. We invaded that office and they took us with open arms.

JS: So you felt welcomed.

NG: Wonderful people, oh, absolutely, absolutely wonderful people.

But I was only there in Nashville for three weeks to a month. A lot of people stayed longer. Since I was an investigator and I had a place to live. I had my mother's house. My home, I couldn't come back to, but my mother's home was okay. They let us go back to start doing disaster work.

We didn't have an office; we didn't have any of that set up yet. So I was temporarily working out of either the Lafayette office or the Baton Rouge Resident Post.

JS: Did you have equipment to work with?

NG: I had my laptop so I could hook up to their system, to their network.

At that time, three weeks to four weeks afterwards, the water had gone down in the city, and we were starting to do disaster work. Commissioned Corps officers were in, people from the region. I'm not sure who they got to come in. I want to say retail food specialists, that they were going in and inspecting pretty much anybody who handled food, whether or not it was to reopen them or tell them what to destroy; the pharmacies, all the drugs that were exposed to or held at improper temperatures, anywhere in the city. And they had groups of people.

I know in the Lafayette Resident Post, they were responsible for getting all the GSA cars organized, to have the equipment for these people to go out and actually do the inspections, so I think we were moving, I think we got about 50 new cars then, GSA cars. We were getting cell phones for people so they could communicate, trying to figure out their schedules and when to pick them up from the airport. You know, they were working in the New Orleans area, but there were no hotels available. They obviously couldn't stay anywhere in the city, so they were commuting two to three hours one way each day to come in to do their job.

I wasn't responsible for the organization of that. I was sent there just to assist with them any way I could. Our FDAers in Lafayette and Baton Rouge were the ones

that were actually coordinating and doing the disaster response, and I was there just to pick up whatever slack I could for them. And they needed help. They were swamped in both areas.

I was also asked to do Public Affairs work. The USDA Food Safety mobile was coming in town, and I assisted the USDA. I don't know if you're familiar with the big USDA RV camper, but we went around, and we worked at several of the distribution points.

So here I was, a month before, going to the sites to pick up bleach and ice and food, then a month later, I'm actually distributing bleach and gloves and food-safety information, and how to disinfect, or if you could salvage your refrigerator, what foods you should throw away, what foods you should keep, what medicines to throw away. So we went to several grocery stores, to church parking lots, and FDA and USDA, along with the Department of Health and Hospitals in Louisiana, helping distribute information to the public.

JS: How did the public know about this?

NG: People were coming back. And I don't think anything was broadcast because at that time there were still one or two television stations. It was just word-of-mouth. And they were in very visible locations, so people were coming around. It was mainly in the harder-hit areas, so if people were driving by on a main thoroughfare, they'd see the site, or it was always in conjunction with something else. So if it was a church organization giving out food or the military with ice, USDA set up shop next to them.

Even Tide was here with their big mobile washing machines, washing people's clothes. Yeah. That was nice -- I had never seen that before either, so, I mean, America really did open their hearts and they were here. They helped out the people of New Orleans.

JS: When you came down for that, did you stay down here then, or was there a time when you went back up to Nashville?

NG: I was back here in Louisiana most of the time.

JS: Permanently.

NG: We got back into our home, goodness, October, mid-October. I think that's when we were able to get back into Jefferson Parish and actually came back to the house, where we had a refrigerator. We had two refrigerators and had to get rid of both of them. So once we had that, we had a lot of cleaning up to do. And it was probably mid-October because I remember Halloween, being here, taking my niece trick-or-treating around piles of debris. It was terrible, terrible. But we were trying to make it as home-like as possible, but you had to walk around taped-up refrigerators and freezers and rolled-up carpet and everything. It was home. We were back.

I have to admit, it was much easier being here. I think I would have had a harder time being in Nashville, away from everybody, since my entire family came home. I would have been in Nashville without my family. You know, they were taking people's

families. If you were married and had children, FDA was taking care of them and I think paying per diem and putting them in the hotel rooms. But my family had their jobs here. They couldn't leave. So it was nice to be back home with everybody.

And I'd say within, oh goodness, November, December, we had found space, temporary office space here that they were starting to set up, this Resident Post here, and there was work that we were doing on that, packing up the old District Office, when we could get in there, and salvaged what we could.

JS: Did you salvage much from the District Office?

NG: It was interesting. I think they salvaged more than we thought we could. No flood damage. I mean, we were on the fourth and fifth floors. But the water came in through the ceilings and mold was everywhere. But we went in there, tried to remediate what we could, and everything we're using right now, this was all in the old office.

JS: Oh, the furniture here in the Metairie Resident Post was furniture in the old office?

NG: Yes. All the furniture in the Metairie Resident Post was from the old office. We were in there with bottles of bleach and paper towels and respirators and cleaned it all down.

JS: It took a long time, huh?

NG: It took a long time, a long time, especially . . . At that point, I think we had electricity, but the first time we went into the District Office, it was with flashlights, and water was still on the first floor, in a sunken area of the first floor and the elevator shafts. But we were able to get in on the second floor and started packing. There were several of us, at least 20, 25 FDA employees. They brought people back from Nashville, and we just made a chain down the stairs and just handed box after box; we got it done.

That's teamwork. That's something about the heart of FDAers. We did what we could.

JS: The sort of normal, run-of-the-mill work of the agency, obviously it has taken time. Things still aren't, are far from back to normal here in New Orleans. But the work of the agency goes on. About when was it that it started to seem like, back here working out of the Resident Post, now the Resident Post in Metairie, when did it start to seem like things were kind of back to normal? Or has it?

NG: I don't think it has. It's much better now. It probably took a full year; I'd say it was a full year. I don't think we were actually functioning as an office. I'm talking about computers hooked up and people settled in and actually knew what we were doing till probably February, March of '06. And a lot of disaster work was still going on at that time. I wasn't doing inspections -- at this point, I was already doing Public Affairs work again, so I don't know what the Investigation side was like. But I know they were doing a lot of reconditioning, disaster work, still going out to firms.

I know several friends of mine, when they would actually go out to the firms, it was mainly to decide if they were opening or not, or what their plans were. So a lot of OEI improvement, seeing what was left, getting statistics on what industry left, what was coming back, what had no plans of coming back. So it's been a slow and steady process, I think. Starting the fiscal year of '07, that's when things got a little bit more back to normal because we had more of a hold on what was open, who was operating, and maybe they had had time to rebuild so we could actually go in and re-inspect them.

But public affairs-wise, I was doing a lot of outreach with the state, with academia, LSU, trying to just get all of our information on what they did with the hurricane, what LSU did with the hurricane, what information the state provided after the hurricane, so if it happened again, we could all be on the same page. I was setting up contacts, so they knew FDA had a presence in the area, because as far as the state knew, FDA had relocated to Nashville. We wanted them to know we were still here. We didn't pack up everybody. We still had two Resident Posts in the area, still had investigators here, still had Compliance and Public Affairs.

JS: In terms of the normal work of a Public Affairs Specialist in the agency, what were the kind of special challenges that you had in the immediate aftermath? I mean, not the immediate aftermath of the hurricane, but when the office gets set up and you're here. Obviously things are different than they were before Katrina.

NG: It was different, and it's hard to say, because that position had been vacant for, oh, gosh, we were all acting in '05. I think '04 is when Stacey had actually become the

supervisor, so probably two years before there wasn't that much PAS activity going on. So, for me to start was almost from, you know, phase one. It was getting out there and just letting people know that FDA was in the community. They didn't have our phone numbers. They didn't know we were here. So it was groundbreaking. It was just get out there, let them know FDA is in town. I had no assignments, I had no procedures, I had no guidelines. It was just get out into the community.

There were certain initiatives, especially in '07, but for '06, it was just start making contacts, know people's emergency contact information, know who their press reps are. It was all in preparation if it happens again.

You know, 2006 hurricane season started June 1st. By the time we got settled, we're already in hurricane season again. So that year was challenging because you didn't know what was going to happen. The city wasn't ready yet. FDA was just getting reestablished here, and it was mainly just be visible.

JS: Obviously very different requirements for the position here than the PAS would have, say, in Detroit or Los Angeles or anywhere.

NG: Until the next disaster happens there.

JS: That's right. And I'm sure there are things that the Public Affairs Specialists in other places in the country can learn from the way things were handled here, you know, certainly in the aftermath.

NG: I know Sandy Baxter was our Public Affairs Specialist in Nashville. She just recently retired. But she definitely dealt with a lot more of the public affairs side during the hurricane. During that time when all of us were in Nashville, she was the one dealing with the press. I believe the Commissioner recorded Public Service Announcements. I'm not sure when that happened. But he had something recorded, just trying to get messages out to people on what foods they should throw away, you know, basic things. Don't eat something that's been in the refrigerator without electricity for a week; don't take certain medications. Those PSAs did come out -- not as fast as I think it should have at that time. Not just from FDA, but just from the state, from anybody. It took a couple of months, several months after, where we were still hearing the Public Service Announcement. But it could have definitely come out faster.

JS: I know there was a great concern with getting word out to the public about diabetics who had to be taking insulin, that if insulin is not refrigerated, it has a shelf life of maybe four weeks, something like that.

NG: That's something people just didn't think of before. You packed a little ice chest and you took your insulin with you, and then you came back. But a lot has changed.

Even if you go for a doctor's visit now, the doctors, they have emergency information if you're on, say, a chemotherapy patient, they have hotline numbers now that they hand out to their patients, so wherever you're evacuated, you can always contact this number, which isn't located anywhere in Louisiana, to get your treatment plan. You

sign waivers letting them know that if you're on any kind of medication, or if you're in the hospital . . .

I had a family member who was admitted to the hospital in November of '06 for surgery, and we had to sign waivers for her that if a hurricane hit while she was in the hospital, that we had to let them evacuate her. If they couldn't discharge her and we couldn't take her home, they would evacuate her, and we might not know where she was for a few days.

So a lot has changed in Louisiana, a lot. And it's always after the fact. But they're doing the best they can in preparing if, God forbid, it happens again.

JS: Well, it's going to happen somewhere. It may not be New Orleans. But maybe, as you said, California, maybe somewhere in the Midwest, something will happen. And I guess there are lessons that our other District Offices can learn from the New Orleans experience here.

NG: I hope so. But I also think it's a case-by-case basis. Nothing's going to be the same. So no matter how much you prepare, how much you plan, you're still going to get caught off-guard, and people are going to be in shock, people are going to be sad, emotional, and hurt and scared, and you just, you try to prepare and just do the best you can, but knowing that it could sneak up on you any time.

And we have, I think, another two months left to go for hurricane season this year, keeping our fingers crossed that we'll make it through one more year.

JS: You can never be sure, right?

NG: No, never be sure.

JS: We covered a lot here. Is there anything that we haven't talked about that you feel that we should?

NG: I don't think so. I could probably go on for hours, but I think that's enough.

JS: I know. And I really appreciate -- I know you're not feeling well today -- your sitting down and sharing your experiences during this storm with us, and helping educate the others in the agency and outside about what it was like to experience something like this.

NG: I appreciate you guys taking an interest in it.

JS: So, thanks.

NG: Sometimes you feel like you've been forgotten, but it's nice to know people are still thinking about us.

JS: Definitely not forgotten, definitely not forgotten. Thank you.

NG: Thank you.

JS: After we shut off the tape, we were talking here about how some of the other government employees, federal employees, and I guess state employees too, in the New Orleans area fared during the storm and the aftermath of Katrina. And you were saying that, to your knowledge, some of the other government employees actually did receive support from their agencies.

NG: Yes, they did. I think FDA was one of the first ones to jump on it and to have their people move to Nashville.

But coming from a family of other government employees -- I know the Social Security Administration; my father works for Minerals Management -- it took them longer. They were still in contact with their employees. But they hadn't set up any kind of temporary office for a month after the storm. I think, I want to say October 1st, October 31st, they had to report to a temporary location as well and then were reimbursed for travel status; they were reimbursed for their time, per diem. I think it was also case-by-case. It depended on whether or not you were out of your home. For example, my mother, she could go back to her home, but she had several coworkers who lost their homes in Chalmette. And the ones who had lost everything and were out of their home were put on per diem and travel status.

JS: What about state government employees?

NG: State employees as well. My brother was the same way.

Now, I don't know what their terminology is for travel status or per diem, but I know if, I want to say for at least a month, they were given time off, depending on what agency they were working for, whether or not they were first responders. But I know from my brother's situation, they were given overtime, double time, when they first came back to work, for I'd say the first month or two, where they were working normal hours but getting paid time and a half or double time for it -- time and a half, overtime, whatever it's called -- to do the duties where most people couldn't come back.

So FDA was wonderful, but not the only government agency. But like I said, I think they were one of the first ones to do it. But if everybody could coordinate and make it all consistent, that would be great as well. But . . .

JS: Well, thank you for adding that.

NG: Okay.

END OF INTERVIEW